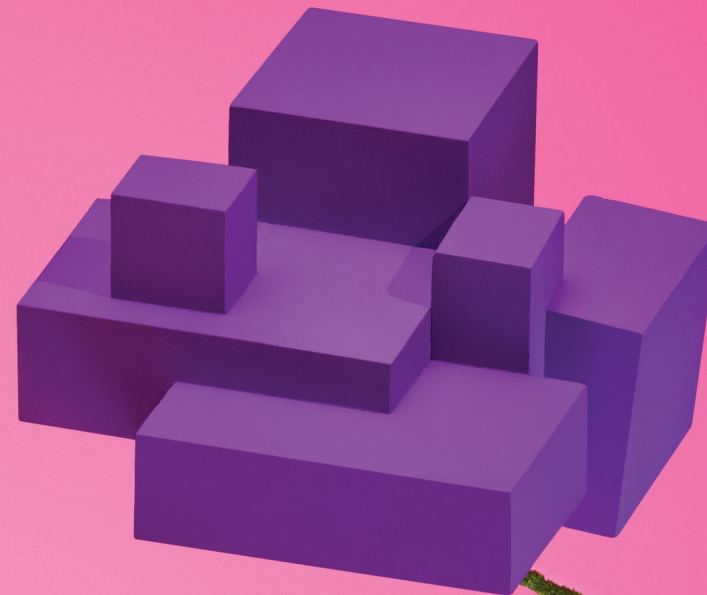


# AHEAD

# OF THE

# GAME



Picture headsets and army gear-clad avatars. Now open up to the idea that losing yourself in a pixelated world is a *powerful* mental health tool. Believe it: Gaming fosters connections, sharpens problem-solving skills, and allows you to peel back layers of yourself. Just press play.

BY MADELINE HOWARD

PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
PALOMA RINCÓN



# My family

and I spent hours playing *Mario Kart* together over the holidays last year, and in that time, I rediscovered the long-absent raw joy of cruising down Rainbow Road as baby Mario. Hit by a tidal wave of nostalgia, I clung to the escapism of zooming along in that simpler world during a radically uncertain time. Even when we had returned to our homes across the country, my sisters and I competed virtually (shout-out to *Catan*). After nearly a year of this obsession, I've concluded I am—*gasp!*—a gamer.

At its core, gaming is a means by which we can socialize in a world where we're not together, says Jessica Gold, MD, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. It centered my family's interactions on a shared enjoyable activity rather than on commiseration. "It was perfect timing for games to grow in popularity," says Sonja Reid, 30, a Twitch streamer (OMGitsfirefox) with more than 740,000 followers. "It deepened my sense of community."

Even pre-COVID, women were increasingly drawn to the gaming sphere. Forty-one percent of all women in the U.S. are into gaming, per recent data from Statista, and, in 2019, about 46 percent of gamers in the U.S. were female (up from 38 percent in 2006). Shocked yet?

And since it never hurts to have another gadget in your mental health toolbox—ahead, the all-around benefits of gaming, online competition, and immersive virtual lands, straight from gamers and social scientists alike. Your happier, more playful future self will thank you.

"There are millions of female gamers, but some people still think that women don't know as much as men, or that they're not as good. You have to constantly prove yourself and show your credentials to complete strangers in ways that none of the men I've ever worked with have faced."

ALANAH PEARCE  
@charalanahzard

## GAMING IS GOOD FOR YOU

Four awe-inspiring health wins of logging on and playing hard

### It can help heal trauma.

Achievement-based gaming can be a coping mechanism for those with post-traumatic stress disorder—possibly due to the way gaming intensely distracts from the past and present. That, in turn, may help reduce the likelihood of panic attacks and depressive spells, says WH advisor Chloe Carmichael, PhD, a clinical psychologist based in New York. "There's a meditative aspect to it," she says. "It can be extremely absorbing, which can be very helpful if you're ruminating on a certain topic that you really need to get your mind off of."

