Steve Jobs and the Distortion of Reality

The Steven Jobs story, it is said, can be told as a drama in three Acts. In Act I, "The Rise" (1975-1985), Jobs and Stephen Wozniak co-found Apple and introduce the world to personal computing. In Act II, "The Fall" (1985-1996), Jobs is forced out of Apple and becomes involved with NeXT and Pixar. In Act III, "The Resurrection" (1996-2007), Jobs returns to Apple (which buys NeXT), sells Pixar to Disney, and oversees the creation of one hit product after another, most recently the iPhone.

The Jobs-Wozniak pairing can, in some ways, be compared to other successful business relationships, such as Morita-Ibuka (SONY), or (to a lesser extent) Bentley-Wedgwood (Wedgwood Pottery), or even Fujisawa-Honda (Honda Motor Co.). In each case, although their contributions overlapped, one partner focused on business, the other focused on technology. At Apple, it was the engineering genius Steve Wozniak ("the Wizard of Woz"), not Steve Jobs (b. 1955), who designed the circuitry and computer code for the Apple I and Apple II, which launched the personal computer revolution. Similarly, Jobs later relied on Woz or others for the architecture of the Macintosh, or the aesthetics of the iMac and the iPod. But the visionary Jobs has always been notable for the intensity of his own involvement in technology and design, as well as his deal-making skills and his ability to generate excitement in the marketplace. Like an evangelist, the charismatic Jobs has created true believers, founding something of a technological cult.

It was so from the beginning. As a young college dropout, Jobs talked Atari, the game company, into hiring him as a technician, by "borrowing" his friend Woz's credentials as an engineer. Then, at nights, he snuck Woz into Atari to play games like Pong and Gran Trak for free. In return, Woz helped Jobs with technical solutions for work problems. When Jobs was asked to design a new game, called Breakout, he secretly turned the job over to Woz. He said that his boss had promised $700 if the game were designed with less than 50 computer chips, and $1,500 if the chip count dropped below 40. And they had only four days to do it. For four long nights in a row the two young men slaved away, with Woz working a day job at Hewlett-Packard as well. They were at the 42-chip level when their time and stamina ran out. Both men fell ill from exhaustion. But Woz's design was brilliant, the game was a huge success, Jobs paid Woz $350, and Woz was happy.

Many years later, it was reported that Jobs had actually been paid several thousand dollars for the design. Apparently, he had given some of the balance to a commune in Oregon, and kept the rest. In the meantime, at Atari and Apple, Woz had produced work for Jobs that (to use a favorite Jobs expression) was "insanely great."