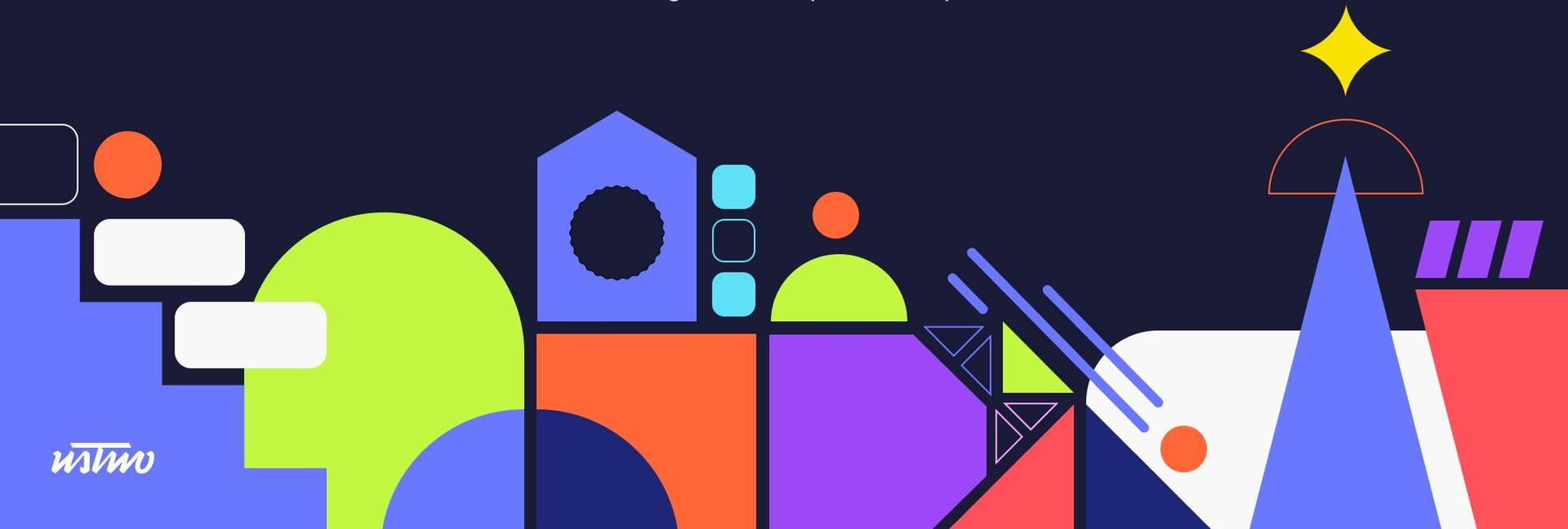




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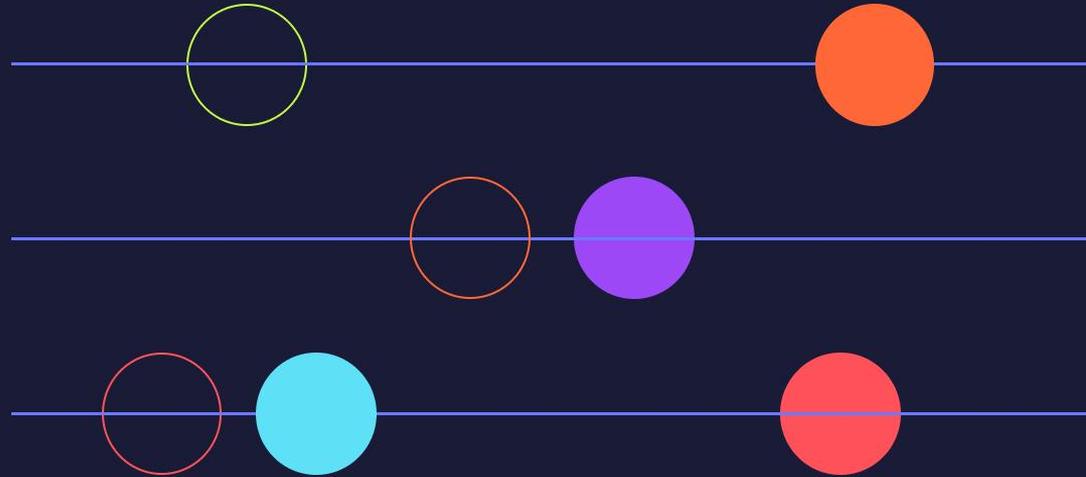
The Play Thinking Playbook

Why and How to Evolve Product Design
Using the Principles of Play



Contents

- 03** The Opportunity
- 04** The Challenge
- 06** The Solution
- 08** 12 Ways to Evolve Product Design with Play Thinking



The Opportunity

Digital product use and fatigue is reaching all-time highs in our hectic, radically digital, post-Covid world.

