

Online memorials: a personal experience

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I present an account of my own interactions with an on-line memorial, which is followed by an analysis of the content of this account, and its relevance to research in this area. I have highlighted the importance of studying emotional response to memorials, and the challenges that are inherent in these types of study. I believe that techniques that have been developed in psychotherapy could assist researchers working in this area, and that this would provide an interesting topic for a future paper.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5 INFORMATION INTERFACES AND PRESENTATION

(e.g., HCI) : H.5.m Miscellaneous

General Terms

Design, human factors

Keywords

Memorials, on-line memorials, personal accounts

1. INTRODUCTION

The creation of memorials for those who have died seems to be an ancient, and persistent, aspect of human nature. Gravestones or headstones are an example of a semi-permanent form of memorial, and are near-ubiquitous, in the UK at least. However, if memorials are defined as being any artifacts that assist survivors in the process of remembering an individual, then a much broader range of artifacts can become memorials, including collections of photographs, books of favourite poems or even items of clothing. An interesting category of memorials, which have only emerged in recent decades, are those that make use of on-line interfaces, such as web-pages or message boards. Such memorials are becoming simpler to construct for the lay computer user, through technologies such as graphical web-page editors, or through web 2.0 technologies. In addition, a number of organizations now seem to be providing hosting services for online memorials; there seems to be the potential for such organizations to provide a more suitable form of service for memorial creators than can be offered by more generic service providers.

So why are memorial in general, and on-line memorials in particular, worth of academic study? One argument here is that the death of those who are close to us is a ubiquitous human experience, yet it is still one which can lead to extreme emotional suffering and, in more extreme circumstances, ongoing trauma. An acquaintance who has worked as a psychotherapist for three decades estimates that 80% of her case-load relates to unresolved feelings of loss, which have often been carried by her clients for years, and which have tended to cause significant levels of

emotional distress for their bearers. Of course, it may be that the population of individuals who seek psychotherapy is not fully representative of the population at large, yet it would not seem unreasonable to postulate that a significant proportion of the population is carrying uncomfortable feelings of loss, with which they may need assistance to process. My own belief about the value of memorials is that they can provide a concrete focus for dealing with such grief, which can often be lacking in everyday life, and at times, I know that I have benefited from standing at head-stones, thinking through the life of someone I miss, and working through the varied emotions that surround their death. I also believe, based upon personal experience, that on-line memorials provide a certain affordance for emotional experience, which can be a significant aid in the grieving process. An interesting challenge for academic research, therefore, is to examine the differences in affordance for emotional experience between on-line memorials and forms which have a longer history. Such an examination could provide for a better understanding of on-line memorials, and the benefit that they could provide for those in grief; it could also provide inspiration for future designs of online memorial site.

Such an argument, however, raises an interesting challenge for research – how should we study and think about on-line memorials, in order to learn more about their nature and use? This seems like a complex area, and one which needs to be approached carefully in order for research to be valid. A significant difficulty is the extreme variation of emotional responses and internal meanings which are attached to memorials, which are challenging to record and analyze, since both are subjective, internal experiences, which are only partially available to both outside observers, and to those who are experiencing them. Another challenging factor for studying memorials is their long-term use, as individuals may interact with a memorial over a period of many years, with the emotional experience of the memorial changing significantly over this time. The selection of methods to study these phenomena is therefore difficult, and this may well be a situation where this no “perfect” method to be chosen. In addition, due to the emotional significant of memorials, the skills required of a researcher who is investigating memorials may be significantly different to those required in researchers who are investigating more “everyday” matters of HCI. As well as knowledge around interaction design, such individuals may well need to be acquainted with knowledge that has been developed in very different domains, potentially including phenomenology, humanistic psychology, and psychotherapy. In addition, to information about the whole emotional life of a memorial, researchers may need to locate participants who have both been involved with them for long periods of time, and who are

sufficiently emotionally-aware to be able to talk about the impact on their life of the memorial. It seems, therefore, that the collection and analysis of data in this context is going to be a significant challenge, but one which has the potential to improve the lives of other human beings. It is this issue, therefore, with which I want to engage in this paper, by providing a personal account of my own experience in relation to an on-line memorial, over a significant period of time, along with an analysis of this account, which is rooted in personal reflection.

