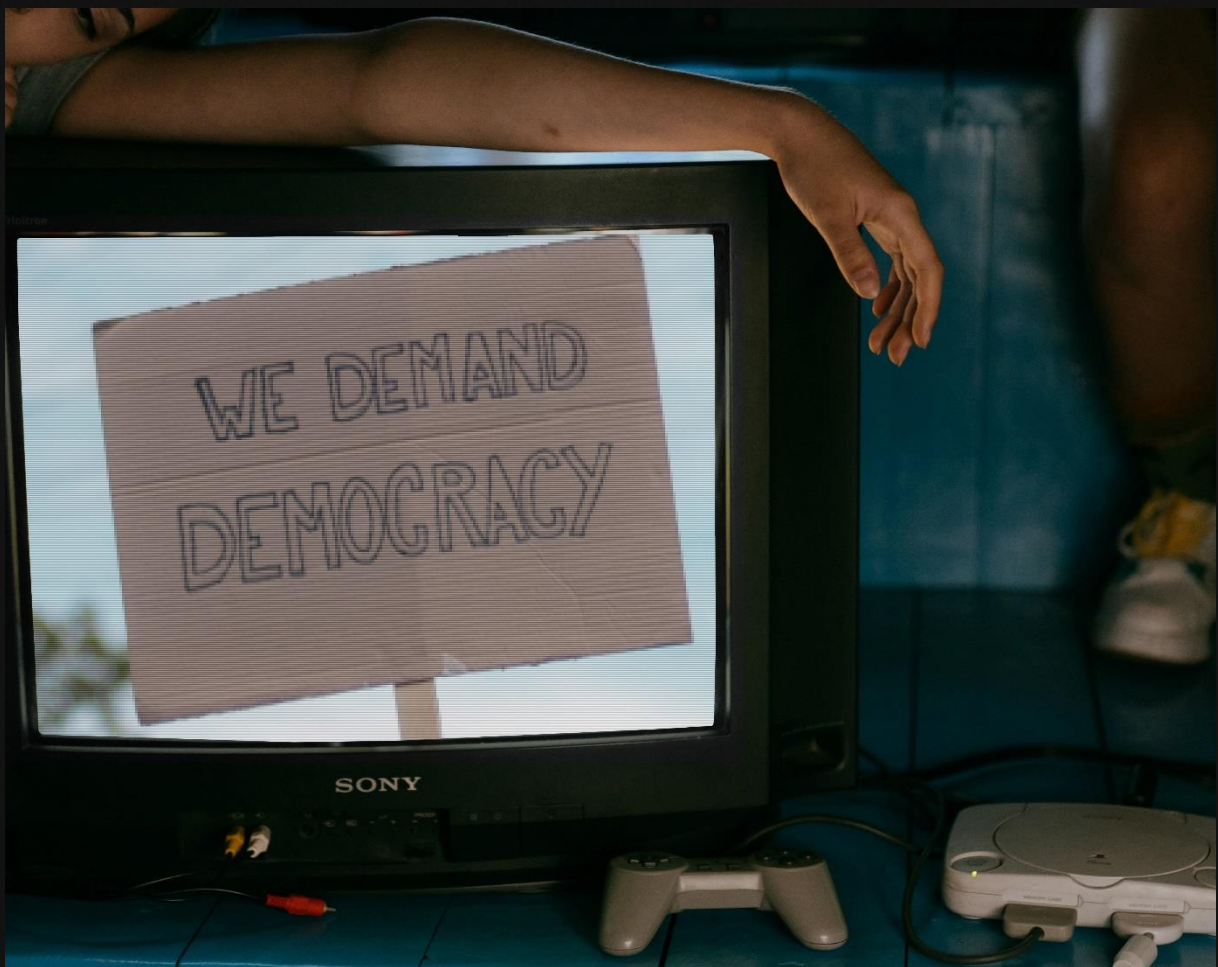


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Special Issue

Democracy Dies Playfully. (Anti-)Democratic Ideas in and Around Video Games

edited by

Eugen Pfister, Tobias Winnerling and Felix Zimmermann



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Likers Get Liked. Platform Capitalism and the Precariat in Death Stranding

Ryan House

Abstract

Kojima Productions' *Death Stranding* (2019) imagines a post-apocalyptic future in which the United States has been broken apart into isolated, individualist communities. Players assume the role of Sam Bridges, a courier for the seemingly ubiquitous Bridges corporation, who is tasked with reunifying the country by linking the cloistered settlements to the Chiral Network, allowing communication and the sharing of resources between those connected to it. In *Death Stranding*, the themes of control and precariousness resonate through both semiotics and procedure. Bridges, as a symbol for the game's procedural mechanics, asks players to make connections between what Sam is asked to do (by Bridges) and what they are asked to do (by the videogame). Drawing parallels between Bridges and platform capitalism, this paper will examine *Death Stranding* as an algorithm, in Alexander Galloway's terms, to reveal how the game replicates the real world systems of precarization of an emerging class of workers: the precariat. This paper argues that *Death Stranding* becomes a ritualization of precarious labor and that the playful disposition it engenders provides a starting place to begin reassessing our modes of democratic participation.

