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Who killed Miss Norway?

Five years ago, the news that a beauty pageant participant had died in a car crash stunned her virtual world friends. But was it really an accident?

By Tracy Spaight

April 14, 2003 | In the spring of 2002, after more than a year in pre-production, I began work on "Real People Virtual Worlds," a documentary film exploring how people interact with each other in the graphically and textually mediated settings of online worlds. Along the way, I expected to interview people who make like they're elves or slay monsters or just hang out in virtual taverns with their virtual friends. And I did. What I didn't expect is that I'd stumble into a real-life murder mystery, complete with intrigue, deception, and, ultimately, the disappearance and death of a beauty queen.

Karyn logged onto LegendMUD for the first time in the fall of 1996. A law student at the University of Oslo, she found the novelty of LegendMUD -- a text-based virtual world that promised "adventures in a place both strange and familiar" -- a welcome respite from her studies. As a newcomer to the world of multiuser dungeons, Karyn was eager to learn more about the art of being someone else. "I started out being me," she confessed at a role-playing discussion in the out-of-character auditorium (where players can take off their masks, so to speak, and just be themselves). In her charmingly broken English, she added, "I have never done anything like playing games like this." The MUD's denizens welcomed the Norwegian newcomer into their community and offered her advice on how to become a role player.

Being the sort of person who makes friends easily, Karyn decided to pursue the life of a merchant within the game. She learned how to acquire items in remote or dangerous parts of the fantasy world of LegendMUD, transport them back to town, and sell them (at a nice markup) to other players who lacked the knowledge or the time (or the patience) to set off and find the items for themselves. Before long, she had formed a mercantile group called the Norse Traders -- like horse traders, but with Vikings. The Norse Traders, under her leadership, emerged as a powerful, well-respected guild. All because of Karyn.

Years later, on the other side of the world, I sit in front of my computer reading about Karyn's adventures in this virtual world. I reflect on the fact that the entire community, indeed the whole universe that was and remains LegendMUD, ran on a 486 desktop computer that sat under a desk in Austin, Texas. I page through the archives of LegendMUD, reading about her life.

"Thanks to Beam, Point, Landy, Aermid, Rummy, Outsider, Manic, and the many others who have helped me so far," she wrote on her Web site. These were her friends in the game -- people she knew (and who knew her) only through a blinking cursor on the screen. And yet the group had formed lasting friendships. I look at the photograph on her LegendMUD Web page. A beautiful young woman, wearing a "Miss Norway finalist" sash, smiles back at me. The caption reads, "This photo is taken at the Miss Norway 1995 contest. The guys on the picture are some of the contestants in the Mr. Norway contest, and the girl in the back is Monica, a friend of mine, also participating in the pageant. You should now be able to determine who's who on the picture, including who's me ..."ⁱ

It's painful to read the details of her life, knowing that it was about to come to an abrupt and tragic end. On Jan. 29, 1998, Karyn and a friend were out test-driving a Porsche 911. Sometime around 6 p.m., they crossed over the center lane of a stretch of highway outside of Trondheim and collided head-on with a Volkswagen. Karyn and her friend were killed instantly, as was the driver of the other vehicle. Or was she? Karyn's death would soon become a cause célèbre in virtual world circles. The more I looked into the story, however, the more I began to suspect foul play.

When your friend logs out of a virtual world, his or her avatar remains in the world for a moment or two and then blinks out of existence. You expect to see the friend again tomorrow evening. Or maybe the day after that. But sometimes your friend doesn't return. Weeks pass. Then months. Most often it's because the person has grown tired of the game and has moved on. But on rare occasions, it's because the individual behind the keyboard has blinked out of existence in the real world. And in the real world, that person won't magically reappear with an experience hit or stat loss. Death in reality is permanent.

Without Karyn's leadership, the Norse Traders began to fall apart. Weeks passed. People knew that something was wrong but couldn't figure out what. Then someone realized: Karyn was missing. E-mails were sent out, but she didn't reply. Where was she? Was she in trouble? Some friends decided to investigate. What they found shocked the community to its core. Posted on Karyn's home page was a newspaper article reporting her death and a letter from her parents. Karyn was no more. Real life had become real death. She was gone.ⁱⁱ

In a virtual world, as in real life, people mourn the passing of a friend. Given the nature of Internet communities, it's not surprising that there is often a lag of weeks or even months before news of a person's real-world demise arrives in the virtual realm. When the news of Karyn's death finally reached LegendMUD, the outpouring of grief was immediate and heartfelt. The message boards in every tavern quickly overflowed with expressions of sorrow.

