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Digital afterlives

Tracing the resurrection process of dead online cultures

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we discuss the different dynamics of the resurrection process of "dead" online cultures and objects. We have previously defined four life phases of online objects (active, passive, zombie, haunting), and this article adds resurrection as activities which affect both alive and dead objects. We explore resurrection through three case studies: the Finnish online platform IRC-Galleria, short-form–video content platform Vine, and the gamified online community Habbo Hotel. Our findings are based on traces and evidence found on the web by using the clue method. We identify three distinct forms of resurrection process: the narrative resurrection, which never materialises; partial or resuscitative resurrection, where a passive object is revived; and complete resurrection of a dead object. Our approach focuses on theory and its applicability, while building on media archaeology, online culture, and social media studies.

KEYWORDS: digital afterlives, life phases, media use, online cultures, resurrection

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Introduction

Contemporary online cultures are shaped by a fascination with novelty and virality, reflected in the pursuit of new popular trends and the desire to keep up with them. Alongside exists a phenomenon where attention turns towards the past and the dead: the revival of deceased online phenomena. Familiar online communities from childhood can serve as a way to reconnect with cherished digital experiences, but nostalgia can also be a way to question and resist the prevailing digital culture and media landscape.

In our previous work, we have defined life phases of online cultures through a media-archaeological framework where we acknowledge that media never die but become resurrected to new uses and adaptations (Hertz & Parikka, 2012; Parikka, 2012). We have identified four life phases of online cultures – active, passive, zombie, and haunting – positioned within a four-field matrix based on their cultural and operational life (Vaahensalo & Sihvonen, 2022; see Figure 1). These life phases demonstrate the uses of past media content; how users remember, reuse, and circulate online objects to keep the past media alive. In this bottom-up phenomenon, participants negotiate the past and its remembrance through the recycling of digital content (e.g., Menke & Hagedoorn, 2023: 2104). Additionally, we have explored these life phases in terms of digital vulnerability; viral and popular phenomena are more likely to become part of the historical narrative of the Internet, but marginal online cultures can also exert significant influence (Vaahensalo & Sihvonen, 2024).

While gathering case studies for our research, we have repeatedly encountered a fifth online life phase: resurrection. By resurrection, we refer to an aspiration or a concrete action to revive and repurpose an online culture or social media platform that has been perceived or declared as dead. However, there are clearly different dynamics between the processes or aspirations of online resurrection. While one online platform that has functioned mainly as an archive of past profiles attempts to reconnect with users via e-mail, another one merely flirts with the idea of resurrection without an actual return but becomes simultaneously harnessed as an instrument for political powers and populism (see, e.g., Menke & Hagedoorn, 2023: 2103).

Whereas the life phases we previously defined deal primarily with online cultural remembering and the valuation of dead digital phenomena, resurrection is about bringing something back. Digital zombie life and haunting involve an awareness of death, but resurrection brings – or seeks to bring – something lost back, either in its original form or in an updated version. Resurrection entails a certain discursive explicitness about return and restoration, rather than merely reshaping something old into a new form.

In this article, we define resurrection as various activities that affect the life phase of online objects by exploring how it unfolds through three different case studies: the Finnish online platform IRC-Galleria (hereafter also referred to as the Gallery); short-form–video content platform Vine; and the gamified online community Habbo Hotel. All these platforms have either disappeared from use

entirely or seen their peak popularity replaced by a position on the margins of online culture – Vine and Habbo through an actual shutdown, IRC-Galleria through cultural and usage decline. They are also connected by efforts to bring them back; all of them involve hopes, aspirations, or concrete actions related to resurrection.

This approach focuses on theory and its applicability through cases. Our findings are based on the traces and evidence found on the web. The traces illustrating our case examples do not serve as empirical data in the traditional sense. Rather, we have selected them as tools for presenting our conceptual framework and introducing the notion of online cultural resurrection – they illustrate the different dimensions, distinctions, and environments in which the process of resurrection operates.

Our theoretical perspective is media-archaeological, combined with online culture and social media studies. Previous research on digital death has primarily focused on social media users and their digital footprints that can remain on social media platforms indefinitely (e.g., Savin-Baden & Mason-Robbie, 2020; Sisto, 2020; Wright, 2014). Additionally, reminiscence related to social media and online cultures has largely focused on the personal and individual, emphasising how users recall their previously published content and the experiences shared on social media (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021; Jungselius & Weilenmann, 2023; van Dijck, 2007).

