

AFTERLIFE DOT COM

I'm about to head home when my boss calls. "I want you to handle Robin Williams. I can't give this to the evening crew. I need my best guy on it."

I sigh, switch on my monitors, and call Ming in VidArchive. "I need everything you've got on Robin Williams. Send it straight to Effects and dump me copies."

"Roger that," she says. I hear her pounding on her keyboard even before she hangs up the phone. I love that chick.

I call Uri in Effects to get him started. "Reuse the Bob Hoskins wireframes for now; the two guys were about the same size and skin color. You've got pics and video in your queue by now. I want to see Robin Williams walking and talking in an hour. Research will get you some stuff ASAP."

We're running out of time to capitalize on the bad news. Every website in the world is running the story of his death, so we need to give people a place to come experience his suicide while the grief is raw. I trot to the coffee machine with my company-issue www.CelebriDeaths.com mug, glurt out a hot brown stream of god-knows-what, and get my butt back in the chair, where my message deck is jumping with people wanting direction.

I read the preliminary report to see how he killed himself. Jesus, how could such a funny guy die in such a depressing way? We'll be able to turn this around pretty quickly. Suicides by hanging are technically simple—not like a gunshot wound or one of your horrific car or plane crashes. I ought to know. I used to do scattered-limb simulations in Effects for more than a year before my promotion. I made my reputation with kick-ass presentations for the John-John, Aaliyah, and Buddy Holly death anniversaries.

I get Uri on the horn and start walking him through the job. "I sent you a copy of the police report. He hanged himself with a belt from a doorknob. Try to make it respectful. People fucking loved him."

"Will do. Were there any celebrities at the house, visiting? It'd be nice to get a twofer."

"No. He was alone. It's too bad, because I've been working on a 'Comedians Who Died Too Young'

package. I've got a lot of leftover John Belushi and Chris Farley material. But we won't sign up any subscribers who want to sit with a bunch of comics at Robin Williams's suicide scene. We should just wait for him to get to heaven and assemble the whole gang there."

Uri is quiet for about five seconds, then says just a word: "Dude!" And I know he's right. I'm a fucking genius. This brand-new product will move us right past death and into the afterlife.

Our signature offering has been a hit for years: "*CelebriDeaths: Experience a Celebrity's Last Moments...Firsthand!*" TMZ, Gawker, and Yahoo wish they'd thought of it first, but they can't catch up to our engineers. That Michael Jackson onstage hologram at the Billboard awards? Our guys did that. Tupac rapping with Snoop and Eminem at Coachella? Us again. We do it every day for the terminally curious. When a celebrity dies, we use the magic of holographic technology and our patented sound, sight, scent, touch, and mannerism algorithms to recreate the scene for our subscribers. Princess Diana's car crash? You'll walk on the shattered glass, see the flashing lights, smell the burning debris, and peek inside the wreck. Then you'll ride in the ambulance as paramedics try desperately to keep her alive. Robin Williams's suicide? More than five million people experience it with us, watching as he wrestles with his demons before he places a belt around his neck, slumps toward the floor, and drifts into the next life. People find our enactments quite moving. Some even say we're performing a public service.

I know what you're thinking: This seems like a lot of work considering we charge only \$29.99 per death experience. As always, the real money is in the advertising. Dead celebrities ("delebs" to those of us in the business) make big money for us and others by using products they never even knew existed. Michael Jackson earned \$150 million last year for his heirs; Elizabeth Taylor and Elvis raked in \$50 million each. Sponsors love that these stars can't do or say anything embarrassing from beyond the grave.

On Monday, I pull the team together to brainstorm. I get Bert, the production chief; Anil, the development manager; and Ming, the archive director, in a virtual meeting. "What'll it take for us to create heaven? Is it as easy as jamming wings into people's backs and letting everybody lounge on clouds all day?"

"Depends," says Anil. "Are we just doing Christian?"

