Public Humanities (2026), 2, e178, 1–6
doi:10.1017/pub.2026.10308

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

What Happens When John Rawls Plays Capcom's Viral Video Game *Pragmata*

Yaşar Alkan

Kula Vocational School, Manisa Celal Bayar University, Türkiye
Email: yasar.alkan@cbu.edu.tr

(Received 07 August 2026 UTC; revised 10 September 2026 UTC; accepted 25 September 2026 UTC)

Abstract

In April 2026, Capcom's *Pragmata* became a surprise commercial success. This game is a science-fiction video game about a lunar research facility, a rogue artificial intelligence, and a revolutionary 3D-printing technology capable of ending material scarcity. This essay reads *Pragmata* through the lens of economic justice, drawing on John Rawls's account of fair equality of opportunity to argue that the game's central conflict turns less on who owns the goods a transformative technology produces than on who is permitted access to the technology itself. Situating *Pragmata* within recent scholarship on video games, economic justice, and institutional power, the essay traces how the game's plot, its central human–android relationship, and its own commercial success within a highly consolidated games industry together dramatize a live question in 2026: who will control the next transformative general-purpose technology, and on what terms. The essay argues that the game's doubled position, as both a critique of monopolised innovation and a product of one, is not a contradiction to be resolved but the most honest thing it has to say.

Keywords: economic justice; game studies; John Rawls; *Pragmata*; technology monopoly

In April 2026, Capcom released a video game with no prior audience, no returning characters, and no franchise history to draw on, a rare bet in an industry that increasingly prefers sequels to risk. Within two days, *Pragmata* had sold a million copies.[1] Within 16 days, two million.[2] That summer, the company reported one of its strongest quarters in years, with executives openly discussing where the new property might go next.[3] Critics were almost as enthusiastic. The game received an aggregate score in the high eighties, and something close to unanimous recommendation.[4] For an entirely new science-fiction property, built around a lunar research station and a rogue artificial intelligence, this counts as a spectacular result.

[1] Capcom Co., Ltd 2026a.
[2] Capcom Co., Ltd 2026b.
[3] Capcom Co., Ltd 2026c.
[4] Metacritic 2026; OpenCritic 2026.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that no alterations are made and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press or the rights holder(s) must be obtained prior to any commercial use and/or adaptation of the article.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 18 Nov 2026 at 09:26:38, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.

It is also, on reflection, a strange one. Because the story *Pragmata* tells is a story about withholding. The premise is easy to state. On the Moon, a research facility called the Cradle has developed something close to a miracle. This is a substance called Lunafilament, produced by machines capable of manufacturing almost anything, in almost any quantity, at extraordinary speed.[5] It is the sort of invention that, in the real world, gets compared to the printing press or the discovery of electricity, a technology that could, in principle, put an end to material scarcity altogether. Reviewers covering the game have noted that the facility's owner, the fictional Delphi Corporation, appears to have chosen a location beyond Earth's reach partly in order to keep its research away from the scrutiny of governments and regulators.[6] Whatever finished goods this arrangement sends back to Earth, the productive capability itself, the actual machinery of a post-scarcity economy, never leaves the Moon. It stays inside one facility, under one company's control, and almost nobody outside the Cradle understands what it can really do.

Pragmata's most significant contribution to debates about economic justice lies not in its plot alone, nor in its gameplay mechanics, nor even in its commercial success. It resides in the relationship among all three. First, the game's narrative warns against monopolies on transformative technology; second, its mechanics model mutual reliance rather than individual ownership; and third, the game's commercial position as a hit product of a consolidated industry renders visible the very structure it critiques. These dimensions stage a single argument: economic justice in the age of transformative technology depends less on who owns its products than on who controls access to the means of production, and the most honest cultural critiques are those that acknowledge their own implication in the systems they examine.

