

TOP GOOGLE ENGINEER CONFESSES THAT GOOGLE SIMPLY STEALS ALL OF IT'S TECHNOLOGY FROM OTHERS

 Go to Steve Yegge of Steve Yegge
Jan 23

Why I left Google to join Grab

Note: This is my first time using Medium. Please forgive any faux pas. Also, it's pretty long even for me, so you might want to go grab a coffee. I'll wait.

Also, please note that these are my own personal opinions: I do not speak for my employers, old or new.

After nearly 13 years at Google, I have finally left the nest! Never thought it would happen. I always thought I would die at Google—maybe choking to death on one of their free chocolate brownies, or maybe finally having a heart attack over YouTube's increasingly bizarre policy enforcement. But regardless of how I envisioned the Grim Reaper catching up with me, I always assumed he'd be hauling me in surrounded by colorful furniture, free food and snacks, and slightly entitled geniuses.

It is difficult to pry people away from Google. Even after almost 20 years of operation, Google is still one of the very best places to work on Earth, just about any way you care to measure it.

I have a lot of good stories saved up that I'd love to share. Google corporate didn't much care for my blogging, and even though they never outright forbade it, I received a lot of indirect pressure from various VPs. So eventually I stopped. Sad.

But that's not where my mind's at today. Those stories will have to wait for my book. Today I just want to tell you about my new gig, because I think you're going to be amazed. In fact I think I can safely predict that no matter who you are, *something* in this post is going to amaze you.

Before I tell you about the new gig, I'll share a few brief observations about Google, to help paint a backdrop for why, of all the great companies out there, I

chose to join Grab.

Why I left Google

The main reason I left Google is that they can no longer innovate. They've pretty much lost that ability. I believe there are several contributing factors, of which I'll list four here.

First, they're conservative: They are so focused on protecting what they've got, that they fear risk-taking and real innovation. Gatekeeping and risk aversion at Google are the norm rather than the exception.

Second, they are mired in politics, which is sort of inevitable with a large enough organization; the only real alternative is a dictatorship, which has its own downsides. Politics, as ex-Google SVP Bill Coughran once said, is the best solution humanity has come up with to this problem in the past 5000 years: the problem of resource contention. So it's not necessarily bad. But politics is a cumbersome process, and it slows you down and leads to execution problems.

Third, Google is arrogant. It has taken me years to understand that a company full of humble individuals can still be an arrogant company. Google has the arrogance of the "we", not the "I". When a company is as dramatically successful as Google has been, the organization can become afflicted with a sense of invincibility and almost manifest destiny, which leads to tragic outcomes: complacency, not-invented-here syndrome, loss of touch with customers, poor strategic decision-making. So I love the people at Google; they're super smart and world class and always humble individuals, no matter how badass they are in their respective disciplines. But the company strategy is a mess.

I think this is obvious to anyone who has followed Google's public launches over the past five or ten years. Google does all sorts of things these days that leave everyone scratching their heads: Picking unwinnable fights and then trying to

force their product on us (e.g. Google+), launching products that are universally panned (e.g. Allo), deprecating and turning down well-loved services (e.g. Reader, Hangouts), launching official APIs with competing and incompatible frameworks (e.g. gRPC vs. REST), launching obviously competing stacks that don't talk to each other (e.g. Android native vs. Dart/Flutter), etc. Their attempts at innovation have been confusing and mostly unsuccessful for close to a decade. Googlers know this is happening and are as frustrated by it as you are, but their leadership is failing them.

But fourth, last, and probably worst of all, Google has become 100% competitor-focused rather than customer focused. They've made a weak attempt to pivot from this, with their new internal slogan "Focus on the user and all else will follow." But unfortunately it's just lip service. It's not that they don't care. The problem is that their incentive structure isn't aligned for focusing on their customers, so they wind up being too busy and it always gets deprioritized. A slogan isn't good enough. It takes real effort to set aside time regularly for every employee to interact with your customers. Instead they play the dangerous but easier game of using competitor activity as a proxy for what customers really need. This is where their incentives are focused. Google incentivizes successful feature and product launches, and by far the easiest, safest way to produce those is by copying competitors.

