Vile Rat: Spontaneous Shrines in EVE Online

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ABSTRACT
Grassroots or vernacular forms of commemoration such as roadside memorials and spontaneous shrines that appear in the wake of national tragedies have emerged in recent decades as legitimate and ritualized public expressions of grief. Consistent with this trend is the phenomena of online game communities appropriating game mechanics for commemorative practices within game worlds. In this paper, we discuss the spontaneous shrines created in *EVE Online* to commemorate the sudden death of Vile Rat, a prominent member of the *EVE* community. We suggest that these in-game commemorations are creative appropriations of game mechanics that hybridized and translated traditional and contemporary tropes for grieving, commemorating and memorializing to enact innovative mourning rituals in a new media space. We conclude by discussing the salient qualities of *EVE* which enable and facilitate such collective and meaningful commemoration and speculate towards the player-driven memorialization as a design space in MMOGs.

Keywords
EVE Online; Death; Memorialization; Commemoration; Vile Rat; Sean Smith; Benghazi; MMORPG; Spontaneous Shrines.

1. INTRODUCTION
On the 11th of September 2012 the American diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya, was attacked several times by a large number of armed militia. Four American personnel were killed in the attacks, including the U.S Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, and Sean Smith, a Foreign Services Information Management Officer with ten years experience, a husband and father of two young children [3]. Two embassy security personnel, Tyrone Wood and Glen Doherty also died [4].

Sean Smith, aka Vile Rat, was also a prominent figure in the game, *EVE Online*. Vile Rat was a key senior member of the alliance Goon Swarm Fleet, and its many incarnations (all Goon alliances etc. referred to as GSF hereafter in this paper). He was a former elected member of the game's Council of Stellar Management (CSM) and was a moderator on the GSF's 'home'; the Something Awful forums.

News of the Benghazi attacks and of the death of American personnel was reported widely. In the mass media, obituaries and reports on Sean Smith rarely failed to mention his involvement in *EVE Online* alongside his career in the State Department, and the wife and two children he left behind. Obituaries also followed from CCP, the developers of *EVE Online*, moderators on the Something Awful forums, and from Mittani, leader of GSF and former chairman of the *EVE Online* CSM. Commemorative comments on various blog and forum threads dedicated to Vile Rat quickly ran to thousands of posts in length. A charitable fund for Sean's family was organized on the crowd-sourced fundraiser site *YouCaring* and raised $25,000 within 12 hours, eventually collecting $127,001 from 2,634 supporters. A Wikipedia page dedicated to Sean Smith as a notable person was quickly established, and within *EVE Online* players, using various game resources, constructed and performed a range of commemorative acts in his honor.

In this paper we examine the mobilization of various game features, mechanics and resources to create memorials and perform commemorative acts in Vile Rat's honor within the *EVE Online* game world. We argue that these practices resemble other forms of vernacular, or 'grassroots' [11], commemorative practices that often follow deaths, tragedies and disasters. While the specific form and materials used were idiosyncratic to *EVE Online*, these commemorative acts draw on ritual forms and symbolic repertoire common to other forms of spontaneous and improvised memorializations. This instance suggests further possibility for the consideration of memorialization tools in game design. In the concluding section of this paper we point to future avenues of analysis for this case study.

2. VERNACULAR COMMEMORATION AND SPONTANEOUS SHRINES
In recent years, scholars have studied emerging forms of mortuary, ritual and commemorative practices that are less bound to institutions such as the church, and more meaningfully connected with everyday experiences and activities [11] [15]. Examples of alternative secular ritual practices of these kinds include roadside memorials [2]; memory fences such as those found at sites of national tragedy such as the Oklahoma bombing or the World Trade Centre [6]; and the AIDS quilt.

Throughout the 60s and 70s mourning became an increasingly privatized and individualized practice, and traditional and formal rites that made mourning a public and community affair waned [15]. As mourning became less of a formal social obligation, or duty, and became more private, less ritualized and more personal, opportunities for public expressions and acknowledgement of personal grief also declined [9]. This waning, along with increasing emphasis placed on the expression of individual authenticity and personal identity gave rise to new ritualized forms of public mourning and expressions of grief that were more informal, individualized and varied [15], and were increasingly disconnected from traditional sacred institutions. *Makeshift memorials* and *spontaneous shrines* are important forms of these new ritualized practices for public mourning.

