“Making Out” While Driving: Relational and Efficiency Games in the Gig Economy

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Abstract

On-demand or “gig” workers show up to a workplace without walls, organizational routines, managers, or even coworkers. Without traditional organizational scaffolds, how do individuals make meaning of their work in a way that fosters engagement? Prior literature suggests that organizational practices, such as recruitment and socialization, foster group belonging and meaningfulness, which subsequently leads to engagement, and that without these practices alienation and attrition ensue. My four-year qualitative study of workers in the largest sector in the on-demand economy (ridehailing) suggests an alternative and more readily available mechanism of engagement—workplace games. Through interactions with touchpoints—in this context, the customer and the app—individuals turn their work into games they find meaningful, can control, and “win.” In the *relational game*, workers craft positive customer service encounters, offering gifts and extra services, in the pursuit of high customer ratings which they track through the app’s rating system. In the *efficiency game*, workers set boundaries with customers, minimizing any “extra” behavior, in the pursuit of maximizing money per time spent driving and they create their own tracking tools outside the app. While each game resulted in engagement—as workers were trying to “win”—games were associated with two divergent stances or relationships towards the work, with contrasting potential implications for retention. My findings embed meaning-making in what is fast-becoming the normal workplace, largely solitary and structured by new technologies, and holds insights for explaining why people remain engaged in a line of work typically deemed exploitative.

Keywords: games, meaning/meaning-making, independent work, on-demand/gig economy, Uber, Lyft

TaskRabbit. DoorDash. Instacart. The on-demand or "gig" economy is rapidly changing how work is organized, with digital platforms connecting workers and customers for tasks that last only minutes or hours, and algorithms performing functions previously carried out by managers. While emerging research explores how algorithms and digital platforms restructure work (e.g., Curchod et al. 2019; Kellogg et al. 2020; Lee et al. 2015; Rahman 2021; Vallas and Schor 2020), only few studies have examined how such changes—notably, the lack of traditional organizational scaffolds (e.g., socialization practices) and the replacement of human managers with automated algorithms—shape the relationship between workers and their work. In a work setting devoid of managers and coworkers, how do individuals make meaning of their work, and how does that affect the effort or engagement they devote to the work? Going beyond the dichotomy of "good job, bad job" that often characterizes independent work (Kalleberg 2011), this paper explores how those working in the socially isolated and algorithmically-managed setting of the on-demand workplace make meaning of and, ultimately, engage with their work.

Making meaning of one's surroundings is a fundamental human endeavor (Baumeister 1991; Brief and Nord 1990; Hall and Mirvis 2013), and from the earliest days of capitalism, business leaders and the popular press have encouraged workers to interpret the significance of their work and its role in their lives (Hurst et al. 2017). Traditionally, organizations align workers' behaviors to organizational objectives, scaffolding meaning-making by providing a shared mission, fostering group membership, and infusing work with purpose. Organizations with "strong cultures" (O'Reilly 1989) connect workers to shared goals, such as putting a man on the moon (Carton 2018), promoting a healthy lifestyle (Besharov 2014), or achieving financial freedom (Pratt 2000), and thus align workers' behaviors to organizational objectives. Managers and coworkers offer cues that help individuals interpret their surroundings (Salancik and Pfeffer 1978; Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001)—for example, when managers normalize the taint of dirty or illegal work by extolling its positive value (Anteby 2008; Ashforth et al. 2017) or when coworkers remind one another of shared values in difficult situations, such as tending to cranky patients (Dutton et al 2016).

The on-demand workplace lacks many of these scaffolds that traditionally support meaning-making, relying instead on emerging technologies, particularly algorithms, to facilitate work: a digital infrastructure connects workers with customers for short-term assignments in real time—hence the term, "on-demand." Irrespective of "where" exactly the work is done (i.e., digitally by a MTurker or on the road by a Dasher), the digital platform constitutes a defined work setting by enabling worker-platform-customer interactions. However, there is no "there" there. Individuals work independently with little to no direct contact with managers or coworkers, and algorithms take on managerial functions such as hiring, directing, evaluating, and disciplining workers (Lee et al. 2015; Cameron and Rahman 2021; Rahman and Valentine 2021). Tasks are micro-sized (Irani and Silberman 2013); algorithms set pay rates (Rosenblat 2018); and automated bots troubleshoot workers' problems (Shapiro 2018). Moreover, on-demand work has been construed as a "bad job" because of its precarious nature—the work is financially uncertain, unpredictable in terms of scheduling, and often physically dangerous (Kalleberg 2011; Ravenelle 2019; Cameron et al. 2021b). This type of environment, which offers limited opportunities to enrich group membership or enhance work tasks, creates a context ripe for alienation, in which workers become estranged from the organization, their coworkers, and even themselves (Braverman 1974; Pratt and Ashford 2003). Indeed, some accounts equate the resultant technically-mediated workplace to an "assembly line in the head" (Bain and Taylor 2000) where workers are subject to the "tyranny of the algorithm" (Lehdonvirta 2018) and toil under "algorithmic despotism" (Griesbach et al. 2019).[1] In this paper, I ask, "How do on-demand workers make meaning of their work in the face of these challenges and how does this affect their overall engagement with the work itself?"

To answer these questions, I draw on a four-year study of workers in the largest sector of the on-demand economy, ridehailing. In this sector, which lacks traditional scaffolds, I find that two distinct

[1] While some workers have responded to this social isolation by joining online forums, and scholars are enthusiastically looking at the potential of these spaces to foster belonging (e.g., Rosenblat and Stark 2016, Wood et al., 2019), the extent to which these limited scaffolds have affected the everyday meaning-making of workers—most of whom have not joined these spaces—remains an open question.

touchpoints (interactions or points of contact with the work), each interpreted differently, undergird two workplace games. In what I call the *relational game*, workers create meaning by connecting with customers and crafting positive customer service encounters, which they quantify and track through the app's algorithmically-mediated rating system. In the *efficiency game*, workers find meaning by completing work quickly at the highest pay rate and managing customers by minimizing any extra-role behavior; but, unable to accurately track their efforts through the app, drivers create their own tracking tools and, at times, resort to manipulating the platform's algorithm. While each game results in immediate engagement or effort—as workers try to "win"—the games are associated with two divergent stances or relationships towards the work, either amicable or adversarial, with contrasting implications for retention.

In contrast to when organizations and managers scaffold meaning-making and bank on the common perception of purpose to guide workers' behaviors, the emerging technologies that scaffold on-demand work cannot fully encompass the meaning-making process, which thus becomes fragmentary. In other words, as there is more room for workers to interpret the touchpoints, there are more varied ways to incorporate touchpoints into games, resulting in different kinds of meanings. In contrast to prior research, which emphasizes how workers collectively define, refine, and reinforce the rules of a single game (e.g., Burawoy 1976), this study extends our understanding of games, identifying two, each with its own rendering of the platform and mechanisms for fostering engagement. Ultimately, I argue that the extent to which each game's meaning is supported by the digital platform has divergent implications for workers' long-term commitment to the platform.

MEANING-MAKING, WORKER ENGAGEMENT, AND ON-DEMAND WORK

Making meaning of work entails interpreting what work signifies and the role it plays in one's life (Baumeister and Vohs 2002; Brief and Nord 1990). According to Pratt and Ashforth (2003), meaning is the output of having made sense of something, such as an individual coming to understand the place of work in the broader context of their life. Meaning can be constructed individually (from one's own values and perceptions), socially (from norms or shared perceptions), or both (Pratt and Ashforth 2003). Work

that is deemed meaningful (positive meaning) is associated with many benefits, including performance (Wrzesniewski 2002), motivation (Hackman and Oldham 1980), identification (Pratt et al. 2006), job satisfaction (Wrzesniewski et al. 1997), empowerment (Spreitzer and Quinn 1996), reduced stress (Elangovan et al. 2010), and fulfillment (Kahn 2007)—in short, elements that foster engagement.

Challenges in Socialization

Relationships with others in the workplace affect individuals' meaning-making and engagement, especially when they perceive these relationships provide a sense of coherence between themselves and the work (Heaphy and Dutton 2003; Kahn and Fellows, 2013; Dutton and Ragins 2017). Socialization practices often go beyond a narrow focus on knowledge or skills to build collective identities and foster belonging (Ashforth et al. 2000; Kunda 1992). During NASA's lunar pursuit, management guided all workers, even secretaries, to construe their jobs not as an assortment of short-term tasks, but as actions supporting NASA's long-term objective of lunar landing (Carton 2018). Managers of individuals who perform "dirty work" offer validation and cognitive reframing, thereby neutralizing the job's stigma (e.g., without personal injury lawyers, manufacturers would not be held accountable; Ashforth et al. 2017). Many non-traditional organizations employ similar socialization practices that emphasize group membership through regional events, routinized scripts, and coordinating outfits (e.g., Leidner 1993; Hochschild 1983). In the network marketing organization Amway, distributors organize "dream-building sessions" in which members of one's "family" tree introduce new distributors to the company's culture and selling practices, thereby fostering belonging and collective identification (Pratt 2000). In building community among its members, organizations foster a sense of group membership that encourages engagement in the work.

In recent years, one of the fastest growing areas of employment has been in non-standard work arrangements, such as on-demand or "gig" work (Cappelli and Keller 2013; Katz and Kalleberg 2016; 2019; Spreitzer, Cameron and Garrett, 2017), in which workers have peripheral and/or temporary group membership. Typically working independently, on-demand workers are often physically and socially

isolated, having no regular in-person meetings with managers or coworkers. Without true organizational membership, independent workers often struggle to build a cohesive work identity or a sense of belonging (Caza et al. 2018) and can expend significant effort to forge their own practices to manage the existential angst of being untethered to an organization (Petriglieri et al. 2019). And as this work is not closely tied to a profession, individuals do not have access to professional societies and associations, which can serve as avenues of socialization (e.g., Barley and Kunda 2004; O'Mahoney and Becky 2006). Even truck drivers and taxi drivers—the closest analogue to ridehailing drivers—have shared social spaces. Mandatory training for licensing and vehicle pick-ups at corporate/leasing offices ensure that drivers are aware of occupational norms and standards and that higher-ups are available if they have problems (e.g., Luedke 2010; Viscelli 2016). On the road, taxi drivers often run into one another at mechanic garages, road stops, and relief centers. One taxi driver-cum-ethnographer describes the waiting lot at John F. Kennedy airport as a "setting for drivers' sociability," with queues up to four hours long and fifty cars deep (Occhiuto 2017: 279). While waiting, Occhiuto talked shop, played cards, ate, and, of course, interviewed other taxi drivers. Without a shared gathering space, the potential of meaning-making through social mechanisms such as socialization and belonging for on-demand workers is limited.

In addition, the nature of on-demand work itself limits the ability to create rich interpersonal relationships with customers. In contrast to relationship-based service work in which parties have repeated interactions that build trust and goodwill (e.g., hairdresser, doctor; [Rahman and Barley 2017]), interactions with customers in on-demand work are one-off since the matching algorithm makes it difficult to be matched with the same customer repeatedly. These "pseudo relationships" are transactional and limited in trust, mutual understanding, and goodwill (Gutek 1995). Transactional service work highlights this instrumentality, with one worker noting that "the ultimate concern of sales is not the product or service—it's about the prospect's money" (car sales; Oakes 1990). A salesman that sold to those in his personal network noted similar transactional relationships with customers: "all my efforts were focused on getting to the next pin level …. friendship was only limited to what I could sell" (direct

sales; Butterfield 1985). Overall, without organizational scaffolds to foster a sense of group belonging, the burden lies on on-demand workers to create their own systems to stave off alienation and spur engagement in the work at hand.

