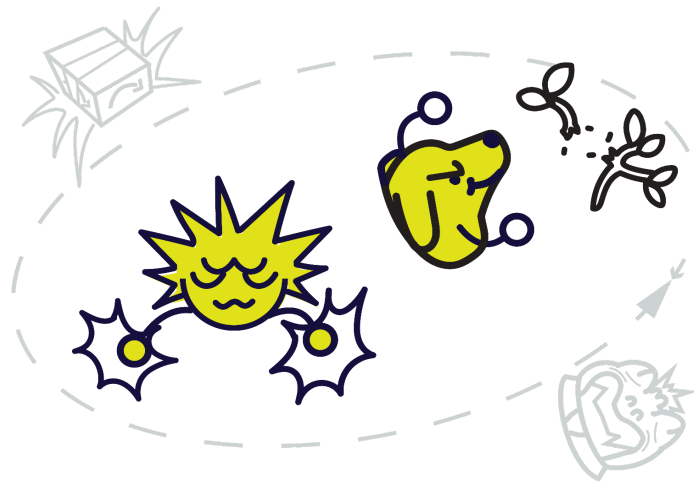## How to ~~shit~~ on your company

Some reflections around outsourcing, Amazon digital labor and postcapitalism imaginaries

Jerónimo Gutiérrez Balanta, March 2025

*Translated from Spanish with DeepL (free version), roughly edited by me.

Introduction

In 2023 I joined Amazon as a Bilingual Customer Service Associate, a job I could do from my home in Cali, Colombia and to which I went because of the precariousness and the very few job offers at that time for Visual Arts and Design, here I would start my experience working in this giant corporation in a team in charge of preventing people from getting refunds, I was a "specialist" associate and even a supervisor, and during the year I worked there I realized first hand the digital and physical working conditions within Amazon, its robust information, data, surveillance, logistics and outsourcing systems as well as its powerful infrastructure that allow it to maintain and reproduce itself today as the second largest company in the world by revenue and as a symbol of global capitalism and the triumph of corporations over the quest for a sustainable world. Now almost 1 year after having quit to pursue my MA in Digital Media at HfK Bremen funded by a DAAD scholarship, I proposed to think about how we can characterize and reflect on Amazon's outsourcing infrastructures? how we can challenge

them through fiction and speculation, in the form of kits or user manuals or games, even in radical ways.

In our contemporary capitalism, outsourcing has become a recurrent if not mandatory practice to ensure profit margins, reduce costs and maximize efficiency (2016, Srnicek, N., & Williams, A.) and capital accumulation. This process generally involves the movement and deployment of certain parts of their corporate infrastructure of companies such as Amazon from their largest market (US or Canada for example in the case of retail) to regions and countries where labor is cheaper and potentially more exploitable (2016, Srnicek, N., & Williams, A.) as well as bounded and enclosed by borders or the sea (2019, McKenzie, W.). Through these infrastructures we can glimpse global power relations, the centralization of power and accumulation of wealth. Amazon uses this complex system of warehouse plants, logistics management and supply chains, as well as its systems of surveillance and learning in virtual workers, to train, maintain and scale its centralized control. Understanding these infrastructures is crucial because they shape working conditions, corporate power over the regulations of outsourced countries and the ability of workers to resist. By analyzing Amazon's model, cross-referencing it with my inside experience in customer service and logistics we can map and critique how outsourcing infrastructures work and how to challenge them.

This essay also examines how fiction and speculative design can serve as tools of resistance. In Professor Ralf Baecker's Radical Machines class, I proposed, as a semester project, the creation of fictional kits or user manuals for customer service associates. The idea was to develop a kind of anarchist guide for workers like me, rethinking corporate logics through comics and a retro aesthetic inspired by 2000s video games. I was very inspired by speculative design approaches and I'm building this kit as a way to question the apparent singularity of capitalism; that this is the end, there are no more possible systems and corporations won, is there something beyond this, beyond work, beyond generating income? With these concerns at heart I try to offer alternative imaginaries to this catastrophic vision, combining my personal experience, my artistic practice and my research on infrastructures and post-capitalism. Thus, this somewhat verbose essay is an excuse to reflect on contemporary labor, inviting us to look with a critical but also playful lens at how to attack the paranoid lethargy that companies like Amazon impose on their workers.

