I am done with Microsoft

This is part one of a series of articles in which I am chronicling the fact that I am cutting all reliance on any big tech company. All of these companies own our privacy, use unethical business and labor practices, and force consumers to pay more for less every year. Everyone knows this, but we’re all to dependent on them and we just tell ourselves the products and services are worth the crap that comes with them. We are creatures of habit and we are reluctant to give up stuff that we think we can’t live without. Well, I am over it. Between now and the end of the year I am going to cut my ties to Google, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft and I am going to tell you how and why along the way. I’ll also cover Apple, who you already know I am not a fan of and whom I already have no ties to, for all you fans of the fruit company who want to join me on leaving Big Tech behind.

I have two laptops. One was shipped with Windows 8, but I have been running Linux (Currently Ubuntu 18.04 LTS) on it for almost two years now. That is my primary machine, a quasi-desktop with external monitor, keyboard, and mouse attached where I do most of my work and play. Using Linux on it showed me firsthand that I’m not nearly as dependent on Windows as I thought. There is nothing I can do on Windows that I can’t do—just as easily—on Ubuntu. It is user friendly and simple. Installation seems a bit intimidating, and the terminal might scare some people, but install is really much simpler than it looks and you can do a lot without using terminal, which itself isn’t hard to learn. I have no doubt that my future desktop/laptop needs will be fulfilled by Ubuntu or another distro and I won’t feel like I am missing out on anything.

My other laptop is a Microsoft Surface Pro 4 running Windows 10 Pro and I confess that I really like it. For a while, before I replaced Windows 8 (an abomination) with Linux, the Surface was effectively my only computer as I went months without ever turning on my other laptop. Windows 10 is very good. It’s everything about the Windows I grew up on, cleaned up and modernized for the smartphone world. But it’s not the OS that has kept me using the Surface. It’s the form factor. This truly is, to shamelessly use Microsoft’s own marketing “the tablet that can replace your laptop.” I take all my notes, hand written with a stylus, on the Surface. I draw on it. I watch Hulu and Netflix on it in tablet mode. I write papers on it with a keyboard that is amazingly good considering the fact that it is a folio cover. Apple has copied with form factor with the iPad Pro. Google has copied it with the Pixel Slate. I really think that tablets and laptops are going to converge into do-it-all devices like the Surface.

I don’t want to give up the Surface’s form factor. I’m scared to take Windows off of it because, Apple-like, this hardware was built for this software and I’m not sure if I trust the pen and the keyboard to work flawlessly with Linux, though there is a thriving Linux-on-Surface community and my other laptop’s touchscreen worked no issue, so maybe I’m just a chicken. But the Surface’s design is what has kept me wed to Windows this long. Not the OS itself, which is good, though I have my issues with it, to be addressed below. I was excited when the Pixel Slate was announced because it’s an Android/Chrome Surface, which would be awesome as it would let me leave Windows once and for all. But I have since decided that abandoning Microsoft for Google doesn’t accomplish much, so my search continues. I remain hopeful that Purism or someone will release a Surface-style device with Linux out of the box. I know Linux elitists think that wiping the OS, installing Linux, and getting it to work is a ritual that makes you part of the club, but really that’s just a barrier of entry for non-techies. I can and will install it myself, but I’ll happily pay someone to do it for me and include a promise that it will work and a support team I can call if it doesn’t.

But I’m not waiting for that Linux Surface to be announced for me to decide that I am done with Microsoft. I will continue to use the Surface that I already own until it is time to replace it, but this is my last Windows device.

Why, you ask? Well, Windows 10 is good, but there’s a lot that annoys me. The fact that Candy Crush and a plethora of other crap come pre-installed, even on “clean” installs from Microsoft infuriates me. Most of this stuff can be uninstalled, which to be fair is better than, say, Samsung phones with redundant apps that cannot be removed, but still, why put it on there in the first place? Ubuntu comes with lots of useless things too, including several games, but when you go to install it you have the option to do a minimal install which forgoes all that nonsense.

Candy Crush is a nitpick. Massive Windows updates that cripple your system and delete your files is not. Windows 10 is the latest version of the OS which is supposed to fix this. Every time Windows releases a major update, Microsoft swears it fixes all the problems, every time it doesn’t. The latest Fall Update has been a disaster, to the point that Microsoft stopped the release until the issues could be resolved. Windows updates, even when they work, are intrusive, popping up right in the middle of what you’re doing. Ubuntu, on the other hand, gets out of the way. Updates also improve things, they install in the background, and the computer doesn’t restart until you’re damn good and ready for it.

These are the same complaints that Mac users have leveled against Windows for years. They are the same ones that right now Google is mocking in its Chromebook ads. They were part of life as a Windows user. I was used to them. I didn’t like them, but I accepted them. The straw that broke the camel’s back for me in Windows, though, is the fact that Microsoft is making everything “software as a service,” which is a load of crap. I was once okay with paying for Microsoft Office—though now that I use Libre Office I wonder why—but I am not ever going to be okay with paying a *monthly fee* for Office 365. Cloud? Real time collaboration? That’s great, but $100 bucks a year? Sending it as an attachment will do thank you. But Stetson, you say, you don’t have to use 365. You can still buy a permeant license of Office, a one-time fee. You can, but for how much longer? Microsoft is now talking about making Windows itself, a desktop operating system, software as a service. That’s a whole new level of idiocy and I am not going to pay for it.

