

Article

Grief in the age of AI: Griefbots and online death spaces

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Abstract

This paper explores how grief is intertwined within artificial intelligence (AI) and other digital areas. It examines concepts such as the griefbot, an AI used to provide communication between the deceased and the bereaved, digital online memorial spaces to commemorate those who have passed, and digital immortality. While griefbots provide comfort to those who have lost a loved one, questions surrounding ethics of use, such as obtaining the consent of the deceased, using the deceased's data, and respecting their privacy, remain relevant. The digital afterlife industry, which includes online memorials, puts into question several societal challenges. These challenges can lead to debates over who “deserves” the most to have access data and digital spaces. Capitalism and digital immortality may reveal power dynamics with the deceased. For instance, business leaders and public figures may leave behind a digital legacy to continue to wield authority beyond the life of their physical bodies. As societies continue to merge aspects of human lives (and deaths) into the digital world, we must address issues of consent, privacy, and equitable access. Grieving and remembrance must not be lost in the digital age.

Keywords: griefbots, digital immortality, digital afterlife industry, artificial intelligence

Introduction

Grief is a universal human experience that we must all face at some point in our lives. Be it the loss of a relative, friend, or pet, each human's reaction to grief is personal and individual. The rise of technology has brought about startling changes within the online space, including AI generated art, algorithms promoting ads specific to browsing habits, and in a potentially more morbid area, griefbots.

Griefbots can be described as “chatbots based on the digital footprint left behind by the deceased through social media, emails, texting and messaging systems—with the aim of providing the bereaved with the chance to speak to their loved ones after their death” (Jiménez-Alonso & Brescó de Luna, 2023, p. 3). Griefbots join the multitude of other online devices hu-

mans use to commemorate the death of individuals. For example, social media sites such as Facebook may turn into online memorials when an active user passes away, altering their profile from one designed for social interactions to another meant for remembrance. Griefbots are different because the data gathered from the deceased's personal devices and profiles are used to construct an online entity that has the ability to continue to 'communicate' with the living through reciprocal connections. As technology continues to evolve, more people are interweaving themselves online, meaning griefbots may become more common to deal with grief. As such, it is important to balance both griefbots' positive and negative characteristics (e.g., griefbots may offer tremendous benefits to loved ones left behind, especially if the loss was sudden).

The emergence of griefbots raises several ethical dilemmas, including negotiating consent. Did the deceased agree to this prior to death? Do their family and friends approve of it?. Griefbots also raise issues surrounding the creation of a digital life after death and the commodification of the deceased's data. If not answered before the death of an individual, these questions along with others relating to privacy, data management, and identity, may become contentious.

Griefbots: A new form of communication with the departed

Social media has allowed people to access the lives of others, including after someone has passed away. Online memorial websites create a sense of community where friends and family of the deceased can come together to post memories, yet there are no interactions between the users and the digital remnants of the deceased. The griefbot is a technology that allows the bereaved to go beyond memorial sites and allows one-on-one conversations with a chatbot, which uses the deceased's digital footprint (e.g., texts, emails, online posts). Combined, the data creates an online entity that permits correspondence between the living and the dead. Jiménez-Alonso & Brescó de Luna (2023) state that griefbots should not be used as a replication of the dead person, but rather to emulate a simulation of having the bereaved chat with a lost loved one.

Some may argue that griefbots represent another form of communication with the dead, like how people tend to visit cemeteries, speak to the grave of a lost loved one, or interact with the Facebook profile of a lost loved one through posts. Griefbots are unique because they take existing data to create a unique communication method that allows the bereaved to have a conversation that may help bring closure. The griefbot allows friends and family members to express themselves and receive a response in return. These types of actions can be classified as "continuing bonds" (Bassett, 2015), how people will hold onto the digital elements via social media sites, griefbots, or other online methods of interacting with the dead. Bassett (2015) states that "the dichotomous nature of letting go *vs.* continuing bonds suggests a 'one size fits all' model of grief, which is unhelpful. Rather than relationships with the dead being static and unchanging, they are dynamic and change through what Neimeyer [2001] describes as a process of 'meaning reconstruction'" (p. 1132). This meaning reconstruction allows a continuation of the relationship with the dead whilst the bereaved are still able to move forward and restructure their lives. While it may be helpful to continue bonds with a deceased person using griefbots and social media, it is important to be mindful of the handling of grief and not to get stuck in the digital spheres of remembrance to hinder moving forward in the real world.

