

OIT Research Report

2021 Virtual Platform Experience

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RUXSTARS (RAINBOW UX ROCKSTARS) is a community UIUX research program created by Out in Tech #UIUX.

The **aim** of the program is to foster:

- (1) digital community engagement,
- (2) collaborative work,
- (3) skills development in UIUX,
- (4) socializing, and
- (5) conduct valuable research to LGBTQ+ initiatives and advocacies

It is a year-long program where designers and researchers can collaborate, attend events, and produce a publication for the research theme of the year.

Visit <https://outintech.com/ruxstars> for more details.

All of the events took place between April and November 2021. **Efforts have been made to update this report with the most current information about these video conferencing platforms, but their offerings and pricing may vary.**

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(Research was conducted from March 2021- November 2021, some platforms may have changed features and pricing structures)

This report was constructed for the leads of Out In Tech (OiT) channels to have advice on some of the various video conferencing platforms currently available. We hosted virtual events from April through October to try out a new platform each month. Our attendance at these events ranged from 7 people to 20 people. We aimed to look at platforms that would be free to use, require no download, and where users could move freely on their own, unlike Zoom. Our results are as follows.

Purpose

Let's face it, in the past year and a half, we have all, to some extent, burnt out on Zoom. We're done with being trapped in a box, listening to whoever is most outspoken, both during work and at times that are supposed to be relaxing and fun. But with limited socializing opportunities, many of us keep coming back to it. The purpose of our research was to explore alternative video chat options that give participants the ability to move freely about a space and have many separate conversations at one time in an organic manner.

Among our participants, there was great enthusiasm for these types of events, both now and in the future. Living in a rural, conservative area can mean that virtual events are participants' only connection to the queer community. Virtual events are a great help to those with physical disabilities who find getting to and being at in-person events an exhausting experience. Interesting possibilities can unfold when participants are meeting people from all over the US and other parts of the world. Meeting online can help anyone with social anxiety reach out and connect from the safety of their home. Finding a queer community is sometimes hard no matter where you live or who you are. Being able to connect the community is at the heart of Out in Tech's mission and being able to provide better events promotes a more inclusive, accepting and diverse tech community across the board.

Platforms

The following platforms were examined by our team:

Remo - <https://remo.co>

Wonder - <https://www.wonder.me>

Kumospace - <https://www.kumospace.com>

Gatheround - <https://gatheround.com>

Gather - <https://gather.town>

Spatial Chat - <https://spatial.chat>

Our Process

- 1 - Host events at two time slots each month (to accommodate a range of time zones) and take opportunities to survey other group participants from events using the same platforms.
- 2 - Survey to gathering quantifiable data post-event, and screening for interview participants
- 3 - Conduct user interviews
- 4 - Synthesize data using affinity mapping
- 5 - Present findings

Observations

Our findings turned out to be a mix of specifics about the platforms themselves and the subtleties of running a well-received virtual event. Most of what we learned about the platforms was through reading up on them. What our interview participants provided was insight into the experience of the platform (and the event) itself.

Our major findings are as follows:

- **Need for feelings of security:** People want to:
 - Know why they're here, what they're supposed to be doing.
 - **Control their presentation:** They might want to avoid showing photos or video, add their pronouns, and generally customize in order to feel comfortable.
 - See the code of conduct, so that there is a reference point for acceptable behavior.
- **Large vs small groups:** People have different preferences. You can't make everyone happy--but you can encourage people to move into the size groups they're comfortable with. All the platforms are set up so that people can easily split off into smaller conversations or gather into bigger ones, so encourage your guests to mix things up.
- **Platforms work best on a desktop or laptop,** and they run computers hard. Recommend that people don't use mobile and keep a power cord handy.
- **Events need proper promotion and explanation:** People need to feel prepared, especially for what to expect of a platform they have never used, but also what to expect of the style and culture of the event itself.
- **People want to experience community:** Networking is great, whether formal and work-oriented or extremely casual. Either is best when people have opportunities to form genuine connections.
- **Virtual events are great, even post-pandemic,** for people with limited mobility, social anxiety, or limited access to LGBTQ+ community in their area.