### It's a unique way to foster bonds.

When playing against others, chatting long-distance, or accomplishing a common feat, you're connecting in the way you would with any team sport, says psychotherapist Mike Langlois, LICSW. And unlike on traditional social platforms, you don't need to show your face, a potential upside for introverted individuals. "I've created more friendships through gaming than I had prior to playing," says AnniePants02, a self-proclaimed faceless Twitch streamer with over 40,000 subscribers (who keeps her IRL identity a secret).

### It gets you moving (really!).

"The stigma that playing video games is somehow lazier than watching TV or movies is strange to me," says Alanah Pearce, 27, a game writer and content creator at Sony Santa Monica Studio. She points out that propelling a character forward works your reflexes, unlike passively watching something in front of you. During COVID, for fitness, Pearce relied on a virtual reality lightsaber game (see "Choose Your Own Adventure," page 93) that involves swinging at objects, since she's a high-risk individual who couldn't safely work out in a gym.

### A surge of confidence comes too.

Gaming gives you self-assurance thanks to the Proteus Effect, a behavioral phenomenon named by Stanford researchers. When people were given a taller avatar and interacted with someone in a virtual environment, they then negotiated more aggressively in a bargaining exercise in the real world than people given a shorter character. Point is: Our real selves can shift to behave like our digital ones. This can translate to just about any task, Langlois says. Scary convo on deck? Play a game beforehand that makes you feel strong and capable.

## Metamorphosis Magic

A character can be an unconventional way to play around with self-expression. Here's how to explore, with advice from Mike Langlois, LICSW, a psychotherapist who specializes in using gaming to help patients heal.

### ► Gaming involves stepping into different avatars and roles. Why is that so clutch?

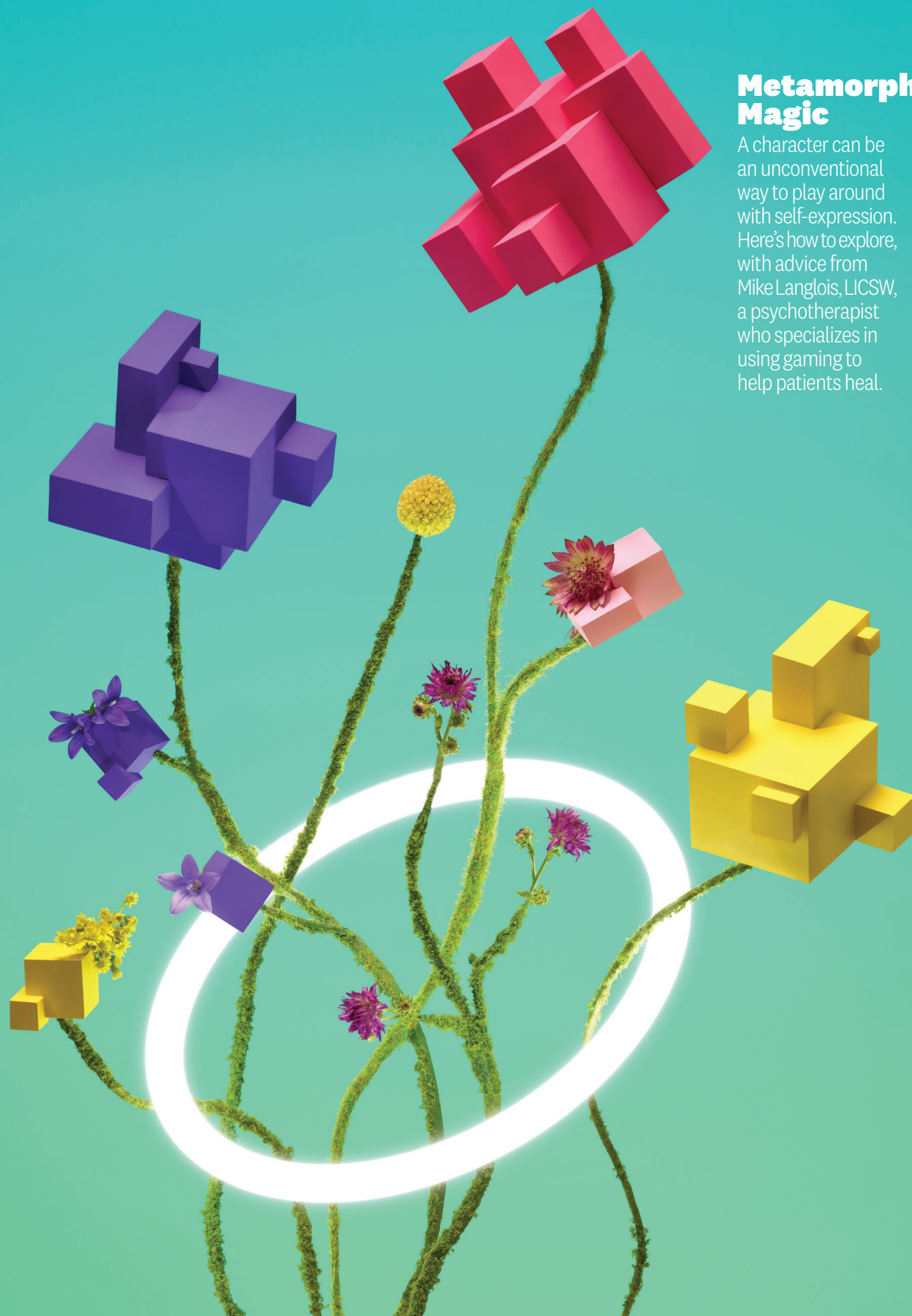
■ **ML:** You experience a heightened sense of freedom in games because you have total control of how you present yourself. I have a lot of patients who take their first steps into trans identity development, for example, by playing either a gender-neutral avatar or one whose gender is different from what they present in everyday life.

