

Personal Digital Storyworlds, Narrative Architects, and Gmail

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Abstract

New technologies change the recording of our life stories. They challenge us to make a coherent picture from so many digital puzzle pieces. Online, we have been given a rich variety of what I call “personal digital storyworlds” and seemingly unlimited space to collect personal data. However, we have not given users the conceptual and practical tools to help people create cohesive, meaningful life narratives out of all these digital fragments. Bottom line: we are very good at capturing data, but we are not good, yet, at helping people make sense of all these digital narrative elements. This paper asks the audience to reimagine Gmail as a storyworld. The goal is to provide new insights that advance academic conversations about personal digital archives, which will become an essential element of Web 3.0. Using data from participant interviews, this paper makes the case that personal digital archives produce meaningful, conflicting emotions in people, and they provide insight into how technology shapes how we understand ourselves.

Keywords

narrative; gmail; stories; design; archives

Introduction

We have all become digital storytellers, historians, editors, curators, co-authors, and autobiographers of our own lives. We are all quick-and-easy photographers and digital memory collectors. We are all now writers—we just don’t realize it. Thus, it is critical to examine and articulate how intimate communication technology (iCT?) is changing one of the oldest, most important human communication practices because the stories we absorb shape our realities. This is a critical time because never before has the historical record been so complete. People that, arguably, would never write daily messages now transmit digital volumes each week. Critically, these messages often find themselves archived. Facebook and Google have become what I call **personal digital storyworlds**. Within our personal digital storyworlds, we are building and storing the various audio, visual, and textual elements that make up our life stories—and at any time—the blueprints (code) may change. The “software” that makes up the private journal in my pocket (paper) never changes, but, for example, Gmail’s interface changes constantly. Gmail is one of the most powerful current examples of the new ways our technology allows us to write, record, and examine life stories. Using two examples from ethnographic interviews, this paper argues that Gmail has a narrative architecture, which supports our personal digital storyworlds

Gmail’s “Narrative Architecture”

Writing about video games, renowned media studies scholar Henry Jenkins wrote:

In this short piece, I hope to offer a middle ground position between the ludologists and the narratologists, one that respects the particularity of this emerging medium—examining games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility. (Jenkins, 2004, p. 119)

Jenkins conceptualization of game space as an environment rich with narrative possibility is, I argue, the same for Gmail. Gmail is not simply an email/messaging system. Gmail is a giant narrative system “ripe with narrative possibility.” Jenkins also argued that game designers were “narrative architects”

crafting storyworlds. A storyworld suggests a narrative world “that accumulates, growing larger and more complex as we absorb the narrative” (Abbott, 2008, p. 20). I believe that the Gmail design team are also narrative architects, even though they might not realize it.

A Label Named “Forget”

In order to illustrate the idea that Gmail is ripe with narrative possibilities, that it is a personal digital storyworld, these next two sections briefly explore ethnographic interviews I conducted with two participants. Winston is male, Caucasian, thirty-nine, and a PhD student. His Gmail archive contains 16,417 messages. Winston showed me an ironic label in his Gmail called “forget,” which he said is for “the stuff I’m supposed to forget but can’t anyway.” He went on to say it is for “stuff I just didn’t want to think about anymore but decided I needed to archive anyway. Isn’t that a curious distinction?” (Winston, Personal communication, 2010). He said that almost everything in “forget” is personal. I told Winston I thought it was interesting that on the one hand, he wanted to forget, but on the other hand, he actually made a label to ensure he would never forget. “I know,” he said, “isn’t that interesting?” It is interesting, and it should be seen as a huge opportunity for Gmail’s narrative architects: How can we design for the paradox of memory, the desire to remember and forget simultaneously? Viktor Mayer-Schönberger (2009) argued that there has been a “fundamental shift to the default of remembering” and that too much remembering may have “terrible consequences” (p. 11). Winston seems to be struggling with the default of remembering, too. However, Winston indicates that the need to throw away is equally as powerful as the desire to remember. I argue that Winston’s “forget” label is rich with self-reflective potential. Furthermore, Gmail’s narrative architects can design ways to help Winston understand the life narrative sitting in his archives. For example, should the system ask users if a particular label or message is personal, very personal or something-you-want-to-forget-but-can’t? Should the system gently prompt users every year or so to look back at these messages and see if they feel differently about them? This could be a potential way to help users reflect on how they may have changed in the three years since the message was archived.

