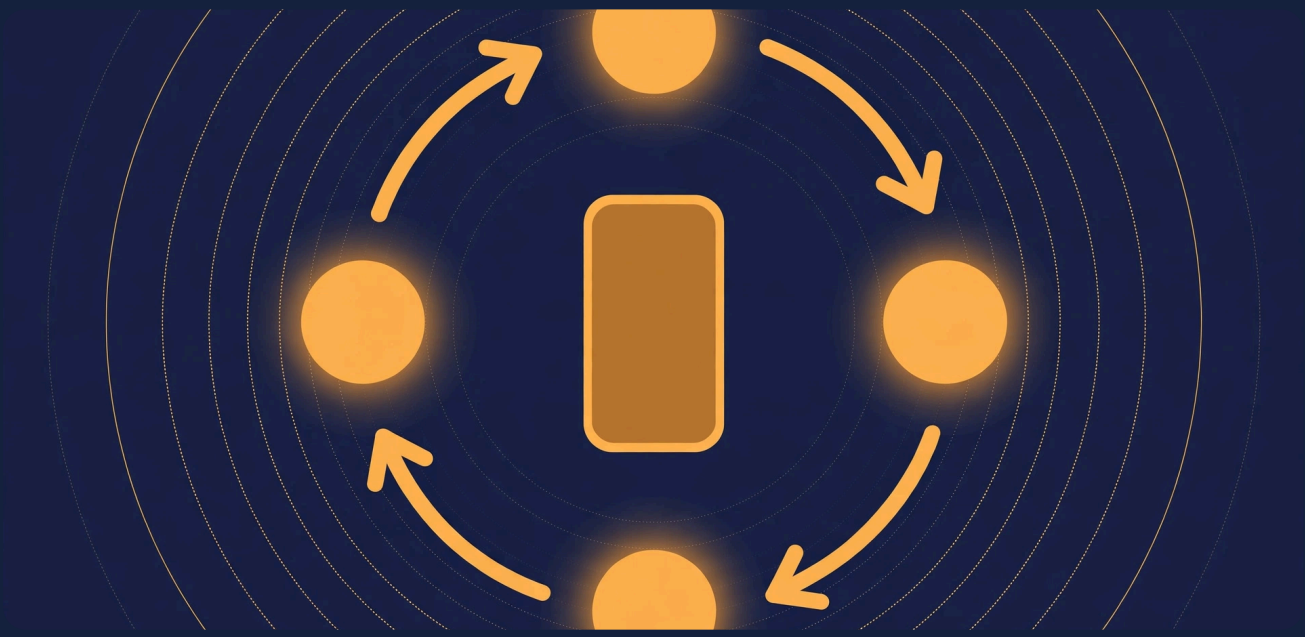
Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products

By Nir Eyal — A 20-Minute Read Summary



The Book in 60 Seconds

Why do some products become habits — things we use without thinking — while most are tried once and forgotten? Nir Eyal's answer is the Hook Model, a four-step loop that turns a conscious choice into an automatic behavior: a **trigger** cues the user, an **action** follows, a **variable reward** keeps them engaged, and an **investment** makes the product more valuable next time and harder to leave. Run the loop often enough, and the product stops being something you decide to use and becomes something you just do. The book is a practical manual for building that loop, and an honest wrestling match with the ethics of doing so. It is a short, sharp read, and once you have read it, you will see the loop everywhere — in your phone, your inbox, and your own daily routines.

The Central Argument

Eyal's core claim is that the most successful products do not win on features, marketing, or even quality in the usual sense. They win by becoming habits. A habit is a behavior done with little or no conscious thought, and a product that becomes a habit has solved the hardest problem in business: it no longer has to convince you to come back. You come back on your own.

The argument rests on a simple observation. Most products compete for attention, and attention is scarce. A product that relies on advertising, reminders, or willpower to bring users back is fighting an expensive, losing battle. A product that has become a habit gets its users back for free, because the cue to return lives inside the user's own head — in a feeling of boredom, loneliness, anxiety, or curiosity.

