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Undergraduate



How Death and Mourning in Online Communities

Mimics the Mourning Rituals of Reality

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Abstract

In the modern age there exist two spaces of reality: physical reality, where humanity has existed for its entirety, and Virtual Reality, a new place which mimics real life in many ways. Just like in real life, in Virtual Reality there are groups which come together due to similar interests, friends who know each other intimately, and bonds which are created without people ever actually meeting each other in person. Another aspect of real life which is mimicked online is mourning and grieving as well as memorializing important people. Websites can be created entirely dedicated to a person as a communal mourning space. In games where you play with other people, as well as games where you play alone memorials are put in place by developers or even fans of the game to commemorate people considered important by the fans or makers of a game. In this research I will show how online communities and spaces mimic real life mourning and death rituals, these themes that are central to anthropology's understanding of culture and society past and present takes on a new dimension with the advent of technology that enables virtual communities.

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Methodology/Literature Review

In what follows I will cite many forms of information. I have reviewed the limited academic literature on the topic. What I have found so far is about mourning using online outlets such as websites like Facebook, and also a few articles about online memorials in games. But for the most part I shall combine the results from my ethnographic research and personal experience. Since I consider myself a member of the online culture, my research experiences is akin to what some call a "native anthropologist" (an anthropologist who in some way is an insider to the community where they conduct research). Since I have experience in the areas of this community I knew where to look for informants on sites like Reddit or Tumblr. I stuck to the areas focusing on massive multiplayer games and then went into groups who had recently mentioned any kind of memorial activities. The study of online communities forces anthropologists to rethink the key concepts of "fieldwork" as well as "participant-observation", central to ethnographic methods. I will reference the experiences of a key informant who would prefer to remain anonymous and to respect his wishes. I have not included his name. The research presented is a culmination of personal experience, literature research, and ethnography in the online world.

Mourning Via Websites

In our lives when someone dies we may seek the comfort of friends and family. We may seek solace and shut ourselves away to cope. We may communicate with the deceased at their gravesite, speaking to them as if their spirit were there to receive our grief and offer us



reassurance. Humans mourn and cope the lost of friends and family in different ways depending on the person and the persons culture.

In the modern era however there exists a new way to cope with loss. This is done through websites that are dedicated to the deceased and their life. These websites come in two forms generally, already present social media sites, and custom webpages set up for friends and family. These webpages work as a kind of public wake for the deceased, they allow any of the friends or family to see a sort of "memorial" and to be involved in some way (Sofka, Cupit, & Gilbert, 2012). This also has inherent problems, as they allow most anyone to view these pages. If compared to real life, it would be like having a wake and inviting every vague acquaintance or even some strangers to attend.

Social media

sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram have been used as memorial pages since their inception. When the owner of a page dies many times the family, able to log on through various methods, may post on the page that the person has died. At that point the page becomes like a memorial wall. The friends and family of that person may leave messages on the page they used, saying goodbye, reliving memories, or leaving well wishes for the family in a place where they can see it.

On Facebook

people do this pretty often, the person would have likely posted their day to day live on the website, making it a memorial of their life without any effort on the part of the family. When the news goes out that the person has died, people will flock to the page to give their condolences and the scroll through pictures to see the person's life. Others may post on the page in the same way



that people go to a gravesite, speaking to the deceased through Facebook, talking to them through posting (Kasket, 2011).

This does however present two problems. Anyone can post on the page, including people who wish to "deface" it. This is essentially like someone coming to a wake and knocking over the wreath. Facebook did however fix this problem. The pages on Facebook of a deceased friend or family member can now be memorialized. By contacting Facebook the page can be locked, so that no one can post on it, but people can still view it (Kasket 5). This effectively turns the page into a true memorial, an untouchable piece of that person's life which can be viewed by anyone who may miss and mourn that person. The other problem is that people are not always truthful when representing themselves online. They may have posted fake pictures, stories, the entire profile may not represent them at all (Karppi, 2013). This however is solved by the fact that even a fake memorial is a memorial. It still allows family and friends to grieve together in a common place.

