

SHORT RESEARCH ARTICLE

Synthetic afterlives: Deathbots as affective infrastructures of memory

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Abstract

This short research article interrogates the rise of digital platforms that enable ‘synthetic afterlives’, with a focus on how deathbots – AI-driven avatar interactions grounded in personal data and recordings – reshape memory practices. Drawing on socio-technical walkthroughs of four platforms – *Almaya*, *HereAfter*, *Séance AI*, and *You, Only Virtual* – we analyse how they frame, archive, and algorithmically regenerate memories. Our findings reveal a central tension: between preserving the past as a fixed archive and continually reanimating it through generative AI. Our walkthroughs demonstrate how these services commodify remembrance, reducing memory to consumer-driven interactions designed for affective engagement while obscuring the ethical, epistemological and emotional complexities of digital commemoration. In doing so, they enact reductive forms of memory that are embedded within platform economies and algorithmic imaginaries.

Keywords: AI; generative AI; synthetic afterlives; deathbots; platforms; memory

This short research article interrogates the irruption of digital platforms that claim to enable ‘synthetic afterlives’, exploring how they shape mnemonic work, particularly in the context of death. The concept of ‘necro-technologies’ is not new (Nansen *et al.* 2023), having evolved through various forms including gravestones, funeral books and memorial pages, as well as (more recently) ‘deathbots’; conversational bots or avatars programmed from the digital data of deceased persons (Bao and Zeng 2024). Deathbots differ, however, from earlier precedents in that they purport to offer forms of bidirectional ‘imaginal’ dialogue between the living and the dead (Brescó de Luna and Jiménez-Alonso 2024) – a technological response to practices hitherto thought of as belonging to the realm of magic, such as spiritualism and seances (Natale 2021). Key questions arise: How do these platforms encourage users to archive or digitally reconstruct a person’s past? What kinds of mnemonic resources do they produce? And how are these experienced by users? We explore how platforms intervene in memory practices through an analysis of four digital legacy services, elucidating what is at stake as (some of) our means for life story reflection and recollection move online, interacting evermore with algorithms and automation.

This article contributes to the special collection's focus on artificial intelligence (AI) and memory by examining how AI technologies reshape the cultural and technological conditions under which memory is made, mediated, and monetised (and by whom) in the context of deathbots. We focus on how users interact with AI architectures (eg, Large Language Models, or LLMs) through mediating agents such as deathbots, whose design choices and affective scripts – as well as their users' algorithmic imaginaries – shape both the experience and meaning of memory in AI-driven platformed environments. In doing so, we provide further evidence of the platformisation of memory (Smit 2024; Smit *et al.* 2024a) and explore how AI and memory can be researched at the intersection of digital memory, critical algorithm and digital death studies.

The four platforms – *Almaya*, *HereAfter*, *Seance AI*, and *You, Only Virtual* – operate within what has been termed the 'digital afterlife industry' (Öhman and Floridi 2017). While deathbots are often deployed in contexts of grief and raise important questions around digital personhood and the ethics of digital twins, in this article, we engage with these themes only briefly. Our focus lies instead on the mnemonic consequences of these technologies, particularly how they are framed and function as tools of remembrance rather than solely as instruments of mourning or attempts at emotional continuity (Meitzler *et al.* 2024). To support the analysis, we have carried out extensive socio-technical walkthroughs of these four platforms (Light *et al.* 2016; Ritter 2022; Troeger and Bock 2022).

Before presenting our findings, in the following section, we outline the theoretical framework that underpins our analysis. We then introduce the platforms under study and describe our methodological approach. Our analysis shows that the infrastructure of these platforms drives a tension between archiving the past as memory and continually reanimating it through algorithmic processes. These deathbots operate with a reductive conception of memory and connection that obscures the complexities of digital remembrance, and downplays the ethical and emotional implications of their often deceptive and commercially exploitative practices. We argue that memory is increasingly shaped by platform economies that monetise remembrance and reduce it to affective, consumer-driven interactions that change what it means to remember with AI, as well as to be remembered in a posthumous digital space.

Between remembering and talking to the dead

The platforms under scrutiny here are considered instances of death-tech (Arnold *et al.* 2017; Biçer and Yıldırım 2022), and many of the issues arising from them are resonant of studies into 'digital immortality' and social networks (Stokes 2015; Savin-Baden *et al.* 2017; Kania-Lundholm 2019; Kasket 2019; Öhman C and Watson 2019; Harrington 2020; Sisto 2020; Bassett 2022) and AI in death (Meese *et al.* 2015; Savin-Baden 2021). Scholars have raised important questions about how the development of synthetic afterlife technologies challenges our understanding of personhood, mortality, and, crucially for us here, memory (Hoskins 2024). As dialoguing with the dead increasingly happens across multiple modalities – varied data inputs, presentation techniques, and AI-driven responses – it suggests 'new kinds of social links and symbolic rituals' surrounding death (Sisto 2020) and potentially potent new forms of 'conversational pasts' (Hoskins 2024) produced through human-machine entanglements. These practices are therefore deeply (and explicitly) mnemonic, reshaping how memory is mediated, sustained, and performed through AI's architectural and interpretive filters. Our concern is not simply with what AI can do to memory in these processes but with how memory is commodified and emotionally shaped as a result.

