



Return of the Jaded

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..... Events in the PC market have all the elements of a good Hollywood movie. Yes, that's right, a movie. While making a Hollywood movie about the PC market and its executives might sound far-fetched, it really isn't. After all, the actions of capitalists occasionally serve as grist for Hollywood scriptwriters. Look at *Wall Street* and *Jerry Maguire*, for example. If Michael Douglas and Tom Cruise can keep audiences interested in an ambitious, overpaid, self-absorbed stockbroker or sports agent, just imagine what they could do with some of the personalities who head major software companies.

If Hollywood could make a film about the PC industry, what would it look like? My speculation is that the PC business would resemble a science fiction trilogy. Even though science fiction movies usually contain exploding spaceships (which are much more engaging than imploding business plans), it sometimes seems as if Bill Gates is from another planet.

More to the point, such movies can actually teach us a few things about the way commentators describe recent market events. But to get the point, you must suspend disbelief for a moment and consider the following reviews of three possible future films.

Soft Wars

This campy comedy laced with a few tragic undertones captures the imagination of many moviegoers for its heart, originality, and good intentions. The film

focuses on the adventures of the lead character, Jobs, a calculating, socially adept, self-absorbed entrepreneur of the street. Jobs possesses a touch of flair, an ego the size of Connecticut, and a boyish desire to be at the center of the future.

The movie borrows many themes from old western capitalist ideals about an individual entrepreneur pursuing a dream, but in a new twist, translates these themes into a suburban garage in a remote valley on a Silicon moon. There Jobs and his buddy, Woz, dream of achieving glory by fomenting a quixotic revolution against the established order known colloquially as the empire.

The revolt against the empire is more than just a business proposition to Jobs; it is also a social statement. In the empire, all the soldiers wear the same blue suits with red ties and loafers, eat Shredded Wheat for breakfast, golf regularly, and do not recycle. In contrast, Jobs and his followers never wear ties, start their mornings with Pop Tarts and a latte, jog sporadically, and know how to separate cans from bottles. Many moviegoers can identify with Jobs' socially liberating creativity and irreverence. Others identify with his status as the outsider battling the stultifying order of the establishment.

The film has dramatic tension, lots of action, and several outrageous business prospectuses. With the help of his friends, Jobs launches several missile attacks from his garage. Calling these the Apple I and the Apple II, these attacks get

the attention of some mid-level managers in the empire.

Then, tragedy strikes! Just as the audience begins rooting for Jobs, he meets a jobsian fate. The Apple III explodes on launch. Next there is a poignant and melodramatic rescue of Princess Lisa, an obsessive love interest of Jobs. Unfortunately, this rescue comes too late, and Lisa dies. The Lisa episode leaves Jobs vulnerable to doubts from his backers, who are also growing tired of his histrionics. Besides, most of them were perfectly happy to see Princess Lisa snuffed. She was not that pretty, and there wasn't that much under the hood, either. Nobody was ever sure what Jobs saw in her.

In the climactic scene, Jobs tries to delay a revolt from the faithless by launching his most creative attack yet, which he calls the Macintosh. But the revolt happens anyway. In the midst of it, Jobs utters a prophetic line, "If you strike at me, I will grow more powerful than you can possibly imagine." Most audience members have no idea what Jobs meant by this, but as with anything Jobs says or does, it oozed panache.

Audiences are riveted by this movie. It contains a mix of personal hubris, higher ideals, and unexpected irony. Indeed, critics have dissected the final scenes ever since the movie's release. Jobs is banished from his company, which subsequently acquires many trappings of a corporate setting. The credits roll as a man in a gray suit sells Jobs' last great prod-

uct as if it were soda. Is this irony or tragedy? The product begins to sell successfully, planting the seeds for the spread of recycling and the ultimate destruction of the empire.

