

# ORIGIN.

The Art + Culture Magazine

## Björk

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Face of the Game

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Sea Pirates





PHOTO: CARSTEN WINDHORST

# INTERVIEW WITH SCOTT SNIBBE

INTERVIEW: MARANDA PLEASANT

Maranda Pleasant: What's your background?

Scott Snibbe: I have degrees in computer science, film, and art. I studied all of those three things at the Rhode Island School of Design, and basically I always wanted to do some kind of combination of all that stuff; somehow to be some kind of combination of an inventor and an artist or filmmaker. I was never actually that interested in being a fine artist, because I wanted to find a way to turn interactivity into a mass medium. Somehow you could just distribute music or movies. So when the iPad came out, all of a sudden this was the first time.

One of my motivations was to create experiences that counter the neuroses that you typically have with computers and with mobile devices. You know, 'cause ordinarily you're going from your email to your calendar to Facebook, so these are ways of having a more meditative experience. Some place where you can focus on what you're doing; focus on the present instead of what's coming, or what just happened. It's just to have a positive effect on your mind.

MP: How did you meet Björk? Had she seen your iPad stuff? Had she seen your software?

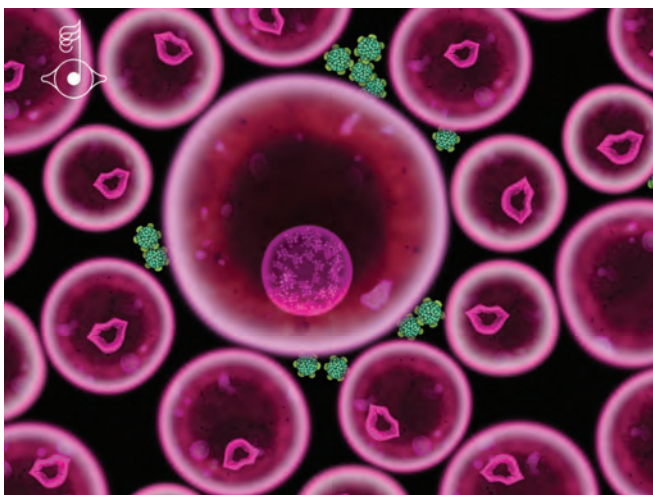
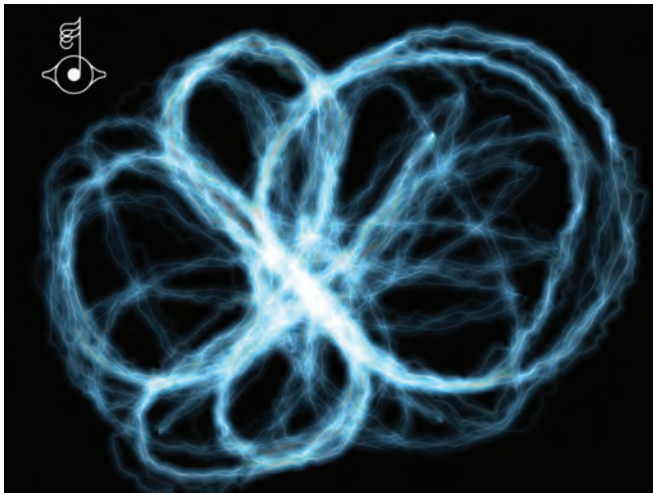
SS: Yeah. She saw these natural apps right at the beginning and it turned out she had been working on

an album for three years that was all about nature, music, and technology. So she approached me and a couple other people who were doing this particular genre of being interested in expressing nature through technology in some way. And she invited us to work on her new album that she wanted to release as an app rather than an album. There is a CD you can buy too. But the idea is that the main way that you experience this project is as an app.

MP: Now, what was your role in this?

