The Datafication of the Soul: Interrogating Digital Immortality

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The human desire to survive death is not new. Religious traditions, philosophical systems, memorial practices, and popular culture have long offered ways of imagining continuity beyond biological life, whether through heaven, reincarnation, ancestral presence, symbolic immortality, or cultural remembrance (Bhargava; Cave; Iglesias et al.; Lifton; Nairn; Nairn and Matthews). What is changing, particularly in the age of artificial intelligence, is the form that such continuity is imagined to take. That is to say, the afterlife is no longer only a theological or metaphysical question; it is increasingly becoming a technological, commercial, and datafied one. Today, digital immortality raises questions about whether the self can be preserved through information (Savin-Baden, et al), whether personality can be inferred from digital traces (Meese, et al.), whether a voice or likeness can stand in for a person and whether mourning can be mediated through responsive systems rather than static memorials (Xie).

To understand the implications of digital immortality in contemporary society, we must first grapple with the instability of the term itself. Scholars typically divide the concept into "weak" and "strong" forms (Puzio 428). Weak immortality refers to digital doubles, ghostbots, or thanabots that imitate the deceased through emails, social media posts, images, voice recordings, and other digital remains (Harbinja et al; Jiménez-Alonso and Brescó de Luna; Puzio; Savin-Baden et al). Conversely, strong immortality involves the radical ambition of mind-uploading, where consciousness is imagined as transferable into another substrate (Mercer and Trothen; Puzio; Stokes). This latter goal is highly contested. Joseph Ulatowski argues that uploaded consciousness is not merely technologically improbable but metaphysically impossible, as a digital entity could never truly comprehend an embodied mortal life, having never possessed a body itself. This fundamental barrier demonstrates why a chatbot trained on a person's messages fails to solve the philosophical problem of conscious existence. It may convincingly simulate personality, but simulation is not consciousness. Consequently, critics frequently return to the "hard problem" (Stokes 165), suggesting such entities are merely "philosophical zombies" (Iglesias et al. 98). These systems might display humanlike behaviour, yet they completely lack subjective experience or first-person interiority (Stokes; Peake).

Even if digital immortality remains an act of replication rather than true survival, it possesses profound social and emotional power. The dead have never disappeared entirely from social life; they remain through memory, ritual, objects, photographs, stories, and kinship obligations (Hallam and Hockey; Lifton; Williams). Digital media, however, intensify these continuities by making posthumous presence interactive, persistent, and networked, fundamentally unsettling the boundary between life and death. As Meese et al. contend, computational environments actively sustain a person's social existence, using algorithms to enable the deceased to generate content, respond to the bereaved, or take visual form as

avatars. Yet, artificially sustaining this existence is highly problematic. A continuous digital presence directly conflicts with traditional “rites of passage” (Dilmaç 289) that historically help mourners process a physical departure. Because the deceased physically disappear but remain highly active online, they are seemingly prevented from transitioning out of the social world. This liminal state can severely hamper the mourner’s ability to process grief and find psychological closure (Elder).

The emotional promise of these encounters can make such risks difficult to recognise. Digital afterlife services often present themselves as tools for remembrance and grief support, offering the bereaved the consolatory experience of hearing a loved one’s voice or conversing with an avatar (Puzio; Xie; Bassett). These platforms may appear to align with psychological frameworks that understand mourning as a process of continuing bonds rather than clean separation (Klass et al; Meese et al), but their interactive nature introduces new forms of dependency. Jiménez-Alonso and Brescó de Luna observe that, unlike static gravestones or passive photo albums, two-way griefbots create an expectation of reply, meaning that the bereaved may come to rely on anticipated reciprocity as part of their coping process. When such reliance becomes rooted in denial or avoidance, the virtual relationship may prolong rather than ease grief.

