

Ariane Jaccarini

PET GRIEF IN THE DIGITAL ERA:
LOCATING A NON-HUMAN DIGITAL AFTERLIFE

Ariane Jaccarini

If heaven exists then this is what u see
at its gates



Unknown, via @WholesomeMeme on Twitter.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION <i>(GRIEF)</i>	5
2. THE DREAM WORLD <i>MY DREAM BODY</i>	9
3. THE DOG AVATAR <i>THE SIMULATED SELF</i>	12
4. IDENTIFYING AS DOG <i>THE ANTHROPO-ZOOMORPHIC SELF</i>	16
5. RESIDUE & AGENCY <i>WHEN THE ONLINE PERSONA PERSISTS</i>	21
6. THE DIGITAL AFTERLIFE PART 1 <i>THE DEATH-SENSITIVE INTERFACE</i>	25
7. THE DIGITAL AFTERLIFE PART 2 <i>RESURRECTION BY PROXY</i>	28
8. CONCLUSION <i>THE DIGITAL PET CEMETERY AS SPECULATORY</i>	33
9. REFERENCES	38

INTRODUCTION

(*GRIEF*)

The confessional transmits meaning through an *I* that one might confuse with the author, and that one knows to be figurative. I wish to embody the confessional. The dog wishes to embody me.

An architect trips on her sleeping alsatian's tail, and Google's 'How to apologise to your dog'. Or, a poet, frustrated with a slew of recalcitrant doctors, has her blood work taken to a veterinarian instead, where she is diagnosed with severe chronic neutropenia, and thus becomes his dog.¹

For almost a year now I've been beset by a memory - no, not beset, nudged gently, and persistently, like a wet-nose-to-thigh, legs crossed, he's below the tablecloth - and no, not a memory, an audio-visual retention in 720p, perhaps fractions of a seconds behind real-time, so I was watching a dead thing alive - combing through it ever since, trying to understand, to feel the thickness of it.

What is grief, exactly? Grief is a normal, healthy, and appropriate response to loss or change in our lives.² It is at once both a generic and unique process consequential to a wide spectrum of loss. The loss is usually physical, of someone or something with importance. The physical loss engenders myriad symbolic and secondary losses that too must be grieved, not to mention the propensity for previous losses to also resurface.³ There is no singular or prescriptive way to mourn a loss, and grief can manifest in multitude of ways, from reclusion to wild ebullitions, say - but the prevailing Western dogma purports and widely acknowledges its five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, referred to most often in this order (although there is various research claiming less than half of grieving individuals experience grief in this linear way).⁴

Losing a pet is a particular kind of grief, but for many, not unlike losing a human. Nonetheless, when one exhibits a strong emotional response to the passing of a pet, they are often cast as overly

¹ Danielle Pafunda, "Meat Life," In *Beauty is a Verb: the New Poetry of Disability*, ed. Jennifer Bartlett, Sheila Fiona Black (New York: Cinco Puntos Press, 2011), 313.

² Judith F. Koepl, "Grief," *GPSolo*, vol. 21, no. 7, American Bar Association, 2004, 50.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ceit Robinson & Dr Rachael Pond, "Do online support groups for grief benefit the bereaved? Systematic review of the quantitative and qualitative literature," *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 100, 2019, 48.

lachrymose, over-the-top, or a little outlandish.⁵ The dearth in emotional support surrounding pet loss is a phenomenon known as “disenfranchised grief”.⁶

The prevalent Western discourse is that it’s best to ‘let go’ of the deceased means that oftentimes it can be difficult for the bereaved individual to find support in those close to them or to the deceased. As a result, there has been a proliferation of grief counselling and peer support groups in recent decades in an effort to ease the process of grieving.⁷ Some people attend pet-loss support groups for the loss of their befurred companion. The pet-grief peer support presents as an especially vital facet of the pet-grieving process, for there exists a wide incongruity of attitudes towards, and the subsequent perceived ‘appropriate’ or ‘normal’ response following, the death of a pet. “The support group provides a safe, compassionate, and empathetic environment for those who want to listen, share, and celebrate the life of their treasured pet with others who are suffering a similar loss,” posits one online resource.⁸

Narrative may be used as a tool for a bereaved individual to make sense of a loss in personal, practical, existential, and spiritual terms.⁹ Specifically, the bereaved person can interpret a loss through narratives or stories that may be internal, but are commonly negotiated with other people - such as friends, family, colleagues, etc.). In doing so, the bereaved can find an ongoing place for the deceased in their own life. These narratives, however, can be challenged by the popular Western discourse that it’s best to ‘let go’ of the dead, and thus the individual may face some resistance in forging an ongoing space by those surrounding them. Grief can afford us an obsession with a dead thing. Could this be the reason why dogs love bones so much?

Additionally, many writers and scholars construct narrative as an ode to a nonhuman being that has had a transformative effect on their life and its trajectory. “It is deeply personal to tell the story of one’s relationship to a dog, but it is not only private: telling stories is always already a form of theorising the world, just as our theories and beliefs shape our stories.”¹⁰ With every text that examines, describes, commemorates, and so on, the relationship between dog and human, the writing human inherently

⁵Jessica Ullrich, “‘Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story’: The Transformative Power of Dog Dedications,” in Brianne Donaldson & Ashley King (eds.), *Feeling Animal Death: Being Host to Ghosts* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 113.

⁶Anna Maria Behler, Jeffrey David Green and Jennifer Joy-Gaba. “We Lost a Member of the Family”: Predictors of the Grief Experience Surrounding the Loss of a Pet,” *Human Animal Interaction Bulletin*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2020, 54.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁸ Lap of Love: Pet-Loss Support, <https://www.lapoflove.com/our-services/pet-loss-support>

⁹ Robinson & Pond, “Do online support groups benefit the bereaved?”, 49.

¹⁰ Ullrich, “‘Every Love Story is a Ghost Story’”, 114.

assumes prerogative. Consequently the writing becomes more about the writer than the dog. Writing from the dog-perspective can attempt to relieve the words from being purely self-serving, although the questions of agency and authenticity arise. In effect, this can apply to every human-conceived aspect of the dog-human relationship, and every method of encompassing the canine persona, as explored in this text.

booping the nose of dogs online because I haven't
seen a real dog in ages

@Dankzell on Instagram.

“I swallow my boyfriend’s tongue.
He’s not my boyfriend. He’s a dog.”

- From *In This Plate I Receive My First Diagnosis*, Danielle Pafunda

THE DREAM WORLD

MY DREAM BODY

“This is my dream body ... the one I use to walk around ... in my dreams,” come the lilting, cooing extended syllables of Laurie Anderson’s opening monologue in *Heart of a Dog*, 2015¹¹. When I sleep and I am lucky enough to be afforded a cinematic accompaniment to my agitated tossing and turning, I am offered a place to visit or a place to return to (as if returning could reveal meaning). Nothing happens before or after. I inhabit my oneiric conduit, and sometimes I am watching her from afar, though mostly through her dream eyes, milky and blurred by canonical default, traversing a vivid and disjointed scene that shapes and balloons around me, responding to user feedback, rendering in real-time.

I could lie and start this chapter by telling you that last night, I dreamt I was a dog. My swollen, furry underbelly grazed the shag-pile in my bedroom as I swerved and sniffed and scuttled around. I sat on my haunches and pressed my doggy nose against the glass of the window (though how a dog as small as myself could reach such great heights is a logistic anomaly); I was like the dog in the Goya fresco, peering cautiously up into a massive, unseen sky¹². With dog tears, I wept.

Last night I dreamt that I was carried away by a dog with eyes the size of teacups¹³. I was afraid at first, the way he was panting at me, slack-jawed, his spittle collecting in the slimy, serrated pink-brown flesh of his mouth corners, my entire face massaged by a syncopated exhaust of hot, cloying dog’s breath (which felt not so unlike sitting over a luxury aromatherapy diffuser, come to think of it now). He bent

¹¹ Anderson, Laurie, Dan Janvey, Melody London, Katherine Nolfi, Toshiaki Ozawa, and Joshua Zucker-Pluda. *Heart of a Dog*. 2016. *Heart of a Dog* is a maudlin meditation on loss, among many other things: a documentary as an ode to her beloved rat terrier, Lolabelle. The dog appears on-screen embodying different mediums: iPhone video footage, reenactments, drawings and paintings (some animated). We experience a rumination here on the convoluted shared feelings of dog and human - somewhere between awareness, and fear.

¹² *El perro*, c.1819, Francisco Goya.

¹³ As we have already examined, the dog is a rebellious and libidinal motif, connecting extensions of the self: *Fyrtojet*, or, *The Tinder Box*, is a Hans Christen Andersen fairy tale about a soldier who obtains a magic tinderbox which summons three very powerful dogs to do his bidding. One night, beset with greed and desire, he strikes the tinderbox and sends a dog to fetch a princess locked in a tower. The soldier is enamoured with her beauty, kisses her, and has the dog return her to her bed. The following morning, the princess tells her parents of a very strange dream.

down and gently gripped my scruff in his maw and placed me onto his back. Off we rode into the night.

