

The OuijAmazon Desktop Metaphor

Hal Berghel

University of Nevada, Las Vegas



Amazon.com is the gold standard of e-commerce, representing the integration of a solid understanding of the virtues of the World Wide Web and a keen online business sense taken to the level of art.

We're now well into 2012, or 17 AA (after Amazon). Amazon.com has been the world's online super-retailer since the cretaceous period of e-commerce, surviving the mass extinction of ill-conceived and underfunded e-businesses. It's now solidly interwoven into the fabric of global e-commerce.

In this column, I'll reflect on another, less-well-known, aspect of Amazon: Jeff Bezos's perfection of mind control by secretly converting our workstations into digital Ouija boards. At least that's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

LIFE IN E-AMAZONIA

Like many of you, my life in e-Azonia began innocuously enough with Web surfing. I noticed that no matter what my search target was, the results seemed to contain at

least one link to Amazon. Initially, I was lured into a few of the original departments—books, movies and TV, music, and so on—standard fare for an Amazon neophyte.

But then something strange happened. Jeff began to e-speak to me, personally and telepathically. He communicated with me infrequently at first (he's very e-polite) but over time with increased e-frequency. He suggested more goodies for my consideration. By the time he offered me an Amazon Prime membership—an offer extended only to special friends—I was hooked.

Jeff has now taken control of my online shopping willpower. I've become an e-recluse. No brick-and-mortars for me. No idle chatting with clerks and salespeople. I leave my house only for fresh food and café au lait—Jeff has everything else covered.

Last week, I needed a battery for my watch. Jeff came through. I

needed a tool to open the watch? Jeff's the man. The case back gasket was ruined. No problem. Jeff has a pack of 72 for \$6.99. I don't know how Jeff can keep track of all of this stuff. At this point, I'm confident that if Jeff doesn't have it, I can probably get along without it.

Every few days, Jeff or one of his messengers drops worldly delights in a happy-face box on my doorstep. Jeff has become the home delivery e-milkman for the new millennium.

AMAZON AND THE OUIJA BOARD

My last e-discussion with Jeff went something like this—at least this is the way I choose to describe it.

Jeff: "Welcome, Hal. Thank you for your business. I see you're looking at a Powermatic table saw."

Hal: "Yes, Jeff. I was somewhat concerned about the California Proposition 65 warning on it, but then I

noticed that everything useful in life has a California Proposition 65 warning on it, so I'm willing to take a chance."

Jeff: "Good call on Prop 65. Would you mind if I made a suggestion?"

Hal: "Not at all, Jeff. You know more about this stuff than I do."

Jeff: "Well, Hal, I've found that my other customers who bought this award-winning Powermatic table saw also bought a Forrest Woodworker II 40-tooth ATB .100 Kerf Saw Blade with a 5/8-inch Arbor. Have you ever considered that?"

Hal: "Can't say as I have, Jeff. How expensive is that bad boy?"

Jeff: "For you, Hal, \$113.04 will buy this beauty. This is 11 percent off the MSRP. And of course I'll give you free Super Saver Shipping, and it goes without saying that the purchase will be tax-free. I don't know if this is for you, Hal, but I might mention that 64 of my customers have given this a five-star rating.

"If you should decide to buy this, I can have it to your house in two days. But let me caution you, Hal, I only have two of these left. More are on the way, but I don't know when they'll get here. The choice is yours, big guy. I'm just trying to help."

Hal: "I know you are, Jeff. You're a people person."

Jeff: "Thanks, Hal. I'm always here for you."

I felt the warmth.

It's precisely at this point that Jeff deploys his digital mind control. Jeff was one of the first e-commerce innovators to reject traditional screen gumbo like pop-ups and animations as products of the unrefined intellect. He took a swerve and invented a new desktop metaphor of his own: the Amazon virtual Ouija board. That's right, Ouija board. Just connect to Amazon. Look at your hand as it rests on the mouse. Jeff's imaginary hand is holding on to the other end, guiding you to e-nirvana. I call this the Ouij-Amazon desktop metaphor.

