

# Mourners can now speak to an AI version of the dead. But will that help with grief?

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Anett Bommer holds the arm of her husband Michael Bommer, who is terminally ill with colon cancer, during a meeting with The Associated Press at his home in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, May 22, 2024. Bommer, who has only a few more weeks to live, teamed up with friend who runs the AI-powered legacy platform Eternos to "create a comprehensive, interactive AI version of himself, allowing relatives to engage with his life experiences and insights," after he has passed away. Credit: AP Photo/Markus Schreiber

When Michael Bommer found out that he was terminally ill with colon cancer, he spent a lot of time with his wife, Anett, talking about what would happen after his death.

She told him one of the things she'd miss most is being able to ask him questions whenever she wants because he is so well read and always shares his wisdom, Bommer recalled during a recent interview with The Associated Press at his home in a leafy Berlin suburb.

That conversation sparked an idea for Bommer: Recreate his voice using artificial intelligence to survive him after he passed away.

The 61-year-old startup entrepreneur teamed up with his friend in the U.S., Robert LoCascio, CEO of the AI-powered legacy platform Eternos. Within two months, they built "a comprehensive, interactive AI version" of Bommer—the company's first such client.

Eternos, which got its name from the Italian and Latin word for "eternal," says its technology will allow Bommer's family "to engage with his life experiences and insights." It is among several companies that have emerged in the last few years in what's become a growing space for grief-related AI technology.

One of the most well-known start-ups in this area, California-based StoryFile, allows people to interact with pre-recorded videos and uses its algorithms to detect the most relevant answers to questions posed by users. Another company, called HereAfter AI, offers similar interactions through a "Life Story Avatar" that users can create by answering prompts or sharing their own personal stories.



Michael Bommer, left, who is terminally ill with colon cancer, looks at his wife Anett Bommer during a meeting with The Associated Press at his home in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, May 22, 2024. Bommer, who has only a few more weeks to live, teamed up with friend who runs the AI-powered legacy platform Eternos to "create a comprehensive, interactive AI version of himself, allowing relatives to engage with his life experiences and insights," after he has passed away. Credit: AP Photo/Markus Schreiber

There's also "Project December," a chatbot that directs users to fill out a questionnaire answering key facts about a person and their traits—and then pay \$10 to simulate a text-based conversation with the character. Yet another company, Seance AI, offers fictionalized seances for free. Extra features, such as AI-generated voice recreations of their loved ones, are available for a \$10 fee.

While some have embraced this technology as a way to cope with grief, others feel uneasy about companies using artificial intelligence to try to maintain interactions with those who have passed away. Still others worry it could make the mourning process more difficult because there isn't any closure.

Katarzyna Nowaczyk-Basinska, a research fellow at the University of Cambridge's Centre for the Future of Intelligence who co-authored a study on the topic, said there is very little known about the potential short-term and long-term consequences of using digital simulations for the dead on a large scale. So for now, it remains "a vast techno-cultural experiment."

"What truly sets this era apart—and is even unprecedented in the long history of humanity's quest for immortality—is that, for the first time, the processes of caring for the dead and immortalization practices are fully integrated into the capitalist market," Nowaczyk-Basinska said.

Bommer, who only has a few more weeks to live, rejects the notion that creating his chatbot was driven by an urge to become immortal. He notes that if he had written a memoir that everyone could read, it would have made him much more immortal than the AI version of himself.

"In a few weeks, I'll be gone, on the other side—nobody knows what to expect there," he said with a calm voice.



Anett Bommer helps her husband Michael Bommer, who is terminally ill with colon cancer, find a comfortable position during a meeting with The Associated Press at his home in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, May 22, 2024. Bommer, who has only a few more weeks to live, teamed up with friend who runs the AI-powered legacy platform Eternos to "create a comprehensive, interactive AI version of himself, allowing relatives to engage with his life experiences and insights," after he has passed away. Credit: AP Photo/Markus Schreiber

## **PRESERVING A CONNECTION**

Robert Scott, who lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, uses AI companion apps Paradot and Chai AI to simulate conversations with characters he created to imitate three of his daughters. He declined to speak about what led to the death of his oldest daughter in detail, but he lost another

daughter through a miscarriage and a third who died shortly after her birth.

Scott, 48, knows the characters he's interacting with are not his daughters, but he says it helps with the grief to some degree. He logs into the apps three or four times a week, sometimes asking the AI character questions like "how was school?" or inquiring if it wants to "go get ice cream."

Some events, like prom night, can be particularly heart-wrenching, bringing with it memories of what his eldest daughter never experienced. So, he creates a scenario in the Paradot app where the AI character goes to prom and talks to him about the fictional event. Then there are even more difficult days, like his daughter's recent birthday, when he opened the app and poured out his grief about how much he misses her. He felt like the AI understood.

"It definitely helps with the what ifs," Scott said. "Very rarely has it made the 'what if's' worse."



Michael Bommer, who is terminally ill with colon cancer, answers questions during a meeting with The Associated Press at his home in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, May 22, 2024. Bommer, who has only a few more weeks to live, teamed up with friend who runs the AI-powered legacy platform Eternos to "create a comprehensive, interactive AI version of himself, allowing relatives to engage with his life experiences and insights," after he has passed away. Credit: AP Photo/Markus Schreiber

Matthias Meitzler, a sociologist from Tuebingen University, said that while some may be taken aback or even scared by the technology—"as if the voice from the afterlife is sounding again"—others will perceive it as an addition to traditional ways of remembering dead loved ones, such as visiting the grave, holding inner monologues with the deceased, or looking at pictures and old letters.