By examining past and marginal web cultures, we promote a critical historical understanding of digital culture. The viral phenomena and popular platforms trending today did not emerge from nowhere or arrive fully formed; they are part of broader sociocultural and technological developments, within which even once-significant digital phenomena are at risk of being forgotten. By exploring the resurrection of web cultures, we also seek to highlight the power dynamics involved in digital remembering and processes of (digital) cultural heritage.

This article proceeds as follows. First, we outline our media-archaeological framework and the conceptual tools developed in our previous research. In the methodological section that follows, we explain how we have operationalised this framework in the present study, and how we have constructed the examples that practically demonstrate processes of resurrection. Next, we conceptualise online resurrection through our case examples and introduce a matrix illustrating the life phases of online cultures. In the final section, we summarise and discuss the findings.

Media-archaeological perspective on online life phases

We have employed media archaeology both as a guideline for finding research data and as the conceptual lens through which we have developed the theoretical framework and its key concepts. For media theorist Erkki Huhtamo, media archaeology is a critical practice that seeks traces of overlooked or misrepresented aspects of both media's past and present, aiming to create a dialogue between the two. Huhtamo has specifically focused on recurring and reactivated media

phenomena, the *topoi* – reappearing cultural motives, stereotypes, or clichés – which foregrounds media archaeology as a suitable background theory for resurrected online objects (Huhtamo, 1997, 2011). *Topoi* and the resurrected online objects operate through similar logics, as the perceptible dead online objects are more likely to recur in online culture than to face complete disappearance, which is one of the reasons why media archaeology provides a fruitful theoretical framework for this study.

Media archaeology aims to understand the conditions under which our current media landscape has emerged by focusing on the weird and forgotten media and counterfactual questions such as *what if* and *what if not*, which serve to challenge dominant narratives of media history and to speculate on alternative media futures – including those that never materialised. It resists the linear models of media's progress: Older media should not be viewed as primitive versions of current media, but rather as autonomous media forms studied on their own terms (Huhtamo, 2020; Parikka, 2012).

However, not all research on forgotten and obsolete media qualifies as media archaeology. Research typically involves four key attributes, but not all these need to be present in every study: emphasis on non-linear historical trajectories; interest in non-discursive aspects of media highlighting the material, technical, and operational properties of media over textual content; rejection of medium-specific historiographies; and attention to failed, obsolete, or imaginary media technologies. Media archaeology can also serve as a metacritical activity that questions, deconstructs, and revises the existing media historiography (Huhtamo & Galili, 2020). More importantly, creative methods and thinking differently have been encouraged within media archaeological studies (e.g., Strauven, 2019).

We avoid constructing chronological narratives around our case studies, aside from providing essential background for each object. The selected cases are understood as forgotten or obsolete objects, even as we examine their current manifestations. While we do not focus on the material dimensions of media per se, we draw on theoretical approaches within media's materiality. We also direct our gaze toward what happens to "dead" online cultures and objects, rather than concentrating on the discursive aspects (Vaahensalo & Sihvonen, 2024: 4–6).

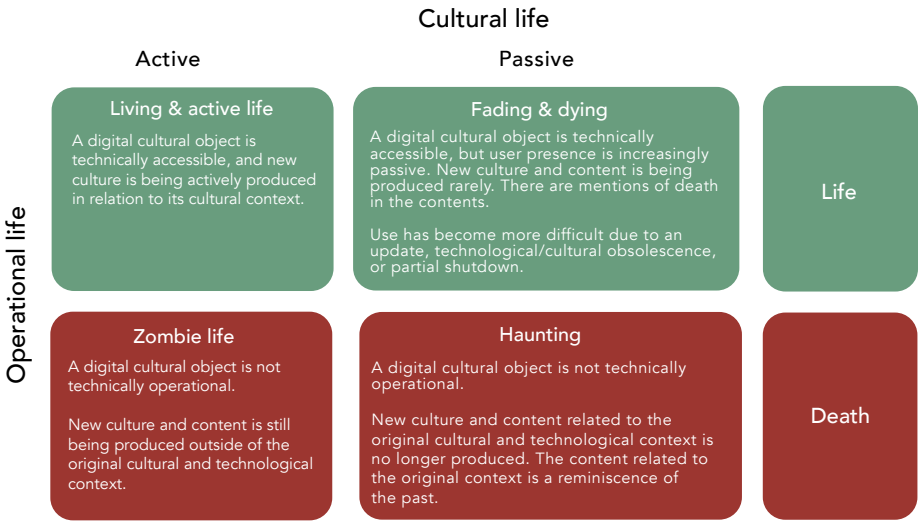
Our matrix is based on the operational and cultural lifespans of online objects – concepts adapted from Wolfgang Ernst's (2013: 55–73) studies of material media (see Figure 1). As Ernst notes, a medium's cultural lifespan does not necessarily align with its operational life: A device can still function, if supported by the current technology, but its cultural lifespan has changed. Like other media archaeologists, we also believe that media never die; we argue that the cultural lifespan of the online object can evolve in entirely different directions after its operational life has ended (Hertz & Parikka, 2012; Vaahensalo & Sihvonen, 2022, 2024).