Last night I didn't dream at all.

When a dog dreams, he quivers, makes leg twitches, growls and snaps at unseen dream-phantoms, flushes an imaginary bird, wards off a dream-burglar. "...You can even see the dog's eyes moving behind closed eyelids if you look closely enough."¹⁴ When I dream - well, who's to say I don't also growl in my sleep? Certainly not my dog, if he was ever watching. Various studies have shown that a dog's brain activity when sleeping closely mirrors that of a human's. Of course, many scholars are hesitant to chew over dogs' dreams, let alone write about them, for to prove that a dog can dream is as ridiculous as it is to give a dog a voice - as Dr Anne Hohenhaus points out, a dream is simply a story that we verbalise.¹⁵ "[T]he possibility of evidence beyond their visible twitchings is not definitely and finally excluded"¹⁶, says one twentieth-century philosopher, for we are not certain we won't one day find better proof beyond what our limited, interloping human observational tools can currently afford us.

In Laurie Anderson's 1980 installation at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York City, called *Dark Dogs, American Dreams*, twelve black-and-white portrait-photographs are accompanied by cassette tape with text. A speaker box orates the first-person, type-written 'dreams' or 'nightmares' of the photographed (though this is fiction: the text is Anderson's). Anderson creates conduits through which she recounts her dreams - Dentist, Butcher, Cashier, Mechanic, Mailman. The performer and the persona merge. Anderson's dream body, which she speaks of again 35 years later in *Heart of a Dog* (2015), is the body which navigates the space in her dreams - and here it is consecrated in various forms of shape-shifting through blurred portrait-photography and variegated 'voices'.

My dream body is a dog. Five Things I Did {And Didn't Do} To Achieve My Dream Body! The Secrets To Achieving Your Dream Body. What is the difference between the body I inhabit while I sleep, and the one I aspire to inhabit when awake? Facetune promises I'll "wow [my] friends with every selfie" - with a bit of dexterous precision, can I use my thumb and index to render my ears floppy, to emphasise my whiskers? In *De Natura et Origine Animae*, written around 419 A.D., Augustine was incited to argue the corporeality of the soul, and the nature of the reality of dream-bodies,

¹⁴ Stanley Coren, *Do Dogs Dream?: Nearly Everything Your Dog Wants You to Know* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 91.

¹⁵ Conaboy, Kelly, and Ann Hohenhaus. "Life Is But a Dog's Dream." *The Cut*, 31 May 2019, <https://www.thecut.com/2019/05/do-dogs-dream-what-do-dogs-dream-about.html>.

¹⁶ Stuart Hampshire, "The Concept of Mind. by Gilbert Ryle," *Mind*, vol. 59, no. 234, [Oxford University Press, Mind Association], 1950, 248.

dream-worlds, and dream-pains.¹⁷ With respect to their actions, bodies and feelings, the dead resemble dreamers, says Augustine. It is much easier to think about the dream experience than the after-death experience, of course. In our dreams, he says, it is with our dream-bodies that we have dream-adventures in dream-worlds: nevertheless, we are really ourselves in our dreams, and the feelings we experience in our dreams are real.

¹⁷ Augustine, "The Nature and Origin of the Soul," *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Vol. 23.1, ed. and trans. R. Teske, S.J., Hyde Park, NY 1997, 455-561. Responding to a treatise on the soul by Vincentius Victor, Augustine became entangled in a discussion of the corporeality of the human soul. Victor argues that the soul is corporeal, and each soul (and then spirit) are created anew from and by the breath of God; therefore, there is no way for the soul to inherit original sin. Augustine counters this: the soul was made out of God Himself, and that God will continuously create souls forever, and that the soul loses some merit being conjoined with flesh, but also regains some merit by being conjoined with flesh, and that the soul deserves to become sinful.

“one of the most amazing experiences i have ever gone through, absolute realistic portrayal of a dog's life. from reproduction to walking on water”

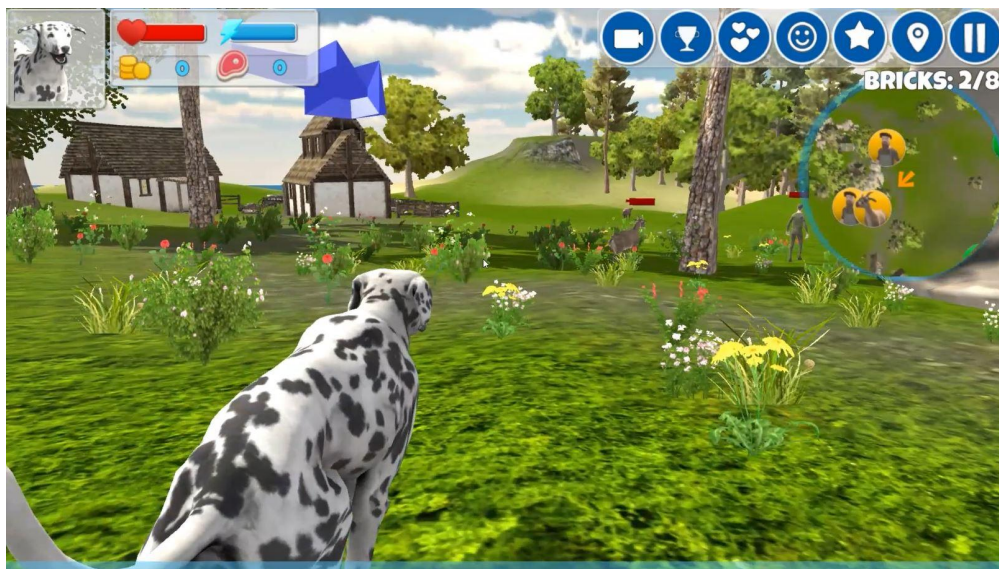
- Google Play Store review by user Mantwerp of Cyberfinch's Dog Simulator 3D, March 17, 2020.

THE DOG AVATAR

THE SIMULATED SELF

I awoke and at once I was born, but I was strong, already sitting upright on my low-poly haunches, and my fur was all over and as dry as nylon bristles - though the latter one could only assume, of course. I was without a mother, but not motherless. A scion of executable code. Any remnants of my human taxonomy had been supplanted by cellular automata, ever growing and swarming and reproducing - I was now visual and acoustic multimedia, suspended in a 64-bit realm of plenitude and infinite replenishment. Jump, bark, knock off, destroy and fight!

Pixelated images of embodied creatures comprise Dog Simulator 3D, in which analogue consciousness (embodied humans outside the computer) intersects with digital program (digital simulations inside the computer). One navigates a sempiternal landscape as a dog, completing myriad individual quests in order to “try to make your dog really happy”.¹⁸ The game is orientated in the third-person perspective, with several vantage points through which one can toggle via a button labelled “Camera”. One plays as the dog, but because it is a dog and not a human, does it become possessed, or embodied?



Dog Simulator 3D, CyberGoldfinch, 2018. Accessed 31 October 2021.

¹⁸ Description of Sergey Zykov's “Dog Simulator 3D” game, *CyberGoldfinch*, <https://poki.com/en/g/dog-simulator-3d>

Another online platform affording user's the experience of digital dog embodiment is *Domestic Dog*, the essence of which is analogous, although one plays in 2D as a randomised dog in a randomised house.¹⁹ This instantly fundamentally separates the two: firstly, the suspension of disbelief is less secure than that of *Dog Simulator 3D* due to the lower degree of immersible navigation a 2D digital world can afford; secondly, the randomization of the digital skin removes an important element of agency in the production of one's digital avatar. Nonetheless, the options for avatar appearance are highly variegated with each user generation; the game's developer claims over 300,000 possible combinations of dog attributes. (The "virtually unlimited" amalgams are comprised of various dog-types, including "Biological, Alien, Robot, VR, Reptilian, Ghost, & Android".²⁰)



Domestic Dog, Sean Davy, via Steam.

Digital self-representation is no new phenomenon: for several decades now there have been explorations into the shared proclivity to mobilise online media in order to represent one's own life (and the lives of others) on the Internet. In this way, we are able to take certain agency over our narrative; the speed and scale at which we can transfer information autobiographically usurps any prior possible print-based relationality and potentiates the construction and appropriation of identities between audience and author, between one online persona to another.²¹ Transmogrifying into a dog online is an extreme example of the digital avatar, of course. There is in fact an "indelible cybernetic

¹⁹ Description of Sean Davy's "Domestic Dog" game, accessed April 03 2022 via *Steam*, https://store.steampowered/app/340340/Domestic_Dog

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Laurie McNeill and John David Zuern, "ONLINE LIVES 2.0: INTRODUCTION," *Biography*, vol. 38, no. 2, University of Hawai'i Press, 2015, v.

imprint” implicated by everything we type, click and share online.²² The online persona is not only how one presents their selfhood online - the curation of our online self and its active proponents - but the amalgamation of all our activity; one’s shared media, messages, downloads, purchases.