Makeshift memorials and *spontaneous shrines* are two common terms used to refer to the practice of depositing and carefully arranging various kinds of materials and memorabilia in public spaces in response to someone's death or other tragic events [11] [13]. These practices came into widespread public consciousness

in the 1980s and 1990s, although examples have been documented that date back to 1865 and 1963 following the assassinations of Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy respectively [11]. They reached their apogee in the global reaction to the death of Princess Diana in 1997, which included, in London alone, *"50 million bouquets of flowers, weighing some 10,000 tons, that were laid outside Buckingham Place and Diana's London residence of Kensington Place"* [1, pp.328-329]. By the time of Princess Diana's death, and through the public response to it, these makeshift memorial practices reached a relatively stabilized and commonly understood ritualized form. As Brennan suggests, this event, along with the Hillsborough stadium disaster, *"appeared to mark the revival (and invention) of half-forgotten customs and traditions"* [1, p.328]. Both of these cases involved the creating and signing of condolence books; observations of a minute's silence; communal occupation of public space; and the creation of, and pilgrimage to, temporary spontaneous shrines to leave a ritual offering and witness what others have left [1].

These temporary, improvised memorials usually spring up at places of significance in the individual and/or collective memory of the death or tragic event. For example, a makeshift memorial may appear outside a person's place of residence; a road side 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, most commonly, memorabilia and tributes will be left the site of a tragic event or disaster. Spontaneous shrines typically occupy and appropriate public space. They often appear and grow quickly without planning or institutional approval [9].

While often referred to as 'makeshift' they are carefully constructed acts of bricolage. Items are carefully placed and arranged by visitors. Items are often positioned to create and maintain pleasing aesthetical arrangements, repeating patterns, layering and framings of objects. Care is also taken with the selection of items, and the choice is imbued with significance. The artefacts placed at makeshift memorials vary, but tend to be drawn from a common repertoire [8]. Flowers, balloons and candles are common. Teddy bears and stuffed animals, photographs and drawings; written notes and banners; poetry and missives; and other forms of memorabilia and materials drawing upon religious symbolism and paraphernalia such as angels and crosses are also common. Item selection is typically not random, but imbued with significance for the events being commemorated. For example, teddy bears and soft toys were common at the site of the Oklahoma City bombing [8] and hand written poems and drawings depicting themes of rebirth were common at sites commemorating the Black Saturday Bushfires [12].

Further, makeshift memorials are often expression of community and solidarity [15], social discontent and protest [11] as well as being public expressions of grief and condolence. Wouters suggests that *"these public expressions signal a rising need to find more public recognition of personal mourning and that, via these rituals, participants are seeking to assert membership of a larger symbolic or 'imagined' community."* [15, p.2]

These forms of mourning rituals have also been adapted and spread through the Internet and social media. Given the rise and acceptance of these forms of vernacular commemoration, and given the amount of leisure time people devote to online video games, and as people form social relations associated with these media, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that these games also become vehicles for expressing grief and for commemorating the deceased [14]. The developers of games have been known to place memorials within games [7], and numerous examples of

player-driven funeral rites conducted within multiplayer games can be found posted to video hosting sites such as YouTube, involving the reappropriation of in-game items and practices for public expressions of grief and mourning. These videos, and the process of sharing them, further document the funeral commemoration and act to memorialize the dead. The most (in)famous of these is depicted in the YouTube video "Serenity Now Bombs a Funeral" [7]. In the following section of this paper we describe and analyse how *EVE Online* players used various game mechanics and features to construct memorials for Vile Rat in the game world.

3. R.I.P. VILE RAT

In the days following Sean Smith's death, many players of *EVE Online* began constructing memorials within the game using a variety of game resources and mechanics.

Figure 1. Commemorative Cargo Containers

Figure 1 shows a list of in-game items that have been named with missives to Vile Rat. Many featured a version of "R.I.P Vile Rat" or the leave-taking, conversation closer often used in the *EVE Online* community; "Fly safe VR". These costless and easily created 'cargo containers' were deposited outside of the main station in VFK-IV; the main solar system of Vile Rat's Goonswarm. In this frequently traversed area of the vast and empty universe of *EVE*, players appropriated this public and visible space of community significance to create a temporary and public memorial outside Vile Rat's metaphorical home. Other players navigating through this community hub would see these items both as a cluster of objects floating in space and on the table-like user interface depicted in Figure 1. Like many of the flowers and ephemera typically left at spontaneous shrines, which quickly weather and decay, these memorializations are temporary. They disappear after the daily reset of *EVE*'s servers.