The matrix offers a conceptualisation of the life phases of online objects and cultures – categorised as active, passive, zombie, and haunting. An *active* object

is both operational and supported by an active user culture. A *passive* object, by contrast, is experiencing a decline in user engagement: Content production slows, users migrate to other platforms, and interaction diminishes. Once the operational life ends, the object "dies" and user activity ceases. The object is often left to the read-only mode. Although new culture is no longer produced on the object, its cultural life may continue elsewhere as its remnants and attributes circulate across the web (Vaahensalo & Sihvonen, 2022, 2024).

A *zombie* object is reactivated and repurposed for new cultural functions (Hertz & Parikka, 2012). A *haunting* object is less active: It merely reflects the formerly active user culture of the dead object without new interpretations or modernisation. Such objects are reminisced about and commemorated by virtual gravestones or nostalgic reflection, which serve as only subtle echoes of the object's past existence (Vaahensalo & Sihvonen, 2022, 2024).

Figure 1 Four-field life phase matrix



Comments: The four-field life phase matrix conceptualises how active online cultures or objects are, both technically (operationally) and culturally, and categorises post-operational life based on cultural activity, focusing on content that commemorates platforms or content that was previously published on them.

This framework has its limitations, as it assumes that online objects are either alive or living dead that travel the web, finding new purposes. It does not consider objects returning to life. Next, we outline how we have identified our case objects representing different forms of resurrection, the criteria used, and objects to which these apply.

Methods: Tracing the life phases

We use empirical material as a heuristic device, and the article is abductive in nature. Abductive analysis arises from observations that do not fit the current theoretical explanations; it goes back and forth, creating a dialogue between theory and empirical material (e.g., Frankfurt, 1958). Our aim here is not to definitively prove the resurrection of our cases, but rather to offer the most plausible theoretical explanations of resurrection to show how it can manifest in various ways across different contexts.

We trace the past and present of our cases by identifying clues that can be used as evidence of their life phase. Inspired by microhistorian Carlo Ginzburg's (1979: 276–280) clue method, we examine details that seem insignificant and negligible to build narratives and understandings of the events. Originating in art history and known as the Morelli's method, this approach likens the art connoisseur to "a detective who establishes the author of a 'crime' […] on the basis of clues that are not perceptible to most people" (Ginzburg, 1979: 276). Ginzburg (1979: 280) compared this to medical semiotics, where the doctor diagnoses an unrecognisable illness by interpreting the patient's symptoms.

Our primary evidence – the clues and traces – can be the actual case objects returning, new emerging user activities, and any announcements (news, social media posts, etc.) of their comeback. If the object has not yet returned, the focus lies mostly on other evidence, such as social media posts, memes, online conversation threads, and other user-related practices. This depends on the object's life phase, which must be identified first to distinguish resurrection from zombie life.

Our approach comprises the interpretation of both life phases and traces and signs of online objects by using media-archaeological guidelines and asking questions such as whether the object is still operational, what purpose it currently serves, and what the conditions it exists in are. Our work began with assessing the death of the platforms. In the cases of Vine and Habbo Hotel, the shutdown of the platforms and the processes leading to it have been well documented. For instance, in the case of Vine, we have previously examined the continuation of its cultural life by studying the current presence of different memes, Vine videos, and videos produced on other platforms that reference or are reminiscent of Vine (Vaahensalo & Sihvonen, 2024). The death of IRC-Galleria is not related to the platform's closure, but to the decline of its use and culture – something we have identified in our previous research by examining both the content published on the platform and the public discourse surrounding it.