We see an unprecedented opportunity for design that focuses not just on **jobs to be done** but **joy to be had**.

Evidence of this opportunity is everywhere, from the recent rise of **playful tools for personal expression** in professional video conferencing,

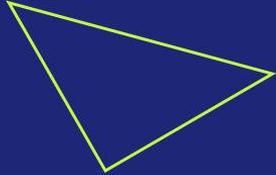
to the success of **game-inspired design approaches** in language learning, fitness, and even meditation products.

At the core of this opportunity is the fact that people increasingly want digital experiences that not only enable them to **get things done**, but that are **intrinsically meaningful, delightful**, and even **fun**.

The Challenge

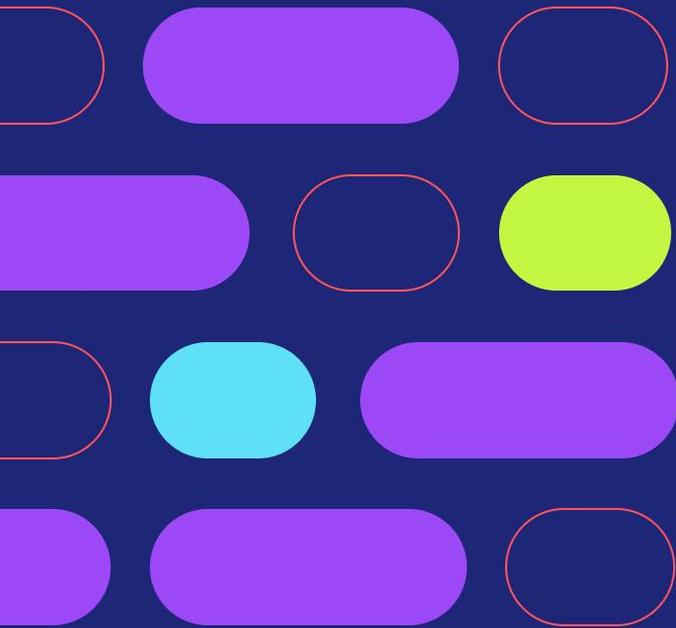
The challenge is that traditional product thinking is not well suited to seize this opportunity, since it prioritises **outcomes over experiences**.

After all, the closest analogue to “joy” in product thinking — user satisfaction — is typically framed in terms of **function and minimization**: of friction, time to completion, or cognitive load.



So, what's the
missing piece?

How might we design
for **joy to be had** as well
as **jobs to be done**?



The Solution

We believe the solution is **Play Thinking**, an age-old design ethos that values emotion and experience just as highly as outcomes.

And while Play Thinking is typically applied to game design, we plan to show how its core concepts and principles can help build truly compelling and effective products.

We will explore practical ways that **Play Thinking** can help companies design and build better products across a range of performance metrics.

Play as a **Motivator**

Why and how can
Play Thinking drive
greater **engagement**
and **retention**?



Play as an **Educator**

Why and how can
Play Thinking drive
greater **adoption**
and **onboarding**?



Play as an **Advocacy Engine**

Why and how can Play
Thinking drive greater
NPS and **WOM**?



Play as a **Community Builder**

Why and how can
Play Thinking drive
more **connections**
and **virality**?



How can Play Thinking be used to **motivate**?

Focus metrics: Engagement & Retention

1

Set the emotional stakes of functional product outcomes

2

Convey confidence in the user's ability to complete tasks and achieve their goals

3

Continuously validate and celebrate user progress and milestone moments

1. Set the emotional stakes of functional product outcomes

Although product thinking and Play Thinking both emphasize beneficial outcomes, Play Thinking offers a much richer toolkit for **inspiring action** through the **promise of a desirable feeling** — whether it be a sense of connection, accomplishment, excitement, or something else — and **encouraging perseverance** in pursuit of that feeling.

