

'2 people like this': Mourning according to format



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Abstract: Memorials to the dead on the world wide web are increasing in number and variety. Each venue comes with its own advantages and drawbacks. This paper is a first exploration of how the formats of three frequently used venues (web cemeteries, webring and social networking sites) affect the experience of web memorialisation – both for those who created the memorials and their visitors. Although all web memorials can benefit the bereaved, format affects: control over the narrative, number and type of visitors, and the ways that visitors interact with the site and each other. It is hoped that the issues raised in this paper will be considered both in the design of new sites and in guiding the bereaved to existing venues that best meet their needs.

Key words: web, memorial, bereavement, SNS, cemetery, webring

**All quotations are verbatim and therefore include the punctuation, sentence structure, spelling and capitalisation present in the original.*

As long as computers have been interconnected, the bereaved have made memorials to the dead in cyberspace. The first was a simple bulletin board, dedicated to a member of an online community that was started before the advent of the internet (Rheingold, 1993); as access and the means for creation have improved, the likelihood that the bereaved will remember their dead in cyberspace and the options for doing so have increased. New opportunities for digitally remembering the dead are appearing at a dizzying pace but simpler venues, like the bulletin board, continue to be used as well.

The benefits of web memorialisation

Many types of web memorial options are well utilised today. At the time of this writing, a web cemetery created in 2004, Gonetoosoon.org, has more than 80,000 memorials and a garden of remembrance in the virtual world, Second Life, is so crowded that it is difficult to read the individual names of the dead. This should come as no surprise; web memorials, regardless of their format, afford many benefits

for the bereaved. Unlike traditional post-death rituals, web memorials can be created by anyone at any time, providing a place for the disenfranchised to display their grief and for honouring the dead long after traditional post-death rituals have ended. Creating a web memorial may bring various psychological benefits, providing a place for: accepting the death, emotional release, constructing the dead and incorporating the loss into the author's self-narrative. Because most web memorials are public, they allow authors to signal others that they are bereaved and they provide a venue for the uninitiated to unobtrusively learn about bereavement. Most web memorials have a guestbook or comment section, spaces that can be used for creating a shared biography of the dead, for offering condolences and for connecting mourners from different parts of the deceased's life across distance and time. Those who create web memorials tend to see them as permanent tributes to the dead, providing a place to visit at any time from anywhere and a means to introduce their loved ones to those who never had the opportunity to meet them. Given all of the ways in which web memorials can aid

the bereaved, it is no wonder that in two surveys of web memorial authors, more than 90% reported that creating and visiting web memorials had been beneficial in their bereavement (Roberts, 2004; 2006). Asked if they would make online memorials when other losses occurred, 89% said that they definitely would; some spontaneously reported that, as a result of their own positive experiences, they had helped others create web memorials for their dead. A study of college students who had visited Facebook memorials created by others (Graves, 2009) found similar results; like memorial authors, they reported that visiting was beneficial in their bereavement.

Thus, there are ample reasons for remembering the dead in cyberspace and the bereaved appear to be utilising every possible online venue to do so. As memorial types become more diverse, understanding which format best matches individual needs can maximize their potential benefits. As a first step toward that goal, this paper discusses some popular forms of web memorialisation according to the experiences of those who use them – memorial authors and other visitors. Possible benefits and drawbacks of each web memorial format are considered in light of the potentially conflicting needs of various groups of the bereaved.

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Three general formats

Three of the most common types of web memorials (those in web cemeteries, webrings and social networking sites) will be considered here; each is either free or inexpensive to create. Regardless of the venue, each provides a place to post what Haverinen (personal communication, 25 June, 2011) calls 'intentional memorials' (content created exclusively after the death of a loved one) which are the focus of this paper.