Workplace Games as a Means of Fostering Engagement

A long tradition of research has examined games in the workplace. Early research describes how workers would play poker or steal one another's bananas at work as a way to pass the time and relieve "the beast of monotony" (Roy 1959:158; De Man 1928 [1985]; Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939). Burawoy (1976) documents more sophisticated games that generate engagement in the work itself. Defined as a set of rules, a set of possible outcomes, and a set of outcome preferences, games allow workers to make choices about when and how much effort to exert in order to obtain a desired outcome (Sallaz 2013). In the game of "making out" in the manufacturing industry, for example, machine operators synchronize their efforts with production quotas and piece-rate pay. In the "tipping game" in the service industry, front-line workers decide how much "emotional capital" to exert in completing tasks for customers in return for variable tips (Sherman 2007; Sallaz 2009). More than just helping workers pass the time or earn maximum money, these games produce a sense of social and psychological achievement and lead workers to enthusiastically engage in the execution of their work. Games are wide-spread, presenting across varied occupational groups, including truckers (Ouellet 1994), lawyers (Pierce 1996), IT professionals (Barley and Kunda 2004), workers in casinos (Sallaz 2009) and call centers (Sallaz 2019), "girls" on the VIP party circuit (Mears 2015), and even the unemployed (Sharone 2007).

A game is more than an assemblage of incentives; it is a set of rules, strategies, and "wins" that take place in a collective context. Unlike gamification, which relies on rules designed by management to improve workers' affective experience (Deterding et al. 2011; Mollick and Rothbard 2014), games are a result of organic interactions between coworkers. Indeed, because social interactions are considered a necessary element of games, some scholars have used work games and social games interchangeably (e.g., Sharone 2013; Sherman 2007). To be sure, organizations provide the raw materials of the game;

however, it is the workers who determine how the game is played and who is winning. Two aspects make games social. First, workers typically agree on the objectives and rules, with veterans instructing newcomers on how to play (Sallaz 2009). In gratitude to an old-timer who taught him how to improve his make-out rate, Burawoy gifted him a ham (1976: 52). After a new concierge easily obtained a reservation at an exclusive restaurant, a more experienced concierge advised her to "make the guest think you worked hard" to secure larger tips (2007: 129). Second, games are social because workers receive feedback on their performance from coworkers, often competing against one another (Sallaz 2013). Among casino workers, breakroom conversations revolved around higher-earners and their strategies to increase tips (Sallaz 2002). And in the factory, Burawoy (1979: 63) remarked that even non-work conversations referenced the game: When "someone comes over to talk, his first question is, 'Are you making out?' followed by 'What's the rate?'" Those who accumulate more wins garner status among their coworkers, "strut[ing] around the floor" (Burawoy 1976: 64) and getting praise for their "hamminess" (Sherman 2007: 128), while those who do not follow the rules are shunned and labeled "rate busters" (Burawoy 1979: 145).

The variable nature of the outcome or "win" entices workers to play games. In manufacturing work, unpredictability is determined by the time-study man who sets the piece rate for each machine. Some jobs are "stinkers" (difficult), so workers are content with baseline pay, while others are "gravy" (easy), so workers take more frequent breaks or speed up the pace of work, building up a kitty (Burawoy 1976). In service work, customers' preferences and behaviors—from what kind of service they prefer to their propensity to tip well—generate uncertainty. Cab drivers used typologies such as "the sport," "the blowhard," and "the lady shoppers" to classify customers' tipping predictability (Davis 1959). Workers keep a close watch on potential sources of unpredictability and adjust their actions accordingly. Too much or too little variability would lead them to quit playing. For example, if a customer was a never-tipper, such as a solo businessman, workers exerted no extra effort, leaving him to carry his own bags (Sherman,

2007: 130). Understanding which elements of the game were unpredictable was essential for workers to decide how to approach the game or if they were even going to play at all.

Overall, the meaning-making literature has emphasized how organizations can encourage workers to find meaning through their work by providing scaffolds that foster group belonging. To date, however, the literature has not explored meaning-making in a workplace with few scaffolds and minimal social interactions, such as the on-demand workplace. The lens of workplace games may provide an alternative mechanism of meaning-making, with a focus on how workers make meaning *at* work as opposed to *through* the work. While games are usually described as socially immersive—as workers collectively strategize how to control and "win" against the unpredictable element of the game—I examine what role games might play in understanding how individuals construct meaning in a setting where work is solitary and mediated by technology, such as on-demand work.

RESEARCH SETTING, DATA COLLECTION, AND ANALYSIS

Ridehailing Services

First launched in 2011, ridehailing services, such as Uber, Lyft, and Juno, have disrupted the taxicab industry. The core innovation that enables these services is algorithms. Algorithms match independent drivers (working from their own cars) with customers within seconds, giving drivers block-by-block directions. Behavioral suggestions or nudges direct workers to take specific actions (Scheiber 2017; Cameron 2021). A pop-up message might encourage a driver to continue driving for an extra ten minutes to earn as much as yesterday or alert them to how much more money they would make if they drove at different times. Fares dynamically adjust based on demand, and performance is evaluated by customer ratings and driver acceptance and cancellation rates. Drivers have little contact with company employees; even hiring and firing, euphemistically called "activation or deactivation," is conducted online. Requirements may vary, but most companies require clean driving records, no moving violations in the previous three years, state vehicle inspections, and, increasingly, despite industry protests in some cities, criminal background checks. Once hired, which can take from three days to three weeks, workers can go "online" and begin.

The Workplace: RideHail - Technically Mediated and Socially Isolating

In the ridehailing industry, drivers manage and maintain their personal workplace, i.e., the car they are driving. Unlike taxi services, cars may be personal vehicles, either purchased or leased explicitly for driving, or rented. In addition to being a tool to earn income, cars often become a symbol of personal expression, as workers choose the make and model of the car, and customize the interior with trinkets, photos, or scents, for example. Two other salient features of the workplace are the customers and the app, both of which "manage" drivers. Customer ratings are proxy for performance evaluations and drivers who continually receive poor ratings or complaints are deactivated (Cameron and Rahman 2021). Given the remote nature of the work, interactions with customers are typically the only human contact that drivers have while working.[2]

Drivers begin a shift by choosing a location to open their app and swiping right to go "online." Once online, the app coordinates the work cycle, including assigning rides, providing routing directions, setting timers, and setting pay rates. Within the app, drivers navigate between screens to get information specific to their work—including maps of high-demand areas, upcoming promotions, amount of time driving, ratings, customer compliments/complaints, summary of prior rides and fares, and account documentation (e.g., ride history, car registration)—as well as to contact support. Participants in my study were often active on several platforms, and switched between them during a shift, having multiple apps open and choosing the one that matched them with a ride first. Because of the near-identical nature of the work, drivers' windshields often displayed multiple decals (e.g., Lyft mustache and Uber decal) and, when speaking, drivers often referenced their work on the platforms interchangeably (e.g., using the Uber term "surges" and the Lyft term "primetime" in the same sentence to describe incentives). Further, core algorithmic features across platforms were similar (e.g., rating systems). Thus, in this paper I use the

[2] Starting in 2015, Uber installed hubs in some cities (Isaac 2019). Less than 15% of my informants had visited one and of those, the majority had only visited once. Starting in 2013 new Lyft drivers were required to meet a mentor for thirty minutes; in 2017, this was discontinued.

word “ridehail(ing)” when discussing the act of driving and “RideHail” when discussing the platform company, and only name a specific company when it is necessary to contextualize a comment.

Unlike taxi drivers, who attend training programs and meet in leasing offices and garages, on-demand drivers have no direct contact with managers or coworkers, and most participants do not know other drivers. When I asked one informant if he ever saw other drivers, he took a moment before replying thoughtfully: “Yeah. When I check the passenger app and see [icons of other] cars” (28). During my three years of driving, I did not meet a single employee of RideHail and, apart from research purposes, I only met other drivers in passing at gas stations and rest stops.[3] Even drivers who worked in an area with a RideHail resource center tended to avoid them due to inefficient service. Instead, the website and the app were the primary means of communication between drivers and RideHail and outlined (un)acceptable behaviors. Videos and community guidelines, for example, encouraged drivers to keep their cars clean, treat customers with respect, and follow safety laws. They also cautioned that drivers could be deactivated for any number of reasons, including failing to maintain a minimum rating (no exact number was given), not following the app’s GPS directions (possible fraud), or customer complaints. These materials were publicly available, but drivers were not required to review them before beginning to work and, to the best of the author’s knowledge, there was no way that RideHail could confirm whether drivers had accessed them. Overall, drivers had few tangible artifacts about the organization’s culture, yet their actions while working for RideHail were tightly scripted by the organization’s algorithms.

Data Collection

Given the emerging nature of on-demand work and my interest in theory development, I designed a multiple-sourced qualitative study and spent four years collecting data. I used three overlapping data sources, which I triangulated to bolster validity (Eisenhardt 1989): participant observation as a driver (n=160 hours), participant observation as a rider (n=112 rides), and longitudinal semi-structured

[3] I did not meet a RideHail employee until the bulk of this research was complete and then in an academic setting, during an academic talk.

interviews in twenty-three North American cities (n=136 interviews). While these three data sources form the basis of the analysis, I also collected data from social and print media and company websites.

Participant Observation. To better understand how drivers constructed meaning at work, I participated in the ridehailing industry as both a driver and a rider. From 2016 to 2019, I worked as a driver in a major US East Coast city using both my personal car and a rental car. I worked in several week-long bursts and varied my driving times and routes to widen my range of experiences: I drove the weekday morning commute and the evening bar shift, timed my airport runs with international flight arrivals, visited higher and lower income neighborhoods, and worked major holidays, including two New Year's Eves (the busiest day of the year). I also conducted mini-experiments on myself: Some days I tried to maximize my income by chasing surges and bonuses, while other times I purposefully ignored surges and did not check my earnings until the day's end. Sometimes I manipulated the app, hoping to confine my trips to a certain area, while other times, I let the app decide. To gain perspective on drivers' experiences in different areas, I enlisted a research assistant to drive in a US Midwest city. Our ethnographic notes included reflections on work performance, busyness, ratings, surge pricing and bonuses, pay, interactions with support services, breakdowns, accidents, car care, and weather, traffic, and road conditions. I also attended classes on defensive driving and on my legal rights as a driver hosted by an organizing group. As a rider during the same time period, I kept notes on nearly all rides taken (n=112). Some of these rides were personal, and some were specifically for the sake of this research, such as an afternoon taking rides around an unfamiliar city. Field notes included how I hailed the ride, the car's condition, app malfunctions, and overall impressions of the ride including my rating.

Semi-Structured Interviews. To gain a broad understanding of ridehailing, in my first round of data collection, I conducted sixty-three semi-structured interviews with drivers in twenty-three North American cities. Questions focused on the individual level (e.g., why workers began driving and what a typical day looked like), the situational level (e.g., interactions with customers and the app), and the work system level (i.e., the social-technical elements of RideHail's business model and the gig economy). In

the second round (n=44, 76% of Round 1), which were conducted eighteen to twenty-four months after the initial interviews, I asked workers to describe any changes since our last interview (e.g., schedule changes or app updates) and their current financial situation, and I followed up on themes that were not addressed in the first interview. In the third round (n=36, 82% of Round 2), I focused on how drivers' work lives were changing, with a focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, and how drivers navigated and solved problems (e.g., with customers, the app, the platform company). The majority of interview data in this paper is from the first and second round of data collection. All interviews except one were conducted in English, and all interviews except ten were professionally transcribed.[4] In total, I conducted 136 interviews with sixty-three drivers of which nineteen (30%) were female. Fifty (70%) reported driving as their primary source of income and all except one reported driving to meet essential household expenses such as utilities. Twenty-four drivers (38%) were active on at least two apps, though not all participants lived in cities with multiple companies. At the time of the first interview, the amount of time drivers had been employed in the industry ranged from two weeks (10 rides) to seven years (18,000 rides), with my sample averaging drivers who had fourteen months of driving and 1,800 trips completed, with a 4.87/5.0 rating. Most drivers saw work as a means to earn a living and earning money was a common expressed motivation, with the exception of only one person.[5] (See Table 1 for interviewee details.)

