

Wireframe, Season 3, Episode 2:  
Why can't dad unmute himself on Zoom?

Khoi (00:00):

So you've heard this next story before. You've heard it because it's probably happened to you.

Michelle (00:07):

Yeah, so most recently it was when I went to go visit my parents. And essentially I arrived and my dad probably a few hours after I'd come into the house, he was like, "So I've got a list of things for you to do while you're here."

Khoi (00:18):

This is Michelle Brown. She is a designer in Toronto, Canada. And this wasn't the first time that she'd arrived at her parents' house and been given a list of things to do.

Michelle (00:31):

It's pretty much always tech-related tasks. I never really get anything like, "Here, help us fix this drain." It's a little bit more like, "Fix the TV. There is something going weird with the internet," or questions about, "How do I watch Netflix on my phone?"

Khoi (00:46):

Like I said, you've lived a version of this story yourself, where there is an aging family member who asks you how to help them figure out why this gadget or that app doesn't quite work right. From my own experience, I've definitely dealt with this maybe about a million times with my own family. This time, Michelle's job was to help install a brand new surveillance camera that her dad had just bought.

Michelle (01:14):

The first problem I ran into was I realized that my dad's phone was not in fact connected to the Wi-Fi in the house. He was actually using data. He actually had no idea what Wi-Fi and data was.

Khoi (01:24):

Not even on the Wi-Fi, so that's another problem. And now Michelle has to take a step back and fix that one too.

Michelle (01:31):

And I also had to draw a couple of diagrams for him to show what was Wi-Fi, and what was data, because they'd actually been exceeding their cap of data, and they'd been wondering why things were slowing down and cutting off the last few months.

Khoi (01:44):

And then it was back to installing the camera and the app that goes with that, which you have to sign up for. So Michelle is signing him up when she realizes that he's already got an account.

Michelle (01:56):

So we tried to log into his account and he had forgotten his password.

Khoi (02:01):

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So now they're breaking into it.

Michelle ([02:03](#)):

Fortunately, his password was super, super secure and it only took us two tries to get in.

Khoi ([02:07](#)):

Michelle did manage to install that camera in the end, but she wasn't simply going to walk away and hope for the best.

Michelle ([02:14](#)):

I actually ended up installing it on my phone as well, because I knew that if anything went wrong with this down the line, I was going to be the one who was providing the tech support for it.

Khoi ([02:26](#)):

You love your family, you really do, but sometimes you can't help but shake your head. Am I right? It's that their tech problems are so simple for you to understand, and for some reason, so hard for them to figure out. Design is integral to these situations for good and for bad. And especially now, in 2020, with everything going on, connecting with your loved ones matters more than ever before. And often that means from a distance. And that's where technology and design come in.

Khoi ([02:58](#)):

So for today's episode, let's unpack why Michelle and people like her, people like you and me, seem perpetually stuck playing family tech support. I'm Khoi Vinh, Senior Director of Design at Adobe, and this is Wireframe, an original podcast from Adobe XD.

Khoi ([03:20](#)):

You might be the go-to tech support person in your family. But designers can really create solutions to help our aging population live a better life. With Adobe XD, you can design and prototype experiences that help the elderly monitor their health, follow regimens, connect with caretakers and so much more. Learn more about designing user experiences with Adobe XD at [adobe.ly/tryxd](https://adobe.ly/tryxd).

Khoi ([03:48](#)):

Miriam Johnson joins me for this episode. She is one of the producers of Wireframe. Hello, Miriam.

Miriam ([03:54](#)):

Hi Khoi. I've had my own tech problems with my mom, so I can totally relate to this.

Khoi ([03:59](#)):

So what's the story?

Miriam ([04:01](#)):

Well, there was a while where whenever I would FaceTime my mother, I could only see half her face.

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Khoi (04:07):

Were you able to get it fixed?

Miriam (04:08):

Well, I tried. I tried to explain how the other person was seeing her. I'd be like, "Mum, the little square of yourself on your screen is what I'm seeing." And then I'd call her the next time and just see like one eye for half the conversation.

Khoi (04:22):

Yeah, I've been there. There are so many times when I FaceTime my family and I could only see the top of their head or maybe I mostly just see their thumb. It's pretty bewildering.

