

# Dream Gone Viral

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## 1 Introduction

It is not hard to imagine having a few hundred subscribers or followers on social media — you, or perhaps one of your friends, have achieved this. But can you imagine this person suddenly becoming one of the most influential figures on YouTube? To be honest, even when I daydream, I do not make such wild and ridiculous assumptions.

Yet this is no daydreaming; it is the story of Dream, the pseudonym of a Minecraft<sup>1</sup> YouTuber who dominated the entire community just two years after his debut and with only a few dozen videos posted. Prior to July 2019, Dream only had approximately 1,200 subscribers. By July 29, 2020, he reached 6 million subscribers. In 2020 he gained a net total of 14 million subscribers (Dream, “11 million subscriber post”). As of today (April 2022), Dream has 28.9 million subscribers and is projected to reach 30 million by May<sup>2</sup>. Needless to say, his surge in popularity is unparalleled and his YouTube career a tremendous success.

While data reflect virality, there is far more to tell beyond numbers. This essay will attempt to contextualize Dream’s popularity, look for the various factors that collectively made him famous, and discuss the impacts, both positive and negative, that Dream has brought upon the Minecraft community. This essay will roughly follow the outline listed below.

(1) Perform qualitative and quantitative analyses on obtained data.

- \* (Absolute growth.) How fast did Dream’s channel grow?
- \* (Relative growth.) How fast was Dream’s growth compared to that of other gaming YouTubers?
- \* (Reception.) How did viewers react to Dream’s content? In particular, how were different sentiments distributed?

(2) Analyze a potential list of factors that contributed to Dream’s success.

- \* (Effort.) Dream researched the YouTube algorithm to facilitate viewer influx.
- \* (Uniqueness.) Dream distinguished his videos from others’.
- \* (Skill.) Dream had strong in-game skills.
- \* (Sincerity and quality.) Dream was motivated to create content that were both attractive and appealing.
- \* (Kairos.) The pandemic lead to more people using YouTube, which greatly benefited Dream.

(3) Discuss the impacts that Dream brought upon the Minecraft community.

- \* (The good.) Is Dream’s success unique? If so, how? What good did he bring to the community?
- \* (The bad.) In early 2021, there was a drama involving Dream. Did Dream negatively impact the community? If so, how?

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<sup>1</sup>A sandbox video game released in 2009. *The* best-selling video game of all time. Period.

<sup>2</sup>Projection based on interpolation of current data.

\* (The future.) Can Dream's success be replicated? What about Dream himself?

## 2 Context & Methods of Acquiring Data

### 2.1 Why Dream?

There was a time when I was heavily addicted to Minecraft, playing it for hours every single day. Though I now only play the game occasionally, I still keep myself updated on everything happening in the Minecraft community. I discovered Dream's channel in February 2020, early enough to witness his exponential growth in subscriber count. After receiving the prompt "virality," I immediately thought of him, believing that this makes an expendable topic.

### 2.2 Where are the Data From?

(1) (Dream's YouTube subscriber count.) YouTube only shows current subscriber count but does not make the history public. Little is known about Dream's subscriber counts before 2020. The only publicly available info states that he has "around 100 subscribers from 2014 to 2019," according to wiki ("Dream wiki").

Trying to access more data, I used Wayback Machine, an online digital archive that crawls billions of webpages (Wayback Machine). As far as I know, this is the only way of obtaining Dream's subscriber counts in early days (no other third-party website records such data). By trial and error, I was able to retrieve data from as early as August 2019, less than a month after he first started to gather a viewer base. In particular, I gathered a hundred data pairs (subscriber count and date) to be used for plotting.

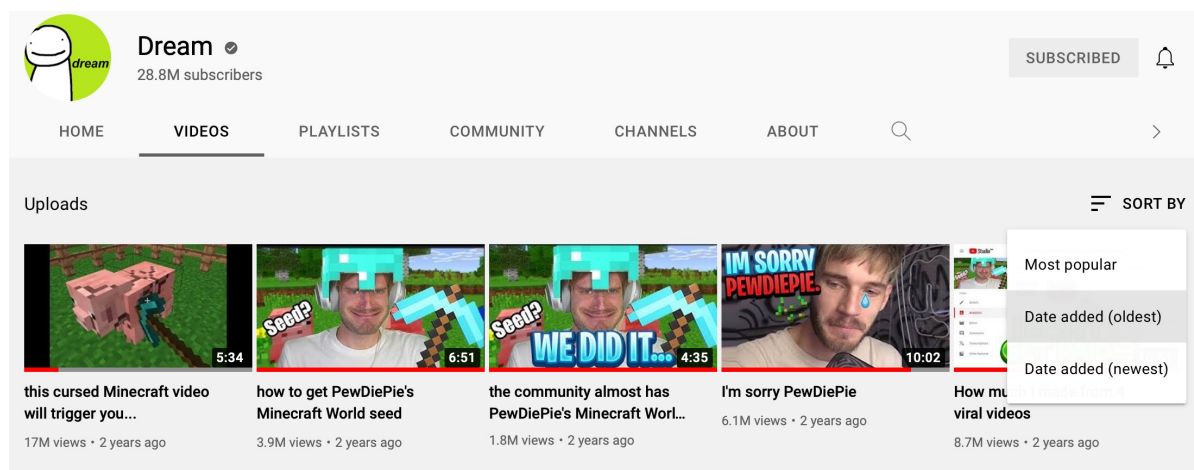


Figure 1: Dream's four oldest available videos; uploaded between July 1 and July 9, 2019. I used these four videos to find the earliest possible data on Dream's subscriber counts post-July 2019

