

From Game Design to Gastronomy (and vice versa): we shall not play around with food... or shall we?

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ABSTRACT

Gastronomy and (video)games are two fields without an apparent relationship, both in terms of development processes and consumption trends. Some would even argue that the connotations society associates to them are explicitly different. However, this might be nothing but a cliché. Would it be possible that indeed there is a link that connects games and gastronomy? Would it be possible that such link is even greater than we imagine? In this article, exploration around new ways of connection between gastronomy and games is conducted. Gastronomy and Game Design are connected through Game Design theories [1, 6, 8, 9], such as LeBlanc's *8 Kinds of Fun*, with the aim of detecting potential starting points that might lead to further contributions to the evolution of the gastronomy scenario. It is commonly said that we shouldn't play around with our food... but shouldn't we?

Keywords

gastronomy, game design, storytelling, fun, memorable experience, multi sensory, innovation

1. INTRODUCTION

Gastronomy and (video)games. Two apparently disconnected worlds with and often considered distant, especially in terms of form - a distance that becomes visible in terms of the social attributions that we impose to both. Haute cuisine is often associated to connotations related to cultural richness, while there is a -tendentious- trend of relegating games to the category of trivial entertainment. As for ordinary gastronomy, we often relate it to the sole fact of biological survival, forgetting the undeniable experiential value that it provides - the same value that other cultural products have.

Hybridization between creative disciplines is, without any kind of doubt, one of the ideal scenarios for true innovation. Creativity, in the end, consists in the connection of ideas and concepts that were apparently distant - a connection found with the purpose of evolution.

The field of (video)games is a clear example about this fact. This area is currently experiencing a true revolution both in terms of technological platforms and areas of application. We are recently observing how the field of game design is being reshaped and reframed, opening its boundaries to concepts like *gamification*, *serious gaming* or *playful learning*. All these recently born concepts are a product of the combination between game design and one or more other creative disciplines.

However, the relationship between gastronomy and (video)games has not been studied yet - not in depth, at least. It is not common to find rational in-depth analyses that sustain and confirm the apparent formal differences that we intuitively associate to games and gastronomy. This article aims to be a provocation to trigger and encourage further exploration on this area - both in terms of theory and practice. Are games and gastronomy so radically different in their essence?

2. GASTRONOMY AS EXPERIENCE

Apart from the evident biological function it performs in our lives, the act of eating goes far beyond the mere intake of food. Throughout the history -and in an intercultural manner- gastronomy has played a key role in the everyday routines of most communities. The list of human social rituals where food and entertainment coexist and interact is almost endless. A clear example of that is the *Symposium* from the ancient Greece, where food and beverage intake was combined with storytelling, music, dance and even philosophy [5].

Another example, although not strictly conceived as a pure gastronomic act, is the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, popularized by the opera composer Richard Wagner [3, 4] - it is a significant contribution to the analysis of gastronomy as an experiential product. *Gesamtkunstwerk*, an originally Germanic term, means *total art* or, in an academic formulation, the *synthesis of the arts*. Wagner [3, 4] argues that the concept of *total art* refers to a piece of art that embraces all or most of the existing forms of art. We are, therefore, talking about the creation of a multi format piece that, as such, will generate a multi sensory experience - an experience in which senses such as taste or smell gain presence and relevance, indeed, through gastronomy.

Thus, *Gesamtkunstwerk* might be, in so far as representation of an immersive multi sensory experience, a first common denominator between gastronomy and (video)games. Assuming the immersive character of games as experience generators, we can encounter a clear parallelism between them and many purely gastronomic experiences.

In the act of eating, multiple factors influence our perception of the food - and, by extension, the experience that this perception makes us live. Some of these factors are inherent to the food itself, but some others are not. External stimuli such as, for example, light, ambient sound, music, contextual visual impulses or even social interaction have a remarkable influence on our perception. All these factors are clearly oblivious to the food itself, but they still play an important role in the experience of eating. In the light of this, it is difficult not to question ourselves about the potential these factors have as enhancers of the dining experience.

