Conversation with Michael Sani
Ashley Hopkinson
November 7, 2024

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and about the organization?

Michael Sani: My name is Michael Sani. I'm the Chief Exploration Officer of Play Verto. Play Verto is a gamified research and data analytics platform that connects with communities that are often left unheard, gathers rich insights that reflect their reality, and amplifies those realities to places where they can have representation, affect change, and hopefully feel part of a decision-making process. It's really an effort to ensure that there's greater representation in decisions and bringing lived experience to that, which is often overlooked in research.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there a project you've done that you can share as an example of what Play Verto does?

Michael Sani: I'll use the example of the People's Report, because we're in some exciting explorations now to relaunch that early in 2025 and go for the next five years.

The People's Report was a co-created initiative with social entrepreneurs from around the world that realized that they're in their own lane. They're working on social justice, access to health, education, and climate. If you took a holistic look at the target communities that they often represent, they're likely to be affected by more issues than the one that the social enterprise is working with them on.

We came together as a large group of social enterprises and said: What if we could co-create a set of 11 questions, and we all commit to asking our target communities all 11 questions? Then we'll look at the data together to see where it can help us collaborate to increase our impact, and where we can take that data and bring it to the corridors of power, from local governments all the way up to institutions like the UN and COP.

That was the goal. In terms of how it worked practically, once you align on the questions, you can say, well, this relates to the sustainable development goals and other key indicators that businesses and governments are definitely talking about; whether they're actualizing those discussions is a different matter.

Once you've got the set of questions, that's when Play Verto comes to life, because effectively it's a website. It's a web-based application. It's highly customizable, so we really customize the look and feel to the campaign or topic or theme. We regionalize it. If you click on it in a certain part of the world, if it's architecture or animals or wildlife, it will be regionally adapted. We build a relationship with what we call *the player*, which normal research would call the respondent. We've got 60 languages on the platforms so we really care about someone being able to play in their native tongue.

The ethos is that we want to communicate the why. If we're going to go out there and ask someone to share their reality, why are we doing that? What are the goals of the project, and how do we ensure that they understand the goals and can play a role? Then the playful interactions are where we capture the insights. We've designed playful and creative ways for people to answer traditional survey questions like earth scales, MPSs, select options, multiple choice. You name it, we've got a playful version of it.

The hypothesis that we continuously validate is that play and creativity and joy are really great mechanisms to get someone's attention and trust. If you partner that with a real upfront definition of the why, then you are managing expectations and an individual can make an informed decision.

We know that those informed decisions are working for us, because we have an 80% average completion rate on our play-based surveys, which is three times that of a traditional platform. Play and creativity is a must for us.

The third part of that is when you play, you see the data. Obviously, we are trying to build that continuously to be a better experience for the individual. I'll tell you more from the perspective of why that's important to us as a methodology rather than how we are doing it, because it's evolving continuously.

We want people to be able to see the data because at its core it does two things. It helps an individual challenge their own misconceptions—it's just me, nothing ever changes—and then you see this data and you're like, "I'm part of the 84%. Whoa." That can take you on your own journey.

Hopefully that journey also builds agency, because so many decisions are made about us without us ever being informed. A select few people design manifestos. A select few people decide which

manifestos are going to be prioritized and which pledges are actually going to come into play, even when we're in power. Whereas what we are hoping is that the more you develop a sense of agency, especially from a younger age.

The more you grow as an individual, [to the point] where you might challenge a negative view at the dinner table that you don't agree with. You might stand up to a friend group where you would normally be silent. You might vote. You might volunteer, and it grows. That's where we think representative data can play a fantastic role in an individual and a collective journey of social change.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is distinctive about Play Verto, and how do you think it stands out in the larger world of research and measurement and information-gathering?

Michael Sani: The play-based nature of the platform is definitely a unique selling point. That can be replicated. If it gets replicated and there's more engaging ways of conducting research in the field, we'll be very happy that we've set that in motion. We [don't think that] it's ours and we can be the only ones that do it, because that's a very old-school way of thinking.

