**Is Google Evil?**

Is Google the new “evil empire?” Microsoft has long held that title for many people, especially here in Silicon Valley. Google is arguably now more important for more people and invites a comparison because of its infor-mal corporate slogan: “Don’t be evil.” Indeed, you can find many rants now on the Web that include the words “Google,” and “evil,” as well as curse words. *Wired* ran an article long ago on the topic of Google and evil.1 Wikipedia devotes a page to criticisms of Google (http:// en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism\_of\_Google). So, is it evil?

This topic has been the subject of a long and extensive Intelligence Squared (IQ2) debate among distinguished commentators (http:// tinyurl.com/yf5lkcp), but I’ve found it to be lacking and believe I can offer at least a comple-mentary perspective.

As this column’s readers know, I like to know the semantics of the words I’m discuss-ing. Because Google refers to both a company and a technology, what we’re discussing is the behavior of the former in wielding the power of the latter.

It’s fair to note that Google’s motto only directly addresses a state of being rather than a behavior. This might limit you to judging Google’s intentions or general effect on soci-ety rather than individual acts. But this motto is interpreted behaviorally by at least Google’s own code of conduct (http://investor.google. com/conduct.html) as well as one of its explicit philosophies: “You can make money with-out doing evil” (www.google.com/corporate/ tenthings.html).

What is good and what is evil depends on context and is often arguable. Is it evil to index (legal) hate sites or to censor expression on the Web? Eric Schmidt famously said that evil is whatever Sergey says it is.1 That’s not quite good enough, so let’s think about it a bit more. We need to put “evil” into a more specific context. There’s a sense of “evil” in being immoral in a fundamentalist religious sense. Fundamental religions view sex with some caution, if not out-right alarm. Pornography is considered evil in this sense. And Google allows porn advertise-ments1 — so it’s evil. Presumably, it draws the line somewhere south of illegal child porn, so it’s not all bad.

But, of course, that’s not — for us *IEEE* *Internet Computing* and Slashdot readers — aninteresting kind of evil. Our context is com-puter users and software. In particular, Google’s motto seems to apply primarily to users and per-haps only its users. So let’s look at the question of evil from that perspective.

Some of the Web concerns about Google in this sense seem overblown, such as a rant that Google is evil because Facebook emails started opening the Chrome browser for message alerts rather than the installed default browser (http:// tinyurl.com/yeyld3w). Well, annoying maybe, but not quite evil. But as usual, this was labeled evil by calling it Microsoft-like behavior, just as opposing politicians often compare each other to Hitler. So it’s instructive to consider Micro-soft’s case before considering Google.

Is Microsoft Evil because It’s a Technical Empire?

When I came to Silicon Valley in the early ’90s, the first joke I heard was: “How many Microsoft engineers does it take to change a lightbulb? None. Bill Gates just declares darkness to be a feature.” What Microsoft behavior generated such derision?

The joke really doesn’t get to the point. Yes, Microsoft software comes down from the Red-mond mount written in stone (we can’t see the source), and it’s glitchy. But that’s not evil: that’s just software.

A lot of the motivation behind the joke is that Microsoft gets so much say in our cyberlives. Personally, I try to avoid this software. I’ve begun almost every talk I’ve given in the last 20 years with the announcement, “No Microsoft products were used in the making of this presentation.” I use straight handmade (with Emacs macros) HTML that’s always read-able on the Web, even 17 years later, unlike PowerPoint.

But I have to be able to read PowerPoint,­ Word, and Excel docu-ments (with Open Office). I don’t want to: I have a pointer to www.gnu.org/ philosophy/no-word-attachments. html at the top of my home page. But I have to because so much of the world, including this magazine, runs on Microsoft Office. (I’ve given up trying to teach one person at a time to use Word to output PDFs, although ODF would be even better.) There’s no escaping Microsoft’s control, at least for a while.

