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Introduction to Party Studies

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Introduction to Party Studies

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Abstract

This special issue expands upon a past research seminar and article to support the value of creating a subfield of ‘party studies’ in game studies. All together six articles compose this special issue with various lenses for how analyzing parties supports the analysis of games and vice versa. Parties are important as a framing within game narratives, as a part of game production history, for how they generate playful communities related to games, and finally how they expand our understanding for analyzing games. We furthermore argue that this kind of subfield endeavor helps us as scholars come together to expand our expertise across the ever more diverse pools of knowledge we study.

Keywords

Parties; party studies; festivities; community; playfulness

What is it that brings people together to party? We ask this question as we think about what we hope to be an emergent area of party studies. This special issue features six articles that all investigate parties and partying in the context of game studies. However, we could just as easily be talking about bringing people together to celebrate in general. That is a foundational question for humans across time, yet academic research offers surprisingly little resources for a person trying to figure out how to throw a good party. We can find analytical concepts, like the *carnavalesque*, *collective effervescence*, or the *liminal/liminoid*, that help us understand why partying is important – yet rarely help us to design one (see also Drife, 2000). Parties are woefully understudied.

On the issue of bringing scholars together around a shared research interest, there is also more work to be done. It is a serious and longstanding concern in the interdisciplinary approach to studying games that scholars may simply talk past each other (Williams, 2005). There are many reasons why connection across discipline, across method, across ontology are difficult (in the context of games, see e.g., Deterding, 2017; Kriz, Harviainen, & Clapper, 2018; Karabinus et al., 2025). We have

different competencies, vocabularies, norms, knowledge constitutive interests, values, and worlds of thought. Yet the rewards for crossing these divides are potentially immense. Debatably, the entire birth of game studies as a field was due to a willingness to bring together diverse forms of thinking around games (even if there were also clear boundaries in the beginning, such as an emphasis on digital games and a preference for positive approaches). It has given rise to important definitional works on games and play, documentation and understanding around game play and creation practices, as well as situated games and play in culture and society more widely. More recently, we have seen the emergence of numerous subfields, such as queer game studies, historical game studies, black game studies, analog game studies, and regional game studies. As with many of these, we are hoping to use the framing of a subfield to bring focus on a specific topic, while also using said subject as a searchlight to identify academic work in other fields that requires integration into game studies. As each year there are more scholarly works and fields, integrative projects become increasingly challenging. A subfield that is clearly located under a specific umbrella while also actively seeking to build on work done in other fields is one answer to the question of how to cross academic divides in order reap the benefits.

Party studies in game studies aims to bring us together. This special issue grew out from an article that argued parties are a form of bringing people together. A specifically playful way of pursuing social connection across local, regional, and larger communities. This special issue aims to expand this line of inquiry for game studies. Its contributions sketch out the types of roads such a subfield can investigate and the value of answering specific questions through the lens of party studies.

The road to party studies

The path to this conception of party studies begins in the fall of 2022. Tampere University Game Research Lab was about to celebrate its 20th anniversary and, to mark the occasion, 'Party' was selected as the theme of the annual work-in-progress Spring Seminar. The topic had been identified as potentially relevant, interesting, and fun for game and play scholars, and the anniversary provided a nice alibi for choosing it. In the seminar call for papers, scholars were invited to explore "the diverse connections between parties/partying and games/play" (Game Research Lab, 2022).

The seminar featured 19 presentations and two keynotes. One of those, 'Parties as Playful Experiences: Why Game Studies Should Study Partying' (Masek & Stenros, 2024), was later published in *Eludamos*. In that article, we argue that parties are akin to games in many ways: e.g., they are a fundamental aspect of human culture engaged in by most humans, and there are structural similarities between parties and games, for example in the way they set up liminoid spaces where normal societal rules and expectations are on pause. Regardless of this, parties have received

scarce academic attention except when associated with risky behaviour, which is similar to how games were treated in academia up until the turn of the Millennium. The article ended with a call to establish party studies as a subfield of games studies: “parties are understudied, misunderstood by most of the past empirical work that address them, and game studies is the right field to study them further” (Masek & Stenros, 2024, p. 90).

The following year, we decided to further facilitate the emergence of such a subfield by committing to a special issue on the topic. The editors of *Eludamos* graciously agreed to our proposal, and a call went out in March 2025. Less than two years later, here we are.

In our earlier party article we had also claimed that “research on parties can be found from a diversity of sources, in part because there is no established ‘party studies’ literature” (Masek & Stenros, 2024, p. 77). In our effort to begin staking out a research area, we reviewed work on parties, hailing from disconnected traditions. We mostly drew from three strands of research: earlier theoretical work that has been presented in game studies, as we argue that game and play studies can offer a fitting umbrella for understanding parties (Sutton-Smith, 2009; Schechner, 2017); empirical research on the dangers of partying, mostly discussing teenagers (Doxbeck & Osberg, 2021), gay men (Hammoud et al., 2017), and recreational drug users as the risk groups (Hunt et al., 2010); and the motivations of people attending parties (Demant & Østergaard, 2007).

When carving out a space for a new research focus, a key step is in establishing predecessors and contemporaries in nearby fields and the literature they have produced that is relevant for the discourse that is emerging. Our background review was far from comprehensive, and there are obviously other pools of research that focus on parties – often with different terminology. One such pool is American sociology, where the access to parties functions as a way to produce social stratification, tying into issues of class, race, and gender (e.g., Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Mears & Mooney, 2024; May & Chaplin, 2008; Mears, 2020).

Nor is this special issue the first of its kind in attempting to gather scholars around partying. Key predecessors include a special issue on parties and celebrations in *The Journal of American Culture* (Elza, Edgerton, & Jackson, 2010), which even includes one article on Nintendo Wii parties (Foster, 2010). There are also thriving academic communities that are adjacent to our endeavour. The closest comes festive studies, which even has its own devoted journal, *Journal of Festive Studies*, which offers “a forum for those who share an interest in the world’s diversity of festivities, including holiday celebrations, family rituals, carnivals, religious feasts, civic parades, commemorations, music festivals, and more” (Journal of Festive Studies, n.d.). Another interesting academic community is event management, which published the *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*. The journal concentrates on “business, sporting, cultural and celebratory events and festivals

around the world” (Jago, 2010). Curiously, both journals omit parties in their descriptions. It is almost like a signal of cultural legitimacy: celebrations and festive commemorations are culturally valuable, while lowly parties are not worth academic attention.

A particularly interesting conversation about parties is taking place in the field of artistic research, where a three volume series called *Party Studies* is being published (Aguado, del Buey, & LaBelle, 2021a). Here, the focus is on the “party as an experimental social form and expression” (Aguado, del Buey, & LaBelle, 2021b, 7). The first book documents and theorizes the house party, the second does this for underground clubs (Aguado, del Buey, & LaBelle, 2024), and the third one, not yet published, is to address raves and dance clubs. While the approach is different as it originates in artistic research and seems particularly interested in privacy and secrecy, the project seems quite well-aligned with ours, so the matching name is not a problem. While they do not focus on play and games, their approach is quite playful. In the first volume, the introduction ends with a call that nicely encapsulates their project:

From the passion of festivity, the transformative joy of partying, and the numbing ache of the hangover to a politics of home-making, resistance, and sleep, *Party Studies* is put forward as a generative, and rather restless method and discourse, and maybe even, a way of life, which may help in keeping the party alive as an imaginative and extremely promiscuous enactment. (Aguado, del Buey, & LaBelle, 2021b, 9)

In sexuality studies, there is also a subset of works focused on organized semi-public events where participants exhibit various sexual behaviors typified as ‘parties’. These parties have been discussed in a variety of social contexts, including for their medical dangers (Friedman et al., 2008) but also for the motivations for participants as a form of play (Harviainen & Frank, 2018). This literature in general seems to bear a closer connection to discussing the phenomena through the language of games and play, including one the more influential books on the topic having an entire chapter on ‘Games People Play: Group Sex as Experimentation, Adventure, and Play’ (Frank, 2013, p. 167).

In addition to these disconnected domains of scholarly work on parties, it is obvious that there must be – as there always is – interesting research that is not available in English (for a completely random example, see Hemmersad & Hodne, 1979). Clearly, a comprehensive and systemic literature review on studies on parties and partying, from the point of view of game studies, is sorely needed.

In this way, our call to game studies is not the emergence of a completely new topic or area of interest, but rather a call for game studies to host more of the party. This begs the question of what game studies has to offer an academic field on festivities, rituals, and partying. In addition, the opposite question is asked: how

does a deeper understanding of parties help game scholars understand our field better? This special issue provides several articles with useful answers to both.

Games and parties as a dual framing offers several critical values for scholars who wish to understand partying, or games better. On the one hand, games, both in their communities of play and production, are their own cultural space that host their own forms of parties. Game industries around the world have hosted numerous parties as a site of important work within the fields of games, both historically and contemporaneously. Player communities gather for parties, whether at game conventions or local area network parties, online gatherings of friends, or other forms of social celebration of their gameplay. On the other hand, games are specifically designed to enrich 'parties' to the point that many festivals or celebrations incorporate formal games. It is interesting to ponder why, how, and in what way these games transform the experience of their party. The reverse is also true that parties exist within the fiction and mechanics of certain games, to heighten and change the play of those games.

Games as digital spaces also host parties, and utilize these parties in their design in order to provide players with unique experiences. This form of digital partying may become increasingly relevant as a more digital world may transform several of its cultural forms of partying. The adaptations to COVID-19 already saw a massive world shift in which individuals attempted, successfully and not to digital spaces as the new form of partying. These adaptations bear transformative meaning to the culture of parties.

In addition, the very structure of a party becomes a clearer point of focus when placed in the lens of game studies. It is revealing that by investigating the concepts of play and playfulness, partying emerged as a foundational type of playful experience for many individuals. This conceptual center reveals some of the value for the current works compared to previous scholarly approaches to parties. In the most recent special issue of the *Journal of Festive Studies* (Valerio, 2025), the words 'play', 'playing', 'playful', and to a lesser extent 'games' are used throughout the texts to describe the practical behaviors occurring in festivities. Their usages however are primarily cursory, where the conceptual essence of play or playfulness is bearing relatively little weight in explaining the phenomena. In this way, game studies conceptually reframes and centers playing, playfulness, and games as a fundamental lens for partying. In looking at parties through this lens, fundamental questions about certain partying activities become clearer. Questions such as: what rules and norms are followed in these parties? Which are broken? What playful behaviors are participants in this party doing? What playful experiences are participants having?

In this way, we clarify three primary manners that party studies in game studies offers: games hosting parties both for characters and players; parties in game creation and the surrounding ecosystem; and finally parties as playful structures with

their own rules frequently inhabited by playful experiences and play behaviors much akin to games.

Introduction to the articles

This special issue moves party studies forward in each of the proposed ways with a wide selection of approaches. First, three articles analyze parties in specific games, either as player-initiated festivities or as stable elements in the game's narrative. Ash Rezvani's article, 'The (Drop) Party Revolution: Egalitarianism, Communitas, and Control in Jagex's *RuneScape*', discusses a specific type of celebration in an on-line roleplaying game where players create parties that are not facilitated or encouraged by the game service. In 'drop parties' higher-level characters distribute both worthless and valuable items to lower-level characters. In this manner, the specific party activity of sharing these game-item 'drops' is culturally dependent on the game it is hosted by. Rezvani analyses this historical practice in *RuneScape* with the concept of *communitas*.

This is followed by a pair of articles that analyze partying as a diegetic and non-diegetic framing within contemporary digital games. Tim Timvig & Carl-Erik Engqvist dive into a specific single-player digital game in their article 'Getting High in a Hi-tech Setting: Narrative Structure and Archetypical Partygoers in the *Mass Effect 3* DLC *Citadel* Mission: "Party"'. They analyse the narrative structure of the party and explore the functions the different characters inhabit in these fictional party settings. They also bring a deeper analytic framework of this party based on game studies theory, specifically integrating Caillois' (1958/2001) classic paradigm for rule-boundedness with a more contemporary expansion upon it (Masek, 2023).

Matilda Ståhl and Fredrik Rusk embrace parties on two levels. Their article, 'Party of Two at a Fraternity Party! Or Boundaries of Co-Play in a Duoethnography of *Fallout 76*', firstly features an analysis of the representations of parties in an online multiplayer game. Secondly, they discuss the meta-position of doing duoethnographic research as a form of partying between scholars.

These three works, when placed into conversation with each other, highlight the deep value of looking at instances of play, games, and partying *in situ*. By closely analyzing specific instances of partying in games, layers of expectations and especially rules become revealed as interdependent frames for the experience. Timvig and Engqvist demonstrate how analyzing a variety of rule interactions in fictional parties allow for a deeper understanding for how cultural expectations of parties may emerge and how diverse forms of enjoyment may need to be constructed in games. Ståhl and Rusk similarly demonstrate how norms and rules within a game-party mix with norms of player groups, of people themselves, and even the rules of conducting research in academia. They present an ongoing reflection for how they as scholars follow certain norms that may or may not align with local player cul-

ture, or even each other, highlighting the critical need for understanding intersectionality in our perspective. Finally, Rezvani's closely examined instance of partying in the context of *Runescape* bears numerous critical layers for rules. The author describes how a specific egalitarian frame of a party where players seek to share valuable loot still faces layers of structure and hierarchy from the game developers themselves. In this way, we see how important it is to analyze the layers of meaning of specific parties occurring in specific games.

Two articles then address the game industry and the parties that have both historically and contemporaneously been vital to the production of games. Tom Boellstorff and Braxton Soderman's article is an opening into party game production studies. Their article, "Get on the Party Line: Parties, Games, and Work at Mattel Electronics in the Early 1980s", discusses the parties and party-like aspects of the work culture at Mattel Electronics and explores the emergence of party video-games for Intellivision in the early 1980s. The impetus for the party line was sociability: videogames should be something fun to do together.

Taina Myöhänen also expands this analysis of party behavior in the game industry, through a contemporary and regional game studies angle. The article, titled "Those People Are My People": Safety at Game Industry Events in Finland', analyses game industry events through the prism of party studies. This shifts the attention from instrumental values to social interaction. Based on interviews, the article argues that safety is a precondition for a successful event and maps how a feeling of safety is communally produced.

These articles together demonstrate the critical value of analyzing the phenomena of partying in game production. If parties, as theorized, are valuable ways of bringing people together, these texts highlight successful forms of party-making in bringing together game makers. These texts address similar critical lenses such as inclusion, gender, diversity, felt safety, and fun for successful parties. This technique of game production bears valuable fruit for any scholar interested in understanding successful game industry bonding, gatherings, and partying.

Finally, the special issue is closed by an article that looks at parties that are not directly related to games with an approach strongly informed by game studies and the broader concept of playfulness. Aska Mayer, Velvet Spors, and J. Tuomas Harvainen analyse three playful transformative events in their article "'We Poke the Body and See What Happens...': How Do People Manage Expectations in Transformative Parties, Festivals, and Retreats?'. They explore how event organizers engage in expectation management. These pre-event processes help in getting participants on the same page; they have a shared understanding of the party and find a common vibe.

This text brings to the front and center a theme present throughout these texts. In addition to game studies gaining value from understanding parties, the theories

built in game studies bear analytic value to unpack partying as phenomena. Whether it is a deeper understanding of playful experience or different player relationships to rules, partying and games bear more than a superficial similarity. They are structural, they are inhabited often by play, they can be spaces of joy, fun, transgression, and bonding. They also bear major cultural meaning for those involved and face complicated intervention from structures of power both inside and outside their intended experience.

Interestingly, many of the articles in this special issue also touch on the topic of party studies as a potential or emerging subfield. For example, Boellstorff and Soderman argue for approaching parties as organizational practices, while Ståhl and Rusk, inspired by the idea that game nights are parties, position their duoethnography as “party like”. These meta-contributions also maybe pave the way for establishing norms of this emerging approach.

In this way, the final contribution of this special issue is the development of the meta-knowledge of party studies as a subfield in game studies. In seeing how diverse scholars have taken this frame and applied it for their own purposes, with their own research foci, and their own methods, we have found our initially intended frame opened admirably. What form party studies takes, if it becomes a stable subfield, is still unclear. It is our hope that this special issue shows how fruitful the centering of parties in analysis can be.

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The (Drop) Party Revolution

Egalitarianism, Communitas, and Control in Jagex's RuneScape

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The (Drop) Party Revolution

Egalitarianism, Communitas, and Control in Jagex's *RuneScape*

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Abstract

Egalitarianism is an essential prerequisite to, and direct consequence of, experiencing collective joy and Turner's *communitas* during parties. While arguably an essential characteristic of parties, egalitarianism can pose an unwelcome threat to established structures of hierarchy, and those who hold material and social power will often attempt to suppress or control the festivities to maintain the status quo. Interestingly, the threat of party egalitarianism and *communitas* also extends to player-created parties in non-party games, as evidenced by drop parties in the early years of the MMORPG *RuneScape* and Jagex's subsequent attempts to control drop partying. Using the infamous Pay to PK player riot of 2007 and the introduction of the Falador Party room as a case study, this paper examines the powerful relationship between egalitarianism, wealth redistribution, and the experience of collective joy at parties.

Keywords

Party studies; *communitas*; collective joy; *RuneScape*; MMORPG; player riot; Jagex

Party till you drop

The early 2000s was a good time to be a noob¹ in *RuneScape* (Jagex, 2001), one of the most popular massive, multiplayer, online role-playing games (MMORPG) at the turn of the millennium. With many skills to level up, quests to complete, and friends to make, there was plenty for new players to occupy themselves with as they adventured through the charming fantasy world of Gielinor. To improve one's abilities (and gain prestige within the community), players could certainly follow the MMORPG genre conventions of repetitive grinding to level up, such as chopping the same trees repeatedly to increase their woodcutting skill. While this time-

1 A 'noob' is an unflattering word for new, inexperienced players within many online gaming communities.

consuming and monotonous method of player progression was an intentional part of the game's design and was certainly enjoyed by many players – present author included – there existed another, alternative path that could catapult a new player from poverty to wealth with just a few lucky clicks: drop parties.

In their earliest form, drop parties involved one or more wealthy, high-level players manually dropping items on the ground for a group of other (usually new) players to race one another to pick up. Some of these items were common and low value; others were worthless junk. Critically, however, drop parties promised at least some of the dropped items would be extremely valuable: high-level gear, stacks of gold coins, and coveted discontinued items a player could sell for millions. While these early events were largely spontaneous affairs, drop parties eventually gained enough popularity to become daily celebrations across the many worlds² of *RuneScape*, planned in advance by players and advertised on official game forums or in populated areas in-game.

Players hosted drop parties to celebrate all manner of milestones, from their real-world birthdays to reaching max level in a particular skill. One of the most common reasons for hosting a drop party was, in fact, quitting the game; quitting players used drop parties as a method of redistributing the wealth they had amassed over their *RuneScape* journey to lower-level players before logging out for the last time. The practice was embedded into *RuneScape*'s culture by the mid-aughts, and seeking out drop parties became a viable alternative method of increasing one's level and wealth. Players established entire communities centered around drop parties, with the goal of "spreading wealth to lower-level players so they can level up and afford better gear" ('Drop party', n.d.). Invented, popularized, and sustained by players, drop parties were celebratory events defined by the redistribution of wealth between players.

I was lucky enough to stumble upon a drop party early on in my *RuneScape* career – then marked by low levels, poor equipment, and poverty – and the festivities changed the course of my *RuneScape* life forever. I encountered a long train of revelers on the road between the two major cities of Falador and Varrock. At the front of the wandering line was a max-level player, adorned with armor and weapons collectively worth nearly a billion gold pieces, who invited me to join his birthday festivities. After finding a few more partygoers, our leader turned north into the woods. As he and two friends prepared items for dropping, the rest of us talked, drank beer, lit campfires, and cycled through different "dance" emotes. Relegated as I was to the activities and locations typical of lower-level players, this was the first time I socially engaged with higher-level players for an extended period. I had the distinct sense that my newness and lowliness did not matter to the others for once; the other low-level players and I were never condescended for being "noobs" as we often were in other situations.

2 Each server is referred to as a 'world' in *RuneScape*.

We revelers stood together in silent anticipation as the campfires turned to ash. Once the preparations were complete, the leader and his friends began running around wildly – they had begun dropping items. After a minute, the items appeared to the rest of us, and we raced to pick them up. It was chaotic, spontaneous, and undeniably joyful. I distinctly remember the thrill of sprinting through the forest as fast as I could, laughing to myself, grabbing everything from cheap tin ore to a valuable dragon scimitar I was far too under-leveled to actually use. Our group was small enough (and our hosts generous enough) that there was an abundance of items, which meant we all walked away with something of value.

The leader and his friends cheered us on, though they left soon after the race finished; they were going to pick up more items from the bank and change worlds to host another birthday drop party for a new group. All of us were given an open invitation to the next party, but most of us chose to linger, socializing and swapping the items we'd just gathered. I traded the scimitar for things I would later sell to purchase better gear for myself, allowing me to rapidly advance a few levels. More important than the material wealth, however, was the social connection: I added a few usernames to my friends list and later adventured with some of the players I'd met during the drop party. During the (albeit digital) drinking, dancing, and gifting of valuable items at my first drop party, the hierarchies of wealth, skill, and level melted away to create a temporary community of equals. The egalitarian spirit of drop parties facilitated the shared experience of collective joy and merrymaking – a phenomenon the anthropologist Victor Turner describes as *communitas*.

The suspension of hierarchy is a necessary component for the experience of *communitas*. In his book, *The Ritual Process*, Turner argues that human culture cyclically moves between two primary states: structure, which relates to hierarchy, and anti-structure, the latter of which Turner develops into his concept of *communitas*. To understand *communitas*, one must first understand structure. Turner (1969, p. 96) argues that a culture's structure refers to its hierarchies and rules, which construct political, legal, and economic systems within a particular society. Broadly speaking, the structure of a culture dictates the "arrangement of positions or statuses" (Turner, 1969, p. 126) between people. In the real world, one's position within society can be obvious or subtle, built on multiple intersecting social hierarchies with varying degrees of visibility. The digital cultures of MMORPGs like *RuneScape* also construct player status through many different metrics, but most straightforwardly position players by displaying their character's level – there is no avoiding the hierarchical arrangement, as it is visibly embedded into the game's user interface (see Figure 1). Regardless of whether a culture operates in a digital space or the real world, our lives and livelihoods are often dictated by cultural rules and structures.

If structure refers to the persistent, institutionalized, rule-based hierarchies that define a culture or a game, *communitas* is the opposite: fluid, spontaneous, and egalitarian, "emerging where social structure is not" (Turner, 1969, p. 126) and creating a "communion of equal individuals" (1969, p. 96). When we experience com-



Figure 1. Screenshot of *Old School RuneScape* usernames and player levels. © Jagex

munitas during parties, we are no longer segmented into the various structures of culture but instead *with* one another, rather than above or below. I certainly felt as if I was *with* the other players during my first drop party, rather than below them in level and status. Turner theorizes that this ritualized, temporary egalitarianism serves as an outlet for disenfranchised, low-status individuals who suffer under everyday structures of hierarchy.³ Communitas thus keeps a culture “from becoming overly rigid and unstable by providing occasional relief [from structure] in the form of collective excitement and festivity” (Ehrenreich, 2006, p. 11). The drop party inspired this feeling of communitas, allowing us partygoers to temporarily exist outside of the game’s usual structure.

Alas, we could not party forever. The drop party ended and the ecstatic joy of communitas ceded to the game’s hierarchical structure; I returned to my lowly status of noob, but I was a much richer one with substantially more friends. The collective joy created by the drop party may have been temporary, but the increased degree of egalitarianism between me and other players was not. Over my decade-long (2002–2012) *RuneScape* career, drop parties served as a delightful respite of com-

3 This ‘safety valve’ theory of festivals has been echoed by other scholars such as Roger Caillois (1938/1959), Mircea Eliade (1957/1959), and Max Gluckmann (1954), each noting that these festivals, religious rituals, and parties provide people with temporary relief from the structure of hierarchy, making it more palatable in day-to-day life, and directs their passions toward playfulness instead of drumming up revolution. Klaniczay (1990) provides a helpful overview of these theories.

munitas and egalitarianism as I otherwise endured the long, usual grind of the game in my pursuit of increased levels and upward socioeconomic mobility.

Despite the ubiquity of drop parties during the 2000s, they are nearly extinct today. The current player base of *Old School RuneScape* (Jagex, 2013) is markedly smaller than it was in the aughts and is largely composed of seasoned players; the rare drop parties that occur today merely shuffle wealth among the alternate accounts of long-term players rather than meaningfully boost the status of new players. The drop parties of yore now serve as a powerful source of nostalgia for players – visiting the game’s official Discord server and searching for ‘drop parties’ brings up comments from players who remember the celebrations fondly and remark sadly on the disappearance. Similarly, entering the term ‘drop party’ into a search engine now results in forum posts such as “Where all the drop party’s like the old days?” (Alternative_Bank7115, 2024) and “Drop Parties: Do they still exist... I miss the old school drop parties, I was just wondering if they still happen as you rarely see them anymore” (DominoDaddy, 2022). Drop parties do not occur with the same frequency they used to, whereas in the past they “were such a huge thing they happened almost daily” (Disnerd8319, 2018, Official *RuneScape* Discord). It would be one matter if the player-created practice slowly faded away as the culture of *RuneScape* evolved and the player base gradually diminished; but drop parties did not have a natural death.

Marked by developer crackdowns and player riots, the history of *RuneScape* drop parties is a turbulent one and runs strikingly parallel to the fates of many other festive practices in the real world. Festivals and parties have been suppressed or controlled by ruling powers throughout history, a phenomenon observed by historians and anthropologists alike,⁴ since the creation of egalitarianism through *communitas* challenges the rules and hierarchies underpinning our everyday cultural structures. Taylor provides an explanation for this oppressive behavior, noting how “from the perspectival viewpoint of those concerned with the maintenance of ‘structure,’ all sustained manifestations of *communitas* must appear as dangerous and anarchical, and have to be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions” (1969, p. 108). Naturally concerned with the structure and hierarchical rules of *RuneScape* was, of course, the studio that developed the game – and Jagex’s management of drop parties, especially during the infamous “Pay to PK” player riot of 2007, illustrates how the threat of egalitarianism created during festive occasions can extend to player-created parties in digital games.

Using *RuneScape*’s drop parties as a case study, I argue that egalitarianism is an essential prerequisite to, and direct consequence of, experiencing collective joy within party contexts. To outline the rise and fall of *RuneScape*’s drop parties, I combine the methods of participant-observation – largely conducted during the aughts

4 See Burke, Chapters 7-9; Davis, Chapters 4-6; Ehrenreich, 2006; Stallybrass and White, 1986; Thompson, Chapters 12 and 16.

when drop parties were at the peak of their popularity – with an online ethnographic analysis of official and unofficial game forums, fan wikis, Jagex's update and patch notes, and the game's official Discord server. Much like parties in the real world, *RuneScape*'s drop parties threatened the game's underlying hierarchical rule structure by establishing egalitarianism and were similarly subjected to suppression and control. Ultimately, the fun of a party – both virtual and physical ones – relies on the temporary suspension of hierarchical structure to facilitate shared joy that can only arise within a community of equals.

Parties, status, and resource exchange

Most multiplayer games employ straightforward hi-score and ranking systems, such as multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs) like *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) or fighting games like the *Mortal Kombat* series (Midway Games, 1992–present). Unlike other multiplayer games, MMORPGs like *RuneScape* establish structural hierarchies between players based on multiple intersecting layers. The most obvious structure of hierarchy relates to player level, usually prominently displayed next to their username. However, a player's position within the rule-based hierarchy of an MMORPG can also depend on the strength and value of their weapons, armor, and other items; how much money they've acquired; how large and opulent their house is; the guild or clan they belong to; their reputation with non-player character (NPC) factions; and the titles, items, or rank they've earned through completing quests or challenges. Most of these structural layers are visible to other players and thus communicate messages about social status as well as material power.

While the player's level and status are recorded and displayed by the game system itself in many cases, the social dimension of MMORPGs adds additional complexity to the underlying power structures of these games. In his discussion of the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, game scholar Scott Rettberg explains how

a player's performance is also measured informally by his or her fellow players, particularly fellow guild members ... The types of ways players evaluate other players might range from their ability to effectively perform a given task during a raid, to their generosity... or their adherence to complex systems of social mores and etiquette. (2008, p. 8)

Where a player exists within the complex hierarchy of an MMORPG can have serious consequences: for example, *Guild Wars 2* was dominated by competitive guilds with rigid power structures that accepted new players only by application. Once initiated into a guild, members had to achieve a certain skill level and adhere to "in-game equipment standards established by guild leaders" or risk being booted (Perez, 2015, p. 5). These implicit social hierarchies, when combined with the hierarchies codified and made explicit by the game's rules, renders the player's status

within an MMORPG arguably just as complicated as our status within the structures of real life. While this may seem like awfully high stakes, the hierarchical system established by MMORPGs is part of their appeal.

Unlike the real world, where upward socioeconomic movement is often more dream than reality, MMORPGs promise players “a capitalist fairytale, in which anyone who works hard and strives enough can rise through the ranks of society and acquire great wealth” (Rettberg, 2008, p. 3). Money, once obtained, can be used to purchase expensive items, titles, pets, homes, and other prestigious objects, which can be equipped or flaunted as a way of increasing one’s social status. For example, once a player reaches the maximum level in *RuneScape*, they often turn to investing copious amounts of money and time to buy stylish (and sometimes useless) outfits for their avatar as a way of continuing their upward movement in the game’s social hierarchy.⁵ Given the symbolically charged nature of possessing and wearing rare, expensive items in *RuneScape*, the phenomena (and subsequent popularity) of drop parties – where low-status players can acquire expensive, status-boosting items with little to no effort – seems altogether incongruous with the underlying hierarchical structure of the MMORPG genre and the satisfaction that results from working hard to obtain these items within a “capitalist fairytale.” However, drop parties could hardly be deemed parties at all if they weren’t marked by the joyful redistribution of material wealth in pursuit of egalitarianism, collective joy, and social bonding.

Parties, festivals, and other ritualistic social gatherings have long served as methods of facilitating the exchange of resources between people. The Roman festival of Saturnalia began with a grand public feast hosted by the Roman state at the Temple of Saturn, followed by private banquets and gift-giving between friends and relatives (Blake, 2011, p. 366; Miller, 2010). During the Incan festival of Inti Raymi – still celebrated today – the sharing of food and other resources between people continues to support community bonding (Mars, 2010, p. 42). Many indigenous peoples living in the American Pacific Northwest hold gift-giving ritual feasts called *potlatches*, where rich⁶ hosts give away material goods such as food and other items of value to earn status within their community (Barnett, 1978; Boas, 1978). While a plethora of historical examples abound, one need not investigate the past for evidence of the connection between parties and the redistribu-

5 This phenomenon is referred to within the *RuneScape* community as ‘FashionScape’.

6 It is worth noting that the accumulation of wealth among Indigenous people in the Pacific Northwest was done for the explicit purpose of “publicly disposing of wealth... Accumulation in any quantity by borrowing or otherwise is, in fact, unthinkable unless it be for the purpose of an immediate re-distribution” (Barnett, 1978, p. 86). Possessing wealth was desirable only because it facilitated the hosting of festivals (Boas, 1978, p. 74). While the economic structure of these Northwest tribes was markedly different from our modern-day economic system, and thus terms like ‘wealthy’ and ‘poor’ do not convey precisely the same meaning in these differing contexts, I still employ them here for brevity’s sake.

tion of material resources – if you’ve attended a birthday party, wedding, or potluck, you know gift-giving and sharing food characterize most parties. In fact, resource redistribution is considered such a fundamental aspect of parties that failing to provide food for guests or bring gifts for the host is usually indicative of dreadfully bad manners (Post, 1955). Certainly, gift-giving, sharing food, and the general exchange of resources are, and likely always have been, core components of parties and festivals (Masek & Stenros, 2024; Turner, 1982).

Though the exchange of resources at a party often occurs between people occupying similar socioeconomic strata – as many of us can attest to from family Christmases and other holidays – it’s important to acknowledge that parties often explicitly and intentionally facilitate the redistribution of wealth *between* classes. For example, before the economic strain of the Black Death, noble families in Europe would host occasional holiday or celebratory feasts for the peasants who lived and worked on their estates (Woolgar, 2011, p. 15). A modern, familiar example of parties facilitating the distribution of resources between rich and poor are charity balls and galas, attended by wealthy patrons who understand the very pretense of the party means they are expected to donate money to a social cause or charitable organization. However, far from performing an equalizing function, some parties – like potlatches and charity balls – serve as opportunities for wealthy, high-status individuals to exchange some of their material power for increased social power, rather than inspire true egalitarianism. In these instances, parties become tools to accentuate a culture’s structure, rather than subvert it through *communitas*. While the redistribution of resources is arguably a core characteristic of parties, if this redistribution is performed to emphasize rather than diminish differences between participants, the party fails to create the egalitarianism necessary for the experience of collective joy.

I attended many drop parties over my years of playing *RuneScape*, and while I left all of them with a newly full inventory, only some managed to instill that same sense of shared euphoria I felt so deeply during my first. I recall several unfun drop parties spoiled by a spell called Telekinetic Grab, which allowed players to ‘cheat’ by picking up items from a considerable distance, removing the need to run around for items. These drop parties took on a competitive edge, pitting players against one another rather than bringing them together; rarely would everyone in attendance have a Magic level (or the required runes)⁷ to cast the spell, so the playing field was never truly equal. Telekinetic Grab became an unwelcome imposition of hierarchical structure, a reminder that other players had privileges that I did not. In fact, Telekinetic Grab became such a common issue during drop parties that Jagex decided to intervene, creating an empty building in the town of Seers’ Village where the spell was disabled for players to host fairer drop parties. Notably, Seers’

7 Runes (of which there are many types) are consumable items in *RuneScape* used to cast magic spells.

Village is an area exclusive to paying members – free-to-play players did not benefit from this addition and were still subjected to “telegrabbing” spoilsports.

‘Telegrabbing’ was also disabled inside player-owned homes, private spaces only accessible to others by invitation, so some players adapted by hosting exclusive drop parties. Previously, drop parties began with “massive amounts of players following one another in a massive train telling everyone about the drop party about to occur” (RuneScape Classic Fandom Wiki, “Drop party”), where all players were welcomed to spontaneously join in regardless of level or social status. By contrast, drop parties hosted in another player’s home usually required some degree of preexisting connections with higher-level players. For example, a mutual friend invited me to a drop party in the house of a max-level player (level 126), and while I had participated in countless drop parties – my main account was in the mid-70s by this point – the party unfolded in an unfamiliar manner. Rather than chatting with other players as we wandered aimlessly in a line to collect more revelers, my friend and I stood still with a group of strangers as the partygoers teleported in. Our host graciously traded us food and drink as we waited, and some attendees (including my friend) contributed an item to be distributed at the drop party. We were encouraged to wander around and “enjoy ourselves” before the party began; I marveled at our host’s lavish rooms and furnishings. When the drop party began, I quickly realized that every one of the dropped items held considerable value, which lessened the excitement and surprise of picking up the items.

Our host was much like a wealthy philanthropist hosting a charity gala to bolster their social status; sometimes, drop parties were occasions for high-level players to flaunt their wealth, play at magnanimity, and instill awe in others. High-status players, who occupy a privileged position within the game’s hierarchy, were the ones initiating drop parties because they had amassed the required wealth to give away. However, not all drop parties resulted in the kind of wealth redistribution necessary for the creation of egalitarianism. For example, in exclusive drop parties in player homes, guests were typically high-status players themselves and were expected to contribute items to the item pool. In these instances, drop parties merely shifted wealth between rich players, and the occasion primarily served as a method of strengthening the host’s social status. By contrast, the spontaneous, non-exclusive drop parties were open to all players and resulted in meaningful wealth redistribution between high-status players and low-status players. In my experience, drop parties in player homes were not very fun when compared to those I stumbled upon.

What was the difference, then, between the dullness of this house drop party and the thrill of my first? What was the fun of drop partying?

We can't have fun together unless we're equals

Structurally, parties and other celebrations are characterized by a few fundamental elements: music, dancing, the sharing of food and drink, as well as costuming and self-decoration (Ehrenreich, 2006; Turner, 1982). These elements combine to perform a critical function of parties: facilitating social connection and bonding between strangers, family and friends, and with the community at large (Masek & Strenros, 2024). While the presence of these foundational components may define a party (and are often present in other adjacent practices like rituals, celebrations, and ceremonies) they do not necessarily dictate whether the participants find the party fun, engaging, or socially satisfying. It is entirely possible to have a terrible time at a party. What separates enjoyable parties from unenjoyable ones is how well the party performs the function of facilitating social interaction, connection, and bonding. If a party successfully brings a group of people together – or masses of people, as in the case of festivals – they are collectively joyful. The fun of parties is deeply rooted in the joy of being together.

Perhaps because of its ubiquity, the phenomenon of collective joy has been given many different names throughout time. I am using the phrase “collective joy” after historian and author Barbara Ehrenreich, who defines it as the “incommunicable thrill of the group deliberately united in joy and exaltation” (2006, p. 16). She observes how collective joy occurs during parties, festivals, and ceremonies; when the joy extends to all participants, the collective experience results in the creation of powerful social bonds and a strengthened community. Sociologist Emile Durkheim also recognizes the thrill of being together: “the very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation” (1915, p. 217). Though Durkheim’s work is primarily occupied with the social origins of religion, it’s worth highlighting that he also notices how collective joy acts as a vehicle for cementing social bonds and assisting in the formation of new ones. He refers to the experience as “collective effervescence,” which he describes as ritually induced, collective euphoria and exaltation – akin to Ehrenreich’s description. The euphoria of collective joy, in Victor Turner’s view, was a product of specifically *spontaneous*⁸ or party-created *communitas*, “richly charged with affects, mainly pleasurable ones... [it] has something ‘magical’ about it. Subjectively there is in it the feeling of endless power” (1969, p.

8 Turner believes there are three kinds of *communitas*: spontaneous, normative, and ideological. He is straightforward in his description of the latter two, with normative *communitas* referring to that which eventually becomes structure, and ideological *communitas* referring to a purely utopian society. However, he provides a vague, flippant description for spontaneous *communitas*: “approximately what the hippies today would call ‘a happening,’ and William Blake might have called ‘the winged moment as it flies’ or, later, ‘mutual forgiveness of each vice’” (1969, p. 132). While the poetry is perhaps best left up to the interpretation of the reader, “a happening” during the 1960s (when Turner was writing) was slang for a party.