Return of the Jaded

This film chronicles the same events as in *Soft Wars*, but they are viewed from the perspective of Bill, a calculating, socially awkward, self-absorbed scion of an established family. Bill possesses a bad haircut, an ego the size of Connecticut, and a boyish desire to be at the center of the future. The film makes no social statement.

The story opens with the empire's generals sending a few managers to clean up the mess caused by Jobs' explosions. They disapprove of Bill's haircut and his attitude, but they overlook it because they are in a rush. They hire Bill on a temporary contract to help with the cleanup. The film contains a comic subplot that revolves around the tension between Bill's demeanor and his handlers' needs.

While an insolent attitude like Bill's will later lead to good music and bad haircuts among those in Seattle who do not have trust funds, in this film it sparks a series of hilarious confrontations. Much to the dismay of the empire's generals, Bill insists on disobeying orders. Yet, at every turn, the empire finds it cannot get rid of him. Most audiences laugh heartily as the empire's managers make Chaplinesque mistakes, as Bill escapes every banishment attempt.

The film's defining moment occurs one night when Bill has a dream. In it, he meets Yoda, a new-age Jim Henson puppet, who looks like a mix between Buddha and Kermit the frog with age spots. Yoda tells Bill about reaching a "jaded night," the most enlightened state any programmer can hope to achieve. Yoda declares the film's main theme: "To have a jaded night, a programmer must do what is good for the industry, not what is good for his company. He must use the force of open standards."

Bill wakes up in a sweat after this vision. "Open standards?" thinks Bill as he shivers at the thought, "What a radical

and senseless act." Then Bill pauses and reconsiders. "But what the hell? I don't have stock options in the empire, and it might lead to some profitable opportunities for me in the future."

In broad daylight, Bill puts an open software standard into the empire's systems. This soon wreaks havoc in many far-flung corners of the universe. Movie audiences enjoy watching the farce unfold, as the empire's managers flail against a force they cannot control. Indeed, in another hilarious act of buffoonery, the empire's generals design a new weapon, the OS/2 Death Star and invite Bill to help them build it! (Most audiences find this part of the movie utterly implausible but suspend disbelief readily enough anyway.)

As Bill sabotages the empire's Death Star, a rebellion forms. It is composed of anyone who had ever been slighted by the empire's managers—which is almost anyone who does not wear a blue suit and has not tasted the sweetness of an Apple. Bill emerges as the unlikely leader of this new rebellion, which lives in a galaxy of open standards.

The final scenes involve a dramatic battle loaded with exploding egos. The rebel alliance's attack is intelligent, compact, and indelible. The empire appears to have better weapons and more resources, but its attack is slow, clumsy, and misdirected.

Many audiences cheered the decline of the empire, but found the movie's ending somewhat unsettling. Bill helped accomplish what Jobs set out to do—that is, loosen the grip of the empire on the universe—but Bill did it with the help of open standards and not with any higher ideal in mind. Additionally, there was never any chance Bill could become a teen idol for anyone except other socially inept geeks. Bill, to put it bluntly, holds no appeal for mass audiences.

The Empire Strikes Back

This sequel is more notable for the story behind the movie than the movie itself. The producers and financiers, desperate to move the film forward, ceded creative control to Bill in the middle of filming. Bill

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then released several new versions of the script, and each new rewrite left less room for other actors. There were whispers that many of the other actors found Bill to be heavy-handed.

The movie is set several years later in the open standards part of the galaxy, as uncertainty fills the air. There is an uneasy truce between the empire and the open galaxy, which has just launched attack 3.1. The members of the open galaxy endlessly debate how to overthrow the empire, while the empire plots to regain universal hegemony with a rebuilt Death Star.

