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BJÖRK WEEK: BEHIND THE BIOPHILIA APPS

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M speaks to interactive artist Scott Snibbe about his involvement with the groundbreaking *Biophilia* app suite. Find out about the concept and design behind the project and watch the apps in motion.

Scott is founder of Snibbe Interactive in San Francisco, and creates immersive, interactive art for clients including the Science Museum and ICA gallery in London, and for Sony BMG.

He is trained in computer programming and fine art, using both disciplines to produce digital concepts and virtual worlds for commercial and artistic applications. His artworks have been installed in more than a hundred museums, performance spaces and public places worldwide.

M: *Björk said she wants audiences to interact with Biophilia in a million ways. How do you think the app suite fits in with that vision?*

Scott Snibbe: The purpose of the app suite is to let people interact with the music, not merely in a simplistic way but to really really get at the meat of the music. Björk was really clear about that, and that's why she brought in myself and other interactive art specialists. All of the apps are not merely a visualisation of the music, like music videos. And for the most part, they are not pure instruments that you could create any kind of song with, but they are something in between those things. The spectrum is actually quite broad when you look at all 10 of the different apps.



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It ranges from musical instrument on one side to a music video on the other, but it's always in between that spectrum some place. So, for example, with *Virus*, which is one of the apps we're working on, you are able to progress through the whole song and it's an anti-game. You are trying to save a cell from being attacked and killed by viruses but the only way to hear the whole song is to allow the cell to be killed. It's almost a femme fatale song about a virus that loves its cell so much it's got to kill it.

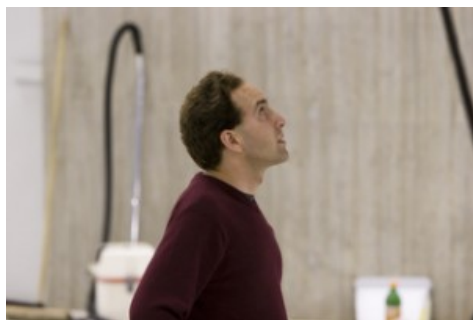


Scott at work

There's a very strong narrative conceptual side to everything she does. Nothing is merely to create some kind of cool effect, but actually is highly conceptually related to the story of each song, the natural aspect and also a musicological aspect of the song. *Virus* focuses on generative music, music that's created algorithmically and is different every time.

M: *There are touch points between game and education, music and nature, but how did you go about interpreting those themes for the apps to create those points?*

SS: One thing to realise is that Björk created the album using new interactive technologies, which was part of her inspiration. So, going into this album, she worked with her engineer Damian Taylor to create a number of custom electronic instruments. One of them was on the 'lemur' and the other was using videogame controllers. And she actually wrote a lot of the music using these new forms of experimental custom forms of music creation. And then what she wanted to do was open up her audience a little bit to how she had done that, because for her it changed the way she was composing music. She came up with some very weird rhythms, melodies and scales. Some of the songs don't even fit into any traditional scales because they were improvised, freeform along the musical continuum. So part of it came from that, but I'll tell you, 80 or 90 percent of this project comes straight from Björk.



Ideas man...

She wrote a manifesto that she gave everyone when she began, and it was about every song and gave the natural aspect to it, the musicological aspect to it. Now, each of the apps are a little different. Some of the apps ended up coming out exactly the way she described it in her initial manifesto. But with other apps there was a huge amount of interpretation and we riffed on the main concepts. Much like she

was the movie director and we were putting together the movie. There's a lot of room for elaboration on top of her very strong concepts. And also she's very tightly involved all the way through, giving very detailed feedback on hundreds of revisions.

M: *What was it like to be brought into a project with such a clear manifesto? Was it easy to fit into that?*

SS: Well, it's a huge pleasure, it's one of the most wonderful experiences of my life to be honest. Björk's such a great collaborator, I think it's pretty obvious to anyone that pays attention to her career. She's worked with countless musicians. Usually collaborations dilute the quality. People try to get along when they are collaborating so often they say 'that's good, that's good' and then their collaboration is a little bit weak but they had fun doing it.

But Björk manages to be both extremely kind and generous during the process but still manages to keep a strong hand and the highest quality results. I've really learned a lot from her because she has an extremely generous and gentle way of steering everyone to a consistent strong goal. So it's been wonderful. She has very strong direction, she's extremely clear about what she wants, but then she's extremely open to what we have to add. From her perspective, her biggest emphasis is on the music and narrative conceptual aspects and then she leaves a lot of the other visual and interactive work to us because we have expertise and experience in that area.

