

AlbertMohler.com

Happy Fifth Birthday, iPod — The Little White Box that Redefined Cool

Tuesday, October 24, 2006



Have you ever wished a machine a happy birthday? Consider this machine: “It weighs 6.4 ounces and consists of a few layers of circuit boards and electronic components, covered by a scan of white polycarbonate and stainless steel. It’s slightly smaller than a deck of cards. On the front is a screen smaller than a Post-it note, perched over a flattened wheel. It doesn’t have an on-off switch. If you didn’t know what it was, you might guess that it was a sleek, high priced thermostat, meant to control temperature in a high-priced condominium.

A very sexy detached thermostat that feels very good when you palm it. But you almost certainly *do* know what it is — a portable digital music player that holds an entire library of tunes — because it is the most familiar, and certainly the most desirable, new object of the 21st century.”

That is how author Steven Levy describes the iPod, now the iconic technology of the 21st century. Apple Computer introduced the first iPod on October 23, 2001. Just five years later, 65 million iPods have been sold and the technology has redefined entertainment, restructured the sale of recorded music, unleashed programming from a broadcast schedule, and redefined cool. Not bad for a little white box that is just five years old.

In *The Perfect Thing: How the iPod Shuffle’s Commerce, Culture, and Coolness*, Levy explains that Apple did not set out to develop a portable music player. Instead, the iPod grew out of the company’s “Digital Hub” strategy. The main thrust of this strategy was to make the Apple Macintosh computer indispensable to an individual’s entertainment and computing needs. The iPod flowed out of this strategy.

Now, even five years later, Apple controls over 70% of the digital music player market. Interestingly, Apple’s iTunes digital music technology predated the development of the iPod. In just a few short years, Apple redefined personal entertainment and the sale of recorded music. After all, that little white box can hold a lifetime music collection.

Much of this is due to marketing, of course. After all, Steve Jobs, Apple’s chairman, is a master at marketing “cool.” As Levy explains, “Jobs builds his brand the way Michelangelo painted chapels.”

Over the last half decade, the iPod has progressed through through several phases of development. The original iPod, now updated through several generations, has been joined by a product line that includes versions such as the iPod shuffle, the iPod mini, and the iPod nano. With every stage of development, the nano seems to get faster, smaller, more sophisticated, and more cool. The coolness factor is central to the iPod project. Its shape, feel, user interface, appearance, and accessories are all intended to convey a sense of coolness and bestow this quality upon the user. I am, therefore iPod.

Some now suggest that the iPod has changed human social behavior. Shopping malls, airplanes, and even some classrooms are filled with persons whose ears contain the miniaturized earphones that transport the iPod’s treasury of music into the ears. In some high schools, hooded clothing has been banned from classrooms, because students used the hoods to hide the earphones.

Social isolation is indeed made possible by the iPod. Users can effectively tune out the world around them. As Andrew Sullivan once observed, watching pedestrians in New York:

There were little white wires hanging down from their ears, or tucked into pockets, purses or jackets. The eyes were a little vacant. Each was in his or her own musical world, walking to their soundtrack, stars in their own music video, almost oblivious to the world around them, these are the iPod people. Even without the white wires, you can tell who they are. They walked down the street in their own MP3 cocoon, bumping into others, deaf to small social cues, shutting out anyone not in their bubble.

Don't get Sullivan wrong, even as he made this observation he admitted that he had joined "the sect of the little white box worshipers."

As is always the case with technology, this revolution comes with a mixture of both promise and peril. The promise is truly amazing. Just a century ago, most persons lacked any opportunity to enjoy the pleasure of recorded music. For most, the only music they heard was the music they or others around them made. Their musical exposure was limited, local, and occasional. We are now the first human generation to be able to carry an entire collection of bands, artists, orchestras, and musical traditions in a machine that easily fits in a pocket.

The technology also brings its own perils and temptations. There is the very real danger of social isolation, and this is true not only on the streets of New York City. In far too many homes, teenagers are able to tune out family life as they retreat into their own enclaves of entertainment. Furthermore, as the iPod has added video and photographs to its entertainment package, the technology becomes a potential platform for pornography as well as for operatic productions. Who knows what lurks in the iPod your teenager cradles like a life-saving device?

In any event, the iPod has brought great pleasure and incredible possibilities to its users. Even as we now take this technology for granted, it is healthy to reflect upon the fact that the iPod is only half a decade old. Will some new and unforeseen technology have become so ingrained in our lives just five years from now?

So, happy fifth birthday to the iPod. I celebrated the iPod's birthday by loading several dozen new selections into my music library. Now, my iPod is armed with a whole new arsenal of music. It was the least I could do in recognition of such an auspicious occasion.

Thanks to [Bob Kauflin](#) of [Sovereign Grace Ministries](#) for reminding me of the iPod's birthday and to [C.J. Mahaney](#) for reminding me to feed my iPod. Mission accomplished, guys. Check out Bob's blog, [Worship Matters](#).

