What Remains

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What if you could talk to someone you love who has passed away? What if you could leave a digital version of yourself so your children can talk to you after your death? In a time when AI is poised to permeate every aspect of human life, this documentary series (6 x 30 minutes) follows a curious and empathetic host as s/he explores the roots of our grief and mourning practices and traditions to consider the implications of emerging "digital immortality" technologies and the "grief tech" industry.

What Remains

In each episode, this host-driven series will engage the audience by showing a first-hand experience of what these "digital immortality" services offer, asking thought-provoking questions, and reflecting on personal stories related to the themes of death and mourning.

Concept Overview

The acronym "AI" has been heralded as the next "greatest technological disruption that will change the world." It applies to anything, from scientific research to job automation, from political elections to mental health, and now, with the introduction of "digital immortality" services, even to death. This new insdustry, known as "grief tech", uses AI to create interactive avatars of dead people using a person's information and data from social media and personal archives. Such innovations may be seen as as a promise as much as threat. However, in order to inform our imagination of what might come next, and to better understand the opportunities and challenges of these technologies, we would like to take the time to listen to what the dead have to say about this topic, and learn from their living legacy in contemporary grief and mourning practices around the world.

Format and Structure

Each episode will tackle an aspect of the current debate on "digital immortality" by looking at a particular cultural practice or tradition, either current or directly connected to the present. In conversations with people who know the topic from different perspectives, we will explain and highlight its historical, geographical and cultural context, as much as what makes it relevant to the universal human experience, which should allow us to make more inform predictions of the potential impact of "digital immortality" in our future mourning practices.

Episode 1: "Whose dead is it anyway?" — This episode explores the potential controversy around personal data and who really owns it by looking at the Huron-Wendat's "Feast of the Death" and their struggle to decide over the remains of their ancestors.

Episode 2: "Family affairs" — This episode looks at how families make decisions about the remains of their deceased loved ones, and how "digital immortality" adds an extra layer of complexity to these discussions. We will learn about how the Toraja people live with their mumified remains of their ancestors and how this peculiar practice helps to keep families together.

Episode 3: "Tap once if you can hear me" — In this episode, we will look at the business side of "digital immortality" and what common business terms such as "acqustion," "life-time customer value" and "attrition" mean in the context of a industry that deals on profound human emotions. At the same time, we will look at the rise of parapsychology and spiritism "services" in Victorian England.

Episode 4: "Do not disturb" — This episode asks what it means to have a repository of "immortal" beings in the cloud (a purgatory of sorts) and what could be done about these unclaimed souls as the "grief tech" industry grows. We will also explore the allegories of death and after-life found in American pop culture's representations of zombies and poltergeists.

Episode 5: "Something new, something old, something borrowed" — The ubiquitous presence of connected devices also means that humans are constantly interacting with them. In this episode we will look at how "constant connectivity" contrasts with other ritualistic and periodic mourning and remembrance traditions. We will also look at how, "El día de los muertos" was born out of crosscultural contact in modern-day Mexico and has been actualized over time.

Episode 6: "Hello? Is there anybody out there?" — In this episode we will look at some of the therapeutic uses of AI to help people overcome the loss of a loved one, and how the mental healthcare community is preparing to integrate this new technology. We will also look at Itaru Sasaki's "Wind Phone" project and what it says about individual and collective grief.

We propose to cast a benevolent look at the relationship of humans with death and loss across cultures in the eara of AI with an investigative and curious tone.

Visual Style and Tone

The visual style of the series underscores its thematic focus on continuity over rupture, giving it a distinct identity that resonates emotionally while inspiring curiosity. The aim is to represent technology as an extension of human endeavour and creativity, seamlessly interwoven into the fabric of traditional cultural narratives.

Natural lighting, earthy tones, and rich, saturated colors will dominate the sequences about traditional death rituals, highlighting human connection through tactile visuals of artifacts, practices and landscapes. These moments will feel grounded, evoking a sense of timelessness and shared experience.

In contrast, synthetic, nature-inspired images, along with visual motifs such as fractals, flowing networks, and biomimetic designs will merge with transitional techniques such as time-lapsed imagery or layered projections of past and present, connecting AI to the cycles of growth and transformation inherent in human traditions.

The interplay between these visual styles will create a dynamic tension that mirrors the series' core question: How do human societies embrace new tools and practices while holding on to deeply rooted traditions? This approach aims at redefining how viewers perceive AI, grounding it as an atropologic phenomenon, one that reflects a continuous human history rather than an alien disruption.

Why Now?

AI, and particularly "grief tech" are relatively new, but as Yuval Noah Harari puts it "AI is now at its amoeba stage, basically. But it won't take it billions of years to get to the dinosaur stage. It may take just 20 years because digital evolution is far, far faster than organic evolution." There are a few journalism pieces and documentaries that look at the irruption of "digital immortality" services" with a focus on its potential risks, but we want to take a step back and look at how these technologies relate to the living experience over hundreds, or even thousands of years of those who are developing them and learning to live with them: humans.

What remains is all about allowing context and historical depth to open up new perspectives and inform more elaborate opinions about the potential impact of these new technologies. This documentary series is mainly directed at the millennial generation, who, as the most-educated group of people in history, have faced unprecedented technological development and fast changes in culture, society and economics. All of this has allowed them to develop particular approaches to work, consumption, identity and life-meaning. Now, the introduction of "digital immortality" poses new existential questions to this generation as they prepare to deal with the loss of their boomer parents and set the stage for their children to understand their place in a future in which the promise and the threat of technology seems to be the replacement of humanity as the leading force in the world.

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