

Degralescence, Prince Codec, and the Kingdom of Media

A Media Preservation Fairy Tale by Mike Casey, Media Digitization and Preservation Initiative, Indiana University, USA

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Once upon a time, a king and queen ruled the kingdom of Media. Media was a peaceful land that was home to all things audio and video. Its subjects lived happy analog lives where preservation, access, and the means of production all revolved around their physical forms. But the king and queen had felt the winds of change blowing across their lands. They had heard tell of an unspeakable evil lurking about their borders. And they knew that the old ways could hold fast no longer.

Reports of the first attacks on the border towns of Media were sketchy and difficult to understand. A few residents of the kingdom, known as analogons, noticed that if a certain type of shadow fell upon them, their bodies began to crumble away. They could not interact with the material world around them. Their hands passed ghostlike through objects and they lost the ability to speak. A growing number of analogons, both young and old, in the border towns and villages of Media were lost in this way.

It was clear that a force more powerful than ever seen before was moving swiftly into the kingdom. It was the evil twin-headed monster, Degralescence, a hideous instantiation of degradation and obsolescence. The king and queen now quickly realized that this could mean the destruction of their kingdom and the loss of most of their subjects. They knew that it was beyond their power to repel Degralescence, so they called to the neighboring kingdom for help. Within days, Prince Codec rode to the rescue.

When Degralescence heard this news, he laughed and spat upon the ground. “I eat codecs for lunch,” he cried! Which was true. He was not particularly concerned about this turn of events and went back to plotting Media’s demise.

The next day, Prince Codec met with the King and Queen to discuss the recent attacks on the borders of Media, which were increasing daily. After hours of talking, and with no good ideas in sight, Prince Codec asked them, “who is the wisest person that you know?”

“That would be the wise woman of Preserverance,” said the Queen. “She lives outside the kingdom in an enchanted forest that has endured for thousands of years. The seasons do not affect it. I don’t know why I didn’t think of her. Some of our finest scholars have consulted her and her persistent records over the years.”

“How do I find this wise woman of Preserverance?” asked Prince Codec.

“Ride in the direction of the setting sun in the fall of the year. Ride until you think you can go no further, until you despair of ever reaching your destination. Then keep going. Just before you give up, you will find yourself in the forest called Preserverance.”

Fortunately for all concerned, it was the fall of the year and Prince Codec set out the very next evening at sunset.

Days turned into weeks turned into months and still Prince Codec rode on. He was a particularly determined and optimistic person who was not inclined to give up easily, and so it seemed that he never got close to his destination.

In due course, the land began to change. Leaves fell off the trees, branches and logs lay rotting on the ground, grass decayed, flowers withered, and the sky turned a permanent shade of ominous gray. The air was heavy with the smell of things crumbling. Food became scarce and there were no signs of other creatures. Dark was the Prince's mood and darker still were his thoughts. After weeks of traveling through this degrading landscape, Prince Codec awoke from another night of restless half-sleep and thought that he could go no further. He muttered under his breath "I give....."

And at that very moment, he found himself on the edge of a splendid green forest.

Prince Codec entered the forest carefully. The sun shone brightly and birds darted from tree to tree. There was a well-worn path to follow. In about a mile he came to a small limestone house that appeared old but immaculately preserved. The Prince dismounted and entered the house. He saw a long table at which was seated a woman who seemed both old and young and neither old nor young. The walls of the room were lined with floor to ceiling bookshelves in which old and new books occupied every available space. On the table were several books that appeared to be in the middle of repairs. Scattered about the table were various brushes, an X-acto knife, a scalpel, and a few types of glue and tape. On the far end of the table was an audiocassette with its shell open, a roll of splicing tape, a splicing block, and a stack of ten other audiocassettes. From the doorway, Prince Codec could see into an adjoining room that was stuffed full of books, photographs, and audio and video recordings. A small sign on the door read "The Backlog."

"I am looking for the wise woman of Preserverance," said Prince Codec.

"Yes, that is what they call me," said the woman. "How can I help you?"

Prince Codec explained about the kingdom of Media and the attacks by Degralescence.

"This has been foreseen for many years, but the kingdom has not prepared for it," said the wise woman. "The power to stop Degralescence lies with the Sword of Migration. You must seek it. It is your only hope."

"Where can I find this sword?" asked Prince Codec.

"Finding is easy," said the wise woman, "but capturing it and making it do your bidding are quite difficult. Many have tried, but none have succeeded. Its power is not yet available to us. Ride to the Forsaken Glen. You will find a small lake in the middle of the glen. The sword is hidden in the lake where it is guarded by the three Queens of Obsolescence. You must successfully complete a task given to you by each of the queens to gain the sword."

"That doesn't sound so hard," said Prince Codec.

"I would wish you luck, but I can't tell that you have any more foresight, persistence, or courage than any of the others who have tried," said the wise woman.