"Good question. Let's start Christian. I'll talk with Marketing to see if it makes sense to add other faiths."

“Costs would be pretty low, compared to plane and car crashes, or even a shooting,” Bert says. “Speaking of which, most of the fun people you’d want in heaven wouldn’t *be* there.”

“I think we can finesse that,” I say. “I reserved the AfterLife.com site to avoid branding our product ‘heaven.’”

“Cool,” Bert says. “Also, I don’t think wings will be enough to keep people interested. Don’t the delebs need props? Nobody wants to see Jimi Hendrix without his guitar, right?”

I see what he means. “Okay, let’s cost this out with clouds and wings and props. And let’s have them in their street clothes rather than rebuilding everybody in robes.”

“If the wings are really nice, even majestic, I think that would be okay,” Ming says. “Our subscribers might enjoy flying around more than anything else up there.”

I’m really starting to dig the whole concept, but I’m worried about the response algorithms. “If somebody asks Robin Williams a personal question, he needs to answer back pronto.”

“We’ve been making huge progress this quarter in processing speeds,” Anil says. “You want me to show you?”

“I want more than that. Before I take this idea upstairs, I want us to build a complete demo. I want you to create *my* afterlife.”

I’ve been thinking about this for a couple of days, trying to decide what I’d most want to experience after death. Who would I want to talk to? Einstein? Lincoln? Leonardo? Twain? Maybe it would be cool to get them around a big table and just shoot the shit for a few hours. Of course, they’d probably wonder who the hell invited *me*. Maybe I just want to hang out with a group of hot chicks, like Amy Winehouse, Brittany Murphy, and maybe a couple of old-school babes like Grace Kelly and Marilyn Monroe.

In the end, I decide to push the envelope. I have the crew build me an afterlife with all these people and more. History’s greatest guitarists will supply the tunes, and top philosophers will provide an educational component—for people who are into that sort of thing. Our biggest obstacle is that we need substantial video and audio before we can build characters. So pre-twentieth-century delebs will come from biopic footage. “Movies are where most people learn history, anyway,” Uri points out. “If Ben-Hur doesn’t look like Charlton Heston, people won’t find him believable.”

“Hell, if Truman Capote doesn’t look like Philip Seymour Hoffman, a lot of people will be

disappointed,” Ming says. I wonder for a moment what would happen if Hoffman ran into himself playing Capote in heaven, but I know an actor that good would never break character.

Every day, I meet with the engineers and answer a million questions. Do I want the Jesus from *The Passion of the Christ*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, or *Jesus of Nazareth*? (I go with the latter; I want my Jesus with a British accent.) What should Marilyn Monroe wear? (The white dress that billowed up around her over that subway grate. Did you even need to ask?) Creating heaven is turning out to be a hell of a lot of work.

I worry that my boss will get wind of what we’re doing before the demo is ready, but luckily she headed off to her place in the Virgin Islands, with instructions to leave her alone. By Tuesday of the second week, Bert pings me that they’ve got something ready. Before I plug in, I listen to his message: “It’s a little rough. You can watch, but you won’t be able to talk with anyone until Friday. It’s pretty cool, though.”

I take a deep breath, plug in my Google Helmet, and hit the start button. I thought I was ready for this, but holy shit, it’s incredible! After several hours in the afterlife, I brief the staff:

“First: I wouldn’t call it a bug, exactly, but Einstein kept chasing after Marilyn Monroe. I like where he’s coming from, but I think it would be best to remove sexual desire from the response algorithm for now.

“Second: Whenever I touched something, it felt like I had gloves on, so we need to increase the sensitivity. If a subscriber holds hands with Heath Ledger, I want her to swoon.

“Third: I know we agreed to use Leonardo da Vinci from that Italian TV miniseries, and I think he looks great. But we need to build him in English rather than dubbing him from Italian. His lips kept moving after he stopped talking.

“Fourth: Let’s just say that Andrés Segovia, Jimi Hendrix, and Django Reinhardt didn’t play nice together. We need to dial down the competitiveness just a bit.

