

GOOGLE

April 2000. Anyone going onto Google were greeted with a spinning spiral gif called the MentalPlex circle. It would then read your mind and show you the results.

Doing so would lead to a random error message, such as:

Insufficient conviction. Please clap hands three times, while chanting "I believe" and try again.

and-

Brainwaves received in analog. Please re-think in digital.

<http://archive.google.com/mentalplex/>

Google regularly takes part in April Fools, such as the Google Gulp, Searchable Socks and even com.google.

<https://archive.google.com/romance/>

<https://archive.google.com/googlegulp/>

<https://australia.googleblog.com/2016/04/google-search-for-your-socks.html>

<https://archive.ph/cjHgp>

This extends to their other services.

In 2014, Google Maps teamed up with Pokemon to allow users to explore real world maps and capture Pokemon. And John Hanke, CEO of Niantic Labs, a former Google internal startup, said "haha just kidding, unless..." and it became the massively popular Pokemon Go.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YMD6xELI_k (announcement)

<https://blog.google/products/maps/become-pokemon-master-with-google-maps/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCjGzSCPzs4> (gameplay)

But Google aren't fooling anyone.

YouTube did trick people as in April 2008, clicking on any of the featured videos led to-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fgY0CUubD0>

<https://www.wired.com/2008/04/youtube-rickrol/>

This might seem like a pretty tired joke now, but in 2008, this was Rickrolling at its peak, this was when Rickrolling became mainstream, and it's been something of an April Fools staple ever since.

In 2013, YouTube teamed up with The Onion to claim that this whole time, YouTube had been a contest for the best video, and the site would be shutting down while they decide on the winners.

"And then our esteemed panel" to "2023 featuring winner and nothing else"

2023? But that must mean, I'm the winner!!

YouTube even went as far as to have a pair of hosts read out the first batch of "Best Video" nominees on a live stream, non-stop, for 12 hours.

https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/youtube-contest-submissions-closing_31/

These are all fine, but arguably Google's most notorious prank took place on Gmail.

Gmail itself was launched on April 1st 2004, leading many to think "A Google Email?! Haha, pull the other one it's got an attachment!" But it was a very real email service, and the hoax was it wasn't actually a hoax. A double-bluff.

Much like this New Zealand April Fools advert in 2015 where they say the first customer to trade their car would get a free BMW. It sounded too good to be true, but someone took the bait and got a free car.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzKAep8Ybb8>

Or Ron Gilbert, who again, hates April Fools Day, announcing a very real new Monkey Island game on April Fools Day.

<https://twitter.com/grumpygamer/status/380819751208902656>

https://grumpygamer.com/april_fools_2022

Gmail has taken part in many pranks including having emails in paper form sent in the mail and adding morse code but their most infamous prank came in April 2016 in the form of a Minions gif.

<https://tenor.com/en-GB/view/minion-king-mic-drop-outta-here-frown-gif-17809508>

This is the mic drop. And depending how you look at this, this was either a massively successful prank, or an absolute disaster.

The premise was, when writing an email, next to the send button was a bright yellow button saying "send and mic drop". This would send your email but also attach this Minion gif. What could go wrong?

Given people use Gmail for work purposes, it only took one misclick to suddenly look grossly unprofessional. Gmail's Support Page was flooded with complaints of how this gif had led to lost business and lost jobs. While it might seem clearly indicated, once the disclaimer is dismissed it doesn't alert you again. And the mic drop button is so close to the genuine send button, naturally many would hit it by mistake. But also, it had replaced the "Send and Archive" button, so many clicked on it out of habit.

And yet, there's one more feature of this prank that severely backfired. It's a mic drop. A symbol of having the last word. In Gmail, the mic drop would not only send the funny gif, but also close and mute the email thread. So if you send an email with a mic drop, even if you didn't mean to, any and all replies to that email will not go into your inbox. And there was no way to unblock it, unless you were fast enough to click the Undo button.