"I will always remember the good times we had," one of them read, "the good laughs we shared, and the chats. I didn't know [sic] much about you, but one thing is for sure, you were a good friend to me. You had a good heart."

News of Karyn's death soon spread to other virtual lands. Even players who had never met Karyn, or even played on LegendMUD, sent messages to express their sorrow. As a player of Discworld (an unrelated virtual world) wrote: "We play 'games' like this one here on the Internet, often without realizing how our actions affect *real* people, perhaps thousands of miles away, on the other side of a telnet session. We form friendships that outgrow the boundaries of any simple 'game'; sometimes, we even fall in love. How can this be, that we experience such profound emotion from a game, with people that we have never met face to face? It is my hope that those that read of your story will reflect upon the relationships that *they* have built, playing these 'games', and try to realize the importance of building lasting, caring friendships wherever possible, because life is fleeting ..."

In response to player requests, the immortals (the administrators of the MUD) decided to construct a "Garden of Remembrance" to honor Karyn's memory. After many hours of wandering around LegendMUD, I finally stumbled across it. When I (metaphorically) entered the room (actually, a database record), the following text was displayed:

The Garden of Remembrance

"This ever-lit room exists in memory of the people that had brought light to the land of Legend and left us prematurely. The grass grows soft and green, the sky above seems always to be a perfect, endless blue. The memories of friendship and laughter and joy abound. A rose garden lies to the east and a quiet pond to the west. An imposing arch of trees leads out to the north.

"A small tree is here, lovingly planted in memory of Karyn. A brass plaque has been placed in front of the tree.

"The plaque reads: 'In Memory of Karyn whose kindness and companionship will always be missed.'"ⁱⁱⁱ

Raph Koster, at the time one of LegendMUD's administrators and now the lead designer of Sony's Star Wars Galaxies, wrote a eulogy for Karyn that has been widely reprinted over the past five years. He called it "A Story About a Tree," and originally told it at a luncheon for Ultima Online players (he was also the lead designer of UO) in May 1998. In his essay, Raph describes the friendships that Karyn made in the game and the difficulty players had in articulating the grief they felt over the loss of someone they had never met in real life. The Garden of Remembrance, in Raph's view, marked a defining moment in the consciousness of the online gaming community:

"In the end, that garden and that tree served not only as a memorial to a well-loved and much-missed person, but as a marker of a moment, a moment in which the players of an online game realized that they weren't 'playing a game.' That the social bonds that they felt within this 'game' were Real ... Sometimes it takes a moment of grief to make people realize it, and sometimes people just come to an awareness over time, but the

fundamental fact remains: when we make a friend, hurt someone's feelings, suffer a loss, or accomplish something in an online world, it's real. It's not 'just a game.' I am not going to let anyone tell me that the Garden of Remembrance isn't Real, or that the grief we all felt over Karyn's death was not Real. And I hope that UO players aren't going to let anyone tell them that their experiences within UO aren't Real either, that it's 'just a game.' It may be for some people, but we all know better, don't we? For Karyn's sake, and also for our own."^{iv}

This "Garden in the Machine" helped the community come to terms with the loss of their friend in the virtual and real world. Five years later, however, the wounds would be reopened in a way few could have imagined.

In the spring of 2002, I mailed a demo tape of my film to Richard Bartle, co-creator of the first multiuser dungeon. The tape included footage of Raph Koster talking about the Garden of Remembrance. Karyn's story immediately set off alarm bells for Richard; he'd seen similar situations in other online communities and smelled a rat. Had anyone actually checked the story? Was there corroborative evidence? I decided to do some research.

According to Karyn's memorial page on LegendMUD, she attended the law school at the University of Oslo. I decided to start there. I contacted the university to see if they had some record of a 24-year-old female law student dying in January of 1998. The woman I spoke with reported that they have no record of any law student of any name dying in a car wreck in January of 1998. OK, so perhaps Karyn exaggerated her educational attainments a bit. It wouldn't be the first time that someone had padded their résumé.

I next turned to Karyn's foray into the glamorous world of beauty pageants. I sent a letter to Geir Hamnes, the director of the Frøken Norge competition, asking about the identity of the woman in the photograph posted on Karyn's memorial page on LegendMUD. Geir replied that her name was Trine Solberg Lepperød, a finalist in the 1995 competition. Had I stumbled across the real Karyn? Excitedly, I fired off an e-mail to Geir, asking if

Trine had died in a car crash a few years back. "No," Geir replied, "she's alive and lives in Oslo." He gave me her e-mail address.

