

# ETERNALIZATION: *new avenues in digital grief*

*by Ian McDuffie*

On an afternoon this last December while casually, in a spirited bout of procrastination, checking my Facebook, I noticed that everyone from my high school had set their collective statuses to "I miss you, Ben," or some such variation. Upon checking this High School Ben's page, I saw that his status had been changed to "Ben passed peacefully this morning at 5am," and instruction to leave him messages there. So, with a ton of bricks totally derailing my day and my soul, I found out someone I had known decently in high school had died, less than 12 hours after it happened, *from casually checking the internet.*

I realize that in these digital days, there isn't anything strange about that. The internet is how everyone finds out someone is dead. Wikipedia, for instance, is alerted to a death almost before they hit the floor. But here I was, for the first time alerted, in real time, to a death that directly affected me. Yet still, that isn't much different from finding out in an email. Keeping up with everyone you've ever known is more than just easier with the internet and its social-networking virtues, it's become as ingrained in our daily routine as breathing.

What began to strike me as strange about this event was how Ben's Facebook page began to change from just the normal set of status-questions and comments about what he was doing. Within a week of that December day, there was a huge outpouring of good memories, stories of parties, and short-form to long-form essays on why Ben was a good person, how he changed lives. All things

that people would rarely be said face-to-face, if at all. But here, the social stigmas were gone, the playing field was leveled, and anything said was now appropriate.

There was so much outpouring of "good times" that Ben's family then made a group dedicated to Ben-memory outpourings, links to youtube videos of Ben partying, and other missives and more short-form essays (now increasing in length) of the spirit of Ben. In a real-life memorial service, there simply wouldn't be enough time to allow everyone to speak. Here, people were able to share their memories, their (sometimes harrowing and exhausting in detail) feelings of this newly-lost friend. Details of when to attend his "FUNeral" (a name Ben chose himself as part of his last wishes) were made public on his Facebook page, and later, the entire "FUNeral" was posted in 10 parts on Youtube. All of these were more and more forums for outpourings of support, stories, and grief, further opening the table for anyone to weigh in on a life.

As time went on, and more and more people contributing to his memory, I realized what was happening. Ben's Facebook, and all of the other iterations of his internet-identity, had become a digital memorial for him. This phenomenon was nowhere near new to me, nor is it very new to the world at large. There is a fair, yet small in the grand scheme of the Internet, amount of people who congregate on these old Myspace or Facebook pages. There are even sites that collect people's written statements and eulogies.

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The phenomenon stretches beyond just social-networking sites. There are also digital graveyard sites, ones that charge a fee monthly-to-yearly to have a person remain eternalized. Perhaps a little surprising, at least in the consumer-spirit of the internet, is that these such sites are not very populated. Of course, one of the most prevalent misconceptions of the internet is that "everything is free." Sites like these have clearly marked what an appropriate price for grief is, or at the very least, put an importance of people being able to express their feelings on their own terms, with little middleman involved.

These kinds of sites, that have another entity mediating, also have the other side effect of placing their own aesthetic and tonal sensibility onto to the memorial. In an [article](#) for Salon.com, Scott Rosenberg points out that the (now seemingly defunct) site Virtual Heaven's introduction "captures all the pathos and inanity of the 'virtual cemeteries' ... that are multiplying on the Web." The introduction, which offers sympathies towards "those dearly departed who now exist solely within these uncharted realms of Cyberspace," and continues (somewhat ironically in the face of it's lack of existence) by extolling the virtues of "the wonders of digitalization, indefinitely within this most eternal of sites." Rosenberg is correct in that Virtual Heaven's many spelling mistakes and floppy writing are tacky and detract from many people's desire to contribute to the cause of digital memorial, he is slightly unfair in two respects: one, it puts an unfair system of judgment on people's acceptance of the internet as a grief-forum, as if the people who would submit memorials to tacky websites are tacky themselves (as he says while referring to the less-than-stellar grammar of Virtual Heaven, "for obvious reasons, stonemasons don't make typos.") Also, while this is no doubt because of its age, the article does not include Facebook in the big picture of digital memorials.

Addressing the issues of aesthetic, Facebook, for all digital intents and purposes, is a blank slate.

Its layout is so ingrained in its users minds that it has no bearing on what they post, it almost attaches to them in the uber-personalized way that only the utopian-internet or a childhood room can manage. This blankness and familiarity more fully allows people to feel comfortable in their eulogizing, allowing in theory for a more honest summation of feelings.