We have encountered, therefore, the first indications of a direct relationship between gastronomy and games: both rely part of their value in the creation of an immersive multi sensory experience. Is it possible, however, to establish a comparative that suggests a clearer analogy between these two fields? To do so, it might be helpful to map the concept of dining experience to some literature on Game Design theories. In Chapter 3, such analysis will be conducted based on Marc LeBlanc's theory *8 Kinds of Fun* [1].

3. GASTRONOMY AND GAMES: COMMON DENOMINATORS

LeBlanc [1] suggests the existence of 8 basic types of fun - he also uses the term *pleasures* to name them. LeBlanc argues that

those *pleasures* can be found in whichever ludic experience and, therefore, in whichever game. It is not necessary –and probably nor usual– the presence of 8 kinds of fun all at once in a same ludic experience, but the presence of some of them certainly is an indicator of the quality of the experience.

Sensation	Fellowship
Game as sense-pleasure	Game as social framework
Fantasy	Discovery
Game as make-believe	Game as uncharted territory
Narrative	Expression
Game as unfolding story	Game as soap box
Challenge	Submission
Game as obstacle course	Game as mindless pastime

Figure 1. 8 Kinds of Fun (LeBlanc et al.)

It is worth considering, then, how do dining experiences map with LeBlanc's [1] *8 Kinds of Fun*. At the same time, it is important to discuss in which ways these *pleasures* could enhance and maximize such gastronomic experiences. In this line, we can argue that four of these kinds of fun present clear similarities in the two areas we are considering: games and gastronomy.

The *pleasure of sensation* is the most evident link between games and gastronomy. The experience generated by the act of eating is partially based on this *pleasure*. Both in terms of smell, taste or even touch, when we eat we receive –ideally positive– impulses that give us pleasure. Physical sensation is, therefore, a key aspect in a dining experience – it is the axletree over which any initiative in this area should pivot. In the context of games, the *pleasure of physical sensation* also plays a key role – it is responsible for the most visible layer of the experience the players get. Elements such as the visual graphics, the soundtrack or even the touch and feel of the game controllers have a clear impact on the overall playing experience.

Another type of fun we often find in both games and dining experiences is the *pleasure of submission*. This kind of fun consists in the fact of providing the user with an experience in which he can relax and get rid of previously accumulated tensions. It is clear that both playing and eating activities usually end up being a parenthesis in people's everyday routines. They are activities that, amongst many other things, serve the function of changing our routines and mindset.

A third kind of fun that games and gastronomy share is the *pleasure of discovery*. In this case, we are talking about a very particular type of fun – and it works in a very similar manner for both eating and playing experiences. In the same way not all gamers –or players– can be identified as explorers [6], not everyone perceives the fact of discovering new kinds of food, flavors and textures as something exciting. Discovery is, therefore, a pleasure that tends to extremes – it might be addictive for some but disgusting for others at the same.

Last but not least, it is important to point the *pleasure of social contact* as one of the greatest shared elements between gastronomy and games. Assuming as proven the great importance

of social contact in games [1], it could be argued that this type of fun is equally relevant in the gastronomical sphere. As mentioned in Chapter 2, gastronomy has played a key role in social rituals along history. Besides the evident need of nutrient intake, most societal models we are aware of have centralized multiple of their rituals around eating activities and events. Thereby, we can argue that social contact is an especially relevant pleasure when examining the potential links between games and gastronomy.

In the light of this, we could argue that 4 of LeBlanc's [1] *8 Kinds of Fun* are clearly present in both gastronomic and gaming experiences. Does this mean that the other 4 pleasures –narrative, fantasy, challenge and expression– cannot be present in a dining experience? How could we provide them and, most importantly, would they provide any kind of differential value? In order to answer these questions it might be useful to analyze some real study cases in the area of creative gastronomy.

4. EXPERIENTIAL GASTRONOMY: STATE OF THE ART

To date, *haute cuisine* has already conducted a considerable exploration on the concept of experiential gastronomy. Assuming the fact *haute cuisine* is a product that goes far from non-negotiable primary needs, it needs constant innovation in order not to lose its added value – this distinctive factors are the ones that justify the consumption of *haute cuisine* and its considerably high prices.

