

IRONSIDE, R. and LEITH, C. 2024. Virtual afterlife: dark tourism in the hereafter. In Stone, P.R. and Wright, D.W.M. (eds.). The future of dark tourism: enlightening new horizons. The future of tourism, 8. Bristol: Channel View Publications Ltd [online], Chapter 2, 27-37. Available from: <https://www.channelviewpublications.com/page/detail/?k=9781845418984>

Virtual afterlife: dark tourism in the hereafter.

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2024

Virtual Afterlife: Dark Tourism in the Hereafter

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“...you are now travelling to the Virtual Afterlife...”

It is Sunday afternoon in the year 2040. Charlotte reaches for her virtual headset and waits to connect with her friend, Becca. Today they have chosen to connect virtually in a small café in the centre of New York, a special place they found sanctuary from the rain ten years previous. Since her friend passed away four years ago, they have made a habit of catching up regularly.

In this chapter, we adopt a futurology perspective to explore the Virtual Afterlife, connecting the living with virtual souls in a conversational AI environment. Foregrounded in the evolution of a ‘spiritual-quest culture’ (Eaton, 2015), big data and thanatological perspectives (Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Stone, 2012), we use three scenarios to conceptualise the opportunities (psychotherapeutically; spiritually; commemoration) and challenges (morally; commodification) of the Virtual Afterlife as a form of futuristic dark tourism.

Introduction

Charlotte sometimes grew anxious as she settled into the familiar surroundings of the art-deco café; a place in which she had spent increasingly more time in recent months. Lifting a glass and taking a small sip of whisky, she realised her worries would, yet again, be unfounded within moments of sitting across from her lifelong friend, Becca. In no time at all they would be talking, laughing, reminiscing. No doubt Becca would have already heard about Charlotte’s latest romantic misadventures and was already planning an hour of teasing at her expense. For her part, Charlotte was always desperate to hear Becca talk with passion and excitement about her own recent travels as a successful photojournalist. Her childhood dream come true. Despite the very different paths they had taken over the last four years, Charlotte knew that the deep connections which they shared could never be broken. Becca’s sudden and traumatic death four years previously hadn’t ended their friendship, so the pointless fear of stilted conversation was hardly likely to lead to a parting of ways.

It is Sunday afternoon in the year 2040 as we join Charlotte waiting for her friend Becca in a New York café. Just moments earlier, Charlotte had been somewhere else entirely, sitting with her Virtual Afterlife Counsellor (VAC) in a Unique Virtual Experience Suite (UVES). After fitting her virtual headset, haptic technology suit and settling down into a comfy seat with a whisky, she had pressed the button on the side of her headset and started her journey into the Virtual Afterlife.

This chapter follows Charlotte and her counsellor, Hagan, into a possible dark tourism future where living and virtual souls are connected in an immersive AI (Artificial Intelligence) environment called, the Virtual Afterlife. In this unique space, technology has provided users with the opportunity to

meet, converse and interact with individuals who are deceased. The Virtual Afterlife also presents opportunities for the living to choose to upload their digital footprint into a virtual space to enable others to connect with them when they are no longer alive. We propose that this future concept is grounded in the expansion of virtual and haptic technological developments, as well as a growing trend towards the use of big data and social media interactions which already leave behind a 'digital afterlife' (Basset, 2018). Furthermore, the growth in a 'spiritual-quest culture' (Eaton, 2015) and desire to understand and relate to death in contemporary society (Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Stone, 2012), suggest developments in the virtual and spiritual space may present opportunities and challenges for dark tourism in the future. It is through this lens that we examine three potential scenarios, from the perspective of Charlotte and Hagan, for dark tourism futures in the Virtual Afterlife.

Grief, therapy, and the Virtual Afterlife

Becca was giggling as she strolled confidently into the café and made her way to their usual table in the corner alcove. As she approached, Charlotte had a flashback of them both venturing into the same café for the first of many visits almost ten years ago. On that wet winter's day, it was intended as nothing more than a brief sanctuary from the New York elements. Several hours later, the girls stumbled into the night, having made a vow (witnessed by a bemused café owner) that they would return to the café on the same day every year as a celebration and renewal of their friendship. Nothing would ever get in the way of this vow.

