Remotely

Connected

Remotely Connected
Exploring delightful social interactions
at work in the context of home office

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Abstract

Remotely Connected is an explorative interaction design project searching for ways to bring back social aspects that have gone missing with the beginning of the home office. The question I am looking at is, 'How might we provide for delightful social interactions among colleagues and keep them socially connected in the changing context of work?' The goal of this project is to explore possibilities for new modes of playful, nuanced social communication suited for the new way of working, outside the box of given digital solutions we have in our hands today.

I looked at a wide range of topics related to work from home and identified three potential areas of possibilities based on my insights. The areas of exploration were 1. How might we enable ad hoc, serendipitous encounters? 2. How might we create a sense of working together? 3. How might we connect people beyond time, location, and language?

I approached these areas by collecting people's ideas through ideation workshop and developing them into design probes to facilitate discussions. Throughout the project, I kept an ongoing discussion and project review with potential users and an expert panel. Based on the learnings from the explorations, I developed my final proposal 'TouchBase', a customizable digital hangout place for teammates.

This project has raised discussions on the social aspect of remote work among the participants. Also, this project attempted to find a way of making a less isolated remote work culture.

"Social video calls exhaust me. Face to face, voice to voice, with nothing in between. Communication so literally and abstractly boiled down to staring at and talking at each other's faces. Where is the space for the mundane, the idle, and the liminal... those subtle and nuanced moments that also come with being together?"

Marie Foulston
‹Party in a Shared Google Doc›

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1.
Introduction

Motivation / Goal / Process / Scope / Outcome

Motivation

Goal

This project started from very personal, yet universal motivation. The prolonged home office, or home school in my case, made me both love and hate talking to my classmates. I missed the jokes and the small talks, but video calls exhausted me. On top of everything, I felt lonely.

My classmates and I will be starting our careers in a time filled with uncertainty. In this chaotic time of re-adjusting ourselves to new ways of working, I feel like our obsession with productivity made it the only element we successfully translated from a traditional office to a home office. I don't want people to forget the important social values that made us a part of the team.

So, this project is my attempt to translate the fun and delightfulness that we had in the offices into the digital space.
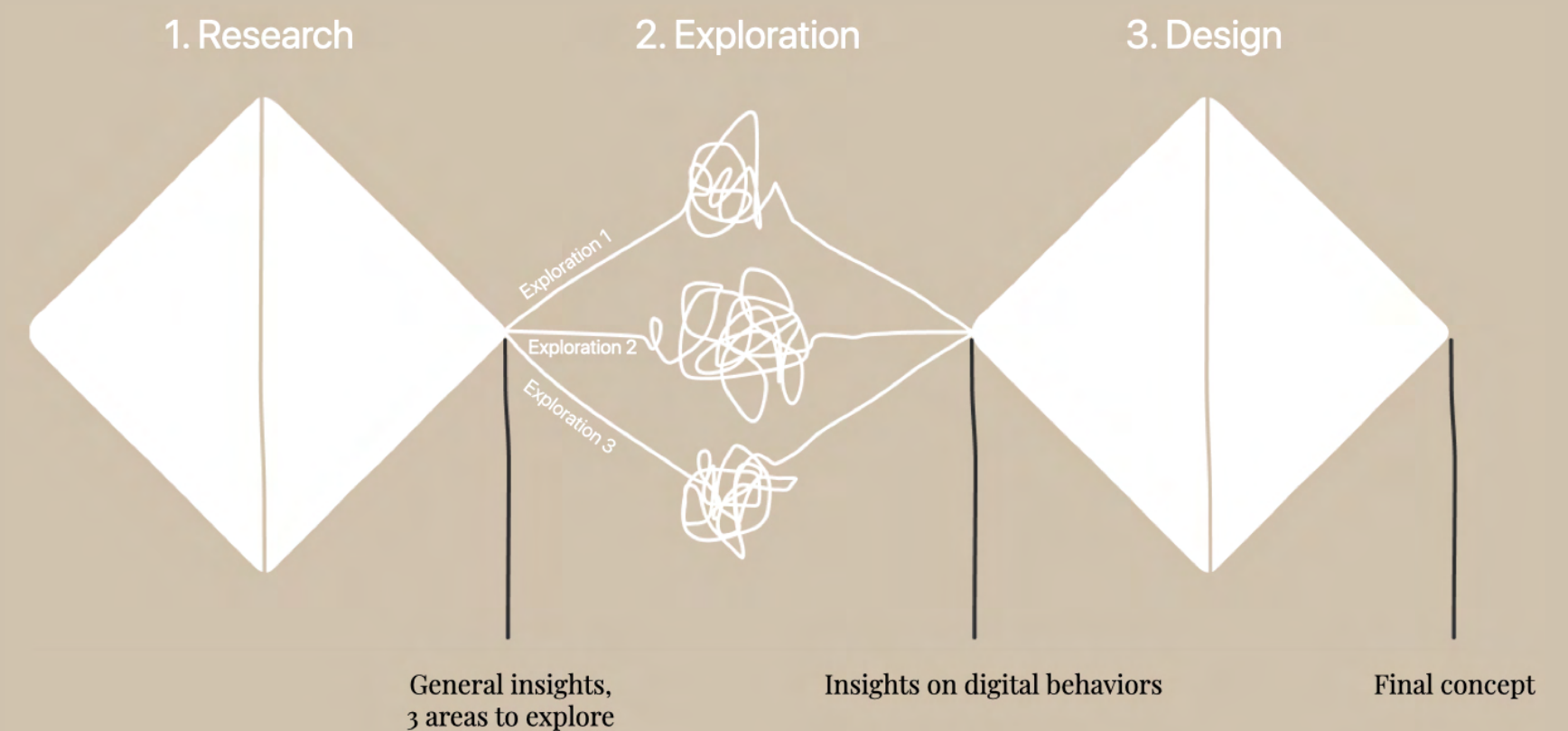
The goal of this project is to explore possibilities for new modes of playful, nuanced social communication suited for the new way of working, outside the box of given digital solutions we have in our hands today.

Process

My project can be divided into roughly 3 phases - research, explorations, and design of the final concept.

In the research phase, I looked at a wide range of topics related to work from home, to understand the topic from different angles. Through the desktop research and interviews, I identified 3 potential areas of possibilities based on my insights. I explored these areas by collecting people's ideas through ideation workshop and developing them into design probes to facilitate discussions. Based on the learnings from the explorations, I developed my final proposal 'TouchBase'. Along the project, I incorporated new workshop format suited for the remote setting.

I will explain my process in detail in chapter 3. Approach and Methods.

1. Research

2. Exploration

3. Design

Exploration 1

Exploration 2

Exploration 3

General insights,
3 areas to explore

Insights on digital behaviors

Final concept

Scope

Outcome

The project's outcomes are 1. a series of explorations on the social connection between employees during work from home, and 2. a product concept 'TouchBase', a social platform dedicated for fun and playful interactions among teammates that enables 'ambient intimacy'.

Ambient intimacy is about being able to keep in touch with people with a level of regularity and intimacy that you wouldn't usually have access to, because time and space conspire to make it impossible.*

This project is not looking for solutions. Rather, it takes an explorative approach to look broadly at the possibilities to improve the remote work experience a bit better.

Also, fixing pain points of existing communication tools is not in the scope of this project. For example, I am not focusing on improving the video call experience itself.

* Leisa Reichelt (March 1, 2007). Ambient intimacy. Disambiguity.

2.
Background &
context

Background / Why is social relationship at work important? /
Reflection on the current state of work /
Mapping out the digital trend / Future scenario

This chapter summarizes the findings and key insights gained through desk research and user interviews. The topics I looked at are broad, and the bricolage below roughly shows the areas I researched.

Background

The concept of telework has existed since the 1970s, but the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a rapid shift towards it. For those who can work remotely, especially knowledge workers, homes became the new offices.

Many people say that working from home has brought overall positive effects on our lives. The home office reduced some of the major stress from working from offices – you can use your time more flexible, spend less time commuting, and focus better on your task. At the same time, however, it introduced us to new challenges – spontaneous collaboration became harder, natural opportunities for social interactions disappeared, and the line between work and life has been blurred. Indeed, the home office is associated with lower social support, lower feedback and greater role ambiguity which increase exhaustion among employees.*

Productivity seems to be at the centre of the discourse around home office and remote work. The value of social aspects has been less prioritized – and after a year, we are still communicating based on the tools, relationships, and the culture we had before the pandemic.

For a better work environment in the changing context of work, now is the time that we focus on preserving the relationships employees have built and enabling social connection among them.

Therefore, this project attempts to explore delightful social interactions at work in the new context of work.

* Oakman, J., Kinsman, N., Stuckey, R. et al. A rapid review of mental and physical health effects of working at home: how do we optimise health?. BMC Public Health 20, 1825 (2020).

Why is social interaction at work important?

The amount of social interaction in the workplace has a strong impact not only on employees' individual satisfaction, but also on motivation, and the team's performance. In this section, I am looking at the implications of social relationships at work at both employee and organization level.

"Outside of immediate family, people's co-workers become their most consistent opportunity for social interaction. What happens when you lose that is one of my greater concerns."

Kati Peditto

environmental-design psychologist

Employees' mental health

Interaction is an essential need of our human character. And for most people, their co-workers are the most consistent opportunity for social interaction outside of the immediate family. However, many of us are losing this opportunity when we're working from home.

According to Jodi Oakman, work from home is associated with lower social support, which increases exhaustion among employees. Those working more days at home experience greater emotional exhaustion and cognitive stress associated with reduced social support from their colleagues.
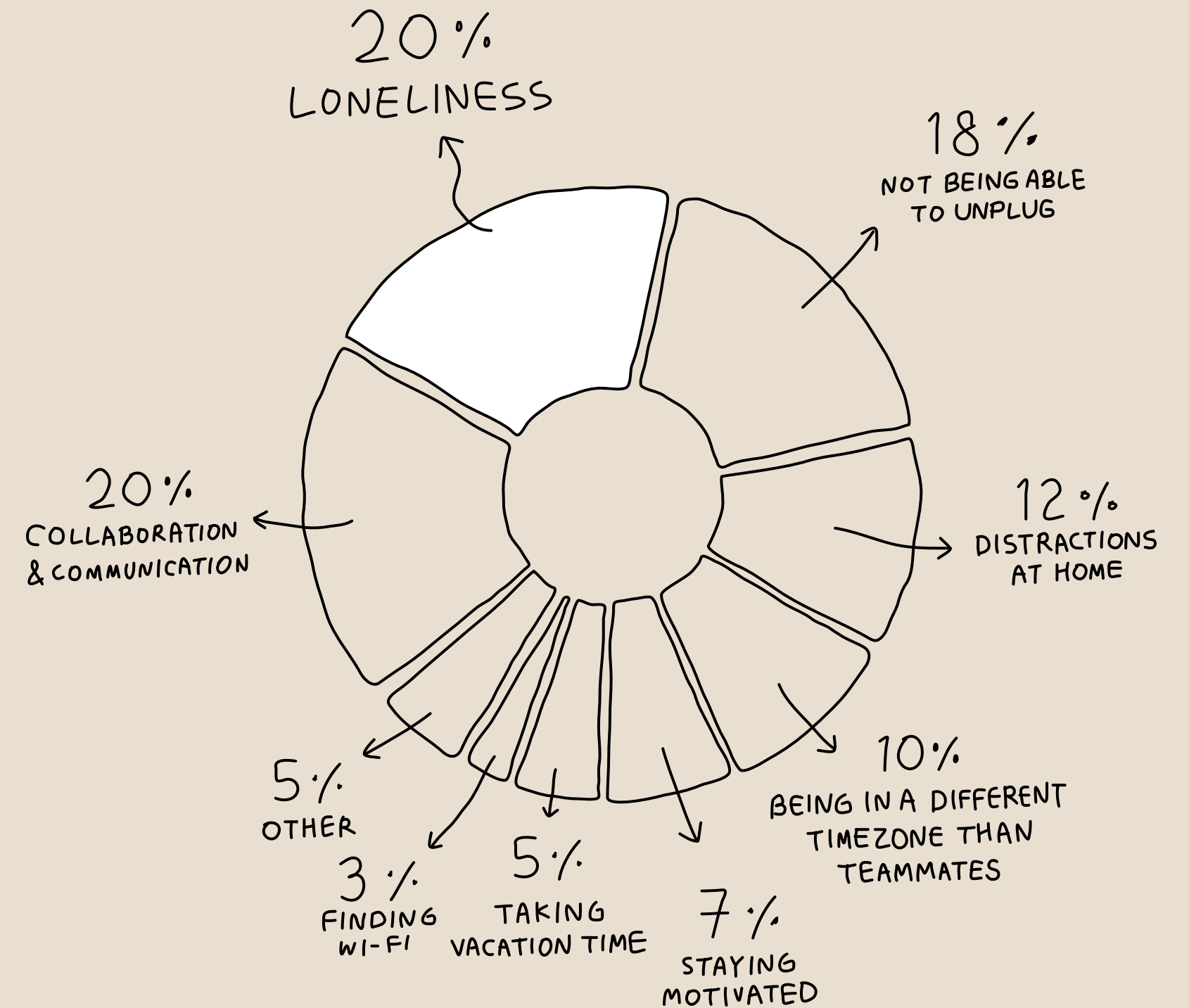
Image: Unsplash

In fact, a big number of people working from home mention 'loneliness' as their 'biggest struggle'. In surveys done both before and after the pandemic about working from home, loneliness often tops the list as the worst part of working remotely. Psychologists point out that prolonged home office without social interaction can lead to loneliness, anxiety, stress, pressure and depression.*

* How To Keep Your Mental Health in Check When You Work From Home. We Work Remotely.

What's your biggest struggle with working remotely?

20%
LONELINESS

18%
NOT BEING ABLE TO UNPLUG

20%
COLLABORATION & COMMUNICATION

12%
DISTRACTIONS AT HOME

10%
BEING IN A DIFFERENT TIMEZONE THAN TEAMMATES

7%
STAYING MOTIVATED

5%
TAKING VACATION TIME

5%
OTHER

3%
FINDING WI-FI

State of Remote Report 2020, Buffer

Productivity

When you lose connections, you stop innovating. It's harder for new ideas to get in and groupthink becomes a serious possibility.”

Dr. Nancy Baym
Senior Principal Researcher at Microsoft

On the other hand, good social relationship with colleagues also improves employees' productivity and the team's overall performance.

In 2015, Google identified the five key dynamics that make a successful team at Google. The first and the most important of the five were psychological safety. That is, the safer team members feel with one another, the more likely they are to admit mistakes, to partner, and to take on new roles.* And the premise of this safety is that you know and understand each other.

* Julia Rozovsky (November 17, 2015). The five keys to a successful Google team. Rework.

> **"** The results indicate that positive affect relates positively to creativity in organizations and that the relationship is a simple linear one. **"**

Gloria Mark
Professor in the Department of Informatics at University of California

Also, social connection at work increases the level of cognitive engagement to the task. In other words, people focus better on their jobs. The social interactions between colleagues provide a sense of appreciation for the organizational member. Therefore, interaction with colleagues makes their work seen as meaningful, which eventually make people more engaged in their tasks.*

Finally, positive emotional experiences at work promote more information sharing among employees, which is connected to improved creativity in organizations.

* Kahn, W. (1990). Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work. The Academy of Management Journal.

Reflection on the current state of remote work
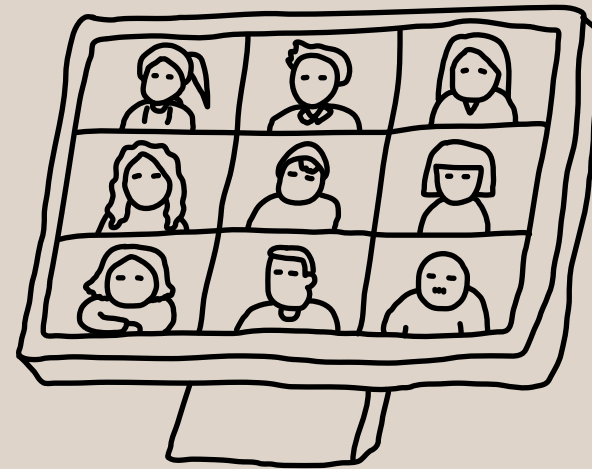
In this section, I'm summarizing my key insights I gained through the desk research and 7 interviews with knowledge workers who have experienced working from home in different degrees.

Interviews

Key insights

People have very different opinions about working from home. So, what are the advantages and disadvantages of working from home? And how is it really like to work from home these days?

To find out, I talked with seven knowledge workers between their 20s-40s to gain a deeper understanding of people's experience of working from home. Five of the interviewees have been working from home since the pandemic (5 months – 1.5 years). Two of the interviewees started working remotely before the pandemic.

Most of these interviews were conducted remotely. I used different software for each interview – Whereby, Zoom, Skype and Google Meet – to use the interview process as a learning opportunity itself.

1.
It's either calls or messages

First of all, we have very limited modes of communication. The most commonly used software during home office have fairly similar functions – calls or messages. However, these services are designed for specific purposes, not to substitute the entire social interaction. This is why the overuse of these software can result in some side effects such as 'Zoom fatigue' and 'Slack addiction.'

2.
Ad hoc, serendipitous encounters are gone

When people were sitting together, social interactions could happen anywhere anytime, with varying degrees. But now, these tiny moments have almost disappeared, and many of our social interactions these days are scheduled. Now we say that we 'attend' social 'meetings.'

Bumping into people in
the hallway

lunch

Asking quick
questions

Chat by the coffee
machine

Saying hi when
arriving

Random jokes with
neighbors

Sitting down at lunch

Before/after
meetings

Saying bye when
leaving

**Face-to-face social
conversations at the office**

lunch

Company-arranged
social events
(on Zoom)

**Face-to-face social
conversations at the home office**
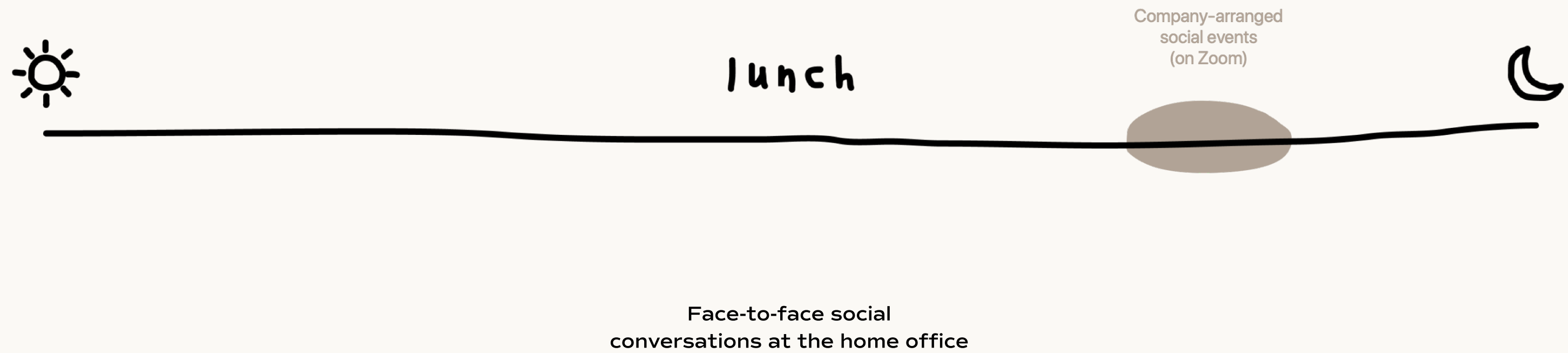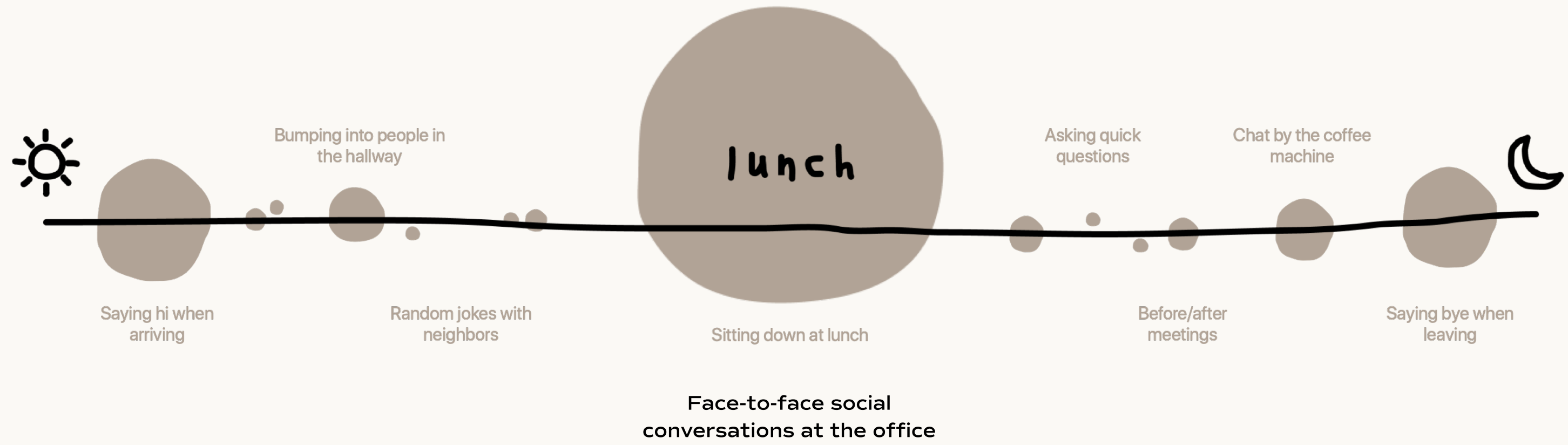
3.
We're losing our weak-ties

Keeping in touch with close colleagues is important as well, but research shows that building networks of casual acquaintances can boost happiness, knowledge and a sense of belonging.

4.
The pandemic might have tainted our view towards remote work

Not many of us have experienced remote work pre-pandemic. Working from home wasn't a choice, and our social contact outside work has also been limited. However, research shows that the overall positive impact of working from home is thought to be bigger than the overall negative impact.

"David used to walk by my desk every morning, and we'd talk for 2 mins. But we haven't talked since Corona."

3D animator
32, male

"I still send Snaps to my closest colleagues. But I don't know how the others are doing."

VFX artist
28, female

"I wonder how they're doing, but I don't want to reach out to them first. It feels awkward."

Engineer
35, male

Mapping out the digital trend
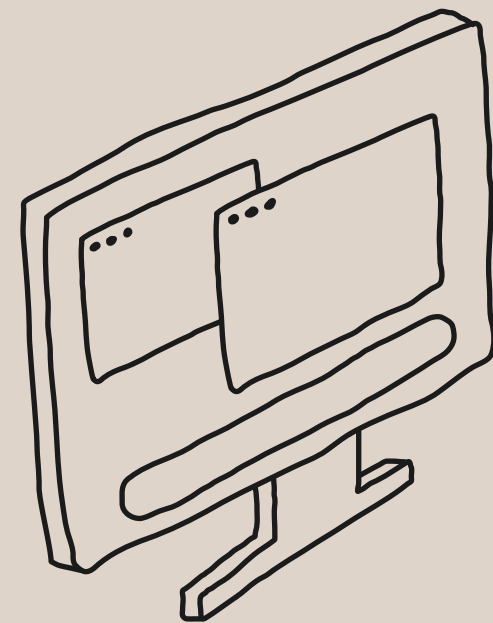
In this section, I map out existing digital services in the market and reflect upon relevant digital trends.

Remote work market

I discovered that the market aiming for remote work is already enormous. There are tons of startup companies working on the same mission of improving the home office experience. Everyone has their own creative approach to the current situation. Yet, no one has come up with a clear solution. Which made me frame my approach into finding ways to improve the current situation, not to solve it.
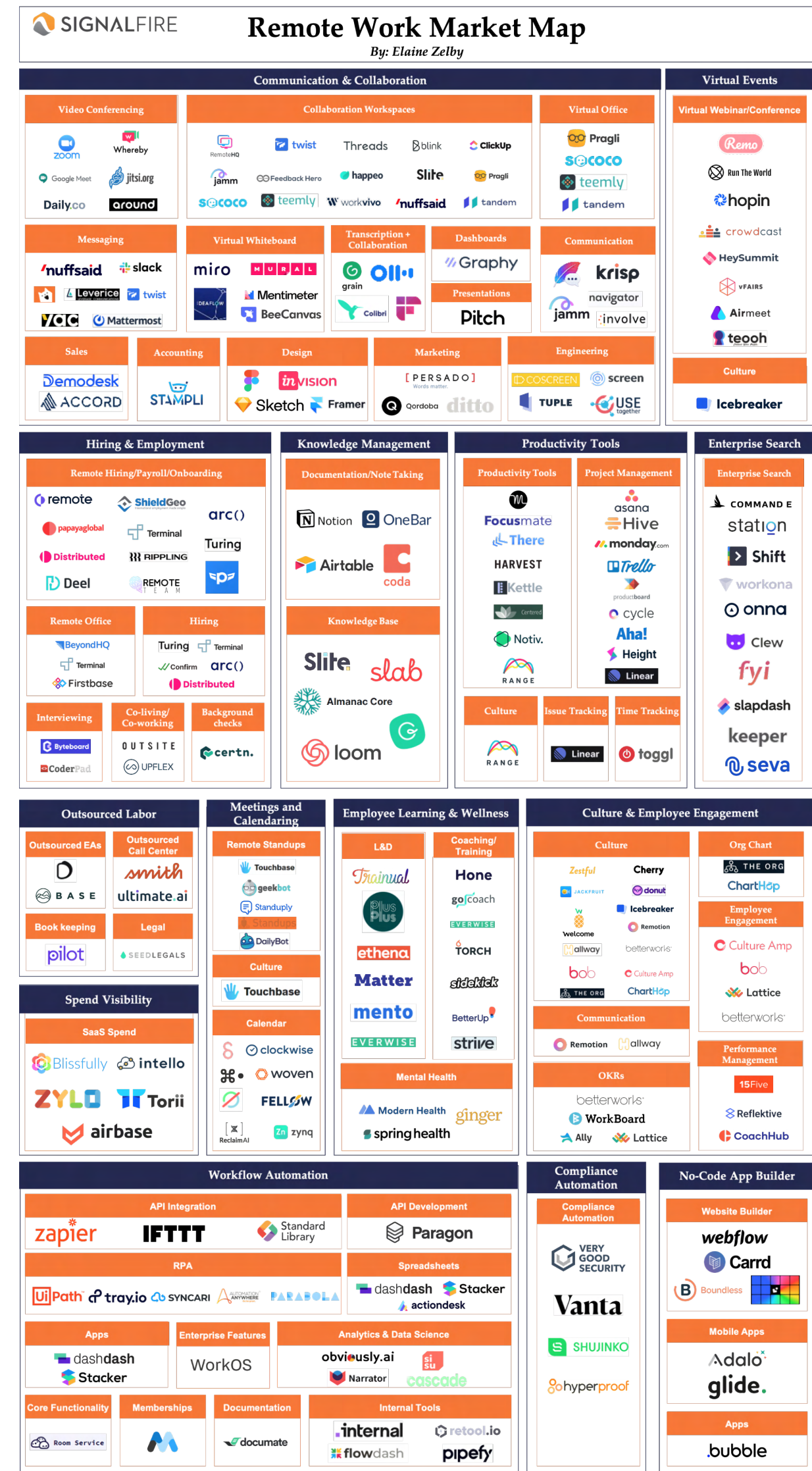
Spatial interface

Spatial Interface has been mostly associated with gaming or considered as artefacts from the early 2000s' digital hype – for example, SecondLife and Club Penguin. The modern screen interface has been focusing on simplifying the information into lists and texts in 2D space. However, humans have an innate sense of understanding things in 3D space, because that's how we experience most of the things in our lives. If applied in the right places spatial interfaces can be really powerful.

In his blog Dark Blue Heaven, John Palmer introduces the application of spatial interface in social applications and its advantages.

1. Afforded Intuition
Our natural understanding of space makes spatial software easier to use.

2. Expressiveness
In a spatial interface, more degrees of freedom mean users can interact more creatively with software and with each other.

3. Presence
In many spatial interfaces, we can sense other users through the presence of an avatar or figure.*

* John Palmer (April 9, 2020). Spatial Software. Dark Blue Heaven.

Image: Nintendo

Virtual office

Virtual Office

Mimics reality

Spatial
Sococo
Pragli

Synchronous ←————————————————→ Asynchronous

Makespace

Tandem

Zoom   Teams   Slack   E-mail

Digital native

Image: Spatial.io
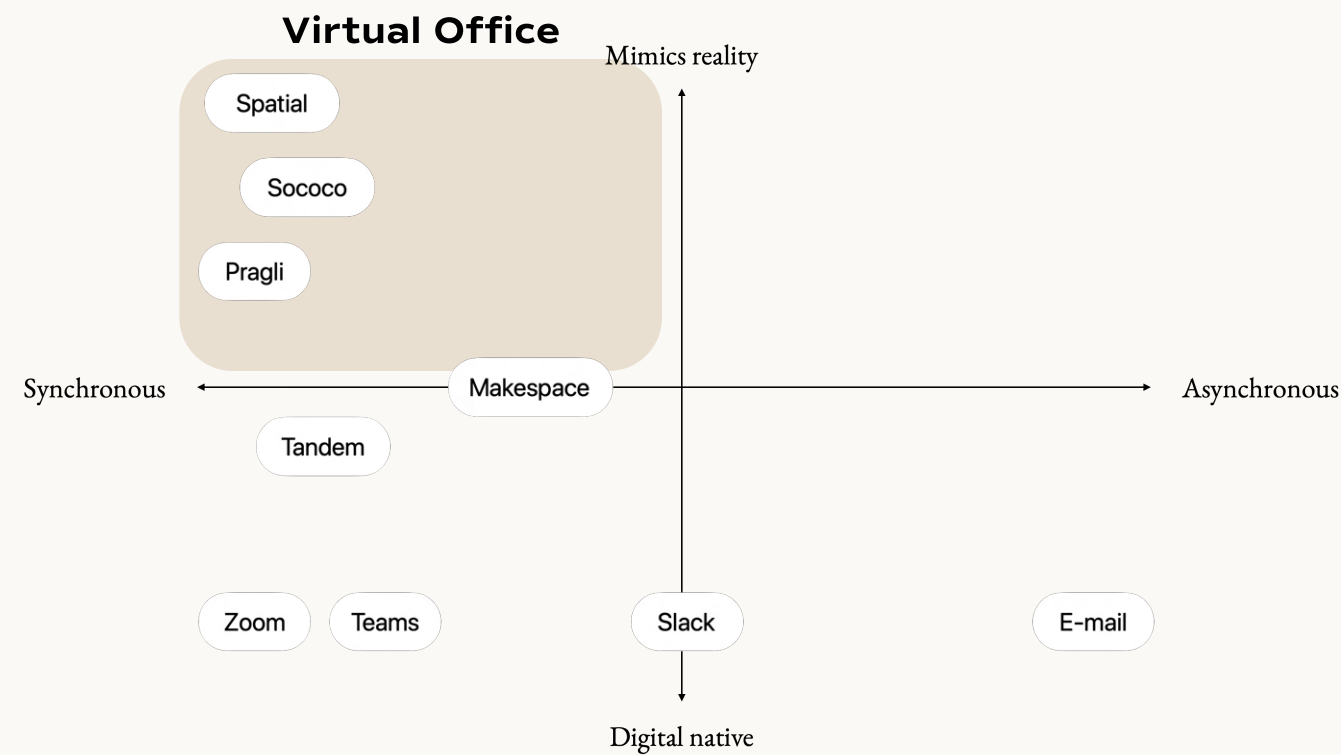
Virtual office services use spatial interface to mimic the office experience in digital space. Virtual office software have existed before, but many more appeared with the beginning of the lockdown. The new services incorporate new technologies and concepts, such as VR and AR, and spatial audio.

Image: Gather.town

Calm technology

Calm technology displays the information in the user's periphery, rather than at the centre of attention. Mark Weiser and John Seely Brown describe calm technology as "that which informs but doesn't demand our focus or attention." A clock on the wall that you glance at, or the indicator light on MacBook's power cord are examples of calm technology.

One of the principles of calm technology is that Technology should require the smallest possible amount of attention. Therefore, many of the examples of calm technology feature physical objects, rather than the digital interface. However, Matt Webb's project "Glancing" — which shows friends' status on the iOS menu bar — shows that the calmness can be achieved in digital spaces as well.

Image: Matt Webb, ‹Glancing›
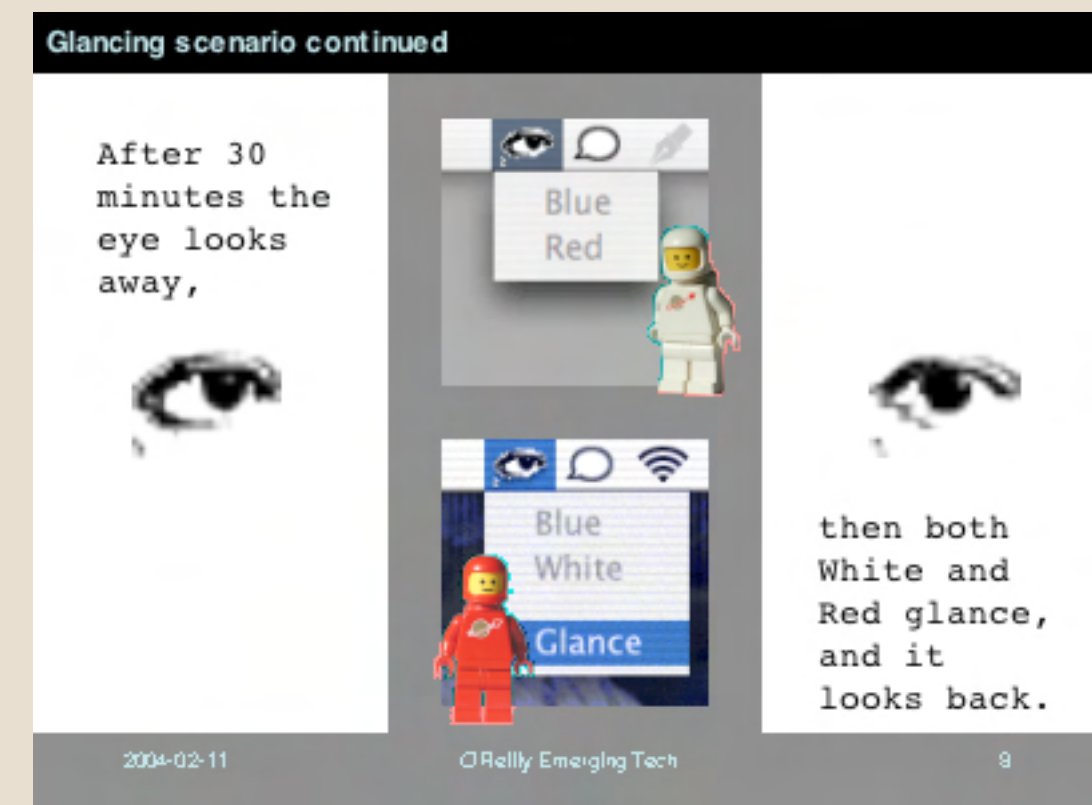
Future scenario
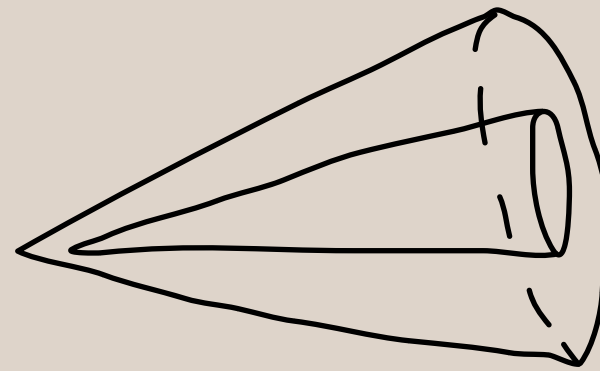
What's going to happen in the future of work?

Hybrid work model

So far we experienced a shift from where everyone's sitting at offices to where everyone's sitting at home. And experts speculate that there will be another shift to a hybrid work model, where some people are at the office while others are at home. According to a survey by Slack, the majority of workers prefer the hybrid work model over office model and remote work model.

While the hybrid work model brings great advantages for both employees and organizations, it has some downsides that we should prepare for. According to We Work Remotely, the problems of the hybrid work model can be that 1. Remote employees might feel isolated and disconnected from the in-house team, 2. Time difference can be a challenge, 3. Communication requires extra effort, and 4. On-premises employees may receive preferential treatment.*

* Hybrid WFH Work Model: Here's How to Make it Work. We Work Remotely.

Hybrid, home or office: A global breakdown of working location preferences

	Global	U.S.	UK	Japan	France	Australia	Germany
Hybrid (home and one or more other locations)	72%	72%	72%	65%	74%	72%	77%
Home only	13%	16%	15%	8%	11%	14%	10%
Office only	12%	11%	8%	13%	14%	13%	13%
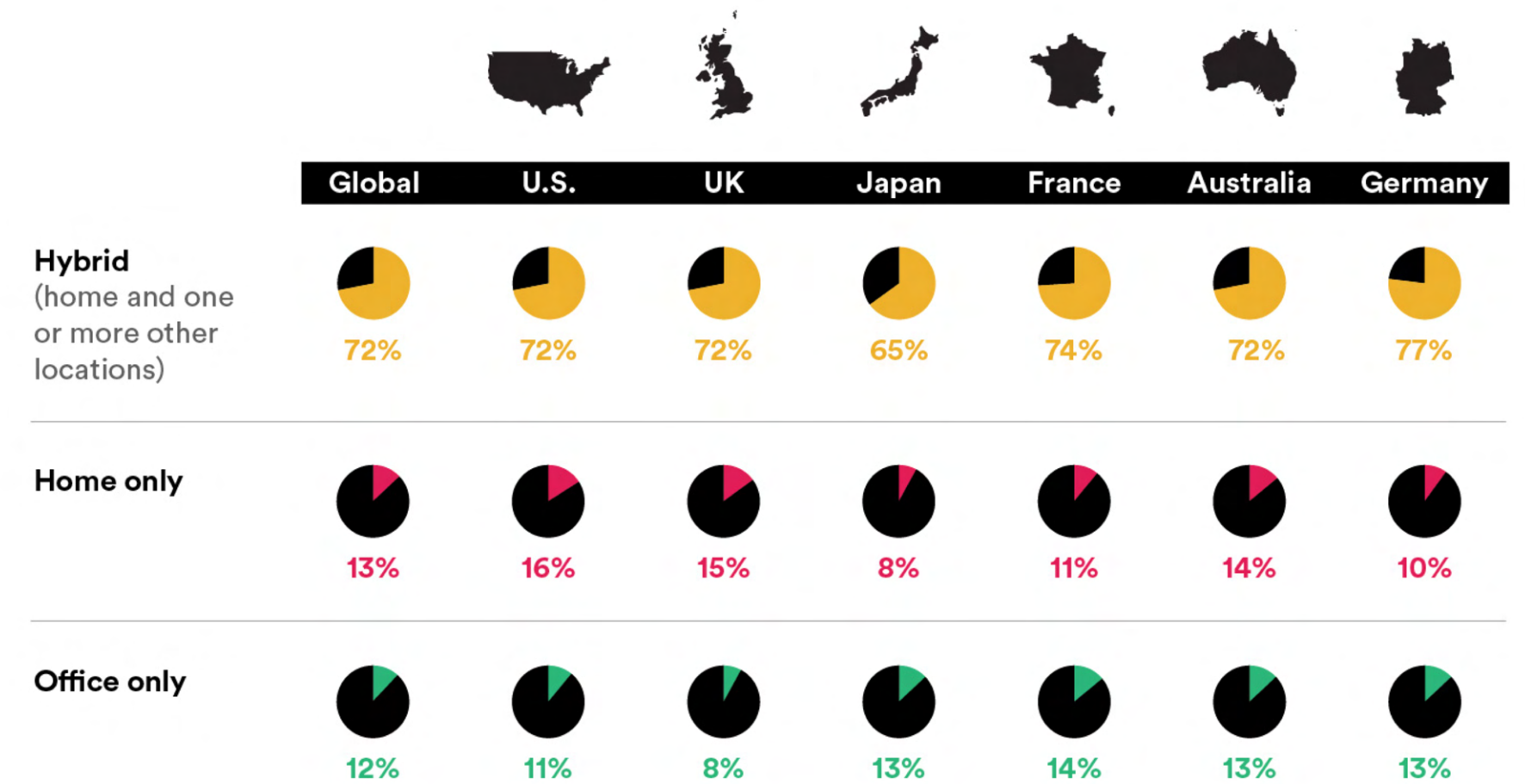
Image: Slack / Moving beyond remote: Workplace transformation in the wake of Covid-19

3.
Approach and Methods

Problem statement / Target group / Approach /
Methods / Areas of exploration

Problem statement

Target group

How might we provide for delightful social interactions among colleagues and keep them socially connected in the changing context of work?

