PLANETAPLAY PRODUCT STORY

Bulgaria's first video-on-demand platform, built directly into a media production pipeline and engineered to behave like a desktop application.

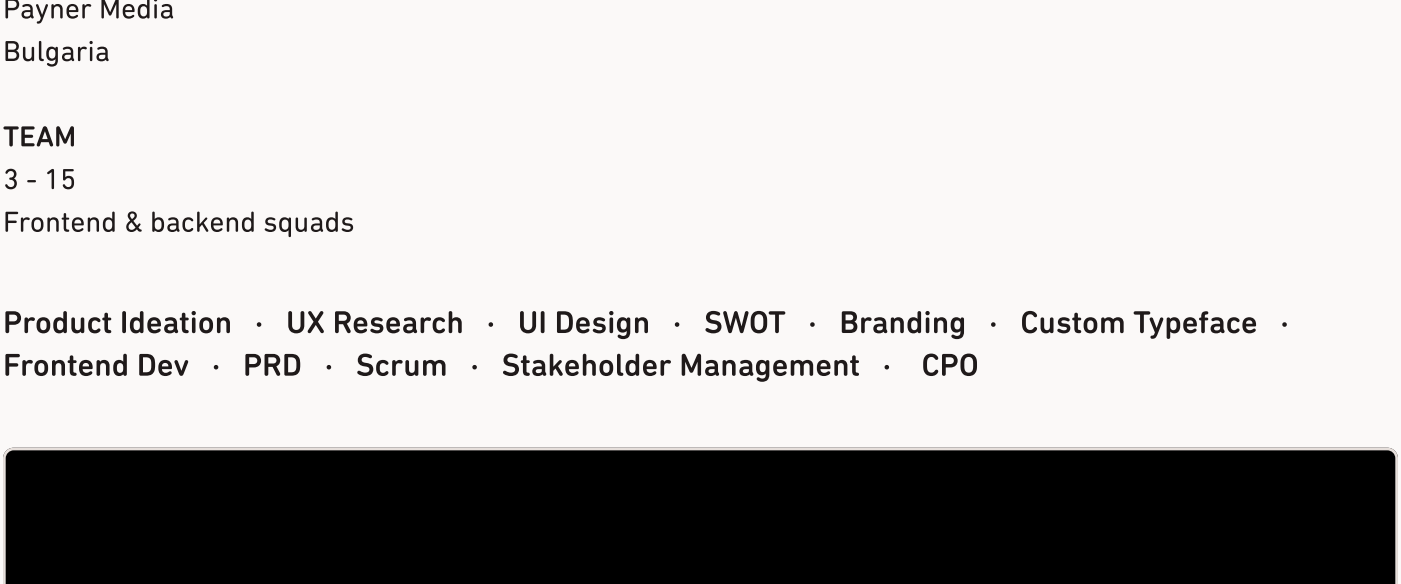
ROLE
Product Owner, Designer & Architect

TIMELINE
2008-2014
Six years

CLIENT
Payner Media
Bulgaria

TEAM
3 - 15
Frontend & backend squads

Product Ideation · UX Research · UI Design · SWOT · Branding · Custom Typeface · Frontend Dev · PRD · Scrum · Stakeholder Management · CPO



01 · Summary

Planetaplay was the first video-on-demand platform in Bulgaria built directly into a production pipeline, and the first that behaved like a desktop application.

I led its creation as **product designer**, **product architect**, and **product manager**. The **decisions**, the **research**, and the **design direction** were mine: the **SWOT** and **product strategy**, the **UX research**, the **interaction model**, the **brand** and a **custom typeface** reused across five products, and the **technology direction**.

The entire frontend shipped as a single **AJAX** page where **search**, **playback**, **playlists**, **sharing**, **comments**, and **ratings** all happened in place, with no full-page reload.

In **2008** this was a **structural advantage.** Bulgaria ranked fourth in the world for fixed broadband speed, but that speed only existed for traffic that stayed inside the country.