I sent Trine an e-mail. Two days later she replied that yes, she was the woman in the photograph, but that she had never heard of LegendMUD. Trine was startled to learn about her own death. "I was scared by all these letters this 'Karyn' person got," she told me, after looking at the memorial on the Web site, "since the picture is of me and I am alive!" Trine, who is now a product assistant in a textile business, had no idea how anyone who was not at the competition could have acquired the photo, since to her knowledge it had never been published anywhere.

This left the matter of the newspaper article that had been posted on Karyn's Web page. Surely a scanned newspaper article demonstrated that someone had died on that highway? I set to work tracking it down. While searching, I learned that only 352 Norwegians died in traffic accidents in 1998. That's less than half as many that die on U.S. highways in any given week! Of all those deaths, only 89 involved people between the ages of 15 and 24.^v So if a young woman and her friend had died on Jan. 29, 1998, while test-driving a Porsche 911 on the E6, there should definitely be a record of it.

While Babelfish and other nifty Web translation programs will translate from English to Norwegian, none of them seem to go in the other direction. So with a borrowed Norwegian dictionary, I started plodding through the online archives of Norway's leading newspapers -- Dagbladet, Verdens Gang, and Aftenposten. After many frustrating hours of getting "søket fant 0 dokumenter," I tried a key word search for "bilulykke" and "frontkollidert" and there it was: "Woman Dead in Car Accident near Skogn," Jan. 29, 1998 -- the same headline and date of the newspaper article that had been posted on Karyn's Web page. Translated, the text read:

"A woman was killed in a car accident on the E6 near Skogn in Northern Trondelag Thursday afternoon. According to witnesses, the woman's car crossed over into the opposing lane and collided head-on with a truck. She was alone in the car and died instantly, according to the officer on duty at the Levanger police station. The driver of the

truck was not injured in the accident. The road was icy in the area where the accident took place."

Only one fatality? What about her friend and the driver of the other vehicle? Something was fishy here. I called the Levanger police department (fortunately, the receptionist spoke English) and asked him to look up the accident report. Although the receptionist was unable to divulge the woman's name, citing privacy concerns, he did tell me that she was "a lot older" than 24, did not die in a Porsche and was not named Karyn. He also said that Karyn was not a Norwegian name. A quick search of Norway's bureau of statistics showed that only three women in all of Norway go by the name Karyn.^{vi} Yet LegendMUD's Karyn claimed that her name was Karyn in and out of the game.

It strained the bounds of probability to suppose that there had been two accidents on the same date at the same time on the same road, both involving a head-on collision with fatalities. Was the newspaper article actually scanned, as some Legendites remembered, or was it simply a transcription? If there was a scanned image, then perhaps Karyn had changed the wording of the Aftenposten article in Photoshop, and then posted it on her Geocities Web page?

I contacted Geocities and asked about its privacy policy. Would Geocities consent to allowing a third party (such as a person's parents) to access an owner's Web page and post a letter on it? After some checking, a company spokesperson replied that no, they would not, since they have no way of knowing if a third party is actually related to the owner of a given Geocities Web page, and in any case to grant access would violate the privacy policy.

The conclusion seems inescapable: "Karyn" fabricated her death just as she'd fabricated her life. So who killed Miss Norway 1995? Karyn did. Or rather the person behind the Karyn mask.

Who was Karyn? Someone logged into LegendMUD night after night from September 1996 to January 1998. Then that person disappeared. The individual was likely Norwegian, or at least Scandinavian, since according to all involved she routinely chatted

with friends in Norwegian. There are several suspects within the world of LegendMUD itself, including the Norwegian-speaking player who translated the original newspaper article. I even considered the possibility that Trine might be Karyn after all, except that her surprise and bewilderment seemed so genuine.

Unless Karyn steps forward, we'll probably never know who the real-world Karyn was. I say "she" guardedly, however, since it's quite possible, and indeed probable, that the person behind the Karyn persona was actually a man. It wouldn't be the first time that someone engaged in virtual cross-dressing. As MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle points out, "gender swapping on MUDs is not a small part of the game action. By some estimates, Habitat, a Japanese MUD, has 1.5 million users. Habitat is a MUD operated for profit. Among the registered users of Habitat, there is a ratio of four real-life men to each real-life woman. But inside the MUD the ratio is only three male characters to one female character. In other words, a significant number of players, many tens of thousands of them, are virtually cross-dressing."^{vii}

For his forthcoming book, "Designing Virtual Worlds," Richard Bartle compiled a set of guidelines for spotting a "female-presenting male player." According to Bartle, players will claim that their alter ego is physically attractive; avoid players of the same gender they are pretending to be; use the same real-world name as their alter ego; invent reasons they can't go to real-world player gatherings or talk on the phone; and finally, "have their alter ego succumb to injuries or ailments that lead to absences or promised absences."^{viii}

Now let's look at Karyn again, with Bartle's list in hand. She claimed to be a Norwegian beauty queen. Check. Most of her companions in the game were men. Check. Her name was Karyn, both in and out of the game. Check. She lived in Norway, which prevented her from attending player gatherings. Check. She never talked to other players on the phone. Check. She died in a car crash while test-driving a Porsche. Check.