I've been in the social-impact ecosystem for 15 years. This is my second social enterprise, and I know social entrepreneurs around the world personally. I've shared in their lives. I've collaborated with them. I'm part of networks where we get to meet regularly at conferences and crescendo moments. That is the pool of people I go to when we are disseminating and doing our research. That is completely different from a traditional research company that has a panel, because many people on a panel are checking their emails. They get an email [with a survey], and they're not bothered about who's conducting the research or who's commissioned it or where the data's going. They just know that, click, click, click, click, click—I'm three surveys away from my Amazon voucher. That's a very different type of data, but that has been the old-school data that shapes government policy, corporate strategy, institutional policy.

We want to disrupt that, but not to go and do product testing with people, because that's a key part of research that we're just not interested in. We want to do research on people's lives, behaviors, interests, needs, wants, hopes, aspirations, realities. If we can do that by reaching what many describe as the first mile, the people most affected, those often furthest away from the decision-making table, that's one of our unique selling points: reaching the voices that are often unheard.

We do it in so many unique ways. One is trying to make sure that we can operate in an offline capacity. We've got various examples in different parts of the world where there's no connectivity. It's an element of citizen science. We work with community leaders. We'll download a Verto experience to a

device or two. They can go into a community and invite the community to play. That data is stored on the device browser. Then when you're back online, the data comes into a central database. We're constantly thinking about how we reach people that are often not reached. The platform is quite iterative and bespoke. Where can we lead with pictures more than words for folks that may not have the literacy level? We're always trying to think about this: what's the minimum lovable product that everyone can play? Then you raise it depending on where you're targeting and who you're speaking to.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is the role partnerships play in your work, and how do you maintain those partnerships?

Michael Sani: Partnerships are crucial in most effective collaborations, and we look at ourselves as an organization where if you're the person leading that partnership, you're a weaver. You're weaving folks into a larger tapestry.

To follow the analogy, because we're a fairly small organization, we collaborate with people so that we don't have to do everything. We just want to stay in our zone of genius, do our bit really well, and work with other people, whether they're the disseminators or whether they're the folks that are going to the policymaking tables to advocate on behalf of the data. We try to bring in partners that are complementary.

With social enterprises, the great thing is there's an unspoken shared passion for social change. If a project makes sense and someone can see that by coming together we can achieve more than doing something individually, that flows really well. That has been the main factor to some of our successes over the years, but we're still learning.

Elements of our learning have been when we failed, when it hasn't gone right, when you didn't communicate an expectation effectively and then it came to a point where all the assumptions were wrong. There's been a lot of that iterative, agile approach to best-practice or next-practice on how to do it right and how to continuously be a better collaborator and be a better partner, but it's something we really enjoy. When they go well it's really great, because then you get to share in the efforts.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think is missing from the conversation about research and measurement? What are some of the gaps you see that you'd like to see filled?

Michael Sani: I'll give you an example with the Transforming Education research. We do a lot in education. People have been meeting at the United Nations General Assembly and the fringe events around it every September for years and years. It's quite shocking when you arrive at these things and you realize that we're there to talk about transforming education and there's no voice of the young

people there. There's no voice of students in the transforming of education—the core most affected stakeholder. That's the part that we like to play in the research. Where's the voice of those most affected by this decision? Where's their interpretation of what's good, what's not good, what needs to change, how to evolve, what they feel is missing?

That piece of research was such a standout because it was a global piece of research: 37,000 children and young people from age 9 to 18 played this experience. We crafted the experience a little bit like a story where it had a beginning, middle, and end. The research started with the post-pandemic: What does a school life look like now? What did you like? What didn't you like? How was hybrid learning? Then we went into change-making effectively: What skills do you think you need to drive change? Have you ever tried to create change at school? Who do you want to create change with?

