

# How One Awkward, Chubby, Bespectacled White Boy from New Jersey Got All of YouTube Dorky Dancing, and Why We Should Thank Him for It

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It is December 2004, and YouTube is still a few months away from being launched online; a grainy, heavily pixilated, pre-YouTube video opens with a chubby-cheeked, bespectacled, headphone-wearing young white male, framed by a tilted web camera in front of an aquarium and a window with a not-quite-long-enough blue curtain. For the first few seconds, this appears to be a subdued lip-sync to a song with unrecognizable lyrics. But no—at 16 seconds, Gary Brolsma, aka the “Numa Numa” kid, erupts into a frenzied explosion of arm-pumping, eyebrow-raising, unabashed dancing enthusiasm. Although at this time the world had not yet seen anything quite like this self-produced dance for the Internet, we would all soon be infected by the sheer giddiness of the Numa Numa–inspired, YouTube-driven, viral dorky dance revolution. For this, Gary deserves the sincerest of collective high fives.

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Placed in his proper position in Internet history, the unassuming Gary Brolsma is a revolutionary who began the biggest popular production and distribution of dancing the world had ever seen. To appreciate the much-loved and subversive aesthetics of the self-produced and self-distributed dorky dancing that floods the Internet, it is necessary to know something about its beginnings. Today it is almost impossible to remember back to 2004 and relive how stunning (magical even) it was to watch the grainy and pixilated video on Newgrounds then YouTube—posted for all to enjoy, to critique, and even to emulate.

Memories are buried under our mindless acceptance of the ubiquitous cell-phone-cum-tiny-computer, homemade Internet videos, and instant connectivity. User-uploaded content is what we *do*. From YouTube (still the reigning star) to Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Vine, etc., the proliferation of websites and apps obscure the reality that YouTube was only launched in 2005. The momentous impact YouTube and these other sites have had on the production and reception of dance is inestimable: They incited billions of self-produced dance performances—people dancing in their bedrooms and living rooms; on playgrounds, the streets, or mountaintops; in the sky and at the bottom of the sea. The viewership for this kind of self-produced dancing outstrips viewership of any other form of dancing, anywhere, at any time, throughout the world.

YouTube, in particular, has been instrumental in promoting “dorky dancing”—allowing what was once perceived as socially awkward or amateur movement to be embraced and celebrated. With the advent of video-sharing sites, first the youth (especially males) of America and then *everybody* found rapid-distribution and worldwide outlets for their physical expression. Dancing was the crucial gatecrasher. With YouTube, self-expression moved beyond words and still photography and entered the realm of moving images. People could control and distribute their own embodied explorations precisely in the realm where these investigations are most tangible: the body itself. And we have one awkward white boy from New Jersey—Gary Brolsma—to thank for getting this online dorky dance party started.

Although awkward dancing has been present since the first time a stumbling dancer elicited laughter, “awkward dance” is not necessarily the same thing as “dorky dance.” Awkward dancing is certainly one substantial component of dorky dance. But the aesthetics of dorky dancing used here consider many other factors. Awkwardness is, of course, culturally specific. I am using “dorky dance” as would be perceived by Western audiences, primarily in the United States. It includes several common ingredients: uncoordinated, jerky, arrhythmic movement; hysterical (the term derives from the chaotic way a body moves when experiencing hysteria) movement that is off tempo from any musical rhythms, and off tempo from any sense of internal rhythm; the limbs move in unexpected directions; there is no kinetic logic when or how they stop and start; the dancer makes faces; and the dance cannot be aligned with any known style or technique.



Figure 1.1. Still images of Gary Brolsma from “Numa Numa Dance” reflecting the original pixilated quality of the video upload. Image Source: [http://livingromcom.typepad.com/my\\_weblog/2006/07/craft\\_is\\_not\\_en.html](http://livingromcom.typepad.com/my_weblog/2006/07/craft_is_not_en.html). By permission of Gary Brolsma.

Although dorky dance is rooted in awkward movement, other essential designators distinguish “dorkiness.” A dance is read as dorky depending on the viewer’s ideas about “proper” physical appearance/status, as much as it depends on the lack of any technical ability on the part of the dancer. However, at the time of Gary’s debut, which set a standard, other “dorky” signifiers were being established. For example, the clothes of the dorky dancer are ill-fitting, badly matched, definitely *not* nerd-chic. The hair is odd or unkempt; badly fitted spectacles can be part of the mix. The physical stature of the dancer is uncomfortably out of the normative range: they are too short, too tall, too pudgy, too scrawny, existing on the physical fringes.

What makes dorky dancing so popular is its tenderness and vulnerability. Dorky dancing is humorous precisely because it is oblivious to any

expectations. Gender plays a small role since male-produced movement (especially by white males) is still interpreted as inherently dorkier than that of females. American audiences are not as accustomed to watching men dance, and when they do, is usually in the sanctioned style of something like men dancing in boy bands. Dorky dances have an innocent, sincere quality that is both refreshing and witty, not merely naïve. They optimistically counteract the cynical and sarcastic impulses that fuel so much of our current humor. Dorky dancers express an overwhelming sense of believability. No spectator is expected to “suspend disbelief.” In fact, as soon as the video feels in the least contrived or artificial, they are outed online as inauthentic “astro-turfs” or “sell-outs,” and provoke a spate of negative dorky-dance video-responses. The genre is unapologetically unpretentious, militantly eschewing social expectations of dance propriety and any sense of artifice that comes with high production values. Who needs a state-of-the-art camera, film crew, and professional editing, when a stationary webcam or even a handheld bouncing cell phone camera will not only suffice—it will actually add to the aesthetic of amateuristic charm?