You can look at Google's entire portfolio of launches over the past decade, and trace nearly all of them to copying a competitor: Google+ (Facebook), Google Cloud (AWS), Google Home (Amazon Echo), Allo (WhatsApp), Android Instant Apps (Facebook, WeChat), Google Assistant (Apple/Siri), and on and on and on. They are stuck in me-too mode and have been for years. They simply don't have innovation in their DNA any more. And it's because their eyes are fixed on their competitors, not their customers.

To be fair, there are exceptions. Google's Cloud Spanner, BigQuery, TensorFlow, Waymo and a few others are generational innovations and will take some time for the industry to catch up with. But they do not excuse nor

justify the parade of failed me-too consumer products that Google has been launching of late.

In short, Google just isn't a very inspiring place to work anymore. I love being fired up by my work, but Google had gradually beaten it out of me.

And so, like many Googlers, I'd been thinking of moving on for a few years. But where would you go? It takes a lot to pry someone away from the best place to work on earth, since if nothing else, Google still has a pretty incredible work environment, especially for engineers.

The big name-brand tech companies are almost all operating in the Seattle area, but I think they mostly suffer from the same big-company problems. Facebook gets most of its "innovations" from acquisitions these days (Instagram, WhatsApp, Oculus). And I also don't like what I've heard about their culture, from friends who've gone there.

Amazon continues to innovate a fair bit, but they're also not above copying ideas from competitors and trying to squish the smaller ones and generally being big mean bullies. I am tempted to make fun of Jeff Bezos here, but I've heard that nobody has done that three times in a row and lived to tell the tale, so I'll, ah, quit while I'm ahead. But I spent seven years at Amazon and this time around, I was aiming for something different. Oracle, Twitter, Apple, eBay, Microsoft, Adobe, Salesforce, and the other big brands here? They all seem kinda meh.

It seems like you can only really get inspiration from startups these days, so I nearly joined a few. But none seemed just right.

So there I was, scouring the landscape for some inspiration, when I got an email out of the blue from an old Google buddy of mine, Theo Vassilakis. Theo had read the tea leaves years ago and had left Google to do his own big-data startup Metanautix, which he successfully sold to Microsoft.

Theo was writing to let me know he had just become the CTO of Grab, a Singapore-based startup with an eng office here in Seattle.

And that, folks, is where our adventure begins.

Why I joined Grab

To my lasting surprise, I have gone to war.

There is no better way to put it. I feel like I've joined a literal revolutionary war, surrounded by and fighting alongside guerilla troops, and it's win or die.

I have not been this excited about something since maybe the early days of Grok, when I was working 12+ hour days on my mini-startup within Google to revolutionize the way developers interacted with a billion-line code base. But even that was only changing the world for devs. This is so much bigger.

If you look at the heat map of tech opportunities in the greater Seattle area, from the lukewarm (Niantic, OfferUp) to the warm (Facebook, Amazon) to the hot (SpaceX, small startups), then Grab is a huge green ball of flame just about blasting your face off.

Grab is the biggest startup in the history of Southeast Asia. Grab is fighting the most important battle in the world today, on the biggest stage. I am typing this on a plane coming back from Jakarta, where I just witnessed history in the making.

I have not seen a land rush this massive since the early days of the Web, and it just might be even bigger.

So what is Grab? Well, the simple and unsatisfying answer is: They're the Uber of Southeast Asia. But that's a terrible marketing message, because Uber is trying their best to become the most hated company in the U.S. It's like touting

them as the Comcast of Southeast Asia. And it's also inaccurate because the Grab and Uber company philosophies are so radically different.

