

The interactive role of the diner in gastronomic restaurants: spectator, actor or co-creator?

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interactive nature of the eating ritual and discusses how such interactivity is currently being articulated in the specific context of gastronomic restaurants. An account of the basic concepts related to interactivity is given in order to facilitate the discussion. A reflection on the role of the diners in gastronomic restaurants is conducted in order to better understand the extent to which the experiences proposed by those can be considered interactive. To close, a space for exploration is opened, suggesting co-creation as a strategy to foster interaction in the experiences proposed by gastronomic restaurants.

Author Keywords

Eating design; interaction design; gastronomy.

INTRODUCTION

One of the aspects that, *a priori*, differentiate the gastronomy experience from other kinds of experiences is the interactive nature of the eating ritual. When visiting a museum, one is *contemplating* a piece of art; when going to the cinema, one is *watching* a movie. There is not much space for decision-making, besides choosing from a given cultural offer. The individual becomes a spectator, consuming somebody else's proposal without having the chance to have an influence on it. There is no interaction whatsoever¹.

Differently, the experience of eating allows for active participation. Diners are called into play to constantly renegotiate the impact they want to have on the unfolding experience. Those interactions are not limited to the social dimension, which is indeed of great importance. In the very nature of the eating ritual the individual has the freedom to interact with food, with others, and with the space in which eating is taking place. Those interactions empower the individual to generate an impact on all that is surrounding him, receiving as feedback a series of stimuli that will eventually influence his perception of the experience.

Eating as a social ritual presents great similarities with the ritual of play [2], that being “*the fundamental human drive that makes interactivity so powerful*” [1]. We could argue, then, that eating is intrinsically interactive.

A BRIEF NOTE ON INTERACTIVITY

To deepen this discussion, it is important to clarify the notion of interactivity. What is interactivity? What is it not? This is a debate that could lead to ever-lasting discussions, but for the sake of this study we will assume interactivity as “*something that takes place between two parts that are active*” [3].

What does it mean, then, to behave as “active parts”? Such parts, or agents, need to be capable of receiving stimuli, processing them and producing other stimuli that are impacted by the reception and subsequent processing of the previous ones [1]. In this way, an interaction will involve two or more agents that will simultaneously receive, process and emit messages that will have an impact on the other agents, thereby imposing an emergent character to the unfolding of the events. The messages the agents emit will be clearly influenced by the previous succession of information exchange [5].

However, the presence of two or more parts that have the capacity of being active is not a direct guarantee of the flourishing of interactivity. Interactions between two agents will not take place if one does not perceive the other as capable or willing to interact [3].

In other words, for interactivity to take place, all of the parts need to feel that they are an active agent in the unfolding of an experience, thereby having the perception that they can have an influence on it [4]. This is very important, and the fact that one of the parts has *interactability* – that is, is capable of engaging in interaction [3] – will not necessarily mean that the other part will perceive it that way. If one of the parts lacks *interactiveness* – that is, is unlikely to engage users in interactions [3] – it will make it difficult for interactivity to take place at all.

¹ While exceptions exist, this is the general way those experiences unfold. Our discussions do not apply to those exceptions.

It is also important to note that the notion of interactivity is better expressed as a continuous variable than a discrete one - it is more appropriate to talk about different levels of interactivity rather than about its presence in absolute terms. Some of the factors used at evaluating the presence of interactivity are the pace of interaction, the perception of agency [3], the information flow, or the space for choice [1].

INTERACTIVITY IN GASTRONOMIC RESTAURANTS

This reflection has been conducted in the context of *elBulliLab* (Barcelona, Spain), a research institution led by the world-renowned chef Ferran Adrià. Through the use of their own *Sapiens methodology*, elBulliLab is collecting, structuring and interpreting data with the aim of establishing *gastronomy* as a research discipline.

elBulliLab defines a *gastronomic restaurant* as a place in which food is being cooked and served to clients who pay in exchange, and differs from a regular restaurant in that it has the non-negotiable aim to achieve the highest excellence at all times in its offer of food and drinks. Providing the diner with a pleasant and ludic experience is the ultimate goal. Given this definition, if we study the dominant trends in the proposals of experiences presented by

gastronomic restaurants we will soon realize that in many occasions the perception of interactivity is somehow compromised.

For the purpose of this discussion, a collection of playful eating proposals was clustered in the form of a map (Figure 1). It is important to clarify that it is beyond the purpose of this text to discuss the limits of what play and playfulness mean. Also, this collection does not include the totality of proposals that might exist. It is rather a representative sample that must be considered an indicative list of playful eating proposals.

A quick look at the map shows that most of those proposals that are executed by gastronomic restaurants engage participants rather in active or reactive experiences than in interactive ones. We will consider that an experience is reactive when the individual receives stimuli without later on emitting a response, or without a chance of his responses having a significant impact on the other agents [5]. Furthermore we will consider that an experience is active one when the individual performs actions that do not generate a response from the other agents, or do generate such responses that do not have an impact on the unfolding of the experience in the form of emergence.

