

How Not to Design Your User Experience – A Complex Example from Amazon

Step 1 – The User’s Mistake

As an Amazon customer since 1996 and occasional buyer of MP3s, I was led to believe I could just buy another album before going to bed with my mobile and earphones.

Mistake – big time! Once in his life, everybody should consider that the size of his ripped CD collection and legally acquired MP3 collection is enough to last him for the few remaining years he still has. (Equal opportunity notice: All considerations are assumed to be valid for females, too.)

New Buying Process

Previously – when even I was young – you could get your MP3s with a normal checkout operation and they were offered for download with Amazon Downloader. With the introduction of Amazon Cloud Player I guess this was deemed too clumsy for adding a song ID to my user data.

The screenshot shows the Amazon.de product page for the album 'Bavaria' (Traumreise durch Bayern). The page features a navigation bar with the Amazon logo, search bar, and various account options. The main content area displays the album cover, title, format (MP3-Download), price (EUR 5,00), and a 'Jetzt mit 1-Click kaufen' button. A green banner on the right side of the page promotes the 'amazon cloud player' with a 'Player starten' button. The page also includes a 'Gutachten anzeigen' button and a 'Auf meinen Wunschzettel' button.

What Has Happened in the Background

When 1-Click was enforced, all users seem to have been activated by default (may be wrong, I may have activated 1-Click trying to buy the first MP3 after the change).

For the specific user, all addresses were activated. For payment methods, there was some strange logic involved. I had 18 addresses in different countries, all were used for a paid order at least once (usually to send a gift directly to a friend). However, only 2 addresses had a payment method associated with 1-click: One was a German address with a valid bank debit and one was a Canadian address with an expired credit card as payment method.

New Rejection Process

Once I click on „Jetzt mit 1 Click kaufen“ = „Buy using 1 click“, I get a totally new user experience, carefully crafted to preserve quality time with my family.



Finding #1: UI Design: What About a Link?

In 1989, Tim Berners-Lee wrote the first definition of HTML already containing links. Amazon's business model and website make heavy use of that. Not so this error message.

Well, simple errors need no link to a help description. So I should go and read the text.

Reading the text leaves me with puzzled feelings: „Consult the [Terms of Service] of our [MP3 shop]“ (potential link sources marked). Will consulting a legal document get me the desired service?

No, of course not. In the best case – if you are a legal counsellor yourself – you will understand why we denied your service request. In the most common case, you will see the document and give up. Know hereby that we don't need you. We have hundreds of millions of customers with a much simpler configuration than you have. You have grown too complex. You are no business case any more. Die or go away!

Seriously, if you mean what you state in your company's motto, do not just add a link to Terms of Service, but to a meaningful help file.

Why, we don't need a link. We have customer service. (See chapter „A Help File from Customer Service“)

What Has Happened in the Background

The idea behind the transfer of all addresses to 1-click was to give users choice about the billing address and the payment method. (This comes at the price of stretching the 1-click paradigm a bit.)

Then, some evil copyright-wielding ork stormed amazon's headquarters. „I can prove you deliver MP3s to customers in countries you hold no distribution license for!“ he growled, pointing his 500 pound club at whatever VP venturing his way.

Naturally, all VPs threatened by the ork's club tried to appease the monster by speed of action.

The result is what you see: Before the user is asked about the billing address, a omniscient decision is made about the user's country of origin.

In my case, this was the decision input:

1. User has 18 addresses, about 10 of which are in Germany.
2. User has a valid bank debit associated with a German address (actually the one he uses most often).
3. User has an expired German credit card associated with a Canadian address (used once).
4. All other addresses have no associated payment information.

The verdict is clear: This user cannot be from Germany. Or at least the ork might have the least bit of doubt and smash any of us.