Miriam (04:33):

I can only imagine how many families have struggled with this exact same thing.

Khoi (04:37):

Especially these past few months, right? Whether it's FaceTime or Zoom or Skype, or what have you.

Miriam (04:43):

Yeah, exactly. So I also asked another Wireframe producer for a family tech support story.

Khoi (04:48):

You mean Dom, right?

Miriam (04:49):

Dominic Girard, yeah. He bought his parents a digital photo frame two Christmases ago, and they still haven't set it up.

Khoi (04:56):

Oh, no. So what happened?

Miriam (04:58):

So he called his mom. Her name is Ginette and he asked her about it.

Ginette (05:02):

That photo frame, you know what? It's still in the box. I tried to do it. I tried to figure it out. I just can't. I can't. I put an email address on it, and then I think a stranger in Texas started getting our photos. I tried to reset it like you said, that didn't change anything. Then your father tried to make it work. Well, he couldn't figure it out either. So you know what? It's staying in the box until I see you at Christmas.

Khoi (05:29):

She sounds kind of angry. I mean, you have to have a little sympathy for Dom's mother there, right?

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Miriam ([05:36](#)):

Yeah, or for any parent really. Like you said, Khoi, we all have these stories.

Speaker 5 ([05:43](#)):

My grand mom, she came up to me and she was like, "Did you know, you can take pictures with your iPad?" And I'm like, "Yeah, I did."

Speaker 6 ([05:55](#)):

My 75-year-old mother just can't seem to figure out how swipe right when I phone her on a multiple apps.

Speaker 7 ([06:04](#)):

My dad was called me over because he needed help getting his new printer working. It turns out it wasn't plugged in. My dad is an engineer.

Speaker 8 ([06:12](#)):

So my mom recently discovered emojis, and she hasn't sent me a message with words in them for the past two weeks now.

Khoi ([06:22](#)):

Yeah, we chalk this up to being an old person problem, but there is more to it than that. Am I right?

Miriam ([06:30](#)):

Well, let's get into that. And let's start with Dr. Jeff Johnson.

Jeff ([06:36](#)):

Technology doesn't stop. The people who are my students today, I try to convince them that they will experience this themselves, and they of course, don't believe it. Their children are going to be saying to them things like, "Mom, why are you Instagramming me? Who uses Instagram anymore?"

Miriam ([06:54](#)):

So Dr. Johnson co-wrote a book called, Designing User Interfaces for an Aging Population. He also runs a consulting firm that is basically all about designing for older adults.

Khoi ([07:10](#)):

There are a ton of old people in America. That's the fastest growing demographic, if I'm not mistaken, right?

Miriam ([07:10](#)):

Yeah, apparently 40% of America's population is over 50.

Jeff ([07:15](#)):

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We felt it was time to pay close attention to this demographic and to make sure the technology can be useful for them because the irony is that technology can benefit older adults, perhaps even more than it can benefit younger adults because older adults often experience limitations that make it more difficult for them to get around.

Miriam (07:35):

So think of things like being stuck in a nursing home, or you're confined to your own house for whatever reason.

Khoi (07:42):

They're basically scenarios where it becomes kind of critical that you're able to connect with the people that you care about.

Miriam (07:48):

Right. And if they struggle, it's because older adults, they really don't have a great mental map of how these newer technologies work. So it's like, if you're standing in the cockpit of an airplane, and you're seeing all these dials and knobs and buttons in front of you, unless you're a pilot, you won't know what any of them mean or what to do with them.

Khoi (08:11):

Yeah. That's basically how I feel when I use Tik Tok.

Miriam (08:13):

That's exactly how Dom and Michelle's parents feel too.

Khoi (08:20):

And my mom and your mom too, probably.

Miriam (08:20):

Yeah. I mean these tools, they're just not used to them.

Jeff (08:23):

When people grow up, as they go from about age 10 to about age 30, there is a certain technology that is dominant at the time. And that's the technology that gets into their brains and becomes part of their being. And when the technology moves on from there, then people tend to get confused and they fall behind.

Khoi (08:44):

This really applies to a lot of different things, right? Like the food we like, the clothes we wear.

