

PROJECT 10¹⁰⁰

Project 10¹⁰⁰ is an ambitious endeavor that asks the world to submit ideas to help the planet. Creative Lab's promotional video features ideas that have already helped millions of people, like the Hippo Water Roller, but this project aims to use Google resources and ideas from the web community to help even more.



Do-Gooders!

Meet the [Google Creative Lab](#), a department devoted to giving the ubiquitous company a good name simply by [doing good deeds](#).

BY JOHANNA LENANDER

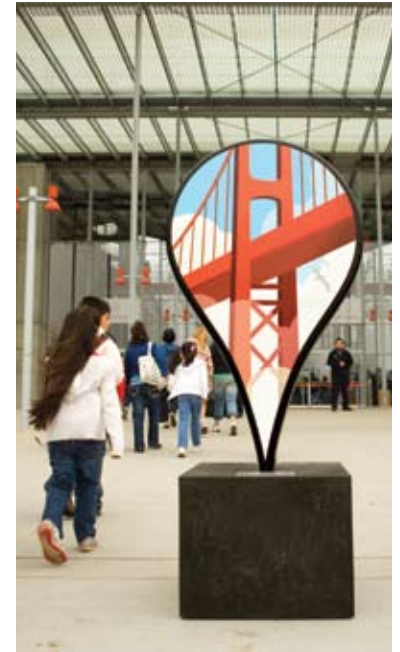
When a brand name becomes a verb it indicates two things: The name stands for an innovative product that outperforms the competition (i.e. “Hoover” or “Xerox”), and it’s so ubiquitous that we’ve stopped thinking of it as a name. In little more than a decade, Google has become such a part of our lives that we hardly notice it. Yet, at the same time the name evokes comforting familiarity, it also generates excitement and a kind of brave new world mystique. We know that a global army of brilliant young tech nerds are riding their bikes to work, eating Google lunches and working on cool new things. (Are they making a phone? A new PC operating system? A global redistribution system that will end world hunger?)

Google clearly wants to be everybody’s friend. The company has built its business on giving people things for free. But it’s easy to feel skeptical of a company that’s so big, knows so much and has so much power. Do they really mean it when they say, “Don’t be evil”?



GOOGLE MAPS FAVORITE PLACES

For this project, Google asked local experts (New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, Isaac Mizrahi, Yo-Yo Ma, Al Gore and Tony Hawk, to name a few) to point out some of their favorite places in New York, Tokyo and other cities around the world. Real-life map pins were placed in front of favorite businesses to call attention to the establishments and the Google Maps project.



FEELING GOOD

The Google Creative Lab serves as evidence that they do mean it. The Lab is Google's in-house advertising and branding unit that was founded in October 2007. It's a small group of 25 talented people based mainly in New York City who have the large task of staging company messages on Google's global platform. "Our charter is to remind the world what it is they love about Google," says Andy Berndt, the Lab's managing director, an advertising power player who was co-president at Ogilvy before joining Google. "We take bits of stuff that are floating around the company and make sure people know about them and understand why they exist."

This may sound obvious. But it's about more than promoting products through clever marketing. "The Creative Lab isn't exactly an agency, but we're not an internal marketing department either. We're more like a rogue creative think tank that floats around and identifies areas where we can make the biggest impact," says creative director Jeff Gillette, a writer with a background in psychology. The Lab is experimenting with ways of doing advertising that aren't really advertising at all. "A lot of what we do is more educational than it is advertising or marketing," Berndt says. "I often feel like we're doing public service announcements."