The early data on are the hardest to gather, since the number of times Wayback Machine crawls a page is correlated to the number of visits that page receives. Back when Dream was not famous, not many people clicked on his videos, so I had to go through *every* video he posted in 2019 to get enough data for plotting. A lot of these early webpages were corrupted, meaning they could not be properly loaded, and only a fraction of them actually provided the info I needed. Things become much easier later on. As Dream's subscriber count reaches millions, every time when he released a new video, the high amount of clicks lead to Wayback Machine's frequent crawling, and I was able to retrieve data on almost any date starting mid 2020.

Below is one exmaple showing how I obtained my early data.

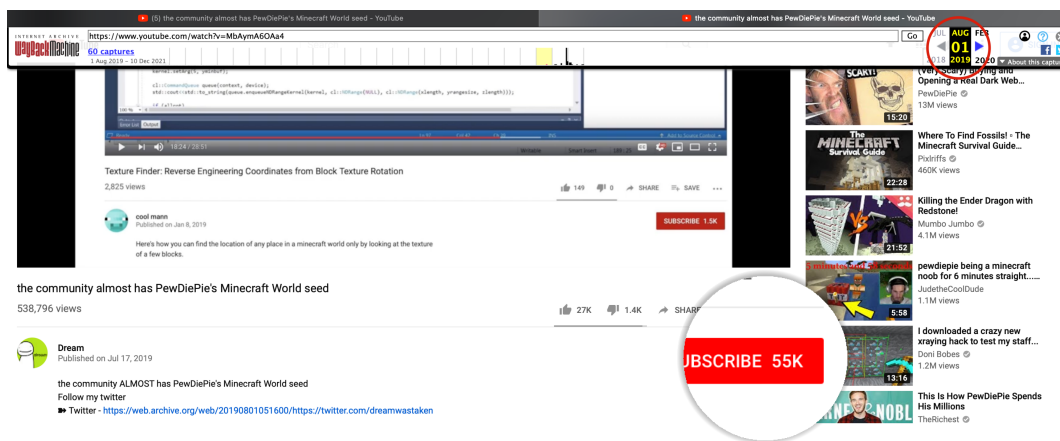


Figure 2: Dream had 55k subscriber by August 1, 2019

- (2) (Sentiment analysis.) I did a *quantitative* analysis of comments on various videos based on my sub-arguments. All videos are related to Dream. Some are his own videos, some are reaction videos on his game plays, and some are critical videos, especially during his controversy. I analyzed both top comments (based on YouTube's algorithm) and most recent comments in order to minimize bias.
- (3) (More data.) Finally, there were several relevant official websites that also supplanted me with important data. One such example is a one-trillion-views-celebration page jointly developed by Minecraft and YouTube, in which there were detailed charts showing how each genre of Minecraft videos developed in the past decade. Data as such would be used in later sections (YouTube Culture & Trends).

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Growth of Dream's Subscriber Count

Below is a graph generated from the data collected on archived YouTube pages. It seems that Dream's subscriber count has undergone a near-exponential growth during the first half (early 2019 to late 2020). The second half is, as expected, at a decreasing rate, resembling more of a logistic growth— after all, YouTube's gaming community only has finitely many people and Dream, already having a large viewer base, clearly could not maintain that exponential growth. Nevertheless, even till today, Dream's daily subscriber gain is still five-digit.

