“The Mad Hatter’s Dinner Party”: Enhancing the Dining Experience Through the Use of Game Thinking

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It’s often said that we shall not play with food... but shouldn’t we?

The eating experience is a sum of multi-sensory impulses [7], where taste is not the only sense involved. The ideal of such holistic experience has been approached from various disciplines. The scientific community has been investigating gastronomy's experiential value for a long time. Gastronomy is also a field of interest for many creative practitioners. In a similar manner, contemporary haute cuisine chefs are also experimenting with the idea of cuisine as a multidisciplinary artistic form.

One way or another, these proposals tend to present the diners with a rather contemplative experience in which their only role is to eat and contemplate [1]. While this is not necessarily wrong, we suggest that for us to build a truly holistic dining experience diners should be put at the very center of the experience.

We propose that by using game thinking during the food design process we would be able to generate what game designers call a magic circle [4]. By binding together all the multi sensory contents of the dining experience through gameful mechanics, we might achieve a greater level of immersion that might result in a better perception of the whole experience, including the taste itself [1].

Gastronomy could be considered one of the most complex artistic expressions. Could game thinking help us enhance and enrich its experiential value?

Building on top of this hypothesis, we conducted an experiment of a playful dining themed after L. Carroll’s [3] ‘Alice in Wonderland’. During two weeks and a half, we conceptualized, designed, built, and executed a whole dining experience. In ‘The Mad Hatter’s Dinner Party’, diners were immersed into the magic of Wonderland.

The diners were welcomed at the entrance, where they were asked to pick a hat (Figure 2a). They were told that one of them was an infiltrated queen. Next, they were given a magic potion and a hat with a card code. Whoever tasted a sweet potion would secretly become the queen, while the others -who tasted it sour- would have to guess who the queen was at the end of the dinner. After the magic potion, a servant walked the diners into the room of Wonderland. There, the food and a waiter acting the role of the Mad Hatter were waiting for them. Once inside, each of them was given an edible card (Figure 2b) related to the card code on their hats, followed by an object with a magic superpower.

After handing out the objects, the diners were presented with a magic forest (Figure 2c) they had to eat in order to find a hint towards guessing who the queen was. Afterwards, the diners had to enter the labyrinth (Figure 2d) in order to collect as much food as possible without running out of time. Once the labyrinth was unlocked, diners killed and ate the dragon (Figure 2e), which was rewarded with four drops of dragon blood (Figure 2f) as a proof of eternal gratitude. The queen was given a very spicy drop, and this was the last clue for the others to unveil the mystery. After that, everything was removed from the table, so that the Mad Hatter could remove the tablecloth. The moment of truth (Figure 2g) had come, and the diners discovered a golden treasure shaped cake locked inside a box. For them to get a key to open it, the mystery of the queen had to be solved. Once the cake was eaten, the experience reached its end. It was time to return to the real world.

Findings

Once the dinner concluded, the four diners were asked to share their impressions about the experience. The Playful Experiences cards [6] were used to help the diners translate their experience into words. Our key findings were:

• The game mechanics indeed helped the diners perceive the dinner as a coherent experience in which eating and playing were one same thing.

• One of the diners mentioned that he would “bet the food wouldn’t have tasted that good if it weren’t for the whole experience”.

‘The Mad Hatter’s Dinner Party’ was a successful experiment in that it conveyed a coherent immersive experience. It presented diners with a magic circle in which eating, playing, watching, hearing, touching, and even talking were perceived as a whole. Therefore, we suggest that further experimentation in this area might be of great relevance for researchers, designers, and practitioners in the field of gastronomy and all its related disciplines.

References

[1] Ferran Altarriba. 2016. From Game Design to Gastronomy: we shall not play with food... or shall we?