A locally hosted platform could outrun YouTube for local users, and I architected the product around exactly that gap.

02 · Challenge and Context

YouTube in 2008 **reloaded the full page** on every action, had **no operable playlist**, could **not integrate with a production pipeline**, and reached Bulgarian users over **slow international routes**. The local clone **Vbox** scaled hardware behind a basic player, with no real backend, metadata, or controlled embedding. No existing product solved the combination **Payner** needed.

Payner Media held the **largest catalogue and production pipeline in the country** and wanted it in front of internet users. The requirements ruled **YouTube** out one by one:

- **Metadata** pulled directly from the production pipeline
- **Controlled embedding**, so clips played only where the label allowed, the brief that became **Planetapartner**
- **Format optimization** through an FFMPEG transcoding backend
- **User profiling shared across** all their sites, the brief that became Planetaface
- **A dynamic comment section**, RSS from Planeta.tv, and cross-links to the store, all under the label's full control

SWOT summary

Strengths: the largest catalogue and pipeline in the country, a four-year client relationship with insider knowledge, and technical judgment already validated by the failed Vivacom VOD attempt.

Weaknesses: everything built from scratch, a scope close to impossible, and dependence on one client's vision.

Opportunities: the local-speed asymmetry, a market shifting to bundled IPTV and VOD, and integrations YouTube and Vbox structurally could not offer.

Threats: YouTube improving, monetization rules eventually opening the region, and the client's lack of proper management and technical domain knowledge.

03 · Discovery and User Insights

I treated this as a **research problem** before a design one. We ran **surveys** and **polls** on the fan forums, sat through observation sessions, interviewed Payner's editors about the production process, ran split tests, and, because no off-the-shelf analytics existed yet, built a primitive heat-map tool to quantify how people actually clicked and moved.

The audience split into two age groups, 14 to 25 and 30 to 45, and behaved more alike than expected. Both cared about **speed of interaction** more than **features or visual polish**. They wanted to reach the next clip, fast. That single insight set the constraints for the whole product.

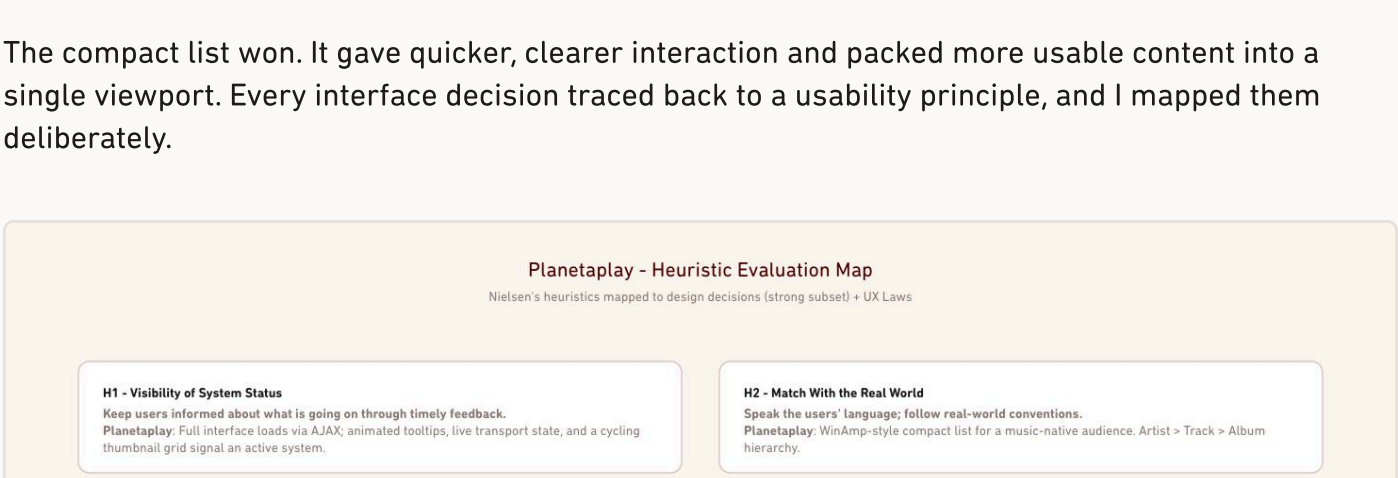
Jakob's Law

People spend most of their time on other products, so they expect yours to behave like the ones they know.