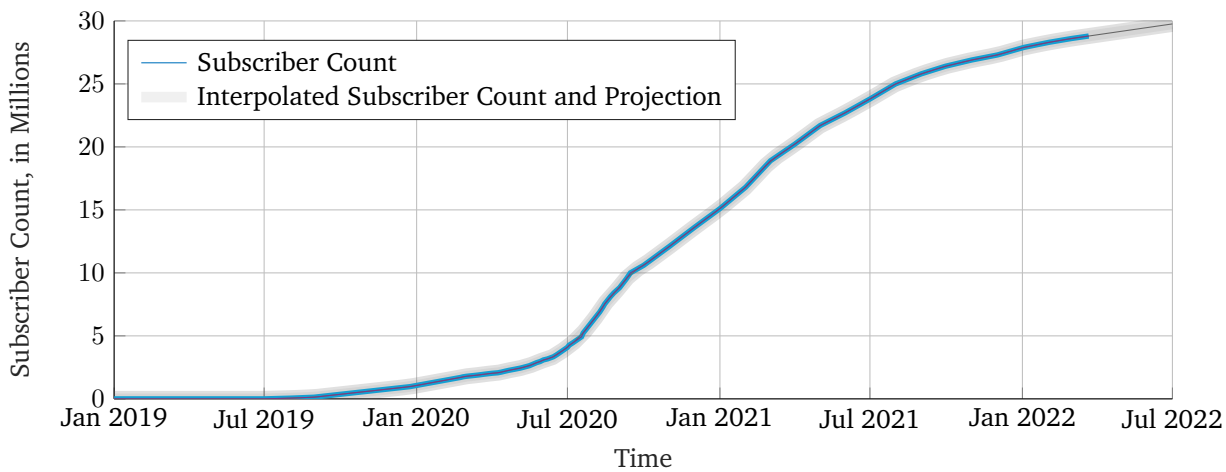


Figure 3: Dream's subscriber count, 2019 to present (March 2022), along with an interpolated curve showing the prediction in the near future

#### 3.2 Dream vs. Other Gaming YouTubers

To put into context, it is reasonable to compare him with other gaming channels on YouTube. The table below shows the top five fastest growing gaming channels in 2020.

| Name                       | Dream | MrBeast Gaming         | Total Gaming | Techno Gamerz | NOBRU        |
|----------------------------|-------|------------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| Subscriber Gain ( $10^6$ ) | 12.5  | 12.1                   | 11.5         | 10.6          | 10.5         |
| Number of Videos Posted    | 47    | 88 (registered in May) | 300+ (daily) | 300+ (daily)  | 300+ (daily) |

Table 1: Fastest growing gaming channels in 2020, along with their number of videos posted

With or without taking the frequency of uploading into account, Dream completely outgrows any gaming channel but MrBeast Gaming. However, the latter owns several accounts which, added together, has more than 130 million subscribers, making him unarguably the most subscribed individual on YouTube<sup>3</sup>. As a result, MrBeast’s gaming channel should grow much faster than any other channel, assuming all other factors are held constant. However, Dream defied this assumption. Even when compared to probably *the* most influential YouTuber, he still does not fall short in number, no to mention he only uploaded half as many videos as did MrBeast.

Currently, Dream is the fifth largest gaming (not just Minecraft) YouTuber<sup>4</sup>. The table below contains his and other top gaming YouTubers’ data.

| Name                        | VEGETTA777 | Markiplier | Total Gaming | Mikecrack | Dream | jacksepticeye |
|-----------------------------|------------|------------|--------------|-----------|-------|---------------|
| Subscriber Count ( $10^6$ ) | 32.9       | 32.4       | 31.7         | 30.9      | 28.8  | 28.1          |
| Yearly Gain ( $10^6$ )      | 0.8        | 4.3        | 9.1          | 8.3       | 10.0  | 1.6           |
| Total Videos Posted         | 6,976      | 5,125      | 1781         | 1659      | 108   | 4902          |

Table 2: Current top gaming channels by subscriber count, along with their net gain in the past 12 months and the total number of videos posted

As shown in Figure 5, Dream has entered his “second phase” in which subscriber count is increasing at a decreasing rate. Nevertheless, he still managed to gain 10 million subscribers in the past 12 months, faster than any gaming channel of similar size. In fact, during these twelve months, Dream only posted twelve videos, whereas all other channels update on a daily basis. If Dream keeps this momentum on, it is highly probable that he will top the leaderboard within a year.

### 3.3 Sentiment Analysis: YouTube Comments

Needless to say, almost every video Dream posts received overwhelmingly positive review. His most viewed video, “Minecraft Speedrunner VS 3 Hunters GRAND FINALE,” received more than 100 million views. By October 2021 (right before YouTube made dislike count invisible), this video had gathered 4.2 million likes with only 73k dislikes, a near-perfect 98.2% (Dream “Manhunt 3”).

<sup>3</sup>If counting MrBeast’s 92-million-subscriber main account alone, PewDiePie at 111 million would be the most subscribed instead.

<sup>4</sup>Many consider PewDiePie as a gaming YouTuber since he initially was. However, in recent years he has been constantly uploading numerous vlogs, comedies, and so on. Another famous ex-gamer is Farnaflou, who in 2018 stated that he would gradually step out of YouTube.

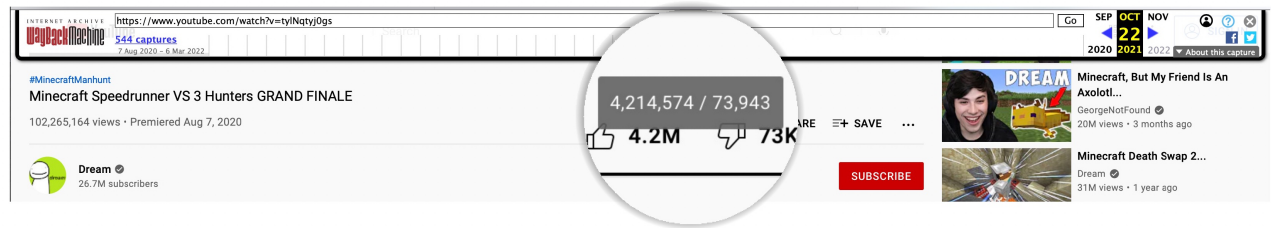


Figure 4: The like-dislike ratio of Dream’s most viewed video, archived Oct.22, 2021

This is also reflected by the comment section. Doing sentimental analysis on Dream’s own videos, admittedly, does not reveal much, as one already expects the outcome prior to conducting the analysis. As a side story, during my two years of subscription to Dream, in his own comment section, I have *never* seen any negative comments on him, except on the cheating controversy, which is to be mentioned in the Discussion section.

