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[music]

[00:00:07] **Elliot Rayner:** When you look at Latin or Mediterranean countries like [00:00:10] France, Spain, and Italy, that morning learning session disappears. As you can imagine why, you know, it's-it's a completely different culture.

[00:00:17] **John Quintana:** I would say gamification is something of a dirty word in Babel [00:00:20] because we are so motivated to help you have that moment of, "I learned something."

[00:00:27] **Tamzin Taylor:** I don't know about you but whenever I've sung along with [00:00:30] songs that are in Spanish, I've no idea what I'm saying and I'm probably saying the wrong thing. [chuckles]

[00:00:36] **Elliot:** You don't know *Despacito* lyrics by now?

[laughter]

[00:00:39] **Tamzin:** Yeah. [00:00:40]

[00:00:41] **Elliot:** Language is like the most difficult puzzle in the world and there's not just one way to do it and the problem is, is that everyone's different. [00:00:50]

[00:00:53] **Tamzin:** The world of education is undergoing major changes and not least because of the unprecedented times we're living in. [00:01:00] But interestingly, online and app-based education has been growing for some time. Now is the time for big thinking. And Babel is one of the most ambitious education companies leading the charge [00:01:10] with their language learning app. Can apps take the place of regular teaching methods? And can remote learning eventually replace traditional educational institutions?

[00:01:19] **Dirk Primbs:** Welcome [00:01:20] to our second season of the *Apps, Games & Insights* podcasts. We're your hosts Tamzin Taylor and Dirk Primbs both working for Google. Today, we'll be exploring [00:01:30] the growth in the online and app-based education and how language learning app, Babel, is adapting to meet the growing demand. Today, we're joined by Elliott Rayner, Head of Product Marketing [00:01:40] at Babel, and John Quintana, Head of Guided Learning Experiences at Babel. They'll be sharing with us their expert knowledge and app-based education and how to react [00:01:50] in a time of crisis. So...Buenos Dias, Bonjour, hello, welcome.

[00:01:56] **Elliot:** Thanks for the intro, Dirk. How are you doing?

[00:01:58] **Tamzin:** Welcome to the podcast guys, it's great to have you here. [00:02:00]

[00:02:00] **John:** Thank you so much for having us.

[00:02:02] **Dirk:** So, we heard about your titles but I'm curious, who is it we're talking with here? I mean, I have to say that I have a bit of a fan [00:02:10] moment here. Babel was one of the first companies I worked back then in another-another life very close with, back then in Berlin. I shared with Tamzin earlier, Babel was [00:02:20] also, due to its gamification features, one of the blackmail tools I used to educate my kids in languages. So I coupled your point system with time on computer.

[laughter]

**[00:02:30]** As I said, I have a bit of a fan moment here and I think I still have a running subscription so maybe to kick this off, share a little bit about you. John, maybe if you wanna **[00:02:40]** go first. What is your background?

**[00:02:42] John:** Sure, yeah. So actually is some ways, Elliot and I probably have some rather similar backgrounds and our careers took interesting forks. Elliot's more towards marketing and mine more **[00:02:50]** towards product. But started out working in strategy for tech product launches and worked at a Digital Innovation consultancy for a while.

**[00:03:00]** So, coming up with new products and features, and from there, found my way to Berlin and found a really great home at Babbel. Um, started **[00:03:10]** there actually in the product marketing group and started like doing some product innovation work there at Babbel. And so, now I technically work as Head of Product, um, for the guide **[00:03:20]** team, but that doesn't mean anything to anyone. So, for external people, guided learning experiences is just much more illustrative.

**[00:03:28] Dirk:** It probably means you're the best one **[00:03:30]** to answer the question for our audience who may not be familiar with it, what Babbel actually is, right?

**[00:03:35] John:** When you say what Babbel actually is, meaning, like, as a tech product?

**[00:03:39] Tamzin:** Well, Babbel to my mind **[00:03:40]** makes me think about the Babel Fish, right, from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Is that why it's called Babbel? Was it inspired?

**[00:03:47] Elliot:** Since I've joined, I've had about three different stories, which I always think is good when there's like **[00:03:50]** a living legend, but, uh, yeah, it's actually a biblical term as well of it that, uh, and then also it's a slang term. But yeah, as you rightly say Tamzin the Babel Fish, which, uh, **[00:04:00]** the main character swallows to teach them every language on earth, which is definitely the most effective way to learn a language. I hope we can crack that one one day, but yeah, um, that's where it gets the inspiration from.

**[00:04:09] Dirk:** I think he **[00:04:10]** puts it in his ear or did I get my-my nerd references wrong.

**[00:04:14] Elliot:** Oh no, you're correct. Yeah.

**[00:04:15] Dirk:** And well, maybe swallowing helps too. Never though really tried anyone right? [laughs] **[00:04:20]** So Babbel, we got that established as a language learning service, right, coming as what, app, web-page services? Is it multifaceted or is it all sitting **[00:04:30]** on my device essentially?

**[00:04:32] Elliot:** Yeah. So, we have the app and the web and they work together. So, that's what's one of the great things about Babbel is when you wanna learn a language, you can jump from one to the other, and obviously, **[00:04:40]** it remembers your profile. So, if you wanna do it on a commute on the way to work by your phone, you wanna jump onto a podcast while you're chopping vegetables, and then you want to focus and have your **[00:04:50]** full screen, you're able to do so, uh, jump from one to the other and keep learning?