Winston told me that the ever-increasing storage provided by Gmail made him “feel free” to create this label. He says, “why not? You want to forget it, but what if someday somebody comes back to me,” and asks him something, and he cannot remember, he says “I want to go back and look.” Winston then allowed me to explore his “forget” label with him. He clicked on it and found 63 messages that he wanted to forget but not forget. Some of those messages included multiple labels besides “forget,” such as “personal,” “health” or the name of his ex-wife. In other labels, Winston found former students, gaming partners and a woman who found him online and knew him when they were in fourth grade in another country. Winston began to go through his various labels. In each label he would find another contact, another message. And each message sparked a narrative of some particular time in his life. I did not ask him to tell me these stories. Often, he did not even need to read the message: Simply looking at the names and dates were enough to prompt a story. Clicking through, exploring his archives, seeing an old message was enough of a prompt to spark a narrative about his life at that particular time. Research suggests the instinctive ways humans tell stories around images or even graphs (Abbott, 2008; Viégas, Golder & Donath, 2006; Viégas, Boyd, Nguyen, Potter, & Donath, 2004). It was almost as if each message were a textual photograph, and Winston and I were looking at an old photo album of text.

A Folder Called “Letters”

Sara is thirty-seven, Caucasian, and has a PhD. She, too, has a folder similar to Winston’s, although, it was buried in her old Yahoo! account, and she had forgotten about it. Her Gmail and Yahoo! accounts contain a total of 40,014 messages. Toward the end of our IM interview, she suddenly stopped and said:

I just glanced through a few of my Yahoo folders and I would also say that the majority of emails that I’ve saved are painful emails. I have a folder called “Letters” that I must have put together at some point and the majority of things in there are from breakups. (Sara, Personal communication, 2010).

I asked her why she saved all of these “painful” emails. I said, “What do they mean to you?” She told me:

Honestly I don't know the logic anymore. They were all related to dating, and I think what I said before about “proof of concept”¹ probably went both ways. I think I might have saved some of the painful emails because I wanted to show myself later, “Wow was this guy a dick.” Maybe also I was thinking like, “Well maybe this will work out.” Also it gave me texts to analyze...I just read and re-read until I guess I hit the point that it either stopped hurting, or I stopped looking. (Sara, Personal communication, 2010).

Sara uncovered buried digital treasure. An entire folder filled with emails that, like Winston, she saved because they have great personal value; They offer rich narrative insight into her life at that time. These “letters” illustrate the tumult of searching for some connection, for love, for reassurance. For both Sara and Winston these archived messages are more than mere data. They are a digital transcript of their lives. They are digital proof-of-existence. It's not just a bunch of email. It is, literally, their lives, their storyworlds. And it is searchable. They can look back, and rather than having “terrible consequences,” the narrative architecture that supports their storyworlds gives them a chance to reevaluate, to easily go back to the past, reflect, and, hopefully, learn more about themselves and their relationships.

Conclusion

What can you learn about yourself from exploring your personal digital storyworld? And how can narrative architects help users like Winston and Sara explore and make narrative sense of their storyworlds? We are collecting and archiving more personal digital data than ever, and now is the time to start asking these questions and using our digital storyworlds to help us learn about ourselves, our relationships, our life stories, and the world we live in. There is self-knowledge in our personal digital storyworlds. With new ways of imagining our personal digital archives and new tools we can begin to harness that knowledge and learn more about ourselves.

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¹ Sara means “proof-of-concept” in that it is proof to her that someone did, in fact, like her at some point.