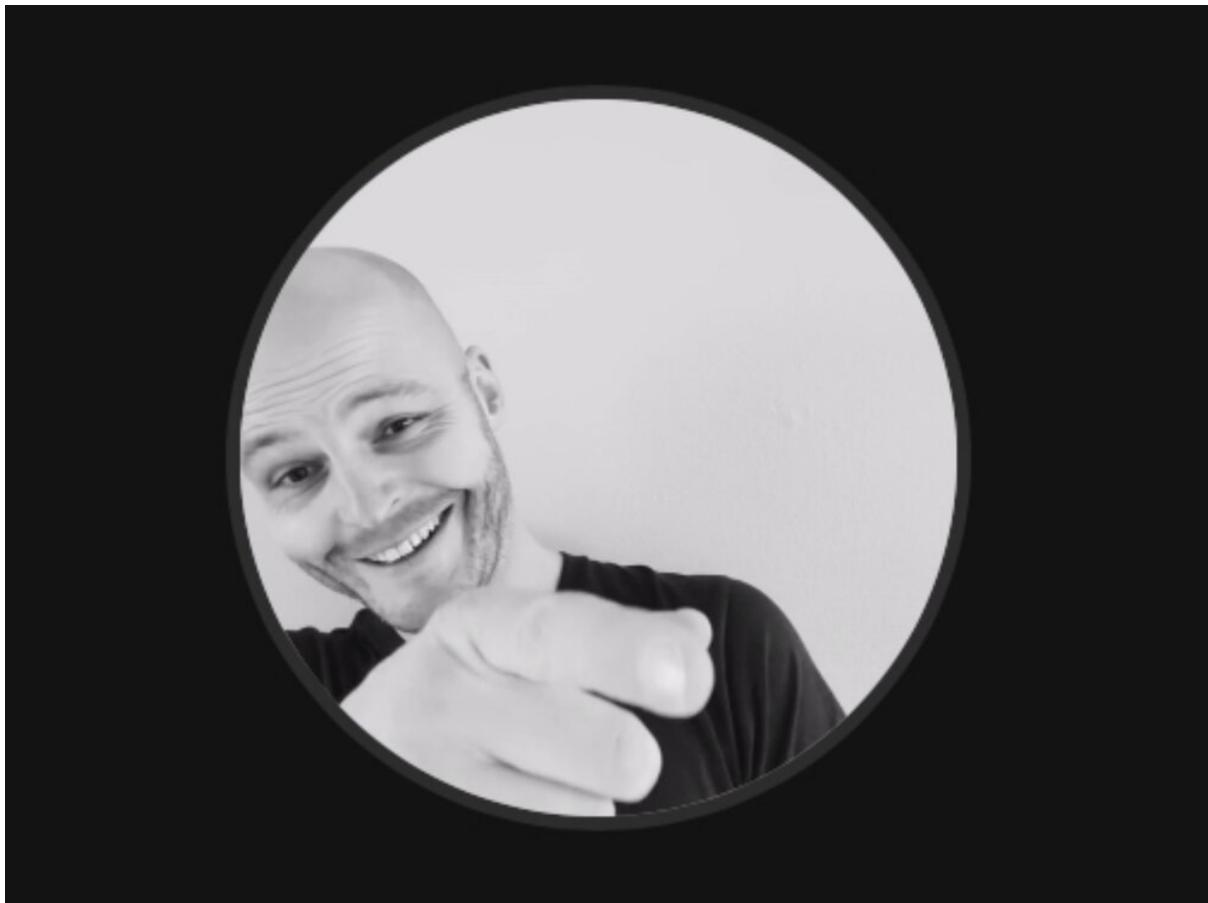


Hello Video

Greeting you with a smile!

Willem L. Middelkoop

Jan. 10, 2026



Just look around the modern web today, thanks to AI generated texts and images everything feels polished, perfect... and a little cold. I wanted to break the proverbial ice with a simple smile. So I replaced my hero photo with something alive: tiny, random videos of me waving, nodding, or just being there. There is more than meets the eye to make it work, let me explain in this post.

Inspiration

As father of two I often play with kids, from this I know that to make new connections it sometimes helps to overcome boundaries (like shyness) when you pull a crazy face, make a joke or wear a silly hat. Although my website is aimed at grown-ups, I figured that a little fun could still help to make things approachable.



John Hodgman and Justin Long in the award-winning "Get a Mac" ad campaign ("I'm a Mac" and "I'm a PC")

Maybe you remember the Apple ad campaign with just two guys playing a PC (John Hodgman) and a Mac (Justin Long), highlighting differences between Macs and PC's in a playful way. They captivated audiences with humour and relatable characters. Thanks to the simplicity of the format, I imagined that I could make it work for my website, even without a marketing budget like Apple (ha!).