**[00:04:54] John:** Yeah, we started as very much a desktop experience back in 2007. And **[00:05:00]** I think we were pioneers at that time. Everyone else thought language learning

could only be done in a class or through CDs. And then after we moved on to desktop, we did, you know, **[00:05:10]** build an app and app has very much ruled our lives, much like many people, but we recognized that an app is not enough for most language learners. **[00:05:20]** Like the reasons that people love an app are, you know, "Hey, it's in my pocket. I don't have to make an appointment with a teacher. I don't have to, you know, **[00:05:30]** change out of my pajamas. Awesome. Great."

But what really is tough about an app is there's nobody else there with you. And it doesn't really **[00:05:40]** feel like you're talking to anybody when you're just talking to an app.

So, a little while ago, we actually set up a whole new experience called Babbel Travel, **[00:05:50]** specifically for the German market. We're looking to expand beyond the German market for people who want to go to another country and learn their dream language in that other country, **[00:06:00]** obviously, and we can probably talk about that later.

COVID has had an impact on what we're doing there. We also, and I think why Elliot thought it would be so great to talk to you guys **[00:06:10]** today is, in this past year, we've really exploded it with a lot more experiments on how to bring language learning to people's lives.

**[00:06:19] Tamzin:** Mm.

**[00:06:19] John:** So, it's through **[00:06:20]** video, through podcasts, and through some experiments and actual online live classes. So, now it's much more than an app **[00:06:30]** and we're scaling that up in the year to come so that it serves more learners.

**[00:06:35] Elliott:** And it taps into something that we talk about quite a lot, which is about blended learning. So, this idea that there's more **[00:06:40]** than one way to learn, uh, to learn anything. And actually a combination is the best. And as John says, sometimes it can be intimidating to-to learn something new, especially to-to face-to-face, **[00:06:50]** and especially learning languages, um, you need a lot of confidence. So, to be able to pick up an app and begin your journey is fantastic, and to take those first steps. But ultimately, you need something more than **[00:07:00]** that.

You need to be able to have the confidence to start a conversation. So, we can't just have one solution, we have to have many solutions through the language learning journey to make sure the user is progressing, because learning a **[00:07:10]** language is-is a long journey. And we need to have a solution at every single stage.

**[00:07:14] Tamzin:** Actually it's such an interesting area to discuss because you both probably saw from your own stats, in fact everyone was stuck **[00:07:20]** at home during COVID. And I was reading somewhere that said that, like 80% of all kids' pocket money went into playing games where they can interact with their friends. **[00:07:30]**

**[00:07:31] Elliott:** [chuckles]

**[00:07:32] Tamzin:** Right?

**[00:07:32] Elliott:** Yes.

**[00:07:32] Tamzin:** Because they-they're like, how can they have that social element? And I think to your point you made when-when Babbel first started as a desktop website, that's fine. **[00:07:40]** I remember trying to learn Finnish over, uh, using a CD-ROM

actually, which was fun until I, kind of got bored of it, and had no one to speak with, apart from my husband, which wasn't [00:07:50] fun 'cause he just laughed at me. So, how do you see the evolution of social? 'Cause I think having people interact with one another and how do you interplay the-the [00:08:00] actual learning of the content with the interaction with other people?

**[00:08:03] Elliott:** It's really interesting because if you use the Babbel app, you'll see that every way we teach is around interaction. [00:08:10] Everything is built around conversations, because that's the real reason you wanna learn a language. Most people aren't learning a language for the transactional purpose of ticking a box. They want to have a conversation, they want to interact. They [00:08:20] want to engage. And so, all of our lessons are built around two people having a conversation about something. And by doing that, we hopefully, inspire people to go have conversations. And [00:08:30] yes, there are some great digital solutions to doing that.

So, now we have social communities where people can engage. There's events that people can go to. And we're actually looking at more, um, [00:08:40] live lessons and sessions where people can actually login once they're confident enough and use what they're learning. So, that's the ultimate step i-is trying to take what you've learned and actually put [00:08:50] it into practice because the science shows that's when you really start to progress with the languages when you get the confidence to speak it.

**[00:08:57] John:** I can build on that a bit, on that role of the app and social [00:09:00] learning that, uh, you brought up, um, so one of the insights there also, um, Elliot's team has brought to us is, it is so terrifying to open your [00:09:10] mouth with another person and start to use that language. And so, in as much as we can say, like, okay, it's not enough to learn through an app, and like you need to start using it with other [00:09:20] people, I think you can't underscore the value of being able to start with an app where it feels a little bit less scary to take those first baby steps into that [00:09:30] language, until you can build that confidence and start using with others, either virtually or in person.

**[00:09:36] Tamzin:** And you mentioned that you're looking at events. Are these originally in-person events or are they now [00:09:40] moved to the COVID world of online events? How are you managing that in this time?

**[00:09:44] Dirk:** I was asking the same thing, right? Is there the step outside the app world? Was that on the menu? And [00:09:50] how much of that had to back scale right now?

**[00:09:53] Elliott:** Yeah, I think it was- it was something that we use a lot for a long time. And, um, obviously, now, it's very difficult to do that. As John [00:10:00] mentioned before, we have this, um, opportunity called Babbel Travel, which is even, you know, it's very popular in Germany, when you wanna learn new languages. Actually, what better way than to disappear for three months into a French [00:10:10] village and-- where you have no choice but to speak French. Uh, to see-- now, that's-that's the best way where you have no excuses. And I think that's, um, a big part for the future as well is step one, [00:10:20] nice and easy app to-to start and get your confidence.

