

Dying on Facebook

MRP Proposal, by XXXXXX
XXXXXX
Supervisor: XXXXXX
Reader: XXXXXX

Overview

This project will interrogate why and how we engage with the digital spaces and objects that may be left behind when a person dies. A Facebook profile that remains active—and interactive—after a user’s death affords its deceased creator a kind of narrative immortality as visitors continue to build and reshape the space. I will investigate this notion by producing and analyzing my own interactive digital memorial with the help of contacts in the interactive division of the National Film Board. It will be based in part on an existing NFB-Interactive piece by Alicia Smith, entitled *Please Call, Very Sentimental*. Like a Facebook profile, this site will invite acts of sharing and self-writing, albeit in a very different visual environment: visitors will contribute and engage with digital representations of traditionally physical memorial objects.

A deceased person’s Facebook page is, I think, both a memorial object *and* a memorial space. It is a permanent reminder of its creator’s life, and a semipublic environment to which other users can contribute content and share their memories of the deceased. Over time, however, the memorial aspects of such a page begin to fall away; what begins as a self-authored representation of one person and later serves to memorialize her ultimately becomes a collective narrative documenting the lives of its visitors. Whether a profile’s creator is living or dead does not seem to effect many substantive changes in other users’ posts, which remain autobiographical. With time, then, a dead person’s Facebook page looks less like a memorial and more like a pastiche of its visitors’ life stories.

Method

To demonstrate the overwhelming presence of the living user in an online memorial space like Facebook, I will design an online memory box. It will comprise a single screen divided into three zones: a large central image, an input bar, and a small photo frame. The largest zone will consist of a Flash-based, animated photograph of a

wooden box. Users will click to interact with the box itself in only a few ways: zooming, turning 360 degrees, and opening the lid.

The input bar occupying top quarter of the space will serve as the site's explicitly participatory element. Users will be invited to enter text and upload images, which I will then alter to represent physical objects more closely. The memory box will then be modified as well: all submitted objects will be added to the original image, and will be independently manipulable; that is, users will be able to interact with their own and others' submissions, which become permanent components of the space.

Importantly, movement of both the box and submitted objects will involve more than a standard cursor. Instead, I will animate an image of my hand manipulating the objects when clicked. The design of the site will intentionally mimic a physical space in order to call attention to the rhetorical differences between physical and digital memorial objects. By emphasizing virtual images of tactility and physical movement this feature will, I hope, make users aware of how the architecture of digital space can influence their emotional response.

Finally, the site's upper left-hand corner will present an initially static photograph; this placement will echo the structure of a Facebook profile page or timeline. In order to submit content, users must first upload photos of themselves; I will then edit each image, reducing its opacity. At launch, this zone will feature a photo of my own deceased Facebook acquaintance, Betsy. As users interact with the space, though, their semitransparent portraits will appear superimposed over the original photograph in the frame. Eventually, they will collectively erase the original image, reflecting a parallel process exhibited on Facebook memorial pages: they gradually transform into autobiographical spaces for the living. The site I will create, then, will literalize the process by which multiple living users' life narratives overwrite the story of the deceased.

I will recruit an audience for this project from Betsy's Facebook page, and have begun the review process with the Office of Research Ethics. This project will make explicit practices of memorialization and disclosure I think are unique to online spaces generally and social network sites in particular, and will allow me to interrogate exactly how a Facebook page transforms from a living profile into a new kind of memorial object.

Schedule and grading

I will meet weekly with my supervisor to discuss my progress. I have divided the term into three major phases of planning, production, and writing, although I will be writing continuously throughout the term.

Planning (September-October)

During the first month of term I will create a detailed plan for the site design and pursue both in-person and online training for the technical components of the project, with particular emphasis on Adobe PhotoShop and Flash.

- First milestone: Theory and design précis (~8 pages) and site sketches, 1 October **(15%)**
- Second milestone: Final essay outline, 15 October

Production (October-November)

With the help of producers and programmers, I will build the site itself.

- Third milestone: Final version of site, 26 November **(35%)**

Writing (November-December)

In this phase I will finish and submit draft and final versions of the essay.

- Fourth milestone: Essay draft, 3 December
- Fifth milestone: Final essay (~30 pages), 17 December **(50%)**

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