

Not now, ancient sheep virus found hiding in medieval parchment!

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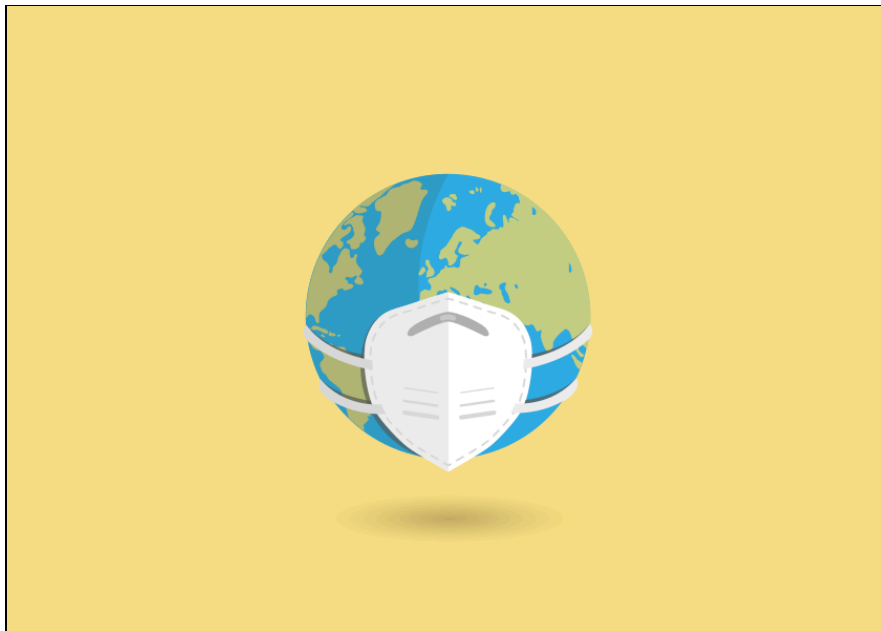


Image: An image of our planet, Earth, wearing a mask to protect against viruses. (Image by cromaconceptovisual from Pixabay)

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An article in *Science* reports the discovery of [an ancient sheep virus found hiding in medieval parchment](#). They extracted its DNA. Now, I do know that viruses, obviously, have histories. Jussi Parikka has spent years studying malware (see Parikka, Jussi, *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses* (Peter Lang, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4539-1868-5>). But I have also seen disaster movies and seen how they always pan out.

In any case, it reminded me that I had also been thinking about this preservation-of-viruses question not long ago:

*The preservation of computer viruses follows, in some ways, an opposite pattern to the preservation of real-world (biological) pathogens. The core example of this is the smallpox virus, of which two samples remain in the world, in the United States and Russia, aptly embedding the ongoing and never-really-forgotten Cold War superpower ambiance. Up to a point, the debate around the smallpox virus follows the same logics as computer virus preservation. There is a merit to preserving these viruses so that we can study them and so that we can ensure that our medical knowledge is well equipped to handle future pandemics. However, there are also calls to destroy the viruses. Will there come a point when we feel we have learned all that we can from the stored virus? What are the ongoing risks of keeping live, massively deadly pathogens under biocontainment? (They range, in fact, from terrorism and biowarfare to accidental escape to new mutations. Many conspiracy theories about Covid-19, for instance, circulated around its possible escape from the Wuhan Institute of Virology.) Yet what happens when the world geopolitical situation abruptly destabilizes, as it did with the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the retention of biological agents suddenly poses a threat to international security? Good actors today, even when subjectively judged in the present, may not be good actors tomorrow. That there are so few stocks of smallpox left attests to the ambivalence of enthusiasm for preservation. (Eve, Martin Paul, *Theses on the Metaphors of Digital-Textual History* (Stanford University Press, 2024), p. 277, <https://doi.org/10.11126/9781503639393>)*

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