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Rickrolling

Rickrolling or a **Rickroll** is an Internet meme involving the unexpected appearance of the music video to the 1987 hit song "Never Gonna Give You Up", performed by English singer Rick Astley. The aforementioned video has over 1.5 billion views on YouTube. The meme is a type of bait and switch, usually using a disguised hyperlink that leads to the music video. When someone clicks on a seemingly unrelated link, the site with the music video loads instead of what was expected, and they have been "Rickrolled". The meme has also extended to using the song's lyrics, or singing it, in unexpected contexts. Astley himself has also been Rickrolled on several occasions.^[1]^[2]^[3]



A screenshot of the music video to the song on YouTube, taken in 2009

The meme grew out of a similar bait-and-switch trick called "duck rolling" that was popular on the 4chan website in 2006. The video bait-and-switch trick grew popular on 4chan by 2007 during April Fools' Day and spread to other Internet sites later that year. The meme gained mainstream attention in 2008 through several publicised events, particularly when YouTube used it on its 2008 April Fools' Day event.^[4]

Astley, who had only recently returned to performing after a 10-year hiatus, was initially hesitant about using his newfound celebrity from the meme to further his career but accepted the publicity by Rickrolling the 2008 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade with a surprise performance of the song. Since then, Astley has seen his performance career revitalised by the meme's popularity, and Rickrolling saw a massive resurgence online in the early 2020s.

History



"Never Gonna Give You Up"

0:19

An audio sample of the song "Never Gonna Give You Up".

Problems playing this file? See media help.

Origin

"Never Gonna Give You Up" appeared on Astley's 1987 debut album *Whenever You Need Somebody*.^[5] The song, his solo debut single, was a number-one hit on several international charts, including the *Billboard* Hot 100, *Hot Adult Contemporary Tracks*, and the *UK Singles Chart*. The accompanying music video, Astley's first, features him performing the song while dancing.^[6] On video streaming website *YouTube*, Astley's performance appears since October 25, 2009 at a *URL* ending with the character string "dQw4w9WgXcQ".^[7]:369 Computer scientists Benoit Baudry and Martin Monperrus called this "the canonical rickroll url" based on it being the URL for the most watched result for the YouTube search string "rick astley never gonna give you up".^[8]:190

The use of the song for rickrolling dates to 2006, originating from the *4chan imageboard* in an early meme known as "duck rolling". Sometime in 2006, the site moderator, *Christopher "moot" Poole*, implemented a word filter replacing the word "egg" with "duck" as a gag. On one thread, where "eggroll" had become "duckroll", an anonymous user posted an *edited* image of a duck with wheels, calling it a "duckroll". The image caught on across 4chan, becoming the target of a *hyperlink* with an otherwise interesting title, with a user clicking through having been stated to be "duck rolled".^[9]

In March 2007, the first trailer for the highly anticipated *Grand Theft Auto IV* was released onto the *Rockstar Games* website. Viewership was so high that it crashed Rockstar's site. Several users helped to post mirrors of the video on different sites, but one user on 4chan, Shawn Cotter, had linked to the "Never Gonna Give You Up" video claiming to be the trailer, tricking numerous readers into the bait-and-switch. In 2022, Shawn Cotter was interviewed by Vice Media. He said the reason of using "Never Gonna Give You Up" was because he found a list about songs that were popular at the time he was born using the *Internet*, and this song is on the top of 1987, which was his year of birth.^[10] This practice quickly replaced duck rolling for other alluring links, all generally pointing to Astley's video, and thus creating the practice of "rickrolling".^{[9][11]} The bait-and-switch to "Never Gonna Give You Up" greatly expanded on 4chan on *April Fools' Day* in 2007, and led to the trick expanding to other sites like *Fark* and *Digg* later that year, quickly adding the name "rickrolling" based on the prior "duck rolling".^[9]

Simultaneous references

A precursor of "rickrolling" occurred in 2006, when rural Michigan resident Erik Helwig called in to a local radio sports-talk show and, instead of conversing with the DJs, played "Never Gonna Give You Up", leaving the DJs speechless. While this occurred before 4chan's use of the song, *Know Your Meme* editor-in-chief Don Caldwell said there was no direct confirmation of whether it had inspired the 4chan use of the video.^[12]

Also in 2007, the episode "The Gang Dances Their Asses Off" of *It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia* also included the song, with the creators of the show unaware of the song's rising comedic popularity, leading them to incorrectly claim they had invented the trend in a 2021 podcast; although the song's use in the episode of such a popular show could be argued helped contribute to the rise of rickrolling.^[13]

Growth in 2008

Rickrolling started to appear in more mainstream sources during 2008, with a SurveyUSA April 2008 poll estimating that at least 18 million US adults had been Rickrolled.^[14]

