SVA's John F. Simon Jr. Develops App for Björk's New iPad Album 'Biophilia'

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MFA Computer Art Department faculty member and alumnus **John F. Simon Jr.** (MFA 1989 Computer Art) was one of a select few artists chosen to create an app for Icelandic singer Björk's groundbreaking new album, *Biophilia*. The first app album ever created, *Biophilia* is divided into 10 separate apps (available for download at the iTunes App Store) and features vivid graphics, related essays, games and touch-screen capabilities, all designed to allow users to interact with the album on an iPad. The *Briefs* recently caught up with Simon, who also worked as software engineer and co-creative director with Björk on the project.

How would you explain this project to those who know nothing about it?
When you download *Biophilia*, it is like getting a CD of music, plus the little booklet that comes with it. The apps are like the booklet that you sit and flip through as you listen to the album. Except in this case, the booklet is interactive and includes games and instruments that let you jam along in the style of each track. You get to participate in the music in ways that are as unique as each song.

How did you get involved with the project, and what was your role?
The album has 10 tracks and 10 apps, each designed by a different artist.

I was very lucky to be included with this really exceptional group of artists, designers and programmers. Scott Snibbe, a well-known designer of interactive experiences, was the lead developer. For the particular track I worked on, called "Mutual Core," he needed an artist, an iPhone/iPad software engineer, and someone with a geology background, since the song is about tectonic plates and the Earth's core. I happen to fit all three requirements. My role was to work with Björk as a sort of co-creative director to interpret the song into visual metaphors, then develop meaningful and interesting interactions, link the interactions to the music in a way that made a playable instrument, and finally make sure the piece supported the music education goals she had for it. In my case, the musical lesson is on "chords"—you make chords with the Earth's tectonic plates and when the song plays you visualize the chords in the strata.

Do you think connecting music to apps is going to become a craze?
I hope so. Once you get into programming an iPad, the possibilities are mind blowing. The recorded music and the interactive instrument just seem to merge. I hope every musician will open up their music as generously through an interactive app. The only thing that might slow it down is how much more creativity and time it takes to produce apps.

What do you think the benefit of album apps is, opposed to the basic listening experience or a simple music video?
One great thing about my app is that you can hook your iPad to a

desktop Mac and play the app instrument through Garage Band using any samples you want. "Mutual Core" sounds amazing with the Grand Piano samples. Then you can record, mix, etc., in all the custom instruments in the album. And all this is filtered through the design considerations and style of the track.

Are there any other comments you want to make on the project?

It is surprising how much more interesting the iPad/hand gesture interface is for interaction and design than the desktop/mouse interface. I would not have believed how much richer the experience is until I had a focused project that made me really experiment with the possibilities. Being able to detect 10 touches at once, the multi-touch package alone has much more to offer instrument builders.

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