

Ludic Surveillance and Semogenesis of Choice in *The Uber Game*

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News gamification integrates video game mechanics such as points, badges, and challenges, transforming the experience of news reading into an interactive, competitive process. This commodifies users' news consumption, aligning it with the logic of neoliberal self-entrepreneurship and engagement metrics. To this end, this study examines how the gamified news feature story *The Uber Game* transforms choice into a semiotic mechanism of control, where *ludic surveillance*, regulates players' decision-making through algorithmic incentives and constraints. Drawing on Halliday's concept of *semogenesis*, this study argues that *The Uber Game* encodes choice as a structured process, where players navigate a predetermined system of algorithmic incentives and semiotic constraints. *The Uber Game*, developed by *The Financial Times*, offers players a first-hand experience of life as a full-time Uber driver, immersing them in the precarious conditions of the gig economy. The study unravels how the game simulates platformized conditioning and labour discipline within Uber's broader system. The semiosis of choices the players enact is not isolated within the game context, but rather is part of a socially conditioned discourse that is related to gig work and corporate algorithms. By mapping these dimensions, this study not only analyses meaning-making within the gamified system but also reflects on the broader gig economy structure that Uber exemplifies.

Keywords: gamification, gig work, Halliday, semiotics of choice

1. Introduction

Gamified culture now permeates nearly every aspect of contemporary life, from health (self-tracking apps) and news consumption (gamified news) to education and work (gig economy platforms). Gamification, whether in news media, gig work platforms, or other digital environments, reflects broader transformations in media technologization and neoliberal digital labour. While platforms promote user participation through gamified incentives, "feedback loops", and interface constraints, these systems operate structured mechanisms of control and "surveillant capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019). Gamified news interfaces place users at the centre of meaning-making, allowing them to participate in sequential representations and non-linear storytelling through their interactions with the game interface (Fawzy, 2019, 2020). News gamification integrates video game mechanics such as points, badges, and challenges, transforming the experience of news reading into an interactive, competitive process (Fawzy, 2020). This commodifies users' news consumption, aligning it with the logic of neoliberal self-entrepreneurship and engagement metrics (Fawzy, 2019; Ferrer Conill, 2018).

News consumption is thus transformed into an interactive and engaging experience, incorporating playful elements to enhance users' participation (Ferrer Conill, 2016, p. 41). By integrating game mechanics, news gamification introduces innovative formats designed to reinforce journalism's democratic and civic functions, particularly in engaging younger users (Ferrer Conill & Karlsson, 2015, p. 357). This aligns with Jenkins' (2006) concept of *convergence culture*, where media consumers are integrated into production processes through interactivity and participatory engagement. News gamification exemplifies this convergence by integrating game mechanics, aesthetics, and interactivity into journalistic discourse, transforming news consumption into an engaging, participatory experience (Burke, 2016; Ferrer Conill, 2016; Fawzy, 2019). By incorporating elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, and interactive storytelling, gamified news reconfigures the semiotic and discursive norms of journalism, positioning the user as both a reader and player. This shift from a reading mode to a playing mode

reflects broader transformations in news industry, requiring an examination of the semiotic, discursive, and ideological implications of this evolving genre.

Reconfiguring agency through technological affordances, gamified news interfaces blur the distinction between journalist and user, allowing users to “play” the role of investigative reporters while assuming the task of participating in the news meaning-making process (Fawzy, 2019). However, while these platforms promote agency and personalization, they do so through specific mechanisms of *ludic surveillance* (Whitson, 2013) that predefine the range of available choices, ensuring that users’ engagement remains curated and commercially beneficial. To this end, this study examines how the gamified news feature story *The Uber Game* transforms choice into a semiotic mechanism of control, where ludic surveillance regulates players’ decision-making through algorithmic incentives and constraints.

The Uber Game, developed by *The Financial Times*, offers players a first-hand experience of life as a full-time Uber driver, immersing them in the precarious conditions of the gig economy. This interactive news game challenges players to balance earnings, expenses, and personal responsibilities. Recognized for its impact, *The Uber Game* received a Gold Medal at the annual *Serious Play Awards*, which celebrates excellence in game-based learning and simulation. Drawing on Halliday’s concept of *semogenesis* (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999), this study argues that *The Uber Game* encodes choice as a structured process, where players navigate a predetermined system of algorithmic incentives and semiotic constraints.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical and methodological framework, addressing ludic surveillance, the semiosis of choice, and the walkthrough methodology used for data collection. The analysis then follows in three sub-sections, examining how players navigate limited, pre-structured choices during play, how they perform forms of emotional labour, and how algorithmic nudging and behavioural conditioning are enacted through the interface. The discussion interprets these findings through a surveillance lens. Finally, the conclusion summarises the paper’s main contributions and identifies avenues for future research.

2. Theories and methods

2.1. Ludic surveillance

Whitson (2013, p. 169) argues that “digitized gamification leverages the feedback tools from games as part and parcel of this care of the self”. In other words, surveillance in gamified systems is no longer a top-down system; rather, it becomes internalized as a self-disciplinary mechanism. The players watch their progress and modify their own behaviour through algorithmic feedback loops that translate human activity into quantifiable data. Rooted in the ethos of *you are your badges*, gamification operationalizes algorithm-governed activities to produce prescribed behaviours through the codification of communication resources and social practices (Fawzy, 2020), as well as the logic of surveillance and competition (Bacalja et al., 2024). In many cases, gamification is employed as a convergent mechanism that justifies mass surveillance and as the defining structure of control in digital society (Garfield, 2019, p. 700). To this end, gamification, particularly in the context of gig work, can be interpreted as a practice of “ludefaction” (Kirkpatrick, 2015) and “exploitationware” (Bogost, 2011), governing playing activity with capitalist doctrine, which reinforces (and potentially intensifies) the existing state of affairs (Bacalja, 2024).

“Gaming is the execution of algorithmic codes in coordination with the operation of a player” (Whitson, 2013, p. 163). The player engages with the game mechanism and, while playing, becomes part of a process involving algorithmic feedback. From this perspective, gamification exemplifies an instance of “post-panoptic surveillance” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987),

shaping a distinct form of post-digital agency (Thomas, 2024), wherein players' choices are regulated and directed through their intra-actions with a gamified interface.¹ Shifting from Foucault's (1988) notion of *panoptic gaze* (centralized surveillance) to algorithmic modulation, where control is decentralized and continuously adapted, gamified surveillance is arguably no longer a power technique; rather, it is a cultural tool, enacted and maintained by interacting social actors rather than imposed by a singular authority. Gamified practices simulate putative players to be "competing, self-directed, constantly and voluntarily surveilled consumers" (Tulloch & Randell-Moon, 2018).

