Missing Mods: An Examination of an Online Fan Community's Archiving Practices

by

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Abstract

This project studied the practice of information sharing in the context of online communities devoted to the preservation of video game mods. My research investigates how these fan communities share and archive challenging content, and how they react to the potential and actual loss of these materials. More specifically: how do online fan communities archive the content that their members have created? How do fan communities respond to the disappearance of said content? How do these communities think of and discuss preservation? A brief overview of several sites related to the fan community surrounding *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* will be presented, and data collected from one of these sites was coded and analyzed. This examination offers a unique perspective on the practices of an online community surrounding the storage of digital content. In particular, this examination provides information on how online communities think about archiving fan-created material that is solely shared online.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Questions

In order to explore how online fan communities view the storing, sharing and archiving of content online, several discussions about loss that took place on a *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* fan site were examined. From this, the main research questions directing this thesis are:

- How do fan communities respond to the disappearance of said content?
- How do online fan communities archive the content that their members have created?
- How do these communities think of and discuss preservation?

Research Problem

The internet has made it much easier to share information and build communities across great distances. These communities can be quite invested in maintaining access to some type of content. In particular, fan communities have made great use of the affordances of the internet to grow and thrive online as they share and discuss massive amounts of content. They share pieces of fiction, software, artworks, videos and music, all related to the object they are fanatical about, whether that be a television show, sports team or short story. The content they share may be from the original creator ("official" media), their own fan creations, or content that another fan has created. Additionally, in the process of conversing about these materials, the discussions themselves are a form of content that reveal perceptions not only about fan works and official media, but also their community, their online spaces and the internet itself.

While the internet has brought a large variety of people together, surrounding a wide range of topics, the information hosted on the internet and the spaces in which people gather

online are rather temporary. The continued existence and accessibility of content hosted online is dependent on continual maintenance as files are vulnerable to "file corruption, format obsolescence, unreliable hosting sites, and insufficient metadata" (Fraimow 2014) among other threats. Relying on private companies to maintain uploaded material has failed in the past, for a multitude of reasons, including the company shutting down, or technical issues. For example, a MySpace server migration caused a massive loss of data of anything older than 2016, a time period that includes when it was the most popular social-media site (Kleinman 2019). In spite of these issues, online fan communities continue to flourish, although their expectations for access to content over time may differ.

Although the fans themselves may or may not be in charge of maintaining and building the sites that host fan-created content, they are frequently the ones that manage content and maintain the community across multiple sites. This management is often accomplished without any formal training in librarianship or information management. This research project examines the practice of archiving in the context of online communities devoted to fan-generated content. More specifically, this project focuses on examining fan communities' reaction to loss when storing and sharing complex material. I examined how online fan communities perceive the loss of fan-created content, and their efforts to preserve that content. What methods are suggested and undertaken by fans when creating archives of content are also discussed.

In order to narrow the realm of study, the fan community surrounding the video game *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* was chosen to be studied. More specifically, discussions surrounding storing and sharing modifications, or mods, made for the game by fans, will be the particular content that will be examined. I intend to study how the fan community deals with the impermanent nature of online content, while also managing the extra complications

that come with sharing mods.

Mods are difficult to define; however, they generally are a piece of software or media that either alters existing content of the game or adds entirely new content to the game. This can encompass a large variety of different assets including "user-interface customizations and patches, to non-official expansions, which add new levels or maps to games, to total conversions, which replace all assets in a game" (Frelik 2015, 16). Fans who create these assets are often called "modders," whether those assets are adding new content or modifying original content. Perhaps the most common type of mod are those that change the appearance of items, clothing or characters in a game. For example, modders have added Santa hats for the characters to wear (inyriforge 2015b), replaced swords with candy canes (inyriforge 2015a), and added clothing from a completely different media franchise (Quanon and 90SK 2014). Figure 1 shows an example of such a mod. Additionally, mods can also increase the accessibility of the game; for example, by increasing the font size (sovietshipgirl 2022). Larger and more complex mods can involve adding entire storylines or characters, complete with new or altered voice acting, textures, music, 3D models, sound effects, and areas. As mods become larger, they are often comprised of smaller modifications, which makes classifying an individual mod difficult, even for those making the mods (Sith Holocron 2017). The wide variety of forms that mods can take vastly increases the complexities surrounding storing, sharing and archiving them.

Figure 1. An example of a mod that changes the appearance of items in *Knights of the Old Republic* (inyriforge 2015a). A character from the game is wearing a Santa hat and wielding two large candy canes.

Other forms of fan creation, such as fan fiction or fan art, can easily be saved in a variety of file formats or can exist as physical items. In contrast, a mod cannot exist physically or even on its own. While one can enjoy many fan creations without being familiar with the source material, mods cannot be played without having access to the original game. Being entirely dependent on the game they are made for adds complications to their already precarious existence. The problem of software obsolescence will be one that we will continually face in the future. However, due to mods' multiple dependencies, they are

particularly susceptible to this issue. As with all software, mods can be plagued by incompatible updates. If the original game is updated, the mod may no longer be playable if there were major changes made. Or if the game can no longer be run due to changes in hardware or operating systems, then the mod itself will be inaccessible as well. The very nature of mods makes their existence brief and ephemeral, and how this complexity is approached by fan communities was of particular interest.

Storing and sharing mods within a fan community can be relatively difficult for a variety of reasons. Primarily, mods themselves can require a large amount of disk space; while mods are usually shared as compressed files, even these compressed files can still range in size from a few kilobytes to many gigabytes. In order to share these mods, download links need to be provided, which requires online server space. This, in addition to the enormous number of mods produced for games, creates the need for dependable data servers. There are a variety of options for modders to host their work, but two of the most common methods are through dedicated modding sites or simple file-sharing sites. As dedicated modding sites have grown and expanded, it has become more typical for modders to upload their work in such places. These sites usually host mods for a large variety of games, rather than focusing on one specific series or title. As well, the files for the mods are hosted directly on their servers, rather than an external file-hosting site, which protects them from third-party mismanagement. They organize mods by game or mod type, so that they can easily be found by other fans. These sites are generally unaffiliated with the original developers of the games or the corporations that own the copyright, and often get funding through donations or advertising. Similarly, simple file-sharing sites are used since they allow the hosting and sharing of large files. However, unlike with dedicated modding sites, the sharing aspect is up to the modder. Typically, modders announce their mod on a fan site and provide a link to the

hosted file. However, this can be precarious as, depending on the service chosen, the modder may need to pay for the service, or the file hosting may only be temporary. Regardless of whether the modder is using a dedicated modding site or a simple file-sharing site, the lifespan of mods are dependent on the chosen sites' continued existence. When this fails, it often falls to the fans themselves to collect and re-distribute the mod files. Modders may re-post their work themselves, but if they have left the community, they may not even be aware that their old work is no longer accessible.

However the mods are stored, fan sites are usually where the mods are announced and discussed. Depending on the members of the fan community, announcing and discussing a specific mod is only one type of conversation that can take place. Active and dedicated fan communities that congregate in online spaces are a source of a multitude of in-depth discussions that can reveal community views on content loss and how to mitigate it. But, similar to file-sharing sites, the servers that host the fan discussions need to be maintained somehow, and again, that is not always the case.

The fan community surrounding *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* was chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is a dedicated fan community with an active online presence. Secondly, since the original Windows version is currently nearly twenty years old, there will have been a greater number of incidents that could have resulted in, or did result in, content loss. From server failure to defunct corporations, an older fan community is more likely to have faced these challenges. The strategies that the community developed in response, in addition to any attempts to mitigate the loss of content, reveal details on their archiving process. The discussions surrounding these efforts give insight into how the community views the saving and archiving of content and which actions are considered the most valuable. However, this decision is not without drawbacks as an older fan community is also more likely

to have a larger amount of content that has been lost, both in terms of mods and the surrounding conversations.

Additionally, a number of factors about the *Knights of the Old Republic* game itself make it particularly well suited for examination. While the game originally came out in the early 2000s, it has a long history of multiple publications and re-releases. It is also a single player game, which is usually easier to make mods for as multiplayer games typically enforce conformity to prevent players from installing mods that allow cheating. *Knights of the Old Republic* was first released July 15, 2003 exclusively on consoles, which are generally difficult to make mods for and to install mods on (Parker 2003). More importantly, it was shortly thereafter released for the Windows operating system on November 19, 2003 (Thorsen 2003). Releasing a game for Windows greatly opens up the possibilities for modding, and it is after this release date that one would expect to see mods being developed and shared, and a fan community forming around these activities. Three years later it was re-released in a box set with several other games, all for Windows (Sinclair 2006). In addition to the two Windows releases, the game was also later re-released digitally on Steam on September 5, 2009 and on GOG.com in October 2014 (Product Release - Valve 2009; "Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic" 2020). Releasing a game digitally removes many barriers to accessing a video game, the most relevant being that there is no need to find a physical copy of a game that may be out of print. Without a re-release like this, as time goes on, playing a game and, by extension, the mods, becomes increasingly difficult and would require tracking down a used copy or obtaining an illegally copied version of the game. In particular, the digital release would be expected to reinvigorate interest in the mods that were previously created for the original Windows release, as that is what occurred with similar re-releases (Dark0ne 2010). This interest should encourage the rediscovering and sharing of older mods within the fan

community.

To gain an understanding of what information is online, and to ensure the continual access, in some way, to this information, studying archival practices is important. This study will bring a greater understanding of how general internet users store and share information, specifically in online fan communities. Additionally, it will examine community perceptions surrounding the temporary nature of online content and the creation of archives. This study will also provide a better understanding of how these users work around unreliable technology when attempting to diminish the loss of content. To this end, I review the academic literature that forms the foundation of my thesis in chapter two. The literature has been grouped into four broad sections. In the first, I provide an overview of academic literature that has examined various aspects of fan communities. As there are a multitude of ways to study fan communities a few choice papers are presented. In the second section, I review relevant literature that covers how online communities utilize the affordances of the internet, and how online structures, in turn, influence online communities themselves. In the third section, I review literature from the academic community that analyzes modding communities, and the difficulties that these communities often encounter. In the fourth and final section of chapter two, I look at the research most directly related to my thesis, that being, research that examines online fan communities that create their own archives, whether that be of fan works or the original content that they are a fan of. Chapter three serves as an introduction to several sites that host mods made by the *Knights of the Old Republic* fan community. I outline the historical background of these sites since their inception and through multiple incidents of content loss. Additionally, chapter three covers the methodological approach of this thesis, how the data collected will answer the research questions, and an overview of the research process undertaken. Finally, the data management plan for this

thesis is detailed. In chapter four, I present a discussion of the data and answer the research questions. In the final, fifth, chapter, I present my concluding remarks and future avenues of research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Anyone who has revisited a website to find the server gone, or even a new site in its place, may understand to some extent that the internet is not a permanent source of information. Vint Cerf, often described as an "internet pioneer," has even spoken about the dangers of digital archives when the software that is required to access the content becomes obsolete (Neuman 2015). Similarly, Phillips (2003, 43) calls attention to the fact that easy accessibility of online information does not automatically include "viability over time." Software changes can easily render content unreadable or unplayable. Phillips (2003) strongly argues for the development of policies to preserve website content as websites are unlikely to survive over time without concerted efforts towards preservation. However, there is still a cultural sense that the internet itself is an archive, and that anything that we have found online can be found again, particularly through Google's search algorithms (Lothian 2012, 554). This is despite evidence to the contrary, as Google cannot find what is no longer online. Additionally, "Google has stopped indexing the older parts of the Web," leaving older websites invisible to those using Google's search algorithm (Bray 2022). Even with the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, there are a number of issues that complicate the archiving of websites. This includes whether a site has been saved, or even saved completely, as missing images and broken links plague the snapshots that the Wayback Machine holds (De Kosnik 2016, 50). I am interested in how users, and specifically fans of video games, think about and deal with the impermanent nature of online content, and how they work to archive and provide access to that content.