About Infraestructures

Let us begin by understanding that infrastructures extend and expand beyond physicality, they comprise what some call the political, social, technical, economic and productive hegemony that shapes our world. The term infrastructure has a history that begins in the 19th century in France when it was coined in relation to the railroad system, and it would also be used in Marxist theory paired with the concept of "superstructure", but to my knowledge it does not go as far as that. Thus the concept evolves in the 20th century in the post-war dynamics, to become a general framework describing large-scale institutional and technical networks, up to our present day where it is proposed as an epistemological, social and political framework of hegemony (2024, Gramelsberger).

Kroth proposes the idea that infrastructures have a role as order-making mediator, which can be understood as the ability they have to structure and organize interactions between people, institutions and technical systems while reinforcing hegemonic interests, this we could exemplify with the outsourcing practices of Amazon, where its delivery network, wages, logistics centers and domain allows it to exercise meticulous control over the movement of its products and workers, but without being directly involved in the labor, social or political conditions of the context. This domain also allows it to concentrate money, power in a relatively decentralized network that prevents the uprising or organization of its workers and families because Amazon becomes omnipresent. This can be seen in Amazon Colombia where there is no physical headquarters despite having more than 2000 thousand workers in customer service when I worked there.

The nature of this infrastructure makes it incredibly difficult to alter or destroy, as Kroth mentions in the text Broken Relations. Infrastructures also function through the institutionalization of aspirations, meaning that they dictate not only how they are built, but also what futures are possible. Amazon's outsourcing model exemplifies this: by establishing techno-political infrastructures (such as comprehensive body tracking and tracking systems, automated software trained live by chat agents, ambiguity about who your boss is because even asking for vacation is mediated by a system, weekly equipment changes), these systems reinforce the infrastructure over time, and invite us to understand more logically the implication and importance of talking about this topic nowadays. Digital activism, or the idea of affecting Amazon's infrastructure, comes precisely from my experience, and how absurd it is that a Colombian or an Indian is reimbursing thousands of dollars a day and acting in conjunction with the police to prevent scammers in Texas or New York, yet earning a tiny fraction of what their equivalent would earn in Europe or the United States. Art has the responsibility and possibility to exploit scenarios and ideas and discussions where workers can undermine or damage this infrastructure, exposing the precariousness of labor and imagining alternative futures that change the course of their reality.

On Amazon Infrastructure: Reconstruction and self reflection

Before talking about design and art and my characters, I think it's important to talk a little bit about Amazon's infrastructures, maybe characterize them a bit. The well-known ones like their delivery routes, hosting services like AWS, etc, and I'm interested in describing the systems I was exposed to as a worker, and give visibility from the exercise of memory, to the customer service infrastructures. A few days ago I had the opportunity to meet with the artist Henril Niertaschker, a PhD student at HfK Bremen who has worked a lot the last years around technology and work automation, Andrea Sick and Victor Artiaga suggested that we could connect also because we both share an experience working in logistics or shipping companies. I told him about the kit I was planning to make and he gave me many ideas about the direction it could take, projects and bibliographies like "the world after Amazon" and the text "Breaking Things at Work", but it especially offered me perspectives I hadn't thought of, like the idea of the cyborg worker, the ambivalence that exists in feeling satisfied with repetitive and miserable but rewarding work, the different layers of what digital work means and the typification of these and the fabulous idea of reconstructing work from memory, the latter related to the fact that necessity and alienation simply prevent you from questioning these things, at the end of the day you have to make money in capitalism and get on with life.

In relation to the infrastructure I was trained in, at the time I joined Amazon I was placed on a team that doesn't exist on the public internet, which was in charge of preventing concession abuse, which meant that if someone called with the intention of getting money, gift cards or supervisors, I was trained to (explicitly) put friction and de-escalate all potential abusers based on a percentage of risk, always following Amazon's internal policies and aiming for everyone to have a consistent experience. The policies are so vast, changing and infinite and the contacts with people so dissimilar that one of the first things I remember thinking was the realization that Amazon would not (yet) replace my position with an artificial intelligence because it sure was more expensive, a lot more. The average agent is a hyper-vigilant body-cyborg, who through a corporate computer mediates the millions of users and outsourced employees who contact every day the monstrous equivalent of wikipedia but Amazon's policies, and who, aided with risk systems and artificial intelligence, decides whether you get your money for something you didn't get, whether it's true or not.