Web cemetery memorials

There are many sites whose sole purpose is to house individual memorials to the dead; because of their similarities to physical cemeteries, I call them web cemeteries. As sites designed for remembering the dead, each makes creating memorials easy; in older web cemeteries (for example, the Virtual Memorial Garden and World Wide Cemetery), an email form is all that is required,

while newer web cemeteries (for example MuchLoved.com, Gonetoosoon.org) provide memorial authors with online tools and basic templates for memorial construction. Regardless of individual choices in memorial composition, each web cemetery has its own look and features – the common site formats that provide a sense of place in cyberspace. In most cases, memorials are public and a separate guestbook is attached to each; visitors can both read and leave entries.

Webring memorials

Personal webpages can be joined together into webrings. In webrings, each individual webpage prominently displays a common graphic, inscribed with a webring title (for example *Empty Arms Webring*); clicking on that graphic moves the visitor forward through each member webpage, eventually returning to the site from which they started. Webrings allow the personal webpage (designed and maintained by an individual) to be part of a group; typically these groups are formed according to topic. There are webrings for almost every interest; in among the pampered dog webrings and the gardening enthusiasts, there are webrings devoted to various losses, death of child and death of pet being the most numerous. Many webrings are hosted by sites like webring.com, an online platform which facilitates the creation and maintenance of webrings for free, in trade for the advertising posted at the webring hub. As independently created webpages, the content of webring memorials can be whatever the authors desire, provided that they have sufficient computer expertise for their project. Some webring memorials are simple, with a few photographs and the name of the deceased, while many are elaborate with music, slideshows, twinkling stars, and multiple pages of text. Like most memorials in web cemeteries, webring memorials can be viewed by anyone and they tend to have separate guestbooks which can be signed and read by visitors.

Memorials in social networking sites (SNS)

Memorials in SNS are created and housed in a place that was not designed for the dead; as a result, advertisements, headings (eg. Events, Newsfeed) and the automatic features (such as 'Reconnect' in Facebook) that mark regular profiles are part of intentional SNS memorials as well. Designed to promote social networking, sites such as Myspace and Facebook feature visitors' comments, along with their profile pictures, prominently on the opening page. As in all SNS profiles, the creator has the ability to block access to the memorial completely, to allow only certain people to see or comment on it, or to limit access to certain parts of the memorial on a case by case basis, decisions that can be changed at any time.

Format differences and implications

Advertisements

In most cases, web cemetery memorials are free of advertisements; whether they appear on webring memorials depends on the site hosting the webpage, but all memorials in social networking sites have advertisements. In public SNS memorials, advertisements are not only posted on the sidebar, but they often appear in the comments section as well; these ads can be large and intrusive. The comments section of one Myspace memorial had separate advertisements for a bar, a movie about domestic terrorism and the picture of a buxom woman leering into the camera over the question 'Want a girlfriend?' Because they had been posted most recently, these adverts appeared before the personal notes of memorial visitors. Advertising in the comments section can be controlled by limiting access to the memorial, but that action may shut out legitimate visitors and will do nothing to the adverts that are part of the profile itself; many memorials that I have seen recently were 'sponsored' by anti-aging cream.

Creator control

'...He was debonair. He loved his friends. They loved him. He was handsome and kind. His goodwill and humor distinguished him. He loved to dance...'
(World Wide Cemetery memorial)

'Mom, you were a good mother, but a sad one I think...I wish your life had been as sweet as your face.' (Virtual Memorial Garden memorial)

As personal web pages, authors have total control over the structure and content of webring memorials; early web cemeteries such as the Virtual Memorial Garden and World Wide Cemetery offer the bereaved complete control over what is written; some simply leave the name of the deceased while others post pages of text. In the unstructured format provided by these two cemeteries, the majority of authors describe unique qualities of the dead; another third to half of memorials are letters to the dead; fewer than 10% are written in the standard obituary form, with its timelines and accomplishments (Roberts & Vidal, 2000; deVries & Rutherford, 2004). In newer web cemeteries, memorials have a more structured format; each has certain sections (such as Life Story, Timeline and Tributes) that guide the narrative. Segmenting memorials in this fashion may limit author flexibility; the woman who wrote a letter to her dead mother as her memorial in the World Wide Cemetery might feel compelled by the tabs in newer web cemeteries to compose something closer to an obituary instead. How these categories affect the experience of creating a memorial has not been studied; it is clear, however, that at least some of the bereaved will write whatever they want, regardless

of format. In the 'stories' section of a ForeverMissed.com memorial, one author wrote : *'This may not quite read out as a story, but you know what, to each their own :):' Deleted all the haters. Anyone else being disrespectfull to _____<deceased>, gets Permanently Banned too.'*

