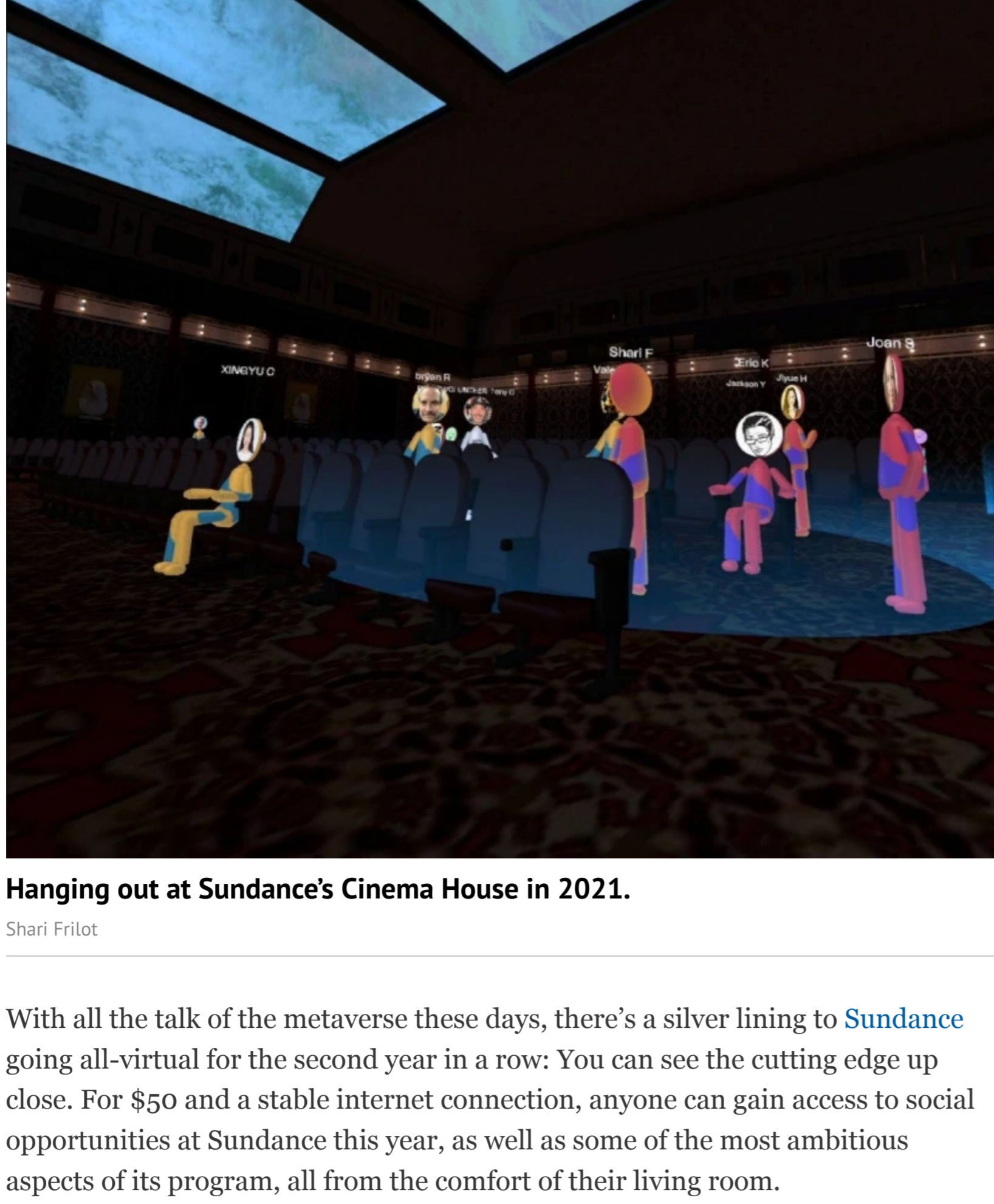


How to Socialize at Sundance 2022 from Your Living Room

For \$50 and an internet connection, you can experience a lot of the more promising aspects of this year's festival.



Hanging out at Sundance's Cinema House in 2021.

Shari Frlot

With all the talk of the metaverse these days, there's a silver lining to [Sundance](#) going all-virtual for the second year in a row: You can see the cutting edge up close. For \$50 and a stable internet connection, anyone can gain access to social opportunities at Sundance this year, as well as some of the most ambitious aspects of its program, all from the comfort of their living room.

Once again, those who purchase [the festival's \\$50 Explorer Pass](#) can engage with the festival community from their computer's browser or VR headset. While that cost has doubled from last year, it's still a decent investment if you make the effort to use the technology it has developed from the ground up. These passes don't sell out, and based on the experiences many online visitors had last year, they're worth the price of admission.



The Explorer pass provides access to the short films, which are often where the best festival discoveries get made, along with the ever-unpredictable TV experiments in Indie Episodics. When you consider that many of the feature film highlights will make their way to distribution later this year, these two sections provide the most authentic opportunity to experience programming unique to the festival experience. Beyond that, the pass allows you to traverse the festival's easy-to-use 3D environments, which have expanded their accessibility from last year. You can also [buy single film tickets](#) to feature films in the lineup for \$20 a piece. (For more details on how to buy tickets to movies this year, go [here](#).)

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Once again, the best social option for Sundance requires you to create a digital avatar, at which point you can use either your computer's keyboard or a VR headset to wander a series of virtual spaces. On your computer, when your avatar approaches other people, your face will appear as a small video chat window whenever you approach another person. You can find fellow avatars milling about in the Film Party space, which features multiple "portals" that will take you to other parties as well as the [New Frontier](#) gallery; this year, even those without a VR headset can also get into Cinema House, where live performances will take place.

