

MEMORIA VIRTUALIS

MEMORIA VIRTUALIS
– death and mourning rituals in online
environments

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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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I dedicate this work to my father.

At my home office in Helsinki, 19th of May 2014.

(1) Pixel terrains and memory symbols

1. Introduction and research questions

The autumn sun is highlighting the colors of Oxford city, and the wind is whirling the leaves around my feet. It is early November in 2011, and I am taking a day trip to Oxford with a colleague from the University College of London, where I am spending the fall semester as a visiting scholar. We are looking around the college buildings, marveling at the great architecture and enjoying this beautiful autumn day, when we find a door to a small chapel. I push gently, and the huge mahogany door opens slowly. I quickly glance inside the chapel for any signs of opening information or people and step inside. Our steps echo into the massive space, making me almost tiptoe, and I sense an intense fragrance of candles and something spicy, almost incense-like, which does not feel familiar in a Catholic church, but then I remind myself of the fact that my experience with Catholic churches is very minimal. I move slowly and respectfully around the room, looking at the beautiful lead glass work in the windows, statues of saints and other decorations adorning the walls. The light from the windows forms narrow light pillars, dust dancing inside of them. I see a collection of votive candles by the entrance of another room, flames flickering in the small draft from the windows. The sign next to the candles says, "Please offer 20p for charity", and I pick my pockets for small change. I find one 20p coin, place it in a small basket and pick a votive candle. I light it with the flame of another candle and place it among the others, sending some thoughts to my father "up there somewhere". I am not a Catholic, not even a Lutheran anymore, and I do not believe in any Christian divinities, but this small ritual is something that I have grown accustomed to whenever I visit a place considered to be holy. It is my personal ritual to remember and honor my late father.

I stop to think about my PhD thesis, virtual death and mourning rituals in online environments, and feel almost like a heretic in action, since I have only lit a couple of virtual candles in my life. I need the sensation of an actual candle in my hand, the heat of the flame, the scent of smoke and dim light to feel a sense of authenticity in my action: lighting a candle for the memory of someone. I can't help thinking about the contrast with my research topic and the old ritual places and spaces that are filled with history. 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.

My academic background comes from anthropology, museology and archaeology, but my fondness for the old and ancient was actually one of the main reasons I chose to study within virtual technology, because of the contrast it creates. In addition, virtual mourning practices were very marginal in Finland in 2007, when it was time for me to choose a topic for my master's thesis – which eventually led me to this PhD project. Growing up in Finnish culture, which has a dualistic view on mourning and honoring – strict, private and normative but at the same time ambivalent, secular and public – also gave me the opportunity to question and ponder something entirely different from my experiences. It gave me the possibility to look at the phenomenon of virtual mourning and honoring rituals as an outsider, classify it as *the Other*, unfamiliar and strange.

As much as I wanted to be the modern Indiana Jones, my interest in technologies – or in other words my inner *geekiness* – also led me to find a new academic home from digital culture studies, which enabled me to explore and combine multiple methodologies from anthropology to history and from psychology to sociology, since there is not such a field as virtual thanatology. Thanatology itself is a study of death and dying, mourning and bereavement, but for me as a cultural researcher, it allows me to understand human behavior in a holistic manner. Death is not only a psychological, medical or cultural phenomenon – although many of the abovementioned disciplines want to take the subject as their own. Combining death, virtual technology, and the Internet, is something that is currently changing the practices and rituals of bereavement, death, dying and honoring. Digital culture, however, provided me the framework to understand my research topic from a cultural, material and theoretical perspective, although the professor of digital culture, Jaakko Suominen, refuses to determine the discipline within strict boundaries, since the very technology in the focus of the discipline is both rapidly changing and in a constant flux of cultural appropriation (Suominen 2013). This allowed me to grasp holistically *what* virtual mourning *is* in a specific time frame and what the social and cultural aspects of mourning and honoring online are created from.

Mourning online as a phenomenon is almost as old as the technology itself, since the first virtual

memorial websites¹ and online graveyards date back to the early 1990s in the US, when the commercialization of the Internet and home computers became increasingly popular and accessible. During this project I have not been able to find signs of mourning in text-based online environments, but it does not mean that the online communities in the 1980s did not express mourning and honoring rituals in text-based websites.

In 2007, I had not even heard about virtual memorial websites², which is why I wanted to know who these people who turn to virtual technology instead of the “old” rituals are. Is it only young people, the Web 2.0 generation, the *digital natives*³? Why do some people choose virtual technology? How are virtuality, death and/or the afterworld being conceptualized through the Web? How are these rituals transforming notions such as value, family, identity, friendship and love⁴ (Wesch 2008)? I had even more questions to ask and eventually I found out that there were even more answers, and especially the amount of research material found: memorial blogs, memorialized profile pages in social media, memorialized avatars⁵ (i.e. online game characters), virtual tombs and honorary quests in online role-playing games, anniversary meetings in virtual environments, virtual chapels and graveyards, virtual candles, memorial videos on YouTube, funny memes⁶ made of the material the deceased had posted online, discussion boards with memory threads, pictures and videos passed on, poetry, songs, and honorary flights in real-time flight simulators... The list was endless.

¹ In the biggest Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* the necrologies and death notices were moved to their website in 2011, which caused a debate of equality and whether the printed version would be only for people who were considered important or otherwise remarkable in Finnish society. The newspaper argued that, actually, the online version would provide a more equal way of publishing the necrologies at the time the family wishes and not according to the publication process of the printed version. Currently, the website consists of all the obituaries published since 2006. (HS, 5/19/2011, accessed 10/25/2013.)

² At the time there was only one virtual candle website, www.sytytakynttila.fi, in Finland and only a few private websites which resembled obituaries.

³ Digital natives and digital immigrants are terms originally used by Marc Prensky in his article *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants* (2001). By natives, he refers to the generation that was born to use digital technologies, and digital immigrants, on the other hand, are people who learned to use digital technologies during their adult life.

⁴ See more: Michael Wesch and his YouTube video “The machine is us/ing us” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLIgopyXT_g) about how the Internet has transformed the everyday life.

⁵ The word ‘avatar’ originally means gods’ embodiment on Earth, but was coined by Chip Morningstar for a game he designed in 1986, *Habitat*. The word is currently known as the player’s representation in an online gaming environment (Pearce & Artemesia 2009, 21).

⁶ An Internet meme can be an image, hyperlink, video, picture, website or hashtag. It may be just a word or phrase, including an intentional misspelling. These small movements tend to spread from person to person via social networks, blogs or news sources. They may relate to various existing Internet cultures or subcultures and are usually intended as humorous. (Suominen et al. 2013).

In order to understand the contextualities of the abovementioned examples, I continued analyzing my research material with simplified research questions, which began with one main research question:

- *Why are* death rituals practiced in online environments?

From there I aimed to grasp at the practices of online mourning and honoring, how memorials are erected in online environments, with the following research question:

- *How* are virtual memorials created in various online environments?

The overall amount of research material prevented in-depth analysis in each environment, but soon I realized there was a specific recurrence in the contents of virtual memorials that also existed in the interview and survey responses. I wanted to know about the contextualities of the reasons the answers to the first two research questions provided, which is why the third research question is as follows:

- *What kind of* systems of meanings are virtual memorials constructed from?

The main research question – *why are death rituals practiced in online environments?* – was the reason that intrigued me in the beginning of my research in 2007. The simplicity of it has allowed me to ask more detailed questions, since people are individually different and respond to bereavement and ritualistic behavior in many ways. Furthermore, since the spectrum of online environments selected for this research provide different possibilities (and limits) for mourning and honoring, they also represent the motives of the service providers, which are interwoven with the motives and actions of the mourners. Some environments, such as online gaming environments or Facebook as a social network, were not primarily designed for mourning and honoring, but they were later provided by the service, since the users themselves began to express the specific need. This question is carried through the entire body of this work, and will be more thoroughly reflected in the final chapter.

The following research question, *how are virtual memorials created in various online environments*, dives in to the dynamics of virtual memorials and how they are created in online environments. Phenomenologically, this question refers to the way a specific phenomenon gains its meaning from the perceiver and their consciousness, and, in other words, how a virtual memorial is not necessarily initially intended as one but becomes a memorial either

unintentionally or intentionally. The notion of intentionality is the key factor here, since some memorials, at first, resemble very much the spontaneous memorials created at disaster sites in the offline world. Additionally, this question provided further need for elaboration, such as: how does online mourning differ from offline mourning? Does it add some levels of experience? How do virtual memorials differ from actual memorials from the user's perspective? These notions are mostly examined in chapters (4) *Unintentional memorials – acts of community and collectivity* and (5) *Intentional memorials – creating places of remembrance*.

My third research question – *what kind of systems of meanings virtual memorials are constructed from?* – partitions online mourning and virtual memorials according to their complex contextualities, and, furthermore, to what kind of systems of meanings they represent and are created from. By systems of meanings, I refer to the social constructionist approach to human experience, where social and cultural communication are shared systems of meanings, manifested in language and communication contextualities between individuals (Berger & Luckmann 1991 [1966])⁷. The systems of meanings investigated in this study are entwined with the dynamics of memorials and how they reflect *identity*, *community* and *space* and *place*. In *identity*, I am interested in how it is being reflected in the ritualistic way of creating and using virtual memorials, how death itself affects identities and how virtual mourning and honoring are being used to reflect this change and, furthermore, how virtual memorials enable identity play in a virtual environment, where the concept of authentic self is questionable because of the anonymity the Internet provides. In addition, death affects individuals on a communal level, and I was interested in what kind of *communities* virtual memorials represent, create and maintain and whether there are differences in the sense of community in specific online environments. Finally, I examined how the sense of *space* and *place* is experienced in virtual memorials in different online environments, especially in shared virtual worlds and online gaming environments, but also in websites and social media applications. All three aspects, identity, community and space and place, are examined throughout the three analysis chapters.

⁷ Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their work *Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966) created the foundation to the sociologist theory known as social constructivism. According to Berger and Luckmann, the social systems of individuals and communities create mental representations of each other's actions, in which they reciprocally reflect and represent in relation to each other. Individuals begin to represent specific roles to one another, and they are further institutionalized and incorporated in the society on a larger level. Reality is, thus, constructed of a shared system of meaning(s). In relation to bereavement and death rituals, these systems of meanings become the core foundation for how people expect to be treated and, furthermore, how they treat others at the time of loss. Codes of conduct and behavior considered as "appropriate" are one example of how these systems of meanings in grief are represented.

Many researchers claim that the death culture(s)⁸ of the late 21st century differ(s) immensely from the death culture(s) of the previous centuries (Ariès 1974, 1981[1974]; Elias 1993[1985]; Pentikäinen 1990; Walter 1994), but at the time of death, the need for communal behavior still remains, and digital technology has provided new tools for being together and sharing at the time of loss. People still seek out a place to carry out rituals, such as lighting candles, writing eulogies, visiting memorials during anniversaries, and feeling a sense of community at the time of loss. The Internet provides a new space for rituals, which previously have been based on communal and in-person experience, such as birth, marriage and death. These rituals have benefited from new forms of online communities and their social expressions (Haverinen 2009a; Sumiala 2009, 2013; Sumiala and Tikka 2010).

Communication researcher Steve Jones claims in his article *404 Not Found: The Internet and The Afterlife* (2004) that “there is nothing unique about the Internet and computer-mediated communication that print media cannot provide” and “the dead are memorialized today, however, much as they have been in print cultures” (Jones 2004, 84). Jones agrees that print media is more expensive and not as flexible as digital media (Jones 2004, 84–85), but when discussing the online environment, it must be remembered that the Internet is not static but changes more rapidly than for example print media has changed during the centuries. One year on the Internet, in so-called “Internet years”, can be almost a decade, and mourning online in 2004 was very different than in 2013 because of the rapid change of the contents of the Internet and the amount of new technological interfaces (smart phones and tablets for example) that have emerged.

Internet technology is also very much bound to the public media, which has enabled a type of mass media mourning (see e.g. Hietala 2007; Sumiala & Tikka, 2010; Sumiala 2013) and spontaneous memorials, which are erected especially for victims of violence or traffic accidents. Spontaneous memorials include usually mementos such as flowers, candles, teddy bears and other

⁸ By death cultures, I refer to the Western world, which is deeply influenced by Christianity, and albeit some geographical differences, the death researchers mentioned are somewhat unanimous about the changes that Western death culture has gone through during the 19th and 20th century. With these changes, I do not only refer to practical changes, such as the disappearance of the black mourning dress, but also to the disappearance of the thought of death (Walter 1994, 1). The religious and ritualized death became medicalized and privatized during the early 20th century, which led to the assumption that death became a taboo (which I somewhat agree with), but instead of a taboo, which refers to something sacred and forbidden, I agree with the abovementioned scholars: death has become both erased from the public *and* private lives of individuals, and the key here is the medicalization. Death is handled by professionals, who are doctors, nurses, coroners, hospice carers and grief counselors. The ritualized religious point of view, where God and the Church took care of the dead and the bereaved, changed to a scientific and medical view on death and dying. Through media, we see death everywhere and all the time, but it is anonymous death, faces in foreign countries, starving children and victims of crime. We watch horror and action movies, where people are killed in numerous ways, but a person can still reach adulthood without experiencing the death of a family member or seeing a dead person in person. It is not taboo, but an abstract that happens “to somebody else”.

small items (Haney et. Al 1997; de Vries & Rutherford 2004; Clark & Franzmann 2006; Santino 2006). Media and movie researcher Veijo Hietala (2007) claims that the 21st century is the age of “big emotions”, an age of new romanticism, that is fed by the mass media. With “big emotions”, Hietala refers to the way people are more allowed to express emotions and emotions themselves are more valued, as opposed to the previous decades, the 1960s and 1970s, which were the times of reason and logic (Hietala 2007, 20–25). Hietala uses the death of princess Diana as an example of an event that can be seen as the culmination of how people publicly and ostentatiously expressed their grief and loss ritualistically over a public figure. He argues that after Diana’s death in 1997 all great tragedies, such as the sinking of the Estonia ship, police murders in Finland in the fall of 1997, the movie *Titanic*, the tsunami of Thailand in 2004 and other tragedies have been extensively produced by the media for the public, but in addition, the media has responded to the demand of the public: the age of great emotions. (Hietala 2007, 25, 34, 44.) Most likely, mourning online has been greatly influenced by – if it is not directly descended from – mass media mourning. Often, a death of a child attracts the attention of the media, and people can collectively express their sorrow and condolences, but I made a pragmatic decision to limit the material to only mourning of a person the individual actually knew or were related to, which means they are friends, family members and work colleagues – private people mourning their intimates.

Hence, my research field is the Internet, the physicality of which is built only on linguistic *metaphors* and *abstractions* such as ”going online”, ”surfing” and ”being online” without any actual physical movement or sensational experience (Haverinen 2009). One cannot experience virtual space as one experiences the dimensions of an actual physical room; the sounds, the smell, the distances, but experiences online are not to be compared directly with something that is possible to experience with all five senses. To understand virtuality, one must also understand virtuality as a concept and a creation of the mind of its users. It is an abstraction, pixels on a screen, and a socio-culturally constructed environment (Uotinen 2005), which is built more on language than on visibility. The sensation of a virtual space and spatiality is always limited to the (computer) screen, but the limitations are merely visual, and the conceptuality of virtual environments is a more complex notion. This notion I will explore further in chapter (1) 2.3. *Conceptualizing virtuality and the afterworld.*

The research data was compiled throughout 2007–2013 and consists of 38 online interviews, 3 online surveys with 153 responses and autoethnographical observations which I documented using

screen video, screenshots and field notes. The data consists of social media applications (e.g. Facebook, blogs), one massive multiplayer online role-playing game (*World of Warcraft*), one shared virtual environment (*Second Life*), 3 memorial websites in English and 2 in Finnish, videos on the YouTube video service, news articles and discussion forum posts. The research data has been divided in primary and secondary research material (see more in chapter (3) 1. *Research data and the triangulation matrix*) because of the amount of overall data. The primary research material has been the main data for analysis, and the secondary research material is used as complementary. Furthermore, I have divided the material in to two analytical categories: *intentional* and *unintentional memorials* (see Table 1.).

Unintentional memorials	Intentional memorials
Originally created by the deceased (i.e. social media profile pages, blogs, avatars), becoming memorials after the death.	Online environments (i.e. websites, locations in virtual worlds) created by the intimates of the deceased with a purpose of creating a virtual memorial in honor of the deceased

Table 1. Analytical categories of the research material.

Intentional memorials are specifically created memorials in various online environments and are usually created by the family or friends of the deceased. These memorials are intended as eternal spaces to remember, honor and mourn the person in a manner similar to how a gravesite is intended to mark the physical remains of the deceased. Unintentional memorials are, on the other hand, spontaneously created spaces, which, for the most part, were initially created by the deceased themselves, and transform into a space where people start to gather and post messages after he/she is gone. These spaces can be *inter alia* blogs and profile spaces in social media and are often later turned into actual memorials.

The toolbox for gathering research material and analyzing the results is formed from three types of methods surrounded by the theoretical frame, i.e. the research pyramid.

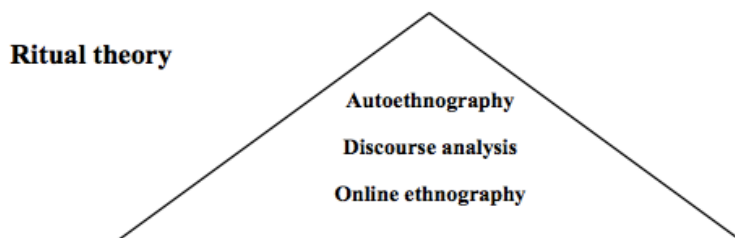


Figure 1. The research pyramid contains three methodological approaches: autoethnography, discourse analysis and online ethnography. The main theoretical frame for the methods has been ritual theory.

Autoethnography on the top of the research pyramid is a method where the researcher's own self is under study. By combining autobiographical and ethnographical findings, they can be used to analyze and write an autoethnography, which is why it is both a process and a product of research. (see e.g. Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011; Uotinen 2010, 163; Chang 2008.) In addition to autoethnography, I have used discourse analysis as a method for understanding the social reality of mourning and honoring online. In this research, discourse analysis is derived from interpretative ethnography, and is used to understand how people “*perceive, function, and learn* within their collectively created and maintained ‘conceptual world’” (Smart 2012, 149; hyphenation added; see also Geertz 1973). Linguistic researcher Christian R. Hoffman describes discourse analysis as “a recipient-oriented hermeneutic concept” (Hoffman 2012, 7), where the users of the discourse are subjected to the same semiotic web of meanings.

Online ethnography as a method is used to gather information from online environments, in this case through empirical observations, screenshots, screen video, online interviews and online surveys. The ethnography used in this work has been deeply influenced by *interpretative ethnography* created by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) during his fieldwork in Southeast Asia from the 1950s to the 1980s. Geertz was interested in semiotics and symbols and in how a shared social world is constructed in discursive practices of language. From these vantage points, I have used ritual theory as an overall theoretical framework of understanding the experience of mourning and honoring online, i.e. practicing ritualized behavior of mourning, remembering and honoring within the Internet. Rituals in this work are considered as the force keeping a community together (Bell 1992; Sumiala 2010; see also Durkheim 1980[1912]).

Memorial activity on the Web is currently a global phenomenon, but I limited my research to my language skills: Finnish and English. In addition, since my fieldwork would have not been possible without the Google search engine, I was subjected to the geographical limits that Google forces its users to follow⁹. I tried to overcome this obstacle during my visits to the United States (2010) and the United Kingdom (2011), where most of the international research material came from. Death is also to some people a very sensitive topic to discuss, which is why the transparency of me and my research might become the objective of the overall research. With this in mind, I have followed the examples of anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2008) and sociologist Christine Hine (2000; 2005). Boellstorff studied the *Second Life* virtual world and used his avatar as an

⁹ More about this in chapter (3) Fieldwork and research material.

extension of his identity as a researcher in the offline world. I also created an avatar in *Second Life*, Morita Hoxley, as a replica of myself, for it to represent me as an anthropologist as truthfully as possible. This brings reliability into the online research situation where anybody can claim to be anybody (Boellstorff 2008). In addition, I created a research blog at <http://bittiavaruuteen.wordpress.com>¹⁰, which worked as a representation of me and my research, as well as a way to gather informants through a research call. More about this in chapter (2) 3. *The New Trobriand – Doing ethnography online.*

Much time has passed since the dawn of the Internet, and new technological innovations, such as social media, semantic web, smart phones and tablet computers, are now forging the practices of the everyday. It is impossible to keep up with the development of new applications, which is why this study was planned from the start as a monograph, since the selective decision of the researcher is also about the final form of the research publication. I needed to decide whether to seize the changing moment by publishing the research in articles or to create a full monograph as a review of both time and place, where the examined phenomena has occurred. I chose a monograph, since I wanted to see how the phenomenon will change in time, but also to gain a holistic understanding from the multiple contextualities of the research material. This study aims to portray exactly why and how virtual memorials came to exist during 2007–2013 in various online environments and what kind of systems of meanings they represent. In the following chapters, I will further highlight the technological, sociological and cultural changes that have enabled the use of virtual technology as environments for mourning and honoring.

2. Virtualisation and change of death rituals

2.1. Ritual and death

The technology for mourning online is young compared to the traditional ritual practices of death, mourning and honoring, but before I will explore the history and development of the technology, I will briefly introduce how this work relates to the research of death and mourning rituals. Scholars agree that there has been a significant change in death rituals throughout the Western world, but they disagree with the motives and results (Walter 1994; Davies 2004, 2011). This work is focused on the *experience* of mourning and honoring online, where ritual practices work as the

¹⁰ Currently www.annahaverinen.com.

dramatization and display of mourning.¹¹

Professionalization of death and various social changes, such as the urbanization, secularization and development of technology and industry, have, in the Western societies, resulted in a death culture, which does not recognize the same ritual practices as previously. Burials are no longer a social event that concerns the whole community, but usually only the immediate family. It is possible even to reach adulthood without ever seeing a dead person or experience the loss of a family member or a friend. Death is experienced via mass media, movies and games, and it is abstract, although more visible than ever.¹² However, the emotions caused by death have not disappeared, only the solutions to cope with loss, sorrow and bereavement have changed.¹³ (Ariès 1974, 1981 [1977]; Elias 1993[1985]; Pentikäinen 1990; Walter 1994; Davies 2004, 2011.)

The practices of death, dying and bereavement were dictated by outside powers for centuries, which is why Michel Foucault (1998[1976]) accuses change in power for causing the change of thanatological practices. The changed attitudes towards death are not due to some new anxiety in our societies, but how the political governance over death shifted to life with hygiene, diet and sexual regulations. Foucault has stated that modern life is dominated more by the social and political regulations of societies, and death is the moment when power becomes powerless and the individual useless to its community. According to Foucault, the power to ordain life and living developed in the 17th century, when different disciplinary practices and institutions were developed and, through this development, the foundation for current social infrastructure was created. This infrastructure began to dictate when, how and under whose supervision a person should die. (Foucault 1998[1976], 98–99.)

The changes in power relations explained above are visible in the change of funeral and social practices that were carried out in the Western world only decades prior. For example, the loss of

¹¹ Media-anthropologist Johanna Sumiala (2010) has studied rituals in the media, and I will explore her media ritual theory later in this chapter.

¹² Finnish television channel Yle began to air a program called *Viimeiset sanani* (eng. My last words) in the spring of 2013 where every episode focused on one dying person and their final words to their family and friends. The program caused turmoil in the public, because it was unheard of to have actual dying people on television. However, many considered that it was time to have the public discussion of who is allowed to speak about death. If it is not the dying themselves, then who? <http://tv1.yle.fi/juttuarkisto/asia/viimeiset-sanani-%E2%80%93kuka-saa-puhua-kuolemasta>

¹³ I request the readers to bear in mind that the history of the modernization of death rituals is a generalization that does not allow individual changes but overgeneralizes the change in time. In this work, I have used this generalization, since it fits with the survey and interview materials, where I particularly asked if my interviewees felt that the death and mourning rituals they practice have changed from what they have experienced at a younger age or heard from their parents and grandparents. Furthermore, this research does not represent the disciplines of history or even cultural history, but digital culture.)

the black dress as a mourning outfit, funerals that affect the whole community and social codes of the bereaved seem to have disappeared everywhere in societies that are now considered *modern*, from Scandinavia to South America and Asia. (Walter 1994.) French historian Philippe Ariès claims skeptically (1981[1977], 28) that death is being silenced and faded out from our daily lives, muted almost, but Ariès leaves his “accusation” there, and does not explore further the agency of mourning and dying. Two decades later, thanatologist Tony Walter has argued that the modernity has actually offered the dead an autonomy that was previously denied by the society and the church. The individual is not modern anymore, but *neo-modern*, where the individual has the power to rule both death and actual dying. By the end of the 20th century, the individual has the right to determine what is *a good death* and how they should die. For example, the hospice movement rose from this development and debates about euthanasia were active, especially throughout the 1990s. (Walter 1994, 87–89.)

In the 21st century, it seems that the secularization of societies has changed the thanatological debate even more from the dying to the bereaved and has offered more autonomy for bereaved people: how they should practice rituals of honoring and remembering, how they should express grief and loss, and what kind of support systems society should offer at the time of death of a loved one. Community norms about mourning have now been replaced by professional opinions on what is considered to be *normal grief* (Parkes 1972; de Vries & Rutherford 2004).

Walter also discusses the secularization of burial codes and how in the late 20th century secular burials in the United Kingdom were redesigned to fit the unreligious way to bury a body. Hymns changed to folk songs and then again to popular pop songs, such as Eric Clapton’s *Tears in Heaven*, which won a Grammy in 1993 and was dedicated to Clapton’s own 3-year-old son. (Walter 1994, 180–181.) Rituals were created to fit the purpose: to mourn and honor according to the personality of the deceased.¹⁴

According to Walter, ritual is rooted in the community and is a socially approved way to *symbolically* express emotion at the time of crisis. However, according to Walter, the neo-modernist individual does not seek out ritual in the same manner as previously, but seeks out ways to express emotion by talking, for example in therapy or grief groups. (Walter 1994, 177.)

¹⁴ I will discuss this notion further in chapter (5) *Intentional memorials*.

Ritual action around the body and within the community is replaced by talk in a group of strangers facilitated by a psychotherapist (Walter 1994, 178).

What, then, is the meaning of the burial ceremony, if people do not seek out ritual anymore but talk? Walter asks. Why not leave the body to the incinerator without any ceremony and go directly to psychotherapy? What ritual offers instead is a *ritual act of solidarity*, where people join together to perform an act, or in other words *do something together*, in order to pay respects and honor both the deceased and the bereaved. Funerals are not for the deceased, but for the grieving family and friends, who come together out of solidarity.¹⁵ (Walter 1994, 178.)

In the everyday discourse of mourning, rituals are seldom used as a coping mechanism, but psychological and medical jargon is embraced more, and many can cite the steps of coping with loss, also called the *Kübler-Ross model*: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (Kübler-Ross 2005[1969]; 2005), which can be used to discuss coping with grief or, for example, how such categories can feel even obsolete to the bereaved.¹⁶

Anthropologists have been especially interested in the *rituals of death* and how they communicate the social and cultural practices of the community. All rituals have a logic, and death rituals respond to the psychological and social problems that a death of an individual causes in the community (van Gennep 1960 [1909]; Durkheim 1980 [1912]; Davydova 2005). Ritual theorists have also been interested in how rites of passage are used to construct identities on a community and individual level. Rites of passage are *liminalities*¹⁷, the transitional state of two phases (Turner 1995[1969]), where the identity of the individual is in between the old and the new. For example, the identity (and soul) of the deceased is in an abnormal and marginal state before the burial, which releases the soul to the afterworld, from liminality to post-liminality, and works as a closure for the bereaved to accept the loss (see e.g. Fingerroos 2004; Turner 1995 [1969]). However, the liminality theory is problematic when researching the rituals of the bereaved, which are in the

¹⁵ Walter (1994, 178) also notes that there is also a difference between men and women and how they express grief. Men tend to deal with bereavement by doing and many women deal with stress by talking. This division between genders was also visible in this study.

¹⁶ Human development researcher Pamela Roberts (1999a, 1999b) discovered in her research about Web memorials (graveyards) that they actually adhere to researcher of religion Nathan Kollar's (1989) four steps of post-death rituals: entering into a special time or place, engaging in a symbolic core act, allowing time to absorb what has occurred and is occurring and taking leave.

¹⁷ Turner (2008 [1969], 132) distinguishes *communitas* as following: a) existential or spontaneous communitas, the transient personal experience of togetherness, b) normative communitas, communitas organized into a permanent social system, b) ideological communitas, which can be applied to many utopian social models.

focus of this research instead of the rituals of the disposal of the body. Closure for the bereaved seldom occurs during the burial ceremony but is actually the beginning of a process that the bereaved must undergo in order to be able to continue with their lives.¹⁸

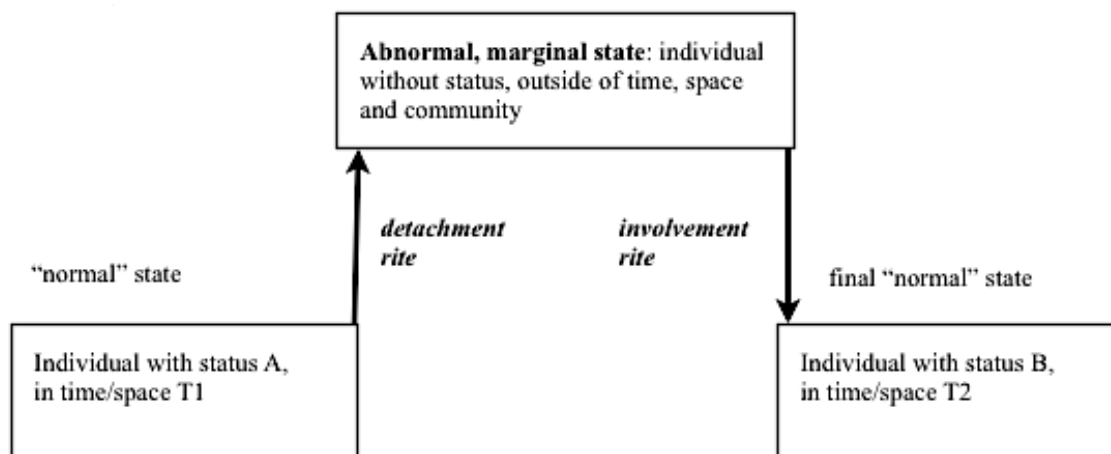


Figure 2. When an individual is transitioning to a new status in life (from A to B), they first need to detach themselves from the old status and being. Detachment rites highlight the temporary abnormal state of the individual, they are marginal and different from normality, but through the involvement rite, they obtain the new status and new normality in their community. (Fingerroos 2004, 38; see also Leach 1976 and Turner 1995[1969].)

Catherine Bell discusses the ritual theories at length in her work *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992), where she presents the works of inter alia Emilé Durkheim, Victor Turner, Roy Rapport, Arnold van Gennep and Clifford Geertz and creates two definitions for different ritual theories: 1) ritual is a set of distinct autonomous set of activities, 2) ritual can be applied to all human activity (Bell 1992, 70). Bell stresses the meaning of activity in ritual theories and whether they are intended as technical-utilitarian or ritual-magical, where the first represents ritual practices intended to create an instrumentally effective and pragmatic result and the latter non-instrumental, rule-governed and symbolical effect (Bell 1992, 71). The level of expressivity and communication are the key notions that determine the difference between abovementioned utilitarian and symbolical levels of ritual activity (Bell 1992, 72; Rappaport 1979, 174–78). Bell agrees that all human communication is symbolical and performative, but it does not necessary apply to all communication being ritual, albeit the core of ritual is often very symbolical and exists only “in the mind” (Bell 1992, 73). Bell invokes the term “ritualization” by Sir Julian Huxley to represent “the adaptive formalization or canalization of emotionally motivated behavior, under the economic pressure of natural selection” (Bell 1992, 73; Huxley 1966, 250). Ritualization for Bell represents

¹⁸ This notion is further explored in chapter (5) 2. *Temporal changes of mourning and its ritual aspect.*

a way “of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’, and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors” (Bell 1992, 74). In this work I have intentionally avoided the dichotomy of sacred/profane, since the interviewees and survey respondents did not choose to describe any online locations as sacred/holy. I am aware about the analytical aspects of those terms, but I chose instead to use mostly terms such as ‘mundane’ or ‘everyday’ to describe how rituals were practiced among other daily chores or online activities.

Media-anthropology and media ritual theory are most contributive to the research of online rituals. The theory leans toward the Durkeheimian tradition, where rituals are considered the force keeping a community together (Sumiala 2010, 11; see also Durkheim 1980 [1912]). Media-anthropologist Johanna Sumiala has studied how the media ritualizes public events and tragedies¹⁹, such as the death of Princess Diana in 1997 or Finnish school shootings in 2007 and 2008. In my research, I have focused on private people mourning and honoring their intimates, whereas Sumiala studied mostly the public displays of public tragedies.

	Media rituals (Sumiala 2010)	Online rituals
RITUAL	dramatisation and display of mourning	<i>display of mourning, acts of honoring</i>
SYMBOL	flowers, candles, intimates	<i>links to YouTube videos, song lyrics, poems, <3 - symbols, photos</i>
MYTH	the suffering of the innocent, death of a young person	<i>the suffering of the innocent, death of a young person/parent</i>
SACRED	community, “nation”	<i>community, life itself</i>

Table 2. Sumiala’s analysis of media rituals (2010) can be applied to the research of online rituals.

According to Sumiala (see table 2.), media builds a ritualistic space, where the community can be together and heal from the tragedy through ritualistic symbols, such as bringing flowers and candles to the place of the tragedy (Sumiala 2010, 136). In online mourning and honoring, the bereaved themselves occupy already existing online spaces and mourn together with similar symbols, albeit made of pixels.

¹⁹ See also Veijo Hietala (2007).

Rituals are, however, a theoretical way to make conceptualizations about behavior and experience, and during the everyday, people do not actively think they are performing *a ritual*, as they do not actively think they are *mourning online*. Communication researcher Mikko Villi (2010) argues that reading a newspaper can be described as a similar ritualized activity as attending a mass, where nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed. [--] news is not information but drama” (Villi 2010, 104–105; see also Carey 1989, 20–21, 34.)

The death ritual theorists introduced above have been the most influential in this study, but as my research progressed, the classical death ritual theories did not fit a multi-sited, multi-technological and complex research material. As ethnologist Outi Fingerroos has noted in her thesis, ritual theories create neat little packages that the research material is supposed to fit in, but the neat boundaries neglect the importance of contextualities (Fingerroos 2004, 34). All the death ritual theorists highlight the importance of community in ritual, but in web memorials there can be situations where the mourner is without any community, and expressions of honor and grief in a web memorial can be highly private. With this in mind, I focused on understanding the *experience* of mourning online, with all its contextualities, without trying to force the phenomenon into given categories.

2.2. Short history of the Internet and previous research of online mourning

When considering the Internet of today, it is hard to imagine the first days of Internet technology in the 1950s, when a group of US government researchers wanted to find a new and better way to *share information*. The Cold War also worked as a catalyst, since the US government officials were concerned regarding how to communicate in a possible post-nuclear world. *Advanced Research Projects Agency* (ARPA) was founded in 1958, and it would explore the possibilities of creating new communication and defense methods. A few years later in 1961, a researcher from the *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, Leonard Kleinrock, created the packet switching theory²⁰ and was hired by ARPA. This led to the launching of ARPANET in 1967, which we can refer to as the precursor of today’s Internet. ARPANET was, however, limited to government researchers and authorities, and it would take another 20 years for the technology to reach the public. (Ryan 2010.) The launching of ARPANET was the initiator for other networks to be

²⁰ As many other inventions in the world, packet switching theory was not invented only by one man but also explored in the field of humanities by sociologist and IT philosopher Ted Nelson, who invented the word hypertext (Ryan 2010).

launched around the world, such as the National Physical Laboratory (NPL) in the UK, CYCLADES in France and, finally, the first commercial packet switching network open for the public, Telenet, in 1974.²¹ (Arpo 2005.)

The University College of London was one of the first international connections to ARPANET in 1973. However, at this point in time there was no software that could govern how computers would communicate with each other through a common protocol. Ten years later, in 1983, Transfer Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) was established and finally enabled separate computers to communicate through a common protocol: in other words, the Internet was born. (Ryan 2010.) However, connecting computers together and sharing information was taking its baby steps in the 1980s, but the novelty of technology intrigued researchers in all disciplines.

Corporations appropriated this technology very quickly and pioneered exploration into new ways for communicating in meetings and sharing data inside the company. Communication over networks started to receive criticism regarding the lack of social interaction, and the criticism prevails even 30 years later in the 2010s. According to cultural researcher Robert Arpo, the revolutionary and novelty discourse about Internet technology had already begun in the 1970s and continues 40 years later. However, these specific political and cultural ideologies in history had already surfaced during the time of the Enlightenment; how this is intertwined with the development of this technology is often neglected. (Arpo 2005, 21–23.)

What we recognize today as the Internet is also called the World Wide Web or WWW, which took its first steps in 1990 when Tim Berners-Lee from CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, created an Internet-based hypertext system, which connected the scattered information resources under the same user interface. The base of the interface was Nelson's hypertext, which Tim Berners-Lee developed into a visual program, *Hypertext Markup Language* (HTML). HTML enables for example the typography of letters and where the images and text are placed on the site. To form a WWW site, HTML requires a *Universal Resource Locator* (URL), which refers to the individual marking of the site or directory. (Arpo 2005, 22–23.) For example the URL address of the University of Turku is <http://www.utu.fi>, where <http://> refers to the communication protocol and www.utu.fi to the server where the actual files are located.

²¹ At the same time with the development of ARPANET in the 1960s, there were only a few computers in the entire country of Finland, but the social and cultural capital for the development of technology and telecommunications was already rooted in society. Semiconductor technology enabled smaller sizes in technological innovations and some even call the 1960s the “era of miniaturisations”, which led to the cultural and social appropriation of personal data processing (Saarikoski 2004; Suominen 2003; Saarikoski et al. 2009, 32.)

Another crucial part of the appropriation of Internet technologies was played by literature, moreover science fiction. Novelist William Gibson used the term *cyberspace* in his novel *Necromancer* (Gibson 1986, 10)²², which popularized the term, and his work can be seen in sci-fi movies at the turn of the century²³. Alternate worlds had been part of the science fiction tradition already throughout the 20th century, which had been part of creating the common ethos of virtual worlds and online environments. Science fiction and fantasy literature have been great influencers in the design of virtual and gaming worlds, especially the ones researched in this study, *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*.

From a cultural and an ideological perspective, the Internet is not only a technological innovation, but also a result of a cultural revolution. French researcher Armand Mattelart (2003) connects the history of the Internet to the ideological structures developed already in the 17th century, which have culminated to the networked societies of the late 20th century. According to Mattelart, the world has been divided to the slow and the fast, where speed has become a glorified absolute value, a meter for success and a sign of meeting the expectations of the future. Slowness automatically refers to backwardness and outdatedness. Mattelart argues that this is a direct equivalent for the previous imperialistic structures that in the name of progress and revolution took the primitive (slow) cultures under their domain. (Mattelart 2003, 155–157.) Mattelart's portrait is displayed in many current features of modern thinking, which favors the young, fast and adaptable.

In order to culturally appropriate a new technology, such as the Internet, entire social, cultural and communal infrastructures need to change, which is manifested in language, organization structures and in everyday consumption (Suominen 2009, 10). Economist and technology researcher Mika Pantzar (1996) has used the term “taming technology” (also known as domestication, see i.e. Uotinen 2005), when describing how we learn to use new technology, as well as in how the technology learns to use us. Web 2.0²⁴ specifically represents how the technology learns from its users. Users themselves become producers when they mix, recreate and create their own content

²² Interestingly, in the novel the consciousness of the dead people can be found “alive” in the virtual world. More recently, a similar theme has been explored also in the science fiction television series *Caprica* (2009-2010).

²³ For example The Matrix trilogy: *The Matrix* (1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003). In *Neuromancer* the data network is also called the Matrix.

²⁴ The term was popularized by Tim O'Reilly at the O'Reilly Media Web 2.0 Conference in 2004. Web 2.0 is not a technological upgrade, but instead it refers to the ways webpages have been designed to interact with users and other contents on the Web.

from what others have uploaded already, in order to create a cumulative social experience. (O'Reilly 2007.)

The research of the Internet as a technology was dominated by an organizational focus in the 1980s, but, since the commercialization of computers and the Web in the 1990s, it has received a more humanistic perspective. Interaction between people became one of the main interests, and many article collections, such as Michael Benedict's *Cyberspace. First steps* (1991), Steve Jones's edited *Cybersociety. Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (1995) and Rob Shields's edited *Cultures of Internet. Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies* (1996) were the groundbreaking works to advance discussion and develop new perspectives on how this technology is changing the everyday practices and how cultural researchers should study it.

At the beginning of my research in 2007, virtual anthropology as a field and as a method was yet a fairly unknown concept in the Finnish academic field, despite the fact that it was being done internationally already since the early 1990s, when this new virtual terrain was explored inter alia Arturo Escobar in his article *Welcome to Cyberia: notes on the anthropology of cyberculture* (1994).

As a new domain of anthropological practice, the study of cyberculture is particularly concerned with the cultural construction and reconstruction on which the new technologies are based and which they in turn help to shape (Escobar 1994: 211).

By the study of cyberculture, Escobar refers to two particular areas, computer and information technologies, including artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. Escobar was interested in *technosociality* and *biosociality*, the first of which refers to the sociocultural constructions created by the new technologies and the latter to "a new order for the production of life, nature and the body" (1994, 214). Escobar stated that in both cases both nature and culture are reinvented under specific political and economic conditions that the anthropology of cyberculture should and could explore (1995). The fascination with biotechnologies was a typical interest of scholars in the early 1990s, when 'computer hype' was taking its first steps towards what was called a 'digital revolution' in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Since then there have been different approaches to online research, where for example British anthropologist and material culture theorist Daniel Miller represents a material culture approach,

where the online cannot be researched without the offline (Miller 2000, 2011). Miller's approach has been influential in understanding the digitalization of mourning and honoring symbols, such as obituaries, letters, teddy bears, candles and flowers displayed often at spontaneous memorials. A more current approach has been suggested by Philip Buddka in his working paper *From Cyber to Digital Anthropology to an Anthropology of the Contemporary?* (2011): the online is more than digital materiality, but a total social phenomenon, which "combines the material, the social and the symbolic in an associative web" (Budka 2011, 4), which is also the approach used in this work.

In a more domestic terrain, the history of computer and gaming technology has been explored inter alia in digital culture studies, where the focus has been on the social, cultural and historical appropriations of various digital technologies and online applications. Especially how the themes around the appropriation of social media in the everyday have contributed this work. (e.g. Suominen 2012a, 2012b; Saarikoski 2011, 2007; Saarikoski et al. 2009; Suominen et al. 2013.) Other popular themes studied in digital culture have been online sports and media (Turtiainen 2012) and life-publishing in social media applications (Östman 2008). Especially Östman's PhD research of life-publishing in blogs has contributed to this work, since biographical writing in blogs is a form of narration of the everyday, streams of consciousness (Östman 2008), and they are similar to memorial blog writings, where the narrator describes his/her everyday with pictures and/or words for a public or semi-public audience. Other fields that have contributed to this work have been cultural studies (the everyday appropriation of information technology and virtual ethnography, e.g. Uotinen 2005; Tuuva-Hongisto 2007), media studies (identity discourse in discussion forums, e.g. Paasonen 2002, 2009) and game studies (games as dynamic cultural constructions, e.g. Mäyrä 2008).

Online mourning research began in the late 1990s, but in Finland, the research has been dominated by the nursing sciences and psychological care (e.g. Nikkola et al. 2013; Pallari et al. 2011), which have been interested in how coping with death and bereavement is practiced in discussion forums. Only a few media researchers have scratched the surface of how death is dealt with in social media applications, such as YouTube memorial videos (e.g. Sumiala 2010, 2011; Sumiala & Tikka 2010) and the Facebook social networking site (Karppi 2013). In Scandinavia, the dynamics of creating and maintaining virtual memorial websites has interested scholars in Denmark (Refslund & Sandvik 2013; 2014) and Sweden (Reading 2011; Lagerkvist 2013). Internationally, computer, information, social and cultural scientists have explored online mourning in web cemeteries (de

Vries & Rutherford 2004; Roberts 1999a, 1999b; Roberts and Vidal 2000) and the modes of mourning in social media (Sofka et al. 2012; Williams & Merten 2009; Pennington 2013; Walter et al. 2011). In the research of mourning in virtual worlds, the researchers have been mostly doing descriptive works of how mourning and death rituals are displayed in the *World of Warcraft* online gaming environment (Chuang 2007a, 2007b) and in the *Second Life* virtual world (Boellstorff 2008) without thorough analysis of the phenomenon. Many other online researchers have mentioned that some have appropriated the use of social media for mourning purposes as well, but have not solely focused on the topic (Fearon 2011; Hine 2011; Miller 2011). In England, the legal studies have also been interested in the post-mortem privacy issues of data protection and what the rights of the intimates regarding ownership of the online material belonged to the deceased are (e.g. Edwards & Harbinja 2013). For example, most websites do not share private user information with the intimates to the deceased because of their terms of service, and currently there are no legal paragraphs concerning digital material.

The field of online death research is growing rapidly, and in 2013, the Death Online research network (<http://deathonlineresearch.net/>) was established to enable networking and mutual collaboration around online death scholars around the globe. The First Death Online Research Symposium was held in April 2014 at the University of Durham, England. In a domestic research terrain, the Finnish Death Studies Association published – for which I was the editor-in-chief – a theme issue about online death research in its open-access online journal *Thanatos* in the summer of 2014 (www.thanatos-journal.com, *Thanatos* vol. 3 1/2014), which explored death and mourning in online environments from the vantage point of several disciplines.

2.3. Conceptualizing virtual memorials

In order to conceptualize *what a virtual memorial is*, I want to first clarify the very essence of a memorial itself. Several online dictionaries, such as *Cambridge Dictionaries Online*²⁵ and *Oxford Dictionaries*²⁶ describe the definition of a memorial by its physical features (“a statue or a structure”, “often made of stone”), but in this work I will use a more conceptual definition by *Merriam Webster Online*, “serving to preserve remembrance”²⁷, which allows a memorial to be any object of any shape and size which symbolically resembles the memory of a person or an

²⁵ http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/memorial_1?q=memorial Accessed 26.5.2013.

²⁶ <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/memorial?q=memorial> Accessed 26.5.2013.

²⁷ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/memorial?show=0&t=1369562897> Accessed 26.5.2013.

event. It can be a natural landscape, built architecture, a monument, a tomb, an event or a small item, such as keepsakes.

According to art history professor Liisa Lindgren, memorials are spaces and places of remembrance, stages for the viewer to experience what is being remembered as an interpretation and sensing presence. Memorials construct sense of communality and collective history in the community, since they are not only built to honor, for example, a person, but also to create a space and a tool for remembrance.²⁸ (Lindgren 2000, 220.)

According to Lindgren, memorials are often a political way to express national identity and symbols. On a grass root level, this can be seen, for example, at Finnish cemeteries, which are mostly governed by the Lutheran Church of Finland. Lindgren gives an example of a tomb monument in the shape of an angel made by artist Kauko Räsänen, which was banned from the Ristikangas Cemetery in Lappeenranta in 1961, because it was considered against the common norms of cemetery memorials. Five years later, the monument was eventually accepted to another location in Lappeenranta-Lauritsala. (Lindgren 2000, 222.)

Christian elements on memorials in the Western world have created a unified way of understanding *what represents a memorial*. They are iconic, and life is expressed as a retrospective memory, which is dearly missed and remembered with bittersweet fondness. A graveyard can be seen as a mirror of society, where societal and cultural values are being expressed in a very visual form and how the dead are being treated reveals the values of the culture in question. (Nickels 2006; Nickels & Lempiäinen 1990.) However, memorials are also very much connected to the space and place they are erected in. Concepts of space and place are, thus, explored in this work on a phenomenological level, since virtual space and place are not similar bodily experiences as in the offline, actual, environment. This is why in this work, I have been interested in the mental experiences of space and spatiality and virtual environments becoming meaningful places.

According to philosopher Immanuel Kant, the perception of the world is understood *a priori*, where objects are recognized through empirical knowledge and always affected by the observing subject. (1997[1903]). The experience is created by the exterior phenomena, but the meanings and

²⁸ According to French historian Pierre Nora (1989, 8) “memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name”. History, on the other hand, is a human made reconstruction of the past, made from memory that only represents the facts that fit the purpose of the reconstruction itself. History calls for analysis and criticism, since it is an intellectual and secular production. In this case memorials that are erected as symbols of history could be analysed by how they reflect relative connections between temporal continuities.

form are constructed in the mind (Kannisto 1998, 316). For example, the concept of a table is recognized despite the fact that there are many shapes of tables. Most often ‘a table’ is a flat rectangular surface supported by four legs. However, one recognizes a square surface supported by one leg as a table as well. We learn and are taught to recognize them both.

Philosopher Edmund Husserl did not separate physical objects and imagination, since he believed objects’ physical attributes are not constituted only by their functionality but also by the perceiver’s own personal motives (1997[1903]; see also Husserl 1973[1907]). Philosopher Don Ihde speaks of *gestalt switches*²⁹, also known in gestalt psychology, when the perceived object has many different attributes depending on the point of view (imagination) of the perceiver, or in other words, the object is a visual illusion, where a two-dimensional abstract image can be either a stage, a pyramid or a box (Ihde 2009, 12–13) or the image of a woman can portray two women, one old and one young.



Image 1. A classic gestalt switch image of a woman, one young and the other old, named “My wife and my Mother-in-Law”. The age of the woman depends on the perception of the image. The most famous version of the same image was adapted by British cartoonist William Ely Hill (1887–1962), who used a German postcard from 1888 as a model. Psychologist Edwin Boring used the above-displayed version in the paper “A new ambiguous figure” (1930), and it has been since used especially in psychology textbooks.

I do not claim that the Internet as a space is a similar visual illusion, but I wish to highlight the constructed nature of perception, which is affected not only by the individuals’ contextual self but also the contextuality of the perceived terrain – in this case, the Internet. Language especially affects the readily conceptualization of what is perceived but also the visual attributes and visual *cues*, such as shadowing of text letters, animated images, colors etc. A memorial is a far more abstract construct than any other place, since it symbolically consists of individual and communal

²⁹ Also known as gestalt shift, ambiguous figure and multistable image.

ideas, values and attributes of a personality, which has been lost from this world and is only remembered in the mind, often with symbolical objects, such as photographs or belongings of him/her.

Geographer and archaeologist Christopher Tilley has claimed that “a space is a far more abstract *construct* than a place [--] Without places there can be no spaces” (1994, 15; italicizing added). A space becomes a place through human interaction, an intentional feeling of an experience, which can be anything from an association to a memory and movement (Tilley 1994, 15). It is, thus, constructed through social interaction, whether imagined (alone) or real (someone sharing the experience). Especially online gaming environments are created through vivid interactive imagery and play between other gamers and the environment itself. They are *active* experiences. (Nardi 2010, italicizing by Haverinen.)

According to French philosopher Michel de Certeau, space and spatiality are socially, subjectively and collectively constructed as part of the everyday practices and human agency. (de Certeau 1984: 130.)

Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body. ‘I feel good here’: the well-being under-expressed in the language it appears in like a fleeting glimmer is a spatial practise. (de Certeau 1984: 130.)

de Certeau connects the sense of place to the body and feelings. “I feel good here” is a sentence that describes subjective and bodily experience of a spatial practice. However, the space does not have to be a *built* environment, as *construction* as a word might imply. In this context – in online environments – the words *built* and *constructed* also refer to the way online environments can be built either as three-dimensional landscapes (online gaming and virtual worlds) or two-dimensional webpages with HTML markup language. When digging deeper in the building elements of online environments, we come to ones and zeros, pixels that are subjected to the laws and functions of coding language. But let us stay in the humanities and keep the definitions of built and constructed at the level of how human interaction and sociality become the building blocks of online environments as *constructed experiences*.

Memorials – both as spatial and symbolical presentations – are also often closely linked to the ideas of the afterworld, and often the burial site is considered as the gateway to the deceased, since the physical remains are buried there. On an everyday level this is manifested by the way people can visit the grave and often talk to the dead³⁰. The monologue is ritualistic but also works as an act of solidarity (Walter 1994).

As a concept, the afterworld might be merely culturally constructed, but it also exists and has existed in many cultures around the world. The sense of ‘the other place’, where friends and relatives go and where we will join them when the time comes, is also something characteristically human. Concepts of the afterworld, its habitants and their spirits might have been used as moral catalysts to create order and cohesion in the community. Punishment of god(s) or ancestors implicates that the boundary between our world and theirs is only a line drawn into water, more conceptual than actual, and both of the worlds affect each other. Seeking advice from the dead has also been part of many religious practices throughout the world, and keeping ‘the dead happy’ has also been a powerful way to maintain, for example, social order and kinship relationships.

As a researchable concept, the afterworld is immeasurable and abstract. It cannot be located geographically, although many religions locate it over the sky or in some other high place, and it cannot be researched through natural sciences. It is merely a location relying on the belief and intuition of people. Theologian Rudolf Otto has written about (1990 [1917]) a *numinous* (related to Immanuel Kant’s concept *noumenon*), which is an object or event that is known without the use of the senses. The afterworld as a concept is then a *noumenon* or *numinous*, since it cannot be measured, yet it is known (or believed to exist). Immanuel Kant (1997 [1783]) has also used *noumenon* as a synonym for "thing-in-itself" and categorized a *noumenon* to positive and negative versions, where the positive would refer to an entity that is apprehended by pure intuition, non-sensory and special. In other words, what is thought (*noumena*) is opposed to what appears or is perceived (*phenomena*). (see also Schopenhauer 1991[1917].)³¹

The similarities between the virtual and the afterworld appear in the discourse of mourning and

³⁰ Personally, I recall how my mother often discusses who has visited my grandparents’ graves during Christmas, but more recently, I can see the pictures of the graves with fresh flowers and Christmas candles on Facebook, when my aunt posts them on her Wall.

³¹ Memorials do not necessarily, however, require the body of the deceased, but the idea of the body is what is needed. *The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier* might be the most commonly recognized memorial which does not actually contain the body of the soldier, since it does not refer to any particular person but all the lost soldiers who could not be buried. This is called a *cenotaph* (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, accessed 5/25/2013).

honoring. The dead are “somewhere”, “there” and “close”, but at the same time unreachable and have left this world. In a similar sense, communication through virtual technology is referred to as “people there somewhere”, in anonymous locations with anonymous faces. Memorials online are for people to stumble upon, to find them in random Google hits and to seek out places with solace and comfort. “Life will go on” is a common message in memorial blogs, where the authors wish to tell people, the audience, the readers, that it is possible to overcome the pain of losing a loved one.

As explained earlier, the aesthetic and symbolical norms of the community can affect memorials and their content. Online, these norms are not as strict, but the boundaries are formed by the functions of the application being used, terms of use and possible administrator surveillance, in which case the limited content applies to pornographic, racist or illegal material. Virtual memorials as memorialization objects are often conceptualized from the previous experiences of mourning online and attending virtual memorials, where the previous experiences of such a behavior work as the determining factor of codes of conduct and attitudes.

