What Is Your Least Favorite Security Question?

Password saturation is a bane of the 21st century. Passwords are required to access pay statements, approve leave, buy music, change insurance deductibles, bid on auctions, check social networking sites, check e-mail, and so on.

To alleviate the inconvenience of inevitably-forgotten passwords, some sites use security questions to differentiate between legitimate users and hackers trying to break into that user's account. This is a sound idea; however, its implementation is often fundamentally flawed. There are too many bad security questions, and far too few good ones. System architects have simply not done a good job designing foolproof questions.

Take my (least) favorite security question, "What is your favorite color?" At first glance, this may seem sensible. But I don't have one favorite color; my favorite colors vary with the seasons. In October, I love the warm glow of a burnt orange; in December, a Spruce green; in springtime, the brilliant magenta-pink on my redbud tree. Besides, when I'm asked to name a favorite color, I typically wonder, "Am I buying a new necktie, new underwear, a new sofa, or a new car?"

Questions about "favorites" make rather crummy security questions because "favorites" fluctuate according to mood, situation, and circumstances.

Questions that prod me to remember my childhood are particularly vexing too. Not that my childhood was traumatic (it wasn't), but my memory is getting faulty. Ask about my "first" or "favorite" anything from childhood, and I'm likely to give you a different answer eight months later. "What was your favorite Christmas present as a child?" What kind of question is that?

Consider the list of available security questions at the Air Force's Advanced Distributed Learning Service. Users of that system must select not two, not three, but six security questions, from a list that references cartoon characters, friends, sports, TV shows, and food. Here's the complete list, along with my initial reactions (which invoked great angst, upon realizing I'd be lucky to remember even *one* of these answers):

"Who was your favorite cartoon character as a child?" (Do *The Simpsons* characters count? Or only Itchy and Scratchy?)

"What was the name of your best friend as a child?" (I had a new best friend every time I changed schools.)

"What was the name of your favorite teacher in high school?" (Do I still have to call her Miss Simmons? Or can I call her Ann now?)

"What was your first job?" (Which came first: babysitting or cutting grass?)

"What was your favorite sport as a teenager?" (To watch, or to play?)

"What was your favorite TV show as a child?" (All that time wasted in front of the TV and I have to pick just one?)

"What was your first pet's name?" (Do goldfish and hamsters count? What about pet rocks?)

"Who was the first presidential candidate for whom you voted?" (In the primaries? Or in November?)

"What was the make and model of your first car?" (First car I drove? Or first car I owned?)

"Who was your childhood hero?" (Fictional? Or role model?)

"Who did you go with or take to your high school prom?" (Which prom? I went twice.)

"If you had chosen your first name, what would it have been?" (When people choose their own names, we get names like Lady Gaga.)

"Who was your first love?" (Do I still have to call her Miss Simmons? Or can I call her Ann now?)

"What is your favorite American landmark?" (Can Daytona Beach count as a landmark?)

"What is your favorite Science Fiction character?" (I don't remember the names of Asimov's robots.)

"What is the name of the first National Park you visited?" (I remember getting carsick, but I don't remember the name of the park.)

"What was your favorite food as a child?" (Breakfast, dinner, or dessert?)

"What is the name of your favorite sports team?" (The last home team to win a championship.)

As a software engineer, I'm amazed when such inane questions get past design reviews and acceptance testing to the point where literally thousands of government workers must scratch their heads in frustration, spending countless man-hours deliberating about which program they liked more as a child (was it *Mork and Mindy*? or *Star Trek*?), then spend even more time debating coworkers about whether or not Wii counts as a sport.

Personally, I prefer questions that fluctuate less. What is *your* oldest sibling's middle name?

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