Instead of comparing Grab to Uber, let me try to thread the narrative from my view on the ground, from back when my sister-in-law Cathy and her husband Romano started a food truck. Until then, Cathy had been working at an optometrist's shop and Romano at a library, so we're talking about pretty humble beginnings. They had been saving for years to start their own business, and they had researched the heck out of it so they could be as successful as possible.

In 2012 they launched their Xplosive food truck, serving a Filipino/Vietnamese fusion menu of tasty street food, and it was about as successful as a food truck can be. They won awards, were featured prominently in major Seattle magazines, were introduced by the Seattle Mayor, landed huge catering gigs, and were even the highlight act in a video that Jeff Bezos made for his investors, about how hip Amazon was in the South Lake Union area. Xplosive's customers (mostly Amazon employees) would line up for an hour each day before the truck arrived, and would beg and plead when their full truck ran out of food after just a few hours.

Sounds like success, right? They had ridden the food truck wave at exactly the right time, and for a couple of years, food trucks were *everywhere*; they were the in thing. But early last year, Cathy and Romano abruptly sold their truck and their coveted city parking spot right next to Amazon, and quietly opened up a full-time kitchen dedicated to food delivery through Peach.

They made this dramatic change because they had their ear to the ground, so they were among the first to recognize the significance of the Restaurant Apocalypse.

Restaurants and food trucks are both about to be obliterated by Peach and Uber Eats. The whole restaurant industry is quaking over this; it's why you've seen

some big restaurants starting up food trucks. But that won't save them. The entire food truck industry is about to go tango uniform, disrupted by food delivery just as it was getting off the ground. Trucks will never disappear completely, because they can make money in local venues in good weather. But they're not where the real money is. The best profit for small business owners now lies in food delivery.

Food delivery is hitting the world like a cat-5 hurricane. You can't watch a network football game without seeing commercials about it. It is an exponentially-growing new industry built atop ride-hailing infrastructure, which itself only emerged a few years ago. The driver network can pick up food from literally anywhere and deliver it anywhere within a city-sized radius.

This idea has far-reaching consequences. It turns out that food delivery is a democratization process: It democratizes the restaurant business, creating mom-and-pop entrepreneurial opportunities that simply never existed before. Opening a restaurant is a huge, prohibitively expensive endeavor. Food trucks lowered the barrier to entry significantly, but food delivery lowers it to near-zero. Cathy and Romano realized you can literally cook out of your own kitchen to get started. They are the forefront of a new era. When this idea inevitably takes off, people are going to be able to order take-out from their neighbors, from anyone in the city who wants to cook their family recipe. It will change cuisine forever.

What's astonishing about all this is how fast we went from ride hailing to food delivery to dedicated kitchens for small business owners. In tech years it has unfolded practically overnight. From my perspective, these past few years have been filled with Google teams bickering with each other about what to launch; meanwhile, entire new industries were springing up and evolving through successive disruptors, with more sure to come.

I began this story by grouching that Google can't innovate anymore, but let's face it: Uber, Amazon and Facebook (with Facebook Takeout) all didn't see food

coming either. They just copied it.

With that context in mind, let's look at why I jumped on Grab. Because when I heard about the opportunity and finally understood its potential, I couldn't say yes fast enough.

Southeast Asia: The World's Battleground

I've painted ride hailing as a big disruptor, but hey, you already knew that. It has enraged taxi businesses around the world to the point of physical violence. It's a revolutionary change, and it has become a platform that has enabled the burgeoning and incredibly disruptive food delivery industry.

But in the U.S., people love to hate on Uber because "their drivers are slave labor." The driver has to pay for a car, maintain the car, insure it, pay for fuel, clean it, etc., so on the whole Uber is viewed as somewhat predatory. I honestly don't know how much of this is truth vs. perception. But given that millions of drivers are opting in, and given that people are generally pretty clever about optimizing their income, the economics would seem to be at worst a moral gray area in the States and Europe, and more likely a pretty good deal for most drivers.

