

The unfinished digital estate.

The question of what happens to your digital things when you die has been studied carefully for fifteen years. The answers the research kept arriving at were never the answers that got built.

This is a short history of a gap, with the sources linked so you can check us. It matters to what we make, because the Bequest is an attempt to close a small corner of it — but the history is worth reading whether or not you ever buy anything from us.

2009: naming the blind spot

Michael Massimi and Andrea Charise presented [Dying, death, and mortality: towards thanatosensitivity in HCI](#) at CHI in 2009. Their observation was simple and slightly damning: interactive systems are designed almost entirely for people who are alive and active. Mortality is handled badly, late, or not at all — usually by an interface that keeps cheerfully suggesting you reconnect with someone who has died.

2010-2013: what people actually wanted

A run of studies followed, most of them out of Microsoft Research in Cambridge. [Passing on and putting to rest](#) (CHI 2010) looked at what bereaved people do with the digital remains of someone they loved. Richard Banks turned the subject into a book, [The Future of Looking Back](#) (Microsoft Press, 2011).

Then came the paper that gave the idea its name: [Technology Heirlooms? Considerations for Passing Down and Inheriting Digital Materials](#) (CHI 2012), by William Odom, Richard Banks, Richard Harper, David Kirk, Siân Lindley and Abigail Sellen. Its finding, stated plainly: families wanted to treat their digital archives in ways their technology did not support.

A year later [Digital Artifacts as Legacy](#) (CHI 2013) found the same thing from the other end — studying people thinking about the data they are accumulating *for* their children.

What actually shipped

We want to be fair here, because the honest version of this story is less dramatic than the marketing version and we would rather tell it correctly.

Things did ship. Google has an Inactive Account Manager. Facebook has a Legacy Contact. Apple has Digital Legacy. These exist, they work, and using them is better than not using them.

But look at what they are. Every one of them is a mechanism for transferring **access to an account**. None of them produces a thing. There is no object at the end of the process — no artifact a person can hold, copy, keep on a shelf, or hand to somebody else. What is inherited is permission, granted by a company, revocable by that company, and dependent on that company continuing to exist.

And how well it works

In 2015 Raquel Prates, Mary Beth Rosson and Clarisse de Souza published [Making Decisions About Digital Legacy with Google's Inactive Account Manager](#) at INTERACT. Their analysis found the tool gave people insufficient means to anticipate the consequences of their choices, to review what they had configured, or to be confident their beneficiaries would actually receive anything.

Ten years later, the OpenID Foundation's [The Unfinished Digital Estate: Culture, Law, and Technology After Death](#) (2025) still describes available tools as "inconsistent, incomplete, and largely controlled by proprietary platforms." Hence the title of this page. The estate is unfinished, and the people whose job it is to think about identity standards say so.

The gap, stated precisely

So the claim is not that nobody built anything. It is narrower and, we think, harder to argue with: **the richer ideas in the research — inheritance of a whole artifact, accrued history as something of value, an object that can be handed over rather than a permission that can be granted — did not make it into products**. They stayed in papers, theses and design fiction.

You cannot bequeath a login. Executors know this better than anyone; they spend months chasing password resets on accounts that vanish the moment they succeed.

What we built

The [Bequest](#) is a small answer to a large problem, and we would not claim otherwise. Any knife can be struck as a sealed, read-only heirloom copy. The owner decides blade by blade what passes on: everything, the wear alone — proof that a journal was kept daily for twenty years, without a single page of it — or nothing.

What makes it an heirloom rather than a transfer is that it is a file. There is no account to inherit, no service to outlive, and no company whose closure could revoke it. Copies are infinite and each copy is the original. If we shut the doors

tomorrow, every sealed knife still opens.

That is the whole of it. It is not a solution to digital inheritance. It is one object, built the way the research kept suggesting objects should be built.

Where to read more

[The Digital Heirloom](#) — The overview — and the Bequest as it shipped.

[A file, not an account](#) — Why ownership, not access, is what an heirloom requires.

[Pass it on](#) — The practical mechanics of handing one down.

[Aging Software and the Digital Heirloom](#) — The full lineage document, with all fourteen references.

Common questions

Can you inherit digital files or accounts?

Files, yes — a file can simply be given to someone. Accounts, not really. Google, Facebook and Apple all offer ways to transfer access after death, but what is transferred is permission granted by the company, not an object the heir owns.

What is a technology heirloom?

The term comes from a 2012 CHI paper by Odom, Banks, Harper, Kirk, Lindley and Sellen, which studied whether digital materials can be passed down the way physical heirlooms are. Their finding was that families wanted to, and their technology did not support it.

Why is digital inheritance still an unsolved problem?

Because most digital things are accounts rather than objects. An account depends on a company continuing to exist and continuing to grant access. Research from 2009 onward asked for inheritable artifacts instead; what shipped were access-transfer mechanisms.

How is the Bequest different from Google's Inactive Account Manager?

The Bequest produces a file. A sealed, read-only copy of the knife that the heir owns outright, can copy infinitely, and can open without anyone's permission. No account changes hands because there is no account.

What happens to a sealed heirloom copy if Offline.Ltd closes?

Nothing. It is a single HTML file with no network calls. It opens the day after we close exactly as it did the day before.

Archive copy of [offline.ltd/heirloom/the-unfinished-digital-estate](#). Offline.Ltd — one Swiss Knife in the exact shape of your life. Forged in Amsterdam.