Fan Communities

As this thesis is focused on how fan communities organize information, the field of fan studies provides a starting point from which an overview of fan communities can be obtained.

For my purposes a fan will be defined as a "self-identified enthusiast, devotee or follower of a particular media genre, text, person or activity," while a fan community will be defined as a "socially organized group of fans who share one hero, text or genre and then network with each other" (Duffett 2013, 293). There is a wide variety of research being done in relation to fans and fan communities (Hellekson and Busse 2006). For example, De Kosnik et al.'s (2015) article explores why and when fans create content related to the object of their affection, in relation to the date of release of said object. Kem (2005) surveyed members of a fan community to gain an understanding of their opinions on potential roles for librarians in their community. Hill and Pecoskie (2017) examined the information activities that some members of fan communities undertake. As well, one of the most widely cited works in fan studies is Jenkins' ([1992] 2013) book, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, which dealt with fans as active consumers, rather than several earlier theories of passive fan consumption of media. Although all of this research is tangentially related to my specific interests, these are necessary to participate in the scholarly conversation surrounding fan research due to fan practices being the focus of my thesis.

In the case of De Kosnik et al. (2015), their research project focused on two sites in particular, FanFiction.net and Archive of Our Own. Both sites allow users to upload their fan fiction to the website, where it can then be read and discussed by other users. The researchers looked at the amount of fan fiction published at these two different websites for three blockbuster franchises and found that, while there was a spike in production of fan fiction after the release of the movie, it did not drop off the same way between movies or even between sites (De Kosnik et al. 2015, 150). They hypothesize one of the causes of this may be the dissimilar policies at the two sites, as FanFiction.net has, in the past, deleted content (De Kosnik et al. 2015, 160-161). While there are often similar sites dedicated to a specific fan

community, in regards to fan fiction, sites such as Archive of Our Own are often the primary source for fans looking to store, share and access fan-created content since it hosts a large amount of fan fiction from a large variety of fan communities. These sites create a place to store and share fan-created content and in regards to my own research project, similar sites are my main source of data. Official or unofficial policies of such sites will likely create discrepancies between the archiving behaviour on different sites.

Kem (2005) focused on the bibliographic needs of fan-fiction writers, specifically fans of the works of Joss Whedon. Their thesis provides suggestions for the potential roles for librarians in such communities. They found that there were conflicting ideas about the possible role of librarians in the fan-fiction community, as what the community wanted was at odds with many of the principles of librarianship. For example, accessibility to content is important to librarians but the fan-fiction writers did not want or intend for their works to be consumed by the general public, even though they are posted in public spaces online (CLA 2008). The works were solely intended for the fan community. Despite this apparent clash of ideals, many of Kem's (2005) survey respondents expressed concerns about issues (such as inability for advanced searching) that librarians and information professionals have had a long history of finding solutions to. This lack of knowledge results in collections of content formed through informal methods of gathering and sharing that may or may not be easy to search through. Whether or not mod creators also feel that their work should be private will greatly affect how a fan community views archiving practices.

While there may be many potential roles for librarians in fan communities, it is more commonly untrained fans that take on such information activities. Hill and Pecoskie (2017, 846) used serious leisure as a framework to examine "a diverse collection of fanfiction publishing platforms, blogs, and associated websites … from those that welcome a variety of

genres and foci to those that are more narrowly focused to a specific culture, title, genre, character, or audience." They found that, in fan-fiction communities, some fans perform "significant information-related activities," including curating collections of fan fiction, reviewing and creating pathfinders to fan fiction as well as creating "unique organizational schema" (Hill and Pecoskie 2017, 843). Following further from this, these information activities have potential implications for the longevity of the fan community. Hill and Pecoskie (2017, 852) argue that the multiple examples that they found of fans carrying out information activities allows "for the fan community's digital heritage to be continued." Over time, such information activities would become more important as a fan community would have a longer history and a larger amount of fan content that has been produced. Keeping a record of this fan-created content and where that content can be found ensures that earlier works are not forgotten over time. Additionally, such activities would introduce the works of members who are no longer a part of the fan community to those who may be just joining the community.

Online Structures and Communities

There are many different aspects of content storage online that will affect my study. First, what is chosen to be collected, or rather, how the material is curated greatly affects what content is available to examine. Second, for content that has already been lost, memories of said content may be the only evidence that some fan creations existed in the first place. Third, fan communities that exist primarily online will be influenced by the precarious nature of the websites that they engage with. Fourth, issues surrounding copyright and how a community perceives their rights to content will both determine the longevity of online content.

In regards to larger collections of fan content, there are many sites that allow users to upload or submit content, thus creating an online archive of unofficial fan-created content, as

mentioned by De Kosnik et al. (2015) and Hill and Pecoskie (2017). Such sites are often created and moderated by fans themselves, which creates an archive for the wider fan community. In relation to this, Reid's (2007) article examines how different fan archives characterize themselves. Generally speaking, the volunteer in charge of the archive would be the one to define the scope of it, and their own personal outlook on the purpose of the archive would greatly affect what they decide to keep and to discard. Reid (2007) specifically examined two curated archives of fan material relating to *The Lord of The Rings* novel and associated material. M.A.K. Halliday's linguistic methodology was used to analyze the "About Us" sections of both archives, to examine the language used when describing the site and how to get one's work accepted. Reid (2007) found that the two archives were very dissimilar: one used informal wording while the other used much more formal, almost academic, wording. The wording reflected the type of work that each site was interested in accepting: the more formal site would accept critical essays on J.R.R. Tolkien's work, while the more informal site focused on fan-fiction stories. In discussion forums, Reid (2007) found that both archives had their critics and their supporters, but few to no people supported both sites, indicating a split in the opinions of the community on what was considered "worthy" texts. What content that fans consider "worthy" greatly changes what content they archive, whether they are volunteering with a larger archive or simply sharing what they personally like.

For many websites, the only evidence that they ever existed, particularly if they were not or could not be saved in the Wayback Machine or saved by another web-archiving team, would be the memories of those who visited and who were emotionally invested in its continued existence. Yang and Wu (2018, 2108) searched for "personal reminiscences about disappeared websites posted by individual users without solicitation" on the Chinese Internet. One of the primary focal points of many of these memory narratives that Yang and Wu (2018,

2114) found was the loss of community. These memory narratives provide valuable insight into not only what is missing from the internet but also the meaning that users ascribed to these websites. Finding and studying such narratives, when they themselves may also eventually disappear from the internet, is "an integral part of web historiography" (Yang and Wu 2018, 2108). Taking this into account for my research project reveals several complications. Making a comparison between what is available now, through archives and re-posts, and what was once available would be difficult since it may be impossible to know exactly how much fan content has not been saved. Old references and mentions may reveal traces of such content, but said references may be the only indication that the content ever existed for online consumption.

The often temporary nature of online content has been previously discussed in academic literature, but few articles look at the effect on fan communities. Versaphile's (2011) article does discuss the ephemeral nature of online fandoms due to their reliance on websites and server space. Online fan communities can easily be destroyed by this dependence if no one has a backup or the time to commit to maintaining it. Versaphile (2011) details an extensive history of server migration and defunct websites, both resulting in a loss of content, from broken links and deletion. Depending on where they are hosted, online fandoms are much more vulnerable to loss than more traditional formats. A printed zine could last for hundreds of years, while online content would be lucky to survive for 10 years. Conversely, only a few may read the zine, while a piece of fan fiction posted online may have thousands of readers. Versaphile (2011) points out that works stored online, mainly by volunteers, are more likely to fall victim to abandonment and as a result, deletion, than physical zines, which do not depend on servers to continue to exist. Such a parallel does not exist for mods, which do not have a physical (or non-software dependent) precursor to compare their longevity to. Mods

cannot exist in isolation and with that comes a multiplicity of issues, including dependencies on the original game, operating system and hardware. However, issues that Versaphile (2011) touches on, such as incomplete search functions, and privacy wished by the creators, can complicate archival processes and can create problems associated with studying the surrounding culture.

Creator intent and copyright can work at cross-purposes to the practice of archiving. Additionally, the fan community's general outlook on such matters and surrounding culture may also create problems. As previously discussed, Kem (2005) found that many fan-fiction authors viewed their works as being for the community that they were a part of, and not for the general public. These fan-fiction authors may not want their works archived, as that may make it easier for the general public to find their works. Conversely, a fan community's perspective on an archive restricting access to material that they were using was inspected by Burnett (2009). Their article explored the differing viewpoints on the removal of content in a particular online archive. Specifically, on November 22, 2005, the Internet Archive limited access, without warning, to a number of concert recordings of the Grateful Dead band that they had previously hosted. As a result, there was a large backlash from the fan community that did not see the loss of the access to the content as trivial. The content was eventually restored nine days later. The trading of concert recordings had been a part of the fan community long before the Internet Archive began hosting the material. The trading and consumption of the concert recordings was obviously a critical part of the fan community as there were numerous guides to what recordings existed, and discussions of how to acquire them. While the fan community obviously had a very strong view that the archiving and sharing of this content was important to them, this sentiment was not shared by all members of the band. A member of the band said the removal was due to legal and copyright reasons,

although that was not substantiated by other members of the band, some of whom supported the fans' complaints. In the case of archiving mods, the developers of the original game may have strong opinions on their copyright and may not want mods created at all. This would likely affect any surrounding mod community negatively. There are, however, several developers who release development tools for their fans, which makes the creation of mods easier (Barrett 2014). As a final complication, the people who create the mods may have entirely different opinions on how their creations should be treated.

Mods and Modding

Modding and modders have been the subject of a number of research articles and books, each covering peculiarities of the production of mods and the issues surrounding them. While I will not be examining specific mods made for *Knights of the Old Republic*, the mods are an integral aspect to this thesis as they are the raison d'être of the fan community in question. In chapter 7 of his book, *Playing with Videogames*, Newman (2008) provides an in-depth overview of modding, covering multiple aspects including the history of modding, the effect of end-user licence agreements, the more difficult modding of consoles and cartridges, encouragement from industry, and the effect of genre conventions on both developers and modders. While Newman (2008) covers all of these topics surrounding modding, more specific examinations of modding explore these and other topics in greater detail and depth. Having an overview of issues that modders face when creating mods will be important to this thesis since these issues will have an effect on the modding communities themselves. In particular, the history and consequences of legal issues will be important to understand, as these can influence the continued existence of the websites where modding communities gather. Additionally, the amount of free labour that modders put into their creations can often disguise a complex relationship to video game companies.

On the legal issues surrounding mods, Postigo (2008) and Altizer (2013) each examine the conflict and disconnect between the video game industry's and the modding community's views on the legality of mods. Postigo (2008, 72) ultimately argues for a "hybrid position between knowledge culture and commodity culture where norms and law work together to achieve a beneficial relationship for both fans and the cultural industries" after covering the modding community's views on copyright and on the rights of modders in creating unlicensed content. Altizer (2013) primarily examines what rights modders and their fans believe they have, and the response from mod communities in the face of legal threats. As it currently stands, mods exist in a legal grey area and can be subject to take-down notices or cease and desist letters, depending on the content and the owners of the intellectual property (Hernandez 2019). Some online fan groups avoid hosting or creating mods that incorporate intellectual property from corporations that have previously issued cease and desist letters (Altizer 2013, 116). As a result, the ideas that modders hold about their rights as creators or the threat of legal action will influence not only what mods are created, but what mods can be archived.

