



Re-Designing the Dining Experience: Harpooning Meatballs in the Name of Co-Creation

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Abstract

This paper describes three design artefacts that are part of a series of designs aimed to challenge and re-invent the social and aesthetic experience of dining. The artefacts comprise a social table designed to either expose or provide an intimate room for the guests, fork-headed spears designed to invite playful behaviour, and a meatball cage, designed to extravagantly display an excess of food while at the same time making it hard for guests to get to the food. The design artefacts were used in a live experiment with eight children, and helped guests take active part in composing, exploring and challenging the dining experience.

Author Keywords

Social dining; experience design.

Introduction

We all eat, and most of us like dining considerably. Everyday experience tells us that a fine meal or eating experience has more to it than simply the food. For this reason, people spend money on romantic restaurants, throw barbeques under the summer sky, and make an effort presenting special meals with silver-ware, candle light and heir-loom tablecloths. In consequence, most adults are quite experienced in designing experiences around the meal, though mostly within certain well-known genres such as 'picnic' or 'romantic dinner for two'.

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Around the world, professional chefs have long experimented with taking experience design and dining a bit further. Perhaps being fed up with how a traditional restaurant looks and works, some have started experimenting with introducing performance theory to restaurants, serving food that need to be co-created at the table, or using tools and preparations that allow for new tastes, textures and interactions.

Intrigued by how the use of design skills can invite guests to participate in the dining situation, we set out to experiment with some of the well-known ingredients in a meal: the table and the cutlery. As a frame for the experiment we chose to challenge the concept of good and bad table manners and through various designs invite guests to co-create a unique dining experience with strangers around a table.

Within the fields of experience design, numerous attempts to shape experiences and invite to certain behaviour have been described. Some work concern the development of frameworks or vocabulary to help designers articulate qualities in their designs (for example Arrasvuori et al., 2010; Petersen et al., 2004). While some of these contributions voice a view on interaction qualities that are closely related to traditional HCI values, such as precision or instant feedback (Lim et al., 2007) others open the field to other aesthetic qualities such as

dramaturgical structure (Löwgren, 2008), aesthetic ideals such as sensing or emotion (Lundgren, 2010), or sensory qualities such as the ones described by someasthetics (Shusterman, 2008). Some work is less theoretical and describe practical experiments with designs that invite certain behaviour or reflection. In critical design, for example, a design artefact is presented as a physical representation of a hypothesis, inviting the user/audience to consider for example technology's role in society or mundane life (Dunne, 1999). The work presented in this paper has taken inspiration from the theoretical work in the field but aims to present a series of physical design artefacts that invite to exploration and reflection rather than offer explanations.

In the following, I will describe three design artefacts that we used to shape eight children's experience of a meal. These artefacts comprise a social table, fork-headed spears, and a meatball cage. Further design artefacts were made as part of the experiment, including edible tableware, partnered spoons, 'broken' cups and glasses, and special servings for sharing. These are not the topic of the present paper, but may appear in the photos from the experiment.

The Designs

The design artefacts were designed to challenge and help participants re-invent the social and aesthetic experience of dining. As such, the artefacts are not stand-alone objects; they are designed to trigger playful behaviours, and are best understood in use. Our exploration was enabled by the participation of eight children around the age of eight—an age where the play between good and bad manners can be understood and appreciated. The food served during the meal was a three-course dinner and eight snack servings co-designed and delivered by professional chefs. The preparation and presentation of the food was designed to fit certain

Figure 1: The Social Table setup during the experiment, including the meatball cage, fork-headed spears and the intimate room under the table.



affordances such as sharing, poking, wondering or making a mess.

The social table

The central design artefact is a large round table, approximately two metres wide, with room for eight guests (see, figure 1). On the surface are eight manholes in which the guests stand while eating. As a result, the guest is restrained and cannot move to get things out of reach. The table is covered by a long white tablecloth, which reaches the floor, only keeping the manholes open. During the experiment, the room above the table included several cultural references to a formal dining situation, including white napkins, uniformed waiters, and spotlight. The rhythm of the servings and the announcing of the food also contributed to the feel of a formal dining experience.

Under the table, and enclosed by the tablecloth, is a low space with benches all the way round the walls, leaving a small room on the floor on about 1.5 m². Each of the eight bench 'pieces' is fitted with a transparent drawer in which food servings were placed from outside the tent-like room. Each drawer contains a light that during the experiment was switched on when a snack was placed inside the drawer.

The social table was designed to either expose or provide an intimate room for the guests, and hold subtle clues about what kinds of manners would be expected, such as decoration, cultural references and the fixed positioning of guests. These clues were then contradicted by adding design objects with other values to the context. Two of these were the forks and the dish used to present the main course.

The fork-headed spears

The fork-headed spears are in fact ordinary forks attached to long wooden sticks (see, figure 1). Because of their length they

are difficult to balance, and they invite the guest to explore just where to hold it and how to manoeuvre it to make use of it. The fork-headed spears were designed to physically challenge the guests, invite to playful behaviour (such as using them as swords) and to provide the guests the possibility to grab food from the dish used for the main course, the meatball cage, which was placed centrally on the table, and otherwise out of reach for the guests.

The meatball cage

In traditional cooking, the presentation of food is central to the dining experience, and specialized dishes and arrangements are often used to invoke a certain impression in the guest. Presenting meatballs in an impressive collective serving is a challenge—somehow meatballs don't fit well with fine dining, they tend to roll all over the place, and considering their size and shape they almost invite to being thrown, especially when served in abundance. Our solution for a dish that allowed for the serving of 500 meatballs was a circle of chicken wire, about 65 cm wide and 20 cm high, which perfectly caged in and displayed the meatballs at the same time.

The meatball cage was designed to display an overwhelming amount of food, inviting the guests to reach out of their manholes and in over the table to get the food. The high sides of the cage combined with the fork-headed spears facilitated harpooning in an exaggerated diagonal direction from over one's head/shoulder, leaving it impossible not to break the atmosphere of fine dining, suggested by the table.

The Experiment

The three design artefacts were deployed in an experiment, a staged meal with eight invited children around the age of eight. The children were escorted by, and instantly separated from, parents, and were guided to take room under the table by the use of stage light: the room fell dark and the space under the

table lit up, signalling the children to enter. During the performance, change of light settings was used to invite the children to move from dining over the table to under the table, or vice versa.

The experiment was witnessed by 20 guests, who—from dark corners of the dining hall—formed a passive audience for about two hours. Servings and other interventions were based on a dress rehearsal with eight other children, and directed on the fly, with a sharp focus on group dynamics, and according to a detailed storyboard.

During a meal lasting two hours, and facilitated by a series of design artefacts, alliances between eight strangers emerged, cultural norms about behaviour challenged, and about 500 meatballs became either eaten or airborne. The social and exiting experiences aside, the experiential performance enabled by our designs, managed to gently provoke and challenge the cultural assumptions made about good and bad manners, and engage eight children in this discussion.

Inviting guests to become participants in the co-creation of an experience around a meal does not have to entail a theatre troupe or a large budget. Small designs that challenges some of the general assumptions made about the meal is all it takes to create the outline for an experience that is exiting and extraordinary to take part in. The experiment 'Re-designing the dining experience' managed to gently provoke and challenge the cultural assumptions about the qualities of dining, and eight children—who were initially strangers—formed in two hours a strong fellowship and together explored the boundaries for a socially engaging meal.

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