Step two, one-on-one conversation. But step three is that immersion, to go into that culture because that's why we wanna learn a language. [00:10:30] It's to-to meet someone, to experience something new. And ultimately, whether it's a one-night live event, or it's to take a week off or to study abroad, these are opportunities that Babbel is [00:10:40]

exploring. Because we wanna be, um, available and we have a presence at every single part of the language learning journey, not just the first few hours on an app.

**[00:10:48] Dirk:** Is it then that you **[00:10:50]** want to enable people to do that language travel? Or is it just you wanna be like traveling with them as a tool?

**[00:10:57] Elliott:** No, we would have the opportunity where we could organize it for them **[00:11:00]** so they would buy a package to be able to do that.

**[00:11:02] Dirk:** Wow.

**[00:11:02] Elliot:** Or, like I said, live one-on-one lessons, you know, it is I've-I've learned and I wanna practice my French grammar and just spend an hour doing that. Or **[00:11:10]** we have audio in the app where you can just practice to yourself and, uh, audio correction will tell you if you did it right or you did not. So, I think that's really what we're trying to explore is a lot of different **[00:11:20]** solutions. You know, language is like the most difficult puzzle in the world, and which there's not just one way to do it.

And the problem is, is that everyone's different. You know,-

**[00:11:29] Tamzin:** Mm.

**[00:11:29] Elliot:** -some people **[00:11:30]** love learning grammar as crazy as that sounds. Some people will just sit down and learn grammar for ages and enjoy it. Other people, that's their worst nightmare. So, we can't ignore that, we need to have more than one solution. We **[00:11:40]** need to understand, um, language learners more than anyone else in the world. And that's why we employ over 150 linguists and didactics, experts. People who understand language learning **[00:11:50]** more than anyone on earth.

And they're the ones that make John and I's life so much easier because they pave the way to allow us how to design a product because they're the ones who can tell us what the problem is **[00:12:00]** before we can try to solve it.

**[00:12:01] Dirk:** This is actually very fascinating. For the future listeners of this podcast, we are recording this and October, 2020. And as we all remember, it's a **[00:12:10]** fun time that we have a thing called COVID on our heels. So now that you described that, let's say experience, travel angle of your vision, what's now-- **[00:12:20]** And knowing that when COVID started, I had so many friends who said like, "Oh yeah, I'm going to use that, uh, lockdown time to learn something, to read more, to whatnot." **[00:12:30]** Did you experience now an uptick or downtick in your community activities? Are people really trying to pick up that Spanish skill they always meant to learn and **[00:12:40]** using the online ability of those platforms? Or was that actually going down?

**[00:12:45] Elliot:** I think it's one of the few positive stories of these last six months as that, **[00:12:50]** we saw a huge uptick in people wanting to learn. We actually had around a 50% increase of our weekly users and a significant number of new subscribers. **[00:13:00]** And what's great is that those new subscribers actually stayed with us and kept learning. And I think when you look back, and it could have gone both ways to-to people because of what's going on **[00:13:10]** completely ignored learning a language. "Well, I'm definitely not going to do that." Now, all other people embrace and say, "You know what, I'm going to do something positive and use this time well."

And I can say not **[00:13:20]** only us, but the digital learning industry experienced a huge uptick and not only was, um, very positive, but it also led us to a lot of decisions that

**[00:13:30]** we're working on now. It gave us a confidence to realize how much growth we can expect and the future of the industry. And that now we need to work harder than ever to create new solutions, to keep **[00:13:40]** people learning. Because as you say, um, around 300 million students are affected right now because of COVID and industries are adopting. Every university now is becoming **[00:13:50]** a digital teacher, becoming a digital university, and that's really exciting. And I think it's gonna change the education industry forever.

**[00:13:56] Tamzin:** Have you had any of these professional outfits reach out to you for advice? **[00:14:00]**

**[00:14:00] Elliot:** No, not me, maybe John, but yeah, I-- it-it-it has been an interesting time. I think, you know what it is, I think a lot of them are already set up to do it. I think, like I say, blended learning, **[00:14:10]** this has been something that's been around for a long time. This isn't completely new, just like remote working, remote working was around before COVID, but it gave it-it the push that it needed to become **[00:14:20]** significant and to be widespread.

And-and so I think it's the same for educational learning. A lot of people were doing it. It was becoming the norm. I'm sure every major university was already embracing this. You only have to **[00:14:30]** see, um, digital solutions like Coursera and edX. These things were already growing, but as always with innovation, you sometimes have that-that trigger, that **[00:14:40]** spark that pushes it, and then it changes the industry forever. And I think education is gonna go through that in the next five to 10 years.

**[00:14:46] John:** Wasn't necessarily higher education institutions reaching out to us, **[00:14:50]** but definitely before and even more so is actually businesses. So a lot of businesses offer language learning as a benefit, particularly in Europe. And **[00:15:00]** so a lot of times there was maybe a teacher coming into the office for your weekly German lesson or your weekly French lesson or whatever. And so they reached out to us, both for our **[00:15:10]** app, um, service that we offer, but also for our now online tutoring program that we offer.

**[00:15:16] Elliot:** As John says, we have a B2B business as well. So **[00:15:20]** a number of startups that want to teach their employees languages, and we have a service. So that was, um, you could see a significant increase in business and conversations going on there as companies realize that **[00:15:30]** the digital is-is the best way to serve that need right now during these times.

