

Mortality In Design

Special Issue of *Design Issues*
(<http://www.mitpressjournals.org/loi/desi>)

Introduction

"Precisely what is unsettling about modern technological construction is that, instead of holding together earth and sky, mortals and divinities, it penetrates the earth to extract resources, pushes beyond the sky with rockets and satellites, attempts to suppress mortality with medicine and drugs, and precisely in this attempt to control the body, rejects the art of dying, and thereby and in the very process the remembering of the divinities that is the most intimate part of human suffering." (Mitcham, 2005:34).

Mitcham argues that modern technology suppresses human mortality. This proposed special issue explores this same human mortality through a focus on *mortality in design*. How do mortality and design interrelate? How does human mortality shape design and design shape human mortality?

For us, the notion of *mortality* captures the impermanence of the human existence underscored by the inevitability of death. Our focus is on digital spaces of dwelling that have a particular architecture, whether computer games, virtual worlds, or social technologies. We also consider spaces of dwelling that have a digital aspect such as domestic and urban public spaces. Our exploration of the digital acknowledges that the digital and the material can interleave, whether through physical spaces being layered with technologies such as public displays or through digital spaces borrowing material forms such as through architectural metaphors. The key question we probe is: what vision of human mortality exists in such contemporary spaces?

This overall question provokes a set of related questions to be explored in the papers of the special issue. How is human mortality considered as contemporary spaces of dwelling are conceived? How are human actors in the design process conceptualized? How are humans imagined in the products of design? In answering these questions, we focus on what happens in such spaces of dwelling: being, interacting, remembering and continuing.

Digital artefacts and environments are often pegged to and engaged with by individuals and small groups yet are often impermanent and liable to change in response to other, larger, more abstract forces, such as the market and Internet policy. While post-modernity may recognize "other aspects of our humanness, which lie beyond the empirical framework of naturalistic materialism",³ and mass-production may embrace obsolescence, human mortality today has largely been subdued through medicine, science and information technologies. Human rites of passage⁴ may become highly visible for at least a time through particular physical designs, such as degradable urns which, when buried ultimately enrich the soil and contribute to a memorial garden.⁵ However, human mortality is less visible in the online environments individuals dwell in, the virtual and game worlds

1 Mitcham, Carl, "Thinking the Re-Vernacular Building," *Design Issues* 21, no. 1 (2005): 32-40.

2 Ibid.

3 Walker, Stuart, "Design and Spirituality: Material Culture for a Wisdom Economy," *Design Issues* 29, no. 3 (2013): 89-107.

4 Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

5 Siu, Kin Wai Michael. (2005). "Culture and Design: A New Burial Concept in a Densely Populated Metropolitan Area," *Design Issues* 21, no. 2 (2005): 79-89.

they inhabit, the artefacts that are carried and worn and spaces that are moved through, lived and played in. Corresponding artefacts that enable rituals of disposal are rare.

In addition, while Siu's *Invisible Urn* may acknowledge the fragility of the human and practices associated with designs that embrace human mortality it also assumes the persistence and immortality of government and certain aspects of human society.⁶ Human officials are posited as continuing to manage burial grounds where urns are placed while relatives' commemorative practices are presented as being subject to changing priorities and migration. Thus even in physical artefacts that recognize human mortality, certain immortalities are assumed. Digital spaces of dwelling have even more limited acknowledgment of the nature and extent of human mortality.

Digital design thus provokes a series of questions regarding the human – both the designer and the designed-for – with relation to durability and vulnerability. This special issue engages these questions. How is the mortal human designed-for thought of, as a mind or a body, for example?⁷ How much agency is this mortal human conceived to have and how is it thought to be subject to the vagaries of time? How do the design process and the human designer respond to the ephemerality, shift and vulnerability of the mortal human? To what extent is the human designer's agency, identity and mortality abstracted through, for example, an absence of explicit representation in the final design? Even if design is capturing "rituals cast in space" how is it subject and subjected to the forces of the eternal market?^{8,9} Finally, how do the human designer and the mortal human designed-for exist in time and experience the vagaries of time and mortality differently from the design itself? Even taking "the user" seriously may not engage with these aspects of human mortality in "a fragile encounter" between "other and self", "openness and closure".¹⁰

In response to the lack of attention to the fragility and vulnerability of the human in digital design, this special issue investigates its representation in digital systems, environments and artefacts through considering design processes, design actors and the design imagination. In this way it connects with the prior special issue of "Design Issues" on Interaction Design Research in Human-Computer Interaction (24(3)). It also builds on and extend further recent work in "Design Issues" that considers the role of ethics in design and the relationship between the designer and the designed for^{11,12,13} and in the domain of Internet and death studies.^{14,15,16} The main themes of this issue are designing for future death (designing), imagining life and death in design (being), designing human communication (interacting), resurrection and immortality (remembering) and materializing memories (continuing). We envisage that submissions will be in the form of design case studies, design field studies, studies of new designs and literature reviews. All submissions should include a concrete approach to design(s) through e.g. digital artefacts in use, proposed designs, discussion of particular artefacts or environments etc..

6 Ibid.

7 Harper, Richard H. R. *Texture: Human Expression in the Age of Communications Overload* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

8 Brown, Frank E. *Roman Architecture* (New York: George Braziller, 1961).

9 Bastianello, Dominik, email message to Connor Graham, 13th March 2014.

10 Steen, Mark. "Human-Centred Design as a Fragile Encounter," *Design Issues* 28, no. 1 (2012): 72-80.

11 Ibid.

12 D'Anjou, Philippe. (2009) Beyond Duty and Virtue in Design Ethics. *Design Issues*, 26(1), 95-105.

13 Walker (Ibid.)

14 Kera, Denisa. "Designing For Death And Apocalypse: Theodicy Of Networks And Uncanny Archives," *The Information Society* 29, no. 3 (2013): 177-183

15 Kocurek, Carly. "Who Harkens to the Monster's Scream? Death, Violence and the Veil of the Monstrous in Video Games," *Visual Studies* 30, no. 1 (2015): 79-89

16 Meese, James, Nansen, Bjorn, Kohn, Tamara, Arnold, Michael and Gibbs, Martin. "Posthumous Personhood and the Affordances of Digital Media," *Mortality: Promoting the Interdisciplinary Study of Death and Dying* 20, no. 4 (2015): 408-420.