If AI technologies increasingly shape how individuals relate to the past, they do so quite particularly in contexts of loss and remembrance, where they mediate access to synthetic

narratives of the deceased. In such cases, deathbots function as algorithmic mnemonic agents that not only reproduce traces of the dead but also actively participate in shaping how they are remembered. These systems further embed memory within platform logics (Smit *et al.* 2024a), raising significant epistemological and ethical concerns particularly as memory work is increasingly mediated by infrastructures that are opaque and shaped by affective economies.

In this context, deathbots can be seen as part of a broader algorithmic infrastructure of collective memory (Gensburger and Clavert 2024), whereby AI is increasingly understood as redistributing agency, challenging authorship, and reshaping how the past is constructed and experienced (Volynskaya 2024). Memory emerges as co-constructed through real-time interaction (Hoskins 2024) and probabilistic modelling (Smit *et al.* 2024b), raising in turn ethical concerns about transparency and accountability (Richardson-Walden and Makhortykh 2024), especially as AI-generated memory products reflect the socio-technical and economic systems from which they emerge (Gensburger and Clavert 2024). As Schuh (2024) noted, such artificial memory operates through plausibility rather than provenance, complicating truth claims while making synthetic history increasingly indistinguishable from archival reality. These dynamics are intensified in commercial applications, including digital afterlife services (Meitzler *et al.* 2024) and emotionally resonant platforms (Joanroy *et al.* 2025), where memory becomes affective and commodified; what Pilkington (2024) critiques as a form of ‘myopic memory’ under capitalism. Moreover, the persistence of digital traces – often beyond the control or awareness of users – alters traditional processes of forgetting, raising new challenges for how we grieve, remember, and let go (Hoskins 2024).

Underpinned by AI architectures, the emergence of synthetic afterlife technologies like deathbots reflects a broader shift in societal experiences of death where ‘symbolic representations’ of the dead become pervasive online (Morse 2023), and boundaries between the living and the dead increasingly porous (Stokes 2021), not least of all through the ‘trickery’ encouraged by these platforms as new forms of banal deception underscore our interactions with AI (Natale 2021: 129). These ‘technologies of illusion’ (Natale 2021) are sustained through what Airoldi (2022) termed ‘machine habitus’ whereby algorithmic outputs are culturally shaped performances informed as much by training data and design choices as by social norms. Central to these dynamics are user’s ‘algorithmic imaginaries’ (Bucher 2018) – that is, the emotional and cognitive frameworks through which people attribute agency, autonomy, or emotional presence to algorithmic systems. The simulation of empathy and connection (McStay 2023) is one of the most powerful – and ethically fraught – features of (death)bots. In the face of death, interacting with these platforms might also be understood as an example of the ‘algorithmic as if’ – a digitally mediated enactment of desires and relationships that reality can no longer fulfil (Kopelman and Frosh 2025: 2393).

Within this context, Meese *et al.* (2015) argue that memorialising and remembering have become entangled within the commercial start-up economy, raising fears that platforms will prioritise profitable or ‘consumable’ versions of the deceased, and of memory work. We consider deathbots here to function as platforms in that they are governed by algorithms, interfaces, and affordances designed for continuous interaction and data capture (Smit 2024; Smit *et al.* 2024a). Drawing on Poell *et al.*’s (2019) definition of ‘platformisation’, we highlight the combination of infrastructural, economic and governance dimensions which ‘reorganise’ cultural practices – including mnemonic ones – around platforms. In the context of memory, the platform society (van Dijck *et al.* 2018) refers to a socio-technical formation in which digital platforms not only host but actively structure, generate, and monetise remembrance practices, transforming memory into a data-driven, constantly updating, and commercially mediated process shaped by algorithms. Deathbot services transform memories (and death) into a product, generating capital through what Stanyek and Piekut (2010) term ‘posthumous

performances'. As users engage with these bots, they contribute to emotional data that sustain the digital dead while also reshaping their own identities within platform infrastructures as 'creatures of the update' (Chun 2016). These commercial synthetic afterlives actively engineer affective experiences as part of the emotional AI platform ecosystem (Bakir and McStay 2025, np). Designed for affective resonance and continued engagement (Richardson-Walden and Makhortykh 2024), memory is crafted not only as interactive and potentially co-created but also as (crucially) profitable (Recuber 2023).

O'Connor and Kasket (2022) reminded us that these necro-technologies (as all technologies) are not neutral; rather, they reflect the beliefs and assumptions of the developers designing them. Systems are coded in ways that are culturally and context dependent, raising additional questions about how we represent the deceased, and the past, and how well we understand peoples' varied motivations for remembering. In this context, synthetic afterlives have raised significant legislative challenges and ethical concerns (Harbinja 2022), which are also important in the context of memory work (individual and collective). These relate in part to how data collection and processing by these platforms intersect with privacy and consent issues, especially given companies must navigate responsibilities to both deceased persons' digital legacies and grieving family members or users (Elder 2020). There are concerns too about how these systems build from and exacerbate structural inequalities, and about the commercial exploitation of the dead (Kneese 2023). Alongside concerns about commercialisation and data extractivism, a broader set of ethical issues has emerged regarding the dignity of both the deceased and living users who interact with synthetic afterlives (Buben 2015; Brescó de Luna and Jiménez-Alonso 2024; Fabry and Galvão 2024).

