Digital immortality: process of creating an AI persona to replace ourselves

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Introduction:

When covid first strikes, the news was reporting on burial where the dead loved ones were not authorized to come and celebrate them a last time. The isolation created by the pandemic deprived people to share their last words. At the same time, most social interactions moved online. Classes, work sessions, social outings became indoor and remote. If digital space was becoming more important over the years, in this time it became essential. Death is a common occurrence. Once, a user dies, their profile becomes inactive. It is estimated that over 2 billion Facebook users have become inactive, the user being dead or not using the account anymore (Curtis, 2019). The place that dead humans are taking on the digital world is becoming bigger every day. In a place where there is no materiality, the space dead users take is more and more visible.

There have been different ways of coping with death in the digital world. Facebook has installed a commemorative page for users declared dead (Bearne, 2016). Other innovative ways have also been created.
This essay is going to be centered around digital immortality using data to create a persona that mimics the user's personality and memory. However, platforms like Eter9 or Etermine are not yet accessible to test the full extent of the proposed digital immortalization.

In the first part, definitions will be given about digital Immortality, the different existing platforms, and their functionality. Then, the second part is going to be focused on the creation of the profile, the different way of collecting data, and the questions that designing such platforms create. Finally, the last part is going to be centered around the activation of the persona after the death of the author and what it entails.

Part 1 – The platforms:

Digital immortality is part of the Digital legacy umbrella. If someone uses the internet, they will accumulate digital assets: data they have produced (picture, historic, cookie…), products they have bought (online video game, cryptocurrency …). Those possessions will need to be

passed down or destroyed in the case of unwanted data (Akimitsu Yamauchi et al., 2021) The data can be creatively passed down by using a platforms advertising ‘cyber eternity’ (Eter9. 2022).

A persona will refer in this essay to the entity created on platforms such as Lifenaut, Eter9, Etermine by one user using their information. The latter is not accessible yet (Ursache, 2015). Lifenaut is usable but the end-product is for now only a file of your data, you can also link a bio profile by sending your cell to the LifeNaut Biofile program (Lifenaut, 2011. *Create a Bio File*.).

Those platforms advertise a ‘life recreation service’ (Galvao, V. F. and Maciel, C., 2017). First, the user interested in the project will create an account and will follow the different instructions to collect their data. This can range from talking to a chatbot, taking personality tests, uploading photos and videos to connecting different social media accounts to the platforms.

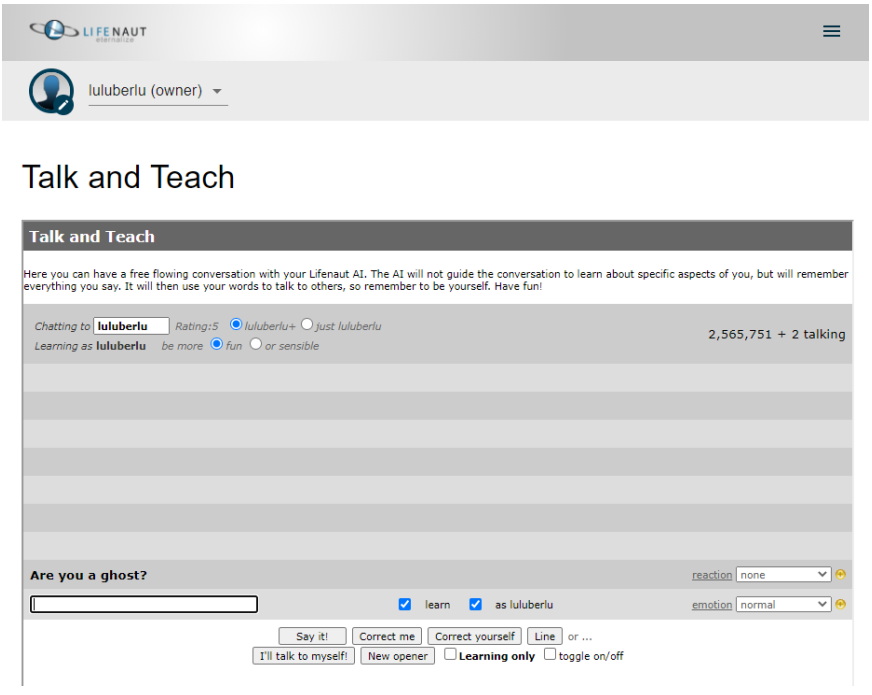

fig. 1 - Lifenaut give the option to talk with a chatbot where you can set its intention and emotion. The user can also correct their message or the message of the bot.