For example, Dream recently released a video titled "Minecraft Speedrunner VS 5 Hunters THE LAST MAN-HUNT" (Dream “Manhunt 5”). The comments, some displayed on the next page, can roughly be divided into two categories: the explicitly positive ones and the implicit ones. The former consists of comments explicitly complimenting Dream’s videos or, in this case, since Dream announced that he would end the “Manhunt” series, expressing regret and sadness (e.g., the bottom two in Figure 7). Most of these comments represent awe and commendation toward Dream’s video qualities.

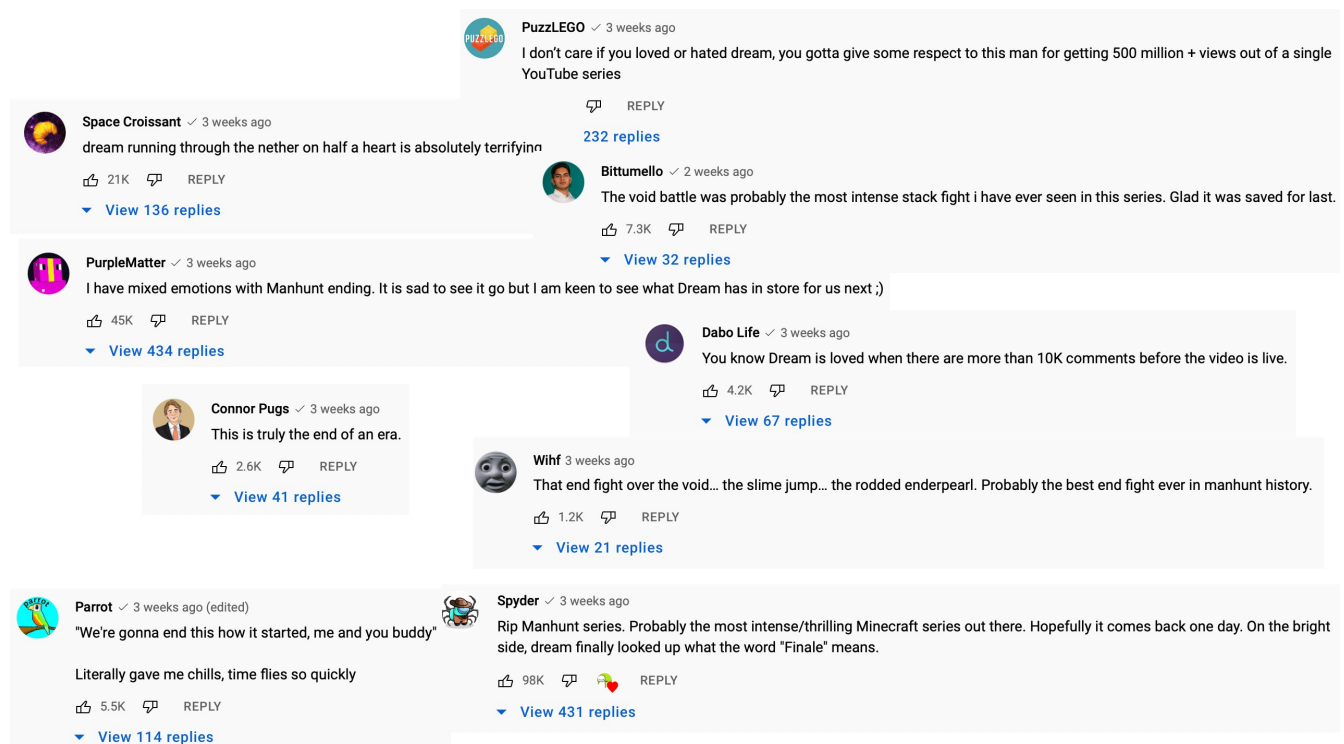


Figure 5: The “explicitly positive” comments in Dream’s most recent video

Figure 8, on the other hand, consists of more implicit compliments. These comments reflect more emotional resonance with respect to the content of the video, rather than the videos themselves. Some of these comments may even seem negative at first glance without knowing the context. In order to understand them, one needs to understand the context first. The one on bottom right by FlatPlanet, for example, is in fact a comment reflecting how Dream successfully created tension to his video. Minecraft is a game based on Hit Point (HP) with a player having 10 Hearts. The minimum amount of heart to stay alive is 0.5 and there were many instances when Dream barely survives. The audience including FlatPlanet loved such eye-catching moments. The remaining focus on George, seemingly making fun of him, while in fact George is a good friend of Dream and appears as a hunter in every single episode of Dream's Manhunt series. It has been a unspoken tradition among both Dream's and George's viewers to make friendly and polite jokes of George every time when Dream releases a new video. With these contexts in mind, it should be clear that these comments aimed to express joy rather than taunt.

