



Editorial

Afterword: Play, Personhood and Digital Mortality

Douglas Davies

Department of Theology and Religion, University of Durham, Abbey House, Palace Green,
Durham DH1 3RS, UK; douglas.davies@durham.ac.uk

1. Introduction: Retrospective and Prospective Themes

This Afterword echoes our editors' framing of this Special Issue as seeking to both sketch the 'state of the art' and indicate some 'future avenues' for research in digital death. Accordingly, I will first highlight selected concepts explored in previous chapters before focusing on the notions of play, personhood, allurement, and fear as notions for ongoing consideration.

This perspective supports our editors' depiction of digital death as a hybrid field sustained by a considerable variety of established academic disciplines extended into opportunities for innovative work. They are obviously right not only in seeing how changing times align with shifts in values and research perspectives but also in judiciously noting that, as in the case of ritual, digital rites do 'not necessarily call for new versions of ritual theory'.

One firm acknowledgement of this chapter reflects the goal of the CHANSE programme that funds our Digital Death (DiDe) Project in which I am a grateful partner, along with Dr Georgina Robinson, based at Durham University. CHANSE abbreviates the Collaboration of Humanities and Social Sciences in Europe, and, in what follows, I seek to bring my own research background in both the humanities, especially in theology, and in the social sciences, especially in anthropology and sociology, to bear upon issues of digitally framed mortality. A sketched autobiography of my death-related research will help frame my perspective on previous chapters and provide a basis for my suggestions for future study concerning the theoretical notions of play or ludic theory and of 'dividual' personhood, along with brief reference to allurement and fear.

2. Personal Death Studies Background: Changing Times

Our editors noted that no field emerges in a vacuum, and this is also inevitably true of my own death studies rooted in both the social scientific domains of both the anthropology and sociology of religion on the one hand and that of a humanities-grounded study of theology on the other. That work began in 1969 with explorations of Mormon groups, Sikh materials, and the sociology of knowledge relevant to ideas of salvation; the Mormon work continues to this day. Then, from the late 1980s, I focused on cremation including *Cremation Today and Tomorrow* (Davies 1990; Davies 1995), and the seminal *Encyclopedia of Cremation* (Davies and Mates 2005). Other projects and publications embraced the re-use of old graves (Davies and Shaw 1995); natural woodland burial (Davies and Rumble 2012); death, ritual, and belief (Davies [1997] 2017); the theology of death (Davies 2008); and the complementarity of UK lifestyles and deathstyles in *Mors Britannica* (Davies 2015). Today, I also work on Resomation—the alkaline hydrolysis of human bodies—where I am studying the organisation and motivation of a UK-based company whose digital platforms sustain the live-streaming of funeral services (Davies and Robinson 2024).

2.1. Corpse, Nuance, and Digital Sensorium

Retrospectively and methodologically speaking, much of this social scientific research, involving surveys, interviews, and fieldwork on death rituals, made me somewhat sceptical



Citation: Davies, Douglas. 2024. Afterword: Play, Personhood and Digital Mortality. *Social Sciences* 13: 384. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13080384>

Received: 18 June 2024
Accepted: 18 June 2024
Published: 23 July 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

when first encountering studies of ‘online religion’ and ‘digital ethnography’, as when I joint-supervised Vivian Asimos alongside Jonathan Miles-Watson, himself a rare example of a contemporary scholar of Structuralism. Her doctoral work on *The Slender Man* proved a valuable piece of research (Asimos 2019; 2020, pp. 125–37). It helped to assuage, at least in part, my fear of an online serious loss of nuance in the understanding people gain from interpersonal, face-to-face work, not least in terms of death, grief, and mourning, given the somatic ‘messages’ conveyed by a silent corpse, grieving relatives, an open grave, or the senses triggered within a crematorium.

Still, some of that caution remains with me, suspecting that there are ‘losses’ that cannot be compensated for, not even by massed online support. I find something similar in Patrick Stokes and his signposting of the ‘ambiguity of the dead online, who are both gone and still with us’ (Stokes 2021). Speaking positively, however, it is obvious that digital materials bring new aspects of human behaviour to light.

2.2. *Seeing Again and the Voyeur*

Still, this issue touches on a certain ambivalence in emotional dynamics framing offline and online, dealing with the dead whether as bodies or memories. Here, I find Altaratz and Morse’s (2023) chapter of significance, as they depict and critique how ‘digital technologies ... facilitate posthumous bonds’. Their reference to Barthes on photographic albums relating to private/individual aspects of life on the one hand, and to digital collective practice on the other, certainly merits ongoing reflection in potential shifts from private to public modes of behaviour.

This becomes increasingly pressing in their descriptive case of the deceased South Korean child, Nayeon, being technologically ‘remade’ to enable the mourning mother to have some ‘final’ final time with her child. Many readers will grasp the dissonance versus closure paradox evident in this case. The mother’s perception of the ‘age’ given to the recreated child in the digital event contrasted with her child’s age present in her own mind and did not engender a ‘final encounter and closure’, for ‘dead’ children can age in the imagination of a parent in whose life-experience time passes and birthdays or death-days are counted. Indeed, the very notion of ‘closure’ is ambiguous and merits detailed work for death studies at large, let alone for digital death.