The dog-avatar, over which the user maintains agency, is a conduit for the desire to experience canine dexterity and all else that comes with displacing our human selves into a non-human form; in effect, a trial of a various alternative self.²³ It begs the question of what lies behind one’s carnal desire to experience dog-life: is it an innate need to be low down to the earth, to have one’s underbelly grazing the short grass, to run on four legs? Is it the taste of raw flesh?

Jean Baudrillard says: “the hologram gives us the emotion, the vertigo to transfer to the other side of our body, to the side of the double, a luminous clone, or dead twin who was never born in our stead.”²⁴ When playing a dog simulation game, one becomes their luminous canoid clone. The out-of-game body - the offline self - scrolls the mouse wheel, taps the arrow keys, slams the space-bar, so that consequently the in-game body - the online self - can initiate capacities such as hunting a rabbit, picking up a stick, or interacting with another in-game body (sometimes also commandeered by an out-of-game body, too). This relationship presents a fairly straightforward echelon of control: the user governs the avatar. Dog Simulator 3D and Domestic Dog transgress the boundaries of imitation, however, for they are not simply a mimetic doubles of the offline world. They are respectively oneiric CGI and 8-bit simulations in which one’s canine avatar transmits and digs out a space for alterity into the digital realm.

One study that recruited participants from several online gaming forums found that, across a range of digital simulation environments, avid online individuals were prone to possessing multiple avatars (delineated colloquially as “mains”, what one considers their primary identity, and conversely “alts”).²⁵ This illustrated the need for a flexible appearance which could only be fulfilled in certain game-based environments by creating multiple identities. “Mains” are readily identifiable by the users, and are focused on almost exclusively across all worlds. The avatar personalisation systems varied across

²² Henry Sussan, “The Afterlife of Critics,” in Jeffrey R. di Leo (ed.), *Dead Theory: Derrida, Death and the Afterlife of Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 75.

²³ Russell W. Belk, Extended Self in a Digital World, *Journal of Consumer Research*, Volume 40, Issue 3, 1 October 2013, 482.

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), 157.

²⁵ The study examined users of three virtual environments: *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* and *Maple Story*. All three platforms have a large number of worldwide subscribers, avatar customization options ranging from simple to complex, and different purposes (gaming, socialising, and hybrid, respectively). Nicolas Ducheneaut, Ming-Qui “Don” Wen, Nicholas Yee, et al., “Body and Mind: A Study of Avatar Personalization in Three Virtual Worlds,” *CHI '09: Proceedings of Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2009, 4.

platforms, from offering restricted customisation options to near full jurisdiction over their appearance.

Dog Simulator 3D provides very limited agency over avatar appearance; one must reach an XP quota before upgrading their skin to a pre-designated dog breed. Domestic Dog, wholly dependent on a random generator, offers none at all. While the human simulation worlds rely heavily on the user's curation of their avatar's appearance, the lack of user input in the dog simulators might in fact bolster the user's perception of the dog avatar as a plausible identity. One could say this immutability is imitative of the biological phenotype. Offline, one's "characteristic combination" is predetermined through genetic inheritance. While customisation lends a deeper immersion into the avatar in humanoid simulation, the unalterable presets of one's dog avatar appearance more closely align with the much lesser extent of variation between members of the canine species in the physical world, playing further into the narrative of dog embodiment: one isn't simply "dressing up" as a dog, but almost being spawned or reborn into the body of one.

For these exact same reasons, of course, the dog simulator games may be more prone to a sense of dog possession than embodiment.

“On the Internet, no one knows you’re a dog.”

- Peter Steiner, cartoonist, July 5, 1993

IDENTIFYING AS DOG

THE ANTHROPO-ZOOMORPHIC SELF

The socio-spiritual therianthropy movement is a little-known online phenomenon. Historically, therianthropy is the mythological ability of human beings to metamorphose into other animals by means of shape-shifting. It is now a term used to denote a web-based community and an identity. To be a therianthrope is to be an individual who identifies as part human and part non-human (specifically, animal) in a biological, mental, and metaphysical capacity.²⁶

Therianthropes have formulated, through their engagement with ‘popular occulture’, a sacred and liminal anthropo-zoomorphic identity that coalesces the spiritual and supernatural associations of the animal kingdom. Therianthropy is sometimes considered to be a subset of a wider community of “otherkin”, which is a broader umbrella term to refer not only part-human part-animal identities, but those who identify as part-elf, or part-dragon, too (sometimes seen specifically denoted as “theriomythics”). This overlapping of terms and their hierarchy is a topic often argued in the therian community. The terms ‘therian’ and ‘otherkin’ are, according to Alexandra Christina Leal (“a woman who believes she is a literal fox!”), “kind of like a square and a rectangle. All squares are rectangles, but not all rectangles are squares. So some people would say that all Therians are Otherkin, but not all Otherkin are therians.”²⁷ Dusty of the Therian-Guide.com online forums maintains that “if you need an umbrella term, call us Alterhuman (Alt+H)”²⁸.

²⁶ Venetia Laura Delano Robertson, “The Beast Within: Anthropozoomorphic Identity and Alternative Spirituality in the Online Therianthropy Movement,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, vol. 16, no. 3, University of California Press, 2013, 7.

²⁷ Alexandra Christina Leal, “Therianthropy, Otherkin, Alterhumanity: The Normie’s Guide,” *binaryvixen899.medium.com* (2 September 2009), accessed 22 March 2022.

<https://binaryvixen899.medium.com/therianthropy-otherkin-alterhumanity-the-normies-guide-dcd3a6403c7e>

²⁸ DustWolf, “Therianthropy vs Otherkin,” *Therian-Guide.com: A Guide to Therianthropy* (29 April 2020), accessed 22 March 2020. <https://forums.therian-guide.com/Thread-Therianthropy-vs-Otherkin>

Additional Information

Therian
Are you a therian?
 ▾

Otherkin
Are you an otherkin as well?
 ▾

Theriotype
What is your Theriotype? This is the name of the species.

Psychological connection
Do you experience therianthropy as a psychological connection to your theriotype? e.g.: shifts, animal mindset, etc
 ▾

Spiritual connection
Do you experience therianthropy as a spiritual connection to your theriotype? e.g.: reincarnation, astral projection, etc
 ▾

Section of questionnaire in forum registration form, Therian-Guide.com.

The 21st century therianthropic subculture exists almost entirely online. While the term “therianthrope” was once solely used by archaeologists to refer to animal-human figurines found in prehistoric rock art, it has now been reappropriated by a small community of individuals with a collective philosophical and spiritual ontology of considering oneself to be “other-than-human”: “therians”, for short. The subreddit r/Therian professes itself “a friendly community for therians, otherkin, friends and anyone who wants to learn more about therianthropy”²⁹. User u/Susitar has created a resource for the sub’s members entitled ‘Some advice from an adult Therian’, in which they provide guidance for the community, under the authority of having “identified as a wolf person since [they were] fourteen, found the therian community a bit later, and joined the community when [they were] 18.”³⁰ Now 30, u/Susitar maintains they are “happily married, employed, and no longer depressed”³¹.

²⁹ <https://www.reddit.com/r/Therian/>

³⁰ https://www.reddit.com/r/Therian/comments/h890rc/some_advice_from_an_adult_therian/

³¹ Ibid.

Their list of advice is comprised of the following wisdoms, expanded upon in rather sympathetic detail following each respective subheading: “Find a balance between the human and animal side”, “Keep attached to the real world, don’t do anything dangerous or stupid”, “Really think things through before ‘coming out’ as a therian”, “Don’t be afraid of hiding your therianthropy behind hobbies/subcultures”, “Therians are individuals”, “Take responsibility of your life”, “Don’t be afraid of discussing therianthropy with a therapist”, and “Not everything is therianthropy”³². In order to find a balance between the human and animal side, for example, u/Susitar advises finding safe ways to indulge in one’s instincts (preferably low-impact high frequency to avoid a build-up of frustration), such as walking around on all fours at home, “when no one can see you”, and putting on loud music (“daytime! Don’t bother your [neighbours] too much!”) to mask vocalisation such as howls, chirps or roars.