Finding #2: Non-Trivial Use Cases

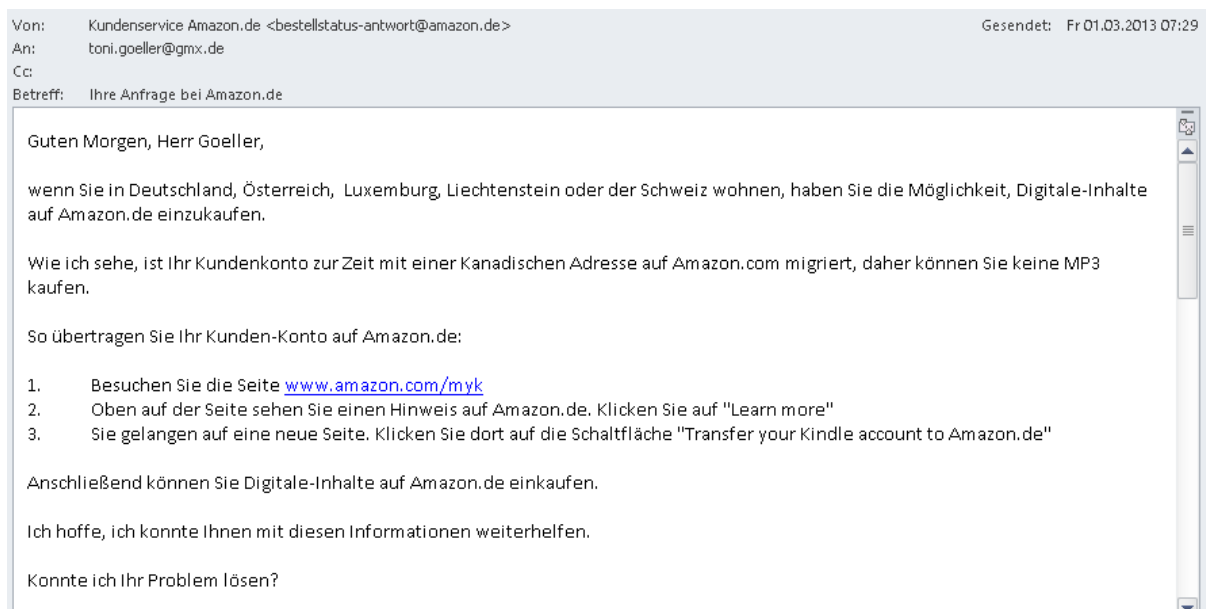
Obviously, this copyright region protecting fix was only reviewed and tested for the case where one user address was activated for 1 click. Otherwise, it would have been clear that the order of address selection and region check has been interchanged.

OK, you can never test everything. But at least learn from this error now by adding a meaningful user configuration to your tests.

A Help File from Customer Service

I tried what I rarely do: Contacted customer service (via email).

Very fast, I got a response:



Don't know whether Austrians or Swiss are happy to be addressed by DE in above rejection message, but people from Liechtenstein are used to be overlooked on the map.

Don't know either who associated my Kindle account with amazon.com and for what reason. But let's derive a few more findings:

Finding #3: Naming – Talk About Things the Customer Requested

For amazon employees, it may be clear that „Kindle“ stands for all kinds of online products.

For ignorant customers, the Kindle stands for eBooks (maybe – eBooks sold by amazon can be read on other devices than the Kindle). It does not associate at all with music or video which are almost never consumed on the Kindle.

Almost no user would think that a rejection of a MP3 purchase is due to a setting in „My Kindle“.

Finding #4: Carefully Review and Inform about Automated Heuristics

As we already saw with the decision that I do not live in Germany and shall be denied MP3 purchases on amazon.de, heuristics are a matter of luck.

The same for the decision to associate my Kindle account whose existence I was not aware of with amazon.com. (Why not amazon.de? Why not amazon.ca – I lived in Canada for a while when I was already an amazon.com customer.)

Reverse engineering the decision it was probably sufficient to have 1 US address out of 18 addresses. Or, to start my amazon customer „career“ at amazon.com in 1996.

Now if you create an account, name it Kindle, use it for purposes both related and unrelated to Kindle and configure it using daring heuristics, wouldn't it be good to ask your customer about it and to explain what all this new stuff is good for?

This, of course is an unfair advice. I may have been asked in a time when I was not interested in Kindle nor in buying new MP3s. The unsolicited mail may have been deleted by me or my SPAM filter.

Or, instead of writing unsolicited mail, what about asking me when I try to do something with my unknown Kindle account for the first time?

Another Help File from Customer Service

As I might have guessed, the first help file did not do the job. Following it did not even associate my Kindle account permanently with amazon.de – more of that later.

I gave up on amazon MP3s for a month. Then curiosity drove me to give it another try and contact customer service again. And again, the answer came within a few hours.

Von: Kundenservice Amazon.de <bestellstatus-antwort@amazon.de> Gesendet: Do 11.04.2013 09:04
An: toni.goeller@gmx.de
Cc:
Betreff: Ihre Anfrage bei Amazon.de

Guten Tag, Herr Goeller,

vielen Dank für Ihre Rückmeldung an Amazon.de und das informative Gespräch heute Morgen.

