Good 404 Error Pages

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The Dreaded 404 Page

No matter how careful you are, sometime someone is going to try to pull up a page on your web site that doesn't exist. You might move a page or they might mis-type a URL or follow a link of someone else that mis-typed a URL.

When it happens, unless you take precautions, the user gets your web server's default 404 page. This is generally a plain white page that tells them in geek-speak that the page doesn't exist. In observing casual web users, the most common reaction that I have seen to this error is for the user to decide that the site no longer exists (ouch!).

What to do?

First off, create a custom 404 page for your site (links to how to do that at the end of the article). Here are some general guidelines for your custom 404 page.

Do:

- Explain what has happened in human-readable text (if you mention â¬S404 errorâ¬ý, explain what it means).
- Use copy that is friendly and consistent with the voice of your site.
- Explain how it could have happened (including the possibility of changes to the web site).
- Offer a site map.
- Make the 404 page look like part of your site (and yet make sure that it stands out that this is an error page). Most experts say to make it minimalistic and exclude the normal navigation, but I usually just make it look like part of the site with something red and bold to indicate an error.
- Make sure that the error page is longer than 512 bytes (characters) long or Internet Explorer will show its own error message instead.
- If possible, offer a search form.
- If possible, log the error or give the user the ability to report it to you.
- If possible, show the user options relevant to what they may have been looking for.

Donâ¬"t:

- Automatically redirect the user without their permission (unless you are sure that you know what page they were looking for).
- Assume that the error is the fault of the user.

If you follow all (or at least most) of these guidelines, you should help retain visitors that could have otherwise been lost. Good luck!

Links:
http://www.alistapart.com/articles/perfect404/
http://www.sitepoint.com/article/error-handling-user-experience
http://www.evolt.org/article/mblog/4090/4299/
http://www.4guysfromrolla.com/webtech/061499-1.shtml (404 on IIS)
http://www.4webhelp.net/tutorials/misc/errors.php (404 on Apache)
http://www.plinko.net/404/custom.asp (includes instructions for different web servers)