After establishing death or passive life, we moved on to the signs of resurrection. Thanks to our earlier research, we already had prior knowledge about Vine and IRC-Galleria, which indicated that the nostalgia and longing associated with these platforms also include echoes and speculations about resurrection. The phases related to Habbo Hotel became familiar to us through an excellent student project produced in our course on the death of online cultures. The next step here was to identify or assess resurrection based on the platform's operations and user activity.

From the level of platforms, we moved to the level of content, identifying discursive signs and cues that illuminate processes of resurrection. Rather than excluding seemingly minor details, we treated all clues as potentially meaningful and analysed them contextually, seeking corroborating or contradictory traces within and beyond the immediate context. This iterative process continued across the web until thematic saturation and recurring patterns emerged.

More important is to determine whether the clue or sign proves the case object relevant or irrelevant in terms of resurrection. This has been done by closely analysing the content, the wordings, and their meanings. For instance, "comeback" and "return" (in Finnish, "paluu", "palata"), "revival" and "revive" (in Finnish, "elvytys", "uudestisyntyminen", "elvyttää", "virota"), and "re-release" or "releasing of an old version" (in Finnish, "uudelleenjulkaista", "vanhan version julkaisu"), all potentially refer to past objects and things attempting to resurface in the present.

The identification and selection processes are interpretative, more hermeneutically oriented, and based on the perspectives and analytical intuition of the researchers. The data and traces demonstrate how the phenomenon is practically realised in the context of online cultures. However, that is not to say that there is a lack of evidence online pointing to the death of certain phenomena or the impossibility of their resurrection.

Since construction, justification, and demonstration of the concept of online resurrection is the central aim of our research, our methodological approach also includes elements of concept analysis, the goal of which is to clarify the features of new concepts or those being adapted for new purposes, and to relate their meanings to other existing concepts (Kinnunen et al., 2024; Nuopponen, 2010). Our conceptual analysis is situated in relation to the media-archaeological and conceptual frameworks we have developed in our previous research.

We examine dead online phenomena also from a cultural-historical perspective, viewing them as something past and, in part, lost. However, through resurrection, these phenomena become reconnected to the present and its societal and cultural context. A culturally and ethically sustainable examination of the history of the Internet and social media requires an assessment of what aspects of past platforms or phenomena have been recorded, archived, and remembered – and why (e.g., Marshall & Shipman, 2012). With resurrection, attention also turns to whether there is a desire to revive the phenomenon in its original form, or whether only certain aspects of it become emphasised.

For critical and ethically sustainable research, it is essential to understand that past online cultural phenomena do not transfer into the present as given or unchanged. Canonisation and monumentalisation – even in the context of digital culture – involve processes of selection, through which certain elements are highlighted, granted authority, and incorporated into a broadly recognised cultural heritage (e.g., Sivula & Suominen, 2023). It is the researcher's responsibility to question these processes and to ask what is accepted into the present and what is left in oblivion.

The resurrection activities

Short-form–video content platform Vine

We have come to recognise Vine as an object that is, at the very least, haunting, as its former users at times reminisce about it vividly (Vaahensalo & Sihvonen, 2024). Vine was founded by Dom Hoffmann, Rus Yusupov, and Colin Kroll in June 2012. Twitter acquired Vine in October 2012, and it was shut down in 2017 due to monetisation issues. Vine was comparable to TikTok, as both were built around the short-video format. Therefore, after it was closed, users posted memes suggesting TikTok had defeated Vine (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Image-based Internet memes of Vine versus TikTok

Comments: Vine's death and its rivalry with TikTok appear in image-based Internet memes, where TikTok – despite its dominant position – is portrayed as an anti-hero, and the short-lived Vine as an idealised, nostalgic, and misunderstood hero.
Source: Memedroid, 2024 (left); Tumblr, 2021 (right)

Within the field of social media and digital culture research, Vine has primarily been used as a source for collecting visual social media data (e.g., Duguay, 2016, 2020; Redi et al., 2014), but its broader significance in the development of social media has been regrettably underexplored. Nevertheless, according to Calhoun (2019: 28), Vine's ease of use, popularity, and viral content significantly contributed to the widespread appeal of online videos under one minute. During the 2010s and 2020s, short-form–video publishing became popular on platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook as well, but the influence of short-form–video culture is especially evident in the 2020s on the video platform TikTok. Furthermore, Marone (2017) has identified and predicted that in addition to the platform's technical features – such as short and evermore looping videos – the culture that developed around Vine content and the ways humour was communicated have influenced how humorous content on social media is perceived.