**[00:15:33] Tamzin:** I have a question on something you mentioned earlier to your point about everyone learns differently. In this world **[00:15:40]** where people learn differently and you have such demand, what I would estimate is probably a whole bunch of people coming into the app over COVID, who maybe hadn't considered having the time before. **[00:15:50]** How do you cater for all those different needs and how do you make sure that people get the type of learning that suits them?

**[00:15:55] Elliot:** I actually think that's a really good description of my job, is that we have a thousand things to do **[00:16:00]** and that John would love to put into place and I have to make sure, "Okay, what are the top five things that we prioritize?" And say, "This is the most important." One of the ways we do that is like many businesses creating **[00:16:10]** user personas. So really defining, okay, who are the top five people? Is it, for example, someone of a certain age who's, um, moving to a new country or someone **[00:16:20]** who is starting a new career, who wants to learn English.

We often use the example of, um, someone who wants to speak a-a-a wedding speech and wants to practice and learn something new. [00:16:30] So, you know, these are all relevant reasons to use our products, but all drastically different. And that's part of the process of prioritizing and finding, uh, a better understanding of how to-to [00:16:40] save those people and then working with our product teams to clarify, okay, what are the most, uh, important ones that we wanna deliver over the next year.

[00:16:48] **Tamzin:** Funny, you should mention that use case, because [00:16:50] that was me. I was trying to learn Finnish for my wedding. I failed, my best friend turned up and she learned Finnish via reading the text. And you probably imagined [00:17:00] how that went down. No one understood, but still good effort. Sorry, John, you were going to say?

[00:17:04] **John:** No, it's actually, you know what, it's funny, 'cause we do lots of user research and the wedding speech thing comes up [00:17:10] a surprising amount. It's really major for people. Uh, I know I was gonna say, uh, from an instructional design perspective, when you talk about like all these different [00:17:20] types of learners, I mean, Elliot's absolutely right. Like we have to figure out what are like the most common denominator learners that we can help.

And at the same time, [00:17:30] kind of a little bit to what Elliot was talking about before, about when you're trying to build a habit, you're trying to fit learning into pockets of time. And sometimes you have more time and sometimes you have [00:17:40] less time and sometimes you're in a place where it's like, I'm really ready to like lean in and dig in. And sometimes I just wanna lean back a bit. And so we've [00:17:50] actually tried to create a variety of learning experiences from very short to much longer deeper sessions from something that's very passive audio like through our podcasts and a couple of other audio [00:18:00] visions that we're working on, versus like live human interaction.

And so starting to also classify those learning experiences, and recommend [00:18:10] them to the learner and see like, is that the right match for you, right?

[00:18:13] **Tamzin:** Mm-hmm.

[00:18:13] **John:** And if not, like, let me re-engage you with something that is different, right? That is either a different [00:18:20] length, a different format, and seeing if that's the right fit for you.

[00:18:24] **Elliott:** And to that point, as well. So, when we explore what John's talking about, it's not just all the different ways people [00:18:30] learn. But when they learn, one of my favorite studies that we produced recently is looking at the different times that people are logging in to learn. And for us, we see very significant patterns, as you would [00:18:40] imagine. Early in the morning, maybe with your cup of coffee. Maybe after your lunch, you've got a bit of time, uh, and then maybe just after you've brushed your teeth. But do you necessarily want to do the same [00:18:50] thing during those times?

If you wanna do a focused grammar session right after you've brushed your teeth, you probably will have weird dreams. So, that's the whole point of what John's talking about. We need to have different solutions. But [00:19:00] even then it gets even trickier. One of my favorite parts of that presentation is when you look at Latin or Mediterranean countries like France, Spain, and Italy, that morning learning session disappears. [00:19:10] As you can imagine why, you know, it's-it's a completely different culture. I used to live in Latin America, and it wasn't that uncommon to have dinner or the evening meal at 9:00 PM, 10:00 PM.

Our [00:19:20] rituals are completely different. So, we can't design one ritual and say, this is your learning ritual. We have to, um, personalize. We have to create many different solutions, and then [00:19:30] hand it over to our user and allow them to build it. Where the exciting part comes in and what John's working on now is where do the patterns start to emerge that-- where do the patterns emerge that [00:19:40] we know that you like to do grammar at this time. What we've learned is that you might also like to do this at this time. And that's when we can become better teachers.

And that's basically what we're trying to do is [00:19:50] the way you learn something is to be able to trust your teacher, and you wanna give them that expert guidance. And the more we learn about how our users learn, the better teachers that we become. And that's [00:20:00] exactly what John's working on right now.

[00:20:02] Dirk: Is it also different based on the age of your users? So, again, I have my kids in my mind, right? What I used back then was basically [00:20:10] gamifying language learning for them. So, I told them, they can earn points and basically use those points to buy computer time that they use-

[00:20:18] John: Mm-hmm.

[00:20:18] Dirk: -for gaming or whatnot. In the end, [00:20:20] at some point, they did the math and realized that they spent so much time in Babbel that this was not really a dark match, but they-they learned French pretty efficiently through that system, I have to [00:20:30] say. So, I'm wondering, is there like, did you crack the code of how to motivate, uh, younger versus older population, the self-driven Tamzin that tries to [00:20:40] pick up Finnish versus my son who hates French to the core but still needs to learn it for school? Is there a stream in your product for each of those demographics?

[00:20:50] Elliott: [00:20:50] I think there are many different solutions. I mean, when you look at gamification, in general, that's really what it's about. It's-it's making something that, uh, usually wouldn't wanna do in making it a little bit more fun [00:21:00] to get you in. However, for language learning, it-it can't just be about that. There has to be something more. We talk a lot about this 'aha' moment and it's like, you know, the Holy Grail of what every app [00:21:10] developer is trying to do is-is really showing your value proposition to the user. It's quite difficult to do that with the language.

