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Virtual Death vs. Reality

by Jenn Hernandez

The Internet lends itself to a separate reality and a sort of immortality based on the permanence of content posted there. A person's memory can outlive them, as long as there are browsers visiting their blogs, or our memorials [1], and websites. The Internet is global, so as the bounds of communication are made endless and reality follows suit as users are immersed in a separate cyber reality where death may not seem truly final.

Part of a person's identity is social. People define and identify themselves as others see them. According to the Social Identity Theory as posted on the University of Twente in the Netherlands' communications webpage:

Apart from the "level of self", an individual has multiple "social identities". Social identity is the individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership of social groups...people's sense of who they are is defined in terms of 'we' rather than 'I'...The theory has also implications on the way people deal with social and organizational change. [2]

So people are remembered by the "we" of society (whoever that "we" may be) when the individual ceases to exist. People seek out "we"s within the reader and blogging sphere to create a place to share thoughts so that they can be known to others, and therefore hold a reality of having existed. When they die, this is the part that lives on. In Judeo-
Christian traditions, the individual and personal dies utterly. There is no soul left as a hungry ghost to roam the world, remembrances should be kept to a minimum, as the person is dead—why bring them back to life in the memory if they're truly dead? In The Book of Sirach in the Old Testament of The Bible, it is stated that:

My son, shed tears for one who is dead with wailing and bitter lament; as only is proper, prepare the body, absent yourself not from his burial; Weeping bitterly, mourning fully, pay your tribute of sorrow, as he deserves, one or two days to prevent gossip; Then compose yourself after your grief, for grief can bring on an extremity and heartache destroy one's health. Turn not your thoughts to him again; Cease to recall him; Think rather of the end. Recall him not for there is no hope of his return; It will not help him, but will do you harm. Sirach 38:16-21 [3]

This is contrary to the beliefs of cultures such as the Asians and the Greeks, as evidenced in Achilles' monologue in Homer's Odyssey:

But say, if in my steps my son proceeds, And emulates his godlike father's deeds? If at the clash of arms, and shout of foes, Swells his bold heart, his bosom nobly glows? Say if my sire, the reverend Peleus, reigns, Great in his Phthia, and his throne maintains; Or, weak and old, my youthful arm demands, To fix the sceptre steadfast in his hands? O might the lamp of life rekindled burn, And death release me from the silent urn! This arm, that thunder'd o'er the Phrygian plain, And swell'd the ground with mountains of the slain, Should vindicate my injured father's fame, Crush the proud rebel, and assert his claim.' [4]

The ancient Greeks believed that a ghost had reality for as long as the person was remembered and had a link to the living world. In Achilles' case, his link is his son.
If his son is successful, then others will remember his father through his heroic deeds.

In Asian cultures, shrines are kept to give ancestors the reality of remembrance, as evidenced in Lisa See's novel, *Peony in Love*, which follows the main character, Peony, in her death and afterlife as a hungry ghost, seeking remembrance. The last poem Peony writes while still living reveals her view of death and hope for remembrance: "It is not so easy to wake from a dream. My spirit, if sincere, will stay forever under the moon or by the flowers..." [5]. Peony hopes that the man who was to be her husband will remember her by dotting and placing her ancestor tablet in his family shrine because, "the dotting would allow [her] to be worshipped as an ancestor and give [her] a place to inhabit on earth for all eternity..." [6].

Blogs are like cyber shrines in some cases, being devoted to memorials written by or about someone before they've died. One example of such a blog is Andy Olmsted's [7]. He writes a final post before going to serve in Iraq, in case he should die. He does die, but is strongly remembered and kept alive in the cyber reality through his blog. He created a sense of community for himself online, which is upheld in a memorial posted by a friend. This memorial includes a link to Andy's last post, which he asked to have put upon this friend's blog [8] in the event of his death. The final post, "stirred so much interest that Olmsted's father, Wes Olmsted, said it has since been
translated into several languages, including Hebrew, Farsi and Russian. 'He touched a lot of people around the world,' Wes Olmsted said" [9]. So, just as other cultures use different techniques to remember their dead, the Internet culture can be as sacred as a gravesite and resting place for the deceased's soul to continue contact with the world even after they are gone.

The blogs and websites individuals leave behind can give an insight into their lives, an aid of remembrance. When reading the work of the deceased, one may even have trouble imagining they are dead, because reading their words lends a sort of vitality as well as immortality to the person's image.

This February 15th, 2008, a high school student killed himself, but left behind a Xanga [10], a social blog, that he kept updated almost daily. Upon reading through it and hoping to figure out what he was trying to tell the world in his final days, many of the entries were so full of life and deep emotion that he seemed as alive as ever.

The social identities of Dustin Tran and I are intertwined, as we went to the same high school, so he continues to live in my memories of him, rather than in the reality he's not a part of anymore. It would be hard to imagine that he just stopped existing one day when his memory is so alive online.

The last entry Dustin had left was a running checklist of things he wanted to accomplish in the New Year:

1. Graduate.
2. Get accepted into a college/university. OSU! Chyeahh!
3. Finish the rest of my make-up work.
4. Get the Natural Helper's Club back on track.
5. Have a successful Clothing Drive.
6. Get lettered/corded in Key Club
8. Get lettered in NHS.
10. Get good Midterm and Final Grades.
11. Enjoy Prom.
12. Workout and get beefed up. ;]
14. Sleeping and waking up early.
15. Get on Varsity Tennis.
16. Go on a road trip down to Cali. with some friends.
17. Make Senior Jagfest Court.
18. Become a better speaker.
19. Finish the STARS Video Project.
20. Make a new friend.
22. Register to Vote.
23. Karaoke with friends.
24. Get started on making the Valentines Day gift. ;]

Seeing what he'd already crossed off (get accepted to college) and seeing what he had yet to accomplish (enjoy prom, make varsity tennis) made it seem as though he hadn't left off, though he has. His list will remain forever frozen in cyberspace as a memorial and a reminder. He'd never have a chance to enjoy prom or cross out
anything more on his list. I can finish his list, but he cannot. This realization brought a nauseating visceral reaction: the pit of my stomach contorted and then went numb as Dustin was wrenched from my reality. As much as I don't want to believe it, he is gone. I can live in the blogosphere where he is still alive all I want, but in reality he is gone.

Blogs can also form online communities that may not be able to exist otherwise. One such example is the blog of an inmate on death row, Vernon [12]. Through his blog he shares his reflections on his life, where death is inevitable, and it's just a matter of waiting out the sentence. This applies to all of us; we are awaiting death, but on not always so definite a timeline. If we had no contact with others through the Internet who knew their timeframe, then we'd have no idea what those who don't have much time left are thinking. We would be less likely to reflect on our lives as well.

Another example of this sort of blog is BH's blog [13]. He had ALS and used his space to chronicle his thoughts and the rest of his life on the Internet. By doing so he touched other's lives, as well as carved out a memory for himself as he was losing his own. As death becomes more openly discussed and mourned by online communities through blogs and websites, a separate reality is created, an epitaph of sorts. What remains on the Internet as an epitaph is the final and lasting image of a person and their life. The Internet can blur the boundaries of reality as we are given a permanent reminder of those who have succumbed to a mortal death, though perhaps not so mortal after all.

References:


Image Citations:
[e] www.xanga.com/smartchincboi