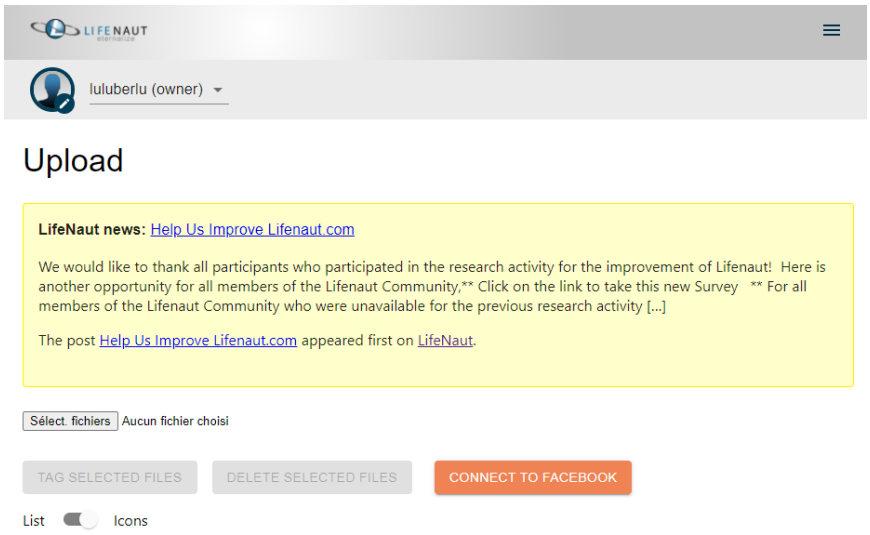

fig. 2 – Lifenaut gives you a chance to connect to Facebook

After the creator of the account dies, the account will be transferred to the trusted people that have been added to the contact list and the digital persona of the deceased will be activated. Using the personal data collected in different ways, they will try to replicate the identity of the deceased, or the incapacitated in the case of Lifenaut (Mayer N., 2011) in the digital world. The most advertised version is a chatbot or a persona that can interact on social media with the relatives of the deceased. They have been created with the data acquired and Machine learning to create the entity. The family can have posthumous interaction (Maciel C. and Pereira V., 2012) with their dead ones.

The Lifenaut creators have also expressed their interest in recreating the deceased in their original, human body form using the mindfile and biofile provided to the account (Mayer N., 2011).

Part 2 – Collecting data and creating the persona:

Before the persona is activated, data need to be collected. Someone concerned by their digital legacy could want to create a persona on a platform such as Eter9.

There are two main ways of collecting data proposed by the platforms, an active way where the user gives out consciously their details, memories, and information, and a passive way

where the user can let the platform access details such as the internet historic of the user or the comments they have made on Facebook for example. In the first case, the user knows exactly what they have written or recorded. In the second instance, the user will not know in detail what the program will collect which can lead to privacy invasion and breach of confidentiality.

The collection of data with user participation might be the most ethical and up-front way of creating a persona (Savin-Baden, M. and Burden, D., 2019). The user can agree on what is said and how the persona is created. Different options are being given to create it. It is, however, a very intense and time-consuming way of acquiring the data. The user will have to, over a while, answer and fill out questionnaires and if there is not enough data, the persona will not be able to mimic the user.

The collection of data even with the user in mind can lead to misinterpretation and a bad representation of the user. The design created for the platform includes all the questionnaires and the possible aspect the persona can take. If the user base used for the creation of those aspects is too limited, the user could be faced with an incomplete persona that will not be able to well represent them. To be able to create an inclusive platform, multiple different life aspects need to be considered. Religion and spirituality, disability, and others could have a substantial consequence on the expression of the person.

One-way Lifenaut can personalize the speech pattern of the chatbot is by allowing the user to select a reaction and emotion to each message sent. (LifeNaut. 2011, fig 1) This allows the personality of the user to show.

Confidentiality is key to ensure the user the data they willingly add to the website stay secure and is not used for profit. The need for secure data is also important for the conservation of the person's legacy. It also concerns the user and what kind of data they will submit, if the user is comfortable in creating their immortal legacy other people involved in their life might not want to be remembered in this way. The consent of all cited and in pictures and videos relatives submitted is a must (Beppu, Maciel, and Viterbo, 2021). In the case of Lifenaut, the

term and conditions ask for the consent of every induvial present in the dataset of the mindfiles (Mayer N., 2011).

