



REMEMBERING THE DEAD

John F. Barber and Greg Philbrook

We Have Failed To Stop the Killings

Marcus G. Stokes . . . Lakeitha M. Stokes . . . Tera R. Agee . . . Teresa R. Thomas . . . Demetrius R. Thomas . . . At the time of this writing, these are the latest mass shooting victims in America. Their names, and hundreds more, are displayed individually on a computer screen, along with age, place, and date of death.

The display of victims' names is an act of remembrance, intended to highlight the loss of human life by gunfire and promote the will to seek solutions to

this and other forms of violence. Through its use of technology, *Remembering the Dead* replaces direct interaction, typical of traditional interactive storytelling, with internal, personal remembrance, and reflection, seeking to engage audiences in emotional stories of failed social and civic justice.

This discomfort, this disjunction, this departure is intentional, to make clear that people continue to be shot, and killed, by other people with guns. *Remembering the Dead* is visceral, a denial of ignorance, a reminder that, as a nation, we have failed to stop the killings.

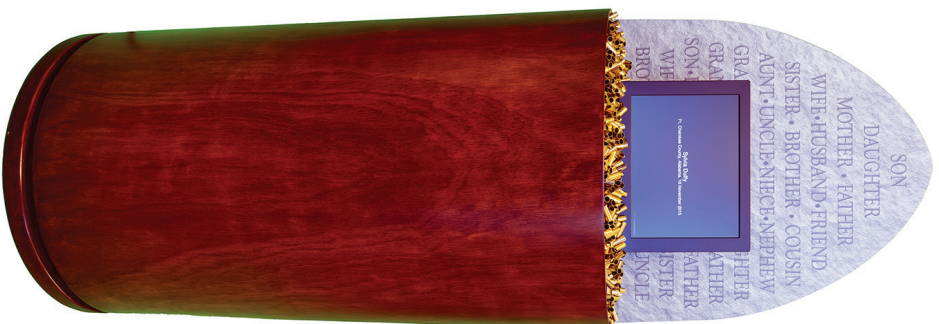


FIGURE 1. Remembering the Dead is a digital storytelling installation, a memorial to victims of mass shootings across America, 1880s to present.

Prevalence of Gun-based Violence

Gun Violence Archive (GVA), an independent data collection and research group, reports 15,208 gun-related deaths for 2019, excluding suicides. This number is slightly less than the air miles one would travel from Salt Lake City, Utah, to Paris, France, then on to Hong Kong, and finally, to Honolulu, Hawaii. All types of gun violence are included in this total: murder, homicide, accidental shootings, domestic violence, home invasions, drive by shootings, and mass shootings (Gun Violence Archive).

GVA defines mass shootings as incidents where four or more people are shot or killed at the same general time and location, not including the shooter. This numerical value is the only criteria for categorizing mass shootings. No subcategories, other definitions, or circumstances are used to alter the count. In this way, all those injured and/or killed in mass shooting incidents are considered.¹

GVA reports 417 mass shooting incidents across America in 2019, more than the calendar days of the year (Gun Violence Archive). These mass shooting deaths are approximately 2.75 percent of the total gun related deaths for 2019. Despite this small percentage, the horror of mass shootings is not trivial. People as targets, shot and killed in private residences, places of business, entertainment venues, learning centers, and places of worship shatter belief that we can gather as a community

or as private citizens and conduct our lives without fear. One outcome is the unfortunate reality of children growing up while practicing active shooter drills in school.

Despite the horror, mass shootings seemingly register just above disinterest in the national consciousness. Media reports quickly shift from victims to the motivation, mental state, or ideology of the perpetrator(s). Attempts at gun safety, even research of gun violence, are quickly sidelined by powerful lobbies and their cadre of purchased politicians. Like our societal failures in addressing mental health, The United States has some of the weakest gun laws among developed nations

Call To Action

Remembering the Dead seeks to deny ignorance of mass shootings. The collaborators of this project, John Barber and Greg Philbrook, admit their own guilt in ignoring mass shootings. They were distant, removed from their lives. Something that happened to other people. People they did not know, with whom they did not share stories.

