Stanford eCorner

The Joy of Hacking Products

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Palantir Co-Founder Stephen Cohen shares the experiential learning approach he adopted during his time at Stanford, which included a heavy dose of hacking products. Cohen also describes how market realities can shape the promise of even the best ideas.

Transcript

So kind of recognizing there was no single linear path that would lead to an entrepreneurial outcome, I immediately tried to jump to non-linear paths which for me meant working on products. I love working on products, of course since my last one was a K-12 grade book, I don't exactly know if my choice of product at this age was particularly great but I had some fun ones in those opening years. This was at the beginning of wireless internet taking over, everyone had these routers, no one had any idea where to place them. So I had this idea that I would hack the network card in my laptop and I got this old crusty card from my house in Fremont. I got - I played on the varsity tennis team in high school and I got an old tennis container and a tennis ball, put a laser mouse on top of it so I could track 2D coordinates with this card and then I hacked into the driver in this laptop so I could pull up the signal strength readouts and effectively build a 2D topological model of the signal strength in a room like this. Now what did this actually amount to? Well I was this freshmen a few months into Stanford and I've got this card that's roughly sized like this and I am walking all around Tresidder and everywhere else with this tennis ball duck-tape contraption in rows probably looking like a crazy person just back and forth mapping out all the signal. Obviously that idea didn't exactly evolve into Palantir but... But, yeah, you know after that I started working on an augmented reality toolkit; it was actually part of my senior project work. And what it did was it would take webcams and it would find these elements in a scene and basically project a 3D matrix onto that so it could determine the 3D coordinates of what it was seeing. Anyways, you could rig this thing up to build a 3D mouse.

So, I wrote a 3D mouse, I connected it to Quake II which was just recently open sourced and there you have it; you have this new way of interacting with video games with your computer. You can just move around and move your hands to do things kind of Minority Report-ish and I figured that this could be next big thing. And I talked to a good venture capitalist friend of mine, Ashmeet Sidana, who I think now is a partner at Foundation Capital and he said, Stephen, it's a great idea but it can't impact the real world. The entrenched players in this market, these console manufacturers, they are the ones who control the distribution and because of this - the central feature of the marketplace it might be a good product, it might be a good idea but it probably won't be a reality. And so of course this like really bummed me out. This is not what you want to hear here and any entrepreneur has plenty of stories like this where they get the bad news but sure enough years later, how many of you all have used a Connect before, right? You probably have played with PlayStation 3's variant of it. We got that exact same technology and sure enough it came from the console manufacturers who controlled most of it. So he was right but my - the story I am trying to paint here is one of working outside the traditional balance of the institution here at Stanford while still leveraging the resources that were available and still longing to find a way of connecting that world of ideas and products to the actual real world.