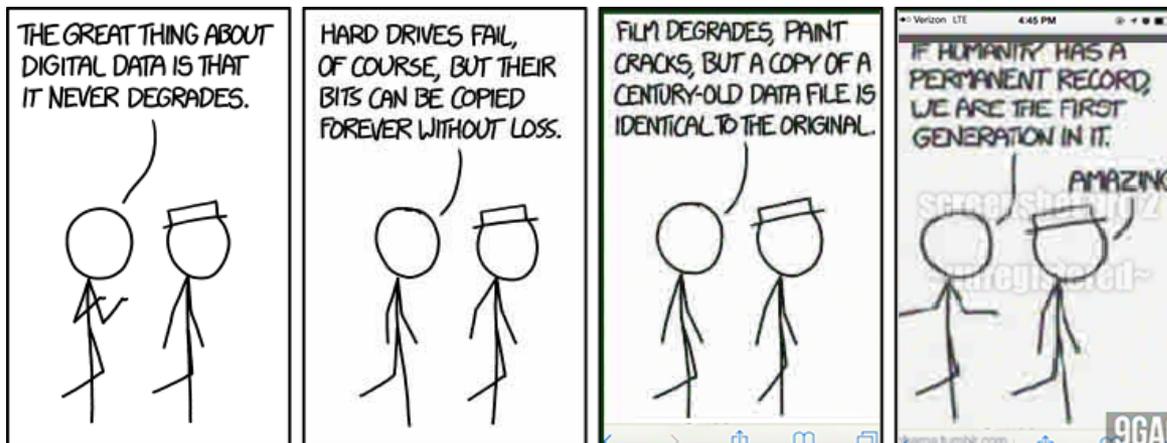


# Re:Format

## What is file format obsolescence and does it really exist?

#dpcformat



[HTTP://XKCD.COM/1683/](http://xkcd.com/1683/) [CC2.5](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/)



Digital **Preservation** Coalition

# Re:Format

## Has our thinking on obsolescence become obsolete?

Paul Wheatley, Digital Preservation Coalition

@prwheatley



Digital **Preservation** Coalition



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## Windows



Windows cannot open this file:

File: `obsolete_digital_object.wpd`

To open this file, Windows needs to know what program created it. Windows can go online to look it up automatically, or you can manually select from a list of programs on your computer.

What do you want to do?

- Use the Web service to find the appropriate program
- Select the program from a list

OK

Cancel

“File formats are subject to... ..rapid obsolescence and evolution”

[Digital Preservation Handbook, First Edition, 2002](#)

“...the problem may not be as severe as the digital preservation community perceived it to be some 10 years ago. Many established file formats are still with us, still supported, and still usable. It is quite likely that the majority of file formats you deal with will be commonly understood and well supported.”

[Digital Preservation Handbook, Second Edition, 2016](#)



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“The contents of most digital media evaporate long before words written on high quality paper, and they often become unusably obsolete much sooner, as they are superseded by new media or incompatible formats... ..This has prompted my observation that **digital information lasts forever—or five years, whichever comes first.**”

[Jeff Rothenberg, Scientific American, 1995 \(revised 1999\)](#)

“It’s worth noting that a lot of the 'official' advice on obsolescence that you might find is useless. Various sites will classify formats as obsolete that are still perfectly easy to open and migrate from.

[Chris Rusbridge, Unsustainable Ideas \(blog\), 2012](#)

“(evidence supports the argument that) ...Jeff Rothenberg's pre-Web analysis of format obsolescence is itself obsolete.”

[David Rosenthal, DSHR’s Blog, 2012](#)

“Digital material is just as susceptible to obsolescence as analog formats.”

[Joey Heinen and Andrea Goethals, iPRES2015](#)

“...there are genuine and significant preservation risks beyond the black and white delineation of format survivability...”

[Pennock, May and Wheatley, iPRES 2014](#)

...so what, actually, is the question?

What is a file format?

What is file format obsolescence?

Do we need to worry about obsolescence now, and for what content?

Do we need to worry now about format obsolescence in 100 years time?



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