Es tut mir sehr leid, dass Sie eine Fehlermeldung aufgrund "geografischer Einschränkungen" erhalten haben und so Ihre MP3-Käufe nicht abschließen konnten. Ihren Unmut in dieser Angelegenheit kann ich nachvollziehen und ich bedaure, dass wir in diesem speziellen Fall Ihre Erwartung nicht erfüllen konnten.

Ich kann von dieser Fehlermeldung auf folgende möglichen Ursachen schließen: Um im Amazon MP3-Shop einkaufen zu können, müssen Sie in Ihrem Amazon-Konto sowohl eine deutsche Rechnungsadresse als auch eine deutsche 1-Click-Zahlungsart (Bankeinzug oder Kreditkarte) hinterlegt haben.

Sie können Ihre 1-Click-Zahlungsart und Ihre Rechnungsadresse auf der folgenden Seite prüfen und gegebenenfalls ändern:

<https://www.amazon.de/gp/css/account/cards/view.html>

Falls Ihre 1-Click-Zahlungsart korrekt eingerichtet ist, bitte ich Sie sicherzustellen, dass Sie keine nicht-deutsche IP-Adresse verwenden. Sie können dies ganz einfach selbst überprüfen, indem Sie einen Amazon.de Geschenkgutschein für einen Einkauf bei Amazon.de verwenden. Oder Sie kontaktieren Ihren Internetanbieter oder Netzwerkadministrator und bitten ihn, Ihre IP-Adresse zu prüfen.

Darüber hinaus habe ich Ihr Konto geprüft und festgestellt, dass Sie zur Zeit auf Amazon.com. angemeldet sind. Bitte übertragen Sie für einen erfolgreichen MP3 - Einkauf Ihr Konto auf Amazon.de. Vielen Dank!

So übertragen Sie Ihr Kindle-Konto auf Amazon.de:

1. Besuchen Sie die Seite www.amazon.com/myk.
2. Oben auf der Seite sehen Sie einen Hinweis auf Amazon.de. Klicken Sie auf "Learn more".
3. Sie gelangen auf eine neue Seite. Klicken Sie dort auf die Schaltfläche "Transfer your Kindle account to Amazon.de".

Again, I reset the Kindle association to amazon.de.

I checked my 1-Click settings and noticed that only one German address had a valid payment method.

Finding #5: Tell the Customer the Error Cause

„If your 1-click payment method is configured correctly, I ask you to verify that are are not using a non-German IP address. **That is very easy to check for yourself** by entering an amazon.de gift voucher for your next purchase on amazon. Or you contact your ISP or network administrator and ask them to check your IP address.“

Wow! Very easy to get at amazon.de gift vouchers! Can you send me a few to test every location from which I might buy amazon stuff? No, I'm quite sure it cannot be tested with 1 Euro vouchers – they are not powerful enough. Give me some Euro 20 vouchers.

Folks, this is nonsense! Do not ask an average customer to check for national address ranges – if you think you have to reject a service request because of the IP address it comes from, tell the customer that.

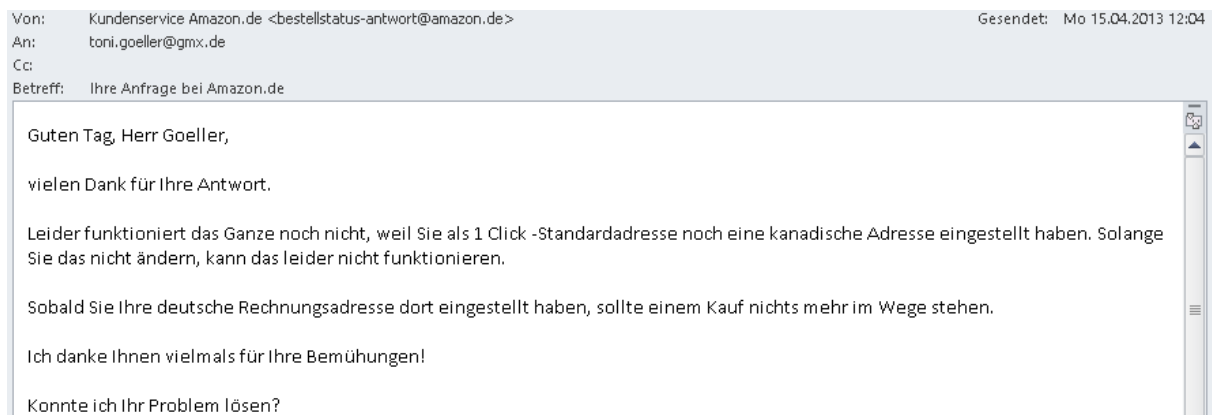
And, by the way, do the orks tell you that you are not allowed to deliver to a German customer just because he or she purchases from a hotel in Italy while in vacation? Orks are neither customer nor prey-friendly – customers and prey are pretty much the same thing for orks anyway –, so I think you should not take all they say for granted.