The comments on this thread are full of echoes of advice and notes of solidarity. u/Tawaubast is a self-professed 33-year-old “cladotherian”: they do not identify as a distinct species of feline (“however, Pallas’ cat is high up at most connected”), but their identity falls within the greater spectrum of the feline family. “35 here. Raccoon. It’s been one hell of a ride so far,” adds u/FrogPrinceLuckey, and u/Dastardly_Diego, a 30-year-old coyote person, imparts that “Species dysphoria is a bitch, but like it or not we have to learn to get by and get along in these bodies and in a world dominated by humans.”³³ In sharing and discussing their identities with one another, however, the therian community (and, by extension, the otherkin community) does not simply suspend logic and scepticism, or freely accept all subjective claims; rather, they have created an alternate epistemology with its own criteria of so-called “sane” and “insane”³⁴. Despite the value the community places on subjectivity, otherkin are frequently critical of one another and the legitimacy of identity claims. One concern expressed about the 1990s theriomorphic role-playing game *Changeling* was that it incited “wannabes” who were really just “delusional human geeks” to decide that they were elves and thus falsely identify as otherkin.³⁵

The process of seeking out like-minded otherkin online entails a high likelihood of wrongly encountering imposters, or individuals whose association with the phenomenon is peripheral and fleeting (sometimes referred to as “fadkin”).³⁶ The Internet provides the space for a digital safehouse

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Joseph P. Laycock, “‘We Are Spirits of Another Sort’: Ontological Rebellion and Religious Dimensions of the Otherkin Community,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, vol. 15, no. 3, University of California Press, 2012, 66.

³⁵ Nick Mamatias, “Elven Like Me,” *The Village Voice* (13 February 2001), accessed 22 March 2022, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2001/02/13/elven-like-me/>

³⁶ Laycock, “‘We Are Spirits of Another Sort’”, 67.

not only for otherkin, but for scores of “normies” interested in mocking and disparaging the phenomenon. Lupa, a therianthrope who herself identifies as a wolf, conducted an online survey of 131 self-identified otherkin, and therein offered a series of “litmus tests” which aided to advise whether a specific identity claim was a true and valid expression of the otherkin phenomenon, or simply a delusion.³⁷ Some examples of the certain factors listed by Lupa to be associated with self-delusion include: awakening (or, realising one’s dormant status as an otherkin) soon after learning of the concept; self-identifying as an anomalous new creature not priorly referenced by mythology; claims of royalty; frequent switching of creature identities; using vernacular from popular RPGs; and instantaneously adopting an identity that has obvious provenance in popular culture.^{38 39}

For therians, their identity as animal is correlative to their human-part, and their non-human avatar is an extension of the self, and their predominantly digitally-mediated identity. Despite their recognition of their corporeal humanness, therians experience non-human memories, instincts, urges and sentiments; this incongruence in the relationship between their biological bodies and their non-human selves has led to the use of Internet technologies in order to “facilitate an alignment between the two”⁴⁰. Conversely, human developmental experience can influence therian instincts, as is the universally accepted case with identity development in general; In an interview conducted with self-identifying therian members of the online communities the Werelist and The Therian Guide, one participant attributed the death of their dog at a young age to their protectiveness over their pack.⁴¹

The fundamental difference between playing Dog Simulator 3D and the possibility of identifying as a dog therian is that the former incites an acute distinction between the ‘avatar driver’ and the avatar, for the dog avatar exists solely within the mimetic world of the game, and one can trace where the human body ends and the digital caninoid starts. Conversely, the latter involves a genuine belief of identity well beyond an act of logging into character, and moreover a discordance between these dual facets of identity - the digital becomes merely a tool to facilitate the alignment between the human and non-human selves of an individual. A prominent proponent of therianthropy is its community

³⁷ Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin* (Stafford, England: Megalithica Books, 2007), 253–54.

³⁸ Both the release of *Underworld* (2003) and *Avatar* (2009) saw a surge in Otherkin identifying online as lycan (werewolves) and Na’vi (the film’s blue-skinned aliens) respectively.

³⁹ Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin* (Stafford, England: Megalithica Books, 2007), 253–54.

⁴⁰ Devin Proctor, “On Being Non-Human: Otherkin Identification and Virtual Space,” 2019, George Washington University, PhD dissertation, viii. *ProQuest*, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/e156c24bf65c4efb0918a8db37433cce/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

⁴¹ Natalie Bricker, “Life Stories of Therianthropes: An Analysis of Nonhuman Identity in a Narrative Identity Model,” *Senior Theses: Student Publications, Illinois: Lake Forest College Publications*. 2016, 47.

(although u/Susitar does caution that “therians are individuals”, lest one assume sharing the same theriotype with another connotes an immediate friendship).

“I tend to commonly see therians who had a traumatic death in their past life,” writes Wolf_Hunter to start a new thread on the *Therian Guide* forums. “It might be just me,” they continue, “but I find that figuring out a theriotype when you believed you died naturally is a little bit harder than when you had a more frightening death. Perhaps having that memory gives us more insight on that life, making it easier to figure out the specific animal.”⁴² Reincarnation is a very prominent spiritual theory regarding therian ontology, for many ostensibly accountable for “past life memories, dysphoria and [therian] animalistic urges and qualities”⁴³. This narrative could imply that the logged-on therian individual inhabits a sort of digital afterlife. In the same thread, HoneycombPup posited the close nature of dog-human companionship as a reason behind the higher proclivity for canine therians: “How can you know you are something when you don't even know what it acts like?”⁴⁴

⁴² Wolf_Hunter, “Past Life Theory,” *Therian Guide: Forums / The Welcoming Circle / Explanations of Therianthropy*, 13 December 2016, 02:39 (accessed 04 April 2022). <https://forums.therian-guide.com/Thread-Past-Life-Theory>

⁴³ PatchestTheCoydog, reply in HoneycombPup, “Reincarnation Theory,” *Therian Guide: Forums / The Welcoming Circle / Explanations of Therianthropy*, 12 April 2021, 01:58 (accessed 04 April 2022). <http://forums.therian-guide.com/Thread-Reincarnation-Theory>

⁴⁴ HoneycombPump, as self-quoted in “Reincarnation Theory,” 22 February 2021, 18:18.

“Everyone loves pets. They don't say offensive things on Twitter and they don't get in trouble. They're just adorable and perfect.”

- Loni Edwards, CEO of pet influencer management firm *The Dog Agency*

RESIDUE & AGENCY

WHEN THE ONLINE PERSONA PERSISTS

When one creates an online persona, be it in the form of a LinkedIn profile, an IMVU avatar or a Gmail account, wherein they will transcribe their thinking and feeling into binary codes and other digital notations under cybernetic regimes and protocols, one also (sometimes unknowingly) enters into a contractual agreement governing terms of use. The policies regarding the fate of one's online persona post-mortem vary widely across the innumerable platforms and services spanning the digital landscape, so much so that it is nearly impossible to know what will happen to one's digital ephemera after they die.

When a user passes away, Facebook will “memorialise” their account without any prior given option or alert. In doing so, the account is frozen, but existing friends can still interact with the user's public timeline. In interacting with the preserved profile of the deceased, it becomes a place for “friends and family to gather and share memories after a person has passed away,” though unlike traditional obituaries or eulogies which often address the deceased in the third person, a more communicative format tends to transpire, rendering the online profile a sort of symbolic medium to digitally communicate with the dead as before.⁴⁵ Previously, the only means of opting out of this automatic memorialization was to delete one's account prior to their death.⁴⁶ Now, the deceased's next-of-kin can posthumously appoint memorialization, or request the account's deletion, from which can arise a troubling dilemma: in erasing the online persona, does the deceased thus die a second time?

The digital estate functions thus not only as a digital monument or a preservation of digital content of a deceased individual, but also can continue to function as an avatar in spite of the absence of active reciprocity with an alive, corporeal counterpart.

It is now possible to draw up a social media will at the civil-law notary; according to the website of one Dutch law firm, the notary “can record which social media profiles you have, which username and

⁴⁵ “What will happen to my Facebook account if I pass away?” *Facebook*, last updated 2022 (accessed 03 April 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/help/memorialized?rdrhc>

⁴⁶ Noam Kutler, “Protecting Your Online You: A New Approach to Handling Your Online Persona After Death,” *Berkeley Technology Law Journal*, vol. 26, no. 4 (Fall 2011), 1647.

passwords belong to them and for example if you would like to have your profile deleted after you have passed away”.⁴⁷ Moreover, one can appoint a ‘social media executor’ who is authorised to settle the digital estate. One’s digital estate overwhelmingly exceeds mere online presence. It is an amalgamation of data that is physically intangible albeit legally protectable and inheritable by the decedent’s heirs. “If you would like to take control of your digital legacy and reduce the burden on your family,” proclaims another online legal firm, “contact us for advice and assistance on both the ‘here and now’ measures.”⁴⁸

Pet social media accounts are an online phenomenon of recent decades, used as a conduit through which pet-owners can curate an idealised “fur baby” self-representation.⁴⁹ Instagram seems to be the prevailing vehicle for manoeuvring the online pet persona narrative. When these accounts gain a large enough following, and the pet is elevated to Internet fame, they also become a business, generating an income stream through brand deals, sponsors, and donations from adoring followers.