Creators may delete comments and control access to the memorial, but whatever comments are posted will shape the narrative

Because most webring and web cemetery memorials have separate guestbooks, the content (text, pictures, music, graphics) of the opening page is the author's vision and one that only they can change. In contrast, comments are not separated from SNS memorials; they are just as visible as anything posted by the person who created it. Accompanying each comment is the visitor profile picture; additional content (eg. photos, videos, links to music) appears there as well. Comments are listed according to the time they are received, with the most recent on top in the most prominent position. As a result, SNS memorials change with each new comment and are less likely to present a unitary vision than memorials in web cemeteries and webrings. Creators may delete comments and control access to the memorial, but whatever comments are posted will shape the narrative. As in newer web cemeteries, each SNS memorial comes with pre-set headings but, because SNS profile sections were created for the living, they may make the task of creating a suitable memorial for the dead more difficult. Standard Myspace headings include sign of the zodiac, favorite television shows and 'Who I'd like to meet', not the qualities that most people emphasise in paying tribute to a deceased loved one.

Visitors and visiting

'I love that theres a myspace page that i can go to, to express my feelings.' (Memorial visitor, Graves, 2009, p46)

A seat at the table

From the creator's perspective, the prominence of visitor comments on SNS memorials may dilute the intended narrative but from the visitor's vantage point, SNS memorials give any 'friend' a seat at the table. Each memorial type allows visitors to publicly identify themselves as bereaved and to openly mourn for their dead, but in SNS visitors' words and pictures shape the memorial itself. One Myspace memorial, made by a mother for her 21-year-old son, had a sunset background, over which were

posted several pictures of the young man in business suits and one of him smiling with friends near a mountain vista. The mother had written a few sentences about his life and untimely death and had posted the contributions of others that fit her instructions. 'From the ones who love him, this is <deceased> in a word or sentence'. Blogs and videos were private and a statement of purpose was prominently displayed: *'This page is to remember _____ and his life & is a place for friends to write to him'* but, despite her efforts, the mother's control over the tone of the memorial was limited. Three years after his death, close to 1,000 comments had been posted; most were in textspeak from scantily clad age-mates, often with beers in hand. Those contributions paint a different portrait of the young man, one involving more bathing suits than business suits.

'OMG!!!! i effin miss you like crazy! ahhh i was looking at old pictures and saw you and it hit me on how much i miss your FACE. i love you i love you i love you.' <3 (Comment on the memorial from a female friend, 1½ years after his death)

Frequency and relationships

For all who have access, web memorials provide a place to visit the dead at any time, from almost anywhere; survey responses from web cemetery and webring memorial authors indicate that they visit their web memorials more frequently than the physical memorials to their dead (Roberts, 2006). In addition to easy access, two other qualities set visiting web memorials apart: 'permanent' evidence of one's visit (that will not wilt or blow away) can be left at web memorials; and, conversely, one can visit without being seen.

Of the three types, SNS memorials appear to be visited the most frequently; certainly, they have the greatest number of comments. Brubaker & Hayes (2011) found a mean of 149 comments per Myspace memorial; while the largest guestbook in the World Wide Cemetery was that size in 2005, it was an outlier (mdn=3 entries, Roberts & Schall, 2005). The greater number of comments at SNS memorials may be a function of the community in which they reside, one in which frequent visiting and commenting is expected and the term 'friends' is loosely applied (eg. Brandtzaeg, Luders & Skjetne, 2010).