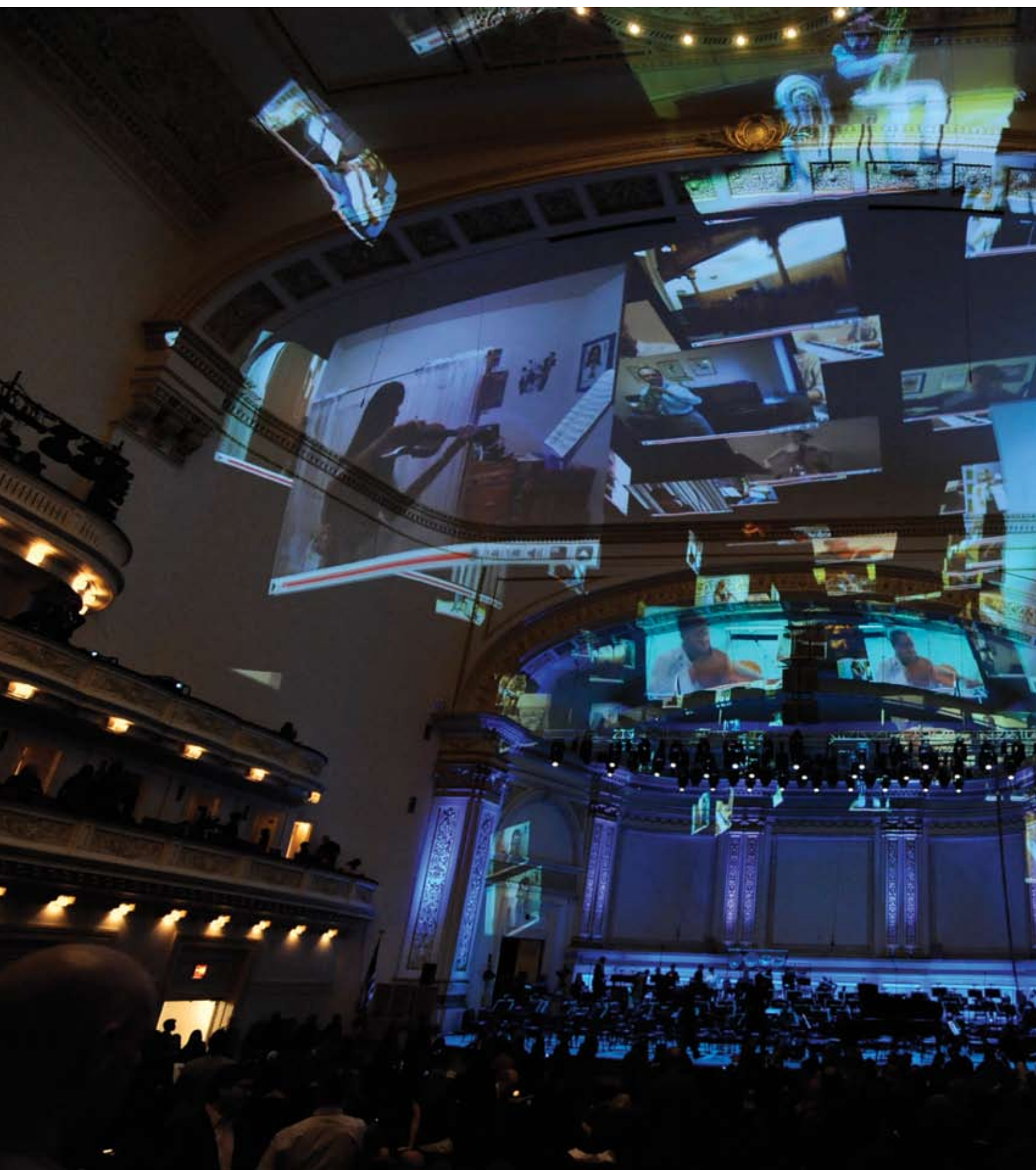
And like public service announcements, Google's messages intend to serve the greater good. "I initially became a designer and got into communications to try to positively impact people as much as I could," says Robert Wong, the Lab's executive creative

director, who runs the operation together with Berndt (his past experience includes award-winning stints with Arnold Worldwide and Starbucks). "And in the past, I felt like I hijacked marketing dollars to do good. And now I actually don't have to do any hijacking—the thing itself is good."

This seems to be a collective feeling among Lab employees. Wong and Berndt say the team is part of a mission: "It's not just us. Every single person that we hired seems to have that same belief in this mission. And it's not like it's Google's mission; it's individual missions that ended up being exactly the same as Google's," Wong says.

The other Lab employees concur. "When I first met with Andy and Robert I was won over by their desire to use advertising and branding to change the world. I decided it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up," Gillette says.

The fact that a bunch of seasoned advertising whiz kids sound like starry-eyed Obama campaign volunteers when they speak about their jobs may be the truly revolutionary thing about the Lab. The team displays an almost evangelical sense of commitment. "We all work together toward the same goal. It's not about winning awards or becoming famous. It's about spreading the best of Google," says Ji Lee, a graphic designer who is another of the Lab's creative directors. "And because the products and projects we promote are free and helpful to many people, we feel that we actually make a positive difference in the world. It's the main reason why everyone's here."





