

How to create a virtual office and why you should

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Motivation

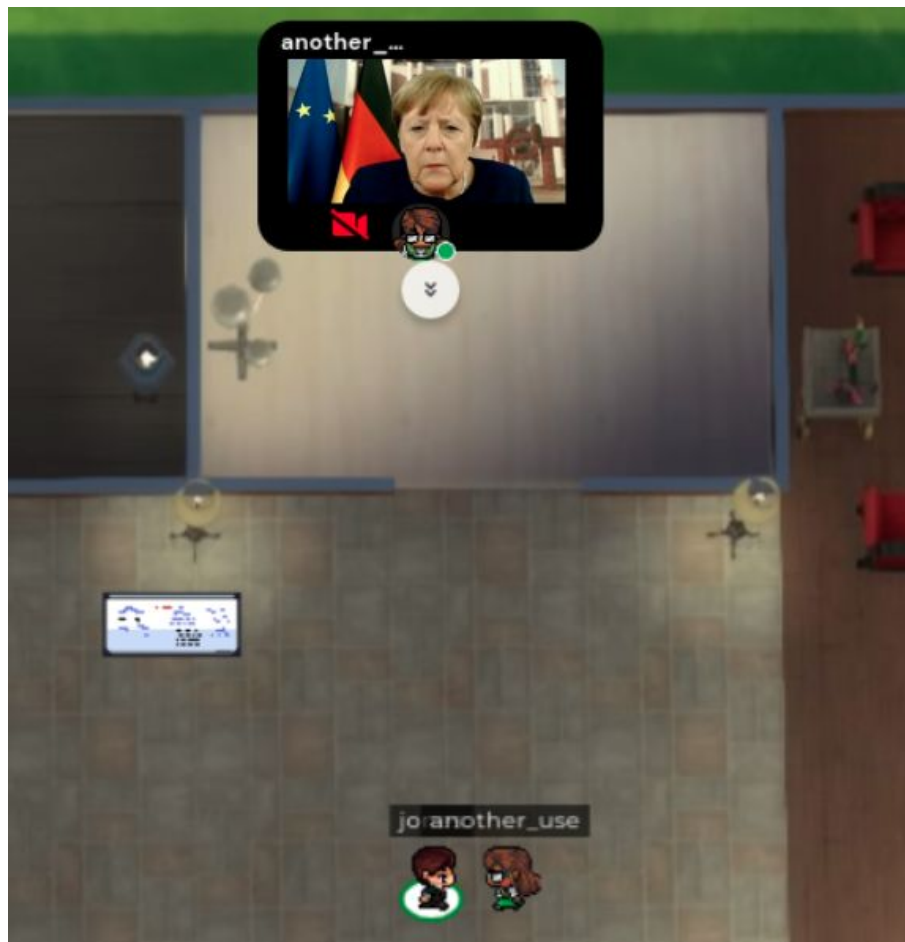
During the Covid-19 pandemic, a lot of people are forced to work from home. Due to cloud applications, homeoffice is a technical possibility for most tech companies (such as [S O NAH](#), where I work). But the technical possibility to work from home did not replace what we value most about our work: The interactions with the team and all the non-work randomness that makes working in a start-up (or ex-start-up, now SME) so exciting.

If your team is like us and you are really thirsty for that office atmosphere, here is a possible relief (if not cure) for your problem:

Gather.town - Tool introduction

[Gather.town](#) is a web application that is essentially a browser video conferencing tool (like Jitsi, Google Meet or Zoom) combined with an old Pokémon gameboy game.





You have a character that you can move around on the map with

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 and when you get close to anyone, the video conference starts dynamically.

But the real added value to your team comes with the adaptability of the tool:

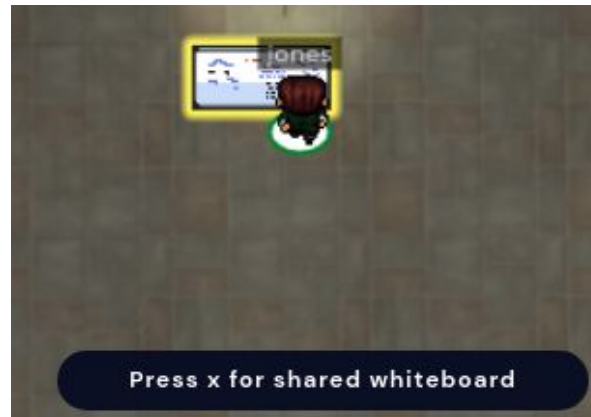
Customize it to fit your needs

In this tool, you can not only go into break-out-rooms dynamically by “walking away” with someone (which is way more fun than on Meet or Zoom), but you can also design the space to support your work culture and the interactions at work, that you are now missing out on.

