

/dev/random

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I was reading about the “Do Not Track” initiative on *Engadget* the other day. That’s where, along with the page request, your browser includes an environmental variable or flag indicating that you don’t want your browsing habits tracked. Now, perhaps I’m leaping to conclusions here (I do that so often I had to have a hot tub installed for the cramps), but I’m guessing most advertisers are already aware of that. It’s a bit like telling a rabid dog that you prefer not to be mangled at this time. Unless you have a cat like “Tara” in California, then bring it on.

Tara is the Internet’s darling as I write this, but by the time you read it I’m sure the meme will have faded into obscurity; if you care enough, you’ll have to search for it and wade through stuff about 1930s movies and Buddhism before you find anything related to cats. Writers have been dealing with publication delays for decades if not centuries; they just make life that much more interesting, and they’re not at all awkward. So, how is the late May weather where you are?

Back on task, “Do Not Track” brought to mind a whole host of other opt-outs we should consider implementing. My car, for example, would benefit from a “Do Not Stall” flag. I’d also like to get a “Do Not Food Poison” flag for use at certain restaurants, along with “Do Not Overcharge” and “Do Not Expect a Large Tip Because You Left Me Sitting Here without Taking My Order or Even Anything to Drink for Forty-Five Minutes.”

Perhaps this initiative will spur a whole new series of browser flags. I’m thinking “Do Not Redirect to Some Stupid Two-Minute Advertising Video When All I Want Is the Current Temperature” and “Do Not Create Pop-Ups that Obscure the Story I’m Trying to Read” would be nice. I’d also like a “Do Not Insinuate That Because I Don’t Have the Latest Video Plugin My Browser Is Hopelessly Non-Compliant” flag. That one really pops my garters.

I was a Web designer back in the mid-to-late ‘90s, and I made sure that my clients’ content was visible in every conceivable browser/platform combination, even though it meant having a lot of different systems on hand and a ton of work. Nowadays the lazy so-and-sos just design their content for one specific system and cast aspersions on you if yours doesn’t happen to be that one, as though the fact that their content doesn’t display properly is somehow *your* fault. I don’t know what sort of advertising model they think that represents, but I call it “A Product I Will Cross the Street to Avoid Buying.”

The other headline-grabbing news event, currently neck and neck with Tara the cat tonguing out the first baseball, is the promise of dire consequences from the Chinese as a result of our rather puzzling indictment of five of their nationals for cyber-espionage. If you stop and think about the way the Internet was designed and the rather cavalier approach we as a community have taken to security thereon, charging one nation with spying on another takes on the mantle of a vaudeville act (pause for my younger readers to look that up).

The *mise-en-scène* is a classroom with five desks occupied by students in school uniforms, each representing a sovereign nation. They are taking an online exam, and each is obviously looking at the monitor screen of the student on the right. The student on the right end peri-

odically arises and casually strolls by the student on the left end on his way to the water fountain. He is apparently quite thirsty. After one of these trips the student on the left end jumps up and loudly accuses him of cheating. All of the characters are male, incidentally, because most women are too smart to fall into this trap.

The accused now indignantly levels the same charge at the student to his left. This process repeats sequentially until all stand accused, at which point they leap upon one on another and begin a melee with mice, keyboards, and external drives, pummeling and attempting to strangle one another with the USB cords. There is much pulling of hair, ripping of clothing, and use of shoes as projectiles. During the struggle, the teacher pushes a key on her own workstation and calmly walks to each desk, rotating the screen so the audience can see the big fat red "F" in the center of them. The curtain closes with the crazed student body trying to cram each other head first into their DVD drives, yelling "Cheater! Cheater! Cyber Bleeder!"

I suppose I would be amiss (which is as good as a mile) if I failed to at least mention in passing the infamous Heartbleed bug, which has caused so much heartache, not to mention heartburn, in my own era. This figurative deceased equine has already been subjected to a thorough and prolonged pummeling, so I think I'll just bypass the bug itself and dwell on the lessons learned: There

weren't any. Do you honestly think the next time (and every time after that) software developers are going to import libraries from another source they will subject them to a comprehensive security review before incorporating them into their own products? I chuckle derisively at your naïveté. The World Wide Web is built around the premise that the only way to deal with a mistake is to make another, worse, one that will draw attention away from the original.

When will the next big insufficient bounds checking scandal hit? By the time you read this, I expect. As with Tara, Heartbleed will probably be relegated to the ancient history archives, as Internetland now seems to regard anything that happened more than 14 days ago as the distant past. Yet another oblique corollary to Moore's Law is that the span of time during which any new technology is considered "bleeding edge" seems to be contracting. It is no longer an exaggeration to say that a newly released product ordered from an online vendor may well be obsolete, or at least obsolescent, before it is even delivered to your house. In some areas of technology, products are obsolete before they even roll off the assembly line.

In fact, by the time you read this column it will be thought of, when thought of at all, as a relic from an earlier age. Much like the author.

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