M: *How did you go about interpreting all the huge themes that collide in Biophilia? How did you bring them to life on a 2-D screen?*

SS: Each of these pieces had a script. We worked on three of the apps and the overall container for everything, and managed the project. For each of our apps we started off with a storyboard. But it actually depends – there were two different parallel techniques and developers used one or the other. One line is to make a really strong storyboard and work from that to move forward, which is what we did on *Virus*. The second is to work more iteratively, which is what we did on an app called *Thunderbolt*, about electricity. That's one where we kept making prototypes and showing Björk and modifying. To be honest, both of those apps had a first revision that we almost exclusively scrapped.

The third way of working is with really strong art direction, so M/M in Paris, who were her designers, had a very strong role in a lot of the apps. *Virus* and *Tesla* were done more directly with me and my studio, with feedback from Björk, but because *Cosmogony* app was designed almost entirely by M/M in Paris, they made this three-dimensional galaxy and instructions for how to move through it and so on. For that one my studio just added the subtleties of interaction, to make it easy to use and so you don't get confused and have a beautiful experience.

M: *So, did the project really push you on a technical level as well as a creative one?*

SS: Oh yes, on both levels. It's been intensely driven to push the boundaries creatively, definitely.

M: *Reviewers have said that Biophilia is pushing a very new and groundbreaking experience on the app platform, where people haven't been before. Do you think that's true? Have you come across anything else that is this immersive?*

SS: It's absolutely true. Interactivity is something new. Games aren't something new, they've been around for a long time and there is a certain language and goal-orientated logic to them. But games are a subset of interactivity. Interactivity itself is a new medium. It's a way of incorporating a person's movements, gestures, choices into any type of experience, not just something where you are driven forward relentlessly, short term goal after short term goal.

So I think that's the beauty of what Björk saw in the iPad. I think she looked when it came out for a few developers who were using interactivity in this broader way, as a new form of artistic expression, a new palette. And then she chose to do that with her album. Even though some of these things are game-like, and we are definitely using game-like elements, none of them have a clear forward-driving goal. They are all ways of exploring music and exploring a creative experience. Or even, as a lot of great art does, exploring yourself – finding a way to put a little bit of your own personality into what you are doing.

“ Music was always interactive until vinyl records were invented...”

M: Do you think the sheer depth and size of this project will baffle music fans a little, or do you think there is a thirst for innovative apps?

SS: I guess it's an empirical question, because we will see how many people download it, but of course my opinion is that apps aren't just for app specialists. You see it in the trends too. App sales are going to outstrip music by the end of the year, so it's certainly on the rise. I don't think they are specialised. Personally I think pre-recorded music is something specialised, it's become more of a niche. Music was always interactive until vinyl records were invented. In the 19th century the app was sheet music, and you'd get this sheet music and play it with any instrument you wanted. You could play it as a 10-minute version or a two-minute version with friends. You could change the words. Music is meant to be interactive. Throughout the history of humanity – whatever it is, 35,000 years – I think we've got about 70 years or so where music was not interactive primarily. Apps bring music back to what it naturally is – an interactive, participatory experience.

M: What's next for you?

SS: We're still working on this. The beauty and intensity of this project is that it's alive. Musicians were never allowed to change a song once it had been released. You could never go into someone's iTunes and change one of the songs in an album they bought. But with an app it's completely different, it's alive and you can change it from release to release. So for the next few months our efforts ate on release after release of *Biophilia* as we introduce new songs and eventually the album at the end of September. That's the big focus for our studio. We do other things too, but this has been the biggest focus for my studio for the past year.

M: I'm guessing it was a hugely costly project, how was it funded?



Installation work

SS: Ah ok, it was a really expensive project, however the way we are funding it is like a business venture collaboration. Björk is really excited about this and keeps saying its like we're going back to the punk days where you make your own flyer, you put it up around town, you bring your own amps. That's essentially what we're doing, but in a distributed worldwide way. We're partners with

Björk and her record company One Little Indian. We're sharing the risk and investment, and sharing the profits. She's obviously put an enormous amount into the music and other aspects of the project, then all the developers have put a lot into our development, and we're sharing the profits as the apps are released.

You can read our exclusive interview with Björk [here](#). To read the inside story on the making of *Biophilia*, read our feature [here](#).

Coming soon in M's Björk Week; an interview with early collaborators Plaid, *Biophilia* album review and a look behind the scenes of the stage show with Björk's production manager Peter van der Velde.

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