YOUTUBE SYMPHONY
A one-night Carnegie Hall orchestral event brought together professional and amateur musicians from around the world, thanks to the community-building advantages of the web and YouTube. Participants auditioned for the privilege of playing under famed conductor Michael Tilson Thomas by submitting videos of themselves on YouTube. This photograph shows the visual projections that accompanied the live event—a first ever for Carnegie Hall.



SOUNDING GOOD

One endeavor that fulfilled this mission was Project 10¹⁰⁰ (pronounced “10 to the 100th”), a competition that commemorated Google’s 10th anniversary in September 2008 by awarding \$10 million to up to five inventions that the company feels will have a positive impact on the world. (As an example of a socially beneficial design, Google cited the Hippo Water Roller, a barrel-shaped container with a handle that holds 24 gallons of water and is easy for a child who’s fetching water on foot to transport.) More than 150,000 ideas were submitted.

But not every message is about saving the planet with fanfare. “It’s about the small stories,” Berndt says. One of the Lab’s most publicized feel-good projects is the YouTube Symphony Orchestra, which raised the profile for YouTube’s content and provided a hands-on example of how the site can serve more complex purposes than uploading and watching videos. (Google purchased YouTube in November 2006.)

In December 2008, Google and YouTube launched a worldwide competition for classical musicians (both amateurs and professionals) to form a virtual ensemble that would perform at Carnegie Hall for one night. The musicians auditioned via a YouTube video of themselves performing repertory staples as well as a new work composed for the occasion. Out of 3,000 submissions, 200 finalists were selected by 22 of the world’s most prominent orchestras, including the London Symphony Orchestra. The finalists’ audition videos were posted online for a public vote to fill the final 96 slots. Google flew the winners to New York City to rehearse together for the first time a few days before the concert. The optimistic and moving message worked on several levels. The musicians, who hailed from 30 different countries, became a living, breathing example of how a wildly diverse group—including a Polish farmer, a Vegas poker player, a high school student from California and a Korean surgeon—can come together in seamless collaboration.

And then there was the underdog aspect. “A bunch of people who didn’t go to the best schools got a shot at Carnegie,” Berndt says. “These guys became local

