

**Identity is a Wicked Problem**

## Identity is a "Wicked" Problem

**There is no universally accepted definition of the problem.**

Is the problem that we have too many hard-to-remember passwords?

That we have passwords at all?

That passwords are too weak?

That I cannot protect my identity and my anonymity?

That I cannot easily describe the many facets of my life in a single online profile on Facebook?

# Identity is a "Wicked" Problem

**There is no stopping rule.**

How will we know when the online identity problem is solved?

## Identity is a "Wicked" Problem

**Solutions are not true or false, but bad-or-good.**

We might describe client-side-certificates as "better" than passwords (or worse), but we certainly wouldn't describe one as true in the mathematical sense (although we could describe specific technical properties as true).

# Identity is a "Wicked" Problem

**There is no immediate test of a solution.**

Did Google implementing two-factor authentication for login "solve" their identity problems?

Only time will tell. Perhaps we will see the problem shift to malware and compromised clients.

## Identity is a "Wicked" Problem

**Every solution to a wicked problem is a "one-shot operation."**

An initial mistake about how the social graph was created from contacts in our email accounts effectively dealt Google Buzz a blow from which it has so far been unable to recover.

# Identity is a "Wicked" Problem

**Wicked problems do not have an enumerable set of solutions.**

Clearly we've been trying to figure out how to do identity management on the net for 15+ years, and yet we still see new ideas every other week.

# Identity is a "Wicked" Problem

**Every wicked problem is essentially unique.**

Identity on the web is not like identity in the real world; there is no physical confirmation of a person that we can use, and every interaction is mediated by a (usually possibly compromised) client.

It is not like identity on a single computer.

It is not even like identity on a corporate intranet.

The hard-won lessons we've learned in other situations don't apply as often as they do apply.



## Identity is a "Wicked" Problem

**Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.**

Perhaps password problems and phishing exist because we don't have a PKI infrastructure.

Perhaps we don't have a PKI infrastructure because we don't know how to establish highly available trust zones amongst mutually distrusting parties.

How do we stop moving the problem around?

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**Discrepancies can be explained away.**

Did client-side-certificates fail to solve the identity problem because concept of PKI doesn't work, or because the user interface to them in browsers was awful?

# Identity is a "Wicked" Problem

## **What do we do?**

Rittel's hypothesis (and Conklin's):

- Build shared understanding
- Build shared memory

# Identity is a "Wicked" Problem

**The planner has no right to be wrong.**

The failure of Microsoft Passport caused almost everybody I know outside of Microsoft to (unfairly) write off CardSpace almost immediately.

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## References:

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