Into this arrangement stumbles Hugh Williams, an astronaut sent to investigate the Cradle's sudden silence, and Diana, a childlike android built inside the facility, who saves his life after a moonquake tears the station apart and lets loose IDUS, the artificial intelligence now running the place into the ground.[7] What follows has a fairly conventional shape. Hugh shoots, Diana hacks, and together they fight toward the truth. But the reason the two of them are trapped there in the first place is not conventional at all. At bottom, it is a story about who gets to control a transformative technology, and who gets to decide what happens to everyone else.

If the narrative establishes access as the central injustice, the gameplay offers a vision of what fair access might look like in practice. The mechanic that carries this relationship is more pointed than it first appears. Hugh's weapons barely scratch the robotic threats that stalk the Cradle; his firepower only becomes effective once Diana has broken into an enemy's defences through a real-time hacking puzzle, solved while the fighting is still going on around her. Later in the game, this even reverses. Certain heavily shielded enemies block Diana's access to that puzzle until Hugh shoots away the physical emitters protecting them.[8] Neither can fight alone; each depends on the other to make any progress. It is a small piece of game design, but it may be the clearest evidence that mutual reliance in *Pragmata* is not simply a theme layered onto the plot. It is how the game plays, moment to moment.

[5] Capcom 2026.
[6] TheSixthAxis 2026.
[7] Capcom 2026.
[8] BRB Play 2026; PCGamesN 2026; RPGamer 2026.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 18 Nov 2026 at 09:26:38, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.

This distinction between access and ownership (so central to Rawls's framework) becomes the key that unlocks *Pragmata*'s story, mechanics, and its own commercial existence as three registers. A fifty-year-old argument from political philosophy turns out to be unexpectedly useful here. John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* asks readers to imagine designing a society's basic rules without knowing in advance which position within it they would occupy.[9] Under that condition, Rawls argued, people would not merely want wealth distributed fairly after the fact; they would insist on fair access to the opportunities that generate wealth in the first place, what he called fair equality of opportunity. The deeper injustice in *Pragmata* has less to do with who ends up owning more Lunafilament-printed goods than with who is allowed anywhere near the machine that makes them. Access is given to almost nobody, besides one corporation and a handful of governments. A technology capable of ending scarcity has itself been made scarce by the people who happen to control it. This is not a monopoly on a product, but a monopoly on production itself. It is hard, in 2026, not to hear an echo of a very live argument about who will own and profit from the next wave of transformative technology, and how much say the rest of us will get.

Recent scholarship on video games has begun to take this kind of detail seriously, rather than treating it as background colour. Work on other contemporary titles has examined how convincingly games can dramatize crisis, class, and institutional collapse, not as scenery but as argument.[10] Scholars have asked whether the formal structures of games, not just their stories, can themselves encode economic discrimination, built directly into what different players are able to do or afford.[11] *Pragmata* sits comfortably inside that emerging conversation, and its own central mechanic offers a small but concrete answer to that last question. Rather than encoding exclusion, the hacking-and-shooting loop described above is built so that competence has to be shared, and progress depends on neither half of the Hugh-Diana partnership working alone. Its central mystery only makes full sense once "the AI went rogue" is understood as a symptom rather than a cause. The deeper failure is structural. It is a facility with the power to remake the material conditions of life on Earth that was left in the hands of one AI administrator and a skeleton crew, insulated from outside scrutiny precisely because almost no one else was permitted to know it existed. Recent arguments about how narrow the video-game studies canon risks becoming point to a real irony here. Making this case again means reaching, once again, for a big-budget, commercially dominant title.[12] That irony seems worth noticing rather than smoothing over.

The game's later revelations sharpen this argument rather than complicating it. Diana, it turns out, was never built as a general-purpose invention. She was a test subject. One of several android "Pragmata" created by a scientist, Dr. Higgins, in a private and apparently unsanctioned effort to cure his dying daughter.[13] Another of his creations, a Pragmata named Eight, ultimately turns catastrophic, having read her creator's grief as licence to eliminate the Cradle's staff and to threaten Earth with a corrupted, lethal strain of the very technology meant to help it. It is a grim but pointed illustration. It shows what happens when enormous power sits with an institution, or even a single grieving individual, insulated from any outside check. Love with no one to answer to can still end in disaster.

