SoulMate: Companion Technologies for Navigating Existential Concerns

Abschlussarbeiten & Projekte

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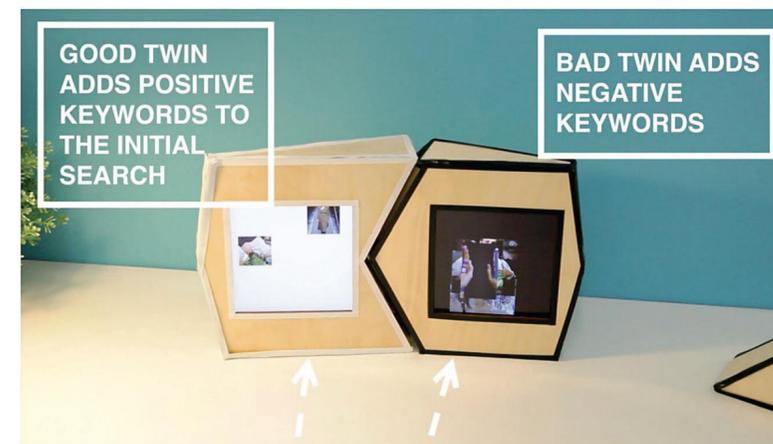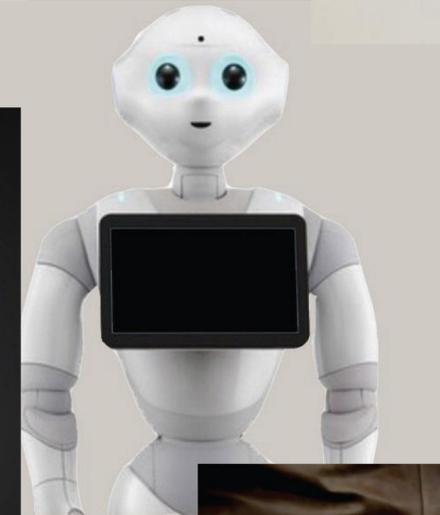
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Companion Technologies
for Navigating
Existential Concerns

(Rozendaal et al., 2016,2019; Hassenzahl et al., 2020; Avatar SDK)

Companion Technologies for Navigating
Existential Concerns

Meaninglessness

Wer bin ich?

Identity

Was gibt meinem Leben Bedeutung?

Wann fühle ich mich wirklich frei?

Freedom

Wozu bin ich hier?

Wie kann ich mich verbunden fühlen – zu mir und zu anderen?

Death

Isolation

Wie möchte ich meine endliche Zeit auf der Erde verbringen?

(Kaptelinin, 2018; Pyszczynski et al., 2010; Yalom, 1980)

Companion Technologies for Navigating Existential Concerns

Is Q&A the only way to support people in navigating existential concerns?

Let's Talk About Death: Existential Conversations with Chatbots

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ABSTRACT

Many people prefer not to think about their own death, let alone talk about it. This contributes to fear of death and reduces the acceptance of its inevitability. We hypothesized that talking about one's own death with a specially designed chatbot reduces fear of death and strengthens the confidence to discuss the topic further with loved ones. Participants (N=100) talked with the chatbot for an average of 25 minutes. It offered conversations about planning for one's own death, end-of-life preferences, and hopes for the afterlife. We measured participants' fear and acceptance of death (DAP-R questionnaire) and readiness for end-of-life conversation (REOLC questionnaire) before and after the chat. Overall, attitudes toward death improved and fear decreased, while readiness for end-of-life conversations increased. Bigger changes in attitude corresponded with longer, more reflective responses in the conversations, com-

miss opportunities to achieve a good death based on personally meaningful, consistent, or dignified choices [43].

Despite the potential benefits of an outspoken approach to death, communication barriers often prevent open conversations about death, even in cases where denial inevitably fails, such as in the case of terminal illness [25]. There are many individual reasons why people avoid talking about death, e.g. to avoid being a burden on their loved ones.

Most of these reasons can be traced back to underlying cultural patterns that encourage them. Thanatologists summarize such patterns as "death systems". A death system shapes how we think and feel about death and how we act when we are confronted with it [15]. To understand a prevalent death system, thanatologists look at the activities and components within a society that are related to death.

...ieties, death is managed in institutions ...l hospices. Because medical systems ...re, death is often implicitly seen as a ...e dying person alike. This creates a ...[28]. In some parts of the world, such ...rica, the funeral has become largely ...delegating the responsibility for the ...uneral industry. This largely removes ...ence and reduces possible encounters

...th is not in itself problematic, hospitals ...ath in their specific ways, either as a ...he end of treatment, or as a matter of ...lding a last farewell. There seems to be a lack of a coherent language for expressing existential concerns, which suggests that the meaning of death is fragmented in many ways [56]. This contributes to existential isolation and the notion of death as separate from life [2]. Outside of specialized institutions (e.g., hospices, churches, hospitals, funeral homes), death remains difficult to discuss, especially on a personal or spiritual level.

Overall, many contemporary death systems fragment death into specialized fields, but lack a holistic understanding of people's individual relationship to death. In contrast, a death system that integrates death into society would enable individuals to achieve a good death by thinking, feeling, and acting in ways where they experience acceptance and self-efficacy. Gerontologists even describe the open and explicit spiritual and existential coping with death as the hidden dimension of successful aging [57].

To counteract the denial of death and its negative consequences, the Death Awareness Movement [8] encourages people to talk more openly about death. For example, death cafés are virtual or real places where people meet to talk about death [33]. Not only the ill or old benefit from such existential end-of-life conversations, but also healthy or younger people [55]. In general, end-of-life

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1 INTRODUCTION

This paper contains references to death and dying, which some readers may find distressing.

Death is a taboo in many contemporary societies. While it is inevitable, people often refuse to anticipate it, plan for it, or even talk about it. As a result, important preparations are often made too late or not at all. People miss opportunities to shape their deaths in ways that are consistent with the meaning of their lives; they

Schwerpunkt der Arbeit: Iteratives Prototyping & Testing

- **Identifikation von Bedürfnissen + Anforderungen:** Welche Unterstützung wird überhaupt benötigt? Wann? In welcher Form?

- **Iterative Entwicklung und Testung von Prototypen:** Wie könnte eine neue Companion-Technologie ausschauen, die diese Bedürfnisse und Anforderungen adressiert?