Memorializing the Dead with Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Rick May 1940 – 2020
'That was a hell of a campaign, son!'

Rick May was the voice of 'the Soldier'; a celebrated and iconic character from *Team Fortress 2 (TF2)* (Valve 2007). He died on the 8th of April 2020 following a stroke and complications related to COVID-19 (Wilde 2020). In the May 2020 patch notes for *TF2*, Valve, the game's developers, announced a month-long tribute to Rick and his voice acting work for the company (Valve 2020a, 2020b). During the month of May, the opening screen and main menu of *TF2* featured an image of the Soldier standing at attention and saluting. A rendition of *"Taps"* called *"Saluting the Fallen"* was also added to the soundtrack and played over the main menu. Bronze statues of the Soldier were placed on the game's active maps. The statues featured the Soldier standing at attention and saluting from the top of a marble column. The column carried a bronze plaque with the inscription, *"Rick May 1940 – 2020"* followed by an iconic line from the Soldier, *"'That was a hell of a campaign, son!'"* As players approached and remained in the vicinity of the statues, the game played randomly selected lines from Rick May's repertoire of voice acting for the Soldier. The tribute ended after a month, but the statues have reappeared every year on the 8th of April to mark the anniversary of his death. A permanent memorial was added to the *Granary* map later that year (Morton 2020). The memorial evokes a short *TF2* promotional video, *"Meet The Soldier"*, which was set on the same map. In the video, the Soldier is instructing a squad of soldiers in the manner of a deranged drill sergeant. The video cuts to reveal the gathered soldiers are severed heads arranged on a wooden farm gate. The permanent memorial features the Soldier statue and the severed heads from this iconic video.

Scholars studying death have noted that death in many western countries has been undergoing something of a transformation in recent decades (Arnold et al. 2018; Jacobsen 2021; Khapaeva 2017). Grieving and rituals for the dead have become less formal, more personal and private, and less bound by the funerary traditions of the past and the rites and rituals of the major world religions. As part of this general trend, forms of memorialization to mark the deceased have drifted away from the grave and the final resting place of the deceased and can be found across many public and

private spaces not previously associated with the dead. This trend can be seen in the spread of memorial trees, benches and other inscribed markers to the dead across public spaces in recent decades.

Other memorial forms have emerged into popular awareness during this period that are less formal, more personal and often created by 'grassroots' movements rather than state and/or religious institutions. Examples highlighting this shift in memorial forms include the AIDS quilt, roadside memorials, and memory fences at places of national tragedy, such as the sites of 9/11 attacks in the US. Grassroot memorials (Margry and Sánchez- Carretero 2011) and spontaneous shrines (Santino 2006) are two common terms used to refer to vernacular, temporary and improvised memorials that often spring up in response to death and tragic events. A makeshift memorial may appear outside a person's place of residence; a roadside memorial will mark the place of a fatal road accident; a spontaneous shrine will appear at the place where a missing person was last seen or where they were murdered. Members of the public often help create informal memorials by leaving memorabilia, flowers, cards and other tributes at the sites of tragic events and disasters.

Valve's memorialization for Rick May is an example of these trends in memorialization. The memorialization activities did not occur at the graveside but occurred at places of significance for the deceased and for the people experiencing his loss. The memorials were carefully crafted from the arrangement of selected items of significance in the life of the deceased, such as his voice acting. They evoke 'tradition', military service and the solemnity of a funeral with bronze statues and a mournful rendition of *"Taps".* They evoke the chaos and mayhem of the game though their reference to the iconic *"Meet The Soldier"* promotional video. The memorials for Rick May were public expressions of grief and condolence made by the game developers that expressed appreciation for the life and contributions of a departed member of the community.

In this presentation we will discuss several examples of memorialization in digital games. We highlight how game designers have appropriated and refashioned a range of cultural materials and resources drawn from 'traditional' memorial forms and mixed them with symbols and mechanics from games to create evocative memorials for commemorating the dead. Game memorials are often a pastiche that mix tropes and motifs from gaming cultures with memorial traditions drawn from the world religions and national institutions such as the military. Drawing inspiration and insights from Ronald Grimes' work on ritual, we highlight how these vernacular memorials are *designed assemblages*; a notion that suggests they are planned and deliberately constructed from the composition and arrangement of "unrelated, fragmentary, or discarded objects" (Grimes 2014, 232-233). Understanding game memorials as designed assemblages highlights the way in which these memorials are constructed by building associations between assorted material and symbolic resources drawn from traditional memorialization and gaming repertoires. It suggests how games can be fertile ground for cultural creativity and inventiveness, and how they can be used for memorialization and similar purposes. Furthermore, it highlights how games can be a source of new memorialization practices and how memorial culture in general is not necessarily bound by tradition but can use and refashion traditions as resources for creating novel and inventive memorial forms.

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