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Keywords: Precariousness, Precariat, Platform Capitalism, Kojima, *Death Stranding*, Play, Ritual, Homo Ludens, gameenvironments

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Economic crisis, environmental catastrophe, the collapse of civilization – apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives express a “bold desire to imagine a totally different world by questioning the current order of things” (Moon 2014, iii). These stories are often allegories that reveal the nature of human experience in contemporary culture.

Alexander Galloway argues that videogames have transformed the allegory by way of a unique form of political transparency in which players must not only work to recognize the allegorized representation of an apparatus of control but must actively and purposefully engage with that apparatus. He argues that “to *interpret* a game means to interpret its algorithm” (Galloway 2006, 91, original emphasis). Rather than obfuscating their structures of organization behind allegorical metaphors and symbols, videogames wear those structures on their sleeves: they “deliver to the player the power relationships of informatic media firsthand” (Galloway 2006, 92). Galloway’s (2006, 91) term for this, “algorithism,” highlights the role that both allegory and algorithms play in the making of meaning in videogames as players enact the metaphors that reproduce the various structures of organization and regulation of our contemporary political situation. This potential for reflective, creative action is why videogames are a useful tool for exploring and exposing the various structures of informatic control in our globally-networked world.

In this article, I examine Kojima Production’s *Death Stranding* (2019) through the lens of Galloway’s algorithism to reveal how the game’s systems replicate the real world systems of precarization and the emerging class of workers it has produced: the precariat. First, I provide a summary of work on precarious labor and the precariat to make the argument that matters of American capitalism are fundamentally also matters of American democracy. Next, I investigate the evocation of Johan Huizinga’s concept of the *homo ludens* throughout the game to present *Death Stranding* as a ritualization of life in the *gig economy* in which labor dimensions are characterized by temporary and variable employment. Through this analysis, I argue that the precariat and *homo ludens* share a status of liminality that carries with it the potential for

revolutionary, democratic action. The article concludes with an appeal to embrace the *homo ludens* through aggressively creative responses to the structures of power that move us ever closer to precarity.

Precariousness and the Precariat

Isabell Lorey (2015) classifies and defines the systemic forces that constitute and reinforce instability in modern, industrialized societies: precariousness, precarity, and precarization. *Precariousness* names that aspect of the human experience relating to our mortality. We all live our lives with some relationship to precariousness by virtue of our natural tendency to die, be sick, get hurt, and so on (Lorey 2015, 18). *Precarity* refers to the inequity of people’s relationships to precariousness based on socio-economic hierarchies. For example, essential workers are typically low-skill, low-paid positions, and while health care is typically tied to employment in the US, those benefits are usually not extended to part-time or seasonal workers (Lorey 2015, 21). Finally, *precarization* is the instrumentalization of insecurity by structures of power (Lorey 2015, 63).

Precarization has been systemically naturalized in the US and its tenets internalized by laborers themselves as a valorization of the neoliberal ideals of one’s management-of-self and personal responsibility. Over the past fifty years or so, the “macrostructures of the American political economy [have] produce[d] the kinds of economic insecurities...that often render real democratic engagement by ordinary citizens difficult if not impossible” (Thelen 2019, 20). Increasingly, these macrostructures are under transformation arising out of US economic policies during the long downturn of manufacturing through the 1970s and 80s, the dot.com bubble of the 90s, the housing crisis of the early 2000s, and the recession of 2008, but most

notably these changes have come from the commodification of information (Srnicsek 2017a). "In 21st century advanced capitalism came to be centered upon extracting and using a particular kind of raw material: data" (Srnicsek 2017a , 23), accelerating the rise of atypical work arrangements as institutions that harness this data-as-raw-material position themselves as the basic infrastructure, or platform, that mediates the interactions between laborers and clients. While this tendency towards precarity is a problem shared by "all the rich democracies," it "presents itself with special intensity in the United States" (Thelen 2019, 15).

One main reason for this intensity in the US is the amount of social protection conditioned on traditional employment relationships, which are in decline. This is not a recent development; the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, passed to protect the general welfare of workers, notably excludes entire groups of laborers such as agricultural and domestic workers and independent contractors. Likewise, the trend of the fissurization of workplaces in which a company spreads its operations out over a range of contractors, suppliers, etc. makes organization between employees all the more difficult. Thelen (2019, 19) identifies the direct connection that the platform has with the consumer as granting a distinctive form of power in which "American consumers... are often enlisted in a kind of explicit or implicit alliance against labor." Thus, the problem of precarity is "structural, rooted in the ways in which the institutions of [the US] political economy reward and encourage business models that are organized around reducing labor costs to a bare minimum" (ibid.).