The audience's mental model came from **WinAmp**, roughly 90 million active users at the time, so I designed the core around a compact list with **Artist**, **Title**, and **Album** columns, the hierarchy the audience already lived in.

To test the direction before committing, I produced two interface versions. One followed the YouTube pattern, the other was the research-driven compact list.

The compact list won. It gave quicker, clearer interaction and packed more usable content into a single viewport. Every interface decision traced back to a usability principle, and I mapped them deliberately.

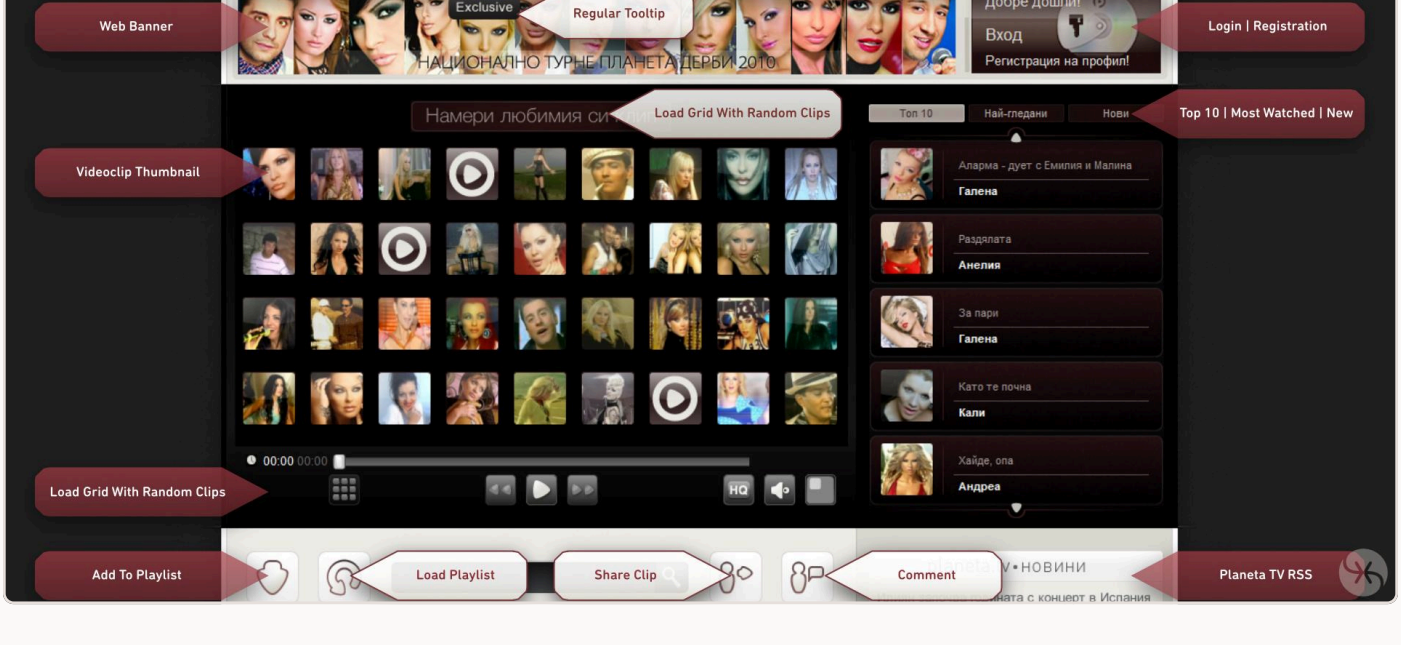

Planetaplay - Heuristic Evaluation Map
Nielsen's heuristics mapped to design decisions (strong subset) + UX Laws
H1 - Visibility of System Status
Keep users informed about what is going on through timely feedback.
Planetaplay: Full interface loads via AJAX; animated tooltips, live transport state, and a cycling thumbnail grid signal an active system.
H2 - Match With the Real World
Speak the users' language; follow real-world conventions.
Planetaplay: WinAmp-style compact list for a music-native audience. Artist > Track > Album hierarchy.
H3 - User Control and Freedom
Provide clear exits; let users move freely.
Planetaplay: Three parallel discovery paths, zero-registration entry, full playlist CRUD. Most users engaged without an account, by design.
H6 - Recognition Rather than Recall
Make options visible so users need not remember across views.
Planetaplay: Thumbnail grid, always-visible genre tabs, sidebar widgets, and hover tooltips. The whole interface sits in one viewport.
H7 - Flexibility and Efficiency
Let novices and experts each work at their own speed.
Planetaplay: Casual users browse the grid; experts search and reload saved playlists.
H8 - Aesthetic and Minimalist Design
Remove the irrelevant so the relevant stands out.