The idea of a memorial is constructed in discourse, in language, in order to create a purposeful meaning to a physical object for it to resemble something as abstract as a personality or a memory of that personality. Memorials are also created to honor, which is a very culturally colored notion of something that should give value both to the person being honored and the social and kinship relationships tied to this personality. Honor is considered a positive value, which provides a positive status to the person or people in question in their community. Actions directed to the memory of the deceased, in other words their honor, can either emphasize or diminish the feature of honor. The acts in war to dishonor might be one of the most profound ways to bring shame and ruin morality among people.

3. Structure of the book

The structure of this work has been divided in seven chapters, of which three (4.-6.) create the analytical backbone of the work. In the following chapter, (2) *Joining the dots – theory and methodology*, I will present my methodological choices and the theoretical background used in this study, which include hermeneutic phenomenological interpretation and the very important ethical discussion of online research. The chapter also includes discussion about online ethnography as a method and how autoethnography and participant observation have been used to understand the experience of online mourning and honoring.

In the third chapter, (3) *Fieldwork and research material*, I will review the fieldwork process and introduce the overall research material and research process. The first subchapter introduces my research material in a triangulation matrix, where the reader can find each research environment and how they relate to each other in the overall analysis. The matrix also includes the analytical questions used to analyze the environments in question. The research material is divided in to *preliminary* and *secondary* categories, which determine the amount of analysis and fieldwork used in the environment in question and whether they are used in this work as the main research material or supportive examples from other environments. The following subchapters introduce the research environments but not individual memorials, which is why they are named *Memorial websites*, *Social media*, *Online games*, and *Surveys and interviews*.

In the next three chapters, (4) *Unintentional memorials – acts of community and collectivity*, (5) *Intentional memorials – creating places of remembrance*, and (6) *Transcending worlds – memorials and identities*, I will reflect on the research material against the research questions, where the main question (why death rituals are practiced in online environments) carries through the entire work but is more thoroughly answered in the final conclusion: (7) *Phenomenology of mourning*. The second research question (how are virtual memorials created in various online environments) dives into the dynamics of virtual memorials and how they are created either unintentionally, by accident, or intentionally, by plan and specific intention. The third research question (what kind of systems of meanings virtual memorials are constructed from) explores the conceptions of community, identity, space and place within the context of experiencing different aspects of online memorializations.

The first analysis chapter, (4) *Unintentional memorials – acts of community and collectivity*, concentrates on the first steps of creating a memorial online. The main objective in the chapter is to analyze how an online environment, a specific website or an application, becomes memorialized through social interaction and ritualized communication between individuals after the death of an intimate. I will introduce case examples from my personal autoethnography on Facebook and how I had the unfortunate opportunity to observe a friend's social media profile becoming a memorial after her suicide. My autoethnographical observations are also used in other instances, where I reflect my experiences to the experiences of the interviewees. Facebook is used as another case example, where I conduct interviews and explore with Reima, who experienced how social media can serve as a tool for crisis management and real-time collectivity after the

sudden death of his wife. Reima took active agency in maintaining the practices of communication both online and offline after his wife's death and funeral. The practices of solidarity and codes of conduct are also examined in a case example from YouTube and *World of Warcraft*, where I will introduce an unintentionally memorialized video of an attack to an actual online gaming memorial event. The attack was documented via screen video and distributed on YouTube as an example of a "good prank" but caused an outrage in the gaming community by how they disgraced themselves and caused pain and sorrow to the people trying to cope with the loss of a fellow gamer. Finally, I will discuss the notion of *communitas* (Turner 1995 [1969]) in unintentional memorials and how it relates to the feeling of co-presences through digital technology at the time of death.

In chapter (5) Intentional memorials – creating places of remembrance, the notions of space and time are discussed from the vantage point of ritualized remembering in intentionally created online memorials. First, I will discuss the meaning of space and place in a shared virtual world, and how a location in a virtual world shares similar memories and connectiveness to the memory of the deceased as offline locations. The case example is from a role-playing community in *Second Life*, where one of the members created a family crypt in the home cave of a deceased fellow gamer, who used the cave as the home of her role-playing character. Furthermore, the classical theory of rites of passage, i.e. liminal theory, is critiqued with case examples of memorial blogs and the experience of annual remembering rites, such as birthdays and Christmases, which create a ritual calendar of remembering a loss to the bereaved, and how this loss is coped with within the frame of public memorial blog writings. Finally, the notions of time and space are continued in a discussion on memorials as family heritage and part of family legacy in a case example from Yolanda, who created several memorial websites for her deceased husband, so that her grandchildren and future relatives would be able to find the memorials and remember him.

Chapter (6) Transcending worlds – memorials and identities dives into the meaning of identity in memorials and reflects different aspects of *built* and *received* identities of the bereaved and the deceased. I will continue with memorial websites and how the identity of the deceased is built within the website and the comments family and friends leave on the website. The memorial website service providers also enable the display of specific aspects of identities with the selection of visual layouts and background music used for the ambience of the memorial site. Furthermore, I will discuss the complexity of memorialized identities in online gaming, where the individual can represent multiple identities from the offline and the online worlds, and continue with the

previously introduced case from the *Second Life* role-playing group. The final subchapter will explore the meaning of privacy and publicity in online mourning and virtual memorials and will reflect on various types of online memorials from the vantage point of private emotions becoming increasingly more public in a semi-anonymous environment such as the Internet.

(2) Connecting the dots – research and theory

This work represents a multidisciplinary research approach in complex multi-sited online environments. The challenge of this research has been the amount of research material used, since they represent complex online environments and cultures both online and offline. However, I have not aspired to make in-depth analysis of each and every online mourning case in each environment, but instead to understand holistically the experience of using virtual technologies and computer-mediated communication to cope with loss and bereavement. My initial hypothesis has been that mourning and honoring rituals do not substantially differ from each other but are regulated by the limits of the current environment/application in question.

Personally, I represent the generation that still (barely) remembers the world without the Internet, and this research also displays the digital divide between people and how the Internet, and especially social media, is being used as a fully implemented part of social lives. There is no clear division anymore between what is online and what is offline, since the technology itself has become almost ubiquitous but also culturally adopted in the media and social world³², which is phenomenologically fascinating, since the early years of Internet studies concentrated on this particular divide.

In this chapter, I will discuss the theoretical framework used in this study, which roots itself in phenomenological anthropology, ritual theory and discourse studies. Digital culture as a discipline is familiar with online ethnography, but as my background originates in anthropology, I will also discuss the complex attitudes towards this particular research method. Finally, I will explore the ethical dilemmas of online research and how researching bereavement was particularly difficult in the beginning of this research in 2007–2008.

1. Hermeneutic-phenomenological interpretation

According to philosopher Timo Laine (2001), the hermeneutic-phenomenological method is not something the researcher can just read from a book and learn, but it is a constant process during research: a process of reflecting on the questions and decisions behind every choice and action. Reflecting on questions such as *what kind of people* are in the center of the research? and, *what*

³² A curious example is how social media language or in other words how people communicate on, for example, Facebook by liking and on Google+ by giving +1 signs as a symbol of appreciation and communicating non-verbally has transferred itself to bathroom wall writings. I saw in the city library, Kirjasto 10, in the center of Helsinki, a bathroom wall writing where others had commented it with “1 like, 2 likes, 3 likes” (in Finnish *1 tykkää, 2 tykkää, 3 tykkää*). Photo can be seen in *Sosiaalisen median lyhyt historia* (Suominen et al. 2013, 229).

kind of knowledge can be derived from the subject in question? provides phenomenological understanding on the topic. However, Laine lists a few analytical key concepts, which are *experience, meaning, communality, understanding* and *interpretation*. (Laine 2001, 26.) To analyze hermeneutically, the researcher must understand the complex web of meanings in language, the culture in question, the individuals being researched, as well as the researcher's own background and cultural and personal baggage, if you will, that they bring into the research. Reflection must be carried out from the beginning to the end of the analysis process, in order to avoid the researcher's *preconceptions* affecting the results.

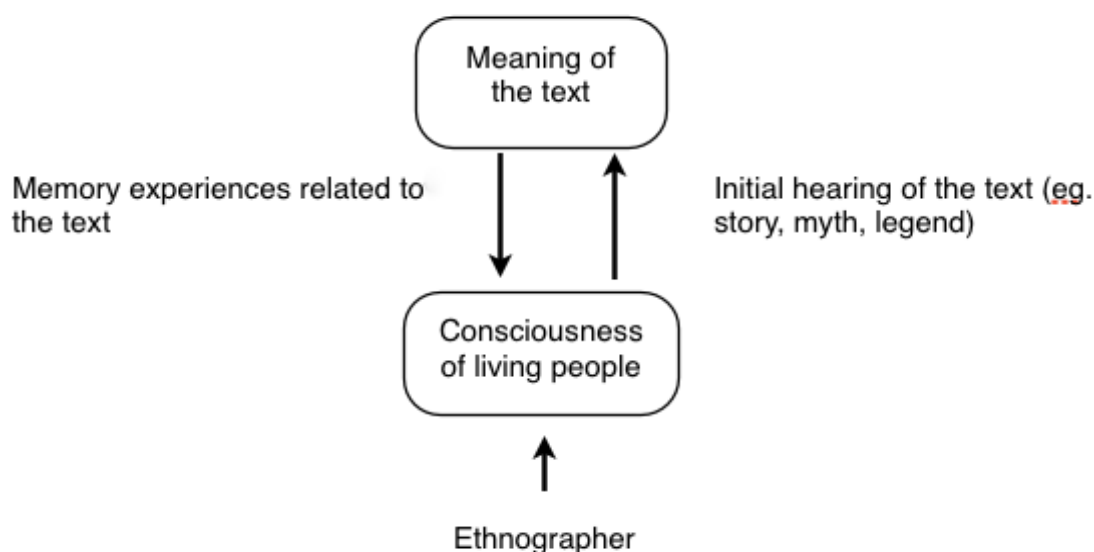


Figure 3. Ethnographer's place in relation to the research situation depends on how the ethnographer enters (the research) situation. In order to understand the meaning (of the text), the ethnographer must enter the research situation from the vantage point of the "living people".

The keyword in phenomenological anthropology is *experience*. Experience is formed by meanings, and meanings are created *intentionally*, or in other words, the world is experienced *intentionally* (Laine 2001, 27). These meanings are in the focus of phenomenological investigation, since they are first and foremost subjective experiences influenced by cultural contexts and community. From this vantage point, the individual is the sum of its world.

As part of my phenomenological approach in philosophical terms, I have used Immanuel Kant's most profound gift for Western philosophy: transcendental idealism. Kant stated (1997 [1783]) that the world is interpreted through previous, *a priori*, experiences, which determine the way people understand the world around them. Humans perceive objects always in relation to space

and time, and in order for the mind to understand them, the brain must process the sensorial information into knowledge and further on into actions. Some notions, such as space and time, cannot be directly derived from experiences, since the very essence of them is subjective (and culturally bound) and they are, in fact, more preconceptions of how abstract notions are understood and explained in the mind. In other words, spatial and temporal features can be measured analytically through physics and mathematics, but in order to do that, the human mind must first have an initial concept of the fact being measured. Space and time are not *things-in-itself* but intuitively perceived abstract notions. (Kant 1997 [1783], 77, 94–95.)

In this research, I have aspired to understand how abstract notions, such as memorials, memory, identities and death, are visualized, experienced and represented in virtual environments and especially how they represent systems of meanings including identity, community and space and place. Virtual memorials are abstract concepts, created in the mind and displayed on a (computer) screen but also derived from actual physical memorials, which work either as symbols of all memorials in general or symbols of particular memorials (such as the grave of the deceased). The physical (or actual) objects become meaningful at the time of loss and bereavement, when they entail the memories of the person who owned them³³. However, the Internet has provided new forms of ‘physical’ possessions, *virtual* possessions, and, for example, a profile page can become a meaningful and individually personalized item, a personal artifact, loaded with memories and meanings.

According to philosopher and culture historian Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), experience (germ. *Erlebnis*, fin. *kokemuksellisuus*) can outsource to all man-made objects, which he regarded as “expressions of life” itself (germ. *Ausdruck*). The interpretation is, therefore, almost as immersing as a good novel, which is based on learned symbols (letters), which represent different meanings. (Dilthey 1976, 219; Oesch, 1994 [online].) However, Dilthey did not focus entirely on linguistic meanings, but also included physical gestures, which can carry out different (cultural) meanings (Laine 2001, 29.) In this sense, CMC does not entail physical gestures as they are traditionally understood from in-person communication, but it must be remembered that the particular nature of CMC, such as, for example, how people have circled around the “lack of face-to-face” with

³³ Media and movie researcher Veijo Hietala has argued regarding the meaningfulness of photographs that they become meaningful, important, because of their ability to freeze time, store moments and memories of people. The memory itself is fragile, and when we store photographs in albums or frame them on our bookshelves, they become route markers and signposts to events and situations that we wish to remember. (Hietala 2007, 157.)

emoticons³⁴ and different computer slang working as symbols of, for example, laughing out loud (or LOL), but also in order to save time during real-time chat (Nardi & O'Day 1999, 108).

The “experience” Dilthey mentions and “expressions of life” are related to online on the level of *ideas*, since online and life on the Web are usually non-materialistic expressions, abstracts, of the offline world. The online is an extension of the identity and the personality of the offline, and they cannot be seen as separate entities but social and cultural realities bleeding into each other. Home pages, profiles, blogs, photo albums and galleries and avatars are extensions and representations of the self, regardless of imagined or actual, but nevertheless extensions of the self that the individual experiences as their identity as a whole. In a similar sense, the virtual memorial page represents the identity and the personality of the deceased. It is the extension of that personality in a virtual form, rooting directly to the offline world but displayed within the possibilities of the online environment in question (cf. online gaming memorials and memorial websites are visually very different). It can represent the personality as a true representation of who the person was (according to the people who created the memorial) or represent the relationships the deceased had in the virtual world (cf. gamers usually have game-related memorials, which often highlight the avatar of the deceased).

2. Terminology

Key terminologies in order to determine the *location and the contents* of the research are about *virtuality, space, place, online* and *offline*. However, first I would like to clarify what I mean with terms such as *the Internet* and *the Web*. The Internet is an international system of interconnected computers using Internet Protocol Suite (often referred as ICP/IP), a network of networks or, in other words, the technology that enables computers to connect with each other. The World Wide Web (Web or WWW, see abbreviations) is a system of interlinked hypertext documents, webpages, accessed via the Internet. (Tietotekniikan termitalkoot, accessed 15.7.2013.) However, in common speech, these two terms are often used to describe the very same thing: any webpage online. I will use both terms as synonyms in order to avoid repetition and since my interviewees have spoken of the Internet as a general term of anything online.

Memorials in this work are very much spatial concepts as well, which is why I have been interested in the experience of online space and place. Online space is created through the screen

³⁴ *Emoticon* is a visual expression, usually a yellow smiley face, expressing a particular facial expression and feeling, such as anger, amazement, laughter or embarrassment (Frehner 2008).

of the device being used (laptop, personal computer, (smart) mobile phone). It can appear as a two-dimensional webpage or a seemingly three-dimensional virtual world. These experiences of spaces are, however, created *in the mind*, since the space does not require physical entering, smell nor touch in a similar sense than, for example, traveling or entering a building requires. Online experiences are, however, multi-sited and multidimensional (mental) spaces, and the concept itself, space, has to be considered in a new way. People connecting through virtual technologies do not share the same physical space, not even the same geographical locations, but they share dynamic virtual spaces, which are both manifesting themselves on the screen of the device being used and in the mental constructions of the users.

Sherry Turkle (2011), among others, has explored the concept of *co-presence*, which refers to sharing *imagined* spaces. People feel the presence of others through technologies, which is enhanced by real-time communication and feedback. Social media, especially, relies on the notion of real-time communication and creating a feeling of a social and psychological GPS (Turkle 2011, 167.) The feeling of space and co-presence of others is, thus, a socially constructed practice, which relies on the real-time notion of technology and enables communication through people sharing the same spatial-temporal environment.

Additionally, in order to understand these various spaces and shifts between the online and offline, I will clarify the terms *virtual* and *actual*, as according to Tom Boellstorff (2008). The etymology of the word *virtual* is in the Latin words *virtus* and *virtuālis* meaning *virtue*. The Oxford Online Dictionary (2012) describes the meaning of the word as something “not in fact or reality, simulated, imitated; nearly, almost” and “something that is simulated in a computer or online”. By virtuality, we most often refer to virtual realities, alternative computer generated worlds. In this work I will use the term according to Boellstorff as referring to something occurring online, on the Web (Boellstorff 2008, 18–22.) As the opposite of virtual, I will also use the word *actual* when referring to something that occurs offline, outside of the Internet, that happens in person. The etymological origin is also in Latin: *actualis* (active practical), *actus* (act, action, performance) and *agere* (*to do, to act*). (Boellstorff 2008, 18–22; Oxford Online Dictionary 2012.)

The concept of identity in this work is also understood within the frame of virtual and actual, constructed and contextual, complex representation of the self and the individual’s community. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall has made a short description of how the modern human is able to form his/her identity. According to Hall, the identity of the individual is highly contextual, which

in immigrant cases becomes a net of complex negotiations of outside and inside demands and appropriateness, which make the identity a “moving celebration” (Hall 1999, 23). The concept of the modern individual as a subject derives from 16th century Renaissance humanism up until 18th century Enlightenment thinkers, such as René Descartes, the “father of modern philosophy”. Descartes was the first to separate the spirit and the material, where the spirit formed the thinking subject able to reason and thought. (Hall 1999, 30–31). 19th century sociology connected the individual to the others, and identity was thought to be formed in the negotiation of otherness and self, where the individual becomes the sum of all their social relationships (Hall 1999, 31). From social relationships, the Freudian school provided the power to the unconscious, which enabled the individual identity to become a constant process of growing and change (Hall 1999, 38–39). According to Hall, the unconscious did not suffice to Foucault, who was more interested in how society as a collective manifested its objectives through regulations of the individual life. Foucault argued that the more collective and organized a society, the more isolated, supervised and individualized the society is. (Foucault 2005 [1975]; Hall 1999, 42–43.) The feminist movement and identity policy created a more individualized and personalized idea of what identity is and *can be*. To feminism, identity was political, and the division of private and public segmented individuals in society. (Hall 1999, 43.) Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler created the theory of *performativity of gender* or, in other words, how gender is performed to fit the assumed normality of society (Butler 1990).

The above-explained “short history of identity” works as the theoretical background to this research and for the analysis of *actual* and *virtual identities*, where the notions of performance and representation are in focus. Since the field of this research has been online and the concept of mourning and honoring are derived from the experience of what is online, the concepts of identities are important as well. Death not only breaks the identity of an individual, when life ceases to exist, but also creates new identities that need to be appropriated through rituals of mourning. These identities can be referred to as either *actual* or *virtual* identities, where the first describes the offline, “real”, identity of a person, which can be represented in various ways both in the online and the offline worlds; for example a Facebook profile page is often displaying an *actual identity*. With virtual identities, I refer mostly to role-playing, where the identity is *played* in a virtual world. The identity can represent certain aspects of the person behind the identity (or avatar) but is often very different from the actual person. Mourning and honoring a virtual identity in this context is often connected to gameplay, where the story of the role-play needs to be re-

written to fit the loss of a fellow player.

3. The New Trobriand – Doing ethnography online

This work contributes to the discipline of digital culture research, which at the University of Turku was established in 2001. On the university website, the discipline is described as studying the utilization of new technologies and their cultural expressions and appropriations (http://www.ucpori.fi/digitaalinen_kulttuuri_, accessed 10/25/2013). The professor of digital culture, Jaakko Suominen (2013), however, refuses to make clear definitions of the discipline³⁵, because it would create limitations on the research of future technologies and would require constant re-definitions. Suominen argues that the power of definition manifests itself in language being used in presentations, introduction lectures and dissertations (Suominen 2008; 2013). Professor of contemporary culture Raine Koskimaa (2007) has defined digital culture from three perspectives, focusing on the implementations of culture: a) all human activity that can be linked to digital transformations (e.g. work, leisure, consumerism), b) digital art and entertainment (e.g. games, multimedia, entertainment production, distribution and usage) and c) subcultures and marginality in a digital frame (e.g. gaming cultures, hackers, online activism). This work entwines itself partly in all three perspectives, where the research lens has been focused towards the everyday ritualistic practices carried out online at the time of loss and mourning.

To access this field made of pixels and a terrain of interconnected hypertexts, I have used virtual ethnography as an approach and as a method. Traditionally, ethnography means a description of people (from Greek: *ethnos* = folk/people, *graphein* = to write). In a more elaborate definition, ethnography is a method to understand how a particular social group constructs, maintains and reproduces their shared social world (Geertz 1973; Smart 2012). Added with the term “virtual”, I intend to highlight the online nature of my field and data, and certain methodological and analytical approaches have been made to obtain an understanding of what virtual mourning is and why people are doing it. In order to avoid the repetition of the word *virtual*, I will also refer to my material as *being online*.

Ethnography is traditionally considered as a classic method of anthropologists, who have studied the human as a cultural being from the 1900s. Anthropology consists of many subfields and has

³⁵ Internationally the discipline could be considered as a part of digital humanities, but that too is yet a foreign term in the Finnish academic world.

roots in both natural and human sciences, which is why it can combine biology, sociology, history, religion and psychology. In short, anthropology studies the human behavior as a whole, with all its contextualities. (Sarmela 1993.) The most common way to understand the human experience has been a method – also considered as part of ethnographical research – of participatory observation, coined by a British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) with his research of *Kula* trade in the Trobriand Islands in 1914. Malinowski stated that the researcher must have daily contact with the informants, participate in their lives, and experience what they experience, as opposed to previous studies conducted as “armchair anthropology”³⁶, where the anthropologists gathered their knowledge from, for example, missionaries, travelers and seamen (Malinowski 2005[1922]). In this sense, the Internet has become a new terrain, the new Trobriand, for anthropologists, since it has brought under scrutiny the methodologies of the discipline (Haverinen 2009).

The ethnography used in this work has been deeply influenced by *interpretative ethnography* created by anthropologist Clifford Geertz during his fieldwork in Southeast Asia from the 1950s to the 1980s. Geertz was interested in semiotics and symbols and how a shared social world is constructed in discursive practices of language. Geertz also casted the groundwork for fieldwork, where the researcher should spend an extended amount of time in the social group being researched in order to create a ‘thick description’. (Geertz 1973.)

As interworked of construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usages, I would call symbols) culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can be casually attributed; it is a *context*, something which they can be intelligibly – that is thickly – described. (Geertz 1973, 14; hyphenation added.)

Geertz argued against the romantic belief that anthropologists should pursue to become as native as possible with participant observation (1973, 13). According to Geertz, this is impossible, and all anthropological descriptions are in fact *imagined* and part of scientific analysis: “[--]we imagine Berbers, Jews, or Frenchmen to place upon what they live through, the formulae they use to define what happens to them. What it does not mean is that such descriptions are themselves Berber, Jewish, or French [--] they are anthropological – that is, *part of a developing system of scientific*

³⁶ An example of an armchair anthropology of the Internet is *Elämä Facebookin ihmemaassa* (2011, eng. *Life at the Wonderland of Facebook*), where Ridell herself did not use Facebook but used only interview material from other users. She described her work as armchair anthropology.

analysis” (Geertz 1973, 15; hyphenation added). In this work, I have used autoethnography as an elementary part of gathering both research material and creating an analysis, where I have had the opportunity of actually living the experience of mourning online, but I could never say that my experience is similar to my interviewees. Bereavement as an emotion and as an experience is highly subjective, and, as a researcher, my analysis is always an interpretation of the research material (interviews, survey answers, observations, visual data) I have been able to gather. As empirical research, the very word ‘empirical’, however, excludes this work from the objective familiar to natural sciences of finding the ultimate truth, if one even exists.

To approach the Internet ethnographically, the researcher must understand that the basic principles of online spaces and places are (on many occasions) fundamentally similar *and* different than offline. They are technological artifacts used for work and leisure but also alternative *spaces* and *places* to experience and connect with others. The individuals using these virtual technologies are also bodies, embedded with meanings that are reflected in their “online bodies”, avatars, the online presentations of themselves. Sociologist Barry Wellman (2011, 21; see also Wellman & Gulia 1999) writes about the third age of Internet research³⁷, which disregards the previous approach of the second age of Internet research, which divided the online and offline as separate entities and studied the Internet by grabbing “the lowhanging fruit using standard social scientific methods” such as surveys and fieldwork. Wellman calls for more in-depth analysis and theories and the incorporation of the Internet in all disciplines. Coincidentally, in this work, I have used the abovementioned “standard methods” as surveys and fieldwork, but not only to “grab the lowhanging fruit” but to create a coherent description of *what online mourning and honoring is* and what the meaning of such a phenomenon ritualistically is in a time when mourning and honoring online are becoming increasingly more appropriated in the Western world.

Traditionally, ethnographical research consists of some form of observation, which can be either (the previously mentioned) participatory, or, observing from the outside. In participant observation, the researcher’s own experiences and own self is also under scrutiny; when the

³⁷ According to Wellman (2011, 21–22), the first age of internet research was mainly interested in the novelty of technology and how it would change the world in a manner similar to the invention of fire. However, in a paper “Net Surfers Don’t Ride Alone” (with Milena Giulia, 1999) Wellman already noted, that the internet is a similar communication technology as the telegram and telephone, and in itself would not change the common dynamics of communication in communities. During the second age of internet research (which began about 1998) the marvel and appraisal began to shift to more critical debate. The dot.com boom and the final “internet euphoria” collapsed in early 2000. The Internet became more democratic with faster search engines and browsers. All this enabled the researchers to focus on smaller user groups and documentation on large-scale surveys, which inter alia included user demographics and statistics.

researcher is trying to experience life in a similar way to the informants, and *with* the informants. At this point, I would like to highlight the participatory aspect, which requires that the researcher is together with the people being researched. In an online situation, this is not necessarily possible or meaningful. In this case, autoethnography defends its place as a prominent method to understand a phenomenon empathically (see e.g. Saaremaa 2007). Creating a memorial page is not a communal experience compared to a memorial service in an online game. The key element in both these approaches is the combination of *emic* and *etic*, where the *emic* is an immersive inside point of view, the experience of ‘the natives’, and the *etic* is a descriptive outside experience of the subject (Pike 1967; Geertz 1973; Morris, Leung, Ames & Lickel 1999; Kottak 2006).

Online communication is also as contextually rich and complex as any situation occurring in person. However, the contextualities need to be considered from different angles, when the communication taking place can be multi-sited, mediated with different technologies, situation-based and either real-time or delayed. Additionally, in the context of the online, the Internet does not contain a homogenous group of people, when the estimated amount of Internet users worldwide is almost two and a half billion in 2012, which is 34% of the world population (Internet World Stats, 2012.) To draw ethnographical conclusions does not mean to generalize conclusions to be applied to *all* users, but to create a description of the specific people being researched.

At the beginning of my doctoral thesis research, I decided I needed to enhance my ‘*online persona*’, since, during the fieldwork of my master’s thesis, I learned the difficulty of contacting people via email or other services, especially people in foreign countries. I sent over 80 contact requests on memorial websites, but only 6 people responded. Others did not even decline my interview requests. Thus, I created a research blog (<http://bittiavaruuteen.wordpress.com>) to introduce myself and my research and also to work as a notebook of my progress. In addition, I edited my Facebook profile to appear in searches and have the same research information as my blog. I had to consider my Facebook profile picture at all times to appear trustworthy and professional but also to reflect my personality. In the blog, I wrote about myself, my dogs and my life, as well as about the research. This seemed to help me receive more replies to my emails and contact requests, since otherwise they were considered as spam.



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Doodling and doing

21.3.2012

These couple of weeks have been surprisingly productive in a thesis-wise way, although the possibilities of intense procrastination have been tempting. Last week the academic and professionals of culture studies gathered together to a discussion event about the current disappointing situation of getting oneself employed or funded. The government is cutting away funds from all the culture fields, since the appreciation of cultural values have declined since the 1980's. The discussion event was named *Tuumasta toimeen* (From thought to Action, see more here, in Finnish) and it seems the pessimistic attitude is yielding away because of the grass-root "yes we can" attitude. I spoke for less bureaucratic and less hierarchical university, where it does not matter whether you are a freshman, graduate or a professor. It is the ideas that matter. Fresh point of view. Sometimes even inexperience is an advantage when thinking outside the box.

More thinking outside the box -attitude was seen in the Ethnos seminar in Jyväskylä on Friday and Saturday. Unfortunately I had the opportunity to only listen my own workshops in which I either presented a paper or co-chaired with Laura Hirvi. To my own surprise I found out I have done auto-ethnographical research for the past four years, instead of reflexive. Need to look into that more, since I believe Johanna Uotinen has written about that method (or approach?). Either way, the seminar was a success and a bitter-sweet experience, since Jyväskylä is my academic home of which I seem to miss more and more when the years go by. *snif*



ANNA HAVERINEN



Image 2. A screenshot of the front page of my research blog *Bits in the Space – ponderings of the Internet from the bottom to the surface and beyond*. In this screenshot, I had already closed the subpage *Join research*, where I had more information about my research and links to the surveys. (<http://bittiavaruuteen.wordpress.com>.)

The presence of the researcher and personal interaction with the informants can highlight different nuances about the topic being researched. Tones of voice, gestures, facial expressions, proverbs and other linguistic features can provide a very rich image of the subject being researched, assuming the researcher is familiar with the cultural context of the informant (see e.g. Nardi & O'Day 1999, 106). However, personality differences and the language being used affect the research situation tremendously, which is why the interpretation may become incomplete or even false. Informants may lie, their memory may fail them, they may exaggerate, the researcher may misinterpret them or some things may be lost in translation. The anthropologist has to trust his/her instinct, training and people skills in the situation in order to make a successful ethnographical observation about what was not brought out in the interviews.

In other words, the researcher immerses him/herself in the culture being researched but,

simultaneously, has to be able to keep an academic and analytic distance. An autoethnographical approach consists of a more subjective and reflexive approach, since the researcher cannot approach these mourning sites purely as ‘a native’, because of his/her researcher identity. Nor could I have observed *in situ* how a person creates a memorial, since the situation would have been specifically organized for research purposes, which would have diminished the authenticity from the start.

In 2007–2009, my observations of memorial websites concentrated on international websites (Memory-Of.com, Virtual Memorials.com, Last Memories.com), since, at the time, there was not a Finnish website available (besides a virtual candle website www.sytytakynttila.fi). To understand and reflect on the experience of creating a memorial online, I decided to use the experience of remembering and honoring my father, who passed away in 1986, since I felt that losing that relationship has been the most defining loss during my life. I examine the choices and actions behind the creation process of the memorial, pursued this same examination when interviewing people who had already created memorials. What kind of information should I share? What kind of layout would honor him? Should I add background music? What kind? Should I keep the memorial private, protected by a password, or let everyone access it? To whom would I speak about it? Why would a virtual memorial honor his memory? I chose not to pay for the memorial but to use only the two-week test period. I felt extremely uncomfortable creating memorial sites for him, and I did not speak about them to my family. Those feelings came as a surprise, since I expected the sites to become meaningful spaces for me and my family. However, they remained only for research purposes. I will reflect more about these experiences in chapter (2) 3.1. *Autoethnography or participant observation?*

When searching for material, I faced an interesting feature, or problem, in the search results that the most common search engines provide. Searching something online is commonly known as “Googling”, however, Google.com is only one company providing an online search engine, but it is in my experience the most effective and also the most popular search engine. The problem I encountered was the location-based search paradigm. Google.com uses the IP number of the computer to track the geographical location of the person/computer to provide more relevant information according to that location, and this way the search engine can narrow down, or “guess”, the most relevant search results. For example, if I search something in Finnish in the UK, the search engine suggests keywords in English, “guessing” that I made a spelling error. It also

excludes a lot of Finnish search results by “guessing” that I am actually trying to find something only based in the UK. In addition, the search results are based on the keywords the sites provide for Google and how good Google is at “guessing” the relevant result.

When conducting online research, it also enables my field to be portable and almost ubiquitous. It was accessible by any digital device connected to the Web, anywhere in the world, at any time I wanted and needed it to be. I carried out my field work in coffee shops, in university libraries, at my parents’ house, at home, on the train, on the bus, in Finland, in England, in Denmark and in the United States. These multiple geographical locations have also enabled me to research the paradigms of different search engines in different countries. As a result, I aimed to use the same keywords in different search engines, in different geographical locations to see which hits are “the most relevant” according to the search engines. I used Google, Bing and Yahoo! with the following keywords:

- virtual memorial (in Finnish, *virtuaalimuistomerkki*)
- virtual memorial website (in Finnish, *virtuaalimuistomerkkisivusto*)
- online memorial (in Finnish *online muistomerkki*)
- internet memorial (in Finnish *internet muistomerkki*)
- virtual candle (in Finnish *virtuaalikynttilä*)
- memorial page/site (in Finnish *muistomerkkisivu/muistosivusto*)

Collecting research data from a virtual field can be both intriguing and highly difficult to the anthropologist. All of the material is subjected not only to the limits of technology but also to different rules and legislations. Additionally, “the page does not exist” is the most horrifying sentence that a researcher may face during their fieldwork, which is why virtual research data is as fragile as any cultural inheritance material, which can one day exist and one day be destroyed entirely³⁸. Fortunately, technology offers many ways to retrieve preserve and collect this data, everything from simple screenshots and videos to programs that download entire sites with their full content. I used screenshots as a way of making notes and recording changes, for example on Facebook or in *Second Life* memorial parks. Screen video by Quicktime Player was used only in

³⁸ Unfortunately, one of my fieldsites in *Second Life* disappeared in the spring of 2013 because of financial difficulties of the memorial park service providers, who were private people depending the generosity and micro-donations of other *Second Life* residents. *Remembering Our Friends* memorial park was closed March 1st 2013, and I learned about it little after that. It was a research disaster and a personal loss as well. (<http://annahaverinen.com/2013/03/16/the-webpage-cannot-be-found/>, accessed 23.12.2013.)

Second Life in order to track my exploration in the memorial parks and to record all the interviews.



Image 3. *Linden Memorial Park*, where I am sitting at a *Day of Remembrance* memorial. The event was organized April 17th 2008, and all the participants could plant a flower and name the flower in honor of the person they wanted to remember. In the center, the white humanoid form statue has a glowing rainbow between its outstretched hands with the text “*Day of Remembrance*”. The night sky can be seen in the background, and the screenshot is fairly dark, because of the hour. *Second Life* follows the Pacific time zone, which is why it was often night time when I conducted my fieldwork. However, I could switch the settings to “daylight” despite the SL hour. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 10/1/2010.)

Fieldwork in *World of Warcraft* was not as extensive as in *Second Life*, since WoW requires a monthly fee and actual gameplay in order to proceed in the world. I had previous experience in playing the game, which is why I wanted to explore something new and unknown. In *Second Life*, I used an avatar to explore the world and carry out interviews. A more extensive description of my fieldwork can be found in chapter (3) *Fieldwork and research material*.

The abovementioned two virtual (gaming) worlds created interesting problems of geographical location and time differences when I was conducting my fieldwork and interviews. *Second Life*

has its own time zone, which follows the Pacific time, which is 10 hours behind Finland. When meeting informants in *Second Life*, I had to wake up at 4 am to conduct an interview in the virtual world, where my interviewees were following the time zone of, for example, Los Angeles. This fact was often discussed as small talk in the interviews, where, for example, Nadia said she was having a hot chocolate as an evening drink, as I was drinking my (early) morning coffee to be alert and awake for the interview. In this sense, the boundaries between our offline and online selves were blurred.

The time zone problem became evident when I tried to meet people in the world randomly by wandering around the memorial parks hoping to meet somebody “in action”. The people using the areas were mostly from United States, hence following their own actual time zones and daily routines, which is why I only stumbled upon a few people. The interviewees were found mostly from email lists and from my survey answers.

3.1. Autoethnography or participant observation?

Ethnography is often described by the definition of *ethnos* (people) and *graphein* (to write, to analyze), where as the *auto-* in autoethnography means personal experience (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). In other words, autoethnography is a method where the researcher's own self is under study. Combining autobiographical and ethnographical findings, they can be used to analyze and write an autoethnography, which is why it is both a process and a product of research. (Uotinen 2010, 163.)

According to communication researchers Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner, autoethnography was created³⁹ when scholars began to ask “what social sciences would become if they were closer to literature than to physics [--] and if they were self-consciously value-centered than pretending to be value free” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011, 274; see also Bochner 1994). Autoethnography was a response to the critique of social scientists towards the idea that research should be free from the personality of the researcher to understand the deep level of emphatic understanding of experience (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011, 274; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Previously in anthropology, the researched “Other” was heavily distinguished from the researcher’s own world, and it was believed that the researcher would bias the results if they were originally “too native”. However, the intentional self-reflexivity has, according to educational

³⁹ The term *autoethnography* is rooted in the late 1970s and is usually credited to David Hayano (1979) with his article *Auto-ethnography: Paradigms, problems, and prospects*.

professor Heewon Chang, liberated anthropologists to study their own stories and narratives and bring their personal histories in the research focus⁴⁰ (Chang 2008, 45).

Chang divides autobiographical writing in to three forms 1) self-narratives of informants, 2) native ethnographies, or in other words, ethnographies conducted by ethnographers about their own people, 3) personal autobiographies, or “confession tales” (Van Maanen, 1988), ethnographic memoirs (Ellis & Bochner 2000) and reflexive ethnographies (Tedlock 2000). Malinowski’s field diary can also be, according to Chang, Ellis and Bochner, categorized into an autobiographical ethnographic memoir, the first in its kind. (Chang 2008, 44.)

Autoethnography has received a great deal of criticism for being self-indulging and self-reflexivity as stalling modern anthropology from developing (Salzman 2002). Arthur Bochner answers this criticism as follows:

The question that I’m usually asked is, ‘To what kind of truth do these stories aspire?’ Often this question is asked in a tone that expresses skepticism, doubt, and even hostility. Some critics (e.g. Mink 1969–1970; Shotter 1978) argue that stories give life a structure it does not have and, thus, stories fictionalise life. Since the experiences on which narratives are based may be vague and uncertain, the stories they arouse can never be determinate or complete (e.g. Shotter 1987). Given the distortions of memory and the mediation of language, narrative is always a story about the past and not the past itself. (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 745.)

Ellis and Bochner highlight the goal of social sciences, where research can provide intellectual *and emotional* insight in to the social and cultural world of ourselves and others. “The study of self-narratives through self-reflection is beneficial to cultural understanding”, Chang agrees with them (Chang 2008, 34). Narratives and language are ways of representing ideas of the world, which reveals more insight than the accurate truth of what “really” happened. Memory is always selective, and people can remember things that did not actually happen. Nevertheless, the way people narrate their own histories reveals their personal experience of their social world.

So the question is not, ‘Does my story reflect my past accurately?’ As if I were holding a mirror to my past. Rather I must ask, ‘What are the consequences my

⁴⁰ According to Chang (2008, 43), cultures are either “out there, in the public world” or “in here, in the private sphere of the self”.

story produces? What kind of a person does it shape me into? What new possibilities does it introduce for living my life?’ The crucial issues are what narratives do, what consequences they have, to what uses they can be put. These consequences often precede rather than follow the story because they are enmeshed in the act of telling. (Ellis & Bochner 2000, 746.)

The criticism presented above has also been rooted in the war between objectivity and subjectivity in social sciences. Objectivism promotes systematic data collection and data analysis that is validated by others as well, not only the researchers themselves. Subjectivistic approach takes the personality of the researcher into account, where the research situation itself is never context-free and interpretation is always subjective. (Chang 2008, 45.) The war has led autoethnographers into two different camps, where the first represents what Anderson (2006) describes as “analytic autoethnography” and Ellis and Bochner (2000, 2006) and Denzin (2006) stand for “evocative”, emotionally engaging, autoethnography (Chang 2008, 46; see also Saresma 2004, 96).

There are currently various ways to do autoethnography, and at the time of publishing their article in *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* in 2000, Ellis and Bochner note that autoethnography has increasingly been the main term for describing research methods that combine *the self to the cultural*⁴¹ (2000, 740). In this work, I will also use the term *autoethnography*, although, for example, reflexive ethnography⁴² would fit the purpose as well. In reflexive ethnographies, the researcher’s experience is studied together with the culture in question. In native and full-member ethnographies, the researcher is already part of the culture being studied (Ellis & Bochner 2000, 740). In my case, the research has been reflexive, since my experiences have not been the main research focus, but an addition and a method to understand mourning and honoring online. Being a “native” or a “full-member” (e.g. Adler & Adler 1987) of the culture in question would apply

⁴¹ Gender theorist Tuija Saresma has also written about the relationship between bereavement and the researcher’s own experience. In her article *Pään ja sydämen tieto (Knowledge of the heart and head, 2004)*, Saresma has combined a poetical and theoretical approach to the research of her own grief experiences regarding the death of her little brother, and she notes: “I was not ashamed of this type of [autobiographical] writing, which is often despised in the academic circles, but I thought consciously that if writing helps in my grief, I should definitely write” (Saresma 2004, 93.) Saresma also argues that emotions and (scientific) knowledge should not be separated but used as a collaborative force in research in order to provide complex insight in to complex subjects of human experience (Saresma 2007, 132).

⁴² Ellis & Bochner (2000, 739–740) have listed the various subgenres of what can be regarded as autoethnography: autobiographical ethnography, autobiology, auto-observation, autopathography, collaborative autobiography, complete-member research, confessional tales, critical autobiography, emotionalism narratives of the self, ethnobiography, ethnographic autobiography, ethnographic memoir, ethnographic poetics, ethnographic short stories, evocative narratives, experiential texts, ethnographic short stories, first-person accounts, impressionistic accounts, indigenous ethnography, interpretive biography, literary tales and lived experience. (see also Saresma 2004, 96.)

only partly, since I have been familiar with most of the online environments studied. Mostly, I have considered myself native enough to understand websites and virtual worlds from the point of views of the users as well as the service providers⁴³. In addition, I had not considered myself a native online mourner before the experience of losing a Facebook friend due to suicide. I was a native “Facebooker”, which is why the rules and regulations in that environment were familiar enough for me to follow the practice of mourning a friend online.

Anderson’s description of analytical (objective) autoethnography requires the ethnographer to be 1) a full member of the social world under study, 2) engaging reflexivity to analyze data on self, 3) visibly and actively present in the text, 4) including other informants in similar situations in data collection and 5) committed to theoretical analysis (Anderson 2006). With these requirements, I would also describe my work as a combination of reflexive and analytical autoethnography. ‘

I chose to use autoethnography over participant observation, since I could not observe a person mourning and honoring online *in situ*, but only observe the outcomes of that behavior. At first, in 2007, I described my method as participant observation, where I used self-reflexivity to understand and relate to my interviewee, but, during the spring of 2012, at the time of my analysing process, I understood autoethnography describes my method more thoroughly.

Self-reflexivity has also been a matter of discussion and a solution to avoid the stigma of Westernized, heterosexual, white and Christian perspectives in research (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). Ethnologist Outi Fingerroos (2003) has written about reflexive pinpointing, where the researcher locates themselves both in relation to the subject in question and the theoretical background as well as the research community, which in my case is very multidisciplinary. Autoethnography has been one solution to express specific contextual background, which has enabled the research itself. Reflecting the pragmatic choices during and after fieldwork can also work as a validating factor when reflecting the laboratory environments of natural sciences. But human experience is not formed in a laboratory, it cannot be repeated and duplicated, which is why the researcher needs to open the contextual frame that enabled the research and the results. In human sciences, the reflexive and contextual frameworking creates specific transparency to the research from the very selection of the research topic, which in death studies especially has been

⁴³ For example, Facebook added the memorialization of profiles feature only after they recognized the need for this type of activity (see more <https://www.facebook.com/help/150486848354038#How-do-I-report-a-deceased-person-or-an-account-that-needs-to-be-memorialized?>, accessed 4.7.2013). In addition, many features inter alia in virtual memorial websites are designed to attract activity on the site (e.g. sharing options, notifications by email and text messages, annual reminders).

studied as the main source of motivation to study death, dying and bereavement (Moncur 2013). My personal experiences of bereavement and death in the family were the reasons for selecting this topic for my thesis, although I did not anticipate the somewhat cathartic experience of trying to understand the complexity of bereavement and honoring in online environments. Ellis argues in her paper *Heartful Autoethnography* (1999) that autoethnography “is extremely difficult. So is confronting things about yourself that are less than flattering. [--]honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and self-doubts – and emotional pain.” (Ellis 1999, 671–2).

The most common response I got when informing people of what I do was either pity and disgust or envy. Pity and disgust for the difficult and painful topic and envy for the challenging and new field. What interested me the most was people’s disgust, which revealed the muted discourse of mourning and death. Out of sight, out of mind, as the proverb goes, but I wanted to know whether this disgust was the reason people wanted to reach out in the virtual world, since the actual world was not able to confront emotions caused by death and bereavement. Additionally, despite the painfulness and personality of the topic, I also wanted to know how one survives from losing a loved one.

Health studies researcher Tessa Muncey (2010, 2) hesitates to call autoethnography a method, but agrees that autoethnography “somehow emerges from the iterative process of doing research, while engaging in the process of living a life”. To Muncey, autoethnography was a way to explore her own experience as a teenage mother and understand why her experience differed so much from the common discourse of blaming teenage girls for promiscuity. According to her own experiences, Muncey claims that teenage mothers are actually the result of some form of abuse, especially sexual abuse, and the healthcare system should not portray attitudes of blame and guilt towards adolescents (Muncey 1998). I also wanted to explore myself as a bereaver, since an essential part of my history and identity has been affected by the early death of my father. Losing a parent at an early age casts a shadow over a child’s life, where every milestone in life is affected by the fact that the father is not there to witness birthdays, confirmation, graduations and getting married. None of my friends growing up had similar experiences, and I often compared myself to families where parents have been divorced. However, these were incomparable.

I personally began to use the Internet on a daily basis after my early twenties, whereas many of my peers were active “surfers” from high school onwards, which is why I regarded myself – as some of my interviewees – as a *digital immigrant* (Prensky 2001). In other words, an adult who

has learned about computer-mediated communication technologies later in her adult life. Somewhere around 2003–2004, broadband technology became affordable enough for me to start exploring the puzzling concept of “surfing online”. I often wondered how one spends so much time online. I did not understand the concept of surfing, where every new link leads to new websites and new information, or where one even finds these links. I remember one of my roommates at the time describing how they just needed to Google something, and after that they just went on clicking without actively thinking they were “surfing” or “searching” for anything specific. “There’s just so much interesting stuff online”, he claimed. When I joined the Finnish social media website Irc-Galleria in 2006 during my Erasmus exchange year in Madrid, I began to understand how one can sense the presence of others online and the deep social relationships people can form without ever meeting one another in person. Social media introduced me to a whole new world of human experience.

What has been especially fruitful in autoethnography has been the deeper empathical understanding of interviews and how the social and cultural experience of mourning online *grows*. My initial attitudes of wonder, surprise and slight amusement were met with similar attitudes of my interviewees, when they first were faced with the opportunity of mourning and honoring online. Those feelings were, however, lost during the research, and now it feels automatic and natural to use online environments to mourn and honor, as it had felt to my interviewees who were more experienced in the matter. In addition, during this research, the phenomenon itself – especially in a Finnish context – has become socially and culturally more accepted due to similar reasons of enough exposure of people using online environments to mourn and honor. My self-narrative can be mirrored to the changing attitudes in society as well (see e.g. Spry 2001, 710; Muncey 2010, 31).

3.2. Discourse analysis

Virtual memorials are highly textual, since the very foundation of the content of a memorial is usually text-based and communally shared on memorial webpages through writings (e.g. commenting on a Facebook memorial page, lighting a virtual candle on a memorial website and writing obituaries), but they are also influenced by several visual details that bear cultural connotations. For example, a virtual memorial site can have a specific layout theme depending on the age, gender, profession or interests of the deceased. A baby girl’s theme is usually light pink

with details of toys, teddy bears, flowers, butterflies and other examples of what is culturally considered appropriate for her gender and age. In addition, the theme also represents the cultural background of the service providers and the target audience for the website as a service. Religious symbols are usually hidden and only implied in hidden details, for example, the usage of purple and doves, which are recognized as Christian faith symbols. Song lyrics, links to YouTube videos, memes and other visual material are often used to add context and depth to the communication and the contents of the memorial.

Discourse analysis is useful when researching social reality and social conventions, which are highly contextual and manifested through practices of language. Language is a socially shared system of meanings, where meanings are created *in relation to* and *in difference between* each other. Discourse analysis is a research of practices of language and other accountable actions, where focus of analysis is in social reality and how it is produced in different social conventions. (Jokinen et al. 1993, 19; Suoninen 1999, 19; Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, 2; Wu 2010.)

Currently, there are two (very similar) schools of discourse analysis, the British and the French. The first was developed by different psychologists and uses discourse analysis as a method to understand the practices of social reality, and the latter was heavily influenced by philosopher Michel Foucault and is more interested in linguistics. (Jokinen, Juhila & Suoninen 1993, 11; Wu 2010). In this work, I have used the British school of discourse analysis, where the focus is on the complexity of social reality instead of power relations (such as in the French school). In order to understand the social reality in question, my approach has been derived from interpretative ethnography, by Clifford Geertz, which, according to linguistic and discourse researcher Graham Smart, is interested in how people “*perceive, function, and learn* within their collectively created and maintained ‘conceptual world’.” (Smart 2012, 149; hyphenation added).

The conceptual world of the people being researched is a combination of language, social interaction and complex contextualities, where, for example, bodily actions and visual expressions are as crucial as speech and writing (Suoninen 1999, 19; Wu 2010). Writing and speech are considered as a continuum and not separated, since CMC selectively adapts properties of both (Frehner 2008, 170; Crystal 2004, 79).

Once we engage with texts “on-line”, so to say, we automatically adopt a perspective to them which is necessarily informed by the given situation, context

and purpose which we find ourselves in. In other words, our perspective, or frame of mind, is based on our personal knowledge about that situation and text in which we engage at present. [--] Texts are thus always interpreted through the meaningful veil of previous texts we have encountered in our lives. (Hoffman 2012, 5–6)

Linguistic researcher Christian R. Hoffman (2012, 6–7) highlights the importance of contextualities and previous experiences, where the reader positions him/herself as either *observer* or *listener*, which construct meaning from two different vantage points, and which reveal the text as either *unstable* or *dynamic*. Discourse analysis is “a recipient-oriented hermeneutic concept” (Hoffman 2012, 7), where the users of the discourse are subjected to the same semiotic web of meanings. Hoffman uses the term “semiotic signpost” to describe how authors guide their readers to interpret their texts in a specific manner, and through this dialogism (whether intended or unintended by the author), the process of meaning-making becomes a social and a mental process (Hoffman 2012, 7).

Using discourse analysis does not mean that I use language as a mirror image of what *is* reality but as a construction *about* reality (Jokinen, Juhila & Suoninen 1999; Wu 2010; Hoffman 2010). Words do not necessary have the same contextual, cultural and personal meanings to me as a researcher as they would to the user of the language, but in order to understand the complex contextualities, I have used a wide range of research material as well as including material within the range of my language skills: Finnish and English. I do not intend to imply my English is at a native level, but that it is on a level that makes it possible to understand different contextualities in online communication.

Arja Jokinen, Kirsi Juhila and Eero Suoninen (1993, 17) have made a five point list, which works as the theoretical framework in discourse analysis:

- 1) Language constructs social world
- 2) There are multiple parallel and competing systems of meanings
- 3) The contextual nature of meaningful action
- 4) Agents are connected with specific systems of meanings
- 5) The nature of language is to produce specific outcomes.

Jokinen, Juhila and Suoninen (1993, 18) note that each of these abovementioned notions can have

different values in research, where the importance of knowing these values relies on the researcher. With self-reflection, the researcher can also avoid the possible researcher bias, or in other words, avoid the description of phenomena, actions and activities without self-constructing them (Jokinen, Juhila & Suoninen 1993, 24; see also Parker 1992, 68; Potter & Wetherell 1989, 182).

I used the discourse analysis to analyze both survey answers and interviews in order to find anomalies and similarities in order to create analytical categories and a “conceptual grid” (Atkinson 1992, 459; Silverman 2000, 825), which were created from the specific words and phrases that were most repeatedly used in the answers. The contents of memorials were analyzed in a similar manner, where the posts, comments and other writings were in the focus of the analysis. Interviews in the *Second Life* shared virtual environment were recorded with screen video and later transcribed, although the program collects all chat logs⁴⁴.

Discourse analysis does not often have a specific starting point, but it is an iterative process, which is not linear but a cycle (Suoninen 1999, 20–21). Hermeneutically speaking, the cycle has reached its end when the saturation point has been reached and no new information is possible to extract from the data in the research context in question.

4. Ethics in online research

At the beginning of my research in 2007, there was little information on how to conduct virtual research ethically, especially in emotionally loaded topics, and applying similar rules to virtual material than to actual material is not always meaningful, since the Internet does not represent unified content or purpose (Kuula 2011[2006], 195.) The research data for this thesis also represents a wide selection of virtual material, where different aspects of privacy and publicity issues can emerge in the same content. This is why in many cases it is suggested that every case should not only be determined individually and framed by the research subject itself but also bound to the legal constraints, such as personal information protection laws (Kuula 2011[2006]).

Currently there are many ethical guidelines where the abovementioned anonymity does not suffice when exploring online content. Digital culture researchers Sari Östman and Riikka Turtiainen have developed a simple room board for ethical research (2013, 64).

⁴⁴ Fortunately I had taken the screenvideo, since all chat logs were lost from my computer due to hard disk failure in autumn 2011.

Online Researcher's Ethical Room Board

Is the Internet your <i>Tool</i> <i>Source</i> <i>Research material</i>	in other words is your research <i>with the Internet</i> <i>on the Internet</i> <i>about the internet</i>
--	--

To an online researcher, the Internet is often a combination of all the abovementioned, in which case the Internet is a *research environment*, where the researcher must inter alia:

- Consider the relationship of research ethics to source criticism
- Appropriate the cultural conventions of the particular research environment
- Understand the contextualities of how the research material is being created in the environment
- Consider the publicity and intimacy of the content
- Respect the people being researched and the content they produce
- Remember that online environments are not static, but constantly changing, which is why all research ethics are to be considered case-by-case

Figure 4. Turtiainen and Östman's (2013, 64) ethical room board.

The room board of Turtiainen and Östman highlights the importance of understanding what the role of the Internet is in the research. It can be a tool, a source or the actual research material, in which case the ethical guidelines need to be considered in different ways, albeit always considered.

In addition, the Association of Internet Researchers have similar guidelines from 2002 and 2012 (AOIR 2012), that define internet research as following:

- (a) utilizes the internet to collect data or information, e.g., through online interviews, surveys, archiving, or automated means of data scraping;
- (b) studies how people use and access the internet, e.g., through collecting and observing activities or participating on social network sites, listservs, web sites, blogs, games, virtual worlds, or other online environments or contexts;
- (c) utilizes or engages in data processing, analysis, or storage of datasets, databanks, and/or repositories available via the internet;
- (d) studies software, code, and internet technologies;
- (e) examines the design or structures of systems, interfaces, pages, and elements;
- (f) employs visual and textual analysis, semiotic analysis, content analysis, or other methods of analysis to study the web and/or internet-facilitated images, writings, and media forms;

(g) studies large scale production, use, and regulation of the internet by governments, industries, corporations, and military forces.