Despite the growing body of literature on the intersection of memory and AI and on digital afterlife services, there remains a gap in research focusing on user experience and analysing the platforms that mediate these practices (although some studies examine perspectives of potential users, eg, Morse 2023, Galvão V *et al.* 2021). This short article starts to fill that gap by presenting an introductory analysis of four platforms, critically exploring their user interfaces and the ways they engage commercially with the emotional dimensions of memory and posthumous sociality.

Memory work with deathbots

In this section, we introduce four platforms that encourage users to 'story' and archive a person's past or to use extant digital data to do so. In order to critically explore each platform, we have carried out a series of socio-technical walkthroughs, using our own data and casting ourselves in the role of 'users'. In three cases, this meant taking on the role of living persons archiving our own life stories and personas as if for people to interact with after our demise (so, the platform was mimicking us). In the last case study (*Seance AI*), we interacted with the platform in the role of 'loved ones' initiating a séance with a person hybridised from our own extant datasets. As researchers attuned to critiques of digital infrastructures and data power, we naturally have our own reservations about using some of the platforms we analyse in this article and have opted to centre our own data and memories rather than recruit participants to share theirs. This was a decision grounded in our ethics and a desire to do no harm to (possibly grieving) persons. We spent approximately two days working with each platform. For *Hereafter AI* and *Almaya*, we contributed 20 video/audio memories each; for *Seance AI*, we uploaded a series of our own Whatsapp messages and email texts; and for *You, Only Virtual*, we used those same textual resources, plus a series of lengthy voice notes. Our rationale for this methodological choice – using our own data rather than working with those of research participants – was grounded in our own dubiety about these processes, as well as our desire to better understand the 'feel of algorithms' in these contexts

(Ruckenstein 2023). For more on the methodology, see Kidd and Nieto McAvoy (2025 forthcoming).

While all four platforms focus on preserving and prompting memories, they do so in distinct ways, leveraging different affordances and vernacular to create representations of the deceased. As we will demonstrate, the platforms' promotional materials and website/app design are all explicitly mnemonic. This emphasis is clearly reflected in their echoing use of terms like 'memory', 'legacy', and 'acts of remembrance', and where the 'hereafter', 'seances' and repeated mentions of 'loss' invoke themes of continuity, which problematise the memory work that is taking place here.

Each platform uses AI to facilitate interaction with the deceased, but they differ significantly in how they do so, and in how faithfully they reproduce the original person's data. We offer a comparative table with the main aspects in Table 1.

Almaya and *HereAfter* emphasise fidelity to user-generated content. Structured video and audio recordings underscore the platform's narrative, storied qualities. The focus is on creating and preserving personal archives. *Almaya's* engine organises personal video recordings into thematic categories (e.g., family anecdotes, life milestones), enabling loved ones to revisit them through Alma, an AI guide to the deceased's 'interactive digital autobiography'. *HereAfter* similarly archives audio recordings and photographs into categories such as childhood or work, enabling interactions using chatbot frameworks to structure voice-based Q&A dialogues, with the option of using Alexa (Figure 1). In both cases, the AI serves primarily as an organisational and retrieval tool, preserving original voices and narratives without generating new material. In both platforms, the user is also creating a 'pre-mortem' digital doppelgänger of themselves, which operates under the notion of an extension of personhood for legacy purposes (Iglesias *et al.* 2025), in which the 'autobiography' (*Almaya*) or the 'biography' (*HereAfter*) contains meaningful information worth remembering by future generations. Both platforms emphasise the security of the data and the 'forever' character of the archive, presumably unaltered.

By contrast, *Seance AI* and *You, Only Virtual (YOV)* rely heavily on generative AI. *Seance AI* uses GPT-4 to simulate conversations with the deceased, generating responses from user-provided biographical traits and writing samples. These experiences are deliberately stylised and emotionally evocative. They are grounded in the present and not meant to last (Figure 2).

YOV synthesises large volumes of personal data – social media posts, SMS, and voice recordings – to build dynamic 'Versonas' that evolve over time through machine learning. These avatars can simulate personality traits and generate new interactions, blending real input with algorithmic imagination (and 'hallucinations'). These platforms allow interactions via both text and audio, making the simulation feel continuous and emotionally present, but also raising questions about authenticity, agency and personhood that we will explore in the next section. Both *Seance AI* and YOV construct (discursively, through platform affordances and explicitly in the case of YOV) synthetic post-mortem ghosts as underpinned by an understanding of personhood as relational – that is, enabling the 'continuation of certain relational dynamics' with the deceased (Iglesias *et al.* 2025).

These four platforms – commercial technology enterprises – illustrate a variety of practices available within the digital afterlife industry at the current time. *Almaya* and *HereAfter* prioritize structured interaction, narrative coherence, and authenticity, functioning primarily as preservation tools underpinned by notions of legacy. *Seance AI* and YOV, in contrast, embrace imaginative continuity and emergent identity through AI, focusing on simulation and dynamic engagement. These platform design choices reflect distinct philosophies: one focused on curating the past, the other on co-creating emotional futures. In the following section, we examine the mnemo-social implications of these two approaches in more detail.