'I didn't know you were friends with _____.' 'I'm not. We're just Facebook friends.' (Author and former student)

As part of her research on undergraduates' visits to Myspace memorials, Graves (2009) asked how close visitors were to the deceased; on a five-point scale, the average answer was three, probably not close enough for a trip to a physical cemetery, perhaps not even a web

cemetery. When individuals who had few ties to the dead, 'just Facebook friends', leave comments, they dilute the shared biography that such a memorial can promote; not having specifics to contribute, their entries, however well meaning, may be so much noise to those who feel the loss acutely. They also displace entries of those who knew the deceased well; because the most recent comments are listed first, those visitors seeking to shape the narrative had best write often.

'R.I.P only knew you for a while but u were pretty fucking awesome.'
(Myspace memorial comment)

Access and deletion

In the same spaces that make visitors' comments so prominent, access to memorials is most likely to be limited, delayed or denied. Complex SNS privacy settings can intentionally or inadvertently block the site from other mourners; in Facebook, inadequate attention to 'friend' requests can delay the ability to post on the memorial wall. The SNS format also allows for changes in settings at any time; memorial creators can block access and delete comments whenever they choose. In their study of unintentional Myspace memorials (profiles which became memorials after the creator died), Brubaker & Vertesi (2011) note that in one case, an entire group of 'friends' was banished and their comments deleted. The same actions could be undertaken at intentional SNS memorials as well. Thus new and/or unpredictable groups may become disenfranchised through SNS memorial management. While newer web cemeteries provide the ability to make one's memorial private (some requiring a password for viewing), the majority of the bereaved do not choose this option and while both newer web cemeteries and webrings allow authors to delete comments, there is comparatively little evidence that they do so.

Content

'Hi _____, I miss you and the times we used to make funny phone calls on your mom's phone. Remember the lady we always used to call?... I think she liked it... Wonder if she ever ate any of the pizzas we sent her... Love, _____' (World Wide Cemetery guestbook)

'i SEEN YOU TODAY AT YOUR ViSiTATiON AND YOU LOOKED BEAUTiFULL... iT WAS REALLY HARD FOR ME THO JUST SEEING YOU LAY THERE... ii GAVE YOU A GOODNIGHT KiSS BEA ii LEFT'
(Brubaker & Hayes, 2011, Myspace comment)

Regardless of format, most visitors write to the dead at web memorials, and messages, while varying in writing style,

tend to be similar in content; they tell the dead how much they are missed, give them updates on recent activities and reminisce. When visitors deviate from this pattern and do not write to the dead, they are usually responding to a directive from the creator of the memorial. The Facebook memorial for a middle-aged restaurant owner said: 'This page was created for those who would like to share some memories or comments about _____', instructions that were studiously followed by friends, loved ones and restaurant patrons. They posted photos and memories; they responded to others' stories and added the details that they recalled. Only two comments at this lengthy memorial were written to the deceased, both by his girlfriend.

Although there is much overlap between comments posted at SNS memorials and guestbook entries at other sites, SNS visitors are the most likely to write to each other; they answer questions and try to guide the direction of the conversation, much as they do in the SNS profiles of the living. A Facebook memorial for a murdered girl contained, in among the notes to the dead, several questions about the suspect and his trial; each was politely answered by frequent contributors. One stranger even wrote that she knew (and had always been wary of) the family of the murderer; responses to this were tactful and attempted to change the focus. '*Lets just put details aside and remember buitifull _____. Forget her killer how she died all that stuff. Just think about her and how happy she is up in heaven :) RIP _____.*' Again, most SNS memorial comments are written to the dead, but if they are not, the living are usually kind to one another. I have only encountered a few contentious exchanges; at one Myspace memorial, a mother hotly disputed each comment that described her son's death as a suicide; in another, there was a thread of more than 50 comments about one inappropriate posting.