AOIR also highlights the possible new technologies and/or new innovations in old technology, which may raise new ethical questions for researchers. Thus, the AOIR also notes that the importance of ethical research is always the responsibility of the researcher, who must reflect upon the possible harm of their research, how vulnerable the researched community/individual is, and continually contemplate the ethicality of their research throughout the entire process from data gathering to analysis and final publication. (AOIR 2012.)

Ethical research practices are the foundation of every discipline in the humanities and especially in ethnographic work. The people being investigated should be treated with respect, and interviews should be conducted case-sensitively, meaning the information provided in the research text should not be recognizable, especially when the topic concerns intimate issues or children (Kuula 2011[2006]; Turtiainen & Östman 2013.) Ethical research can, however, be seen more as a particular practice and activity than merely following the rules (Uotinen 2005, 72.)

At the beginning of my research, I asked various questions concerning the material I was about to investigate: am I researching individuals or groups? Is the material publicly available? Does the website disclose recognizable personal details? Does the website prohibit research? Are the people on the website aware that they are being researched? With these questions, I reflected on my actions and choices when trying to determine the ethical research frame(s) for a particular website.

I aimed to keep myself and my research as transparent as possible in order to both garner trust and follow the legal frames, which is why the research blog (<http://bittiavaruuteen.wordpress.com>), the profile info of my *Second Life* avatar, Morita Hoxley, and my Facebook profile featured the same information about my research, the working title of the thesis and my university and faculty details about where the research would be published. I Googled myself regularly in order to keep my 'online persona' up-to-date and correct. For example, during my field work on the memorial websites, I received a few Facebook messages from the people I contacted, where they wanted to be sure I was a 'real person', a legitimate researcher and the same person that contacted them. This is why Facebook proved to be an excellent way, in addition to my blog, to enhance my online visibility with a sensitive research topic. With this in mind, I also wanted to regulate the pictures featuring myself that could be found publicly. I wanted to present myself as not only an academic researcher but a human being, a young woman with a life that is not just research. In the email

interviews, I always disclosed personal details about myself: where I lived, how old I was, how I related to the topic and what I had been doing lately. I will discuss the interview further in chapter (3) 5. *Online surveys and interviews*.

When selecting people for the research, I aimed for a heterogenous selection with a) representatives of both genders, b) as wide range of age distribution as possible and c) memorials that did not represent hate speech, violence, racism or a particular cause⁴⁵. With “particular cause”, I refer to memorials that sometimes promote punishment for the reason the memorialized person died, such as a traffic accident caused by a drunk driver. These memorials can be full of hate speech against drunk drivers and petitions for harder punishments.

Privacy and publicity became an especially important issue, not only because the people I contacted were mourning and going through a crisis of losing a loved one but also because many people do not necessarily comprehend the amount of personal details they share publicly on different websites. For example, it is usually possible to find a publicly open memorial site on Google by searching for the name of the deceased. This can lead to more information about the family and friends with full names, who might be included in the Family Tree page with birth dates and other recognizable information.⁴⁶ It would not be difficult to actually find addresses and phone numbers as well. Furthermore, when people were creating the memorials, they were not thinking about the possible researchers finding the website, or even anonymous viewers. I was often met with prohibitions to include a certain memorial in my research, since the memorial was not “created for research purposes”. With this in mind, I always asked permission to study a particular memorial from the actual founder and continued according to their possible permission. I also asked permission to study the memorial websites from the companies providing them, but only Memory-Of.com replied and granted permission. With other websites I investigated, the regulations presented on the site would prohibit research.

This policy of asking for research permissions was especially difficult on Facebook, where the site itself is designed to promote publicity and sharing and where people do not necessarily perceive the full publicity of their material in and outside of the site. Most of my requests were denied,

⁴⁵ For example I stumbled upon a public Facebook memorial for a young Finnish man, whose peers were clearly antisemitists and widely made racist comments about the current events in the media. My perspective would have been biased when observing this type of material, which is why I made the limitations as mentioned above.

⁴⁶ Additionally, with some material, it can be difficult to determine whether it is copied from somewhere, re-distributed, modified and/or collectively produced material. Copyright issues may seem clear, but when citing materia, it can be unclear whether the strict citing regulations apply to the virtual material as well. (Kuula 2011[2006], 172.)

although I disclosed where I found their information, and on one occasion, Facebook itself automatically banned me⁴⁷ from sending any more research requests, since the service thought I was spamming⁴⁸.

I joined, by request, one private memorial group on Facebook, where the founder of the group, Reima, had read about my research in a newspaper interview. In that group, I observed for a total of nine months, and I left the group when I began to write my dissertation, since I felt it was not my place as a researcher anymore. I accepted only one informant as a friend on Facebook, Nadia Lane, who was a fictive avatar in *Second Life*. Since the person behind that avatar did not feel comfortable (or think it was necessary) to reveal his/her true identity, I removed Nadia Lane from my friends at the same time as I was leaving the memorial group. My avatar in SL remains, and, at the time of writing this research, I am indecisive about whether I should delete it or just modify the personal information of the avatar and continue to visit the virtual world. SL felt strangely closer to my personal taste than WoW, and I believe I will continue exploring the world more in the future.

In the survey forms, I provided a possibility to select whether the person wanted full anonymity or to be cited using their first name or their full name. However, in the survey for online role-playing gamers, I did not remember to provide this part, but it had a question concerning whether the person would allow me to contact them for further questions. These answers are automatically anonymized. In general, I will refer to the interviewees and informants either by their first name, gender and age or the name of their avatar, according to their wishes.

All of the interviews⁴⁹ were conducted online either via email or Facebook chat or in *Second Life* text-based chat. The email account I used was from the university server, although I would have preferred Gmail with its better archiving qualities. However, I wanted to appear as legitimate as possible. Interviews in Facebook chat were copied to my computer and deleted from my Facebook

47 To prevent spamming, Facebook has programs that detect possible harmful actions, such as sending the same message to several people in a very short time.

48 A similar incident happened to Sari Östman (2008), when she was researching life-publishing (fin. *elämäjulkaiseminen*) at Irc-Galleria.net, a Finnish social website popular among teenagers and young adults.

49 However, I have had informal discussions about the subject, death and mourning online, with hundreds of people during 2007–2011.

account⁵⁰.

The emails and survey answers I have also downloaded to my computer. All the research material was saved to my external hard drive as a backup copy. The interview material for my master's thesis was also printed and stored in my private archive until further notice. All the survey answers were also printed and stored. Interviews in *Second Life* were recorded with screenvideo and with permissions from the interviewees. These archiving practices were disclosed in the interviews if possible, but I did not always have the opportunity to mention if the material would be provided for further research, which is why I would not prefer to provide the material for external research, since permission was not asked from the people in question.

When taking screenshots or recording my activity on the screen, I also kept in mind the copyright law in the United States and Finland, which prohibits any commercial use but allows non-commercial and respectful use of the material. The videos and screenshots should also be referred to appropriately and accurately, in order to avoid any conflicts with the service providers and the people creating memorials. (US Copyright Office 2012; FINLEX 2005; Kuula 2011[2006], 172.)

Both *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft* allow all distribution and modification of the screenshots the users take in the world (http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Linden_Lab_Official:Snapshot_and_machinima_policy, accessed 7/8/2013; <http://www.wowhead.com/help=screenshots-tips-tricks>, accessed 7/8/2013).

Ethics in autoethnography may at first be thought to be irrelevant, since in autoethnography the researcher's own self is under study, but often autoethnographies include memories and accounts from other people in the autoethnographer's life as well. Permission to use those memories, in which other people have been involved, has also been asked.

This is one of the most important ethical problems in this kind of research. Because now we're not just talking about faceless, nameless, unidentifiable subjects – if we ever were. Your intimates are identifiable individuals with names. Don't they deserve the same consideration as your participants who have given you permission to write about them? (Ellis & bother 2000, 759.)

⁵⁰ Although it remains unknown to what extent Facebook stores records and contents of its users, since the Statement of Rights and Responsibilities has been changing throughout the years and currently states: "you grant us a non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license to use any IP content that you post on or in connection with Facebook (IP License)." <https://www.facebook.com/legal/terms>, accessed 8/31/2012.)

Ellis & Bochner stress the problem of ethics in autoethnography and suggest that the autoethnographer should provide the text for reading to their intimates in question, and they can either comment, add or delete some features from the text (Ellis & Bochner 2011, [31]). In my case, I have discussed with my intimates the experiences I have used in my thesis, since English is not the first language within my family.

(3) Fieldwork and research material

1. Research data and the triangulation matrix

The fields in my research have been the Internet and my autoethnographical experiences as a researcher and an individual. The aim from the beginning was to understand the various ways people use the Internet to mourn and honor the dead and whether these experiences are similar regardless of the application(s) being used. The fieldwork has been conducted in several phases, which have overlapped each other (see Table 4. Triangulation matrix for specific time periods). The selection of the material was pragmatic and according to the popularity of the virtual environment in question. The officially held memorial websites were selected randomly from the search hits in Google search engine (more about this in 4.2. *The Humanity of Google and the Problem of Time and Space*). Currently, the Facebook social network is the most popular one in social media, although memorials on FB have not been first in their kind but originate, for example, in MySpace.com, which was more popular in the beginning of the 2000s. The YouTube video service was selected because of the same reasons. Personal blogs were chosen from the interviews and survey answers, if the people in question shared information about them. One massively multiplayer online role-playing game (*World of Warcraft*) and one shared virtual world (*Second Life*) were selected because it came to my knowledge that these environments had established memorial parks, chapels and shrines for their users and it seemed significant to include this type of social mourning and honoring as well.

Since the material seemed to pile up during the initial fieldwork of gathering information about different mourning and honoring environments online, I decided to divide the material into primary and secondary research material, the first of which would serve as the main research material and the latter as complimentary. The primary research material consists of four memorial websites, three social media applications, one shared virtual environment and two online gaming forums. The secondary field material was gathered from four memorial websites, one social media application, two online gaming environments, one memorial website discussion forum and several Finnish and international online newspapers discussing online mourning (see table 3.)

	Primary fields	Secondary fields
Memorial website services	Virtual Memorials.com Last Memories.com Memory-Of.com Sytytakynttila.fi	Muistopaikka.fi Gone Too Soon.org Find A Grave.com Pet Memorials.com
Social media	Facebook (memorial groups, pages and memorialized profiles) YouTube.com (memorial videos, commentary on the videos) Personal blogs (Finnish only)	Vimeo.com (memorial videos, commentary and discussion about the videos)
3D virtual worlds	<i>Second Life</i> (Linden Memorial and Remembering Our Friends memorial parks)	<i>World of Warcraft</i> (memorials integrated in the game experience and one memorial event recorded in video)
Discussion forums	<i>World of Warcraft</i> discussion forums <i>Second Life</i> discussion forums	Discussion forums at memorial websites
Newspaper articles		various foreign online newspapers (e.g. BBC, CNN, Yahoo! News) various Finnish newspapers (e.g. <i>Helsingin Sanomat</i> , <i>Aamulehti</i> , <i>Satakunnan Kansan</i> , <i>Kaleva</i>)

Table 3. Primary and secondary field work material.

The research data is divided analytically in to two separate categories, *intentional memorials* and *unintentional memorials*. The first refers to intentionally created virtual memorials, such as virtual memorial sites, groups, cemeteries, videos, memorial services in online games and virtual worlds. Intentional memorials are *intended* as memorials, to last as long as possible, and their function resembles a scrapbook with photographs, stories, family trees and anecdotes. In an online form, they can also contain audio and video. An intentional memorial can be a small-scale memorial group on Facebook or a full memorial website or an avatar in an online game that interacts with other players.

Unintentional memorial refers to online memorials that are initially created for something else and by the deceased himself/herself, such as social media profile pages, blogs, websites and (YouTube) videos. These become memorials usually by accident and often immediately after the death. People gather in these places to share information about the incident (especially if it was sudden) and the funeral arrangements and to give condolences to the family. The importance of an

unintentional memorial is shorter in time, but they are often made as intentional memorials (such as a memorialized profile page on Facebook), or the content is modified to the actual memorial (such as adding photographs to a memorial video).

Since the total research material consists of online environments that are very different, I created the following triangulation matrix (see table 3.) to clarify the relevancy of each site in the overall research and the research questions concerning the specific field. Triangulated fields should be covered with triangulated methods to create a more holistic description and analysis (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). According to digital culture researcher Riikka Turtiainen, conducting multidisciplinary research should be considered a possibility of inventions instead of restrictions. Triangulation of methodologies is not actually a specific method in itself but an attitude, a metamethod the researcher embraces and places on the research material. (Turtiainen 2012, 41.) Triangulation is also useful when analysing complex research material (Turtiainen 2012, 41; Kangaspunta 2008, 178), such as websites and other online environments. Since the research material in this study represents a multitude of contextualities, triangulation provides a tool for analyzing and categorizing different themes, subjects, anomalies and similarities.

The triangulation matrix⁵¹ is firstly divided by the research environments, which are a) official memorial websites, b) online gaming and virtual worlds, c) social media applications or d) interviews and surveys. From there, the matrix displays what the research material in the specific category is, what the theoretical backgrounds and research methods used to analyze that field are, during which time period the fieldwork was conducted, what kind of research questions were used during the fieldwork process, and finally, what the place of each environment⁵² in the overall research data is.

⁵¹ The term *triangulation matrix* was first coined by digital culture professor Jaakko Suominen in his blog posts *Triangulaatiomatriisi* (8/30/2010 <http://jaasuo.wordpress.com/2010/08/30/triangulaatiomatriisi/>, accessed 1/13/2013) and *Triangulaatio digitaalisen kulttuurin lähestymistapana* (6/1/2010 <http://jaasuo.wordpress.com/2010/06/01/triangulaatio-digitaalisen-kulttuurin-lahestymistapana/>, accessed 1/13/2014).

⁵² More detailed descriptions of each research environment are displayed later in this chapter.

RESEARCH MATERIAL	THEORETICAL BACKGROUND /METHOD	FIELDWORK	CONTENT ANALYSIS QUESTIONS	PLACE IN OVERALL THESIS
Official memorial websites				
International and Finnish memorial websites (total: 6 websites)	Ritual theory, discourse analysis, online and autoethnography	2007–2012	What are and who creates virtual memorials? What are the services provided? What is the meaning of publicity and privacy? How are new practices of mourning and honoring being adapted in Finland?	Case examples of memorial websites: Understanding the who, how and why people create online memorial websites
Online gaming and virtual worlds				
<i>Second Life</i> shared virtual world (two virtual memorial parks)	Ritual theory, discourse analysis, online and autoethnography	2010–2012	How do virtual world communities commemorate? Answering questions of who, how, what, where and why. What are the visual choices in virtual world memorials?	Case examples of mourning in shared virtual world
<i>World of Warcraft</i> online role-playing game (memorials integrated in the game)	Ritual theory, discourse analysis	2007, 2010, 2012	How do virtual world communities commemorate? Answering questions of who, how, what, where and why. How does the culture of the game affect memorials in-game?	Contextual understanding of mourning in gaming communities: Online gaming memorials
Social media applications				
Facebook (total: 17 memorial groups and memorialized profiles)	Ritual theory, discourse analysis, online and autoethnography	2008–2013	What is the meaning of social media in mourning and honoring? What kind of discursive practices do people use in the FB memorials? How do people use social media in mourning and honoring?	Case example of social media mourning and honoring; understanding the who, how and why
Finnish memorial blogs (total: 3 blogs)	Ritual theory, discourse analysis	2010–2011	How are memory and mourning constructed in memorial blogs? What kind of contents do memorial blogs display publicly? What kind of discursive practices do people use in the memorials?	Gathering background information on how Finns are appropriating online mourning and honoring, focusing on public memorial blogging
Discussion boards and blog posts (e.g. Wowwiki, Second Life blogs)	Ritual theory, discourse analysis	2007–2012	What kind of discursive practices do people use on discussion boards about virtual memorials?	Gathering background information and context about gaming memorials
Interviews and surveys				
Surveys in surveymonkey.com (total: 3 surveys)	Ritual theory, discourse analysis	2010–2011	What are the attitudes toward virtual mourning and honoring? What kind of rituals do people practice and why? What is the importance of virtual memorials? How do actual and virtual memorials differ or do they differ?	Gathering informants for further interviews, gathering background information
Interviews	Ritual theory, discourse analysis	2009–2012	What are the attitudes toward virtual mourning and honoring? What kind of rituals does the person practice and why? What is the importance of virtual memorials? How has the person experienced his/her own personal online mourning?	Main case examples: Understanding the who, what, where and how people experience online mourning and honoring.

Table 4. A triangulation matrix of the overall research material, fieldwork time period, field work methods and main questions in the particular field. My research questions were targeted to understand the experience of online mourning, environments to mourn and honor in and the systems of meanings implemented into online memorials.

The place of each research environment in the overall research data has been divided into (1) case examples, (2) gathering background and contextual information for case examples, (3) contextual understanding of the phenomenon of mourning and honoring online. Case examples are used to display specific details of experiencing online mourning and the process of creating virtual memorials; they create the core of this research. Background and contextual information is gathered to support case examples, since they provide either similar details of the experience or, in other ways, provide similar environments of the phenomenon. For example, MySpace memorials precede Facebook memorials, but because of the higher user volume in Facebook, MySpace was analyzed only superficially and in order to understand contextually how and why online memorials are being built in social media. Finally, discussion forums and newspaper articles were analyzed to support the overall research data and contextual understanding of the discourse of online mourning and virtual memorials

As documenting methods I decided to use screen video and screen capturing with handwritten notes and a personal blog dedicated for the research. The blog, <http://bittiavaruuteen.wordpress.com>, played a crucial part in creating a visible online persona, since the problem of contacting people online is the anonymity of it. Jason Rutter and Gregory W. H. Smith (2005, 88) have emphasized the ethical negotiation between the absence and presence of the researcher. In the research setting, people are often advised to “forget” that the researcher is there, but in online situations the researcher’s presence is usually almost invisible. Furthermore, it is very difficult to claim trust in an online environment, where identities are at play and one cannot know anyone’s legitimate self for sure, especially if the subject is highly personal and emotionally loaded, as my research topic is. This is why I wanted to enhance my visibility in Google search hits, if someone should try to find me and know more about my research. I wrote about my fieldwork, thoughts that came to my mind during the process, notes about phenomena relating to the topic and other personal things. The *Info* page contained a clear photo of me, a very casual one that hopefully created an impression of a trustworthy person: not a mere academic, but a human being with similar experiences of loss and bereavement. The *Join Research* page contained a few simple questions, such as “Have you created a memorial online?”, which worked hopefully as an attraction of interest to my research, and finally a link to my surveys at www.surveymonkey.com (see appendices). Consequentially, my Facebook profile contained the same information about my research and a research request to fill out the surveys. This proved to be wise, since a few people from the United States “checked up” on me in Facebook, asking if I was the same person

requesting permission to research their memorial sites⁵³.

In order to reach people in online communities such as in *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*, I spread the word about my research in discussion forums and on email lists. However, this was not successful, until two friends of mine, who have been playing *World of Warcraft* for years, spread the word about my research in their own communities. My friends and people that were part of different online communities promoted my research as well, and I also used Facebook as a way of sending invitations to take part in my survey(s). In *Second Life*, I contacted the founders of the *Remembering Our Friends* memorial chapel area, Carlo Dufvaux and Mike Bemis, to interview them and to promote my research in their own communities. These pragmatic tactics were fruitful, and I had the possibility to interview people in live chat (in *Second Life* and on Facebook) or via instant messaging (such as email and Facebook messages).

All of the respondents in the surveys and interviewees have been asked permission to include their responses and/or activity in the memorials as well as permission to refer to them either by their full name, first name, online name or, per their wishes, to anonymize them. The responses are used as such, without correcting any spelling errors if the topic is understood otherwise, but the Finnish responses are translated to English.

⁵³ Teela Sanders described a similar situation in her research on the online sex work community (Sanders 2005, 75), where she tried to claim the trust of sex workers and they searched her online to verify her authenticity.

2. Memorial websites

Memory Of – your Online Center for Healing
(<http://www.memory-of.com/Public/>)

Memory-Of.com was one of the very first search hits on Google in 2007. The site was founded by a private individual who wished to preserve the memory of his brother online.

Memory-Of.com is the largest online memorial site in the world, with over 35,000 visits each day and more than 2.5 million virtual candles lit. Launched in the fall of 2004 by the founder who created a memorial website for his brother, James, to experience first-hand how a permanent tribute with enhanced global accessibility could provide comfort to anyone who visited.

(<http://www.memory-of.com/Public/contact.aspx#aboutus>, accessed 23.12.2013.)

Memory-Of.com

Founded in 2004 by Library of Life Foundations. Total of 95,715 memorials, 4,633,366 candles.

Fees:

Monthly (\$4.95/£2.75)

Annual (\$49.95/£27.75)

Everlasting (\$94.95/£52.75)

Services:

Personalized layout, background music, personalized URL, 1 GB photo space (approx. 300 photos) 300 MB audio clips (approx. 15 clips) , 300MB video clips (approx. 15 clips)

(accessed 5/16/2012)

The site offers a various selection of memorials, which are can be purchased by a monthly (\$4.95/£2.75), annual (\$49.95/£27.75) or a one-time fee (\$94.95/£52.75)⁵⁴. The front page of the main site is focused on the center with the picture and a linked headline, *Begin Your Free Trial*. The overall colors are down-to-earth browns, pastel greens, orange and greys. In the upper part of the main page is a Flash animated banner of recent *Anniversaries*, with the name of the deceased and the date of their death scrolling from right to left. On the left side of the site is a similar animated box, *Latest Candles*, where recently lit candles are scrolling from bottom to up and the viewer can see what recent visitors have written alongside the candles.

⁵⁴ Prices checked 5/16/2012.

- [Create an Online Memorial](#)
- [How To](#)
- [Testimonials](#)
- [FAQ](#)
- [Gifts and Comfort](#)
- [Features](#)
- [Resources](#)
- [Forum](#)
- [Press](#)
- [Contact Us](#)

Celebrate Their Life and Legacy



1 CREATE a Memorial Website



2 INVITE family and friends



3 SHARE photos and messages

In Memory-Of.com Today:
95,652 Memorials and 4,625,966 Candles

[BEGIN YOUR FREE TRIAL](#) →

Latest Candles

Wince1994.memory-of lit a candle in memory of **GIÖI NGO**: "Lighting this candle in your memory sweet Gioi. U will always be in so many hearts "

05/03/2012 05:11


Grma To Angel Cayden Wince1994.memory-of lit a candle in memory of **Amelia Marrocco**: "Lighting this candle in your memory sweet Amelia. U will always be in so many hearts "

05/03/2012 05:10

JOAN TAYLOR lit a candle in memory of **"DJ" Danielle Martin**: "I LIGHT THIS CANDLE FOR YOU DJ & PRECIOUS ANGEL IN THE

Publish a Memory Book

Transfer a Memorial Website, including photos, candles, condolences and more into a hardbound Memory Book to cherish at home by clicking "Turn Your Memorial Site Into a Book" on a current memorial page or by beginning our [14 Day Free Trial](#) and becoming a Memory-Of.com member now.



[click here for larger video >>](#)

> New Memorials



Bugs Henderson
1943 - 2012
Born in Texas
Memorial website created by Megan Giles



Sura Zutler
1928 - 2012
Born in New York
Memorial website created by Margarita Zutler-Itin



Ashley Hanson
1982 - 2011
Born in California
Memorial website created by Karen, Ashley's Mom

> Testimonials

As Featured In: [The New York Times](#) [THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR](#) [The Washington Post](#) [more >>](#)

Image 4. The front page of Memory-Of.com. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 5/4/2012.)

The memorials contain a small amount of profile info on the front page and a picture of the deceased.⁵⁵ Visitors can leave tributes and condolences, view a photo album, light and view memorial candles and watch possible video clips or listen to audio. Different themes and layouts

⁵⁵ Memorial websites resemble the personal websites familiar from the 1990s, which usually contained a similar front page with a picture of the person and a short biography. Currently, most of the personal websites, such as my own (www.annahaverinen.com, previously bittivarvuteen.wordpress.com), are more concentrated on the textual and visual contents uploaded on a blog, where, for example, I can share information about myself, my thoughts and about my research. Other subpages reveal information about my work and how to contact me as well as downloadable versions of my presentations. Additionally, many blogging service providers, such as www.wordpress.com and www.blogger.com, provide similar features as the memorial websites studied in this research. The only difference is that, on an official memorial website, the user can browse through other memorials easily.

for the memorials are provided in order to personalize the page as much as possible. Many themes are placed in categories such as hobbies (Sports, Music), nature (Garden, Sunset) or patriotic (All American)⁵⁶. Audio clips are often used as background music for the site and its subpages. The site provides a selection of background music, which consists of either Christian songs or other copyright free material⁵⁷. It is also possible to upload your own (copyright free) music as well. The URL of the site can also be personalized, for example, with the name of the deceased (e.g. <http://firstname-lastname.memory-of.com>), which also affects Google search hits.

On the *His/Her Legacy* subpage, the visitor can read about the legacy of the deceased, which is usually related to their children or their character as a friend/family member/co-worker etc. The feature *Timeline* resembles the Timeline on Facebook, where it is possible to see a linear timeline of the life of the deceased with different highlights, such as graduation and marriage. The memorials or the site itself do not have any sharing buttons, but include a box where the viewer can add emails, if she/he wants to share the memorial to friends alike.

In addition to memorials, the Memory-Of.com also provides different discussion forums for grief counseling and a list of merchandise from custom engraved jewelry to teddy bears and quilts as “keepsakes that offer sympathy and condolences, and pay tribute to those we love” (<http://www.memory-of.com/Public/GiftAndComfort.aspx>, accessed 5/8/2012). The site has promoted a live chat service since 2007; however, it remains unavailable in 2012.

The fieldwork on this memorial website was conducted during my master’s thesis during 2007–2009 and complementary observations during 2011–2013. I chose the site as part of this research because of its relevancy in Google search hits, where Memory-Of.com was listed usually in the top five with search keywords such as ‘memorial site’ and ‘online memorial’.

I sought out people randomly for interviews by browsing different memorials displayed on the front page. I sent an average of 20 research requests of which 12 were for females and 8 for males, but I received only 3 responses, which were from two men (Akwasi and Nathan) and one woman (Yolanda). In my autoethnography, I created a memorial site for my late father and aimed to understand the experience and choices behind the creation process of a memorial in conjunction

⁵⁶ The overall selection of the themes represent American culture, since for example the Sports theme has an image of a baseball bat, a basketball and an American football but nothing else. These sports items are considered as “all American”.

⁵⁷ In 2008, there was a selection of popular songs, such as Eric Clapton’s “Tears in Heaven”, but it seems these have been removed in 2012 for copyright reasons.

with the email interviews I conducted with the abovementioned people. The interviews lasted about 5-6 months. I chose not to pay for my father's memorial, since I did not feel it was necessary, but also because I did not feel comfortable creating the memorial itself. Further investigation on the website was purely observational, since I felt contacting people through the memorials they had created for their loved ones was both not appropriate and not an ethical way of researching the experience of virtual mourning. This is why the surveys (described later) proved to be an excellent way of reaching people on their own terms without intruding on their 'private virtual spaces'. Similar choices were made with the other memorial websites.

Last Memories (<http://www.last-memories.com/>)

The *Last Memories* website is provided by *Convile IBC* and the physical location of its server is in the Czech Republic. It was launched in April 2006 alongside another memorial website for pets (*Pets Memories*, www.pets-memories.com). The services of the site are similar to *Memory-Of.com*, but *Last Memories.com* provides free obituaries as well. On the main site, the colors being used are similar pastel colors but mainly different shades of blue. Silhouettes of birds flying and a family with one child holding hands are the main imagery being used. Differing membership options are displayed on the bottom in separate boxes, where there are memberships from a monthly fee of \$4.90 to a lifetime membership of \$99.90 (limited Christmas offer \$49.90 in 2013). On the front page recent memorials, advertisements of various services, a link banner on the left side and a picture link about memorials having anniversaries (*Angelversaries*) can be found. The website also provides services in different languages (German, French, Spanish, English, Swedish, Japanese, Russian, Portuguese, Chinese). *Last Memories* does not offer any merchandise as *Memory-Of.com* does, but it does offer similar grief forums, articles for support and further information on how to cope with sorrow and loss.

Last Memories.com

Launched in 2006 by Convile IBC. Total of 29,815 memorials and 965,296 candles.

Fees:

Angel membership \$4.90,
Heaven membership (\$39.95)
Lifetime membership (\$99.90)
Obituaries are free

Services:

Personalized layout (also custom graphics), background music, personalized URL, family tree, photo album, flash animations (also custom versions), YouTube video plugins and custom music, guest book, social media plugins, 500MB space capacity, expanded by request.

(accessed 5/21/2012)



Image 5. The front page of the Last-Memories.com website. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 5/4/2012.)

The memorial can have a custom layout and background music as well. Layouts vary from holidays (Easter, Christmas), to nature (flowers, butterflies) and patriotic themes of the United States. If the person creating the memorial cannot find a suitable layout, it is possible to upload your own background image and choose colors, but this is only available for paid memberships, not free accounts. What is different compared to Memory-Of.com are the animated objects that

can be added to the site. Objects vary from butterflies to stars and even baseballs that can be customized to fall, fly, shine or bounce around the page. In addition, the user can customize the links being displayed on the memorial and add a Facebook ‘Like’-button as well⁵⁸.

Last Memories.com has wanted to enable social aspects of their memorials, and there is a box on every memorial where the viewer of the memorial can share the page, for example on Facebook, Blogger or email.

My main fieldwork was conducted at the same time as in Memory-Of.com in 2008 (complementary observations until 2013), and I had similar experiences with the difficulty of reaching people for interviews. I eventually received only two responses, which were from Sandy and Jeremy. While conducting interviews with Sandy and Jeremy via email, I also created a memorial site for my late father and worked towards understanding the experience and choices behind the creation process of a memorial. These interviews also lasted 5-6 months, but they did not begin simultaneously with the people from Memory-Of.com.

Virtual Memorials™

(<http://www.virtual-memorials.com/>)

Virtual Memorials™ was founded in 1996 and claims to be the first in business. It was created by a private person (name was not found on the site) and is currently owned by Virtual Memorials Inc. The physical location of the server is in the United States.

The front page of the site does not have any flash-supported animations, but relies on picture and text links.

Otherwise, the front page offers text links to recent memorials and anniversaries. A new feature (since 2010)

has been a Facebook ‘Like’-box, which allows you to like the memorial website service in your own Facebook account.

Virtual Memorials.com

Launched in 1996 by Virtual Memorials Inc. The site does not disclose the total amount of memorials.

Fees:

Basic memorial free of charge, limited resources.

\$55 one-time payment, unlimited resources on the site

Services:

Personalized layout, background music, personalized URL, picture slide show, photo album and a guest book.

(accessed 5/21/2012)

⁵⁸ Not linked to the FB profile of the deceased but as a social plugin, which can be found on most of the websites among sharing buttons.



What Is A Virtual Memorial...

A Virtual Memorial is an Online Memorial Website that celebrates the personal life story of a departed loved one.



Virtual Memorials was founded in 1996 and hosts thousands of online memorial websites.

VM's first memorial.

"When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight." -Kahlil Gibran

News and Events



CD backups now available
Order an archival copy of your memorial

Virtual Memorials has launched Critters.com

Create a [pet memorial](#) for your beloved pet at Critters.com



Virtual Memorials is honored to recommend [Grief Net](#). GriefNet.org is an on-line community of e-mail support groups for the bereaved by the bereaved.

VM in the News
Featured on CNN, NBC, The New York Times and dozens of local newspapers. Click to view VM in the press.
[read more news](#)

Memorials Include:

- Quick setup
- Personal Backgrounds
- Password
- Unlimited Pages

Create A Memorial...



If you are dealing with grief, the process of creating an online memorial can be hugely rewarding and often cathartic. It can be a journey through one of the most unique and powerful experiences you may engage in. We invite you to begin a [free trial](#)

Birthday for Today: December 23



Adam Schmidt
Memorial created by Gabriele Ralph

Anniversary for Today: December 23



Jeffrey Rizzo
Memorial created by Marnie McDorman - his wife

[Create A Memorial](#)

Visit A Memorial...

[Birthdays](#) [Anniversaries](#) [Infants](#)
[Children](#) [Teenagers](#) [Heroes](#)

First Name

Last Name

[advanced search](#)

Recently Created Memorials:

- Judith Hendrix Honeycutt
- Kolin Lionberger
- Mary Calcasola
- Claudette Willie
- Darlene Harrington
- Renita Jones
- Foo Kong Dean
- Kenneth Lehnert
- Jesslyn Bogard/McMillan
- David Crossman
- Claude Hill
- Robert Houlihan Jr
- Ken Benson
- Harry Desselle Jr.
- Andrew Goodwin
- Vicky Wilson
- Denny Appell
- Michael Danko
- Jeremy Demeria
- Aundrea Romeo
- Nathan Peterson
- Christopher Smith
- Colton (Cole) Krout
- Melinda Schaefer
- Pedro Gonzales
- Denny Hutton
- Miguel Reed-Torres
- David Robinson Jr.
- Renee Boulis
- Leo Rizzo
- Kyle Wecker
- Richard Curran
- [more memorials...](#)

Find us on Facebook



Virtual Memorials
Like You like this.

Image 6. The front page of the Virtual-Memorials.com website. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen 12/23/2013.)

The memorial is very much like a personal website from the early 1990s. Usually a memorial site includes brief profile info on the front page and a picture of the deceased. Visitors can leave tributes and condolences, view a photo album, light and view memorial candles. A basic version of a memorial is free of charge and includes a main page with text and one photo and a guestbook for family and friends. An unlimited amount of text, photos, a slide show, custom pages etc. are at a one-time fee of \$55.00.

Custom memorials can have pictures, text and audio (from the music list of the website) but no video. However, users can create basic slideshows from photo albums. The custom memorials can have a personalized layout as on the previously mentioned sites, but VirtualMemorials.com does

not provide any animated applications, such as falling snowflakes, flying butterflies etc. The subpages of the memorial can be found from the left side of the memorial page.

The fieldwork was conducted in 2008–2009, and I had even more difficulties in reaching and acquiring people for interviews, since only one woman, Calla, responded to my request. The website itself was the least pleasant to do my autoethnography in, since the services and the visuality of the site felt outdated and the least comfortable for mourning and honoring online. Virtual Memorials has not been updated since 2008 besides the Facebook widget, which might imply other sites are overcoming its clientele.

Muistopaikka (www.muistopaikka.fi)

Muistopaikka.fi was the first official Finnish memorial website. When I started gathering my research material in 2007, there were no official websites besides sytytakynntila.fi and individual memorial sites hosted by e.g. Yahoo.com and Kotisivukone.fi.

The front page is very different from the other three memorial websites, since it doesn't promote its services or, for example, use Flash animations. All users must first register themselves in order to view memorials, which are then listed on the front page under the title *Muistopaikkoja* (eng. *Memorial Sites*). Some memorials are, however, secured behind a password. The viewer cannot browse through the different options of the site without first registering.

The subpages of the memorial offer a biography page, with a photo album on the upper part of the page and a guest book and memorial candle featured on the left side. What is particular about the service is that it provides information about the physical location of the gravesite with a Google Maps application, which was not encountered on other websites that were part of this research. This was something very unique compared to international memorial websites. Furthermore, people can share information about the funeral either beforehand or after the memorial service.

Muistopaikka.fi

Launched in 2009 by Hannu Rantanen, afterwards co-hosted by the Espoo congregation. The site does not disclose the total amount of memorials.

Fees:

None, registration required to view public memorials.

Services:

Main page with a picture and a short biography, subpage with a longer biography, Google Maps gravesite location widget, subpage about the funeral.

(accessed 8/30/2012)

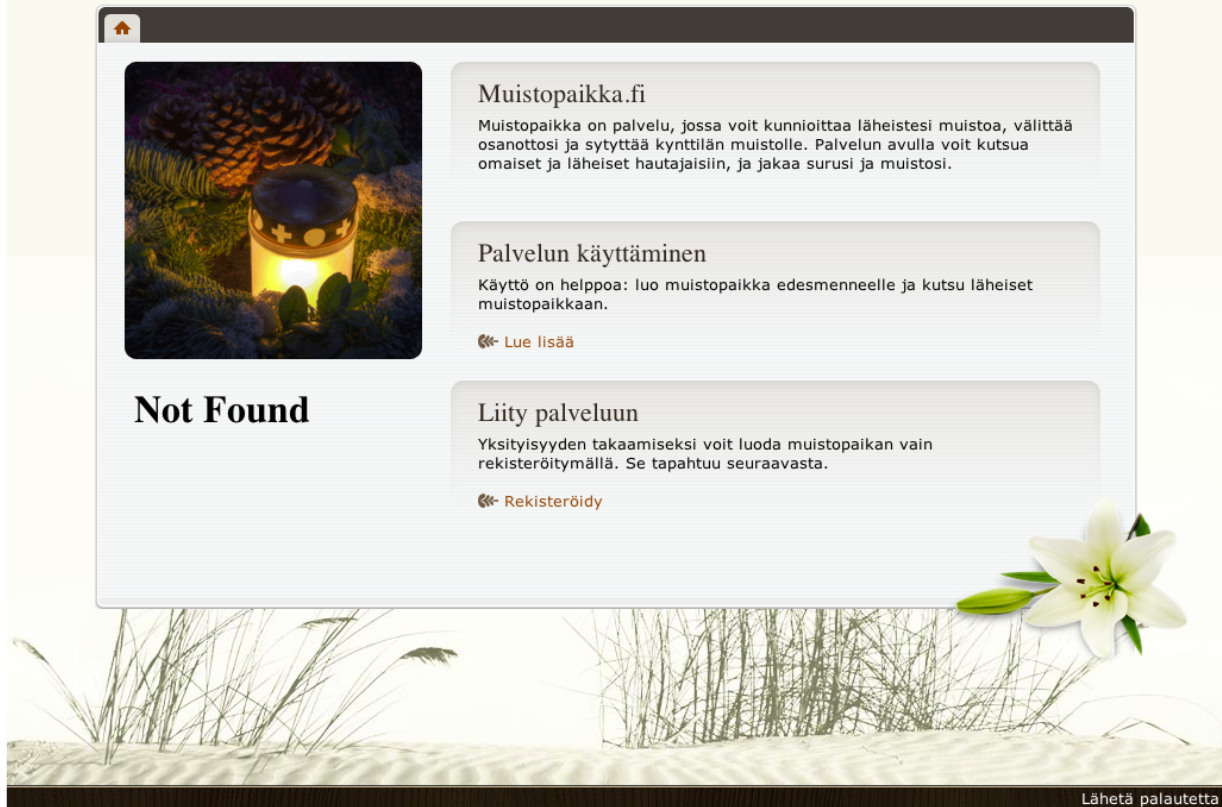


Image 7. Front page of the Muistopaikka.fi Finnish memorial website. The “not found” text is indicating a missing Facebook application, which sometimes did not work. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 5/4/2012.)

Since the only Finnish version of a memorial website was launched during the final part of my fieldwork, I observed the website and its features only as complementary research material to the interviews I had conducted and also to understand how this phenomenon was being appropriated in Finland. Additionally, the friend I lost due to suicide and mourned on Facebook had a memorial site created on *Muistopaikka* as well. I found it accidentally, since the mother did not promote the memorial on Facebook. In her interview, she also said that she used virtual mourning as a coping method for herself, not to actually *honor*.

Sytytäkynttilä.fi – virtual candles

(<http://sytytakynttila.fi/>)

The first website that the Finns appropriated as part of online mourning practices has been the Sytytäkynttilä.fi memorial candle website. On the site, anyone can light a virtual candle and write something next to it. It was created in 2001 by psychologist Aapo Puskala, who felt that this kind of service would be of great use as a place for honoring and offering condolences.⁵⁹

Sytytäkynttilä.fi

Launched in 2001 by Aapo Puskala. Over 100 000 candles and over 300 000 condolence candles on the site.

Fees:

Free of charge, no registration required.

Services:

All candles are first approved by the administrator. Since 2011, a possibility to offer condolences (comment) for the candles others have lit.

(accessed 12/2/2012)

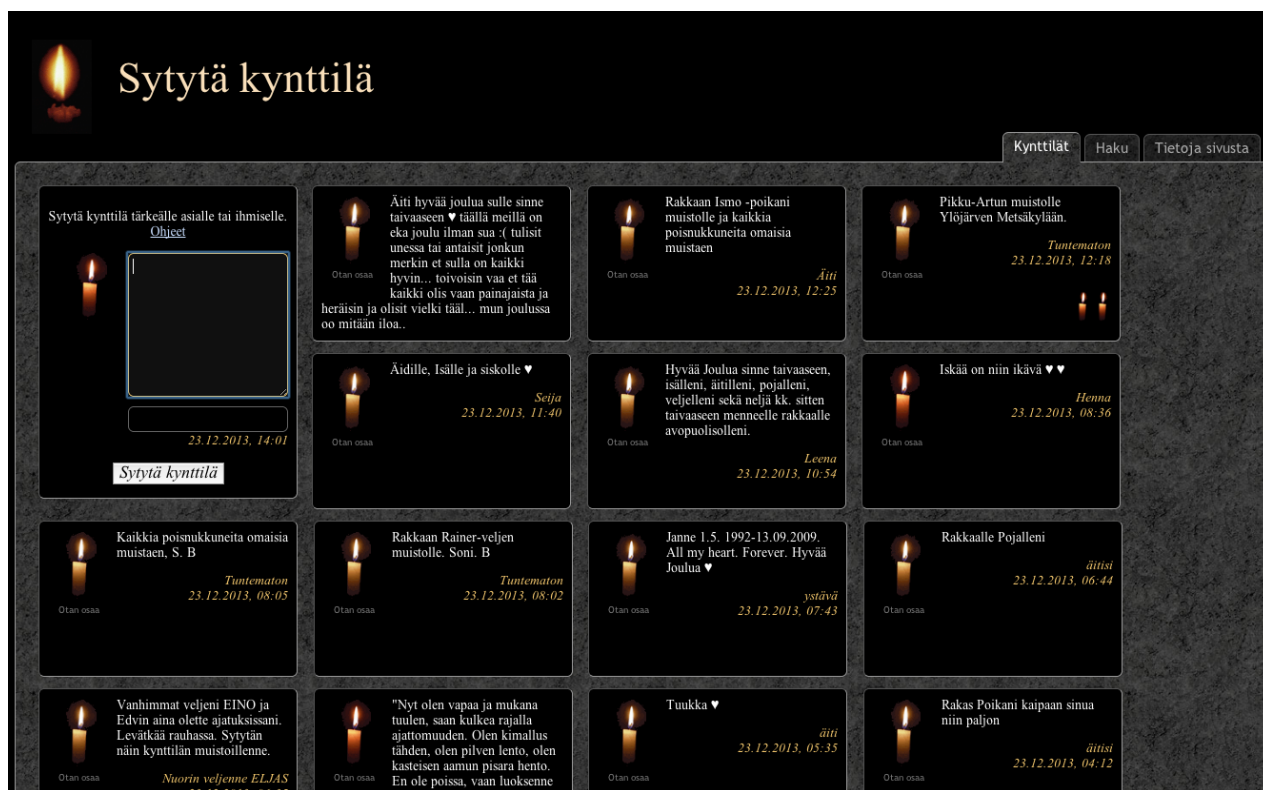


Image 8. The front site of the Finnish virtual candle website www.sytytakynttila.fi. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 12/23/2013.)

The site has gained popularity throughout the past decade, especially after the tsunami catastrophe in 2004 in Thailand, where many Finns lost friends or family. This kind of national disaster caused

⁵⁹ The Sytytäkynttilä.fi –website also provided a possibility to understand in what situations people feel the need to light a candle for someone, even for unknown people. The exact time is being displayed on the candle picture as well, which reflects the situations in which people feel the need to remain quiet and reminisce. This could be another matter for future research.

turmoil in the Finnish press, creating a need for public and mass commemorations. History has shown how people gather together at the time of disasters⁶⁰, whether they are caused by nature (Thailand in 2004, Japan in 2011) or by people (school shootings in Finland in 2007, 2008; shootings in Oslo in 2011) or to support a cause (candle marches for the rights of minorities). Virtual candles have been one of the most popular ways to express and feel communality, and the website currently has over 113 000 candles and over 395 000 condolence candles lit (accessed 12/23/2013).

Puskala was also kind enough to allow me to promote my research on the site with a small advertisement in 2010–2011, when the website was a subsite to another website (www.lintukoto.fi), which gave me the possibility to reach people for my surveys and later for online interviews. However, this caused a small bias in the answers, when people were reflecting mostly on virtual candles, but it must be remembered that at the time of the answers there was no other popular public and officially maintained website in Finland that would have provided this type of service.

3. Social media

Social media can be broadly understood as mobile and Internet technologies that are user-driven and contain text, audio, video and photography. As websites and applications, social media is usually recognized as weblogs (i.e. blogs), video and photo sharing services, social networking sites, audio podcasts, chat rooms and message boards. (Suominen et al. 2013.) In this research, I decided to focus on two major websites, the Facebook social network and the YouTube video sharing service, since during the fieldwork in 2008–2013 they had the highest amount of users internationally. In addition, mourning and honoring online was appropriated in Finland mostly through YouTube memorial videos during the school shootings of Jokela (2007) and Kauhajoki (2008). YouTube also provided a great amount of fan videos from online gaming communities. Facebook was an especially important way to understand how mourning and honoring were practiced ritually as a community and individually – as I did in my autoethnography. Personal blogs were added to the research, since in Finland they seemed to answer to a larger need for online memorial websites, which in the beginning of this research did not exist.

⁶⁰ Ida Marie Høeg has studied the ritualistic activity after the Utøya shootings in Norway 22nd of July 2011.

Facebook – social network (www.facebook.com)

Facebook is a social networking website launched in 2004, and by March 2013 it had over 1.11 billion users worldwide (<http://www.statisticbrain.com/facebook-statistics/>, accessed 1/13/2014). The basic idea is that the user creates a personal profile, adds friends and can exchange messages and share information about their own life in Status Updates, which are visible to the user's friends or public. The profile can have different profile albums, and the user can 'like' various *Pages* dedicated to causes, people or other things, such as movies, music, public figures

etc. Users can also belong to various groups dedicated to joined interests. Friends can be customized to different social groups such as Work or Family, which enables the user to filter the visibility of the content they share and also the content they want to see on the Wall, where all the posts of the users are visible. The profile can also be publicly open, visible to all or closed and visible only to selected friends. Some researchers claim that Facebook has become the revolution of online communication and actually can be seen *as the Internet itself*, instead of a separate application online (Miller 2011.)

Facebook as a research tool seemed to be a mandatory part of this research, since the popularity of the website internationally is massive. In addition, at the beginning of the fieldwork for my master's thesis, Facebook had just arrived in Finland, and I anticipated that it would only be a matter of time before Finns would appropriate mourning on Facebook as well.

Facebook.com

Launched in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes. Originally for university students. Estimated 1.11 billion users world wide (Statistic Brain, accessed 13.1.2014.)

About 2 million Finnish users
(Tilastokeskus/Pönkä/Facebook 2013).

Fees:

Free, only registration required.

Services:

Memorialization of profiles since 2009.
Anyone can create a group or a page in order to honor and remember.

(accessed 1/13/2014.)

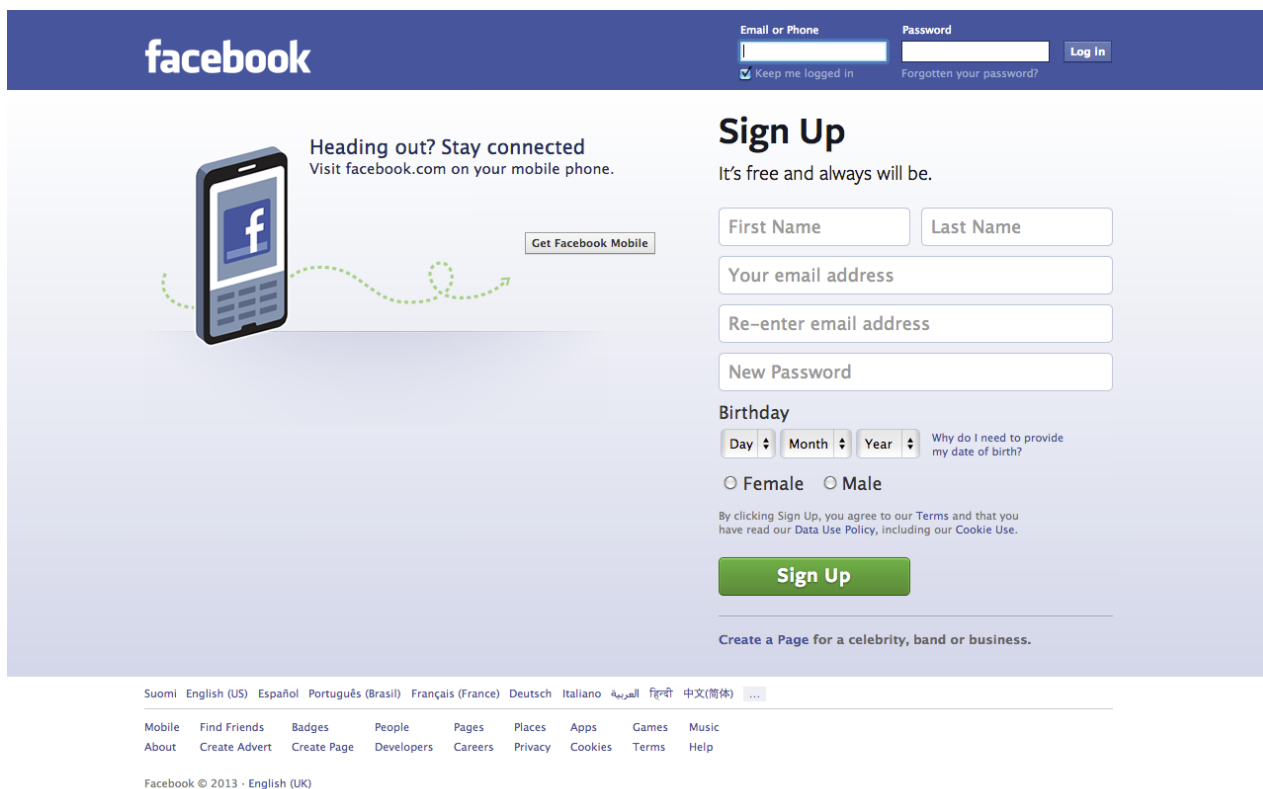


Image 9. Facebook's login page. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 12/23/2013.)

The overall research material on Facebook was compiled during 2008–2013. Initially, I aimed to interview and just observe other people mourning and honoring, since it was difficult to receive permission to even publicly observe open memorial groups and pages. However, I did not anticipate having an experience of losing a friend by suicide in May of 2008. Suddenly, I realized I was living the experience of mourning and honoring on Facebook, which eventually became my main autoethnography. My friend's profile page became a place for her family and friends to firstly share information about the incident and eventually to mourn and honor her. Her profile was also later officially memorialized, and her mother also created a memorial page on *Muistopaikka.fi*. I struggled with ethical dilemmas and personal feelings about whether I should include this experience in my research but eventually decided to place myself in an equal position with my interviewees. I felt a new dimension of understanding when I was actually *experiencing the same situation* as my informants and interviewees.

In addition to autoethnography, I searched the service's different memorial groups for private people both in English and in Finnish and contacted 25 American and 32 Finnish memorial group founders. Eventually, I received research permission from 7 American (4 females, 3 male) and 10 (6 females, 4 male) Finnish groups, of which all but one Finnish group were visible to all users of

Facebook. The non-visible group was initially created for sharing information about a sudden stroke of the founder's wife, but since his wife did not survive, the group afterwards became a place of sharing memories and honoring.

I always requested permission to observe the contents in the group in question, and the group founder made the decision to give information to others about me. This was extremely difficult, since my research requests were usually denied, but this also proved, that as an ethical way of conducting this kind of research, one should *always* request permission from the group founders (and members, if possible) despite the fact that the group would be open to all viewers. All of the groups I contacted were publicly accessed, besides the fact that one should first register as a user on Facebook. From Finland, it was difficult to search for international memorial groups because of the settings of the site, which limit the user to their own geographical location. When visiting San Francisco in the spring of 2010 and London in the autumn of 2011, I had the opportunity to use the search engines in the very same country where many of my informants already came from.

YouTube.com – video sharing service

YouTube is a social video sharing service established in 2005, where people can upload, share, view and discuss videos. The service is concentrated on user-generated content but also consists of clips from television and movies, as well as a large amount of music videos. YouTube is understood in this research to be a part of social media. On it, people communicate and share through audiovisual content of videos, which are created either by screenvideo (recording activity on the screen of the computer, popular among gamers), editing and combining video material from various contents (mash-up) or by creating photo and video collages with editing programs such as MovieMaker (Windows) or iMovie (Mac). I used such search keywords as *memorial video, in memoriam, in memory of, rest in peace, r.i.p./rip* and, in Finnish, *muistovideo, muistolle, nuku rauhasa, muistomerkki, r.i.p./rip*.

YouTube.com

Established in 2005 by three PayPal employees and bought by Google late in 2006. Video sharing service, where users can share, like and discuss audio-visual material.

Fees:

Free to use, registration needed.

Services:

Memorial videos often uploaded on user accounts and shared through the service.

Videos (often video blogs or *vlogs*) of deceased users can become unintentional memorials.

(accessed 12/2/2013.)

YouTube was, alongside Google.com, one of the key elements when searching for prominent research material. Memorial videos have been the most popular way to memorialize amongst adolescents, since the videos are fairly easy to make with the basic video programs in most computers. Furthermore, memorial videos were among the first types of Finnish virtual memorials and became increasingly popular among the young after the school shootings of Jokela (2007) and Kauhajoki (2008).

A memorial video usually consists of an opening frame with the name of the deceased, birth and death dates and a title, either *R.I.P*, *Rest in Peace*, *In Memory of* or *In Memoriam*. Background music is chosen to reflect the loss, sorrow and love the maker felt for the deceased. Commonly, a memorial video consists of only pictures, but sometimes video as well. Song lyrics, poetry and Bible quotations are also common.