As we continue to curate our digital experiences through algorithms and other means, we must ensure that we are not creating an image of the deceased that is not reflective of who they once were. As chatbots continue to evolve and update, technological advances may impact the deceased's data. For instance, as years pass, chatbots may become more advanced and go beyond their original uses, which may result in more authentic interactions and lead to higher privacy risks (Öhman & Floridi, 2018).

It is unclear whether chatbots should have an 'expiration' date. Privacy issues are major concerns (who would ensure that proper security updates are frequently occurring), but ethically, could a bot five years in the future even be the same "person" as the deceased? It is highly likely that the griefbot would take on a whole new persona, one that is far removed from its original source. Thus, we cannot deny that ethics around death and the digital world are still contentious, meaning that further examination must take place.

Digital rebirth or ethical overstep? Examining the boundaries of AI

Thanatechnology (*sensu* Sofka, 1997) is a term that brings together death and technology (Bassett, 2015), a area of growing ethical concerns. In *Griefbots, Deadbots, Postmortem Avatars: On Responsible Applications of Generative AI in the Digital Afterlife Industry*, Hollanek and Nowaczyk-Basińska (2024) discuss Project December, an online site that uses generative pre-trained transformer (GPT) AI technology to allow users to chat with anyone, including dead relatives. After a controversial incident involving a man speaking to his late fiancé via Project December, the relationship with Project December ended because chatbots of deceased individuals, which were created without their consent, were not labeled as simulations or parodies. As a result, Project December created their own terms to be able to continue to offer users the opportunity to correspond with the dead. On Project December's current website (Project December, n.d.), users can, for a ten-dollar fee, create a 'personality simulation' of the deceased relative they wish to interact with. The website asks for personal details about the deceased, such as their nicknames, type of personality, and 'writing style.'

While Project December frames their product as a simulation, the ethical implications raised by improperly labeling them should not be ignored. Without the deceased's prior written consent, the simulation might go on to create any sort of digital being that may not even be a true representation of who the person was as a living being. Project December allows users to take control of a person who can no longer speak for themselves, whether they would have consented to be presented this way or not and whether they would have wanted to speak with the bereaved or not. In other words, it is unclear whether the wishes of the living are more important than those of the dead. Griefbots raise concerns about their impact on both the dead and the idea of death itself (Savin-Baden et al., 2017) since they "promise to recreate, and in [doing so] perpetuate, the identity of those no longer living" (Jiménez-Alonso & Brescó de Luna, 2023, p. 4). No matter how accurately AI imitates speech patterns, it will never truly recreate a person online. People are multi-faceted and perceptions of the deceased in the moments preceding their death may not be accurate.

Is it ethical to continue interacting with a digital being who may or may not be the authentic self of the deceased? Would these interactions truly benefit the living or simply delay the inevi-

table process of letting someone go? We must address the ethical dilemmas digital immortality now forces us to face.

Digital death and capitalism: The future of storing and managing online legacies

We must assess the underlying rationale to justify the digital immortality of certain individuals. A high-ranking person that controls policy or capital may want to maintain an everlasting online presence. Savin-Baden et al. (2017) highlight how digital immortality allows for “the potential for the (unfettered) control of power, capital and the means of production” (p. 191). Digital immortality may positively or negatively influence the living population. If the digital immortal’s word is the only ‘real’ or ‘valid’ one, we may begin to see a lack of innovation to the point where it may eventually become stagnant. Worker exploitation could also be a very real danger, as the digital immortal may only be influenced by market trends or profits and not see that there are real world considerations to what may be happening to the workers and their personal lives. Quite simply, the ‘human touch’ would be lost.

At the most extreme end, the weaponization of digital immortality may lead to the rise of an unfettered and unquestioned digital tyrant. Speeches and propaganda materials may continue to exist in their online space, allowing their followers to justify the rule of their authoritarian regime. The larger the digital tyrant’s footprint, the harder it may be for people to move beyond the legacy that was left behind by their government. From a more positive perspective, the idea of knowledge management and preservation would be beneficial, as the digital immortal would hopefully prior to their death, have uploaded and onboarded all relevant information and knowledge they uniquely have. Because we may see a digital immortal leader in the future, we must establish laws and regulations to avoid any abuse, as well as maintain collaboration with those who would ensure that the digital entity would not become too short-sighted or corrupt. If an individual decides they would like to continue their legacy through digital means, what is the protocol to follow? In other words, what can we do, especially if the individual is high-ranking, to ensure their subordinates are not bound to perpetuate the digital immortal’s agenda?

