

The World-Changer: Steve Jobs knew what we wanted

October 6 2011, By TED ANTHONY , AP National Writer



In this Jan. 24, 1984, file photo, Steve Jobs, chairman of the board of Apple Computer, leans on the new "Macintosh" personal computer following a shareholder's meeting in Cupertino, Calif. Jobs, the Apple founder and former CEO who invented and masterfully marketed ever-sleeker gadgets that transformed everyday technology, from the personal computer to the iPod and iPhone, died Wednesday. He was 56. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma, File)

(AP) -- In dark suit and bowtie, he is a computing-era carnival barker - eyebrows bouncing, hands gesturing, smile seductive and coy and a bit annoying. It's as if he's on his first date with an entire generation of

consumers. And, in a way, he is.

It is Jan. 24, 1984, and a young Steve Jobs is standing at center stage, introducing to shareholders of [Apple Computer](#) Inc. the "insanely great" machine that he's certain will change the world: a beige plastic box called the Macintosh.

Here is the Wizard of Cupertino at the threshold of it all, years before the black mock turtleneck and blue jeans. He is utterly in command - of his audience and of his performance. All of the Jobs storytelling staples are emerging.

The hyperbole: "You have to see this display to believe it. It's incredible."

The villain: "And all of this power fits in a box that is one-third the size and weight of an IBM PC."

The tease: "Now I'd like to show you Macintosh in person. All of the images you are about to see on the large screen will be generated by what's in that bag."

He retreats into the shadows, pulls the inaugural Mac out of its satchel. He inserts a disk and boots up. Suddenly, on the screen - roughly pixelated by today's standards but, for 1984, stunning - a typeface rolls by to the theme from "Chariots of Fire." A picture of a geisha appears. Then a spreadsheet. Architectural renderings. A game of video chess. A bitmapped drawing of Steve Jobs dreaming of a Mac.

The computer speaks. "Hello. I'm Macintosh. It sure is great to get out of that bag," it says. "It is with considerable pride that I introduce a man who's been like a father to me: Steve Jobs."

Applause shakes the place. Steven Paul Jobs, basking in it, tries not to grin. He fails. The future, at this moment, is his.

It is 27 years later now, and Steve Jobs has exited the stage he managed so well. We are left with the talismans of his talent, a tech diaspora: the descendants of that original Mac. The iPod and iTunes, Nanos and Shuffles and Classics and Touches. The Apple Store. The iPhone and the App Store and the iPad 2. They are part of the cultural fabric - tools that make our lives easier and, some insist, sexier and more streamlined.

But taken together, what do they mean? Are they merely gadgets and services that sold well, that answered the market's needs for humans of the late 20th and early 21st centuries? Did Jobs' prickly perfectionism - born, some said, of outsized ego - merely create a whole run of really useful tools? Or is something more elemental at play here?

Jobs the CEO, Jobs the technologist and futurist, Jobs the inventor and innovator and refiner of others' ideas: All of them, in the end, relied upon another Steve Jobs who sewed the others together and bottled their lightning: Steve Jobs the storyteller, spinning the tale of our age and of his own success, and making it happen as he went.

From his earliest days with Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, he was a half-step ahead of the rest of us, innovating and inventing and creating and doggedly marketing it all by building a lifestyle around it. From Apple's personal computers, he harnessed the new and repackaged the existing to create something fresh, something more.

Beyond his measurable successes, though, Steve Jobs claims one spot in history above all others: He realized what we wanted before we understood it ourselves.

We wanted easy to use. We wanted to lose ourselves in what our gadgets did. We wanted sleek, cool, streamlined - things that weren't always associated with consumer electronics. We wanted the relationship between object fetish and functionality to be indistinguishable. We wanted to touch the future without seams that would yank us out of our communion with our machines. We wanted, in short, intricate simplicity.

To Jobs, the above sentences might have been commandments. They were used to denounce - in a friendly manner, but always pointed - what Apple cast as the corporate, bland chaos of the PC culture that IBM and Microsoft were creating.