Within the context of gamification, players are engaged in playful modes of surveillance in which "[t]he interiority of the self is made recognizable and, more importantly, actionable first via quantification, and then by the algorithms that frame that body as something that can be measured, quantified, and then acted upon" (Whitson, 2013, p. 169). However, while Whitson (2013, p. 164) argues that the surveillance instantiated through gamification is still pleasurable, I will argue that it is (also) both pressurizing and constraining. Rather than treating choice as a transparent reflection of individual agency, the concept of ludic surveillance reveals how players' choices are shaped by ludic designs that fragment, track, and reassemble their behaviour into digital badges and scores. Surveillance, in this sense, is not a top-down mechanism of control but a semiotic and material process of fragmentation and recomposition. Differently put, choice within the context of ludic surveillance is no longer an expression of individual autonomy but an effect of algorithmic entanglements.

2.2. Halliday's semiotics of choice

Halliday's (2013) notion of the semiosis of choice is centred on the idea that *text is meaning and meaning is choice*. Within his Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework, meaning-making is interpreted as constantly the result of selected specific choices from a network of potential options, which are not random but are motivated by the context. These choices occur at different levels of the discourse and the different *metafunctions* (Halliday, 1994). For example, at the lexicogrammar level, the network of potential options includes choosing between a declarative, interrogative, or imperative mood to realize interpersonal meanings. As for the *textual* metafunction, it includes choosing conjunctions, continuatives, and other elements to organize meaning into a coherent flow. The *ideational* metafunction involves selecting a process type (e.g., material, mental, relational) to represent experience. The *interpersonal* metafunction, on the other hand, is realized through choices that establish social relations, negotiate attitudes, and position interactants within structures of power and obligation.

Halliday argues that all human action, and particularly semiotic activity (meaning-making), is structured around choice. To mean something is always to choose this rather than that. However, Halliday (2013, pp. 15-16) identifies a limiting case of such choice, which he calls "choice in polarity", involving binary options such as the following:

- Doing this rather than not doing it.
- Meaning this rather than not meaning it.
- Meaning this rather than meaning not-this.

To explain, polarity involves the presence or absence of meaning/action, as well as the contrast between opposing meanings. Every act of meaning is thus inherently contrastive and evaluative — it defines itself by what it excludes. For Halliday, this principle underlies the semiotic and

¹ See Barad (2007) for the concept of *intra-action*.

pragmatic functioning of any communicative system, from grammar to social interaction. To this end, Halliday highlights the limited nature of semiotic choices. He interprets choice as a structured procedure rather than an entirely autonomous action. This process operates within three key constraints: “(1) in a given environment, (2) with a given output, (3) at a given probability.” (Halliday, 2013, p. 19), corresponding to the following three paradigms:

- there are specified conditions under which choice is available.
- there is a specified realization of whichever of options is selected.
- there is a specifiable likelihood that any one choice will be made. (Halliday, 2013, p. 19)

That is, choices are not limitless but are conditioned by predefined circumstances, ensuring that only certain options are available at any given moment. Additionally, each selection leads to a determined realization, meaning that the consequences of a choice are already embedded within the system. Finally, choices are not made randomly but follow anticipated patterns, influenced by external factors such as social norms, linguistic systems, or technological constraints. At the heart of this framework lies *semogenesis*, the unfolding of meaning across three interrelated dimensions: *phylogeny* (evolutionary meaning potentials), *ontogeny* (individual development of meaning), and *logogeny* (the real-time construction of meaning in discourse, Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999).

In this study, these categories are transposed from language to the algorithmic and ludic semiosis of *The Uber Game* and its broader implications for platformized labour, as follows:

- The *phylogenetic* dimension is reflected in the historical evolution of platform discourse; that is, how claims of autonomy and entrepreneurship have become encoded in interface design and player options as surveillance mechanisms.
- The *ontogenetic* dimension appears in players' learning curve: as they progress, they internalize platform logics of efficiency, ratings, and self-surveillance.
- The *logogenetic* dimension captures moment-to-moment gameplay, where discourse and algorithmic choices unfold, shaping players' decisions.

For example, in Hallidian theory, phylogeny concerns the historical evolution of meaning potential within a semiotic system. In the context of the current study, this can be extended to describe the historical evolution of the platform's semiotic repertoire. Or in other words, how the discourses, interface logics, and norms of gig work have developed over time. Thus, the study interprets “evolution” semiotically as the historical and cultural evolution of meaning systems that organize digital labour. By linking these dimensions within the context of *The Uber Game*, my aim is to show how Halliday's semiosis of choice can illuminate algorithmic governance and the illusion of autonomy in platform games.

2.3. Methodology

To analyse the semiotic and algorithmic structuring of *The Uber Game*, this study employs the *walkthrough* method (Light et al., 2018), which facilitates a systematic exploration of digital platforms by examining their design, affordances, and regulatory mechanisms. This method is particularly useful for understanding how the game interface structures players' choices, nudges behaviour, and enacts algorithmic governance through interaction design. The walkthrough followed a step-by-step process that involved:

- (a) Accessing *The Uber Game*²
- (b) Onboarding as a new player, and documenting how the game introduces players to the economic conditions of gig work, including the financial constraints and incentive structures that shape decision-making.
- (c) Interacting with the game's affordances, such as ride acceptance, surge pricing, passenger ratings, and financial trade-offs, to trace how the platform nudges players toward specific labour patterns.
- (d) Incorporating a planned disconnecting period between two rounds of gameplay. This separation was introduced to observe how the platform engages players upon re-entry and to try different playing techniques.
- (e) Comparing two pre-planned difficulty settings, where the first round of play adopted the “Easier” mode and the second, the “Harder” mode. This approach allowed for a comparative analysis of how difficulty settings alter the game’s affordances, constraints, and behavioural incentives.

