

# WORKING FOR SYSTEMS THAT DO NOT DO THE WORK. JOANA MOLL'S *THE HIDDEN LIFE OF AN AMAZON USER*

By Jussi Parikka

*"If you double the number of experiments you do per year  
you're going to double your inventiveness."  
– Jeff Bezos*

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Joana Moll, *The Hidden Life of an Amazon User* (Installation, 2019), projection still.

The pseudo-mathematical formula offered by Jeff Bezos taken from the opening chapter's epigraph of *The Life, Lessons & Rules for Success: The Journey, The Teachable Moments & 10 Rules for Success Cultivated from the Life & Wisdom of Jeff Bezos*<sup>1</sup> (s. previous page) is one of those pithy self-help manual statements situated somewhere between the corporate teachings and inspirational jargon that defines Silicon Valley's self-styled contemporary discourse. "Most of our freedoms are energy intensive",<sup>2</sup> as Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote, and most libertarian digital discourse is particularly so.

But such discourse does not come merely in the guise of self-help books. Joana Moll's *The Hidden Life of an Amazon User* takes as its starting point a far

more significant quote from the non-discursive language of code that lurks behind the Bezos one-liners, tech-bro enthusiasm, interface effects, and screen views of contemporary logistics. Hence, a more fitting epigraph could instead be the opening code gambit that lurks behind the Amazon web interface:

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/* jQuery JavaScript Library v1.6.4 http://jquery.com/ Copyright 2011, John Resig Dual licensed under the MIT or GPL Version 2 licenses. http://jquery.org/license Includes Sizzle.js http://sizzlejs.com/ Copyright 2011, The Dojo Foundation Released under the MIT, BSD, and GPL Licenses. Amazon elects to use jQuery and Sizzle under the MIT license. Date: Mon Sep 12 18:54:48 2011 -0400 */
(function(M){var r=window.AmazonUIPageJS||window.Pp=r._namespace||r.attributeErrors,A=p("AmazonUIjQuery","AmazonUI");r.A.guardFatal?A.guardFatal(M)(A>window):A.execute(function(){M(A>window)})(function(M,r,p)

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1 Influential Individuals, *The Life, Lessons & Rules for Success: The Journey, The Teachable Moments & 10 Rules for Success Cultivated from the Life & Wisdom of Jeff Bezos* (Influential Individuals, 2018).

2 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History: Four Theses. Critical Inquiry* 35/2 (2009), pp. 197–222, here 208.

*The Hidden Life of an Amazon User* maps the purchase of one copy of *The Life, Lessons & Rules for Success* book on the Amazon website, and it does so in a gesture of algorithmic self-reflection, laying out the hundreds of pages of script and document requests required in the code to run what appears to end users as a seemingly simple purchase *click*. The 8724 pages of code translates to 87.33 MB of information which becomes the numbingly long interface experience of Moll's piece: the energy consumed to load the code and the (human) energy needed to scroll through it is measured as a transaction that speaks directly to the larger scale *economy-cum-ecology* of contemporary digital culture.

Moll's critical interface project can also be considered an experimental set up of the Standard Amazon User (SAU): a semi-automated algorithmic pattern of interface actions that are measured and guided by a mass of code and synchronised in relation to the planetary scale logistical operation that is the backbone of Amazon's infrastructural and data-intensive operations – the warehouse driven architecture of digital economy. Moll's piece is a laboratory situation of the logistical SAU whose energy consumption translates as putting the code *to work*. In this orchestrated set of labour and energy, environmental costs and user clicks are harnessed by code in an extension of the algorithmic logic that is already at the core of how Amazon works at its back end: in order to fully automate the logistics of the warehouse, the primary test case of the Standard

Amazon Worker (SAW) is a step towards measuring how to automate the SAW into technological robotics.<sup>3</sup> In this shift from human servantry to the automated logistical landscape of machine servantry,<sup>4</sup> we see what was, in some ways, already the focus of Ivan Illich's critical notes of the 1970s in *Energy and Equity*: class relations are solidified in energy relations and infrastructures.<sup>5</sup> We are also presented with lessons in capitalism: energy costs are externalised both onto the user and the environment. We can call it *integral waste*,<sup>6</sup> and we can see it cited in Jessica Wood's article on the logistics and labour of Amazon's system: "[E]mergency services responded to 189 calls from 46 Amazon warehouses in 17 states between the years 2013 and 2018, all relating to suicidal employees."<sup>7</sup>

