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Gatto, Alex

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The People's Game: Modern Media Preservation

Alex Gatto

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Alex Gatto

Professor Marisol Alonso

WRI 010

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The People's Game: Modern Media Preservation

“Once something has been uploaded to the Internet, it is there forever.” A phrase to this effect is no doubt familiar to most people in the Information Age as a commonly accepted fact of the Web. With billions of people now able to connect to this online landscape, there are similarly billions of possibilities for social media posts, photos, articles, and innumerable other mediums to be saved and shared. A community's proliferation of content among them will allow works to live forever across the Internet. This idea is the inverse of an archaeological perspective, as this behavior propagates digitally born objects to be brought into the future rather than the commonplace trash. This sentiment, however, can be narrow-minded, as the truth of preservation is not this simple in reality. Everything that has been uploaded to the Internet can be subject to obscurity and loss no matter its relevance, format, and importance. Even though the proliferation of digital media is a fact of life accepted by the world, much of the Web's contents have already been lost to the pixelated sands of time (De Kosnik 64). Nothing lasts forever, but the amount of time that this supposedly safe content will be available for is much more finite than conventionally thought.

1. Modern Loss

Every year, around 11% of social media posts from that year are entirely lost (SalahEldeen and Nelson 10). This wave of loss applies exponentially to outdated and dying media formats. The analog grandfathers of data storage, such as VHS tapes, LaserDiscs, film

reels, physical books, and CDs, are subject to decomposition and disaster. While numerous copies of a work are bound to exist, through action it can only be assured that media is safe.

No matter what sort of film, book, program, video, or website becomes lost to the time, this loss is, in every circumstance, a loss of culture and history. It is not just the obscure and meaningless that fade into nothing. For example, the silent film era, as of 2013, had lost 75% of its catalog (Cannady 3). Thousands of culminations of artistic vision and expression, works that show the burgeoning efforts of film in its infancy, are gone. Stories die when they are forgotten, just as history dies when no one is there to record it. Preservation, this grand discipline, “[safeguards] holdings of great historical, cultural, aesthetic, financial, community, and documentary value and significance” (Casey, *Media Preservation* 4) for the future as the culminations of human expression they were.

1.1 Preservation Methodology and Digitization

Media preservation itself is not a new field. Silent films that ultimately survived the passage of time were most often deliberately saved—the random discovery of film canisters in unexpected places being uncommon due to celluloid film’s fragility. Like any physical material, celluloid is susceptible to decay from the elements while also being flammable to the point of requiring exclusively dry and cool environments in order to be preserved (Collections Care). This is an example of the conditions in which physical media need to be kept in order to survive.

For every format, specially controlled storage areas can be made to accommodate whatever condition is best for preventing materials from deteriorating. As said above, a dry and cool environment is used particularly for film. In this instance, former salt mines are used, as the salt keeps moisture levels low while enclosing enough space for the temperature to be controlled (The U.S. Farm Report 9). Alternatively, warehouses are specially fitted for various kinds of

control such as temperature, humidity, and air purity, as not all physical works can be stored the same way. Audio master tapes, books, nitrate film, cellulose acetate film, newspapers, and more each require differing, particular brands of care that ensure the safety of these items for years to come (Collections Care). However, not all physical pieces are kept safe like this, as the great amount of physical media that exists is not all chosen for preservation.

Digitization, the process of transferring or ripping audiovisual data from physical mediums into digital equivalents, is a newer but similarly vital aspect of the archival process. There is a multitude of equipment and methods for digitizing each respective medium. As such, the field calls for more than technical skills; critical thinking is a must, as even the same formats do not always have the same needs. Aspects of audio and pictures are altered on the digitized copy for better quality and authenticity, but these alterations are all based on the practitioner's judgment. Regardless, analog media is constantly degenerating, and there is insufficient time or equipment to digitize everything (Casey, *The Gathering Storm* 16). However, given the impossible task of preserving everything, it has been found that the worth of digitizing, or preserving physical works, is dependent on a triage of importance. This triage is done according to the judgment of archivists based on the cultural and historical value of a work. This relationship between the collector and the collection is the archival imagination, the dynamic between preservationists and that which they preserve, as a collector ceases to exist without the existence of their collection, while said collection cannot exist without the collector (Hanáková 10). One cannot exist without the other, so the importance of the collector, the preservationist in this instance, maintaining this dynamic is clear in the person and material's mutual need.