If you're a Sundance diehard skeptical about all this, look, I get it: Nothing can replace the adrenaline of the on-the-ground Sundance experience, as you rush from screenings to parties, processing the festival with your peers one hour at a time and meeting new people in the process. By that same token, however, if that aspect of the festival really means something to you, it would be a shame to ignore its virtual manifestation — particularly now that it has improved over last year.

"Weirdly, from a user perspective, it's simply going to be more accessible," said Shari Frlot, who programs Sundance's boundary-pushing New Frontier section and spearheaded the development of its virtual spaces for the second year in a row. While Sundance was angling for a hybrid presence this year, the cancellation of the Park City event didn't impact any of the plans for the virtual opportunities. "We were building it for it to withstand a hairpin turn like this," Frlot said. "In fact, New Frontier is going to see more action in a lot of different ways."

In 2021, visits to New Frontier programming expanded from roughly 30,000 to 40,000, a number that blossomed in tandem with the estimated half a million views of features, short films, and episodics. Now, the festival is leaning into that opportunity with an eye toward even bigger numbers. "We just didn't know how well this thing was going to perform," Frlot said. "This year, we are building toward bringing the festival and New Frontier websites into closer communications."

With all that in mind, here are the key ways you can make the most of socializing at Sundance in 2022.

Get Situated in the Space Garden

Anyone with a festival pass — including accredited press and industry members — automatically has access to Sundance social spaces as well as New Frontier. An introductory email will include a customized link to "Space Garden," a private 3D area where you can build an avatar and access the main virtual spaces. (Once again, Sundance recommends you use Google Chrome.) Each space can hold up to 100 avatars at a time, but if it reaches capacity, each newcomer will be sent into a new "instance." (Think of it as an overflow room.) The avatars are a bit like Gumby with a Zoom circle stamped into the head, but if you can get past that inherent disconnect, consider how easy it is to roam the Sundance grounds without the elevation sickness and deep freeze.

Film Party

Once you create your avatar in the Space Garden, the most logical starting point is to walk through the portal to Film Party. This large, circular environment is the main social area, where avatars can meet up and sort out their plans. Last year, I often encountered filmmakers here under the same conditions that I might come across them IRL: One day, I dropped into Film Party to find Edgar Wright hanging out by the virtual bar, surrounded by a bunch of fans, which seemed about right. I also met young people from across the country who were eagerly engaging with the festival program for the first time and meeting new people in the process. It was a microcosm of the way that the festival community has evolved in recent years. "Cinema culture is shifting online," Frlot said.

That development is enabled here by a fairly user-friendly interface. When you move your avatar toward another person, it creates a "bubble" in which you can interact. Anyone inside the bubble can hear each other. (The capacity of the bubble has shrunk from six to eight people from last year, so the noise doesn't get overwhelming.) One the right side of the screen, you'll see a list of everyone in the room, so you can easily find people you know. Here the festival has added another important function: Text chat. You no longer have to roam around searching for the people you came to see; instead, just send them a DM to track them down. Additionally, all feature films in the lineup get their own space for a private party. The festival site will include a blog post listing all the smaller parties to save time. But don't forget to experience the program itself.

Explore New Frontier in the Spaceship

The sixteenth edition of Sundance's New Frontier section is the latest opportunity to browse innovative creativity, from interactive digital spaces to multifaceted storyteller experiences. The Spaceship is a vast gallery (with stunning photorealistic views of the Earth visible out the window) where portals to each part of the program can be found alongside descriptive text. These range from "Atua," a sculptural AR experience that requires you to download an app on your phone, to "Godwana," a virtual ecosystem featuring the world's oldest tropical rainforest that you can visit multiple times over the course of the festival to witness the impact of climate change. Some of the programming tips into gamification, including "The Inside World," a Vegas-set mystery that involves AI and human actors as well as an NFT component.

The virtual New Frontier presentation at Sundance 2021

As usual, the VR experiences in the lineup do require a headset. The release of the Oculus Quest 2 (now known as the Meta Quest) has brought VR into more households than ever before, so if you've invested in one, you should be able to access five of the nine VR works at the festival (the others require a tethered headset). "Interestingly, the field of XR was very robust and healthy throughout the past year, especially with the larger mainstream embrace of the metaverse," Frlot said.

Live Performances in the Cinema House

One of the more significant developments over last year's virtual Sundance experience is that the Cinema House, a large theater filled with virtual seats and a stage beneath its screen, is now accessible through the browser. That means you don't have to have a headset to experience some of the coolest virtual events in this year's program. That includes opening night selection "32 Sounds," from innovative documentarian Sam Green. Building on his remarkable "7 Sounds" that played the festival last year, the new feature-length work is a 95-minute live performance about auditory experiences that includes live music and narration with a visual component.

Additional Cinema House programming includes live events such as "Cosmogony," in which the Gilles Jobin dance studio in Geneva will feature three motion-captured dancers acting as puppeteers of their own bodies. "Suga" goes one step further to create an immersive experience that captures dancers in a volumetric space to recreate the transatlantic trade route. "It allows you to understand the sugar industry through the lens of the slaves that came over on this boat," Frlot said. "Dancers perform live on a sugar mill. You have to be in it to understand how special it is. It comes with so much heart and thoughtfulness. As Americans we have so much trouble facing up to slavery in our culture. This gives us a whole new way to relate to this open wound."

Frlot knows that many people will be reticent to embrace virtual Sundance over the alternative that was canceled again this year. "We are going to miss being in person. There's something really special and irreplaceable about that," she said. "But the ability to have a social life in a spatial 3D platform is super-special and very exciting."

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