On the one hand, Moll's project is a performance piece of repetition and patience measured by the 14-minute period it takes to scroll down the code of thousands of pages, matched perhaps only by the obfuscating legal conditions of contemporary Terms and Conditions culture. Digital capitalism is embedded in infrastructures of service as well as the quietly executed code. On the other

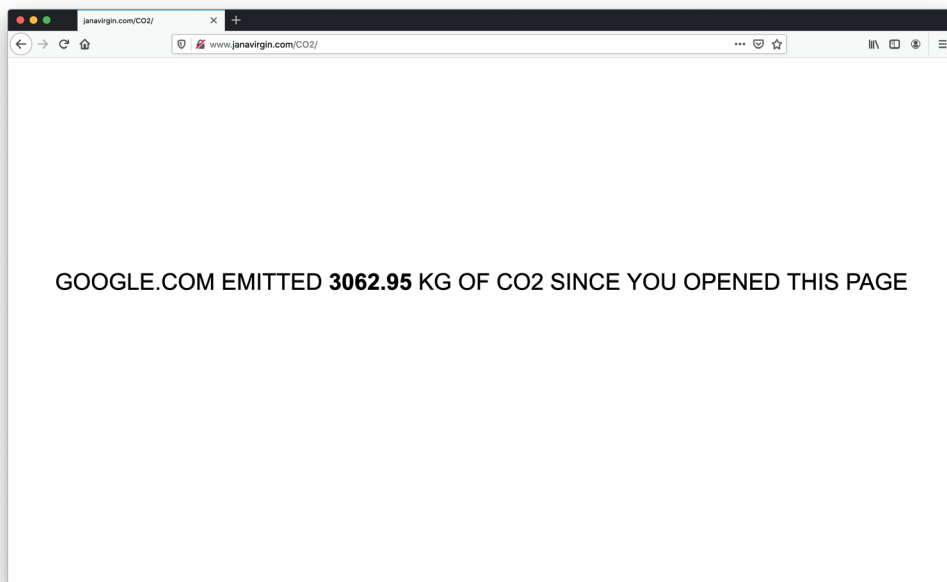
3 Jessica Wood, A Glimpse into a Dark Future. Amazon's Logistics of Extraction and the Illusion of Efficiency. *Strelka Magazine* (July 30, 2019); <https://strelkamag.com/en/article/jessica-wood-amazon-logics-of-extraction>, access: December 2, 2020.

4 Markus Krajewski, *The Server. A Media History from the Present to the Baroque*, trans. Ilinca Iurascu (New Haven 2018).

5 Ivan Illich, *Energy and Equity* (New York 1974).

6 Sean Cubitt, *Finite Media. Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* (Durham 2016).

7 Wood, A Glimpse into a Dark Future.



Joana Moll, *GO2GLE* (website, <http://www.janavirgin.com/CO2/>, 2014), screenshot.

hand, this also implies that the piece is not only performance art but it is also art of logistics: any user action is synchronised and matched with large-scale logistics operations, whether that of physical transport, storage, or data transmission that ensure an ecology of relations of measure and tracking, capturing value and energy. If “logistics maps the form of contemporary imperialism,”<sup>8</sup> as Deborah Cowen argues, then it follows that critical interface art may also participate in this extended mapping of where the user sits in relation to the infrastructures of the digital appropriation of our energies, and how the distributed mass of users is synchronised in relation to centralised structures of data and power.

Any interface is thus a logistical oper-

ation, and any interface is already part of metainterfaces<sup>9</sup> that do not merely cater to the human user. Instead, they operate on – and express – the symbolic and material realities that are part of a complex ecology of relations. Moll’s earlier project *CO2GLE* is an example of the work of an interface that registers its own existence as part of a larger ecology of energy: *CO2GLE* measures real time Google.com search CO2 emissions while reporting them in plain terms on the screen. *The Hidden Life of an Amazon User* is in many ways a continuation of these same themes and more: a contemporary software art response to the emergence of the field of energy humanities. In addition to being cultural and historical in-

<sup>8</sup> Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics. Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis 2014), p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Christian Ulrik Andersen and Søren Bro Pold, *The Metainterface. The Art of Platforms, Cities, and Clouds* (Cambridge, MA 2018).

vestigations, the art methods used also make the connections between value, labour, energy, and digital interfaces that stand at the core of Moll's work and are constantly performed – by you – in front of your screen, captured in code and in the energy costs of imagined freedoms and digital discourse. At a fundamental level, *The Hidden Life of an Amazon User* tells us, we work for systems that do not do the work.

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<sup>10</sup> **Editorial note:** This essay was first published on Joana Moll's project website <https://www.janavirgin.com/AMZ/>; It is here published with additional images and kind permissions by both the artist and author.