



What happens when your
YouTube
spotlight
fades?

Fifteen years since YouTube began, Emily Gulla tracks down some of the platform's original superstars. Her question?
What happens when the camera stops rolling..? ›

My very first video was about marshmallows.

The year was 2011. JLS were number one in the charts, skater skirts were all anyone wore and Robert Pattinson's face shone down from my bedroom wall as I stuffed gelatine-based snacks into my mouth. I was a 12-year-old wannabe vlogger, convinced that the path to fame and fortune lay in marshmallows, or cinnamon or fireballs – or whatever the ridiculous internet trend of the moment was.

My spirit guide, career hero and (if I'm honest) pre-teen crush was called Charlie McDonnell. He was just like me. He made videos about tea and GCSE results from his bedroom, but the difference was he was getting rich from every single one. Just like all the kids in my year at school, I was obsessed with this new breed of star: part-boyband frontman, part-children's TV presenter, part-boy-next-door and 100% compulsive viewing. But Charlie wasn't in One Direction or The Wanted; he wasn't on MTV or T4. He was a star on a new platform, one that reached into people's bedrooms and captivated a generation: YouTube.

Unsurprisingly, my vlogging career didn't *quite* take off. The height of my success was when I got 15,000 views on a video about *The Hunger Games* (now hidden where it belongs – on private mode). Charlie, on the other hand, joined a cluster of YouTube's early stars. The same year that I uploaded my first video (2011), he

became the first British person on the platform to reach one million subscribers – which won him the Gold Play Button plaque (since awarded to the likes of Alfie Deyes and Joe Sugg).

While the lives of huge stars like Zoella and PewDiePie loom large on our screens, as I flick, cringing, through the remnants of my brief foray into their world, all I can think is: what happened to the ones who came first?

THE PIONEERS

Charlie's voice is so familiar that I have to remind myself we've actually never met. He's phoning from Toronto, where he now lives, and it's hard not to call him "Charlieissocoollike" – the moniker he was known by for over a decade. Back in 2007, aged just 16, he'd started making YouTube videos – goofy ramblings to camera filmed on a webcam "for fun – just to waste time, basically". It was a hobby, and never his main ambition – he wanted to be a graphic designer. But by age 19, he'd moved to London, fully funding himself with his YouTube earnings. "Paying my rent was the main tipping point for me. I thought, 'This is actually my job now; it's sustaining me,'" he recalls. Charlie put his plans to study design at university on pause to focus on his burgeoning online career – and he reigned supreme as the poster-boy for British YouTube. We're used to stories like this now, but back then this was a new, unprecedented phenomenon. It was

seen as risky for him to abandon all future paths to focus on just this, but he was earning thousands of pounds a month – why wouldn't he?

For Bryony Matthewman, now 36, it was a comedy sketch that changed the course of her life. Aged just 23, she was a graphic-design graduate working a nine-to-five admin job in Enfield when she first uploaded a funny video from her childhood bedroom. It was 2006, and being featured on YouTube's homepage was enough to get you millions of views, and to establish Bryony (AKA Paperlilies) as one of the year's biggest vloggers.

"I remember getting my first 10,000 subscribers and imagining 10,000 people in a room," she recalls. "Even

at that point, it was so many more people than I'd ever expected."

With her subscriber numbers climbing daily, Bryony took the plunge and moved out of her family home, living with a friend to work full-time as a YouTuber. Her income came from promoting brands in her videos and from Google AdSense, which offers certain content creators a cut of their video's advertising revenue (YouTube notes that revenue generated for creators is and has always been core to its business and how the platform can remain free). YouTube even invited her in to answer developers' questions on how vloggers were taking over the site.

At her peak, Bryony was making around £2,000 a month from deals

with brands – a fraction of what today's stars make but, for the time (and for free branded trips to LA), pretty damn good indeed. But, as more and more people entered the site (Zoella's first vlog was 2009) and new platforms launched (oh hi, Instagram), competition for eyeballs got tougher. Bryony, Charlie and those like them were suddenly, and unwittingly, battling to cut through the noise.