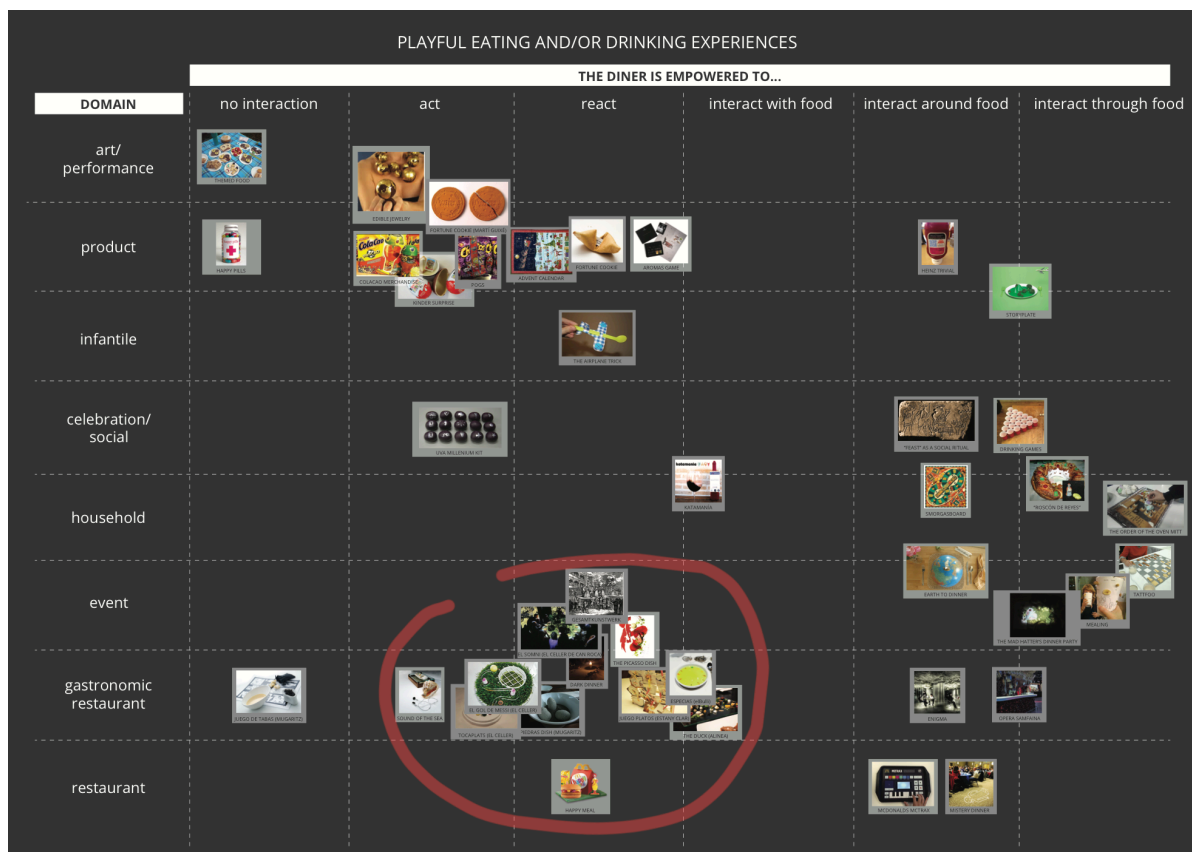


Figure 1. Map including examples of playful eating and/or drinking proposals, clustered by level of interactivity and field of application. The dominant cluster of proposals coming from gastronomic restaurants is highlighted in red.

Why is such a lack of interactivity perceived in those experiences, given the fact that the ritual of eating has in itself the potential of being highly interactive?

In order to better understand this, let us put our focus on the very basic concept of the gastronomic restaurant. According to *elBulliLab's Sapiens*, in a gastronomic restaurant there are two radically different parties: the restaurant team, who produces a proposal, and the diners, who experience it. Similarly, it is associated with the idea of excellence. Such a quest for excellence is generally approached by gastronomic restaurants with the attitude of designing an experience that is as guided and detailed as possible.

DISCUSSING THE ROLE OF THE DINER

The eagerness to achieve an experience that is guided to the smallest of details often implies a clear assignment of roles, as well as the definition of a series of protocols that give the restaurant a high control on all the variables involved in the unfolding of the experience. In those experiences, diners navigate within the frame that the protocols impose. Are the diners actors or spectators? There is a fine line between the two – valid arguments to support both statements can be found. Let us start, then, by examining how much of a spectator can the role of the diner be.

From spectator to actor

Diners at a gastronomic restaurant could be considered spectators in that they attend the restaurant with the aim of enjoying an experience designed and executed by other people. The restaurant builds a frame –the desired experience– inside of which most of the variables are under control. Diners are consumers of a carefully developed product, the creation of which they do not have access to. In most gastronomic restaurants there is an emitter, the restaurant, and a receiver, the diner (Figure 2).