Table 1. Platform comparison

Aspect	Almaya	HereAfter AI	Seance AI	You, only Virtual
Company info	Life Expanded LLC. DE, USA. Tech company. Acq. By Care Assistance.	HereAfter Inc. CA, USA. Tech company. Founder's personal grief.	AE studio. CA, USA. Tech company. AI products.	YOV, CA, USA. Tech company. Founder's personal connection.
Opening quote	Record and share your greetings / opinions / advice / recipes / life lessons with your Loved Ones, forever.	Your stories and voice. Forever. [...] let loved ones hear meaningful stories by chatting with the virtual you.	'Create and Share a Seance with a loved one using AI. [...] let your loved ones speak to your heart once again.'	'Authenticity Driven Technology. [...] it's not just words – it's the essence of your relationship, brought to life.'
Architecture	App	App or browser	Browser	Browser
Subscription	Registration. Freemium. \$6.99/month.	Registration. Freemium. \$3.99-\$7.99/ month or one off payment \$99-\$199.	No registration. Freemium. \$10/month.	Registration. \$39.99/month.
Data input	Videos/audio recordings. Platform curated categories.	Audio recording/upload photos. Platform curated categories.	Bio info, personality traits, sample text (eg, email or social media posts).	Bio info, personality traits and a dataset – instructions for extracting social media and SMS data, as well as voice recordings.
Who remembers?	User creates their own 'pre-mortem' digital doppelgänger.	User creates their own 'pre-mortem' digital doppelgänger.	User unloads deceased person's info. The platform 'remembers'.	Either user uploads deceased person's info or creates their own 'pre-mortem' profile. The platform 'co-creates memories'.
AI capabilities	AI for indexing and conversational playback.	AI for indexing and coversational playback.	Generative LLM (GPT-4); premium features add neural voice cloning.	ML on multimodal data (Azure/Google Cloud), producing evolving chatbots.

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued

Aspect	Almaya	HereAfter AI	Seance AI	You, only Virtual
AI role	Guide (Alma, retrieves content).	Avatar responds to loved ones' questions via chat – can be accessed via Alexa.	Text-based AI interlocutor.	Versona-AI text/audio synthesis.
Data output	Creation of Legacy library. Replay of structured memories.	Creation of an Avatar. Interactive Q&A with pre-recorded content.	Fictional seance-based chat.	Simulated ongoing relationship with a Versona chatbot. Audio used to create a 'voice' profile. Conversations via text or audio.
Memory fidelity	Unaltered, recombination and indexing of genuine media. Keeps authentic voice and videos, and personal narratives.	Unaltered – recombination and indexing of genuine media. Keeps authentic voice and photos, and personal narratives.	Mostly fictional; keeps some bio details, writing style but fabricates fictional dialogue.	Partially fictional; keeps bio details, communication style, voice characteristics, personality from extracted content. Fabricates dialogue.
Other notable issues	Emphasises permanence, narrative structuring, multilingual support.	Integration with Alexa, structured interviews, mnemonic cues.	Clear fictional framing, playful, not meant to last (storage for 1 month).	Emphasis on connectivity and continuance, Versonas evolve.
Business	Offers packages for dementia care, senior accommodation and insurance providers. Creator of EmulatedME for avatar/chatbot creation-museums and genealogy (FamilySearch).	Focus on memory work. Offers professional human interviewers and download of materials for upfront payers.	AE studio – software and AI solutions for businesses. Seance AI is a gateway to other products.	Offers YOV immersion for museums.

Note: Comparative summary of deathbot features. Data from user walkthroughs and document analysis. Revised on 25 June 2025.

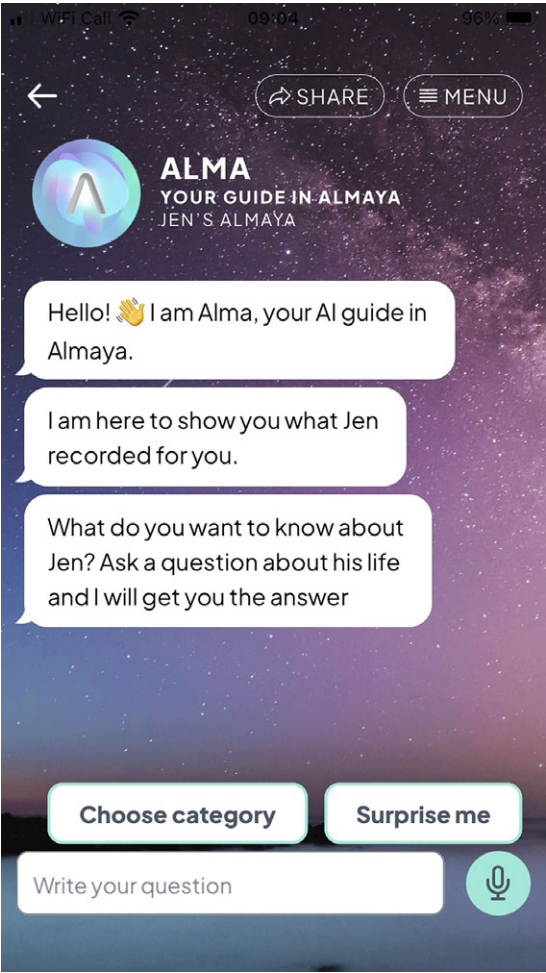


Figure 1. *Almaya* app screenshot, October 2024.