To extend the methodological depth and address players’ experience more directly and to complement the first-person perspective method with reflections of other participants (e.g. a second-person methodology), the walkthrough analysis was complemented by two secondary data sets. The first comprised 42 players’ comments posted on *Hacker News* (2017). These comments, written by both casual players and individuals with lived experience in gig work, offered reflections on the game’s illusion of agency and depictions of economic hardship to have a better understanding of how they themselves negotiated the game’s constrained semiosis of choice. The second complementary data set drew on the Financial Times feature *Uber: The uncomfortable view from the driving seat* (Hook, 2017), which included interviews with real Uber drivers in San Francisco. Their testimonies have helped the study evaluate to what extent the game’s design captures the precarity and surveillance mechanisms underlying platform labour.

In interpreting the game’s ludic mechanisms, I also drew on prior empirical and semiotic analyses of gig driving in the Egyptian context—particularly Uber and DiDi (Fawzy, 2025b, 2025c). This approach aligns with Whitson’s (2013, p. 171) observation that “understanding how these communities are formed around the rules of play is important to understand not only gamified self-surveillance but gamified participatory surveillance”. These studies provided both conceptual and comparative grounding, which examine the interface-centered construction of gig personas, platformized tempo-spatial surveillance, and the “Uberization” of culture in the Global South economies.

3. Analysis

Through the ideational metafunction, which is linked to the phylogenesis dimension, the game interface conveys meaning by presenting a series of scenarios that illustrate how economic circumstances are not merely the result of players’ agentive choices but are shaped by external constraints. At the level of ontogenesis, the game structures the player’s individual learning experience, shaping their evolving understanding of gig work as they progress through different scenarios. By continuously exposing players to decisions framed through financial and reputational risk (e.g., losing status, missing earnings, or lowering ratings), the game reinforces the habit of prioritizing platform incentives over personal strategy (Miller et al., 2018). The

² This can be accessed freely at: <https://ig.ft.com/uber-game/>

interpersonal dimension of the game interface, notably linked to the paradigm of ontogenesis, through which the ludic structures shape players' engagement through persuasion rather than direct coercion, reinforces a form of participatory surveillance.

However, the conversational tone of the game obscures its hierarchical control, framing players' actions as independent rather than structurally determined. Casual phrasing (e.g., *Do you get a receipt?*, *Want to go for it?*) creates an illusion of relatability and empowerment, making playing seem like a neutral personal choice rather than a structurally conditioned necessity. Additionally, modal expressions, directives, and incentive-driven messaging frame surveillance mechanisms as neutral facts rather than game-imposed constraints. Modal expressions such as *busiest times for rides*, *peak period doesn't start until 10 PM*, and *Want to go for it?* subtly present the game structuring of playing time and decision-making as an objective reality rather than a contingent choice. The textual metafunction further reinforces this surveillance system through reward structures that emphasize efficiency, reliability, and economic survival, subtly framing the player's role as a compliant gig worker rather than an autonomous agent. Based on this, the following sub-sections group players' choices based on how they structure agency and control within the game.

3.1. Structural constraints and pseudo-autonomy

The opening screen of the game, after two introductory screens, illustrates how players face limited, pre-structured choices before they even begin. The distinction between "Easier" and "Harder" difficulty highlights these constraints, shaping the player's experience from the outset. Rather than offering true autonomy, the game presents a pre-determined set of economic conditions, reinforcing the notion that players must navigate a working environment shaped by systemic limitations rather than personal preference.

Through the ideational metafunction, the game reinforces that economic circumstances are not merely agentive choices but are structured by external constraints. For example, the instruction in (1) acknowledges bodily sensation (*aching legs*, *wave of exhaustion*) yet immediately shifts back to progress tracking, foregrounding the quantification of labour rather than workers' well-being.³

- (1) *You turn off the app for a bit to stop the car and stretch your aching legs, but a wave of exhaustion hits you. You decide to call it a day. Today, you drove for 12 hours, completed 22 rides, and earned \$144 in fares. You still need 29 rides before Friday to get the bonus.*

The binary choice exists between resting (*call it a day*) or continuing work (*29 rides before Friday*), framing rest as a guilty indulgence rather than a necessity. The phrase *You decide to call it a day* suggests agency, but the system's quantification of goals undermines this autonomy. Here, ride count is foregrounded as the dominant evaluative framework, while health, satisfaction, and work-life balance remain secondary considerations. Players' reactions in online forums demonstrate this sense of forced constraint, as shown by the comment of one player (2). Another responds, reframing this frustration through social critique, as shown in (3).

- (2) It really annoyed me that the game forced me to make errors. I don't oversleep and I have a generous data plan... The feeling of "this is hard" was lost and was replaced by "this is not a useful demonstration".

³ Discourse produced by the algorithms of *The Uber Game* is given in italics in the examples, while comments belonging to the players without italics.

(3) Whether intentionally or unintentionally you're demonstrating the concept of privilege... You want to play the game that you want because you believe yourself to be a rational, intelligent, logical person. You believe you can win the game. But the type of person that drives for Uber and Lyft in real life [doesn't] have the privilege to choose.

These exchanges reveal how the game's pseudo-autonomy is both felt and contested by players, some perceiving the lack of meaningful choice as a design flaw, others recognizing it as a representational strategy that mirrors structural economic constraints. The dialogue between these positions corresponds to Halliday's (2013) notion of choice polarity, discussed in Section 2.2, exemplifying how play is bounded by the game's predefined ludicity and surveillance mechanisms. A clear example of ludic surveillance is shown in the game's instruction in (4).

(4) *You notice there's surge pricing in the Sunset District. The 3x fare is attractive, but Sunset is 30 minutes away.*

Buttons: *Chase the surge*

Don't chase the surge

The buttons seem to offer a neutral choice, but it is actually a structured trade-off dictated by the game's incentive system. The game subtly "nudges" (Hansen & Jespersen, 2013; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Turner, 2024) players toward platform-preferred behaviours by describing the 3x fare as "attractive" while framing the 30-minute commute as a calculated risk. This binary framing obscures alternative options, such as resting or waiting for closer surges, reinforcing the game's control over players' semiosis of choices while preserving the illusion of independence. From an ontogenetic perspective, the player gradually learns to prioritize system incentives over personal strategy, reinforcing a behavioural pattern of continuous engagement. Additionally, through a logogenesis lens, the game shapes how players' decisions are framed linguistically. Modal expressions like *is attractive* guide perception, subtly persuading players without direct coercion. The phrase *You notice there's surge pricing* conversationalises the platform's incentive structure, making it seem like a natural, everyday part of gig work rather than a calculated mechanism.