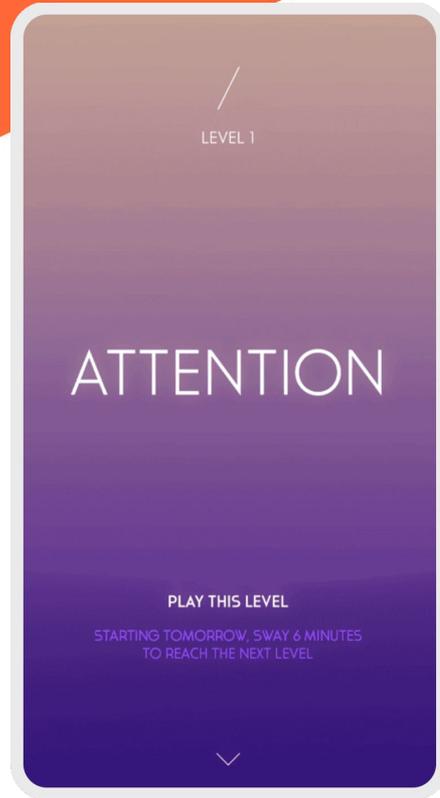
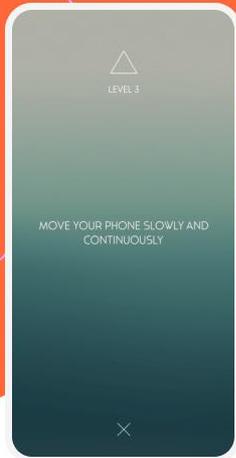
5x

the boost to motivation and performance that senior execs reported to McKinsey and Co when feeling that their work represented “high stakes; excitement; a challenge; and something [that] matters, will make a difference”



Popshop Live, a streaming ecommerce app, builds playful yet meaningful connections between sellers and customers via live interactive “shows” that blur the lines of entertainment, social media, and ecommerce





Sway, a guided meditation app, makes meditation accessible with clear multisensory cues and plentiful positive feedback

2. Convey confidence in the user's ability to complete tasks and achieve their goals

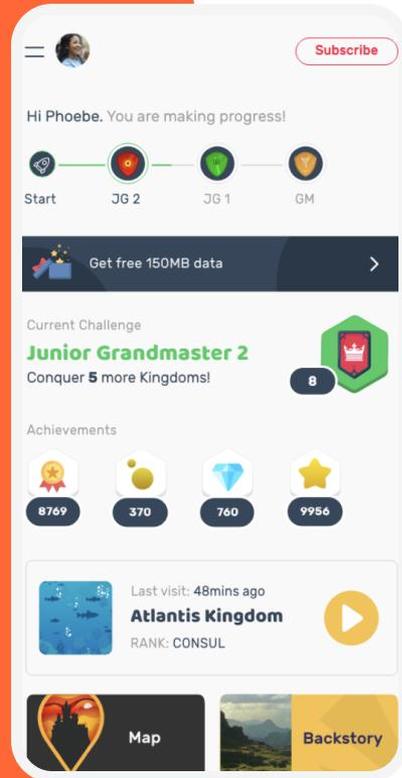
Drop-off is best understood as a **critical failure of motivation**. And one of the most important yet fragile drivers of motivation is confidence; confidence that you understand what's going on, and confidence that you can do what's required. Games build and sustain users' confidence, and hence motivation, by **simplifying tasks** and **offering empathetic instructions**.

"Competence [is] the experience when an individual is in a position to be in control and master a situation. [It] is one of the most important and most attractive characteristics of well-designed computer games since they continuously enable players to experience self-efficacy" - Hense & Mandl (2012)

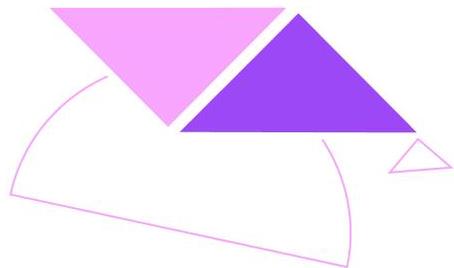
3. Continuously validate and celebrate user progress and milestone moments

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are, well, intrinsically linked. In design terms, this means **more is always more when it comes to giving positive feedback**. This is a core axiom in Play Thinking, wherein every aspect of an experience — from the first step to the final outcome — is designed to **generate joyful motivation** through positive reinforcement.