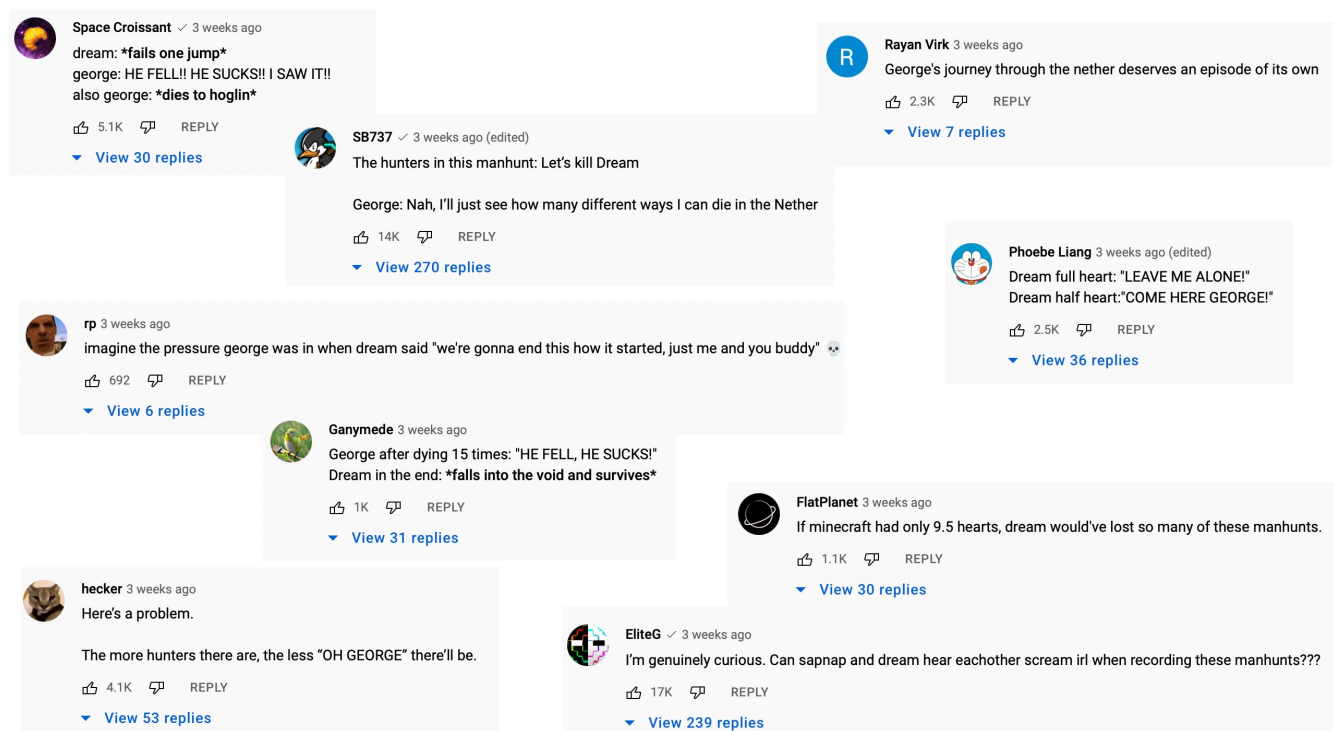


Figure 6: The “implicitly positive” comments in Dream’s most recent video

YouTube also offers a feature to display the most recent comments on top. Using this setting, the sentiment analysis on top still hold. To sum up, Dream’s comment sections are filled with overwhelmingly positive ones.

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 How did Dream Blow Up?

A natural question following the insane growth rate of Dream’s popularity is what made him stand out from millions of other YouTube content creators. Upon analysis, Dream’s success comes from a masterful orchestration of various factors, some of which will be discussed below.

