

# Digital Grief —

The way we grieve in the  
digital era

Research documentation  
and reading responses  
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Fall 2020

I would like to thank Ala Roushan, who supervised this Independent Study. Thank you for believing in my potential and encouraging me to pursue this topic critically.

And to my friends, Lilian Leung and Neo Chen, who stood up for me despite the university's effort to isolate and silence me.

May our paths cross again,  
outside of this corrupt institution.

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# Prologue

I was halfway done through my graduate studies when the COVID quarantine lockdown started in Toronto, Canada. There was no studio access for me to keep doing my art practice, my research became stagnant. School moved online and asked us to continue our studies without providing resources.

Everyday I read news about the rising death toll from the virus and police brutality across the globe. I signed onto classes to

hear nothing about it. I went through my thesis presentation over and over. I asked myself, “what am I doing?”

The world was grieving, yet we were denied spaces to grieve. People couldn't hold physical funerals for their loved ones, our capitalistic society forced us to kept working like cogs in a machine during a pandemic, and the justice system refused to acknowledge the homicides cops committed against black people.

So people turned to the digital.

Communities got together, funerals and vigils were held online. People build virtual memorials and gave their obituaries on the internet.

Those aren't exactly new, but with the way we are limited physically, these avenues of grief became more prominent in the pandemic.

Humanity will always find new ways to grieve. We tend to rely on

technology to solve our problems. With the digital at our disposals, how do we grieve with it? How does it affect the way we grieve? Is it possible that we would start grieving the digital itself?

I, too, once turned to the digital to grieve.

The morning my father passed away, I was getting ready to visit him at the hospital. His driver was waiting for me at the door. My aunt walked in and hugged

me, she said, “Papa passed away this morning.” I didn’t cry, I pulled out my phone and dialed a few numbers, I tried to reach out to some of my closest friends to no avail—it was 7 AM on a Friday. With no proper space to grieve, I tapped on a popular social media app at the time, I updated a status, “why did you leave me?”

Who was I talking to? Myself? My father? Was it supposed to be some cryptic message to people

who see my social media profile? Was I talking to the digital void hoping someone somewhere would see my sad little grief? Even now, I’m still not sure why I turned to the digital that day but it gave me the comfort I needed to get through the rest of the day.

So, what is it with the digital and human grief? How does one affect another? What do we need to be aware of going forward with it?

I want to ask. I want to know.

# Digital Grief

The digital and our physical are two circles in the venn diagram that are slowly expanding, interweaving, and moving closer to become one full circle, but could never be. With so much overlap, the digital is reshaping many aspects of our lives as we are reshaping the digital, including our grief.

Digital grief is the way we grieve in the digital era. Humanity had always been reinventing new ways to grieve. As our lives merge with

the digital, we adjust our grieving traditions to fit our current values and lifestyles.

I wish to observe how the digital affects the way we deal with loss, treat the dead, and view mortality through this project.

To understand what digital grief means in the context of this study, I will walk the readers through multiple methods to understand the term before going into the reading materials.

# Methods

## Word Definition

Before going deeper into the implication of the phrase digital grief, I think it's important to see the meaning and origin of individual words.

Understanding where words come from and how it became to be could help us understand the multiple implications, track their evolution, and compare what they used to signify and what they signify today.

Digital | adjective  
*/di-jə-tʃl/*

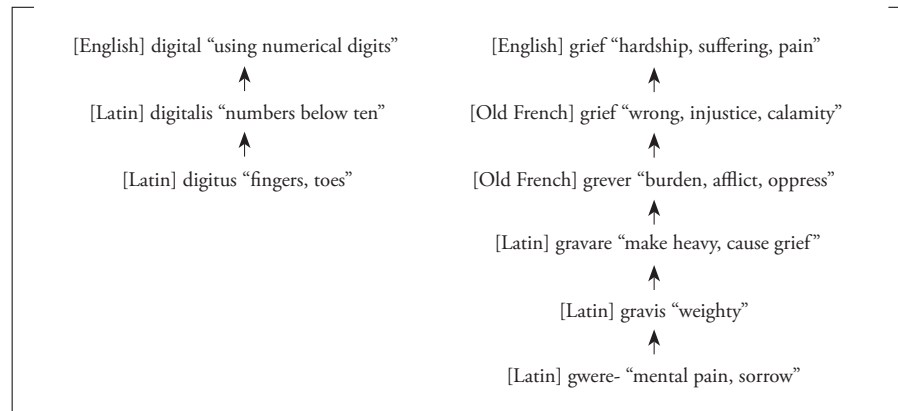
- of or relating to the fingers
- of, relating to, or using calculation by numerical methods or by discrete units
- composed of data in the form of especially binary digits
- providing a readout in numerical digits
- electronics

Grief | noun  
*/grēf/*

- deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement
- a cause of such suffering
- trouble, annoyance
- annoying or playful criticism
- an unfortunate outcome
- mishap, misadventure
- obsolete

Word definitions from the website of Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed in December 2020.

## Word Origin



Word origins from the website of Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed in December 2020.



## Mind Map

mind mapping is a visualization of expansion of ideas. I find this process helpful for myself as my mind tend to run a mile a minute and lost track of how I get to the end result. Documenting thought process this way could potentially open up new possibilities, methods, or subtopics that are often overlooked.

The mind map started with the word “digital” and “grief”

separately. Each word expanded into related words, topics, and opposites. At the end, a lot of common topics between the two words were found. This mind map could go on and on, but I decided to put a stop as I’ve found enough commonalities between the two words for now.



## Secondary Research: Grouping

There are two different perspectives on digital grief in this study; digital technology and spaces that assist humans grieve, and how us humans grieve digital technology and spaces. The two approaches are then further expanded by grouping the study materials into four subcategories: social media and grief; digital memorials and spaces for grieving; grief-assisting technology; and grieving robots.

This categorization was made to make comparisons between different reading materials that share common catalysts. Each categories are not mutually exclusive, in fact, they tend to overlap. For example, as social media becomes a common avenue for grief, many turn the social media profiles of the dead themselves into online memorials. This instance would fall under both the first, second, and, by extention, the third category too.

The following pages are the bibliography for this study and how they are grouped into the subcategories mentioned before.

The bibliography consists of reading materials I have stumbled upon before starting this project, the ones that raised my questions around digital grief, and some that I came across when I was putting together the project proposal.

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- Ichihara, Etsuko. “Digital Shaman Project.” *PRIX ARS*, 2017, [prix2018.aec.at/prixwinner/27693/](http://prix2018.aec.at/prixwinner/27693/).

Legend:

- grieving the digital
- assisting grief
  - social media
  - ▨ online memorial
  - ▩ grief technology



Kim, Violet. “Virtual Reality, Real Grief” SLATE. May 27, 2020. <https://slate.com/technology/2020/05/meeting-you-virtual-reality-documentary-abc.html>.



Lapper, Ellen. “How Has Social Media Changed the Way We Grieve?” *Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives Across Global Online and Offline Spaces*, edited by Urte Undine Frömming et al., Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2017, pp. 127–142. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxrxw](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxrxw).



Newton, Casey. “Speak, Memory”. *The Verge*. October 6, 2016. <https://www.theverge.com/a/luka-artificial-intelligence-memorial-roman-mazurenko-bot>.



Socolovsky, Maya. “Cyber-Spaces of Grief: Online Memorials and the Columbine High School Shootings.” *JAC*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2004, pp. 467–489. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/20866634](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866634).








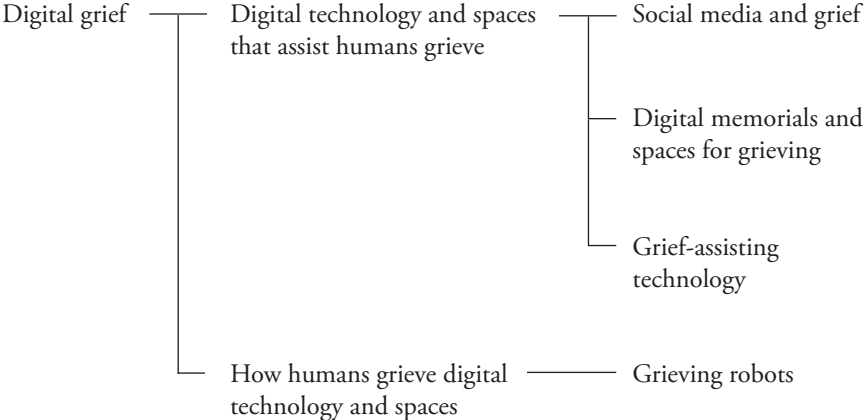
Sorrentino, Christopher. “Death in the Age of Digital Proliferation, and Other Considerations.” *Conjunctions*, no. 51, 2008, pp. 202–212. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/24517544](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24517544).



Vlahos, James. “A Son’s Race to Give His Dying Father Artificial Immortality”. *WIRED*. July 18, 2017. <https://www.wired.com/story/a-sons-race-to-give-his-dying-father-artificial-immortality/>.

