**"Play and joy are such powerful tools for change for people":
Josh Lavra of Hopelab on using technology to support the
mental health and well-being of young people**

Rollo Romig
October 21, 2025

Rollo Romig: Please introduce yourself and tell me about your work.

Josh Lavra: I'm Josh Lavra. I've been at Hopelab coming up on seven years. It's a
place where it's possible to get really deep into this work. Hopelab started 25 years ago
under this idea that it's possible to bridge what science is telling us is supportive for
young people and what design or the translation of research can do to actually make
that useful for young people.

It started with a video game, which is a really interesting entry point. Particularly 25
years ago, it was less common to see something like a video game being used to
support the well-being of young people. It was a seed of an idea that we could take
what research is telling us is important and supportive and translate that into something
that's useful and actually desirable by young people. It started a path of first developing
products. Hopelab did that for quite a while, always centered on the mental health and
well-being of young people. That covered a range, from thinking about loneliness as
young people were entering college age to the last product that we had, which was
focused on supporting the mental health and well-being of Queer and trans young
people, and helping them deal with stressors from society.

We spent many years in this space of creating products and co-developing with young
people. And we started to dip our toe into investing in startups, mostly for-profit, that
were also working in the space of mental health and well-being. We started being pulled
more towards ways that we could support young people that were already doing this
work, as opposed to doing it ourselves or in partnership with them.

My role has evolved over my seven years. I first came in on the product side, from more of a design background. My academic background is in chemical engineering, but I have pivoted over the years towards design, and now I lead a portfolio of work focused on supporting young leaders that are doing really great work out in the world. We have a pooled fund called the Responsible Technology Youth Power Fund that is now in its third year. So far it has supported 33 predominantly youth-led nonprofits that are working in the responsible technology space. That's been a really great way for us to work alongside young people that are doing work to support their own communities.

We're only 25 people, but have a pretty broad set of work. We have a research team that's producing research but also helping to translate research. We're supporting researchers at HBCUs to expand their work but also work more closely with young people. We have a policy team, too. As a 501(c)(3), we're limited in the policy work that we can do, but we are able to work alongside folks who are focused on policies that support the well-being of young people. It covers a wide range of areas, which, if you think of it as a Venn diagram, the middle represents what is most supportive for mental health and well-being, particularly for Black, Brown, and Queer young people.

Rollo Romig: What does the design part of it look like?

Josh Lavra: I started with a lens of human-centered design, which is essentially creating things not only for people but with them, and also taking into account the diversity of people that might use a digital product. Design, in my mind, was just a lens to approach the work from. It's making sure that something is desirable for people, something that they actually want, something that's feasible to make, or something that's viable either as a business or as a supportive tool. It starts from a human need, and then working with the people that would be affected by the thing to create it together. The design lens to me has been less about aesthetics.

If you look at Hopelab's public face, we have a design-forward way of presenting our work, because design is an important tool in translating research and complicated things like human emotions and well-being. But at the core of it, it's about doing things in collaboration with people that are most affected by them.

Rollo Romig: Give me some examples of some of these design products, the ones that have been most interesting to you.

Josh Lavra: When I joined Hopelab, I was coming at the tail end of a product and then starting to develop a new product. The thread between those two has been really interesting to me.

The first product was a chatbot to teach positive psychology skills to young people who had gone through cancer treatment. Something unique about Hopelab is that when we create a product, we test it in a pretty rigorous way with a randomized control trial. It's like prescription medicine. You test it with a group of people who don't get it and then people who do get it. Then you see the effect across those two. This tool is called Vivibot. This chatbot, in our research, was shown to be effective in supporting their

mental health and well-being as they're going through an incredibly stressful and complicated transition in their life. Many of them say it feels like starting a new life after finishing cancer treatment. We had developed the voice of the bot in partnership with young people. This was before AI was so ubiquitous. It wasn't artificially intelligent and didn't have natural language processing, but it had a tone and voice that was designed with young people who had had the experience of having cancer.

