
Designing for a pleasurable and creative death

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Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov's last book "The Original of Laura" introduces the idea of a design for the "craziest death in the world". The main character, Philip Wild, a lecturer in experimental psychology at the University of Ganglia experiments with death by shutting off his body from his toes upward and restoring it again with the use of elaborate tools. The whole book is a "neurologist testament", of a "luxurious suicide", a "poisonous opus" describing a process of dissolution and self-obliteration in which the main character tries to "mimic an imperial neurotransmitter on awesome messenger carrying my order of self destruction to my brain". I would like to offer a design reading of this book and look closer at other similar acts of destruction that aim to develop such elements of creativity. How can suicides be made into pleasure? What are the design principles for pleasurable and creative death? When does death become a trophy?

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous

General Terms

Creative death, design

Introduction

"You'll scream with laughter. It's the craziest death in the world" [1]

Pleasurable and creative death, a contradiction in terms, which presents an interesting design problem for a society immersed in various technologies of enhancement and redefinition of live. Solutions offering pleasurable and creative death vary from online recipes and social networking strategies for painless euthanasia to extreme green guerrilla movements supporting voluntary mass suicides. While the euthanasia websites and organizations face many challenges of various government censorship agendas, activist solutions for the extinction of humankind are concern with the issue of healthy earth ecosystem. There are also numerous design ideas on green burials and eco cemeteries that present less extreme ambitions but nevertheless are scientifically, technologically and socially complex. To this account we should also add the semi-serious Darwin Awards for the most impressive forms of deaths (with their infamous motto "Honouring those who improve the species...by accidentally removing themselves from it!"), various online suicide pacts and rings that romanticize death and Twitter live suicide notes that border with new forms of reality show. The death spectacle does not concern only our physical body but even more often our virtual existence where we are starting to witness individual and mass Facebook profile suicides, game avatar suicides as an art form and even game environments' massacres. The growing numbers of solutions and design ideas that explore the possibilities of pleasurable and creative forms of deaths are simply exploring the scope and depth of human imagination.

The main issue with these creative explorations of our limits and mortality seems to be their purpose and function. The most obvious seems to be that people need a place where they can voice freely their thoughts, uncertainties and various musings on death without being hospitalized and normalized. An example of the therapeutic effect of such imaginary deaths could be this typical post describing certain mild forms of depressing or even teenage obsession: "It was so refreshing, so therapeutic to read the open discussion without the fear of people calling 911 or sending the emergency services on you and having you involuntarily committed" [1].

The death websites as discursive and fantasy playgrounds are usually by questions such as "What would be a cool way to die?" or even descriptions such as "The 10 manliest ways to die" [3]. The actual death design ideas seems to be able to connect with every aspects of our public and private lives like dying by inhaling (cat) hairballs, chopping your own head off while standing next to a major world Leader, preparing a grizzly bear death or even repeating Empedocles jump into some volcano, or some simulation of Kenji Urada's death by a robot etc. There are even reviews of the internet classic "Cool Ways to Kill Yourself" by Scott Christensen [4] and the lees famous "Layman's guides to suicide" [5] or whole genre of fake Youtube suicides.

The design 'problem'

The "user needs" and activities supported by these services as well as the whole context of these interactions and exchanges are hard to define. While services oriented towards euthanasia often deal with issues of privacy, pain and illegality, the online suicides

can comprise many issues starting with ideation of death and the need to provoke emotional response or attention, to real curiosity or even concern related to some non anthropocentric ideal of a healthy planetary ecosystem, or even an authentic need to free ourselves from the virtual doppelgänger that we are feeding online on various social networking platforms. The stopover between being and oblivion in the age of emergent technologies and digital revolutions is simply increasingly short and the responses to the ephemerality of our digital but also physical existence increasingly variable. What is the function of similar projects offering a technological response to death? Are we trying to give comfort by making fun of death? Do these projects create some illusion of immortality? Are they paying respect to the dead and preparing us for the inevitable? Are we just trying to leave a trace of our existence?