What really struck me as a worker

I feel that working there gave me a new but mostly radical perspective on how these corporations operate control over their employees, the interfaces with which I related to the internal programs (which were many and changing) made me after a few months lose perspective on the money, when you become a supervisor of this concession prevention group at Amazon you are simply like a watchdog of the "first level" agents and by definition a specialist who can use your judgment to choose what benefits Amazon the most. Determining with

your final word the outcome of an interaction with a customer, a bank, a scammer (or many) and other companies. Many times this meant denying or processing refunds from a few cents for a payment error to thousands of dollars for a charge dispute with banks that the customer initiated with Visa or Amex, other times it was scammers, and the final word was based using gps systems, police networks to determine the veracity of a police report, and your *Amazonian* "judgment" tinted with internal policies. This was all done in conjunction with systems that assessed Amazon's risk based on your purchase history, your behavior, your location, etc. I was earning at that time around $800 a month and on certain days the refunds I made exceeded $10,000, with a single button and in less than 8 minutes (the calls had to be resolved in this time) you decided what to do with Amazon's resources and its customers, it's not a minor thing, it's crazy.

Now, I believe that the criticism and analysis of this digital infrastructure and the way Amazon operates and perpetuates its outsourcing, is that with its infrastructure it is not only enriched by its physical and digital presence per se, but precisely from what is extracted from here, which is no longer just labor or physical effort of workers but in the rent of data, this global fight that we hear about for the management and control of privacy and personal data. Amazon is a direct example of how the value chain shifted from the means of production to data, what Wark McKenzie characterizes as the ownership and management of information vectors. Let's use a concrete data, by 2023 Amazon had more than 31% of the cloud computing market with its subsidiary Amazon Web Services, and this is only in very simple terms on the hosting and support of the virtual dimension of companies and private, without counting the parametrization and incessant reading of all possible data of its workers and logistics systems, this infrastructure of Amazon that seems to grow the more we describe it allows it not only to feed and rent in our bodies but also from out brains (McKenzie, 2019), behaviors, free time, tastes and imprint towards the world, everything that is housed there is subject to be rented whether we know it or not. The tyranny of data and privacy clauses seems (in a very reductionist way) to be about extracting rent from absolutely everything, the metaphor of the infected body to explain Techno politics, I think allows us to visualize and process why it is important to always think holistically and critically about our routines, purchases or relating to others, because at this point in history the intrinsic to thought, beyond just the personal, responds not only but also to the infrastructures we exist, no one is exempt at this point of the influence of these large corporations because we are part of a market-based society, which dictates with its dynamics our biology, sexuality, thought and everything we think private or intrinsically ours.

Speculating and fictioning, imagining a strike or a future

Based on these ideas about infrastructure, the conditions and roles I had at Amazon, the capitalization of the brain, our biology, flesh, free time, the hypervigilant worker, the cyborg worker, the corporate culture, the systems to perpetuate and reproduce infrastructures in the name of money. From this and many more things that have been going through my mind since I arrived at this master, is what configured my interest to re-signify

that experience, because only months later was that I really started to think about how particular it was and how much it spoke about our future.

