
Cook Your Way: Political Game Design with Alternative Controllers

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Abstract

Cook Your Way is a research-creation project exploring political game design strategies for critique and reflection. It proposes a discussion around the topics of immigration systems, ethnicity, commodification, and labor. It does so via metaphor juxtaposition and the deployment of alternative game controllers as the basis for a political argument. The Cook Your Way design process draws from critical and speculative design practices, as well as the reflective game design

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framework to develop its design strategies.

Author Keywords

Political game design, alternative game controllers
research-creation, reflective game design, migration.

Introduction

Immigration systems, borders, bureaucracy are closely intertwined with the global distribution of labor [13], and the different processes and sites that combine to oppress migrants while producing specific political subjectivities. In this context, ethnicity is often marketed as a cosmopolitan product and valued as social capital in global markets [11]. It narrates migrant trajectories in terms of entrepreneurship, strategic cosmopolitanism, and transnational commerce. It downplays economic redistribution, racial inequality, unemployment and labor rights [11].

The social and cultural practices around food production and consumption play important roles in the tensions and adaptations of the migration process. Ethnic foods form relevant sites for cultural dialogue [16], but can also become a shorthand for hosts fetishizing and commodifying migrant cultures [17]. In such commodified visions of multiculturalism, “ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” [9].

A working definition of **game controls** is provided by Marcotte:

“both the physical and digital aspects of control that allow players to interact with a game, including controllers, their physical, tactile feedback and materiality, and the feedback that players receive from them through the software” [12].

Alternative controllers are a mix of custom-created devices and / or re-appropriations of conventional input and feedback devices for novel interactions. Alternative controllers provide opportunities to explore interactions which move away from prescribed and hegemonic design values or expectations. The complex materiality of games highlighted by alternative controller design is key to foregrounding tensions and political implications at play.

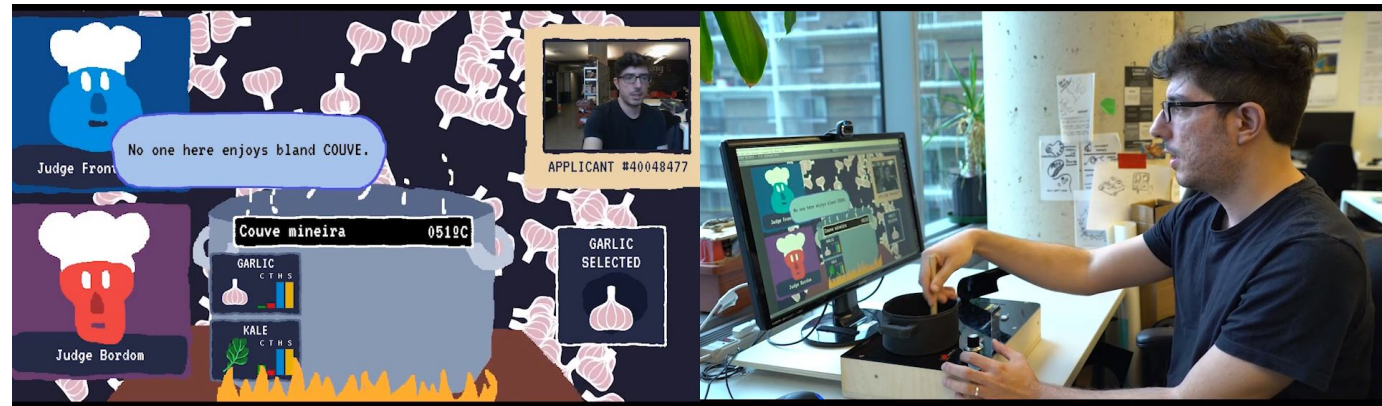


Figure 1. (left) in-game screenshot showing immigration judges/chefs, applicant webcam image, and the cooking pot with information on the state of the current recipe. (right) Player using the stirring component on the cooking station controller. © Enric Granzotto Llagostera.

In *Cook Your Way*, my design goal is to highlight the importance of migrant labor, cultural commodification, and the complexity of immigration systems. This is a political game in which players act as visa applicants asked to cook a typical dish of their country of origin using a cooking station device. They are assessed by in-game authorities according to their potential to “contribute” to the new country's society.

