

“Hit ’em where it hurts the most” – exploring the humor of an attack on a gaming funeral

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[World of Warcraft YouTube attack humor theories incongruity theory memorial pvp](#)

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Gaming environments are often adapted by gamers to host real-time memorial events for fellow gamers who have died offline. Honoring the memory of a peer takes rather complex forms, since there are several expectations of authenticity, respect and – especially in this case – a good sense of humor.

The memorial event I will analyse in this review took place in 2006 in World of Warcraft, the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). A gamer passed away and her peers wanted to arrange a memorial in the gaming world in order to pay their respects in the environment and context in which they had known her. They announced the event on a related gaming forum and specifically requested other gamers to leave the event at peace, since the area was heavily battle oriented and gamers often attacked others there as part of the gaming dynamics (PvP = Player versus Player). Despite the request, a rival group of players decided to attack the memorial event. The entire attack was recorded and later distributed on video sharing platforms such as YouTube.

Currently there are several versions of the video on YouTube, but the most viewed one is an edited version named “Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral”. It has received over 6 million views since 2006 and continues to receive comments and raise debate at the time of writing in 2016. The comments left by viewers of the video include various opinions for and against the attackers, from amusement to anger and conspiracy theories suggesting that the attack was orchestrated by both parties (the guests and the attackers). In this review I will explore the humor of attacking an online memorial event and propose suggestions for analysis with two humor theories: incongruity and superiority theory.

Death, mourning and memorialisations have taken their permanent place in online environments. People use these spaces for expressing grief and respect, reaching out to each other for solace and peer support. (Gotved 2014; Haverinen 2014; 2015.) Different types of memorials and real-time memorial events are also documented and shared in various channels, but as already mentioned above, these expressions of loss and bereavement divide opinions. Some believe online mourning to be inauthentic, and a person expressing such an intimate emotion publicly makes themselves a public target of ridicule instead of empathy. Contexts vary immensely, and so do interpretations of appropriate expressions of grief.

In this review I will explore this ridicule of grief in an online gaming context by proposing suggestions for analysis with humor theories. Gaming environments are often adapted for real-time memorial events for gamers who have died offline. Honoring the memory of a fellow gamer can, however, take rather complex forms, since there are several expectations of authenticity, respect and – especially in this case – a good sense of humor (see eg. Phillips 2015). The research material is based on a specific memorial event, which took place in 2006 in a massively multiplayer online role-playing game named *World of Warcraft* (abbreviated as *WoW*). The group holding the memorial service publicly announced the event beforehand in a *WoW* discussion forum and asked for the event to be respected by other players, since the gaming area was notorious of its player versus player policy, which is based on gamers battling each other. Instead, a rival group decided to attack the memorial service. The attack was recorded and several copies have been shared on video sharing platforms such as YouTube ever since. The most viewed version is named “Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral” and it has received over 6 million views since 2006. It continues to receive comments today (6,379,906 views, 31,659 comments. Many of the comments appear to be deleted, since 8th of August in 2013 I documented 46,350 comments). The commentary includes various opinions for and against the attackers, from amusement to anger, from angry debate to ambivalent opinions about death, dying, bereavement, gaming ethics, moral and humor (Gibbs et al. 2013).



Video 1. Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHJVolaC8pw>.

As *WoW* encourages (as well is often based on) social interaction with other gamers, death of a peer can feel awful. Memorial events are often organised in the world to both pay respects as well as mourn the loss together with the people sharing the same sense of loss. The culture of the game (and the role-playing lore) often dictate the nature of the memorial event. (Haverinen 2014.) However, sometimes the gaming culture can develop the memorial to an entirely different direction, as in the case focused on in this review.

I will explore both the content of the video and the comment section deploying humor theories presented inter alia by psychologist Julia Wilkins (2009), which can provide some leverage in understanding why the video continues to raise debate almost ten years later in 2015. Thus my main question is: why the memorial attack is perceived as funny by some and awful by others? In order to understand the culture of *WoW*, I will first briefly introduce the context of the game, the attack and the humor theories used in this analysis, and walk the reader through the video. Finally, I will introduce some examples, which indicate why people think the attack was funny, and I will suggest how this type of research material could be explored further.

What is *WoW* and what are humor theories?