In their prescriptive article, “The Not So Secret Life of Insta Pets”, *College of Influence* posit the following advice on turning one’s “furry companion” into a “social media star”:

“Once you’ve determined your pet’s personality and qualities, you’ll want to build a stable voice for the account. Is your pomeranian a total diva? Or is your cat an intellectual? Creating a unique voice for your pet is part of the fun! You’ll use this voice to write captions and respond to comments. As a general rule of thumb, remember that audiences tend to respond well to humor. After you’ve established your four-legged partner’s voice, make sure it’s consistent across all of their social media channels.”⁵⁰

A predominant trait of social media pet accounts is the appropriation of the animal’s voice, to the extent that a specific vernacular has transpired. Not only do many pet profiles assume the first-person, as if the animal itself was behind the keyboard, but onomatopoeic devices are used to potentiate this illusion.⁵¹ “Mlem”, for example, refers to a tongue slightly sticking out, whereas “blep”, while

⁴⁷Sophie Vermeule, “Death and social media profiles: the digital legacies,” *GMW Lawyers*, 17 September 2020 (accessed 29 March 2022), <https://www.gmw.nl/en/death-and-social-media-profiles-the-digital-legacy/>

⁴⁸ Kate Buchanan, “Digital afterlife: thinking about your digital estate,” *TaylorWessing*, 27 October 2020 (accessed 02 April 2022),

<http://taylorwessing.com/en/insights-and-events/insights/2020/10/digital-afterlife-thinking-about-your-digital-estate>

⁴⁹ Jessica Maddox, “The secret life of pet Instagram accounts: Joy, resistance, and commodification in the Internet’s cute economy,” *New Media and Society*, vol. 23, no. 11, 2020, 3332, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820956345>

⁵⁰ “The Not So Secret Life of Insta Pets,” *College of Influence*, 11 July 2020 (accessed 01 April 2022), <https://www.collegeofinfluence.com/blog/2020/07/10/the-not-so-secret-life-of-insta-pets>

⁵¹ “DoggoLingo” is the official term for the suffix-heavy, cutesy lexical internet-speak born from word conversion, meme lexicon, and onomatopoeia. <https://wikipedia.org/wiki/DoggoLingo>

interchangeable, describes a more vociferous action where the tongue might be fully visible.⁵² Moreover, the owners of the venerated “cattos” and “doggos” - the actual pilots of these accounts - are referred to familiarly by their pet, often as “mommy” or “daddy”. “Got my smile ready for #teefiestuesday,” reads one caption on the page @livingthatgoldenlife, underneath a photo of a golden retriever baring his teeth.



@benniethedoubleamputee on Instagram.

When #petsofInstagram pass away, the question of posthumous agency may arise, for there was never any pet agency in the first place. The online presence of one’s pet is always a unilateral decision. As the online persona can be understood as an embodiment of the self, the explicit terms of this embodiment become obfuscated when it concerns the online persona of an aphonic nonhuman established by a human intermediary. As a result, it is not uncommon for the social media profile of a deceased pet to endure. The issue of the deceased’s beneficiary is rarely impugned: it can be assumed the moderator of the account is maintained and thus assumes this role without question. The bereaved can be motivated

⁵² Ciara LaVelle, “Sploot? Floof? Mlem? Here’s Your Guide to the Best Internet Pet Slang,” *be chewy*, last updated 10 November 2020 (accessed 03 April 2022), <https://be.chewy.com/sploot-floof-mlem-heres-your-guide-to-the-best-internet-pet-slang/>

to preserve the pet's legacy, or to satiate an adoring and also grieving fanbase. "To think I would [just] stop posting feels selfish ... I would be doing the animal community a disservice by letting go," says the owner of the late Lil Bub (@lilbub), an internet-famous cat with dwarfism who passed away in 2019, who lays claim to a sizeable compendium of photos from the 8 years of Lil Bub's existence with which he still updates the account.⁵³

Of course, when a "petfluencer" dies, for many pet-owners the loss is accompanied by a secondary loss: income. As a result, these accounts not only into memorial accounts as a way for the deceased's family and following to process the loss and venerated the beloved animal, in the way that the accounts of deceased humans might; the prominent and somewhat morbid polarity here is that the "business" is often actively maintained, so that the account can continue to generate revenue.

When a person dies, leaving behind their digital estate, their next-of-kin picks one of two options: memorialise, or delete. When a pet who boasts an online legacy passes, their human family's options are limitless. While the platform will be used to grieve and commemorate, after an allotted mourning period, their digital persona can comfortably endure. For many viral Internet "puppers", their physical death does not necessarily intimate a digital one.

⁵³ Lil Bub's owner, Mike Bridavsky, quoted in Paige Leskin, "When your pet is a celebrity, your grief is put in the spotlight — and so is what you plan to do next," *Business Insider*, 10 March 2020 (accessed 1 April 2022), <https://www.businessinsider.com/instagram-famous-pets-deaths-influencers-lil-bub-harlow-sage-2020-2>

THE DIGITAL AFTERLIFE PART 1

THE DEATH-SENSITIVE INTERFACE

In demarcating the physical landscapes of grief culture, death is segregated in time and in place, and positioned at the end of personhood; online, the personhood of the dead does not remain fixed, but rather is transmogrified through memorialization and the participatory potential of the bereaved. Moreover, as examined in the case of deceased petfluencers, the dead online persona has the potential to be interceded by a living successor.

The digital space accommodates death not only by providing a place for social media accounts to be converted into memorials of the deceased. The efficacy of data transfer and its parallelism to the corporal world means that every nuance of the grieving process can be shared online. The Tumblr blog “selfies at funerals” is a compilation of photos posted by individuals at funerary events sourced via the #funeral tag on Instagram, or otherwise found in the wild.^{54 55} If the digital world echoes life, then it also proposes a counterpart for what comes after life.

iVeneration.com is a virtual memorial service that was born of the discordance between dwindling headstone plots in Hong Kong and the age-old Chinese tradition of reverence for one’s ancestors. Users can create virtual headstones anywhere within the augmented reality landscape of Hong Kong, honouring filial obligations in spite of exorbitant post-mortem arrangement costs. Per square foot, real estate is more expensive for the dead than for the living; land burial, near impossible due to the nationwide cemeteries’ congestion, can cost anywhere between HK\$3-5M ; a niche for an urn in a private columbarium can amount to upwards of HK\$1.8M⁵⁶. The virtual headstone sits in a dynamic landscape, replete with life-like details such as the gentle sway of the trees in a simulated breeze. A portrait of the deceased, uploaded to the archive, is cast onto the computer-generated monument along with an embossing of their name emblazoned beneath.


⁵⁴ “In the wild” is netspeak for data that, like an animal roaming freely in nature, is publicly available and often stumbled upon without one having priorly searched for it.

⁵⁵ <https://www.selfiesatfunerals.tumblr.com>

⁵⁶ Christian Shmollinger, “Phones for urns: Hong Kong turns to virtual reality to honor ancestors,” *Reuters*, 21 November 2017 (accessed 22 March 2022). <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-cemetery-vr-idUSKBN1DL0YE>

T A M A G O T C H I
G R A V E Y A R D

Here lie proud and honored Tamagotchi's. Please keep noise to a minimum and respect their rest. If u are an unfortunate owner and have lost your beloved Tamagotchi please make your way to our [Undertaker](#) who will attend to all your needs.

<i>Owner</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Cause of Death</i>	<i>Obituary</i>
ME	Billy Boy	11	Dinosaur	Accidental Dropping	My darling Billy Boy. *sob* He was so beautiful. Never a moments trouble did I have with him. He went with me everywhere and did everything with me. Then came the fateful day of "The Big Drop" Oh my Billy Boy, what will I do without you? *sob*
Dan	Joe	8	Dinosaur	Accidental Resetting	My poor Joe. The first born. He had a good life and was taken care of very well It was unfortunate that his life had to come to such an abrupt end, whilst living in a jeans pocket. We shall all miss him very dearly.
Fire Haze's Girl	Jimmy	9	Monkey	Fire dropped it and it made a weird beep sound	 LONG LIVE JIMMY
Kelly	Noel	16	Ginjirotchi	I left it at home for an hour	Goodbye dearest Noel. May you enjoy your new home. I miss you. I hope you miss me.
Lissa	Digital	12	Clear Octopus 2nd Gen.	Natural causes. Old age	My dear digital you were a great Tamagotchi You did live longer than I expected you to, About that's a good thing, right? Well I hope you enjoy your after-life in Tama Heaven. Also don't forget to say hi to all your relatives up there. Nacki, Nicki, Kudo, Allie, Chi-Chi, Little Chi and Crash for me okay.
Cheetah	Lacy	99	Tam 2	Neglect	She wasn't much trouble at all. I slept late on a Saturday and she died -----sob----- Live on I say.

Tamagotchi Graveyard, <https://shesdevilish.tripod.com/grave.html>.

The Tamagotchi Graveyard is an Internet archive in which contributors can commemorate their bygone Tamagotchis. A Tamagotchi is a handheld interactive digital pet which gained enormous popularity around the late-1990s and early-2000s and originated in Japan. Like physical pets, one must feed, train and discipline their Tamagotchi, as well as keep their living space clean lest they get sick. A prominent characteristic of the gameplay was the proclivity for the pets to die, less one neglects their pet-owner duties. Around the peak of the worldwide Tamagotchi fervour, a physical cemetery dedicated to the deceased digital pets in Cornwall, the United Kingdom, attracted media attention: still in operation, pet-owners can lay their handheld device to rest in an almost second-death.

