

Google Everywhere

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It all started with the search engine. I think it was sometime back in 2000, while I was working in Argentina.

I was an avid everyday AltaVista user; I found it quite useful since 1996 (when I started browsing using Netscape at the University of Geneva) and I was frankly happy with it; I was not looking for another search engine. All the others I had used were not as good, so I kept using AltaVista for years. I knew how to cope with the poor result sorting, and I would usually find what I was looking for, typically as a link buried in page 4 or 5 of the search results screen. It was like that, it took time, and more often than not, I did not find what I wanted.

However, one day I saw a colleague at work looking for something at a new search engine, called “Google”. I asked her the URL, typed it on my browser, and started to use it. I haven’t stopped since. Google was (and is) amazing. It is rather unusual for me to have to go to page 2 or 3 of the search results: I usually find what I’m looking for, right in the first page. The “I’m Feeling Lucky” button is the sign that shows how smart the backend engine is (as well as the team that created it). Joel Spolsky was among the first to notice this at the time, I think.

I used Google just like that, for a couple of years, and in 2002 I discovered the Google Toolbar. That changed a lot of things in my day-to-day workflow: it seemed stupid, but having that search box in the browser made everything so much faster! I started to include it in every browser of every computer I used, either at home or at work. But then again, I was not using Google for anything else than search. I knew that they offered other services, but I wasn’t too much interested in looking at them. What I learnt to use was the Google search syntax; I found that using “site:” and “filetype:” in my queries were simple yet powerful ways to find what I was looking for.

The IPO in 2004 made the big news. Everyone started to talk again about the web, like when Yahoo! and Netscape went public, nearly 10 years earlier. The big NASDAQ boom seemed to be so far away, and so close at the same time.

Finally, in February 2005 I was invited to open a Gmail account. And I think that everything changed that day; Gmail was so advanced (and still is!). I’ve

used Hotmail since July 1996 (I am sure to have signed up for one of the first Hotmail accounts), and I've also used Yahoo! Mail extensively; but Gmail was years light ahead of everything. At that time, AJAX was appearing as the new hot technology, and again, Joel saw Google's advance in Google Suggest.

Nowadays, I'm at Google nearly all day long:

I get informed on what happens elsewhere thanks to Google Reader, the greatest RSS reader I've ever seen;

I use Google Docs & Spreadsheets extensively for my own documents, particularly when I have to cooperate with other people remotely on the same files;

I use the latest version of the Google Toolbar in my Firefox browsers, with nearly all of the cool features turned on; for example:

I open Word and Excel files using Google Docs & Spreadsheets;

I make it handle "mailto:" links with Gmail;

I added the Google Reader button, to see if new information is available;

I keep an eye on my blog thanks to Google Analytics and the Google Webmaster Tools;

I have a personalized Google News page, with some keywords that I follow closely every day;

All of my bookmarks are now online, hosted in Google Bookmarks; this is the first time in more than 10 years that I have found a useful way to centralize all of my bookmarks and "favorites" in only one, single, accessible location (I do not use Google Browser Sync at all, though);

My personal agenda is hosted in Google Calendar;

I host a couple of programming projects in Google Code: DVD Rental and Juicy-CRM;

I use Google Talk with some of my friends, particularly if they are connected simultaneously to Gmail (that integration is awesome);

I use several of Google's services for preparing towards my Master's degree in IT:

The most important, is definitely Google Notebook, together with Firefox Google Notebook Plugin: they both allow me to put together ideas and references for new papers, and then I can export all the links and references in Google Notebook to a new document in Google Docs & Spreadsheets...;

I use Google Scholar a lot, to get links to PDF papers and reports;

Google Groups, with an amazing mass of newsgroup postings, makes a really good reference, particularly for Computer Science subjects;

My Search History helps finding links that “I knew I saw” sometime in the past, and you cannot retrieve otherwise;

I host some photos in my Picasa account (though I prefer Flickr, actually);

When using Windows XP computers, Google Desktop makes it easy to find information on the hard drive (but I do not use any “widgets”, I prefer to keep my desktop as clean as possible);

I’ve even played a little with Google Pages... actually I’ve even written a blog entry about it.

The other day I’ve discovered Google Base... so one of these days I’ll post something about it as well. :)

Just to tell you, even in my job toilets I’ve put some of the Google Testing team “Testing on the Toilet” papers, with great success!

But Google’s advance goes beyond what eyes can see; one of the key concepts in their infrastructure seems to be “MapReduce”, a whole infrastructure that allows them to parallelize complex problems in small chunks, in many different programming languages, using their server cluster to do the tough jobs. Again, Joel has written a very interesting article about it. After having worked for Microsoft, Joel is able to see the differences between Google and his former employer, and his insight is really awesome.

I think that Google makes the web a useful tool. I nowadays spend more time in front of a browser (usually Firefox, or Camino on the Mac) than using any other application. I can access all of my stuff easily, fast, without problems. It looks like “the network is the computer”, after all. Sun was right... but Google delivered it through the web.