“Positive feedback increases both perceived competence and perceived autonomy, and that perceived competence and autonomy, in turn, increase intrinsic motivation.” – Burgers, Eden, van Engelenburg & Buningh (2015)



Gidimo, a Lagos-based educational startup, reimagines learners as heroes conquering the unknown, either alone or in (friendly) competition with fellow learners



How can Play Thinking be used to educate?

Focus metrics: Adoption & onboarding

4

Emphasise exploration over exposition to sustain attention with a sense of agency

5

Frame info as puzzle pieces or quest items to tap into the psychology of curiosity

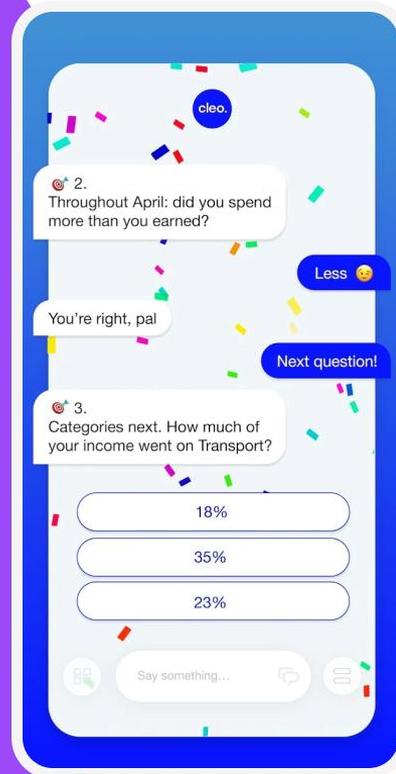
6

Introduce complexity in a progressive way to cultivate confidence and mastery

4. Emphasise exploration over exposition to sustain attention with a sense of agency

Games leverage “agency” — the capacity to think and act on the basis of free will — to **induce voluntary immersion** by offering an enticing combination of **interactivity and choice**. In this way, absorbing information can take on a deeper meaning and urgency, since “success” or “failure” becomes the direct consequence of the user’s choices and will.

“Trainees participating in simulation game learning experiences have higher declarative knowledge (+11%), procedural knowledge (+14%) and retention of training material (+9%) than trainees participating in more traditional learning experiences” – Kapp (2012).

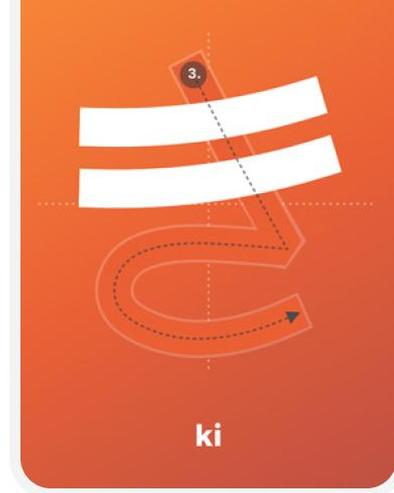


Cleo, a financial tracking and budgeting tool, takes a conversational, pop quiz-inspired approach to increasing users’ financial awareness and literacy.

5. Frame info as puzzle pieces or quest items to tap into the psychology of curiosity

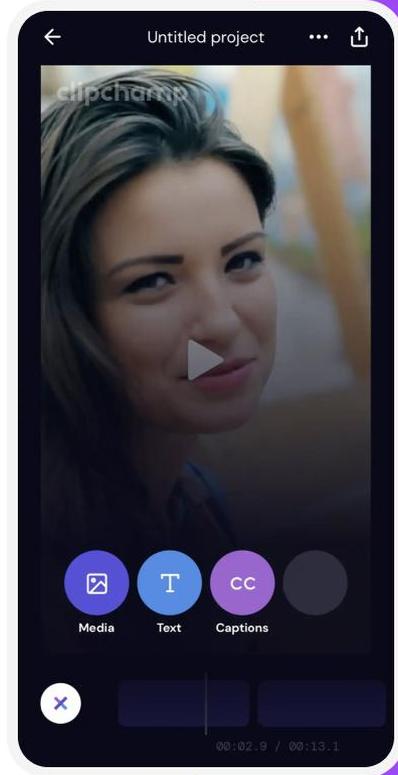
One of the starkest contrasts between product and Play Thinking lies in their attitudes towards **curiosity** – a core human impulse that is rightly credited with **driving innovation and improvement** throughout history. Product thinking tends to neglect curiosity in favour of eliminating ambiguity (to reduce cognitive load) whereas Play Thinking seeks to capitalise on it.

