

SHOPPING PLEASURE AT BOL.COM

Lost Boys content & usability, Bas Raijmakers, May 2001.

Chapter on Bol.com (case-study) for the usability book edited by MetaDesign.

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SHOPPING PLEASURE AT BOL.COM

The Bol.com website offers books, music, games and films to a European public in more than 12 countries, all in the local language. We analyzed the overall usability of the website with an emphasis on the shopping experience and My Bol, the personalized version of the site. Shopping experiences and personalization will become more important in the near future, and some specific usability issues need to be solved if sites are to get it right. For this case-study, we looked at the United Kingdom site. But the European sites are very similar. Most features discussed here are present in all sites



picture 87

We selected four usability issues that have been evident in many usability studies. Each of these issues contributes greatly to the user-friendliness of a website in general. If you want to perform well with your website you have to perform well on these issues. Bol.com serves as an example here. Instead of Bol.com, you can also use your own website as an example, or the websites you have built, and try to answer the questions below.

1. Does the site make it easy to scan and browse products?

Often shopping means that you don't exactly know what you are looking for. You might have a rough idea, but want to decide in the online shop what exactly you will buy. Or you might be browsing through a shop and buy on impulse. Does the site support scanning and browsing in this way, or does it force the user to fall back on search?

2. Is comparing and choosing products made easy?

People like to compare before they choose and buy. Can products be viewed simultaneously or collected together before you buy them in a way that makes comparing, e.g. on price or on contents, possible?

3. Is using My Bol (a personalization tool) worth the effort to the user?

Personalization does involve telling the system what your preferences are, either explicitly or through your actions at the site. Is the personalization offered by My Bol clearly explained, and are the results worth the effort the user has to put into it?

4. Is it a pleasure to use the site?

Shopping can be a pleasant experience. Certainly e-Commerce interfaces that are not work related should be a pleasure to use. What makes online shopping a real pleasure and what makes it really boring?

At Lost Boys content & usability, five of our experts¹ answered these questions, basing their ideas on our experience with interviewing website users for many clients since 1996. This experience makes it possible for us to comprehend what the most common problems of users with websites are. But we have also learned that every website is different. Bol.com is a fine example of a well developed e-commerce site that has been designed and adjusted over several years with a lot of attention paid to it. It has been translated into many languages and is maintained by several local offices. All this attention does not, however, prevent the site, in the eyes of the user, still having flaws and areas where it might improve its performance. Bol.com is not unique, every website can be improved. It is important to note that these possible improvements are problems and opportunities for the website, and not for the user. If the user doesn't like what he sees, he will go to a competitor like Amazon.com, just one click away, and try his luck there.

Scanning and browsing

Research shows that browsing categories and products accounts for 87% of all online impulse buying. Searching leads only to 13% of all impulse buying². Together, impulse purchases represent almost 40% of all the money spend on e-commerce websites, states the same research by the company of Jared Spool, a usability veteran. The reasons for the difference between browsing and searching are simple. Browsing customers following category links, view more pages with products and see more of the range of products available. These findings show that people actually do go shopping online, and do not only move into a website to get exactly what they decided they needed before going online. Shopping online is not just a matter of efficiency, for many people it is a real shopping experience

¹ Jeroen Büchli, Danielle van Diemen, Geke van Dijk, Simone Kortekaas and Bas Raijmakers performed this expert validation in May 2001.

² 'What causes customers to buy on impulse?', E-Commerce White Paper by User Interface Engineering (www.uie.com), 2001.

resulting in a substantial part of the revenues generated. But do e-commerce websites support that experience well? It seems there is still a lot of improvement to be made.

It is not at all certain that the people who do have an either rough or precise idea of what they are looking for, will find what they have in mind. Research by Jakob Nielsen's Nielsen Norman group³ showed that the biggest trouble users have, is that they can not find what they are looking for. In their research of 20 e-commerce sites with American and European users, 24% of the users could not find what they were told to look for. Yet the article was present at the site and the respondents probably made more effort than they would have at home without a researcher at their side asking them questions and paying them to look for the product. This research shows that the scanning and browsing that lead to actually selecting and buying products, is not always well supported. What exactly does it take to support scanning and browsing?

Scanning



picture 85

The homepage of Bol UK shows that Bol has well understood that it has to offer different ways of browsing to the user. Here you can Browse by subject on the left, browse bestsellers on the right and browse the Editor's Choice in the middle. The piece of content right in the middle of the screen is a bit strange though: what has a Voter Apathy Poll to do with the core business of this site? That is confusing to users who come to buy books or music or films. For first time users, a homepage must make clear what the site is about at one glance. First time visitors still have to 'get the concept' of the site and the homepage must support that function. The opening text and the following poll do not sufficiently support this. Returning visitors will overlook this quickly because it has virtually nothing

³ 'E-Commerce User Experience', Nielsen Norman group (www.nngroup.com/reports/ecommerce/), March 2001.

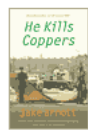
to do with what this site is about. Actually, it seems to be mainly there to help fill the Bol client database, since the voting form includes a checkbox which you have to tick to prevent Bol from sending you commercial information to your email address. Since the subject is not very relevant to the visitors of this site, I do not think this will be a very successful campaign.

