

Playing with food: reconfiguring the gastronomic experience through play

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ABSTRACT: Research suggests that play is an influential factor in the eating experience. Yet, playing with food remains a common taboo. We explore ways that eating and play might unfold in gastronomic restaurants. We review current practices and conduct mixed-method interviews with a range of stakeholders, using the PLEX framework for playful interactions to identify limitations of current approaches, as well as opportunities to take the convergence of gastronomy and play further. Our findings point to four design opportunities to extend playfulness in gastronomy: (1) eliciting play beyond surprise and make-believe; (2) facilitating socialization through emergent forms of play; (3) using common eating rituals as inspiration for gastronomy; and (4) using play to enhance degustation. Our contribution extends understanding of the potential of playful gastronomy for chefs and restaurateurs, by positing new experiences for diners.

1 INTRODUCTION

Eating is a key ritual in the lives of human beings, as is play (Caillois, 1961). Significantly, similarities have been drawn between the rituals of play and feast (Huizinga, 1950), and different types of play have been shown to have a positive impact on the dining experience (Wang, 2013). However, as Wang (2013) argues, and our own research concurs, the use of play within gastronomy has unexplored potential.

Gastronomy is not simply eating. It is a reconceptualization of how food is conceived, and eating enacted. Experiences that transgress taboos around food and eating can thus be easily incorporated into gastronomy. Yet, steps in this direction remain limited. We explore how gastronomic chefs currently encourage diners to play with their food. Using theories of playfulness, we demonstrate how this notion might be taken further to facilitate other kinds of play. Through a series of mixed-method interviews, we interrogate understandings of playfulness in relation to gastronomy from the perspective of six stakeholders: a chef, a maître d', a gastronomist, two food enthusiasts, and a non-expert. Our findings extend understanding of how gastronomy and play might be better intertwined.

Our intention is not to deny the success of current gastronomic practices, but rather to—quite literally—enlarge the playing field. Our research to date demonstrates that doing so can add value.

2 GASTRONOMIC FOOD-PLAY

Gastronomic food—arguably the pinnacle of fine dining—is often characterised by play: dishes that look one way, but taste another; feasting as a theatrical event; elaborations imbued with strong narrative or aesthetic significance. French gastronomy critic, Philippe Regol (2009), suggests that avant-garde cuisine cannot be understood without taking into account the chef's willingness to “put a smile on the diner's face”. He coined the term *play-food* to describe instances of playful gastronomy.

Play-food is focused on a very particular understanding of play, one in which the diners sit and contemplate, while the restaurant amuses them through captivating, mysterious, or surprising experiences (Regol, 2009). There are exceptions (c.f. figure 1). But few gastronomic dishes challenge the idea of a passive diner who reacts, rather than interacts with the food or other diners, even though interacting is a key characteristic of play.



Figure 1. (l-r): eBulli's *Las especias*; The Fat Duck's *Sound of the Sea*; Mugaritz's *Kaolin Potatoes*; Alinea's *Balloon*; El Celler de Can Roca's *Tocaplats*.

Experience	Description	Experience
Captivation	Forgetting one's surroundings	Captivation
Challenge	Testing abilities in a demanding task	Challenge
Competition	Contest with oneself or an opponent	Competition
Completion	Finishing a major task, closure	Completion
Control	Dominating, commanding, regulating	Control
Cruelty	Causing mental or physical pain	Cruelty
Discovery	Finding something new or unknown	Discovery
Eroticism	A sexually arousing experience	Eroticism
Exploration	Investigating an object or situation	Exploration
Expression	Manifesting oneself creatively	Expression
Fantasy	An imagined experience	Fantasy
Fellowship	Friendship, communality or intimacy	Fellowship
Humor	Fun, joy, amusement, jokes, gags	Humor
Nurture	Taking care of oneself or others	Nurture
Relaxation	Relief from bodily or mental work	Relaxation
Sensation	Excitement by stimulating senses	Sensation
Simulation	An imitation of everyday life	Simulation
Submission	Being part of a larger structure	Submission
Subversion	Breaking social rules and norms	Subversion
Suffering	Experience of loss, frustration, anger	Suffering
Sympathy	Sharing emotional feelings	Sympathy
Thrill	Excitement derived from risk, danger	Thrill

Figure 2. The PLEX framework (Arrasvuori, Boberg, & Korhonen, 2010). GREEN highlights: experiences embraced by Regol's play-food; YELLOW: those embraced by current gastronomic dishes; RED: those not currently represented in gastronomic restaurants.