Now Microsoft is bringing Alexa to Windows. Which means if you use Windows, you use Amazon. Not a good way to convince me to stay. I could go on with the numerous other scandals and issues that plague this company, but I would be lying if I said those were what drove me away. Those didn’t affect me personally, so they didn’t bother me. Which makes me part of the problem, I know, but I am going to do better. I will keep using the Surface at least for the remainder of the school year, taking notes. But I won’t be giving Microsoft another dime of my money. My next computer, whatever form factor it is, will not run Windows. I will buy a computer with *no* operating system if I have to so that I’m not paying Microsoft for a Windows license I’m not going to use. I have been a Windows user my whole life and I really like my Surface’s hardware, even if it doesn’t have the latest ports. But software as a service is stupid and you won’t convince me otherwise. Updates that do more harm than good should be a contradiction in terms, not par for the course. So from now on, I’m going open source all the way.

I really tried to be done with Google

The next in my dump big tech companies series was the hardest. I tried to stop using Google and found that I actually could not, partially because Google owns my soul and some Google services I just don’t want to give up, privacy be damned. But, I discovered that it’s actually pretty hard to be Google-free, even if you want to be.

My phone is an Android, which you probably already knew. Specifically, it’s an Essential PH-1 running Android 9.0 Pie. Yes, I live the #donglelife and this phone is pretty iPhone-like for someone who hates iPhones so much. And yes, Essential as a company is pretty much toast. My last phone was a BlackBerry KeyONE, which is truly the anthesis of an iPhone. But it met its untimely end on the corner of a concrete step earlier this semester, and I bought this phone because it was simply the best phone I could afford.

But this post isn’t about phones. It’s about being free of Google, a company which recently dropped its motto of “Do no evil.” Make of that what you will. Android, as you probably know, is owned and distributed by Google. There’s a whole feud going on right now between the EU and Google over whether or not Google has an unfair monopoly. Google’s argument is Android is free and open-source. Anyone can use it and anyone can make their own version. Which is true. I could root my phone and install, say Lineage OS, as a Google-free fork of Android. I can also install apps from outside of Google’s own Play Store. None of that is an option with Apple, with the lack of avoiding Apple’s app store being the source of Cupertino’s own monopoly lawsuit, which is currently going to the United States Supreme Court.

The problem is that even though you *can* bypass Google Play, you can’t for a lot of stuff. Downloading apps from outside of the official repository is a security risk, something which Apple users always use as a defense for Apple’s walled garden. That’s true in the same way that being in a maximum-security prison is safer than being in a national park. You are safer, but really, the park is where you want to be. Even before I decided to go Google-free I had downloaded apps from outside of the official app store. On three different Amazon Kindle Fires I went outside of Amazon’s own app store to get Google’s back on there. I’ve had updates break an app, so I went back and re-installed the APK from outside of Google Play. Recently, a lot of people learned that the Play Store can be avoided when Epic Games chose to avoid paying the Google tax and released their Android port of *Fortnite* directly from their website, again, after not being able to do so with Apple.

It’s not really Google Play, the app store, that’s the trouble. It’s Google Play Services, which lets an app know that this is an officially Google-powered device. Several apps—including apps that I really need, like my banking app—won’t work without Google Play Services. The logic here is that if you are running a version of Android that doesn’t have Google on it you may be using a pirated device. You *could,* but it’s not a given. After all, Amazon’s devices ship, warranty and all, without Google, and there’s nothing illegal about rooting your own device. But that’s how it is, and I need my banking app. So, even if you install stuff outside of Google Play, you’ll likely need Google Play Services anyway.

Still, I de-Googlized my phone as much as I could. I replaced my browser, Kiwi, which is based on Chrome, with Firefox and within Firefox I swapped Google Search with DuckDuckGo. I uninstalled Keep Notes (the artist formerly known as Google Keep) and replaced it with a notes app from F-Droid, an open-source Android app store. I made a Proton Mail account and removed Gmail. Replaced Google Maps with Waze. Replaced Hangouts with Telegram, which I was going to have to eventually do no matter what because Google is killing Hangouts for good, rest in peace.

But I’m to dependent on Google. I uninstalled Keep from my phone, but all my notes are still in Drive. I disabled Gmail on my phone and made a new email, but I still have my Gmail and the truth is I don’t think I could get rid of it, at least not quickly. It’s to tied to, well, all of my life. And some Google stuff I didn’t even try to replace. There are tons of options for a gallery besides Google Photos, but Google Photos is to damn convenient. Yes, I’d rather let Google store and see my pictures just so as soon as I take one it’s available on any device. Google’s tentacles just have to tight of a grip on me and everyone else.

Even Apple users are tied to Google; it’s the default search engine in Safari, and pretty much everyone has a Gmail account at least as a secondary account. Microsoft is pretty easy to drop, and I will drop Facebook with genuine excitement. I think Amazon will be mostly painless. But I cannot fully get away from Google. I know they are an ad company who makes 98% of their revenue by selling my data, but their services are to convenient or to tied to something critical like my banking service to live without them, as unfortunate as that is. Still, I’m sticking with DuckDuckGo, using Proton for personal emails, and watching Purism and whoever else tries to take-on the iOS/Android duopoly. I may not be Google-free, but I can try to be Google-light.

Note: Yes, I know there are Microsoft and Facebook apps on my phone. I need them for school. Facebook is gone after this semester and Microsoft after next semester.