I use the example all the time that if you do [00:21:20] planking every morning, there'll be one day when you look in the mirror and you look great and you'll think, "Oh, this is working. I'm going to keep doing it." With the language, how do you create that moment? You can sometimes-

[00:21:27] Tamzin: Mm.

[00:21:27] Elliot: -study for a long time and [00:21:30] not get the confidence to do that. And I think that's where the older con, um, consumer, more mature consumer, we're looking at solutions of how to, um, reward. And I think that's where the conversations [00:21:40] comes in, because that's what they're aiming to-to do that. You can earn up to a thousand points of getting the right picture to the right word. But if you can express how you're feeling in a [00:21:50] different language, tell a joke, make someone laugh in a different language, that's the thing that's gonna make you keep learning. So these are the kinds of things we're trying to inspire and crack into.



**[00:21:58] John:** Absolutely. And to lean even **[00:22:00]** harder into that. I think we at Babbel are very much guided by that sort of 'aha' moment, uh, as opposed to gamification. **[00:22:10]** Actually, I would say gamification is something of a dirty word at Babbel because we are so motivated to help you have that moment of, "I learned something." **[00:22:20]** And our biggest challenge is actually throughout the product, helping you see better, what you've been learning, the knowledge that you've been acquiring.

And so I think actually, if any **[00:22:30]** of our engineers or product designers heard that we were saying like Babbel's super gamified, they'd like run in horror because for them it's-- There are some elements **[00:22:40]** to try to motivate you and get you going. And we know that gamification is something of a, uh, it can be a cheap tool and it does work for all ages. If you've ever been to Vegas and you see **[00:22:50]** people at slot machines, there are all ages there. But what we're trying to do is really help people connect the dots of like, you learn something right here in this moment. You were introduced **[00:23:00]** to this word here, you were introduced to this concept here, and now you're able to apply it here.

**[00:23:03] Tamzin:** It's almost like you've got to create that intrinsic motivation to keep coming back. So I think that's where that gamification element comes in, **[00:23:10]** is like, you know-

**[00:23:11] John:** Yes.

**[00:23:11] Tamzin:** -you've got a leaderboard, for example, or you've got-

**[00:23:13] John:** Yes.

**[00:23:13] Tamzin:** -I don't have enough points, so, you know, unlock the next level, that kind of thing.

**[00:23:18] John:** Those things for sure help. **[00:23:20]** But unless you have that feedback that I've actually learned the language and can produce it. So what Elliot's been saying of like, I can actually **[00:23:30]** open my mouth and say something in Spanish. If you don't get that, you will fall off the app for all the leaders that you can have.

**[00:23:38] Tamzin:** How do you find that out from your customers? Like how do you **[00:23:40]** know if they've achieved that point of learning?

**[00:23:42] Elliot:** I can tell you that it really links into what we're trying to achieve is that we're trying to build, like I said, different steps of the language learning journey. **[00:23:50]** Uh, I think that's what the real evidence is that people are progressing is that you, um, once you're moving from using the app one day to next time, you're going on a run using the **[00:24:00]** podcast, then, um, signing up for a live lesson to practice your grammar, then booking, uh, a week away for an adventure. You're making your way through the language journey. And I don't think there's **[00:24:10]** any other company in the world that's doing it now. Every other company that serves the language education is serving one part of it. So you have gamified apps to get you involved. **[00:24:20]** you have travel companies, uh, you have live online learning or face-to-face learning.

What we're trying to do is occupy each part of that journey. And I think that's the real **[00:24:30]** evidence is once we can take people from each step, that's evidence that, um, we're doing that.

It is a-a long journey into what John says is, I think a lot of people like to pretend that **[00:24:40]** this is the way to really learn a language in an easy way. And, you know,

there's no easy way to learn a language, it is difficult, but that's part of the challenge. And that's one of the-the rewarding [00:24:50] parts of it is the achievement of doing something for the first time. And I think that's, uh, a much better thing to tap into, rather than points or a hot streak.

A good example, [00:25:00] uh, the hot streak is a-a really common thing in a lot of apps now. But what you don't see from the other side is that someone breaks that hot streak, they might disappear for months, the shame of losing [00:25:10] your hot streak, and we don't want that, we know that life's tough. And some weeks you might be busy, you might be busy with the kids, your life changes, you might go through a pandemic,-

[laughter]

-uh, life changes, [00:25:20] life's crazy. So we don't want you to-to suddenly feel ashamed. I think, uh, a great example I like to use is diets. That's why cheat days were invented. Because if someone broke a [00:25:30] diet, after three months, they would say, "Well, the diet is over, I'll give up." But we don't want that, you can cheat one day, and as long as you come back, that's how you make progress. So I think that's a much healthier thing to tap into. [00:25:40]

[00:25:40] **Tamzin:** It's an interesting question for all of the apps out there who run services where the app is not the core activity itself if that makes sense. [00:25:50] So clearly, the person learning the language has to speak, uh, as you said, that's the biggest step to take. People who are using a fitness app, they're not actually on the app, they're out there running or doing exercise. You [00:26:00] know, this has been a big challenge for the industry. How do you know if and when customers are really engaged, and they're actually getting the benefit out of the-the service you're providing? How do you [00:26:10] tie that in against, say, your retention metrics? Is this something that you-you link them together, or?

