How Ars Technica’s tech-savvy staffers conduct happy hours in locked-down 2020

Enlarge / Artist’s approximation of Security Editor Dan Goodin’s Zoom calls with other infosec pros.
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As the United States settles into Labor Day weekend, we hope you’re finding ways to celebrate—or, more crucially, to carve out something that resembles a “vacation” when travel and holiday options have become more limited. With that in mind, I polled my Ars colleagues with a vacation-minded question: How *do* you put the “happy” into “happy hour” in a socially distanced universe?

Unsurprisingly, many of the answers hinge on technology, though not all of them. If you’ve been struggling to socialize or break out of a 2020 rut, we hope our suggestions inspire you, though we’d also love to see your own suggestions in the comments section below.

Life updates between bets

In the before time, I was part of a semi-weekly poker night with friends from graduate school. Once the pandemic hit, we moved poker night online. We used Zoom for video chat, but we

actually had a tough time finding good online poker software.

We wanted a service that would let us create private rooms and play fake-money games with a decent user interface. After trying and discarding several options, we discovered Pokernow.club. It's free, Web-based, and has a nice user interface.

I've found online poker is a good choice for catching up with friends. People of all skill levels can play. Poker doesn't involve constant action, so there's plenty of time for people to update one another on their lives between bets.

While Zoom poker isn't as much fun as real-life poker, it has had one upside: we've been able to invite mutual grad school friends who moved to other cities.

—Timothy Lee, Senior Tech Policy Reporter

Don't toot your horn here

I have two big social outlets. The first, a local wind ensemble I play in, is unfortunately remaining on hiatus until a room full of people tooting their own horns no longer presents a pandemic risk. The other, however, is my tabletop RPG group, and that's still going like gangbusters.

We're doing so well because playing online is our first nature: we've always been in five states and three time zones ever since we started our game in 2015. We get together every two or three weeks on Roll20 to tell stories and roll virtual dice into the wee small hours of the night. (At least, for me. Our California contingent plays at reasonable hours, hehe.) It's a great way to hang out with friends without the stilted strange awkwardness that can come from running a Zoom or Hangout happy hour just for the sake of screens.

Another thing I've discovered lately: even for someone like me, a tried-and-true introvert who's used to working from home

and mostly socializing online, you sometimes need to go outside. Grabbing a blanket and a cup of coffee and sitting outdoors just to chat with a friend (several feet away) a couple of times a month is a great mood-booster.

—Kate Cox, Tech Policy Reporter

Sliders versus switches

I have a family with three children, so in a lot of ways "happy hour" was already either kind of a myth, or properly socially distanced, depending on how you want to look at it. I spend more time with friends on the Internet and less in person than I used to—but it's a change more like shifting a slider than turning off a switch.

The biggest impact has likely been on my mom, who moved to a nearby town to be closer to me and the kids a year ago—we still visit pretty regularly, but visits are outdoors-only. Thankfully, she's got a place with acres of yard, so as long as the weather's good, that's not so bad.

—Jim Salter, Technology Reporter

The Kusogrande rabbit hole

I've always played games online, but games have become my main connection with the outside world during the pandemic, so they're more important than ever. My wife and I started a Discord group with some fellow friends and family members who play games—her brother, some game developer friends of mine, an old friend of mine who I've worked with several times over the years, and a friend of my wife's from the swing dancing scene.

We've all played *Minecraft* for hours every Friday night since April 29. Our survival world now has a jungle city, a skyscraper made of cascading water, a military fortress, a

series of Pacific Modern homes in terracotta, a nightclub on a balcony, an interdimensional transit system, an underwater luxury penthouse, and a working Mario Kart race track with a scale recreation of Peach's castle from *Super Mario 64*. We've been busy!

Also, I've gotten heavily into the Kusogrande community, a Twitch-based scene where people speedrun, showcase, and race in bad or strange video games—a sort of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* for video games.

Last but definitely not least, I've been doing game jams on itch.io and Discord. Dozens or even hundreds of people form teams and spend a weekend or a week developing small-scope games that riff on the same theme, then share their work and vote for the best games. Weirdly, thanks to these things, I feel like I've actually been more socially active and connected during the pandemic than I was before it!

