

Commensality as a conceptual framework for TTRPG research

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Commensality is the term used to describe “the social interactions associated to the act of eating together” (Alhasan et al., 2022, p. 2), and has an established tradition of study in anthropology, particularly the anthropology of food (e.g.: Douglas & Gross, 1981; Bloch, 1999; Traphagan & Brown, 2002; Mintz & Du Bois, 2002; Anigbo, 1987). Traditionally it refers to mealtime and eating practices amongst a family unit (Ferdous et al., 2017, p. 6960), and provides a framework for scholars to explore the ways in which people find and create meaning through a shared, central experience, i.e. eating a meal together. This concept interacts with Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) in the form of theories of digital or computational commensality, which researchers employ to investigate the impacts of digital technology on the sociocultural processes of eating together. Introducing digital technology to mealtimes changes the way in which people engage with both the social norms around eating and the other people they are eating with, and the relatively new field of scholarship in this area is demonstrative of the various ways digital technology can impact commensal experiences. I believe that the framework of commensality can also provide valuable and novel insights when applied to studying tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), particularly *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D).

Alhasan et al. (2022) noted that participants, who were eating a meal in physical solitude while on a video call with each other, used the technology to create a “shared multisensory space” by subverting traditional norms of commensality, including wearing pyjamas, sitting cross-legged on the floor, or “making loud gustatory sounds” (p. 12). This is an example of participants playfully challenging the sociocultural norms around eating in order to create an intimate and connected co-dining experience with each other through the use of digital technology. In the context of a more traditional family mealtime setting, Ferdous et al. (2017) note the differences between certain kinds of digital technology during meals, where shared technologies like television or music are perceived as unproblematic and welcomed, while personal devices like mobile phones can be a source of tension and their use is governed by informal rules and restrictions by the family (p. 6962; Ferdous et al., 2016, p. 12, 13, 15, 17). They also point out that this perception of personal devices is not consistently

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applied across all ways of using these devices - when used “for a common purpose”, such as sharing images or searching for information to contribute to the conversation via web search, these devices can positively contribute to commensal experiences (Ferdous et al., 2017, p. 6962; Ferdous et al., 2016, p. 20).

In the data collected for the first study of my PhD, participants often expressed annoyance over inappropriate use of digital technology during the game session, particularly players’ use of mobile phones for purposes that did not contribute to the shared experience of the game, such as texting a friend or browsing social media. They also recounted positive experiences of players sharing relevant memes with the table, or conducting discussions via message with other players or the DM when their character was experiencing or doing something privately, rather than vocalising the conversation aloud to the entire table. It was also common for shared technologies to be welcomed by the players, who often felt the game was enhanced by having atmospheric music playing during the session, or in one participant’s case, projecting thematic images of fantasy landscapes on the wall. These experiences seem remarkably similar to the norms and restrictions around which technologies are considered appropriate to use during a family meal explored by Ferdous et al. (2016; 2017). As a result, I believe that there is significant value in applying the conceptual framework of digital commensality to further investigate the informal rules and expectations of players during a D&D game, and how technology interacts with these processes, by positioning the D&D group as the ‘family unit’ and the game as the ‘meal’ being shared.

In conclusion, applying commensality as a lens through which to view social practices and meaning at a D&D table could be insightful in multiple ways. While this is a relatively well-used theory in terms of both the anthropology of food and interactions between technology and food, commensality has not yet been meaningfully applied to studies of TTRPGs, and could provide a new way of viewing these practices and the way they interact with different kinds of digital tools.

BIO

Ruby is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, with an interest in tabletop role-playing games, particularly *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the ways in which players create and engage with meaning through fantasy and roleplay.

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