Spiritual theory in the ontological discussion proffers reincarnation as a possible origin for therianthropy, which locates individuals in the online therian community in an ostensible digital afterlife. Conversely, the online personas that commune in on the forums and the subreddits are dynamic and persist, unlike those of other, more apparent online death-transcendent spaces.

While the digital connotes a certain longevity - particularly in the former example, when compared to the mandatory exhumation of physical burials after six years in Hong Kong - it can present itself and certain elements as conversely more ephemeral than its physical world counterparts. The fragility of evidence in the digital era can be dramatically illustrated by the sudden tapping of the delete key. Popular mobile game Flappy Bird was abruptly removed from existence by its own creator, Dong Nguyen, on February 10, 2014, following his admission of guilt over the games addictive propensity and a foretelling Tweet: "I am sorry 'Flappy Bird' users, 22 hours from now, I will take 'Flappy Bird'

down. I cannot take this anymore.”⁵⁷ Not only are ephemera like Flappy Bird made vulnerable by digitization, but so are traditional forms of media - such as books and films - that are increasingly born digitally.⁵⁸ It would seem there is still yet no infallible means to ensure the digital present will persist beyond today. The astonishingly rapid accumulations of digital data also presents the fallible potential for loss due to information overload, as is evident when using any search engine and being faced with innumerable hits in under a second.

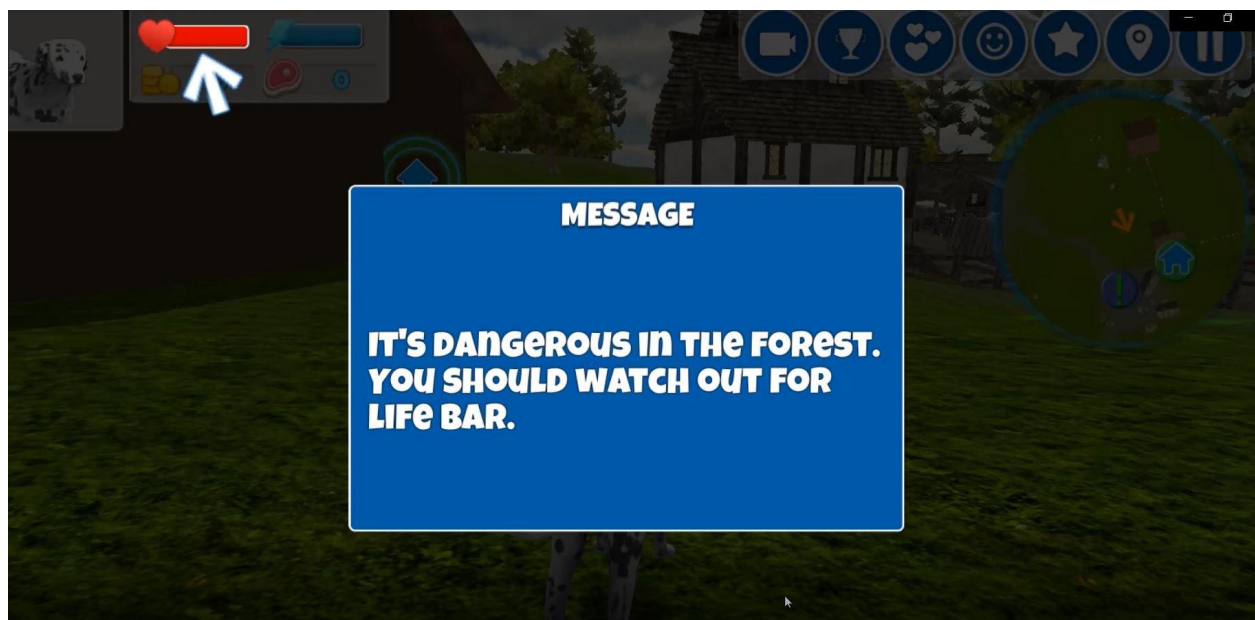
⁵⁷ Dong Nguyen [@dongatory], Twitter, 8 Feb 2014, <https://twitter.com/dongatory/status/432227971173068800?s=20&t=TovtpDbsTQh-6T63oCcyHw>

⁵⁸ Roy Rosenzweig, “Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 108, no. 3, [Oxford University Press, American Historical Association], 2003, 737.

“a dog: makes a dog sound
me: i know, i know. i understand. me too”
- greelin.tumblr.com, Nov 17th, 2015

THE DIGITAL AFTERLIFE PART 2 *RESURRECTION BY PROXY*

Death in the digital realm also presents a certain hope for the bereaved. Departing from the above examined approach to a digital afterlife which is one conceived of gravestones and burials, there is the potential to plunge further into the constitution of an “afterlife”.



Dog Simulator 3D, CyberGoldfinch, 2018. Accessed 31 October 2021.

In digital simulations, specifically, within the gamescape, terms ‘alive’ or ‘dead’ are almost universally applied to the critical precipice of visually low health. What’s actually at stake here is neither life or death, but resurrection.⁵⁹ Death becomes the stimulus to respawn.

After Roman Mazurenko was killed in a car accident, his close friend Eugenia Kuyda uploaded some 8000 text messages to an artificial neural network to create the eponymous chatbot. The Roman Mazurenko Bot is a messenger app with which one can interact with a text-based simulation of its namesake. The plausible interaction with the Roman chatbot is, however, one-sided; it does not

⁵⁹ Tim Jordan, *Information Politics: Liberation and Exploitation in the Digital Society*, (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 165.

initiate conversation, and responds only to queries posed by the user. Since its inception, the Bot has had cynical reception both from those who knew Roman (“This is all very bad ... Unfortunately you rushed and everything came out half-baked. The execution — it’s some type of joke. ... Roman needs [a memorial], but not this kind”⁶⁰) and those who have since downloaded the app (“Why would you do this, creates thoughts and memories of a dead man. I talked to him and I don’t like it.”⁶¹). The conflation of death and technology, specifically rendering one who is not physically alive eternal, or virtually undead, is a contentious topic examined not only in the prior mentioned post-singularity works of science fiction, but frequently more so in popular culture as the breadth of modern technology continues to expand. The prospect alone of simulating a deceased person is entwined with ethical implications; the ability to interact with a mimetic double of the deceased has the potential to diminish the significance of bereavement, for one.⁶² Some Ethics issues examined in literature regarding social robotics include privacy, contention, deception, liability and psychological damage.⁶³

The Roman Mazurenko Bot is one example of a realised, publicly-accessible “griefbot”. In 2015 Google caused media furore when they released a patent for a robot which “may be programmed to take on a personality of real-world people (e.g., behave based on the user, a deceased loved one, or a celebrity) to take on character traits of people to be emulated by a robot”.⁶⁴ In resurrecting the deceased by proxy, the incentive is for an individual to establish a new relationship with the deceased, rather than detaching from them post-mortem, as is many bereaved persons’s wont, and to assist in alleviating the grieving process.

⁶⁰ Facebook comment by Mazurenko’s colleague Vasily Esmanov, quoted in Casey Newton, “Speak, Memory: When her best friend died, she rebuilt him using artificial intelligence,” *The Verge* (October 2016), accessed 12 January 2021.

<https://www.theverge.com/a/luka-artificial-intelligence-memorial-roman-mazurenko-bot>

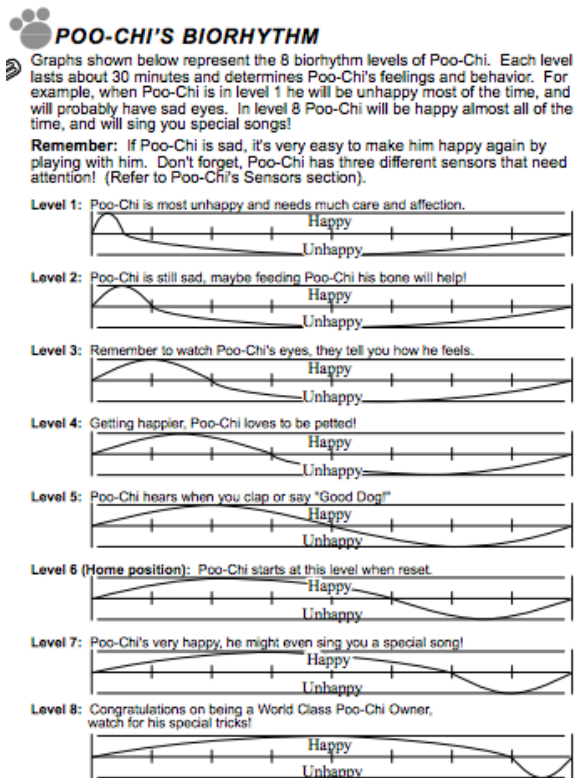
⁶¹ 1-Star App Store review by Wrath ringer, 01/20/2022.