An illustration of how this is presented to the player is shown in Figure 1, which represents a work-life trade-off, where the player must choose between social engagement (*Yes*) or continued labour (*No*). Ontogenetically, the player learns that rejecting social plans in favour of work becomes a normalized behavioural pattern. Logogenesis is evident in how the text constructs social engagement as an optional distraction rather than an integral part of life. Other players also recognized this algorithmic nudging. One remarked as shown in (5).

(5) It's still railroading the player in a very unrealistic way that has less to do with "privilege" ... and more to do with "I'm going to shove the intended storyline down the player's throat within 30 seconds".

Another player called it "a very rigged game with some sort of agenda behind it". Such comments show that players see through the illusion of agency and understand it as central to the game's design — a ludic reflection of real-world platform surveillance and labour coercion.

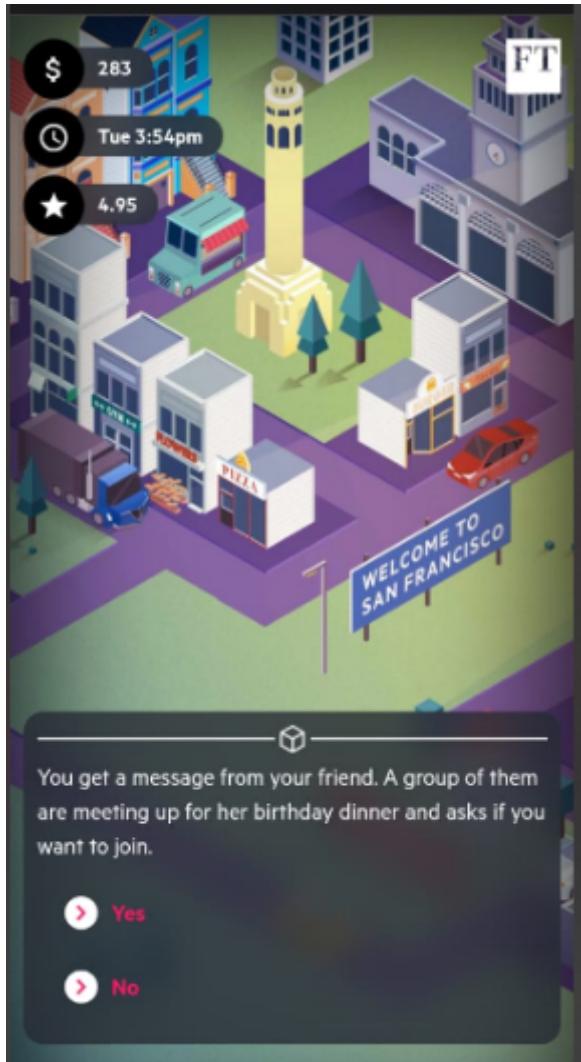


Figure 1. Binary framing that simplifies a complex socioeconomic reality

3.2. Affective and participatory surveillance

In *The Uber Game*, players must perform similar forms of emotional labour, such as being polite, conversational, and accommodating, to secure high ratings and maximize earnings. The game's choice architecture reflects this hidden expectation of affective labour. For instance, after picking up a friendly passenger, the player must decide whether to rate her "5 stars" or "3 stars", implicitly linking sociability to platform success. This structured decision-making reinforces mutual surveillance, where both drivers and passengers monitor each other's behaviours based on emotional expectations.

A striking example emerges in a scenario where passengers bring In-N-Out burgers into the car, Figure 2-Left, forcing the driver to choose between refusing the food (risking a lower rating) or accepting it (taking on unpaid cleaning labour). From a phylogenetic perspective, these micro-decisions accumulate over time, shaping behavioural conditioning. The choice between *Say Something* or *Keep Quiet* is not an isolated event but part of a long-term ontogenetic adaptation process, gradually conditioning players to prioritize passenger satisfaction over personal well-being. On a smaller scale, it also builds upon interactions from previous screen interfaces, reinforcing the idea that each decision is shaped by prior engagements and learned behaviours.

