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RIP Vile Rat

Makeshift Memorials in *EVE Online*

Martin R. Gibbs, Marcus Carter, and Joji Mori

On September 11, 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 the father of two young children (Clinton 2012a). Two Embassy security personnel, Tyrone Wood and Glen Doherty, also died (Clinton 2012b).¹

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 Goonswarm Federation and its many incarnations.² He was regarded as the “chief diplomat” and negotiator for Goonswarm, most recently for the Clusterfuck Coalition, an informal null-sec coalition of alliances with more than twenty thousand members. He was a former elected member of the game's Council of Stellar Management (CSM) and was a moderator on Goonswarm's Internet “home,” the Something Awful forums (see chapter 8 for more on Goonswarm).

Public announcements from the U.S. State Department and eulogies by Hillary Clinton emphasized his public service, his family, and his long involvement in online virtual worlds:

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. (CBS Interactive, 2012)

News of the Benghazi attacks and of the death of American personnel was reported widely. In the mass media, many obituaries and reports on Sean Smith's death 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 (e.g., Associated Press 2012; Beckhusen 2012; Kaufman and Hauser 2012; Kushner 2013; Thier 2012). Obituaries also followed from the U.S. State Department

(Clinton 2012a); CCP Games (CCP Xhagen 2012); the CSM (Heard 2012); moderators on the Something Awful forums (Parsons 2012b); and the Mittani (2012a), leader of Goonswarm and former chairman of the *EVE Online* CSM. Commemorative and often heartfelt 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 fund-raiser site YouCaring.com and raised US\$25,000 within twelve hours, eventually collecting US\$127,001 from 2,634 supporters (Dicker 2012; Mittani, 2012b; Parsons 2012a; Totilo 2013). A Wikipedia page dedicated to Sean Smith as a notable person was quickly established (Wikipedia 2012), and within *EVE Online*, pilots appropriated various game resources to construct and perform a range of commemorative acts in his honor.

In this chapter, 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" (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011), commemorative practices that often follow deaths, tragedies, and disasters. Although the specific forms and materials used were idiosyncratic to the *EVE Online* universe, these commemorative acts drew on ritual forms and symbolic repertoires common to other forms of spontaneous and improvised memorializations. This suggests further possibilities for employing memorialization in game design. In the concluding section of this chapter, we reflect on the unique features of *EVE Online* that encourage a social world with such rich and meaningful community practices.

Vernacular Commemoration, Spontaneous Shrines, and Makeshift Memorials

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 (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011; Wouters 2002). Examples of ritual practices of these kinds include roadside memorials (Clark and Franzmann 2006); memory fences such as those found at sites of national tragedy, such as the Oklahoma bombing or the World Trade Center (Doss 2002); and the AIDS quilt (Hawkins 1993).

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, in the Anglophone world at least, mourning became an increasingly privatized and individualized practice, and traditional and formal rites that made

mourning a public and community affair waned (Wouters 2002). As mourning became less of a formal social obligation, or duty, and became more private, less ritualized, and more personal, opportunities for public expression and acknowledgment of personal grief also declined (Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti 1998). 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 (Wouters 2002) and that 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 (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011; Santino 2006). 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 (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011). 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" (Brennan 2008, 328–29). By the time of Princess Diana's death, and through the public response to it, these makeshift memorial practices had 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" (328). Both of these cases involved creating and signing condolence books; observing a minute of silence; communally occupying public space; and creating, and making pilgrimage to, temporary memorial sites to leave a ritual offering and witness what others had left (Brennan 2008).

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 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, most commonly, memorabilia and tributes will be left at the site of a

tragic event or disaster. Makeshift memorials typically occupy and appropriate public space and often appear and grow quickly without planning or institutional approval (Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti 1998).

Although often referred to as makeshift, these memorials are carefully constructed acts of bricolage. Items are carefully placed and arranged by visitors and are often positioned to create and maintain pleasing aesthetic arrangements, repeating patterns, layering, and framing of objects. Care is also taken with the selection of items, and the choice is often imbued with significance. The artifacts placed at makeshift memorials vary but tend to be drawn from a common repertoire (Grider 2001): flowers, balloons, candles, teddy bears and stuffed animals, photographs and drawings, handwritten notes and banners, and poetry and missives are common. Memorabilia and materials drawing on religious symbolism and paraphernalia, such as angels and crosses, are usual. 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 (Grider 2001), and handwritten poems and drawings depicting themes of rebirth were prevalent at sites commemorating the Black Saturday bushfires (Mori, Howard, and Gibbs 2012). Furthermore, makeshift memorials are often an expression of community and solidarity (Wouters 2002), social discontent, and protest (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011) as well as being public expressions of grief and condolence. Wouters (2002, 2) 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.”