### ► How do you guide people through exploring an identity safely online?

■ **ML:** I pay attention to the avatars my patients are using in terms of their physical and game presentations, and I will mention the qualities and attributes I see and ask about them. I might also steer them toward a game where you can customize the character, so they get a chance to create the identity they want.

### ► How can you experiment in a game setting?

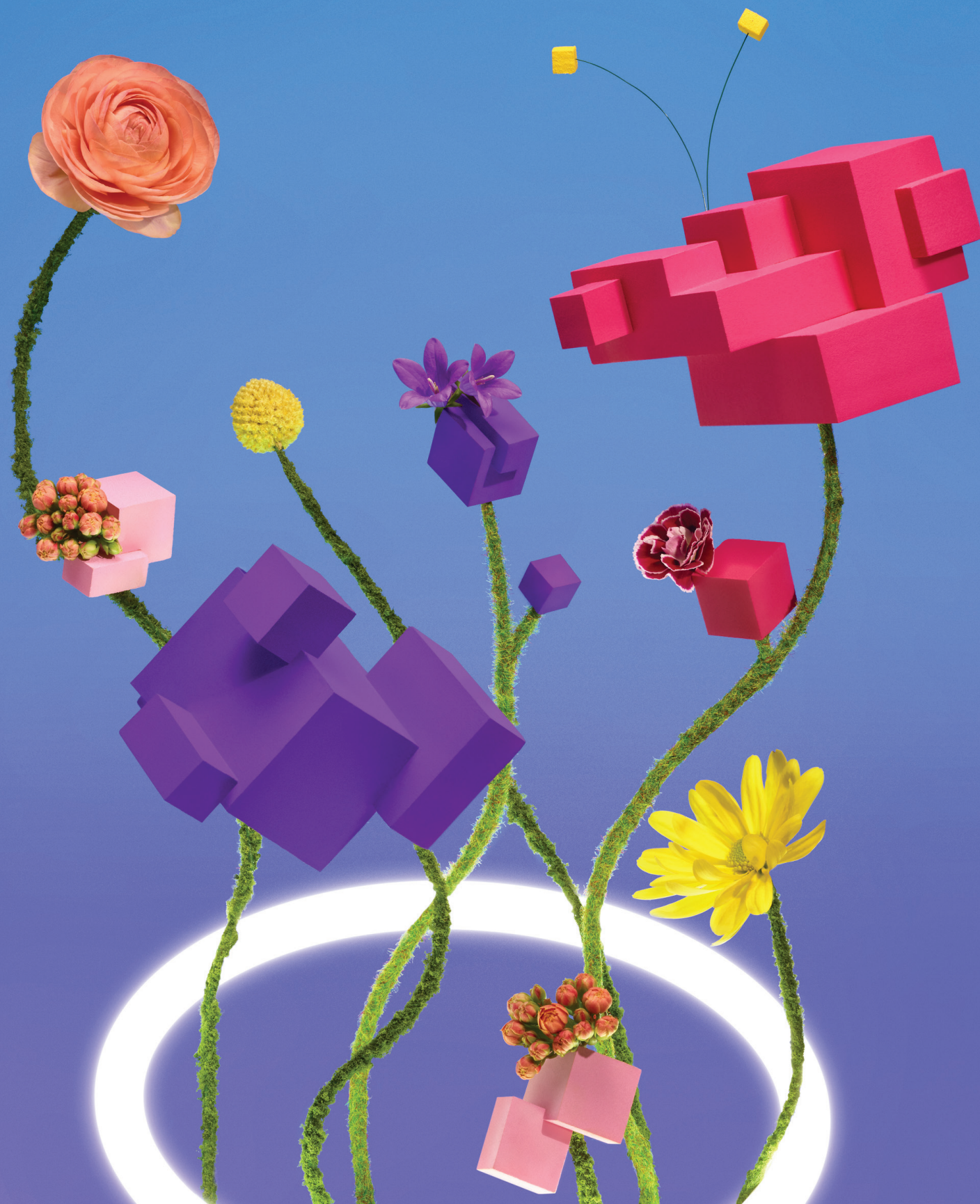
■ **ML:** I encourage people to get curious about all the aspects of games. How do they feel when they are in a game world, either as a nonbinary person or as someone else? How much time are they spending crafting their avatar compared with the time they spend playing? All of these inquiries might help give a better sense of identity in both the game and life.