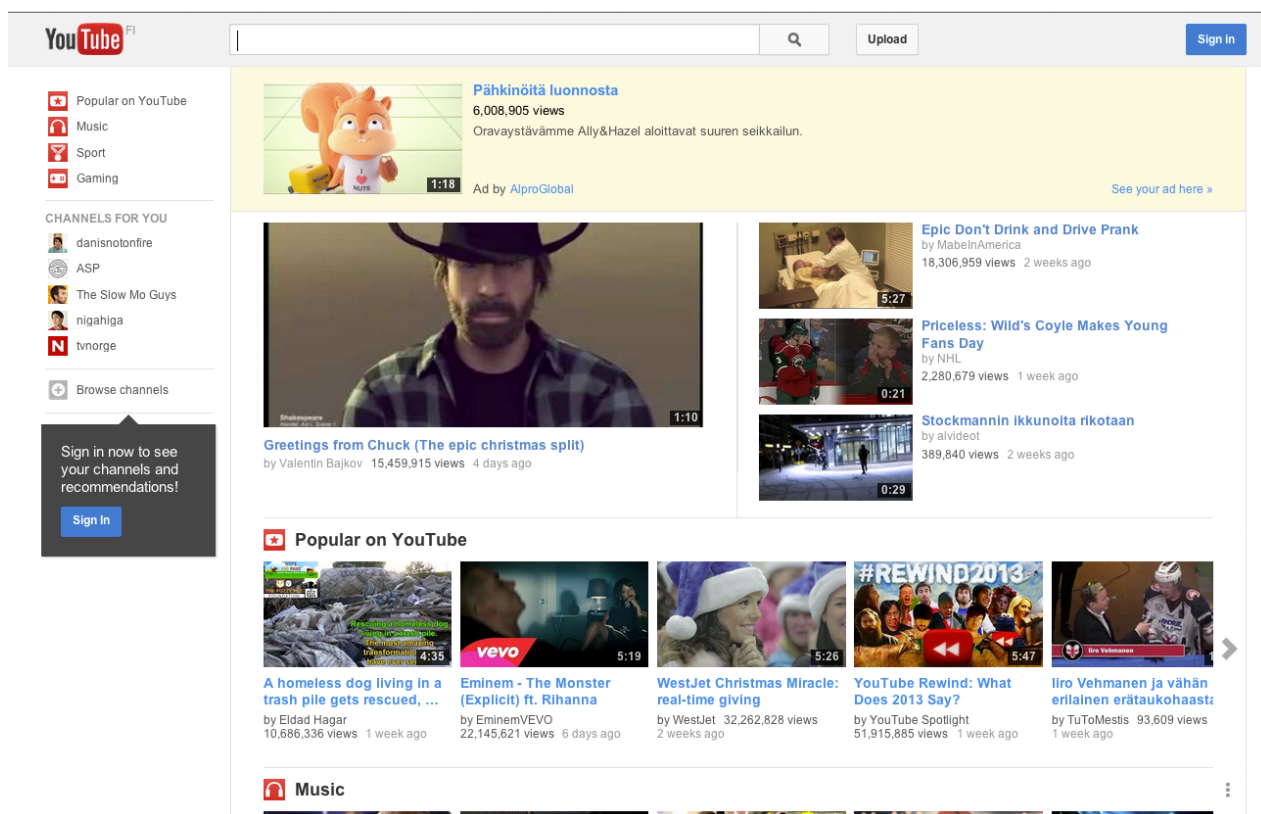


Image 10. The front page of the YouTube.com video sharing service. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 12/23/2013.)

Memorial videos were part of the research to understand how people are utilizing audiovisual material to mourn and honor. They are not closed entities, but they are also linked to other online environments, such as *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* memorials, which were often adapted as videos and distributed on video sharing websites such as YouTube.com. One of the most popular

World of Warcraft memorial videos is one where a rival group of players attacks a memorial service held by other players. This attack was recorded and later distributed on various video services, especially on YouTube. The attack happened in March of 2006, and one of the first videos was uploaded right after attack: “*Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral*” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHJVolaC8pw>) has received over five million viewers since 2006 and continues to receive comments (5/30/2012 44,337 comments). I used the video and the comments as contextual material in understanding gaming culture(s), particularly *World of Warcraft*.

The commentaries in all memorial videos were of great importance in understanding what audiovisuality brings to mourning and honoring but also the time frame in which the memorial is most meaningful to its users. Some videos are ‘inactive’ for years, but then a friend or a family member can leave a comment revealing the importance of the video. These types of memorial videos, which can be publicly accessed by anyone but often remained as very private material, can become places of pilgrimage, which the intimates of the deceased access during significant holidays, such as birthdays. The comments they leave reveal the discourse of ritualized remembering and mourning.

Personal blogs

A web blog or, as it is commonly known, a blog, is a website usually written by an individual rather than a group, where information is published in entries (or posts) which contain often personal reflections, comments and sometimes hyperlinks to other documents (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/blog>, accessed 7/15/2013; Hoffman 2012, 14). According to linguistic researcher Christian Hoffman, web blogs have changed significantly since the 1990s, although many blog features seem to have resisted technological advancements (Hoffman 2012, 13). Hoffman divides the properties of a blog as follows:

[origin] = websites [technology] = hyperlinks [genre] = personal journal
(Hoffman 2012, 14.)

In this research, I will focus on the genre of blogs, which are either personal journals and/or memorials. Often these two types are mixed together, where the author of the blog can be either actively visible in the contents of the blog (i.e. personal journal) or hidden from the content (i.e. memorial blog). What is typical about memorial blogs is that they represent both monologue and dialogue types of communication in a quasi-conversational space (Hoffman 2012, 3; Nilsson

2003, 31)

I was introduced to five Finnish memorial blogs either through the “jungle drum” of my research or through people mentioning blog URLs in their survey answers, and I contacted them afterwards. I have used two memorial blogs as case examples of writing a memorial blog, and both of them are written by mothers who have lost their child due to a tragic accident. One of the blogs was founded ten years after the death of the infant and the other shortly after the death. The permissions to use the blogs in my research were granted during the email interviews, and I will not address the direct URL of the blogs as per the wishes of my interviewees, but I will refer to the first name of the author(s) of the blog(s). I observed and analyzed the websites from the outside, without contributing or trying to blog about mourning myself.

4. Online gaming environments and virtual worlds

Death and mourning rituals within online gaming and shared virtual worlds has not been extensively studied, which is why I wanted to explore those worlds in this research. The origins of massive multiplayer online gaming worlds (such as *World of Warcraft*) and shared virtual environments (such as *Second Life*) are in fantasy and science fiction literature and tabletop role-playing games. J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of The Rings* trilogy (1954, 1954, 1955) and *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) have paved the way for modern computer-mediated role-playing experiences. (Pearce & Artemesia 2009, 8–9, 18–20; Mäyrä 2008, 127–128).

The two worlds chosen for this study, *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*, were selected to represent two types of online gaming environments, although a shared virtual world (such as SL) does not require actual gameplay like a combat-oriented role-playing game (WoW) does. However, most of the case studies chosen for this research represent role-playing communities. SL, as a shared virtual world, cultivates online life and identities, and is not designed for actual goal-oriented game play, as WoW has been (Mäyrä 2008, 129). Both of them are used with an avatar, chosen by the user/player, and can be used/played either alone or within a gaming group. Game researcher Frans Mäyrä (2008, 45) describes online gaming as a performance taking place in a socio-cultural network of human actions, where the players can experience a variety of beauty and a feeling of community, learn, construct identities and experience personal healing or recovery. Game and media researcher Celia Pearce (2009) highlights the importance of spatiality

and worldness in the gaming worlds⁶¹. The spatiality of online games is not only represented graphically but also mentally, where the background story of the game world itself creates a narrative space of a specific game history. In other words, they contain historical connotations in the previously mentioned fantasy literature, but also rich references to popular culture, mythology, symbolism, history and religions. The role-playing story being played is often based on literature or the game lore built for the gaming experience (WoW). The memorials, again, contain similar contextualities but often reveal the multi-faceted ways of communicating identities, friendship, community, values and love both offline and online. Game researcher Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O'Day have described the elements of these virtual worlds in a four level system: a) geography, which defines how places are connected to each other and how they are accessed or expanded (as in the case of SL), b) identities created in these worlds, which can be entirely fictional, partly fictional, or non-fictional, c) communication and awareness of different communication practices used in the world in order to communicate with others successfully and plausibly (as in the case of role-playing) and d) the sense of community that develops between long-term inhabitants of the virtual world (Nardi & O'Day 1999, 111–112).

Second Life – shared virtual world

Second Life describes itself as “a free 3D virtual world where users can socialize, connect and create using free voice and text chat” (<http://secondlife.com/>, accessed 12/2/2011). It is not a game, however many people not accustomed with SL describe it as an online game. I will distinguish SL by describing it as a shared *virtual world* but refer to it together with *World of Warcraft* as *online gaming*. Users of *Second Life* I will refer to as *users* or *players*, although, for example, SL-Wikipedia refers to them as *residents*.

Second Life is a free online program that is downloaded on a computer and requires Internet

Second Life

Launched June 23rd 2003 by the Linden Lab Company. A shared virtual world. Own currency, Linden dollar (exchange rate at 16.5.2012 €1 = 276L\$. Many role-playing communities. Estimated 1.000.000 active users in 2011 (www.secondlife.com), total amount of individual accounts unknown.

Fees:

Basic membership is free, premium (from \$12.24/month to \$88.56/year) consists of, for example, land area and currency.

Services:

Several publicly open memorial areas. In this research, I focus on the Linden Memorial and Remembering Our Friends Memorial Parks. Creating memorials require Linden dollars.

(accessed 5/21/2012)

⁶¹ See also Bartle 2003 and 2006.

access to work. In the world (known as a *grid*), a person can move around with an avatar, the appearance of which can be edited to represent the player's actual persona or a fantasy character, to meet and chat with people, trade goods and participate in private or group activities in role-playing communities or operate on their own.

I created my avatar⁶² as a direct extension of myself to avoid the possibility of fraud or suspicion, which is very familiar in online interactions⁶³. I added true personal details in the description of the avatar⁶⁴, such as my full name, affiliation and a link to my research blog. The name *Morita Hoxley* was very different from my own, but this is due to the settings of SL, which gives you the opportunity to decide your first name and then choose a last name from a selected list⁶⁵. The info of the avatar included a link to my research blog and to my Facebook account.

There are several memorial areas in the world, but I narrowed down my material to two of the biggest, *the Linden Memorial Park*⁶⁶ (LMP, 2009–2011) and the *Remembering Our Friends*⁶⁷ memorial (ROF, 2006–2013), the first of which is created by the Linden Company and the latter of which is a privately funded memorial. Their basic visual characters distinguish them from each other, since LMP was created to resemble a natural conservation area and a historical site with old ruins, which resemble ruins from the Ancient Greek. There are inter alia waterfalls, beaches, forests, plains and small paths for walking around the island.

⁶² The look of the avatar can be personalized from the shape and colour of the eyes to body build, height, color of skin and ethnicity. I will discuss the identities in virtual worlds further in chapter (6) *1. Built and received identities*.

⁶³ David Hakken (1993; 1994), for example, has written about online fraud, when a hostile researcher started to denigrate in discussion forums. Additionally, to claim trust and maintain the transparency of my research, I felt it was necessary for my online and offline personas to be similar.

⁶⁴ The publicly visible Facebook profile of mine was also deliberately designed as an extension of my research and my personality, to create a presence online and to attract people for my research. The topic itself – death and mourning – is something considered very private by many, which was a problem in many stages of the research.

⁶⁵ This might be due to avoiding any disrespectful naming.

⁶⁶ Closed from new memorials in 2011 but remained accessible for visitors (http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Linden_Lab_Official:Linden_Memorial_Park, accessed 12/23/2013).

⁶⁷ The area was closed entirely in March of 2013 because of the lack of funding possibilities, which made the memorial chapels and the entire area disappear from *Second Life*. (<http://community.secondlife.com/t5/General-Announcements/Remembering-Our-Friends-Memorial-Closing-3-1-2013/td-p/1867611>, accessed 12/23/2013.)

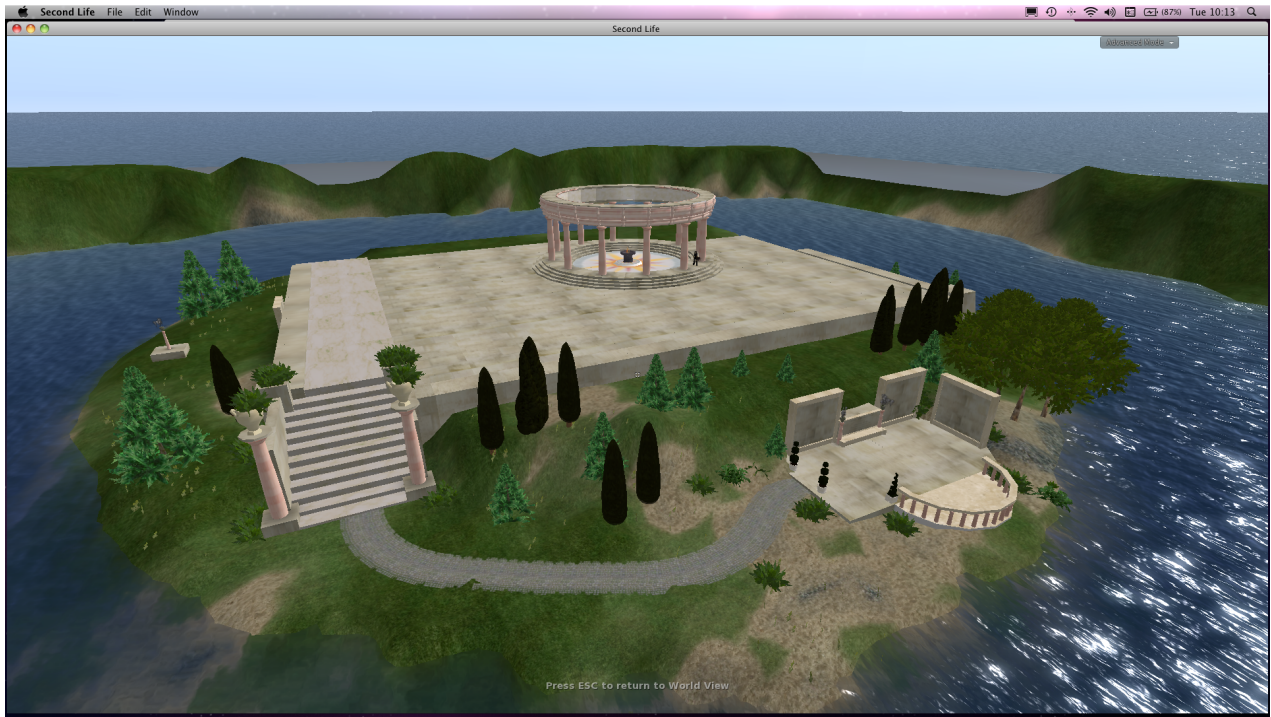


Image 11. The Linden Memorial Park waterfall is next to a small island with a temple-like structure, which has a flame burning in a huge bowl. The island is accessible by a bridge, which is not visible in the image. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 3/20/2012.)



Image 12. A typical memorial in LMP resembles a family burial, with a big headstone, flower plantings and torches. The torches require oil in order to burn, and they can be purchased with Linden dollars, the currency used in *Second Life* (1€ = about 276 Linden dollars). (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 3/20/2012.)

ROF was founded in 2006 and is a smaller area concentrating around three chapels by the sea. The *Artistic Fimicloud* and *Felicia Feaver* chapels are for memorial plaques for people outside the gaming world, and the *Jeffry Pastorelli Memorial Chapel* is for former players of SL who have passed away. I examined all the memorial plates inside the chapels and bigger memorials placed in the memorial area.



Image 13. The main hall of the Jeffry Pastorelli Memorial Chapel at ROF. The chapel continues left and right, and at both ends there are seating areas and a stage with a piano, flowers on tabletops and candles. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 5/16/2011.)

Inside the *Second Life* world, I conducted four interviews, two with Nadia Lane, one group interview and one interview with one of the founders of ROF, Carlo Dufaux. Furthermore, I used email to interview people who had completed my survey and left an email address for them to reach out to me. Most of my visits in the world were documented via screenvideo and screenshots, which was very fortunate, since many of the memorials changed or even disappeared during my fieldwork. Since the majority of *Second Life* users come from the United States and the world follows the Pacific time zone, I was not able to accidentally meet people in the world. However, I explored the various memorials in both of the memorial parks, read all of the stories included in the memorials, both big and small, watched the videos linked and visited the websites added in the memorial descriptions. I limited my observations to *actual* people only, not memorialized avatars,

which have, for example, died in the game story or stopped playing the game.

World of Warcraft – multi-user online role-playing game

World of Warcraft is a massive multiuser online role-playing game (MMORPG) which was launched in 2002 by the Blizzard Entertainment Company. The game guide explains the idea of the game as follows:

For example, mages are powerful spellcasters who use magic to inflict damage on their enemies from afar but are very vulnerable to attacks. These traits define the role of the mage: hang back, do a ton of damage, and hope to kill the monsters before they reach you. (<http://us.battle.net/wow/en/game/guide/>, accessed 5/5/2012.)

The landscape of the game is influenced by fantasy literature and medieval aesthetics in a continent named *Azaroth* with dungeons, spell casting wizards, elves, dragons and battling monsters (Nardi 2010.) In order to improve your skills in the game and achieve new levels, the player must fulfill quests and practice their individual craft (such as mercenaries or blacksmiths) and skills (such as skinning or mining). Several areas of the gaming world are achieved only by leveling up by carrying out quests, battling against monsters and developing the aforementioned skills. Leveling up also provides a possibility to acquire a magical animal companion (see Image 13.). The race and the political faction of the player indicate what their role is in relation to other players. The background story of the game explains that the political factions, Horde and Alliance, have a truce between them, but the game encourages players to engage in battle. This also depends on whether the player has chosen the Player vs. Player or Player vs. Environment servers, the first of which is a more battle-oriented server. (<http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/game/guide/>, accessed 9/30/2011; Corneliussen & Walker Rettberg 2011[2008], 5.)

Role-playing in WoW is purely optional, and the game can be played solo as well. Playing in a

World of Warcraft

Launched in 2002 by Blizzard Entertainment Company. MMORPG = Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game. Estimated about 8 million users in 2013 (Blizzard 2013).

Fees:

Monthly fee of \$14/€19.90.
Several gaming extensions with additional fees.

Services:

Memorials are requested from the Blizzard Company, but anyone can create an event inside the gaming world.

(accessed 5/21/2012.)

community of other gamers is, nevertheless, one of the key reasons to spend hours in the game world. Communal spirit can be strong among players who have played together for years and hundreds of hours with elaborate tactics and training. They have shared details about their personal lives with each other and "lived" together in the story that they have created for the game.



Image 14. Caylee Dak is a memorialized WoW avatar, which is integrated in the gameplay by the Blizzard Company. Dak was a 28-year-old player named Dak Krause who died of leukemia August 22nd 2007. The avatar can be found in Aldor Rise in Shattrath City. (http://www.wowwiki.com/Caylee_Dak, accessed 12/23/2013, image credits to <http://bigbadpauldrons.wordpress.com/tag/caylee-dak/>).

Researchers such as Bonnie Nardi (2010) claim that WoW has created a new form of digital culture, since it has enabled a visual-performative medium orienting "human activity in a stimulating visual environment that makes possible a release of creativity and a sense of empowerment in conditions of autonomy, sociality and positive reward" (Nardi 2010, 7).

Since the elementary nature of WoW differs from SL, it would have required hundreds of hours of gaming to even reach some of the memorials inside the world, which is why I decided to "visit" the memorials with the help of two of my (key) informants, who are also my friends, by watching them visit the shrines with their avatars. The way in which the memorials are placed in the world

reflects both the meaning of the character for the player community and the symbolic features implemented in the memorial, such as the faction (either *Alliance* or *Horde*) or the race and culture of the character. WoW is a fantasy game especially exploring Viking and Medieval aesthetics at great length, which is why many of the memorials resemble either Viking burials or other Middle Age type warrior tombs. The Blizzard company grants permission for any memorials (shrines, tombstones and memorialized avatars), which is why there are not many of them⁶⁸. This is why several of the memorials are for people who contributed to the game, for example, as game developers or were otherwise ‘known figures’ in the game.



Image 15. A screenshot from a memorial dedicated to Michel Koiter, a former employee of Blizzard Company. His avatar is memorialized inside the game, and the angel in front of the memorial heals other players, for example, when they die in battle. The memorial is located on a hilltop in the Barrens, west of the Crossroads. (Screenshot the courtesy of Heidi Similä, 2009.)

The memorials are listed on the wiki page of the game (<http://www.wowwiki.com/Category:Memorials>). There are a total of 19 memorials programmed as part of the gaming world either as non-player characters (NPC) or as part of the visual appearance, knitting together the

⁶⁸ The memorials in *World of Warcraft* are listed at <http://www.wowwiki.com/Category:Memorials>. *Second Life* memorials are listed at <http://secondlife.com/destinations/memorial> (excluding the Linden Memorial Park). (Viewed 12/11/2011.)

‘story’ of the game. Memorials in *World of Warcraft* have to be requested from the game company Blizzard, which is why they are not as common as in *Second Life*. However, gamers can create as many events as they please.

Other gaming environments/communities

Memorial activity in online games is not concentrated solely on *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft* but is common in other popular online games as well. I have documented memorial activity in other gaming environments to understand the scale of the phenomenon. Initially, I wanted to include *Aces High II*, a flight simulator of a World War II online game, since it came to my knowledge that there had been various memorials arranged in the game, but when I began conducting my fieldwork, I realized that I needed to limit my research material at some point. I made the pragmatic choice to arrange my material according to whether the source was primary or secondary, where the secondary sources would work as complimentary material to understand the scale of the phenomenon. Examples from other gaming environments work as secondary sources and to highlight multiple contexts or gaming cultures in general.

5. Online surveys and interviews

Online surveys

The main approach to my research material has been qualitative instead of quantitative, but in order to understand this phenomenon and its users in a holistic manner and to gather people for further interviews, I created three online surveys, which had either open or multiple choice questions. I used www.surveymonkey.com, since it seemed user-friendly and multi-faceted, but also because the basic version of the application was free of charge. The research itself required triangulation of both methodology and the material, which is why I decided to use a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Surveys as research methods have been a topic of contention among researchers in humanities (Alastalo 2005, 113–114), and many anthropologists, for example, relate surveys as sociological research and too general to make any quantitative conclusions. However, surveys in online research are a quick and economical way to gather a fair amount of data, since they enable contacting people for further interviews and gathering general and contextual information from

different countries. However, according to sociologist Marja Alastalo (2005), attitudes towards surveys have been changing throughout the past decades. In her dissertation *Metodisuhdanteiden mahti* (eng. The Power of Method Trends), Alastalo reflects on how various research climates have been affecting both teaching and the conducting of research in Finnish universities. She discovered that dissertations reflect the research climate of their time and, in relation to survey research, depends on current attitudes on whether survey research is popular or not. The current “trend” is to combine both quantitative and qualitative approaches and use theoretical interpretation frames that may even be the opposite of each other, but the objective is to highlight the various nuances, not to find the absolute truth. (Alastalo 2005, 113–115.)

Initially, at the beginning of my master’s thesis in 2007, I aimed only to contact people directly, asking for research permission of their memorial and inquiring about whether they would be interested in an email interview about their experiences. I thought that this would provide me with a small group of people, which would be qualitatively rich. I sent over 70 research requests⁶⁹, and only 6 people replied and gave me research permission; the others did not give me any response. I realized that I needed to try another approach, where the people would be the initiating part of the process and offer themselves to my research. The research topic itself, mourning and honoring, is a very private experience and emotionally sensitive, which is why – later – it seemed only logical that people experienced my approach as intruding on their privacy.

Information about my research and surveys were spread through “a virtual jungle drum”, where Facebook played one part and my research blog (<http://bittiavaruuteen.blogspot.com>) played the other. On Facebook, I used my own profile info and posted research requests regularly on my own Wall, on *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* pages and on the page of the University of Turku. I posted in different gaming forums⁷⁰, and a few of my friends promoted the research in their own private gaming communities. In addition, as already mentioned previously, I promoted my research with a small ad on the Finnish virtual candle website.

In survey psychology, the interest has been on the possible bias that the surveys themselves can create. The outcome of the survey is influenced by its layout, questions, semantic differences and

⁶⁹ First selected only memorials that seemed to be active in a way that some effort had been put in the creation of the memorial and there would be some comments or candles being lit by visitors. However, since it was difficult to receive feedback from the memorial builders, I decided to send interview request randomly by clicking different memorials on the website and only tried to contact an even amount of males and females. Male memorial builders were more difficult to find, which might imply that the majority of memorial website users are females.

⁷⁰ <http://www.wowwiki.com/Forum:Index>, <http://community.secondlife.com/t5/Forums/ct-p/Forums>

aims of the survey. The context of the survey has to be considered as well, since, for example, clicking a survey from a pop-up window and receiving a survey request via email contain very different contextualities that the recipients evaluate and then determine whether they will take part in the survey. (Selkälä 2013, 106–107.)

The problems of surveys lies in the communication between the researcher and the respondent, which is limited or even impossible. The interviewer cannot ask clarifying questions at the same speed as in a discussion in person, but the amount of data can be bigger in a fairly short amount of time. However, the responses can vary greatly in quality (some answer in great length, some only in few words), but this is where the researcher must reflect on the questions beforehand. They must be short but also descriptive enough to alert qualitatively rich answers. Additionally, in surveys the questions follow each other more rapidly than in a discussion, which is why the previous question is still active in the respondent's memory and can affect the results of the following question (Selkälä 2013, 110). Too much description or examples can lead the answers in the wrong direction, where the respondents own intuition is mislead by the question itself (Selkälä 2013, 109). This was shown especially in relation to one question of mine, where I asked if there was a difference between actual and virtual memorials and to give an example of lighting a virtual and actual candle. 90% of the responses reflected upon only lighting virtual and actual candles, but they did not reflect any other rituals or memorials (such as visiting the cemetery). Furthermore, the quality of the answers varied, but at some point there was not anything new in the responses and they began to repeat themselves. At that point, after two years of gathering answers, I decided the data was saturated.

The aim of the surveys was to understand particular ways to mourn online and to map out the general attitudes and beliefs towards virtual mourning and honoring. I used three different themes: online gaming memorials, social media and online memorials in general. "*Virtual Memorials in Online Games*" was aimed at *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft* players (n=70), "*The grief process on the Internet*" examined the general attitudes and beliefs of virtual mourning and honoring (n=41), and the third survey, "*Facebook and Memorial Groups*", reached out to the Finnish users of Facebook memorial groups and pages (n=42). Most of the respondents were from the age groups 23–30 (n=50), 31–40 (n=36) and 41–40 (n=36), which did not surprise me, since the common use of social media and online gaming belongs to the first age group but in the latter the experience of losing an intimate is most probable.

Country of origin:	Age ≤16	Age 16-22	Age 23-30	Age 31-40	Age 41-50	Age 51-60	Age 61-70	Total:
Finland	1	8	18	20	16	10	1	74
United States	-	3	20	9	13	3	2	50
Great Britain	-	-	6	4	3	2	-	15
Other	-	1	6	3	4	-	-	14
Total:	1	12	50	36	36	15	3	153

Table 5. The surveys mainly reached people from the United States and Finland (as intended) but also people all around Europe (e.g. Poland, the Netherlands, Sweden and Spain), which reveals the international nature of the research sites.

The surveys had one common section, which consisted of 13 arguments about death, mourning and honoring. People could choose their opinions on a scale of 1-5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Only 68 people responded to this section, which from the total of 153 responses is quite a small amount. Several people skipped the section, which was unfortunate and due to my settings failure in the survey application. However, I believe the survey answers are sufficient for my research, since the purpose was not to create quantitative data but to reach people for further interviews and gain contextual understanding about mourning and honoring online.

Online interviews

The respondents could leave their email address, if they permitted contacting themselves for further questions and a more thorough online interview. Some researchers have found that addressing only one email at a time assures more responses than sending the same email to many addresses (see e.g. Joinson 2005, 28). In total, I contacted 62 people for clarifying questions, and 38 people were interviewed with longer email correspondence. The longest email interview lasted 1 year and 2 months and the shortest 3 weeks, which also showed in the interview responses since the grief was not as acute anymore after several months from the beginning of the interview. However, this type of interviewing enabled the interviewee also to reflect their own emotions, and as a researcher I could observe how their attendance on the memorial decreased over time.

Email interviewing is asynchronous compared to interviews in person (Kivits 2005, 35). It is difficult to maintain a research relationship, since it is easy to just not answer research requests or stop answering the emails during the interview. In order to keep the interviewees engaged in the interviews, I shared details about my personal life in order to create a feeling of trust and mutual

understanding, but also to give a personal feeling to the situation and to who I am as an individual. Many emails began with apologies and explanations as to why the person had not been able to respond earlier due to their family/work/school duties, although I stressed that there was no rush and they could answer at a pace most suitable to their personal needs. Jöelle Kivits (2005) made similar choices in her research about information seekers in health care. She began her emails with information about herself as a person to provide a face for the “anonymous” researcher behind the screen.

The stage of mutual self-disclosure is essential in setting up the basis of the interview relationship as it enables participants not only to be more familiar with the project, but also to ask the researcher personal questions and to add, to the interview objective, other threads to the email communication (Kivits 2005, 40).

Johanna Uotinen has also written about empathy in interviews, although Uotinen reflected situations where the research situation occurred in person (Uotinen 2005, 74). Nevertheless, an email interview requires similar skills of empathy and intuitive understanding of the situation in question. As Uotinen did in her research of domestication of CMC technology in the Karelian area, I constantly asked myself how I would feel in a similar situation, where an anonymous (and often foreign) researcher would contact me at the time of loss and bereavement. I used a significant amount of time for the first emails I sent, so that they would appear as very polite, respectful and empathic. Also, during the interview process I reflected the notion, that since I – personally – had experiences of grieving, I must try to “think out of the box” and try not to assume things too much. The legacy of George Marcus’ *reflexive turn*⁷¹ has been strong in my anthropology studies, which is why it has affected the way I have both analyzed the research data, as well as how to choose a specific methodology, which is why I have asked: how do my choices affect the results? How have I influenced the results by selecting specific questions and themes during the interviews? Has my age, occupation and gender affected the way people answered in the interviews, or even their willingness to participate? All these questions relate to the importance of ethnographic contextual information, which seeks to fill out the blank spots. Digital culture

⁷¹ George Marcus and James Clifford published their work *Writing Culture* (1986) as a response to the political debate in anthropology in the 1980’s, where the aim of Marcus and Clifford was to reinterpret the way ethnographies were being conducted as well as produced as research texts. Now, thirty years later, Marcus argues, that we are facing another challenge of multi-sited ethnographies, where geographical distances lose their previous meaning in the globalized world (Marcus 2014, 32–33). The *reflexive turn* Marcus references began early before the publication of *Writing Culture* (1986) and began to question what kind of information the researcher themselves bring into the research situation with their gender, age, sexual orientation or other demographic details.

itself, as a discipline, does not overlook the importance of contextuality, since it is derived from multiple sources in order to create a coherent image of the subject being studied.

Virtual world researchers Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce and T.L. Taylor (2012, 101) have written about a skill of *textual listening* – similar to Uotinen’s emphatic understanding – which according to them is “unique to online research and requires the understanding of the nuance and conventions of online communication”. Boellstorff et al. agree that text is missing the usual vocal and bodily cues that are typical in a face-to-face situation, but people have found a way to enrich computer mediated communication and of which the researcher must be intimately aware of. For example, spelling (such as not using capital letters, errors in punctuation), formality/informality, using written forms of dialect and smileys reveal a little about the personality at the other end of the email correspondence. Being able to practice the abovementioned textual listening requires extensive experience from various forms of online communication, since instant messaging, chat applications and emails are different types of mediums, which have their own communication culture and culturally appropriated ways of expressing yourself. In other words, *digital nativeness* (Prensky 2001).

For example, when I interviewed people with my avatar, Morita Hoxley, in *Second Life*, I needed to both understand the technicalities of the Second Life program as well as the communication culture in-world, which would also depend on the avatar contexts and whether the people being interviewed were role-playing in the world. Initially I contacted the founders of the Remembering Our Friends (ROF) memorial park, Mike Burleigh and Carlo Dufvaux, for interviews and we had a (virtual) meeting with Carlo at the memorial park. With the help of Mike and Carlo, I managed to get in contact with other people who had either created memorials in ROF or elsewhere in the world.

Since people using *Second Life* either use it for role-playing or as an extension of the person they actually are in real life (or in their *1st life*), the interviews were a complex mix of in-character and out-of-character situations. In other words, the avatars are created and used to resemble the people behind them or as part of fantastical stories created inside the game. The role-players I interviewed did not leave their characters aside when talking to me, and the general dynamic of the group was

according to the roles and the stories they were playing in the game⁷². Having an interview in such an environment requires from the researcher at least some knowledge of the dynamics of role-playing as well as the world itself. Nadia, being one of my key informants, thoroughly explained the language codes of the world and how the game lore took place in the chat window.

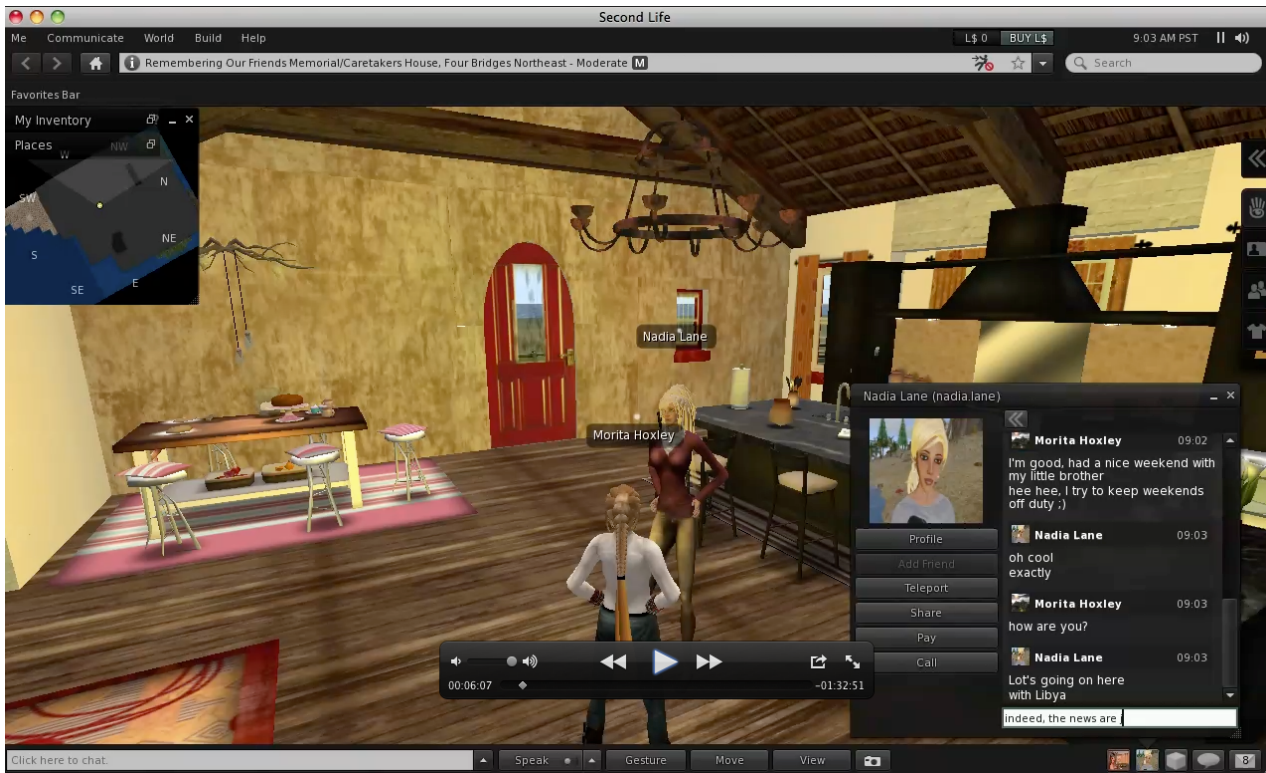


Image 16. A screenshot taken of a recorded meeting with Nadia in the *Remembering Our Friends* memorial park area, which also had a small house belonging to the founders of the memorial park. The house was publicly accessible and also listed as a location, which is why it was easy to teleport to and use for meetings. The message box on the right was used for private messaging, and the actual chat window was placed on the left. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 2/27/2011.)

Nadia considered me a rookie (or a ‘n00b’⁷³) in the world, and she was kind with her elaborate explanations. I did not tell her that I was already familiar with most of the things she wanted to explain, since some of the information (especially about the dynamics of SL) actually was new and I enjoyed talking to her. Personally, I have some experience of role-playing, since I have

⁷² Boellstorff et al. (2014, 101) also note, that some users also enrich their discussion with drawings made of text characters (for example a rose (@)--;---). Facebook has enabled the textual emoticons to be visually transformed into images, such as a traditional smiley :) is transformed to a round yellow smiling face. Currently different emoticons are highly popular in mobile applications, such as Instagram (picture sharing application) and WhatsApp (instant messaging application).

⁷³ *Noob* (also known as *n00b*) originates from the word *newbie*, which refers to a new person and someone inexperienced. *Rookie* has a similar meaning. (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=noob>, accessed 12/23/2013.)

experimented with it on various occasions, both online and offline. Having friends who role-play and LARP (live action role-playing) and who are familiar with other forms of fantasy games has also given me insight in to how these people interact with each other and what the common social codes are. Despite my experiences, the group interview I conducted with Nadia and her role-playing community was both difficult and interesting, since the people seemed to be mostly talking aloud and to each other and I often felt almost invisible. Nadia, being a virtual journalist, ushered the discussion, also to my benefit, since being a non-native English speaker, my responses and questions were not as swift as hers. The pleasantries the people exchanged when meeting us (me and Nadia) were also according to the roles they played in the community.

Despite my efforts, the Linden Lab Company, the founder of the Linden Memorial Park, did not answer my requests for any interviews⁷⁴. The memorial park was closed from new memorials in the summer of 2011, but the area remains open for visitors, and I continued to explore the area on my own but did not meet any people there for interviews.

There is always a notion of suspicion in conducting interviews – both from the interviewer and interviewee – and especially in online context I sometimes had to question the veracity of the responses. It is not always possible to verify the interviewee’s claims, for example in the case of Second Life interviews where the people did not always disclose their actual and offline identities, but it is not always even necessary (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 100). Boellstorff et al. (2012, 100) note that as anthropologists (and digital culture researchers) “we are interested in cultural meanings and practices and can usually confirm broad patterns through participant observation and interviews with other informants”. In this case exaggerations and even lying can also reveal important details about the subject in question. However, since most of the responses both from the surveys and the interviews resonated with each other I believe the results from the interviews were successful.

⁷⁴ I was traveling to San Francisco in the spring of 2010 and would have been able to visit the headquarters.

(4) Unintentional memorials – acts of community and collectivity

Not all memorials are intentionally created. They are initially intended to be profile pages on social media, personal blogs, video compilations of gaming or other fun activities, photo albums and even chat room nicknames. All of these materials represent a personality behind them, an individual, who interacts with various people in various online environments. The materials become emotionally loaded artifacts, albeit created of pixels, but nevertheless meaningful representations of identities and relationships, culture and community after an individual related to these materials dies. Death turns these spaces – and digital materials – into meaningfully experienced places for family and friends to seek solace from each other; to remember, honor and feel connected to the deceased and others bereaving.

Many scholars have used the term *spontaneous* to describe memorials that are created in locations not originally meant for memorialization purposes (e.g. Santino 2006; Sumiala 2013), such as places where they died and places where the person worked or lived. However, the definition of *spontaneous* is very different from *intentional*: the first indicates *an impulsive action or proceeding from natural feeling or native tendency without external constraint*⁷⁵, and the latter refers to *an action done deliberately, planned or intended*⁷⁶. With these definitions in mind, I will concentrate on the intentionality, the free will and deliberate action of creating virtual memorials.

In this chapter, I will discuss how unintentional memorials are being created in online environments that have not been initially intended for memorializing purposes. First, I will introduce an autoethnographical example from Facebook and study the meaning of digital last words that are left by the deceased in online environments. The case example was chosen from my personal autoethnography, since it reveals the process of how a virtual space becomes a symbol for the deceased in real-time, which I would not have been able to observe with an interviewee. Instead, it would have been a remembered reflection of the past. In addition, the autoethnography as a research method in online environments (instead of ethnographical participant observation) proved itself an extremely fruitful way – albeit emotionally difficult because of the topic – to gather qualitative research data. Furthermore, in the following chapter, I will discuss the meaning

⁷⁵ Merriam Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/spontaneous>, accessed 1/15/2013.

⁷⁶ Merriam Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intentional>, accessed 1/15/2013.

of crisis management with a social media application and how acts of honor are being produced online with a case example of Reima, who founded a closed group on Facebook after his wife suffered a stroke. The group was intended as a place and way of rehabilitation, but after his wife not surviving, it became a place for family and friends to share their feelings privately and intimately. From there, I will continue to case examples of a memorial event organized in *World of Warcraft* which was attacked by a rival group of gamers. The attack was recorded and later distributed on YouTube, from where I used one particular video named *Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHJVolaC8pw>). I will analyze the notions of solidarity and codes of conduct within the frame of this particular event, which keeps on receiving comments in the version on YouTube. Finally, in the last chapter, I will explore the notion and experience of co-presence and community and how they are being constructed within unintentionally created virtual memorials.

1. Becoming of a memorial and the significance of last words

The use of virtual technology for death and mourning rituals is culturally a new phenomenon and often not even considered as a ritual practice because of the novelty of it⁷⁷. However, people practice many rituals unintentionally, since the very concept of a ritual is often understood only from religious contexts (Bell 1992; 1997). In this chapter, I am interested in exactly how online spaces and activities become ritualized in a very profane context. This is why the key concept in this chapter is *unintentionality*, where undeliberate activity creates the memorial and memorialized space. When asked about (offline) mourning and honoring rituals, people often described lighting candles in front of the picture of the dead, planting or having fresh flowers at home and at the gravesite and visiting the graveyard during anniversaries. Seldom did they describe how they browsed the photos of their loved one on Facebook during anniversaries, visited their profile just to read the status updates or repeatedly read the blog the person wrote. These actions were done unintentionally among other things during their daily activities. A ritual itself is often conceptualized through culturally shared behavior – such as the abovementioned graveyard visiting – but, because of the novelty of online rituals, they are currently in the process of being culturally defined and appropriated.

⁷⁷ The profanity of the Internet can sometimes highlight the ritual act of honoring and remembering, but often responding to a status update and joining a memorial group are not considered a form of death ritual, which according to Bell “is central to many practices and strategies of ritualisation that people do not always see themselves as actually constructing such events. They are more apt to perceive themselves as simply responding to circumstances[–]” (Bell 1997, 167).

Memorial activity in online environments has resemblance to spontaneous memorials in the offline world (see Image 14. and 15.). Spontaneous memorials are usually created for victims of tragedies, such as traffic accidents or other occurrences that are socially considered accidental or otherwise for no reason (e.g. a disease, old age). (see e.g. Azaryahu 1996; Haney et al. 1997; Everett 2000; Clark & Franzmann 2006; Santino 2006; Doss 2006; Margry & Sánchez-Carretero 2007.) It is likely that the ritualized custom of spontaneous memorials has paved the way for the appropriation of online memorials.⁷⁸



Image 17. A roadside memorial in Greenwich, London, where a cyclist was killed in a car accident. The place of the accident gathered several typical spontaneous memorial items, such as candles, signs and teddy bears. Later, a bicycle painted white (“Ghost Bike”) was added to the memorial and flowers were changed to artificial versions, which would not wither. The memorial became a permanent part of the location. (see also Voigts, 2013; photo by Anna Haverinen, 9/23/2011.)

⁷⁸ For example, in the wake of the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on September 11th 2001 hundreds, if not thousands of websites, were expanded or created expressly for the purpose of memorializing and commemorating the losses incurred (Foot & Schneider, 2004; Siegl & Foot, 2004).



Image 18. In the Remembering Our Friends memorial chapels area, in the center of the square, there is one memorial place which all the three memorial chapels surround. Jeffrey Pastorelli was one of the contributors of the memorial area but unfortunately died shortly after the launching of the ROF. His memorial is a great example of how memorial items, *mementos*, are being used in virtual worlds as well, since there are several items placed on his memorial. (Screenshot of screenvideo Anna Haverinen, 1/18/2011.)

The difference between spontaneous and unintentional memorials is the motive behind the action: *Spontaneous* by definition might resemble *unintentional*, but *spontaneous* at the same time is more *deliberate* than *unintentional*. Unintentional memorials are not intended as memorials, but are created by people accessing the particular space with the same motivation: to mourn and seek solace in a place somehow connected to the deceased. The space in question has a linkage to the deceased, since he/she created the online material in question or otherwise played a significant role in the environment. A spontaneous memorial has a similar linkage, since it can be erected in a place where the person lived, worked, spent time (e.g. sports area, a pub, a library...) or died. Spontaneous memorials are created from different keepsakes and mementos, such as flowers, notes, teddy bears and candles, which are placed in a specific area related to the deceased.

What is similar between virtual memorials and the abovementioned spontaneous memorials are the keepsakes people leave in the location, although in the virtual versions the keepsakes are often links to YouTube videos, digital photos, screenshots, song lyrics, poems, quotes from the Bible,

stories or hearts (<3)⁷⁹. However, in online gaming environments and shared virtual worlds the keepsakes can be very similar as in the offline world, since they are three-dimensional spaces, where objects, albeit immaterial and digital, such as teddybears, candles, flowers and other items, are possible to display (see Image 15.)

At the beginning of this research, online mourning was an entirely unfamiliar practice for myself, which is why I made an effort to especially understand what the motivation to mourn online is and how people do it, since it seemed like an alien way for myself to remember the memory of a loved one. Since the research material was international, I wanted to keep my interviewees on an equal level, and in-person interviews with only a few people (in this case, only Finns) would have been an unequal setting. However, online interviews (email, Facebook chat and avatar-mediated interviews in *Second Life*) did not provide as much contextual knowledge as I wanted, and as an anthropologist and an ethnographer I am trained to place myself as an individual and a researcher into the same research realm. In order to step in to the shoes of my interviewees and understand all of the features of virtual memorial websites, I decided to use the memory of my late father in order to reflect on the choices and feelings during the process of creating a virtual memorial. I could have used the memory of my grandmother as well, since she died when I was a teenager and my father died when I was three, but somehow it felt more appropriate to use the memory of my father. However, after doing my fieldwork for awhile, it did not seem like a suitable way to explore the experience and the entire process felt forced and unfruitful. Only later did I realize that the experience of losing a close relationship was not fresh enough to understand the emotions of pain and loss in an online context.

An unhappy event came to my “rescue”, when in June of 2008 I lost a friend, with whom I was mostly connected to on Facebook, and I was forced to actually *live through* the experience of using Facebook to seek solace for my own grief and to be with the people who knew her. In the following autoethnography, I will describe the situation and context of this particular event.

I was temporarily living in Kotka city, some 133 km from Helsinki, working as a head guide at the Maritime Museum of Finland, when I learned about her death. I remember having my breakfast in front of the computer (as usual), checking my Facebook messages and listening to the morning radio broadcast. I was living in student housing that summer in an ascetically furnished room,

⁷⁹ According to linguistic researcher Carmen Frehner, “the missing paralinguistic cues are substituted by various features imitating speech such as [--] the employment of capital letters to express loudness or, most obvious, the use of spoken vocabulary as well as the use of emoticons to indicate the mood of a statement” (Frehner 2008, 168-69).

where my world usually focused around my computer and my connections on social media. Suddenly our mutual friend sends me a message through Facebook chat saying: “Katie⁸⁰ has died, she killed herself!!”

I felt my blood rush from my face out of shock and disbelief. “No. This cannot be happening”, I thought and started crying. I knew they were really close friends, and we were hundreds of kilometers apart, and I felt useless trying to help her during the chat. Everything I wrote sounded wrong, flat and banal. I wanted to reach out and hug her, because I knew anything I would say would not help. Earlier that spring, Katie had hospitalized herself because of her depression, and I had tried to contact her on Facebook, asking how she was doing and whether she would like to get coffee with me or something. I could not help myself thinking if only I could have done something more. Maybe I should have called her, maybe I should have visited her in the hospital, maybe this would not have happened if all of her friends would have made more of an effort. I felt guilty for not doing enough, although some part of me tried to reason that we weren’t even that close, so my possible efforts would not have helped. Nevertheless my guilt stayed with me. I went to see Katie’s profile, and I could see our common friends posting solemn wishes on her Wall, such as “safe travels dear friend”, but their own personal status updates were of disbelief, anger and pain: “can’t believe she did it!!” and “this is the worst day of my life!”

I kept reading all of the messages on Katie’s Wall and eventually found a message from Katie’s mother from a few days earlier, where she asked if anyone had heard about Katie and that they should urgently contact her (the mother) immediately if they knew something. I could sense the terror in her words, not knowing what had happened to her daughter, hoping for the best but expecting the worst. A few hours later she had posted: “Katie has been found. Thank you all for helping, she is in a better place now.”

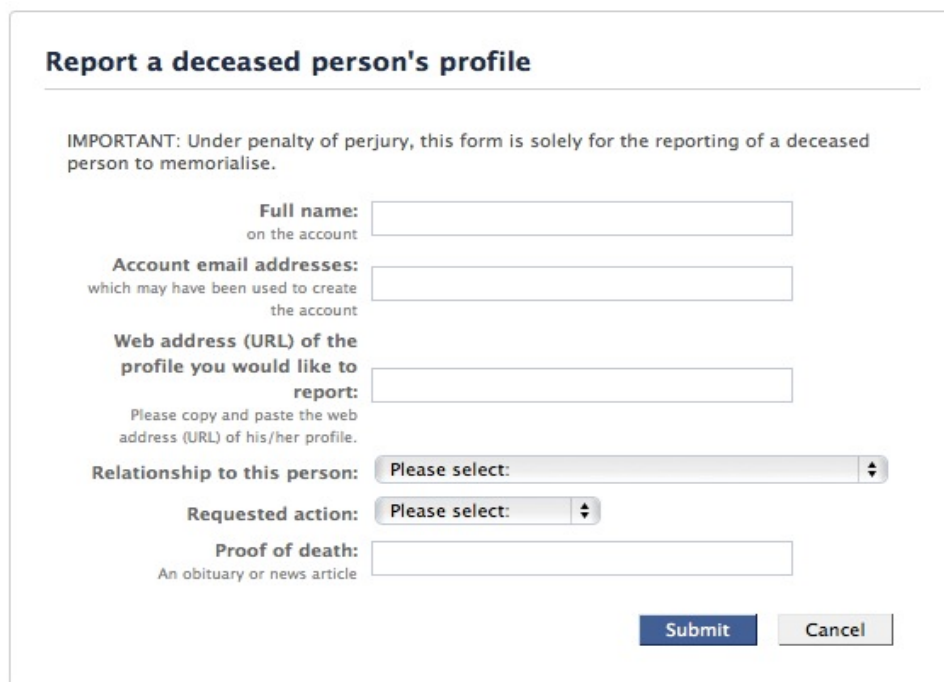
The word about Katie’s suicide spread fast with the help of Facebook and mobile phones, which I learned from all the messages appearing on Katie’s Wall. I found out details about her death and how deliberately she had planned everything; how she had left letters to her family and made sure that her two pets were in good care. No loose ends were left behind, besides the question in everybody’s mind: “could I have prevented this?”

The following month it became a routine of reading every morning and evening what others had

⁸⁰ Name changed.

written, and there were dozens of messages each day. People ‘liked’ each other’s posts, posted song lyrics and YouTube video links and shared memories they had of Katie. The memories were the posts that were most ‘liked’ and commented on, since through these memories everyone came to know more about her and could reminisce together. Although I did not know Katie’s family, I felt better seeing the messages from her mother and sister, since it kept me up to date on their wellbeing. I did not know Katie well, and I could only imagine the terror and pain her family and close friends were going through, but still I wanted to show how much I had liked her by ‘liking’ their posts on Katie’s Wall and just “being there”, present albeit virtually⁸¹.

After a few months, the only people posting regularly were Katie’s sister and mother, who also contacted Facebook officials in order to memorialize Katie’s profile. Memorializing is a form of deactivation of the profile creating “a passive profile”, without removing it from the service (Facebook Help Center, accessed 9/20/2012). It allows the friends to interact with each other through the profile, for example by posting on the Wall of the memorialized profile, but it is no longer itself part of the social interaction⁸².



The image shows a web form titled "Report a deceased person's profile". At the top, there is a warning: "IMPORTANT: Under penalty of perjury, this form is solely for the reporting of a deceased person to memorialise." Below this, the form contains several fields and dropdown menus:

- Full name:** A text input field with the subtext "on the account" below it.
- Account email addresses:** A text input field with the subtext "which may have been used to create the account" below it.
- Web address (URL) of the profile you would like to report:** A text input field with the subtext "Please copy and paste the web address (URL) of his/her profile." below it.
- Relationship to this person:** A dropdown menu with the text "Please select:" and a downward arrow.
- Requested action:** A dropdown menu with the text "Please select:" and a downward arrow.
- Proof of death:** A text input field with the subtext "An obituary or news article" below it.

At the bottom right of the form, there are two buttons: "Submit" (in a blue box) and "Cancel" (in a grey box).

Image 19. A screenshot of Facebook’s *Report of a deceased person’s profile*. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 2/13/2012.)

⁸¹ Walter describes this action as a ritual act of solidarity (Walter 1994, 174, 178), which I will explore further in chapter (4) 3. *Acts of solidarity and acts of disgrace*.

⁸² In other words, Facebook no longer suggests tagging the friend in pictures, greeting them on their birthdays and promoting any of their previous ‘likes’ in the Newsfeed, such as “Katie liked Fazer chocolate”, which suggests that you could like Fazer as well.

It is our policy to memorialize all deceased users' accounts on the site. When an account is memorialized, only confirmed friends can see the timeline or locate it in Search. The timeline will also no longer appear in the Suggestions section of the Home page. Friends and family can leave posts in remembrance. (Facebook Help Center, accessed 9/20/2012.)

Additionally, the profile of the deceased can not be found by someone who is not already their friend, which means they can not send friend requests. The friends of the deceased can find the profile Search hits⁸³, but, however, in January of 2013, I was not able find Katie's profile, when using the Search box in the upper corner of the page. I needed to click on my Friends list displayed on the left side of the page, contributing some effort. The memorialization also originally hid all the status updates of the deceased, which upset me, since I would have wanted to read her posts.

Facebook has evolved a lot as a social media application since it was launched in 2004, and it keeps making changes. Not all of the changes are announced for some reason, and they often appear only when searching for something particular, which was the case when I tried to find Katie's profile. In the spring of 2013, Facebook made changes to the memorializing feature and they restored all the status updates of the deceased, possibly because of the pleas of the Facebook users⁸⁴, which were not, again, visible to all of the friends of the deceased.

People leave surprising things in their online profiles. At the time of an accident, the last messages do not gain the same meaning as in the case of a suicide, since suicide is more deliberate and the bereaved often might feel there should have been visible signs to read before the incident. When FB restored the status updates, I read them all, and Katie's last status update was a thank you to all of her friends, and at the time – before her suicide – it seemed to relate to her birthday, which had been a week before (people posted congratulations on her Wall). But now, five years later, when the update became visible again, it struck me how the status seemed like a final thank you to her friends before her suicide of two weeks later. I can only imagine that she must have known that

⁸³ The Search is the box in the upper corner of the service, where users can find people, events, groups and other things on Facebook. I personally use it to find my current friends' profiles if they are not logged in to the chat and I want to post or view something in their profiles, such as their photo albums, cover photos etc.