Planetaplay: Two-zone contrast hierarchy and a dense compact list over cards. An application feel, built pixel-perfect.
Hick's Law
Decision time grows with the number of choices. Three discovery paths, not ten; sidebar widgets capped at three categories.
Jakob's Law
Users carry mental models from other tools. WinAmp interaction and universal transport controls transferred existing habits.
Fitts's Law
Target time depends on size and distance. The two-zone layout puts the most-used element, the player, in the dominant area.

The heuristic evaluation map I produced, connecting Nielsen's heuristics and the Laws of UX to specific Planetaplay decisions.

04 · The Final Solution

The interface shipped as a single **PHP/AJAX** page.

Everything happened in **one viewport**, **no page reloads**, **no navigation away from the content**, no **waiting**. The architecture served **speed of interaction** above everything else.


Planeta TV
Editors Choice Playlists
Regular Tooltip
Web Banner
Login | Registration
Load Grid With Random Clips
Top 10 | Most Watched | New
Videoclip Thumbnail
Load Grid With Random Clips
Add To Playlist
Load Playlist
Share Clip
Comment
Planeta TV RSS

The Planetaplay interface as shipped. Above the fold: three discovery paths, the central search field, transport controls, and the login area, all loaded at once via AJAX.

Two-zone contrast layout

The **video** and **audio** player sat in a **high-contrast dark zone** that pulled the eye to the center. The **playlist** and **interaction area** sat in an **intermediate-contrast zone** around it.

Attention went to the **content first,** controls stayed reachable without competing for focus. The player, the most-used element, occupied the largest and most central area, with transport controls within the shortest possible reach.

Three discovery paths

The interface gave **three routes to the same destination**.

