

**Gmail as storyworld:  
How technology shapes your life narrative**

by

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## Abstract

Gmail is a storyworld, a world which expands and grows more rich as new narrative elements are added. These narrative elements can be powerful, self-reflective tools. If designed right, we can make the elements even easier for humans to visualize and use for self-reflection. We are now all digital storytellers, historians and autobiographers of our own lives. And if this is true, for millions, Gmail is one of the primary tools used every day to record the bits and bytes of our narrative life. Crucially, *whenever Gmail changes the interface it changes the shape and possibilities for your digital storyworld.* We are very good at capturing personal data, but we are not good, yet, at helping users make narrative sense out of all these thousands of messages. This dissertation contributes to the emerging field of Personal Digital Archiving by offering, first, a new analytic tool called Narrative Interface Analysis, which can be used to examine any narrative system (Gmail, Facebook, Twitter etc.). And second, based upon participant interviews, this dissertation also offers practical design recommendations to system builders in the hope that those who write code will see themselves as what Henry Jenkins calls “narrative architects” or world builders so that users can begin to make sense of the vast digital storyworlds we are creating almost by accident every day.