In Jobs' hands those principles were potent weapons. Apple's successes and missteps are well known, but things seemed to accumulate voltage when they passed through the switching station of Jobs' brain.

"There are two sides of it. One is the interface design side. The other is his ability to persuade major media outlets and others to work with him," says Edward Tenner, a technology historian and author of "Our Own Devices: How Technology Remakes Humanity."

"His personal mystique," Tenner says, "became a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Some of it is the American penchant for big personalities. Microsoft had Bill Gates, Facebook Marc Zuckerberg. A dominant human face focuses things. Think of IBM, one of the 20th century's most influential companies: It dominated as the computer age dawned but lacked a defining figure; does it hold the same place in popular culture as an Apple or a Facebook? The Hollywood storytelling tradition, built on the American cult of individual achievement, feeds the belief in a national history of invention and innovation.

Progress by committee? Not so compelling a script, even though Apple succeeds on the hard work of thousands. But the American inventor mystique - the notion that one guy armed with a combination of a good idea, hard work, challenging conditions and a bit of snake oil, can still change the world? That's been a big seller since Eli Whitney and the cotton gin.

When it comes to Jobs, comparisons are legion. Like Edison? A little, but not really; Edison didn't understand the elegance of interfaces. Like Barnum, selling the sizzle? Except that Jobs had the steak, too. Perhaps more like broadcast pioneers David Sarnoff and Bill Paley, who realized they must harness the pipeline - the airwaves, in their case - so that the content could flow through.

In a world of corporations and committees and consultation and collaboration, Jobs personified the power of the individual to effect an outcome - or at least the appearance of it. He was nothing if not cinematic. He projected his own image onto giant screens behind him as he rolled out product after product like some microchip Merlin. He was not merely a technologist; he was a stylemaker.

Jobs "saw there was this personal quality to computing," says Paul Levinson, author of "Cellphone: The Story of the World's Most Mobile Medium and How It Has Transformed Everything."

"The attractiveness of the product . They're gleaming, beautiful objects that are physically attractive," Levinson says. "iPods are almost worn as jewelry. Who would have imagined it would have been cool to see wires coming out of somebody's ear?"

Every medium, of course, needs messages. Every container needs

content. Every gadget, to endure, needs to transcend itself and become what the people who use it dream it could be.

Imagine, in the Foghat and Starland Vocal Band days of 1976 when Apple came into existence, if someone said you could acquire all the music you could listen to in a lifetime, from the best bands, in a matter of moments - and not by ordering 10 eight-track tapes for a penny from Columbia House. Unthinkable.

Imagine if, on the day Jobs introduced the Mac, someone said: Hey, wanna watch "Risky Business" on this screen that looks like a thick piece of paper? And we can read magazines and newspapers AND play Missile Command while we're waiting for it to - what's the word? - "download." Preposterous.

Sure, we had downloaded music and even movies before iTunes; yes, we had been digital when it came to reading before the App Store. But again Apple stood in the intersection of utility and desire. Those services helped free content from physical format and let it go where people were.

When Jobs introduced the iPhone in 2007, his sexy-beast patter made a great point of identifying the three fundamental gadgets that people sought out: the music player, the cellphone and the Internet-access device. The iPhone, he made great hay of saying, was all three.

Apple didn't just want to make money from things it made; it wanted to make money from things others made - to be a distributor of content through its devices. So if you want The New York Times on your iPad, Apple gets a cut. If you want premium Weather Channel maps, Apple gets a cut. If you want the Beatles or "Harry Potter" and you get `em on iTunes, Apple gets a cut.

Put another way: Jobs built a tech company, then left. When he came back, the landscape had changed enough that he decided, hey- this should be a media company, too. The Internet era had arrived and the two notions had grown together. And there Steve Jobs stood in the middle, getting it - and controlling the conditions of distribution to benefit Apple, much to content companies' irritation.