Some have named this new class of precarious, insecure laborer the *precariat*, defined by their tenuous relations to production, to distribution, and to the state. This idea arguably originates from the work of French sociologist Robert Castel (2016, 166) whose work focuses on the destabilizing social invalidation that threatens workers

who “are not in control of their present and cannot organize their future” due to a new form of capitalism that “weakened and sometimes destroyed forms of social organization” (Castel 2016, , 161). In no small part, the rise of atypical work arrangements – short-term, non-recurring, seasonal, migratory – is both a symptom of and cause for the precarization of these workers. These workers on average experience an increased amount of unpaid labor, they are cut off from non-wage benefits typical of the salariatⁱ and proletariat labor arrangements, and they receive less protection and support from the state (Standing 2014). Importantly, “precarity is not the same as poverty” (Thelen 2019, 6) and is not only a problem for low-skilled workers (ibid.). High-skilled workers such as non-tenured, *contingent* faculty in universities across the US face increasing precarization as workloads rise and job-stability decrease. These systemic processes of insecurity are as much a problem of democracy as it is of economics or capitalism, and so it is imperative for the precariat to achieve a class-consciousness that can communicate its interests effectively in the democratic process.

Death Stranding

Just months after its release, Hideo Kojima’s *Death Stranding* has proven to be a work to define our times. As those of us in the real world continue to live through the global COVID-19 pandemic, we find ourselves isolated from friends, family, and neighbors under *shelter-at-home* laws to slow the social spread of the infection. Similarly, in the post-apocalyptic world of *Death Stranding*, the United States has been broken apart into isolated, individualist communities. Players are challenged with reunifying the nation by linking the cloistered settlements to a futuristic WiFi service, the Chiral Network that allows not only communication, but the sharing of resources between those connected to it. Human connection is a major theme of the game

through both narrative and system. Kojima points to his own motivations behind the game’s goals, saying, “I have always had this habit of feeling lonely” (Chen 2020). As players expand the Chiral Network, they create *strands* that connect with more and more people, creating not only technological networks but also social ones. Kojima’s hope is that the connections within the game will help players feel “that you’re not alone. You see other people’s footprints and think it’s not just me here” (Goldberg 2019). As I will later argue in more depth, this connection to others transcends the boundaries of the game itself.

Players assume the role of Sam Porter Bridges, a courier for the seemingly ubiquitous Bridges corporation, whose job is equal parts postal worker and cable guy. Players as Sam traverse North America to deliver packages and connect people to the Chiral Network, a somewhat literal *internet of things*. Narratively, the network allows users to *print* certain resources from one node to another, such as medicine, food, and even vehicles. Procedurally, the Chiral Network also affords the player the ability to share resources with other, unseen players, though what is shared and with whom is randomly selected by the game. Because the gameplay revolves around the arduous traversal of often very rough terrain, players are encouraged to build structures (such as ladders, bridges, and climbing ropes) which are then available to other players (assuming their PS4s are connected to the internet) once they have connected that area to the Chiral Network. Upon encountering one of these shared structures, players can give *Likes* to the building player. This giving and receiving of *Likes*, or the *Social Strand System*, constitutes a formalized, yet intangible currency between players – the more likes players give, the more they will receive – and this allows them greater access to other players’ structures and progression through the game.

The game's plot focuses on Sam's reconstitution of the United *Cities* of America while uncovering the role of his employer, Bridges, in the supernatural disaster known as the Death Stranding.ⁱⁱ Bridges, by all accounts, exists to serve two needs: cargo delivery and high-speed internet. Porters like Sam haul and deliver analog goods between settlements while building and repairing the Chiral Network's infrastructure. Bridges is particularly well-suited to meet the business demands of this world because the process that powers the Chiral Network also produces the tools that its employees use to detect the invisible BTs, making above-ground travel a little bit safer for the porters. These tools, *Bridge Babies* or BBs, consist of live human fetuses contained in stasis inside a glass womb-like structure that connects to its user's suit in the front midsection. Via a connected, near-prehensile antenna, the BB alerts its users (and players) to dangerous BTs by pointing towards them with flashing lights and whirring sirens.ⁱⁱⁱ In the course of the narrative, players discover that the development of this technology caused the disaster that makes all of this necessary and profitable.

Enter the *Homo Ludens*

Kojima has long held a fascination with Johan Huizinga's work, particularly the concept of *homo ludens* or *human-as-player* that foregrounds the importance of play as the central and defining feature of all of human culture. For Huizinga (1950), play is the natural state of the human being; it exists *a priori* to society and culture. It is a free and voluntary activity: "Play to order is no longer play ...[:] it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it" (Huizinga 1950, 7). This has clearly become an important idea to Kojima, and in fact, the mission statement on the Kojima Productions website could be read as a manifesto to the *homo ludens*. It reads, in part:

"'Playing' is not simply a pastime, it is the primordial basis of imagination and creation. Truth be told, *Homo Ludens* (Those who Play) are simultaneously

Homo Faber (Those who Create). Even if the earth were stripped of life and reduced to a barren wasteland, our imagination and desire to create would survive--beyond survival, it would provide hope that flowers may one day bloom again. Through the invention of play, our new evolution awaits." (Kojima Productions 2019)

Though characteristically hyperbolic, this statement is striking when taken as a declaration of intention: Kojima wants to guide players into a new state of being as *homo ludens* through the games he produces. But what sort of *homo ludens* is created via *Death Stranding*, and how might that entity transition to the real world?