Among the first public events involved the Church of Scientology, which had been aggressively trying to censor videos critical of the church. The Internet group Anonymous, as part of their Project Chanology to challenge this censoring, protested at the Church's various headquarters across the globe by chanting the song, among other activities.^[15] A number of collegiate basketball games in March 2008 had people dressing up as Astley from the video and lip-syncing to the music as a prank before the start of the game.^[16] YouTube's 2008 April Fools joke made featured video hyperlinks on the site's home page end up on the music video.^[17]^[18] In April 2008, the New York Mets baseball team asked fans on the internet what song they should use for their eighth-inning rally song. "Never Gonna Give You Up" received a massive number of votes, driven by websites like 4chan.^[19]^[18] At the 2008 MTV Europe Music Awards, an online campaign led to Astley being named the "Best Act Ever" despite not being on the original shortlist of nominees, effectively rickrolling the awards.^[20]



An Astley impersonator during one of March 2008 rickrolls at collegiate basketball games

By November 2008, the "Never Gonna Give You Up" video on YouTube had more than 20 million views and was considered a viral video; however, Astley initially appeared indifferent to the newfound fame.^[20] When Astley was asked about the trend of rickrolling during an interview in March 2008, he stated, "it's weird", since he had not performed much lately, but he found the interest funny.^[21] However, at the 2008 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, Astley made a surprise appearance on a float of the animated TV show *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends* for Cartoon Network to lip-sync the song to the crowd and television audiences, making that performance the largest rickroll to date.^[22] According to Astley, Cartoon Network had urged him to perform for the parade along with a large performance payment, and although he had been wary of trying to promote himself using the popularity of the meme, he decided to go for it.^[23]

Later usage

In September 2009, *Wired* magazine published a guide to modern hoaxes that listed rickrolling as one of the better known beginner-level hoaxes, along with the fake e-mail chain letter.^[24] The term has been extended to simple hidden use of the song's lyrics.^[25] Cover versions of "Never Gonna Give You Up" have also been used as part of rickrolling; in April 2018, the creators of TV's *Westworld* released a video that purported to be a spoiler guide for the entire second season in advance, but instead featured lead actress Evan Rachel Wood singing the song while accompanied by another main actress, Angela Sarafyan, playing the piano.^[26]



Astley performing the song during the 2008 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade

In 2011, members of the Oregon legislature slipped snippets of the song's lyrics into speeches they gave on the floor of the legislature. Aides later stitched together a video compilation of these snippets into a full song, released on YouTube.^[27]^[28]

The most popular upload of the music video on YouTube used for rickrolling was "RickRoll'D",^[29] posted in 2007. In February 2010, it was removed for terms-of-use violations but the takedown was revoked within a day.^[30]^[31] It was taken down again on 18 July 2014^[32] and later unblocked. It was once again taken down for terms-of-use violations in July 2021, when it had more than 89 million views, but as of May 2022 was once again viewable.^[29] The official Rick Astley channel uploaded another version on 24 October 2009, that surpassed one-billion views in July 2021.^[33]^[34]

Its meme status led to the song's usage in pop culture. In 2015 on the "Neon Mixtape Tour—Day 32" level from *Plants vs. Zombies 2*, Dr. Zomboss alludes to the song before attacking the player. The song is used in the 2016 *The Angry Birds Movie* in a scene where Mighty Eagle attempts to fly. Four episodes of the twentieth season of *South Park* contain allusions to the song.^[35] In the post-credits scene of Walt Disney Animation Studios' 2018 sequel film *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, a "sneak peek" of *Frozen II* suddenly switches to Ralph singing "Never Gonna Give You Up" and replicating Astley's dance from the original music video. The song also appears in the film *Bumblebee*, and was featured at the end of its initial teaser trailer.^[36]

On 5 January 2018, Paul Fenwick announced that he had started several Rick Astley hotlines that when called, would play "Never Gonna Give You Up" along with several other artists' adaptations of it. Fenwick advertised it by saying, "You are encouraged to use them for paperwork, loyalty schemes, and general joy."^[37] On 25 August 2019, the Boston Red Sox and the San Diego Padres played a Major League Baseball game at Petco Park in San Diego, the Red Sox's first game there in six years. During a mid-inning break, the Padres' scoreboard began to play "Sweet Caroline"—a

tradition at Red Sox home games in Fenway Park—but as the Neil Diamond song approached the chorus, the video-board suddenly switched to "Never Gonna Give You Up", much to the amusement of the crowd.^[38]

On 13 October 2019, during the Sunday night NFL game between the Pittsburgh Steelers and Los Angeles Chargers at Dignity Health Sports Park, the PA announcers played the beginning of the Styx song "Renegade", a standard at the Steelers home of Heinz Field, then switched to "Never Gonna Give You Up".^{[39][40]}