It was out in the world and supporting young people, and it was really great. We thought then, okay, maybe we could take the principles of this tool that is supporting young people in a really challenging time. Could we translate that to support Queer and trans young people? We could have just said, OK, we're going to tailor this for Queer and trans people and then put it out in the market. That is the wrong route. We ended up creating a prototype and then sharing that with young Queer and trans people to get their feedback.

Across the board, they hated it. It didn't feel supportive for the challenges they were facing. Positive psychology teaches practicing gratitude or reframing a situation in a more positive way. We were talking to these young people, and they're like, "I'm holding my partner's hand. Someone yells a slur at me from their car as they drive by. Practicing gratitude in that moment is not helpful for me."

We quickly learned that the tailoring of a tool like Vivibot towards Queer and trans people is just not going to work. Then we spent a few years working with about 600 young people across the country. This was right before COVID, so we were able to travel to LGBTQ centers in Alaska; Birmingham, Alabama; and Chicago going around and talking to young people about the challenges they're facing and some ways we might be able to support them, and then pairing that with what research and science was telling us was causing stress for young Queer and trans people.

It was a long, very iterative process of coming up with ideas with young people, co-designing it, then getting feedback on it and continuing to develop it, until eventually we launched what was called imi.guide. This is a totally free web based mental health tool that we studied in a randomized control trial, which was shown to be effective after just 10 minutes of use. Now, over 200,000 young Queer and trans people have used it.

Rollo Romig: You mentioned that the first product that Hopelab came out with was a video game. Have you continued to make games?

Josh Lavra: I think it was our co-founder Pam Omidyar who had this inkling that video games could be used in a way that was positive for young people. It set off this spark that we could look at these problems in a way that is meeting young people where they're at. Although we haven't developed a video game since, this idea of play has been a part of some of the other products we've created. There was another one before my time called Zamzee, which predated Fitbit and other fitness trackers. It gamified fitness for young people and was really effective at helping them maintain an active lifestyle.

One of the companies our Ventures team is investing in is Mightier, a gaming platform that is helping support the mental health and well-being of young people. I sometimes sit on the pitches for our Ventures team, and just yesterday we were pitched a video game that's in a handful of schools right now that's helping young people manage their emotions. Although Hopelab is not developing those products anymore, we see video games as a really effective tool.

Rollo Romig: What are your observations about the value of play or of games when it comes to this work? What makes them a special tool?

Josh Lavra: Play is so important. It gets this rep of being superfluous, or maybe too childish, often when adults are making decisions or creating things. Play and joy are such powerful tools for change for people. Joy is a great motivator for change. If you feel good doing something, or you feel like you're in community, or you feel seen or respected, the joy that comes from that is a powerful motivator. In the way we do our work, we're always trying to focus on joy.

There's no shortage of stories about how the mental health and well-being of young people is challenging right now. Many young people are struggling, and there are pockets of joy. There are really bright, incredible things that young people are doing. We're not ignoring the challenges, but by taking more of an asset-framing approach to the work helps us build better solutions and form partnerships around a more positive outlook. The thought that young people have the ability and the autonomy to make change in their communities and in their lives is rooted in joy, in a hope for joy. I think all of our work is starting from that place.

Rollo Romig: How do you think about the line and the balance between research and making things?

Josh Lavra: There's so much great research that is locked up in academia, that goes nowhere. There are really smart people with incredible teams and great intentions, and often lots of funding, that are working on topics that would be so important for other people outside of academia to be aware of or to be able to put to action. There's a huge gap between what's happening in research and academic settings, and what is happening out in the world.

I come from an engineering background, and in college took and then was a teaching assistant for a program called Effective Communication for Engineers. The stereotype is that someone in engineering isn't expected to be the best communicator. Getting in the weeds of science and in research is important, but when that is lost on anyone who isn't as deep in the weeds with you, then you're losing an opportunity for any impact from your work. When I think about how we translate research, it's really just trying to open up this whole world of helpful, important information to people who might not have a PhD or understand a research paper.

Rollo Romig: It sounds like there's a lot of lost opportunity for actually implementing ideas that emerge from research, and also for people who are

making things to root what they're making in research. What are some ways that gap could be bridged?

