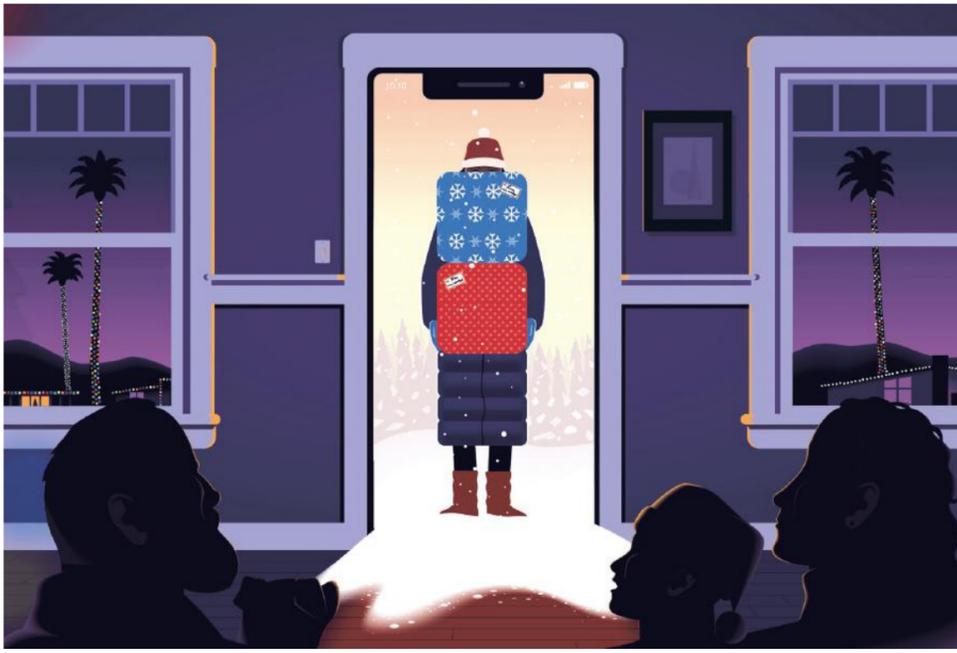


# GEAR & GADGETS



## Be Present This Holiday

Faced with Christmas in quarantine, far-flung families are finding ways that their smartphones, tablets and other tech can help them maintain traditions

By Ashley Mateo

**B**EING HOME for the holidays is bound to feel different this year: Nearly 75% of Americans plan to do their best to celebrate with family and friends virtually according to a recent OnePoll survey conducted for Asurion Home+—with 93% of respondents blaming Covid-19.

But even if you spend the holiday season alone, you needn't feel lonely. The dumpster fire that is 2020 has yielded at least one upside: The widespread adoption of social tech has made everyone more-or-less comfortable with shared digital experiences, from work meetings to big family meals and, implausibly, weddings.

Virtual communing is no longer limited to Zoom calls with relatives who can't quite master unmuting: New app features offer an interactive e-gathering experience, which can be more meaningful than lifeless video chats said Jeremy Birnholtz, director of the Social Media Lab and associate professor of communication studies at Northwestern University. "Assuming you're going to get the exact feelings out of online interactions as an in-person one isn't realistic. But online interactions can help preserve relationships."

Bradley Keys, a Santa Monica, Calif., marketing director, was worried that his annual Christmas Eve viewing of "The Polar Express" with family and friends would be ruined by the pandemic. Then he found a way for them to join his celebration from

wherever they happened to be holed up: "This year, we'll be using the Rave to watch together from a distance," he said. The Rave app lets users sync up their Netflix, Amazon Prime and YouTube screenings and text or voice chat during the show.

To take his family's annual Yuletide game nights virtual, Tal Shelef, co-founder of a real-estate listing site in Toronto, turned to the Houseparty app. "We've celebrated Game Night as a family tradition since I was a kid," he said. "It keeps family gatherings exciting, diffuses tensions and helps everyone relax." Houseparty lets up to eight people per "room" share face-to-face video as they play. Try Quick Draw, Heads Up, Trivia or Chips and Guac!—a Cards Against Humanity knockoff. For her newborn's first holiday,

Jaime Cassavechia, founder of a Manhattan PR firm, said she's using the two-way audio feature on her Nanit baby monitor to continue the tradition of having Nana read "The Night Before Christmas" to her kids. The camera can even record the moment to its connected app so she can share the video with family.

Your motive for connecting virtually can be as simple as catching up or re-creating traditions, said Mr. Birnholtz, whether that's decorating cookies or opening gifts together.

"My grandmother started a tradition of singing Christmas songs together before we exchange gifts," said parenting blogger Tirralan Watkins of Northridge, Calif. "Since we won't see that side of the family in person this year, we'll be using [the Spotify app's] Group Session to listen together." Via this feature, revelers can share control of a holiday playlist that will stream simultaneously to devices in each household, letting family members sing along together over FaceTime if they wish.

If your group of cohorts skews sportier and traditionally gathers for rides and runs, you can still sweat together while socially distanced. Sarah Casarella, a program manager in Edmonds, Wash., swapped her annual pre-feast Thanksgiving spin class to pedal with her workout buddies atop their Pelotons. The machines' screens let members video-chat with each other during live and on-demand cycling and treadmill classes. "We started riding together during lockdown and we wanted to celebrate what we'd built over the year and the gratitude we had for each other," she said.

Not everything needs to happen in real time, especially if you're celebrating across different time zones. Emily Ershowsky, director of accounts at a Denver events agency, downloaded the video app Marco Polo to keep her East Coast family apprised of her holiday activities. With the app, which allows private groups to communicate via a reel of messages—think an exclusive, non-expiring version of Instagram Stories—she plans to share moments from wintry walks to the lighting of her menorah and her final countdown as the clock runs out on 2020.

### A BLUE CHRISTMAS WITHOUT ZOOM?

Don't abandon the tradition of cuddling up in front of a holiday classic. These services let you sync a viewing experience with friends and family world-wide.



Disney+'s GroupWatch allows six subscribers to sync up and watch its stable of classics including "Home Alone."



With Amazon Prime's Watch Party you can chat with up to 100 friends while you enjoy a holiday special together.



Up to eight Hulu subscribers can join a virtual Watch Party for films like "Happiest Season" via supported web browsers.



Sling Watch Party allows users to watch live TV with up to three friends, while also interacting via real-time video.

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