On the topic of the labour required to make a mod, the video game industry often cultivates and encourages modder labour, which can easily become free publicity for the original game. Sotamaa (2007) examines how the industry tries to take advantage of free labour from modders, due to the free advertisement and other benefits the video game industry gains from the commodification of modders' leisure time. More specifically, Sotamaa (2007) focuses on mod competitions that offer prizes but not the benefits that employees are guaranteed. Additionally, the video game industry often reserves the intellectual property rights to the resulting mods through End User License Agreements (EULAs) (Sotamaa 2007, under "Mod competitions and cultivating free modder labour"). Depending on the intricacies

of the mod and the amount of support provided by the game developer (such as access to developer tools), mods can take a great deal of time and labour to make. After investing so much effort into mods, modders will likely be intent on having some control over their creations.

Online Fan Communities Archiving

There are volunteers within the fan community who have taken it upon themselves to maintain and provide access to fan content that they have not created themselves. Rather than the activities described by Hill and Pecoskie (2017), where fans maintain collections or provide recommendations, the focus here is the fans that are actively attempting to prevent the loss of content over time. I will be following De Kosnik's (2016) usage of "archives" and "archiving" as employed in her book *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*. That is to say, online archives will be discussed "using the language of performance" (De Kosnik 2016, 20). To explain further:

> Their archival labor consists of a repertoire, a series of actions that they must perform over and over, which consists of moves such as paying for server space, processing submissions (even if an archive has an automated intake process, in which contributors can upload their own content without an archivist's assistance, the archivist must still constantly oversee, debug, and improve the automated system), responding to users' questions, migrating the data when necessary, and representing the archive to interested members of the public or press. The very fragility of digital data and Internet sites, the fact that digital content is so prone to disappearance and loss, means that no Internet archive should be regarded as a structure that will last into perpetuity. Most, if not all, digital archives that currently exist will not survive into the next century. But I predict that the methods and means that rogue archivists have developed for assembling, coding, and operating idiosyncratic archives will survive. In other words, the repertoire of digital archive building that has been pioneered over the past few decades will likely outlast any actual archives that have been built. (De Kosnik 2016, 7)

This definition of archiving encompasses what is required for the continued existence of online content. However, in the case of mods, there are further requirements to entirely

"preserve" them: it is not enough to merely save the data of the mod, the mod must keep its context and also remain playable. To expand from here, I will draw from Phillips' (2003) discussion of preservation. That is, preservation includes "information accessibility and viability … over time" (Phillips 2003, 48). Furthermore, "if software technology challenges are not considered, document components are inaccessible due to hyperlinks to non-existent references, or systems management procedures fail to adequately capture required data and supporting software" (Phillips 2003, 48) then the content has not been truly preserved.

Research examining archiving behaviours in fan communities primarily focuses on fan fiction or those preserving the original works that they are a fan of. De Kosnik's (2016) book explores the creation and maintenance of online fan-fiction archives. Navarro-Remesal (2017) examines fan archives of video games, which for a variety of reasons, are difficult to obtain either through an official video game archive or by buying an original copy (or a re-release). Broadly speaking, there has been little research examining archiving behaviours in fan communities. There is a large gap in the scholarly research in regards to fan archives of mods, which this study would partially address.

In *Rogue Archives* De Kosnik (2016) studies unofficial archives run by self-professed archivists, who have little to no formal training. In this case, the fans taking it upon themselves to ensure the survivability of online content are not affiliated with any official institution. Additionally, the content that they store and safeguard is primarily "content that has never been, and would likely never be, contained in a traditional memory institution" (De Kosnik 2016, 2). This is content that official institutions were not designed to intake, that were outside of their scope, or that the saving of is complicated by copyright issues. One of the main threads running throughout De Kosnik's (2016, 277) book is how important continual labour "is required to make the Internet work like an archive." Without the persistent labour

of these fans, much of the content that they safeguard is at risk. Particularly online, where domain renewal, server space and software updates are all risks that must be mitigated and can all cause the loss of content. In the absence of this continual labour "the collapse of that archive inevitably follows, immediately or eventually" (De Kosnik 2016, 88). Examining what happens when an archive collapses, how the rest of the fan community responds and what actions that they take is one of the primary aims of this thesis.

In the case of video games themselves, archiving can be complex. Older video games can be difficult to preserve as they can require special hardware or software to play. Navarro-Remesal (2017) presents an overview of video game preservation and the fans of works that are in danger of being lost. Fan curation of archives has several flaws, including "the lack of a valid or stable set of criteria, community instability and copyright problems" (Navarro-Remesal 2017, 131). Despite this, in the case of "'Bad,' Unreleased, and 'Flopped' Games" (Navarro-Remesal 2017, 133), fans "engage with and record aspects of the history of the medium that are usually left behind by official institutions" (128) as fans may be the only ones invested in archiving them. It can be particularly difficult for official institutions to trace which corporation owns the rights to which games, while fans may ignore such copyright issues. However, a corporation may own the copyright, but not distribute the game and be invested in preventing others from distributing the game. Navarro-Remesal (2017) also summarizes the many arguments that have been made for and against the use of emulators to "preserve" the playability of video games. That is, whether emulation is truly archiving as an emulator does not completely replicate the original experience. However, it does replicate *an* experience, as much of the original hardware these games are played on is difficult to obtain and difficult to repair. Due to this fact, the experience of playing many of these video games may be lost completely. This research project only looks at a single game, which has benefited from

several re-releases, unlike the games that Navarro-Remesal (2017) examines. In the end, the preservation of mods first requires the preservation of video games.

Chapter 3: Context & Methodology

Fan communities often exist across several sites and the community surrounding *Knights of the Old Republic* is no different. There are several different sites that creators can announce their new mods to and that provide space for community discussions. In order to examine the community's response to loss, I needed to find the sites where community discussions on modding, mods and saving mods occurred. I started at the most popular digital distribution platform on which *Knights of the Old Republic* was re-released for Windows and which hosts a community section for all of the games that they sell: Steam ("Steam (service)" 2020). As a result, the community sections hosted on Steam are very likely the first point of contact for many entering the modding fan community.

Digital Distribution

Steam is primarily an online commercial digital distribution platform for games, including *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. Besides selling the games digitally, each game has a "Community" section, which includes multiple sub-sections, including sections for discussions, screenshots, news, guides, and reviews, among others. Some games on Steam also have a "Workshop" sub-section ("Workshop," n.d.). Steam Workshop hosts mods and facilitates the installation of mods for some games. However, *Knights of the Old Republic* is not supported through the Steam Workshop. While there is no dedicated location for hosting mods, under "Guides" there is a section called "Modding Or Configuration" ("Guides," n.d.). These guides are written by players. The majority deal with configuring the game to run on newer software and hardware. As time goes on, getting the game to run requires an advanced level of technical skill and knowledge. While these guides are important as they broaden the potential audience of *Knights of the Old Republic* by assisting those without a high level of technical skill, what is more interesting is that a few of these guides detail mods.

Due to the fact that *Knights of the Old Republic* is not supported by Steam Workshop, the majority of guides that mention mods contain links to other modding sites. As of August 2020, *Knights of the Old Republic* had five guides that suggest mods to install and link to them (DarK_St3alth 2020; doctor sharp 2020; dusty_thoreau 2013; Matenka 2018; WhiteGoblin 2016), two guides that detail specific mods and how to install them (Bridewall 2018; DeaconOfTheDank 2015), and one guide that details how to complete a specific section of a game when the player has a specific mod installed (Blake Nightrider 2015). Despite the minimal amount of community interaction surrounding mods that takes place on Steam, the guides themselves provided an excellent point of origin from which to discover other sites more central to the *Knights of the Old Republic* modding community.

The Steam guides contained links to fifteen distinct domains. However, there are three restrictions that I applied in order to narrow the number of sites examined to those which would answer the research questions. Firstly, the site needed to have a section that was specifically for community discussions, whether that be forum threads, comment systems or blog posts. This space had to be hosted on the site itself, and not link to a tertiary social-media site, which could complicate or restrict the process for those wishing to take part in discussions. Secondly, the site needed to host or link to downloadable files for multiple different mods that are for *Knights of the Old Republic*. This is to ensure the examination of the part of the fan community that is dedicated to modding, rather than another type of fan creation. Additionally, this restriction was applied in order to discard any site that has been created to publicize a single mod, as I am interested in larger conversations surrounding modding of *Knights of the Old Republic*, not conversations specific to a single mod. Thirdly, while there is some crossover (of mods and fans) between fan sites of different languages, the primary focus will be on the English-speaking fan communities.

Taking these restrictions into account, there were six sites of the original fifteen that were suitable for closer examination. The other nine domains did not fulfill the requirements. Some were links to directly download a file, which did not include a space for any fan discussions. Others were links to download files that did not fit under the definition of a mod or were simply listing instructions on modifying the game. As a result, the following sections will review the remaining six: Mod DB, Nexus Mods, GameFront, Deadly Stream, LucasForums, and LoneBullet. These six were all found through the fan-written modding guides that were posted to Steam, and were all hosting or linking to mods, in addition to providing a space for community discussions. Examining the history and context of each of these sites gives an overview of the larger video game modding community and how it relates to the modding community surrounding *Knights of the Old Republic* specifically.

Mod DB

Mod DB is one of the older and larger sites dedicated to hosting a variety of mods for a variety of games. Over the years Mod DB has dealt with server migration and changing priorities as what would become Mod DB started in 1998 in order to share cheats for a game called *Counter-Strike* ("About Us," n.d.). It is currently owned by the digital media network DBolical Pty Ltd., which was created in 2006 by the founder of Mod DB (Ismail, n.d.).

On Mod DB, *Knights of the Old Republic* does have its own dedicated section. As of August 2020 there were nearly fifty mods listed ("Mod DB - Star Wars," n.d.). According to the site's timestamps, the first mod for *Knights of the Old Republic* was posted April 12, 2008, well after the initial physical release, but before the digital releases (GameWatcher 2008). Notably, the *Knights of the Old Republic* section does have a user re-uploading mods from GameFront (approximately thirty of the mods are re-uploads), which will be discussed further in the GameFront section.

Nexus Mods

Similar to Mod DB, Nexus Mods is a site with a long history of hosting a space and content for fans. The earliest incarnation of Nexus Mods was launched in August 2001 and was called Morrowind Chronicles, which was primarily a forum and information site (Dark0ne 2008). When Nexus Mods began hosting mods, it originally was focused on only sharing mods for the *Elder Scrolls* video game series ("Nexus Mods" 2020). Since then, it has been renamed multiple times and broadened in scope to host mods for a large number of games (Dark0ne 2008). Nexus Mods previously had mods for each game hosted on their own site, giving each game (or series) a unique domain (Dark0ne 2013b). The staff has since moved away from this hosting model and now has centralized the mods under one domain with different sub-sections for each game. Like Mod DB, mods are hosted on servers Nexus Mods owns and maintains. Unlike Mod DB, Nexus Mods is run by a small team and is not owned by a media conglomerate (Dark0ne 2013a). The original founder maintains open communication on the site itself ("News & Updates," n.d.). There are regularly posted updates and thought pieces, including detailing server issues, welcoming new staff members, and sharing plans for the site.

Nexus Mods was the second-most linked to domain in the Steam guides. The *Knights of the Old Republic* section of Nexus Mods is relatively active for an older game. It is much more active than the *Knights of the Old Republic* section at Mod DB. It had nearly 400 mods uploaded, with several having been uploaded recently, as of August 2022 ("Mods at Knights of the Old Republic Nexus," n.d.). The earliest mod was posted in December 2013, which is four years after the digital release on Steam, but a year before the digital release on GOG.com (darthbdaman 2013).