139). Taken together, Turner, Durkheim, and Ehrenreich all point to a few key conditions for the experience of collective joy: first, it occurs during ritualized spaces like parties; second, it relies on a group of people coming together; and third, if it is experienced, it has sincere power, creating strong social bonds between revelers and forming communities.

One of Turner's contemporaries, the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, outlines a fourth and final requirement for the experience of collective joy. In *Rebelais and His World*, Bakhtin analyzes the relationship between carnivals, laughter, and ritual inversion. He calls collective joy "the laughter of all the people" (1965/1984, p. 12) and emphasizes the equalizing function of the experience, writing that "not only does laughter make no exception for the upper stratum, but indeed it is usually directed toward it... One might say that it builds its own world versus the official world" (1965/1984, p. 88). In this world of laughter there is "a temporary suspension of the entire official system with all its prohibitions and hierarchic barriers. For a short time life came out of its usual, legalized and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom" (1965/1984, p. 89). Bakhtin views folk festivals, carnivals, and parties as an almost utopian ideal, firmly based in equality and resulting in the "abolition of alienation" (1965/1984, p. 10) between people. Turner, too, realizes the egalitarianism present in playful rituals and the worlds of laughter they create, referring to participants as "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention... [they] tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism. Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized" (1969, p. 95). Once again, the ritual suspension of the rules of normal life creates an egalitarianism between revelers. Both Turner and Bakhtin view joyful ritual practices like carnivals, parties, and festivals as expressions of collectivism and community that directly defy the hierarchical structures of socioeconomic power that dictate day-to-day life. When parties do successfully contest normal hierarchical structures, they create a temporary new world in which we can experience collective joy together as equals, and we achieve one of the "highest aims of human existence" – at least according to Bakhtin (1965/1984, p. 9). Experiencing collective joy therefore relies on the creation of a temporary world, one that dissolves the alienating structures of hierarchy and establishes an egalitarian community instead. How is this "utopian" world of laughter thus created?

The creation of a temporary world set apart from normal reality is frequently referred to within game studies as *the magic circle*,⁹ within which the rules of reality

9 While the concept of the magic circle has been subjected to rigorous criticism and reinvention within game studies over the last two decades, and the applicability of the concept to formal, structured games remains contested, it is important to remember that when Johan Huizinga originally introduces the phrase "magic circle" in *Homo Ludens* (1938/2016, p. 20), he does so to emphasize the fact that play and ritual are, in essence, the same. The magic circle thus proves applicable to parties as playful rituals (or, alternatively, as a type of ritualized play).

are suspended and replaced by the rules of play (or, as Turner would likely describe it, the temporary abandonment of structure in favor of *communitas*). In their discussion of the magic circle, game designers Salen and Zimmerman (2006) emphasize that it is players themselves who construct and maintain the border of the magic circle, which delineates between the temporary world of play and the real world. Similarly, experiencing the joy of *communitas* during a party relies on the revelers themselves collectively agreeing on how and where to draw the (albeit imperfect) border between structure/hierarchy and anti-structure/*communitas*. No one individual can create a temporary world, impose it on others, and still facilitate collective joy; a party then becomes a spectacle and a tool of control, rather than a shared experience. The world of a party must be mutually agreed upon and created together, or not at all. The fourth and final condition for the experience of collective joy, then, is the *collaborative* drawing of a magic circle within which hierarchy is replaced with egalitarianism.

When all four conditions for collective joy are met – namely, when a group of people come together to collaboratively create a ritual space within which the hierarchies of normal life are suspended in favor of egalitarianism – we exist in *communitas*, experiencing an exalted, euphoric fun that unites us and forges strong social bonds. A party is fun when it inspires this sense of collective joy; my first drop party was fun because it temporarily diminished the structural hierarchies embedded into the rule system of *RuneScape*. By contrast, the use of Telekinetic Grab and the status-boosting affairs of player-hosted drop parties were unfun precisely because they reinforced the game's structure rather than offering relief from it. When high-status, wealthy players used drop parties as a method of *reducing* their privilege through giving away valuable items, they narrowed the gap between rich and poor and reminded us that we were all equally worthy of status.

Essentially, drop parties were fun when they facilitated social bonding through the generous redistribution of wealth and subsequent creation of egalitarianism. Games that emphasize differences between players, like *RuneScape*, encourage a degree of competitiveness that is not conducive to egalitarianism and social bonding,¹⁰ but for *RuneScape* players unconcerned with achievement and progression, drop parties established the egalitarianism necessary to serve as “instruments for generating social connection” (Stenros & Masek, p. 84). Drop parties helped fulfill one of the primary player motivations behind playing MMORPGs like *RuneScape*: socializing, making friends, and collaborating with others (Yee, 2005). Player enjoyment and engagement in MMORPGs “is greatly enhanced when the game provides

10 Game designer Greg Costikyan provides examples of such unfun scenarios: “if your older brother always beats you in a footrace, you will quickly lose interest in playing with him. If your friend Jessica always wants to be the princess and insists that you must belong to the supporting cast – prince, ogre, ugly stepsister – and particularly if she never permits a reversal in the story whereby her premier status is overturned – you will want to find another way to play” (2013, pp. 9–10).

opportunities for pleasurable social interactions such as grouping and socializing, resulting in the formation of social ties" (Chen et al., 2006, p. 265). Of course, the social bonding facilitated by the creation of egalitarianism during drop parties openly defied the game's rigid and competitive hierarchical structure. As the founders of the hierarchical system of *RuneScape*, Jagex was understandably preoccupied with maintaining the structure of the game – a structure threatened by the *communitas* of drop parties.

The (drop) party revolution

By all indications, Jagex initially supported drop parties. The introduction of the Seers' Village party hall, where Telekinetic Grab was disabled, proved that Jagex aimed to preserve at least some of the egalitarianism of drop parties. Eventually, Jagex shuttered the Seers' Village space to introduce the Falador Party Room (see Figure 2) in a free-to-play location within Gielinor. Unlike the empty room in Seers' Village, the Falador Party Room had a festive atmosphere, complete with dancing knights and decorations. However, all drop parties held in the Falador Party Room followed the same prescribed format: instead of dropping items themselves, players donated items to a chest and had to spend 1,000 gold coins to start the party. Items dropped from the ceiling within balloons, and players would pop these balloons to acquire a random item placed in the chest. The Falador Party Room structured a previously spontaneous and participatory form of revelry, and drop parties



Figure 2. Screenshot of the *Old School RuneScape* Falador Party Room ('Falador Party Room', n.d.). © Jagex

became yet another victim of the longstanding tradition of ruling powers attempting to control and co-opt festive practices which create egalitarianism.

Historically, the infusion of structure into parties and festivals was a common strategy employed by ruling classes threatened by masses of people united in ecstasy. The “endless power” of these unified communities provided opportunities to reimagine power structures and ways of organizing society, thus presenting a threat to prevailing structures. Turner (1982) explains that during joyous celebrations, “Previous habits of thought, feeling, and action are disrupted. [Revelers] are thus forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain these” (p. 204). The egalitarian world of parties offers revelers a chance to reflect on the norms of real life and assess whether the current structures of society are, in fact, desirable. As parties, festivals, and carnival facilitate social bonding and joy through the creation of egalitarianism, these ritual practices are antithetical to hierarchical structures.

Recall that, according to Turner, structure refers to the “segmented, and often hierarchical system of institutionalized positions” (1969, p. 177) which exists in direct opposition to *communitas*, which is characterized by “homogeneity, equality, anonymity” (1969, p. 111). Boundaries between individuals are dissolved in *communitas* and “a group unity is experienced, a kind of generic bond outside the constraints of social structure” (Turner, 1982, p. 205). For as long as the party lasts, we are “undifferentiated, [a] homogenous whole... not ‘segmentalized’ into statuses and roles” that functionally separate us from one another (Turner, 1969, p. 177), which allows us to “experience one another concretely, and not in terms of social structural abstractions” (Turner, 1982, p. 205). When we experience *communitas* during a party, our individual identities are subsumed into that of the crowd; we exist as a small part of a greater whole, *with* one another rather than above or below. While revelers are still aware of one another’s existence, this dissolution of self into a powerful mass is critically important to the creation of egalitarianism. The anonymity of operating as part of a larger group emboldens people to act in ways they may never attempt to as an individual, such as violating and challenging structural power. To avoid any threat to hierarchy, then, unity must be prevented – and structure, with its emphasis on segmentation and separation, turns a party into a spectacle and a homogenous crowd into an audience.

A crowd participates, but an audience watches – usually in darkness, gaze focused on the bright light of the stage rather than on one another. Individuals within an audience are “unaware of other spectators except as a mass... caught up in the speech, the spectacle, the performance” (Ehrenreich, p. 187). Spectacles are isolating; talking during most performances is considered rude and disruptive, so audience members are discouraged from communicating with one another. Spectacles immobilize us, forcing us to quietly sit in seats or stand aside, watching the show rather than being part of it. A party, however, invites participation and prompts us all to share food and drink, dance, give gifts, and play music. Spectacle is, ulti-

mately, a performance to be consumed by the masses, “designed by a small group of leaders for the edification of the many” (Ehrenreich, 2006, p. 186). Spectacle reinforces social hierarchies, whereas parties, festivals, and the carnivalesque invert and mock these structures (Bahktin, 1965/1984). Though likely unintentional, Jagex’s introduction of the Falador Party Room made a spectacle of drop parties by infusing them with structure.

Jagex introduced the Falador Party Room in anticipation of a major change to the game’s structure. On December 10th, 2007, Jagex announced that they were implementing a trade limit, intended to both curb real-world trading¹¹ and prevent “unbalanced” trading. One of the changes introduced with the trade limit related to dropped items: now, only items with a market value of 3,000 gold coins or less would become visible to other players when dropped, so no meaningful wealth redistribution could occur. This eliminated drop parties outside of the confines of the Falador Party Room. Most *RuneScape* players were outraged by these (and other) changes in the update, arguing that the trade limit update prevented “larger gifts from being given to others, and reduces the amount of help that can be provided to fellow players” (‘Trade limit’, n.d.). Players could no longer trade valuable items between their own accounts, gift their friends, or kill one another in the Wilderness¹² to acquire the loser’s dropped loot. The ‘Trade and Drop Changes’ update forcibly removed the mechanism that allowed for the creation of egalitarianism through wealth redistribution and was immediately met with player protest.

The ensuing player riots, now referred to as the ‘Pay to Pk Riot’, remain “one of the largest, longest, and most impactful player unrests against Jagex in the history of the game” (‘Pay to PK Riot’, n.d.), as players protested not only the trade limit, but a whole series of unwanted updates. The riot was dispersed at first, occurring across multiple worlds, although eventually Worlds 18, 66, and 69 became protests hubs; these servers were almost always at the maximum capacity of 2,000 players for the week of the riot with the exception of the first night, when players staged a mass log-off (‘Pay to PK Riot’, n.d.). It was, to my recollection, utter chaos in the spirit of the carnivalesque – and exceptionally fun.

I first encountered the rioters in the city of Falador, a popular spot for trading at the time.¹³ While it was normal for Falador to have a high concentration of players, there was such an enormous crowd of players simultaneously speaking that their words overlapped into unreadable blocks of text. I had to leave the area to ask a

11 This refers to the practice of spending real-world money on virtual in-game items, accounts, and currency. Real-world trading is prohibited in the Terms of Service of most digital games.

12 The Wilderness was a dedicated player-versus-player area.

13 The Grand Exchange (a location in the city of Varrock which functions as an auction/trading system) had been introduced only a few days prior to the riot, and so at the time of the Trade and Drop Changes announcement, Falador city park remained one of the most popular spots for trading.

friend about the crowd, and she informed me of the updates and the burgeoning protest. Without further delay, I returned to join in: we mocked, insulted, and laughed at Jagex, engaging in carnival laughter through provoking those in power. I remember swarming a moderator who dared enter the fray in Falador's main square, berating them for the changes alongside the other players in the mob. Some players set up auto-firing cannons and clockwork toys to intentionally create disorder, while others released origami balloons and dropped a truly absurd number of useless items. Players killed themselves so gravestones would appear through the city, a behavior that transgressed normal day-to-day practices like the initial mass log-off. Within two days, the riot had spread to other cities; players showed their support for the protest by wearing pink skirts or 'full pink', which became the unofficial riot outfit ('Pay to PK Riot', n.d.).

Notably, the riot also had spectacular drop parties; as one player put it in the official *RuneScape* Discord, "Ain't no parties like the 2007 pay to pk riot drop parties" (Tweester, 2020). Since dropped items over 3,000 gold coins no longer appeared to other players outside of the Party Room, all drop parties were restricted to the new building. The drop parties were nearly continuous during the riot in the three protest worlds, and featured the most expensive, legendary items I'd ever seen. Players put billions of gold pieces, party hats (the most expensive item in the game at the time), and other ridiculously valuable items into the party chest. Players were shedding their wealth in unprecedented numbers, as many claimed they were quitting to protest the changes.

The Pay to PK Riot featured wealth redistribution, costuming, transgressive behaviors, carnival laughter, and the temporary suspension of normal day-to-day practices: it was a carnival. Parties, festivals, and carnival are regular sites of social upheaval. Cultural theorists Stallybrass and White note that:

It is in fact striking how frequently violent social clashes apparently 'co-incided' with carnival... it was only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—and then only in certain areas—that one can reasonably talk of popular politics *disassociated* from the carnivalesque at all. (1986, p. 14, emphasis in original)

While many of these revelrous uprisings were spontaneous, intentionally planned revolts associated with carnival and festival practices emerged during the sixteenth century (Ehrenreich, 2006). Parties provided advantageous conditions for those seeking rebellion: dancing, music, and drunkenness created disorder, masking and costuming granted anonymity, and the forbidden play¹⁴ of egalitarianism promp-

14 This refers to any kind of play involving transgressive behavior, often explicitly contesting the accepted and expected behaviors of the real world. Game scholar Cindy Poremba describes forbidden play as pitting the "rules from each 'reality' in collision to each other, challenging the integrity of the boundary between worlds" (2007, p. 773). Poremba explains that this collision usually occurs when the implicit rules of the ludic

ted reflection on the “natural” order of hierarchy. Understandably, when masses of people gathered as equals, joyfully uniting through challenging structures of hierarchy, those positioned at the very top of structural hierarchies found much cause for concern. In Europe, Church authorities, as well as monarchs and nobles, sought to suppress and control any joyful practices that spurred collective joy and, consequently, inspired egalitarianism.

The strong association between peasant uprisings and parties, festivals, and carnival led to a concerted “wave of repression” beginning in the seventeenth century (Ehrenreich, 2006, p. 97). Until the twentieth century,

... there were literally thousands of acts of legislation introduced which attempted to eliminate carnival and popular festivity from European life. In different areas of Europe the pace varied, depending upon religious, class and economic factors. But everywhere, against the periodic revivals of local festivity and occasional reversals [of structural power], a fundamental ritual order of western culture came under attack—its feasting, violence, drinking, processions, faires, wakes, rowdy spectacle and outrageous clamor were subject to surveillance and repressive control. (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 176)

From Russia to Scotland and further south into the Mediterranean, ruling classes targeted traditional festivities, sports of every kind from football to boxing, saints’ days, and Christian holiday celebrations deemed too unruly. For example, the maypole – long associated with festivities in English and French culture – became such a symbol of defiance against prevailing hierarchical orders that they were regularly torn down before peasants could congregate, experience collective joy, and risk developing egalitarian aspirations.¹⁵ To the common person, “it must have seemed as if pleasure itself had been declared illegal” (Ehrenreich, 2006, p. 100), as “almost every possible occasion for revelry and play” was “denounced and often banned outright” (2006, p. 98). For *RuneScape* players at the end of 2007, the “Trade and Drop Changes” update evoked a similar feeling; no longer could players revel with one another freely, subjected instead to the rigid structure of the Falador Party Room.

world are put in conflict with the implicit rules of reality; in our present discussion, this occurs as the egalitarian rule of parties colliding with the hierarchies embedded into the structure of normal life. Forbidden play thus has “critical potential” to say something about society as it encourages partiers to look back on normal life to criticize it, and in the process of doing so, can disintegrate the boundary between play and the real.

- 15 Beyond the threat of egalitarianism, there were other reasons for the rigorous and extended attempts at suppression, such as the Calvinist obsession with work and conflation of leisure with sin, the increasing work hours resulting from industrialization, and the introduction of bourgeois, rather than entrepreneur, capitalism (Ehrenreich, 2006; Stallybrass & White, 1986; Weber, 1930/2005).

Jagex did respond to the carnivalesque protestations of their players once the riots died down; in the case of drop parties, Jagex acknowledged that hosting drop parties was a “popular activity” and advised players to continue the practice within the Falador Party Room (Jagex, 2007). Players hosted parties there for a while, but drop parties were never quite the same after the riot. Since any player could place items in the chest and the drops were no longer curated by an individual or small group, there was a much higher ratio of useless to valuable items; the Party Room did not facilitate meaningful wealth redistribution between rich and poor players like previous drop parties had. Eventually, dedicated ‘party crashing’ clans formed, and would descend on the Party Room to fill the chest with junk. Finally, depending on the value of the items placed in the party chest, NPCs would announce that a party was going to happen – and when the collection of items amounted to a million gold pieces or more in value, every banker across Gielinor would offer free teleports to the Party Room. This attracted large groups of players, increasing competition and the likelihood of walking away with nothing of value. Jagex had successfully relegated drop parties to a space they had manufactured. No longer occurring in a world collaboratively constructed by the revelers themselves, drop parties became a spectacle, and could not inspire collective joy, egalitarianism, and social bonding in the same way as before.

Gone, but not forgotten

While Jagex did eventually lift the trade limit ban three years later in 2011, drop parties never fully recovered. Undoubtedly, the waning relevance and player count of *RuneScape* in recent years also contributed to the death of the practice. A dedicated fanbase still plays *Old School RuneScape*, a version of the game permanently frozen in the era during which drop parties were held with regularity, but even still, drop parties don’t occur as they used to. Though Jagex supported drop parties at first, their preoccupation with preserving the structure of their game and preventing real-world trading had the unintended consequence of extending the real-world suppression of festival practices into a virtual space. *RuneScape* drop parties serve as a regrettable modern installment within a historical narrative: those holding structural power attempt to control parties, festivals, and joyful ritual practices which spark communitas, redistribute power between social classes, and support community bonding through egalitarianism. Joyful ritual practices are often subjected to suppression and control because of the inherent threat they pose to hierarchical structures of normal life. Regardless of whether the festivities happen in the physical world or virtual world, egalitarianism is an essential prerequisite to and consequence of experiencing collective joy in party contexts.

Feeling some degree of fairness and equality is a necessary precursor to experiencing the collective joy inherent within communitas. Even in situations where some roles are given preferential treatment – such as the marrying couple at their wedding, or the person whose birthday is being celebrated – all participate in its cre-

ation. To experience collective joy, something “rather more than the casual camaraderie of ordinary social life” (Turner & Turner, 1982, p. 205), all revelers must collaboratively create the temporary ritual space of a party to have fun. Once the party concludes, we know its hierarchy will dissolve – and, for many of us, be unfortunately replaced by the oppressive social and material hierarchies that define our current world.

Do these hierarchies *need* to define our world, though? Importantly, partying together and experiencing collective joy prompt us to ask this transgressive question, helping us “look back on everyday life and criticize it and look forward to the process that can re-make it” (Rinzler & Seitel, 1982, p. 7). The world of laughter is one that encourages us to renegotiate the structures that rule over us in our day-to-day lives: this is precisely the reason why party-created egalitarianism poses such a dire threat to those occupying positions of structural power. Experiencing spontaneous, collective joy during parties proves that hierarchies are socially, rather than naturally, imposed – and can thus be undone. Reveling in *communitas* with one another can be a truly revolutionary act: one that reminds us that we all have equal worth, that our joy has power, that we can use our joy to remake a new and better world for all to equally share.

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Getting High in a Hi-Tech Setting Narrative Structure and Archetypical Partygoers in the Mass Effect 3 DLC Citadel Mission: ‘Party’

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Getting High in a Hi-Tech Setting

Narrative Structure and Archetypical Partygoers in the *Mass Effect 3* DLC *Citadel* Mission: ‘Party’

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Abstract

This study engages with representations of partying in singleplayer sci-fi games by taking the *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012a) DLC *Citadel* (BioWare, 2012b) mission ‘Party’ as its case. Through a theoretical lens based on previous notions of partying and play forms – chiefly the theory of game rubrics by Roger Caillois (1958/2001) and the three-act structure of drama by Syd Field (1979/2005) – the structure of the party, and the roles and functions of the characters present there, are analysed to understand the possibilities and limitations of participating in partying. The findings are presented as a timestamped graph of the three acts of the in-game party, along with descriptions of eleven identified festive archetypes. The study concludes that the Cailloisian concepts are apt for analysing parties as narratological and gamelike phenomena, and that the complexity of fun preferences should be taken seriously in forthcoming party research.

Keywords

Partying; games; Roger Caillois; three-act structure; *Mass Effect*; sci-fi; archetypes

A party is a collective event among like-minded individuals. It requires teamwork and an understanding of group dynamics. (EDI, *Mass Effect 3*)

In their clarion call for game studies to include party studies as a subfield within the former, Masek and Stenros (2024) have offered a tripartite taxonomy of parties, distinguished by their respective purposes: parties connecting strangers, parties reinforcing connections within family and friend groups, and parties reinforcing

connections within society. Yet, as the authors note, the literature is scarce regarding how partying is understood as a playful activity. In this article, we contribute to the emerging body of work on partying as a subdivision within game studies by offering a visualisation of the dramaturgical structure of parties and a burgeoning typology of partygoers. To mend the dearth of party research within game studies, we set out to analyse a microcosmos within a microcosmos in the hope of sparking interest in further studying the nature and characteristics of representations of parties from a narratological and ludic perspective. This, we trust, will be beneficial for understanding the omnipresent forms of leisure in our forthcoming ludic century (cf. Zimmerman, 2015).

Despite the advantageous effects of partying, recent studies suggest that partying has decreased in post-pandemic society, especially among young people (Törrönen et al., 2019). Oftentimes, research on partying has focused on the negative impact of the phenomenon – and the resulting moral panic attributed to it (Masek & Stenros, 2024). Today, however, a reversed moral panic might be dreaded. Instead of socialising, young adults engage in *sofalisising* (Tosuntaş et al., 2020), and a decrease in alcohol consumption has been tied to increased social media usage (Luomanen & Alasuutari, 2022; Törrönen et al., 2021), leading to shifting drinking patterns and practices (Caluzzi et al., 2024). Thus, young people risk missing out on the power inherent in partying, namely, the ability to reaffirm friendships and expand one's network of friends (Demant & Østergaard, 2007). Alarmingly, various editorials speak of an ongoing 'loneliness epidemic' following the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic (eClinicalMedicine, 2023; Ng, 2024; Thomas, 2024). Thus, the culturally reproduced literacy needed to throw and attend a successful party to connect with friends and society at large risks becoming rusty. This warrants more research on parties as phenomena, to understand the norms and mechanisms dictating successful parties, lest we risk bringing up a generation unsynchronised with its own species. As noted by Masek and Stenros (2024), a boring party is a failed party – but little research exists on how to achieve fun at a party. More research is thus needed regarding the genre, structure, and components of a successful party.

The central aim in Masek and Stenros's (2024) study was to understand how participants see parties as connected to playfulness, relying on previous studies that likewise identify connections between play and other activities (such as between play and group sex; see Harviainen & Frank, 2018). To understand how partying can be further qualified as a form of play, as well as to note how notions of playfulness in in-game settings are represented, in turn, we have chosen to return to Roger Caillois's (1958/2001) notions of play to consolidate a rigorous theoretical framework apt for analysing our empirical data. In doing so, we set out to capture the nature of partying through a Cailloisian understanding of games and play, returning to his concepts of *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*, along with different approaches to rules.

As our object of study, we chose the singleplayer science fiction game *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012a), specifically the downloadable content (DLC) *Citadel* (BioWare, 2012b), containing a fictional party. *Mass Effect 3* is part of a videogame series lauded for reflecting the whole of society (Zekany, 2016), and subjected to ample player-based research due to its impact on its players and its devoted fanbase (Burgess & Jones, 2018; Dutton et al., 2011; Krobová et al., 2015; Murzyn & Valgaeren, 2016). The *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007–2013) has sold approximately 14 million copies worldwide. *Mass Effect 3* is the most popular of those, with seven million copies sold (D'Angelo, 2012; Radić, 2021). The *Mass Effect* games are praised for their narrative, worldbuilding, characters, voice acting, and emphasis on player choice (Wojnar, 2021). Arguably, many players have been exposed to the game's worldview. Additionally, the subreddit r/masseffect displays plenty of fan-based praise for the party within the DLC. Consequently, it is reasonable to believe that the party reflects a strong sentiment among the players, as the fanbase feels deeply connected to its representation. They may thus regard the representation of the party as an example of a real-life party – one of the few instances of leisure time presented in the game, in contrast to the otherwise serious narrative.

Aims and research questions

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it aims to study the representation of the party in the *Mass Effect 3* DLC *Citadel* and to examine the usefulness of Cailloisian terminology for interpreting the narrative structure and the playful experiences of a party represented in a digital game. Second, it aims to understand how archetypical partygoers are represented in the party. This is done to show the complexity of parties as ludic phenomena, from the standpoint that people enjoy them differently. To guide our analysis, we have engaged with the following research questions:

1. How can the representation of the party in-game be understood narratologically?
2. What playful role and ludic function do the characters have at the fictional party?

The setting

The *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007–2013) is a series of sci-fi, action roleplaying, singleplayer games developed by BioWare. The games' narrative focuses heavily on player decisions significantly impacting the story, the state of the game world, and nonplayer character relationships across all three titles, resulting in multiple possible play experiences (Zakowski, 2014), as well as individually driven approaches to history (Marino Carvalho, 2015) and even religion (Irizarry & Irizarry, 2014).

The trilogy takes place in a futuristic Milky Way galaxy where various intelligent alien species coexist under an interstellar political alliance centred on the Citadel, a space

station and symbol of galactic civilization (Mass Effect Wiki, n.d.). Humanity is relatively new to this stage, having recently discovered faster-than-light travel through antique alien technology known as mass relays. Players take on the role of Commander Shepard, and from the start, they can customise Shepard's sex, appearance, backstory, psychological profile, and first name. Shepard is an elite human soldier tasked with protecting the galaxy from threats and uncovering secrets hidden in its ancient history. The emerging narrative explores themes of cooperation, war, identity, bigotry, synthetic life, and the legacy of earlier civilizations, all the while allowing players to guide moral and tactical decisions.

The narrative game mechanics in Mass Effect

What makes the *Mass Effect* games narratively interesting is how they present the relationships between the protagonist Shepard and their squadmates. These companions are one of the trilogy's defining strengths, serving as combat allies but also as narrative lenses and emotional anchors. Each game features a diverse team of alien and human characters who join Shepard for political, personal, or purely ideological reasons. To deepen the relationship between Commander Shepard and these companions, the player can: (1) talk to them between missions aboard the Commander's ship, Normandy; (2) complete loyalty missions, which are personal side quests that explore their backstories and unlock combat bonuses upon success; and (3) romance certain companions, experiencing evolving relationships with returning characters throughout the game trilogy.

Each companion serves as a portal into a culture, theme, or conflict in the galaxy, personalising and contextualising the galactic politics, ideologies, and historical grudges. Companions often react to the player's choices, challenge their worldviews, or support their goals. Some disagree with the player's choices, whether on moral or political grounds, making them feel like fully realised characters rather than easily controlled pawns (cf. Jørgensen, 2010). Through optional conversations, the player can develop empathy and even intimacy with each companion, which enriches the narrative stakes, especially when threats put these characters in danger. This empathic relationship creates a powerful narrative effect and investment in the games (Lankoski, 212). Further, rather than relying on codex entries or exposition, the galaxy comes alive through their perspectives, where they both serve the plot and become the plot – defined by game developer Lee Sheldon (2004, pp. 42–43) as *pivotal characters*, a role usually reserved for the protagonist or antagonist. Through these supporting characters, the game engages with notions of multiculturalism – arguably to reinforce American imperial logics as beneficial (Patterson, 2015) or to present a future solution to postcolonial legacies through multicultural universalism common in the space opera genre (Callahan, 2019; Hayden, 2017). However, although there are a variety of characters, including LGBTQ ones, these are justified only through systems of efficiency, militarism, and nationalism; in essence, as useful assets and expendable when not (Youngblood, 2018).

Description of Mass Effect 3: Citadel and the ‘Party’ mission

The analysed party is found in the *Citadel* DLC, the final DLC pack for *Mass Effect 3*. It has the following description on Electronic Arts’ homepage: “Commander Shepard and the Normandy crew get a much-deserved break, but their shore leave is short-lived. Face down a new villain before catching up with old friends from Mass Effect 1 and 2” (BioWare, 2013).

The DLC gives the player new adventures, areas, and attractions on the space station Citadel, and the option to connect with some of the series’ non-player characters, including companions, and to have a party. The party can thus, in Masek and Stenros’s (2024) terms, be labelled a party connecting friends and family. As such, the party portrayed is reminiscent of a typical house party (cf. Demant & Østergaard, 2007). Moreover, the party in *Mass Effect* follows the traditional three-act structure outlined by Syd Field (1979/2005, pp. 13–14) in his book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, with ascending and descending actions and a few climaxes. As noted by Morisset (2014), the *Mass Effect* games challenge the Aristotelian stipulation that narratives be structured around a beginning, a middle, and an end, as players can influence the storytelling. However, the player does not have any agency to influence the general outcome of the party, following in line with the function of limited agency in the game series itself, as noted by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012), as well as by Burgess and Jones (2018) regarding the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy (see Reardon et al., 2017).

As an optional event in the game, the party remains relevant to players who invest time and emotions in the fictional characters, as the game’s characters, like other fictional characters, are scripted to elicit the same empathic responses as real individuals do (cf. Lankoski, 2012; Morrison & Ziemke, 2005).

Method, material, and delimitations

For this study, we based our analysis on a walkthrough of the relaxed version of the party, provided by the YouTube channel Zevik (2014). Our analysis is a theory-driven close reading of the dialogues in the recording, along with observations of the actions in the narrative (see Appendix 1). Although notions of hypermasculinity, female sexualisation, disability, or queerness in the *Mass Effect* series have been noted by previous research (Blythe Adams, 2015; Jerreat-Poole, 2020; Krampe, 2018; Lavigne, 2015; Lima, 2023; Winter, 2022; Youngblood, 2018), we do not focus on the representations of the social background variables of the characters in this study. For the dramatic structure of the party, gender, extraterrestrial race, or rank are deemed irrelevant to the essence of the encounter or the gamelike situation in question – although social background variables are frequently ascribed meaning in real gamelike situations (cf. Goffman, 1961/2013, p. 29).

Theory: Caillois's rubric of play forms

To strengthen the logical ties between game studies and party studies, we draw on a theoretical framework informed by prior work on play forms. In this study, we thus engage with Roger Caillois's (1958/2001) fundamental rubric, in which analogue games can be analysed according to their ability to create fun through competition (*agôn*), chance (*alea*), make-believe (*mimicry*), and vertigo (*ilinx*). Our case, a representation of a party played out in a video game, might thus come off as a counterpoint to the Cailloisian game rubric. However, as Carbone et al. (2017) note, contemporary games – videogames – ought not to be squeezed into the shape sorter provided by Caillois's pre-videoludic rubric. Rather, the Cailloisian perspective on play, society, and agency should be used to analyse the social premises under which present video games exist. This, they mean, is cognate with Caillois's embracing of contradictory and unattainable notions of reality. Moreover, McDonald (2020) argues that the Cailloisian subdivision of play into four forms was arbitrary and non-empirical, and that this position opens new ways to discover fundamental types of games and play – an act which, in itself, would also constitute a form of play. In this article, we have sought to elaborate the Cailloisian rubric by adding newer modifications to his theory to our analytical framework.

Our first modification stems from Masek's (2023) introduction of two new concepts to the Cailloisian duality of *paidia* (rulelessness) and *ludus* (ruleness), namely, *līlā* and *muhō*: creating and changing rules as a form of play, and violating rules as a form of play, respectively. Importantly, all four ways of engaging with rules can be present in the same experience, overlapping with one another. Another configuration of the duality of play has been suggested by Lauwaert et al. (2007), namely, the addition of the concepts of *repens* (surprise) and *repositio* (forced retry), to compensate for the neglect of temporal and dynamic structures of games. To make a game enjoyable, they argue, a game must achieve balance between its game elements and the game experience, as too much *repens* or *repositio* kills the fun of playing the game. The proper balance between the concepts, on the other hand, "gives players the delight of mastering a complex, new task" (Lauwaert et al., 2007, p. 103). Although relevant to the analysis of games in general, these two concepts were tricky to operationalise for our present data (which depict a party rather than a party game as such). Thus, we had to exclude them from our analysis.

Our second modification stems from McDonald's (2020, p. 863) interpretation of Caillois's definition of play as the pure form of an "experience of uncertainty that draws its content from elsewhere". In our interpretation, play (the experience of uncertainty in a safe space) is understood as deriving its content from a game (sources catering to various desires). These desires include the "drive to compete, to submit passively, to become other, and to destroy one's own equilibrium" (McDonald, 2020, p. 869). In other words, the elements of *paidia*, *ludus*, *līlā*, and *muhō* are summoned through the grimoires of *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx* – sometimes intersectably (see Figure 1). As noted by Rogers (1982), games offer total experiences

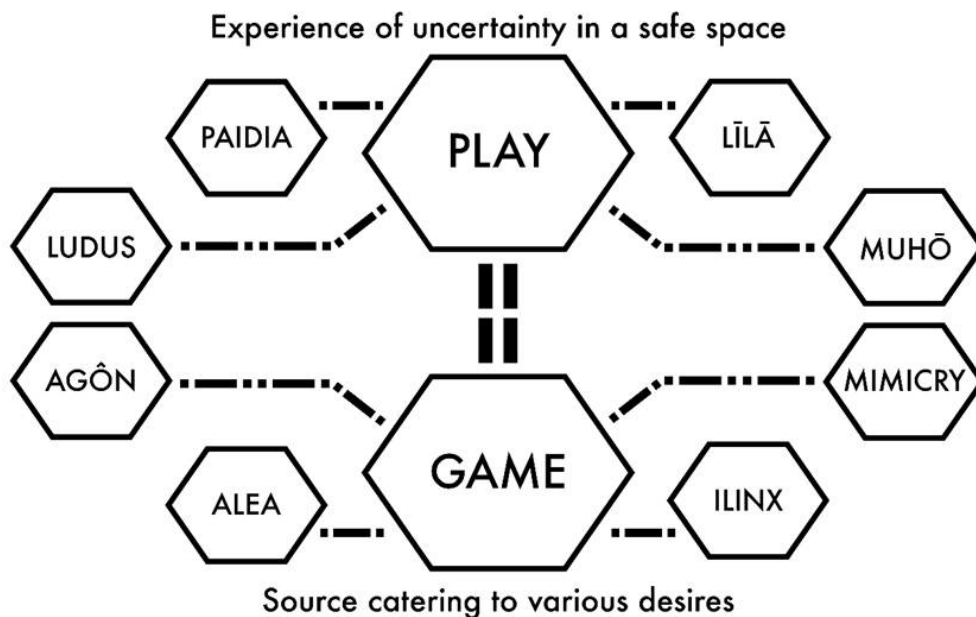


Figure 1. The relation between play (as experience) and game (as object), as understood in this study.

that are hard to classify in any rigid matrix, as they are interconnected. However, despite being interconnected, we still perceive the parts as essentially different. Remaining too rigid, thus, would not enable any analysis in the end. Furthermore, similar intersecting analyses of play forms and games have been carried out, for instance, by Ottens (2016), who utilises the Cailloisian fourfold rubric to analyse a *Lord of the Rings* boardgame, observing how the four play forms intersect.

Partying and playfulness: Inviting Caillois to the party

Applying Caillois's concepts to other disciplines has been successfully done before. For instance, Wilhelmsson (2008) has shown the potential in applying the Cailloisian rubric to understand narratives as games or games as narratives. Both games and narratives are free, separated from everyday life and limited in time and space, uncertain (in the sense that the nature of a narrative or game cannot be determined beforehand), unproductive (in terms of material wealth), regulated by rules, and fictional (in the sense that narratives and games require a suspension of disbelief to be enjoyed).

Similarly, there are clear connections between the Cailloisian play forms and the act of partying, as hinted in Masek and Stenros's (2024) descriptions. The party-as-ritual seems cognate with both *mimicry* and *ilinx*, in the sense that costumes (*mimicry*) and the consumption of inhibition-reducing drugs along with dancing (*ilinx*), are common across various parties. In all three forms of partying, "games", "game play experiences", and "game playing" feature as ways to facilitate social interaction or reinforce

social connection, respectively. Although Masek and Stenros (2024) do not specify the general genre of these games, it is nevertheless reasonable to assume that these games are of a competitive or chance-based nature. Moreover, the authors argue that the bulk of previous research on partying treats parties as sites where legal restrictions are challenged, thereby risking a rhetoric in which partying “should be seen as somehow unacceptable or forbidden by society” (2024, p. 78). This conception of partying aligns with the Cailloisian concept of *ilinx* – the panic, chaos, and destruction of established order as the source of fun and excitement. In their conclusion, Masek and Stenros defend their identified similarities between parties and games through an argument which echoes the definition of games by Caillois (1958/2001, pp. 9–10), namely, as something free and joy-inducing, as something separate from ordinary life, as something arbitrary and thus void of strict determinability, as something unproductive, as something rule-bound, and as something based on make-believe. Parties, much like games, are “a seemingly inefficient use of resources and full of arbitrary rules and rituals. They promote fictional ‘as if’ spaces where normal social expectations change. They frequently create positive experiences” (Masek & Stenros, 2024, p. 90), and “succeeding at making a socially connecting party is often seen as a playful experience itself” (2024, p. 87). In other words, setting out to establish the pre-imagined definition of a successful party – acting it out, as it were – becomes an act of *mimicry* in itself. Furthermore, as “numerous individuals measured the success or failure of parties” in their empirical data (2024, p. 88), it might be argued that parties are seen as competition (or, indeed, chance) against a hypothetical adversary, in the sense that the host can either succeed or fail – win or lose – in their pursuit of hosting a party. The same can be said about the partygoer, who might have something at stake – winning the heart of a potential bed mate against a handful of other suitors (*agôn*), or hoping to have a good time despite the general uncertainty of any alcohol-induced gathering under the tyranny of an unknown seating chart (*alea*).