World of Warcraft was created by Blizzard Entertainment in 2004 and especially in 2006 it had a wide global user base of thousands of gamers. It is based on real-time gaming, where the players use different avatars such as orcs, dwarves and elves to roam around a continent called Azeroth.

Player can choose from two rival factions, Alliance or Horde, which also determines which races are available to choose as an avatar. According to the game lore, Alliance and Horde are in an endless war against each other. Gamers can also choose between two realms, player versus player (PvP) or player versus environment (PvE), which determine the nature of the game play. In PvP the gamers can attack each other whenever they want and the battle between Alliance and Horde determines who is your enemy. In player versus environment the gamers fight against the game's artificial intelligence instead of other gamers. ([World of Warcraft](#) 2015.)

There are several terms that describe unwanted behavior in gaming environments. Many of them date back to the 1990s and are based on specific games. Two terms, trolling and ganking, are introduced in this article since they are often mentioned in the comment section of the memorial attack video. Griefing is also often introduced as a term that refers to obstructing the game's objectives, such as intentionally killing own team-mates. Griefters scam, cheat and abuse, often victimising the weakest and newest players, who have no skills or ability to protect themselves against the attack. In some gaming environments griefing has "evolved from being an isolated nuisance to a social disease" ([Davies](#) 2006).

A troll is a personality type who enjoys harassing others by trying to upset and annoy people in various ways, such as by interfering with others' gameplay. They also often spread lies and rumors to see if people believe them. A troll's main intention is to provoke the other participants into an emotional response (usually anger) for their own amusement, or in other words "for the lulz". ([Phillips](#) 2015). Ganking, on the other hand, is the process in which a group of characters attack one or more players that do not have a chance to defend themselves for some reason. Ganking is also when a high level player attacks another with a lower level, because a lower-level player has no ability to defend themselves. ([Achterbosch et al.](#) 2013.)

These two behaviors are fairly similar, although they are derived from different origins. What they have in common is the verbal or physical attack on one gamer or a group of gamers, who are not able to defend themselves due to gaming logics (such as when a higher level attacks a lower level) or website management (such as when it is impossible to ban or prohibit a user from attacking the website or other individual users). What the above mentioned categories also have in common is humor. When asking the motives of trolls, trolling researcher Whitney Phillips (2015) almost always received the same answer, "it's for the lulz", which means that trolls do what they do because they find it funny.

In this review the case example of the *WoW* memorial attack is mostly perceived as ganking, since ganking is more frequently mentioned in the video comment section. However, it has elements of trolling as well (especially when commenters are trying to troll other commenters), and I will deploy the expression “for the lulz” to describe the motives of the attackers.

This practice of “lulz”, doing something inappropriate for your own amusement, can be analysed using incongruity or superiority theories (Wilkins 2009; see also Vandaele 2002). According to incongruity theory, humor is experienced at the moment of realisation of incongruity between two opposing concepts and a surprise element when they collide. In this case, when the viewers realise that a solemn memorial event is being attacked and the mourners are defenseless, there is incongruity between the vicious killing, the purpose of the event and the happy upbeat music playing in the background. Superiority theory explains humor through *schadenfreude*, laughing at the misfortunes of others, because these misfortunes assert the viewer’s superiority in contrast to the shortcomings of others. In this case the viewers experience *schadenfreude* (malicious pleasure) when they realise the mourners are defenseless. This is intensified because viewers might think that the mourners’ behavior – creating a memorial event in a gaming world – is itself distasteful. The mourners have demonstrated their shortcomings by creating an inappropriate event, and their destruction further demonstrates their inferiority.

The video

“You fucking trash, you are not good enough to lick the dog shit from the beggers boots you fucking degenerate sorry excuse for mentaly retarded humans.”[\[1\]](#)

“I hope azshira’s dad dies of a heart attack, then at funeral some guy runs in naked and pushes the coffin over and runs around slapping people screaming LOL OWNED, then releases a video of it.”

The video titled “Serenity Now bombs a World of Warcraft funeral” is 7 minutes and 42 seconds long and re-edited from the original attack footage. There are several versions of the attack in various YouTube channels, but the specific version analysed in this review is the most popular and it is also shown first in Google search results, when a search is conducted using the key words “*WoW* memorial”.