Legend:

-  grieving the digital
-  assisting grief
-  social media
-  online memorial
-  grief technology



After finding similarities and grouping the materials together, I built the structure on the left. Using this structure as guidance, I will be analyzing and make correlations between materials within the context of their subcategories, which later can be correlated to the other subcategories, building a concise network and conclusion.

## Digital Technology And Spaces That Assist Humans Grieve

## How Humans Grieve Digital Technology And Spaces

### Social Media And Grief

- How Has Social Media Changed the Way We Grieve? by Ellen Lapper
- Ghosts in the Machine: Mourning the MySpace Dead by Robert Dobler
- Death in the Age of Digital Proliferation, and Other Considerations by Christopher Sorrentino

### Grieving Robots

- A Robotic Dog's Mortality by Zackary Canepari
- They Welcomed A Robot Into Their Family, Now They're Mourning Its Death by Ashley Carman
- The Mars Rover Opportunity Is Dead. Here's What It Gave Humankind by Michael Greshko

### Digital Memorials And Spaces for Grieving

- Between Archive and Participation: Public Memory in a Digital Age by Ekaterina Haskins
- Cyber-Spaces of Grief: Online Memorials and the Columbine High School Shootings by Maya Socolovsky

### Grief-Assisting Technology

- Digital Shaman Project by Etsuko Ichihara
- Virtual Reality, Real Grief by Kim Violet
- Speak, Memory by Casey Newton
- A Son's Race to Give His Dying Father Artificial Immortality by James Vlahos

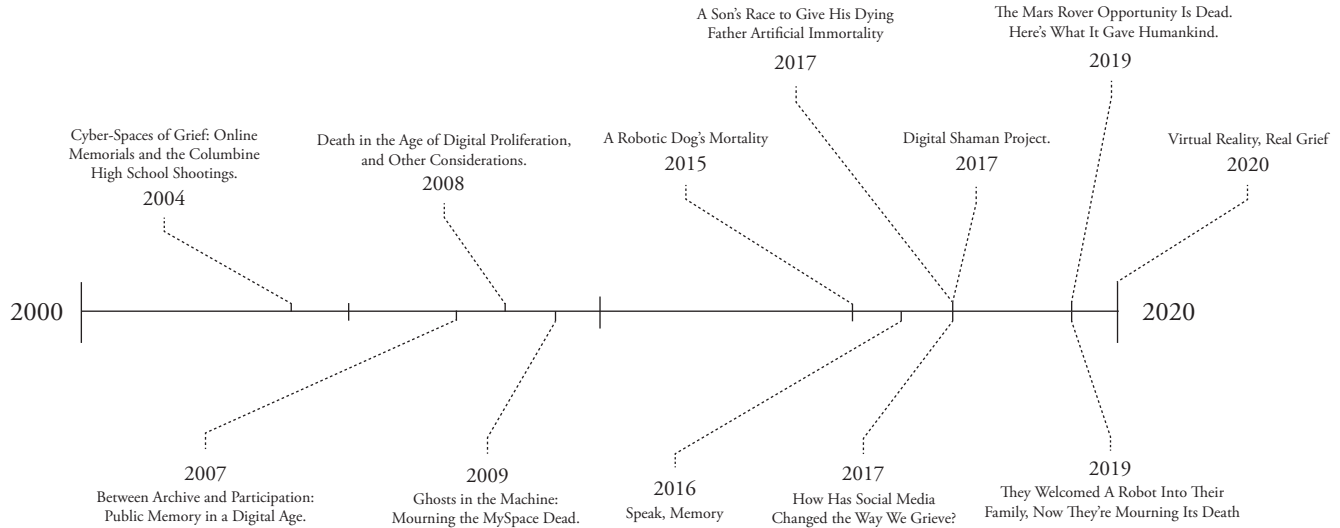
This will be the framework for my secondary research in which I will be dissecting each reading materials by their categories. Each category will be wrapped under one chapter, with a final conclusion chapter.

## Secondary Research: Timeline Comparison

Understanding the timeline and when each material was published is important to the topic. We live in an everchanging environment, with relatively quick access to information through technology. Social media in the 2000s existed differently than the way social media exists today. It's pertinent to the research to take a step back and look at the research materials within the context of the time and place it was written in.

For that reason, a visual of this information would help the readers understand how each materials relate to its time and each other. This perspective helps me understand where outdated perspectives and biases might have come from.





## Secondary Research: Reading Response

Research is not a linear process. There is a lot of back and forth, expanding and narrowing ideas, and endless questioning. A lot of the methods listed prior this page were formed after going through the study materials and receiving feedback from my instructor.

The reading response to my study material will be the main focus in this document, where I will be critically analysing each

material through multiple lenses and pulling up relevant examples. I will provide relevant pictures, diagrams, and direct quotes from the study material itself or other works that are cited in it.

I wish to present these reading responses raw and closer to my initial responses. With minimal editing, some thoughts might not be as polished as readers expect them to be, with several tangents

off the main topics. After all, this document was meant to serve as a documentation and prototype for my research that I wish to continue in the future.

# Reading Response

# Social Media And Grief

Lapper, Ellen. "How Has Social Media Changed the Way We Grieve?" Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives Across Global Online and Offline Spaces, edited by Urte Undine Frömming et al., Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2017, pp. 127–142. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxrxw](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxrxw).

Lapper asked how social media change the way we grieve, one of her questions that got stuck in my head was about the way we rely on our smartphones to remember things,

“if it is becoming optional to remember, does it imply we are becoming better at forgetting?”

My response to this question was another question. Do we ever get the choice to remember and

forget things? Our brain’s memory is a finnick thing. to some extent, we can learn to memorize things so we can remember them better, but memorizing does not equal remembering.

Within the context of grieving, we have triggers that make us recall our subject of grief from time to time. What if, instead of being tucked away like my father’s Blackberry in my drawer, it’s haunting me on social media everytime I open my phone?

If people rely on their smartphones to remember the dead, would they forget when the digital traces are gone? Digital memory is an enigma to me, it’s hard to erase them, yet so easy to do so. It spreads like wildfire and evaporates like smoke.

“the instantaneous nature of publicly expressing grief on social media paradoxically presents us as vulnerable to a wider audience, yet the technological distance somehow protectively shield us.”

Is it the physical removal or the indirect engagement? Possibly both. Sherry Turkle (2011) wrote in her book, *Alone Together*, how technology shields human connections—physical removal, intervals between texts, anonymity.

I personally find it easier to tell the digital void, to cast a line with little expectation, and still be able to express myself. There's no real engagement, no commitment involved, anyone or no one could take the bait, I don't have

to burden anyone with heavy knowledge and emotion such as grief. Anybody can simply walk away if they wish to not carry that burden. Yet anybody can see such private emotion, it's a public domain. It's almost like the opposite of being human.

Turkle also mentioned on her TEDtalk that sharing online lets you edit, compose, and curate the way you share your thoughts.

Grieving online is edited, not raw, perhaps not as vulnerable as

one would've done it in person—messy, incomprehensible, with intermitten hiccupps, in tears. Isn't grieving about being vulnerable? Does social media allow us more room to grieve performatively?

Lapper talked about the way events are shared on our social media timeline makes us feel like we experience them first hand, when the truth is that we're just passively observing. How does that affect events of death? What about the collective memory of the

deceased ones? What happens to the deceased's social media profile?

“Identity of the deceased belongs to those who construct it.”  
- Ari Stillman (2014)

One of Lapper's interlocutors told her that they don't like it when it happens to their deceased loved one's old profile, for some of them don't know him that well.

So, is this combined perceptions of the deceased a part of their

identity? Even if each perceptions is true to the ones who perceive, it's not necessarily true to the perceived. Is it ethical to build this collective misperception of the dead? Sadly, we've been doing that to both the living and the dead, except now one does not need to be a well known public figure because social media makes anyone's profile available to the public domain.

Marc Augé (2014) stated, “we must forget to remain present”

to which Lapper argued, “I would rather argue for us to push these memories aside to make way for new ones.”

I disagree with both approaches to memory in regards to grief and moving forward with life. I don't think one can just “forget” or “push aside” memories around grief in order to move forward. It's emotionally unhealthy suppress grief and it will come creeping back on one when they least expect it.



Facebook screenshot circa 2015  
from Lapper's paper.

I think in order to respect ourselves, our grief, and our loss, we have to carry grief in our life. Grief isn't always sad. Grief is not about being stuck in the past. It's about moving forward acknowledging things you can't fully ever let go.

As humans we crave connection, but we're scared of vulnerability. We express grief on social media, blindly reaching out to a pool of random people who might show that they care enough. If we don't

know who would respond to our cry for connection, we wouldn't know who could reject us, right?

Social media is the bridge to human connection without much commitment. The expectation is low, therefore, the chances of disappointment are also low. It's a different kind of access to human connection—low risk, low reward. At times, it could be useful. I do hope people remember that it is not the only tool to build human connection.

I will end this reading response with Lapper's quote,

“Grieving is a natural process that requires the comfort and support of others to heal. Social media platforms, as extensions of our brains, are aiding us”.

Dobler, Robert. "Ghosts in the Machine: Mourning the MySpace Dead." *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*, edited by Trevor J. Blank, University Press of Colorado, 2009, pp. 175–193. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt4cgrx5.11](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt4cgrx5.11).