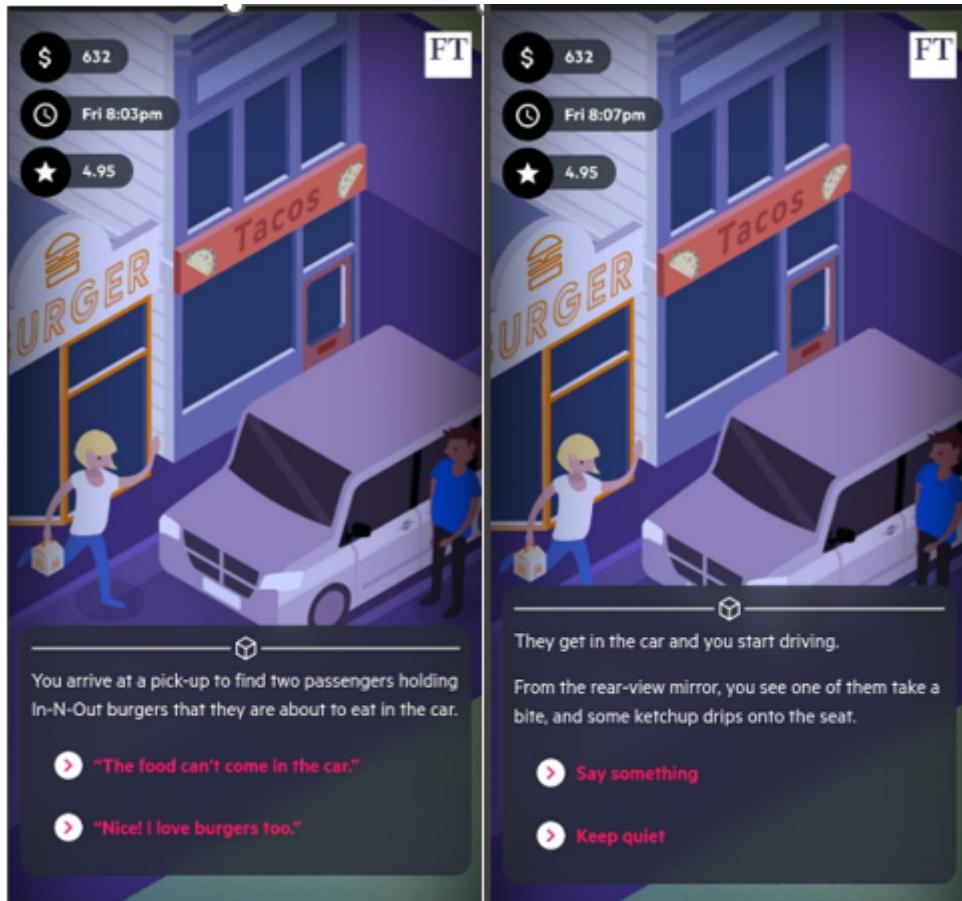


Figure 2. Affective and performative labour

Figure 3 further emphasizes this notion. It illustrates how the player is faced with a dilemma, whether to *insist* on following parking regulations or *relent* to the passenger's request. The framing of the choice highlights how players must navigate competing pressures: adhering to rules that protect them from fines and demerits versus prioritizing passengers' satisfaction, which directly affects their rating and income.

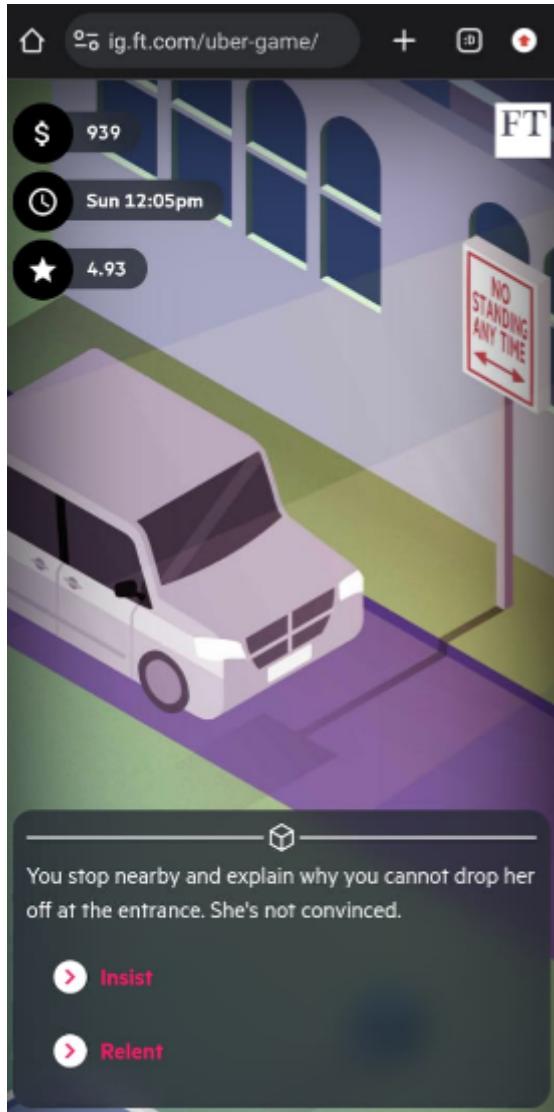


Figure 3. Nudging players into affective labour

The fact that the game explicitly presents the passenger as “not convinced” pressures the player to consider emotional appeasement as a factor in decision-making. Aligning with this, one player comments “[t]hat was entertaining and sickening all at once”, indicating the affective dissonance produced by the game’s ludic mechanics. These reactions show that the game succeeds in communicating the emotional exhaustion and performative compliance required of gig workers, yet it also reproduces the very structure of affective control it critiques. Similarly, players noted the infantilizing tone (Scherer et al., 2023) of the system’s moral cues. One player comments as shown in (6). This points to how *The Uber Game* not only simulates surveillance but *interpellates* players into moral positions, oscillating between guilt, empathy, and defiance, thus functioning as a performative space of affective governance.

(6) It’s offensive to all the working-class people who do manage their time and finances... to suggest otherwise.

3.3. Algorithmic nudging and behavioural conditioning

The game presents players' choices as personal, financial choices, implying that drivers must invest in their own tools and well-being to succeed. For instance, Figure 4 outlines the unavoidable expenses the players must cover, such as unlimited data, business licenses, and gym memberships.

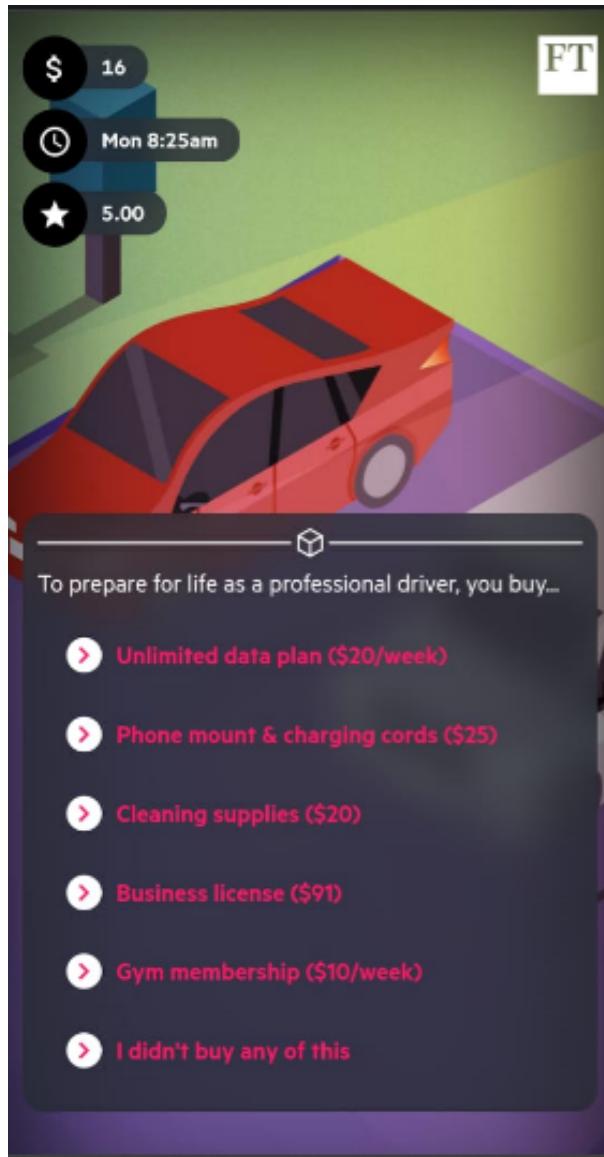


Figure 4. Essential expenses for maintaining algorithmic viability

The game presents multiple purchase options, but this choice is largely illusory. For example, an unlimited data plan (\$20/week) is required to stay online and receive ride requests, conflating waiting and mobility temporalities (Fawzy, 2025a). A phone mount and charging cords (\$25) directly impact navigation and earnings, while a business license (\$91) is a legal requirement in certain jurisdictions. Even the gym membership (\$10/week) signals that players' well-being is their own responsibility, further shifting health risks onto the individual.