Sense of community

'Ashley...you can see already how much you've meant to everyone....there are so many people who cared about u....look at all these comments.' (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011, Myspace comment)

'It means a lot to me when other people post as well, it makes me feel comfortable in the fact that I'm not alone.' (Interview with Facebook memorial visitor, DeGroot, 2009)

McMilan & Chavis (1986) have written that psychological sense of community requires four conditions. These are: a sense of belonging and emotional safety, that one matters, that there are shared values and shared emotional connections. Most web memorials can provide a sense of community; for example, in social networking sites there is a common loss and a need to remember the dead, a space to write emotional content without reproach and,

by virtue of access, the visitor knows that they matter. At SNS memorials, the sheer number of comments contribute to a sense of community as well; clearly, the mourner is not alone and the deceased is well remembered if there are hundreds of comments on their memorial wall.

Lengthy memorial guestbooks are rare in web cemeteries; sense of community is strengthened instead from imagining those who visit without comment. The authors we surveyed estimated that fewer than one-third of the visitors to their memorials signed the guestbook. Bonds with imagined visitors may be influenced by site structure; at SNS and other standalone memorials, it is likely that those who visit knew (or knew of) the dead person. However, because web cemetery and webring memorials are housed among the dead, with constant reminders that one's loss is simply one of many and easy access to others' memorials, those grieving different losses are bound together in a community of the bereaved. Bonds with unknown others were mentioned frequently by the authors who responded to our surveys and acknowledged in many guestbook entries as well.

'I leave a beautiful red Poinsettia in memory of your dad to comfort you during this holiday season. Take care, _____ (another daughter whose dad lost his battle to lung cancer last year).' (World Wide Cemetery memorial guestbook)

The neighborhood

'I was leaving flowers for my brother today. and I thought everyone should have some flowers, so I leave a lovely dozen of red roses, may god bless you.' (World Wide Cemetery memorial guestbook)

Post-death rituals are most effective when the bereaved are allowed to remove themselves from everyday life and affirm their relationship with the deceased; engage in some symbolic action either for or reminiscent of the deceased; take time for the experience; take their leave and return to ordinary life (Kollar, 1989). All web memorials afford these opportunities, but format partially determines the experience of each. Web cemeteries and bereavement webrings, having been created as separate locations for the dead, are places to which the bereaved can remove themselves and from which they can take their leave. The memorial authors we surveyed engaged in these practices; first they would visit their loved one and then, as part of their leave-taking, they would look at other memorials within the same venue. Frequent visitors (like the sister above) do the same thing; they linger and take their leave slowly, with many detours before finally closing the gate. SNS memorials, however, stand in the middle of the town square, surrounded by the busy profiles of the living; short of searching for likely terms (eg. RIP, In Loving Memory),

there is no easy way to find other SNS memorials to the dead and, even if one does, it is quite likely that they will be denied access. As a result, the slow leave-taking afforded by cemeteries is less possible there; instead, one is immediately thrown back into the here and now, a different neighborhood altogether.

Familiarity

'How was your Christmas? Mine was ok ... got clothes and stuff what about you?? ... Did u get my text message?' (comment to a dead friend, Myspace memorial, Brubaker & Vertesi, 2011, p. 3)

'Beth described her communication as talking "just like we always did; I just get no response now."' (interview with Facebook memorial group member, DeGroot, 2009, p171)

For most people, web cemeteries and bereavement webring are unfamiliar territory; few spend time there until they have lost a loved one. As a result, they may delay their first visit and, once there, may struggle with what to write and to whom. In contrast, most visitors to SNS memorials are familiar with the site already; they have their own profiles and networks of friends there, one of whom may have been the deceased. Consequently, fewer adjustments are required; the bereaved visit SNS memorials immediately (and often) and they bring their style of communication with them, frequently writing to the dead, as they do to the living, with textspeak and a sprinkling of emoticons. Next to their messages are the pictures that accompany all of their SNS posts. Each of these factors, which make SNS memorials and profiles so similar, blur the lines between the living and the dead. DeGroot (2009) has posited that the experience of visiting SNS memorials is almost identical to visiting profiles: '...they envision that they are in the physical presence of their friends, conversing with them and maintaining their relationships' (p52), qualities that may make the often disparate tasks of accepting the death and continuing the bonds, easier for the living.

