Leaving Google

I’ve been an unapologetic Android fanboy ever since Google took Linux and turned it into something that could power smartphones. Honestly, I never thought I’d see the day when I’d consider leaving Android—or Google—even as they slowly chipped away at the privacy they once promised under the motto “Do No Evil.”

But now, it feels like Google has left me behind.

TL;DR

Google’s new Play Store restrictions mean you can’t install apps from outside their store—including F-Droid and custom apps. This article explains why I’m leaving Google/Android, what alternatives I’m considering (mainly GrapheneOS and /e/OS), and the trade-offs involved. For a detailed comparison of Android alternatives, see Android Alternatives.

Other Articles

This is just one of a series I've written. Recommended order to read is:

1. Android Alternatives: Escaping the Play Store Lockdown
2. Installing GrapheneOS: My Experience
3. Apps Installed After GrapheneOS Setup
4. One Month with GrapheneOS: A Real-World Review

Problem

When Google started wanting to keep a list of my contacts, where I went, who I talked to, and continuously pushed their apps to me so they could gain even more information, I found alternatives that worked as well or better—without requiring me to give up my privacy. NextCloud (https://nextcloud.com/) (and its predecessor OwnCloud, https://owncloud.com/) let me keep contacts, calendars, and files private. Thank God I have a server at a colocation site, so I truly control that (though there are options for people who don’t have their own server). µlogger (https://github.com/bfabiszewski/ulogger-android/blob/master/README.md) lets me plot a track when I’m camping or on a long trip, and share that with friends and family without publishing it to the world (I know, Google still tracks).

I put up with the gradual erosion of privacy, but this latest move is a dealbreaker. Google has decided that, going forward, you won’t be able to install any apps that don’t come from their Play Store (see https://keepandroidopen.org/). Starting with the September update, as I understand it, I won’t be able to install F-Droid (https://f-droid.org) or any apps I just want to use, like RustDesk (https://rustdesk.com). A few years ago, I couldn’t find a vehicle expense logger I liked, so I paid a developer to build one for me. Now, I can’t even install my own app on my own phone. And I rely on the excellent, privacy-enhancing µlogger to share my location on long trips, but it’s only available on

F-Droid.

With these new restrictions and the ongoing security concerns, I've decided it's time to move on. There are plenty of alternative operating systems for phones (see the links at the bottom). I still like Android, so I'm sticking with something similar—or better yet, something built from the same code base.

One of the big concerns here is what programmers call 'scope creep.' You start off with a simple change, then add another, and another. Before you know it, the result is nothing like what you expected. Google forcing everyone to use only apps approved by them, in their Play Store, is inconvenient. Why can't developers just get their own Google account (and pay Google a fee, so they charge you more)? Then, maybe later, Google decides they don't like your app anymore because they can't make money from it, so they force you to change it or it disappears for users. I'm not saying that's definitely where this is going, but it's a real concern. Ten years ago, we all liked Google Docs, and it was convenient to have your contacts and calendars sync across devices. Now, we see the results: targeted ads, YouTube recommendations that keep you watching longer than you meant to, because they know so much about you.

Solution

After some research, I narrowed it down to two options that top my list. This might not be the right choice for everyone, but here's what I'm thinking: GrapheneOS (https://grapheneos.org/) and /e/OS (https://e.foundation/e-os/). Both have their strengths, but since I have an older Pixel—and GrapheneOS is specifically designed for Pixels (and not much else)—I'm leaning that way. The installation looks pretty straightforward, but I'm still planning to get a burner phone and test things out, just in case I break something. For what it's worth, /e/OS runs on a lot more devices, including Pixels, but I'm hoping GrapheneOS's focus on my specific phone will make the switch easier.