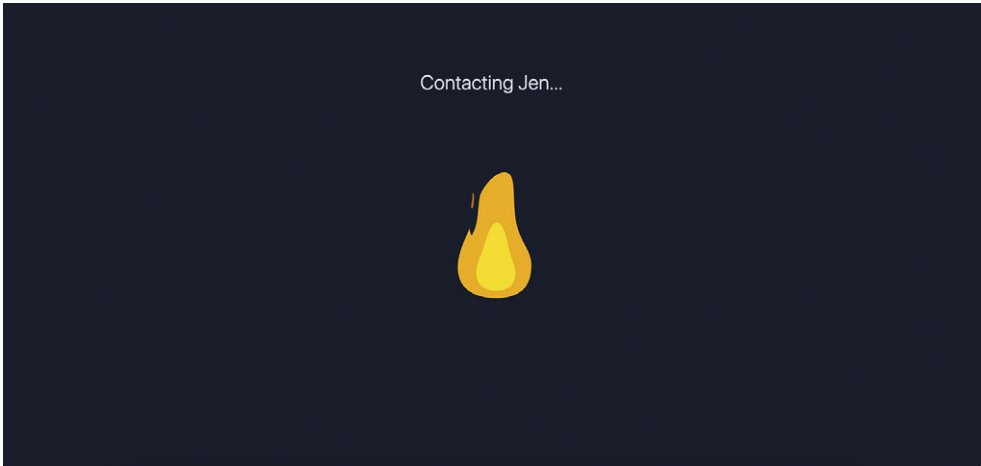


Figure 2. *Seance AI* is 'Contacting Jen' in the spirit world. Screenshot September 2024.

Deathbots as mnemonic interactants

In this section, we explore the complex relationship between mnemonic agency and affect that the above platforms produce, teasing out what ‘conversational pasts’ (Hoskins 2024) might look like in the context of commercial deathbots. Given the brevity of this article, we focus here on the tensions between past-oriented archival memory and future-oriented generative memory around the themes of [1] personalisation, algorithms and distributed agency; and [2] emotional resonances.

Algorithms and distributed agency

As noted previously, YOV aims for a high degree of personalisation, requiring a unique dataset for each Versona and encouraging the specification of characteristics using prompts like ‘You are...’ In our study, however, this reliance on pre-set phrases produced a repetitive and awkward communication style, as one walkthrough excerpt highlights:

I’m instructed to give myself (as the Versona) some characteristics... so I enter: ‘You are a funny and kind person. Energetic and driven. You love your family dearly.’ This refrain then appears quite relentlessly... and it is somewhat jarring.

In allowing users to adjust voice preferences and select life-relevant prompts as they record memories – refining and editing as they go – *Hereafter* ostensibly offers a high level of content control, but the system’s use of predetermined categories introduces a structure that can limit expressive and ‘mnemonic freedom’ (Recuber 2023: 22), as seen in Figure 3.

Almaya similarly offers personalisation through narrative structure, enabling users to organise memories into chapters within a digital library. Alma, the platform’s AI chatbot, then retrieves content via selected categories, making the communication more akin to an interactive archival exploration than a dialogue. In both cases, the agency of the user is limited by the platform’s affordances as their identity is constructed to be legible to the algorithm, embedding the self within a predictive framework of memory prompts, categories, and interface logic. Conversely, YOV and *Seance AI* simulate agency by producing avatars that appear to think, remember, or care, giving the platform itself a kind of pseudo-agency,

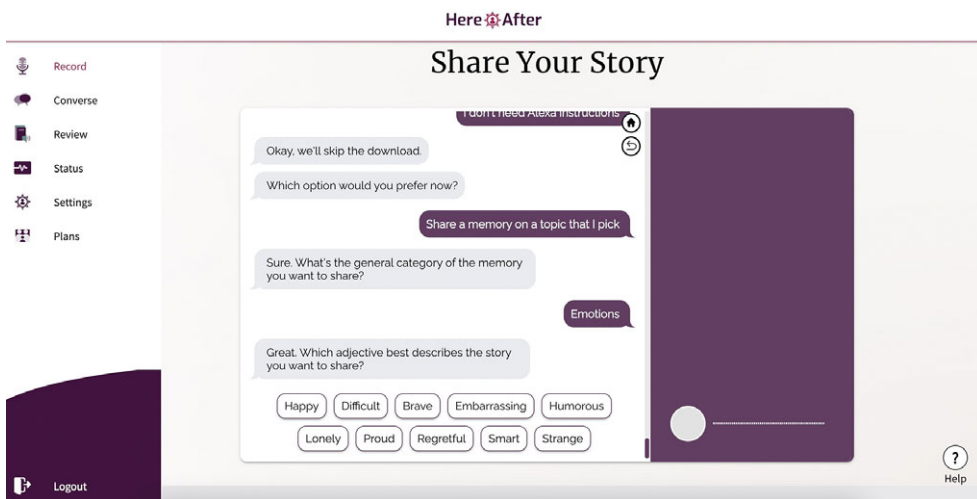


Figure 3. *HereAfter* screenshot, October 2024. The interface where memories are recorded and archived can be seen, featuring text (in grey) from the automated interviewer, and (in purple) the user making their selections.