My initial research into design solutions for death and apocalypse was dealing mainly with virtual remains and issues of memorials. I was trying to categorize the design ambitions in these projects into three groups: projects creating new forms of technological sentimentality and kitsch (Milan Kundera [6]), projects responding to the immense indifference of nature and the universe (Friedrich Nietzsche [7]) and projects offering a technological form of "apotheosis of the perishable" (Georges Bataille [8]). These three paradigmatic responses to death and apocalypse in terms of sentimentality, indifference and transgression further reference to the original iconography of death starting with the sentimental motive of the "death of the maiden", the indifference behind the "dance of death" and the transgressive qualities of every "triumph of the death" (Eva Schuster [9]).

Designing for death

I encountered the issue of pleasurable and creative death only while reading the "final" novel by Vladimir Nabokov "The original of Laura" [1] that was symbolically written shortly before his death in 1977 but published in 2009. This novel inspired a new view on the digital and technological types of death wishes, actions and design choices in relation to various technologies. It delineated a whole new border between technological sentimentality, apotheosis of the perishable and the indifference we are facing as part of the complex systems that condition of our existence.

The extreme objectification of the human existence, the loss of intimacy connected to death seem to define these transgressive forms of death that we are starting to witness online and that are described in the novel. We can even "blame" Nabokov to be one of the first designers of a pleasurable and creative death, someone who predicted the future design for dying. In this respect literature can serve as a source of design ideas, testing ground, even a prototype that lets us experience such solution. The most important message from these spectacular forms of death in the novel that can serve as a design principle is that we are actually dying while alive. We can monitor, control and make sense of every moment of our dyeing, even become aware of the pain of dying on the level our cells and tissues, to somehow immunize ourselves from the fear of death. This almost stoic but at the same time transgressive relation to death is also part of that ecological wish to understand ourselves as a part of a larger system which is nowadays less spiritual and more material. In these "design" projects related to creative and pleasurable deaths we place ourselves and understand ourselves as part of some large scale

metabolism, we are part of a collective organism, some food cycle or even part of the inorganic world to which we need to return. There is a potential for whole new design approaches to monitoring, experiencing and immunizing ourselves to death. All these fantasies of pleasurable and entreating forms of death we imagine or slowly experience relate to the idea of discovering our inorganic "heritage" or rather our inorganic future.

"The Original of Laura" is to my knowledge the first prototype that introduces the idea of a design for the "craziest death in the world". The main character, Philip Wild, a lecturer in experimental psychology at the University of Ganglia, a neuroscientist haunted by jealousy because of his young, unfaithful and beautiful wife, experiments with death by shutting off his body from his toes upward and restoring it again with the use of elaborate tools. The whole book is described as a "a mad neurologist testament", of a "luxurious suicide, delicious dissolution" (243), a "poisonous opus" describing a process of dissolution and self obliteration in which the main character tries to "mimic an imperial neurotransmitter on awesome messenger carrying my order of self destruction to my brain". I believe we should read this book as a death design manifest and look closer at similar acts of destruction that aim to develop elements of creativity and almost a Buddhist awareness of our inorganic end. How can suicides be made into pleasure? What are the design principles for pleasurable and creative death? When does a death become a trophy? All these questions seem to elude to the main idea in the book, that the difference between human and animal, human, insect or and plant are just first steps in understanding our inorganic nature and even defining technology and science as that which brings us closer to this ultimate "inorganic" truth about

our origin and destiny. That is why the human characters in the novel are described in a very scientific, botanical and entomological way: the main character Flora, her grandfather Lev Linde but also other characters reference to various flowers , inanimate objects are often described as living, so the clock on Flora's hand is "onyx eye on her wrist" (25), "telephone is ringing ecstatically (39) etc.