Rickrolling saw a massive resurgence online in the early 2020s. In online classes on Zoom during the worldwide COVID-19 lockdown, students often rickrolled their classmates and teachers.^[41] A 4K remaster of the "Never Gonna Give You Up" music video went viral in early 2021.^{[42][43]} Nintendo and The Pokémon Company had announced 1 July 2021 as "Bidoof Day" with plans for a major announcement for the Pokémon series, which turned out to be a rickroll using a parody of "Never Gonna Give You Up".^[44] Later that month, the music video for "Never Gonna Give You Up" reached 1 billion views, becoming the fourth 1980s song to do so.^[45]

In the tenth episode of the second season of Ted Lasso, "No Weddings and a Funeral", the main character prepares to give a eulogy but instead leads the attendees in singing "Never Gonna Give You Up", rickrolling the attendees and the audience.^[46] Greta Thunberg rickrolled her followers on April Fools' Day 2021 by posting a link to "a climate-related video" that linked to Astley's music video.^[47] She followed this on 16 October 2021 with a climate-action speech at the Climate Live concert in Stockholm in which she said, "We're no strangers to love...You know the rules and so do I", followed by singing the song and dancing to it, to great applause; Astley tweeted his thanks.^[48]

Astley recreated the original video clip in a 2022 advertisement for the American Automobile Association. In the videoclip, a QR code was included to Rickroll the viewers.^[49]

Studies

In 2022, KTH Royal Institute of Technology faculty Benoit Baudry and Martin Monperrus searched for cases of Rickrolling in academic literature by searching Google Scholar for "dQw4w9WgXcQ", a string of characters appearing in the "canonical rickroll url".^{[8]:189–190} They documented 23 instances in which an author appeared to have intentionally attempted to Rickroll readers of the academic work using the "dQw4w9WgXcQ" URL, such as by placing it in footnotes.^{[8]:189–195}

In 2024, researchers with Old Dominion University did an analysis of millions of random web link "sinks", and found a high correlation with Rickrolling. As background, a "sink" is the final destination in a chain of URL redirects. The researchers found the YouTube page for Rickrolling was one of the most common sinks on the Internet. Idiomatically they found an "all roads lead to

Rome" situation. The researchers were not looking for Rickrolling, it emerged unexpectedly in the data. It is explainable because the Rickrolling prank depends on URL redirection to send viewers to a location they were otherwise not expecting.^[50]

Reaction

In an interview in March 2008, Astley said that he found the rickrolling of Scientology to be "hilarious"; he also said that he will not try to capitalise on the rickroll phenomenon with a new recording or remix of his own, but that he would be happy to have other artists remix it. Overall, Astley is not troubled by the phenomenon, stating that he finds it "bizarre and funny" and that his only concern is that his "daughter doesn't get embarrassed about it."^[51] At the time, a spokesperson for Astley's record label released a comment which showed that Astley's interest in the phenomenon had faded, as they stated, "I'm sorry, but he's done talking about Rickrolling".^[9]



Astley performing in 2017

In November 2008, Astley was nominated for "Best Act Ever" at the MTV Europe Music Awards after the online nomination form was flooded with votes.^[52] The push to make Astley the winner of the award, as well as efforts to encourage MTV to personally invite Astley to the awards ceremony, continued after the announcement.^[53] On 10 October, Astley's website confirmed that an invitation to the awards had been received. On 6 November 2008, just hours before the ceremony was due to air, it was reported that MTV Europe did not want to give Astley the award at the ceremony, wanting instead to present it at a later date. Many fans who voted for Astley felt the awards ceremony failed to acknowledge him as a legitimate artist. Astley stated in an interview that he felt the award was "daft", but noted that he thought that "MTV were thoroughly rickrolled", and went on to thank everyone who voted for him.^[54] In 2009, Astley wrote about 4chan founder moot for Time magazine's annual Time 100 issue, thanking moot for the rickrolling phenomenon.^[55]

According to The Register, as of 2010, Astley had directly received only \$12 in performance royalties from YouTube. Although by that time the song had been played 39 million times, Astley did not compose the song and received only a performer's share of the sound recording copyright.^[56] However, Astley denied those reports in 2016.^[57]

Astley himself has been rickrolled a few times; in an interview with Larry King, Astley stated that the first time he fell for the prank was through an email his friend sent him during the early days of the phenomenon.^[1] On a Reddit post in June 2020, a user, u/theMalleableDuck, claimed to have

met Astley backstage when they were 12 years old, but the user posted a link to the song instead of a picture verifying the encounter. Astley later confirmed he had been tricked into clicking the link.^[2]^[58] The submission became the most upvoted post of 2020 on Reddit.^[59]

As of May 2024, the music video has over 1.5 billion views on YouTube.^[60]

See also

- List of Internet phenomena
- List of practical joke topics
- Sandstorm (instrumental), an instrumental piece by Finnish DJ Darude that has become the subject of a similar Internet meme.
- goatse.cx, the shock bait and switch precursor to Rickrolling.^[61]



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 - [An Oral History of Rickrolling](https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/an-oral-history-of-rickrolling) (<https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/an-oral-history-of-rickrolling>)
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