

Play With Your Food

Playful design for food & beverage, from the first crunch to the friction people choose.

Play Facts

Per bite, first to fiftieth

Senses invited	All five
Sound	One good crunch
Hands involved	Both
Friction	Chosen
Cartoons needed	None

Contains no gimmicks.

The second in a series taking The Joy Dividend into practice. No. 01 removed the friction nobody chose. This one adds the friction people do.

ON THE TITLE

What every parent says not to do, and what every food brand should.

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OPENING

Nobody needs to twist a sandwich cookie apart.

It doesn't make the cookie taste better. It takes longer. It leaves cream on your thumb. People do it anyway, and Oreo has built campaign after campaign around how to eat one: twist, lick, dunk. The company calls it a ritual.

By the logic of the last paper, that's friction. By the logic of the eater, it's the best part.

No. 01 in this series removed the friction nobody chose: the sleeve that tears down the side, the lid that won't reseal, the date label nobody can read. This paper is about what comes after calm: food people play with. Some of that is friction they pick on purpose. Some of it is a sound, a shape, or a texture that invites them in.

Play is what the food invites you to do.



Inefficient, unnecessary, and the point.

01

THE ORDER

Play comes second. That's what makes it work.

The Joy Dividend runs in a fixed order: remove noise, layer delight, deepen with purpose. The book's chapter on joyful design opens with the handoff. With friction removed, design becomes the medium for joy.

STEP 1 · NO. 01

Remove noise

The Calm Advantage

STEP 2 · NOS. 02-03

Layer delight

Playful Design (this paper), then Surprise & Delight

STEP 3 · NO. 04

Deepen with purpose

Connection & Purpose

The guard rail for this step is blunt. Joy ≠ gimmick: playful elements only work after core functionality is rock-solid. A cookie that's fun to twist and impossible to get out of the sleeve is a joke on the customer.

Playful Design's promise is “joyful by nature”: treat grown-ups like curious, sensory beings. It relieves the monotony and utilitarian gloom of a category busy optimizing its nutrition panels, and it delivers sensorial fun and humor people find rewarding and energizing.

The line between play and surprise is soft, and good products use both. A working test: Playful Design is participation built in, there on the first bite and the fiftieth. Surprise & Delight is the unexpected moment. The category's favorite idea of fun, the stunt flavor, leans toward novelty. That belongs to the next paper, and plenty of it fails the gimmick test before the bag is empty.

Playful Design

Participation, built in.

Surprise & Delight

The unexpected moment.

02

CHOSEN
FRICTION

63%

more bid for IKEA
boxes people built
themselves than for
identical ones they
didn't¹

Chosen friction is a feature.

It's one route to play, and the least intuitive. People value what they help make. In a series of experiments, Norton, Mochon and Ariely had participants assemble simple IKEA storage boxes. Builders bid 63% more for their own boxes than non-builders bid for identical pre-assembled ones.¹ The researchers called it the IKEA effect.

The fine print matters more than the headline. When people built something and then took it apart, or stopped before the last steps, the extra value disappeared.¹ Chosen friction only pays when people get to finish. The book's Ritual Integration Model makes the same point about weekend projects: foolproof kits, results worth sharing.

TWO KINDS OF FRICTION

	CHOSEN	IMPOSED
Who decides	The eater	The package
Who's there	You, or the whole table	You, alone with it
What it points at	The food and the table	An obstacle
How it ends	In a win	In a workaround
In food	Twisting, cracking, building, dipping	Tearing, cutting, prying, hunting

PLAY MOVES

Make it optional. The food works without the ritual; the ritual makes it better.

Make it finishable. Every assembly ends in something worth eating.

Make it easy to share, never required. It should work for one and get better at a table of six.

03

THE SENSES

Food is already multisensory. Most briefs aren't.

The book's Multisensory Joy Matrix covers color, shape, touch, sound, and scent. Food adds taste. But sensory pleasure isn't play on its own. It becomes play when it invites people to do something: listen for the crunch, snap the bar, pull the cheese apart.

2–20 kHz

the frequency band that, turned up, made the same chips seem crisper and fresher²

Sound

The crunch is part of the flavor. When Zampini and Spence played people's own bite sounds back to them louder, or boosted only the high frequencies, the same potato chips were rated both crisper and fresher.² Most participants didn't realize the sound was doing it. Opening sounds carry messages too: Snapple says the pop of its cap tells you the bottle hasn't been opened.³

PLAY MOVES

Design the sound on purpose: the snap, the crack, the fizz, the pop of the lid.

Protect it. A crunch that goes soft by day three is a broken promise.