“Curiosity-induced behaviours such as information seeking play a meaningful role in workplace learning as well as in job performance.” – Reio and Wiswell (2001).



Drops, a language learning product, offers bite-sized mini missions to learn new words and phrases. Its playful interaction models imbue the learning process with a sense of freshness and dynamism.

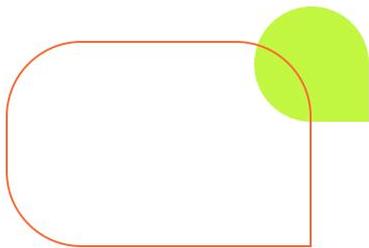
Clipchamp aims to democratise video editing with abstracted tools and simple templates that users can progressively “peel apart” as they become more confident in their abilities and more ambitious in their scope.



6. Introduce complexity in a progressive way to cultivate confidence and mastery

The concept of the **flow state** has taken on a near-mythical status in popular culture, and for good reason. Defined as a state of **balance between one's ability and the challenge at hand**, achieving “flow” is an effective way to induce users to self-educate and self-improve by gradually introducing complexity in a way that **fuels rather than dampens user confidence**.

“The worst thing a kid can say about homework is that it is too hard. The worst thing a kid can say about a game is it's too easy.” – Henry Jenkins, USC Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts and Education



How can Play Thinking be used to drive **advocacy**?

Focus metrics: NPS & WOM

7

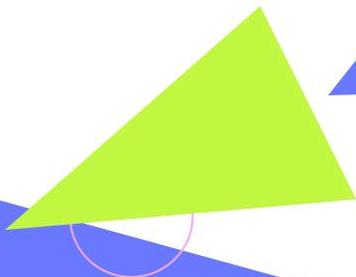
Offer shareable artifacts of achievement to invest relationships with more meaning

8

Recognise and reward advocacy to create a virtuous collaborative dynamic

9

Combine tangible and intangible value to avoid superficiality and transactionality

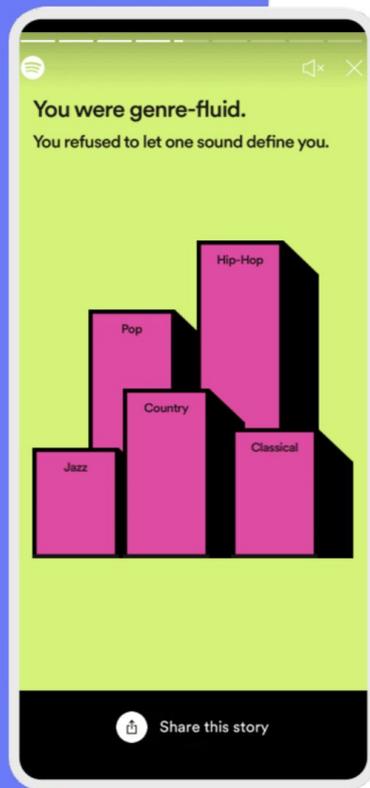


7. Offer shareable artifacts of achievement to invest relationships with more meaning

Although the underlying causes of digital fatigue are numerous and still nebulous from a scientific standpoint, two of the key drivers appear to be the **immateriality and ephemerality of digital experiences**. To put it simply, such experiences often feel like silicon slipping through our fingers. A simple yet successful “counter” is to **create or concretise meaning with shareable artifacts**.

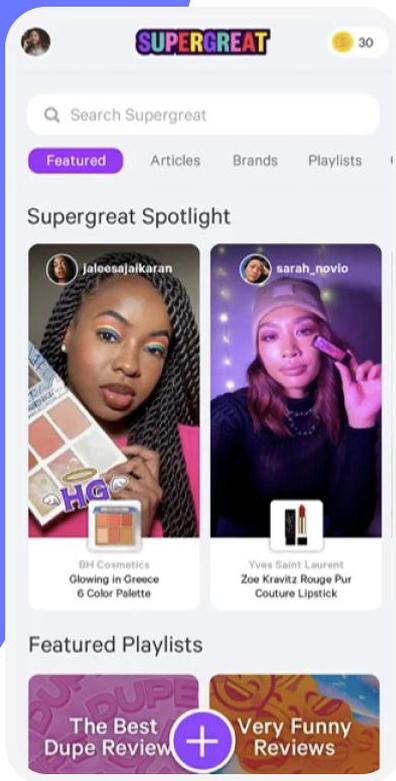
3.4 billion

the number of PlayStation Trophies collected by a sample of less than 5 million players across just 11,000 games, according to PSNProfiles



Spotify Wrapped takes rows and columns of streaming data and reframes them as a nostalgic yet upbeat reflection of “you” by generating shareable visualisations of your musical tastes over the past year.

