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## Touching the future

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Michael Neely is no fortune teller, but he works in the future on a daily basis.

Instead of gazing into a crystal ball, he peers at a computer screen, a digital sign or an iPad and accesses the future with a swipe of his finger.

The time of immediately accessible, completely customizable knowledge isn't far into the future, and if you ask Neely, he'll tell you the future is now.

"It's not so futuristic anymore," said Neely, 46, founder and owner of Blind Squirrel Digital in Newton.

Neely and his business partner, Jeremy Cooper, 34, specialize in interactive media, from designing screens that respond to the touch of the finger to creating games for hand-held personal devices.

"It all comes down to the end user," Neely said. "People used to sit down in front of a TV and have the information fed to them. The average user now wants to make selections and choices."

Neely and company launched an interactive iPad game, called "Doorways," on Wednesday afternoon. They will be available for purchase at the iTunes store, whose parent company, Apple, has a home in Maiden.

"The fact that these companies are coming here are a testament to why I came here," Neely said.

Newton's proximity to Charlotte and the area's low-business costs drew Neely to the city, and he thinks Google and Apple saw the same appealing qualities.

Neely said technology advances at a rapid pace, and as technology advances so, too, must his company.

"It's been a constant struggle to learn what's current and what's in the future," he said.

The company makes and designs digital and interactive signage, which allows users to choose messages and graphics displayed on a flashing sign.

Neely also creates touch-screen, interactive signs that can change the future of how information is displayed.

The touch-screen boards are used for train-station schedules, museum displays and other venues with the need to display large amounts of information.

"You can touch the screen with each finger," Neely said. "It's like 10 mouse clicks at once."

Although this technology isn't yet widespread, Neely sees touch-screen displays becoming an important part of the future's digital revolution.

"There are still some technology hurdles to cover," he said.

If Neely and Cooper are modern-day fortune tellers, then their downtown Newton office is a veritable space-age command center. Large computer monitors line their workplaces, which help create various media, from 3-D applications to digital effects for movies.

Neely's film credits include "Pirates of the Caribbean III," "Spider Man III," "Fantastic Four" and "The Incredible Hulk II." He's always working on an undisclosed project slated for future release.

Neely hopes to share his enthusiasm for digital media with others through education and awareness. Neely and Cooper both worked at Western Piedmont Community College teaching future graphic designers, animators and media moguls about their crafts.

"We try to inspire people to do things that we're doing," Neely said.

"We try to inspire people to make iPhone apps and other digital media, then we have an industry here."

Neely has a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in graphic design and a Master of Fine Arts degree in computer art and 3-D animation. He opened the doors of Blind Squirrel Digital in 2007, and Cooper joined the team about 18 months ago.

"I get to be creative every day," Cooper said of his job in interactive media. "It's fun. It's a good time. We want to be on the cutting edge."

And during Neely's more than 20-year career in graphic arts, it's that cutting edge that continues to surprise him.

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Newton businessman and entrepreneur Michael Neely outlines the future of digital media and how his company, Blind Squirrel Digital, makes that future a reality.

NEWTON, NC

O-N-E Staff Writer

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