One possible incompatibility between play and partying concerns the Cailloisian criterion of unproductivity. Unlike games of competition which – when taken too seriously – risk resulting in a sundering of a social entity, parties are generally “goal-oriented toward facilitating a unique type of highly playful experience” (Masek & Stenros, 2024, p. 88), and the phenomenon of highly playful partying is an act “that creates an experience of social connection in a group mediated through a shared engagement-prioritizing activity” (2024, p. 87). Obviously, this notion of partying as inherently goal-oriented does not quite align with Caillois’s definition of play as free and unproductive. In their Marxist reading of Caillois’s work, Kristensen and Wilhelmsson (2017, p. 392) interpret Caillois’s definition of play as something “voluntary” as follows: “all except play is depriving man from being man and the free will to play lies at the essence of man as a social being, making man completely man”. In addition, the players of games must “remain amateurs to reach this paradise” of Caillois’s (Kristensen & Wilhelmsson, 2017, p. 396), wherein real and dream are mixed, rather than play being an accumulation of capital, in the capitalist sense. In

Masek and Stenros's (2024) notion of partying, however, a clear goal-orientation towards succeeding with a party seems to contradict the notion of play as unproductive (unless, of course, the goal-orientation of a party must be understood as autotelic, in the sense that the – mostly social – capital accrued when hosting a party or attending one is only relevant in the separated and fictional space of said party). For this study alone, we have not engaged with how the party might influence the out-of-party context in the *Mass Effect* story. Thus, we safely conclude that, for the sake of the party as something separate from ordinary life, the freedom and unproductivity criteria remain intact within partying, despite the goal-oriented pursuit of connecting people or reinforcing connections between them.

Operationalisation: Games and rules

In this study, we rely on Caillois's (1958/2001) four play forms – *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx* – along with Masek's (2023) elaboration on the Cailloisian rule terms *paidia* and *ludus* and the addition of the Masekian rule terms *lilā* and *muhō* to analyse the party in the *Mass Effect 3* Citadel DLC. For the reader's benefit, we have operationalised the terminology to add rigour to our analysis (see Table 1).

Ludic term	Caillois's/Masek's definition	Operationalisation	Examples at a party/among practitioners
AGÔN	Games of competition. Relates to merit.	Engaging in explicit competition or declaring a will to compete against fellow partygoers, for instance, by taunting or comparing.	Playing beer pong at a party (<i>agôn</i> + <i>ilinx</i>).
ALEA	Games of chance. Relates to heredity.	Engaging in games based on chance or deriving fun at the party from that which cannot be controlled or expected beforehand.	Playing poker at a party (<i>agôn</i> + <i>alea</i>).
MIMICRY	Games of make-believe. Relates to masking.	Dressing up for the party or engaging in charades or deriving fun from being out of one's usual character.	Dressing up for the best outfit (<i>agôn</i> + <i>mimicry</i>).
ILINX	Games of vertigo. Relates to trance.	Engaging in mind-altering activities or declaring a will to create chaos at the party.	Drinking wine while wearing a toga (<i>ilinx</i> + <i>mimicry</i>).
PAIDIA	Play as an act freed from rules.	The deriving of fun or pleasure from activities at the party, where there are no rules.	Experimental artists, children.

LUDUS	Play as an act bound by rules.	The deriving of fun or pleasure from activities where the rules of the party are respected.	Lawyers, dice-based role-players.
LĪLĀ	Play as an act of making rules.	The deriving of fun or pleasure from altering the rules at the party or creating new rules.	Politicians, gamemasters.
MUHŌ	Play as an act of breaking rules.	The deriving of fun or pleasure from breaking the rules at the party.	Jesters, online trolls.

Table 1. Operationalisation of the ludic terms used in the analysis of the DLC party.

Analysis

First, we present our analysis of the three-act structure of the party based on our operationalisation of the Cailloisian concepts (see Figure 2). Then, we present a typology of partygoers using the same terminology.

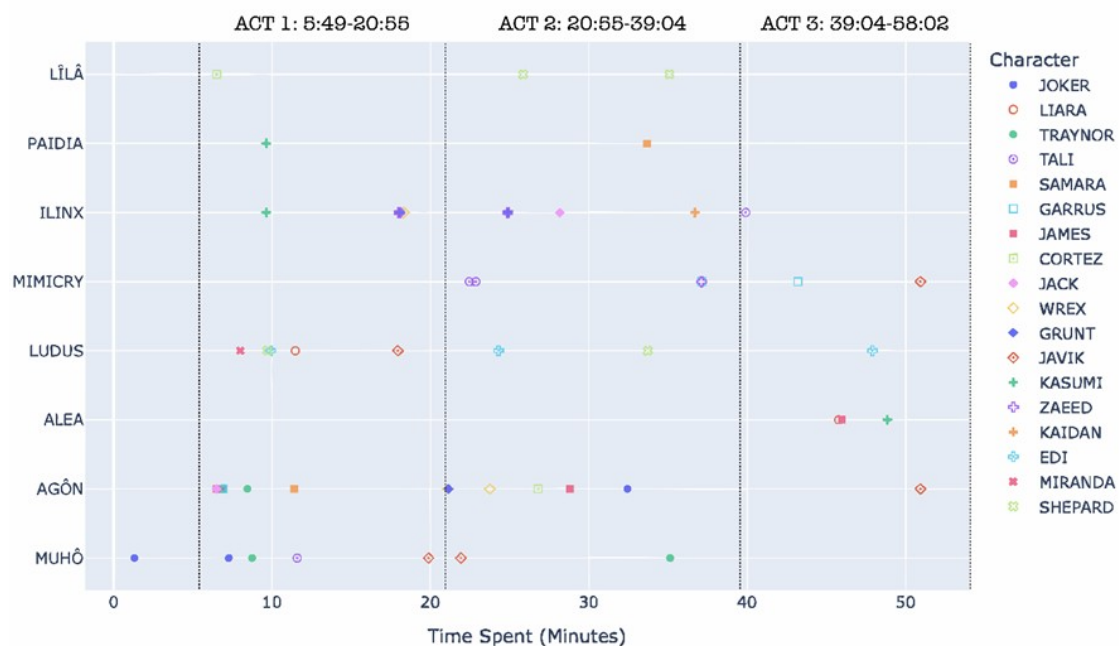


Figure 2. Timeline of game characters' actions categorised through the Cailloisian/Masekian concepts, divided into three acts.

The three-act structure of the party

Prologue

After the mission ‘Citadel: Retake the Normandy’, the pilot of Shepard’s ship, Joker, suggests that the protagonist throw a party in their apartment to celebrate the mission’s success, offering the player the option to either follow suit or cancel. To get the party started, Shepard must pick up party supplies in the nearby commercial district and then decide whom to invite from a guest list. Some of the nonplayer characters are invited by default, while others, including squadmates, are optional invites. Understandably, only squadmates who survived the three games and finished parts of their story arcs can be invited. As a disclaimer, not all characters were available in the walkthrough we chose to analyse.

Act I: In search of conflict

When the invites go out, the AI character Glyph asks the protagonist what type of party they want: quiet or energetic. These choices will set the initial dialogue in the first part of the party, but not the different groups formed during the party, which are determined by the guest list. Depending on the number and types of guests, up to four groups form during the party – each with different dialogues between the characters, placement, and events, while the squadmate Kasumi, if available, will move between groups. As noted earlier, we have focused solely on the quiet version of the party in this analysis.

In the first act, we note a clear over-representation of *agôn*, *muhō*, *ludus*, and *ilinx*, with only one instance each of *lilā* and *paidia*. The over-representation of *agôn* stems from the competitive banter among the non-player characters, many of whom have military backgrounds. An example of this is the conversation between Jack and James, seated on a sofa and discussing the subject of tattoos, where they clearly enjoy comparing their military exploits (Appendix, 06:30–06:42). During the same instance, another example of *agôn* occurs in the kitchen, where Traynor, Liara, Garrus, and Tali engage in icebreaking by commenting on the size of Shepard’s apartment, and how expensive it must be (Appendix, 06:54–07:06). The characters add their own suggestions for alternative projects on which the money could have been spent – a conversation which resembles the art of whining, as the characters playfully compete in providing better suggestions.

Instances of *muhō* occur in relation to instances of *ludus*, as can be seen in how Joker engages in a narrative attempt at breaking decorum, producing a *faux pas*: “I’d make Cerberus popular. Big propaganda campaign, like I was running for president. Fundraising dinner, shaking hands, kissing babes” (Appendix, 07:16). Miranda comments on his utterance by correcting his phrasing – “I think the expression you want is kissing babies” (Appendix, 08:80) – thus offering a return to a rule-bound and adequate way of communication. Joker continues his *muhōesque* critique of the Cerberus project, to which his love interest EDI responds with a *ludusian* remark, “Do

you remember that I am also a Cerberus project?" (Appendix, 09:56), leaving Joker feeling presumably ashamed of his negative exposé. An instance of *paidia* is also put in relation to *ludus*, as Kasumi shows up out of nowhere, childishly interrupting a conversation on which she has been presumably eavesdropping all along, to which Shepard declares the impertinence of said gesture.

Finally, the first act contains an instance of *ludus* versus *ilinx*, wherein Javik proclaims that his chauvinistic race only participated in parties where they "considered the future and respected the dead", that is, where rules were observed and where logic-based activities were cherished (Appendix, 17:57). Zaeed, Grunt, and Wrex each voice their distaste for *ludus*, preferring fun based on *ilinx* – to which Javik responds with a *faux pas*, questioning the whole point of the party and thus breaking the decorum of the same:

Zaeed: Sounds boring.

Grunt: There's usually more yelling and cursing at any gatherings I go to.

Wrex: Get a bunch of Krogan together, and things always get fun and probably broken.

Javik: 50,000 years from now, no one will remember this party. What is the point? (Appendix, 18:02–18:53)

In conclusion, the first act seems to hinge on tension: the characters need to break the ice and feel comfortable in their new surroundings. Interestingly, this involves summoning play forms that break the stiffness of the situation. Competing, taunting, or playfully bantering with other partygoers may satisfy the need for conflict and getting the party going. This also relates to the sensation of boredom visible towards the ends of the first act, where certain characters express a lust for chaos. In essence, the first act of the party quickly moves from stiffness to increased dynamics and an ascension of action.

Act II: Burning one's candles at both ends

In the second act of the party, a clear over-representation of examples of *agôn*, *ilinx*, and *mimicry* occurs, along with two instances of *ludus*, *līlā*, and *muhō*, and one single instance of *paidia*. A good example of *agôn* is the dialogue between the Krogans Wrex and Grunt, where the younger Krogan tries to challenge the veteran Wrex to drink more:

Wrex: Drink!

Grunt: I'm drinking, but it's not a drinking game.

Wrex: Afraid to lose?

Grunt: Nothing to do with fear. I know I'll lose. (Appendix, 21:06–21:30)

The same aliens are represented in a notable instance of *ilinx* where they engage in a dialogue with the protagonist, by repeating the surname Shepard in different humorous ways, clearly making fun of their commander with the intent of creating communicative chaos. A clear example of *mimicry* is the Quarian (alien) character Tali and her attempt to mimic a spaceship using her body language and making sounds like an engine: “You have to imagine my arms are the wings” (Appendix, 22:27–22:52).

Examining the occurrences of *ludus*, *lilā*, and *muhō*, a few instances can be mentioned in detail. As an example of *ludus*, the AI EDI finds pleasure by observing the disorganised activities inherent in the structure of the party: “I am observing displays of complex social entropy, so yes, I am having a good time” (Appendix, 24:18). The host, Shepard, follows the behaviour of *lilā* by asking the alien Javik to go easy on the drinks: “Sure, uh you might want to tap the brakes a little” (Appendix, 25:50). The alien Javik, in turn, breaks the social rules according to *muhō* by clearly wishing to touch a female character in his drunken arousal. Seated at the bar desk, he explicitly remarks: “I would like to touch you” (Appendix, 21:55), laughing at her reaction and the absurdity of his own remark.

In conclusion, the second act seems to be based on social entropy (as aptly stated by EDI): consuming alcoholic beverages, as committed by Wrex, Grunt, Tali, and Javik, leads to the removal of personal inhibition. Wrex and Grunt, having taunted each other to become intoxicated, engage in mind-bending play with their host, whereas Tali and Javik break decorum by voicing their present lust for intimate interaction. Consequently, the host is heard declaring various orders back to order, that is, establishing new rules and reminding the guests of culturally agreed codes. The second act of the party thus orbits around the theme of utmost energy; the characters are burning their candles at both ends, as it were, in their pursuit of festive exaltation.

Act III: Denouement

After talking to the character Glyph a third time, the player can choose to start the final phase of the party. In this case, the groups and interactions are determined by the theme of the second part, and the protagonist can only decide which group Glyph will appear with, for example, helping some characters make food in the kitchen or keeping an eye on others who are quarrelling. Regardless of the theme, the player can, after talking to all groups and listening to as much dialogue as they want, then go to the couch to gather the guests for a group photo. With a final camera move showing the photo later hanging on a wall, the scene fades to black, marking the end of the party.

A clear over-representation of *alea* and *mimicry* occurs in the final act of the party; *ilinx*, *ludus*, and *agôn* occur one time each. Engaging in *mimicry* are Garrus and Zaeed, playing around with the potential ways to improve the apartment by technical means – prospecting the herbarium and the bathroom, and discussing possible traps to install. In the previous act, the two characters have talked among themselves about the potential of the apartment, engaging in mind games about planning and picturing what could be done to their present surroundings. In the third act, the two characters – in their devoted illusion – split up into different parts of the apartment, communicating via comlinks, thereby furthering the illusion of their game of make-believe. Garrus remarks: “Ah, there are too many windows, and they’re... too big. Makes it easy for someone to track your movements, but it’s got potential. Be easy to set up a defensible position over there” (Appendix, 37:17).

In a separate room, Liara and James have retreated to play a game of poker (*alea*), with Javik serving as an observer. Kasumi later joins the game out of nowhere, smoothly setting up a hand of holographic cards – which further heightens and mirrors the *alea* nature of the activity: uncertainty functions as the key to fun in this instance.

Liara: You’re bluffing.

James: Don’t be so sure.

Kasumi (*appearing out of thin air*): Aw, be nice, Liara, you’re going to have your hands full with me anyway. (Appendix, 45:56–48:51)

Javik, comparing the game of poker to the games favoured by his own kin, engages in an act of *agôn*, warning the others of how ill they would fare: “Be glad we are not participating in one of the games from my cycle. You would all lose horribly” (Appendix, 48:46). Later, he admits having merely pulled a joke, deceiving the other partygoers at the poker table – thus deriving fun from *mimicry*: “I will never die of tricking the primitives, that is a game I enjoy playing” (Appendix, 50:51).

In conclusion, the third act seems to be based on a dwindling amount of energy or social inhibition, in the sense that the intoxicated guests have lost their spirits; for example, Tali is found in her drunk stupor on the bathroom floor, while Garrus and Zaeed, in their boredom, are succumbing to larping out their paranoia of a future attack on the apartment. In the process, they are messing with Shepard’s need to be a controlling host. Others are handling the dwindling party energy by either directing it towards games or preparing food in the kitchen (while keeping a small amount of banter going, for example, by arguing over the measurements of curry). The participants’ hunger-related conflict is thus eased and resolved.

Some guests, despite having a good time socially, still suffer from boredom, which risks putting the party at peril, as a failed party is a boring party (cf. Masek & Stenros, 2024). Some guests thus retreat to play poker in their desperate attempt to enjoy themselves while remaining physically present at the party, though not participating in the common activity. This means that the magic circle of the party (cf. Huizinga 1949/2016) is split into further magic circles within the greater one. The resolution of the party – which has suffered the sundering of the guests and the splitting of the same into various groups – is the group photo, wherein all the participants of the party are gathered; in a sense, putting the separate parties of the party into a sole party. Thus, the party fills its designated purpose: reconnecting comrades-in-arms.

The archetypal partygoers

Having detailed the dramatic structure of the party, we now turn to the characters present and, given their functions at the party, sketch their archetypal roles. Eleven festive archetypes have been found represented at the in-game party, and we present them in an arbitrary order.

Shepard, the ambulating host

The host archetype of the party, chiefly represented by the character Shepard, oversees the events and tries to steer the guests. Authorised to keep order, he routinely engages in actions wherein he derives pleasure from the elements of *ludus* and *lilā* by emboldening or inhibiting the guests. By telling certain guests to control their intake of mind-altering substances or by encouraging them to engage in conversation with the other guests rather than meditating for their own sake, the host dictates decorum and decides the decibel of the party.

Wrex and Grunt, the bombastic competitors

Wrex and Grunt, true to their nature as Krogans, an alien race of brutal but honourable warriors, regularly compare scars and battle stories, or challenge each other to friendly games, which for non-Krogans may seem quite violent. Thus, they fit the archetypal representation of the constant *agôn* competitors. Likewise, by referring to their ancestry or culture, they act out the concept of *ilinx*, as a true Krogan festivity means an unhealthy amount of chaos, destruction, and fighting.

Zaeed and Garrus, the creative potentialists

It is not surprising that Zaeed, the mercenary, and Garrus, a former Citadel security officer turned vigilante, who, in their professions, must regularly switch roles and adapt to new situations, are the ones who embody the concept of *mimicry* during the party. Perhaps they are so bored that they deem acceptable party behaviour to be speculating on a potential attack on the apartment and then acting out and implementing creative solutions that would create hell for any potential attackers.

Kasumi, the wild card trickster

Manifesting *paidia* and *ilinx*, the wild card trickster seeks to surprise the guests and disestablish order, routine, or general boredom by using her cloaking suit to appear and disappear out of nowhere suddenly, usually delivering a fun comment in the process. Yet, as must be noted, the wild card trickster does not engage in *muhō*, but rather in *paidia*: having a childlike manner, Kasumi disregards the rules without being rude or taunting the other guests or her host.

Liara, the odd card outcast

The token scholar of the group, Liara, is both an oddball and a powerful combatant. At the party, however, it is the former that shines. At one moment, she follows suit in the spirit of *agôn*, participating in a competitive comparison of the apartment; in the next moment, she leans towards *ludus*, and then she falls into *alea*. Regardless of the chosen concepts, there is always an element of social awkwardness in her attempt to navigate the party's dynamics.

Joker, the laid-back jester

True to his nickname – Joker – this character has no lack of entertaining comments that always challenge the social conventions of the moment. His very nature is soaked in the concept of *muhō*, which makes a player question whether the character is intentionally provocative or constantly letting his mouth run before his brain has caught up. Notably, however, he does not engage in competitive or vertigo-inducing activities but prefers to create tension by breaking decorum verbally.

Javik, the sarcastic party critic

Javik is a tragic figure: the lone survivor of his Protean race, he woke up from cryosleep 50,000 years later when all his kin were gone. He views the world with a certain aloofness stemming from being surrounded by what he views as 'primitives' and their backward cultures. From this point of origin, although his sarcastic comments fall into the categories of *muhō*, *agôn*, and *ludus*, they are there to remind the other party participants that he is not impressed with their version of celebrations and that things were much better, party-wise, when his empire controlled the galaxy. He derives his form of fun at the party by arrogantly distancing himself from its customs.

Tali, the intoxicated theatre monkey

Engaging in a combination of *ilinx* and *mimicry*, the intoxicated theatre monkey eagerly jumps at the opportunity to throw away the mask of their hypercorrect, technical, everyday self. Replacing it are playful reenactments of matters that may seem dull in the daily form, but in the eyes of Tali hold a certain magic she loves to portray. Unfortunately, when she discards her engineer self, there is also the sacrifice of constraint, which leads to disastrous results as she consumes too much alcohol, way too quickly.

Jack, the chaotic party crasher

Jack loves parties and thrives on conflict; that is clear from her utterances. She lacks boundaries and would be straight up in your face to smash it to bits if you metaphorically happened to step on her toes one day. Not only does she thrive on conflict, but she also usually initiates it with a combination of *agôn* and *ilinx*. As the party progresses, there is an escalating need for *ilinx*, a craving for action and destruction, even wishing to set things on fire, to satisfy that need.

EDI, the observant festive beginner

There is a first time for everything, and the festive beginner, the AI EDI, finds great pleasure in observing the spiral descent of the party, while still maintaining that it is all part of her preconceived clinical definition of a festivity. Perhaps predictably, as the machine she is, she is a pure manifestation of *ludus*. This is constant, regardless of whether she follows a recipe, making food for the hungry and intoxicated guest, or pointing out inconsistencies in her partner Joker's drunk remarks.

Kaidan, Cortez, and Jacob, the introverted wallflowers

Not much can be said about these three characters in the context of the party, besides the fact that they never stand at the centre of events but are instead content to fade into the background. Even Kaidan's *ilinx*-themed question – "Is it time to start dancing?" – is asked in a polite tone, not demanding anything of the host. The introverted wallflowers, thus, do not seem to participate in the party from any Cailloisian perspective on playfulness.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to study the in-game party in the *Mass Effect 3* DLC *Citadel* to analyse how Cailloisian terminology can be used as an applicable narrative model for the specific party event, and how archetypal partygoers are represented in the party. As we have shown, the Cailloisian terminology can be used to visualise, frame, and understand the representation of a party as a gamelike event. Turning to our first research question, regarding how the representation of the party in-game can be understood narratologically, we have noted that the party follows a three-act structure. Moreover, the party in-game is not only designed as three parts but also functions as a set of actions following the three-act structure, rising in intensity to the beginning of the third act, then descending, and culminating in the climax of the group photo. In other words, parties can potentially be understood as dramatic events.

Turning to our second research question, regarding the ludic role and function of the characters present at the party, we have identified eleven party archetypes, each aligning more often or seldom with the Cailloisian concepts. As other scholars have noted, the Cailloisian rubric cannot be taken as an absolute shape-sorter toy in which different games are to find their perfect place. Rather, the Cailloisian concepts

should be used to stimulate thought and sharpen the researcher's gaze when engaging with gamelike empirical data. Certainly, the Cailloisian concepts are broad enough to be applied to various forms of data, which risks leading to subjective interpretations of gamelike events rather than the comforting exactness afforded by the absolute exclusion of deviant data. However, we believe that the Cailloisian concepts for categorising play can illuminate characters and events in dramaturgic contexts, thus complementing more common narratological methods.

Discussing the represented party from a ludic perspective instead, we note that as a rule, games are based on rules – and so are parties. Masek and Stenros (2024, p. 78) note in their review of previous party studies literature that most empirical studies on partying “focus upon those who are breaking legal restrictions”. Interestingly, the party represented in *Mass Effect* likewise centres on the idea of breaking or adhering to the rules. Thus, in contrast to Masek and Stenros's (2024, p. 88) notion that “parties in general are goal-oriented toward facilitating a unique type of highly playful experience”, the representation of the party in *Mass Effect* seems to provide a contradicting set of playful experiences for each party archetype. The party thus becomes a multifarious, immersive place – a porous magic circle that allows itself to be altered by the partygoers into a blob without its silhouette breaking. The host, Shepard, is seen idling about, observing the partygoers and occasionally asking them to conform to his preconceptions of a proper party. The player of the game, thus, has limited agency, and the party lives its own life, as it were – much like any real-life party.

On a broader scale, the representation of the party challenges Caillois's (1958/2001, p. 87) idea of different cultures and their differing relations to the play forms. In his view, ‘rational’ cultures were characterised by *agôn* (struggling to overpower others in capitalist societies) and *alea* (the chance of being born into nobility). In contrast, ‘primitive’ cultures were structured around *mimicry* (masks used in religious settings) and *ilinx* (drug-induced rituals connecting the members of society). In the multicultural context of *Mass Effect*, we see how different gamelike attitudes towards partying intersect. The party's representation thus provides a multicultural perspective – in alignment with the game series' ideological project of embracing multiculturalism (cf. Hayden, 2017). However, despite presenting an innovative vision of the future and of diverse cultures, the representation of the in-game party in *Mass Effect* feels predictable. This hints that culturally reproduced forms of parties are hard to forego. Nevertheless, whether the party follows the established structures of, for example, a typical Western house party or not (cf. Demant & Østergaard, 2007), the purpose is to create what Tolkien (1947) defines as *secondary belief*. Even in the context of alien cultures, our minds need some familiarity to connect with before they can be broadened to accept the fictional elements. The party, thus, is merely a costume. The representation of the party is, in itself, an act of *mimicry*, and although the characters are aliens, they are also tropes, connected to known preconceptions within popular culture. For example, Tali is the Badass Bookworm, Wrex the Bruiser

with a Soft Centre, and EDI the Benevolent A.I., among other tropes, as outlined on the TV Tropes wiki (cf. TV Tropes, n.d.a, n.d.b; n.d.c).

Indeed, parties exhibit gamelike qualities, and, as we have shown, the theoretical work on defining partying in the DLC reveals a set of Western norms, clichés, and scripts. This representation of a party is indeed comparable to scripts in cognitive linguistics, for instance, the restaurant script (cf. Schank & Abelson, 1977). The elementary usefulness of any script is, of course, its applicability to common everyday situations, which enables us to execute an action unconsciously, which eases our quotidian experience of reality, much like any prescriptive manual of how to behave – comparable, for instance, to John Bridges's (2008) *How to Be a Gentleman*. The representation of the party also serves as a reminder of the multifarious faces of fun, and of the complexity of enjoyment. *Food preferences* – low lactose, gluten-free, vegan, kosher, halal – are often taken into consideration by the host of any party nowadays. Still, as shown in this study, a broader scope of *fun preferences* should likewise be considered when throwing a party!

Limitations

Having based this analysis on a deductive, theoretically informed approach, our gaze is naturally limited. Moreover, this study focuses on *one* of the potential party scenarios in the *Mass Effect 3* DLC. Other, more energetic representations of parties should be studied to differentiate among various forms of parties and to further typological classifications of parties. Likewise, the Cailloisian approach towards games and play would be beneficial to apply to other ways of partying, to establish a sociology of the form and function of festive activities across various contexts. Additionally, accounting for party distinctions based on social background variables would be a natural next step in this budding scholarly endeavour. Finally, interweaving the Cailloisian concepts with Goffman's (1959) notions of frontstage and backstage behaviours would provide richer nuances of the archetypal partygoers and of which play forms and which relations towards rules occur in frontstage and backstage settings, respectively.

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Co-authorship statement

Timvig wrote the theory sections; Engqvist wrote the contextual sections. The design of the study, along with the analysis and conclusion, were all conducted and written jointly by both authors.

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Appendix 1

Time	Character	Quote	Concept
PROLOGUE			
01:18	Joker	"I'm going to go out and see how much trouble I can get into without snapping a femur."	MUHŌ
ACT 1			
06:30	Jack	"Nice ink, but you've got a long way to go to catch up."	AGÔN
06:33	James	"Nah, I just got this when I lost my squad a few years ago."	AGÔN
06:44	Cortez	"Tactful as always" [as a response to James's question of "how far down" Jack's tattoo stretches].	LĪLĀ
06:52	Traynor	"I can't get over the size of this apartment. The electric bill alone could have paid for my college tuition."	AGÔN
06:58	Liara	"Or funded the war."	AGÔN
07:01	Garrus	"Or made a nice down payment on one of those Atlas mechs."	AGÔN
07:06	Tali	"Or put an air conditioner in this suit. You have no idea how hot it gets."	AGÔN
07:16	Joker	"You know why Cerberus is going to lose? Demographics. You recruit a guy who's 20 and got no life, he'll work his ass off for the cause, but do you see any old people in..."	MUHŌ
08:00	Miranda	"I think the expression you want is kissing babies."	LUDUS
08:44	Traynor	"So, you're Archangel. James told me it was some sort of maid service on Omega."	MUHŌ
09:38	Kasumi	"And crunches. Lots of crunches."	ILINX
09:38	Kasumi	(Shows up, interrupting a conversation).	PAIDIA
09:42	Shepard	"Hey! Not okay, Kasumi."	LUDUS
09:56	EDI	"Jeff, do you remember that I am also a Cerberus project?"	LUDUS

11:20	Samara	"If I had a credit for every amorous attempt I've had to reject over the centuries, I could purchase the Citadel."	AGÔN
11:28	Liara	"When I was an archaeology student, I found Galactic dialects to be fascinating! All of the phonetic variants..."	LUDUS
11:35	Tali	"... is the last thing we should talk about at a party."	MUHÕ
17:53	Javik	"Protean gatherings were nothing like this. We considered the future and respected the dead."	LUDUS
18:00	Zaeed	"There's usually more yelling and cursing at any gatherings I go to."	ILINX
18:07	Grunt	"Yeah, get a bunch of Krogan together and things always get fun and probably broken."	ILINX
18:14	Wrex	"You're right. These things are better when you have redundant systems and natural plate armour."	ILINX
19:57	Javik	"50,000 years from now, no one will remember this party. What is the point?"	MUHÕ
ACT 2			
21:04	Wrex	"Drink!" (Grunt) "I'm drinking, but it's not a drinking game." (Wrex)	AGÔN
21:09	Grunt	"Afraid to lose?" (Grunt) "Nothing to do with fear. I know I'll lose." (Wrex)	AGÔN
21:55	Javik	"I would like to touch you."	MUHÕ
22:30	Tali	"Of course, the SR2 is much bigger, so they upgraded the ventilation."	MIMICRY
22:52	Tali	"What you have to imagine my arms are the wings."	MIMICRY
23:45	Wrex	"On the arm here? Got that taking some knives off a gang of drunk Batarians. They figured they could stop me from collecting the bounty on their boss."	AGÔN
24:18	EDI	"I am observing displays of complex social entropy, so yes, I am having a good time."	LUDUS
24:53	Grunt	"Shepard."	ILINX
24:57	Wrex	"Shepard!"	ILINX

25:50	Shepard	"Sure, uh, you might want to tap the brakes a little."	LĪLĀ
26:45	Cortez	"Actually, I'm a dessert guy. My aunt used to make this chocolate lava bomb cake."	AGÔN
28:09	Jack	"Is there a place I can go light something on fire?"	ILINX
28:48	James	"Yeah, but which one's better?"	AGÔN
32:26	Joker	"EDI said you found her voice attractive..."	AGÔN
32:30	Traynor	"That was when I thought she was a VI..."	AGÔN
33:34	Samara	"Then I found this quiet corner. Reflecting on one's place in the universe while a party rages within reach can feel oddly self-affirming."	PAIDIA
33:43	Shepard	"Meditating isn't often considered party behaviour."	LUDUS
34:07	Shepard	"Now get back out there and have some fun."	LĪLĀ
35:08	Joker	"We're just happy giving each other shit."	MUHŌ
35:11	Shepard	"We can call EDI over, and you can discuss your feelings like mature adults."	MUHŌ
36:42	Kaidan	"So, do you think we should start dancing or something?"	ILINX
37:13	Garrus	"Ah, there are too many windows, and they're... too big. Makes it easy for someone to track your movements, but it's got potential. Be easy to set up a defensible position over there."	MIMICRY
37:26	Zaeed	"I'd extend a wall out. Prevent someone from sticking you in the back."	MIMICRY
ACT 3			
39:52	Tali	"You want to see my tattoo?"	ILINX
43:05	Garrus	"Micro filaments, Shepard. Tiny strips of explosives laid across the glass in a grid. It's your first line of defence when an intruder enters. Hit the switch and boom!"	MIMICRY
45:56	Liara	"You're bluffing."	ALEA
45:58	James	"Don't be so sure."	ALEA

47:54	EDI	"You see, Shepard. A party is a social construct that can be designed for maximum efficiency."	LUDUS
48:46	Javik	"Be glad we are not participating in one of the games from my cycle. You would all lose horribly."	AGÔN
48:51	Kasumi	"Aww, be nice Liara, you're going to have your hands full with me anyway." (Playing poker)	ALEA
50:51	Javik	"Hahaha! I will never tire of tricking the primitives. That is a game I enjoy playing."	MIMICRY

Party of Two at a Fraternity Party!

Or Boundaries of Co-Play in a Duoethnography of *Fallout 76*

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Party of Two at a Fraternity Party! Or Boundaries of Co-Play in a Duoethnography of *Fallout 76*

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Abstract

For the emerging field of party studies in game studies, this paper offers one account of how looking at boundaries of play as they are maintained in situ can be meaningful for understanding play and partying in practice, beyond a theoretical phenomenon. The paper is based on a duoethnography conducted by the two authors through playing *Fallout 76* as fieldwork together between December 2021 and April 2022. The aim of this paper is to explore how the situated boundaries of co-play impacted our experiences of duoethnography within the game as well as to discuss how these boundaries connect to our intersectional identities. We explored how spatial, game design and temporal boundaries shaped our gameplay. However, we were also impacted by our intersectional identities, as we are both cisgender, white academics of middle class background, although with varying backgrounds in terms of gender (cis woman and cis man), family status (childfree and father of two), and different academic status. As such, through restorying and reconceptualization, we critically discuss our experiences in dialogue with previous research, so that the boundaries are not taken for granted and thereby maintained without reflection.

Keywords

Ethnography; duoethnography; play; co-play; *Fallout* series

I entered a fraternity house in Morgantown to discover the remnants of a party so wild that it... killed people? I wonder if I can find some clue about what happened here. (Entry from the quest 'Wasted on Nukashine', *Fallout 76*)

Digital play includes actors, artifacts such as computers and chairs, sites such as forums and communication platforms, networks, and policies, all of which shape play in different ways. In this paper, we exemplify the complexities and boundaries of co-play through a duoethnographic exploration (Sawyer & Norris, 2013) of *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2018). The notion of *party* is present on multiple levels in this paper: the party quest 'Wasted on Nukashie' is discussed here to both give the reader an understanding of the gameplay of *Fallout 76*, but also to exemplify a party within a game. Additionally, we discuss a situated experience of what co-play can look like for a 'party of two', as games often use 'party' rather than 'team' to refer to a group of players. While our play sessions were not positioned as 'parties' when we did the field work, the party quest design facilitated an experience which was 'party-like'. As we will explore further, due to the relaxed pace and low skill required, the experience of the quest was more similar to playing party games than the otherwise 'hardcore' game experience of the *Fallout* series (1997–2018).

Further, as there are situations where partying in the same physical space is not possible, such as the 'Zoom parties' of the COVID-19 pandemic (Holm, 2021) or due to living in different parts of the world, we argue that parties can take place online as well, especially as Masek and Stenros (2024) include game nights in their definition of parties. As exemplified by Fisher, Chen and Taylor (2025), autobiographic perspectives can be highly useful for understanding 'partying in practice', especially so in contexts that are shaped by power asymmetry (which also was the case here). Thereby, we offer one account of how looking at boundaries of co-play as they are maintained *in situ* can be meaningful for an understanding of 'partying in practice' and beyond a theoretical phenomenon, as advocated by Masek and Stenros (2024).

Fallout 76 (Bethesda Softworks, 2018) is the digital multiplayer game we engaged with and it is here understood as part of shaping our shared gameplay and analyzed as such. The *Fallout* game series "provides a critical assessment of our world, both past and present, and portrays the aftermath of nuclear war" (Reid & Downing, 2018, p. 52). The fraternity party quest we engaged with exemplifies a shared play session within the game, with its combination of tongue-in-cheek humor and societal criticism. Playing online multiplayer games has many similarities to ethnographic fieldwork, for example a stance of inquiry, engagement, and reflection. Neither play nor ethnographic fieldwork consists of clearly bounded spaces but are rather "results from a complex mix of actors and sites knit together in deeply contextual ways" (T. L. Taylor, 2022, p. 40). In other words, the aim of this paper is to explore how the situated boundaries of co-play impacted our experiences of duoethnography within *Fallout 76*, as well as to discuss how these boundaries connect to our intersectional identities.

Boundaries are here seen as active rather than static, as dynamic and to be questioned rather than taken as unchangeable facts (N. Taylor, 2024, in turn informed by C. L. R. James). Inspired by Nicholas Taylor's book *Grounds of Gaming* (2024), we discuss how boundaries shaped our interactions within the game as well as how

these are boundaries are connected to our intersectional identities. Aligning with the autoethnographic tradition in games studies (see, e.g., Fisher et al., 2025; Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012; Wilde, 2023), we use our embodied game experiences as a starting point and analyze moments of friction during fieldwork. Some of these we clearly identified as such already in ‘the field’ (such as the player outstaying their welcome in Fredrik’s camp, see section ‘Game Design Boundaries of Co-Play’), whereas others were briefly noted in the field notes and we started untangling the friction in the process of writing this paper (such as neither of us questioning that it would be Fredrik’s timetable that primarily impacted when we played, see section ‘Temporal Boundaries of Co-Play’). We then turned to N. Taylor’s (2024) dynamic boundaries, and in the case of temporal boundaries, also to Sharma’s (2014) discussion on temporal normativity, to better understand the larger patterns which impacted our situated co-play. As highlighted by N. Taylor (2024), boundaries highlight both the inclusion and exclusion of play, and boundaries can be used to maintain the inequalities within gaming cultures. Play extends beyond any particular place, as:

the boundaries that define contemporary sites of play are productive of a host of interconnected sets of relations, including gender and racial difference; economic privilege and exploitation ... and the increasing capture of communicative practices and social belonging by the extracting and sorting apparatuses of platformization. (N. Taylor, 2024, p. 203)

Additionally, not only space, but also time is political and shaped by power relations, but so is time (Sharma, 2014). As such, we discuss how spatial, game design and temporal boundaries, related to our intersectional identities, impacted our co-play experience of *Fallout 76*. While we focus on one at a time in the section Boundaries of co-playing *Fallout 76* we do not suggest that boundaries fall into neat categories as they often overlap, and the organization of three subchapters is for the sake of paper readability. Finally, through restorying and reconceptualization (Sawyer & Norris, 2012), we critically discuss our experiences in dialogue with previous research, so that the boundaries are not taken for granted and thereby maintained without reflection.

Fallout 76

Fallout is a successful game series with *Fallout 76* (2018) as the latest title. The series takes place in a post-apocalyptic United States, following the fictional Sino–American war and nuclear holocaust of 2077. This alternate US timeline follows the Second World War, when the world at large is faced with nuclear power in the wake of the atomic bombs (Inscoe, 2021). In line with the previous titles *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2010) and *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015), the player can explore an open post-apocalyptic world where the United States is torn by nuclear warfare. The game mechanics align

with real-time shooters (both first- and third-person), but with additional roleplaying elements. Each game in the series has its own narrative but all take place in the same coherent universe (McClancy, 2018). Leino (2015, p. 174) describes *Fallout: New Vegas* as having “a creamy middle” (referring to the concept by Aarseth, 2012) where “all players go through the same events in the beginning, make their own ways through the relatively open world, and upon completion of the right tasks, end up in one of the numerous, but pre-defined ending sequences”, and both *Fallout 3* and *Fallout 4* follow the same pattern.

