
the perfect product

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Have you ever wondered why all of a sudden a product's sales boom irresistibly, without any real explanation? People flock to stores to buy it, to cinemas and theatres to watch it. People talk about it in bars, offices, homes. Peer pressure becomes unbearable. Families split in factions fueling endless debates, friends discuss for hours in front of lowering levels of alcoholic beverages. Love. Hate. Passion. Indifference. Numbness.

Enter the world of **Harry Potter**.

This marketing phenomenon has swept the market like magic (pun intended), turning kids into readers and parents into kids. It has single-handedly revitalized the book industry (or so it seems) and spawned the well-known endless array of puppets, toys, videogames and paraphernalia that seems unavoidably attached to any commercial success these days.

Last but not least the movie industry has jumped on the bandwagon (Mr. Spielberg, no less) and produced a fairly boring movie that has nonetheless charmed nations across our round and vast world. Ok, maybe make that the *western* world.

And the question is still: why?

A disclaimer

I'll be honest right up: I am obviously not the right person to give a real, scientific, proven answer. I won't even try to, mind you. What follows are just a few theories slapped together without any respect for their origin and/or theorists.

This might even end up being *deja-vu* for all I know. In that case I'll quickly admit being known for coming up with ideas that other people have expressed much better than me before I have.

But I'll still forge ahead and try to put together a few thoughts, hopefully keeping you interested in the meantime.

More rambling

So, where to start. Yes, products. Needs. Marketing. Chickens and eggs. Who came first?

Well, who cares.

What we are talking about here are products of a slightly different nature, products, you see, that people want anyway. Products and services that people want without knowing, that seem to become indispensable in such a short time that you cannot *not* consider becoming part of the game, unless you live in a cave on a mountain that is.

Think Swatch. Think cellular phones. Think Harry Potter.

What makes these "products" such a hit, beyond any hype that eventually starts to arise around any blatant commercial success, beyond

the social and cultural barriers they seem to bridge and ignore?
 What makes grandmothers press ridiculously tiny buttons to sms their grandchildren 160 puny characters?
 What makes a 40 years old Italian man walk into a book shop and lay down 15+ euros for a book about a British kid wizard and his friends?

Curiosity (killed the cat)

Just to make sure I don't come across with the wrong impression I'd like to point out right now that I like the books and I feel indeed part of the Potter-loving crowd.

But what makes me curious is instead considering what are the inherent qualities of the Harry Potter product that have made it what it is.

When I say "product" I mean Harry Potter as a brand, a relationship between a name and people, consumers, users or however you are inclined to call us human beings.

Take the books for example.

Are they well written? Are they masterpieces of English literature? Do they set new standards for their quality? Will they be standing side by side to William Shakespeare's works in the far far future? In a hundred years? Well, I doubt it. Honestly.

Consider the story itself then.

Does it touch themes that no one has ever approached before? Parallel worlds, magic? The revenge of the weak and clever in a world that seems to value and worship beauty and money? Good over evil?

These topics have been written about ever since humans started to carve runes in clay blocks.

The plot thickens

Let's all take a side step now.

Enter chaos. Theories.

Originated at the beginning of the 1900's, chaos theories have become well-known for offering new tools to study natural, social and economical phenomena.

I'll leave any in-depth enquiry to you, patient readers.

For the purpose of this article I'll focus on a core concept that originates from chaos theories, that of the *attractor*.

Liberally quoting from [Judy Petree's "Chaos without the math"](#) pages:

"A chaotic system is sensitive to initial conditions and causes the system to become unstable. Chaos studies the interdependence of things in a far-from-equilibrium state. Chaotic systems are unpredictable and if these systems are perturbed either internally or externally, they will display chaotic behavior and this behavior will be amplified microscopically and macroscopically.

Complexity or the edge of chaos yields self-organizing, self-maintaining dynamic structures that occur spontaneously in a far-from-equilibrium system. When a complex dynamical chaotic system becomes unstable in its environment because of perturbations, disturbances or stress, an attractor draws the trajectories of the stress, and the system is propelled either to a new order through self-organization or to disintegration.

And from [Kelleen Farrell's "Graphing non-linear equations"](#) pages:

Pictures often provide more information than equations can offer. By graphing points, mathematicians can study the behavior of a mathematical model and the system it models. By graphing the points of non-linear equations (that describe chaotic systems), scientists hoped that they could understand the system more fully.

There were no discernible patterns at first. It appeared that points appeared at random positions and had no relationship to each other. But, using computers, mathematicians were able to create a vast number of points to graph. Eventually, they discovered that the system settled into a pattern. Although no point repeated itself, (affirming that the system was unpredictable) all points stayed within the boundaries of the pattern. In addition, it seemed that the patterns revolved around a central area that appeared to attract the points, like a vortex attracting everything to itself. These images were called strange attractors and were the first images of the order lying within these dynamical systems.

