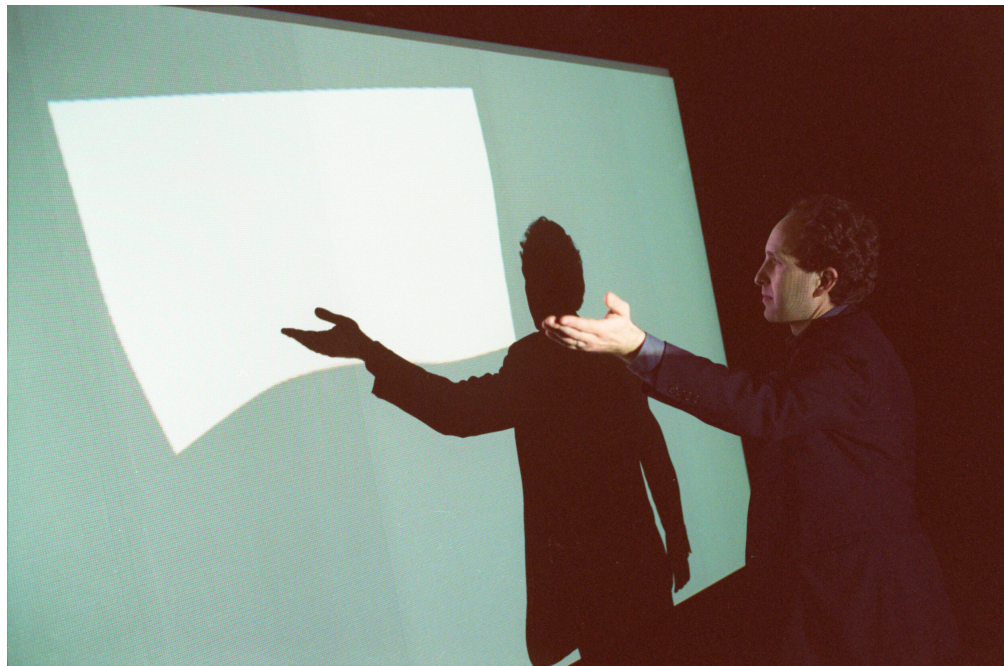




NOAH KOFF • SEPTEMBER 30, 2019

Interview with thought leader Scott Snibbe



With digital artwork "Compliant", Art Interactive Gallery, Cambridge.

Massachusetts, 2005. Photo by Kris Snibbe.

Social media has long been the domain of raw selfies and sometimes dull home videos. But that's all changing now thanks in part to Scott Snibbe, a brilliant cross-disciplinary American artist, entrepreneur and educator.

With his app innovation, Eyegroove – the social network for music videos (acquired by Facebook), he helped hundreds of millions of people with confident creative expression across Facebook's platforms, including Instagram and Messenger. Also unique among artists, Scott is an accomplished entrepreneur and founder of four creative technology companies, with twenty-five patents for his inventions with social media, music, video and augmented reality. As an educator, Scott has served his community through teaching positions with UC Berkeley, NYU and California Institute for the Arts, and for the past decade as a volunteer meditation instructor.

In this interview from his home in Berkeley, California, Scott shares how creative play, human connection and meditation guide his life and work.

The following interview has been edited for clarity.

We hope you find it valuable and welcome your comments at the bottom of the page.

WHAT DID YOUR PARENTS DO FOR WORK?

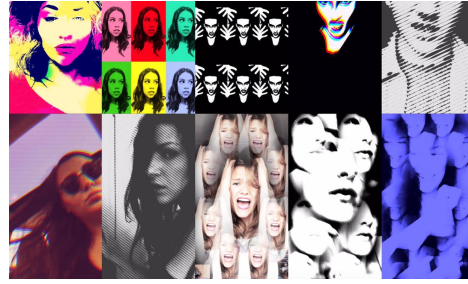
My parents were both self-employed, my father as a cabinetmaker and my mother as an artist. They worked together on Plexiglas sculptures in the '70s, then my mother started working with anodized metal in the '80s, and glass in the '90s.