<https://techcrunch.com/2016/04/01/google-reverses-gmail-april-1-prank-after-users-mistakenly-put-gifs-into-important-emails/>

<https://blog.google/products/gmail/introducing-gmail-mic-drop/>

Google pulled the plug on the prank early citing a bug and even stated in very few cases, the mic drop would continue to appear in emails, even when users hadn't pushed the button.

Seems like an image of a Minion wasn't much of a laughing matter. In 2018 Microsoft announced they would not take part in any April Fools, possibly with this situation in mind. And in 2021 Google have cancelled April Fools plans for two years running citing covid. Is

this the downward spiral for April Fools or will they be finally back in 2023 with the Best Video On YouTube or something else to surprise us?

April Fools is great publicity and this event certainly became newsworthy but perhaps not in the way they meant. And this just in:

THE NEWS

In 1957, one of the UK's highly respected news program, Panorama, broadcast a 3-minute long segment about the Spaghetti Tree. For context, spaghetti wasn't as widely available as it is now, and was considered to be a novelty and an exotic delicacy. But because the news show treated the subject just seriously enough that, with an audience of about 8 million, this tricked a lot of people, many contacting the BBC asking how they can grow their own Spaghetti Tree. The advice they gave was to plant a sprig of spaghetti into some tomato sauce and hope for the best. This is widely regarded as the most successful April Fools Day prank done by a news program.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8scpGwbvxyI> (the prank)

There's been similar trickery with news bulletins, such as the radio play of War Of The Worlds where Orson Wells described the alien invasion as fictional news bulletins, but if you tuned in late it caused something of a panic.

And the infamous BBC fake-documentary Ghostwatch framed as a live broadcast investigating ghost hauntings that seemed real, real enough to create fear, anger and a lot of complaints. And this predates a lot of found footage horror like Blair Witch.

These aren't April Fools Day pranks but it demonstrates how powerful our imagination can be when you blur the lines of fact and fiction, especially when you use news reporting as the format.

But how does the news, who are generally meant to report the truth, handle April Fools Day?

In 2014, NPR posted on Facebook "What has become of our brains?" "Why doesn't America read anymore?". This was met with a lot of angry comments, some who despair at the state of society, others offended saying "um actually I read lots of books actually". People were furious. But those who actually read the article would see:

We sometimes get the sense that some people are commenting on NPR stories that they haven't actually read. If you are reading this, please like this post and do not comment on it. Then let's see what people have to say about this "story."

A beautifully played April Fools Day prank and with a kinda moral message behind it.

https://www.facebook.com/NPR/posts/10202059501509428?stream_ref=10 (NPR facebook page)

https://www.npr.org/2014/04/01/297690717/why-doesnt-america-read-anymore?utm_medium=facebook&utm_source=npr&utm_campaign=nprnews&utm_content=04012014&fbclid=IwAR0fg3Xj_Vyw40K8HZLuMXV31UIA_PR57L91_4LjEWSu2FUzLh7xjYqqu-o (the actual page)

And therein lies the problem with news on the internet. The tendency is to just look at the headline and not dig into it any further and clickbait headlines can spread before the context can catch up.

Like in 2009 when The Pirate Bay was acquired by Warner Bros, it tricked many despite being told "look at the date":

I don't get it. What does the date have to do with anything.

In 2016, China's state-run news agency Xinhua announced something of a ban on April Fools Day as part of the country's tough measures against spreading misinformation. But they announced this April Fools Ban on April Fools Day, leading many to not take this very seriously. And it's believed to be partly down to having been fooled by an Onion article calling Kim Jun Un the sexiest man alive. And even reported on a Virgin Airways plane with a glass bottom in 2013 which was, you guessed it, an April Fools prank.

But of course, plenty of news channels around the world have been pranked themselves with an April Fools.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v758C1hgmmk>

Stop with the Rickrolls!!

