

Conference Track Description: “Death, Degrowth, and Finitude in the Age of the Lifelike” (PoM Conference Aachen 2024)

This document provides the official description of Track 11: Death, Degrowth, and Finitude in the Age of the Lifelike, part of the Politics of the Machines (PoM) Conference, Aachen 2024 (<https://www.pomconference.org/pom-aachen-2024>).

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Death arises from the gradual accrual of damage and errors in the intricate operational code governing life, leading to the permanent cessation of all biological functions needed to sustain an organism. All living entities eventually grow old and die. To what extent, then, is this true for (or desirable in) the lifelike?

The question opens a field of inquiry spanning multiple disciplines. Consider the imaginaries that we develop for lifelike agents, machines, and systems. Should death be programmed into such technologies? What can the processes, conventions, rituals, and technologies typically associated with

death teach us about the design of lifelike agents and systems? Should artificial life emulate and adapt to the organic cycle of life and death by incorporating self-limiting mechanisms and transformational phases that lead to the ecological benefits of death? Or can we envision alternative pathways where lifelike agents evolve without a predetermined endpoint?

Attempting to define death might be less important than understanding its potential function in the context of the lifelike. After all, death, renewal, adaptation, and evolution are inextricably intertwined in living systems. Far from being a mere endpoint, death assumes a profound role in biological existence. It clears the way for new generations, ensuring the survival of the fittest and adaptation to changing environments. Death can also confer meaning along with finitude; after all, ‘what exists, exists so that it can be lost and become precious,’ as Lisel Mueller writes. Consider as well other phenomena that attend death, such as cognitive decline and memory loss. In the digital sphere, forgetting is often a deliberate act—a means to safeguard privacy or maintain system efficiency. As we imbue lifelike agents with learning and memory capabilities, the act of forgetting takes on new dimensions. Is there an ethical imperative to allow lifelike systems to forget, just as humans do, to avoid the burden of eternal memory? How should artificial life forget?

Perhaps death is not inevitable. With growing insights into the mechanisms of ageing, reproduction, and death in humans and other organisms (such as naked mole rats and microanimals like rotifera), humans are increasingly capable of extending lifespans of engineered cells and organisms much longer than what was previously believed possible. Biological engineering thus takes us closer to pre-programmed immortality (or near-immortality), with the potential to completely rewire outrage and loss in the face of death.

Conversely, what roles can creative technologists, digital humanists, and new media artists play in designing for individual and collective decline? Consider, for instance, the ethical implications of death and lifelikeness in artificially sustained biological functioning, as in the case of a human on life support; can they still be considered alive? If not, who should have the ultimate authority to decide whether to keep a body functioning when it’s no longer capable of sustaining itself? How could technology-mediated memory contribute to that which has ceased to exist, living on in a state of impermanence? Might new technologies summon forth new forms of hauntology, nostalgic yearning, or mourning? As boundaries between the organic and inorganic become murkier, humans might be forced to reframe the processes and experiences of dying. Could behavioural innovations or new social technologies help support such shifts in perspective?

In this track, we invite submissions of scientific and artistic research and practice, and hybrid versions thereof, that embrace such questions. We welcome contributions from (but not limited to) creative technologists, anthropologists, digital humanists, new media artists, speculative designers, biohackers, and transdisciplinary researchers who explore senescence, obsolescence, decay, degrowth, deterioration, disintegration, decomposition, forgetting, mortality, and finitude in the age of artificial life and programmable biology.