Furthermore, *Fallout* as a game series is shaped by nostalgia through a ‘retro-futuristic’ style with clear influences from 1950s United States in terms of decor, weapons, music, in-game menus as well as quests. This era is associated with a more innocent and happier time, although only for a limited group of people: those included in a nationalistic, white, heteronormative and middle-class society (McClancy, 2018). This is also reflected in the track list played on the Diamond City Radio (the ‘default’ radio channel within the game) with gendered and sexualized 1950s hits, resulting in a “United States ambiance” (Inscoe, 2021). However, these themes being embedded in both the visual and the auditory landscape can also be seen as a societal commentary. Mosberg Iversen (2012, p. 1) points out that the “whole series invokes issues such as consumer culture, corporate power, propaganda, racism, and what it means to be human”, which becomes extra poignant given that the ruined game world status. Interestingly enough, the post-apocalyptic world state can also create openings for playfulness or a “perverse kind of relief”—in a time shaped by fear of an impending apocalypse on the horizon “worries may be laid to rest, and desires long repressed can be indulged when there is no longer a future to be considered” (Condis, 2017, p. 188).

Unlike its predecessors, *Fallout 76* is an online multiplayer game, and the player will explore, or, as presented by the game, reclaim, post-apocalyptic Appalachia together with other players. As such, *Fallout 76* is the first game in the series to offer player-to-player interaction and not only player-to-game interaction (Mo & Kim, 2019). So far, *Fallout 76* has not received the same academic interest and discussion as its predecessors (see, e.g., Inscoe, 2021; Leino, 2015; McClancy, 2018; Morrisette, 2020; Mosberg Iversen, 2012). There was a mixed reception upon launch, primarily focused on the lack of dialogue (Mo & Kim, 2019) as well as narrative in the game: “*Fallout 76* exists as a stripped-down version of prior *Fallout* games, a digital ruin to wander through but without purpose” (Wills, 2018, p. 1). Although, some argue that the game has, in part, redeemed itself since (Mäntylä, 2021), partially due to non-player characters (NPCs) included later. As the latest installment in an often-referenced videogame series, we argue that empirical insights from *Fallout 76* have relevance in the academic discussion on online game culture.

Duoethnography

We have previously employed interviews and screen recordings conducted by the participants *in situ* for research on in-game identities (see, e.g., Rusk & Ståhl, 2020, 2022; Ståhl, 2021; Ståhl & Rusk, 2020). Although these data sources provide a rigorous participant's perspective, our understanding remains fragmented, since there are sites, contexts and actors that affect the participant's gaming that is beyond our reach using these data sources. As such, researching our own gameplay allows us additional access in a manner that few participants might be willing or comfortable to provide. The accounts given here are still fragmented and situational (as all ethnographies are), but by using our own experiences, we hope to provide insights into the complex, relational and embodied experiences of co-playing a digital game. Accordingly, we conducted a duoethnography, informed by previous ethnographies, (Haddow, 2022; T. L. Taylor, 2022) autoethnographies (e.g., Wilde, 2023) in-game and other relevant contexts. The fieldwork was inspired by the twin-ethnographies of Sundén and Sveningsson (2012), however, unlike their in-game experiences (different guilds in the same game) our in-game experiences are shared and shaped by us co-playing the quests and exploring the game together. Researcher positionality and reflexivity in relation to the researched context is essential in all ethnographic work (see, e.g., Bucerius, 2013; Haddow, 2022). However, when the research context is the researchers themselves, these discussions need even further emphasis. The intention behind this work is to exemplify relevant boundaries of co-playing through our own situated experiences (Taylor, 2024), which align with Sundén's (2012, p. 170) description of autoethnography, where the researcher becomes the subject of research through "connecting the personal with the cultural, the social, and the political" as well as the technological. As such, this paper additionally provides insight into how autoethnographic material can be highly meaningful for understanding 'partying in practice', especially in contexts shaped by power asymmetry (Fisher et al., 2025).

Central for duoethnography is conversations that center around *restorying* and *re-conceptualization* (Cummins & Brannon, 2022; Gibbons & Gibbons, 2016; Kinnear & Ruggunan, 2019; Mair & Frew, 2018) and where duoethnographers expect not to "reify previously held beliefs but to generate changes to old stories" (Sawyer & Norries, 2012, p. 94). We co-play *Fallout 76* while communicating over voice chat, document said gameplay through individual fieldnotes (both perspectives) and screen recordings (Matilda's perspective). We use the datasets for stimulated recall (Pitkänen, 2015) during a recorded dual interview (both perspectives). While our (co)constructed discussion is the core of the dissemination through this paper, the fieldnotes and the documented gameplay allowed us to revisit our shared and individual processes and narratives (Sveningsson, 2012).

In practical terms, the in-game fieldwork took place between December 2021 and April 2022, and mostly during the in-game season called 'Zorbo's Revenge'. Our in-game fieldwork took place in our respective homes, generally playing between 9 and

11 PM. Both had previously played *Fallout 4* and, in addition, Fredrik had played *Fallout 3*. Only Matilda had played *Fallout 76* prior to the fieldwork. Once this venture started, we had known each other for several years and already considered each other friends and colleagues. While we had talked about games on numerous occasions, including the *Fallout* games, we had not played any games together before this. We were both playing *Fallout 76* on an Xbox One and thereby used the voice chat application offered by the console to communicate in-game. Both have played on console prior to this, but had mostly played singleplayer games. Furthermore, both of our game setups were located in a shared space within our respective homes, an aspect we will return to later in this paper. Co-observed family members have not been mentioned here by name out of respect for their privacy, despite having the misfortune of being parent or partner to one of the researchers, respectively.

While the in-game activities took place in 2021–2022, the restorying and reconceptualization continuously occur as we work with this material. We discussed the gendered aspects of co-playing in detail in a previous chapter (Ståhl & Rusk, 2025), and this paper is another step of reconceptualizing our experiences. A first draft of this paper was presented at the ‘2023 Spring Seminar: Party!’, arranged by the Game Research Lab at Tampere University, Finland. As an initial step to frame this fieldwork within party studies, we were then discussing our experiences on three inductive levels: becoming a party, being a party and then ending the party, perspectives that were later included in the analysis although they are no longer explicit categories (see section ‘Boundaries of Co-Playing *Fallout 76*’). As we revised this initial draft, we included the theoretical layers of boundaries, mainly informed by N. Taylor (2024) and Sharma (2014), and the connection to party studies through the paper by Masek and Stenros (2024). As this writing process was done in parallel with a paper focusing specifically on gendered aspects of our co-play (Ståhl & Rusk, 2025), the scope of this paper is broader, and provides additional perspectives to the previous paper, specifically the discussion on temporality. While notes on both hardware and software are included in our fieldnotes, throughout the analysis we saw that the game design choices of *Fallout 76* were the most salient in our co-play experiences and, in this context, the most meaningful analytical perspective. As such, the revised version of this paper has a narrower focus which is also reflected in our terminology: ‘game design boundaries of co-play’ (rather than technical boundaries of play as presented by N. Taylor, 2024). Throughout the process, Matilda has been leading the analysis, which has then been shared with Fredrik and the various drafts have been revised as we restoried and reconceptualized our experiences. As such, for the sake of reader transparency of the analysis process, all quotes are dated.

Death at the fraternity party

With few enemies present and following more of a murder mystery logic than the average quest, the fraternity party quest slightly stands out from other *Fallout 76* content. The *Fallout* series in general has a dark sense of humor (Mosberg Iversen, 2012) and environmental storytelling is central. As players, we are encouraged to explore what happened at the fraternity house (PI KAPPA MU) and why all students are dead. We were browsing the quests we had available, and after some consideration, Matilda suggested we play this quest as “it would be suitably challenging” (fieldnotes, 20 February 2022) for getting back in the game after a longer break. Additionally, she found it to be “on theme” as Fredrik “had been at Levi [the largest ski resort in Finland] with a group of guys” (partying and skiing). While she had not finished all available quests, Matilda had prior experience of the game, and thereby an understanding of what quests and areas were more challenging than others.

The environmental storytelling is front and center in this quest and the party context sets a somewhat lighthearted tone despite dead students. On the ground floor where we enter the fraternity house, there are multiple references that we associate with a stereotypical North American frat party: kegs, empty bottles, multiple forms of alcoholic beverages as well as red plastic cups used for playing beer pong (see Figure 1). The only enemies we face are ‘radroaches’ (radiated cockroaches), which is one of the enemy types considered to be the easiest to deal with. At our level at the time (26 and 25 respectively), these are more of a nuisance than actually dangerous and can be eliminated through a single bash with the butt of one’s gun.



Figure 1. Screenshot from *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2018). Matilda’s perspective, 20 February 2022. © Bethesda Softworks

While exploring the area to solve the quest (“Investigate what the partygoers were drinking”), we discussed what we saw over voice chat. In the upstairs bedrooms, there are clothes available with the University logo on them. Matilda asked if Fredrik had seen the skeleton in bed with a mannequin (see Figure 2) upon seeing which Fredrik joked “this one has a garden gnome in the bed... seems like a good party” (fieldnotes, 20 February 2022). After a while, we find a bottle of ‘Vintage Nukashine’, a fermented drink including nuclear material, which we are encouraged to drink. For two in-game minutes, we experienced the effects of the drink, which is changing the color scheme to black and white with an at times sepia tint as well as a number of ‘party crashers’ (zombie-like partygoers that technically are still alive although their minds have been destroyed by radiation damage and are thereby feral, known as ‘feral ghouls’ in the *Fallout* series) to spawn in the basement. These party crashers are easy to defeat as they do not charge at us but shift from side to side where they are standing. Once the two minutes are up, there is a loading screen with a scene from the quest and a comment stating that “Half of the fun with Nukashine is that you never know what crazy places it will take you” (see Figure 3). This corresponds with the writings of Nichols (1993, p. 537) on student culture and partying: “Intoxication is not a condition towards which one moves in the course of partying, according to these narratives, but a necessary condition to begin”, framing the ‘perfect buzz’ as elusive.

After that, Matilda ‘wakes up’ in the southeast corner of the map, which can be considered one of the most dangerous areas in the game. Fredrik is nowhere to be seen, waking up in a completely different location on the map. Next to Matilda is a



Figure 2. Screenshot from *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2018). Matilda’s perspective, 20 February 2022. © Bethesda Softworks

table where two skeletons and two garden gnomes are seated, with pre-war money and an axe strewn around the table. The quest encourages the player to read the label of the Nukashine bottle, which provides the player with a riddle that points the player back to Morgantown and the partygoers' alma mater. Following the steps of the riddle, we found ourselves in a tattoo parlor where a Nuka-Cola machine covers a false door to a speak-easy that serves Nukashine. In a backroom, the players can interact with Biv, a drink-testing robobrain,¹ and eventually learn how to make Nukashine themselves.

The low difficulty of the quest is similar to the low skill level required and "spirit of levity" associated with party games (Nguyen, 2019, p. 1). For example, Matilda finds a locked footlocker which requires the lowest level of skill to pick. While picking the lock, she hears the noise of Fredrik fighting feral ghouls. She pauses picking the lock but notes that Fredrik should be able to take care of them and resumes with her lockpicking. As neither the enemies nor the lockpicking are particularly difficult, these activities do not take away from the spirit of levity. Further, while zombielike, the behavior of the feral ghouls in this quest (shifting from side to side rather than charging at the player, perhaps to emulate drunken dancing) are intentionally designed in line with a more lighthearted quest. Despite being surrounded by death, this quest has little in common with horror games where the player "often has access to limited resources in the face of manifold threats" and thereby kept on their toes (Schnaars, 2019, p. 78). Similarly, the partygoers having been dead for quite some time, the low sense of urgency and skill required encourages more leisurely exploration, more in line with the rules of a party game (Nguyen, 2019; Stenros &



Figure 3. Screenshot from *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2018). Matilda's perspective, 20 February 2022. © Bethesda Softworks

Montola, 2024) than the otherwise ‘hardcore’ *Fallout* games do in general. Here, play and ethnography clearly overlap (T. L. Taylor, 2022) as we intentionally chose to play this ‘party game quest’ when we wanted less of a challenge after a break in playing the game, where the design of the quest in combination with the party theme encouraged a spirit of levity in our own gameplay.

Boundaries of co-playing *Fallout 76*

In the following subsections we will discuss spatial, game design and temporal boundaries of play, and how these shaped our co-play experience and interaction. We are here echoing N. Taylor (2024, p. 209, he in turn informed by C. L. R. James) who views boundaries as “dynamic, material-discursive interventions into the world that ought to be problematized rather than accepted as fact”. As mentioned in the introduction, we do not suggest that the boundaries fall into three neat categories, as they often overlap. Through restorying and reconceptualization (Sawyer & Norris, 2012), we discuss our experiences from a different perspectives and in dialogue with previous research, so that the boundaries shaping our play are not automatically maintained and taken for granted.

Spatial boundaries of co-play

While ours is ‘a party of two’, there are also other people present both in-game (which we will return to in the following subsection) and out of it. As we co-play *Fallout 76* on console, their open placement in our respective homes allows full insight into the content on display for anyone present on either end. In his discussion about the physical location of gaming devices and their setup in domestic settings, N. Taylor (2024) describes three types: the hearth, the cabinet and the bunker. The hearth is comfortable: it signals that the gaming device is placed in a position similar to that of the fireplace: in a shared family space and with wires tucked away out of sight. As there are usually multiple seating slots, the space is also used by other family members, occasionally at the same time as gameplay occurs. The purpose of the setup is to create “bonding, shared narratives and experiences” (N. Taylor, 2025, p. 87). We see also connections between the hearth and more traditional forms of co-play: in the form of shared screen play (SSP), which according to the historical analysis by Karhulahti and Grabarczyk (2021), was once both a profitable and desirable design, yet is no longer the preferred way of co-play. The bunker game setup is defensive and maintaining traditional (gender) roles and values, it is for individual use, with no wire management and in general, in an unkempt space. The cabinet is also set up for individual use but curatorial: with wires kept neatly out of sight and centered around displaying and curating media through artifacts signaling “gaming, geekdom and fandom”, resulting in “cabinets of curiosity” in a neat space (N. Taylor, 2024, pp. 82–83). In both cases, at the time of fieldwork both our setups could be described as hearths, and the space was also used by other people at

the time. As such, our gameplay can be understood as shared beyond our interactions with each other: it was also shared with those present in or passing through the physical spaces we occupy.

In her fieldnotes, Matilda (2 February 2022) reflects on views into the game:

On the other hand, the soundscape is partially closed, partially opened. It is only me and Fridde [Fredrik's nickname] that can hear the entire conversation. On the other hand, I can't see what he sees and vice versa. No one both sees and hears everything.

This partial view offers insight into the other person's home, such as Fredrik pointing out that "sharing is caring" when listening to Matilda and her partner at the time banter about whose chips she is currently eating from (26 February 2022), when Fredrik steps away from the game briefly to admire the snow castle his daughter had built (21 January 2022) and lets the dogs out into the backyard (25 December 2021). However, the voice chat opening a door to the other person's home can also result in our microphones picking up other voices in the same space. Fredrik noted that Matilda's partner at the time, who was playing *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) in another part of the room, was giving response cries to said gameplay which was picked up by Matilda's microphone. Matilda addressed some of these response cries, but not all. Engaging with the people we lived with could also result in confusion as in terms of who one is talking to. For example, Matilda had noted the following situation in her field notes (12 January 2022):

Fredrik: *mumbles*
Matilda: what?
Fredrik: now I am talking to [wife's name]
Matilda: ah okay
Fredrik: and now I am talking to you

Thereby, our game setups being located in a shared physical space ('hearths' as per N. Taylor, 2024) shaped our co-play in various ways. Our gameplay was shared with those we lived with, but it was also interrupted by things outside of the game world and our interactions, despite attempts by family members at both ends so as not to disturb our play, which in turn limited their activities. Placing our game setups in a less public location of our respective homes would have resulted in causing less confusion and interruption between ourselves but closing us off from our families. Having the device physically placed in a shared location can facilitate transparency, and thereby, also function as a form of parental control and monitoring (Harvey, 2015). Further, it would have cleared the shared spaces for other activities without the need to listen to our conversations while playing. However, being able to dedicate a space for gaming purposes only is a privileged position to be in, requiring the financial opportunity to do so. Further, the participants in Harvey's interview study (2015) on play in a domestic setting, some families reported that simply having a

gaming setup in a shared space which facilitates local co-play does not mean that family play automatically happens.

Game design boundaries of co-play

In the following section, we will discuss some examples of how the game design and associated boundaries impacted our experience of co-play. *Fallout 76* can only be played on public servers with a maximum of 24 players, a design feature which directly impacted our co-play as we would have preferred to co-play on a private server had that been possible. The game currently offers both voice chat and, added more recently, text chat. However, for reasons unknown to us (whether voice chat was not available on console at the time of the field work or the feature was well hidden and needed to be turned on manually), we were convinced that players could only interact with each other through a number of emotes. We thereby used the software provided by Xbox for voice chat in parallel with the game. As we had mostly played singleplayer games before this, we also both invested in new hardware (new headsets) to facilitate a smoother voice chat experience. Using different software for voice chat shaped an interesting scenario when Fredrik was thrown out of the game. As we had just cleared a raider camp from enemies when this happened, Matilda was idling around the camp, playing the banjo and waiting for Fredrik to return, continuously talking with him as the voice chat was separate from the game. As she stayed there longer than intended by the game through the respawn timer, the raiders respawned around her pixel by pixel, and Fredrik then rejoined the game mid-fight (we have discussed the gendered aspects of Fredrik logging back on in time to 'save' Matilda elsewhere, see Ståhl & Rusk, 2025). During this fight, Fredrik was killed by a raider and Matilda rushed to save him by using a stimpak. However, as we were not part of the same team anymore as neither of us had had time to send an invite during the fight, Matilda was not able to do so. We have not been able to confirm whether that is still the case, but at the time, the game not allowing players to help non-team members creates clear in-game boundaries for co-play.

Apart from our tiny party and enemies of various kinds, there are also friendly NPCs and other players roaming about in Appalachia. We did on occasion discuss the different dialogue options available for interacting with an NPC, such as whether or not Fredrik should 'waste' a stimpak to help an NPC (field notes 23 March 2022). However, we often end up skipping these dialogues as it is difficult to talk with each other in the external voice chat at the same time as the NPC dialogue audio is playing. *Fallout 76* does not offer the player to adjust the audio specifically for dialogues, perhaps due to the game not having any NPCs originally but added those with the 2020 'Wastelanders' update. While skipping NPC dialogue is not something Matilda would do if she was playing by herself, she found herself overwhelmed trying to listen to both the NPC and Fredrik at the same time.

We did also encounter other players in-game, however, these meetings were mostly unremarkable. One of the more memorable ones was a player dressed as Santa

Claus dropping us both a communist attire as a gift before they continued on their journey. In her field notes (2 February 2022), Matilda noted that since we started playing together, no one had offered to play in a team with her: “Three is a crowd? ... That might be because two players are perceived to already have company. On the other hand, it can also be seen as I am already ‘claimed’ [by a man]?”. We continue the discussion on these phenomena and how co-playing *Fallout 76* can be understood as gendered in more depth elsewhere (Ståhl & Rusk, 2025). Coincidentally, of the most memorable interactions we had with other players happened the same session as we played the party quest (20 February 2022, see subchapter Death at the fraternity party). As we were about to wrap up our session for the day, a random player (level 6) emerged in Fredrik’s camp. At first Fredrik greeted them and invited them to trade, however, eventually, the player overstayed their welcome both in terms of time and getting too familiar with what we considered a personal space within the game. Fredrik fired a few warning shots, the player threw a bomb at him and left, but fell off a cliff and died from fall damage. We thought that would be the end of it, but the player respawned and refused to leave the camp. While the player was using one of his workbenches, Fredrik put up walls all around them (referred to by Fredrik as ‘*Fortnite-ing*’² the player). Having listened to Fredrik’s growing frustration, at this point Matilda left her camp to witness this incident with her own eyes. As we were tinkering with Fredrik’s camp decorations, a new player emerges (about level 500). They showed an ‘angry emote’, the ‘haha’ emote, fired at Matilda and the camp and then displayed the compass emote, meaning ‘follow’. They repeat this interaction a few times, presumably to show that they are not happy with the lower-level player being trapped. We discussed that the low-level player should know that players’ camps are considered sacred “especially if they have friends that are level 500 and something” and questioned why the player did not simply fast travel to the Vault 76 (the only fast travel option which is free apart from one’s own and ally camps) to escape as it was only a short walk away from Fredrik’s camp. The situation ended with Fredrik leaving the game, his camp vanished and the player eventually left the area as well.

It is clear that this player oversteps what we perceived as *normative play* in this context (Harper, 2013): respecting other players by not overextending their welcome in someone’s camp. However, in his field notes, Fredrik also noted that his main frustration was not at the player, but at the game, as we thought that the game did not offer a clear way to communicate and show one’s intentions, including a clear way to communicate “gtfo”³ (20 February 2022). The game has no technical limitation to visiting another player’s camp, using their equipment or sleeping in their bed. While destroying someone’s property is punished by the game, invading someone’s

² ‘*Fortnite-ing*’ here refers to the practice of building walls around another player to trap them and then eliminate them in *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017).

³ GTFO is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “internet slang initialism that stands for ‘get the f**k out.’ It functions as a forceful dismissal, ordering someone to leave a conversation, space, or online forum” (Merriam-Webster, 2026).

privacy through crashing their safe haven is not. Similarly, the player can choose not to engage in player-versus-player (PVP) play and thereby not be harmed by other players' shots unless they shoot back (the Pacifist Mode). However, as Matilda experienced in an occurrence before our fieldwork, the game does not stop anyone from invading the personal space of one's avatar (see Ståhl & Rusk, 2025). One of the most infamous examples of this is teabagging, "a controversial practice where the player's avatar repeatedly crouches over a defeated player's 'body' in order to simulate rubbing his or her genitals over the avatar's body" (Myers, 2019, p. 765). As noted by Stenros and Montola (2024), creating formal rules that forbid teabagging is difficult to enforce as the experiences of the action are contextually situated and more about etiquette and the social rules of the game. As a consequence, it is difficult for players who view the teabagging as a mediated form of sexual harassment to avoid playing with players who see it as a bit of harmless fun.

From our perspective, a quick visit from a stranger could be tolerated, but they should not outstay their welcome. This was a form of respect we also show each other: we primarily did stick to building our individual camps and occasionally visit the other person's camp, but in some cases, we have also created shared camps with our respective small shacks. However, as we in hindsight consult online discussions on visiting other players' camps,⁴ we note that the consensus appears to be that players are welcome visitors in other players camps, are allowed to help themselves to things in unlocked containers and utilize workbenches and so on available in the camp as long as they otherwise leave it the way they found it. As such, it appears that our embodied experiences of what is considered respectful behavior for personal space are contextual, and our stance might be different from the norm of *Fallout 76* community at large. One reason for this might be that it was a new game to Fredrik and neither of us had engaged with online forums, etc., as part of our *Fallout 76* play experience. It might also be culturally situated, as a preference for rigorous personal space is deeply embedded in Finnish culture, with both of us living in a relatively small town at the time of the fieldwork and in a country which is allegedly the most sparsely populated country in Europe. Taken together, the visit in Fredrik's camp shows how the game design has set boundaries towards certain kinds of harmful behavior (players taking damage from shots and property getting destroyed), but allows players to disrespect other players in certain ways (shooting at them, teabagging and invading their safe haven) as formal rules against these are more difficult to enforce. As there appears to be varying opinions among players on what is socially acceptable in-game, there is a need for tools for solving conflicts (Stenros and Montola, 2024). As Fredrik noted, the use of emotes in *Fallout 76* does not offer a meaningful way to solve a conflict or communicate when a player is crossing one's boundaries. While we later realized that voice chat might have been utilized to potentially solve this conflict, the conflict would not have occurred in the first place if the game had offered playing on private servers.

⁴ See, for example, 'Fallout 76 Guide - Unwritten Rules: Wasteland' by MrMorp (2024).

Temporal boundaries of co-play

Before playing the party quest, we had had a several week-long breaks from playing *Fallout 76* together. Matilda commented on this (fieldnotes, 20 February 2022): “Back to *Fallout*! I had been playing *State of Decay* before, so it took me a while to find the flow. Especially with the longer break”. As mentioned earlier, our play sessions mostly took place between 9 and 11 PM. Our session often ended when there was a ‘break’ of some kind, such as us finishing a quest or milestone within a quest, going back to our camps after exploring, or dying somewhere in the wilderness. However, there were also situations where we ended a session because a certain element of the game malfunctioned and we no longer had the patience to try to find a solution. There were also times when we simply got tired: “we got quieter there at the end ... partially because my social capital was running low” (Matilda’s fieldnotes, 14 January 2022). Unfortunately, we were less thorough in documenting the situations when we stopped playing than when we started to do so. While this is understandable given the time of the day, this is something we note as worthy of further exploration in future ethnographic studies of shared play.

As such, we wish to highlight that leaving the party and *not* playing together is also part of the co-playing experience. For example, during Matilda’s first solo play session after we started playing together, she felt very lonely. After doing “some slightly sad shuffling around ... on my lonesome”, Matilda witnessed a radstorm over a lake, realized the humor of her moping and sent a photo of said radstorm to Fredrik as a WhatsApp message (16 December 2021). During another solo session, she had reorganized things in their joined building project in her camp. Fredrik asked if he did not have a cooking station anymore, upon which Matilda replied that she moved it. As a reply, Fredrik jokingly pretended to be hurt about this upon Matilda replied, “that is what happens when you do not join me” (19 January 2022). While we use humor to negotiate these situations, both instances suggest a certain level of disappointment in not playing together. In her fieldnotes, Matilda (13 January 2022) noted that she “played *Subnautica* and saw that Fredrik’s username logged in. We had not agreed to play that night, but I felt that I wanted to show that I get him wanting to play alone/other games. So I texted him a comment about *Subnautica*”. Accordingly, questions of how to end a session would be fruitful to do further empirical research on, but also on not playing games together: especially to explore what the expectations are if one commits to playing together and how these are managed. In other words, how ongoing consent to play (see, e.g., Stenros & Montola, 2024) is negotiated in situ during co-play is a meaningful perspective for party studies as well as game studies at large.

Our usual time slot (9–11PM) was set in line with Fredrik’s family life with two children and their hobbies, plus housework and two dogs, shaping our co-play schedule. As we both lived in Finland at the time of the field work, we did not have to take time zone differences into account, which could have added an additional layer of complexity in scheduling the co-play. On 21 January 2022, we played in the morning

for a change. Our fieldnotes showed that we were highly aware of the change of pace: Matilda noted that her partner at the time was at work and Fredrik commented that he did not need to be careful not waking anyone up while talking. However, just as we were about to get started, Matilda had to take a quick break for a phone call and reflected that “that doesn’t happen when one plays in the evening”. Before our co-play could start in the evening, Fredrik put the children to bed before we could get started. This timeslot was also used for checking on his and managing their family schedule. Furthermore, once play started, he had to be mindful not to wake any sleeping family members when playing the game, because of the console being adjacent to his daughter’s bedroom (fieldnotes, 21 January 2022). In comparison, Matilda lived in an adult ‘gamer household’ where there was more allocated time for playing various games. However, co-play also takes organization and at times sacrifice for Matilda, as it is largely Fredrik’s schedule which dictated co-play scheduling. For example, Matilda noted shifting from “a super exciting place in *Subnautica*. Tell me, what don’t I do for research?” (fieldnotes, 19 January 2022), taking a break from watching a television series with her partner at the time (fieldnotes, 8 January 2022), and life in general impacting play “I told [previous partner’s name] that if we don’t start playing now, I simply will not have the energy to play anymore tonight” (fieldnotes, 12 January 2022). However, when working on this analysis (26 August 2025), Fredrik noted that Matilda “is/was more comfortable with staying up late” and that he felt “like a wimp who always said that it was time for bed”, highlighting that we had different views on how late it is acceptable to stay up playing, especially on a weekday.

As a result, both of us expected Matilda, as a child-free person, to adapt to Fredrik’s schedule, as her time was understood as more flexible. Her time as an adult, child-free person and chosen spare time activities (spending time with her partner, watching a television show, playing whatever game she preferred at the time, etc.) was understood by us to be of a lower priority, despite both of us having work, housework and partners to fit into our daily time puzzles. While a person without children to take care of in general presumably has more hours of the day to utilize as they wish (as seen in the previous discussion of Matilda having time to play the game on her own), Matilda is also limited by the temporal normativity of nine-to-five rhythm of work and society (Sharma, 2014). Matilda being junior in comparison to Fredrik in terms of age and academic seniority (research assistant and doctoral researcher when we first met, currently postdoctoral researcher and associate professor) presumably also segmented this, at the time of the fieldwork, taken-for-granted temporal boundary.

Access to game technology is shaped by the gendering of time: in the case of some of Harvey’s (2015, p. 127) participants, prioritizing time for play is not something ‘good mothers’ and ‘normal girls’ would engage in. Gender therefore also plays a role here, as Matilda was expected to be understanding and flexible towards Fredrik, the one of us living a more ‘normal’ life, dictating our shared play timetable. As a child-free woman, a group facing societal stigma for their life choice in general (see, e.g.,

Suhariyati, Rahmawati & Ubudiyah, 2025) and by prioritizing time for play, and thereby engaging in non-normative behavior as a woman (Harvey, 2015), it is not surprising that, apart from some comments in Matilda's fieldnotes, this is a practice we did not question at the time. To be clear, we are not saying that Fredrik should have neglected taking care of his family or that our shared gameplay should create an additional burden for his wife. In a discussion on the gendered labor arrangements around gaming, N. Taylor (2024) uses the bleak example of *Fortnite* streamer Tyler 'Ninja' Blevins. Ninja is the face the audience sees, while his wife, Jessica Blevins, supports him behind the scenes by taking care of phone calls, emails, their home and dogs. Additionally, we wish to stress that it is not a unique phenomenon for our shared gameplay as we have experienced the same assumption of playing together with other parents (dads) as well.

Informed by Pierre Bourdieu, Sharma (2014, p. 74) highlights how time and power are related, and how in ethnography, behaviors connected with utilizing power over others' time should be noted and analyzed. Through the restorying and reconceptualization which is central in dueoethnography (see, e.g., Sawyer & Norris, 2012), we emphasize that the timeframe of co-play and how that is managed is valuable to analyze and we are here using our own experience to exemplify why it might be highly fruitful. How the timeframe for shared play is decided and on what grounds it is based, how the individual players are affected by this and, finally, what how the people not part of the party are impacted, are all relevant analytical questions.

Discussion

A reader unfamiliar with the *Fallout* series might find it bizarre referring to a quest engulfed with the skeletons of dead students, radiated feral humans haunting the premise and a perpetually drunk sentient-brain-robot-cyborg as a 'fun pastime'. However, *Fallout* is a game world where science experiments with questionable to nonexistent ethics (see for example Gomez, 2026 on Vault-Tec vaults) are numerous and likewise are companies stopping at nothing when it comes to push their revenue. After all, it is a game series infused by "hope, satire, tragedy", intentionally designed to raise questions about societal issues such as consumer culture and corporate power (Mosberg Iversen, 2012, p. 1). Therefore, while we exemplified gameplay in *Fallout 76* through one particular quest for this paper, it needs to be understood in relation to the game and game series as a whole. While the party goers did not die of natural causes, there are no obvious signs of blood in the frat house. Unlike the slow motion V.A.T.S.⁵ kills used in *Fallout 4* and *76*, there is limited gore and use of 'aestheticized blood' splatters (Schnaars, 2019) in this quest. In this capacity, especially in comparison to quests centered around solving the mystery behind unnatural deaths in other RPGs, this quest stands out. Take for example the

⁵ "V.A.T.S. (Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System) is a visually dynamic, stat-based combat system in *Fallout 3*, *Fallout: New Vegas*, *Fallout 4* and *Fallout 76*" ('VATS', n.d.).

serial killer in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018) creating bizarre displays of human body parts behind and the search for the person behind missing women in Kirkwall, eventually including both blood rituals and necromancy in *Dragon Age 2* (BioWare, 2011). Taken together, the difficulty level of the enemies and other mechanics, such as the lockpicking, aligns with the spirit of levity (Ngyuen, 2019) of party games, perhaps to facilitate a pause from the heavy, sinister and dark themes otherwise highly present in the game, as a way to lay our worries to rest for a while (Condis, 2017).

However, given that 50s and its associated aesthetics represent a happier time for a certain demographic—nationalistic, white, heteronormative and middle-class society (McClancy, 2018)—one can also question for whom this quest is considered a refuge. We end up asking ourselves: do we appreciate the party quest because we can ‘afford’ to take a break from the dire future presented in the game series? While we are not US-based and endeavor to break free from heteronormativity, we are both cisgender, white and middle class. In addition to having resources like hardware for playing games, we also have the privilege of time to play games (even if it is, as discussed earlier, limited) and take trips for leisure as mentioned in passing in the fieldnotes. While frat party culture is not the same in our national context, we still have enough understanding of the concept to see the humor in the quest. Furthermore, as white, able-bodied and coming from a certain socioeconomic background, we would presumably be welcome at a party of this kind. In other words, we can ‘afford’ to party.

For the budding field of ‘party studies’, we wish to highlight the relevance of looking at boundaries of partying and play as they are maintained *in situ*. Based on the experiences discussed here, we see that connections between time and power (Sharma, 2014) and how ongoing consent to play is negotiated (Stenros & Montola, 2024) would be particularly meaningful lenses for the field of party studies. We see ethnographic (duoethnographic or otherwise) approaches focusing on partying and co-play as it happens as fruitful ways to understand parties beyond a theoretical phenomenon, in practice (Masek & Stenros, 2024). Despite the frat party quest itself being designed to offer a break from the main gameplay loop and the overall bleak narrative of the *Fallout* series, the game design boundaries we faced did not always facilitate meaningful and respectful co-play. Limited opportunities for communication as well as team status and inventory management impacting our ability to help each other encourage resource-hungry playstyles, in line with the gameworld being a frontier.

The final boundary that we wish to highlight relates to the “boundaries in academic knowledge production” (N. Taylor 2024, p. 203). We found that playing *Fallout 76* together for research became something between work and play: there was a lot of joking around, and we covered many non-work-related topics while playing. Yet, at the same time, all activities were understood through the lens of fieldwork and things that might be relevant to document in one’s fieldnotes. On the one hand,

researching our own gameplay allowed us access in a manner that few participants would be willing or comfortable to provide, for example insights into questions of spatial boundaries within domestic settings. After all, as noted by Harvey (2015, p. 138), the domestic “sphere and its regulations and activities can be a powerful and productive space for the perpetuation of intersecting discourses regarding normative technological subjects constituted through the materiality of banal, everyday practices”.

On the other hand, considering the other person a friend has to some extent censored what we wrote in our fieldnotes, knowing we would eventually share them with each other. Here we see the strength in the restorying and reconceptualization (see, e.g., Sawyer & Norris, 2012): we can revisit the fieldwork through a critical lens, together. The resulting texts (like this and Ståhl & Rusk, 2025) do not share entirely flattering views of us, yet display accounts that highlight our situated boundaries of play and our positions of privilege within them. While our play took place outside of office hours and off-campus, academic power dynamics, expectations to ‘publish or perish’ (see, e.g., Butler & Spoelstra, 2020), as well as the power of speed (Sharma, 2015, p. 72)—that is the notion of ‘being busy’ seen as something admirable—our play did not happen in vacuum outside of societal norms and values. As such, temporal boundaries is a fruitful lens for looking at both co-play and partying, here exemplified with both of us taking certain temporal boundaries for granted. However, it requires a multilayered and intersectional discussion which might not always be comfortable. Fredrik noted as part of writing this paper (26 August 2025), that despite our best efforts of respecting the other, it is easy “to end up in different camps” (in this case metaphorically, however, as established, also in different in-game camps). As such, we see that openly discussing, listening to each other and then setting our own shared boundaries of co-play within the party is to be encouraged.

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Both authors have done work following four criteria (see below), however, as Ståhl has done more substantial contributions to all and is the corresponding author, she is the lead author.

- Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work (Ståhl & Rusk).
- Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content (Ståhl & Rusk).
- Final approval of the version to be published (Ståhl & Rusk).
- Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved (Ståhl & Rusk).

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Get On the Party Line

Parties, Games, and Work at Mattel Electronics in the Early 1980s

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Get On the Party Line

Parties, Games, and Work at Mattel Electronics in the Early 1980s

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Abstract

In this article we explore the influence of parties and the emergence of party videogames in the early 1980s at Mattel Electronics, at the time a division of the massive toy company Mattel. Despite the relative marginality of party games in game studies, we have much to gain from studying their history and transformations. Intellivision, produced by Mattel Electronics, was the main rival to the Atari VCS and differed from the latter through an emphasis on sophisticated gameplay. The turn to Intellivision party games involved a vision for home videogaming, but also reflected how the category of 'party' shaped cultures of work, play, and design at Mattel Electronics. Attending to the complexity of the party category, we examine how a party ethos shaped Intellivision videogame production and how actual parties influenced game design and labor practices. Then we analyze how some Intellivision videogames were forged around the party category in terms of their simplicity, short play times, stimulating effects and socialization features, focusing on 'Party Line,' a cartridge that was almost finished before the great 1984 videogame crash in the US shuttered Mattel Electronics. From this analysis we draw a range of insights that illuminate the place of party studies in game studies. That place cannot be reduced to party games as such. Nor can it be reduced to festive, rebellious, and spirited gatherings. Parties as organizational practices played a crucial role in fostering creativity and teamwork, and had structural implications for weaving together different forms of labor. If party studies is an attempt to take seriously what has been often disregarded as frivolous, then it is important to note the cultural work that party games can do within larger historical contexts – like expanding our understanding of diverse gamers and legitimating videogames as an acceptable pastime to skeptical publics.

