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The Truth is in the Archives: An Examination of The X-Files Fandom's Preservation Practices

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For fans and scholars alike, receiving an Error 404 message while scouring through archives is an inconvenient pain. “Oops, this page is not available,” and “Page not found,” messages serve as epitaphs for fandom treasures that were unable to stand the test of time. Unfortunately, it is not rare to encounter these messages for those interested in older fandoms. Though services like the Wayback Machine can help uncover sites thought to be lost, it is not foolproof. In November of 2021, Liminalfic.org, a website functioning as a search engine for ‘90s/’00s *The X-Files* fan fiction archives, stopped working. A month earlier, a website mimicking a digital library catalog of fan fiction was completely inaccessible. Sadly, these types of losses are not uncommon, resulting in the threat of losing archives becoming a persistent fear within the community. As the years pass, domain names are forfeited, meticulously designed webpages are lost to neglect, and some of the oldest original fans are beginning to pass away. The loss of these archives means the loss of a fandom’s legacy. Luckily, fans of *The X-Files* (also known as X-Philes) are experts at adapting and evolving in online spaces, a trait that is seemingly passed down with each new wave of fans.

This paper will examine how the archival habits of X-Philes have been inherited by the newer generation of fans — some of whom were not even alive during the show’s original run. While new works are published every day on contemporary platforms like Archive of Our Own, Tumblr, Twitter, etc, fans are continually choosing to become digital archaeologists, learning how to navigate online webpages older than they are in order to access pieces of the fandom considered now to be ‘classics’ or ‘staples.’ For many fans, experiencing these older archives inspires a sense of communal pride in what those original fans created and the legacy they left behind. While some fans choose to engage as spectators, others are picking up where their predecessors left off and adopting innovative ways to respect and conserve *The X-Files*’ distinguished online provenance. This not only serves as a means of fans ensuring that other fans are able to enjoy the same content they have, but it is allowing the legacy to become accessible to all within emergent digital spaces. To examine this inter-fandom exchange, I will address the following research questions: 1) How are contemporary fans engaging with older fan fiction works and archives? And 2) Are any new archival techniques occurring in the community?

Literature Review

Though certainly not the first media text to inspire extreme levels of devotion, *The X-Files*’ online fan base emerged at a defining moment in the history of fandom: the popularization of the internet. As Adrienne L. McLean explains: “the X-Philes were among the first to use cyberspace to create their own virtual fan culture and specialized interest group,” (McLean, 1998, p. 3). As a result, while these fans were

partaking in leisure activities and expressing their devotion to their favorite television show, they were simultaneously paving the way for fandom culture for decades to follow. Not only were they among the first to utilize these spaces, they arguably have had to adapt and evolve more than any other fandom with every new platform. Originally these fans, inspired by the Zine-culture of science fiction predecessors like *Star Trek*, created communities around mailing lists and forms and utilized the affordances of online technology to centralize their activities (Chin, 2013). The desire to create specific sites where all the information fans might want was localized eventually led to the creation of The Gossamer Project, one of the first fandom-specific websites for fan fiction (Chin, 2013).

Though the show ended in 2002, fans were not done expressing their affection for the cult media phenomenon. While the newsgroups and mailing lists started to fall out of fashion, X-Philes began adopting new sites like Facebook and Twitter for their fannish activities (Jones, 2014). The emergence of new spaces, while exciting in their possibilities, can begin isolating older fans who may not want to change modality or who have a difficult time doing so. This platform preference is noted by Jones who explains that from her experience in *The X-Files* fandom “there seems to be a clear divide between ‘older’ fans who use Haven and Gossamer and ‘newer’ fans who use LiveJournal and Archive of Our Own,” (Bury, et al., pp. 299-318). While much scholarship focuses on how the emergence of these new platforms allowed fans to move towards bigger and useful sites, this paper serves to examine the way fans are now using these new platform affordances to backtrack and re-examine the older sites with new tools.