This increasing inclusiveness leads to another truism of the Internet, that being the fact that anyone can use it. This is a potential benefit for digital memorials, as it maximizes the amount of people that can honor someone they knew, no matter how well they knew them or not, with no threat of anyone criticizing them.

This all-encompassing availability means just that, that anyone can contribute to the proceedings. This sort of inclusiveness led the most terrible and the most publicized case of digital memorial. The most publicized example was of Mitchell Henderson, a 7th grader who committed suicide in 2006. His Myspace page remained active, and children in his grade began to eulogize him. Unfortunately (as it would turn out), they did so in their 7th grade English-level best, and their thoughts were riddled with typos, including a reference.

In theory, this should not have mattered, as typos have no bearing or import on personal feelings. Yet some enterprising groups on the Internet found his page and a blog post he had made shortly before his death about his loss of an iPod. The collective forum underground jumped on this, claiming he'd killed himself over the lost iPod. Thus, Henderson was immortalized, but in this case, in the worst of Internet titles: he became a meme, an Internet fad to be reposted ad infinitum at his expense, and his Myspace page, still active on the Internet, is plagued with a repeated picture of his grave with an iPod on it, bearing the caption (originally in all-caps), "Mitchell I found your iPod." A tragic case of death turned to a digital zoo.

When the [New York Times Magazine](#) mentioned the event, it was in conjunction with an article about "trolling" (by their definition, "someone who inten-

tionally disrupts online communities.”) Thus, the phenomenon of digital memorials was made widely known to the public under a deeply unfavorable light, not to mention the fact that Henderson's death was glossed over in the first paragraph. In his case, Internet culture was the more interesting story, not a young suicide. After glossing over anything relating to tragedy in the event, the article continues on with an embarrassing adults-explaining-the-kids essay on what “the lulz” are.

Certainly the dangers of the uncontrollable internet are real, but do they outweigh the possible good of digital memorial? What seems to me the obvious benefit to the people who use them is the eternalization of who is being memorialized, much like the “wonders of digitalization” that Virtual Heaven revered. To this day, for instance, Ben's wall is posted on, nearly daily, a steady stream of messages. What has changed in the half-year since his death is not the amount of postings, but the tone of these messages. The way they are written increasingly leads to people referring to Ben as if he still lives. Occasionally it is addressed as if he will read them from his laptop in the sky, but in general, it is as if he's only on a trip, or down the street, not gone forever. “Yo I went you know where today and had the most amazing you know what... and its not chipotle. Seriously, drive slow up there homie,” one person writes (a more casual example of a posting), and while the casual tone is endearing, what is more interesting about this example is the need it shows to keep Ben updated with their daily lives, and how their actions still relate to him, serving much the same purpose a causal email greeting would. Because of our digital age, for many people, he can live on, seemingly as forever as all of us, and the hard fact of his disappearance need not be directly accepted, not to mention the subconscious relief it must give us to think that when we die, our own digital ghosts will live on past us.

What then comes from the fact that people can make it known to the world that they miss a passed-on friend, sibling, or son? People can then

share the grief, and can stop themselves from feeling alone in it, even if they aren't discussing it face-to-face. People need an escape from what they feel, and using the Internet, arguably the ultimate facilitator for escapism (a term I use in the least deprecating of ways), is a perfect tool for immortalizing a lost friend.

Yet the Internet isn't devoid of pitfalls for this monument of grief, even aside from those already brought up. The FUNeral, as previously mentioned, is contained on YouTube entirely in 10 segments, yet certain portions have had their sound removed due to the audio containing copyrighted songs (Red Hot Chili Peppers song playing during a slideshow). So even this moment cannot be contained as it was perfectly, due to such a petty concern as copyright issues. And what's to say some other server issue or copyright fuss wouldn't remove them all together. The internet is not the infallible monument to infinity that people assume it to be. Rather, it is no more immutable than a headstone, weathered by age to the point where the name engraved in unrecognizable. Of all the digital memorial sites mentioned in Scott Rosenberg's article, only one out of six still remains, the rest replaced with an empty server advertisement, the website equivalent of a headstone.

Despite all this, people clearly believe their memorials to be eternal. And as such they are allowed a new forum to get things off their collective chests, and, at least in Ben's case, in a constructive manner. In a eulogy posted to Ben's wall, a friend cautioned mourners not to let fear get in the way of saying what they needed to say. With the inclusiveness of the Internet, and well-intentioned digital memorials, that fear need never have existed. Only time can tell if these memorials will be progressive or regressive, but for now, as an open forum of thoughts and feelings, casual to personal, one feels that it must stand.

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