Supergreat, a beauty community built on user-generated reviews, tips, and discussions, offers redeemable points in exchange for making community contributions that other community members rate as valuable.



8. Recognise and reward advocacy to create a virtuous collaborative dynamic

While Play Thinking is commonly incorporated into product design in a competitive context, the truth is that **collaborating often feels more fulfilling and motivating than competing**. Establishing teamwork-based rules and rewards systems can incentivise advocacy by making users feel great about recruiting prospects to “join the team” and share in the benefits.

603

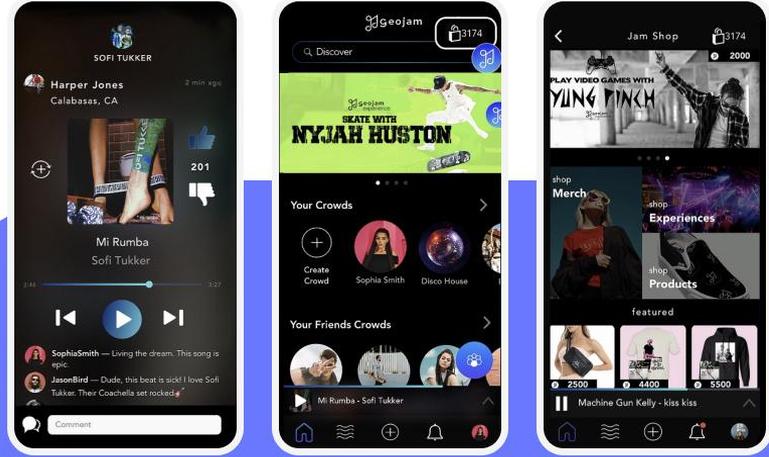
the number of new Wikipedia articles created per day by “Wikipedians” working together for free to advance the site’s mission to share collective knowledge

9. Combine tangible and intangible value to avoid superficiality and transactionality

“Mind share” — the awareness and popularity that a brand or product enjoys among relevant consumers — is typically framed as a marketing goal, but it should absolutely be viewed as a product design priority, too. One effective approach is to deliver tangible and intangible value with **product features and benefits that bridge the physical-digital divide.**

91%

The difference in customer retention rates that businesses with unified online-offline strategies enjoy over businesses that do not bridge the divide.



Geojam, a social media platform for music, recognises and rewards users for listening and sharing music they love, empowering them emotionally as curators and rewarding them materially as fans.

How can Play Thinking be used to build **community**?

Focus metrics: **Connections & Virality**

10

Offer templates but enable playful tailoring to facilitate emergent community behaviours

11

Empower and encourage identity formation at both the personal and communal levels

12

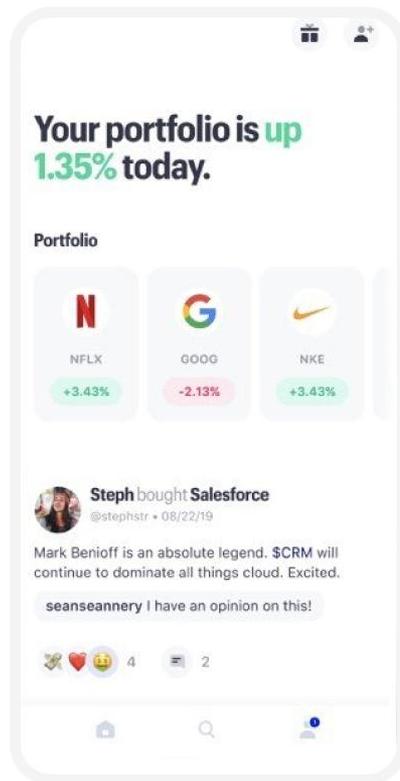
Amplify and incentivise prosocial actions to foster a spirit of positivity and inclusion

10. Offer templates but enable playful tailoring to facilitate emergent community behaviours

The simplicity and absurdity of “memes” make it easy to dismiss them as insubstantial, but the reality is that the modification and amplification of templatised concepts (humorous or otherwise) is indicative of a megatrend in the **democratisation of creativity**. Enabling and encouraging **emergent means of expression and interaction** is key to building community.