These forms of mourning rituals have also been adapted and spread through the Internet and social media (Brubaker and Hayes 2011; Marwick and Ellison 2012; Walter et al. 2011; Gibbs et al. 2015). 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 (Wachowski 2008). Game developers have been known to place memorials within games (Gibbs et al. 2012), 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 World of Warcraft Funeral” (Gibbs, Carter, and Mori 2013; Hollingsworth 2006), which depicts a public virtual funeral under attack by other players. In the following section of this chapter, we describe and analyze how *EVE Online* players used various game mechanics and features to construct memorials for Vile Rat in the *EVE Online* game world.

RIP 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 11.1 shows a list of in-game items placed in a public space that have been named with missives to Vile Rat. Many featured a version of “RIP Vile Rat” or the leave-taking, conversation closer often used in the *EVE Online* community: “Fly safe VR.” Others made public protests concerning the wars and civic unrest in the Middle East and North Africa that had led to Sean Smith’s death. These costless and easily created cargo containers were deposited outside of the main station in VFK-IV, the principal home-based solar system of Vile Rat’s Goonswarm alliance. Similar collections of cargo containers were also dropped in Jita, the main trading hub in New Eden. In this frequently traversed area of the vast and empty universe of *EVE*, pilots appropriated this public and visible space of community significance to create a temporary and public memorial outside Vile Rat’s metaphorical home. Other pilots navigating through this community hub would see these items both as a cluster of objects floating in space and on the tablelike user interface depicted in Figure 11.1. Like many of the flowers and ephemera typically left at spontaneous shrines, which quickly weather and decay, these memorializations were also temporary: they disappeared in the daily reset of *EVE*’s servers.

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Figure 11.1. Commemorative cargo containers observed outside Goonswarm’s main station in VFK-IV, with missives such as “RIP Vile Rat.”

In a similar fashion, pilots appropriated the game mechanic of cynosaural beacons, or “cynos,” to create a kind of candlelight vigil for Vile Rat in the days following his death. A large number of pilots gathered in their spaceships in the system UMI-KK and deployed a great number of cynosaural beacons:

We gathered in UMI-KK with tons of cynoships as well as some titans and carriers to light space-candles in honor of Vile “Sean Smith” Rat who died serving his country in Libya on 9/11/2012. RIP Vile Rat, you will be missed. (EnderCapitalG 2012)

Cynos are in-game items that enable pilots, even entire fleets of pilots, to make quick interstellar jumps to specific locations as long as another pilot has “lit” a cynosaural beacon to guide them to its position (known as “bridging”). Tactically, this allows for the quick deployment of support in fleet battles or provides the survivors of a battle a quick route home. Consequently, the location and incidence of cynos is strategically useful information, and an in-game map exists that depicts the occurrence of cynos in each star system in the New Eden galaxy; the higher the occurrence of cynos, the brighter the star system appears. Figure 11.2 depicts the effect of lighting a huge number of cynosural fields on this map, something visible to any pilot in the game. In the comments on this image from Reddit, one pilot explained the aesthetic significance of this image: “The light shined over most of the galaxy as did Vile Rat’s influence ... sad day for EVE.” The technical properties of the item within the game also had meaning, according to one Goonswarm member: “Cynos really were the perfect choice—they symbolized our wish: that VR would bridge home and come back to us. A wish so strong it dwarfed the rest of the galaxy.”

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Figure 11.2. Cynosural field map, displaying the volume of cynos lit at a memorial for Vile Rat. From Powers (2012).

While large numbers of beacons were lit in this vigil, pilots also artfully deployed warp disruptors to spell out the words “RIP Vile Rat.” These objects appear in space as large, shimmering orbs, and owing to the technical process of deploying these beacons, arranging them to spell out “RIP Vile Rat” in open space would have been logistically difficult. Because of its size and location, this temporary 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 pilots, including being featured in commemorative YouTube videos with more than two hundred thousand total views. Close to a hundred pilots were captured in the video as they paid their respects in a virtual pilgrimage to this temporary monument. With a pilot populating each bubble, the YouTube video description explains that “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” (PinkyFeldman 2012).

