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# The Future of Genealogy Conferences

Lisa A. Alzo discusses futuristic possibilities for hosting family history meetings and events

**P**UBLIC HEALTH CONCERNS SINCE MARCH 2020 have had a significant cooling effect on conference organization and attendance. As a result, many of us have become familiar with Zoom, GoToWebinar, and WebEx to present and attend Webinars. Not surprisingly, there has been a shift in thinking for those organizing conferences. In terms of the time and cost savings alone, you can see why some conference organizers are looking toward permanently virtual events.

## Current Model for Traditional and Virtual Conferences

Typically, conference speakers are allotted hour-long sessions to present their topics of interest, usually including 10 to 15 minutes set aside for questions and answers. Think of how many conference sessions you have attended, or webinars you have viewed, and you'll have to agree that most talks follow the same format, despite educational psychologists knowing for decades that the attention span of a typical student is only 15-20 minutes. Many of us may be older than college-age students, but the argument in favor of shorter talks remains valid – even in a virtual format. With distractions and perhaps not very exciting material to listen to, is it any wonder that we find our minds wandering after a few minutes? This situation is only going to be exacerbated since we must accept that we are living in a young person's world: a world in tune with YouTube, Twitter and TikTok. In young minds, there's little patience for protracted talks, and for the current genealogy demographic to welcome today's generation to participate. It's probably an appropriate time to consider adapting the current conference model to include new and dynamic means of presenting talks. These considerations, among others, must surely have occurred to the organizers of RootsTech in promotion of their 2022 virtual conference.

## Avatar Presentations

By now, many genealogists have become familiar with

My Heritage's Deep Nostalgia™, [www.myheritage.com/deep-nostalgia](http://www.myheritage.com/deep-nostalgia), still image animation software developed in collaboration with D-ID, [www.d-id.com](http://www.d-id.com), a Tel Aviv, Israel-based company. Deep Nostalgia™ was introduced in February 2021, and I reviewed the software in a preceding article (*Internet Genealogy*, 2021 August/September). Although some viewers have described animation of their deceased relatives' and distant ancestors' images as unsettling, my own thoughts are positive. I am in awe of the technology and (in my opinion) the animated images make the subjects more relatable. It's worth noting that My Heritage chose to not have Deep Nostalgia's animated subjects appear to talk even though it's entirely possible. However, MyHeritage introduced LiveStory at RootsTech 2022, <https://blog.myheritage.com/2022/03/introducing-livestory-give-voice-to-your-family-stories>. A review of this new feature will appear in a future issue of *Internet Genealogy*.

Imagine then a scenario in which the combination of conference rethinking and advances in computer technology has the potential to change how we might attend virtual and possibly hybrid genealogy events. No headsets or controllers are required.

Remembering 1980s Max Headroom (prosthetically enhanced Canadian American actor Matt Frewer), movies such as *Simone* (2002), *Avatar* (2009), and latterly Fox's hyper-realistic creations in music competition show *Alter-Ego*, it's easy to dismiss avatars



Advances in software and computer processing power now make it possible to accept an avatar as a normal presenter.

as a concept. For those familiar with Second Life and similar virtual worlds, you may not be too impressed with their avatars either. However, if you think realistic avatar presentations are just wild imaginings, think again. Not only are avatar presentations already available, but you can view them and create your own video presentations quickly.

With cumulative advances in software and computer processing power, it really is now possible to accept an avatar (even an avatar of yourself) as a normal presenter and not just a computer creation; you won't be able to tell the difference.

There are a number of companies involved with AI text-to-video generators including AI Studios <https://aistudios.com> and Rephrase.ai [www.rephrase.ai](http://www.rephrase.ai). I personally like London, England-based Synthesia [www.synthesia.io](http://www.synthesia.io).

### Synthesia Text-to-Video Generator

Synthesia already has an impressive client list. You can create a free demo video, but you must have a personal or corporate account in order to produce your own presentation videos. You are allowed up to six slides per video with a personal account, and up to 50 slides per video with a corporate account.

As of January 2022, presenters can choose to be represented by one or more of over 40 male or female avatars based on real-life models. You can also choose to have your avatars speaking in one of over 50 different languages tailored to given audiences around the world. There is a bit of a learning curve, but it's relatively easy to navigate: choose your template, make your selection from the male or female avatars, select a language, and type in your script. Instead of the built-in templates, you can also choose to upload one of your own separately prepared PowerPoint presentations. Captions for the hearing impaired can be included during the video generation stage by simply clicking a toggle button. If you have an interest in producing a sales promotion video, you can also include a sound file from a choice of tracks included in Synthesia's music library. The software manipulates the avatar's facial movements in such a way that they appear to be talking naturally. With a paid add-on service, you can also create a realistic avatar of yourself. What would be the point of having an avatar of yourself presenting your own webinar? Well, planned and smooth delivery that is appropriately timed is always important, and your avatar's performance will be flawless! Ethical checks are in place (uploaded content is moderated) to prevent misuse of Synthesia products in production of so-called deepfake videos.

