

No sex, please, we're Apple

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Byline: Matt Hartley

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Illustrations: Color Photo: / Daisy Mae's Alien Buffet is a mobile video game designed to run on Apple's iPhone and iPod Touch devices.

Color Photo: /

Daisy Mae suddenly vanished without a trace last Friday, leaving a concerned Hong-Yee Wong searching in vain for an explanation for her disappearance.

Then, on Monday she was back. It was as if she never left.

Why she disappeared, where she went and what caused her to be returned are questions only Apple Inc. can answer.

Daisy Mae is the titular character in Daisy Mae's Alien Buffet, a mobile video game designed by Mr. Wong's Vancouver company, IUGO Mobile Entertainment, to run on Apple's iPhone and iPod Touch devices. In the game, players guide a scantily clad Ms. Mae as she uses oversized weapons to vanquish aliens.

Daisy Mae's Alien Buffet was one of about 5,000 applications featuring sexually suggestive material removed from Apple's App Store inside iTunes last Friday. Although Daisy Mae was able to return to iTunes, other applications weren't so lucky.

While the App Store has spawned a growing industry of startups eager to cash in on the popularity of the iPhone, Apple's purge of so-called "sexy apps" highlights the power of its role as gatekeeper of apps and raises questions about the transparency of its platform and the issue of censorship in the era of the smart phone.

"Apple wants to be seen as reaffirming control over the App Store and reaffirming control over the entire ecosystem so that everybody knows that Apple's in charge," said Carmi Levy, an independent technology analyst in London, Ont.

"Apple has been very clear since day one that it owns the playground and it will define the rules by which all games within that playground are played."

Since Apple launched the App Store in July 2008, more than three billion applications have been downloaded from a catalogue which now tops more than 140,000 separate apps.

Mixed in among apps that recommend restaurants, provide access to newspapers and allow users to play games while riding the subway, there are a growing number of "sexy apps" featuring adult content, including videos and photographs of women in bikinis and lingerie.

Until last week, Apple permitted such apps in the App Store. Like all apps, each "sexy app" was vetted by Apple, approved by the company and loaded into iTunes, where it was either made available for free or sold at a price determined by the developer (Apple takes 30% of the revenue from the sale of apps while developers keep 70%).

The App Store and similar marketplaces offered by Research In Motion Ltd., Nokia Corp. and Google Inc. now offer developers the chance to reach millions of potential customers through digital storefronts users carry with them on devices.

Of course, for the dozens of application developers who saw their creations initially approved by Apple, and then yanked unceremoniously from the App Store, the news came as a shock.

"We were of course very surprised that [Daisy Mae] got pulled," IUGO's Mr. Wong said this week. "There was no warning or notice from Apple before that ... We got an email, and it was gone."

"It reappeared again without any notice as well. I think they probably did a re-evaluation."

Although IUGO started out making games for other publishers -- the company developed versions of Tiger Woods Golf for Electronic Arts, which ran on traditional cell-phones -- the App Store allowed the company to create and publish its own games, giving it greater control over its intellectual property and revenue stream.

"The Apple opportunity was perfect for us because we know we're well positioned to create full game experiences and it's an amazing chance for us to make our own original IP," Mr. Wong said.

Still, Mr. Wong concedes it would be easier to work with Apple if the company were more open about what content developers can include --and what is offside.

"For any company to try and draw very firm guidelines on what is socially acceptable is almost an impossible task," Mr. Wong said. "Apple is forced to do this, but on the other hand, what we would like from a developer standpoint that would make our life easier would be clear and consistent guidelines. That would reduce these kind of situations in the future."

Philip Schiller, Apple's head of worldwide product marketing, told the New York Times this week that

the pulling of the sexy apps was related to a small cluster of developers that were sending in "an increasing number of apps containing very objectionable content."

Some analysts have said that Apple's removal of sexy apps from the App Store is related to the upcoming launch of the iPad, the company's new tablet-style computer. Apple is hoping to position the iPad as an education device with the launch of a new bookstore in iTunes and also wants the iPad to be something families keep in their living rooms.