But ride hailing isn't really changing society for the better in the U.S. and Europe. It's simply making personal transportation a bit cheaper and more accessible. The food delivery revolution is a big social change, but ride hailing itself, not so much.

In Southeast Asia (SEA), however, ride hailing is absolutely transformative and society-changing in ways that we can barely appreciate here in a country where we elect reality TV stars to the office of the presidency. The traffic in SEA is *terrible*. Aside from Singapore, the traffic infrastructure ranges from bad to terrible to near-nonexistent. (I mean, c'mon, Indonesia alone is 17,000 islands.) The credit-card industry is near-nonexistent. This is a much, much harder

problem than it is in the States. But there are half a billion people who desperately need both cheap transportation and jobs. Ride hailing provides both!

It's not uncommon for people in Southeast Asia to get jobs as drivers and make 3 to 5 times their previous income. I don't need to read some Gartner report to know this. I just have to go ask family members. My wife Linh is Vietnamese and she has tons of friends and family in Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore. We already have half a dozen family and close friends who have become Grab drivers in those countries, and *they love it*. It has changed their lives.

So unlike in the U.S., ride-hailing transport is a game-changer for the entire social and economic infrastructure of Southeast Asia, including Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. That's 620 million people—twice the size of the US, including 12 cities of 2M+, of which the US has only four. And the middle class in SEA is expected to double in a couple of years to over 400 million.

Did I mention this is a big opportunity?

After transport, you get the food-delivery wave, which is following suit exactly the way it has in the U.S. And it is growing more rapidly in Southeast Asia, because—as any Asian person will happily tell you—they love their food more than you do. Food unites their cultures in a way that's nearly incomprehensible to westerners, especially outside the large cities.

Here's the thing, though: **Transport and food are only scratching the surface.** Same-day food delivery can be generalized to same-day anything delivery, for instance. We're going to see major disruptors happening yearly (if not faster) for many years to come. Payments and financial services are up next, and they're a *staggeringly* huge opportunity.

You need to download the Grab app in order to hail a ride or order food. Everyone in Southeast Asia has smartphones, so everyone there is getting the Grab app. Which means the next step is mobile Payments. Grab is signing up local merchants—and there are millions of them who can participate—at an incredible rate, so that people can pay for stuff with their Grab app.

Why does that matter? After all, mobile payments aren't really taking off in the U.S. Visa has been pushing them for years and nobody's biting; in fact it's been a disaster. But it matters in Southeast Asia because SEA is primarily a cash economy. Fewer than 2% of adults in SEA have credit cards, and over 60% don't have bank accounts at all. There's still a deep distrust of banks, and of course there's a ton of credit card fraud, which makes the whole thing so dicey that everyone just uses cash there.

But they trust smartphones! You can thank Steve Jobs for that. Southeast Asians use smartphones possibly more than anyone else in the world. Westerners have all these stuffy conventions about not staring into your smartphone while you're eating with your family, or out having fun with friends, or riding as a passenger on a motorbike, or, you know, driving one. Not so in SEA. Everyone stares happily into their smart phones *all the time*.

SEA is a cash economy. But cash has a ton of problems. Thieves are everywhere, yes; but there is also an old-world substrate of bribery, corruption, scamming and fraud. For instance, getting into a taxi, if you're not careful, can quickly land you in a situation where the driver has no meter and demands an exorbitant fee, which he will split with the police officer who will arrest you if you don't pay up. Heck, we saw a worker today in the Jakarta airport with a company shirt that said "NO TIPPING" on the back, because in SEA there can sometimes be a fine line between tipping and mandatory bribes.

If you pay for everything with your Grab app, then all the prices are agreed and decided up front, and you don't need to carry any cash at all. So people are adopting it at a rate that's nothing short of astonishing, given how cash-centric

the SEA economy has been, literally forever. But they can “top up” their Grab account with cash, so their distrust of banks is bypassed completely.