The video begins with captions (see above) from a *WoW* discussion forum where people discussed in a heated tone how inappropriate the attack was. The music playing in the background is

“Yesterday” by *The Beatles*, and the lyrics “yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away” provide an ironic contrast for the upcoming video. Then the original post about the passing away of the gamer is also quoted, stating the time and place of the intended memorial. The people responsible of the memorial promise that they are “planning some cool stuff” and state that they would “appreciate it if nobody comes to mess things up”.

After that the music changes to *The Misfits*’s punk rock song “Where Eagles Dare”, while the video shows members of the Serenity Now group on their way to the memorial event. The song’s lyrics, “I ain’t no goddamn son of a bitch”, seem to respond to the heated forum posts shown earlier. The music then changes to Mozart’s Requiem, while the video shows images of the memorial event. People are lining up on a snowy field to pay their respects by a lake. The view point and music keep changing back and forth between the attackers and the mourners for some time in order to build up the tension.

Later the attack begins and the soundtrack changes to upbeat pop song from early 1990s “Scatman” by Scatman John, a track which the final texts of the video identify as the theme song of Serenity Now. The attack proceeds and when all the gamers from the memorial party are killed, one of the members of Serenity Now goes to stand by the lake and quotes the forum post: “she loved fishing”. Then the image changes to a text on a black background, “Sorry for your loss”, and continues with an image of the same character by the lake adding two more things that the deceased supposedly liked: “and snow, and pvp”. A final text admits “Yes, we know we are assholes”, with a laughing smiley face (:D). Credits scroll up the screen, thanking various people for helping with the video, providing a list of music used, and finally showing the banner image of the Serenity-Now.org website.

Why is a memorial attack funny?

As already stated, the video continues to receive heated discussion about the incident almost ten years later. The majority of the commenters seem to appreciate the humor of the video, but for various reasons. According to the incongruity theory, the reason for laughter is that the viewer perceives incongruity between a concept involved in a certain situation, in this case a memorial event, and the real objects thought to be in some relation to the concept of memorialisation, in this case the attack at the memorial. The attack is perceived as an inappropriate response to a solemn memorial event intended to honor the memory of the deceased. The comments below fit this theory

by identifying the humor in the inappropriateness of the attack (comment 1), as well as the inappropriateness of having a funeral in a game world context (comment 2):

Comment 1: “its funny in a fucked up kinda way”

Comment 2: “This is hilarious. Really a funeral in a fucking game?”

The comments below show that some viewers feel guilty for laughing at the video (comment 3), because the attack is thought to be “tasteless” and “awful”. The final comment plays with the two words “laughter” and “slaughter” (comment 4) and is intended to be funny and tasteless as well, since the memorial party could not protect themselves against the attackers and were indeed slaughtered:

Comment 3: “Am I the only one who feels guilty for laughing a bit at this? dunno, maybe it was the music but i cracked up a bit despite the fact that what they did was awful. i ’m expecting my express ticket o hell arrive in the mail shortly... ”

Comment 4: “There is no slaughter without laughter”

A lot of viewers also claim they return to watch the video again (or stumble upon it) from time to time and that it continues to amuse them even years later (comments 5–7):

Comment 5: “I haven’t seen the video in years i forgot how dark, tasteless....and fucking hilarious his video is :D sincerely good job guys that was awesome.”

Comment 6: “watched this for the first time like 3 years ago, still the BEST VIDEO EVER.”

Comment 7: “Still fun watching all these years later. I never understood how anyone could take the idea of an in-game funeral seriously. Sitting your avatar near a bunch of other avatars doesn’t really have any impact. If you want to celebrate an ex-person in-game, I think there’d be better, more imaginative, more meaningful ways to do it.”

However, the superiority theory can explain why so many of the viewers seem to react with schadenfreude to the misfortune of being in the memorial party and being slaughtered. Many viewers claimed that the memorial party actually deserved the attack, since they had publicly

announced the event and organised it in an area intended for PvP. In other words, they were “asking for it” (comments 8–9):

Comment 8: “Hit em where it hurts the most.”

Comment 9: “i remember my cousin was one of the victims...lol he screamed at his monitor for like 5 full minutes man i was rofling so hard”

Comment 10: “dude lol they held it in contested territory what did they expect to happen”

Some viewers (comment 10) seemed to believe that the gaming context was inappropriate for a memorial event, especially since that specific area was battle oriented.

Why it isn't funny?

