To Make You Completely Present in the Moment

an interview with Scott Snibbe

Scott Snibbe is a media artist whose work engages users in creative interactions with interfaces of different kinds—some huge (airport instattations) and some really small (the screens of mobile phones). As a researcher, Snibbe explores engagements with technology that don't necessarily have a goal or purpose, but rather unfold unexpectedly, like events. Some of Snibbe's early interactive media projects from the 1990s have found new life in the form of apps. A designer and an entrepreneur, Snibbe founded and runs Snibbe Interactive and Scott Snibbe Studio, which specifically focused on production of original apps. His recent collaboration with Bjork on her *Biophilia* app album has made an important contribution not only to media art as such, but also to experiencing music. His game apps are different from what gaming is typically associated today—pervasiveness, intensity, and total consumption of the gamer. Snibbe's apps are instead slow, subtle, and meditative. In a sense, they actually push you to find new ways of getting in touch with all around you.

—Svitlana Matviyenko

Svitlana Matviyenko: As pieces of application software, apps apply the power of computing system for a particular purpose. Thinking of your projects, how do you see this "purpose"? How do your projects—such as *Biophilia* apps for Bjork or MotionPhone app—challenge or further develop the idea of an app?

Scott Snibbe: I've been creating a similar type of computer program as interactive audiovisual artwork for about thirty years. I was raised by artists, and when I got my first computer, an Apple II+, all it did when you turn it on was flash a cursor on an empty screen. So that type of computer felt like a blank canvas, and I started filling it with abstract art, animation, and generative sound.

In college, I worked in a computer graphics research lab—the only place where I had access to computers capable of interactive graphics—and I did

more useful projects, like designing interfaces for movie special effects. However, I continued my private work on the side. One of my advisors said such work was "useless," so then I started calling these projects "useless programs" whose only purpose was to delight and tickle ones imagination and emotions. These programs were as useless as, say, a song, a story, or a movie.

For years I tried to convince various people that these programs had a market—not just to be shown in a gallery, but the same kind of market that songs have. We came close to a game deal with Sony in the 1990s but it never panned out. When the app store opened, that was finally a chance to release some of this work (Gravilux, Bubble Harp, and Antograph), without having to explain what it was or who the "market" is. And it turned out there was a paying audience for such programs.

In general, projects like these, and later *Biophilia*, change our understanding of an app from something useful, or a diversion, to something capable of sustaining emotional narrative experiences, and, in particular, ones that take interactivity beyond gaming.

SM: In our anthology, we suggest thinking of apps as a technique. Would you apply this definition to your apps?

SS: My work treats apps (or rather, more broadly interactivity) as a medium—one capable of the same expressive range in emotions and storytelling as movies, music, or literature. The apps I've created with my team and collaborators are meant to hold a place in culture similar to a book or a musical composition—something that expresses the human condition through interactivity. It's hard for me to understand apps as a technique—they represent an expressive palette, not necessarily a specific area of expertise. Movies and music aren't techniques, but expressive media.

SM: Among the affective, aesthetic, technical, social, and economical aspects of app-computing, which, in your view, are the most significant in terms of their influence on the popularity of apps? Are there any other aspects you would add to this list?

SS: The biggest aspect influencing the popularity of apps is the App Store itself—in particular, Apple's. The opening of Apple's App Store marked the first time that an individual software developer could release his software directly to a worldwide audience of millions, and also profit on that work. Other companies have copied this model, but not to the same effect. Android's store, for instance, allows instant publishing, so there's currently little curation and no quality control, so its harder to find an audience with the flood of pornography, viruses, and so on, each day.

SM: Initially, your apps were available only for the iOS devices. But I see Gravilux is already available for Android. What other factors apart from the
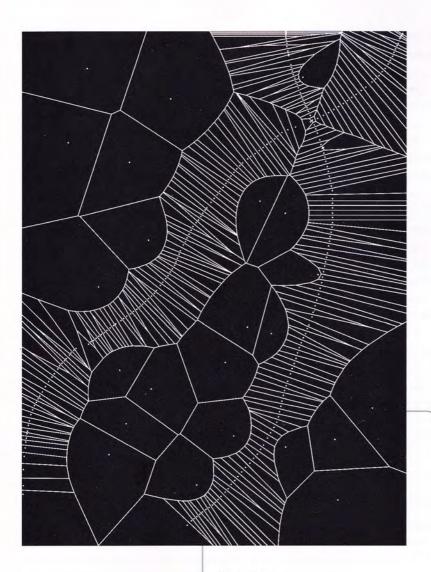
Figure 18.1
Bubble Harp, an app by Scott Snibbe.
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new growing markets do you take into consideration as an app developer (i.e. programming language, regulations and requirements, audience, etc.)?

SS: We mainly take into account the quality of experience we can create and the audience on the platform, and for now always start on iOS because of the high quality of the experience and maturity of the market.

SM: On the one hand, mobile apps have become a major technique to operate our mobile devices. At the same time, the practicality of many apps is limited. Often, they sit on our touch-screens, handy and cute, without ever being used. In our project, we call these apps "charming junk." Where between sense and nonsense would you locate your apps?

SS: As I mentioned, my apps are useless by utilitarian standards. Their purpose is to expand a person's mind, and create an emotional resonance with image, sound, and interactivity. Many of them are meant to reflect one's mind back onto the screen—the most positive, beautiful aspects of one's mind. We're ordinarily cramming new information into our minds, which creates anxiety and craving—this is the effect your average email, news, and gaming app, though they are "useful." However, it's possible to create interactive apps that nourish our minds too. So that's where our apps stand on this continuum. Though it sounds a bit New Age, our apps are actually meant to provide some of the benefits of practices like meditation and yoga—to make you completely present in the moment, and to bring out the more positive aspects of your mind.

SM: In one of your interviews you said, "Listening to [Bjork's *Biophilia*] album without the apps isn't like watching Avatar without 3-D—it's like watching Avatar without the picture. The combination of the music and the apps [is] the full expression of Bjork's concept." Could you elaborate on that, focusing, if possible, on what you meant by "full expression"?

SS: The way people's brains work is that we fuse sensory phenomena into a simulated model of the world around us that appears only in our minds. Phenomena like music and color are *solely* psychological. They do not exist in the outside world, but are a radical interpretation of colorless and soundless vibrations of magnetism and matter. So, our brains are designed to fuse sense phenomena, not to isolate them. Listening to music without some sort of image accompaniment is actually nonsensical—and there is historical evolutionary evidence that movement and music are entirely fused sensually. It's a recent and unnatural phenomenon that people sit quietly and listen to music, or, that they do other things with music in the background. Music is meant to accompany dancing, movement. So, *Biophilia* is best appreciated as an app, because the visuals complete the sensorial whole. The concert is also a great way to experience it, though you can't explore a virus or dark matter in a concert hall.

That's the idea of the app, to provide a kind of alternative to the concert—a live interactive experience, but one that can leverage everything possible on a screen, from the abstract to the microscopic, gigantic, and invisible.

Providing sensory fusion is why long-playing albums (LPs) were so successful—they came with a beautiful work of art, liner notes, and a record that made you stay in one place to dance, lie down, or otherwise totally immerse yourself in. So this new album as app is a way to go back to our sensorial roots where music is interactively fused with image and movement.

SM: If you think of the most desirable app that has not been and possibly will never be designed, what would it be?

SS: An app to induce single-pointed concentration.