

# The little hipster who could

Wausau native strikes gold with hot iPhone app

What does Wausau and Apple's iPhone app of the year have in common? His name is Ryan Dorshorst, a Newman Catholic and UW-Stevens Point graduate who, at age 28, unexpectedly has found himself riding a tsunami of success atop his Hipstamatic iPhone photography application that makes snapshots appear like they were taken decades ago.

Dorshorst says 1 million iPhone users have downloaded the \$1.99 app and many of its five 99¢ add-ons, called Hipstapaks, which provide more filters to create even more fun effects. The filters mimic lenses, flashes and film types to create a broad range of retro effects that include blurring, discolored images, over-saturation and vignettes. Hipstaprints, which the company now offers, offer a casual and seemingly accidental snapshot feel, similar to shots created through hours of toiling in a dimly-lit darkroom.

The basic idea of Hipstamatic is that it makes your iPhone act like a simple, old, film-based snapshot camera.

Dorshorst and Hipstamatic co-founder, Lucas Buick, also a UW-Stevens Point grad, claim the app is patterned after a cheap plastic camera built in 1982 in, of all places, Merrill, by brothers Bruce and Winston Dorbowski.

They say the camera was dubbed the Hipstamatic 100, and that the creators were killed two years later in a car crash on their way back to Merrill from Wausau after having signed a lease on a building to mass-produce the cameras.

A whole social media package is built around this story, including a webpage, blog and Facebook profile of the alleged surviving Dorbowski brother, Richard, who appears to have given Dorshorst and Buick his blessing to create the Hipstamatic app.

The nostalgic story lends a retro feel to the whole endeavor — the quirky photography crowd seems to relish the Hipstamatic's backstory.

But the neatly packaged backstory appears to be a myth.

Nothing checks out. There's no record of a Richard Dorbowski, or his inventor brothers for that matter, ever existing. Richard did not graduate from Merrill High School in 1975 as his Facebook page professes, nor did he graduate UW-River Falls in 1980. He is not the chief comptroller of Neenah Paper — a call to the company revealed that employees there never heard of the guy. There is no death certificate for Bruce or Winston Dorbowski in Lincoln or Marathon counties where they supposedly were traveling when they were killed by a drunken driver. There also are no Dorbowskis currently registered to vote anywhere in the state of Wisconsin.

Even some faraway Hipsta-fans question whether it's true. One Australian blogger concluded, after finding little online evidence to back up the story, that it is indeed a fallacy. Marie Peters' blog went on to say that the boys went too far with their story. Despite that, she still loves the app and will continue buying all the new goodies to come. She has since posted new iPhone photos shot using the Hipstamatic app.

A tip-off could be that one of Ryan Dorshorst's favorite movies is *The Big Lebowski*. Dorshorst, Lebowski, Dorbowski...

Regardless of the veracity of their backstory (or should it be called a

marketing ploy?), the application Dorshorst and Buick released in December 2009 has since exploded on the scene.

The Hipstamatic is more popular than most of the other 300,000 apps now available through Apple's App Store. There were just 140,000 apps available earlier this year, an Apple spokesman told *City Pages*. So it's saying something to be named the app of the year when you're competing on such an enormous field.

So just how did a Wausau kid and his buddy come to create a hip, new trend that's leading photographers — amateur and otherwise — to create retro snapshots and even what some consider art — with a hand-held smartphone?

It helped that Apple went gaga over the Hipstamatic app soon after it launched a year ago and that iPhone users were given a much-improved camera with the release of the iPhone 4, suddenly making it a viable alternative to a point-and-shoot camera. But there's more to the story, much more. The guys were a little busy last week closing on a new building in San Francisco for their growing company, Synthetic Corp. Their new building has gallery space for Hipstamatic exhibitions and events. Dorshorst, however, answered questions via e-mail one late night:

## 'I'm both a tech geek and a photo nerd'

**Q: Where did you go after UW-Stevens Point?**

**A:** I got married and moved to Saint Paul, Minn., originally intending to get a job at one of the many awesome design studios (there). I was already doing freelance website design and programming when I decided that I'd really rather continue working for myself than find a job working for someone else. So I sent a spur-of-the-moment e-mail to my friend Lucas (who had moved to Chicago after graduating from UWSP) asking if he wanted to start a design studio with me. One thing led to the next and by the fall/winter of 2006 we had started Synthetic Infatuation. For the next three years, we would work with startup companies from around the globe to help them brand themselves and build web products for them.