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Figure 11.3. Candlelight vigil.

Pilots also engaged in a more lasting form of commemoration by renaming player-owned stations in a similar dedicatory fashion. The main Goonswarm station was renamed “VFK-IVile Rat Will Be Remembered” and remained so named until January 19, 2013. Numerous other stations were renamed, both by friends and enemies of Goonswarm. In total, 241 player-owned 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 “ZA0L-U VII-RIP Vile Rat,” still remained at the time of writing several years later, as continuing player-created dedications. Poignantly, several stations remained as a memorial despite having been conquered by other player groups in the months following Sean Smith’s death.

However, over time, these renamed stations slowly reverted to previous and other names. Although sometimes this was due to their capture by other player groups, we observed numerous instances when outposts were conquered but the missive to Vile Rat was left and several occasions when an outpost changed hands three, even four times without being affected. Those renamed were often done in blocks, for example, RAZOR Alliance (an in-game opponent of Goonswarm) changed the names of sixteen of its outposts to commemorate Vile Rat, returning all of them to their earlier names two months later. Many of the other name changes occurred at times of no discernable significance to Vile Rat’s passing; the names of outposts are often changed to reflect in-game events occurring around them, such as taunting invading players or referencing alliance members’ mistakes and achievements. As seen in Figure 11.4, there has been a gradual decline in commemorative station names over the course of the past two years.

The notable cliffs in Figure 11.4 reflect alliance leadership decisions or significant in-game events. Midway through January 2013, Goonswarm (Vile Rat’s own alliance) renamed the majority of its remaining stations for reasons of probity. The Mittani (2013), leader of the Goonswarm Federation, noted, “After a certain point I thought it was getting morbid, and had GSF’s swapped back to their old names.” The name changes had served their purpose, and for some, it was time to move on from that point. The notable declines in August and September 2013 were due to events surrounding the Fountain War (see Carter 2015; chapter 5). TEST Alliance Please Ignore, one of the largest holders of sovereignty in the game, which had been

allied with Goonswarm at the time of the Benghazi attacks, lost all of its sovereignty to Goonswarm and its allies. Despite its changed relationship, TEST had not renamed its memorial stations, and the majority of these commemorative outposts were only renamed when Goonswarm took control.

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Figure 11.4. Number of player-owned stations with commemorative Vile Rat names.

Also of note is the reversal of the decline on the anniversary of Vile Rat's death. Ten stations were again renamed to commemorate Vile Rat at this time. In line with the widespread adoption of vernacular forms of commemoration following highly publicized deaths, we have since seen many outposts renamed to honor other deceased *EVE* players, though not nearly at the scale of the Vile Rat commemorations. We feel that the twenty-two stations that remain dedicated to Vile Rat have some persisting significance; for example, one of the six remaining Goonswarm memorial outposts is in UMI-KK, one of Goonswarm's historical homes and the site of the cyno lighting vigil. Others reflect the sole remaining commemorative outposts from allied (and enemy) alliances.

Shoot Blues, Tell Vile Rat

Vile Rat was also highly regarded by many in the *EVE* community for his diplomatic skills. Many, like the prominent *EVE* personality the Mittani, credit his diplomacy skills and his artful and tenacious negotiations with other null-sec alliances with fundamentally shaping New Eden as it is known today:

If you play this stupid game, you may not realize it, but you play in a galaxy created in large part by Vile Rat's talent as a diplomat. No one focused as relentlessly on using diplomacy as a strategic tool as VR. (The Mittani 2012a)

An important role Vile Rat played as the head of the Goonswarm's Corps Diplomatique was smoothing over trouble with and between allied corporations and alliances. This role was captured in an *EVE* meme showing a simple decision tree often referred to as "Shoot Blues, Tell Vile Rat" (see Figure 11.5):

"Shoot Blues, Tell Vile Rat" is a phrase that has been a part of Goonswarm vernacular since time immemorial (2006), where a member of GSF would create a diplomatic incident (almost always on purpose), and then inform the head diplomat Vile Rat. (Mustache 2013)

In the *EVE Online* interface, the friend or foe status of other players is represented through color, moving through a spectrum from purple to red. Purple represents pilots in the same fleet, allied pilots and forces are represented with blue icons, and hostile pilots and forces are red. The simple meme captures the *EVE* null-sec ethos: if people are being assholes, blow them up—but if they are allies, talk to Vile Rat so he can sort out the resulting diplomatic issues.