In a similar fashion, players appropriated the game mechanic of warp-bubbles to create a larger and more artful dedication to Vile Rat; depicted in Figure 2. Warp-bubbles are large, shimmering orbs which prevent player ships from entering warp speed, normally used tactically to capture and destroy ships. Due to the technical process of deploying these warp-bubbles, arranging them to spell out 'RIP Vile Rat' in open space would have been logistically difficult. Due to its size and location, this monument also involved the appropriation of public space for a community's public expression of grief. Images of this monument have been widely circulated by players, including being the feature of a commemorative YouTube video with over 40,000 views. Close to a hundred players were captured in the video as they paid their respects in a kind-of pilgrimage to this temporary monument. With a player populating each bubble, the YouTube video description explains, "*the tiny dots of light inside the bubbles are individual players paying their respects by lighting a "candle" using the in-game cynosural field item.*"

Figure 2. Candle light vigil

Cynosural fields, or 'cynos', are an in-game item, which enables players, even entire, fleets of players, to quickly traverse *EVE*'s vast universe to a specific location, as long as another player has 'lit' a cynosural field. Tactically this allows for the quick deployment of support in fleet battles, or to allow the survivors of a battle a quick route home (known as 'bridging'). Consequently, the location and incidence of cynos is strategically useful information, and an in-game map exists which depicts the occurrence of cynos in each star system in the Universe; the higher occurrence of cynos, the brighter the star appears. Figure 3 depicts the effect of lighting so many cynosural fields on this map, something visible to any player of the game. In the comments on this image from reddit, one player explained the significance of this image as so; "*The light shined over most of the galaxy as did Vile Rat's influence... sad day for EVE.*" The technical properties of the item with the game also had meaning, according to one GSF member, "*they symbolized our wish: that VR would bridge home and come back to us.*" [1]

Players also engaged in a more lasting form of commemoration by renaming the player-created space stations in a similar dedicatory fashion. The main GSF station was renamed '*VFK-IVile Rat will be remembered*', and remained so named until the 19th January 2013. Numerous other stations were renamed, both from friends and enemies of the GSF. In total, over 250 stations were renamed in some commemorative form, such as '*6Vile Rat Remembrance Station*', '*C-Can't Believe Vile Rat is Gone*' and '*H-Never forget Vile Rat*'. Some, such as '*O-2 Hard to bear RIP VR*' remain as continuing player-created dedications inside *EVE*. Poignantly, one station remained as a memorial despite having been conquered by another player-group, twice. Further examining the process of gradual reversions of station names to their previous or new

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[1] http://www.reddit.com/r/Eve/comments/zst02/

names will give insight into the process, duration and politics of mourning in internet-mediated communities.
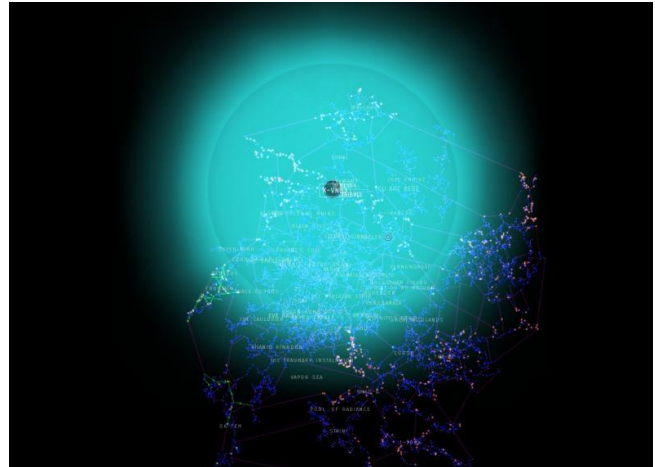

Figure 3 Cynosural Field Map.

4. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK

Sean leaves behind a loving wife, Heather, two young Children, Samantha and Nathan and scores of grieving family friends and colleagues. And that's just in this world, because Online, in the Virtual Worlds that Sean helped create, he is also being mourned by countless competitors, collaborators and gamers who shared his passion. - Hilary R. Clinton [5]

Vernacular commemorative practices such as roadside memorials and the spontaneous shrines that appear in the wake of national tragedies have emerged in recent decades as valid and legitimate, expected and ritualized, public expressions of grief. These commemorative practices have hybridized tradition and modernity, religion and secularity, the old and the new, to create new rituals that connect meaningfully to the contemporary lived experiences of individuals and communities [11] [15]. In much the same way, the commemorations created by *EVE Online* players through the creative appropriations of game mechanics that we have described in this paper were also hybridizations that translated many of the traditional and contemporary tropes for grieving, commemorating and memorializing to enact innovative mourning rituals that connected with the daily activities and practices of the *EVE Online* communities.

Margry and Sánchez-Carretero [10] have suggested there are seven characteristics common to makeshift memorials and spontaneous shrines. Each of these characteristics was evident in the Vile Rat commemorations. (1) They involved bricolage; Cargo containers, cyno beacons, and warp bubbles were the materials of choice appropriated for the commemorations. (2) They are both offerings for the deceased and also for a wider audience. Indeed, some comments were directed to Vile Rat, particularly those wishing he "rests in peace", but also comments for a broader audience articulated his legacy for the *EVE* community. (3) Memorials convey meaning through narrative; the lighting of many cynosural beacons symbolized Vile Rat's influence and the wish for his safe return from distance places. (4) Memorials can reclaim a public space; many objects such as cargo containers were renamed and deposit in the GSF's 'home' system; claiming this space (albeit temporarily) as a commemorative site. (5) The memorials are unofficial and non-institutionalized; the game community (not the game developers) initiated and sustained the commemorative activities for Vile Rat. Interestingly, calls by players for CCP to permanently rename a star system in Vile Rat's

honor have not been fulfilled. This differs from the permanent memorials that game developers have created in games such as *Dungeon and Dragons Online* and *World of Warcraft* [7]. (6) Sites are created in a personal way, but also follow patterns learnt and inscribed through the mass media. Individuals could personalize individual contributions to the Vile Rat memorials but also used widely understood commemorative symbols such as candles and R.I.P. missives. (7) Finally, the shrines need not be religiously based. The Vile Rat commemorations did not exhibit any overt religious influence. These characteristics have helped us analyze the Vile Rat commemorations as an extension of existing practices into new media. They are novel in terms of their creative appropriation of game mechanics, but also 'traditional' or commonplace in their use of common tropes and motifs of contemporary mourning rituals.

Though memorializations and commemorative acts are not everyday events in game-worlds, this analysis illustrates how the spontaneous shrines for Vile Rat in *EVE* closely replicate commonplace practices. The considerable and meaningful outpouring of grief and mourning that occurred following Sean Smith's death was enabled by *EVE Online*'s unique single-server configuration, the persistent trans-media identity of *EVE* players, and player-driven governance. Having a persistent and single virtual world enabled the entire player community to participate in public commemorations that were meaningful assertions of membership in the prominent and symbolic community of *EVE* players; a community enabled and enhanced by the presence of the player elected councils and persistent identity systems.

Allowing public forms of mourning can be important to community formation and healing in the wake of tragedy. Thus, consideration of how to design for these rituals in MMOGs and virtual worlds can be fruitful. However, care also needs to be taken before allowing (for example) permanent player-generated memorialization, particularly given the essentially spontaneous and temporary nature of many commemorative shrines, and the manner in which they are meaningful appropriations. It is also worth noting that the 'sandbox' character, or unstructured and open-ended game play, of *EVE Online* also lends itself to memorialization far better than more structured and directed play of 'theme park' games such as *World of Warcraft*. As one player noted in response to player requests for CCP to create a permanent and official Vile Rat memorial, "*In the Sandbox that is EVE, we can make our own memorials*". The flexibility afforded by player named items and the availability of objects that persist publicly for periods of time in the game world enabled and facilitated spontaneous commemoration for Vile Rat.

Commemorative activities were not limited to the *EVE Online* game world, but blurred across a range of other media and there are several avenues for further analysis of this case study. In particular, two avenues for ongoing inquiry suggest themselves. First, an examination of the rhetoric of the media and institutional responses to Sean Smith's involvement in the *Something Awful* and *EVE Online* communities that serves to legitimate this involvement as a serious pastime worthy of public acknowledgement. Secondly, tracing the responses from CCP and the *EVE Online* community through various blogs and bulletin boards offers the opportunity to better understand how people respond when a prominent member of their virtual community dies, with opportunities to understand more about how virtual and game communities form, reproduce, and repair following a traumatic event.

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