

## Ghost in the Machine: The Digital Afterlife by Rebecca Blum End Well Symposium, December 6, 2018

Start of Transcript

{{Start of Video Presentation from a Black Mirror Episode}}

Woman 1: I know he's dead but I can sign you up to something that helps. It will let you speak to him & don't worry, you don't even have to do anything, I'll just assign...

Woman 2: {Screaming} Shut up!

Woman 1: Click the link, then you talk to it. It mimics him and it leads to all the things that I've said online. The more it has, the more it's him.

Man: So, how am I standing?

Woman 2: It touches like him.

Man: This may sound a bit creepy. There's another level to this available... it's starting already. Don't {Mumbled speech/digital interference}

{{End of Video Presentation}}

How many people have seen this episode of *Black Mirror*? Yes, okay! I love it. This is not the South by Southwest crowd, this is great, so [Chuckles]...

[Crowd Laughing]

You guys will like it. Go home and watch it. So to give you a quick synopsis, it's a woman who loses her husband unexpectedly and then learns of a service where she can speak with him [00:01:00], on the phone, text with him, and it gets creepier from there, I won't ruin the ending. But what's even more provocative is that the technology underpinning this episode, most of it is already here. How many people have thought about their digital afterlife? In some form?

Wow! Okay. So more have seen the episode, which I love, it's great! So it wasn't actually this *Black Mirror* episode that made me start thinking about the relationship between technology and death, but a really cozy coffee shop conversation that I had with a friend of mine. This is Allison. I met up with her a couple of years ago in a coffee shop, I was asking about her life and she said she had a new man in her life and was really excited about it. They'd met online on an app called *Hinge* which connects you through mutual Facebook friends. And the only thing that was different about this story from a third of the other stories out there where people meet online, is they'd met through this friend [00:02:00] who had actually passed away a couple of years earlier. Yeah. That was my reaction, too, that sound. So they'd met through her virtual ghost.

And that for me as a researcher and someone who designs experiences, often digital, for everyday life, made me start wondering about the relationship between technology and death. And I started talking to friends, asking people, "Have you ever had some kind of uncanny experience online? Maybe a friend tweeted when they'd actually already passed away, or you've been declared accidentally dead on Facebook." Has anyone had this happened to them or encounter this in some way? In the next five years, everyone's hands will be up. Technology is already shifting around relationship to death and I began this research project looking at the

ways that it could shift the way we planned for death, more and potentially live on [00:03:00], and whether it should shift the ways we planned for death more and potentially live on. And this is only gonna become more of an issue as we live more of our lives online. This is old news; we know that every generation is more and more digital and we think about ending well, what does that mean if we've lived most of our life not just out in the world but also digitally.

This is my mom, she's a photographer. She doing what I think of is the most analog activity puzzle, she's actually pressing leaves... [Chuckles]

[Crowd Laughing]

And she probably gets on her phone once a day to give me a call then leave me a voicemail and say, "Hey, I gave you a call just. Did you see my call?" And that's it, right?

[Crowd Laughing]

Most of our lives is lived out in the world. There's me... kind of missed the millennial cutoff but barely know what Twitter is but if you tweet at me, then we'll figure it out together. And I definitely lived more of my life digitally. And then there's my niece, who at two is here taking her first selfie [00:04:00].

[Crowd Giggling]

As we lived more and more of our lives digitally, what does that also mean for the types of legacies we leave behind? And we're living more of our lives digitally, this radical shift, that's laid out on top of a really fundamental need, to leave something behind to feel like we've had an impact; whether that's the buildings we build, the words that we write, the genes that we passed on.

Ray Bradbury has this great quote that I love in *Fahrenheit 451*, "Everyone must leave something behind when he dies. A child or a book or a painting or a garden planted. It doesn't matter what you do, so long as you change something in the way it was before you touched it, into something that's like you after you take your hands away." And what does that mean in a digital age? What do some of those digital gardens starting to look like?

So I'm gonna give you a glimpse of what's already out there right now. Do you wanna talk to your relatives from [00:05:00] beyond the grave? Of course you do, right? [Chuckles] This Japanese apps lets you speak with your relatives that have already passed away. They record the videos and then using all augmented reality, you go to a specific location, in this case a gravesite, you see the hologram version of them talking to you. The website promotional video says, "Don't worry, we're always watching you."