WAS THERE A PERSON, OR EXPERIENCE, THAT INFLUENCED YOUR FOCUS IN BUSINESS?

The first influence that made me want to combine business and art was Andy Warhol. My parents were a peripheral part of his art scene in New York in the sixties, and told stories about his parties and art. In high school I started reading more about Warhol and became infatuated by the idea of creating an “art business” the way Andy had with The Factory—minus the drugs.



The second influence was Gary Kildall, the father of my childhood best friend. Gary created the first microcomputer



Music videos created with Eyegroove, 2016.

operating system, and during the late '70s and early '80s was on equal footing as an entrepreneur with Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. For about seven years his company, Digital Research, dominated business PC operating systems with its hardware-agnostic OS, CP/M.

Gary died young, but he was the well-rounded, compassionate entrepreneur we all wish for when we complain about the lopsided personalities of the titans who built our tech giants. Gary was a bona fide genius with a Ph.D. in computer science; a brilliant hands-on coder who'd rush to a colleague's house at 2am to demonstrate a new breakthrough; a handsome, athletic, vivacious connoisseur of life's pleasures; and a compassionate human being who'd make a bee-line for the one lonely person at a party and get them laughing and engaged. I interned at Gary's company during middle school, shipping

commercial software at the age of 11. Gary made me believe running a company was something creative, fun, and meaningful; and that you could maintain an authentic personality and a full life while being a CEO.

YOU WENT TO BROWN AND RISD, WHAT DID YOU LEARN THERE?

At Brown I studied computer science and fine art. And at the Rhode Island School of Design I studied film animation. There were no mixed programs of art, design and computers at that time; so I completed full tracks of art, film and computer science independently.

The courses that impacted me most were project-based; where students worked together creating films, computer programs, and fine art. The environment of talent at Brown created a competitive atmosphere, where each of us wanted to impress the other brilliant artists, filmmakers, and computer scientists – both students and professors.

Andy van Dam, one of the founders of SIGGRAPH

and of Brown's Computer Science Department, allowed me to join his computer graphics research lab when I was only nineteen, and to publish computer graphics research papers as an undergraduate. He felt the arts had a huge role to play in advancing computer science, and gave artists, filmmakers, and designers the opportunity to work in his lab side-by-side with computer scientists and mathematicians, even going so far as to have an official, paid, "artist" role for a half-dozen people in his lab. As part of my scholarship at Brown I started out in this role, later diving deep into computer science coursework.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST "REAL JOB"?

Right out of Brown I joined some friends who had started CoSA (The Company of Science and Art), which had recently been acquired by Adobe. I worked on an early version of the special effects software After Effects, building several innovative features including a computer-vision-based motion tracker, a keyframe animation system, and a web-based animation format similar to Flash. After Effects transformed the effects industry, making "online" effects systems that cost \$1000

an hour obsolete with a \$300 program you could use on the first color Macs. Eventually, After Effects was used in everything from Star Wars to TV and commercials, and it's earned over a billion dollars in revenue for Adobe since the 1990s.

HOW DID YOUR FIRST COMPANY SONAMO GET STARTED?

I was working at Interval Research, an incubator funded by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen. In 1999, he decided to shut down the lab, but his venture firm, Vulcan Ventures, funded a couple of projects to turn into startups. Ours was one of them. Sonamo was an early social community for people to make and share cartoon stories with each other. It was getting some uptake, but we shut the company down due to the one-two punch of the millennial stock market collapse and September 11.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM SHUTTING DOWN SONAMO THAT YOU TOOK FORWARD TO YOUR

NEXT PROJECT?

After Sonamo I worked full-time as a digital artist for five years, and then my next company emerged out of the interactive art I was creating using large-scale augmented reality projections and computer vision. What I learned from Sonamo, which was a more opportunistic company idea, was to focus exclusively on business ideas stemming from strong personal passion, rather merely ticking the boxes of current tech trends.



Snibbe Interactive office in SOMA, San Francisco featuring interactive augmented reality exhibits for science museums.