- **Novelty is good:** Having an alternative to zoom is exciting and provides a positive experience, because it “doesn’t feel like work.”
- **People need to feel comfortable leaving conversations:** This helps them maximize meeting new people, and also to feel safe and empowered. Give people permission, make an announcement, and generally set a norm that it’s ok to say some version of “nice talking to you” and leave.
- **Account creation and personal profiles:** Some platforms have longer onboarding than others. This is a double-edged sword. People get annoyed with having to create an account, but having a profile makes it easy for others to connect and learn about other participants even when they’re shy or the conversation is rolling along. Participants can learn about each other’s backgrounds or interests without it feeling like an interrogation, or having to remember to ask for their LinkedIn. Once an account is created, future events are quick to join.
- **Structured vs Unstructured:** Our participants reported different preferences for structure. Some platforms offer more constraints and guidance than others, but in running the event and understanding the platform a bit, you can offer ways of structuring (or freeing up) the style of the event so that people can get what they want out of it.

Recommendations

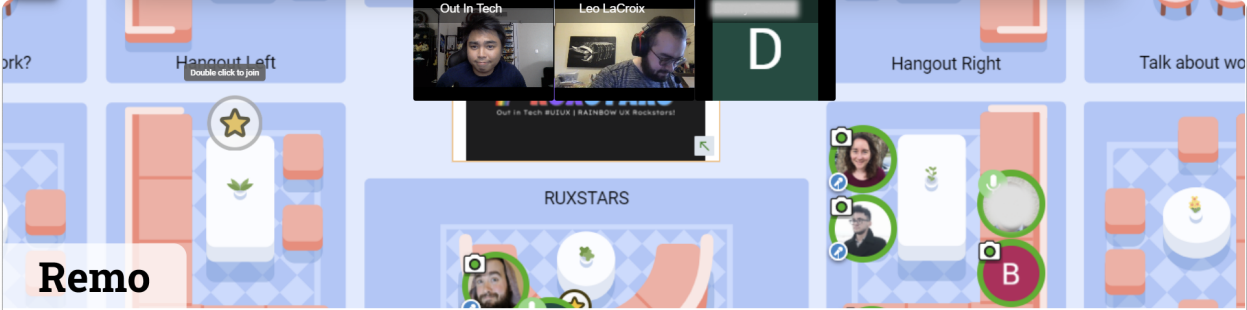
Many of our findings from the interviews were geared more toward how the events were run than to the platforms themselves. Therefore, many of our takeaways and recommendations are about running events in general.

- In the description/advertising the event, **be specific** about:
 - Announcing what the platform will be so people can check it out beforehand
 - How to navigate the platform, some have video walkthroughs you could attach to the event invite
 - What to expect. Will the event be structured or unstructured?
- **Structured vs Unstructured events:** Our interviewees and survey participants were very split on whether they preferred structure or not, it seems to be a very individual preference. **Know your event platform and tweak it** to cater to the need for some structure to help people feel comfortable (multiple comments in surveys & interviews said “no idea what to expect” and “awkward”) **Help people get what they want out of the event, whether they are looking for structure or not.**
 - **Encouraging general conversation in structured platforms** like Gatheround can help when a platform feels too structured. Encourage just talking and ignoring the questions in the breakout when that feels right.
 - **Some ideas/examples to add structure to unstructured platforms:**
 - Dropping icebreaker questions in the chat (and announcing them)

- Adding text on signs or in the background, to plant icebreaker questions within the space.
- Offering some kind of **text-only happy hour**--(perhaps an event on Slack) so that people who thrive on non-face-to-face types of networking have a specific time to connect with people and chat together.
 - NB/Trans community has expressed desire for a text-only happy hour participation option--While this is possible on most of the platforms we tested (people can keep video and mic off and just use the chat) the focus is not on the chat and chat comments can get overlooked easily.
 - In the opening announcements of a video event, you might announce: "some people prefer to interact without video or only in chat, please help them feel welcome by keeping an eye on the chat and engaging there."
- **Location-focus** can be nice for people looking to meet local folks:
 - Rooms labeled with geographic areas.
 - Events advertised (and timed) for specific countries/cities.
- **Offering information** for people who join late and miss the intro.
 - Labeled place where introductions and instructions can be found by people joining at different times, so no one feels lost. (Labeled rooms are available in Remo, customizable signs in Kumospace, areas can be labeled in Wonder, a landing space can be set in Spatial Chat and content pinned in place)
- If an event clumps together so it is all one large conversation dominated by a few people, like Zoom, **encourage people to split off** and have 1 on 1 or small group talks. People are shy to initiate that kind of thing, but also expressed interest in smaller groups and opportunities for more intimate connections.

