BEHAVIOUR

THIS PAGE HAS TIMED OUT

Richard Asher counts the number of hours he has wasted remembering and forgetting passwords

I MADE A PHONE CALL THE OTHER DAY.
I wanted to book a seat at a comedy gig. At a tiny theatre attached to a fairly average bar.

'Should I book?' I asked. 'Does it sell out?'

'Often does,' said the lady.

'Okay, fine, can I book two places please?'

'You can do it online.'

'That's nice. But I'm already talking to you. Can you just take my name?'

'Afraid not, sir. You can only book online.'

'Really? You can't just take my name?'

'Sorry, sir. I can't.'

So I hung up, defeated, and trudged my sorry way through cyberspace to embark on a 20-minute battle with account creation, passwords, email validation and reference numbers. Twenty minutes I'll never get back.

Curiously, I did not find myself revelling in the joyous feeling that the web has made our lives easier. I mean, seriously, what has happened to us? Not sure what Darwin would say, but to me it looks as if this species has stopped evolving. We humans have peaked. Not so long ago you could book anything by ringing up and leaving your name. We are no longer capable of such complexities. Pen? Paper? Oh, we couldn't possibly! The computer won't know about it. We've painted ourselves into a technological corner.

Have you ever been driven somewhere by someone with GPS? You tell them you know the way. They ignore you and demand your address. Once again you tell them you know the way. And that you can read a sign. They don't hear you; your cries are white noise from bygone times. Address, please.

I have a bank branch three minutes from home. If I time it right, I reckon I might get my transactions done in less time than it takes to complete my bank's improved multi-stage login process. I'm giving serious thought to dropping online banking altogether.

I want to embrace technology. But when it results in things taking longer than before, well, I question its value in our lives. At these times I dream of opting out, in favour of a simple life in Offlinefontein. That comedy gig very nearly didn't get my business because,

Richard Asher is offline

no matter how you spin it, creating and using accounts is a pain in the wrist.

The gig's policy basically means booking takes 20 times longer than in 1958, doesn't it? Back then, you'd make a phone call and that would be that. It's laughable to believe that computers always make our lives more convenient.

If being forced to create an account is cadenza-inducing, when trying to use it three months later, I feel empathy for those Tibetan monks who self-immolate. You see, I've landed up with too many silly passwords for too many ancient accounts. So I meet that little grey, heartless 'invalid password' box far too often. Each time, the rage is a tad more dangerous. Each time, it's harder not to punch my screen.

Doubt creeps in. Did I even have an account with these fools in the first place? I have many accounts, mostly not through choice. The days of shopping in shops, banking in banks and meetings with attractive travel agents are long gone, and now I'm lost in an online account labyrinth.

The trouble with everything happening online is that everyone is terrified of fraud. Hence a world in which the phrase 'create account' exists haunts my dreams. My list of login details has hit five pages, and I'm tired of copying and pasting from it. Enough. I don't care how great MyPasswordRememberer.com is, I can't face any more passwords.

I'm pining for offline. Like vinyl, it would be unwise to write offline, um, off. It may grow to have real retro-chic appeal in the near future. For me, the quaint, password-free pleasure of handing over cash and walking away with my goods is growing.

But, unless you can afford a private secretary, there's no escaping the web entirely, is there? During my long sufferings in cyberspace, I have at least learnt some tricks. There are ways to minimise the Sisyphean business of online verifications. For 'strong' and memorable passwords, base them on an easy phrase.

Example: 'To waste time and money making passwords is hateful.' Take the first letter of each word, substituting numbers or symbols where possible. Your password is thus: 2wt&$mp1h. Letters, numerals and even a dollar sign! The last of which is handy for particularly obnoxious password requirements – I'm looking at you, SARS. Trust me, when you have a grumpy, cynical phrase like that as your memory aid, it'll stick in your mind forever! **GQ**

A WORLD IN WHICH THE PHRASE 'CREATE ACCOUNT' EXISTS HAUNTS MY DREAMS

PASSWORD PLEASE
OK

ILLUSTRATION BY LOUIS MINNAAR