# How to Become Virtually Immortal

Posted by *Laura Parker*

It's not enough that Internet companies have entered every corner of human existence—now, some are starting to cater to non-existence. In recent years, Google and Facebook have created systems to deal with death, such as suspending inactive accounts and allowing people to bequeath their data to a surviving friend or relative. The newest entry in the e-death industry is a small start-up called Eterni.me, which is taking end-of-life services to Asimovian extremes. "We all pass away sooner or later, leaving only a few

memories behind for family, friends and humanity—and eventually we are all forgotten," the Web site reads. "But what if you could be remembered forever?"

Never has the cryonics movement, with its promise of reviving frozen bodies in the future, seemed so old-school. Eterni.me wants to rely on the real substance of twenty-first-century life: online activity. There are other companies that offer related services: Legacy Locker and Entrustnet allow users to nominate an "executor" who will act out their digital wishes after death, including passing on account information to designated heirs. Deathswitch sends personalized messages to pre-selected contacts. Life.Vu offers online memorial pages for loved ones who have passed away. But none of this is close to what Eterni.me is promising.

The company plans to store data from Facebook, Twitter, e-mail, photos, video, location information, and even Google Glass and Fitbit devices. While you are living, you can curate and add to this material; you can also choose privacy settings and determine what information you want stored and made public. Eterni.me then allows you to create a list of people who will be contacted and given access to your account in the case of death, giving your descendants quick and easy access to that Instagram pic of your latte or a detailed history of your Facebook pokes.

The service's defining feature is a 3-D digital avatar, designed to look and sound like you, whose job will be to emulate your personality and dish out bits of information to friends and family taken from a database of stored information. A user will be encouraged to "train" its avatar, through daily interactions, in order to improve its vocabulary and conversational skills. Eterni.me's co-founder, Marius Ursache, thinks of it as a more advanced version of Siri, who, ten or fifteen years from now, will be able to "respond to questions more naturally, and learn from every conversation you have with her."

Ursache, a thirty-seven-year-old designer and entrepreneur, dreamed up the idea for a chatbot-navigated Web site ten years ago while he was studying medicine in Romania. He repurposed the idea more recently while attending a program for entrepreneurs at M.I.T. (Bill Aulet, the managing director of the Martin Trust Center for M.I.T. Entrepreneurship, encouraged Ursache to enroll in the workshop after the two met in Bucharest, in 2012.) At first, Ursache thought about using something like Facebook's timeline to make sense of Eterni.me's stored data, but that would have been impractical, because there would be too much of it. A search engine could also have worked—but he wanted something a little more personable. Some early press reports described Eterni.me as "creepy"—perhaps inspired in part by an earlier incarnation of the Web site that referred to it as a "Skype chat from the past." Ursache dismisses this criticism. "The role of the avatar has been greatly romanticized," he told me. "It's not the point of Eterni.me—it's just the interface. He describes Eterni.me more as a library of material. "The avatar acts as a librarian, helping users make sense of the stored information," he said. "We're not trying to replace the person who died."

Developmental psychologists often talk about the importance of leaving a legacy—something tied to who we are that will outlive us. But this is usually something obvious, like having children or writing a novel. An avatar with an approximation of your voice and bone structure, who can tell your great-grandchildren how many Twitter followers you had, doesn't feel like the same thing. And what of the period of grief in the days, weeks, and months following a friend or relative's death? "A post-death avatar goes against all we know about bereavement," Joan Berzoff, the director of an end-of-life certificate program at the Smith College School for Social Work, in Northampton, Massachusetts, told me. For the time being, it seems that Eterni.me's appeal is more philosophical than practical. "A hundred years down the track you might not only be able to talk to your mom who died a year ago, but to your grandmother who died when you were sixteen, and your great-grandmother who died before you were born," Susan Bluck, a psychology professor at the University of Florida, said. "So it means that we could, in some way, forge relations with ancestors who lived and died well before our own lifetime."

Ursache says that he plans to hire a psychologist to address issues like these. For the moment, however, he's focussed on trying to recruit tech companies to help develop the Eterni.me platform and build a basic demo to show potential investors. The tech challenges are significant, and Ursache estimates that a working version of the service could take up to two years. The technology required to power some aspects of Eterni.me already exists—think chatbots and algorithms for analyzing information—but Ursache says that what is available isn't enough to meet all of Eterni.me's goals. For the avatar to work well, for example, Eterni.me needs artificial-intelligence technology that is much more advanced that what currently exists. The obvious first step would be working out how to build an avatar advanced enough to be a decent facsimile not only of a human being, but of a particular person. Then there are questions surrounding storage. How much information should be saved? How will Eterni.me be able to sort relevant data from what is irrelevant? Ursache wants Eterni.me's algorithms to filter information so that only major life events are catalogued (a video of your son's first steps, a Facebook timeline post announcing a new job or promotion), as well as personally curated private mementos (e-mails or texts from a lover, for instance).

Because these problems are still to be worked out—a full-scale, public launch of the service could be as many as five years away, Ursache said (giving people enough time to get used to the idea of our descendants ogling our Instagram selfies once we shuffle off this mortal coil). I asked Ursache why he launched the Eterni.me Web site now, given that so much work has yet to be done. He admitted that it was more of an exercise in market research: before investing much time or money in Eterni.me's development, he had to gauge the level of public interest. Three thousand people registered in the first four days. There were some critics, too: Ursache received a handful of e-mails full of expletives and a few more wishing failure on the project. "You get the feeling you're doing something right when nobody is indifferent to your idea," Ursache said. By the time I spoke to Ursache, in late February, the number of people who had registered their interest in Eterni.me had reached more than seventeen thousand. When we spoke again a

week later, it had climbed to twenty thousand. As Aulet, at M.I.T., told me, "Everyone wants to live forever."

*Illustration by Dadu Shin.*

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