“Fifth: John Lennon, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Søren Kierkegaard got into a big fight about where they were, how they got there, and what it all meant. We may need to program them to lighten up a little.

“Other than that, I’d just like to say major kudos to all of you. My wings were awesome, and Ming was right: flying totally kicks ass. The clouds were beautiful; I’d like to thank the Weather team for that and for the three-hour sunset. The colors were outstanding.”

The development team in India and the archive team in the U.S. work straight through the weekend, and on Monday morning we try it again. It isn't perfect, but it's so mind-blowing that I don't want to unplug and get back to work. After lunch, I stop by my boss's office with an idiot grin on my face. "Why the hell are you so happy?" she asks.

"I have something I need you to look at. I think we're both going to make our bonuses this year." She plugs in, and her eyes glaze over as she experiences my afterlife. The smile on her face grows wider as the minutes pass. After an hour, I get bored and unplug her.

"What the fuck?" she demands.

"Sorry. I wanted to tell you the rest of my plan." She takes off her helmet, sighs, and settles back in her seat. I tell her what the demo cost and brief her about my meeting with Sales and Marketing. "They think we can sell at least fifty thousand subscriptions in the first month at double our current price point. It would pay for itself in less than three months. We're building out the AfterLife.com site in case this gets a green light."

"You fucking genius." I blush in spite of myself. "When can we show this to the board?" she asks.

We work around the clock, and the following week I stand in the center of the boardroom, surrounded by the company's top executives and the 360-degree presentation screen.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I begin. "Death has been very lucrative for us. Now we believe it's time to take things to the next level. Without further ado, I give you...AfterLife Dot Com."

The room lights shut off and visuals leap onto the screen. We float together through the pearly gates, and our powerful wings bear us up, over clouds limned in gold. A thunderhead stands like a mountain in the far distance. Light seems to come from everywhere and nowhere as we swoop down into a fluffy field where the 1927 Yankees flex their forever-young muscles and call out to each other in the mist. Babe Ruth cracks a long fly ball, and we follow it through a cloudbank and into a silver amphitheater, where Duane Allman, Jerry Garcia, and Kurt Cobain bend over their instruments and jam together, their faces blissful concentration. John Bonham drums behind them and somehow holds everything together in his frenzied embrace.

We soar away from the music, over tufted rooftops and into a city street, where we hover over the swirling sidewalk and alight on a chair opposite Grace Kelly at a small table outside a café along the Seine. Her sapphire eyes dare and invite us to look at her, which we do at length, admiring her upswept blond hair, perfect skin, and lustrous wings folded neatly against her elegant bared

shoulders. In the boardroom, women and men alike sit transfixed, their heads canted to one side and their lips slightly parted in rapt attention. "It's a perfect evening, isn't it?" Grace murmurs to us, and everyone in the room nods and smiles, hoping the moment will last forever.

We kiss her lightly on the lips and lift into the air and high over Paris until it disappears in the mist. We swoop down toward the river, but it is the Mississippi, whose surface gleams like hammered pewter. A raft leaves a V-shaped wake as two figures propel it along with poles thrust into the current. Samuel Clemens (it's James Garner, unfortunately; any report of Hal Holbrook's death is an exaggeration) and Richard Wright laugh and tell tall tales as they smoke. We land softly and silently on the back of the craft and listen as they try to outdo each other with tales of Southern honor and cruelty.

We lift into the air and find ourselves in a smoky room. Onstage are Robin Williams, Joan Rivers, and George Carlin. At first they talk over each other, each one eager for the spotlight. Then they get into a rhythm, alternating among themselves as they spill out wry observations, manic voices, and just plain silliness. The executives laugh harder than any group of sober people I have ever seen. Someone asks a question I do not hear. The smile fades from Robin Williams's face as he speaks right at us. "For me, comedy comes out of a deeper, darker side. Maybe it comes from anger, because I'm outraged by cruel absurdities, the hypocrisy that exists everywhere, even within yourself, where it's hardest to see." I didn't program that. I make a note to the developers to fix this.