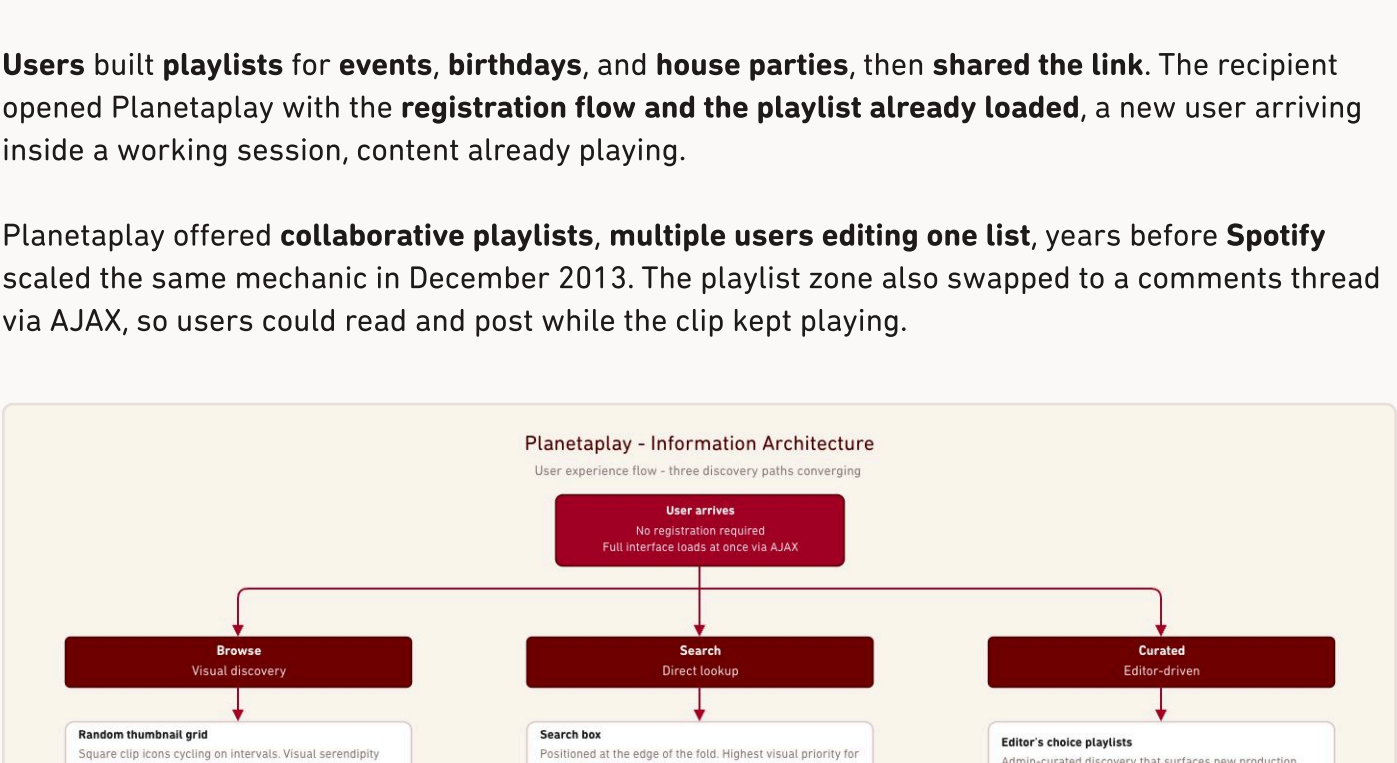
- **Browse:** a random thumbnail grid cycling on intervals, an accidental discovery engine.
- **Search:** a box at the center of the fold for users who arrived with a name in mind, returning a sortable list with an immediate count.
- **Curated:** editor's-choice playlists and sidebar widgets (Top 10, Most Watched, New premieres) driven by Payner's editorial team.

The compact list view, following the WinAmp model: Artist, Title, Album columns, a custom scrollbar, and per-row download, share, and add-to-playlist actions.

Playlist sharing and the growth loop

Users built **playlists** for **events**, **birthdays**, and **house parties**, then **shared the link**. The recipient opened Planetaplay with the **registration flow and the playlist already loaded**, a new user arriving inside a working session, content already playing.

Planetaplay offered **collaborative playlists**, **multiple users editing one list**, years before **Spotify** scaled the same mechanic in December 2013. The playlist zone also swapped to a comments thread via AJAX, so users could read and post while the clip kept playing.