Then the third and final part of that piece of research really dug into the depths: What do you want from education? What's missing? Out of 37,000 people—19,000 from what many refer to as the Global South—there were some really great core trends that kept emerging.

Young people wanted to learn about culture and community, which is no wonder. They look at us adults fighting and countries going to war and they're probably sitting back thinking, if we understood each other a little bit better, perhaps this wouldn't happen. They wanted to learn how to manage their own mental health, and then they wanted to learn how to save the planet. There were three fundamentals.

There were others around financial education and inclusion, but those were the three that really stood out to me. I thought, how wonderful and heartwarming that these young people are saying it. This is what we want. This is what's missing.

Then when you put the other hat on and you look at most national curriculums globally, those three things are not on the curriculum. You're either fortunate enough to have a really great teacher that brings them in somehow, or you go to a really good school where it's an extracurricular piece that's bolted on. If you go to a state school that's under pressure to get the grades, the teachers are overworked and under-resourced, and these elements are just not really considered.

That's the bit that I really care about. Where's the voice of those most affected, and how are they shaping the decisions? I don't claim that we're the only ones doing it, but we do it in a fun way, because life is far too serious.

For me personally, when something feels so formal, there's a sense that I become a different version. I'm tired. I'm tense. I get flashbacks to high school where I'm in a multiple choice test and I'm looking

up at the clock. Whereas when it's playful and captures my imagination, there's a sense that I'll let loose and I'll tell you what I truly think. That's the bit that we really care about. Let's really capture someone's heart and mind when we're asking them what their reality is like.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think are the most important actions that can help advance play-based research?

Michael Sani: It requires some engagement from the ecosystem. We've been fortunate enough to have some outliers: Lego and Nike and Unilever, and even Deloitte. They've come to us for our methodology, and we've conducted research for them, and we've got them large data sets that they can act upon.

For this to become a little bit more household, we need to weave in more academic-focused researchers to believe that you can do qualitative research en masse. Where you might use a traditional survey platform, you can actually be a little bit more playful. We've worked hard. We've had publications in the past that have been co-authored with Oxford and submitted to the UK government. We've got projects in other parts of the world where we're working closely with government institutions.

When we start to see more people publicizing it, demonstrating that they've made decisions on the findings, then I think some people might change their ways. But these things are habitual and ingrained. There are many folks that just go to a traditional research company to get research. They couldn't really care where that's coming from, as long as it's representative and they get the data back, and then they'll talk about it in a press release.

Whereas I think more and more people are beginning to realize that that isn't actually representative. Just because you can give me a quota of people that make up key demographics, it's lacking cognitive diversity and real-world experience. Then when we look at big decisions that have been made on that data, and we go, "Why did it go wrong?" there's a part of me that says, "I know why it went wrong," because we didn't reach real people.

I think you need a combination of factors. You need it to be a bit more publicized. You need that academic stamp of approval. And then you need a continuous amount of outliers, organizations that want to do it differently, until you reach a tipping point and it becomes the norm.

The reason we want to stay in the niche of social change is because if we can concentrate in one area that's actually most important, then that's the bit that we really want to disrupt. If you come to me to do research on whether I like product A or product B, it doesn't matter if it's more playful, because the

underlying goal of that is to sell more of product A or product B. That isn't the reason we exist as a platform.

We've been told, especially with potential investors, "You need to go a bit more mainstream. That's where the money is." It might well be, but it's not where the passion is. We stick to where we want to be.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is your measure that you are making progress and advancing the goals that you have for Play Verto? What are your own metrics for success?

Michael Sani: Of course, revenue is an essential part, because that keeps good people employed. It enables you to grow, it enables you to have the resources to continuously iterate and develop the platform. We measure ourselves on revenue and repeat business. That is just a norm. It's when I can point to data we've collected and a decision has been made on it, therefore those people that played have influenced the decision. That's the bit that gives me the most joy.

