

## Panel G1

Auditorium

### Death, Life, and (Re)Animation

Chair: **Jason Kennedy**



*Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (Sakaguchi and Sakakibara, 2001) offered the first serious attempt at producing photorealistic digital humans; within a decade, the character Clu in *Tron: Legacy* (Kosinski, 2010) provided the first real success at achieving it. Since then, visual effects companies increasingly use synthespians to (re)animate dead celebrities and historical figures, calling into question both the posthumous rights to preserving one's own legacy as well as the means by which to treat digital reincarnations with respect and authenticity. This panel presents scholarship on the relationship of photorealistic digital humans to film, virtual reality, and photographic media. This panel brings together papers that seek to extend our understanding of the use of visual effects to create the illusion of life, death, and reanimation on screen, including: ontological differences between profilmic and digital performances, truth and authenticity of performance, and authorship. Bode focuses on the 'poetryreincarnations' of Jim Clark, whereby photographs of long dead poets are manipulated using VFX technologies to create posthumous poetry recitals. Bode questions the ability of Clark's re-animations to create a sense of life, but, noting their largely positive reception among the poetry community, considers how the specific creative and professional identities of its dead subjects may nevertheless communicate a 'poetic animism'. Mihailova provides an alternative interpretation to Lamarre's (2008) notion that perceived absences in photorealistic digital animation preclude it from a legitimate connection to life and soul. Citing contemporary blockbuster films, Mihailova explores how digital visual effects can be seen to create life forces on screen, as well as to help us better understand our own relationship to soul, spirit, and anima(tion). Kennedy articulates the uses of synthespians modelled after dead celebrities to produce posthumous performances in films such as *Furious 7* (Wan, 2015) and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (Edwards, 2016). Kennedy draws from his practical animation experience to provide affirmative answers to North's question: "[is there] any use for synthespians in lead acting roles other than for the technological novelty value[?]" (2008). Finally, taking cues for Benjamin (2010), Bennett examines the recreation of authentic experiences vis-à-vis photorealistic animatronic and digital characters modelled after historical figures. Bennett reflects on how signifiers of authenticity that underscore truth-value may affect audience response in his forthcoming virtual reality project, which features a digital version of Antarctic explorer Captain Robert Falcon Scott.

The exponential rate of technological change in the visual effects industry threatens to outrun our ability to provide meaningful theoretical responses. Together these papers provide a timely and much needed scholarly investigation of the ontology of photorealistic digital humans, including the life-giving and life-taking properties of visual effects, the degrees of use of visual effects to achieve immortality on screen, and the effectiveness of such visuals.

## Biography

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Jason Kennedy is a Senior Lecturer and Animation Pathway Leader in the Digital Design Department, School of Art & Design, Auckland University of Technology in Auckland, New Zealand. He is a practicing artist with work in 3D animation, 3D Fine Art, video projection, and fine jewellery.

Jason entered the fine art world circuitously through his initial ambition to become a palaeontologist. He enrolled in Albion College's geology programme (in Albion, Michigan, USA), only to discover that while he still loved dinosaurs, he liked the idea of animating them more than digging them up. Jason graduated from Albion in 2004 with a major in studio art (drawing) and minors in geology and mathematics. He completed a MFA in electronic art from the University of Cincinnati in 2007. His Masters research focused on the role of identity and immortality vis-à-vis digital representations of self. Jason is currently working on his PhD, which examines how our understanding of what is acting must change in light of modern animation and performance capture practices. In addition to being an animator, Jason is also an actor, and he draws on these two areas of experience in his research.