It appears that with the finale of the eleventh season in 2018, *The X-Files* might permanently hold the title of a post-object. Rebecca Williams (2015) notes that:

if researchers do seek to explore fandoms surrounding older media texts and objects, access to fan spaces and communities can be more difficult[...] Fan scholars must consider how we might continue to access and research fans from spaces that no longer exist – in many ways a form of ‘post-object fandom’ in its own right. As the shows that fans love get older and become less ‘valuable’ to researchers, so too do the spaces that surround them. It is perhaps unsurprising that as texts ‘end’ and ‘die’, so too do many of the places where fans discuss them. (p. 201)

Though I recognize my potentially biased positionality, because of *The X-Files*’ unique positioning in the history of online participatory culture, I argue that the preservation of that specific fandom’s archives serves not only the interests of fans reminiscing and engaging with their favorite media text, but it protects an integral site of history for fan studies historians. Williams further explains that for fandoms that appear to be immortal (i.e., *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *LOST*, etc) “paying attention to a range of endings and fan reactions to them is key to

understanding fan responses to periods of transition, change and cessation.” Currently, *The X-Files* has been a post-object fandom for four years, but this is not the first time it has been in a post-object stage. Bertha Chin examined the fan-media producer collaboration by looking at the fans who made up The X-Files News (XFN) and how their connection to the ‘official’ or legitimate creators influenced relations among fans (Chin, 2013). Bethan Jones detailed how members of the XFN and X-Philes alike were campaigning in the hopes of getting another *The X-Files* movie after the 2008 film as well as other means by which the community was keeping itself alive (Jones, 2014). Both of these post-object analyses occurred before the revival seasons in the late twenty-teens after which Gillian Anderson adamantly stated that season eleven was her last and the women of The X-Files Network are mostly retired (Andersen and XFN Staff, 2019).

In Chin’s analysis of *The X-Files* as a post-series fandom, she notes that in “the absence of new materials to be discussed, analyzed and expanded on creatively, a new type of website has become popular among certain groups of X-Philes in recent years, which highlights fan–producer collaborations,” (Chin, 2013, p. 88). I would argue that the fans she is describing in 2013 are looking out a window at a landscape of vast possibilities: the women at XFN were mediating conversations between fans and producers in new and exciting ways, there was hope that the campaigns for more content that Jones describes might take off, and they could look back at what they had and still cling onto the idea that there might be more in the future. I would argue that in the absence of new materials in the 2022 climate, fans are now choosing to look into a mirror and reflect on the past and how the show affectively resonates with them and this permanent community. Despite the quiet chorus of maybes, contemporary fans seem to accept that Mulder and Scully have solved their final X-File.

While fans are grappling with the knowledge that their favorite show has come to an end, they simultaneously have dealt with the loss of different historic online fan sites. In 2017, Ephemeralfic.org, the partner site to Gossamer, was lost in a cruel twist of fate. According to the site’s owner, Scott Miller, as reinscribed on Fanlore:

Due to circumstances outside my control, Ephemeral was cruelly wiped from the Internet. Our hosting provider, with no warning to me, disappeared from the web, most probably going out of business. This left me unable to access Ephemeral's server, which most likely no longer exists. Worse, due to a computer crash a few months ago, I lost the backup of Ephemeral's code and so have no way to recover the site. (Accessed 2021)

He continues to state that he plans on reviving it from the ground up, however, the site is still down. That message used to be on the front page of the Ephemeral link, but attempting to access the site now just results in a malware warning. Though Fanlore claims that, as of 2020, the site is back up in its beta form, this is not the

case at the time of writing. While this is a devastating loss for Miller, it is a loss shared by the community that contributed to it and cherished it. While fan studies can sometimes prioritize the participatory fan over the lurkers, these types of sites benefit all as they do not require an account or any form of public engagement, which makes their loss even more devastating (Bury et al., 2013).

In *Rogue Archives*, Abigail DeKosnik emphasizes that the motivation for many digital archivists for putting forth so much labor and time into building and maintaining archives is “their fear of loss, their anxiety over digital ephemerality, and their suspicion that if they do not save a community’s cultural works, those works will vanish entirely,” (De Kosnik, 2016, p. 131). I pose that for X-Philes, whose collective reputation is partially defined by their information-seeking behaviors, their anxieties about lost archives are exacerbated when acknowledging the permanence of *The X-Files* post-object status, (De Kosnik, 2016). In terms of new content, the future is uncertain at best, and all the while the content of the past is crumbling behind them. In the following case study, I will examine how fans are utilizing the skills they have acquired through new archives in order to maintain the cultural provenance of these sites so that fans of the past can continue to contribute while contemporary fans experience the depths of this fandom’s history.

