

The Future of Our Digital Selves

Jess Myra
Umeå Institute of Design
Umeå University, 90187, Umeå,
Sweden,

+46 07 (0)8 81 48 58

jessmyra@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper presents insights on designing interactions for digital immortality after physical death, and will focus on points of interactions with the digital archive for those that remain alive.

Current tools for digital memento and digital archive management are not intended to function for post-life communications and do not sufficiently consider the longevity of content, digital legacies, and relevancy of content over time.

Conclusions and insights from graduate thesis research are presented here to inform appropriate interactions for digital immortality. It will include how cultural legacies of the past can inspire digital legacies for the future. Also, correlations will be incorporated from a survey addressing mementos, digital legacies, digital will planning, digital archives, and the death of loved ones.

Keywords

Digital Archive, Digital Immortality, Digital Legacy, Digital Mementos, Thanatography, Thanatosensitivity, Traditional Mementos.

Considerations

Results presented here are based on interviews and an online survey [3]. This survey had a total of 115 respondents and incorporated qualitative and quantitative questions. Input methods were via radial button selection, multiple checkbox selection, and free text entry. Questions covered general demographics and six subsections (traditional mementos, digital mementos, digital will, your legacy, those gone, digital archives) totaling 31 questions with the option for feedback at the end.

Participants were spread across 22 countries, with most respondents from North America (60%) and Europe (24%). Gender division was males (61%) and females (39%). The majority of respondents were working professionals (75%), with lesser respondents as various types of students (18%), with nominal respondents either a stay-at-home parent or as “other”.

INTRODUCTION

Dusty photo albums and boxes of letters (*traditional mementos*) are being replaced with hard drives and cloud storage (*digital mementos*). Instead of fading images and ink, we have the endurance of digital bytes. As we transition to this new type of digital content management, traces of ourselves start to manifest that will retain life far after we die.

In human history, there has always been a desire to leave a legacy and be remembered. This happens at various scales whether as a civilization, culture, family, or individual—think pyramids to gravestones. In modern times, our channels of communication have shifted from traditional to digital memento management.

This compulsion to capture our lives for posthumous remembrance is known as *thanatography* [2]. This paper explores interaction opportunities for how our digital legacies can be everlasting and retain relevance to those living long after our death. This a new approach to human-computer interaction research in post-life digital humanities called *thanatosensitivity* [2].

Cultural Legacies

An important part of research for this thesis examined cultural legacies that have survived throughout the generations. Studies included: on-site visits, interviews with anthropologists, audio guided tours, observation, and reflections resulting in topic provoking questions.

The goal of this portion of research was to discover how current behaviors and historical societies can inspire the legacy of digital content for the subsequent generations of technocrats. The following cultural legacies were examined:

Native American Totem Poles, Vodou Spiritual Communications, and Icelandic Sagas.

Traditional Mementos

Traditional mementos are often just meaningful to the person that owns them and they likely do not even remember the last time they handled them [3]. Comparatively, many people want to be remembered long after their death so the paradigm of coveting personal objects as a method to retain a legacy to pass on to others is not very effective. The meaning and value of traditional mementos can easily be lost to the next sequence of receivers [3].

Digital Mementos

We are amassing gigabytes of photos, videos, and emails and we struggle to parse meaningful content at relevant times from the collections. Web services like Flickr, or software applications like iPhoto add some clarity with organizational methods like date stamping or tagging. Facebook's implementation of the Timeline also helps us to reflect on shared moments based on years of our lives. Yet, why is a date, keyword tag, or year relevant after we die? Does this meta data add value to our digital legacy when people want to access it later?

The Archive

The digital archive is a collection of all digital content that the person owned including the digital photos, video, audio, emails, tweets, and text messages from that one person. However, the lines between digital archives are not so distinct [3]. Typically, digital media is shared with others [3]. Our milestone moments and memories have value because we experience them with people. Consider the shared mementos between a family, or tight network of friends. The digital archive of someone who has died in that context is viewed less as '*theirs*' and more as '*ours*' [3].