What should be successful is the different lists offered on the homepage. At other locations in the site more lists with suggestions pop up. This is a very good idea that will be loved by users, for these lists give them new ideas for books, music and films that they might not have thought of themselves. Thus users get to know what's currently popular or new. The lists come in different formats. That makes the site lively, but it also makes it harder to evaluate the separate suggestions. Most of the lists are meant to scanned and clicked through, not to be read, with the exception of the Editor's Choice.



picture 78

Editor's Choice



He Kills Coppers - 20% Off

Jake Arnott's blistering follow up to his impressive first book *The Lona Firm* returns to the moral corruption of 60's Britain. In the run-up to the World Cup of '66 a policeman, a journalist and a killer become ensnarled in the Soho underworld. Arnott's fearless evocation of ethical dilemma is matched by his deft hand at recreating an utterly convincing depiction of 60's urban life. Brilliant stuff. [more](#)

[details...](#)



John G: the authorised biography - 30% Off

The life and career of John Gielgud is virtually a history of twentieth-century English theatre. For eighty years he bestrode the English stage like a Colossus in classical and Shakespearean roles. But Gielgud permitted neither himself nor his interviewers to discuss his arrest, in 1953, for homosexual soliciting in a public lavatory. This event prevented Sheridan Morley from publishing this authorised biography during Gielgud's lifetime. One year after his death, this important book is, in all senses, a revelation. [more details...](#)



Moro The Cookbook - 30% Off

PICTURES

Moro is the name of Sam and Sam Clark's trendy Clerkenwell restaurant that draws on both Spanish and Eastern Mediterranean traditions. Now, as is de rigueur these days, they have produced the book of the restaurant's food. Their recipes are eminently cookable and the book is a pleasure to read as well - no wonder Nigella Lawson, Ruth Gray of the River Cafe and Claudia Roden have already given it their ringing endorsement. BOL [talked to the two Sams](#) about sharing a restaurant, a marriage and the same name. [more details...](#)

picture 79

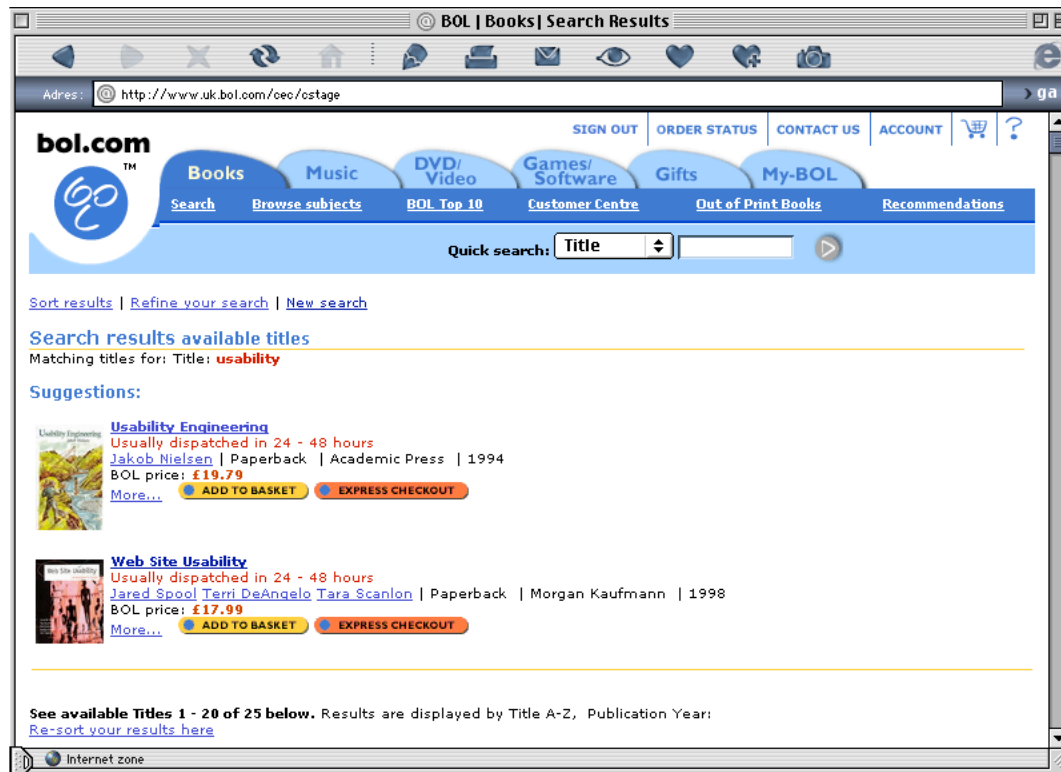


picture 80



picture 84

Even a result from the search engine gives two suggestions before the complete list with results is displayed. For the user looking for a specific book this might be annoying, but for the user resorting to the search engine to find what books on a certain author or subject are available, this is a nice service because it supports browsing. Bol knows this and refrains from suggestions if only a very few items are found as result of a search.