2.3. *Death, Sex, and Dreams*

With that mother/child case in mind, I see Altaratz’s and Morse’s point on the ‘voyeuristic desire’ of some audiences who seek death ‘as spectacle’, and they are right to see ethical issues involved in this. Their allusion to voyeurism prompts me to think of death, sex, and Geoffrey Gorer, who balanced the late Victorian secrecy over pornography and openness over death with the later 1960s’ openness over sex and avoidance of death (Gorer 1965). Given that the Internet now hosts pornography in ways that exponentially mirror Gorer’s point, it is at least worth noting the voyeuristic potential of death and asking what the psycho-social dynamics of sex and death carry for the 2020s. As bedfellows, or whatever they are, their roots lie deep within everyone and in digital culture.

As for Altaratz and Morse’s ‘Fabricated Encounters with the Dead’ and their allusion to séances, I am prompted to think of the non-fabrication evident in dreams. Very few ever attend a séance, but practically everyone dreams, including online users, though just what the interface of the two might be could provide an immense opportunity for research (Davies 2021). My key point here is methodological/theoretical, turning on the fact that while digital technologies may ‘facilitate posthumous bonds’, they do so through procedures of conscious fabrication, unlike the deeply personal ‘unconscious’ source of dreams.

Fabricated encounters demand extensive data to construct an avatar, as in cases of Holocaust survivors, but the information so curated (which strikes me as particularly serious, seminal, and ethically oriented) depends upon conscious sources. Other human depths of ‘knowing’, however, include unconscious materials, and this difference is not

trivial. Our colleagues quite rightly discuss the way in which VR, deepfake, and AI technologies facilitate some kind of 'interaction with representations of deceased individual as hyper-realistic avatars', and they capture this perspective in the phrase 'digital séance'. There is no guarantee, however, of how the online world depicting the dead may harmonise with or create some radical dissonance of an 'emotional roller-coaster', as with the bereaved Korean mother.

2.4. Banal Digitality

This brings me to my final appreciation of Altaratz and Morse and their reference to the capacity of digital technologies to generate repetitive GIF portrayals of the dead whereby they might be made to nod, wink, or smile. Here banality makes its presence felt: just because one can do something does not mean that one should. This is why ethical consideration also belongs to digital practice, with technical competence always inviting ethical judgement.

I am reminded of a present given me years ago by a colleague rooted in post-modern and critical theory. After returning from Italy, he left a 'picture' on my desk of the crucified Jesus, whose eyes from one angle were closed in death but from another winked knowingly. I guess my lapsed Catholic friend would have seen this artefact as ironic, regardless of how a pious Catholic or pragmatic Protestant might have viewed it. Just how folk might engage with a winking dead child is a question of its own.

2.5. Time Moves On

Returning to my more biographical themes and theoretical shifts, times certainly change, bringing new challenges to research methods and to personal disciplinary prejudices. The 1960s witnessed something like 'Death Studies' emerging from a cluster of interests of a few social scientists and, later, a few clinical bereavement/support people and some historians. The ongoing decades also brought some architectural historians, geographers, literary, music, and art specialists into the field. Much of this development was represented in the UK and parts of North and West Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and, increasingly, the USA—all reflected in the international journal entitled *Mortality* and its allied conferences on 'Death, Dying, and Disposal', in both of which I was much involved. Other journals, notably *Death Studies* and *Omega* also furthered the field.

From the mid-sixties too, it was—perhaps with grief—that major changes in fashion emerged, with various stage style theories dominating until the mid-1990s when 'continuing bonds' began to joust with, and in some quarters routed, attachment/loss perspectives. Here, Mórna O'Connor's (2024) chapter is instructive when she contends 'that the Continuing Bonds theory of grief is oftentimes used as an unqualified synonym for grief' in some online contexts. Her cautionary comments are important at a time when ideas easily conform to theoretical fashion. Indeed, one benefit of this Digital Death Project lies in bringing detailed evaluation to over-easy assumptions.

This is where a degree of historical awareness comes into play. For example, concurrent with the emergent 1990s fashion for 'continuing bonds' was the 1993 UK innovation of natural, green, or woodland burial and its competitive option to both cemetery burial and cremation (Davies and Rumble 2012). The complexity of factors associated with pragmatic shifts in custom easily align with theoretical issues. The olfactory sense, for example, covers different kinds of awareness in the smell of soil at a woodland burial, the behind-the-scenes treatment of coffins and ashes at a crematorium, and a memorial post on a remembrance digital platform. Such elements should always remain a point of consideration regarding our embodiment, emotions, and research activities. Indeed, much further thought needs to be given to the digital sensorium and to the habitus of online participants.