This project is targeting **knowledge workers**. Knowledge workers use analytical, theoretical or otherwise high-level knowledge to develop services or products, usually online.*

* Sébastien Ricard (Dec 10, 2020). The Year Of The Knowledge Worker. Forbes.

Approach

generate many ideas
ideation workshop → visualize some of them
as design probes to
facilitate discussion → deeper
understanding of
digital behavior → Final concept
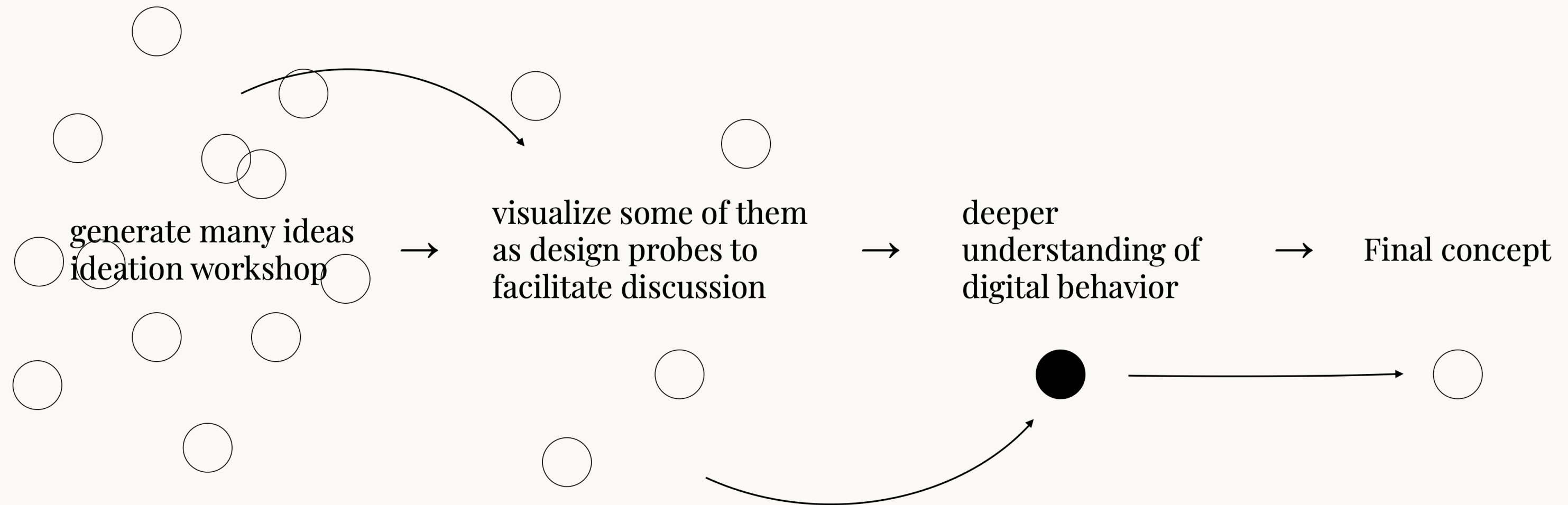
My approach to this topic comes from 3 different angles, based on the possibility areas I set up based on my previous research. I am generating and collecting ideas from potential users, and building quick tests or visualisations as design probes to raise discussions. Through this process, I am collecting more in-depth insights about people's needs and digital behaviour. In the end, I am proposing the final design concept based on the previous explorations and insights.

Methods

Desktop research

Reading existing reports, articles and studies, attending lectures and webinars and listening to podcasts about a wide range of topics related to work from home.

Interviews

Interviewing people who have the experience of working from home to get insight on users, their experiences and needs.

Testing

Building rapid tests with existing software to evaluate the idea and facilitate discussions.

Probes

Using the wide range of explorative concepts to gain deeper insights on potential users.

Self-ethnography

Reflecting on my own experience, as a diploma student who has been working on this project from my kitchen.

Ideation workshop

Running a remote, asynchronous ideation workshop on Miro to collect ideas for the exploration.

Presentation & feedback

Presenting the project to potential users, experts, designers and diploma peers to get feedback.

Feedback workshop

Running a remote workshop to get feedback on the final concept from potential users.

Self-ideation

Using methods as brainstorming, crazy 8, and SCAMPER to explore more possibilities.

Prototyping

Prototyping the selected ideas, from paper prototypes to refined digital prototypes, to raise discussions.

Expert panel

Along the project, I had regular project review sessions with Bjarte Misund (Whereby), Timo Arnall (Playdeo), and Dhritiman Chatterjee (Halogen).

Areas of exploration
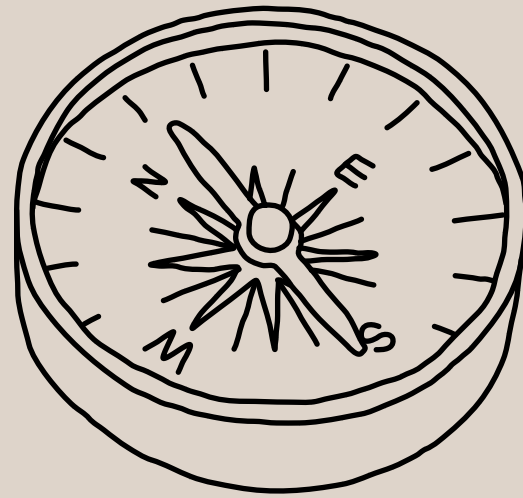
Work from home is a broad topic, and there are many aspects to look into. So I broke down the topic into more specific areas for exploration.

How might we enable ad hoc, serendipitous encounters?

In my first exploration, I am sketching out ideas that can enable serendipitous encounters in existing digital spaces. Conversations don't occur naturally in the remote setting. Most of the interactions today have to be scheduled or initiated. This decreases the frequency of employees' overall interactions and changes the personality of the conversations into something more serious. Also, people are losing casual contact with some colleagues, therefore less exposed to different views - which affects both employees' mood and creativity.

How might we create a sense of working together?

How might we connect people beyond time, location, and language?

In the second area of exploration, I explore ways to feature the constant and ambient presence of colleagues, in the user's periphery. When we are sitting in offices, others' presence and the ambient buzz in the office create the right amount of tension that keeps us engaged at work. Also, you catch the tiny social cues that make you understand people's intentions - for example, if someone puts on a headphone, you know that she doesn't want to be bothered now. On contrary, at home office, people usually sit in silence without much understanding of what colleagues' days look like.

In the last exploration, I am looking at virtual shared objects as ways to connect people in different time zones. All conversations are naturally synchronous, and even the companies that encourage asynchronous communication at work recommend people to have synchronous meetings for social purposes. But when hybrid work model becomes more normalized and diverse team across different locations and nationalities becomes more normal, what could be the ways to socially keep in touch with our colleagues who are living on the other side of the world?

4.
Process I –
Ideation

Framework / Asynchronous, unmoderated remote workshop /
Evaluation / Reflection on this workshop format / Conclusion

Framework

Actions
ex. Having lunch together

Literal translation →

Mimicking reality

ex. Zoom lunch

↓ *identify*

What it does

ex.
Free food prepared by someone else
Talking with random colleagues
Break away from computer screens

Accepting differences, adapting digitally →

Digital adaptation

ex.
Lunch deals with local restaurants
Video-roulettes
Dedicated screen for socializing

I designed a workshop where people 1. identify what they miss from the offices, 2. make a literal translation of these into digital spaces, or 3. identify the underlying values of the things they miss, and 4. adapt these core values into new solutions.

DEDICATED WORKSPACE

EXERCISE BY WALKING AROUND

CHATTING DURING BIGGER GATHERINGS

EAVESDROPPING

RANDOM ENCOUNTERS

COMMUTING (TIME ALONE)

EYE CONTACTS

LUNCH

VISITING PEOPLE'S DESKS / ROOMS

FEELING OF BEING "DONE FOR THE DAY"

DISCUSSING THINGS TOGETHER

WATER COOLER CHATS

SAYING HI / BYE WHEN ARRIVING / LEAVING

PEEKING ON WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING

Asynchronous, unmoderated remote workshop

Workshop format

This ideation workshop was set up on Miro, with 3 different ideation exercises with instructions that participants carry out by themselves.

Why this format?

Originally, I planned to carry out this workshop face-to-face, but due to covid restrictions, it was impossible to gather a big group of people in the same space. After running two test workshops, I decided to create an asynchronous, unmoderated workshop that participants can carry out by themselves to make the best out of the current situation. Even if it fails, I thought it would be a good learning opportunity itself - to learn about the challenges of remote, asynchronous collaboration.

Preparation

On Miro, I prepared three exercises following the framework, with step-by-step instructions. Participants would use red stickers and sticky notes to participate.

The first exercise was about identifying what they miss from the offices. I made cards of 'actions' that people miss from offices. Participants voted for the ones that they agree with and added more things that nobody mentioned yet.

In the second exercise, participants wrote down what could be the direct digital translation of what they miss from offices.

In the last exercise, participants identified the core values of the things they miss and thought of how these values could generate new solutions.

I made a few iterations based on feedback I got from pilot-testings with my diploma peers. It was important that the workshop had a clear and linear structure, and that the directions were short and precise.

SAYING Hi / BYE WHEN ARRIVING / LEAVING

UNDERLYING VALUES

NEW SOLUTIONS
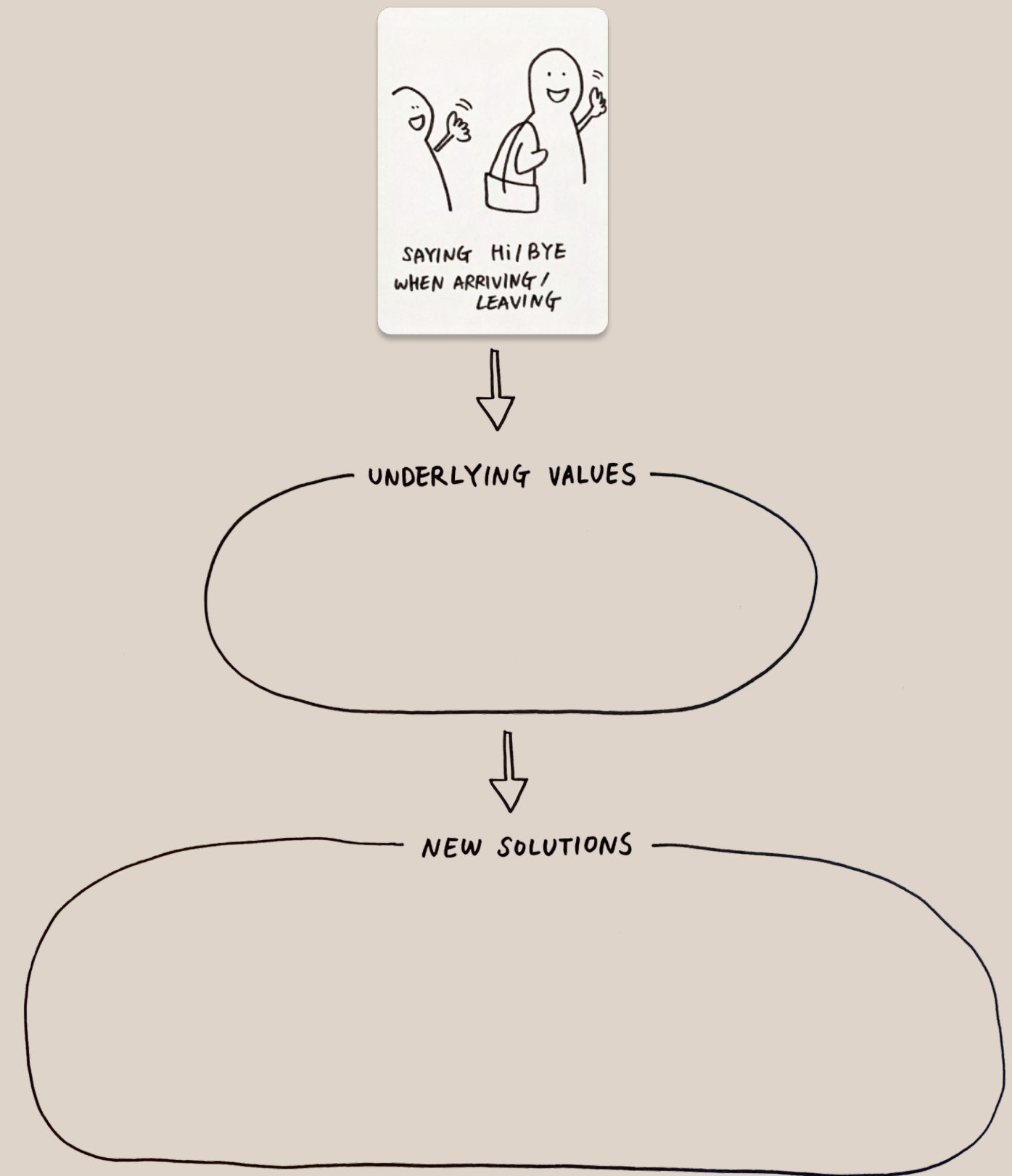
Running the workshop

I shared the link with the UX Norge Slack channel, employees at Whereby, and some other companies with knowledge workers. I also shared the link on LinkedIn. I was planning to keep the link available for a week, but decided to keep it open indefinitely because there were still people visiting and adding notes after a few weeks.

Outcome

The workshop ran successfully. As a result, I could get answers from more than 80 participants from not only Norway but also from Sweden, England, USA, South Korea, Singapore, and more. The amount of collected data was huge, and it took some time to go through all of them and distill the ideas. Many of the sketches I made in the exploration stage are based on the results from this workshop or inspired by them.

The workshop is still available at:
https://miro.com/app/board/o9J_lUvqWfA=/
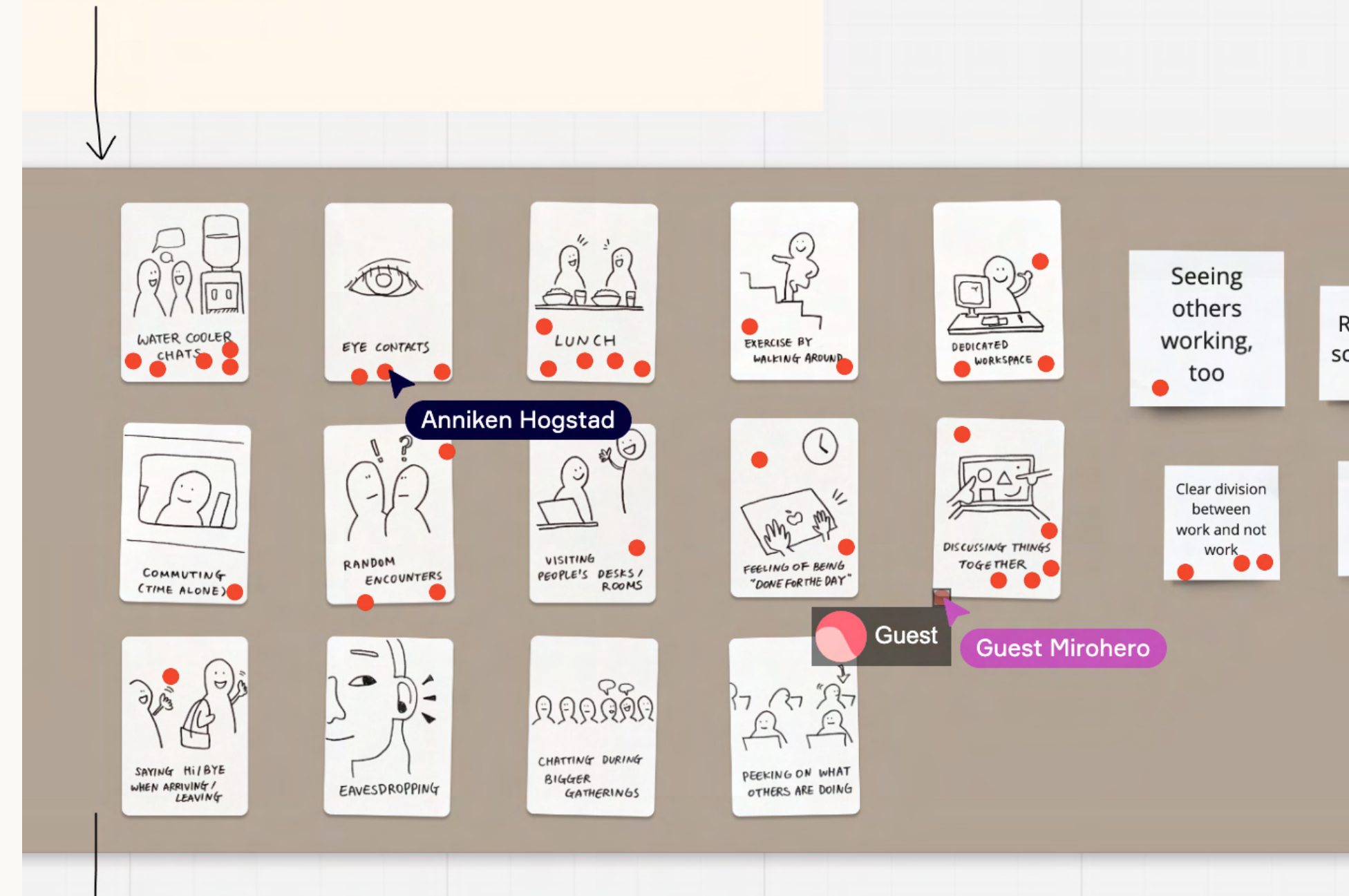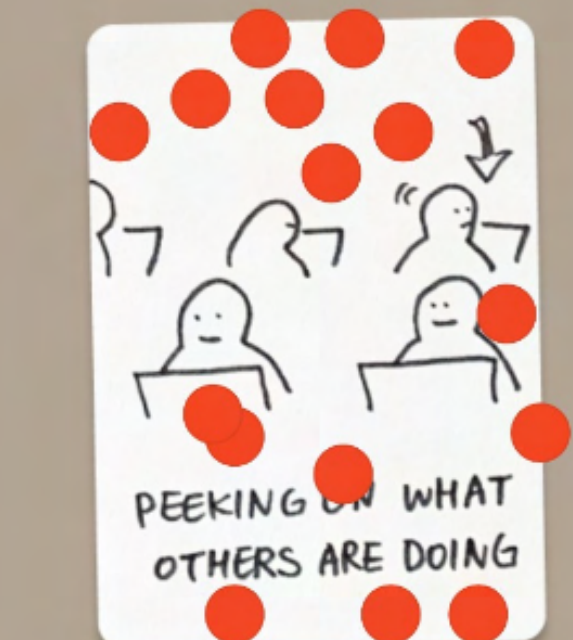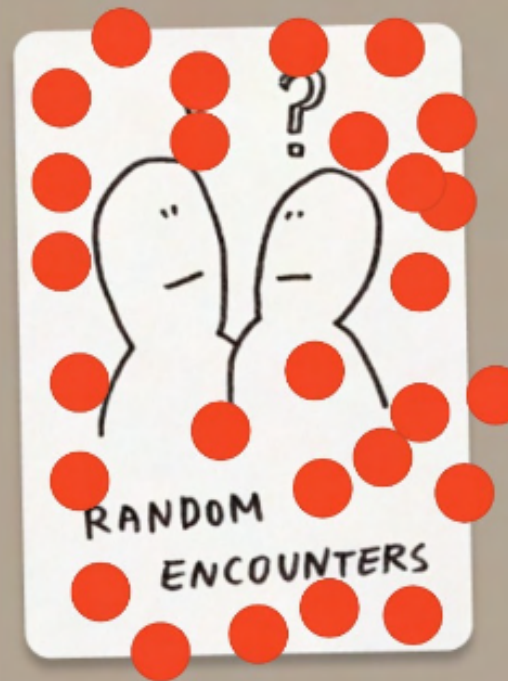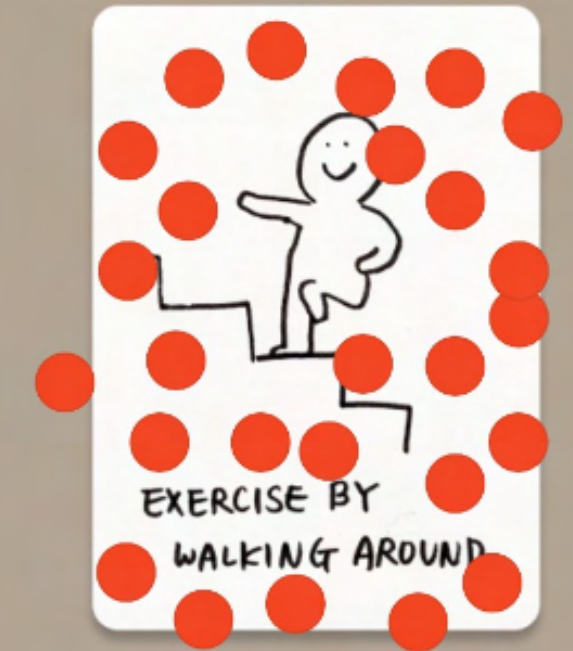
The red dot

ag while holding down the
option/alt button to copy.

Copy this card to
add new ones

WATER COOLER
CHATS

EYE CONTACTS

LUNCH

EXERCISE BY
WALKING AROUND

COMMUTING
(TIME ALONE)

RANDOM
ENCOUNTERS

VISITING
PEOPLE'S DESKS /
ROOMS

FEELING OF BEING
"DONE FOR THE DAY"

SAYING HI/BYE
WHEN ARRIVING /
LEAVING

EAVESDROPPING

CHATTING DURING
BIGGER
GATHERINGS

PEEKING ON WHAT
OTHERS ARE DOING

WATER COOLER
CHATS

DIGITAL
TRANSLATION

Weekly recurring coffee meeting

If a meeting is over sooner than expected, spend the extra minutes talking about other stuff.

Whenever it fits, suggest 5-10 min chat for a non-dedicated theme talk

Coffee videochat every morning for those who feel like it.

Open chat room

Audio group #watercooler where people can drop in and out

Staying in the zoom meeting after the actual meeting is over

Using integrations like Donut for Slack to create random coffee break pairings in the company

PHYSICAL
TRANSLATION

Walking breakings with coworkers who lives nearby

DIGITAL
TRANSLATION

Employer buys lunch - we get togther on Teams, camera/mike is optional. Share private pictures from last week.

Agree to have lunch at a specific time, so you don't get interrupted during lunch. Those who want can have video open for company

lunch sent day in advance and made together.

Evaluation

Accordance with the main focus

Does it bring people together?

Level of invasiveness

Will people feel safe using it?

Or does it invade people's personal space?

Compatibility with workflow

Can it naturally take place during work?

Or does it steal people's attention from the main task?

Voluntary participation

Is it something people can join anytime?

Or is it forced sociability?

Delightfulness

Is it delightful?

I set up a set of evaluation criteria that reflects the core values of my project. When the workshop was over, I went through the ideas and evaluated them with the criteria above.

Reflection on this workshop format

1. The psychological threshold to participation is very low

Participants can drop in and out anytime, and they are free to skip parts and only take part in a certain part of the workshop.

2. Participants get inspired from other people's ideas

Participants could freely look around and add on to other people's ideas.

3. Participants can think over the task

Even though the common rule is that ideation workshops should be done under a time limit, thinking sometimes takes time. I observed that some participants came back to the board over a few days, to add in more thoughts and ideas.

4. Easy to engage a big number of people

There is no limit to the number of participants. If you have the right channel to share the workshop, you can easily get a big number of people to participate.

5. Participants can join from different time zones

The workshop is running 24 hours, so it can be especially effecting in engage participants from different cultures.

Conclusion

1. Participants can't ask questions

Since the workshop doesn't have a moderator, participants can't ask questions. So if they didn't understand the task right away, many wouldn't bother to figure it out by themselves and just skip the exercise.

2. No live discussions

On average, about 5 people were on the board at the same time, but they were working in different areas on the board, not communicating with each other.

3. Shorter attention span

When people work on the computer, they switch tabs approximately every 20 seconds. I observed that many of the participants didn't stay long enough to get through all the activities on the board. As a result, the participation rate of the last exercise was significantly lower than the first exercise.

4. Preparation takes time

Things have to be extra clear and thought through for participants to carry out the workshop by themselves. Therefore, it takes a lot of time and effort in planning the workshop. Processing the result takes extra time too - since it is hard to get an overview of the progress, and the amount of information is much larger than in moderated workshops.

5. It's hard to control the participant group

If you're sharing the workshop with the public, it is hard to control who's participating in the workshop.

This project is exploring possibilities in the area where almost everyone has lived the experience. Therefore, the advantages of running the workshop in this format were much bigger than the disadvantages. I got lots of inspiring ideas and a better understanding of asynchronous collaboration through this process. I also received valuable feedback from so many designers about the structure of this workshop itself.

I used this format later in the project again to get feedback on the prototype of my final concept.

5.
Process II –
Explorations

Exploration 1. Enabling ad hoc, serendipitous encounters

Exploration 2. Creating a sense of working together

Exploration 3. Connecting beyond time, location, and language

Learnings from the explorations

Explorations

In this section, I am introducing the ideas I took forward from the ideation phase, how I visualized or tested each concept, and finally summarizing reflections on them. The sketches I made in this phase served as great conversation starters. They encouraged participants to imagine new possibilities and helped me understand their underlying values through the discussions. I could start discussing concrete examples rather than talking broadly about the topic.

Areas of exploration

Present-focused

Concept 1
Enabling ad hoc, serendipitous encounters

Concept 2
Creating a sense of working together

Future-speculative

Concept 3
Connecting beyond time, location, and language

Enabling ad hoc, serendipitous encounters

Zoom / Slack / Spotify

In the offices, we bump into people all the time. And this creates weak but meaningful social ties between colleagues that you share the office with. We can sometimes experience this in digital spaces as well. For example, when we see someone else's icon or mouse pointer in software like Google Docs, Figma, and Miro.

Then, could the other software we heavily rely on during home office also turn into the places where you experience those small, serendipitous encounters?

Zoom

Empty room

Coffee break

Busy room
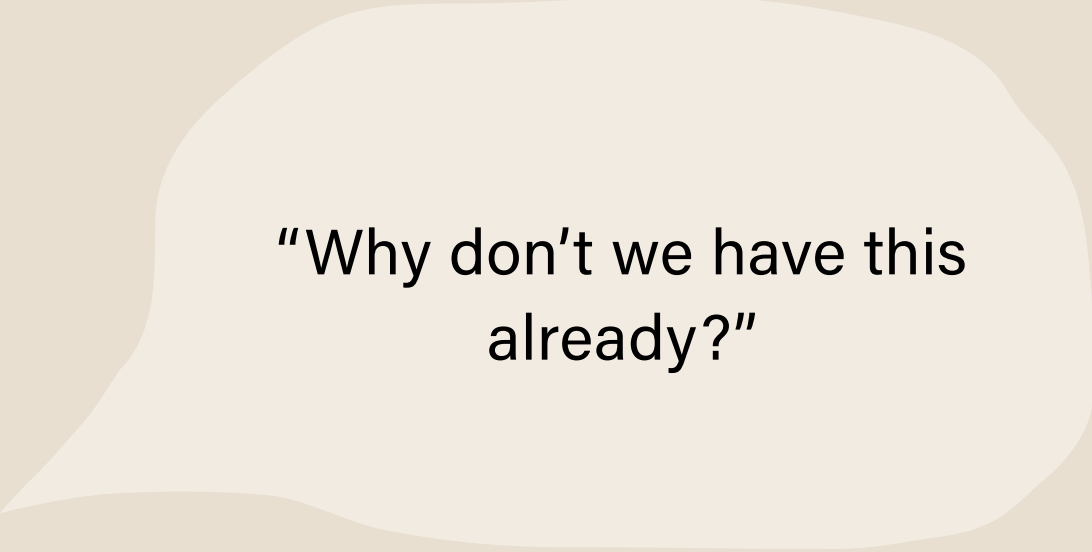
Coffee break

What if Zoom had a hangout room that is always there and easily accessible to everyone? This room can be the digital water cooler where people meet. It could signal how busy the room is with visual cues or by letting users hear the muffled sound of the conversation before entering the room.

New Meeting ⌄   Join

Schedule   Share Screen

Coffee break

Coffee break

Feedback & Reflection

"Why don't we have this already?"

"I need this feature. I always feel anxious before entering a meeting."
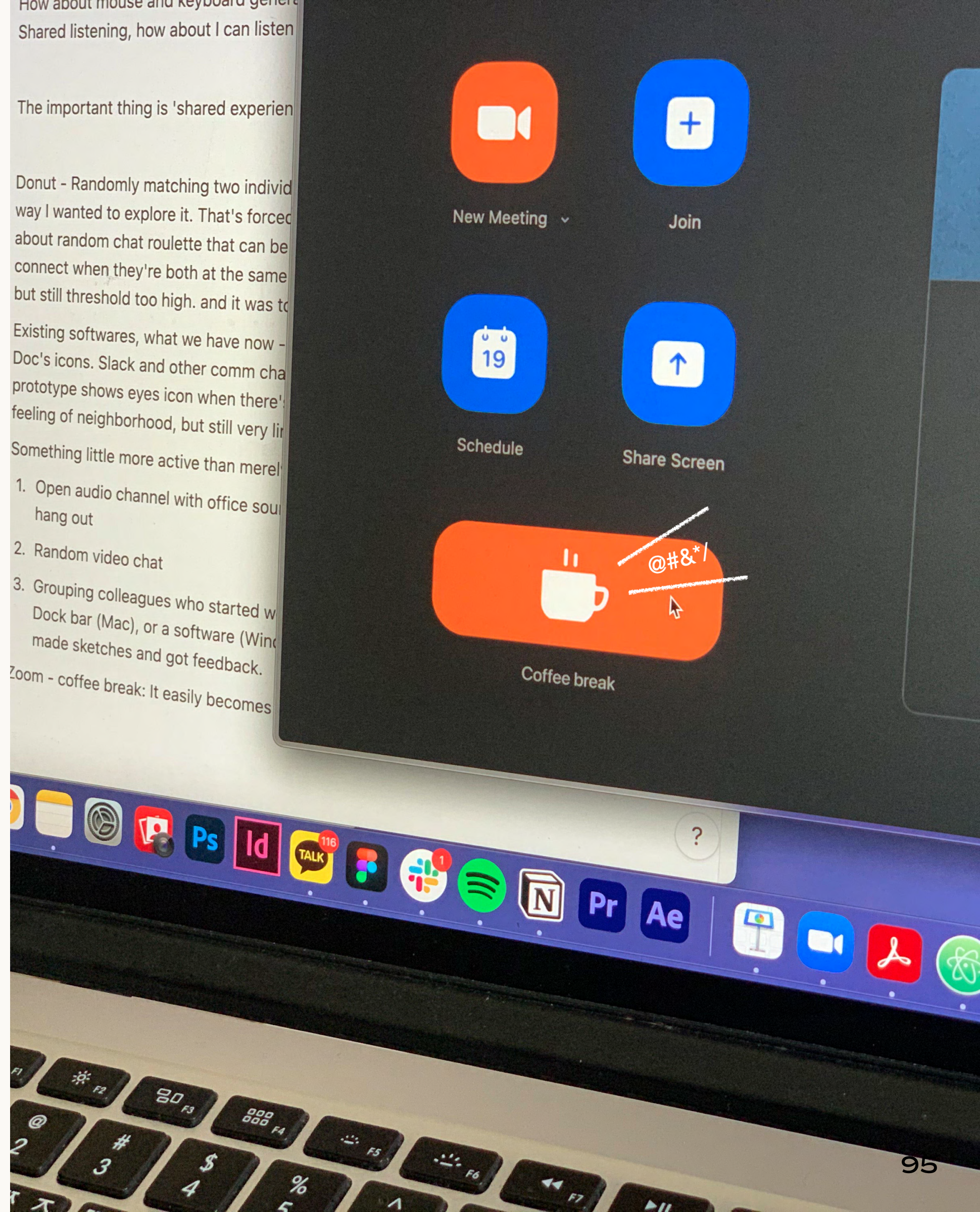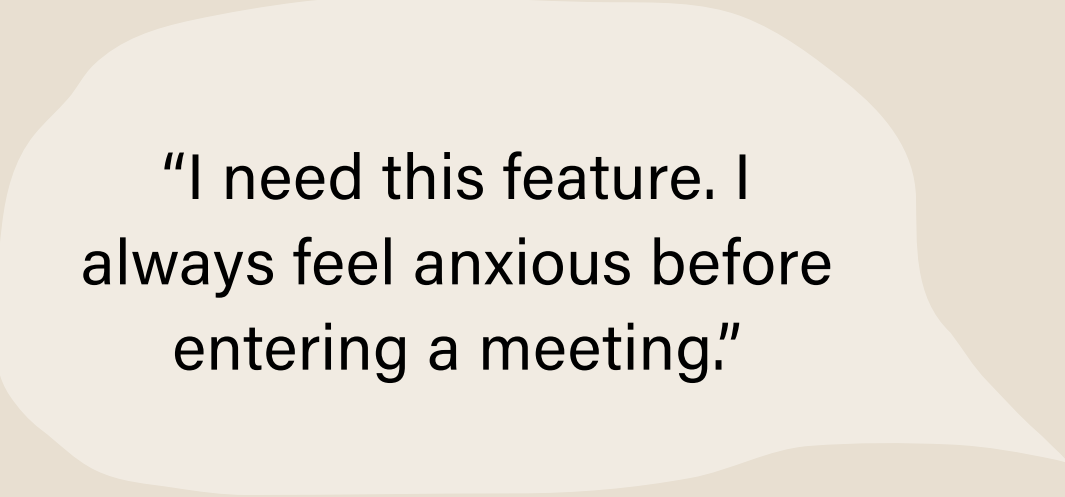
Everyone welcomed the idea of a hangout space where they can drop by, and the possibility to get a glimpse of the room without entering. Many participants shared their experience of feeling anxious before joining a call.

Slack

Slack is one of the most popular communication tools at work these days. However, not all channels on Slack are work-related. Some of the most popular channels on Slack are informal or social in nature. So, what if you could see your colleagues' mouse pointers when you are in these social channels? Perhaps there could be a channel #meet of mouse pointers for those who want to meet up.

Feedback & Reflection

"I think I would feel a little anxious to enter these channels."

"This would actually give a feeling of bumping into somebody."
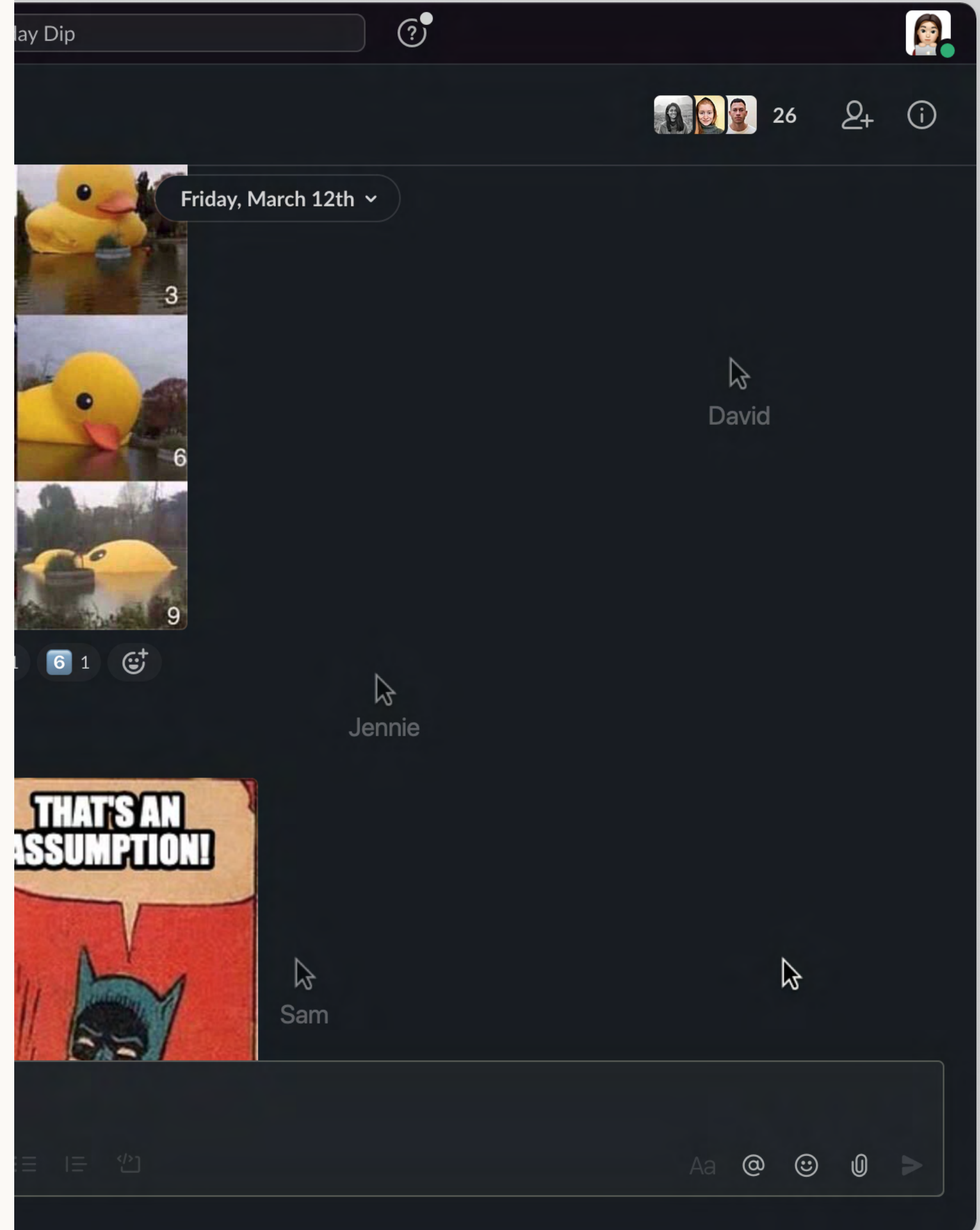
Participants had polarised reactions to this feature. Some people thought it would feel delightful to meet an unexpected colleague's cursor, and said this feature would stimulate more interactions between people. However, others worried it would change the dynamic of existing social channels.

"What if I keep seeing someone that I want to avoid?"