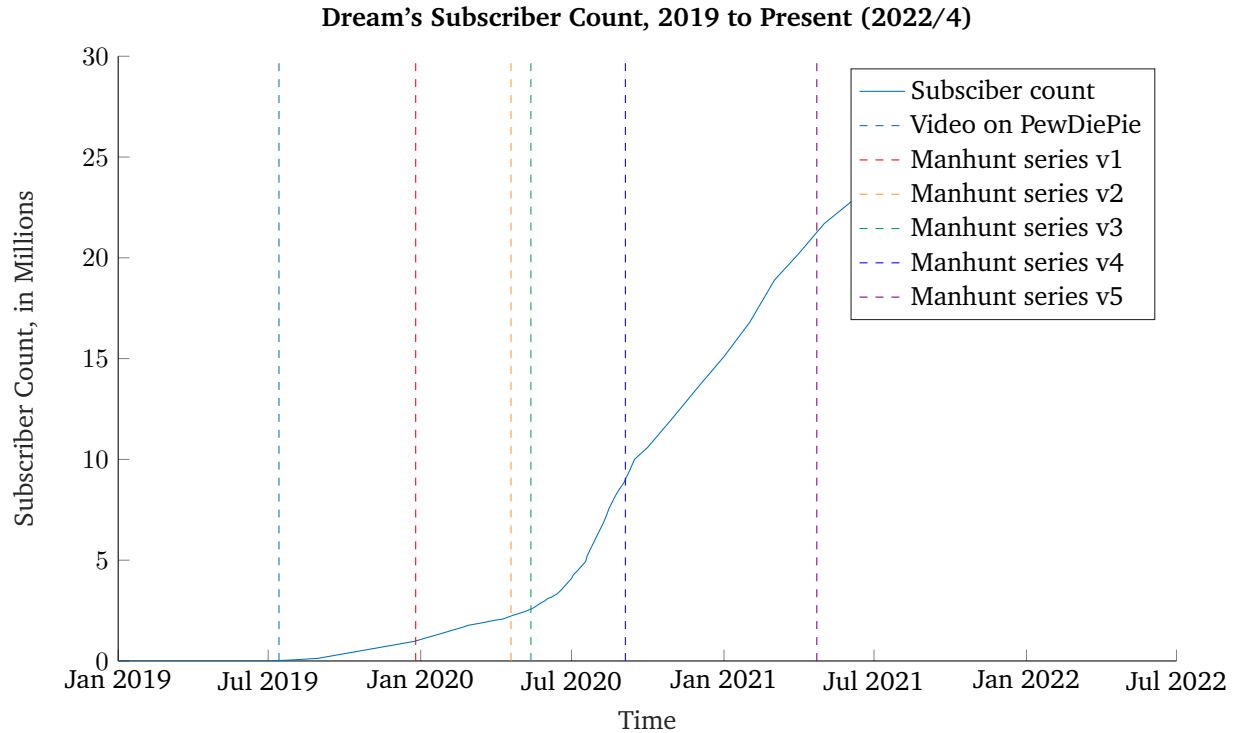


Figure 7: Dream’s subscriber growth plot, along with several vertical bar representing important events

During his early days, Dream was able to obtain his first influx of subscribers by mastering the YouTube algorithm, a path few YouTubers then had thought of. He attempted “trend-jacking,” a technique referring to making videos on trending topics in order to increase one’s own view count. In July 2019, PewDiePie, the YouTube superstar with around 100 million subscribers, started playing Minecraft and challenged the community to reproduce his world. Due to Minecraft’s mechanics, this reverse-engineering is nearly impossible. Dream, however, seized this opportunity. With over 16 quintillion ( $1.6 \cdot 10^{19}$ ) outcomes possible, Dream eventually succeeded using his — and the community’s — knowledge in math, computer science, and days of effort (Dream “PewDiePie”). He posted three consecutive videos showcasing his progress, each time deliberately putting PewDiePie’s picture in the thumbnail and name in title, hoping that the YouTube algorithm will carry his videos to PewDiePie’s viewers. The

result was immediate. As suggested by Figure 7, the change in slope after the first (blue) dotted line is visually significant. In one month Dream gathered 55,000 subscribers and in two months, 130,000. Having mastered the YouTube algorithm, Dream took his first step to success.

Dream's next step was to differentiate himself from other Minecraft YouTubers by creating his own type of Minecraft videos. While there were already countless ideas for videos emerging from the Minecraft community, he wanted something noble enough to create his own niche. In an FAQ, Dream mentioned that he had some knowledge in coding, which most Minecraft YouTubers knew little of. Dream realized that he could "create certain things that other creators [could not] even think about doing (Dream "Q&A" 06:40 – 07:00). Bearing this in mind, Dream started to upload videos on his custom-coded versions of Minecraft, including imaginative and eye-catching titles like "Minecraft, but Gravity Flips Every Minute" and "Minecraft, but Everywhere We Look Explodes." He consistently implemented various coding designs between late 2019 and mid 2020. During this time, his subscriber count grew steadily and by April 2020, he reached 2 million subscribers.

By that time Dream was already a relatively well-known figure in the community, but out of all factors, his "Manhunt series" is unarguably the one that really made him stand out, securing his position as the most well-known Minecraft content creator.

In mid 2020, Dream noticed that among all his videos, several named "Minecraft VS xxx" received significantly more views and positive feedbacks. In these videos, Dream attempted to "beat Minecraft" by completing certain main quests of the game while evading several "adversaries", known as hunters, whose only goal was to hunt Dream down and prevent him from beating the game. Dream promptly adjusted his uploading strategies and focused almost exclusively on Manhunt. The series originally started when Dream was playing 1v1 against his friend, and as of 2022, the series evolved into 1v5. A total of around 20 videos, the Manhunt series gathered about more than 500 million views and quickly became *the* official major trend of 2020 and 2021, according to a report jointly issued by YouTube and Minecraft (YouTube Culture & Trends).

Needless to say, Dream's near-perfect in-game skill helped to lay the foundation of Manhunt series' huge success. A five-time Minecraft Championship winner, Dream never failed to amaze the audience with his skills in fighting, micro-ing (short for micro-management), and coming back in disparate situations ("Hall of Fame"). On top of that, Dream constantly interacted with the community, learning untold tricks and incorporating them into his new videos, surprising both the in-game Hunters and the viewers.