3 THE DIVERSITY OF PLAY

Play is ambiguous (Sutton-Smith, 1997) and difficult to measure (McGonigal, 2011). Play can be liberty and invention, fantasy and discipline (Caillois, 1961). Whatever its form, it is ultimately *fun* (Huizinga, 1950). Crucially, the perception of fun is highly subjective, so play can be extremely diverse. The *PLEX framework* (Arrasvuori, Boberg, & Korhonen, 2010; figure 2) proposes 22 types of playful experience. Using that framework, we find that Regol's idea of *play-food* covers only three forms of play: captivation, discovery, and sensation (figure 2, in green). Other gastronomic dishes (c.f. figure 1) elicit another seven forms of play: Challenge, Competition, Expression, Fantasy, Fellowship, Humour and Thrill (figure 2, in yellow). There is clearly more to play than currently on offer in gastronomic restaurants.

Outside the context of gastronomy, culturally framed eating rituals often leverage play to support social interaction and active participation, neither of which appear in the PLEX framework. The Tortell de Reis, for example—a traditional Catalan dish eaten at Epiphany (January 6)—contains two ceramic figures: a king and a bean. The person who finds the king in their slice is “king” for the day; the person who finds the bean must pay for the cake. Pimientos del Padrón—a variety of green peppers that may or

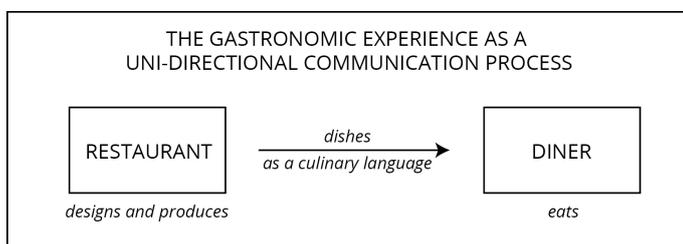


Figure 3. El Bulli's restaurant-diner communication model.

may not be extremely spicy—are also a source of mirth in group situations, where the thrill of not knowing whether the chosen pepper will be spicy is enhanced through social interaction. Both of these popular dishes afford social play.

4 THE LANGUAGE OF GASTRONOMY

4.1 *The unidirectional model*

According to eBulliFoundation (2017) the gastronomic experience is a unidirectional transmitter-receiver communication process (Shannon, 1948). In this model (c.f. figure 3) a restaurant designs and elaborates dishes using a particular culinary language; a diner receives and eats those dishes. The entire experience is controlled down to the smallest detail; the focus held tightly on the food, and the social aspect left to the side. As per Regol (2009), the role of the diner is to “sit and contemplate.” To understand if this model is representative of broad understandings of gastronomy, we interviewed: a chef, a maître d', a gastronomist, two food enthusiasts, and a non-expert, using a 5-step mixed participatory method, as described below.

4.2 *Stakeholder interview structure*

1. The participant was invited to a meal, in a setting chosen to raise tensions. For example, the non-expert was invited to a Michelin-starred restaurant, and the maître d' to a random cafeteria for a sandwich. We thus used destabilisation (Shklovsky, [1917] 1965), to open our guests to exchange un-filtered views (Wilde, 2011).
2. We presented the guest-interviewee with four empty jam jars and a packet of M&Ms. Their task was to distribute the M&Ms between the jars to represent their understanding of gastronomy. Three jars were labelled with key motivations to eat: degustation, socialization, and nutrition (Douglas, 1972; Warde & Martens, 2000; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). The fourth jar's label was blank, to enable our guest-interviewee to add a value of their own (figure 4).
3. We proceeded with the meal.
4. We offered the M&M-filled jars as petit-fours, to accompany coffee, thus facilitating a smooth



Figure 4. Jam jars with M&Ms, the container to the right, labelled by the guest-interviewee as “reflective interaction.”

transition from open conversation to a more focused reflection. We then used tangible interviewing tools (Clatworthy et. al., 2014) to discover how our guest-interviewees perceived the idea of playful gastronomy. For example, we asked them to use pre-filled cards to create the sequence of actions that happen at a gastronomic restaurant, then to place playful interactions drawn from the PLEX framework where they might be desirable.

5. To conclude the interview, our guest-interviewee filled in a recipe template with their personal idea of a “playful gastronomic experience.”

4.3 Findings

Rather than following a single model, we learnt that the gastronomic experience had different meanings for each of our interviewees, and in all cases included socialisation. Some diners enjoyed focusing on degustation, with socialisation as an accessory; others claimed socialisation to be as important as the tasting of the food. Yet, socialisation is rarely considered by gastronomic chefs.

