User Experience: Ge Wang

Developer Name: Ge Wang
Development Company: Smule
Tags: Connectivity; Workflow; Fun
URL: http://smule.com

Ge Wang is a professor of music and computer science at Stanford University, where he oversees the Stanford Laptop Orchestra at the university’s Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics (CCRMA, pronounced karma). Wang is also the cofounder of Sonic Mule, lovingly known by its team as Smule, which has built several phenomenally successful musical iPhone apps from Ocarina, a virtual flute, to I Am T-Pain, a vocalizer that imitates the popular Auto-Tune software used in hip-hop post-production.

Like Ngmoco, featured in Chapter 3, Smule has managed to turn the iPhone into a creative conduit where users can play, learn, and perform. Also like Bob Stevenson’s team, Wang’s engineers and artists have managed to reinvent Smule’s trademark aesthetic and play in a litany of new ways, creating a family of bestselling apps. As with Topple 2, players can fire up Smule apps such as Ocarina or Leaf Trombone (shown in Figure 11–1) and recognize the seed of the challenge, but still revel in its new and creative implementation.

Smule’s apps are also an education in connectivity. Each instrument they create is more deeply enmeshed with other players, in ways that beget creative sharing and competition alike. At heart, friendly rivalry is the lure that keeps both Smule’s and Ngmoco’s players coming back, long after they’ve become inured to the gorgeous art or the novelty.

Unlike other developers, though, Wang and his team have recognized and considered the iPhone first and foremost as an object, not simply a computing platform for software. In Wang’s hands, the iPhone has become a compact instrument; the phone’s guts, the code, even the visual design melt away.
What is your background like?

I’m a computer music researcher. What I liked about both disciplines was that I could be truly creative. The act of programming, I believe, can be and should be an extremely creative endeavor; not only do you get the wonder and the joy of building things, but you get to craft, build, and then express. That’s also why I love music. But with music, there’s an emotional aspect that touches people in a universal way.

Our apps are panoplies of both [music and programming]. Everything from graphics, numerical analysis, programming, design, networking—all of these things go into every one of our apps. On the musical side, we are exploring the rules of Western tonality, how we can bend and break them, emotionally and psychologically, and how we can convey that to other people. Both fields are extremely rich. At some point in grad school it occurred to me that I could combine the two. And that’s how I started at computer music research [as a student] at Princeton.

Why did you bring your research from computers to the iPhone?

I started as a professor at Stanford in September of 2007, first in music and eventually in computer science. When I first came to Stanford I had absolutely no plans to found a company.