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Death and Mourning Rituals in Online Environments

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Anna Haverinen

Anna Haverisen digitaalisen kulttuurin alaan kuuluva väitöskirja *Memoria Virtualis – death and mourning rituals in online environments* tarkastettiin 8.8.2014 Turun yliopistossa. Vastaväittäjänä toimi Associate Professor Stine Gotved Kööpenhaminan IT-yliopistosta ja kustoksena professori Jaakko Suominen Turun yliopistosta.

Death leaves many questions unanswered, where most of the world religions and philosophies have aspired to respond. Religions speak of different afterlives and laws of karma, that try to answer the questions of “what happens after death?” and ”does it all really end?” The bereaved themselves try to answer these questions with different rituals and avoidance of oblivion by remembering their loved ones and building memorials for them.

Memorials are symbols of both individuals and their community. They reflect many aspects of the culture they represent, but are also connected to a specific time and history. Memorials are built to answer the question ”does it all really end?” with a firm ”no”, since as long as there are memories and someone to keep remembering, there is no oblivion.

Today, in the age of internet technology and social media, people can connect with each other despite their geographical or time distances. The technology we call the internet today is all around us, it is mobile, complex, and increasingly focused on being social. People share pictures, stories, anecdotes and details about their daily lives in various websites, mobile applications and even live different lives in virtual worlds. People connect with each other in multiple ways, which are meaningful and important, especially in times that are not so joyful, such as death and dying.

We leave a surprising amount of digital material online after we die. Profile pages in social media, avatars in online games, blogs, YouTube videos, tweets, status updates,

instant messages, music libraries and location tags reveal the life of an individual, who can be now remembered and memorialised online as well. Virtual memorials are now digital scrapbooks representing personalities, loved ones, and online networks of friends and family members. A memorial in the Web is more complex than a mere headstone in a graveyard. It can be a Facebook profile page, which becomes the space and place where family and friends can gather together to mourn and remember whenever they want and with whom they want, privately or publicly. The profile page can also be officially memorialised, so that it will be preserved as a common place of remembrance as long as the website exists. If Facebook feels too profane for mourning and honouring, too plain and filled with cat videos, one can create a specific memorial website that shows a collection of videos, photographs, stories and memories of that person, who is missed so much. It becomes a virtual place, where people can visit during Christmases and birthdays to connect with their loved ones – both alive and dead – and to cope with their loss.

A web page does not wear out; it does not change in time. A web page does not gather dust and spider webs, it does not require conservation practices and it does not have to stand against the climate and nature. A web page is – seemingly – unchangeable, formed of pixels and ones and zeros and accessed only through the screens of our digital devices. However, a web page is extremely vulnerable since it can be deleted in a blink of an eye, and it leaves no trace behind. Such a thing happened in the middle of my research since one of the memorial chapels in Second Life, a shared virtual environment, had to be shut down because of lack of funding resources. All the memorial materials were restored to their owners, but the area itself, the chapels, the nature and the detailed buildings have now all disappeared.

What does it mean, then, to mourn and honour online? Does a virtual candle bear the same importance as lighting an actual physical candle? Are these digital practices now replacing “old rituals”, such as visiting the cemetery or even hugging someone who is bereaving? These are only a few of the questions I have been asked and I, myself, have been asking when conducting this research.

This entire project began in 2007 with my master’s thesis, from there I continued to explore this phenomenon of mourning and honouring online in my PhD in 2009. I did not want to focus on one website or environment specifically, since I wanted to understand holistically, as a whole, how and why people choose to mourn online. That is why I conducted my fieldwork in social media websites, such as in Facebook and YouTube, in official virtual memorial websites, and in online gaming environments, such as Second Life and World of Warcraft. These environments do not also exclude each other, but experiences, relationships and people bleed and affect into one another.

During my fieldwork I visited the memorials, created my own memorials in the honour of my late father, conducted interviews and observed what kind of ritualistic activities people create in different online environments. This type of research is called online ethnography, which is an elemental research method in virtual anthropology. Ethnographic research usually consists of different types of observation and interviews, where the researcher can either participate or observe from a distance.

However, in online environments participating was not usually possible, but almost impossible, since people usually mourn and honour privately, alone. This is why my ethnographic research also consisted of an approach named as autoethnography, where the researcher's own self and own experiences are under study – in this case how I mourned a Facebook friend, who committed suicide in 2008. I observed my personal grief in real-time and documented my experience in a research diary.

In this work I wanted to understand *why* people create online memorials and *how* memorials are being created. I also wanted to understand *what kind of systems of meanings* are being created and enabled through online memorialisations, such as how identity is being (re)constructed, how space and place are being experienced, and how the experience of community is being enabled. But first, I will talk about my theoretical framework, ritual theory, since it is rooted very much in the questions of how and why memorials are made online.

Using ritual theory means I have been interested in the rituals people practice when mourning and honouring their loved ones. In online environments rituals means how people share pictures of the deceased, tell stories about him/her, comment on the posts of other people visiting the memorial, share music links, poems and prayers, and light virtual candles. It is how people visit the memorial during Christmases to wish a happy Christmas to the deceased, and share their affection and care to one another, even if only through writing a small heart in the comment section, if there are no other words. A small heart can symbolise a hug and a hand on the shoulder, which sometimes is enough to feel that you are not alone in your grief.