GameFront

GameFront is another large mod hosting site that hosts mods on their own servers. Similar to Mod DB and Nexus Mods, it is dedicated to mods for all games, in addition to being a relatively old site that has gone through several server migrations and changes in name. When it was originally founded in 1998, GameFront was called I/O Error ("About GameFront," n.d.). Over the years it has been renamed several times, having been named FileLeech, FileFront, and then finally GameFront ("About GameFront," n.d.). However, unlike Mod DB and Nexus Mods, GameFront was sold several times to various large media corporations and there have been multiple times in the past when it was announced that GameFront was closing.

The first potential closing occurred when the media conglomerate that currently owned the site filed for bankruptcy, and GameFront, at the time called FileFront, was to be closed March 30, 2009 (Orland 2016; Yam 2009). There were efforts to back up the site data made by a community calling themselves "Save FileFront" ("Main Page" 2009). Additionally, Mod DB encouraged members of their community to re-upload files from GameFront to their servers in order to save them from being lost (INtense! 2009). It is unclear how much content was re-uploaded to Mod DB in 2009 as there was no centralized organization of this endeavour. In contrast, the "Save FileFront" community tracked what was backed up and what still needed to be backed up through a wiki ("Main Page" 2009). However, before March 30, 2009, GameFront was bought from the media conglomerate in question, Ziff Davis Media, by the original founders of the site and stayed online with its data intact ("Welcome" 2009; Black 2009).

The second announcement regarding the future status of the site was made after the site had been renamed again and had been bought by a different media conglomerate. Defy Media, which at the time was known as Break Media, bought the site in 2010 and renamed the

site to GameFront in November 2010 ("GameFront" 2019; Burnham 2010). Defy Media made an announcement on April 14, 2016 that stated that the site was being shut down on April 30, 2016 (Whitaker 2016). This total shutdown of GameFront's servers would mean the erasure of all of its hosted content two weeks later. A group called Archive Team, "which archives websites that are about to close … scraped the files [GameFront was] hosting" and uploaded them to the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine (quoted in Xuul 2016). Additionally, both Nexus Mods and Mod DB made announcements relating to saving mods from GameFront to their own platforms (Dark0ne 2016; XanT 2016). More specifically, Mod DB again called on its user base to upload mods that had been hosted on GameFront to Mod DB's servers (XanT 2016). Similar to the call to action of its members in 2009, Mod DB did not arrange or organize its community beyond calling their members to action. However, at least one member began to re-upload mods to the *Knights of the Old Republic* section on Mod DB (scorch1, n.d.). In contrast, Nexus Mods began working with "some of the archive team [who was] working on the Archive.org backup of Game Front and … original staffers from File Front and Game Front" (Dark0ne 2016) in order to re-upload mods to Nexus Mods and, notably, to keep the metadata intact. The endeavour at Nexus Mod culminated in an account called GameFrontArchiver. Impressively, this account uploaded over sixty thousand mods to Nexus Mods. Nine hundred and two of those mods were for *Knights of the Old Republic* (GameFrontArchiver, n.d.).

While GameFront stayed up past April 30, 2016, it was taken down shortly after and the site's data disappeared. In August 2016, the owners of Mod DB (DBolical Pty Ltd.) joined the ranks of the multiple different owners of GameFront when they purchased the domain name from Defy Media (INtense! 2016a). Unfortunately, while they were not able to acquire the hosted files, DBolical Pty Ltd. was able to determine what mods existed on the site before it went down by recovering a list of old URLs (INtense! 2016b). From this, they created a list of

mods that were no longer available and then asked the community to assist in recovering and preserving the mods by re-uploading them to the site ("Missing in Action," n.d.). The lost files were eventually restored from a backup created by the original GameFront Team (FileTrekker 2018). GameFront was then officially re-launched under DBolical Network in August 2018 ("About GameFront," n.d.)

In both 2009 and 2016, backups of GameFront were created by multiple parties before the site ultimately continued in some form. These backups were generally not kept in the long term. In 2009, the "Save FileFront" community suggested that those who helped back up FileFront should delete the files to "free up space" (Black 2009) on their hard drives and to prevent the launch of competing fan sites that may not respect the original modders' wishes. After the re-launch of GameFront in 2018, GameFrontArchiver, at Nexus Mods, kept their uploaded mods accessible. However, Nexus Mods and the new GameFront team eventually decided in order to avoid encouraging other sites from duplicating GameFront's files, that the files uploaded by GameFrontArchiver would be taken down (Dark0ne 2019). Any mods that were uploaded by GameFrontArchiver were changed to redirect to an error page (GameFrontArchiver 2016). Conversely, at Mod DB, the backups made by individual members stayed up after this time, which was likely complicated by Mod DB's decentralized call to action and since Mod DB and GameFront were now both owned by the same company.

Besides the attempted shut downs of GameFront, it has had multiple issues with maintaining an accessible repository of mods over the years. Gamefront previously blocked fans from certain countries from downloading the mods hosted on their servers (besyuziki 2014). These restrictions forced fans from these countries to either use online tools to get around the block or to move to a different site (RuffGuff 2013). In some cases, gaining access to the GameFront community entailed going to a different fan site where instructions on

bypassing the block were freely shared (eXistenZe 2013; Sith Holocron 2014). After the re-launch of GameFront in 2018, they removed the country restrictions on downloads ("GameFront File Hosting Rules & FAQ" 2020). Additionally, when GameFront was still called FileFront, it hosted mods for each game at a unique site and then switched to a more centralized model, like Nexus Mods did. However, unlike Nexus Mods, GameFront had some issues with the transition. In the process of this transition to one large site, the mods that were less popular were removed and some users had difficulty finding the mods that they wanted (FileTrekker 2015; musicforthepiano 2015).

Prior to the centralization of the sites, the subsite for *Knights of the Old Republic* was known as KOTOR Files, which was started in 2005 (Jamie 2005). *KOTOR* (also capitalized as *KotOR*) is an acronym of *Knights of the Old Republic*. Looking at the GameFront site, the earliest mods seem to have been uploaded around 2005, although it is difficult to determine as an accurate date is not given. As of August 2020, GameFront hosts roughly one thousand files for *Knights of the Old Republic* ("GameFront - Star Wars," n.d.). The current site has also inherited its sections from KOTOR Files and appears to have slowly grown more complex since the launch of KOTOR Files ("FileFront" 2005; "FileFront" 2015). There is a comment space provided for all mods; however, none of the mods that were skimmed had any. Comments that were made previously seem to have been deleted when the sites were centralized as the comments disappear with the switch in site (Inyri Forge 2006a; Inyri Forge 2006b; Inyri Forge 2006c).

GameFront's history has generated a huge amount of discussion on other sites. Mod DB's call to action and the existence of the GameFrontArchiver account at Nexus Mods does prove to me that there is a motivation in this community to prevent the loss of content. As a topic of examination, GameFront's precarious existence was one of the most prominent

examples of content loss in the modding community due to the relatively long life span of GameFront and the number of mods that were hosted there.

Deadly Stream

The site that was most frequently linked to from the Steam guides was Deadly Stream, which is described as "Home of Star Wars Gaming." It is a fan-created site that is specifically dedicated to mods for *Star Wars* games ("Welcome to Deadly Stream," n.d.). Deadly Stream improved its mod-hosting capabilities at the end of 2010, which was partially in response to issues with other mod-hosting sites (Doctor 2010b). It is unclear when the site was created, or if it existed previously under a different name; however, the current domain name was registered on January 2, 2008 ("Domain Name," n.d.). As it is a small fan-created site with little documentation, the majority of the information about the site and its history is gleaned from forum posts.

The namesake of Deadly Stream was the founder's online username, as the site was initially intended to serve as a showcase for his work (Doctor 2010b). This was used as a name for the site until it stuck, despite discussions of changing it to something more descriptive (Doctor 2010c). Deadly Stream makes no mention of affiliation with large corporations or copyright holders, and it seems to be owned by a single individual who maintains it with the help of a number of moderators and administrators ("Staff Directory," n.d.). Ownership and responsibility of the site has previously been passed between members of the forum (Sith Holocron 2012). Financial support comes from the sale of premium memberships, which allow "higher message allowance, more webspace for attachments and no restrictions on downloads" ("Welcome to Deadly Stream," n.d.).

Despite there being little documentation of the site's history, the forums do provide a wealth of information, albeit buried in discussion threads. There have been a number of

incidents during which Deadly Stream suffered the loss of data. Sometime in the summer of 2010, the hosting company used by Deadly Stream went out of business, which caused the blogs and forums to be erased (Doctor 2010a; Lord of Hunger 2010; Stoney 2010). In response to this, the owner at the time began making regular backups of the site, although the data was never recovered (Doctor 2010a). In another incident, software that was designed to remove spam accounts removed legitimate members of the community, leaving the mods that they had uploaded to the site without named modders (Hassat Hunter 2011). In this case, the community assisted with the re-creation of the lost information, by providing the names of the original modders.

While Deadly Stream is described as a general fan site for *Star Wars*-themed games, its primary focus appears to be modding *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords*. As of August 2022, these two games have a combined total of approximately 1, 800 mods that have been uploaded to their sections, compared to a total of eight mods that have been uploaded for other games ("Deadly Stream - Downloads," n.d.). Of these 1, 800 mods, approximately half have been uploaded for *Knights of the Old Republic* ("Deadly Stream - Downloads," n.d.). The earliest mod for *Knights of the Old Republic* was uploaded December 28, 2010, which was a year after the release of the digital version on Steam, but also appears to be when the site started offering improved capabilities for hosting mods (MrPhil 2010; Doctor 2010b). Deadly Stream does not use a third-party file-hosting company as the mods and other files are hosted directly on the site's servers.

Deadly Stream hosts a very active *Knights of the Old Republic* section with mods being regularly uploaded, updated and commented on. New forum conversations take place frequently on a range of relevant modding topics, from discussions about other modding sites to requests and explanations on where to find older mods. Additionally, there are a number of

general discussion sections that range in specificity from discussing anything to site feedback, role-playing and non-*Star Wars* games. While there are a great deal of forum threads dealing with topics related to technical help, there are also in-depth conversations about modding and the future of the community. Relevantly, the discussions that arose when other sites went down or were going down are especially valuable as they are well-suited to providing the information needed to answer the research questions of this thesis.

LucasForums

The LucasForums site originally hosted forums dedicated to games developed or published by LucasArts, which includes *Knights of the Old Republic* ("LucasForums" 2016). More relevantly, LucasForums did host sub-forums dedicated to sharing mods ("The Star Forge" 2016). It was only linked to a few times by the Steam guides. This may be since LucasForums appears to have gone down or been taken down in the summer of 2016 (mattig89ch 2016a; mattig89ch 2016b). It is difficult to find information about its formation and history other than sporadic mentions on other sites and forums. It began sometime before December 2001, as that is the earliest snapshot of the site that exists in the WayBack Machine ("LucasForums" 2001). There is, however, a number of references to it in the other sites. For example, when someone suggests a mod that was hosted there (WhiteGoblin 2016) or when someone introduces themselves as having been part of that community (megarock58 2016).