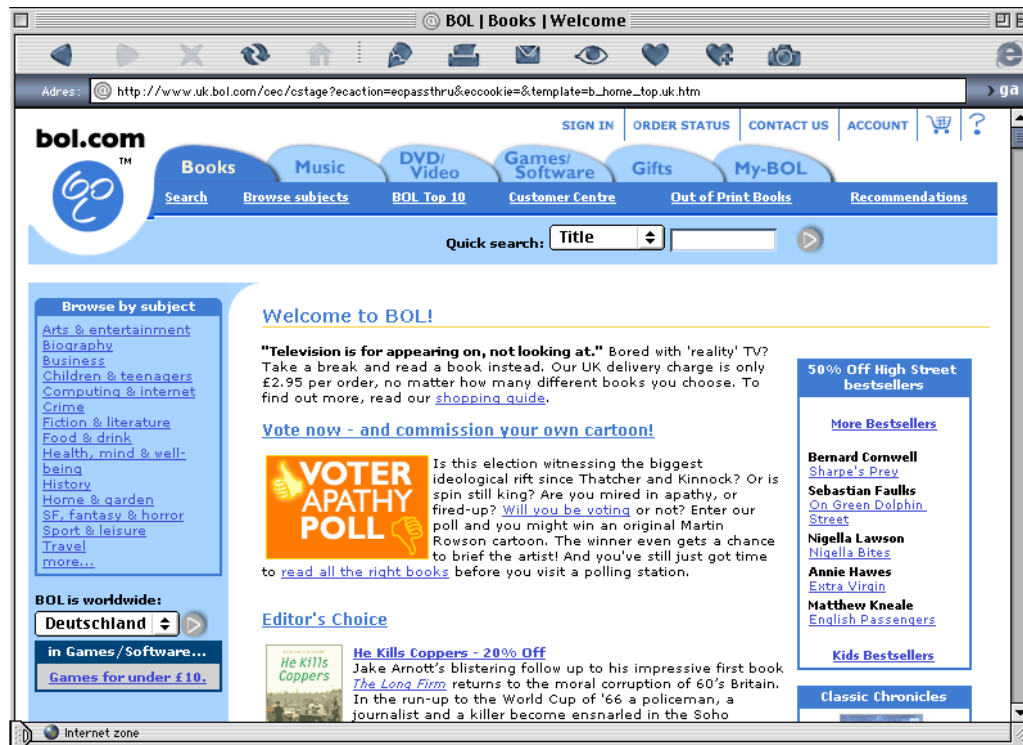
picture 83

All these different lists support 'scanning' by users really well. People on the web hardly read pages, they scan them. Scanning is reading little bits of pages. It is widespread, and webpages must simply support this behaviour. Users just do not have the patience to read through lengthy texts before they know that what they have found is what they need. If I ask users what they are scanning for, they usually say 'content'. Once they have found 'content' they are willing to read it. Bol has understood this well by providing lots of opportunity to scan and only giving the full information at the end of the line: when the user has arrived at a page giving information about a single book.

Browsing by category

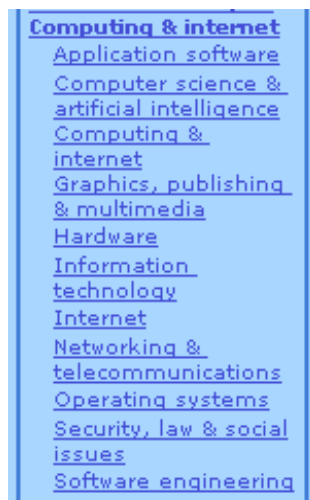
Browsing greatly benefits from well defined categories that are clearly displayed at any time. This gives the user an overview of what is for sale, and the opportunity to switch to another category if he can not find what he is looking for at any one time. This only works well if the categories are comprehensible to the user. The names of the categories and subcategories must be exclusive, they must be complete, the hierarchy must be clear and the names of the categories must fit together.

A long and diverse list of categories is already visible on the homepage on the Bol website:



picture 85

The categories are distinctively different, their names leave little to the imagination, and they are well introduced by the heading 'Browse by subject'. They are merely somewhat hard to read, due to all the underlined text. One name runs over two lines. This is confusing when I try to read this column quickly, as everyone does. When entering a subcategory (Computing & internet) it becomes even less clear:

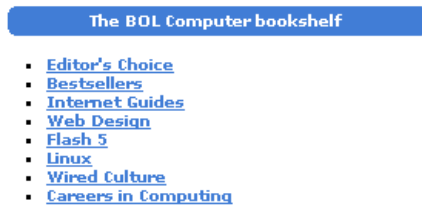


picture 23

Here most subcategory names run over more than one line, making it really difficult to read. One of the subcategories has the same name as the category itself, which confuses the hierarchy. And what is the difference between 'Computing & internet' and 'Internet'?

On the opening page of the category 'Computing & internet' another list of categories is shown, on the right side of the screen. The relation between this list and the list above remains unclear. There is

apparently no hierarchy or any other connection. That is confusing, the user will have to browse through both to be sure he has done everything possible to locate his book.



picture 90

In the music section, another problem arises when checking out the Rock & pop category. Here the line up of subcategories is:



picture 89

Some categories seem to be missing here, unless you were to put, for example, Grunge, Hard Rock, Speed and Brit Pop all under 'General'. Artists representing these music genres are present in Bol's database, but you can only find them with search. That is a pity, because people browsing will now make no impulse purchases of these artists' albums.

It is hard to make an appropriate division into categories and subcategories that fits the users' understanding. And if you do accomplish it, you may have to adjust it regularly because new genres arise, especially in music. The user will sometimes wonder where certain books or cds are stored. And not all users are the same, they will all have different expectations. That need not be a problem, for you can put an item in more than one (sub)category. Just make sure that only one version exists of the information page on the item itself. Otherwise users might wonder if the two items are different. It is always very helpful to show the path taken while browsing, in this case to show the (sub)category you are in. Bol does that when displaying the complete information on one item on its own page, but in such a way that it is not very recognisable (see description below). Finally: be prepared to add categories to your database over time.