Twitter, Tumblr, and

Instagram can also work as online memorials, though these sites do not have the same ability to memorialize the page as Facebook does. However, when a famous person dies their Twitter feed will be filled with fans and well wishers to the family just like a public wake or funeral, their Instagram or Facebook will be treated the same. Separate memorial pages may also be created by fans (Frost, 2014). These events mimic death-related social rituals in the "real" world. Just as we are accustomed to see memorials created for the dead, through statues, events, works of art, or in some cases small things like park benches. People go to the online pages like someone visits a



tomb or memorial to communicate with those who are gone and with others who knew the deceased. There are even people who would "deface" these monuments, posting things on websites as one would spray paint a memorial or crash a wake.

Personal websites are another version of this. These are websites, separate from existing websites like Facebook or Twitter, which are set up by the family or friends of the deceased which function in the same way as a wake. The site may contain pictures of the deceased, stories about them, their achievements in life, and their plans which they can no longer fulfill. These sites are rarer than a memorialized Facebook page or Twitter feed, but are easier to manage, not allowing defacers to access them. The creator can manage who has access to the site, by handing the domain out to only certain people, or only allowing certain people to edit or post on the website.

Online

mourning, like most online activities, mimics real life in a way that is astounding. Memorials such as these have been in place for centuries, and the idea of mourning at these memorials is not a new concept (Riechers, 2012). The astounding part is that these websites and memorials have been present on the internet nearly since its public accessibility in 1991. It took almost no time at all for the practice of mourning via online channels to become prevalent. Today, websites dedicated to the dead can be found in every corner of the internet, some are fifteen or more years old, and some were created yesterday. They are also highly accessible forms of memorial; anyone can create a webpage for free on Google. This means that the highest celebrity and the poorest members of society can have memorials online.





Mourning in Online Games

In online gaming there exist many forms of community. Looking into the many forms of online gaming, you can find Guilds, Clubs, Clans, and Crews scattered across cyberspace. These groups are collectives of people, from hundreds and thousands of different backgrounds, all working towards the same goals. These people build bonds between each other by fighting together online, working together, and overcoming obstacles, all in online games. The players may even know each other better than the people they interact with in real life. This means that these tight knit groups of people will react in much the same way to the death of a group member as a group of people in real life.

The difference however is that these people will reach into their games to memorialize them. In the online multiplayer game World of Warcraft, virtual funerals and processions are not a rare occurrence. There is a virtual city in the game called Stormwind, and in that city is a massive cathedral with an adjacent graveyard. Guilds that have lost members are known to hold a service for their members in the cathedral, with many guild members dressing their online avatars in formal clothing, going to the cathedral, while they all log into a voice chat server and perform the ceremony. Some guilds go so far as to go to the graveyard next to the chapel and "bury" the lost member.

A funeral in the online game World of Warcraft.



These ceremonies once again show how online mourning rituals mimic reality. This act of holding a service, with formal clothing, and in many cases a lead priest, mimics the mourning rituals of Christian and Catholic funerals. The most interesting part however, is that these people who come together may all have different mourning practices, because not all of them will be of the same culture. Some of them may consider mourning not to be a solemn occasion as many Americans do, but rather a celebration of life. Some may be of Latin American descent, where Dia de los Muertos is a celebration of ancestors and respect (nationalgeographic.org). They may instead be Hawaiian, where the color of mourning is not generally black, but pink or other bright colors. But despite these differences, which might normally divide people, online gaming together a group of people to mourn and respect the dead of their group.

Developers also have inserted memorials to players and other developers into their games. In World of Warcraft memorials to the fallen are sprinkled across the landscapes (Gibbs, 2012). In a place called The Barrens (a massive desert located in World of Warcraft) there is a small hill with a shrine at the top. The shrine is dedicated to Michel Koiter, a developer who died before the final game could be released. On the shrine is the developers in-game avatar, with an angel of death (the games go-to symbolism for death at graveyards) above his character. Even when the entire region was changed during a major update, the shrine was still there, untouched by the chaos around it. This shows that in game, just like in real life, humans have a respect for the timelessness of a memorial, not changing it to continue on its respect. Also in World of Warcraft is a gravesite dedicated not to a developer but to a player. The player died while scuba diving and his friends (some of whom were developers) created a headstone for him in-game with his online avatar paying respect to the grave.



