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Playful innovation

Philips Design has created 'Spark', a game that stimulates creativity and innovative thinking.



Most of us have fairly standard notions about the idea of playing games: perfect for children; ideal for adults when in an institutionalized form such as sports; something done by teenagers and 'escapists/geeks' who belong to a kind of gaming subculture. "When you ask someone if they have read a certain book, this is seen as a valid question," says Slava Kozlov, Senior Consultant in Strategic Futures Design at Philips Design. "But when you ask them if they have played a certain game, they will often be dismissive, saying something like 'I'm not interested in that kind of thing'. There is a certain stigma attached to games and gaming."

Serious games

This is even more so in the business environment. "Our culture frowns upon gaming in the workplace because you're supposed to be serious and productive," Slava explains. "Many people don't really trust the idea of adults learning through play." However, there is a growing awareness that games can be an excellent medium to promote the development of skills within organizations. Cisco, the networking equipment and management company, has developed the Mind Share game to help its employees 'reinforce and practice a variety of standard networking skills'. Meanwhile IBM has INNOV8, an on-line business process management simulator which is used by personnel, customers and students in over 100 universities worldwide. According to the IBM website, 'one study found that a great lecture can improve learning by 17%, but serious games can improve learning by 108%!'

The term 'serious games' is in fact widely used to describe games which are principally designed for a purpose other than pure entertainment. There is even a Serious Games Institute. The Strategic Futures Design group at Philips Design was already exploring this area, so when Philips Consumer Lifestyle commissioned further research into improving insight generation, this was seen as an ideal opportunity.

Open your mind

"We were asked to create something stimulating and interesting for the workshops," says Slava. "The workshop participants are not necessarily from creative professions, so they sometimes need help in thinking differently than they may have to their daily working environment. There is already a process in place to do this, but it can lead to overly rational and predictable outcomes. People often simply end up confirming the assumptions they had at the beginning and find it difficult to think outside the usual boundaries because that is not how they are used to working. We felt we could change things by developing a game."

Spark

The result was Spark, a board game that stimulates creative thinking, played in teams during workshops. The basic pretext of the game is that by rolling a dice you move characters around the board and into different life situations, or contexts. As an example you may move a character, described as 'Jane, a 20-year-old female gamer' onto a context space which says something fairly predictable like 'walking the dog'. But you could also land on a space which says 'undergo Botox treatment'.



In each case, you then have a couple of minutes to brainstorm on the implications of this combination of character and context being discussed. There are also wild cards (e.g. 'you discover you are broke') that can add to the complexity of the given context.

Finally, participants have to imagine how to help this person to achieve their main lifestyle aspirations (such as 'I want to have immediate and direct access to others and to information') which enriches and stimulates the thinking still further.

"Spark has definitely proven to add extra dimensions to the discussions," says

Birgitta ten Napel, Director Market Driven Innovation at Philips Consumer Lifestyle. "During insight generation workshops, participants tend to produce ideas that are close to home. We used Spark during workshops in our new business area Relationship Care, and it helped the participants to broaden their perspectives and come up with fresh ideas related to the proposition."

Planned yet random

"Each character has a short description, enough to help you imagine what that person might be like, but not enough to restrain you," says Slava. "These descriptions, as well as the aspirations and contexts, are not fictional, they are based on the results of our ongoing research. The customization of the board-game characters is also possible." In addition, the workshop facilitators select the characters and contexts to use beforehand which they consider most suitable for the workshop.

A deliberate element of randomness is also brought in through the use of dice. "This helps throw up interesting and unexpected combinations which immediately get you thinking," he continues. "These are often combinations that would normally have been filtered out of the process, but which you are now forced to consider. Such random, unpredictable elements together with animated discussion among the participants lead to fresh, innovative insights."

Combining learning with enjoyment

Slava firmly believes there are many advantages of introducing the gaming element into these workshops. "You can experiment without taking risks. Suspend your values and beliefs and adopt different roles which allow you to consider issues from a different angle. Learn how to deal with new situations effectively. Think more unconventionally while remaining relevant. And, in the process, enjoy yourself more!"

Spark was finished at the end of last year and has subsequently been used extensively in Philips Consumer Lifestyle workshops. "The main complaint is that there are not enough games in circulation!" he continues. "An increasing number of people are interested in using it. People also appreciate the design, because it looks and plays like a real board game. "



“When the workshop participants see Spark on the table, they immediately leave their laptops and mobile phones to huddle round the board,” says Birgitta. “They are interested in the game and so far, everyone has enjoyed playing”.

Wider appeal

A couple of requests have already been received to make Spark available on-line. There is also talk of developing a version with an Asian context (the current version is for Europe). It would seem that adding value to business through games is an idea that more and more people are willing to play with.

[+ Hear more from Birgitta ten Napel talking about Spark](#)