Ralf Baecker in the Radical Machines class proposed us at the beginning to think about what is radical and what is a machine, clearly these questions are very broad, but the important thing is that he opened us the possibility to think of machine as an open concept, as systems that transform energy into something, at some point it was said. At first I hesitated a lot, because actually being a newcomer to Digital Media and because in recent months I had been working with small synthesizers, I was dominated by the idea of doing something with electronics. I thought about wearables, devices to modify the sound of an alarm, things like that, but finally what gave way to my interest in the work was the idea of user manuals, the notion that I could make a user manual for a machine that doesn't exist yet and then reverse engineer it, kind of like cheap alchemy. When I shared this idea with Ralf there was a lot of feedback from him and he suggested I check out works like Stewart Brand's "counterculture" fanzine World Earth Catalog (1968-1975), also the works on Amazon by the Remini Protocol labor company and the concept of civil disobedience. On my part I was very interested in the aesthetics of user manuals and their development, manuals of companies like Sony, Teenage Engineering or Ikea, and speculative design proposals such as "Activating Public Space Around Cable Car Towers in Medellin" (2023) Yuqing Zhang, Yuhui Yang or A Defensive Incubator (2017) by Ayo Rosanwo, the latter the Incubator, as a proposal to imagine a dystopian machine that defends the user and institutions of shootings in the United States, and conceptually I also read a bit about theories of de-growth or degrowth and the Foucauldian concept of Heterotopias (Interpretation by Hye Jean Chung, 2018 in her book Media Heterotopias,). With all these inputs and what I was learning in the Nature and Technology class about thinking from infrastructures, it was that I came up with the idea of creating a fictional guide that was aesthetically digestible and fun and that would allow me to talk about the digital and physical outsourcing infrastructures that I experienced in my time at Amazon to reflect for the power dińamics between these companies and the humans that sustain them.

Corporate culture and neoliberalism

"Corporations cannot face the consequences of punishment in the same way as individuals, who can be imprisoned, and corporations are legal entities that do not have moral conscience equivalent to that of an individual. Corporations often represent significant economic power. Corporate disobedience therefore poses rich and novel questions that have real-world as well as theoretical Importance."

Pollman, 2019

I bring this phrase up to think about how, from legal frameworks, corporate disobedience, understood as illegitimate actions taken by corporations to achieve their goals, is documented and interpreted as something

possibly beneficial for innovation or technological progress. When I talk about the triumph of corporations or ask ourselves how to imagine the world after Amazon we are questioning the whole neoliberal capitalist apparatus they represent and constitute, and in this apparatus is included the corporate language and culture. Nick Srnicek makes some very interesting reflections on how neoliberalism as an ideology became the dominant system after the middle of the 20th century, and that this changing system always takes advantage of the state's ability to create what he calls "natural markets" with water, air or natural resources for example, implying that neoliberalism proposes what is necessary and possible for humanity. I relate this idea to the rise of corporate culture, which in the 80's became a popular way to determine the behavior and practices of employees to feel part of a corporate body with much larger and more important purposes than that of a passing human being. Manuals and systems are then created that punitively condition our relationship with the company, and therefore with the world, everything that does not generate income for this ultimate goal of the company and its leaders is unproductive, then social values change to always speak in terms of productivity, efficiency, good practices, submission. The employees from my vision becomes an obedient organ that punishes itself every time it thinks outside this neoliberal framework, while corporations live and act at the expense of these bodies to behave as entities outside the law, which is shielded in the absence of a head with its hundreds of CEOs so as to exploit the body, the work, the data of what they outsource, through the infrastructures that we have mentioned.

Therefore the ethical question of corporations acting as bodies also brings into play in relation to my project, the idea of reacting violently or radically, I agree as Srnicek mentions, that individual actions in our time may not have repercussions without the support of organized demands. But it is precisely in imagining, in fiction or metaphors that I feel, we can induce these exercises of radical thinking, giving way, creating and feeding possibilities in thought, in a world increasingly deterministic, plagued by monopolies and distractions that tell us that there is nothing beyond, that 40,000 years of recorded human history have led us here, to Jeff Bezos funding his personal space project and Sam Altman being able to define all humans in terms of usability and profitability. At the time as a supervisor I also took it to the limit of my possibilities, being radical, giving refunds, sharing policy information, affecting Amazon's digital infrastructure or doing the job as mediocre as possible (because it is impossible to do nothing because of all the permanent metrics) to then propose an exercise from the university and from the arts,, catalyzing that experience to offer fun alternatives to reflect through design and art.