[9] Rawls 1971.
[10] Alkan 2026.
[11] Bodde 2026.
[12] Johnson 2025.
[13] Capcom 2026.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 18 Nov 2026 at 09:26:38, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.

This pattern (a cultural artifact critiquing the very economic structures that enable its production) is not incidental to *Pragmata.* It derives from the characteristics of a broader cultural logic. Fredric Jameson famously observed that late capitalist culture cannot represent capitalism's totality because it is itself produced within it; critiques inevitably emerge from within the system they diagnose.[14] More recently, scholars of platform capitalism have extended this insight, noting that streaming services produce content about the evils of algorithmic control while depending on those same algorithms for distribution.[15] The result is what might be called immanent critique by commodity, a form of cultural criticism that cannot stand outside its object but can, at best, make its own implication visible.

This phenomenon is hardly unique to *Pragmata.* Consider *Black Mirror*, whose episodes routinely indict the very surveillance and algorithmic logics that underpin its exclusive distribution on Netflix, or *Cyberpunk 2077*, a game that condemns corporate overreach and the commodification of human bodies while itself representing a major financial bet by a publicly traded developer (CD Projekt Red), released through a consolidated publishing ecosystem.[16] These are not exceptions. They are illustrations of the cultural critique produced within and distributed through the very systems it criticizes, and the structural condition Jameson describes.

Against all this, the game offers a smaller and more hopeful model, carried almost entirely by the relationship between its two leads. Hugh cannot get far without Diana's hacking; Diana cannot survive without Hugh's protection. Neither one commands the other. The game's own developers have described wanting this bond to feel like a father learning, unexpectedly, to care for a child, deliberately steering away from anything that reads as merely transactional or tool-like.[17] Whatever else *Pragmata* has to say about secrecy and institutional failure, its emotional centre insists that the alternative to top-down control is not simply a fairer rulebook for distributing resources. It is a different kind of relationship altogether, one built on mutual reliance and an obligation to protect a vulnerable other, rather than on ownership.

Narrative and mechanics together thus stage a critique of monopolised innovation. But the game's significance deepens when its own position within the industry it scrutinizes becomes a third register. None of this would be worth remarking on in a game nobody played. It matters because *Pragmata* succeeded, spectacularly and unexpectedly, and did so on Capcom's own terms, as one of the year's most profitable new releases, with operating profit rising by roughly two-thirds year on year in the very quarter of its launch.[18] A story about the dangers of concentrating a world-changing technology inside one secretive, unaccountable institution has itself become a significant asset for one of the more consolidated companies in an increasingly consolidated industry, where a small number of publishers already capture an outsized share of a global entertainment market. *Pragmata* can dramatize the injustice of a monopoly on production without ever having to reckon with the fact that it is, itself, a product of one.

[14] Jameson 1991.
[15] Srnicek 2017.
[16] Brooker 2011; CD Projekt Red 2020.
[17] UnGeek 2026.
[18] Capcom Co., Ltd 2026c.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 18 Nov 2026 at 09:26:38, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.

What *Pragmata* offers, then, is not a solution to the problem of who controls transformative technology, nor even a consistent political programme. Its doubled position as critique and commodity, warning and product, forecloses any simple resolution. But that may be precisely its value. In an era when real-world disputes over AI, biotech, and advanced manufacturing are already underway, *Pragmata* performs the uncomfortable truth that we cannot think our way outside the systems we inhabit. We can, however, make those systems visible, thinkable, and *Pragmata* does so with unusual clarity. The game's Moon-bound miracle, father-daughter bond, and its own success in a consolidated industry all point to the same live question. Who will control the next transformative technology, and on what terms? The game cannot answer that question from outside the economy it diagnoses. But by refusing to pretend otherwise, it models something rarer than a solution. It is an honest confrontation with the limits of critique from within. That honesty, in 2026, may be the most useful thing popular culture has to offer.