18 million

The number of Roblox “co-experiences”, ranging in nature from playful to entertainment-driven to purely social, and all built by 7+ million independent creators using the flexible yet templatised Roblox Studio toolkit.



Public (FKA Matador) is a hybrid investing app and social network that uses a “news feed” of friends’ recent activity to encourage discussion and even friendly competition, ultimately leading to more app engagement and more investing activity.

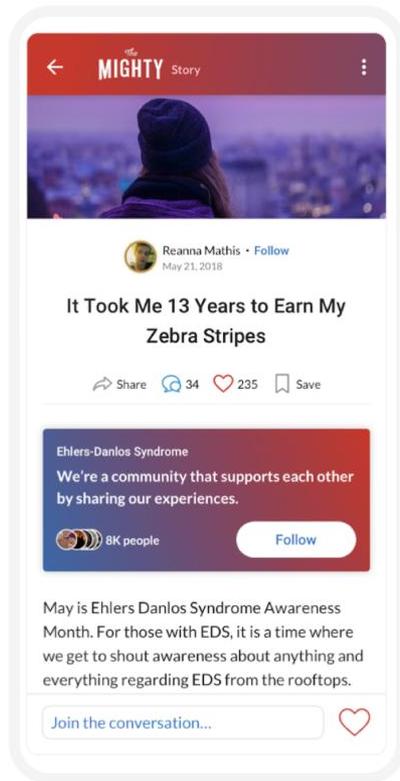
11. Empower and encourage identity formation at both the personal and communal levels

Identity is among the most pressing issues of our time, in digital and “real life” contexts alike. While the default approach in product thinking is to reduce identity to a set of predefined, machine-readable variables, Play Thinking frames it more in terms of **expression** and **association** (with other people and ideas). As such, **identity can be creative and connective.**

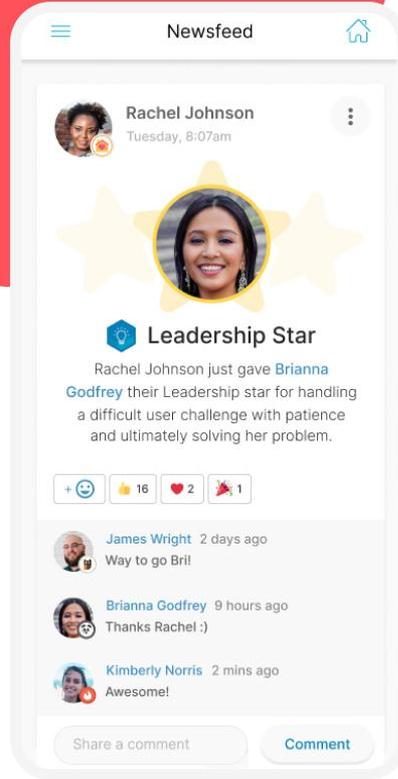
200 million

The total unit sales of the revolutionary Sims series, one of the biggest franchises in gaming history and a decades-old testament to the power of digital identity.

The Mighty, a social app designed with the differently abled in mind, seamlessly combines tools for expression and association — activities that are important for everybody but especially crucial for its target users.



Arcade's peer recognition and rewards system enables team members to not only celebrate but learn from one another's achievements in the workplace.



12. Amplify and incentivise prosocial actions to foster a spirit of positivity and inclusion

Although amplification tools are under scrutiny in the “misinformation age”, the **need for prosocial sharing and community is greater than ever**, given the increased prevalence of social isolation and remote work. Play Thinking offers a **uniquely behavioural conception of community**, based on recognising “good deeds” in the context of communal settings and rules.

49 billion

The number of upvotes shared and received in 2020 by users of Reddit, an online “community of communities” with a unique “karma” system that recognises and incentivizes prosocial behaviour.

Thank you!

If you're interested in applying Play Thinking to a product challenge or opportunity, feel free to reach out with a brief or ask about scheduling a Play Thinking workshop with our team.

hello@ustwo.com