Capitalism and business are areas that impact life after death online, and not only doing so in terms of how a deceased wishes to be digitized. The digital afterlife industry (DAI) has grown since the onset of social media and monetizes death within the online space. There are four main categories of the DAI industry: information management services, posthumous messaging services, online memorial services, and ‘re-creation’ services (Öhman & Floridi, 2018). Information management is concerned with how someone’s digital assets are handled, which in this case, may be related to a will. Posthumous messaging sends messages to designated recipients after confirming the sender’s death, often with a fee. Online memorial sites are usually connected to funeral homes, but they can often be linked to existing social media platforms like Facebook (people can create Facebook groups, the deceased social media user’s profile can be updated to read ‘Remembering’ after their death has been confirmed to the website).

As these areas encompass various levels of the DAI industry, different challenges emerge from areas such as privacy and putting a price on which digital remains are worth archiving. As more people who have fully lived their lives online begin turn to online spaces to outlive death,

we must consider the long-term sustainability of such spaces (e.g., cost, availability). Öhman and Floridi (2018) express the following:

Such capitalization of digital remains may have far-reaching consequences, especially as capital requires human labour to remain productive. In other words, a growing volume of digital remains necessitates an increase in posthumous interaction online. If not deleting them, what would make the cost of storing billions of dead profiles financially viable? Is increasing commercialization the only solution, or will we see something similar to the management of public cemeteries? And if the choice will be to delete profiles, what would the selection process look like? Would profiles with a larger audience be prioritized? (p.319)

Like in our current society, those who pay the most may be the ones who would ensure their digital remains remain active should storage issues occur. Most memorial sites tend to operate on monthly subscriptions models. What would happen if payments were to be missed? Would the data be removed? Either way, funding issues might cause distress to families, especially those from lower income brackets. Supply and demand may also impact the quality of data that would be kept within storage units. Photos, videos, and other such data often have higher storage needs than something like a text message, this could be an issue that DAI information managers may face in the future if a larger portion of the population opts to maintain their digital legacy.

Navigating privacy and ownership in the digital afterlife

Privacy is another area of concern. Edwards and Harbinja (2013) use the term 'post-mortem privacy' to refer to the fact that someone is entitled to privacy after death (e.g., removing information from the internet):

“Post-mortem privacy is not a recognised term of art or institutional category in general succession law or even privacy literature. It may be termed the right of a person to preserve and control what becomes of his or her reputation, dignity, integrity, secrets, or memory after death” (p.103).

Privacy concerns may relate to digital assets such as profiles on Facebook and how these are managed post-mortem. Facebook holds all the assets of a deceased user. How these assets are overseen upon death can sometimes harm the bereaved. An individual's use of Facebook (including posts and photos) is governed by contractual agreements. However, there are no clear guidelines on how this type of information should be overseen (Edwards & Harbinja, 2013).

Drawing upon a personal example, this year a friend's husband passed away suddenly, and she was using a Facebook thread to enable friends and family to post photos and memories of his life. Her main thread containing multiple posts, stories and photos of her deceased husband was removed by Facebook, stating she was “misleading users to gain likes” as well as “trying to gather sensitive information from others.” Despite reporting this to Facebook, the post was never re-activated, and my friend ended up losing precious memories of her husband. This story is an example of how privacy could be protecting the dead, as there was no way to know whether her husband would have consented to this information about himself being shared

across a social media network, but it was also extremely harmful to my friend who lost many invaluable pictures and stories that others shared about her husband. If clear social media privacy laws were enacted, issues like these may be avoided. As most people have posts and memories on social media that others may wish to obtain or keep upon their death, it is now more important than ever that we address these issues.

Conclusion

Death is an inevitable part of life, and because we spend much of our lives online, it is possible that our deaths may also eventually carry over to online spaces as well. The digital afterlife industry may affect both the deceased and the living relatives they leave behind. Griefbots may help the bereaved move on from their grief, but may also breach the deceased's consent.

Ethics play a major role in the digital legacy of individuals. Who is 'worthy' of preservation? Will money or notoriety drive who gets to have the honour of becoming immortal? How might the digital immortality of a high-level CEO or government official come influence workers' rights, sector innovation, and overall productivity? As technology continues to permeate our lives (and soon our afterlives), we must think about our role within the digital death industry, and how we will 'live on' within the internet.

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