Most vendors try to capture us with proprietary formats. Ever received a document in Apple BinHex? Or a Lotus Notes meeting invitation? But when Microsoft promotes a proprietary for-mat, all of us, even Linux users, have to conform in some manner. Does that make Microsoft evil?

Though hegemony is a sufficient reason for resentment, it isn’t nec-essarily evil. In a parallel universe, Pat Robertson is a warm-hearted, charitable Christian and Bill Gates is a benevolent dictator, while every-one derides Linus Torvalds for being too controlling.

Is Microsoft Too Aggressive?

Microsoft has long had aggressive business practices and been sued for antitrust violations in multi-ple countries. A lot of that can be excused as, well, successful aggres-sive business practices.

Many websites detail Microsoft’s predatory business practices. But some make the good point that this is just business as usual. We don’t like that Microsoft does whatever it can to suppress its competitors, pushing the envelope of legality and sometimes beyond. We engineers (and some prosecutors) tend not to like this, but then we don’t like many successful business practices. That’s why we’re engineers.

That said, Microsoft seems to have a corporate policy that’s con-sistently exceptionally aggressive in pursuing its own interests rather than those of its users. Because of the new threat from Google, Micro-soft seems to be working with some companies to “delist” them from Google search (http://tinyurl.com/ y9avxl4). They’re possibly going after Google with legal challenges by using “stalking horses” to disguise their intent.2

If true, this kind of behavior still might not rise to the level of evil, but it would certainly be business hard-ball that isn’t in the best interest of Internet users. In contrast, Google’s spokesman has at least proclaimed the policy: “We work hard to put our users’ interests first and to compete fair and square in the market.”2

Google might indeed be able to resist some of the worst practices

— we’ll see. But this is free market capitalism, held in check only by government laws and prosecutors. My own expectation of any pub-lic company being altruistic under shareholder pressure is low. But if you really believe in capitalism, none of this purely business behavior, by either Microsoft or Google, is truly evil. And remember that Google’s motto is directed toward users, not competitors.

Why Silicon Valley Thinks Microsoft Is Evil ? The Internet was around long before the Web became commercially pop-ular, and some ethics sprang up around the technology. One of the earliest was trust. You didn’t abuse the Internet, and you trusted users not to do so. If someone sent out spam, the proper response was for all recipients to send the spam back to the sender. When the spam war first escalated by spoofing, we all for-warded the offending message to the postmaster of the domain requesting that the sender no longer be allowed to use that address. How quaint all that seems today.

But the ethic of trust never went away: we just stopped expect-ing good behavior of random users and non-Internet businesses, along about the time that AOL became popular. We still expect our major Internet service and platform pro-viders to be trustworthy.

Part of that trust extends to another Internet engineering ethic: the best protocols and formats are adopted and made open to benefit everyone. Good engineers all see what’s good, come to consensus on it, and adhere to those sometime de facto standards. If someone (say Sun) sets up a reference architecture, you learn from it and replicate it. Bad engineers do a poor job and screw up the implementations, creating bugs that need to be fixed. But no one does this deliberately. Except Microsoft.

Microsoft isn’t evil because it imposes imperfect software on us, or because it suppresses its competitors. It’s evil from the geek perspective because it acts (intentionally or not) to impede the progress of software, going so far as to pervert standards, so that it can keep its monopoly. This basis for judging evil seems obvious to me, but I don’t see this written in any of the discussions of why Google might be evil, so I’m saying it here.

Microsoft has always played catch-up in the Internet world, starting with the development of a Mosaic-based Internet Explorer (IE) years after the world had discovered the World Wide Web. Its catch-up tactics really upset many engineers. It’s one thing to capture the market by inventing something or even building upon that invention. It’s another to try to ignore standards or, worse, pervert some-one else’s invention so that Microsoft users and developers are locked into that changed technology, which less-ens its widespread utility.