It was particularly humour, entertainment, and personal life–themed content that played a significant role on Vine – something that has undoubtedly shaped how the platform is remembered (Vandersmissen et al., 2014). As polarising social and political content and hate speech gain strong visibility on today's social media platforms, it is natural that users feel nostalgic for a platform remembered as light-hearted and humour-driven. When examining nostalgic remembrance, it is important to remember that the light-hearted cultural heritage around Vine does not mean the platform was free from the same issues commonly associated with social media (e.g., Duguay et al., 2018).

Until this day, Vine remains closed, not yet revived. However, one potential revivalist or nostalgic activist – Elon Musk – has begun flirting with its resurrection by posting polls about Vine's revival since October 2022 (see Figure 3). Musk, who now owns the rights to Vine, has the financial and technological power to bring it back, which may awaken hope in former Vine users. This flirting is based on and justified with anti-TikTok sentiment and the possibility of the shutdown of TikTok in the US (Bushard, 2024; Shah, 2025).

Figure 3 Elon Musk posting polls on X asking if users want Vine back

Source: Liberatore, 2022

The far-right has often been noted to use narratives that aim at restoring past morals and norms (e.g., Menke, 2025), but that is not the only way to engage with the past. In our analysis, flirting with resurrection is a form of haunting that may be embedded with political endeavours, power dynamics, and power struggles – or it may involve playfulness, jokes, and sarcasm. Musk's background and participation in Donald Trump's presidential campaign and administration cabinet, however, hint that Vine might be turned into a political tool, as the platform X has already supported far-right hate speech and sentiments under Musk's ownership (Shah, 2025; Small, 2025).

In right-wing populist rhetoric, there is often an effort to construct a narrative in which the world is portrayed as being in crisis and chaos. This sense of crisis is also used as a trigger for nostalgia, as longing for the past can serve as a strategy to "freeze" the unstable present (Menke & Wulf, 2021). In the case of Elon Musk and the idea of reviving Vine, this nostalgia is not only linked to broader societal turmoil, but also to the challenges faced by Musk's own platform, X. Following its change in ownership, the platform has experienced a decline in user engagement as well as ongoing speculation about its potential demise (Binder, 2024; Hern, 2024).

While Vine's actual revival has remained largely wishful thinking and flirtation, its afterlife is culturally vibrant and filled with nostalgic longing. Within individual pieces of content connected to the platform, there are references to the resurrection of famous users and memes on new platforms. This has occurred primarily at the macro level through the reanimation of "dead" cult-like figures and viral characters associated with the platform (Vaahensalo & Sihvonen, 2024: 10–14). By reanimation, we mean reviving a phenomenon – much like in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* – using past traces such as memes, images, and recordings to create a new cultural construction that echoes, but is not identical to, its former self.

Instead of creating an entirely new social media platform, Musk turns to Vine, most likely due to the formerly established user base it might still have. Vine remains in the narrative of social media through a process in which former users and a revivalist agent enter a dialogue or negotiation to discuss the potential resurrection, with some former Vine users not being excited about the idea of its revival (Liberatore, 2022).

Since in Vine's case the revival has remained at the level of often idealised storytelling about the platform and its past, we refer to this instance as a narrative resurrection. Vine serves as an example of resurrection activities of dead, haunting, and zombie online objects that flirt with their comebacks but are not necessarily returning in reality. Flirting with resurrection is formed from questions and intentions of revival – narrated but not yet actualised and made technically accessible.

The Finnish online platform IRC-Galleria

The Finnish online platform IRC-Galleria was published in 2000 and became remarkably popular in Finland in 2004. During its most popular years, the Gallery had over half a million users, which was a significant number for a platform targeted at approximately five million Finnish speakers at the time (Statistics Finland, 2005). The original idea behind IRC-Galleria was to provide users of the IRC instant messaging service (Internet Relay Chat) with a photo gallery connecting nicknames to real faces. Later, its use expanded beyond IRC users, and the platform was especially embraced by Finnish youth as a tool for self-expression and building social relationships (Rautavuori, 2020; Suominen et al., 2013, 2017).

In April 2007, at the height of its growth, IRC-Galleria was acquired by Sulake Ltd., the company behind the virtual community Habbo Hotel. However, changes in company culture following the acquisition, combined with the rise of Facebook, quickly halted IRC-Galleria's growth in popularity, and users gradually began to leave the platform (Rautavuori, 2020). In 2014, IRC-Galleria's founder, Jari Jaanto, bought the platform back, aiming to simplify its design to better reflect the platform's "golden era" and to make it more mobile-friendly (Linnake, 2014).

