

SOME SHADOWS OF ETERNITY

–THE INTERNET AND MEMORIALS TO THE DEAD–

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Abstract

Drawing on the experience of running the Virtual Memorial Garden web site, this paper looks at some of the reasons why Internet memorials appeal to the thousands of people who have used the service it provides. Also touched on are the wider, social effects that this kind of use of the Internet may have in the future.

Introduction

The impulse to create some form of memorial to the dead seems to be nearly universal across all cultures (Palmer 1993). It is not surprising, therefore, that web sites that allow the creation of on-line memorials have sprung into existence. The oldest and, almost certainly, the largest of these is the Virtual Memorial Garden (<http://catless.ncl.ac.uk/vmg>) which has been in existence for nearly six years. Its approach has always been rather different to most, if not all, the more recent memorial sites in that it is entirely free to use, is non-denominational and does not unduly restrict the content of memorials. The VMG also provides for the creation of memorials for people's pets and this service is also extremely popular. At the time of writing there are about 5250 memorials for people and 2500 for various animals. The shortest memorials consist of just names and dates, the longest stretch to fairly extended texts of over 8Kbytes. A small proportion of the memorials have links to other sites or images, and one or two have links to sound or midi files.

In this paper I shall look at how people use the Virtual Memorial Garden and how it helps them in a variety of ways. This information is drawn from the content of the memorials, messages in the visitors' book for the site and personal communication with a considerable number of memorial creators. At no time does the use of this information break the strict policy of anonymity that the VMG maintains. For a more general look at Internet memorial sites the reader is referred to (Roberts 1997, 1998, 1999; Redhead 2000).

Creating Memorials

Making a new memorial in the Virtual Memorial Garden is rather simple. The user fills in a web page form with name and date information for the person or pet being remembered and then writes a memorial text. When they are satisfied with this they click the submit button and are shown an approximate representation of how the memorial will look and if they are happy with that they can then confirm their submission. At this point the memorial is queued and before it is entered into the site it will be checked for obvious errors or for possible misuse (see below). Once the memorial has passed this inspection it is added into the site and a message is sent to the submitter confirming the entry and containing a URL that will take them directly

to the memorial. A small number of memorials are posted in languages other than English and these are harder to validate and sometimes present character set representation difficulties – until the web uses Unicode everywhere mixing text in many languages on the same page is not easy.

Surprisingly, though the form is easy to use, about 20% of submissions contain significant errors: pets entered as people (though rarely vice versa), many spelling errors, confused dates, and inverted names. Usually I detect these errors and correct them, though pets have sometimes found their way on to the people pages when the memorial texts or names do not immediately indicate that the memorial is for an animal. The most common error is that users do not enter their e-mail address correctly, so sending the confirmation message to the user fails. In some cases this may be intentional, but most of the time the errors would indicate that the user is an inexperienced user of the Internet and is not entirely confident with such things as e-mail address syntax.

A small number of memorials submissions are sent by letter where people have heard of the service, perhaps in a newspaper or on television, and do not have access to the Internet themselves. In the last two years such letters have almost entirely stopped as net access has become much more widely available. What has increased, however, is the number of memorials that have had images attached to them. This reflects the much greater ease of access to scanning technology and digital photography that the low prices of computing equipment has made possible.

Types of Memorial

The subjects of memorials fall in to several different categories, other than the obvious distinction between those for people and those for pets. The most common is a memorial for a close family member, most usually a grandparent, parent, partner or child, however there are people who systematically enter memorials for their ancestors over several generations. Memorials are often “retrospective” in that the subject has been dead for many years, though this more common for parents and grandparents than other family members. There are many memorials for still born children.

The next most common category is for friends, and far less of these tend to be retrospective as they are often written in response to an accident or suicide. The other categories, though distinct are much less common. There are memorials to colleagues, to heroes and heroines (for instance Kurt Cobain, Princess Diana), and memorials created by carers for people they have looked after who have no relatives.