2.6. Personal Experience and Academic Interests

So, too, must further thought be given to the personal experiences of bereavement or the approach/avoidance attitudes to death that easily affect people, including the research

direction of many academics, as captured in Pearce and Komaromy's collection of narratives of parental death (Pearce and Komaromy 2021). Emotions can easily lie beneath the radar of scholarly endeavour. Nothing is more instructive in undergraduate seminar groups than when a rather abstract discussion of grief theories encounters one student's reference to the death of a sister, brother, parent, or grandparent, for, just then, the ethos shifts, the atmosphere changes, and new forms of relevance emerge.

I will not pursue this further except to note the experience of the death of academic mentors or mentees. I have experienced both the death of my first academic supervisor as well as of two doctoral students and have written about the ensuing loss of a certain shared pool of thought, let alone of the persons themselves. Mutual discussion is no longer possible despite the publications or, I venture to add, extensive online posts, that may exist (Davies 2023, pp. 149–70). This is worth bearing in mind when considering AI possibilities of a kind of verbal exchange with 'the dead' and of the place of inventive ideas or, rather, of their absence.

2.7. Neologism, Digital Death, and Academic Roots

With the coming of the World Wide Web, as earlier chapters of this Special Issue demonstrate and document, it was not long before death, grief, mourning, and memory appeared online. Bereaved folk deployed this networked world, with researchers soon following. This has included a rush of neologisms such as 'Thanatechnology' and 'Thanatosensitivity', depicted in Davide Sisto's valuable account of digital death; he dated those technical terms to 1997 and 2009, respectively, in a study that creatively engages with philosophical and ethical aspects of the online world (Sisto 2021, p. 59). Additionally, in Patrick Stokes' work *Digital Souls* (Stokes 2021), the subtitle 'a philosophy of online death' highlights the inviting potential of this digital arena for philosophical analysis.

This Special Issue further exemplifies this trend, notably in Nowaczyk-Basińska and Kiel's (2024) postulated 'immortological imagination' as a complement to Ruth Penfold-Mounce's previous notion of 'thanatological imagination'. They note how the digital world has been a motivating factor for 'a new cohort of scholars', giving us pause for thought as to the relationship between previous work on death and its more recent digitally innovative environment. Perhaps I am a little sensitive over this because of my own academic longevity, including experience as Series Editor of Bloomsbury's six-volume *A Cultural History of Death*, covering some 2500 years (Davies 2024).

There is, of course, valuable excitement in developing new fields, just as there is place for cautionary reserve in generating new research categories. Katarzyna Nowaczyk-Basińska and Paula Kiel frame their work in some previous sociological theory of C. Wright Mills and the notion of 'sociological imagination'. They then speak of 'both thanatological and immortological traditions' as being 'essential to how cultures manage the awareness of mortality', a proposition that needs brief qualification, in that world cultures have managed quite well for millennia and continue to do so, often adapting and developing practices as times change. To what degree digital resources will significantly influence or frame these cultural shifts remains to be seen.

In methodological terms, it is important to bear these colleagues' comments in mind when they speak of 'new cohorts' and of some ideas being derived not 'from the experience of bereavement' or from any 'specific case of death' but rather from an 'awareness of human mortality . . . and hope of continuity' . . . 'thus establishing the importance of the immortological imagination'. The issue of 'establishing' concepts takes time and much analysis, rather as in Adela Toplean's (2023) interplaying of digital and field ethnographies in this volume.

In these reflections, I, retrospectively, allude to my own, hardly novel, notion of 'words against death', first proposed as a guiding postulate in my original *Death, Ritual, and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites* (1997)—an idiom that, for good or ill, is still going strong in that book's third edition (Davies [1997] 2017). It was, for example, also echoed in Tara Bailey and Tony Walter's 'Funerals against Death' (Bailey and Walter 2016). While ignoring details,

I mentally recall other notions where I tried my hand at invention, sometimes paying off and sometimes best forgotten! Perhaps the same applies to this chapter's later concern with the notions of dividual/digital personhood and Ludism applied to digital domains.

2.8. Classics Deployed

Just how to draw from established theoretical traditions while also developing new arguments remains a question of academic/intellectual virtue. One good example in this Special Issue lies in Sumiala and Jacobsen's (2024) use of Philippe Ariès and his historical division and ideal-type depictions of European death. Whatever one thinks of Ariès, his grand narrative of largely European mortality, with its subdivided types of death, is typically driven by a historian's commitment to evidence, coupled with abstractions used for interpretation. In this case, his abstractions pinpoint the individual, society against nature, the afterlife, and the existence of evil (Ariès [1977] 1991, pp. 602–14). Each of these abstractions, alongside his sense of the importance of 'destiny', provides conceptual trajectories for Sumiala and Jacobsen to construct notions of the spectacular and the digital framing of mortality. In drawing from Max Weber's interpretative notion of ideal types, they align their argument with a sociological classic as they advance Ariès and his historical domain into that of the digital domain.