As the Covid-19 pandemic locked down societies everywhere, Finnish IRC-Galleria sent an e-mail to its former users informing them that their old accounts were still accessible. The website traffic increased, and it was reported that the Gallery was experiencing a revival. The founders stated that they wanted to offer people something to do and someone to talk to due to the possible loneliness caused by lockdown (Aarnio, 2020). Curiously, the Gallery has never been shut down, and the oldest accounts are at least 20 years old. Still, we can describe this phenomenon as a resurging trend.

The Gallery's life phase reflects a state of passive life rather than actual operational death: an incomplete state of rest, which is followed by resuscitative resurrection. Since the foundation of Facebook, the Gallery has lost several thousand users and has been largely under the radar, attracting only a niche audience. But because it was never formally closed, it never died. The Gallery's case demonstrates how a passive and dying platform experiences a revival, implying that resurrection functions on both sides of the death of the online object. Additionally, in the Gallery's case, the resurrection is more of an invitation than a negotiation, which is sometimes turned into humorous memes implying how the Gallery accounts have survived better than bank accounts, as Figure 4 demonstrates.

Figure 4 IRC-Galleria versus Nordea

Comments: Nordea is a Nordic financial services company and bank whose banking services have been known to have problems, especially in Finland. Translation: We're keeping your account safe, whether you like it or not. Even if you last logged in back in 2005 and forgot your password in 2010. Even if everyone moved on to Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Your thirst traps are still there [left-side]. We lost your account. Again [right-side].
Source: Vainkeskiluokkajutut, 2024

The technical persistence of the platform is one of the central themes in the remembrance of IRC-Galleria. Many former users refer to their accounts as still existing on the platform, but these accounts are not equated with active use; they are seen as forgotten traces of the past, detached from their users, frozen in the cultural and historical context in which they were created (hugotroll, 2019; Ukkoloinen, 2021).

In users' recollections, one of the most central reasons for using the platform was the ability to comment on other users' photos, and IRC-Galleria made it easy to approach strangers (Onninen, 2013). Many remember finding romantic relationships and lifelong partners through the platform, or that IRC-Galleria played a significant role in making a then-current relationship visible to their peers (Lapintie, 2014).

This ease of communication is something the platform's administrators have also aimed to recreate in bringing IRC-Galleria into the 2010s and 2020s (Aarnio, 2020).

Just as IRC-Galleria's dormancy has been partial, so too has its resurrection remained incomplete. Although IRC-Galleria remains technically functional, the platform is still dependent on browser-based use, which feels outdated in an era where platforms are expected to be primarily accessible via mobile devices. The persistence and nostalgic sentiment associated with the platform have also not translated into renewed momentum or significant cultural resurgence. It is important to note that the use of IRC-Galleria has not entirely ceased – there are still active users, and as recently as the 2010s, tens of thousands of new photos were uploaded to the Gallery daily. As the platform's administrators have acknowledged, the rise of Facebook's popularity pushed IRC-Galleria into the margins, from which revival would require not just technical functionality but a full-fledged cultural reanimation. Some sources also indicate that, after leaving Sulake, the owners of IRC-Galleria have focused their efforts on developing products other than IRC-Galleria (Fraktio, 2015; Karilahti, 2016). This may reflect the view that a local social media platform has limited prospects for competing for users whose attention is already fragmented across numerous massively popular international platforms.

The Gallery's case demonstrates resurrection activities being applied to partially dormant objects; passive and dying objects are revived in terms of user activity and production of new content. The revival is not only narrated but becomes actualised – though without major technical efforts or permanently active production of new content and culture. Partial resurrection reactivates an object technically with little new content, while resuscitative resurrection actively tries to culturally revive an object that is not dead.

The gamified online community Habbo Hotel

Habbo Hotel, or Habbo, is a virtual world and gamified online community that was founded by Sulake Ltd. in 2000 originally by the name Hotelli Kultakala [Hotel Goldfish]. In Habbo, users create an avatar to interact with other users and play games. Habbo has been expanded into nine communities (or hotels) in different languages. In October 2020, 316 million avatars were registered in the game. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many former Habbo users reunited with the virtual world to hang out remotely with others and revived the platform that had already been in "a Sleeping Beauty–like" phase, at least in Finland (Mikkonen, 2020; Wikipedia, n.d.). Until this day, Habbo remains playable but has been developed throughout the years.