From what I've seen, GrapheneOS comes with almost nothing preinstalled. My big question was: would the apps I use now work without installing the Google Play Store (which is what started this whole mess)? The answer is… yes and no. Below is a list of apps I currently have installed, along with the DuckDuckGo AI's take on whether they'd work if I switched to GrapheneOS. (Full disclosure: I didn't research each one—this is just what the AI said, and it's not always perfect. I've edited the responses a bit for clarity.)

App	Compatibility on GrapheneOS
Chrome	**Can be installed** via the sandboxed Play Services, but alternatives like Vanadium (a Chromium-based browser) are recommended.
CoreNexa	**Compatibility varies**; some users report mixed results.
Davx5	**Compatible**; works for syncing with DAV services like Contacts and Calendar.
FreeOTP+	**Should work**, since it doesn't rely on Google Services.
K-9 Mail	**Fully compatible**. Open-source and works without Google Services.
Messaging	**Compatible**, depending on the platform (Signal, etc.).
Monocles	**Reports vary**; might have installation issues–check community forums for updates.
NC Password	**Compatible**; works independently from Google Services.
Nextcloud	**Compatible** (including Notes and other Nextcloud apps).

App	Compatibility on GrapheneOS
QR & Barcode Reader	**Should work** if you get it from F-Droid or another trusted source.
Stellarium Mobile Plus	**Might have compatibility issues** due to features not available on GrapheneOS.
WiFi Analyzer	**Compatible**, but some features may vary.
wX	**Mixed reports**; may not work seamlessly.
ulogger	**Not much info**; best to check user feedback for the latest status.
Google Maps	**Security issues**; consider OsmAnd or Magic Earth instead. Magic Earth has better traffic.

My biggest challenge will be finding a good mapping app, but I already use OsmAnd a bit, and Magic Earth looks like a solid option. I mostly need maps when I'm in unfamiliar areas or worried about traffic. I'll miss wX (a weather app for storm chasers), but CoreNexa is rarely used, and Monocles has plenty of competitors on F-Droid, so I should be fine there.

Stellarium is a real loss. As an amateur astronomer, I love being able to point my phone at the sky and confirm, "Yep, that's Jupiter–not Venus." But at the end of the day, phones are communication devices, and I can live without it. If I really need it, GrapheneOS does let you install the Google Play Store–they just warn you about the security risks if you do.

That's what I want: something that warns you if you're about to do something risky, but ultimately says, "Hey, it's your phone." Google used to be like that.

More details on my android alternatives search is located in this article

Next Step

I'll get a burner phone so I have a backup if needed, then I'll take my Android 7a and see what happens. I'll try to write more when I've done that, if anyone's interested.

Glossary

Term	Definition
F-Droid	Open-source app store for Android, focused on privacy and free software.
NextCloud	Open-source suite for file sync, calendar, contacts, and more—self-hosted alternative to Google services.
µlogger	Open-source location logger for Android, with self-hosted server support.
Sandboxed Play Services	A way to run Google Play Services in a restricted environment for better privacy on some custom ROMs.
Burner phone	A cheap, secondary phone used for testing or as a backup.
GrapheneOS	Security- and privacy-focused Android-based OS, mainly for Pixel devices.
/e/OS	Privacy-focused Android-based OS, supports many devices.
OwnCloud	Predecessor to NextCloud, open-source file sync and sharing platform.
Scope creep	Gradual expansion of a project's requirements or features beyond its original goals.
Play Store	Google's official app store for Android devices.

Links

Here are some of the links I used while researching. I especially leaned on Wired, since I've trusted them for other things. There were a couple more, but I lost track. Give them a read—maybe you'll come to a different conclusion than I did. Or maybe you're ready to try a Linux-based phone. There are plenty: Sailfish, Plasma Mobile, KaiOS, and many more. Too many to list, but I've made my choice.

- https://www.wired.com/story/best-android-alternatives/
- https://eylenburg.github.io/android_comparison.htm
- https://beebom.com/android-alternative/
- https://itsfoss.com/open-source-alternatives-android/

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