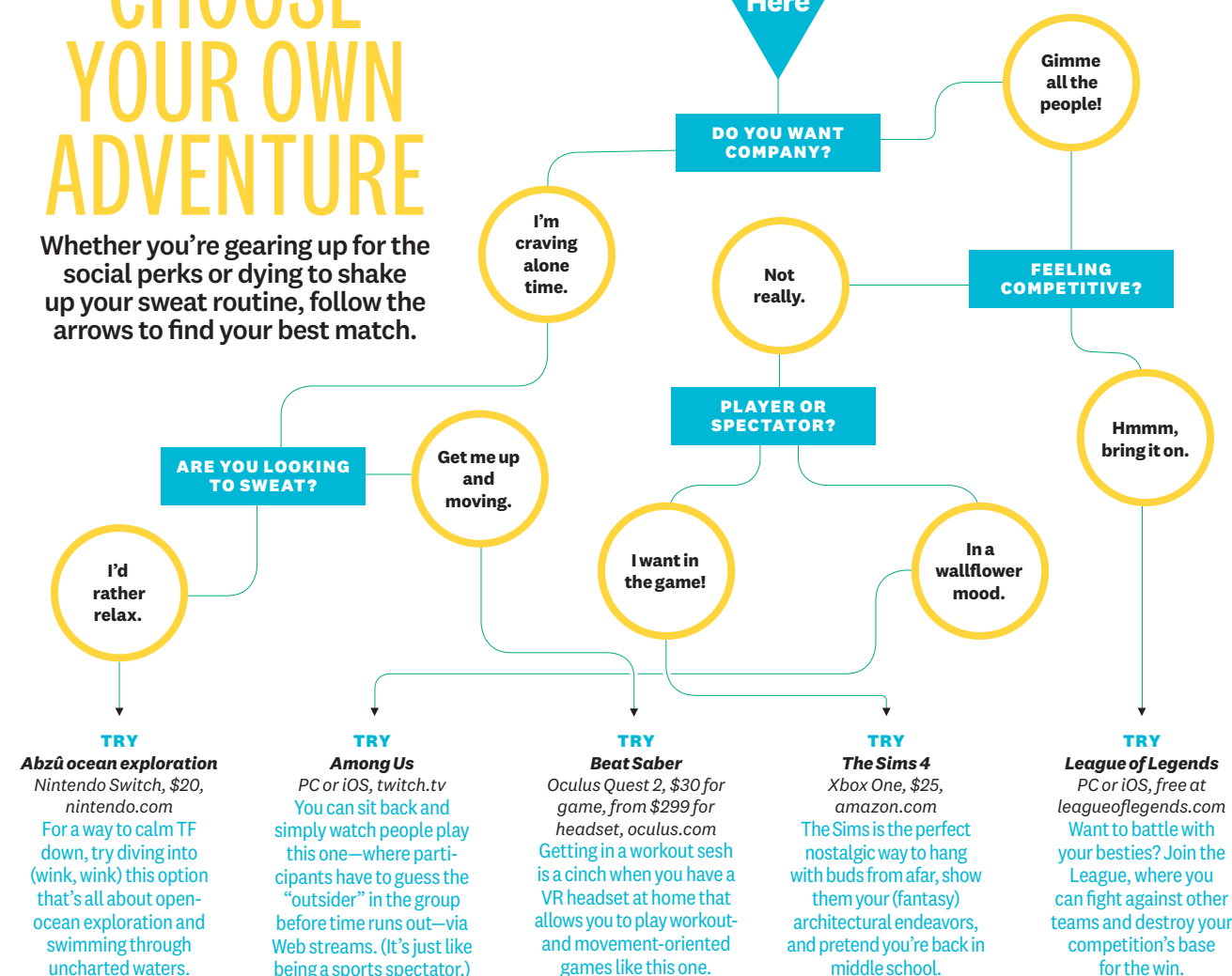
# 79.9 million

Nintendo Switch devices have been sold to date, making it the brand's top-selling console since 2011. It also sold over 198 million copies of its top 10 games.



## CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Whether you're gearing up for the social perks or dying to shake up your sweat routine, follow the arrows to find your best match.



## Relationship Redux

Neisha Bhagwandin of Seattle and her now-partner had their first date via their Nintendo screens. The rest was history.

After losing my job because of the pandemic and breaking off a relationship, I felt so alone, isolated, and depressed. The only thing I had the energy to do during this period was play video games like *Dragon Age* and *Street Fighter*. They were an attempt to save myself from the boredom of depression and didn't require me to get up from my bed. I had been waiting for the much-delayed and anticipated new installment of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, a social simulation series I'd played during childhood that was becoming popular again; it involves building a home and simply enjoying it as you interact with other animals.

The upbeat, nostalgic, and cute nature of it was a positive boost for my mental health, and I quickly joined online communities of individuals who were

passionate about the *AC* life. It was the most social I'd felt in a long time, but it ended up changing my life forever—just not in the way I initially expected.

When I matched with a particularly interesting person on Tinder, he told me he also loved playing *AC*. I had an idea: What if we had our first date on our *AC* islands in lieu of actually meeting? It ended up being the ideal move, and we clicked. Having such clear common ground made it really easy to flirt and banter over our shared interest, and the date felt comfortable and less pressured, given that we weren't physically present (not to mention it was safer amid COVID and via an app). And as we played in and explored each other's worlds and creations via our avatars, it was as if we had a peek into each other's creative types and personalities.

We ended up playing often with each other, and eventually we met up in person. Now? We've been dating for a nearly a year and have matching *Animal Crossing* tattoos.

“Gaming used to be a way for people to isolate themselves. Now it's used as a means of interaction and positivity.”

■  
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