KEEPING IT FRESH

The problem with creating something new is that people start to expect it. They crave it. They want it straight away. And when that "newness" involves real people – with real lives,

problems, anxieties and hang-ups – that can be tough. Watching their viewer numbers slowly fall, Charlie and Bryony found the race to create new and exciting content increasingly difficult at the exact same time that more and more creators were entering the marketplace. They both began to realise that when you monetise your hobby and downtime there's no such thing as a day off. Despite being flown around the world by brands and seeing huge success on her channel, in 2011 Bryony was 28 years old and craving the stability of a normal job. "I didn't know if I was going to get another brand deal or if people would stop watching my videos. It's so reliant on coming up with good ideas – and if you're the face of it, you're going [to be critiqued]." She cites YouTubers who've avoided this personal level of scrutiny, crediting Colleen Ballinger for creating a character persona, MirandaSings, which gave her a valuable distinction between Colleen the human being and Miranda the famous YouTuber. I get the feeling that Bryony wishes she had done the same. "When your whole channel is based on your own personality, any criticism feels like someone clawing at your soul. But if you create a completely separate character, even if it's still your face, you can avoid that personal level of scrutiny.

"It's all tied up in your own self-worth. The appeal of YouTubers, generally, is that they're real people," Bryony continues. She remembers starting to edit her behaviour in real-time while filming videos, forcing herself to appear more energised and alive in line with her YouTube persona but, she says, "I just didn't feel very genuine any more."

Charlie admits he was planning his contingency escape plan as early as 2013. Then over two million subscribers strong, he was noticing a slight drop-off in views, so began "building up a skillset" that would >



TOPS, ALL REDBUBBLE.COM. JEANS, (LEFT AND CENTRE) BOTH LEVI'S, (RIGHT) WAREHOUSE

enable him to pursue jobs in the film industry should he suddenly need to, teaching himself to write film scripts. “I saw people dropping,” he says. “I did feel like I’d put all my eggs in this basket. I felt like I needed to be ready for the idea of the bubble bursting.”

What bothered Charlie was that, to keep his views up, he had to keep himself “on” – a constant pressure to keep “creating” at all costs. This vicious cycle sent him into depressive periods where he was “physically unable” to make videos. “Between 2010 and 2012, when I was at my most popular on YouTube, was also when I experienced my first bout of burnout and intense depression from working myself so hard and chasing that popularity,” he explains. “You feel trapped by a system of your own making.” Charlie revealed in a video that he eventually saw a doctor and was diagnosed with anxiety and depression in 2016 – though he suspects he’d been depressed for almost 10 years. He started taking medication and saw a therapist.

He tried one more time, creating what he describes as a “last-ditch attempt” franchise that involved his persona a lot less. But it didn’t take off. In fact, his views dwindled further. Eventually he filmed his last-ever video – shutting his laptop for good 18 months ago.

“Chasing popularity left me burnt out and depressed”

ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

“Are you TheHill88?” It was the question Caitlin dreaded most, as she tried her best to smile at customers on the tills of Target – a budget clothes and homeware store in Brisbane, Australia. “It was always awkward. I’d be standing there in my uniform with no make-up on... but it’s a humbling experience.” She was 23 and, having abandoned her YouTube career just months earlier in 2011 to embark on

a university degree in Theatre, she was now paying the bills by working in shops and waitressing. Just a few years previously, aged 18, Caitlin had been Australia’s number-one YouTuber. Overnight, a comedy battle-rap she’d filmed in response to another YouTuber blew up, reaching over four million views. “My inbox just broke,” recalls Caitlin. Her parents were blissfully unaware until TV shows started calling the house for interviews. Realising that YouTube was something

she could make money from full-time, Caitlin ditched her original dream of going to university, instead choosing to work on the now-defunct New York-based company HitViews, connecting YouTubers to brands, while making her own videos. By 2008, her channel had a cumulative view count of 17 million, making her enough money to live, but not enough to splash out.

