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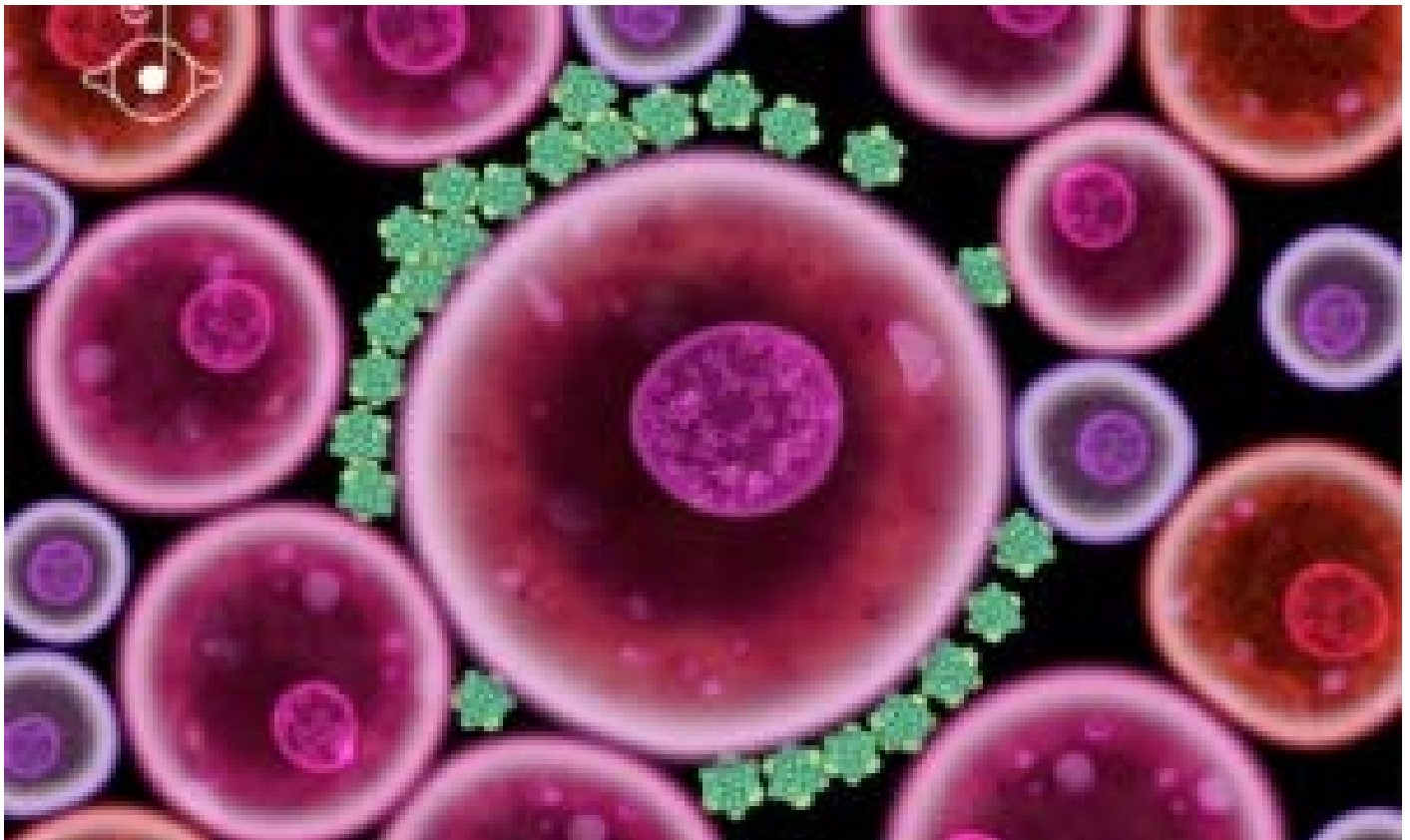
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Scott Snibbe talks Björk's Biophilia, apps and interactive music

And why album apps could bring back the 'falling in love' stage for music fans



Björk's Biophilia app made a splash on the App StorePR

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Yeah, that Björk app again. The Biophilia project has been [covered at length](#) by The Guardian, but her app-album remains the subject of intense interest from musicians, record labels and app developers alike.

That was certainly the case at the Amsterdam Dance Event conference, where Björk's collaborator on Biophilia, Scott Snibbe, gave a keynote speech setting it in the wider context of his two decades working on interactive music projects.

That's an important thing about Biophilia: it builds on a lot of the work Snibbe was doing in the days when the things people do in apps now required \$70,000-worth of specialist equipment to run.

He's making the direct link between then and now, for example with plans to release an iOS app in November based on Motion Phone, a piece of software designed to let two people perform an electronic music duet that was shown at the SIGGRAPH conference in 1995.

Snibbe's past projects also include customising console controllers to control generative music software,

"The challenge was to find some way of distributing this," he said. "We made the prototypes, and tried talking to Sony to get a video-game distribution deal, but all that stuff fell through at the time. We were trying to find creative, open-ended ways to interact with music that weren't turning it into a game. Guitar Hero pigeonholed music into the same idiom as a normal game, trying to get a score. You don't get a score using Pro Tools, right?"

Snibbe and his collaborator Lukas Girling were, as you might expect, pretty excited when Apple released its first iPad: a device capable not only of running this kind of software, but providing a built-in distribution channel to get it out to other people.