This veracity shines through when a video is produced for fun, not for financial gain. Genuine dorky dance videos cannot deliberately be made for profit, since this altered intention is not lost on the viewer, whose “purity” of viewing experience thus becomes tainted. Being commercially unfettered is what allowed user-generated YouTube dance in the first place. To fulfill the crucial criterion of dorky dance-dom irreproachably, and have the video accepted as amicably amateur, it must be self-produced and posted gratis on the web for a globe-spanning audience. The overriding intent of dorky dancing is to generate laughs, not profits. The sociability of the Internet removes traditional barriers between laborer and consumer and the financial obstacles of dance production and distribution. There is no need to rent a studio or a theater, to sell a required number of seats, or, in the case of film, to have hefty budgets and sales. On the contrary, dance in film reads as ultimately having financial aims, even in low budget productions.

People have always liked watching funny, awkward movers, and they have long figured prominently in the pantheon of beloved Hollywood characters. But these dancers could never be dorky because Hollywood is always driven by the bottom line. Since the earliest moving pictures, dancers have stumbled across the screen to generate laughs, from Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton to the more recent Pee-wee Herman and Napoleon Dynamite. In comparison to these consciously awkward silver-screen dancers, dorky YouTube dancers

emit a sense of veracity, of being authentically amateur and genuinely vulnerable. They have not constructed their clumsiness to drive the plot of a big (or even small) budget film.

Significantly—just as it functions in the larger world of art-making—the indispensable ingredient of dorky dance is intention. Fun is fundamental. As much as dorky dance can comment on and critique society and our restrictive conceptions of dance aesthetics, its real purpose is to entertain. Therefore, it is no accident that dorky dance finds a perfect home on YouTube, the free forum where people can see funny dancing in a space that feels welcoming and unpretentious—utterly unlike the atmosphere of the concert performance hall.

YouTube was launched in February 2005 (just a few months after the “Numa Numa Dance” was first uploaded), was purchased by Google in October 2006, and grew quickly from its inception. Currently, according to YouTube’s website, forty-eight hours of content are uploaded every minute, translating into eight years of content uploaded *every day* from the site’s hundreds of millions of users.<sup>1</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, by 2015, 64 percent of American adults now own a smart phone, up from 35 percent in 2011.<sup>2</sup> The rate is even higher for young adults (18–29), 85 percent of whom were smart phone owners in 2015.<sup>3</sup> With so many smart phones in pockets, our expectations for privacy are altered. Any action we create in public—dance or otherwise—now has the potential to be captured and displayed online, transforming any such quotidian display into a virtual performance. The portability and speed of the smart phone allows all users to transition seamlessly from producer to viewer, from critic to distributor.

YouTube continues to develop as the most popular forum for meaningful, participant-driven communication and artistic creation, especially in the realm of dance. At the time of its inception, it was the perfect space to “broadcast yourself;”<sup>4</sup> as YouTube’s early motto suggested. This platform allowed instantaneous communication and collaboration, at a temporal and geographical speed that connected across the nation and around the globe in seconds, which seemed miraculous at the time. Clips could be easily produced and quickly posted on the web from the privacy of home (or in public on one’s smart phone or iPad) mere moments after a video was recorded. The sheer speed of this transmission and reception created the perfect forum for instant spoofs and parodies and invited a wider participation and dialogue in the dance-making process that still exists today.

This technology also revolutionized the role of the audience, who needed

very little expressed interest in dance to be exposed to it.<sup>5</sup> Bombarded by dance images—particularly of the funny or awkward variety—the new viewer often adopted a more active role in this virtual world of dance. Those who were once spectators transformed into active dance collaborators; participation ranged from something as simple as reposting or e-mailing videos to adopting the role of the critic by writing commentaries about creations to becoming simultaneously an artistic-collaborator-critic-commentator by creating a dancing response-video. This dialogue occurred, and continues to occur, in an atmosphere that makes participation in dance fun, rather than grandiose or laborious.

Many of the most popular initial self-posted videos on YouTube—the ones that so quickly became viral—were those of dorky dancers. The infamous “Numa Numa Dance” is a deliciously dorky dance that exploded on the Internet as the first user-uploaded video that became popular primarily because of its dorky dancing. It should rightfully be placed into the annals of Internet history as the first dorky dance “viral video.”<sup>6</sup> The video’s creator, Gary Brolsma, has even been lauded by YouTube anthropologist Michael Wesch as “the first guy on the dance floor of this global mixer” (that is, the YouTube community of collaboration).<sup>7</sup> Although “Numa Numa” originated on a flash video-sharing site called Newgrounds (which predated the existence of YouTube and was especially popular with video game players and early technology adopters), the video quickly established its home on what would soon become the most popular video-sharing site, YouTube. Then-nineteen-year-old Brolsma (from Saddle Brook, New Jersey) created the clip and intended to share it with a small group of friends, but “Numa Numa” became an overnight sensation. One estimate proclaims that it has been viewed over 700 million times on various sites<sup>8</sup> and, by June 2014, the first copy uploaded to YouTube had been viewed nearly 54 million times.<sup>9</sup> But Brolsma never expected his creation to explode in this way: “I’ve always been a fan of making little video clips to entertain friends, by making mini-documentaries on stupid things, or just plain old goofing around. Honestly, the original Numa Numa Dance was exactly that. I’m just a regular guy that sits in front of his computer bored out of his mind messing around on the Internet looking at funny videos and other websites to pass the time. The video was originally intended to make a few friends laugh by just goofing off. It only took one take and about 15 minutes to put all together. A lot of people ask me if I planned the video out or took multiple tries with it. The real answer is . . . no.”<sup>10</sup>