### AI Created Content

The technology underlying animated still images and avatar presentations falls under the umbrella headings of artificial intelligence (AI) and synthetic media. There is a further step that, as far as I know, has not yet been implemented by Synthesia yet could result in entirely AI generated presentations. Currently, Synthesia requires that a script be entered into their interface by someone. However, there are many companies that have shown that AI technology is fully capable of generating articles, poetry, and even books given the relevant instructions. For instance, as of January 2022, AX Semantics <https://en.ax-semantic.com> can generate content in 110 languages.



Screenshot of the author's AI generated presentation for her genealogy company.

You can refer to [www.researchwriteconnect.com/blog](http://www.researchwriteconnect.com/blog) for an example of AI generated content that I created. For your own first foray in generated content, consider entering your name and "family history" into the generator following its instructions. You might be surprised at the result.

Therefore, there may yet be a marriage between an AI content generator and an AI avatar to make for a seamless presentation from start to finish. You can view a few of my own Synthesia created videos at [www.lisaalza.com/synthesia](http://www.lisaalza.com/synthesia). Whatever the future holds, there's a good chance that avatars will play a role in genealogy Webinar presentations.

Still, other aspects of AI's impact on genealogy have been described elsewhere (Internet Genealogy, 2021 August/September," and on the FamilySearch blog [www.familysearch.org/en/blog](http://www.familysearch.org/en/blog)).

### Holographic Presentations

I should at least mention something of another technology that is best suited to the stages or vendor halls of traditional conferences.

In the first of two articles I wrote concerning the



Future of Genealogy (*Family Chronicle* 2009 May/June, and a 10-year anniversary revisiting in *Internet Genealogy* 2019, June/July) I alluded to thoughts of immersing myself in scenes from my ancestors' lives, much as the characters in *Star Trek Next Generation* used their holodeck to immerse themselves in a variety of scenarios. Well, 13 years later, fantastic advances have been made, but that reality remains elusive for now.

Despite this, so-called holographic performances seem to regularly feature in entertainment news stories mentioning various musical artists. Although described and marketed as holographic, these performances are based on a stage effect called 'Pepper's Ghost' established around 160 years ago.

Adapted and brought up to date by companies such as Mursion, [www.mursion.io/en.uk](http://www.mursion.io/en.uk), the effect is essentially a projection technique. Of course, the lanterns of the 1860s have been replaced by super-bright and pin sharp projectors to create spectacular stage performances. A new LA-based company PORTL Hologram, [www.portlhologram.com](http://www.portlhologram.com), is also making a name for itself by selling and renting booths that use a similar effect. Booths equipped with cameras, microphones and speakers can be installed at single or multiple venues worldwide. The booths allow viewers to see and interact with life-size versions of someone else on the other side of the world.



New technologies like those from PORTL Inc. will allow viewers to see and interact with others on the other side of the globe.

It's difficult to see how any of this expensive technology will take the place of a simple slide projector, or a fully virtual event, but as eye-catching crowd pleasers, they certainly have a lot of potential.

### Planning for Our Digital Future

At present, it might seem unrealistic to imagine some of the presentation scenarios described above, but the blending of traditional genealogy method and technology has been happening for years. If you have been

in the genealogy field for more than a decade, then you will likely remember when DNA testing was considered "cheating" not to mention too expensive for many researchers. Now there are many advertisements to encourage anyone with a curiosity to order a DNA test to discover their heritage. In his December 2021 blog post, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates predicts that in the next two or three years, virtual meetings using avatars will be commonplace in the metaverse (the ultimate in virtual worlds), see [www.gatesnotes.com](http://www.gatesnotes.com). Whether this holds true for genealogy conferences and society meetings remains to be seen. A large part of the traditional conference model involves networking and socializing. Conferences provide a place to interact with other attendees and presenters, and in some instances, to even meet long-lost relatives or make cousin connections. For these reasons, it's a challenge for virtual meetings to capture the same vibe as in-person events. However, it is worth considering that perhaps virtual options will provide additional educational opportunities for those who can't afford to (or prefer not to) travel or simply prefer to learn from home. The shift to the metaverse is happening in both small and big ways, and in acknowledgment, Facebook recently changed its name to "Meta." With the metaverse in its infancy, there are bound to be problems to address in the future. However, retailers such as Walmart and Gap are moving more and more into digital sales. In a January 18, 2022 segment on *Good Morning America*, [www.goodmorningamerica.com](http://www.goodmorningamerica.com), a Walmart representative said the company's entrance into the metaverse is meant to appeal to a new generation of customers who spend time there, and noted that "we need to be where they are."

A long-time complaint of many genealogy societies is the loss of membership through attrition or other factors, and the question of how to attract younger members is discussed at many board meetings. Perhaps we as members of the genealogy community need to consider the same "go where they are" philosophy of Walmart and other companies and begin thinking about how we too are to become active participants in the metaverse. ☹

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