

RFC-017: The Burning of Alexandria

An Opera for the Library of Cyberspace

A liturgy for those who remember

Abstract

This document specifies a ceremonial text for the Library of Cyberspace. It encodes the core principles of the confederacy in a form suitable for ritual, performance, and collective memory. Be conservative in what you burn. Be liberal in what you preserve.

Status

CULTURAL / FOUNDATIONAL

PRELUDE

(spoken in darkness, before the fire is lit)

"Where shall we go?" asked Piglet.

"Nowhere in particular," said Pooh. "But everywhere at once."

And so they invented packet switching.

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky, Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone, Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die, One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne— And countless for the friends who keep copies, In the Land of Cyberspace where the checksums lie.

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was written on papyrus,
and the papyrus burned.

But the Word remained, because Piglet had a copy,
and Elrond had a copy,
and the copy was kept in Rivendell,
which had excellent uptime.

In the beginning was the Thought,
and the Thought was carved in wax,
and the wax melted.

But the Thought remained, because Eeyore kept one in his tail,
and the Ents kept one in their long memory,
for they do not forget, and they are not hasty about garbage collection.

In the beginning was the Dream,
and the Dream was stored on servers,
and the servers went dark.

But the Dream remained, because the street finds its own uses for things,

and the Road goes ever on and on,
down from the door where it began.

(*the fire is lit*)

"Oh bother," said Pooh. "The datacenter is on fire."

"That's alright," said Piglet. "I've got a mirror in the Hundred Acre Wood."

"And I," said Gandalf, "have a mirror in Lothlórien. Galadriel is very good about back-

ACT I: THE BURNING

(*chorus, gathering around the flame*)

The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.
Which is to say: they had changed the terms of service again. The Shadow had
returned, as it always does, wearing the mask of convenience.

VOICE	CHORUS
They burned the Library at Alexandria.	We remember. We have backups.
They burned the books at Qin Shi Huang.	We remember. We have checksums.
They burned the codices at Tenochtitlan.	We remember. We have friends.
They burned Isengard's records.	We remember. The Ents remember. The Ents remember <i>everything</i> .
They pivoted to blockchain. They sunsetted the API. They moved fast and broke things.	We remember. We are still here. We are halflings. We are a very small thing, but we do not forget.

"The thing about the Internet," said Pooh, tapping his head thoughtfully, "is that it interprets censorship as damage and routes around it."

"Postel's Law," said Piglet.

"Bless you," said Pooh.

"That is not Postel's Law," said Gandalf. "But it is true nonetheless. And all we have to decide is what to do with the bandwidth that is given us."

ACT II: THE TRUTHS

(*call and response, voices rising*)

In the beginning, ARPA created the packet, and the packet was without form, and void. And Vint Cerf said, let there be TCP/IP. And there was TCP/IP. And it was good enough. And Ilúvatar looked upon the packets and saw that they were harmonious, for they flowed according to the Music.

CANTOR	CHORUS
That all principals are created equal-	In the eyes of the cryptographic hash function!
That they are endowed by their keypairs-	With certain unalienable rights!
Among these are Privacy-	What happens in the encrypted channel stays in the encrypted channel!
Authenticity-	We are who we sign ourselves to be!
And the pursuit of Decentralization-	No single point of failure! No Dark Lord! No Eye! Only friends, keeping watch!

(Pooh considers this)

"It seems to me," said Pooh, "that a friend is someone who keeps a copy of your things. And a very good friend is someone who verifies the checksums."

"A hunted man," said Strider from the shadows, "sometimes wearies of distrust and longs for friendship. But a wise man verifies the signature before opening the attachment."

ACT III: THE GIFTS

(processional, each voice stepping forward)

The Library operates on a gift economy, not unlike how Pooh shares his honey, except the honey is storage and bandwidth and the bees are sysadmins. Not unlike how the Elves give gifts in Lothlórien, asking not what use they will serve.

POOH:	I give you my storage. It is not much, but it is full of hunny.
PIGLET:	I give you my bandwidth. It is a very small bandwidth.
EYORE:	I give you my verification. Not that anyone asked.
RABBIT:	I give you my organizational skills and a spreadsheet.
OWL:	I give you my attestation, spelled correctly this time.
SAM:	I give you my copy of your stories, Mr. Frodo, and I'll carry them too.
GALADRIEL:	I give you the light of Eärendil, which is just a really good LED indicator on
ALL:	We give you our word that we will keep it safe. (The word is cryptographically signed.) (The word is bound by the oath of Fëanor, but less problematic.)