Browsing by viewing lists

When viewing lists, actually mostly scanning lists, the user requires certain information to be able to make a buying decision. What is the ideal set of information? Jared Spool of User Interface Engineering found that a website loses sales if it gives too little information in its product lists, forcing customers to bounce up and down between multiple separate productpages and the list⁴. Bol seems to

⁴'Are Product Lists On Your Site Reducing Sales?', E-Commerce White Paper by User Interface Engineering (www.uie.com), 2001.

have a fairly good idea of what information it is offering in its lists, but has not come to a definite decision as there are several formats for displaying lists of books. Which one would sell best?

In Web Design



The Art and Science of Web Design

Jeffrey Veen's *Art and Science of Web Design* gets as close to the pulse as you can get without rupturing an artery. Veen aims to show us how to understand the web from the inside and

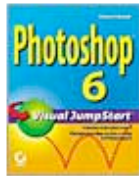
takes apart the core web concepts that are skirted over in most web design books. HTML aces, graphics monkeys, or anyone new to web design will find inspiration you to greater things. Veen teaches you the rules and then, like all great masters shows you how to break them. [more details...](#)

In PC Home Office



Norton Internet Security 2001 Family Edition

Make the web a less scary place by securing your PC against malicious downloaded viruses, hackers and unsuitable sites for your children. Norton Internet Security 2001 Family Edition contains a Firewall to prevent hackers accessing your PC, an industry acclaimed Anti-Virus package and a user-configurable family function that blocks access to unsuitable internet sites. [more details...](#)



Photoshop 6 Visual JumpStart

If the term 'layer' has you thinking of haircuts or lasagne and 'cloning' has you thinking of sheep then you are almost certainly a novice when it comes to Adobe's premier image editing and manipulation tool,

Photoshop 6. Rest assured, this book has been written to enlighten you. Bold, clear and useful, Richard Schrand's book will have you up and going with Photoshop and ImageReady in no time. With an informative whistle-stop tour of the tools and complete with a full colour insert of what is possible, this is a great place to start having fun with Photoshop. [more details...](#)

Software Applications



Instant Access Databases

Microsoft Access is both popular and powerful. This book will help you get the most out of it. From simple itineries to code driven web databases, Greg Buczek's book covers it all. Offering a wide range of examples and repleat with a CD ROM containing more templates than you could shake a stick at, this provides a true one-stop, one size fits all solution to making Access work for you, without making work for you. [more details...](#)

picture 106

The first one really stands out from the rest. It is used on all the categories' opening pages. These are the first actual books you come across when you start browsing, apart from what you have seen on the homepage. A long description is given, but no author, publication date or publisher for example. And no Buy buttons. Even if you like the book and want to order it (which is quite possible after the lengthy story about it) you have to move on to 'More details...!.



Java in a Nutshell : A Desktop Quick Reference | 3rd ed | English
 Usually dispatched in 24 - 48 hours
[David Flanagan](#) | Paperback | O'Reilly UK | 1999
 BOL price: **£17.99**

[More...](#)

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[EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)



Where Wizards Stay Up Late : The Origins of the Internet | 1st Touchstone ed | English
 Usually dispatched in 24 - 48 hours
[Matthew Lyon](#) | Paperback | Simon & Schuster Inc | 1998
 BOL price: **£9.00**

[More...](#)

[ADD TO BASKET](#)

[EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)



A Brief History of the Future : The Origins of the Internet | English
 Usually dispatched in 3 - 7 days
[John Naughton](#) | Paperback | Phoenix Press | 2000
 BOL price: **£7.19**

[More...](#)

[ADD TO BASKET](#)

[EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)



Mastering Windows 2000 Server | 3rd ed | English
 Usually dispatched in 24 - 48 hours
[Mark Minasi](#) | Mixed Media | Sybex International | 2001
 BOL price: **£40.49**

[More...](#)

[ADD TO BASKET](#)

[EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)



A+ All-in-one Certification Exam Guide | 3rd ed | English
 Usually dispatched in 3 - 7 days
[Michael Meyers](#) | Mixed Media | Osborne McGraw-Hill | 2001
 BOL price: **£39.59**

[More...](#)

[ADD TO BASKET](#)

[EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)



UNIX in a Nutshell | 3rd ed | English
 Usually dispatched in 3 - 7 days
[Robbins, Arnold](#) | Paperback | O'Reilly UK | 1999
 BOL price: **£17.99**

[More...](#)

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[EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)



Windows 98 for Dummies | English
 Usually dispatched in 3 - 7 days
[Andy Rathbone](#) | Paperback | Hungry Minds Inc | 1998
 BOL price: **£17.09**

[More...](#)

[ADD TO BASKET](#)

[EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)



Database Systems : A Practical Approach to Design Implementation and Management | 2nd ed | English
 Usually dispatched in 24 - 48 hours
[Thomas Connolly](#) | Paperback | Addison-Wesley | 1998
 BOL price: **£27.29**

[More...](#)

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[EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)

picture 107

The subcategory 'Computers & Internet' has almost the opposite way of displaying information. Here no description, but many details including how quickly you can have the book in your home or office. If you know the book, this is enough to recognise it and decide to buy it. Bol clearly knows this and has included Buy buttons here.



