

## **A digital eternity?**

### **Issues and perspectives surrounding digital death**

Special Issue edited by Jacques Cherblanc and Fiorenza Gamba

For twenty-five years now, digital technology has been an environment in which a room has opened up not only for the discourse on death but also for its commemoration and experience. Since the appearance on the Internet in April 1995 of the World Wide Cemetery, the first online memorial site, death has overcome the frontiers of specialized scientific analysis (both human biomedical and social), law (the notions of identity and the post-mortem properties of data in particular), administrative and bureaucratic management (concerning funeral homes and public funeral services), of its religious preoccupation (which the different faiths confront in an eschatological perspective), of its artistic transfiguration (as literature, poetry, cinema, plastic arts have shown over the centuries and still show today), of its obsessive thematization (necrophilia, profanation, etc.).

The initiative of Canadian engineer Michael Kebbee (quickly followed by others similar) starting from a strictly personal context - his own illness - opened up a space focused on two aspects which later proved to be fundamental: on the one hand, the possibility for all concerned to express the emotions related to death according to their own personal experiences and needs, thanks to a relatively simple and accessible technology; on the other hand, through this same technology, the possibility to communicate and share their own grief and mourning with a community of people in the same condition. Much has changed since then. First of all, digital technology. If we were to retrace a brief history of digital death, we would include in this expression the different forms in which attention to death could manifest itself through digital technology.

From the first virtual cemeteries, very similar to classic obituaries, to the most modern, closer to video games; and from the first web pages dedicated ad hoc to commemorations with a system of personal pages managed by site administrators, we have moved on to platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, where user initiative has become more marked, sometimes even problematic (Gamba 2016). More recently, it is the digital legacy that offers service packages, where the management of one's digital data becomes an opportunity for individuals to design their own Digital Afterlife (Graham, Gibbs & al. 2013).

The digital nature of death is also expressed in video games, sometimes even in a very realistic way with the scientific use of these games to better understand, for example, near-death experiences (NDEs) and their effects (Barberia, Oliva & al. 2018). Currently, however, artificial intelligence represents the new frontier of digital death. Deadbots, avatars, holograms produced with personal data and animated by specific algorithms broaden the field of digital death, which moves from commemoration to possible immortality in which the deceased individual can become the protagonist. Yet, this new ritual dimension, which questions the separation of the dead and the living (Thomas, 1975), is not entirely new (Cherblanc, 2011). Secondly, the focus on death in the public space has changed: topics such as euthanasia, end of life, cremation, organ donation, and, of course, digital death are now part of the civil society debate and the political and legal agenda, which lists the discourse of death among the signs of civilization. This does not automatically imply that death has ceased to be a taboo, but that it's a complex topic in complex societies.

Finally, the identity aspirations - both collective and individual - which in our post-mortal societies (Lafontaine 2008, Jacobsen 2017) aim to an infinite extension of life towards a condition of a-mortality, which involve the sense of limits and the difference between life, death, and immortality. The interaction of these conditions and the expression of needs related to them has revealed a great complexity concerning death, memory, mourning, immortality,

and commemoration. On the one hand, digital death, death in the digital world, raises many complex questions about ethics, privacy, self-determination of each human being, or his or her overcoming towards the posthuman (Gamba 2020).

On the other hand, it plays an important role in crises such as the Coronavirus pandemic that has recently become and continues to become established. For example, it contributes to transforming physical rituals into digital ritualizations to alleviate the restrictions imposed by COVID-19. This is shown by sites such as *InMemori*, which offers a wide range of commemorative services to protect the private and fragile dimension of the bereaved, or the memorial *Ogni vita è una storia* (every life is a story), which was opened in full speed by the daily newspaper *Eco di Bergamo* last spring to give relatives, spouses and families the opportunity to commemorate the dead of COVID-19.

However, the question remains as to what extent these ritual innovations protect against possible complications of mourning (Maltais and Cherblanc, 2020). The journal *Etudes sur la mort* (Studies on Death) calls for contributions for the thematic issue 157: *A digital eternity? Issues and perspectives surrounding digital death*, to welcome in its pages reflections not only on the current situation of the use of digital technology concerning death and the issues that accompany it but also to critically identify the perspectives, possible developments, and the imaginary that animate the relationship of death to the digital. While it is undeniable that this relationship is now a fashionable subject (one need only consult any search engine to confirm this), it is also a tangible sign of interest and importance that the subject has acquired (Bourdeloie 2015), not only within the narrow confines of the disciplines classically assigned to its treatment but also in a more broadly interdisciplinary perspective, following the wishes expressed in this respect by the founder of Thanatology, Louis-Vincent Thomas, almost fifty years ago (Thomas 1975).

This is why the call for papers is deliberately general in terms of the competencies called for, and any contributions from different disciplines and perspectives, whether in theoretical essays, empirical research results, or artistic experiments, are welcome. Likewise, the call calls for a timely examination of the most current issues and emerging perspectives in the field.

## Themes

As a guideline, contributions could address, inter alia, the following themes:

Death, digital and ethical issues

Borders of AI or borders of death? Death, algorithms, and immortality?

Mourning, memory, and oblivion

Identity and Digital Afterlife

Digital rituals: personalization and hybridization Online funerals and crises

## Submit an article

Proposals for papers (between 500 and 1000 words) in French or English should be sent to Jacques Cherblanc [Jacques\\_Cherblanc@uqac.ca](mailto:Jacques_Cherblanc@uqac.ca)  
and

Fiorenza Gamba [Fiorenza.Gamba@unige.ch](mailto:Fiorenza.Gamba@unige.ch)

They should also include the following information:

- Name, affiliation, and contact details of the author;
- Keywords (3 to 5);
- Indication of the title of the call for Paper, "A digital eternity? Issues and perspectives surrounding digital death" in the subject field of the email.

#### Deadlines

- Deadline for submission of a proposal for Article 30.03.2021 ;
- Notification to the authors of the acceptance or rejection of their proposal 30.04.2021 ;
- Submission of the article in Word format (25,000 to 30,000 characters including spaces and bibliography) following the Recommendations to Authors (see attached document) 10.06.2021 ;
- Expertise of the articles and recommendations to the authors (acceptance, refusal, revision) 10.09.2021
- Final version of article 15.10.2021 ;
- Publication 15.11.2021.