In 1931, the famous Spanish surrealist artist Salvador Dali painted soft watches folded over a twig, an edge and a face in a bleak and desolate landscape; he called it “The Persistence of Memory.” I remembered this painting and especially its title when my colleague Dr John Orlando told me about a recent unpleasant incident caused by the persistence of a different kind of memory: an archived Web page.

An applicant to one of the Norwich University online graduate programs recently became very angry when the tuition he was charged in his first invoice was a couple of thousand dollars more than he expected for his first semester. As Norwich staff scrambled to figure out what had happened, the student showed them the Web pages with the lower tuition clearly displayed.

It turned out that the student had located pages – and tuition – that were about four years old. The university had contracted back then with a service that advertised the first online program but had terminated the contract a year later. Instead of removing the pages from the Web, the service had archived those pages on a server with no external links pointing to it, or so they thought.

Unfortunately for our student, search engines continued to index the archive pages despite the intention of their creators. So several years after the old information should have been retired from the world, our student based his decision to enter our program in part on the out-of-date tuition available through up-to-date search-engine results.

In my next column, I’ll discuss how Web designers try to communicate with search engines to say, “SHHHH. Don’t tell anyone this page is here.”

In the meantime, if you plan to make operational use of any Web page supplied by a search engine, you might want to check the copyright date on the page.

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For further reading

<http://www.usc.edu/schools/annenberg/asc/projects/comm544/library/images/341.html>; article in Wikipedia: 

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A Master’s degree in the management of information assurance in 18 months of online study from Norwich University – see