Death Stranding is explicit with its preoccupation with this idea. In an unlockable text entitled *Bridges Needs Homo Ludens*, the character Heartman describes the player character as fitting those ideals that Kojima Production's website lays out:

"[a] very special type of human. A breed that would serve Bridges rather well. Homo ludens—they who play. Be it deliberate or unintentional, Homo ludens unite people—creating culture, shaping the very world around them—not through violence, nor laws or proscriptions, but rather through metaphorical acts of play. I know of only one person who matches this description. The one they call the "Great Deliverer," Sam Porter." (*Death Stranding* 2019)

In this text, Heartman delineates several "new varieties of man" (*Death Stranding* 2019) all defined primarily by something that could be called disposition, such as "homo religiosus" (*ibid.*) as a disposition to understand the world through religion and "homo loquens" (*ibid.*) as a disposition toward "the language of science and logic" (*ibid.*). A strengthening of the disposition to play, then, seems to be the "new evolution" (Kojima Productions 2019) that awaits us if Kojima has his way. But as we will see, Sam's "metaphorical acts of play" (*Death Stranding* 2019), which of course are not so metaphorical for the player, are not only subject to Bridges' control, but are "bound up with notions of obligation and duty" to individuals and institutions,

something Huizinga (1950, 8) writes only occurs when play has become ritual. Sam’s *play* is labor marked as essential and defined by its physical precarity in a world in which precariousness is already ultra-heightened. Read this way, Bridges functions as an allegory for institutions of precarization in the real world. But it is also an algorithm for *Death Stranding* and videogames at large. Rather than obfuscating the underlying principles of its logics of control behind the “semiotic domain” (Sicart 2013) of the narrative, *Death Stranding* demands that players not only pay attention to, but learn and internalize even, its systems of precarization. The question I return to in the conclusion of this article is how the free and creative *homo ludens* fits into this seemingly inhospitable system. Before I can answer this, though, a closer look at Bridges is necessary.

“Great, so I’m Mario and you’re Princess Peach.”^{iv}

To illustrate his concept of the control society, Deleuze (1998, 18) asks us to picture a freeway on which “people can drive infinitely and ‘freely’ without being at all confined yet while still being perfectly controlled.” In other words, the freeway gives an impression of freedom where one can go wherever they like, yet it provides a very narrow range of possibilities. Drivers may go as far as they wish, but they will only ever arrive at the exits provided by the freeway. From here, it is quite easy for one to make the turn from freeways to Bridges.

As the ubiquitous institution in *Death Stranding*, Bridges seems to have a hand in nearly every aspect of post-apocalyptic life, from corpse disposal to the delivery of goods and necessities to, as stated above, providing internet service. Players are never given a full account of the history of Bridges or what exactly the organization does. Rather, they embody the perspective of a low-level employee, a “Porter” (*Death*

Stranding 2019), whose knowledge of the company is largely ascertained via corporate directives as they receive jobs to deliver packages or link up isolated areas to the network. As such, the institutional machinations of the organization are largely held back from the character and player. They are tasked with simply executing operations on the ground level. These operations largely consist of moving cargo from one underground node to another and, through the Chiral Network, Bridges provides Porters with the means to traverse the hazardous terrain of a world destroyed.

This move to view Bridges through the lens of the platform might lead us to the seemingly inevitable conclusion that Sam (and the player) are not the free and empowered *homo ludens* but precarious laborers in a gig economy. Indeed, most of the game is comprised of the player as Sam accepting chains of short-term, temporary work assignments. While this pattern does not seem to differ from the medium's typical use of quests and objectives to advance progression, what makes *Death Stranding* stand out as uniquely *about* this precarious class of workers is how the game's mechanics literalize the precariousness of Sam's occupation through the core gameplay loop of balancing cargo while traversing uneven terrain. Furthermore, Bridges evaluates that work through the data it generates, mirroring the data-as-raw-material infrastructures of Srnicek's platform capitalism (2017a).

The experience of playing *Death Stranding* feels, as one reviewer of news and review website IGN puts it, "like trying to push a wheelbarrow full of bricks up a flight of stairs" (Ogilvie 2019). The game features a unique inventory system wherein players are not only limited by the number or weight of items carried but must also spatially arrange the items on the player-character's body. Everything carried by Sam is literally carried *on* Sam. The result is a sometimes comically tall, often frustratingly unstable

backpack that will cause Sam to lose his balance. To keep Sam from falling and damaging himself and the cargo, players must almost constantly shift the weight of the load to his left or right by squeezing the Left and Right Triggers of the PS4 controller. This mechanic makes even straightforward movement somewhat tedious and the arduous travel required by much of the game’s spaces exponentially more difficult. At the very least, players must navigate narrow paths between unstable terrain to avoid tripping and, throughout much of the latter half of the game, must negotiate perilous cliff sides while climbing and descending mountains.