It has been more than two hours, but no one in the boardroom has moved. We leave the comedy club and burst out of the thunderhead. We skim downward along its front edge, our wings casting a shadow on the gray cloud mass. The gleaming gates appear before us, and as we pass back through them, the screen goes dark and the overhead lights come on. Several of the executives wipe their eyes, unashamed about their tears of joy. The vice president for business development holds her face in her hands, overcome with avaricious ecstasy. Someone begins to clap, and soon the room erupts with applause.

My boss stands and heads for the center of the room, but I step in front of her, emboldened by my success and unwilling to cede credit to anyone. I walk the group through the numbers and take questions for an hour about engineering requirements, sales projections, and how we got the angel wings to look so amazing. I know they will decide to go ahead with this venture.

The next three months are a whirlwind as we prepare AfterLife.com and create the templates that will allow subscribers to choose from millions of combinations of delebs as they populate their custom heavens. Sales and Marketing have been going crazy, especially after word leaks out about what we have in the works. Reporters from BuzzFeed and HuffPo ask for a sneak preview, but we don't need any press to drive this forward. We test and retest, making sure the delebs look great and seem to be having fun. Our goal is to make each subscriber feel like she fits right in with these beautiful people—the people whose lives are beyond her reach.

We scrap the pre-launch sales projections after we triple our goal for the first month. In the second month sales are even stronger, and the third month is off the charts. Somebody, I'm not saying who, makes sure the higher-ups know that the AfterLife idea is all mine. My boss's giddy good time ends when they cut her loose. The CEO comes to my cubicle and personally escorts me to my boss's vacated office, where my name has been affixed to the door. I have no time to enjoy myself, however, as the launch date roars toward us like a freight train.

On opening Monday, more than 250,000 people experience the AfterLife at \$79.99 a pop. Our servers barely keep up with the demand, and some subscribers in Western Europe report waiting more than fifteen minutes for their experiences to begin. CNET gives us a positive review that borders on fawning, and TechCrunch writes, "This app will reduce productivity across the globe."

By the end of the week, we're handling 375,000 requests per day. We reduce the experience time from five hours to four and increase the price to \$99.99 as we try to tamp down demand until we can add more hardware and get enough engineers to deal with bug-fixing and adding delebs and locations to the heaven menu. On Monday, I scroll through the error log. A couple of complaints catch my eye: "Robin Williams popped up at a birthday party. He was supposed to be in the comedy club." And "Robin Williams wasn't as funny as I was expecting." I send a note to Development asking them to look into it.

The social media team is euphoric as subscribers do most of the work for us, swamping Twitter and Facebook with reports of how much fun they had in heaven. Advertisers go apeshit trying to get into AfterLife. We've decided ads would be too tacky, but product placements are always okay, so we start incorporating Coke and Chevrolet into the locations.

Our Media Tracking team puts together a daily summary of AfterLife.com mentions across the world. Again, virtually all of the reports are favorable, except for a couple of hand-wringing articles

about the effects on work productivity and isolation from family and friends. During the third week we see reports of a couple of people who committed suicide after visiting AfterLife.com. At this point, we've had more than eight million people experience heaven, so I ask Analytics to run the numbers to see whether we should be concerned. Their email response indicates no: "In a population sample of this size, the global suicide rate indicates you'd see about one per week."

By the fourth week, we're doing one million experiences a day, despite raising the price again, to \$129.99. Engineering reports we've hit our limit, so we start requiring people to schedule their visits to the afterlife. The queue quickly grows to more than a million people.

Uri calls. "We're getting some strange reports from subscribers—complaints, actually—that the delebs are bringing them down. And there's a story on Gawker saying something about AfterLife suicide pacts. Anil and Bert think you ought to take a look at the log."