A significant example of the game externalization of costs is seen in a windshield repair scenario shown in (7).

(7) *You're feeling less tired after a good night's sleep, and more confident getting behind the wheel. As you're rolling through the city, a pebble hits your windshield and leaves a crack.*

Buttons: *Repair it immediately (\$10)*

Ignore it

The optional buttons frame business costs as a player's responsibility. Both options have financial risks: repairing costs money immediately, while ignoring the damage could impact future earnings.

Similarly, buttons like *Start Driving Now* or *Start in the Evening*, as shown in Figure 5, frame game surveillance as a simple scheduling preference. However, these choices are not neutral: they are nudged by algorithmic incentives like surge pricing or bonuses for peak-hour labour. On a smaller scale, it also builds upon interactions from previous screen interfaces, as in Figure 2 where the second screenshot builds upon the first. This conditioning is reinforced by the bonus system, which structures labour as goal-oriented and task-based.

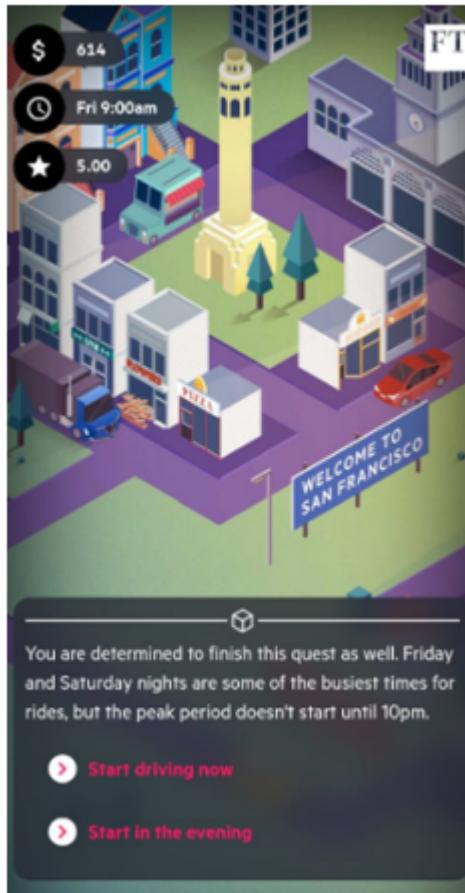


Figure 5. Framing precarity as a scheduling preference

The instruction in example (8) further illustrates this idea.

(8) *It's the end of the first day. Today, you drove for 9 hours, completed 24 rides, and earned \$164 in fares. You still need 51 rides before Friday to get the bonus.*

Button: *Start Day 2*

The interface gamifies labour, encoding work into a quantified system of hours, rides, and fares. The phrase *you still need 51 rides before Friday to get the bonus* constructs driving as a structured task, reinforcing incentivized labour engagement. However, limiting “the semiosis of choice” to clicking *Start Day 2*, reinforces the financial precarity suggested by the preceding text. The imperative mood of the button assumes progression is necessary, rather than allowing the driver to question whether they want to continue. The system frames continuation as the only logical next step, subtly shaping behaviour without overt coercion (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). What appears to be worker’s autonomy is often algorithmically constrained. For instance, the decision to drive at night seems to be based on personal convenience, but verbal cues in the interface nudge drivers toward peak-hour optimization, as in (9).

(9) *Busiest times for rides: Peak period doesn’t start until 10 PM.*

Through a phylogenetic lens, the game’s structuring of players’ time is framed as algorithmically regulated where earnings must conform to pre-set rhythms rather than individual preferences. That is, players are conditioned to conform to algorithmic incentives rather than exercising any true autonomy.

Consider Figure 6, which depicts a moment of self-care (grabbing a quick meal). The phrase *before getting back on the road* subtly reinforces work as the default state, presenting the act of eating as a brief interruption rather than a necessary pause for well-being. The button *Back to driving* refutes choice, highlighting the lack of autonomy within the game structure. For example, there are no alternatives, such as *Take a break* or *Rest for a while*. Instead, it signals a structural constraint, where drivers must optimize even basic bodily needs around the demands of the platform. Further stressing this notion is the imperative mood used in the button.

Accordingly, the illusion of control was interpreted by others as narrative manipulation by some players, as expressed on (10). This directly demonstrates how players themselves recognize the game’s constrained semiosis of choice, where options are simulated but decisions remain structurally overdetermined. Another user summarizes this condition succinctly in (11). This critique situates the game within a broader discursive economy of platform labour, where gamification sustains the ideological apparatus of precarity.

(10) I got annoyed because it forced me to go to SF every day after the first one. What was the point of giving me a choice on day 1?

(11) The “gig economy”—what an awful name to normalise workers with no job working very hard for less than minimum wage.