I used several sampling approaches to ensure maximum variation and participant anonymity. I met roughly half my informants through hailing—either as part of my everyday life (e.g., running errands) or through expeditions to an unfamiliar area. To increase participant anonymity, I often hailed rides from family and friends' apps. The other half of my sample was recruited from direct and online advertising (e.g., gas stations, forums), convenience sampling, and snowball sampling. Snowball

[4] One interview was conducted in French and transcribed by the author. One participant declined to be audio-recorded and in the other cases the audio files became corrupted. Participants' data was recorded and analyzed based on the contact summary sheet (Miles and Huberman 1989) that was created immediately after each interview.

[5] Driver 43, who worked full-time doing remote office work, drove in the evenings after her job and during major events in order to get out of the house and be social after being alone all day.

sampling was by far the least effective method as most drivers did not know other drivers. Whenever possible, I tried to oversample on drivers who were white or female, as these made up the minority of drivers (Campbell 2018). Lastly, I collected data across multiple cities because ridehailing itself as well as new features were introduced at varying times. Shared rides, a feature that matches drivers with riders traveling in the same direction, was introduced in 2014 in San Francisco and, as of 2020, is still only available in larger cities. The sample included drivers from cities where ridehailing was well established (Boston, Philadelphia), nascent (Ann Arbor, Missoula), eventually banned (Austin, Montreal), and facing pressure from unions (New York City, Seattle). In sum, this data represents a large swath of experiences.

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Data Analysis

I analyzed data using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006; Locke 2001; Strauss and Corbin 1990), with field observations, interviews, and artifacts collected from drivers as my primary data sources. Drawing from my ethnographic data, I identified key features of the work environment (e.g., the app, customers) that shaped drivers' experiences at work, and I considered these the "touchpoints" for my induced theory on workplace games. Drawing on marketing literature (e.g., Pantano and Milena 2015, Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010), which uses the term touchpoint as an analytical tool to think about the customer's experience with an organization, in this paper I define a touchpoint as any "contact or interaction a worker has with any part of the organization that shapes the worker experience." A soldier's unit members, commander, uniform, and the Soldier's Creed are all examples of touchpoints in the military. While any workplace has an infinite number of touchpoints, not all are theoretically salient; in the on-demand workplace, where there are few traditional scaffolds, certain touchpoints (i.e., the customer and the app) are particularly salient—workers constantly interact with them and they play an important role in facilitating meaning-making. Below, I describe and summarize the touchpoints and show their relationship to the induced theory of workplace games.

Stage 1: Focused Coding. As already described, my experiences driving sensitized me to the importance of touchpoints. My first day driving—in the middle of a Washington, D.C. heatwave—was

dramatic. My overheated phone shut down twice, once mid-ride, as I had not realized I needed to buy a holder and place it in front of my A/C vent. Befuddled by the app and its buzzing notifications, I missed my first ride because I dropped my phone under the seat. Interactions with customers were mixed. I had an energizing conversation with a nurse whose daughter was at my alma mater, followed by a ride in which I consoled a mother visiting her son in chemotherapy. A few rides later I was trying to speak as little as possible, shrinking into my seat as I drove three large men, one beside me, down winding back roads against the setting sun. Interviews confirmed my own experiences, and drivers reported having both positive and negative experiences with standard features in their environment. Realizing that drivers' experiences centered around these particular components —in part, because the work was otherwise so socially vacuous—I created a list of all the possible touchpoints in the environment. Using the touchpoints as my unit of analysis, I created several documents that catalogued every mention of touchpoints and participants' comments about them over the three rounds of interviews.

Stage 2: Axial Coding. In the next stage of analysis, I began axial coding and iterating between the data and existing theory to build "a dense texture of relationships" around concepts (Charmaz 2006: 60). Drawing on Strauss and Corbin's (2007) suggestions for early-stage coding schemas, I then coded for each mention of a touchpoint that corresponded with workers' thoughts, feelings, or action. From this I was able to refine my analysis. With my touchpoint data laid out neatly in front of me in a mass of index cards, I asked myself: "What problems are touchpoints allowing drivers to solve?" I focused on the customer touchpoint first as the data was especially vivid and varied, with one driver expressing delight at potentially being forever remembered by a customer (31) in contrast to another driver who refused to even look directly at customers (35). I also noticed how touchpoints were related to one another. For example, a car might be decorated in a way to spark conversations with customers (e.g., covered in unicorn decals) and then drivers would check their customers ratings. This analysis led me to focus on the touchpoints of the customer and the app and their relationship to one another.

Stage 3: Theoretical Coding. In the final round of analysis, theoretical coding, I developed relationships between categories elicited in earlier stages to "weave the fractured story back together" (Charmaz 2006: 63). Starting with the connection between the customer and the app, I went back to the literature for a theory to explain my observed phenomena. I found the literature in the sociology of work, especially workplace games, fruitful, as games had been documented in many industries. After identifying the building blocks of games (rules, feedback, clear outcomes), I reordered my touchpoint data around these three aspects, paying particular attention to when the existing theory did and did not match my data. Moving between analyzing data, drawing models, and writing memos, I abstracted from these categories and relationships to identify two games, ultimately explaining how they differ from those previously examined and how these games affect work engagement.

CONSTRUCTING MEANING IN THE ON-DEMAND WORKPLACE

I present my findings on how workers make meaning in the on-demand workplace and how this meaning affects their engagement in two sections. In the first section, I describe how interactions with the touchpoints are the building blocks of two distinct games: the *relational game* and the *efficiency game*. The touchpoints of the customer and the app are central to both games, but how workers interact with the touchpoints and how they understand their relation to the game is different in each of them. In the second section, I discuss the divergent implications of the two games and how workers see themselves in either an amicable or adversarial relationship towards the digital platform and RideHail.

ENGAGING IN THE WORK: PLAYING AND WINNING RELATIONAL GAMES

The goal of the *relational game* is to connect with customers and provide good customer service, and thus drivers seek to curate positive service encounters. In playing the relational game, drivers personalize their interactions with customers by extending physical and emotional support and using items in the car to generate connection. Drivers then track the outcomes of their efforts through the app's rating system. In part because workers are satisfied, in that they can track their success via the ratings algorithm, they tend to follow the algorithm's other suggestions, seeing the algorithmic management system as working on their behalf. Below, I describe the two most common ways that drivers personalized service encounters

(through behaviors and through the car itself), and then demonstrate how drivers used the app for both immediate and long-term feedback on their customer service.

Customers as an On-Demand Touchpoint: Personalizing Service Encounters

Extending Physical and Emotional Support: Drivers personalized their service encounters with customers by providing physical and emotional support. Each driver created their own rules for how to connect with customers. Some drivers took note of customer details to spark a conversation, such as a 76ers cap or Macy's shopping bags. Others kept small items such as mints in the car for customers. One driver (31) kept three chargers, water, an umbrella, two blankets, and gum "just in case" (see Image 2).

> I was working football last Saturday, and two guys got in the car late, and we were sitting in a traffic jam, and the guy was like, "I'm dying, my God, I'm so thirsty." I was like, "There's water in the back. Go grab one," and you would have thought they won a pot of gold. They each had a water in their hand. And they're like, "God, I'm starving," and I'm like, "Hey, here's some summer sausage, you guys should eat it," and they're like, "Oh my gosh, you're the best driver ever!" (Laughs.) You never know. It's a dollar water and a dollar sausage, and it made their day. They're going to go back and remember me and talk about me for the rest of their lives. They won't even know who I am. (31)

By providing extra amenities to customers in need, the driver seriously joked that he would be forever immortalized by some customers which was also a source of professional pride. In addition to providing physical comforts, drivers also offered emotional support. As popularized on the HBO show *Taxicab Confessions*, the close quarters of the car and the transient relation with the driver make the ride an easy setting for intimate sharing, with drivers often stepping into the role of counselor and confidant. Describing how she focused on uplifting customers who were upset, a driver said, "You know how Dr. Phil does 5-minute cures. I call mine 7-minute interventions. I let people vent. Your boyfriend broke up with you? I tell you to find another one! I make 'em laugh" (27). Emphasizing his empathy and listening capacity another driver noted, "I'm more of a listener, like a bartender. Sometimes you're their psychologist or their sounding board. I'm pretty good at being able to ask them questions about what they do or what they're interested in, and then people will just go" (63). In more emotionally charged situations, drivers

may stop the ride to console customers, such as when they share details about experiencing addiction or domestic violence. A driver explained helping a near-suicidal customer:

> I look at them and try to talk with them. He was about to cry and a little bit intoxicated. He told me he doesn't know—for this week, everything he touched turned bad. He lost his job. He's writing a book, and he doesn't know why. When he got home, he was about to kill himself, just the end of his life. And I talked to him, I told him a little bit about myself and how in our lives sometimes things don't go the way you want—it's just a chapter of a book, and you have to go through anyway. He said thank you and that he wished that he met me before… before he got out of the car, he just shook my hand, said thank you to me again. It was a good ride for me. (24)

In these situations, the rule is to prioritize the needs of the customer even if this is not to a driver's immediate financial or time benefit. Though these practices are labor-intensive, requiring drivers to attune to a rider's emotions and respond appropriately, they suggest that providing personalized service is a key component of how some drivers see their role.

Tips were not mentioned as a motivating factor for playing the relational game and, indeed, those playing the relational game did not report earning more in tips than those not playing the game. Instead, beliefs about customers—that they were "professional" (3) and "high class people" (51)—predisposed drivers to be friendly and open. Purposefully displaying a friendly demeanor, a driver said, "getting in a RideHail should always feel like you're getting a ride by your cousin's friend to the airport. Why would you try to do anything other than to make them feel like they're your buddy?" (18). In another illustration of hospitality, a driver said, "I'm an ambassador of this town… whether it's the football team or the hockey team or the student service center or this restaurant, the people just love that stuff" (31). Once in the car, drivers and riders swapped stories and discovered mutual interests, sometimes even spending time together later at bars, casinos, or sporting events. A driver described how a musical connection with a rider blossomed into friendship, "I met this girl who was also in a band, and she invited me to come to one of her shows. I did, and their band is totally kick ass. I've gone to five of their shows…I feel like I made a buddy—I see her at [other] shows all the time, and we always catch up" (50). Learning from one another and finding shared hobbies strengthens the rapport between drivers and customers, making the work more pleasurable and meaningful. In addition to developing personal relationships, several drivers

reported finding professional contacts (e.g., termite inspector, babysitter, and book agent) from riders, and one driver even found a rider an internship.

Using the Car to Vibe with Customers: Using the car itself, or props within the car, was another way drivers fostered connections with customers. In American culture, the car is an extension of the self and a means of expressing personal and/or group identity (Berger 2001). Popular media outlets, such as MTV's *Pimp My Ride*, *Lowrider* magazine, and Instagram feeds dedicated to "VanLife," showcase customized cars that symbolize self-expression and individualism. In ridehailing, drivers create their own physical and social space with props to draw in customers. A car decorated with unicorn decals and lights prompted customers to squeal, "This looks just like my bedroom when I was a kid!" (26, see Image 4). On a Friday night, I got a ride with a so-called "party car":

> The car was popping! Fairy lights on the floor. Tinsel garlands on the backseat. A snow globe and glow sticks on the dashboard. Top 40 music. I'd never seen anything like it—"It's a party car. I do it on Friday and Saturday—it's a hit on South campus [fraternity row]." Seems the car has quite a reputation. On the drive, he told me several stories about how excited students were when they got inside and realized they got the party car. [Field notes–Sept 2018. See Image 5.]