And payments of course opens up even more verticals and services—pretty much anything you do with money these days in the West, you *cannot* do in SEA (or you can, but they gouge you on fees, which really hurts when you are poor). Payments are going to open up these verticals to everyone, even people who live out in remote villages. It’s nuts. The world is changing right under our noses.

So why do I say I’m going to war?

Well, Uber’s there, obviously. Uber is everywhere... except for China, that is, where they had to pull out because Didi was killing them for various reasons. Uber exiting China highlighted a few important things: Firstly, that **this is a winner-take-all space**, because it creates a network effect by uniting all the verticals and making competition very difficult. Exactly what happened with Didi in China. So competitors will fight until there is only one left standing. That, folks, is a fight to the death.

Another takeaway is that Uber can be beaten, when a few years ago they seemed unbeatable. Frankly I personally think Uber is gonna lose SEA as well. They’re planning an IPO and they need to clean up their books, because Uber, as we all know by now, is losing money faster than any company has lost money *in the history of money*. As one famous investor put it, the ride-hailing space can be thought of as piling huge heaps of money on a table, pouring gasoline on it and lighting it on fire. Uber is dumping *billions* of dollars into driver and passenger rewards and incentives and promotions in an effort to buy loyalty for just long enough to drive their local competitors (of which there are perhaps eight worldwide) out of business. And of course their competitors are all forced to respond in kind.

Yuck.

I honestly don't know what's going to happen, and I'm pretty new to this space so if you quote me on any of this then you're an idiot quoting a bigger idiot. But if I were a betting man, I wouldn't be betting on Uber in Southeast Asia long-term. Uber has to cut their losses soon, and they're being out-competed in Southeast Asia.

However...

There's another player in SEA, strongly resembling Grab. And they're fierce. That competitor is Go-Jek, which my iPhone happily auto-corrects to Go-Jerk. They, uh, might want to get that fixed.

Go-Jek and Grab are mortal enemies, locked in a life-and-death land war that's going to enable the biggest social and economic transformation in modern history. So even though Vizzini warned us not to do *exactly that*, I'm getting myself involved in a land war in Asia.

I have never been so excited. It didn't really hit home until my first day on the job last week. I went to a Grab leadership conference in Jakarta, and part of it was an Amazing Race where we had to book 2-wheel and 4-wheel rides to get around the city in a race with other teams. When I hopped on the back of that bike, looking up into tropical rain, and the driver headed directly into oncoming traffic and I uttered the words, "I'm gonna die", that's when I knew this was real. And when I realized I couldn't look *anywhere* without seeing a sea of green Grab and Go-Jek helmets, that's when I realized that this is outright war. This is history being made.

This war is happening on two fronts: Online and offline. Online, we have to put together world-class technology in the shortest timeframe it's probably ever been done, and the business requirements and business logic are growing more complicated by the week. And I mean literally by the week. But Grab makes smart tech choices—e.g. AWS, the Go language, Kotlin for Android. And they

don't have Not Invented Here syndrome, so they don't waste time reinventing wheels. I have every confidence that we'll win this.

Offline, there are *armies* of agents (real people) involved in expanding the network of drivers, merchants, passengers, and other participants. We're talking thousands, hundreds of thousands, *millions* of agents. I'm not going to tell you how it's happening, but those numbers are real.

Oh, and we get to build a platform. :) You know how I love those.

The whole world's attention is focused on Southeast Asia. Banks, investment firms, mega-corporations, government regulators, mafias (!), *everyone* is charging in, metaphorical guns blazing. This is not hyperbole. This morning I saw a spy photo of an Indonesian mafia-run operation: a big seedy-looking room full of guys with stacks of phones doing fake ride bookings. Amazon just launched same-day Prime delivery in Singapore. Didi and Softbank and countless others are funneling money into the key players. I'm not exaggerating in the slightest when I say the world's attention is focused right here on Grab's territory, on that network of green motorcycle helmets. Oil companies, power companies, car companies, battery companies, credit card companies, banks, international restaurateurs, tourism companies, taxi companies, airlines, retailers—dozens of major industries are going to be impacted by this land war for better or worse, and they're all fighting to make damn sure it's “for better” for themselves.