Miriam (08:49):

Yeah. It's like how we all know someone in their 70s who's had exactly the same haircut since the 1960s. And the scary thing is, we are all on our way to becoming that person as far as someone else is concerned.

Khoi (09:01):

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None of us think that we're stuck in time, but I guess we really are.

Jeff ([09:04](#)):

Nobody is old. Everyone thinks of themselves as young. Then if you give them a product that brands them as being an old adult, they're not going to touch it with a 10 foot pole.

Miriam ([09:20](#)):

Khoi, let me ask you this, how much music do you listen to using an app like Spotify or Apple Music?

Khoi ([09:27](#)):

Pretty much 100% of everything I listen to.

Miriam ([09:29](#)):

So how do you generally feel about the way that those apps are designed? Do you find them easy to navigate or is there anything you'd do differently?

Khoi ([09:37](#)):

It's basically what I know, right? So it's very natural for me to go through and try to find the artist or the album that I want, then I queue it up and hit play.

Miriam ([09:46](#)):

It can be a pretty different experience as you age though. So I wanted a bit of an older perspective on something like this, so I spoke with Mike Dougan. He's 69, he drives a lot and he listens to a lot of music on Spotify while he's driving.

Mike ([10:02](#)):

My youngest daughter introduced me to it, but then she's so quick with how it works and what to do. And she does it all in a blur because she's very computer savvy, and to be really honest, it was all Greek to me. I just couldn't figure out how to go in and create my playlist of music that I like with the different genres. Because sometimes I really enjoy classical, sometimes it's more the sort of soft rock or just plain folk music. And I don't think necessarily that they're being designed for my age demographic. I think that's where the challenge is.

Khoi ([10:38](#)):

Spotify is so popular and you've really got a wonder how many other people are struggling like this with how to put playlists together or even just how to find the music that they like?

Miriam ([10:50](#)):

Now, imagine this you're tasked with designing a music app that is specifically for seniors, and you had no idea how to do that, and you'd never done anything like it before.

Khoi ([11:06](#)):

Why are we playing this bit of classical music right now?

Miriam ([11:09](#)):

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Just to make a small but useful point, Khoi. Classical song titles are really long. And this one, it's Beethoven by the way, is no exception. It's called Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, OP.67: Allegro Con Brio.

Khoi ([11:26](#)):

It doesn't really roll off the tongue

Miriam ([11:27](#)):

No, it really doesn't. And an interface like Spotify, doesn't do a great job of displaying it either, which brings us to Sophie Kim.

Sophie ([11:35](#)):

My name is Sophie Kim. I'm a product designer at Studio Red. We are a product design consultancy located in Menlo Park, California.

Miriam ([11:45](#)):

A fun fact about Studio Red is that this is the studio where they designed those super cool sunglasses that everyone in The Matrix wore.

Khoi ([11:56](#)):

That's pretty cool. I mean that fact, not necessarily the glasses.

Miriam ([11:56](#)):

So you wouldn't wear those glasses?

Khoi ([11:59](#)):

Not in 2020.

Miriam ([12:02](#)):

Not in New York. So in this case, Sophie wasn't designing futuristic eyewear for senior citizens, she was working on an app called Octave, and it's built a partner with a piece of pretty high end audio equipment. So this is the kind of thing that you buy if you want to convert your massive CD library into a digital one.

Khoi ([12:22](#)):

So what's the connection to seniors here. I guess you're about to tell me that this app's customers are generally older.

Miriam ([12:30](#)):

Right. And their user research confirmed it.

Sophie ([12:33](#)):

When the company research about their typical persona, the typical persona was like 65 years old.

Miriam ([12:41](#)):

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65 years old. And many of them were really into classical music especially. Like really into it.

Sophie ([12:48](#)):

So they collect the music throughout their life. A lot of them have like 5,000 CDs, 10,000 CDs. That was kind of average.

Khoi ([12:57](#)):

Okay. So you've got 65 year old customers. They've got CD collections of five or 10,000 discs each. So there's probably some pretty simplistic assumptions that a lot of people would make when designing a music app straight out of the gate.

Miriam ([13:11](#)):

Right. And when Sophie first started this project, she did make some of those assumptions.