So basically what this all means (or what I make out of it) is that if you consider a chaotic system, attractors are boundaries for all the possible values of the parameters that describe the system's status. A behavioral pattern if you will. Order out of chaos.

Well now, how would you perceive humans to be?
And the social, cultural and economical environments they have always created?
Did you think "chaotic"?
Yes. I agree.
Now, as we proceed please remember these concepts. Thank you.

The next step

We looked at chaos and instability, now let's turn 180 degrees. Let's talk about things that haven't changed much in at least the past 4-5 thousand years, say...**human beings and what matters to them.** If you consider mankind from the point in time when it started leaving painted and written signs of its thinking and history you might be urged to say that we have evolved quite a bit. Maybe even changed profoundly. But if you change the level of "granularity" of the analysis and move to the emotional level, to what really still matters to all of us, you will soon realize that we are still standing where our ancestors stood. Leaving red marks in dark caves.

Consider Greek tragedies and soap operas. Consider what makes you, as an individual, feel good about yourself. Love, safety, food, shelter. Primary needs and emotions are still exactly the same, layered with a coat of cultural grime that thousands of years of civilization haven't been able to thicken that much. We are still moved by the same basic drivers, we are very often puppeted by our genes and memes to behave like the monkeys we still are, under our expensive fabrics and carefully stitched animal hides.

I'd like to go one step further in this lo-fi dissertation. Imagine taking a few terms that somewhat describe the way our need-based, still primitive mind works. I am not talking about well-proven

psychological theories here, I am referring to a common-sense-based approach, lining up just a few key words, coupled in sets of opposites. Take for example complexity/simplicity and risk/safety. Now let's agree on a 10 steps scale that goes from opposite to opposite:

Complexity ----- Simplicity
Risk ----- Safety

I again leave it up to brighter minds to come up with other, more meaningful sets.

What I wanted to do was not listing all the possible terms but just to have a few examples ready to use for the next paragraph.

Let's pick a moment in history now, any time, any place.

I'll choose September 4th, 2001, Italy.

That's the day my former employer, Razorfish Milano, decide to cease activities in Italy, in case you were wandering.

My idea is that you can probably describe how my colleagues felt that day by positioning their emotions on the "scales" I described above.

They just lost their jobs: was their "risk need" high or low? And their "simplicity need"?

Now move up in granularity again, what about the city they were in, Milano? What about their country at that point in time? Where was the risk/safety need meter positioned in that period for the Italian population, for Europe, for the western world?

I guess we can all imagine playing this game, mapping in these terms the overall "inclination" of a culture towards certain needs.

This is obviously an always-changing dynamic, chaotic balance we are talking about. The meters move constantly, sometimes violently.

Think about the western world's risk/safety need meter on September 10th 2001 and then about the same meter at the end of the day after.

1+1=5

Now let's go back to the fact that we said that on a basic level humanity has not changed much.

Do you still see from the start of civilization the need meters fluctuating, charting humankind's emotional inclination in a never-ending dance of continuous movement?

Very good.

Now imagine the meters stabilizing for a few fleeting moments in a given configuration, moving ever so slightly, attracted around a set of values that define a need pattern for that period of time.

Chaos. Attractors. Small fluctuations. A behavioural pattern.

What if somebody by will or chance creates a product or a service that matches that need pattern perfectly? How would you think people would react?

Yes, they'd flock to libraries, toy stores, cinemas. To buy it.

A product. A *perfect* product. An attractor. Harry Potter.

The little wizard, again

So I guess the next question is now: "Well then, tell us what is the need pattern that made Harry Potter such a success".

To that I answer: "I have no idea".

I can somehow guess a few of the needs that the Potter phenomenon answers to.

A need to hope that there's a parallel world where good dominates evil, or where evil gets defeated by children's innocence and purity.

A world where a-technological simplicity wins over scientific complexity...and the medium that started it all (a book) also resonates here.

Again I believe that pointing the "what" is not only difficult or impossible, it just isn't the point.

What I have un-scientifically hinted here is that there are some very basic emotional drivers at the basis of our consumption patterns. Drivers that have nothing to do with marketing plots and hype.

Marketing can in these cases only stare in disbelief and then ride the wave. I am not saying that it has no effect, I am just saying it would not matter that much.

That's all folks

All's well that ends well and this is it, I am afraid.

This paper has no real conclusion, it was simply meant to leave a small seed, maybe even inspire you to go the next step.

But stay with me for the infamous last words.

Do I think somebody can predict the need pattern attractor and design products and services that sell by themselves? No. Chaos theory tells us that.

That's where genius comes into play.

But I won't go there. This time.

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