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THE LIST

These films are out there

Amateur videomakers find an instant audience in cyberspace

BY BETH WHITEHOUSE
STAFF WRITER

January 18, 2006

Three weeks. That's about how long it took for Rudy Cassol's video to be passed by e-mail to so many people that his friends started to see co-workers in their company offices - strangers to Cassol - watching it on their computers.

Cassol posted "The Winning Ticket" on Google Video (<http://dallasmontage.com>) in December and sent the link for the expletive-laced film to his friends so they could watch the practical joke he played on buddy Thad Toups. Cassol and some friends had TiVo'd the winning Texas lottery drawing from the prior day, then rebroadcast it, swapping Toups' ticket with one they'd bought with those numbers, which made Toups believe he had won. They documented his ecstatic response and subsequent dejection when he realized it was a prank. "We thought it was funny to us; we didn't think it would be funny to everyone else," said Cassol, a Dallas engineer. "We were kind of dumbfounded by the whole thing."

But that's what can happen in cyberspace - especially now that sites such as Google Video have made it possible for amateurs to post their work for worldwide viewing. The films are as short or as long as desired - seconds to hours - and can be anything from home videos of a 50th birthday party to artsy films shot as a hobby to pranks played on a friend.

"Every human has his own TV station," said Harry Douglas, 49, who owns a video production business in Manhattan. He recently posted video of his December holiday visit to Rockefeller Center and time at home with his cat, which he named "Hmon Paraiso" (<http://video.google.com/videoplay?ocid=7513449611610215384&q=Hmon+Paraiso>). "No one will ever pay me a dime for anything like that, but it's fun and a creative outlet for me."

A treasure trove. A secret city. A gold mine. This is how some users have described Google Video, where users can watch films, most free, using a downloadable video player available on the site. It isn't the only place on the Web to post work. YouTube (www.youtube.com), for instance, also allows the public to post video, and it shows the number of people who have viewed each one, something Google promises is coming soon. After NBC's "Today" show did a piece on "The Winning Ticket" Dec. 29, YouTube showed 45,000 people had checked it out, Cassol said.

It's fun to scroll through the Google site and to send links to friends, suggesting they check out a particularly funny or interesting video, users said. "That's the beauty of the system - the viewers of the video are really determining what is popular," said Peter Chane, senior product manager for Google Video, which launched a year ago next week (<http://video.google.com>).

Google has been scanning thousands of books from university libraries in the hope of one day creating a searchable online archive. Likewise, "We're really trying to get all the world's video indexed and online," said Chane. That video includes archived TV programs, educational videos and clips from C-Span and The Food Network, some of which Google now sells to consumers. But it also includes anyone out there with the time and inclination to put their videos in the archive so others can watch them for free.

"We weren't sure what was going to happen when we launched it," Chane said. "We've been delighted. We're not releasing any figures, but I can tell you we've been overwhelmed by the demand."

Michael Martine of Montpelier, Vt., runs a Web site called "Google Video of the Day" (<http://gvod.blogspot.com>), which is not affiliated with Google Video. He started it at the end of October to weed through posted videos and select some of the best ones and give people a place to make snarky comments about the pieces. He said he doesn't know why the average person posts videos. "It's not like 'America's Funniest [Home] Videos,' where they're going to win a prize," Martine said. "Maybe it's the Internet equivalent of seeing yourself on TV."

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Google Video (Photo by Newsday / Moises Saman)

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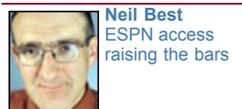
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Advertisers have been posting their commercials so people will send the link to their friends, spreading the word for the companies, Martine said. And he thinks it's inevitable that some unknown filmmaker will be discovered after posting work on such a public video site, although to the best of his knowledge, that hasn't happened yet.

Viewers can search Google Video just like they search Google for print comment. Type in "Long Island," for instance, and up comes a video by Anthony Borgia, who is actually from Carteret, N.J. He decided to visit "The Amityville Horror" house in Toms River, N.J., that was used in the 1979 movie, and the actual house here on Long Island. He filmed both and set the footage to the eerie soundtrack theme (<http://video.google.com/video?docid=7326558172290848651&q=amityville+horror>).

"I would like people to leave comments," Borgia said, something that Google Video doesn't allow viewers to do, at least not yet. "I like when other people see what I post."

Kevin Ludlow, a 26-year-old software designer from Austin, Texas, stumbled on Google Video this summer and immediately started posting content on it, including interviews he did with his paternal grandparents, Howard and Kitty Ludlow, who grew up in the Bronx. The two shorts can be found by searching in Google Video under their names.

"I look at it in a more personal sense. Someday all this information will be available to future generations of my family," Ludlow said. He said he would have loved to be able to watch a video interview with his great-grandparents, for instance.

Ludlow includes a link to his personal site for viewers who want to find out more about him. "I like to be able to share my little world with people," he said. "The more paths people can get to that world from - that helps me meet my goal."

On a computer near you

"Dad Fight." Two dads brawl on a playground, stunning the little ones playing there. Over on a nearby picnic table, their grown sons settle their bet: "I told you my Dad could beat your Dad," one says to the other as he collects the dough. The film is 33 seconds long.

"Diet Coke and Mentos Reaction." A teenager on his parents' suburban driveway drops Mentos through a tube into a 2-liter bottle of Diet Coke and creates a geyser. The 2-minute, 59-second video is set to a tune that repeats, "Developers developers" ad nauseam.

"Sweet Child O' Mine." This man should keep his day job for now. In this video, he does a parody karaoke rendition of the Guns N' Roses tune "Sweet Child O'Mine." The 5-minute, 48-second film is so, um, unbelievable that it's compelling viewing.

"Amityville Horror Houses." This amateur 3-minute, 21-second filmmaker visits the original "Amityville Horror" house here on Long Island, as well as the house in Toms River, N.J., used in the 1979 movie and the one on-location for the remake.

"Elvis Project Demo." This 32-second video shows just how strange some contributions can be. A man next to a film screen sings what sounds like gibberish into a microphone. Why? Who knows. Maybe just because he wants to.

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