As there is an obligation for mortal reasoning, the flaws inherent to humanity's natural thought process crop up among this dedicated archivist crowd. Thus, while many well-equipped

people are working to preserve and archive these materials and history for the future, traditional methods and ideas in the field, and corporate interests, hinder these efforts.

2. Opponents to Digitization

It has been said that modern technology has not yet improved enough to digitize analog media perfectly. Unlike a digital copy, an original copy would carry the highest authenticity and closest accuracy. This would mean that the survival of these original copies is of greater importance than digitization. Going further with this opinion, it could be understood that, if these materials have survived for so long already, then even going so far to digitize them is an act that can surely wait until the technology mentioned above becomes suitably advanced to perfectly digitize a material. Going even further with this idea, the original copies should perhaps stay squirreled away in an air-conditioned vault, never to be seen again.

Additionally, if these works can stay out of public access, then media companies' rightful copyright holdings will be protected. It is in the best interest of these companies to safeguard their works so as not to lose money or become victim to bad actors taking advantage of loose copyrights. Considering the possibility of these bad actors striking, copyright concerns outweigh the need for public archives, according to copyright holders. In reality, there is no time to wait for innovations in digitization technology. All analog mediums are deteriorating and will become completely unusable after too much time passes. With the time in which these physical formats can survive already so short, perceived obsolescence of digitization method similarly shortens the timeframe for preservation (Casey, *The Gathering Storm* 17). The best of the current day is better than the perfect of the future when the damage to the originals will continue ravaging these physical items until nothing remains.

The continued romanticization of magnetic tape, celluloid film, vinyl, and physical mediums in general halts progress. A preservationist's mission is to preserve and archive the past for the future. The belief of these original, physical copies being superior is naive, as the originality is itself a "fluid concept" when the essence of the medium is derived from shared ideas (Hanáková 36). Originality and authenticity are subjective descriptors standardized into a longstanding preservation canon. As such, their common application in this field can hurt preservation efforts as items may physically decay without a digital counterpart. As technology evolves past antiquated formats, the need to adopt these evolutions into the core of preservation consequently rises. In other words, it is action over tradition—traditions that are, in fact, incongruent when applied to all preservation cases.

2.1 International Federation of Film Archives

Founded in 1938, the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) is a collective of archives that are representative of the problems that eventually come from traditional preservation practices revolving around the importance of celluloid film and other such materials. Members, who are approved preservation groups from around the world, are told to improve the physical conditions of their archives without any further instruction. The substitution of formats only needs to occur with the deterioration of the original, restrictions on access to the public, FIAF respect of copyright law, their stance against the destruction of archived works, and the opinion that the original shall be maintained even when copies, both physical and digital, exist (FIAF Code of Ethics 5–6) are just some of the regulations of the FIAF. It should be noted that these regulations have been under review for revision since 2022 with no codified changes made as of March 2025 (FIAF Code of Ethics' Revision Project).

There is nothing wrong with the rules of the FIAF, per se; many are good preservation practices that foster a proper environment for materials to remain in perpetuity. However, through these terms, many archives would be deemed ineligible to join the FIAF and receive their support. Without this support, these fledgling archives do not receive their much-needed aid for preservation, and hence their archives are in less desirable states. At the same time, the FIAF also limits the control of its actual members (Frick 166–167). Its continued focus on physical composition prioritizes the past before the future. That is to say that the FIAF imposes its single viewpoint on the myriad views and circumstances of those in the same field. The FIAF is a vital part of the film preservation sphere, of course, but their specifications, as said before, can hurt archives as well.

2.2 Upholding Copyright

As an official institution, the FIAF upholds the copyright restrictions put upon them by intellectual property (IP) holders (FIAF Code of Ethics 7). It is common for such a stipulation to appear with the same rulings applied to any community-driven audiovisual information hosting platform. These regulations are due to media companies generally being very protective of their IPs. As such, many official and professional efforts at archivization and preservation are handled and overseen by rights holders themselves. In other words, they control what is saved, how something is saved, and who is saving it. Thus, most materials are kept locked away in uncertain, perhaps dire, conditions so as not to allow free access to the general public. Efforts by corporate bodies are, at their core, about money. In pursuing theoretical loss prevention, the only entities that benefit are most often solely these IP holders. The trend of capital-over-consumer is a sentiment no better seen than in the realm of software, due to digital rights management (DRM).