Pet memorials tend to be much more straightforward: there are, as yet, no memorials for famous animals for instance. However people frequently create memorials for all the pets that they have ever owned once they discover the web site.

Memorials can also be classified by their content. Some have no message at all, just a name and dates. The majority, though, are rather like traditional newspaper *in memoriam* notices, and overwhelmingly they are Christian in spirit. They contain expressions of devotion and belief that the submitter will be reunited with the deceased at some time in the future. Often they contain a (usually) brief life history of the deceased and frequently long lists of relatives, some surviving, others also deceased. Poems are common, again often devotional in nature. Interestingly most of the pet memorials tend to follow a similar format, though verse is much less

common. Pet memorials, however, frequently reflect much more intense feelings than those for people.

Many memorials are celebrations of the person for which they were created and talk about shared experiences and make references that are probably only clear to the author of the memorial. Some of these have an almost stream of consciousness feel about the way in which they are written and can be almost joyful. Other memorials are darker in tone and take the form of apologies, regrets and even confessions. Frequently they express the wish that the author had spent more time or communicated more with the subject; these are almost invariably memorials for parents or siblings.

These categorisations are, of course, generalisations and most memorials take something from all these types. However, the thing that unites them all is that there is rarely a bad word said about the subject of the memorial: “the best mother”, “the perfect father”, “the most loving friend”. Here pet memorials do differ because people are prepared to say slightly negative things about their pets: “he was a bad dog, but I loved him.” People seem to be able to be much more open about their relationships with their pets and, as pointed out above, reveal much greater depths of feeling than they do when writing about family or friends, both positive and negative.

Remembrance

There seem to be many reasons why people find the creation of an on-line memorial an important and helpful thing to do. The most important of these seems to be the closure that people achieve when they write their thoughts about the subject of the memorial. The entries in the visitors’ book and the e-mail that I receive often express the relief that people have found through the simple act of writing a memorial text. As with the difference between traditional written letters and e-mail, many people seem to find themselves freed by the act of writing electronically and can reveal what they are really feeling rather than cloaking it in conventional words.

Also adding to this freedom is the anonymity that the VMG gives to memorialists. No clues are given as to who created a memorial other than those that may have been included in the text, though as was just pointed out, this does not lead to negative postings. On occasion people will ask who created a particular memorial and, with the consent of the author, I have put people in touch with each other. This has led to people sharing experiences and helping each other to recover more effectively from loss. However, it has led at least once to anger where someone has created a memorial without the knowledge of the other party who felt that they should have been asked.

Another important aspect of on-line memorials is that they are available at all times from anywhere in the world. Memorials are often created by people who are unable to attend funerals, who live far away from the burial place of the subject (if, indeed, this is known), or who wish to create somewhere for others who are far away to visit. Creating a memorial allows them to play a part in the ceremonies associated with remembering the dead.

These ceremonies of remembrance play a crucial role in coming to terms with death, and in a surprisingly large number of cases memorials are created by people who have been explicitly excluded from these ceremonies, usually by the families of the

deceased. A famous example of this was the funeral of William Randolph Hearst, which his lover Marion Davis could not attend. Of course, not all these exclusions are intentional, but close friends often feel that they have not been involved enough in a funeral and need to say more than they have felt able to. For famous people, fans are rarely involved in burial rites and they need to express their sorrow and anguish. An Internet memorial allows all these people to do this without inhibition.

Confessional memorials were mentioned above and their creation provides the catharsis of clearing the air but with the protection of anonymity, though sometimes they are so revealing that I have been asked to remove them by the authors who later felt too easily identified by what they had said.

Sometimes the memorials seem to be an opportunity to tell the world, either about someone that nobody would otherwise have heard of, or about how the author feels about a famous person. Other times it is to express incomprehension when a death has been sudden or somehow mysterious. There are quite a few memorials for pets that are missing, presumed dead.

Ultimately people find using the Virtual Memorial Garden a comforting experience that lets them share their feelings with others without exposing themselves more than necessary. They are also attracted to the possibility of eternity – a memorial on the Internet need not become eroded by time or weather and many people find this a pleasing idea.

