YOUR DIGITAL Afterlife

When Facebook, Flickr and Twitter Are Your Estate,
What's Your Legacy?

Evan Carroll *and* John Romano

Foreword by Omar L. Gallaga, contributor to NPR's *All Tech Considered*

Your Digital Afterlife:
When Facebook, Flickr and Twitter Are Your Estate, What's Your Legacy?

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Find us on the Web at: www.newriders.com
To report errors, please send a note to errata@peachpit.com
New Riders is an imprint of Peachpit, a division of Pearson Education.

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ISBN 13: 978-0-321-73228-6
ISBN 10: 0-321-73228-6

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in the United States of America

For everyone who lives the digital lifestyle.

Acknowledgements

It takes more than a pair of authors to write and publish a book. We would like to send our heartfelt thanks to the people who supported us throughout the process:

John's wife, **Christina**, and his son, **Nikolas**, for being awesome. Thanks also to his **Mom** and **Dad** for teaching him what's important.

Evan's **Mom** and **Dad**, his sister**, Becky**, and his entire family for their encouragement and patience.

Virginia Ingram for setting us on our path and always encouraging us.

Omar Gallaga for his most excellent foreword and support.

Michael Nolan for believing in the value of our book and helping us make it happen.

Margaret Anderson for her guidance as our development editor.

Nathan Dosch for his expert legal review.

Nancy Aldrich-Ruenzel and the entire **Peachpit staff** for bringing the book to life.

Rich Evers for providing the introductions that made this book possible.

Hugh Forrest and the **SXSW staff** for helping us bring this issue to a larger stage.

Jim Doughty for lending his mastery of words to our title.

Paul Smith for supporting us and having a most generic name to use (or abuse) as an example.

Bruce DeBoer and **Britt Brown** for their photographic talents.

Babatola Oguntoyinbo for listening to Evan's rants from time to time.

John Ellsworth and family for their enthusiasm.

John's **Uncle Grant** for sharing his letters with the world.

Matt Haughey for sharing more about Brad Graham's wonderful story.

Our employer, **Capstrat,** for surrounding us with smart, talented people.

...and to the countless other friends and family members who provided encouragement and didn't mind us talking about death all the time.

Thanks again,
John and Evan

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Foreword

By Omar L. Gallaga

Omar L. Gallaga
Photo: Mark Matson, Austin American-Statesman

In March 2009, the authors of *Your Digital Afterlife* co-presented a "Core Conversation" at the South by Southwest (SXSW) Interactive Festival called "Who Will Check My Email After I Die?" Core Conversations are stripped-down panels with only one or two speakers and lots of audience participation. By all accounts, the discussion, which was also facilitated by entrepreneur Matt Ludwig, was a huge success. It generated enthusiastic chatter from several people I was following on Twitter, was the jumping-off point for several great blog entries on the subject of the digital afterlife, and was even mentioned on the NPR segment I contribute to, "All Tech Considered."

I missed it.

You have to understand, SXSW Interactive lasts five days and, as a local tech reporter, I try to cover it like a huge, stretched-out, hard-working blanket. The Core Conversation was held at 5 p.m. on Tuesday, the last day of the festival, and by that point I was a threadbare, tattered sheet of a man. As I blogged away on my laptop and saw that the time was drawing near for the last slot of the last set of panels of the fest, I decided to stay put in the luxurious, very fun Blogger's Lounge. A newspaper colleague of mine was already covering the panel and, I thought to myself, if the session were going to be that great, why would they stick it in that slot? It was, poetically, *an actual death slot*. I mean, come on. *Come on*.

Also, they were serving beer in the Blogger's Lounge.

One year later, two discussions on death and digital data were held in that same regrettable SXSW Interactive death slot, but this time I made sure to attend. There's nothing like living with deep regret for twelve months to encourage better decision making.

And speaking of regret…the book you hold in your hands (or are reading in electronic form) is a big ball of warnings and solutions to a set of problems that is looming large in every one of our lives. Death, inevitable, is coming for each of us, but what happens to all the data we consume and create is a question that has never been harder to answer.