This feeling of physical precariousness is by design. Discussing how Sam differs from traditional videogame protagonists, Kojima says,

“a game is basically not your normal day life. You’re supposed to be a hero. You’re super fast, or you can jump high, or you can fly. That’s the beginning of games, right? But in our game, it’s like a blue-collar worker.” (Chen 2020)

Through this characterization, *Death Stranding* ties physical precariousness to the economic precariousness of the working class. In this way, the game reifies the neoliberal ideology that these gig workers perform services essential to a society despite their being kept separate from its more elegant benefits. In the world of the game, those benefits translate most notably to the safe, underground settlements that the majority of society occupies, including those, of course, who request deliveries that range anywhere from life-saving medications to pizzas and movies. In order to keep this society functioning, players, through Sam, inhabit a world of danger and little comfort.

Like Deleuze’s freeway, Bridges’ network provides these Porters the means to traverse the world unconfined, yet simultaneously restricts their movement via the affordances only it provides. For instance, one key gameplay mechanic in *Death Stranding* is the

placement of ladders, climbing ropes, bridges, zip lines, etc. that are necessary to get from Point A to Point B. However, these structures only work while in an area that is connected to the Chiral Network; players outside the network are very limited in what they can build and have no access to other players' structures. Bridges achieves this platform power partly through a proprietary reward system: Likes. As players complete orders, they are evaluated on several metrics such as time taken, damage done to the package, amount of cargo carried, and distance traveled. In place of *points*, players receive *Likes* and accumulating these grant players greater access to the network in the form of new, upgradeable structures to build, improved player stats, and greater capacity to *interact* with other porters.⁹ This greater *interaction* typically means that more player-built structures will appear in-game so long as Sam is in an area connected to the Chiral Network. Players are thus incentivized to level up their standing within Bridges through those evaluation metrics. The more one submits to the network, the more one gets out of it. This relationship places the impetus on the precarious laborer to improve their own working conditions from within an oppressive system of precarization designed to keep them dependent on that very system.

At its core, the *Likes* system functions to further entrench Sam and the player within the economic and political power of the platform by means of affective labor, or effort undergone to produce or modify the emotional experience of others. According to Sarah Ahmed (2004, 117), "emotions play a crucial role in the 'surfacing' of individual and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies and signs." Emotions, such as hate, create "a metonymic slide" (Ahmed 2004, 119) that allows for the categorization of others; in her extended example, hate speech can cause non-whites and immigrants to slide into the semiotic place of the rapist or molester for a receptive audience of such speech. Although

Ahmed's work omits the ways that nonhuman entities aid in the circulation of affect, my reading attempts to bridge her work with ideas of human/nonhuman assemblages.

In *Death Stranding*, the system of *Liking* functions similarly, but in an opposite direction. As players complete orders, they receive *Likes* as a form of compensation from the sender of the package, its recipient, Bridges, and other players. These *Likes* enhance the player's standing within Bridges, and as players rank up, they are afforded benefits that enable them to better carry out their labor. One such benefit, though, stands a bit apart from the others: by increasing one's *Bridge Link*,^{vi} players strengthen their bond to other players. This strengthening is not on an individual basis, as players never encounter other players in the game but rather only evidence that other players have occupied a particular space: structures they have left behind, signs they have placed, or glowing areas where they have rested. Indeed, the bond that is strengthened between players more closely resembles that of a class identity – a recognition that these others' interests align with your own. A metonymic slide between *other* and *self* rather than between different groups of *others*. Camaraderie, in other words. As these bonds become stronger,^{vii} players are afforded a longer period to give *Likes* to other players' structures. When a player encounters a structure built by another player, a small white bar appears and quickly depletes, during which the player may press the Touch Pad on the PS4 controller multiple times to give *Likes*. This can result in players spending more time standing still, repeatedly mashing the Touch Pad on the PS4 controller, rather than carrying on with the game. Hence, this figurative action of *Liking* manifests in reality as actual affective labor. One last example here: consider the hundreds of emails sent to the player from NPCs. While occasionally containing some minor narrative information, the majority of these emails provide not much more than world-building color. A thank-you note from a

past client letting you know how delicious the pizza was, or an update on their sick wife. While these emails do nothing to progress the game narratively or procedurally, players receive a single like from the sender upon reading them, reinforcing the affective feedback loop.

Importantly, though, we must remember from where these systems originate: the platform, Bridges. For all the camaraderie produced from this affective labor, the main takeaway is that it is all in service to advancing the interests of the platform. Because it situates itself between different groups, both between employees/clients and employees/employees, Bridges is in the most advantageous position to extract value from the by-product of all this precarious and affective labor: data. Read this way, Bridges aligns with Srnicek's (2017b) conception of the capitalistic, digital platform designed to extract and use data as a resource for economic and political power:

"By providing the infrastructure and intermediation between different groups, platforms place themselves in a position in which they can monitor and extract all the interactions between these groups."

Death Stranding imagines a future in which these processes have run their natural course: a platform à la Amazon, grown to become essentially synonymous with the US government, has implemented a social score system to further fragment and control their precaritized labor force. The game tells us time and time again that human connections "keep us alive... the bonds between us make us stronger" (*Death Stranding* 2019), but there is little thought given to who controls these bonds and what is given over to them.

