

VIDEO

How
YouTube
celebrity
PewDiePie
reinvented
fame

STAR

+ By Lev Grossman

➔ Photograph by Ryan Pfluger for TIME

7,981,513 views

👍 484,767 👎 7,117



THE CHANNEL WITH THE FIFTH MOST subscribers on YouTube is Justin Bieber’s VEVO channel—all Justin Bieber videos, all the time. It has 22 million subscribers. VEVO also owns the sixth through the 10th spots on the list, the other ones being, in descending order, RihannaVEVO, OneDirectionVEVO, TaylorSwiftVEVO, KatyPerryVEVO and EminemVEVO.

But go the other way, up the list, and something strange happens. You pass through a kind of YouTube-fame singularity where the rules of normal real-world celebrity no longer apply. At No. 4 is the online sketch-comedy duo Smosh (22 million subscribers). No. 3 is YouTube Spotlight—new and trending videos (24 million). The No. 2 channel belongs to HolaSoyGerman, a Chilean comic

made around \$12 million before taxes.

In person, Kjellberg is affable, articulate and low-key. Like a lot of Swedes, he speaks near perfect English with an American accent, only occasionally betraying his Swedishness by enunciating slightly too well, the way they do in ABBA songs. Also like a lot of Swedes, Kjellberg is really good-looking, with prominent cheekbones and ghostly pale-blue eyes, though on the day I met him, at a coffee shop in Manhattan overlooking the Hudson River, the effect was somewhat mitigated by a big comedy Viking beard. “I should trim it,” he says. “But the thing is, my fans wanted me to shave so bad—so bad. And I just don’t want to give them the satisfaction.”

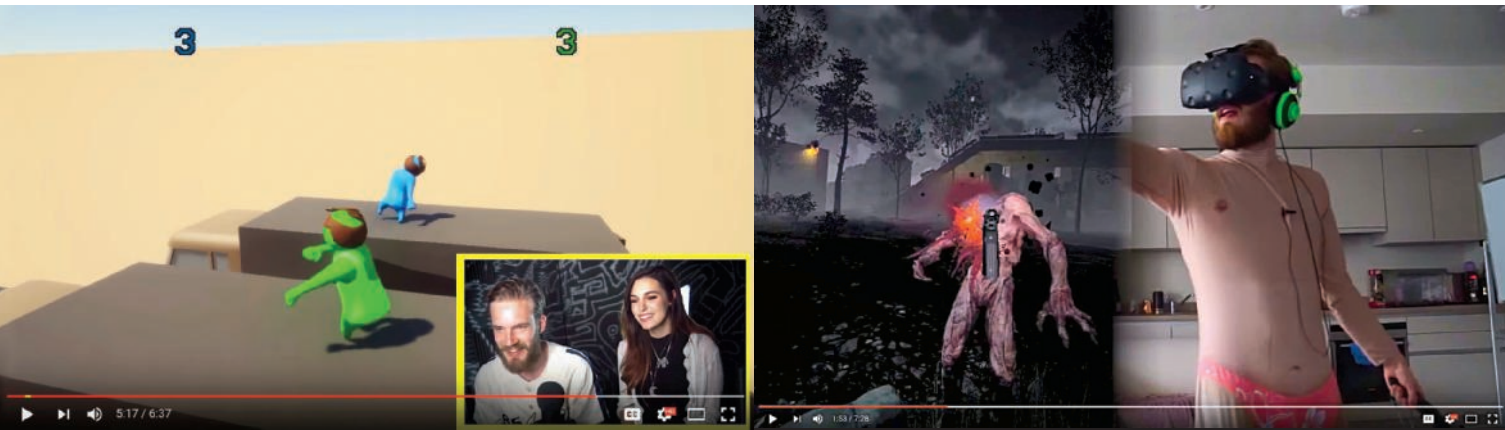
In spite of the beard, a bunch of passing middle-school students recognized him.

bagging is, do yourself a favor and don’t Google it. As far as I can tell there was no *HTC Vive*—Part 02.)

Lights up on Kjellberg. He’s in his kitchen. He has on headphones and VR goggles pushed up on his forehead. He’s wearing a sheer, flesh-colored one-piece bodysuit with nipples drawn on it.

“Well, hello there!” he says. “Why do I always sound so creepy? How’s it going, bros! My name is PewDiePie!” (He has a signature style for pronouncing his name: in falsetto, with something approximating a Southern accent, while closing his eyes and wiggling his fingers. It’s his impression of a minor character in *South Park* called Mr. Hankey the Christmas Poo.)

Kjellberg grandly announces the topic for this video: he’s going to play a horror game in VR. “I’m a little scared,” he says.



and musician with 28 million subscribers. The top spot is owned, and has been since 2013, by PewDiePie. PewDiePie had, at press time, 44,426,617 subscribers.