"One more question," said Prince Codec. "Do I have to go back through that miserable grey land where nothing is left alive?"

The wise woman laughed and said, “That’s my nemesis, Old Man Degradation. It takes a lot of time and energy to keep him out of my forest. He does like to have his fun with adventurers who travel through his domain. No, it’s only possible to travel in one direction through his dominion. You will return along the same path but you will see no sign of him.”

Prince Codec thanked the wise woman of Preserverance and rode off.

Three days later, Prince Codec entered the Forsaken Glen and soon came to the lake in the middle. As he walked to the edge of the lake, he noticed three whirlpools moving towards him. When they reached the shore, they rose up out of the water revealing three women with constantly changing faces that were beautiful and terrible in turn, and bitter-sweet with echoes and shadows. One moment the faces were filled with longing for the past. The next, they were lit by the dreams of the future.

“Who are you? And what do you seek?” they cried as one.

“I am Prince Codec and I seek the Sword of Migration.”

“That shall never be,” said the first Queen of Obsolescence. “No one has yet been found who can wield the Sword. Obsolescence rules in this world!”

“Then I shall take the sword!” cried Prince Codec, although in the next moment he realized he could not move his legs.

“You have no power here,” said the second Queen. “There is only one way to capture the sword. You must complete a task set before you by each Queen of Obsolescence. If you successfully complete all three tasks, the sword will be yours. If you fail, you shall forfeit your life.”

The first Queen stepped forward. “I am the Queen of Playback Obsolescence. Your first task takes the form of a riddle. Listen carefully.”

*He dances with me, we are bound together,
We seek the same end—to banish ‘forever.’
He works with the product while I pursue the means;
Media, after all, must be played by machines.
Chemistry and biology are the tools of his trade
Culture and profit drive the victories of my reign
He is the master of decay, I am the master of supersession;
We are both masters of decline, in the service of regression.*

Who is he?

Prince Codec thought long and hard about this riddle. He asked the Queen to repeat it several times. Something seemed strikingly familiar, as if it were part of his recent experience. He understood how culture, profit, things superseded, and the means of accessing media were part of the Queen of Playback Obsolescence’s trade, but who was her partner? Decay, decline, chemistry and biology, the products that carry media....and then he had it.

“Is it Old Man Degradation?” asked the Prince.

It was the right answer and the Queen flew into a rage that might have lasted a good long while had it not been interrupted by one of her sisters.

“My sister and her silly riddles—they never work,” cried the second Queen. “I am the Queen of Format Obsolescence and I have a real task for you. Your clue is this: s-h-n. Bring me an example of what this represents and tell me what is locked away inside.”

Prince Codec thanked the Queen, assured her that he would return with what she asked for, and rode away.

Being the prince of codecs, and having specific knowledge of such things, he immediately guessed that the letters shn might be a file format extension. However, try as he might, he was not able to think of a file format that fit. Prince Codec recognized his weakness here—he was a young man and did not have direct experience with older file formats. He needed someone whose knowledge base stretched back at least a few decades, and so he decided to call upon an old family friend.

On the southern border of Media, there is a small town called Normal. On the edge of town lived a man who was known to all as “The Keeper,” although his real name was Thomas Render. His passion was creating and maintaining lists and documentation of all the formats that could be found in Media. This included physical analog and digital carrier formats as well as digital file formats. The Keeper was highly regarded by the citizens of the town but not by the castle, which had on numerous occasions declined to hire him even though they had no one else engaged in this line of work. So The Keeper relentlessly pursued his mission over the course of many years, providing free information to anyone who inquired, although there were no inquiries from the castle. The Codec family had known Thomas Render for years, and the Prince had often visited his house as a young lad.

Prince Codec followed a side road to the edge of Normal until he came to the house of The Keeper. He was greeted at the door by an elderly man with a shock of white hair and piercing brown eyes.

“Prince Codec, my young friend. What brings you here?”

The Prince described the quest for the Sword of Migration and the task set upon him by the Queen of Format Obsolescence.

“The only clue I have is the three letters, shn. I am wondering if it could be a file extension?”

“I think you might be right,” said Thomas. “I seem to recall an audio format that used .shn, but let’s check the registry of digital audio file formats.”

Thomas retrieved an oversized book and placed it on the table in front of them. The two pored over the registry, looking through page after page documenting every audio codec and file format that Thomas had encountered in Media. A little more than halfway through the book they found it: .shn, the file extension for the Shorten audio file format.

“That’s a good name for a short-lived codec!” said the Prince.

It had not occurred to him that not only analog objects could experience obsolescence, but digital file formats too. Now he had to find an example of audio encoded in this format to bring to the Queen of Format Obsolescence.