⁸⁴ After memorializing became possible in 2009, another group against the feature was created: The New Memorialize Feature – Campaign for Changes, which revealed the errors Facebook officials had made. At the time of writing this thesis, the group had lost its members, and the last post in the group is from the year 2011. (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/161774659156/?fref=tsp>, accessed 3/29/2013).

her status update would be there for others to see after her death. She left another message as well – deliberately or by accident – in her Microsoft Messenger program profile (the program was popular among my friends prior to Facebook). In Messenger, it was also possible to write a “status” on the messenger profile, and Katie’s last status read “to infinity and beyond!” It was a quotation from her favorite animation movie *Toy Story* (1995). After her suicide, the status gained a new meaning and it seemed like a final farewell. The message is still visible if I log in to the service and will stay visible as long as the service or feature exists.

Since I had not read her updates in years, I did not remember anything she wrote. Reading her updates all over again revealed the struggle she had with her deep depression. Realizing this made it difficult to even write about my autoethnography and Katie in this chapter. I had not had any training to analyze painful emotions such as grief and loss. It felt very real and very painful⁸⁵, although as a researcher I can understand the useful meaning of this situation, when I am forced to live the very same experience(s) as my interviewees. But as a person, I would have wanted to keep these emotions to myself, private and unpublished. I have the permission of Katie’s mother to use this material (as anonymized), and she herself answered to my survey, and we had an email interview as well, but ways to cope with emotions caused by painful research material are not taught in ethnography classes. We read about anthropologists “lost in the field”, when they for example marry a tribe member they were conducting their fieldwork with, but reading is not the same as experiencing. Actually experiencing the research topic provides the important *emic* insight for analysis and is more than using empathic understanding or participant observation (Geertz 1973; Gothóni 1997; Ellis & Bochner 2000; Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011).

Last words have significance to the people mourning and especially if the death has been tragic somehow. During this digital age, we leave much more words behind us than before. Text messages, emails, status updates, comments, ‘likes’, shares, chat logs and even phone numbers in our mobile phones become meaningful when the person behind them is suddenly gone. The above-explained autoethnography reveals the emotional importance of having the Facebook profile of a deceased friend online and accessible at all times, since it became a ritualized space, a medium for expressing ritualized discourse of mourning and honoring and a shared place for all of

⁸⁵ Sociologist and death researcher Jacqueline Watts (2007) has explored the meaning of a researcher’s emotions in ethnography of cancer patients and argues that empathy and emotions can work as instrumental tools of data collection and analysis when researching sensitive topics. Feelings can be reconceptualized as a form of the data analyzed and be an elemental part of the research process itself, which “produces an interwoven assemblage of individual subjectivities” (Watts 2007, 9; see also Rowling 1999; ; Dickson-Switft et al. 2007; Finlay 2002; Frank 2001).

Katie's friends to intimately connect to each other and remember her together. A social media profile page became an unintentional memorial to seek solace and knowledge at the time of a crisis, carry out acts of solidarity and, eventually, to mourn and honor intentionally.

2. Crisis management and real-time collectivity

The acute shock and disbelief a person feels after the death of a close person is the point when people usually seek out other people and information about what happened. The immediate family and close friends are the first people to find out, but they are not necessarily the only people the deceased had touched during their life⁸⁶. Social media, especially Facebook, can provide immediate flow of information to a great amount of people in a very short period of time. Before Facebook, all of this would have been done by mobile phones (text messages and phone calls), maybe even in Microsoft messenger or through email messages, but the amount of people who are now involved in (digital) networks of social relationships is massively larger.

In this section, I will introduce Reima, 51, who wanted to share his story about losing his wife and how he used Facebook to cope with his loss. His wife had had a sudden stroke, and Reima created a closed group on Facebook to inform specific friends and family about the situation, share news from the hospital, and, later, to use the group as a way to help his wife rehabilitate. The group gained a new purpose when his wife did not survive.

When I created the page, it was supposed to be just a tool to inform people during the crisis and share information straight from the hospital. I did not want to think about anything else, aside from herself later deleting the group as unnecessary after reading all the messages. I also thought it would have been a great way to help her rehabilitate, when she would see all the people caring and supporting her. The role of the forum changed naturally when [she] died. Friends had the opportunity to express their sorrow and condolences. [--] it worked as a

⁸⁶ In addition to dealing with dying, social media has given a new possibility to connect with people and have the sense of "real" life, especially during difficult treatments or in hospice. In Ireland, the hospice care encourages the terminally ill to write about their experiences in a form of a blog (Lowney & O'Brien 2012). In Finland, the Finnish blog reading application Blogilista provides, for example, over 70 blogs with the tag "cancer" (<http://www.blogilista.fi/haku?query=sy%C3%B6p%C3%A4&mode=blogs>, accessed 8/26/2013), where the writers themselves or their intimate is suffering from cancer.

*commemoration or a greeting card.*⁸⁷ (Reima, e-mail interview 4/12/2011, translated from Finnish, anonymized.)

As in the email interview quote above, Reima states three different purposes for the group: a) a way to inform and share information, b) a way to help his wife rehabilitate and c) a way to express sorrow and condolences (replacing a greeting card). The group was intended for only specific friends and family members, since it was easier to communicate inside the group instead of, for example, marking every status update with a specific audience or discussing the same things individually. When creating the group, Reima also created a private space for family and friends to express their sorrow together, privately from other Facebook users, who might not have known the deceased.

Reima was not the only person managing and creating the forum, but his children were an active part of the process from the beginning. It was a family project.

*We agreed beforehand with my children about the guidelines for the forum. We did not want to create a place of sobbing and feeling sorry for us, but of course we allowed posts of condolences. If pity for us would have gone too far, I would have restricted it.*⁸⁸ (Reima, e-mail interview 4/12/2011, translated from Finnish.)

Reima and his children did not want people “sobbing and feeling sorry for us”, since it can feel patronizing, underestimating and pitying. Managing the forum guidelines, they wanted to claim their personal autonomy in how they wanted to be treated, since the death of Reima’s wife not only posed him with a new identity, a widower, but also his children, as half-orphans, children without a mother. For the bereaved, these identities are not only hard to accept, since by acknowledging, for example, the status of a widower, the (very sudden) death of a spouse is being acknowledged at the same time. Preventing the act of “feeling sorry for us”, they also determined the social conduct in the online space, the original purpose of which was support, positive attitude, privacy and love.

⁸⁷ Quote in Finnish: ”Kun perustin sivun, sen oli tarkoitus olla vain sairaala-ajan kriisiviestinnän väline. Muuta en siinä vaiheessa halunnut edes ajatella, kuin että jonain päivänä hän itse luettuaan tekstiä, poistaisi foorumin tarpeettomana. Ajattelin myös että se voisi toimia kuntoutumisen välineenä, kun hän näkisi kuinka monet ihmiset hänestä välittävät ja häntä kannustavat. Foorumin rooli muuttui luonnollisesti, kun [hän] kuoli. Ystävät saivat foorumin kautta ilmaista surunsa ja osanottonsa. [--]se teki muistotilaisuuden tai adressin tehtävää.”

⁸⁸ Quote in Finnish: ”Sovimme lasteni kanssa etukäteen säännöistä foorumin käytössä. Emme halunneet siitä nyhkyttely- ja säälittelypaikkaa, mutta sallimme toki osaaottavat julkaisut. Jos säälittely olisi mennyt liian pitkälle, olisin rajoittanut sitä.”

*I wanted to restrict the membership so that we could avoid any type of social pornography, since the threshold to apply for the membership was at least something. All of the applicants were accepted, and no messages were deleted and no communication was restricted in any way.*⁸⁹ (Reima, e-mail interview 4/12/2011, translated from Finnish.)

Restricting the membership to specific people, the group was hidden from curious eyes, which Reima refers to as “social pornography”, which is a term often used in context with online voyeurism. Johanna Sumiala refers to the works of Laura Mulvey (1973) when analyzing the voyeuristic aspect of media representations of violent images. “The desire to see something private and forbidden is fulfilled through an act of voyeurism and the fantasy it nurtures”, she notes. (Sumiala 2013, 54.) Mourning as a feeling was noted in my interviews as a very private and intimate feeling, which should and would be shared only with specific people. Any other form, i.e. a public way, was considered socially unacceptable, attention-seeking and socially inappropriate behavior. For Reima, it was also a way to protect his children, himself and their family and friends in the group.

Reima anticipated that the group would not work as he intended, but the people being accepted surprised him positively, as they followed his and his children’s wishes. He already had previous experience of mourning on Facebook from another memorial group created for a friend, which is why he knew beforehand what kind of place he wanted to create and participate in. Creating the group was also an active way to determine how, when and what kind of support he wanted to have from people, for example, before and after the funeral.

*I could inform the people quickly that I did not wish to have withering flowers in my living room, and I founded a trust for that purpose[--].*⁹⁰ (Reima, e-mail interview 4/12/2011, translated from Finnish.)

The most common way to express condolences is to bring flowers to the bereaved. Flowers are not only symbols of (human) life but also socially and culturally approved ways of both greeting and showing affection. Withering flowers are often used as symbols of aging and the end of human

⁸⁹ Quote in Finnish: ”Jäsenyyden halusin rajatuksi siksi, että sillä välttäisimme sosiaalipornoilun, sillä kynnys hakeutua jäseneksi on kuitenkin jonkinlainen. Kaikki hakijat hyväksyttiin mukaan eikä yhtään viestiä poistettu tai muutoinkaan rajoitettu viestintää.”

⁹⁰ Quote in Finnish: ”Sain sitä kautta nopeasti välitettyä viestin, etten halua olohuonettani täyteen kuihtuvia kukkia, vaan perustin sitä varten rahaston[--].”

life, since the lifespan of flowers is short as human lives are. (Sumiala 2013, 47.) The bereaved have often discussed the burden of receiving a great amount of flowers that fill the house. One interviewee claimed she could not stand the smell of roses anymore, because they reminded her too much of the time after the funeral. Reima's approach was more pragmatic, and he wanted the money for the flowers to be channeled in a more useful way.

[--]I want to thank all of you friends for the support and compassion towards our entire family. The flower trust collected over 3500e, and we are contemplating using the money in a working group we founded. Some of the money will be used for the spring trip of [her] group.⁹¹ (Reima, memorial group post, April 2011, translated from Finnish, anonymized)

Reima himself described the group as a way of crisis management and said he found a great deal of support by discussing with people there and felt the group was a meaningful way to keep family and friends up to date on his wellbeing, without the need to discuss the same matters with each of them individually. In the group, they could comment on his posts collectively and, at the same time, see what other comments or replies to his posts were made. Communication was communal and strengthened the sense of community and co-presence in the group.

I'm doing alright with the everyday chores and even with the loneliness. A friend of mine provided me with a great visualization about surviving the mourning process. He put an hourglass on the table and said that the big lump of sorrow is slowly, bit by bit, pouring into the consciousness. In time, it will drain out and turn into longing. This is exactly how I experience it and cope with this.⁹² (Reima, memorial group post, April 2011, translated from Finnish.)

Nursing scientists Anna Liisa Aho, Merja Paavilainen and Marja Kaunonen have found similar results in their research of online support groups. In their article *Mothers' experiences of peer support via an Internet discussion* (2011), they summarize that the users of the support forum received emotional, informational and communal support through the discussions with people who

⁹¹ Quote in Finnish: ”[--]haluan kiittää kaikkia ystäviä tuesta ja myötätunnosta koko perhettämme kohtaan. Kukkarahasto tuotti yli 3500€ ja sen käyttöä pohdimme perustetussa työryhmässä. Osa käytetään [nimi poistettu] ryhmän kevätretkeen.”

⁹² Quote in Finnish: ”Pärjään ihan hyvin arjen askareiden ja yksinäisyydenkin kanssa. Ystäväni kertoi mielestäni mainion mielikuvan ihmisen selviytymisestä surutyössä. Hän laittoi pöydälle tiimalasin ja kertoi, että suuri surupaakku valuu hiljalleen vähän kerrallaan tajuntaan. Aikanaan se valuu tyhjiin ja muuttuu kaipaukseksi. Juuri näin minäkin asian koen ja sen avulla selviydyn.”

had similar experiences of losing a child. The discussion forum users claimed to have gained increased well-being from using the forum, where others “showed compassion, comforting, wishing strength, sustaining hope, encouraging to take care of oneself and giving feedback” (Aho, Paavilainen & Kaunonen 2011, 4.)

In the case of Reima, I also asked about the differences between offline and online activity and how they differ from each other. For example when comparing the meaning and experience of lighting a virtual candle and an actual candle at the cemetery, Reima claimed that in an online environment the importance comes from the possibility to share more effectively and collectively online. For Reima, an actual candle at home is a private action that is both for creating an atmosphere and honoring the memory of a loved one. However, in an online environment the candle is more visible to others and thus is a public and communal practice of remembering and honoring. He separated the content from the medium, where a virtual candle can serve the same purpose online as an actual candle at the cemetery.

Of course, a virtual candle serves a different purpose than an actual candle creating an atmosphere at home, but at the cemetery the candle is pretty much equal with the virtual version. Fewer friends are able to see the candle at the grave than on the Web (if they happen to visit the page).⁹³ (Reima, survey answer 4/12/2011)

Reima took an active part in moderating the expression of his grief and how others expressed their personal grief towards him. Thanatologist Tony Walter (1994) describes this activity as the *autonomy of the bereaved*, where mourning and honoring rituals are to restore the agency of the bereaved in their personal life. Facebook enabled Reima to claim his personal and family agency in regarding how they wanted to grieve and how they wanted to receive empathy and condolences. By telling everybody in the group that they did not wish to have the traditional flowers withering in their home but wanted the money to be used more usefully, they also challenged the cultural norm of offering condolences with flowers. Reima and his family also wished not to be pitied because of their loss and were positively surprised by how well the Facebook group worked in the way they intended: as a group of care and love.

⁹³ Quote in Finnish: ”Totta kai virtuaalikynttilä tekee kuitenkin eri tehtävää, kuin tunnelmaa luova kynttilä kotona, mutta haudalla tuo kynttilän merkitys lienee kuta kuinkin tasavertainen virtuaalisen kanssa. Harvempi ystävä oikean kynttilän näkee haudalla kuin sen voisi nähdä netissä (jos nyt joku sattuu vierailemaan sivulla...)”

3. Acts of solidarity and acts of disgrace

Many online applications invite ritualistic behavior and construction of community from their very programming and design. On official virtual memorial websites, the features contain inter alia virtual candles and obituaries, which are also featured on the front pages of the websites in the Latest Candles⁹⁴, Latest Memorials⁹⁵ or Angelveraries⁹⁶ sections. This way, any random browser of the site can see them and be triggered to click the features and browse memorials of people they do not necessary know. Often these types of people may leave a comment or light a candle as an act of solidarity and respect for the bereaving family, especially if the memorial (or the death) has been somehow relatable.

*The deceased was not very close to me. Joining the (memorial) group was a gesture towards the friends of the deceased.*⁹⁷ (Petri, 28 yrs., survey answer 8/3/2011, translated from Finnish.)

The official memorial websites also promote anniversaries and invite people to write in the memorial guestbooks and visit the site regularly by sending an email notification to the founder of the memorial every time a new candle is being lit or a comment has been posted. On Facebook, the website sends a notification about new comments, 'likes' and posts to all members of the memorial group, which invites people to react and comment on the posts further. Thanatologist Tony Walter (1994, 178–179) argues that the neo-modern individual does not seek ritual for its symbolism or communal action but as a representation of solidarity. Therapy can actually provide a similar conclusion than a religious ritual, but it requires neither community nor religious belief.

If modern death is a private affair, and revival encourages the sharing of personal feeling, then neither is conducive to ritual, for ritual is rooted in community and in socially approved not individually expressed emotion, in symbol more than memory, in action as much as in talk. The neo-modernist, especially the expressivist, seeks no ritual but talk – hence, for example, the life-centred funeral. (Walter 1994, 177).

⁹⁴ Memory-Of.com.

⁹⁵ Last-Memories.com.

⁹⁶ Virtual-Memorials.com.

⁹⁷ Quote in Finnish: ”Kuollut ei ollut kovin läheinen. Liittymiseni ryhmään oli ele vainajan ystäviä kohtaan.”

But from the vantage point of ritual theories, I would argue that talking is also a ritual and ritualized, whether it is talking to a therapist or to a family member. Showing support and offering condolences online are very much bound with the language being used, and there is a specific discourse of mourning and honoring (whether religious or not). ‘Liking’ status updates or posts on Facebook can feel like empty actions and too “profane”, when dealing with death and emotions such as sorrow and bereavement. The social pressure of articulating something is heightened in an online environment, where physical gestures can not be seen (e.g. a hug, facial expressions, a touch), which is why in the Finnish memorial groups expressions such as *tsempihali* (power hug), *jaksuhali* (comfort hug), *voimia* ([I wish you] strength) and heart symbols (<3) are used as a way of *ritualized communication*, which “readily affects the way language is used and the significance it is accorded” (Bell 1992, 113).



Image 20. An example from a Finnish memorial group, where one of the group members posted in English (the group and members were Finnish) and other members responded to the sadness of the post with hearts. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 9/8/2012.)



Image 21. Another example from a Finnish memorial group, where a girl named Filippa recalls a memory of the deceased about a time when they had been sliding down a sled hill and the deceased tried to “dunk” (i.e. jump) from a

take-off ramp. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 10/5/2012.)

According to sociologist Catherine Bell (1992, 91), ritualization differentiates sacred and profane acts from each other and gives more importance to the sacred. The interviewees and survey respondents highlighted the importance of “authentic support”, which implies that the person must mean what they write/say online. Otherwise the division between the sacred and the profane does not exist (although, consequentially, these “authentic gestures” can not be verified by the other person). Furthermore, whether the person was personally known or familiar in the media, for example, was separated by importance, authenticity and, as in the following quote, whether it is “corny” to mourn them or not.

*The appropriateness of mourning and honoring depends in my opinion on the context; a memorial made for a loved one is touching, but mourning an unknown person (for example, Karoliina Kesti, people killed in the Norway incidents) can sometimes be corny.*⁹⁸ (Anna, age not disclosed, survey answer, 10/9/2011, translated from Finnish)

Especially in the Finnish research material the appropriateness of mourning and honoring online was often debated. The negative attitudes were mainly from the people who had not had experience in online memorials and considered them as something more suitable for the young, or as mentioned earlier above, for those who do not have people to talk to in person.

*At first I felt it was strange, because I believe sorrow and mourning to be an intimate and a personal matter. Nowadays I am more understanding. Yet, I still do not know how I would act, when it comes to mourning. Honoring a memory is easier, although dignity and authenticity must be present. Sometimes, I have felt that in this case the Web can also provide a place for performance, which is why it has not always felt very correct.*⁹⁹ (woman, 48 yrs., survey answer, 10/26/2010, translated from Finnish)

In the quote above, the respondent stresses the difference between mourning and honoring online,

⁹⁸ Quote in Finnish: ”Suremisen ja kunnioittamisen sopivuus riippuu mielestäni kontekstista; jonkun läheiselle tehty muistomerkki on mielestäni koskettava, mutta tuntemattomien muistelu (esim. Karoliina Kesti, Norjan tapahtumissa kuolleet) saattaa olla välillä kornia.”

⁹⁹ Quote in Finnish: ”Aluksi vierastin sitä kovin, koska katson surun ja suremisen olevan intiimi ja henkilökohtainen asia. Nytemmin suhtaudun asiaan jo ymmärtäväisemmin. Silti en tiedä miten itse toimin, suremisen kohdalla. Muiston kunnioittaminen on helpompaa, vaikka siinä pitää muistaa säilyttää arvokkuus ja aitous. Toisinaan on tuntunut, että tässä myös verkko tarjoaa performanssipaiikkaa, siksi se ei aina ole tuntunut aivan korrektilta”.

from which she believes honoring to be more easily carried out in online environments. However, displaying mourning for her can sometimes feel like a performance, which she implies to be somewhat staged or *performed* or, in other words, not real. The separation between correct and incorrect display of mourning in her answer is similar to the secular-holy dichotomy in ritual theories. According to Bell, “acting ritually is first and foremost a matter of nuanced contrasts and the evocation of strategic, value-laden distinctions” (Bell 1992, 90). Online communication is still burdened – especially in Finland – with the 1980s discourse of unauthentic online communication, which displays online environments as too secular for an “intimate and personal matter”, such as mourning.

*The Web serves best for those who “do not have anybody” or those who do not know how to talk about their feelings in front of other people.*¹⁰⁰ (survey answer, Taina, 48 yrs., 10/22/2010, translated from Finnish.)

*Nowadays, it is perfectly normal, and there is nothing wrong with it, as long as the remembering and virtual mourning is genuine and does not offend anybody. For many people, the Internet is an easier way to express themselves, since during writing expressions of emotions do not matter and the encouraging support received from other can help a lot, unless the bereaved does not have anyone close to talk to.*¹⁰¹ (survey answer, Sonja, 18 yrs., 11/14/2010, translated from Finnish.)

Another similar stereotype of mourning online is displayed in the survey answers of Taina and Sonja, where they argue that the Internet and online mourning are for people who do not have anybody to talk to or are not accustomed to speaking about their feelings in front of other people. This stereotype of “socially awkward” people, who do not know how to communicate outside computer technology (Suominen 2009, 7–8), is sometimes noted in the survey answers, with a stress on the importance of face-to-face communication during grief.

When asked about the experience of paying respects online, woman, 48 yrs. claims she joined a memorial group on Facebook merely out of respect for the family, despite the fact that she felt the

¹⁰⁰ Quote in Finnish: ”Netti palvelee parhaiten niitä, joilla ”ei ole ketään” tai sitten ihmisiä, jotka eivät osaa puhua ja purkaa tunteitaan toisten nähden.”

¹⁰¹ Quote in Finnish: ”Nykyään aivan normaalia, eikä siinä ole mitään väärää, kunhan muistelu ja virtuaalinen sureminen on aitoa, eikä loukkaa ketään. Monille internet on helpompi tapa ilmaista itseään, sillä kirjoittaessa tuntee purkaukset eivät häiritse, ja muilta saatu rohkaiseva tuki voi auttaa hyvinkin paljon, ellei surevalla ole läheisiä joille puhua.”

environment was not suitable for such behavior.

The son of my friend died, and the son's FB page worked as a place of paying respects and offering condolences, also the mother participated in the discussion several times. She also wrote on her personal profile constant updates about the loss. Personally, I found this somewhat alien, although I was familiar with online environments, which would require me to have a "modern relationship" with the Web, maybe this is a question of personalities, I can share my joy, hide my sorrow?

¹⁰²(survey answer, woman 48 yrs., 10/26/2010, translated from Finnish, unitalized section altered for anonymization purposes¹⁰³)

In online gaming communities, many mourning practices are connected to the realm¹⁰⁴ and role-playing lore of the game world, which defines what players are allowed to do in the environment – both morally and by gaming design. For example in the case of *World of Warcraft*, commemorations can be attacked by other players if the realm being used is a player vs. player realm (PvP). A case that can be considered already “a classic” happened in March of 2006, when a rival group of players attacked a memorial service held by other players in a PvP realm. The group holding the memorial service publicly announced the event beforehand in a WoW related discussion forum and asked for the event to be respected by other players. Instead, a rivaling group attacked the funeral. The attack was recorded and later distributed¹⁰⁵ in various video services, especially on YouTube. The video used for analysis, *Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral*¹⁰⁶, has received over five million viewers since 2006 and continues to receive

¹⁰² Quote in Finnish: ”Läheiseni lapsi kuoli, pojan FB-sivut toimivat osanottoviestien vastaanottopaikkana, myös pojan äiti osallistui keskusteluun useasti. Lisäksi kirjoitti profiiliinsa jatkuvaa päivitystä menetyksestä. Itse koin tämän jotenkin vieraana, vaikka verkkoympäristöt ovat tuttuja ja sitä kautta pitäisi olla "moderni suhde" nettiin, ehkäpä tämä persoona kysymys, iloni voin jakaa, suruni piilotan?”

¹⁰³ The description of the respondent's profession deleted due to anonymization purposes.

¹⁰⁴ A realm (or a server) which determines how the players can interact in the world. Player vs. Player (PvP) is considered more difficult than Player vs. Environment (PvE), since in PvP the player can be attacked by any other player including the environment of entering an enemy zone. (http://www.wowwiki.com/PvP_realm, accessed 7/11/2012.)

¹⁰⁵ Other forms of honoring and remembering rituals in WoW are honorary quests and events that are organised by players around anniversaries or integrated in the actual game-play by the Blizzard Company, where avatars of deceased game players can be coded inside the game as a permanent part of the world. This notion I will discuss further in chapter (6) 2. *Mourning the avatar and the person behind the avatar*. Moreover, many of the events in online gaming environments are usually recorded with differing screen video programs and edited to memorial videos. These videos can be given to the family and/or friends of the deceased as keepsakes and distributed online as mementos of the deceased.

¹⁰⁶ The comments analyzed in this section are from the *Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral* video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHJVolaC8pw>, accessed 8/8/2013.

comments (46,350 comments on Aug 8th 2013). The commentary includes various opinions for and against the attackers, from amusement to anger, from angry debate to ambivalent opinions.

It actually seems kind of disrespectful and childish to hold a video game funeral; it might not have been a good idea to present such a thing to the family of the deceased. (comment X on the Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral video, accessed 7/12/2012.)

Well this is a video game. And by hosting the funeral in a pvp zone they were asking for it (comment Y on the Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral video, accessed 7/12/2012.)

Comment X points out how creating a commemoration in a video game environment is “childish” and “disrespectful”. Comment Y agrees with comment X by noting that “they were asking for it” (the attack), since they held the meeting in a combat-based PvP server, where the aim is to gain points by defeating others. The blame of the incident in both comments was posed upon the people holding the commemoration, and the discourse being used is surprisingly same as in any other victim-attacker situation from the actual world. However, not all commenters agree.

It's sad that they even thought it would be funny to crash a funeral, that shows no respect for the dead, virtual or not, it's still was rude. (comment Z on Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral video, accessed 7/12/2012.)

Because they were stupid, that exonerates the party responsible for taking the opportunity to desecrate the funeral?

No. They are still sociopaths, according to the dictionary definition.

It's not a fucking video game you dense piece of shit, it was a funeral. It superseded the fucking game, for a short amount of time. Getting ganked in PVP for anything else would be nothing, you're right, it's just a game.

But this was a funeral, and YOU are a sociopath for not being able to respect that. (comment F on the Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral video, accessed 8/28/2013.)

According to comment Z, online memorials should be considered similar to offline memorials, whether they are virtual or not. Holding a commemoration in a game supersedes the game world, and *communitas* (in the Turnerian sense) in WoW is both normative and existential, where social

codes of conduct should be applied in online communication as well. There was no difference between whether the funeral was in a virtual world or not; for them it was a real event, which was especially asked to be respected by other players. The avatar-user relationship is a complex mix of actual and virtual identities, role-playing and codes of conduct inside and outside of the game.¹⁰⁷ Also, the gaming environment itself creates borders around and within what is considered ‘real’ or ‘imagined’. Play researcher and historian Johan Huizinga first coined the term *magic circle* in his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1949[1938]), which studies the experience of play through the notion of a magical circle, in which the players follow specific rules and codes of conduct. Huizinga wrote:

All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the ‘consecrated spot’ cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (Huizinga 1949[1938], 10.)

Death transcends these borders and bleeds (ritualized) values from the offline to the online realm. The death of a co-player reminds all players of the fact that there are actual people behind the avatars, but for some users what happens inside the game world is considered not to affect the offline world, which often leads to cyberbullying and trolling¹⁰⁸. Researchers claim that reasons for hostile bullying online vary but are rooted in boredom and amusement. (see e.g. Hardaker 2010, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin 2013, 2012; National Crime Prevention Council United States 2007; Brandtzæg et al. 2009.)¹⁰⁹

The attack could also be seen as an anti-ritual, where ritualistic behavior is used to break the boundaries of another ritualistically created space. For example, the Finnish independence day

¹⁰⁷ This notion is discussed further in chapter (6) 2. *Mourning the avatar and the person behind the avatar.*

¹⁰⁸ Game researcher Frans Mäyrä has also discussed how online game players do not necessarily perceive other players/avatars as real people. Mäyrä claims that the degree of ‘social presence’ is “not a direct consequence of the media, but a complex part of the socially constructed reality” (Mäyrä 2008, 125; see also Gunawardena 1995).

¹⁰⁹ I will discuss avatars and mourning in online environments further in chapter (6) 2. *Mourning the avatar and the person behind the avatar.*

ceremonial reception at the presidential palace often evokes political protesters outside of the palace, protesting against the elite power, segregation, poverty, unemployment and the “ostentatious” party, where only specific people of the society are invited. By getting invited to the presidential hall, the individual is getting an acknowledgment from society that he/she is somewhat important and significant to society. The protests are also ritualistically creating an anti-ritual liminoid, where they are questioning the other ritual they are protesting against. (Sumiala 2013.) In the case of the YouTube video the attack itself, it shows a strong anti-ritual against the funeral and has cultural roots in actual history, where attacking a funeral is an attack against the sacred, attack against the intimate and private and where a ritual of mourning and honoring becomes a ritual of defending the right to bury the dead in peace, without conflict.¹¹⁰

Gaming environments and shared virtual worlds consist of another level of expressions of life (see Dilthey 1976, 219), since the visual information on the computer screen is seemingly three-dimensional and the avatar is not only a symbol of an individual and its physical being, but *it is the person* inside the virtual world. It moves, it talks and in the abovementioned case it kills other players. In a situation where the person behind the screen is channeling their own personal feelings, such as grief, through the avatar, the person can be more intimately involved in the situation and deeply vulnerable with their feelings. The boundaries between the online and the offline become blurred and insignificant.

Mourning in online gaming environments is a fairly new practice, and there are no fixed rituals and codes of conduct when it comes to online mourning and honoring, which is why disrespectful behavior is very common and often feared by mourners (Haverinen 2011). The abovementioned attack has caused players to create secret commemorations, especially in WoW (and other combat-based games), in order to keep their characters safe and be able to mourn in private.

Unintentionally created memorials online are especially vulnerable to the abovementioned activity, where acts of honor and solidarity can become acts of rudeness and even hostility. In the abovementioned case the actual video, *Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral*, was not intended as a memorial, but, due to a great number of Google hits, it has become a symbol, albeit

¹¹⁰ From the offline world, similar examples can be found from terrorism and war zones, such as Afghanistan or Northern Ireland, where, in the conflict areas, private ritual situations can be attacked by terrorists (see e.g. Brewer, Mitchell & Leavey 2013). Ethnologist Outi Fingerroos (2004, 269–272) has also written about ritualized power and death in her dissertation about death rituals in the Karelian area during the civil war in Finland in 1918. The deaths during the civil war were politicized and valued in different ways, which also led, for example, to attacks against the funeral party and disgracing the funeral ritual of the counterparty.

a warning, of mourning and commemorations in *World of Warcraft*, which attracts attention, debate and opinions several years after the original incident. Watching, sharing and commenting on the video also creates a ritual of mediatized witness while watching the suffering of the ‘other’ (Ellis 2009; Frosh 2009; Sumiala 2013).

According to game researchers Bonnie A. Nardi and Vicki O’Day (1999, 115; see also Boellstorff 2008), virtual worlds can become extensions of social reality, instead of the usual concept of escaping reality, and thus inherit social values and objectives from the real-life environment. However, this extension of reality is only possible if the agents in the virtual world also represent their offline selves in some way and are not only fictive avatars. A funeral in a gaming environment is as equally important an event to the bereaved as an offline commemoration or burial service. Death of a co-player bleeds values from one world to another, from the offline to the online, and the death reminds all players about the actual human beings, living individuals, behind the avatars and computer screens. Although online mourning may seem to some like a performance staged in the online and not authentic, it is the bereaved themselves who have claimed the need for support that they seek out from these environments, despite the “secularity” of the environment in question. Acting ritually is about nuanced contrasts, Catherine Bell (1992, 90) argues, but these contrasts are often difficult to determine in an online environment, where subjectivity is highlighted: there are no two similar experiences.

4. Online co-presence and constructed performance of community

Social networking sites, in this case especially Facebook, have enabled people to maintain a feeling of *co-presence* with family and friends at the time of absence (Miller 2011, 33). The feeling of togetherness is essential at the time of loss and mourning as well, and online environments are able to provide a safe space and, as anthropologist Daniel Miller quotes his interviewee Dr. Karamath, “give new life where there had been little hope” (Miller 2011, 33). According to Miller, co-presence is created from reciprocal communication within Facebook, where images and messages work as mediums and agents of presence.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Many of the websites and applications for virtual memorials invite communality and ritualistic behavior from their very programming and design. Features on the official memorial websites contain inter alia virtual candles and obituaries, but the websites also promote anniversaries, when people are invited to write in the memorial guestbooks and visit the site regularly. The websites send an email to the founder of the memorial every time a new candle is being lit or a comment is being posted, which creates and enables communal and regular activity on the memorial site. However, these memorials are created intentionally and deliberately, which I will further discuss in chapter (5) Intentional memorials – creating places of remembrance.

Within Facebook, people largely live their lives as they always have done, but in real time they toss forth images and items that are evidence of that co-presence in the world. They are open to reciprocity, such as the exchange of comment or at least ticking the 'Like' box attached to those comments. [--]Facebook thereby achieves something compared to which all previous media now seems mere simulacra - the relationship we feel through the co-presence of another person. (Miller 2011, 74)

In unintentionally created memorials, the real-time factor works as the glue to why people are connected to each other at the time of crisis. Unintentional memorials are most often made immediately after death for people to seek out answers and solace from a space connected to the deceased. In this way, they are very similar to spontaneous memorials mentioned earlier. In this section, I will discuss how co-presence is a form of ritual in virtual memorials and how the feeling of co-presence is created in Facebook memorials.

Media researcher Tero Karppi (2013) has explored the mourning practises on Facebook through the concept of noopolitics, the control of mass behavior, which according to Mauricio Lazzarato (2006) is a continuation from biopolitics, the control of individuals and individual bodies.

This practice of convening a group of people to share memories and thoughts connects memorial pages and memorialized user accounts to noopolitics. In noopolitics the question is no longer so much about regulating individuals and manipulating individual bodies, but rather controlling mass behaviour and building collective intelligence. Noopolitics denotes ways of steering heterogeneous groups and publics from a distance through, for example, media technologies that affect mind, memory and attention. (Lazzarato, 2006; see also Gehl, 2013; cited in Karppi 2013, 12.)

Karppi has been interested in the way deceased users have used Facebook, instead of the mourners, since the profile page of the deceased is the reason why people gather together and engage in ritualistic behaviors (Karppi 2013, 11–13; Kern et al. 2013, 3). Sharing memories collectively, 'liking' posts and uploading photos are the ways people wish to maintain a connection with the deceased (Brubaker & Hayes 2011, 129; Karppi 2013, 12).

However, Karppi highlights an approach where the content cannot be separated from the medium

itself. His approach is, thus, service provider oriented, where the construction of community is regulated and created mainly by the service, Facebook, itself, not the people using the service. Moreover, Karppi is interested in why Facebook has made the deletion of accounts so difficult¹¹² and believes that Facebook created the memorialization option for the accounts to remain in the service “for the dead as well as the processes of mourning [to] become governed through platform applications known as memorialized user accounts” (Karppi 2013, 10). Karppi’s approach highlights the business approach of Facebook, which relies on the information of user accounts that can be used for advertisement, but neglects the fact that memorial activity (pages, groups and gathering on profiles) was being practiced *before* the launch of the memorialization feature in 2009. Karppi (2013, 11) believes that memorialization is a way for Facebook to categorize and differentiate the dead and the alive, which seems logical, since the amount of new deceased Facebook users is roughly 19,000 per day (Karppi 2013, 1; Dead Reference Desk, 2012).

What Karppi neglects is the main marketable value for Facebook, which is the community it creates, enables and displays. Without the community, there is no Facebook, which is why any feature that empowers people to create and maintain their own personal community is of great value to Facebook. From the vantage point of ritual studies, Facebook only enabled a commonly shared symbolical space for people to gather together and share their loss. A researcher must understand the framework they are working with, and mourning rituals in differing online environments are always regulated by the boundaries and possibilities of the specific environment. In SL, for example, virtual memorials are very different from the ones on social networking sites or other two-dimensional webpages. During the past few years, Web 2.0¹¹³ has enabled Internet users to create their own content and modify others’ content, which eventually led the website (or virtual world) administrators to enable this type of activity with different applications, creating specific areas for mourning and honoring and, for example, memorializing significant game player avatars as part of the actual game play in WoW.

¹¹² As for difficultness, some of my interviewees noted that it took some effort to find information about deleting accounts, but at least in August of 2013 by writing “how to delete a deceased...” to the Help section on the upper corner box on Facebook, the info reveals several links about reporting a deceased person, deleting personal accounts etc. As for the actual process of reporting a deceased person, Facebook requires proof in the form of birth and death certificates and some document stating the relation to the deceased (Facebook, accessed 8/19/2013, <https://www.facebook.com/help/www/265593773453448>). Whether it should only be a biological relative that should report a deceased person is another question entirely.

¹¹³ Karppi argues that the deceased users of Facebook challenge the ideas of user participation and user-generated content, typical to Web 2.0 business models, since the deceased “do not interact or give back” and they are useless for service providers (Karppi 2013, 4).

On Facebook, the sense of community and feeling of co-presence are created ritualistically through symbolic communication of offering condolences and sharing thoughts and memories of the deceased. Victor Turner (1995 [1969]) argues that ritual is the affirmation of community, where the ritual channels *communitas* and institutionalized social order. By *communitas*, Turner refers to the arena where social changes are transferred to new social order, equally, without the usual social hierarchy. The experience of *communitas*, according to Turner, is similar to the experience of deep collectivity and sharing, feeling of belonging and solidarity or, in this case, the feeling of co-presence created by Internet (and mobile) technology. Turner's concept of *existential* or *spontaneous communitas*, the transient personal experience of togetherness (Turner 1995 [1969], 130–133), is experienced online in many ways, manifested in text and images, and the interpretation of this feeling of togetherness depends on age, gender, the social relationship with the deceased and to what extent the bereaved is accustomed to online communication.

They [virtual memorials] can serve a purpose in the modern world, where people form relationships through virtual platforms, such as games and chatrooms. Despite living far away from one another, it's possible to take part in important events such as a memorial service. (Heidi, 27 yrs., Finland, survey answer 3/8/2011.)

I received a request to join the [memorial] group from two of my relatives, my cousin and my cousin's kid (15 yrs.), and I wanted to join. One reason for wanting to join was that the request of my cousin's child felt so moving. How could I refuse? Another reason was that part of our family lives in Sweden and the other part in Finland. This is why it could even be difficult to share thoughts about the passing away of a mutual relative without Facebook.¹¹⁴ (Salla, 42 yrs., Finland, survey answer 2/25/2010, translated from Finnish.)

The sense of this existential *communitas*, the feeling of togetherness, which I here assimilate with the term *co-presence*, is the igniting power for unintentional memorials, especially on Facebook. Social networking sites enable a fast flow of information, which leads to people gathering in a

¹¹⁴ Quote in Finnish: "Sain kahdelta sukulaiselta, serkkunani ja serkkuni lapselta (15 v.) jäsenyysspyynnön ryhmään ja halusin osallistua. Halusin osallistua siksi, että serkkuni lapsen pyyntö tuntui niin liikuttavalta. Miten voi kieltäytyä? Toinen syy haluan osallistua on se, että osa suvustamme asuu Ruotsissa ja osa Suomessa. Ehkä olisi vaikeakin tästä syystä jakaa ajatuksia yhteisen sukulaisen poismenosta ilman Facebookia."

familiar space¹¹⁵ affiliated with the presence of the deceased – the profile page or a memorial group – but also communicating with each other about their loss and grief within their own personal profiles and status updates. Heidi, in the abovementioned quote, refers to attending memorial services, which are held either online or offline. For her, the relationships formed online are part of communicating and forming relationships in a modern world and a sign of a modern community life. For Salla, a memorial group was a way of strengthening the relationship between her family members living in two different countries. The request to join a memorial group felt moving, since it came from a teenager. Mourning together online is for both of them a way of creating existential communitas, the feeling of togetherness, which is constructed in and around mourning and honoring rituals and the ritualization of communication in an environment enabled by Facebook.

I have received help from the memorial page of my friend on Facebook. Through the page, I have been able to share my feelings and hear about the feelings of others. The song links that have been shared have felt very important, partly because that way, I will know other people are feeling the same thing. The importance of the memorial group is great for myself, because it enables me to remember my friend with their intimates, although I do not meet them that often.¹¹⁶ (Nora, 17 yrs., survey answer 11/30/2010, translated from Finnish, *his/hers in Finnish does not specify gender).*

For Nora, quoted above, the feeling of togetherness is the main reason she feels the memorial page has aided her in her grief of losing a father quickly and unexpectedly due to illness. Links to songs both create ambiance and deliver sympathy from others: people can virtually be together when they listen to the songs. Moreover, singing and songs as part of death rituals has been extensively studied, and for example Karelian laments¹¹⁷ (fin. *itkuvirsi*) symbolize the singer as the escort of

¹¹⁵ More about the notion of space and place in memorials and mourning in the following chapter (5) *1. Space becoming a place.*

¹¹⁶ Quote in Finnish: ”Olen saanut apua edesmenneen ystäväni muistosivusta Facebookissa. Sivuston kautta olen voinut jakaa omia tunteitani ja kuulla muiden tunteita. Laulut, joiden linkkejä sivulla on jaettu ovat tuntuneet erittäin tärkeiltä, osaksi varmasti siksi, että tiedän muidenkin tuntevan näin samoin. Muistoryhmän merkitys itselleni on suuri, sillä sen avulla voin muistaa ystäväni hänen läheistensä kanssa, vaikka en heitä näekään usein.”

¹¹⁷ The tradition is known in eastern Finland and Soviet Karelia and mostly used in ritualized situations such as weddings and funerals but also on non-ritual occasions, such as greeting an old friend (see also Tolbert 1990). Lamenters as a tradition have not survived in Finland, but most of the collected and studied materials are from the early 1900s, when cultural researchers such as Samuli Paulaharju (1924) travelled around Soviet Karelia to record and write down the known laments and lamenters.

the dying to the afterlife (Utriainen 1999; Nenola & Timonen 1990; Nenola 2002; see also Walter 1994, 181). The singing is called crying, because of the expressive sounds, lyrics, gestures and melodies the singers use, and during funerals, the role of the laments has been especially important as part of the death rituals. Religion researcher Terhi Utriainen argues that the body of the lamenter is a bodily liminal, which symbolizes the boundaries between the living and the dead, where the laments themselves create the symbolical space where the body of the deceased is transformed to the afterlife (Utriainen 1999, 226). The lamenters also channeled the emotions of the bereaved and were used as substitutes for excessive crying and showing of emotions.¹¹⁸

As death and madness crying is also the junction of the subject. The lamenter is moved from the area of safety and security to a multitude (cosmological, social, cognitive, emotional and bodily) area of uncertainty. (Utriainen 1999, 227.)

Utriainen highlights the notion of the body in laments, where the lamenter's own body in relation to others by movement and touching during the laments makes the situation itself as remarkable (Utriainen 1999, 227). In an online context, the bodily movements and expressions are channeled and expressed in other ways, where the gestures are either symbolical (e.g. 'liking' a status update or posting a heart) or channeled through audiovisual material (e.g. posting a link to a YouTube video) or by written language (e.g. posting song lyrics, poems, biblical quotes and aphorisms).

Religion researcher Catherine Bell argues that rituals are always connected to performance, where the performativity creates the ritualistic arena and frame against the profane. According to Bell, intrinsic to performance is creating the boundaries around something different, something significant, that says "pay attention" and "is a specific type of demonstration". (Bell 1997, 160.) Expressing grief and honoring the memory of the deceased on Facebook is not only limited by the FB officials creating a memorial of a profile page, but the communication itself changes within the community. Writing a personal status update in the memory of someone is framed to be something different from other updates by stating 'RIP', 'rest in peace' (both in English and Finnish), or, during anniversaries, for example, Finnish FB users can write "a year ago a star was being born in the night sky" and American users often mention angels and Heaven. With speech familiar from death rituals, the users classify their updates as something different, less profane in an environment considered very profane, and by responding to status updates and comments of the

¹¹⁸ Since 2010, there have also been reports of a new tradition of "professional mourners" known in China, where professionals are hired to perform an excessive mourning ritual at the funeral. (Moore 2010; Independent 6/19/2011; Lim 2013).

profile pages of the deceased, the users create a ritualistic online space¹¹⁹, where they can feel and express the same grief and loss together.

*[--]sometimes it has been too easy to dwell in the times when [he] was alive. On the other hand, especially now when I am on the other side of the globe, it is nice that I can browse through the old photos and stories whenever I want to. Initially, the memorial group was intended for close friends only (at least in my own mind), and it was quite a surprise when the member count climber past 400, if my memory serves me right, in under two weeks. Of course it somehow feels good when you know that others miss him too.*¹²⁰ (Mika, 24 yrs., survey answer, 10/13/2010, translated from Finnish, anonymized)

*I have received a great deal of help and peer support, one knows that one is not alone. Even surprising people have written their condolences; memories, not so much[--].*¹²¹ (Meri, 21 yrs., 8/27/2010, survey answer, translated from Finnish)

However, the profanity of Facebook (and the Internet) can sometimes make offering condolences difficult, less meaningful or inappropriate. In the *Virtual memorials and online mourning* survey, the respondents were heavily against someone creating a virtual memorial in their honor.

Absolutely not. They're mawkish and tacky. (Woman, 40 yrs., Great Britain, survey answer 10/10/2011.)

No. I don't want any extra attention. I understand the need to honor the dead by virtual memorials, funerals and everything, but for me personally, they are not important, and I don't want anybody to feel that they'd have to (!) honor me in some way. For example, when I die, my wish is that my body will be cremated and there will be no memorial service or such. I absolutely don't want there to be a plot in a graveyard that people feel that they have to visit. If the people mourning me

¹¹⁹ More about the notions of online space and place in chapter (5) 1. *Space becoming a place.*

¹²⁰ Quote in Finnish: ”valilla on liiankin helppo upota takaisin siihen aikaan kun [hän] oli elossa. Toisaalta etenkin nyt, kun olen pallon toisella puolella, on mukavaa, että niitä vanhoja kuvia ja juttuja voi selata kun silta tuntuu. Alunperin muistoryhmä oli tarkoitettu (ainakin omassa paassani) lähimmille kavereille ja oli melkoinen yllätys että jäsensuuri ylitti 400 ellen vaarin muista, alle kahdessa viikossa. Tottakai se tuntuu tietyllä tavalla hyvältä, kun tietää, että muutkin kaipaa.”

¹²¹ Quote in Finnish: ”Olen saanut paljon apua ja vertaistukea, tietää ettei ole asiansa kanssa yksin. Yllättävätkin ihmiset ovat kirjoittaneet suruvalituksia, muistoja ei niinkään[--].”

wish to do something, then they can light a candle at home. (Woman, 29 yrs., Finland, survey answer 10/17/2011.)

In the latter response, woman, 29 yrs., emphasized the “have to” notion and not wanting extra attention. Honoring a memory of a loved one is considered, at least in her opinion, a mandatory act, which is not necessary for her. She feels that even visiting a gravesite should not be an option, since it is an unnecessary effort and lighting a candle at home is enough. Interestingly, some respondents felt ambivalent about somebody mourning them online and found that it would not matter to them personally, since they would be dead. According to Bell, the power of ritualization and ritualistic performance is connected to a multisensory experience, where the person needs to feel themselves part of the actual situation, instead of “being told or shown something” (Bell 1997, 160).

In conclusion, offering and receiving peer-support and condolences in social media applications creates a sense of co-presence, existential communitas, and the Wall or News Feed on Facebook works as the arena for the sharing of grief and condolences, where status updates and other messages, such as links to songs, are linked to a larger cultural discourse of death and bereavement. This discourse speaks volumes about how death and mourning are being valued and expressed and what is considered to be the socially and culturally appropriate way to communicate mourning and honor a memory. The young are not expected to die, and accidents are often considered “useless” deaths that could have been avoided. Appropriate ways of communication determine the ritualistic ways of offering condolences and communicating feelings, which should not be expressed ostentatiously, since Facebook is mostly an arena of fun and play¹²².

¹²² For example, the public request of the ‘dislike’ button has not yet lead to any actions from the Facebook company.

(5) Intentional memorials – creating places of remembrance

As I have previously explained, not all memorials online are intentional, but in some cases people turn to online environments with the specific intention of creating a memorialized space, which reflects the identity of the deceased, provides a shared social place for remembering and honoring, and collecting memories and stories of a loved individual, a family member and a friend, whose legacy is wished to be preserved legacy for further generations as well.

In the first section of this chapter, *1. Space becoming a place*, I am interested in how online spaces become significant and emotionally loaded places both on an individual and a communal level and how an existing location in a shared virtual world, *Second Life*, becomes the virtual resting place of an avatar. I will introduce a case example of a Gorean role-playing community that lost one of their members, Yuki, in 2008 due to heart failure in surgery. Anjali, who has been responsible for creating the visual landscape for the role-playing community, created a memorial for Yuki in a cave, which Yuki's character took as her home. The cave eventually became a family crypt for Anjali, when she decided to add memorials dedicated to other lost relationships as well.

Furthermore, in chapter *2. Temporal changes of bereavement and its ritual aspect*, I will discuss the meaning of ritualized memorial visits on anniversaries, how the importance of a virtual memorial site changes in time and how the rite of passage theory fails to describe the ritualized practices of remembering and honoring. I will introduce two Finnish memorial blogs created by two mothers, Seija and Kaarina, who lost their child due to a tragic accident. The memorial blogs are used as a way of communicating loss and bereavement to their personal communities, but also as a way of understanding their own grief and coping with loss.

Finally, in chapter *3. Memorials as family legacies*, I will continue the discussion about time and reflect how intentionally created online memorials are intended to last for further family generations, as a way of preserving and sharing family stories, which tie the family members together despite temporal or geographical distances. I will introduce Yolanda, a mother of three, who lost her husband and decided to honor his memory on virtual memorial websites. She created three individual websites with different service providers, which should ensure the legacy of her husband to last for their great grandchildren.

1. Space becoming a place

When thinking of virtual environments, people rarely think of them as spatial conceptions but as flat objects on a computer screen, although in speech, the experience of the Internet is often described with spatial notions. Even the common question “are you *on* Facebook?” consists of a notion of *being in a place*, as having a Facebook account would be a spatial experience. Also, “going online”, “being online” and other similar expressions suggest placeness, a connection between two (or more) spaces. Thus, virtual spaces – albeit two-dimensional webpages and applications – can manifest themselves as spatial conceptions both visually and verbally. In this chapter, I will explore how different virtual memorials as particular online spaces become meaningful and subjective experiences of a specific place, mediated by a (computer) screen. But first, I will discuss the notions of space and place a little bit further.

Communication scientist and sociologist Jan van Dijk (2012, 174) argues that global media networks spatially enlarge societies and at the same time reduce the size of the world. The natural environment is replaced by different social environments and social networks constructed and contained by people. Cultural geographers Pauli Tapani Karjalainen and Petri Raivo (1997, 230) argue that place is not an objective fact in a cartographic sense but a notion of human interpretation and the result of human experience. The specific meaning of a place is a result of special systems of meanings which are derived from lived experience, whether actual, remembered or imagined (Karjalainen & Raivo 1997, 230). Geographer Yu-Fi Tuan argues, accordingly, that humans know better how to behave in a built environment instead of “nature’s raw stage” and all built environments are contextualized by social and cultural relationships (Tuan 2001, 102). Memorials as built locations – whether online or offline – contain similar cultural and social contextualities, since they represent not only an individual, but also aesthetics, values (what and who is considered important), materials available (cf. during a war, materials can be scarce or some materials can be considered too expensive or even too cheap, i.e. profane), religions (symbols used in the memorial), political views, individuals and community (i.e. to whom the memorial is for and who the audience is.)

In this sense, a constructed space enables the representation of identities as well, since the social roles and relationships in the space determine who, for example, has the main agency to enter (or exit) the space. For example, not everyone has the permit to enter the presidential hall, a school class, a doctor’s office or a police department. There are always specific social roles (and

situations) in these environments that determine which identities are being represented in the space and how agency is determined. In the case of virtual memorials in online spaces, one would imagine more equal participation and disappearance of social hierarchies, but actually they contain similar rules of conduct and social roles just like any other space. Creating a virtual memorial webpage and molding that space individually to reflect the personality of a loved one reflects both social roles and relationships of the deceased and the bereaved. For example, official virtual memorial websites, such as the three websites studied in this research, offer different theme layouts to choose from. The memorial can be selected to portray the patriotism¹²³ of the deceased with the US flag, white head eagle and the dome of the white house in the background of the site banner (see Image 22).



Image 22. An example of a Memory-Of.com patriotic layout I created for a fictive person “Heikki Kalevi Tauno”. On the left side, I can send a notification via email to the people I want to inform about the site. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 11/19/2013.)

¹²³ The websites used in this research (www.virtual-memorials.com, www.memory-of.com, www.last-memories.com) were targeted to the US, which is why no other nationalities or country symbols were provided.

Virtual memorial webpages are specifically created as places of memory and remembrance, since they are built from the stories written, comments and candles being lit and photographs being uploaded in order to add more depth and dimension to the memorial.¹²⁴ The memorial sites also often allow various animations, colors and background music to create a specific ambiance for the site, which is supposed to differentiate the memorial from others as a unique place of its own – in a similar manner as many people want the burial site to reflect specific personal taste and family history. However, only a few memorial websites allow some custom HTML for the user to create their own unique environment.

Art historian Liisa Lindgren (2000) highlights the aspect of communality and history that memorials create. A memorial is not erected just to honor the memory of the deceased, but it also symbolizes all places of memory and remembrance¹²⁵. The online spaces where memorials are created intentionally are originally designed for play, social interaction and communication. By providing an option to create a memorial in these spaces, for example, in a shared virtual world such as *Second Life*, the memorial becomes not only connected to offline memorials in actual cemeteries but also to the culture of the virtual world itself. Thus, it consists of multiple levels of symbolism. A memorial is more of an ideological and a phenomenological tomb than the resting place of an actual body, in a similar manner as *The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier*¹²⁶.

At the beginning of this work, I was interested in whether mourning and honoring experiences would differ in various environments, especially in the case of online gaming and shared virtual worlds, where the very visual information is richer than on mere websites. Anthropologist Bonnie A. Nardi describes the experience of playing an online role-playing game as a “human activity in a stimulating visual environment that makes possible a release of creativity and a sense of empowerment in conditions of autonomy, sociality and positive reward” (Nardi 2010, 7). Accordingly, this description could be applied to any online environment, which by definition is

¹²⁴ In addition, the unintentional memorials explored in the previous chapter highlight the notion of how social activity creates the feeling of place and persona through the social relationships created and maintained in the environment in question.

¹²⁵ During the Finnish civil war in 1918, many fallen soldiers were buried in unmarked graves, which remained only in the memory of the locals. From the 1940s to the 1960s many local communities requested that the graves should be blessed by the Church, instead of moving them to official cemeteries, since the places had become meaningful and intimate to the locals. Later, the two political sides of the civil war erected memorial statues in different areas, which became a meta battle of its own: each of them should have equal number of memorials. (Peltonen 2003, 228).