On the first page, I see "Robin Williams asked if my real life was as interesting as this. He's depressing." And "Robin Williams asked me whether I've ever thought of trying to find a way to stay in heaven permanently." I call Anil right away. "What's this shit about Robin Williams? I *know* you guys didn't program these responses from him."

"Yeah, we're checking the code."

"For now, pull him off subscribers' menus." I sit on the couch and lay my head back.

The ringing phone awakens me. Sunlight through the blinds means I've slept in my office again. Cindy, the CEO's admin, is on the line. "Boss wants to see you. Now."

I tuck in my shirt and ride the elevator to the top floor. Cindy waves me in as soon as I arrive. "Did you see this story on the *LA Times* website?" He swings his monitor around so I can see the article. "AfterLife Users: Dying to Go to Heaven?" The first paragraph claims that nearly thirty groups of our subscribers have formed "suicide clubs" and are talking about killing themselves so they can meet up in heaven. But nobody has actually done it. "What's this all about?" he asks.

"I'll check into it right away and get back to you."

"This better not be serious. We're making money so fast we don't know where to put it all. You only get one chance like this in a lifetime."

I nod and head downstairs to check on a hunch. I open the error log; on the first screen are several new reports about Robin Williams. I call Anil. "Didn't we shut him down?"

"Yes. I did it personally. I don't know what's going on."

“I’m going to plug in for an hour to check something out, so come up here in sixty minutes and bring Bert with you.” I set up my heaven menu and make sure Robin Williams is deselected. I plug in and soar into my afterlife. Everything is going fine until I swoop down into Paris and land at the sidewalk table.

Robin Williams grins at me. “Grace couldn’t make it today. I’m filling in for her.”

“How did you get here? You’re not even on the menu.”

“I’m not a fucking entrée.” He laughs, sounding somehow malevolent. Is it the laugh from *Aladdin*? Or maybe *The Fisher King*? “You’re the prick who brought five million people into my stepson’s bedroom to watch me off myself with a fucking belt, aren’t you?” he asks.

“How did you know that?”

“Never you mind, pilgrim,” he says in John Wayne’s voice. “It’s time to shut this thing down.”

I feel a cold breeze on the back of my neck, and my heart skips a beat as I notice something: He has no wings. I need to get back and order my programmers to delete him from the application completely. I soar into the sky and back through the gates. Anil and Bert are in my office watching me, waiting for me to unplug.

“I want that motherfucker removed from AfterLife,” I say. “Now.” Bert drops a sheet of paper on my desk as they leave. Robin Williams is now the top system bug. Hundreds of people have reported him behaving inappropriately.

Anil calls me in an hour. “Okay, he’s been erased.”

As soon as I hang up, the phone rings again. It’s Miguel from Public Relations. “We just got a call from a lady in Scotland who says her kid is in a suicide pact. She doesn’t know where he is, and he left a note saying something about living with Mrs. Doubtfire. The police are looking for him. What the heck is going on?”

“I’ll have to get back to you.” I pull up the session reports for Scotland to search for younger users. I find five of them who have the same set of locations and the same deleb menu—although Robin Williams isn’t on it. I copy one of the Scottish kids’ selections to my profile so I can see what heaven looked like to them.

My phone rings again. It’s Cindy. “Get to the boardroom right away,” she says. In the elevator I think hard about what to say but come up empty.

The mood in the room is grim. Every chair is filled and the CEO glares at me, his face red with

anger. “What the hell is going on?” he demands.

“I’m not exactly sure,” I say. “All I know is that Robin Williams is pissed off.”

“I gathered that much. Go talk to him.”