Methods

My positionality in this project is that I am a fan of *The X-Files*. I have been an active part of this community since 2017, so I am familiar with the terrain of these fan spaces and the discourses happening within. I utilize an ethnographic approach to my observation of contemporary fan communities in order to understand where the preservation interventions are taking place. Through immersing myself in the community, specifically on Twitter and Tumblr, I observed different methods in which fans were approaching these older archives. For the purposes of ethical integrity, I will utilize the names/usernames that the fans use to refer to themselves. In the case I use a person’s last name, it is because they are posting it in affiliation with the content of the case study and I want to give proper credit for their creations and contributions.

Findings and Discussion

Through my examination and immersion within the online *The X-Files* community, I noticed three main approaches fans utilize in order to bridge the gap between older fandom artifacts and newer audiences. Specifically, I observed that fans were 1) expanding the accessibility of fanworks (namely fan fiction) through audio recordings; 2) preserving the history of the fandom through documenting the perspectives of those who experienced it; and 3) blending the stylistic, affective

aspects of the older archives with the functionality and ease of newer archival systems. For each of these three approaches, I have chosen to analyze a representative entity that exemplifies these strides toward fandom preservation.

Expanding Accessibility

On September 28th, 2019 a fan tweeted “Where’s the podcast that reads me #TheXFiles fic?!” One day later, Rachel Drouillard (@red2007) created the Audio Fanfic Podcast, a resource dedicated to the creation and dissemination of audible fanfiction (This Is How It Started, 2022). While audio recording fan fiction, also known as audiofic or podfic, is not a new phenomenon, it was not commonplace in *The X-Files* fandom prior to this (“Podfic,” 2021). Though initially just an idea from a tweet, the podcast has grown and developed official merchandise with their logo on it (see Figure 1.) and there is now a team of women who are working on the project. Alongside Rachel, are her co-chairs, Annie Flowers (@bananniex) and Kristin Sauter (@kristinsauter) who all contribute to the podcast in different ways. The main function of the Audio Fanfic Podcast is to record fan fiction so that audiences can listen to it and take it on the go if they so wish. This is beneficial in bridging the gap between ability impairments and enjoying fanworks. Since the 90s, the main form of fan fiction has been online documents and web pages. This can create limitations for fans who have visual impairments, cannot look at screens for too long, struggle to stay in a stationary position to read, etc.

Prior to this service, fans could utilize text-to-speech or other dictation software, but success was not a guarantee. One study found that verbal dictation on Fanfiction.net was sensitive to certain formatting on the archive, and overall proved



Figure 1. The Audio Fanfic Podcast's Logo

to be ineffective for consumption and retention (Lammers & Palumbo, 2017, pp. 76-90). When it comes to considering older archives, fan fiction authors were required to format their stories themselves. Any given story on the Gossamer archive exemplifies the finicky formatting which would hinder visually-impaired fans from being able to partake in the community and enjoy it at the same level as everyone else. The Audio Fanfic Podcast is comprised of volunteers who submit recordings of stories they have read which allows for a more pleasant listening experience than automated voices. Wholistically, this is a

service by fans, for fans with various people pitching in what they can in order to create the best listening experience possible.

The popularity the podcast received in the first year alone is a testament to how valuable and in-demand this service is. Through the work of volunteers, they managed to put out 400 stories that amassed over 200k+ plays on Soundcloud (“This Is How It Started,” 2022). The success of the podcast has spawned other endeavors too, including: a bi-weekly podcast dedicated to fan fiction topics and interviews, thematic compilations of fan fiction recommendations, and special interest podcasts. Overall, the Audio Fanfic Podcast is working to bridge the gap of former inaccessibility or limiting structures to ensure that these communities can be enjoyed by everyone and anyone.