Ownership

We accept a broader ownership of digital content as we tag our friends, and they tag us, and we each share the same content independently through different outlets [3]. With so many channels available to access and share digital content, and so much of our time now being dedicated in the digital realm, there is a larger audience available that is unparalleled by our traditional mementos [3]. There is greater opportunity to reflect our digital selves forward to be remembered by future generations and more importantly, to provide value for them via our digital archives for a longer period of time.

Everlasting Presence

As traces of our digital selves persist after we die, there is opportunity leverage digital media so our lives can continue to be meaningful for our loved ones. We can retain relationships with people we care about and make our life experiences available for their benefit. In essence, we can persist digitally to some degree after physical death.

Current platforms that exist have not been built for the functionality of post-life content management. Facebook's Memorial pages are static archives in an active public platform that do not address the sensitivities of specific relationships. The Timeline organization of content is practical for our own self reflection in life, however, as a digital archive it does not provide direct value for others.

Remembering the Dead

One of the biggest challenges with digital immortality is retaining relevancy of our digital content over time so our lives can be valuable and meaningful to future generations. In the period immediately after death, family and friends mourn and go through the grieving process. After acceptance of the death, the person is remembered by those surviving via memories and mementos. If the person was known first hand in life, triggers such as a place, date, or smell can recall shared moments. However, what happens generations after the death of someone and those people that knew them in life also pass away? How can someone who has been dead for a long time retain a legacy in digital content that will have meaning to future generations

Activating Archives

Now we have the opportunity to leverage qualities of digital content to support different types of relationships into the future. With the copious amounts of data being collected and shared about our personal lives, there is opportunity to stay connected in new ways after death. Algorithms based on personality and character traits can auto-post on someone's behalf—as seen in the new online service *LivesOn* that will tweet for you beyond the grave [1]. Similarly, services like *Dead Social* and *ifidie* allow users to send preplanned messages in social media after death.

Intersections of Life

However, not represented in the current suite of post-life digital services are the benefits of shared life experiences and commonalities across digital archives after death. Namely, the moment of overlap between someone's life and a digital moment from someone who is dead can be valuable in different contexts.

These corresponding life experiences can be available from the archive of those that have died to provide a new basis for empathy throughout life phases of the living that the deceased can contribute to. This provides an opportunity to discover new perspectives on people you thought you already knew, or new commonalities with a relative you never knew in life [3]. Commonalities and shared experiences are timeless. They retain value in new ways to different people, for different reasons, at different moments.

Because we have various degrees of relationships with people, we often want to share and remember people in different ways based on how we knew them [3]. Also, the type and amount of information we will want to share will depend on how close we are to them [3]. Thus, using public platforms to serve the purpose of many degrees of relationships is not appropriate. It does not satisfy the specificity of personal relationships, and imposes moments in the public sphere that would likely not be expected and potentially not desired as well.

CONCLUSIONS

With new outlets for connecting to a larger audience, and with traces of ourselves that are left behind in digital media, it is more important than ever to consider aspects of ownership, longevity, and relevancy over time of our legacy after death. Different from past traditions, the future of digital content management allows us to preplan and augment our digital archive to remain connected with loved ones and individuals in our social network long after we are physically gone.

Through my research, I believe current existing platforms do not leverage digital media adequately for post-life legacy in an active contextual way, nor does it support the needs of those close to us as a platform for communication and memory in our physical absence. I believe the lines between individual digital archives are blurred and there is opportunity for our life to retain relevance far after we die by leveraging the value of commonalities across our digital archives. Through shared memories and availability of empathetic experiences, our lives can have meaning over time via the rich digital content that aggregates throughout our lives.

There is a new opportunity presented to us that did not exist before with traditional mementos. Fortunately, we are in control and will get to decide what it means to command our post-life digital selves—should we choose to.

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