Some commenters of the video claim that a memorial event or a funeral in the gaming world should be respected just as much as it would be in the offline world, because of the sense of loss and bereavement some gamers may feel after the loss of a peer. The incongruity of attacking a memorial event provoked laughter and amusement for some, but not for all, as the comments below state (sometimes quite graphically, comments 11 and 12):

Comment 11: “WTF? They attacked a funeral? Who does that?”

Comment 12: “The people who did this have no respect and deserved to get their throats slit i dont see this as funny or silly, The people felt like this person was close to them and wanted to show how much they cared that doesnt me people have to be fucking rude about it. It may be silly to some but some people were probably crying about this person crying the fact that you cant be adult about somthing like this just leave me speechless”

Since the video itself is an edited version of the footage recorded during the attack, it also a narrated version of what happened, how and by whom. The background music creates the ambience for each party, and the camera alternates between the memorial and the approaching attackers. This creates a sense of anticipation in the viewers, since they know more than the memorial party. *The Misfits'* song clashes with Mozart's Requiem, since the first has an aggressive punk tone and the latter

features a choir singing music closely associated with the setting of a church. When the attack begins, the background music changes to Scatman John, with its upbeat electronic melody and nonsense syllables. This particular choice of music was amusing for some (comment 13):

Comment 13: “Bombing a funeral o the musical stylings of Scatman John. It’s a special kind of beautiful that only super dickery can achieve.”

However, some commenters claim that the attack was actually created in honor of the deceased girl, because of her love for PvP. PvP is based on combat, and the gaming logic and storyline is built around that fact (comment 14):

Comment 14: “The alliance did it to pay their respects. Because the dead girl was a huge PVP fanatic. And the guy who organized BOTH GROUPS thought it would be the best way to toast her memory.”

Comment 15 claims that the attack was prearranged and there was nothing wrong with it. At the end of the video, one of the attackers does indeed say “she loved pvp”. However, the video also admits “yes, we know we are assholes”, and this apology contradicts the conspiracy theory.

Comment 15: “The thing is, I think the deceased would have found what happened to be funny and cool. I love pvp , and anyone who really does too, would appreciate all this. This was cool. If it was my funeral and I sat over it all watching and I see the guys turned up and raided, I would be rolling in laughter and amusement. Not laughing at anyone tho, but at the whole situation.”

This comment explains that the player versus player culture is based on combat, so attacking a memorial event should be considered as true to the culture and in that sense an honorable way to remember a peer – as well as funny and hilarious.

Lulz – the reason for anything

Massively multiplayer online role-player games are great fun, but because of the ”massively multiplayer” aspect they also raise questions concerning morality and humor. In gaming cultures, players are bleeding offline practices (such as expectations of memorial etiquette) into online environments or using game tactics against other players for their own amusement. The video of the memorial attack by Serenity Now keeps raising interest and provoking different reactions almost

ten years later, and this debate can provide great insights into the development of online gaming, game ethics and gaming cultures.

The incongruity and superiority theories are possible ways to analyse the commentary and reactions towards the YouTube video. Many viewers respond in their comments to the perceived contradictions between a memorial and an attack, or between a memorial event and a gaming environment, or to the perceived inferiority of the attackers or the mourners. However, the content analysis I have provided in this article is based on only browsing some of the comments. A quantitative analysis would provide more thorough knowledge. One option would be to use SentiWordNet, a lexical resource for opinion mining. In addition, there are blog posts and other Web material discussing the event outside of the YouTube context, which could also provide additional insights into the cultures of gaming and online mourning. Incongruity and superiority theories can be useful, but there are other ways to explore the humor (or the lulz) of the attack, such as using ganking analysis (Achterbosch et al. 2013; Goguen 2009), disaster humor (Davis 2003; Oring 1987) or framing memorial trolling as a kind of cultural critique (Phillips 2011).

The highest-ranked definition of “lulz” in the Urban Dictionary (posted in 2007) explains the logic behind it as follows: “Lulz is the one good reason to do anything, from trolling to rape. After every action taken, you must make the epilogic dubious disclaimer: ‘I did it for the lulz’.” However, by breaking and stretching the social and cultural boundaries in gaming cultures trolls and gankers are also revealing the meanings users construct around these technologies and environments. By analysing the reactions to the video and the attack, it is also possible to reveal what kinds of values are placed upon online gaming and relationships built and maintained online.

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All links verified 18.2.2016.

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Notes

[i] The comments are quoted exactly as written, without spelling corrections.