The Shrine of the Fallen Warrior - World of Warcraft

Dedicated to Michel Koiter



Multiplayer games do not just have memorials to dead players and developers, but also to celebrities. World of Warcraft added a memorial to comedian/actor Robin Williams in the form of a genie in-game, the player must rub a lamp to summon a blue genie with resemblance to William's famous character from "Aladdin". In Star Trek online there now exists a memorial to Leonard Nimoy, a statue of the actor famous for playing Spock in the original series who died early in 2016.

These memorials, and the protection and preservation they get in games, mimic memorials in actual reality. When someone important dies memorials may be placed, to remind the world of their life and importance. Most of these memorials can be seen in graveyards, headstones and statues working as markers. But when someone important dies they may receive a statue or memorial somewhere in a public space. This is popular with musicians and authors, Dr. Seuss, Freddy Mercury, Selena Quintanilla, and Michael Jackson all have memorial statues dedicated to them post-mortem. It is important to acknowledge that these practices have been happening for thousands of years, in ancient civilizations like Rome and Greece had statues dedicated to emperors and philosophers deemed important enough to respect. In online and virtual spaces these memorials give the dead a sense of immortality, since the virtual spaces these memorials cannot deteriorate (Kasket, 2011)

Other games can also be found which show respect to the dead, but in different ways due to how the community works. In a multiplayer online game your sense of community comes



from the fact that you are surrounded by the other players, avatars are interacted with and voice chat bring you together. They work together and are bonded by the challenges they overcome in a virtual world. However, in a single player game where you are not working with other people, the community comes from the websites around the game. Reddit, Facebook, and Tumblr are websites which form communities based on these types of games. People get together and craft theories about the games, draw fan art about them, write their own stories using the characters, and generally form a community around a similar interest.

In cases such as these, the developers and the community can help with mourning a death. In certain situations the developers can add memorials to single player games during development or as a patch (an update to the game after release) after the fact. In *Borderlands 2*, Gearbox (the games developers) added a memorial to a player who died before the second game came out. The players name was Michael Mamaril, and when his friend contacted Gearbox upon his death, the developers added a character to the game with his name. There is a chance of him appearing in-game and giving the player weaponry if they interact with him.



The Borderlands 2 tribute to Michael Marmaril, often called the Tribute to a Fallen Vault Hunter

In single player games where the game does not connect to a central server (such as World of Warcraft and Borderlands) the community itself can make changes to the game with the use of modifications (addition content made by fans for fans) or with in-game tools. In the single player role playing game The Elder Scrolls 5: Skyrim, the community came together and made a mod for a player whose brother had died. The brother posted to the website Reddit that his brother loved the game, and included pictures of the last place in the game his brother saw before dying. The community created a mod that others could download, which added a shrine to the spot shown by the pictures posted on Reddit.



Bear's Shrine- added to the single player game Skyrim by the community in memory of a community members brother.



These are prime examples of communities and developers coming together to honor other members of that community or fans of the game. The idea of people coming together like this to honor other members of a community is something which occurs in real life, though in different ways. Adding a character who looks or acts like a person is something unique to stories and videogames, but in real life a community may come together and honor a prominent member. A famous person may honor one of their bigger fans by adding them to a story they are writing, or dedicating a song at a concert to them, or even by helping the family of the deceased.

Honoring and memorializing people in these virtual spaces is part of those spaces identities. These spaces are different from websites, which act more like webs of connected databases. Virtual spaces are these realms created on computers and servers; they act like physical places where people can send their avatars to represent them. You can explore a virtual space, interact with it, and meet other people within them. The fact that they include memorials to celebrities, developers, and fans is what makes these worlds come to life. They feel real, like the world has history and emotion just like the real world. Both worlds are influenced heavily by the people who have been lost along the way, and it is possible to find the memorials placed throughout the worlds by those who thought they deserved them.