Just as it's hard to care about doing regular backups for your computer until data disaster strikes, nobody enjoys thinking about where all our emails, MP3s, Facebook profiles, and tweets will end up when we go to what the TV show *Lost* might call, "The Great Sideways." (Retroactive spoiler there. Sorry.) One thing's for sure: That data doesn't just go away, as much as we'd like it to, when we are gone. And it isn't all just freely available to family members who might seek to preserve your digital legacy.

Death, inconvenient, brings with it many thorny problems in regard to privacy, ownership, and your data's value, in both sentimental and monetary measures. What exactly is a high-level World of Warcraft account worth to a deceased player's family? Should the contents of emails belonging to a soldier killed in action be bequeathed to a spouse or parents? Are there things you can do to plan ahead or should you rely on the many companies that have sprung up to help you deal with digital death details?

Luckily, you don't have to navigate the choppy legal waters or debate the moral questions around these issues; Evan Carroll and John Romano have done that for you. They offer in this book not only stories of grief-stricken people affected by these issues, but practical ways to protect your legacy and to deal with the terms of service for popular online services should you ever be in the terrible position of caretaking a loved one's digital dynasty.

It's good information you won't want to miss the way I did the first time around.

Omar L. Gallaga is a technology culture reporter for the Austin American-Statesman*, where he also writes on the blog* Digital Savant*. He's a contributor to NPR's "All Tech Considered" segments and has written for CNN.com,* The Wall Street Journal*, MSNBC.com, and* Hispanic *magazine. His own blog is at Terribly-Happy.com.*

We all die. The goal isn't to live forever, the goal is to create something that will.

—CHUCK PALAHNIUK

CHAPTER 4

The Artifacts of Your Life

You may not realize it but you're the exact cause of this cultural shift to digital things. You, along with millions of others, are creators and collectors, curating a rich collection of digital things around you.

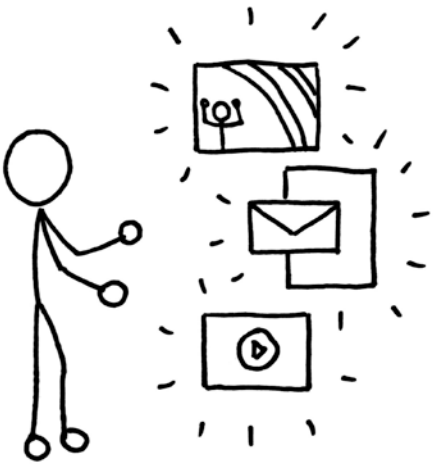
It's easy to assume that your digital things aren't significant. After all, they take up virtually no physical space and you don't see them everyday. But as you live an increasingly digital life, this collection grows. It's more than just computer data, it's a set of artifacts that has the potential to chronicle your life.

Throughout this chapter, envision yourself at the center of a digital universe of content. We'll explore each part of it, how much you have, and where it's stored.

You're at the center of a rich collection of digital content.

Digital Creations

Within the universe of your digital things, you're most closely connected to the things that you create. People have created things for centuries, that's nothing new. Digital technology, however, has changed the way we create and the amount we create. You probably create new digital things everyday, but if asked to name all those things you probably couldn't. That's because we don't think twice about many of them.



You're creating new digital things, like photos, email, and videos.

If asked to think of the things you have created, you would probably list things you spent a lot of time and energy on. Maybe it's a song or the perfectly shot photograph. These works of art are certainly things you created and are important parts of your digital content, but there's much more than that to consider.

Do you think of your Facebook profile as your creation? How about your tweets (brief status updates posted on **twitter.com**)? These new means of expression are a part of the Internet called Web 2.0 or the Social Web. It includes websites that would not exist without the content that its users create. These sites actually encourage us to create content. Some reward us in some way for our contributions. Others rely on social pressure from our friends to participate.

Individually and cumulatively, the small things you create are an important part of your digital content. Small things like Facebook status updates, tweets, and blog comments should all be considered. You probably couldn't name all of these individually, but they are connected back to you via an identifier like an email address or user name.

Of course, you need to consider the more significant digital things you create, like photos, emails, and videos too. Not to mention those things that you may have converted from analog by recording or scanning them.

Digital Reflections

In most cases, your content is not created in isolation. It's connected to others within a content ecosystem.