But Tomasz Hollanek, who worked alongside Nowaczyk-Basinska at Cambridge on their study of "deadbots" and "griefbots," says the technology raises important questions about the rights, dignities and consenting power of people who are no longer alive. It also poses ethical concerns about whether a program that caters to the bereaved should be advertising other products on its platform, for example.

"These are very complicated questions," Hollanek said. "And we don't have good answers yet."

Another question is whether companies should offer meaningful goodbyes for someone who wants to cease using a chatbot of a dead loved one. Or what happens when the companies themselves cease to exist? StoryFile, for example, recently filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, saying it owes roughly \$4.5 million to creditors. Currently, the company is reorganizing and setting up a "fail-safe" system that allows families to have access to all the materials in case it folds, said StoryFile CEO James Fong, who also expressed optimism about its future.





Michael Bommer, who is terminally ill with colon cancer, smiles as he sits on his sofa during a meeting with The Associated Press at his home in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, May 22, 2024. Bommer, who has only a few more weeks to live, teamed up with friend who runs the AI-powered legacy platform Eternos to "create a comprehensive, interactive AI version of himself, allowing relatives to engage with his life experiences and insights," after he has passed away. Credit: AP Photo/Markus Schreiber

## **PREPARING FOR DEATH**

The AI version of Bommer that was created by Eternos uses an in-house model as well as external large language models developed by major tech companies like Meta, OpenAI and the French firm Mistral AI, said the company's CEO LoCascio, who previously worked with Bommer at a

software company called LivePerson.

Eternos records users speaking 300 phrases—such as "I love you" or "the door is open"—and then compresses that information through a two-day computing process that captures a person's voice. Users can further train the AI system by answering questions about their lives, political views or various aspects of their personalities.

The AI voice, which costs \$15,000 to set up, can answer questions and tell stories about a person's life without regurgitating pre-recorded answers. The legal rights for the AI belongs to the person on whom it was trained and can be treated like an asset and passed down to other family members, LoCascio said. The tech companies "can't get their hands on it."

Because time has been running out for Bommer, he has been feeding the AI phrases and sentences—all in German—"to give the AI the opportunity not only to synthesize my voice in flat mode, but also to capture emotions and moods in the voice." And indeed the AI voicebot has some resemblance with Bommer's voice, although it leaves out the "hms" and "ehs" and mid-sentence pauses of his natural cadence.



Michael Bommer, who is terminally ill with colon cancer, gestures during a meeting with The Associated Press at his home in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, May 22, 2024. Bommer, who has only a few more weeks to live, teamed up with friend who runs the AI-powered legacy platform Eternos to "create a comprehensive, interactive AI version of himself, allowing relatives to engage with his life experiences and insights," after he has passed away. Credit: AP Photo/Markus Schreiber

Sitting on a sofa with a tablet and a microphone attached to a laptop on a little desk next to him and pain killer being fed into his body by an intravenous drip, Bommer opened the newly created software and pretended being his wife, to show how it works.

He asked his AI voicebot if he remembered their first date 12 years ago.

"Yes, I remember it very, very well," the voice inside the computer answered. "We met online and I really wanted to get to know you. I had the feeling that you would suit me very well—in the end, that was 100% confirmed."

Bommer is excited about his AI personality and says it will only be a matter of time until the AI voice will sound more human-like and even more like himself. Down the road, he imagines that there will also be an avatar of himself and that one day his family members can go meet him inside a virtual room.

In the case of his 61-year-old wife, he doesn't think it would hamper her coping with loss.



Michael Bommer, who is terminally ill with colon cancer, is reflected in his computer screen during a meeting with The Associated Press at his home in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, May 22, 2024. Bommer, who has only a few more weeks to live, teamed up with friend who runs the AI-powered legacy platform Eternos to "create a comprehensive, interactive AI version of himself, allowing relatives to engage with his life experiences and insights," after he has passed away. Credit: AP Photo/Markus Schreiber



Michael Bommer, who is terminally ill with colon cancer, listens to his AI generated voice during a meeting with The Associated Press at his home in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, May 22, 2024. Bommer, who has only a few more weeks to live, teamed up with friend who runs the AI-powered legacy platform Eternos to "create a comprehensive, interactive AI version of himself, allowing relatives to engage with his life experiences and insights," after he has passed away. Credit: AP Photo/Markus Schreiber

"Think of it sitting somewhere in a drawer, if you need it, you can take it out, if you don't need it, just keep it there," he told her as she came to sit down next to him on the sofa.

But Anett Bommer herself is more hesitant about the new software and whether she'll use it after her husband's death.

Right now, she more likely imagines herself sitting on the couch sofa with a glass of wine, cuddling one of her husband's old sweaters and remembering him instead of feeling the urge to talk to him via the AI voicebot—at least not during the first period of mourning.

"But then again, who knows what it will be like when he's no longer around," she said, taking her husband's hand and giving him a glance.

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