
Welcome to
THE
GRAVEYARD
Done, but with errors on page.
Internet

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On a Deathwatch

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On a Deathwatch

They were ephemera and phenomena on the face of a contemporary scene. That is, there was really no place for them in the culture, in the economy, yet they were there, at that time, and everyone knew that they wouldn't last very long, which they didn't.
— William Faulkner, letter, 7 March 1957

Jason Scott, the founder and public face of the Archive Team, demands attention as much for his wardrobe as for his idiosyncratic archiving philosophy. Wearing a stunning range of comical costumes to tech-conferences, he has an eclectic personal style which combines black shirts with skull patterns, steampunk goggles, pirate fancy dress, vintage coats, hawaiian shirts, and bow ties with formal suits. His wardrobe is as diverse as the stories of superheroes and other fictional narratives that Scott uses to describe the Archive Team, a loose gang of geek volunteers on a mission to save dying online platforms.

Since 2009 the Archive Team has saved millions of web pages from oblivion. Their archival activism reflects a shift of attitude, one in which the Web is no longer viewed as an archive itself but as a place which is constantly re-edited and where business

shutdowns are effectively destroying the record of our recent creative history. The Archive Team's efforts, however, follow no established protocol; there is no recipe for digital archiving. Theirs is an improvised method, a form of guerrilla warfare against a larger system in which the authority of service providers is usually taken for granted.

For Scott, his archival passion seems to fill his life, literally. At Open Source Bridge 2012 he gave a presentation on 'Open Source, Open Hostility, Open Doors', where he showed images of his house, cluttered with magnetic tapes, CDs, and hard drives. Data storage discs, stacked one on top of another, form building blocks in this hoarder's house. Yet his surroundings provide few clues to his personality. It's as straightforward as a stock photo; a warehouse of an obsessive collector with a serious working agenda: 'Let's save as much as we can, because everybody, apparently, is trying to destroy everything as fast as possible.'[1]

Among their other activities, the Archive Team is currently fighting to preserve Google's open source code repository named Google Code: URL shorteners; wiki sites with their external links; Yahoo! Answers; Vine videos; and public files hosted by the United States government.[2] Archiving is the very core function of their activism. What started in 2009 as a sense of injustice over the lack of care for users' content displayed by corporations like Yahoo! or Ma.gnolia, the Archive Team has grown into an open source project run by volunteers, developers, and archivists. They are watchmen, keeping an eye open for signs of instability in the online

economy such as new acquisitions, changes in operating policies, or announcements of service closures. And 'The Deathwatch' is part of their wiki site where they list those companies.[3] In 2014, for instance, ImageShack first appeared on the Archive Team's radar. The site has crippled many blogs by changing its pricing policy from a free to a paid model, and deleting free-account holders' images that had been hosted on its servers for many years. The Archive Team keeps track of ImageShack and, as of February 2017, reports its 'vital signs' on 'The Deathwatch' as being: 'Stable. Probably worth keeping an eye on'.[4]

The metaphor of death is a persistent feature in discussions of online business shutdowns. Pinterest boards Google Graveyard[5] and Microsoft Morgue[6] list the discontinued services of two giants: the Graveyard is a provocation created by Microsoft's head of PR, Frank Shaw, while the Morgue was set up in response to Shaw's creation by journalist Harry McCracken in 2012.[7] Similarly, a Tumblr site 'Our Incredible Journey' posts screenshots of closures announced by start-up companies. Sometimes they cheerfully inform users of a new owner of a site: more often, they augur an uncertain future for the data that users have shared via the site as well as the likely shutdown of a service.[8] Uninterested in their own digital heritage, corporations are happy to move on to the next venture.

We have become accustomed to being passengers, only occasionally protesting from the backseat, people's cell phones vibrating from our angry tweets. Online businesses appear to be

untroubled by the cultural or personal consequences of the loss of massive amounts of publicly generated content. Years of life are put into personal microsites, yet we do not have control over the future of our data. Who can we entrust with our data? Do we believe in the policies of social media companies which promise social responsibility?