Textually, the game provides little in the way of a critical interrogation of these issues, instead falling back upon utopian ideas of a technology. In one in-game document,

the character Die-Hardman, a leader of Bridges, reflects on the similarity of the Chiral Network to the internet of our present time:

“...human society was living with the internet side by side and reaped its rewards. But there were those that questioned whether or not it might eventually deprive people of their freedoms. They saw it as a symbiotic surveillance society, monitoring and controlling everything in its path. Likewise, nowadays we also have those that stand in opposition to the Chiral Network, calling it a surveillance system. That is the reality of this time in history we find ourselves in. In order for humanity to survive, everyone needs to bear some kind of burden.” (*Death Stranding* 2019)

“Those that stand in opposition” are framed throughout the game as fringe, selfish isolationists or out-right terrorists. They do not represent rational, critical objections to the “symbiotic surveillance society” (*Death Stranding* 2019). Other characters reiterate the same sort of technological optimism by way of having no other option. Mama, a scientific researcher for Bridges, sums it up like this: “Maybe we’re making the world better, maybe worse. It’s the only plan we got” (*Death Stranding* 2019). This purposeful disregard for the potential downsides of the technology of this world is positioned as somewhat humanist. That same character also theorizes that because machines do not understand death, they will never surpass human beings. By this logic, when it comes to the question of determinism, humanity may still be in the driver’s seat, but the track appears to be circular. Bridges’ monitoring of employees is necessary for the expansion of the Chiral Network, but at the same time, the means of that monitoring is achieved through that expansion. Moreover, structures left by players in service to this goal begin to deteriorate after a while. Nothing provided by the network lasts forever; it must be continually re-upped. Who, or what, is driving whom? Moreover, who is left out? Of course, there is also the precarity hidden in the subtext of Die-Hardman’s phrase *some kind of burden*. What may seem on the surface as a statement of solidarity instead highlights the disparity between the burdens of

the precariat and other, more protected groups. Moreover, it functions as a means of furthering this precarization by valorizing the very precarity it attempts to hand-wave away.

In *Death Stranding*, the themes of control and precariousness resonate through both semiotics and procedural architecture, but it is only through the player’s enactment of the game’s metaphors that its meaning is produced. Bridges, as a symbol of the game’s procedures, prompts players to make connections between what Sam is asked to do (by Bridges) and what they are asked to do (by the videogame). As Galloway (2006, 105) states, to interpret videogames is to understand “what it means to do something and to mean something else.” What we arguably *mean* to do is to play in this post-apocalyptic, fantasy world for a little escapism from the pre-apocalyptic, real one. But what we *do* in *Death Stranding* is recognize and embody a precarious life of labor subject to a platform of control that at once sustains and exploits it.

“...The old ways die hard, but that’s what’s gonna have to happen...”^{viii}

To conclude this reading of *Death Stranding*, I want to focus on two components of the end of the game. The first is a scene from the ending cinematic that positions the character Die-Hardman, an embodiment of Bridges and thus the systems it allegorizes, as a foil to Sam, illuminating the player character’s playful disposition towards the challenges they face. The second is the post-narrative, free-roam play that reemphasizes my reading of the *homo ludens* as a figure of the precariat through the ritualization of Sam’s precarious labor. These readings accentuate the status of liminality shared by the *homo ludens* and the precariat and point towards the transgressive potential for both.

As the narrative draws to a close, a cut scene depicts Die-Hardman delivering a speech to celebrate the establishment of the United Cities of America as its first president, an appointment he seemingly inherited from his now deceased Bridges boss, President Bridget Strand. During the speech, he dramatically removes his character-defining skull mask as he calls for “a new America [with] the strength and the courage to rise above our past and embrace our future” (*Death Stranding* 2019). Later, in private conversation with Sam, he remorsefully divulges the insidious role he played in the unfolding of the plot and his feelings of irredeemability. He then wonders aloud to a bewildered Sam if his rise to power was perhaps the result of divine intervention on the part of the ghost of Cliff Unger, a supporting character and sometimes antagonist. After confessing to having been the one to kill Cliff only to be spared by his ghost at the end, Die-Hardman tells Sam, “[Cliff] wanted me to do this, to keep on being Die-Hardman” (*Death Stranding* 2019).

Through the character of Die-Hardman, we see the personification of an institution that seems to recognize the importance of change unfettered by tradition and precedent but seems equally content to justify the status-quo through ostensibly arbitrary correlations. Die-Hardman is the product of the system he operates within, and he represents the sort of videogame character that Kojima attempts to deconstruct through the character of Sam: “You have to watch your step, otherwise you fall, and there’s no character like that” (Chen 2020). Comparatively, Die-Hardman is hard to kill and always comes back against the odds. His very name is a reference to the archetypal heroes of American action films, particularly those of the 1980s. He is powerful and in charge, but he is not the *homo ludens*. He is too entrenched in the past and indebted to the ways things are already structured, to the ways those

systems play out, and to the things that need to be changed. He represents an establishment that views its own history of existence as enough justification to continue to exist by any means necessary.