WHAT WAS THE PRODUCT YOU BUILT AT EYEGROOVE?

Eyegroove was a social network for music videos. The app lets people choose any song in the world and make an instant short video with real-time



Eyegroove when we were three people (Graham McDermott, Jesse Fulton, Scott Snibbe).



effects to share within our community or out to Instagram. A core insight we had was that music adds instant emotion to digital content, and that personally created videos are by nature more authentic than text or links. We also found that real-time effects and editing helped people feel comfortable sharing, allowing people to take on personas and express moods that contrast with the blunt rawness of #nofilter videos.

Eyegroove's users loved its authentic community and its rich effects. It was particularly popular with people of diverse genders, sexual orientations, and ethnic backgrounds, who found our community open, positive, and welcoming to all. Today, TikTok is the leading app in short-form music video sharing.



Scott Snibbe presenting Björk with Webby Award for Biophilia, 2012.

LET'S TALK ABOUT ONE OF YOUR RECENT

INNOVATIONS, THE AR CAMERA (FOR FACEBOOK), HOW DID YOU GET THE IDEA?

Facebook acquired Eyegroove for its real-time effect technology and the team talent in video tools, at a time when it was ramping up to compete against Snapchat. There were hundreds of people working on these teams at Facebook. Our team started out by integrating our engine for real-time augmented reality video effects into Spark AR (formerly AR Studio), eventually reaching over 500 million people through Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Messenger.

Over time we also created an engine for music effects, and contributed to other augmented reality and video features. After a year on video sharing, I moved to Building 8, Facebook's experimental hardware division founded by ex-DARPA and ex-Google ATAP director Regina Dugan. Building 8 was later renamed Portal after its first product release, and I worked there for two years on home-based augmented reality products.

WHAT WISDOM DID YOU GET FROM THAT PROJECT?

The sheer power, velocity, and aggregated talent of the teams at Facebook was what first awed me. I was impressed by the processes Facebook has for organizing and motivating large groups of people towards a singular effort. I was also impressed by the freedom employees are given to choose their day-to-day work, and the ease in moving between teams, while still working together as a whole to deploy new products and features.

I loved the strengths-based management philosophy at Facebook (described in Marcus Buckingham's [First Break All the Rules](#)), where, instead of trying to improve employees' weaknesses, you allow them to double-down on their strengths, by focusing on the intersection of what people are good at and what they love. The idea is that trying to improve one's weaknesses will only ever get you to mediocre performance, but focusing on your strengths can make you a superstar.

I was also impressed at how much a single person can make an impact at Facebook, if they have the guts to simply write up their idea, seek and integrate feedback, and be coached on how to get

it funded and executed.

On the flip-side, I saw how the distribution of user experience across many teams, and an emphasis on incremental A/B tests to develop small features, can sometimes muddy the personality and quality of software products, and lead to unintentional side effects, both technical and social.

**KNOWING WHAT YOU
KNOW NOW ABOUT
SELLING YOUR
COMPANY TO
FACEBOOK, WHAT
WOULD YOU DO
DIFFERENTLY IF YOU
WERE TO DO THAT
ALL OVER AGAIN?**



Former Eyegroove team members Elise Ramsay, Matt Roberts, Graham McDermott, Scott Snibbe, Andre Seibel, Michael Feldstein, Johan Ismael at Facebook, August 2018.

When I arrived at Facebook, I had spent 16 years working independently as an artist or entrepreneur. My leadership style – decisive, enthusiastic and opinionated – had worked well for me in my past roles. At Facebook, the leadership style was more

humble, collaborative and data-driven. At times, when debating leadership, it required one to “disagree and commit” in order to succeed. And of course, as in any large organization, there was elaborate politics. In hindsight I would have spent more time observing and asking questions of everyone around me, to understand the political complexities of the organization, before diving into projects. I’d recommend this approach to anyone in a similar situation. I joked with friends at Facebook who were also former entrepreneurs, that the company should offer a course called, “How to Have a Boss.”

