Do Funding Sources Matter?

Why I Chose to Stop Helping at Maker Faire After They Received Military Funding (For a Good Cause)

Mitch Altman • 8-July-2012
I ask these questions because I think they are important ones to ponder, and important to answer for ourselves. And, given that these answers are personal, what am I willing to do and not do based on the answers that others come up with?

I love Maker Faire! It has been a huge, wonderful part of my life since the first Maker Faire in 2006. It has changed my life for the better in so many ways. It has positively changed so many peoples' lives. And it will continue to do so.

So, it was not an easy choice for me to choose to stop helping at Maker Faire while its associated MENTOR program is being funded by DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

At the start of the World Maker Faire in New York last September I was awarded the first (and last) "Hitch Altman Maker Hero Award" for my "outstanding contribution to the cause of maker-related education and/or open access to technology." It was overwhelmingly emotional for me to be honored in this way. I never would have imagined at that moment that this was my last Maker Faire.

Two days later, at the end of the World Maker Faire, at the thank you dinner for folks who helped make it happen, Dale Dougherty, who started MAKE Magazine and Maker Faires, gave thanks and inspiration to us all. And he saved the really good news till the end: Maker Faire received a $10 million grant to give kids opportunities for hands-on learning at a thousand high schools. Yow! Then, almost in passing, he mentioned that this grant came from DARPA. To some, this may have had no impact. To me, it felt like a kick in the gut.

Without exception, at every place I've ever worked, someone has wanted to use the cool things that I and my co-workers created for military purposes. Again, for others, this may not be a problem. But for me, it has led to me quitting the project each time. A couple of examples: my first job was making games on Apple II computers - the military wanted to modify them to make killer helicopter training simulators.

At the company where we developed Virtual Reality, and where I spent three months of my life creating a VR system for the University of Central Florida, I later found out that the military was behind the sale, and that they were going to use the VR system for World War III training simulators.

I guess I just never anticipated that Maker Faires would be anything but unambiguously positive for me. Maybe I was naive.

As the hacker scene has grown from handfuls of spaces in 2007 to about a thousand spaces currently (and growing), and as Maker Faires are now being sponsored by large corporations, I suppose it was inevitable that we would become a market. And I suppose it was inevitable that we would be seen as opportunities for others for their goals. And those goals may or may not be in alignment with mine.

I struggled for months trying to decide the best thing to do. Should I keep helping out the way I have been at Maker Faires, and in some ways help DARPA in their goals? Should I stop helping out the way I have, and eliminate a great source of joy in my life?

I looked into the goals of DARPA.

According to their website, DARPA's mission is "to maintain the technological superiority of the U.S. military and prevent technological surprise from harming our national security by sponsoring revolutionary, high-payoff research bridging the gap between fundamental discoveries and their military use." According to Wikipedia, they currently have an annual budget is $3.2 billion to accomplish their goal.

If our country's military were simply for defense, and for the security of our country, then I would have no problem with DARPA's mission. Unfortunately, the way I see it, our military is only partly for these purposes, and primarily a means for large profits for military contractors' profits (despite the tragic consequences, both to people in other countries and to our own country's own safety and security).

I looked into the DARPA grant that the Maker Faire folks received for what they call their MENTOR program.

The DARPA grant's stated purpose is to increase the number of high-quality engineers available. The stated reason this is necessary: the US education system is not adequate to provide them. Money from the grant is renewable annually. As already stated, I agree that our countries education system is
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THE MANUFACTURING EXPERIMENTATION AND OUTREACH (MENTOR)

The Manufacturing Experimentation and Outreach (MENTOR) program focuses on engaging high school-age students in a series of collaborative design and distributed manufacturing experiments. DARPA envisioned situations deploying up to a thousand computer-numerically-controlled (CNC) manufacturing machines—such as "3D printers"—to high schools nationwide. The goal is to encourage students across clusters of schools to collaborate via social networking media to jointly design and build systems of moderate complexity, such as mobile robots, go carts, sports cars, etc., in response to prize challenges.

Several performers are currently under contract as part of MENTOR. As their efforts mature, MENTOR will expand to ultimately reach our goal of 1,000 high schools by the 2014-15 academic year. Schools for the first year of the program have been selected, but as we prepare for rapid expansion in the near future we welcome input from interested schools and districts. Contact us at mentor@darpa.mil.

RESOURCES
• "Democratizing Design:"
  Remarks by LTC Nathan
  Wiedenman at Maker Faire
  (5/19/2012)
• DARPA-BAA-11-19:
  Manufacturing
  Experimentation and
  Outreach (MENTOR),
  CLOSED
• 9/28/2010 Press
  Announcement
I'm greatly saddened that I won't be able to help at this year's US Maker Faire after applying for and accepting a grant from DARPA. I look forward to working and playing at Maker Faire again, after they are no longer associated with DARPA.

By his response to my post, it seems that the head of O'Reilly media, which is the umbrella company that runs the Maker Faire, was greatly angered by my post and is perhaps holding a grudge against me. As a result, I may never have the opportunity to help out at Maker Faire again. And that makes me even sadder.

It was the best I could do. I wish I could have come up with a way to feel great about it all. But I failed at that. Yet, I would feel worse if I thought I was helping DARPA's goals.

To explain my intellectual reasons further, for what they're worth:

- If funding sources didn't matter, then politicians should be able to receive "gifts" of any amount from any person or corporation. After all, there are no strings attached, right? The money is a gift, and the politician can do whatever they want with the money.

- Given that a gift is renewable annually, what kinds of things are people (consciously or otherwise) willing to compromise to increase the likelihood of receiving next year's funding? What kinds of things are people (consciously or otherwise) willing to stop doing to increase the likelihood of receiving next year's funding? Will what we do start becoming more about money, and less about what we love?

- One of the more powerful forms of marketing is to show that somehow "you" are inadequate (because you aren't happy, you have dandruff, you are somehow helping to cause harm etc.), and then to associate a warm fuzzy feeling with others getting some benefit from PRODUCT X - where PRODUCT X can be a Pepsi, a political candidate, a corporation's "concern" about the environment, etc. With repetition, a higher percentage of people end up buying PRODUCT X. In the case of this DARPA grant, the inadequacy is your educational opportunity (or your project's funding), and PRODUCT X is the US military.

- There are pluses and minuses to every choice. There are pluses and minuses to funding choices. DARPA funding exists to further the goals of DARPA.
Accepting the funding may help further one’s own goals. We can each do the best we can to balance the pluses and minuses, and make the best choice we can. To use an extreme case (perhaps easier to think about?): Wernher von Braun chose to accept funding from the German military to create his dream of a space program— and it worked! As well, the German military was helped in its goals, resulting in the death and suffering of London civilians bombed by missiles.

- If DARPA is creating opportunities for people, it seems likely that more people will work for DARPA and other arms of the US military. If people are working for the military, some may be doing what they love. Others will merely have a job. Will this job help them explore and do what they love?

- What does it mean that money for worthwhile endeavors, such as education, is no longer funded by organizations that exist for those endeavors, but are funded by the military? Are these unelected officials the people we want making decisions about spending priorities for our country and its future?

There are no obvious, absolute right and wrong answers to all of this. Hackers and hackerspaces are being given more opportunities to apply for DARPA grants. And as we contemplate these opportunities it is up to each of us to make our own choices. My wish is that you make choices that are conducive to creating more fulfillment in your life, and for the lives of those around you. Then each of us can all learn from the consequences of our choices (and make new choices).