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FridgeMatch: Design probe into the future of urban food commensality

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ABSTRACT

The FridgeMatch prototype was an educational experiment in rethinking the future of sharing food and eating together (commensality) from a design and a Science Technology Society studies (STS) perspectives. We designed a new practice of mediating food over social networks, which reflected related phenomena of underground restaurants, crowdsourcing of food information and persuasive apps supporting various dieting practices etc. With this prototype we supported ad hoc interactions over impromptu dinners based on sharing data on food leftovers, which enabled commensality between strangers. The project was part of a series of workshops between several universities and local hackerspaces in Singapore, Prague and Amsterdam in 2010–2011. We involved university students, but also local foodies and hackerspace members and asked them to reflect upon existing food online networks and then collectively create a prototype for a novel form of commensality. While as an educational probe, FridgeMatch examines the possibilities of interdisciplinary (design and STS) case study approach to teaching, as a prototype it supported interaction between strangers over food leftovers in their refrigerators. With this probe and prototype we tried to follow and understand the emergent actor-network relations between leftovers (their ethics and economy), Facebook app (technologically mediated forms of interactions between strangers), refrigerators (as an important site of everyday practices), and the users (lifestyles in the modern city).

1. Introduction

The research into the future of food commensality began with a set of questions, which identified various social, cultural, and technical trends: What eating and cooking together mean in a society, where less people have time to meet regularly for meals and to enjoy family dinners? How to reflect upon the practices of exchanging pictures of meals and crowdsourcing data about food recommendations? Are they symptoms of alienation or they are emergent and authentic forms of commensality? To what extend is commensality becoming a data driven experience? To what extend it involves strangers? How do we connect the data experiences of networking, recommending and sharing with the visceral experiences of enjoying the meals?

In terms of methodology, we used a form of para-ethnography (Holmes & Marcus, 2008) supported by prototypes, through which we enhanced the observed "food hacking" experiments in the various hackerspaces as active participants and initiators. In collaboration with members of the hackerspace in Singapore and Prague we designed an application for

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exploring and testing ideas of future commensality. We were interested to see, how these new forms of commensality can reverse the negative effects of alienation and fast food culture. These questions and trends were identified early on in 2009–2010 while working on a project about food and cultural heritage in Singapore (Graham & Kera, 2010). We tested several scenarios of future experiences of eating and cooking together based on prototype we built during 2010 and 2011 workshops.

The STS component of the research was added in 2011 when food became a topic in our graduate module on STS and Design at the National University of Singapore. Food was used as a medium for discussing various emergent science and technology issues surrounding intensive data practices, such as the use of data in forming social networks and bonds, supporting citizen science projects, Quantified Self interaction over body data, but also ubiquitous sensor networks and the use of data in monitoring food flows. We became interested how people discuss nutrigenetics and nutrigenomics data over consumer genomics services, such as 23andMe, and in various extreme dieting practices, such as paleodiet, which inspire people to build their own hacked kitchen utensils. We followed the practices of sharing detailed scientific data on food, DNA and metabolism, but also the technical descriptions of the sous vide cooking techniques with their detailed temperature measurements on popular paleo-diet communities. We were trying to understand these hybrid networks, which connect the material "base" (food, tools, and documents) with the social phenomena (sharing expertise, creating a community, changing diets, new forms of commensality), and used an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) approach to understand these networks before we transform them into design interventions.

2. Three forms of food commensality over data

One important topic, which emerged in these workshops and dinners was the issue of present and future forms of food commensality. We explored them through design interventions into the "life cycle" of food items and its relation to intensive data sharing practices. Sharing and interacting over data seemed to support very rich and objective information about genotypes, phenotypes, food molecules and cooking temperatures. This defined a form of food commensality as a search of an ideal food, which is often in conflict with ethical and environmental considerations on sustainable food practices and production (Grunert, 2011; Gussow, 1999; Keith, 2009), especially in the case of the paleodiet. We decided to explore data practices, which support just and sustainable forms of food commensality rather than this search for the perfect, healthy meal. With the idea of using food wastage and food leftovers as means of interaction we were trying to challenge the data obsessed practices. We design new ways of sharing and meeting people over leftovers, which is not the healthiest food practice, but it resolves many other issues related to the lifestyle in big cities.

The two main prototypes, which came out of this project responded to these two extreme forms of commensality: on one side, a rather asocial form of DNA data based dinner, and on the other dinners organized via the FridgeMatch application for sharing leftovers. With these two prototypes we were hoping to tackle important challenges: what eating and cooking together mean in a data intensive world, where the dining table is not a private, family space, but a site of conflicting data exchanges or an opportunity to interact with strangers? What happens when the table becomes a space over which we have to negotiate and decide on what is good for the individual, for the society and the planet?

The prototypes responding to both forms of commensality were developed during several workshops in Prague (Hackerspace Brmlab, 2011), Istanbul (ISEA, 2011), and Singapore (Design for Anthropocene, 2012; Food hacking Workshops, 2011). The workshops attracted an interdisciplinary group of educators, students, artists, designers and geeks from different countries with interest in food and technology. We created several food prototypes, services and events. The first one was an underground restaurant called "Secret Cooks Club" (2010) followed by a Facebook application "FridgeMatch" (2011) in Singapore (FridgeMatch, 2010). We also tested a design fiction scenario of a personalized DNA dinner called "23andMe Dinner – You Are What You Eat but you can also Eat What You Are" (2011) to explore the objective data search for ideal meals and the type of (a)sociality this creates.

In 2011, as part of another workshop we run in Prague on issues on food commensality, a group of Czech students from the New Media studies in Prague created a web application called "Open Sauce" supporting their "Hotkarot" project. They envisioned a form vegetarian conspiracy movement against hotdogs with a "carrot in a bun" form of activism mocking the food politics behind any "carrot and stick" approaches. With this project they explored the possibility of a third form of food commensality over data, which are crowdsourced in a form of recipes for "sauces". These crowdsourced sauces were supporting more healthy food habits in a form of a parody and artistic performance surrounding fast food practices. In the last of this series of workshop we organized an apocalyptic picnic "Recipes for Disaster" (2012) in Singapore and created a prototype of a wearable garden in collaboration with the foodhackers from the "Centre for Genomic Cuisine" and the Australian based organization "Carbon Arts". In this paper we will describe the "FridgeMatch" (formerly FoodMatch) prototype, a Facebook application created in 2011 to study future forms of commensality.

2.1. Commensality and metabolism

In the research phase we used Actor Network Theory (ANT) notion of agency (Latour, 1993, 2005) to analyze commensality as a network of possible relations between our body, family, society and the planet, for which we can "design" different experiences of eating together. We were inspired by applications of ANT methodology on food studies (Fine, 2004; Lockie, 2002; Murdoch, Marsden, & Banks, 2000), to which we added a design perspective. We used low-fidelity prototypes