The game is presented as a standardized test, one step within a longer visa-like application process. The cooking station alternative controller is a custom-built device with interfaces for different actions, like adding ingredients, stirring a pot or chopping vegetables. Using such interfaces involves performing gestures that resemble actions of food preparation. Such actions are closely monitored and must be done precisely as instructed on-screen by the immigration judges/chefs.

At its core, *Cook Your Way* is an exploration on political game design, drawing from critical and speculative design inspirations. The project goals can be summarized as (a) to provide a play experience to foster reflection and engagement with the topic of immigration systems and lived experiences of migration; (b) to raise questions about the multimodal interfaces of control, labor and other processes that permeate migration; (c) to experiment with game design frameworks and strategies focused on reflection and criticality [10].

The relevance of this research-creation project is related to disputing the hegemony of play [7], going against the grain of a cultural narrative of play as apolitical entertainment [3]. I aim to reaffirm the importance of play's political dimension, recognizing and engaging with its multimodal assemblages.

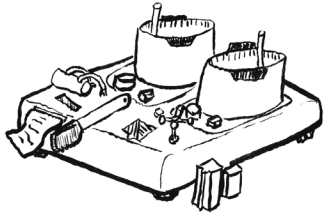


Figure 2. Early concept sketch of the cooking station alternative controller. © Enric Granzotto Llagostera.

Cook Your Way's political game design

The design inquiry driving the project can be summarized in two main clusters: 1) an exploration of juxtaposing metaphors and 2) the design of the custom controller device. Design moves were considered in the light of the Reflective Game Design framework, which focuses on game design that positions players as "critical about their capacity for critical reflection, action and individual agency" [10]. The framework helped to focus on the players' conscious engagement with the game, through design strategies such as "clarity over stealth" and "disruption over comfort" [10].

The application process: uncanny juxtapositions

The application process presented in the game brings together meritocratic discourses around migration, as well as a procedural presentation of commodification. It combines contexts, from cooking traditional dishes like the collectively prepared and disputed *feijoada completa* [5] to the gaming character of cooking reality shows and their narratives of meritocratic performance. Cook Your Way's standardization, its office-like materiality, mixes elements from language test centers and automatized border security equipment.

Design values, like reliability and security, emerged from this mashup of contexts and were used to design cooking in-game, de-familiarizing its performance. This is somewhat analogous to Eisenstein's dialectical montage in film, where the superimposition of shots creates conflict that points to new interpretive dimensions [4]. While Eisenstein builds from a perspective related to properties of a shot's image and sound, conflict here draws from a metaphorical-referential level.

The game integrates elements of surveillance and monitoring, through visual reminders and the enacting of identification procedures inspired by automated border security. It exposes such processes while raising questions with regards to their effects and the criteria that are activated. Players are confronted with the disorienting and often conflicting demands of immigration systems, and are asked to navigate through it while satisfying externally imposed constraints.

The cooking station: a speculative prop for political game design

Cook Your Way's political argument relates directly to the effects of border keeping and to the material and procedural qualities and effects of interfaces [8]. Game controls are conventionally positioned in terms of transparency, efficiency and aesthetic states of frictionless fruition and subjugation [12,14]. The cooking station is designed to break down that convention, in a self-aware aesthetic that aims, drawing from Brechtian theatre, to point to the systemic issues entangled in this enactment [15].

The cooking station controller was created using both digital fabrication methods (laser-cut acrylic for the top panel, chopping knife and other parts) and handmade techniques for its casing and sculpted cooking pot. The hard and dry affordances of the controller object contrast with on-screen visuals and text, which use satire and humor.

The physical setup, with its custom controller, screen and webcam, is designed as a speculative prop for political game design. Props work as "parts representing wholes designed to prompt speculation in



Figure 3. Player changing an ingredient chip at the cooking station. © Enric Granzotto Llagostera.

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the viewer about the world these objects belong to” [2]. The work of world-building of the prop hinges on incompleteness and familiarity, pointing players to its suggested context [1] and fostering critique and reflection about it [2].

Future work

I plan to evaluate Cook Your Way through structured playtests, examining the questions it raises and player reflection. Evaluation will also involve workshops (based on Frasca’s proposal for game design intervention as critical dialogue [6]) in which participants create stories by modifying the game. The game has been shown at alt.ctrl.GDC 2019, a key exhibit for alternative controller games and an opportunity for getting public responses.

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