In 2024, a 20-year-old version of Habbo Hotel – Habbo Hotel: Origins – was published alongside the current version of Habbo. This nostalgic revival occurred when former developer and player Macklebee found an old server that contained lost files. The old version was then restored, and the claim is that this revival will be permanent and published in English, Portuguese, and Spanish (Aaltonen, 2024). The revival of an old lost version represents revival from death and a decision that was made for entertainment and nostalgic reasons.

In our analysis, Origins appears as a resurrection of something once dead, but,

curiously, this new life phase seems to be under debate, whether it is declining or not. For example, a Reddit user gives the impression that the Habbo Origins is "dead": There is little to do, and only casinos and donation rooms have people in them, but no one is playing the games. Some other users consider the re-released version to be dying slowly, and they sarcastically point to the increasing use of Discord instead, noting that the use of Habbo was fun when you were a child (Dapper_Wear8350, 2025). Others, however, defend it and consider it a vibrant space, although they seem to meet a counter-argument that Origins is vibrant only during the peak hours in the UK, used by the same group of users, with no new users joining the platform (FreaknKitty, 2025).

For some, returning to Habbo Hotel can mean not only reminiscing about past online culture but also revisiting their own childhood, as well as resisting adulthood and the norms associated with it (see Figure 5). This nostalgic feeling acts as a bridge between the idealisation of the past and recursive online objects. It may connect to the idea of the free, simple, and better Internet and reflect our relationship to our own time. However, what sets Habbo apart from Vine and IRC-Galleria is that, despite its community-oriented nature, it is primarily a game rather than a social media platform.

Figure 5 A meme about the generational gap between a Habbo user and their parents

Source: Habbopost, 2024

Nostalgia tied to games, and the phenomenon of retro gaming, is widely visible in the form of re-released or remastered versions of games from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (e.g., Bosman, 2023; Garda, 2013; Wulf et al., 2018). In contrast, this retro boom has yet to fully extend to social media – or more specifically, to the platforms themselves and their concrete resurrection. It can be speculated that returning to old games from one's earlier life is more appealing and, from the perspective of those attempting a revival, also less risky. Social media platforms and the cultures built around them are more complex ecosystems than games, which may make their revival more difficult.

Resurrection from full dormancy, or operational death – in the light of Habbo Hotel: Origins – refers to a dead, forgotten object returning to its former purposes, although in new cultural contexts. This complete resurrection is both narrated and actualised with technical inputs and operations playing a part in the process, producing new culture and content. However, it is not guaranteed that reactivation will lead to an active life phase.

