**Apples and Aesthetics**

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Apple products have inspired many devoted fans, and the iconic logo of a stylized Apple with a bite out of it has become one of the world's top brands. Many people paused to pay their respects to Steve Jobs, co-founder of the Apple Computer company who passed away in early October. Impromptu memorials appeared in front of Apple stores where people left messages, many expressing a sense that Steve Jobs had changed the world.

The Apple computer company had modest roots. Steve Jobs dropped out of college, a decision he shares with other successful computer entrepreneurs like Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and Bill Gates of Microsoft (a pathway I don't normally recommend for my own students). Steve Jobs eventually met up with the "other Steve," Steve Wozniak, who designed the hardware and operating system for the original Apple computer. Together they formed the Apple Computer Company in 1976, working out of Jobs' family garage. From there the company quickly grew with its popular Apple II personal computer. Out of nostalgia, I have kept a dusty but working [Apple II+](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apple_II_Plus) compatible computer under my basement stairs, a relic from the early days of personal computers.

In the 1990s Apple moved away from the bland beige box that defined the original Apple computer to a series of stylish new products. The new iMac was introduced in fun candy-coloured cases and sales began to climb. The iPod, with its iconic white cord and earbuds, launched Apple into consumer electronics. Later, the introduction of the chic iPhone merged the cell phone and music player with an internet access device. More recently the svelte iPad was introduced, a device somewhere between a smartphone and a laptop which we didn't even know we needed. Each of these new products was launched by Steve Jobs, dressed in his signature black turtleneck and blue jeans showcasing each new product to an eager audience of fans.

These products are not without their issues. Personal electronic devices can isolate us from our immediate surroundings and are a source of distraction. The rapid obsolescence of devices has exasperated the e-waste problem (there has been a new iPhone released for each of the past 4 years). We are bombarded by glitzy marketing campaigns, and people camp out in front of Apple stores to be the first when a new product is released. Certain devices have become associated with success and status. There is much to critique.

However, this does not take away from the fact that many Apple products are examples of good design that takes into consideration aesthetic norms. The aesthetic norm deals with the notion of delightful harmony. In his book Art in Action, Nicholas Wolterstorff considers the example of a spade and suggests that a spade serves its purposes well if it consists of two things: first, it must be good for digging holes; but second, it should be satisfying to use for this purpose. The area of human-computer interaction (HCI) is concerned with making the interface between humans and computers, like Wolterstorff's spade, "good and satisfying to use." Apple products have not only been functional, but elegant and intuitive to use. In 1984, when PC’s were still running clunky command-line interfaces, the Apple Macintosh emerged with a mouse and a graphical user interface. Later, the iPod featured a novel click wheel, and the iPhone brought an intuitive touch screen interface. Computer manufacturers can learn from Apple, and many have mimicked their products and designs.

Donald Norman, a former vice-president at Apple, wrote a book called [The Design of Everyday Things](http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?ttype=2&tid=5393). In this book he looks at the design of things ranging from telephones to faucets and light switches. Using doors as one example, he explains how the design should provide intuitive cues signalling whether a door must be pushed, pulled, or slid open. Have you ever walked up to a door and tried pushing, only to discover it needed to be pulled? The problem is not you, but a poor design giving improper cues. If simple things like a door need a sign like “push” or “pull,” the design has failed. A good design links aesthetics and usability. A classic example of poor interface design is the time-setting feature on old videocassette recorders (VCRs). For years a flashing “12:00” was a common sight on VCR displays in many homes.

Under Steve Jobs Apple become highly profitable. But the motivation to strive for good design should not be limited to making a profit. Good designs are a concrete way to show care for customers and users. Christian engineers and computer scientists can concretely show love for their neighbours by keeping aesthetics and usability in mind when designing new products, whether they be doors or digital devices.