1. [Web Design in a Nutshell](#)

Usually dispatched in 3 - 7 days

| Paperback | O'Reilly UK | 1998

BOL price: **£17.99**

Providing quick access to the wide range of technologies and techniques from which Web designers and authors must draw, this text contains information on topics including: understanding the Web environment; ...

[More...](#)

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2. [The Non-designer's Design Book: Design and Typographic Principles for the Visual Novice](#)

Usually dispatched in 3 - 4 weeks

| Paperback | Addison Wesley Longman Publishing Co | 1994

BOL price: **£15.29**

Designed for beginners; nondesigners using DTP, ie promotion executives in publishing houses; secretaries; and students working on presentations. ...

[More...](#)

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[EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)



3. [Web Page Design in Easy Steps](#)

Usually dispatched in 24 - 48 hours

| Paperback | Computer Step | 2000

BOL price: **£8.99**

This guide covers all the major aspects of designing Web pages. Areas covered include: introduction to the Internet and the World Wide Web; determining the purpose of a Web-site; the home page; and ...

[More...](#)

[ADD TO BASKET](#)

[EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)



4. [Dreamweaver 3 Bible](#)

Usually dispatched in 24 - 48 hours

| Mixed Media | Hungry Minds Inc | 2000

BOL price: **£33.29**

This guide to Dreamweaver 3, the tool for Web site design and production, enables the user to: incorporate recent Web technologies, such as XML and SMIL into Web pages; strengthen the active content of ...

[More...](#)

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picture 108

A third version is a a combination of the first two. You get a short description of the book, but also all the details and the Buy buttons. This is the section that is part of the 'Computing & internet' page, but not hierarchically linked to the subcategories of 'Computing & internet'.

See available Titles 1 - 20 of 77 below. Results are displayed by Title A-Z, Publication Year:
[Re-sort your results here](#)

[A Guide to Methodology in Ergonomics](#)

Usually dispatched in 2 - 3 weeks

[N. Stanton](#) [M. Young](#) [Gavriel Salvendy](#) | Paperback | Taylor & Francis | 1999

BOL price: **£15.29**

[More...](#) [ADD TO BASKET](#) [EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)

[A Guide to Usability: Human Factors in Computing](#)

Usually dispatched in 2 - 3 weeks

[Jenny Preece](#) | Paperback | Addison-Wesley | 1993

BOL price: **£23.39**

[More...](#) [ADD TO BASKET](#) [EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)

[A Practical Guide to Usability Testing](#)

Usually dispatched in 2 - 3 weeks

[Dumas, Joseph S.](#) [Redish, Janice C.](#) | Paperback | Intellect | 1993

BOL price: **£13.46**

[More...](#) [ADD TO BASKET](#) [EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)

[A Practical Guide to Usability Testing](#)

Usually dispatched in 2 - 3 weeks

[Dumas, Joseph S.](#) [Redish, Janice C.](#) | Hardback | Intellect | 1993

BOL price: **£22.46**

[More...](#) [ADD TO BASKET](#) [EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)

[An Introduction to Usability](#)

Usually dispatched in 3 - 4 weeks

[Jordan, Patrick W.](#) | Hardback | Taylor & Francis | 1998

BOL price: **£42.75**

[More...](#) [ADD TO BASKET](#) [EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)

[An Introduction to Usability](#)

Usually dispatched in 3 - 4 weeks

[Jordan, Patrick W.](#) | Paperback | Taylor & Francis | 1998

BOL price: **£14.39**

[More...](#) [ADD TO BASKET](#) [EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)

picture 109

Yet another way of displaying is used in the search results. This is the simplest way giving the smallest amount of information. Yet it is an important one because only a very limited amount of all available books on Bol are accessible by browsing alone. Most books are only accessible through Search. You really have to know the book to be confident enough to put it in your shopping basket based on such little information.

So, which version would sell books best? Version one does not allow buying because the necessary buttons for that are lacking. Versions two and four both lack a description of the book. Not a problem when you know exactly what you are looking for, but that is seldom is the case when browsing. Version three (the Webdesign page) seems most suitable, because it has all a browsing user needs: a description, all the details and Buy buttons. You wonder why all this effort has been made to develop all these different versions of displaying lists, instead of putting effort into creating the ideal list?

Comparing

Comparing is not supported by Bol. Users have to fall back on the tricks that only experienced users know. One trick is opening at least one other window and switching between them, or readjusting the size and setting them alongside each other. That is a rather clumsy way of comparing, because pages get messy when you make the windows so small. The other option for experienced users is loading everything into your shopping basket, clicking each of the items to review and compare them and later deleting the items you do not want. This is something inexperienced users do not think of nor dare to do. They are not always aware of the fact that you can usually throw things out again.