[00:26:16] **Elliot:** Retention, it's a huge part of our strategy, we actually [00:26:20] are very happy that the average user that we have stays for more than a year, for a subscription model company that's quite good. But even if they're staying for the year, are they actually learning? [00:26:30] We're in the process now of trying to develop a much smarter way that we can understand what our users are doing when they're on our app. How much time are they spending in different areas? What are they doing? [00:26:40] Because that's the kind of data we need to be able to improve the app to make sure they're staying in and they're actually learning something and learning something new.

[00:26:50] **John:** [00:26:50] One of our key indicators is if you're not starting to learn, then you're not going to keep learning. So this is why we keep trying to draft it like just start something small even. Uh, [00:27:00] maybe you don't have time for a full lesson, start a really small learning activity.

[00:27:03] **Tamzin:** Mm.

[00:27:03] **John:** And I think like when you look at when people will maybe choose to cancel a subscription, we can tell it's been a while since [00:27:10] you've used the app. What's rather remarkable is how long it takes people to give up on that language learning dream. They really wanna try it. They want to believe [00:27:20] that they'll come back to it. And I think this is where we have an obligation to help get them back on board. So, we keep working on that.

**[00:27:27] Tamzin:** Excellent. Now, switching **[00:27:30]** topics slightly, podcasts clearly are the future because we're on one right now.

**[00:27:35] John:** (laughs) Of course.

**[00:27:37] Tamzin:** And podcasts really succeed when you've got extremely **[00:27:40]** good talent on it like Elliot and John. Thank you for joining us. How do you work with your podcast? Because this is a new medium and, you know, as you mentioned before, it can be a passive way of learning. **[00:27:50]** But how do you make them engaging? Have you got celebrities? How does it work? Just quick story. This is a restaurant in Sydney, Italian restaurant and you go to the bathroom, and they have **[00:28:00]** language lesson playing over the speakers.

**[00:28:02] John:** [laughs] I invented that Italian restaurant.

**[00:28:05] Tamzin:** It's refreshing. You sit there. Oh, I'm learning. You know, it's like the old school tapes you put in your car. But I'm curious, how **[00:28:10]** do your podcasts work? And how do you keep them engaged and interesting?

**[00:28:13] Elliot:** As you say, podcasts have been something of a-a success for us recently. We've reached over a million downloads, and it's something that we're continuing to **[00:28:20]** grow. As we mentioned before, something that we always try to include is everything ties back to conversations. We know that that's what users wanna do. That's how they judge success. **[00:28:30]** That's how they know when they speak a new language. So, a lot of our podcasts focus on that, you know, two, three people sharing information, uh, basic conversation, but then also sharing stories. **[00:28:40]**

I think culture is a huge part of why people learn a language. They wanna understand a new way of thinking, a new culture, meeting new people. And so, a lot of our **[00:28:50]** podcasts focus on that is, um, even some of our employees of Babbel featuring on that and sharing stories of how they learnt a language and stories of their individual countries and **[00:29:00]** little things like that. That makes it a lot more interesting than this trick to any podcast is that you feel like you're listening to your friends, you forget that these people are strangers.

And a huge part **[00:29:10]** of that whole strategy is this idea of on-the-go learning. Like many companies, we're very aware of the problems of too much screen time, I'm extremely bad for that. **[00:29:20]** I'm trying to reduce it as much as possible. So, the more we-we can create language solutions that allow you to put the screen down, whether you're chopping vegetables or going for a run and still think okay, I did my **[00:29:30]** language journey today. I've done my ritual and I didn't even have to touch the screen. That's a big victory for us. And it's a real part of our strategy. Okay, what are the other ways that we can create **[00:29:40]** new solutions to on-the-go learning?

**[00:29:42] John:** The one thing that came to mind in terms of the difficulty of scaling podcasts for language learning is the language combinations, **[00:29:50]** which is something we talk about all of the time. So, if you were trying to do education through a podcast for any other topic, it's super simple. You're probably speaking in English to **[00:30:00]** English speakers who are trying to acquire some sort of skill.

But here we have to think about English speakers learning Spanish, German speakers learning Spanish, French speakers learning Spanish. And you have to create **[00:30:10]** a different podcast for each one of those at different language learning levels so that they

can understand it. The easiest way to scale those podcasts would be to be as we'd say, monolingual, [00:30:20] like we're doing right now. Easy peasy, you can make a ton of those, but to have that level of, it's at the right language level and in your language combination. [exhales] [00:30:30] It, like, can drive you crazy from a content production perspective.

[00:30:34] **Elliott:** And I think that's something that not a lot of people know about Babel. Is that you're learning Spanish, the Spanish courses that a French [00:30:40] person sees to a German person sees to what an English person sees are different. That's where I didactors and our linguists come in. So, that's how really complicated you get because they understand that from an English [00:30:50] perspective, you're gonna have to learn the basics of masculine and feminine because we don't have that. But someone from a French or Spanish won't. So, that makes them really individually catered, which really helps.

[00:31:00] But as John says, when it comes to podcasts, it's a lot more complicated, a lot more content. One interesting thing we've developed this year is Apple mixtapes.

[00:31:08] **Tamzin:** Hmm.

[00:31:09] **Elliott:** Which is talking through [00:31:10] different songs. So, we talked about different ways that people in language and people know that actually listening to music in a different country is actually a really nice way. You can listen to the lyrics. And so, we created we built, [00:31:20] uh, a playlist of different songs in different languages, and then had our podcast host explain them. And he gets really interesting. As you can imagine, reggaeton lyrics are very interesting. So, [00:31:30] but our podcast host going through them.