¹²⁶ The custom began in the 19th century, but it became a cultural practice after the First World War. The custom is to bury a part or entire body of a fallen unknown soldier, who becomes the symbol of all unknown soldiers. There is a Greek word for this type of burial as well, a *cenotaph*. In Finland, there is a cenotaph in every cemetery, where anyone can place a candle or flowers in memory of their intimate, who has been buried elsewhere.

social, although I would consider the description “stimulating visual environment” highly subjective and more suitable for virtual worlds and online games. However, the key to meaningfulness in these social spaces are the social linkages between people, which are connected to the online places that they (have) share(d) together, mediated by different images, avatars, virtual landscapes, words and stories.

All spaces – whether online or offline – are intensely contextualized, and experiences are built both *a priori* and *a posteriori* (Kant 1997 [1783]; Tilley 1994), or in other words *before* and *after*, by referring to previous similar experiences and later connecting to new experiences. Archaeologist Christopher Tilley describes spaces as *mediums*:

The alternative view starts from regarding space as a medium rather than a container of action, something that is involved in action and cannot be divorced from it. [--] These spaces, as social productions, are always centred in relation to human agency and are amenable to reproduction or change because their constitution takes place as a part of day-to-day praxis or practical activity of individuals and groups of the world. (Tilley 1994, 10.)

According to Tilley, spaces are never static experiences but in a constant flux of (subjective) social and cultural negotiations, and in order to illuminate the meaning of contextualities in memorialized spaces, I will introduce a case example from *Second Life* (SL). Anthropologist Tom Boellstorff, in his anthropological study of SL, defines virtual worlds as “places of human culture realized by computer programs through the Internet” (Boellstorff 2008, 17.) SL is accessed through a program downloaded on the computer and enabled by Internet access. Using the virtual world begins from selecting the appearance (and possible background story, if role-playing) of the avatar, which also determines how the users will and want to interact with others in the world. Creating the identity¹²⁷ for the avatar is the first step of taking part in the gaming environment(s), since the avatar is the medium through which the gamer experiences the world and channels their own personality.

SL is not a game in a similar sense to *World of Warcraft*, where the player fulfills quests and battles against monsters and other players in order to reach higher experience levels and new areas in the world. By reaching these levels in WoW, the gamer gains both access to new areas and new

¹²⁷ I will discuss identities further in chapter (6) *Transcending worlds – complex identities and notions of privacy*.

equipment, which enables the gamer to proceed in the game. In SL, the “gaming experience” comes from role-playing and there are specific role-playing zones, where, for example, shooting a gun is enabled and attacking other players is possible (wiki.secondlife.com, accessed 9/17/2012). In both of the worlds, WoW and SL, it is possible to explore on your own, but as one of my interviewee claims, it’s “more fun with others” (Heidi, interview 7/26/2010).

In order to navigate in a virtual (game) space, the user also needs to understand the culture of the game world and be familiar with the different commands that create the bodily movements of the avatar. The movements are not only for navigating in different terrains but also create an image of a personality through commands (*emotes*), such as “yell”, “dance” “teleport” or “blow kiss”, which make the avatar move according to the command *or* the other person must imagine the avatar doing something if the game design does not allow avatar movements (see also e.g. Nardi & O’Day 1999, 108; Nardi 2009). Thus, the *experience* of the game world itself is formed through three steps, a) the visual experience of the *worldness* in the game, b) the identity of the character as part of the role-playing story and c) the ability to carry out the story and the character in the text-based chat, which creates the narrative environment of the game.¹²⁸ All of these factors create the contextualized environment where the user navigates with their avatar (and character).

In the following case example from SL, I will introduce a group interview with avatars from a *Gorean* role-playing community. The group consisted of three people, Nadia, Anjali and PeterAlan, who did not know each other beforehand very well, but they played the same role-playing story *Gor*, which is based on fantasy novels by author John Norman. The Gorean philosophy is based on master-slave relationships, and there are many roles the players can choose from, such as a Kajira (slave girl), a Free Woman/Man (generally, just a person who is free from a master-slave relationship), a Mistress/Master (owns slaves), a Panther (a savage, free woman) or a male slave. They all come with important roles in the game. (<http://secondlife.wikia.com/wiki/Gorean>, accessed 9/17/2012.)

Nadia was my connection to Anjali and PeterAlan, since they all of them knew a deceased avatar named Yuki Yanagi Lilliehook. Yuki played a role of a feral child (a Panther), who lived in the

¹²⁸ Online and offline experiences are often criticized with the notion that online communication is “unreal”. However, this idea lacks the notion that every social situation is a construction of cultural practices and identities and can even be considered a simulation of an ideal situation itself, where multiple differing social and cultural identities take place (Butler 2002[1990]). We are taught to use certain linguistic and bodily actions in order to navigate through various social (and cultural) situations and perform in a certain manner in society, or as Boellstorff states: “the ‘real world’ of human social life is also synthesised through human artifice” (Boellstorff 2008, 17.)

woods, did not speak but grunted like an animal and was always doing small pranks to people, which is why Nadia referred to her as a “lovable brat”. Offline, Yuki’s name was Yokuren¹²⁹, she was born in 1983, lived in Hong Kong and suffered from bone cancer. Yokuren died of complications during heart surgery in 2008, but before her surgery, she had written letters to her friends in SL. They were to be sent if she did not survive the procedure. I received these letters from PeterAlan during our group interview.

The group interview with Anjali, PeterAlan and Nadia was conducted March 20th 2011 and took place in a region¹³⁰ called *Teletus*, which is a Gorean role-playing area maintained and created by Anjali. The interview in SL took place in a written chat window (although SL has voice chat as well), and I will use their responses as such, unmodified, as they responded in the chat. I also have permission to refer to all of my interviewees by the name of their avatars. Often in Internet research anonymity is stressed as an ethical way of conducting research (Hine 2000), but in this particular case, I did not know the actual offline names of my interviewees¹³¹.

The cave where we met was deeply connected to Yuki, since she had taken the cave as her character’s home, and after Yuki’s death Anjali could not erase the area when making new expansions for Teletus. The cave had gained similar sentimental importance for Anjali as photographs or other belongings of the deceased possess to others.

Anjali: I’ve rebuilt teletus about 8 times I think. Keep expanding and all. and each time I keep the cave.

Nadia: how long has it been here? was it built right after Yuki died?

Anjali: Well since it was Yuki’s cave.. no.. She lived in a cave on the first Teletus.

Nadia: this was her home?

Anjali: I made that the memorial. aye.. originally.

Nadia: ohhhh

¹²⁹ Her nationality will be debated later.

¹³⁰ In SL, the users (or residents) can create their own different land areas, which are either a) parcels, divided parts of specific region, from small sections to entire regions, b) regions, which are marked as squares on the world map as part of the mainland or as private states or c) one or more regions which are owned by a resident (<http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Land>, accessed 9/1/2013).

¹³¹ My personal avatar, Morita Hoxley, represented me as myself and had my personal details, such as my email address and a link to my research blog, in the avatar description. I even tried to make the avatar look as much as myself as possible (which was surprisingly difficult!). By providing my actual identity, I wanted to claim trust in a situation where anyone can represent anybody. Additionally, researching mourning can often be very difficult, because of the sensitivity of the topic itself. (Haverinen 2011.)

Morita Hoxley nods

Nadia: oh my her presence is deep here

(Second Life group interview, 3/20/2012.)

Anjali refers by “first Teletus” to the first version of the area she had built. Yuki initially took the cave as her home, since it fit her role-playing character being a feral child, a Panther, living in the wild. When Nadia refers to Yuki’s “presence”, she means both Yuki as the “feral child” and the offline Yokuren, since the memorial inside the cave includes both images of Yuki’s character and a photograph of the actual Yokuren, displaying her as a young girl in her early twenties with blue hair, a cropped tank top and cargo pants (see image 23). The memorial inside the cave is created in the shape of a grave (small dirt mound, a tombstone at the head), in order for it to resemble an actual memorial familiar from the offline world but also because Anjali was not able to attend the actual funeral due to geographical distance: Anjali lived in the United States and Yokuren in China. None of them had ever met in person. Creating the “final resting place” for Yuki, Anjali also symbolically could provide her a sense of *good death* (see e.g. Peltonen 2003, 236) with a symbolical burial. Thanatologist Tony Walter argues that people go to funerals to comfort others instead of themselves and to pay their respects by witnessing “the last statement about a person, an ultimate affirmation of human dignity” (Walter 1994, 180). In online gaming communities, it is often not possible to attend the actual funeral due to geographical distances, which is why the online spaces, where the community interacted together, gain a special meaning of paying respects and having a sense of closure.

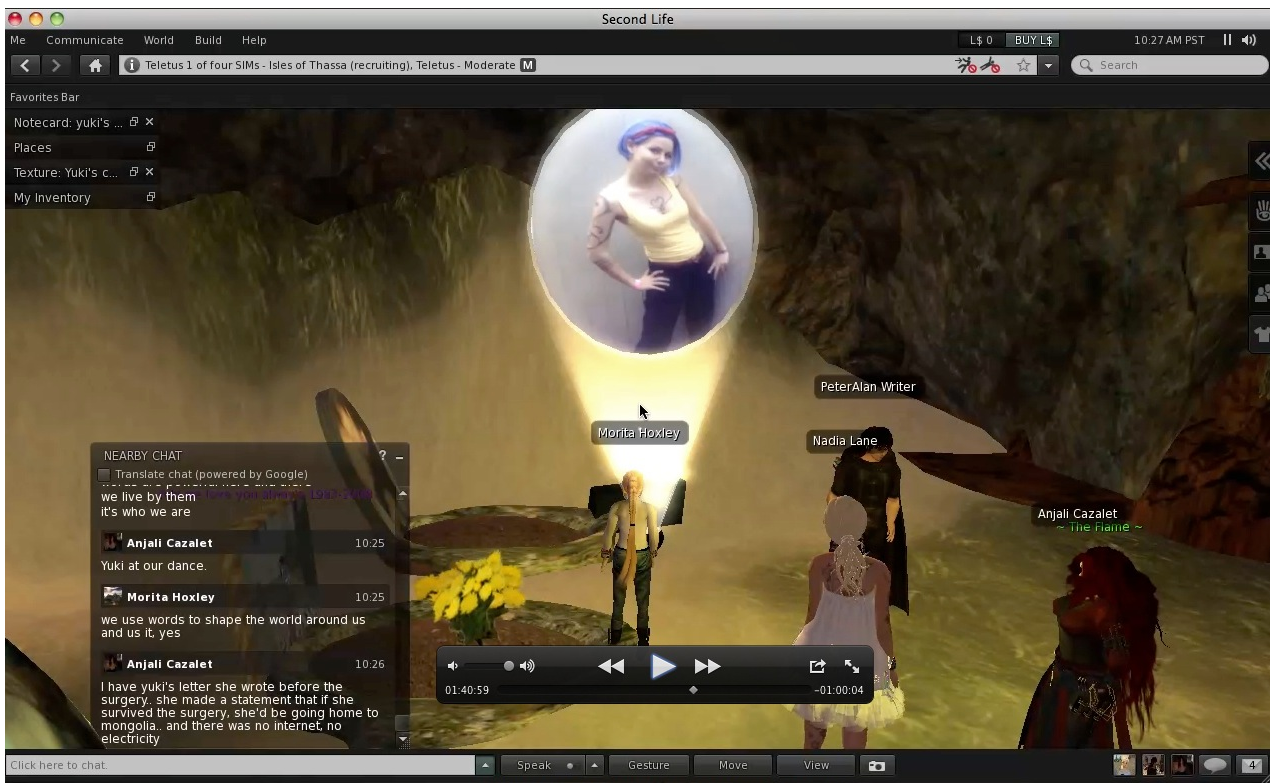


Image 23. Anjali's memorial cave and the photo slideshow on the wall of the cave. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen 9/17/2012).

Since the cave became a symbol of a lost relationship and as a space began to represent feelings of loss and bereavement, Anjali decided to add other memorials in the space as well. When Anjali lost her actual parents in the offline world, she decided to dedicate the cave to all (virtual and actual) friends and family who had passed away. It became a symbolical “family crypt” (see image 24).

Anjali: since then, each new build, I've recreated, expanded some.then it seemed onyl fitting, when I lost others dear to me, that I would keep them all together... so this has sort of become a family crypt..

Nadia: who are the others here Lady?

Anjali: On the right, my RL mother.

Nadia: is she with your father?

Anjali: on the left, my greatest great granddaughter that passed a week or so ago.

Nadia: I'm sorry to hear Lady

Anjali: and the far left. A dear friend, my slaver..

Nadia: she died too?

Anjali: the man was her partner of 19 yrs.

aye.. Leigh passed of cancer

Peter: What was the slaver's name?

Morita: sorry to hear that

Anjali: Leigh and Arianna passed of cancer.

my mother had brain damage from west Nile

(Second Life group interview, 3/20/2011.)

Similar behavior of honoring people outside the gaming environment can be seen in other memorial areas in SL as well. In the Remembering Our Friends area, one of the three chapels is dedicated to intimates of SL residents, who have not been part of the world themselves. This has raised some questions both inside and outside of gaming communities about whether it is acceptable to use online space for offline relationships. Geographer Avril Maddrell (2010) has been researching similar memorial activity in the highlands of Scotland, where mountain walkers sometimes erect memorials in high places for passed-away family and friends, who have not necessarily even visited the particular place. The place itself only has particular meaning for the mourner. This activity has caused heated discussion online, where people disapprove of this activity, labeling it as intrusive for nature as well as for other visitors (Maddrell 2010, 134).

Maddrell quotes geographer Richard Tressider by arguing that the highlands are both secular and sacred, because of the liminality and reflexivity of the spaces where people come to face the physical and mental constraints they do not otherwise have in their daily lives (Maddrell 2010, 127; Tressider 1999.) Online gaming environments provide escape in a similar manner, and the online world becomes an important part of the daily lives of its users: they become meaningful.

The meaningfulness is the key element in how online spaces become places for their users. At the time of loss, people want to have familiar surroundings and familiar codes of conduct to follow. This is why death rituals (burials, commemorations and lighting candles) from the offline world are carried out in online worlds, since rituals themselves are created to balance lives between two liminalities and help people to adjust to changes in life. Rituals are a familiar way to cope with loss and bereavement. Funerals and commemorations in a game are often the only way the community can show their respect to the deceased (and their family and friends) and to share the

sense of loss with others in a familiar surrounding¹³².

They [virtual memorials] can be important for some, and they most certainly can be helpful. Especially in the cases when the deceased is an "online face", someone known mostly (or "only") virtually/online. Makes sense to have the memorial / mourning in the same surroundings, with the same people who can (also) share the sense [of] loss. (Ilkka, survey answer 1/22/2010, [missing words added for clarification].)

In conclusion, and as in the survey answer above, Ilkka notes that it “makes sense” to honor the relationships formed online in the same environment they flourished in. The places where people have communicated and bonded become meaningful, since they are reminders of the deceased and of all the memories the people in question shared in the space. Creating memorials in these spaces makes the area permanently connected to specific people and events, and they become “implicitly immortal” because of their symbolical dimensions (Peltonen 2003, 238).

¹³² Death and war researcher Ilona Pajari (2006; previously Kemppainen) has studied the heroic burials after the wars in Finland (1939-1940 and 1941-1944). All of the fallen soldiers were to be buried in their home cities and villages by military chaplains and with grand gestures and symbolized rituals from the national authorities. The funerals took a great part in explaining the community's loss, and the national authorities gave advice to people on how to mourn and honor their loss as a way of strengthening the national spirit and communality. The concept of *good death* contained not only the heroic death of the soldiers for their country but also a proper burial and a proper way of mourning and honorary rituals. “People could understand the fallen soldiers as part of their local community, even if they also remained part of the military, buried among their fellow soldiers.” (Kemppainen 2006, 264.) Interestingly, similar military rituals have been practices in gaming environments with a military theme, such as World War II flight simulator *Aces High II*. A memorial flight was organized for a fellow player, a young girl who died suddenly, and the flight was recorded and turned into a memorial video for her family and friends. (Memorial video for ‘Tailspin’, <http://vimeo.com/866332>, accessed 11/19/2013.)



Image 24. Anjali created four tombs in the cave. The one on the right is for her real-life mother, and the one next to that is for Yuki. The two on the left are for other SL friends she has lost. The frame in the center displays a picture slideshow of Yuki. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 20.2.2011.)

Virtual memorials are not, however, only for online relationships, as in the case of Anjali and her cave in Teletus, which became a symbolized resting place of all the lost relationships in Anjali's life, whether role-played in a shared virtual world or actually lived, in the offline¹³³. Anjali was also able to visually construct the space to resemble a small cemetery with tombs and headstones, but she also added features that would not have been possible in the offline world, such as an ongoing slideshow displaying pictures of Yuki on the cave wall. The cave was already meaningful as the home of a role-playing character, connected to the virtual and actual identity of Yuki, and thus, meaningful in itself as any similar location in the offline: homes, workplaces, schools and other areas which are connected to the person who has died. A virtual memorial is a discursively built place, which is experienced subjectively according to the cultural and social context of the person.

I argue that the Internet enables a new sense of placeness, which is built from the social interaction between people, which makes the place meaningful and emotionally loaded. It is virtual, created from pixels and never equal to the actual offline world, nor should it be. An online place is a

¹³³ This notion I will explore more thoroughly in chapter (6) 2. Mourning the avatar and the person behind the avatar.

reminder of a personality through memories connected to that specific space. In the case of Yuki's memorial, they are derived from actual gameplay. Visuality and three-dimensionality are not necessarily applied, but both websites and locations in virtual worlds become similarly meaningful to their users, since Facebook, for example, archives the social interactions between people and it can be viewed only with a few mouse clicks. It is the social content and memories that connect the place to a larger symbolical meaning.

2. Temporal changes of mourning and its ritual aspect

*There was the time before [her] death, and there is the time after [her] death. Feels like the entire counting of time would have begun all over at that point. From a new, painful beginning.*¹³⁴ (Kaarina, introduction to memorial website, accessed 9/10/2013, anonymized)

For the bereaved, time gains a new element when a relationship is lost due to death. There is the time before the death and the time after the death. Others try to comfort the bereaved, saying that the pain will get easier *in time*. The bereaved is grieving the past, present and the future in equal amounts, since future interaction with the person will not take place, such as children having their first day at school. Anniversaries remind the bereaved of what they have lost and also mark the length of time between the death and the present, but, at the same time, they are meaningful dates to remember their loved ones. Analyzing the meaning of time in virtual memorials and bereaving highlights the meaning of anniversaries and ritualized activity as a way of understanding the loss.

The importance of virtual memorials is not static, but constantly changing and a subjective experience, in a similar way to grief itself (Haverinen 2009a, 77). Activity on a virtual memorial changes over time, and, according to my observations, the attendance and activity in the memorial reduces rapidly after half a year, which, interestingly, is also clinically proven: the active bereavement time is about six months (Prigerson & Jacobs 2001). The significance of using the memorial for mourning is most acute in the early phases of grief, when the shock and the need of support are the greatest.

¹³⁴ Quote in Finnish: ”*Oli aika ennen [hänen] kuolemaa[nsa], ja on aika [hänen] kuoleman[sa] jälkeen. Tuntuu kuin koko ajanlasku olisi silloin alkanut alusta. Uudesta, tuskallisesta alusta.*”

*The loss of our son was so unexpected and shocking that I found it necessary to found that blog in his honor; because of my profession, so many people need to know what happened to us, and the blog helps to inform about this situation. At the same time, it helps people who didn't know [our son] understand the great loss we have experienced.*¹³⁵ (Seija, e-mail interview, 9/20/2010, anonymized, translated from Finnish.)

Seija wanted to share with the world (and her community) very quickly what had happened to her family when her teenage son died in a traffic accident. She claims that because of her profession, people needed to know what had happened to her family, and the blog worked as an intermediate between her family and their community, almost as a sign that death has touched this family. The current death culture no longer recognizes, for example, mourning clothing, which was previously a clear sign to everybody of a death within the family.

Some online memorials are created even years after the loss, such as in the case of Kaarina, who created a memorial site a decade after her daughter's death¹³⁶. Kaarina wanted to collect all of her previous writings and thoughts to one (digital and public) place, for others to find and learn how struggling with loss will get easier.

*Ten years after the death of our child, I made her a memorial website on the Internet. I put there the texts and bursts of sorrow from the first years of mourning, a lot of photos and everything possible that had given me comfort and I knew how to put into words. My wish was that the website would somehow comfort and be in aid of those who had experienced a similar sorrow and who were going through the worst pain.*¹³⁷ (Kaarina, memorial website, accessed 9/10/2013.)

Kaarina wanted to make a permanent and public website that would help others in the same situation, but also as a medium for herself to collect and organize the thoughts she had put on

¹³⁵ Quote in Finnish: "Meidän poikamme poismeno oli niin odottamaton ja järkyttävä että katsoin aiheelliseksi perustaa tuon blogin hänen muistokseen; ammattini johdosta niin kovin monen täytyy saada tietää mitä meille on tapahtunut ja blogin olemassaolo helpottaa asian kertomisessa. Samalla se auttaa heitä jotka eivät poikaamme kunnolla tunteneet tietämään kuinka suuren menetyksen olemme kokeneet."

¹³⁶ Virtual memorials which are created years after the death are most often created for family members.

¹³⁷ Quote in Finnish: "Kymmenen vuotta lapsemme kuoleman jälkeen tein hänelle muistosivut internetiin. Laitoin sinne ensimmäisten suruvuosieni tekstejä ja surunpurkauksia, paljon valokuvia ja kaiken mahdollisen itseäni lohduttaneen minkä sanoiksi olin osannut tai osasin pukea. Toiveeni oli, että sivusto voisi olla jollain tavalla lohduksi ja rinnalla elämiseksi heille, joita on kohdannut samankaltainen suru ja joilla on pahin tuska päällä juuri nyt."

paper in the past. The blog displays a retrospective of the past, how she felt after the death of her daughter and the years to come. Many of her writings concern specific life events and ages that she couldn't witness, such as going to school or her daughter's confirmation. In this sense, death also takes away the joy from annual anniversaries and calendar holidays and creates another level to them: how the anniversary *should have been* celebrated. They are now the first, second and fifth Christmases after the death and birthdays without their guest of honor. The bereaved will begin to live in two separate timelines: how life *should have been* and how *it actually is*.

*And there is still a candle on our yard every evening: From here our girl left. Today, she would have been a little over 4 years old.*¹³⁸ (Kaarina, memorial blog, an entry dated in 1999, accessed 9/10/2013, translated from Finnish.)

*[She] drowned on a warm August Saturday. Already during that autumn, I also cried over the fact that "now she won't ever leave for school carrying a backpack". Then I realized that every day carries a grief within it. I understood that I only needed to cry the cries of that one day, and that, already, felt like it was too much.*¹³⁹ (Kaarina, blogpost titled "Today, she would be 7 years old in 2001", accessed 11/22/2013, translated from Finnish, anonymized.)

Two separate timelines are often discussed in memorials; how a special event should have been celebrated or how the bereaved is remembering a life event that did not take place. Rituals during special life events are signposts during the life of an individual and they are no less significant to the family and intimates of the deceased. In the case of Seija and Kaarina, as mothers, they both expected to witness specific life events during the lives of their children, but as they did not happen, they are grieving the memories that were not able to take form. The memorial blogs are not only honoring the memory of their children, but also expressing the deep sorrow of a parent losing a child and manifesting the loss every parent is deeply afraid of.¹⁴⁰

Death also creates new anniversaries. The day the person dies becomes a significant anniversary to

¹³⁸ Quote in Finnish: "*Ja pihamaallamme palaa edelleenkin kynttilä joka ilta: Tästä meidän tyttömme lähti. Hän olisi tänään hiukan yli 4-vuotias.*"

¹³⁹ Quote in Finnish: "*[hän] hukkui elokuun lämpimänä lauantaina. Jo samana syksynä itkin sitäkin, että "nyt hän ei lähde ikinä reppu selässä kouluun". Sitten minä ymmärsin, että jokainen päivä kantaa murheen itsessään. Ymmärsin, ettei minun tarvitse itkeä kuin sen päivän itkut, ja niissäkin tuntui olevan kyllin.*"

¹⁴⁰ Thanatologist Phyllis Silverman (1981, 23) has claimed, that grieving mothers suffer two losses: the loss of the identity enabled by the relationship with the deceased and the loss of a societal support.

remember and honor the memory of the deceased¹⁴¹. Anniversaries can become the rhythmic factor of the everyday for the bereaved, when they want to keep on remembering the person they lost. The anniversaries become the core of ritualistic practices and create a ritual calendar of mourning and honoring.

*When my grandfather died, for a few years I lit a candle for him on the anniversary of his death. Now, six years later, I don't even always notice that the day has already passed. To me, it has become more important to remember him every time he comes to my mind, not when the calendar says I had to give him away.*¹⁴² (Nana, 23 yrs., survey answer 9/9/2011, translated from Finnish.)

*It is okay to use a small amount time to remember the dead from time to time (for example, on the anniversary of their death and/or other holidays).*¹⁴³ (Outi, 31 yrs., survey answer 11/26/2010, translated from Finnish.)

*Today is the anniversary of my grandmother's death, I just remembered it, but in a foreign, new environment, I did not realize to light a candle or that the day is today.*¹⁴⁴ (woman, 48 yrs., Finland, survey answer 10/26/2010, translated from Finnish.)

Ritual time¹⁴⁵ is one angle to examine the meaning of time in bereaving and honoring rituals, such as the abovementioned candle lighting and remembering the dead during anniversaries. According to ritual theory, time is divided into different sections, where different rituals, or rites of passages, maintain social cohesion and social structure in the community and enable the individual to gain a new status in life (Gennep 1960[1909]; Turner 1995 [1969]; Leach 1976). Anthropologist Arnold

¹⁴¹ Virtual-memorials.com displays both the birthdays and the days of death (Angelversaries) on the first page of the site. Last-Memories.com also uses the term Angelversary, but Memory-Of.com displays Anniversaries without stating if the date is the date of the death or the birthdate (accessed 11/29/2013.)

¹⁴² Quote in Finnish: "Kun ukkini kuoli, sytytin muutaman vuoden ajan kynttilän hänen kuolinpäivänään. Nyt kuusi vuotta myöhemmin en välttämättä huomaakaan, että hänen kuolinpäivänsä on ollut. Minulle on muodostunut tärkeämmäksi muistella häntä silloin kun hän tulee mieleeni, ei silloin kun kalenterin mukaisesti jouduin hänestä luopumaan."

¹⁴³ Quote in Finnish: "Kyllä vainajien muistamiseen voi käyttää pienen hetken silloin tällöin (esim. läheisen kuolinpäivä ja / tai jokin juhlapyhä)."

¹⁴⁴ Quote in Finnish: "Juuri tänään on isoäitini kuolinpäivä, muistin sen juuri, mutta vieraassa, uudessa ympäristössä en huomannut sytyttää kynttilää, enkä edes muistanut päivän olevan tämän."

¹⁴⁵ The answer from woman (48) also states that the ritual practice of remembering her grandmother is closely linked to a familiar place (most likely the respondent's home). More about space and place in memorials: see chapter 5.1. Space becoming a place.

van Gennep (1960[1909]), who has been considered to be one of the fathers of the rites of passage theory (also called the liminal theory), divides death rituals into two different personal statuses (A and B) and two time spaces (T1 and T2). Both statuses and time spaces are divided and connected by detachment rites and involvement rites. In between these rites there is an “abnormal” and “marginal state”, where an individual is between two identities and time spaces and has not completed the rites of passage in question. Most commonly, this theory was connected to death rituals (a connection also made by anthropologists Victor Turner and Edmund Leach), who were avid followers of van Gennep) and the status of the deceased, which is through different funeral rites transferred to the afterlife. However, when considering the status of the bereaved, the funeral rites do not suffice. Could we actually understand from the responses quoted above that after a few years, i.e. a few repetitions of ritualized remembering during anniversaries, people (Nana, Outi and woman, 48 yrs.) have gone through a rite of passage of transferring the status of the deceased to the afterlife? Possibly, but the classical liminal theory suggests a singular event, *one ritualized event*, as a rite of passage, since there are no new statuses or time spaces gained after each ritualized remembering during the anniversaries.

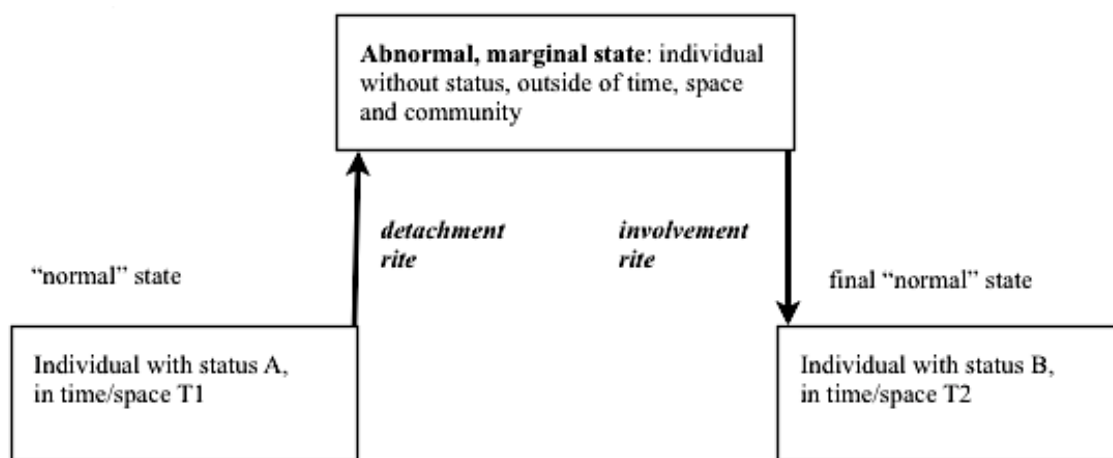


Figure 5. Figure according to Fingerroos (2004, 38), describing the liminality theory of Arnold van Gennep (1960 [1909]) and Edmund Leach (1976).

The figure above explaining the rite of passage process suggests that it is, in fact, a unique event, which is not repeated. In this case, the rite of passage and liminality theory do not explain the process of how the status of the *bereaved* is changing as well; how they gain a new status, if they gain such at all. For example, in the case of a bereaving friend, there are no such words as “a widower” or “an orphan”, neither is there a word for a parent who has lost their child. What is,

then, this new status or time space they are entering through the rites? They have to reconstruct themselves according to what has happened and adopt a *psychological understanding* of the death within their social group.¹⁴⁶ (Walter 1994, 39.) This happens through repeated ritualized gestures of remembering and honoring, such as visiting the cemetery on anniversaries and lighting candles on, for example, the Day of the Dead. Many bereaved are aware of the psychological terms assigned to grief processes, although some refuse to categorize their own life and emotions in neat boxes and phases of grief.

They say that grief has certain phases, and not before the bereaved has undergone all of them will they begin to heal. I would certainly like to meet the person who has written down all the phases and see whether they have themselves experienced such a deep grief that they can honestly say that all the phases must be gone through. [--] I really do not understand why [we] need to accept what has happened. This type of unfairness cannot ever be accepted, one does not even learn to live with it, but, despite of that, one just needs to carry on. Maybe we just do not ever heal, since we do not believe we will ever accept what has happened. Let's always be just a little bit broken, if nothing else helps.¹⁴⁷ (Seija, blog post 9/22/2013, accessed 11/25/2013, translated from Finnish, anonymized.)

The blogs served two different purposes for the women: a place to gain (and offer) psychological understanding of their loss as well as a place to carry out remembrance rituals which bring comfort and continuation in their lives. Through the memorial blogs the two different timelines are also able to co-exist through writings of anniversaries and life events that did not take place. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1974, 233–235) has written about *permanent liminality*, a social outsiderhood, which refers to rites of passage process, where the involvement rites do not transfer

¹⁴⁶ Fingerroos (2004, 40) also notes that modern interpretation of death rituals does not have to rely on the rites of passage theory, although they often are applied in anthropological ritual studies. Thanatologist Tony Walter also notes that the late modern period controls death through psychological understanding instead of the previous (modern) medial understanding. Grief experts have excelled in helping the bereaved in their grief, and, according to Walter, they are a “more sophisticated version of control - of others and of death - through knowledge and technique”. (Walter 1994, 39-40.)

¹⁴⁷ Quote in Finnish: ”Sanovat että surulla on tiettyjä vaiheita ja vasta kun sureva on käynyt ne kaikki läpi hän alkaa eheytyä. Olisi ihan kiva tavata se joka on nuo surun vaiheet kirjannut ylös, onko hän muka joskus kokenut niin syvää surua että voi vilpittömästi väittää että surun vaiheet on käytävä läpi. Minä en kyllä käsitä miksi [median] pitäisi jossain vainness hyväksyä tapahtunut. Ei kai tälläistä epäreiluuutta voi koskaan hyväksyä, sen kanssa ei opi edes elämään mutta siitä huolimatta on yritettävä jatkaa eteenpäin. Emme kai sitten koskaan enää eheydy kun emme edes usko että koskaan tulemme hyväksymään tapahtuneen. Ollaan sitten vähän rikki aina, ei kai tässä muukaan auta.”

the individual away from the liminality, but the individual remains – either by their own will or not – in the social liminality (see Figure 6.). Seija notes in her blog post, that “Maybe we just do not ever heal, since we do not believe we will ever accept what has happened. Let’s always be just a little bit broken, if nothing else helps”. For her, she chooses to remain in the liminality of being a bereaved mother, although the society around her pressures her to let go of her grief and continue with her life through the psychological phases of accepting loss. She refuses to accept her loss, but chooses to “carry on”, despite her pain.

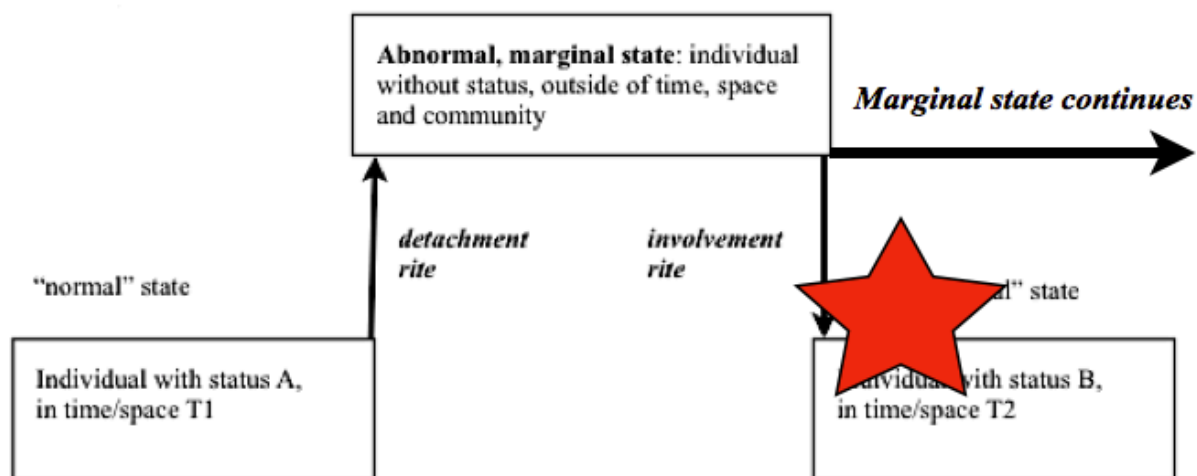


Figure 6. The ritual process of entering back to the normal state with a new status in a new time/space is not completed. The bereaved remains in the “abnormal state”, without the social status.

Turner notes, that rites of passages usually elevate the individual to a higher social status, such as in the case of initiation rites, which are usually relevant in different age groups. However, ritual degradation is also equally possible albeit usually less common than ritualistic elevation of social status. (Turner 1974, 232.)

Thanatologist Tony Walter argues that the current death culture is more concentrated on expressive talking than ritual itself and ritual is replaced by discourse. Grief counseling work highlights the importance of talking and speaks of bereavement as a process which the individual undergoes, but Walter notes that self-help and grief counseling groups can also isolate the bereaved from society and what the bereaved would actually need is a wider education campaign to teach everyone how to support bereaved individuals. (Walter 1994, 34–35). The bereaved often state, that they feel left alone or that others do not know how to confront them as being bereaved.

In the case of Kaarina, she and her family were not “allowed to remain alone”:

Everybody does their “grief work” in their own way. Some retrieve themselves to solitude, into silence, close the door behind them... Maybe for some it is the best possible way, the most nurturant way. In our case, we couldn’t and weren’t allowed to remain alone. We talked and talked and talked. Over and over again. We were blessed with understanding and patient people who listened to us. On top of that, I wrote and wrote and wrote. And we cried so long and hard. Dad cried the most. Sometimes we still cry, but not every day.¹⁴⁸ (Kaarina, memorial blog, an entry dated in 1999, accessed 9/10/2013, translated from Finnish.)

By using the memorial as tools of informing their community (and others experiencing the same loss) about what had happened to them, the blogs also served as a way to gain autonomy in a situation where other perhaps do not always know what to say and when to say it. This way, they wanted to avoid situations where other people might mistakenly make inconsiderate remarks or otherwise interact inappropriately with them.

There were a few completely inappropriate comments, from people who have not met [him] or us, that have tried to push themselves to the blog. Fortunately I realized from the beginning that I can moderate the comments automatically, now they first come to me and I can check what I am willing to publish. [our son] was an agnostic which is why my purpose is to moderate that there will not be any religious messages to a place founded in his honor, I feel that they would offend his memory if I would allow religious comments.¹⁴⁹ (Seija, e-mail interview 20/9/2010, translated from Finnish.)

The memorial blogs for Seija and Kaarina were also a way to offer help through sharing information, as well as a way to cope with their loss. Both have written intimate details about their

¹⁴⁸ Quote in Finnish: ”Jokainen tekee ”surutyötään” omalla laillaan. Jotkut vetäytyvät yksinäisyyteen, hiljaisuuteen, panevat oven perässänsä kiinni... Ehkä se on joillekin paras mahdollinen tapa, hoitavin tapa. Meillä ei osattu eikä haluttu jäädä yksin. Me puhuimme ja puhuimme ja puhuimme. Kerta kerran jälkeen. Meitä siunattiin ymmärtäväsillä ja kärsivällisillä ihmisillä, jotka jaksoivat kuunnella. Sen lisäksi minä kirjoitin, kirjoitin ja kirjoitin. Ja me itkimme niin, kauan ja hartaasti. Isi itki kaikista eniten. Vieläkin itkemme joskus, emme tosin joka päivä.”

¹⁴⁹ Quote in Finnish: ”Muutama täysin asiaton kommentti, ihmisiltä jotka eivät ole koskaan Santeria tai edes meitä tavanneet, on yrittänyt tunkea blogiin. Onneksi oivalsin jo alussa että voin estää kommenttien tulon automaattisesti, nyt ne tulevat ensin minulle ja voin tarkistaa mitä suostun julkistamaan. Santeri oli agnostikko ja niinpä minun tehtäväni on valvoa ettei myöskään mitään uskonnollisia viestejä ilmaannu hänen muistokseen perustettuun paikkaan, koen että olisi hänen muistoaan loukkaavaa jos sallisin uskonnolliset viestit.”

everyday feelings in the blogs, about how they discuss the memory of the deceased child with other children in the family (Kaarina) and what kind of things bring them comfort (such as Christian faith for Kaarina and for Seija, her husband). This way they were able to act on their desire to share with other parents their experience of how it feels to lose a child and how it is possible to carry on.

Seija launched the blog very shortly after the death of her son, but Kaarina's tragedy had happened before Internet technology and she uploaded handwritten texts. Seija used the blog (and other honoring rituals, such as lighting a candle on their driveway every evening after the memorial service [Seija, 9/21/2010, email interview]) to come to terms with her loss and as a tool for crisis management¹⁵⁰ in her community. Kaarina had been writing about her feelings and experiences by hand during those ten years after the loss of her daughter, and decided to upload all the material to the blog in order to show others how it is possible to survive the death of a child.

In conclusion, the rites of passage theory does not fit in explaining what the bereaved are going through with virtual memorials but instead focuses on one event, such as the funeral, which, however, does not provide any closure for the bereaved themselves. The ritualized remembering during anniversaries can not be regarded as a rite of passage either, since there are no new statuses or time/spaces for the bereaved to enter, but the remembering rituals are repeated during the anniversaries as part of a personal way of remembering and honoring the memory of a loved one and keeping the memories alive, especially during meaningful anniversaries. Seija and Kaarina wanted to share their thoughts and feelings in a memorial blog so that others experiencing the same loss (of a child) would find comfort and solace in their writings. The blogs also served for the women as diaries, which would provide them with a retrospective of the past events.

3. Preserving family legacies

In memorials, especially on gravestones, time is frozen between the birth and death dates, and the stones are meant to last for coming generations, especially grandchildren and other family members. Gravemarkers and headstones do not only represent the place of the disposed body but also collectively held beliefs and concepts about the deceased individual and his/her society as a community (Huntington & Metcalf 1979, 9). According to French historian Philippe Ariès, the

¹⁵⁰ More about crisis management see chapter 4.2. Crisis management and real-time collectivity.

Western custom of visiting the deceased body began after the 1750s. The place where the physical remains were disposed became more meaningful for the mourners¹⁵¹, and it did not suffice anymore that the Church cared for the wellbeing of the soul – the wellbeing of body also mattered. (Ariès 1974, 69–70.) During the late 18th century, graves were created in the fashion of the idolized Antiquities and the grave was intended to represent the *persona* of the deceased, without contradicting the Christian belief of resurrection and eternal life. The burial gained a new importance, since the intimates of the deceased began to express the difficulty of accepting the death of their loved one. They wanted to visit the deceased, at the graveyard, which is why burials were more often located in the immediate proximity of homes. At the graveyards, families wanted their deceased family members next to each other, which is why formal family burials were built. The burial site became a meaningful place of memories and remembrance, and visiting the site was more a *meditative act* than a representation of religious faith. (Ariès 1974, 70–73, italics added.)

Ariès describes the aforementioned change in death culture as “a cult of memory”, which was visible in the systematic park type of graveyard planning, monumental memorials and how visiting these memorials gained a museal feature. Monumental tombs represented ideologies, world views and historical events of the community or community members. (Ariès 1974, 72–73.) A more modern example of this type of behavior is the tomb of the lead singer of The Doors, Jim Morrison, and how his fans visit his grave every year on the anniversary of his death, July 3rd. Anthropologist Stig Söderholm has studied the cult activity around the legend of Morrison and his tomb in Paris. Visiting the tomb during the anniversary has become almost like a pilgrimage for dedicated fans. (Söderholm 1990.) However, pilgrimages in the age of the Internet do not require physical movement, but they are more spiritual voyages, traveled in the mind more than in distance, more often physically alone than with others, but accompanied by the *co-presence* of others. The death of Michael Jackson created well-known virtual pilgrimages to online environments that displayed either his musical work or photo art about his career. Videos on YouTube became modern places of pilgrimage, meditative acts, which act as significant connections to his life, music and history and where the people pilgrimaging can experience a sense of community and its cohesive force (Sumiala 2013, 17, 73; about pilgrimages see also

¹⁵¹ Ariès claims that, previously, the Roman law of the Twelve Tables stated that the deceased should not be buried or cremated inside city limits, because of contamination risks, but by the eighteenth century, the dead were not something to be afraid of anymore. Ariès claims that the reason for this change can be attributed to be the belief of resurrection of the body in Christian faith. (Ariès 1982, 30–31.)

Turner 1995[1969]).

What is significant about virtual pilgrimage destinations is that they are accessible despite the time and spatial distances. They can portray significant events as they happen in the present, such as a musical performance of the abovementioned Michael Jackson, which can be accessible years after the initial event. As long as the videos exist, even our grandchildren can hear and watch Michael Jackson perform. According to Sumiala, this creates a new “ritual time”, which is “experienced in new, multi-temporal ways” (Sumiala 2013, 87), where online memorials can archive cultural and social norms of their time, interpreted in the present through the sense of co-presence of others.

Here I will introduce Yolanda, a mother of three, who lost her husband due to an enlarged heart (ie. heart failure) at the age of 36. They were high school sweethearts who reconnected years after school and were married for 14 years. I found one of the memorials Yolanda had made on Memory-Of.com and interviewed her in 2008. She had created three individual memorial sites (see images 25.–27.) with three different service providers, since she wanted to ensure her children and grandchildren would have access to the sites (if one of them would be closed) and would remember her husband as he was: a loving father, a husband and a friend.

[the virtual memorial is for] [--] his children so they can share in the knowledge of their heritage, to keep documentation of the family lineage, to keep a history of health issues, and to give people a way to pay respects that is convenient, free, and will always be available. (Yolanda, email interview 6/12/2008.)

The memorials Yolanda made contain extensive amounts of personal information about her husband, although only one of the memorials mentions the cause of death. Yolanda wanted her children to be able to “keep a history of health issues”, which may refer to the enlarged heart that caused her husband’s death, but she also wanted to have different functionalities that each of the sites provided (see images 25., 26. and 27.).

I wanted the functionality that the other site had (Every site is different in what they allow you to do). Also, so that he is on all major sites; easy to stumble upon and easy for my kids kids kids to find. (Yolanda, email interview 6/4/2008.)



Image 25. The front page of the memorial Yolanda built in the Memory-Of.com service. The memorial concentrates on the biography of Yolanda’s husband and is written by his aunt. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen 11/29/2013, anonymized.)



Memories

██████████'s Life

██████████ 1971 - ██████████ 2008

› [Sharing](#)

› [Photo Album](#)

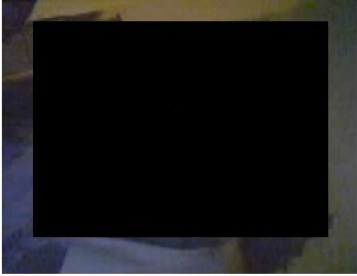
› [Slide Show](#)

› [Edit Memorial](#)

› [Guestbook](#)

Invite others to view this Memorial. Enter email addresses below:

Security code 9k6



Please sign the guestbook for ██████████ by clicking [here](#)

This page has been visited 763 times

Image 26. The front page of the memorial Yolanda built in the Virtual-Memorials.com service. In the center, there is a picture slideshow of her husband. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen 11/29/2013, anonymized.)

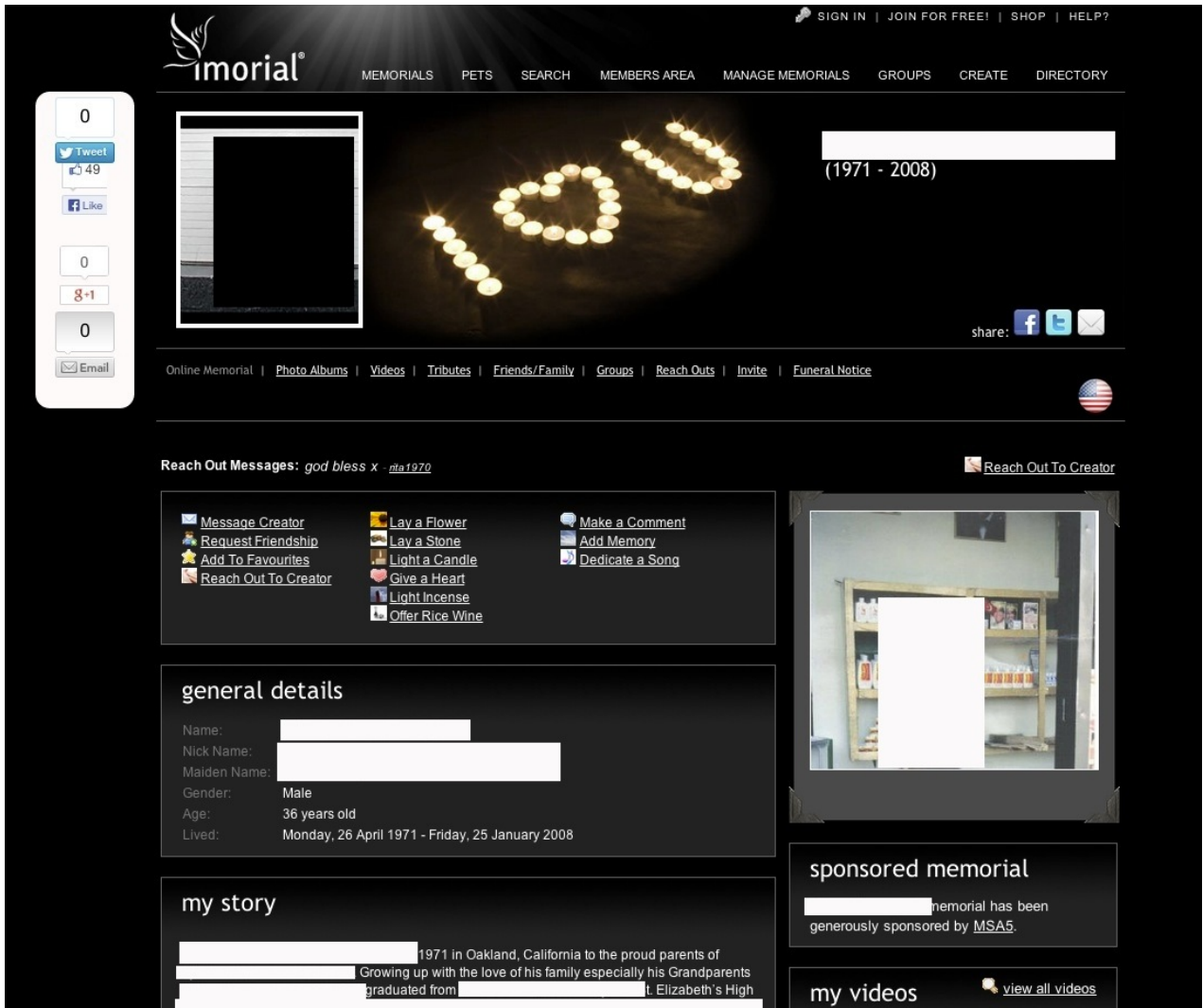


Image 27. The front page of the memorial Yolanda built in the Imorial.com service. On the right side, there is a picture slideshow; in the center, different text links for visitors to, for example, leave a comment, a flower or a heart. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen 11/29/2013, anonymized.)

Yolanda’s answers also reflect the assumption that the websites – and the Internet as we know it – will exist for generations¹⁵² and will be accessible to her grandchildren. Our experiences and our relationships mold us in to the people we are and who we will be, and family histories are very important for some to continue family legacies and, for example, connect children to their deceased parents. Family stories are the concentration of kinship and lineage, which also determines an individual’s personal identity in relation to others and creates a sense of belonging (Koenig Kellas 2007). A sense of belonging to a specific lineage connects an individual to a

¹⁵² Many people in the queries also claimed that a virtual memorial is “more eternal” than a physical memorial, such as a tombstone. This is an interesting claim, since a virtual location is only reached if the technology allows it, in other words, if the Internet connection is working on the device being used. It seems that some people possess an optimistic approach to this technology and believe it to be a natural part of people’s everyday life as any technological everyday device, such as the telephone, a refrigerator or the television, and to continue to serve as everyday technology for further generations.

specific family history – as well as the future – within the time and space of their lineage. Showing family pictures to children and grandchildren, for example, is part of assimilating them to the family history and culture, which have their own stories, rituals, habits and quirky little details, and these stories become part of the identity of the children. (Stone 2004 [1988]; Fiese et al. 1995; Pratt & Fiese 2004.)

In anthropology studies, kinship¹⁵³ and descent have been regarded as a form of production and distribution, which are formed by groups and social relationships, interlocking positions and roles that contain both action and ideas about the other (Keesing & Strathern 1998, 174). Kinship also consists of obligations between relatives. They usually are in relation to the moral codes of the community or, in other words, what is the right thing to do, and in the case of death, the obligations do not disappear. Descent systems themselves are a way of defining continuity from the past to the present and between the living and the ancestors (Keesing & Strathern 1998, 183).

In the case of Yolanda, she felt obligated to mourn and honor her husband, but also wanted to harness Internet technology for future generations to remember and learn about their past and ancestors, and to have a common virtual space that all of them could access. She took agency in enabling the continuation of her husband's legacy, so that the memory and meaning of him would not disappear in time. The virtual memorial websites she created contain vast amounts of detailed information about a man, an individual, whose personality is displayed in various photos, photo commentaries, life stories and the memories of visitors (friends and family) who have shared their tributes. The memorials are accessible to all friends and family, which is how she intended them to be.

XXX lit a candle on 07/07/2008: "Still hard to scroll by ur name in my phone and not call u. I miss u brah!" (memorial website, anonymized, accessed 11/8/2013)

XXX lit a candle on 07/07/2008: "If I lit a candle for everytime I thought of you, everytime I missed my best friend, the internet would catch on fire." (memorial website, anonymised, accessed 11/8/2013)

01-21-2010 4:32 PM [--] *By:* XXX *From:* Oakland I will NEVER forget you Brotha (memorial website, anonymised, accessed 11/8/2013)

¹⁵³ *Kinship*, in this context, is understood as "blood relationships" but also marital relationships between individuals (see more Keesing & Strathern 1998; Evans-Pritchard 1960; Malinowski 2005[1929]; Walter 1994, 156-161).

In this sense, the memorial does not only document the life of one man but also how his intimates have experienced the loss of him and how they have survived throughout the years. In the abovementioned tributes and virtual candles, the visitors address the deceased and express how his name in their cell phones feels difficult to see. All of these comments, intimate and personal, are visible for anyone – and as Yolanda wanted – for her children and future grandchildren. All of the websites have their specific look, provided by the memorial website companies, and their background music creates an ambience for the site. In the offline world, this type of customization is not possible, and the memories of the individual are usually communicated to other generations orally – if told at all.

During anniversaries friends and family can “travel” to the memorials and leave their messages on the guest books. They can read what others have written and comment on them if they wish. Yolanda intended the memorials to be eternal storages of family legacies, but they have also become places of pilgrimage, where friends and family members can visit – together or alone – and renew their relationship with the deceased. These types of remembering rituals also bring comfort to the bereaved, since they can see how many other people are missing their loved one and sharing their loss.

In online gaming environments, the memorials are either connected to the realm of the world (as in the case of WoW) or erected in specific memorial areas (as in the case of *Second Life*). However, communities in these environments transcend from the online to the offline, when they create real-time commemorations for the deceased. In some cases, the gaming communities have contacted the family of the deceased and invited them to participate in a commemoration in SL, enabling the RL family to be part of the world and community the deceased was a part of: his/hers virtual family.

Yes, yes, hell yes! We had a two virtual memorials when my partner in SL passed away. All his SL friends and family were there and his RL family also joined using one avatar. We were from all over the real world in one place at the same time for the love of one man. It was awesome, and I think I speak for all that were there!
(survey answer, woman, 41 yrs., 4/17/2010)

In the survey answer, woman, 41 yrs., was part of a virtual commemoration (or a funeral), which was intended for everyone that knew the deceased, whether online or offline. Often, virtual communities want to show their respect and love to the family of the deceased and how much they valued his/her input in the virtual community. Many players also claim they have two different families: online and offline. These types of events are also often recorded and shared on video-sharing websites, such as YouTube and Vimeo¹⁵⁴.