In 2021, Volkswagen had a great idea for an April Fools joke. To promote their electric cars, they would pretend they have rebranded the entire company from Volkswagen to Voltswagen. Clever stuff.

So they wrote up a convincing sounding press release, ready to go live for April Fools Day. Except, they accidentally published the press release publicly on March 29th. Once the news started breaking naturally, journalists had questions like - is this actually real? This is where the story should've ended... but Volkswagen were apparently so committed to the bit, this le epic prank, that they said yes. It's real.

They even post this name-change announcement on Twitter.

But then Volkswagen stock prices started to go up and using misinformation to artificially inflate your stock prices... well that's a crime.

Volkswagen had to come clean that it was all just a silly April Fools joke. And it STILL wasn't April 1st yet.

Journalists were hurt.

Dear Volkswagen: You lied to me.

Unbelievable that a company that once had to pay \$30 billion for lying had told a lie!

This press release is full of lies, look at this one:

Founded in 1955

No it wasn't, it was founded in 1937. Go on. Look it up. Go look up how Volkswagen was founded.

<https://twitter.com/VW/status/1376636090497523717> (tweet announcement)

<https://twitter.com/VW/status/1377263642702458881?lang=en-GB> (come clean)

The problem with April Fools online, is that the internet is something of an eternal present. Everything is happening at the same time, even if it happened in 2016, if you've just seen it, it's right now.

When a TV show does an April Fools joke like Spaghetti Trees, it's limited to its time-frame. It's controllable. But online, news can spread beyond that one day of the year. In 2017 Futurism posted an April Fools of Pluto being reclassified as a planet. But then this article was re-published by a different site, several months later and with a key phrase removed. And then the news went viral in early 2018, well beyond its April Fools Day context.

<https://futurism.com/pluto-reclassified-as-a-major-planet>

And in this time where we can still hear people parroting "fake news", it's hard to tell what's even a joke anymore.

On April 1st 1981, The Guardian ran a story claiming there's machines that can control the weather. Silly harmless stuff.

<https://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Guardian/Pix/pictures/2013/3/25/1364230669104/Weather-April-fool-1981-G-001.jpg>

But in 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dC6tQLPs2ak>

How can you do parody when everything is already ridiculous?

THIRD CHAPTER TITLE

Many respond to April Fools Day with protest.

Philly E-Lanes April 1 2012.mp4 (protest footage)

In 2019, r/Games closed it's subreddit, not as a prank, but to highlight toxicity in the community they're trying to combat.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Games/comments/b7ubwm/rgames_is_closed_for_april_fools_find_out_why_in/

Elsewhere on Reddit, r/place ran an art project on April 1st 2017 where users collaborated on the same canvas but each person could only change one single pixel at a time every 5 to 20 minutes. Over one million users worked together over three days with the final result coming to represent the Reddit culture and Internet culture as a whole. And this was repeated on April Fools Day 2022.

<https://www.reddit.com/r/place/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnRCZK3KjUY> 2017

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5O3UgLG2Jw> 2022

And also T-Mobile ran a charity campaign in 2020 and 2021 called Give Thanks Not Pranks to spread positivity instead of pranks. I've got my issues with charity campaigns that are "we have a pile of cash but we won't donate it all unless you tweet a hashtag" kind of strategy but whatever.

<https://twitter.com/TMobile/status/1245365481000833024>

<https://www.t-mobile.com/news/community/give-thanks-not-pranks>

<https://www.t-mobile.com/news/community/give-thanks-not-pranks-2021>

But why is there protest? Why don't people like April Fools? We've seen how jokes can wildly backfire and cause outrage or misinformation. But is there more going on?

It's possibly just fatigue. Especially with the "just a prank bro" YouTubers.

In 2019, the LaBrant family staged a prank for a YouTube video where they convinced their 6 year old daughter they would be giving away her pet dog, filming her crying the whole time.