SS: We were the producers and we managed the production of the whole app. We also wrote two of the individual apps and we managed the production of the other apps with a number of other really amazing developers. Björk wanted this project to be educational, so every app has the musical score and the lyrics. It actually plays the song and shows you the traditional musical score. You can sing along with it like it's karaoke. But again, this isn't just a video. This is actually totally interactive. You can go and find your favorite parts of the song and practice it over and over again, or you can put on a click track and you can put this on your music stand and play. You could probably play it on your keyboard. (laughs) This is exciting if you're learning music, or studying music, or you want to perform music. Björk was actually very frustrated by traditional music education and notation, even though

SCREENSHOTS FROM THE BIOPHILIA APP, TOP TO BOTTOM: COSMOGONY, THUNDERBOLT, VIRUS



she's trained to the hilt in that area. So, we've also looked at other ways of visualizing music.

MP: Wow. What was it like trying to get somebody's vision? Obviously she had some kind of vision.

SS: Well, she had a kind of narrative vision, like a movie director. I didn't totally realize it, but once I started listening to Björk's older albums, and once I started working with her, I realized how strong of a story there is in every album and in every song. When we first met I thought our first meeting would be an hour, but it ended up being eight hours. And she went through every single song and explained the story, the concept, the natural aspect, the musical aspect, and some ideas for interactivity. She was like a director. She was saying most of this in words and then allowing myself and the other developers to throw out ideas and interpretations of how to manifest that vision into particular colors and shapes and interactive concepts.

MP: What was that like? Was it a big undertaking?

SS: It was definitely huge. It's an amazingly huge project. But I was really excited. There's only a couple people I really ever met who had the same kind of idea that technology can be this thing that brings you closer to nature rather than further away. You know, most people believe those things are at odds. You have to choose or alternate between them. But Björk has this vision that you can use electronic music and technology to actually get closer to nature. So I was excited. It was obviously a lot of work.

MP: How long did it take you to do it?

SS: The whole project was June through October, so about eighteen months or so. But you know, not full time, and there were numerous different people involved... You might say with this visualization that "oh, it's beautiful, but it's not as useful as a musical score." But Björk actually uses this on stage. If you look really closely during the performances there are teleprompters and they're playing exactly this, rather than some other visualization. So she and the other musicians actually find this more useful than normal—you know, than looking at a normal musical score.

MP: Wow.

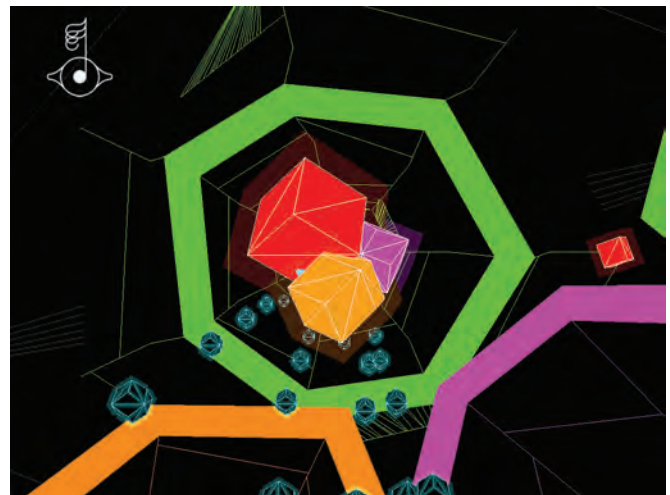
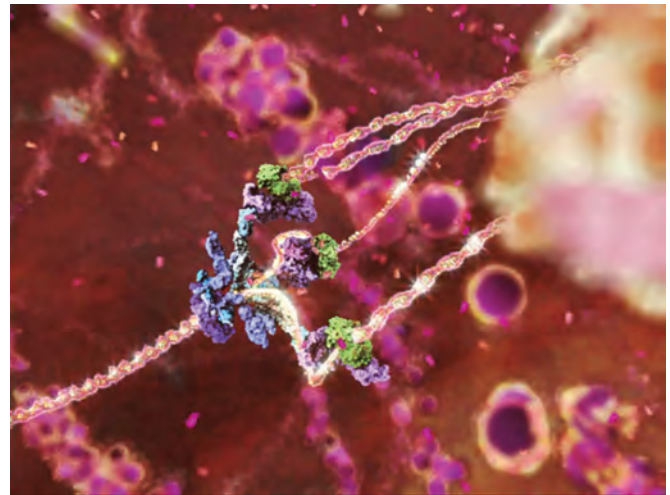
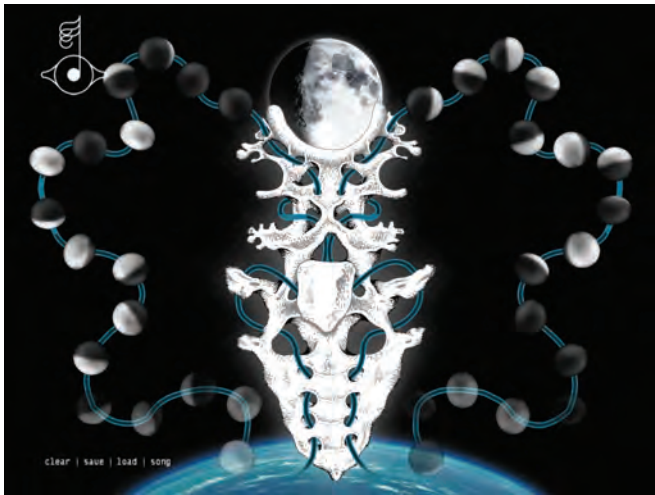
SS: The way Björk came up with this idea is—this is actually what spontaneously occurs in her mind as she's listening to music, especially popular music—she says it's as if she's going through these tunnels and the shape of the tunnel changes based on the tempo or the beats, or the structure of the song.