Handling Death in Online Groups

Another aspect of online gaming is the way that groups handle the losses of their members. I will be drawing on personal experience as well as the experience of other people I



have spoken to in this section, as there is very little written on the subject. However, the loss of a group member online is much the same as it is in real life. As previously stated, these groups of people are bonded together in incredible ways. The way they fight together in games brings them close, and they may know each other better than they know people they interact with in real life.

When a member of a group dies the group will generally react in one of three ways. The groups will split apart, come together, or continue on as normal. This is widely dependant on the person who died and their personal importance to the group. In my experience and the experience of my informants, if a group member of little importance dies, then the group can carry on, but if they are of great importance, the group can destabilize.

I personally have been in two such groups, one which fell apart, and another which continued on, with almost nothing changing. In my guild in World of Warcraft, we had our guild leader die in a car accident. The guild was summoned by the leader's wife, who also was a player, using our voice chat software. She told us he had died earlier that week, and the guild had no clue how to react. He was the one who had lead from the beginning, planned the raids, and organized the guild. Without him the guild fell apart fairly quickly. His wife was never online after that, and the guild had no leadership, no one was able to pick up the torch. We eventually all separated a few of the guild members went on to form a new guild, with his characters name as part of the title, and had success since much of the leadership went with us. The rest scattered.

The other experience I have is with my clan in Destiny, an online first person shooter game made by the developer Bungie, which I have been a member of since 2014. Our clan is a



rather successful one, and has about twenty members. One day, a member stopped logging on, she had been there since the beginning, but was not a member of the leadership and as such we did not think much of her absence. Then one day, about two weeks later she logged on, but it turned out to be her sister. She sent out a message saying that our friend had died, she did not tell us how, just that she had died about two weeks earlier. The news shook the clan, but it did not exactly hurt us. She wasn't an incredibly prominent member, and as such we just continued on, we mourned her loss, and performed a few raids in her honor, donning the colors of her character as we played.

My final example is from an informant who plays the multiplayer online game Guild Wars 2. In his experience a leader of his guild died of cancer. None of them knew he was even sick, and when he died he just stopped logging on. A month later the leader's brother logged on and informed the guild, who was shocked. A leader had died and the scramble for a new leader had begun. The guild had apparently never thought about who would lead them if he ever left, and the officers of the guild were stumped as to who should lead them. But unlike my old guild in World of Warcraft, this guild managed to survive and become stronger. For a few weeks the guild became destabilized, meetings and raids were canceled while the officers decided what to do. In the end the group ended up electing a new guild leader from an existing officer, and bound together to mourn their leader, who they all knew very well. That of course what part of their problem, they thought they knew him well, they talked to him almost every day and about everything. But he never told them about his cancer. They managed to continue on, and are



stronger now than they ever were, because they went through the mourning process together.

These examples show how much these online groups mimic their real life counterparts. In the most casual friendship groups or biggest corporations you can find these reactions. When Apple CEO Steve Jobs died the company mourned his loss, but continued on, because the framework was in place for the company to continue with little to no interruption. People die in groups all the time, employees or friends, and they keep going, because the death does not interrupt a routine in place. But the death of a leader can destabilize even the most secure of companies. When Walt Disney died in 1966 the company entered almost two decades of unrest and hostile takeovers, until Michael Eisner was elected to take over as CEO and Chairman in 1984, setting the groundwork for Disney's incredible success in the modern day.

There exists this new world which has grown adjacent to our own. It has given anthropologists an opportunity that has never existed before, to study a new culture, to watch it as it grows and forms. To see a new culture which has formed not from the remnants of a previous culture, but arguably was started by the outcasts from every culture. Started as most cultures start, by people who felt like they did not belong in the culture of their birth and sought solace amongst people who experienced the same things. This online culture takes many forms, and like cultures in the physical world, fights amongst itself while at the same time defending itself from outside threats. This culture must be studied and nurtured, not neglected by outsiders as it has been by many who consider it a "waste of time" to be present in an online format. This culture is not a trend, it is an opportunity.





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