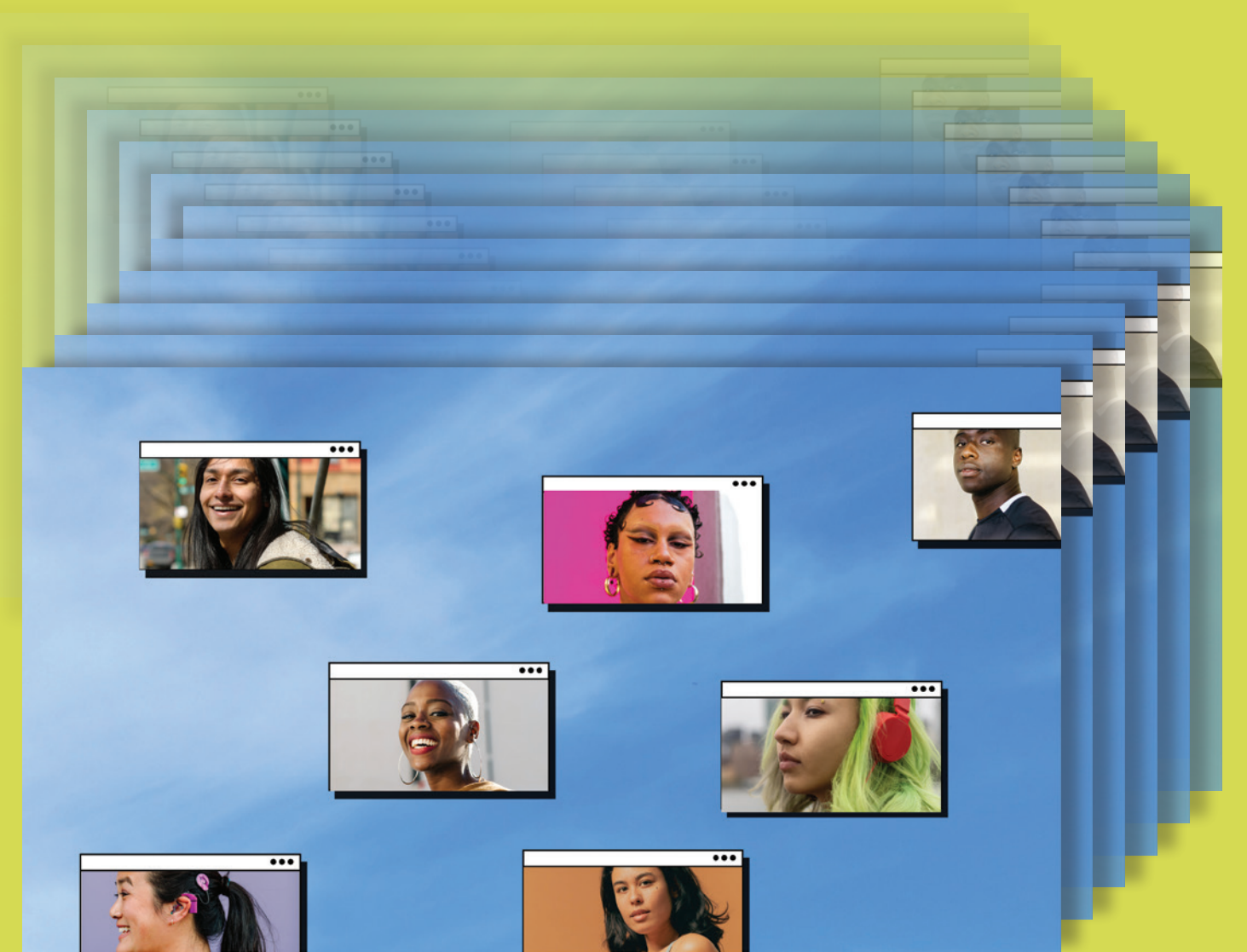


# THE GOOD PLACE

Words by Allyssia Alleyne

How can we rethink digital spaces – and design a better kind of social media? Somewhere Good, a new initiative from entrepreneur Naj Austin, attempts to do just that



ABOVE Social media, but different: Somewhere Good

**FOR MANY**, social media stopped being fun a long time ago. Twitter promotes itself as 'a free and safe space to talk', TikTok is trying to 'inspire creativity and bring joy' and in 2017 Mark Zuckerberg penned 5,800 words on Facebook's goal of 'building a global community', but the world's most popular platforms have found themselves haunted by negativity, fostering feelings of loneliness, anxiety and low self-esteem among its most loyal users.