The whole novel is a catalogue of various ways of dying related to various media and technology, so the grandfather of Flora who is painter is defined by a boring death (What can be sadder than a discouraged artist dying not from his own commonplace maladies, but from the cancer of oblivion invading his once famous picture.... 45). Flora's father who is photographer is the first to explores the more spectacular forms of death related to technologically mediated suicide: "Adam Lind had always had an inclination for trick photography and this time, before shooting himself in a Montecarlo hotel (on the night, sad to relate, of his wife's very real success in Piker's "Narcisse et Narcette"), he geared and focussed his camera in a corner of the drawing room so as to record the event from different angles. These automatic pictures of his last moments and of a table's lion paws did not come out too well; but widow easily sold them for the price of a flat in Paris to the local magazine Pitch which specialized in soccer and diabolical faits-divers... 50-51). This scene almost predicts the real time, Youtube types of suicide performances, even if it was written in 1977. We have to give a credit to Nabokov for realizing the potential of any new media and technologies as not only to enhancers our lives but also our deaths. Technologies are defined as the way in which we explore our relationship and connection

with the inorganic world. The whole social and media impacts of our deaths are just one aspect of the very complex system of reporting and proving someone's death. Even the purpose of this memoir of Flora (Laura) written by her lover is to destroy her in the act of portraying her which is coupled with as disturbing and strange diary style descriptions of her mad husband and neuroscientist.

The first description of the "most creative suicide" is on page 127 where it starts with a simulation of some neuroscientific jargon: "An enkephalin in the brain has now been produced synthetically... It is like morphine and other opiate drugs... Further research will show and why morphine has for centuries produced relief from pain and feelings of euphoria... I taught thought to mimic an imperial neurotransmitter and awesome messenger carrying my order of self destruction to my own brain. Suicide made a pleasure, it's tempting emptiness." (128,129)

The "tempting emptiness" of the creative suicide is further elaborated into a mental exercise in which the student who desires to die "projects the mental image of the way he imagines his suicide by slowly destroying the three divisions of the physical self : legs, torso and head" the "self emblemizing" (139) process, the "process of "self-deletion", the slow amputation that is some moments ecstatic : "deletion of my procreative system sweet death's ineffable sensation" (145) , "the process of dying by auto-dissolution afforded the greatest ecstasy known to man" (171), "divine delight in destroying one's breastbone.. Enjoy the destruction but do not linger over your own ruins lest you develop an incurable illness, or die before you are ready to die" (181).

The ecstatic descriptions of death are coupled by description in terms of scientific methodology related to the ideal of "sophrosyne" – the ideal self-control stemming from man's rational core (155): "An act of destruction which develops paradoxically an element of creativeness in the totally new application of totally free will. Learning to use the vigour of the body for the purpose of its own deletion, standing vitality on its head" (213). It is an experiment and expression of scientific curiosity (159) a process of scientific testing a discovery: "Now when it is the discoverer himself who tests his discovery and finds that it works he will feel a torrent of pride and purity" (161). Death is defined by the scientific curiosity and interest in "extravagant messages that reach the brain" (193) and this scientific approach to self objectification and discipline is almost morbidly synonymous to Michel Foucault's "techniques of the self" [10]: "In experimenting on oneself in order to pick out the sweetest death, one cannot, obviously, set part of one's body on fire or drain I of blood or subject it to any other drastic operation, for the simple reason that these are one-way treatments...(246)

Nabokov's sketchy notes on the science of neurotransmitters express probably the most powerful example of reductionism of the human beings that turns our whole science and technology project into a death manifest. This first 21st century novel basically performs the "stuff of which our dreams and nightmares are made of", the neurotransmitters and molecules as our basic identity: " the self –annihilation a deep probe of one's darkest self, the unravelling of subjective associations" (247). In terms of these extreme and posthuman design ideas, all our technologies are actually the reversal of ontogeny and

even phylogeny, they are simply ways we explore our return to the inorganic past and future.

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