Sophie ([13:17](#)):

The first assumption was okay, people are going to need big text. Like those kinds of simple things, how you want maybe more contrast, you want to have the big button. We thought it should be more simplified in general, but actually strangely it was opposite, because they wanted to read more.

Khoi ([13:43](#)):

She said they wanted to read more. Maybe they wanted to be able to read the full title of a really long Beethoven song.

Miriam ([13:51](#)):

Well, wouldn't you if you were a Beethoven fan? It is a lot of texts for your average music app. By comparison, one of Justin Bieber's most popular songs is called Yummy.

Khoi ([14:03](#)):

And it's just as good as the Beethoven song.

Miriam ([14:04](#)):

They're both musical geniuses.

Khoi ([14:07](#)):

So what you're saying is Spotify is built for Yummy?

Miriam ([14:11](#)):

Yeah. Short song titles definitely show up better. So when Sophie asked her older users, they largely said that they found apps like Spotify too light.

Khoi ([14:22](#)):

Too light, meaning too little information, right?

Miriam ([14:25](#)):

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Yeah. And too reliant on user intuition.

Sophie ([14:29](#)):

It was very interesting because a lot of things we thought is very intuitive, they didn't get it. Some users didn't like swiping or zooming or any new kind of interaction that we think is fresh.

Khoi ([14:43](#)):

Yeah. I guess those conventions which a lot of us have come to accept as just being the way that you would use your phone, they still are kind of novel and difficult to keep in mind for many users.

Miriam ([14:55](#)):

And especially even if you think about something like motion control with your hand shaking or something like that, swiping and be really difficult if you have any kind of issue like that. And she also got similar feedback around icons. Younger users might see icons as really clean and simple. And for her users, they felt like information was hiding.

Khoi ([15:17](#)):

So Miriam check it out. I'm going to drop some design knowledge on you. The universal rule for when to use icons and when not to use icons, is it depends.

Miriam ([15:29](#)):

I love rules like that. They're so specific.

Khoi ([15:32](#)):

Anyway, let's get back to Sophie. Where did all this user research lead the team with this Octave app?

Miriam ([15:38](#)):

Basically, don't make the interface too fancy and layer in as much information as possible.

Sophie ([15:44](#)):

We laid out information much more logically, alphabetically, something a little more expected, maybe it's a little more boring but it's definitely worked much better.

Khoi ([15:55](#)):

Right. You stick to what works in the real world, and then you apply it in a sensible way to the digital world.

Miriam ([16:01](#)):

Exactly. And also don't let the app cut off song titles with like a ... where it's scrolling across the screen. And keep the interface consistent throughout so that no one is trying to memorize how each section is navigated.

Khoi ([16:19](#)):

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Miriam, as I'm listening to Sophie's experience, it really reminds me why it's so important to design with the people that we're designing for.

Miriam ([16:30](#)):

Yes. And this is something that Dr. Jeff Johnson talks about. We heard from him a little bit earlier.

Jeff ([16:36](#)):

People say, "Well, we can handle all of the problems with older adults because we are designed for accessibility, so for blind people and deaf people." But the trouble is older adults often have multiple things failing, and they're not usually totally blind, and they're not usually totally deaf. And so the things that will help a blind person are not necessarily the same things that will help an older adult who has failing eyesight, but not no eyesight.

Khoi ([17:06](#)):

One easy way to address this is to design the technology in such a way that it offers information to people in different ways. So you could have captions and sound and visuals, and that way the user has options.

Miriam ([17:22](#)):

And it's not just older users who benefit from that kind of thing. I love watching shows with captions on.

Khoi ([17:27](#)):

Yeah, captions are really great. We did a whole story about them back in season one.

Miriam ([17:32](#)):

It's so nice to see the words on the screen. And for Jeff, this is all part of empathic design. He says sometimes the best thing a designer can do is physically embody users who are not like them.

Jeff ([17:44](#)):

What it involves is taking young designers and giving them physical constraints, putting clothing on them that constraints their movements, putting glasses on them that blur their vision or darken it. Some car companies, for example, put suits on people that constrain your movement and then say, "Okay, get in and out of this car." That opens a lot of people's eyes.

Khoi ([18:11](#)):

The idea of physically embodying your users is really interesting, provided of course that you are still designing with them and you're not just imagining what their experience is.