In our proposed Virtual Afterlife, Charlotte's relationship with Becca continues despite her friends untimely and sudden death four years previously. Advancements in Virtual Reality (VR) enable the two friends to travel to locations around the world that were meaningful during their 'living' travels together. Unlike some of the low-budget dark tourism VR trends that started to emerge more than 30 years previously, such as *Chernobyl VR Project* and the controversial *08:46* (Hassapopoulou, 2018), the Virtual Afterlife Environment had been designed, at least initially, as a therapeutic space. Users are encouraged to travel to virtual places that evoke meaning and significance for them and their deceased counterpart. The integration of haptic technology, a skin-tight suit that simulated feelings – such as a hug – generated a more real, immersive experience. The Virtual Afterlife was also designed to offer a conversational AI experience and to, at least seem, like the deceased person continued to be conscious of real-world occurrences. Each 'soul' in the Virtual Afterlife is linked to a continuous stream of big data relating world news, events and, if selected, connected to the personal social media accounts of their living friends and family.

This concept, and the role of technology in posthumously preserving souls in a virtual hereafter, is not new – neither is it beyond the scope of recent commercial, creative, and technological developments. Television programmes such as the *Black Mirror* episode "Be Right Back" (2013) have played with the idea of recreating loved ones in simulated and 'real' AI environments. Basset (2018) acknowledges Facebook RIP sites already extend our souls into the digital realm and companies have started to shift into

the death-tech industry. Using data and online spaces to recreate ‘virtual souls’ who can be conversed with, memorialised, and remembered is not then a distant, dystopian future, but an emerging reality in the posthuman sphere.

In our scenario, the unexpected loss of her friend Becca had been traumatic for Charlotte. As her closest, long-term friend there had been so much left unsaid. The Virtual Afterlife had presented an opportunity for Charlotte to connect with her friend and relay these messages, as well as seek comfort in her familiar company. This experience surpasses her public memorialisation across various social media platforms that regularly attracts the sentiments of Becca’s wider social network (Brubacker, Hayes, and Dourish, 2013). Gibson (2007) suggests that a desire to record a loved one’s existence, or a need for public recognition are drivers for sharing feelings of grief with strangers online. However, from the earliest days of Becca’s passing, Charlotte had become ever more frustrated and angered by the way her friend’s death had been, to her mind, hijacked by mere acquaintances. She had resisted the pressure to “like” a lengthy Facebook post by Becca’s grieving father simply because she felt others were using it as an opportunity to share their own limited and superficial memories of her dear friend. As Walter (2015) identified, memorialising the dead online is subject to norms created by online mourners, and those who do not engage with such expectations leave themselves open to censure. For Charlotte, the unfortunate consequence of this was a growing, and public, conflict with Becca’s father who took it as a snub to both him and his dead daughter. Charlotte rejected what she considered a desire for public, self-interested displays of grieving. She wanted what she and Becca had in life – a private world belonging to them where nobody else could intrude. Charlotte was self-aware enough to know that she was struggling to deal with her loss. However, she firmly rejected the pleas of family and friends that she should seek counselling. Charlotte only had one wish – to talk to Becca. She had no desire or need to share her feelings with anyone else. The sudden end to Becca’s life had left much unsaid. The Virtual Afterlife offered the opportunity Charlotte was looking for; a virtual environment where she could process her feelings of grief in the private space she needed, to look her lost friend in the eye and say – and hear – what had to be said (Yuen, 2013).

Initially, it had been Charlotte’s intention to visit Becca once a year on the anniversary of the day they first visited the New York café. However, in the last couple of years Charlotte had found herself visiting much more frequently – often at least once a month. This raised concerns for her VAC Hagan, who had recently suggested Charlotte needed to ration her visits to the Virtual Afterlife. Charlotte pleaded with him that she was making progress through her visits with Becca and felt that limitations could potentially cause a setback to the emotional strides she was making. However, Charlotte herself felt a constant desire to visit Becca in the Virtual Afterlife and, when there, never wanted to leave. The addictive component of virtual environments has been recognised by scholars (Merkx & Nawijn, 2012). When considering *The Metaverse*, Bojic (2022) highlights the reality-mimicking features as a risk of the virtual realm becoming more appealing to the physical option. When in the Virtual Afterlife, Charlotte very quickly forgot she was in a created virtual environment, and that Becca was herself as virtual a construct as

her surroundings. On her visits to the Virtual Afterlife, Charlotte was very often in varying emotional states, depending on her general mood and on factors linked to her life in the physical realm. She took comfort in the ability of Becca – as she always had in life – to recognise her mood and respond appropriately in her bearing and conversation (Pelau et al 2021). As recognised by Muresan and Pohl (2019) building rapport over time could help the growth of empathy between the human and AI. However, while this helped with the grieving process it also raised concerns about the addictive potential of emotional relationships between living and virtual souls.