But, on 1 October 2015, ten people were shot and killed at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon. Barber and Philbrook teach at a university in Washington state, close enough that the local news media sent reporters to the scene.

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around the world. So, perhaps we have grown calloused. Perhaps we just don't care. Or, perhaps we do care, but mass shootings are too chilling a reminder that life, and its many aspirations and activities, can end quickly, brutally. Perhaps the deaths of victims seem, somehow, surreal, distant, and impersonal. Perhaps it is better to keep our heads down, eyes averted, trusting others to keep us safe. For whatever reason, though desire and practicality, it is easy to ignore mass shootings, and the stories associated with those killed.

Certainly it was close enough to make the collaborators think, "What if this happened on our campus and the people killed were people we knew, with whom our lives intersected?"

Following the mass shooting at Umpqua Community College, Barber and Philbrook felt compelled to respond, to recall those individuals killed, their life stories abruptly halted by bullets. They created *Remembering the Dead* as a physical, virtual, and conceptual memorial to lives and stories lost to gun violence.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for *Remembering the Dead* is inspired by Ray Bradbury, George Bush, Jr., Jacques Derrida, and two kinds of death, physical and memory.

In his novel *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury describes a dystopian future where books are outlawed and burned. People memorize and recite entire books so that their ideas will not be lost.

A similar commitment was suggested in response to the ban by President George W. Bush's administration and the U.S. Department of Defense against photographing coffins of those killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Iraq War, 2003-2010, in which more than 4,000 U.S. troops were killed. The ban on photographs of coffins was overturned in December 2009. An online movement encouraged citizens to memorize the names of three individuals killed in Iraq and use them whenever possible. Those killed would not be forgotten. Jacob H. Alcott...Alessandro Carbonaro...David J. Grames Sanchez.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida suggests there is perhaps no more fundamental self-affectation than for one to speak his or her name, even through recordings. Through recordings, past events and people dead or radically absent are no longer spectral voices. They come to life, to presence, to the present, and affect those who will listen. "Recording is reproduction as *re-production* [emphasis in original], of life itself... [When someone speaks he affects himself. I am...touched, presently, by the recorded speech of someone who is dead. I can, here and now, be affected

by a voice from beyond the grave.... A miracle of technology" (Derrida 2001, 70-72). In absence of recordings, survivors can speak the names of the dead, re-producing connection and remembrance.

Remembering the Dead also draws from two concepts of death, physical and memory. With physical death the body ceases to function. The person is no longer among the living. With memory death, when survivors no longer remember the deceased, that person no longer exists. Respite from memory death is sought through community service, creative works, and family descendants, something to evoke the name of the dead among the living. Through such endeavors, the deceased goes forward in time. As long as we remember the names of the dead, we remember the stories attached to their life endeavors.

Memorial Manifested

Memorials can help us remember. Memorials, whether to victims of wars, natural disasters, accidents, or natural causes, have long been utilized to create conceptual and social spaces in which the living can recall and reflect upon the dead. Such memorials most often manifest as physical objects, located at significant sites. But, physical memorials must be visited in person. They may be difficult to update, may lack from regular maintenance, may present access challenges, and may be removed.

Figure 3 (pages 63-64) *Remembering the Dead* prompts outcry against what is lost to mass shootings in America: stories of humanity, lives, achievements, dreams, and aspirations

Remembering the Dead seeks to skirt these issues by manifesting virtually, physically, and conceptually. At its heart, *Remembering the Dead* is a dedicated online program and database maintained by Barber and Philbrook. The database is updated with each mass shooting.

Virtually

As a virtual memorial, Remembering the Dead is a website available to anyone, anywhere with Internet access and display technology. Once evoked, this website displays names of gun violence victims. Each name is displayed individually, along with age, place and date of death. The most recent victims are displayed first, followed, randomly, by others from the work's database. As the name of each victim is displayed that name is spoken using text to speech technology. After its display, each name is added to a memorial list in the screen's background. This process continues, eternally. With each name displayed, the memorial list grows longer. With each name spoken, the loss of human life becomes more tangible.