These references from other sites are not enough to form the basis of this thesis as LucasForums going down did not generate as much discussion as GameFront did. The fact that it was a niche site, dedicated to one company, whereas GameFront hosted files for a vast multitude of games, may have limited the response. As well, prior to being taken offline, there were very few active members of LucasForums (mattig89ch 2016a). Unlike GameFront, there was no announcement that the forums would be shut down, which did not encourage the

discussing, planning and carrying out of any actions that could be undertaken to mitigate the loss of content. Additionally, the surrounding discussions of its loss were more subdued, perhaps since the site frequently went down in the years leading up to it being taken offline (Guest newbiemodder 2011; milestails 2015). Having previously often been offline, some were still wondering if LucasForums would come back months later, adding to the general confusion (mattig89ch 2016b). These factors seemed to greatly diminish the resulting discussions. While this is ultimately another example that the modding fan community surrounding *Knights of the Old Republic* has suffered loss over its long lifetime, this inciting event will not be used as a starting point due to the minimal community discussion and due to the difficulty in determining the history of the site.

LoneBullet

The site LoneBullet appeared to be not as well known or used as it was rarely linked to from the Steam guides. The earliest reference to LoneBullet that I found was through the WayBack Machine on December 17, 2014, which shows a placeholder page stating that it will launch "this Tuesday" ("LoneBullet" 2014). One of the reasons for why LoneBullet was originally launched was to get around the country restrictions at GameFront ("RIP GameFront" 2016). When GameFront was closing, the blog advertised that LoneBullet had a nearly complete backup of the GameFront files ("RIP GameFront" 2016).

However, LoneBullet is generally viewed by others in the modding community as sharing mods without the permission of the original mod creators (StellarExile 2020). Sometime in early 2016, a "Restricted List of Files" was added to the FAQ ("LoneBullet: Help" 2016). Files that were not to be uploaded to LoneBullet included: "Files that you do not have permission to upload or share publically, this includes copyrighted files and files of other authors. If the author allows, you can upload by giving citation in the description … Files that

attract Law Enforcement or DMCA" ("LoneBullet: Help" 2016). Despite these restrictions, LoneBullet does appear to host free downloads of copyrighted games (Narnus 2018).

Methodology

In the case of *Knights of the Old Republic*, one of the largest and most precarious mod sites was GameFront, having experienced multiple incidents that resulted in the loss of content. The community's response to GameFront's server migrations and ownership changes will be the main case study for this thesis. Each time GameFront was at risk, fans attempted to save the mods that would be otherwise erased, while negotiating absent creators and time limits. In particular, several discussion threads, which relate to the saving or archiving of mods from GameFront, that occurred on the website Deadly Stream will be the primary focus of this research.

In order to answer my research questions, I have chosen a qualitative methodology. Since a qualitative methodology "[seeks] to arrive at an understanding of a particular phenomenon from the perspective of those experiencing it" (Vaismoradi et al. 2013, 398) it is particularly well suited to my research questions as they focus on the response of the community. More specifically, as there is little research on fan's archiving practices, even less on archiving of fan-created mods, this thesis uses qualitative content analysis as it concentrates on "exploratory work on the unknown phenomenon" (Vaismoradi et al. 2013, 399). Content analysis is the "systematic coding and categorizing approach used for exploring large amounts of textual information unobtrusively to determine trends and patterns of words used, their frequency, their relationships, and the structures and discourses of communication" (Vaismoradi et al. 2013, 400). As a result, the data from Deadly Stream will be analyzed through inductive coding. Inductive coding was chosen as it "is used in cases where there are no previous studies dealing with the phenomenon, and therefore the coded

categories are derived directly from the text data" (Vaismoradi et al. 2013, 401). In deriving the codes directly from the data, inductive coding "[identifies] significant concepts and patterns" (White and Marsh 2006, 35). The general nuances of the discussion revealed by the coding will be examined to identify the broad opinions that the community has about archiving and preservation.

In characterizing qualitative content analysis, White and Marsh (2006, 35) stated that "purposive sampling [allows] for identifying complete, accurate answers to research questions" when selecting data. As a result, using Deadly Stream's built in search function, the forum will be searched for forum threads that contain both "GameFront" and "archive" in the content of its posts. This search of Deadly Stream forum threads will be limited to those that took place in the "General Discussion" or "KOTOR Modding General Discussion" sections of the site, to avoid forum threads that primarily deal with technical help. As well, the search was limited to forum threads that had more than 25 replies (which correlates to more than one page of discussion) to ensure that forum threads that created an appreciably sized discussion involving multiple members of the community would be chosen. This search results in the selection of three forum threads, which contain a total of 179 posts in which 49 individuals participated.

The three threads that are selected from the chosen search terms are titled "Kotorfiles is now gone" (Xuul 2015), "Gamefront closing down on April 30" (DarthParametric 2016a) and "Nexus reuploading mods?" (Canderis 2016). Each of these threads indicate that they will answer the research questions. Firstly, the discussion thread "Kotorfiles is now gone" covers the community's response after KOTOR Files was merged into the GameFront website. This discussion took place during July 2015 and deals with GameFront switching from a unique site for each game to a more centralized model and the issues that arose from that switch.

According to the title, the community appears to see this as a loss of content. This should answer my second research question: How do fan communities respond to the disappearance of said content? Secondly, in the thread "Gamefront closing down on April 30," the community has discussed the pending loss of content. This discussion took place in spring 2016, after it was announced for a second time that GameFront would be closing. In this case, the community had some warning before losing anything and since, due to the search terms, I know that archiving is discussed in this thread, it should answer the question: How do online fan communities archive the content that their members have created? Thirdly, the thread titled, "Nexus reuploading mods?" deals with the response on this forum to the actions of another site. From skimming this thread, I discovered that this discussion deals with Nexus Mods uploading mods taken from GameFront, and takes place in the same time period as "Gamefront closing down on April 30." This discussion of another site's attempt at archiving should give insight into the community's views on different approaches to preservation and should answer the third question: How do these communities think of and discuss preservation? Of course, there will likely be some crossover in what subjects are discussed in these threads and each thread will help to answer more than one question.

To prevent the loss of formatting and images, through the transferring to another document, the text of the posts was examined in situ. Backups of the forum threads were created, but it was unnecessary to reference these as the forum threads were available throughout the data-examination process. Figure 2 and 3 each show an example of an aspect that could be lost in transferring, that being an embedded image and differing font colours, respectively. Key data from the forum threads was recorded in a spreadsheet in order to create a base where codes can be transcribed. To ensure that the posts will be distinguishable in the spreadsheet, the title of the thread, the username of the post author, the date the post

was made and the sequential post number (as given by the website) was recorded, with one post per row. Codes were then added to the respective row in the spreadsheet. Table 1 shows how this spreadsheet looked while coding was underway. The username and date posted were hidden to save on space. Table 2 is a portion of the codebook that explains the codes in use in table 1. Other aspects that were displayed in the posts were not recorded. This includes location, reputation, personal taglines, and any achievements that members display. Not all members have these displayed and distinguishing between users' rank or location is outside the scope of this thesis.

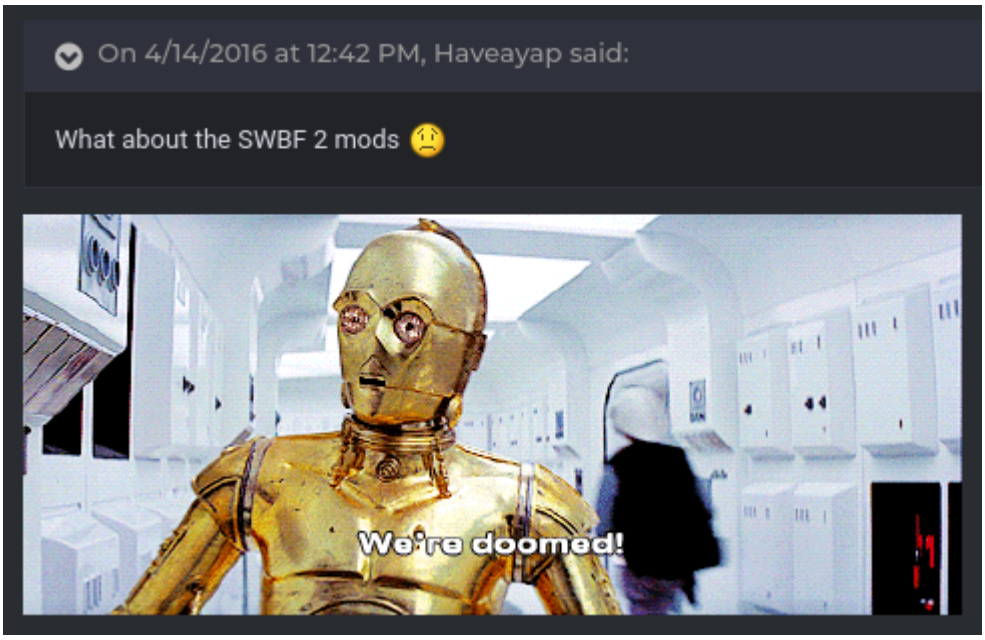

Figure 2. A screenshot of a forum post that quotes another member from earlier in the forum thread (Dastardly 2016). In response, this forum member posted an image from the movie *Star Wars* showing the character C-3PO. The image has the subtitle "We're doomed!"

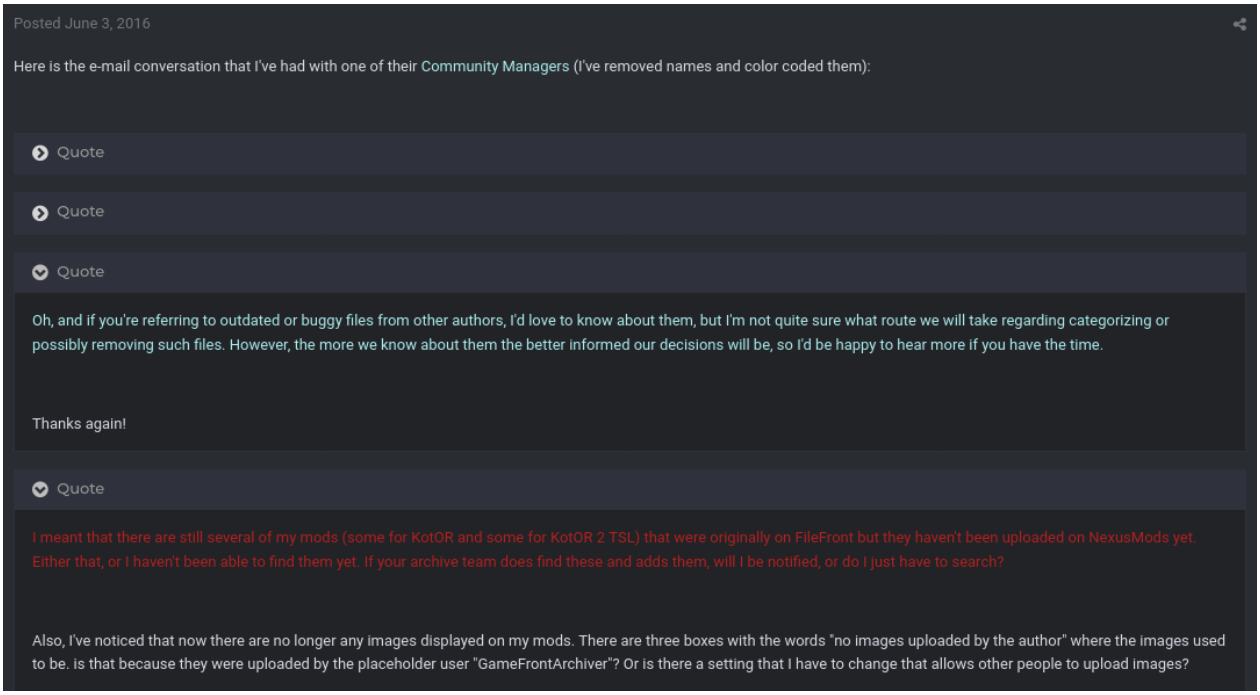

Figure 3. A screenshot of a forum post in which the post author quotes from an email exchange that they had with a community manager at Nexus Mods (redrob41 2016b). The first paragraph of the text from the community manager is coloured pale turquoise and the first paragraph of the forum member's response is coloured dark red. Other than the colour difference, there is no way to discern who wrote which quote.

