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In bits, bytes and stone

Making sense of digital afterlife, remembrance and heritage designs

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Abstract for Digital Existence, 2015

Title: In bits, bytes and stone: Making sense of digital afterlife, remembrance and heritage designs.

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The digital spheres of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and Social Network Services (SNS) are influencing 21st. century death. Today the dying and the bereaved attend mourning and remembrance both online and offline. Combined, the cemeteries, web memorials and social network sites constitute parts of an intricately weaved and interrelated network of practices dealing with death, mourning, memorialization and remembrance [1]–[3].

Design pioneering company IDEO'S recent failed attempt to 'redesign death' is an example of how delicate and difficult it is to work with digital and symbolic 'death designs' [4]. Urns, coffins, graves, cemeteries, memorials, monuments, websites, applications and software services, whether cut in stone or made of bits, are all influenced by discourses of publics, economics, power, technology and culture. Designers, programmers, stakeholders and potential end-users often do not recognize the need or potential of working with or using, specific 'death-services/products', since they find little or no comfort in contemplating, working or playing around with the concept of death and its life changing consequences. Especially not while being alive and well. Such complexities cannot be successfully integrated by applying company best-practice, team member's 'designerly way of knowing', or textbook design methods within the established design or HCI schools.

This paper proposes an overview of the expanding online market for 'digital death design', a socio-technological research field in need of attention. The paper focuses on a selection of online solutions and prototype services and their affect, influence and impact on what is considered more traditional offline rituals, practices and places (e.g funerary rituals, mourning groups, cemeteries and remembrance walks). Grounded in existential thinking and ethnographic fieldwork the paper discuss both subjective and shared meaning-making practices, emotive behavioral changes, ideas and concepts of memory and legacy afforded by the new digital online solutions and services. In asking whether or not 'digital death design' should be embraced or discouraged, the paper brings to the fore a mapping of abilities for augmentation, expansion, empowerment and opportunity as well as consequence, vulnerability, insensibility, alienation and deterioration of commonly valued socio-cultural normatives concerning death and remembrance.

The findings in this paper are contextualized through a qualitative ethnographic research design based on Danish cemetery users and mourners and their different experiences with and attitudes towards new online grief, mourning and remembrance designs, platforms, services and initiatives. Additionally the respondents and interviewees are engaged with a prototype design that encompasses digitally enhanced experiences and interactions regarding mourning, memory and remembrance. The design is situated in a traditional public place of death, the Almen Cemetery of Aalborg in Denmark.

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