Spotify

Liked Songs

Kitchen Swagger

Morning Coffee

Your Top Songs 2020

HALLOWEEN 4 EVER

Lemonade

Oyster

Jazz Vibes

AHO IxD: Screens

Flight

**TITLE**

2

Leave The Door Open
Bruno Mars, Anderson .Paak, Silk Sonic
Jason is also listening to **Bruno Mars**

0:07

Linda is also listening to **Ny Pop** → Playlist

Mizuki is also listening to **Friminutt** → Podcast

Sam is also listening to **Jazz** → Genre
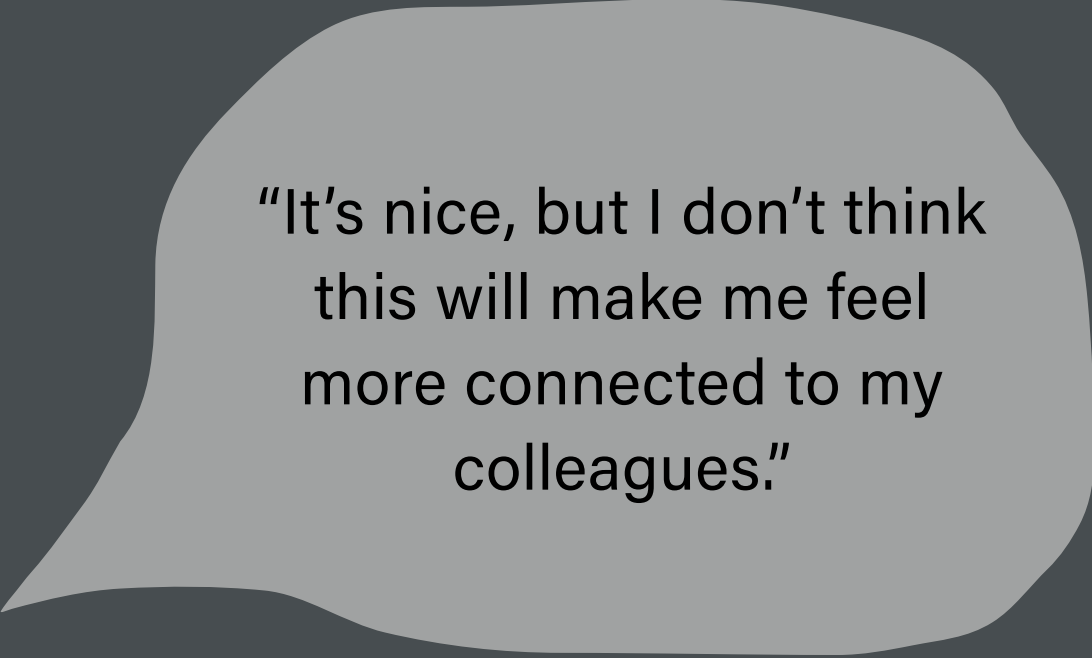
What if Spotify had a feature that tells you if someone is listening to the same artist, playlist, or genre? If you keep seeing someone's name over a long time, that could create a bond or familiarity among those people. Spotify and other music platform run in the background of the user's attention, and interaction with music platforms are minimal compared to other software we use during work. So the information should be displayed discreetly, in a way that does not steal the attention.
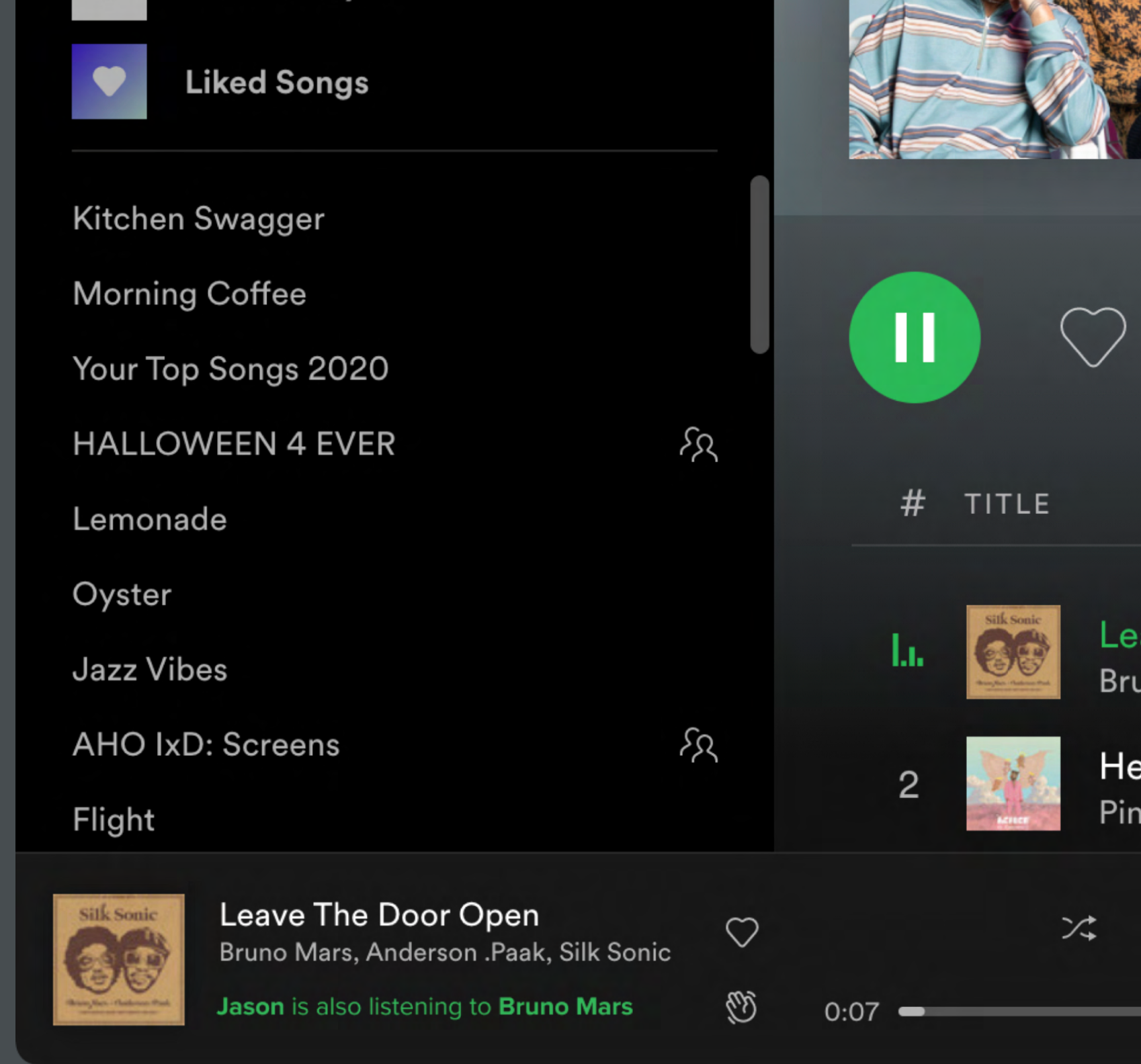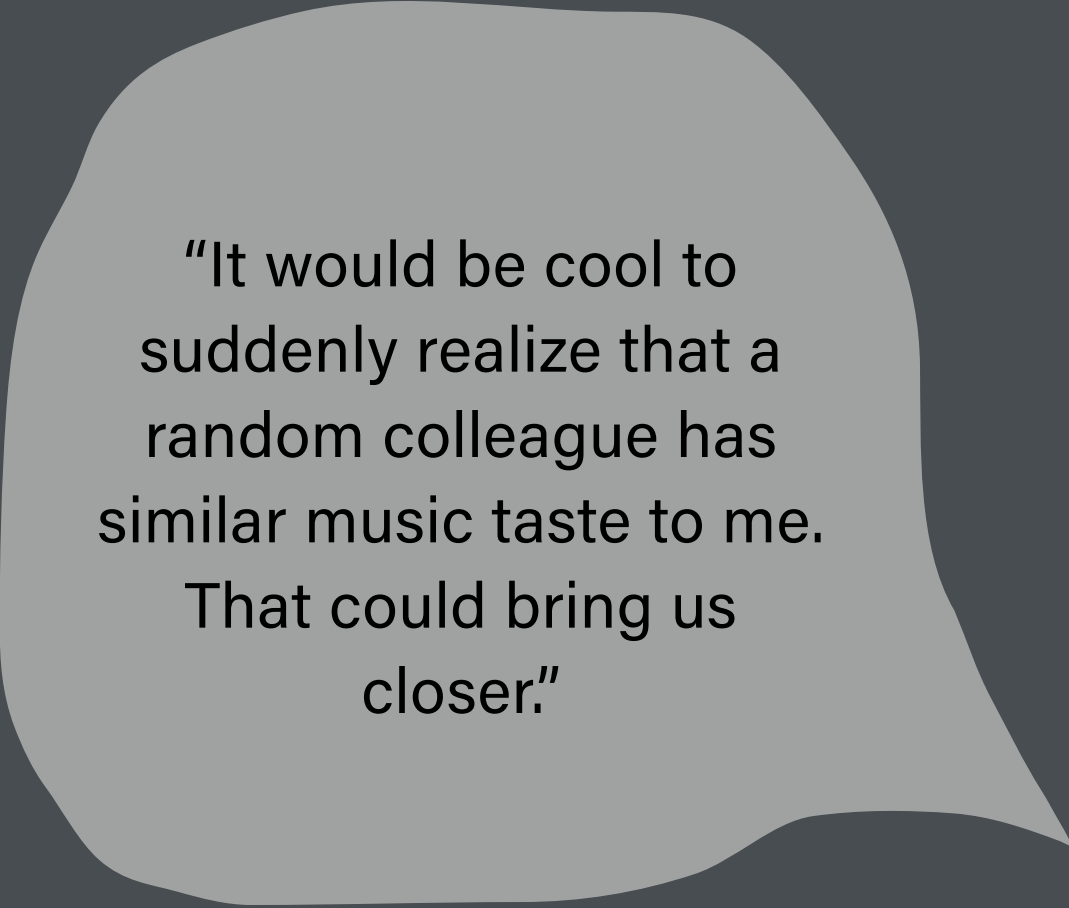
Feedback & Reflection

Most participants agreed that music has the ability to bring people together. Repeatedly seeing someone's name could create a rapid bond between them.

However, some participants questioned if merely seeing their names could make them feel connected to their colleagues.

"It's nice, but I don't think this will make me feel more connected to my colleagues."

"It would be cool to suddenly realize that a random colleague has similar music taste to me. That could bring us closer."

Exploration 2.

Creating a sense of working together

**Virtual desk buddies / Shared listening platform / Office soundscape mixer /
Digital co-working space / Fading status icon**

When we're in physical spaces with someone else, simply being there makes people aware of each other's presence. However, presence requires effort in digital spaces.

In fact, many remote workers say they sometimes feel lonely while working. So in this exploration, I look at different ways to display other people's presence in the

users' periphery to create a sense of working together.

Virtual desk buddies

What if we could have virtual desk buddies in the corner of our screens, with avatars representing our status? These groups can be tailored for project teams, or tight social groups, or even randomly assigned. This can be a way of communicating tiny social gestures with minimal effort or providing an instant communication channel for those who need frequent interaction.

How does it work?
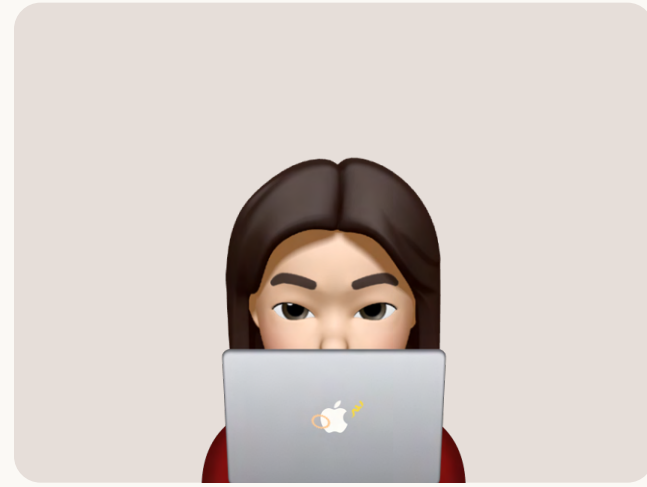
Default status.

The avatar waves at the other colleagues when they start working. When someone is waving, you can wave back at them by clicking their avatars.

🟢 Blinding Lights - The Weekend

When you listen to music, the avatar puts on the headphone.
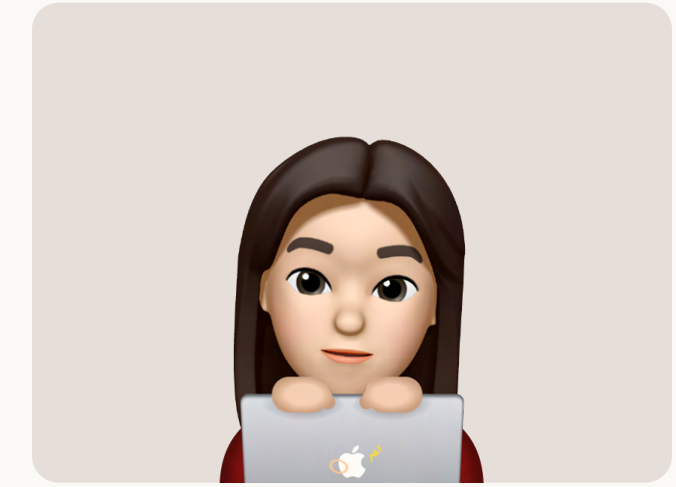
When you click other colleagues avatars to check their status, your avatar will peek over the laptop to signal your colleagues that you checked their status.
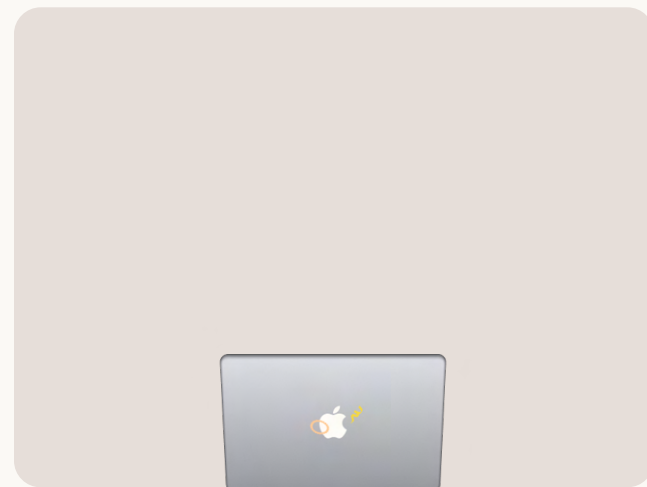
If you are not active for a while, your avatar will disappear from the screen with the laptop open.
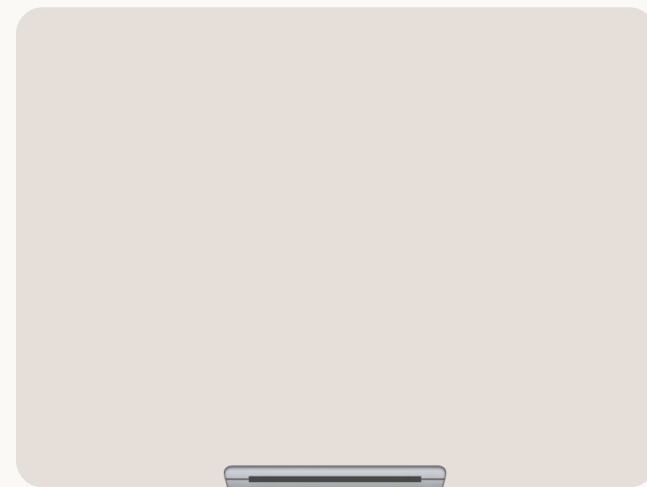
When you haven't started your day or finished your day, the avatar will disappear and the laptop will close.
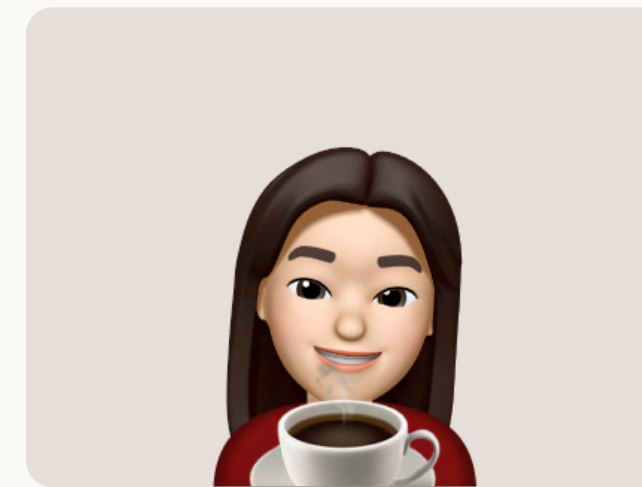
You can set your avatar with coffee to signal you're up for a chat.

It's snowing again here in Oslo >:(
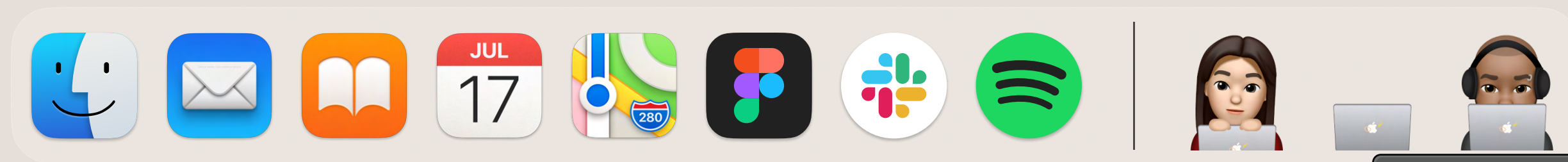
You can click your colleagues' avatars to check their status, or long hold to open the audio channel.
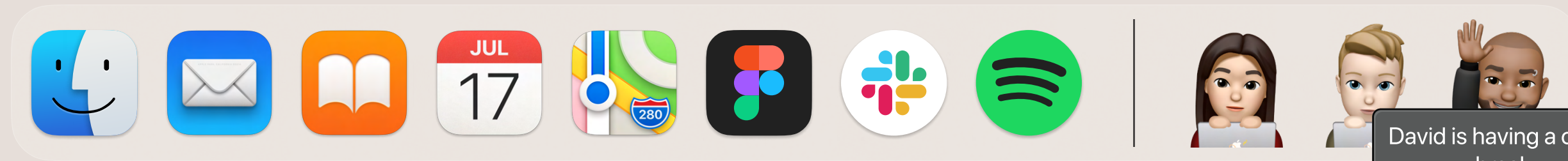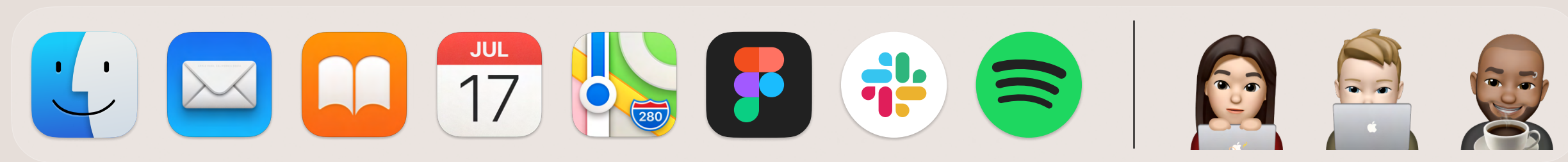
Testing

I made a prototype of this concept using component and variant feature in Figma and tested with another designer living in London for two weeks. I set the different status as the variants' properties so that we could change status by swapping the instances. We had the window of the prototype open on our screen to check each other's status easily. I also shared the prototype link with some others to receive feedback.

To create avatars, I tweaked Apple Memoji. I made several characters on my iPhone and took screenshots with different facial expressions. I added new elements such as body, hands, laptop and headphone in the same graphic style.

Process II – Explorations Creating a sense of working together
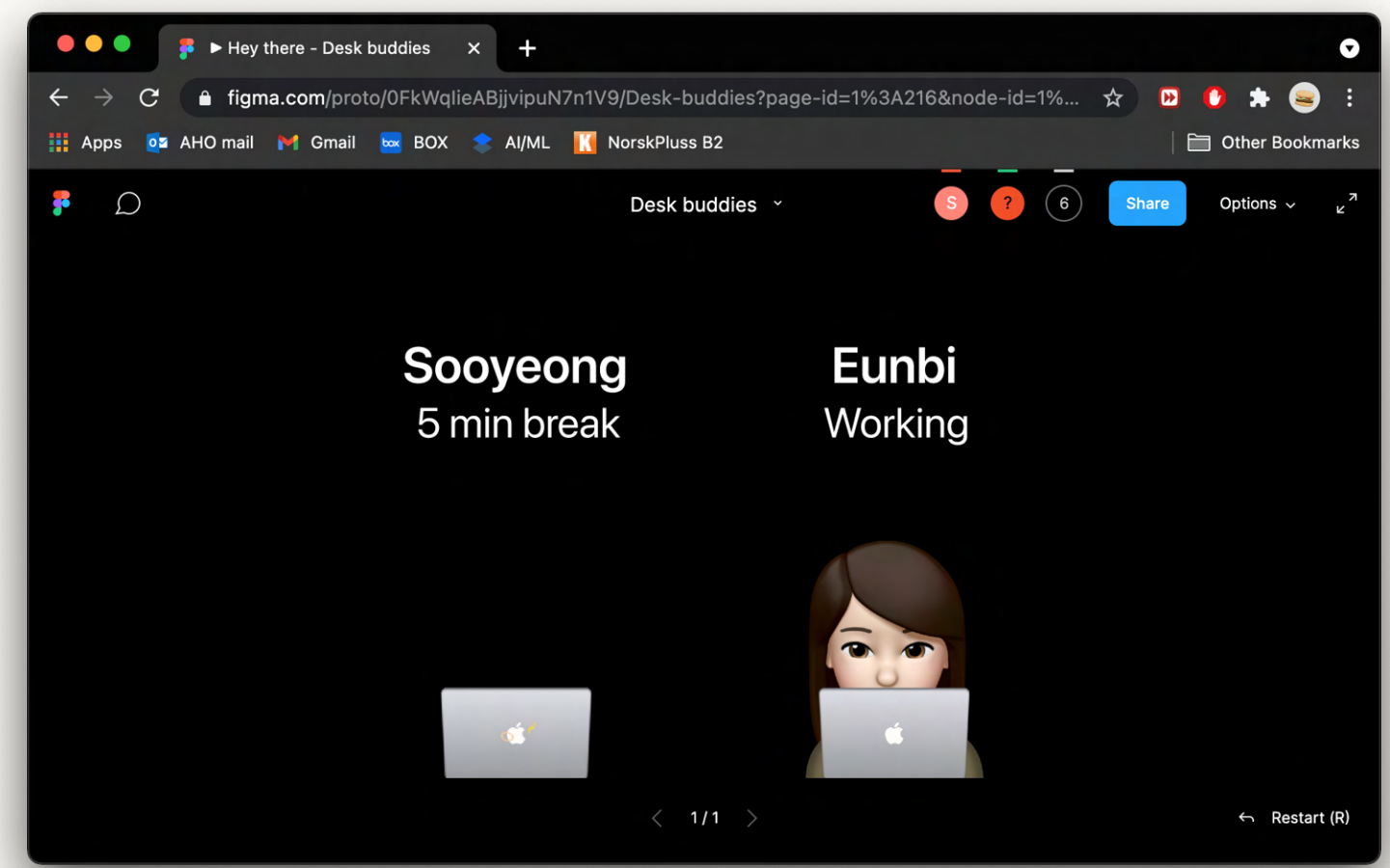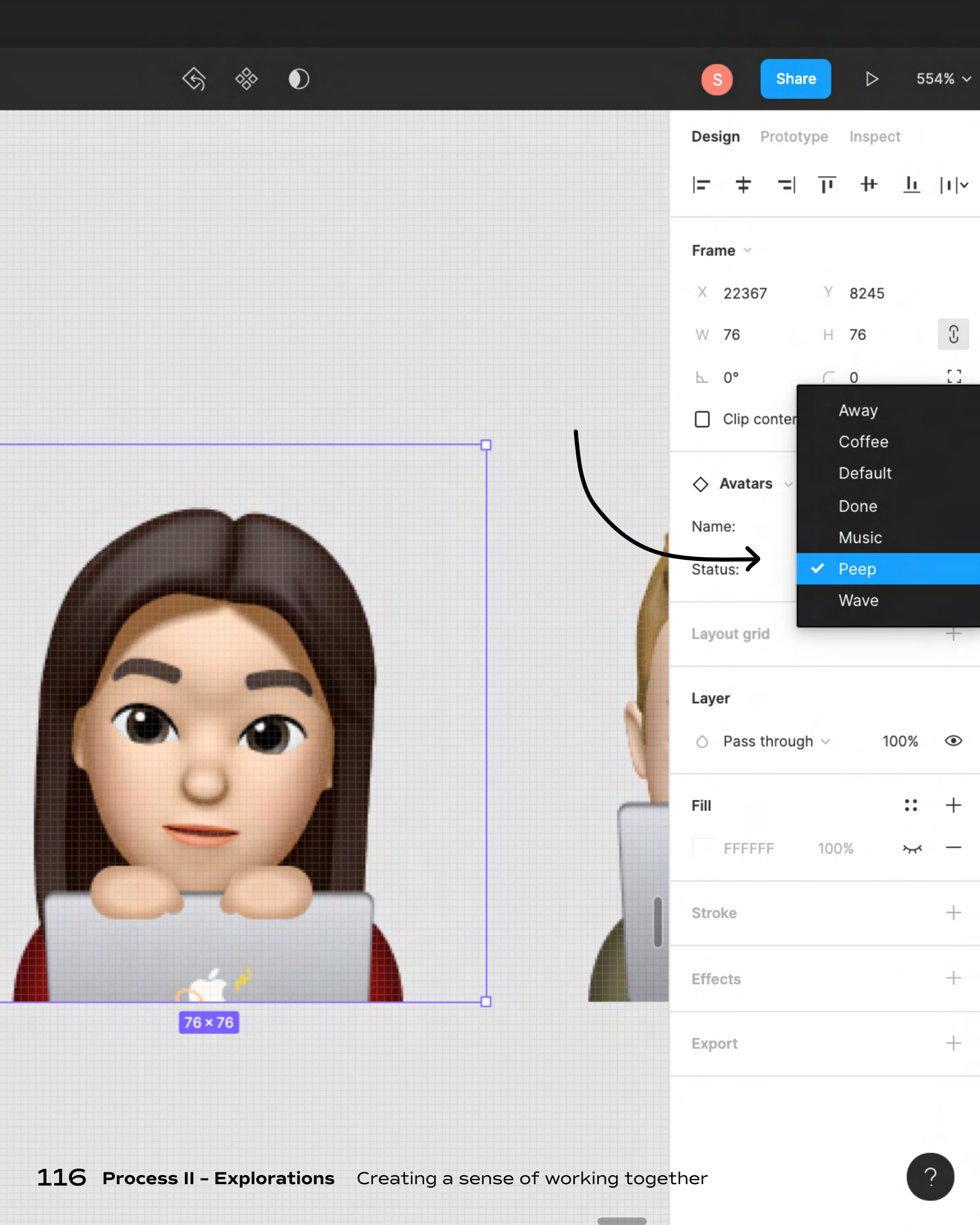
Feedback &
Reflection

Image: Lene Gaupen

The human figures created a strong sense of togetherness. Most participants said they felt significantly less lonely.

The feature could connect participants with an adequate amount of distance. Participants did not feel uncomfortable using this with a stranger. Some people even had the window open even when they're not participating.

Participants thought it would bring more delightfulness if it was used between a group of friends.
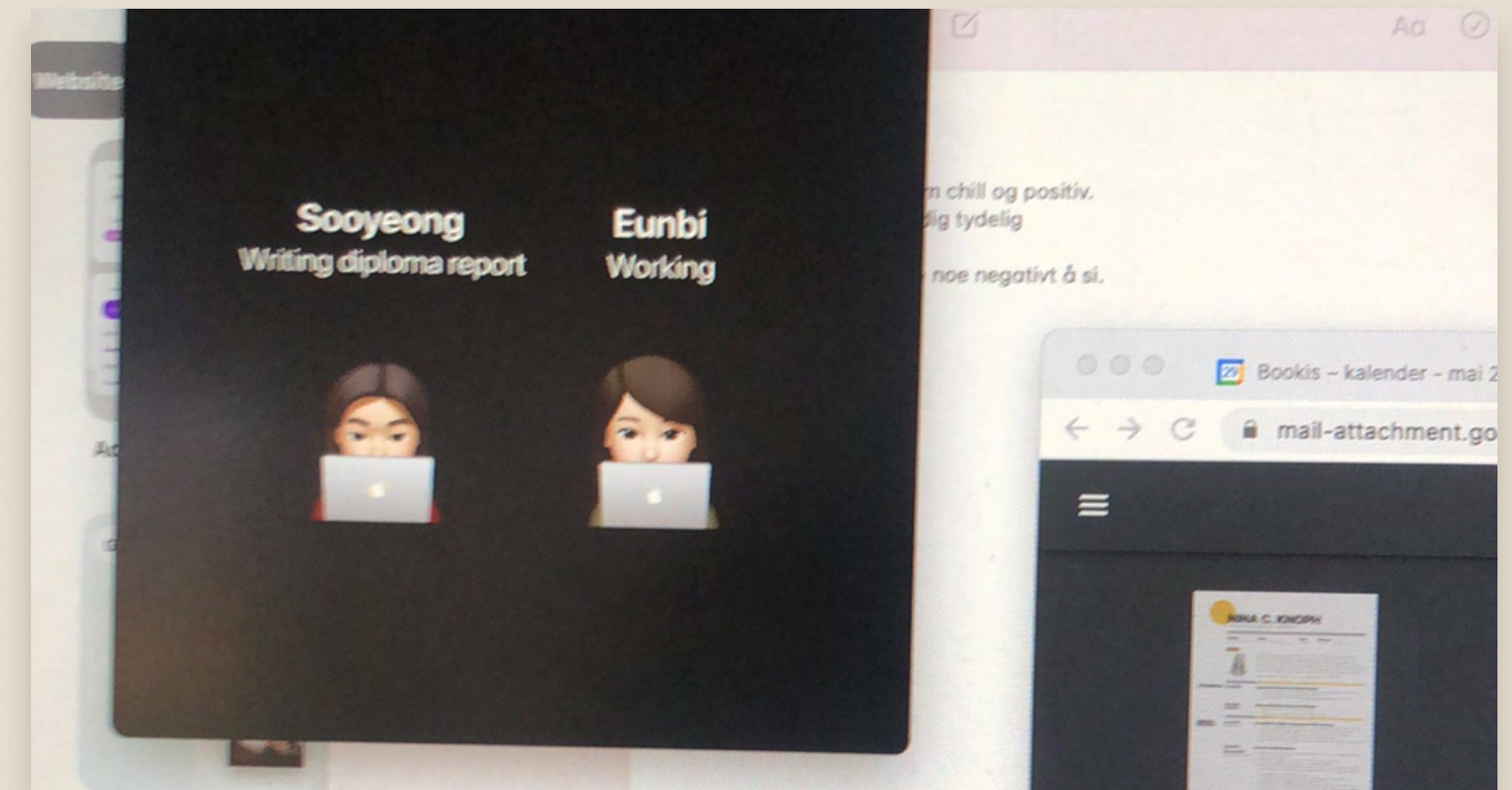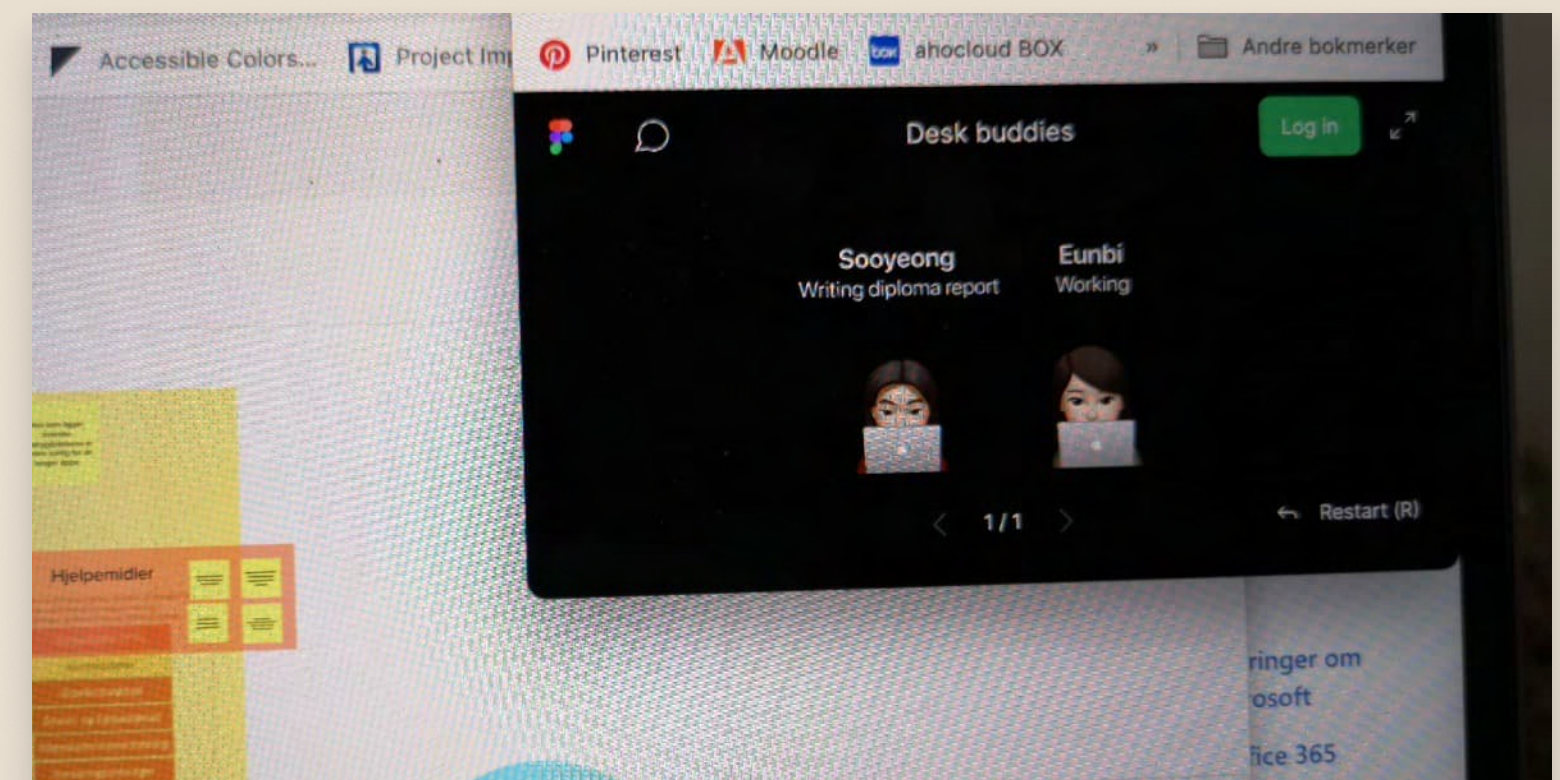
Image: Marte Rennemo

Shared listening platform

What if there was a shared listening platform where everyone contributes to the playlist? Users could send song requests with messages as they do on the radio. The AI could generate a playlist that reflects everyone's music taste based on the song requests. The playlist would be live-streamed so that everyone listens to the same music at the same time. If the team is spread in different locations, this could be a way of providing a shared experience and connecting remote workers to office workers.

Chill Pop   12 people listening

Can you play Blinding Lights by the Weekend? :)

Mona 20 minutes ago

Blueberry Eyes (feat. SUGA of BTS)
MAX, SUGA

Chat room   4
Chill Pop   18
Jazz Instrumental   5
Heavy Metal   2
Low-fi Hip Hop   1
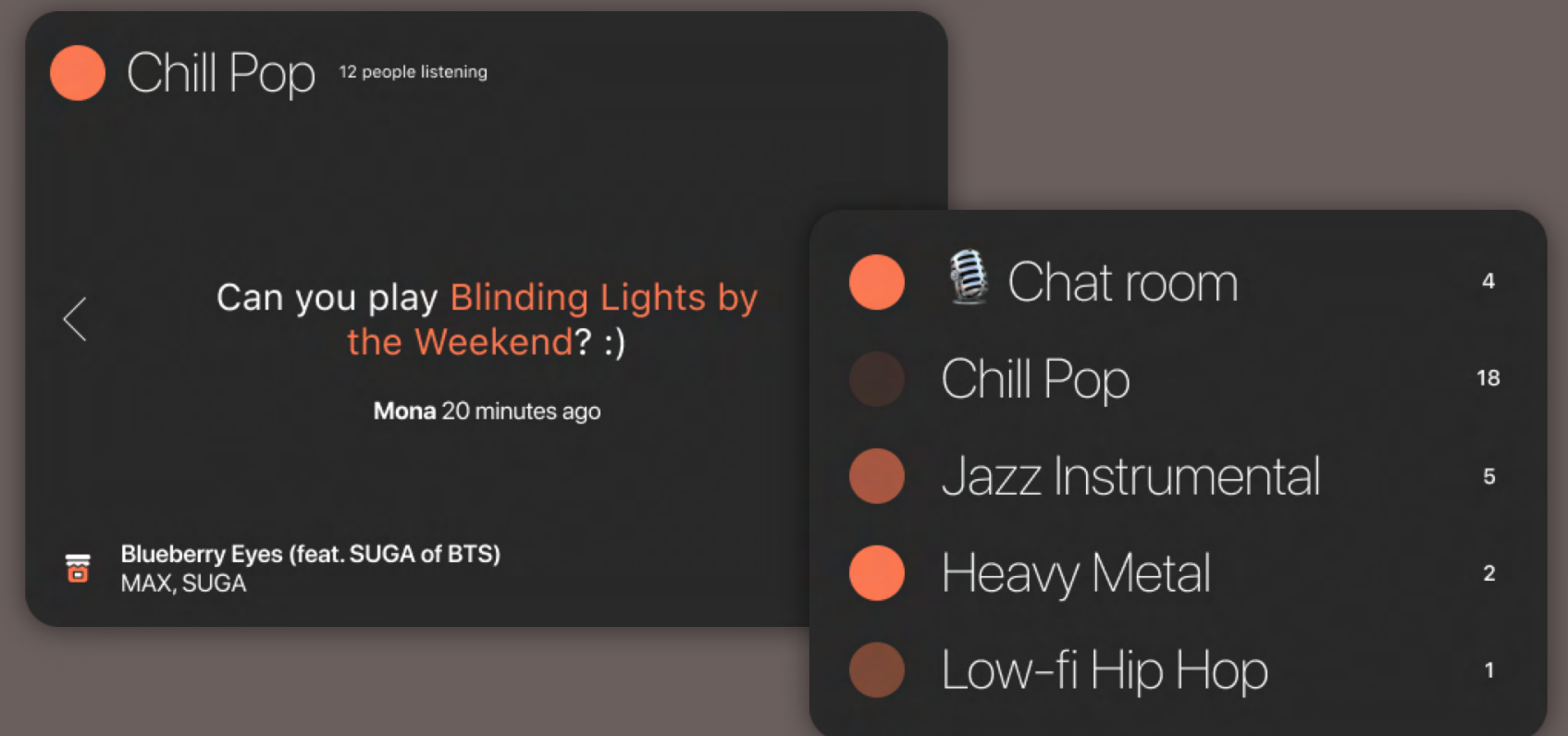
Testing

I set up a Zoom room and streamed my playlist on Spotify. 7 people joined the test for half a day. Participants went in and out of the room whenever they wanted. I muted everyone's microphone. People requested songs on the chat, and I manually added them to the queue to my playlist. After the session, I sent out some questions for feedback.

Feedback & Reflection

Most participants felt like they had a shared experience across the digital space. Some participants thought the level of interaction between participants was too subtle, and therefore could not feel a strong sense of togetherness.

The test session didn't interrupt the testers' main tasks.

Some testers felt anxious about requesting a song, wondering about the effects it could have on the other listeners.

