

# OUTSIDE THE BAG

DESIGN PROVOCATIONS ON THE FUTURES OF COURIER GIG-WORK



**SWITCH  
GIG**

# SWITCH GIG

Switch-Gig is a project funded by the UKRI [Not-Equal Network+](#)

November 2019 to July 2020

For further information about the project and context for this booklet a full report and related projects are available at the Crank & File website

[crankandfile.co.uk](http://crankandfile.co.uk)



UNIVERSITY  
*of York*

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University



Behind the convenience of slick food apps hides the labour of thousands of people who do the work of moving food from cook to customer. Although highly visible with big bags and branding, moving at speed through our cities, these workers find themselves squeezed between capricious employers and impatient customers, doing dangerous work for unreliable pay.



This booklet contains a series of provocative concepts, built through conversations with cycle couriers, that highlight some of their experiences of gig work, and envision a future where their hidden challenges and injustices are made visible. These concepts speak of the frustrations and joys of their work.

# LOCAL HEROES

## COURIERS ARE KEY WORKERS PROVIDING A VITAL SERVICE TO THEIR COMMUNITIES

- ⇒ They live in the communities they serve, supporting local businesses.
- ⇒ The rider community in small cities is closely knit, and information travels fast. Riders are there to help each other and take pride in their work.
- ⇒ However, they can feel hidden, and are hurt by disrespect and anger from some people.
- ⇒ Cycling, especially, is fun and the job has many moments of joy on two wheels, close to the ground and with intense knowledge about the physical and social geography of the city, both on the road and off. Every metre travelled is felt, up and down hills, through snickets, shortcuts and towpaths.



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## NOW PLAYING



▶ 2:14

Emergency workers memorial to include medic in PPE

🕒 02 Jul



## UP NEXT

▶ 0:24

Meet the penguins named after NHS heroes

🕒 05 May



▶ 0:41

New London mural pays tribute to NHS 'heroes'

🕒 02 May



▶ 1:18

NHS hero Captain Tom sent 100th birthday wishes

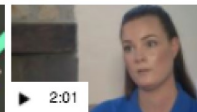
🕒 30 Apr



▶ 0:45

Author Michael Rosen thanks fans after coronavirus recovery

🕒 29 Jun



▶ 2:01

'It's for all the fallen soldiers in the Vale'

🕒 11 Nov 19



## 999 Cenotaph: Planned Emergency Services Memorial updated to include PPE and Deliveroo Rider

A planned sculpture to celebrate emergency workers has been adapted to reflect the current coronavirus crisis.

The seven-figure Emergency Services Memorial will now feature a medic wearing PPE and a Deliveroo Rider.

It is set for central London in 2023 - provided the £3 million needed can be raised.

The BBC's Daniela Relph has been to meet the artist behind the work.

🕒 02 Jul 2020



Share

# INVISIBILITY

## COURIERS ARE INFRASTRUCTURE MAINTAINING AND IMPROVING OUR CITIES

- ⇒ Couriers are a service to the restaurants and shops they work for
- ⇒ As human infrastructure, they are mobile, itinerant, transferrable and often disposable.
- ⇒ Businesses have shifted to rely on courier labour to exist, but the couriers themselves feel invisible and unrecognised by those companies and their employers.
- ⇒ This leads to direct issues like long, unpaid, waiting times, and conflicts with staff, and indirectly issues with other road-users and police as the courier tries to recoup these costs
- ⇒ Couriers have many costs, and bring a lot of unrecognised value to city centre businesses

**Your bill is enclosed. Please read**

# MYSTERY WORK

## UNEXPLAINED ALGORITHMS CREATE MYSTERY AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

- ⇒ The “Black Box” of mysterious proprietary algorithms decide how and where couriers work
- ⇒ Couriers are under close surveillance by their employers during their work, but this transparency is entirely one-way. Couriers try to divine meaning in the sparse feedback available
- ⇒ There are many theories among riders about how systems might work. If they stand 10m closer to the restaurant will they get more work? Are there “hidden zones” not shown?
- ⇒ Feedback is vague, and sometimes poor service is unavoidable. Riders always carry the bag.
- ⇒ Couriers can be sacked at a moments notice for arbitrary reasons, with no possible recourse, that creates anxiety and uncertainty about all aspects of their work.

# ← « • ❄️ ❄️ Ride or Wait Tarot ❄️ ❄️ » →

## About Your Free Tarot Reading

### A unique fortune telling experience for On-Demand Riders

Ride or Wait Tarot offers you, the Deliveroo or other on-demand rider, an exceptional fortune telling experience. Using the Rider Waite Tarot, you can see what your on-demand platform has in store for you based on the cards you have drawn. Discover when the platform is operating in your favour or against you. Our free tarot reading will give you a unique insight into your future and allow you to face it with more control, serenity and wisdom.

