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Fred Mitchell, left, Justin Brock, Ryder Booth, Garrett Mitchell, Holmes Futrell and Colin Gilboy — all developers of the app “Notability” — get together at the Mitchells’ home in Palo Alto to work on improving their top-selling iPad app.

Locally developed app hits No. 1 on iPad best-seller list

Milestone offers window into the universe of app developers around the world

by Chris Kenrick

A Palo Alto company’s iPad app last week shot to the No. 1 spot on Apple’s list of “top paid apps.”

The youthful six-member development team celebrated by lighting candles, eating cake and blasting “Celebration” by Kool & The Gang.

The story behind the note-taking app Notability — combining Stanford University and University of California engineering talent and the efforts of several graduates of Gunn and Palo Alto high schools — offers a glimpse into the universe of thousands of app developers working in dorms, kitchens and home offices around the world.

Like several competing apps such as Notes Plus and AudioNote, Notability allows a user to record a presentation and simultaneously take notes. Later, the user can tap a piece of text in the notes and hear what was said at the same point in the lecture, or any audio recording.

“For students, doctors and coaches, among others, this feature will be highly useful,” wrote New York Times “App Smart” columnist Bob Tedeschi of Notability last week.

That small mention — plus the recent addition of a handwriting fea-

ture to Notability — is what developers believe propelled them to the top of the charts last Friday (Nov. 11), where Notability remained as of the Weekly’s press time Thursday.

More than 140,000 apps have been developed for iPad users. Apple does not post the proportion of paid versus free apps.

“It was a great surprise to me,” said lead developer Colin Gilboy, who has worked on Notability, and a predecessor app for the hearing impaired, since earning a master’s in electrical engineering from Stanford several years ago.

“We try to do what we do, and people like it.”

The six full- and part-time members of the Notability team are physically scattered — from San Diego to Los Gatos to Palo Alto to San Francisco — and do much of their work through Skype video and chat.

Engineer Holmes Futrell met his colleagues in person for the first time just last week after working remotely for more than two years from San Diego, where he is a graduate student in computer science at the University of California.

Bay Area team members gather once or twice a week in the Palo Alto dining room of Fred Mitchell,

a former senior executive at Adobe Systems who in 2008 launched the app development company Ginger Labs. The company is named for the Mitchell family’s 13-year-old yellow Labrador retriever.

Using customer feedback — Mitchell gets about 100 e-mails a day — team members go round and round about how to improve the Notability product.

“We’re always thinking about the next app, but in the first week that we shipped the current version of Notability we heard from customers and tallied up the number of new features they requested — and it was over 100,” Mitchell said.

“So, as complete as it seems, users have lots of ideas, and we’re going to keep pressing on Notability and improving it.”

Mitchell estimates Notability will have 500,000 customers by the end of December.

Besides Gilboy, Futrell and Mitchell, the team’s members are graphic designer Ryder Booth, Mitchell’s son Garrett Mitchell, who focuses on the app’s “library” or organizational screen, and Justin Brock, who does marketing.

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Brock keeps tabs on “campus reps” in K-12 and higher education who are willing to share their experiences with the product.

It was feedback from math and science students, among other things, that drove the addition of Notability’s handwriting feature, for easier use in the lab.

Despite the proliferation of iPad apps, Fred Mitchell thinks it’s “still the beginning” for the app business.

“Ninety-eight percent of the opportunity is in front of us,” he said. “The iPad will get faster, thinner, lighter, with a more high-resolution screen. And the quantity of them sold so far is a small number compared to cell phones. So that’s a lot of growth opportunity for developers.

“It’s a very democratic place because we have hundreds of reviews by people we don’t know, and they can say anything they want. Luckily, they’re saying mostly favorable things these days.” ■

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