Table 1. Portion of the spreadsheet that was used for coding. Table 2 explains the codes.

Thread Title	Comment ID	Code_01	Code_02	Code_03	Code_04
Gamefront closing down on April 30	44879	RH#	RHD		
Gamefront closing down on April 30	44926	LOR			
Gamefront closing down on April 30	44948	Others	SE	MBG	
Nexus reuploading mods?	45782	MBG	RH!		
Nexus reuploading mods?	45783	RHAC			
Nexus reuploading mods?	45790	RHWV	RHD	AEU	MBG

Table 2. Selected Codebook

Code Description	Code Symbol
Do not re-upload mods without permission	RH#
Modder's rights (Re-uploading mods is disrespectful)	RHD
Reference to *Star Wars* lore	LOR
Others outside of Deadly Stream are talking about site going down	Others
Acknowledgement of other online spaces that host mods or parts of the fan community	SE
Mods were/are/being archived on this other site or by this other group	MBG
Re-uploading to save mods, although modders' permission was not given	RH!
Those re-uploading allow original modders to gain control of re-uploaded mods	RHAC
Re-uploading without permission is in conflict with stated values	RHWV
Archive of mods already exists, more are unnecessary	AEU

When developing the codes from the data, ideas relating to archiving and loss of content were prioritized; however, other concepts introduced by members of the fan community were not ignored in this coding process. The first pass through the data entailed reading each forum thread and assigning codes to each post while creating a comprehensive codebook. Once the initial coding pass was complete, the codebook was reviewed, edited and several similar codes were merged together, creating a more encompassing code. For example, there were a variety of critiques that forum members directed at Nexus Mods' archiving process, which included, "archive process was rushed" and "archive process has created duplicates." These two concepts were merged into one: "this archiving process was unorganized." As well, after the first pass, there were two concepts that related to contacting modders about re-uploading their mod: "contact modder to ask them for permission to re-upload their mod" and "contact modder to encourage them to re-upload their mod." Merging these two resulted in one code that covered both sentiments: "contact author directly to ask for re-upload or permission." Originally, there was a code for "online space is lost," which covered community members talking about the loss of a site as a gathering space and a code that covered specific features of the site that had been lost, such as a role-playing forum thread. As both of these codes dealt with loss of something, which was specifically not a mod, these two codes were deemed similar enough and combined into a single one: "aspect of old site is lost (online space, features...)." After merging several codes, the data was coded a second time. Overall the resulting codes were generally related to re-uploading mods and the loss of websites or mods. To a lesser extent, there were also a number of codes that related to the fan community and modding itself.

Data Management Plan

The three forum threads under examination were backed up, to ensure that even if the site goes down during the writing of this thesis, the data would not be lost. These backups were created using both Conifer and the Wayback Machine. Conifer is a program that creates Web ARChive (WARC) files, which archives web pages in their entirety. Both the snapshot on the Wayback Machine and the WARC files include metadata about its creation and the information it contains (Blumenthal 2021). Additionally, Conifer names the WARC file with the name of the scraped site and the date that the file was saved. I ensured that both backups were correctly created and all relevant data was included. The resulting WARC files from Conifer were 11MB in size and copies were saved on two external encrypted hard drives. These two hard drives also contain backups of my working spreadsheet and thesis.

The Wayback Machine is widely accessible, and as I have outlined how I found this community and the forum threads in question, other researchers should be able to easily find the data that I examined. Currently, there are multiple iterations of the Deadly Stream website saved in the Wayback Machine. The three threads that I examined are only a few of the large number of Deadly Stream forum threads that are stored in the Wayback Machine. Despite the issues that may arise with using the Wayback Machine as a data repository, one of the major ethical benefits is that it allows the community to maintain control over the data if they decide that such research of their community is unacceptable.

As of August 2022, the Deadly Stream site rules and guidelines do not mention any restrictions on research, viewing or expectations of privacy. The closest relevant guideline is that community members are "solely responsible for the content of your messages, and you agree to indemnify and hold [Deadly Stream] harmless with respect to any claim based upon transmission of your message(s). We reserve the right to reveal your identity (or whatever

information we know about you) in the event of a complaint or legal action arising from any message posted by you" (Snigaroo 2019a). Additionally, accessing the Deadly Stream forums is not restricted through requiring an account or password; as a result, I consider Deadly Stream to be a public site whose members do not have an "expectation of privacy" (CIHR-IRSC, NSERC-CRSNG, and SSHRC-CRSH 2018, 16). Consequently, this thesis involved "'non-participant' observational research" that was conducted in a "publicly accessible space" (CIHR-IRSC, NSERC-CRSNG, and SSHRC-CRSH 2018, 138). Citations and direct quotes reference screen names of community members due to these facts and since, regardless of my citations, the threads in question can be easily found.

Chapter 4: Discussion

In coding these particular forum threads ("Kotorfiles is now gone," "Gamefront closing down on April 30," and "Nexus reuploading mods?"), it became clear that this was a community that was familiar with the unstable nature of mod hosting sites. The forum threads under examination took place on Deadly Stream, which is a fan-run site that improved its mod hosting in 2010 after signs that other, larger mod hosting sites were unstable (Doctor 2010b; Sithspecter 2016d). These chosen threads contain the community's discussions surrounding archival practices and methods in response to the loss of content hosted on GameFront, which, for a long time, was a major and popular mod hosting site. Additionally, the forum threads detail the thoughts of community members about loss and what actions they take to mitigate that loss. Of the three forum threads that are being examined, the most extensive was the discussion of Nexus Mods' actions ("Nexus reuploading mods?") with four pages of posts, compared to two pages for both "Kotorfiles is now gone" and "Gamefront closing down on April 30." The posts in the thread about Nexus Mods also tended to be longer than those in the other two threads. The resulting codes revealed strong opinions about certain aspects of archiving and preservation. In particular, both the most used and least used codes give insight into what was and was not of particular concern to the community and also gives an overview of the discussions.

Resulting Codes

With the creation of my codebook, the data "analysis is integrated into coding … in qualitative content analysis" (White and Marsh 2006, 39). I examined what is of importance to the community by quantifying how often different codes appear as the frequency of codes "cautiously may stand as a proxy for significance" (Vaismoradi et al. 2013, 404). While frequency may "simply reflect greater willingness or ability to talk at length about the topic"

(Vaismoradi et al. 2013, 401), the Deadly Stream forum threads are moderated with one of the intents being keeping the discussion "on-topic" (Snigaroo 2019a). Additionally, forum rules include "refrain from making successive posts" and "your posts should contribute to the thread in some manner" (Snigaroo 2019a), both of which function to limit the ability of community members to derail or extend the discussion. As a result, I am proceeding with the understanding that a greater frequency "[indicates] greater importance" (Vaismoradi et al. 2013, 401). In regards to the concepts that were most often brought up in the discussions, there were a total of nine codes that were each used more than twenty-five times over the course of coding the data. The description of these codes and the number of times that they were used, can be seen in table 3.

Table 3. Most Common Concepts

Code Description	**Times Used**
Negative reaction to loss	36
Modder's rights (Re-uploading mods is disrespectful)	36
Those re-uploading allow original modders to gain control of re-uploaded mods	32
Mods were/are/being archived on this other site or by this other group	30
Contact modder directly to ask for re-upload or permission	29
Do not re-upload mods without permission	28
Acknowledgement of other online spaces that host mods or parts of the fan community	26
Mods are lost	26
This archiving process was unorganized	26

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the topics of the threads, the two codes that were most frequently applied covered a community member's negative reaction to loss and arguing for the rights of modders. The very frequent and negative response to loss shows that the community is concerned about the continued accessibility of content. However, the community also wants the wishes of the original modder respected; four of the most frequently used codes directly deal with the original modder's wishes. This is not entirely unexpected since the longest and most in-depth thread ("Nexus reuploading mods?") was primarily a discussion about the wishes and rights of the original modders. Specifically, whether Nexus Mods re-uploading mods from GameFront without seeking permission from the original modders was an acceptable course of action or not.

In terms of concepts that were mentioned the least, there were a total of eleven that were brought up in the discussions only twice. Table 4 shows the code descriptions and the number of times that they were used.

Table 4. Least Common Concepts

Code Description	Times Used
The original site has all legal rights to do whatever they want with the mods, including giving them to a different mod hosting site	2
This site was created since or in anticipation of another site going down	2
GameFront going down was a surprise	2
Similar aspect to old site already exists	2
I, the modder am or would be glad of re-uploading	2
Check if modder has already re-uploaded before taking any other action	2
Modder did not take into account site going down when writing what could or could not be done with their mods	2
Modder is probably assuming their mods are safe on site that is or will be gone	2
Interactive community that I am a part of is what is important in modding	2
Making other like-minded fans happy is what is important for me, a modder	2
The Wayback Machine has information on what mods are missing	2

Overall, there was a great deal of confusion about the legal status of mods and who held what rights. While other codes that covered legal beliefs were used more often (such as "intellectual property rights are not a solid foundation to prevent re-uploading," which was a concept brought up in the threads eight times), only a few community members believed that a mod hosting site could transfer hosting rights to another site without the permission of the modder. The code that covered the concept "this site was created since or in anticipation of another site going down" was primarily used when members were remembering the creation of fan-run sites that were created to take the place of corporate-run sites that were in danger of going down or did go down. When reviewing the history of fan websites, community

members primarily focused on what had been lost, rather than successful fan endeavours. Very few members thought that GameFront going down was a surprise. More commonly, others mentioned signs that indicated to them that the site was going to go down, including a lack of updates and difficulty in getting the site to load properly. The infrequency of this code perhaps speaks to the fact that as an older fan community, the *Knights of the Old Republic* community was familiar with sites going down.

As for the modders themselves, there were a number of codes that covered modders' opinions or related directly to modders' actions. For example, the code that covered the concept "I, the modder, have asked the re-uploader to take my mods down or give me control of them," was used twelve times. Conversely, very few modders mentioned that they were happy with someone else re-uploading their work. Of those that did, their reasons were primarily that they themselves had lost the mod files, either due to a hard drive failure or disorganized files. Some community members were reminded to check if a modder has already re-uploaded their work before assuming that it is gone and taking further action, such as re-uploading it or mourning its loss. The next two codes related to modders that had left the community or who could not be contacted. Modders often wrote a README file that contained what could be done with their mod, including their opinions on re-uploading as well as whether others could create derivative works of their mod. Community members pointed out that such instructions were likely written with the modders assuming that the site their mod was hosted on would continue to host the mod indefinitely: "I don't think modders intended for their mods to be lost in the black if KotOR Files went down. In my opinion, the spirit of the permissions clauses that we wrote was more or less, 'Don't take credit for the mod I worked hard to make'" (Sithspecter 2016a). Similarly, the next code also deals with members assuming that the original modders thought that their work would always be

available. Besides these few cases, speculating about the thought process of others was not very common. There were only a few modders speaking about their motivations for creating mods and only two kinds of motivations were mentioned, neither of which frequently came up. As the conversation about GameFront going down was only tangentially related to modders' motivations for creating mods, it wasn't surprising that these two codes were infrequently used. In order to find if any mods were lost when GameFront went down, some members stated that they would use the Wayback Machine's snapshots of GameFront, to determine what mods were once hosted there and compare that to what mods are still available on other sites. Other codes that covered whether the Wayback Machine had a certain site archived or had working download links, were used more frequently.