A similar rooting in sociological classics underlies Adela Toplean's chapter whose title 'Socio-Phenomenological Reflection' takes her argument and descriptive ethnography in Romania back to Alfred Schutz and his creative approach to the 'everyday lifeworld', where we find people's 'paramount realities' to be full of 'opacity'. This is an extremely significant factor, for it questions the nature of a person and personal information in relation to both life and death. 'Opacity' is a notion closely aligned with my account of the death of my own parents and what I explicitly omit (Davies 2021). Since the digital domains depend to a great extent on positive information, the explicit absence of information poses its own problems. Though, as visual representations of the dead come into play, it might be argued that such representations afford some sense of a person's identity. Toplean also draws on Alfred Schutz and the notion of co-presence or the 'we-relationship' when discussing personhood, something I take up later when discussing the notion of dividual personhood.

Her chapter is also important for its pragmatic ethnography, including some photographic representations, and for its existential portrayal of embodiment, as when she speaks of 'only a failing—wounded—body' being able to 'fully develop a sense of life'. She speaks of the wider Romanian cultural complexity of trust or lack of it in a post-communist context. Alongside that, her inclusion of contemporary Romanian 'interest in Saints that heal incurable diseases', will find a strong resonance later in this chapter for the deceased teenage boy and potential Catholic Saint for the Internet, Carlo Acuti. Rather like some of Toplean's cases, he lies at the interface of off- and online domains.

3. Digital FOMO and Grief

Much, then, can be said about historical sources and online possibilities while also acknowledging appropriate constraints for the personal lives of those who have suffered the loss of family and friends. But what of those who may not have been personally touched by grief, and who may, whether consciously or not, feel de-skilled over issues of loss? Because this may include some digital death researchers, I am prompted to think of the familiar social phenomenon of FOMO—fear of missing out—and of cautiously applying it to bereavement, grief, and loss online. It is perfectly understandable that some unbereaved people may gain a real interest in digital death because they are already interested in digital phenomena and since 'death' in some abstract ways has become much in evidence online. While readers can ponder this question for themselves, I wonder whether the historical case of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and her initial stage theory of grief might helpfully illustrate how, from the later 1960s, it became widely adopted by people personally unfamiliar with grief. Not wanting to be culturally disadvantaged by that fact, some adopted her early view to gain a sense of accredited competence (Davies [1997] 2017, pp. 72–74).

Perhaps something similar has also become evident for digital experiences as exemplified in Anu Harju's (2024) chapter and its critique of the notion of 'digital afterlife' as failing in its explanatory power when applied too broadly. Stage theories of grief and some digital afterlife notions may easily fracture under the stress of generalization or of empirical data. She not only emphasises the potential fragility of technology supporting online platforms that may well fade or fail over time but also the fact that 'afterlives' have traditionally been framed by ideas of ultimacy, as in notions of ancestors, gods, or cosmic merit. Here, I think Harju is correct when highlighting the 'inseparability of the social and the technological in the constitution of digital afterlife'. When she accepts the notion of 'techno-affective assemblage' and pursues it in terms of 'relationality, materiality, and the affective potential of data', she achieves a great deal in theoretical terms.

Iron Age, Digital Age, and Functional Immortality

With an eye to interdisciplinarity and almost as a theoretical interlude, let me link Harju's work with the apparently quite different domain of Iron Age funerary rites in ancient Judah. This will help us bridge eras, places, and methods. In his magisterial alignment of archaeological, anthropological, and textual analysis of Iron Age bench tombs, Matthew Suriano (2018) forcefully argued against the kind of Western and classical influence supporting the notion of immortal souls. Instead, he advocated the notion of 'functional immortality', another neologism, that aptly summarises how relations with the ancestors, or 'fathers' in that period of Jewish life, were sustained by funerary rites. The ancestors 'lived' when nourished, fostered, and attended to by the living; they could, equally, fade when no longer of use to their descendants. Their immortality was 'functional'. This functional immortality might well be applicable to the memorialising of the dead online. Indeed, the transient rise and fall of some online platforms has been noted (e.g., Arnold et al. 2018, p. 112); indeed, it is also part of Durham University's DiDe Project task to record, for posterity, as many death-related platforms as possible. In this Special Issue too, Sumiala and Jacobsen note the potential temporary nature of some digital platforms and the 'ephemerality' of startups.

Such ephemerality has also been aptly noted in Elaine Kasket's work that aligns well in conceptual terms with the functional immortality just noted. She ends *All the Ghosts in the Machine*, an account of 'The Digital Afterlife of your Personal Data', with a suggested 'Decalogue for your Digital Dust'. This reflexive form of her Ten Commandments begins with 'Death Anxiety' and ends with a touching exhortation to 'Forget immortality' (Kasket 2019, pp. 181–83, 242–51). To invoke Suriano's Iron Age alongside Kasket's digital age is to see the wisdom of our volume's editors when acknowledging the value of linking older and newer topics of research in digital studies of death.

Bearing in mind Kasket's deeply humane advice, we can return to Harju's triadic link between 'relationality, materiality, and the affective potential of data' to underline the 'affective potential' or the emotions aligned with online participants. I have argued elsewhere that it is precisely when emotions pervade ideas or representations of a person that 'values' emerge and often assist in framing identities and even a sense of destiny (Davies 2022, pp. 33–36). Applying this to online memorialisation, we can appreciate how someone's death, or some tragic event, gathers immediate emotional responses that condense online but which can, equally, dissipate and fade with time.