You create something new when you reflect upon someone else's content. And it happens in reverse when they reflect upon your content. Either way, these contributions add up to something greater than the sum of its parts.

Aggregates

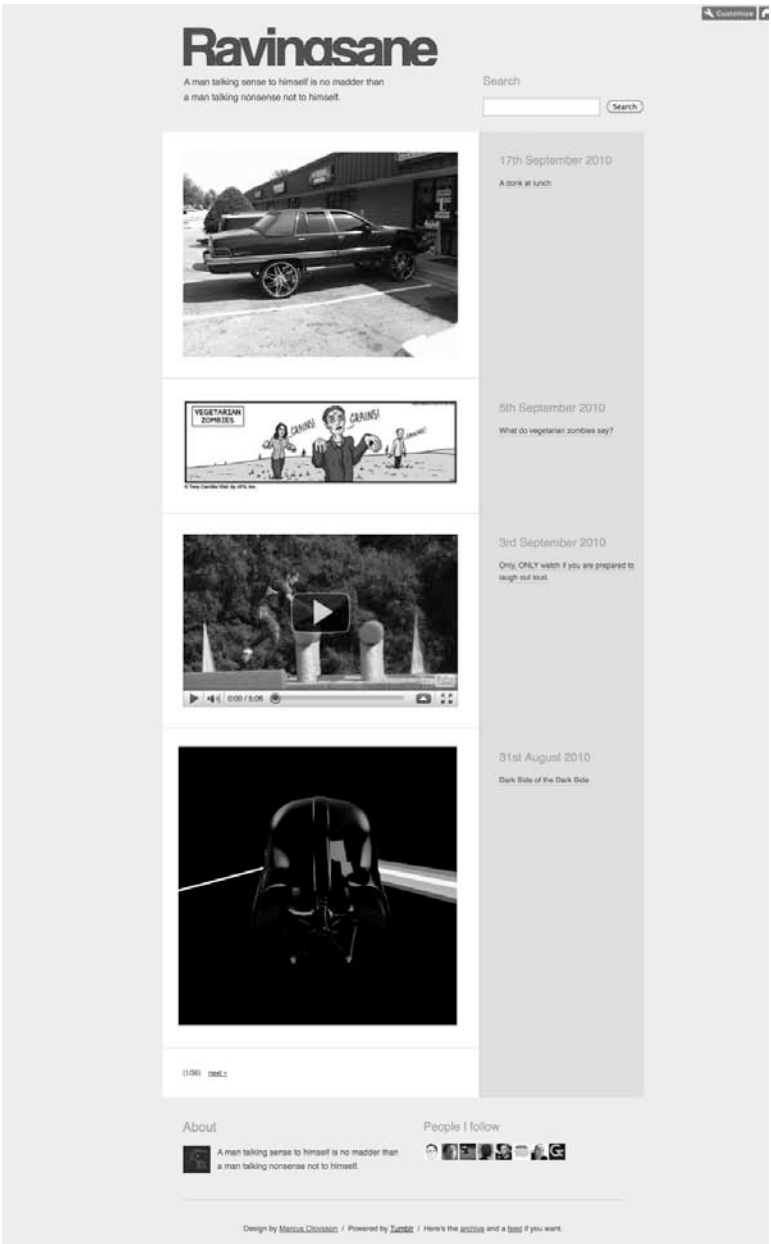
Let's say you create a blog where you post quotes, photos, and videos that you find interesting. The blog itself, as an aggregate, is a new expression even though the components were created by someone else. A friend of ours has created a blog at Tumblr (shown on page 35). The collection of entries on his tumblelog is uniquely shaped by his interests and expresses a new idea, one that's greater than the ideas that each original object expresses individually. Even if you do not have a blog, you're doing the same thing when you share a link on Facebook—perhaps to say you "like" this book. It's another way of saying that you identify with the content in question.

Shared Interactions

You reflect upon the content of others and participate in shared interactions online.

Increasingly, social websites allow us to respond to the content of others, and vice versa. The most classic example is a comment on a blog. After reading the post, you can add your own ideas at the end. Often this starts a conversation between two or more people. Your comment is clearly marked as yours, but it has a relationship back to the author of the article or to other comments. In this case, your comment is a new creation that reflects on their post and your attitudes.

