

Microsoft patent would let us chat with the departed

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A chilling episode of the Twilight Zone that first aired 60 years ago focused on a young boy (played by Bill Mumy) who frustrated his parents by insisting he speaks to his grandmother daily on the toy phone she had given him just before she died. When his grieving and exasperated mother finally grabbed the phone to toss it away, she was startled to hear her mother's voice on the line.

The episode touched on the yearnings we all share of speaking one last time to a loved one no longer with us.

If a recently disclosed Microsoft patent comes to fruition, we'll be able to see, hear and converse with long-gone relatives. Or more accurately, with 3-D motion images complete with realistic voice reconstruction and distinct personality traits culled from a trove of the individual's communications on [social media platforms](#). In short, a chat bot.

"Creating a Conversational Chat Bot of a Specific Person" is the dry but accurate title of a patent filed by Dustin Abramson and Joseph Johnson Jr. of Microsoft in 2017 and approved this month.

The patent states that the chat bot could use information gathered from social media posts, images, [voice data](#), electronic messages, written letters and other [personal data](#) provided by the individual or others acting on the individual's behalf "to converse and interact in the personality of the specific person."

Users would be able to chat with the departed, asking questions about momentous events in their lives or just calling to say they love them. They could do so over a cellphone, desktop computer or with personal assistants such as Alexa or Siri.

While conversing with the chatbot, if a user asks a question for which there is little or no concrete data stored, AI and machine-learning processes would be tapped to construct logical and likely responses. According to the patent, that could be achieved by relying on "crowd-based perceptions" and "psychographic data."

Prior voice recordings combined with speech synthesis would be used to create a "voice font," and collected images, even if only in 2-D, can be converted to 3-D motion from depth information culled from old photos.

Sophisticated models down the road may enable users to speak to a person at differing ages, as a spunky youngster starting a new career or a sage senior citizen reflecting on a lifetime.

The idea of bringing the dead to digital life is not new.

Michael Jackson "performed" at the 2014 Billboard Music Awards, five years after his death, thanks to emerging holographic technology.

CGI renditions of Peter Cushing's Grand Moff Tarkin and Carrie Fisher's Princess Leia continue to appear in Star Wars movies. And the recently completed war film "Finding Jack" stars a CGI-

enhanced James Dean, the teen idol who died in a car crash in 1955 at the height of his popularity.

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Last fall, Kanye West gave his wife, Kim Kardashian West, a hologram of her late father, a defense attorney in the notorious murder trial of OJ Simpson. The hologram dad "spoke" to Kim about her decision to become a lawyer and carry on his legacy. (It also, not surprisingly, offered effusive praise for Kanye, "the most, most, most, most, most genius man in the whole world.")

Microsoft's proposal differs from those examples. It would be the first time a bot would be equipped with data harvested from social media data.

The idea has caught on in tech circles. Eternime.ai aims to preserve a digital copy of you for further generations. AI avatars armed with memories and stories of participants connect with social media accounts and portable devices that allow it to engage in conversations with relatives.

Similarly, Hereafter AI conducts extensive interviews with individuals and constructs a digital storage bin of information that can be accessed in the future by family members.

The chat bots are not limited to relatives, according to the patent. They can be a "friend, a relative, an acquaintance, a celebrity, a fictional character, a historical figure," or even "a random entity."

The concept is certain to raise ethical issues. Without clear permission to use specific types of data, who will establish the boundaries of what personal data and imagery is appropriate to use, potentially for eternity? What checks on accuracy will there be? And what about "deep fakes" in which realistic avatars are produced by political enemies or criminal enterprises attempting to fool targeted audiences?

All we know is that if a child or other relative of yours is chatting on a cellphone with a deceased family member or friend, there's no longer any reason to be alarmed.

More information: [Creating a conversational chatbot of a specific person](#)

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