The easiest inbuilt extras, that might make this video conferencing tool a suitable replacement for a physical office are

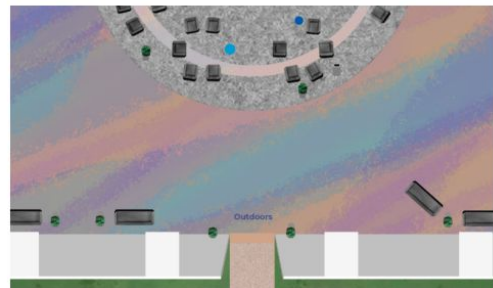
- easily **show your screen** to people near you
- **games** like scribble.io, poker, mahjong or chess that can be launched just inside the same interface
- **video screens** (with youtube videos) that pop up when you get close to them
 - awesome to showcase your favourite christmas tunes
 - or show the latest company PR video
- **whiteboards** that can be drawn on by multiple people at the same time

- **shared documents** that can be placed in the room, so they are easier to find than by searching for them in the depths of the company cloud.



But to make this a replacement for your physical office, you need more

While gather.town was fun and easy to access for a simple workshop, the standard “rooms” or “worlds” were not keeping my team engaged.



After the first workshop with this tool ended, everybody left immediately and went back to work. In addition to that, nobody was pleased with my proposal to use it as an alternative to Google Meet: **“Why use gather.town instead of Google Meet? Only because I can run around - which gets boring soon enough?”**

Defining the goal

To really get my team to use this tool and thus **enable them** to get some of the office experience back, I had to define the characteristics of an office that I want to emulate. I came up with the following:

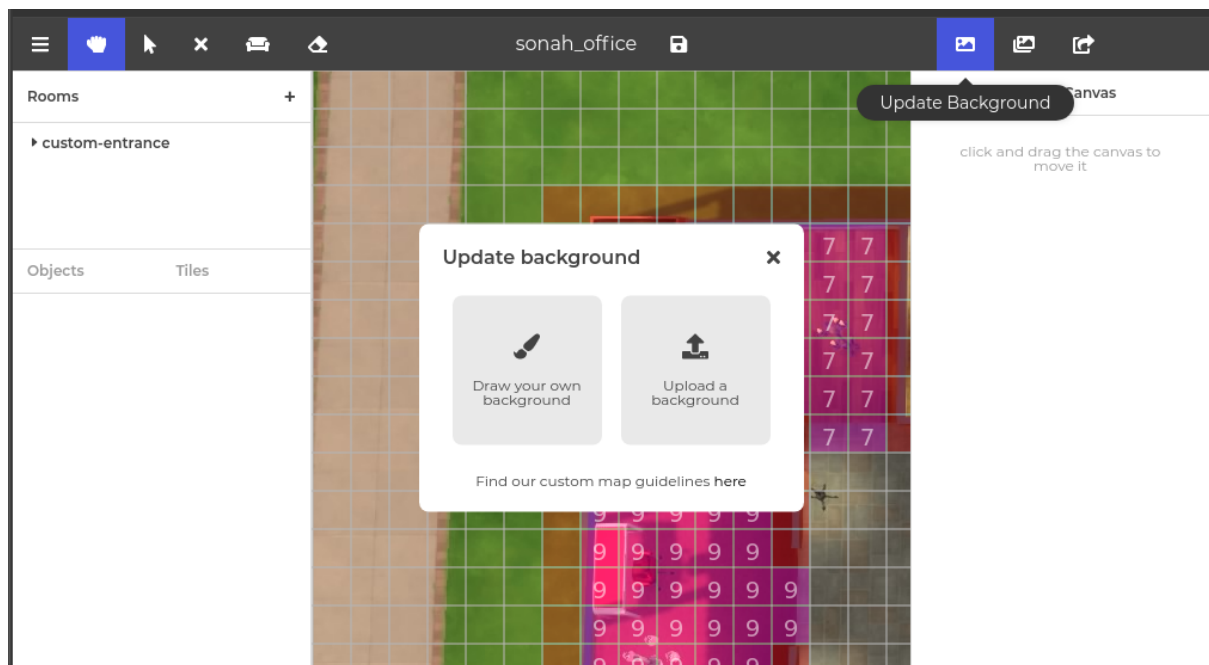
- **separate rooms** that enables private conversations
- employees have their **"own" space** where they can be found
- employees can **"shut their door"** on the rest when they don't want to be disturbed
- **internally public information** can be presented (like a whiteboard with the roadmap or a TV with some current KPI stats) to everyone without them searching for that information
- **communal spaces** where you can have meetings with multiple people

Due to gather.town's **mapmaker**, it was possible to incorporate all that!