Physically

As a physical, multimedia memorial, *Remembering the Dead* manifests as a computer screen atop a bespoke wooden cabinet, representative of both a bullet and a tombstone. A bed of empty bullet casings, hundreds of them, mostly 9mm, a common caliber used in gun violence, surrounds the screen. Inside the cabinet is a computer and sound system. As each name is displayed, it is spoken using text to speech technology.

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Figure 2. Names of mass shooting victims are spoken before being added to the ever-growing memorial list in the screen's background.

Conceptually

Conceptually, *Remembering the Dead* manifests as an act of recall and remembrance of those killed by gun violence, their presence experienced by viewers of the work who, in seeing and hear-

ing victims' names, are connected to the victims and their muted stories of ambition, aspiration, achievement, and accomplishment. This connection provides a liminal portal fostering emotional connection and affection.

Connection with Exhibition Theme

What then is the connection with interactive, digital storytelling? One might argue that the "horn" of interactive storytelling is for participants to evoke action using an interface, which then prompts response. This action-reaction moves the storytelling forward.

Remembering the Dead challenges this approach by exploring interactive storytelling internally, the victims and their stories remembered, immediate and present. Thus, the interaction becomes less a process of doing actions, and more an effort to engage the audience emotionally in a story about the loss of life to gun violence.

How does this effort relate to the exhibition theme 'The Expression of Emotion in Humans and Technology'? By showing and speaking the names of those killed in mass shootings across the United States, *Remembering the Dead* provides, through technology, a context for audiences to consider their emotional reactions and responses to this staggering and ongoing loss of human life.

Through its use of text to speech technology, *Remembering the Dead* returns to spoken voice as the basis for storytelling.

Purposes

In sharing its story, *Remembering the Dead* has two purposes. First, awareness. By combining sound, technology, and culture, with a focus on listening and reflection, *Remembering the Dead* foregrounds awareness of mass shooting victims as people with lives, dreams, aspirations, achievements, stories.

And, second, activism. Sharing this information in a responsible, respectful manner will, hopefully, prompt community outcry against what is lost to mass shootings in America: humanity, lives, achievements, dreams, aspirations, and stories of sons and daughters, mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, friends, sisters, brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, grandsons and granddaughters, grandmothers and grandfathers.

Conclusion

Jeanne M. Ray... Helen Mason... Ellis Max Mansfield... These names, and hundreds more, are part of *Remembering the Dead*, an experiment in expression of emotion in humans and technology, and a work of reflective interactive digital storytelling focused on people killed in mass shootings across America, 1800s to present.

Through its use of technology, *Remembering the Dead* replaces direct interaction, a primary component of interactive storytelling, with internal, personal remembrance and reflection on stories of lives cut short, of dreams unfulfilled. Following the exhibition theme, expression of emotion in humans and technology, *Remembering the Dead* provides, through technology, a context for audiences to

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consider their emotional reactions and responses to the staggering and ongoing loss of human life to gun violence.

As both a memorial and interactive storytelling project, *Remembering the Dead* asks viewers to reflect on stories of lives cut short, of dreams unfulfilled. As an experiment in expression of emotion in humans and technology, *Remembering the Dead* promotes an autonomous zone that evokes a physical presence, and demands attention, interaction. Within this space new perceptual, phenomenological, and sensory engagements are prompted through the act of remembrance and reflection. Through engagement, viewers assert the humanity of the victims. Hopefully, by remembering the dead, we can stop future killings.

References

Derrida, Jacques. (2001). "Above all, no journalists!" In H. de Vries and S. Weber (Eds.), *Religion and Media* (pp. 56-93). Stanford University Press, 2001.

Gun Violence Archive. (2020). <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/past-tolls>

Footnotes

¹ Gun Violence Archive (GVA) is against gun violence, not guns or gun owners and strives to provide an unbiased, complete view of the subject. GVA gets and verifies its data daily from over 7,500 law enforcement and government sources, and news media outlets. See <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org>