

Designing better ways to let go of digital memories than 'delete'

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Researchers are looking at better ways of helping grieving people let go of emotionally-charged digital content after the death of loved ones or the break-up of relationships.

As we spend more time online we are gathering large collections of digital possessions – such as photographs or emails – many of which represent important relationships, events and activities.

Letting go of objects is well known to help grieving people to move on with their lives. However, currently the only option available for disposing of digital possessions is pressing delete – which instantly and permanently removes items from storage devices. This rapid process is found by many to be deeply unsatisfactory for letting go of highly emotive photographs or messages.

"Deletion is a crude binary process leading to negative side effects," says Dr Corina Sas, senior lecturer at Lancaster University's School of Computing and Communications. "On the one hand, those who immediately delete digital material may later regret this decision. On the other, those who keep everything encounter frequent unwanted reminders in unexpected contexts, which can be distressing.

"In years to come, digital disposal will become increasingly important, particularly for younger technology savvy generations, with large digital collections."

To get a greater understanding of how designers could improve ways of letting go of our emotionally-charged digital possessions Lancaster researchers interviewed 10 psychotherapists about grief therapy for their paper 'Design for rituals of letting go: An embodiment perspective on disposal practices informed by grief therapies', published in the journal ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction.

Researchers discovered that in psychotherapy, ritualistic artefact disposal is a highly embodied practice often involving people physically manipulating objects. It is important that people are able to use bodily actions (throw, release, tear, sow) to transform objects, as this symbolises the transformation of the relationship. The use of [natural materials](#), and also natural, or wilderness, settings, were also found to be important in many grief rituals.

Researchers identified three distinct themes of letting go: 'Dynamic disposal', which involves cutting, tearing or throwing – this is normally used to express anger; 'Open disposal', which can involve releasing an object and seeing them drift away, such as balloons or an object floating away in a stream – which can convey sadness or regret; and 'Covert disposal', which involves the slow transformation of an object by dissolving in water or decomposing in earth, which can also express sadness.

"The traditional function of digital storage containers has been preserving content", said Dr Sas. "For rituals of letting go we should look at new ways to release content. Containers could display digital possessions such as text or images or sounds one at a time before they appear to drift away, never to be found or seen again.

"We could also explore ways to encourage destruction and transformation of digital possessions through shaking, breaking or throwing so that the fragmentation of the content can be seen but take

longer to disappear than by pressing delete."

Another idea put forward by the computer scientists is to deliberately design fragile [storage devices](#) made from self-dissolving or biodegradable electronics, rather than the robust storage units currently available. Natural materials, like stone, could be augmented as containers for symbolic [digital possessions](#), enabling a person to dispose of the container and emotionally disinvest the remaining possessions.

Other suggestions include abstract representations of digital content slowly fragmenting in time, like under the force of elements, also nature-inspired digital art forms that can develop from seeds to blooming plants – marking the transition of the [digital content](#) buried at their roots.

More information: Corina Sas et al. Design for Rituals of Letting Go, *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* (2016). [DOI: 10.1145/2926714](#)

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