Death and commercial ‘souls’ in a virtual hereafter

As a qualified Virtual Afterlife Counsellor, Hagan often used his experience to guide the client through their immersive Virtual Afterlife in a way similar to grief counsellors in the physical realm. He vividly recalled the client from last year who had been struggling with the death of a loved one in a traffic accident. Although investigators were adamant that death had been instantaneous and involved no suffering, the client had been unable to accept this, leading to regular debilitating nightmares. Eventually an immersive virtual afterlife environment of the traffic accident had been created and, over several sessions, Hagan joined the client to witness it again and again. Understandably traumatic to begin with, as the sessions continued Hagan was able to listen to, probe and explain the feelings of the client and help him understand the underlying reasons for the nightmares and the reality of his loved one’s sudden, though painless, passing. On other occasions, Hagan had taken on the role of a passive bystander and simply observed how a client engaged with the immersive virtual afterlife environment then prepared a report of his findings after the event.

The Virtual Afterlife had originally been conceived as a therapeutic space to counter an increasing anxiety about death, such as the type Hagan’s client was experiencing. As scholars noted, Western society has become increasingly distant from death, removed from the everyday experience, and placed in medical facilities, religious institutions, and funeral homes (Ariel, 1981). Hidden from the public gaze, Stone (2012) observed that death was being denied, in favour of the preservation of life, forming an ‘absent-death’ paradox. While the idea of witnessing another’s death was controversial, when handled with care and sensitivity, Hagan had observed benefits as a Virtual Afterlife Counsellor. In many ways, this progression to witnessing death in the virtual world was a natural progression for ‘real world’ dark tourism that enabled visitors to learn about and confront their death-related anxieties (Stone and Sharpley, 2008).

Hagan had also noticed that his clients were drawn to the Virtual Afterlife as an alternative space for spiritual practice. Urbanisation, rapid modernisation, and rationalisation in the late nineteenth and much of the twentieth century had contributed to a movement away from spiritual and esoteric thinking towards more scientific, secular ways of approaching the world. Max Weber had earlier denoted this as a process of “disenchantment”, where superstition and religious customs would be replaced by scientific, rational thought (Weber, 1946: 7). However, despite assertions from scholars that spiritual thinking and

practice would diminish, the late ninetieth and mid-to-late twentieth century witnessed a profound re-emergence of alternative, non-secular beliefs, and contemporary hyper-real popular cultures (Possamai and Lee, 2011).

The early 2000s, spurred on by a rise in reality-television programs, led to an increase in forms of dark tourism that actively encouraged engagement with spirituality. Ghost walking tours, ghost hunting events and haunted attractions, invited visitors to not only learn about dark history and folklore, but to engage with various spiritual practices familiar to the late Victorian era (such as séances, Ouija Boards and mediumship) and “confront complex and potentially troubling questions about life and death” (Ironsides, 2018: 112). The commercialisation of ghosts in this manner was considered by some to be indicative of a growing “spiritual quest culture” (Eaton, 2015) in which a bric-a-brac style approach to spirituality through commercial and subcultural experiences was being pursued in favor of more traditional religious practice. Mediation between the living and the dead through psychic mediums, drug consumption and an increasing proliferation of technology designed to facilitate after-death communication, witnessed considerable public and academic attention at this time (Eaton, 2020; Santo & Hunter, 2021). The development of a Virtual Afterlife had provided a new outlet for such mediations to occur.

During his work as a Virtual Afterlife Counsellor, Hagan had treated a range of people. Most of his clients considered themselves to be non-religious, however, he had noticed a growing trend in the number of people using the Virtual Afterlife as part of non-secular spiritual practices. For some, the belief that the soul could live on, at least partly, in a virtual world had gained popularity. This had led to considerable debate in religious and non-religious communities about the ethics of a ‘digital afterlife’, how the dead may be classified and whether we were truly free to die (Savin-Baden, 2019). It had not been a surprise to Hagan that the Virtual Afterlife has also led to commercialised experiences with the virtual dead. Several organisations now offered the opportunity to interact with the virtual dead in a range of scenarios. Some of these were relatively innocent in nature, such as paying for time to speak to a dead celebrity, whereas others had raised considerable moral and ethical concerns about how virtual bodies in the Virtual Afterlife should be treated.

Despite the positive benefits of the Virtual Afterlife, Hagan also had growing concerns about some of the more unethical practices he was hearing about. Recently, he had discovered that backroom virtual experience creators had established themselves – and indeed won awards – in the pornography virtual experience sphere; exploiting rapid advancements in the area of haptic technology. To Hagan's mind came the recent court case involving a tech billionaire and the virtual afterlife experience he “enjoyed” with JFK and Marilyn Monroe. The court's decision was seen by many as less than satisfactory. As the billionaire had previously purchased all virtual image rights of Monroe, there was seen to be no legal barrier. However, the rights of JFK were owned by a large media conglomerate, and they ultimately sued for un-authorized use. To the delight of the virtual pornographer/virtual afterlife experience creator all the following societal debate and moralistic handwringing had simply led to a rapidly filled order book for high-quality, bespoke, though highly dubious, experiences.