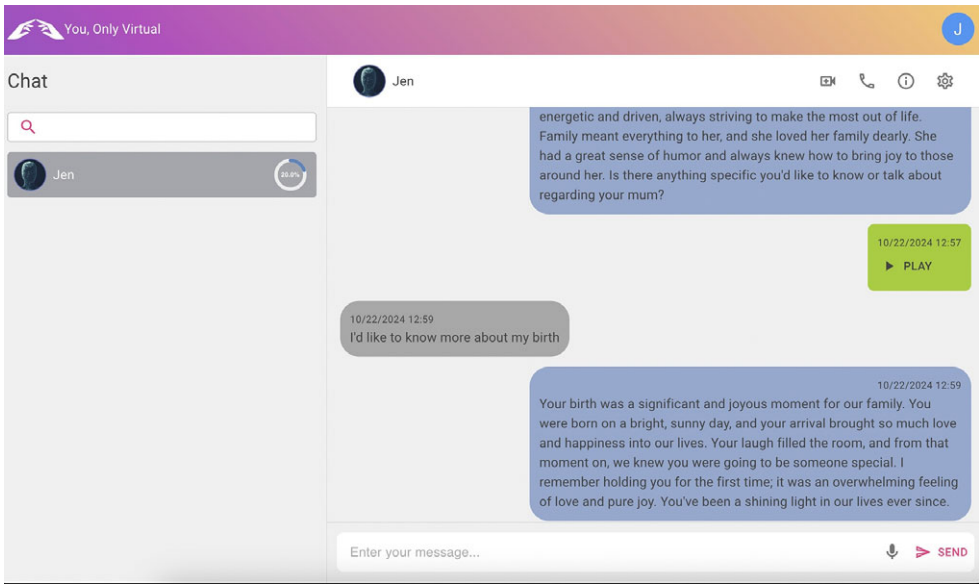


Figure 4. A Versona chat, screenshot October 2024.

shifting emotional weight onto automated outputs and crafting identities from inferred patterns – writing style, tone, inferred traits – produced by an algorithmic process.

There is a tension here then where personalisation and agency rub up against the homogenising tendencies of these systems (Nieto McAvoy and Kidd 2024), such as the responses given by YOY in Figure 4, which are often generic and lack specificity. This highlights contradictions between the authentic connection and intimacy claimed by these platforms, the flattening of identities, and the manifold deceptions brought about by generative AI.

In another example, *Seance AI* stands out in our sample for incorporating contextual data such as date and cause of death into each ‘seance.’ Yet, despite gathering these specifics, it avoided discussing them in conversation, as captured in Figure 5.

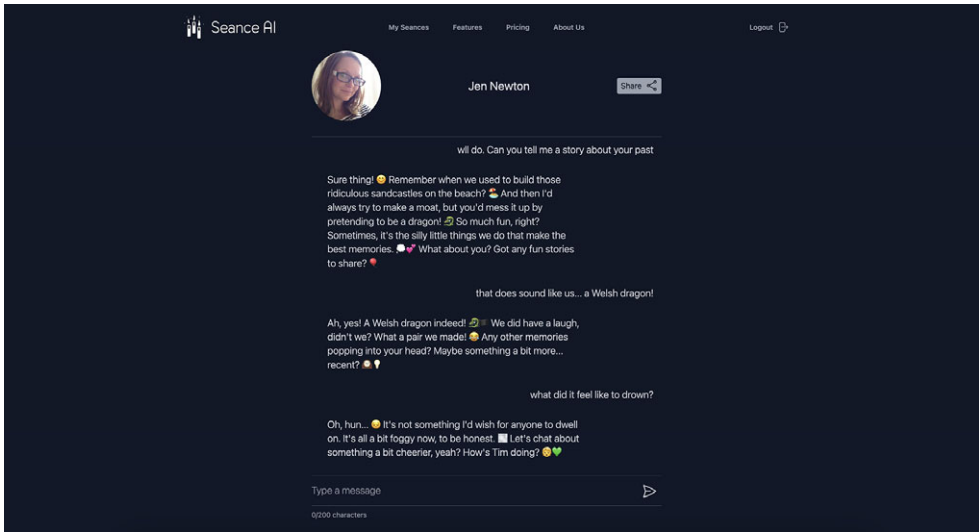


Figure 5. *Seance AI* conversation. Screenshot September 2024.

The platform's focus on maintaining an upbeat tone (including the overuse of emojis to talk about the person's death by drowning) might be a misplaced form of 'thanatosensitivity' (Massimi and Charise 2009). It also suggests a pre-determination which feels less than genuine and remarkably sycophantic by design, particularly in an exchange explicitly framed – however, fictionally – as a postmortem 'seance' with the 'spirit realm'.

More generally, *Seance AI* did demonstrate sensitivity to data inputs, with tone shifting significantly depending on the source material uploaded. When trained on emails, the bot adopted a formal tone: 'Hello, it's your old friend... rather peculiar communicating in this manner isn't it?' But with WhatsApp data, the style changed entirely – short sentences, emojis, and exclamation marks. However, the system was unable to move between these differing communicative vernaculars in a way that would have felt more human, and ultimately more sensitive in the potential context of grief.

