



Button Bash: Recharging energy at work through play

Design by Sylvia Kormelink

Text by Pieter Desmet

Google is famous for its slides—they've been incorporating them into their offices worldwide for about 20 years now.

The idea? Playful elements like climbing walls, mini-golf courses, and swings stimulate creativity and energy, so believe many American tech companies. You've probably seen pictures of them.

Honestly, my first reaction was: what a gimmick! A slide in an office environment? Maybe it's my Belgian background, but I saw it as a typical example of 'American quirkiness'. It didn't fit the calm, focused work atmosphere I'm used to. And yet... it is a cheerful idea. After a long meeting, sliding down a slide—you take a moment to step out of your head and enjoy a moment of pure playfulness. It's a tempting thought.

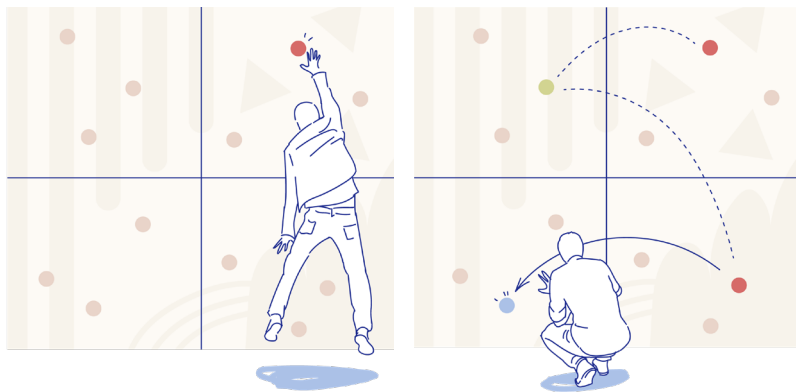
Homo Ludens: Play as the foundation of culture

That attraction is understandable; it's because play is deeply rooted in us. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga already noted this in 1938. In his famous work *Homo Ludens*, he described humans as beings that play. Play isn't just something children do, or something we do in our free time to relax. It's a fundamental part of how culture is created and developed. Play creates its own rules, provides structure, and offers a free space for creativity and collaboration. Think about how sports, art, and even science have their roots in playful experiments. I can definitely relate to that! On top of that, play has both direct and indirect positive effects—positive emotions, stress reduction, and strengthening relationships. So, the idea of incorporating playful elements in our offices isn't so far-fetched after all.

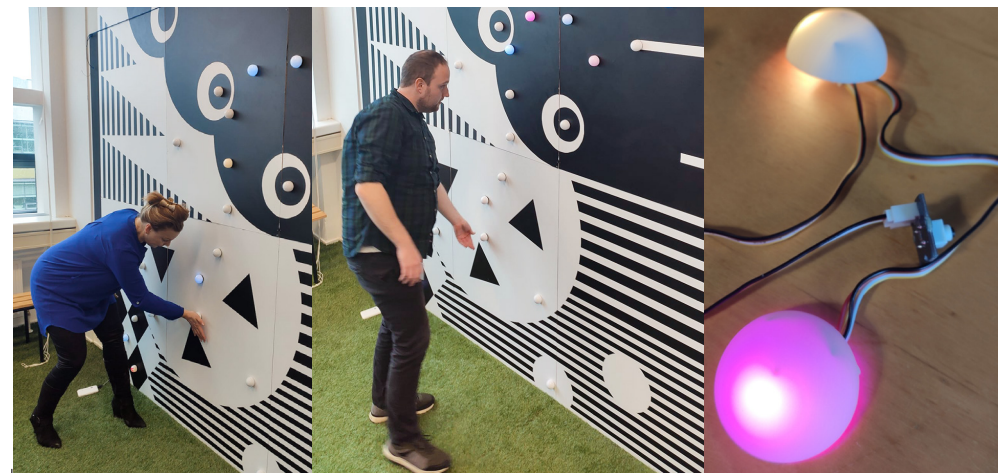
Button Bash: Active play at work

A cheerful example of this is Button Bash, a graduation project by designer Sylvia Kormelink. This interactive system gives office workers the chance to take an active, playful break in their work environment.

Button Bash consists of a wall with buttons that light up in various patterns. It's simple to use: press any button to start. A light signal indicates which button to press next. You follow the sequence of the lights. The game is played standing up, and the buttons are strategically placed to get your whole body moving. Once all the buttons are pressed, you return to work feeling content and energized



Button Bash gets you moving



Playing with Button Bash



Prototypes for play at work

Lowering the threshold for playfulness

Sylvia started with the research of American psychologists Meredith van Vleet and Brooke Feeney. In 2015, they defined play for adults as an activity with three characteristics: (1) the goal is enjoyment, (2) it's highly interactive, and (3) it's engaging and absorbing.

With those three characteristics in mind, Sylvia researched the role of play in current office break habits. She found that many employees avoid playful activities out of fear of being seen by colleagues as less serious or efficient. That explains my own hesitation about those slides. Think of the embarrassment of colleagues seeing you struggle with table tennis. Sylvia identified several dilemmas related to play at work that guided her design process:

1. I want to spend time with colleagues, but I don't want them to see my shortcomings.
2. I want to fully engage in an activity, but I also want to be mindful of the people around me.

Her challenge was to design something that lowers the threshold for playful behavior by addressing those two dilemmas. Button Bash does this with a simple, direct approach to play. No complicated rules, and you can't get it wrong. You immerse yourself in the game without disturbing colleagues. This way, you can relax for a moment without the nagging feeling that you're straying too far from your work goals or making an incompetent impression: playful yet professional.

A clever integration of play and work

The project also had a surprising effect on Sylvia herself. She found the graphic pattern she designed for Button Bash so beautiful that she decided to paint it on a wall in her home. The strength of her design lies in its simplicity. Instead of a big slide, she chose a more subtle approach. Button Bash invites us to take a playful break without requiring much time or attention. She achieved this balance by creating and extensively testing multiple prototypes. Button Bash lowers the barrier to play at work. It offers a simple way to recharge both physically and mentally. This smart balance between work and play is not only good for our physical health but also for mental well-being. Stress is reduced, and the mind is refreshed. Will you Bash with us?



Sylvia Kormelink developed Button Bash in 2024 as a graduation project for the Design for Interaction master's program. Her supervisors were Gert Pasman and Haiyan Xue (TU Delft). Sylvia is currently working as an experiment designer with the innovation team at HTM Personenvervoer N.V.

Colophon

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Reference

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