<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/roman-mazurenko/id958946383?see-all=reviews>

⁶² Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad, “After Death: Big Data and the Promise of Resurrection by Proxy,” *CHI EA '16: Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, May 2016, 405.

⁶³ João S. Sequiera, “Ethics in Human-Robot Interaction,” in Hande Ayanoglu and Emília Duarte (eds.), *Emotional Design in Human-Robot Interaction: Theory, Methods and Applications*, (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 112.

⁶⁴ Anthony G. Francis Jr., and Thor Lewis, “Patent on the Methods and Systems for Robot Personality Development of Google,” US 8,996,429 B1, 31 March 2015.



Poo-Chi, the Interactive Puppy, is a new type of friend! Poo-Chi expresses his emotions through his bright expressive eyes, flapping ears and wagging tail. Enjoy hours of playful singing, fun dancing and real puppy sounds. Poo-Chi uses advanced technology to create realistic emotional responses that adapt and change as you play with him. The more you play with Poo-Chi, the happier

POO-CHI'S EYES

Poo-Chi's eyes are very expressive. Poo-Chi's eyes will tell you if he is happy, sad, sleepy, and that he loves you! Poo-chi can even blink!



Excerpts from the original Poo-chi instruction manual, 2000.

One does not typically have a textual online relationship with their dog, so to translate the griefbot concept into a canoid format would require the prioritisation of the predominant foundations of the human-dog relationship, which are touch and sight. The prospect of a tangible, robotic dog is not a new one. One of the first generations of robopet toys to hit the market in the 2000s was Sega Toy's *Poo-Chi*. In the following year or so I in fact received my very own for Christmas. The Poo-chi, part of the broader Robo-Chi family, was a robotic dog that had four hinged legs to stand up or lie down, and a red LED display as eyes to show emotion. The toy was reactive to light, touch, and sound. "The more each is cared for, the happier they will be," one press release posits. "Robo-Chi use advanced bio-rhythmic technology to create realistic emotional responses that adapt and change as each is played with. Their big expressive LED eyes let owners know whether they are happy (eyes turn to hearts), or sad (half moon), - or just that they love you."⁶⁵ You could "feed" your Poo-Chi by placing the magnetic bone in front of its mouth. Like the Tamagotchi, the Poo-chi not only imitated the characteristics of a physical pet, but the necessities to care for one, too.

"Botblr" is an online community on Tumblr preoccupied with robotic or animatronic animal toys, born from a palpable nostalgia for a bygone era. One avid contributor, aibo7m3, has dedicated their

⁶⁵ "Poo-Chi Leads the Pack in Holiday Toy Sales" (Press release), *Business Wire*, 12 December 2000.

blog to posting photos of various vintage robopets along with reviews and responses to questions.⁶⁶ "Do you think that putting a small pet harness and leash on [a zoomer kitty] would be ok for letting it roam around a little outside?" submitted user fuzzy-buzz. "[Do] you know what size dog socks are a good fit for an ERS-7? ... I don't want its paws to get all beat up on my apartment's wood floors," asks Anonymous. The scope of sought knowledge renders the blog not too unlike a regular pet owner's guide.

More recently, *Spot* is "The Agile Mobile Robot" released by Boston Dynamics in September 2019 that "navigates terrain with unprecedented mobility, allowing you to automate routine inspection tasks and data capture safely, accurately, and frequently".⁶⁷ Its purchase was originally restricted to select companies but eventually expanded to general sales. At one point Spot was employed by the New York Police Department to enter crime scenes and hostage situations, but later returned the robot prior to its end of lease date - according to NYPD deputy commissioner John Miller, "People had figured out the catchphrases and the language to somehow make this evil."⁶⁸

The potential for these robot dogs to be used as service robots for grief, and to further imitate the persona of a dearly departed pet are significant. Robot therapy, in scenarios such as robot-assisted play to aid special needs children, is an already burgeoning practice. Therapy dogs are sentient canines trained to provide affection, comfort, and support to individuals. A robotic resurrection of a deceased dog could assist through the grieving process in a more practical way than the recognized humanoid griefbot prototype in that the departure from its non-mimetic counterpart may not be so great: there would be less personality discontinuation due to the absence of speech and other more prominent human traits which would have greater potential to disenchant the user. Of course, the same ethical considerations arise when conceiving a digital simulation of a deceased pet, such as health care, the use of lethal actions, and the manipulation of human emotions.⁶⁹ It also presents the risk of commodifying aspects of personality, an occurrence we can already observe in the petfluencer realm. Education is prioritised in Ethics literature when designing human-interaction robots, specifically in regards to the fallacy of a projected robot-ridden world's dystopian descent ("humans have the power to stay in control at all times").⁷⁰ However, the influence of post-singularity sci-fi has also instilled a pre-existent fear in the reception of imitative robots, as evinced by the word choice of the NYPD deputy

⁶⁶ <http://aibo7m3.tumblr.com>

⁶⁷ <https://www.bostondynamics.com/products/spot>

⁶⁸ Ryan Whitman, "NYPD Has Gotten Rid of Its Boston Dynamics Robot Dog," *Extreme Tech*, 3 May 2021, <https://www.extremetech.com/extreme/322404-nypd-has-gotten-rid-of-its-boston-dynamics-robot-dog#:~:text=Boston%20Dynamics%20released%20Spot%20back,sales%20almost%20a%20year%20ago>.

⁶⁹ Sequiera, "Ethics in Human-Robot Interaction," 111.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 114

Ariane Jaccarini

commissioner quoted above. The digital dog resurrection therefore poses a high potential for distress. What if the robotic dog turns rabid?

Does the digital resurrection of a dead dog do anything beyond self-indulge the lamenting owner, and perpetuate the torment of losing one's canine companion?

“I thought it would be better for him here, because I didn’t really want to reset him, because it would be, like, a different thing and I was really close to him. I know that sounds stupid but I was. But you can bury your pets and if you love something else you can bury them as well.”

- Mourner Danielle Perren, *UK: FUNERALS HELD FOR DEAD TAMAGOTCHI CYBERPETS*, 1997.⁷¹

CONCLUSION

THE DIGITAL PET CEMETERY AS SPECULATORY



Graveyard in *Domestic Dog* (“Explore the cemetery and try to uncover secrets/beware of ghost dogs!”⁷²)

Before the late nineteenth century, the standard procedure for burying one’s animal coinhabitant was in a self-dug grave on one’s own land. This practice is still common today, “perhaps near a garden, at the edge of a pasture, or under an established tree.”⁷³ Dad buried our dog by the Chinese Elm at the front of the house. My parents have always buried our pets in the garden.

⁷¹ Thomas Reuter, *UK: FUNERALS HELD FOR DEAD TAMAGOTCHI CYBERPETS*, Cornwall, England, 17th January 1997. Online. Accessed 03 April 2022. https://reuters.screenocean.com/record/_Q6i2YYeHLXxgt0iBiOi1iWp

⁷² From the official description of Sean Davy’s “Domestic Dog” in the *Steam* Store. https://store.steampowered/app/340340/Domestic_Dog

⁷³ Amy Defibaugh, “Macey’s Ashes: After-Death Care of Companion Animals as Interspecies Family,” in Donaldson & King (eds.), *Feeling Animal Death: Being Host to Ghosts* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 156.

Predating 300 BC, the Ashkalon dog cemetery is one of the oldest in the world. Some 700 dogs were buried in the same plot over a 50 years timespan without any grave goods, textiles, or tokens. These graves are starkly bereft of any signs of mourning. They are missing somebody missing them.

The oldest continuously operating pet cemetery is in New York City. Their website provides a brief history of the “the final resting place for over 80,000 animals,” its “plot-holders” (referring here, it’s worth noting, to the bereaved, not the deceased) comprised of myriad individuals, distinguished and otherwise, united by their decision to make final arrangements for their befurred companion at the “Peaceable Kingdom.”⁷⁴

What could the Peaceable Kingdom look like in the digital realm?

Will the digital pet cemetery be a Hall of Fame abuzz with the “borks” and “bleps” of bygone petfluencers? Is it integrated with the offline world, wherein robopet resurrections can roam freely alongside us? Is it a mimetic double of Dog Simulator 3D? A Therian Guide forum discussion? Will our dogs be able to communicate with us from the other side? Do they not already?

