

# Game Design for Cultural Studies: An Experiential Approach to Critical Thinking

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## Abstract

How can game design be used to foster critical reflection and render cultural studies less boring (Grossberg, 2006)? This paper discusses the design process of *Cutting Edges*, an abstract mini-game made to encourage students and scholars of cultural theory to actively explore abstract philosophical claims. The initial intention was to produce a well-rounded game that could be used in a classroom setting to expand and mediate discussion on gender identity through playful experience. Focusing on the pressures of gender-related social ascription, *Cutting Edges* was an attempt to use the metaphorical potential of game rules and mechanics to make tangible what is at stake in gender-critical thinking. While making the game, the creative process of finding meaningful mechanisms of representation turned out to be a rewarding resource for reflecting cultural theory. Design activities demand reflection, evaluation, and planning and might thus be promising tools to expand our notion of critical thinking.

## Introduction

By and large, declaring cultural studies dead has turned a fashionable sport in contemporary academia but small is the number of critics who actually start an attempt to fight for the comatose patient's reanimation. This paper starts off from the assumption that cultural studies goals are worth pursuing even if they need some serious update. This could happen via an arranged marriage with game design, whose work of "designed experiences" (Squire, 2006) might spark an approach towards cultural theory that is more engaging and less boring than what currently counts as cultural studies (Grossberg, 2010).

I will first sketch out what needs to be rescued about the initial cultural studies idea and explain why the whole project has become so dreadfully discredited throughout the last couple of years.

I then will discuss gameplay as an activity that might directly benefit and reform intellectual and pragmatic practice, as well as describe how it might expand the range of what is deemed possible in the field of games and learning by discussing the mini-game *Cutting Edges*, which was designed in order to make students and scholars approach gender theory via game experience. The paper will be rounded off by a conclusive statement about what the design process has taught me about the relation between making a game and reflecting about its subject.

## Cultural Studies Reloaded: Theorizing Experience and Experiencing Theory

To its early founders, cultural studies has been understood as an intellectual and pragmatic project that pursued the goal of dismantling and challenging structures of dominance. It thereby took a clear political stance and borrowed freely from social science disciplines to arrive at a radically contextualized understanding of how power relations pervade popular culture

(Sandard & van Loon, 2004). Initially, then, this project has been about democracy, about handing agency to the people who are most marginalized by hegemonic powers. If we compare this early mission statement to the canonized work that students now encounter in their unpalatable textbooks, we might rightly doubt that cultural studies has measured up to its ideals (Rodman, 2010, p. 155).

Yet before we cast it off as a lost cause, why not attempt to carry on its central proposition to a new context that makes us appreciate its relevance in a world of abounding socio-cultural inequalities? What if we released cultural studies from its present deathbed of institutionalized order and took it to an informal, ordinary game setting? Would that help us reestablish the lost link between theoretical abstraction and pragmatic action? From the perspective of game studies, which argues in favor of games as effective learning spaces (Gee 2003; Koster 2005, p. 54) this looks like a promising endeavor. After all, games require us to learn their inherent rule systems through active exploration. As such, game mechanics possess expressive qualities whose rhetoric instruments are based on the experiential involvement of the player (Rusch, 2009). Why not leverage this potential in order to encourage players to wander around in social and cultural theory and discover the implications of their actions? That way, the current cultural studies trend of theorizing experience could be fruitfully expanded by the practice of *experiencing* theory.

### **Cutting Edges: A Game About Gender Theory**

This consideration sparked the idea of *Cutting Edges* (*CE*), which attempts to turn gender criticism, one of the major thinking tools in cultural studies, into a game. Most basically, it represents the possibility space that we have as human beings born into a world based on a radical binary masculinity/femininity distinction. Given that our bodies are already coded in either way, and that we are raised to orient our decisions in life towards the rules of this code, we can choose whether to affirm the socially constructed gender roles ascribed to our biological bodies or work against them. The former would warrant social stability, while the latter would be sanctioned by means of social pressure. In early feminist Simone de Beauvoir's terms, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (1949) only so through the constant affirmation of the things and behaviors that are constructed as feminine. This is the basic argumentative structure on which *CE* is based. It is what I found to be the most salient characteristic of a tradition that seeks to dismantle the gender binary as a social construction stabilized only by continuous performance (Butler, 1999).

*CE* never pretended to stand for itself as an autonomous game, but it was intended as a tool to complement and deepen theoretical discussion. This means that *CE* was especially designed for the cultural studies college classroom in order to support—not to substitute—intellectual debate. The reason I dwell on this point so extensively is because *CE* is an abstract 2D game which draws most of its representational power from its unspectacular use of very basic objects and its subversive use of simple game conventions.

The player starts off as a full circle on the bottom of the screen, which can be navigated to the right and left. A small window in the right upper corner of the screen displays a rectangle or a triangle respectively. This is supposed to represent biological fate as the goal condition we are assigned to upon birth. As we move our circle around, rectangular and triangular objects spawn on the top of the screen and fall to the ground. Whenever they touch the player's circle they cut off a piece towards the shape of the respective object. Also, they trigger audible

feedback: If the touched object is identical with the goal shape there is applause; if the caught object is ‘wrong’ there is booing. This audible layer is intended to represent the social sanctions that set in whenever we perform a gendering act.