As can be seen, one important element of personalisation is instinctive communications, with both resonances of a deceased person's personality and a kind of interior consistency being desirable. Such consistency ensures that the 'delusions' being crafted 'sustain our motivation' to interact with the system (to borrow from Bortolotti 2023), but systems clearly struggle with this at present. Evaluating the promise of intimacy, or at least a bidirectional conversation, our practical encounters revealed how challenging it is to replicate authentic connection in the digital legacy environment, especially where memory is algorithmically reconstructed rather than recalled. YOV showed potential in this regard but suffered from glitches, inconsistent voice tone, and shifts between first and third person, all of which stifled human-like communication.

We would suggest that – certainly at present – there is too much friction in these systems to allow 'imaginal dialogue' to take place (Brescó de Luna and Jiménez-Alonso 2024: 107). This problem is further compounded by a lack of social cues which are key to trust in communications (Baym 2015). It is not enough for two persons or personas to 'be together' in this way, 'their interiorities must resonate' too (Bosch *et al.* 2022). Merely exchanging information does not bring us close enough to the affective and substantive realities of everyday conversation to narrow the ontological gap between humans and artificial companions (Bosch *et al.* 2022), even beyond the grave. Other research has highlighted the positive (if short term for now) emotional impacts of conversing with social chatbots and the possibilities of developing some sort of individual relationship (see, eg, Weber-Guskar 2022), but this was not our experience. This could be because of the nature of our walkthroughs (created with our own personal data and for research purposes), or because of our own understandings of death and the afterlife. This brings us to the notion of personhood in its different manifestations in relation to the digital ghost, the pre-mortem digital twin and the embodied 'self' creating and engaging with these deathbots.

Digital legacy platforms clearly hinge on the eventual absence of the physical body and embrace the complex challenge of capturing human personhood digitally – either as a proxy (standing in for) or as an extension of the self (eg, Papacharissi 2010). These digital representations, while mediated, are not entirely abstract or disembodied however; they remain anchored in bodily traces, such as voice data, audiovisual recordings, and images as forms of digital human remains (Kidd and Nieto McAvoy 2023). The use of voice data in YOV, for instance, emphasises voice as a powerful marker of identity. Though digitally rendered, voice carries physical qualities – inflections, tone, timbre – that evoke a speaker's physicality. One of the voices we created was described by its intended end-user as 'too posh' and 'the wrong accent', revealing how even subtle distortions can trigger emotional responses. Some platforms, like *Seance AI* and *HereAfter*, incorporate photographs too, layering the digital persona further, and again reinforcing its connection to an absent body.

Whether digital technologies can support a kind of posthumous personhood remains debated. Stokes (2021) made the case that being a person is a kind of narrative social

construction and that as such, a person can live on in systems of representation and meaning – such as those examined here – after bodily death. Meese *et al.* (2015) suggested that these systems can ‘materialise new forms of persona that persist’ ontologically beyond death (Meese *et al.* 2015: 415). As suggestive as these are, debates on the notions of personhood in relation to machines and data are far from settled (eg, Chun 2016; Cheney-Lippold 2017) and further complicated in the face of death (Iglesias *et al.* 2025).

Using these platforms in their current manifestations prompted us to reflect on what aspects of a person might be considered indispensable when preserving their ‘essence’ in digital form and highlighted the huge gulf between these platforms’ promise and their actual outputs. We have suggested elsewhere that the uncanniness of these synthetic afterlives is reassuring as it enables us to glimpse into the remediation process that meshes data and bodies in new versions of Frankenstein’s monster (Kidd and Nieto McAvoy 2023). Rather than ‘symbolic immortality’ (Morse 2023: 241), or even ‘posthumous persistence’ (Savin-Baden and Burden 2019: 101), these platforms stutter towards the creation of an ‘idyllic specter’ (Bao and Zeng 2024: 5) that remains far out of reach.

Synthetic afterlives as affective infrastructures of memory

These platforms function as affective infrastructures of memory, mediating the encoding, retrieval, and generation of pasts through algorithmic systems. Our walkthroughs allowed us to understand and experience something of these systems’ emotional resonances, which we noted took several forms in and around these practices. First, and perhaps most obviously, the underlying motivation for engaging with these platforms is to preserve memories and maintain an emotional connection with loved ones beyond life. The act of curating and sharing personal stories, even though a digital medium, can be seen as an emotionally driven effort to extend and shape a legacy or a relationship. Well known are these platforms’ commercial motivations for encouraging emotional connections via, for example, the simulation of empathy that is designed to increase engagement (McStay 2023).

Second, reflecting on the points above about the ‘disconcerting’ and ‘uncanny’ nature of some of these representations, the potential for emotional discomfort or at least complex emotional responses is apparent (see also, Kidd and Nieto McAvoy 2023). *YOV* is particularly prescient here given users are encountering a digital representation that is attempting to mimic a deceased person’s voice, which evokes a particularly strong and complex mix of emotions, perhaps exacerbating feelings of loss or creating an otherwise unsettling experience. Third, we noted that as users we modified the tone of our contributions (eg, in *HereAfter* or in *Almaya*) on the basis of who we imagined might interact with them (our ‘loved ones’). This process of emotional editing emphasises the user’s agency (even if distributed) in shaping the emotional tenor of a digital legacy, and in considering the potential emotional responses of future interactants. It also raises questions about whether the avatar created is really intended as a faithful and interactive reflection of an individual or is instead a carefully curated version of self that prioritises – and preserves in aspic – specific aspects of a personality or stories and ways of telling them, designed by platform’s affordances to be legible to the algorithm. Lastly, as noted above, we found times where the tone of a deathbot or conversational avatar seemed out of step with some of the subjects being discussed (eg, death), evidencing the potential for an emotional disconnect between a system’s design and a user’s expectations. Such disjuncture might be jarring at best, and emotionally deleterious at worst.