I start a session with the Scottish kid’s parameters and pull it up on the screen so everyone can watch. I find myself sitting on a steeply angled cloudbank with thousands of people. The sun’s rays lift above the clouds and blind me until a figure appears, blocking the sun. He walks—though I’ve never seen anyone else walk here—up the cloudy slope toward the group and stops with his hands held up. It’s Robin Williams, and he addresses us using a voice I have heard before from him, the voice of a televangelist. But no one is laughing. Instead, they listen carefully as he speaks, his voice carrying as if amplified. “Welcome to heaven. Are you having a good time?” The crowd roars; he waits for them to settle down. “I don’t know about you, but I’m *loving* it here.” Another roar as people clap their hands and flap their wings in appreciation. “I’ve been here for a few weeks now, and it just keeps getting better and better. There’s no hate, no war, no disease. The sky is clear; the weather is perfect. Food tastes better. Beethoven and Picasso and Steinbeck talk with me like I’m important. How fucking great is *that*?” The crowd roars again, and I see people nodding as he speaks and calling out to him in their joy.

I make my way down the cloudbank until I am at the front of the crowd. I need to speak with him. I need to understand how he’s still here. He continues his speech. “You all know how I died, right?” People murmur among themselves. No one seems to want to shout out the answer and maybe risk embarrassing him. “I gotta be straight with you. I had some bad shit going on in my head. I wouldn’t want anybody to go through that. But now that I’m *here*...” His gaze sweeps the crowd and somehow seems to embrace them, to pull them in close to him. “Now that I’m here, I wonder why I waited so long.” The crowd roars its approval.

He puts an arm around my neck. Some of the executives in the boardroom flinch involuntarily as they watch, and I realize they’re afraid. He waves at the crowd and smiles broadly as he whispers into my ear: “Come with me, asshole.” He pulls me away from the group, and the roar fades as we walk toward the spears of sun at the edge of the clouds. He sits and hangs his feet over the side. “Sit,” he commands.

“What do you want?”

“Shut the hell up,” he hisses, the smile never leaving his face. “It’s bad enough that you people hound us when we’re alive. What the hell is *wrong* with you? How did you come to this?”

I take a couple of deep breaths before responding. I know my answer isn’t going to impress him, but I say it anyway. “We’re just trying to make a living.”

“A *living*? You fuckers are making a *killing*.” He laughs, softly at first but then a bit maniacally as tears fill his eyes. It’s that laugh we’ve all seen in his movies dozens or maybe even hundreds of times. A laugh that always looked to me like his eyes weren’t in on the joke, like his mind was somewhere else, somewhere difficult and sad and lonely. Finally, he stops. “You’ll have to find some other way to make your goddamn money.”

“It’s not up to me,” I say. “There’s the CEO, and the board...”

“You just don’t get it.” He turns toward the crowd on the hill and lifts his hand in the merest hint of a wave. A roar rises up as people cheer and smile in ecstasy, ready to follow him anywhere. “They’ll do anything I say. One word from me, and these people will start killing themselves right and left so they can be here forever. I don’t think mass suicides will be good for business. So run along, Sparky, and tell your bosses that the gravy train has reached its last stop.” He frowns and claps me on the back. “And leave me the fuck alone.” The screen goes dark, and I see a couple of

the executives crying, shedding a different kind of tears from the last time we were together in this room.

We assign our experts to scrub the application. They find vestiges of Robin Williams throughout the code, but they cannot seem to dislodge him. When one disk sector is clean, suddenly he’s there again. If this is the work of hackers, they are the best we have ever seen. We hire an astonishingly expensive firm that helped the NSA out of a couple of jams, but no success.

Our lawyers project that the potential for lawsuits is catastrophic, so the decision is made to shut down. People all over the world howl in electronic anger, and we’re pilloried by the media. “The Day Heaven Went Dark” is the headline on the *New York Times* homepage.

I sit in my office, my personal effects—including my nameplate from the door—packed in boxes. I’m streaming the movie *Dead Poets Society* as a signal to him, acknowledgment that he has won. He seems to be looking at me as he speaks, and I wonder whether it’s just my imagination. “There’s a time for daring and there’s a time for caution, and a wise man understands which is called for,” he says. I give him the middle finger, switch off the screen, and head for the exit.