In each of these examples, the decorations sparked conversation, signaling that drivers are open to engaging with customers—so much so that they have spent time and money to enhance customers' experiences.

Music was another common way to foster connection with customers. Music can be a powerful tool for transcendence, making it possible for individuals to communicate across gender, race, class, nations, and even language (Juslin and Sloboda 2011), and it often spurred deeper, more meaningful exchanges during a ride. I was surprised by a black driver's socially conscious music choices, including Tupac Shakur's "Brenda's Having a Baby," a song about a twelve-year old's rape, and her pregnancy, homelessness, and attempts at selling drugs and her body before being murdered. In a follow-on interview, the driver provided more detail:

> Driving started getting easy after I figured out what music people liked, so we could all vibe together. Honestly, I didn't know what white people liked (laughs). I figured black people love Drake, so white people might like Drake, so I played Drake's Views album. The black

> community is starting to wake up [become socially aware], so I'm going to play an artist that's a little woke. I played Chance the Rapper, and a lot of people started vibing, and that's when I really started getting more comfortable.... [My favorite thing is] teaching [white] people about black people—you can't do that at the workplace because people get uncomfortable. (1)

Similar to Driver 1's social awareness campaign through music, other black drivers raised social awareness by sharing memorial cards featuring victims of police brutality (see Image 6). Drivers also used their objects more generally to spark conversation or create a connection and had things in the car such as pamphlets, flyers, products, and, in one car, a dog that "hangs out and loves people" (18). As a rider-cum-participant observer, I met a gubernatorial candidate who handed and read me a copy of his stump speech, an author who pitched his latest book, a fundraiser who solicited donations for his after-school tutoring program, and an energy healer who explained the crystals and Tarot cards scattered around the car (see Image 7). Music and other objects thus turned the car from a space that customers passed through to one in which rich social exchanges occurred. In summary, the willingness of these drivers to offer emotional support and to have useful and/or creative items on hand (charger, healing crystals) reflects how they proactively sought to meet their goal of providing good customer service.

The App as an On-Demand Touchpoint: Monitoring and Following the Algorithm

Monitoring Customer Feedback. The app, the second touchpoint, provided drivers with immediate feedback on how well they are doing at providing good customer service through the ratings algorithms. Scrolling through comments on the app, drivers can see their overall rating and reminisce about specific interactions. Noting how the app reminded her of one such positive encounter, a driver said "One customer left a nice comment because she was running for her train and I recall making some moves to get her back in time. She actually wrote and told me how much she appreciated it. That's always nice that people just really acknowledge and appreciate your customer service" (28). During interviews, drivers often pulled out their phones to show me their ratings or a recent customer compliment. "Look—I have a ton of these. People love me," a driver (32) exclaimed, looking at his phone and scrolling through over fifty compliments, including "Best driver ever! Driver is a real jokester and made my ride to the airport fun"; "Cool car and good music"; "Made my day—great conversation." Others kept memory

books of past rides: “Oh, I remember you!” one driver exclaimed, flipping through a spiral notebook with more than 20,000 rides. “Look!” He points to an entry. “You’re in here too—PhD student at UM studying RideHail” (Field Notes – Mar 2017). In another example, a driver described how she checks the app repeatedly to remind herself of her customer service skills:

> I have all of the reviews to prove [I am a good driver]. I can go on there and [see], “I just loved the conversation. Thank you for the ride. You put me in a good mood.” “Your car is so clean. Your car smells good; you’re a sweet person.” All of this stuff, it’s wonderful. It makes you feel good and want to do better. I always look at everything because I play with my app a lot. I'll go in it and look at different things or look at my ratings, see if it’s still a 4.86. I just go in the app and touch all over it. It gives you that motivation to continue. (33)

The app is a tangible reminder of a job well done and, as a phone application, it is always available, allowing for an instant emotional boost. Many drivers reported checking their apps constantly, even outside of work shifts. As one driver reported, I “check it more than [I] drive” (39).

Ratings were another indicator that drivers had successfully managed interactions with customers. Without exception, every driver interviewed rattled off their rating to the hundredth-decimal point. Though only a rating in the mid 4’s was required by RideHail, many drivers become obsessed about maintaining near-perfect ratings, emphasizing their engagement in the work. “It’s becoming addicting…. I got an email from the head person in Detroit saying I’ve made it in the top 10% of drivers in the past week. My last week was 4.88, and any comments that were made, [I can] tell you what those comments were. Over the course of 13 months, I’ve only had one negative feedback” (31). Returning after almost a year-long break, the driver remained committed to maintaining a near-perfect rating: “Ever since I’ve been back on, I haven’t had anything less than a five-star rating—it might even go up to 4.96 very shortly.” The driver also reported his frustration that the app didn’t provide more specific feedback to improve his rating. Just for fun, another driver spent two months trying to increase his rating from a 4.8 to a 4.9 saying he “absolutely watched the app all the time” (3).

In addition to monitoring customer feedback, drivers can also review their telemetric scores on acceleration and braking to verify that customers had a smooth riding experience. One driver noted, for

example, “It [the app] reports every day how smooth you brake. The ratio is supposed to be—you can see on the app—3:25, a smooth brake. I have a 3:23… [it signals] the passenger can be comfortable with you (26).” Overall, drivers saw high ratings and telemetrics as indicators of successfully managing the service encounter, and constant feedback from the app motivated them to continue exerting this effort.

Following the Benevolent Algorithm. In addition to tracking their ratings on the app, when playing the relational game drivers usually followed the app’s nudges concerning when and where to drive, trusting that the nudges were aligned with their own interests—even though they were unclear about how the underlying algorithms worked. One driver observed about the ranking system, “They [the app] say I made the top ten percent, but it doesn’t tell you in what. Maybe it’s the amount of hours you’re on the road. Maybe it’s the number of five-star comments you get. I don’t know. I honest to God don’t know” (3). Unlike the Old Testament’s God of wrath, the algorithm was described more like the New Testament’s God of mercy in that drivers believed it always assigned a beneficial combination of rides: “I really believe it’s God and the algorithm. I don’t know how it works, not at all…[but] at the end of the day, it just works out. It’s really weird” (23). Making money was easy because the algorithm was “always pumping (42),” and even when drivers misjudged optimal driving times, they earned enough.

> I call it lucky or blessed, but it seems when I start late, I’ll get trips that are worth more money. I can’t say that I can aim for that… I get lucky all the time. I catch a surge, a big surge halfway across town, and then I catch another surge back across town, and then I’ll be right back to the money where I would have been working that whole morning. I say it’s a groove because I keep getting that same luck. (Laughs.) I know what it takes to get my 200 bucks a day. (19)

Calling himself blessed, the driver attributed his success to an algorithm that helps him “get lucky” with surges later comparing the algorithm’s matching skills to sex, noting “it’s always good.” Another driver (32) explained how the algorithm always assigned him interesting riders, naming a local artist and athlete.

Drivers who used the app to confirm their good customer service tended not to question the app’s nudges around matching and incentives. They trusted that the algorithmic system was aligned with their own interests. Describing the algorithms as “fantastic” (50), “fair” (21), and “good” (63), drivers had no reason *not* to follow the nudges around matching and incentives. When logging on, drivers would “check

on the app first for any surging demand" (13), because "RideHail has figured all that stuff out" (16), and they would generally "accept 98-99% of rides" (32). In describing a typical day, a driver said "If I'm just starting out for the day, I pretty much press yes to everything ... So right at the beginning, I'll say all right, let me just go" (13). Even when drivers learned that the app presents varying incentives to drivers, they seemed unconcerned about possible inequity, emphasizing that they were earning enough. "No. It doesn't bother me… I usually finish [complete the incentive] … and then they give me what they say" (6). In summary, when playing the relational game, drivers were uncritical about the matching and incentive algorithms and they believed that the app's nudges were in alignment with their own interests.

Summary: Rules, Feedback, and Wins in the Relational Game. In the relational game, the primary goal of drivers was to create connections with customers and provide good customer service. To meet this goal, drivers managed customers by curating positive service encounters. What drivers classified as a "win" in the relational game overlapped with RideHail's customer satisfaction goals, such that the digital platform supported the relational game. Ratings, compliments, and badges provided workers with feedback, confirming that their efforts were valued and that they were, indeed, "winning." The drivers' actions constituted a game, as opposed to mere reaction to an organization's attempts at gamification, because workers went "above and beyond" the suggestions laid out in community guidelines. There is no concrete benefit to a driver for increasing their rating from a 4.8 to a 4.9; and taking actions such as decorating the car or providing water costs time, energy, and money. As part of the game, once drivers confirmed that they were winning, they paid less attention to other components of the algorithmic management systems. Drivers thus tended to follow without hesitation the nudges from the matching and incentive algorithms. As a result, drivers in the relational game viewed the digital platform as a facilitator, and they described an amicable relationship with RideHail. Overall, drivers viewed themselves as repeatedly "winning" in a system that was working to their advantage.

ENGAGING IN THE WORK: PLAYING AND WINNING EFFICIENCY GAMES

The goal of the *efficiency game* is to minimize time driving while maximizing income, and thus drivers focus on completing rides quickly and efficiently. To play the efficiency game, drivers depersonalize their encounters with customers through emphasizing social and physical boundaries with customers which minimize the length and depth of their interactions. Different from the relational game, in the efficiency game drivers are unable to track their wins on the app and they are constantly unsure whether they have been assigned the most lucrative rides by the algorithm. Because of this uncertainty about where they stand in the game, drivers often take matters into their own hands, keeping their own financial logs and at times even countering the matching algorithm in order to receive more lucrative rides. Below, I describe drivers' strategies to create social and physical boundaries with customers and then consider how the app keeps drivers from verifying their status in the efficiency game.

The Customer as an On-Demand Touchpoint: Depersonalizing Service Encounters

Enforcing Social Boundaries. In the efficiency game, the goal is to get customers to their destination as quickly as possible to maximize earnings and, therefore, drivers enforced social boundaries to minimize the length and depth of their interactions with customers. Noting how her quest for efficiency underscored her interactions with customers, a driver said, "All I know is that I need to get you to your destination 'cause that's my mindset. Get you to your destination in a fast, safe way so I can get my money and you can get out of my car" (33). At best, customers are seen as faceless fares that need transport and, at worse, as self-centered monsters that need to be defended against. A driver described how he avoids engaging with riders:

> Twenty to thirty percent of people are nice, but I'm not trying to establish a personal relationship. This is a taxi. I get you where you need to go and go about my business. I'll talk, but I'm not trying to get to know you. I don't do much if I'm not getting paid for it. Not going out of my way to help you. People will take advantage of you. It's the ones who do three-minute rides and try to take two or three treats. It's one treat or get the hell out of here! People get crazy, greedy, take more than they should. You're dealing with random people you don't even know, and you're sharing your space with them (laughs)... after a while, mentally, you black it out. I'm not trying to develop a full-blown relationship, hang out with them on the weekend, pow wow, and all that stuff. It's just a ride, and that's it. (Laughs.) Get the fuck out. (35)

Believing that most customers are unpleasant, unappreciative, and sometimes downright greedy, drivers merely tolerated their presence focusing on getting customers in and out of their car quickly. By avoiding eye contact, eschewing conversations, and refusing to offer help, drivers created self-protective boundaries that limited interactions, and even saw offering emotional support as dangerous. A driver described his defensive tactics, "I just be taking them where they want to go. I had about five or six ladies in my car crying. You think you're helping somebody and then you get an email from RideHail saying you hurt them or you harassed them" (44). Another strategy to avoid talking was to pretend they did not understand when customers reported problems. A driver said, "If I see you're about to say that you are not happy, I just try to change the subject or talk about something else. Or I'll pretend I didn't hear what you said or that I just don't understand and everything is okay. When they get out, they're like, 'Bye, have a nice day!'" (12). These drivers compartmentalized their behavior, "keeping it business" (8) and "professional" (3), making it clear that connecting with customers was not their goal. Instead, their behaviors were focused on minimizing interactions so they could complete their rides as quickly as possible.