4. Play: The Ludic World of Digital Death

These accounts finally bring me to the first of my theoretical issues of this chapter, which asks, what does play or ludic theory have to do with death and, more especially, with death online? Let me itemize three.

First, because digital platforms already involve enormous materials given to 'play' including online gaming and iGaming. Second, because 'play' is explored here as a theoretical perspective rather than in its everyday sense of play. This involves an invitation to look at everyday things from a different perspective. In the quite familiar terms of social

science, 'ludic theory' belongs to the formal, 'etic', mode of analysis and not the 'emic' domain of popular play and games. Third, because at first glance, play and death seem, intuitively at least, to belong quite apart, and it is this apparent disjunction that provides a stimulus for closer analysis.

4.1. Theoretical Ubiquity of the Ludic

That we can propose a ubiquity of 'play' both as popular behaviour and abstract analysis, interpretation, or hermeneutics is evident from a cluster of theoretical ideas associated with, for example, Johan Huizinga (1872–1945), the Dutch historian of religion, and his seminal work *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 1950); Donald Winnicott (1896–1971), the British paediatrician and psychologist (Winnicott [1971] 1991); and British anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–1983), with his many studies of ritual, performance, and theatre (Turner 1982, 1987). Meanwhile, American anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1929–1997) fully engaged with play, drama, tragedy, and many forms of ritual, including the place of analogical and digital characteristics of ritual (Rappaport 1999). This is evident as well with the current Dutch anthropologist André Droogers (1941–), who has developed a broad theory of religion grounded in the theory of play or Ludism, a notion with deep Dutch roots in Huizinga (Droogers 2014; Droogers and van Harskamp 2014). Many other current scholars could be cited, whether focusing on 'Fun and Faith in the Ganges' with anthropologist Catriens Notermans (2018) or 'Our Play Pleases the Man, the Spirits of the Desert, and Whatever' of religious studies scholar François Gauthier (2018). Very recently, the eminent sociologist Richard Sennett has also addressed himself to issues of performance that are, inevitably, 'play'-related (Sennett 2024). One volume of collected essays from a conference broadly approached the theme of *Death, Culture, and Leisure*, including brief mention of Huizinga and Turner (Coward-Gibbs 2020). These and other sources will be familiar to literary scholars and critics and invite digital studies to share more extensively in the ludic approach to web-based platforms of mortality, not only as a mode of reflexive consideration driving individual scholars in their own online behaviour but also in theoretical perspectives.

As for Droogers, he approaches Ludism or play theory in research contexts by thinking of 'two or more ways of classifying reality' (Droogers 2014, p. 112). For my purposes, this double factor covers both researchers' immersed engagement in the 'game' of digital materials and their clear recognition of being 'outside' that rule-based world. Researchers both play the game whilst knowing they do so. This is a skill to be developed rather than a taken-for-granted aptitude of everyday awareness and may lie beyond certain people's competence. Not all can achieve it, especially perhaps if they have experienced close bereavement of their own. Certainly, digital scholars would need to engage in a deeper study of this perspective than I can provide here, but it might well provide ample rewards. This issue of 'classifying reality' is complex and always challenges our presuppositions and cultural contexts. Yet much is often taken for granted, and perhaps that is partly the case with digital studies, as I also hope to show below for the notion of 'the individual' as a presupposed certainty in much Western intellectualism.

Certainly, the very idea of play occupies a marginal position in much Western thought, though many, for example, will be broadly familiar with the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and his notion of 'language games' that sets words within the context and 'rules' surrounding their use. In some ways, ludic theory, as in Droogers' case, is one kind of application of Wittgenstein's concerns to more ethnographic contexts; I would press that further still into the online domain AND to the online researcher. Though not thinking of digital contexts, Benson Saler is one who alludes to Wittgenstein's idea of 'games' in terms of how we classify things, especially when items are 'linked together by networks of other games' (Saler 2022, p. 144). Literary scholars will also be familiar with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin regarding aspects of carnival, laughter, festive fun, and issues of ritual symbolism and methodology that lie beyond the scope of this Afterword (Bakhtin [1965] 1984; 1986, pp. 159–72).

All this, however, leads on and invites a discussion of how online death factors align with other online and offline activities. Just how does digital death align with other online behaviours? What do switches from one platform to another signify? Might the very context of a screen not inevitably align and mutually frame diverse form of content, bringing death alongside many a diverse set of interests?

4.2. *Play's Theoretical Seriousness*

To speak of play in relation to death online is, then, not to deploy an inappropriate category and does not degrade the seriousness of mortality. We might, for example, set the notion of play on a behavioural continuum of cultural significance extending from children's play through to adult and international sporting events. In more existential terms, the theoretical nature of ludic theory brings a higher-order interpretation to these human behaviours. In so doing we might ask whether the alignment of one form of behaviour with another—as with play and death—is appropriate to online behaviour. Do digital platforms have something of 'play' about them, which invites a ludic form of analysis where death issues are concerned? At least, it is a proposal worth exploring, making death, funeral rites, and modes of memorial open to analysis as ludic behaviour.

