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Online funerals and “Animal Crossing” memorials may become the new normal

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Undertakers are offering live streaming of funerals (Thomas Kronsteiner/Getty Images)

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Video chats replaced social contact for millions of people around the world over the past months, as they've stayed home, following social distancing regulations due to COVID-19. Virtual meetings for work, Zoom happy hours, online gym classes, and [celebrity children's story time](#), have functioned as acceptable stand-ins for real human interaction to stay safe from the coronavirus.

There are life moments, though, where being able to see, and hug, your loved ones feels irreplaceable. Some of them, like weddings, and graduations can be postponed. Funerals can't.

The family and friends of the [nearly 300,000 victims](#) of the coronavirus, as well anyone who dies from other causes during lockdowns, have had to figure out how to mourn their loved ones without being in the same place. Many of them are turning to tech, from participating in funerals over Zoom, to building memorials in the virtual worlds of video games.

It's a solution born out of necessity, but experts say it is something that is likely to have a lasting impact on the funeral industry, even when movement restrictions are lifted.

"I think this is opening people's eyes to the power of live streaming funerals," said Zach Chatterton, the CEO and founder of Gather, a funeral home software company.

It's something that the funeral industry has been slow to adopt, he says, but the pandemic has changed the ability to attend a memorial remotely from a "nice to have," into a "must have." His company builds software to help funeral homes manage payments, and collaborate with families on uploading photos and writing obituaries. Live streaming was on the roadmap for development, but he decided to prioritize it early in 2020 after seeing a report of a family that couldn't attend a funeral in Italy.

"It was a crazy four weeks, just heads down, testing dozens of different microphones, cameras, and even the case we would ship it in," he said. And as movement restrictions were introduced in the U.S., the team at Gather had to practice what they were developing, and collaborate over video chat. "We were all working from home, trying to figure this out."

The [kit the company came up](#) is now in hundreds of funeral locations across the U.S., Chatterton said. Similar services have been [in high demand](#).

Many people looking to do something meaningful to mark the death of a loved one are also turning to online, virtual worlds. Sarah Chavez, executive director of the nonprofit group, The Order of the Good Death, [told Marketplace Tech](#) that the popular game Animal Crossing has become a focus to [create virtual memorials](#).

"People have created altars, shrines, cemeteries. They're all really beautiful and poignant and personal — all qualities or things that we really hope to evoke when we honor someone we love in a real-life funeral experience," she said.

Video games like World of Warcraft and EVE online have been used as a way to virtually mourn real world deaths for some time. They allow users to create and manipulate environments that can be shared by other people. When foreign service officer Sean Smith was killed in the 2012 attack

on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, he was commemorated in the real world, [but also in EVE Online](#). [His community there](#) immediately started naming locations after him.

The games often have locations like graveyards or cathedrals which become gathering grounds. “A group of sometimes hundreds meet as their avatars at specific special places,” said Johanna Pirker, professor at Graz University of Technology in Austria, where she researches immersive and virtual reality environments.

Researchers see virtual worlds eventually becoming even more powerful tools for people to gather, remotely. Pirker believes VR worlds could become more popular than video calls for attending funeral services. “Compared to Zoom or Skype they give you an additional feeling of immersion,” she said. With a video call, there’s a detachment. Yes, you’re sharing an experience with other people, but you’re not there with them, and sometimes watching through a screen can emphasize that.

That’s something Vanessa Sibanda can relate to. Her cousin died recently in her mid-20s, for reasons unrelated to the coronavirus. Due to lockdown restrictions in the U.K., Sibanda had to watch the funeral via video conference at her home near Manchester.

“It was so surreal, to be home in the lounge with my mother, sat there watching, at a time when people should be comforting each other,” she said.

She says although it wasn’t a replacement for being able to hug her family, it was better than nothing.

“When you’re grieving you kind of have to be at the funeral to know they’ve been laid to rest.”

It was a difficult experience though, without some of the ceremony that a traditional funeral would have had. Sibanda didn’t wear a special outfit, but did make sure she was appropriately dressed, knowing she’d be on video. Other friends and family members called in from work, on their breaks, and there was some in-and-out of participants. “It was a different experience for everyone,” she said.

Although many people will opt to attend services in person when restrictions on public gatherings are lifted, there will always be people who can’t. Pirker says this is particularly true for the elderly population, who often can’t attend their friends funerals for accessibility reasons. She hopes some of what has been invented through necessity sticks, and they’ll be able to attend virtually in the future.

Throughout the pandemic movement restrictions, people have been finding creative ways to replicate as much of their normal lives as possible, online. The end of life may become a lasting part of that too.

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