It is possible to play *CE* in at least two different ways, depending on whether the player acts in affirmation or confrontation to the game rules: If the player bases her decisions on the visible and audible incentives and only gets in touch with those objects that get her in the ‘right’ shape she will soon find her circle to have transformed into a shape that is identical with her aspired goal. By then, she might have put a lot of effort into politics of avoidance, trying to run away from the ‘wrong’ objects. And as a ‘reward’ for such behavior, the final screen compliments her on her successful identity project: “Congratulations, you’ve turned into a stereotype. Individuality is overrated!” The converse strategy, i.e. getting in touch with whatever object comes around without paying attention to the social noise will make you maintain an individual shape. After a certain number of ‘resisting’ actions, they transform into a magical ringing sound indicating that the player has grown beyond the choir of sanctioning voices that are constantly assessing and evaluating every one of her steps. Even though it is never possible for the avatar ever to return to the flawless state of unconditional roundness throughout the game, it is possible to end the game by maintaining one’s individual shape over a certain period of time. In this case the player is cheered for her belief in resistance as a resource to embrace her unique self.

*CE* seeks to exploit the player’s knowledge of popular game conventions, such as displaying a goal condition on the fringe of the screen or giving immediate feedback to give some hints about the game rules. It plays with the basic expectations that a player has when she engages in playing a game, as opposed to less interactive activities, i.e., reading a book or watching a movie. Take the simple expectation that there will be a conflict whose stakes need to be learned in order to reach the end of a game. Since players know that they are supposed to engage in a play activity in *CE* they have taken for granted expectations that they never really challenge. The option to play against the seeming game objectives is only explored if the player is willing to challenge the basic assumption that the reward system is valid. In other words, the player is invited to “outplay” the game system as an analogy to what it takes in real life to counteract gender ascriptions.

### **Game design as reflective tool**

As *CE* is still a work in progress, it has not yet been play-tested in a suitable setting that might tell us whether the central design goals are actually applicable. Nevertheless, there are experiences and insights to be shared that I gained solely from working on the first *CE* prototype. After all, thinking about what is at stake with games such as *CE* has tremendously enriched my understanding of what I deem possible in game design when it comes to its implementation in cultural studies.

One of the most painstaking challenges related to the making of *CE* was the process of deciding on the most important aspects of gender theory that might be turned into a conclusive ludic system. The results, as I have pointed them out, are the results of an intense negotiation process in which I struggled to cut complexity down to its basic foundation. Determining the basic foundations required a substantive amount of relational knowledge. I realized that through the activity of selection I was often pushed to reread theory in regard to its underlying argumentative dynamics. Not only was this a very holistic approach towards literature, it was

also fun because it seemed like a meaningful riddle that I wanted to solve for the higher end of making a game for others.

Once I surpassed this hurdle, there was the question of how to best include my chosen features in a working game system. It should work both on the level of game mechanics and in terms of adequate theme choice. Games' inherent rewards systems seemed at once like a suitable metaphoric instrument to generate an analogy to social sanctioning mechanisms. But is the sanctioning mechanism in *CE* really strong enough to enable an understanding of the pressures involved in the decision to affirm traditional gender roles even if one desires to explore them more freely? Hardly. If games are understood as possibility spaces, exploration and trial-and-error are central gameplay experiences. If a player realizes that a certain strategy turns out to be boring or unsuccessful she will dig deeper and explore the game rules until she determines how they work. My reservation about the reward system in *CE*, then, is whether the audible feedback invites players to explore rather than push them to go for the 'right' decision. However, if players simply believe in the validity of game conventions and don't understand the necessity of pondering possibilities other than catching the 'right' pieces, the final surprise might be successful.

What all of these considerations concerning the representational logics of *CE* have boiled down to is a deep reflective process on the stakes of gender theory. This has convinced me that my design activities around *CE* have been more beneficial to my own understanding of cultural studies than the play experience enabled by a well-balanced game could ever be to a student/scholar. This takes me to a new level of argumentation on which I suggest game design activities as tools through which to gain a more holistic understanding of theoretical claims. Translating cultural studies claims into a ludic format requires us to set to use what we somehow already need to have under our belts: understanding of cultural theory. Game design as a reflective tool in cultural studies, then, is one of the more advanced instruments by which to gain an understanding of society. It is one that demands students and scholars to actively negotiate what for them are the most salient aspects of an approach and how they can be represented via games' causal links.

### **Concluding Remarks**

To sum up, my initial goal to make a game that might be used in cultural studies classrooms to help students and scholars overcome cultural studies' current numbness induced me to work on *Cutting Edges*, a game that should make feminist criticism tangible via simple game mechanisms. It was only during the design process of *CE* that I realized how much I benefited from thinking about how to create such a game. As a corollary, I learned that there are two different things at stake in the marriage of cultural studies and game design: First, there is the playable artifact, the game, which might be used in combination with an extensive discussion of the socio-cultural issue at stake; second, there is the game design activity as practice that requires us to expand our range of creative knowledge acquisition and evaluation. Along the lines of this twofold agenda of game design in theory much can be done to counteract the widespread complaint that cultural studies has lost its grip on the initial mission to tackle the very structures and relations of power from cross-disciplinary perspectives (Crawford and Rutter, 2006, p. 149). Game design could be a pathway towards a more creative and experience-based theorization culture in academia. It is desirable for both game design and for cultural studies to take an active part in this experiential turn.

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