Enforcing Physical Boundaries. Drivers enforced physical boundaries to protect themselves and their property, further highlighting their desire to be efficient with their time and energy. A common way to create this boundary, and one that I frequently employed myself as a driver, was to place a bag on the front seat in the hope of avoiding the emotional labor of small talk and the physical intrusion of someone so close (see Image 5). More generally, drivers felt that customers disrespected their property: "People forget it's my vehicle. They put feet on seats, fart in the car, do all this weird stuff. They mess up your door handles. You know they've got food on their hands. These people don't care!" (35). To counter rider's potential disrespect, drivers prominently placed towels, dash-cams and notices that customers were being recorded, and signs requesting riders to wipe their feet and refrain from eating, drinking, and slamming doors around their car to remind customers to behave.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing to a dry erase board in the seat pocket. [The driver] quickly went

> into a long rant, her voice getting louder and angrier. "I had to make it cause people were misbehaving. They trifling. This one woman spilled coffee all over my backseat—and didn't even say sorry!" [Swings arms open. I get nervous as she's driving.] "So, I made the sign. But then people started touching the sign. And messing it up. **No.** [Voice gets louder.] You don't need to touch the sign to read it, so I had to make a new sign." [The first line is, "Don't touch the sign."] "Is it okay if I touch the sign?" "Yeah, but don't mess it up." (Fieldnotes–Sept 2019, Image 7)

Physical objects helped to enforce boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in the car. In addition, drivers felt comfortable refusing requests that would decrease the profitability of a ride. Taking customers by fast-food outlets was especially problematic as drivers not only lost time making stops, but risked incurring additional cleaning costs if customers spilled anything. A driver described how he kept his car clean and odor-free:

> They want to go to McDonald's and get something to eat. If somebody gets in the car and says, "Hey, do you mind going through McDonald's?" I say, "Absolutely not. Why would I go through McDonald's?" And they say, "Well, I have other drivers that do it for me." I say, "Well, if other drivers like to wait 15, 20 minutes sitting in a drive-thru, that's on them." I don't want to make 17 cents a minute and drive you a mile down the road and have my car smell like McDonald's and have you sitting back, eating fries, making my car smell like fries. (61)

Similar to not comforting crying passengers for fear that their help could be misinterpreted, drivers protected themselves from potential liabilities by not offering more personalized services. A driver said:

> I try not to overstep any boundaries. These people are strangers. If it wasn't for the app, your problem wouldn't be mine. I have people coming up to the car, and they got real [a lot] luggage, and I say, "I'm sorry, I'd really like to help you, but I can't touch your luggage." You want my help now, but the moment one of those straps breaks, you're gonna be writing a complaint, and I'm gonna be responsible. So I got to respect myself. I gotta respect my boundaries. (44)

By not providing additional services, drivers preserved both their time and their energy, allowing them to devote more energy towards driving. In the efficiency game, boundaries helped to limit interactions that could be time intensive, emotionally draining, and financially unbeneficial. When drivers enforced these boundaries, they asserted control over their work and affirmed that a primary goal was simply to get riders to their destination fast.

The App as an On-Demand Touchpoint: Monitoring and Countering the Algorithm

Monitoring Financial Trackers. When playing the efficiency game, drivers focused their efforts on making the most amount of money in the shortest time possible; achieving this goal was complicated

by the fact that drivers did not trust the platform's match algorithms and incentive messages. Drivers described being bombarded by alerts, receiving up to three per day, one driver wondered: "Why is RideHail sending me alerts for surge pricing? I never walked out of the house or jumped out of the bed because of the surge" (46). Similarly, one weekend I noted, "I really want to rest … and RideHail has been sending me damn [incentives] all week. Fine, I'll drive" (Fieldnotes - 30 Jan 2018). Drivers felt these messages were misleading because often when they entered an area, surges would disappear. Some drivers ultimately chose to ignore incoming alerts—i.e., "[I] don't chase the surge" (15), "I'm too smart to chase surges" (9); some even drove in the opposite direction—i.e., "I never go where there is a surge" (29), "I don't go to them, I go away from them" (32). This stance towards alerts sometimes led to a blanket disregard of all messages as drivers chose to "ignore all the texts and emails" (32). Instead, to get the best rides, drivers positioned themselves in busy areas, scoured newspapers for large events, or drove around wealthy neighborhoods in the early morning for the lucrative airport pick-up. Yet even the savviest drivers who analyzed local events and traffic patterns to find the most efficient times and places to drive were frustrated, noting that driving for RideHail was "far more complicated than being a taxi driver" (20).

Drivers also did not believe that the app accurately accounted for their earnings, and worried that it shortchanged them of their promised fares. To compensate, drivers would compulsively check their app to verify if they were paid correctly. A driver said, "I'm checking my trips constantly… Every time I complete a trip, I look to make sure that I got paid. I see what my money adds up to. [And] I call if there is a delay … in the information getting to my phone" (19). Sending "Correct my Fare" requests to RideHail was so routine that I simply logged it as "No boost [incentive]" in my field notes. I wrote "I've gotten so many fares incorrect. I normally just notice if I get [an incentive or not], but sometimes it may not be calculated correctly - especially when it's a range [e.g., 1.6 - 1.9 surge]. How am I supposed to remember and keep track of that?? <u>So many ways that [RideHail] could be cheating us</u>!! [emphasis in original]" (Fieldnotes - Feb 2017). Not only did the app occasionally miscalculate fares, it also did not

reflect the true cost of driving as it did not account for gas, wait time, and car depreciation. Drivers therefore tended to take matters into their own hands, designing their own tools, such as Excel spreadsheets and longhand ledgers, to accurately record their income, incentives, and expenses. (See Images 8 and 9.) More than half of my nearly six hours of interviews with one driver focused on his extensive tracking system, as he described his "really religious" accounting system. His goal? To be a "savvy" driver with "no tax liability" because "RideHail doesn't care about their drivers … and the key to rideshare is to get what you can out of them" (9).

Unlike in the relational game, in the efficiency game drivers were not focused on customer ratings; instead, drivers described ratings as another indicator of the algorithm system's crookedness. Frustrated about being blamed by customers for things outside of their control, drivers said that the ratings system was "unfair" (57), a "joke" (44), "Not right. Not fair" (26), and, more generally, "sucked" (43). Workers rejected the app's attempt to gamify ratings, such as the non-monetary rewards (e.g., badges) for high ratings. Emphasizing her alignment with the efficiency game, and mocking RideHail's badges, one driver said, "It's like 'Mommy! Mommy!! I got a badge. I got a cool car badge, I'm cool.' It just bothers me. Give me cash, I don't want no stinking badges" (26). In summary, when playing the efficiency game, drivers mistrusted the incentive information presented by the app, and instead devised their own methods to find the most lucrative rides and track their earnings.

Countering the Malevolent Algorithm. Drivers were regularly able to finesse their interactions with customers to complete rides quickly but, as they were dependent on the matching algorithm to assign and price rides, often resorted to manipulating the algorithm to obtain desired rides. Enraged at not receiving enough rides during high-demand times, one driver said, "[I] know exactly who is behind the algorithm's decisions, and it's not God. The machine and the software are set up by people, by humans. God?? No! Just humans made it" (40). Drivers frequently claimed that the matching algorithm was not assigning the best rides and that, indeed, the algorithm was "out to get them."

I swear there was a conspiracy because in the afternoons—I logged in every single day at 4:00—I

> would get a long ride that would take me out of the city in the opposite direction towards the airport. And then, right after I get out of the city, the city would light up like a Christmas tree [on the heatmap display]! I swore it was a conspiracy against me because I did very little, if any, prime-time rides. Because I'm always sent in the opposite direction. (42)

Misleading projected wait times, not being assigned a ride immediately after a high-paying one, and long dry spells between rides led drivers to believe that they were being personally targeted. A driver describes how the algorithm "forced" him work longer as he neared an incentive target:

> I've had that weird thing happen outside a building and didn't get rides. I know what they're doing. It's not rocket science. If a driver gets to 67 rides, and they've got three to go [to reach an incentive], why would you want them to get in the queue quicker than everyone else? So, if I need three more rides, it's 4:00 in the morning, I'll get a ride in Bethesda, which is 50 minutes [long], and then I'll get a ride that's another hour. Well, all that time, I'm looking at the clock going I almost don't want to take this ride because I need to get quick [short] trips, so I can just get the bonus. When you're two rides away from the bonus, you don't care about [the fare]. You just want to get the ride, so you can get that extra hundred bucks, or 80 bucks, whatever it is. But I think [RideHail] knows what they're doing—they have it programmed in to make it as hard as possible when a driver is pushing the edge of the envelope to [get the incentive]. (61)

The driver perceived the algorithm as penalizing him because it "knew" he was close to his target and assigned longer rides to get more work out of him. In contrast to viewing the algorithm as unknowable, as in the relational game, here drivers saw the intention of the algorithm as clear—to keep drivers on the road longer at less pay, which was in direct conflict with the goals of the efficiency game.

Because drivers believed the algorithm was working against them, they deployed tactics to counter some of the algorithm's decisions, thus reasserting control in their work. Creating rules about which rides were more profitable, drivers rejected rides they believed would pay less, such as those that suggested that customers would not be traveling far (e.g., rides starting at grocery stores). Many avoided unpaid travel time: "If they want me to go somewhere that's too far away from where I want…and it's gonna take me thirty minutes to go pick somebody up, or it's rush hour, I'll usually decline—it's not worth it" (53). Another driver declined anything "more than ten minutes—it's just too far" (46). If drivers declined too many rides, they risked being temporarily suspended or permanently deactivated.

A quest for efficiency also affected how workers viewed the driver support hotline. The support phone number was hard to find and frequently out of service; conversations with support staff were

frustrating and often not helpful. Similar to creating expense trackers, many drivers kept detailed logs of their conversations with support to be sure issues were handled. My interactions with support were equally aggravating. After my first fare miscalculation, I spent twenty minutes trying and failing to find their number. Taking matters into my own hands, I selected "I have a safety issue" on the app to get someone to call me back regardless of whether I had a safety issue. In summary, in the efficiency game the algorithm was perceived as not being aligned with drivers' interests—or even as conspiring against drivers—and thus drivers deployed countering tactics to receive the most lucrative rides.

Summary: Rules, Feedback, and Wins in the Efficiency Game. In the efficiency game, the goal of drivers was to complete their rides as quickly as possible, ideally at the highest fare. To do so, drivers managed customers by depersonalizing the service encounter, minimizing conversation, and not offering additional services, such as carrying bags. Unlike in the relational game, however, what drivers classified as a "win" in the efficiency game did not overlap with RideHail's goal; accordingly, the app was not designed in such a way that it supported the efficiency game. Drivers believed that the app's trackers did not provide accurate feedback, leading them to create their own tools to track their efficiency. At times, drivers even manipulated the algorithm. As a result, drivers in the efficiency game viewed the digital platform as an opponent and described themselves in an adversarial relationship with RideHail. They viewed themselves as repeatedly trying to "win" in a system in which they were disadvantaged.