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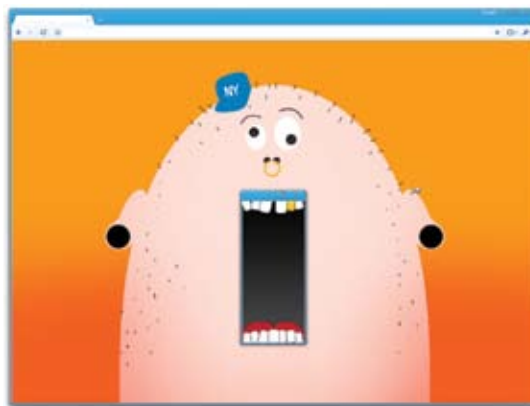
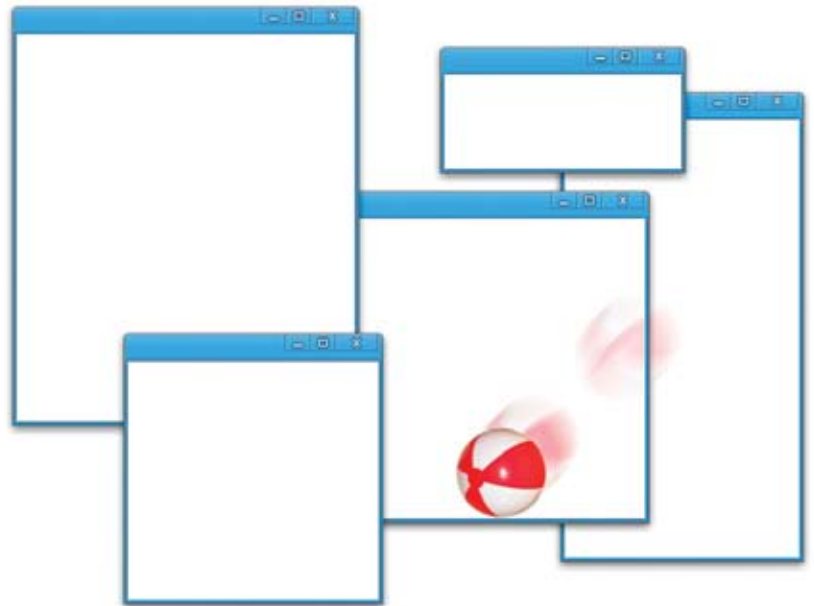
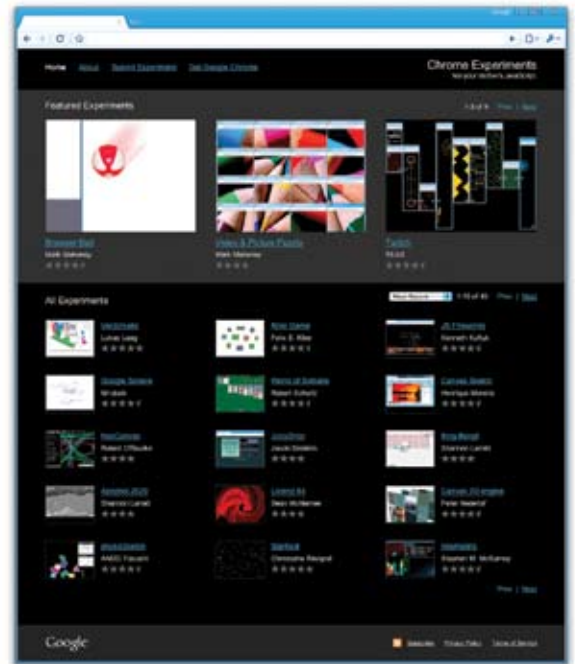
This site houses the experimental toys of web visionaries and artistic-minded programmers the world over. The Creative Lab tapped this community to help it show off the power of Google's new web browser, Google Chrome.

Subtle Splashes

What do Google Creative Lab's colleagues in the advertising world think about their concept of advertising as an agent for positive change? They actually don't seem to know a whole lot about it, which is surprising considering how the Lab's projects have attracted a fair amount of attention and Google makes the news practically every day. "Nobody seems to know anything about them," says John Weich, creative director at up-and-coming Amsterdam agency Lemon Scented Tea. "All you know is that there is money and that they are able to collaborate with the smartest and most talented people in the world. Google is at the center of the knowledge base. When other ad agencies do market research it's a joke compared to the information that Google has access to."

Maybe it's the Creative Lab's subtle approach that confuses its peers. They don't have a website that shows off their work, and when individual team members are interviewed by the press they don't really mention the Lab's existence. This isn't necessarily because they're secretive. Maybe it has something to do with the way the Lab just drops its work into the online culture and lets it evolve by itself, without huge announcements and big billboards.

Andy Berndt, the Lab's managing director, describes how he learned how to adapt when he first joined the company and pushed for a big launch of the Chrome browser when it was introduced to the public. "I was like, 'Let's tell that story, let's tell it in a big huge way!'" he says. "And I was politely informed that it was probably not going to happen—maybe we would tell that story later or we'd tell it quietly. And that's when I really learned how the process worked here: You don't make a lot of noise about something in the beginning; you put it out there and you learn what things are not working so the product improves before you start talking about it. It's just not the way you work at all at a mainstream ad agency, where everything builds up to the launch moment and you just start screaming. I think I learned a lot from that. It's a good example of the school of iteration versus the school of perfection. It's just a different way of thinking."



BROWSER BALL & PUPPET

Browser Ball (above) and Browser Puppet (left) are just two examples of the 50+ Chrome Experiments on the site. Both show off the capabilities of Google Chrome's Javascript engine in playful ways: one by letting users open up multiple windows and bounce an animated ball between them; the other by opening up a series of windows that create characters that react to the sound of your voice.

heroes. I met a lot of them, and they had just died and gone to heaven.” And finally, it gave a badly needed boost to classical music. The event generated about three times more press than Carnegie Hall’s previous blockbusters. And that was a big boost to the Creative Lab, too, which wanted the event to positively impact both individual musicians and the classical music industry as a whole.