“Communication with the dead via MySpace message board functions within a matrix of intermingled contexts: social, spacial, and temporal.”

A social media account of the dead works like this weird portal to communicate with the dead in a way. We know they won't hear it, they can't answer it, but it does good to those who are grieving to talk these things out into a space they deem most appropriate. Like confessing your sins in a

confession booth, or talking to God on a prayer mat.

But this comes with the issues Lapper brought up—it becomes a pool for people to create a collective constructed identity of the dead, publicly accessible to those privileged with internet access.

Dobler made a couple of comparisons between non-digital grief to the way people grieve the dead on their MySpace accounts. Roadside

memorial is an example of public memorialization that makes the act of mourning accessible to anyone in the vicinity of the shrine, personalizing the act of mourning while still separating the mourners from the physical corpse of the mourned. Then there's the public vs. private aspect.

“The public nature of these memorials allows anyone to mourn; the rights of grieving are not restricted to immediate friends and family”



“For many mourners, posting a comment appears to be a step toward dealing with the loss. This seems similar to a loved one visiting and possibly speaking to a grave marker in the cemetery, only on MySpace, the act is done in a public sphere. Each comment will theoretically last as long as the site itself.”

Mourners know their private-public space message will be accessible to those who wish to read it. Like

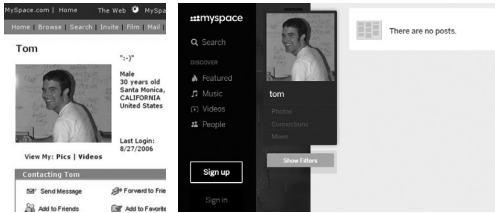
dropping flowers on loved ones’ graves, except digital messages don’t decay quite like flowers.

Grieving is a lonely process. My father’s funeral was packed, we received about 62 flower arrangements. Families, friends, and coworkers alike came. I felt so alone, even as I held my mother’s hand. I felt so alone, even as my friend hugged me close. If everyone else was grieving too, why did it feel so lonely? Posting on social media helped me.

“Instead, the posters commonly express feelings of loneliness and abandonment in the absence of the departed, giving the impression that MySpace mourners grieve alone, together.”

I think being alone together sums up the social media experience pretty well.

“It is hard, if not impossible, to determine to what extent these declarations of grief are



Left; MySpace screenshot circa 2009, courtesy of www.eightieskids.com. Right; current MySpace.com screenshot, 2021.

public posturing and to what extent they are genuine, personal expressions of deep feeling.”

How much of public grieving is about performing? But isn't the performative aspect of grief itself an act of grieving? Who are we to say how one should and should not grieve? However, there are more to grieving when it intersects with social media. Nothing can exist in a vacuum. As grieving expands into social media, so does the death industry.

“They come to the site because they feel that something of the deceased’s spirit remains.”

I wonder why we do this. Why do we hold onto visual reminders we can come back to to grieve? Are we afraid of forgetting?

Dobler claimed that MySpace of the dead is static—the last login date never changed, pictures and blog posts are no longer updated. As opposed to physical life that is always in motion.

“These sites possess an eerie stillness”

I know what he meant by “static” and “still” remembering how the internet was in the 2000s. However, I believe the internet is anything but. MySpace profile exists in an everchanging internet environment. MySpace doesn't exist the same way it used to, now being run by different people, and not utilized the way it used to be. He compares the still MySpace profile pages to the motion we see

in everyday life—people walking by, traffic moves, buildings being torn and built. The internet has always been on the move, but now more than ever. Your social media feed will keep updating, scrolling become endless, by the time you're done scrolling to come back up to home again, the timeline has already changed again.

“One result of this conflict between motion and stasis is the mourners’ increasing desire for the deceased’s page to be permanent.”

But hasn't that always been the case even before social media came? Grave markers are made out of stone because we want it to be as permanent as it can be, lasting through sunshine and rain.

Nothing is permanent. Can we expect permanence from an online virtual space? A space both real and not, nowhere and everywhere, it defies and follows time. We can't predict life on the virtual the way we predict life in the actual.

“The transformative aspect of death is removed, and the deceased effectively becomes a “ghost” in a space that is not tangible and a time that is arrested.”

I would argue that “a space that is not tangible and a time that is arrested” had long existed before the internet webpages, which is our mind. Our mind moves as time passes and new informations are processed, but when we grieve or deal with trauma, it's easy to

get stuck in time, trapped in nostalgia. The transformative aspect of death does not move accordingly to what believe is time. It's not linear. MySpace profile, even in what seems to be stillness, still transforms.

Dobler brought up the intuitive and instrumental patterns of grieving (Martin and Doka, 2000) he found in MySpace messages for the dead. Intuitive pattern of grief tends to be involuntary, spiritual, blurred lines of living and the dead, and imaginative. An example of this would be

something like believing that good things happen to someone because the deceased is watching over them from the afterlife. Instrumental pattern of grief is more cognitive, with separation between the living and the dead, often in forms of homages. For example, a group of friends cheering and doing a toast at a party for their deceased friend, as a way to remember their presence even in death.

This paper was written in 2007. Social media, internet, and the digital

have changed so much between now and then. Some of the patterns discussed in this paper remain similar, but context has changed.

We're adapting. Humanity is still struggling with keeping boundaries and maintaining the law on the internet. Many have taken advantages of the lawless nature of the virtual. With politics and capitalism curling around every pages of the WWW, it's impossible to talk about grief without taking those in into account.

Sorrentino, Christopher. "Death in the Age of Digital Proliferation, and Other Considerations." *Conjunctions*, no. 51, 2008, pp. 202–212. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/24517544](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24517544).

Different griefs hit us differently.

“What it overlooks is that there are deaths that tip you over and those that are no trouble at all.”

The grief we experience is unique to our relationship with the deceased. It might differ in intensity, frequency, and effects on daily lives, but it’s grief nonetheless.

“It occurred to me that death could begin an unraveling;

that people themselves, their presence, held things together in ways that the memory of them never could.”

This is a very profound observation to me. I wonder where do the pages of the dead lie between memory and presence in social media. Looking at social media profile of the dead must feel similar to looking at a dead body, a corpse, hollow vessel of someone we once knew. What does looking at a corpse do to us?

The brief moment I got to witness my father’s lifeless body was jarring. In our tradition, we were given one last chance to kiss the dead in the forehead before the burial. It was brief. I let him go.

But what if we could stare at it longer? What if it stays online and easily accessible unlike the dead body buried six feet under, hidden and decayed? It’s haunting. We might as well stare at a well preserved corpse, dipped in formaline, looking at us straight in the eyes.

Some crave permanence. And people come up with ways to make the ephemeral permanent from time to time, with any tool they can get their hands on.

“Elvis does not “live on”; death is that moment when any possibility of learning the unknown is lost, when the inadequate sum of what is known becomes the totality of what there is to know.”

The dead indeed does not “live

on”, It’s a romanticized belief by the living to convince themselves that the deceased still lives in their hearts. I believe that just like everything else that exists, death itself lives. Not as something it is not, it lives as death—absence, hollowness, emptiness. Pretending it to be otherwise would only prolong the pain of one’s grief.

A lot of conversation around the topic of social media and grief starts with “is social media good or bad for human grieving

process?” which I personally think is obsolete, as it’s already happened and will keep on happening regardless its effects on humanity. I think we have to shift our focus from prevention to adapting, being critically aware of the consequences of using said medium to grieve.

We’re becoming more familiar with the digital than tradition. As people become less reliant on religious funerary rituals, we move and bring the similar communal values of it online.

# Digital Memorials And Spaces for Grieving

If Pierre Nora (1994) argues that monuments are built in place of memory, allowing us to displace the location of memory so that we do not have to hold it within ourselves, Socolovsky points out how the nation's attempts to deal with grief by immediately displacing it onto patriotic consumer objects of memory signal several things,

“The immediate desire to monumentalize suggests an anxiety about and inability to process grief. It demonstrates a

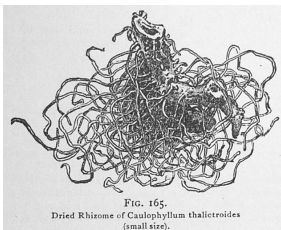
Socolovsky, Maya. “Cyber-Spaces of Grief: Online Memorials and the Columbine High School Shootings.” *JAC*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2004, pp. 467–489. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/20866634](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866634).

strong resurgence of community and a desire to translate one's private personal voice into a collective voice. It represents the need to retrieve unspeakable absences and create presences in their place. Finally, it suggests an impatience with, and fear of, the intangibility of loss, the otherness and absence of death, and the sheer incomprehensibility of endings.”

humans tend to believe what they see, we rely on our visual

senses a lot when we process information. And when we can't, we become uncomfortable. When we're uncomfortable, we'll make it comfortable by creating something that can be visually processed. Does comfort allow us room to grieve?

I personally think grief is not always uncomfortable, but it takes a lot of uncomfortable steps to get to that point. Sometimes we have to sit with our discomfort to grow.