PewDiePie’s real name is Felix Kjellberg. He’s 26 and lives in Brighton, U.K., though he grew up in Sweden. Most people over 30 haven’t heard of him, but he is a bona fide global celebrity of an entirely new kind: if you track his numbers on Google Trends, which is admittedly a very rough metric of fame, he ranks only slightly below Tom Cruise. He has no easily defined talent—he can’t sing, can’t dance, can’t act—but over the past six years Kjellberg has uploaded around 2,800 videos to YouTube, which collectively have amassed more than 12 billion views. *Forbes* estimated that in the 12-month period ending in June 2015, he

Kjellberg’s girlfriend, YouTuber Marzia Bisognin, often guests in his videos, left; demoing a virtual-reality horror game while wearing a bodysuit

They asked to have their picture taken with him, and he agreed very graciously.

As popular as he is, it’s hard to explain exactly what Kjellberg is famous for. His videos mostly show him playing video games and talking about them, and—as he would be the first to admit—he’s not even that good at playing video games. It might help to look at an example.

On April 13, Kjellberg uploaded a video called *KILL YOURSELF IN VR?!—(HTC Vive—Part 03)*. (If you’re curious, *HTC Vive—Part 01* was *TEABAGGING IN VR*, and if you don’t know what tea-

“I’m a little shaky. I’m a little sweaty. But that’s all right. The ladies like it.” The camera zooms in, and he winks, deadpan. Then he adds, with a very slight trace of pleading in his voice, “Please keep watching.”

It’s actually kind of complicated what Kjellberg is doing here. He’s pleasantly confident (“How’s it going, bros!”), but then he takes it too far (“The ladies like it”); then he shows a little desperation (“Please keep watching”), which is also a joke (that’s the confidence again). He’s self-assured but not arrogant, vulnerable but not pathetic, handsome but not vain. He’s totally unpolished, but at the same time his timing is consistently spot-on. Most of the critical literature about PewDiePie focuses on the bad language and crude physical humor—and

admittedly there are a lot of both—and the fact that he is, at the end of the day, just a guy playing video games and yelling. But they tend to ignore the fact that PewDiePie is actually very funny.

The rest of the video, seven minutes of it, is mostly split screen: on the left is in-game footage of PewDiePie shooting monsters and shrieking in terror and yelling slightly Swedish-accented action-movie taglines (“You want some?”). On the right is in-kitchen footage of Kjellberg flailing around looking ridiculous in the way that only somebody wearing VR goggles and a skintight onesie can. For the big finish, Kjellberg dies on the floor, in slow motion, with stirring movie-soundtrack music and stock footage of a white dove fluttering. Then the music stops. He scratches his crotch.

then that he started making videos.

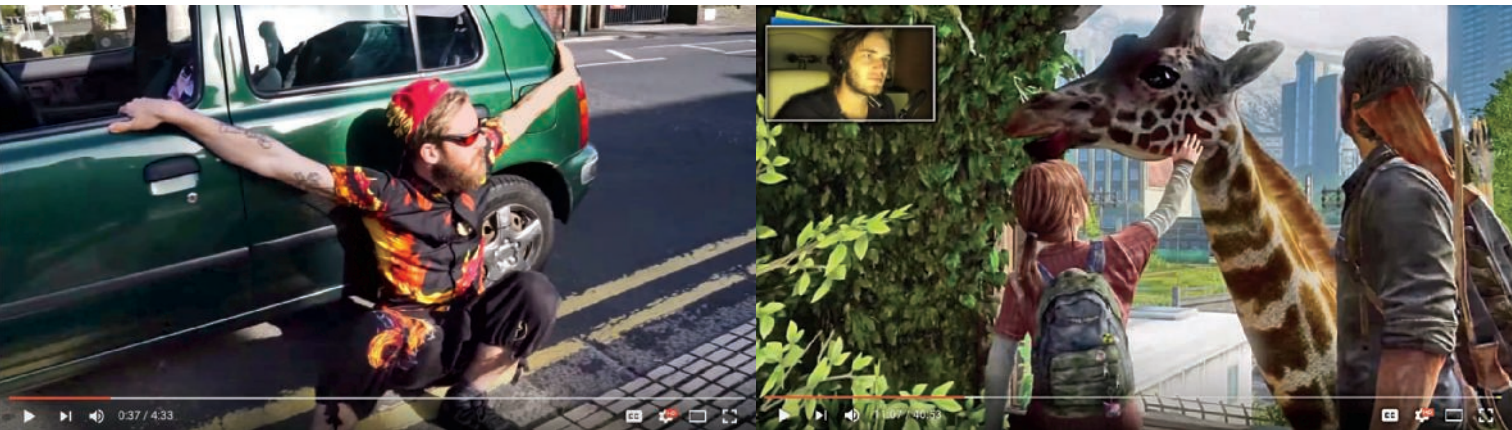
Kjellberg’s videos fall into a category that’s known online as Let’s Play, in which people play games and provide running commentary over them. At their best, Let’s Plays combine the fun of *MST3K*-style comment tracks, vicarious entertainment, thoughtful analysis and chill couch banter with a friend. Let’s Plays are insanely popular now—there’s a whole community and a whole subculture around them—but back in 2010 not a lot of people knew about them. “I remember when I did my first video,” Kjellberg says. “I’d sit alone in my room just look-