Here, the allied notion of practical performance and its digital manifestation is relevant. In ordinary life, funeral behaviour has its own form of performance, identifiable as an elevated conception of play. Digital technologies certainly sustain the trend of having screens set up within a crematorium for playing photographs or film clips of the person's life—so, too, the extensive livestreaming of funerals. These immediately bring the ludic character of ritual to light. Both photography and film inherently carry the cultural significance of entertainment, bringing 'entertainment' into funerary ritual participation. The interplay of vocal reminiscence and the visual presentation of the deceased's life provides its own emotional intensity. Voice and film—sound and visual stimuli—create more than the sum of their parts; they reinforce the idea of dividual and not individual identity as elaborated below.

The idea of performance invokes the concept of a stage occupied by actors as well as an audience. At the simplest level, this reflects liturgical activities associated with funerals, but it also extends to more peripheral behaviour of the total group and online participants. For example, we might think of contexts in which domestic behaviour leads up to the formal funeral and moves on to a reception or party and, subsequently, to many forms of person- and family-memorialising, all offering a total funeral-field of play. Domestically, this might involve gendered or commercial division of labour in providing food and drink, and in the place of funeral anniversaries of the dead, or at Christmastime and the like, in which ordinary domesticities become intensified in their funerary form. Those elements of wider behaviour all invite consideration.

4.3. *From Priest, through Celebrant, to Digital Mourner/Player*

The ritual division of labour can also be expanded to funeral celebrants, whether those of an ecclesiastical and priestly status or of specific laypersons playing the part of funeral celebrants. Indeed, in recent decades, the emergence of funeral celebrants can be recognised as one form of secular ritualism—or, we might say, its own form of ritual play. The very fact of the rise of these celebrants is a mark of the underlying play nature of ritual, one in which the nature of ecclesiastical power has declined, allowing these celebrants to occupy priestly positions. This is important for digital research where thousands of 'ordinary' people, online friends and the like, engage in memorial acts online. The web-world of mortality has provided a further democratization of funerary function; in other words, non-priestly hands handle the digital remains of the dead. Here, ease of access affords its own potential source of secularisation.

5. Personhood: Dividuality Transcends the 'Individual'

But what is the player, the mourner, the one digitally engaged with the memory of the dead? My contention here is that digital death—perhaps digital studies more generally—might benefit from some reflexive analysis of the personhood of the player. While the easy answer, indeed the default position, is to speak of 'an individual', I want to shift this perspective from 'the individual' and individualism to 'the dividual' and complex personhood at large. Though the resistance of philosophical, theological, economic, and political theory that has established the 'individual' with its self-contained agency as the unit of human existence is stubborn, as in parts of Ariès' work, there is much more to say.

Durkheim's work, for example, discusses the way cultural classifications pervade people's sense of identity, making us 'double' in nature as 'cultural' forms pervade the 'individual'—something that was quite considerably enhanced by the Dutch scholar Anton Zijderveld (1937–2022) in his pursuit of 'Homo duplex' (Zijderveld 1970). Such notions inspired me from my first intimation of the relationship between 'individual' and 'society' (Davies 1984, pp. 159–64) to more recent accounts of 'dividuality and grief' (Davies [1997] 2017, pp. 75–78; 2021, pp. 170–75; 2023, pp. 8–10). It has become increasingly obvious that issues of identity in human personhood are better approached as complex rather than simple with the American anthropologist McKim Marriott's notion of 'dividual' or complex personhood serving well to indicate how each of us is created and sustained in and through many 'others' (Marriott 1976). The 'individual' who is a convenient agent for commercial, Neo-Liberal concerns is hard to find in the relational bonds of everyday life.

This becomes particularly significant when the idiom of continuing bonds is under discussion, as in much current material on grief. Whether off- or online, critical analysis show that dividual and not individual personhood provides a better perspective on the human processes involved. There is an intrinsic contradiction involved when we speak of 'continuing bonds' in the language of 'the individual', or individualism, for the dead are part of the living (Davies 2021, pp. 155–76) in our memory, emotions, dreams, and even our sense of embodiment (Davies 2021, pp. 155–76). Here, many might cite Martin Buber ([1937] 1958) and his account of the deeply interpersonal nature of the 'I-Thou' relationship. While this is not the place to document these arguments in detail, it is precisely the place to invite fellow researchers in digital death to scrutinize 'the individual' and ask whether some version of dividual personhood might not better account for the identity of digital death players and for their online psychological and networked dynamics.

6. Postscript: Allure and Fear

In this brief postscript, let me simply sketch the two notions of allure and fear as existential topics for developing in research on digital death. These topics concern many disciplines and, yet, may benefit considerably from digital death studies.

6.1. Allure of the Digital

The notion of allure, an almost infectious emotional and intellectual attraction towards some phenomena, has a long history in human cultures, and I have alluded to it elsewhere from a variety of authors and for the 'uncanny valley' effect over defunct robots; it may yet be a potential source of deeper digital death research (Davies 2017, pp. 181–83). The concept of allure carries some family resemblance to the wider sociological notion of charisma evident in prophetic leaders, as Max Weber argued. Whether in the allure of place or the charisma of person, there is something about certain phenomena that draws many people to seek a kind of satisfaction embedded in emotional meaning.