Keywords

Intellivision; labor; Mattel Electronics; party games; party studies; videogame history

At a deli in Los Angeles in November 1982, William Fisher, Keith Robinson, and Andy Sells were on their lunch break lamenting the success of *Trivial Pursuit*. The board game had become a cultural phenomenon, sparking parties at homes across North America (Schiro, 1983). They were programmers who worked on the Intellivision videogame system and worried that videogames were getting a bad reputation.¹ People were coming together in happy communion to play *Trivial Pursuit* while videogames were denigrated as anti-social, producing captivated ‘vidiots’ more interested in computers than their fellow human beings. The programmers realized that in response they could design cartridges for parties, leveraging that festive atmosphere to rehabilitate the solitary image of videogames. Looking up at the deli’s menu, they saw that the list of sandwiches three feet and longer – meant for groups to share – was called The Party Line. The idea for Party Line videogames was born.²

Excited to tell their boss, Gabriel Baum, the programmers returned to Mattel Electronics, the division of the massive toy company Mattel which developed and marketed Intellivision. Unfortunately, their lunchtime brainstorming had led to missing a meeting, and Baum was livid. So the programmers waited to pitch their idea, working up a proposal and game prototype in their free time. On February 3rd, 1983, “they filled a conference room with balloons and streamers” and pitched the Party Line idea (Robinson, n.d. a). Baum was pleased. Champagne was poured. The launch party – a pitch party of sorts – was a success.

This origin story is deceptively trivial. An ostensible vignette of inspiration and innovation, it hints at how the category of ‘party’ shaped cultures of work and play at Mattel Electronics. The lunchtime conversation led to an early experiment in party videogames, an academically neglected genre that has spawned hits like *Mario Party* (Nintendo, 1998–2025), *Gang Beasts* (Boneloaf, 2017), and *The Jackbox Party Pack* (Jackbox Games, 2014–2026). The subsequent presentation demonstrated the work of parties within the office. In fact, the history of Mattel Electronics featured many kinds of parties. These included corporate parties to launch new software and hardware; brainstorming parties at parks, bars, and restaurants; arcade parties to integrate organizational units and research game possibilities; and celebratory parties to honor achievement and recognize success. Alongside these actual parties, an ethos of partying pervaded videogame development. Robinson once referred to the atmosphere at Mattel Electronics as “half stress, half party” – a fun, sometimes zany, workplace that was also steeped in long hours and impending deadlines (Robinson, 1998). We see this in the origin story recounted above. A creative lunchtime breakthrough resulted in the just desserts of condemnation from the boss, leading to off-hours development of a passion project.

1 The recounting of this lunch is based on Robinson (n.d. a).

2 We use title case when referring to the proposed concept, quote marks (*Party Line*) for the unfinished game, and italics (*Party Line*) for the cartridge after its 2021 release.

In this article we explore one origin of party videogames, and how parties shaped work at Mattel Electronics. However, our analysis extends to party studies and videogame history more generally. Party studies scholarship has often noted “the word *party* defies easy definition”, typically concluding that “a party is a festive gathering” (Elza, Edgerton, & Jackson, 2010, p. 1). Occasionally scholars acknowledge other meanings, like search party or party to a lawsuit (LaBelle, 2021). But these are neither etymological fossils nor false cognates. Addressing this polysemous complexity shapes the place of party studies in game studies itself.

‘Party’ (whose etymology is shared with ‘part’ and ‘partition’) originally referred to a “group of people on one side in a contest, battle ... in opposition to others; a faction” (Oxford University Press, 2026). These remain active, contemporary meanings of ‘party’, as in notions of an aggrieved party or a political party. The emergence of ‘third-party videogame companies’ in the early 1980s reflects these meanings of party, which cannot be reduced to festive gatherings.

Furthermore, even the festive-gathering meaning of party is complex. It cannot be understood via the classical notion of categories as having either-or membership, where it is assumed that “anything that meets the definition is just as good a category member as anything else” (Murphy, 2002, p. 15). Instead, categories are radial, with gradients of membership and prototype effects toward the center.³ For example, one prototypical party is a birthday party for a child, with games and a cake, held at the home of the child in question and involving invitations. Less typical parties are for adults, do not celebrate an occasion, are connected to work (an office party), or are unknown to the honoree (a surprise party). But these are all still parties. Parties have different temporal, affective, and locational structures. With regard to affect, parties are typically fun (as the phrase ‘in the mood to party’ indicates), but need not be fun for some or even all participants. Festivity is typical, not definitional, as many who have attended office parties can attest (compare Masek & Stenros, 2024).

We seek to attend to the complexity of the party category. At Mattel Electronics, parties could be festive, but not always. They played an important role in videogame design and labor practices, product promotion, and linking programmers and marketers. The Party Line videogames extended typical ideas of party, framing domestic gameplay as a festive, group activity mediated by technology, while also using parties to promote and market Intellivision.

Our analysis is based on more than a decade of research on Intellivision, including over 150 interviews and around 20,000 pages of archival materials (Boellstorff & Soderman, 2024). We conducted additional interviews with two key developers of Intellivision party games, William Fisher and Julie Hoshizaki, and were able to play *Party Line* games with them (since this unfinished cartridge was released in 2021).

³ See, *inter alia*, Lakoff, 1987; Murphy, 2002, 2024; Rosch, 1973.

Our methods are based on a ‘near history’ approach, where we were able to use archival documents to engage interviewees in historical analysis. This is analogous to ‘augmented interviews’ used in ethnographic research (Ryder & Miller, 2026; for further discussion see Boellstorff & Soderman, 2024, pp. 17–20).

Using this approach, we examine how a party ethos shaped Mattel Electronics and explore how actual parties influenced game design and labor practices. We also analyze how some Intellivision videogames were forged around the party category, focusing on ‘Party Line’, a cartridge that was almost finished before the 1984 US videogame crash (hereafter the Crash) shuttered Mattel Electronics. Our analysis links technical elements to social contexts of labor, design, and gender. Ultimately, we demonstrate the multifaceted importance of parties to the early videogame industry while also detailing an overlooked origin of party videogames and the historical specificities that shaped their inspiration and development.

Working and partying at Mattel Electronics

Intellivision was sold between 1979 and 1984 by Mattel Electronics, at the time a division of Mattel. Founded in 1944 by Ruth and Elliot Handler in Los Angeles, by the 1970s Mattel was a toy industry juggernaut, with hits like Barbie and Hot Wheels. The company had a long history of technological innovation – for instance, Chatty Cathy, a doll released in 1960 with the ability to speak phrases from an inserted phonographic record. Mattel was also known as a marketing innovator, which included developing some of the first television commercials for toys. After its rival the Atari VCS, Intellivision was the most successful videogame system in the US during the early 1980s.

In this article, we focus on a programming group within Mattel Electronics known as Applications Software. As Mattel Electronics consolidated in the late 1970s, it relied heavily on APh Technological Consulting, a company with expertise in computer programming. Every game available at the time of Intellivision’s release was created at APh. Concerned by this dependency, Mattel Electronics executives founded Applications Software to bring game design in house. Gabriel Baum was hired to manage the group: as he recalled, “part of why I was brought in was to get discipline into the creative process” (interview, 21 October 2018). However, he also cultivated creativity within the group, particularly through supporting a party ethos. The idea that managers should “foster ‘cultures of fun’ in contemporary workplaces ... gained momentum in the early 1980s” (Fleming, 2005, p. 285). During this time at Mattel Electronics, a particular articulation of work and play was taking form through the intersection of games and parties.

A range of evidence, from interviews to documents, reveals the playful atmosphere of game design at Applications Software. This regularly took the form of parties, including holiday parties (Priestley & Robinson, 1983); the 1981 holiday party was

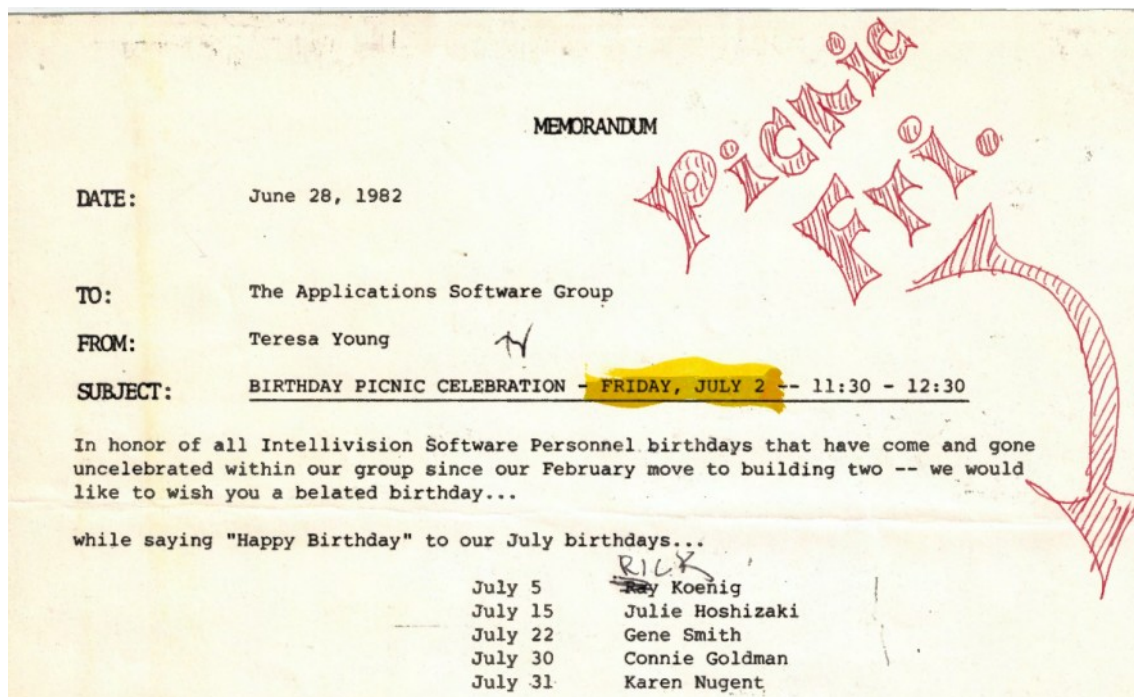


Figure 1. Excerpt, memorandum for a birthday party (Young, 1982).

hosted by the comedian Jay Leno. Employee birthdays were marked with parties, such as a breakfast event with donuts and coffee or a lunch picnic (Figure 1). Often these parties would include acknowledgment of employee achievements (Young, 1982). As time passed, other Applications Software events were framed as parties. For instance, seminars to workshop games were sometimes termed parties, like a "*Masters of the Universe* Brainstorming Session and Cast-Signing Party" (Warhol, 1983). The pitch party for the 'Party Line' videogames mentioned above also promoted programmer ideas. These were not prototypical office parties: yet through this very atypicality, notions of party were intersecting with the labor of game design.

A party atmosphere was central to the early videogame industry. In *Atari Inc.: Business is Fun*, Goldberg and Vendel (2012) discuss a range of parties at Atari going back to the early 1970s. These included Friday night parties, Christmas parties, and even a party "held to celebrate the official opening of Atari's new Corporate Headquarters" (Goldberg & Vendel, 2012, p. 211). In second-generation videogame companies, this party atmosphere was framed within the demands and deadlines of game design. Nolan Bushnell, one of Atari's founders, emphasized "people talk about the party atmosphere, but what they don't realize is that it was all based on hitting quotas" (in A. Fisher, 2018; see Backiel, 2003; Goldberg & Vendel, 2012, pp. 584–585). The phrase 'half stress, half party' mentioned above implicitly recognizes these understandings of a 'party' atmosphere that is not relegated to leisure.

This 'party' atmosphere, particularly at Atari, was informed by the dominance of young men. Scholars have examined how "the development side of video gaming

has always involved a unique type of frat that included the partying generally associated with them" (McDivitt, 2020, p. 13), reflecting how "certain formations of masculinity are, themselves, infrastructural to the production of digital games" (Taylor, 2024, p. 29). For example, the Friday afternoon parties at Atari were also used for recruitment, where women were brought in to speak to male programmers (McDivitt, 2020, p. 26). Questions concerning practices and feelings of inclusion and exclusion in game industry parties continue to be important (Myöhänen, 2025). It is also crucial to recognize that parties differ in terms of social and work-related context, which influence inclusion and gender dynamics.

In contrast to Atari's frat atmosphere, our archival analysis and interviews, particularly with female programmers, paint a picture of relative gender inclusion in Applications Software in the early 1980s. Note that the memorandum above (Figure 1) is about celebrating the birthdays of five programmers in July 1982; three of the five are women. One of them, Connie Goldman, noted how when hired "they gave me a whole month before I showed up because I had a baby at that point and I had to set up daycare. And so they were very generous about that" (interview, 24 October 2018). Another, Karen Nugent, recalled "there really were a lot of women involved at that point, which is pretty cool" (interview, 3 December 2018). The third, Julie Hoshizaki, remembered how when taking a computer science class in college, "all the men realized I was the only woman in the room. And they all turned and looked at me, and I said, 'oh, I better leave'. And I walked out. That was the only time I've ever felt threatened in school or my career" (interview, 13 November 2018). When asked about the work atmosphere and parties at Mattel, Hoshizaki said, "for sure there was no fraternity atmosphere. I never felt threatened or uncomfortable" (interview, 14 March 2026).

Indeed, the women we interviewed who worked as Applications Software programmers emphasized that they were invited to the party. Underrepresentation and exclusion certainly existed, and we have documented evidence concerning a gendered work environment, including sexist materials that support the idea that a frat-like atmosphere existed in some instances (Boellstorff & Soderman, 2024, pp. 141, 172). This challenges a simple, linear narrative of increasing gender equality, indicating how dynamics and practices in the early videogame industry can provide resources for further study, not just cautionary tales. In addition, scholars must attend to specific contexts, in terms of the type of parties being discussed and corporate work atmospheres. For example, office birthday parties differed from corporate bashes, and Atari's context differed from Mattel, with its history of making girls' toys and presence of women in leadership roles.

In addition to parties at work, it is important to consider work as itself a party. In this form, labor and leisure mingle; work and play merge. Many employees emphasized how work at Mattel Electronics was magical and fun (Boellstorff & Soderman, 2024, chapter 6). Pranks and practical jokes were common, and zany behavior propagated, like hitting rubber duckies with golf clubs in the open cubicle

workspace. While Baum managed creativity and enforced game production schedules, he also cultivated a party ethos, allowing a creative work environment to emerge. Designing videogames required play as much as work, and Baum understood this. Thus, arcade machines were available to play, and spontaneous, festive gatherings would occur, like the famed *Biplanes* tournaments employees fondly remember.

Biplanes, released in 1981 as part of the *Triple Action* cartridge, was a game where two players control planes and try to shoot each other down in a blue sky with two clouds. Despite its simplicity, the flying and shooting mechanics could afford different strategies and play styles – for instance, intentionally going into a stall and shooting backwards while falling. Its short length augmented its social function, catalyzing impromptu office tournaments that attracted small audiences and conviviality. Such forms of “playing together” have remained key features of the labor of videogame design (Sotamaa, 2021, p. 113).

Outside work the party could continue, with some programmers hosting actual parties or organizing activities after work or during lunch. Eric Del Sesto was only 18 when hired at Applications Software, and emphasized the welcoming, playful reception he received (interview, 23 February 2021). He recalled “we did a lot of things outside of work together ... seemed like almost every night there was something going on that I could attach myself to, to have fun. And that was a great atmosphere” (Del Sesto, 1988). Party studies, broadly conceived beyond the study of prototypical parties, can help us think about organizational and social partitions between party/stress, work/play, and how one can emerge in the other. Play can erupt at work, work can leak out into leisure spaces, and in some cases the partitions become difficult to distinguish. For example, softball teams at Mattel Electronics led to leisure time socialization. Hoshizaki recalled visiting nearby arcades during lunch breaks to play games, as did Fisher, who added “it was research. It was also fun, but it was research” (interview, 20 August 2025).

Often occurring in bars, restaurants, and parks, Mattel Electronics brainstorming sessions exemplified work as party and mingled leisure and labor. When the journalist Howard Polskin observed Intellivision programmers for a *TV Guide* article in February 1982, they spent time brainstorming in a corporate office before heading to a restaurant. Polskin explained that Baum wanted “to pump some wine into them to help loosen their thoughts”, thinking that a “change of atmosphere might spark their thinking” (Polskin, 1982, p. 42). Parties themselves are all about atmosphere and social context, but in this case, the festive atmosphere and stimulating effects of alcohol channeled creative thinking. Even in 1982, Polskin understood that play and partying were being used to cajole labor: “When Mattel wants to stoke them, it knows which buttons to push” (Polskin, 1982, p. 44). In these situations, play and labor merge, becoming what scholars call playbor, where passion, playfulness, and even partying can motivate and sustain work (Bulut, 2020; Kücklich, 2005).

AGREEMENTMATTEL ELECTRONICS USE OF THE UNDERGROUND, REDONDO PIER

Purpose: Mattel Electronics (Mattel) desires to use The Underground, an electronic game room at Redondo Beach Pier (Underground) for purposes of exposing their staff to a "video game arcade experience".

Date: Wednesday, July 14, 1982

Time: From 5:00 P.M. to 9:00 P.M. (the session).

Attendees: Approximately seventy (70) Mattel employees and their associates.

Cost: \$400.00 for the session.

Terms: Paid in advance - prior to July 7, 1982.

Figure 2. Excerpt, rental agreement memorandum (Doepke, 1982).

Polskin noted that the night following the brainstorming session, an actual Mattel Electronics party was planned – the “definition of heaven” for the programmers, he speculated, since it “was held in an empty Redondo beach video-game arcade, and every game was free for the night” (Polskin, 1982, p. 44). This was not an isolated incident: such parties were held twice a year during the Intellivision period. These parties were festive, but had other purposes too. As one industry publication noted at the time, corporate parties can “generate excitement and interest during relatively inactive periods” (Stacey, 1979, p. 82). The biannual parties were used in this way, particularly before demanding work periods (Baum, 1983b). Moreover, the rental agreement with the arcade explained that, for Mattel Electronics, the event was “for purposes of exposing their staff to a ‘video game arcade experience’” – revealing that this exposure was crucial to the employees’ work (Doepke, 1982; Figure 2). It was fun, but also research. Indeed, at the time these parties occurred, Mattel Electronics was pivoting from sports to arcade-style videogames and ports of arcade games in order to compete with its main rival Atari.

The arcade parties served organizational functions as well, commingling marketers and programmers. Baum’s memos announced that “to ensure a continuous rise to as yet unreached pinnacles of creativity this year, a joint Software-Marketing party will be held” (Baum, 1983a), or that “the Software group in close coordination with the Marketing group will be hosting a party” (Baum, 1982b, see Baum, 1982a). Partitions between marketing staff and designers had a long history at Mattel Toys, and this persisted in Mattel Electronics. These tensions were captured by the Creative Media staff Brad Geagley in a satirical guide for programmers that paired short statements with images from Dante’s *Inferno*. One page read “you will learn that Marketing has the final say on what products you will assist in developing ... occasionally, however, small hostilities have been known to surface” (Geagley, n.d., Figure 3).



OCCASIONALLY, HOWEVER, SMALL HOSTILITIES HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO SURFACE.

GOING ON, YOU WILL MEET YOUR CO-WORKERS:

Figure 3. Excerpt, Dante's infernal guide to applications software (Geagley, n.d.).

Baum used parties to bridge this segregation. Party scholars have often drawn on theories of ritual, liminality, and integration, particularly when addressing parties as part of a cultural field including carnivals and play (Bakhtin, 1984; Sutton-Smith, 1997). At Mattel Electronics, parties could counterbalance organizational partitions between the 'creative' programmers and marketers. This reveals an awareness that marketers were themselves creatives; their insights helped develop video-games that would sell. These parties were not liminal but integral, linking two forms of labor.

These parties were labor in their own right – a reminder that party studies should attend to scholarship in organizational studies and labor studies on fun and play (Barsoux, 1993; Greenwich, 2001; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Yerkes, 2001). Parties are not all partying. They require a significant amount of work. The party noted above, involving renting an arcade from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m., cost about \$1,350 in 2026 dollars; staff collected RSVPs, provided directions, created agreements for services and rental fees, organized catering, and even bought plates and forks at the supermarket (Doepke, 1982; see figure 2). This reflects how partying and work are linked: parties typically have hosts or organizers who labor to create atmosphere and put on the event.

While these programmer/marketing parties linked organizational structures within Mattel Electronics, other parties faced outward. During this pre-internet era, conventions played a key role in sales. For Mattel Electronics, the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) was crucial. At CES, parties were a way for Mattel Electronics to build relationships with vendors. As one party organizer wrote in the industry magazine *Playthings*, corporate parties to introduce new products were a “meaningful way to reinforce advertising, marketing, and sales” (Stacey, 1979, 82). As far back as the June 1978 CES, likely the first for Mattel Electronics, there was a “cocktail party for reps” (Wall, 1978). Other companies did the same, like Atari, whose marketing staff held cocktail parties “where distributors [could] see some of the new products Atari would be introducing that year” (Goldberg & Vendel, 2012, p. 368).

Parties, then, took a range of forms at Mattel Electronics, shaping the ethos and labor of Intellivision videogame development. This was also the context in which the genre of party videogames emerged.

Party games at Mattel Electronics

Like other second-generation consoles, Intellivision was bringing videogames into the home, the locus par excellence of parties. However, party games were not an influential force within Intellivision game development. This was the case despite the fact that Mattel Toys released analog party games long before Intellivision, including “the snuggle struggle home party game” *Tight Squeeze* (1967), *Blarney* (1970), *Up For Grabs* (1978b), and *Groop Loop* (1978a) – a *Twister*-like game. Historically, Mattel Electronics quickly became functionally separate from Mattel Toys, a competitive siloing exacerbated by the former’s phenomenal success in the early 1980s, when Intellivision was bringing in more revenue than Barbie and Hot Wheels combined.

If Mattel Electronics staff were unlikely to get party game ideas from the Toy division, they were no more likely to get them from the nascent world of home videogames. Party videogames were not a recognized genre during the second generation. For instance, when Chris Crawford published the landmark work *The Art of Computer Game Design* in 1984, he did not include party games in his taxonomy of computer games. Crawford did identify “social lubrication” and icebreaking scenarios, but as motivations for playing games, not categories of videogames themselves (Crawford, 1984, p. 16).

Intellivision videogames reflected this marginalization of party games. Programmers focused at first on producing sports and strategy titles. Some of these required two players – for example, *Major League Baseball* (1979a), *NFL Football* (1979b), *Sea Battle* (1980b), and *Utopia* (1982c). However, while it only takes two to tango, parties generally require more participants. An exception was *Horse Racing*, released in 1980 as one of the console’s original titles. *Horse Racing* allows for up to

six players, all of whom place bets on four-horse races. One or two of the horses can be player controlled, or all four can be left to the console. One of us recalls raucous family parties where *Horse Racing* was played collectively. Although ‘party’ is never mentioned in the instruction manual, the game’s box states that it is “a great party game!”.

Beyond *Horse Racing*, there were sporadic suggestions for Intellivision party games. In 1981, one fan sent a letter to Mattel Electronics suggesting they develop a ‘Pin the Tail on the Donkey’ videogame. Baum responded to the fan, explaining that programmers were “developing many new cartridges for 1982 and 1983 including action cartridges, party cartridges, and cartridges aimed at different age groups” (Baum, 1981). It is unclear what party cartridges Baum had in mind. Some brainstorming sessions for new products did mention party game possibilities like “follow-the-leader party type games” and “charades” (Sohl, 1981).

In this article we focus on the Intellivision console, known as the Master Component. However, Mattel Electronics also proposed a Keyboard Component, which would turn the Master Component into a home computer (Boellstorff & Soderman, 2024, chapter 3). Although technical challenges prevented a general release of the Keyboard Component, enormous development took place for it. This included party game ideas. For example, an idea for a Mad Libs cassette – a “party game played by two or more players” – was suggested in a memo whose recipients included Baum (Naddor, 1981). In another example, a memo proposed party gaming for the Keyboard Component:

Intellivision would take the role of Games Master at your next party. A variety of games – word, action, logic, etc. – would be programmed into the computer, and would remember each player’s name. For instance, in a variation on ‘Twister’, Intellivision would command, “Joey, put your hand on Diane’s ankle”. (Script Development, 1980)

Party games were separated from the usual videogame fare and listed alongside self-improvement, health, and wellness applications, thus linking them to broader social contexts. The suggestion that the computer would remember each player’s name emphasized personalization and intimacy, crucial to health and self-care applications as well. The example of Joey touching Diane’s ankle reinforces this intimacy, as does the idea that game mechanics for party videogames would extend into the physical environment. Party gaming required understanding social context and intimacy, whereas other videogame genres replaced context with psychological projection into a fantasy world.

In the early videogame industry, there were conflicting perceptions regarding if videogames were solitary or social. The first arcade games – like two-player *Pong* (Atari, 1972) – appeared in bars, a key location of socialization. One might imagine arcades of the time populated by isolated individuals engrossed in *Pac-Man*

(Namco, 1980), *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978), or *Asteroids* (Atari, 1979). But arcades were also social, with onlookers, competitions, groups of friends hanging out, and even birthday parties and other social gatherings. At home, early videogaming was linked to family entertainment, not individual use (Newman, 2017). For instance, Intellivision's early sports games required two players because of this link to domestic entertainment, and because cartridge memory limitations made computer opponents hard to implement.

When Mattel Electronics programmer John Sohl was imagining new titles for Intellivision in December 1980, shortly after the system's release, he imagined 'conventional games' like *Othello*, *Scrabble*, chess, and bridge, all social games with two or more players. Sohl (1980) explained that "one of the "great advantages" of Intellivision was that "it can take the place of a missing second player", particularly when some players "live alone", "are married to a non-game-player", or are "night people living in a house full of morning people". Crawford made a similar observation, explaining that creating an "illusory personality against which the player competes ... is one of the most exciting and least developed potentials of the computer as a game technology" (1984, p. 10).

Crawford and Sohl were not wrong, and at Mattel Electronics one-player games became more dominant as Intellivision's catalog grew. Their thoughts anticipate how videogames might transform the social space of play, contributing to the growth of single-player game experiences within the home and to an atmosphere where party gaming would be less visible as an innovation.

"Get on the Party Line"

It was not until early 1983 that party games solidified as a goal at Mattel Electronics, challenging the idea that videogame development should shift to single-player, arcade-style experiences. As noted in the introduction, Fisher, Robinson, and Sells proposed the Party Line concept to their boss, Gabriel Baum, in February 1983. On May 13, the concept was formally presented to Mattel Electronics leadership, including Josh Denham, President of Mattel Electronics. In a 1998 interview, Fisher (1998) recalled how they "served punch and cookies" while explaining "we had this line of games that were based on playing them at parties... And they loved it".

This pitch party was accompanied by a detailed proposal which outlined the reasoning behind the new line of videogames. The proposal represents one of the earliest known analyses regarding what party games might entail for home videogame systems. It contains rich ideas regarding how to create a new type of videogame, commodify the social space of parties, produce new forms of videogame marketing, extend videogame play to more diverse audiences, and forge design ideas integrated with social contexts. Denham wrote an effusive memo to Fisher, Sells, and Robinson (1983), proclaiming "it's one of the best marketing ideas that I

have heard in a long time". Robinson was praised in his performance review from this period, which noted that the party game "concept identifies the need for these games and describes its implementation realistically in terms of programming, marketing, and advertising" (Minkoff, 1983). What was the reasoning behind this proposal that generated such excitement?

The first goal listed in the Party Line proposal was the "elimination of negative pre-conceptions about video games", ostensibly solved by the second goal mentioned, to "[expose] people to videogames in a positive environment", like a party (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 2). We mentioned before how Fisher, Robinson, and Sells were upset that magazine coverage of the boardgame *Trivial Pursuit* was generating negative press for videogames: the "solitary (i.e. antisocial) fad of video games, the magazines declared, was dead" (Robinson, n.d. a). Indeed, Crawford identified these perceptions as a "weakness" of videogames, writing that "many computer games are played alone, leading to the accusation that the games are antisocial. A board game invites a group of people to sit around the table. A computer game encourages one player, accepts two, but discourages more" (Crawford, 1984, p. 47). Party videogames, the proposal articulated, would combat negative perceptions related to videogaming. Instead of associating videogaming with solitary play in the home or arcades (which at the time were still often seen as dens of crime, adolescent corruption, and gambling) people's introduction to videogames could occur in an exciting party atmosphere. This connects party gaming's origins at Mattel Electronics to disparate moments in videogame history, such as the rise of serious games in the 2000s, also bent on shifting negative perspectives surrounding games concerning their trivial nature.

At the heart of the Party Line idea was reaching "many potential video game owners that have not been sold on video games" (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 2). The goal was to invite more people to the party of videogaming that was raging within the US. The proposal playfully nodded at the polysemic richness of 'party', ending with "Mattel Electronics should get on The Party Line" (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 16). The phrase alludes to the political meaning of 'party line', the official policies of a political party. The polysemy was catchy but also intentionally meaningful: the programmers wanted management and marketing to adopt their game idea as an official 'product line' which, in turn, could bring more players into Intellivision's tent.

In fact, the catchy phrase is triply polysemous. From the late nineteenth century to the 1970s, many US homes had 'party lines' where they shared a telephone number with other households, fostering a range of cultural practices around eavesdropping, sharing, and community (Donovan, 2016; C. Fisher, 1992; Rymarczuk, 2016). The phrase 'get on the Party Line' invokes this history: one key aspect of the Party Line games was that players would share gameplay, like different customers sharing a phone line. The proposal authors wrote that the party games would be designed to be "played by anywhere from two to five hundred and ten people at a

time" (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 13). The reference to 510 is a programmer's inside joke. As Fisher noted:

255 is the largest possible value for an eight-bit number such as a player number counter. If we have two teams and each has a separate player number counter, the largest possible number of players we can support is twice 255, or 510. (Interview, 11 September 2025)

But this also playfully stands in for multiplicity in general, a radically different conception of videogame sociality beyond one or two-player games.

In the Party Line proposal, the authors express concern that videogames are limited in their capacity to serve multiple players – in comparison to, for example, boardgames. In the early 1980s, there were still millions of US homes without costly game consoles or computers. The idea that a single game system could be shared among many players at social gatherings responded to these limits – recalling how shared party line phone systems responded to limited (and costly) dedicated lines. The proposal suggested as a common feature of Party Line games that guests would be divided into teams, with the controllers regularly "handed to the next player" during gameplay (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 4). Indeed, "the excitement and pressure of handing off the controllers" was presented as a key feature of the game experience – a social mechanic allowing gameplay to extend "beyond the cartridge" where "the entire party/crowd atmosphere, becomes a part of the game" (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 4). The party atmosphere would change game design, and game design would change the party, signaling interactions in the world.

Reaching more players, creating shared videogames, and being aware of the social context were key components that linked Party Line games to a broader marketing and sales vision. In their proposal, Fisher, Robinson, & Sells asserted that one advantage for party games would be an "Expansion of Market" and exposing "large numbers of non-video game owners to our systems in a fun environment" (1983, p. 5). Extending beyond the cartridge was not just about gameplay, but promoting Intellivision through party atmospheres. The proposal suggested that "the party theme can be easily exploited by marketing and advertising" and that "'Party Sales' have been proved in the past (e.g. Tupperware). We are providing software that SELLS ITSELF AND SYSTEMS" (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 5, capitalization in original). The Party Line concept involved not just games but promotion, connecting to the ways that Tupperware and other companies were finding success with parties as sales events linked to the home and to femininity – an example of how gendered contexts could influence specific kinds of parties in the industry.

These ideas were well received by management because party games were framed strategically in relation to Intellivision's market position and outlook. Fisher emphasized that the Party Line concept – proposing a whole genre and series of

games – was motivated by a sense they needed to “go big or go home” given the state of the videogame industry in 1983 (interview, 20 August 2025). The concept “was a Hail Mary”, Fisher added, because “not enough people were playing our video games and we needed to get more people involved” (interview, 20 August 2025). Intellivision had always been far behind its rival Atari in terms of market share, but by 1983 the entire US home videogame boom was eroding, fast. For the February–April 1983 period, when *Party Line* was pitched, Mattel Electronics sales were a measly \$22 million, down from almost \$120 million for the same period in 1982. For the May–July 1983 period, there was a shocking loss of \$201 million. About 15% of staff were fired.⁴ In September, a ruthless review of unfinished games recommended ‘Party Line’ for termination, explaining that the “party concept [is] deemed artificial and invalid” (Rochlis, 1983). Fortunately, market testing indicated the concept had promise, and development continued even through further layoffs (Robinson, n.d. a). Six possible games had been proposed, and management greenlighted developing the three that were closest to completion – *Space Cadet*, *Blow Out*, and *Hard Hat*.

In *Space Cadet*, two teams each control a flying saucer that flies between two planets – one icy blue and white, the other fiery red and orange. Twinkling stars appear randomly in the background; touching one causes a shot to be fired at your opponent’s planet, changing a piece of it to your own planet’s color (Figure 4). The goal is



Figure 4. *Space Cadet* screenshot. © Blue Sky Rangers, Inc.

4 For more details, see Boellstorff & Soderman, 2024, chapter 13.



Figure 5. *Blow Out* screenshot. © Blue Sky Rangers, Inc.

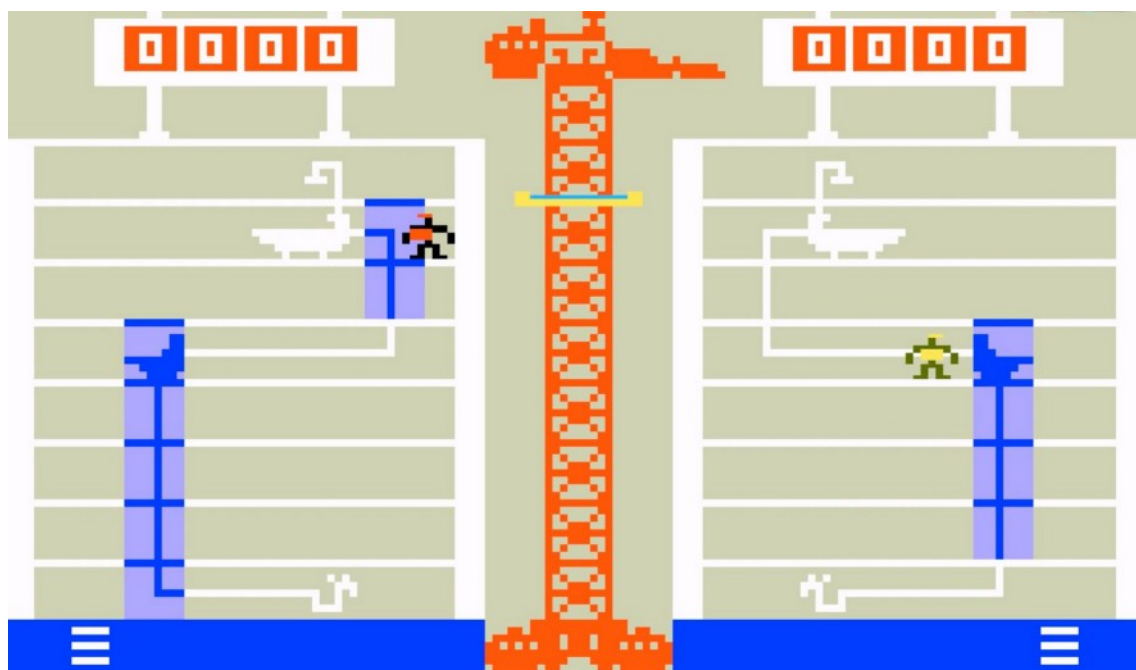


Figure 6. *Hard Hat* screenshot. © Blue Sky Rangers, Inc.

to completely transform the opposing team's planet into your planet's colors. In *Blow Out*, two rollerskaters move on the top of a building's rafters, dropping darts to pop balloons and gain points (Figure 5). The team that pops the most balloons wins. In *Hard Hat* two teams each control a worker installing windows on a highrise building, competing to install more windows and gain more points (Figure 6).

Despite work on these titles, 'Party Line' did not survive the Crash. The three games were nearly complete and shown at the 1984 January CES (Minkoff, 1984a). Two weeks later, Mattel Electronics shut down. The party was over. The much smaller company that bought the rights to Intellivision in 1984 did not further develop 'Party Line', in part because they decided to release only one-player games (Robinson, n.d. a).

'Party Line' largely disappeared from history. It reappeared only in 2021 – 37 years after the 1984 CES demo – when Intellivision expert and homebrew developer Joe Zbiciak, working with a group of former Intellivision programmers, stitched the ROMs for the three games together. As released, the games retain their various states of completion. *Space Cadet* was the only finished *Party Line* game. In March 1984, as Intellivision was being sold off, one memo noted "Space Cadet is complete and would be pre-code released if it was an individual game" (Minkoff, 1984b). *Blow Out* was still unfinished, with an estimated "2-4 weeks of adding features" needed (Minkoff, 1984a). Finally, *Hard Hat* was "nearly complete", but did "not have the time limit/multiple player teams feature in yet" (Minkoff, 1983; 1984a). While these games never had a chance to be the life of the party, they provide valuable insights into the design of party games at Mattel Electronics.

Party Line and game design

While not released until 2021, *Party Line* demonstrates a vision for party games and their development. This vision was articulated in the Party Line proposal, where the authors offered a set of principles for party game design:

(A) colorful graphics; (B) fun, bouncy music; (C) easy game concepts; (D) simple use of hand controllers; (E) large number of people can play; (F) short 'turns' so everyone gets a chance; (G) game play extends 'beyond the cartridge'—the excitement and pressure of handing off the controllers, the rooting for 'your team', the entire party/crowd atmosphere, become a part of the game. (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 12)

We can distill these ideas into four design principles: simplification, short-term play, stimulation, and socialization.

From the outset, simplification was seen as vital for reaching partygoers who had not played videogames before. It was a general principle, articulated in terms of

easily digested goals, mechanics, and game concepts. It was, however, a seemingly contradictory principle for Intellivision. After all, true to its name, Intellivision was marketed as more sophisticated than its rival Atari which had less memory, simpler graphics, and its one-button joystick. In contrast, for example Intellivision's complex hand controllers had a twelve-button keypad, four action buttons, and a disc (not joystick) with sixteen directions of movement. Some complex Intellivision games could use all of this functionality.

The proposal authors challenged this core premise of Intellivision, asserting that complexity discouraged new players. They explained that a negative perception of videogames was that they "are too complex to learn. Especially true of Intellivision games with instruction booklets that can run to thirty pages and buttons that are used for different things at different times during the game" (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 2). For example, *Horse Racing* – as noted above, advertised as a "great party game" – was not simple in any way. The twenty-page manual was jammed with detail about judging the computer-generated horses' performance, graphs indicating how 'coaxing' and 'whipping' simulations worked, and even a recommendation to keep a written record of the races with detailed observations.