"The iPad will by design change the demographic spread of customers who use the App Store and will broaden out the audience to something that is a little more family friendly and a little more focused on education," Mr. Levy said.

Save for Daisy Mae, IUGO's games don't tend to fall under the "sexy app" banner, but for some companies who realized there was an appetite among smart-phone users for applications featuring women in bikinis, Apple's purge came as a heavy blow.

Alan Johansen is co-founder of On The Go Girls, a small development company in California that specializes in "sexy apps." One app the company designed, known as Dirty Fingers, featured a bikini-clad model who would "clean" whatever area of the screen the user touched, while another allowed the user to scratch off a model's dress like a lottery ticket.

In January, the company's nearly 60 applications were downloaded more than three million times by iPhone and iPod Touch users, Mr. Johansen said. But after last Friday's cull, only one of the company's applications remains available in the App Store.

Mr. Johansen said the company first started noticing its applications were being pulled from the App Store about three weeks ago, and he questions the reasons behind Apple's decision. "Why did it happen in stages?" he asked in an interview. "Was it to test developer reaction? Was it to test consumer reaction? Or was it just such a huge process that it required three stages?"

However, not all sexy apps have been removed from the App Store. Apps from major publishers, including one for Sports Illustrated's swimsuit issue and another from Playboy are still available for download, a decision that has riled some independent app developers.

Apple's Mr. Schiller told the New York Times that the company took the source and intent of an app into consideration when deciding which apps would be pulled and which would stay.

When asked about the Sports Illustrated application, he said, "the difference is this is a well-known company with previously published material available broadly in a well-accepted format."

In fact, the only On The Go Girls application restored to the App Store was an app the company designed

for the Hooters Restaurant chain.

When Mr. Johansen's company contacted Apple to discern why well-known publishers were being allowed to post sexually suggestive content while smaller developers were shut out, the company was met with silence from Cupertino.

Mr. Johansen said developers would benefit from clearer guidelines about what they can include in the App Store. "Reviewers could review and follow those guidelines and not be in a situation where -- let's not even call them applications -- these investments wouldn't turn out to be a wasted effort. Other storefronts and carriers put these guidelines in place not only to help developers, but you have to believe it would help save those companies a lot of time in reviewing stuff that was just completely inappropriate."

On The Go Girls founders are now thinking about expanding their portfolio beyond sexy apps, and examining other, more open platforms such as Google's Android operating system, which runs on handsets built by a number of manufacturers.

It's not just sexy apps that Apple rejects or pulls from the App Store after receiving complaints. In the past the company has rejected applications from the creators of the television show South Park for explicit content and other applications for violations such as copyright infringement.

Apple has also rejected applications which offer "limited functionality" -- one such app that made farting noises was rejected for this reason.

Apple also rejected an application developed by Google -- Google Voice -- that allowed users to make inexpensive long-distance calls over a Web connection, rather than through the iPhone's phone system.

Although developers may complain about the restrictions Apple places on the iPhone ecosystem, the popularity of Apple's products ensure that the platform is one developers can't ignore.

"If you build your entire business on App Store-delivered content, you run the very real risk of having everything turned off if Apple at some future point decides that your applications no longer meet their criteria," Mr. Levy said.

"It's a very risky place to be if you're a developer, but at the same time, the strength of the Apple ecosystem and the fact that the App Store is now ground zero for apps on any platform, means that you either play by Apple's rules or you don't play at all."

Not all developers are lamenting the loss of the sexy apps. Developers like Ken Seto, co-founder of Toronto's Endloop Systems Inc., believe many of the sexy apps were low-quality and the clutter made it more difficult for other apps to get noticed.

"The App Store is a bit of a lottery," he said. "There are probably quite a few developers who don't

necessarily agree with the reasoning behind what they're doing, but who aren't too upset that the App Store isn't cluttered with these anymore."

mhartley@nationalpost.com