The Platforms

Each platform's details and related recommendations



Remo

Capacity: 850 guests (event) Up to 8 guests per table.

Tech needs: iOS/Android supported but not tablets. Chrome is best.

Presenter mode:
Can broadcast video or play pre-recorded content. Can invite presenters to the stage, robust Q&A feature.

Fun Features:
Chat: (all/table/individual)
Whiteboard (can add sticky notes, text, shapes, media) and Virtual Business Cards.

Known issues:
Our mobile users had trouble. (tested in April 2021)
Can meet 1:1 and up to 8 people, but can't gather in larger groups.

Onboarding:
Profile-creation, a bit time consuming but basically creates a virtual business card.

Customizability:
Add names to tables to give people a topic idea, these can be changed during the event. Can change room using various colors, table layouts, virtual locations.

To prepare: Remo recommends setting up a room in advance and trying it out.

Remo overview:

Remo is set up as a room of tables much like an in person event. Different size tables are available for groups from 1 on 1 chats to up to 8 people. You get video for whoever is at your table and you change tables by double clicking on where you want to go. Hosts can add names to tables to give people a topic idea, these can be changed during the event. Hosts can even shuffle participants randomly (with a warning countdown) to mix things up. Hosts can present lecture-style and add guest speakers. Participants can interact via chat and/or a robust Q&A feature that allows for +1ing questions. Host can pin content to the side panel "billboards" for participants to see (icebreaker questions/code of conduct, etc) Room setups are customizable. When joining, participants are prompted to create a personal profile that functions as a business card.

Pricing is a bit complicated. A free account allows for 1 Host/Team member, with 15 “guest days” per month. Guest days are days that events are hosted. You can host multiple events at once, but an event is only 30 mins. Unclear whether you can just create another event after 30 minutes, since it’s the same guest day. (This new pricing/timing structure is as of Oct 2021, our event was in April 2021 when it could go for over an hour for free.)

Pain Points:

A free event ends in 30 minutes. Tablets and iPads are not supported at the moment. Remo is compatible with iOS and Android, however our users experienced issues with mobile back in April. The best browser to use is Chrome.

Highlights:

Virtual business cards make it easy to connect and share info. Any table can use a whiteboard (can add sticky notes, text, shapes, media, and more) and it has great potential for large events--up to 850 guests.

Safety and Comfort:

Users are given the option to edit their camera and microphone settings before joining the event. Their virtual business cards give the ability to add, remove or edit any information the attendee sees fit.

UX/UI

Wonder

Capacity: Circles can have up to 14 people, but a Wonder room can hold up to 500. For now it is free.

Tech needs: Chrome, Firefox, and Edge are supported. Mobile version exists (untested).

Presenter mode:
Broadcast feature: make announcements to all (mutes all participants' mics and cameras).

Fun Features:
Wonder is simple, free, and has a huge capacity, but does not offer fancy bells and whistles at this time.

Known issues: Requires a photo; bypass this if desired by covering the camera when taking.

Onboarding: No download, installation or registration required (just click the link).

Customizability:
Hosts can rename, edit, and delete topic "Areas" and set background image from library or upload their own.

To prepare: Set an icebreaker question with built-in feature. Remind participants they can bypass the mandatory photo by covering the camera.