WHAT PROJECTS ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

I left Facebook to spend more time on areas of my life neglected during the intense time there. The first is to be a great father to my eight-year-old daughter while she still thinks I’m the coolest guy in the world. Now that I’m working from home, we can spend a few hours a day together playing music, exploring nature and making things together.

My creative side is now satisfied by writing fiction.

A dozen years ago I stopped producing and exhibiting digital art, because it had become too expensive and was only reaching small audiences. I was also frustrated with the modest scope I could accomplish with the resources I had, limiting me to the digital art equivalent of sentences rather than the richer “feature-length” interactive experiences I had in my head. Writing’s creative palette is infinite, if you can master the technique, and within the next couple of years I hope to publish a first novel.

The third project is practicing and teaching meditation. I’ve been leading meditations for 13 years. For the past seven years, I’ve been making notes on a meditation system based on Tibetan Buddhism that requires no supernatural beliefs on the part of practitioners, avoiding concepts like karma and rebirth that can’t be validated by the scientific method, and instead relying solely on current psychological and scientific foundations. I’ve started “beta testing” the first parts of this system at a couple of local Buddhist centers and hope to share with more people next year when it is further developed.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE WHO IS LEARNING TO MEDITATE?

The “gateway drug” apps for meditation are Headspace and Calm. These apps help people gain the first benefits of meditation: reduced anxiety, better sleep, and an ease with one’s place in the world. Insight Timer is also a great app that is a clearinghouse for meditations from a diverse range of teachers.

After an introduction through Headspace or Calm, I saw that some of my friends begin to hunger for the spiritual and moral aspects of meditation, similar to those who get an introduction to yoga as an athletic practice and then become curious about its spiritual side. For those interested in exploring the spiritual side of meditation, in the context of the Tibetan tradition I’m most familiar with, I recommend the book [How to Meditate](#) by Kathleen MacDonald. The Dalai Lama’s books are also fantastic, and he’s written several for purely secular audiences, like [How to Practice: The Way to a Meaningful Life](#), or the more recent [Beyond Religion](#). One of my favorite books by the Dalai Lama is [The Universe in a Single Atom: The](#)

[Convergence of Science and Spirituality](#), that shows how today's physical and psychological sciences overlap with wisdom from Buddhism for a rich, contemporary take on wonder, meaning, and happiness in life. The audiobook version, read by Richard Gere, is particularly good; at the end you feel the resounding impact of the Dalai Lama's words as Gere sighs in wonder.

HOW DOES MEDITATION HELP WITH YOUR WORK?

Meditation helps with some practical things in life, like keeping you focused, maintaining a joyful attitude towards work and others, and directing one to projects that will be most beneficial for humanity. People who know me will laugh at the prior sentence, as I often fail in all these areas. In general, what meditation does for me is remind, and connect me daily, with the invisible aspects of life, and the infinity of time and space. It also reminds me every day of my death, and helps me to not take things too seriously and keep the big picture in mind.

DO YOU MEDITATE WITH MUSIC OR WITHOUT?

I meditate silently, with visualizations or focus on the breath or mind. I find music distracting to get to the subtler aspects of the mind. "It's sublime in the early morning to be completely silent and explore what's deep down beneath the obsessions, personality, and thoughts – that's what the mind is." I find music too strong and specific, pulling one's attention away from subtler states of mind. But it can be nice when you're doing other things, or as a backdrop to mantras if you like that kind of thing.

WHAT KINDS OF PROBLEMS COULD WE SOLVE WITH AUGMENTED REALITY THAT ARE INTERESTING TO YOU?

In today's mobile, physically disconnected social life, there's an opportunity for augmented reality to bring people together to share activities they used to experience face-to-face. "As we see commerce AR platforms emerge over the coming years, I hope that companies bend towards applications that create and sustain genuine human connections rather than developing

addictive, consumptive applications that succeed in drawing attention without building meaningful human connection, or even pull people further apart.” As an example of the wrong direction to go, I’d hate to see familys’ relationships mediated by AR glasses, replacing eye-to-eye connection and physical contact.



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