Sustainable Ebook Strategy

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I love reading, and I love books; and in the 21st century, reading books means, to a large degree, electronic books. The advantages are obvious; a small ebook reader is able to hold hundreds or thousands of volumes that would otherwise be impossible to carry around. You can instantly search for text, highlight and bookmark quotes, and a lot more.

But the world of ebooks is a mess; lots of formats, vendors trying to lock-in their customers at all costs, and the eternal issue of DRM. The very idea of DRM on ebooks is an abomination, an abhorrent reality, blocking people from reading books in any way they want.

It took me a while to find out a proper combination of hardware and software to build a sustainable ebook library; that is, one that is based on open standards, able to whitstand the passage of time and the troubled waves of technology. This article summarizes my current setup and why I think it's the best for me. Maybe it works for you too.

- Hardware
- Software
- Shopping
- About DRM and Other Formats

Hardware

I have tried at least five different kinds of ebook readers: plain laptops, Kindles, iPads, Android tablets, and finally a Kobo device.

I gave up on Kindles and iPads, as each tied me to their respective ecosystem of online shops and reading experiences. I did not like either. In particular, the iBooks format in the iPad and the Kindle format for ebooks are both the same kind of cancer; something to avoid at all costs. Yes, they offer interesting layout and content options, but they are not standard.

I do not want to be in a position where my reading experience depends on the whims of a company, like Microsoft who decided to remove books from their customers' devices because it got tired of selling books. So using standard

formats is a must. I cannot even begin to comprehend how a company can behave like that.

Android tablets are unusable pieces of... technology in general (let's stay polite), so don't even bother. The quality of ebooks reader apps in Android also leaves a lot to be desired.

I tried other ebook readers on the iPad, such as Marvin 3 by Appstafarian (by far the best I've tested, sadly no longer maintained), or even the long-gone Stanza for iPhone and iPod Touch, but none actually worked for me. iOS devices have very bright screens; that's great for editing pictures, but not so much for reading books. They don't compare to e-ink devices for longer reading sessions, and in particular when reading outdoors in bright daylight.

For the past five years I've used a Kobo Aura H2O device, a fantastic, durable, affordable, simple, and quite powerful device that I use almost every day. It's lightweight, waterproof (it has come with me to the beach and the mountain), and has fantastic battery life, lasting weeks on a single charge. But most importantly, it supports ebooks in EPUB format *and* without DRM, which was a primary requirement when I bought it.

This Kobo ebook reader even supports one of my preferred services: Pocket, which means that I can quickly synchronize my reading list before boarding a train or a plane, and read it comfortably offline.

If I have to buy a new ebook reader in the future (my current one doesn't show any signs of fatigue, though) I will be able to read my collection of books without any problem, thanks to the EPUB standard. And it will probably be a Kobo device, for sure.

Software

I manage my ebook library (~900 titles at the time of this writing) with calibre. It's simply perfect: it's cross-platform, comes bundled with a great EPUB reader, and this Kobo plugin automatically converts standard EPUBs into the Kobo EPUB format, which makes many books faster to scroll and nicer to read.

The Kobo plugin for Calibre can be installed directly from the Preferences > Plugins > Get new plugins menu, and then search for "KoboTouchExtended" by Joel Goguen. Once installed, use the "Send to device" button to automatically convert EPUBs into Kobo EPUBs upon transferring to the reader.

Thanks to this plugin, I can keep my collection in EPUB format in Calibre (future-proof), and I can enjoy it in a more dedicated format (albeit proprietary) in my device. And since Calibre is cross-platform, if I ever move to another operating system, my book library will follow me intact.

Other allies in my quest for generating DRM-free EPUBs are Pandoc (great to save a whole website into a single EPUB file) and the Asciidoctor EPUB3 module for Asciidoctor, which is my preferred way to generate EPUB files.

As for PDFs, I only truly read them on my laptop. I mostly use the PDF reader bundled with Ubuntu, but on the Mac, iOS and Android I prefer using PDF Viewer made by the awesome team of of PSPDFKit assembled by my friend Peter Steinberger.

Shopping

As a principle, I do not buy books from Amazon; neither in paper nor ebooks. I use Amazon only to check the catalog and read reviews, and then I buy my books directly at the editors' websites, or, if possible, directly at the writer's website.

I think it is important to support writers directly, so when a writer offers an interesting book on their website, I buy it directly from them. It is important to to cut the chain of intermediate agents between readers and writers as much as possible.

I usually buy or download DRM-free ebooks from the following providers:

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As a side note, Standard Ebooks is a great way to read timeless classics without DRM and with excellent quality; you should check it out, and please consider making a donation if you can.

About DRM and Other Formats

I occasionally do, however, buy books from some non-Amazon bookstores with an interesting catalog online, even though they sell ebooks protected with DRM. In those cases, I remove the DRM after download, so that I can read them without restrictions in any device I want.

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support the writers and their work. And thankfully, more and more publishers are dropping DRM from their ebooks these days.

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As for the ebooks I had in the Apple iBooks format, I consider them lost. They are incompatible with anything else, and thankfully I only had two of them, anyway. I do not plan on repeating this same mistake again.