Missives to the Future

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A lot of Jazz from the 20’s and 30’s gets played in my office, and I often reflect on its ability to entertain and inspire though the ages. Non-amplified transducer-based analog wax-cylinder playback became amplified, multi-tracked, digitally-based media presentation, and through this entire transition in technology, process, and distribution, the power, art, and energy of those musicians long gone in the flesh still carry through. Every technology is a tool, what we do with that tool is what matters in the long run.

It doesn’t matter what kind of art you practice, from speaker design to plumbing, how you express your skill in your craft is what defines your legacy. Clean, elegant (yes, in the engineering sense) design rings strong and true in the work created to anyone who encounters it. One doesn’t need to know hydro-engineering to appreciate the Hoover Dam, and one does not have to be an artist to enjoy a well-made sidewalk. That goes as well for things from embedded systems to remote sensors; if you put your best into the design it will demonstrate your skill and creativity to any who choose to look.

There is a difference between utility and functionality that goes beyond simple ability. The iPod was on the surface a basic music player, yet its creators’ reach in design scope and execution beyond the device made it a game-changer. How they envisioned the product’s functionality outside of the box with a support ecosystem and a clear user interface that allowed full use of that functionality was as important to its success as the device itself.

You can do it too. How does your project fit into the application space it addresses, and where does it fit in the product ecosystem? How can you expand that utility beyond its direct application space? If an embedded system, how can you ease integration issues to help your fellow engineers design it in? How can you ensure that the engineer working with your system can implement all of its functionality in their design? If a finished product, how can you expand (with a mind to cost, of course) its functionality set to encompass more of the application served? How can you provide the user with a way to easily access device functions and use the

product better?

What you create does impact the world around it. We must all strive to ensure that our creations not only serve their intended purpose, but also represent our best efforts to serve the greater space around it. By doing that we create a legacy for ourselves and our industry that we can be proud of.

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