We've got projects that are slightly under embargo at the moment, so I can't talk about exactly who they are, but we are working with a particular Ministry of Education. We're currently in the field conducting research. We've just surpassed 65,000 players for this particular piece of research that's going to gauge children's perspectives on their climate education. The goal is that they are then going to affect their education. It's a three-year project.

When you do wave two of the research, the hope is that there's been a shift and that the data points to a positive shift. Then you can correlate that to the fact that you collected the data, the Ministry of Education, the curriculum writers who came together with young people and teachers to go, these are the results. What can we change? Something has changed. The year two data shows you that it's worked, because data X has now changed to data Y. For me, it's that piece where data is driving decisions and you can point to the fact that it's real people with lived experience that have contributed to that. It points to another goal that we're currently working on.

One of the things that we're really passionate about is creating a data commons of all of the data collected on Play Verto. If you want to work with us moving forward, you have to adhere to a data-sharing principle that you own your primary insights—anything personal is encrypted, that's yours—but the anonymous aggregated data comes into one central repository.

We want to use that to make those insights available to impact leaders so that if I'm running a social enterprise on education or wellbeing in India, I can come to this data set and I can ask it, How do children feel about X around the world? I get the insights, and then I can use that to demonstrate the

importance of my project. We want to remove this notion that big important data sits behind paywalls and is not accessible, and research is often replicated because you didn't have access to the first part that was being done. It is done that way because it's a $106 billion industry today.

Imagine the way you communicate with ChatGTP, for example, but it's coming from an archive of data that's been collected from organizations and social enterprises and anyone that's conducted research with us. You can have this finger on the pulse of reality, not just official SDG indicators that are measured and we can't quite understand, but [for example] how many people have access to health services today and where are they, and how many people don't and where are they? How can we use that data to actually respond?

Ashley Hopkinson: What are some insights or teachable lessons that can be taken from your approach?

Michael Sani: It's a good question. There's an element that has to do with holding ourselves accountable to the why of the project. If we are doing a piece of research, why are we doing it? Having that as a North Star that you can come back to when you are making decisions. These are the questions we're going to ask. If we get the data to these questions, does it help us achieve the why?

You have to really, truly understand and have representation of the target demographics you are looking to research in the curation of the research itself. We would do focus groups with different young people around the world when we're considering what to ask them about the future of education.

You need to then match that with the indicators that define the system today and how you are contributing to them or not contributing to them. There's layers to it, but crucially, it's making sure that the why remains ever-present and can be communicated. The target demographic or community is understood and considered in all elements of how we are going to communicate to them, how they are going to play, how they are going to see the data, and how they are going to be kept up to date if something changes. I think that's a big piece that is really important to us.

From a personal perspective as a social-change leader, the one thing I would say to people is if you are passionate about doing work in social change, find the tribe, because it can be lonely leading anything. Over the years, I've developed a tribe of other social enterprise leaders, and we meet regularly and seek shared experiences from one another that we can draw energy from. That's another big part.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is a challenge that you face in the work, and how are you working to manage that challenge?

Michael Sani: One of the biggest challenges is that the data is taken seriously and is seen as credible, because we live in a society where the majority of people, if they heard play or fun or joy, then it can't be serious, so we can't act on it. I think it's a terribly wrong assumption.

Coming up against that, how can you demonstrate that just because you've gathered this data playfully, the insights actually should be acted upon? One of the ways we're trying to constantly mitigate that is going to formal academic, traditional research organizations, like well-known universities, and laying ourselves at their mercy to say, validate this, or let's collaborate.

Reaching people and getting them to participate is an issue for the majority of organizations doing research. That's one of the things we're good at: high completion rates, reaching people. The youngest player to ever participate in a Verto experience is seven. The eldest player is 83.

We've asked some beautifully deep questions about people's realities, their mental health, their families, and they answer. We know we can do that bit hands down, and that's wonderful and we celebrate that as an organization and partners and collaborators.