And like I say, the-there are some people who will learn best through music, just like they are through grammar. And so, it was great to-to- [00:31:40] to bring that to life to have another solution.

[00:31:42] **Tamzin:** That's so cool. I don't know about you, but whenever I've sung along with songs that are in Spanish, I have no idea what I'm saying. [00:31:50] And I'm probably saying the wrong thing.

[laughter]

[00:31:53] **Elliott:** You don't know Despacito lyrics by now?

[laughter]

[00:31:55] **Tamzin:** Yes. Dirk, what do you think? [laughs]

[00:32:00] **Dirk:** Yeah, as [00:32:00] the resident podcast nerd here, I wanna linger on the topic of podcasts a little bit longer. Your podcasts are mostly available as real podcast should be publicly, [00:32:10] right? So, I can subscribe everywhere on-on your different shows. How many podcasts shows do you publish right now?

[00:32:17] **Elliott:** As John said, it gets a little bit complicated because we do it from [00:32:20] language to language. I think we've got like six or seven different brands. So, English learning French, French learning German, et cetera. But then within that, there's levels because, obviously, we need to start at the beginning [00:32:30] and then, uh, we get more experts. So, for our most popular language-learning combinations, which are

German to English and English to Spanish, there's a little bit more depth there. Where you can go from **[00:32:40]** beginner to advanced.

So, yeah, slowly growing outwards and then starting to offer more. One thing that we're really happy with this year, is, as you say, we're available on wherever you **[00:32:50]** want to download our podcast, but now you can also find it within the app. So, when you're in the app, you can click and find it. And so, that's something that's really important to us is that within **[00:33:00]** the app, you've got all of these solutions. And that's kind of step one to what John is-is slowly building is turning our app from one thing into 20 things. And **[00:33:10]** more important than building them is connecting them, uh, how do we connect them in a really smart way?

**[00:33:17] Tamzin:** When we think about all these great new formats and innovative **[00:33:20]** services you're building out for Babbel, how do you think about your value proposition? As in, are you planning on putting all of this in one subscription price? Or do you see a future of **[00:33:30]** different tiers or progressions or in-app purchase? How do you see these fitting together from a business perspective?

**[00:33:38] John:** So, that is more of a marketing question, right? I mean, in some ways, **[00:33:40]** you could say it's a product question, but it's like, all right, you're building all this awesome stuff. How are you gonna pay for it? How are you gonna ask people to pay for it? I will just speak from a pure product perspective and let Elliott **[00:33:50]** take the marketing angle on that. I would say there's loads of research out there that shows us that many, many language learners out there will not want to pick up an app. **[00:34:00]** But they'll be like, "An app, that's not for me. It's too much of a burden, whatever."

And so, we do need to be able to offer some value outside of the app. And **[00:34:10]** we certainly have some efforts going in that direction where like, if you come to [babble.com/live](https://www.babbel.com/live), you know, you go to and I don't actually know that's the exact URL. So, don't go **[00:34:20]** there. But like to our online tutoring, you can get a really awesome Babbel experience through our online tutoring. You can get a really awesome Babbel experience through Babbel Travel. And you didn't **[00:34:30]** necessarily need to download the app. And some of these other small learning experiences, we-we want to be able to have those bring value to any of those platforms.

**[00:34:40]** Now, in a funnel, is it gonna be professional pack, mid-level pack, beginner starter pack or whatever? That's totally a question for Elliot.

**[00:34:50] Elliott:** **[00:34:50]** Yeah, I think it's something we're-we're starting to explore as we move from one product to many products. And that's a good problem to have. We're very proud of that the app is extremely accessible, **[00:35:00]** the price that we charge, it makes it accessible for a lot, which is very linked to our-our purpose as a brand. I remember reading one study, which said interview people how much they would pay to **[00:35:10]** simply click their fingers and learn-learn a language. And I remember it being a five-figure number, which is very high, but-but not at all surprising, yeah, because it's something that people need.

So, I think there is value **[00:35:20]** there to grow. And I think as we expand our portfolio of products that will become a little bit more complicated, but the idea is to keep it all under one ecosystem.

**[00:35:28] Tamzin:** Mm.

**[00:35:28] Elliott:** We wanna build communities, we **[00:35:30]** wanna keep it all connected. So, as you become a Babelonian and you start to learn a language, you move from these worlds, and you can go deeper into those worlds. And, um, **[00:35:40]** that's something that we're exploring, and we wanna make it as seamless as possible.

**[00:35:43] John:** Absolutely.

**[00:35:44] Tamzin:** Excellent. Well, definitely, yeah, that blends with the trend we're seeing on multi platform gaming and-and as we discussed **[00:35:50]** before, this rise of social. So-so, it sounds like you guys are going the right direction.

**[00:35:53] John:** Thanks.

**[00:35:54] Tamzin:** John and Elliot given how successful Babel has been, especially of late with **[00:36:00]** people in lockdown and all the-the great product advancements you're making. What are some three tips that you would have for our developer listeners out there when it comes to building and **[00:36:10]** maintaining a successful app?

**[00:36:12] Elliot:** Yeah, that's a tough one. Um, first thing that was spring to mind to me is -is purpose. I bore people to death on how much I talk about purpose, but I think any **[00:36:20]** successful company, uh, has a very well defined purpose and it's evident in every part of the business. So make sure you know who you are and you invest a lot of time into really understanding who you **[00:36:30]** are and rolling that out so everyone understands it.