—Samuel Axon, Senior Reviews Editor

Yes, our infosec pro uses Zoom (sometimes)

I've done one video-based happy hour since the lockdown began. The meetup was with a bunch of security people from my neighborhood. It was good to see everyone's faces and catch up. One of the fun things is that several kids, including my own, joined the conversation and got to hear about and discuss hacking and security. That's something that never happened when our group held happy hour in a bar. Now that I'm thinking about this, I'm ready to rally the group for another video get-together.

If you're wondering: we didn't spend any time thinking about which platform was the most secure. Zoom provides encryption in transit, the same protection offered by Gmail and most

other online services. Had we been discussing sensitive topics, we might have chosen FaceTime or another service that uses end-to-end encryption.

—Dan Goodin, Security Editor

Feeling wrecked? Try *Rec Room*

My social groups in Seattle are pretty analog, and my local board gaming crew never agreed upon a digital facsimile for any of our favorite games. We bought a few standalone game clients on Steam, but we had bad luck with everything we chose. *Tabletop Simulator*, despite its potential for aimless fun and easy add-on DLC packages, remains a difficult proposition for basic actions like picking up pieces and cards in a given game. *Blood Rage*'s Steam version launched with a nightmare list of launch-week woes, while *Charterstone*'s server-side management of ongoing games crashed enough times to kill its "legacy" appeal.

For locked-down socializing, I have found that the most exhilarating option has been to dip into virtual reality, particularly in *Rec Room*, a free-to-play social-space app that includes a series of structured and free-form multiplayer games and activities. Since the game's launch in 2017, its suite of fun has become quite diverse, and it works on pretty much every VR headset imaginable, from PlayStation VR to Valve Index. (If you don't have VR access, you can join any session in "2D" format, as well.) Start simple with accessible fare like bowling and table tennis. Team up and fight strangers in paintball gun battles. Join forces in co-op adventures, where you either fake like a sword-and-shield medieval warrior or wield laser guns in an '80s-styled robo-battle.

Arguably, the app's best quality is how it lets a "leader" guide a group of friends from one activity to the next seamlessly, so that friends aren't constantly worrying about whether they've been disconnected or split up. The games are

fun, sure, but they're mere window dressing for the natural socializing afforded by VR. Everyone can hear and see each other as if hanging out in real life, and positional audio sells the sense that you're all really wandering around at a bowling alley. It feels good to not fret about how many feet of space is maintained between friends, and to see hands and heads move around as if people are really right there.

—Sam Machkovech, Tech Culture Editor

"OMG CROTCH KNIFE"

A lot of my socializing with family and friends has involved cocktails in the back yard, socially distanced. We make an amazing simple syrup with pomegranate juice or cherry juice and then add some fresh-squeezed lime and whatever alcohol sounds good, add some ice and shake it up.

While away camping alone this summer, I did manage to simulwatch *John Wick 2* with my husband, who was holding down the fort back home. Sometimes we got off-sync and spoiled an upcoming event, but our texting stream during the movie pretty much sums it up. (Colby is my dog.)

> ***Me**: Now they're sHOOTING AGAIN*
> *ugh*
> *Dude brains*
> *Not right*
> *OMG CROTCH KNIFE*
> *No way*
> *So wrong*
> ***Husband**: Right!*
> ***Me**: He needs therapy*
> *And of course the guy is a head taller than everyone else on the stupid train*
> ***Husband**: Hm*
> ***Me**: Why are they dragging this guy's death out so long*
> *Lol and everyone leaves the train at a run*

I need to let Colby go potty
Almost to the half hour mark
Morpheus!!
hahaha
Ok
Gonna pause now
***Husband**: K, I'll wait*
***Me**: ok*
***Husband**: ok*
***Me**: Started*
***Husband**: You don't want me owing you*
***Me**: Hm*
Not sure I remember them saying tha
That
That was a lot of headshots
Whoa
Broke the rule
***Husband**: Now what?!*
***Me**: Why did he get him?*
That's crazy.
***Husband**: There you have it*

—K.S., Associate Copyeditor

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