Choosing

Once you've found a book you like, you can take a closer look if necessary. It is always better if you do not need, to because then the overview has given you enough information for your buying decision already. Bol supports that by supplying "Add to my cart" and "Express checkout" buttons in most of its lists. Sometimes, however, you need the extra details to make a choice. Here is what I found as a result of a search command:

[People and Computers XIV - Usability or Else!](#)
Usually dispatched in 2 - 3 weeks
[Sharon McDonald](#) [Gilbert Cockton](#) [Yvonne Waern](#) | Paperback | Springer-Verlag UK | 2000
BOL price: **£58.50**
[More...](#) [ADD TO BASKET](#) [EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)

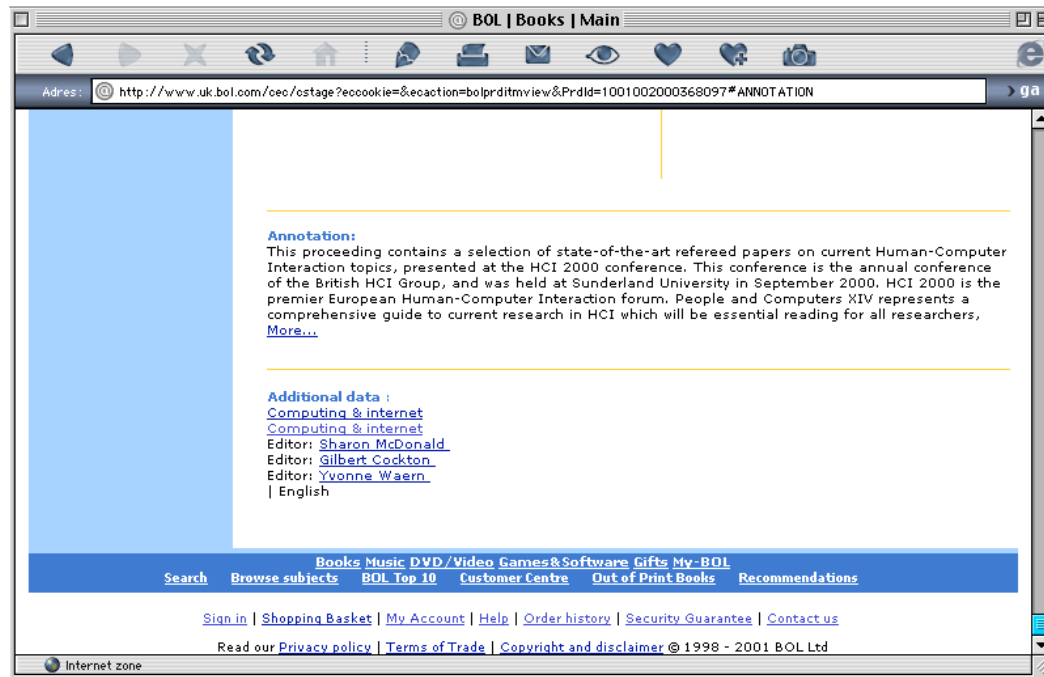
picture 104

And here is what you get if you click the "More..." link.



picture 34

This does not look like a lot more information. Is that all? Scrolling down displays what we were really looking for:



picture 100

"More..." hardly leads to more. It leads to exactly 12 more words:

Annotation:

This proceeding contains a selection of state-of-the-art refereed papers on current Human-Computer Interaction topics, presented at the HCI 2000 conference. This conference is the annual conference of the British HCI Group, and was held at Sunderland University in September 2000. HCI 2000 is the premier European Human-Computer Interaction forum. People and Computers XIV represents a comprehensive guide to current research in HCI which will be essential reading for all researchers, designers and manufacturers who need to keep abreast of developments in HCI.

[Return to overview](#)

picture 103

That is not really worth clicking and waiting for the next page to load. And even if you have done it, you will have a hard time noticing these 12 words, because they appear below the visible part of the window. You have to scroll for them. This can easily be avoided of course, by putting all content on one page. Content elements may then have to be shortened, although this is unlikely to happen as the pages displaying information on one item have a lot of space left over.

...and moving on

At the bottom of the page there is another suggestion about learning more about this book. The header "additional data" is very general and does not really say anything about what you might expect. Additional data on the book you are looking at? You will be disappointed. These links aim to help you browse further, to other, related books. Another header might make that clear very simply.

Additional data :
[Computing & internet](#)
[Computing & internet](#)
Editor: [Sharon McDonald](#)
Editor: [Gilbert Cockton](#)
Editor: [Yvonne Waern](#)
| English

picture 92

This is a rather confusing list of five links with the word English in the last line behind a vertical line. No one knows what this last line means, so it should preferably not be there.

The upper two links are not self-evident. You have to actually follow them through to understand what is behind them. If you do so, you come to the homepage of the browse category "Computing & internet", and the browse subcategory with the same name. Once more, it is clear that giving categories and subcategories the same name is confusing, for users can no longer distinguish between them. Here the links are identical but the information behind them is different. These additional info links are actually the only indicators of the categories and subcategories that books belong to. It is a good idea to put these links here, because they support further browsing through related books. It also gives the user a sense of where he is in the site. The full potential of this feature is not utilised, however. By adding just a few more words, such as 'This book is in category ... and subcategory ...' the user can be in no doubt as to where these links lead to.

The next three links, one on each of the editors, are a little more understandable but yet not immediately clear either. You have to follow them through to find out what they hide. They lead to the "most recent releases" of that editor. Although this does not always yield new information because there are no other books from the same author available. In these cases, sending someone there is a waste of shopping time. They could be buying books, that's what they came for in the first place. Users always expect more information when following through such a link. They therefore start reading carefully to find something new, and here they are disappointed.

