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INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR

Meet the creative leaders who are transforming the way we do business

GAMING FOR TREATMENT

Swatee Surve's video game tackles anxiety and depression with the help of Socks the fox

BY CAROLYN BICK

Puget Sound Business Journal

Ever play a video game, and lose track of time? How about a video game meant to support your mental health? Enter Litesprite, a gaming platform that helps people manage and mitigate behavioral health issues, as well as issues tied to diseases like cancer and diabetes.

In 2012, Litesprite CEO and founder Swatee Surve noticed a dearth of commercially available digital tools for behavioral health issues. So, she got to work creating a product to help close that gap. In 2013, Litesprite was born.

While Litesprite is a free gaming platform available in beta for anyone to download to their mobile phones, insurance companies, employers and hospital systems pay a licensing fee to have customized reports made for clinicians and their patients using the game. The data can then be used to construct digital biomarkers and predictive models for serious risk factors like suicide, Surve said.

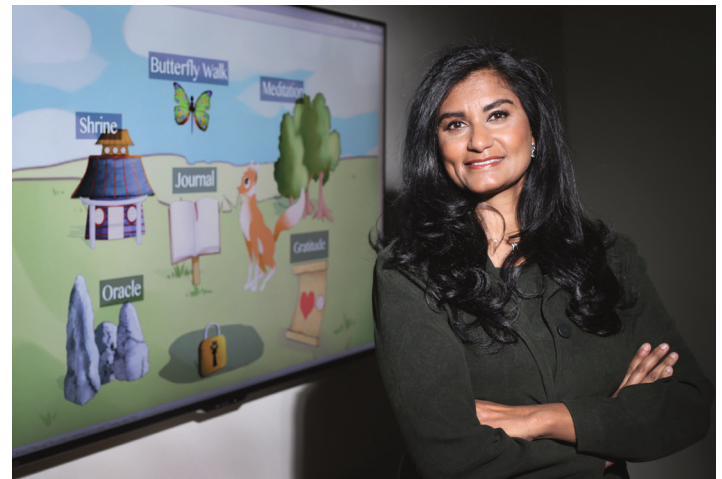
It can also help standardize clinicians' documentation processes and allows them to receive reimbursement for care.

If a person is working with a clinician, the game will collect that person's data, and report it back to the clinician. This allows the health care team to more fully monitor patients who struggle with chronic health conditions. While it's a useful tool for clinicians, the game cannot and should not be seen as a replacement for a doctor, Surve said.

When Litesprite was created, Surve said, there were behavioral health apps around – think Headspace, and other meditation- and mindfulness-oriented guides. There were also physical health tools in the form of enticing and fun games for both adults and kids on gaming consoles like Wii and Xbox, but there were few games tailored specifically for a user's mental health.

After research and interviewing Surve conducted over the course of years, she settled on creating a game to engage a user for the sake of their mental health.

"Because they're games, they're a much more interactive experience, and you can address more issues that a patient may or may not be facing ... and they motivate people," Surve said. "Games highly



SWATEE SURVE

Title: Founder and CEO of Litesprite

Founded: January 2013

Employees: Six

Education: University of Illinois at Chicago, B.S. in biomedical engineering; Pennsylvania State University, M.S. in mechanical engineering; University of Chicago's Booth Graduate School of Business, M.B.A.

Hometown: Chicago

Residence: Bellevue

Fun fact: "I write poetry as a hobby and I also dog-sit as a side hustle."

engage people, and one thing health care providers constantly talk about is patient engagement. ... So, the hypothesis I was making is that you could transfer that into a health care setting."

And it was a sound hypothesis. Since its creation, Litesprite has won 18 global health innovation awards, including being the first video game to receive a United States Surgeon General System for

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Health award for its work with the U.S. Army. It is also one of the few clinically validated digital health solutions available for mental health treatments and is approved for use with Medicaid patients.

Surve chalks up the lack of such health care tools prior to Litesprite to the stigma that used to and still, to some extent, surrounds mental health.

“A lot of people, when I first started talking about it, they were very uncomfortable – visibly uncomfortable even – talking about the issue,” Surve said. “Behavioral health is where I think cancer was 40 years ago, 50 years ago. Our generation cannot imagine someone ... hiding the fact they have cancer, but in the ’50s and ’60s, if you got that diagnosis, the family kept it a secret, and it was considered a death march, and it was a huge stigma.”

Currently the only game Litesprite offers is called Sinasprite. It launched in 2014 and is free for individual users to download to their phones in its beta version. Surve thought through everything, even the user’s fox avatar, which she chose because foxes are fairly neutral creatures in people’s minds and, therefore, one with which they could develop a relationship without too much baggage associated with it, she said.

Darryn Urueta started using Sinasprite last summer to help with his anxiety, PTSD and for meditative purposes. He said the breathing exercises with Socks the fox help him keep calm.

“I don’t believe there are any apps out there that truly compare to Sinasprite,” he said. “What Swatee has created is unique in that the interactive nature of the app allows one to genuinely immerse themselves in a calm mental environment. I have used other apps that were mostly just designed for meditation, but they were mainly just sounds.”

While most of the game is single-player, there is a multiplayer mini-game that asks all players to focus on gratitude. This aspect of the game is important, Surve said, because “one of the things that’s really important when people are trying to make any sort of behavior change is peer support.”

“We intentionally kept it to only four people so you’re really being intentional about the individuals you want to share with,” she said.

Surve herself has used the game, because she has tested it “a lot,” she said.

It’s helped her approach life with a greater degree of calm. For instance, she said she asks herself questions that help her think through a perceived problem or obstacle and now automatically employs breathing exercises in stressful situations, “which happens a lot in a startup,” she said.

Swatee Surve is one of 12 innovators we are honoring this year. See all 12 Innovators of the Year at bizj.us/1ptdu6 and watch for individual profiles throughout 2019.



HOW IT WORKS

A VIDEO GAME AIDE

Swatee Surve helps patients manage and mitigate the effects of behavioral health issues, such as anxiety and depression, through a video game, Sinasprite. The game can be used individually or in a clinical setting that allows doctors to monitor and communicate with patients. The data collected is used to construct digital biomarkers for predictive models that can identify risk factors in patients, such as suicide.



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SWATEE SURVE, founder and CEO of Litesprite