Few among us can refuse a peek at the mystery that awaits about two inches below the green "In stock but may require an extra 1-2 days to process" info-bar on the Amazon page. We attempt to direct our cursor toward the back arrow icon, but something stops us. The mouse becomes the planchette, and an unknown force moves the cursor slowly but surely toward the scroll bar. This force is usually unstoppable in my case. The ancient Greeks created a special word for this in anticipation of Amazon: *akrasia* = *df inability to resist Jeff*.

Amazon takes advantage of the Web's enabling advantages, while avoiding the disadvantages.

A gentle tap on the scroll bar introduces something we didn't know we needed but now can't live without. That's Jeff's invisible hand at work. I hear his voice again: "Hal, take a look at the Forrest DK08244 Dado King 8-inch Blade Set. I can get that to you Tuesday for \$269.10—and all 13 of your peers have rated it 5 stars! If you care to look at the reviews, I'll even sort them so you have the most helpful reviews first."

Of course, some might deny both this phenomenon and the very existence of the OuijAmazon desktop metaphor. But those types probably don't look to the Ouija board for enlightenment either. Some people just can't think outside the box.

ON A SERIOUS NOTE

My imaginary dialog with Jeff illustrates an example of social engineering in the good sense of the term—a fair, arms-length transaction followed in two days by the arrival of a FedEx driver with the promised Forrest Woodworker II 40-tooth ATB .100 Kerf Saw Blade with a 5/8-inch Arbor

that cuts spalted maple like butter. What's not to like?

Bezos's Amazon.com is the gold standard of e-commerce. What brought Amazon to this place was the integration of a solid understanding of the virtues of the World Wide Web with a keen online business sense taken to the level of art.

If we look at Amazon from the point of view of just its website, it's clear that it takes advantage of the Web's enabling advantages, while avoiding the disadvantages. Jeff/Amazon realized early on that

- search engines are unfriendly to brands;
- the Web tends to commoditize everything; and
- for Amazon to prosper, it had to provide a memorable experience at a variety of levels—Amazon goes way beyond the plain portal by integration.

Since the early days, Amazon has featured an informal recommending system augmented with feedback as well as customer relationship management through links to catalogs, advertisers, technical support, and business partners. It also took advantage of the Web's unifying technology to integrate native and third-party multimedia.

In a sense, Amazon is a cloud of self-starting virtual communities built around e-commerce. None of these features in themselves were particularly new or noteworthy 20 years ago, but bringing them together for the purpose of e-commerce was inspired—and it was a key to Amazon's success.

And let's not overlook the sound business model—the *bête noir* of e-commerce sites for the first half of the Web's existence. In retrospect, it's obvious that Bezos's take on e-commerce was the right way to do it, including

- featuring an obsessive customer focus;

- adopting the “Walmart philosophy” of guilt-free returns and low-price guarantees;
- offering the cost structure advantage of an online model with volume purchasing power;
- supporting seamless B2B and supply-chain integration both internal and external to Amazon’s warehousing;
- providing fast, free delivery for orders over \$25 as well as offering Amazon Prime membership—the latter being a stroke of revenue-augmenting genius derived from the big-box stores; and
- to the eternal displeasure of states, municipalities, and brick-

and-mortar merchants of all stripes, offering tax-free transactions.

Of course, the tax-free status will end soon as cash-short states push for legislation to have online retailers do their bidding. As an example, California projects a greater than \$300 million windfall as a result of its 2011 agreement with Amazon.

Even if we take tax avoidance out of the equation, Bezos’s business model still stands above the e-commerce competition. He’s one of the few who seem to have gotten it right from the start.

Except for the Kindle, that is. Were Jeff to have asked me, I would have recommended that he take a swerve around e-book hardware and open his warehouses to the public. But that’s just me. **■**

Hal Berghel, Out of Band column editor, is a professor of computer science at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he is the director of the Identity Theft and Financial Fraud Research and Operations Center (itffroc.org). Contact him at hlb@berghel.net.

cn Selected CS articles and columns are available for free at <http://ComputingNow.computer.org>.