

Technology

Death tech never says die

New technologies – some useful, some bizarre – are proliferating

|By Joseph Wilson

Death and taxes, according to Ben Franklin, are life's only certainties. If Jim Flaherty gets his way, though, we won't be paying taxes much longer, and according to Ray Kurzweil, we soon won't be dying either.

Kurzweil, a self-proclaimed "futurist," is so enamoured of technology's attempts to beat back the cold hand of the Reaper, he believes that the person destined to live forever is alive right now. He even suspects it might be him. Advances in the field of genetic engineering and nanotechnology have convinced folk like Kurzweil that mortality is yesterday's news.

But here in the real world, people keep dying. And while biologists tinker in their labs, more mundane technology is popping up in the marketplace designed to profit from the inevitability of death.

Websites like www.deathclock.com or www.deathtimer.com pop up every now and then in my inbox, luring people who want to know, statistically, when they'll die. There's even a life expectancy calculator on the Canadian Business website, where morbid curiosity is disguised as sensible pension planning.

But these sites are just cool applets based on the law of averages. Sites such as www.mylastemail.com and www.letterfrombeyond.com say much more about our anxiety about death and our relationship to information technology. They invite you to pre-write a message from beyond the grave to your loved ones, which these sites will deliver. There's nothing really new in this. Even the multimedia version consisting of a Web video has been seen before as the VHS tape will.

The new angle is that we would entrust the Web with such a task. The death of a loved one is placed in the same context as spam e-mails from Nigeria and messages from your colleagues spelled without capital letters. In a classic postmodern way, these websites frame life-and-death events as blips in the endless stream of information supplied by the Web.

Technological advances have also wormed their way into the physical infrastructure of the death industry. Why spend eternity in an environ-mentally disastrous rainforest mahogany coffin when EcoPod (www.ecopod.co.uk) offers high-tech coffins made of 100 per cent pressed recycled paper. You can even get one that's surfaced with moss.

You can also order coffins these days with LCD screens on the inside of the casket that give people at a visitation a "more innovative method of paying your respects to the recently deceased." The screens can play PowerPoint highlights from the person's life, music videos, even an interactive quiz on how well you knew the deceased.

The fun doesn't stop when the person is lowered into the ground. VidStone (www.vidstone.com) is a start-up company pushing the use of video screens set right into tombstones for an eternally looping bio. The Serenity Panel is solar-powered and costs around \$2,000. Although he hasn't sold any units yet, inventor Sergio Aguirre is optimistic that the trend will take off.

It's comforting to know that the tried and true tradition of sitting around with family members telling stories and having a good cry is still robust in the face of the digital alternative. If you combine Kurzweil's wish to download his consciousness into a computer to live forever with VidStone's LCD, maybe we're not so far from interacting with video screens in ways that would make Marshall McLuhan squirm.

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