"Asking if something is a media company or a tech company is now irrelevant. Media is technology. Technology is media," says Dale Peskin, a principal at We Media, a Virginia firm that studies how media, technology and society are changing each other.

"The distinction," he says, "has become nonsensical."

In one episode of "Mad Men," the ad-exec main character, Don Draper, builds a campaign around Kodak's slide projector, which the company calls the "photo wheel." Draper understands that what resonates is not what the gadget does; it's what it means that's important.

"There's the rare occasion," he says, "when the public can be engaged beyond flash - if they have a sentimental bond with the product." And lo: Draper rechristens the photo wheel the Carousel - because, he says, "it lets us travel the way a child travels - round and round and back home again, to a place where we know we are loved."

What Don Draper did with the slide projector in fiction, Steve Jobs did with technology in the real world. He constructed meaning from desire.

"What are we, anyway? Most of what we think we are is just a collection of likes and dislikes, habits, patterns. At the core of what we are is our values, and what decisions and actions we make reflect those values,"

Jobs said in a Playboy interview in 1985.

For Jobs, it was about harnessing the here and now with devices that propelled you into the future - the one "Star Trek" and "The Jetsons" promised, where gadgetry lived alongside us without devaluing humans in the process.

As eulogies pour in, it's easy to conclude that Apple was Steve Jobs and Steve Jobs was Apple. The reality is far more complex. Teams upon teams of creative people built the company's dreams and hid its seams.

But on the inside, dictatorship, however benevolent, tends to be more efficient than democracy. And looking from the outside, the charismatic front man trumps communal, incremental progress. Genius may indeed be 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration, but selling genius to the masses - well, that ratio is probably far more balanced.

There is criticism that Jobs was an amplifier, a conduit of others' originality. But he understood how to turn raw ideas into applied, coveted tech. "People always knock him for building off other people. But he knew what to do with it," says Leander Kahney, editor and publisher of the tech blog Cult of Mac.

He made people believe his reality was the one they desired. He convinced us of what we couldn't live without, then packaged it and sold it to us. With a sales sensibility drawn from the 19th century, he sold us the 21st. Which did he do more of - nuts and bolts or smoke and mirrors? Does it matter? Aren't both necessary for what he and Apple accomplished?

In the end, these things are true: a beige plastic cube with a gray screen and a slot in it changed computing. A tiny box that stored bits and bytes, helped along by a virtual store that sold digital files for 99 cents each,

changed music. Another tiny one-button box that did hundreds of things changed phones and media. And a flat, paper-sized slate, a latter day tabula rasa, is still changing all of the above in ways we haven't yet measured.

David Gelernter offers insight into the Jobsian personality in "Machine Beauty: Elegance and the Heart of Technology," his 1998 book. "We believe implicitly that the scientist is one type, the artist a radically different one," Gelernter writes. "In fact, the scientific and artistic personalities overlap more than they differ, and the higher we shimmy into the leafy canopy of talent, the closer the two enterprises seem."

On a recent lunch hour in Cupertino, de Anza Boulevard, which runs right through the campus of Apple headquarters, is full of pedestrians - the acolytes of Jobs. Stop at a red light and watch as they cross. Invariably, each one carries a device. A woman is engrossed in what's on her iPad. A young man is chatting on an iPhone. Three people wear earbuds with white cords snaking into various pockets. One is singing.

Here's the funny thing. Three days later and 3,000 miles east, an urban crosswalk produces the same sight - human beings interacting with the fruits of the Apple tree, doing what they do with Jobs' vision of progress, integrating his gadgets and their contents into everyday life.

Was he inventor? Salesman? Entertainer? Visionary? Those questions miss the point. Like his devices, [Steve Jobs](#) was a medium that led us to other destinations - the ones of our own choosing. That's what made him different. He's gone, but the future he saw is still, quite literally, in our hands.

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Citation: The World-Changer: Steve Jobs knew what we wanted (2011, October 6) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-10-world-changer-steve-jobs-knew.html>

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