Karyn fits the profile for a female-presenting male player rather well. The person behind the Karyn mask probably logged on to explore aspects of his identity, got in over his

head, and then bowed out of the community when a newspaper story about a car crash suggested a dramatic and compelling exit strategy.

Last spring, when I talked with Raph Koster about the Garden of Remembrance, he made an analogy between virtual communities (as exemplified by the friendships people formed with Karyn) and the children's book "The Velveteen Rabbit."

"The rabbit desperately wants to be real with a capital R," Raph reminded me. "But the love of the child who owned the rabbit is what makes it real. I think it's unfair to say that virtual communities aren't real with a capital R. I'm not going to let anyone tell me that that wasn't real. No one's going to say that the friendship wasn't real because I know the grief was definitely real."^{ix}

Raph was referring to the community itself becoming real, or realizing that it was real, through the experience of losing Karyn. But what if Karyn, the catalyst of community formation, was herself not real with a capital R?

In a simulated world, the line between real life and fantasy is easily blurred. For many, that's clearly part of the attraction. Race, gender, age and other markers of identity are rendered invisible behind the veil of the Internet and the anonymity it confers. You can be anything that you want to be, since all that other people "see" in a virtual world like LegendMUD is your avatar. As I learned in shooting the film, many people find it liberating to be judged solely on their ideas and actions, rather than their physical appearance or real-life limitations. But as the Karyn story illustrates, the anonymity of the Internet also allows for hurtful deceptions.

The heart of "A Story About a Tree" is Raph's assertion that "the social bonds of the people in a virtual environment make it more than just a game. They make it real." In one sense, he's right. People do form friendships and even meet their significant others through online worlds -- and they will probably do so in far greater numbers in the years ahead, as online gaming become more immersive, more compelling and more mainstream. But in this case, the "real" existed only in people's heads. Karyn was only

real because the players who encountered her in a virtual world believed that she was real.

The point is not to poke fun at a community for being hoodwinked. After all, she could have been real in reality too; players simply don't know who's behind the blinking cursor. Like the velveteen rabbit, Karyn wanted to be real with a capital R. And magically, through the love of the community, she got her wish.

Epilogue:

A couple of months after I published the article, I succeeded in tracking down the real Karyn, who incidentally, turned out to be a he after all. I won't go into all of the detective work required to find him – suffice it to say that it's difficult enough to role-play a fictional character, but much more so to role-play the person *behind* the character. Karyn didn't respond to my requests for an interview.

Karyn's actions, in my view, invite us to reflect on the boundary between real and virtual, role-playing and manipulation, player and persona. The story also invites players to reflect on how their words and actions in a virtual world can affect real people in the real world. Maybe future Karyns will reflect on this fact before they hit the delete key.

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ⁱ See <http://www.legendmud.org/Community/karyn.html>

ⁱⁱ The letter from Karyn's parents, and a translation of the newspaper article, can be found in the *Legendary Times*, vol. 5, March 6, 1998. http://www.legendmud.org/Community/lt_indices/Vol5/LTv5n11.html

ⁱⁱⁱ To visit the Garden of Remembrance, one must log into LegendMUD at www.legendmud.org, create a character, and type OOC while standing in an inn. This transports you to the out-of-character areas. You then head north, turn left at the piano bar, pass through the door, turn left and walk through an archway of trees, and finally step into the garden.

^{iv} *A Story about a Tree* is available at <http://legendmud.org/Bibliography/texts/treestory.html>

^v See 'Road Traffic accidents,' Statistics Norway. www.ssb.no/vtu_en/

^{vi} See Statistisk sentralbrya Norway <http://www.ssb.no/en/navn/> Type in the name Karyn and see for yourself.

^{vii} Sherry Turkle *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 212.

^{viii} Richard Bartle, *Designing Virtual Worlds* (New Riders, 2003), 199.

^{ix} Interview with the author, January 12, 2002