"We almost had a heart attack out of excitement that our lives hadn't been lived in vain!" he said. "There was suddenly a way to distribute this type of work."

Cue the release of iOS apps like Oscilloscoop and Bubble Harp, which swiftly attracted attention from musicians looking for creative music apps on their iPads. Not that this

was Snibbe's original intention.

"We were trying to reach a mainstream audience with these: people who have never had that experience of creating music on their own," he said. "It was a surprise that so many professional musicians wanted to use these apps, and what we've been working on in the last few months is making this a professional tool too."

With the Biophilia app now complete, Snibbe has been focusing on adding professional features to his previous apps, although he said that he is intent on ensuring they continue to straddle that boundary between amateur musicmakers and professionals.

In their existing form, they caught the attention of Björk in the early stages of recording Biophilia, at a time when she was already using touchscreen instruments to compose and record, as well as some custom-designed devices using gestures and even console controllers.

No wonder she hit it off with Snibbe, once the decision had been made to make Biophilia an app, rather than Björk's original idea of making it a touring exhibition with a house where every room would contain a song. After that idea was shelved, there was talk of making it an iMax film with director Michel Gondry, but that too fell by the wayside.

"When the [iPad](#) came out, she saw myself and a couple of other interactive artists and developers creating these naturalistic music apps, and invited us to come and work with her on the project," said Snibbe. "Biophilia is the first app album that's ever been made. An individual app element corresponds to every song."

From the tunnel racing of Crystalline to the cell tapping in Virus and lightning drawing of Thunderbolt, the app deserves its talked-about status: it's creative, fun and... educational? Snibbe admitted that he "hates that word – it usually means boring", but pointed to Virus as an example of a musical experience that subtly teaches people how viruses work.

"There's nothing more interesting than our universe and its structure in all forms, but our schools manage to make almost anything boring: even music or science," he said.



Scott Snibbe gave his keynote speech at the Amsterdam Dance Event Stuart Dredge/guardian.co.uk

After showing *Biophilia* to the ADE audience, Snibbe talked engagingly about its relationship to the actual music, and the wider issues about the potential of apps for musicians.

"This isn't an add-on to the audio album. The album was conceived as this fully interactive project, and this is the strongest expression of it," he said, before drawing a direct link between the *Biophilia* app, and the days when most albums were listened to on vinyl, which necessitated listening to them in a fixed location on a turntable.

"You'd often sit on the carpet and let the whole thing wash over you while looking at the liner notes and artwork: it was a complete, immersive, sensory experience," he said.

"That was the falling in love stage with the music, but I'm sad to say many of us may not have felt it in a really long time."

Snibbe thinks that one of the downsides to the digitisation of music is that this falling in love stage has turned into a "casual relationship", where people skip around albums, or listen to songs while walking, travelling and doing other things.

"You miss that falling in love period, and go immediately to the 'brushing your teeth together in the bathroom phase'," he said. "But an app can demand all of your senses and attention at once. That's something exciting for musicians. A lot of them lament the demise of the album experience due to digital distribution. But one thing about the app-album is it reclaims people's attention for an entire album."

Does music need to be interactive, though? One criticism of *Biophilia* has been the

expectation that people will be interactive, rather than simply listening to the music itself.

Snibbe's argument is that music being non-interactive was a phenomenon of the recorded music era. He pointed out that in the 19th century, sheet music was "the killer app" – people bought it, took it home and then played songs with whatever instruments they had to hand.

"If the era of pre-recorded media lasted from 1930 to 2010, we may be entering the interactive age of media now, the age of interactivity," said Snibbe. "We may look back at it as just a blip in history, when due to technology limitations, music, film and other entertainment experiences were only one-way."

When fielding audience questions, Snibbe was asked about the future for music apps. He'd like Apple to put a proper 3D camera into the iPad to enable Kinect-like features for people to "use your whole body in space to interact with these pieces", but otherwise said that he feels more of a sense of freedom that there's finally a category of devices to distribute his ideas from the last 20-25 years of research projects.

He also heaped praise on Björk as a collaborator, saying their initial meeting lasted for six hours as she explained every song on *Biophilia* and the story behind it, as well as her vision for how they might work on visual experiences.

"She had very specific ideas about the interactivity with the music," he said. "80% or 90% of this is Björk's vision, but she's so gentle in the way she communicates it. She's not at all a tyrant. It took me a while to realise that when she says 'Let me think about it', it means 'HELL no!'"

Snibbe admitted that *Biophilia* would have been "very expensive" as a work-for-hire project. However, the decision to make it a joint venture between Björk, his company and label One Little Indian mitigated that. No sales figures have been announced for the app so far, although it is still early days, given that all the track-apps have only been available for a matter of weeks.

Can something like *Biophilia* be suitable for more artists, given that expense? Snibbe said that he thinks creatively, it's well suited to musicians with an artistic background or a good visual sense - whether for videos or live sets. "Most musicians don't just want to create a one-dimensional stream of sound as their final artwork," he said.

"Maybe nine out of ten artists have an audiovisual vision for their work... But few artists are creating concept albums, and that's what it's best suited for: where the whole album has some coherent structure. Even for major artists, that might only be one or two albums in their career: the *Dark Side Of The Moons* or *Sergeant Peppers* – albums with

strong visual and conceptual components."

Snibbe added that despite the expense of creating Biophilia, "if it's financially successful, there'll be a huge rush towards it" from other artists.

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