Monetizing a Meme: YouTube, ContentID, and The Harlem Shake

Abstract

The 10th anniversary of YouTube’s first posted video was celebrated on April 23, 2015, a company who rose to power encouraging the development of a robust community of amateur vloggers and video makers which ascended to a massive transnational media corporation. Ten years later, YouTube may seem to function in a similar way, but its latest methods for monetization of User Generated Content (UGC) are potentially leaving content producers without basic rights to their labor. This paper analyzes YouTube’s methods for monetizing UGC with ContentID through and exploration of the colossal assemblage of creative labor that constitutes the “Harlem Shake” meme.

At its peak, the Harlem Shake meme was immensely generative (generating nearly 4,000 YouTube videos uploads per day), and popular. As it spread the “Harlem Shake” rapidly surpassed the status of a “simple” Internet meme and found its way as a pop culture phenomenon, inspiring countless hours of creative endeavors participating in what became a kind of “internet dance craze.” During this “internet dance craze,” the rights owners of the song that formed the musical accompaniment of the meme quickly realized the profit potential of the phenomenon, and profited handsomely from this opportunity through the architecture of control provided by YouTube.

Through an analysis of the history and an examination of the "digital sharecropping" which YouTube uses through its coercive agreements, we argue for a “Fair(er) Use” of copyrighted material in UGC, particularly in regards to memetic remixing, parody, and viral spread. This significance of this article is challenging the current distribution of Content ID payments solely to musical copyright holders and acknowledgment of meme-maker co-authorship as participants in cultural production.