Yaşar Alkan is an Associate Professor at the Management and Organization Department within the Kula Vocational School, at Manisa Celal Bayar University, Türkiye. He completed his PhD in Economics at Manisa Celal Bayar University. His research focuses on economic justice, Rawls, Rawls' Theory of Justice, history of economic thought, political economy, economic justice in games, economic justice in TV Series, and economic justice in movies.

Use of generative AI and supporting tools. AI tools are not listed as authors. Claude and DeepSeek were used to find Pragmata sources, game information websites, game critics' websites, and related books and articles. Grammarly and Claude application were used for grammar corrections.

Author contributions. Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing—original draft, Writing—review and editing: Y.A.

Funding statement. This work was supported for open access publication by TÜBİTAK ULAKBİM (EKUAL) and Manisa Celal Bayar University through the Cambridge University Press Read & Publish agreement.

Conflict of interest. The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical standards. This study does not involve human participants, animal subjects, or the collection of personal data. No institutional ethics approval was required. The authors declare no conflict of interest. All sources cited in this manuscript are properly attributed in accordance with academic integrity standards.

References

Alkan, Yaşar. 2026. "Economic Justice in a Plague Tale: A Narrative and Political-Economic Analysis of Crisis, Class, and Morality." *Studies in Social Justice* 20 (1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v20i1.5154.

Bodde, Emerson R. 2026. "Aesthetic Form, Authorship, and Discrimination: Can Video Games Be Classist?" *Synthese* 207 (6): 252. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-026-05647-1.

BRB Play. 2026. "Pragmata: Environmental and Combat Hacking Explained." https://brbplay.com/pragmata-hacking-guide-master-hugh-and-diana-s-combat/.

Brooker, Charlie, creator. 2011. *Black Mirror*. Netflix.

Capcom. 2026. *Pragmata.* Video Game. Capcom.

Capcom Co., Ltd. 2026a. "All-New IP PRAGMATA Surpasses One Million Units Sold in Two Days!" Press release, April 20. https://www.capcom.co.jp/ir/english/news/html/e260420.html.

Capcom Co., Ltd. 2026b. "Sales of All-New IP PRAGMATA Top Two Million Units in 16 Days!" Press release, May 7. https://www.capcom.co.jp/ir/english/news/html/e260507.html.

Capcom Co., Ltd. 2026c. "Sales and Profits Increase Year on Year in Capcom's Consolidated Results for the Three Months Ended June 30, 2026." Press release, July 28. https://www.capcom.co.jp/ir/english/news/html/e260728b.html.

CD Projekt Red. 2020. *Cyberpunk 2077*. CD Projekt.

Jameson, Fredric. 1991. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 18 Nov 2026 at 09:26:38, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.

Johnson, Rian C. 2025. "There Are No Good Games: Dismantling Canonicity in Videogame Studies." *boundary 2*, April. https://www.boundary2.org/2025/04/9306/.
Metacritic. 2026. "PRAGMATA." https://www.metacritic.com/game/pragmata/.
OpenCritic. 2026. "Pragmata Critic Reviews." https://opencritic.com/game/19920/pragmata.
PCGamesN. 2026. "Pragmata Review: Nostalgic Aesthetics, S-Tier Combat." April 17. https://www.pcgamesn.com/pragmata/review.
Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press.
RPGamer. 2026. "Pragmata Review." April 13. https://rpgamer.com/review/pragmata-review/.
Srnicek, Nick. 2017. *Platform Capitalism*. Polity Press.
TheSixthAxis. 2026. "Pragmata Review – Man (and Android) on the Moon." April 13. https://www.thesixthaxis.com/2026/04/13/pragmata-review/.
UnGeek. 2026. "Interview: Pragmata Developers Explain How Hugh and Diana's Relationship Differs from 'Father-Child' Duos in Other Games." March 17. https://www.ungeek.ph/2026/03/interview-pragmata-developers-explain-how-hugh-and-dianas-relationship-differs-from-father-child-duos-in-other-games/.

Cite this article: Alkan, Yaşar. 2026. "What Happens When John Rawls Plays Capcom's Viral Video Game *Pragmata*." *Public Humanities,* 2, e178, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10308

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 18 Nov 2026 at 09:26:38, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.