The Archive Team do more than observe this cycle of startup and failure. They rescue and then deposit files of 'at risk' user content in the Internet Archive (archive.org). A well-established, world-wide free digital library, the Internet Archive provides space for the Archive Team's torrent files, though the two organisations are not formally affiliated. (Scott himself works for the Internet Archive as Free-Range Archivist and Software Curator). Next to a flat icon of a temple on the Internet Archive's landing page, a search bar offers access vast collections of texts, videos, audio, TV, software, images, concerts, websites, and other collections. Above the search bar, there is another one to access the Wayback Machine, software that allows users to search 279 billion saved web pages and, additionally, to save new ones. The Archive Team, return again and again after their operations, to archive their material in the virtual space behind the classical pillars of the Internet Archive.

Scott guides the Archive Team by the three practical virtues of 'rage, paranoia and kleptomania' and documents their activities on a wiki site bearing the 'Archive Time' logo.[9] With crooked red letters pierced by a sword, this symbol could have been taken from

an adventure RPG.[10] The preservation of content is what makes the Archive Team tick: and, in what sometimes seems like a paranoia-fuelled crusade, they download publicly available data and deposit it in the Internet Archive. This process of digital archiving requires an active cooperation between archivists and developers in the Archive Team. As architects of the web space, the Team's developers re-purpose their knowledge of code documentation to capture instead the peer-to-peer culture of mass collaboration. The Archive Team runs crawler robot-archivists day and night, downloading content from companies' servers and returning the content back to the public via BitTorrent protocols.

Scott invites everyone to share in his mission. Clearly *he* is the mastermind behind the project. Yet he keeps using an inviting we, labelling all its endeavours as collective effort. Joining the project requires merely downloading the Archive Team's Warrior software and lending some bandwidth to a good cause. Downloading and 'saving' the content of GeoCities — the once popular web hosting service — requires little more than a quick search on archive.org. Nevertheless, it is clear that he belongs to the cliquey world of tech-conferences and the process is still spoken about in specialist jargon. His challenge is to show how a project on the periphery is vitally important for the future of web archiving, and to motivate us — observers in our seats — to become internet archivists. Scott measures the scale of the task in minutes, hours, or days, leaving us with a feeling that the clock is ticking, and important content will be erased.

The Archive Team's gift to the future are piles of code; not a user-friendly collection. Perhaps you can download and open the files now, but tech ecosystems are interlinked and operating standards are continually upgrading. While a crawler is hoarding new data, unusable old data is decaying back to its binary origin, waiting to be emulated; a life cycle of its own. Along with the code, the Archive Team sometimes provides screengrabs (the same method archive.org uses to capture web pages). Seeking to arrest their fluid state, pages are frozen in time online. As a gravestone for a digital file, screen grabbing has become a common way of archiving ephemeral digital content. A very accessible one too: anyone can make and store a screengrab.

The 'Why Back Up?' section on the Archive Team's wiki page answers its titular question with subsections: 'Because They Don't Care About You' and 'Disaster Will Strike'. But who is it that 'doesn't care about' us?[11] Lack of care for early users is, in fact, inherent in any online business growth model. User data is at risk on sites that once garnered big audiences but have now fallen out of popularity such as Vine; on sites that failed to make a profit with services that they offer and so can no longer support the platform; and, in cases of corporate sellouts, acquisitions with a goal of deploying accomplished teams of product developers. In 2015, Microsoft acquired Sunrise Calendar, an online calendar app, for more than $100 million.[12] One year later the free calendar was shut down and its team of developers joined Outlook Calendar, Microsoft's own service. A 'This is just a beginning' post

on Sunrise blog informs users of the shutdown in a sad tones; this note of regret lasting only for a paragraph before they are asked to become excited again, this time for Outlook Mobile apps.[13]

Scott says that it is not the Archive Team's job 'to figure out what's valuable, to figure out what's meaningful'; in other words, to select what to preserve and hence create a narrative out of our recent history.[14] This said, the watchmen do have to make a judgement about what to download first. They prioritize sites of massive collaboration; places whose interlinked services support a large user group or places that hold important information, such as governments or digital libraries. Skimming through the list of past missions on the Archive Team's main page, it is clear that most of servers had thousands if not millions of users uploading to the site. GeoCities, once the third most popular website in the 1990s, hosted over 38 million user-built pages, and would have been almost completely wiped out by Yahoo! when it closed the site in 2009 were it not for the Archive Team's efforts. While storage is cheap, especially for older, lighter files, Yahoo! could not, it seems, provide a couple of terabytes to save GeoCities, home to many lively, gaudy and sparkly sites of personal expression. Accompanied by images and looping GIFs, GeoCities was also a gallery, a proto blogging site before template web design became ubiquitous. A treasure chest of 1990s web design, viewed today they bear witness, again, to how exciting it was to mish-mash every possible colour, font effect, and background option. But perhaps these qualities also account for the failure

to see GeoCities as a prize collection of future historic artefacts. Yet, luckily, they are now living their second life, and not just in private archives.