Sweet



Salty, sour,
bitter

How people tend to pair shapes and tastes⁴

Shape

In experiments by Velasco and colleagues, people consistently matched round shapes with sweet tastes and angular shapes with salty, sour, and bitter ones.⁴ Shape is a flavor promise made before the first bite, by the food and by the pack.

PLAY MOVES

Match the shape to the taste. Break the match only on purpose, and make it a joke people get.

Give the hands something to do: a shape to twist, snap, or pull apart.

03 · THE SENSES, CONTINUED

Touch and texture

Contrast is what invites the hands in: the snap before the cream, the crisp before the chew, the stretch of hot cheese.

PLAY MOVE

Build in one texture contrast, and protect it through shipping and storage.

Scent

The first breath after opening is the product's opening line, and its invitation to come closer.

PLAY MOVE

Design the aroma at the open: coffee, warm bread, citrus peel.

Color

Color sets the mood before the lid comes off, and it lives on the food as much as on the pack.

PLAY MOVE

Put color on the food, not only the box, and let it invite a choice: which one first.

Taste and memory

In the book's Nostalgic Design Framework, taste is the most intimate memory trigger. PepsiCo brought Crystal Pepsi back because fans campaigned for it.

PLAY MOVE

Bring back the flavor people grew up with, and give it a reason to exist now.



The best texture contrast is the one people make happen themselves.

04

THE JOURNEY

Play belongs at the table,
not at the tear strip.

The eight stages from No. 01 still apply, and play doesn't belong at all of them. Put it where people have attention to spare and hands free to use it. Keep it away from the moments that need to be calm.

HOW MUCH PLAY, STAGE BY STAGE

STAGE	PLAY	WHERE IT FITS
A Need and occasion	Some	The snack and the shared table, yes. Breakfast in the car at 7 a.m., no.
B The shelf or the screen	Some	Wit in the copy, the way Oatly's cartons joke about reading the fine print. Still one message.
C The trip	None	Protect the play. The crunch has to survive the truck.
D The threshold	Some	A pack people are happy to leave out on the counter.
E Open and prepare	Open: none Prepare: high	No puzzles at the seal. Assembly is welcome when it's chosen and finishable.
F Consumption	High	The main stage: the crunch, the pull, the dip, the twist.
G Every return	High	Play that still works the twentieth time. Novelty doesn't.
H The empty package	Next paper	Easter eggs and hidden extras belong to Surprise & Delight.

A guide for product teams, not a measurement.

05

WORKED
EXAMPLE

Glico left one end bare.

In 1966, Ezaki Glico poured chocolate over its Pretz sticks and stopped short of the end. The bare end is a handle, there so the chocolate doesn't get on your fingers.⁵ That's the Calm Advantage, built in before any of the play. Then Glico named the product after the sound it makes when you eat it.⁵

\$589.9M

estimated 2019
global sales, the
basis of a Guinness
World Records title⁶

In 2020, Guinness World Records certified Pocky as the largest chocolate-coated biscuit brand.⁶ That's scale, not proof the handle sold it. What the product shows is how the moves in this paper stack in one small stick.

THE PRODUCT, ANNOTATED



THE HANDLE · CALM FIRST

One end left bare so the chocolate stays off your fingers.⁵ The friction goes before the fun arrives.

THE BITE · SOUND

Test-sold as Choco-teck. That name was taken, so Glico renamed it for the sound it makes when eaten.⁵

THE STICK · SHAPE

Shaped like the number 1. Since 1999, November 11 has been Pocky & Pretz Day, in honor of the shape.⁵

AROUND THE PRODUCT

Sharing, optional

The brand concept is “Share happiness!”⁵ A box of sticks is easy to pass around. Nobody has to.

Built in, then varied

Almond arrived in 1971 and strawberry in 1976, both in response to what customers asked for.⁵ The flavors change. The handle is still there.

Calm in the handle. Play in the sound and the shape. Sharing if you want it. No cartoon required.

06

GUARD RAILS

Four ways play goes wrong.

Play is the lever most likely to be done badly, because it's the most fun to pitch.

It's a gimmick.

Joy ≠ gimmick is one of the book's four guard rails for a reason. If the product isn't good to eat without the play, the play is decoration on a problem.

100 dB

reported for the compostable SunChips bag, which was withdrawn³

It's noise.

Frito-Lay's compostable SunChips bag was a sustainability win that reportedly topped 100 decibels when handled, and it was withdrawn.³ A sensory feature nobody chose is load, not play.

It mistakes play for childishness.

Playful Design treats grown-ups like curious, sensory beings. A cartoon isn't a texture. Adult products dressed up as toys read as patronizing, and they leave the senses with nothing to do.