Before moving onto this core of this account, I want to first introduce myself as an author, since I feel that my own personal experience and background have had an important influence upon the writing of this paper. I am a professional researcher, with a degree in Computer Science, who has been engaged in research relating to HCI for around 4 years. I have an ongoing interest in human psychology as an academic discipline, and have a minor qualification in this area. I have also undertaken some training as a counsellor, working with an approach to therapy that is often termed person-centred, and which is part of a broader spectrum of therapeutic practice known as *humanistic*. Like a large proportion of the population, I am also someone who has experienced the loss of those who are close to me, but like a smaller proportion of the population, I am someone who has found such losses to be traumatic. In attempting to recover from traumatic loss, I have taken part in over forty counseling sessions as a client, and I have also tried to develop my own abilities to introspect, in the belief that uncovering hidden emotions is a good route to recovery from traumatic emotional responses. The account presented in this paper is therefore a result of the introspective processes that I have gone through, and which have provided much of the detail that can be found in it. I am slightly aware, however, that one of my motivations for writing this paper may be a self-therapeutic one, and I believe that it is important to state such a motivation, up-front, as this may have an influence upon the content and analysis that I have provided.

I now present an account of my interactions with a particular on-line memorial, which will be followed by an analysis of the content of this account. I hope that this will be useful to researchers who are working in this area, and that it will highlight some of the challenges in engaging in this area of research. Throughout the account, I have tried not to provide any information which would allow the particular memorial that I have interacted with to be identified, as it does not feel right for it to become a target of academic study in its own right. I imagine that it would still be possible for someone, however, to locate this website, through use of information that is publically-available in relation to me, as the author of this paper. Since the main contribution of this paper is in a description of my own response to this memorial, then I hope that publication of its location will not be important, and that readers will not try to locate it.

2. THE ACCOUNT

My first interactions with the online memorial described in this paper took place in the summer of 2000, at the end of my second year at a university in a major UK city. During the first two years of my degree, I had spent a lot of time playing as part of a particular sports team, which had become an important part of my life. Outside of term time, however, during university holidays, I was living at home, in a small UK town, and working in a local university, as an intern in an electronic engineering research department. Although these internships provided me with

interesting research experience, this was only a secondary motivation; I was primarily driven by a need to earn sufficient money to continue into my final year at university. At this point in time, my mental state was not good, as I had only had two weeks holiday in two years, and I was extremely mentally tired. I was also missing regular contact with friends in this sports team, which was located too far away from my home to travel to during the week, and was too expensive to travel to at weekends. In retrospect, I now know that I was also still struggling to deal with events that had happened during my first term at university; my Dad had been hospitalized for 6 months, with a serious illness, and had almost died, although by this point in time he was recovering well. I was not, however, aware of the impact that this event had had on me, and was just trying to struggle through, in the expectation that, once I got back to university, all would feel good again. At the time, a doctor would probably have diagnosed me with mild depression, though I personally do not believe in the medical model of mental illness that underpins such language use. I was certainly not happy, however, but was keeping myself functional by training hard, roughly six times a week, in the local gym, in preparation for returning to university in the autumn.

It was during this period that I received an email from a member of this sports team, informing all of us that one of our members, and one of my friends, had died, in a quite horrific way. Kevin (not his real name) had doused himself in petrol and then set fire to himself, whilst working in a foreign country, and had died before he could be taken to hospital. This came as completely unexpected news; I had seen Kevin about two months before he went abroad; he had seemed happy with life, was excited about going abroad, and I never would have expected that he would have wanted to commit suicide. I also knew that Kevin had a younger brother, who, in the words of his parents “worshipped his older brother”. I immediately knew that Kevin’s death would have an immediate impact on his family, and on the rest of us who knew him. At this point, however, I was just too tired to think any of this through, and just returned to work, without mentioning what had happened to anyone, believing that I could just carry on functioning as before. Kevin’s funeral took place roughly two weeks later; I was not able to attend, due to being away on holiday with my family.

It was around this time that a memorial website for Kevin was conceived, though I can’t remember whether it was before or after his funeral. The initial idea for a memorial was posted onto a team mailing list by a senior member of the team, Mark (not his real name) and a very large number of list members agreed that it should be put together, and volunteered to contribute. The motivation expressed by most group members was primarily the creation of a resource to help Kevin’s family, though I have never talked to any team members about their individual motivations. I did not contribute to this discussion, though at the time, I was not sure why; I just found it too hard to reply to any emails and to make any suggestions.

Very quickly after these initial discussions, a skeleton version of the memorial website was created by Mark. This website was hand-coded, in raw HTML, and was hosted (and still is) from his personal page on the web-server of the department he works for. Submissions to the website were made by sending an email to Mark, with a textual message, and a name to be displayed. Mark would then edit the HTML defining the memorial, and add in messages, which accumulated rapidly. A separate section was also

created for pictures of Kevin, which were contributed by team members, mostly by scanning photographs. I browsed this webpage most days, from home, watching content accumulate over time, without contributing personally. I remember clearly, however, one evening where I realized that I needed to decide whether to contribute or not, though I can't remember exactly why this was. It could have been the result of Mark setting a deadline for contributions, though I don't think that this was the case. I think it was more that the site had been around for some time, and that it seemed important to make a concrete decision either way. Regardless, I took my time over this decision, thinking it through in some depth, to make sure that I got it right. I remember this process being very hard, and I remember struggling with mental tiredness and a certain difficulty of engaging with the subject matter, but I can construct my thought processes quite accurately because I wrote them down on paper, which I kept, and have recently found. The following paragraphs summarise what I believe my conscious thought processes were. I provide some comment later on motivations that I was not aware of at the time.