Wonder overview:

No download, installation or registration required, just click the link to join. Participants form circles where they can hear and see others. Move from circle to circle to see what others are talking about, or lock your circle to have a private conversation. Full screen view allows you to enlarge the videos of the conversation you are in. Circles can have up to 14 people, but a Wonder room can hold up to 500. For now, it is free. (Their site says a pricing structure will be rolled out in mid 2022, but will include a free option.) "Areas" are squares that designate places to, for example, discuss a particular topic and can help to organize the space and encourage discussion, but participants can create circles anywhere. Hosts can change or delete areas and set a background image. Chat messages can be directed to everyone, just people in your current circle, or individuals. Host can make announcements to all participants with the Broadcast feature, which mutes all participants' mics and cameras. Hosts can add people as co-hosts and up to 6 people can broadcast at a time. Hosts can add an icebreaker question

where prompted on the sidebar, or announce one with a broadcast. The event space can be reused and can be edited for future events.

Pain Points:

Only works on Chrome, Firefox, and Edge. It says there is a mobile version now but we have not tested it.

Highlights:

So far, it is free and high-capacity. It's also super simple to set up, a tradeoff with being not especially fancy and filled with features like some of the others. Depending on the background, it can be a super-simple clean look and feel.

Safety and Comfort:

Wonder lets you password protect your space. It has you take a photo as you enter the space, but put your finger over the camera if you don't feel like being in a photo. You can upload an avatar once you are in the space by going to Profile. Keep your camera off to only show the avatar. You can easily turn the video and mic on and off.



Kumospace

Capacity: 30 participants free.

Tech needs: Only Chrome is fully supported. Best on computer, not phone.

Presenter mode:
Spotlights host giving announcement. Hosts/cohosts can share screen. (In paid plan, multiple can share screen at once, like for a panel).

Fun Features:
Virtual drinks, spotify jukebox. Interactive piano, white board, games like codenames, chess. Game-based rooms available (tag room has a pathway surrounded by lava...murder mystery room, etc).

Known issues:
Limited except on Chrome right now. Name/pronouns go under the video avatar and longer ones don't fit well

Onboarding: Test mic/camera, add name/pronouns.

Customizability:
Hosts/cohosts can change audio range, every aspect of decor, add fun features, add signs for welcome messages/info, add other rooms (some game rooms).

To prepare: Highly recommend using the customizable signs to add welcome info, ice breaker questions, code of conduct, or instructions to your room.

Kumospace overview:

Like most of the platforms, Kumospace has proximity-based audio. Video-avatars move with arrow keys or by clicking, and you hear whoever you're near. It's easy to wander in and out of conversations or listen to nearby chatter. It mimics a real life space: walking around a room, seeing people's faces and so on. Participants reported that it "felt real" and "more human." Live-captioning is available. Hosts/co-hosts can change the audio range (they recommend small ranges for bigger events). Seating, tables, rugs, and other decor can all be customized by a host ahead of time--or choose from many pre-made rooms. There are even "Game" rooms where, for example, there is a path through lava, or murder mystery room. An event can have unlimited rooms. Hosts/co-hosts can also share screen. (In the paid plan, multiple can share screens at once, like for a panel.)