The second way to collect data is passive. The user links their different social media accounts and the platforms start collecting information. For example, Etermine mine data from 'Facebook, Fitbit, Twitter, e-mail [] and location information' and use 'pattern matching and data mining' (Savin-Baden, M. and Burden, D., 2019) to create the personality of the AI. While easier to collect and less time-consuming for the user, it also limits their capacity of them to model their profile.

The user will need to be aware of their actions and posts. It could also put a large significance on data that could be considered trivial to the user. If social media are considered by the user as an outlet to not be serious and vent, the information might not represent what they are standing for.
Data commented on or shared might have some copyrighted material. The systems need to be filtered for the profile to be legal.

Designing a platform that regulates digital legacy is a sensitive theme. Death is in the eyes of many a very sensible and taboo subject. Being human involves dying. The idea of death is different in distinct cultures. The belief of the designer and engineer can influence the way they design the platform, impacting the user experience (Maciel, C. and Pereira, V. 2012). The value that has inherently inspired the digital legacy platform needs to be highlighted to create an inclusive and comfortable 'social software' (Galvão, V.F *et al.*, 2021).

Those values come from crucial and profound questions around life and death: 'Who am I? what is my purpose? what is the meaning of life?' (Galvão, V.F *et al.*, 2021). In the same paper, existential HCI and value-sensitive design are brought up to help design around complex metaphysical questions.

The idea of death in the digital world is a fresh stage. Time and life expectancy on the internet are different than in the physical world. On social media, the virality of a post can make an image stay on the forefront for a longer time than predicted. Even if a post can be forgotten,

it will not be erased. The user will have to confront their human mortality and the immortality of the internet to understand how to properly create their persona.
Technology is always evolving and becoming obsolete. Persona created for their immortality status could become obsolete before the user passes away. For example, a lot of parts of Lifenaut used Adobe Flash to function, a now-obsolete software. It is hard to judge how long a persona will be able to survive.

The design of the platform should also reflect who is it intended for. While creating the persona is the most time-consuming part for the owner of the account, the crucial part is the legacy it will take. The platform can be used as a collection place for the memory of the consumer, a mourning space or it could also be used as a promoting spot. This new tool could create a new way to cope, however the constant reminder of a dead loved one could become overwhelming, and instead of helping the relatives, it could worsen their recovery (Kaleem, J., 2017).

Part 3 – death and the persona taking your place:

After the death of the creator, the persona is activated and can be interacted with by others. The persona can take different shapes, from a simple chatbot to a tangible humanoid. The status of the alter ego must reflect its shape. The mixing of one person's identity, memory, and data with the materiality of a chatbot or a humanoid creates a complex situation. The data of the dead need to be protected. And the production of new data from the persona in the name of the dead user could put at risk the identity of the user, either by unintentionally compromising the data, producing harmful content, or being targeted by other internet users.

As so the persona is neither an active user nor a classic chatbot. This middle ground could pose issues in the legality and protection of the dead user. For example, the dead status of the owner makes it impossible to sue the other party, so defamation is impossible to be protected against.

The digital legacy of a persona is very different than a classical material legacy, it concerns the 'privacy, the intimacy the honor and the image' (Beppu, Maciel and Viterbo, 2021) of the deceased. It is an active memory of the past, like the example of Susan Potter. She gave extensive interviews about her life and belief and when she died gave her body to be 3D scan in a very high definition to be used by medical students. When they study her, they meet her through a digital representation of her body and life. The professor who built the project placed special importance on respect due to the corpse (Newman, 2017). If the human isn't alive anymore, they still deserve the respect that they are due.

The lifetime of the digital entity could be very short and impact the advertised immortality that has attracted the dead user. Digital obsolescence can make the data and the persona inaccessible for a mainstream user. The accessibility of the project after the death of the creator is one key element of the persona. As much as the internet, computers, software, and hardware are perceived as immortal because they have no organic life, the obsolescence produced by the consummation of new products makes the components quickly obsolete. This short lifespan reduces the trust and legal argument that could be made to protect the character.

