

The Telematic Dinner Party

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Figure 1: (a) Observed dinner party. (b) London/Barcelona pilot study. (c) TDP: guests teasing each other with networked turntables.

Abstract

Meals have traditionally been a site for togetherness. We explore the opportunities to design a technology platform that supports remote guests in experiencing togetherness and playfulness within the practices of a traditional dinner party. Through both visual, aural channels and remote agency, the guests shared a holistic telematic dining experience comparable to a traditional co-presence dinner. Based on the findings, we propose that one must consider the social structure and cultural background of users to inform the design of technological intervention that supports a sense of togetherness.

1 Introduction

There is an increasing desire to remain connected when physically distant. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) and telematic (technology systems that connect people) art practices explored this desire. While CMC historically has focused on workplace and tasks [Grudin 1988], recently, there is a growing exploration around food practices [Grimes and Harper 2008]. Similarly, the telematic art practice typically manifests as a performance, even when using the dinner party format [Mann and Teran 2001]. For most CMC and telematic art explorations around food, the outcomes are often a celebration of the technological feats rather than a means for a shared a dining experience.

2 Our Approach

The final design for the Telematic Dinner Party was informed by observing three traditional dinner parties and conducting an pilot study. The traditional dinner parties identified three prominent interactions : 1) toasting 2) food sharing and 3) coordinated passing of food and drink.

The pilot study connected remote guests in London, United Kingdom and Barcelona, Spain. The study highlighted three main considerations: 1) difficulty in sustaining connections, both technically and socially, 2) a single audio channel degraded communication but prompted creativity and 3) guests a desire to engaged in shared activities, such as toasting.

The Telematic Dinner Party (TDP) builds on the results of the pilot study. Each guest had their own localized presence: 1) visually through tabletop projects of their place setting, hands/arms and

2) aurally through an dedicated audio channel via a lavalier microphone mapped to a corresponding speaker in the remote space.

We identified turntables as a device designed for the dining table and could be utilized to provide physical remote agency. A set of two networked turntables (Lazy Susans) were developed and programmed to coordinate their locations. When a guest manually rotated one turntable, the other turntable would rotate to match the new position, with the last one moved being dominate.

Across the four TDP dinners, the turntables and audio provided the most support in connecting the guests. In regards to the localize audio, guests reported when talking to a remote guest they momentarily forgot it was a speaker in the chair. The guests engaged in teasing by turning the turntables to keep the remote guests from obtaining food or through touching the tabletop video projections of their remote guests food. In all the TDPs, the guests interacted with each other through both the networked turntables and the tabletop projections. Overall, the guests reported they felt they shared a meal and got to know their respective remote guests.

In the Telematic Dinner Party, we demonstrated an implementation of a technological intervention that, for the most part, supported a cohesive dining experience comprised of remotely located guests. The guests had the agency to extended their experience through playful interactions with the networked turntables and the tabletop projects. This playfulness was a mode of mutual engagement, not outside the behaviour that may occur at a co-presence dinner. While further investigation is required, our observations of the TDPs and guest feedback indicate one must consider the social structure and cultural background of users to inform the design of a technological intervention intended to promote togetherness.

References

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