This turned out to be surprisingly easy. The Keeper was also a dedicated collector of the formats he documented and he quickly came up with an .shn file. He dragged and dropped the file into a media player and nothing happened. They tried three other players with no luck. Unfortunately, the format was not supported by any of the media players he had on hand so they were not able to play the file.

Prince Codec’s heart sank. If The Keeper was not able to play the file, he was not sure who could, and his quest for the Sword of Migration would end rather earlier than he might have hoped.

In the meantime, Thomas had returned to the registry, where he was examining the Shorten entry. “It appears that I have an appendix entry,” he said as he turned to the back of the book. “Ah, here it is: Shorten is a lossless codec that is no longer developed and is hardly used but is supported by libavcodec.”

The Prince breathed a sigh of relief. libavcodec is an open source library of codecs for encoding and decoding audio and video data. He knew it well. This would allow him to transcode from the Shorten format to a .wav file that could be played by a media player.

Prince Codec thanked Thomas many times and bid him farewell. The Keeper, however, had one last request.

“If you are going to use this information to save Media, then I would appreciate a kind word on my behalf to the King and Queen.”

Prince Codec gave his word that if he were to prove successful, he would do just that and more. Off he rode.

When the Prince arrived back at the Forsaken Glen, all three of the Queens of Obsolescence were waiting for him in the lake. He approached the second Queen.

“shn is a file extension for the Shorten audio file format,” he said. “Here is a Shorten file, and now we will listen to the contents of the file, which I have converted to the .wav format so that it will play on this media player.” He then began to play the song “Losing You” as sung by Alison Krause.

The Queen was incredulous. “How did you convert it to a .wav file?”

“I used libavcodec,” said the Prince.

“libavcodec—the bane of my existence! It always gets in the way of progressive obsolescence.”

The Queen was furious but ultimately realized that she had been beaten at her own game.

The third Queen of Obsolescence then stepped forward.

"I am the Queen of Repair Obsolescence. Here is the third and final task. If you are successful then the sword is yours. But, I warn you that this is the most difficult task. In the kingdom of Media, there exists a format called Betamax. Find me a person who can repair a Betamax machine, if you dare."

The Queen handed the Prince a broken-down Betamax machine to be repaired.

"This is tough," thought Prince Codec. "I have heard of only one person who can supposedly repair a Betamax machine, and he does not give out his name. I have no idea where to find him."

Prince Codec bade the three Queens farewell and set out on his final task. He made his way to the kingdom of Media where he paid a visit to the director of operations at the largest media archive in the kingdom. After listening to the Prince's request, the director said "I'm sorry, but I have never found anyone who can repair machines in this format. I have heard of one person who is rumored to be the last Betamax repair person alive. He goes by the name Mr. Betamax and nobody knows his real name. The best I can offer is to tell you to check the Betamax neighborhood to see if one of its residents can provide a clue. All the Betamaxes live down on Lost Street next to VHS Park."

Prince Codec thanked him and hurried off to find the Betamax neighborhood. He knew he was in the right place when he saw the distinctive Beta logo on the mailboxes of each house.

The Prince began knocking on doors and talking with the residents one by one. The result was always the same: no one had been repaired even though many needed it. At last he came to a house on the edge of the neighborhood. The resident had a dim memory of being repaired when he was a young boy. "That's the story I was told when I was growing up. I needed a new upper drum assembly and I was sent to an expert in another kingdom who was able to get me running again. You are welcome to check for a repair sticker."

Prince Codec began to disassemble the machine in search of any evidence of repair. After an hour of looking he found it—a small sticker that said "repaired by Mr. Betamax" followed by an address. The Prince thanked the resident and hurried off.

He did not have to ride far to get to the address on the sticker. Mr. Betamax still lived there, and he listened intently as Prince Codec told him the story of Degralescence, the kingdom of Media, the wise woman of Preserverance and the three Queens of Obsolescence. He supported the fight against Degralescence and agreed to repair the machine that the Prince carried. It took him two days to repair, and he was successful only after sending the Prince back to the Betamax neighborhood to scrounge spare parts. Mr. Betamax packed the repaired machine in a custom box and handed it to Prince Codec, who thanked him many times.

When the Prince arrived back at the Forsaken Glen, all three of the Queens of Obsolescence were again waiting for him in the lake. Prince Codec approached the third Queen and presented her with the custom box saying "in this box is something you have never seen. It fulfills my task from you." The Queen opened it and inside found the Betamax machine that she had given him, only now it was repaired, completely functional, and like-new. The Queen of Repair Obsolescence's fury knew no bounds. And although they raged, the three Queens of Obsolescence had no choice but to present the Sword of Migration to Prince Codec and to retreat back to the lake, diminished.