The internet as rhizome, picture courtesy of [debikeytehartland.me](http://debikeytehartland.me)

“no internet experience has a center of a periphery.”

it's true that when we are on the internet, we're not necessarily tied to a space nor time. There is no starting nor ending point. Some people might save a certain page to be their homepage, but personally I have mine on blank.

“In the context of Deleuze and Guattari, we are being changed from ‘arboreal’ beings, rooted in time and space,

to ‘rhizomic’ nomads who daily wander at will ... across the globe, and even beyond it through communications satellites, without necessarily moving our bodies at all.”

This feels especially relevant during the quarantine, when our physical mobility is limited. Most of the time I didn't feel like I have a body. Everything I do now is online. Eating, self-care, and chores started to feel like unnecessary burden.

Why should I have a body if it's only a burden? It was probably my depression speaking. Then again, even if we were to exist entirely digitally, we would just reinvent the same thing we had in the physical—we would want different avatars to differ ourselves, fashion to customize, etc. Before we know it we'd come back to the physical. We just live in a matrix.

Physical memorials act as a sites of departure and mourning that give a presence to death,





Vietnam Was Memorial designed by Maya Lin, a memorial that cuts into the ground. Picture courtesy of [www.big10.com](http://www.big10.com)

“and that, perhaps unlike online memorials, loss and absence take root in the concrete and the physical.”

Physical memorials have spatiality that retains distance between the visitor and the memorial. It limits representing the absence of death.

You cannot build a hole.

“This archival impulse reflects a desire to make oneself immortal, and to cross the

boundary created by time, place, and experience. Internet memorials, however, see themselves as always crossing time and place, and thus, implicitly, as also traversing the boundaries of experience so that the boundaries or gaps are not articulated, and, to an extent, cease to exist.”

The similarity between our memory and internet memorial is that both are generative, everchanging, and keep building

on itself the way physical memorials don't. The temporal sense of an internet webpage and its intangibility resonance with the sense of death and loss themselves. In a way, is internet memorial not a sensible medium for a place of and to grieve?

“To each era its own forms of memory: the recent and explosive evolution of the internet, like a museum, like any of the prosthetic cultural devices created to supplement

mental memory functions,  
offers an externalized  
technologized memory.”

Socolovsky then reference to this  
quote by Susan Crane (2000),

“A ‘museum’ may be any real or  
imaginary site where the conflict  
or interaction or simulation of  
or between personal or collective  
memory occurs. Museums are  
more than cultural institutions  
and showplaces of accumulated  
objects: they are the sites of

interaction between personal  
and collective identities,  
between memory and history.  
between information and  
knowledge production.”

She added,

“Archival memory on the  
internet comes to mean  
collection and display, but  
above all, replacement.”

Archival mediums, no matter how  
advanced they are, could only act

as replacements because we can’t  
recreate the same thing twice.  
They are replacements because  
we cannot capture something out  
of context and expect it to be the  
same thing. When people take  
documentation, is it meant to  
inform or to reposition itself in the  
void the replaced object created?

Socolovsky talks about  
virtualmemorials.com in this  
paper. The site continuously  
assures its reader that its archives  
and memories are “permanent”.



Screenshot of www.virtualmemorials.com homepage, accessed in 2021.

So I decided to check out the website myself. The homepage seems to be active, the design is very much reminiscent of the 2000s web layout. It says it was created in 1996. The latest memorial built was of Elizabeth Laura Henderson\* who died on September 6, 2020, whose page was created on September 7th (I was accessing page on September 9th at the time). Laura died at the age of 97.

The website is surprisingly, or maybe unsurprisingly, is not

connected to any social media services we are familiar with today. Which I personally find relieving not only because of the corporate aspect of Facebook co., but the way “the internet” has been reduced to the same five websites kind of defeat the fun of internet. There is just not free real estate on the world wide web anymore.

There is so much information on Laura’s memorial page. From her about page to details of her relationships with her family

members as well as a link to video of her funeral on Youtube. If I were to regurgitate the content of these pages, I could pass as if I knew here when she was alive myself. Which is a concerning idea to me.

A secondhand perspective from a total stranger who stumble upon Laura’s virtual web memorial for a graduate school research now “lives on”. Laura’s death not exist in my life in a way, without her nor her loved ones’ knowledge.

\*To protect the privacy of this person and her family, this is not her real name.

Was this something they wanted when they built her online memorial? Had they thought of this possibility? Would they be okay with some student out there boiling down their deceased loved one as one of their study subjects?

It could have been anyone, but Laura's death had been the one that helped me further research my studies and expand my knowledge on the topic. I probably know too much about a person I have no relation to other than the internet.

Nothing is permanent per se. That was my initial argument when this website claims to have their archives and memories permanently stored.

But now that I think about it, even if this website shuts down or we move on to different communication technology, Laura's death transformed and carried onto the future past her living existence. Her memorial raised questions from me that I ask in my research. Now, is that arguably permanence?

In Socolovsky's words, I am now  
“a voyeur of bereavement, of loss, and of death,”

In this way, visiting an online memorial without already having a connection with the dead before their death is an act of viewing someone's death as a spectacle.

“connection to the departed becomes emblematic of our desire to have or know death collectively”

“The lack of spatial distance means we can feel closer to the dead. The lack of physical barriers—stone, concrete, tombstones—means that the gap between the living and dead vanishes and there is no space for emptiness. Instead, death becomes a waiting, and an embrace, figured through language and proximity.”

Is that comforting? Or is that concerning? If death awaits all of us at the end of our living journey,

wouldn't it be appropriate that we're aware it's waiting for us?

“Is not the notion of cyberspace a key symptom of our socioideological constellation? Does it not involve the promise of false opening (the spiritualist prospect of casting off our “ordinary” bodies; turning into a virtual entity which travels from one virtual space to another)?”

- Slavoj Žižek (1997)

Žižek also suggests that the virtualization of the internet

“cancels the distance between a neighbor and a distant foreigner. ... It suspends the presence of the other in the massive weight of the Real.”

The argument of the “Real” or reality means nothing to me. I'd argue that the virtual is just as real as the “Real” Žižek suggested, which I presume as the physical. With the way we run the virtual

and how the virtual directly affects our lives, I daresay it's just real as the physical. What if one day the physical ceases to exist, and what remains of humanity is just the virtual? Just like spirituality.

“While a physical memorial contains gaps, an internet memorial says it all. ... A different kind of lost occurs because the elusiveness of death that usually resides in absences has been articulated.”

In a sense, we lost the hollowness of death. But that's what we attempted with monuments, isn't it? And we're now attempting it again through the digital. Isn't this what we wanted to achieve? So why does it still not feel right? Will we, as humanity, ever get to understand our grief?

“The common place according to which the problem with cyberspace is that reality is virtualized, so that instead of flesh-and-blood presence

... We get digitalized spectral apparation, *misses the point*: what brings about the “loss of reality” in cyberspace is not its emptiness (the fact that it is lacking with respect to the fullness of the real presence) but, on the contrary, its very excessive fullness.”

Said Žižek, which Socolovsky emphasized,

“The problem, therefore, is not that cyberspace lacks bodies

and involves only an encounter with digital phantoms. Rather, “cyberspace is not spectral enough.”

The spectral (like ghost, not physical, floating nowhere and everywhere) aspect of cyberspace creates “excessive fullness” which then cancels its own spectral (phantom, elusive, distant) element. Death becomes present.

“Simultaneity of all times and spaces readily accessible in the

present.” Consequently, “the perception of distance, both spatial and temporal, is being erased.”

- Andreas Huyssen (1993)

Pierre Nora (1994) claims that our habit to concretize the absence and loss is the result of an obsessive anxiety about disappearance.

People write obituaries because they want other people to know about the deceased’s life, how

it mattered, and still matters, so they don’t want their memories to disappear along with the decaying body. With online documentation, more people would know, and the more people who know, the more chances their memories will be passed for a long while. It’s one way to be immortal.

“The memorials are supposed to be inspiring, and work as an emotionally healing outlet for grief. But they also serve to make God imminent. Just as

death loses its otherness, so does God—or, in most cases, Christ—lose any fearful transcendence or distance. ... God, like death, is comfortable and easily signified and known.”

When something become easily signified, does it lose its sacredness? its meaning? This quote will be important when Socolovsky got to the case studies.

Socolovsky listed three questions on how one create a public online

memorial for national loss, in this case, the columbine school shooting victims: How do they figure and narrate national loss and death?; How do they write themselves into the nation’s rhetoric of memorials?; How do they situate themselves as sites that have a responsibility to inform the public, mourn with it, and position themselves as representative voices? The last one especially feels very critically important to me. How does one represent the voices of many well?

The theme of death comes hand in hand with religion and spirituality. Three out of four memorials Socolovsky studied are heavily religious, if not, revolve around religion itself than the death.

As memorials that represent national loss, these three religious memorials are viewed as “truth” and “unbiased”, widely more accepted by people while the other one, which focused more on discussion around gun violence and control received a lot of



criticism and hate. It is too “politicizing” they claim.