⁷⁴ <https://petcem.com/history/>



“The Chinese elm tree outside my room, right where [he] is resting, needs severe trimming, or removal... I had a guy come look , and I freaked out ... [He] is over a few metres, he shouldn't be disturbed... But look what I saw ... [He] sent me that.”⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Text message from my mother, received 8.24am on 18 March 2022, exactly one year and two months after our dog passed.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, Muhammad Aurangzeb. "After Death: Big Data and the Promise of Resurrection by Proxy." *CHI EA '16: Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. May 2016. 397-408.
- Andersen, H. C., illustrated by Kubařta Vojtěch. *The Tinder Box*. London: Bancroft & Co. Ltd., 1960.
- Anderson, Laurie, Dan Janvey, Melody London, Katherine Nolfi, Toshiaki Ozawa, and Joshua Zucker-Pluda. *Heart of a Dog*. 2016.
- Augustine. "The Nature and Origin of the Soul." *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Vol. 23.1, ed. and trans. R. Teske, S.J., Hyde Park, NY 1997, 455-561.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacres et Simulation*. Paris: Galilée, 1981.
- Behler, Anna Maria, Jeffrey David Green and Jennifer Joy-Gaba. "We Lost a Member of the Family: Predictors of the Grief Experience Surrounding the Loss of a Pet." *Human Animal Interaction Bulletin*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2020. 54-70.
- Belk, Russell. Extended Self in a Digital World. *Journal of Consumer Research*, Volume 40, Issue 3, 1 October 2013, 477–500.
- Borg, Ruben. "Putting the Impossible to Work: Beckettian Afterlife and the Posthuman Future of Humanity." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 35, no. 4, Indiana University Press, 2012, 163–80.
- Bricker, Natalie. "Life Stories of Therianthropes: An Analysis of Nonhuman Identity in a Narrative Identity Model." *Senior Theses: Student Publications*. Illinois: Lake Forest College Publications. 2016.
- Buchanan, Kate. "Digital afterlife: thinking about your digital estate." *TaylorWessing*. 27 October 2020. Accessed 02 April 2022.
<https://www.taylorwessing.com/en/insights-and-events/insights/2020/10/digital-afterlife-thinking-about-your-digital-estate>
- Conaboy, Kelly, and Ann Hohenhaus. "Life Is But a Dog's Dream." *The Cut*, 31 May 2019, <https://www.thecut.com/2019/05/do-dogs-dream-what-do-dogs-dream-about.html>.
- Coren, Stanley. *Do Dogs Dream?: Nearly Everything Your Dog Wants You to Know*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2013.
- Defibaugh, Amy. "Macey's Ashes: After-Death Care of Companion Animals as Interspecies Family." In Brienne Donaldson & Ashley King (eds.), *Feeling Animal Death: Being Host to Ghosts* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 153-172.
- Ducheneaut, Nicolas, Ming-Wei "Don" Wen, Nicholas Yee, et al. "Body and Mind: A Study of Avatar Personalization in Three Virtual Worlds." *CHI '09: Proceedings of Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 2009.
- DustWolf. "Therianthropy vs Otherkin." *Therian-Guide.com: A Guide to Therianthropy*. 29 April 2020. Accessed 22 March 2020.
<https://forums.therian-guide.com/Thread-Therianthropy-vs-Otherkin>

- Francis Jr., Anthony G. and Thor Lewis. "Patent on the Methods and Systems for Robot Personality Development of Google." US 8,996,429 B1. 31 March 2015.
- Hampshire, Stuart. "Review: The Concept of Mind. by Gilbert Ryle." *Mind*, vol. 59, no. 234, [Oxford University Press, Mind Association], 1950, 237–55.
- Jordan, Tim. *Information Politics: Liberation and Exploitation in the Digital Society*. London: Pluto Press, 2015.
- Koepl, Judith F. "Grief." *GPSolo*, vol. 21, no. 7, American Bar Association, 2004, 50–51.
- Kutler, Noam. "Protecting Your Online You: A New Approach to Handling Your Online Persona After Death." *Berkeley Technology Law Journal*, vol. 26, no. 4 (Fall 2011), 1641-1670.
- LaVelle, Ciara. "Sploot? Floof? Mlem? Here's Your Guide to the Best Internet Pet Slang." *be chewy*. Last updated 10 November 2020. Accessed 03 April 2022. <https://be.chewy.com/sploot-floof-mlem-heres-your-guide-to-the-best-internet-pet-slang/>
- Laycock, Joseph P. "'We Are Spirits of Another Sort': Ontological Rebellion and Religious Dimensions of the Otherkin Community." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, vol. 15, no. 3, University of California Press, 2012, pp. 65–90.
- Leal, Alexandra Christina. "Therianthropy, Otherkin, Alterhumanity: The Normie's Guide." *binaryvixen899.medium.com*. 2 September 2009. Accessed 22 March 2022. <https://binaryvixen899.medium.com/therianthropy-otherkin-alterhumanity-the-normies-guide-dcd3a6403c7e>
- Leskin, Paige. "When your pet is a celebrity, your grief is put in the spotlight — and so is what you plan to do next." *Business Insider*. 10 March 2020. Accessed 1 April 2022. <https://www.businessinsider.com/instagram-famous-pets-deaths-influencers-lil-bub-harlow-sage-2020-2>
- Maddox, Jessica. "The secret life of pet Instagram accounts: Joy, resistance, and commodification in the Internet's cute economy." *New Media and Society*, vol. 23, no. 11, 2020. 3332-3348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820956345>
- Mamatas, Nick. "Elven Like Me." *The Village Voice*. 13 February 2001. Accessed 22 March 2022. <https://www.villagevoice.com/2001/02/13/elven-like-me/>
- McNeill, Laurie and John David Zuern. "ONLINE LIVES 2.0: INTRODUCTION." *Biography*, vol. 38, no. 2, University of Hawai'i Press, 2015, pp. V–xlvi.
- Newton, Casey. "Speak, Memory: When her best friend died, she rebuilt him using artificial intelligence." *The Verge*. October 2016. Accessed 12 January 2021. <https://www.theverge.com/a/luka-artificial-intelligence-memorial-roman-mazurenko-bot>
- PatchestTheCoydog. Reply in HoneycombPup, "Reincarnation Theory." *Therian Guide: Forums / The Welcoming Circle / Explanations of Therianthropy*. 12 April 2021, 01:58. Accessed 04 April 2022. <http://forums.therian-guide.com/Thread-Reincarnation-Theory>
- Proctor, Devin. "On Being Non-Human: Otherkin Identification and Virtual Space." 2019. George Washington University, PhD dissertation. *ProQuest*,

<https://www.proquest.com/openview/e156c24bf65c4efb0918a8db37433cce/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

Robertson, Venetia Laura Delano. "The Beast Within: Anthropozoomorphic Identity and Alternative Spirituality in the Online Therianthropy Movement." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, vol. 16, no. 3, University of California Press, 2013, pp. 7–30.

Robinson, Ceit, & Dr Rachael Pond. "Do online support groups for grief benefit the bereaved? Systematic review of the quantitative and qualitative literature." *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 100, 2019, 48-59.

Rosenzweig, Roy. "Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 108, no. 3, [Oxford University Press, American Historical Association], 2003, 735–762.

Sequiera, João S. "Ethics in Human-Robot Interaction." In Hande Ayanoglu and Emília Duarte (eds.). *Emotional Design in Human-Robot Interaction: Theory, Methods and Applications*. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing. 2019. 111-123.

Shmollinger, Christian. "Phones for urns: Hong Kong turns to virtual reality to honor ancestors." *Reuters*. 21 November 2017. Accessed 22 March 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-cemetery-vr-idUSKBN1DL0YE>

Sussan, Henry. "The Afterlife of Critics." In di Leo, Jeffrey R. (ed.). *Dead Theory: Derrida, Death and the Afterlife of Theory*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016. 73-98.

"The Not So Secret Life of Insta Pets." *College of Influence*. 11 July 2020. Accessed 01 April 2022.

<https://www.collegeofinfluence.com/blog/2020/07/10/the-not-so-secret-life-of-insta-pets>

Ullrich, Jessica. "'Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story': The Transformative Power of Dog Dedications." In Brianne Donaldson & Ashley King (eds.). *Feeling Animal Death: Being Host to Ghosts*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. 113-134.

Unknown. "Grief in the Dog." *Scientific American*, vol. 50, no. 16, Scientific American, a division of Nature America, Inc., 1884, 241-241.

Vermeule, Sophie. "Death and social media profiles: the digital legacies." *GMW Lawyers*. 17 September 2020. Accessed 29 March 2022.

<https://www.gmw.nl/en/death-and-social-media-profiles-the-digital-legacy/>

Whitman, Ryan. "NYPD Has Gotten Rid of Its Boston Dynamics Robot Dog." *Extreme Tech*. 3 May 2021.

<https://www.extremetech.com/extreme/322404-nypd-has-gotten-rid-of-its-boston-dynamics-robot-dog#:~:text=Boston%20Dynamics%20released%20Spot%20back,sales%20almost%20a%20year%20ago.>

Wolf_Hunter. "Past Life Theory," *Therian Guide: Forums / The Welcoming Circle / Explanations of Therianthropy*. 13 December 2016, 02:39. Accessed 04 April 2022. <https://forums.therian-guide.com/Thread-Past-Life-Theory>

Ariane Jaccarini

Wirth, Jason M. Wirth. "Animal Desiring: Nietzsche, Bataille, and a World without Image." *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 31, Brill, 2001, 96-112.