In 2011, artist Richard Vijgen mapped all the GeoCities files that had been rescued by the Archive Team on a digital map *Deleted City*, a survey of the lost world of digital homes with neighbourhoods, organized according to the principle interests of the owner: sites concerned with dress and style were, for instance, organised along Fashion Avenue.[15] Similarly, an exhibition 'One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age' by Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied was staged in 2013 at the Photographers' Gallery in London, showcasing 16,000 saved GeoCities pages.[16] Espenschied also works as a digital preservationist at Rhizome, a born-digital institution conserving, promoting and showcasing digital art since 1996. In 2016, the Internet Archive mined and catalogued 4.5 million GIF files from GeoCities in a new collection, GifCities, a confirmation that the heritage of GeoCities has potential for further exploration.[17]

The Archive Team does not ask Yahoo! for permission to archive this material and, as noted above, actually lists kleptomania as one of its virtues. Their downloading activity is not, however, illegal. There is no requirement to secure permission to download public data, even if it is hosted on a commercial site. Nevertheless, the Team's actions still feels like an intrusion, as if the archivists have come to the corporation to pick through its trashcans to see what they can save. There are also cases where

the Archive Team's practice has had a direct influence on a company's plans to close a site. The IsoHunt bitTorrent service decided to shut down its servers a day earlier after losing a long legal battle to Motion Picture Association of America. They closed on 21st October 2013 instead of the date that they had originally announced (the evening of 22nd October), allegedly in order to prevent the Archive Team creating a public torrent of all of their metadata, of torrent protocols linking to download locations.[18]

What is the future of web archiving? There are opportunities to improve the accessibility and potential of stored material. Community archives that range from neighbourhood microsites, to online records of feminist movements, food co-ops, squatters and artist collectives often keep their deposited material alive along with their policies. They include 56a Infoshop Archive, Southwark Notes Archive Group and Occupy Wall Street records, all discussed in an article by Susan Pell in which she seeks to 're-imagine the politics of the archive from the perspective of autonomous archives and from activists archival practices'.[19] Communities use their archives to organize various activities, protests or workshops. But for activists such as the Archive Team, their politics lies in the very act of perpetual archiving and keeping track of companies' digital preservation policies. Since they don't set out to activate the material they archive, their work requires the attention of others, artists and galleries, both offline and online.

Twitter, which owns Vine, has terminated the app for creating new Vines and left the existing content lying on the

online periphery for users to download or view. Vine has shifted from being a service to becoming a temporary archive of digital ephemera. According to an article in The Atlantic, about 200 million people were watching Vines every month in May 2016, but the site was in decline, stagnating since the August of the previous year.[20] The closure of this once much-loved service was announced later in the same year. 'I'm upset, but I don't see any other way to do it. It's been a dying platform, and it was time for it to go, to be honest. I couldn't see it living much longer and I don't know anyone who uses it now', commented Charlie Murphy, a former Vine star, for BBC news in October 2016, when the shutdown was announced. 'What do you think is going to happen to all the big stars that are on Vine currently?', asked BBC North America's reporter Dave Lee. 'I think that the big stars on Vine, if they are big, have gone off Vine. They've jumped ships years ago [...]'.[21] While many may indeed have decided to jump ship, Vine is most definitely not sailing on but appears to be sinking to the depths.

The combination of the ephemeral nature of digital material and the highly sought after tech skills required to operate in an online environment at least partly accounts for the neglect of existing digital content. Since the future of Twitter's large database of Vines is still not clear, the Archive Team has already started the process of retrieving Vine videos.