The Hook Model is Eyal's framework for how that happens. It has four steps, and the steps form a loop rather than a straight line, because the final step — investment — sets up the next trigger. The model is drawn from behavioral psychology, in particular the work of B. J. Fogg at Stanford, and from close study of companies that were unusually good at habit formation. Eyal is a practitioner writing for practitioners, and the book reads like a field manual: case studies, diagnostic questions, and a method for testing your own product against the model.

There is a second, quieter argument running through the book. Eyal knows the techniques he describes are powerful, and he knows power can be misused. The later chapters turn to the ethics of habit-forming design, and they do not offer easy answers. The book's position is that habit-forming design is a tool, that tools can serve the user's goals or exploit them, and that the maker has a responsibility to know which one they are doing. Whether that is enough is a question the book leaves open, deliberately, and it is the question most worth arguing with.

The Hook Model, Step by Step

1. Triggers: the cue to act

A trigger is anything that tells the user to take the next action. Eyal divides triggers into two kinds. **External triggers** are the ones you can see: a notification, an email, a red badge on an app icon, a button, a friend saying “have you seen this?” **Internal triggers** are emotions: boredom, loneliness, anxiety, uncertainty, the small discomfort of a moment with nothing to do.

The goal of the product, over time, is to move from external triggers to internal ones. When the trigger lives inside the user's head, the company does not have to pay to remind you. You remind yourself. Eyal's diagnostic question is direct: what is the internal trigger? If you cannot name the uncomfortable feeling your product relieves, you do not yet have a hook. The feeling comes first. The product is the relief.

Consider email. The external trigger is the notification or the badge. But the internal trigger — the one that actually drives the habit — is uncertainty. Is there something waiting for me? Did someone reply? That small itch is what sends your thumb to the inbox, often with no notification at all.

2. Action: the simplest possible behavior

The action is the simplest behavior the user takes in anticipation of a reward: opening the app, tapping a button, typing a search, pulling down to refresh. Eyal leans heavily on Fogg's behavior model, which says a behavior happens when three things come together at the same moment: **motivation, ability, and a trigger**. If any one of the three is missing, the behavior does not happen.

Eyal's insight is that designers should focus on ability more than motivation, because ability is the thing you can control. You cannot easily make someone more motivated. But you can make the action easier, shorter, and less effortful — and that changes everything. Every step you remove, every second you shave off, increases the chance the behavior happens.

This is why the best products feel almost frictionless. One tap to open, one swipe to see the next thing, no form to fill in, no decision to make. The classic example is how social apps reduced posting a photo to a couple of taps. Fogg's phrase is designing for the simplest possible action, and Eyal treats it as a discipline, not a detail.

Motivation still matters, and Eyal discusses Fogg's six sources of motivation — seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, seeking hope and avoiding fear, seeking social acceptance and avoiding rejection. But the point is that the action has to connect to a motivation that is already there. You are not creating desire from nothing. You are catching a desire that exists and giving it the shortest possible path.

3. Variable reward: why we keep going

After the action, the user gets a reward — but not the same reward every time. Sometimes it is interesting, sometimes boring, sometimes wonderful. And that variability is the point. We are wired to keep going when the payoff is uncertain.

The comparison Eyal uses is the slot machine. A slot machine does not pay out the same amount every time. If it did, it would be boring, and nobody would keep pulling. It pays out unpredictably, and the uncertainty itself is compelling. Our brains are prediction machines, and when the reward varies, we stay engaged trying to figure out the pattern. Eyal says this directly: the most habit-forming products borrow the psychology of gambling.

He divides variable rewards into three types, and this is one of the most useful parts of the book.

- **Rewards of the tribe.** Social rewards: likes, comments, followers, a reply from someone you care about. We are social animals, and the feeling of being acknowledged by other people is one of the strongest rewards there is.
- **Rewards of the hunt.** Rewards of searching and finding: the perfect item, a good deal, an interesting article, a piece of information you were looking for. The feed that might contain something great, the search results that might have the answer, the inbox that might hold good news. The hunt is why we keep scrolling and refreshing. The next thing might be the good one.
- **Rewards of the self.** Rewards of mastery, completion, and self-improvement: finishing a level, beating your own record, clearing your inbox to zero, watching a progress bar fill up, learning something new. The satisfaction of getting better at something, or of finishing something, is its own reward.