It wears off.

Fun that only works once is closer to surprise, which is a different lever. If something is meant to be play, test it on the twentieth serving, not the first.

07

THE REVIEW

Eight questions before you call it fun.

If the answer to the first one is no, stop and go back to No. 01.

-
- ☐ Does it work, and taste right, without the play?
 -
 - ☐ Which part would people do even if they didn't have to?
 -
 - ☐ What does it sound like, and did anyone design that?
 -
 - ☐ Does the shape promise the taste?
 -
 - ☐ Is there a texture contrast, and does it survive the trip?
 -
 - ☐ Is the effort we ask for chosen, finishable, and easy to share?
 -
 - ☐ Is it designed for grown-ups, or for a cartoon of them?
 -
 - ☐ Will it still be fun the twentieth time?
-



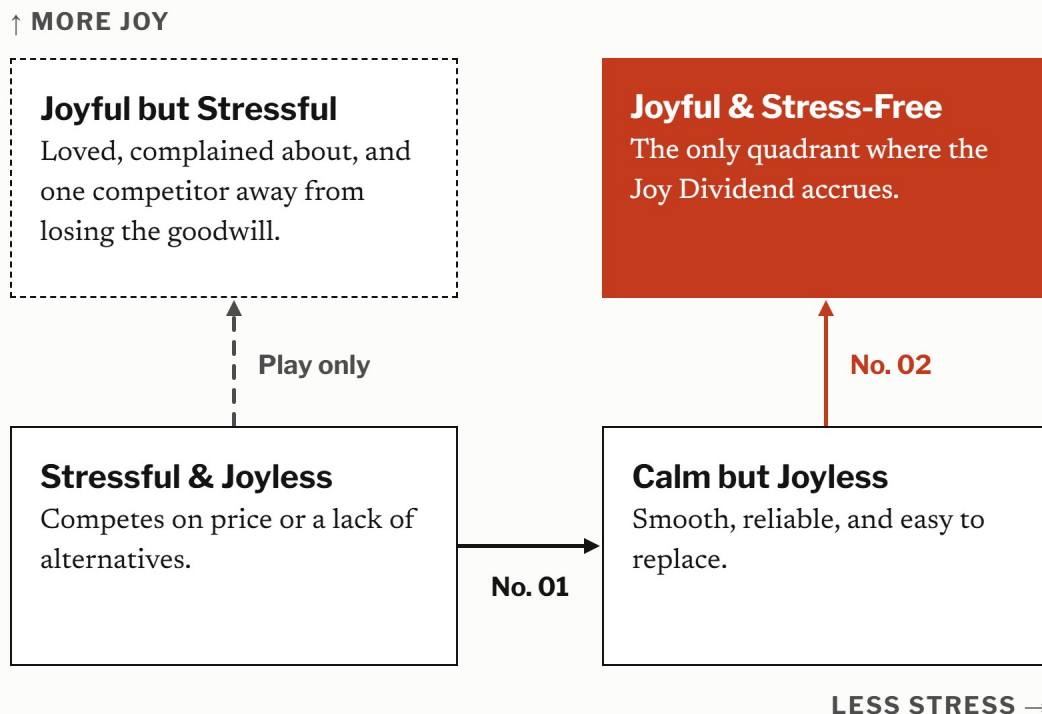
Friction pointed at the table.

08

CALM PLUS
PLAY

Play without calm keeps a brand alive. It doesn't make it compound.

A product that's fun to eat and a fight to open lives in Joyful but Stressful: loved, complained about, and one competitor away from losing the goodwill. Joy can keep a stressful brand alive for a long time. But friction puts a continuing tax on the value joy creates.



The Joy–Stress Matrix. No. 01 removes noise. No. 02 layers delight. Play on its own goes up, and stays stressful.

No. 01 took the product to calm. This paper takes it up. The next one is about the moments nobody sees coming, and how to make them a system instead of a stunt: Surprise & Delight.

Fun isn't a flavor launch. It's how the food behaves in your hands.

Sources

FRAMEWORK

Schieber, H. (2026). *The Joy Dividend: How Brands Win by Reducing Stress and Sparking Delight*. Independently published. Source of Playful Design, the Multisensory Joy Matrix, the Nostalgic Design Framework, the Ritual Integration Model, the Joy ≠ gimmick guard rail, the Joy–Stress Matrix, and the Oatly and Crystal Pepsi cases. thejoydividend.com

EVIDENCE

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SERIES

No. 01: Everything In Its Right Place (the Calm Advantage). No. 03: Surprise & Delight for food and beverage, next.