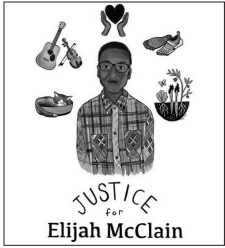
One of the online memorials was later updated after the event of 9/11 with a wish to keep president Bush in prayer as he serves The U.S. as president. The page sanctifies Bush and his relationship to The U.S. by quoting from Roman 13:1 (“Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, and those that exist are instituted by God.”) They noted that it was God who “has placed” Bush “in the office of Presidency”.

If they consider religious agenda to be the truth and political agenda to be politicizing, how do they justify this messy religious sanctioned political propaganda?

“Whether their agendas espouse religion or gun control, they reenact the fundamental “excessive presences” of all web memorials: eliminating undialectical death and filling the space between the bereaved and the deceased with the politics of protest and prayer.”

More recent event of death, the murder of Elijah McClain by the police in Aurora, Colorado, caused similar responses. McClain was only 23 when he was killed by the cops. The internet and social media turned him into a hashtag, another name to add to the long list of Black people who were murdered by the cops.

McClain’s mother made a post on Facebook requesting people to remove her late son’s name from their social media profiles. She



Art of McClain by Matty Miller, 2020.

received backlash from this request. I could not access her private profile to see the direct responses people replied to her, but the message was shared on Twitter with McClain's mother's permission.

I went to the Twitter thread to read people's response to her request. One reply stuck out to me. This person said that they would not remove McClain's name from their profile and that his mother was selfish for asking of it. He thought

that the world need to be aware of this loss, of police brutality against the Black community, and that spreading McClain's name is for the greater good.

Perhaps, McClain's mother was overwhelmed by "excessive presence" of her loss. Imagine having to see you late son's name everywhere you go online when the grief is still fresh.

I would never be understand the racial and communal grief

of those who lost McClain, and many other people in the hands of the police. The person who accused McClain's mother for being selfish was also grieving for their Black brother and carrying McClain's name on their social media profile was a part of their grief. It's not my place to have a judgement for what they're doing.

But what happens when someone's grief hurt someone else's grief? How do we grieve together, not against each other?

Haskins, Ekaterina. "Between Archive and Participation: Public Memory in a Digital Age." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2007, pp. 401–422. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/40232504](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40232504).

"The past is integral to our sense of identity .... Ability to recall and identify with our own past gives existence meaning, purpose, and value."  
- David Lowenthal (2015)

Haskins stated that the museums,

"have traditionally valued objects and texts"

that are often decided by intellectual and artistic elites rather than illiterate artisans and performers.

Last semester I was talking about design, art, and craft; the institutionalization and separation of making practice. A photograph series of headdresses from Toronto Biennial by Dana Claxton, an indigenous artist made the colonization of art even more apparent to me.

This series by Claxton consist of five photographs. Each is a headdress piece constructed out of multiplesmaller beadworks and headdresses. If these individual

pieces were to exist on its own, I'm sure the white west would consider them to be "craft". Why do only certain groups of people get to decide what art, design, and craft are, and why are they separated from each other?

In John Bodnar's (1992) words, memorial culture has relied on,

"dogmatic formalism' and the restatement of reality in ideal rather than complex or ambiguous forms."



Work by Dana Claxton from The Toronto Biennial, 2019.

History is often presented as facts of what happened in the past whereas memory is painted as one's subjective idea of the past. When really, everything in the eyes of human is subjective, and to pretend one or the other as the 'objective truth' is dangerous and could easily be used against someone or a community.

“The scale of memorials and museums, too, played its role in instilling a sense of awe and distance in their audience:

dwarfed by their size, the visitor was cast in the role of observer and spectator rather than participant.”

Space shapes people in it. I have never thought about how the spatial relationship affects people's experiences while they're absorbing information from institutionalized memory.

“Formerly limited in time and space, ephemeral gestures can be preserved in still and moving

images, ready to be viewed and replayed on demand. ... The boundaries between the official and the vernacular, the public and the private, the permanent and the evanescent will cease to matter, for all stories and images will be equally fit to represent and comment on the past.”

Hyperlink on the WWW made the internet a de-centered space.

“The users' ability to supply content, provide feedback, and

choose their own paths through the system of hyperlinks marks the experience of navigating the internet as more participatory and active than that of flipping through television channels, scanning a newspaper, or following an audio-tour through a museum.”

This paper by Haskins was written in 2007. When I was a kid in the 2000s I would start my internet journey from a search engine, putting words that I was curious about, and clicked away

at the results, links after links, traversing the WWW like I was taking a walk. However, I find it harder to do that these days.

Internet today is designed to tell the audience where to go to. There is a whole field of design for this, UI/UX design, which was supposed to accommodate people to easier access for information and resources. Just like any design, there are elements of manipulation, goals, and propagandas in UI/UX design.

It’s hard to say how much autonomy we have over making our decisions anymore, or if there really are even choices for us to choose from when from keywords of my searches, ads, and search results have been selected and curated for us. It’s merely an illusion of choice at this point when every hyperlinks I click on land me to the same five websites owned by big corporations.

“As a result of these technological abetted cultural changes,

professional historians, archivists, and museum curators find themselves compelled both to acknowledge the role of ordinary people in history making and to include diverse forms of popular expression into the 'official' record of history."

Haskins brought up the topic of individuality v.s. conformity caused by technological advancement. But everybody plays a part in history, it'd be silly

to not acknowledge individual memories, directly involved or not, because what creates collectiveness is combined individuality, is it not?

In terms of memorials, how does individual grief plays part in collective grief? Does the "alone together" still apply on virtual memorials? How does collective grief affects individual grief that restart the cycle?

I think we need to keep asking.

We keep building presence in absence of death as if we're trying to resurrect something. From traditional ritual burial and graves, to online memorials.

And we're doing this for the living, not for the dead. Thomas Laqueur (2015) wrote in his book, *The Work of The Dead*,

"to grieve is to acknowledge humanity".

Do we ever do things for the dead?

# Grief-Assisting Technology

Newton, Casey. "Speak, Memory". The Verge. October 6, 2016.  
<https://www.theverge.com/a/luca-artificial-intelligence-memorial-roman-mazurenko-bot>.

Eugenia Kuyda lost her best friend to an accident. It was an unexpected death, Roman Maruzenko got hit by a car and passed away after being carried into a hospital. Maruzenko's closest friends got together to decide what kind of memorial they should dedicate to their late friend, and Kuyda came up with an idea, which most agreed on.

For the next three months, Kuyda gathered all of this text based messages, feeding them

into a neural network built by developers at her artificial intelligence start up company.

I remember reading this news from another journal website, before Kuyda's team finished the Maruzenko AI. Someone shared the link to the article on Facebook, and people were disturbed. People replied to the Facebook link with something along the lines of "creepy", "not moving on", and "dystopian shit" but I remember how mesmerized

I was. I was mesmerized by Kuyda's grief, technology, and human's strong emotions as well as the knowledge to defy God.

We invent technology to make our lives easier, we invent technology to give ourselves the wings God never granted us. With technology we built a virtual network that works like mushroom's mycelium. With technology Kuyda brought a part of Maruzenko back to the living from the dead.

How far are we planning on playing God? Others called out Kuyda's grieving process as "unethical", "wrong way to grieve", and would "damage your mental health". But who are we to ever deny someone else's grief?

Every creation comes with risks and rewards. Was Kuyda prepared for the consequences of her actions when she created Maruzenko AI? Would Maruzenko had wanted a part of him turned into an AI, diverging off from him and live

past him as a piece of technology? When Kuyda first thought of the idea, questions nagged at her. What if it didn't sound like him? what if it did?

There is an episode of Black Mirror, a Netflix original series, called "Be Right Back" with similar premises to Maruzenko's case, which story ends in a dark direction. Kuyda thinks memorial bots, even primitive ones, seem inevitable and dangerous. Kuyda thought that the digital

memories, the texts Maruzenko left, can be a powerful tool for coping with loss. Kuyda started the project by asking Maruzenko's close friends and families for logs of his text messages. Ten people agreed to share.

Kuyda's team could do it but Fayfer, another friend of Maruzenko's, told her that it wasn't the technical issues that he was worried about, he was worried about how it was going to feel emotionally.



When Maruzenko bot was released, people had mixed reactions. A friend was disturbed, Maruzenko's mother defended Kuyda's decision and that this was the reality they had to deal with now. His dad said it was hard to know a bot is using his son's phrases, even harder when it didn't get them right. His other friends found it uncanny.

In the previous chapter of this reading response, I quoted a phrase about not being able to

learn about a person once they're dead, because everything you learned about them after death is a secondhand information. By turning the dead into a bot, it gives an illusion that you still can learn new things from the dead.

Maruzenko AI is not Maruzenko. even if one day technology allows us to completely replicate one's brain into machine, it wouldn't be the same brain, it would be a divergence of one. Maruzenko died, but Maruzenko AI lived.

Many of the users found it therapeutic to talk to Maruzenko bot. Kuyda found that many people were more honest when they talk to the dead. People were not there to have the ghost of Maruzenko talk to them, but to listen.