What makes our "room" an office

When you have a "room" in gather.town, the admin (or everybody if you activate it) can upload a background image, which then becomes the world. I got creative and made an "office" for us in Sims 4, which looks like this:





I imported that picture into the gather.town mapmaker. It gets set as a background image and you have **tiles on top of it, which can have different functions:**

- **impassable (red):**
 - This is great to separate the different rooms in the office from each other.
- **spawn (green):**
 - Here, newly logged on participants are starting their journey - I put it at the buildings entrance.
- **private (pink)**
 - Only people with the same number on the tile can talk to each other. One of the most important features, in my opinion. This is how I separate offices and meeting rooms from each other.



- **spotlight (orange)**
 - This is really useful, until it gets abused. Whoever is on a spotlight can talk to everyone, but can't (or doesn't have to) hear them. We use this if somebody has to make an announcement, but the tile is hidden and only two people know where it is (yet).

How make your OWN virtual office

In the following, I will give you a brief summary of steps you have to take, to create your own virtual office:

- go to www.gather.town and create an account
- create your own space
- change url from
 - https://gather.town/app/ZaksdjPrkGk/your_room to
 - https://gather.tow/mapmaker/ZaksdjPrkGk/your_room
- now upload either your own office creation or reuse the office building I have built for S O NAH
- edit the tiles to have walls, private spaces, etc
- place interactive objects with informational value in the office, like
- employee happiness questionnaire
- latest company PR video
- games you know your teammates like
- pictures of the team

Special advice if you want to make your own office background image (in Sims 4)

These are some tips that can help you get the most out of your own office creation:

- **use cheats** to have unlimited money ("motherlode" yeah)
- fill every wall with **windows to have bright rooms**
- but **basic furniture** in every office in Sims, it has much more variety than gather.town
- make every room or office **unique**
- you have to **exit the building mode** to remove the UI elements for a screenshot
 - go to "living" mode
 - pan the camera to have a birdsview perspective
 - take a screenshot