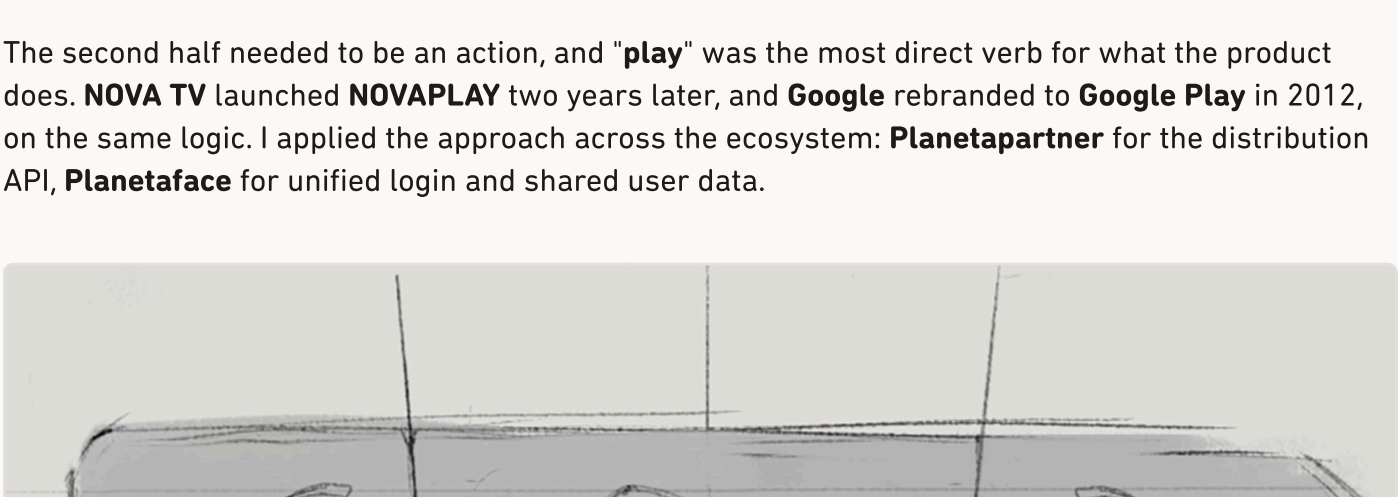

Planetaplay - Information Architecture
User experience flow - three discovery paths converging
User arrives
No registration required
Full interface loads at once via AJAX
Browse
Visual discovery
Search
Direct lookup
Curated
Editor-driven
Random thumbnail grid
Square clip icons cycling on intervals. Visual serendipity engine.
H6 H2
Search box
Positioned at the edge of the fold. Highest visual priority for expert users.
H7 H1
Editor's choice playlists
Admin-curated discovery that surfaces new production.
H6 H7
Category tabs
Exclusive / Promo / Folklore. Genre terms from pop culture.
H2
Results tab
Sortable tabular list with an immediate count indicator.
H1 H6
Sidebar widgets
Top 10 (TV charts), Most Watched, New (premieres).
H6
Planeta.tv RSS Widget
Cross-platform news feed from the TV site.
H4
Content item selected
A video clip or audio track. One destination, three routes.
Video / audio player
High-contrast zone for central eye focus. Watch and read without losing playback.
H8 H1
Transport controls
Play / Pause / Prev / Next / HQ / Volume. Standard, universal patterns.
H4
Playlist zone & Comments
Intermediate-contrast operations zone. The playlist list swaps to the comments thread via AJAX, so users comment while the clip keeps playing.
H3 H7
STAVUX
The single-page AJAX architecture is the differentiator. Every interaction resolves in place, never a full page reload.

The information architecture: user arrival through three discovery paths, convergence on content selection, and the two-zone playback surface.

05 · Branding and Visual Identity

The client proposed **Planetavideo**, **Planetashow**, and **Paynermedia**. I rejected all three. "**Planeta**" was already established from the TV brand.

The second half needed to be an action, and "**play**" was the most direct verb for what the product does. **NOVA TV** launched **NOVAPLAY** two years later, and **Google** rebranded to **Google Play** in 2012, on the same logic. I applied the approach across the ecosystem: **Planetapartner** for the distribution API, **Planetaface** for unified login and shared user data.