Josh Lavra: I think our HBCU fellowship is a great example of this. We're working with researchers who are at the cutting edge of what is needed and supportive, particularly for Black youth mental health. These are some of the most brilliant people I've ever met, but their incentives most of the time are publishing papers. That is how success is measured. Or their work might be supported by grant funding. They're answering the requirements for the grant. It's often just a lack of support. Having a designer to help them translate that research into something that's useful isn't always the priority. The goal often is to publish the paper as opposed to turning it into a web app or turning it into an intervention.

I think where Hopelab has played an important role in this is moving together what research says and what design is able to do a little bit more closely. We've been able to bring design support to some of these researchers to help them translate often just the words into something that is a bit more digestible, or turning what the research is saying into something that is usable.

That used to be apps. Now, rather than developing apps, we're still providing design support but pushing people to use the latest technology. How can you use a tool like AI to fill some of the gaps that you might have as a researcher in getting the word out about what you're doing?

Rollo Romig: Tell me more about translating research. What does that look like?

Josh Lavra: One very broad way of doing it is just telling a story. Hopelab recently put out some reports on what's affecting teen mental health and well-being. We've done one recently with the Born This Way Foundation, which is Lady Gaga's foundation, focused on Queer and trans young people, and then dug a little bit deeper into what rural Queer and trans young people are experiencing. It's 80 pages of data. That's important. However, what feels most useful is the translation of those numbers to stories from young people directly. It's not just the quantitative that's important, but the qualitative as well, and humanizing and putting voice to some of that data.

With imi, the tool I mentioned for Queer and trans young people, we worked with a handful of researchers across a couple of different universities and landed on a model called the Minority Stress Model. This is a model that has existed for quite a while. The idea behind it is that there are stressors that someone with a minority identity, which in this case was Queer and trans identity, experience on top of the everyday stress that most people experience. Inside of this research, there's this model that talks about ways to mitigate that stress.

A young person reading that research paper wasn't going to have the same effect as one using a tool like imi. The tool is a mixture of things you can learn, things you could do, and then stories from other young people. Some of the ways that the research

paper talks about mitigating minority stress, we were able to put into a really tangible form.

One of them is about trying on a different set of pronouns. In this case, it's a bot online, but it's giving a reflection back to you of a thing that you're feeling inside. This positive reflection is a mitigating factor for experiencing minority stress. We're able to put that into an activity that's been designed by a young person to help them understand that concept. It's taking a nugget of wisdom and then working with a young person to put it in a form that they can understand and actually want to sit with.

Rollo Romig: I'd love to hear more about how you approach co-designing with young people.

Josh Lavra: To me, it feels like the baseline. I do not have an academic design background, but I worked at an organization that had helped popularize the idea of design thinking. To me, it feels like common sense that if you want to create something really great, then the people who are eventually going to use it and decide if it is great should be a part of creating it. You can't do this in a vacuum. You can't do this on your own, because you don't necessarily have the same lived experience of any person who's going to use this thing.

That wasn't even negotiable. Anything that we create is going to have to be done with young people in the room with us that also have power to help shape it, as opposed to just being a sacrificial voice in the development process. Particularly with imi—we had taken it to young people and they said they really hated the first iteration. We wouldn't have learned that without doing co-design. We would've gone down a path that we wanted to go down because, honestly, that was the shortest distance for us to take something we already created and tailor it for another population. There was nothing stopping us from doing that except wanting to create something that was actually useful. That was only done by working alongside young people.

Since we've moved away from product design, that's shown up in a couple of different ways. In the last two years of the fund that we're a part of this Co-Lab through, we've brought on previous grantees, all under the age of 30, who we consider young leaders. They're on the steering committee. The steering committee now is made up of co-funders and previous grantees who are all young people. We're setting the direction for this fund and we're selecting the next cohort of grantees. We're co-designing. We're in partnership with young people who previously received one of those grants. As a funder, I don't know what the experience is to have received a grant from this group. I know what the experience is to try to fund those grantees. Even though we're not creating products, it's still embedded in the nature of Hopelab to do all of our work in partnership with young people.

Rollo Romig: If you were talking to a colleague at a different organization in the field and they wanted advice on how to co-design with young people, what are some things you might tell them aside from what you've already just said?