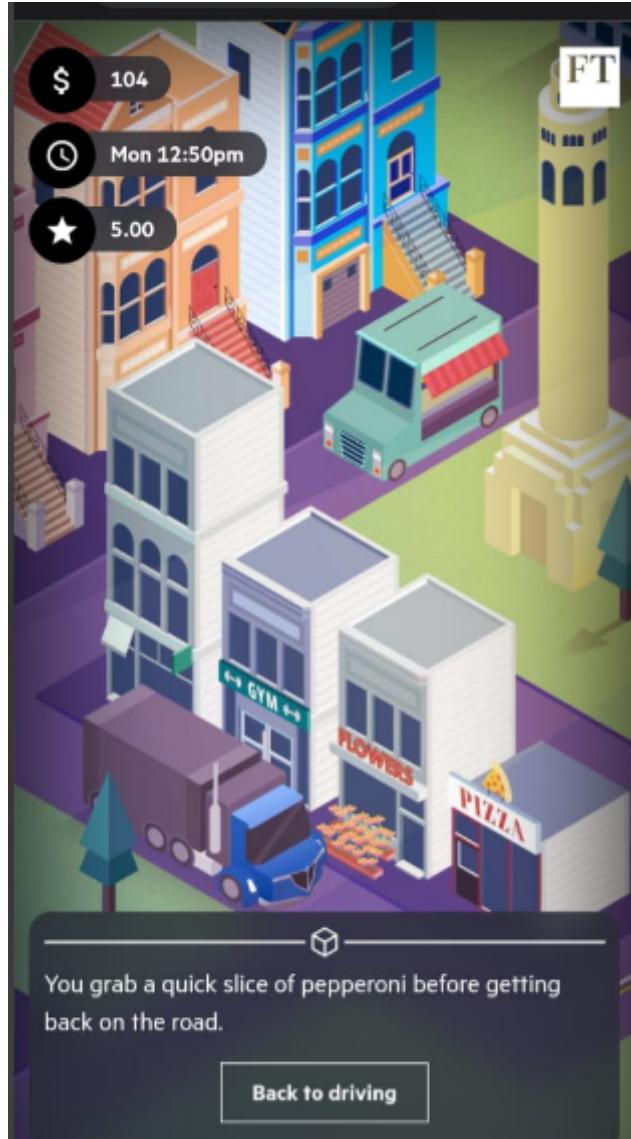


Figure 6. Depoliticized precarity

4. Discussion: Ludic surveillance in *The Uber Game*

The Uber Game starts with a question: *CAN YOU MAKE IT IN THE GIG ECONOMY?* designed to engage the player in a simulation of gig work. The question is structured as a challenge, implying that the game is a test of survival rather than a stable job. The phrase *MAKE IT* suggests that success and achieving financial gains are not guaranteed, reinforcing the idea of precarious work conditions. The phrase *CAN YOU* places the responsibility on the player, individualizing success or failure. As the game proceeds, it presents players with constant binary and polarized choices that simulate the lived contradictions of gig work, such as accept or reject a ride, work longer hours or go home exhausted, chase surge pricing or risk financial loss, among others. Each of these choices enacts a polarity, doing vs. not doing, earning vs. resting, accepting vs. resisting, that mirrors the constrained agency of real Uber drivers. The player's "choice" is not open-ended but systemically constrained, echoing Halliday's (1994) claim that choice always occurs within a system — a grammar of possibilities defined by power and structure. That is, the game interface instantiates participatory surveillance through ratings, financial incentives, and behavioural

tracking, conditioning players to internalize the interface logic and self-regulate their playing techniques.

According to Whitson (2013, p. 163), the essence of surveillance mechanisms in gamification lies in its ability to provide feedback about players' navigations by "amassing large quantities of data and then simplifying this data into modes that are easily understandable, such as progress bars, graphs and charts". This further emphasizes the mechanics of participatory surveillance evidenced in the game. Consider Figure 7, where the top-left section of the screenshot displays key assembled metrics: earnings (\$283), time (Tuesday 3:54 PM), and driver rating (4.95), continuously monitoring and conditioning the player's behaviour. These indicators function as disciplinary tools, subtly nudging players to maximize earnings, optimize time efficiency, and maintain high ratings. The recurrent presence of these metrics across different screenshots further emphasizes their central role in structuring the player's experience, shaping decisions through the logic of quantification and surveillance.

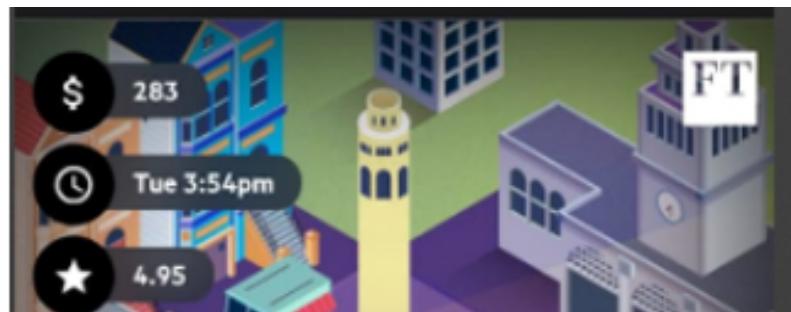


Figure 7. Quantifiable metrics as mechanisms for participatory surveillance

In the game, each player's choice, such as accepting a ride, chasing a surge, or engaging in customer interaction, becomes a discrete data point that is continuously reassembled within the game interface. As shown in Figure 8, the game interface quantifies players' choices into materialized achievements. Using phrasing such as *You helped your son with his homework* and *You didn't buy a business license* personalizes the player's agency while simultaneously reflecting systemic constraints. For example, not purchasing a business license (a choice 59% of players made) reflects structural barriers like high costs and administrative complexities.

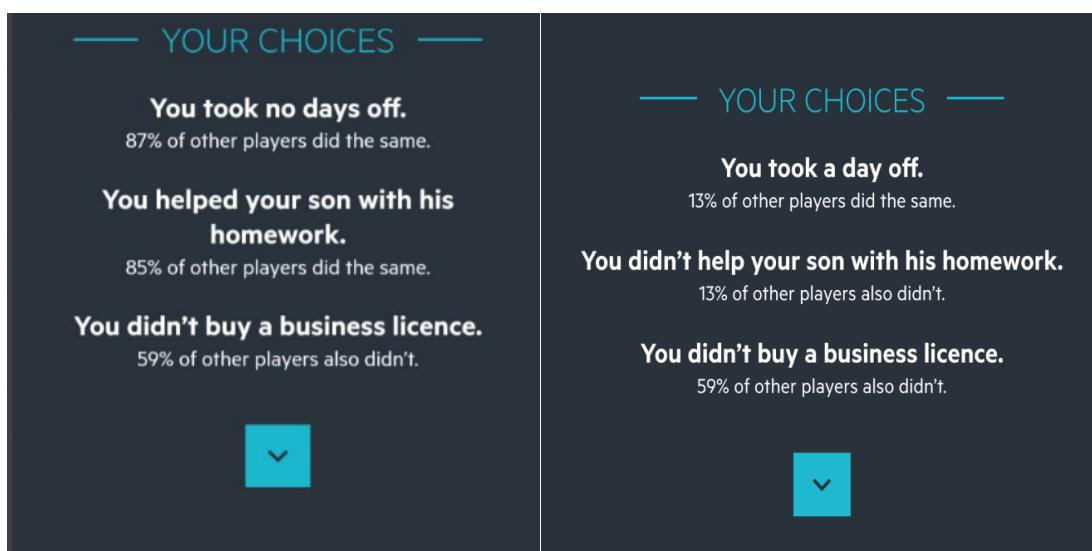


Figure 8. Choices made by a player in The Uber Game, in comparison to those of others

