

The 'Appiest' Place on

EARTH

by Todd
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CENTRAL FLORIDA IS A HOTBED FOR MOBILE APPLICATION DEVELOPMENT.



» In 2005, Stan Van Meter was driving with a cell phone in his hand and another beeping in his lap. He was, in many ways, the typical distracted driver. His wife, concerned for his safety, said that cell phones shouldn't work when you're in the car.

"They should know when you're driving," Van Meter recalls her saying. And in that moment a great mobile software application (or app) was born.

Van Meter's resulting app, tXtBlocker, disables your phone's many features, such as texting, talking and e-mailing, while you're driving (by using GPS or other technology to determine your speed) or in designated areas, such as a school or your home. It's just one of the numerous successful apps being developed by entrepreneurial minds in Central Florida. These software developers are entertaining, informing and assisting us, one download at a time.

Van Meter's tXtBlocker helped launch his company, United Efficiencies, and made the self-described "country boy from Eustis" a full believer in the power of technology to change behavior.

"Our philosophy is to create something for the good of the public, beyond the entertainment value," says Van Meter. "We're looking for functionality and to develop something that's going to help lots of people do something better."

Functionality and fun are hallmarks of the apps that local entertainment, learning and marketing studio IDEAS Orlando has developed. It created "Florida Evacuates" for Blackberry and iPhone to help kids and adults find the closest shelter in case of a storm. At the same time, it released an iPhone app called "Shake & Date" that suggests date-night activities and even allows users to input a budget.

While no developer knows for sure that an app will be successful, most point to several factors that all good ones have in common.

"A seamless user experience, optimization (for battery, speed and graphics), and making good (and innovative) use of mobile capabilities,

such as accelerometers, cameras, touchscreens and GPS, are all keys to a good app," says IDEAS' Lead Developer, Thomas Gorence.

The products of another local company, IZEA, are designed to enhance and reward current user experiences. IZEA is a social media marketing company that specializes in connecting content creators with businesses through sponsored tweets and products such as WeReward and SocialSpark. While SocialSpark is a marketing network that efficiently connects bloggers to companies that are looking to create online buzz, WeReward is a mobile phone app that pays people who use their smart phones to do things such as shop and eat. Users earn points for taking pictures of themselves eating at local restaurants and posting them along with short reviews on Facebook or Foursquare. Earn enough points and WeReward puts money into users' PayPal accounts. It's a way to incentivize the kind of social media, word-of-mouth

advertising that many already do on Facebook and Twitter. In late July, the app was listed in the Top 20 free iPhone Social Networking Apps on iTunes.

Some local developers aren't companies, but individual entrepreneurs. Central Floridian David J. Hinson, who describes himself as a "polytech" who just happens to write and design software, developed the uber useful Cheap Gas, an iPhone app that finds the cheapest gas based on GPS location or postal code. A new feature in version 3 called "Cyborg" superimposes nearby gas station icons into camera viewfinders as users scan their surroundings with the camera on. Hit one of the icons and maps and prices appear. Cheap Gas was purchased in 2009 from gasbuddy.com, which uploads up-to-date information to the app.

When asked why Orlando seems to be a breeding ground for good software developers, some cited the area's strong technical schools or business-friendly

climate, while IDEAS Art Director Millo Aldea offered another reason.

"Orlando excels in all parts of the word 'art.' And technology is an art in itself. As we grow, people are noticing that Orlando is far from just theme parks."

So what's the final key to developing a great mobile app? Lots of testing. Van Meter said he ran numerous focus groups to find out what kind of features people wanted out of tXtBlocker and many of their suggestions made it into the final product. Van Meter enjoys collaborating, and says he would be open to meeting with other local mobile app developers.

"I'd love to have a roundtable with the other folks in Central Florida who are doing mobile software development, to see what everyone is doing, maybe share successful strategies," he says. "Sometimes it's better to cooperate than be in competition with each other." x

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