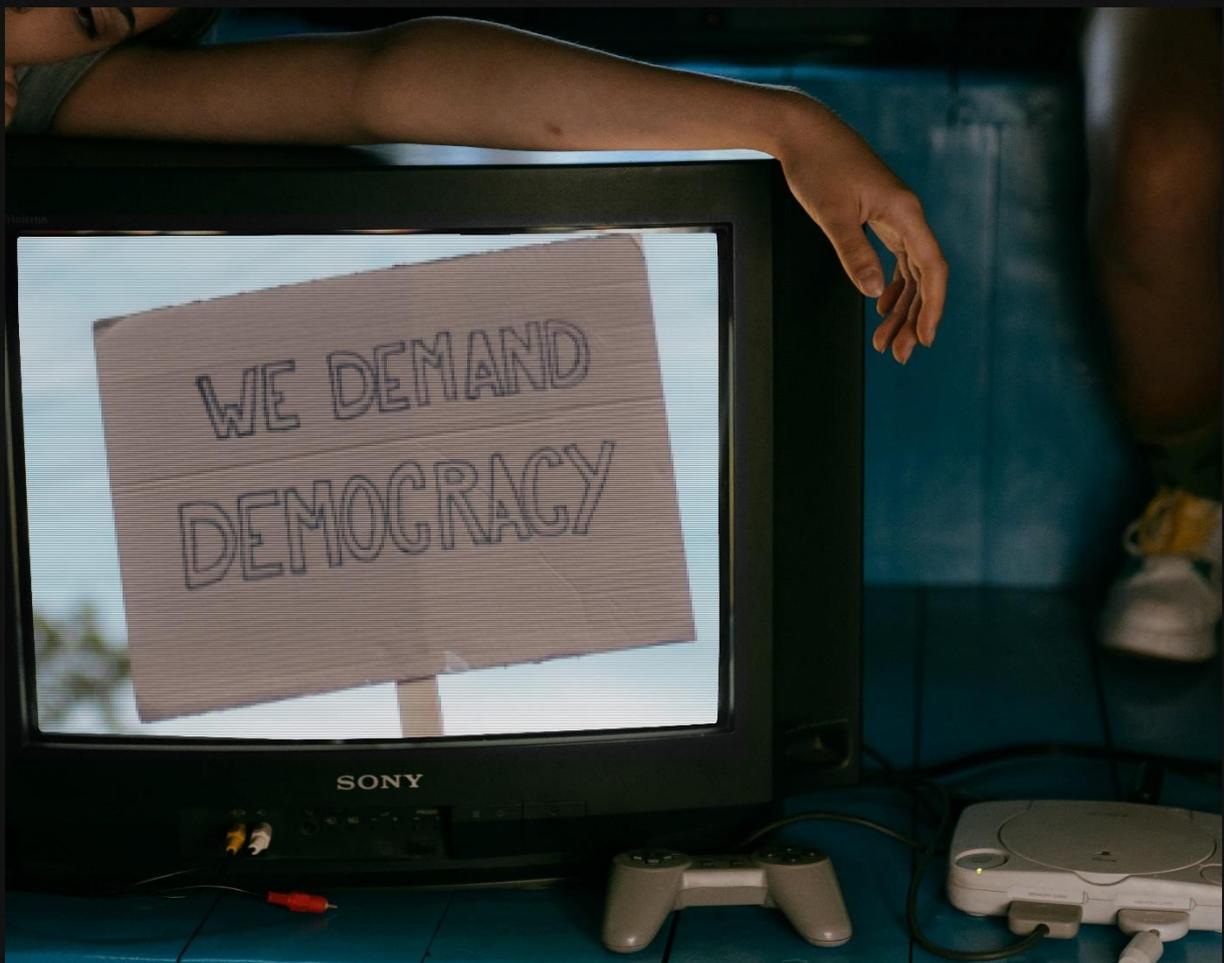


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simulation ludology narrative



Untitled. © Collage by Felix Zimmermann. Photos by cottonbro, Pexels, and Fred Moon, Unsplash.













notably these changes have come from the commodification of information (Srnicek 2017a). "In 21st century advanced capitalism came to be centered upon extracting and using a particular kind of raw material: data" (Srnicek 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



















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,











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