Endurance and popularity

'Thank you for such a wonderful place. Now my parents, brother, and son will never be forgotten.' (Virtual Memorial Garden Visitor's Book, 1997)

Most of the respondents to our surveys considered their web memorials to be permanent, but not all of their memorials have endured; the entire webring from which we drew our first sample has disappeared as have several web cemeteries. Predicting which site will remain is difficult; web cemeteries run on shoestring budgets by single individuals have faithfully housed memorials for more than

15 years and huge social networking sites have practically been abandoned. Those who expect their digital memorials to endure as long as physical gravestones should keep a back-up copy or two.

'MySpace was like a big party, and then the party moved on.' (Michael J. Wolf, past president of Viacom's MTV Networks, cited in Arango, 2011)

Myspace was the most popular social networking site from 2006 until Facebook took on the mantle in 2008; at some point, Facebook surely will fall behind as well. As fickle SNS users move from site to site, those who have made memorials in the venues they are exiting are faced with the question of what to do with their dead. Do they create a new memorial with each move?

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One of my former students made an elaborate Myspace memorial for her boyfriend who died in a traffic accident in 2007. It teemed with activity; there were innumerable pictures and videos, cartoon characters spouted tears and the Rolling Stones played *Paint it Black*. There were frequent visitors; in 2010, when I last saw it, the memorial had 302 'friends' and 2,429 comments. However, none of those comments were recent; like many young adults, my student and her friends adopted Facebook as their social networking site when it became popular. After considerable soul searching, she decided not to bring her deceased boyfriend along; he had never used Facebook and it was time to move on with her life. Now his memorial, once in the centre of a thriving community, sits in a site that neither she nor his family ever visit. Because the SNS format puts comments on the opening page, with the most recent first, his memorial looks less tidy and more lonely than those in web cemeteries that have suffered a similar decline in visits; now, most of the visible 'comments' on his memorial are advertisements.

Conclusions

As we live more of our lives in cyberspace, digital memorials for the dead will continue to evolve; in this paper I have discussed three types that are used frequently today, but there are many others. In order to understand how the needs of the bereaved are met in various web venues, some of the benefits and drawbacks of existing memorial

formats have been considered. Clearly, no one format is best for all. The bereaved vary in their need to control the narrative; those who need to present their perspective without interruption are best served by web cemeteries and webrings, where basic memorial content cannot be changed by others. Conversely, those seeking a broad viewership and more interaction among the living will be most satisfied with social networking sites. For complete control of content, the best option is the independently created webpage, which can be linked with others to form a webring; these however, require greater computer expertise and more maintenance than other memorials.

The bereaved may also vary in their desires to separate the dead from the living; web cemeteries provide a place to linger and reinforce the common bonds among the bereft, but for most that separation will limit the number of visitors to the memorial. Those who place memorials in sites for the living gain more traffic and interaction, but may be challenged by advertisements, inappropriate headings, decisions about access and deletion of comments, and the dilemma of whether to leave their dead in an abandoned site or to carry them into the next popular venue. Of course, the problems with current venues may be remedied in future sites. 1000Memories.com, a new social networking site designed for memorialising the dead, was created because making memorials in Facebook was too 'awkward' (Rudy Adler, cited in Gannes, 2011). As others experience difficulties with existing sites and our digital lives expand into other venues, new innovations will surely come. It is hoped that the issues presented in this paper will aid in both the design and evaluation of options to digitally memorialise the dead, best matching the format with the needs of the bereaved. ■

The Virtual Memorial Garden is at <http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg/> [accessed 20 August 2011].

The World Wide Cemetery is at www.cemetery.org/ [accessed 18 August 2011].

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