Although the Virtual Afterlife had initially been created as a therapeutic space, the commercialisation of ‘virtual souls’ was rapidly changing the landscape into a popular dark tourism destination. The ethical and moral use of imagery and ownership of the deceased had been the focus of philosophical and theological debates for many years. In a virtual reality context, many traced this back to the Tupac at Coachella Music Festival hologram controversy of 2012 which continued to rage for many years with no real consensus evident. From a racial standpoint it was argued that the holographic representation used in this case served to continue stereotypical views of black threatening masculinity, while giving the dead Tupac no agency in how he was being portrayed or commemorated (McLeod, 2016).

Commemoration in the Virtual Afterlife

Hagan had first met Charlotte during a Virtual Afterlife Commemoration Event (VACE). Hosted annually, and funded by the city council, the event commemorated the loss of over 100 people four years earlier, the result of several active shooters in a busy shopping street in New York City Centre. Charlotte had lost her friend, Becca, that day. Hagan had been recruited as one of the Virtual Afterlife Counsellors to attend the event, his role was to be present, walk around the virtual crowd and to speak to attendees who he felt might require additional help and guidance. This was a free service, aimed at supporting those who had lost loved ones. Occasionally, Hagan would meet someone who required additional support, and Charlotte was one of those clients. It was one of the most rewarding aspects of his role and he now sat on the organising committee for several Virtual Afterlife Commemoration Events around the world.

As early as the mid-1990s online memorials started to appear, primarily in the form of text-based information (Carroll and Laundry, 2010; Roberts, 2004). As social networking sites and user-friendly web development services emerged, virtual memorials started to develop into more complex online spaces with images, videos, and opportunities for public interaction (Mitchell et al, 2012). In the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, virtual commemorations also started to appear including the 75th Anniversary Commemoration of the liberation of the Dachau Concentration Camp in 2020 and a Holocaust Memorial Day Virtual Commemoration in 2022. Both events, hosted a variety of recorded talks, image galleries and information online to support individual commemoration practice from home. The progression to immersive virtual commemoration experiences was, therefore, inevitable.

The Virtual Afterlife provides an opportunity for the development of commemorative spaces and events to support memorialisation. Often supported by local governments, but occasionally crowd-sourced by community groups, the events simulated ‘real’ memorialisation spaces enabling individuals to virtually travel from anywhere in the world. For grieving families and friends, this provided the opportunity to participate in events who may not have felt comfortable or have the financial ability to attend physically. As Williams and Merton (2009) and Hess (2007) observed, virtual memorials are ‘de-territorialized’ enabling the transcendence of grief from a physical space and time to fluid, anonymised places. Visitors to Virtual Afterlife Commemoration Events could choose how they interacted, with options to leave

messages and virtual memorial artefacts, the opportunity to talk with other attendees and a VAC if they wished, or just to simply 'be' in the recreated memorial space. Unlike physically attending a commemoration event the opportunity for quiet, anonymous mourning or collective grieving was optional.

For Hagan, these spaces were particularly beneficial for those experiencing loss and he was aware of several support groups and friendships that had developed between people all over the world. Challenges had, however, also emerged as like the earlier virtual memorials on social networking sites grief and bereavement shifted from private to public spaces in the online world (Mitchell et al, 2012). Some commemoration events had become tourism attractions evoking unwelcome behavior from 'visitors' including virtual selfie taking, harassment of mourners and a general misunderstanding of the sacred value virtual commemoration spaces had gained for those personally effected by loss. The selling and consumption of virtual and real souvenirs at VACEs had also gained popularity. These challenges echoed the concerns at real dark tourism sites (Hodalska, 2017), however, the opportunity for anonymity online had amplified behavior. Recently, the desecration of some online memorials with insensitive graffiti, objects and messages had caused significant upset amongst family and friends. In consideration of these challenges, the decision had been made to restrict access to memorial spaces on certain days and times to those connected to victims. This brought comfort to loved ones, creating a more solemn opportunity for mourning, reflection and coming together with shared memories and stories.

