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What Makes Jeff Bezos Tick? A \$42 Million Clock, for Starters

'10,000 Year' Timepiece Is One of Amazon CEO's Many Side Projects

By **STU WOO**

[Jeff Bezos](#) changed the way we shop, with [Amazon.com](#) Inc. He transformed how many of us read, with his Kindle e-reader.

He has a few other potentially life-changing ideas, too. In a patent application made public in August 2011, for example, Mr. Bezos is listed as one of two inventors of a "system and method for protecting devices from impact damage."

In other words: an air bag for cellphones.



Blue Origin

Jeff Bezos's spaceship company, Blue Origin, suffered a setback in September when an unmanned craft veered out of control during a test flight and had to be destroyed.

A drawing in the application shows the system could detect when a gadget is falling and deploy before the thing smacks the ground.

"The protection system," the patent application reads, "causes the device to be reoriented and deploys an air bag prior to contact that the air bag first contacts the surface at impact. Instead of the cellular phone directly impacting the surface, the air bag also impacts and cushions the cellular phone so that damage is reduced or substantially eliminated."

The famously secretive Mr. Bezos acknowledged that his name is on the airbag-patent application but declined to elaborate on the bag. "I can't talk about the future road map, I'm sorry," he said in an interview. "I don't even want to say whether or not we're on it."

Some of history's greatest innovators have been among its most idiosyncratic, and Mr. Bezos shows signs of fitting that mold. If not, the latest businessman to use his fortune to fund ambitious and what some might consider far-fetched plans.

Howard Hughes, after making his name making movies in the 1920s and 1930s, devoted himself to developing and personally piloting the world's fastest planes. Virgin Group founder [Richard Branson](#) has attempted to set speed records on sea and in air. [Oracle](#) Co. founder [Larry Ellison](#) has competed for the America's Cup sailing team he backs himself.

David Risher, a former Amazon executive, said his former boss "thinks in decades and centuries...Unlike most of us, Jeff is hard on the very long term."

Mr. Bezos has already gained some fame with his Blue Origin space-travel project. But the 48-year-old, whose net worth is estimated at \$20 billion, is quietly putting time and money into some other less-public side projects that have little or nothing to do with shopping.

While he declines to discuss his phone air bag, he is a bit more willing to discuss his project to build a 200-foot-tall clock design that spans the last millennium. He has financed a group, the Long Now Foundation, that is building what he calls "The 10,000 Year Clock" deep in a mountain on his West Texas property, not far from his rocket-launch site.

It's like a grandfather clock on a grander scale, Mr. Bezos said. When it's finished, it will play an elaborate cuckoo-like sequence to mark the anniversary of every year, decade, century, millennium and 10 millennia.

People who visit the clock when it is finished years from now will also be treated to a daily chime sequence that has been choreographed by musician Brian Eno, who serves on the project's board.

"The reason I'm doing it is that it is a symbol of long-term thinking, and the idea of long-term responsibility," said Mr. Bezos, who has spent at least \$100 million on the timekeeper. "We humans have become so technologically sophisticated that in certain ways we're dangerous to ourselves. It's going to become increasingly important over time for humanity to take a longer-term view of its future."

Not all of Mr. Bezos's interests outside Amazon have to do with technology. Four years ago, he invested in a company called Glassybaby that blows handmade glass cups to hold votive candles.

Glassybaby's owner, Lee Rhodes, said Mr. Bezos's assistant unexpectedly called her one day to request a meeting. She said he showed up at her Sea Cliff area store and gushed about how much he loved her brand.

At a subsequent meeting, Mr. Bezos gave some advice. "He really wants us to go big," Ms. Rhodes said.

"We were trying to figure out where to open another [glassblowing] shop, and he said, 'Go to Africa. Use the sand on the beach. Employ people.'"

Mr. Bezos persuaded Ms. Rhodes to sell him 20% of the company. The two of them meet about once a year, sometimes over lunch. She once tried to pick up the tab. "That was probably the most gracious moment," she said. "He was like, 'What? No way.'"

An Amazon spokesman said Mr. Bezos thinks Glassybaby has "a great product and a great, missionary founder" but declined to discuss it further.

Mr. Bezos's biggest ambitions are astronomical. Last year, he hired undersea experts to scan the ocean floor to find the massive engines that propelled the Apollo 11's space capsule from Earth to outer space. In March, he wrote on his website that the team had been successful.

The Amazon founder said on the site that he hopes to raise some of the five engines, using private money, and return them to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. "NASA is one of the few institutions I know that can inspire five-year-olds," he wrote. "It sure inspired me and, with this endeavor, maybe we can inspire a few more youths to try and explore."



JEFF BEZOS

At least one of Mr. Bezos's shoot-for-the-stars projects has fallen short. His spaceship company, Blue Origin, is working on a vehicle that would transport astronauts to the international space station.

There has been one hiccup: In August, an unmanned spacecraft veered out of control during a test flight and had to be destroyed.

Mr. Bezos said in the interview that the crash didn't deter him. "The reason we call them test flights or developmental flights is because if you know it is going to work, it's not a failure," he said. "The teams are already working on the next development vehicle. We expected this to be hard. That's why we do test flights."





Write to Stu Woo at Stu.Woo@wsj.com

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