Sam’s answer to Die-Hardman’s confession and justification illustrates their difference of disposition towards systemic change:

“Nobody wants a president who acts like they’re immortal. If you’re not scared of death, how can you value life? And life’s pretty fucking fragile right now. ...the old ways die hard, but that’s what’s gonna have to happen if we’re gonna come together and build a better America.” (*Death Stranding* 2019)

Sam’s, and by extension the precariat’s, disposition towards embracing these structural, foundational changes are rooted in the idea that they are “not in control of their present and cannot organize their future” in this system (Castel 2016, 166). They exist in a liminal present with no extrapolatable future and no past, at least in the form of “an occupational identity or narrative to give to their lives, or any organizational one” (Standing 2018). This liminality is also characteristic of Sam’s other function in the game: the *homo ludens*.

Rituals reaffirm the known order of things (Lévi-Strauss 1966), and play becomes ritual when its outcome is no longer open-ended. In *Death Stranding*, this shift between play and ritual occurs when players have completed the game’s narrative and are returned to the world to continue playing as Sam. After the ending cut-scenes have finished and the credits have rolled, players find Sam awaking in a safe room just as they have every time they have loaded a saved game. Narrative time has been rolled back to just before the events of the ending cinematic that they have just witnessed, which concludes with a scene depicting Sam’s choice to leave the society that he helped to build after his confrontation with Die-Hardman. This turning back of

narrative time allows players to continue to enact Sam’s precarious labor all the while knowing its ultimate outcome. Rather than being an avenue for discovery (i.e., the completion of the narrative in this case), play becomes a “favored instance of [the] game,” (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 30) in which players may continue to enact the gameplay despite the game having *ended*. Thus, play has become ritualized.

Sam’s choice to leave at the end of the game underscores the liminality shared by the *homo ludens* and the precariat. Just as the latter exists in a perpetual present time, the former exists in the liminal space between play and ritual, in a precarious state between the processes of discovery and the routine of certainty. In *Death Stranding*, the end of the narrative signals the completion of the ritualization of play. When players return to the game after having reached the end of the story that has carried them through this experience, play has become fully ritualized into a practice of precarious labor. As our avatar of the *homo ludens*, Sam must leave because the *homo ludens* is a state of mind that remains liminally in play, resisting the structured nature of ritualization. As a cultural disposition, play provides an organizing principle in which “our understanding comes not from a linear progression, but instead by imagining the problem from all angles” (Thomas and Brown 2009, 9). Sam represents a willingness to accept new ideas and fold in new logics and perspectives with which to relate to the world. Importantly, his exodus from the game prompts players, who will leave the game sooner or later, to carry with them to the real world the playful disposition that they have embodied in the game.

In making this distinction between play and ritual I do not mean to suggest that the ritualized play of *Death Stranding* has no value. Indeed, the opposite is true. Emile Durkheim writes of the unifying force of religious ritual as moments of “collective effervescence” (1915, 226) when bonds between individuals in a society strengthen

through the shared experience of sacred, ritualistic acts (ibid.). *Death Stranding*, then, as an embodied ritual of systematic precarization, stands to unify its players with members of the precariat of the real world through the same sort of “metonymic slide” (Ahmed 2004, 19) that facilitates them to see the unseen players of the game as extensions of themselves. This conceptual unification between one’s played experience and the lived experience of others is achieved by the player through the ability of games to “show us what it might be like to inhabit ... different social arrangements from different roles ... [and] how particular agencies give rise to particular social relationships and patterns” (Nguyen 2020, 187). Similarly, Lorey writes that the problems of precarization can be perhaps best met through this sort of personal and affective connection with those that live in its shadow. She argues that by engaging with the myriad individual lived experiences that constitutes it, we can begin to see the precariat as being always in a state of becoming, and in that, indeterminacy lies a potential for a revolution against the systems that enact precarization (2015). The ritualized experience of precarious labor in *Death Stranding* might help us all remember that “life’s pretty fucking fragile right now” and will continue to be until something changes (*Death Stranding* 2019).

Conclusion

Reading *Death Stranding* through the heuristic of Galloway’s algorithm reveals the game to be more than the post-apocalyptic adventure it appears to be on its surface. Instead, the game reflects the modern dystopia of platform capitalism in which workers have had to become acclimated to insecure labor and volatile living conditions. This growing class of workers has come to be known as the precariat. *Death Stranding* allegorizes this social and economic precarization through its core gameplay loop of balancing cargo on Sam’s back while traversing hazardous terrain

and through Bridges, the ubiquitous institution that compels the player to undergo the tasks comprising that gameplay loop. By enacting these metaphors, players become attuned to the game’s structures of control; as Galloway (2006, 91) puts it, “to win [the game] means to know the system.” In this way, we can view the act of playing the game as a ritual of unification with the precarious workers of the real world. Thus, players are positioned to recognize the systems of control in the game and, ideally, extrapolate that recognition to the existing power structures outside of it, as well. The game directs players to this last step through its depiction of the player-character as the embodiment of the play-element that is primary to and generative of human culture: the *homo ludens*. Identification with the *homo ludens*, and the playful disposition it projects onto the world around it, empowers players to imagine and enact transformational changes that break free from the way our world is currently framed.