Regardless of who starts the conversation, these interactions add to your own content and to theirs at the same time. Internet-based communication has given us the first reliable opportunity to document and study these shared interactions. It's helped us realize that you can learn a lot about a person from the way others respond to them. Fascinating stuff. Your participation is part of your collection. Your participation in these interactions is a creation of your own.



Ravingsane, a tumblelog curated by a friend of the authors (anonymous by request).

You should also know that these interactions are not generally as drawn-out a process as this analysis might suggest. It happens rapidly and almost without notice. Twitter is a great example. To many, Twitter is an information network. It's how they remain connected to the happenings among their friends and around the world. Let's say that you post a tweet that offers your opinion on a current event. Others who agree or disagree could decide to respond by expressing their view. Those who agree might retweet or post a copy of your message, sending your opinion out to their followers with their blessing. They are effectively aggregating your thoughts along with others into their profile. Or they might agree only in part and add their own new thoughts. Others might respond by creating new posts that disagree, but, in all cases, they have reflected on your original post.

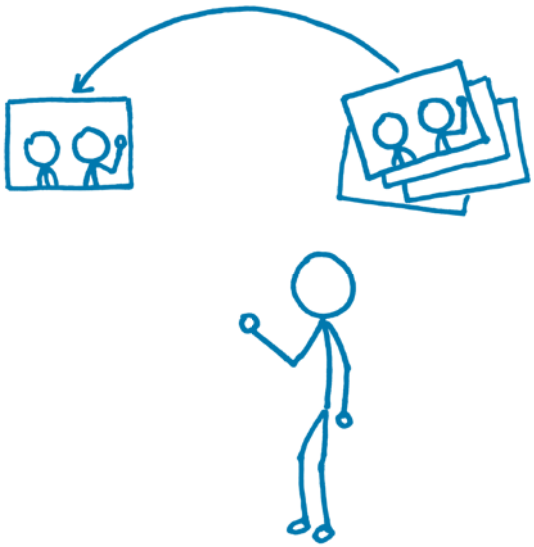
New forms of communication continue to break down the separation between creation and reflection. These acts of communal content creation stretch our understanding of ownership. But regardless of who owns it, your contribution adds to your digital collection.

Digital Collection

It probably isn't your mission in life to amass a collection of things, but you do so whether you realize it or not. We tend to think of collections as groups of things that have a specific theme. You may know people who collect physical things like coins, teddy bears, or decorative plates. In those collections one thing holds true: The collection has a theme. And the collector can easily tell you if a particular object does or does not belong in the collection.

While you may have many collections, all the things you own combined create a greater personal collection where the theme is you. You are the arbiter of what belongs or does not belong.

Increasingly, the things you gather for that collection are digital. This includes both things that you obtained and things that were sent to you. Songs you've downloaded on iTunes or email messages you've received are good examples. These things were created by someone else, but you now have a copy of them in your digital collection and your copy is exactly like theirs. That's one of the most powerful ideas about digital files: Two can be exactly the same.



You gather new things for your collection all the time. We get this content from friends, colleges, and family.

So, there you have it: The things you gather join your greater digital collection alongside the new things and reflections you've created. That sounds like a lot of content, and that's exactly the case. And, you guessed it, it's only going to grow.

How Much Do I Have?

You have a lot of data—much more than you realize. But to help you understand the magnitude, we're going to put that statement into context. Let's first break down how digital assets are measured: You can count how many items there are, and you can see how much computer disk space they take up—their file size.

File Sizes

The more content you have in a computer file, the larger it is. I'm sure you've experienced file-size limits when trying to email large files. There is a range of file sizes (see the list below), but it makes more sense to talk about size in context of things you create, like documents, photos, and videos.

Let's say that you have an 8,000-page document. That's roughly the length of this book 40 times over. That may seem like a lot, but in terms of file size it's about 80 megabytes, without any images.

As a comparison, 80 megabytes is about the same file size as 40 5-megapixel photographs. You can fit roughly 325 of those on a CD.

Let's make one more comparison. The iPhone 4 creates HD video (720p) that will consume 1.3 megabytes every second. This means that a minute of video is the equivalent of 40 5-megapixel photos.