"There's something cosy about listening to the same music."
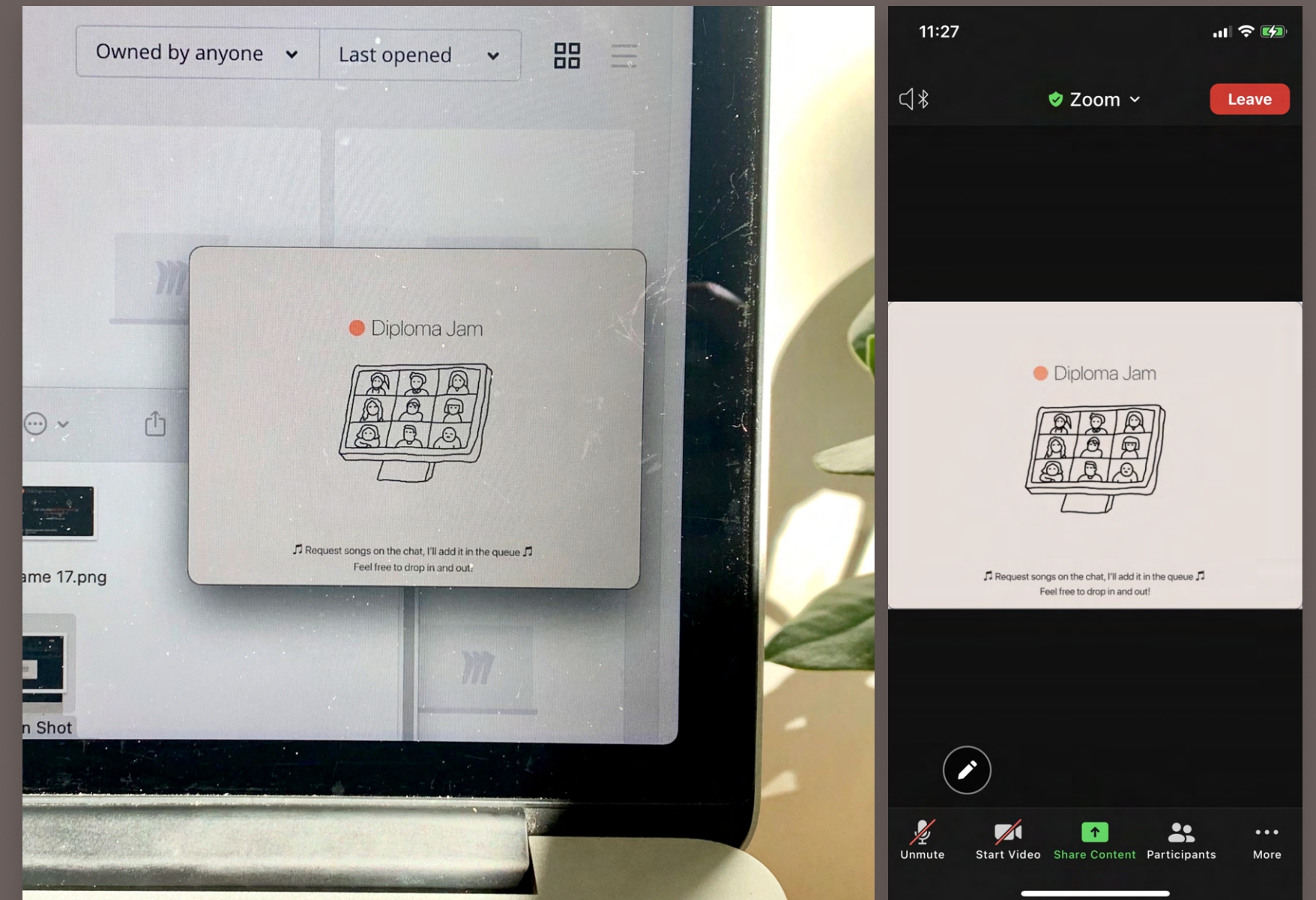
Office soundscape mixer

When people are sitting alone, the silence emphasizes the gap between being in a call and not. So, what if you could create your own office ambience by mixing sounds from your colleagues' home offices? Users join with their mics on, and AI would identify the sound elements from the background noise such as voice, typing sound, footsteps, etc. Each user could adjust the volume of each element to create their own office ambience.
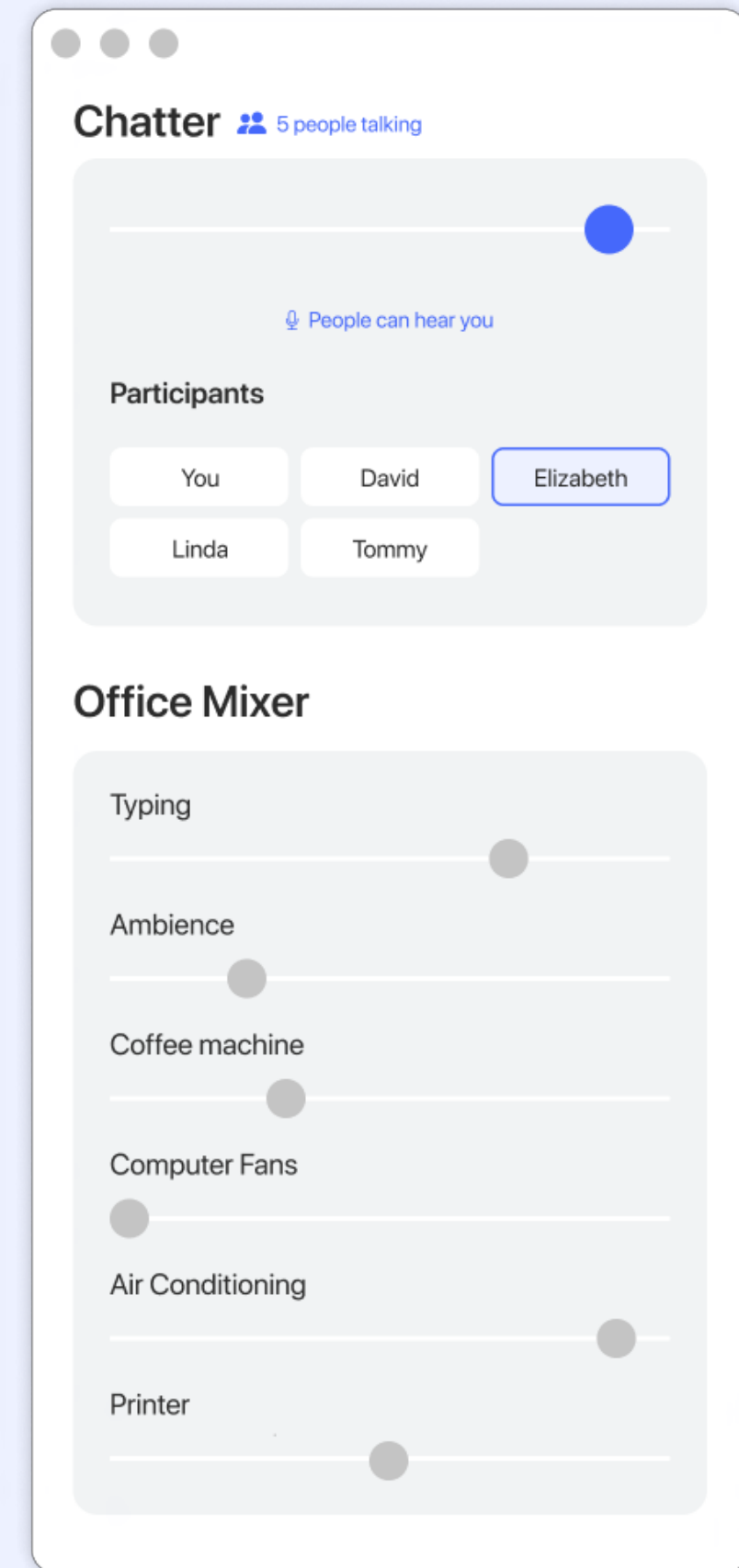
Testing

I downloaded sound samples of the elements that can be found in offices. During a workday, I played the samples together and adjusted the volume of each sample to create my own office atmosphere. I sent the sound samples to some people for testing.

Feedback & Reflection

Participants had polarised reactions to this feature. Some people loved it, and some people hated it. Some participants thought getting rid of the silence helped them focus better on their tasks, and made a smoother transition to joining a call. However, some participants did not enjoy listening to the sound of the office.

"I would definitely use this. I don't like sitting in the silence."
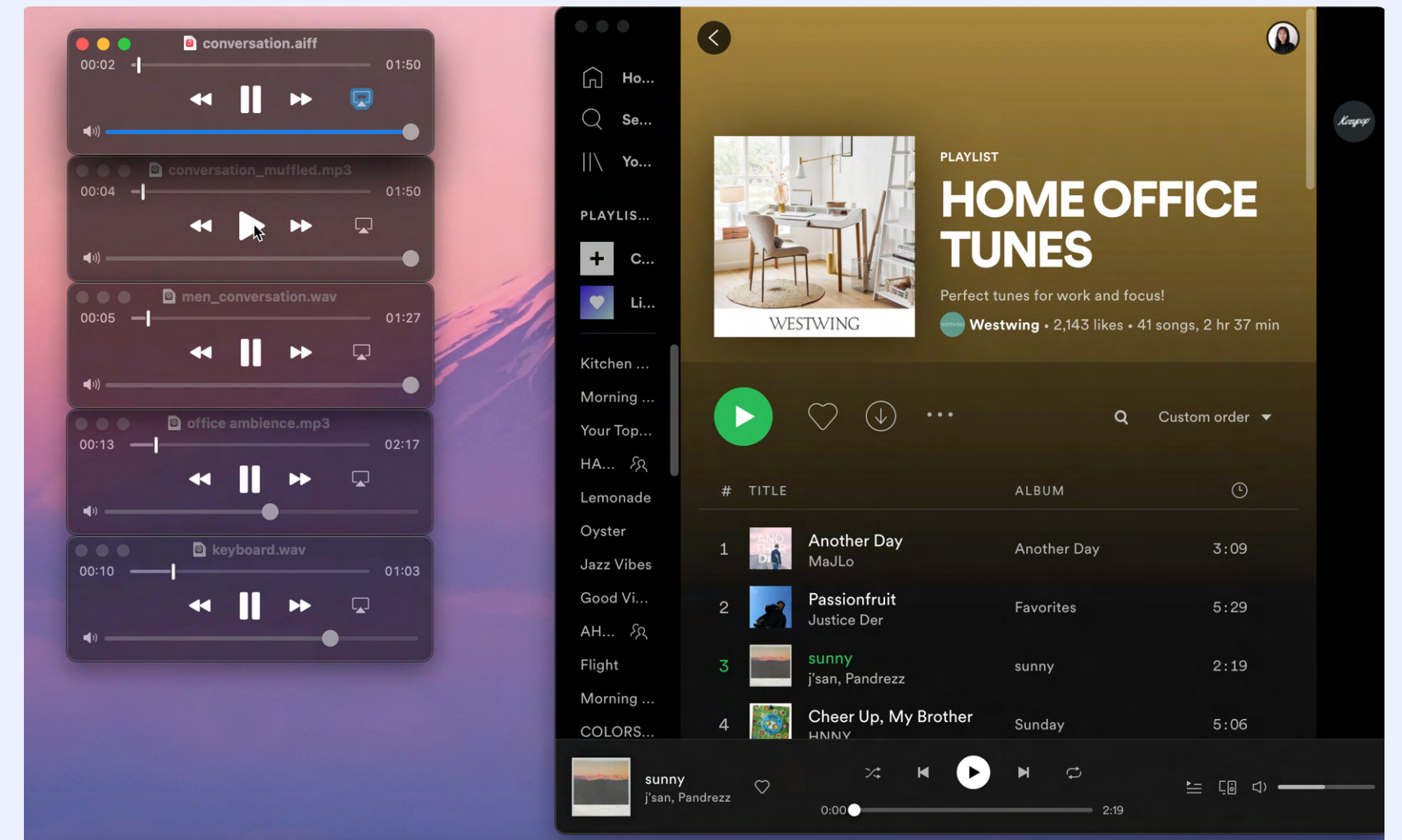
"One good thing about working from home is that you don't have to deal with all the noise. Why would you recreate it?"

Exploration 2.

Digital
co-working space

What if there was a digital co-working space where people join,
share their screens, and quietly work together? Could this be a
way of enabling ambient social feeling while focusing on the work
at the same time? Sharing the screen can feel very
uncomfortable, so I tested different ways to abstract the digital
activity.

Peaches - Justin Bieber ft. Daniel Caesar, Giveon

Home   Chat   Meetings   Contacts   Search   SY
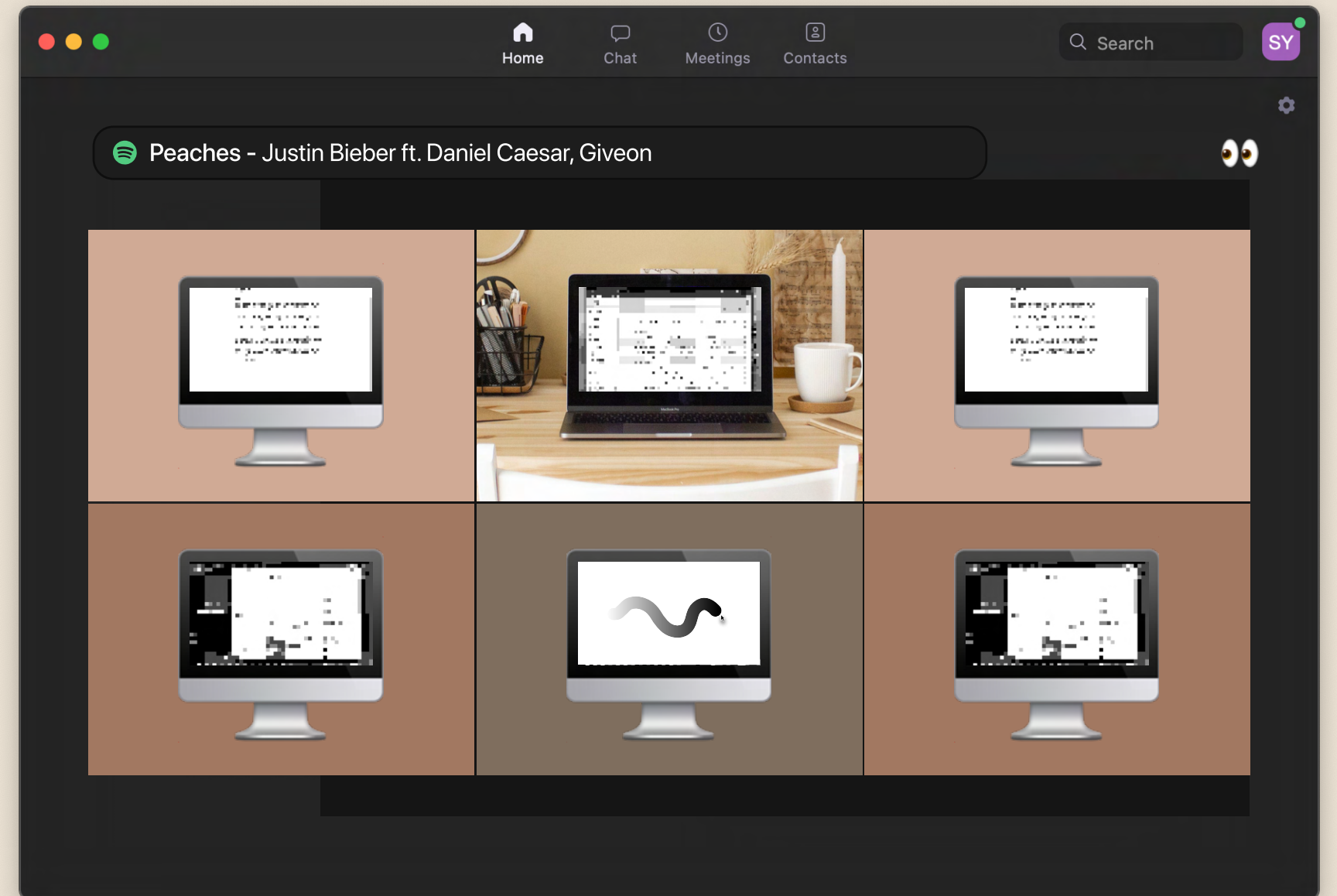
Testing

I recorded my screen while working, and processed the video clips using AfterEffects and p5.js into different styles. Afterwards, I kept the processed videos open in the corner of my screen while working on other tasks. I shared the result with a few designers to get feedback.

Feedback & Reflection

All movements should be very subtle. Sudden movements on the screen (scrolling, changing windows, etc.) took a lot of attention, and it felt noisy and distracting.

Most people liked the idea of a low-key shared workspace that's not a 'meeting.'

I stopped my exploration without finding a satisfactory balance between not being too abstract and calm at the same time. People felt uncomfortable with the idea of sharing their screens as it is, but too much abstraction of the screen made it lose the connotation to work.

"I love that you're in something together, without being in a meeting room"
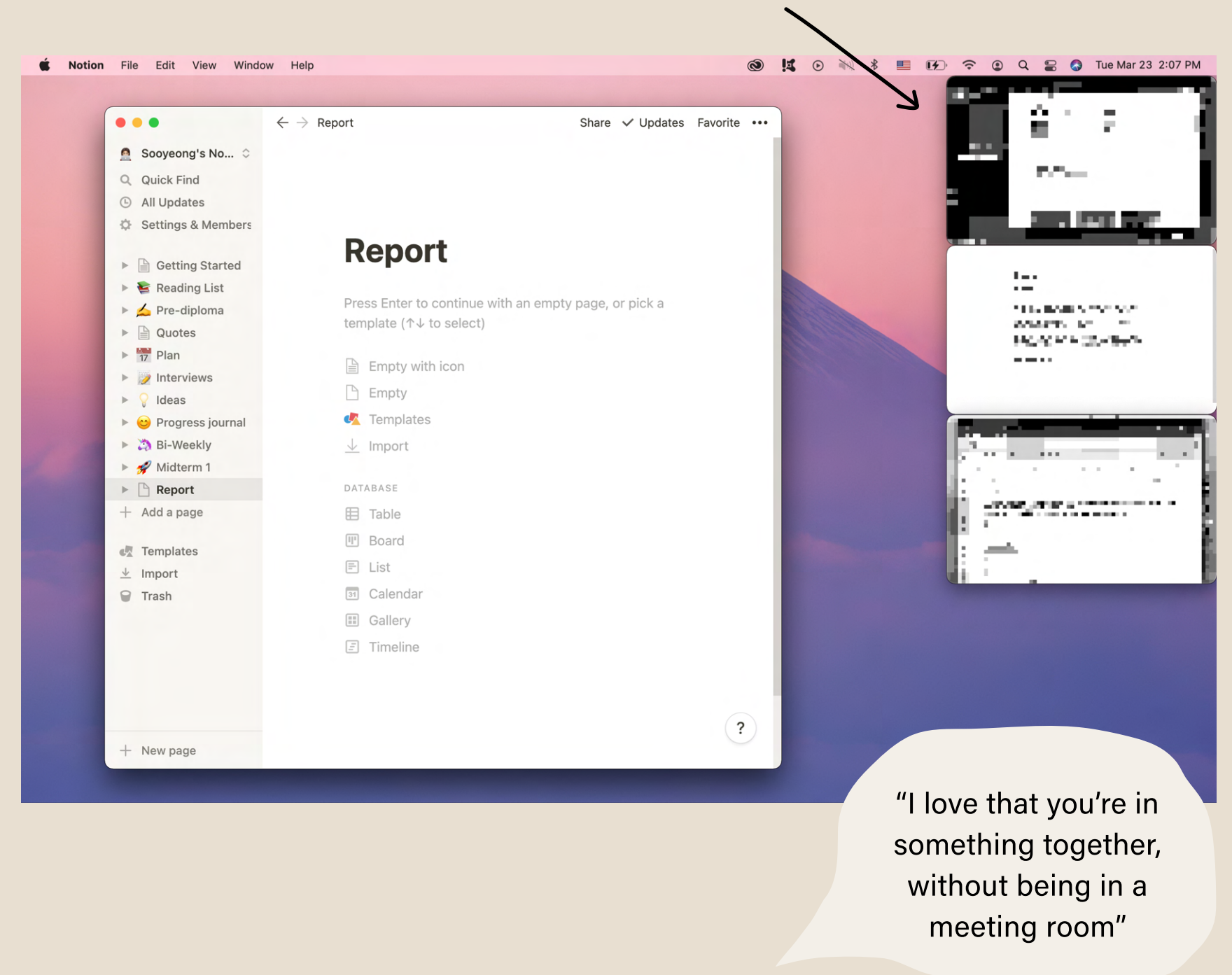
Fading status icon

What if online status icons could reflect the passage of time? Instead of a binary status of online or offline, the status dot could slowly fade away when there's no activity detected. The dot could also represent the group's overall activity.

Feedback & Reflection

Deciding how long it takes until the dot turns completely grey would be important since it can change the personality of this feature. If it fades away within a few seconds, for example, it could display the movement better but not the information about how long the user has been inactive.

Time

● Linda

● Linda

● Linda

● Linda

○ Linda
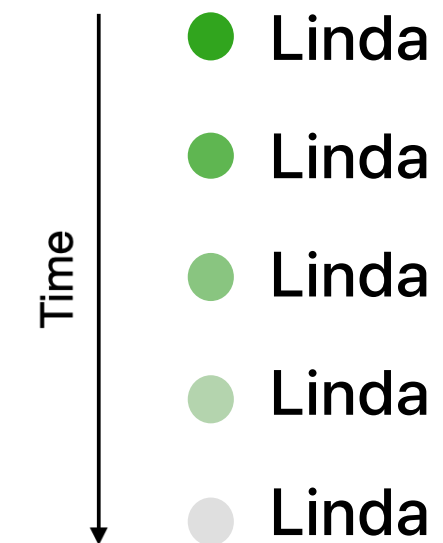
Exploration 3.

Connecting beyond time, location, and language

**Shared bookmark / Virtual office plant /
Timezone calculator / Message timer**

All conversations are naturally synchronous, and even the companies that encourage asynchronous communication at work recommend people to have synchronous meetings for social purposes. Could there be ways to keep people socially connected over different time zones? In this exploration, I am looking at virtual shared objects as a way of connecting people.

Shared bookmark

What if there was a collaborative bookmark for sharing fun links? Anyone can add links they want to share with colleagues. The stored bookmarks could be collected to a button that takes you to a random place on the web that your colleagues have saved for you.
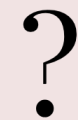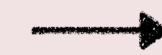
Testing

I built a quick HTML prototype of a button that takes you to a random place on the web. The links I used were what other people have previously shared on Slack. Testers tried the prototype and gave feedbacks.
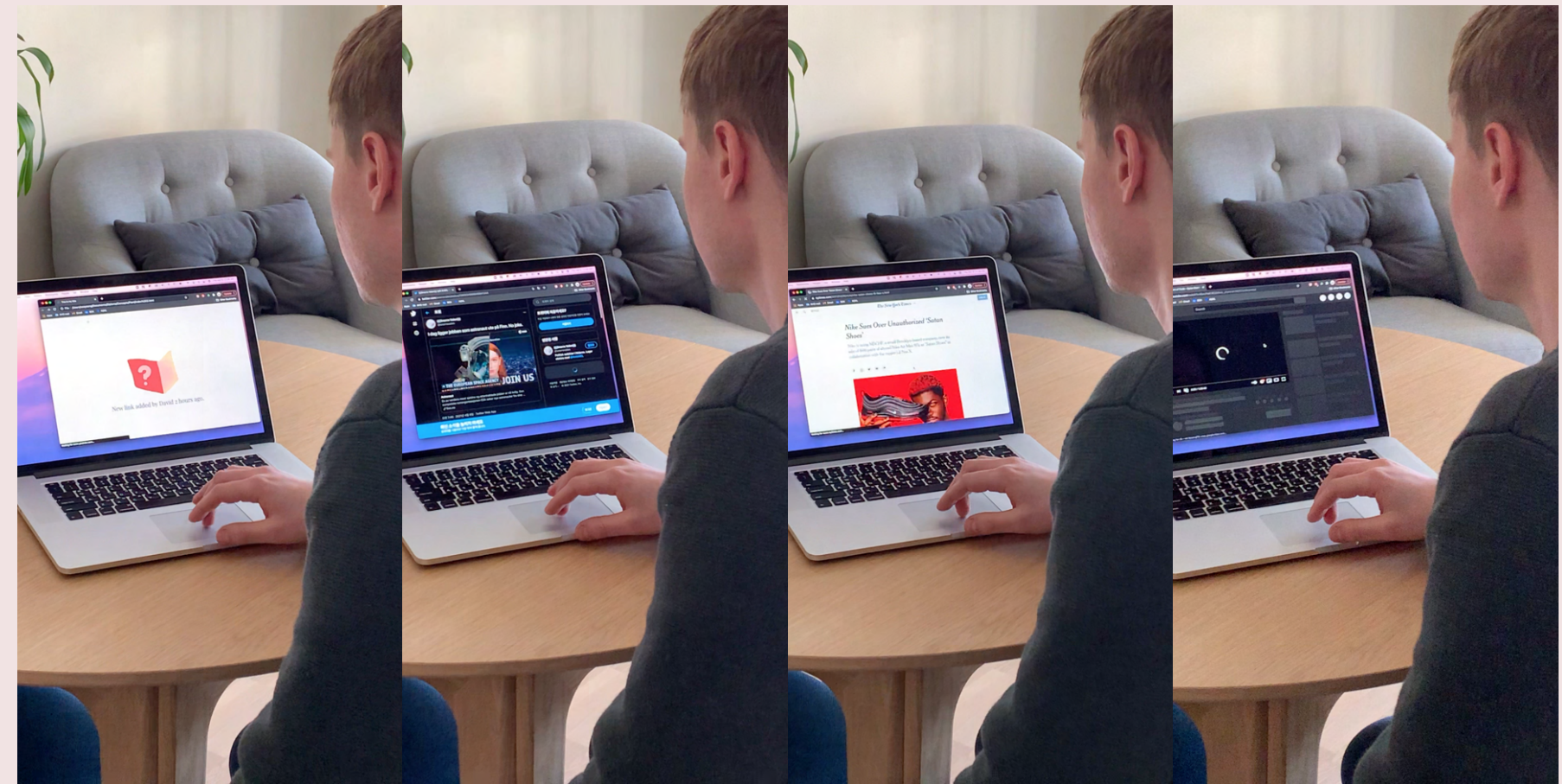
Feedback & reflection

Many participants said they already share fun links and memes with colleagues throughout the day. This feature could support the sharing better if it is provided as a browser extension or an add-on feature on Slack.

"It will be fun to use this with my colleagues."

"I like it because sharing links is something that we already do on Slack."

"How about giving some credit to someone who shared a link that many people enjoyed? That could be a way of motivating people to participate in this."

Virtual office plant
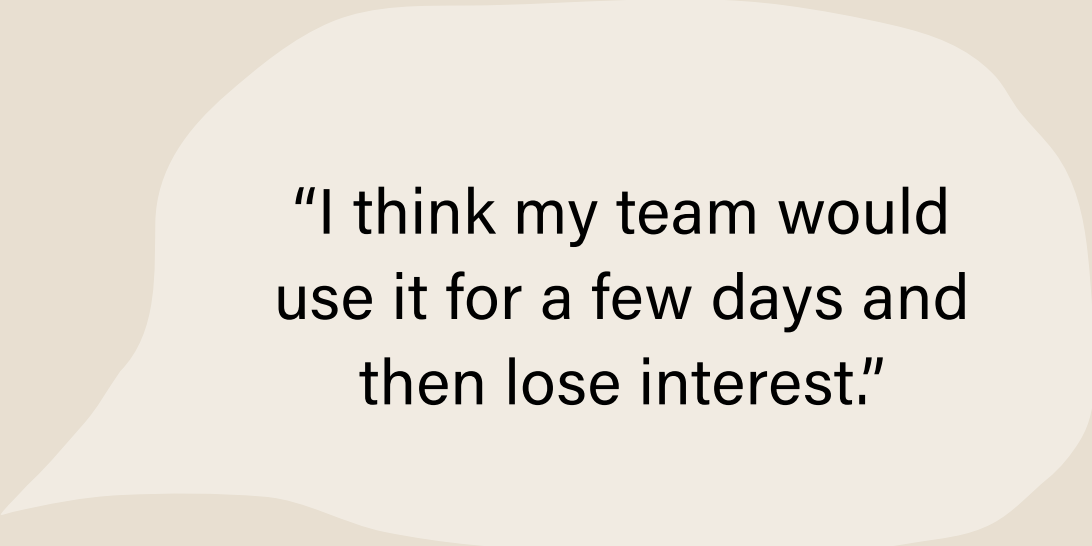
What if teammates could grow a virtual office plant of shared responsibility? Teams could set the goal of minimum watering intervals as they want. Colleagues living in different time zones have to check in regularly and cooperate to keep the plant alive. When the plant blooms to a flower, it could perhaps provide more features so that people can play around with its facial expression, posture and leave messages to each other.
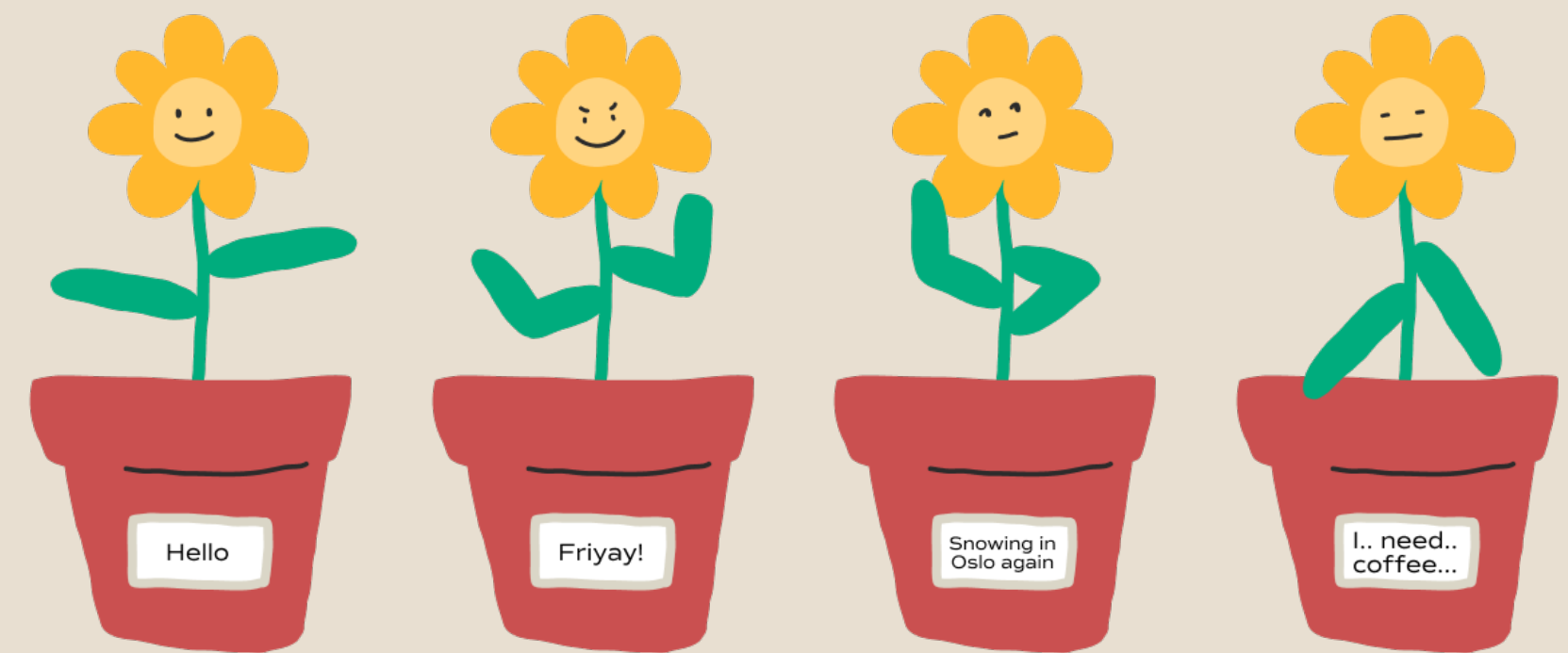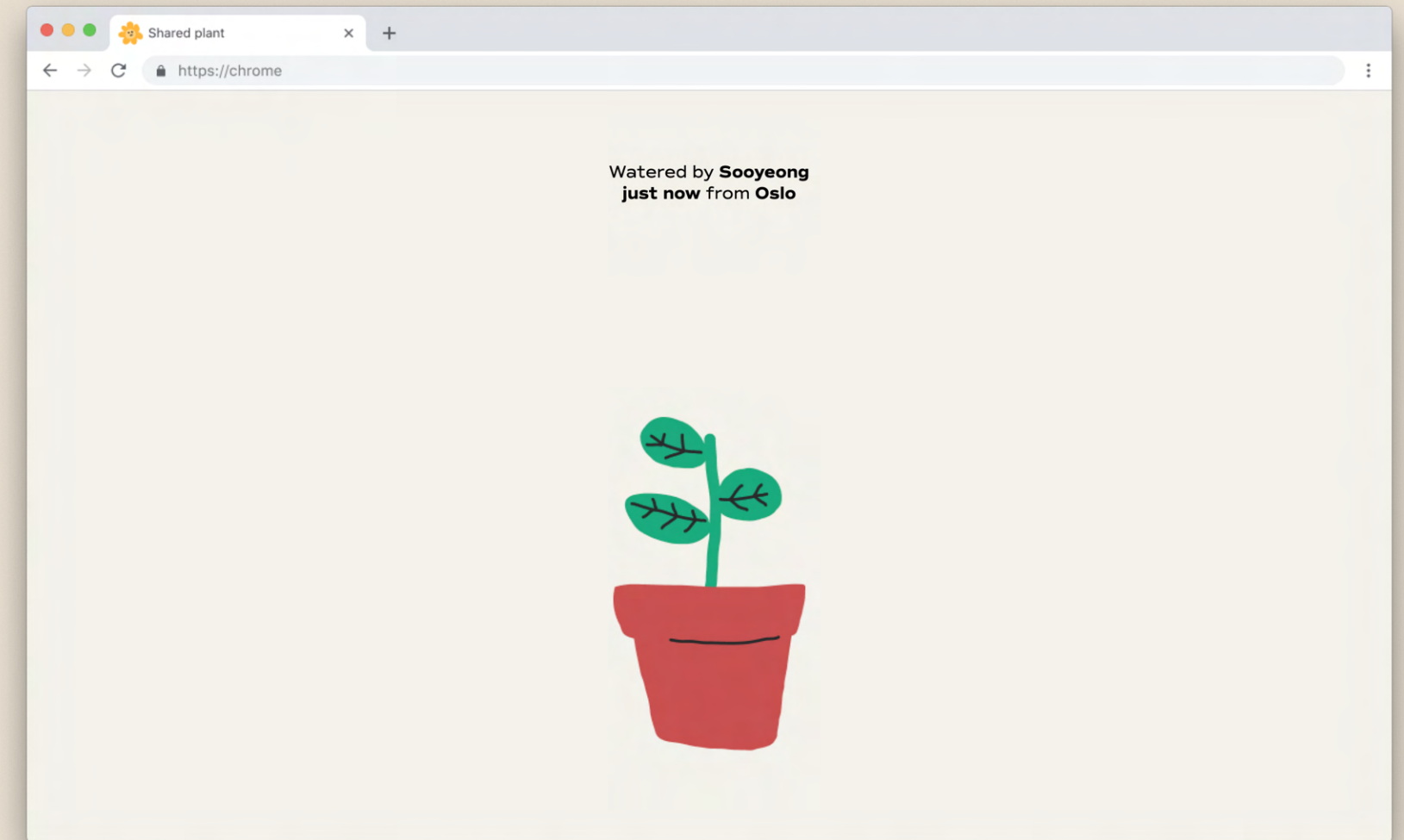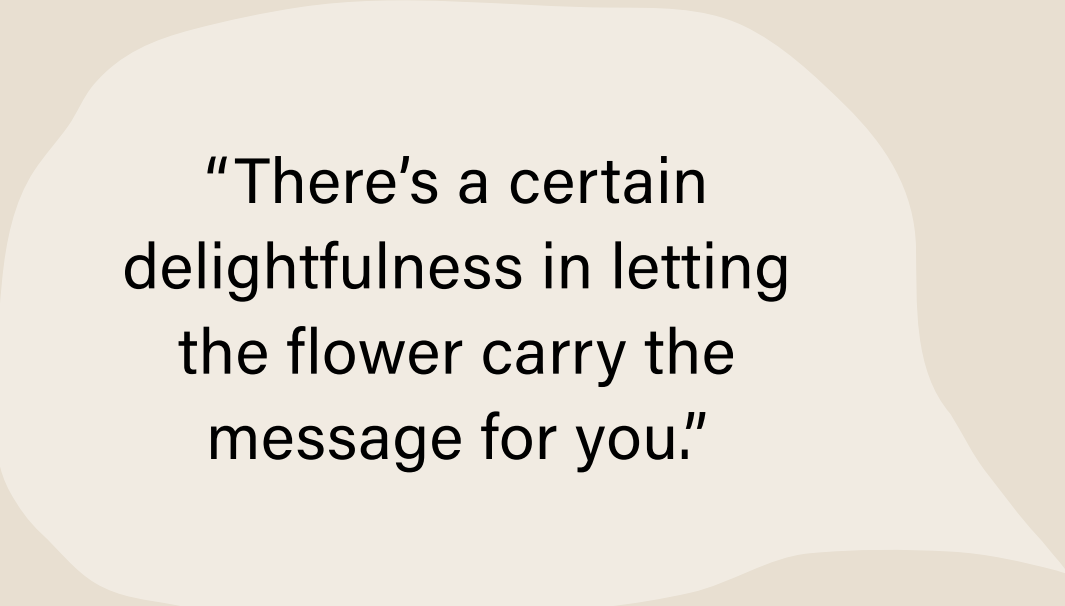
Feedback & Reflection

Participants were positive towards the idea of having a virtual shared object. The ability to change the character's facial expressions and posture made people want to play around with it.

However, some participants thought a virtual plant sounded gimmicky, and many participants thought they would not use this feature in the long term.

"I think my team would use it for a few days and then lose interest."

"There's a certain delightfulness in letting the flower carry the message for you."

Exploration 3.

Timezone calculator

Could there be an easier way to understand time differences? What time was it in Australia 3 hours from now? What would be the best time to call someone working from Canada? I tested a time zone visualiser in a dial format that makes it easier to understand other people's local times in relation to your current time.

I tested this idea with a paper prototype and Figma. However, I did not develop it further.

Message timer

Deliver at <u>12</u> for <u>everyone</u>.

Enjoy your l
everyone|

Deliver at <u>8:30</u> for <u>Nina</u>.

Remember the deadline..|

Save

Happy birthday Nina!

Delivered 08:30

Enjoy your lunch everyone :)

Delivered 12:00

From **Sam**

Remember the deadline...