Unlike canonical Intellivision titles like *Horse Racing*, the *Party Line* games replaced sophistication with simplification. *Space Cadet*, for example, did not require reading a manual to play. It used the direction pad for moving the space saucers, but players did not even need to press an action button to fire. Players merely flew their spaceship over a twinkling star and the shot fired automatically. Julie Hoshizaki, the game's programmer, emphasized she did this "just to make it simple" to play in a party atmosphere (interview, 20 August 2025). Hoshizaki's design simplified interaction even beyond the arcade norm of joystick plus button. *Space Cadet* reduced gameplay to basic movement, which facilitated sharing the controller between party guests.

Beyond the controllers, simplification also entailed easily graspable game concepts. Partiers needed to grab the controller and quickly understand what to do. Attention would be divided when gaming alongside talking, eating, drinking, and cavorting. Simple games would facilitate incorporation into multifaceted festivities. The simplicity of *Party Line* games recalls *Biplanes* which, as discussed above, was often played by Applications Software staff during work breaks. It thus anticipated the vision for party games in terms of design and social context. William Fisher, one of the *Party Line* proposal's authors, agreed that *Biplanes* "could have been a seed for making us think" about party games: "It was a party, a mini party, every day" (interview, 20 August 2025).

Simplicity implied a second design theme, short-term play, with brief turns more akin to arcade experiences. For example, in *Blow Out* the rounds of dropping darts on balloons last just 30 seconds. One can imagine thrusting the controller into the

hands of a new player and yelling quickly, “move the skater with the disk and press the button to throw darts at the balloons!”.

Shortened temporalities had implications within Applications Software itself. In a section titled “Simplicity of Game Design”, the proposal’s authors assert that party games could have rapid development cycles requiring less debugging and game logic programming. The simplicity of party games would even result in “shorter, simpler (and less expensive) instruction books” (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 5). During the second generation, cartridge memory restrictions were key. With their simple gameplay and graphics, party games would be less constrained by this issue, the authors explained. Furthermore, programmers could use “faster but less efficient programming tools” to accelerate production (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 5). Since party games would not require fastidious programming techniques to save ROM space, development could be accelerated using available tools (like Mr. Color, a graphics design program created at Mattel Electronics).⁵ The smaller size also meant that multiple games could be included in a single cartridge, as happened with *Party Line*.

Simplification and short-term play shape our third design theme, stimulation. Instead of complex simulations, stimulations embrace the energy of play, vibrant graphics, sound intensity, and affective properties of socialization. Instead of simulating a day at the football stadium or horse track, one is stimulating the senses: balloons pop, planets change color, windows break. A few titles proposed for *Party Line* explicitly linked partying to stimulation. In ‘Party Animals’, players control animals trying not to destroy a city street as they head to a party: “moose with wide antlers, kangaroos with long tails, hippos that weigh a ton! Players must keep destruction to a minimum” (Robinson, n.d. a). Players are also animals in another never-developed game, ‘Punch Line’. They must keep drinks and snacks flowing at a party trying to appease the animals’ appetites and prevent their awkward bodies from damaging the house. Partying becomes a theme and an aesthetic, an energetic style that shapes a game’s look, sound, feel, and gameplay. Party games were imagined as a lively new art, as Henry Jenkins might say, embracing “the excess kinetic energy that has always surrounded gameplay” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 34).

The completed *Party Line* games foreground stimulation as well. For instance, *Blow Out* is part dance club, part roller derby, part carnival, part party – the game aims to stimulate players through its multicolor graphics, bouncy music, loud pops, and quick, rollerskating action (a popular leisure activity in the early 1980s). When a round ends, streamers and confetti pour down the screen as the rollerskaters jiggle frenetically. This is one of the first moments of juiciness—a colorful, over-the-top spectacle in casual games that “gives excessive amounts of positive feedback in response to the player’s actions” (Juul, 2009, p. 45). A blowout, after all, means a lavish party bent on excessive stimulation. *Blow Out*’s working title in the proposal

⁵ See Boellstorff & Soderman, 2024, chapter 5.

was 'Gang Bang' – a name that would never pass the marketing censors at a toy company. This name also connoted excessive stimulation: transgressive sexuality and street violence, aggressive racial and gendered connotations. Long before *Gang Beasts* took the party game scene by storm, *Blow Out* ran with the idea that the rollerskaters (these "rude guys", as the proposal called them) would "keep bumping into each other and knocking each other off the scaffold" (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 6). While 'Gang Bang' was a joke, the humor included in the Party Line proposal invokes the 'frat party' feeling that McDivitt critiqued as an aspect of the early videogame industry.

Space Cadet's gameplay also reflects ideas of a lively party with jostling bodies, though without the frat party affect: while trying to touch the twinkling stars, players can smack into each other, a bumper-car-like game mechanic that further encourages interaction between teams – virtual and perhaps physical interaction as well. Like the sugary snacks and intoxicating libations that often accompany a party, the Party Line games were imagined as electronic stimulants. The games did not simulate parties but stimulated them. Indeed, Hoshizaki explained that the simple games were designed with inebriated players in mind, reflected in the title of *Space Cadet*, which also means someone who is confused, spacy, and out of touch with reality.

As design principles, simplification, short-term play, and stimulation were all aimed at producing enjoyable experiences – but all three presumed the context of our fourth design principle, socialization. Simplicity allowed for including as many potential players as possible. Short-term play encouraged cooperative interaction when sharing a game. Stimulation aligned game aesthetics with party aesthetics, potentially stimulating conversation about wacky gameplay, sounds, and graphics. Overall, the Party Line proposal was animated by a pervasive concern with the social context of play – imagining how play at parties differs from play at the arcade, at a friend's house, in one's home, or at a store display. The programmers opposed their vision for party games to videogames played at a party which were not designed for the context:

Those not playing are bored... Those who have never played a video game before are too embarrassed to try in a group this size. Those who are already video game fanatics hog the machine and don't give others a chance to try it. (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 3)

The Party Line games would counter these forms of disengagement. They would bring together different parties in the game context: those who are bored, those who are new to videogames, the gaming fanatics. This idea of using a party to bring together different 'parties' is not typical for all parties – but it was a core element of parties at Mattel Electronics, for example, as opportunities to bring programmers and marketers into conversation.

One way to accomplish this socialization – and one way party games radically differ from traditional videogames – is through design that bleeds into the social context. In this regard, a fascinating aspect of the proposal was the idea that “game play extends ‘beyond the cartridge’” (W. Fisher, Robinson, & Sells, 1983, p. 4). When the proposal authors wrote that “the entire party/crowd atmosphere, becomes a part of the game”, they urged a radical rethinking of design that takes play context into account. Handing off controllers, cheering, bumping and jostling other players, drinking: these and other elements could become part of the party game.

To illustrate how this approach differs from incorporating non-party games into parties, we can examine promotion parties in *Intellivision News*. A publication of the Mattel Electronics Game Club, the six issues of this newsletter were produced by a marketing group separate from the programmers in Applications Software. Three times, *Intellivision News* ran articles suggesting parties based on Intellivision videogames: a “Backyard *BurgerTime* Bar-B-Q”, a “Space Action Party”, and a party inspired by *Vectron* (1983b) (Video Entertaining, 1983a; Video Entertaining, 1983b; Video Entertaining, 1983c; Figure 7).

These articles suggest playing videogames at the parties, but then include activities separate from the videogames, though thematically linked to them. The Bar-B-Q idea separates playing *BurgerTime* (Mattel Electronics, 1983a) from party events like a burger-ingredient scavenger hunt and Build-a-Burger relay race. The separation reflects how the single-player *BurgerTime* videogame could not be integrated with the party context directly, but thematically could be linked ‘beyond the cartridge’. For the *Vectron* party, the suggestion is that teams of two compete, taking turns playing the single-player game: “you might even want to make this a father/son or mother/daughter event” (Video entertaining, 1983b). Beyond the cartridge, the article proposed a “video game trivia contest” with questions like “what stops the chef from building hamburgers in *BurgerTime*?” – an attempt to piggyback the massive success of *Trivial Pursuit* (Video Entertaining, 1983b). The article about a Space Action Party was organized around the Intellivision games *Astrosplash* (1981a), *Space Armada* (1981b), *Space Battle* (1979c), *Space Hawk* (1982b), and *Star Strike* (1981c). These are single-player games, and so connections are thematically beyond the cartridge: for example, a party menu including Space Battle Burgers and Astrosplash Punch. In contrast to thematic resonance, Party Line games would integrate social context with the videogames themselves.

However, socialization in party videogame design was largely left to the imagination, not least because *Party Line* was never released before the Crash. *Blow Out*, *Hard Hat*, and *Space Cadet* dabbled with going beyond the cartridge in their gameplay – for example, cueing controller change with music or subtly encouraging physical bumping and nudging. Notes about the ‘Party Animals’ idea included “Listen to your team members who can point out objects in danger”, indicating that the design would have relied on multiple players watching the screen (Robinson, n.d. b).



ENTERTAINING

SPACE ACTION PARTY

Invite your friends to a Space Action party. Send colorful meteor invitations you create from construction paper. Ask your guests to appear in futuristic costumes.

The main event, of course, will be an Intellivision® Space Action Network contest. Players can fight a fierce battle or maneuver through the galaxy. Guests can also create a place in space of their own. A large closet, a room in the basement, the attic, or the garage can be transformed with a little imagination, some paint and recycled materials.

Before the party, check with Mom or Dad to O.K. your flight plan. Then start gathering boxes, empty juice cans, styrofoam, etc. Supply non-toxic paint, brushes, paste, magic markers and scissors and guests can take off. Boxes become space ships, laser guns, robots. Aluminum pie pans become UFO's hung from the ceiling with string. Milk cartons become tiny rockets or missiles. The sky's the limit.

Or guests can create a giant living outer space board game. On a large sheet of kraft wrapping paper

draw squares to make a pathway. Ask each guest to design a square or two. One square, for example, might show a planet being blown up by a Star Strike missile. The directions might read, "Planet Explodes. Go back three spaces." Some spaces, of course, will remain blank. The thing that makes this game special is that the markers are the players themselves. Use dice to determine how many spaces a player can move on each turn.

An Astro Tournament is fun too. Each guest competes in several events. Keep scores from Intellivision® Space Action Network video games and from other games you design. In Word Racer, for example each player must unscramble a list of Intellivision inspired words like "maraad" (Armada).

Just before snacks, play outer space artist. Invite guests to create a poster for their favorite Intellivision Space Action Network game. Cover the posters with clear adhesive paper and they'll make stellar place mats as well as celestial reminders of your adventure in space.

SPACE ACTION PARTY MENU

STAR STRIKE Pop Corn (Cheese Popcorn)
***ASTROSMASH Punch** (3 fruit punch)
***SPACE BATTLE Burgers** (Deviled Burgers)
SPACE HAWK Slaw (Crunch Slaw)
SPACE ARMADA Cookies (Oatmeal Cookies)

*Recipes Included (The others are generic—Mothers usually have recipes)

SPACE BATTLE Burgers

1 pound lean ground beef	2 Tablespoons chopped dill pickle
2 Tablespoons chopped onion	2 Tablespoons French dressing
1 Tablespoon prepared mustard	¼ teaspoon salt
3 Tablespoons catsup	6 slices whole wheat bread toasted
1 Tablespoon mayonnaise	

Mix all ingredients except bread. Spread meat mixture on bread slices and broil 4" from heat source until done. 3 to 5 minutes—makes 6 servings.

ASTROSMASH Punch

2 cups apple juice, chilled	¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 cup orange juice, chilled	1 large banana, peeled, cut into chunks
1 Tablespoon honey	

Measure all ingredients into blender container. Blend at high speed until smooth. Pour into glasses. Makes 6 servings (about 2/3 cup each).

Figure 7. "Space Action Party" (Video Entertaining, 1983a).

These design principles – simplification, short-term play, stimulation, and socialization – articulate an emergent conceptualization of party games in the early video-game industry. They draw on the polysemy of 'party', including typical parties at home but also office parties at Mattel Electronics which served as creative stimu-

lants and avenues for organizational harmony. They link game design with the goal of reaching diverse kinds of players beyond the videogame fanatic, early adopter, or arcade vidiot – and beyond gendered, hegemonic norms of play (Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007). This anticipates the insight that “parties may represent a powerful method of re-including players who do not identify as (core) gamers” (Masek & Stenros, 2024, p. 76).

The more inclusive design of Party Line games dovetails with other initiatives at Mattel Electronics. While Party Line games were being developed, simplified versions of several Intellivision titles were created for TV POWWW!, where contestants (many of whom were women) could call into a television station and play a brief video game by saying ‘pow’ over the telephone (Boellstorff & Soderman, 2026). In October 1982, four of these games were released in a cartridge, *Sharp Shot*. The lack of discernible connections in the archive between Party Line games, TV POWWW!, and *Sharp Shot* reflects how simplification and short-term play were used in multiple contexts. However, it was these four principles in their totality – simplification, short-term, stimulation, and socialization – that articulated party games as a new, distinct genre. The similarity of these approaches reflects a more inclusive vision of gaming emerging from Mattel Electronics operating in expansive play situations and beyond exclusionary, technomasculine forms of gamer identity emerging at the time (Kocurek, 2015).

The party’s over

The Crash meant that Mattel Electronics never released *Party Line*. In late January of 1984, Robinson (one of the Party Line proposal authors) organized a “Waiting for the End of Mattel” party for Applications Software programmers, who called themselves The Blue Sky Rangers (Robinson, 1984; Figure 8). Even at the end, a party was the modality for programmers to find community and process the depressing end of an era. The flyer contained gallows humor, remarking that Mattel Electronics’ demise was the “first time Mattel’s been ahead of schedule on anything” – a joke that suggested that Mattel Electronics ended before its time, before the party really got going, and before great things like the nearly complete ‘Party Line’ could be released. The End of Mattel Party is a good reminder for party studies that festivity does not define all parties. During the following decades, the Blue Sky Rangers have held annual parties at a pizza joint near their former workplace to recall and reignite the era of Intellivision. The parties outlasted the era itself.

From the practices and experiences of Mattel Electronics, we can draw a range of insights that illuminate the place of party studies in game studies. That place cannot be reduced to party games as such. Nor can it be reduced to festive, rebellious, and spirited gatherings. Nor were all parties and party atmospheres exclusionary, though studying frat-like atmospheres and gender dynamics remains crucial. Parties as organizational practices played a crucial role in fostering creativity and

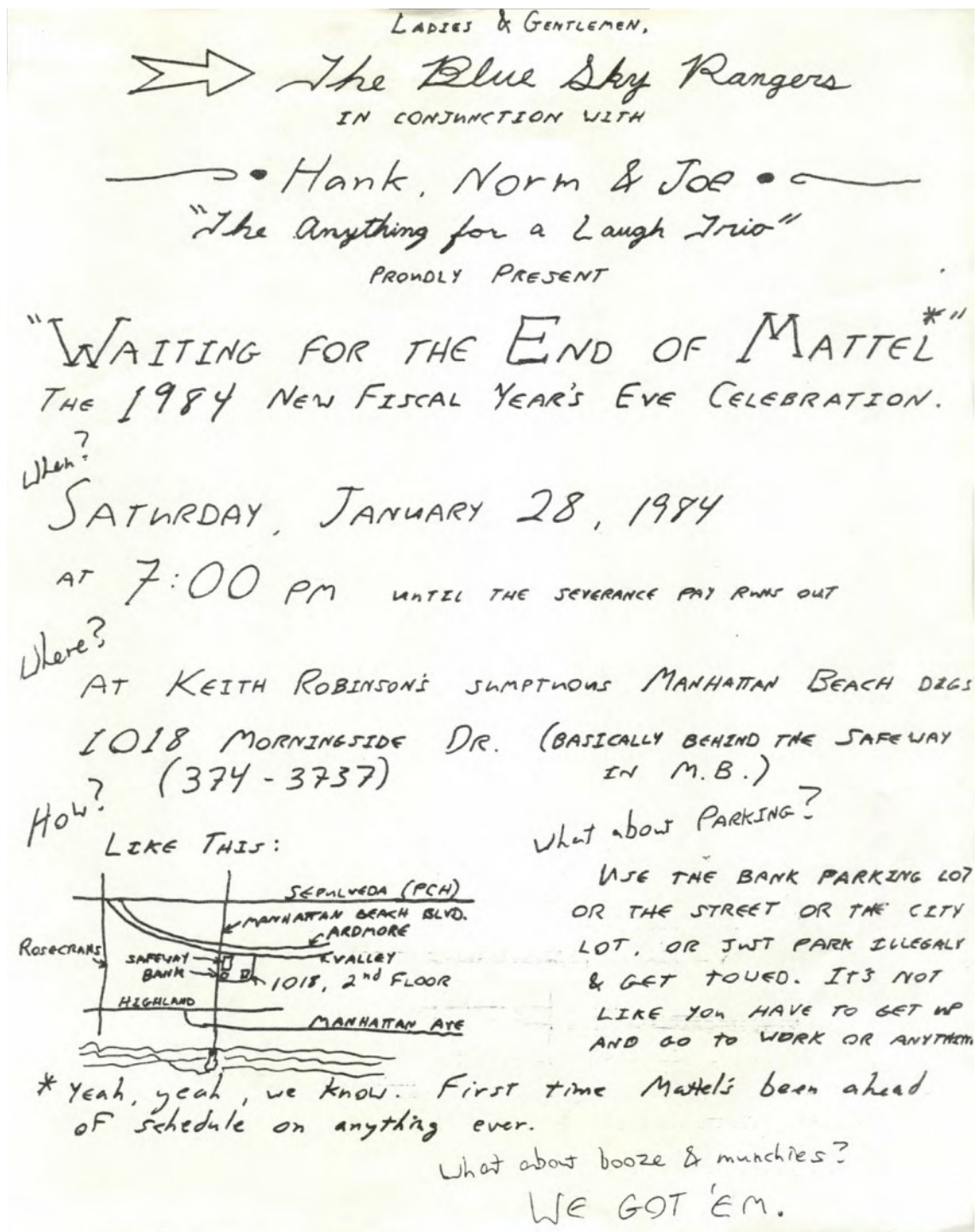


Figure 8. "Waiting for the End of Mattel" party invitation (Robinson, 1984).

teamwork, and had structural implications for weaving together different forms of labor. At Mattel Electronics, party games began to emerge as a genre, indebted to the party ethos that shaped working at Applications Software. This genre was shaped by trends like the influence of arcade-style play, but was distinct in the way it brought together the design principles of simplification, short-term play, stimulation, and socialization.

The 'party idea' that grew out of this synthesis articulated a vision of videogaming that was casual and inclusive, potentially far more welcoming to diverse players. The Crash ended further development of this vision for Intellivision. But despite their relative marginality in game studies and the videogame market, party videogames have continued to appear. We have much to gain from studying their history and transformations. If party studies is an attempt to take seriously what has been often disregarded as frivolous, then it is important to note the cultural work that party games can do within larger historical contexts – like expanding our understanding of diverse gamers and legitimating videogames as an acceptable pastime to skeptical publics.

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“Those People Are My People” Safety at Game Industry Events in Finland

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“Those People Are My People” Safety at Game Industry Events in Finland

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Abstract

Global game industry events pose safety concerns for women and gender-diverse attendees, but events organised within the Finnish game industry are experienced as safe, particularly by women attendees. This article examines how the sense of safety is produced at Finnish game industry events by using empirical material and situating the analysis within party studies. Four interlinked sources of safety are identified: individual safety precautions, social safety forming from close connections, institutional safety providing formal rules and processes, and cultural safety arising from shared community values. While individual safety precautions place responsibility on participants themselves, the latter three dimensions together form a community accountability model that explains how the sense of safety is collectively maintained. By foregrounding safety as a precondition for successful social connection, this article extends party studies by demonstrating how event design, organisers' actions, and community practices can enable authenticity, belonging, and participation.

Keywords

Game industry; events; safety; gender; harassment; diversity; inclusion

After the annual Game Developers' Conference (GDC) held in San Francisco in spring 2023, the game industry press reported various incidents of sexual harassment, assault, and drink-spiking experienced by women attendees at off-site parties and on show floors (Batchelor, 2023; Bevan, 2023; Blake, 2023; Mercante, 2023a). This information was neither new nor surprising, as stories of abuse and harassment had already been reported from earlier GDC conventions and other industry events, including PAX East, Gamescom Dev, and Nordic Games (Batchelor, 2022; Bevan, 2022; Mercante, 2023b; Robertson, 2023).

At the same time, survey data collected from Finnish game developers indicated that women and gender-diverse individuals reported less harassment and fewer unwanted encounters at local game industry events than in their workplaces

(Myöhänen, 2023). In response to the question on event safety, respondents generally reported feeling very safe at local game industry events. Latter is noteworthy as sexual harassment and other forms of unwanted behaviour are known to contribute to safety concerns (Butt, 2022; Consalvo, 2008; Fisher et al., 2025; Fisher & Harvey, 2013; Harvey, 2022; Taylor, 2024). The discrepancy between global reports and local results led to the following research questions: do women really feel safe at Finnish game industry events, how safe do other underrepresented groups feel, and, if safety is experienced, which factors contribute to that?

Safety concerns related to event participation are not trivial in the game industry, as events hold significant value for career development. Researchers have shown that individuals who attend game industry events are more likely to find new career opportunities, gather useful information, receive support for work-related issues, and demonstrate commitment to their careers (Browne & Whitson, 2021; Butt, 2022; Harviainen et al., 2022; Komulainen & Sotamaa, 2020; O'Donnell, 2014). Conversely, non-participation can negatively impact career progression (Browne & Whitson, 2021). As such, game industry events are situated at the intersection between work and leisure, thus exemplifying the blurring of boundaries between professional and personal life, which is characteristic of neoliberal capitalism and cultural industries (McRobbie, 2016). At a broader scale, safety concerns reinforce exclusionary cultures within the industry, which may hinder the participation of underrepresented groups (Butt, 2022; Fisher et al., 2025; Harvey, 2022; Ochsner, 2019; Taylor, 2024; Weststar & Legault, 2018).

The Finnish game industry hosts a wide range of events, from company anniversaries and publication parties to special interest meetings, game jams, and smaller conventions. In this article, particular attention is given to monthly meetups organised by the local branch of the International Game Developers Association, IGDA Finland. These events present several compelling aspects for the purpose of this study. First, they are widely known among local developers, held in major cities across the country, and are free and open to all. Second, although labelled as meetups, these events operate in ways that party studies identify as parties: they take place after work hours, usually in venues associated with partying such as bars or nightclubs (Butt, 2022), facilitate social interaction and identity work (Sutton-Smith, 1997), connect strangers and friends, support the continuity of local game industry culture, and include repeated, ritualised activities such as conversations, drinking, music, games, talks, and game demo presentations (Masek & Stenros, 2024). However, despite the party-like nature of the events, I have decided to use the term *event* throughout this article, out of courtesy to organisers and, as discussed later, recognising the importance of event naming for the creation of safety.

Reading professional events through party studies enables an analytical shift from instrumental values, such as networking, career growth, and information sharing, towards social interaction, norms, and rituals that are also present in these events.

Participation at these events is shaped not only by goal-oriented networking practices but also by social encounters, rules, and playfulness, which may exceed instrumental ambitions. According to Masek and Stenros (2024, p. 87) successful parties are defined by organisers’ active facilitation of social connection and engagement, through which playfulness emerges. Continuing my earlier work on who is able to participate in events and on what terms (Myöhänen, 2025), I argue that the ability to form meaningful social connections depends on the sense of safety. While opportunities to attend are not equally available to everyone (Myöhänen, 2025), nor are the conditions for socialising and engaging with others. When safety concerns prevent participation, they also limit access to social and playful interactions – even when these interactions would be crucial for career progression.

This article examines the relationship between organisers’ implementation of event safety measures and how participants perceive them. The analysis extends the earlier notion of Masek and Stenros (2024) by showing how such facilitation must also address safety in order to be effective. When organisers fail to recognise differing safety concerns, or prioritise the needs of dominant groups, participation becomes limited to those already in privileged positions. In the end, I outline a *community accountability model* that identifies social, institutional, and cultural dimensions through which organisers can facilitate safer events.

The central aim of this article is to offer concrete, empirically grounded examples from the Finnish game industry that event organisers and communities elsewhere can draw on to strengthen their event safety. This article also contributes to the growing body of local game production studies, which have revealed how practices are shaped differently by local laws, cultures, and customs (Keogh, 2021; Kerr, 2021; Prescott & Bogg, 2013; Sotamaa, 2021; Sotamaa & Švelch, 2021). As Aphra Kerr (2021, p. 296) has suggested, conducting local production studies can help situate heterogeneity within the game industry. From this perspective, this article broadens the scope of the existing research on game industry event safety, which has concentrated almost exclusively on large international conventions, and offers alternative views grounded in a local ecosystem.

Research on game industry event safety

Empirical studies have confirmed that safety concerns at industry events primarily affect women and gender-diverse individuals, although these are also the groups that research has predominantly focused on. Ochsner (2019) found that during the 2012 Twitter campaign #1ReasonWhy, responding to the question of “why there are so few female game makers in the industry”, 10% of event-related tweets by women addressed safety concerns. Taylor (2024) has characterised game industry conventions as unsafe for women, attributing this to the infrastructural conditions of large events. Butt (2022), while acknowledging the formative role of party culture in new creative industries, highlights that alcohol usage itself does not make

women feel unsafe, but that drunken behaviour and the tendency to use alcohol as an excuse for unwanted advances create safety concerns.

Several researchers, including Kerr (2006, 2021) and Consalvo (2008), have argued that the historical dominance of white, young, cisgender men in game cultures has created homogeneity that fosters exclusive and discriminatory cultural practices. In this context, harassment is a key factor contributing to safety concerns and is rooted in the industry's gender imbalance. In Ochsner's (2019) study, 15% of tweets described unwanted advances from men and the sexualisation of women developers, who were treated as event promoters ('booth babes') or attendees' girlfriends. Fisher and Harvey (2013) reported similar event experiences among aspiring women developers in Canada, particularly feelings of being unwelcome due to the lack of other women present. Butt (2022, p. 205) further observed how event safety concerns can create professional dilemmas for women and gender diverse industry members, as attending events may feel necessary, but may also involve the risk of encountering harassment (see also Fisher & Harvey, 2013; Ochsner, 2019; Taylor, 2024).

More recent studies of GDC and other major conventions document different personal tactics, or strategies, to cope with harassment and discrimination (Butt, 2022, pp. 205, 208; Fisher et al., 2025; Taylor, 2024). Butt (2022, p. 204) reports that during GDC 2018, several women experienced or witnessed sexual harassment. She highlights how common game industry party venues, such as nightclubs and bars, are often associated with sexual encounters, which further exposes women to unwanted advances in these environments (Butt, 2022, pp. 207–208, 218).

Research has also shown that homogeneity within the industry places pressure on underrepresented individuals to adapt to dominant norms (Butt, 2022; Harvey, 2022; Ochsner, 2019; Prescott & Bogg, 2013). Underrepresented people are left to develop their own coping strategies to survive in the industry (Butt, 2022, pp. 205–206; Harvey, 2022; Taylor, 2024). This self-reliance has also been acknowledged in local industry studies (e.g., Fousek Krobová & Švelch, 2023; Szczepanska, 2023). The pressure to develop individual coping strategies has been connected to neoliberal values (Butt, 2022; Szczepanska, 2023; see McRobbie, 2016). However, as Fisher et al. (2025) emphasise, individuals who are closer to majority groups and hold greater independence at work have more resources to avoid unwanted encounters.

Efforts to improve game industry event safety have included targeted events for underrepresented groups, alcohol-free gatherings, and events organised outside bars and nightclubs (Butt, 2022; Fisher et al., 2025; Harvey, 2022; Komulainen, 2019; Taylor, 2024). It is worth noting that while alternative events may be free from sexual harassment and may therefore be considered safer, they may still not be inclusive – nor even safe – for every attendee (Fisher et al., 2025).

Data and method

Survey data

The first dataset derives from the 2023 Experience Survey conducted by We in Games Finland (WiGFi), a non-profit organisation supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion within the Finnish game industry. WiGFi's biennial online surveys gather insights on diversity, equity, and inclusion within the Finnish game industry community. The 2023 survey was conducted in collaboration with Better Games Together, an initiative involving Finnish game companies Supercell, Rovio, Metacore, and Next Games to support LGBTQIA+ professionals in the industry.

The survey format was familiar to me: I served as WiGFi's chair when the first survey was designed in 2021. In 2023, together with researcher Susi Nousiainen, we provided advisory support for survey planning and conducted analyses for WiGFi (Myöhänen & Nousiainen, 2023; Nousiainen & Myöhänen, 2023). I hold a contractual right to use the 2023 survey data for my own research.

The survey was distributed through organisers' channels, newsletters, and major social media platforms followed by Finnish game industry professionals, resulting in 130 responses. The majority of respondents were current or former industry professionals (89%), alongside game students (7%) and individuals working in fields closely related to the game industry (4%), such as service providers. 55% of respondents had under five years of industry experience, while 8% had over 15 years. In terms of gender, 53% of respondents were women, 37% men, 7% were gender diverse, and 3% chose not to disclose their gender. Due to the collaboration with Better Games Together, LGBTQIA+ issues were emphasised. In separate questions, 38% of respondents identified as LGBTQIA+ community members and 4% as transgender. Other underrepresented identities were not systematically surveyed but appeared in open responses.

Compared to local industry demographics, women and LGBTQIA+ individuals were overrepresented in the survey. At the time of data collection, women comprised 22% and diverse genders approximately 9% of the Finnish game industry workforce of 4100 individuals (Neogames, 2023). While exact data on LGBTQIA+ representation are currently unavailable due to Finnish employment legislation and limited research, estimates suggest that their proportion exceeds 20% (WiGFi chair E. Jukkala, personal communication, September 17, 2023). Given that the focus of this study is on underrepresented groups, this deviation supports rather than distorts the research aims.

Interview data

The second dataset originates from interviews conducted in 2023 as part of my dissertation project. The full dataset includes 33 recorded online interviews and one email interview with individuals from underrepresented groups in the Finnish game industry community.

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region for the research. Given my prior employment and equity work in the industry, reflexivity formed an integral part of the research design and execution. To make my insider researcher position clear, I disclosed my industry background and my previous affiliation with WiGFi in interview calls, and explained my research interest at the beginning of every interview (Coghlan & Shani, 2008; Humphrey, 2007). Interviewees signed the consent form after the interview to ensure they had full knowledge of what they were consenting to (Rothe, 2022).

The call for participation was shared in Finnish game industry professionals' social media groups and through my own social media channels and networks. Recorded interviews ranged from 39 to 146 minutes and were conducted in Finnish or English. Discussions followed an interview question list that was structured to avoid biases and checked before interviews by both research experts and possible target group members. Event questions formed the last section of the list. During the interviews, I emphasised the importance of interviewees' opinions and experiences and monitored my tone of voice and commenting.

Interviewees represented intersecting underrepresented identities. 19 of them were Finnish, including language and ethnic minorities, and 15 were from abroad, representing all major continents. All but one interviewee lived in Finland, with 16 residing outside the capital region. Their professional roles covered most areas of game production, and their career lengths varied from 4 months to 23 years. Companies they worked for ranged from small start-ups to large corporations, with four interviewees unemployed at the time of the interviews. 12 interviewees used she/her pronouns, five used he/him, and six used they/them. Others used multiple pronouns, several favouring she/they, and some chose not to identify through pronouns (which is not required in the Finnish language).

Interview questions did not specifically address sexuality, ethnicity, disability, or other similar identity markers, but interviewees frequently contextualised their experiences through their identities. Five identified as queer, and twelve belonged to sexual minorities. Four interviewees disclosed having a physical disability, and eight identified as neurodivergent. While most interviewees were white or white-passing, nine expressed that they were of non-Finnish ethnic origin. Four people identified as transgender. The group also included individuals belonging to different religious backgrounds.

Protecting informants is crucial in production studies focusing on smaller communities; for example, Butt (2022, p. 162) excluded domestic observations due to the difficulty of ensuring participants' privacy. As presenting the above-mentioned intersecting personal information in chart form could compromise the privacy of several interviewees, I chose not to disclose identifying information in a more detailed format than provided above. Relevant contextual background is included in citations to ensure analytical insight.

Prior to analysis, interviews were transcribed and anonymised. Given that my insider position likely helped build trust with the interviewees, and being aware of the potential for 'over-sharing' (Humphrey, 2007), I offered participants the opportunity to review and modify their transcripts. Ten accepted this offer, resulting in one minor, location-related change. Some citations in this article have been translated from Finnish to English.

Survey analysis

Both datasets covered a range of issues beyond events. Segments related to event experiences were first identified, and the analysis then focused on these selected parts.

The survey's numerical responses primarily informed analysis of perceived safety among women and other underrepresented groups. Due to small sample sizes, gender options 'non-binary', 'genderfluid' and those unsure of their gender were grouped under the category 'diverse genders'. Results from questions "If you don't attend events at all or often, why not" ($n = 108$) and "How safe do you feel at IGDA events" ($n = 99$) were calculated and compared against respondents' gender, career length, and LGBTQIA+ identification. The first question included 12 preset response options, and the second used a five-point Likert scale. Respondents were advised to skip these questions if they had not attended events.

Survey responses concerning experiences of unwanted behaviour at Finnish game industry events ($n = 111$) were analysed similarly and cross-analysed with responses related to IGDA event safety. This question included a list of preset options from which respondents could select all that applied, and an option to add experiences not listed.

Interview analysis

Interview analysis focused mostly on sections in which interviewees addressed pre-formulated questions about their event experiences regarding their safety, such as the importance of codes of conduct and their reasons for perceived event safety, but sections where these topics were raised spontaneously were also included. For the analysis, I applied Nicmanis' (2024) reflexive content analysis

method, chosen for its emphasis on researcher reflexivity. Coding was done inductively but guided by the research questions. The analysis structure developed through this coding process forms the structure of the following sections.

My positioning required ongoing critical reflection, especially during interview analysis. While my background in the game industry provided useful contextual knowledge for situating participants' experiences, certain aspects, such as different safety conceptions and experiences related to immigration, required additional contextualisation of interviewees' backgrounds. Throughout the analysis, I reflected by writing about my own understanding of event safety concerns, which, I realised, had been largely shaped by my prior work against sexual harassment at WiGFi. Acknowledging my biases helped me to ensure interviewees' perspectives, especially when they described positive experiences. Ultimately, the findings included issues that I had not considered in earlier practical work, which further reasoned for the value of the study.

After the interview analysis described below, the survey's open-ended, event-related responses were subjected to deductive analysis. This analysis followed the interview analysis structure in order to confirm – or challenge – findings from interview analysis.

Women's safety at Finnish game industry events

When asked about reasons for not attending game industry events, only 3% of survey respondents selected the option "I don't feel safe", with one respondent specifying that their concern related to the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, more respondents indicated safety concerns in response to the question on perceived safety at IGDA Finland events, indicating that such concerns exist but they did not prevent participation.

IGDA events' safety was assessed on a five-point scale, ranging from "not safe at all" (1) to "extremely safe" (5). Over half of survey respondents, 53%, reported feeling extremely safe, and 40% selected the second highest option (4), bringing the combined total for the two safest ratings to 93%. Among women, the combined total for the two safest options was slightly higher, at 96%, with 47% selecting "extremely safe". Men more frequently chose the highest rating at 68%, but their combined total of the highest options was slightly lower than that of women, at 94%.

These results indicate that women generally feel safe at local industry events. To understand the reasons why women reported such high ratings at Finnish game industry events, I examined factors commonly associated with women's safety concerns identified in earlier research by comparing them to the local industry environment.

Gender imbalance has often been identified as a root cause of women’s safety concerns in the industry (Consalvo, 2008; Harvey, 2022; Kerr, 2006). This explanation would imply a more equal gender composition in the Finnish game industry. Yet the local industry remains heavily male-dominated, with women comprising a smaller share of the workforce than the European average at the time of the study (EGDF, 2025; Neogames, 2023).

Event venues have also been linked to safety issues. Butt (2022, p. 218) notes that industry events are often held in bars and nightclubs that encourage alcohol consumption and gendered behaviour, thereby affecting women’s safety. However, IGDA Finland’s events are likewise held in bars or nightclubs, and alcohol consumption is a common activity at meetups (Myöhänen, 2025; Komulainen, 2019), suggesting that venue choice does not account for the results.

Sexual harassment has been identified as a major contributor to women’s safety concerns in the game industry events (Butt, 2022; Consalvo, 2008; Fousek Krobová & Švelch, 2023; Harvey, 2022; Szczepanska, 2023). To examine this, I analysed responses to the survey question concerning unwanted experiences at Finnish game industry events over the past two years, with a focus on experiences of sexual harassment. It is worth noting that these responses covered a broader range of local events, such as game jams, conferences, and workshops, and therefore do not allow for conclusions about harassment experiences at IGDA events specifically.

The most frequently reported form of event sexual harassment was unwanted sexual teasing, jokes, stories, remarks, or gestures, with 9% of all respondents having such experiences, all but one of whom were women. Sexual comments about clothing, anatomy, or looks were reported by 7%, again with all but one response coming from women. Unwanted messaging, phone calls, or pressure for non-work-related dates or chats were reported by 3%, as were experiences of unwanted deliberate touching such as leaning over, cornering, hugging, or pinching, all these experiences were shared by women. One respondent, also a woman, reported someone asking or spreading rumours about her sexual fantasies, sexual life, or sexual history. No experiences of actual or attempted rape or sexual assault were reported in the 2023 survey.

These results indicate that sexual harassment exists in the Finnish game industry as well, and is a problem encountered almost solely by women. Interview analysis further confirmed that women recounted experiences of sexual harassment. Although not all women were subjected to such behaviour, those who had often described serious consequences, including reduced willingness to attend events and, in some cases, reconsideration of career plans or decisions to leave the industry altogether. An earlier WiGFi study reported that some women avoided friendly interactions with men at events as they could be misinterpreted as flirting (Myöhänen, 2023). One woman interviewee with seven years of industry experience summarised her situation as follows:

Sometimes I'm surprised that I'm still in this business. I've had so many unpleasant advances and comments, and everything else that I've been subjected to.

However, harassment did not fully correlate with perceived safety. A comparison of reported sexual harassment experiences and event safety ratings in the survey revealed that although respondents who reported lower safety ratings (values 2 or 3) had experienced sexual harassment, the majority of women reporting event-related sexual harassment, 85%, still selected the highest safety ratings (4 or 5), with half choosing "extremely safe". This challenges the assumption that sexual harassment directly determines perceived safety.