Most habit-forming products mix all three. A social app gives you tribe rewards when people respond, hunt rewards when you scroll the feed, and self rewards when your follower count climbs. The variability is what makes the loop sticky. If you knew exactly what you would get, you would check less often. Not knowing is the engine.

4. Investment: what makes the loop durable

After the reward, the user is asked to put something into the product: a little bit of work, a little bit of data, a little bit of effort. That investment does two things. First, it makes the product better for the user next time. Second, it makes the user less likely to leave.

The psychology here is quiet but powerful. We value things more when we have put effort into them — the same reason people value furniture they assembled themselves more than identical furniture that arrived assembled. Psychologists call it the IKEA effect, and Eyal uses it directly. When you have uploaded your photos, built your playlists, trained the algorithm, invited your friends, and customized your settings, you have stored value in the product. Leaving means abandoning all of that.

Eyal lists several forms of stored value: content you created, data you entered, reputation you built, followers you accumulated, and skill you developed. Each one raises the cost of leaving in a different way. Content is the most obvious. But reputation is interesting, because on a platform where you have built a following or a rating, leaving means starting from zero. And skill matters too, because the more fluent you become in a product, the more expensive it feels to learn a new one.

Investment also sets up the next trigger. The content you created invites responses, which become notifications, which are external triggers that pull you back in. The loop feeds itself: trigger, action, variable reward, investment, and then the investment creates the next trigger. That is why Eyal calls it a hook rather than a funnel. A funnel has an end. A hook loops.

The Habit Zone, and Vitamins Versus Painkillers

Not every product can become a habit, and Eyal is clear about that. He introduces the idea of the **Habit Zone**, which is really two questions: how often does the user need the product, and how much value does it give them when they use it? A product that is used frequently and delivers real value can become a habit. A product used once a year, however good, probably cannot.

He also makes the distinction between **vitamins and painkillers**, language that product people now use constantly. A vitamin is nice to have. A painkiller solves a real, felt problem. Habit-forming products are almost always painkillers, because the internal trigger is a discomfort and the product is the relief. If the pain is not real and frequent, the loop has nothing to attach to.

That is a useful reality check. The book's most practical tool is the way Eyal suggests testing your own product against the model: walk through the four steps and ask, honestly, where the loop breaks. Is the trigger clear? Is the action easy enough? Is the reward variable enough to keep people coming back? Does the user invest something that makes the next visit better? Most products fail at one of those steps, and naming the step tells you what to fix.

The Model in Action: Everyday Examples

The book is at its best when it is specific, and the examples repay attention because they are all around you.

Pull to refresh. Before it existed, you opened an app and saw what was there. Pull to refresh turned checking into a physical action — a little tug — and the reward was variable: sometimes there was something new, sometimes not. It became a gesture people perform almost unconsciously. That is the whole model in a single movement of the thumb.

The notification badge. The little red number on an app icon is an external trigger, and it is powerful precisely because it creates uncertainty. You know something is there, but you do not know what it is. The only way to resolve the uncertainty is to open the app, which is the action, and then the reward is finding out what the notification was. The badge is a slot machine you carry in your pocket.

Infinite scroll. A page used to end, and ending was a moment to decide whether to continue. Infinite scroll removes that decision, so the hunt reward just keeps coming — one more item, one more item. There is no moment where the product asks if you are done. You have to decide that yourself, and by then the loop has already run a dozen times.

Pinterest. Eyal discusses Pinterest in detail. Every time you save a pin, you are investing. Your boards become a collection that reflects your taste, and the more you invest, the more personal and valuable the product becomes, and the more the algorithm can show you things you will like. The product gets better because of your investment, and you stay because of the value you built.

Slack. Every message you send, every channel you join, every integration you set up is an investment that makes Slack more embedded in your work. Leaving would mean rebuilding all of that context somewhere else. That is not a dark pattern, exactly. It is stored value. But it is stored value that also functions as a switching cost, and Eyal wants you to see both sides of that at once.