Hipstamatic photo sample

Then in the fall of 2009, we began to lose a lot of our clients with the recession, and we decided that we'd rather take another step away from working with others and instead create our own products and sell them. The App Store seemed to make a ton of sense as we had all the skills between the two of us to create an app. In December 2009, we launched our first app, Hipstamatic, and within three days it had become the No. 1 photo app in Japan. Then on Jan. 1, we were featured by Apple on the App Store and our sales began to increase dramatically. By the end of February, we had gotten rid of all our clients and began to focus full time on apps and other analog products to support them.

## Why an analog photography app?

Lucas and I always loved old cameras, especially our trusty office Polaroid, which we used to take pictures of people who would stop by our studio in Chicago. And we've also always loved retro. When we were thinking about what type of app to create, we threw around a lot of ideas including a retro radar weather app, but then we stumbled upon the idea of making an app to turn your iPhone into an old camera that took Polaroid-like pictures. Really the target audience was us — we were building an app that we ourselves wanted to buy. It's really easy to make decisions about how it

continues on 10 ...

## Trendsetting

In an October story for *TheAtlantic.com*, senior editor Alexis Madrigal wrote about the time when photographs looked like paintings and photographers, or "pictorialists" had to defend their work as art.

With the Hipstamatic, Madrigal writes, there's a new trend where "we all can be cell phone pictorialists now." He writes about iPhone art touring the country as "Pixels at an Exhibition," and a new generation of iPhone artists making a case that their shots can be art.

Indeed, Hipstamatic developer Synthetic is challenging users to "tap into their inner Salvador" for an exhibit at the Dali Museum's new building in St. Petersburg, Fla. Filmmaker and visual artist John Waters will choose nine images to show inside the museum and the best submissions will be projected larger than life onto the side of the museum.

Professional photojournalists also have enlisted the Hipstamatic app. When *New York Times* photographer Damon Winter used his professional Canon camera to record video during a firefight in Afghanistan, he also pulled out his iPhone to snap stills using the Hipstamatic app.

Soon he found himself using the app all the time because soldiers were more at ease with an iPhone camera in their face rather than a full-sized camera. Four of those retro-looking photos graced the media giant's front page on Nov. 22, 2010, for a story documenting the day-to-day trials of the First Battalion, 87th Infantry of the 10th Mountain Division in northern Afghanistan.



Hipstamatic photo sample



Hipstamatic photo sample, taken by Christi Rusch of Scott Street Studios



(L-R) Hipstamatic iPhone app developers Lucas Buick, Ryan Dorshorst and their former UWSP prof Jeff Morin, in October as the duo accepted the first-ever UWSP Trailblazers Award

## About Ryan Dorshorst

Dorshorst's parents, Ken and Debra, now live on the Big Eau Pleine Flowage between Wausau and Stevens Point. They're also surprised how quickly the Hipstamatic has risen to the top of the Apple app heap, but they're not surprised their son is behind it.

"I've got a photo of Ryan at age 2 ½ working on our Mac Plus computer, the first one we ever got," says his mom. "I always knew he had this science and creativeness combined in his head."

The Dorshorst family is not worried that success will go to their son's head. He's always been responsible, a leader among his friends and down-to-earth, they say. "He was our home IT specialist until he moved away," Ken Dorshorst says.

"We really miss his expertise," says Debra.

A Macintosh disciple, Ryan learned web programming in high school doing independent work. While in college, he redesigned Newman Catholic High School's website and taught administrators how to update it.

He was always interested in photography, especially black and white, and "really got into classic rock, which is retro," his dad says. In fact, Ryan still wears a tan and brown, goose down vest, which used to be his father's in college.

Ryan's biggest splurge since striking Apple gold was to buy a new car with his wife, Jodi, "which they badly needed," his dad says. It's a Volkswagen Jetta TDI, an environmentally conscious, fuel-efficient, diesel compact. Retro, of course.

For the holidays, his parents received a big package from Ryan in the mail, but they're not opening it until Christmas. One thing it's not: iPads. Ryan already bought his dad one for Father's Day.

UWSP's Jeff Morin can't predict which students will go on to experience the level of success Ryan Dorshorst and Lucas Buick, of Wisconsin Rapids, have. "I remember both of them as being extremely engaged in the life within the department and the life on campus. They were not the type of students who would do their work and then go home," recalls Morin, dean of UW-Stevens Point's College of Fine Arts and their graphic design professor.

Their success has created a buzz on the Stevens Point campus, Morin says. "It's something that I reference in class, because it reminds people that it doesn't really matter where you're from or even where you go to school... It can be pretty inspirational for students to see them succeed in this way knowing that they're local."

Dorshorst and Buick have shared their success with students following in their footsteps. In October, they were dubbed the first recipients of the UW-Stevens Point Trailblazer award for accomplishments. At breakfast, the guys handed Morin a check to create an endowment fund to act as seed money for students with a product idea they'd like to market.