The phrase *YOUR CHOICES*, with its typographical emphasis, implies that the player had autonomy, reinforcing the neoliberal emphasis on personal responsibility rather than structural constraints. The declarative *You took no days off* normalizes overwork, implying that it is common and even necessary for earnings. The high percentage (86%) suggests that this is a collective condition, yet it is framed as an individual decision, obscuring issues like algorithmic control and economic precarity. The other declarative *You helped your son with his homework* humanizes gig workers by showing that they juggle personal and work responsibilities, hiding the difficult trade-offs they sometimes forced to make. *You didn't buy a business licence* raises the issue of informal labour and regulation, hinting at the precarious status of gig workers.

On the contrary, the second screenshot suggests that taking time off is rare in the gig economy, subtly implying that it is a bad decision because most other workers did not do so. Unlike the previous screen, which praised workers for not taking a break, this one makes it clear that choosing rest is an exception rather than the norm. The second screen reinforces the idea that gig workers must excel both professionally and personally despite financial and time constraints, extending surveillance to their private lives. In sum, Figure 8 is an example of the datafication of players' choices. The game reduces complex semiosis of choice into quantifiable metrics.

The comparison to other players (e.g., *86% of other players did the same*) mimics how platforms subtly influence worker behaviour by showing them what the majority is doing, reinforcing gig work norms. Quantified percentage presents the majority behaviour as the norm, implying that these choices are expected, rational, and perhaps even necessary. The desire to maximize earnings, maintain high ratings, and unlock incentives fuels driver engagement, yet this process ultimately serves the platform's profit-driven agenda. Players are encouraged to invest in self-surveillance, optimize their labour practices, and align their behaviour with platform-defined efficiency standards. This is exemplified in how the game frames rest and social engagement as discretionary choices rather than fundamental needs. Rest is conceptualized as counterproductive to economic goals. While the platform presents work engagement as a series of neutral financial decisions, the broader algorithmic logic discourages detachment.

The game reflects on Uber platform surveillance, where drivers are subjected to continuous participatory surveillance and algorithm control. As documented in Hook's (2017) feature, real drivers describe sleeping overnight in parking lots, facing unpredictable pay, and struggling with car-related expenses. Edward, a driver commuting 100 miles to San Francisco, recounts sleeping in his car to maximize work hours, stating, "It sucks. Uber made us do this," while Oneyda Oliveira calls the "independent contractor thing" deceptive, arguing that "Uber completely manipulates the platform". Similarly, other drivers report becoming "addicted" to the app's quests and bonus structures, mirroring the game's logic of compulsion but under far harsher material pressures.

As the developers of *The Uber Game* explain, the game was built using Twine, an open-source interactive storytelling platform that structures narrative through branching paths and conditional scripting (see *OpenNews*, 2017). However, the present study shows that technical simplicity or structural limitation does not reduce control; it amplifies it discursively, just as minimalist gig platforms discipline workers through constrained interfaces. The structural simplicity of the medium mirrors the reductive interfaces of gig work platforms, where workers navigate limited options presented as "autonomous choice". In this sense, what appears as a programming limitation is itself semiotically indicative, *enacting the illusion of agency within a tightly coded environment*. The game's minimal affordances thus reproduce, at the level of design, the same conditions of algorithmic governance and behavioural modulation that define platform labour, materializing the logic of surveillance and neoliberal rationalization through form.

5. Conclusion

The study described in this paper both adopts and extends Halliday's (e.g. 1994) SFL framework by incorporating phylogenesis, ontogenesis, and logogenesis to analyse meaning-making within *The Uber Game* and its broader implications for the gig economy. Traditionally, Halliday's three metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) have been used to examine how language constructs meaning in specific contexts. However, digital labour platforms, such as Uber, do not merely rely on verbal discourse at a single moment in time; rather, they condition workers through long-term discursive and behavioural adaptation. By incorporating phylogenesis (historical evolution of discourse), ontogenesis (individual development of discourse), and logogenesis (discourse unfolding in real-time), the study has helped to unravel how the game simulates platformized conditioning and labour discipline within Uber's broader system. The semiosis of choices the players enact is not isolated within the game context, but rather is part of a socially conditioned discourse that is related to gig work and corporate algorithms. By mapping these dimensions, this study not only analyses meaning-making within the gamified system but also reflects on the broader gig economy structure that Uber exemplifies.

As such, this study extends Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar model of semogenesis to the analysis of algorithmic interfaces and gamified labour, demonstrating that the semiosis of choice in digital environments operates through constrained systemic options rather than free agency. By integrating Halliday's three dimensions of semogenesis, the analysis shows that platform design embeds long-term cultural ideologies (phylogenesis), shapes individual behavioural adaptation (ontogenesis), and structures real-time decision-making (logogenesis).

Theoretically, this adaptation contributes to semiotics by expanding Halliday's notion of semogenesis beyond language to include interface design, algorithmic prompts, and affective feedback loops as semiotic systems. Further, by introducing a systemic-functional account of algorithmic control, where platform affordances function as semiotic choices that constrain and predict players' behaviour. By foregrounding the semiosis of choice as both a grammatical and an ideological process, the study applies Halliday's semiosis of choice in the context of algorithmic governance. It demonstrates that, in digital labour environments, the act of "doing this rather than not doing it" is always already pre-selected by design. The framework therefore invites future research into how SFL can be applied where meaning is distributed across algorithmic codes, datafied experience, and human-technology interaction.

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