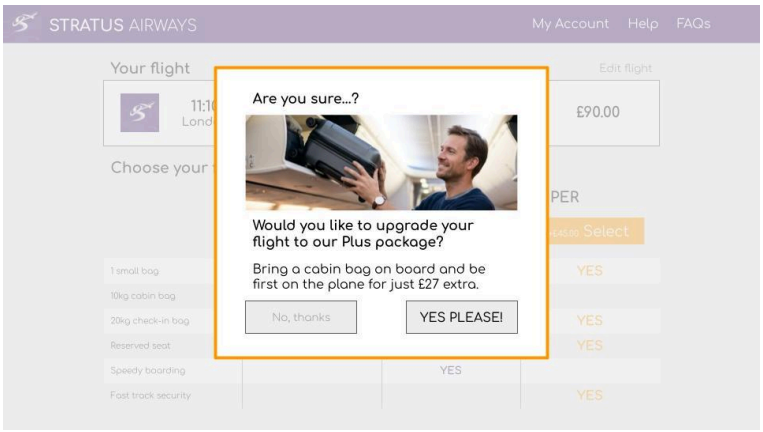
3.4 Sludge

'The choice architect creates excessive or unjustified friction that makes it difficult for consumers to get what they want or to do as they wish.'



Typical design

An obtrusive pop-up interrupts the consumer journey to encourage the consumer to reconsider the choice they've made.
It only appears when the consumer selects the cheapest option, suggesting it's not intended as a helpful chance to correct any mistakes, but just an opportunity to upsell.

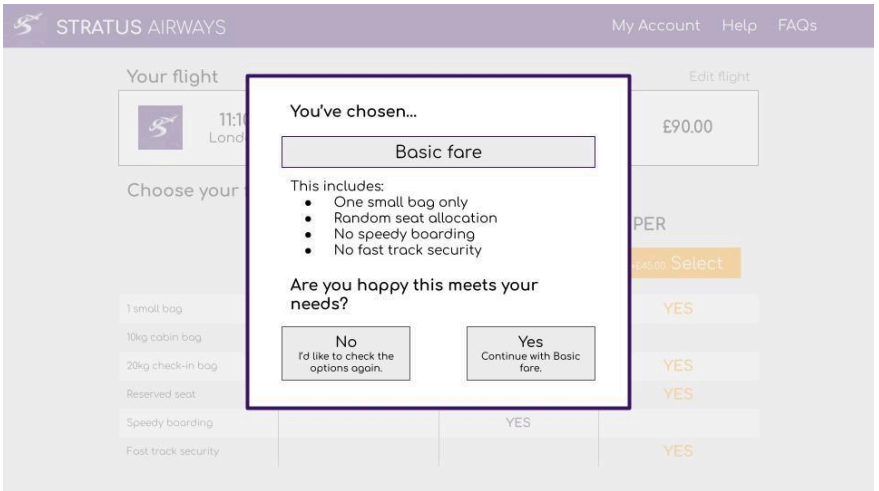
Consumer attitudes towards sludge:	
Top responses	• Annoying (38%) • Makes process longer (23%) • Manipulative (30%) • Indifferent (18%)
Overall sentiment	Positive: 29% Negative: 59%

Sludge makes it harder for people to do what they want to do.[17] It can cause consumers to experience unnecessary economic costs which bring them no value and are not required to complete the transaction. It was by far the least popular practice among consumers.

In the airline industry, sludge is commonly used to prompt consumers to reconsider a choice that they've made - predominantly encouraging them to 'upgrade' their choice to a more expensive option. Not only does this practice add unnecessary time and effort to the transaction, but consumers may end up paying more for something they do not truly value.

Improved design

If it's truly necessary to prompt customers to review their selections, then it could be done in a more neutral and supportive way.
Our design reminds customers what they've selected and prompts them to double check it's right for them.



[17] Shahab & Lades (2021) *Sludge and transaction costs*.