Preservation of Fandom History

As is life, fandom communities continually have people coming and people going. Sometimes individual’s interest begins to fade, maybe they become interested in a different fandom, or life gets in the way of their participation. In contemporary fandoms, there is a strong likelihood that they can be reached through one of the various online modalities of communication. However, back in the days of Gossamer, many fan fiction authors could only be contacted if they left their email in a header or author’s note. Even so, they might not respond. “Does anyone know how to contact [name]?” is a common question for X-Files, and while this could just indicate that there are people out there wanting to show appreciation to their favorite authors, not being able to contact the creators of fandom “classics” means important pieces of the fandom’s history are being lost to time. One tumblr user, lilydalexf, is attempting to bridge this gap through her project Old School X by reaching out and recording testimonies from original fans to document fandom history from the perspective of those who were there.



Figure 2. The banner Lilydale uses to promote her project.

Several podcasts partake in the fan-producer relationship Chin and Jones detail in their research. *The X-Files Files*, *The X-Files Diaries*, and *The X-Cast* all feature interviews with various cast and crew members. Often the hosts will ask the guests to recount their experiences working on the show in an effort to gain new insight and preserve an oral history of the individual’s experiences.

Lilydalexf is doing this too, only she is focusing on the first-person accounts from fans who were participating in *The X-Files* fandom and writing fanfic during the original run of the show. In the same vein as the podcasters, lilydalexf is trying to make sure that the voices from behind the archives are heard while asking those individuals to reflect on how far the fandom has come since. She creates all the content associated with the Old School X project herself, including making banners as seen in Figure 2.

In Old School X, she asks a set of questions that seem to fall into three different categories: 1) reminiscing about their experience in the 90s/00s, 2) reflecting on how fandom has changed since then, 3) more personal questions about their own attachment with the show. Some of the questions she asks specifically include:

- Does it surprise you that people are still interested in reading your X-Files fanfics and others that were posted during the original run of the show (1993-2002)?
- What do you think of when you think about your X-Files fandom experience? What did you take away from it?
- Social media didn't really exist during the show's original run. How were you most involved with the X-Files online (atxc, message board, email mailing list, etc.)?
- What did you take away from your experience with X-Files fic or with the fandom in general?
- What was it that got you hooked on the X-Files as a show?
- What got you involved with X-Files fanfic?
- What is your relationship like now to X-Files fandom?
- Were you involved with any fandoms after the X-Files? If so, what was it like compared to X-Files?
- Do you ever still watch *The X-Files* or think about Mulder and Scully?
- Do you think you'll ever write another X-Files story? Or dust off and post an oldie that for whatever reason never made it online?
- Is there a place online (tumblr, twitter, AO3, etc.) where people can find you and/or your stories now? (lilydale, 2021)

Her interviews allow those who participated alongside these individuals to reminisce about their own experiences, and they invite newer fans to understand the work of those who came before. One of the most consistent answers throughout her interviews is how much the sense of community impacted them, with many of these individuals still in contact with those they initially met in Usenet forums in the 90s.

Blending the Old with the New

Arguably, one of the most distinctive features of the 90s fan fiction archives is the visual component — fan pages littered with manipulated images and fan art. Unfortunately, a lot of these sites are lost when the creator loses interest or is unable to keep up the archive. Luckily, the Organization of Transformative Works’ Open Doors project is trying to mediate these losses by uploading at-risk archives to Archive of Our Own. While this is vitally important, the affective feel of the fandom can be lost when formalized on a standard platform. That is to say, some of the novelty of the older archives stems from the fan-created digital environment. The atmosphere of the digital environment can be replicated, but it does not necessarily evoke the same feeling that immersion in the older archives do. One of the biggest *The X-Files* archives uploaded to Ao3 through the Open Doors Project is the “The Basement” Archive, dedicated to slash fan fiction. In Figures 3 and 4, Figure 3 on the left is how the original “The Basement” Archive looked online, as captured by the WayBackMachine. On the Figure 4 on the right is how it was

