

Something Awful is racing to save the best and worst of web history

It's easy to forget how fragile the internet's memory is, but last month, members of the Something Awful forums got a rude reminder. Ubiquitous image host Imgur announced it would be deleting nudity and pornography starting in mid-May and, along with it, "old, unused, and inactive content" not linked to an account. The wording was so vague nobody knew exactly what that meant. But the worst-case scenario was obvious: an unceremonious purge of images from one of the longest-running communities on the web. A frantic discussion thread commenced, and soon, the solution seemed obvious, too. Using a spreadsheet as a home base, with a tight deadline of May 15th, Something Awful's members had to help download the source images of as many Imgur links as possible – ideally, anything ever posted to the site.

A few weeks later, Something Awful's owner – who goes by Jeffrey of YOSPOS – is feeling confident. "We're rock-solid," Jeffrey told *The Verge* via forum direct message. Though there's still plenty of work to do, he says site members have secured multiple copies of a roughly three-terabyte collection of pictures and short videos, now held on both users' hard drives and Something Awful's own. He plans to have them hosted by the end of May, leaving a minimal gap if anything's deleted. But what's been internally dubbed the Great Imgur Download Caper isn't a one-time averted crisis. It's part of a constant struggle to shore up digital culture and to convince people that it matters.

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Something Awful has a long and notorious past, and much of its nearly 25-year history is told through pictures. The site is one of the fountainheads of our modern visual internet, responsible, among other things, for latter-day cryptid Slender Man and the rise of cheezburger-loving Happy Cat. It’s a place defined by the constant remixing of strange and funny images, encouraged by traditions like Photoshop Phriday, a recurring showcase for creative digital manipulation. “There are many people who started posting on this site as children who are now raising children of their own,” says Jeffrey. (Jeffrey is not the site’s first owner; he purchased it in 2020 from founder Richard “Lowtax” Kyanka, who died in 2021.) Sharing their visual creations is what’s kept many of them coming back.

But the existence of these images has never been exactly stable. As with many forums, Something Awful has historically relied on external hosts like Imgur, which promise free uploads with just a few clicks. It’s a great deal until, almost invariably, the services start culling old photos and leaving behind thumbnail remnants: a broken Flickr link, ImageShack’s lonely yellow frog. Imgur isn’t the first time the site’s members have scrambled to back up a service. An earlier project saw them downloading and rehosting a smaller trove of files from wafflephotos – some holding onto images for a full decade, Jeffrey says, before the site could officially restore them.

The Imgur Download Caper was organized by Jeffrey and a pair of Something Awful administrators, and it involves, basically, three steps. The first step was to scrape Something Awful itself, parsing its decades’ worth of threads to identify and extract links to Imgur. Those targets were identified and compiled into gigantic text files, each one holding 100,000 Imgur link addresses. From there, the site’s members (known as

goons) jumped into action on the second step: divvying up the chunks and mass downloading them, using scripts shared and tweaked by other posters.

These first two steps were time-sensitive. Not only did goons need to beat Imgur's mid-May deadline but they also needed to account for the possibility that Imgur would treat the download as some kind of attack and throttle it – a possibility that, it turns out, never came to pass. They'll have more leeway for the third and final step: hosting the images from servers paid for by Something Awful itself, then overwriting the original posts' hotlinks to point toward them. "We have to coordinate to get everything in one place and validated, but we can take our time and get it right," Jeffrey says.

Jeffrey says he's also been in touch with Archive Team, the self-described "rogue archivist" community that's stepped in to preserve cultural artifacts like SoundCloud music and Google Plus posts. Archive Team is working on its own full-scale Imgur project – team member Arkiver tells *The Verge* that it's backing up links at a rate of about 600 submissions a second, adding up to hundreds of millions of downloads. That offers a fallback of last resort for Something Awful. No matter who's backing up the pictures, however, the forum's managers will have to do the work of updating posts to make sure they link to archived images, keeping their original context preserved.

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It's possible that, even without either of these preservation efforts, many of the Imgur links would remain sound given how little detail Imgur has offered on what it's deleting. (The company, acquired by MediaLab in 2021, didn't respond to a request for more details from *The Verge* in April.) But Jeffrey says hunting for an answer is a "losing proposition" for the

site. “It’s clear we need to host our own images. Websites promising that they’ll ‘host your images for free’ are never gonna stop running out of money – it’s nearly impossible to monetize a site like that,” he says. “We have an opportunity here to get out of that cycle for good.” Expanding hosting is a project that was on the site’s radar already, he says, but one that Imgur’s impending changes have made more pressing.

Something Awful has the benefit of being a paid forum – there’s a \$10 fee to sign up, plus more for perks like private messages or an ad-free site. Jeffrey estimates that the Imgur files will cost between \$80 and \$100 per month to host on top of an unknown cost for the initial archival, a price he says the registration fees will help defray. On other sites, administrators may face the same challenges without the same support. “A good deal of the modern internet is treated as transient and ‘okay to delete whenever,’ and that is a real shame,” says Jeffrey. “Does no one at Reddit care that fifteen years worth of Reddit posts are going to suddenly be full of broken links?”

In fact, parts of the internet *have* moved toward deliberate ephemerality and obscurity. People have flocked to disappearing message platforms and closed forums like Discord, which have few meaningful archival options. European privacy laws have enshrined a “right to be forgotten” that lets people remove potentially embarrassing information from the web. And a lot of Something Awful’s images are silly, obscene, offensive, or all of the above. As one Twitter voyeur highlighted, opening any of those downloaded files means risking an eyeful of the internet’s most infamous shock images. When the Imgur news first broke, at least a few members thought the purge might not be a bad thing. Some cracked jokes about getting to finally bid their younger selves’ cringeworthy uploads farewell.

But history is made of silly, embarrassing ephemera. “If anyone is to ever look back on our society, they won’t be able

to understand it without understanding the internet. Anyone who spends any appreciable amount of time online will experience both the best and worst that humanity has to offer,” Jeffrey says. “People put a lot of themselves into their internet presence and that is reason enough that it should be recorded, warts and all.”

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