Presence after Death

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Abstract

This paper examines some of the increasingly sophisticated attempts that humans make to evoke the presence of themselves or others after death. Research possibilities and ethical implications are addressed.

1. Introduction

Presence scholars have connected presence with many diverse aspects of our lives including art, entertainment, business, education and training, physical and psychological health care, and sexuality, but they seldom if ever have considered the concept in relation to our deaths. As a species, we have long used technology, first in the form of drawings, statues and grave markers, to evoke the sense of the presence of a person who is no longer living; but at the beginning of the 21st century, technology permits very sophisticated artificially intelligent and perceptually realistic replications of people who have died. Here we briefly consider technologies that can evoke presence after death, as well as some research opportunities and ethical implications that they suggest.

2. Beliefs and behaviors regarding death and bereavement

Because it is a universal, mysterious, and often disturbing phenomenon, we are naturally interested in death and develop complex beliefs and behaviors regarding it.

Throughout the centuries and the world, a variety of religious, philosophical and psychological theories and beliefs (e.g., life after death, resurrection, reincarnation and immortality [1]) have helped survivors of the deceased feel some sense of closeness with the departed, while shamans, mediums, clairvoyants and "channelers" have claimed to let us communicate with the dead.

"Until the twentieth century, maintaining a bond with the deceased had been considered a normal part of the bereavement process in Western society. In contrast, in the twentieth century the view prevailed that successful mourning required the bereaved to emotionally detach themselves from the deceased" ([2], Detachment Revisited). The current view is that continuing bonds with the deceased is normal and healthy [2].

3. Using technology to evoke presence after death

The living have often relied on technology – defined broadly as "a machine, device, or other application of human industrial arts… includ[ing] traditional and emerging electronic media… and traditional arts such as painting and sculpture" [3] – to help them attain some sense of physical and social presence or connection with the departed.

3.1. Treatment of the body

In many cultures an after-death ritual is the viewing of the body, which is presented to appear as close to the physical likeness of the deceased as possible in order to evoke, among other things, a sense that he/she is present with the survivors [4]. America in the late 1800s was said to be 'Egyptianized' as airtight coffins and arterial-injection embalming promised (but couldn't deliver) permanent preservation of the body [5]. Today thousands of people add their names to the donor roster for the controversial Gunther von Hagens' Body Worlds museum displays that feature "Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies" [6]. Pet taxidermy "allows pet owners to see, touch and hold their pets, and in a sense, "never have to let go" [7].

3.2. Grave markers, epitaphs and other memorials

The marking of the location that a person has been buried is another way to evoke the presence of that person. Epitaphs ("on the gravestone" in Greek) further identify and help evoke a sense of the deceased. Other types of memorials include roadside memorials, monuments, fountains, buildings named after the deceased, trees planted in their names, even less tangible objects such as endowed academic positions, scholarships, etc.

3.3. Paintings, statues and other art

In many cultures we create or commission drawings, paintings, photographs, sculptures, and statues to provide a sense of closeness with deceased family members as well as national figures.[10] Among the more interesting art forms are

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[10] This paper was inspired in part by the effectiveness of a

postmortem paintings and photography [8] [9]. We also recreate the presence of the dead with celebrity look-alikes, impersonators and tribute artists; stage shows (e.g., *Mark Twain Tonight*; theatrical productions (e.g., *Beatlemania*), and "living history presentations" [10].

3.4. Traditional print and electronic media

Americans and others often keep diaries, scrapbooks, photo albums, and audio and video recordings to maintain a connection with family members, living and dead. They write and read eulogies and obituaries after the passing of a loved one and assemble biographies to memorialize the deceased. Families often compile and record oral histories to keep the sights and sounds of the deceased present in the family life.

3.5. New forms of electronic media

Emerging technologies seem likely to evoke the presence of the dead in ways that are even more physically, socially and psychologically vivid and "real" than have traditional technologies.

Memorials sites on the Internet, for instance, combine many features of the earlier media in a convenient, accessible and multisensory venue.

Other new technologies may bring audio recordings and holographic images to gravesites to evoke the presence of the deceased [11] [12].

A disturbing application of new technology for staying connected with the deceased involves installing cameras in caskets before burial and webcasting the images [13].

Evolving film technologies bring deceased actors back to the living, seeming to interact with modern actors and to "[speak] lines [they] never spoke and [make] gestures [they] never made" [14]. Sophisticated techniques of digital manipulation and presentation have even been used to recreate the experience of a live concert by a deceased artist (e.g., "Sinatra at the London Palladium" [15]). Animatronics (mechanized puppets) is used to evoke the presence of American presidents at Disneyworld [16].

The company All Digital has introduced DiNA by Lynn Hersman Lesson, a virtual "person" who comes to "life" on a wall-sized computer screen through artificial intelligence technology [17]. The enormous image of a woman's face nods in anticipation of a conversation and then engages in it. DiNA can conceivably be designed to be whoever a user wants her to be, living or dead.

Hanson Robotics has created an android replication of deceased science fiction writer Philip K. Dick. It has a real-to-life shell and is programmed with an "intellect" via artificial intelligence and "personality" via a mathematically derived extraction of the author's life. It tracks faces with cameras

inserted in its eyes and recognizes people in a crowd and perceives expressions [18].

Hiroshi Ishiguro of ATR Intelligent Robotics and Communication Laboratories has created the android Geminoid HI-1, a "silicone-and-steel doppelganger" that is an "exact duplicate" of himself [19].

Meanwhile, Microsoft [20] and the U.S. Government [21] are exploring ways of collecting our individual experiences. It's not difficult to imagine a day when we'll store nearly all of our experiences in a computer and then install them in an artificially intelligent android that looks and acts nearly exactly like us as it interacts with our family and friends after we're gone.

4. Ethical implications

Some of the modern means of evoking the presence of the dead – e.g., the webcam in the casket – raise obvious ethical concerns. The more intriguing issues stem from our growing ability to recreate a person in their living form, as we move beyond simple text, drawings, photographs and even film and video recordings all the way to interactive and intelligent avatars and vivid, artificially intelligent androids. When they are widely available, how will we use them and what effects might they have? Will we choose to make realistic or idealized versions of the deceased? Would it be healthy to live with 'people' who are gone? Could they eventually affect us and the world as do the living? Is using these technologies to recreate ourselves for after we're gone somehow against the 'natural order'? What are the ethical implications of lives 'lived' forever?

5. Research directions and conclusion

We should study which current technologies, and characteristics of technologies such as realism, vividness, movement, interactivity, immersiveness, etc., are more and less effective in evoking the sense of presence of someone who has died, and which are most comforting to the bereaved. We should also study which current technologies are most used and which future technologies are most desired by the public, and why.

Few experiences are as universal as mortality and facing the loss and difficult adjustment when those close to us die. Technology has long provided the means for us to evoke the presence of the deceased, but that evocation is becoming increasingly vivid and realistic. While this may cause substantial harm if the technology is used thoughtlessly or unethically, it also raises the very hopeful possibility of easing the grieving process. Presence, and presence research, is likely a key to accomplishing that important goal.

References

References are available from the first author.

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charcoal drawing and an oil painting in evoking the sense of presence of the first author's deceased dog (see http://matthewlombard.com/Sidra).