Sharon McDonald

Most recent releases:

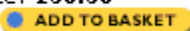
[People and Computers XIV - Usability or Else! : Proceeding of HCI 2000](#) | English

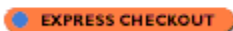
Usually dispatched in 2 - 3 weeks

[Sharon McDonald](#) | Paperback | Springer-Verlag UK | 2000

BOL price: **£58.50**

[More...](#)

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 EXPRESS CHECKOUT

picture 93

Gilbert Cockton

Most recent releases:

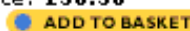
[People and Computers XIV - Usability or Else! : Proceeding of HCI 2000](#) | English

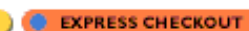
Usually dispatched in 2 - 3 weeks

[Sharon McDonald](#) | Paperback | Springer-Verlag UK | 2000

BOL price: **£58.50**

[More...](#)

 ADD TO BASKET

 EXPRESS CHECKOUT

picture 94

Yvonne Waern

Most recent releases:



[Cooperative Process Management : Cognition and Information Technology](#) | English

Usually dispatched in 3 - 4 weeks

[Yvonne Waern](#) | Paperback | Taylor & Francis | 1998

BOL price: **£31.50**

[More...](#)

[ADD TO BASKET](#)

[EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)

[People and Computers XIV - Usability or Else! : Proceeding of HCI 2000](#) | English

Usually dispatched in 2 - 3 weeks

[Sharon McDonald](#) | Paperback | Springer-Verlag UK | 2000

BOL price: **£58.50**

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[EXPRESS CHECKOUT](#)

[Display unavailable titles](#)

picture 96

In this last picture we see it can be done correctly: here there is actually more info. This again produces a new way of displaying a list of books: one with and one without an image. New here is also the "Display unavailable titles" button. This button actually leads to a book by the same author which is currently out of print. That is how it should be: context sensitive navigation: if there is more info give a link to it, if there is not, do not send anyone there.

This kind of useless clicking up and down pages may be avoided when building the site, if a clear agreement is made on all the elements of the content before they are created. Such an agreement should be part of the concept definition of the website and contain definitions of all content elements including their length, tone of voice, location in the information structure, links to other content elements, etc. The content concept can only be written when a thorough study of the content already available has been made. Content showing up later after the site has been built, is unlikely to fit in the site in such a way that it feels logical and intuitive to the user. If you run into a situation like that, it is likely that you will have to seriously update your website if you want to maintain usability at a high level. The content concept is also very valuable for the technical developers of the database behind an ecommerce site. They need to know lengths, structure, etc. to be able to build a database supporting storage and display of all the newly created and already available content.

Some books have another suggestion for further browsing at the bottom of the page:

Readers who have bought this book have also bought:

[Design Patterns](#) Erich Gamma

[Web Design in a Nutshell](#) Jennifer Niederst

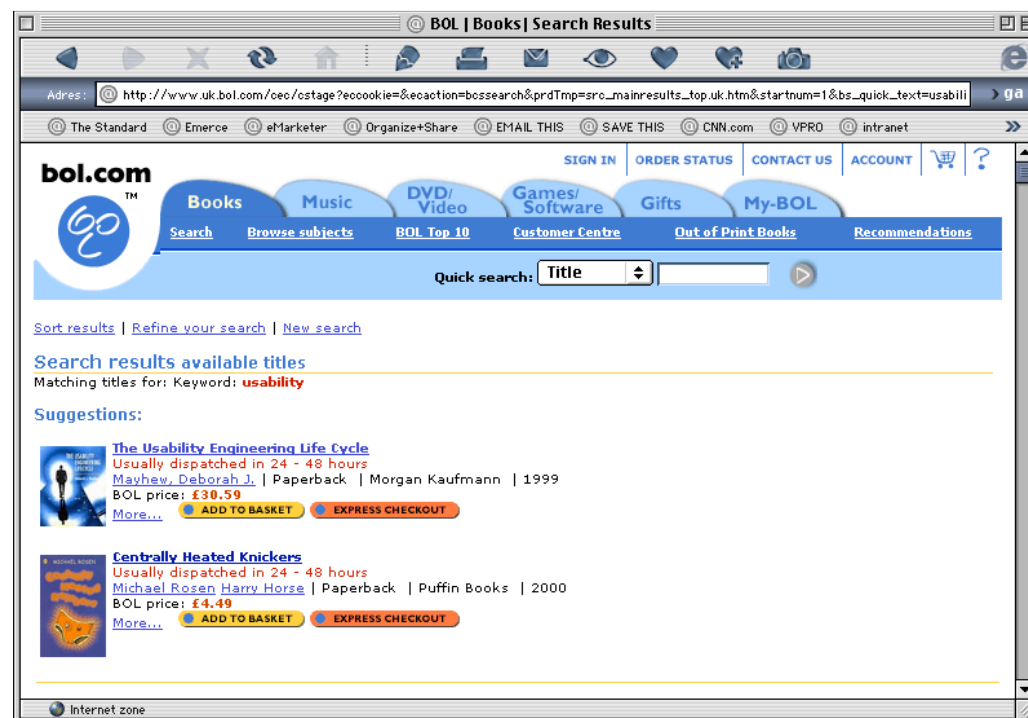
[Over Here](#) Raymond Seitz

picture 91

This is a very useful suggestion that is tailored to my personal behaviour of selecting this specific book. It is reasonable to believe that my choices probably will not be that different from other people's choices. And it is the right place to make the suggestion: when I have finished reading all information on a specific book I am ready to go and look for another one. This gives me some comparison with my current choices.