RELATING TO ONE'S WORK: AMICABLE AND ADVERSARIAL STANCES

The two workplace games were associated with different stances—that is, with how workers understood their relationship to RideHail. The games differed in whether drivers knew for sure that they had won, and the certainty or doubt of their position in the game was in turn associated with their stance. When playing the relational game, drivers were certain of their position in the game, as success could be tracked via the app's ratings system, which was associated with drivers seeing themselves as winning and in a mutually beneficial relationship with RideHail. In contrast, when playing the efficacy game, drivers were uncertain about their position in the game, given that they could not track it via the app, which was

associated with drivers seeing themselves as losing and in an exploitative relationship with RideHail. In the remainder of the findings, I develop these stances and describe their relationship to workplace games.

An Amicable Stance: Certainty and the Winner Self

When playing the relational game, drivers could be sure a win was a win—five-star ratings, compliments, and badges confirmed that drivers were connecting with customers and providing good customer service. In accumulating "wins," drivers saw themselves as enjoying their work and as competent in it, and believed they were beneficiaries of the on-demand economy. Noting the enjoyment of driving, a driver said "I like driving. This gets me out to see beautiful views of the city, to hear cool things and cool stories, and meet people from all around the world. This job is so much freedom" (26). For many drivers who had previously only worked lower-skilled and/or dangerous jobs, these benefits were non-trivial. An immigrant from Southeast Asia described himself as living the American Dream. RideHail was a step up, paying more than his previous jobs as an overnight gas station attendant and catering waiter, and helping him to support his two children in college; it was "very comfortable," he said (4). RideHail helped a recent immigrant from Central Asia to learn American culture and improve his English. "At first, RideHail was hard [because of language skills]. I was too tired to study at night [after driving], but I learned [English] from RideHail—it's very good for me! In 2012, I was ESL Level 2. Now [2016], I've jumped 4 or 5 levels" (14). From 2016 to 2020, I could literally hear the driver's English continue to improve; he eventually passed a test to take a job as a municipal bus driver. Others emphasized how RideHail "saved [them] when …in a financial bind" (17), such as during a lay-off, allowing them to make "good money" (60). A driver with multiple auto-immune diseases who had not worked a steady job in more than fifteen years credited RideHail with "building [herself] back up to a person" (27). In her first year of driving, she got a credit card, then her own car, and then her own apartment. Others shared their success stories with friends and family and recruited them as drivers, sending texts to their new recruits "to keep them encouraged" (19). Overall, in the relational game drivers saw themselves as skillful in completing their work, which in turn led them to see their relationship with RideHail as mutually

beneficial. Summing up his relationship with RideHail, one driver said, “I think of what a great idea, what a great company. It’s a pleasure to work with them. To work *with* [emphasis added] them, because we’re partners, so I don’t say work for them. It’s a great partnership” (19). Optimistic about the future, another cheerfully said, “[RideHail] is here to stay, and I’ll be doing it until I retire (62).” He had almost twenty years until retirement.

An Adversarial Stance: Uncertainty and the Loser Self

When playing the efficiency game, drivers could never be sure that they had won—the app did not show if drivers were being assigned the best rides and did not accurately track their earnings. Indeed, every ride was a crapshoot, as customers could be excessively demanding and the algorithm could assign a low-paying ride, so drivers tried to manipulate the system to assign them higher-paying rides. Amidst this constant uncertainty, drivers saw themselves as lacking competence and losing in the on-demand economy, forced to do low-paid, low-status, physically punishing, and sometimes dangerous work. Fluctuating rates were “just a game and not a cool one either,” because each time “they drop their price, a little bit of the joy of driving for RideHail goes out the window” (32). Trapped in a game they could not win, drivers felt socially stigmatized for being part of the on-demand economy. One driver said:

> It’s not something I like to talk about a lot...In terms of what I do for preparation, what I do to analyze areas that are busy, the hours that I schedule it around. It’s not something I’m proud of either. A huge, huge part of the gig economy is they take advantage of people who don’t know any better. A lot of people that drive aren’t that smart at all, and I don’t want to be grouped in with the people that don’t understand the difference. (20)

Many drivers spoke wistfully about when they could quit and described their workdays as being trapped on a hamster wheel of rude customers, weak protections, and declining wages. Evoking Adam Smith, a driver clearly saw himself as losing: “With the gig economy, there is no future. There are no illusions of grandeur. It is what it is. People using the company for money. The company is using people for money. It’s Adam Smith—the invisible hand….our objectives are not the same” (20). And in perhaps the most extreme metaphor of exploitation and degradation, one driver compared his work to the world’s oldest profession, in which RideHail “is the pimp, the riders are the johns, and we just open our legs” (8).

For many who were accustomed to precarious work situations, RideHail was simply the latest in a long string of bad employers that had destroyed their bodies as they eked out a living. Pushing themselves to exhaustion, drivers complained of mental fatigue, "your brain is always sharp" (51), dizziness, because the "eyes [are] working all the time (51)" from "having to be in a high state of attention" (58), and PTSD-like symptoms (56). Company policies privileged customers, even if it meant exposing drivers to increased physical risk. All drivers, even those with allergies, were required to transport service animals—a policy one driver called "horseshit" (31). And drivers, but not riders, were required to provide evidence of mask-wearing during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, another sign "that they [RideHail] just don't care" (41). Overall, when playing the efficiency game, drivers were not able to see themselves as skillful or successful in the work, as they were painfully aware of the control wielded by RideHail and its algorithms. This led drivers to describe their relationship with RideHail as antagonistic and, at times, even destructive. Drivers saw themselves stuck in "a money game, making money for them…. a cog in a money-making machine" (18). Deeply pessimistic, they envisioned a bleak future. A driver said, "It's hard to have energy for the next month or next year—I am using my body, my energy. Future is way black for me. I can't see anything good in the future in this type of job" (14).

It is important to note that while these findings show how workers invest in workplace games, this does necessarily translate into long-term commitment, as turnover rates are high. Estimates using data from RideHail and self-reporting from drivers place annual turnover rates from 40 to 70 percent, with most drivers lasting less than six months (Hall and Krueger 2015, Campbell 2018). In my sample, turnover was also high, though, due to my sampling strategy, towards the lower end of the range. Moreover, while most drivers described being primarily engaged with just one game, drivers would sometimes stop playing a game after an incident. One driver (19) who was deeply invested in the relational game, calling himself a "partner who worked with RideHail," was temporarily banned from the platform between our first and second interview due to a dubious customer complaint. Even though he was reinstated, he harbored ill-will toward the platform, remarking that he "had finally realized what type

of situation he was in." He made no reference to playing either the relational or efficiency game in that interview and soon after being reinstated, he left the platform entirely. These findings suggest how important games are for workers to remain interested and engaged in their work.

DISCUSSION

This research starts to unravel the puzzle of how on-demand workers construct meaning in a setting that scholars theorize is ripe for worker alienation. Among ridehailing drivers, I found that instead of experiencing alienation, workers construct meaning through workplace games that revolve around the touchpoints of the customer and the app. In the relational game, workers create meaning by connecting with customers and crafting positive customer service encounters, which they quantify and track through the app's rating system. In the efficiency game, workers create meaning by completing work quickly at the highest pay rate, optimizing the ratio of their time to their pay; but, because drivers are unable to track their "wins" on the app, they create their own tracking systems and, at times, manipulate the algorithm. Below, I discuss how the identification and articulation of the relational game and the efficiency game offer insights for the literatures on meaning-making and workplace games.

Understanding Workplace Games as a Form of Meaning-Making

How workers make meaning or sense of their work environments has captured scholars' attention for more than a century (e.g., Baumeister 1991). Much of the literature has focused on organizational practices, or scaffolds, that foster group belonging (e.g., Carton 2018) and form an "encapsulated" (Pratt 2000) environment from which meaning is created and sustained. Indeed, these scaffolds are seen as so essential that the literature suggests that in settings without them, such as on-demand work, alienation ensues (e.g., Pratt and Ashford 2003). By contrast, I found in ridehailing that workers avoid becoming alienated from their day-to-day work because they are able to create meaning through workplace games. This is surprising as the literature typically considers workplace games to be social games, generated through exchanges between managers and coworkers (e.g., Sherman 2007). Recognizing workplace games as a crucial aspect of how on-demand workers create meaning raises important insights about the

nature of games in the context of changing work structures and emerging technologies—and ultimately about how the games affect workers' engagement, commitment, and retention in the on-demand setting.

Emphasizing the reinforcing scaffolds that point workers towards a particular game ("making out" in manufacturing work and the "tipping game "in service work; Burawoy 1976; Sherman 2007), prior research has consistently identified a single game in traditional organizations. By contrast, in on-demand work, the meaning-making process is fragmented, in part because emerging technologies do not scaffold the work in the same way. The digital platform in this setting directs individual workers on which rides to take and what route to follow but does not provide much support on how to find purpose in the work beyond the task of driving. Instead, workers rely on interactions with touchpoints—in this context, the customer and the app—to derive their own meaning at work, either by building connections with customers (the relational game) or by earning as much as possible (the efficiency game). Two different games are thus played in the same work setting. While both games provide a source of meaning for workers, *how* they construct meaning differs depending on the game. This study highlights that in settings where meaning is only loosely scaffolded by an organization and its technology, the important questions become what touchpoints (features) of the work are most central, how workers interpret and interact with said touchpoints, and what might indicate the quality of one's interactions.

Which game drivers play is significant for understanding the kinds of meaning they construct from their work and how they view their relationship with the platform company. Similar to the tipping game (e.g., Sherman 2007), when playing the relational game, workers focus on the social elements of the work, creating meaning by building connections and providing good customer service in order to secure high ratings. However, in the tipping game, workers learn the rules from coworkers, receive feedback directly from customers, and jockey among each other for status, while in ridehailing, drivers learn the rules of the relational game alone, given the solitary nature of the work. They receive feedback not from each other, but from the app's rating system, which allows them to track "wins" and achieve rewards, such as priority dispatch at airports. Experiencing the app as successful at quantifying their efforts, drivers

see it as a positive aspect of their experience—i.e., the app reflects aspects of the work that they view as having meaning. The digital platform is thus rendered a facilitator in the relational game.

When playing the efficiency game, workers aim to complete each ride as quickly as possible. In contrast to the tipping game and other service jobs in which people seek to create personalized interactions (e.g., Wrzesniewski et al. 2003), in the efficiency game customers were viewed as objects to be transported quickly without the pretense of forming a connection. Machine operators focus on managing the technology to optimize the ratio of effort to income, similar to manufacturing workers operating the machines in the making out game. Though piece-rates vary, operators know the rates and can adjust their efforts for each task. In contrast, RideHail drivers never know what ride the algorithm will assign or at what fare. This opacity makes it impossible for them to accurately track their "wins," leading drivers to create their own recording systems and, at times, manipulate the algorithm, often resulting in sanctions. Experiencing the app as unsuccessful at quantifying their efforts, drivers see it as a negative aspect of their experience—i.e., the app does not support aspects of the work that these drivers view as having meaning. The digital platform is thus rendered an opponent in the efficiency game.

