

For Digital Artists, Apps Provide New Palette

By REYHAN HARMANCI

Publishers were not the only ones drooling when Apple unveiled its iPad to great fanfare in the spring. Digital artists also marveled at the device's potential.

"It's like I've been waiting my whole life for this moment," said Scott Snibbe, an interactive artist based in San Francisco. "I had literally given up on screen-based art work."

For years, Mr. Snibbe, 41, had been trying to figure out how to better display his computer art programs, which largely consist of abstract lines and forms designed to evoke a "blissful" feeling from users manipulating the ever-shifting patterns. In the late 1990s, he even did a series of drawings of a handheld device similar to the iPad that he wished existed so that his artwork could be freed from the desk-bound computer monitor.

By 2002, he had grown so frustrated with the available technology that he stopped making screen-based work altogether.

"It wasn't seen by that many people," Mr. Snibbe said, "and then there was the problem that it made no money. There was no way to sell it."

But the advent of mobile devices with touch screens and tilt sensors changed all that. Beginning last January, Mr. Snibbe dusted off some of his old code and got to work. He has since released three mobile applications — Bubble Harp, Antograph and Gravilux — and has become one of the first artists to make it big in the iTunes app store. All told, his three apps have been downloaded over 400,000 times.

The majority of those downloads, though, came when he released Gravilux without charge; eventually, he set the price at 99 cents per download for the iPhone version of Gravilux and Antograph, with Bubble Harp and the iPad Gravilux retailing for \$1.99. He would not say how much he had made, save to allow that he covered the "significant" start-up costs.

His Gravilux application — an elegant, black and white field of dots that follows the user's finger around the screen — was released in May. In 24 hours it soared to the top of the app charts. Apple selected Gravilux to be a featured app, a coveted slot.



THOR SWIFT FOR THE BAY CITIZEN

Camille Utterback, a San Francisco artist who works with large-scale interactive projects.

Mr. Snibbe's apps resemble interactive screen savers, with mesmerizing patterns that respond to touch. He has more on the way this fall and winter.

While artist-made apps make up only a sliver of the 225,000 apps in the iTunes store, the field is growing, with some well-known artists trying out the tech-

A medium that allows art to be seen widely and the artist to gain financially.

nology. In June, John Baldessari, a conceptual artist, announced an iPhone app to coincide with his solo show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art that would enable users to rearrange elements in a 1667 Dutch still life from the museum's collection.

Other artists who have made apps include Amit Pitaru, who is based in Brooklyn and transported his "Sonic Wire Sculpture" installation to the small screen, and the Japanese art duo Exonemo.

This fall, Camille Utterback, a San Francisco interactive video

artist who won a MacArthur "genius" grant last year, will be releasing her own apps, based on previous interactive works. For her app, she plans to adapt aspects of her wall-sized "Untitled 5," made in 2004, which created colorful crystalline patterns based on the viewer's movements in the room.

Richard Rinehart, a digital art curator at the U.C. Berkeley Art Museum has shown mobile applications in his NetArt series and will do so again this fall. He said artist-made apps were "the perfect marriage of mass distribution with collaboration potential and ability to have a local bodily experience." Artists can get their work seen widely, and get paid for it by charging per download.

But there are downsides. Ms. Utterback said her first hurdle was the nitty-gritty business of learning how to write application code — Mr. Snibbe coached her. Programming can be expensive if outsourced: Mr. Baldessari's app, for example, cost \$35,000 to produce.

There can be conceptual resistance as well. "I think it's taking a little bit of time for artists to start making apps because, for a lot of artists, it requires a shift in thinking," Ms. Utterback said.

Throwing an art project into

the iTunes marketplace, an arena filled with "disposable" programs, will not be appealing to many artists. Also, the gallery system is at odds with distribution of apps: as Steve Sacks, owner of the new media gallery Bit-Forms in New York, said, the iTunes model would cut him out entirely.

Then there is the matter of Apple approval. Every application must be vetted by the company before it is made available in the iTunes store. Some artists might have a hard time working under those constraints.

It is early in the development of artist-made apps, but Mr. Snibbe's success has helped clear the way.

Mr. Rinehart said he expected a rapid influx of artists working on mobile applications, in the same way that artists flocked to early Internet projects, although art is currently not among the 20 categories in the Apple app store.

Mr. Snibbe said he delighted in the confusion about what, exactly, was the nature of his apps. Some negative reviews "would say things like, 'This is a useless program,' which I loved," he said. "Is a short story useful? Is a painting useful?"

Utility, he continued, is not the point.