Delivered 18:00

From **Sam**
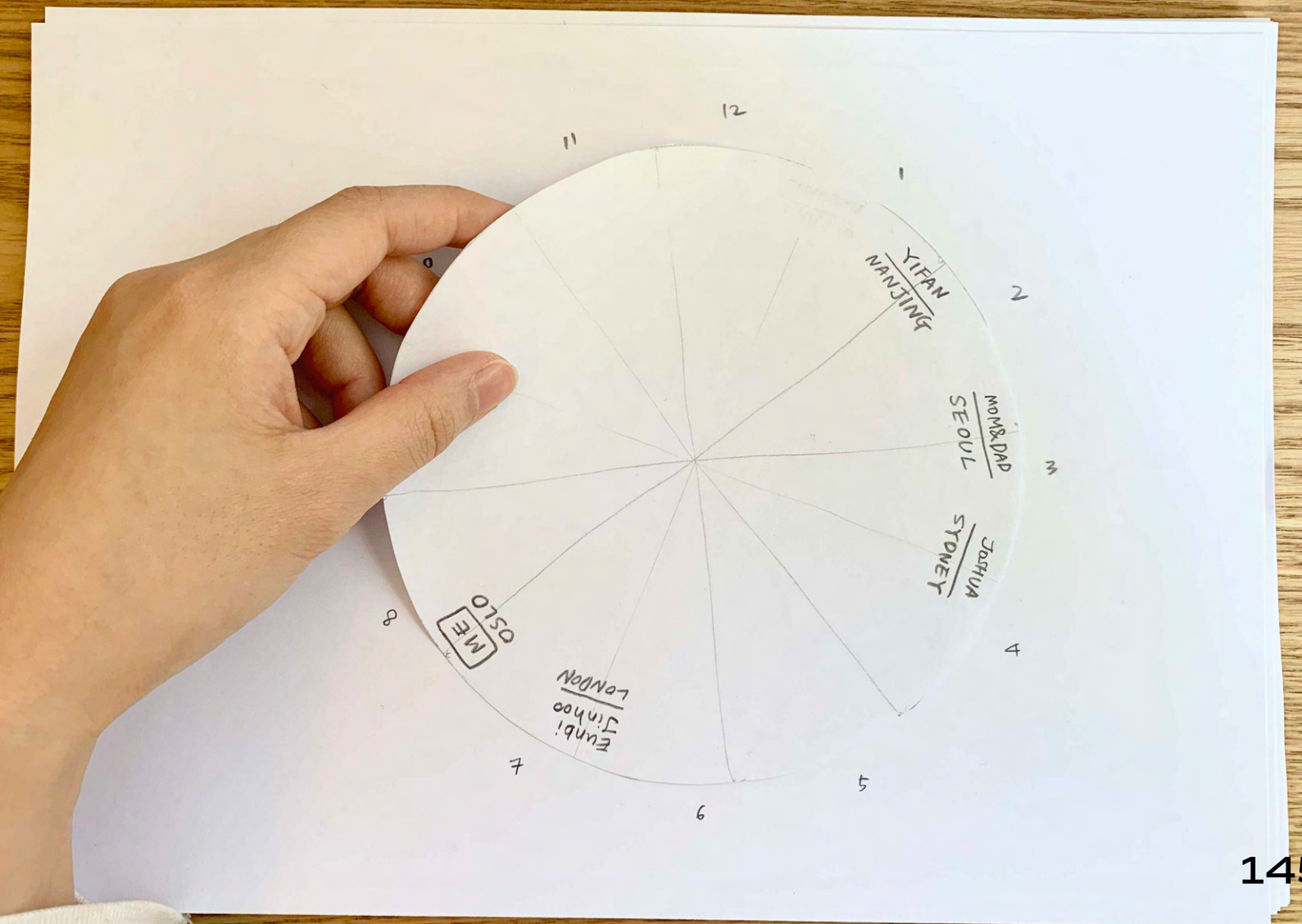
What if people could easily schedule messages for colleagues working from different time zones? Before sending the message, users could decide when the message should be delivered in the recipient's local time.
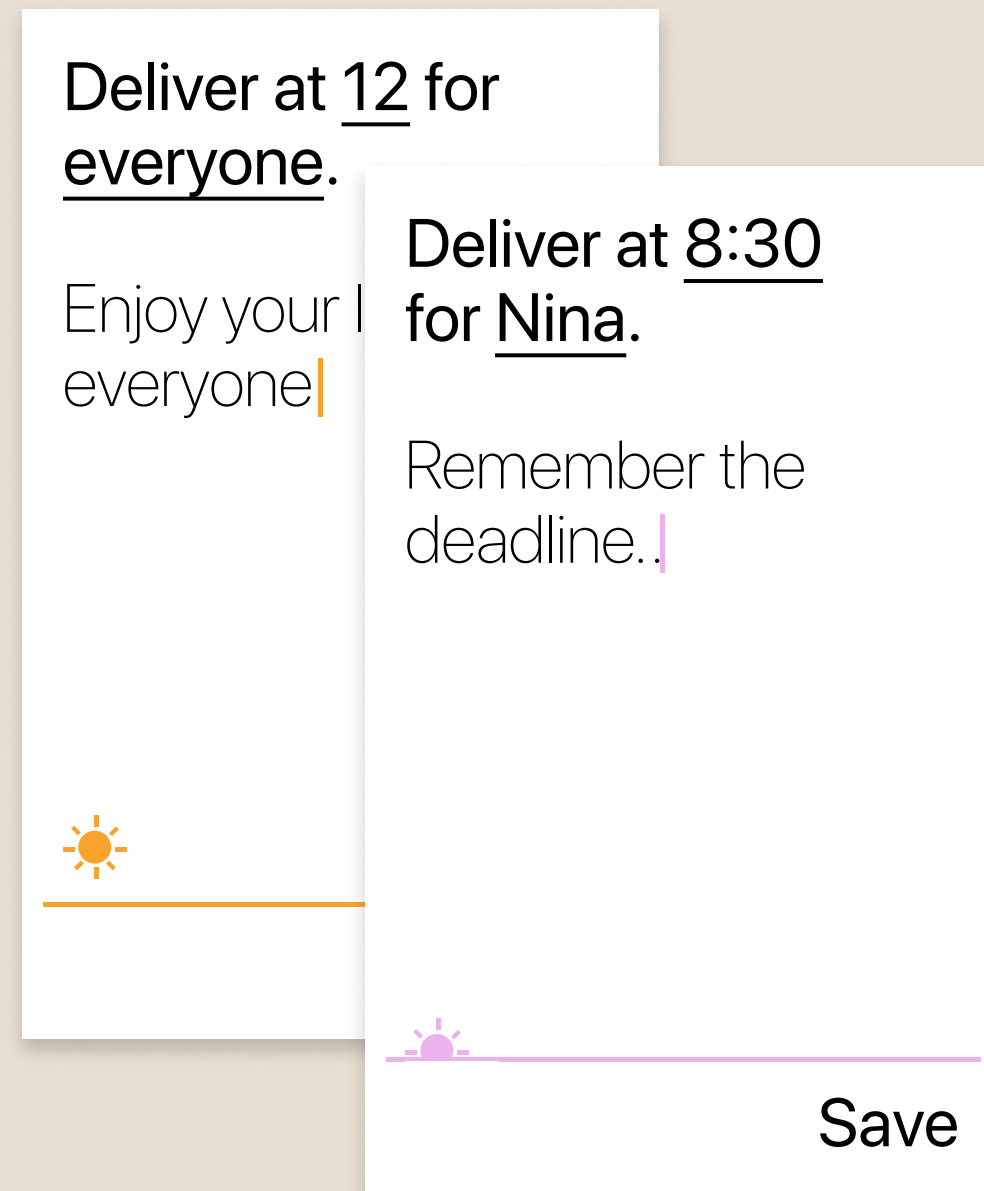
Feedback &
Reflection

Scheduling an email for someone in a different time zone can be tricky. Participants thought the interface was clear and minimized the confusion that might come from time differences. However, to send each other non-work-related messages, people should already know the other person to some degree. Therefore, this feature would help to keep the connection between people who already know each other but not necessarily build new connections over different time zones.

"This interface is great. It would make scheduling a message so much easier than now."

"Can't you just schedule e-mails instead?"

Learnings from the explorations
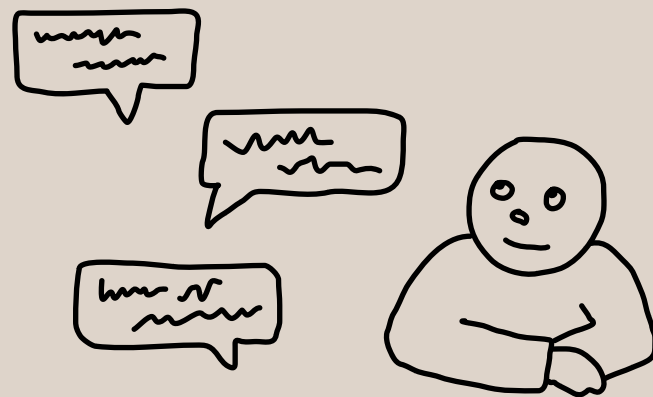
The explorations raised a wide range of discussions, and I could gain more concrete insights on people's needs and digital behaviors through this process. Here are my learnings from these explorations.

1.
In digital spaces, social interactions can easily feel too intimate.

In video calls and audio calls today, participants are expected to devote their full attention to the conversation. Especially in social conversations, this can feel too intimate and uncomfortable.

2.
We need a way to stay connected with less effort.

In digital spaces, presence often requires effort. Therefore, participants were positive towards the idea of being able to stay connected with colleagues without actively participating in something.

3.
Scheduled or forced social activities can feel like a duty

The ability to use time flexible is the biggest advantage of working from home. However, social interactions are often scheduled in the calendar while working from home. Therefore, casual conversations tend to feel less casual than they should be. Also, some participants claimed that they feel the pressure to attend virtual social events organized by the company.

4.
If a service doesn't have a value that manifests, it easily loses long-term engagement

Many participants found the virtual plant idea to be fun, but unlike other ideas that I sketched out, they couldn't imagine themselves using this on daily basis.

5.
The way people work at home is significantly different from person to person.

There are extroverts and introverts, single households and people living with family. When working remotely, people have more freedom to work in a way they prefer. Therefore the reactions to the explorations were also very different - some people would love one idea, while others could not see themselves using it.

6.
Casual hangout spaces are missing.

On-site offices have a rest area where people can hang out. Surprisingly, most teams don't have an agreed digital hangout place they visit to take breaks or check in with other people.

6.
Process III -
Developing the
final concept

Concept direction / Core pages / Tone of voice /
Feedback and iterations

Concept direction

The main goal of my final concept was to 1. showcase the different possibilities that I explored in the exploration phase and 2. engaging people in collecting more ideas about how we could preserve the social elements in the transition to a new way of working.

The discussions from the exploration phase was a long journey of finding the right direction for my final deliverable. So, the outcomes and learnings from the previous explorations naturally guided me into the final concept direction.

Learnings	Concept direction
• Casual hangout spaces are missing.	Provide a digital hangout space, dedicated to social purposes
• The way people work at home is significantly different from person to person.	Customization for the team and the individual, based on their culture, preference, habit, and work style
• In digital spaces, social interactions can easily feel too intimate. • Scheduled or forced social activities can feel like a duty. • We need a way to stay connected with less effort.	Characteristics of the interaction the service pursues – ambient, voluntary, and low effort intimacy.

CATALOGUE OF
FEATURES

TOUCHBASE,
YOUR SECOND
"DESKTOP"

IDEAS
SUGGESTED
BY USERS
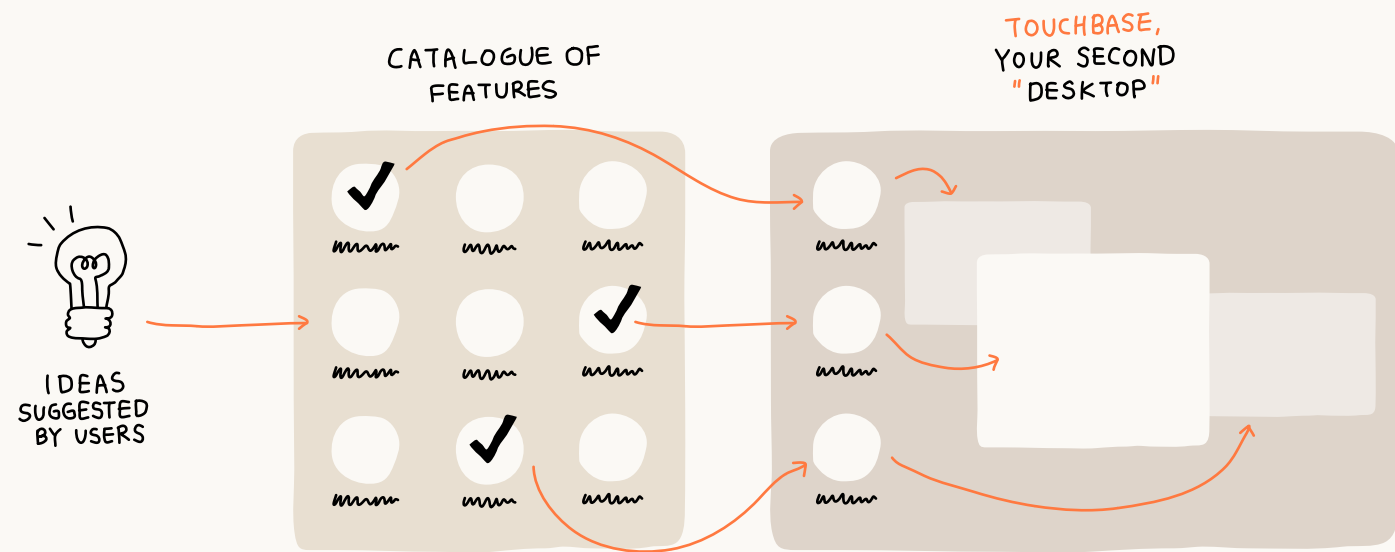
I started sketching a customizable social platform ‹TouchBase›, that incorporates the richness of the ideas from the exploration phase. The ideas are offered as features that users can choose to add to their space.

The concept borrows some of the design languages from existing operating systems and provides a digital space that looks like a desktop, that is solely dedicated to fun and social interactions with teammates. Users decide what features they would like to have on their desktop, like downloading apps from Appstore. As a brand, the service is 'open' and values ideas from the users. It develops new features based on users' suggestions.
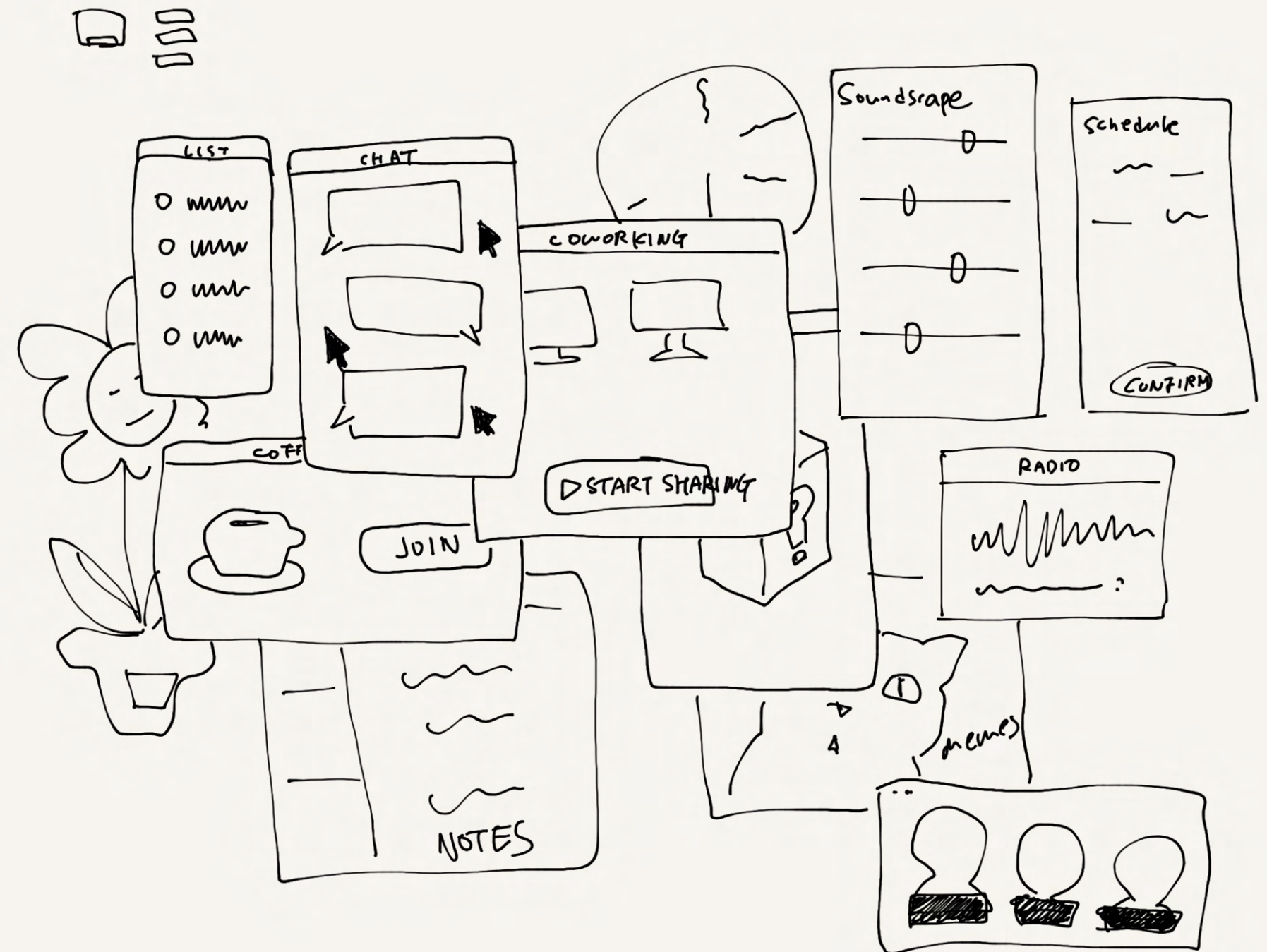
Positioning the service

Asynchronous

E-mail

Slack

Passive participation ←————————————————→ Active participation

Pragli

Gather.town

Teams

Discord

Zoom

Synchronous
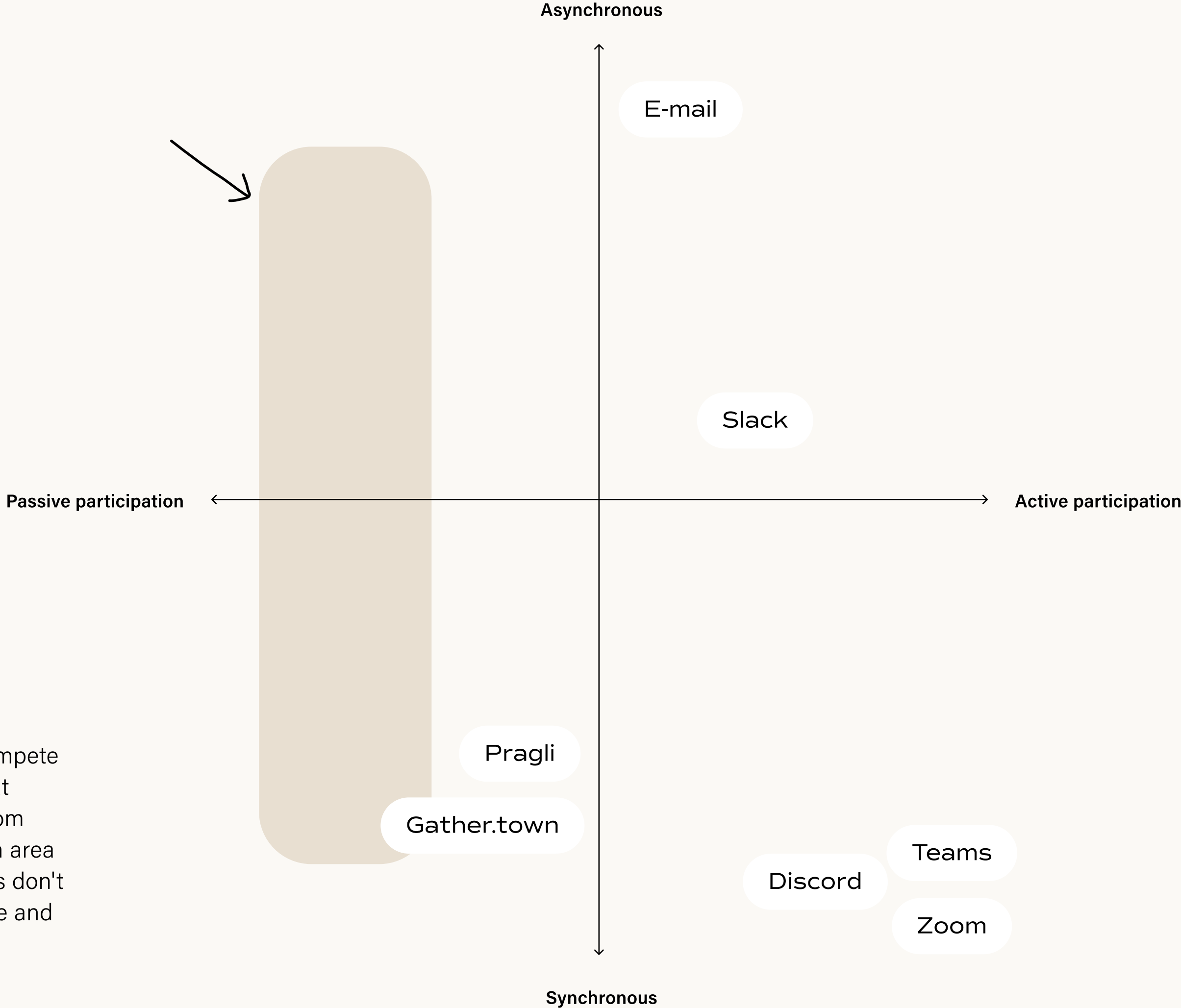
TouchBase doesn't try to compete against existing software that people use while working from home. It positions itself in an area where most existing services don't focus on, by allowing passive and ambient social participation.

Core pages

Onboarding

The service provides a personalized experience based on the information users offer during this process. Therefore, I am designing the onboarding process and personalized digital spaces as an important part of my prototype.

Feature catalogue

Users should be able to navigate through a wide range of features (apps), understand how they work, and select the ones that suit them. So, there should be a page showing a list of features with tutorials.

Feature suggestion

The prototype should be able to show how the service encourages users to suggest new ideas for the features to be developed.

Desktop view

The 'desktop view' is the main page of the service that collects all the features users have added, and the page that users will interact with the most once they finish the setup. It should be able to show the different combination of features to demonstrate different use cases.

Tone of voice
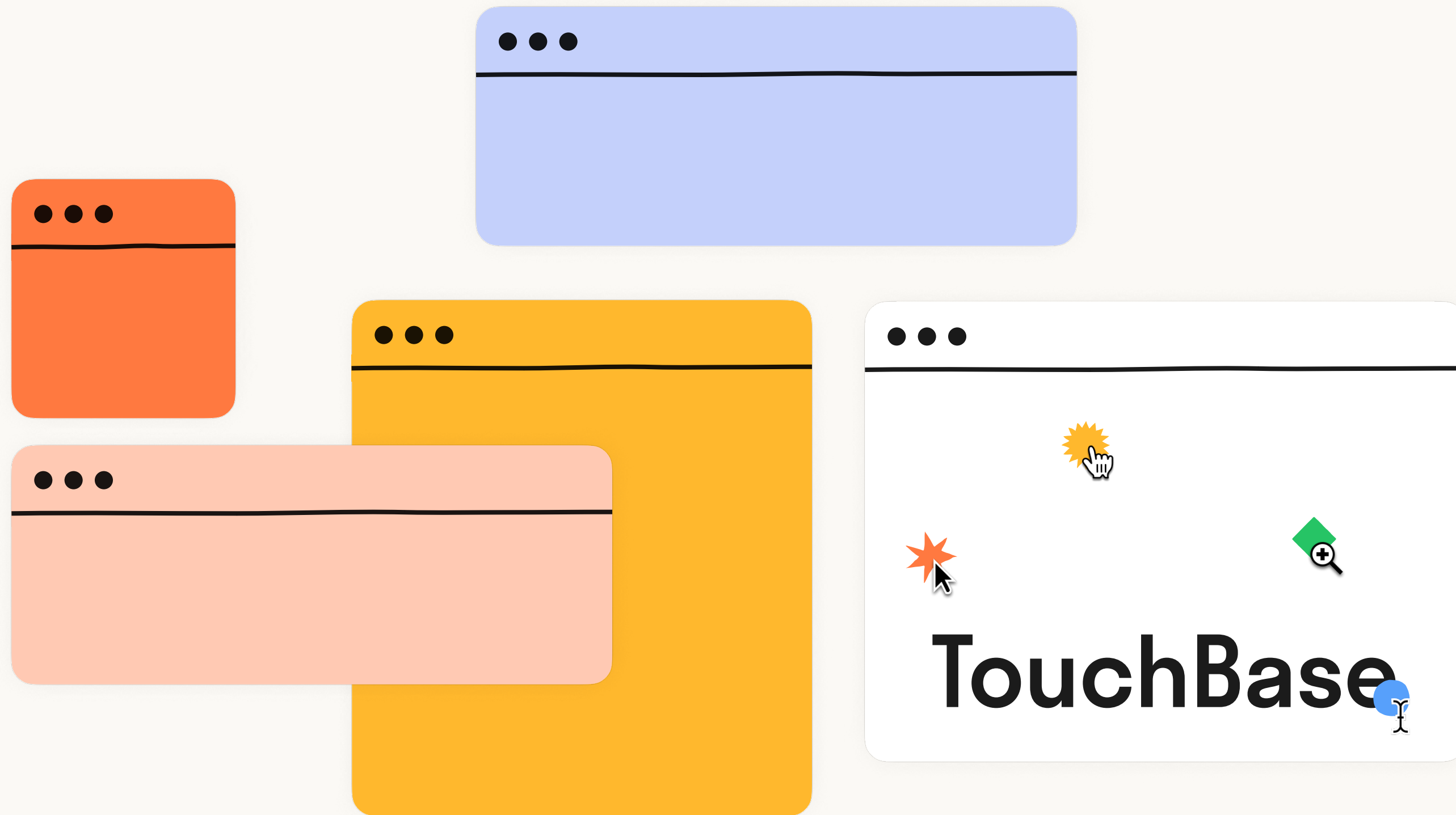
As a brand, TouchBase has a friendly, open and playful tone of voice throughout the graphic style and the language.

Copy style

TouchBase uses clear and simple everyday language for communication. The service addresses itself as 'we', to approach the users in a humanized manner.

When asking about users' work styles, personalities or preferences, TouchBase avoids labelling people or teams with specific terms. For example, TouchBase doesn't use the word 'introvert' and 'extrovert'. Instead, it asks users to answer the statements like "I find video calls uncomfortable.", and "I find it easier to focus when I'm around other people".
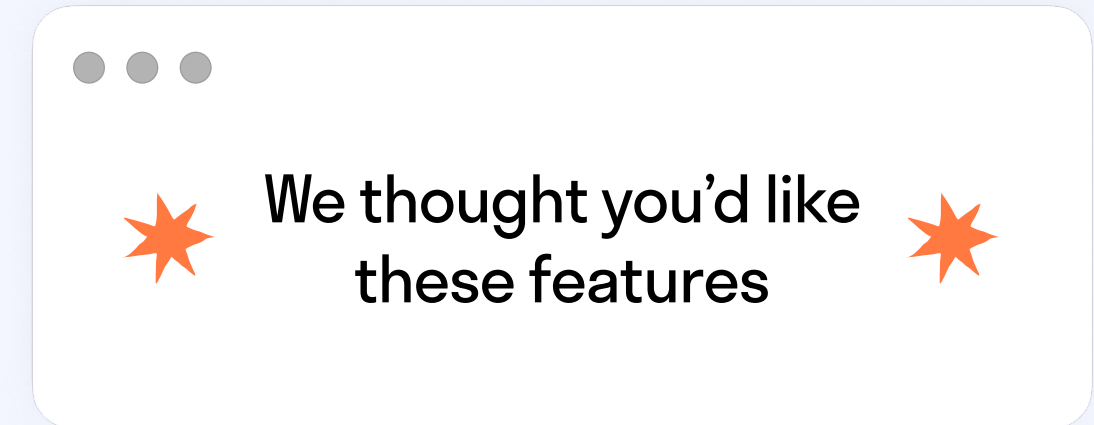
Graphic style
Colors & illustrations

Graphic style
Graphic elements
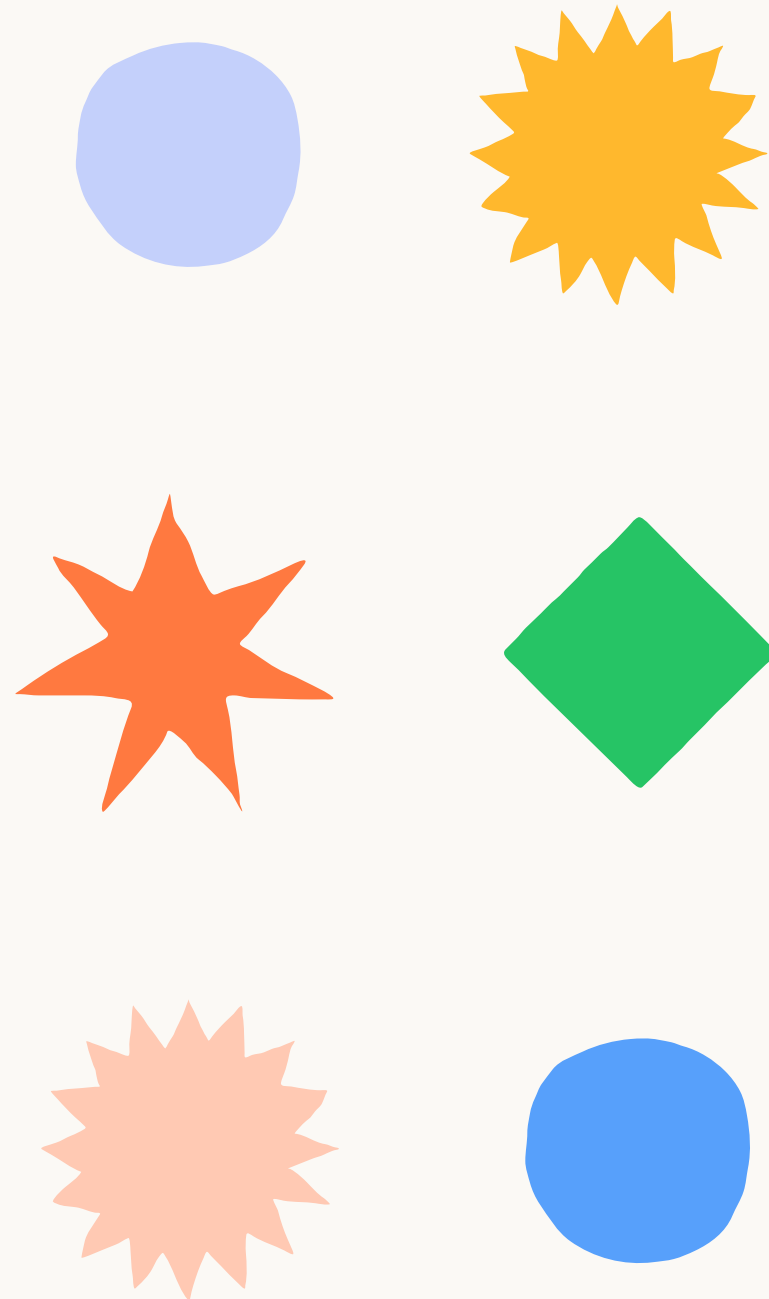
TouchBase uses cheerful colors palette with hand-drawn, doodle-like illustrations.
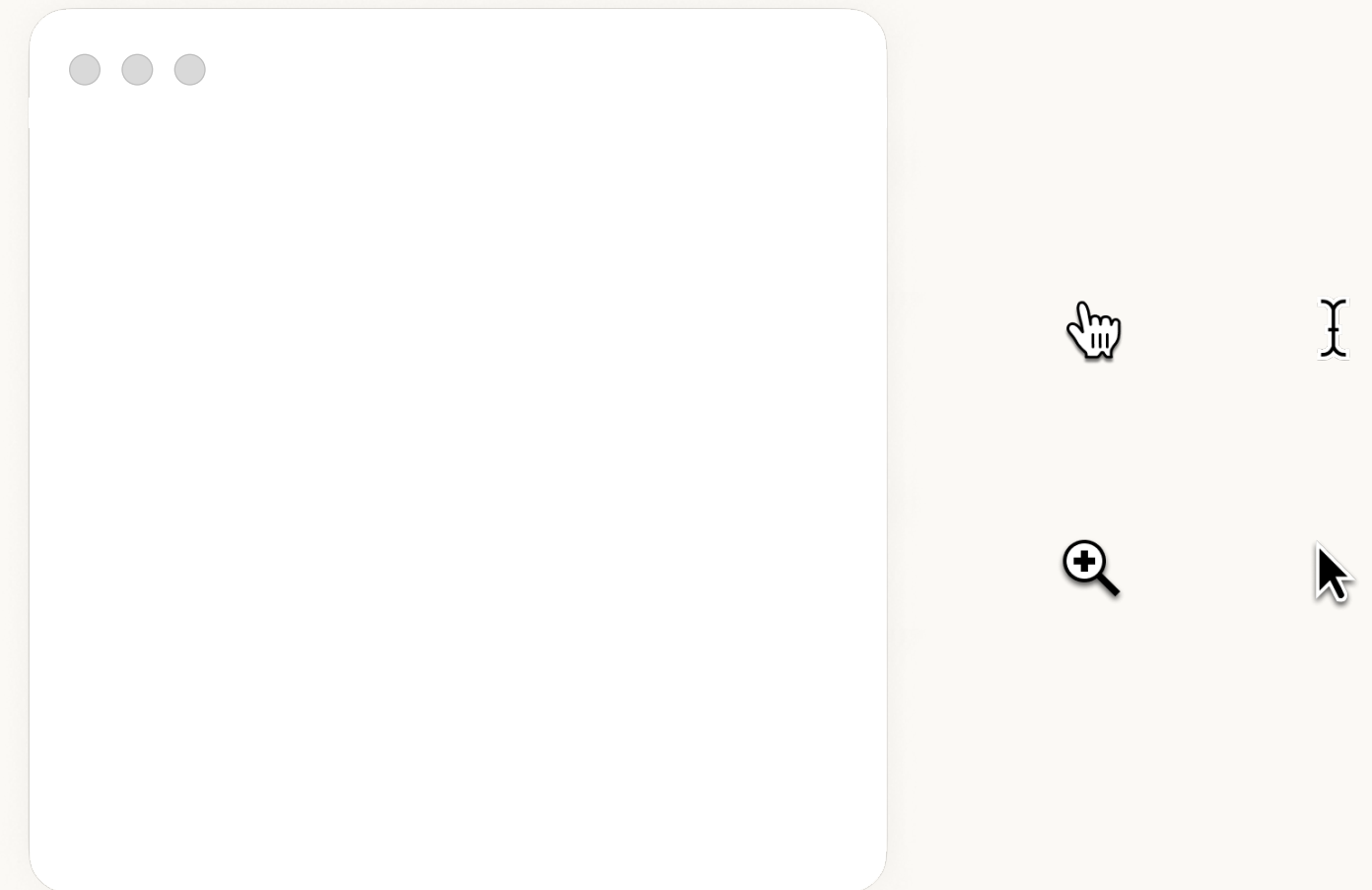
Mouse pointers and windows are used as graphic elements to convey the resemblence to an operating system in a playful manner.

Graphic style
Windows

iOS

iteration based on iOS guideline

The window interface needed a consistent design system to give it a feeling of an operating system. I tested different graphic styles based on iOS, to find a delightful design that can coexist with other apps and windows on the screen.

Graphic style
Iterations - Icons

Initial sketch
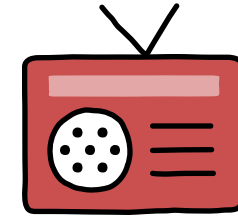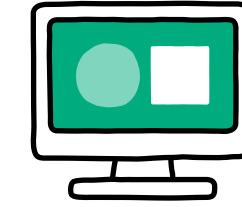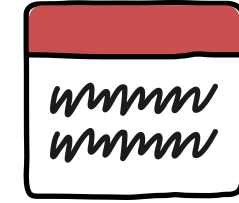
Office Radio   Desk Buddies   Co-working Space   Canvas

1st iteration
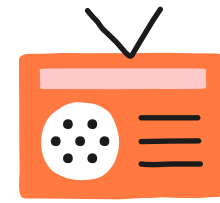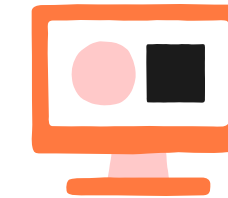
Office Radio   Desk Buddies   Co-working Space   Canvas

2nd iteration

Office Radio   Desk Buddies   Co-working Space   Canvas

Final outcome

OFFICE RADIO   DESK BUDDIES   CO-WORKING   CANVAS

Graphic style
Iterations – Initial sketch
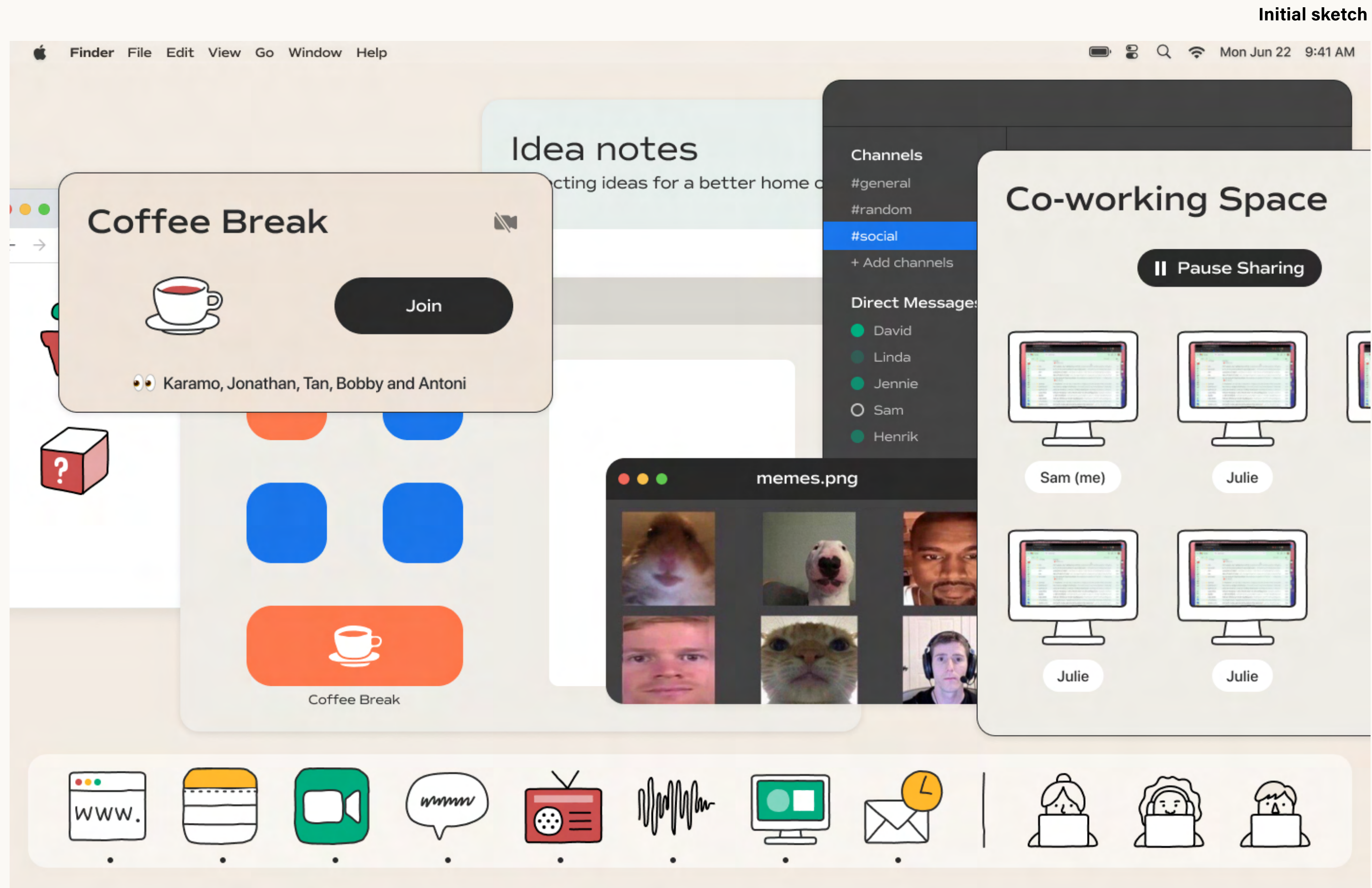
Graphic style
Iterations – 1st iteration
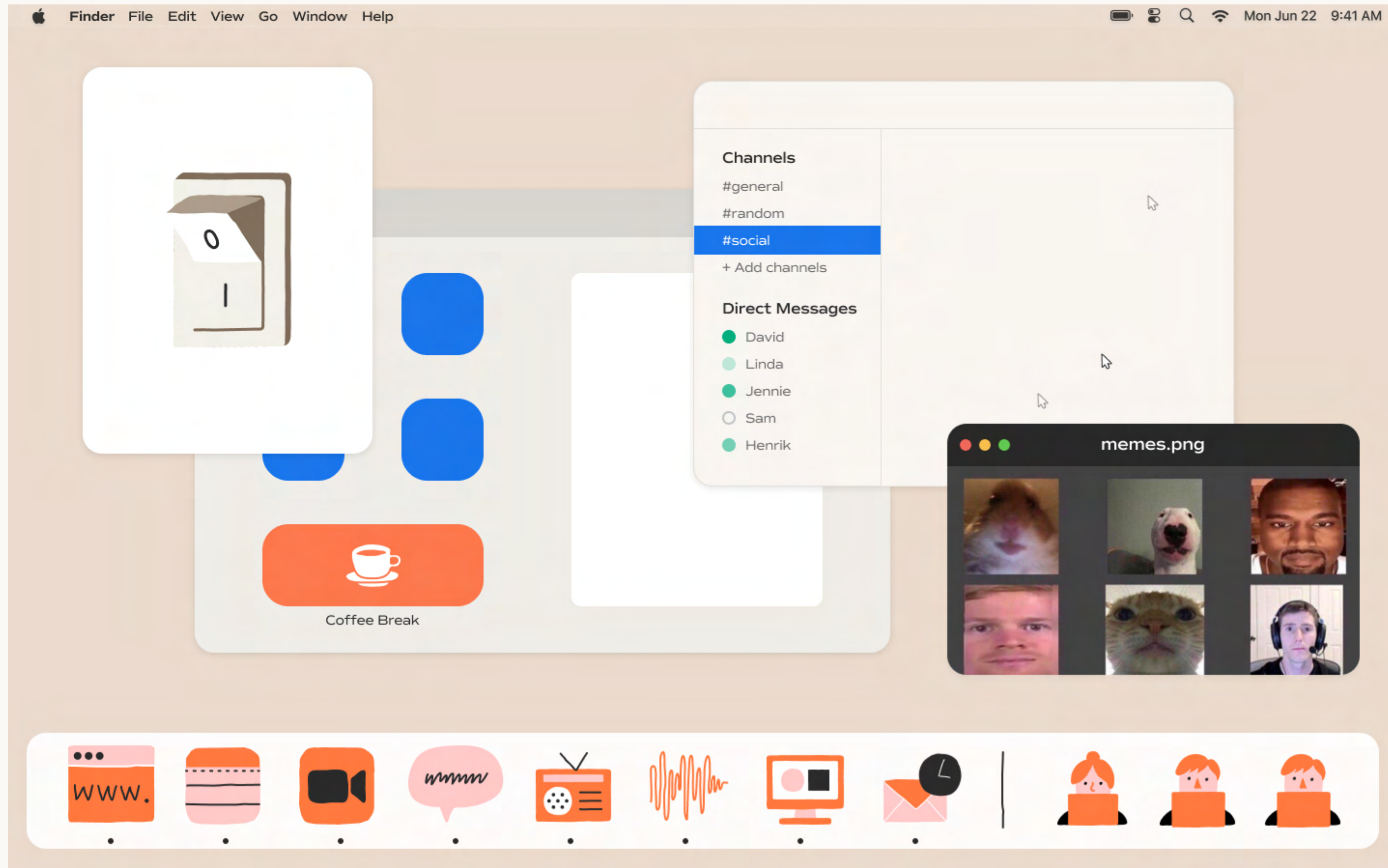
Graphic style
Iterations – 2nd iteration

