Book review: Enshittification

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I liked this book. I consider Cory Doctorow a good, smart writer. He can put together one good sentence after another ("this is why the roads leading to Amazon depots are littered with sealed bottles of human urine"), he can tell stories of boring things in riveting ways, and he can connect various themes and events.

This last bit was a (positive) surprise. The book is a tour of what felt a more vast universe than I imagined. Turns out, the reasons for enshittification are complex and spanning many systems. There are case studies – most you've probably heard of – but this really feels like a *book* in that each one comes with extra depth: details, detours, history. The book travels through a lot of places and teaches quite a few things: computer history, arbitration laws, stock market, history of unions. I would not be surprised if everyone reading this finds a jumping off point to dig deeper into a certain area.

I also didn't mind the tone – angry, but not *too* angry, blunt, but not cynical, with an entire section at the end dedicated to "now we rebuild" and some examples of what we're already getting right.

Only two small complaints:

The book loses a bit of steam at the end. It might be simply that suggesting improvements is naturally harder than riveting stories of Things Gone Poorly, especially if those improvements are systemic and legal. But maybe it could just be a bit shorter.

Cory Doctorow also loves coinage, which – well, justified, seeing how the word that became the book's title helped the idea travel! But there's a lot of others words around: enshitternet, disenshittification, twiddling, chickenization… There's this sentence in the book: "There's something genuinely wonderful about workers who counter-twiddle their bosses' apps and escape reverse-centaurism." There are more like it. At this point, this feels like just bad UI.

But those are smaller things. Overall, this is worth a read. To me, it added a lot more higher-level understanding of systems and processes that lead to bad software (not an altitude level I find myself in), and packaged it nicely into a story.

I'm going to finish by listing a few passages that particularly stuck with me.

Page 34:

> Companies don't treat you well because they're "good" capitalists and they don't abuse you because they're "bad" capitalists. […] Companies abuse you *if they can get away with it.*

Page 51:

> Enshittification – deliberately worsening a service – is only possible when people value that service to begin with. Enshittification is a game of seeking an equilibrium between how much people like the thing that locks them to the service (often, that's other people) and how much they hate the management of that service.

Page 106:

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> The death of competition […] doomed regulation. Competition is an essential component of effective regulation, for two reasons: First, competition keeps the companies within a sector from all telling the same lie to its regulators. Second, competition erodes companies' profits and thus starves them of the capital they need to overpower or outmaneuver their regulators.

Page 129:

> That long delay after you reach a web page but before it shows up in your browser? That's the "surveillance lag," the delay while all those [adveritising] auctions are concluded.

Okay, so maybe I don't mind *all* of the newly minted words and coined terms. This one is sharp.