Restaurants such as *The Fat Duck* (United Kingdom) present gastronomical proposals that transcend the mere aliment, generating a multi sensory experience instead. An example about this is their dish called *The Sound of the Sea*. In addition to the edible elements, *The Sound of the Sea* presents a sea snail shell with an embedded sound system and headphones through which the diner can hear the sound of the sea breeze while consuming the food. This is an example of how the pleasure of physical sensation can be enhanced by combining taste with a less usual sense in gastronomy: the sense of hearing.



Figure 2. The Sound of the Sea (The Fat Duck)

The influence multi sensory stimuli have on taste perception has been researched considerably by the scientific community. One of the most recent studies, conducted by Janice Wang [2] at the MIT Media Lab, suggests that the meaning we associate to sounds can influence the way we perceive a flavor while hearing that sound.

However, we are still restricting the dining experience to the 4 pleasures we analyzed previously: *physical sensation*, *submission*,

discovery and social contact. As a result, we cannot envision a clear and innovative link between gastronomy and games yet.

Fortunately, though, *The Sound of the Sea* from *The Fat Duck* is not the only example we can find about disruptive creative gastronomy. *El Celler de Can Roca*, one of the most prestigious restaurants in the World –ranked best restaurant in the World in 2013 and 2015 by *The Restaurant Magazine*– presents some interesting initiatives in this field as well.

One of *El Celler de Can Roca*'s most surprising –and, therefore, most acclaimed– proposals is a dessert dish called *Messi's Goal*¹, a very singular gastronomic proposal. As opposed to the case of *The Sound of the Sea* by *The Fat Duck*, the sensorial stimuli *Messi's Goal* provides is not limited to the pleasure of *physical sensation*.



Figure 3. *Messi's Goal* (El Celler de Can Roca)

Messi's Goal goes beyond the *pleasure of physical sensation* by, for example, presenting a narrative pattern. The commensal gets directly immersed in a narrative context. The food intake is automatically connected to an emotional meaning, to a narrative significance distinct from the pleasure of taste. If we use Game Design terminology, we realize that *Messi's Goal* generates a *magic circle* that multiplies the perception of immersion the commensal feels. In the light of this, it could be argued that a fifth pleasure by LeBlanc [1] can be valuable to dining experiences: the *pleasure of narrative*.

The presence of this narrative component – with its subsequent meaning – discovers a new type of fun for us: the *pleasure of challenge*. *Messi's Goal* does not relegate the commensal to a passive role. Through the use of narrative, the eating experience provides the user with a goal, a task to be completed. It invites him to be part of the narrative, to actually play a role as a main character.

Furthermore, the presence of a goal to be accomplished by the commensal places him into the narrative context in an immersive way. The user connects with a parallel contextual universe in which there is a task to be completed: to score a goal. Although in this case the degree of imagination is moderated in terms of intensity, we could argue that a sixth kind of fun arises: the *pleasure of fantasy*.

¹ For a better understanding of this article, it is recommended to watch the following video about *Messi's Goal*: <https://vimeo.com/15058377>.

Concepts like narrative, fantasy, protagonist, challenge or immersion are an important part of the experience provided through *Messi's Goal* – and the reality is that all these concepts play a key role in games as well. We could argue, therefore, that *Messi's Goal* is a clear example of the similarities we can encounter between a gastronomic proposal and a game – the presence of 7 out of the 8 *Kinds of Fun* by LeBlanc [1] indicates so. The absence of the eighth pleasure –expression– could even be considered anecdotic, for such type of fun would automatically become present if the dining proposal allowed the commensal to participate creatively in the elaboration process of the dish. It is not hard to envision scenarios in which this might happen.

However, *Messi's Goal* is not the most relevant study case we can encounter in the analysis of the *state of the art* of experiential gastronomy. The same restaurant, *El Celler de Can Roca*, designed in 2013 a whole menu set in the shape of a multi sensory experience that had gastronomy as its pivot point: *El Somni*².