Rituals are a way of coping with loss and bereavement and to have familiar codes of conduct at the time of crisis and grief. However, a phrase such as “I’m sorry for your loss” can feel too trivial, which is why poems, links to YouTube videos and heart symbols express more care and sympathy.

In virtual worlds it is possible to create virtual tombs and other memorial shrines, and even arrange a funeral. Communities in virtual worlds are a complex mixture of who the person actually is behind the computer screen, and who the person is representing in the virtual world, such as a role-playing character. When this type of relationship and personality is being remembered and honoured in a virtual game world, the rituals contain aspects of the game story and culture, as well as familiar codes of conduct from the offline world. It is wished that the relationship that flourished in the game world is honoured in that same environment.

Memorial rituals are most often manifested during anniversaries, such as birthdays, Christmas, Mother's/Father's Day and death anniversaries. Anniversaries become the core of ritualistic practices and create a ritual calendar of mourning and honouring for the bereaved. During those dates it is easier to feel close to the deceased, but it also causes pain to realise that the important anniversaries and milestone in the future will not come to exist, such as a first day at school, seeing your first grandchild or getting married.

Anniversary rituals are connected to time, but the experience of space and place is also very important to rituals, since they define not only what is possible to do, but

also what is appropriate to do in a specific environment. All spaces – whether online or offline – are contextualised and mediums of human experience. It is the social content and memories that connect a place to a larger symbolical meaning. Cultural discourses of mourning define the appropriateness of different practices, such as whether it is 'appropriate' to mourn publicly in Facebook or if it appears as "attention seeking" and "disgusting" as some may claim.

A virtual memorial is also a discursively built place, which means it is built more in language than built actually as a physical place. Memorials online are more conceptualised in language, the way we speak about them, than actually built or created. Online memorials are similar to memorials at the cemeteries that do not contain the physical body, but are more symbols for remembrance and mourning. All these discursively built places are experienced subjectively according to the cultural and social context of the person, their personal background and identity, which is why there is no uniform way of understanding or experiencing an online memorial.

In this work, I have used the concept of identity as a combination of social, cultural and virtual identities. According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1999, 23) identity is contextual and formed through the social interaction between individuals and community. In memorials, life narratives of the deceased usually highlight specific life events, social relationships and valued personal attributes, such as marriages, family relationships or how the person was kind. Memorials are intended to represent that identity and all the important aspects of their lives, such as work, family, friends and hobbies, but sometimes also how they relate to their personal community (such as ethnicity) or nation (such as working for the government as a soldier or in the police force).

Writing the life story of the deceased also enables re-building the bereaved's own identity in relation to the loss, since they can gain a new status in life, such as a widower or an orphan. These statuses are recognised in society, but there are no names for all lost relationships, such as parents who have lost a child. Through the writing the bereaved can gain an understanding of their loss, since they rearrange their past with the deceased as something that has no future anymore, but belongs permanently in the past. Writing to a memorial can be a private way of coping with the loss, and sometimes communicating more with family and friends. Creating an online memorial website is similar to scrapbooking or arranging a photo album with little stories and anecdotes added with pictures. It is a way for the bereaved to arrange their memories in order and also to decide what type of memories are most important to be remembered and shared with others. In this way the stories are shared equally with all the people visiting the memorial. Photographs in this case are the most important material, since they are the visual symbols and proof of the past, reanimating the deceased.

Many scholars have created theories about the privatisation of death and whether it has vanished from the public eye during the past decades of industrialisation, urbanisation and individualisation. However, through the current developments of an increasingly social Internet and Internet technology, death has also become more public and published. The popularity of social media and reality television suggests

that we are currently living in an age where private is public. Some still want to keep their bereavement private; yet, more and more people are willing to enable public access to their online tributes and messages about grief and loss. In terms of death culture, this enables the bereaved to claim authority in how they wish to express their grief, as well as how they wish to be treated.

This research has been focused on a specific time frame of online mourning rituals, between 2007 and 2014, and I predict this phenomenon will be increasingly culturally and socially appropriated in the future. From the vantage point of digital culture studies, this research contributes a methodological aspect of how to research these types of virtual cultures and online death rituals.

During this entire project, many have been worried about the loss of “old rituals”, such as visiting the cemetery, lighting actual candles and funerals, however, according to this research they have not lost their significance; mourning online means returning to a more social way of bereaving together. Death is no longer a taboo nor is it hidden.

With this work, I wish to provide information about what I would call *the first years of social online mourning*, although it has firm roots in the developments of the 1990's. The Web has now become a place and a space for mourning and honouring, since as a technology it has already found its place in the everyday lives, both at work and in leisure. Social internet has made death social again as well. Peer-support, collecting and storing memories, and finding a personal and individual way to cope with loss and bereavement have shifted the view from the dying to the bereaved. No longer the church or the society dictate how one should mourn and honour, but internet provides an independent and democratic way to remember and bereave your beloved.

FT Anna Haverinen toimii projektitutkijana Turun yliopiston digitaalisen kulttuurin oppiaineessa sekä osa-aikaisena palvelumuotoilijana helsinkiläisessä start up-yrityksessä.

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