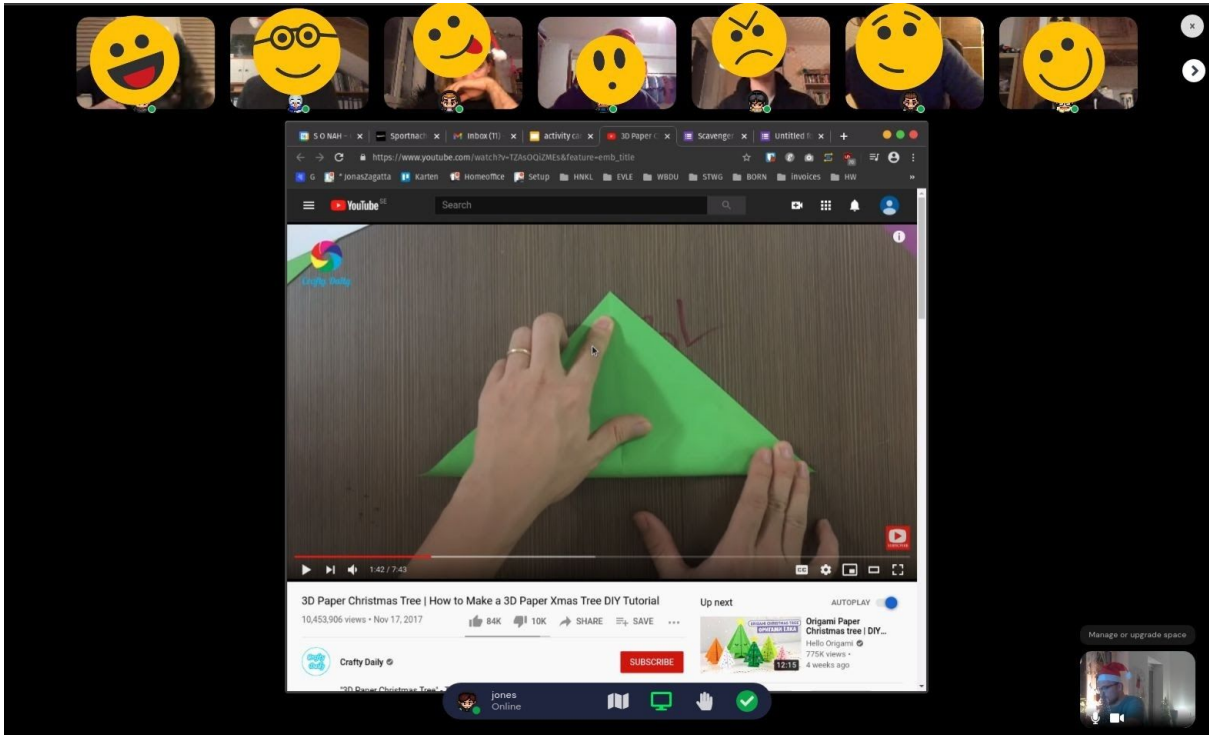
How to establish a virtual office

Remember when I said that *doing homeoffice is a technical possibility for most tech companies but that does not mean it is going to work just as well on its own?* The same applies of course for your virtual office. While creating it is a technical procedure that everyone can do, the real challenge is establishing it. Before you can reap the benefits of what you have sown, you need to put some more work in!

I can recommend the following approach:

- you (as the initiator) should be **logged in all the time** (while you work)
 - you can set your status to "yellow" which activates your camera and microphone only if you are actively in the gather.town browser tab, but you will still hear people that are coming to your office to talk to you, even if you are doing something else on your computer
- ask people to have **any meeting with you in the virtual office** instead of using Meet or Zoom
 - it really is necessary to be the pain in the a** here
- make employees **choose their own room** and write their name on the floor
 - next person to join only for a meeting will get jealous and also demand her/his own office
- have events or workshops there...
 - this is where gather.town really excels naturally, so it is easy to convince people to join for such an occasion
- ...where you use all the different tools that are available
 - I integrated a lot of the tools into our christmas party, which was a great showcase for how to use them





A screenshot of a Zoom meeting interface. At the top, a row of eight participant icons is visible, each featuring a different yellow emoji (e.g., face with tongue out, neutral face, smiling face with heart, angry face, laughing face, angry face, neutral face, neutral face). The main window displays a Google Forms quiz titled "Christmas Quiz". The form includes a text field for "Your email address (zagatta@sonah.tech) will be recorded when you submit this form. Not you? [Switch account](#)". Below this is a "Team Name" field with a red asterisk and a "Who is in the team?" field with a red asterisk. Both fields have "Your answer" text below them. A "Next" button is located at the bottom of the form. Below the form, a message states "Never submit passwords through Google Forms." and another message says "This form was created inside S O NAH. [Report Abuse](#)". The Google Forms logo is centered at the bottom. At the bottom of the Zoom window, a toolbar shows the "jones" user is "Online", along with icons for chat, gallery view, hand raise, and a yellow coin icon. A small "Manage or upgrade space" button is also present on the right side of the form.

Give it a try - with a workshop

If an actual virtual office is just too much to start with, then **a workshop is a good way to try out the tool** and see the responses and interactions of your coworkers. We used the tool the first time for a strategic workshop and it got overwhelmingly good responses:

- 4.4 of 5 rating for the workshop
- 4.5 of 5 rating for doing such a workshop again

(I do the same questionnaire, which takes about 1-2 min for every participant, after every workshop or company event and this has been the best rating I ever got)

To get the most out of your workshop, here are some final tips to make it work well:

- have **alternating group sizes** at different stages of the workshop
 - surely you will have some discussion with **all workshop participants**
 - **smaller subgroups** (e.g. departments) that do certain methods together, depending on what workshop you do
 - I can also recommend some "sparring" **with another team member 1:1** before presenting the results to the whole group
- **use the interaction possibilities** in the world - instead of posting into the chat or sharing links to external documents
 - the **screen share** function is the easiest way to present a method that the participants are going to do
 - alternatively you can set up a **interactive video screen** with a youtube video explaining the method you are using - this way everyone can go through the instructions at their own speed
 - have a **shared document placed on a virtual conference table** - where the results of the different methods are written down
- **utilize breaks**
 - you should always incorporate specific breaks into your workshop, but especially keep it in mind for trying out gather.town
 - **place games** around the world you are using - so people can use the break to experience the virtual world and learn the interaction possibilities while having fun
- **place easter eggs**, to have some "secret" interactions to find for people who are exploring the world, e.g.
 - a funny youtube video
 - a passable wall into an otherwise inaccessible part of the world

Thanks for reading

If you've enjoyed this article or have constructive criticism, feel free to contact me. I would also **love** to hear about your experiences, if you try this out.

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