

# The New York Times

February 5, 2009

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID POGUE

## So Many iPhone Apps, So Little Time

By DAVID POGUE

Who was it who wrote, in March 2008, just after Apple announced its intention to create an online app store for the iPhone, "You're witnessing the birth of a third major computer platform: Windows, Mac OS X, iPhone"?

Oh, right--that was me.

Anyway, there are now 15,000 programs available on the App Store, and so many more are flooding in that Apple's army of screeners can't even keep up. I keep meaning to write a thoughtful, thorough roundup of the very best of these amazing programs, but every day that I don't do it, the job becomes more daunting. (But don't worry. I'll get around to it.)

For the moment, let's use a single program as a case study. It's one of the most magical programs I've ever seen for the iPhone, and probably for any computer. It's Ocarina, named after the ancient clay wind instrument.

Once you install and open this program, your iPhone's screen displays four colored circles of different sizes. These are the "holes" that you cover with your fingers, as you would the holes on a flute. Then you blow into the microphone hole at the bottom of the iPhone, and presto: the haunting, expressive, beautiful sound of a wind instrument comes from the iPhone speaker.



Different combinations of fingers on those four "holes" produce the different notes of the scale. (You can change the key in Preferences--no doubt a first on a cellphone.) Tilting the phone up or down controls the vibrato.

Ocarina has become a mega-hit. YouTube videos show people playing their favorite songs on this thing with amazing skill. (The "Stairway to Heaven" arrangement, featuring four people playing their iPhones in harmony, is especially memorable.) The software company's Web site, Smule.com, even includes sheet-music pages that show you how to play well-known songs on Ocarina.

Ocarina takes advantages of the iPhone's microphone, speaker, touch screen, graphics and tilt sensor. Incredibly, though, it also exploits the iPhone's Internet connection and GPS, as well.

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If you tap the little globe at the bottom of the screen, the screen changes. Now you see a map of the world--and you start hearing the Ocarina performance of one person, in one city (indicated by animated sound waves on the map), who's playing the thing \*right now\*. Sometimes it's the halting fumbles of a rank beginner; sometimes it's a lovely melody played by someone who's got the hang of it. You can hit a Next button to tune in to another stranger, and another, all around the world.

It's a brain-frying experience to know that you're listening to someone else playing Ocarina, right now, in real time, somewhere else on the planet. (And then you realize that someone, somewhere might be listening to \*you\*!)

The best part of this story isn't just that someone has turned a cellphone, for crying out loud, into a musical instrument with fantastic expressive potential. It's that hundreds of thousands of people have bought this program in just a few months--for \$1 apiece.

Apple, which runs the store, keeps 30 percent of each sale. Even so, Ocarina demonstrates that a programmer can make a staggering amount of money from the iPhone store. It's a crazy new software model that I don't remember seeing anywhere else. It's not a boxed software program for \$600, or even a shareware program you download for \$25. It's a buck a copy.

The beauty here is that at these prices, there's very little risk in trying something out. How many software programs have you bought for your Mac or PC? Two? Four? Well, the average iPhone owner may wind up installing 10, 20 or 30 programs. In all, according to Apple, iPhone owners have downloaded 500 million copies of these programs. Half a billion--since last July.

There's a lot of gloom in the tech industry (and every industry, for that matter). But even when the economy is crashing down around us, there's still amazing power in a single good idea. And the one on display here--pricing software so low that millions of people buy it without batting an eye--is turning a few clever programmers into millionaires.