Units of File Storage

Here's a handy list to show the increments of file storage. It all starts with a bit (b), which is the smallest piece of data, stored as either 0 or 1.

Byte (B)	8 bits
Kilobyte (KB)	1,000 B
Megabyte (MB)	1,000 KB
Gigabyte (GB)	1,000 MB
Terabyte (TB)	1,000 GB
Petabyte (PB)	1,000 TB
Exabyte (EB)	1,000 PB
Zettabyte (ZB)	1,000 EB

Your Footprint

You're probably thinking, what do these files sizes have to do with my digital collection? As we said above, it's the unit of measure for computer file size. So let's figure out the potential size of your digital collection.

In 2008 Google reported that it was processing 20 petabytes of user-generated content each day. Stephen Bulfer, CEO and founder of **LifeCellar.com**, estimates that we'll each create 88 gigabytes in a lifetime.

As of this writing in 2010, there are 1.75 billion active Internet users worldwide. Based upon Google's assertion, Bulfer calculates that each user generates 3.3 megabytes daily. With a 75-year average lifespan, that's 88 gigabytes in a lifetime. That number contains only the things you create and share online—that estimate could still be low. Considering that the content we create grows more sophisticated daily and thus file sizes are soaring higher, we can only predict that the amount of content will continue to grow.

It's difficult to quantify exactly how much data we're talking about, but consider these facts: YouTube has reported that 24 hours of video are uploaded to their servers every minute. And the Radicati Group has projected that an average of 247 billion emails are sent per day. We could go on and on naming big numbers, but you get the idea—we're creating a lot of data.

Where Is It?

Today your content probably exists all over the place. Most, if not all, of it is located either on a computer or storage device in your home or office or on a server somewhere that is connected to the Internet. In computing, we refer to storage on your computer or device as *local storage* and storage on Internet servers as *cloud storage*. Over the past several years, especially since the emergence of tools like Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube, more and more content is stored in the cloud. Let's use your photos as an example.

Your content is transitioning from physical storage to local digital storage to cloud storage.

Until ten or fifteen years ago, a photograph was a physical product that was either developed at a lab or instant, like a Polaroid. If you wanted to store your photographs, you probably put them in a box or photo album in your home. When digital cameras emerged, suddenly we could have a digital photo instantly. The product was digital and had to be stored in a digital medium. Of course, you probably printed some digital photographs, but I bet you have many, many more stored on your computer than printed.

But we're not just keeping these photos locally on our computers; we're placing them on the Web for others to view. Websites like Flickr and Picasa specialize in helping us do just that. Now we even have smartphones that allow us to shoot and share a photo in seconds.

We're pushing content into the cloud and in effect scattering our photos across numerous computers on the Internet. While this may be more difficult to manage, the ability to access them from anywhere and easily share them with others is quite desirable.

This shift to cloud storage is significant and one of the primary reasons we wrote this book. **One of many issues with preserving your digital content is that much of it does not reside on a computer over which you have direct control. Increasingly individuals are relying on websites to store their content, and that can cause numerous problems if the service goes out of business or the password is lost.** We'll talk more about these challenges in Chapter 5, The Value of Digital Things, and in the second half of this book we will help you overcome them.

Who's Responsible for It?

In short, you are solely responsible for your own digital content. As we said earlier, you're at the center of it and it's through your curation that it's all connected. After you die, those connections may cease

to exist and your collection of content can drift apart. With physical things, that's exactly how it happens. After an individual's death, the surviving family comes to the residence, divides up the possessions, and takes them as their own. Suddenly the original collection no longer exists.

You have a chance to change that. One of the unique features of digital things is that two exact copies can exist or one copy can be accessed in multiple places at one time. Your digital content can remain connected to you, but still be in the care of your heirs. It's a possibility that's quite exciting.

So What?

At this point you've considered your digital content, where it might be, how much you have, and your responsibility for it. And your next question is probably, "Why do I care?" That's a good question.

With many of our possessions in digital form and new assets continually being created, a significant and growing part of your estate is now digital. All of these digital things are more important than you might think. That's exactly what we're going to talk about next.

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