Miriam ([18:23](#)):

Right. And Jeff is definitely a proponent of both. Khoi, I wonder if we need to take a moment here and throw the entire premise of designing for seniors just out the window. Take a listen to what this next person has to say. This is Don Norman.

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Don ([18:42](#)):

I've been annoyed by the kinds of products I see for the elderly population. So for example, take a walker, it shouts out to the world, "I'm old and frail and see, I can't behave like a normal person."

Miriam ([18:55](#)):

Don is, putting it mildly, pretty well known in the design world.

Khoi ([18:59](#)):

Yeah, he definitely is. He wrote *The Design of Everyday Things*. That's a book that's on probably every UX designer's bookshelf, including mine.

Don ([19:08](#)):

Quite often when you see somebody on a walker you assume also not only are they old and frail, they can't understand, so you have to talk more loudly and slowly and more clearly. Nonsense. Why can't we design a walker that's so attractive that teenagers want it.

Miriam ([19:26](#)):

Don is saying, "Stop assuming age is the problem." We need to start looking at the design opportunities that older users bring to everyone.

Don ([19:35](#)):

I'm 84. Everybody says, "Ooh, that's old." Well I don't feel old. Hell, there's a whole lot of us. I have a friend who's 92 who is in excellent physical condition. Age is not the issue. What the issue is, is what your physical capabilities are.

Miriam ([19:55](#)):

Speaking of age, Khoi, I want to point out the Don who's many years my senior, is way better at tech than I am.

Khoi ([20:02](#)):

Oh really?

Miriam ([20:04](#)):

Yeah. It's actually pretty embarrassing. I called him on Zoom, and I was calling from this very dimly lit cave-like room with my face just kind of peeking out from the shadows.

Khoi ([20:14](#)):

Okay. I'm picturing it.

Don ([20:16](#)):

Let's try it again and talk over-

Miriam ([20:19](#)):

My voice specifically?

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Don ([20:20](#)):

Yeah. Just count to 10 or something. I'm recording now. So-

Miriam ([20:25](#)):

One, two, three, four, five, six-

Don ([20:29](#)):

Okay. That's probably enough to test. So now I'll stop.

Miriam ([20:35](#)):

Anyway, so Don comes in and he's surrounded by a fake background. This is a field of bright yellow flowers. And right away, I can tell he's kind of a video conference pro, and I'm clearly not. And he's wondering why my background isn't as sunny.

Don ([20:51](#)):

So do you know how to change the background behind you like the way I did when I showed you I'm suddenly in a field of flowers or suddenly I'm on a road going down the hill, or suddenly there's the surf behind me and surfers on the beach?

Miriam ([21:04](#)):

I actually don't know how to do that.

Don ([21:06](#)):

Right. And by the way, it's not hard to do, but only if you know what particular little button to push, and then what to do when you've pushed it. It's just not designed properly. That's what our field is all about, it's trying to make things that people can really understand and use effortlessly.

Khoi ([21:24](#)):

Here are two people separated by decades, and in this case, it's really the older person who is a lot more-

Miriam ([21:31](#)):

With it?

Khoi ([21:32](#)):

I wasn't going to say it like that, but sure.

Miriam ([21:34](#)):

Well, so for Don, one of the biggest ways that design fails, and this is no matter how old you are, is by making us jump through way too many hoops.

Khoi ([21:43](#)):

Yeah. This is like Michelle's dad with the security camera.

Miriam ([21:46](#)):

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Or Dominic's mom with the digital photo frame.

Don ([21:49](#)):

Well, look, you've opened lots of boxes of electronic equipment. All of you listening, I'm sure you have. And most of the time it's a mess and you have to plow through this, that and the other. And you see, you don't even know where to begin.

Khoi ([22:03](#)):

This is why it's so useful to have a lot of people open your box or try your app and really get a feel for how it works. Particularly people of different ages, 20 year olds, 80 year old, everyone in between.

Miriam ([22:15](#)):

But here's the thing, Don Norman knows that no matter what, this family tech support challenge that we've been talking about, it doesn't really ever go away.