Predominant Categories

Statements about Loss

Forum members frequently expressed dismay at the loss of mods and even the very idea of loss. The "negative reaction to loss" category covered forum members' negative sentiments in response to news of a site going down: "It is truly sad seeing that website permanently go away, as it pretty much hurt the modding community for not only Kotor, but for the other games that the website hosted mods for" (exocron 2015). Additionally, this code also covered mournful recollections of sites that had previously been taken down before the current topic of discussion: "Almost as disheartening as when Megaupload was taken down" (Damned 2015). As expected, given the forum topics, the loss of mods was frequently mentioned. It was obvious that community members were familiar with loss as several members reminisced about mods that they had missed an opportunity to save and even older sites that were not mentioned in the Steam guides: "There were a couple of mods from PCGamemods that I really wish I could have been able to download and save" (Mephiles550

2015). While loss of mods was a primary concern for most community members, they were keenly aware of various kinds of loss. Members of the community did not simply mourn a loss of fan-created content, but they also mourned the loss of a community space and of aspects of the site that they enjoyed: "Well even if the mods are still available this is quite a sad occasion. The site was such an integral part of these games, I used to love browsing" (Mutilator57 2015). The idea of loss and the potential for loss was always greeted with disappointment by forum members.

Modder Rights

Nearly half of the most frequently used codes dealt with the original modder: their rights, whether they were listened to, contacting them, and whether they had given permission for their mods to be re-uploaded by others. The longest thread, that discussed Nexus Mods' actions in the face of the loss of GameFront, was an in-depth discussion about what rights modders have and whether their archiving superseded those rights. In re-uploading the entirety of the GameFront mod library without asking modders for permission, Nexus Mods was in conflict with a strong belief that many forum members held. That is that re-uploading the work of someone else was wrong: "If you're not the author, it's not yours to upload without their permission. It's as simple as that" (InSidious 2015). While there were many arguments surrounding the infringement of modders' rights, the fact that Nexus Mods allowed for the original modders to claim ownership of the re-uploaded mods was one of the only reasons why several members were not as concerned as they may otherwise be: "But they are still honoring the wishes of the mod owners I don't see why there is still so much flack when mod owners are still getting what they want in the end. If they were ignoring your requests I could see the hostility as warranted" (Blue 2016b). Regardless of Nexus Mods' promises made after re-uploading, some modders found their initial actions inexcusable:

"Well, as soon as I heard about this I contacted their staff to have my mods removed and they did so today. … I don't care to have my mods on Nexus, and in a couple cases they were uploading older versions that contained bugs. So there are pretty good reasons for these files to not be there, if you needed a reason other than the fact that I never consented to it" (JCarter426 2016a). The loss of a favoured hosting platform, in this case GameFront, gave others reason to consider allowing Nexus Mods to continue to host their work:

> I've just sent an e-mail to claim my mods and I haven't asked that they be taken down just yet. I miss having FileFront host my mods, so I'm going to give Nexus a chance. The way they handled this might not have been ideal, since I need to know where my mods are being hosted (in order to post updates) and I only found out about this by luck. At first it feels like they have taken control away from me (by just going ahead and hosting without a modders' knowledge or choice), but if I can gain that control back and claim them, then it might be worthwhile. I can certainly understand how it stings of violation, by them taking without asking. (redrob41 2016a)

Many argued that an attempt at contacting the original modders to ask for permission before re-uploading would have been a much more acceptable course of action:

> I can understand the desire to preserve mods from a site that has recently gone down, I think a better course of action would have been to collect the files, file structure, screenshots, etc, and then at least make an attempt to contact authors *before* uploading them all. I'm very familiar with FileFront, and as an active member of the KotOR modding community for almost a decade, this kind of thing has happened before. PCGameMods went down, FileFront has been under threat of going belly up several times. We make do without violating authors' rights. (Sithspecter 2016b; italics in the original)

The other two threads ("Kotorfiles is now gone" and "Gamefront closing down on April 30") also encouraged contacting modders to seek permission for re-uploading: "I recommend the staff here do the same, while the files are still available. Contact authors and get them to register here and upload their mods - or get permission to upload them yourself. You'll be surprised how many modders are still contactable and are willing to do it" (Circa 2015). The emphasis on respecting modders stemmed from an acknowledgement of the work that they

put into creating mods: "I just think it's entirely presumptuous to expect that just because something has been uploaded to the Internet, the rights/wishes of the creator should be rendered immaterial" (Mutilator57 2016). This was primarily framed as an issue regarding modders' legal rights, while the legality and ownership of mods is untested.

Postigo (2008) and Altizer (2013) both discussed the legal grey area that mods exist in and what rights modders believe that they have. Similarly to the communities that Postigo (2008) and Altizer (2013) examined, the focus in the Deadly Stream forums was primarily on what legal rights modders may hold: "I cannot legitimately determine who is technically covered legally, but people's rights over their work (be it time or personal projects) is a very difficult issue" (Malkior 2016b). Although it varies from country to country, generally speaking, there have been no court rulings that explicitly define mods as either existing under "fair use" or as an intellectual property violation. The lack of legal framework added confusion as to what exactly modders had rights to: "The stance of intellectual property seems to be a shaky one to me as the basis of all of our mods is that of LucasArts & BioWare's original intellectual property" (Blue 2016a). However, rather than framing this as a legal issue, I believe the issue of re-uploading mods without permission comes down to a matter of ethics. It is not ethical to re-upload someone's work when they have asked that their work not be re-uploaded. Within the community, what was considered a more respectful approach to sharing missing mods was request threads: "Distribution of those sorts of mods with absent owners will have to go on using back channels via PMs. … There's a request thread over at LucasForums for just such a thing" (Sith Holocron 2015). Deadly Stream also hosts a "Mod Requests" section in the forum ("Mod Requests" n.d.). Here, any community member who could not find a mod could ask other members of the community. Those who knew where to find it or had a copy would provide their information or temporary download links.

Archiving

The two top codes that relate to the idea of archiving were noting that another group had archived mods and critiquing the archiving process as rushed and unorganized. Both codes were primarily applied to posts that discussed the actions of Nexus Mods. In addition to the complaints about Nexus Mods ignoring modder's rights, rushing the archiving process and creating an unorganized mess of files, there was another complaint that many levied at Nexus Mods: "They didn't even do some basic checks to look for pre-existing uploads or authors. Now I not only have to manually claim all this crap (and via email, they could have at least made a form), I have to try and delete or hide the duplicates. I wish they had just kept their mitts off it" (DarthParametric 2016b). It was also common for community members to share information on which groups had created archives: "So some people … used the Internet Archive and other means to create a backup - just copies of the Filefront webpages as they originally appeared, as if the site were still hosted" (JCarter426 2016b). Members of the forum were paying attention to the actions of others who were archiving mods while critiquing the quality and standards of those making the backups.

Other Online Spaces

Other sites that hosted content related to *Knights of the Old Republic* were frequently mentioned. The majority of the sites linked to by the Steam guides appeared in the discussion threads. Of course, GameFront was the primary topic of conversation. Additionally, an entire thread was dedicated to the discussion of whether Nexus Mods' actions were appropriate. As well, at the time that these threads took place, LucasForums was still online and was mentioned as a place to contact authors and where mods could be quietly exchanged: "we have extensive Mod Request threads on both our main hubs (DeadlyStream and LucasForums). They've been going on successfully for years" (Sithspecter 2016b). LoneBullet is mentioned as

having mods that may or may not be missing; however, other members immediately argue against its use as it does not respect modders' wishes to not have their work re-uploaded: "That website did not ask permission, almost never cites the correct authors, and doesn't respond to contact attempts" (InSidious 2016). While the fan community is spread over several sites, the members of the community are familiar with them and are aware of which sites host what content, whether that be mods or community discussions.

Revisiting the Research Questions

How do fan communities respond to the disappearance of said content?

As the statements about loss above show, the primary response of many fans when faced with the disappearance of content was disappointment. As this specific instance of content loss happened to an older fan community (at the time of these threads, the *Knights of the Old Republic* fan community was over ten years old), it was old enough to have experienced multiple instances of content loss. When GameFront announced that it was closing, members also reminisced about multiple sites that went down in the past, and the consequences of losing those sites. For example, several members remembered that "sometime in 2006, PCGameMods shut down, losing many KotOR Mods" (Sithspecter 2016d). This occurred only three years after *Knights of the Old Republic* was originally released for Windows. Memories of what had been lost influenced community members' current response as well: "I've missed my chance at saving [mods from other games] when Filefront went down. I wont miss it this time" (Drayx 2016a). As Yang and Wu (2018, 2108) found, these "memories of disappeared websites both highlight and repair a web history marked by disruption and disappearance." Such memories of sites and mods that have disappeared profoundly impacted the members of this community, as these sites are still thought of in terms of what was lost. As a result, members were aware of the weaknesses of mod-hosting sites: "I think the biggest

problem was that we used to assume (and still do) that hosting websites won't go down. We put all our faith in KotOR Files, and it tanked, leaving most mods with no clause or provision to go elsewhere. That was the real mistake" (Sithspecter 2016a). The community was aware and understood that hosting services could go down, but their recollections of content loss outlined a history of missed opportunities and lost mods.

The majority of those who commented were not surprised by GameFront going down. While it was not entirely unexpected due to past experiences, the community was disappointed with the disappearance of content. Community members' disappointment prompted the writing of memory narratives about sites and mods that had long since been deleted from the internet, of which nostalgia played a large part. Through these memory narratives, it was obvious that they were familiar with loss, and knew that a loss of content was possible but they lamented not taking the opportunity to save more content when it was available. In reminiscing about older, lost content, there was an understanding that loss becomes an inevitability when existing online. For some members, remembering what had long since been lost was a signifier of how long they had been a part of the community. These memory narratives give an indication of the strength of the connection that the community member originally had to the sites and mods in question. Remembering lost content for ten years and continuing to lament its loss displays the very strong connections that these members had.

It is difficult to find any information on the older sites and mods that were discussed. In particular, there is very little written on PCGameMods, either on Deadly Stream or elsewhere on the internet. What has been written is primarily the memory narratives from those who had written their recollections of the site on a variety of forums, much like Deadly Stream. These memories of loss are the most accessible evidence that PCGameMods existed at all.

Recollections like these provide some details about the history of the community, but also the internet in the early 2000s, as well as these members' own participation in this community. These recollections are useful, not only for researchers, but also for new members who may want to familiarize themselves with the history of the community. As it stands, what has been written about the history of the community is buried in forum threads. This is not very accessible to those who may want to know more about the community and what content was available throughout its history.

How do online fan communities archive the content that their members have created?