In a large range of today's work settings, how workers view the managing technology (as a facilitator or as an opponent) could be a significant factor in workers' meaning-making and engagement. Ranganathan and Benson (2020) show in their study on seamstresses that when electronic counters accurately captured production, workers were more likely to embrace the technology, which, in turn, can motivate gamification and productivity improvements. However, such improvements did not occur when work was more complex and workers could not trust the algorithms' quantification metrics. Derivative traders did not trust the algorithms that replaced managers, making it comfortable for them to game the algorithm and take larger risks, which contributed to the 2009 mortgage crisis (Benuza 2019). As organizations are increasingly using technology to track and rate workers, future research should continue to explore how emerging technology extends traditional conceptualizations of meaning-making and workplace games.

Digital Platforms and the Implications for Workplace Games

As I have noted, a critical aspect of these games in ridehailing is how drivers view the role of the digital platform. The notion of being in (or out) of alignment with the platform is reminiscent of on-going research that examines how the configuration of actors in the service triangle results in different structures in order to mobilize shared interests (e.g., Biggart, 1989; MacDonald and Siranni 1996; Sallaz 2013). Drivers in this study described themselves as "winning" in part because they were aligned with the "right" side of the digital platform. That dynamic echoes the "interest alliance" between sales workers and an organization when the former readily adopts the organization's scripts as a means to increase sales (Leidner 1993). Extending this analogy, this research suggests that changes in the algorithms can support or undermine each game, with divergent implications for the platform company and its workforce.

In the relational game, changes to RideHail's reward systems have strengthened a relationship that workers already viewed as in alliance. In June 2017, Uber launched a "180 Days of Change" campaign to improve the driving experience. The changes included giving drivers access to even finer-grained measurements of their service encounters (i.e., badges for being a good conversationalist). Such changes reinforced the relational game by amplifying the social aspects of the work and making it more likely that drivers would follow the algorithm and continue playing—indeed, commitment is one of the outcomes of workplace games (Sallaz 2013). By contrast, in the efficiency game, increasingly opaque algorithms have exacerbated a relationship that workers already viewed as unsupportive. Over the years, changes to RideHail's algorithms have led many drivers to believe that the assignment of rides and offers of incentives were never aligned with their own interests. Even with financial incentives, drivers found their net pay declining; they also found it increasingly difficult to manipulate the algorithm in their favor, such as no longer being able to match with customers who were already in their car. Frustrating and unpredictable technical changes undermine the meaning systems of workers playing the efficiency game and make it less likely that they will continue to play the game. The question arises, then, whether workers will remain committed to an organization in which they feel constantly disadvantaged. Future

research should continue to explore how consent and commitment are manufactured with respect to these changing technologies and non-standard work arrangements.

Moreover, this study identifies how workers account for multiple sources of unpredictability in their work context. In studies of traditional organizations, scholars identified a single source of unpredictability that workers had to take into account in predicting their wins (i.e., piece-rate, the customer); by comparison, at RideHail drivers contend with two sources of unpredictability: the customer and the app's algorithms. In both games, workers felt they had more control over humans than machines (successfully managing the customer, and either following or unsuccessfully manipulating the algorithm), pointing to a more inverse relationship between humans and machines than often considered (cf., Suchman 1983; 2007; Brynjolfsson and McAffie 2014). It is particularly important for scholars of work to consider these interactive approaches for managing unpredictability as work becomes more complex, involving multiple actors and emerging technologies (Kellogg et al. 2020).

Changes in the contemporary economy, such as the rise of non-standard work arrangements (Katz and Krueger 2019; Spreitzer, Cameron and Garrett, 2017) and remote work (Bloom 2020; Rhymer 2020), suggest that fragmentary meaning-making, divergent workplace games, and possibly higher turnover may become increasingly prevalent. More individuals than ever are working in contract, temporary, or seasonal positions and, because of their limited exposure to an organization's scaffolds, these workers may create their own workplace games among other non-standard workers, viewing their managers and employee counterparts as a touchpoint to be managed. These questions have become even more relevant and urgent in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as unprecedented numbers of workers have found themselves working remotely and relying on unfamiliar technologies to complete their tasks (Cameron et al. 2021b). Being less embedded in the social context may make it harder for workers, especially new hires, to develop shared meanings, which can result in workplace games that may or may not align with an organization's goals. Overall, current changes to work arrangements suggest that the contemporary workplace may become even more fractured and "fissured" (Weil 2014).

Lower-Skilled Work and Workplace Games

Although scholars have recently been paying close attention to the gig economy, there are still very few management studies focused on gig workers, especially lower-paid workers. Prior research highlights how those in "bad jobs" change their self-concept or identity in order to find (positive) meaning (e.g., Ashforth et al. 2017; see Rosso et al. 2010 and Brief and Nord 1900 for a critique on the literature's preoccupation with meaningfulness). In contrast, this study finds that workers construct meaning through the structural features of the work—that is, finding meaning in *how* they work (i.e., enacting the work), not *why* they are working (i.e., for money or a mission). Although all drivers were, to some extent, financially dependent on driving, worries about finances did not crowd out other sources of meaning and were incorporated into larger schemas. Hitting earning targets were incorporated into the efficiency game, and in the relational game, the focus was on ratings as opposed to tip amounts. These findings thus contribute to discussions on how those in lower-paid jobs, in which worries about finances are often prominent, find additional ways of making meaning (e.g., Lamont 2006; Meuris and Leana 2018).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As in any research study, there are limitations to these claims and opportunities for future research. First, this study cannot answer why each worker played a specific workplace game. A reasonable hypothesis would be that workers pushed into driving by a shock event (e.g., job loss) might be more likely to engage in the efficiency game, while those attracted to driving (e.g., being lonely and wanting social interactions) may be more likely to play the relational game. My analysis comparing push and pull factors does not support this claim. In part, this is because it was hard to distinguish push and pull factors, as workers' lives and expressed motivations were fluid and complex. For example, a case that was particularly challenging to categorize involved a driver who was forced to internally migrate due to a natural disaster, so he turned to driving, as opposed to other work he was qualified for, because of the high wages and the schedule flexibility which allowed him to periodically return home to rebuild his house. Over the four years of data collection, another driver expressed multiple reasons for driving (e.g., to build an emergency fund, to pay bills after losing a job, to support her daughter's dream of opening a

business). Further, I found no relationship between work history or economic dependence and workplace games. Other research designs and sampling strategies (e.g., representative sample, longitudinal panels) could provide additional insights on why and when a worker may choose to play which game.

Second, as this is a theory generation paper, it can only propose a set of relationships as opposed to a causal relationship—thus, this study does not suggest that workplace games alone can generate consent or long-term commitment. Economic dependence, lack of alternative employment options, and enjoyment of the work are all reasons drivers may continue working. While my research finds that the app and the customer were the most salient touchpoints in ridehailing, I acknowledge there could have been others that did not come up in the interviews. And in other contexts, certain touchpoints may be more salient: in relationship-based service work (e.g., grocery delivery) customers may be the more salient touchpoint, and in work conducted entirely online (e.g., crowdwork), it may be the app. And while this context finds that the two touchpoints are experienced in parallel (within the same ride), other types of work may suggest a more sequential interaction. Third, my recruitment of drivers resulted in a sample that included drivers that were highly active and who had longer than average industry tenure (Katz and Krueger, 2016). However, the sample also included those with briefer work histories on the platform, suggesting that even individuals with shorter tenure play games, although perhaps not to the same level of involvement (e.g., only offering emotional support). And finally, although diverse in age and prior work experience, drivers in this study were predominantly men, all based in North America. Future research could explore the generalizability of these findings to platforms that have more female workers (e.g., care work) in which the relational aspects of the work are even more heavily emphasized.

Moreover, this research seeks to understand these games, not whether they are ultimately good or bad for the workers or the company, which is actually quite a complex question. Unequivocally, on-demand provides income earning opportunities to individuals who have been shut out of the traditional economy, often with more schedule flexibility than in similarly skilled jobs (Isaac 2018; Cameron and Rosenblat 2020). While workers playing the relational game described their experiences as generative and

enjoyable and some scholars points out the non-monetary benefits of driving (e.g., Raval and Dourish 2016; Kamaswaren, Cameron and Dillahunt, 2018), critical theorists would categorize the relational game as a form of control that "enchants" workers (Endrissat, Islam and Nopenny 2015) by emphasizing the feel-good nature of pleasing customers and reducing the inherent conflict between workers and management. These same critical scholars could describe the efficiency game—which is associated with accounts of burnout, stress, and negative emotions—as, ultimately, positive because it may signal disheartened workers beginning to question the terms of the labor exchange and manipulating the algorithm, ultimately undermining their long-term commitment to a platform designed to take advantage of workers. Indeed, in the quest for efficiency, has led some workers on work binges with life-threatening consequences for themselves and their family (Smiley, 2021). Future research should continue to explore the relationships with workplace games and long-term commitment in on-demand work.

CONCLUSION

This study has veered away from taking a normative position on on-demand work, instead centering workers' lived experiences. I find that workers take matters into their own hands, creating two workplace games—relational and efficiency—that create meaning and generate engagement. But not all games can be won, leading to divergent implications for workers and organizations. Thus, the next time you're in a car, don't ask your driver if they like the work or even how much they are making; ask instead, "What game are you playing, and are you winning?"

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Appendix

Images 1-5: Images Relating to Relational Game

Image 1: Snacks and Drinks for Customers (Source: Reddit, Author's personal copy too dark)

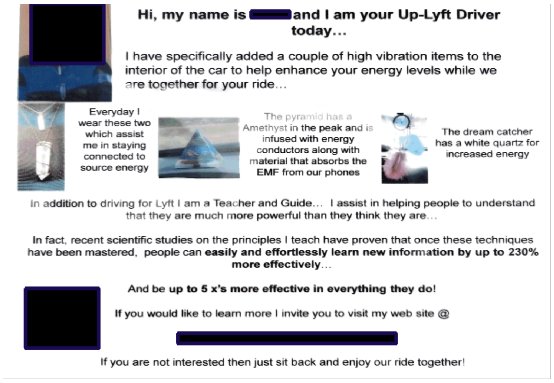

Image 3: Flyer to Spark Conversations about the Metaphysical and to Share Information on In-car Items to Enhance Customers' Well-Being (Source: Author)

Image 2: Party Car on a Friday night for Customers to Enjoy (Source: Reddit, Author's personal copy too dark)

Image 4: Unicorn Decals on Car Ceiling to Spark Conversations about Childhood (Source: Author)

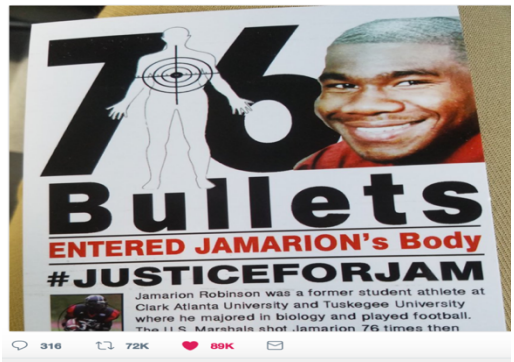

Image 5: Flyer to Spark Conversations on Social Justice Issues with Customers (Source: Twitter)

Images 6-9: Images Relating to Efficiency Games

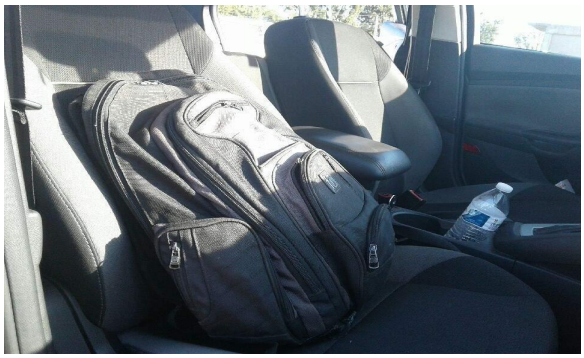

Image 6: Backpack as Object to Enforce Physical Distance between Driver and Customer (Source: Author)

