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Dan and Phil's Return to YouTube: Why It Matters

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If you were on YouTube anytime between 2014 and 2018, chances are you've heard of Dan Howell and Phil Lester. If you weren't a fan of their content, you probably think of them as those British YouTubers with the bad haircuts who everyone wrote fanfic about for a few years. You might remember hearing about them from that weird girl at your school who drew cat whiskers on her face, or you might have seen the 'Heart Eyes Howell' edits on your Tumblr page. When the Dan and Phil gaming channel went on hiatus in late 2018, you may have simply assumed that they faded into the YouTube ether along with many other content creators of the 2010s. But for me, and other people like me, Dan and Phil's five-year disappearance from their joint channel was deeply disappointing, not only because we as fans missed their content, but because it was us who ultimately drove them to stop posting.



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From the beginning of their DanAndPhilGAMES channel, speculation about both YouTubers ran rampant through all corners of the internet. While all Dan and Phil wanted was to play games together online and make lighthearted content for their viewers, they were met time and time again with intense comments about their sexuality and pressure to reveal their identities to their audience. Any physical contact Dan and Phil had in a video was turned into something sexual or would be used in edits to 'prove' that they were secretly dating. There were Reddit threads analyzing the layout of Dan and Phil's apartment, with some fans claiming that one of their bedrooms was used only as a prop. Dan's old MySpace page was unearthed, where he had labelled his sexuality as 'bisexual' before becoming mainstream popular. In 2011, a private YouTube video Phil made for Dan was accidentally leaked by a YouTube glitch, and fans went wild sharing it online as Dan and Phil begged them to stop. On YouNow, Dan and Phil would be hounded by fans in real-time asking if they were gay, with Dan saying in 2013, 'Do you want me to be? Unfortunately not. No. Why do people want... Why are people so obsessed with sexuality?' These examples barely scratch the surface of the YouTuber's experiences from 2014-2018. The internet seemed to be a lawless cesspool, with homophobic and queer fans alike pressuring them constantly into giving some answers. Dan and Phil's audience created a situation in which they speculated so much and so often about their sexualities that, if either YouTuber did want to come out as queer, it would seem as if they were justifying the speculation.

This is why it was so surprising to fans when, about six months into the DanAndPhilGAMES channel hiatus, Dan returned to YouTube with a video titled 'Basically I'm Gay'. In my opinion, it's one of the best videos ever posted on YouTube. It details Dan's experiences with depression throughout his life and his over twenty-year-long struggle to come to terms with his sexuality. Importantly, Dan emphasizes that fans running rampant on the internet, exposing his old social media presence, analysing his body language around Phil, and overall harassing him for over five years, was deeply wrong and affected his mental health so negatively that he had to step away from YouTube for his own wellbeing. He firmly told the camera that it was never okay to speculate on his sexuality, and it was never okay to pressure him to come out before he was ready. As a queer fan who would have benefited from Dan coming out earlier, this was an important message for me to hear. While I didn't think of myself as one of the 'crazy' fans, I can't say that me and my friends didn't wonder about Dan and Phil's relationship. I can't say I didn't scour the corners of the internet for proof that they were together, or read the threads compiling 'evidence.'



Image courtesy of Sarah Kurfess via Unsplash.

I know now that celebrities do not owe the public a statement about their sexuality, even if coming out would benefit other queer people.

> **No one owes you, a total stranger, information about their sexuality.**

It was deeply wrong of me and the many other, more extreme fans to try and find proof of someone's identity for our own benefit. Dan's experiences detailed in the video are unfortunately not unique, and this kind of toxic fan mentality did not just end in the 2010s. Dan's video is reminiscent of what happened to Kit Conner in 2022, as the *Heartstopper* actor was bullied into coming out on Twitter.
Dan's video was received extremely positively, with many fans apologizing in the comments for creating such a toxic environment. However, Dan and Phil's gaming channel did not come back right away after the coming out video. While Phil also posted a video coming out, both Dan and Phil remained quieter on YouTube, posting together every once in a while but never uploading on their joint channel (and who could blame them for wanting to lay low?). That is until 2023, when Dan and Phil announced that, after five years of hiatus, their channel was returning from the dead.

Dan and Phil's first video back was both jarring and comforting; they seemed like the same people as before, but they were also clearly more comfortable around each other, more comfortable being on camera, and more comfortable talking about their identities. Dan explained the hiatus by saying, in a joking tone, 'I stopped posting because I was gay… because I needed to accept that.' While said lightheartedly, that statement carries a lot of weight, and I found myself thinking about it long after the video ended. It's easy sometimes to forget that acceptance takes time, and I am so relieved both Dan and Phil allowed themselves the space to grow off-camera. Frankly, If they had never returned to YouTube, I would have completely understood.

Dan and Phil have posted consistently throughout October, and it's been a relief that, when I look in the comment section of their videos, I see little to no fans analyzing their body language or the way they interact. While Dan did speak briefly about his and Phil's relationship in his coming out video, they have chosen not to publicly label the nature of their relationship, a decision I agree with 100%. The internet, or at least Dan and Phil's fanbase, seems ready to finally let public figures exist without hounding them for some sort of label. The comments about how gay they look have been replaced with comments like 'I'm so proud of them' and 'They seem so comfortable now.' The people who followed Dan and Phil before the hiatus still make up most of their fanbase now, which means the stark change in the comment section is not because of new audience members, but because, like Dan and Phil, their viewers have grown into better people over these past five years.

> **Dan and Phil's return to YouTube is a lovely reminder that things can always get better for queer people, even if it takes time.**

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