One long-established source for this lies in Rudolph Otto (1869–1937), whose widely known study *The Idea of the Holy* (Otto [1917] 1924) is a classic of religious studies. It includes the very well-known Latin description of 'the holy' as being *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Otto [1917] 1924, p. 7). Here, I specifically isolate the 'fascinans' element that bewitches, enchants, fascinates, and captures the nature of allurement to ask what it is about the World Wide Web and its Internet functions that may attract participation? Perhaps

the ease of access to many others speaks to our complex personhood, or that it seems to overcome the relative insignificance of a lone self by speaking to the complex nature of human (dividual) personhood? Or might the web, in and of itself, offer a kind of *mysterium tremendum*? In leaving that as an open-ended rhetorical question, let me simply cite a case that aligns previous eras with today's digital ecology.

This concerns the teenage boy Carlo Acuti who died aged 15 in 2006. He has already been beatified by the Catholic Church as a step towards his being declared a Saint, even the patron Saint of the Internet world. He had been greatly interested in online activities and, when alive, had established a site for recording Eucharistic miracles. So far, two miracles have been attributed to him. His partly reconstituted body has been installed in a church in Assisi accessible for public viewing, while numerous webpages also exist for him. The Catholic Church has seen its own evangelistic opportunity for engaging the young through Carlo as his own digital native. His own transcending of death is inherent in his heavenly capacity as an object of prayer and of helping to mediate prayerful desires (Burgess 2024). He will doubtless continue to occupy a significant online space for young digital Catholics. Here, a double allure embraces a holy corpse with its heavenly transcendence and Carlo's lifetime Internet connection. In Catholic piety, there is much here to assuage the human fear of death.

6.2. Fear

As for fear, Elaine Kaskett has already been mentioned for beginning her 'Decalogue for your Digital Dust' with the exhortation to 'Confront your death anxiety' and ending it with 'Forget immortality'. This is wise advice, since fear in many forms pervades human lives and cannot be expected to be resolved simply by online techniques to curate the dead, their words, and images. As for the post-human possibilities sought by a few, it is highly doubtful that they will ever escape death to achieve the very immortality they desire.

