

## How to Become Virtually Immortal

By Laura Parker

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. “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.

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

The service’s defining feature is a 3-D digital avatar, designed to look and sound like each client. Its job will be to emulate a person’s 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” his or her avatar, through daily interactions, 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 37-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. 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 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 said. “It’s not the point of Eterni.me—it’s just the interface.” He describes Eterni.me as more of 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 people are that will outlive them. But this is usually something obvious, like having children or writing a novel. An avatar with an approximation of a person’s voice and bone structure, that can tell great-grandchildren how many Twitter followers a person had, may not feel like the same thing.

And what of the period of grief in the days, weeks, and months after a friend or relative’s death? “A post-death avatar goes against all we know about bereavement,” said Joan Berzoff, director of an end-of-life certificate program at the Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, Mass.

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,” said Susan Bluck, a psychology professor at the University of Florida. “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 focused on trying to recruit tech companies to help develop the Eterni.me platform and build a basic demo to show potential investors. The 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?

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, but he created the site now for 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,” he said.

By late February, the number of people who had registered their interest in Eterni.me had reached more than 17,000. A week later, it had climbed to 20,000. As Aulet, at M.I.T., said, “Everyone wants to live forever.”

**Do you agree that most people would want to live forever virtually? Why or why not?**

**About this essay:**

This 300-word argumentative essay assignment helps us assess your writing. You will not be graded on your opinion, but on how well you argue it as you follow the guidelines below. **All phones and electronic devices should be shut off during this assignment.**

**Guidelines:**

- 1) Read the article carefully and underline key ideas. Read the question and think of your own arguments to answer it.
- 2) Once you begin to write, write neatly in ink, using upper and lower case letters, and skip every other line on your paper since this helps us read and make comments on your writing. If you make a mistake, cross it out and keep writing. Write in third person (no “you,” “your,” “I” “me” “myself,” “we,” or “our”) throughout your essay.
- 3) Do not waste words restating the question. Instead, **write a creative beginning in your first paragraph that leads to your introduction of the article in the second paragraph by author and “Title” and explain the article’s main idea in a sentence or two after that.**
- 4) **Your thesis or argument that answers the question should be clearly stated by the end of your second or third paragraph.**
- 5) **You can quote the article only once, quoting no more than a sentence, to support your viewpoint. Be sure to attribute the quote to the speaker who says it by name and title and to the story.**
- 6) You can briefly explain the issue in your own words and attribute the facts to the article, but most of your essay should be your ideas. (Simply restating the story reflects little thinking of your own.)
- 7) Count the words on each page and write this number on the bottom of each page. Write the total word count at the end of the essay. You should write only 300-325 words.
- 8) Turn in the article, any scratch paper you used, and your essay by the end of class.