Additionally, since many memorials are publicly open for anybody to access, the question of who has the *right to remember and mourn* (Reimers 2011)¹⁵⁵ becomes irrelevant, and even acquaintances can show their solidarity and respect, not just the next of kin. In different cultures there are different rules of conduct regarding attending a funeral of a co-worker (Walter 1994). In Finnish culture, it is not automatic to attend, but the family sends a separate request if the burial and the wake are open to people outside of the immediate family. The custom is usually to send a greeting card (fin. *adressi*) with flowers to show support. However, online memorials can also work as neutral ground for work colleagues to discuss their loss as well, and to show their support to the family. The Internet has now enabled a more personalized way of contact with virtual memorial websites, memorial video collages and memorial groups on Facebook, where showing support is more communal, real-time and versatile with links to songs, videos and images that offer condolences.

When a (real life) friend of mine in Florida (I'm not in FL) died in a car wreck 4 years back, her online memorial pages not only brought together ALL her friends and family - which were rather spread out - but also gave a place for extended mourning and sharing of stories about her life. (woman, 23 yrs., Denver US, survey answer, 9/18/2010.)

For some, a virtual memorial is the only way one can attend a memorial with

¹⁵⁴ See e.g. Phoenixa Dances A Memorial Tribute 4 RL Mom in Second Life (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWFv9oY8ark>, accessed 20.11.2013), Second Life Russ Russell Memorial.Movie (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9aAQF712Ro>, accessed 20.11.2013), A Virtual Memorial for Second Life Curator (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCcHMCTX2v4>, accessed 20.11.2013), and Aces of Aces High memorial for 'Tailspin' (<http://vimeo.com/866332>, accessed 11/20/2013).

¹⁵⁵ Communication researcher Eva Reimers (2011) has studied inter alia LGTB relationships and funerals in Sweden. Reimers argues that kinship as a social relationship category is ambiguous in respect of how LGTB relationships are legitimized at the time of death. Reimers also argues that "claiming a position as bereaved can entail struggles concerning acknowledgement of kinship, and that examples of denunciation simultaneously stand out as resistance and subversion. To avoid marginalizing prospective mourners, it is important to be aware of how these practices of kinship and grief work together."

others who knew the person. I think it is helpful for those who cannot travel or knew the person only at a distance. (woman, 19 yrs., Nebraska US, survey answer, 9/17/2010.)

I feel it's all helpful for the surviving family and friends. It's closure; a way to say goodbye. (woman, 24 yrs., Seattle US, survey answer, 9/17/2010.)

In the case of Facebook, the service itself already enables a way of creating life stories, narratives about the past, albeit framed by a social networking system. The Timeline feature was added to the service in 2011, and it displays a collection of photos uploaded to the profile, stories posted in status updates, experiences (such as attended events and posts to other peoples' Walls and Updates), a cover photo on the profile, a continuously browsable Wall that displays the main posts (Facebook calls them "highlights") of each year and month and a log ("book") of all the activity of the individuals on the site and, finally, enables a highlight feature where the user can highlight individual posts and life events so that they are more visible on their profiles (Facebook Help, <https://www.facebook.com/help/133986550032744>, accessed 11/7/2013)

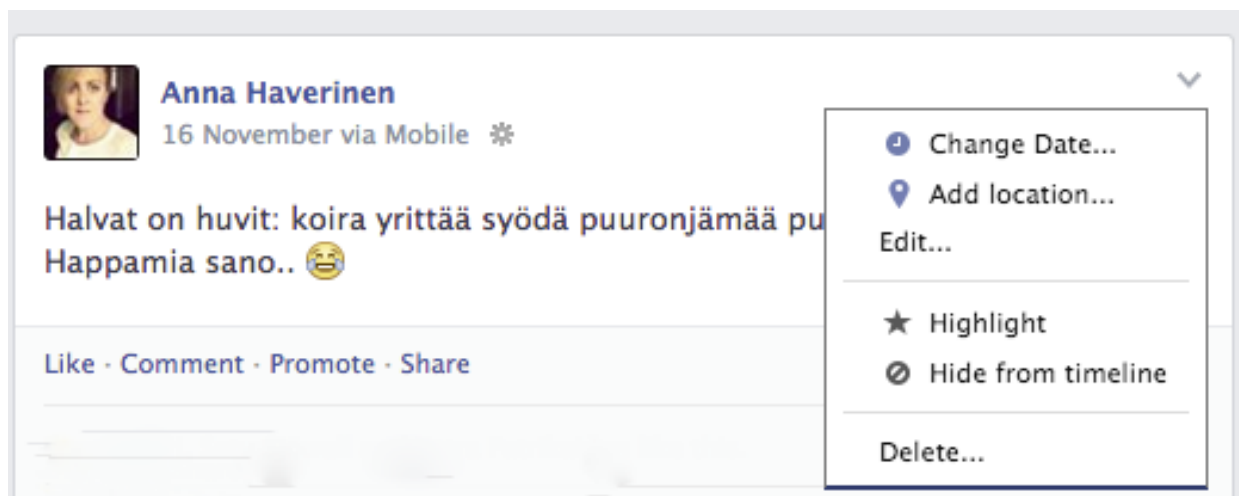


Image 28. A screenshot example from my personal profile on Facebook, where I can highlight individual posts by clicking the small arrow in the upper right corner, which opens a small menu of editing features. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 11/19/2013.) The feature is a ready-made collection of the individual's life, but not as viewed by others (as in the case of memorials) but by themselves as edited and displayed for others when they were alive. They are almost like eulogies or obituaries made by the living.

Since the memorials are intended to last for posterity, the virtual versions enable equality in terms of accessibility and distribution. On the Vimeo.com video-sharing website, a memorial video can be downloaded to your personal computer and memorial videos are often encouraged to be

downloaded, as in the following Facebook memorial post:

For those who may have missed it or just want to watch again... :) You can also download the video from Vimeo if you'd like too!! (Facebook memorial post, anonymized, accessed 11/7/2013.)

All of the abovementioned examples, (virtual memorial sites, gatherings of friends and family in virtual worlds, memorialized Facebook profiles) are examples of how an individual's life can be preserved and remembered together despite the geographical or temporal distance. They enable the entire social network of the deceased to mourn, remember, honor and use digital technology to preserve the cherished identity of their loved one for future generations. Anthropologists Roger Keesing and Andrew Strathern describe a social network which does not necessarily consist of blood relatives or in-laws but is called a *kindred* or *personal kindreds*, such as close family friends (Keesing & Strathern 1998, 181). Social networking systems enable these personal kindreds or, in other words, *extended social networks*¹⁵⁶ to also be part of the honoring and mourning of the individual.

The memorial webpages built online become places of (virtual) pilgrimages, where messages and tributes from family and friends are stored and visible to visitors years after the creation of the memorial. The memorial can also contain material created by the deceased themselves (as Facebook profiles, photographs, anecdotes) and material by his/her family and friends. This material can be collectively shared on the website (or several websites, as in the case of Yolanda). The oral stories and comments are stored in the memorial with the discussion the visitors have had and will have in the memorial. Grandchildren can know about their grandparents in a more thorough way and not just through oral stories, which can fade over time.

The online memorial becomes a culmination of the love and stories of an individual and his/her family, and the memorial becomes a family legacy, a *virtual memento*, which can be updated when needed, shared whenever and to whomever, and, most importantly, it is always accessible to all the intimates of the deceased in order to share their thoughts and memories together in the present.

¹⁵⁶ More about extended social networks research: see computer-mediated social networks (Boyd and Ellison 2007; Scott 2011) and community size research (Hill & Dunbar 2003; Dunbar 2010).

(6) Transcending worlds – complex identities and notions of privacy

People – individuals – represent different things to different people. They are relatives, sons and daughters, cousins and siblings; they are work and school colleagues, characters in online environments and familiar faces in cafes, pubs or wherever they want to spend their leisure time. These social groups, however, might be entirely separate, and, for example, work colleagues may not know that their most timid colleague is actually an aspiring tap dancer, or a mother does not know her daughter's close group of friends in a Second World War flight simulator game, where she is the captain of her flight league.

Death has a significant effect on identities. It reveals the hidden unknown aspects of a person's life but also creates new – often unwanted – identities, when, for example, losing a spouse or a child, as a life event becomes one aspect of the person's own self. Many death rituals rely on transforming identities, where rituals work as a means to adapting to changes in life. (see also e.g. Walter 1994; Ariès 1974; Davies 2002 [1997]; Sumiala 2013.) The next of kin receives a new status according to the relationship they had with the deceased, e.g. wife/husband becomes a widow/widower and a child becomes an orphan, close friends also need to re-arrange their identities.

In this chapter, I will discuss how identities are both *built* and *received* through online memorials, especially on virtual memorial websites, which allow the customization and personalization of the memorial to a certain degree. On Facebook, identities are reflected through the social relationships represented in each user profile as well as the various interests, page likes, groups and other details added to the profile info. However, on official memorial websites, the visual layouts used for the memorials often represent identities, but not only the identity of the deceased but also the identity of the memorial creator, the bereaved, and their relationship with the person being memorialized.

Later, I will discuss the complexity of identity play in online gaming environments, especially in role-playing communities, which use both the role-playing story and the actual information about the deceased player from the offline world to honor and mourn their loss within the virtual world. I will return to the case example of the Gorean role-playing community introduced already in chapter (5) 1. *Space becoming a place* and discuss *imagined* and *actual* identities. Finally, I will introduce the meaning of privacy and publicity in online mourning and honoring and relate how

mourning online communicates notions of private emotions on a public website, such as the Finnish virtual candle website www.sytytakynttila.fi.

1. Built and received identities in virtual memorials

Memorials and identities are connected to each other both on a conceptual and a practical level. Both are abstract notions, highly dependent on the context, actively constructed and built by the subject in question or in the perceptions of others and also change through time and place. In this chapter, I will introduce the notion of how different identities – both of the deceased and the bereaved – are being readily affected by the creation process of the memorial. The action of creating a memorial, intentionally or unintentionally, is a ritualized act of remembering and honoring, which consists of symbolism concerning the relationship between the deceased and the bereaved – as well as their community and other extended social networks.

What is particular about the websites compared to other online memorials is their constructed nature, where they resemble traditional burial sites the most. The websites do not only reflect the social relation between the deceased and the creator of the memorial, but also the relationship between the individual and society, in this case the United States, of which all three websites¹⁵⁷ researched in this study were marketed for. Since all memorials are always subjective constructions of identities, highlighting specific aspects of their personalities, gender and social and cultural status, the memorials can often even be almost like caricatures highlighting only one or a few aspects of the individual. Through their constructed nature, they are also representations of culture, ideology and religion and reflect a specific time in history. They are social narratives of a socially contextualized individual (Wu 2010, 130).

The memorial websites were analyzed using identity theory, highlighted with a socio-cultural narrative aspect, because of the way they portray the identity and the life of the deceased, the way the memorial creator (hereafter as *bereaved*) perceived the identity of the deceased, how the personal taste of the bereaved is displayed on the memorial visually and, finally, the options the website providers provide to the users in customization and personal layouts. In this work, I use the concept of identity as a combination of social, cultural and virtual identities, which represent different aspects of the individual, whether as the bereaved or the deceased, which are communicated through the discourse (both visual and textual) of mourning and honoring.

¹⁵⁷ www.memorial-of.com, www.virtual-memorials.com, www.last-memories.com

Identities in this frame are narrated through the honoring rituals of remembering and honoring the deceased and creating the narrative of the life of the deceased on the memorial (see e.g. Ricoeur 1991a, 121). The Internet provides a complex way of representing and creating identities, and at the time of death the notion of identity becomes important as well. Identity as a concept is used in this work as something a person is or wishes to be in the eyes of others (see e.g. Ricoeur 1991a, 1991b; Cohen 1993; Hall 1999; Bauman 2004, 32). In other words, identity is something that the person already represents in relation to others or what the person actively attempts to represent, for example, in online gaming worlds, where the player's identity is displayed in the form of an avatar.

According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, identity is formed through the social interaction between individuals and community and it is contextual by nature. Hall represents the classic social constructivism theory, which connects individuals always to their community and social interaction. The identity of the individual is never formed by the individual alone, but is always a negotiation against the expectations and assumptions of others. (Hall 1999, 23.) Sociologist Zygmund Bauman, however, connects identity more to *identification*¹⁵⁸, which consists of the prosessual nature of identity and how it changes in time and place (Bauman 2004, 38). Both views have been influential in this work, since memorials are often retrospects of an individual's life, where certain aspects of their identity may rise above others (such as being a mother). It is discursively constructed in the narrative of the memorialization, which is further ritualistically repeated during anniversaries (such as Mother's Day).

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1991a) has introduced his idea of narrative identity, which is created and constructed through narrative stories – in this case, life stories. Ricoeur notes that “human lives become more readable (*lisibles*) when they are interpreted in the function of the stories people tell about themselves” (Ricoeur 1991a, 73; hyphenation in the original). Philosophical anthropologist Jos de Mul (2005) argues that narrative in the modern sense can be applied to visual and virtual material as well, since, according to de Mul, all aspects of the world can be

¹⁵⁸ Bauman also discusses how different groups of people, especially social and ethnic minorities, are granted a more limited range of options when it comes to the possibility of identity creation. Bauman argues, that "at one pole of the emergent global hierarchy are those who can compose and decompose their identities more or less at will, drawing from the uncommonly large, planet-wide pool of offers. At the other pole are crowded those whose access to identity choice has been barred, those who are given no say in deciding their preferences and who in the end are burdened with identities enforced and imposed by others; identities which they themselves resent but are not allowed to shed and cannot manage to get rid of. Stereotyping, humiliating, dehumanizing, stigmatizing identities." (Bauman 2004, 38).

viewed as a narration¹⁵⁹. de Mul argues that narrative identity is a complex combination of several contextualities, containing multicultural, transhistorical and international aspects that are always in dialogue (de Mul 2005, 256). According to de Mul, narrative is “the representation of series of logically and chronologically related events in a series of specific settings, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and caused or undertaken by actors” (de Mul 2005, 257). The basic core of a virtual memorial website consists of the biography of the deceased, which displays the highlights of the person’s life, usually regarding work, school and family. In MO and LM, there is also a subpage named Timeline (MO) or Life Story (LM), which is very similar to the Timeline feature of Facebook.

In image 29. is an example of how the main page of a memorial in LM can look. This particular site was created by Sandy, 44, whom I interviewed in 2008 via email. She had created a memorial website for her deceased sister, who died of breast cancer in 2007, and Sandy found the service extremely helpful in coping with loss and bereavement. The biography on the first page is very similar to obituaries published in newspapers.

¹⁵⁹ Narrativity is in this work a natural companion for discourse analysis, since the roots of my analysis are in social constructivism, where experience and reality are socially constructed phenomena that manifest in visual and linguistic projections and symbols. (see e.g. Jokinen 1999; Juhila 1999.) Narrative studies itself has been under the influence of a paradigm shift, where the research is currently being focused on the *producer* instead of so much on the *content*, and how life experiences and the self is being constructed through a narrative (Koskinen-Koivisto forthcoming 2014; see more e.g. Haanpää 2008; Savolainen 2009; Heimo 2010.).

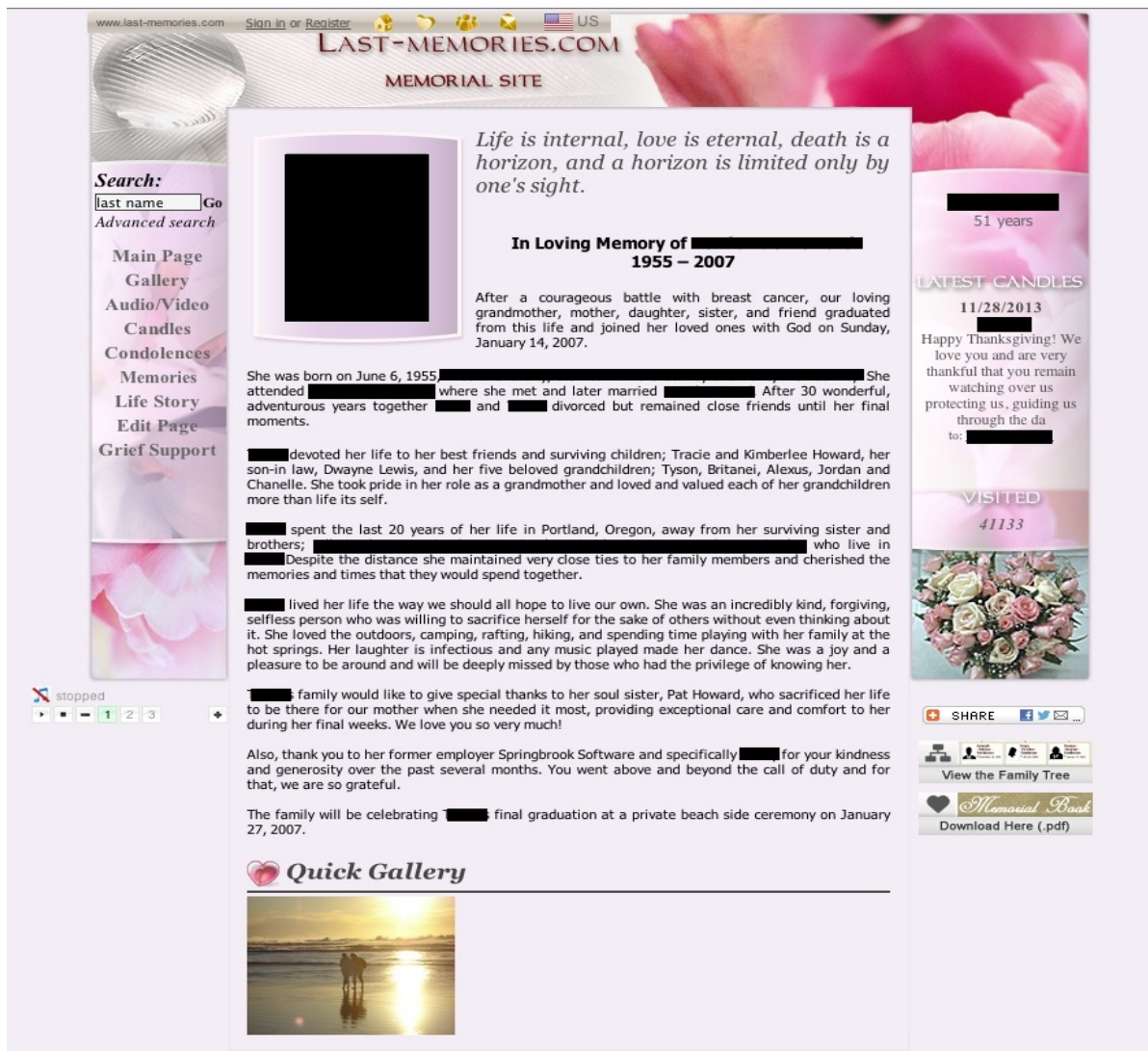


Image 29. An example of the first page of the memorial Sandy, 44, created for her sister on Last-Memories.com. It displays the life story of her sister. The layout was different in 2008 (shades of blue and lilac and an image of a white dove), and Sandy has updated the look after that. On the right side, there is the Latest Candles box, which displays as an animation of the latest candles being lit on the site. (Screenshot by Anna Haverinen, 11/14/2013.)

In the interview, Sandy highlighted the importance of how the site enables her to write to her sister and put her thoughts on paper.

The meaning of this site for me is very significant. It allows me to put my pain on "paper" per say. To write things to her, which helps me to cope with my loss.

(Sandy, 44 yrs., email interview 9/12/2008.)

Sandy's figure of speech, "putting pain on paper", consists of an aspect of how the pain is put away through writing and how it remains on the paper and in text, away from the self. Sandy also feels she is writing *to* her sister, as if she was able to read and receive her messages but not able to respond. The memorial was created in 2008, but Sandy continues to use the site as a way to

communicate with her sister.

Saw a rainbow on my way to work and immediately thought of you. Love and miss you sis. (memorial candle lit by Sandy 7/18/2013, accessed 11/14/2013.)

The loss of *another* – who bears a significant importance in our lives, such as family members – due to death can highlight certain aspects of both the identity of the deceased as well as the bereaved¹⁶⁰. Borrowing from Ricoeur, the self of the bereaved is now different, since it has previously been understood as part of that specific social relationship. The body of the deceased is also changing, since previously it was part of the living but is now part of the dead, which is the unknown and unfamiliar *other*. (Ricoeur 1991a, 131.) The self is not only regarded in relation to the individual's own self but also in relation to the selves of others. The idea of the self as a multiple is where I bring my theory of *built* and *received* identities on online memorial websites, where the multiple aspects of self are narrowed to represent the individual with only a few details, such as parenting, work, musical and hobby interests. I use the word *build* to describe the process of creating identities on memorial websites, where the bereaved, i.e. memorial builder, negotiates the different aspects of the personality of the deceased and which features of him/her are the most important to represent in the memorial and in their life narratives.

Sandy's sister, in her memorial, is portrayed through the love of her family, and she is claimed to have taken pride "in her role as a grandmother and loved and valued each of her grandchildren more than life its self", where her identity is positioned directly in the social context of her family and friends. She had also divorced but "remained close friends until her final moments" with her ex-husband, which also reveals that their relationship continued from being lovers and spouses to friends and ex-wife/-husband. Her personal attributes are also described as:

She was an incredibly kind, forgiving, selfless person who was willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of others without even thinking about it. She loved the outdoors, camping, rafting, hiking, and spending time playing with her family at the hot springs. Her laughter is infectious and any music played made her dance. She was a joy and a pleasure to be around and will be deeply missed by those who had the privilege of knowing her. (Sandy's sister's biography,

¹⁶⁰ Different identities rise to the focus between different people, which, according to gender theories, are also a question of performance and representation (e.g. Butler 1990). In this work, I have expanded this notion to identities, which are performed in different social situations in a specific manner, such as the performative identity of the bereaved, who is expected to carry out socially and culturally accepted identity norms during their time of grief.

accessed 11/14/2013.)

Sandy's text fluctuates between the past tense ("she *was* a joy") and the present ("laughter *is* infectious") and continues to describe herself and her family as "we", missing and thanking various people for their love and support during the final months of her sister's illness.

The LM website also provides a feature called Memories, where the site builder, i.e. bereaved, can write their memories for others to read. However, the feature also provides a memory *from* the deceased themselves, named as "me". The post describes her first Christmas in Heaven and might have been written by Sandy herself.

me

My First Christmas In Heaven

I see the countless Christmas trees around the world below. With tiny lights, like heaven's stars, reflecting in the snow. The sight is so spectacular! Please wipe away that tear, for I am spending Christmas with Jesus Christ this year. I hear the many Christmas songs that people hold so dear. But sounds of music can't compare with Christmas Choir up here. I have no words to tell you, the joy their voices bring, for it is beyond description to hear the angels sing. I know how much you miss me. I see the pain inside your heart, but I am not so far away. We really aren't apart. So be happy for me dear ones, You know I hold you dear, And be glad I'm spending Christmas with Jesus this year. I send you each a special gift from my heavenly home above. I send you each a memory of my undying love. After all "Love is the gift", more precious than pure gold. It was always most important in the stories Jesus told. Please love and keep each other as my Father said to do. For I can't count the blessings or love He has for you. So, have a Merry Christmas and wipe away that tear. Remember, I'm spending Christmas with Jesus Christ this year.

Image 30. Screenshot from Sandy's sister's memorial (*Memories* section). (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 11/14/2013.)

Other posts on the Memories subpage are posted either by Sandy or other family members, and the posts are directed either to other family members and friends as a collective or to the deceased. Some of the posts also include photos, which are used to illustrate the memories which resonate with the Main Page biography, such as photos of the events described (in this case camping photos). The sister's identity is being narratively constructed in the memories and comments in the virtual candles, describing the relationships between the deceased and a particular family member/ the entire family, and how the surviving family struggles to continue their life without the deceased.

In other words, the narrative identity in virtual memorials is built for the mourner as well as the

deceased, whom are represented in the way the deceased's biography is being written and in the content of the posts the bereaved leave on the memorial. The identity of the mourner is being built at the same time as the narrative of the deceased, since the bereaved are negotiating themselves in relation to the loss.¹⁶¹ They are now parents who have lost a child or a spouse, children who have lost their parent(s) or friends and colleagues who have lost a meaningful relationship from their daily lives. Identities are received, when the information about the deceased is constructed to highlight only one aspect of their social relationships and their role in their close community. These identities are created from the outside and might not have been the main identity they would have displayed about themselves. For example, a memorial created by work colleagues concentrates usually on the professional identity of the deceased, but a memorial created by a parent or a spouse would display entirely different information and a different visual outlook.

Borrowing from de Mul, identity can be understood in virtual memorials through three levels, where the relationships between the deceased and the bereaved rise to the focus at different times: a) referentiality (us and our world), b) communicability (us and our fellow man) and c) self-understanding (us and ourselves) (de Mul 2005, 251). By telling (life) stories, the individual always reflects themselves against the *other(s)* (de Mul 2005, 255; Ricoeur 1991a, 141), but also, when regarding the process of creating memorials, the stories told are from the perspective of the other, since the person him/herself, the deceased, can not provide their personal account.¹⁶²

The other is present in different roles in the stories we identify our selves with. In the first place, we identify ourselves with the others that appear in the stories that are being told in our (sub)culture. In the second place, the other is constitutive for our identity because it is always part of our life story, as relative, lover, neighbour, colleague, employer, stranger, enemy, and so on. In the third place, we are always actors in the stories of others. [--] the self is a multiple self. (de Mul 2005, 255.)

According to my fieldwork, the official memorial websites provide a selection for the memorial

¹⁶¹ Parents who have lost a child often feel that society perceives them as failures. In this case, the bereaved also receive *identities* from society, when they feel that society is labelling them with roles such as bad parent. (see e.g. Aho 2010; Pallari et al. 2011; Nikkola et al. 2013.)

¹⁶² Identity and identity play have interested scholars from the beginning of online communication. The computer screen works as a camouflage, where anybody can hide or display him/herself as they wish and the question of trust rises to a different level. Scholars have found that people edit the appearance they provide online in a similar manner as they do in person. They want to appear more attractive, more intellectual, professional, interesting, sexually appealing and/or fun, depending on the context. (see e.g. Saarikoski et al. 2009, 259–263; 2011.)

builder to choose a template from and to decide the visual outlook and the feeling of the memorial. Every so often, Sandy most likely changes the look of her sister's memorial in order for it to fit her feelings at the time. The template (or skin) may include flash-animated features, such as flying butterflies. However, none of the sites researched in this work provided a custom HTML feature, which would have enabled the memorial creator to build their own layout using CSS language. The templates play a crucial part in building a memorial website, since they enable highlighting certain aspects of the deceased's life and interests. Memorial websites offer a set of differing templates to choose from, e.g. a patriotic theme with the national bird, the bald eagle, and flags of the United States. These patriotic themes carry nationalistic values also considered as values of every American. Memorials with these themes are usually for men and women serving the country as policemen/women, fire-fighters and soldiers. Their identity as "serving the country" is thus the main status erected from all their social identities of being someone's child, sibling, friend, spouse or parent. As a symbol for their individual identity, the background music often refers to either their personal taste in music or the lyrics of the song work to portray personal messages of the deceased (e.g. Frank Sinatra's "My Way").

For children, the identity usually concentrates on their gender and age. In Memory-O.com, there is a set of very gender-stereotyped themes, such as pink for girls, pale blue for boys (see image 31.). Boys usually have a theme that displays certain athletic hobbies, again culturally reflecting the "national sports" of the US, with images of American football and baseball. These themes are popular even for stillborns, and, in that case, they represent the hopes, dreams and wishes the parents had for that child: a father teaching his son to play baseball or a mother dressing up the girl with ribbons and pretty dresses.



Image 31. An example from Memory-Of.com of a template used usually in baby girl memorials. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 12/3/2013)

When I explored the memorial websites, I created a memorial for my father in each of them, in order to observe my own feelings and experiences autoethnographically. However, because of the cultural differences, I felt alien navigating the websites and trying to choose the visual outlook of the memorial. I noticed that the memorial reflected my personal taste more than the actual identity of my father, but this also was due to the fact that I was only three years old when he died. My knowledge of him is based on the stories and facts my mother had told me, but I did not know whether he liked sports, music, literature or movies. My aunt had told me we shared the same kind of quirky interest on funny and weird things, but that does not really reveal which things were interesting or quirky in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I had no idea about the true identity of my father. I would have wanted to create a simple website, with white, shades of grey and silver, soothing tones, but they were according to my personal taste and how *I* would perceive a website could be honorable. Searching through the colourful skins and templates that appeared kitschy and

outdated felt awkward and bad.

How am I supposed to pick something to represent a person, that I don't been know? What kind of music did he like? What was his favourite color? Did he like sports? Did he play any sports? My idea of him is colored with the images of the television series 70's Show since I have seen him with the kind of 70's clothing. He died at the age of 30 and I am almost the same age. I cannot do this.. (personal field note¹⁶³, 5/23/2008.)

My personal field note during fieldwork reveals how I remembered my father through a cultural image of a specific decade, displayed on a sitcom show from television. I tried to position myself in his shoes by reflecting on our age and what he had accomplished at the time. He was the father of two small children, finishing studies in engineering and a husband. He had brothers and sisters, but I do not know any of his friends from that time. Is this information enough to make a memorial fit his identity? I felt pressure, although I did not intend to even show the memorial to my family, but I felt I was obligated to make the memorial as good as possible, with the knowledge I had, but I felt I was failing in the task.

Media researcher Tero Karppi notes, borrowing from Marwick and Ellison (2012, 395), that the memorial pages built online are not solely representing the life of the deceased but storage life events, lived moments, and create a modulation of memory that “is built through what is clicked and which recommendations are followed” (2013, 14), especially in memorials created in social media applications, which contain rich material created and maintained by the deceased themselves prior to their death¹⁶⁴.

Facebook, above all other social media applications, has been criticized for creating polished images of people, causing stress, envy and feelings of a lack of importance (Miller 2011). The amount of friends on a Friends list has been a field of competition, where a person's attractiveness is linked to the amount of friends he/she has. Studies have also revealed how the amount and the

¹⁶³ I wrote all of my field notes in English, because the majority of my research material (and this work) was in English already. Gender theorist Tuija Saresma has written about her own grief experiences and relationship to death from an autobiographical point of view, but she has also transformed some of her research material into poetry in English. The translation would be not only modified through the change of language but also in form, where she argues “it would clearly be the construction of the researcher” (Saresma 2004, 94). My field notes are equally constructed, since I knew I would be using them in my thesis as such, which is why translating during the thesis writing process would have only stalled or even modified the original field notes.

¹⁶⁴ See chapter (5) 1. Becoming of a memorial and the significance of last words.

quality of the physical attractiveness of one's friends are directly related to that person's reputation among others (Donath and Boyd 2004; Walther et al. 2008). In other words, attractive friends make the person more popular. However, anthropologist Danny Miller (2011) speaks of how Facebook can work as a medium to represent *true selves*¹⁶⁵, a more complex view to an individual's identity than the face-to-face realm enables. Facebook enables a constant construction of the profile page, where likes and dislikes, photo albums, status updates and links to music and videos form a complex fabric of a person's self-image represented to others.¹⁶⁶

On Facebook, it is not possible to design the look of the memorial page, but it remains visually as any other site in the social network application. In this case, the photographs¹⁶⁷ of the deceased become crucial keys in communicating who the person was as a person, what he/she did and what he/she meant to others. Photos are often arranged in albums titled by their topics (work, travel, school, hobbies), but one particular difference lies between the international and Finnish material: pictures of the funeral. In the United States or the United Kingdom memorial groups these pictures are rarities, but in Finnish memorials they are very often a norm, rather than exceptions. Finns have a custom of photographing funerals from memorial services to the lowering of the casket to the ground, although the reasons behind this custom have not been thoroughly investigated. Finnish death rituals do not usually include an open casket (although there are some local variations), but almost every family recognizes the practice of taking pictures of the casket with

¹⁶⁵ When considering the notion of *what is*, then, *a true self*, gender theorist Tuija Saresma argues that self is the experience an individual has of him/herself and which he/she maintains through a specific way of self narration. The difference between the terms *subject* and *self* is their permanence and continuity, where an experience of self is usually constant but subject (or subjectivity) can be a fragmented and constantly changing discursive entity, albeit both of them are socially relational. (Saresma 2004, 23-24.) Self, in this work, is understood as a constantly changing and socially constructed identity, which is negotiated through the social relationships of the individual's life. Online representations of the individual are equally modified and remodified in order to fit the current self image in relation to how the person *would like to be seen*. Increasingly, during the past few decades, the self is more and more publicly represented in various intimate details, which Saresma (2007, 112; see also Frank 1997, 4-7; Bernstein 1997) describes as the postmodern phenomenon of a need to publicly display one's identity and to *confess* intimate details from personal lives, such as in autobiographical novels or, later, the very popular reality television (see e.g. Hietala 2007) and life-publishing in personal blogs (Östman 2008). The notion of confessing relates to the need for sensationalism and specialization of control (Saresma 2007, 113; Bernstein 1997, 13), which has led to various forms of (public) self representations and identity play. More about public and private in this work: see chapter 6.3. Private mourning in the public Internet.

¹⁶⁶ Death and dying are also becoming a way to display personal history and values on Facebook. By joining a memorial group – whether it is for a particular person or a cause – people also negotiate what information they want to display on their profile pages and how. Memorial groups for certain causes or public figures carry certain moral values that the person willingly supports (Donath and Boyd 2004, 72). “In memory of people who didn't beat cancer” is a strong statement of the person ‘liking’ this Facebook group/page having lost someone to cancer and wanting that fact to be visible as part of their profile info. Most people also claim that they do not wish to delete a deceased friend from their friend list. Keeping a deceased friend visible on your friend list becomes an act of honoring itself.

¹⁶⁷ Funeral photographs and other information about the memorial service are also a part of the Finnish memorial website Muistopaikka.fi, where there is a subpage for the funeral information and another subpage for a Google Maps location of the actual burial.

the flowers and the lowering of the casket in the ground. In Facebook memorials, these images are used to communicate the final moments of the deceased to those who were not able to attend the funeral. These images are a crucial way of narrating the ritualized mourning and remembering of the deceased, and during anniversaries and holidays, especially during Christmas, when Finns visit cemeteries with candles, pictures of decorated tombstones with candles are posted in the memorials. The images are media narrating the mourning and honoring rituals of the offline, transferred to a shared online space, where more people can share the experience of visiting the burial together – albeit in the mind.¹⁶⁸

Virtual memorials represent complex ways of building and receiving identities, both from the vantage point of the bereaved and the deceased. Building a memorial website requires the bereaved to narrate their own perspective of the identity of the deceased through a ritualized narrativity of the biography and life of the deceased. They may want to highlight specific attributes of the person, such as their age and gender, but usually the person is mentioned in relation to their social network: family, work and friends. The narrative of the deceased's life displayed in the memorial is part of a ritualized way of remembering and honoring, where the bereaved is able to construct their own identity again in relation to the loss they have experienced. Paul Ricoeur's main statement is that our identity relies more on the untold and told stories of our lives, rather than the actual experiences (Ricoeur 1991a, 1991b; Tronstad 2011, 257), which in the case of memorial biographies concentrates on specific life events, such as marriages, graduations and children. In Sandy's case example, she has continued to use the memorial website for her sister as a way of communicating both with her and with their family and friends, who visit the memorial as well. It has become an extension of her sister, a representation of her, which Sandy periodically updates visually. On Facebook, on the other hand, the visual look does not narrate identities, since it can not be changed, but the content of the memorial can be either created by the deceased (i.e. a memorialized profile) or by their extensive social network (i.e. a memorial group or a page). The identities in this case are narrated through similar stories and uploaded pictures as

¹⁶⁸ Douglas Davies writes about bodies as microcosms in his work *Death, Ritual and Belief*, where he states that bodies work as symbolical microcosms of societies. Davies gives an example about bishops and how their bodies constantly represent the ideologies, moral code and values of the faith, even without the ceremonial cloth, since it is their primary identity portrayed against the society they belong in (2002 [1997], 10–12). "Their body and its behaviour is a microcosm of the whole world they represent" (Davies 2002 [1997], 12.) When death breaks the body as a living entity, it also raptures the microcosm of society – of which the individual is a part and represents – and in this sense causes the problem, where funerary rituals are the answer. The body or, in this case, the symbolized body, ie. memorial, becomes an idolized symbol of an individual and specific aspects of their identity: somebody's child, a wife, and grandfather, a work colleague, an athlete. The memorial itself becomes a microcosm of a society, on a symbolical level.

on memorial websites.

2. Mourning the avatar and the person behind the avatar

When a member of an online gaming community dies there are various levels of identities to be mourned. The players do not only represent a fictive character inside the gaming world, but they also usually display features of their offline selves when connecting and forming relationships inside the world. The figure below displays the multiple aspects of the self, in this case, the multiple identities a player represents in a gaming environment.

In this chapter, I will discuss the relationship of *imagined* and *actual* identities, which I have explored through role-playing communities in online gaming environments¹⁶⁹. By *imagined* I refer to fictive avatars and role-playing characters of virtual worlds as well as online games where the player builds a character with a specific background story and appearance to represent themselves in the role-playing community, and by *actual* I refer to actual identities, non-fictive personalities, such as those mostly displayed in social media profiles¹⁷⁰.

Imagined identities are a complex mixture of a person behind the screen and the visible avatar, or game character, whose appearance, attitude and background story create an identity that can be very different from the person using the avatar or reflect aspects of her personality that otherwise would be difficult to display¹⁷¹. Media researcher Ragnhild Tronstad has studied identity in *World of Warcraft* avatars and notes that identity is tightly woven in the capacities of the avatar. Capacities include character's class, race, experience level, performance and gender, which all together combined affect the appearance of the character. (Tronstad 2011, 250.) Through the

¹⁶⁹ Moreover, when referring to *online* or *offline* identities, the first will refer to an identity represented on the Web, i.e. it is mediated by online technology, and the latter refers to the opposite, offline world identities, which are displayed in face-to-face communication and social interaction.

¹⁷⁰ One can also question whether or not the social media profiles represent anything 'real', since they are always constructions, representations of the self. Philosophical anthropologist Jos de Mul argues that identity can even be called virtual, since it is fiction, constructed and "creates real effects in our daily lives" (de Mul 2005, 255; see also Heim 1993, 109-110). However, in this work, I refer to 'actual identities' that display the real personality of the individual as truthfully as possible, as opposed to a role-playing character in virtual worlds or online gaming environments."

¹⁷¹ The first time I tried a role playing game in my teenage years, my character was a grumpy old dwarf, who liked drinking a little bit too much and had a short temper. He was grumpy, but that was only because he had lost his family, which had made him bitter. Only later, I realized that the character displayed several personality features and family history of myself, since I had lost several family members at an early age and the grumpiness of old people reflected my own bitterness and anger with the situation. Additionally, grumpy old people are difficult to approach, which works as an armor against the outside world. For a teenager, who was bullied in school, that seemed very appealing, and playing with the character felt empowering.

abovementioned attributes, others perceive the character and the player in a specific manner, where they estimate what kind of person the character is channelling and whether the person is worthwhile to interact with. The capacities also improve during the game, which also affects the appearance of the character (Tronstad 2011, 250). In *Second Life*, the gamer's development and skills are also visible in the appearance of the character, but mainly through the context of where the gamer is playing and especially *how* the gamer/character is communicating.

Both in *World of Warcraft* and in *Second Life*, the server (WoW) or region (SL) determines whether the player is constantly "in character" or, in other words, role-playing the entire time he/she is logged in to the world. Gamers in role-playing servers and regions spend much care, money and time on the appearance of their avatars, in order for them to display both dedication to the game and proficiency (Tronstad 2011, 250; MacCallum-Steward & Parsler 2011, 230). In role-playing communities the character's identity is carefully built in order to create a story to follow and use as a guideline in the way the gamer interacts with other gamers. When the story is believable and the gamer does not have to pay attention to the game mechanics, she can experience a sensation of flow during gameplay. This flow deepens the relationship with the character, and the character becomes more and more connected with the person behind the screen.

all the things that we do in SL when we roleplay (or just be ourselves) accrues bits and peices of our identity. No matter what you may think about the relation between RL and SL, they are, I believe, always going to bleed into each other and get blurred. (Nadia, email interview, 2/17/2011.)

Tronstad has divided identification into "being" the character (*sameness identity*) and feeling the experiences of the character without being identical with the character (*empathic identity*) (Tronstad 2011, 251). Death of a co-player strikes through the immersive game experience, where the gamer no longer experiences the game world in a flow state. In that moment, the gamer

becomes aware and self-reflecting¹⁷² of their own mortality, the lost relationship and the difference between the online and the offline world.

Users navigate between offline and online spaces and identities in a constant flow, where the actual identity of the person and the identity of the avatar can switch places in an instant. A good example is when the user must attend to something offline (for example answer the phone), which is often stated with letters “AFK”, which stand for *away from keyboard*. Additionally, in role-playing communities the users sometimes “stop” the story (OOC, *out-of-character*) if there is a problem or the group must negotiate whether some new storyline would be possible according to the identity of the character. In this sense, the identities are not separate entities but parallel representations of the same individual in two separate spaces.

I have already previously in chapter (5) *1. Space becoming a place* presented a case from *Second Life* where I interviewed three people, Nadia, Peter Alan and Anjali from a Gorean role-playing community¹⁷³, who had lost one of their friends suddenly. Yuki was suffering from bone cancer and was going to get heart surgery, but she anticipated that the surgery may not go well, and she wrote a letter to be sent to her closest SL friends if she did not survive the procedure.

There are two things I need to discuss about information about my health and Secondlife. If you have recieved this letter that means you are very close to me and you probly already know what this is about. And if you don't then I will inform the new ones of this. FIRST THING : Most of you know that I have had a bone sickness, and many of you have guessed that it was bone cancer. That mean's the marrow in my bones does not produce more marrow and is almsot like poison to

¹⁷² The levels of engagement create the depth of flow during gameplay. The engagement towards the game characters differs between fictional engagement, aesthetic experience, aesthetic appreciation and self-reflection (Tronstad 2011, 252; Vaage forthcoming 2014, 10). Fictional engagement occurs when the gamer believes in the world or, in other words, immerses him/herself in the world completely. Aesthetic experience can be explained by the sensuous feeling towards the visuality of the game world, whether it is the detail and complexity or experience of surprise and delight. Vaage and Tronstad describe that aesthetic experience is the level where the experience of flow occurs, but I would argue that flow is a combination of both fictional engagement and aesthetic experience. Tronstad agrees that “fictional engagement may lead to aesthetic experiences, which again may lead to aesthetic appreciation and/or self-reflection, all elicited by the empathic engagement in one and the same scene/scenario” (Tronstad 2011, 253). Aesthetic appreciation concerns the more distant assessment about the visual techniques used in the game world, and through self-reflection, the gamer becomes aware of the separation between him/herself and the character. (Tronstad 2011, 253).

¹⁷³ Yuki Yanagi Lilliehook was part of the Gorean role-playing community as a character and played the character of a Panther, a feral child. In RL Yuki’s name was Yokuren, born in 1983, and she died of complications from heart surgery in 2008. One of the gamers, role-playing as a bard, PeterAlan Writer, started to gather information about Yuki and her death for his personal interest (as a researcher and writer in RL too) by interviewing everyone who knew her and gathering chat logs.

my bones, which in end can kill me. -- SECOND THING : If my surgery goes well that means in a month or so...I hope I get to go back home which is mongolia there is no internet out there no malls no cities nothing like tokyo no roads and very few have electricity I am not sure how to explain it , though my family are thinking of getting me something like a satelite so I can study school I want to be a doctor for children where I live. But I am not sure how Secondlife will go for me becuae I have become addicted to it since I have nothing else to do in the hospital but school and Sl. (Yuki's first letter to her friends, 2008.)

Yuki's letter was sent to a list of people by a friend, Karla, who was part of the same community. Yuki had previously mentioned that she lived in Hong Kong, and in this letter she mentions she would return "home which is mongolia", where she claimed she was originally from. However, after the first shock, her friends started to wonder about small irregularities in her letter, which were discussed with me in the group interview.

Anjali: I have yuki's letter she wrote befor th surgery..she made a statement that if she survived the surgery, she'd be going home to mongolia.. and there was no internet, no electricity yet she made a rather glaring error.. that does make one wonder.

PeterAlan: What was that?

Anjali: saying her parents might get satelite, so she could learn.. go to school.. that would mean there was electricity (Second Life group interview 3/20/2011.)

Anjali started to wonder whether Yuki had been lying all along. The friend who sent the letter claimed to have been to the funeral, but PeterAlan later found out that she (Karla) might have not been there after all.

PeterAlan: I communicated with Karla in rl, so I should really ask her about it, been to shy to persist. THere si an anomaly in that it seems Karla never left the US. (Second Life group interview 3/20/2011.)

They also wondered why she claimed she was from Mongolia, since the RL picture of her, included in one of the memorials, revealed her as a Caucasian white female in her late teens. The group wondered why her family would move to a place with no electricity, since obviously her parents were wealthy enough to provide her a private hospital and home schooling in Hong Kong.

However, despite these irregularities and the suspicion Anjali expressed, it was not possible for Anjali to verify Yuki's story. In addition, it did not change the fact that Yuki was gone, whether actually dead or just vanished from the virtual world.

Anjali: I love the imp. It doesn't matter if the writer lied. She gave a gift of joy, and a bit of wisdom. Her life here served a purpose. (Second Life group interview 3/20/2011, *writer=Yuki)*

The idea of being “in-character” describes the behavior and reactions to differing situations in the story, which can be reflect various aspects of the actual person behind the character. Paul Ricoeur's concept of “narrative identity” is useful in understanding the phenomenological experience of being and living through a role-playing character (Ricoeur 1991a, 1991b; Tronstad 2011, 257). Ricoeur's main statement is that our identity relies more on the untold and told stories of our lives, rather than the actual experiences. By re-calling, remembering and transforming memories into narrative form, we always highlight certain aspects of the story, in order to create a desired impression for the listener¹⁷⁴. We construct ourselves in front of others in a narrative form, and in online role-playing communities the narrative of the avatar (and the role-playing lore) is always present. At the beginning of both WoW and SL, the user must create the visual appearance of the avatar but also (when joining a role-playing community) the background story and personal history for the character. The background story explains to other players why the specific avatar behaves, reacts to situations and communicates in a specific manner but also provides clues to other players about how to interact with the avatar. In other words, and borrowing from media and design researcher Ragnhild Tronstad, “being the character” activates both narrative and imaginative empathy, which enables the player to predict how the character will respond in differing situations (Tronstad 2011, 259). When interacting with others in the role-playing community, the main rule is that the player should always maintain the storyline and stay in-

¹⁷⁴ Folklorist Ulla-Maija Peltonen (2004) has written about archival folklore material from late 20th century and the beginning of 21st century, which consists of multiple contextualities according to how the text (i.e. folklore) was supposed to be read and to whom it was targeted: to the researcher, to the collector, to the community or to the Finnish Literature Society that archived and ordered the written oral stories from the researchers. Some of the stories were altered or even censored, since they did not fit the norms of what was considered appropriate (i.e. sexually explicit material) or valuable enough to collect. There were two types of value, of culture and of monetary, since the collectors were paid for their work. When interpreting this type of archival material, Peltonen stresses the importance of understanding the political and historical (as well as personal) contextualities, which have enabled this type of folklore material to be archived and stored for future generations, i.e. researchers. (Peltonen 2004, 200-208, 214.) Researching online role-playing communities, the researcher must understand equally what the lore they are playing is, what the individual stories of each avatar are and how they represent the lore. The interview with Anjali, Peter and Nadia reflected their offline personalities as well as their role-playing characters, which is why it was important to understand which answers were given “in-character” and which “out-of-character”.

character; however, the actual and virtual personalities are separate, but the personalities and experiences bleed into each other. Anjali notes in the following caption that the experiences in-game and out-of-game are not being separated according to which is “less real”.

Anjali: I know more people here who are suffering in some way and this is their only means of a life

Nadia: is that any less virtual than here?

Anjali: nay. It isn't and there is a very real and scientific reason for it. [--] the mind can not tell the difference between that which we imagine and that which we experience. (Second Life group interview 3/20/2011.)

In the case of commemorations in-game, the identity being celebrated is usually the identity of the avatar. Every character, for example, in WoW, belongs to a certain race, and every race has their own cultural identity that is the framework of how they look and act in the game world. By *cultural identity* I refer to the game lore of each avatar but also to the fantasy culture of the game, where, for example, The *World of Warcraft* game world consists of many cultural referentations to fantasy literature and Greek and Viking mythologies and has its own (fictive) historical events, which are used to explain the relationships between races. For example, night elves (a race that, for example, Bonnie Nardi played and I used 6 months prior to my fieldwork in 2007) are described as one of the oldest races of Azeroth. The WowWiki-guide describes the character as follows:

The night elves now stand as a people who are both highly spiritual and pragmatic, an often sophisticated paradox, and are possessed with a deeply seated desire to find their solace. It is thus no surprise that they have become great healers and will aid all sorts of creatures partly due to their nature and perhaps partly because it helps them find their solace in reconciling for mistakes of the past. (WowWiki.com, accessed 9/11/2012.)

This is why, for example, a funeral for the player of a night elf avatar would have some animistic features and a strong relation to natural landscape, such as a forest or a lake. These features are also familiar from the offline world, where people more commonly choose a cremation and a

scattering of ashes than a regular ground burial¹⁷⁵. Yuki's memorials in *Second Life* also followed her character's story, but later her real life picture was added to one memorial inside Anjali's "family crypt"¹⁷⁶. This way, they wanted to remember and be aware of there having been an actual person behind the character, a girl, who died.

Yuki's burial is an example from *Second Life*, where the virtual world itself does not dictate any game lore but the gaming community decides to play a specific role-playing story. In *World of Warcraft*, however, the gaming environment relies very much on the background story of the game, which is created by the Blizzard company game designers¹⁷⁷. Another example of in-game memorials in *World of Warcraft* is the case of Michel Koiter, an illustrator working for the Blizzard Company, who died at the age of 19 in 2004 because of unknown heart failure. He was part of the WoW illustrating team and played with a beta character, an orc. The shrine was named "Shrine of the Fallen Warrior", and Koiter's orc is placed on a shrine with engraved initials 'MK' on the front side of the rock. The memorial stands on a hilltop of the Barrens, overlooking the Horde town called the Crossroads, which is a popular place for quests. The orc holds a sword on top of his chest in a similar manner as medieval knights were buried in catacombs. There are other swords laid against the shrine and a wooden box on the right side. In front of the shrine is a spirit healer, a large blue angel figure, named Koiter, who initially in 2006 was only visible when a player needed to be resurrected but currently is visible at all times.

¹⁷⁵ In Finland 42,7% of the dead are cremated (2013, <http://krematorio.com/fi/>, accessed 12/30/2013), in the United Kingdom the same rate is 74,28% (2011, <http://www.srgw.demon.co.uk/CremSoc4/Stats/National/2012/StatsNat.html>, accessed 12/30/2013) and in the United States 40,6% (2011, <http://www.srgw.demon.co.uk/CremSoc5/Stats/Interntl/2011/Country/usa.html>, accessed 12/30/2013).

¹⁷⁶ More about this in chapter (5) 1. *Space becoming a place*.

¹⁷⁷ WoW has expansion packs that are intended to add continuity to the gaming experience, more depth and more detail, such as the Cataclysm extension, which, according to the WowWiki, "follows the return of the evil Dragon Aspect Deathwing the Destroyer - formerly known as the ancient guardian Neltharion the Earth Warder - whose fiery arrival from Deepholm, the elemental plane of earth, causes a massive worldwide catastrophe known as The Shattering." In the Shattering, the WoW game world was altered to a post-apocalyptic scene, where all there were introduced to new races, old terrains were altered and the gamers had the opportunity the experience a "new Azeroth", a different world. (Wowwiki, http://www.wowwiki.com/World_of_Warcraft:_Cataclysm, accessed 11/18/2013.)



Image 32. The spirit healer angel in front of the Michel Koiter memorial on a hill top in *World of Warcraft*. (Image courtesy of Blizzard Company Inc. and WowWiki.com contributor Romney.andersondixon, accessed 11/29/2013)

Koiter's twin brother wrote a poem for his brother, and it is about the memorial inside the WoW world:

Where once a hero set foot on his native soil a monument has risen
Where now part of his essence resides a mystical boon will be given

Upon the monument the runic initials MK have been engraved
To honor all the journeys and battles the fallen one has braved

A hero's enduring spirit transcends many worlds beyond our own
Only those with steadfast dedication find a bond with this unknown

Travel the continents and scour the lands for the shrine standing tall
For in the presence of the monolith the warrior will be with you all

(René Koiter, http://sonsofthestorm.com/memorial_twincruiser.html, accessed 5/17/2013)

The poem describes the location and appearance of the memorial in WoW, which combines the culture and lore of the game but also reveals a hint of the offline, actual, identity of Michel with the initials. The poem itself is narrating between the two worlds describing the “journeys and

battles”, which are an essential part of WoW game-play but also used to to describe life itself¹⁷⁸.



Image 33. A picture of the Michel Koiter memorial from above, displaying his avatar from the orc race holding his battle sword and dressed in armor. (Image courtesy of Blizzard Company Inc. and WowWiki.com contributor Theras Taneel, accessed 11/29/2013)

The memorials in WoW also remind the players of the people behind the game and the avatars. They strengthen the sense of community, because all the memorials are dedicated to “one of us”.

It's a way of sharing memories, connecting with other people who knew the deceased, and remembering them. For those who didn't know the deceased, it's a chance to pause and reflect or just connect to the fact that you are playing a game with real people behind the electronic facades. (woman, 41 yrs., United States, survey answer 9/17/2010)

¹⁷⁸ Similar narrations can be found in *Second Life*, where, for example, the Remembering Our Friends memorial area has chapels for differing purposes: a chapel for avatars that have died/stopped playing, a chapel for actual players, often with actual photographs of them, and a chapel for deceased intimates of the players who have not themselves played in *Second Life*. The chapels signify the complexity of identities gamers can express in the shared virtual worlds and online gaming environments through various rituals, which are merged with the offline and online realities. (Haverinen 2013.)

In role-playing memorial examples, the identities of the deceased, actual and imagined, offline and online, are merged in a memorial erected in a gaming environment. In the case of Yuki, Anjali used her real-life photograph with screenshots from their mutual game-play to deepen the content of the memorial and in order to represent the actual girl behind the lovable character, the girl who died. Yuki's letter to her friends raised some questions about her authenticity and about whether her death was actually "fake", but, as Anjali noted, it does not matter, since the loss is the same. The relationship they all knew was gone, both the avatar and the girl behind the avatar. In the case of Michel Koiter, he was part of the creative team of *World of Warcraft* and the Blizzard Company and thus already a known figure in the gaming community as one of the people enabling the world to exist. His twinbrother René was known as his other part, his twin; both of them known as the Twincruiser, which is why he himself also reminds other people of the death of his brother. Michel's avatar was able to be coded to the memorial because of his role in the creative team and displays his orc character resting forever on a megalith with his actual initials 'MK' engraved in the front. The healing angel in front of the memorial continues to interact with the game world by healing injured players and restoring them back to life, which in itself is a powerful symbol of afterlife and his presence in WoW.