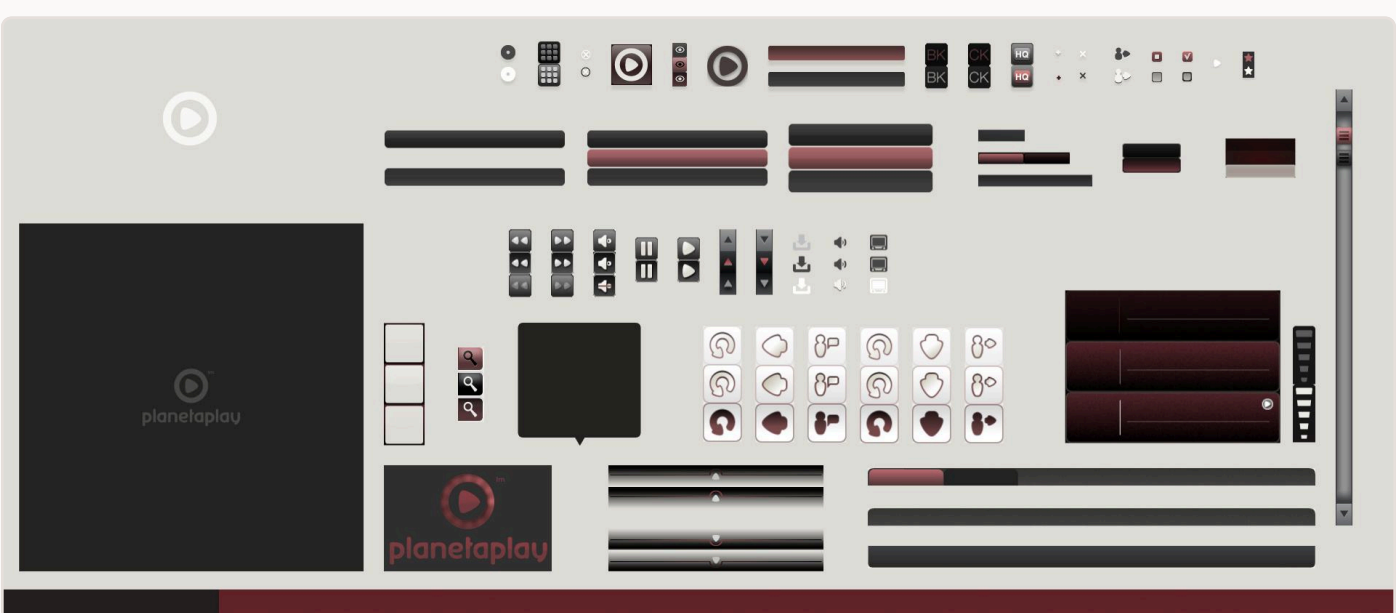
Hand-drawn logo sketch showing the play triangle inside the back/forward interface element.

The final logo system, tested across dark UI surfaces and the burgundy brand panels.

Custom typeface and palette

I took the accessible appeal of **Comic Sans** and mixed it with a cleaner **Helvetica** contour, then drew the result by hand and vectorized it, a custom font reused across all five products.

For color I chose **burgundy** and **cosmic latte**. Burgundy matched the audience's expectations of **value** and **luxury** from the pop content. The warm latte tone kept the dark interface from feeling cold or corporate. The palette worked because I understood what the content communicated and what the audience expected from it.



The complete UI component library, designed in Fireworks and delivered as HTML/CSS prototype. Every button state, transport control, search element, scrollbar, tooltip style, and icon variation used across the platform.

06 · Validation and Impact

Planetaplay launched on November 10, **2009** and ran until **2014**.

Most users never created an account, the zero-registration design meant the real audience was larger than the registered count.

