

I paused, then nodded. I realized it was a bad idea to tell Patrick I was now a believer in the software's power to get losers like us laid. Better to let him think we were all about to get filthy rich.

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Six weeks later, a lean first version of the app—barely more than a working prototype, but we'd clean up the rough edges with our next release—was ready. Lance was going to submit it to the App Store. We were all worried that Cupertino would reject it based on the sleazy premise. Samir, the resident expert at spin, had labored over the marketing language. He said, "We can't afford to have this product look like a result of perceived Silicon Valley bro culture, something for guys to use in sexual conquests." I noted that Lance did not flinch or react to any of this type of language during these discussions. He took it as a given that there would be moral objections to his creation, which had to be strategically neutralized.

The solution for Samir had appeared in careful, feminism-informed (or at least, feminism-aware), almost therapeutic language positioning Bangr as a "sex-positive" app for "consensual partners of any gender expression and sexual orientation," and so on. He developed a series of talking points for us. We would need to make the product appear not only defensible, but actually progressive, even socially enlightened. Samir developed two-word clouds, ones to avoid and ones to use. The words to avoid included *hookup*, *promiscuity*, and *prostitute*, as well as, oddly, the word *love* itself, and with a touch of high absurdity, the words *bang* or *banging* in reference to intercourse. Words that were approved for use were much more profuse and included *freedom*, *fun*, *choice*, *modern*, *partners*, *millennials*, and *matchmaking*, and in cases where we might be called on to discuss the issue (which should be avoided), *escort* or *sex worker*.

There was a talking point prepared: Using Bangr for paid sex work was a violation of the terms of service and could result in you being banned from using the app. If pressed further, we would say that we would rely on a system we'd built into the app where parties could issue complaints against another user, including complaints of any kind of harassment or unwanted advances, which were also strictly forbidden according to the terms of service. And we

were to emphasize that although we took pains to include these measures, all our service was doing was facilitating communication, like an email or text messaging service, and similarly, we were not responsible in the least for any of the content or consequences of what users did with that communication. We were simply empowering our users, opening new fields of experience to them; that was our humble mission and only goal.

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The day that Bangr was submitted to the Apple App Store, Lance popped a bottle of champagne. It was a moment. It was impossible not to feel like we'd run a marathon and our own stamina and endurance were what we were all privately celebrating. We gathered in the break area by the gleaming espresso machine, and Lance shone with triumph. We raised our plastic cups, and our fearless leader gave a toast.

"Here's to our success. To the vision it took to get us here. The long days that made it possible . . ."

He went on in this banal vein for a while. I had to remind myself—and Patrick, whom I went out for beers with afterward—that the battle was hardly won and that really, the toast was premature. Patrick was a clearheaded young atheist from Mormon country and had proved himself a sturdy work partner; I was his technical mentor and felt a responsibility to let him know. In the crowded dark of a sports bar on Market Street, jostled by Giants fans, I took him by the arm.

"You've got to understand this, dude. Apps can languish for months waiting for approval by the chiefs in Cupertino. And if they reject it, there's no court of appeals. You have to change things, resubmit, and wait again."

Patrick shrugged this off.

"How could they say no, when Cruizer is in the App Store?"

He was simply repeating Lance's mantra. Since Cruizer—the hookup app that had inspired Bangr, that we had in fact ripped off, but which was marketed toward, and popular with, gay men almost exclusively—was approved, how could Bangr not be?

I was not so sanguine.

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HILARY BAKER

Outpost, 2014
Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 72 in



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