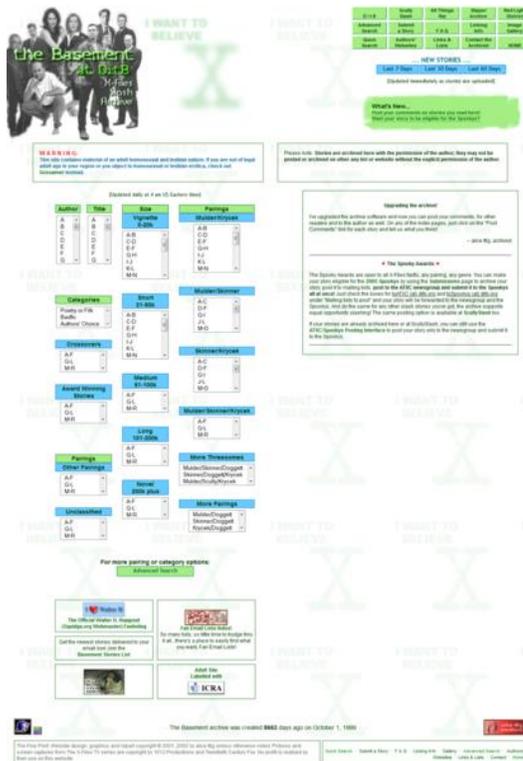


Figure 3. The original site layout for “The Basement” Archive.



Figure 4. The Open Door Project’s translation of “The Basement” Archive on Archive of Our Own.

translated through the Open Doors project. The archivist did a great job incorporating aspects of the older archive onto Ao3 to make it feel a bit more like the original, however, it is still confined by the layout of Archive of Our Own. Xhumor (@IDontWannaWrestle) acknowledges the importance of translating these archives into more accessible and navigable means, but they are making efforts to replicate the visual affective feel of the archives through the utilization of fan art and manipulated images.

Xhumor has painstakingly been going through the process of tagging and applying metadata to older works of fan fiction that were lacking while also taking newer works of fan fiction and giving them an older-archive makeover. Specifically, they are ensuring that every story on their website X-Libris is easily categorizable and searchable (like Ao3 prioritizes) while giving it the visual qualities fans may enjoy (like the older archives offer). According to Xhumor (2022):

This archive began from my aspie need to organize the fanfic I love, and desire to repost the heap of classic fanfic covers I'd salvaged from the Wayback Machine for other people to appreciate.

I often lament the time taken to find all the parts of stories and series and I hate having to go to multiple sites to find all the parts of a particular story. Times and download speeds have changed, so it's no longer necessary to split stories into parts under a certain number of kilobytes. I wanted to take advantage of more modern technology & make a lot of the X-Files fanfic from the past more accessible. (Xhumor, 2022)

The creator of the website will create dust jackets for stories if there is not already one available (see example in Figure 5). Archive of Our Own allows for users to upload images within the story, but the image is not available until a user has already decided to click on the story. Dust jackets were commonplace to see on the



Figure 5. An example of Xhumor's utilization of Dust Jackets to promote fan fiction.

original archives, usually created by readers as a token of appreciation to their favorite stories. While on a smaller scale, fanfiction.net allows users to choose an image that represents their story if they wish. Though there is poignancy in the adage “never judge a book by its cover” through creating an archive wherein these images are always available, the site becomes

an affective digital library while also paying homage to a popular practice that, at least in *The X-Files* fandom, seems to be fading out.

Conclusion

Upon meeting a man who can prophesize the nature of people's deaths, Scully asks him how she will die. His answer? "You won't," (Morgan, 1995). While the concept of Scully's immortality is the source of many fan debates, it is unquestionable that, if not in the text of the show, her legacy as a cultural icon will never die. While there may never be any new episodes of *The X-Files*, the legacy persists as fans continue finding innovative ways to ensure their fandom and its artifacts are always evolving and that their footprint on the history of fandom is available for all to see. For X-Philes, following trails of broken HTML links and finding hidden treasures buried in the Wayback Machine serves as a rite of passage. For nearly 30 years, Fox Mulder continually asserts that "The Truth is Out There." In the case of *The X-Files* fandom, examining fan archives reveals an unmistakable truth, as exemplified by the three case studies: fans are eager to participate in the legacy of archival work that *The X-Files* fandom has contributed to, and the popularity of these endeavors serves to show that even the non-participatory fans are still eager to engage, especially with all the efforts being made to ensure everyone gets to participate.

Note

When initially doing research on this subject, Liminalfic.org had been shut down since late 2021. However, a few days after the FanLIS 2022 Symposium in May 2022, Liminalfic.org returned and is currently up and running.

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