Guest Editors (in alphabetical order)

Dr Connor Graham (National University of Singapore (NUS))

Connor Graham is a Senior Fellow at Tembusu College and a Research Fellow at the Science, Technology, and Society Research Cluster at the Asia Research Institute at NUS. He was lead guest editor for a special issue of *The Information Society* on “The Death, Afterlife and Immortality of Bodies and Data” published in 2013. Recently he was lead editor for a special section of *Visual Studies* on “The Aesthetic of Death and After-Death in an Internet Age” and a special issue of the death studies journal *Mortality* on "Death, Memory and ‘The Human’ in the Internet Era", both published in 2015. He has also been lead editor on two special issues in areas related to the proposal: a special issue of *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing* on “Social Interaction and Mundane Technologies” in 2010 and a special issue of *Visual Studies* on “New Visual Technologies” in 2011. He has co-edited a further two special issues, one each for the journals *Science, Technology and Society* and *East Asian Science, Technology and Society*. He co-chaired two international workshops on *Social Interaction and Mundane Technologies* (SIMTech) in 2007 and 2008 at the University of Melbourne and Microsoft, Cambridge respectively and two further international workshops on *Afterlife and Death in a Digital Age* at the National University of Singapore in 2010 and 2011. He can be contacted via email at aricgra@nus.edu.sg.

Professor Elise van den Hoven (University of Technology, Sydney and Eindhoven University of Technology)

Elise van den Hoven is a Professor at the Faculty of Engineering and IT at the University of Technology, Sydney and an Associate Professor at the Department of Industrial Design, Eindhoven University of Technology. She was lead guest editor for a special issue of *Human-Computer Interaction* on “Designing for Personal Memories: Past, Present and Future” in 2012, was a guest editor for the special issue on "The Theory and Practice of Embodied Interaction in HCI and Interaction Design" of *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* in 2013 and has published over 70 peer-reviewed publications in the area of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI). Papers directly related to the proposal include “A Future-proof Past: Designing for Remembering Experiences” in the *Memory Studies* journal in 2014, “Making History: Intentional Capture of Future Memories” at the 2009 Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI'09) conference in 2009 and “Communicating Commemoration” at the Social Interaction and Mundane Technologies (SIMTech) workshop in 2008. She can be contacted by email at elise.vandenhoven@uts.edu.au.

Dr Wendy Moncur (University of Dundee)

Wendy Moncur is a Reader in Socio-Digital Interaction at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, at the University of Dundee. She has published 27 book chapters, conference and journal papers across interaction design, social sciences and law. A number of papers relate directly to the proposal, including “A Emergent Framework for Digital Memorials” at the 2014 Designing Interactive Systems conference (DIS'14) and “From Death to Final Disposition: Roles of Technology in the Post-mortem Interval” at the 2012 Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI'12). She can be contacted by email at wmoncur@dundee.ac.uk. Dundee, Scotland. She holds an EPSRC Fellowship, and is a Visiting Fellow at the

Centre for Death and Society at the University of Bath. She co-chaired the international workshop “Memento Mori: Technology Design For the End of Life” at the 2012 Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI’12). She has

Dr Wally Smith (University of Melbourne)

Wally Smith is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Computing & Information Systems at The University of Melbourne. He is currently a collaborator on the project “Citizen Heritage: Digital and Community-based Histories of Place”, supported by the Australian Research Council Discovery scheme (2014-2016), a project involving scholars from The University of Melbourne, King’s College London and Deakin University. His research involves the development and application of new interactive technologies, and the theory of their use in various social contexts, especially health, education, architecture and heritage. He has published widely in leading international journals, including *Social Studies of Science*, *Computer-Supported Cooperative Work*, *Ergonomics*, *Interacting with Computers*, *Landscape Review*, *Journal of Architecture*, and *Architectural Research Quarterly*. He is a past National Secretary of CHISIG and is currently Long Paper Chair (with Bernd Ploderer) for OZCHI 2015. He has authored a number of publications directly relevant to this proposal, including “Hand-held Histories: Using Digital Archival Documents on Architectural Tours” in *Architectural Research Quarterly* in 2011 and “Re-connecting Visual Content to Place in a Mobile Guide for the Shrine of Remembrance” in the *Proceedings of British Computer Society Conference on the Electronic Visualisation in the Arts* in 2010. He can be contacted via email at: wsmith@unimelb.edu.au.

Timeline

The table below shows a *tentative* timeline for the development of this special issue. It is subject to change at the discretion of the editors. In order to ensure that submissions that are forwarded for review are relevant, appropriately concrete in their connection to mortality in design and that the issue has the chance of being interdisciplinary, the review process will involve a proposal review stage conducted by the editors.

DATE	WORK DONE
26 February 2016	proposals due
14 March 2016	response to authors
30 May 2016	full papers due
1 August 2016	reviews due
16 September 2016	first decisions made authors notified and asked to revise
11 November 2016	revised manuscripts due
19 December 2017	final reviews to authors
29 January 2017	final manuscripts due decisions recommended by guest editors final decisions made by Editors
22 February 2017	final versions of manuscripts due
TBA 2017	published