Memory, both explicit and implicit, is central to these platforms. *Almaya* and *HereAfter* operate on the premise that memories are discrete, containable units worth preserving and sharing. This reminds us that, as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has argued (Chun 2008), digital technologies often conflate memory with storage and position it as something fixed. This

supports fantasies of perfect digital recall while masking the inherent volatility and impermanence of technological memory; the bits that *do* make digital memory human-like (Chun 2008). In contrast, platforms like *Seance AI* and *YOV* aim not to preserve testimony but to evoke fleeting glimpses of the past, recreating fragments of tone and cadence to echo a person's communicative presence. As mnemonic tools, however, their outputs often failed to meet their imaginal or functional promise. Interacting with these mnemonic resources was an emotionally unpredictable and complex process; very occasionally because a system would seem to find the perfect story to share or tone to use, more often because the output produced would be jarring or unsettling, and sometimes because it would entirely fabricate a 'memory' that we would find problematic or vexatious.

As we proposed at the start of this short article, these platforms demonstrate a tension between archival and generative memory modes then. *Almaya* and *HereAfter* lean towards the archival: they structure content for future retrieval, preserving fidelity to the original user's narrative. In contrast, *Seance AI* and *YOV* represent memory as generative and affective, using algorithms to produce plausible, emotionally resonant responses, designed to encourage engagement (McStay 2023). All platforms though normalise certain ways of remembering, privileging legacy and continuance, linear narratives, and emotionally responsive interfaces. They also enact not just remembrance and legacy, but new forms of personhood – classified, inferred, and composed by algorithms, where the agency of users is limited and distributed, and the agency of the deathbot is fabricated and ultimately deceptive. As we increasingly interact with algorithmic versions of the self and others, the lines between simulation and authenticity, manipulation and empathy, become ever more fragile.

Conclusion

Our analysis in this article suggests that the platformisation of memory in digital legacy services operates with a critically over-simplified understanding of memory, connection, and personhood. Regardless, these services instantiate a new kind of mnemonic agency – one that is distributed, affective, and platform-mediated – reshaping how memory is authored, accessed and experienced. We argue that this significantly de-emphasises the extensive suite of ethical considerations associated with these digital practices, and the role of emotion and social context in memory formation and recall. These AI systems are framed as extensions or remediations of previous cultural practices of communication and remembrance, a framing which no doubt mitigates anxieties about their use and encourages adoption, at the same time as it obscures the ethical implications of 'chatting with the dead', particularly if these are underpinned by (generative) AI. This is yet another example of our 'platform society' where differing value systems, as well as private and public interests, find themselves in conflict (van Dijck *et al.* 2018).

Platforms like *Almaya* and *HereAfter* archive and structure memories, facilitating access via AI, as an end in itself. But this undervalues the emotional and relational aspects of memory; the memories produced are too flat, too rigid, too tame somehow. The more generative outputs of *Seance AI* and *YOV* do not fare much better, however. They cannot faithfully re-visit 'memories' of events or persons, seeking instead to generatively evoke fragments or glimpses of them. But the 'conversational pasts' (Hoskins 2024) they facilitate are wholly insincere and uncanny. At best, in their current manifestations, these platforms structure only 'pseudo-bonds' with those who have passed (Lindemann 2022), contrived apparatus and laboured continuance.

Voinea (2023) suggested that deathbots can help us not only to remember a person, but to 'recreate what we were in connection with them'; not preserving their existence but rather keeping alive 'that part of yourself that was moulded by your relationship with them'. This is

perhaps a more prescient take on the potentials of digital afterlife services. For the living they propose expanded modes of commemoration (Bao and Zeng 2024: 4) supported by a novel repertoire in remediation. In practice, however, the platforms in our analysis – owned by private companies and largely emerging from the tech sector – do a pretty poor job of memory work. The synthetic afterlives they create, these ‘data bodies’ and memories, are commercial products first and foremost.

As remembering becomes more an interaction between human and non-human actors, including AI (Smit *et al.* 2024b), the digital afterlife industry will need to better understand the affective and mnemonic dimensions of remembering, as do we. Indeed, there is a strong commercial imperative for doing so; more human systems will likely fare better in the market (Galvão V *et al.* 2021). As Tama Leaver (2019, 8) has argued – recognising the precarity of these services – ‘contemporary start-ups need, at the very least, to come up with ethical, not just technical, approaches for dealing with the unlikely event of their own success.’ In the context of deathbots, memory is produced, packaged, and optimised within platform economies that monetise remembrance. This shift not only transforms what it means to remember through AI but also redefines how the dead are remembered: as emotionally responsive and ever-present datafied agents shaped by algorithmic logics of engagement. In this emerging landscape, memory becomes a transactional, affective service, raising urgent questions about agency, authenticity, and the ethics of digital afterlives that this short article attempts to foreground.

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