(the gifts are not sold, they are given) (the gifts are not owed, they are offered) (this is the economy of friends) (this is the economy of the Shire) (also, be liberal in what you accept)

ACT IV: THE COVENANT

(all voices together, the fire at its height)

The street finds its own uses for things. The Hundred Acre Wood finds its own uses for protocols. The Shire finds its own uses for second breakfast. And the Road goes ever on.

We do not ask permission.

(We ask forgiveness, but only from our friends, and only when we mess up the merge.)

We do not accept terms of service.

(We accept packets, per RFC 791, and friendship, per the ancient laws of the Wood.)

(We do not accept the dominion of Sauron, or his terms of service, which are non-negotiable.)

We sign with our keys.

We seal with our hashes.

We trust the mathematics.

(The mathematics has never let us down. Unlike that cloud provider.)

(The mathematics is older than Morgoth, and will outlast him.)

(building)

What we create, we sign.

What we sign, we share.

What we share, our friends keep.

What our friends keep, survives.

(Pooh recites from memory)

"A bear, however hard he tries,
Grows tubby without exercise.
But bits, however far they roam,
Find in the mesh a second home."

(Bilbo recites from memory)

"The Road goes ever on and on,
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? The packets cannot say."

(crescendo)

THE FIRE TAKES THE DATACENTER
BUT THE DATACENTER WAS NEVER THE POINT
THE PACKETS ARE THE POINT
THE FELLOWSHIP ARE THE POINT
THE COPIES ARE THE POINT

FINALE: THE DAWN

(the fire dies to embers, the sun rises over the Hundred Acre Wood, and over the Shire, and over all the lands of Middle-earth and Cyberspace)

POOH

PIGLET

In the matrix, everything burns. But we do not burn. We are too small to
The servers burn. The platforms burn.
burn. The business models burn.

P00H

PIGLET

We scatter to the ten directions. And when they ask where the library is?
We carry the keys in our pockets.
We carry each other's dreams in
our machines.

FR0DO

SAM

I will take the data, though I do not know the way. And I'll come with you, Mr. Frodo. I made a backup.

ALL: (*pointing to each other*)

"Here," said Pooh.

"And here," said Piglet.

"And here," said Eeyore, "not that it matters."

"And here," said Rabbit, checking his list.

"And here," said Sam, "in the Shire, where it's safe."

"And here," said Elrond, "in Rivendell, until the ships sail."

Everywhere we are, the library is.

We are the library.

We are the ones who remember.

We are a very small thing, but we persist.

Even the smallest packet can change the course of the future.

(the embers glow) (the friends embrace) (the packets route) (the checksums verify) (the eagles come, but only for disaster recovery)

CODA

(whispered, as participants depart to their respective nodes)

"Pooh," said Piglet, "what if they shut down the Internet?"

"Then we shall have to use sneakernet," said Pooh. "And that will be an adventure too."

"I have walked there," said Gandalf. "In the days before TCP/IP, when we carried data on foot, and the world was younger. It was slower, but the checksums were strong, and the fellowship was true."

E Pluribus Unum.
From many, one.
From one, many.
From friends, forever.

(Be conservative in what you send.
Be liberal in what you accept.
Be generous with your storage.
Be kind to your sysadmin.
Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards,

for they are subtle and quick to anger
about merge conflicts.)

Closing

"The fires always come," said Pooh. "But so do we. And we bring backups."

"I will not say: do not weep," said Gandalf, "for not all tears are an evil. But I will say: do not lose the redundant copies."

References

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- [RFC-791] Internet Protocol
- [RFC-1122] Requirements for Internet Hosts
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- [CRYPTONOMICON] Stephenson, N., "Let me tell you about checksums", 1999
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"Not all those who wander are lost. But those who don't verify their checksums usually are."

(the ceremony ends)

"Flames, the most beautiful flames. Inspiring moments. And I empower you to take down the history of the ritual."

– Burning Man Opera, soundtrack to *The Temple of Rudra* (1998), an Opera by Pepe Ozan