

getDoc.don't

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Although I'm a security guy and this isn't really a security issue, I found a <sarcasm>rather wonderful thing</sarcasm> today. Attempting to obtain the adopted texts of the new European e-commerce regulations, I went to the European Parliament web site and tried to download them. The first document arrived with the file name "getDoc.do". So did the second, and the third. Not only could they have overwritten each other if I hadn't spotted the conflict, but no program I possess would have been able to open even the survivor directly.

On examining the internals of the file (a legal act under DMCA as it was in aid of interoperability) I found it to be an MS Word 2003 document – the easiest thing in the world to open short of a cookie jar. But not under its file name as delivered. To make use of the file I had to recognise the need to change its file extension and also to know it should specifically be changed to .doc, something I'm perfectly capable of, as I am of examining the raw data in the file. But not many ordinary citizens could be expected to know what to do with a file like this, and isn't the European Parliament there to serve everyone in the EU?

A similar thing occurred recently on a white paper archive site. There, one selects a white paper from a list, provides an email address, and the document is delivered as an email attachment with the title of the white paper in the subject line. But in every single email the attached file is named "white_paper.pdf" or "white_paper.doc". So each one that's opened has a 50 per cent chance of overwriting a predecessor, and none of them are recognisable by their file names for what they are. I thought that's what file names were for, but maybe I'm wrong. I happen to know that white papers are submitted to this site under their own original unique file names. But for some reason I can't fathom, the web designer has chosen to ignore all the names – not throw them away, obviously, otherwise the names couldn't be used in the email subject line. But to conceal them from the customer as far as possible. Maybe there's some deep undisclosed philosophical basis for that decision, but it certainly makes the archive difficult to use.

But why am I up in arms? Usability's not my professional discipline. No, but both the above cases are clear demonstrations of the web designer's utter disregard for the user of their product – and that attitude most certainly extends to security as well. My impression is that most web designers these days are so wrapped up in their own artistry and ingenuity that they've forgotten who pays them and what they're paid for. The client should be king, but the client's customers are definitely emperors.

So I say this now to all those web designers out there who feel they're really talented. If a site you built gives your client's customers problems, you got it wrong, however funky the special effects. Bells and whistles don't make up for incompetence at the functional level. Or to put it bluntly, wake up, grow up. And if that doesn't work, give up – and leave web design to those who can deliver products that work properly.

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