I've also got my issue with YouTube Family Channels so fuck this, this is awful.

<https://www.ctvnews.ca/lifestyle/backlash-for-youtubers-prank-convincing-girl-6-she-had-to-give-puppy-away-1.4363827?fbclid=IwAR287f0pFT3IEg12r1y3RsABFw542LXR7qKiDUdISLGYwBVQTuYXSTCwdXI>

Celebrities love doing fake pregnancy announcements and they're never funny.

Justin Bieber did the same and even doubled down. But when people in the comments were like "hey, with miscarriages and infertility, pregnancy isn't something to joke about", he gave a half-assed apology - hashtag dennis the menace - and then followed with an ultrasound of a puppy. So yeah, maybe people just suck at April Fools.

What if the April Fools prank becomes not-a-prank?

ThinkGeek regularly turn some of their fake April Fools products into real products, like 2009's Tauntaun sleeping bag, but then were they always real products they were just trialling out?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHIM2OBfzB0>

In 2012, Adblock made a working version that instead of blocking ads, it would replace them with lolcats. It was only meant to exist for the April Fools but it proved to be so popular, it was kept and eventually went open-source so it can remain online.

In 2006, Gambling site "Paddy Power " announced a Strip Poker Tournament. Despite being an April Fools joke, there was enough genuine interest that a few months later, a very real Strip Poker Tournament was held, with the prize money going to charity and even getting a World Record in the process!

Why are people more on board with these kinds of April Fools jokes and not others? Maybe people just enjoy them more when the joke is not attempting to trick, deceive or obstruct the viewer, but instead, we're in on the joke too.

Like Burger King's Chocolate Whopper in 2018 and McDonald's Milkshake Sauce Pots, people weren't under any disillusion they were fake. But they wished it was real.

<https://twitter.com/BurgerKing/status/979790335240036354>

<https://twitter.com/BurgerKingUK/status/980369184424169473>

<https://twitter.com/McDonaldsUK/status/1112489752073142272>

Whether it's Lego Smart Bricks, Cowbell Hero or Ecco The Dolphin but with guns, we're probably not supposed to think they're actual products. But the fact that the actual brands behind them are getting involved in the making of these, yeah it's free promotion (silence brand), but done right, it's fun and creative. I'm fine with this.

But maybe actual pranks can be done in such a way that may still be unexpected and create some confusion but is largely harmless and the sheer absurd scale of it reveals its true nature.

In 1997 there was The Great Comic Strip Switcheroonie, where a bunch of newspaper comic strip artists swapped comics for the day.

So in a similar vein, in 2016, Alex Norris from those "oh no" comics organised a bunch of webcomic artists to release comics with the exact same joke and punchline "Maybe, I am the fool".

<https://www.theverge.com/tldr/2016/4/1/11345654/why-did-webcomic-artists-all-post-the-same-comic-today-making-fools>

Then in 2019, webcomic artists coordinated again this time to include hyper-realistic eyes called #EyeAmTheFool.

Then again in 2021 with long noodle arms called #IArmTheFool.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/eyeamthefool>

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/iarmthefool/photos>

Another webcomic, XKCD, often does very techy April Fools such as this 3D version.

<https://xk3d.xkcd.com/>

Adult Swim often go all out on their pranks. Like Adult Swim Jr and Bushworld Adventures And sometimes it would invade other shows, like 2022's "Learning With Pibby" which would cause glitches and corruptions to anything playing that night, or like 2006's farts.

And Pornhub, a website I've never heard of before, rebranded themselves to be Cornhub,

April Fools Day is divisive. Personally I love the weird and creative stuff, I even love some of the deceptive stuff, but with a history of poorly executed jokes, bad joke-tellers and some extremely convincing hoaxes, it's no wonder many would rather skip the day.

But however you feel about it, I think April Fools on the Internet is also a good lesson about consuming information online. An annual reminder to not take things at face value so much. After all, no one wants to be the April Fool.