The Third Interaction with Customer Service

These amazon customer care guys are so friendly and patient, calling them can get addictive.

When after all the Kindle settings and 1-click account checking another MP3 purchase rejection came, I decided to contact customer service a third time.

This one was quite short and almost hit the point:



The only problem was that the user interface under <https://www.amazon.de/gp/css/account/address/view.html> says nothing about a 1-click standard address. It simply lists my 18 addresses and allows me to configure each of them separately.

In fact, if there is a notion of standard address inside amazon – not visible to the outsider – it is quite surprising that an address without a valid payment method should be selected as standard address by some undisclosed heuristics.

Finding #6: Your Customer Agent Scripts Shall Relate to the User Interface

Do not tell customers about terms like 1-click standard address that are not reflected in the user interface and cannot be determined from the user interface.

If such terminology is important to explain customers what is happening to them, tell development to show this terms on the user interface.

The Fourth Interaction with Customer Service

My customer care addiction in full swing, I asked a fourth time about the standard address riddle, and was called by customer service.

I am aware that amazon recommends a call if an issue cannot be resolved the first time, and I was already called during the second interaction. However, since the customer care agent may not see my screen – thanks, I prefer that you do not even try to take over – it took me until the fourth attempt to delve deep enough into the settings on the 18 addresses to find the one that made me Canadian. (I'd still love to apply for citizenship, should give it a try if the obstacle to become Canadian is as low as with amazon.)

The fourth agent called me and happened to meet me in front of the screen and busy with nothing but amazon. Together we dived into the sea of my 1-click address configurations and deactivated my Canadian friend's address for 1-click, producing a hike in amazon's revenues on the next MP3 purchase attempt.

Finding #7: Too Complex for Customers and Customer Care

„If something is too complex for computers, give it to humans in customer care“ is not a bad approach. The question is what you learn from it.

The case described here is a complex mixture of problems in error messages, international customers, user interface design and wording and heuristics to set new configuration options. The same problem might not affect many customers, but elements of that case will continue to hit hundreds of potential customers per month, making amazon lose both revenue and customers.

Many indicators around this case show that extension and automatic setting of configuration options has gotten out of hand.

What are the processes at amazon to

- detect difficult cases
- analyze them for learnings
- document change requests
- change the mindset in new feature deployment even when the change request queue is too long to fix old problems fast?

How can amazon stay true to its motto and pay the same attention to detail in the customer experience that Apple is renowned for?

Finding #8: In Difficult Cases, Give Learning Feedback to Your Customer

In iterative customer care interactions like this one, I am frustrated by the thought that the next client with a similar problem will fare no better than me. For obvious reasons, customer care agents on the working level may neither forward me to supervisors (except in some companies) nor to R&D.

However, it would be a consolation to learn what the organization has learned from my painful case. If the customer care agent would be encouraged to forward findings from difficult cases both to R&D and – recipients removed – to the client, the client's respect of and attachment to the company would significantly increase. This would turn important and to a certain extent difficult clients into collaborators, turning a negative experience into a positive relationship.

Presently, no such approach is allowed at amazon.

Conclusion

If you have a high workload, take my serious advice:

Buy less, donate more of your money.

You'll be a happier and healthier person for it.

Other Bugs Detected While Passing By

When I have 2 addresses with a payment method – one is bank debit and one is an expired credit card – and I deactivate 1-click for the valid bank debit, the buying process hangs:

	1. El Bodeguero (Servus habe die Ehre)	3:09	EUR 0,99	 Kaufen
	2. Is denn des net a Leb'n	4:20	EUR 0,99	 Kaufen
	3. La Locomotora de Tegernsee	4:46	EUR 0,99	In Verarbeitung
	4. Cuando salí de Cuba	3:10	EUR 0,99	 Kaufen
	5. Rehagout	3:52	EUR 0,99	 Kaufen

This stays in „In Verarbeitung“ = „Processing“ forever, even when you click on the text.