DRM controls access to copyrighted material through encryption technologies packaged within a purchased product, unlocking access to content only for legitimate sales (Fortinet 1–3).

DRM is ostensibly a collection of technological anti-piracy measures. It is inherently anti-consumer through the limits DRM often places upon digital and even physical purchases. The devices used, the number of installs, and copy protection are some such standard measures. This method of copyright protection only hurts genuine purchasers, as pirates circumvent these restrictions (Wicks 12). DRM serves its purpose well as copyright protection, and it, along with similar practices, would be acceptable as a necessary evil if they still allowed for preservation. However, being anti-consumer happens to coincide with being anti-preservation.

2.3 Hindering Preservation

The actions of IP holders inherently impede preservation efforts. As DRM and copyright laws more often limit the ability to save content for preservation purposes, much is kept out of the hands of archivists, making institutions such as archives and libraries unable to adequately preserve digitized works (De Kosnik 68). Without real professionals' work, preservation work is left in-house without experienced supervision. While this is not to say that a company cannot itself handle the correct archivization of their creations, with many having their own personal archives for film canisters, audio masters, and other such materials, this oversight can still fail to preserve and archive culturally and historically significant materials. Such failure has occurred innumerable times from the past to the present, one such example being the BBC, which notoriously recorded over the original copies of its productions until the late 70s (Moloney 4). Not only were these actions a problem of the past, but the destruction of original and or all copies of a work at the hands of corporate entities is still not a rare occurrence in the modern day.

These practices are not localized to any one country, medium, or group of companies. Examples of such purposeful loss are seen under Japanese copyright law and Warner Brothers. Japanese copyright law is strict to the point of unreasonability concerning preservation. In the Fall of 2023, film holding company Tokyo Laboratory announced that they would be closing and that all held materials needed to be claimed by their respective IP holders. Any unclaimed materials were to be destroyed in order to prevent third-party reclamation, as per Japanese copyright law (Schilling 4–6). Decades of buildup of original copies lost their preservation status and became forever lost to time through the work of the law. Companies have no choice but to follow the law, even when doing so results in losses such as these.

Similarly, it has recently become a trend for the studio Warner Brothers to withhold completed films and preemptively write them off for tens of millions in tax breaks (Thompson 8). With three films now relegated to this fate, it has become clear how much financial incentive overpowers the creative spirit of cinema. These films are forever locked away or destroyed in order to prevent the public from ever experiencing these pictures. However, with one of Warner Brothers' most recent shelvings, the film *Coyote vs. Acme*, much more public attention has been paid to the situation, to the point that people have petitioned for the film's release. The film's entire plot summary was leaked in the midst of the deafening silence that was Warner Brothers' response to the many calls for its release. Their preamble stated "Since WB doesn't seem interested in releasing it" (COYOTE V. ACME 1), this anonymous individual took it upon themselves to make as much they could public. As only the script of the film was leaked, the rest remained unseen until public outcry pushed the film to be bought for distribution by the independent distributor Ketchup Entertainment (Rubin). In the wake of corporate failure

regarding its consumers, those consumers took the fight into their own hands and saved this film from obscurity.

2.4 Piracy

Gabe Newell, CEO of Valve and owner of the platform Steam, famously said in an interview, “Piracy is almost always a service problem and not a pricing problem” (Newell 17). While Newell built his platform as an answer to such problems, creating the finest service for the consumer is not the most common practice in a world in which ever-increasing growth is needed for profits. In the wake of corporate failings, people will often turn to piracy. This shift from legal purchases to theft goes for archiving just the same, the two being inextricably linked in their copyright-infringing nature. Simply put, both require access to a product that is against the financial pursuits of a company, as the product often becomes accessible to the public for free.

Preservation-wise, piracy has become a solution to a problem that piracy created due to IP holders becoming wary of granting access to their works for preservation and archival purposes (De Kosnik 68). Piracy is rightfully treated as an illegal act of theft, but these acts also serve a vital role in the continued life of online and digital materials. Nowadays, piracy is almost entirely digital. Whether through private data leakage, DRM cracking on software and hardware, or peer-to-peer (p2p) file sharing, piracy is standard on the modern Internet. That final method, p2p file sharing, is the quintessential act of digital thievery: one person hosts a file on their computer and sends out keys, called torrents, online in order for the file to be downloaded. These torrents are often collated on piracy websites or private groups, while the file itself always remains hosted only on the one system of origin (Bischoff 2–5). Therefore, p2p is decentralized, meaning data and files are kept on personal computers and hard drives rather than on a central server that could be taken down.