An interesting aspect emerged among women with international event experience. They consistently described Finnish industry events as safe, but this did not apply to international events. One interviewee, travelling to international conferences to source contracting partners for her successful mobile game company, described her recent experiences abroad:

We were just at a conference in [North American city] and it was still visible there, just like an everyday thing. They looked at me and my female colleagues from head to toe, and even though we were the only representatives of our company, we were not approached except in attempts of sexual encounters. It was really interesting, as perhaps I had already got used to the fact that the situation was no longer like this. And then you meet someone outside the Finnish bubble and you're like, oh, this habit is still very much alive here.

The most blatant experiences of sexual harassment shared by interviewees had also occurred abroad, usually at larger conventions, such as an incident with male Ubisoft personnel who propositioned one woman interviewee and offered a meeting with their company in exchange for sex. These statements align with earlier research notions on safety concerns at international industry conventions (Butt, 2022; Harvey, 2022; Ochsner, 2019; Taylor, 2024) and highlight the difference between local and global event contexts, underlining the heterogeneity of the game industry (Keogh, 2021; Kerr, 2021; Sotamaa, 2021; Sotamaa & Švelch, 2021). These accounts also raise questions about how event safety is shaped by the scale and context of professional events.

The safety perceptions of underrepresented groups

Survey data allowed for the separate analysis of responses from gender diverse individuals and LGBTQIA+ community members. Across genders, respondents with diverse gender identities reported the lowest levels of perceived safety. While 88%

of gender diverse respondents selected one of the two safest options, only 25% chose “extremely safe” (see Figure 1). This gender group also reported the lowest safety levels in the 2021 survey (Myöhänen, 2023). However, the smaller number of gender diverse respondents compared to women and men limits the robustness of this finding.

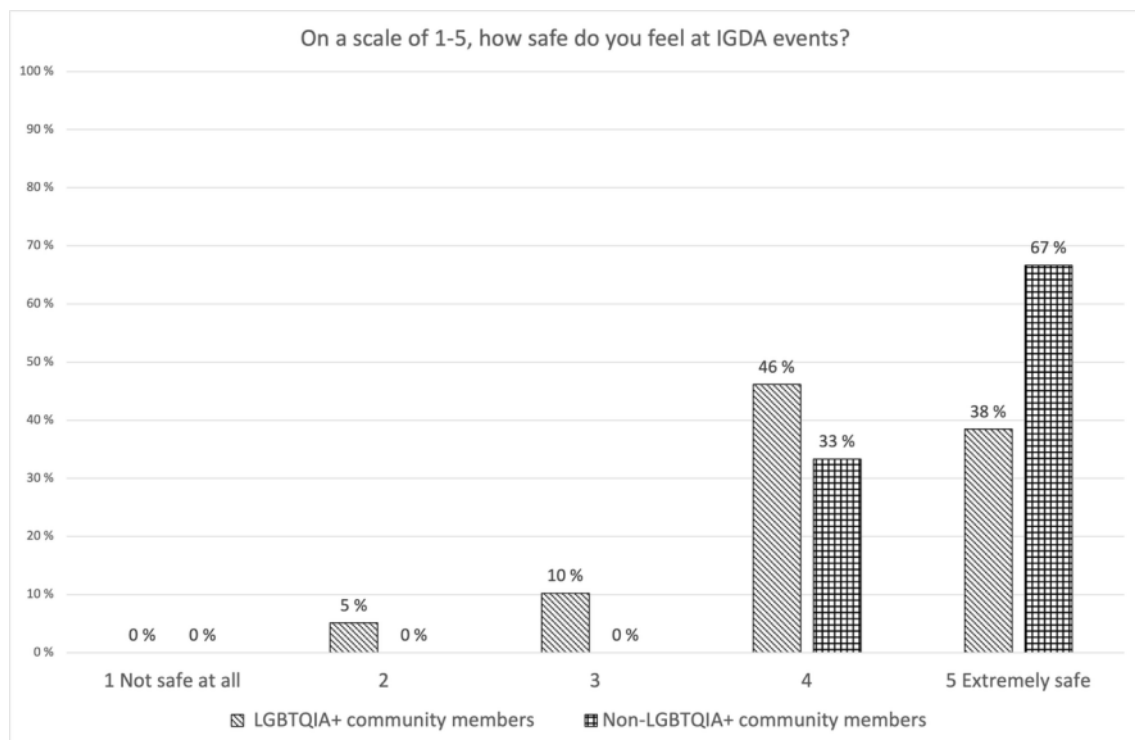


Figure 2. Event safety by LGBTQIA+ belonging.

Even so, safety ratings among gender diverse respondents aligned closely with those of LGBTQIA+ community members. Among LGBTQIA+ respondents, the two safest options combined accounted for 85%. This is significant, as among non-LGBTQIA+ respondents, the same figure was 100% (see Figure 2). This indicates comparatively high safety concerns among LGBTQIA+ community members. It is still important to note that LGBTQIA+ individuals' safety results varied considerably; some, for example, considered local game industry events very safe compared to events outside the professional environment, as one openly transgender interviewee described: "I feel safer here than anywhere else".

During the interviews, I asked how safe interviewees felt at local industry events. Interviewees' responses mirrored survey findings: all confirmed feeling safe at local industry events, some confidently, others under certain conditions. I deliberately refrained from defining safety, allowing interviewees to interpret safety themselves. In the analysis, it became evident that conceptions of safety varied, often reflecting the identity aspects most discussed in the interviews. For example, women frequently referred to the ability to avoid sexual harassment, expatriates highlighted Finland's general safety, and interviewees who discussed their Black or Asian ethnic origin highlighted discrimination and racism as sources of their safety concerns.

LGBTQIA+ interviewees most frequently emphasised emotional safety as central to their event experiences, a pattern that may relate to minority stress arising from

conflicts between their values and those of dominant groups (Meyer, 2003). A well-connected queer interviewee who actively attended events described:

I've never been harassed or anything like that, ever. It's just like emotional safety is the big thing. So if I feel like, okay, these people just do not get me, this group of people is gonna be weird or awkward or the vibe isn't gonna be good, then I'm not gonna go.

While this material does not allow for a more nuanced exploration of differences in safety conceptions, these findings highlight that safety concerns are not a universal experience, but rather a construction connected to lived experiences and identity. Understanding this holds an important role in addressing event safety concerns; if the varying reasons behind safety concerns are not studied, the challenges faced by specific groups may be overlooked. In our report for WiGFi on LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the Finnish game industry, we noted that although the industry was framed as accepting and inclusive, non-LGBTQIA+ members tended to believe that the industry had greater acceptance towards LGBTQIA+ community members than individuals belonging to that community themselves (Myöhänen & Nousiainen, 2023). Such positive bias may also hinder the recognition of, and action on, LGBTQIA+ safety concerns, which will not be solved by addressing, for example, issues related to sexual harassment.

Factors contributing to safety

After asking interviewees about their perceived event safety, I invited them to reflect on what contributed to that feeling. In the analysis, I identified four interrelated categories as sources of feeling safe: *individual safety precautions*, *social safety* stemming from close peers and friends, *institutional safety precautions* including formal structures for safety, and *cultural safety* arising from shared community values. These categories are presented in the following sections. While these categories are interlinked and overlap in practice, considering them separately allows for a more nuanced evaluation of how safety is produced.

Individual safety precautions

“As a woman, you always have to be a bit on guard in certain situations”, noted a woman CEO when asked about event safety. This quote exemplifies the individual safety precautions taken by underrepresented interviewees as they navigate cultural environments that are not inclusive to them (Harvey, 2022). Although such practices were not often mentioned in the material, they emerged particularly in interviews with women and gender diverse individuals. Interviewees described measures such as avoiding leaving drinks unattended, choosing non-revealing clothing for events, leaving events early or before other attendees became intoxic-

ated, monitoring others' alcohol consumption, or opting out of events that might carry safety risks. In a related pattern, some individuals felt safe because they only attended events targeted at underrepresented groups.

Similar protective tactics taken by women have been documented in studies of global game conventions, including, for example, careful clothing choices, using headphones or business cards to avoid unwanted interactions, and using male companions to avoid harassment (Butt, 2022; Fisher & Harvey, 2013; Ochsner, 2019; Taylor, 2024). Communal actions taken to ensure individuals' safety include, for example, verbally exchanging lists of suspicious men, establishing digital support networks to ensure mutual safety, and employing safe words with peers to exit uncomfortable situations (Butt, 2022; Fisher et al., 2025; Ochsner, 2019; Taylor, 2024).

Expressions such as having a 'thick skin', 'being teflon', or referencing senior status or personal characteristics as protection against unwanted advances can also be interpreted as coping tactics (see Harvey, 2022; Fisher & Harvey, 2013). In my material, these approaches were most often mentioned by senior community members. As Fisher and Harvey (2013) note, such strategies are frequently passed down as advice or survival requirements to younger generations of underrepresented people entering the industry. Some senior interviewees recognised their privileged personal position, which was also reflected in some men's survey responses. Finally, some individuals simply explained that since nothing bad had happened to them or they had not witnessed inappropriate behaviour, they had no reason to feel unsafe.

As several interviewees noted, coping did not occur only at game industry events; tactics were applied in all social settings. While it is important to recognise the broader social structures hindering women's and gender diverse individuals' participation, treating this solely as a societal issue should not prevent action within subcultural contexts. Managing safety concerns as personal problems that a person must solve independently places a significant burden on individuals, demanding additional time and energy that could otherwise be invested in more meaningful work (Fisher & Harvey, 2013; Harvey, 2022; Szczepanska, 2023). This is particularly relevant in professional settings, as the responsibility for ensuring a safe working environment is both ethical and expected of the employer. If the management sees professional events as leisure time or informal 'fun' and thus relies on individual adaptation, this can set part of the workforce in an unequal position.

Considerations around individual coping reflect the boundary work characteristic of neoliberal culture, where the distinction between work and leisure becomes easily blurred (McRobbie, 2016). The following sections move away from the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility by examining collective and organisational measures for strengthening safety.

Social safety patterns

The most frequently mentioned reason for feeling safe at Finnish industry events was the presence of friends and familiar faces. Although the word *friend* carries significant meaning in Finnish and was not always used by Finnish interviewees as such, interviewees’ descriptions painted a picture of close, trusted relationships with selected industry colleagues. One interviewee referred to their industry contacts as their family or tribe, another emphasised feeling accepted and able to be herself among her colleagues, and one explained that attending local events felt like being ‘among one’s own people’. By weighing event success by its ability to sustain social connections (Masek & Stenros, 2024), local events would be counted as successful.

The importance of social connections for perceived safety was highlighted especially by women participating in international events. They often confided having security concerns in unfamiliar environments where they knew only a few participants. A safe atmosphere was created in the presence of trusted networks, as described by a well-connected woman interviewee:

Then again, in the Finnish events, because I usually know so many of the people who are there, I feel so safe that if something bad were to happen, I could turn in any direction and wave my hand, and someone would come to help.

Friends and acquaintances forming small, closed circles at local industry events have been criticised for being hard to get into for newcomers, thereby creating an exclusive event atmosphere (Harviainen et al., 2022; Komulainen & Sotamaa, 2020; Komulainen, 2019). From the safety perspective, these tight-knit circles function as protective structures for underrepresented individuals in the industry. A non-binary interviewee who had attended various local IGDA gatherings explained this as follows:

These circles are quite small, and you already know the people, and maybe they know too that if I mess up here, the consequences are bigger than just being excluded from the community. There’s also this assumption that you know how to behave...

Returning to the question of scale and context raised earlier, familiarity appears to reduce safety concerns. Large parties at international events can enable anonymity and weaken accountability, thereby posing an increased safety risk for underrepresented people. In local settings, where ‘everyone knows everyone’, such risks are easier to mitigate.

Examples given above focused on long-lasting connections, but the material also included mentions of ad hoc networks serving the same function. These included, for example, WiGFi gatherings arranged before Helsinki IGDA meetups, designed

to help participants form connections in smaller and safer settings. Such networks resemble in function women's networks created for safety at international conventions (Butt, 2022, pp. 190–191; Fisher et al., 2025; Taylor, 2024, pp. 190; Ochsner, 2019). However, as noted by Fisher et al. (2025), some of these networks do not fulfil their purposes but act more as company PR.

However, social connections are not used only for feeling safer. Parties operate as ritualised occasions for reinforcing social ties (Masek & Sterros, 2024) and these professional events serve a similar function. Interviewees highly valued the possibility of meeting industry friends at events, as expressed by one interviewee: "You know that everyone is there and everyone knows we all are busy, so it is very convenient to meet there". Similarly, 28% of survey respondents mentioned the absence of friends as a reason for not attending events.

Beyond facilitating safety and social ties, events also play a key role in identity creation. Butt (2022, pp. 199–202), following McRobbie (2016), has demonstrated how industry events act as spaces for building and expressing professional identity. This closely resembles Sutton-Smith's (1997) understanding of identity creation as an essential aspect of parties.

However, social networks alone do not fully explain high safety ratings in the Finnish game industry events. Several interviewed newcomers with very limited networks reported feeling very safe at events, and survey results reinforced this finding: respondents with less than two years of industry experience consistently selected either one of the two safest options. While this may reflect the narrow participation history among newcomers, it may also suggest that there are additional factors contributing to perceptions of safety.

Institutional safety precautions

Finland is often described as a 'promised land of associations', with over 100,000 registered and countless unregistered organisations, strong constitutional protection for freedom of association, and widespread participation in civic organisations (Neuvonen, 2025). The strong non-profit culture extends to the local game industry as well; in 2023, there were 14 national and regional game industry support organisations (Neogames, 2023).

Over the past decade, local game industry associations have taken collective action to improve developer safety. In October 2014, following the Gamergate events, Neogames, an umbrella organisation that coordinates and supports the development of the Finnish game industry, IGDA Finland, and the Finnish Game Developers' Association (FGDA) issued a joint statement condemning harassment in the industry (Hiltunen, 2023). In early 2018, at the beginning of the #MeToo movement, Neogames published the first industry-wide code of conduct, which was adopted by all major associations, including IGDA Finland. Later that year, Neogames,

IGDA Finland, WiGFi, FGDA, and Finnish Game Jam established the Finnish Game Industry Task Force to prevent sexual harassment in the industry by developing shared protocols and guidance for handling sexual harassment cases (Hiltunen, 2023; Neogames, 2022). Alongside these initiatives, organisations such as WiGFi and Better Games Together have actively voiced shortcomings in industry’s diversity and inclusion.

In interviews, a gender diverse company manager reflected on these efforts:

We have such great national resources, we have a code of conduct and protocols that anyone can apply, whatever the size of the company, and then we have the Task Force. They are so important resources that... I’m still confused about how the game industry is so different in getting on board regarding these matters. Maybe I’m in a bubble to some extent, because we have these organisations, like We in Games, and also organisations that aren’t that dedicated, but still have taken it [DEI] into their agenda. It’s so significant. It influences the minority experience, or what you could call minority stress, so that it won’t grow that big at all.

To examine the role of formal structures, I analysed interview references to event codes of conduct. While they are not the only safety measure in place, codes of conduct are usually the most concrete and visible safety mechanism for participants, and are widely used across Finnish game industry events.

Nearly all interviewees agreed that event codes of conduct were important. An active eventgoer and former event organiser explained:

I feel that it is important to know that there are such things, because it creates a safe atmosphere. Even though I’d expect that nothing happens since it’s a game industry event, it’s a fact that these things still happen, and people are people.

There was no illusion among the interviewees that a code of conduct could completely prevent unwanted behaviour, but its presence provided peace of mind and reduced safety concerns. Knowing that breaches would have consequences also reinforced participants’ sense of agency. One interviewee described her expectations:

When I meet people from the game industry, it’s at events where the organisers have taken the rules for safe spaces and respectful behaviour very seriously. So you kind of already know that if something inappropriate were to happen, it wouldn’t be allowed or accepted, and something could be done about it if needed.

Codes of conduct also built trust in event organisers, but simultaneously held them accountable for responding to breaches. Events known for poorly handled conduct

breaches were well known, and interview discussions suggested that mismanaged cases carried reputational damage for years.

For some, the code of conduct was not personally important, but it ensured the safety of other event participants. Interviewees from all genders mentioned, often light-heartedly, that they did not check the code because they personally felt unlikely to need it, but they still emphasised its importance for those in more vulnerable positions.

While opinions about codes of conduct capture only a fragment of institutional efforts, it seems that their presence positively influenced the event atmosphere. This suggests that institutional safety measures play a meaningful role in shaping perceptions of safety at events. However, further research is needed across different types of activities and their impact.

Beyond initiatives taken, I also interpret the practice of naming professional events as meetups (IGDA, 2026), gatherings (WiGFi, 2026), receptions (Gamescom, 2026), opening nights, or simply events (GDC, 2026) as institutional safety precautions. Such naming anchors these events to work rather than leisure and therefore emphasises their professional nature. Several women interviewees likewise expressed that sexual encounters do not belong at industry events, thereby highlighting the professional nature of these events through their personal influence. These kinds of individual efforts to reshape culture are beyond the scope of this article, but they exemplify the role of individual agency alongside institutional measures.

Culture of safety

A welcoming and friendly community culture was frequently mentioned by interviewees. A start-up company CEO reflected on reasons for this:

Maybe the idea of Finland being a nice place to make games is that it's easy to get to know the people you would like to hang out with, and usually those people are pretty nice. And then it leads to you becoming friends. Or you feel it is easier to be quite casual. And perhaps the reason why we are so casual is that the game industry has developed a really nice discussion culture where it's not just an endless success story, where you have to say that my company is doing well all the time. And then it causes that feeling that we can come as we are.

Local game industry events were often contrasted with investor meetings and events in other industries. Another CEO described feeling constrained in business settings, whereas game events allowed them to be their *"true self without shame"*. This ability to be oneself emerged across interviews, including managers and job seekers whose positions might otherwise necessitate that they behave differently.

In interviews and the survey's open comments, Finnish events were described as casual, inclusive, and non-hierarchical, and industry professionals as accepting, progressive, and well-informed. The positive atmosphere was reported by majority groups, but also by underrepresented individuals. An Asian student applying for her first industry position described her early experiences:

The feeling that I got so far, it's like everyone in the game industry is so nice and kind. The culture of the whole community is so friendly. In the IGDA meetups, you can talk to anyone you wanna talk to. No matter their level in the industry.

Similar endorsements were given by senior professionals, including a Finnish developer with nearly 15 years of experience in the game industry and some egregious workplace experiences, illustrating how negative work experiences did not carry over into the event context:

If only the game industry was like the events, it would be awesome! ... Everybody is just friends, and you meet new people just like that. It's all really so nice.

A sense of belonging was another recurring theme. Even individuals who described themselves as introverts, socially restricted, or 'not fitting into the crowd' mentioned belonging, or as one newcomer summarised: “Everybody's a bit weirdo, so you don't really stand out that much”. A senior industry professional explained:

I have a feeling from the world that I don't belong. I'm a little lonely space creature. In the game industry, much less. Of course, it still sometimes happens in the game industry, but less than in the world, you know. There are so many freaks here that I feel I also belong somewhere in between.

Interviewees with international experience emphasised the distinctiveness of the Finnish context. A US developer with experience in large US game studios described:

I think first it's just that it's a much safer society here in Finland in general. And then, in game events I feel those people are my people. We are in the same industry, and people don't just randomly come. They come here because of same interests. And you can just naturally trust each other, because we have similar objectives.

In these accounts, safety was described as the possibility of being oneself without adjustment or performance, illustrating psychological safety emerging from the sense of belonging. This aligns with safety concepts articulated by LGBTQIA+ community members, where safety was grounded in emotional safety rather than physical risk. This also resembles the playfulness described by Masek and Stenros

(2024) as a socially situated mode of interaction that softens normative expectations. Due to its consistency across the material, I would mark the ‘possibility to be oneself’ as a central safety dynamic in Finnish game industry events.

Researchers have characterised the Finnish game industry community culture as cohesive, value-driven, low-hierarchical, and open to information sharing (Harvainen et al., 2022; Komulainen & Sotamaa, 2020; Kultima, 2018; Lehtonen et al., 2022). These characteristics have most likely enabled and contributed to a safer environment, as the CEO suspected above. In interviews, several senior professionals noted significant cultural change over time, with one describing the transformation as “like night and day”, while another noted that those who left the industry earlier might struggle to recognise the current atmosphere. While acknowledging this shift, I argue that core values such as open information sharing, low hierarchy, and mutual support have largely remained stable. What has changed is the presence of systematic actions to ensure the safety of underrepresented groups.

Social structures, institutional precautions, or cultural values have only limited impact alone. Formal rules and processes have likely contributed to improved safety at industry events, but they could not be effectively implemented without community acceptance and alignment to the community’s values. When shared cultural values enable inclusive practices and the possibility to effectively introduce safety protocols, and prioritise social connection over transactional networking, they create what I conceptualise as *community accountability*. This framework enables authenticity, belonging, and the ‘ability to be oneself’, and through these, supports the experience of safety. Through this, safety emerges as the freedom to exist without performance or self-monitoring.

While this model presents safety in the Finnish game industry scene, it can also explain why unwanted encounters are more common at large conventions. High levels of anonymity, weaker social ties, and the absence of shared goals can reduce the effectiveness of safety practices. However, the global and local dynamics require further empirical investigation, particularly through comparative research on locally organised industry events.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, I have demonstrated that women in the Finnish game industry generally perceive local industry events as safe. Extending the analysis beyond gender revealed that LGBTQIA+ community members experience distinct and qualitatively different safety concerns at industry events. This emphasised that safety concerns do not appear to function as a single, uniform condition, but is shaped by individuals’ identities and lived experiences.

Women’s perceptions of safety did not stem from the local industry’s gender ratios, event venues, or activities, and women also reported experiences of sexual harassment at Finnish game industry events. Shifting the analytical focus from gender-specific factors to differing reasons for feeling safe made it possible to identify four interrelated safety sources: individual safety precautions, social safety formed through the presence of trusted peers and friends, institutional safety provided through formal rules, policies, and processes, and cultural safety emerging from the community and shared values. Together, the latter three categories constitute what I conceptualise as a community accountability model. This model explains how close social connections, clear boundaries and consequences, and inclusive cultural values reinforce one another to support safety, authenticity, and shared responsibility. Event safety thus emerges as a multidimensional, identity-related condition that affects individuals’ ability to participate, belong, and be themselves at events.

Rather than placing the burden on individuals and emphasising individual safety precautions that reproduce structural inequalities, responsibility for event safety should be located at the organisational and communal level. Event organisers and company managers play a central role in actively supporting the safety and social connections of all participants. While safety concerns can be addressed through targeted actions aimed at specific groups’ concerns, such as measures designed to prevent women’s sexual harassment, attention to dimensions of the community accountability model can create event spaces in which authenticity, mutual responsibility, and everyday accountability enable more equal opportunities to attend and socialise for broader participant groups. For example, event design choices that support smaller sub-events, repeated encounters, and recognisable social networks can benefit all participants, but they are particularly important for underrepresented individuals due to the perceived safety they provide. Such measures also help reduce anonymity, which can be further mitigated through simple practices such as compulsory name tags. To facilitate safety is to facilitate social connections.

Simple but effective institutional measures include implementing a code of conduct and related procedures, which enhance participants’ sense of agency and help to mitigate the impact of unwanted experiences. In the Finnish game industry context, collective statements and coordinated action have been especially effective in signalling that harassment is unacceptable and in shaping durable cultural norms. Even seemingly minor decisions, such as event naming, can contribute to how participants interpret the nature of the event and set the expectations for it. Finally, nurturing shared interests and a welcoming, and inclusive event atmosphere builds a cultural environment in which participants feel able to be themselves.

While the community accountability model may explain the high levels of safety concerns at large international conventions, further research is needed across

other local game production contexts to assess which features are widely shared and which are context-specific. Also, the material used in this study focuses on women, gender diverse individuals, and LGBTQIA+ community members. Future research should extend the analysis to other underrepresented groups, such as people with disabilities, religious minorities, and those from diverse ethnic backgrounds, whose safety concerns remain insufficiently understood.

This study demonstrates that safety concerns are culturally embedded, identity-bounded, situational, and changeable. For party studies, these findings underline that safety is not peripheral to event design but foundational: the freedom to exist authentically and engage socially without high-level self-monitoring is a prerequisite for participation, belonging, and playfulness, also in hybrid professional spaces. Safety does not stand in opposition to playfulness; it is a condition that enables broader participation in playful event practices.

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Ethical approval statement

Approval for the research was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region, statement 48/2023, 28.3.2023.

Data availability statement

Subject to the written consent of the interviewee, pseudonymised interview transcripts will be deposited in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (FSD) for the purpose of reuse in academic research and scholarly theses, including doctoral dissertations and master's theses. The survey data is not publicly available, as it is owned and managed by an external party and participant consent has not been given.

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“We Poke the Body and See What Happens...”

How Do People Manage Expectations in Transformative Parties, Festivals, and Retreats?

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Abstract

Organizers of playful transformative events (e.g., subcultural gatherings, dance festivals, bodywork events, and many more) provide intense experiences to their participants, that have the potential to transform their cognitive, emotional, or bodily state temporarily or permanently. With participants attending such events with strong expectations both towards the transformative potential, as well as the general dynamics and structures of the event, organizers need to reflect on and engage with strategies for creating, managing, and calibrating these expectations. To illustrate such strategies, this paper reports on three cases of somatically and emotionally transformative events, including a queer festival, an artistic retreat, and a clubbing event for grieving individuals. Based on interviews and an ethnographic field study, we apply a dynamic model of expectation types to locate relevant organizers strategies for expectation management for playful transformative events.

Keywords

Expectation management; parties; transformative events; dynamic expectations model; transformative festivals

Entering spaces that allow us to engage with transformative somatic and emotional practices in a shared temporary community is by nature an intense experience, in cognitive, emotional, and physical ways. Examples for such hedonic, exploratory, and playful events include, but are not limited to, events like Burning

Man (Rowen, 2020), religious festivals as the Durga Puja (Shankar & Patnaik, 2025), yoga festivals (Lucia, 2023), “drug-fueled clubbing” (Florêncio, 2023), or “cuddle parties” (Mayr, 2023).

These transformative events differ in their framing: from providing space for shared experiences (e.g., raves) or participant-led organization of activities with relatively loose frames (e.g., Burning Man), to clearly framed events (e.g., ‘cuddle parties’) with an emphasis on structured, time-bound and facilitator-led workshops and activities (e.g., yoga festivals). What connects them is a shared, similar set of objectives and desires to be realized through them: they seek to build (temporary) community, and they allow people to engage *somatically* with themselves and others – they are being physically, emotionally, relationally, socially and perhaps even spiritually engaged.

Due to their transformative potential, such events require specific attention to expectation building, management, negotiation and reflection to prepare and enable pleasurable experience, both on an individual (attendee) and structural (organizers and communities) level. Whereas individually experienced transformative digital games can rely on an onboarding and learning through how they are designed (e.g., Graham, 2024), playful transformative events that combine individual and collective experience – whether larps (e.g., Bowman et al., 2024) or play parties (e.g., Harviainen & Frank, 2018) – need pre-event processes that prime the participants’ expectations the right way so that the events’ feel and mood will be the desired ones.

Within this study, we focus on the organization of transformative events in which individuals, who were potentially strangers in advance (and who might return to being so after leaving an event), engage in shared transformative practices, exploring and entering potentially intimate, momentary, conscious relationships with themselves, as well as other bodies and individuals. We here understand these playful events as spaces enabling “an experience of social connection in a group mediated through a shared engagement-prioritizing activity” (Masek & Stenros, 2024, p. 81) within a temporary or permanent subcultural community with a strong group identity, a significant feeling of belonging and shared norms and rules (Wignall, 2018, pp. 60–61).

We focus on expectation management as an organizational aspect, due to which we have adopted a service studies approach for understanding the preparation of the events, building upon the works of Christian Grönroos (1993, 2009) and Jukka Ojasalo (1999, 2001). This approach deploys existing knowledge of how events-as-services are promoted and later experienced by participants and thereby enables us to understand event marketing and management in a way that is complementary to game culture studies and event design research. Nevertheless, we also see transformative events as settings for play, often game-like. Play is contextual. As Sicart (2014) points out, its most traditional environment are games, but other con-

texts, such as playgrounds or breaks from everyday activities and habits, are likewise possible. An expectation management approach allows us to see how that play is primed for transformative events.

The research was led by the following research question:

Which organizer-led strategies are employed before and during the surveyed events to build and make sense of different expectation types before and during somatic-emotionally transformative subcultural events?

To respond to this question, we applied a multiple case study strategy, combining an ethnographic survey of transformative events and interviews with 19 attendees and organizers across 3 separate events.

We will begin with an introduction of related research and the applied framing for selected events. Following, we will introduce the study design and provide anonymized spotlights on the surveyed events. We will then report on the initial findings of this study, before providing an outlook on current limitations and future continuations of this work.

Background and guiding concepts

Our research is focused on events that engage with practices of both shared somesthetic and emotional transformation within the context of Masek and Stenros' framework for playful experiences at parties and party-like events (2024, p. 81).

First, parties are used as social tools between strangers to develop connection in a first interaction. Second, parties are ritualized events in friend groups and families to reinforce patterns of social connection. Third, parties are structural tools of societies, states, and cultures for reinforcing social connection over a larger group and during liminal changes in cultural identity. (Masek & Stenros, 2024, p. 81)

While Masek and Stenros focus on social transformative potential, this can (and will be here) extended towards the somatic and emotional transformation through engagement in shared activities such as dance, meditation, kink activities, bodywork, or collective emotional expression. Following, we will first provide an overview of existing work on event-based transformative events, and the building and management of desires and expectations.

Event-based transformative (somaesthetic and emotional) experiences

Transformative events and the navigation of those have primarily received attention in research in relation to *transformational festivals* as part of electronic music subcultures, with Burning Man and its local satellite events being typical examples (see, for example, Rowen, 2020). These events are defined as (mass) gatherings featuring performances, participatory workshops, artistic elements, and ritualistic structures; relying on active, social, and creational attendee contribution and (temporal) community building; speaking to a highly diverse audience with both matching and divergent objectives, motivations, and expectations; and explicitly aimed at evoking transformative experiences (Beaulieu-Prévost et al., 2019; Rowen 2020). Rowen further defines those events as follows:

Key to this is the the co-creation of an immersive, participant-driven reality' that produces a sense of empowerment while effacing distinctions between performers and spectators. ... Participants enter threshold spaces where the usual rules of social order don't apply, but by emerging personally transformed, they produce an effect of *communitas* and a shared reference point for emergent social structures. (Rowen 2020, p. 697)

Central to these gatherings is a subjective *experience* of transformation in relation to self, body, space, community, and normalized everyday experiences.

While most research on the concept of transformational festivals such as Burning Man is centered around large-scale events (Beaulieu-Prévost, 2019), research on transformational experiences embedded into specialized smaller-scale events implies a similar understanding (Tkaczynski et al., 2022), as found in somatic workshops (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023), body modification events (Pitts, 2003), analogue roleplaying events (Bowman et al., 2024), or yogic festivals (Lucia, 2023). The shared element of these larger- and smaller-scale events is the notion of shared presence, distinct transformative experiences, as well as their typically participatory, subcultural and/or countercultural nature, offering experiences and “learnings” perceived as lacking in mainstream society (Rodriguez, 2014). Their objective is to “radically change the experience in both an epistemic and personal way” (Chan, 2024), providing transformative “experiences where one cannot know what they are like before having them” (Chan, 2024) (*epistemic*) and/or a transformation of mental, somatic, and emotional capabilities and objectives (*personal*) (Paul, 2014; Chan, 2024).

Especially for first-time attendees, the transformative experience is an epistemic one, while personal transformation applies to all types of attendees (including facilitators). The extent and radicality of transformation achieved through transformative events/experiences is notoriously difficult to generalize (Campbell, 2025) and varies in extent, duration, period of effect, and intensity (Shusterman &

Svanæs, 2023). For instance, people with kinky desires may enter their first kinky experience with very unclear expectations, and emerge having had many expectations met, and/or barriers crossed (e.g., Carlström, 2018a, 2018b).

For the context of this work, we focus on playful events that engage primarily with the metrics for “transformative somaesthetic experience” (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023). In short, such an experience is here defined as (a) an explorative activity, (b) explicitly altering the relation to and conscious experience of the own soma (body-mind) and emotions, (c) as well as modifying the relation to the space one is in an acting upon (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023, pp. 284–285). While allowing for potentially transgressive or uncomfortable experience, it is still “a dominantly positive experience” (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023, p. 284), which is “memorably significant” (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023, p. 285). As such, “it transforms not only perception but also behavior in an intentional way, involving purposive activity. ... The transformative effects are not momentary but lasting or memorable” (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023, p. 285). These characteristics should not be understood as absolutes, but rather as individual scales characterizing the diversity of potential somaesthetic transformation in regard to extent, intensity, duration, or lasting impact (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023).

Expectations for transformative events

To frame the impact of expectations for experiencing transformative events, we first have to briefly turn towards Sandis (2025) proposition for defining transformative experiences.

Words like ‘change’ and ‘transformation’ are ambiguous, for they may refer to either (a) the event or process of changing or (b) the resulting change. The cause of the latter may form part of the former. (Sandis, 2025, p. 31)

Therefore, when we here talk about expectation building, we refer to (a) the expectations towards the engagement with transformation (‘What do I have to do/engage with to have a transformative experience?’) and (b) the expectation towards the transformed state both in regard to epistemic and personal transformation (‘How will it feel to be transformed? What will be feeling different?’). Bowman and colleagues (2024, p. 23) divide transformative role-playing games into three related but somewhat distinct categories: transformative leisure, therapeutic, and educational. Our subjects of study represent these three categories transferred to other practices than role-playing (‘Transformation for what?’), while likewise overlapping with the other two aspects introduced above (the ‘What?’ and ‘How?’ of transformation).

Before participating in a potentially transformative event, individuals might engage in cognitive modeling of an experience-to-be, building expectations towards the

experience, its frame, and effect. To do so productively, individuals build expectations based on what is familiar and/or available information, including comparable experiences by themselves or others, popular imaginaries, or media representations (Chan, 2024; Zimmerman & Ullman, 2020).

As outlined in the introduction to this study and the understanding of the events studied as services, we here draw from theories of customer expectations in service studies to further understand the different roles of expectations in attendance of transformative events.

Customer¹ expectations are not monolithic things that are easy to summarize. Ojasalo (1999, 2001) divided them into several categories (see Figure 1). *Fuzzy* expectations are those where people expect a change, but do not have a clear view of what that change should or could be. If they are not met, customers might be unsatisfied but are typically not able to pinpoint why. *Precise* expectations are their opposite, in which a customer clearly knows what they want and/or need. *Implicit* expectations are present in a situation so inherently that they become “so self-evident to customers that they do not actively or consciously even think about them” (Ojasalo, 1999, p. 96). If implicit expectations are met, they rarely get noticed, but they will almost certainly be noticed by a customer if they are not met. *Explicit* expectations, in turn, “are clear in the customers’ minds” (Ojasalo, 1999, p. 96), and

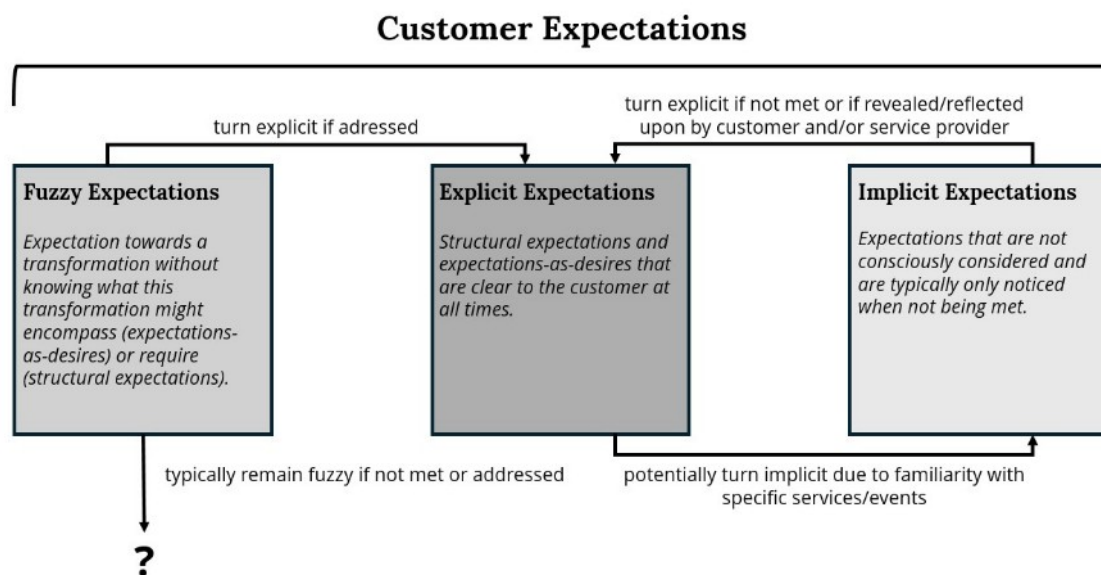


Figure 1. Edited visualization of the dynamic customer expectation model, based on the initial visualization by Ojasalo (1999).

1 When we here speak about customers in the background section, we adopt the language of Ojasalo (1999, 2001). For our specific cases, we have decided to instead use ‘attendee’ to address the differing instances of commercialization across the studied events.

the customers pay attention to whether they are met or not. They nevertheless may not be discussed openly. Finally, expectations can be either *realistic* or *unrealistic*, which means they are either possible or impossible to fulfill. If they are unrealistic, addressing them by the service provider or active reflection by the customer might make those more realistic. Customers' expectations appear in the forms of sets which can contain any and even all of the above types. Expectations are, furthermore, affected by several factors, such as past experiences, personal needs, perceived alternatives, and many situational factors (Wilson et al., 2021).

These categories of expectations apply both to structural expectations (“What will frame and enable an experience?”) and expectations-as-desires (“What do I hope/want to experience and what is necessary for that?”), with expectations-as-desires often being present as initially fuzzy. For the context of transformative events, both relate to the “prediction about the exteroception (perception of the outer world) accompanying an outcome and a prediction about the concomitant interoception (perception of the inner world)” (Villiger, 2024, p. 1096). Building and managing expectations further provides the individual with their subjective understanding of the probability of desire fulfillment. If these expectations towards transformation are not met, individuals have potentially disruptive experiences, which (sometimes but not always) may result in discomfort and/or modified transformational experiences, leading to stronger post-event reflections than an experience fully meeting expectations (Molouki et al., 2020).