This unique fortune telling experience is based on the manuscripts and research conducted in the nineteenth century by the French magus, Edmond. It is the most advanced research of its kind to be applied to on-demand rider experience in the present day.

Before drawing the cards, you need to focus and think about a very precise question. For instance, you might ask, "When or where should I accept new jobs?", "When, where or who should I avoid during my shift?", "Who are my allies at work?", or "Who are my enemies at work?". Then you should choose 10 cards from the deck below and consult the free interpretation about your choice.

### Your tarot reader's background

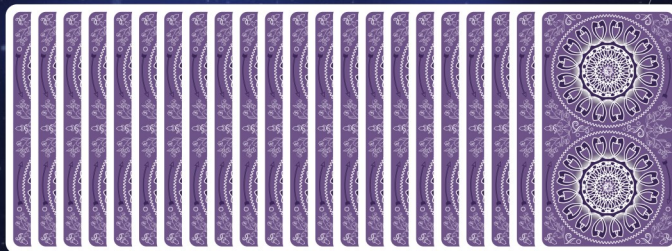


My name is Rhiannon Saint Christopher. I have been a clairvoyant and tarologist for almost 40 years. My approach is based on the manuscripts written by the magus, Edmond, and offers you a uniquely applied fortune telling experience. I was called on by my spirit guides to offer this tarot reading for free.

*Choose 10 cards from the deck below*

SHUFFLE

CUT



# BUREAUCRACY

RIDERS ARE THEIR OWN BOSSES, AND ALSO THEIR OWN ACCOUNTANTS, SOLICITORS, CLEANERS...

- ⇒ Platforms tell riders how and where to work, but refuse to recognise them as employees
- ⇒ Apps like Strava are used defensively to record evidence of work, and to track tax benefits
- ⇒ Their work is precarious. Platforms can sack workers arbitrarily, and are assumed at fault. Evidence is needed to challenge unfair and discriminatory decisions and practices.
- ⇒ Riders find solidarity in unions like the [Independent Workers' union of Great Britain \(IWGB\)](#)
- ⇒ Direct action includes organised boycotts of poorly behaved restaurants, and refusal to work at busy times, undermining the platforms.





## Bag Goblin



5,248 ratings | 7 answered questions

RRP: £12.99

Price: **£9.00**

You Save: **£3.99 (31%)**

**Note:** This item is eligible for **FREE click and collect** without a minimum order. [Details](#)

### About this item

- Tracks miles travelled for tax purposes
- Automatically records delivery times, bag contents and weight
- Records deliveries in case of customer dispute
- Helps clean spillages from poor containers
- Note: Do not make eye contact with Bag Goblin

[See more product details](#)

[Compare with similar items](#)

# EDGE OF THE CITY

## COURIERS FEEL LIKE DEVIANTS, CONSTANTLY PUT INTO CONFLICT

- ⇒ The design of the systems puts them in constant conflict—with other riders for work, with road-users for space and time, with customers for quality, and with their employers for fair pay
- ⇒ They are denied basic employment rights, get no sick pay, regularly earn less than minimum wage, and are pressured into dangerous work patterns.
- ⇒ Platforms often recruit far more couriers than are needed for each city. This reduces delivery times for customers, but also pushes wages down and competition and conflict up.
- ⇒ Cities neglect infrastructure, failing to maintain cycle lanes and bike racks. Some restaurants refuse access to drinking water and toilets.



# COURIER SIMULATOR 2020

- \* *Experience the thrills of Gig Work!*
- \* *Can you earn enough to pay rent?!*
- \* *Keep fit! High Intensity Courier Workout*
- \* *Don't forget your PPE! (not included)*



# TRANSIENCE

## COURIERS MOVE QUICKLY, COUNCILS MOVE SLOWLY

- ⇒ Most couriers are not in the job as a long term career, and work other jobs too
- ⇒ The community of couriers in a city has a fast turnover, and platforms recruit in droves.
- ⇒ Communication with civic institutions is harder as there is no unified voice over time.
- ⇒ Knowledge is shared between couriers as they meet, through social media and unions.
- ⇒ The loudest voices are those that have survived. Insight from those squeezed out is lost.