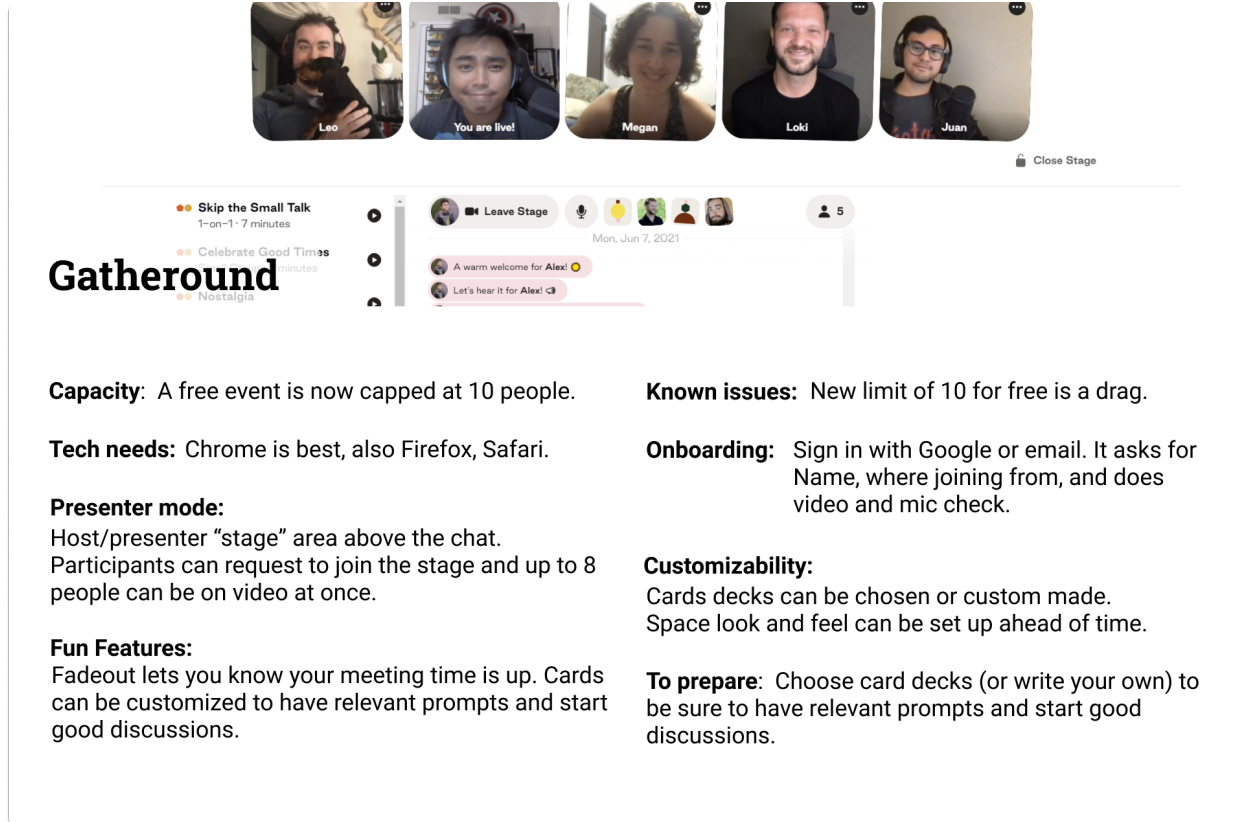
Pain points:

Chrome is the only fully supported browser currently. Best on a computer, not phone. The free account has unlimited rooms, but a max of 30 people (as of November '21. This has changed since our June event) Name/pronouns go under the video avatar but longer ones don't fit well.

Highlights: Virtual drinks, spotify jukebox, interactive piano, white board, and games like codenames and chess.

Safety and Comfort:

In “edit room settings” you can password-protect the space. Video and mic can be switched on and off anytime and participants can use chat to communicate. We highly recommend using the customizable signs to add welcome info, ice breaker questions, code of conduct, or instructions and expectations to your space.



Capacity: A free event is now capped at 10 people.

Tech needs: Chrome is best, also Firefox, Safari.

Presenter mode:
Host/presenter “stage” area above the chat.
Participants can request to join the stage and up to 8 people can be on video at once.

Fun Features:
Fadeout lets you know your meeting time is up. Cards can be customized to have relevant prompts and start good discussions.

Known issues: New limit of 10 for free is a drag.

Onboarding: Sign in with Google or email. It asks for Name, where joining from, and does video and mic check.

Customizability:
Cards decks can be chosen or custom made.
Space look and feel can be set up ahead of time.

To prepare: Choose card decks (or write your own) to be sure to have relevant prompts and start good discussions.

Gatherround overview:

The whole function of the platform is to match people for 1:1 or small group conversations, a bit like speed networking. The style of matching is customizable by the host: Round robin (match with new people every time) or A/B Subgroup matching (2-subgroups that match with each other, like mentors and mentees) “Games” are breakout rooms with card decks. Each lasts from 5 to 8 minutes depending on group size, with periods of hanging out in the main room, on chat or on stage, in between games. During a game, flip over discussion cards to spark conversation. Card decks can be chosen or custom built. To get started, the platform asks participants to sign in with google or email, to enter their name, where they’re joining from, and do a mic/video check. The only video in the main room is the host/presenter “stage” area above the chat. Participants can request to join the stage and up to 8 people can be on video at once. When setting up an event, check out the pre-made questions ahead of time and/or add your own to make sure questions are interesting and relevant to the event and the relationships of the participants (some questions are odd or personal, and some events might want to be specific to a topic).