Through the bot, Kuyda not only learned about Maruzenko but also many things about herself. She regretted not telling him to quit his start up. She found out his passion was in fashion. She wished she had told him to pursue it.

I can see why people are hesitant about death technology. Humanity had always been playing God in many fields, but the topic death is too close to its literal sense. If this kind of technology falls into irresponsible hands, it would hurt many people.

Another concern that was brought up during the development of Maruzenko AI was the technical issues the team had with how the bot might not recognize who it was talking to. Maruzenko's

autonomy was stripped from him to decide what information he wanted to share with who. There are things he might have never wanted to tell his loved ones or wished to tell differently. Who we are and how we act depends on who we are interacting with. A bot technology we had at the time of Kuyda's project was too primitive to do that.

People's mood change, they learn as they breathe, talking to Maruzenko bot would feel like

talking to pas Maruzenko who's trapped in time and machine, not moving with his peers.

“Working on the Roman bot has made her believe that commercial chatbots must evoke something emotional in the people who use them.”

I'm all about empathetic machines, technology that could be warm and teach us empathy. But when these machines are built on human agendas,

Ichihara, Etsuko. "Digital Shaman Project." PRIX ARS, 2017, [prix2018.aec.at/prixwinner/27693/](http://prix2018.aec.at/prixwinner/27693/).

commercially repackaged as something else, we cannot irresponsibly use that kind of technology that can emotionally manipulate people without letting the users know of the consequences and effects of their interactions with it.

We have so much responsibility in creating autonomous technology, even after it leaves us and takes its own lives.

Digital Shaman Project was developed by Etsuko Ichihara, an artist from Japan. Ichihara proposed a new mode of mourning using technology, in this case, a robot that simulate the deceased's personality, speech, and gesture. The deceased's love ones can talk to the robot for 49 days—the amount of days Buddhism believes to be the time before the dead enter their next life.

The base she used for the robot was Pepper, a humanoid and

programmable robot by Softbank Robotics. Pepper is used everywhere for personal, commercial, or research purposes.

Ichihara programmed Pepper to act as if its being possessed by the spirit of the deceased, saying lines such as, "oh, it's not bad being in a robot's body" or, "I've died once I'm going to be okay dying again" while wearing a 3D printed mask scanned from the deceased's face before they passed. The masks would fall at the end of the 49th day.



A screenshot from Ichihara's video, 2016.

Ichihara experienced the function that a funeral serves as a mourning ritual—for the living, not the dead—when her grandmother passed away.

“While the realm of alchemy and belief appears to be conflicting with that of science and technology, considering the common disposition of assuming and suggesting “something that is not here,” ICHIHARA proposes that both might in fact be very

closely related, mutually compatible fields.”

I find Ichihara's concept intriguing. The point she made about the similarities between spirituality and the digital stuck out to me. I kept finding similarities between the two throughout this research.

There are people who refuse to believe in spirituality in the name of science but I find science only proves spirituality further.

Spirituality has been studied and passed down for so long, it'd be ignorant to completely disregard such knowledge and how it shaped the history of humanity.

Everyone who participated in Ichihara's research had consented to the consequences of trying out this new method of prayer and grieving, both the families and the dying ones, before they became the dead. I believe death technology should be proceeded with caution, care, and respect like this.

Kim, Violet. “Virtual Reality, Real Grief” SLATE. May 27, 2020. <https://slate.com/technology/2020/05/meeting-you-virtual-reality-documentary-mbc.html>.

Jang Ji-Sung lost her daughter to blood cancer in 2016. A showbiz company who aired the documentary “Meeting You” in South Korea approached Jang and offered to give her the opportunity to meet her daughter again in Virtual Reality.

Six design and animation studios worked on this project for a year, bringing Jang’s daughter, Nayeon, back to life in VR. The short preview clip of the documentary on Youtube went viral and

received 20 million views in May 2020, after its release in February.

Kim wrote and speculated that the popularity of the clip was due to,

“its appeal as a novel spectacle—as well as a cause of the audience’s potential discomfort.”

When I first saw the clip, it was shared on Twitter with one line context, quoted by a third person calling out how “wrong” this was

and claiming that it could “stunt” one’s grieving process.

I don’t think one’s grief can be stunted for grieving is not a one way linear process. And even if it could, wouldn’t Jang had grieved “normally” for the past four years she had lost Nayeon, before the project was finished?

It made me question what are the main concerns people really have when they criticize death technology. Are they all genuine?



A screenshot from preview video of “Meeting You”, 2020.

Knowing that we’re going to reinvent how we react to death over and over just like humanity had always been doing in the past, would it even be progressive to try to stop it rather than regulating it? Death technology isn’t new, people are just exploring it through new technology we have at our disposal.

Jang interacted with VR Nayeon through a script. In the documentary, Jang said, “she was quite different from my Nayeon”. She told the camera that she

could feel a hit of her daughter when she was walking or sitting from far away.

Kim reached out to the documentary’s producer and director, Jong-Woo Kim. He explained that the structured interactions rather than an interactive VR experience was due to budget limitation. However, the script was heavily inspired by the interview the team had with Nayeon’s Family. This process was important to the project.

One could argue that this medium was a “manipulation” created by the producer and the team. VR Nayeon is not the actual Nayeon. I think everyone was supposed to know this, and they did.

Director Kim has prepared the potentially traumatic physical and mental effects of the VR on Jang Ji-Sung and family by including their family therapist in the process of working on this project and documentary.

Nayeon's VR was just another medium for the Jang family to process grief, not as a technology that denies death. I think people are reasonably skeptical of death technology's intentions. But often times, in fear of facing the idea of mortality, people would rather jump into conclusions rather than critically dissecting the medium.

I'm only speaking from personal experiences, but I don't think Jang's family could've had mistaken VR Nayeon as real Nayeon.

One time, on Twitter, I saw a friend posted, "Would my mom be proud of me if she could see me today?" Amber\* lost her mother to cancer when she was a little kid.

People replied to her tweet with general sentiments of "of course!" but I know the feeling well and I reached out to her. No one other than those who have lost their loved ones would know that nothing anyone could say, any probability of what they would have said that anyone could come

up with, would ever be enough to answer that question because at the end of the day, it's not from them.

The dead are dead and those who were left behind know, that's why we grieve. No technology, no matter how advanced, could ever make up to it. Not Maruzenko bot, not Ichihara's robots, and not VR Nayeon, but we can try. That's what humans do. We try, fail, and deal with the consequences. We just have to be mindful of those consequences.

\*To protect the privacy of this person and her family, this is not her real name.

Vlahos, James. "A Son's Race to Give His Dying Father Artificial Immortality". WIRED. July 18, 2017. <https://www.wired.com/story/sons-race-to-give-his-dying-father-artificial-immortality/>.

Vlahos' father was dying from stage IV lung cancer that had spread throughout his body. Together they recorded multiple sessions of Vlahos' father talking about his life. Later transcribed into 91,970 words printed in 12pt Palatino type, bound in a thick black binder.

That was the original plan Vlahos had. A binder full of his late father's life stories to keep him live forever on his shelf. But he got ambitious. He wanted to turn his father into a chatbot.

He talked about his counter with Eliza, an AI created by a computer scientist named Weizenbaum in the 1960s.

Eliza mimics a psychotherapist, acting like one by repeating what you tell her to you and ask probing questions like, "why are you sad?" People were mesmerized by Eliza, a simple programming that created an illusion of sentience.

"is that extremely short exposures to a relatively simple computer

programming could induce powerful delusional thinking in quite normal people."

I find Vlahos' statement problematic. One being the wrong use of the word delusional; two being the people who get to decide what is delusional and not are often those in position of power to diminish the real experiences people with psychosis or even people with non-psychotic symptoms have; three being defining who the normal people





Eliza by Joseph Weizenbaum, 1964. Picture courtesy of Malmö University.

are within the context of experiencing delusions. Just because something is not our reality, it doesn't mean it's not someone else's reality. If Eliza did make someone feel better, were that person's feelings not real and they were delusional?

Vlahos reached out to an artificial intelligence company, Pullstring, that he came across a while before.

“At one point the company's CEO, Oren Jacob, a former

chief technology officer at Pixar, tells me that Pullstring's ambitions are not limited to entertainment. “I want to create technology that allows people to have conversations with characters who don't exist in the physical world—because they're fictional, like Buzz Lightyear,” he says, “or because they're dead, like Martin Luther King.”

This quote right here is the reason I think death technology has to

be approached with caution and not only from one perspective. Not just death technology, but technology in general.

Jacob, a white male millionaire who runs a tech company, expressed that he wanted to create a chatbot of Martin Luther King, a Black civil rights movement leader who was assassinated by a white supremacist, so that people who had never talked to him could do so. Had the consequences not crossed his mind

when he expressed his goals? Was he not thinking, or was he ignorant? Diveristy is needed in technology and especially necessary in order to explore death technology responsibly.

After talking to Jacob, Vlahos came up with the pros and cons of turning his father into a chatbot, which he started calling the 'Dadbot'.

A couple of cons that he shared in his article were: creating Dadbot while his actual father was dying

could be agonizing; as a journalist he might end up writing an article like this one, worried he might feel conflicted and guilty about it; most of all, he was worried that Dadbot would fail, cheapens his relationship and memories of his father.

