



# Rummaging around

## Internet Archive a jumble of content

If you've ever rummaged through a closet looking for something you think you might have put there years ago, you have a pretty good idea of what it's like to visit Internet Archive at [archive.org](http://archive.org). It's not the most efficient way to find something, but you come across all sorts of interesting things during the search.

Internet Archive was founded in 1996 for the purpose of maintaining a digital library of all the content created by society. The archive accepts donations of texts, audio, moving images, software and even Web pages. Material that is not originally digital, such as books or film, is converted to a digital format. The material is then made available for free in a searchable, online database.



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*InSites*

### Wheat and chaff

Society has created, and continues to create, a lot of stuff. Archiving and organizing it all is a tall order. The people behind Internet Archive take their mission seriously, comparing the archive to the ancient Library of Alexandria, which purportedly contained a copy of every book in the world. They even collaborate with the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian in their efforts to preserve a digital record of humankind's creations.

Of course, this noble effort is useful for researchers, historians and scholars looking for ways to improve our existence. However, not every-

thing we create is noble and high-minded. While perusing television commercials from the 1960s on the site, I came across a hilariously tragic spot. It featured children's cartoon characters the Flintstones extolling the virtues of smoking Winston cigarettes. I also spent some time laughing out loud at the violent slapstick of the Three Stooges.

A lot of the content I came across on the site is old or obscure. Since the archive makes all the content available for free download, owners of contemporary — and potentially valuable — copyrights are probably not rushing to give them away. So you're not going to find many blockbuster movies, best-selling novels or top 10 tunes in the archives.

### Consistently varied

There's also a variety of ways to experience the content. I was able to flip through some books right on the web site, while others had to be downloaded as PDFs, text or image files. Viewing movies and videos also was split between watching some within the site and downloading others. Audio was the same — I was able to listen to a Grateful Dead concert streaming on the site, but I also had the option of downloading it.

The content that's downloaded comes in a range of formats. Some files will open up readily on a Windows or Macintosh platform, while others require downloading third party software to open. The archive also has software and video games available for download, but I didn't want to get involved in all the potential problems of trying to run 20-year-old software on my new iMac.

If you want to view old websites you can use the Way Back Machine. Type in the URL of a site you want to view and a page with a timeline from 1996 to the present, and a calendar appears. The timeline shows the years that the site you're looking for was archived. Click on a year and the calendar shows the specific days the site was crawled. Click on one of the days and the Way Back Machine opens up the site as it looked on that day. Depending on the site, and how far back you go, some of the images may not appear and links may lead to dead ends.

### In need of a makeover

Internet Archive has tremendous potential as both a tool for research and a good way to waste time online looking at cool stuff. The only thing standing in its way is the design of the site. The site's creators apparently are aware of this, as the About IA section mentions that using the site requires programming skills, but there is hope that tools will be developed to make it easier for the general public to use.

The site's design is cumbersome to navigate and visually unappealing. It's heavy with text, with only a few, small images on some pages. As a result, browsing around the site feels more like homework than exploring. A design that's more visually dynamic, with more intuitive navigation, would make visiting the site a more engaging experience.

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