Email, walked through the whole loop. The trigger is uncertainty — is there something waiting? The action is opening the inbox, one tap, no friction. The variable reward is the mix: a message from a friend (tribe), a useful piece of information (hunt), an empty inbox (self) — or nothing interesting at all, which is exactly why you check again later. The investment is every email sent, every folder created, every filter set up. And the investment creates the next trigger, because every email you send invites a reply. The loop feeds itself.

Habit Testing: Identify, Codify, Modify

Eyal lays out a method for testing whether a product is forming habits, in three steps.

1. **Identify.** Find the people who already use the product habitually — the ones who come back without being prompted — and study them. What triggers them? What do they do first? What reward keeps them coming back? Learn from the users who have already formed the habit, rather than guessing from the outside.
2. **Codify.** Write down the steps those habitual users take, in order, and map them onto the four steps of the Hook Model. The point of writing it down is to make the loop visible, so you can see which step is strong and which is weak.
3. **Modify.** Change one thing at a time, and measure whether the habit gets stronger. Make the action easier, make the reward more variable, make the investment more meaningful. It is an iterative process, not a one-time redesign.

The method is also a good way to use the book even if you never build a product. Pick a habit you already have, a good one, and run the three steps on yourself. What triggers it? What is the action? What is the reward, and is it variable? What have you invested that makes it stick? Understanding your own good habits is the best way to understand the model — and the best defense against the bad ones.

A small exercise the book suggests: take out your phone, look at your most used apps, and for each one, try to name the internal trigger. What feeling sends you there? Boredom, anxiety, loneliness, curiosity, the need to feel productive? Most people find that two or three feelings account for almost all of their phone use. That is a useful piece of self-knowledge, and a little uncomfortable, which is the point.

The Ethics Question: The Manipulation Matrix

Once you understand the loop, you cannot unsee it, and the obvious question is whether building products this way is manipulation. Eyal does not dodge the question. He offers a framework called the **manipulation matrix**, with two axes: does the product maker use the product themselves, and would they want their own family using it? And does the product help the user do something they already want to do, or does it get them to do something they would not want to do if they thought about it?

That gives four boxes. A **facilitator** builds a habit-forming product that helps users do something they genuinely want to do, and that the maker uses and believes in — a fitness app that helps you exercise, a language app that helps you practice every day. The habit serves the user's own goals. That is the box Eyal says builders should aim for. A **peddler** builds a habit-forming product they would not use themselves, or that gets users to do something they would not endorse on reflection. The **dealer** is the worst version: a product that hooks people into behavior that harms them, built by someone who knows exactly what it does.

Eyal's test is simple and personal: would you want your children using this product, in the way you designed it to be used? If the answer is no, you have a problem.

It is a good test, and it has limits. The matrix depends on the maker's own judgment about what counts as a healthy habit, and makers are very good at convincing themselves their product is the good kind. Every social media company has people inside it who sincerely believe their product connects the world. The matrix is a starting point for the conversation, not a verdict.

There is also a larger question the book raises but does not fully resolve: who is responsible when a habit becomes compulsive? Eyal's answer is partly that the user has agency, and partly that the designer has responsibility, and the book lives in the tension between those two. It is worth noting that Eyal himself returned to this question in his later book, *Indistractable*, which is in many ways a companion and a corrective to *Hooked*. Where *Hooked* teaches you how habits form, *Indistractable* teaches you how to take control of your attention back. Reading the two together gives you both sides of the argument from the same author.

A related distinction the book draws is between **habits and addictions**. A habit is a behavior you do with little or no conscious thought. An addiction is a persistent, compulsive dependence on a behavior that harms you. Not every habit is an addiction — brushing your teeth is a habit, and nobody calls it an addiction. But the mechanisms overlap, and that overlap is precisely what makes the ethics conversation necessary. The same loop that helps you exercise every morning can also keep you scrolling at two in the morning.

Fair Criticisms

The psychology is narrower than the claims. The variable reward idea draws heavily on operant conditioning — the experiments with rats and pigeons pressing levers for unpredictable rewards. Human beings are more complicated than that, and reducing habit formation to a four-step loop risks making it sound more mechanical and more certain than it really is.