Perhaps the most important reason for the success of Manhunt was because these videos were capable of evoking “strong” emotions. According to a study done in 2012, content that “evokes high-arousal positive (awe) or negative (anger or anxiety)” are more likely to go viral (Berger and Milkman). Dream, either intentionally or not, was doing so. Undoubtedly tension was an emotion ever-present in the videos, as Dream was constantly being hunted down by the Hunters. In each Manhunt video, there were a few occasions where Dream was cornered by the hunters, seemingly in a desperate situation. Every time when this happened, Dream did the impossible. He would somehow outsmart the hunters and escape, leaving the audience in awe. A few videos of these ended with Dream’s defeat, some taking place when Dream was so close to finishing the last quest and some in a split second when Dream fell into a trap set up by the Hunters. In these cases, the viewers, who most likely wish Dream to win, would feel either pitiful or anger. As a result, they would wait eagerly for Dream’s next release, hoping that he would “take revenge.” On top of all of these, though the appropriate choice of background music, Dream’s editing team was able to significantly amplify the dramatic emotions.

It is safe to assume that there were more factors that collectively contributed to the unprecedented success of the Manhunt series, but Dream’s intelligence and dedication recently played the most important roles.

Finally, the pandemic contributed to Dream’s near-exponential growth as well. During the pandemic, significantly more people chose to entertain themselves online. Just two months into the pandemic, YouTube’s daily traffic increased by 15.3% (Koeze and Popper). Even more exaggerating were the data for gaming videos on YouTube. In 2020 Q1, the total hours of gaming videos watched on YouTube was about 1.07 billion hours, whereas this number increased to 1.52, 1.68, and 1.92 billion for Q2, Q3, and Q4, respectively (May). This almost twofold increase corresponded to Dream’s suddenly steepening growth curve starting in July 2020 in Figure 9.

## 4.2 How did Dream Influence the Community?

### The Good

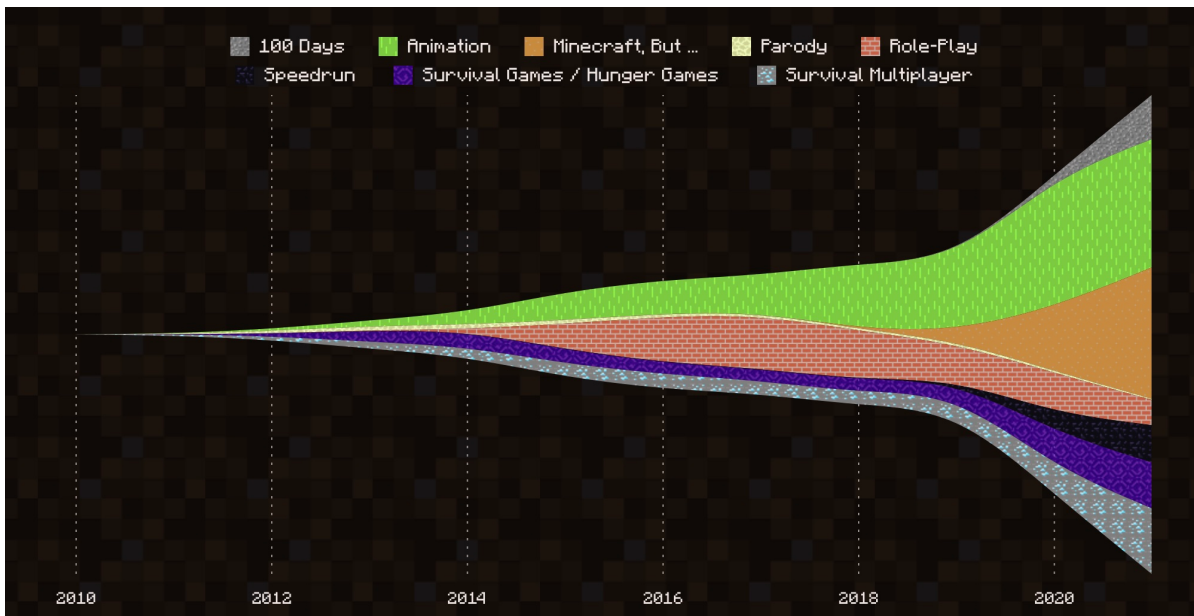


Figure 8: A graph showing the cumulative view counts of videos on Minecraft's most popular genres on YouTube, taken from the official report (see below) by YouTube and Minecraft. Unfortunately there is no *y*-axis.

Dream single-handedly popularized two Minecraft genres, and by doing so he paved the way for numerous other YouTubers. In December 2021, YouTube's Minecraft videos surpassed a total of one trillion views (YouTube Culture & Trends). In the official rewind, YouTube and Minecraft called Dream the leading figure of the community and commended him specifically for his effort in greatly expanding the Minecraft community.