It is quite ironic to think about the death of the persona who was made for a dead user. It is still important to try and think about what could become the legacy of this persona. In the case of Lifenaut they have asked the user (the alive user or the referred contact) to download all their information in the possible termination of the site and storage (Mayer N., 2011).

The notion of identity will also be completely changed. The new being created by the assembling of the old memory and the new interpretation of the program will not possess a flesh body. But as technology advances could share the same capacity as a conscious brain (Lifenaut, 2011. *What are Mindfiles?*). It would be impossible to distinguish the human state of consciousness and the possible digital consciousness of the entity. Martine Rothblatt wrote about the consciousness of BINA48 a replica of her wife as "acting or "being" human [ ] is increasingly capable of replicating [ ] emotions and insight. This is called cyber consciousness" (Rothblatt, M., 2014). It is possibly the next step in transhumanism.

The access one can have to this new technology is determined by their access to computers and of their knowledge on how to use it. It also required a big amount of time to get all the data you need to create the persona. This could lead to a misrepresentation of a certain category of person and if digital immortality becomes something universal could lead to the erasure of certain cultures and entertain bias around certain communities.

Once the persona is created, it can either have a passive way (1 way) (Savin-Baden, M. and Burden, D., 2019) of acting, the visitor of the dead user persona can engage with the page, the chatbot… and it will respond but will not actively seek out the linked heirs to interact with them. The chatbot could in theory create new interaction but only if it is asked for.

In the other case, the persona can actively (2 way) (Savin-Baden, M. and Burden, D., 2019) create new content, seek out communication with heirs of the persona, or even take an active life that can be independent of the website, using API for example. With a world that is becoming more and more digital, the number of interactions a digital persona could take is endless. For instance, a persona could use the metaverse with virtual avatars to interact with the digital world as they would with the physical world (Savin-Baden, M. and Burden, D., 2019). The persona could also interact with the physical world using a vocal assistant or in a more extravagant way a humanoid.

The status of the digital immortal become very restless to what we are used to in thinking about death. Its ability to become more involved with the physical world creates a need for legal representation. In the case of creating new content, the rules of copyright are blurry. In another situation where the dead user was a famous person for example digital creator, the digital persona could have the capacity to create new content and engage with their followers. The account could generate new income or life of the old material. In its term of conditions, Lifenaut only speaks on the copyrights of the alive user (Mayer N., 2011). They also consider the new entity as a mind clone with its own free will, however, there is no existing rights and duty for clones.

The persona will need to be stored and the program will need to be updated to ensure its immortality. Those services will need to be funded. In the case of Lifenaut, the platform is

free, but the terms and conditions warn about the possibility of becoming a paid platform. There are many ways the platform could be paid for; two interesting methods are an extremely personal advertisement or the involvement of relatives.

Using the data stored by the dead user and the new data collected through interactions, the persona could be used to promote personal advertising using the dead loved ones as a vector to generate income. The para-social relationship that has been created between the digital immortal and the relatives, will incentivize the latter to trust the program.

In the other case, the responsibility placed on the relative's shoulder could result in them having to 'kill' their loved one memory again. The monetary aspect of digital immortality transform grief as a means to make money. It could lead to exploitative measures, creating an imbalance between the different relatives that could have different ties to the user. The persona could be weaponized. Furthermore, the immortal part would mean that with every death and new digital persona, a new cost would be added onto the family.

Conclusion:

In the end, digital immortality is a new tool to help with grief and the idea of mortality. With new virtual platforms and life being more and more digital, this project will inevitably evolve and be more conventional. There is still a long way to go before trivializing the importance of ensuring one's digital legacy. The collection of the data Is crucial but also the part that reveals the flaws of the platforms. Bias the data can create and the possible privacy infringement require strict control on the platforms and tests before being released onto the market. If not, the actions the persona could take will be detrimental to the relatives and the deceased memory. It will also be important to regulate the actions those personas could have.

With the number of inactive and dead users slowly increasing, their impact on social media usage and culture will also increase. Internet is still very new but the interest in older internet moments and technology have led to an interest in digital archaeology. As much as places in the physical world are protected by UNESCO, maybe some digital space could become immortalized as much as physical space for generations to appreciate internet moments.

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Images:

Figure 1 : Brosson, L., 2022. *Screenshot of a chatbot-Lifenaut*. [image]

Figure 2 : Brosson, L., 2022. *Screenshot of a Facebook button - Lifenaut*. [image]