

On This Website, the Golden Era of Social Media Never Ended

From 2009 to 2012, anyone with an iPhone could publish a video on YouTube with one click. That inadvertently ended up preserving a specific moment in time.

Matthew Gault Published November 18, 2024 | Comments (4)



September 19, 2012: Woman hands holding an Apple iPhone 4. iPhone 4 displaying loading video screen of Youtube application. © hocus-focus vis Getty.

For the past hour, I've been watching decade-old clips uploaded from iPhones onto YouTube. Between 2009 and 2012, iPhones and iPod touches included a "Send to YouTube" button that allowed users to easily post videos directly to the site.

[Read More](#)

The feature worked so well that YouTube reported a 1700% increase in video uploads during the first half of 2009. It all ended in 2012 when Apple removed YouTube from its apps and ended the ability to upload videos in a few clicks.

Ben Wallace, an engineer and the VP of Customer Success at Kibu wrote about the defunct feature on his personal blog in November. He discovered something magical. “Apple uses the ‘IMG_XXXX’ naming convention for all images and videos captured on iOS devices, where XXXX is a unique sequence number,” he said. “The first image you take is named ‘IMG_0001,’ the second is ‘IMG_0002’ and so on. During the Send to YouTube era of 2009 to 2012, the title of one’s YouTube video was defaulted to this naming convention. Unwitting content creators would then upload their videos on a public site with a barely searchable name. To this day, there are millions of these videos.”

Wallace suggests doing a search on YouTube with a specific number in mind. “Try searching for ‘IMG_XXXX’ on YouTube, replacing ‘XXXX’ with your favorite numbers (I used my birthday, 0416). See what you get!”

But programmer Riley Walz decided to take things a bit further. Inspired by Wallace’s posts, Walz built a bot that crawled YouTube and found 5 million “IMG_XXX” videos. He then made a website that serves them up to interested viewers at random.

As Wallace noted in his blog, there’s something haunting about these videos. The grammar for the short-form video that Vine and TikTok would establish doesn’t exist yet. The fidelity is often low-res. You’re sometimes capturing people in intimate moments. It feels like the 2010 version of finding an old box of Polaroids. It’s the raw stuff of people’s lives, the kind of thing we thought we’d have as we started to build connections with social media.

Once I started watching them, It was hard for me to stop. Here’s an incomplete list of what I saw in the first hour.

7 views. November 13, 2012. Grainy footage of a garage door closing.

21 views. Jan 10, 2012. A car window rolls down and the camera focuses on a woman smoking outside a Starbucks below a non-smoking sign. It looks like trouble is brewing, but the camera cuts off before anything happens. It strikes me that I'm watching a rough draft of a genre of video that'll dominate the internet in the early 2020s: the Karen-style snitch video.

38 views. June 28, 2012. Out of focus and sideways footage of a man lifting weights at a gym.

5 views. December 15, 2011. A wordless tour of a suburban home at night. The sound of children playing can be heard faintly in the background. The video sweeps through the home the way a real estate agent might.

56 Views. December 23, 2011. The nighttime detonation of a homemade bottle rocket. So out of focus, it's hard to tell what's happening.

38 views. March 19, 2012. A laughing baby. There are a lot of laughing babies.

50 views. May 10, 2010. Two guys lip-syncing to a rap song in front of a Marlboro sign in a house. Two takes, unedited. The camera twists from portrait to landscape several times. The stereo screws up halfway through the first one and they restart. It's the kind of thing that, if filmed properly, would kill on Vine in two years.

12 views. March 19, 2013. Young people dance in a club while lights flash and EDM music plays. It strikes me that everyone in the video is ten years older now. I wonder what's become of them.

2 views. October 8, 2012. A woman drives down the road while complaining about her husband's friends to people unseen.

52 views. June 18, 2012. Six black and white kittens lounge and play. There are fewer animal videos than I expected in the sample I saw.

3 views. October 3, 2010. A man tracking down someone he played a game of Madden against in Xbox Live.

0 views. March 09, 2013. A Pink Floyd concert. There's lots of concert footage.

17 views. March 26, 2013. Footage of a majestic horse.

4 views. April 08, 2013. A young woman talking directly to the camera about protesting an internet cafe ban in Jacksonville, Florida.

2 views. April 08, 2012. Someone scrubbing through footage of a *Call of Duty* match. Whoever is holding the camera is in their socks and has their feet propped up on a wooden stand just below a scanline-fuzzed CRT television.

Wallace's search idea and Walz's website help capture a specific moment in time. The iPhone was only two years old in 2009. YouTube had only been around for four. There's an innocence here that I don't typically see on the internet anymore, a naivete. I view nostalgia as a negative emotion, something harmful to indulge in. But please forgive me, I just want to click through a few more of these IMG_XXXX videos. I want to see another 420p kitten or a human caught on camera, unready for the take. I want to see more intimate moments from the time before we began to craft our digital selves.