Most importantly, we celebrate that with the people that play as best we can, to communicate back to them when they've been part of something. If we can get that academic stamp of approval that says this way of conducting research actually gets you rich insights and actionable insights, then I think we'll take the next leap as an organization and drive into the places where the power is, the places where decisions are made, and that's where we want to be.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders and decision-makers can do to encourage more innovation in data and measurement?

Michael Sani: They can ask where the data came from. If they're being asked to act on something, they can ask, "Where did this come from?"

Because even leaders that act on polls, if they go by polls only, we would live in a very different world than what we lived in today. Most notably, the biggest poll that was wrong in my country: it said that we are never going to leave the European Union. We woke up one day and we voted to leave, but the polls didn't say that, because the poll is a very unique way of capturing data. I think that people will often say what they think the person wants to hear. We see that a lot in voting as well. You have shy

voters that say they're voting a certain way because they don't want the backlash even from their friends and family.

Play and engagement and the perspective of you in this world as an individual—that's the wisdom of gamification. When I'm gaming, it's me in this world, and my actions determine the reaction, and I'm the driver of my own progress. We try to capture that wisdom from gaming, because in games, perceived borders of where you live don't matter. Languages don't matter. It's your interaction and the way you navigate. That's what we've tried to do with Play Verto.

What leaders can do is ask where the data sets come from that they're being asked to make a decision on. They can call out the colleagues that have conducted the research and say, "Where's the voice of lived experience in this? How do I know that if we make that decision, the community will respond?"

If they don't get satisfactory answers, then I think they need to look for other ways of doing it. That's where we take great pride in saying that we will get you the data from the people that will be most affected by that decision for you to then consider their views.

We've had some leaders that have made decisions on our data. Most people spend their time online in the places where they feel most engaged, whether that's the interactions that they're doing or feedback they're getting, it is where they're engaged. Social media proves that. That's why they were created to scroll and tap. I think we've replicated elements of that in the way we do research. We have an engagement first. I genuinely believe that doesn't affect the outcome of the research in a negative way. I think it gives you a greater level of authenticity and more heartfelt responses. If leaders can act more on data that's been collected that way, then we'll start to see a shift away from polls and panels.

Ashley Hopkinson: I want to close by asking you a twofold question: How would you define collective wellbeing? And how can it be measured?

Michael Sani: What a lovely question. If I think about my own journey of wellbeing and how it would shape my vision of the collective, I think it would be an opportunity to be vulnerable and in complete alignment to one's truth, but done in a harmonious way that doesn't affect any other community or the planet, so we can live in deep and full vulnerability, in respect of one another and the planet. That, for me, would be collective well-being.

Can you measure that? Absolutely. We continuously try to measure elements of wellbeing. We're currently doing a beautiful project with the Omega Institute, which is one of the oldest places in upstate New York where social activists used to gather to do inner work. They've just launched a women's leadership program there, and we are measuring it. We designed the questions and the

indicators, and we're doing pre-, mid-, and post-event. We love to measure this stuff. I think it can be trust, vulnerability, knowledge, expectations, sentiment, hope, as well as all of the other factors that need to be true. If you think about Maslow's hierarchy of needs, we need certain things to be true for us to even be able to be well. That's not just true for us, but our families and, in many cases, our community.

We love to measure it. We're always open to working with new folks on seeing how we might measure a project or an initiative that they're doing. I think it's an exciting thing to measure, because if you measure these types of initiatives, and you make sure that the people that have participated see the data, you increase awareness. With increased awareness comes a commitment to consciousness and continuing one's own inner consciousness. I'm definitely not the first person to say this, but I do believe it. I can't do any of the outer work unless I'm doing the inner work in parallel, because most of the things that disturb me outside are triggers that relate to my past. I need to have the courage to keep peeling back the onion and see, where did that start? Why do I think this way? Why does that trigger me to heal my inner child? If I can do that in a way that's authentic and vulnerable, that can encourage others to do the same, then we start to see wonderful things happening.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you, Michael.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

* This conversation has been edited and condensed.