Date	Miles	Rideshare Mileage	Uber Rides	Uber Earnings	Lyft Rides	Lyft Earnings	Total Rides	Total Time	$/Hr	Total Earnings	Est. Fuel Cost	Tithe	Savings
3.1.18	31.00	13.63	1	$4.44	3	$18.09	4	1.60	$14.08	$22.53	$2.88	$2.25	$17.39
3.2.18	95.20	45.02	14	$93.15	0	$0.00	14	4.18	$22.27	$93.15	$8.85	$9.32	$74.98
3.3.18	98.30	40.31	10	$67.11	0	$0.00	10	5.33	$12.58	$67.11	$6.39	$6.71	$54.01
3.5.18	28.70	8.77	2	$18.26	2	$5.39	4	1.50	$15.77	$23.65	$1.87	$2.37	$19.42
3.6.18	47.70	20.60	2	$13.26	1	$12.48	3	1.27	$20.32	$25.74	$3.10	$2.57	$20.07
3.8.18	8.00	2.38	2	$12.10	0	$0.00	2	0.50	$24.20	$12.10	$0.74	$1.21	$10.15
3.9.18	124.20	57.55	9	$64.40	5	$46.87	14	5.15	$21.61	$111.27	$11.55	$11.13	$88.59
3.10.18	177.00	85.00	4	$49.03	2	$37.73	6	4.37	$19.87	$86.76	$16.46	$8.68	$61.62
3.12.18	114.20	53.51	1	$2.25	1	$47.21	2	2.40	$20.61	$49.46	$11.31	$4.95	$33.21
3.13.18	31.10	14.08	5	$27.73	0	$0.00	5	1.38	$20.05	$27.73	$3.08	$2.77	$21.88
3.14.18	127.90	49.97	6	$76.42	1	$2.62	7	3.75	$21.08	$79.04	$12.66	$7.90	$58.47
3.15.18	38.40	15.11	5	$25.70	2	$7.81	7	1.95	$17.18	$33.51	$3.80	$3.35	$26.36
3.17.18	44.00	23.99	1	$4.01	4	$62.32	5	1.50	$44.22	$66.33	$2.86	$6.63	$56.84
3.19.18	47.90	20.35	4	$39.56	0	$0.00	4	2.00	$19.78	$39.56	$4.74	$3.96	$30.86
3.20.18	19.80	4.90	3	$10.50	1	$3.44	4	1.00	$13.94	$13.94	$1.96	$1.39	$10.59
3.21.18	111.40	51.19	8	$61.39	1	$23.46	9	4.50	$18.86	$84.85	$11.03	$8.49	$65.34
3.22.18	55.00	22.84	6	$37.41	1	$5.75	7	2.32	$18.63	$43.16	$5.50	$4.32	$33.34
3.23.18	53.50	27.64	4	$28.14	1	$4.52	5	1.93	$16.89	$32.66	$5.35	$3.27	$24.04
3.24.18	206.30	77.11	14	$73.79	9	$47.96	23	9.27	$14.73	$121.75	$20.63	$12.18	$88.95
3.25.18	113.00	51.69	6	$65.15	1	$2.62	7	3.20	$21.18	$67.77	$11.41	$6.78	$49.58
3.26.18	28.90	12.53	1	$17.46	0	$0.00	1	0.79	$21.98	$17.46	$2.92	$1.75	$12.80
3.27.18	37.60	14.52	4	$21.75	0	$0.00	4	1.40	$15.54	$21.75	$3.80	$2.18	$15.78
3.28.18	29.30	12.53	1	$13.10	0	$0.00	1	0.80	$16.43	$13.10	$2.96	$1.31	$8.83
3.29.18	4.40	0.79	1	$2.25	0	$0.00	1	0.15	$14.73	$2.25	$0.44	$0.23	$1.58
3.30.18	67.20	27.50	7	$31.63	4	$21.20	11	3.50	$15.09	$52.83	$6.79	$5.28	$40.76
3.31.18	161.90	72.55	3	$20.90	3	$61.30	6	4.72	$17.43	$82.20	$16.35	$8.22	$57.63
Total	1,901.90	826.06	124	$880.89	42	$410.77	166	69.46		$1,291.66	$179.44	$129.17	$983.05
Average	73.15	31.77	5	$33.88	2	$15.80	6	2.67	$19.19	$49.68	$6.90	$4.97	$37.81
Projected	1,901.90	826.06	124	$880.89	42	$410.77	166	69.46		$1,291.66	$179.44	$129.17	$983.05

Days Driven	26.00	Days Projected	26.00
Days in March	31.00	Miles Projected	1,901.90
% of month	83.87%	Mileage Efficiency	43.43%

Image 8: Spreadsheet Tracking Drivers' Expenses (Source: Reddit)

Image 7: Sign in Backseat Pocket Reminding Customers of Boundaries (Source: Author)

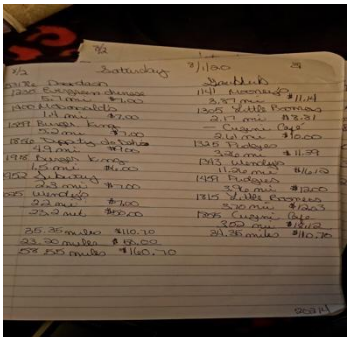

Image 9: Handwritten Tracking of Expenses (Source: Reddit)

Informant Inventory

ID	Gender	Race/ Ethnic Group	City	Expressed Motivation	Length of Time Driving, in months	Number of Rides, Across Platforms	Drives for Multiple Platforms
1	M	Black	Ann Arbor, MI	I; Fired	5	250	N
2	M	Black	Ann Arbor, MI	I; No raise at curent job; Curious	4	12	N
3	M	Black	Ann Arbor, MI	I; In-between jobs	12	--	N
4	M	Black	Ann Arbor, MI	I; In-between jobs	18	5040	N
5	F	Black+	Ann Arbor, MI	I; Unexpected expenses	6	10	N
6	M	Black+	Ann Arbor, MI	I; In-between jobs; Need schedule flexibility for sick child	3	2000	N
7	F	White	Ann Arbor, MI	I; In-between jobs	24	500	Y
8	M	White	Ann Arbor, MI	I; In-between jobs	7	3000	Y
9	M	White	Ann Arbor, MI	I; Not enough overtime at other job	36	2250	Y
10	F	White+	Ann Arbor, MI	I; Need schedule flexibility for school	2	70	N
11	M	White+	Ann Arbor, MI	I; In-between jobs	20	4000	N
12	M	White+	Ann Arbor, MI	I; Laid off	18	1500	Y
13	F	White	Austin, TX	Social; Likes to be busy	12	125	Y
14	M	Middle Eastern+	Charlottlesville, VA	I; Couldn't find other job	36	--	Y
15	F	Black+	Chicago, IL	I; FT job reduced hours	12	500 - 800	N
16	M	White	Chicago, IL	I; Quit other job	18	1700	N
17	F	White	Denver, CO	I; Need extra money for car payment; Social	6	536	N
18	M	White	Denver, CO	I; Need extra money for student loans	14	657	Y
19	M	Black	Detroit, MI	I; Laid off	18	5000	N
20	M	Black	Detroit, MI	I; In-between jobs	36	8000	Y
21	M	Southeast Asian	Detroit, MI	I; Need schedule flexibility because primary caregiver	8	1500	N
22	M	Middle Eastern+	Detroit, MI	I; Laid off; Likes being busy: Supplement Social Security	36	1150	Y
23	M	Middle Eastern+	Detroit, MI	I; Need extra money to pay student loans	9	3000	Y
24	F	White	Detroit, MI	I; Quit prior job because of racist boss	1	200	N
25	F	White	Detroit, MI	I; Laid off	14	1200	Y
26	F	White	Detroit, MI	I; Pay for medications; Social	18	500	Y
27	F	White	Detroit, MI	I; Pay for medications	15	1700	Y
28	M	White	Detroit, MI	I; Save money for retirement and to help mom	11	5000	Y
29	M	White	Detroit, MI	I; In-between jobs	33	18000	Y
30	M	White	Detroit, MI	I; Need I to supplement side business	18	2000	Y
31	M	White	Detroit, MI	I; Need money for daughter's college fund; Social	14	1700	N

* --: Either driver did not know and did not want to check app in interview, or author forgot to ask.
*+ Indicates indivdiual was a first-generation immigrant.
* I indicates "Income."
* NB indicates "non-binary."

Informant Inventory

ID	Gender	Race/ Ethnic Group	City	Expressed Motivation	Length of Time Driving, in months	Number of Rides, Across Platforms	Drives for Multiple Platforms
32	M	White	Detroit, MI	I; Could not find other work	18	2100	Y
33	F	Black	Houston, TX	I; Laid off; Need to support adult daughter	60	800	N
34	M	White	Lewiston/Bangor, ME	I; Not enough I from other job	0.5	10	Not an option
35	M	Black	Los Angeles, CA	I; Wanted extra money for grandchildren	18	1000	N
36	F	White	Missoula, MT	I; Need schedule flexibility as a new mother; Curious	4	400	Not an option
37	M	White	Missoula, MT	I; Holds mutliple jobs	9	1500	Not an option
38	M	Black+	Montreal, Quebec	I; Couldn't find other work	18	--	Not an option
39	F	White	New Haven, CT	I; Laid off	9	580	Y
40	M	Southeast Asian	New York City, NY	I	18	1500	Y
41	M	POC	New York City, NY	I; Need schedule flexibility due to illness	30	4500	Y
42	M	White	New York City, NY	I; Need schedule flexibility due to illness	30	6500	Y
43	F	Black	Philadelphia, PA	I; Need schedule flexibility due to eldercare	12	4000	N
44	M	Black+	Philadelphia, PA	I; Pays more than union job	20	4000	N
45	M	White	Philadelphia, PA	I; Starting a business	1	350	N
46	F	White	Port Huron, MI	I; Extra expenses; Likes being busy	4	300-350	N
47	NB	Black	Sacramento, CA	I; Quit prior job because of racist boss	3	356	Y
48	M	Hispanic	San Francisco, CA	I; Likes being busy	3	200	N
49	NB	Hispanic+	San Francisco, CA	I; Need schedule flexibility	2.5	150	N
50	M	White+	Seattle, WA	I; Social	12	500	N
51	M	Southeast Asian+	Washington, DC	I; Need schedule flexibility due to illness	6	--	Y
52	M	Black	Washington, DC	I; Need schedule flexibility	24	5000	N
53	M	Black	Washington, DC	I; Not enough I from other job	8	1000	N
54	M	Black	Washington, DC	I; Need schedule flexibility	4	650	N
55	M	Black	Washington, DC	I; Laid off	18	500	N
56	M	Black	Washington, DC	I; Laid off	10	--	Y
57	F	Black+	Washington, DC	I; Pay for daughter's college	30	1500	Y
58	F	Black Hispanic+	Washington, DC	I; Holds mutliple jobs	10	--	N
59	M	Black+	Washington, DC	I; No more overtime at other job	1	25	N
60	M	Black+	Washington, DC	I; Quit prior job due to boss; Need schedule flexibility due to school	7	2000	N
61	M	Black+	Washington, DC	I; Not enough hours; Need schedule flexibility	6	1200	Y
62	M	Black+	Washington, DC	I; In-between jobs	5	--	Y
63	M	Hispanic+	Washington, DC	I; Laid off	60	4000	Y

* --: Either driver did not know and did not want to check app in interview, or author forgot to ask.
*+ Indicates indivdiual was a first-generation immigrant.
* I indicates "Income."
* NB indicates "non-binary."