Dorshorst says more than 1 million iPhone users have downloaded the Hipstamatic app, which — at \$1.99 each — means his company, Synthetic, has sold a minimum of \$2 million worth of apps. There also are five, 99¢ Hipstapak add-ons to download. Many users have, and if every buyer of the Hipstamatic app also purchased the add-ons, the company would have sold nearly \$7 million worth of Hipstamatic-related apps. Apple takes a 30% cut, which leaves up to \$5 million of sales to the company. Not bad for a first attempt.

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should work such as swiping to change lenses, or the intentional limitation of having to shoot a new image and not allowing imports from a user's photo library. It was all to make the experience right.

I'm definitely both a tech geek and a photo nerd. I took half a dozen photo classes in art school, and spent countless hours in the dim light of the darkroom.

**Was it difficult to get Apple to approve the app and when did it really take off?**

We've only had problems related to very specific issues, though they've almost always been resolved after a resubmission. For example, we added a contest feature in version 150, which came out in the spring of 2010. It was rejected because originally Apple didn't allow contests in iPhone apps. However, the next day was saw that the iPhone developer terms had been amended to allow contests! Three days later our app was in the store.

This was also a point when our sales began to increase even more dramatically. Because of the way we had build the contest — users have to tweet about or "like" a photo on Facebook to get votes — it broadened our social reach dramatically. This word-of-mouth style advertising is what helped a lot of new people learn about our app.

Other big boosts happened early on when we were featured by Apple as App of the Week, or when we got really good press such as the *New York Times* write-up last month, or when we recently were picked as App of the Year by Apple.

**Will Hipstamatic users ever be able to import pics and post-process them with the app's filters?**

By design we don't allow post-processing nor do we allow saving the original image before the Hipstamatic effect is applied. We feel if this feature were enabled a lot of the magic of Hipstamatic — and indeed the instant unexpectedness of this style of photography — would be lost.

**What's next?**

We're working on a lot of amazing events over the next three months. We're having an exhibition for the grand opening of the new Salvador Dali Museum in St. Petersburg, Fla., in early January, where we will be projecting gigantic Hipstamatic images onto the side of the building as well as having a special printed exhibition of Hipstamatic photos hung alongside Dali's work in the museum. It's going to be amazing!

**The 'original' Hipstamatic 100**

Legend has it, or so says Synthetic Corp.'s Ryan Dorshorst and Lucas Buick, that the Hipstamatic 100 was a plastic camera built in 1982 by a couple of brothers in a lakeside cabin in Merrill, Wis. It is purported to have had changeable plastic lenses, automatic focus and cost just \$8.25.

Bruce and Winston Dorbowski, the legend goes, crafted fewer than 200 of the cameras by hand. When driving home from Wausau in 1984, after securing a building in which they planned to mass-produce the camera, the brothers were killed by a drunken driver. Or so the story goes according to Richard Dorbowski, the alleged surviving brother.

But considering that nothing in the story checks out, it's a savvy marketing campaign, not history. Ryan Dorshorst declined to answer questions about Richard Dorbowski, his brothers or the Hipstamatic 100.

Gerald Mortensen of FlapJack Creative, a non-traditional Wausau-based advertising and marketing firm, considers the Hipstamatic backstory creative genius.

Mortensen says it feels like a fun backstory that the company no longer needs, given the popularity of their product. And the drunk driving aspect shouldn't be tossed out so lightly. Still, there's potential for the Dorbowski story to become a full-blown marketing campaign. "If you create a good product that links to a certain era, I would want to package it," Mortensen says.

But as popular as the Hipstamatic app has become, the Dorbowski story could just as well be dumped. He's a bit surprised that Dorshorst and Buick haven't made it more transparent that it's just a good yarn. "Ethically, there's going to be people on both sides of the fence," Mortensen says.

Anyway, "How many people are really going to care nowadays?" Mortensen says.

Not many, says Marty Yawnick, a graphic designer in Fort Worth, Texas, who publishes the popular blog, Life In LOFI: iPhoneography, where he muses about iPhone photography. Yawnick was among the first to rave about Hipstamatic.

Most people, he says, won't care that the Hipstamatic 100 didn't actually exist. "There may be some backlash that



Photo of two of the purportedly few remaining "original" Hipstamatic 100 cameras and of the legendary Dorbowski brothers (top) as seen at Hipstamatic.com

as a community we fell for the story hook, line and sinker," Yawnick says. "Quite honestly, I feel a little embarrassed."

Yawnick suspected the story might not be true. But when he later met the guys, he didn't ask. "Personally, I didn't want to know that Santa Claus didn't exist." **CP**

For more on the Hipstamatic 100 backstory, log on to //hipstamatic.com.

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