El Somni is a much more complex and interesting experience than *Messi's Goal* or *The Sound of the Sea* – according to its authors it is “an opera in twelve dishes, a banquet in twelve acts” [7]. It is a clear and openly recognized attempt to achieve an experience based on Wagner's idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Based on a narrative about an oneiric world, the constant presence of stimuli for the five senses provide the commensal with an immersive experience in which all the events respond to a coherent narrative structure.

On the documentary³ about *El Somni* [7], it is easy to appreciate the complexity related to the design and development of the proposal – involving at many times the presence of multiple creators from a wide range of creative disciplines.



Figure 4. *El Somni* (Aleu, F. and El Celler de Can Roca)

Considering LeBlanc's [1] 8 *Kinds of Fun*, *El Somni* covers the pleasures of *physical sensation*, *submission*, *discovery*, *narrative* and *fantasy*. Therefore, it provides an immersive experience where the commensal connects with a narrative universe in which every single stimuli has a coherent meaning and purpose – no matter through which sense it is articulated.

However, *El Somni* does not provide one of the most important aspects of games: interactivity. A playful experience is interactive by definition. In *El Somni*, the commensal is given a passive role – he is relegated to a position in which he only receives and processes stimuli without having the chance to take the initiative.

² The name of the dining experience called *El Somni* is in Catalan language. The direct translation to English is: *The Dream*.

³ The trailer for the documentary can be found on the following link: <https://vimeo.com/85266764>. For a better understanding of this article, it is recommended to watch the full documentary.

We clearly see, then, that this experience does not provide the pleasures of *challenge*, *expression* and *social contact*. As the documentary [7] shows, this lack of interactivity results in some commensals starting to talk, which was not part of the initial plan. These commensals are, therefore, *breaking the rules* – spontaneously evoking another Game Design concept: *cheating* [9].

Why do the commensals start to talk if the whole experience was designed to be enjoyed in silence? It could be argued that they act in such a disruptive manner when they stop feeling part of the *magic circle* [8]. The absence of an invitation to decide and act puts them in a situation where they lose the interest in the proposal momentarily. By having considered the importance of interactivity in ludic experiences, such interest drops might have been mitigated.

All the above stated, and without denying its condition of a very interesting and complex dining proposal, we could argue that the experience *El Somni* provides could be improved by implementing dynamics that support pleasures such as *social contact*, *challenge* and *expression*. By doing so, the degree of immersion perceived by the commensals might have been higher.

In the same line, as part of the research she conducted at the MIT Media Lab, Janice Wang suggests that “*the goal of multi sensory design is not to take away from the social function of food, but to enrich the overall experience*” [2]. It could be argued, then, that *game thinking* might have been useful in order to turn *El Somni* into a richer dining experience with a better emphasis on social contact.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Janice Wang also claims that “*building opportunities for play into the dining experience is an exciting area with much unexplored potential*”. As it has been discussed earlier in this article, there are certain similarities between dining experiences and games. Therefore, having an understanding on the principles of Game Design could be highly beneficial for the design of disruptive gastronomic proposals.

Game thinking and *storytelling* could open the doors for new and exciting types of dining experiences. How would it be, for example, to experience a menu set themed on the tales by the *Brothers Grimm*? Is there any chance that we might learn –and, in a way, revive– a country's major historical event while eating a history-themed dessert? Let us consider, in addition, the

implementation of pleasures like *expression*, *social contact* or *challenge*. How would our flavor perception change if the food we are eating looks exactly like an art piece we have previously painted ourselves? Would some *petit four* taste better if they have been won in a competition against the rest of the commensals on the table?

There is no clear and proven answer to all these questions yet. However, as this article aims to illustrate, we can already intuit the great potential that we might uncover by exploiting the singular synergies between gastronomy and Game Design – a potential that is worth further research, both in terms of theoretical reflection and hands-on practice. We can clearly envision a near future in which gastronomical research institutions like *El Bulli Foundation* or the *Nordic Food Lab* start exploring this possibility.

Are we facing the start of a potential new (r)evolution in gastronomy? This will only be answered by time and further experimentation. In the words of Janice Wang, “*the future of eating – as an artistic venue, as a playground, as a tool for social change – is open like never before*” [2]. What is clear so far is that, indeed, we shall play around with food.

6. REFERENCES

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