Visitors

Creators of memorials do not simply write the memorial and never return. Many of them visit the web site regularly and do so with other members of their families or friends present. They like to show other people the memorials and often create them for other people who they then show the memorial. They usually do this at some significant anniversary associated with the deceased, which, as would be expected, is when many people visit as they would a physical memorial.

Every memorial in the VMG has its own visitors' book and a significant number of memorials have had entries made in them. Most are expressions of sympathy and support from people who find themselves in similar circumstances (SIDS, still birth, drunk driving accidents). However there are some where the creators of the memorials are carrying on a kind of conversation with the deceased. They talk about their thoughts and feelings and work through decisions they have to make.

As with a real cemetery, there are visitors who have not built memorials, but who simply browse through the pages reading the texts that others have written. The VMG has been described on several occasions as "a quiet place on the Internet", which is exactly how it was intended to be: no advertising, no commercial associations of any kind. Many of these visitors are people affected by the memorials they read and often feel the need to cry.

Another frequent type of visitor is the genealogist who is looking for names and dates that might be significant for their researches. The VMG does not cater for them specifically but they often leave messages in the visitors' books asking for more information about the subject of the memorial. However, I do not know how often these requests are answered.

The pet memorials attract similar types of visitors, though instead of genealogists there are quite a few people who are looking for names for new pets. I do not know if the memorials for people attract people looking for names for children as nobody has ever mentioned doing this explicitly to me.

Misuse

People interested in the VMG often ask about misuses of the site. Since anyone can submit a memorial to the site and there are many mischievous or malicious people in the world, it is inevitable that there will be a certain amount of misuse. The surprising thing is that there is in fact very little. Every now and then someone types in what is obviously a false memorial or just gibberish. These are easily spotted and get weeded out when the submissions are scanned before being published on to the live web site.

To my knowledge there have been less than a dozen false memorials have been put on to the site. Of these four or five were students playing around and I noticed them. Of the rest three presenting interesting cases. The first was written as a memorial to a paratrooper who had been killed in a training accident. It seemed absolutely serious, but I received e-mail from the subject of the memorial the day after it was put on-line – his fellow soldiers had done it as a joke and shown it to him.

More seriously several memorials were created by someone who was emotionally disturbed. Again the memorials seemed genuine and were for parents, a brother and a child. However, the brother contacted me to tell me that not only was he alive, but so were his parents and that the child never existed. He was quite upset by the memorials, and so of course I removed them immediately I had verified his information.

The last case was different again. I received an e-mail message telling me that a recent memorial was not genuine and that it had been created in response to a posting in a Usenet newsgroup. On asking further questions I got other e-mails from different addresses talking about the memorial and in the end, there was a confession that all the e-mail was from the same person using aliases and that indeed the memorial was a fake.

It is possible that there are many more spoof entries than I am aware of, but as with the examples discussed above, they are well disguised as real memorials in which case there is probably only a very small number of people that could recognise them as fake. The hardest area to police is that of memorials in languages other than English. If the memorial is in a language that I do not speak then I cannot assess its content and have to rely on guess work.

Conclusions

Over the period of its existence it has become clear that the VMG provides a much needed service to the bereaved, and the fact that the memorials are Internet based is a major part of its attraction. The possibility of a genuinely eternal memorial that can be visited whenever and wherever you are is highly attractive to people. Virtual memorials also take up no physical space and as alternative methods of disposal of the dead become increasingly important, they provide a good alternative to gravestones and other traditional monuments.

Surprisingly, the idea of on-line memorials does not offend people, and in fact there has been almost no negative reaction to the VMG since it was started. Recently someone did express a dislike of the fact that the memorials for pets and people were on the same site, but equally, some people have said that they would prefer it if they could somehow be closer.

In the long term I can see the use of virtual memorials becoming much more common, and a small number of them will take on the form of archives and feature multi-media presentations about the life of the subject. These however, I think, will be few in number and the majority of memorials will take a much more traditional simple form.

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