20 years ago, Steve Jobs built the “coolest computer ever”—and it bombed

Enlarge / This G4 Cube ran for several years as a headless server until succumbing to the thermal issues that plagued the device from launch. It’s now a decoration in Managing Editor Eric Bangeman’s office.

reader comments

261 with 159 posters participating

Share this story

This month marks the 20th anniversary of the Power Mac G4 Cube, which debuted July 19, 2000. It also marks the 19th anniversary of Apple’s announcement that it was putting the Cube on ice. That’s not my joke—it’s Apple’s, straight from the headline of its July 3, 2001, press release that officially pulled the plug.

The idea of such a quick turnaround was nowhere in the mind of Apple CEO Steve Jobs on the eve of the product’s announcement at that summer 2000 Macworld Expo. I was reminded of this last week, as I listened to a cassette tape recorded 20 years prior, almost to the day. It documented a two-hour session with Jobs in Cupertino, California, shortly before the launch. The main reason he had summoned me to Apple’s headquarters was sitting under the cover of a dark sheet of fabric on the long table in the boardroom of One Infinite Loop.

“We have made the coolest computer ever,” he told me. “I guess I’ll just show it to you.”

He yanked off the fabric, exposing an 8-inch stump of transparent plastic with a block of electronics suspended inside. It looked less like a computer than a toaster born from an immaculate conception between Philip K. Dick and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. (But the fingerprints were, of course, Jony Ive's.) Alongside it were two speakers encased in Christmas-ornament-sized, glasslike spheres.

"The Cube," Jobs said, in a stage whisper, hardly containing his excitement.

He began by emphasizing that while the Cube was powerful, it was air-cooled. (Jobs hated fans. Hated them.) He demonstrated how it didn't have a power switch but could sense a wave of your hand to turn on the juice. He showed me how Apple had eliminated the tray that held CDs—with the Cube, you just hovered the disk over the slot and the machine inhaled it.

And then he got to the plastics. It was as if Jobs had taken to heart that guy in *The Graduate* who gave career advice to Benjamin Braddock. "We are doing more with plastics than anyone else in the world," he told me. "These are all specially formulated, and it's all proprietary, just us. It took us six months just to formulate these plastics. They make bulletproof vests out of it! And it's incredibly sturdy, and it's just beautiful! There's never been anything like that. How do you make something like that? Nobody ever made anything like that! Isn't that beautiful? I think it's stunning!"

I admitted it was gorgeous. But I had a question for him. Earlier in the conversation, he had drawn Apple's product matrix, four squares representing laptop and desktop, high and low end. Since returning to Apple in 1997, he had filled in all the quadrants with the iMac, Power Mac, iBook, and PowerBook. The Cube violated the wisdom of his product plan.

It didn’t have the power features of the high-end Power Mac, like slots or huge storage. And it was way more expensive than the low-end iMac, even before you spent for a necessary separate display required of Cube owners. Knowing I was risking his ire, I asked him: just who was going to buy this?

“That’s easy!”

Jobs didn’t miss a beat. “That’s easy!” he said. “A ton of people who are pros. Every designer is going to buy one.”

Here was his justification for violating his matrix theory: “We realized there was an incredible opportunity to make something in the middle, sort of a love child, that was truly a breakthrough,” he said. The implicit message was that it was so great that people would alter their buying patterns to purchase one.

That didn’t happen. For one thing, the price was prohibitive—by the time you bought the display, it was almost three times the price of an iMac and even more than some PowerMacs. By and large, people don’t spend their art budget on computers.

That wasn’t the only issue with the G4 Cube. Those plastics were hard to manufacture, and people reported flaws. The air cooling had problems. If you left a sheet of paper on top of the device, it would shut down to prevent overheating. And because it had no On button, a stray wave of your hand would send the machine into action, like it or not.

In any case, the G4 Cube failed to push buttons on the computer-buying public. Jobs told me it would sell millions. But Apple sold fewer than 150,000 units. The apotheosis of Apple design was also the apex of Apple hubris. Listening to the tape, I was struck by how much Jobs had been drunk on the elixir of aesthetics. “Do you really want to put a hole in this thing and put a button there?” Jobs asked me, justifying

the lack of a power switch. “Look at the energy we put into this slot drive so you wouldn’t have a tray, and you want to ruin that *and put a button in?*”

But here is something else about Jobs and the Cube that speaks not of failure but why he was a successful leader. Once it was clear that his Cube was a brick, he was quick to cut his losses and move on.

“A spectacular commercial failure”

In a 2017 talk at Oxford, Apple CEO Tim Cook talked about the G4 Cube, which he described as “a spectacular commercial failure, from the first day, almost.” But Jobs’ reaction to the bad sales figures showed how quickly, when it became necessary, he could abandon even a product dear to his heart. “Steve, of everyone I’ve known in life,” Cook said at Oxford, “could be the most avid proponent of some position, and within minutes or days, if new information came out, you would think that he never ever thought that before.”

But he did think it, and I have the tape to prove it. Happy birthday to Steve Jobs’ digital love child.

This story originally appeared on wired.com.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1694275