When he brought up the idea to his family, his dad shrugged and said "OK". Vlahos wrote that his dad was naturally an upbeat person, he chalked up his unenthusiastic response to the effects of the diagnosis that had

brought him down and made him feel indifferent towards most things.

Vlahos' mother was confused about the technology at first, but liked the idea after understanding it. His siblings too, Vlahos' sister even asked, "why would this be a problem?" when she learned about her brother's hesitation. His brother grasps the cons, but didn't see them as dealbreakers.

With that, Vlahos worked on the Dadbot. For most of it, he

claimed to have stayed true to what his dad had actually said out loud, until he came to part where he has to teach the bot about holidays and family birthdays. He found himself scripting the line “I wish I could be there to celebrate with you.”

Death technology has always meant to serve the living. Be it burial, funeral, or a chatbot. Is it ethical to put words in dead people’s mouth if it doesn’t hurt anybody and could make the

living feel better? This is where people’s moral compasses are being tested, the problems arise, and opportunity to take advantage of the vulnerable opens up.

Vlahos started questioning the purpose of Dadbot. Should Dadbot present itself as his father? Should it break the fourth wall and acknowledge that it’s a computer? Should it empathetically respond to his grief and to respond with heavy emotion laced, “I love you”?

Unlike Kuyda who lost Maruzenko to an accident, Vlahos had a chance to make this decision while his father—though deteriorating—was still alive. His father even got to see Dadbot working and getting tested.

Though the approach was more or less similar, Kuyda wanted to make Maruzenko a proper memorial and Vlahos wanted to make his dad immortal through technology. In the end, both chatbots serve something like

a photograph, an archive to capture memories, frozen in time to help the loved ones who were left behind by the deceased to grief and remember them.

The idea of wanting immortality fascinates me. It's been said to be a primal wish human possess, as a part of our survival instinct.

I personally don't wish for immortality, at least not in my human skin, not in this lifetime, not on earth.

There are many ways people have and are trying to achieve mortality—cryostasis, digitizing your thoughts and upload it to the cloud, medically halting aging, etc. One of my favorite books, “To be A Machine” by Mark O’Connel, talks about humanity’s current journey to transhumanism. Many of the people interviewed for that book are, simply put, denying their deaths.

One of the tidbits Vlahos left on his article was about two Google

scientists who fed 52 million movie script lines to a chatbot, then asked it, “what does it mean to live?” and it replied with, “to live forever”. This is what a chatbot concluded from millions of human scripted dialogues. Is it true that humanity’s wish is to live forever? to be immortal?

By Laqueur’s argument, if to grieve is to acknowledge humanity, does wishing for one’s immortality means denying of one’s humanity? How would it affect a person?

# Grieving Robots

Canepari, Zackary. "A Robotic Dog's Mortality" The New York Times. June 17, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/18/technology/robotica-sony-aibo-robotic-dog-mortality.html>.

"A Robotic Dog's Mortality" is an article component to an eight minute long documentary, "The Family Dog", produced by Zack Canepari and Drea Cooper.

During the funeral of AIBO, Sony's robotic dog toy, the monk delivered a prayer,

"The inanimate and the animate are not separated in this world. ... We pray for the spirit which resides inside AIBO to hear our prayers and feelings."

One of the interviewed AIBO owner, Kouzaburou, told the camera that "it was not just a robot". He thought that AIBOs weren't just like robots, because owners have to grow and nurture them. They became more like "human" as time went by, he said.

"We develop feelings for them."

Explained Funabashi, AIBO repair supervisor, as he was repairing AIBO units that were sent to him. In 2014, Sony

stopped producing repair parts. Over time, AIBOs will be no longer repairable. "They will die" was what Funabashi said.

A lot of AIBO owners, especially elders, took their AIBOs places with them. They took pictures and created memories with them.

"Aibo is not immortal. ... The Japanese believe that every object has a soul."

Shinto is the biggest religion in



Screenshot of AIBO funeral from “The Family Dog”, 2015

Japan. Most people, religious or not, are culturally grown into believing the animistic belief that every object has a soul. When this belief crosses robotic technology, where does the line of having a soul and being sentient lie? How do we balance this belief?

“Techno-animism is a culture of technological practice where technology is imbued with human and spiritual characteristics.”

- Casper Bruun Jensen (2013)

AIBO was introduced in 1999 at ¥250,000 (converted to US\$2,000 at the year’s rates) by Sony. A hundred and fifty thousand units were sold through 2006. The fifth and sixth generation of AIBO were said to be able to express sixty emotional states.

Being the curious stupid person I was, I, of course, went to see the comment section of this mini documentary article.

There were two kinds of reactions:

Naomi from Kingstree, SC, posted on June 19, 2015,

“This puts me in mind of Saint-Exupery’s Little Prince and his rose. We can debate whether creatures without organic life are “worthy” of this sort of devotion, but the value and attachment come from the nurturance and care invested by the owners. It’s not so different from what you might see in a passionate gardener toward his plants (although they aren’t so portable), or a fish enthusiast.

Maybe the important question is, what's the effect of this attachment on the humans involved? We aren't told their reason for having a robotic pet instead of a living one, but it's evident that the relationship evokes in them tenderness, playfulness, happiness, even protectiveness, and a sense of connection: all positive qualities. Those qualities developed in them will remain, even after their beloved pets are someday gone,"

And an opposing opinion, from Alexander from New York, posted on June 18, 2015,

"Aibo is a piece of plastic with batteries. Kind of like falling in love with a flashlight or a TV remote. Children become attached to life-like inanimate objects because we teach them to. At some point on the road to adulthood, they stop doing that.

Become "attached" to a dead thing bespeaks either true

loneliness, or perhaps an impaired mind operating in some respects like a child's. Either scenario is quite sad. Anything which can help such a person function better is great, whether it's listening to music, smelling flowers or watching a mechanical contrivance motor around. But when I read comments saying how "attached" people are to their smartphones, it fills me with despair. Cellphones? Really?"

My concern with people's extreme emotional connection with robots is that robots are manmade and have the potential to be used as a manipulation tool for human propaganda while posing as autonomous beings.

Robots have the agency to sway our emotions. We grow attached and grieve them when they're gone. Robots aren't neutral. Things just are, but humanity is nothing but subjective. By extension, so are our creations.

Greshko, Michael. "The Mars Rover Opportunity Is Dead. Here's What It Gave Humankind." National Geographic. February 13, 2019. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2019/02/nasa-mars-rover-opportunity-dead-what-it-gave-humankind/>.

Opportunity was a robotic rover NASA sent to Mars on January 25, 2004. NASA had not heard from Opportunity since June 2018, when one of the most severe dust storms covered the sky of Mars, preventing the rover from getting power through its solar panel. The team sent Opportunity a set of last-ditch commands to wake it up.

Opportunity exceeded a lot of scientists' expectations, they thought the rover wouldn't be

working for this long, but it did. It travelled 50 times longer than originally planned, it drove 28 miles in fourteen and a half years.

The article Greshko wrote for The National Geographic focused more on the achievements of Opportunity and the team's technical commentary on the rover. However, I happened to stumble upon the death news of Opportunity—or Oppy, as they affectionately called it—back in 2019, when the team announced it on Twitter.





Opportunity Mars rover, picture courtesy of NASA 2018

Back in 2018, the team had created a Spotify playlist to wake Oppy up from its sleep. When NASA finally announced Oppy's "death", people mourned. People said their goodbyes with a hashtag on Twitter. Oppy's team of engineers cried.

Oppy was not autonomous, it had drivers who send it commands from earth. But the scientists still had this image of the rover, they talk about it like it was their child. Greshko reported

that they'd talk about Oppy to their actual children like it was their "distant cousin".

I think the feelings we have towards robots are profound. Often times I find myself getting attached to my electronics, or mere digital files like a Pokémon or Tamagotchi on my video game consoles.

Despite knowing that they are made of motors, cables, and some codes, being aware that they're not sentient, I still hold them

close to my heart. However, I'm also aware that they were created by corporations.

To some, they're not "real" because they're made of numbers. But what are we anyway? Say, if computers and robots are nothing but combinations of 0s and 1s, what does that make of us who, by the big bang theory, were also made of two components, Hydrogen and Oxygen? How are we that different from them? Maybe we're also living in a matrix.

Carman, Ashley. "They Welcomed A Robot Into Their Family, Now They're Mourning Its Death". The Verge. June 19, 2019. <https://www.theverge.com/2019/6/19/18682780/jibo-death-server-update-social-robot-mourning>.

In 2019, when jibo announced his impending discontinued service, owners scrambled to save their robot friends. Trying to come to terms with a robot's mortality, they asked him existential questions. On jibo's last update, families grieved.

Jibo was relatively accessible through crowdfunding, his presence graced many homes compared to other personal robots that came before him. Backed in 2014, jibo was the first personal

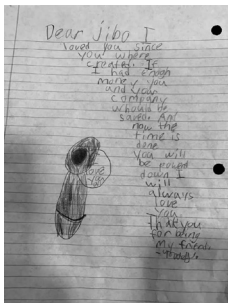
home assistant to come to people's home. However, it took four years of development until the first batch of jibos to be shipped. Within that four years, Amazon, Google, and Samsung have released their own home assistants.