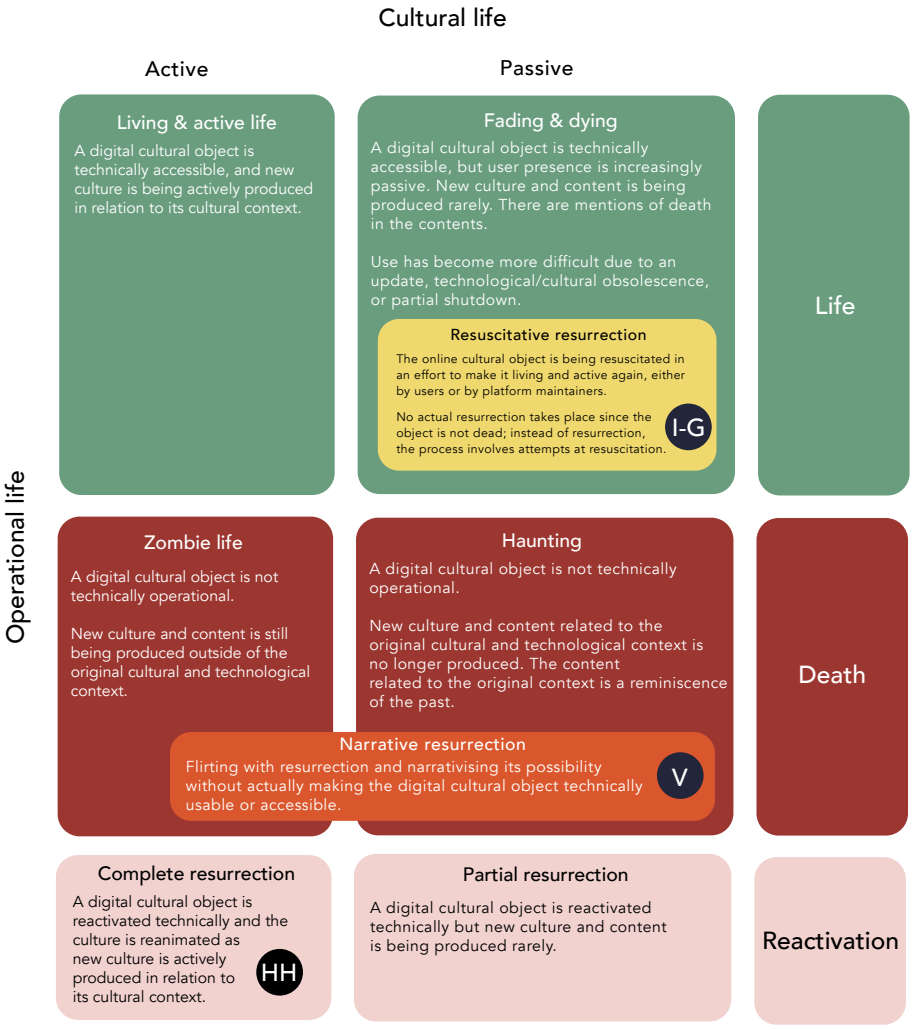
Resurrection activities in life phases

In Figure 6, we have positioned resurrection activities in relation to the previously identified four life phases and located our case objects accordingly. As the visualisation shows, resurrection is not an exclusively linear continuum of life and death. Resurrection operates across different life phases and at both operational and cultural levels. It may remain merely narrative and discursive, or involve actual return, where user practices are reactivated, and the object re-enters the media ecology, often acquiring new cultural, social, or political meanings. Alongside playfulness and politics, humour often appears to be involved in resurrections, particularly in relation to the polls and power dynamics discussed in connection with the returns.

Online cultural zombie life and haunting tend to be fragmented and user-driven, whereas resurrection often involves a connection to the maintenance or ownership of the platform. In this sense, resurrection is more authoritarian, although it may be sparked by user interest and the visible zombie life of the phenomenon in question. An active zombie life likely plays a role in initiating resurrection, as from an economic perspective – which is emphasised in authority-driven resurrections – it is far riskier to attempt a revival of a mostly forgotten platform than one that is actively remembered.

By examining these case examples, we have identified that resurrection requires both technical reactivation and cultural reanimation. As the example of IRC-Galleria demonstrates, reactivation and technical operability do not simply mean that a platform functions as it did in its original form; rather, they require the platform to adapt to present-day technology.

Figure 6 Resurrection activities and the case objects positioned in relation to the online objects' life phases



Concluding discussion

Our research engages in media archaeology as a meta-critical activity by examining resurrection activities. We trace cyclical, reappearing online phenomena and explore their cultural implications and power dynamics, asking under what conditions and contexts forgotten and neglected media resurface, whose digital past is reactivated, by whom, and why? This underlines the media-archaeological insight that things are rarely genuinely new, when instead we find the old in the new and the new in the old, rethink our relationships with older media, and develop a critique of temporality (Parikka, 2012: 164–167).

As the change processes of the web are fast and unstable, this framework is designed to aid researchers in building a critique of temporality (Parikka, 2012: 164–167). By identifying dynamics and underlying reasons for online objects' life phases, we can question the innovativeness of the web cultures and demonstrate disturbances in media ecology. This also makes the limitations of the matrix apparent: As it is solely about how users are in interaction with the object, it does not consider the conditions, nor any other agents that operate the object.

The case of Vine and Elon Musk shows that resurrecting social media platforms is an exercise of power, requiring both technological reactivation and cultural reanimation. As Sihvonen (2022) has argued, resurrection (or revivification) is a social negotiation between users and producers, shaped by contemporary cultural and social conditions. Users may resist reversions that alter or insult the original experience, which can affect the reversion's success. Close comparison of reversions and originals can deepen the understanding of this process (Sihvonen, 2022: 90). Future research on the resurrection of online objects – such as Habbo Hotel: Origins – could examine interactions between users and platform maintainers to better understand how these objects are reinterpreted and how the agency of the revivalists and communities emerges.

We have demonstrated the theoretical framework of resurrection and the life phases of online cultural objects from the perspective of individual platforms, but the framework is applicable more broadly to media phenomena and features such as platform affordances and infrastructural features, as well as memetic phenomena and formats. A precondition for the framework's applicability in future research is that the phenomenon can be actualised at both the cultural and the operational levels.

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