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At premiere of General Magic doc, tech icons consider the future

During a filmic celebration of a legendary startup, and Silicon Valley's past, tech VIPs reflect on the industry's current uncertainty and where things are headed.



Richard Nieva July 27, 2018 1:13 p.m. PT



Left to right: Andy Hertzfeld, Bill Atkinson and Marc Porat, co-founders of General Magic.

Richard Nieva/CNET

As the credits rolled at the premiere for "General Magic," a new documentary about a seminal but little-known Silicon Valley startup of the same name, the darkness of the theater was punctured by phones suddenly lighting up, one by one, like a field of stars. After an hour and a

half of being disconnected while the movie played, people were beginning to check their phones, as if by reflex.

It's a scene that plays out in probably every movie theater in the world. But on Thursday night at the California Theater in San Jose, California, where the film made its Silicon Valley debut, the occurrence illustrated the real legacy of General Magic: Because of that company, our phones are our lives.

The film follows the ambitious '90s startup, spun out of Apple, that set out to create the world's first mobile computer -- with apps, mail and a touchscreen. The device it came up with, called the Magic Link, ultimately failed to sell. But it laid the groundwork for Apple's iPhone, which ignited the smartphone revolution, and for Google's Android operating system.

The rest is history.

And history is what this film, directed by Sarah Kerruish and Matt Maude, is all about. Founded in 1990, General Magic was a Murderers' Row of tech talent. It included CEO Marc Porat; Andy Hertzfeld and Bill Atkinson, already legends from their work on the early Mac team; and youngsters Megan Smith and Tony Fadell. Smith would go on to become a vice president at Google, then chief technologist of the United States under Barack Obama. Fadell would become the "Godfather of the iPod" and play key roles designing the iPhone. After that, he founded Nest, the maker of smart home devices, which sold to Google in 2014 for more than \$3 billion.

In the case of Smith and Fadell (both with acne and long brown hair), it's a glimpse at tech superstars before they were industry heavyweights. It's like seeing young LeBron James in "More Than a Game," the documentary chronicling his high school career.

As stacked as the General Magic team was, though, the company ultimately failed. It was plagued by a lack of focus. In one scene, Hertzfeld, a co-founder, laments all the time he put into designing a digital coin-flip feature, instead of doing more mission-critical work. The company also suffered from being too early. The internet was only beginning to emerge, and chips weren't nearly as powerful as they are today.

"Our naivete was empowering," Atkinson said in an interview. "If we knew how expensive it would be to build, we would have given up."

But as much as the film is nostalgic, it also seems fitting for the present moment. What grew from the roots of General Magic is now a topic of intense scrutiny. The tech

industry is facing a reckoning for its scale and influence. Giants including Google and Facebook are in the crosshairs of lawmakers, who blame the platforms for not doing enough to prevent abuse by Russian trolls who tried to interfere in the 2016 US election. Facebook is also in the hot seat over data misuse by Cambridge Analytica, a UK-based consultancy that harvested personal information from 87 million Facebook users.

As industry veterans who've seen the sector rise to arguably the most powerful in the world, they've got a good perch from which to reflect on the current climate.

"I'm aware of problems I never considered before," Hertzfeld said in a question-and-answer session after the screening. "When you see the stuff that happened with the 2016 election, or the potential for a surveillance police state, what I'm hoping is, as an industry we get an understanding of what's going on and kind of course-correct."

When the subjects of the documentary were asked on stage if they're still optimistic about the industry, Fadell, who's recently spoken out against tech addiction, summed it up.

"Back then I was an optimistic optimist," he said. "Now I'm much more of a cautious optimist. Hopeful optimist, conditional optimism. But you always have to have hope."

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