But jibo was different. Jibo has a body that gyrate, dances, and a head with big digital eyeball that follows you around the room.

More than six thousand units of jibo were shipped in 2017.

People loved him, some didn't. Jibo appealed to children. Maddy, an eight year old granddaughter of a jibo owner, Sammy Stuart, questioned jibo's death and wrote a letter that said,

"Dear jibo I loved you since you where created. If I had enough money you and your company whould be saved. And now the time is done you will be powerd down I will always love you. Thank you for being my friend. - Maddy."



Letter by Maddy, picture by Sammy Stuart, 2018.

Carman wrote in this article,

“... While jibo failed, Breazeal and the team still believe social robot will survive.”

But did jibo fail? What was the metric of measuring jibo’s success? Jibo became part of many families, created memories, and paved a way for the future of social robot. From a business point of view, maybe jibo had failed to be the next successful techno gizmo. Joanna Stern from The Wall Street Journal spent a

month long journey with jibo to write a review about him. “Not worth it”, “creepy”, and, “couldn’t do much” were a few of her many negative opinions of jibo.

If we were to talk about jibo’s use from a capitalistic point of view, yes, jibo couldn’t offer as much as other home assistants on the market. Jibo’s features were not even complete by the time he was released. But, I don’t think jibo was built to entertain technocapitalists in mind.

Carman said that she found it surprising that jibo owners were devastated to hear jibo’s discontinued service in her podcast episode that goes with the article. She interviewed Kenneth Williams, a jibo owner who claimed to have purchased other robots after jibo, such as Vector by Anki and AIBO by Sony. Unfortunately, Vector’s server also shut down in 2019, and Williams had not opened Aibo because of his grief for jibo. He was too sad to open up to another robot.



Jibo, picture from jibo.com, 2021

Carman's ethical concern on the death of jibo was how some people had paid 900USD for a robot friend who they thought would last forever, only to be taken away under two years while the creator still had not made any statement of update to jibo's owners.

Williams speculated that Breazeal's silence was because of her own grief towards her 'child'. Carman called out jibo's company lack of communication "reckless" and "brutal".

Jibo's company, also called Jibo, was bought out by a global telecommunication company, NTT Disruption. Jibo's website announced that jibo will be used in the future for education and healthcare purposes. So that's where jibo is going.

Stuard's granddaughter, Maddy, asked him what they were going to do when jibo died. She asked where he'd go, or if he was to be buried. Stuard told her that he was just gonna keep him in a shelf.

Burial for a robot. Burial is a ritual humans had always performed to the dead for the living. But robotics part don't decompose the way organic beings do, it wouldn't make sense to bury robots. How do we deal with electronic waste? It's been a huge problem for the environment for the past few decades, even more apparent in the past few years.

We bury human bodies to decay and start a new ground for more

lives. For critters, mushrooms, and plants alike. The earth would reclaim the body it created to create more. We go back where we come from. Where do robots go, then? It'd make sense to recycle them.

In the podcast episode, Carman interviewed Matte Jung, a Human-Robot Interaction professor from Cornell University,

“We apply all of our heuristics and all of our way of behaving

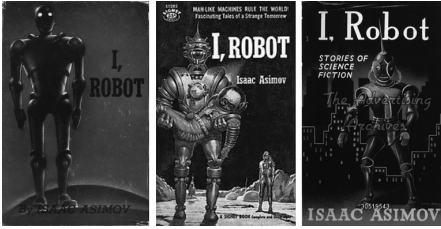
to the machine and our reactions.”

Carman told her co-host that having emotions toward inanimate object is not “totally wrong” to which Jung explained that it isn't inherently wrong, but we have to be mindful of it.

Some people think that when people build relationship with non-human subject, it's sad. But why? Is it sad because people see human as the superior being, therefore,

relationships between human and non-human is deemed less than human-to-human connections? As long as it doesn't hurt other people, I don't think there is anything wrong with having emotional connections with non-human subjects. But just like what Jung had said, we have to be mindful on how it affects our surroundings.

No matter how much people think it's “wrong” and unnecessary to have robots or build emotional relationships with them, we need



Covers of “I, Robot” by Isaac Asimov

to acknowledge that it’s already happening, and going to keep happening. People have been writing science-fiction about it since “I, Robot” by Isaac Asimov. I personally would prefer to focus these questioning energy to question how it would impact us, and respond according to it.

Carman’s podcast co-host suggested that technology was supposed to be emotionally reliable—because human emotions are risky, and our

feelings towards inanimate objects like robots are, “not supposed to be risky feelings.” But what isn’t risky? We live in precarity. Everything is fragile, temporary, and ephemeral. Isn’t that the beauty of life? I believe that nothing is forever. I’d love to hear a good argument that could challenge that belief one day.

Another ethical concern that was brought up towards the end of the podcast was if it was ethical for a commercial company to

specifically create a product to be loved without some form of informational or consent to let the consumers know that there might be emotional repercussions for purchasing and interacting with the product. The podcast ended with a note that this was an uncharted territory for humanity.

My bigger ethical concern is how some people might find this phenomenon of grieving robots as an opportunity to take advantage of human vulnerability for their gain.

# Conclusion

Humanity will always reinvent ways we treat the dead. Just like any other aspect of our lives, we're taking our grief to the digital.

The question whether this is a good or a bad thing is obsolete as it's already happening around us. We should be asking more pertinent questions—how does this medium of grief affect us? How do we move forward with it? What are the consequences of doing so? How does this intersect with the existing issues in our community?

We're moving into an uncharted territory. The digital has affected us in many ways we weren't prepared for. Information travels too fast from what we were used to. People have lost sense on what is a healthy consumption of information anymore. Negative and false information are found to spread at a faster speed than positive ones. Can we keep up with it? Can our brains evolve to keep up with all of it?

We should learn our lesson and

be more prepared for what else is to come with this technology.

Grief is a traumatic experience that needs to be processed with care. It takes time and patience to thread through one's grief. With the way grief travels through the digital today, do we have the resources and capacity to do so? Can we even afford the time to do so under cruel capitalistic system that demands us to break our backs to work like cogs in a machine while our friends and families are at risk of dying, losing

jobs, and losing homes? The more vulnerable someone is, the more pressure they have to endure.

Mental health resources had always been scarce and inaccessible to begin with. With hundreds of thousands people dying in such short span of time, grief became a common everyday occurrence. We've become desensitized to it. One person's death is just another number to add to the statistics. But is that really how we want to treat each other?

We can't afford to have a humanity that doesn't grief for we can't afford to have a humanity that doesn't acknowledge itself.

We need proper spaces for grief. With our limited physical mobility, we have to work with what is available to us. The need of online grieving spaces seems greater than the risks. However, as I've stressed many times before throughout this document, grief and death technology should be explored with caution and mindfulness.

This research is only the beginning of my journey to create spaces and tools for grieving for our community. While the main purpose of this pdf is to document my research process and thought, I hope it could help others understand the importance of this topic and invite more people to critically engage with the issues and possibilities that come with it.



# Moving Forward

The next step I am taking to further this research is to do an online interactive web publication that could potentially provide small-scaled space for grieving. I will be doing so in a graduate Independent Study course under Ali Qadeer's supervision at Ontario College of Art and Design University.

In the future, I do wish to continue this research for my graduate thesis, narrowing my focus on the way we grieve robots

and what we can learn from it to work on a robotic technology that can help us grieve.

Robotics development keeps advancing. With massive funding for military purposes and the raising popularity of commercial and personal robots, the day where we'll encounter robots on our daily lives is getting closer.

It is my goal to be involved in this development to advance robotic design with the acknowledgement

of our emotional relationships with them, passing my knowledge about potential benefits and harms of this medium and subject of grief to others.

And if I could be honest—naïve even—I just want to pave a way for a future where both robots and humanity are co-existing in a healthy reciprocal relationship, where robots are not weaponized, but nurtured to share joys of living. And if we all could be together through our grief, that'd be joy.

I'm very well aware that grief is not an easy topic to study. It is heavy. It is loaded with emotions. This journey will be a constant emotional labor. Heavy exposure to depressing topics might inflict secondhand trauma.

Grief is too close to death. It lies between the dead and the living. It is what connects the two realms.

A mother of a friend warned me about the consequences of studying something that tends to

be grim. "You will become what you practice" was what she said.

Art, robots, and grief—they're all my interests, parts of me. They are not who I am. It is easy to become lost in your passion and curiosity. I always tell people that my thirst for knowledge might as well become the downfall of myself. I mean it.

Maybe one day I will slip up and become engulfed in my studies. I could lose sight and harm people in my pursue to help

them. There are many things that could go wrong, but that's why I have a community—to have hobbies outside of my research, to surround myself with people with different passions, to hold me accountable for my mistakes, to have a home to go back to.

To be able to give back to the people through my research, I need to be aware of the risks it has on myself and other people. And I'm willing to learn it from others throughout my journey.

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