This film introduces a new foil for Bill named Garey, who claims to speak for millions. At the start of the movie, Garey threatens to report Bill to the Umpire, also known as the DOJ (the Department of Jaded). Bill, tired of Garey's whining, orders him to be frozen in ice, which leaves a permanent scowl on the latter's face. While Garey is totally and utterly unlikeable, audiences enjoy his tirades. Some movie critics see Garey's role as analogous to that of Greek mythology's tragic Cassandra, who carried the truth of impending doom to an unhearing audience. Others see Garey just as Bill does—as a fool in lawyer's clothing.

At the start of the film, Garey visits the DOJ, initiating an investigation. Garey's visit ends with him in a huff, as the DOJ finds Bill guiltless of any transgression. The DOJ then writes a consent decree, which does nothing.

With the DOJ in retreat, Bill is free to do as he wishes. What will he do next? Many of Jobs' original followers are stunned by Bill's success and resist joining his rebellion. Yet, many friends of Bill's parents resist joining his rebellion too, unsure of the reliability of a boy with a bad haircut.

Bill then makes a fateful decision and announces it to the papers. He reveals that he has built a new Death Star with 95 windows. It looks remarkably like the

empire's OS/2 Death Star that Bill helped build and destroy in the last movie. In a press release Bill declares: "My ship is good for the industry. It recycles many old programs, shreds data like never before, and includes golf in the standard package. These are exactly the functions that many users have requested." Many of Bill's parents' friends are impressed.

This announcement brings dissension to the open galaxy. Garey screams betrayal. The remainder of Jobs' followers plan a rebellion, but their plans lack gravity. Many users choose to worship the Sun, joining another open standard run by a band of eunuchs. Always practical, Bill forms an alliance with the Sun worshippers against the empire, secretly vowing to destroy them as well. The feeling is mutual. The Sun worshippers secretly vow to sue Bill at the DOJ again.

The movie ends as Bill's transformation becomes complete. The empire signs a peace treaty with Bill. The empire agrees to abandon their own Death Star, making room for the ship with 95 windows. Both sides release press announcements describing the treaty as "win-win." As a final gesture, Bill announces that he is getting married, building a castle, and taking up golf. Bill's parents are relieved; he is embracing his heritage!

Even though it lacked the flair and originality of the previous movies, audiences flocked to see this big-budget spectacle. Yet, many viewers complained about all the loose ends. Would they have to return in three years for an update?

Indeed, as it was released, this movie started rumors about more sequels. The latest rumor says that Bill prefers a script called *Gone with the Windows*. This movie is set during a civil war, but largely takes place at a coffee plantation inhabited by Sun worshippers. Rumor has it that Bill's minions pick a fight with the eunuchs over the making of cappuccino. Bill's Death Star then turns the java into dry roast. Unfortunately, it is difficult to be more precise about Bill's plans, because, as usual, Bill has refused to share the details with anyone who lives more than 15 miles in any direction from Redmond.

There is also talk of making *Back to the Future-IV* in which Jobs returns to his company to recapture his past. This suggestion appeals to the many people who are desperate for an alternative to Bill. There are reports that Bill will financially back this project because he needs a few new ideas from Jobs.

Lessons learned

What do we learn by looking at the PC industry through the lens of science fiction movies? Bill Gates and Steve Jobs are both odd and unprecedented figures, to be sure, but the activities of capitalists make for good movies only in rare cases. Movies need plots. Plots must have character development and stories. It is a stretch to fit real events into these requirements. In other words, the PC's market battles do not begin and end according to any schedule, nor do the wars follow any script in which the actors change, learn, and mature. Indeed, fights may simply go on and on; they do not have to end before newspapers grow tired of reporting about them. Reality does not need to fit into a movie script.

More to the point, even when market events are entertaining, their *raison d'être* is not entertainment. Yet, only the entertaining stuff, such as dramatic personal triumphs and quirky confrontations, makes headlines. Such reports are amusing and gripping, but they reveal more about the archetypes and stereotypes reporters use to tell stories about our world than about anything actually happening. It makes one wonder how often reporters get frighteningly close to turning real events into fiction. Sometimes it is enough to make an observer jaded.