It isn’t that Microsoft killed off Netscape with business tactics that the US courts found unlawful — it’s the perception that it tried to sup-press good technology by substi-tuting perverted versions of useful Internet technology. A good example of this perception is the rant “Steal-ing the Internet” (www.kortexplores. com/node/59). There are in fact many examples of how Microsoft, with its IE product, has delayed or substituted its own non-compatible versions of Internet formats. The most famous page only worked on IE and the developers were too tied to Microsoft tools to think outside that particular box. You have your own experiences. Or just look at what cross-platform Web developers are still saying on the blogs (http://blog.seattlepi.com/ microsoft/archives/165664.asp).

Microsoft’s move to pervert Java, because the promise of testing once and running everywhere was per-cieved as a threat (rather than a joke) almost worked, too. Now to be fair, Sun (now Oracle) didn’t offer Java as open source initially (they have now, as Eric Schmidt initially wanted), and they were criticized for this behavior as well.

A widespread perception that Microsoft is reluctant to support say that Microsoft changes and pro-posals are just functional improve-ments for Microsoft users. My own view is that this is a limited perspec-tive that ignores the effect of locking users into the Microsoft world and limiting the utility of the technology to the wider world of users.

Microsoft has recently moved toward open standards, possibly because of the EU’s criticism and antitrust fine, but even that move isn’t without criticism, such as the suspicion around the new ISO stan-dard of OOXML (http://tinyurl.com/ yamgf5u). There also seems to be an effort by Mircrosoft now to redefine “open source” (http://tinyurl.com/ y9j9fmc).

Ever look at this code? Remem-ber WMA music, now that you’ve had to repurchase everthing in MP3? Ever tried to run the US Naval Observatory’s animated gif clocks in IE (http://tycho.usno.navy.mil/gif clocks.html)? How long did it take IE to support HTML 4.0 (www.alan wood.net/demos/ent4\_frame.html), PNG, and SVC as well as other tech-nologies not invented by Microsoft that might allow use of new Inter-net-based functionality across plat-forms? Still today, there are several Web technologies (such as Java­ Script) that just don’t work properly in IE when they work on all other major browsers because Microsoft has done something weird some-where in order to imprison its users.

Internet technologies and even tries to co-opt them if they prove too useful is what makes Silicon Valley engineers see Microsoft, and some-times other companies, as evil.

It’s not just Microsoft’s pervasive-ness that enables it to get away with perverting standards or widely used technology — it’s that they integrate their proprietary products so that it becomes not only convenient but even necessary to use one when you use another. Windows becomes like the La Brea Tar Pits: you get stuck to it with one limb, and then another and another, until you’re completely sucked in.

There are blogs that defend, to some extent, sometimes, Microsoft’s contributions to Internet technolo-gies (www.3doughnuts.com). If you talk to Microsoft engineers, who, after all, share the same values as other good engineers, they’ll often. If you don’t like to use Google search, there are plenty of alternatives. I would recommend www.alltheweb. com for one; otherwise I don’t use Yahoo for much. I haven’t tried Bing, but I’m sure it works well. For Google to succeed, it has to continue to be so good that you decide to use it — that’s an engineering ethic.

OK, branding plays a part in this. Google was the first really, really good search engine. As noted in a previous edition of this column3 (and many other places), the Web hasn’t ended up as the engineer’s dream in which the best offer of products or technology always wins. People often just vote based on habit rather than merit. Oh well. So, all Google has to do is to stay at least as good as anyone else. That’s still hardly evil.

Google is also keeping me as a user because they keep bringing out other useful tools, for free. I love free. (Thank you Google for free Wi-Fi in Mountain View, too, which I used to write this piece, along with Ubuntu.) And I could do without any one of these tools right now if I wanted to use something else, and I frequently use alternatives.

There might be cases in which I can only get a certain functional-ity, even a kind of search result from Google, perhaps because of some busi-ness deal. That’s not evil: that’s prog-ress. It’s arguable that there would be some cause to worry, if for instance, no other search engine could search Flash. But that’s not the case.