Robert Bruce Thomas, Industrial Designer, Creative Director, Engineer, Instigator, Mentor
And Last But Not Least
"Disturber of the Universe"

Turning Tinkering into "Thinkering"

I was an Industrial Designer at the age of five! It was my grandfather's fault. He was way too tolerant and let me hang out in his cabinet shop and – he had a band saw. But since I was not allowed to use it, he let me be the designer! So that's how I used to supply my peeps & homeys with an amazing arsenal of bomb fantasy gear - from laser guns and bazookas to crossbows and boomerangs, from go karts to kites.

Ultimately this paved the way through many other design adventures and finally to entering Pratt Institute where I got my degree in Industrial Design. While a student there, I co-owned a design-build construction company in Manhattan for several years, to pay for school, then sold my shares in that to go work for a well known Connecticut ID firm. There I got to be the lead designer on exciting projects like Tools for Stanley Tools, Watch Bands for Timex, a full size prototype of a racing sailboat and finally the original concept models of the IBM PC!

Starting my own firm in Richmond VA, headquarters to many international businesses, I went on on to design exhibits, graphics, packaging, products and "humane interfaces" for some the world's leading companies.

The thing I most like to do, however, is to tinker. I like to tinker with computer technology, electronics technology, user interface technology, digital manufacturing technology, presentation technology and even garden and kitchen technology which combine to become holistic living technology. Some of my 3D tinkering has even become wall art and sculpture!

Not surprisingly, given my "hands on", entrepreneurial bent, some the the things I've "tinkered" with have gone on to become serious projects with serious backing. They range from furniture design like Klik Home my "design it yourself online" furniture company (think Amazon meets Ikea) to the BeagleBrick, a combination of Software Defined ham radio and

Texas Instrument's new PC-on-a-chip technology. The BeagleBrick was ultimately funded by Texas Instruments, and became the Senior Project at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology from 2009-2010 where it was presented at the world's largest gathering of amateur radio enthusiasts and educators at Hamfest Dayton, 2010 and written up in Wired Magazine, who dubbed it "the iPad for Hams".

So to date, I've raised almost a million dollars in private, venture and government funding for "tinkering" projects that I ultimately prototyped, pitched and produced.

So yes, I love to tinker. And when I'm not tinkering, I like to mentor other tinkerers like my students at Virginia Commonwealth University Department of Crafts and Material studies where I taught them the art of sharpening using a chisel while retaining all their fingers as well as how to use all the machines in the woodworking shop to the same end – even though I'm a metal guy. I then did a technological about face and turned them on to Rhino and 3D design in my "Think Before You Build" module. Or like the students in VCU's Da Vinci Center where I added design and manufacturing guidance and even helped them weld together their third world surgical bed.

And further, it's also why I teach Morse code to Cub Scouts leaving them with 25% of the alphabet in 1 hour, why I'm writing "Morse Rap" - dahdidahdit dida dah (C A T) and why I teach the Tech license class to prospective amateur radio students and why I still build kites, boomerangs, Assyrian Wind Wheels and other arcane thingamabobs. It's the pursuit of the concept of the "Citizen Scientist" and "Tinkerer" that made this country great and which we desperately need to revitalize and fold into our educational systems. Not to mention my corporate clients!

So if you're looking for someone to inspire your team to tinker, a geek to lead geeklets, a nerd to mentor the nerdlettes and a technological "KungFu Cowboy" to lead the "grasshoppers" in a kind of "Wax on, Wax off" techno-methodology, then you'd probably have to search the entire country to find one. But no need – I found you!

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