Satirizing boastful car videos generated over 13 million views; right, playing PlayStation’s emotionally wrenching The Last of Us



Kjellberg’s rise to fame: he never really had a video go viral. He just ground it out, slow and steady, growing subscriber by subscriber.

It helps that Kjellberg lacks that air of glittery-eyed narcissism that afflicts many YouTube stars—that sense that they wither into lifeless husks when not on camera. Kjellberg just has a naturally infectious good humor that pops right through the screen. It’s the kind of thing you could never teach. “Having come up in the music business, there’s a few artists I saw that level of instinct with,” says Courtney Holt, head of Maker Studios, a producer and distributor of online videos, which partners with Kjellberg. “Eminem had really good instincts about who his audience was and what art form he was making. Felix has that.”



KJELLBERG’S PARENTS are both successful professionals. His father is the CEO of a Swedish company; his mother is head of IT at an accounting firm. He grew up in Göteborg, which is Sweden’s second largest city. As a kid Kjellberg was, according to him, pretty much the same as now, though a bit shyer and more introverted. He was always into games. “I wasn’t allowed to have a Nintendo,” he says. “Only when I was sick, we would rent one. So I was sick a lot.”

Kjellberg buckled down in high school and got into a competitive college, but it didn’t take. “I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it, and I did, but then I realized when I did that it’s not what I wanted,” he says. “I couldn’t relate to any of my classmates. It was a very strange period.” It was around

ing around like, I hope no one sees me, because this is the weirdest sh-t ever.”

Over his parents’ horrified objections, he dropped out of college and started working at a hot-dog stand. “I would get notifications on my phone,” he says. “Literally every single interaction on my channel, I would get an email, and I would read every single one, every comment. I was so hooked.” An interesting note about

HE NEVER REALLY HAD A VIDEO GO VIRAL. HE JUST GROUND IT OUT SLOW AND STEADY, SUBSCRIBER BY SUBSCRIBER

As PewDiePie grew, he evolved. Somewhere in there he started calling the monsters he was killing “bro,” and that evolved into calling his fans “bro,” and that became an official thing: PewDiePie fans are Bros, collectively the Bro Army. “It started off ironically,” Kjellberg says. “Now it’s somewhere in between.” Kjellberg has also matured, up to a point. In the first few years, he would regularly say things that were genuinely offensive. In 2012, he apologized for having made jokes about rape and swore off them. In April of this year, he posted a video in which he apologized for having used words like *gay* and *retarded* in pejorative ways in his early work. He doesn’t do that anymore.

He does still push and frequently, gleefully crosses the bounds of good taste in matters of profanity, sex and violence.

But he has also mobilized the Bro Army to raise over a million dollars for charities like Save the Children, the World Wildlife Fund and, most recently, Charity: Water.

The business model evolved too. At first Kjellberg collected revenue from advertising, then from merchandise. Now he also gets money for brand deals—basically a game company will pay him to play its games in his videos. “It’s not something I’m trying to hide,” Kjellberg says. He holds up a bagel. “It’s not like I have to be, like, This bagel is delicious, I love it, it’s my favorite.” (He adds politely: “It is good though.”) It’s part of a larger cultural shift: audiences have learned not to care as much as they used to—if money’s changing hands, eh, it doesn’t have to taint the whole affair—and companies have learned not to ask for as much. “I remember five years ago if I was approached by a brand then it would be like, I would have to say a specific line, and that