Firstly, I believe that my primary motivation was to leave some kind of message for Kevin's family. I had met his younger brother, who had started to play for the same team occasionally, and having younger brothers myself, who were of a similar age, I thought I could guess just how terrible he would be feeling. I was fully aware that a message from someone who he barely knew could not really make a difference to immediate grief, but my contribution felt like a small amount of effort on my part to invest, just in case it helped in some way, at some time in the future. This motivation shaped the content of the message, which I will talk about later in this section. I do not know, however, whether any of Kevin's family ever read any of the messages in the memorial that we constructed, though I imagine that they did.

Beyond this primary motivation, however, I was also motivated by the importance, to me, of my membership in the sports team where I had met Kevin, and in affirming my place in this continuing social structure. I knew that Kevin's funeral had been attended by almost the whole team, and that people had noticed my absence, and had wondered where I was. I felt like I had excluded myself from what might have been an important collective experience, and didn't want others to think that this was deliberate. I felt that, if I didn't contribute to the memorial website, that I wouldn't then have been taking a full place in the social life of the team, and was worried that I would then be treated differently when I returned to university at the end of the summer. Equally, I felt some kind of duty to contribute to the memorial, acting out a role as a member of the team. In fact, I felt that choosing not to contribute would be a significant act, which I would then have to find a way to explain to the other people involved, and I wasn't sure how I would express my reasons.

Beyond motivation, however, there was one issue that worried me, which was the appropriateness of contributing to the memorial. I felt that I knew Kevin reasonably well, but that others in the team had known him much better. A lot of the people who had contributed to the memorial had been really close friends of him, and there were others who had contributed, who barely seemed to know him. I personally felt, at the time, that it inappropriate for those people to contribute, though I feel differently now. As such, another factor in my decision to contribute was my own assessment of how well I felt I knew Kevin, and whether I felt I knew him well enough.

Finally, a third factor in my decision to contribute was uncertainty about whether I wanted to leave a message, potentially permanently, on a website which I knew might exist for decades, and whose entire content was publicly viewable. I guess I was concerned about who might read it, and if there would be any consequences for me. I could not have specifically said that what I thought those consequences were, but I was worried about the potential of something unexpected turning up.

After deliberating on these issues for some time, I decided that, on balance, I would contribute to the memorial, and composed a message describing what it was like playing with, and against Kevin. I think I thought that his family had not seen much of the side of him that we saw – the skilled, fast, dedicated player, who would risk injury every match on the pitch just to win. I wanted to convey something of this impression, in the hope that, at some point in the future, one of them might read the message, and might learn a bit more about who Kevin had been. I wrote the message quickly and emailed it to Mark. After checking, a few days later, that my message had been added, I don't remember looking at the memorial for a long time after that, and I finally came back to it roughly two years later.

When I did come back to the memorial, I was in a very different situation to when I had last looked at it. By this point, I had finished my final year of university, started a job in a new city, and was no longer part of the same sports team. Due to working towards final exams, and then starting a job almost immediately, I felt even more tired, and, at the same time, since leaving university, I had been swamped by a whole range of uncomfortable emotions that I could not understand or control. In an attempt to work out what was happening to me, I had started taking part in a series of psychotherapy sessions, provided by my employer, and very quickly, I had started to get upset about a whole range of issues, including leaving university, and my Dad being ill several years before. Through taking part in these sessions, I began to develop a belief that I had been feeling bad because, for years, I had stored up a wide range of uncomfortable emotions inside myself, and that I to recover, I had to release them. Psychotherapy sessions were one mechanism for doing this, but I knew that I needed to find others. In my final allocated session, I started to get upset about Kevin's death, and began to realize that this was one event had affected me more than I realized. Remembering his memorial, I decided to see if that had some use in releasing further emotion. On arriving home that evening, I found a comfortable position in the house, turned on my laptop, and used a search engine to locate the memorial. I started by reading through messages left by other team members, and then found my own.

On reading it, the effect on me was immediate. I began to feel a whole variety of emotions welling up that were associated with that time, and which I just had not felt before. I cried a lot, but for many different reasons that I didn't expect. Firstly, I cried about Kevin dying, and missing his character on the pitch, and in all the other social situations that exist around team sports. I then began to get upset about the impact on his family, and especially on his younger brother, and also on the others members of my team. I then began to feel some of the loneliness of that summer, in which I had been very separate from many of the people whose company I had enjoyed so much, for so long. I then felt myself begin to move into the present, and started to look through more messages that had been left in the memorial. This made me realize just how

much I was missing family and friends, many of whom lived a significant distance away from me. Having reached this thought, I found myself returning to a more normal state of mind, and starting to relax and wind down from what was quite an intense emotional experience. Though I have looked at the memorial again, especially in the writing of this paper, I have never felt such a weight of emotion in connection to it since. My personal belief about this experience is that, somehow, reading the memorial allowed me to connect to emotions that had been buried during a difficult time and to release them, a process which helped my mental state considerably.