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Figure 11.5. “Shoot Blues, Tell Vile Rat” decision tree meme.

On Saturday, September 15, a few days after Sean Smith’s death, Goonswarm held an event it called “Vile Rat Memorial Not Purple Shoot It Diplomatic Disaster Op” as an ironic commemoration and celebration of Vile Rat’s diplomatic contributions to Goonswarm’s alliance and to the game. The rules of the event were simple: “Bring whatever expensive stuff you can afford to loose [*sic*]. Rules are simple, form a fleet, whatever is not purple shoot. When your targets are all dead, just shoot everybody else!” All territory controlled by Goonswarm, and the territory of some of its allies who opted in to the event, was declared “Not Purple, Shoot It” (NPSI). That is, all pilots not in the same fleet were fair game to be attacked and destroyed throughout Goonswarm space. Furthermore, there would be no sanctions for any blue-on-blue destruction; pilots would not have to replace the spaceships they’d destroyed during the NPSI period. The event culminated in a “Thunderdome” in the UMI-KK system: a last-man-standing pitched battle that began with fleet-on-fleet combat and followed with an everyone-for-himself melee. At least twenty-four hundred ships were destroyed in the Thunderdome alone (EVSCO 2012), leading one participant to declare, “What commenced was surely the largest thunderdome (not to mention sheer waste of personal ISK) in all of *EVE* history” (millertime903 2012). The event was live-streamed by some participants, and the proceeds from views were donated to Sean Smith’s family (CCP Navigator 2012).

The NPSI event was repeated a year later, with plans to make it an annual event. For eight hours on September 14–15, 2013, the space controlled by Goonswarm, and some of its allies who opted in to the event, was again declared NPSI. The NPSI Op culminated in another “megafight” at the warp-in point of the first planet in the EC-P8R system. It was estimated that more than twenty-five hundred ships were destroyed in the event (Mustache 2013).

A semipermanent player-created memorial to Vile Rat was built by the player Vnixx near the first moon of the sixth planet in the VKF system, the Goonswarm home system, using mobile

small warp disruptors (MSWDs) to spell out the words “Never Forget Vile Rat.” A MSWD is “a small deployable self powered unit that prevents warping within its area of effect” (EVElopedia, n.d.) that can be anchored in space and persists until moved by the owner or destroyed. The warp disruption fields of MSWDs appear as shimmering bubbles in space (see Figure 11.6). Although we are unsure when this player-created memorial was constructed, we know that it was defaced on or around October 14, 2013. An unknown pilot destroyed the MSWDs in the word “Never” to leave the words “Forget Vile Rat.”³ Although outrage might have been the expected response to this kind of irreverent vandalism (as found in the case of similar harassment of commemorative rituals in games; see Gibbs et al. 2013), the general response from Goonswarm was unperturbed, amused, and even supportive of the defacement (Goonswarm member, personal communication, October 16, 2013). Comments on Reddit supported this view, with the top rated “the dude himself would have found it funny probably” (varoksa 2013) and reply “Not only would he have found it funny but after only a day or two would have asked ‘why haven’t any of you blown that up yet?’” (redworm 2013). In general, the view was one of support and that, given a suitable amount of time had passed, more than twelve months, such destruction was “in the spirit of eve” (Red_Oktoberfest 2013). Public outcry about the modification to the memorial was conspicuously absent, and the defacement was celebrated ironically as a further commemoration to the spirit and ethos Vile Rat brought to the *EVE* community.

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Figure 11.6. “Never Forget Vile Rat” tribute. From Mustache (2013).

A Permanent Memorial

In the hours following Sean Smith’s death, there were calls on the *EVE* forums for CCP Games to build some kind of permanent memorial in New Eden dedicated to Vile Rat. These calls echoed earlier requests for memorials to other individual *EVE* players who had died (e.g., Hrett 2012), requests that had previously been steadfastly refused by CCP. However, there were rumors that CCP was considering a monument, or graveyard, to collectively commemorate players who passed away. Proposals for both individual and collective, permanent monuments in New Eden were controversial, and remained so, among the player community.

