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Pimp My Password

What's a simple guy to do in the age of sophisticated hackers?

I'M NOT COMING UP WITH A NEW PASSWORD. It will not contain a mix of letters, numbers and symbols. My password will be the same one I've always used—with, if you demand it, a number after it. And that number will be zero. Because as important as it is to your website that my password be able to impress other passwords at a password cocktail party, it is more important to me that I be able to remember it. If I were good at memorizing random snippets of information, I would go on *Jeopardy*. I would buy stuff for my wife in the right size.

I use the same password for every website, and when I typed it into Gibson Research Corp.'s website to test its strength, I was informed that in a "massive cracking array scenario" my password could be decoded in 37.61 seconds, though probably significantly less time now that I've told Gibson Research my password.

I know there have been a rash of cyberattacks in which passwords have been stolen. In June, the hacking group LulzSec (motto: "Laughing at your security since 2011"; suggested motto: "Laffing @ sp3lling sinz 4eva") published the names, e-mail addresses, passwords, birthdays and mailing addresses of more than 37,000 Sony customers. In December, a group called Gnosis posted more than 200,000 e-mail addresses and passwords of registered users of the Gawker websites. In apparently every year, Rupert Murdoch's employees broke into everyone's cell phones.

Every time a breach happens, security experts blame the victims. They say we have the passwords of Neanderthals, using only lowercase letters and numbers, idiotically ignoring the language Q*Bert screamed as he plummeted to his death. People who do security for websites believe it's reasonable

for everyone to memorize a different password for each site, change it every few months and make sure it contains Greek letters and in no way relates to our lives or the way humans think. That's because people who do security for websites are nerds. They memorize the names of Tatooine's moons for fun. They don't think about how they're going to feel after their mother dies and every website keeps cheerily asking for her maiden name.

The other problem is that most of the stuff that requires a password is not worth memorizing one for. There's no point in keeping a random string of symbols in our heads just to listen to alt-country on Pandora or read Justin Bieber's tweets. The only way we're going to spit "\$f8%Tg*5" out of our mouths is if a guy with greasy hair behind a heavy door asks—and the government has made alcohol illegal again.

I took my complaints to Diana Smetters, a software engineer on Google's security team. Smetters has a simple system for her own passwords, which involves writing down the ones she doesn't use regularly and locking them in a fireproof safe in her house. Though

I'm guessing there might be nothing sadder than watching your home and all your possessions go up in flames while thinking, At least my Internet passwords are safe. Smetters, who got a Ph.D. at MIT in computational neuroscience—which are two words that are impressive but don't make sense together—chooses her passwords with her own algorithm. She suggested I pick a word, like *baseball*, capitalize a letter (as in "baseBall"), shove an exclamation point at the end ("baseBall!") and add the first word or phrase I think of when I log on to that particular website. So for my Google accounts, my password might be "baseBall!ThePlaceWhereThat OCDWomanDianaWorks."

But that seemed too easy to guess. So I called Kevin Mitnick, who runs a security consulting firm and spent five years in prison for hacking. He said I should create a password by writing down a series of four random consonants separated by four random vowels. I could then easily memorize the result, "kulexosi," except that I'm not a Klingon. The only thing this system is useful for is coming up with names for prescription drugs. Mitnick also said that a lot of people use their initials followed by a word that describes them, to which I suggested "jasAwesome!" We talked for five more minutes, after which, without my having told him any of these things, he casually worked the following into conversation: my birthday, my Social Security number, my address and my mom's maiden name. I had the feeling that he also knew how many women I've slept with and that he was not impressed.

On Mitnick's recommendation, I signed up for Google's two-step verification process, which I can use in place of a password at lots of other sites and which required taking a photo of a bar code on my screen with my phone. I know it's excellent security because, even after watching a tutorial video about it, I don't understand it at all. Sure, I feel safer. But I fear I've started down a long path that ends with my buying a very expensive fireproof safe. ■

