

FREEDOM STEW

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

“What are you going to say about Steve Jobs?” everyone has been asking me – or at least, the rare subset of people who know about this column and are also sufficiently co-located to bump into me in restaurants and bars. “Important guy...he changed the world...must be lots to mention...”

Actually, I wasn’t planning on saying anything. There are certainly many people out there writing about the passing of Apple’s enigmatic founder. What could I add? I never met the man. But most of the commentary isn’t really about personal reflections anyway – it is about Apple’s role in the greater culture, and I can certainly comment on that as well as anyone, having lived through 100% of it from my vantage point out in the ether.

Steve Jobs had a vision for taking extremely complex things and coaxing them into a state of supreme simplicity. For that alone he will surely be remembered, and his skills were so profound that, yes, it really might be appropriate to use a word like “genius” to describe him. He had a remarkable ability to transform a very pure vision of simplicity into actual, concrete objects.

But this sympathy for simplicity isn’t really where the eulogists are stopping. Many of the commentaries take the position that Steve Jobs “liberated” or freed us from the world we knew before he arrived. When I heard somebody on National Public Radio refer to Jobs as “Moses in a turtleneck,” thus equating him with the revered biblical figure who liberated the children of Israel from oppression, I knew I needed to step in. Why would I even have this column if not to comment on such things?

The word “Freedom” has many definitions. One is the ability to move about without feeling hindered or tethered to a specific place or pattern of life. In this sense, Steve Jobs was certainly an agent of freedom in our times.

Another, more fundamental, way to look at freedom is as a state of immunity from the control of government or cultural forces – an idea that is crystallized in concepts such as “freedom of speech” and “freedom of expression.” The Western ethos is spring-loaded to respond with nearly religious affirmation and zeal to images depicting this form of freedom, but actually, this form is quite unrelated to anything Steve Jobs was doing.

A big part of the Apple experience is about muddling these distinctly different forms of freedom into a big stew, so that you can talk about one kind of freedom by appealing to the innate sensibility and desire for the other kind. Steve Jobs wasn’t alone in embracing this type of marketing – the 1960s, in which he and I spent our formative years, were full of commercials offering “liberation” through choosing the correct soft drink or cigarette – but Steve Jobs was really, really good at it, and he was also really bold about *how* he did it.

The best example of this artful stirring of the freedom stew is the weirdly futuristic “1984” Super Bowl television commercial, in which the gray, regimented world of George Orwell’s dystopian classic explodes to life as a single full-color amazon in orange track shorts throws a hammer through a jumbotron image of Big Brother. Many commentators cite this commercial, which announced the first Apple Macintosh, in their testimonials about Steve Jobs’ magnanimous and liberating effect on the culture. The guy on NPR went so far as to say that, after years of consideration, he has come to the conclusion that this commercial was really true. Seriously, though, it had nothing to do with reality, unless you happen to be gullible enough to imagine yourself as one of the gray people sitting in front of the jumbotron, in which case you shouldn’t really be acting as a spokesperson on the nature of freedom.

George Orwell wrote the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a reaction to the dehumanizing effects of totalitarian governments – he wasn’t really interested in the freedom to point with a mouse or the freedom to choose a font that suits your personality. Even a moment’s reflection would reveal that the hapless conscripts marching through the tubes in the commercial wouldn’t really be yearning for a graphic user interface on their home PC.

To this I will add that the image of a teenager twirling around in a field of flowers with an iPod on does not seem particularly freer to me than the image of a teenager twirling around in a field of flowers *without* an iPod on. Not that I have anything against the iPod, but can we keep freedom out of this?

Joe

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