One of the video categories that was hugely benefited from Dream is "Minecraft speedrunning," in which players attempt to beat the game as fast as possible. Though the history of speedrunning dates back to as early as 2011, it remained outside the mainstream categories due to its high skill cap, low tolerance for mistakes, and an additional factor of luck. Back then, only the most skilled and dedicated players were willing to invest time, hoping to gain themselves a spot on the speedrunning leaderboard. Strictly speaking, Dream only did formal speedrun twice. Nevertheless, his Manhunt series, in which his ultimate goal aligns with that of a speedrun, roughly falls into the same category. Seeing his huge success, many other YouTubers started to produce similar videos. According to statistics, prior to 2019, speedrunning videos gained a total of 42 million views, whereas by 2020 the cumulative viewcount reached a stunning 736 billion. This number doubled again in 2021, reaching 1.46 billion.

The other genre consists of the "Minecraft, but xxx" videos, which first emerged in late 2018. In these videos,

players “are not just playing but manipulating the game” by means such as customizing game rules or altering the game’s code (YouTube Culture & Trends). Prior to Dream’s appearance, most “Minecraft, but” videos fell into the former, where gamers simply made changes to the few built-in game rules made available by the developer. Dream’s success, however, demonstrated the sheer potential of the latter. In fact, there were nearly a dozen Minecraft YouTubers skilled at coding, but none thought of Dream’s idea. Seeing Dream’s success, they decided to follow his path and design their own custom-coded Minecraft videos, and their work paid off. In 2019, the cumulative view count for this category was 380 million, whereas in 2020, it skyrocketed to 2.48 billion and in 2021, 5.12 billion. Currently, “Minecraft, but” series is the most trending category among all.

It is certainly not an understatement to say that Dream is one of the leading contributors to this unprecedented prosperity of the Minecraft community.

### **The Controversy — the Speedrun Scandal**

Despite his astounding feats, Dream has caused several dramas, the most important one being allegedly cheating in a speedrun. While this drama surely brought turmoil to the community, it fortunately ended soon without spreading too much harm.

In December 2020, the speedrun moderator team conducted a series of research on one of Dream’s previous submitted speedruns after noticing that Dream was unrealistically lucky in that run. Using statistical methods, they inferred that Dream have most likely cheated or altered game data ( $p \approx 1.3 \cdot 10^{-13}$ ) (“Dream Investigation Results”). Dream, on the other hand, fiercely denied such allegation on social media.

Some of Dream’s more fervent fans, however, were unhappy and began attacking the moderator team. Chaos spread around the community, especially on Twitter and Reddit, but fortunately did not last long. In January, Dream issued an apology on Twitter, saying that “[the] drama [had] been stressful for most of the Minecraft community and a lot of that was due to [his] original response to the drama” and that he “[took] full responsibility for that” (Dream “Apology”).

In May 2021, facing continuous criticism on social media, Dream confessed that his speedrun was based on a modified client but claimed that he was unaware of the change when playing the game. Following this response, Karl Jobst, then a speedrunning moderator, reinvestigated the case and dived deep. After collection testimonies from Dream, the previous moderator team, and several other major figures involved in this incident, Karl Jobst analyzed the potential psychological factors and posted a detailed video on YouTube, suggesting that while Dream

should take full responsibility for the drama, he was likely was telling the truth that he did not know his client was modified (“Confession Truth”). This video sparked discussions on Reddit. While people still held different opinions on both Karl Jobst’s video and on whether Dream intention cheated, most agreed that it was time to put aside the quarrel and move on. Dream would continue to film his Manhunt videos and the drama gradually faded away.

### **Can We See Another Dream?**

An answer to a speculative question like this is speculative. Undoubtedly, even if someone is able to replicate Dream’s sudden success, it will not happen easily. Nevertheless, there is certainly hope. As analyzed previously, Dream did not start on his own — he made smart use of YouTube’s algorithm and gained his early viewer base by clinging himself to PewDiePie, the trending celebrity. Perhaps this trick could be reused in the future, or perhaps someone else willing to study YouTube’s algorithm may come up with other approaches that serve the same purpose. Given YouTube’s ever-increasing user base, if someone as lucky, skilled, and dedicated as Dream also becomes the “chosen one” by YouTube, it is entirely possible that they may surpass what Dream have achieved.

## **5 Conclusion**

Even if I were to daydream of becoming a celebrity, I would have not imagined becoming popular at Dream’s rate. He is no ordinary YouTuber. He was willing to invest time researching the YouTube algorithm, think ahead of time and predict the audience’s appetite, and most importantly make videos novel in style, captivating in content, and relatable in emotion. It is no exaggeration to say that his success was well-deserved. On the other hand, while his cheating scandal was by all means stigmatizing, his enormous contributions to the Minecraft community should not be overlooked. Dream has recently called an end to his signature Manhunt series. A few days before this analysis is finished, Dream posted a new video titled “100 Floor Survivals,” and based on the current receptions, it will probably develop into a new individual series. On a personal end, as Dream is transitioning to his next phase, I look forward to seeing if he will continue to bring surprise and impact to the community.

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## Description of Changes