Searching

Browsing Bol seems fine with all its little suggestions, toplists, bookshelves and best-sellers. But if you can't find something you like, you end up at the search engine sooner or later. After all, every category and subcategory only offers around 20 titles to browse through. Once you start using Search, you notice how limited browsing on Bol actually is. Search can yield you an enormous number of books on almost any subject (for example, the keyword usability gave me 77 results). That is so many that a whole new browse begins within the results of the search action. Unfortunately, the way the information is listed here, does not really support user-friendly browsing when you do not exactly know what you are looking for, as we have seen above. Search at Bol does offer tools to successfully sort or refine your search results. That is important, but it is no replacement for browsing. I am sure these tools are not intended to be a replacement, but users will end up using them as such anyway because they have no choice. The only other choice is: give up and leave. Bol seems to have detected this issue and goes some way towards a solution by highlighting two books before the actual list of results starts. At first this is a bit confusing because you expect nothing more than a simple list of search results. That list starts just below the two suggestions. After a few experiences, I began to like it because it offers a real extra, two ideas on top of a dull, grey list of search results so hard to read or scan. Each time you do the search, other suggestions are given, but they are always part of the search results.



picture 41

My Bol

My Bol is where the user can make a personal homepage according to his book, music and film preferences. On this page, Bol presents products that fit the preferences of the user. This works through

a process called personalisation. The user has to enter his preferences in a series of forms and Bol subsequently comes up with suggestions for products you might like. It is something like the suggestions 'People who bought this book also bought...' as shown above. Only here you must actively submit your preferences. Although that takes effort, users will be prepared to invest the time because they expect something in return: suggestions for products they would not have found otherwise.

Entering preferences

The process starts with entering your preferences. The same categories as for browsing are used in this process at My Bol. And the same problems with categories that browsing customers encounter, turn up here too. Categories and subcategories must form a clear structure. The names must be exclusive and when no subcategories exist, they must not be offered, as with 'Soundtracks, film & TV'.

Select Soundtracks, film & TV Subgenres

Select the sub-genres of your choice, then click the "Submit" button.

Soundtracks, film & TV - Sub-genres

Soundtracks, film & TV

[? HELP](#) [Submit](#)

afbeelding 1

In the case of artist selection, the same artist having more than one entry in the database also occurs. I took the example of John Williams. Obviously, there are a lot of John Williams on the planet, so it was no surprise to see more than one in the music business. However, the one I was looking for appeared four times in the list. The database has apparently several entries for the same artist which, from a user's point of view, is very unfriendly. From a database programmer's point of view, it is a terrible clutter.

Select your favourite artists

Click on any of the boxes next to the artists that interest you, then click the "Submit" button. Click the "Continue to My-BOL page" button to go to your My-BOL page.

Search for an artist	My favourite artists
<input type="text"/>	Sting Delete
Search	Radiohead Delete
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Easy Listening) John Williams (Film	Police (The) Delete
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> John [guitar] Williams	Live Delete
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> John [guitar] Williams	Madonna Delete
<input type="checkbox"/> John Barnes & Roy Williams	Garbage Delete
<input type="checkbox"/> John McLaughlin Williams	U2 Delete
<input type="checkbox"/> John T. Williams	Pearl Jam Delete
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> John Williams	Ennio Morricone Delete
<input type="checkbox"/> John Williams' Baritone Band	K's Choice Delete
Submit	

afbeelding 4

Other problems were that artists who did not show up in the lists, did show up in the search engine later. It is also impossible to enter albums in the preferences; this rules out collections of different

artists on one cd. Here, very much like the browsing discussion earlier, it is vital that the user can choose from a clear structure of categories, encompassing a large detailed universe.

After putting all that effort into entering your preferences, it is high time to see some results. And My Bol results are disappointing. Music is suggested from totally different categories than the ones from your preferences, supposedly because these are currently the most popular cd's. You do get a second chance, however, by rating what My Bol has suggested to you. But then it is apparent that rating several suggestions does not really help, not even after spending half an hour on telling My Bol what you like and what not.

It is a pity that My Bol fails to come up with good suggestions. Submitting preferences and rating suggestions can be good fun if you get good results from it. This can be a great way to browse an e-commerce website, because it can bring you products you would not have thought of yourself. However, with My Bol this feature still needs some work.

The pleasure of shopping

Bol seems to have been built mainly for people who know what they want before they arrive at the site. People who want to get what they want as quickly and efficiently as possible. Bol will work well for them. Unfortunately for Bol, a lot of people shopping on the net do not know exactly what they want. Or they would just like to shop around and get some ideas on nice things to buy. According to the UIE tests, 40% of all money spent on e-commerce sites are impulse purchases. These people make their decisions as a result of ideas they get from the website they are browsing. The Bol.com site offers opportunities for these shoppers too. But these opportunities only lead to a limited selection of all the books, music and films available. And that severely limits the revenue this site could make. The vast majority of what Bol has on offer is only accessible through their search engine. Using a search engine, however, is not what you expect to do during a pleasant shopping experience. A pleasant shopping experience involves scanning and browsing many bestseller lists, tips, suggestions and categories. These are the tools that give shoppers ideas for what to buy. Ideally, Bol's complete collection would be accessible via browsing and scanning. This could be done by extending the category structure. Or by adding more crosslinks, such as 'People who bought this book also bought..'. The efficiency of the site is well taken care of, but a lot could still be done to increase pleasure of use. With growing user shopping pleasure, the revenues of the site will grow because more impulse purchases will be made.