

Retirement and regeneration—how robots and replicants experience death

June 7 2017, by Siobhan Lyons



Blade Runner's Roy Batty tried to escape death, despite being a replicant. Credit: Warner Brothers

In the 2014 film *Interstellar*, Matt Damon's Dr Mann explains that "a machine doesn't improvise well because you cannot program a fear of death."

The demise of non-human characters in science fiction films, TV shows and books has shown otherwise, suggesting that fear of losing "life" is

not always a uniquely human phenomenon.

In fact, popular culture is helping redefine what it means to be truly human, with emphasis placed on behaviour rather than biology. If fiction is anything to go by, human birth may not always be the only prerequisite for "death."

The language of robot "death"

The language we use to describe the end of robots, replicants, Time Lords and other "non-humans" reveals we do not believe they experience death in quite the same way as humans. Instead of "died," we say they are "retired" or "regenerated."

In Robert Heinlein's 1961 novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, the concept of death is replaced with "discorporation" or willing oneself to die – a learned skill that only Martians possess.

Similarly, in Isaac Asimov's 1976 novelette *The Bicentennial Man*, the [robot](#) Andrew Martin attempts to secure an operation so he can decay like a human. Andrew is successful, yet his death is surgically implemented and is not completely understood as natural.

For robots, there is no death in the biological sense, and the actual experience of being retired or regenerated does not always carry with it the same significance.

Even in the news, robots are sometimes considered flippantly to have "died." Consider the remote-controlled robots that were sent into the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Japan, the site of the 2011 meltdown: [Several reports](#) claimed that the robots "died" from radiation poisoning.

Fear of death is not just for humans

This prompts certain questions about the existential nature of robot or non-human death. While the robots of science fiction are not often considered able to die, they are seen to experience fear of the unknown all the same.

In the television series *Doctor Who*, for example, the Time Lord – an immortal humanoid from the planet Gallifrey – never dies but is destined to be regenerated.

As the tenth doctor, David Tennant's incredibly emotional regeneration in "The End of Time Pt 2" [has been voted one of the saddest TV "deaths"](#) of all time. His fearful plea, "I don't want to go," registers especially poignantly.

The 1982 film *Blade Runner* showcases one of the most notable examples of a non-human's fear of death. In the film, humanoid replicants are given a life-span of four years before they are "retired."

Rebelling against their makers, replicants including Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), Leon Kowalski (Brion James), and Pris (Daryl Hannah) express fear at the thought of their demise.

By the end of the film, Roy begins to deteriorate, and just before he goes, he delivers a brief but poignant speech:

"I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die."

Philosopher [Mark Rowlands calls the scene](#) "the most moving death

soliloquy in cinematic history." Interestingly, he also challenges the notion of death as a "bad thing":

"Roy and his replicants wanted to avoid death because they wanted more life. And the underlying assumption here is that life is a good thing – another assumption that we, typically, share with Roy."

We're changing, too

These examples show that attitudes towards the emotional capacity of robots have changed since the early days of sci-fi.

Recent TV shows like Westworld portray robots not only as more benevolent than humans, but also more human than humans. Specifically, through their philosophical struggle to attain consciousness and avoid being turned off and retired. The show encourages sympathy for the robots and their struggles, while portraying human behaviour as abhorrent.

This suggests openness to a radical idea: biology may no longer act as the sole guarantor of humanity in the future, and the title of "human" will have to be earned through struggle.

Since mortality defines humanity, perhaps robot [death](#) will eventually be treated with the same gravity we afford the demise of each other.

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