Process III – Developing the final concept Tone of voice
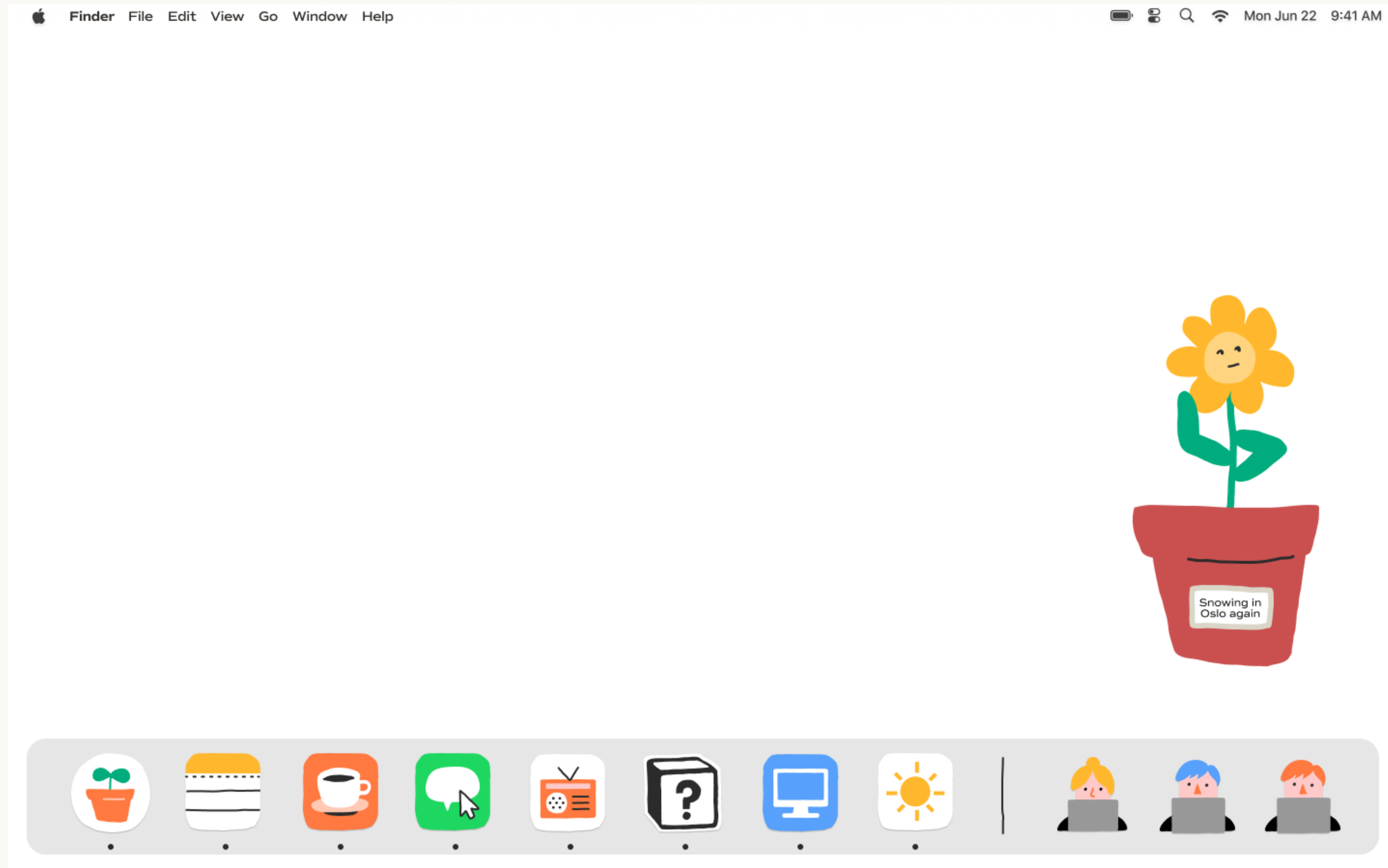
Graphic style
Iterations – 3rd iteration
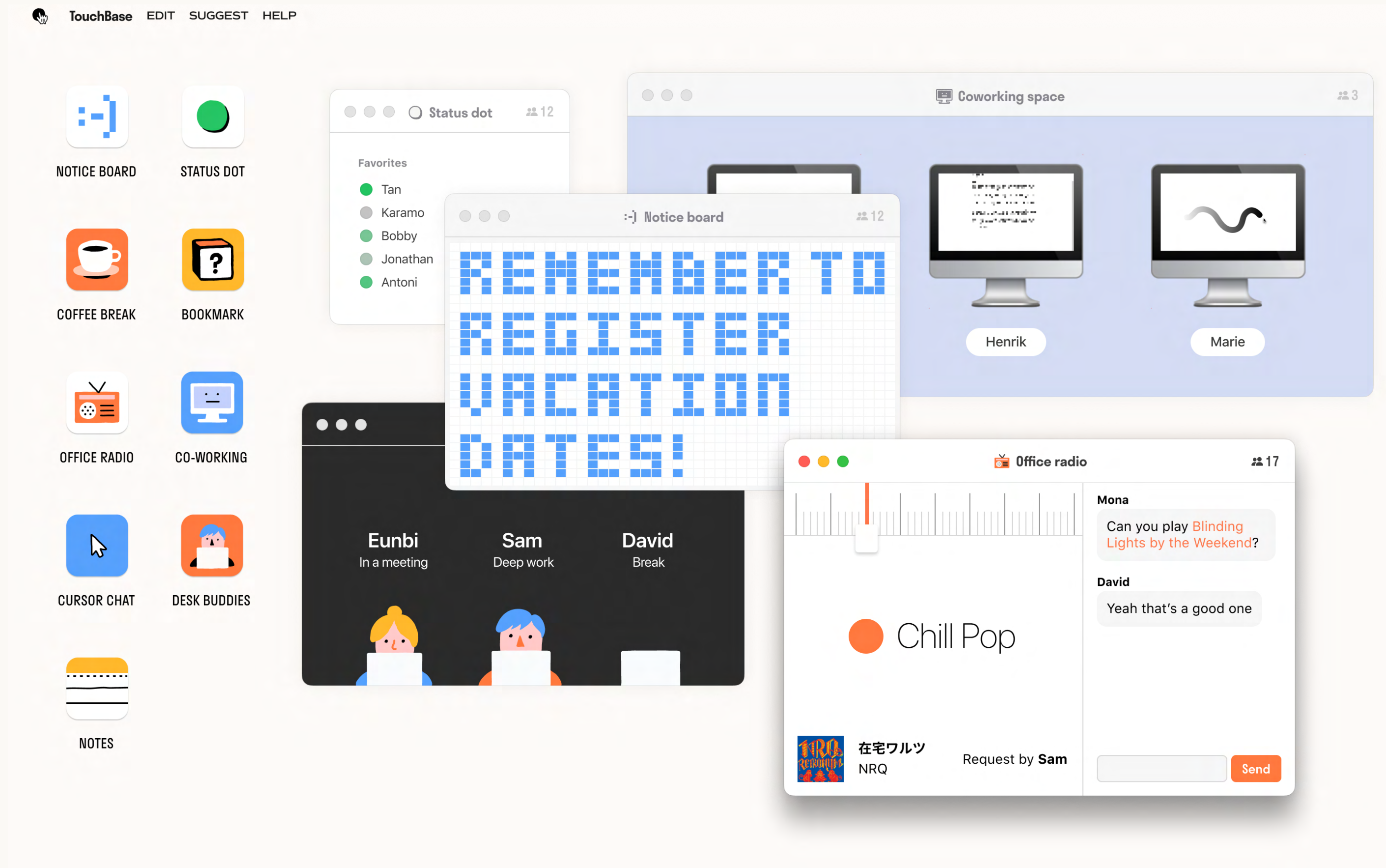
Graphic style
Iterations – 4th iteration
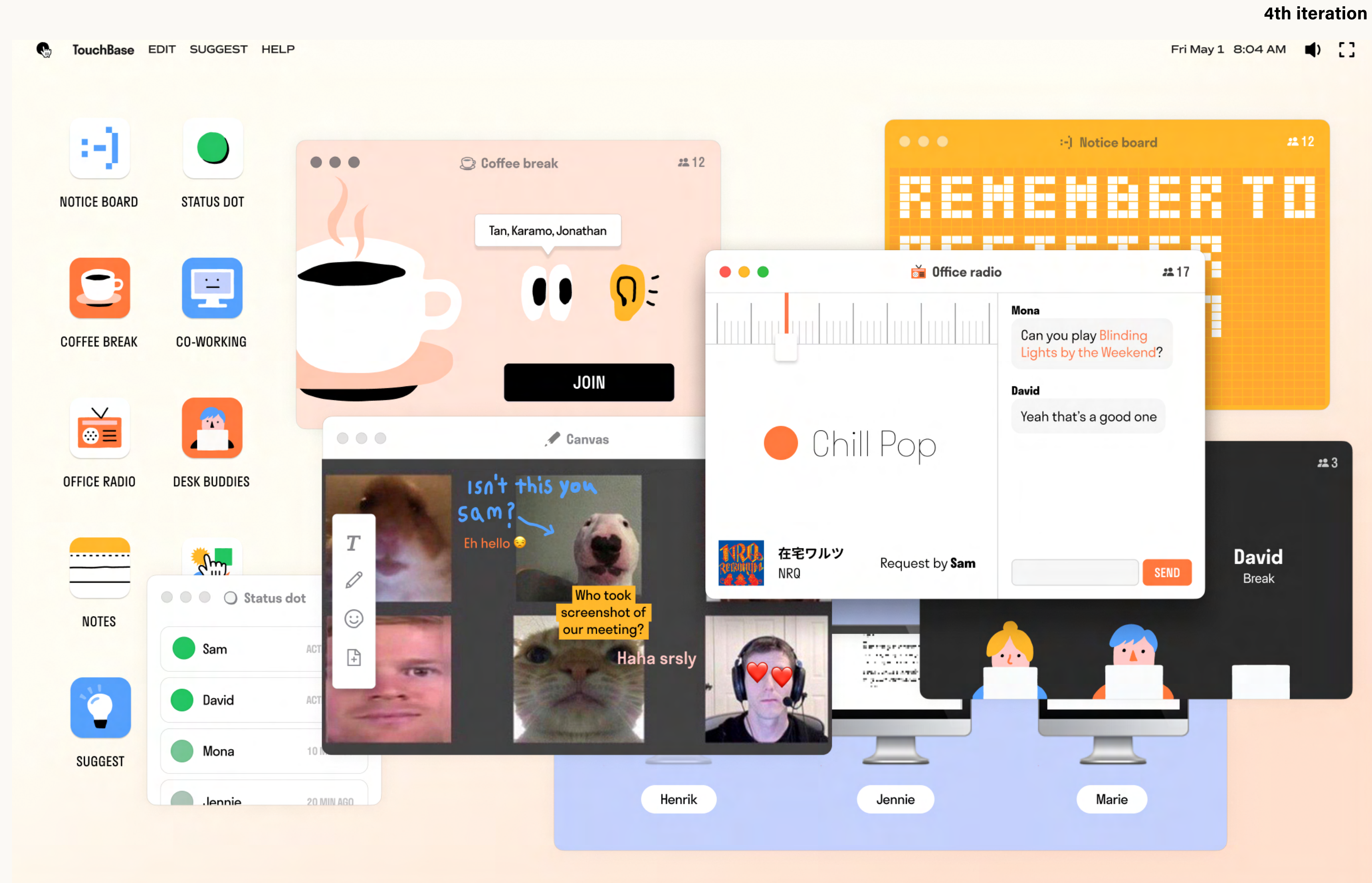
Feedback and iterations

After developing the first version of the prototype, I collected feedback from experts and potential users.

Presentation
I presented the project's process to the designers at Blank, Bjarte Misund (Whereby), Dhritiman Chatterjee (Halogen), Timo Arnall (Playdeo) and got feedback from them.

Feedback workshop
I set up a feedback workshop showcasing my prototype on the Miro board, to engage a broader group of people. Participants left comments with sticky notes, and I made iterations based on them.

Here are the main changes I made through the iterations.

- location of the service (browser → app)
- minor UI fixes
- language, UX copy that complies with the brand's tone of voice
- communication of the concept

Feedback workshop
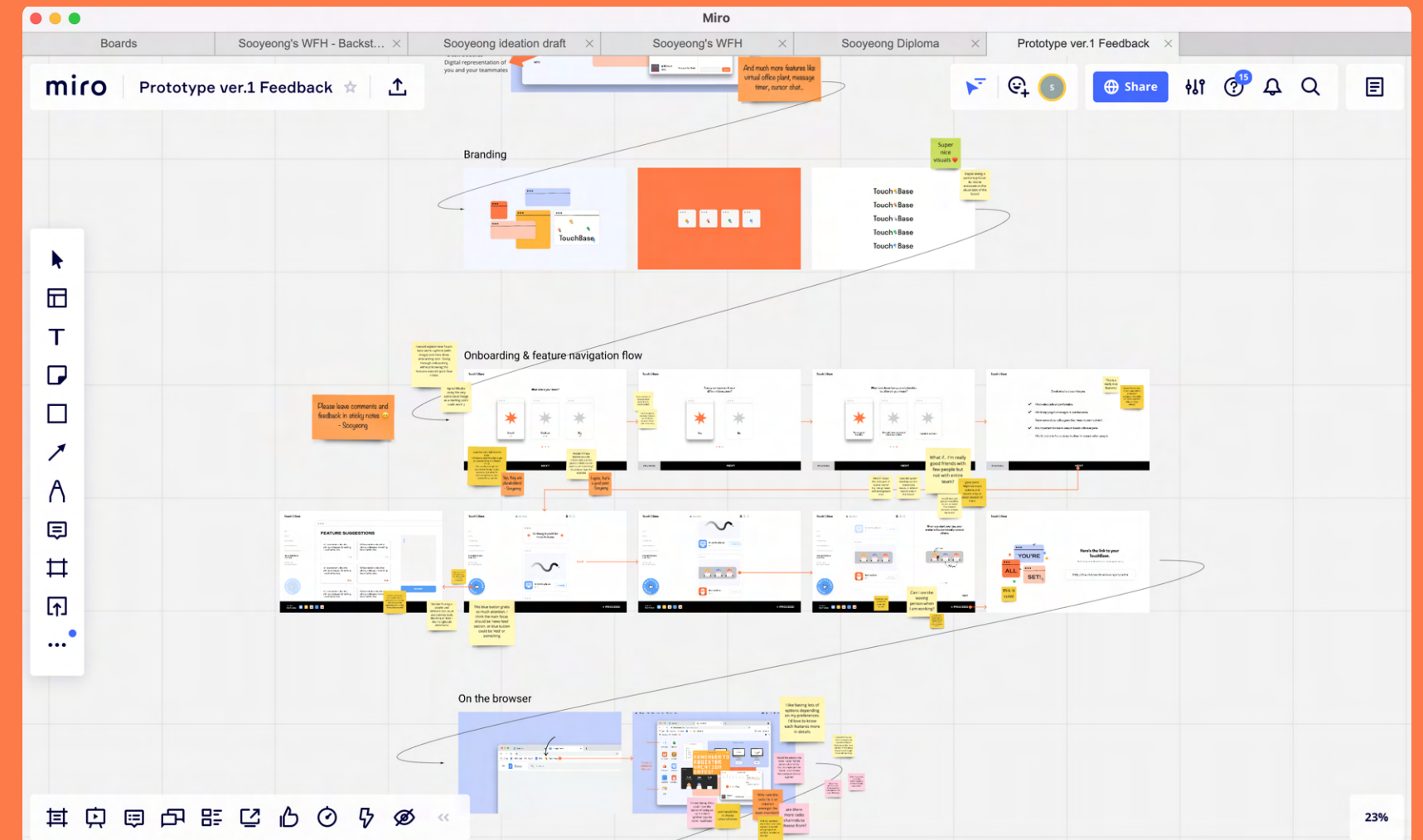
Onboarding & feature navigation flow

I would explain how Touch base works upfront (with image) and then show onboarding later. Going through onboarding without knowing the features doesn't quite flo I think

👍 1

Agree! Maybe using the very same cover image as a starting point could work :)

Please leave comments and feedback in sticky notes 😊
- Sooyeong

Touch Base

What size is your team?

Small 2-5

Medium 6-15

Big 15+

NEXT
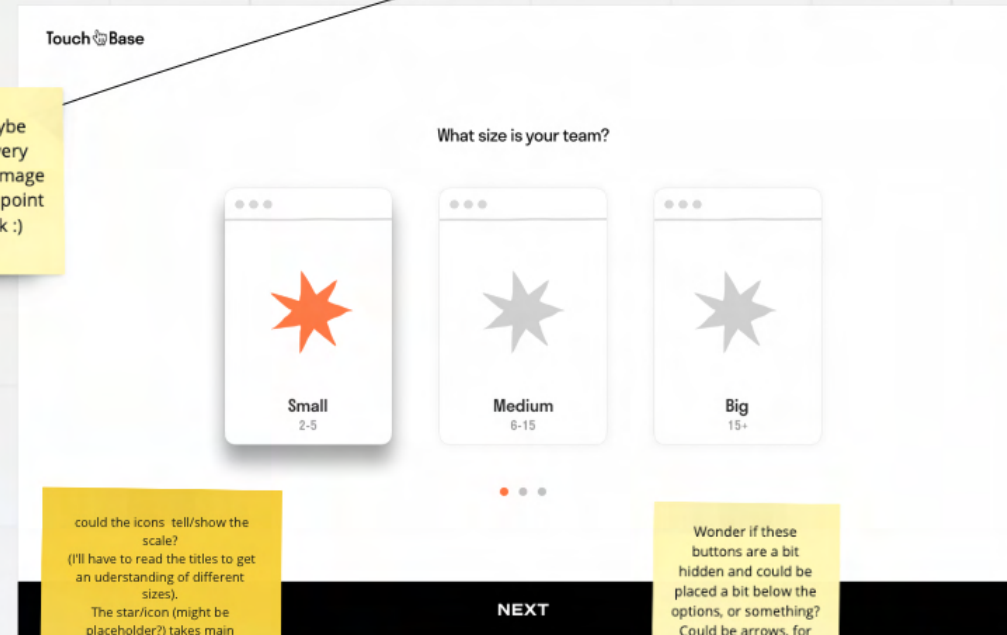
could the icons tell/show the scale?
(I'll have to read the titles to get an understanding of different sizes).
The star/icon (might be placeholder?) takes main attention, but what I'm interacting/main action - seems like a sub-title

Does elevated or pressed down mean that its chosen/active?

Are the options windows that you can minimize, expand, close? (the three dots)

Wonder if these buttons are a bit hidden and could be placed a bit below the options, or something? Could be arrows, for example

Yep, they are placeholders! - Sooyeong

I agree, that's a good point - Sooyeong

Touch Base

Does your team work over different timezones?

Yes

No

PREVIOUS   NEXT

Touch Base

What best describe to others

We are good buddies

We could h chats o

PREVIOUS
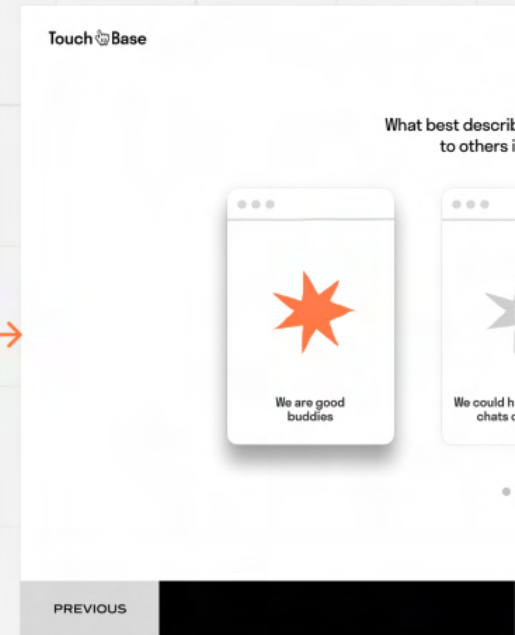
What if i would like to be part of several teams? E.g. Design team and development team

Touch Base

ALL
NEW
TRENDING
CATEGORIES

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

POPULAR IN YOUR TEAM

FEATURE SUGGESTIONS

I'd like a random video chat with my colleagues. Something like a ChatRoulette.
♡ 71

I'd like a random video chat with my colleagues. Something like a ChatRoulette.
♡ 71

I'd like a random video chat with my colleagues. Something like a ChatRoulette.
♡ 60

I'd like a random video chat with my colleagues. Somet like a ChatRoulette.
♡ 60

I'd like a random video chat with my colleagues. Something like a ChatRoulette.

SUBMIT

ADDED FEATURES

a call to action for new ideas might be truly valuable - but make it easily legible

a little bit of structure here would help not getting to much trolling - like structure the beginning with a 'i'd like' - 'it would be nice with'

Wonder if using a smaller and different icon could also communicate the thing of 'idea' - like the lightbuld cliché hehe
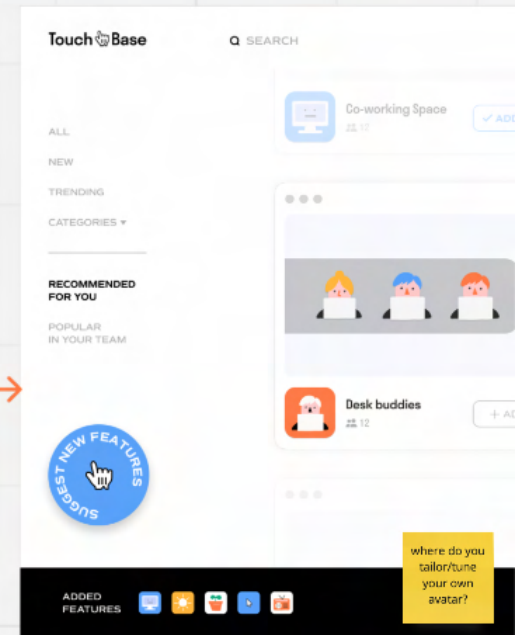
Touch Base   🔍 SEARCH

ALL
NEW
TRENDING
CATEGORIES

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

POPULAR IN YOUR TEAM

We thought you'd like these features

Co-working Space
✓ ADDED

Scroll

→ PROCEED

ADDED FEATURES

This blue button grabs so much attention. I think the main focus should be 'news feed' section. or blue button could be 'Add' or something

Touch Base   🔍 SEARCH

ALL
NEW
TRENDING
CATEGORIES

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

POPULAR IN YOUR TEAM

Co-working Space
✓ ADDED

Desk buddies
+ ADD

→ PROCEED

ADDED FEATURES

Touch Base   🔍 SEARCH

ALL
NEW
TRENDING
CATEGORIES

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

POPULAR IN YOUR TEAM

Co-working Space

Desk buddies

ADDED FEATURES

where do you tailor/tune your own avatar?

Feedback workshop

Color theme
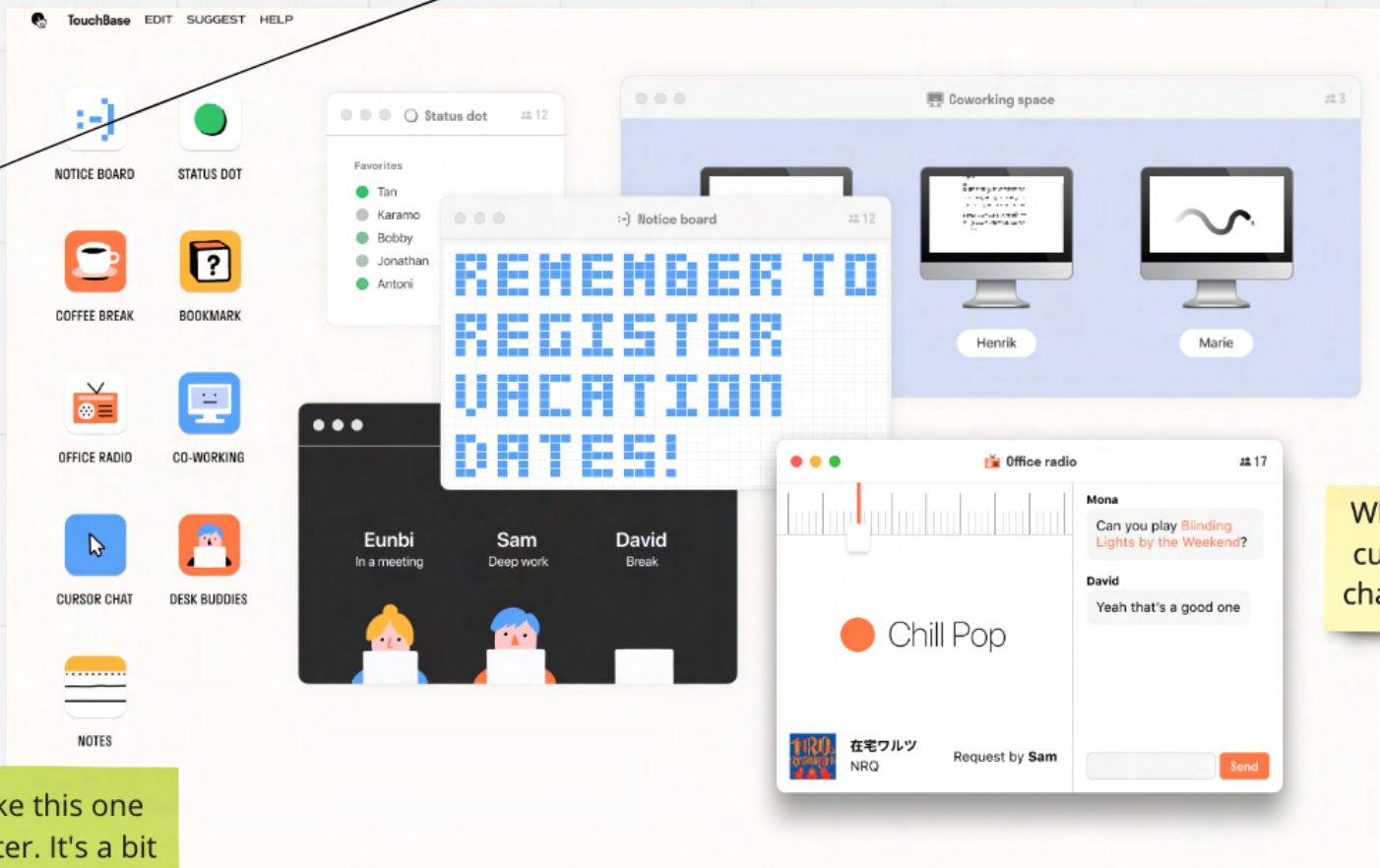
Sticky notes:
- Which one's better?
- I like this one better. It's a bit cleaner, ergo less distractive.
- What's cursor chat? 😀
- This one!
- This one!
- I like this one!
- This one
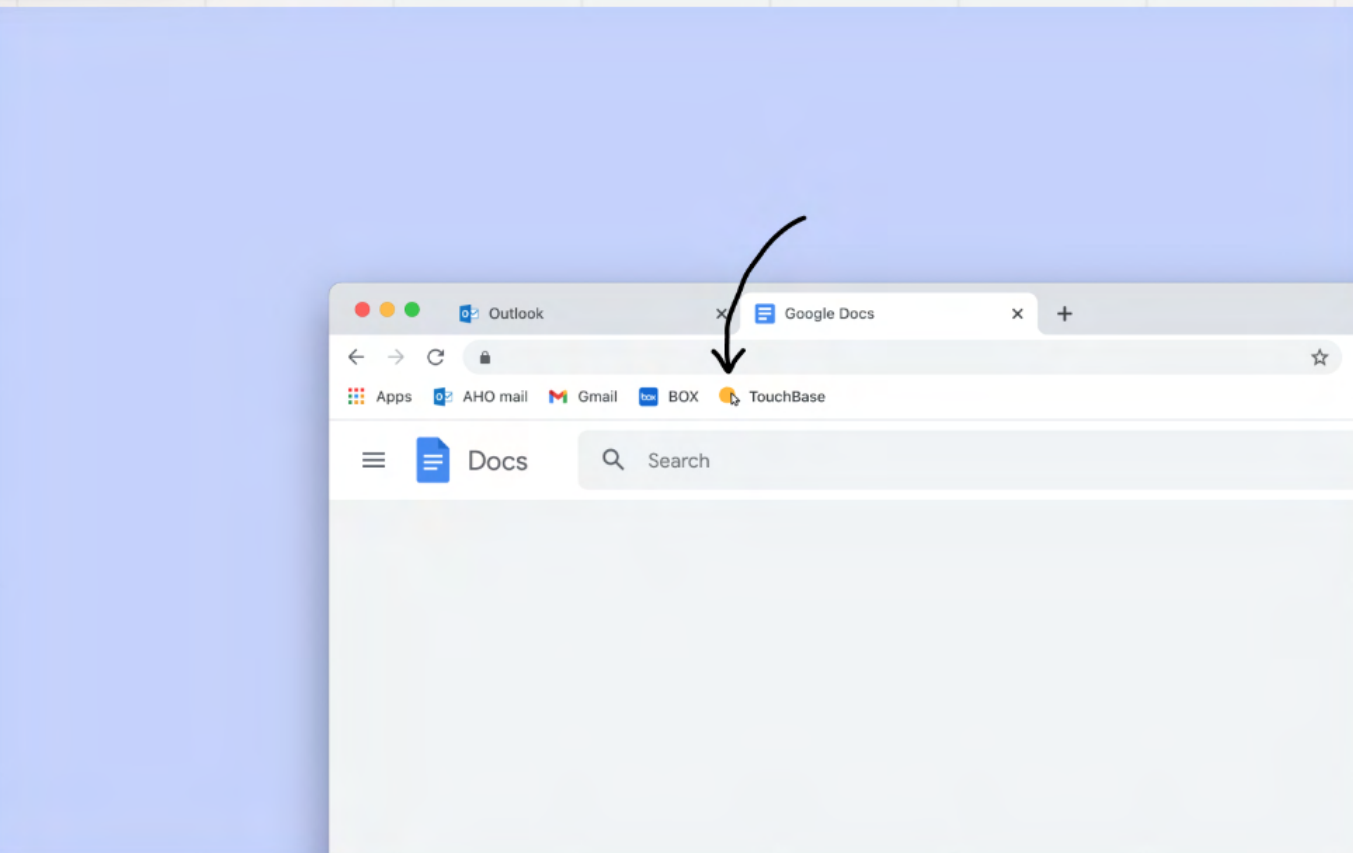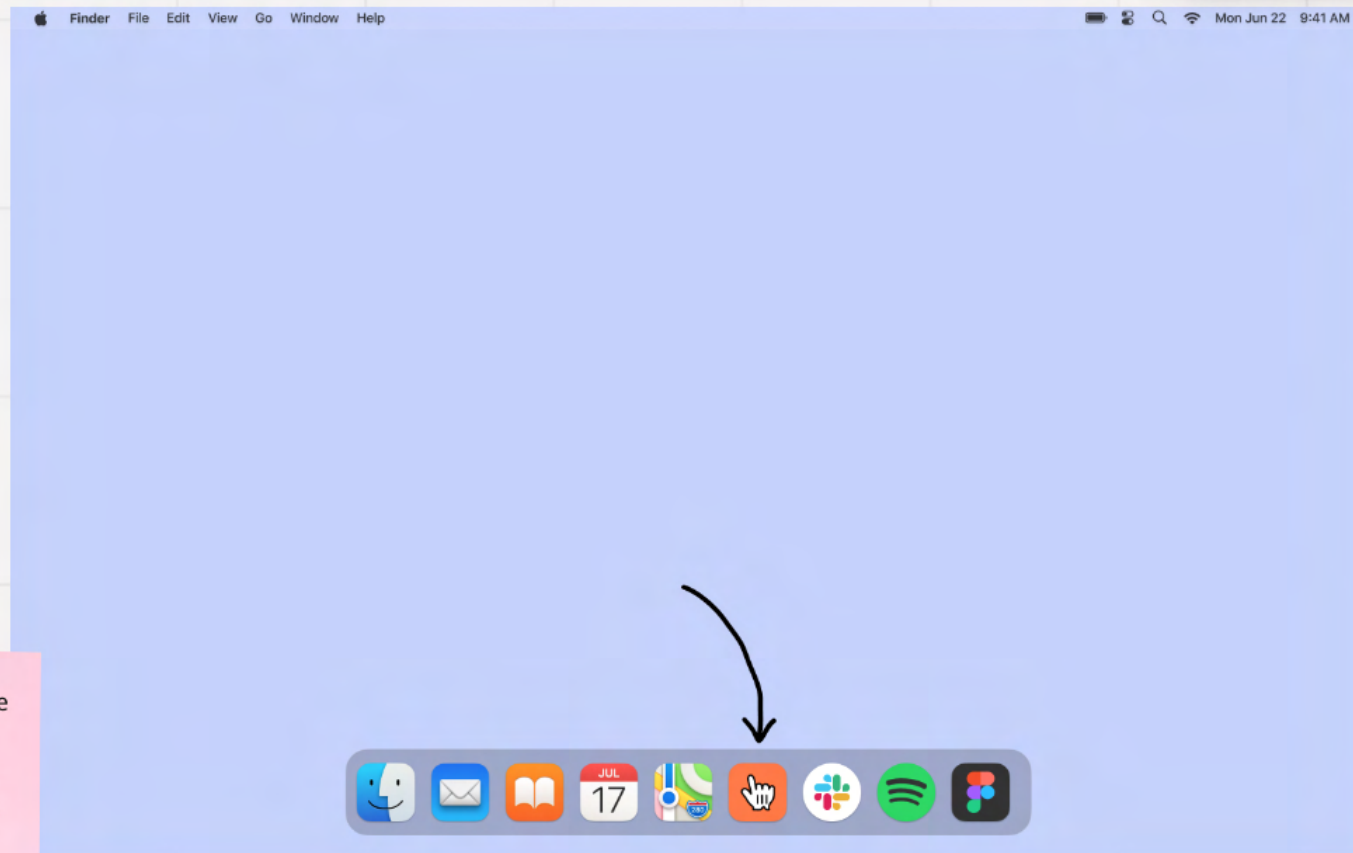- this one! More colours!
- <3
- The blue one is more calm
- this
- This one is nice but I'm wondering if it could be 'too busy' for some???
- Seems like the warm colored windows on a cooler background works better

Feedback workshop

Where should it locate?
Desktop app vs Browser

<3

I think I would prefer desktop

This seems more convenient - agree with the tabs becoming messy

it might have to work both places, in the same way as Miro, Slack etc. What about app on mye phone?

Desktop app. In the browser it may quicker disappear in other mess

desktop!

Desktop! Browser tabs often becomes a mess

I think it's more convenient here

This is super nice! I really see the benefit of having such a co-working space. UX is not my expertise - and its maybe not relevant at all. Have through about the onboarding process? Or stakeholders? Who runs it? Is it free? How do one come across the app?

will there be a small software pr 'widget/thingy? Or one main software? That can open several windows/so you can position them/tailor where you want them?

Agreed. It is easier to keep track of thing if you for instance have to go look for things in the broswe. Then you can just Alt/CMB+Tab back and forth

Browser → App

The biggest change I made after the feedback was the location of the service. Originally, I sketched the service as a web service or a browser extension, assuming it would be more convenient for users to access the service from the browser while working on their computers. However, browser tabs and windows are more likely to become messy and drown among each other.

Many users said they frequently use the 'command + tab' function to switch between apps. Since the users would visit this service several times during the day, a desktop app would make the service more easily accessible.

