

Searching the Archives, or, How I Came to Reconstruct Early Internet Porn

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When porn scholars think of the pornographic archive, we are often met with a conceptual and definitional impasse. This impasse is born from pornography's unique position as a typically sequestered medium. Simply put, the debate is this: is pornography defined by its preservation for a select audience, or does its isolation actually denude it of its pornographic function? But though both options are provocative, this might not be quite the right question. Moving away from an isolation/sequestration framework, I want to ask how the process of *finding* pornography across a number of different "archives" might better shed light on pornography's complexity, and might well be the more critical question to pursue when considering the preservation of pornography for research.

Searching for pornography may seem like an unremarkable task—pornography is, we are often told, omnipresent and ubiquitous—marked by an embarrassment of riches (how does one *not find it* might be a better question?!). The question of search has often been limited to the question of how to prevent children's access to pornography, painted with moralistic and fear-mongering strokes. Rather than continue this well-trod line of questioning, I want to explore how the act of searching reflects back on each era's particular moment but also want to reckon with the changes that have taken place in the contemporary moment when digital search so often leaves a number of traces. I propose a more robust consideration of how the *search* for porn is historically, culturally, and technologically-contingent. This necessitates that porn scholars not universalized or flatten the archive as *only* a "hidden" space.

First, an object lesson: Let us consider "woods porn," which has been described as a unique phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s, and which refers to pornography that could be readily found in forests during these decades (no joke!). Woods porn names a secret archive of adult magazines that served populations either left out of or underserved by the traditional pornographic venues of adult cinemas, video stores, and bookstores. To stumble upon woods porn would be to find an off-the-grid archive whose secret nature did not cater to the traditional consumer, but rather served the under-aged, the homeless, and the marginalized. In this example, the search for pornography is bound up with the discourse of prohibition, with limitations to media dissemination, with chance, the accidental, and surprise. This phenomenon reveals cultural / historical / and technological particularities: 1. A nontraditional viewing space for nontraditional audiences; 2. a *laissez faire* approach to parenting, where children could explore the woods unsupervised; and 3. social or technological limitations to accessing pornography.

I want to turn now from this analog example to the digital realm of pornographic search. Pornography can leave a trace after it is searched for (and found)— I am thinking, in particular, of the countless times I have witnessed friends and colleagues in professional settings accidentally reveal their pornography searches. The auto-fill feature in Google remembers what kink you sought out last week, and suggests it this week during an unrelated search, unless you diligently delete your history or use incognito mode. The tab you forgot to close or the pornographic pop up ad hides itself under more sanitized programs; nestled, for instance, under a PowerPoint presentation you're about to give. Searching for pornography online is intimately bound to searching for ways to keep pornography from arriving uninvited, because our digital world is always actively trying to find ways to keep us plugged in, to not close the browser, but to recommend, curate, or sometimes foist, new pornography upon us. How are we, as scholars, making this act of searching (and hiding our searches) visible in our scholarship?

The trace (a kind of afterlife) is not the only compelling phenomenon of the digital pornography. Another less studied phenomenon is its capacity to disappear over time, which might seem at odds with the Internet's other affordance, to ever expand. The act of searching for and preserving pornography is often thought to be a materialist problem—which is why the preservation of video, film, and print pornography is so often the first things spoken about, because these media clearly degrade—but so too does the Internet degrade. While the Internet has been symbolized as lasting forever, it is increasingly becoming clear that this concept does not hold, and that the archiving (or lack of archiving) of online pornography yields an intellectually generative example of digital decay and digital rot. I happened upon this problem in doing my own research on early gay Internet porn of the 1990s because the act of searching for early gay web porn seemed impossible. I could not find any of the web porn I remembered viewing from this era as a teenager.

My only access to such early Internet pornography (which might as well have been prehistoric) came in a roundabout way. I could not access the cyberporn of this era, so instead, I searched for Internet porn through whatever pornography was available—in this case, video and print—and looked for how the discourses surrounding cyberporn were being represented and debated. The result was an unexpected one: print media offered me one index of early Internet porn, despite technically being separated from “the real deal.” In addition, I found a number of porn videos from the 1990s that narrativized cyberporn, and these videos became other access points for reconstituting early Internet porn. The GIFs, e-rotica, virtual reality, and plodding video clips I was hoping to find only appeared in apparitional and remediated states, which made the portrait I could paint a fraught one, at best. But it also made the act of searching for porn the real subject of my work, and highlighted how such searches were tied directly to questions of ephemerality, remediation, chance, and disembodiment.

Foregrounding and interrogating acts of search in porn scholarship will be one integral step toward rendering a more accurate picture of pornography's many and changing archives.