The actions that were mentioned on the forums were primarily individuals attempting to save mods before they disappeared. The main concern of the community members was being able to have access to mods, and by extension of that, being able to play the mods that they liked, or remembered. Several members of the community stated that they would save content to their personal hard drives: "I'll probably download and backup all of the games' patches and some other big downloads. I don't want to see anything get wasted and I've got the HDD space..." (Fair Strides 2015). There were several community members who also encouraged other members to save content before it was lost: "Quickly everyone! Download all KotOR/[*Knights of the Old Republic II*] mods! Time is running out!" (milestails 2016a). Information on backups made by others in the larger fan community was also shared on the forums. These, again, were primarily individual endeavours that were identified by the individual making the backup: "Apparently Snigaroo of Reddit will be backing up the mods he's used in his KOTOR1 and KOTOR2 builds" (Sith Holocron 2016). However, members were aware that others' backups may not be complete: "MrWonko … didn't manage to save the whole thing, but he did get most of the mods I remembered" (Drayx 2016b). Consequently, it was

also understood in the community that individual action should still be taken to ensure that the mods that they wanted were available: "If you want anything from whatever scraps of KOTOR Files still remain, you've got the next fortnight to archive them" (DarthParametric 2016a). The members of the modding community who participated in such activities were, in essence, creating archives of fan-created content, which then could be shared in the mod request forum threads. The mods themselves were primarily always the focus of such efforts. The archiving of forums, discussions and comments were rarely a focus, if mentioned at all.

Just as De Kosnik (2016) explored in her book, it is primarily the work of community members that ensures that fan content is available to others over the long term. The *Knights of the Old Republic* fan community had several members that "designated themselves 'archivists,' … and began uploading (or assisting users with uploading) whatever content they deemed suitable for digital preservation" (De Kosnik 2016, 1). The previously mentioned Snigaroo and MrWonko were two, but among the members of the forum, there was one person who was consistently viewed as an archivist by other members of the community. milestails, who self-described themselves as a "Fulfiller of Mod Requests," frequently assisted other community members in finding mods (milestails 2017). Upon hearing that GameFront was closing down milestails pointed out that their work would become more difficult: "This makes my job of helping others locate elusive mods that much harder!" (milestails 2016b). Additionally, other members stated that the only positive result from Nexus Mods re-uploading mods from GameFront was "that MilesTails will get a well-deserved break" (Sithspecter 2016c). In knowing where online certain mods could be downloaded and keeping copies of mods that were no longer available and providing them upon request, milestails was performing "significant information-related activities" (Hill and Pecoskie 2017, 843) for the greater community.

Mods are not the only content that this fan community creates; however, mods were the primary focus of all archiving efforts. Deadly Stream itself hosts a great deal of other content including community members' blogs, not to mention extensive forum threads that contain tutorials, role-playing and discussions on a variety of topics. It is unclear if similar content that was hosted on the older mod-hosting sites was ever saved. Even if all of the mods are successfully moved to the next hosting provider, there will still be loss of information and discourse. In addition to the very discussions that I examined, any other memory narratives, that primarily appear in forums, would also be lost. In coding the forum threads, I was surprised there was less emphasis on saving such information that would help newer members familiarize themselves with the community. While there was an understanding that mod-hosting sites can go down, the community's understanding of the temporary nature of their meeting space was less clear. The history of the community itself seems to be thought of in terms of where the most mods have been hosted.

How do these communities think of and discuss preservation?

The archiving activities undertaken by community members would ensure the continued existence of the mod files; however, beyond that, little attention was paid to the context of the mods. For example, the saving of the forum threads themselves was not discussed. Wholly preserving the mods would involve archiving the forum threads and discussions that detail how to install mods and how to play the game on newer operating systems. Additionally, what would be lost includes the historical context of the mods themselves and any discussion that surrounds the creation of mods, as modders frequently post previews of their work in the forums before releasing it. Recording this context was not considered; within the community, preservation is firstly thought of in terms of the wishes of the original modder and secondly thought of in terms of easy access to mod files. These two

concepts often came into conflict, particularly during the discussion of Nexus Mods' actions. By the time that GameFront went down in 2016, the community had formulated what were acceptable actions to take in the face of content loss. Community members often pointed to the previously mentioned request threads. While not the most accessible, request threads seemed to be a compromise between modders commonly asking that their work not be re-uploaded and allowing access to those who did not have a chance to download a mod when it was originally available. A factor of request threads is that they perhaps make the labour of archiving slightly more visible as request threads require an active member in the community to have a copy of the mod and be willing to share it. It is more evident that "communities must work to conserve their digital artifacts and rituals, or risk losing them to the digital's proclivity for ephemerality and loss" (De Kosnik 2016, 30) when a community member responds to a request for a mod, rather than directly downloading mod files from a server with no human interaction.

In contrast, the actions of Nexus Mods allowed easy access to mods: "I believe according to the language in the official [Nexus Mods] post that this is specifically a method to create an easier way for people to have access to the files as mods. … to expose the truly obscure mods to users who have likely never heard of them" (Malkior 2016a). Unlike what Kem (2005) found in the fan community that they examined, privacy was not a requirement of preservation or access, here the main concern was allowing modders to maintain control over their work, in whatever way that was possible. Community members also understood that it was necessary to strike a balance between modders who are active in the community (and wish to have control over their work) and those who had since left the community:

> Once again, we keep going round and round with this: *Preservation Does Not Require Immediate Publication*. I'm not faulting Nexus … for working to preserve, but instead their decision to

publish quickly with little effort to contact mod authors. This is how I think it could have been handled better:

1. Nexus notices Game Front is closing
2. Nexus downloads all the mods, descriptions, screenshots, and structure
3. Nexus announces that they have backed up all the File Front mods
4. Nexus attempts to contact mod authors
5. After a reasonable period of time with no feedback from authors, Nexus publishes the mods. (Sithspecter 2016e; italics in the original)

Both in the case of request threads, and in the critiques of Nexus Mods' actions, it was evident that the community believed that immediate and easy access was not essential when preserving fan-created content.

Having older fan-created content accessible increases the longevity of the fan community since current members can continue to enjoy it or modders may gain inspiration from it. More importantly, by having such content available to new members, it removes the restriction needing to have been a part of the community when the content was released. This reveals a downside of request threads. Mod request threads depend on community members remembering the mod that they want to request, or at least hearing about it secondhand. New members do not have the luxury of remembering mods that were only available before they joined the community. In these cases, the documentation of the community itself becomes important. Additionally, request threads require labour from specific community members: that is someone who has access to the correct files. Sites themselves are ephemeral, but people's participation in online communities can also be quite transient. As a result, gaining access to a mod through request threads entails much more specific requirements than someone simply paying server fees and keeping a website updated. The *Knights of the Old Republic* fan community continues to exist because community members are engaged and invested in its existence.

When I began this project, I did not expect modders' rights to be such a large component of the discussions. It perhaps should not have been surprising, particularly in a community where all labour is essentially performed for free. Request threads are a way that the community balances between providing access to older mods and respecting modder's wishes. Another of the ways that the community accomplished this is through Deadly Stream's "Guidelines for Reuploading Abandonware Mods" (Snigaroo 2019b), which is one of the site's policies. It follows a similar route to what Sithspecter (2016e) outlined above: it requires Deadly Stream staff to attempt to contact the modder to request permission, and if there is no response, then the original modder must be out of contact for two years. Only then does Deadly Stream staff consider re-uploading their work. It would be much more effective to ask modders, when they are still active in the community, what their wishes for their work would be if it were to become unavailable, rather than trying to contact them after a mod hosting site has gone down. However, implementing such a suggestion becomes complicated when considering who is (and, perhaps more importantly to the modders, who is not) in charge of carrying out those wishes.

Most of the archiving that was discussed on the forums was only undertaken in response to loss. Besides milestails, who had a reputation for knowing where mods were currently hosted and having already downloaded a large number of mods, the act of archiving primarily occurred after a warning, or after content was already gone. No community member mentioned that they had already archived the content that they wanted. The community's focus was on loss or potential loss, rather than how to preserve content when there was no threat of loss. While familiar with the loss of websites, fan communities still rely very heavily on them and expect that they will continue for the foreseeable future. For example, there was no discussion of what may occur to the content hosted on Deadly Stream if the site was no

longer maintained. In focusing on what has been lost, rather than ensuring the fan community's content is available long term, it seems there has been little preparation for future access. In order to better preserve content, when both mods and the surrounding discussions are primarily stored online, it is necessary to make considerations for the precarious nature of existence on the internet.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

The *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* video game has a dedicated online fan community that focuses on the creation and sharing of mods. Due to the nature of mods, which can require a large amount of server space to store and share, this fan community relies on sites to host their creations and to communicate and collaborate. The community is dependent on these sites as its continued existence requires access to mods and other like-minded fans. As the fan community formed shortly after the game was released in 2003, this community has experienced several incidents of loss over the years due to sites going down. In these incidents, loss did not only include the fan-created content, but also included the sites as a gathering space for fans. As a consequence of the ephemerality of existence on the internet, this fan community has developed several methods to mitigate loss and has come to conclusions about which are the most appropriate to pursue. When it was announced that the mods that were being hosted on GameFront would be lost, the discussion in the surrounding fan community included fans' reactions to the loss of a major mod hosting site and to the actions others took in response. Insight into the community's thoughts about the archiving of older content was gained by examining the discussion that took place on Deadly Stream, which is a fan site run by volunteers that is dedicated to modding *Knights of the Old Republic* and other related games.

Community members' memories of the previous incidents of content loss affected their actions and expectations in the face of the loss of GameFront. Over time, the community had gained an understanding that sites could not be depended on for long-term use, and it became more clear that fans are responsible for the continued existence of fan sites and access to mods. When it comes to the longevity of fan sites, it is individual members who pay hosting fees and maintain software in order to keep the site available and working. In the case

of Deadly Stream, it has persisted through donations from fans and the efforts of volunteers to keep the site running. When confronted with loss, archiving mods was a major concern. However, when preserving mods, the primary concern of this community is respecting the wishes of the creator, rather than accessibility of the mods or maintaining their context. In this community, it was common for modders to request that their creations not be re-uploaded to other sites without their knowledge or permission. While there were arguments made excusing the modder's displeasure on the grounds of lacking legal framework due to the questionable legality of mods, it is perhaps easier to frame this not as a question of intellectual property rights, but one of ethics. In order to respect those who had put in the time and effort to create a mod and who had asked that their work not be re-uploaded, request threads were this community's solution to preservation. In these forum threads, members can ask if anyone else in the community has a mod that they remember, or know where it is available. The trading of digital files through forum threads and private messages depends on an active community. Consequently, the archiving and sharing of material is seen as a service in this fan community and some members are well known for it. In particular, the community benefited from having a self-ascribed "archivist" member who regularly shared material. Rather than relying on fallible sites and online services, this community has come to the understanding that collective effort is necessary to maintain archives and access to materials that are difficult to store and share.

Future Research

The loss of content that is hosted on the internet is an ongoing problem and will continue to be an ongoing problem. Gaining an understanding the diverse approaches that people have tried in order to solve, or at least mitigate, the ongoing problem of content loss on the internet would be beneficial. The different approaches, formulated by the communities

that have already been affected by content loss, can give us both a variety of solutions on how to maintain content online and an understanding of what has not been saved. Online fan communities both create and archive a vast variety of materials in a multiplicity of formats. Mods, fan fiction, fan art, concert recordings, and reaction videos are only some of the types of content that fans create. Each media type and format comes with its own challenges and complications, which are often multiplied when sharing online. From materials that are more likely to fall to copyright complaints to materials that require a large amount of storage space, fan communities must decide how to manage these complications, along with the ephemerality of online servers and services. Online fan archives allow us to gain an understanding of how people work around all of these complications. Since each fan community prioritizes different aspects of preservation, from privacy to creator control, each community will develop slightly different methods and practices in response to the loss of content. These diverse solutions that fan communities have come to are important to study. As the majority of all media is now shared online, created online, and consumed online, those who have spent a great deal of time solving the problems surrounding saving this media will have novel and innovative solutions. The methods that they have developed and the approaches that they have tried will be crucially important to maintaining the repository of human knowledge that the internet has become.

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