Permanent monuments proposed by players included renaming a stellar system or star in honor of Vile Rat (ARMTEL 2012), such as renaming the Goonswarm staging system from

VKF-IV to VR-RIP. Other suggestions for an individual, permanent memorial were smaller in scale and more localized. For example, Rashmika Clavain (2012) proposed “an Officer fit Titan wreck on a low-sec gate.” Similar proposals for objects in space included permanent spaceship wrecks, structures, or containers with appropriate descriptions situated in significant or meaningful locations. Others proposed renaming an agent after Vile Rat (agents are nonplayer characters who give missions to pilots) and perhaps using his profile picture for the agent. Others proposed changing the “flavor text” (Gibbs et al. 2012) found in the “info tab” of an appropriate object, such as a spaceship or the Diplomacy Skill Book.

Proposals for a Vile Rat memorial restarted an ongoing conversation about a permanent memorial to collectively honor all the “fallen players” with an in-game monument of some kind. Ideas included a “graveyard” in or near one of the major trading hubs or the EVE gate. The EVE gate is a location with significant meaning in New Eden lore, as it was the location where humanity first arrived in New Eden, before being cut off from the rest of the galaxy. The EVE gate is the most tangible connection between the *EVE Online* universe and our own—the point where our universe was (or will be, chronologically) severed from the game universe:

I like the thought of memorializing anyone who played *EVE* by giving them a virtual resting place just on the far side of the *EVE* gate—as if, in death, a small part of them passed on, and made it into the *EVE* universe itself. (Bizzaro Stormy MurphDog 2012)

Proposals for the graveyard suggested a variety of objects ranging from a large monument with listed names to spaceships or wrecked spaceships (again) or an orderly grid of container–tombstone objects each bearing the name and/or portrait of a deceased player, somewhat reminiscent of military sites such as Arlington Cemetery. Others suggested using the many in-game billboards located near stargates to cycle occasional commemorative messages. In making and responding to these suggestions, it appeared important for many commentators that all deceased players should be equally honored rather than some, such as Vile Rat, being singled out for special treatment by CCP.

However, among forum commentators, there was little consensus on what form these proposed permanent monuments created by CCP should take and, indeed, if they were appropriate and/or desirable in *EVE*. Objections ranged from the character of *EVE* as a game that offers escapism from real life to concerns about *EVE*'s sandbox properties: “EVE is a sandbox, if people want to memorialize someone within the game it should be on the players to do it, not

CCP” (Paul Oliver 2012). Rather than CCP creating monuments, many players suggested that CCP should leverage *EVE*’s sandbox features and create the opportunity for players to purchase, construct, and/or maintain more permanent memorial objects. Again, these suggestions were somewhat contentious, with some players worried that, “*EVE* being *EVE*,” with all the ruthlessness that entails, players would find some way to exploit memorial objects for tactical and strategic advantages or for disingenuous or offensive means. Others were concerned, within the context of *EVE* as a sandbox, that any objects players could create could also be defaced and destroyed by other players.

Although CCP has constructed a number of in-game memorials to celebrate major game events, such as large and destructive battles (CCP Dolan 2014), riddle (Drain 2011) and tournament competition winners (Carter and Gibbs 2013), and pilot riots and protests (Drain 2011), no memorials to deceased subscribers have been built to date that we are aware of. However, in early 2014, CCP announced that it would construct a monument dedicated to *EVE* subscribers to celebrate the first decade of *EVE Online* (CCP Loktofeit, 2014). Although the original plan for this monument was rumored to be a commemoration of deceased players, it has since evolved into a celebration all players of *EVE Online*. The Worlds within Worlds monument was constructed near Reykjavik Harbor and has been etched with the main character names of all players with active subscriptions on March 1, 2014. However, CCP did acknowledge the contributions and importance of players who have died in *EVE Online*’s first decade and consequently allowed leaders of *EVE* corporations to submit names of players who had passed away, to ensure they were also commemorated on the monument.

Conclusion: Creative Appropriation of Game Resources in Commemorative Practices

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 (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2011; Wouters 2002). In much the same way, the makeshift memorials created by *EVE Online* pilots through the creative appropriations of game

mechanics that we have described in this chapter 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 *EVE Online* communities.