We also learnt that people might be open to an increasingly playful approach to gastronomy. Of the forms of play represented in the PLEX framework, most guest-interviewees found the majority interesting. However, they could hardly recognize play in restaurants beyond surprise and make-believe. As discussed, there are exceptions that harness challenge, creative expression and risk. Nonetheless, playful gastronomy is mostly articulated through passive forms of play. A key conclusion is that restaurants might be playful, but in a very narrow way. They may even be perceived as less playful than they believe themselves to be.

The interviews allowed us to identify four design opportunities towards increasingly playful gastronomy: (1) eliciting play beyond surprise and make-believe; (2) facilitating socialization through emergent forms of play; (3) using common eating rituals as inspiration for gastronomy; and (4) using play to enhance degustation. We unpack these opportunities in the following section.

5 PLAYFUL GASTRONOMY

5.1 *Beyond surprise and make-believe*

In earlier interviews of chefs (Altarriba Bertran, 2017), open-ended play was perceived as a disruption. Chefs strive to be in control. The dominant forms of play they offer are thus passive. However, our findings show that playful eating might benefit from being active, social and free. Embracing a richer idea of what play means might be a step towards

enhancing the playful qualities of a gastronomic meal. We thus posit that diversifying the forms of play that gastronomic chefs draw from can afford new forms of gastronomy that may appeal to a broader range of diners.

5.2 *Socialization through emergent play*

As a step towards active, social, and free playful eating experiences, we propose emergent play (Juul, 2002) as a tactic to leverage diners’ participation throughout a meal. One example could be plates that include three-dimensional models of objects that support the development of scenarios (c.f. 5.5 designstudio, 2015). Such plates can provide multiple opportunities for play that are intrinsically related to eating.

Unlike the make-believe proposals often found in gastronomic restaurants, this approach does not impose a predetermined story. Rather, it provides players with a relatively open canvas, with minimal elements to provide opportunities for imaginative free-play (Sproedt, 2012).

5.3 *Gleaning inspiration from eating rituals*

Chefs often look for inspiration for their food in “real-life eating” (Gelb, 2015). Yet, they rarely take inspiration from the accompanying interactions. Eating rituals—such as those around the Tortell de Reis, or the Pimientos del Padrón—gain their cultural currency from the qualities of interactions that they afford. Such rituals could thus serve as valuable inspiration for new forms of playful eating.

To succeed, this approach would require a renegotiation of the chef’s role from designer-expert (Bürdek, 2005, and Blomberg et. al., 2009), to a more open role that engages with diners’ desires, dining habits, and understandings of gastronomy. It may, thus, challenge the current, dominant, chef-centric view, though it does not have to. Instead of designing for play based on their personal intentions and expertise, in this scenario the chefs become facilitators that set the conditions for diners to find their own means for playing (Sproedt, 2012). The chefs, can thus leverage their expertise in new ways.

Placing diners’ interactions at the centre of the dining experience can uncover novel ways to transition from the progressive, unidirectional model that dominates today’s gastronomic dining experience, towards more emergent and playful experiences.

5.4 *Playful enhancement of degustation*

Finally, for a playful eating experience to be successful, the play should enhance the degustation, not distract from it. Playful gastronomy thus requires elements of play to be intrinsically bound to the act of eating.

6 CONCLUSION

Play, as currently represented in gastronomic restaurants, is limited. While this may not be a problem, per se, our interviews with stakeholders uncovered a desire for a more playful approach in the design of gastronomic experiences. Our research points to four design opportunities to support such a shift: (1) embracing forms of play that go beyond surprise and make-believe; (2) facilitating socialization through emergent forms of play; (3) using common eating rituals as inspiration for gastronomy; and (4) using play to enhance degustation.

While there exist many bridges between play and eating, there is space to strengthen the connections between the two, particularly in the context of gastronomy. Current unidirectional experiences preferred by gastronomic chefs leave little space for diners to interact actively and freely, or to alter the unfolding of events. Our findings suggest that opening gastronomy towards active, social, and free playful eating experiences might open up the gastronomic experience to a broader range of diners. In any case, doing so would certainly be welcomed by the chef, maître d', gastronomist, and two food enthusiasts we interviewed, as well as by the non-expert.

In addition to the forms of play identified in the PLEX framework, social and active play were identified as key sources of knowledge that could be harnessed in the design of gastronomic experiences. These forms of play empower diners to find their own means for participating. A richer and broader understanding of the role of the chef, as well as the role of play might therefore be helpful in diversifying the gastronomic scene, making it appealing to a broader spectrum of diners.

In future research, we will deepen our exploration of how such playful gastronomic experiences might play out. We will broaden our consideration of the context of gastronomy to include gastronomic experiences created by the home “chef”, as well as by professionals in contemporary rituals and feasts that take place outside of the restaurant.

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