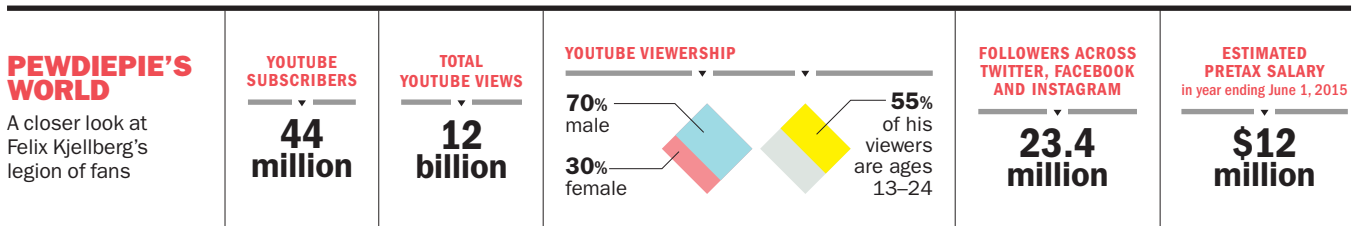
(Sample aphorism: “To fly, you must get rid of the things that weigh you down. This is why all your friends left you.”) He made appearances on *Colbert*, *Conan* and the *Today* show. Kjellberg also starred in a 10-episode series called *Scare PewDiePie* for YouTube Red, YouTube’s premium subscription service. The show—which has Robert Kirkman, creator of *The Walking Dead*, as an executive producer—stages real-life situations inspired by horror video games—creepy mental hospital, etc.—complete with actors and gory props. It began airing in February.

Scare PewDiePie was produced by Maker Studios, which is owned by Disney—it was acquired two years ago for \$675 million. (It’s a notable fact that Walt’s vision has now expanded to include an aggressively bearded Swede who makes videos called things like *GIVING HEAD TO SENPAI*, which is actually even worse than it sounds.) In Janu-

fun than his regular videos. The scares feel a little forced. (It currently has a user rating of 2.9 out of 10 on IMDb.)

YouTube’s superpower as a medium is its incredible directness and authenticity—it conveys a realness and a sense of connection between entertainer and audience that is utterly unlike, say, the faux authenticity of reality television. “You watch someone in a different way, a closer way, just because you’re watching a person,” Kjellberg says. “You’re not watching someone behind a show. It’s more raw.”

The challenge that YouTube stars like PewDiePie face is that there are contexts in which authenticity isn’t an asset. Some of the appeal of movies and TV lies precisely in how glossy and unreal and inauthentic they are, and Kjellberg doesn’t do inauthentic. “If you’re a movie actor, you’re playing a part,” Holt says. “What’s interesting about Felix is, he’s extremely successful at being an authentic version



completely removes the authenticity.”

What started off as a furtive hobby has turned into something that suspiciously resembles a job. In the week before this article went to press PewDiePie uploaded 13 videos, including *EATING TOILET CANDY!!*, *PEWDIEPIE DATING SIMULATOR* and *REGRETTABLE PORN (Animated)*. He works six days a week. “I take Saturdays off,” he says. “Gotta reset somehow. It’s funny because I always viewed YouTube as something where I can wake up whenever I want, I can work whenever I want and have all this freedom. But the more I get into a traditional lifestyle, the happier I am as a person.”

OVER THE PAST YEAR, Kjellberg has been taking PewDiePie out of YouTube into other, more conventional media. Last September, he collaborated on a mobile game called *PewDiePie: Legend of the Brofist*. In October, he published a book of aphorisms called *This Book Loves You*.

ary, Kjellberg and Maker jointly launched Revelmode, which is a kind of YouTube-celebrity collective, led and curated by Kjellberg. He and his chosen YouTubers will collaboratively produce shows and video games and charitable initiatives. “The idea was, let’s build infrastructure around him so we can realize all of his creative ideas,” Holt says. “The space is moving really quickly, and I think he is one of the smartest people I’ve ever met in it.”

SO FAR, none of Kjellberg’s forays into other media has proved, definitively, that he can replicate his colossal online success elsewhere. The numbers are certainly good—*This Book Loves You* was a *New York Times* best seller, and *Legend of the Brofist* has sold extremely well—but not good enough to suggest that Kjellberg is building a new audience rather than just leveraging his old one. *Scare PewDiePie*, despite being vastly more effortful and expensive, is distinctly less

of himself. When you see him, you’re seeing *him* ... He can adapt and change, he can try new things, but he’s always PewDiePie.” It’s the secret of his success but also, so far, its limiting factor.

Not that Kjellberg particularly needs to be a star outside of YouTube. He doesn’t have to prove anything. He may be Internet famous, but he’s getting real-world rich. He personally dominates an entire medium, which is a lot more than most celebrities can say, and unlike most celebrities, he does it single-handed. Nobody directs PewDiePie, nobody writes his lines, nobody handles him. He’s pioneering a new kind of fame that never existed before: it’s not manufactured by a studio or a network, it’s handmade, at home, subscriber by subscriber, view by view. Alone in his kitchen, wearing his flesh-colored bodysuit, Kjellberg has personally rewritten the rules of the game. And while he was doing that, he was also winning it. □

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A black and white, high-contrast close-up photograph of an eagle's eye. The eye is the central focus, showing detailed feather patterns around it and the texture of the eagle's skin. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the sharp edges of the feathers and the intensity of the gaze.

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