Decentralization is why p2p file sharing aids preservation efforts. This allows individuals to make up their own archives while collaborating with others. With myriad collectors, one archive going down can be easily made up by another (De Kosnik 65). Additionally, by skirting copyright laws that often hinder professionals, these archives can become more robust with works that could never have been saved officially. In fact, with how complicated copyright holdings and laws can be, there are times when it is uncertain who truly owns the rights to an IP, this muddy outcome having no positive resolution (Schilling 7). Of course, as a genuine act of theft, much of a pirate's gains are not for furthering archivization, but instead a simple unwillingness to pay for something. This brings a bad stigma to archiving due to its innate illegality and its palpable adverse effects on most media sales (van der Ende et al. 148–151). As such, it is essential for above-board, perfectly legal ways of aiding preservation to be just as, if not more, prevalent than piracy.

3. What Can Be Done

There are many ways to support preservation and archivization without resorting to piracy or becoming a professional archivist. Anyone can create or sign a petition to have something released or saved, and everyone can post online calling for the same. As said before, the actions of companies are driven by financial gains and losses, so indicating to these companies that there is a market present, and that consumers would be willing to give them their money, could influence a company's decision as to whether or not to release or re-release a work, allowing for better preservation and archivization of said property. The same principle applies to older preservationists who are tied down by tradition. Nothing can happen if everyone remains silent and inactive.

Another way to be active is to support smaller community efforts more directly. The connecting force of the Internet has brought many together into circles for operating their own archives or developing specialized archival software and hardware. A recent example is the Domesday Duplicator, which allows the best possible data ripping from LaserDiscs (Inns 11–13). This technology can substitute simpler, yet lower-quality, emulation, making it the best way to archive LaserDisc content.

Emulation, though, is an important medium as well, as it allows for antiquated software to be kept alive through the digital recreation of its source's behaviors (BasuMallick 14–15). Despite their notoriety as a way to use software without paying for it, emulators are not themselves illegal, with only the unlawful aspect on the consumer end being the use and distribution of copyrighted materials (United States Court of Appeals).

For the less technologically inclined, there are independent distributors such as Discotek Media and Vinegar Syndrome that purchase the rights to obscure and foreign productions for broader release, allowing these works not to be lost to time. No matter the place of origin, these releases bring a work into the modern day again for a hopefully continued existence. Monetarily supporting such ventures enables more content to be brought into archives without relying on illegal or uncertain means. As well, voting with one's wallet can signal to the original IP holder the worth of their properties being released, as seen with *Coyote vs. Acme*, mentioned earlier.

4. Conclusion

There truly is no catch-all solution to furthering media preservation and archivization. In the face of forces such as tradition and corporate financial interests, truly overcoming them all and transitioning into a perfect space of public collections for the future of culture and history is an unachievable task. In truth, this impossible outcome has never been the intention of those

working toward a better state of affairs. What matters, in the end, is progress, continuing onwards to at least create a more favorable archival situation. As there is no surefire avenue to success, an individual doing anything can help. It is the prerogative of the people to see that the future of the media they enjoy or want to see saved is wrought by their own hands.

There does not have to be a grand effort spanning the hearts and minds of the public, but instead, a better collective of general awareness. As previously stated, everything helps this cause. Whether it is a curated collection of obscurities bringing a swath of the unknown with us into the hereafter, or an unsaved link running through the Wayback Machine, these actions are all a part of a collective effort to further preservation. This creates a mounting cascade effect of more and more becoming archived as more people can reap the benefits. When something is made more available through these particular practices, this item generally will become more likely to survive as myriad copies exist, and the idea of contributing is implanted within the general public.

In a time where so much information is at humanity's fingertips, "widespread, bountiful access is, itself, preservation" (Frick 153). Awareness begets progress begets awareness. While it is true that not everything can be saved physically or on the Internet, infinitely striving toward such a goal is just as good. Even if nothing is forever, the sands of time eventually weathering away all that is created, it does not mean that which can be saved, however temporary it may seem in the moment, should not be.

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