The experience can be worse for people who aren't white. A 2020 survey found that 41% of Americans reported being on the receiving end of some form of online

harassment; and of those who had been harassed, 54% of Black respondents and 47% of Hispanic respondents said they were targeted because of their race or ethnicity specifically. (Seventeen percent of white harassment targets made the same claim.)

So perhaps it's no surprise that, at the time of writing, there are nearly 10,000 people queuing up to enter Somewhere Good, the as-of-yet-unreleased virtual community which positions itself as a social playground for people of colour, by people of colour. First announced in October 2020, it is the type of space ▶

## There are no friends or followers; there are no ads, or algorithms suggesting content; there are no timelines or news feeds or endless scrolls

**OPPOSITE** Naj Austin, founder of Somewhere Good and Ethel's Club

that, according to founder and CEO Naj Austin, is both frustratingly rare and increasingly coveted.

'Generally, people are very disillusioned with current social platforms and are looking for something that's more meaningful. They want a place to actually gather and connect with people in a way that feels safe and feels fun,' Austin says over the phone from her home in Brooklyn. '[At Somewhere Good,] we're chasing this larger narrative of: "Can we create a digital space that allows for [people who hold] marginalised identities to connect with one another, in a way that feels playful? In a way that feels intentional?"'

Rather than cobbling together elements of incumbent platforms and repackaging them with a brown skin, Somewhere Good is turning to its prospective users to find out what the features and feelings they actually want from a social platform are, and using design to deliver them. Early on, the team began polling those on the waitlist to find out their needs and priorities, and used those responses to shape their offering. 'I deeply believe in collaborative building with everyone,' Austin says. 'We're doing the best we can from our perspective, but everyone has their own biases, everyone is coming in with their own lived experiences. The only way to make [Somewhere Good] stronger is to give everyone a platform to voice what those are, and for us to try to build around it.'

Those on the waitlist aren't the only ones eager to see what the company comes up with: in May this year, Somewhere Good raised a \$3.75m seed round that included investment from former Reddit CEO Ellen Pao and actor-activist Gabrielle Union.

This isn't the first time Austin has wrestled with the question of how best to build and serve communities. Somewhere

Good is her second startup, following quickly on the heels of Ethel's Club, a wellness-focused members' club for people of colour that she founded in Brooklyn in 2019. Moving the club's programming online at the start of the pandemic was a crash course in digital engagement, but building an app at scale is a different beast.

Last spring, the team recruited an interdisciplinary group of research fellows to 'help us think about our platform and how it exists amidst the internet,' says Austin. Features that address concerns around care and safety have been priorities, and remain works in progress: a moderation system that protects those involved, but doesn't feel carceral; procedures to report abuse that are thorough but not triggering; a citation function that ensures thinkers and creators are properly credited for their contributions to discussions. A robust set of community guidelines – a 'living document' that users can suggest additions to – mandates a tonal baseline of dinner-party civility.

The action happens in forum-like 'worlds' related to different subjects – Afrofuturist texts, say, or Black feminism – that are updated with conversational prompts. Responses can be added via voice notes, and in the future gifs, images, links and text will be enabled, too. After a certain amount of time passes, conversations are archived; people are encouraged to move on and keep exploring.

But the platform is remarkable as much for what's missing as it is for what's there. On Somewhere Good, there are no friends or followers; there are no ads, or algorithms suggesting content; there are no timelines or news feeds or endless scrolls.

'Most platforms reward ego-driven, loudest-person-in-the-room behaviour, ►