Service providers can respond to existing expectations through various strategies. For example, they can try to focus fuzzy expectations into clearer and hopefully realistic ones, help reveal implicit expectations and seek to meet them (or mitigate damage once they have not been met), and to attempt to calibrate unrealistic expectations into ones that can be accomplished (Ojasalo, 2001).

Expectations can also be self-fulfilling, so that customers get the experience they expect, because their experiences are affected by their expectations, and they may make predictions of what they are likely to get. Therefore, it does not necessarily make sense to under-promise something in order to exceed expectations, but rather to make at least realistic or even inflated claims, so as to try and make them into self-fulfilling prophecies (Wilson et al., 2021). It can be a useful strategy to delight customers with something extra that is unexpected, but this can easily lead to this delight becoming part of future expectations, i.e., a new baseline expectation (Rust & Oliver, 2000). The delights have also a tendency to be something only peripheral to the basic expectations (the ‘musts’) that form the core of the experience for a customer. In relation, Villiger proposes that participants/customers (assuming expectations are build towards a potentially positive experience) should “form positive/optimistic affective expectations because your affective experiences tend to assimilate to your affective expectations; thus, positive/optimistic affective expectations tend to promote positive affective experiences” (Villiger, 2024, p. 1104). To expect a pleasurable experience from engaging in a specific activity “gives rise

to desire” (Gregory 2021, p. 120). However, there is a potential unreliability to expectations build around such events due to unfamiliarity with a transformative experience (e.g., first-time attendees) or the introduction of unpredictable factors (e.g. other individuals and their desires and expectations) (Villiger, 2024).

Events related to e.g., sex or transgressive and physically risky yet playful activities dance on a tightrope between being sufficiently risk-aware yet still playful enough, as elements such as warning signs or the presence of health or safety professionals can be “mood killers” for many participants (e.g., Haywood, 2025). What therefore needs to be established are safer spaces for play, yet without compromising too much of that playfulness for the sake of safety. These structures contribute to a “non-serious framing” (Masek, 2024) of playful engagement, in which the application of safety measures allow for a safe(r) engagement with an otherwise risky or potentially even dangerous practice.

Methodology

In the next section, we introduce the events we attended, and explain how we collected data for this study, how we analyzed it, and we elaborate on privacy issues and risk mitigation strategies.

Overview of events

For the context of this paper, we are focusing on collected data related to Ojasalo’s model of expectations (Ojasalo, 1999) and the separation of structural expectations and desires-as-expectations.

To investigate them, we participated in three events that have somatic-transformative potential for the people that attend them (see Table 1). All three cases touch upon the earlier introduced categories of potential transformation (leisure, therapeutic, educational; Bowman et al., 2024), are designed to provide spaces for episodic and personal change, and utilize a diverse range of expectation management strategies before and during the respective event.

Overview of events

Event name	Location	Attendees	Target audience	Preset activities	Facilitation	Pre-event marketing
“Queer Slowing Down Festival” (Event 1)	On-site; primarily indoors; Central Europe	~75–100	Exclusively self-identified queer individuals; international audiences	individual and group-based body-work; kink practices; participatory learning	workshop based; primarily time-bound activities, preset within a heavily structured framework	social media; organizer’s webpage
“Artistic Retreat” (Event 2)	On-site; primarily outdoors; Northern Europe	<20	artistic practitioners and designers	participant-led workshops; time-unbound free activities (e.g. sauna, nature walks)	workshop-based; participant-led programming and framing; time-bound participant-facilitated workshops	social media; organizer’s webpage
“Clubbing While Crying” (Event 3)	On-site; indoors; Northern Europe	~75–100	grieving individuals and their friends	musical performances; dance; open and unbound engagement with artistic installations	little direct facilitation, reliance on participant-led engagement with the provided programming and space	social media; digitally published pre-event interviews with organizers and featured artists

Table 1. Overview of events.

Event 1: ‘Queer Slowing Down Festival’

Event 1 (E1) was a commercial three-day festival located in Central Europe, with an international and exclusively queer audience (~75–100 participants).

As described by an organizer to the authors, the main objective of the event is “to poke the body in many ways and see what happens”. The event was designed to create a temporary “slowed down reality” in opposition to everyday life outside the frame of the event.

Engagements consisted of intentional, intimate, and somatic practices, workshops and activities for body consciousness, “reconnection”. The workshops offered were explicitly playful (e.g., by incorporating roleplay), primarily participatory (e.g., by engaging in group meditation), and explorative (e.g., by encouraging expressions of desires and intimacy).

While the event structure and offerings put an emphasis on providing space for kink practices and sexual(ized) interaction, the event explicitly allowed participation without engaging in either.

Some of the workshops we observed made an anti-oppressive, self-actualizing understanding of education and learning explicit. Here, we witnessed references to bell hooks' (1994) concept of *engaged pedagogy*, and Paulo Freire's (1996) *pedagogy of the oppressed*. In a practical sense, this was applied through organizational attendees taking on the role of facilitators, forgoing the traditional, hierarchical teacher-student dynamics.

Event 2: 'Artistic Retreat'

Event 2 (E2) consists of a series of one-week-long summer school events located in Northern Europe. They are organized by a non-profit non-hierarchical platform, which is focused on providing alternative spaces for art and design education outside of institutional structures.

As the organizer takes an explicit stance against conceptualizations of formalized education, participant numbers are kept small (less than 20 attendees per iteration).

Each iteration of E2 is organized about a particular theme or questions, which provides a loose framework for each event. Within their events, education is described as mutual knowledge-sharing, with decentralized facilitation, and as a practice of care. Attendees enter the event with proposals for shared activities, becoming facilitators themselves. During E2, these activities included somatic practices and bodywork, game design and (live action) roleplaying games, reading and writing exercises, as well as fine arts workshops, providing an exploratory, reflective, and potentially introspective experience.

The program for each iteration is organized by all on-site participants in a shared manner, based on personal daily preferences, wishes, and expectations.

E2 is run on a nature campsite on an island, with basic infrastructure (food, electricity, internet) being provided through existing infrastructure independent from the organizing platform.

Event 3: 'Clubbing While Crying'

Event 3 (E3) is described as a club-night/party for griever(s) (~75–100 participants). It is designed to welcome grieving individuals and their friends and speaks to a primarily local audience. It was developed by the primary organizer based on conversations with artists also working on the topic of grief, as well as based on personal experiences and cathartic experiences while attending parties during periods of grief.

The event is part of an event series themed around the theme of individual and collective practices of grief, experiences of loss, and affection. Produced and initiated by an individual organizer, the events are conceptualized by them as research-based instances of “learning through experience”. The organizer invites artistic practitioners as hosts for each iteration. The events are primarily held on-site in Northern Europe.

E3 has been held at a Northern European performance art venue, featuring performances by two musical artists as well as a spatial participatory installation by a third artist. The first musical performance featured primarily soft and ambient soundscapes, with the second act providing a harsher and angry electronic set. The organizers describe the event in interviews as being aimed at creating a communal and collective space for grieving and emotional expression in the context of a party, with both grief and clubbing being emphasized as somatic experiences.

The event was accompanied by a “soft space” designed by the third artist for re-treating, with them and attendees sharing stories of grief. The event was advertised through a social media marketing campaign as well as interviews with artists and the organizer published through the venue’s social media channels.

Data Collection and analysis

As pointed out by Grönroos (1993), gathering reliable data on customer expectations is very difficult. Gathering data during an event means that actual expectations are not studied: here, the experience itself may color or even retroactively change the expectations. Studying expectations before an event may lead to inaccurate results, too: people may or may not link the upcoming experience to their earlier expectations.

Here, Grönroos (1993) suggests measuring only the experiences, not the expectations in themselves. We follow this line of thinking and therefore decided to collect a rich tapestry of qualitative data that cover both people’s pre-event expectations and influences of past and current experiences.

As such, we collected and analyzed three types of data throughout this study across three events (see Table 2):

Data	Method	Source	Analysis
Interview data	Semi-structured conversational interviews (after Brinkmann, 2020)	Organizers and attendees	Unpacking and explication (Crabtree et al., 2012)
Fieldnotes	Ethnography (Hollway et al., 2010)	Written by Author 1 and Author 2	Unpacking and explication (Crabtree et al., 2012)
Supplementary material	Provided by organizations	Organization’s marketing material, internal policy documents, reflections	Depending on the type of material: Visual ethnography (Pink, 2007), unpacking and explication

Table 2. Overview of methods for data collection and analysis.

On location, 4 workshops were observed during “Queer Slowing Down Festival” (Event 1) and 16 interviews were conducted with attendees, organizers, and facilitators. Additionally, we interviewed 2 organizers of “Artistic Retreat” (Event 2) and 1 of “Clubbing While Crying” (Event 3) remotely (total interviews: n=19). Observations and interviews were focused on preparative practices before attending the event and the engagement with organizer-led expectation-management strategies. All three authors collected data in varying constellations (see Table 3), based on potential matches between authors and participants regarding age, gender identity, professional/disciplinary background, and subculturally conforming visual appearance (Alvesson, 2011).

	Event 1	Event 2	Event 3
Author 1	✓	✓	✓
Author 2	✓		
Author 3		✓	

Table 3. Overview of data collection.

We analyzed the data in a deductive fashion, based on Ojasalo’s “dynamic model of expectations” (Ojasalo, 1999, pp. 96–97) employing a mixed-methods approach (see Table 2).

Researcher positionalities

Due to our varying personal involvement and the related influence of our backgrounds on access, understanding, and reflection of the subcultural cases surveyed, we provide a snapshot of our researcher positionalities, as a team.

We are a team of white, queer and nonbinary academics, living at the time of writing in Northern and Eastern Europe, with professional backgrounds in communication design, human-computer interaction, arts, and information studies. We all have an interest in somatically transformative experiences on a personal and professional level: we attend and organize transformative events, e.g., raves, meditation events, body modification performances, kink parties, or live-action role-playing. Here, the majority of the authorship team is part of these respective local communities and has also researched them as part of their academic work. In turn, this means that we have access to some subcultures not only due to established rapport and membership, but also through our aesthetics, and assumed societal defaults. In particular, our whiteness may have allowed us more access to and positive regard within the studied events.

Ethical considerations of data collection

We conducted a risk assessment for this study to locate potential areas of increased risk.

The events that we attended all deal with matters that are stigmatized to some degree. This heightened the need to shield participants from negative consequences due to participating in this research.

Internally, we developed a strict research protocol to mitigate these risks through limited data collection: We did not collect any audio-visual data. Data was only collected as handwritten notes, which were anonymized before digitization.

Personal data was only collected directly from participants with explicit written and verbal consent. Participants were instructed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without the need to give a reason with immediate destruction of their data. For this purpose, interviewees provided a unique identifier.

In the case of attending events (e.g., E1), participants were informed of our presence in person beforehand. We worked together with organizers to be introduced at the beginning of the event, so participants could clearly identify us. We made sure to have visual markers of being researchers, e.g., through badges with “researcher” on it, and using our full names. Organizers performed several check-ins throughout the event, and before activities, where participants were encouraged to decline us observing them. Consent for observation was signaled through colored wrist bands. During E1, we did not actively recruit or approach event attendees as participants. Instead, we opted for a model in which we would occupy a small, but visible, space during the events, in which we would hold ‘office hours’ that allowed attendees to approach us, if they were interested in taking part in the research.

All collected data was subjected to ethical proofreading (Lee, 1993). This process operates under the assumption that participants can *still* be re-identified – regardless of how thoroughly they are anonymized. Therefore, reporting needs to be truthful and genuine, but it requires extra care and checking to ensure no harm is done. For this reason, we decided not to report on attendee-participants as individuals. We will only report on them as part of a group. Additionally, all organizational participants were provided with this article before initial submission to the journal for further ethical proofreading.

Recruitment of organizations and participants

Recruitment of organizations was conducted in two ways:

1. We located potential candidates through web searches and social media and reached out to them ‘cold’.
2. We leaned on our personal networks and existing rapport with organizations (see section ‘Researcher Positionalities’).

For these communications, we prepared a dossier that outlined who we are (e.g., a group of queer academics), what we wished to research (e.g., expectations), and how (e.g., in mindful, privacy-conscious, careful ways).

We limited our recruitment to organizers of events that...

- (a) ...match the characteristics of somatically and emotionally transformative subcultural events as outlined in ‘Background and Framing’.
- (b) ...were exclusively aimed at participants aged 18 or older.
- (c) ...explicitly mentioned examples for transformative practices in their digital information and marketing material (e.g., bodywork, meditation, body modification).

Ten organizations were initially contacted, with four replying in the affirmative. Out of these, three were included due to the timeline of this research project.

Findings

Framing of our reporting

We have chosen these events based on their explicit understanding as playful spaces focusing on “engagement over external consequence, realness, or convention” (Masek & Stenros, 2021). We here follow closely the already mentioned and inten-

tionally open definition of parties as including “gatherings that could be called parties—such as liminal events including rituals, rites of passages, ceremonies, and carnivals” (Masek & Stenros, 2024, p. 77). Within this framing, we understand parties and partylike events as spaces providing a “non-serious framing [that] refers to a contextual understanding that the current situation is explicitly not about other priorities other [than] Active Behavior, Emotional Reinforcement, or Social Sharing” (Masek, 2024, p. 868) and features performative behavior, rituals, and intentional subversion/transgression of social norms and expectations (Riley et al., 2010; Sihvonen & Harviainen, 2020; Tsui, 2024; Masek & Stenros, 2025). The understanding of space is here both a conceptual and literal one: (a) it refers to the abstract space of possibilities offered by the surveyed events, as well as (b) the physical space/venue, which enables playfulness through spatial design.

Selection of cases was based on the aforementioned understanding of parties as playful spaces and the fulfillment of three primary criteria:

- (a) An emphasis of the event on somatically and emotionally transformative practices and experiences (Shusterman & Svanæs, 2023).
- (b) Actively constructing subcultural and/or countercultural qualities, addressing phenomena and experiences which are subjectively perceived as lacking in dominant discourses and everyday life or actively countering dominant values of a larger society (Williams & Hannerz, 2014).
- (c) Enabling “an experience of social connection in a group mediated through a shared engagement-prioritizing activity” (Masek & Stenros, 2024, p. 81), placing potential strangers into momentarily intimate and/or close relationships.

While the selected cases encompass highly different practices and might speak to different audiences (while overlaps between audiences were observed), they still share being primarily playful transformative spaces with similar frameworks, methods, and approaches for creating experiences and framing expectations.

Following, we report on observed strategies for expectation management. For the context of this work, we focus on organizer-led strategies and their impact and function.

Pre-event marketing as expectation management

Here, we introduce marketing for the surveyed events both as tools for the creation and management of expectations.

Organizers (E1, E2, E3) reported pre-event marketing as a primary tool used for expectation building and management, especially for the clarification of structural expectations of attendees towards the event. Marketing is here understood as the

use of communications, in the case of the surveyed events primarily digital tools, to (a) create and increase interest and (b) build explicit structural expectations towards the framework, potential experience, and limitations of an event to increase realistic expectations of attendees (Bruhn, 2023, p. 268; Grönroos 2009). To achieve this, all three events rely on active marketing practices, such as social media (E2; E3), organizers' webpages (E1; E2), or alternative formats such as published pre-event interviews with organizers and facilitators (E3), as well as a strong reliance on attendee-to-attendee word-of-mouth recommendations not actively led by the organizers (E1; E2). Word-of-mouth recommendations here are primarily functional for expectation building because these events speak to specific subcultural communities (E1) or practitioners with a specific own philosophy (E2). However, this type of recommendation and information sharing also requires potential attendees to be already integrated and networked within a specific community.

Intended target groups have been specific to varying degrees, with E1 targeting exclusively a queer audience, E2 emphasizing (but not limiting itself to) art and design practitioners, and E3 grieving individuals and their friends. The grade of specificity and exclusivity in target audiences however varies in between the events, with E2 speaking to a broad variety of practitioners within a larger field and E3 supporting and relying on attendees own understanding of grieving, while E1 applies queer identity as a strict criterion for inclusion, relying on the self-identification of potential attendees. The specificity also underlines the importance of word-of-mouth recommendations for the event (see also the section 'Other Events as Expectation and Organization Informants'), with organizers of E1 and E2 pointing out the reliance on it, instead of public marketing for broad appeal. These target groups have not only been reported in interviews but are also featured clearly and explicitly in information and marketing material for each event. As such, marketing here creates structural and explicit expectations towards the community build and present at each event, providing informative "design abstracts" for the event's structure and content (Grasmo & Stenros, 2022) or "promises" (Grönroos, 2009) as frameworks for possible expectations to the attendees (e.g., towards diversity, 'come as you are' statements, transformational outcomes).

These structural promises are especially referred to by attendees and organizers in relation to explicit expectations towards community and diversity, both built through textual and visual pre-event communication. In the case of E1, their own stock photo archive is utilized, which consists of images shot during dedicated sessions with consenting regular visitors and facilitators of the event space, with an emphasis on diverse representation. As pointed out by the organizers, the objective of this is further to provide an initial priming in relation to the atmosphere of the event, emphasizing softness, light colors and spaces, as well as diverse queer bodies (see also the section 'Spaces as Mediators and Managers of Expectations and Experiences').

As a contributing factor in pre-event communication, the visible presence of organizers and facilitators further has the potential to contribute to expectation building and motivation to attend, as observed for E1 and E3. For both events, organizers were typically visible and known in their respective local subcultural communities. If organizers or facilitators were personally known in their professional function to potential attendees, expectations were partly built upon reference to previously attended events, talks, or workshops, observed specifically for E1 and E3: “I came here because I visited previous event A by the same organizer, I expect it to be a similar experience.” However, this also leads to potential mismatches between attendee and organizer expectations, as seen for E3. Here, organizers were concerned that due to familiarity of attendees with their previous events, expectations would be for E3 to be primarily an artistic-event-as-service, rather than a potentially transformational event dependent on individual attendee-led participation.

Mitigating this but also addressing the potential uncertainty about what to expect from a clubbing event for grieving individuals, organizers and artists of E3 utilized a format not seen in any of the other two events: published pre-event interviews by the hosting venue with the organizer and participating artists. This provided both the organizers’ inspiration and perspective on what type of activities, as well as emotions and social activities could be potentially expected by attendees, while also emphasizing that the experience of the event itself is dependent on attendee-led engagement.

Spaces as mediators and managers of expectations and experiences

In this section, we address the role of expectation management and expectation subversion in relation to space (both spatial and temporal), as well as the use of space for guided experience.

For the context of transformational festivals, Rowen points out the function of these events as both conceptual, temporal, and spatial “threshold spaces” (Rowen, 2020, p. 697): they allow for the temporary suspension of societal norms and playful interactions with the self and others within a “protective frame” (Apter, 1991). With attendees entering the surveyed events with the expectation of having a potentially transformational experience, we witnessed also implicit and explicit expectations regarding the physical and atmospheric conditions of such spaces.

Here, organizers also played with *expected* tropes and aesthetics: For example, the interior design and layout of E1 was mentioned by multiple participants: The light, bright and cozy arrangement of the space – with colorful stained-glass windows, high ceilings, wood, and soft cloth – was recognized as being in stark contrast to

the stereotypical, common idea of a kink-oriented space: the dark dungeon filled with brick and leather and dominated by red and black color schemes.

The expectations towards the anticipated space and its potential unfamiliarity also have been central to pre-event communication of E2, with organizers pointing out that their main focus is the communication of camping as framing the event.

Across all surveyed events, it became clear to us that each event space's affordances require careful management and 'conducting'. Affordances here refers to the inherent invitations for engagements and interactions in spaces (Withagen et al., 2012), and how they can be facilitated. For example, a park bench in a more secluded garden area might invite people to sit and talk (E1), a campsite in nature might encourage less use of digital devices (E2), whereas the choice of energetic music and an open space might invite people to dance and engage in more embodied co-presence (E3).

Spaces were used by organizers to conduct their events in a specific rhythm, to shape the events through repetition (the expected) and unique moments (the unexpected). A key role in shaping the ebb and flow of E1 and E2 was the presence of food.

In the case of E1, afternoon coffee and cake were a firm anchoring point for each day. Organizers were keen on bridging the afternoon 'valley', in which they find attendees to be exhausted, hungry but yet still in a heightened emotional state. We encountered the act of queuing for a slice of cake as an almost meditative endeavor that lulled the whole environment in expectant, yet contemplative enjoyment. By 'mingling' outside of the structured content of the event, participants met each other in the kitchen in different ways, which allowed for cross-pollination between the smaller individual groups.

For the case of E2, repeated shared meals were utilized as gathering and reflection times, as well as for collaborative programming, and provided predictable elements framing the partly unpredictable program. Additionally, organizers here pointed out what they described as "availability and abundance" of necessities (such as food and relaxation spaces), provided so that attendees would not need to consider taking care of those elements themselves, allowing for an increased focus on activities and nature as the space.

Furthermore, a shared element for all three events for creating rhythm was the use of space and temporal frames for carefully bringing attendees in and out of the respective experience. E1 and E2 both used their arrival procedures as transitional spaces for slowing down attendees, while E3 utilized their first program point (an ambient act) as a slow sensory introduction into the space and event. For E2 here space played a significant role, as organizers described a two-kilometer path necessary to reach the transfer to the island as a transitional space and ice-breaker, during which attendees start meeting each other for potentially the first

time. As such, this walk is described as a “no-program element that becomes unofficially part of the program”, as it allows attendees to “fade in”. The same element is utilized again for the end of the event when “fading out” from the temporary reality of E2 back into everyday life. Here, E1 and E3 also apply similar strategies. On its last day, E1 utilizes several workshops for grounding and introspection, as well as a final session for wrapping up, featuring both individual and shared somatic exercises, meditation, and movement-based non-verbal expressions to slow down attendees and allow for emotional expression before, as described by one organizer, “releasing them back into the real world”. E3 utilized a less actively facilitated approach, making use of the specifics of its venue. Following the general philosophy of the organizer for their event series, E3 had a soft ending time, allowing attendees to stay in the event space after the event was over depending on their own needs, and/or move into a bar space below the club space, where attendees shared experiences before leaving the building.

These strategies contribute (a) to supporting and facilitating the experience of a temporary reality detached from everyday life (Rowen, 2020) through transitional spaces as well as (b) mitigating risks of emotional overwhelm in the beginning of an event as well as post-event ‘crashes’ as observed for other types of transformative events (Nilsen, 2015).

Organizers as expectations calibrators

Picking up from the facilitation of experience and expectation during the event in the previous section, we here take a closer look at the role of organizers for expectation management during the events.

Especially for the case of E1, and to some extent E2, we observe intentional and organizer/facilitator-led transformation and concretization of expectation types during the event. As Ojasalo describes, “fuzzy expectations may become explicit, or in fact become less fuzzy and more explicit, if they are systematically focused by the service provider” (1999, p. 96). Here, E1 and E2 provide insights into applied practices for instances of focusing fuzzy expectations and their transformation and calibration expectations through facilitator-led engagement and reflection.

In the context of E1, we observed facilitator-led transformation of fuzzy expectations towards explicit expectations through strategically timed workshops throughout the three days of the event. As noted during interviews at E1, people might attend an event without knowing exactly why they go, with workshops being pointed out as potential framing and calibration devices for these individuals. These fuzzy expectations are potentially intensified among attendees of E1 who take part in the event for the first time (Carlström, 2018a, 2018b).

These workshops were placed within the first half of the three-day event, with facilitators and organizers expressing the role of these workshops for supporting

the “dramatic curve” of the event. These workshops have been aimed at enabling a progressing deeper engagement throughout the duration of the event, as attendees gain an increased understanding of own expectations and desires, as well as of the expectations of others.

The function and structure of these workshops can be exemplified through the following case, a workshop on expressions of desired interactions, happening on the first day of the event. The dramatic curve of the event is here mirrored in the structure of the workshop, with a primarily verbal and introspective introduction, and collectively shared embodied activities, before putting the previously explored ways of communicating wishes and desires to a test in smaller constellations, before closing with a collective reflection. While having a preplanned structure, these workshops on a different scale engage a similarly participatory educational approach as evident in the participant-led programming of E2. Facilitators within the context of E1 describe workshops and activities as spaces of negotiation, getting people to know what they want, need, or expect, rather than teaching ‘hard skills’.

While most of the described elements calibrate and clarify desires-as-expectations, E1 further engages with the calibration of structural expectations through an extensive introductory session in which frames, rules, and activities are introduced and explained. While primarily reacting to structural expectations, such framing sessions also provide a response to potentially fuzzy expectations towards atmosphere, for example through the choice of language, as observed for E1 (colloquial and at times explicit). As explained by one organizer, such introductory sessions also are intended to “shatter expectations” by explicitly reminding about the need to take into consideration own limits and that there shouldn’t be an expectation to be able “to do it all”. This is primarily informed by organizers’ previous experiences of attendees’ discrepancy between necessary energy management and desires-as-expectations: Attendees arrive typically highly motivated and with desires-as-expectations to engage as much as possible with offered activities, while potentially not considering their own limits or the impact of exhaustion on post-event emotional processing, as described also for other transformational events. Additionally, not necessarily communicated explicitly to participants; to further mitigate this all events organize the level of energy in participation through bound activities and structures (described as “the dramatic curve of the event”).

Structural framing devices as found at E1 and E2 provide ways of transforming fuzzy into more explicit expectations. Examples for such devices include (a) post-it boards, consisting of short written expressions of expectations, wishes and desires and (b) organizational framing through daily and repeated calibration and check-in sessions. For (b) E1 and E2 differ. E2 provides one calibration session in the morning. The session here is used for reflections and collaborative programming, deciding and organizing the activities proposed by attendees during registration individually for each day, guided by the question ‘What would you like to learn, experience, share (today)?’. While attendees know beforehand which activities might

await them during the duration of the event, the exact nature and timing of these events is unknown to them until they decide collectively to engage with them. A second check-in session around noon is used for reflection. The participatory and attendee-led programming of E2 here can be understood as mirroring Rowen's earlier quoted notion of "'co-creation of an immersive, participant-driven reality' that produces a sense of empowerment while effacing distinctions between performers and spectators" (Rowen, 2020, p. 697). Further, the adaptability of contents can here be understood as a response to the unique group-dynamics based on the combination, matches, and potential detachments of individual expectations and desires.

However, we also observed that expectations of attendees across all events were primarily individually negotiated, both expressed in interviews with attendees and observations by organizers. Organizers might be able to lead or initiate calibration and transformation of expectations, but the outcome of these calibration methods as being located in participatory workshops is then dependent on the individual engagement of attendees. This, however, can be seen as a natural side-effect of the liberatory and emancipatory approaches evident in all three events.

Other events as expectation and organization informants

As expectations are also impacted by previous experiences, we here address how organizers and attendees relate to previous experiences at the same or similar events.

Related to pre-event marketing, organizational self-understanding, and audience perception, both organizers and attendees reported on experiences and expectations towards respective events by self-positioning in relation to other events. We witnessed two types of comparisons and relations:

(a) Inspired relationality

Inspired relationality refers to the practice of drawing from and adopting practices evident at other events (both transformational and not), as expressed by organizers both towards researchers and to a lesser extent to attendees.

(b) Delineating relationality

Delineating relationality here describes comparison to other events within or outside of the same subculture as a practice for establishing difference, and through that affect expectations (Groth, 2020), evident in responses of both organizers and attendees.

Inspired relationality has been evident across organizers and facilitators all surveyed events, with influences being noted for facilitation style, organizational struc-

tures, timing of food, spatial design, as well as practices for consent negotiation, accessibility, and accountability. Mentioned influential events ranged from seemingly unrelated and in parts entirely different events and the experience of organizing or participating in those (e.g. dance workshops and festivals, decolonial education, film festivals, clubbing under the influence), to events located within the same subcultural framework, or with similar target groups or activities. For the latter, both organizational observations (see E1–E3: “How were things done at event x? What could I learn from that as an organizer?”) as well as personal experiences (see E3: “I experienced A, how could I enable a similar experience for others at my event?”).

Delineating relationality was especially important for E1 and E2. Delineation within E3 is expressed, but in a less explicit way: within pre-event interviews and in interviews with the authors, the organizer of E3 utilized both inspired relationality, as well as delineating relationality. The latter is primarily used here to describe the creation of an alternative club space, both allowing for separation from everyday life (creating a protective framework; Rowen, 2020; Masek & Stenros, 2024), as also observed for E1 and E2. However, the delineation in E3 remains abstract and on a general level.

E1 is positioned as both an alternative to everyday life experiences by centering slowness, exploration, community, and emancipatory learning for a transformative experience, as well as an active counter-project to other spaces and events within larger kink subcultures. This delineation evident in E1 and E2 aligns with the positioning of the two events as not only subcultural, but also potentially countercultural currents in relation to the subcultures they are located in (E1), as well as in relation to the institutional systems they are critiquing (E2).

For E1, delineation was primarily reported in relation to personal experience and professional opinion of organizers regarding other kink-focused events and the framing of those as “welcoming to all”. In opposition to this, E1 is self-positioned as intentionally exclusive for queer individuals. This practice of delineation seemed to be successful especially for enabling the experience of unconditional expression of own queer identities by attendees, as multiple attendees reported on the positive experience of a queer-only space in relation to previous experiences at other event spaces, which followed a “welcoming to all” policy.

The strong relevance of delineation for E1 in comparison to lesser relevance for E2 and E3 can be explained through the differently motivated desires-as-expectations for protective spaces due to systemic marginalization (within broader society), as well as exotification or marginalization in larger subcultural structures.

Also delineating, but with a different objective and context, E2 is actively positioned as a counter-project to established institutionalized understandings of ‘learning’ in arts and design, also rooted in the desire for development of alternative practices

and less-rigid, explorative, and experimental frameworks. Delineation here has been exclusively reported in relation to normative structural conditions.

Discussion

All surveyed events engage with activities, which can be perceived as transformative in (almost) any case, but they further engage with them in a playful way: the events promise and provide spaces that allow for meaningful and transformative experiences across the three realms of transformation as outlined for example by Bowman et al. (2024, p. 23): transformative leisure (E1, E2, E3), therapeutic transformation (primarily E1 and E3), and educational transformation (primarily E1 and E2). As such, attendees for each individual event hold different combinations of expectations-as-desires, which might also vary across the same event: as an example, for an event like E3, for some attendees the desire for therapeutical transformation might be dominant, while others attend the event primarily for a leisure experience in mind.

For E1, from our perspective, the evident understanding of kink practices here aligns closely with theoretical frameworks of kink as leisure activity, “freely chosen activities that are intrinsically motivated and arousing, often resulting in positive emotions, relief from stress, and often engaged in for reasons of self-expression, adventure or relaxation” (Sprott, 2024, p. 1), rather than centering exclusively on erotic intentions. At the same time, the event, through its workshop-based structure, puts an emphasis both on the educational and a potentially therapeutical experience.

E2, while being an educational event, still primarily fulfills the definition of a leisurely retreat as a transformative exploration (still applicable here, this is primarily explored health research; see Kelly & Smith, 2016). Here the venue, experience of the natural space, camping, style of facilitation and programming, as well as the accompanying activities enable a leisure experience, as observed similarly for the adoption of ‘serious’ objectives in playful and alternative venues (Mayer, 2025).

E3 is positioned as actively utilizing the potential of clubbing for increasing social and emotional wellbeing (and as such potentially having therapeutical qualities; see also Kramer & Wittman, 2023) and its playful ritualistic nature (Goulding & Shankar, 2011) for shared and collective forms of grief (Cherblanc et al., 2025).

All three events present different focuses on aspects of Ojasalo’s model, while also extending and specifying the model for the specific context of transformative events. Organizers of all three events put great emphasis on providing clarification and clear information on fuzzy structural expectations (‘What to expect from venues, activities, frameworks?’). Additionally, E1 and E3 address fuzzy and explicit desires-as-expectations in pre-event communication, with E1 and E2 addressing

these also repeatedly during the event itself. For all three events, in line with Ojasalo's understanding, implicit expectations are not actively addressed towards participants but rather play a role in organizer's own planning and scheduling practices. Simultaneously, as shown in the reflection on expectations and space, as well as on event experiences as factors for expectation management, we witness how expectations turn implicit as "some elements of the service become ... self-evident" (Ojasalo, 1999, p. 96) to the attendee due to previous experiences. While this process has the potential to result in negative experiences as implicit expectations are not met, we also observed how the subversion of such implicit expectations might turn into a positive experience (see the section 'Spaces as Mediators and Other Events'). Here we diverge from Ojasalo's framework, which states that "revealing ... expectations increases long-term quality" (1999, p. 97). For some of the implicit expectations pointed out in the two sections mentioned above, productive expectation management does not mean that clarity is provided on each aspect of the experience, but rather that surprise and subversion can potentially also become a positive result of expectations-not-met.

Considering all three events as offers and promises to their respective audience, this research also underlines the relevance of service-oriented approaches to these culturally alternative events as instances of playful and transformative experiences. This becomes further relevant when considering these events as "engagement-focused" in relation to both activities and interpersonal engagement (Masek & Stenros, 2024): the ability to engage positively with them is dependent on the creation and calibration of expectations in attendees. While none of the surveyed transformative and playful events should be understood primarily as full-service experiences, they can be defined as conditional services, in which spaces for playful transformation are created and offered, but are ultimately dependent on the active engagement and contribution of attendees. What might happen at the event can be out of the control of organizers and their expectations, as it might be dependent on what people do, and which desires-as-expectations they are bringing in. Considering the surveyed events (and in extension other playful transformative events) as conditional services, we can understand strategies of expectation building, management, and calibration as techniques for enabling a positive transformative experience.

What can be learned from this is the role of organizers and facilitators as navigators working in between priming and non-priming, navigating fuzzy, explicit, and implicit expectations: We observed cases with heavy priming and framing (E1) for both conceptual, engagement-focused, and structural expectations before and during the event; a strong focus on structural expectations towards the space, with less priming on what to expect in regards to activities (E2); and combinations of pragmatic structural and speculative emotional elements (e.g. in pre-event marketing-interviews of E3) before the event with little active interventions for expectation calibration during the event.

While we here focused on the strategies and elements employed by organizers towards attendees for expectation management, there further are both mutual and one-directional additional layers of structural and interpersonal expectations towards contributions to a shared experience:

- (a) *Attendees ↔ Organizers*: Interpersonal expectations of attendees and organizers towards each other that are mutually influential, including organizers' expectations of how attendees will act and engage, and the expectations attendees have towards the facilitation of the event by organizers.
- (b) *Attendees ↔ Attendees*: Interpersonal expectations of attendees towards other attendees, their engagement and interaction, and their role in potentially enabling fulfillment of one's desires-as-expectations.
- (c) *Attendees → Space*: Expectations of attendees towards the spatial and temporal conditions of an event in relation to their desires ('What is provided that can help me fulfill my expectations?') and structural expectations.
- (d) *Attendees → Framework*: Expectations of attendees towards the conceptual framework of an event.

Additionally, similar to the aspect of relation to other events as a strategy for expectation management by organizers, the previous attendance of events by the same or other organizers plays a role for all three surveyed events as an instance of “priming” of experience. Attendees might want to repeat experiences they had previously in similar form (expectations-as-desires) or replace a previously negative experience with a new positive one (expectations-as-desires). Similarly, they might expect a specific structure and space for an event based on attendance of previous events, either expecting a clearly different or similar structure (structural expectations).

Limitations

For the context of this study, the personal connections between individual authors and organizational participants here have been an especially relevant factor for access and initial trust-building. Undoubtedly, our own positionalities played a major role here. Similarly, the need to collect and analyze data in a privacy-conscious fashion influenced how we could approach each organization and their respective events. Here, we encourage other researchers to build and reflect on our work, to critique it and to engage with other groups and spaces.

Future work

While we have focused on the application and impact of organizer-led measures for expectation management, in future work, we aim to further provide an attendee-focused perspective on individual agency, practices and challenges in expectation management.

We wish to explore the mechanisms of facilitation (and the expectations created through it) from the perspectives of seams (and seamlessness), especially in relation to implicit expectations towards elements “so self-evident to customers that they do not actively or even consciously think about them” (Ojasalo 1999, p. 96), only becoming visible when not met. Seams, as conceptualized by Chalmers & Galani (2004), here point to the idea of something disrupting the linear flow of an interaction: an object, activity, or “thing” that makes one “stumble” before being able to continue.

Similarly, we wish to explore how participants and facilitators alike wrestle with expectation as managing them by proxy, as second order expectations. Throughout our data, we observed participants facilitating situations for other participants that were framed with specific expectations in mind (“What do other people expect from me, as participating in this event?”).

Here, we also wish to draw attention again to our epistemological way of working and researcher positionalities. Other researchers may have arrived at very different insights, particularly due to more complicated establishing of rapport, and a more complex navigation of subcultural assumptions, and norms. Our affiliation to the event and a sense of ‘belonging’ in the space was, without a doubt, underpinned by how people read us – both as people and through signified aesthetics (e.g., a group of white, queer ‘bodymodded’ people).

Conclusion

This article reported on a study of expectation management for somatically and emotionally transformative events through three cases, including a queer festival, an artistic retreat, and a clubbing event for grieving individuals. For the context of this paper, we focused on organizer-led strategies for expectation management, building, and calibration. We analyzed our data through deductive framing, informed by Ojasalo’s (1999 & 2001) dynamic model of expectation types. We located four primary elements relevant to expectation management from an organizational perspective: pre-event marketing, conceptual and actual spaces, expectation calibration through facilitation during the event, and relations to other events.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Research ethics

This study has been conducted in accordance with the national guidelines for ethical principles of research, as outlined in *The Ethical Principles of Research with Human Participants and Ethical Review in the Human Sciences in Finland* by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity 3/2019 (<https://tenk.fi/en/advice-and-materials/guidelines-ethical-review-human-sciences>), as well as the *Finnish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* (<https://tenk.fi/en/research-integrity-ri>). Authors conducted a detailed risk assessment before the beginning of this study and shared it with potential organizational participants and attendee-participants.

Consent

This study is built on the concept of informed consent. Consent for participation in interviews during this study was collected and documented in written form. Consent for observation during ethnographic field studies was repeatedly collected through verbal and visually signaled consent. No reports are made on opinions expressed by individual participants, with the report only including group-based dynamics. To further ensure consensual reporting and safe representation, the submitted paper was reviewed by the organizational participants before submission.

Co-authorship statement

All authors contributed equally to this work. Interviews were conducted by Author 1 (E1, E2, E3), Author 2 (E1, E2), and Author 3 (E2). An ethnographic field study was conducted by Author 1 and Author 2.

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