Two, once again, from my marketing side, user personas, understand who your users are and understand the order of which you want to serve **[00:36:40]** them. You fortunately cannot build one solution for everybody in most industries. So who do you want to serve and in what order? And then finally, I would say maybe, um, **[00:36:50]** onboarding. You could have a fantastic app that serves people for years and years, but if people don't get past the first day of the first week, it'll never happen. As John **[00:37:00]** says, resist the urge to gamify, it is a nice cheat. And I love his example of the slot machines, it's great. There are other ways to do it. That's something that we're working on is how do we make it **[00:37:10]** rewarding to make people stay, but don't get them addicted to their screens.

**[00:37:14] John:** You clicked a particular part of my brain, where you use the word developers and like what's advice that I would give developers. **[00:37:20]** And I guess COVID times, right? From lessons from Babel, I would say the first one is think as lean as possible. **[00:37:30]** It's something that I think we finally started to like tap into at Babel through corona times, we've become way more experimental in corona times. We've started using CRM as **[00:37:40]** an, uh, experimentation channel to start to give us some good leads on what is a good concept to actually develop out into an MVP.

So be super duper lean. **[00:37:50]** I think very much in line with what Elliott's saying, be radically user centric. So like how Elliot was talking about personas, know your user **[00:38:00]** know them on an emotional gut level. I feel like that is a strong point for Babel. Just we have that kind of emotional relationship with them. So it's much easier to know **[00:38:10]** how to help solve their problems if you have that connection with them. And then you ready to pivot and it's kind of in line with that lean idea, but we were trucking **[00:38:20]** along before COVID thinking, "All right, this is what we need to do, this is how we need to serve our learners."

We launched this whole mini company, Babbel Travel. People are gonna be booking [00:38:30] tickets to go to Costa Rica to learn Spanish. No, they're not. And so then we're, you know, experimenting on how to deliver on that promise of travel [00:38:40] without getting on an airplane and still be true to our purpose and language learning. So you can't be super stuck into your roadmap. And think like, [00:38:50] that's definitely the way that we have to go. If you don't have those people in-house that are pivot-friendly, you're going to get caught flat-footed.

[00:38:56] **Elliot:** And this is the great opportunity of working within digital is that you have [00:39:00] the opportunity to change and do things quickly. I've come from the physical innovation world, where I was creating products for World Cups or for things that would go in stores. And if something goes wrong, less stocks traded [00:39:10], um, it's suddenly a lot more dramatic. Whereas, with a digital product, you have the opportunity to be a lot more experimental and take a lot more risks. [00:39:20] And usually, when you take risks, that's when the best innovations come out. So, take the opportunity to do that.

[00:39:26] **Tamzin:** Mm. Just to touch on that point about being ready to adapt and ready to pivot, 100% [00:39:30] I agree with you. How do you ensure that your leadership are supportive? Because that kind of boils down to fast decision making.

[00:00:38] **John:** If you don't work at an [00:39:40] organization where leadership is open to being adaptable, you're barking up the wrong tree. [chuckles] Right? Like, I would say if you're maybe in that situation, try to find allies [00:39:50] within your company. I mean, Babbel is a bigger company, so I don't know, this is how we solve those problems. Right? You find an ally. You're like, "Hey, help me out with a little bit of user access over [00:40:00] here. I'll help you out with a little bit of development over here. And we'll just test something out to build out an unusually use case to convince leadership."

So, I think like build those allies, [00:40:10] get those initial user stories, I think are super-duper powerful for all that you can have. Like the data, some direct user quotes, how much I love it, [00:40:20] does a lot to persuade leadership. And then yeah, get someone like Elliott in your team who can be like, "This is how much money we'll make if we do it," or, "This is how much we optimize the funnel [00:40:30] if we get it right."

[00:40:31] **Elliot:** I'd like to call that storytelling.

[laughter]

I think there's a few other words, but, uh, yeah, effective storytelling, or just do it so quick that nobody notices. Being on- [00:40:40] it-it's the good thing about a company this size, is the opportunities for entrepreneurial. It's something that I would tell all of my team is that, you-you can do that in a company this size. In previous companies I've been at, it's not possible, so [00:40:50] you can take advantage of that.

[00:40:52] **Tamzin:** Those are really good tips. Thank you guys. John, Elliott, this has been absolutely fascinating. Thank you so much for your time today. I definitely have learned that [00:41:00] there is so much more coming up for Babbel. I can't wait to be part of that journey. And hopefully, I'll make it to the end with-- I don't know if you offer Finnish. One day I might hope to impress my in-laws, [00:41:10] but thank you so much. Thank you, Dirk. And look forward to seeing you in-person one day.

[00:41:15] **Dirk:** Thanks everyone. That was great. Thanks for your time.

[00:41:18] **Elliot:** Our pleasure. Really enjoyed it. Thank you.

**[00:41:20] John:** Yes. Thank you guys so much, particularly for sharing your own personal stories. It's great to hear other language learning stories.

[music] **[00:41:30]**

**[00:41:31] Tamzin:** So many thanks Elliott and John, for joining us today and sharing your insights. And thank you, our listeners for tuning in. If you have thoughts on the topics covered on today's episode, we'd love to **[00:41:40]** hear from you. You can find us on Twitter at #GooglePlayDev. Keep an eye out and subscribe to our podcasts for the next episode coming soon. Until next time, keep playing **[00:41:50]** and learning.

[music]

**[00:42:00]**

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**[00:42:05] [END OF AUDIO]**