



Halt! What's the Password?

I saw an advertisement the other day for a product that - at first glance - seemed interesting and useful, but which on further reflection I realized was not something I would want to actually use. It was for a new type of lock for the front door of a home - a 'keyless entry system' that uses a keypad instead of a physical key. You simply step up to the door, punch in your secret number, and the door opens.

This does seem initially like a good idea, so why did I come to the conclusion that I don't like it? Simple. I am overloaded with 'passwords' and 'secret numbers' these days. Overloaded to the point where I am now having serious difficulty keeping track of them all. The last thing I want is to arrive at my front door on a rainy day, and have to think to myself, "Let's see, was it 598423 or 589432?" I'll stick with my traditional key; that works very reliably.

But when I use my computer, I have no choice. Every time I try to register on a website it asks me to set up an account, and I have to create yet another ID and password. I learned long ago that it was hopeless (and unnecessary) to make up completely unique data for each and every one of these. I have a couple of 'junk' passwords that I use for casual use on such websites - places that don't deal in sensitive or financial information - so that is not such a problem.

Dealing with banks though, is a different story. For a start, we obviously shouldn't use the same password we have used at other places, so a new one for each bank is necessary. What is worse, the banks usually don't allow you to use a simple easy-to-remember password - they force you to create a random kind of pattern of mixed letters and numbers. This in itself isn't too bad, because you can make up some combination that looks senseless, but which actually has meaning for you. For example, the password 'IH8252SKUL' might be remembered by the phrase 'I hate to go to school'.

But no sooner have you got this memorized, and your fingers can type it easily, than you get a memo from your bank, "Your password has been in use for more than three months. Before you can continue to use your account, you must change it." So you have to try and think up another clever combination to use. The only other option is to use a difficult and complicated password, and write it down somewhere, which of course defeats the security aspect completely.

But I fool them! It turns out that they don't keep records of previous passwords, so I simply have two of them carefully prepared, and switch back and forth between them each time I get the 'change your password!' message from them.

There is yet another method of remembering passwords, and that is to do it with your fingers, rather than your brain. Instead of trying to consciously remember the actual numbers and letters, just memorize a pattern of movement on the keyboard: "Start at the bottom left of the keypad. Move up two spaces. Move right two spaces. Move down one space." But this can lead to trouble too. A friend of mine was visiting from America a while back, and needed to use an ATM to withdraw some money from his credit card. He inserted it into the machine and started the transaction, and when he was asked to type his security number, used this 'pattern' method to type it in. It was rejected, and rejected again when he re-tried. The machine then locked

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>

up, and refused to process his application. It turns out that the numbers on the Japanese keypad are arranged in a different order from American ATMs, and he was actually typing an incorrect number.

At present, using a mix of these different methods, I have my passwords basically under control. But I can well imagine that as I get older, it is going to become a real problem keeping things in memory. And what happens on that eventual day (far in the future!) when I become incapacitated and unable to use the computer? How are my daughters ever going to be able to access my bank accounts?

Ah, the very idea that such a thing could be a problem ... I'm a woodblock printmaker. Money in the bank? You must be joking!

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>