Pain Points:

With the new 10 person limit, this platform really only makes sense for larger organizations who can afford a paid plan. It has a specific structure that makes sense for speed networking or team-building. It works on Chrome (best), Firefox, and Safari.

Highlights:

Many templates to choose from, you can create/decorate the space. Customizable welcome question pops up in the chat as people enter. The stage can play YouTube videos while everyone comments in the chat below. There is even live tech support during the session.

Safety and Comfort:

Hosts should inform participants that they will be on video if they join a game. There is no switching the video off. They could stay in the main room and be only on chat if they want, but most of the time everyone is in a game.



Capacity: 25 users free, nonprofit discount, see details. **Known issues:** Onboarding can take some time.

Tech needs: Works best on a desktop. Chrome/Firefox **Onboarding:** name/pronouns, choose/customize avatar, setup mic/camera. Tutorial on moving around is offered.

Presenter mode:
“Spotlight square” is a place to stand that allows the speaker to be heard by a wider audience, and can be added as you customize the space. Can send chat messages to everyone or individuals.

Fun Features:
interactive items (playable piano...) too many games to list (tetris, codenames, poker, set, skribbl, sudoku, survive, colonist, dominion, crosswords...) added by customizing your space.

Customizability:
FULLY customizable, if you have the time and interest. Embed sites or schedules. Game room templates, tons of integrated games from other sites.

To prepare: Really rewarding to set aside time to customize/explore options. Try out “Experiences.” Downloadable new-user guide, send to participants.

Overview:

Gather’s playful atmosphere of an 8-bit video game was a big hit with our participants. Walk near another avatar to pop up a video chat with them. Walk around the space and press x to interact with any object that glows, and play games. So many games.

Hosts, leave yourself time to set up. If you have the time and interest, you can set up any sort of space right down to the house plants and furniture. You can also use one of the huge number of pre-made settings, including game room templates. For any room, there are tons of integrated games to add from other sites. For announcements or presentations, add a “spotlight square” where the speaker can be heard by everyone. Pin messages to the top of the chat so people see instructions or ice-breaker questions. As a host, you can use the Build feature to add objects any time. (In settings, turn off “global build” if you don’t want participants to be able to add objects, or leave it on and let them go wild!) Try out the “experiences” section to find rooms designed for different types of activities or games. Gather works best on a desktop using Chrome or Firefox. A free account allows up to 25 concurrent users, (30% off premium for

nonprofits, and options to pay just by the event or by day) We recommend trying to create a space for the number of people you expect. Not too big or people will feel spaced out and lost.

Pain Points:

Even using a template, it takes some time to make the space your own. The editor is a bit clunky (don't forget to hit save). Set aside some time to go in and add interactive objects, they're great ice-breakers and fidgets for awkward times. There is a new-user guide a host can download and send to participants ahead of time that can help people feel prepared.

Highlights:

Super fun, with the best variety of real games and spaces to explore. The large 8-bit world is extremely different from any platform on the current market.

Safety and Comfort:

Space can be password protected to allow only registered participants. The ability to enter a space with or without the camera or the microphone on is available. Due to the creation of the avatar, a user may feel comfortable navigating the event without their camera. Users are able to mute other users who they don't wish to hear.



Spatial Chat

Capacity: 50 participants free. Presenter mode: Screen sharing & “Stage” room. Tech needs: Chrome or Firefox best. Computer, not phone/tablet. Fun Features: Anyone can share a picture/video/gif or their screen (unless restricted by admin). Proximity-based audio. Known issues: No games. Gif/image sharing could be a problem. Avatar gets smaller if video is off. Chat notifications are very small and hard to notice.	Onboarding: Add photo, test mic/camera, fill in bio. Customizability: Can choose from their room backgrounds, unsplash, or upload your own. Admins can share and pin any objects in the space (images, GIFs, videos, text & links) To prepare: link to the getting-started video in invite. Set a “spawn spot” (entry point) and pin text there to add icebreaker questions, instructions, code of conduct, etc, to help people know what to do and feel comfortable in the space. Check “room permissions.”
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Overview:

Spatial chat offers fun background settings for small video avatars to talk to whoever is nearby. You can share and pin any objects in the space (images, GIFs, videos, text & links) with one button on the bottom panel, which can be useful for adding welcome messages or ice breaker questions. Check “room permissions” to switch functionality as needed. Admins can choose a background from SpatialChat’s many options, import one from Unsplash, or upload a custom one. There is a small amount of setup, including: Adding a photo, testing mic and camera, and filling in a “personal description” (good for linkedin, pronouns, ice breaker answers, etc) which appears when someone hovers over you during the event. “Stage” room allows for a presenter, while others send emojis and respond in the chat. People can switch from the stage room to the other rooms (up to 3 rooms in a free event)

There is a getting-started video that shows how to navigate and create a profile, which makes a handy addition to your event invite. Chrome/Firefox are best. Laptop/Desktop are best (limitations on tablets and phones)

Pain Points:

No games. Gif/image sharing could easily be abused and might want to be turned off by the admin (under “room permissions”) especially in a larger group. Chat notifications are very small and hard to notice.

Highlights:

Takes a host 5 minutes to set up: Choose a space name and URL, fill in your info card and go into the space. Customize with lots of great backgrounds to choose from. It allows 50 people for free. Profile shows when hovering over a participant, which is great for passively sharing linkedin, and including conversation starters.

Safety and Comfort:

Cameras can be switched off, but it makes the avatar smaller. “Spawn spot” allows you to determine the spot where guests will arrive, then you can pin usage instructions or welcome information there. To set up, go to “Customize” in the bottom left corner and press “add spawn”. The red bubble will appear – you can change its location and remove it later. It’s visible only to admins.

Feature Comparison

Pricing and capacity as of November 2021

	Remo	KumoSpace	GatherRound	Wonder	Gather	SpatialChat
Chat	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Multiple spaces	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓
Broadcast feature	✓	✓	Has stage instead	✓	✓	✓
1 on 1 video chat	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
Proximity audio	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Password protected	Guest list	✓	No, but invite only	✓	✓	✓
Can keep video off	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Capacity (Free)	850 (30 min free)	30	10	500	25	50

Pricing Comparison

Pricing and capacity as of November 2021

	Free Plan	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
Remo	850 participants (for 30 mins)	Essential (\$270/month) billed annually (\$3,240) - Up to 24 hours per event	Ultimate (\$880/month) billed annually (\$10,560) - Unlimited duration of event	✗
Wonder	500 participants	Pricing structure expected in mid-2022 (Free for now!)		✗
Kumospace	30 participants	Professional (starting at \$150.00/month + \$5/per user) - Capacity up to 1,000 users	(Contact Kumospace) - Customizable features - Unlimited capacity	✗
Gatheround	10 participants	Premium (\$5/per user/per month) - Capacity up to 200 users - Unlimited events	(Contact Gatheround) - Customizable subdomain - SSO support	✗
Gather	25 participants	2 hours (\$2.00/per user) - Up to 500 users - Domain restricted access	Per day (\$3.00/per user) *	Monthly (\$7.00/per user) *
SpatialChat	50 participants	Starter (\$49.99/month) - Up to 120 users - Up to 5 rooms in space	Per day (\$300/per day) - 150 -1,000+ users - 100 rooms in space	Pro (\$12,000/year) - Unlimited capacity - Up to 100 rooms per space

Conclusion

Perhaps our most important finding is the extent to which running a good event is as much or more about the event setup as the platform itself. Creating an environment where LGBTQIA+ people can feel safe to be themselves and make genuine connections goes far beyond the physical or digital setting of events.

As mentioned in the introduction, we found that many Out in Tech folks really value online events and hope that they continue into the future, especially people with limited mobility, social anxiety, or limited access to LGBTQ+ community in their area. We hope that, with the influx of platforms with features like proximity-based audio and integrated games, there can be a more significant separation between work meetings and fun social events, even in times when, and for folks for whom, a computer is the best option.