Avatars are not only fictive characters, which the gamers use without any connections to their offline selves, but they are complex representations of online and offline identities, imagined and actual, as well as the representation of the choices of the game designers. An avatar works as the medium of the self behind the computer screen and navigates the personality to other gamers. (Pearce & Artemesia 2009, 111.) Role-playing communities are tightly woven groups, where people form deep, meaningful relationships (Nardi 2009; Boellstorff 2010) and the death of a co-player creates a crisis that is difficult to explain to an outsider with no experience in these types of (gaming) relationships. People may have not met each other in person, but this does not change the feelings of belonging and the level of care that gamers express to each other. (Haverinen 2014.) The gaming environment can be the only forum where the players can express their loss and grief, but it can also feel as a natural continuum to the relationship they had formed in the environment. Honoring the memory of the player and the avatar is a way of honoring the gaming community as well and the culture of the game lore. As Nadia stated in her email interview, the identities from offline and online "bleed into each other", without clear boundaries of the actual or imagined self, and death blurs these boundaries even more.

3. Private mourning in the public Internet

One of my research aims in the beginning of my master's thesis in 2007 was to understand the notions of what is considered public and what is private in the age of the Internet, reality television and social media. I was interested in whether the idea of intimate and private mourning would change in a public arena such as the Internet and whether the people mourning and honoring online considered the publicity of the content they published in their memorials. Much has changed since then in the field of online mourning but also on the Web. Gender theorist Tuija Saresma has wondered about the postmodern phenomenon of making the private increasingly more public in various ways, for example, in the 1990s, when autobiographical (or confessional) novels became extremely popular (Saresma 2007, 113). Later, media and television researcher Veijo Hietala (2007) has analyzed the popularity of reality television as the postmodern need for spectralism and voyeurism.

In this chapter, I will discuss the notions of privacy and publicity in online memorials as well as the ritualized practice of mourning and honoring online. By *privacy* I refer to how an individual has control over their personal information¹⁷⁹ (Solove 2007, 161; Solove & Schwartz 2008, 44). Social media has especially increased the amount of private individuals sharing information about their daily activities and private life (Östman 2008). However, many still do not comprehend how much information they should and could share, although many are concerned about the amount of private data the Internet stores about themselves and, for example, how their personal details are shared with inter alia advertisers (Vogelsang & Compaine 2000; Solove 2007; Salaam et al. 2012).

Notions of privacy and publicity in memorials were explored with two different research questions: a) Is the memorial as a *location* built to be accessed only by a specific audience (private) or is it a publicly open space, which is supposed to reach a great amount of people (public) and b) is the *activity* practiced in the memorial private or targeted to a broader audience?



Figure 6. There are two types of aspects when considering privacy and publicity in virtual memorials: activity and location.

¹⁷⁹ Generally, researchers divide the conceptions of privacy and publicity into two spheres, the first of which, a private sphere, is where the individual is at solitude, outside of community life, which on the other hand belongs to the public sphere (Solove & Schwartz 2008, 39–44.)

In many cases, the death of a person caused by a tragic accident affects the whole community, and a memorial page can have hundreds of even thousands of people joining it. The word spreads, and people want to give their condolences and show support, even if they have not even met the deceased. The Finnish virtual candle website has daily posts for people known only from the media, such as children that have faced tragic deaths. This phenomenon links closely to media-supported mourning, which is usual when a known figure or person dies. The death of a young person, a child, or a mother/father causes turmoil, since it is also a symbol of the loss of innocence and goodness in the world. The loss of a parent symbolizes our very own fear of the imminent loss of our own parents. Comments such as "too young to die" reflect the idea that a person should live a certain amount of years in order for the death to be 'worthy' or to make sense. (see also e.g. Sumiala 2013; Sumiala & Tikka 2010; Santino 2006; Hietala 2007.)

In Finland, the Finnish virtual candle website (www.sytytakynntila.fi) founded in 2001 has been a tremendously popular place to express condolences and honor people one has not met. It is not uncommon to see candles lit for traffic accident victims or in honor of other deaths that have gained media coverage. Significant anniversaries, such as Mother's Day, also attract activity on the site, and hundreds of candles are lit in the memory of mothers and grandmothers with quotes from the Bible, song lyrics and other reminiscing words. The website is public and free for anyone to access and does not require any registration, but the founder, psychologist Aapo Puskala, moderates the contents of the posts. The candles do not require a signature, but some leave their first names or other signs to signify, for example, the relation to the deceased ("your daughter", "mother"). Thus, the website would be considered as a public place, where the users can determine whether they want to remain anonymous, partly identified (such as a mother) or fully identified (first and last name).

Vuosi	Kynttilöitä	Osanottoja
2001	300	-
2002	2 100	-
2003	1 000	-
2004	3 800	-
2005	2 700	-
2006	6 900	-
2007	17 300	-
2008	13 400	-
2009	6 800	-
2010	7 900	-
2011	15 100	83 000
2012	21 400	176 200
2013	13 300	122 100
Yhteensä	112 000	381 300

Image 34. A partial screenshot of the www.sytytakynttila.fi virtual candle website shows that posting the virtual candles on the site is a private way to mourn and honor in a public place. The ritualistic practice resembles the lighting of candles at the cemetery, albeit the candles at the cemetery seldom contain text. (Screenshot Anna Haverinen, 10/15/2013.)

Some of the candles have received condolences (small candle on the right side bottom of a post), which imply that visitors of the site can somehow relate to the subject of a post or have known the person the candle has been lit for. The condolences feature was enabled in 2011, and the amount of condolences (372 300, accessed 10/15/2013) quickly exceeded the total amount of candles¹⁸⁰ (109 300, accessed 10/15/2013). Furthermore, there are clear visitor peaks on the site in 2007 and 2008, when two very similar school shootings took place in the towns of Jokela and Kauhajoki.

¹⁸⁰ http://www.sytytakynttila.fi/tietoja_sivusta.php, accessed 10/15/2013.



Image 35. A screenshot of the history record of candles on www.sytytakynttila.fi. In 11/16/2013 there were 492 708 candles lit. (http://www.sytytakynttila.fi/tietoja_sivusta.php, screenshot Anna Haverinen, 11/16/2013.)

Image 35. shows a partial screenshot of the website (taken 10/15/2013), where two of the candles contain condolence candles. The one on the right is signed by “daughter” and is wishing a safe journey to a father. The one on the left consists of a longer text about the pain of loneliness and missing the person, Hannu, and is signed by his mother. Both of the candles could be relatable to anyone either through empathy or similar experiences.

In February 2012, I witnessed a wave of mourning for a Finnish mom blogger community, when a popular mom blogger passed away during childbirth. The death of the mom blogger became public, when her husband posted about the unfortunate situation in the comment section of her last blog post. Fellow bloggers blogged farewells for her and linked to her final post, for others to find it easier. A mother dying in childbirth is the fear of every parent-to-be. This particular death became a symbol of their worst fears for all the mom bloggers, and, as one of them wrote, “it could have been me, it could have been any of us”. It crystallized the communal thinking. Personally, I felt like a bystander, since I do not blog about being a mother – I do not even have children – but, as a reader, I felt for the other mothers and especially the bittersweet situation of the family with a newborn and a deceased mother. When several bloggers posted about the event, hundreds or even thousands of people had the opportunity to witness their tributes and familiarize

themselves with the deceased blogger as an individual. The situation resembled a “media death”, where the death is ritualized in the media in various ways (Hietala 2007; Sumiala 2013), but to the fellow bloggers the loss was very real, since they had lost ‘one of their own’.¹⁸¹

Critics of computer-mediated communication usually highlight the non-personal effect of technology. Finnish media researcher Robert Arpo refers to Jean Baudrillard in his dissertation, claiming that face-to-face communication is no longer valid as a basic indicator of reality, because it requires a uniform mode of social space (Arpo 2005, 284; Baudrillard 1983). Mass media and especially the Internet fracture that social space into differing modes with a versatile collection of social and cultural codes and norms. Each user of these spaces brings their own cultural and social background to the situation, which explains the very different experiences of the same subject.¹⁸²

Virtual memorial sites can serve as such social spaces, where the bereaved has the opportunity to share their inner thoughts and feelings to others through a very subjective experience. Writing in memorial blogs is often justified by the notion that it is a tool for the mourning process and for documenting and making notes. In the background, there is a fear that without writing the memories down the deceased is forgotten. At the same time, people want to afterwards remember their own thoughts and feelings during difficult times. By writing memorial blogs publicly, they also want to give solace and information to others in the same situation.

*The more I wrote, the more comforted I felt. That is why I hope that this site can give even a small amount of solace to those who are going through the hardest times.*¹⁸³ (Kaarina, memorial blog entry 10/10/2006, accessed 12/28/2010, translated from Finnish.)

For Seija and Kaarina the process of writing about their experiences publicly in their blogs allowed them to process their feelings through text but also to gain solace from the fact that they can help others going through the same experience of losing a child. Although they wrote publicly, a blog can also be a semi-public place, since the writers can not know for certain whether they can reach people with their texts. Blogging platforms, for example, Blogger, have a setting feature

¹⁸¹ Later, the blog of the deceased mother was closed from anonymous visitors, and one needs to request a password from the husband in order to access the blog. Death privatized the blog space, and the information previously shared publicly became confidential information (more about confidentiality in social networks, see Solove 2007, 170, 179).

¹⁸² More about this in chapter (4) 3. *Acts of solidarity and acts of disgrace.*

¹⁸³ Quote in Finnish: *”Mitä enemmän kirjoitin, sitä lohdutummaksi tulin. Siksi toivon, että nämä sivut saisivat olla edes pieneksi lohduksi myös heille, joilla juuri nyt on pahin tuska päällä.”*

which enables all search engines to find the blog through the keywords in the text and pictures. The users can also list their blogs in popular blog readers, such as Bloglovin or Blogilista (Finnish), where anyone can list a blog with specific keywords for other to find.

One of the characteristics of virtual communication is the anonymity of it. One can never know for certain who is reading or viewing one's publications. Web diaries can address very personal and sensitive topics in a public manner, and the readers will not necessarily know who the author is or vice versa. In the following quote, Seija¹⁸⁴ marked the word *tell* between quotation marks in order to highlight the fact that the communication happens in a non-face-to-face manner.

To me, writing is a form of therapy, although I constantly cry when I'm writing down my memories... With that blog, I want to "tell" other people who have lost their child that it is allowed to express how you feel and moving forward does not necessarily have to mean that you will forget your child, you can keep them in your memories and thoughts without falling into despair.¹⁸⁵ (Seija, e-mail interview 9/20/2010, translated from Finnish.)

The motivation for Seija and Kaarina to build a public memorial (in the offline world) was to provide and seek significance and meaning for everyone. The audience can be considered *cocelebrants* and *spectators* of the space but not *coproducers* (Scheider & Foot 2006.) Most online memorials, however, rely very much on the coproductive nature of the Web 2.0, where materials are being shared, modified and reproduced from the initial context.

Thanatologist Tony Walter has written in his book *Revival of Death* (1994, 40) that "the late-modern revival of death links private and public" together. The public sphere of society controls and manages death in various medical and legal ways: how, where and when one should die and how the body is disposed, but the funeral is increasingly more life-centered and privatized than before. There are twenty years between Walter's words and today, and an individualized life-centered funeral is already a common practice, but the private experience of the bereaved became more the concern of specialists (Walter 1994, 41), which is now changing through Internet technology. The roots of this behavior originated in the 1990s, when, for example, various self-

¹⁸⁴ Already introduced in chapter (5) 2. *Temporal changes of mourning and its ritual aspect.*

¹⁸⁵ Quote in Finnish: "Minulle kirjoittaminen on tavallaan terapiaa vaikka itkenkin koko ajan kirjoittaessani muistoja ylös...haluan tuolla blogilla "kertoa" toisille lapsensa menettäneille että on ihan sallittua kertoa miltä tuntuu eikä eteenpäin jatkamisen tarvitse tarkoittaa sitä että unohtaisi lapsensa, kyllä hänet voi pitää muistoissa ja mietteissä mukana vaipumatta silti täysin epätoivon alhoon."

help groups and bereavement organizations enabled a more specified grouping of the bereaved, such as loss of someone through suicide, loss of a baby and loss in a particular disaster (Walter 1994, 52). Newsletters and discussion forums of the late 1990s formed the practice of seeking help from peer-groups and peer-support, where the groups themselves are private with private discussions but between people who do not necessarily know each other¹⁸⁶ (Aho, Paavilainen & Kaunonen 2011). Social networking sites and online communities have instead enabled the self-help of the bereaved within their personal social groups, where they already share private details about their everyday (such as Facebook, blogs etc.).

However, death (and bereavement) is still burdened by social and cultural values and codes of conduct, which have not yet been appropriated in modes of online communication. Perceptions of what is considered honorable and appropriate behavior during the time of death and bereavement vary (woman, 29 yrs., Great Britain, woman, 40 yrs., Finland, Lydia, 26 yrs., Great Britain). However, in the survey answers, people responded to the claim “Mourning and honoring on the Web is not appropriate” mostly disagreed, both in Finland and internationally (mainly in the UK and the US, see table 7).

	1 = Highly disagree	2 = Disagree	3 = Neither agreeing nor disagreeing	4 = Agree	5 = Highly agree	Total:
Finnish respondents	49% (24)	36% (18)	10% (5)	6% (3)	2% (1)	49
International respondents	48% (19)	30% (12)	18% (7)	3% (1)	3% (1)	40
Total:	48% (43)	34% (30)	13% (12)	4% (4)	2% (2)	89

Table 7. Finnish and international respondents seem to disagree on the survey claim “Mourning and honoring on the Web is not appropriate”.

Despite the survey results, people stated in the email interviews and open-ended questions that they were concerned about appropriate *behavior*, not so much the environment in question. Professor of law and online privacy researcher Daniel Solove (2007, 170) notes that “privacy can be violated not by just revealing previous concealed secrets, but by increasing the accessibility to information already available”. One Finnish survey respondent was asked to photograph at a

¹⁸⁶ Care scientists Anna Aho, Eija Paavilainen and Marja Kaunonen (2011) have studied the experience peer support of mothers in an online discussion forum, where they found out that the mothers received a great deal of emotional support from discussing with others experiencing the same loss.

funeral, which he first felt strongly and “instinctively” against but agreed to do it eventually.

I have photographed one of my friends' grandparents' funeral. [--] The idea of photographing grief first woke up strong feelings inside of me. First, the instinctive reaction was to be against the whole idea. [--] Recently, I have seen pictures of friends on Facebook, where they stand on the side of a coffin with their intimates. The publication of such an event in such a networking service made me think about my own opinions. The previous reaction I had [about photographing grief] would have made me assume that I would judge the publication of such photos, but that didn't happen.¹⁸⁷ (Kari, 29 yrs., survey answer, 9/9/2011, translated from Finnish)

There are many social and cultural regulations on how mourning should be expressed and practiced. As a result, many bereavers claim that they feel the pressure to fulfil a certain role for society as a mourner. A bereaving person ought to be silent and strong, hold their head high and be capable of carrying out their duties as a parent or an employee. “Suffering in silence” is valued highly, especially in Finland, and one should not express strong emotions in front of other people.¹⁸⁸ (Walter 1994, 32–34.) Excessive crying is something that is considered intrusive and improper, whereas stoic silence is a sign of mental strength and character¹⁸⁹. At the same time, the mourner should cry at least a little to show his/her feelings of loss and despair, and a person who does not cry is considered emotionally cold (Vingerhoets 2013, 131–132).

Many interviewees claimed that they alone with their feelings, since they felt other people did not know how to confront them as bereaving, and were sometimes even avoided. They also claimed to feel a pressure from society to cope with grief faster. It was often assumed that they should return to work and “normal” life sooner and that death can even be understated, as Anne describes in her interview:

¹⁸⁷ Quote in Finnish: ”Olen kuvannut ystävän isovanhemman hautajaiset palveluksena ystävälleni. [--] Itse surun kuvaaminen ideana herätti voimakkaita tunteita minussa. Ensimmäinen, vaistomainen reaktio oli kovastikin koko ajatusta vastaan. [--] Olen vastikään tarkastellut Facebookin kaverien kuvia, joissa kaveri ja hänen läheiset seisovat lähiomaisensa arkun vierellä. Tämän tilanteen julkaisu moisessa yhteisöpalvelussa herätti myös kysymyksiä omissa ajattelutavassani. Aiemman kuvaustilanteen reaktion perusteella oletin tuomitsevani ajatukset kuvien julkaisusta heti, näin ei kuitenkaan käynyt.”

¹⁸⁸ In Finland the government authorities gave the public advice and instruction about mourning and honoring after the Winter and Continuation Wars against the Soviet Union in 1939-1940 and 1941-1944 (Kempainen 2006).

¹⁸⁹ Mourning is also a very gendered practise. Showing excessive sorrow or ‘mourning sickness’ (Maddrell 2010, 131) is considered a feminine practise and distasteful.

*It was a female neurologist whom I visited in -86 because of my headaches. Well, she first asked if something particular had happened, since I had more headaches than regularly. I told her that my husband had passed away recently. Well, she replied that grief must be lived through and that I was good-looking enough to find a new man soon enough. That was it.*¹⁹⁰ (Anne, 56 yrs., Facebook interview, 12/15/2010, translated from Finnish.)

In virtual communication the situation Anne describes does not necessarily happen, since the Internet offers a place to discuss with people who have experienced or are experiencing the same. Many interviewees commented that the Internet is a way of "sharing" and "being connected" to others and to experience a sense of community, which they do not necessarily have in actual life. The computer also creates an emotional barrier, which enables the bereaved to feel safe with enough to express their grief and other emotions.

At one point in the history of Facebook a high amount of friends¹⁹¹ was considered a positive achievement¹⁹², but through discussions about the publicity and privacy of one's material, questions such as 'what am I sharing and to whom' started to become more crucial. With 800 or more friends it is hard to manage the amount of data that is being shared about a person, especially since Facebook keeps changing the security settings in order to attract more traffic and to increase connectivity. Facebook also shares information to advertisers that collect keywords from user profiles in order to create more personalized adverts.¹⁹³ Concerning the memorials on Facebook, the visibility of connections has been a comforting fact, since there is little room for anonymity and more social regulation of behavior. Additionally, the immediate family may not be aware of the amount of people the deceased had touched during their life, and the amount of people joining

¹⁹⁰ Quote in Finnish: "Se oli naispuolinen neurologi jonka luona kävin -86 päänsärkyjen vuoksi. No se kyseli ensin onko jotain erityistä sattunut, koska päänsärkyjä on tullut enemmän. Kerroin isäsi sairaudesta ja että oli menehtynyt hiljattain. No, hän siihen, että suru pitää surra ja äkkiäkös tuon näköinen nainen uuden miehen löytää. Se oli siinä."

¹⁹¹ Since Facebook uses the term "friend" to describe contacts (LinkedIn uses "connections" and Twitter "followers"), it has been debated whether the term has false connotations about the nature of the relationships between the people on Facebook. Are all of the people on your Friends list really your *friends*? Behavioral psychologist and anthropologist Robin Dunbar and his hypothesis named "Dunbar's number" claim that the optimal community size for a person is 150, i.e. the amount of friends (or otherwise meaningful relationships) they can have. However, Facebook has changed the concept of how people connect online. In his work *How Many Friends Does One Person Need?: Dunbar's Number and Other Evolutionary Quirks* (2010), Dunbar questions the nature of online relationships formed on social networking sites and his theory of the optimal community size (Dunbar 2010, 21-22; see also Hill & Dunbar 2003).

¹⁹² See also Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, Walther (2008).

¹⁹³ Which, according to Solove (2007, 163–179), is a problem in terms of privacy and what kind of control the individual has over the material they post on Facebook.

a memorial group or a page may surprise them, but in a very pleasant way. (Meri, Mika, Reima, Akwasi.)

On Facebook, the regulation of the privacy of memorial pages and groups is taken more into account, since all the users need to register themselves and there are various – albeit sometimes difficult to find – privacy settings. Some memorials are closed, and one must apply for a membership from the group founder. In this way, people want to guarantee a safe place to share and avoid any hostile comments. In some cases, open access to the site has been a conscious decision in order to reach as many people as possible. (Kaarina, Reima, Seija, Sandy, Yolanda, Akwasi, Jeremy, Nathan, Calla.)

Perceptions of the publicity of memorials, however, vary a lot. Various sites have different privacy settings, which can be so unclear that people choose not to inspect the details thoroughly. Some sites offer plenty of keywords for search engines, such as Google, so that a memorial site can be found by searching the name of the deceased. One can also end up at a memorial with random keywords that the search engine picks up from the texts of the memorial. It is also surprisingly easy to find, for example, personal details of the family and friends of the deceased, if the site has a lot of pictures and detailed information about the family.

I think the meaning of public and private is ones own perception. Although the website is public, it is a very private place for me to go and write my feeling to my sister even though she has passed. (Sandy, e-mail interview 6/18/2008.)

Nothing is private anymore. (Akwasi, e-mail interview 6/14/2008.)

As virtual memorials are a fairly new phenomenon, there lies a strict division between people approving and disapproving of this type of action (although most of the survey answers seemed to be supportive, see table 7.). People disapproving of virtual memorials claim that they are ‘mawkish’ and the Internet is not suitable for an event as dignified as sharing the death of a loved one (woman, 40 yrs., London, woman, 29 yrs., Finland, Lydia). This discourse entails features from Internet critique¹⁹⁴ from the 1980s, which labels online activity as something ‘false’,

¹⁹⁴ Famous sociologist Zygmund Bauman (borrowing from psychologist Lars Dencik) keeps feeding the critique, arguing that modern technology, moreover computers and the Internet, are “hardly a valid substitution for the solid, and pretending to be yet more solid, forms of togetherness” (Bauman 2004, 24). This "solid form of togetherness" is also, coincidentally, the reason people claim to be using social media applications, but, according to Bauman, the Internet creates insecurity and is no real substitute for communication in person. (Bauman 2004, 24-25; see also Dencik 2001, 194.)

‘inauthentic’ and ‘unreal’. People also fear that mischievous people would exploit the material on the memorial or use it to hurt other people. A student colleague, Lydia, that I met in London in 2011 during my visiting scholarship felt strongly against memorials on Facebook, when we discussed my work. She claimed that it was not a proper place for something that should be honorable and graceful, since Facebook is “just jokes and lolcats.”¹⁹⁵ She felt that a social media application is not a place for mourning somebody, and she had deleted that friend from her Friends list, because the profile was not her:

It's not her and it seemed like some people just wanted to get attention, like 'look at me how sad I am!' It's disgusting. (Lydia, 26 yrs., 9/20/2011.)

However, people were often more concerned about the behavior of others and either wanted to pre-regulate the accessibility of the memorial (such as in the case of Reima) or the content and the probable audience of the memorial (such as in the case of Seija, see below).

*[His memorial] site has gained positive feedback from his group of friends, although the kids don't comment there as much, they write their thoughts to me via email. They have founded two memorial groups in IRC-gallery and one Facebook community for [his] memory, I don't usually go there because I want to give the kids their own space to mourn in their own circles if they don't want to participate in "grown up stuff".*¹⁹⁶ (Seija, email interview 9/20/2010, anonymized, translated from Finnish.)

The comment sections in online newspapers are cruel, I have noticed when visiting the discussion sections dealing with news about traffic victims. People are mean when they don't have to stand behind their words with their own

¹⁹⁵ By age alone, Lydia fits the usual target group of people making virtual memorials, since the usual users are from the early 20s to late 40s, but Lydia felt mourning on Facebook was distasteful. The entire phenomenon of mourning and honoring online has grown exponentially during the past few years, and, as already previously mentioned, not everyone approves of using the technology in such a manner. However, there is no typical “online mourner”, since there are extremely subjective opinions on what is considered honorable and what is distasteful, especially in a virtual environment. In the case of Lydia I did not have the chance to ask what she personally would have found a proper and appropriate way of expressing grief and honoring, but her comment about Facebook being “just jokes and lolcats” revealed her attitude towards the social network as somewhat negative, since she said it with a frown and a snort.

¹⁹⁶ Quote in Finnish: “[hänen] sivut ovat saaneet ystäväpiiriltään hyvän vastaanoton vaikkeivat nuoret sinne juurikaan kommentoi, he kirjoittavat ajatuksiaan suoraan minulle sähköpostiini. He ovat perustaneet kaksi IRC-gallerian muistosivua ja yhden facebook-yhteisön [hänen] muistolle, minä en niillä juurikaan vieraila koska haluan antaa nuorille tilaa surra omassa piirissään jos eivät halua "aikuisten juttuihin" lähteä mukaan.”

*names, but they can write whatever they want anonymously.*¹⁹⁷ (Seija, email interview 9/20/2010, translated from Finnish.)

In the case of SL, the practiced mourning rituals in the shared virtual world can either be private or communal, depending on the relationships and choices of the bereaver. Memorial chapels intended for public use (such as *Remembering Our Friends*) can be very private locations to mourn and sometimes work as substitutes for the lack of a burial site in the actual world. However, the areas are publicly accessible (for anyone with a SL account) and open for all users to organize, for example, a virtual commemoration in the chapels. The areas are built to resemble similar memorial parks (and nature reserves) and other areas from the offline world, in order to create a familiar feeling of solace, respect and quiet. The familiarity of the visual look of these spaces provides the gamers with something recognizable and soothing at the time of bereavement.

Thank you, it is a mitzvah (blessing), to have a park like this in Second Life. In Jewish traditions when we visit a memorial or cemetery we place a rock. The reason for the rock to erect a tombstone and a marker. In my inventory I have a special Yahrzeit candle to place memory of my father, where may I place the candle Dusty? My father is a Holocaust Survivor and is loved and missed everyday, May he rest in peace , Amen! (comment on SL website about Linden Memorial Park, 9/23/2009, accessed 2/23/2011).

Privacy and publicity are negotiated in online memorials in various ways. The choices of the bereaved usually determine how public the material they produce in the memorial is, with service providers (such as Facebook or memorial websites) also determining certain possibilities and limitations, such as passwords. Public access to a private memorial website can be used either for convenience purposes (Nathan, Jeremy) or to provide information about the experience of, for example, losing a child or a spouse to a specific cause of death, such as illness (Yolanda, Sandy) or accident (Kaarina, Seija, Mika). In virtual worlds, the notion of public and private becomes increasingly more contextualized, since the worlds themselves are not “public” in the sense that a registration and an avatar are needed to access the worlds. However, inside the worlds some areas can be considered similarly public, as offline world cemeteries (Linden Memorial Park, Remembering Our Friends memorial, Carlo Dufvaux) or private memorials in privately accessed

¹⁹⁷ Quote in Finnish: *”Lehtien yleisönosastokirjoitukset netissä ovat julmia, sen olen huomannut käydessäni katsomassa toisten onnettomuuksissa menehtyneiden uutisoinnin jälkeisiä keskustelupaikkoja. Ihmiset ovat ilkeitä kun heidän ei tarvitse seistä sanojensa takana oman nimensä kera vaan voivat anonyymisti kirjoittaa mitä sattuu.”*

areas (Anjali, PeterAlan, Nadia).

While many scholars have claimed that death has become privatized during the past century (Ariès, Pentikäinen, Walter, Utriainen), it seems that now it has become increasingly more public (and published). Social media and reality television have brought the life of the individual, the private and the intimate, in to the public terrain for anybody to watch and consume. We are living the age of “big emotions“ (Hietala 2007), which readily affects what is currently considered private and non-public. Thanatologist Tony Walter has argued that public practices and discourses of death and dying are impersonal and unrelated to the private experiences of individuals dying or grieving (Walter 1994, 23). Furthermore, Walter argues that death is not hidden, as Ariès implied in his classic study *Hour of Our Death*, but the problem lies more in the fact that private experiences and public discourses are not consistent with each other, which leads to experiences where the bereaved complain about being left alone or others saying they do not know how to speak to someone bereaving (Walter 1994, 23-24). The Internet has now provided a possibility to claim a personal way in expressing mourning and honoring as well as seeking peer support and offering help to others. It expands the social reality of the individual from face-to-face contacts to others sharing the same experience of losing a loved one – they can share the same discourse of pain, anger, sorrow and disbelief that death can cause. Walter demanded a more personal way of expressing grief as well as an increase in the publicity of private experiences (Walter 1994, 24), and now, in the age of social media and ‘big emotions’, when everybody’s private life has become increasingly more public (and published), it is not possible for the bereaved to find their own way of expressing and experiencing death and bereavement on their own terms.

(7) Transformation of bereavement in online environments

I am back in the Catholic chapel in Oxford, and my colleague is waving at me from the entrance. We are leaving, and I take one more look at the candle I just lit in the memory of my father. I remember the time in Spain, in the great white Church in Zaragoza, where I lit a candle with old Spanish ladies. I remember the beach in my home town, where I used to sit in a stranded swing and talk to my father in my pre-teens. My father was not part of the digital and virtual world I have come accustomed to and am working with. Placing his memory on a flat computer screen does not seem to do justice to his memory, which I keep in my heart at all times. But the memory of Katie, the friend who took her own life, remains on Facebook. There is a feeling of being connected with her when I browse through her memorialized profile, since it is the only thing I have left of her and it is the place where we communicated together with our friends. It is her relic that stays online.

Mourning and honoring online has increased during this project, and there are more service providers online than in 2007 when I began my quest.¹⁹⁸ The main objective of this work has been to understand the ritual aspect of the intimates of private people using the Internet for mourning and honoring in various online environments. The research material selected was framed from a holistic perspective, which has unfortunately left the analysis of each individual environment on a superficial level but also enabled further investigations.

The research questions were divided into three levels, where the first – why death rituals are practiced in online environments? – was interested in the objectives and motives behind mourning and honoring online. The second question – how are virtual memorials created in various online environments? – wrestled with the complex ways of creating online memorials and practicing mourning rituals in online environments. From there, I continued to analyze main themes – space and place, community and identity – that were evident in the research material and asked what kind of systems of meaning virtual memorials are constructed from. I will reflect these questions and the results later in this chapter.

In order to analyze all the research environments, from social media to shared virtual worlds and online gaming environments, from blogs to official memorial websites, I have not aspired to draw

¹⁹⁸ For example, there are now several Facebook applications claiming to enable the users to avoid the profanity of Facebook and circle around the mundane speech of the everyday and pictures of funny animals. The applications are integrated with Facebook, since it is a familiar surrounding for the users and they visit the website several times a day.

conclusions of each particular environment. The results do not indicate that there are substantial differences in the social behavior and systems of meanings being created in each environment, but the differences lie in the details of each website and what the application in question allows the user to do in the environment. It is not possible to 'like' a status in *Second Life*, nor it is not possible to move an avatar on a blog page, but the social behavior conducted in these environments is derived from the same motivation: to seek solace at the time of loss.

I have derived my theoretical frame from ritual studies, where the media ritual theory (e.g. Sumiala 2010, 2013) has been especially influential, in addition to sociologist Catherine Bell's (1992) idea of *ritualized* practices, which contains several cultural strategies which define some activities as different from others, as more important and more significant, or less profane. According to the media ritual theory, the media creates a ritualized space for remembering and honoring, where the community can gather together at the time of crisis and heal through ritualized symbols of care, love, community and identity (Sumiala 2010, 136). Transcending these practices – which are often represented offline through material expressions, such as photographs, candles, teddy bears, flowers and even food – to online environments has been appropriated through the discourse of mourning and honoring, which are furthermore conveyed within the language practices used in computer-mediated communication. For example, expressing care and love can occur with heart symbols (<3), 'liking' posts and status updates (Facebook) or sharing stories, Bible quotes and poems, linking images, YouTube videos and song lyrics. All of these are symbols of affection, acts of solidarity, bereavement and remembering, and enable building and maintaining social relationships and a sense of community at the time of loss. These ritualized practices of communicating bereavement turn online spaces into meaningful spaces that represent both the identity of the deceased as perceived by others and the identity (or identities) of the bereaved attending the online memorial.

The methodology used in this study has been derived from online ethnography and discourse studies. Creating an ethnographic view in online spaces required complex understanding of the several contextualities each space provided, since using a social media application such as Facebook is very different from attending a role-playing story in a shared virtual world such as *Second Life*. Getting accustomed to these environments required a certain level of digital nativeness and a deep understanding of the language being used in these environments: on the level of the technology being used, the actual language (English or Finnish), possible dialects and

“net-language” as well as the discourse of mourning and honoring.

Some of the environments posed interesting challenges in terms of how to communicate with people across the globe. Time difference was one of these difficulties, since having a real-time interview with a *Second Life* resident required entering the world within the appropriate time zone of the United States, which in Finland was in the middle of the night. This was also possibly the reason I was not able to accidentally “stumble upon” SL users in the memorial parks, because I usually conducted my fieldwork during the day – which was during the night in the United States. However, this difficulty only occurred during real-time interviews and not in email interviews.

As part of online ethnography, I have used a method of autoethnography, where I have used my own self, both as a researcher and an individual, as part of gathering the research data. The memory of my deceased father was initially the tool for emphatically understanding (participant observation) the experience of mourning and honoring online, but since the experience of losing him was not fresh enough, the entire process felt forced and unfruitful. Eventually the suicide of a Facebook friend forced me to enter the research realm equally to my interviewees, which was both a blessing for the research as well as a difficult pragmatic choice. Researching emotions and experiences of *others* enables the researcher to keep him/herself separate and analytically distanced from an emotionally painful topic, whilst still being sympathetic of and to the bereavement of others. However, why should a researcher allow him/herself the luxury of keeping him/herself emotionally “safe” and invulnerable? Grief in the modern age is considered a sickness that needs to be cured, instead of considering it an important part of being a human who is emotionally capable of expressing the pain of losing a meaningful relationship. Autoethnography can provide both an in-depth analysis on the topic whilst simultaneously being emotionally connected to the experience being researched, but also a wider description of what is happening, since not all interviewees are willing to write (or are capable of writing) extensively about the details of their bereavement and everyday suffering. I do not argue that this type of research would not be possible without autoethnography, but it gave the research more depth, as well as teaching me as a researcher to understand my research questions and the overall research material in a more thorough and personal way. It gave *life* to the work (pun intended).

Autoethnography was also an important tool for accessing the experience of using online spaces in multi-sited environments such as the Internet, the users of which are scattered all around the world. I could have chosen to interview Finnish people only, but at the beginning of this PhD

project in 2009 virtual mourning was still a very marginal phenomenon in Finland and it was difficult to contact people at the time of their bereavement. Many refused my research requests, which I completely understand, since during grief a researcher contacting you may feel banal and intrusive. In addition, since I wanted to understand the use of the internet for death rituals holistically, I wanted to include international material in the research as well.

The key element in reaching people for interviews seemed to be the online persona I created through my SL avatar *Morita Hoxley*, my research blog (<http://bittiavaruuteen.wordpress.com>) and my Facebook profile. I Googled myself periodically to keep track of the kind of information people could be find under my name¹⁹⁹ or research theme. My SL and FB profiles contained the same information about my research and a link to my research blog, where one could find a wider description of both the research and the researcher. In terms of digital culture research, this type of activity creates transparency in the research, and in the case of sensitive topics, the interviewees (or anyone interested) can find information about the person conducting the research. I also excluded interviewing people in person, since I wanted to provide an equal setting for all the interviewees, both in Finland and internationally. Additionally, I believed email interviewing could have provided a certain level of privacy and comfort to the people responding, since, after all, I am an unknown researcher asking about their private and intimate life experiences. However, not having face-to-face interviews left the depth of the analysis on a more superficial level, because in-person discussion always consists of more speech as well as unspoken cues of attitudes and behavior, which is why for future research I would recommend more in-depth interviews with a small group of people and, in addition, cultural comparisons. It could highlight more details on specific cultural forms and differences in online mourning rituals.

The surveys proved to be an excellent way of contacting people for further questions, since the respondents made a personal choice of leaving their contact details, instead of me contacting them directly. The surveys also provided important contextual understanding of the motives of online mourning and honoring. However, the research questions in the surveys and the survey planning could have been better. Many respondents skipped important parts of the surveys, which were due to misunderstanding the survey settings. Many of them I could contact again and request answers for the skipped sections, but not all of them. Nevertheless, in total, I am content with the results, since there was a clear saturation point in the answers when no new point of views rose from the

¹⁹⁹ Coincidentally, a person in my former home town Oulu has the same name as I but a different, albeit public, profession.

material.

In order to reflect on the main results derived from such vast research, let us reflect on the research questions mentioned above, of which the first one is as follows:

- Why are death rituals practised in online environments?

This research question was the main reason I began this project in 2007 with my master's thesis. Why are people using online environments to share their grief and loss at the time of death? The answer could be very simple: to be together. The need for others at the time of grief can be considered a universal feeling, although the rituals carried out can be different, albeit with the same objective. However, using the Internet, and especially social media, a more real-time style of communication is enabled and the bereaved can seek solace on their own terms without boundaries created by appropriate social interactions. For example, the loneliness and pain the bereaved can experience during the middle of the night is often eased when they have the opportunity to share their thoughts online, without the burden of having to wake somebody up with a phone call. Also, the Web is constantly changing, and, in terms of online mourning and honoring, it is impossible to say whether the phenomenon will be entirely different in the (near) future.

Virtual memorials are not, however, only for relationships that originated and then flourished online. For example, avatars in online role-playing environments represent a multitude of identities – imagined, actual, offline and online – and the social relationships formed in these types of environments are usually respected in the very same environment. Memorials also highlight the sense of communality and the historical context of individuals and society. They symbolize all places of memory and remembrance. Some online spaces are initially designed for social networking, play and fun, but these activities also connect the spaces to memories and relationships, which are furthermore honored in the same environment. They are symbols, similar to symbolized burials such as the Tomb of the Unknown soldier, which is an ideological and phenomenological tomb (a cenotaph) instead of an actual resting place of a physical body.

The rituals practiced in online memorials (lighting candles, writing obituaries, visiting during anniversaries, sharing memories and thoughts with others, offering condolences) are seldom considered rituals because of the novelty of the phenomenon. Lighting a virtual candle is sometimes criticized as being lazy or defended as being mentally as important as lighting an actual

candle, since the meaning of the action is symbolical. The authenticity behind the actions was considered the main factor concerning whether online mourning was “real enough”. However, a ritual itself is a culturally shared behavior, which is considered to be different from other behavior, more important and defined, albeit only mentally. The online mourning rituals described in this work are currently in the process of being culturally defined and appropriated.

From *why* memorials are created, I wanted to continue understanding the dynamics of creating a memorialized place in online environments, and my second research question was as follows:

- How are virtual memorials created in various online environments?

The analytical categories used in this work, unintentional and intentional memorials, describe the process of how something (usually) becomes a memorial. Philosophically, the categories have been influenced by transcendental idealism (Kant 1997 [1783]), which describes how individuals perceive the world *a priori* and *a posteriori* or, in other words, reflect the experienced world according to their previous experiences and connect new phenomena afterwards to already experienced realities. Virtual memorials are understood on a conceptual level.

In online gaming environments the memorials are either connected to the realm of the world (as in the case of WoW) or erected in specific memorial areas (as in the case of *Second Life*). In both cases, the memorials represent the culture and visual imagery of the environments, also containing connections to offline historical details, mythology and religions. The Linden Memorial Park in *Second Life* has old ruins that resemble buildings from Ancient Greece. Adding these types of buildings in a memorial park enables the visitor to experience the area in relation to their cultural memories from the offline, to imagine a history for the area, ancient and lost, and a feeling of relatedness to familiar cultural imagery.

The sense of space and place has been one of the key themes in this work, and I have been interested in how a memorial changes this sense of spatiality in online environments and how an anonymous space becomes a meaningful place. It seems that the social interactions (whether with visitors or with the memory of the deceased) create the core of meaningfulness in each online environment, and this is why anonymous online websites, spaces, become meaningful, important and interactive ways of sensing a place of the deceased. Whether the place has been initially created by the deceased themselves (which becomes an unintentional memorial), such as a profile on a social networking site, YouTube video, blog or an avatar, or the place is created by the

bereaved (intentional memorials) in honor of the deceased for family and friends to gather together and remember and share their memories, they are equally important forms of media utilized for honoring and remembering.

Rituals are a way of coping with loss and bereavement, to give familiar codes of conduct at the time of crisis and grief, which is why sharing intimate feelings and thoughts in online spaces enables a feeling of co-presence with others when they respond to those messages with 'likes' (FB), links to music and pictures and comments with memories alike. Rituals are most often manifested online during anniversaries, such as birthdays, Christmas, Mother's/Father's Day and death anniversaries. Anniversaries become the rhythmic factor of the everyday for the bereaved, since they want to keep remembering the deceased. Anniversaries become the core of ritualistic practices and create a ritual calendar of mourning and honoring.

Scholars²⁰⁰ have debated about the privacy of death and whether it has vanished from the public eye during the past decades of industrialization, urbanization and individualization. However, through the current developments of an increasingly social Internet and (ubiquitous) Internet technology, death has also become more public and published. Some still want to keep their bereavement as part of their privacy, and many websites enable that wish with different password and access regulations, often in order to avoid cyber bullying and inappropriate comments²⁰¹. Yet, more and more people are willing to enable public access to their online tributes and messages about grief and loss, whether this is because of the inability to understand how *public* material posted online actually is or an actual *willingness* to provide private thoughts about bereavement on a public terrain. The popularity of social media and reality television, however, suggests that we are currently living in an age where private is public. 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 as bereaving.

From the dynamics of understanding the creation of a virtual memorial I wanted to further understand the differing *systems of meanings* incorporated in the motivations and processes behind

²⁰⁰ See ie. Ariès 1974, 1981 [1974], Elias 1993 [1985], Pentikäinen 1990 and Walter 1994.

²⁰¹ Cyber bullying and grief tourism have not been extensively explored in this research, since the interviewees or the survey answers did not portray any substantial experiences of such hostile activity, but only a fear of them. However, there are numerous cases of, for example, teen suicides reported in the media which have been the result of cyber bullying and where the memorials of the deceased have been continued to be bullied and spammed after death (see e.g. Amanda Todd Facebook memorial, where the memorials has been spammed by images of chloride, which she used in one of her suicide attempts, <https://www.facebook.com/RIPAMANDAWELoveYOU?fref=ts>, accessed 30.4.2014).

the creation of a memorialized online space. By *systems of meanings* I refer to a social constructivist approach to human experiences, where social and cultural communication are shared systems of meanings, manifested in language and communication contextualities between individuals.²⁰² The systems of meanings I initially was interested in are connected to the essence of a memorial: identity, community, space and place. My third research question, thus, was as follows:

- What kind of systems of meanings are virtual memorials constructed from?

All spaces – whether online or offline – are contextualized, and experiences in and about these spaces are built both *a priori* and *a posteriori* or, in other words, referring to previous similar experiences and later connecting to new experiences. Spaces are always mediums of human experience (Tilley 1994). It is the social content and memories that connect the place to a larger symbolical meaning. When someone creates an online memorial, intentionally, they are intended as permanent places and to last for posterity, but also for current friends and family. The memorials are similar to physical graveyards and burials: to having a place to remember and to be remembered – together – but they overcome physical distances and connect people despite their geographical locations and time zones.

A virtual memorial is a discursively built place, which is experienced subjectively according to the cultural and social context of the person. These symbolical and discursively built places enable the construction and re-construction of identities (both of the deceased and the bereaved), which are built in the life narratives and mourning discourses added to the memorials. Virtual memorials narrate a) the relationship between the deceased and the bereaved, b) how much digital material of the deceased is available (photos, profiles, screenshots, comments, quotes, stories written in blogs, video or audio clips), c) what services the memorial platform provides (e.g. level of customization, selections available), d) the proficiency of the memorial builder (how accustomed they are to utilizing different applications) and, finally, e) the death culture and personal taste of the memorial builder.

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

²⁰² Berger & Luckmann 1991[1966].

the deceased usually highlight specific life events, social relationships and personal attributes, such as marriages, family relationships and kindness. Memorials are built to represent that personality in relation to the social relationships of the deceased but often also in relation to their community and nation. Writing the life narratives of the deceased also enables the re-building of 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. However, these discursive identity labels do not exist for parents who have lost a child nor friends or work colleagues. A virtual memorial in that case can permit a certain negotiation of the self, such as in the case of Seija and Kaarina, two mothers who made memorial blogs in honor of their children.

Many virtual memorials reflected their maker's personal communities and cultures by the choices selected in the memorial, but not all people share these cultures, such as in the case of the *World of Warcraft* memorial event in 2006 which was attacked by a rivaling group of players. By January 2014, the video titled *Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral* has received over six million views, over twenty-one thousand likes (a thumb up) and over four thousand dislikes (a thumb down) and keeps receiving comments (total 35,996, accessed 1/3/2014) almost eight years after the initial event. From the vantage point of ritual theory, this event can be viewed as an anti-ritual, breaking the ritualistically created holy space of honoring in an online gaming environment. Attacking a memorial service is an attack against the sacred, an attack against the intimate and private, where a ritual of mourning and honoring becomes a ritual of defending the right to bury the dead in peace. The above-described event also speaks volumes about the complex relationships between users and avatars, which for some are mere computer game characters and for some extensions of the self.

As already mentioned above, social networking sites especially strengthen the sense of community at the time of crisis, and in a Turnerian sense, they enable the sense of *existential communitas*, i.e. the feeling of togetherness, which is crucial in aiding the bereaved to cope with their loss. Existential communitas enables social cohesion in society, which enables the bereaved individual to have a sense of belonging through a ritualized communication of grief and death. Sharing memories, song links, images and other material within a memorial on a social networking website also provides information about the amount of people the deceased touched during their lives. The intimates of the deceased may not know all the little details about their loved one in his/her work community, and sharing these memories and thoughts provides a more complex view on

the personality of the deceased.

This research has been focused on a specific time frame of online mourning rituals, which I predict will be increasingly culturally and socially appropriated in the future. Digital technologies develop faster and become more complex, and I will not even try to foretell which kind of applications and technologies will be used in the future to cope with grief and loss. However, Internet technologies, for example, in hospice care, could provide a social agency to the dying but also to their intimates, where they could share a mutual online space for their thoughts and discussions, accessible at all times. I also hope that this research may aid professionals working in the field of death, dying and bereavement, as a tool for understanding bereavement in a digital age, since future generations will grow up not knowing about “going offline”, since their lives will have always been embedded in the virtual and in the digital.

From the vantage point of the Internet and digital culture studies, this research can also contribute a methodological aspect to researching virtual cultures and online behavior. During this entire project, many have been worried about the loss of “old rituals”, such as visiting the cemetery, lighting actual candles and funerals, but, according to this research, they have not lost their significance, but, in addition to the old rituals, people are instead returning through the Internet to a more social way of bereaving together. Death is no longer hidden. Digital culture can study and understand these types of changes in human behavior, how new technologies are being appropriated in the everyday and especially how already existing technologies are being used “wrongly” or, in other words, in a way not designed in the application itself. Most of the websites researched in this study were not designed for mourning and honoring, but were appropriated in such ways. Other behaviors considered ritualistic could be examined as well, such as consuming alcohol beverages or food or taking pictures of the drinks/food and sharing them on social media. Location tagging could also be examined as a form of ritualistic practice, such as tagging oneself in a Christmas church or in an airport before a holiday.

In terms of digital(ized) death cultures, it remains to be seen to what extent, for example, cemeteries will appropriate technological artifacts in the future, since virtual memorials could easily be added to tombstones with, for example, QR codes (see e.g. www.qrmemorials.com and www.monuments.com/living-headstones). Websites could also add a section in the registration process where the user can determine a next of kin who will be allowed to have access to the material if the user dies. Digital material inheritance laws can also change, when physical material

ownership issues are questioned with an increased amount of digital (and virtual) possessions. With this work, I wish to provide information about what I would call *the first years of social online mourning*, and as long as this technology will prevail, there are endless possibilities for further research, since people will always keep dying, bereaving and remembering the dead.

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Virtual memorials and online mourning

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Yolanda	12.6.2008	Memorial website
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Anonymous horse rider 2nd of March, 2011.

Interviews in Facebook chat quoted:

Anne, 15th of December, 2010.

Heidi, 26th of July, 2010.

Survey answers quoted:

Reima (age not disclosed)	12.4.2011
Petri (28)	3.8.2011
Anna (age not disclosed)	9.10.2011
Taina (age not disclosed)	22.10.2010
Sonja (18)	14.11.2010
Nora (17)	30.11.2010
Mika (24)	3.10.2010
Meri (21)	27.8.2010
Nana (23)	9.9.2011
Outi (31)	26.11.2010
female (40), England	10.10.2011
female (29) Finland	17.10.2011
woman (48) Finland	26.10.2010

Personal field notes quoted:

personal field note, 23.5.2008.

List of abbreviations

autoethnography targeted	a form of ethnographical research where the research focus is to the experiences of the researcher
avatar (avvie) fictive	a virtual representation of a person, gaming character. Can be a character or a straight representation of the user
digital native/ digital immigrant	Digital native and digital immigrant are terms originally used by Marc Prensky in his article <i>Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants</i> (2001). By natives, he refers to the generation that was born to use digital technologies, and digital immigrants, on the other hand, are people who learned to use digital technologies during their adult life.
ethnography	etymological origins in Greek words <i>ethnos</i> = people and <i>graphein</i> = to write; coined in anthropology and is used as a method in research as well as to describe the text produced from the research. Usually combines multiple methods, eg. participant observation, interviews, surveys, literature etc.
Facebook (FB)	a social networking website founded in 2004 by Harvard University students Mark Zuckerberg with his college roommates Eduardo Saverin, Andrew McCollum, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes.
first life (FL)	used in Second Life shared virtual world to refer life outside the virtual world or being offline
HTML	HyperText Markup Language is the standard markup language used to create web pages
Kübler-Ross model	also known as the five stages of grief which are denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance; created by Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her <i>On Death and Dying</i> (1969)
Player vs. Player (PvP)	is a type of multiplayer interactive battle or a fight within a game world between two or more live participants
role-playing games (RPGs)	a game where the players adopt fictional characters in a fictional setting; players actions in the game are determined by their character personalities and are acted out in a spoken or written narrative

in character/out of character to	terms usually used by role-players during role-play when they want express something either as themselves or as their role-playing character (also <i>break character</i> , <i>drop character</i>)
Second Life (SL) Second	a free web program and a shared virtual world create by Linden Company in 2003; also used used to refer the virtual life in the Life world in contrary to the life outside the environment
URL	uniform resource locator, also known as web address, constitutes a reference to a resource
World of Warcraft (WoW)	massively multiplayer fantasy online role-playing game created by Blizzard Entertainment in 2004
WWW	World Wide Web, also known as the Web and the internet

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APPENDICES

Summary in English

UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

Faculty of Humanities

Department of Cultural Production and Landscape Studies

Digital Culture

HAVERINEN, ANNA: *Memoria Virtualis* – death and mourning rituals in online environments

PhD thesis, pp. 243, 2 appendices

Juno doctoral program

August 2014

The main objective of this work has been to understand the ritual aspect of how private people use the Internet to mourn and honor their intimates in various online environments. The research material was compiled in 2007–2013 through ethnographic and autoethnographic observations in social media applications, online memorial websites, one shared virtual environment (Second Life) and one massive multi-player online role-playing game (World of Warcraft). The research material consists of – in addition to the ethnographic observations – three online surveys with 153 respondents (mainly from Finland, the United States and the United Kingdom). In addition, the researcher conducted 38 longer online interviews (i.e. via email, an avatar). The theoretical framework is derived from ritual theory, hermeneutic-phenomenological anthropology and discourse analysis.

The research questions are as follows: *Why are* death rituals practiced in online environments? *How* are virtual memorials created in various online environments? *What kind of* systems of meanings are virtual memorials constructed from?

The results indicate that online mourning and honoring is appropriated in addition to the “traditional” offline rituals. In online environments the bereaved can choose, where, when, how and with whom they share their grief and loss. Memorials are created in the web *intentionally* and *unintentionally*, where the latter refers inter alia to the Facebook profile of the deceased where his/her intimates gather to mourn and honor immediately after the death. The first refers to intentionally memorialized online places spaces via different service providers. Virtual memorials are a way to construct the identity of the deceased, as well as the bereaved in multiple ways. They also re-enforce and create a sense of communality both privately and publicly, and enable one meaningful online place where all the intimates of the deceased can gather together to mourn and honor despite the geographical or time distances.

Keywords:

digital culture, rituals, death studies, grief work, Internet, memorials, mementos, avatars, virtual worlds, discourse analysis, ethnography, autoethnography.

Summary in Finnish

TURUN YLIOPISTO

Humanistinen tiedekunta

Kulttuurituotannon ja maisemantutkimuksen laitos

Digitaalinen kulttuuri

HAVERINEN, ANNA: Memoria Virtualis – death and mourning rituals in online environments

Väitöskirja, 243 s., 2 liitesivua

Juno tohtoriohjelma

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Tämä väitöstutkimus tarkastelee miten nykyiset kuolemanrituaalit ovat digitalisoituneet verkkoympäristöihin. Tutkimus on suoritettu verkkoetnografisin sekä autoetnografisin menetelmin sosiaalisen median sivustoilla, virtuaalimuistomerkkipalveluissa, yhdestä virtuaalimaailmassa (Second Life) sekä yhdestä reaaliaikaisessa verkkopelissä (World of Warcraft) vuosina 2007–2013. Tutkimusaineisto koostuu etnografisten havainnointien lisäksi kolmesta verkkokyselystä, joissa vastaajia on yhteensä 153 pääasiassa Suomesta, Yhdysvalloista sekä Iso-Britanniasta. Kyselyjen lisäksi tutkija on tehnyt myös 38 laajempaa verkkohaastattelua eri ympäristöissä (esim. sähköposti, avatar virtuaalimaailmassa). Teoreettinen kehys koostuu rituaaliteoriasta, hermeneuttis-phenomenologiasta sekä diskurssianalyysistä.

Tutkimuskysymykset ovat seuraavat: *miksi kuolemanrituaaleja harjoitetaan verkkoympäristöissä, miten virtuaalisia muistomerkkejä luodaan verkkoon, sekä millaisista merkitysjärjestelmistä virtuaaliset muistomerkit muodostuvat?*

Tutkimustulosten mukaan verkkosureminen ja muistaminen ovat tulleet perinteisten kuolemanrituaalien rinnalle, jolloin sureva itse voi päättää miten, missä, milloin sekä kenen kanssa suree läheistään. Muistomerkkejä verkkoon luodaan *suunnitellusti* (intentional) sekä *suunnittelemattomasti* (unintentional), jolloin jälkimmäinen viittaa esimerkiksi edesmenneen Facebook profiiliin, missä hänen läheisensä kokoontuvat muistelemaan ja suremaan välittömästi kuoleman jälkeen. Ensimmäinen taas viittaa suunnitelmalliseen muistomerkin luomiseen, jota varten löytyy useita palveluntarjoajia. Virtuaalimuistomerkit ovat keino rakentaa sekä edesmenneen että surevan identiteettiä, vahvistaa ja luoda yhteisöllisyyttä niin yksityisesti kuin julkisesti, sekä luoda yksi yhteinen aina ja kaikkialta saavutettavissa oleva merkityksellinen paikka verkkoon, missä kaikki läheiset voivat ajasta ja paikasta riippumatta muistella ja surra läheistään.

Asiasanat:

digitaalinen kulttuuri, rituaalit, kuolemantutkimus, surutyö, Internet, muistomerkit, muistoesineet, virtuaalihahmot, virtuaalimaailma, diskurssianalyysi, etnografia, autoetnografia.