Furthermore, the push towards digital immortality can also create the conditions for what Bassett describes as “second loss” (160), in which mourners experience renewed distress if digital remains are deleted, placed behind corporate paywalls or rendered inaccessible through technological obsolescence (Bassett; Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie; Harbinja et al).Öhman and Floridi’s notion of the political economy of death is pertinent here. Digital remains are increasingly stored, processed, and monetised by platforms whose commercial interests do not necessarily align with the dignity of the dead or the well-being of the bereaved (Bassett; Magerstädt). Techno-capitalist immortality imaginaries are shaped by commodification and the subordination of life to capital, meaning that immortality becomes less a liberation from death than a new dependency on corporate systems (Hurtado Hurtado). Speculative fiction, such as the series *Upload*, makes these inequalities glaringly visible, depicting a digital afterlife stratified by subscriptions, access, and account ownership. The result is a troubling possibility: while biological death remains universal, digital continuation may become profoundly inequitable (Magerstädt; Bhargava).

Nowhere is this commercialisation more visible than in the growing "Deleb" (dead celebrity) economy and the digital afterlife industry (D’Rozario). In fact, Matthews and Nairn have argued that holographic concerts and AI-enhanced performances, such as the reanimation of Elvis Presley, Amy Winehouse, Roy Orbison, and Whitney Houston, show how the dead can be made productive long after biological life has ended. While such practices may offer nostalgia, cultural preservation and renewed audience engagement, they also raise urgent questions about consent, authenticity, artistic legacy and posthumous autonomy. Without sustained scholarly attention, deceased performers risk being confined to a “digital purgatory” where they exist primarily as entertainment assets, stripped of self-determination and continually repurposed for commercial gain (Matthews and Nairn 11). Research into digital immortality is therefore necessary because it allows scholars to interrogate the collision of memory, technological innovation and market value, while also developing ethical frameworks that treat the identities, voices, likenesses and creative legacies of the dead as more than exploitable content (Forbes; Matthews and Nairn; Sone; D’Rozario; Harbinja).

Digital immortality, therefore, requires careful governance rather than either techno-utopian enthusiasm or denial. Because it touches consciousness, mourning, identity, inequality, cultural representation and platform power, it demands conversation across philosophy, media studies, law, sociology, psychology, religious studies and design (Stokes; Mercer and Trothen; Puzio). Such work is needed to test the adequacy of emerging legal proposals, including the "do not bot me" clause (Harbinja et al 11), to clarify posthumous privacy (Harbinja et al.; Bassett), and to support thanatosensitive design grounded in consent, transparency, context and human dignity (Harbinja et al; Bassett; Puzio). The question is not simply whether humans can or should live forever through data, but what forms of continuity are being produced, under whose control, and at what cost (Hurtado Hurtado). It is to these questions that this special issue turns, bringing together research that examines how the likes of AI, memory and mortality are reshaping the meanings of life, death and what may endure beyond them.

Contributions

The issue opens with the feature article, "Should Death Do Us Part? Audience Perceptions of Digital Immortality," in which Angelique Nairn and Deepti Bhargava examine audience responses to the documentary *Artificial Immortality* (2021). Through a thematic analysis of 1,012 YouTube comments, the article identifies scepticism toward AI-driven immortality, the persistence of religious and spiritual beliefs, and deeply personal reflections on grief and loss. Audiences, they argue, largely view digital immortality as simulation rather than genuine continuity of the self, revealing how emerging technologies unsettle, but do not overcome, enduring cultural anxieties about death. Extending this concern with digital remains, Ümit Kennedy's "Deleting Life Online After Death" turns to the ethical and emotional implications of managing a person's digital archive after they die. Kennedy examines social media traces as fragile, relational records of a life that are often left for family members to manage, curate, or erase. Drawing on autoethnographic work and scholarship on automedia, networked publics, and thanatechnology, the article explores questions of ownership, care, context, and digital remains, framing deletion not simply as removal but as a profound act that may produce a form of "second death."