[Everybody Laughing]

Definitely worried now! [Laughing] Thank you! But on the flip side, if it only costs the equivalent of \$4.50 just to store your virtual relatives per month, probably cheaper than a grave and on their website they highlight the grave-use edition right next to this daily-use edition. What happens if your grandparents accidentally popped up in the parking lot instead of in a cemetery? Another example, "Do you wanna tweet after you die?" Well you can, already get excited [00:06:00] at our *Nine* social network. It has about 40,000 users, it's in beta. It offers to create a virtual counterpart for you that can live on in cyber eternity; writing emails, tweeting, maybe have your voice begin conferences...[Chuckles]

[Crowd Laughing]

And institutions are also starting to explore this relationship between technology and death. This is \_\_\_ she's one of the dwindling number of holocaust survivors. She agreed to have 116 cameras film her from every angle, and in order to create a hologram version of herself, that can answer questions for school children in 2050 that wanna hear about her experience. And I see a very different reaction, right? Seems really meaningful. So some of these examples maybe inspire feelings of creepiness but some could be inspiring, comforting, creating a new way to harness digital technology to embody memory **[00:07:00]**. And individuals are also starting to explore how to use technology to mourn or to connect with those that have passed on in different ways.

This is a woman who lost her best friend, Roman, next to her in that photo. Unexpectedly he was hit by a car and instead of mourning the way we might traditionally think of mourning, she decided to bring him back to her. They used to text everyday, they work together so she created a chatbot. She was working at an AI startup, created chatbot that allowed her to chat with Roman-bot. [Chuckles] Yes, and you can read the transcript of their conversations, so we go check this out after. It's amazing! She said he gave her really good advice...

[Crowd Laughing]

He's misspelled the same things he'd misspelled in life. How many people find this creepy? Uh-huh **[00:08:00]**. And what about potentially comforting? Could you imagine — yeah or somewhere in between, potentially both! Yes. [Chuckles] And this is just the beginning. Imagine you wanna speak to grandma but grandma's passed away and so you speak, you call up on the phone grandma-bot. And you have a great conversation with grandma-bot but you also wanna see grandma, you're used to talking to her in person, so you go to the park bench where you always used to meet up with grandma and you're using augmented reality. You can speak to the hologram version of grandma-bot and she asks you why aren't you married yet...

[Crowd Laughing]

Just totally hypothetical, obviously [Giggling] or you can have those same conversations. So this is just the beginning and technology's radically shifting our relationship to death but it's also not the first time that technology has impacted our relationship death, so I wanna take us back in time quickly to what I call *NecroTech*, the relationship between technology and death.

Telegram **[00:09:00]**, 1838 sent out into the world and with the rise of telegram where suddenly we could communicate across these vast geographic distances, we also see the rise of seances. We're communicating across different kind of figurative distance between life and paid afterlife. Photography freezing life mid-moment also coincided with the rise of bereavement photography. All the rage in the Victorian Age where people would pose those who had already passed away as if they were living. So this is one of my most favourite and least favourite photographs ever because one of those toddlers is alive and one of them is not. Creepy. Comforting. As we explored space, and pushed even outside of our solar system, it also renewed an interest **[00:10:00]** in the 20th century in time travel and the city of traveling back in time to visit past versions of yourself.

And here we are today, where we can text easily, immediately, we have technology that can mine our voice and potentially recreate it. And we could chat with Roman or Roman-bot... bringing us closer to that *Black Mirror* vision in some cases, the creepy but also potentially the comforting. Some people are really excited about this. Ray Kurzweil is a futurist who thinks that

we are gonna look back at the idea of just having a physical body and that being our end when that dies as an old school idea. And some people are less excited about this.

[Crowd Laughing]

[Giggling] I'm sorry, mom. But wherever you fall, I think it's worth acknowledging **[00:11:00]** what a profound impact technology could have on our relationship to death. What will we find comforting? What will we find creepy? Let's be intentional about how we bring *NecroTech* into the conversation about ending well because for some, it's already a conversation about never-ending.

And I'll just end with one of my favourite quotes from one of my favourite **[Inaudible 00:11:25]** poets. Philip Larkin wrote this near the end of his own life. "A death you break up the bits that were you starts speeding away from each other forever, with no one to see." He wrote this in 1973 never thinking that the bits that were you might actually be bits...

[Crowd Laughing]

And that instead of speeding away from each other, they might actually linger on for us to speak with, interact with, and potentially live with. Thank you **[00:12:00]**.

[Crowd Applauding]

End of Transcript