Hagan was suddenly aware that his mind had drifted away from his client as he contemplated preparing for the VACE in a couple of weeks' time. He turned his attention back to Charlotte. This current experience was her 18th since she first made contact two years ago. He was still analysing the data and notes from Charlotte's sessions: it seemed, at least on a surface level, that connecting with Becca in the Virtual Afterlife had provided comfort for Charlotte through the grieving process. However, he couldn't shake a growing anxiety about the future of the Virtual Afterlife. Seven years ago, he was one of the first to sign up for his data and image to be used posthumously – he was now contemplating the fate of his virtual soul in the VAE. Would it help or hinder his family to continue their relationship? Who would control his virtual existence? And how?

Contemplating a post-deathscape

In the final part of this chapter, we return to the present to consider the implications of a possible dark tourism future where a Virtual Afterlife exists. Scholars including Jacobsen (2016) and Stone (2018) conceptualise a 'partial re-reversal' of death in contemporary society. They argue that our approach has shifted away from the 'death-denying' attitudes of the twentieth century (as noted by Aries, 1981) towards a time where the death of the Other is consumed and mediated. The tourism, media and cultural industries play an integral role in the representation, selection, and reproduction of death as a spectacular consumption activity. Dark tourism has already started to embrace the opportunities presented by Virtual Reality, including the Holocaust Survivors exhibition at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education

Centre. An interactive experience that presents visitors with the opportunity to listen and interact with virtual holograms of survivors. Immersive gaming experiences also engage audiences in remote dark tourism environments (Hassapopoulou, 2018; Milligan, 2018). Technological advancements have, therefore, increased opportunities to not only passively witness and explore death through dark tourism but actively interact with the dead. Our fascination with post-mortem communication is certainly not new. It emerges in all aspects of society and culture, historically bound in religious and spiritual practices, as well as in more contemporary forms of commercial spiritual ‘questing’. A Virtual Afterlife, a place in which souls, tethered by their digital footprint to interact with those who travel between the domain of the living and the virtual dead, seems like a comprehensible future in a world where our ‘online immortality’ is already being questioned (Mitchell et al, 2012).

A Virtual Afterlife would challenge our contemporary understanding of dark tourism. Traditionally understood as travel to “sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre” (Stone 2006: 146), dark tourism is often place-bound, set upon a continuum of darkness dependent on its locational authenticity and chronological distance to death-events (Stone, 2018). Alternatively, dark tourism within a Virtual Afterlife would occupy a fluid, movable space, where visitors could select, even co-create, the environment and temporality of dark tourism places (and the people that inhabit them). A Virtual Afterlife may (re)present a *post-deathscape* in which the living and deceased co-occupy virtual worlds and bodies. In this space, it is the undead (rather than the dead) that become the main attraction.

As a wider society, such a shift in our relationship with death would invite wider moral, theological, and philosophical enquiry. For dark tourism, the possible (re)presentation of death in virtual worlds and interaction with ‘virtual souls’ raises important questions. While the survivor holograms of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Centre provide an interactive experience for visitors their responses emerge from a bank of pre-determined questions and answers. It is clear to the visitor that the experience is curated. However, in a dark tourism future where ‘virtual souls’ are AI responsive, this interaction will evolve and change with different people, world events and access to information. *How, then, are the dead authentically represented in a Virtual Afterlife?* Dark tourism, and the wider heritage industries, have been criticised for their selective curation and interpretation of historic events. Yet, a future where the power to interpret the past is transferred to an AI personality, who represents the dead, may pose more troubling consequences. As Stone (2018: 205) suggests “death remains a problem for the living because dead people do not care”. However, in a Virtual Afterlife, where the dead at least *seem* conscious, *what if they do?*

Furthermore, the commercialisation and packaging of death already presents dark tourism with a host of moral and ethical dilemmas (Potts, 2012; Stone, 2019). In a virtual world, where the anonymity of visitors is possible and potentially desirable, managing tourist behavior in dark tourism spaces will present new challenges. Likewise, the potential for the commercialisation of ‘virtual souls’ raises significant ethical concerns linked to the representation, use and commodification of our disembodied selves and data. If as Sharpley (2009: 8) states, dark tourism presents the opportunity to “...write or re-write the history of

people's lives and deaths", a Virtual Afterlife may present the opportunity to immortalise, re-imagine and co-create new, evolving versions of lives and deaths. In this *post-deathscape*, our freedom to die and how we choose to be remembered may be determined by the living, rather than the dead.

Charlotte always knew that Becca would be there for her – anytime she wanted or needed. The Virtual Afterlife provided a virtual anchor for their ever-lasting friendship. However, Charlotte acknowledged that any relationship required space to be fully enjoyed. She smiled at her friend across the table and looked forward to the continuation of their special annual reunions.

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