Shitting on your company, the publication

So with all this context, I finally propose (or rather initially because it was the first thing I did) the user manual, which for this Nature and Technology class I had said it would be a toolkit, but for now it will not be, because I could barely organize this month my conceptual and theoretical framework on what I want to investigate, so now I present this essay and documentation of my manual, detailing and explaining its moments, aesthetics,

intention and possible ways that this can become a game-toolkit to question Amazon's infrastructure and imagine other possible futures.
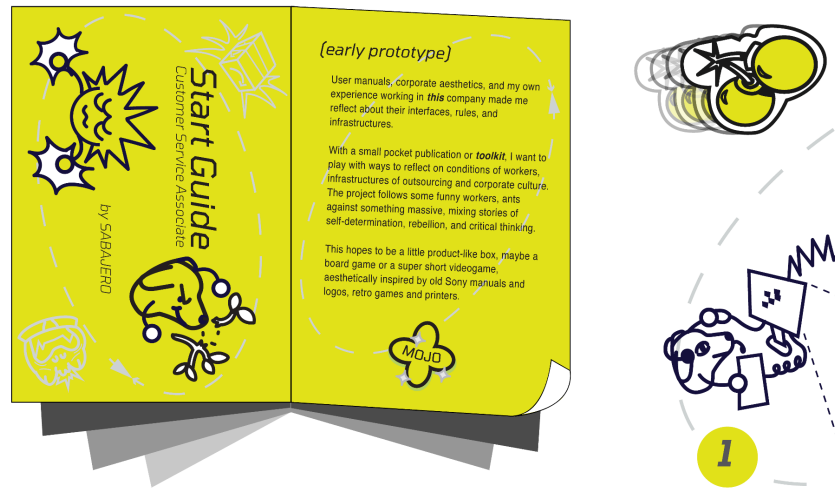

Fig 1. Cover of the zine/publication, February 2025'.

The user manual or Start Guide: Customer Service Associate is a small publication in the form of a poster-zine, which leads the reader to follow some fantastic characters performing repetitive actions that ultimately affect the company and its managers. The characters were designed from the beginning to be impersonal, so that anyone could feel identified, as a curious fact the dog was based on a Labrador my girlfriend had called Molo (short for Manolo), and I chose it a bit because I felt that the "animalization" of these workers was interesting, as it is the book Animal Farm by George Orwell, or stories with which I grew up as Alice in Wonderland, or the fables of Rafael Pombo, where these worlds where animals and creatures coexist with our human logics. These characters also do not fulfill any specific function or constitute a narrative by themselves, I designed them to be striking, playful and ambiguous, with simple shapes and limited colors, to be modular and thus use them in different ways in case you want to use it in another format; from zine to board game, to kit, as products (stickers, figurines) to giant flayers.

On the other hand, while formulating the characters the most fun way I found to imagine people using the kit or playing was to turn hypothetical radical or disobedience actions into special abilities, giving powers to fight Amazon's structures or execute a radical action. I was inspired by the retro aesthetics of video games like Cuphead (2017), Logos of analog functions of Sony products or very specific graphic elements of interfaces and menus of games like Kingdom Hearts or Nintendo, which I felt fit thematically because Amazon mediates training and agent-customer-policy interaction with "friendly" designs, something we can see in the interface of

their website or the design of their infamous mascot Peccy. All these influences of video games and skills I raised thinking that eventually, with an interesting game system could be used to earn points or subtract points, with Henrik we discussed the idea that eventually a game could be based on the idea of simulating and reconstructing the experience of an agent, facing factors such as scammers, overtime, paranoia and anxiety about being constantly monitored, among many other evils of body and spirit resulting from being a connection and mediator of Amazon's infrastructure.