Technological utopia is likely to be as fear-driven as many another form of wishful thinking. This is precisely where actual human, offline, community has a part to play in mutual support, often evident in linking 'individuals' with established religious groups (Gilmore 2012, p. 42). Still, some online folk seem to benefit from networked alliances in ways that we may assume assuages fear, at least to some degree. Is there something about 'safety in numbers' that helps transcend personal loss? Or is there something about dividual personhood that resonates with an online collective? These, and many earlier issues in this chapter, remain as moot points in our ongoing research in digital death.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Altartz, Doron, and Tal Morse. 2023. Digital Séance: Fabricated Encounters with the Dead. *Social Sciences* 12: 635. [CrossRef]
- Ariès, Philippe. 1991. *The Hour of Our Death*. Translated by Helen Weaver. Oxford: Oxford University Press. First published 1977.
- Arnold, Michael, Martin Gibbs, Tamara Kohn, James Meese, and Bjorn Nansen. 2018. *Death and Digital Media*. London: Routledge.
- Asimos, Vivian. 2019. The Slender Man Mythos: A Structuralist Analysis of an Online Mythology. Ph.D. dissertation, Durham University, Durham, UK. Available online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/12962/> (accessed on 24 April 2024).
- Asimos, Vivian. 2020. The Slender Man: The Internet's Playful Creation of a Monster. In *Death, Culture and Leisure*. Edited by Matt Coward-Gibbs. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Bailey, Tara, and Tony Walter. 2016. 'Funerals against Death'. *Mortality* 21: 149–66. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Indiana: Indiana University Press. First published 1965.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1986. *Speech Genres and Other Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Buber, Martin. 1958. *I and Thou*. Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith. Edinburgh: T&T Clark. First published 1937.
- Burgess, Kaya. 2024. Carlo Is More Alive Than We Are—Surely He Is Watching from the Sky. *The Times*, Saturday, May 25, p. 15.
- Coward-Gibbs, Matt. 2020. *Death, Culture and Leisure*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Davies, Douglas J. 1984. *Meaning and Salvation in Religious Studies*. Leiden: Brill.
- Davies, Douglas J. 1990. *Cremation Today and Tomorrow*. Nottingham: Grove Books.
- Davies, Douglas J. 1995. *British Crematoria in Public Profile*. Maidstone: Cremation Society of Great Britain.
- Davies, Douglas J. 2008. *The Theology of Death*. London and New York: T&T Clark.
- Davies, Douglas J. 2015. *Mors Britannica: Lifestyle and Death-Style in Britain Today*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Davies, Douglas J. 2017. Death in Material and Mental Culture. In *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred*. Edited by Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie. London: Routledge, pp. 169–84.
- Davies, Douglas J. 2017. *Death, Ritual and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*, 3rd ed. London: Bloomsbury. First published 1997.
- Davies, Douglas J. 2021. Bereavement, Sacred-Secrecy and Dreams. In *Narratives of Parental Death, Dying, and Bereavement: A Kind of Haunting*. Edited by Caroline Peace and Carol Komaromy. Cham: Palgrave-Macmillan Cham, pp. 155–76.
- Davies, Douglas J. 2022. *Worldview Religious Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Davies, Douglas J. 2023. Mourning Academic Mentors and Mentees. In *The Meaning of Mourning, Perspectives on Death, Loss, and Grief*. Edited by Mikolaj Slawkowski-Rode. Lanham, Boulder, New York and London: Lexington Books, pp. 149–70.
- Davies, Douglas J., ed. 2024. *A Cultural History of Death*. 6 vols. London: Bloomsbury.
- Davies, Douglas J., and Alastair Shaw. 1995. *Reusing Old Graves*. Crayford: Shaw & Sons.
- Davies, Douglas J., and Georgina Robinson. 2024. *British Crematorium Managers & COVID-19*. Durham: Centre for Death and Life Studies.
- Davies, Douglas J., and Hannah Rumble. 2012. *Natural Burial: Traditional-Secular Spiritualities and Funeral Innovation*. London: Continuum.
- Davies, Douglas J., and Lewis H. Mates. 2005. *Encyclopedia of Cremation*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers.
- Droogers, André. 2014. *Religion at Play: A Manifesto*. Eugene: Cascade Books.
- Droogers, André, and Anton van Harskamp. 2014. *Methods for the Study of Religious Change: From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies*. Sheffield: Equinox.
- Gauthier, François. 2018. “Our Play Pleases the Man, the Spirits of the Desert, and Whatever”, Enjoying Religion at the Burning Man. In *Enjoying Religion: Pleasure and Fun in Established and New Religious Movements*. Edited by Frans Jespers, Karin van Nieuwkerk and Paul van der Velde. Lanham, Boulder, New York and London: Lexington Books, pp. 103–26.
- Gilmore, Lee. 2012. DIY Spiritual Community: From Individualism to Participatory Culture. In *Media, Spiritualities and Social Change*. Edited by Stewart M. Hoover and Monica Emerich. London: Continuum, pp. 37–46.
- Gorer, Geoffrey. 1965. *Death, Grief and Mourning*. London: Cresset Press.
- Harju, Anu A. 2024. Theorising Digital Afterlife as Techno-Affective Assemblage: On Relationality, Materiality, and the Affective Potential of Data. *Social Sciences* 13: 227. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Huizinga, Johan. 1950. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing.
- Kasket, Elaine. 2019. *All the Ghosts in the Machine: The Digital Afterlife of Your Personal Data*. London: Robinson.
- Marriott, McKim. 1976. Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism. In *Transaction and Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behaviour*. Edited by Bruce Kapferer. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, pp. 109–42.
- Notermans, Catriens. 2018. Fun and Faith in the Ganges: The Bodily and Spiritual Pleasures of River Bathing. In *Enjoying Religion: Pleasure and Fun in Established and New Religious Movements*. Edited by Frans Jespers, Karin van Nieuwkerk and Paul van der Velde. Lanham, Boulder, New York and London: Lexington Books, pp. 21–38.
- Nowaczyk-Basińska, Katarzyna, and Paula Kiel. 2024. Exploring the Immortological Imagination: Advocating for a Sociology of Immortality. *Social Sciences* 13: 83. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- O'Connor, Mórna. 2024. Grief Universalism: A Perennial Problem Pattern Returning in Digital Grief Studies? *Social Sciences* 13: 208. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Otto, Rudolph. 1924. *The Idea of the Holy*. Translated by John W. Harvey. Oxford: Oxford University Press. First published 1917.
- Pearce, Caroline, and Carol Komaromy, eds. 2021. *Narratives of Parental Death, Dying, and Bereavement*. Cham: Palgrave-Macmillan Cham.
- Rappaport, Roy A. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Saler, Benson. 2022. *The Construction of the Supernatural in Euro-American Cultures*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Sennett, Richard. 2024. *The Performer*. London: Allen Lane.
- Sisto, Davide. 2021. *Remember Me: Memory and Forgetting in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Stokes, Patrick. 2021. *Digital Souls: A Philosophy of Online Death*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Sumiala, Johanna, and Michael Hviid Jacobsen. 2024. Digital Death and Spectacular Death. *Social Sciences* 13: 101. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Suriano, Matthew. 2018. *A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Toplean, Adela. 2023. Socio-Phenomenological Reflections on What Digital Death Brings and Denies in Terms of Relational Experiences to Orthodox Romanians. *Social Sciences* 12: 686. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Turner, Victor. 1987. *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications.
- Turner, Victor, ed. 1982. *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Winnicott, Donald W. 1991. *Playing and Reality*. London: Routledge. First published 1971.
- Zijderveld, Anton. 1970. *The Abstract Society: A Cultural Analysis of Our Time*. London: Allen Lane.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.