Margry and Sánchez-Carretero (2007) have suggested seven characteristics common to makeshift memorials and spontaneous shrines. Each of these characteristics was evident in the Vile Rat commemorations:

1. *They involve bricolage.* Cargo containers, warp bubbles, cynosural beacons, and station names were the materials of choice appropriated for the commemorations.
2. *They are offerings both for the deceased and also for a wider audience.* Indeed, some comments were directed to Vile Rat, particularly those wishing him to “rest in peace” or “fly safe,” but comments were also directed toward a broader audience, articulating his legacy for the *EVE* community. In addition, the NPSI events were a form of sacrifice, offering spaceships to Vile Rat’s memory and creating events that could be consumed by a broader *EVE* audience through video streaming and humorous post hoc accounts of the events.
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. The NPSI events drew on established narratives about Vile Rat’s place within New Eden’s history.
4. *Memorials can reclaim a public space.* Many objects, such as cargo containers, were renamed and deposited in Goonswarm’s home system as well as in Jita, the most important trading hub in New Eden, claiming these spaces (albeit temporarily) as memorial sites. Similarly, the NPSI events laid temporary claim to vast swaths of space for commemorative activity.
5. *Memorials are unofficial and noninstitutionalized.* The game community (not the game developers) initiated and sustained the commemorative activities for Vile Rat. Interestingly,

calls by pilots for CCP to permanently rename a star system or erect some kind of monument in Vile Rat's honor have not been fulfilled. This approach differs from other game developers' approaches to placing permanent memorials in game worlds, such as in *Dungeon and Dragons Online* and *World of Warcraft* (Gibbs et al. 2012).

6. *Sites are created in personal ways but also follow patterns learned 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 RIP missives.
7. *Finally, 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 makeshift virtual memorials for Vile Rat in *EVE* closely replicate commonplace real 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 ability of pilots to shape and influence the game universe, the persistent transmedia identity of *EVE* pilots, and player-driven governance. Having a persistent and single virtual world enabled the entire pilot community to participate in public commemorations that were, like many acts of public mourning, meaningful assertions of membership in the prominent and symbolic community of *EVE* pilots, a community enabled and enhanced by the presence of the player-elected councils and persistent identity systems. This further emphasizes the importance of *EVE*'s single-server configuration, explored in several chapters in this collection, in making *EVE* such a meaningful and real community.

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 massively multiplayer online games 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. The sandbox character, or unstructured and open-ended game play (see chapter 1), of *EVE Online* also lends itself to memorialization far better than the more structured and directed play of “theme park” games such as *World of Warcraft*. As one pilot noted in response to pilot requests for CCP to create a permanent and official Vile Rat memorial, “in the Sandbox that is EVE, we can make our own memorials” (Zagdul 2012). The flexibility afforded by pilot-named items and the availability of player-created objects that persist publicly for periods of time in the game world enabled and facilitated spontaneous commemoration for Vile Rat.

“*EVE* is real” is a common *EVE* colloquialism, originally coined in an *EVE* advertisement but perpetuated by players as a catch-all phrase that captures both the real and meaningful impacts that *EVE Online* has on its players’ lives, while also being used to (often simultaneously) poke fun at the seriousness that sometimes invades *EVE* play. As the other chapters in this collection indicate, *EVE is* real in that it is significant to its players, and the vernacular commemorative practices highlighted in this chapter further demonstrate the prominent and *real* culture that this virtual world has created and will continue to perpetuate, likely for many years to come. It will remain a question for CCP as curators, or janitors (see chapter 14), of New Eden to decide how deaths should be commemorated, memorialized, or noted within the virtual world of *EVE Online*. As Nick Webber suggests elsewhere in this volume (chapter 15), distinguishing between real and virtual in the case of *EVE Online* is meaningless and only causes conflict between CCP and its players when this finely granulated distinction with its many-layered allusions and contradictions is treated dichotomously and, as a result, is not successfully negotiated. Commemorative activities for Sean Smith, aka Vile Rat, were not limited to the *EVE Online* game world but blurred across a range of other media. Indeed, the rhetoric of the media and institutional responses to Sean Smith’s involvement in the Something Awful and *EVE Online* communities further serves to legitimate involvement in *EVE Online* as a serious and *real* pastime.

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Notes

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 - 2 All Goonswarm Federation corporations, alliances, and their close associates are referred to as Goonswarm throughout the chapter.
 - 3 <http://imgur.com/a/4o61y>.