

Steve Jobs: think different

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The precise nature of Steve Jobs's influence on the early 21st century will be a fruitful vein of debate for years to come. One of the more interesting questions is whether he really was a genius without whom the Macintosh, and then the iPod, the iPhone and the iPad, would never have existed – and Pixar would never have prospered – or whether (as John Naughton discussed when Jobs retired in August) he was a Napoleon, a man whose greatest invention was himself.

There is a persuasive case to be made for the second argument. Jobs did reinvent the role of CEO as messiah, a man of such charismatic individuality that he could make the anonymity of his black turtleneck and black jeans into a brand as universally recognisable as his products. The Napoleon argument rests on the Tolstoyan claim that Napoleon's greatness was in fact a role imposed upon him by the faith of his generals, a part he had merely to act. In the same way, it's said, the Steve Jobs legend rests on the tireless creativity of the 50,000 Apple employees who laboured over the features that marked out each successive act of genius: his contribution was in the sales, not the substance.

It is unquestionably true that Jobs's first skill was his capacity to persuade: the ability to create what was called at first unkindly and then admiringly a "reality distortion field". But no one would suppose the monumental self-belief that had him blagging microchips from HP as a teenager was all there was. As one obituarist notes, he turned the reality distortion field into reality. And that was about more than the fanatical attention to detail, the relentless pursuit of excellence and the obsessive passion for design by which he will also be remembered. Other people had seen that the digital age was not, or not only, an incremental technological advance but in fact an opening to another reality. Jobs' contribution was to see that it could be a world to which everyone had access, and then to make it happen. Apple products were not office tools, they were instruments of fun: what you would expect an ex-hippy to want in his own coat pocket. He reimagined the technology as a high street product, and then, as Alain de Botton observed, remoulded our sense of what we need in order to be happy.

Early admirers argued latterly that his very success had become a betrayal of both his own and the internet's original genius. The astonishing creative chaos of the first digital age was, like any other technology in history, falling prey to the controlling greed of its early innovators. In Apple's products Jobs had created not so much a unique combination of art and utility but rather the perfect vehicle for commercial ambition. That, though, would not have been by accident.