Don ([22:24](#)):

No, but I remember I first mentioned this, it felt like 20 years ago when I was at Apple and giving a talk to CIOs or CTOs of companies. And as an aside, I said, "And all of you of course have a second job as a tech support for your family." And they all laughed and groaned and so on.

Khoi ([22:49](#)):

It's so telling how he's been talking about this family tech support thing for 20 years now. And in that time, tech has supposedly gotten easier to use and much better design, but here we still are, talking about the same problems.

Miriam ([23:05](#)):

Yeah. Tech is always racing ahead. And that's why it's worth remembering Don's advice about why user experience design is so important.

Don ([23:15](#)):

It's the way you think through the system and what the person is going to experience and what they're thinking about. It isn't what color you use and what kind of material you use that's important, but the real thing is thinking of yourself, opening it and wanting to be excited. That's what user experience is all about. Coherent, cohesive, understandable, exciting.

Khoi ([23:44](#)):

So Miriam, this whole conversation reminds me of this quote that I've always loved from the writer Douglas Adams.

Miriam ([23:53](#)):

Oh, the guy who wrote The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

Khoi ([23:55](#)):

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Yes, yes, exactly. So he said, "Anything that's invented between when you're 15 and 35 is going to be new and exciting and revolutionary, and you could probably get a career in it too. And anything invented after you're 35 is against the natural order of things."

Miriam ([24:14](#)):

It makes sense. We all find ourselves on either side of the tech support equation, depending on the situation.

Khoi ([24:22](#)):

Right. And I want to come back to the idea that this is partly about how motivated a user is to solve a particular problem. Like Don Norman. He might've been motivated to change his background on zoom, and maybe you weren't so motivated.

Miriam ([24:36](#)):

Right. I mean, is the effort to change a setting worth it for the user? Is it worth it enough digging through Zoom preferences to swap a background. For me, not really.

Khoi ([24:47](#)):

You're not going to feel very motivated to set something up that feels like it wasn't really built for you. So it's really not about age, it's about designers making sure that we design with the people that we're designing for. And that's how we sidestep really kind of simplistic assumptions about our users. And also frankly, how we make sure that we're not making people feel bad when they use the things that we design.

Miriam ([25:13](#)):

Or make people feel bad when we get frustrated at our family members, because they can't work a video chat.

Khoi ([25:18](#)):

Right. Exactly. My mom gets frustrated because she can't work the video chat, and I get frustrated at her. And then I also feel bad. I feel ashamed that I got frustrated. So it's really kind of a lose-lose situation. But I want to come back to Michelle Brown from the beginning of the episode.

Miriam ([25:36](#)):

The one who you said installed her parents' camera surveillance app on her own phone.

Khoi ([25:40](#)):

Yeah, she did that anticipating that she would have to deal with some future family tech support questions eventually. But then she also realized that it was kind of nice to have it on her phone.

Michelle ([25:51](#)):

My mom has taken to sometimes waving at the camera when she goes out the door to say hello to me. Like even this morning, I noticed my mom had gone outside to do some gardening, and I was like, "Oh, you got some new sneakers on." Because I see it now.

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Miriam ([26:04](#)):

So as far as tech support goes, she doesn't seem to mind this one as much.

Khoi ([26:08](#)):

Not only that, but it comes with dessert too.

Michelle ([26:11](#)):

It's good to feel like I'm contributing something. When I go there, my mom makes me some really great food and it feels like I'm giving back at least to say, "For some help with tech stuff, I will eat your pie now."

Miriam ([26:23](#)):

Well, that's the best reason to help the fam.

Khoi ([26:24](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. Thanks Miriam.

Miriam ([26:28](#)):

Thanks so much Khoi. See you later.

Khoi ([26:31](#)):

Miriam Johnson is a producer with Wireframe. And that's another episode of Wireframe. I don't know if it's going to solve your own family tech support problems, but I hope knowing that we're all facing one kind of tech problem or another, maybe that helps somehow. Next time on Wireframe, the rise of crowd funding platforms as we distributed the act of charity. We'll take a look at how designers think through the user experience of giving and at how design helps people give more. I'm Khoi Vinh, and this is Wireframe, an original podcast from Adobe XD. Learn more on how to design with XD at [adobe.ly/tryxd](https://adobe.ly/tryxd).