MP: What was the process like for you?

SS: The process was very intense. Björk on the one hand gave us a lot of creative room, but she also has a really clear vision of what she wants. So it was trying to surf that boundary and to understand her vision of the project, and then express it. It took a little bit of time. I think a lot of us had times when the vision didn't really make sense. But in general it was great. Björk was so tightly involved and very very kind and thoughtful in the way that she expressed herself and what she wanted. It was a very special experience.

MP: What is the emotional side of this? You look at this and it took like a year and a half to birth it.

SS: I feel really proud of it, because it's a feature length. I've always wanted to work on a feature length interactive project,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, SCREENSHOTS OF MOON, HOLLOW, CRYSTALLINE, & MUTUAL CORE.

“One of my motivations was to create experiences that counter the neuroses that you typically have with computers and with mobile devices. Some place where you can focus on what you’re doing; focus on the present instead of what’s coming, or what just happened.”

taking albums or movies and turning them into a whole interactive experience. I’m just so happy to be a part of it and it’s only with Björk that you could create a huge vision like that. It’s a collaborative medium and you need a creditable vision director at the top.

MP: This is the first of its kind, right?

SS: Yeah. It’s the first app/album. Some people make apps that help market an album, or look at the history of a musical artist or something. But this is actually treating the app as the prime experience with an album.

MP: What was it like creatively for you? You’re basically creating this with Björk, so what was that like?

SS: Well, the nice thing about Björk is that she really likes to concentrate and focus, and hang out. I’m used to meetings being as short as

possible. But she would create situations where you would deliberately hang out together for like a whole day, or two days, or three days. Even when we were working in Iceland she rented out a lighthouse for her studio. The lighthouse had this long walkway to it that was just piled-up rocks. Maybe 300 feet or something. And you had to get there before the tide came in and run across with all your equipment, because then the tide came in and we’d be locked in—just be 100% surrounded by water. Once the tide came in you couldn’t leave for eight hours. So I think that really physically expresses her way of working quite well. She likes to get in and focus, and just work 100% on this thing. Not that there wasn’t time to fool around and joke and have fun. What she said about music to us once was that, “The way I make a song is that when I’m collaborating, we hang out. We have a lot of good meals, see some movies, and then somehow at the end of a few days we have a song.” (laughs)