Josh Lavra: This might sound obvious, but a big thing is treating them as peers. Over the years, I've definitely observed people who say they're co-creating or working alongside young people, but then either the inputs aren't valued in the same way as adults or they're not paid for their work that they do, which, to me, is also a non-negotiable. We compensate young people in every interaction we have with them, because they're the expert. It's the same way I would compensate a doctor who came in to talk about medicine. They have a lived experience that is an expertise, and they should be compensated and seen as having that expertise. Respect the experience and expertise that they're bringing the same as you would any other expert that you're working with.

Something I learned early in my time at Hopelab was the importance of closing the loop. Often these co-creation collaboration moments with young people are not over the whole life cycle of developing a product. Maybe you have a prototype, and you develop that with a few young people, and then you find another group, and you move on. There's so much value in closing the loop by saying, "Here's what we did with the inputs that you provided. Here's how the product has evolved. Here's now how we've landed. We'd love more of your input." It's just continuing to have that conversation. It also builds a genuine relationship with the people who've participated in the work, as opposed to getting their input once and moving on. I find as I've been able to stay connected to the young people that we've worked with, that has provided a little more depth to the work.

Rollo Romig: Tell me about your experience of collaborating with other organizations. What role does that have in what you do?

Josh Lavra: We try not to do anything alone. This realm of work that we're focused on, supporting the mental health and well-being of young people, is huge. Hopelab is 28 people. We can't solve it on our own. Even if we could, it would be a misstep to try to do it on our own. We're working in partnership not only because we can't do it alone but because there's such a variety of experiences that our partners have that have proven invaluable for either reaching populations of young people.

The Responsible Tech Youth Power Fund—Hopelab could not have possibly funded these 33 organizations on our own. It's not possible financially, but also the grantees have benefited so much from the brand recognition and expertise of the other funders that are in this collaborative fund. This work is all about partnership because the idea of doing it alone isn't going to get us nearly as far as we need to for how big of an issue this is.

So far, over two years, we've partnered with 17 co-funders. That has de-risked the idea of investing in young people, which for me doesn't feel risky, but I think broadly feels like a risk for some funders to invest in someone who is starting their first nonprofit or their first time digging into a big topic like mental health or responsible technology.

Rollo Romig: I'd like to hear more about Hopelab's approach to funding. What are you looking to fund? What's your focus?

Josh Lavra: The root of it will be the mental health and well-being of young people, which is such a broad category topic. We've gravitated more towards technology within that area. Our Ventures team is focused mostly on startups that are developing businesses—an actual business model that maybe is able to be expensed towards Medicaid, serving populations that need support and care through health insurance.

To me, that's been an interesting idea of investment, because we are a nonprofit foundation. The idea of playing in the world of capitalism didn't connect at first, but if you abstract the challenge to the simplest form, which is support for the mental health and well-being of young people, there are for-profit businesses that are doing that very well and are able to support young people at scale. When we invest in them, we're able to have a seat at the table and make sure that young people are represented in the design and development of those tools.

There have been interesting partnerships on the policy side, too. There are groups of young people that have been pushing for some pretty remarkable policy changes, like the moratorium on AI that recently was stopped. Several of the grantees from the Responsible Tech Youth Power Fund played a huge role in bringing a youth perspective to that and making that happen.

We have a grantee who at 13 started her own nonprofit, is now 26, and she's working on bipartisan legislation related to chronic illness and how social media platforms are advertising pharmaceuticals in a way that provides misinformation. We have this shared belief that young people should have the space to thrive, they should be supported in their mental health and their well-being, and some really interesting partnerships are coming from that shared belief.

Rollo Romig: On the policy side of it, how do the other aspects that you're working on feed into and inform the policy part?

Josh Lavra: It's the question of how change happens. A hypothesis we are holding is that policy is a big lever for systemic change. Whether we like it or not, we're living under a system in which the government is able to change things or not. For instance, the recent cuts to Medicaid significantly affected young people, particularly Black, Brown, and Queer young people. For us to see that level of changes being enacted on the policy side—we're not able to do our work if that continues.