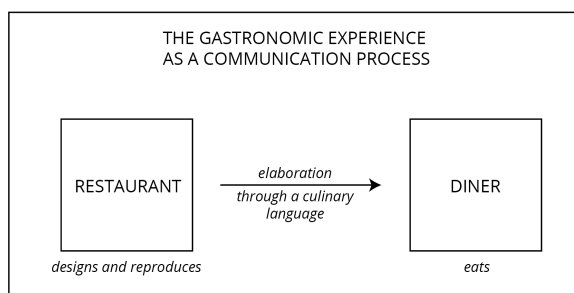


Figure 2. The gastronomic experience as a communication process. The restaurant designs and reproduces a proposal that is communicated to the diners through elaborations they can eat.

In the light of this, it may look like the relationship between the restaurant and the diners unfolds in a similar way, let us say, to that between an artist and an individual who contemplates her work at a museum. However, there are important nuances in which the two experiences differ.

In the case of a work of pictorial art, the design and execution of the piece are usually detached in time from its visualization². Differently, in gastronomic experiences execution of the proposal –or, at least, part of it– occurs simultaneously to consumption.

It is in the execution that the diner becomes an actor, in that he is automatically given a certain power of action over some of the variables involved in the construction of his own experience. The diner is empowered, for example, to dip a piece of sushi into soy sauce, or to decide in which chair around a table he is going to sit. In this sense, the diner transcends the position of the spectator and thereby becomes an actor.

Space for interactivity

Does this mean that the experience proposed by most gastronomic restaurants can be considered manifestly interactive? Not necessarily. We previously discussed the fact that an individual has the capacity of being an actor does not directly imply the flourishing of interactivity. Two key conditions have to be met. First, there must be a second part that behaves actively - that is, a part that is capable of and willing to receive, process and act in consequence of the messages the diner-actor emits. Second, the diner-actor must have the perception that his actions are having a real impact on the emergent construction of his very own experience.

Let us see how those conditions are –or are not– met. The diner-actor is clearly capable of performing actions that could have an impact on another actor –e.g. a waiter– in a way that a subsequent impact is generated on the experience as a whole. However, a good deal of those actions will not transcend into an impact on the experience.

The format most gastronomic restaurants propose is very structured – the spectrum of actions by diners that are sensitive of generating a real

² Again, while exceptions exist, this is the general way those experiences unfold. Our discussion do not apply to those exceptions.

impact on the unfolding of the experience is rather limited and predefined. The same happens with the scope of the impact, often small and limited to very specific parts of the experience. One part –the restaurant— is defining a series of clear protocols, while the other –the diner— assumes them and acts accordingly. The space for real emergence in the ultimate experience is rather limited. Diners can navigate within the frame the restaurant proposes, but they do not have the chance to question or modify that frame.

This reflection leads us to the second condition. Given the fact that diners have the chance to act within a delimited set of parameters, they are likely to perceive their power of action over the experience as weak. If the diner feels that he is losing control on her experience, her actions not being relevant enough, her perception of interactivity might be compromised, if not lost.

As we discussed earlier, being an actor does not necessarily mean interacting – if the diner does not feel she is an active part in the emergent construction of her own experience, she might feel she is being a passive spectator. This could eventually generate a feeling of disorientation, especially in diners with little experience on what it means to attend a gastronomic restaurant.

The fact of not being used to a series of protocols, which are likely to be strongly framed, might make it difficult for the diner-actor to understand where she can actually act and how, thereby her self-perception of being an actor automatically fading away.

CONCLUSION

As we discussed, the experience of eating at gastronomic restaurants can be perceived as limited in terms of interactivity and emergence. This opens a space for exploration in the relationship between the diners and the restaurant – a challenge emerges in finding novel ways to help diners feel they are being an active part of their very own experience.

In the search of a truly interactive dining experience and, even more important, in the attempt to get diners to perceive it as such, it would be useful to empower them in a way that they have a real feeling of agency.

This, without any doubt, implies the questioning of some established assumptions underlying the very concept of the gastronomic restaurant – that is, the clear distinction in the roles of the producer and the receiver. How could we get

diners to feel that they are an active part in the construction of their experience while, at the same time, not compromising the excellence in the degustation?

This is, without any doubt, a complex question that is nonetheless worth addressing. Embracing the idea of the restaurant as a facilitator instead of a creator might be a good strategy. A host-facilitator would not focus on conveying a memorable experience to the diners. Instead, it would assist and empower them to build the experience themselves.

By doing so, the interactions performed throughout the experience would be more impactful – the experience would unfold in emergent ways. Similarly, interactions would play a key role in the perception of the gastronomy experience as a whole.

Assuming gastronomy experiences as the product of combining of a broad range of stimuli, enhancing their interactive quality and enriching the set of interactions that take place in them could result in much more emergent and diverse unfolding of those experiences. Embracing the idea of a diner that embodies the role of the co-creator could be a strategy to achieve this.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was done under the supervision of Danielle Wilde and Henry Larsen (*University of Southern Denmark*), and Yaiza Bocos, Julia de Luis and Ferran Adrià (*elBulliLab*). Additionally, it builds upon a previous research project³ conducted in collaboration with Mirzel Avdić, Asbjørn Grangaard, Lennart Schlüter, and Thomas Neville.

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³ The Mad Hatter's Dinner Party: Enhancing the Dining Experience Through the Use of Game Thinking (<http://www.ferranaltarriba.com/projects/madhatter>).