Process III – Developing the final concept   Feedback and iterations
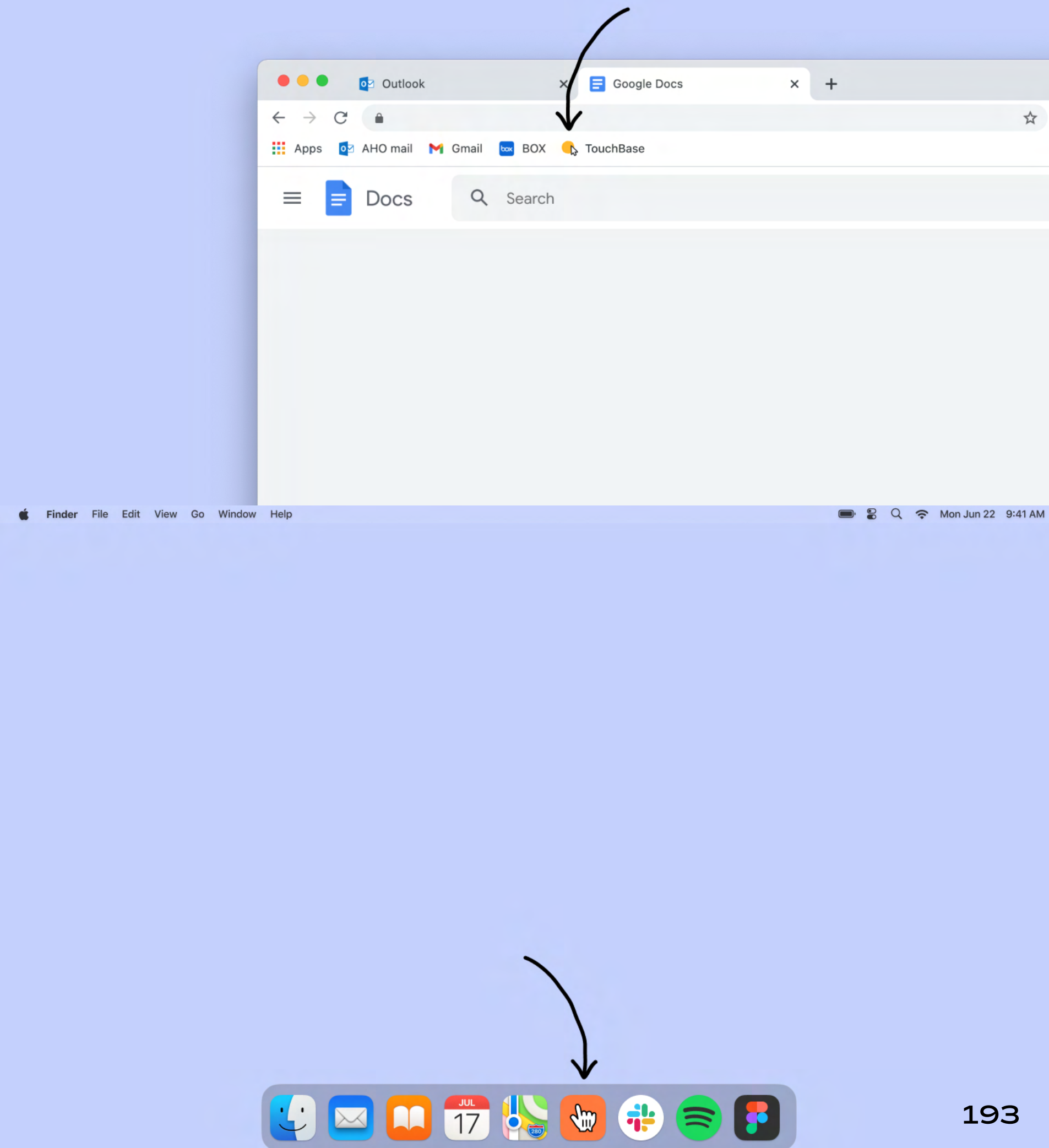
7.
Final concept

Introducing Touchbase / Features (apps) /
User scenarios / Workflow

Introducing
TouchBase
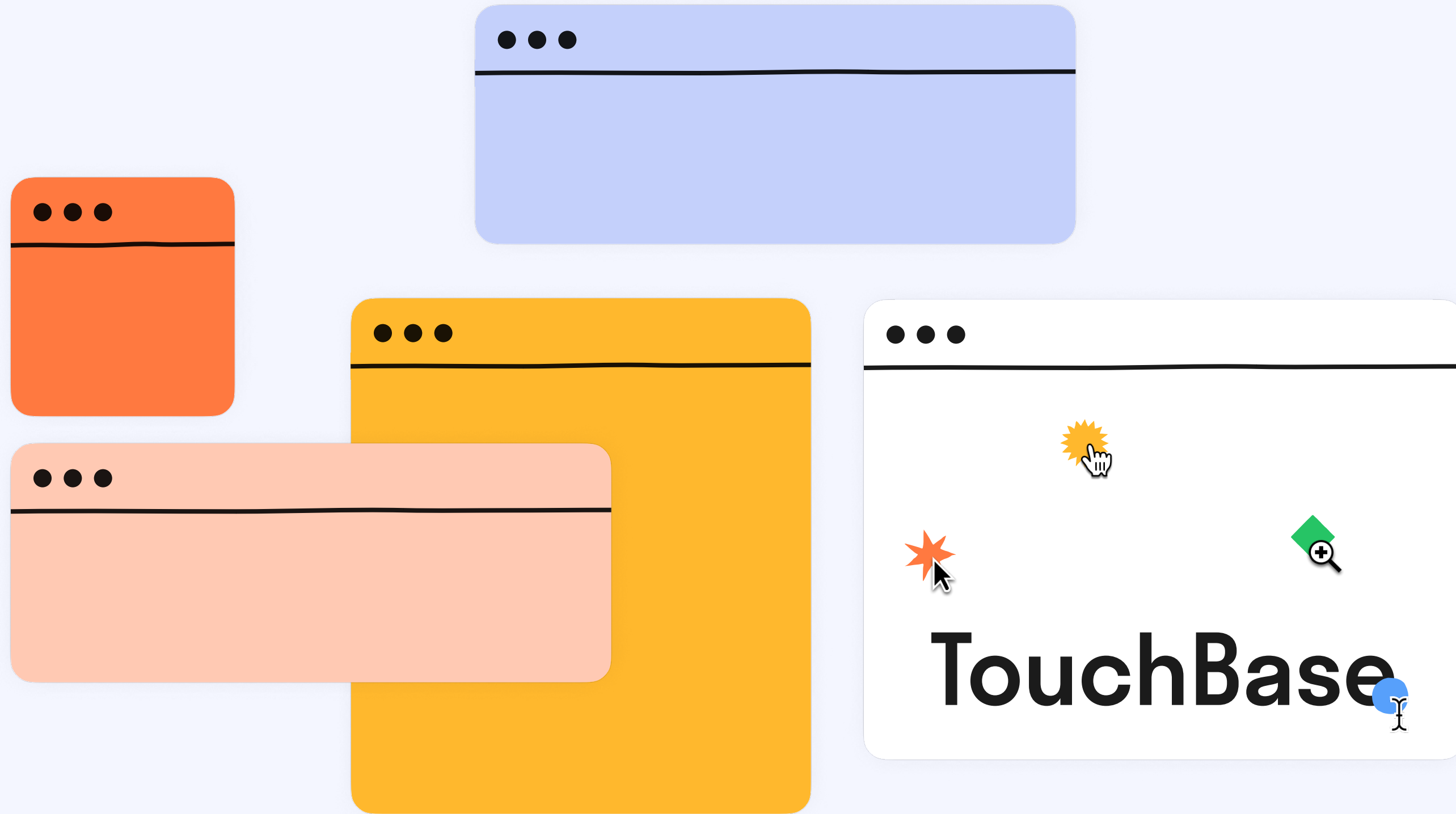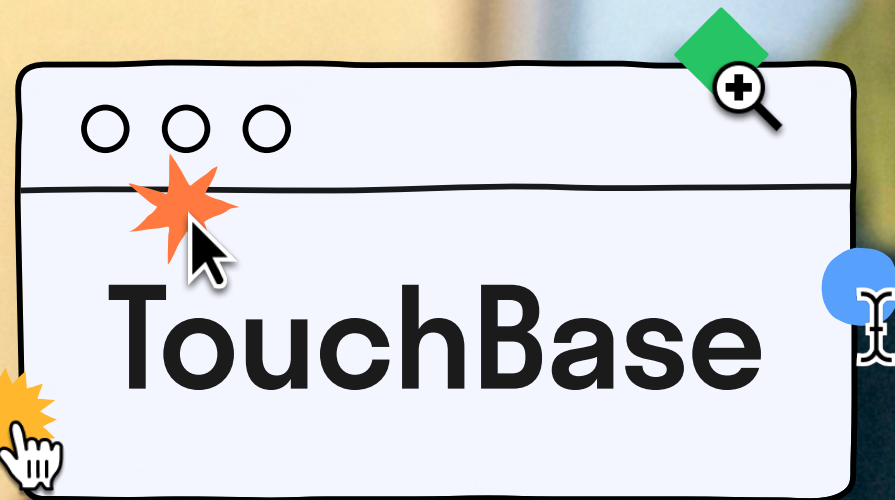
TouchBase is a customizable digital hangout space for teams, dedicated for fun.

Introducing
TouchBase

TouchBase

Fri May 1   8:04 AM
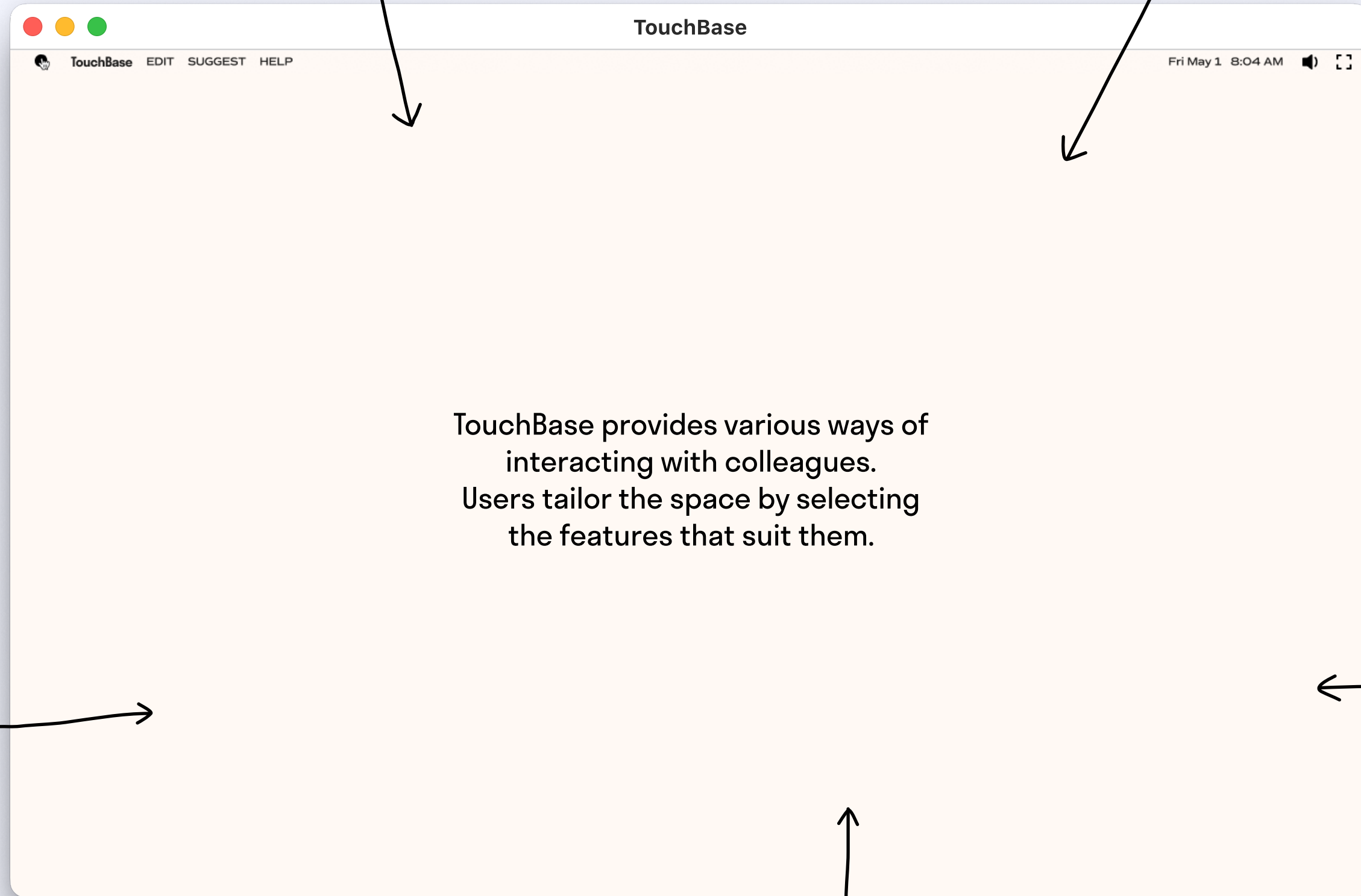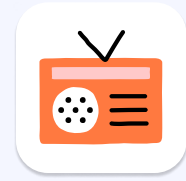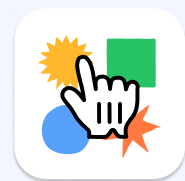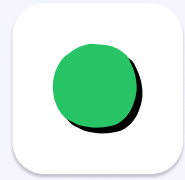
TouchBase provides various ways of
interacting with colleagues.
Users tailor the space by selecting
the features that suit them.

Introducing
TouchBase

We thought you'd like
these features!

Desk buddies

👥 12

+ ADD

#less than 5   #synchronous   #close connection
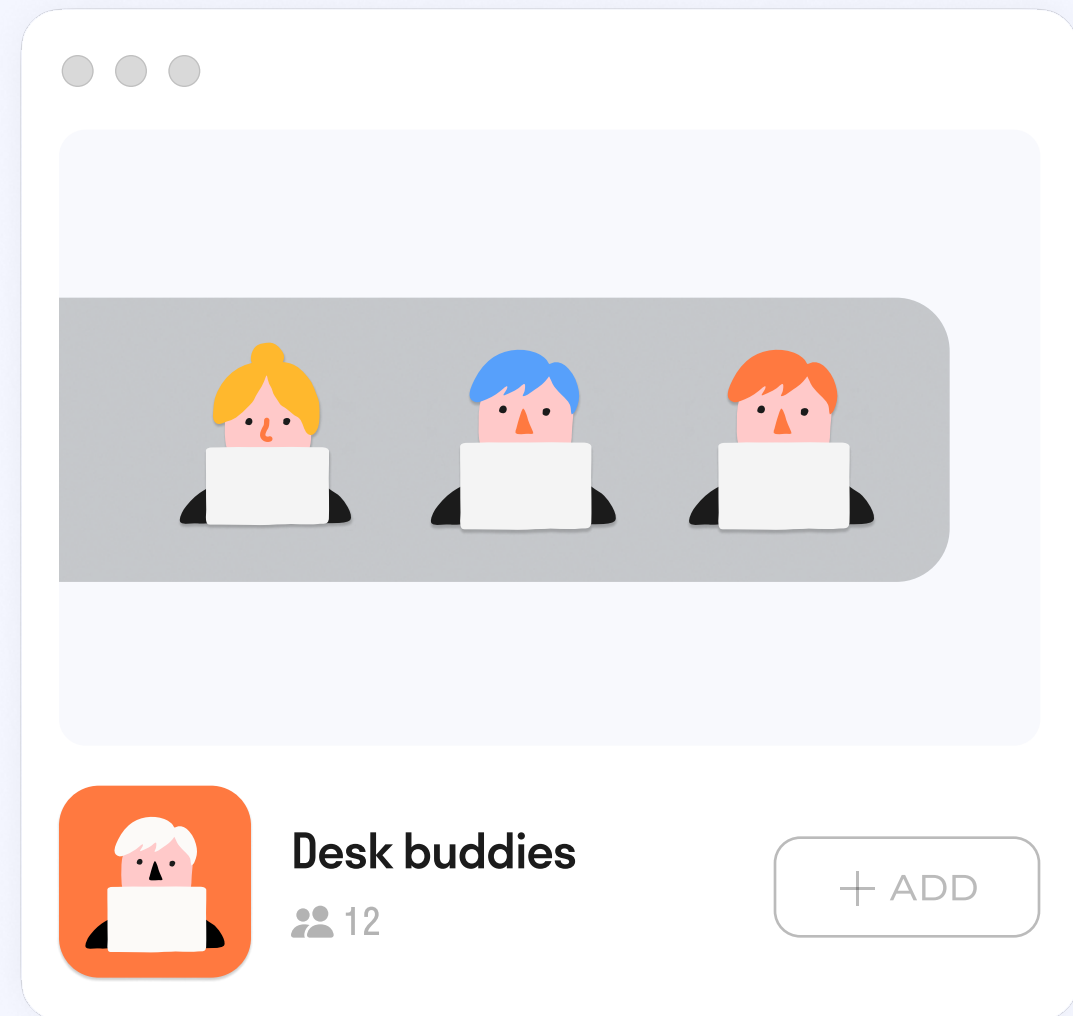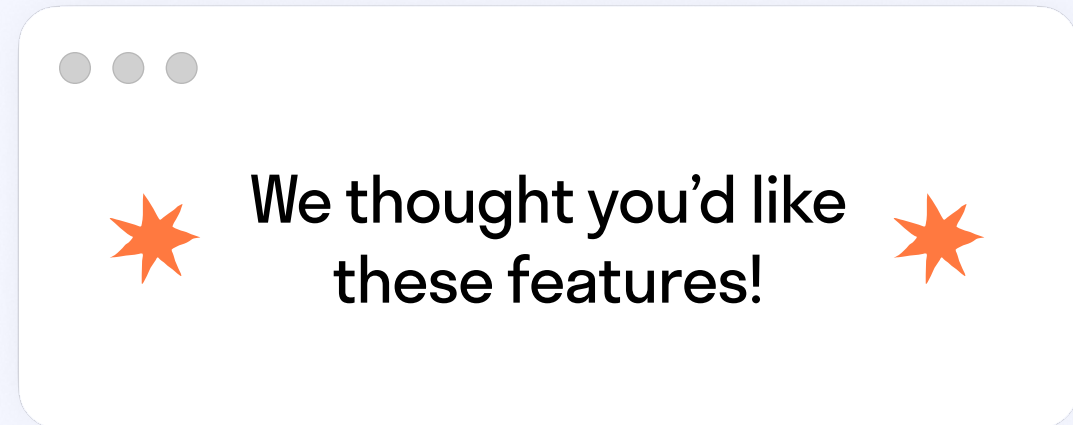
In the onboarding process to
TouchBase, users will answer a series of
questions about their preference to get
tailored feature recommendation.

Introducing
TouchBase

As a result, each user gets their unique combination of features on their TouchBase.

Desktop view

Full screen
mode

Active
window

Inactive
window

Volume
control

TouchBase   EDIT   SUGGEST   HELP   Fri May 1   8:04 AM

Features
added by
the user

OFFICE RADIO

STATUS DOT

NOTICE BOARD

CO-WORKING

Suggest
new features

SOUNDSCAPE
MIXER

SUGGEST

Feature
catalogue

COFFEE BREAK

STORE

NOTES

📻 Office radio   👥 17

Mona
Can you play Blinding
Lights by the Weekend?

David
Yeah that's a good one

🟠 Chill Pop

在宅ワルツ
NRQ   Request by Sam   Send

🔅 Notice board   👥 12

Number of people
using this feature

REMEMBER TO
REGISTER
VACATION
DATES!

⬤ Status dot   👥 8

🟢 Sam   ACTIVE NOW

🟢 David   ACTIVE NOW

🟢 Mona   10 MIN AGO

Jennie   20 MIN AGO

Cow

▶ START SHARING

Henrik   Jennie   Marie

Using TouchBase

Touchbase is a desktop app. Users can use the full-screen mode and easily access the app while working, by using the 'command + tab' key or swiping the trackpad with four fingers.
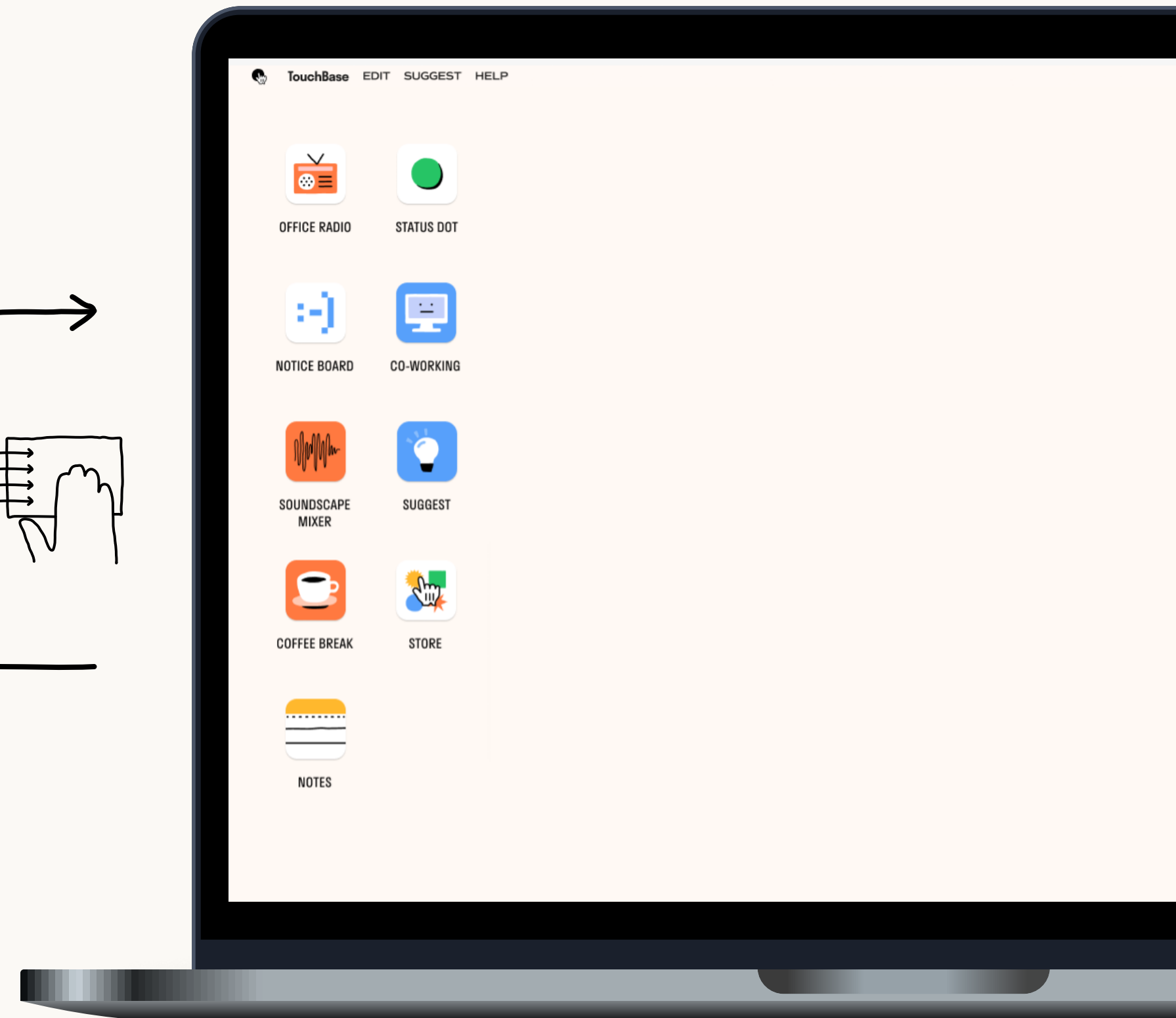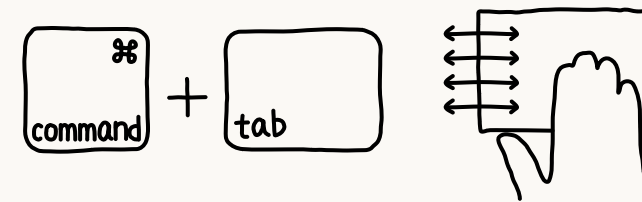
Using TouchBase

Individual features could potentially be added as widgets.

Features

Features (apps)

TouchBase offers a variety of features (apps) that helps people stay connected. New features are developed and added based on the users' suggestions and votes.

The features have different characteristics. Some are for small groups, while others are suitable for bigger groups. Some features feel more intimate, while others feel more casual. Some require frequent interaction, while others may not. Each feature offers different types of interactions, including text, audio, video, and shared objects.

These features are not aiming to fit everyone. Users will explore the features and select the ones that suit their personality and preference themselves.

Feature examples

Deliver at 12:30 for everyone.

Enjoy your lunch everyone|

SAVE

MESSAGE SCHEDULER
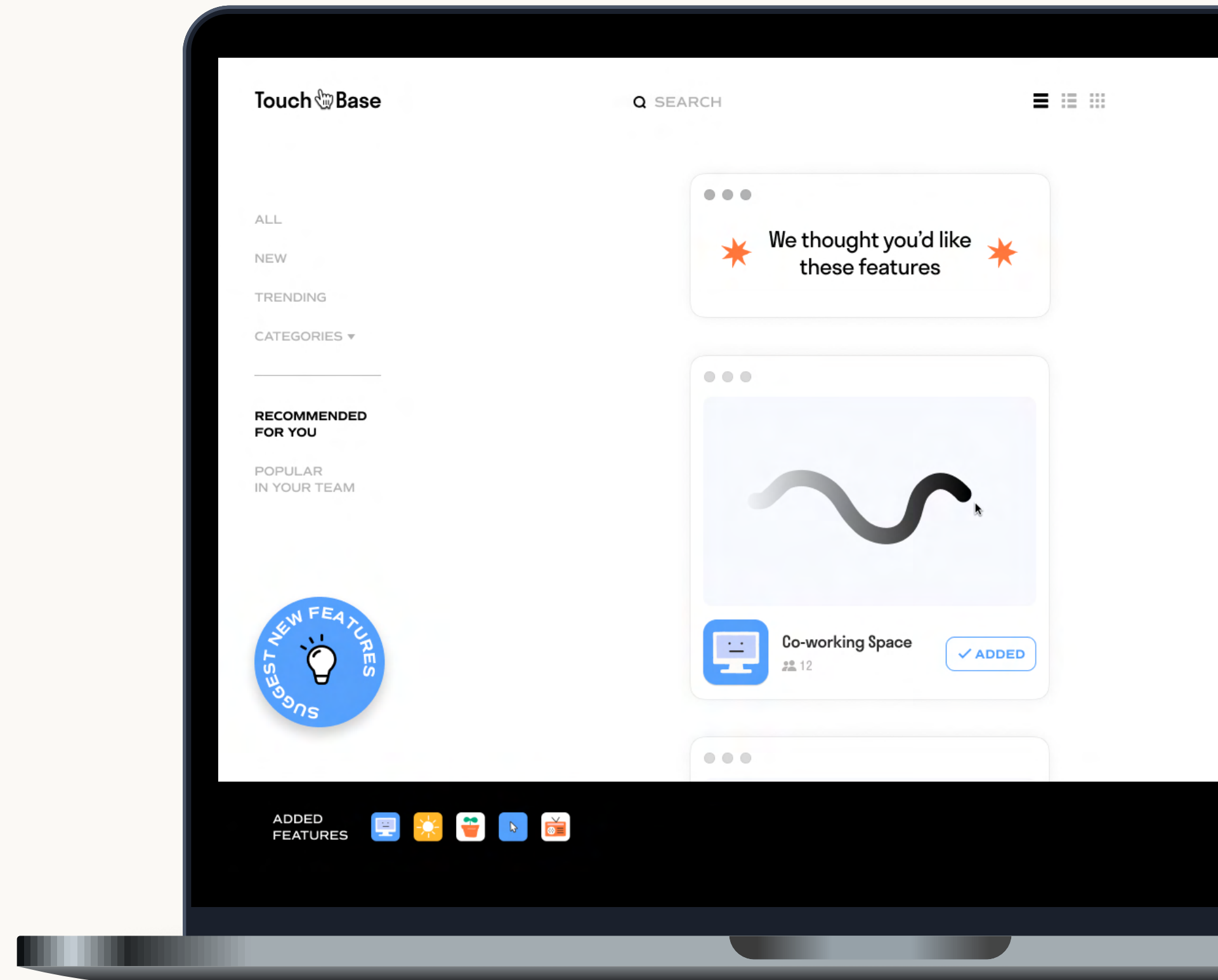
Schedule messages for colleagues in different time zones.

Disclaimer

Most of the examples here are iterations of the ideas from the exploration phase. I redesigned them into a graphic style that fits the brand identity of TouchBase, to demonstrate how different ideas from users could be incorporated as potential features. However, the usability and micro-interactions of each feature is not the focus of this prototype, therefore not thoroughly thought through.
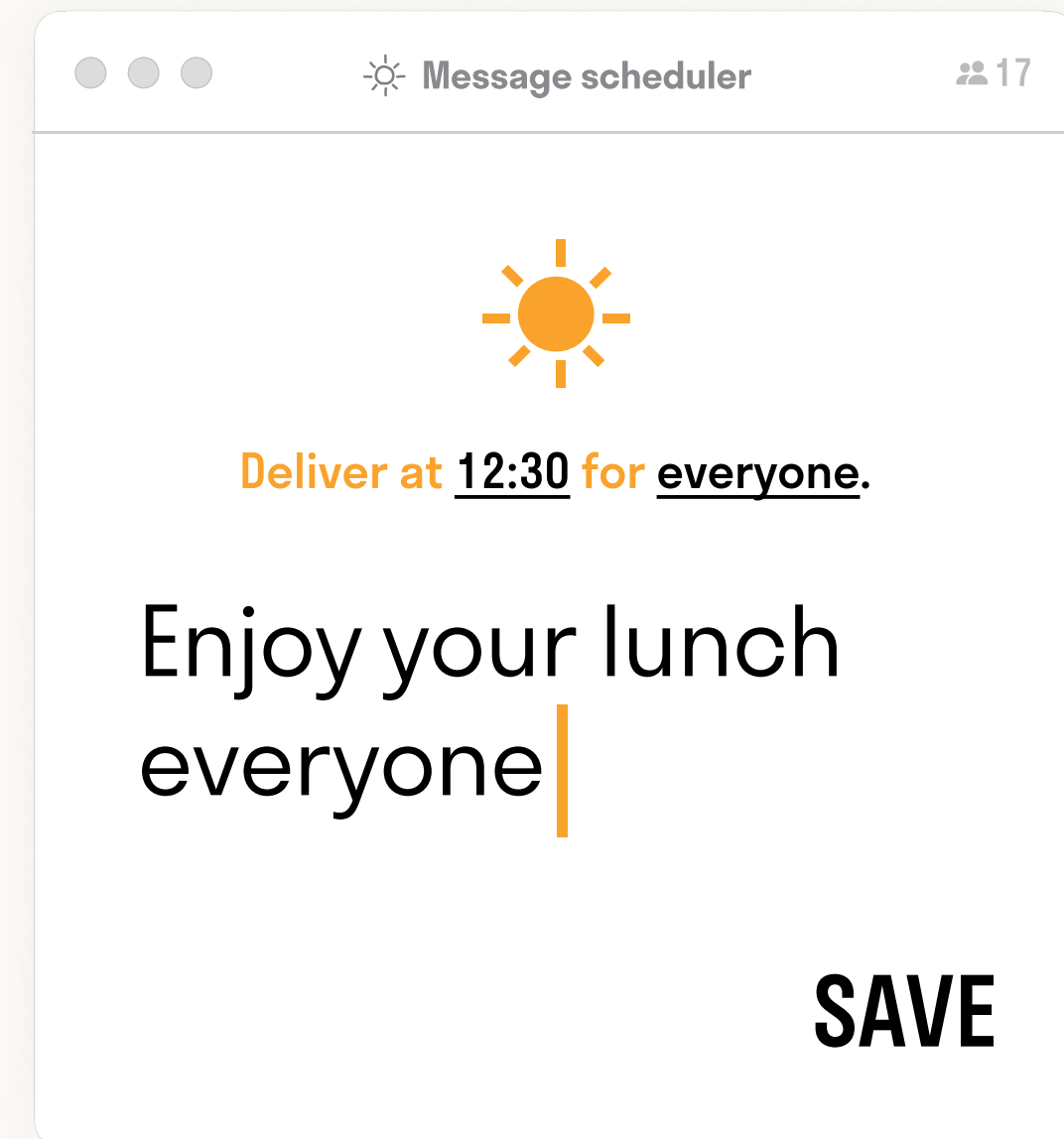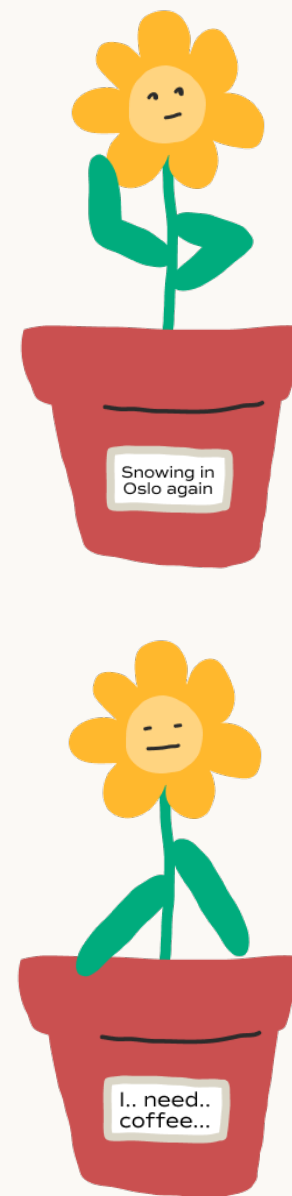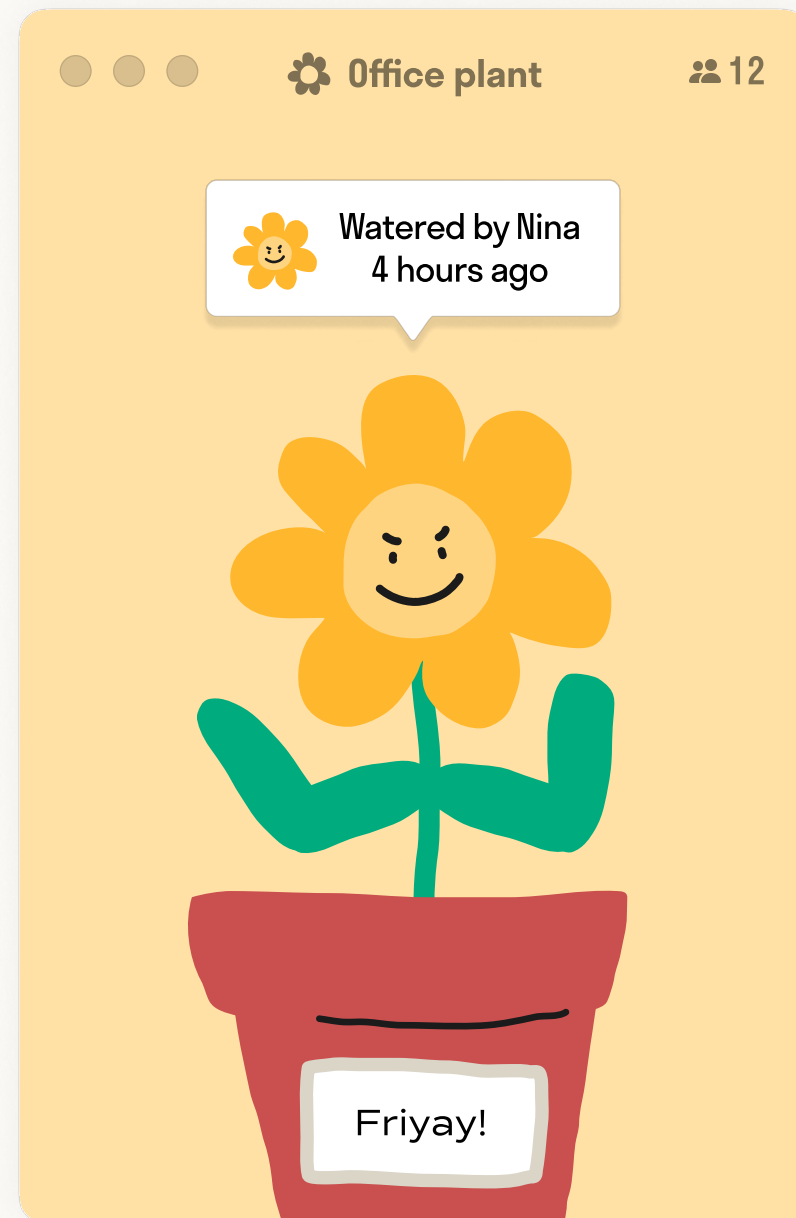
Feature examples

OFFICE PLANT

A Tamagotchi plant of shared responsibility.
You can leave message to each other.
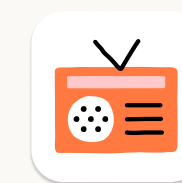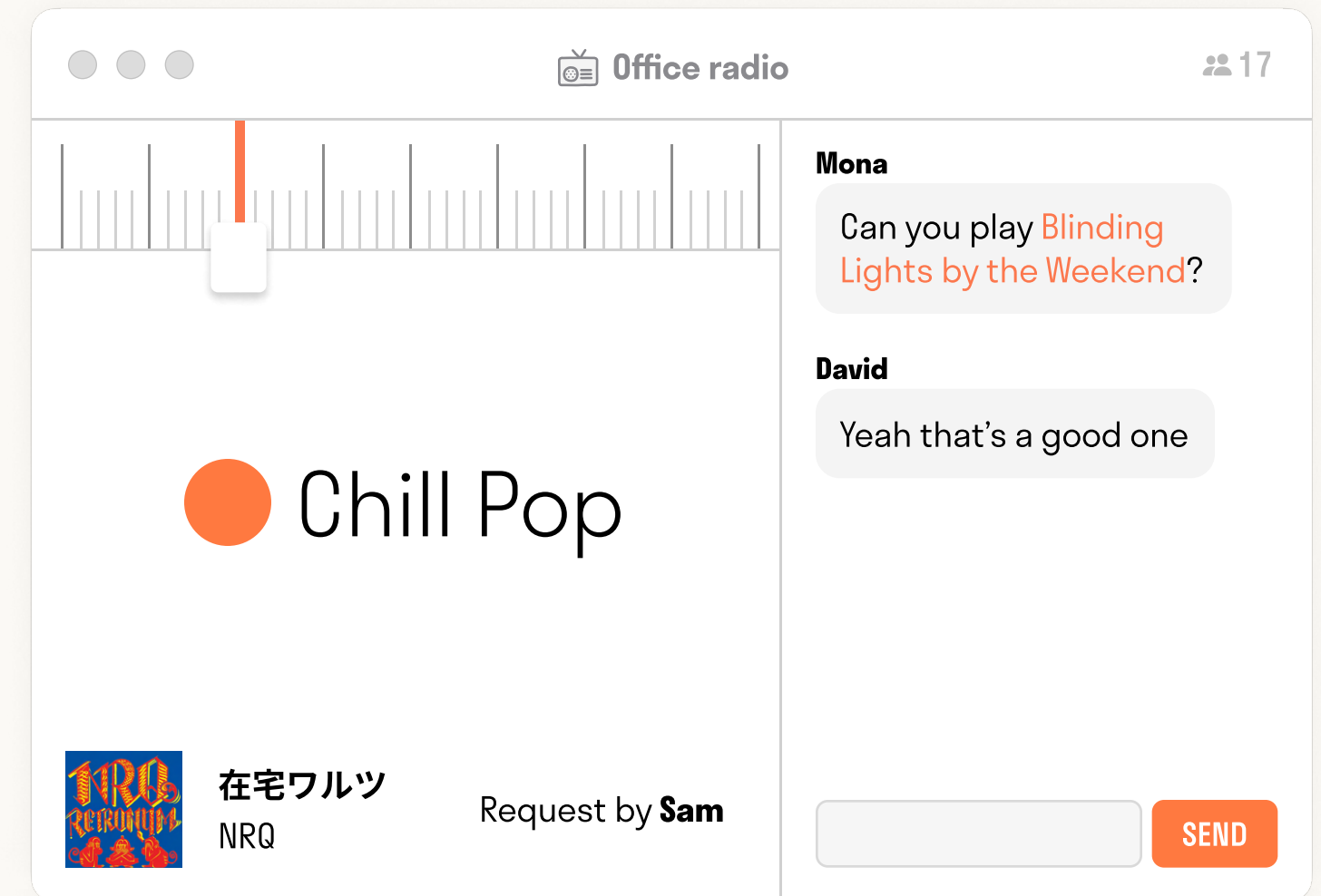
OFFICE RADIO

Shared playlist that everyone can
contribute.