Jeff Bezos has been trying for *twenty years* to solve the last-mile problem. Back in 1999 he pulled us all into a room and told all 300-odd of us employees that Amazon was dying. This was during the spectacular inflection point in Amazon's hockey stick growth curve, and we all gaped at him, wondering what the hell he was smoking. He told us calmly that all we sold were books, music and video, and all of them were being digitized and would die soon. Right then and there he predicted the Kindle and iTunes and Amazon Instant Video, none of which emerged until years later. He said that if we didn't get into hardlines

and other businesses, we'd be dead in a few years. He told us we had to be able to sell and ship anything, a live elephant if need be. So we solved that.

But at the same time, he told us that if people couldn't get their barbecue on the same day, then we were always going to lose to the local merchants. So he set out to solve the last-mile problem: Getting your order to you within an hour or so. And 20 years later, he still hasn't solved it. Sure, yes, they have same-day delivery for a few SKUs in a few cities, and he's got AmazonFresh and some other fledgling attempts. But for essentially the whole world, the last-mile problem wasn't solved until ride-hailing networks came along.

And there is nowhere more difficult to solve that last mile than Southeast Asia. They have some of the highest population density, the worst traffic, the worst infrastructure, and the most people with smartphones who want their stuff now, now, now.

Grab is going to win this war. I know it now because I've met them, and I've met their allies, and I've met their customers. Grab has an unbelievable team. Unlike Google, who can't be bothered to descend the ivory tower to visit real customers, Grab's mantra is: **"Go to the ground"**. They constantly encourage every employee to get involved with actual Grab users as often as possible, so that as an organization they can be instantly aware of both customer needs and incoming market changes, and pivot quickly.

I can't emphasize enough how powerful that mantra is. Amazon's motto is "Earth's Most Customer-Centric Company", and they have built a brand trusted by everyone on earth. But they only interact with their customers once a year—Jeff Bezos mandates that every leader in the company spend a day a year in the customer call centers, because info relayed back from Customer Service reps doesn't paint the full picture. You have to experience it.

And Google ("Focus on the User and all else will follow") employees basically *never* interact with their customers. Amazon only puts its ear to the

ground sporadically, and Google, never.

If you want to hear the latest rumors and real customer needs, then you need all your leaders to be out talking to real customers. You can predict how innovative a company will be by watching how close they are to their customers. This will also predict how responsive they will be to market shifts. “Going to the ground” as a corporate culture is a leading indicator of innovative success. For Amazon it’s yearly. Grab is aiming for *daily*. Their employees all use Grab to commute, which provides direct contact with drivers and other passengers. (We need to find a way in the Grab Seattle eng office, somehow.)

Going to the ground is how Xplosive saw that they needed to sell their truck and start a kitchen, easily a year before anyone else. It’s how Peach realized food delivery was going to be huge before Amazon, Uber and Facebook, all of whom only learned about it from competitors. You innovate by going to the ground. And that’s Grab’s motto, which they take dead seriously.

Grab will win because they go to the ground.

I’ve seen Grab’s hunger. I’ve felt it. I have it. This space is win or die. They will fight to the death, and I am with them. This company, with some 3000 employees I think, is more unified than I’ve seen with most 5-person companies. This is the kind of focused camaraderie, cooperation and discipline that you typically only see in the military, in times of war.

Which should hardly surprise you, because that’s exactly what this is. This is war.

I am giving everything I’ve got to help Grab win. I am all in. You’d be amazed at what you can accomplish when you’re all in.

But you can’t win a war without allies.

So give me a call.

Google

Grab

Amazon

Uber

Southeast Asia