

# 2021 will demand new kinds of video conferencing

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Last year entrenched videoconferencing at the center of our work and private lives — but also showed us the limits and drawbacks of the tools we now depend on.

**What's happening:** Services like Zoom, Microsoft Teams and WebEx were a lifeline in 2020, channeling everything from work and school to parties and doctor's appointments into our homebound lives.

- The more we got to know these tools, however, the more we could see that putting a bunch of kids on Zoom sure doesn't make it a party. For every conceivable use of videoconferencing, there's a need for more nuanced and specialized software to deliver more enjoyable, [less fatiguing](#) experiences.

**As we head into another year** likely to be filled with online substitutes for in-person gatherings, most of us are still using the same basic software for K-12 school, religious services, family gatherings, work meetings and book clubs.

- It doesn't have to be that way.
- Imagine, for example, an app built for birthday parties that offered kids some interactive fun — anything from a digital version of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey to built-in-access to Super Mario or Minecraft. One can easily envision adult-themed possibilities as well.

**Where it stands:** The space has already seen some innovation, with Zoom

adding much-needed security features and Microsoft Teams [experimenting with a "together mode"](#) — including venues like virtual coffee shops and lecture halls to give different types of gatherings a more appropriate digital space.

- Cisco has started to offer custom versions of its WebEx software, including one designed for parliaments and state legislatures trying to conduct government business online.
- Meanwhile, startups are also taking note. [Mmhmm is among those offering tools](#) to people who want to customize video meetings with more than just fun virtual backgrounds.
- Other startups, including Spatial, are trying to [use VR to make digital gatherings more immersive](#), though doing so takes away one of the few benefits of virtual meetings — being able to easily multitask.

**Yes, but:** Much is still lacking in these offerings — especially the ability to capture the whimsy, serendipity and intimacy of in-person events.

**The big picture:** Customized videoconferencing tools may be what users need, but the tech industry usually coalesces around one-size-fits-all platforms that substitute the power of scale for the appeal of tailor-made services.

- From office-document software to search engines and social networks to e-commerce, tech remains a winner-take-all world. Videoconferencing requires a lot of bandwidth and technical overhead, and the ability to deliver that may win out over subtler improvements in interface and social features.

**Between the lines:** Better hardware can also play an important role in making video conferencing more satisfying.

- Already we've seen [Zoom come to](#) smart displays such as Facebook's Portal and Amazon's Echo Show. TV set-top-boxes are probably next. Amazon already added camera support to its FireTV Cube device.
- Dedicated video-conferencing devices could also break into the consumer market after being aimed almost entirely at businesses.
- Meanwhile, 2021's laptop models may get serious camera upgrades, coming after device makers have had time to address the rise of remote work in their development and production cycles.

**What's next:** In the meantime, expect another year of people buying add-on microphones, cameras and ring lights to improve their at-home set-ups.