3. DISCUSSION

The previous section of this paper has presented an account of my own interactions with an online memorial, and its emotional impact on me. This account feels quite long, yet I have had to omit a significant amount of detail in order to fit it into this paper. The account is also very personal, and I hope it has not been too personal for an academic publication, but I felt the need to provide something that was sufficiently truthful, in order to illustrate the many complex issues around studying memorials in general, and online memorials in particular. I now want to use the case-study that I have provided as an illustration in a discussion of wider issues around online memorials, in an attempt to refine the contribution that this paper makes to academic discussion of this topic.

Firstly, I wanted to highlight the difficulty of studying interactions with memorials, given the lengthy time span over which they can exist, and be interacted with. The memorial interactions that have been described in this paper took place over a span of roughly two years, but the memorial itself was constructed more than 9 years ago, and it has taken me this long to fully understand its meaning in my life. As such, in constructing this account, I am relying heavily upon my *autobiographical memory*, but a significant amount of psychological research has highlighted just how poor this aspect of human memory is. As such, there may well be inaccuracies or distortions in my account that I am unaware of, which may have changed the nature of my story, and, in particular, may have made it less truthful. In addition, there are certainly details that I could not fully remember, and where these have been important to my account, I have tried to indicate this.

Beyond this, the nature of account-writing introduces some difficulties as of itself. Inherently, in writing an account, I have had to transform memories into words, which I have used to construct a story to present to the reader. Story-telling is an important aspect of human nature, a significant part of world culture, and humans are very good at telling stories about themselves to others. However, an interesting question here is whether the stories that people construct around their past can ever accurately represent its true content. Various authors have highlighted a human tendency to use personal story-telling to impose a falsely logical order onto past events, in order to try and make sense of the sometimes random things that can happen to us. I have tried to avoid consciously doing this in my account, but I cannot be certain that I have succeeded. In addition, the use of words to express stories that contain significant emotional content is an interesting issue, and one that I have tried to grapple with in writing my account. At times, I have struggled to find the right words to express particularly events or emotions, and though this may partly relate to my own limitations as a writer, it may also relate to inherent limitations of language to express emotional

experience. It is interesting to note that a significant amount of research into human inner experience took place in the 20th century, and some of the concepts defined in this research have become a part of everyday language (for example, splitting the mind into *unconscious* and *conscious* elements, a concept which originated in the psychoanalysis of Freud and others). In the introduction to this paper, I argued that an interesting issue to study would be the differences in emotional affordance between on-line memorials and more common-place memorials such as gravestones. However, an important methodological question here seems to be the topic of emotion, and how to investigate it. There are a wide variety of models of human emotion, many of which are contradictory, and all of which may be difficult to relate to personal experience. Given these constraints, how should research in this area proceed?

As a researcher, I have no immediate answer to some of these issues, but in putting together an account of my own interaction with a memorial, I have at least gained some experience in this area. One interesting feature of my account, and of the process required to put it together, is that I felt the need to include a substantial amounts of background material, describing my life and general state of mind during my various interactions. My belief here is that putting together this background material helped me, and hopefully the reader, to understand my emotional response at this point, at that, without it, much of this emotional response would seem meaningless. In addition, in attempting to remember the detail of my emotional state in interacting with this memorial, I know that I have used various techniques learnt whilst acting as a client in a psychotherapy session. Many of these techniques have been developed in the last 50 years, and have focused on assisting clients in turning their emotional state into words. I believe that such techniques could be useful to researchers who are investigating the emotional affordance of on-line memorials, and wonder whether a review of such techniques would be a useful future contribution to research.

4. CONCLUSION

On-line memorials a relatively new field of academic study, and I believe that there are important methodological and research issues to resolve in studying them. I have argued in this paper that memorials are important because of their affordance for the expression of emotions, particularly grief, and that an interesting area of research would be an investigation into the differences in emotional affordance between on-line memorials and more traditional memorials, such as headstones. By providing an account, and an accompanying analysis, of my own use of an on-line memorial, I have tried to highlight some of the potential challenges inherent in studying emotional affordance. Key issues here are obtaining accurate accounts of interactions that can potentially take place over many years, and in finding ways of expressing, in words, complex human emotions that are only partially accessible to those experiencing them. I believe that the academic study of psychotherapy can provide some inspiration here, though there are significant issues around the different models of human inner processes that are inherent in different approaches to psychotherapy.