Feature examples

COFFEE BREAK

A video call room. You can see who's already there, and hear the muffled conversation before entering.
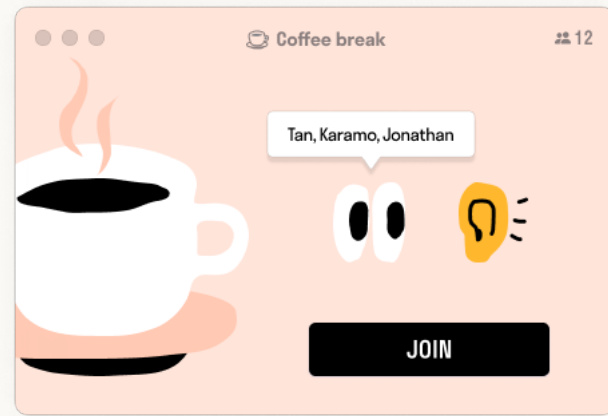
CO-WORKING

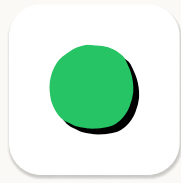A digital co-working space where you join, share screen, and quietly work together.
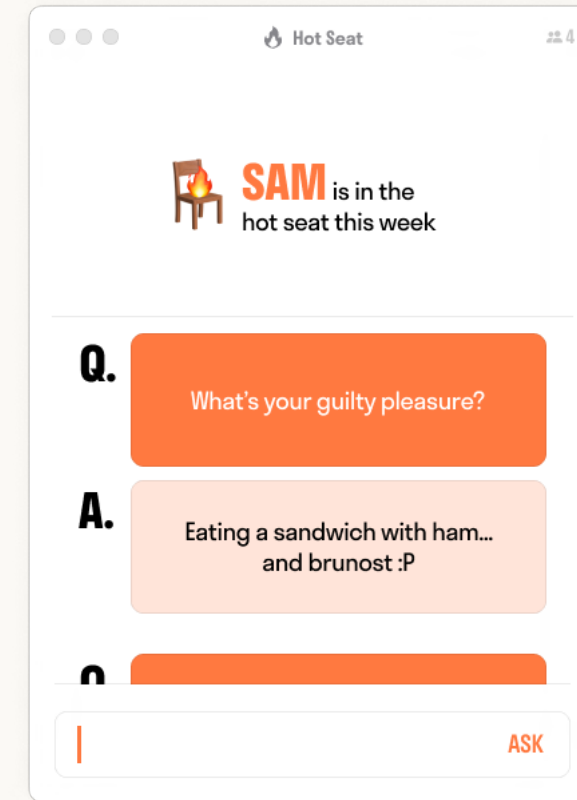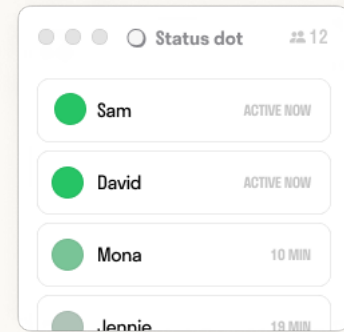
CANVAS

A shared canvas.
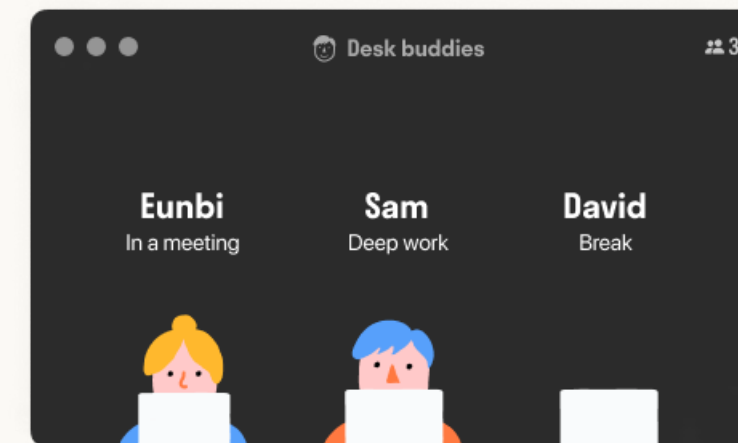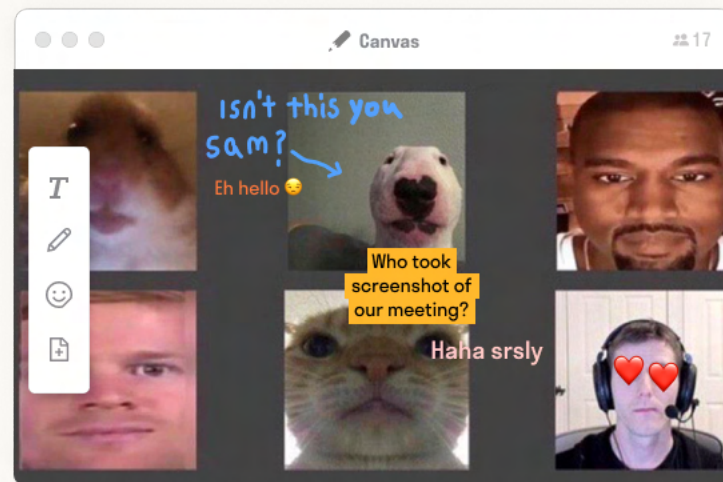
DESK BUDDIES

Digital representations of you and your teammates. You can communicate with social gestures (ex. waving).

Feature examples
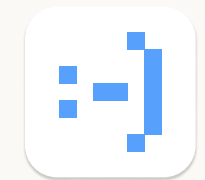

STATUS DOT

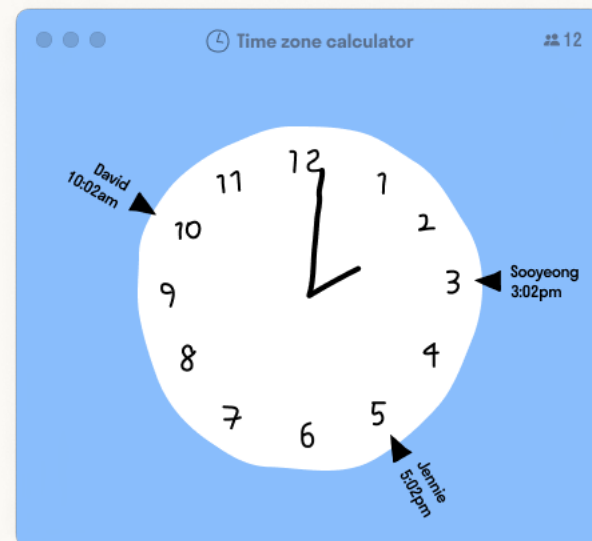Online status dot that fades over time

HOT SEAT

Ask anonymous questions to the person in the hot seat each week

TIME ZONE CALCULATOR

Time zone visualizer. You can spin the dial and easily calculate time differences.
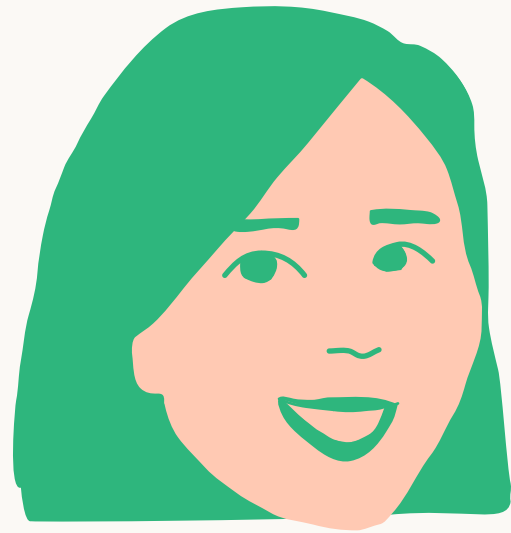

NOTICE BOARD

A digital bulletin board

User
scenarios

Personas

Kate

product designer working in a small,
synchronous team

Henrik

structure engineer working in a big,
synchronous team

Amy

data analyst working in a medium-sized,
asynchronous team

TouchBase can be customized based on the users' preference,
work style, and the team's culture. Here I am introducing 3
personas representing different user groups. I am demonstrating
their journey and how they can use the service differently.

User scenario 1
Kate

Kate is a product designer who recently joined a small team in London during the lockdown.
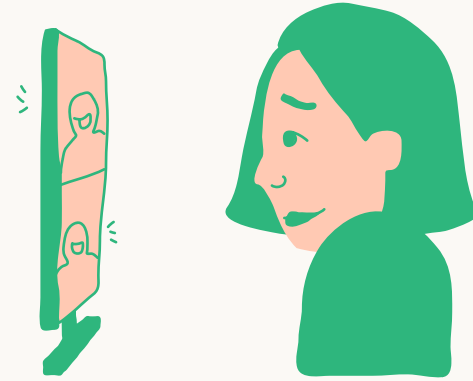
She hasn't met her colleagues in person. She's a bit worried about joining a team that already knows each other well.

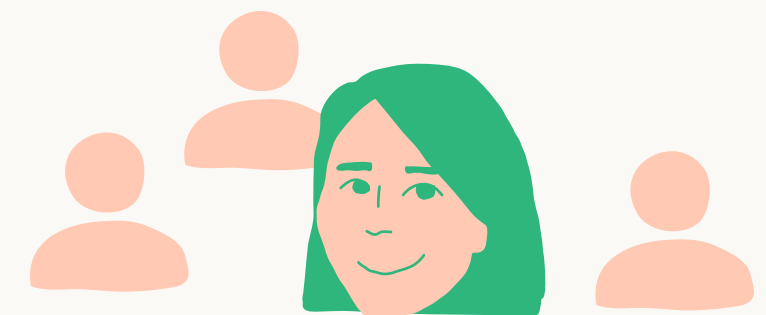Kate, you should sign up to our TouchBase!

http://touch.base/xxxx

Kate is told to join the team's TouchBase. She wants to get to know them better through TouchBase.
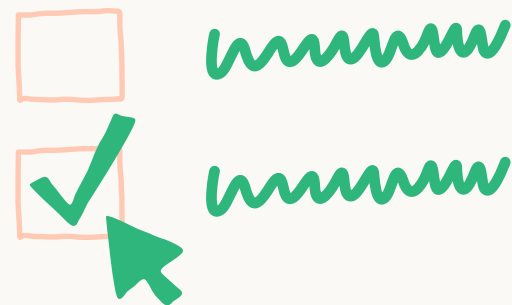
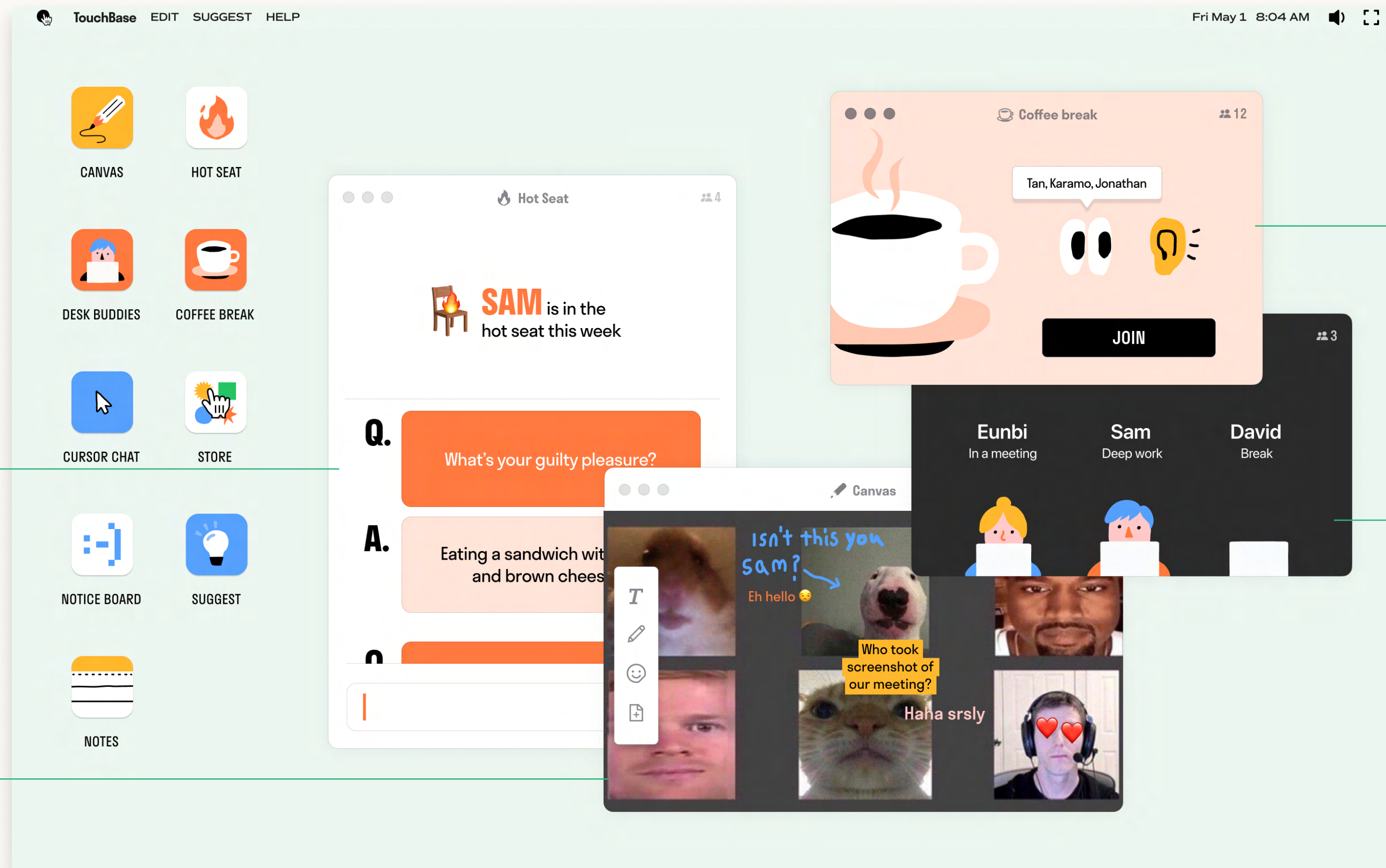Kate answers the onboarding questions and gets feature recommendations.

One of her favorite features is 'Hot Seat', where people ask anonymous questions to the person in the hot seat each week.

Kate feels like TouchBase helped her become a part of the team smoothly and naturally.

User scenario 1
Kate

"Coffee break"
A video call room. You can see who's already there, and hear the muffled conversation before entering.

"Hot seat"
Ask anonymous questions to the person in the hot seat each week

"Desk buddies"
Digital representation of you and your teammates. You can communicate with social gestures (ex. waving).

"Canvas"
A shared canvas
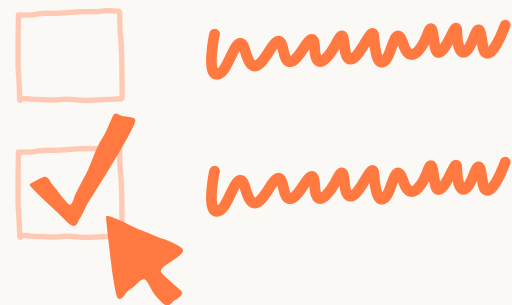
User scenario 2
Henrik

Henrik is working as a structure engineer in a big engineering company in Oslo.
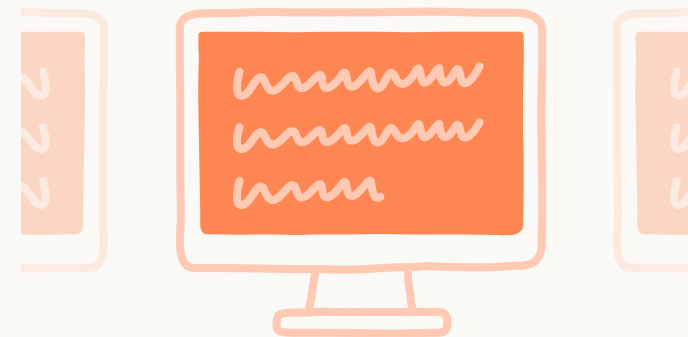

Even though he is not especially close with colleagues and finds video calls to be awkward, he misses their company when working alone in his small apartment.
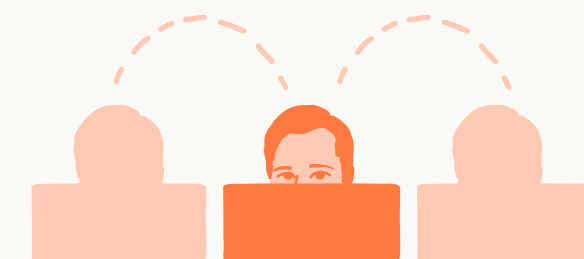

Henrik's company sets up a TouchBase for the employees and nudges people to join the space.

Henrik answers the onboarding questions and gets the feature recommendation based on his preferences.

Henrik's favorite feature is 'co-working space', a digital co-working space where you join, share screen, and quietly work together

Henrik enjoys the feeling of working together. He finds it nice that he can feel his colleagues' presence without making a big effort. He feels less lonely to work from home.

User scenario 2
Henrik

"Office Radio"
Shared playlist that everyone can contribute

"Status dot"
Online status dot that fades over time

"Notice board"
A digital bulletin board

"Co-working space"
A digital co-working space where you join, share screen, and quietly work together

User scenario 3
Amy

Amy is working as a data analyst in an international investment company with an office in Seoul.
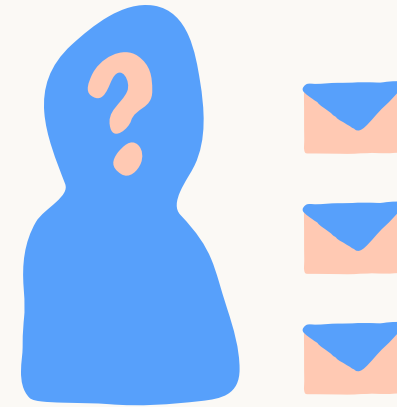
She works with colleagues in Hong Kong and the USA. She communicates a lot with her colleagues through emails, but she doesn't know them personally.

Amy sets up a new team space on TouchBase and tells her colleagues to join.

Amy especially likes the 'office plant' feature, a Tamagotchi plant of shared responsibility. Colleagues leave messages to each other using this feature.
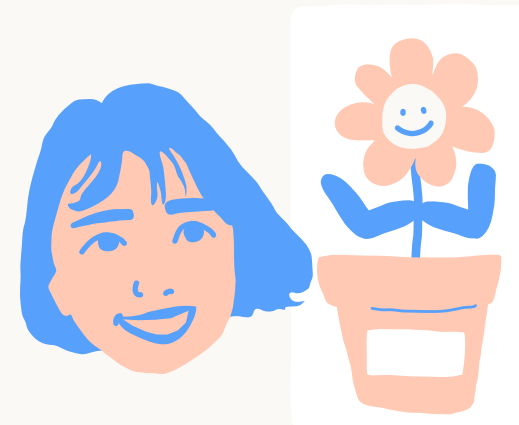
She finds it delightful to check in to the plant and see what her colleagues have done while she was gone. The shared experience makes her feel more connected to the team.

User scenario 3
Amy
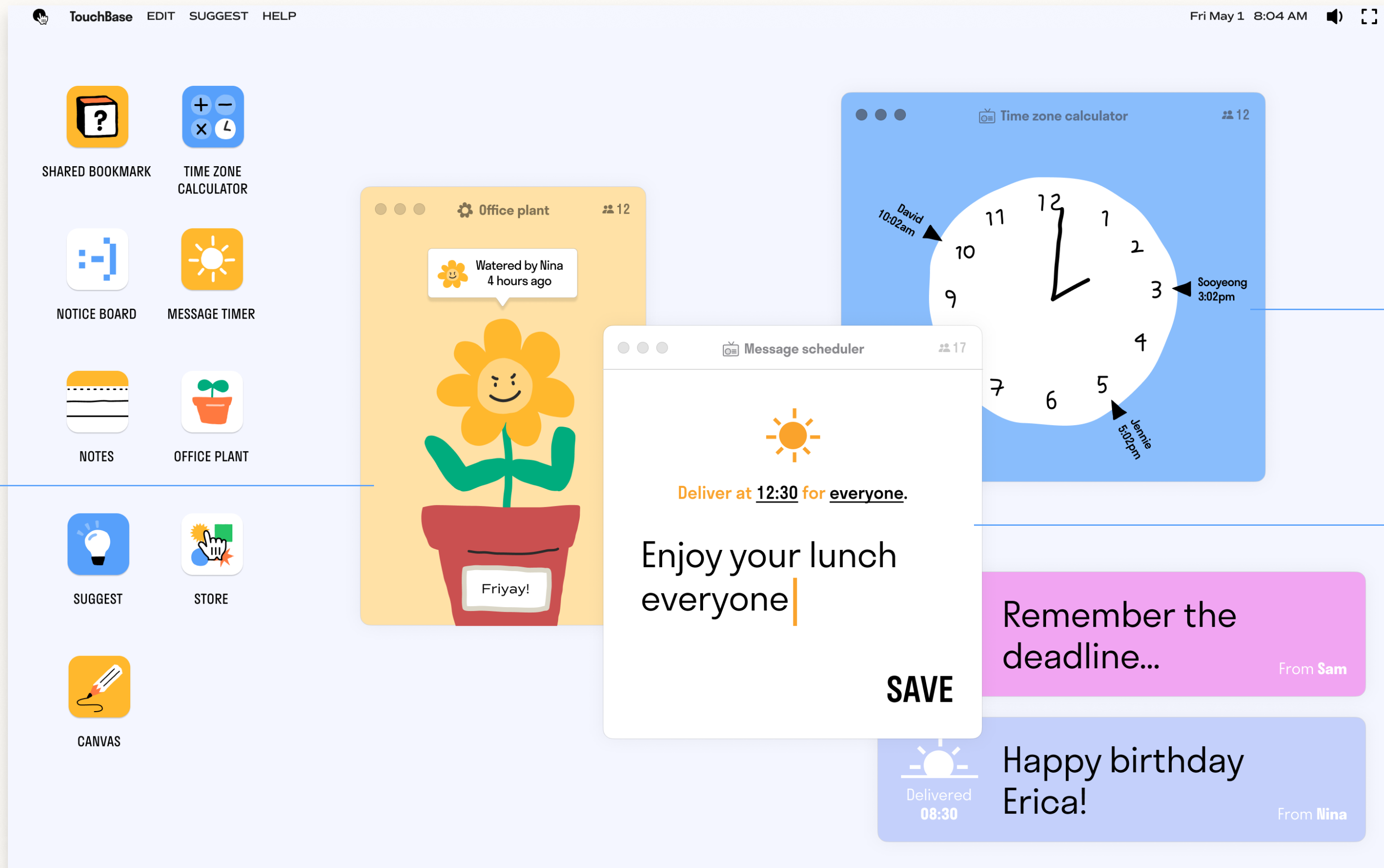
"Office plant"
A Tamagotchi plant of shared responsibility. You can leave message to each other.

"Time zone calculator"
Time zone visualizer. You can spin the dial and easily calculate time differences.

"Message scheduler"
Schedule messages for colleagues in different time zones.

Workflow

UI flowchart

scroll
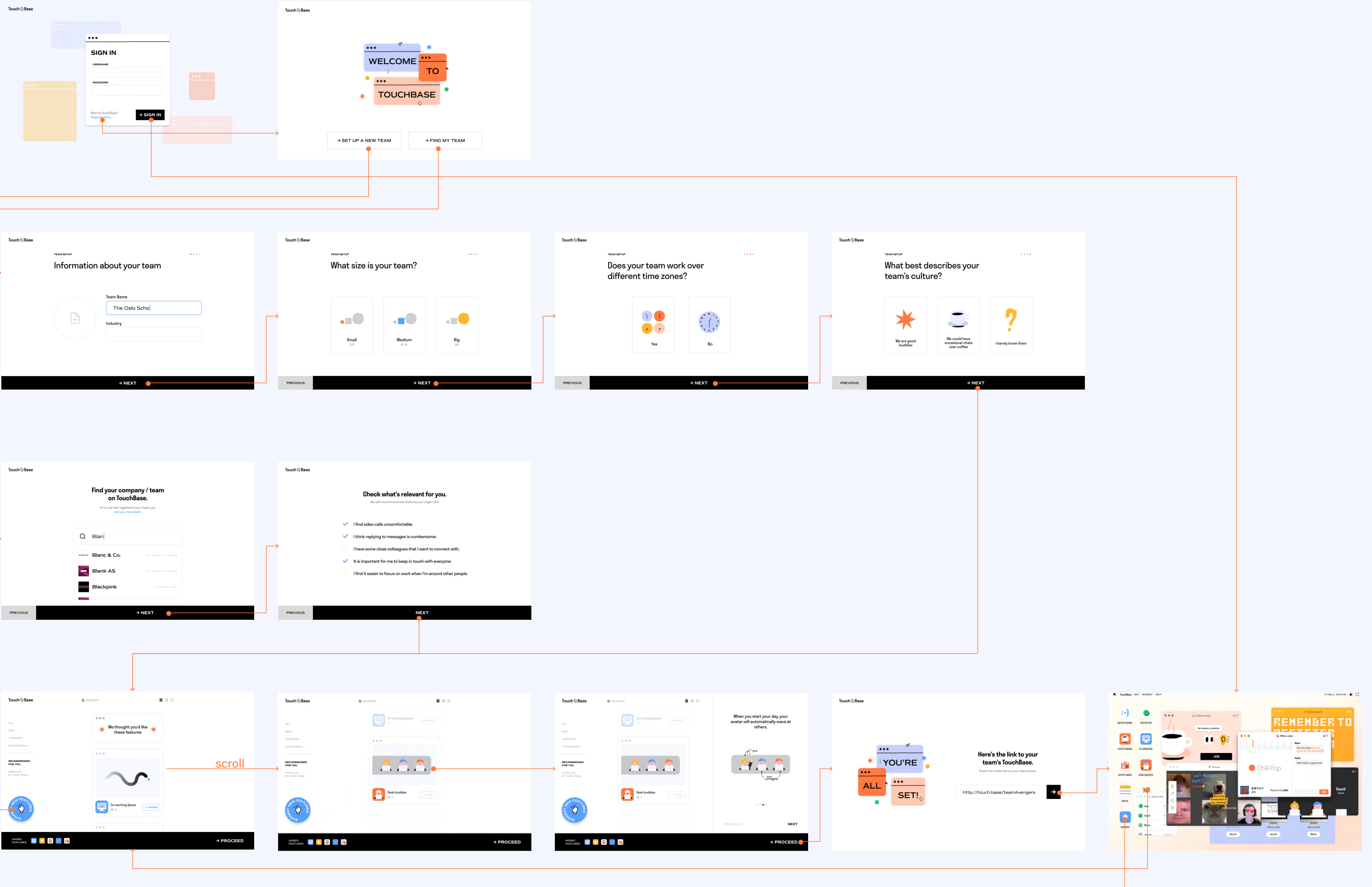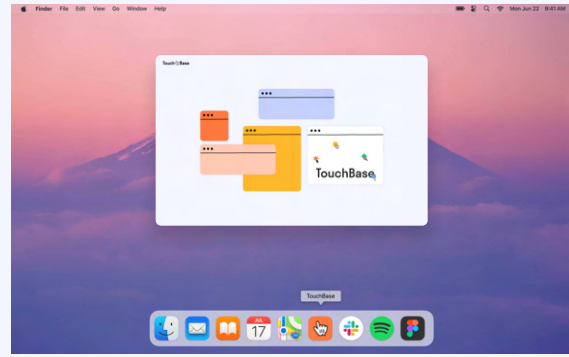
Onboarding
Setting up a new team

Sign in

Sign up

Touch Base

Information about your team

Team Name

The Oslo Scho|
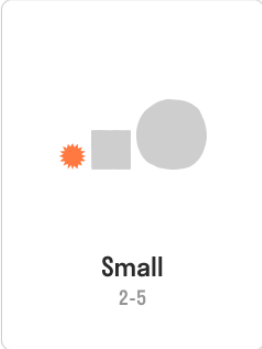
Industry
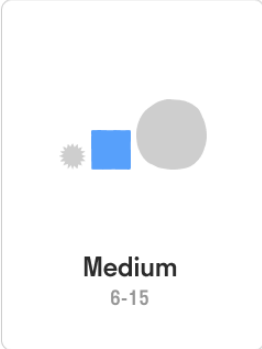
→ NEXT

Touch Base

TEAM SETUP
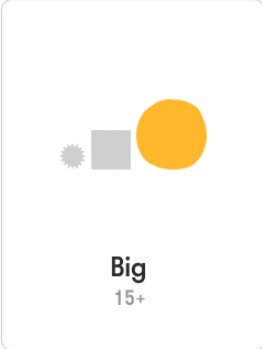
What size is your team?

Small
2-5

Medium
6-15
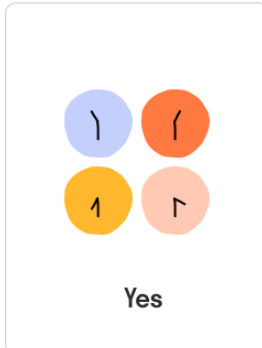
Big
15+

PREVIOUS
→ NEXT

Touch Base

TEAM SETUP

Does your team work over different time zones?

Yes

No
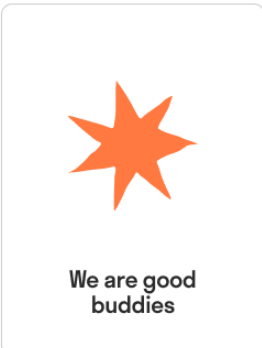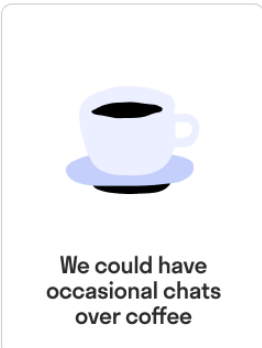
PREVIOUS
→ NEXT

Touch Base

TEAM SETUP
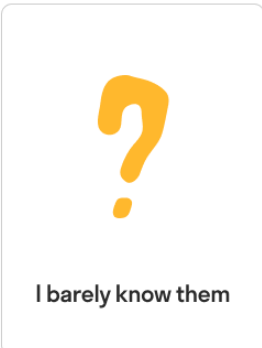
What best describes your team's culture?

We are good buddies

We could have occasional chats over coffee

I barely know them

PREVIOUS
→ NEXT

Onboarding
Joining an existing team

Touch Base

Find your company / team on TouchBase.

If no one has registered your team yet,
set up a new team.

🔍 Blan

	Blanc & Co.	14 members · consulting
BLANC & CO.	Blank AS	36 members · consulting
BLACKPINK	Blackpink	4 members · music

PREVIOUS | → NEXT

Search

Touch Base

Check what's relevant for you.
We will recommend the features you might like.

☑ I find video calls uncomfortable.

☑ I think replying to messages is cumbersome.

☐ I have some close colleagues that I want to connect with.

☑ It is important for me to keep in touch with everyone

☐ I find it easier to focus on work when I'm around other people

PREVIOUS | NEXT

Preference survey for
feature recommendation

Feature catalogue
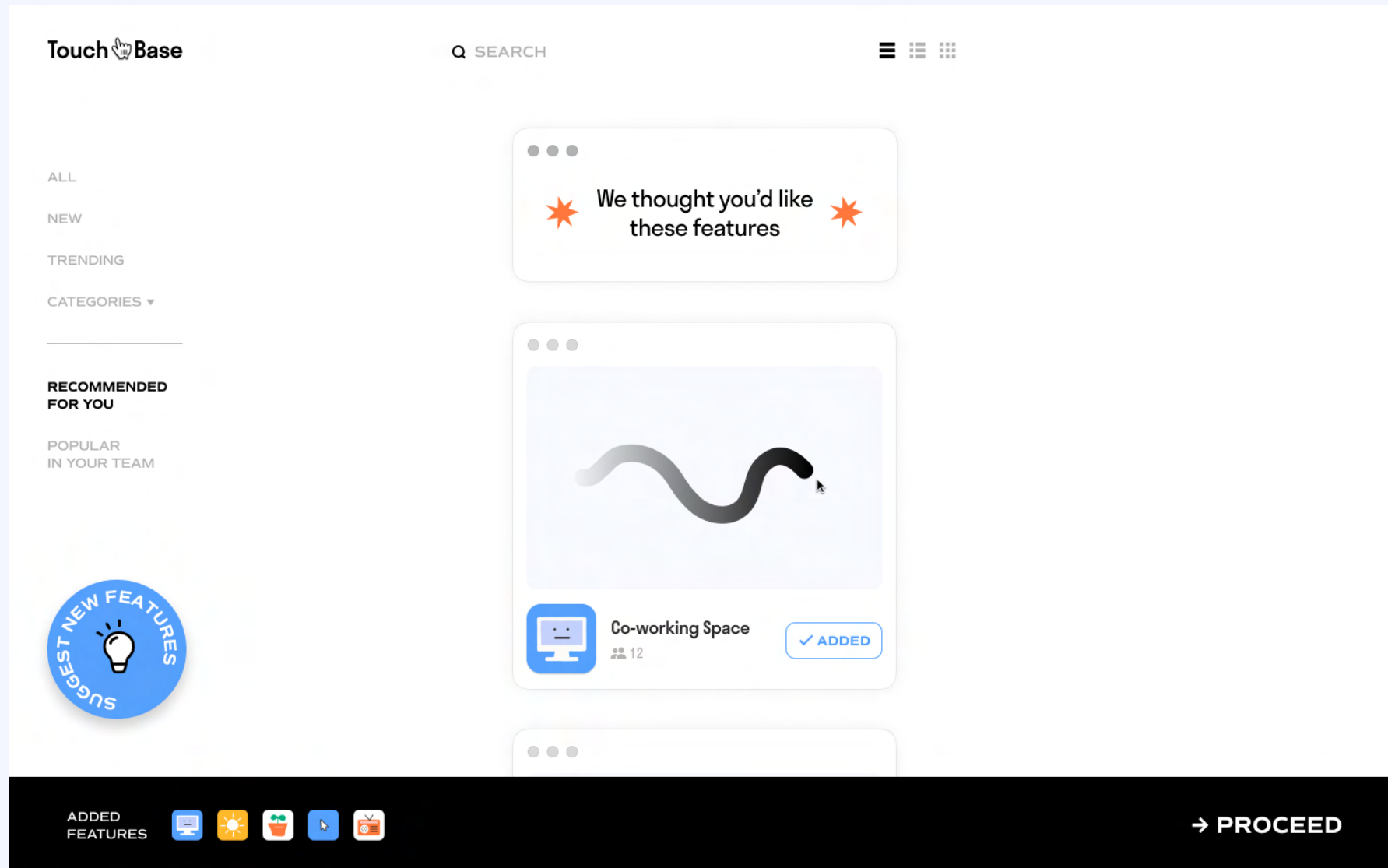
Recommended features

Tutorial

Feature suggestion

Touch Base

ALL

NEW

TRENDING

CATEGORIES ▾

RECOMMENDED
FOR YOU

POPULAR
IN YOUR TEAM

POPULAR SUGGESTIONS

I'd like a random video chat with my colleagues. Something like a ChatRoulette.

♡ 71

I'd like a random video chat with my colleagues. Something like a ChatRoulette.

♡ 71

I'd like a random video chat with my colleagues. Something like a ChatRoulette.

♥ 60

I'd like a random video chat with my colleagues. Something like a ChatRoulette.

♥ 60

I'd like a random video chat with my colleagues. Something like a ChatRoulette.

I'd like a random video chat with my colleagues. Something like a ChatRoulette.

SUGGEST

I'd like...

ADD IMAGES

SUBMIT

ADDED
FEATURES

Finish setup

Touch Base

Here's the link to your team's TouchBase.

Share the invite link to your teammates.

http://touch.base/teamAvengers

8.
Reflection and conclusion

Evaluation from experts / Reflection / Conclusion / References / Acknowledgement

Evaluation from experts

Jørn Knutsen
Designer at Sanity.io

Due to the COVID restrictions and technical feasibility, testing out the final concept was difficult. So, I presented the project to experts on remote work, who have not been following this project. Talking to the experts was a way of stress-testing and evaluating the final concept.

The 3 experts I talked to are Jørn Knutsen (designer at Sanity.io), May-Li Khoe (designer at Makespace), and Hélène Pichon (HR at Whereby).

Jørn said TouchBase is a nice platform for gathering different kinds of people, teams, and apps. He thought the service is extendable and can accommodate different types of users.

One challenge he sees in this project is how this service can play out in the long term. TouchBase doesn't force participation. From his experience of working in an international company, however, social interaction should sometimes be forced to create a company culture where people consciously keep in touch with each other. Since TouchBase can't work without its users, building a culture in this service that everyone participates in would be crucial.

Also, he thought the features on TouchBase could have explored even more passive, and effortless participations. For example, there could have been a leaderboard showing who has typed the most words, who has sent most emails, and so on, so that people can participate in something with much less effort.

May-Li Khoe
Designer at Makespace

Hélène Pichon
HR at Whereby

May-Li thought the concept is playful, humanizing and visually very well executed. She said the project was exciting, and the storytelling and the setting of the project were great.

May-Li said the onboarding process should be able to get people to understand the concept immediately. She mentioned the importance of 'minimum time to awesome' when people come to a product for the first time.

She thought each feature were interesting in their ways but felt a bit static. She said they could communicate better if they were animated. Some movements could humanize the concept and make it visceral.

She mentioned how seeing other's pointers on Figma can sometimes be stressful. She said the next things on this project could be to start considering the unintended consequences of each features.

Hélène thought the project is tapping into aspects people are clearly needing. She thought highly of the tailoring for both team and the individual because it made the concept flexible enough to work for a lot of companies.

As an HR at Whereby, she thinks one of the biggest challenges they face is building the connection between people. She says when people trust each other or relate to each other as 'humans', it makes work a lot easier – from collaboration to having tough conversations. She thinks TouchBase could create that connection at a human level that builds trust between people.

Even though it's aiming for remote workers, she thinks TouchBase would still have value for the non-remote and hybrid work environment, the same way Slack was helpful for communication even when people were all sat next to each other.

Hélène looks forward to using TouchBase one day.

Reflection

General reflection

I started this project by asking, "Could there be new modes of playful, nuanced social communication suited for the new way of working?"

Working on this topic was exciting and scary at the same time. I didn't know where this project would take me to, and I was afraid that I might not find anything in the end.

'People' were at the centre of this project from the beginning to the end. It was exciting to hear so many different experiences and opinions about the current situation. Everyone I met through this project would openly share their thoughts and insights about working from home, and inspired me with an overwhelming amount of creative ideas. They also gave a lot of critical feedback on my project.

Reflection on the process

In this project, I engaged a big number of people and collected an overwhelming amount of ideas from them. As a result, I developed 11 different explorations. Working with 11 explorations was a cognitively demanding process, and I spent more time developing them than I had planned. Since the process was delayed, I had much less time to work on the final concept and didn't have time to go as in-depth in evaluating it as I wanted.

At the same time, however, I believe the broad explorations and user involvement made this project a lot richer.

Since I was working alone on this project, I shared my process regularly and got feedback from the expert panel, diploma students, and potential users. Having regular talks motivated me to move forward. They always gave helpful advice when I felt lost, and their input from different perspectives made this project not just end up in my bubble.

Reflection on the final concept

The strength of the final concept lies in the flexibility and the scalability of it. TouchBase can accommodate different teams (time zones, team size, etc.) and users (introverts/extroverts, work style, etc.). Since new features are continuously added and updated, the concept has the potential to grow and adapt to the changing context of work.

Also, TouchBase is positioned in the area where most existing services are not focusing on. Therefore, it can coexist with software such as Slack and Zoom instead of competing against them.

What is both a weakness and opportunity to TouchBase is that the service relies heavily on the people. TouchBase is a team-based social platform. If the participation level is low in one organisation, the users would not continue using the service.

If I had more time to work on this project, I would have liked to look at what specific services could be integrated into TouchBase, and what synergy they could create. Also, I would have spent more time developing app features that allow even effortless passive participation as Jørn mentioned.

Reflection on my growth as a designer

This project allowed me to grow as a designer in many aspects.

First of all, this project challenged me to push myself out of the comfort zone. In my previous projects, I used to look for a realistic solution that answers directly to the problem. Often, I delivered a polished UI as the outcome. In this project, however, I pushed myself to break out from this pattern. I consciously tried to be more open to crazy ideas and explore possibilities broadly.

Also, I could gain a lot of knowledge on human behaviour and psychology that could be valuable for me as a designer. Especially during the desk research, I read about topics such as organisational psychology and behavioural science. Even though not all of them were directly linked to this project, they helped me understand people better.

Reflection on the COVID-19 situation

The strict COVID restrictions were an opportunity for me to explore the creative use of the resources I had available. I had to switch most of my interviews, workshops and testings I have planned into remote ones. In this process, I learned to use digital tools I had in my hands in creative ways.

The remote workshops on Miro, for instance, was a crucial part of this project. I got lots of inspiring ideas and a better understanding of asynchronous collaboration through this process. This workshop format also inspired other designers and fellow diploma students to organise similar workshops.

One advantage I had was that since everyone was working remotely due to the lockdown during my project, users were more eager to participate and share their experience. Arranging interviews and finding people for testings were not big challenges for me.

However, I had to keep in mind that people's views on remote work might be tainted by the forced home office. Therefore, I engaged remote workers who have been working remotely before the pandemic.

Conclusion

This project explored new possibilities for fun and playful social interactions that could bring joy to the people who are working from home. Users have participated throughout the project from the ideation stage to testing and giving feedback. As a result, I proposed TouchBase, a social platform that lets users tailor the modes of communication, based on their preferences. TouchBase is an extendable platform that can adapt to the changing context of work.

In just over a year, the COVID-19 has brought years of technological advance in remote work. However, relatively little has been done to preserve the social elements during this rapid shift. Participants who have engaged in my project had different opinions about the current situation, but had one they agreed in common: they appreciated the focus on the social aspect of this project.

Social relationships at work will continue to be a relevant topic in the future even after the pandemic. I believe this area has lots of exciting possibilities that are yet to be explored. So many people have lived the experience and are eager to contribute to the change. I believe harnessing this collective power would be very valuable when taking this topic further in the future. To do this, people need just a little push to make them think outside the box, which will be the designers' duty. With the right push, people will come up with crazy fun ideas that will reconnect them to their colleagues.

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Remotely Connected
Exploring delightful social interactions
at work in the context of home office

January 2021 – May 2021
The Oslo School or Architecture and design

Soo Yeong Song