Berndt says the project was his most satisfying experience at Google’s Creative Lab so far: “At a personal level I was just over the moon when it happened,” he says. “And yeah, we showed the world how you can use YouTube beyond just posting a video, but it wasn’t the main story. YouTube and Google have always been about giving people access, and this was another variety of access.”

While the Creative Lab was in charge of realizing the YouTube Symphony Orchestra project, it didn’t come up with the original concept. Three years earlier, a London-based Google employee and classical music aficionado named Tim Lee envisioned a YouTube orchestra formed exclusively from people who had auditioned online. He submitted it through an internal pitching system where it gained traction and was developed as a mock-up. In 2008, Berndt picked up the project for the newly formed Creative Lab and made it happen.

LOOKING GOOD

Idea generation like that exemplified by the YouTube symphony is a cornerstone of Google’s culture. Employees are encouraged to devote 20% of their work hours to dreaming up and submitting ideas for new projects. “You source ideas from everywhere,” Wong says. “There’s the whole Google-wide e-mail list where anyone that has an idea posts it. It could be about products or what we should do for the Google picnic, literally anything. Good ideas get voted up so you can see where there’s buzz.”

There’s also constant sharing among departments. Ideas percolate up the corporate ladder even as business strategy flows down from the top. “Everyone is very excited about passing along cool things,” Berndt says. “It’s different than any place I’ve ever seen before. The entire place stays creative by being quite messy and innovative.”

This seems to be true also for the Creative Lab. The Lab’s work process flows among departments, continents and methods. “We’re starting up something new, so we’re keeping things very organic,” Gillette says. “And we encounter so many different kinds of issues that every one of them almost requires an entirely new process. But as we figure things out more and more, we’ll figure out which process works best for which project.”

While the bulk of the team is in New York City, one of the creative directors is located in San Francisco, and there’s a small satellite office in London. Collaborators for each project are sourced from within different Google units (and on occasion outside the company) according to the project’s needs. “In general, the structure is really flat,” Wong says. “Everybody does

everything. Everyone we’ve hired on a senior creative director level has a very small team of one, two or zero people, even though in the past they’ve run big global things with huge teams.” The Lab seems to thrive on being the little engine that could. “We never set out to build some big department that would have walls and where we would have complete control,” Berndt says. “It’s just not that kind of atmosphere here. People are drawn to different projects by the quality of the idea and the excitement of possibilities.”

One such project is Chrome Experiments, a website that promoted the latest version of Google’s Chrome web browser through a series of technically impressive and playful experiments designed by more than a dozen red hot developers and designers such as REAS, Mr. Doob, Ryan Alexander, Josh Nimoy, Mark Mahoney and Toxi. Each project turned the browser window into an interactive application, game or piece of art. For example, Mark Mahoney’s “Browser Ball” creation features a ball that bounces back and forth through separate browser windows.

Gillette says the idea came out of a brainstorm he had with art director Ed Kim and creative programmer Aaron Koblin. “We were thinking about ways to show off the powerful stuff under the hood that no one can see. So we asked the question, ‘what if we created a cool experience out of the browser itself, using the browser as a medium for art rather than just the frame?’” says Gillette, who was one of Chrome Experiment’s creative directors.

So what does cool browser technology have to do with making the world a better place? According to the Creative Lab team, it’s all about keeping the internet ecosystem healthy. “The best part of this project was the fact that we’ve added something positive to the web. A lot of these experiments will get web developers to think differently about what’s possible and will help the entire web evolve,” Gillette says.

And keeping the cyber universe in shape ultimately benefits the physical world. “Before deciding on a project, we always ask ourselves how interesting it is and how much it would help people,” Berndt says. “It’s a good pressure that brings a different kind of thinking and a different kind of scrappy resourcefulness.”

“So many of our products have such scale around the world and reach so many users,” Berndt continues. “Helping them learn how to master them can really benefit a lot of people. If we make something that helps nonprofit organizations run their businesses through Google docs and spreadsheets so more of their donated money actually goes to the people they serve, then everybody wins. We’re incredibly lucky to have that situation.” **HOW**

Johanna Lenander was born and raised in Örebro, Sweden, and now lives in Brooklyn, NY. She has contributed to magazines such as I.D., New York, Surface and T: The New York Times Magazine. Her favorite designer and illustrator is her 2-year-old daughter, Alva.

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