500K+
REGISTERED USERS
1 IN 6 ONLINE BULGARIANS

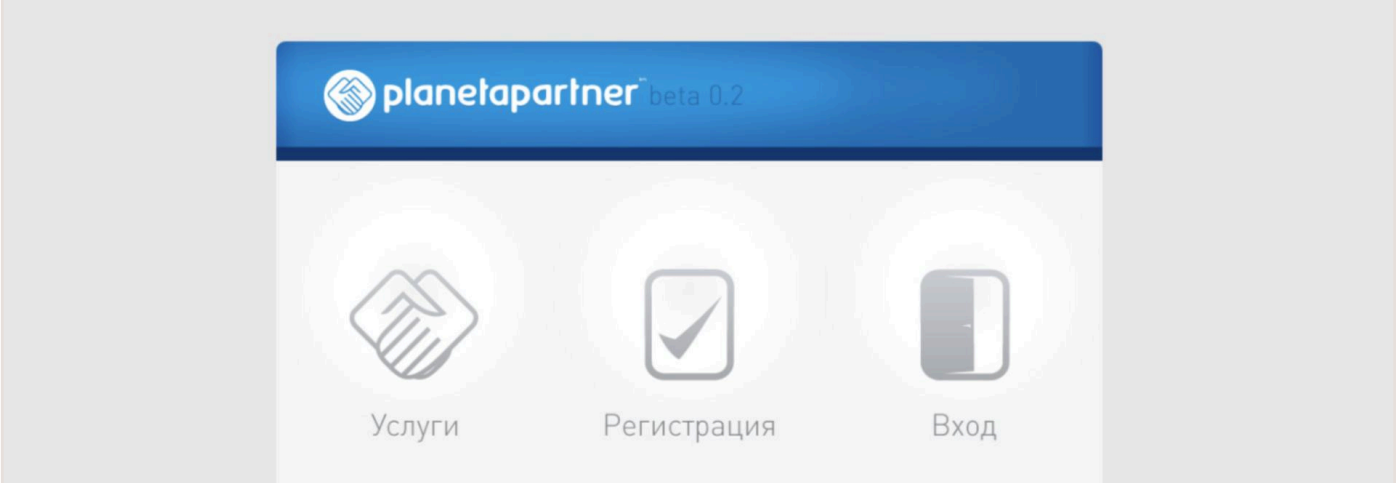
52,560+
HOURS OF VIDEO PLAYBACK

4.8M
SHARED PLAYLISTS
DRIVING THE GROWTH LOOP

A **custom analytics backend** tracked user actions, playback metrics, and the exact point of engagement drop-off.

The data fed four outputs:

- **Production optimization** (which artists to invest in)
- **Artist ranking** beyond TV ratings
- **TV show creation** from the data
- **Advertiser reporting** with concrete per-clip engagement metrics.



Planetapartner, the controlled-distribution layer built for a requirement YouTube structurally could not meet. Partners apply, declare their audience, and receive a per-file access code, keeping the label in control of where each clip plays. Extended functionally to support IPTV partnerships.

The product met every UX and adoption target I set. It closed in 2014 for reasons that had nothing to do with the implementation.

The local-speed advantage narrowed as international routes improved and EU rules opened YouTube to the region. Two ISP partnership deals (Evrocom and the stronger Megalan/Mtel opportunity) failed at the client's decision stage. An undisclosed mobile operator acquired the user base and the technology stack.

07 · Retrospective and Learnings

The architecture held for the full six years without a major rewrite. The AJAX single-page foundation, the two-zone contrast layout, the three discovery paths, and the compact list all shipped in 2009 and remained the interface until the product closed. The research-first approach paid off. Nothing shipped without validation, and the growth loop worked exactly as designed.

What did not work was outside the product. The business context moved faster than the client's willingness to act on what we had built, the Megalan/Mtel deal was the real loss, the right partnership with a capable technical team and a proven API ready for IPTV integration, killed by internal management problems at the moment it needed executive commitment. The product was ahead of its market window.

What I carried forward

Planetaplay was the **most complex project I have built and managed**, ideation, UX research, UI design, brand identity, functional specification, Scrum, stakeholder management, and people management across a rotating team of fifteen.

Product design, practiced at the level where you own the **vision**, the **research**, the **interface**, the **brand**, and the **technical direction** together, is the most complete model I know for **building solutions**.