

The Death of the Avatar: The Condition of Digital Identity After Losing Access to Social Media Profile

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Objective of the Research

In an era where digital platforms are ubiquitous, user identities become dispersed and multifaceted, prompting questions about the significance of losing access to these identities. The objective of this research is to investigate the status of digital identities after losing access to a social media profile. The planned study will delve into the concepts of life, death, and immortality within the context of digital footprints, focusing on how abandoned social media profiles, which still function as parts of users' identities, will represent traces of the person even when access to them is no longer possible.

Methodology

The research employs a multifaceted approach. It begins with an analysis of archival internet pages using resources from the Internet Archive, comparing profile-building possibilities on platforms like MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, and TikTok from 2000 to 2024. This analysis includes a review of social media terms of service, focusing on account blocks and their consequences. The materials from the initial phase of the study—comprising available Internet Archive web pages and user profiles present on them—will undergo analysis through the document research method. Additionally, interviews and workshops with social media users who manage multiple profiles will be conducted to understand their strategies and emotions related to losing access to accounts. The findings from these analyses will inform the development of a video game, which serves as an artistic visualization of the research outcomes. This game will metaphorically depict the journey of a digital entity in a state of digital purgatory, emphasizing the themes of digital identity and loss.

Reason for Undertaking the Research

The need for this research arises from the lack of regulations regarding the accounts of deceased individuals and the evolving role of artificial intelligence in managing these accounts. As the number of deceased users on platforms like Facebook is expected to surpass active users, it is crucial to understand the implications of abandoned profiles, blocked/suspended accounts and digital traces left behind. The research addresses the disruption in the status of individuals who cannot control their digital traces. This study aims to document and respond to these changes, contributing to the fields of new media art, internet studies and game studies by providing insights into the complexities of digital identity in the modern age.

Expected Outcomes

The research is expected to enhance the understanding of digital identity and its fragmentation due to lost access to social media profiles. The findings will be visualized in the form of an interactive video game, presented at a solo exhibition and released online. This game, designed using Unreal Engine, will provide a metaphorical exploration of digital identity loss, aiming to increase awareness about online behavior and security. Additionally, the research will produce multimedia documentation of workshops and interviews, contributing to the broader discourse on digital identity. The ultimate goal is to enrich the study of internet behavior and promote new media as a creative means of expressing and understanding digital existence. The research findings will be discussed in article published in open access. It will be initially submitted to *Artnodes*, *AN-ICON*, and *INSAM Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology*.