

“What is *Find a Grave* ?”

“*Find a Grave* is a website where you can look up the locations of actual graves in cemeteries. It’s one of the weirdest online communities that I have ever encountered because it’s a place where people whose hobby is searching out graves and visiting them, get together to exchange information. So maybe you’re a Civil War buff, or a music fan or you’re obsessed with people who made wood cabinets in the 18th century, and you like to go visit their graves. This is the site where you come and you post your photographs of these graves and you can also post the location. So these kind of perverse hobbyists show up at the site but then the other people who come to the site are people who are genealogy buffs or in mourning for friends or relatives that have died and they create these webpages discussing where their grave is but also talking about the person and it’s kind of like a vast, online cemetery.”

“So what do these websites actually look like?”

“Well the websites are individual web pages for every person and they often have a picture of the person who’s dead, hum some information about them, their relatives, and you can actually take a random stroll through the online cemetery, so you can look at graves of people you’ve never met or heard of and you can leave these little icons like flowers, or you can put a flag on a soldier’s grave, and the kind of fascinating thing is that people actually do this, they go on the 4th of July and thank veterans of wars that they weren’t even alive for, for, you know, saving their country, it’s kind of a bizarre thing, something you’d never see offline.”

“Why do you think that people would have this empathy for somebody they’ve never met?”

“I think it’s because there’s so much information on these pages, like you get drawn into the person’s life because you see their pictures, and there may be someone you’d never interact with and it gives you this tiny sense of knowing something about this person that you otherwise wouldn’t, and it’s so different from just looking at a tombstone in an actual cemetery with the date of birth and death and that’s it.”