

DEMOCRATIC DEBATE

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‘MissionRacer’: How Amazon turned the tedium of warehouse work into a game

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Inside several of Amazon’s cavernous warehouses, hundreds of employees spend hours a day playing video games. Some compete by racing virtual dragons or sports cars around a track, while others collaborate to build castles piece by piece.

But they aren’t whiling away the time by playing Fortnite and Minecraft. Rather, they’re racing to fill customer orders, their progress reflected in a video game format that is part of an experiment by the e-commerce giant to help reduce the tedium of its physically demanding jobs. If it helps improve the efficiency of work like plucking items from

or stowing products on shelves for 10 hours a day or more, all the better.

The video games are optional for the thousands of “pickers” and “stowers” across a handful of the company’s warehouses. (Amazon chief executive Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

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Developed by Amazon, the games are displayed on small screens at employees’ workstations. As robots wheel giant shelves up to each workstation, lights or screens indicate which item the worker needs to put into a bin. The games can register the completion of the task, which is tracked by scanning devices, and can pit individuals, teams or entire floors in a race to pick or stow Lego sets, cellphone cases or dish soap, for instance. Game-playing employees are rewarded with points, virtual badges and other goodies throughout a shift.

Think Tetris, but with real boxes.

Amazon's experiment is part of a broader industry push to "gamify" low-skill work, particularly as historically low unemployment has driven up wages and attrition. Gamification generally refers to software programs that simulate video games by offering rewards, badges or bragging rights among colleagues.

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Uber and Lyft have mastered gamification in an effort to keep drivers on the road longer, generally by dangling cash rewards for completing seemingly arbitrary goals, such as 60 rides in a week or 20 more miles. The companies keep drivers engaged with meters or other gauges that are tantalizingly close to a new objective.

Target has used games to encourage cashiers to scan products more quickly, and Delta Air Lines used them to help train reservation agents, tasks that may otherwise seem rote, said Gabe Zichermann, who has consulted with companies on gamification and written three

books on the topic.

Other firms award workers badges for achieving fitness goals that, over time, may reduce the employer's health-care costs.

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"This is most successful when the games are replacing tasks that are otherwise boring," Zichermann said. "Anything to reduce the drudgery, even the smallest amount, is going to give a bump to workers' happiness."

But, he said, gamification can be used to mask higher productivity goals, because the games' algorithms are typically kept secret. In customer service jobs, for instance, gold stars awarded for resolving 20 customer concerns may over time require 22 or 25. "When [employers] want to generate more output, they can ratchet those

levers,” he said. “It’s like boiling a frog. It may be imperceptible to the user.”

The thinking goes that if it feels like a game, it will feel less like work.

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But the rush to gamify comes with risks, said Jane McGonigal, a video game designer who has studied workplace gamification. “Competition is only enjoyable for a short time,” she said. “As soon as workers start underperforming against their colleagues, it becomes less fun and can actually be counterproductive.”

Amazon has rolled out the video games to five warehouses from suburban Seattle to near Manchester in Britain, after starting to offer them at a lone warehouse in late 2017. The games are a response to worker complaints that Amazon’s push for more automation has made

laborers feel like cogs in a bigger machine, as they increasingly work alongside robots.

By fostering workplace competition through games, Amazon is also slyly pushing workers to raise the stakes among themselves to pack more boxes bound for customer homes.

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Amazon has come under increasing criticism in recent years for its treatment of warehouse workers, with media reports surfacing of punishing productivity goals and insufficient bathroom breaks.

Amazon said it provides ample time for repose and bathroom breaks.

Nonetheless, that helped trigger political backlash last year from Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), both of whom are running for president, and helped motivate the company to raise its minimum wage to \$15 per hour. Amazon employs hundreds of thousands of people worldwide, including more than 250,000 in its

U.S. warehouses.

Amazon on Wednesday is set to hold its annual shareholder meeting, where warehouse worker conditions have been a perennial topic of concern.

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The company said it doesn't monitor game results or penalize workers for not participating. However, warehouse workers are tracked carefully for speed, efficiency and other factors, and those who underperform can be fired or reassigned. If the games are helping to push workers to be more productive, it could make those who eschew them appear to be straggling.

"We have performance expectations for every Amazon associate, and we measure actual performance against those expectations," said spokeswoman Lindsay Campbell in a statement, noting that the

company offers coaching to help those who are underperforming.

Work within Amazon's hundreds of warehouses has changed drastically in just a few years. At many facilities, warehouse employees who would otherwise be required to walk miles each day, seeking out merchandise from aisles of shelving, have instead been instructed to stand still as squat wheeled robots bring stocked shelves to them. The robots, the fruits of Amazon's \$775 million purchase of Kiva Systems in 2012, haven't yet replaced human workers, but workers say they have increased the job's monotony, with little room for creativity.

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Laborers were required to sharply increase their output as well, from picking 100 items off shelves per our to 300 items per hour and later nearly 400 per hour, according to employees at several Amazon facilities. Amazon declined to discuss its employee goals.

Many experts predict that Amazon strives to one day automate the

package-fulfillment process almost entirely, further eliminating the need for humans, which Amazon disputes.

“We are both creating jobs and adding automation,” said Campbell, noting the company has added 300,000 full-time jobs worldwide since installing robotics in its warehouses in 2012. Automation makes jobs “more efficient,” allowing workers to focus on other tasks, she said.

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The games are showing some early signs of success at Amazon.

Workers, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal from Amazon, said the games have indeed helped ease the tedium of the job, adding variety to tasks that otherwise can be physically demanding and monotonous.

One worker said she had at times picked nearly 500 items off the moving shelves in one hour, egged on by the game pitting her against

other pickers to compel a racecar around a track. She said pickers and stowers compete with one another to complete video game tasks faster, meaning they are moving more real merchandise onto trucks that bring the items to customers' doorsteps.

With names like MissionRacer, PicksInSpace, Dragon Duel and CastleCrafter, the games have simple graphics akin to early Nintendo games like Super Mario Bros, workers say. The Seattle-based company declined to provide images of the games, and laborers are forbidden from bringing cameras into warehouses.

In at least one warehouse, said an employee, workers have used high achievement on the games to push managers to reward them with extra Swag Bucks, a proprietary currency that can be used to buy Amazon-logo stickers, apparel or other goods.

In Amazon's case, gamifying its warehouses may prove to be crucial as it pushes to compete more closely with the immediacy of shopping at brick-and-mortar stores, where the vast majority of retail dollars are still spent. Shaving seconds off every order can reduce costs and help it guarantee same-day or overnight delivery for more products.

It also could help pare order-fulfillment expenses that rose 35 percent last year, compared with a 20 percent rise in product sales.

The company last month said it is working to reduce the standard shipping time for Prime members from two days to one day.

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meaning warehouse workers are likely to face pressure to move even
faster.

