

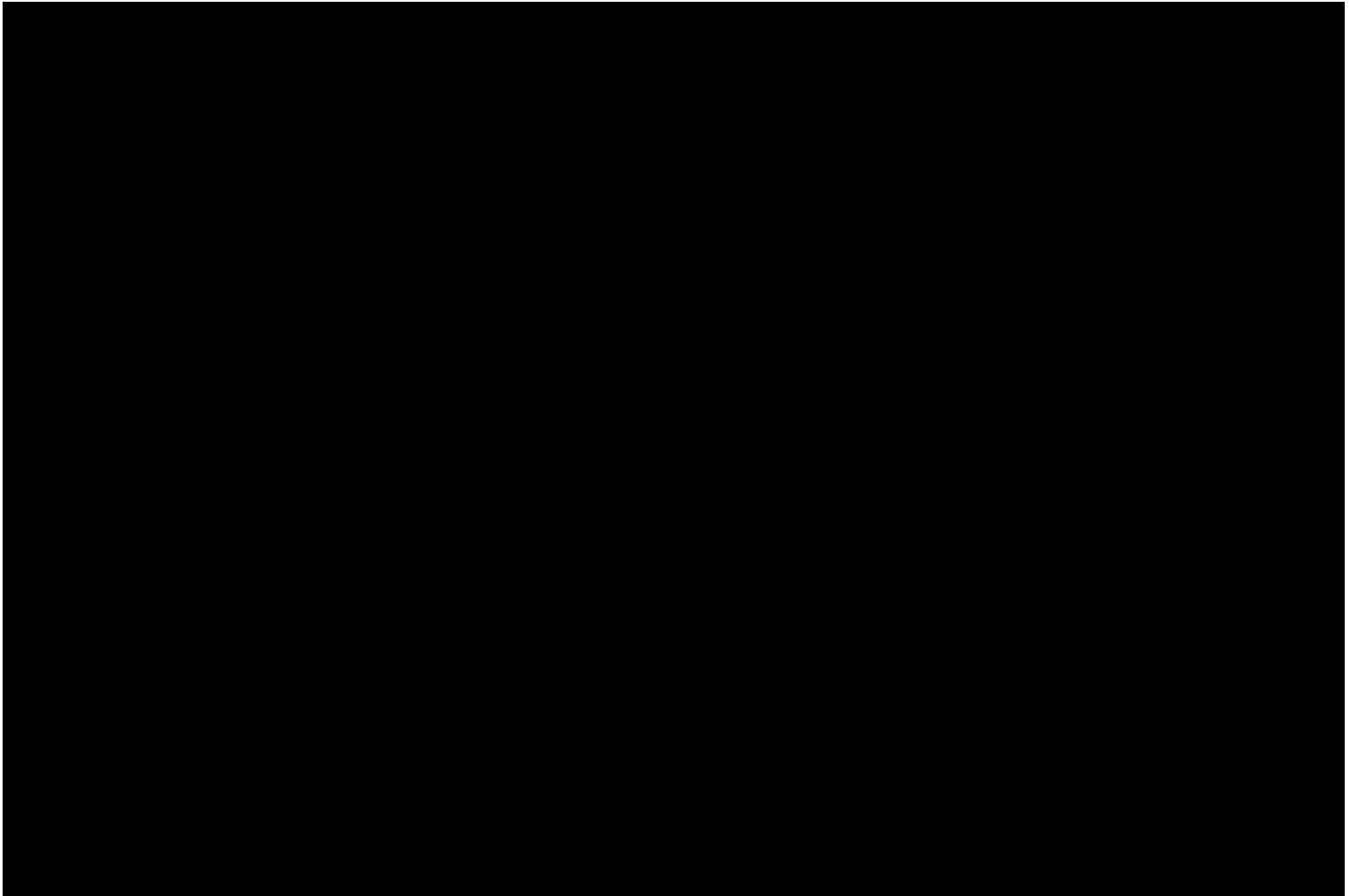
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The odd appeal of absurdly long YouTube videos that play nothing on purpose / How many hours would you spend watching a timer count down? Or a blank screen just... be blank?

By [David Pierce](#), editor-at-large and Vergecast co-host with over a decade of experience covering consumer tech. Previously, at Protocol, The Wall Street Journal, and Wired.

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I swear, this is a screenshot of an actual YouTube video. Image: David Pierce

The video's title is, for once on YouTube, pretty straightforward: "24 hours + of pure black screen in HD!" Leaving aside the questions about the difference between standard- and high-def pure black screens, the video does what it says on the tin. Hit play, and you get

more than 24 hours — 24 hours, one minute, 27 seconds, to be exact — of black screen and silence. It's like turning off your computer, without turning off your computer.

This video has 40.2 million views.

The first time I watched it, I assumed there was a joke or a Rick Roll or something in there somewhere and watched an upsettingly long time to find it. Nothing. So I figured it was a bit. Fun meta-commentary about the drivel people choose to watch! Most commenters seemed to agree and were goofing on the concept. “How is this not in theaters?” commenter Orbital wrote. “The story, the characters, the acting is a masterpiece! especially at 1:23:53, where dark acted as the void, is just so beautiful.” Uinthlees YT called it “a complete masterpiece” with “many wonderful, heart-touching moments.” And Buzzcut Boy wrote that they watch it every night before they go to bed: “i have watched this video so much that i even see it when i close my eyes like my eye lids are a little screen playing this master peice.”