How, then, might this experience translate into the real world? Games encourage players to adopt playful dispositions towards the various challenges or objectives set before them. Although Huizinga (1950, 13-14) writes that play stands “outside ‘ordinary’ life... within its own proper boundaries of time and space,” he notes that its effect, however, “continues to shed its radiance on the ordinary world outside.” Just as our representation of the *homo ludens* exits Bridges, so too might players carry with them the playful disposition they rehearse by playing the game into the real world.

The consequences of this transferal of a playful disposition may range greatly in scope and intensity – from the invention of new forms of protest to reimagining the very fabric of our democratic system – yet all work toward the establishment of a more just society for all. For instance, players may perhaps more readily recognize the methods of control unfolding all around them in their everyday lives and seek new

ways to confront them. Srnicek (2017a, 67) suggests that the type of platform capitalism reproduced in the game has “inbuilt tendencies to move towards extracting rents by providing services” and predicts Amazon to be the platform best positioned for profitability. If other platforms adopt similar tendencies, it would intensify the stress on the precariat class that provides the labor that keeps Amazon and platforms like it operational. As Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos looks set to become the world’s first trillionaire by 2026 in the midst of a global pandemic (Sonnemaker 2020), it is clear that these trends are exacerbating the already growing economic inequality in the US and around the world. As such, the business practices of these platforms, particularly in terms of the working conditions of their employees, have come under increasing public scrutiny. One can find calls for boycotts and strikes of these platforms on a near daily basis on social media and elsewhere. However, falling back into routine tactics of protest will only be so effective so long as the systems of protocological control are always changing. Increasingly, protestors have taken to alternative avenues to raise awareness for causes such as these. For example, TikTok user @humphreytalks (real name Humphrey Yang) produced a series of short videos on the website in which he uses grains of rice to illustrate the scale of Bezo’s wealth. The videos have been seen by nearly three million users and have accumulated hundreds of thousands of comments, arguably surpassing the level of awareness raising that any given boycott might achieve (and perhaps boosting the effect of future boycotts). By adopting a playful disposition towards enacting change, the *homo ludens* uncovers novel methods of engagement and protest. Like being in the thrall of imaginative play, the *homo ludens* pushes at the boundaries of knowledge to create something new. It becomes a “culture-creating force” (Huizinga 1950, 211).

Another way this playful culture creation might manifest is through the interrogation of our understanding of the problem at hand. McKenzie Wark has recently called into question whether this new economic reality is even still capitalism, taking Srnicek's work a step further by positing that this new platform power is no longer capitalism at all but something much worse (2019). Through this act of questioning, Wark embodies the figure of the *homo ludens* by asking us to see Marxism as dynamic and to adapt its criticisms to this post-capitalistic system in which information is owned, controlled, stored, and commodified. She recognizes that new approaches are needed for this problem because the problem itself continually shifts: "you don't have to own the means of production anymore to be a ruling class" (Verso Books 2019). The rules of the game have been changed and to have a chance, one needs to adapt one's strategies to meet those new challenges.

Likewise, Standing envisions new avenues of the democratic process: a stronger, deliberative democracy with the needs of the precariat class at its center. He notes that "chronically insecure people make bad democrats" (Standing 2012) and argues that democratic practices should be infused throughout our culture, not just at the level of government. For instance, he calls for a "democratic governance of occupations ... based on values of social mobility, solidarity, and equity" (Standing 2012) to reinstate comprehensive occupational regulations that have been weakened or removed in the era of globalization. A healthy democracy requires more than just voting, and Standing suggests foundational changes that would incentivize deeper involvement with local and national democratic processes.

These are but a few examples of what may be possible when we begin to imagine new ways of existing and resisting. To embrace the *homo ludens* means to learn to cultivate a playful disposition to the world around oneself. Games are instrumental to

this goal because they provide spaces that encourage us to try out inventive solutions and offer us diverse structures of agency that allow us to imagine alternative forms of society.

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ⁱ Salaried, white-collar workers.

ⁱⁱ For the sake of conciseness, suffice it to say that the dimensions of the living and the dead have converged at points called *beaches*. Invisible ghosts called *beached things* or BTs now roam the surface of Earth, not only killing those they come into contact with, but exploding with the magnitude of a nuclear bomb. Humanity has moved underground.

ⁱⁱⁱ BBs maintain a liminal space between the world of the living and the dead because they are born of braindead mothers, according to the narrative. It is stated that they typically stay operational for about a year.

^{iv} *Death Stranding* 2019.

^v I.e., other unseen players.

^{vi} This metric evaluates the number of *Likes* received by others.

^{vii} I.e., one's *Bridge Link* score increases.

^{viii} *Death Stranding* 2019.