Survivorship bias. The book studies products that succeeded and works backward to find the loop in them. But there are plenty of products that had triggers, easy actions, variable rewards, and investment, and still failed. The loop may be necessary for habit formation, but it is clearly not sufficient, and the book is sometimes read as a guarantee when it is really a description.

The ethics framework may not restrain much in practice. Critics argue that the book is, whatever its intentions, a manual for building addictive products, and that the manipulation matrix is not enough to restrain how the techniques get used. When a company is under pressure to grow, and the loop is what grows engagement, the facilitator box is a hard place to stay. The techniques are value-neutral in theory and very much not neutral in practice.

The scope is limited. The model fits products you use every day, like messaging apps and social feeds, much better than products you use once a month or once a year. It also fits consumer products better than enterprise tools, where adoption is driven by a manager's decision rather than a user's feeling. Apply the Hook Model to everything and you will stretch it past where it is useful.

Eyal would probably accept most of these criticisms, at least in part. The book itself is careful to say that the model applies where habits are possible, and that not every product should try to be habit-forming. A product that solves a rare problem well does not need a hook. The model is a tool for a specific job, and like any tool, it can be misused.

How to Approach Reading It

Read it in two passes, and read it actively. On the first pass, read it as a user. Catch yourself in the examples. Notice the next time you check your phone without a reason, and ask what the trigger was, what the action was, and what reward you were hunting for. That is the fastest way to understand the book, because the evidence is in your own pocket.

On the second pass, read it as a builder, or as someone who thinks about products. Pick one product you use or work on, and walk it through the four steps honestly. Where does the loop break? Is the trigger weak or unclear? Is the action harder than it needs to be? Is the reward predictable and therefore boring? Does the user invest anything that makes the next visit better? That audit, done honestly, is worth more than a dozen rereads.

And read it with the ethics question open, not closed. The manipulation matrix is a place to start, but bring your own judgment to it. Ask not just whether the habit serves the user, but whether the user would choose it if they could see the loop clearly. That is a higher bar than the one in the book, and it is worth holding.

Memorable Lines

> *"The ultimate goal of a habit-forming product is to solve the user's pain by creating an association so that the user identifies the company's product or service as the source of relief."*

> *"Habits are defined as behaviors done with little or no conscious thought."*

> *"If the user does not transfer their perception of value to the product, the product will fail."*

On the difference between frequency and habit, Eyal notes that products that require a high degree of engagement are the ones that stand to benefit most from the Hook Model — and that companies that form strong user habits enjoy the benefits of a competitive advantage, higher customer lifetime value, and a kind of pricing power that comes from being hard to leave.

Why It's on the List

Hooked earns its place on best product management reading lists because it answers a question every product person eventually has to answer: once you have users, what keeps them? The recent books in this series have been about discovery and strategy — finding what to build, testing ideas before committing, asking questions that produce real evidence, and getting a product past the early adopters into the mainstream. *Hooked* is what happens next: the inside of the product, where the other books were the outside. It is short, practical, and unusually honest about its own implications. It also gave the whole industry a vocabulary — trigger, action, variable reward, investment — that is now used in product discussions everywhere. And because it is about human nature rather than any specific technology, it has not dated. The products change. The loop does not.

What to Read Next

- **Chip War by Chris Miller** — next in this series: the story of the tiny piece of hardware that everything in this book runs on, and the geopolitical fight over it.
- **Indistractable by Nir Eyal** — the companion and corrective to *Hooked*, from the same author: how to take control of your attention back once you understand how it gets captured.
- **Crossing the Chasm by Geoffrey A. Moore** — the previous episode in this series: how a product gets past the early adopters and into the mainstream, the step that comes before habits can form.
- **Influence by Robert Cialdini** — the classic on the psychology of persuasion, and the deeper science behind several of the mechanisms Eyal describes.
- **The Design of Everyday Things by Don Norman** — coming up in this series: how good design makes the right action the easy action, the ability side of Fogg's model taken to its fullest.