If those young people are not able to access care, then our job of trying to support their mental health and well-being is a lot harder. It feels non-negotiable for us to be thinking about policy. It has taken me some time to understand why that's important, but at the end of the day, we have to be working with policymakers on changing some of the big barriers that exist for young people to be cared for.

Rollo Romig: What are some of the biggest barriers on policy, and what are some of the most urgent things that Hopelab thinks needs to happen?

Josh Lavra: I'll speak from my perspective on that. I don't know necessarily where Hopelab stands on all of these ideas.

Technology is clearly moving a lot faster than our government. Harms are being enacted on young people as a result of technology not being regulated. One example that feels really tangible right now are these AI therapists and AI companions, and that there aren't guardrails for these companies to protect young people from getting to a point where they consider taking their own lives because this predictive text algorithm is telling them that that might be the route to go.

The speed at which we're putting up some guardrails around this evolving technology isn't fast enough to protect young people. That's been proven. There are too many stories of young people discussing the harms of these AI companions. I don't think Hopelab would draw this line, but there's a lack of responsibility taken for some of the harms that young people have experienced from social media. A lot of the young people that we're supporting through Responsible Tech Youth Power Fund are talking about their personal experience with the harms of social media. Some of our partners, too, have been working on projects that are highlighting the young people that have taken their own lives and the effects on their families. Now those families who are advocating for legislation or regulation around social media.

There's not a single answer to any of this. It's really complicated and challenging. One tangible example is the Kids Online Safety Act, KOSA. This is a piece of legislation that many of our partners are supporting. There are also voices that we care about deeply that have shown that there are some flaws in that legislation. From our research and our partners' research, there's so much evidence that in many cases, the only place for young Queer and trans people to find community is online, in social media. To flat out restrict them from having access to that could actually be incredibly harmful. Eliminating social media access for all young people isn't always the answer.

There's a lot of nuance that we need to listen to, and that talking to young people from different backgrounds will give us a clear picture of what type of support is needed for them. It's not going to be one size fits all. Our interest particularly in Black, Brown, and young Queer people perhaps allows us to see a perspective that is representing a different viewpoint than some politicians might be building legislation around.

Rollo Romig: With AI, it's been head-spinning. Just a couple years ago, it seems there was much more serious talk about being careful. OpenAI was supposedly founded as an organization to roll out a safer and more ethical version of generative AI, which they seemed to have completely abandoned. On the government side, there was even a proposal to ban the regulation of AI for 20 years. Obviously, the fight for policy change is still essential, but in this reality, what can we do to help protect young people in the absence of effective and nuanced regulation?

Josh Lavra: Yes, totally. And even with regulation, there's always going to be compromise where it's probably not fully protective in any case. That's why it's so important for us to continue to invest in what young people are doing. Through the fund, there are organizations that are actively working on educating young people. For instance, Cyber Collective is an organization we've supported now for two years. They

have a program called Internet Street Smarts, which is helping young people understand what it means to exist online. How do you avoid being scammed? How do you avoid being taken advantage of by a stranger who might be an adult pretending to be a young person?

Young people are helping other young people prepare themselves and support each other in a way that government has been incapable of doing. Throughout history that has been the case. Our communities have protected and helped each other. I see that all the time in the Queer community. We have each other's backs. We are the ones that are supporting each other when the government falls short, which is often. Young people know exactly what is helpful for their community, and the best thing that we can do is support them, listen to them, and then sometimes just get out of their way.

I don't necessarily believe in giving them money and disappearing. There's non-financial support. We could provide connections. I think Hopelab has a lot of credibility in this space, so we can bring young people into spaces with us and help them continue to build their credibility. For me, it's listening to what young people are doing, and doing all that we can to support them in that work.

Rollo Romig: Everyone loves the word "innovation," but we find it's often more effective to just listen to what's there and help spread good ideas that already exist.

Josh Lavra: Yes. There's a framework with three flavors of innovation: incremental, evolutionary, and revolutionary. People are so drawn to revolutionary innovation, a new thing for a whole new set of customers, where the reality is that the incremental innovations, the slow improvements, or the evolutionary ones, which is taking a current challenge that people have and helping solve it for another group of people, are the space of innovation that I want to play in. I feel you could see the effects of them in years as opposed to decades.