Prince Codec picked up the sword. It was light as a feather. He noticed faint markings down the middle of the blade that popped out when it was held at a certain angle in relation to the sun. The Prince followed the markings. “These are metadata mappings,” he mused to himself. He was certain now that the sword was authentic, and he was beginning to understand its power. A dark cloud passed over the sun, shaking him out of his reverie. He was filled with an overwhelming sense that too much precious time had passed. Sheathing the sword, he jumped onto his horse and began riding for Media.

When the Prince reached Media, he saw the damage done to the villages on the border and learned that Degrescence was marching to the middle of the kingdom, threatening the castle. He saw streams of analogons running from the towns trying to escape the effects of Degrescence. There was fear in their eyes. Many of the recordings were crumbling and none of them could speak. Playback machines limped or crawled for want of spare parts. His greatest fear was being realized—the content on thousands of recordings locked up in analog formats was being lost.

Prince Codec reached the edge of the field leading up to the castle and there he saw Degrescence, who was preparing to lay siege. He was immense, larger than any animal that the Prince had ever seen. He had two heads, each on a long, serpent-like neck. His body was like that of an elephant with a large tail that looked more like a weapon than a tail. It seemed to the Prince that the beast grew slightly, but noticeably, larger as he watched him over the course of an hour. When Degrescence caught sight of Prince Codec at the edge of the field, he roared, rising up on his hind legs and pivoting his two heads, showing off his power. But, Prince Codec was not particularly concerned, for he now wielded the Sword of Migration and upon that he would rely. As Prince Codec and Degrescence readied themselves for battle, the sands of time continued to slip away for the survival of Media and all of its inhabitants.

At first light the next morning, the battle was joined. It was fierce and hard-fought. The Sword of Migration was effective but could never quite bring down the beast. Degrescence was a powerful fighter but could not get through the Sword to reach Prince Codec.

After many hours of fighting, both Degrescence and Prince Codec fell exhausted to the ground. A truce was called. Degrescence looked at the Prince, who was leaning against a tree with the Sword of Migration by his side.

“You are a tough opponent,” said Degrescence, rubbing his back with his tail while cradling both of his heads in his hands. “Where did you get that sword?”

“From the three Queens of Obsolescence,” replied Prince Codec.

“So you have met my mother, the Queen of Playback Obsolescence?”

“Yes, she asked me a riddle about her partner who I had met on the way to see the wise woman of Preserverance.”

“So, then, you have also met my father, Old Man Degradation?”

It was like someone had lit a hundred candles simultaneously during the darkest of nights. Everything came into focus and made perfect sense. Of course. Degralescence was the offspring of the Queen of Playback Obsolescence and Old Man Degradation. He carried the worst traits of both of them. More importantly, he could never be killed, since obsolescence and degradation are invincible forces that are inherent in the very nature of the world itself. “Then what good is this sword?” the Prince thought to himself as he picked it up and raised it over his head.

Prince Codec despaired of finding a way to stop Degralescence from destroying the kingdom of Media. He knew he could not leave, as the kingdom would shortly be overrun. He also knew that he could not win.

Finally, in his hopelessness, he fell into a deep but unsettled sleep.

And when Prince Codec awoke, he realized that the purpose of the Sword was not—had never been—to put an end to Degralescence once and for all, as he’d assumed. Despite its shape, the Sword of Migration had been forged not for attacking, but for protecting; it was less a sword, in fact, than a shield. It would serve to keep Degralescence in check, but the beast would always try to assert the forces of decay and extinction and must be constantly monitored and fought.

He now turned the Sword towards the analogons who had been watching the battle from what they judged to be a safe distance, and to Degralescence he said:

“You want to harm these good citizens of Media? Go on, then; just try it.”

Degralescence, too, was just waking from a fitful slumber, and Prince Codec’s words caught him in an unusually foul temper. With a roar, he rose to cast his shadow upon the cowering crowds as before.

But with a flash of the Sword of Migration, Prince Codec swept the crowds up in a bright globe of glowing light just moments before Degralescence could reach them. True, the shells of their old bodies crumbled away just as they had in the previous attacks—nothing could be done about that. But within the glowing orb all their true forms could still be seen, undiminished and unchanged; and Prince Codec deposited them swiftly and safely into a surrounding hillside. No longer humble analogons, they were now transformed into things of spirit that could inhabit any object at will.

Then Prince Codec returned his attention to Degralescence. “Is that the best you can do?” he taunted.

Fast as lightning, Degralescence turned to launch a fresh attack on the crowds in the hillside; but Prince Codec was faster still as he swung the Sword a second time and migrated them all to safety once more, this time into the clouds in the sky.

Again and again Degralescence attacked, and again and again Prince Codec frustrated his onslaught, laughing merrily and whirling the Sword of Migration about him to keep the citizens of Media perpetually out of the monster’s reach.

And there the two of them remain locked in battle.

Except, of course, for when Prince Codec takes a moment's break to decompress.

And that is the way it has happened for many years, right up to this very day.

The End