But now, after spending too many hours watching too-long videos just like “24 hours + of pure black screen in HD!” I think I've discovered their true purpose. Not only are they not a joke but they're also some of the most useful and user-friendly things on YouTube.

The ultra-long video is a longtime staple of YouTube, of course. The first one I remember watching was 10 hours of goats bleating the chorus to Taylor Swift's “I Knew You Were Trouble,” but I think my all-time favorite is when Nathan Graham from the gaming channel Unspeakable uploaded a video called “PLAYING MINECRAFT FOR 24 HOURS STRAIGHT!”

which turned out to be a few minutes of gaming and about 23 hours of looped footage of Graham sleeping. The upshot: 14 million views. It's a good joke.

There are more useful genres of mega-long YouTube, too. You can get 24 hours of a roaring fire, which is good background viewing in the winter. There's an astonishing amount of content directed at dogs, which mostly amounts to 20-plus hours of soothing music and nature shots. (The "most replayed" bit of one such video is a sweeping overhead shot of a lush island, down to the beach, and I like imagining my dogs just scrubbing back to that bit over and over to soak in the island vibes.) There's also plenty of super-long Cat TV, too, but that seems less popular. I found one that's just 20 hours of a seal spinning around in the water, titled "No need to be Upset 20 HOURS LONG!!" It has 644,000 views, several of which are now me.

The most sensible long videos are the music ones. Twenty hours of spa music, 12 hours of jazz, 14 hours of loungey covers of popular hits. I've come to like these even better than the always-streaming channels like Lofi Girl because they're so predictable — I've played a 24-hour video called "Starbucks Jazz Music Collection 2021 - 24 Hours Smooth Jazz for Studying, Work, Relax, Sleep" so many times that my brain knows its ebbs and flows, and it barely even registers as I go about my day.

And yet, I still can't explain why "24 hours + of pure black screen in HD!" is such a huge hit. Its channel's owner, a guy named Noah who calls himself "Black Screen Guy," has picked up 65,000 subscribers and more than 150 million views on videos just like it. The even longer "44 hours of pure black screen in HD!" has 5.4 million views. Thirty-five hours, 2.2 million views. Thirty-two hours, 2.4 million. The channel's most surprising success story? "24 hours of pure white screen!" is exactly what it sounds like and has 44 million views. Which is a lot more than the 7.2 million on "a red screen for 24 hours!"

In this case, it turns out, the outrageous length is the whole appeal. Across all these videos and many other silent blank ones, every viewer seems to have their own use case. The most common, by far, is to use these videos as a way to simply keep your device on. "I keep this playing overnight so that my laptop doesn't shutdown while downloading games," one commenter wrote. "I have to keep this open on my phone because it's broken and will not turn back on if it turns off," another said.

There are also a surprisingly large number of times when you might want your device on but the screen off. "I use this so I can have music open on another tab at night and have this open so the screen with the music on it wont shine so bright in my room," one commenter

wrote on a two-day-long video of a blank black screen. “I use this every night, put on a podcast and q this to come on next,” said another. “Unironically useful for avoiding screen burn in,” another wrote. “Big thanks <3.”

In the description of one video, a 10-hour saga of pure black screen, the Black Screen Guy himself suggested even more possibilities. You can use a black screen to check your computer’s backlight or look for dead pixels; to trick your parents into thinking the computer’s off so you can play games without having to reenter the password; to track time by how long the video’s been playing; to clean your screen without turning off the computer; and so much more. A black screen does wonders, apparently, especially when it doesn’t involve turning anything off.

My immediate reaction to this was, well, confusion. Just turn off your screen! You can change the settings on a Mac or a PC to turn off your display without putting your computer to sleep, and smartphones and tablets have plenty of ways to play audio in the background even with the display off.

But you know what’s actually easier than tweaking a bunch of settings, especially for younger users accustomed to finding everything they need on YouTube? Just playing a video. One commenter on a blank-screen video called it “the perfect video to cast to your tv when you’re too tired to get up and turn it off,” which seems both ridiculous — if you can cast from your phone to your TV, you can probably use your phone to turn off your TV! — and telling. A blank-screen video is both a stupid solution and a strangely elegant one.

In a way, I’ve come to see “24 hours + of pure black screen in HD!” as a perfect microcosm of YouTube. YouTube is part entertainment platform, part information library... and part tools repository. It can soundtrack your day, teach you how to beat any game or solve any problem, keep your pets entertained while you’re gone, or transport you to just about any place on earth. A blank screen video is a productivity tool, plain and simple.

I even understand now why a seven-day-long video, which is just a timer counting down 168 hours, has 3.7 million views. One commenter summed it up thusly, “This is the timer you need when you need to stay active on your computer while working from home. No one will notice you were gone because this video keeps playing.” As long as the computer’s awake, I can be wherever I want.

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