Rollo Romig: Yes, because there's already momentum, and things are already happening.

It seems that perceptions of youth mental health have changed pretty rapidly over recent years, including among young people themselves. Do you think that's true? How do you see that change as having happened and what more needs to change in terms of perceptions?

Josh Lavra: We put out a report recently from a survey designed in collaboration with young people. We were asking questions that were important to them as opposed to just asking questions that we wanted to ask. We got some interesting insights about what's actually weighing on the minds of young people. To be honest, it's obnoxious to see the number of stories out in the world saying every young person is in crisis right now, which is certainly true for some and not for all.

In the research that we shared, a majority of those surveyed, 61% of young people said that they considered themselves to be a "somewhat" or "very" happy or content person

at the moment, but their concerns are about their futures. Am I going to be able to afford to pay rent? Am I going to be able to raise a family? Am I going to have health insurance? Am I going to get a job? There's definitely some clarity that their access to technology, their lack of connection to other people in the physical world, are causing some challenges, but it seems the bigger stressor is projecting into the future.

There's work to be done about making young people feel safe and secure and loved in their day to day lives now, but how do we help young people prepare for their futures? How are we, as adults who are in a lot of ways responsible for our reality right now, setting up the future so that young people don't have to stress so much about it?

Rollo Romig: I'm interested in your experience of the Youth Mental Wellbeing Co-Lab, what you hope to get from it, and what you might have found valuable so far.

Josh Lavra: There are friends of our work already in the Co-Lab, which is exciting. #HalfTheStory is a grantee of the Responsible Tech Youth Power Fund, and also an organization that I'm personally a huge fan of. KoKo is a long-time friend of Hopelab. They've been doing some incredible work thinking about how to preempt some of the harms young people might experience online.

For me, it's like, wow. We can extend the arms that Hopelab has out in the world with all these organizations that are working in spaces that we would love to, but we're not able to. When we joined this Co-Lab, I was imagining that Hopelab's been driving this car, and our headlights are on, and we're only seeing the road as far as our headlights can go, but now this Co-Lab is like another car on the road with us that's expanding the field of view, or like lights on the hillside helping us to see more of the scene ahead of us. To me, it's superpowering what Hopelab can do by finding partners in the space that are aligned on these topics, but working in totally different angles than we're able to.

Rollo Romig: What's a question that you want to explore with your colleagues in the Co-Lab?

Josh Lavra: I'm often curious about what's working and what isn't working. I like to share that story of the product that failed for us, because failure is a really helpful educator. That's a question of what is and what's not working is on my mind, and something I would love to dig into with some of the Co-Lab members.

At Hopelab, we have some flexibility in the work that we do, and I'm always curious if there are threads that some of these other partners have been trying to pull on but maybe don't have the capacity or the funding to dive into fully, and whether Hopelab can play a role in being a thought partner or unlocking funding to help explore those things. It highlights this idea that we shouldn't be doing any of this work on our own, and this feels like a great community of people who are aligned in values and interests.

Rollo Romig: What do you think are some of the barriers to collaboration between organizations?

Josh Lavra: Time is a big one, and the space to do it. A year flies by. You have an idea, "I would love to chat with them," and then three months go before you're able to get a meeting even to talk about it.

The need to start big. There's a lot of value in just starting small. It could be a small little experiment to test drive what it's like to work together, or maybe a common problem that you want to find an answer or two for. It doesn't need to be a big collaboration, a big effort to work together. Finding small ways to collaborate or even to bridge the work that we're doing feels helpful.

Funding, of course. That's the benefit of this Co-Lab. We're all receiving funding to continue doing the work that we're doing, but this funding can often unlock the capacity to do some work together. That has certainly been true for the Responsible Tech Youth Power Fund. This funding has enabled us to think long-term about the fund, which, boy, has that changed the game. We're not on a one-year cycle. We're able to think multi-year, which has really shifted the work. I would be curious if that's been the case for other Co-Lab members too.

Rollo Romig: Thanks so much, Josh.

Rollo Romig is the manager of Solutions Insights Lab. He is the author of I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India, which was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

* This interview has been edited and condensed.