But, alongside hundreds of comments saying “I want to be like you”, there were cruel ones too: sexual

comments, strangers wanting to “destroy” her and trolls in *Scream* masks threatening to kill her in her own home. Caitlin couldn’t help but spend hours reading them, zoning in on the worst. “It’s no good trying to carve a career in something that actually causes you pain and suffering. We’re not all made to be stars,” she says. On top of that, she “felt tired of listening to myself talk. I’d rather play a character or help other people tell stories about characters. I didn’t want to be myself on YouTube,” says Caitlin. “I’d floated from opportunity to opportunity, until those opportunities ended and I got to go to university. I finally felt at home. And I realised: this is what I was meant to do six years ago.”

It also helped bring her peace. Getting recognised at work meant that Caitlin could hear nostalgic adults telling her they’d loved watching her as a teen. “It helps me appreciate what people saw in me, which I didn’t see at the time because I was caught up in negative comments.” Since then, she’s gone back to the platform, but as a hobby – she’s not trying to make it her job this time. Charlie feels the same, now working as a screenwriter he’s grateful to be behind the camera, rather than in front of it.

Bryony’s channel fizzled in 2012, and she found a job in social media branding strategy, something she acknowledges she may not have done had it not been for YouTube.

And while she doesn’t regret a single part of her former career, she does sometimes worry about what else she could have achieved during those years. “Many people my age have bought houses and are further on in life. And that’s because I spent the best part of a decade on a different path.” Still, she feels it was worth it. “Maybe I’m slightly behind the curve in some of the other stuff. But how many people have had the chance to live that life? I still feel really privileged.”

THE NEXT GENERATION

After speaking with the YouTubers of the Noughties, I can’t help but look back at my failed vlogging attempts as a bullet dodged. All the people I spoke to were glad they did it, but felt the transience of that fame. It seems the YouTubers of old weren’t primed for their careers to be sustainable – financially, mentally or emotionally. For them, “there wasn’t a road map for long-term success”, Caitlin explains.

Now, research* has found that almost half of millennials plan to change jobs after just two years, and we can view the first YouTubers as early examples of the decline of the “job for life” ideology – something we now see everywhere as the gig and portfolio-career economies continue to evolve. However, like the first bankrupted dotcom millionaires, or pop’s one-hit wonders, the original YouTubers found out the hard way that sometimes the brighter your star burns early on, the more quickly it expires.

On the flip side, these internet stars almost certainly paved the way for today’s YouTubers to bank better deals, and agents to protect them. And, with kids as young as seven creating content, and TikTok making internet fame even easier, the need for that protection has, perhaps, never been greater. ♦ *YouTube was contacted for comment on the points raised but did not respond before this magazine went to press.*



BEHIND THE SCENES

Emily Gulla

“After trying and failing multiple times as a teenager to become a YouTube star, I’ve recently rediscovered how fun it is to make videos. I’ve started up again as a hobby – but I’m not trying to make it my job this time.”

THE YOUTUBE HALL OF FAME



PEWDIEPIE

PewDiePie’s gaming vlogs and commentaries have earned him 103 million subscribers (despite controversy in recent years over his use of racial slurs, for which he has apologised).



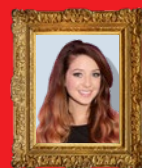
RYAN’S WORLD

The most-viewed vlogger in the world,[†] the eight-year-old American’s toy reviews and DIY challenges have been viewed over 36 billion times.



JENNA MARBLES

Setting the precedent for comedy vloggers across the world, Jenna Marbles has over 20 million subscribers and was the first YouTuber to have a waxwork made at Madame Tussauds in New York.



ZOELLA

The UK’s most famous lifestyle vlogger, now known as Zoë Sugg, paved the way for influencers after her, launching everything from beauty ranges to a novel.

GROOMING: JULIA WREN AT CAROL HAYES MANAGEMENT; USING CLARINS AND T3 HAIR TOOLS. STYLING: LOTTIE FRANKLIN. MODELS: LEVI AT IMM MODELS AND NADIA AT HIRED HANDS. COCOA BEACH STOOL AND BETTIE DINING TABLE: BOTH WAYFAIR. CHAIRS: LOAF.COM; LAMP SHADE: ARGOS. *THE 2019 DELOITTE MILLENNIAL SURVEY. †ACCORDING TO STATISTA.COM