The next two articles shift attention from personal archives to the infrastructures through which digital afterlives are produced. In "The Limits of Digital Immortality: Deathbots and the Fragility of the Self," Eva Nieto McAvoy, Jenny Kidd, and Bethan Jones examine deathbots as a critical case for understanding digital persistence. They argue that these technologies do not preserve a coherent self but generate probabilistic approximations from scattered data traces. While deathbot interfaces may create the illusion of continuity, they depend on fragile infrastructures, platform architectures, and ongoing economic support. The article therefore reframes digital immortality as a tension between the large-scale persistence of data and the partial, contingent survival of individual identity. Gabriel Pereira's "From Slop to Slop: On the Eerie Afterlives of (Generative) Images" expands this infrastructural critique by examining how images scraped into AI training datasets acquire involuntary afterlives through generative media. Drawing on Mark Fisher's concept of the eerie and critical data studies, Pereira argues that training images are neither preserved nor erased, but persist as latent traces within AI outputs. Through a critical making project that transforms dataset images into videos, the article shows how generative AI produces both a failure of absence and a failure of presence, revealing an infrastructural afterlife shaped by appropriation, opacity, and scale.

From here, the issue moves between historical precedent and speculative representation to consider how posthumous presence has long been mediated, contested, and controlled. In "Before Digital Immortality: Post-Mortem Photography and the Historical Roots of the Digital Afterlife Industry," Yusuke Nagato situates contemporary AI simulations of the dead within a longer history of posthumous representation. Drawing on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century post-mortem photography in Britain and America, the article shows that current concerns about consent, identity, exploitation, and consolation have important historical precedents. Nagato argues that post-mortem photography functioned as an early technology of immortality, preserving the illusion of life for the bereaved and reframing digital immortality as continuity rather than rupture. In "Encountering the Deceased through Data: Memory, Mourning, and Control in *The Last Day of Molly* from *On Children*," Wuxuan Zhang, Crystal Abidin, and Christina Chau examine how dystopian science fiction imagines digital archives of the dead. Focusing on a Taiwanese story in which a mother repeatedly accesses her deceased daughter's final memories, the article argues that memory becomes a data archive open to interpretation and control by others. This process re-presents the deceased while stripping them of agency, transforming mourning into an ongoing practice of replay, analysis, and possession. Continuing this focus on mediated memory, Chee-Hann Wu and Genevieve Kleynhans's "Curated Immortality: Memory, Narrative, and Living Archives in *Marjorie Prime*" examines how Jordan Harrison's play reimagines immortality as curated memory rather than the preservation of bodies or consciousness. The authors argue that the Primes function as embodied archives, sustaining loved ones through selective, rehearsed, and revised storytelling. As human memory declines, narrative authority shifts to artificial companions, raising ethical questions about care, omission, and control, and framing immortality as a relational process shaped by whose stories endure and who determines how they are remembered.

The final cluster of articles foregrounds embodiment, identity, and the political consequences of digital persistence. In "True Cost of True Nyms: Ageing and Abandonment in Cyberpunk's Digital Afterlife," Dorothea Rebecca Schonsee revisits Vernor Vinge's *True Names* as an early imagining of digital afterlife, pseudonymity, and transhumanist escape. The article argues that the promise of immortality in the novella depends on the extraction and abandonment of the ageing female body, embodied by Debbie as the hidden cost of Erythrina's virtual transcendence. Reading Vinge alongside Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism*, Schonsee reframes digital immortality as a gendered and political economy of persistence marked by loss, opacity, and embodied remainder. Tess Ezzy's "Uploading the Mask: Late Diagnosis, Paternal Loss, and the Neurodivergent Afterlife" similarly challenges assumptions about the self that digital afterlife technologies claim to preserve. Drawing on *Black Mirror*, *Upload*, *Westworld*, death-tech platforms, and autoethnographic reflection, Ezzy argues that AI afterlife systems often rely on neurotypical assumptions about memory, cognition, and selfhood. The article develops the concept of "posthumous masking" to show how digital preservation may capture only the performed, adapted self rather than neurodivergent experience, reframing late diagnosis as a form of posthumous reconstruction that reinterprets the archive of a life. Finally, in "Two Logics of Memory," Maria Josefina Alippi examines the conceptual confusion underpinning AI grief technologies: the conflation of computational memory with human memory. Drawing on science fiction, media ecology, and psychoanalysis, Alippi argues that while AI systems treat memory as archive, data, and storage, human memory is embodied, affective, and central to the ongoing constitution of selfhood. By outsourcing grief and remembrance to technology, these systems risk diminishing the transformative work of memory, a loss the article situates within digital capitalism's broader commodification of human interior life.

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