Revisiting Vine.co in January 2017, I was pleasantly surprised to see Vine maintaining its material online. A heading on the site reads: 'Vines are short looping videos that have inspired,

entertained, and given rise to a creative community since 2013. From break-out comedians to musicians to fandom edits and sports, Vine creators have shaped pop culture.'[22] And below this banner, the content can be filtered by each year for which the service was active, from 2013 to 2016. Twitter has gone further than just freezing the Vines online: it has made an effort to activate the material by updating their Highlights, Editors' Picks and Playlists sections. Converting a commercial service to a commercial archive, Twitter's approach might be the experiment which sets an example for the archiving policies of the future. But why preserve mundane bits of information on so many people?

The Archive Team tracks the living pulse of many online companies, largely judging the importance of ephemeral content in terms of the user group who are likely to be affected by its disappearance. The need to archive digital material lies in our inability to preserve such personal content in other ways outside the technological environment where it was produced. Our virtual selves are scattered across different platforms, in tweets, blog posts, emails, microsites, and myriad other small interactions.

Perhaps each new generation finds something fascinating in the ephemera of its predecessors. This is a paradox found in the difference between the origins of the work in the Greek *ephēmeros*, meaning lasting only a day, and its common understanding as 'collectable items'.[23]

To make our voices heard, we need a form of radicalism that is community oriented and constructive by nature. Hence,

the Archive Team's attitude to items of digital ephemera. Taken individually, it might appear light, trivial, or even superficial, but, en masse, constitutes a cultural document worthy of a serious approach to digital preservation. This means that we must change our perceptions of this ephemera and of our networks which generate and host it from viewing them as being nothing more than pastimes, frivolities, or a hobby, and instead glance into the future to think of the stories they might tell of our own lives and the lives of those around us, if only they endure. The contradiction of such a serious approach to such preservation is that it contrasts so sharply with our concerns about personal privacy and confidentiality; and the feeling that everything we do on the internet is being tracked, recorded, filed, and preserved by agencies beyond our control or even knowledge. Taking control over digital archiving is taking back control over our data; an act which removes us from a mere position of an observer on a Deathwatch, and sets ground for future communities whose interests in preservation are beyond surveillance or marketing.

All links are last accessed on 8th of February 2017.

1 Jason Scott, Open Source Bridge 2012, online video recording, Open Source Bridge.
2 As listed on 8th of February 2017. on the Archive Team's homepage.
3 'Deathwatch' section on the Archive Team's wiki site.
4 'ImageShack' section on the Archive Team's wiki site.
5 Link to Google Graveyard Pinterest board, uk.pinterest.com/googlegraveyard/google-graveyard/
6 Link to Microsoft Morgue Pinterest board, pinterest.com/harrymccracken/microsoft-morgue/
7 Harry McCraken, 'Google Graveyard, Meet Microsoft's Morgue', *Time* (online), 3 July 2012.
8 'Our Incredible Journey' is a Tumblr documenting good-bye messages that companies send to their customers.
9 Jason Scott, Open Source Bridge 2012, online video recording, Open Source Bridge.
10 Right corner of the Archive Team's wiki site.
11 'Why Back up?' section on the Archive Team's wiki site.
12 Alex Wilhelm and Ryan Lawyer, 'Microsoft is Acquiring Calendar App Sunrise for North of $100 Million, TechCrunch (online), 4 February 2015.
13 'This is just the beginning', blog, Sunrise Blog, 2016.
14 Jason Scott, Open Source Bridge 2012, online video recording, Open Source Bridge.
15 A video of *The Deleted City* installation is available at deletedcity.net

16 'The Wall: One Terrabyte of Kilobyte Age, Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied, The Photographer's Gallery, 18 April – 7 July 2013.

17 Gifcities collection is available at archive.org

18 As reported on Ars Tecnica and other tech news sites, see Cyrus Farviar, 'IsoHunt Shuts Down a Day Early to Avoid Becoming Part of Online Archive', *Ars Tecnica* (online), 21 October 2013.

19 Susan Pell, 'Radicalizing the Politics of the Archive: An Ethnographic Reading of an Activist Archive', Archivaria, 80, (fall 2015), 33–57, Abstract.

20 Adrienne LaFrance, 'Is Vine Dying', *Atlantic* (online), 25 May 2016.

21 'Vine Star Charlie Murphy Discusses the Service's End', BBC News (online), 27 October 2016.

22 Vine.co, link to the archived homepage: web.archive.org/web/20170129194215/https://vine.co/

23 Definition of ephemera, Oxford Living Dictionaries (online).


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