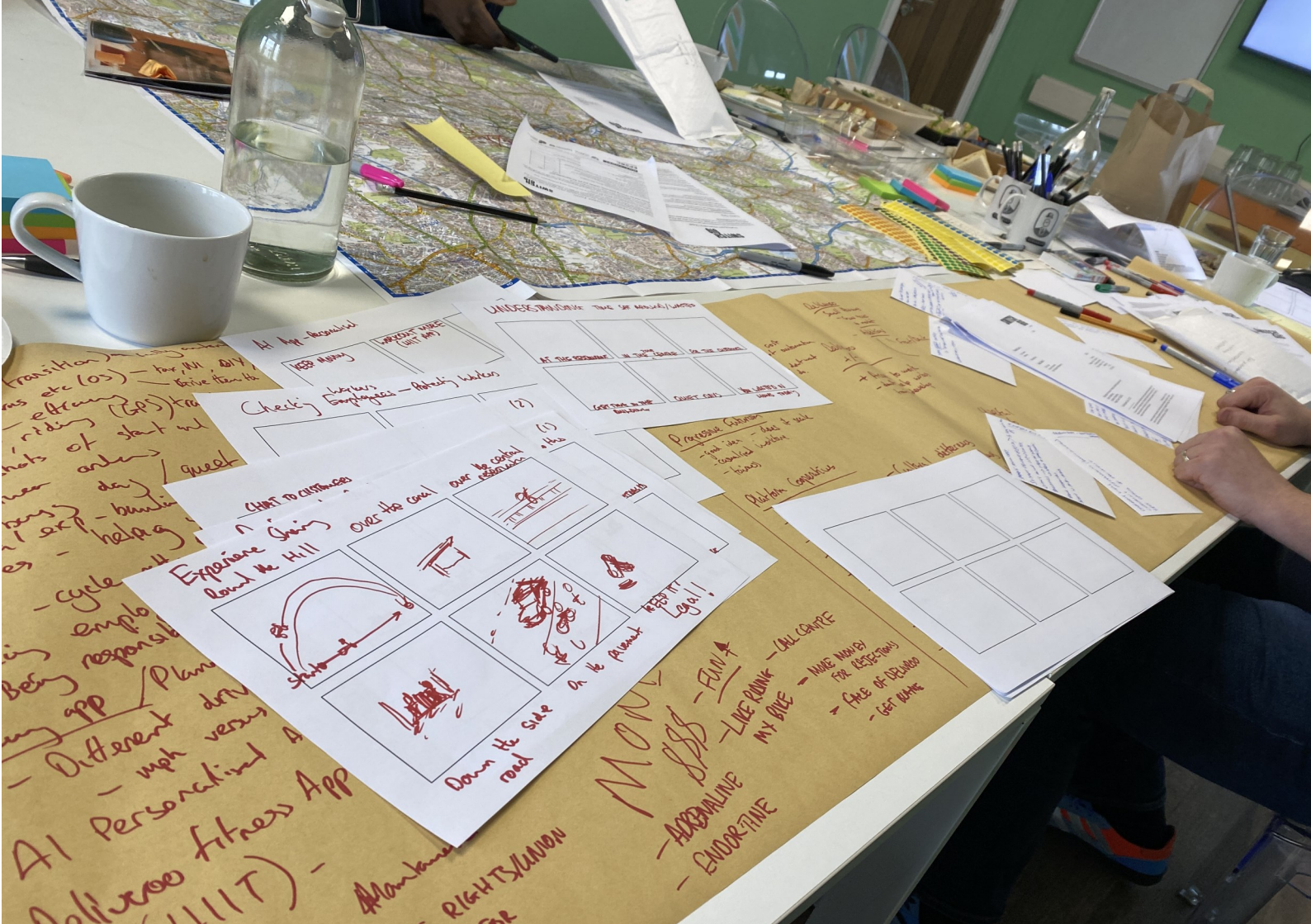


**IT SPOKE!**  
THE RACK OF SHARED KNOWLEDGE

*if royal mail are permitted  
in pedestrianised areas,  
couriers should be too*

*this job is to an area  
that tips riders well*





# ...PROCESS



These provocations came from a series of full day design workshops, organised by the Switch-Gig project and held in Manchester and York in early March 2020.

Switch-Gig is a project working with couriers to explore their experience of work for digital platforms, to gain a greater understanding of their needs, challenges and opportunities.

In each workshop, couriers and researchers worked together to explore experiences of courier work in each city, culminating in a series of design activities to develop the speculative concepts that have been refined and presented here.

These workshops were intentionally limited to couriers, so the provocations reflect their own experiences on the streets, and are not the views of the platforms.

For more information about these workshops and reflections from researchers and industry partners, please see the full report at the project website at [switchgig.wordpress.com](https://switchgig.wordpress.com)





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Switch-Gig is funded by the UKRI Not-Equal Network+ (<https://not-equal.tech>)

Thanks to the couriers who participated in the workshops, the partner organisations, the project advisory board and friends of Switch-Gig: Lily, Jamie, Shaun, Callum, Tony, and the Independent Workers' Union Great Britain ([iwgb.org.uk](http://iwgb.org.uk))

For further information about Switch-Gig, the full report, published papers, and the sister projects in Crank & File, see the website at <https://crankandfile.co.uk>.

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