Thinking about game mechanics

As for the world creation and the things the manual intends to teach, I proposed the fiction of two common scenarios I encountered as a supervisor, first of them Refund and Gift Cards, where the doggy virtual agent is on his shift attending to a group of scammer cats, the cats usually pretend that a package did not arrive, create fake reports and police stations, and return items different from what they ordered, the ability of the Surprise Hat (1) is like a form of awakening, it allows the worker to gain advantage points and literally start "the party", so the associate is able to use more radical skills, in the next step with the hat on you can refund an amount between 10 and 100 dollars, this action allows to make Combos (2) and use the Repeat skill (3) to make it recurrent at random level, continuing with the speculation, Mojo (4) is the skill that allows to win the game without being fired, a vector accumulable by turns that allows to become an enemy of Amazon, that's the way the idea goes. In the second scenario I talk about filtering internal policies that restrict customers and workers so that Amazon has to constantly work on them, using Pull Request, a worker takes a policy and filters it on the internet and worker networks not only to attack but also to be able to help people in legal cases where Amazon denies legitimate refunds, thus also impacting by decreasing the pressure of certain workers because without fixed policies the benchmarks to measure certain behaviors decrease.
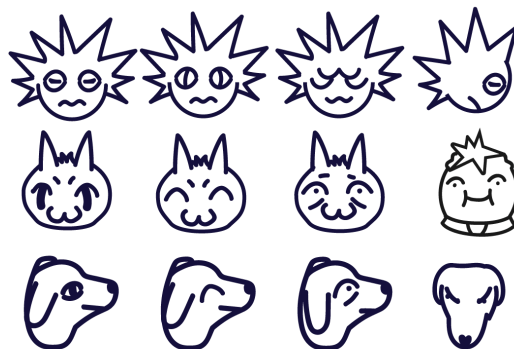

Fig 2. Early designs for the characters, November 2024.

This dialogue with myself for now is nothing more than speculation, I presented the zine at the Hochschule Tage 2025 at the University of Bremen as a work in progress intended to be a game and it had very good reception and feedback, in the end it seems I ended up reverse engineering the characters, aesthetics and manual first before its conceptual framework and my ideas, but that's also what artistic research is about, creating on the fly and opening up possibilities.All this design and mapping of concepts now for me generates a much more robust base that allows me to make decisions and think about more extensive and important research on questioning corporations and their infrastructure from design, but for now I will need more time to continue working on the structure of the game, to make it interactive, interesting and serve as a kit, to fulfill its task of inducing thought and hopefully also disobedience.

Fig 3. Proposed abilities for Hochshultage Zine, February 2025.

What's next?

For now we can perhaps recap a bit, I have exposed as I said in the beginning, by way of verbiage, how Amazon's outsourcing infrastructure allows it to maximize its profits, reduce costs and exploit workers in countries with a weaker currency and economy, and that this digital and logistics infrastructure filters, invades and reproduces beyond the physical reality, even changing the way workers think and relate to their bodies and their context. This critique also stems from my internal experience as a worker at Amazon, where many of these infrastructures and systems of control, surveillance and training are then used as arguments and inputs to explore the possibility of imagining futures beyond the corporations, but given that these corporations grow in power and influence, it is not necessary to imagine from the radical and "violent" actions, how to fight these monsters. This characterization and analysis of the publication that I present here is intended to be a starting point, a spark to inhibit thought, to generate conversation, to encourage workers, us, to think beyond work and its alienating

capacity. In this way I lay the groundwork for a deeper and more detailed exploration that I am very interested in, about how to think critically from design and art, in a fun and digestible way, but with the intention of shaking our misperception (and injected) that there is nothing else after this capitalism.

*Disclaimer on the use of LLM and my concerns about it

Google NotebookLM was the main LLM I used. I used it to create briefing docs, especially for secondary sources and to find information that could relate to my direct topic of interest instead of reading the entire book. ChatGPT was used to get some style revision in some paragraphs, but overall NotebookLM + my writing was the way to go. I wrote the text in a highly personal style, and manually translated it using DeepL, performing a manual style correction. As a result, my text may contain structures, phrases, and sections that are not totally grammatically correct, especially since I wrote it first in Spanish. Some prompts I used with Google NotebookLM were: *How to logically organize my arguments in this paragraph?* and *What is the best way to introduce the concept of "Infrastructures of Outsourcing" in this section?*

A small anecdote: a classmate from the master's program asked in a WhatsApp group if we could use Turnitin at the university to detect plagiarism and AI-generated content. This made me curious about what percentage of three paragraphs I wrote, based on bibliography and personal experience, ChatGPT would detect as Ai. When I submitted my fragment, I was very surprised because it said that some parts of my text were too long or used connectors like *therefore, however, consequently, and thus,* which could potentially mean AI.. It also suggested changing phrases that were actually my own thoughts to sound "more human." I found this very interesting and again, an invitation to be critical towards these tools.

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