STEVE JOBS DID NOT CHANGE THE WORLD, BUT BILL GATES MIGHT

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Category: Observations

A great deal has been written this week about the sad death of Steve Jobs at the age of 56. There is no doubt about it, he was a remarkable man who had a huge impact on the electronics industry. From the Apple 2 home computer, through the original Mac and up to the iPod, iPhone and iPad, Jobs pioneered technological innovation that was beautiful to look at, easy to use and very functional. It often took years for the Windows world to catch up with stuff that the Macintosh could do straight out of the box. Perhaps the most obvious demonstration of the quality of Apple products was the sheer devotion which they attracted among their users. I can't think offhand of any other organisation where a video of the CEO announcing a new product launch would attract as much attention as Jobs' presentation of the latest iPhone/Pad/Pod.

But did he change the world? A lot of commentators of have that he did, but to . be honest that's either hyperbole or just ignorance.

The majority of the world's population are far too busy making a living and putting food on the table to afford the high-end consumer goods that Apple produces. Those who can afford mobile phones or computers will generally go for cheaper, less-fashionable brands. Viewed from the perspective of the whole world, Apple design and produce wonderful, expensive toys for rich people. They have changed the way that some people work, they've brought new words to the English vocabulary (podcasting) and they have pioneered a catch up race in phone design, they may have brightened up your life, but they didn't change the world.

So what about Bill Gates? Conventional wisdom pits him against Jobs as the opposite pole of the computer industry; Microsoft versus Apple, Windows versus Mac, Gates versus Jobs.

No, I don't think that Windows changed the world even if I do use it every day; personal computing was always going to take off , with or without Bill Gates. The advances of the last thirty years did not depend on any one individual.

But there is one way in which Gates might truly change the world; he is giving his money away. For years, he was the richest man on the planet, but through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation he is donating the vast bulk of his fortune to good causes around the world and encouraging other gazillionaires to do so, too. One thing they are investing in is malaria vaccines. If a cure for malaria can be found, this will change the world in a way which no shiny white telephone could ever do! Take a look at this.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not criticising Steve Jobs, he was a great man and his greatness went far beyond his contribution to technology (take a look at this video for an example of his broader insight). However, I am criticising those who give a prominence to technological play-things that they simply do not deserve. In a world where people are dying through hunger, warfare and preventable diseases the choice of an iPhone or Android, Mac or Windows, just doesn't matter.