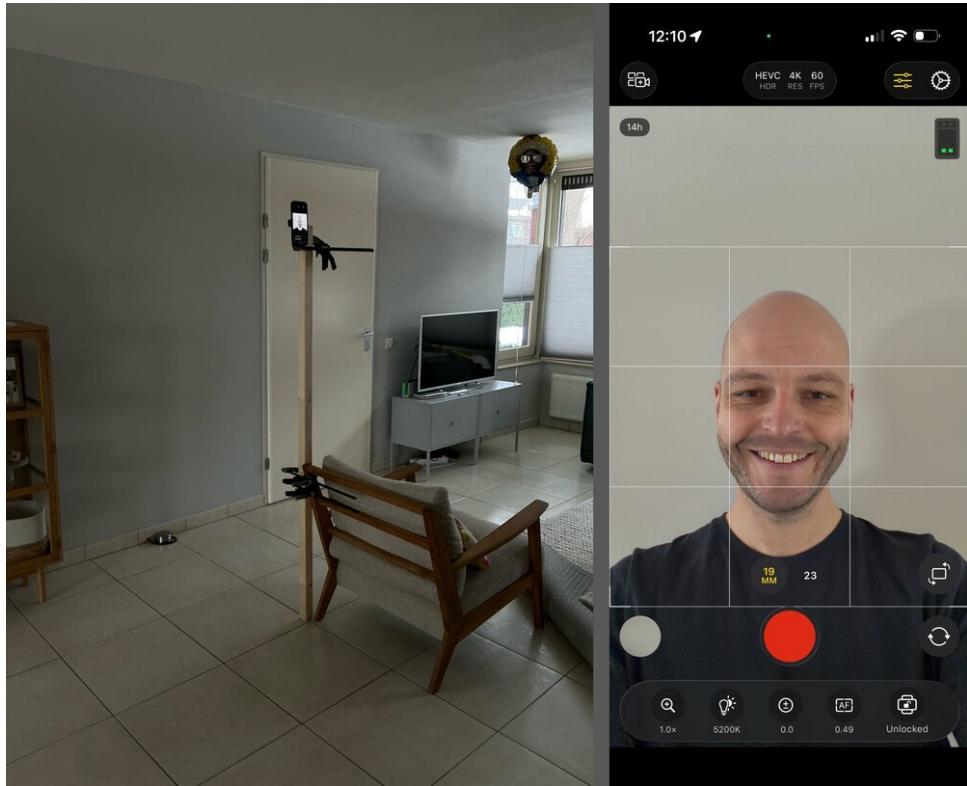


Live paintings in Harry Potter's Hogwarts

Inside the School of Magic from Harry Potter there are paintings that move, talk and feel sentient. Instead of a static image, they appear to be alive. As they move they convey a much richer picture of the depicted person. Could I capture myself in a magical painting?

Making it

Instead of long and fully scripted scenes I decided to go for quick cameos, glances into my life as professional, endurance athlete, writer and father. By recording them in a standard setting (my living room) I can shuffle them and record additional seasonal shorts (e.g. wearing a Santa's hat during Christmas).



The "Ultra Professional Movie Studio Setup" - my living room and iPhone

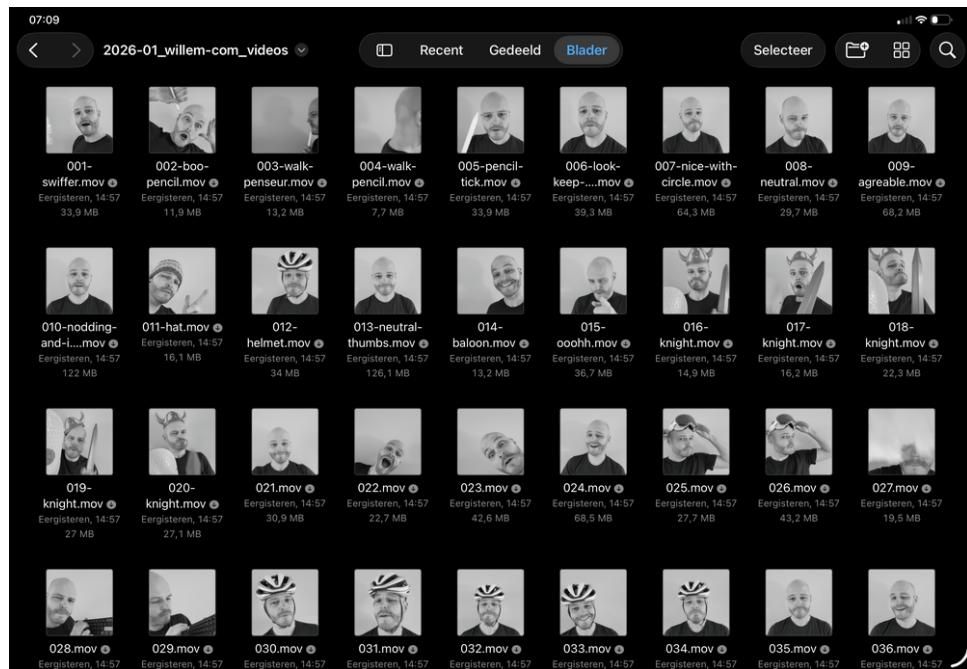
Using some clamps, wood and furniture I positioned my iPhone facing a grey wall. Targeting the round "hero frame" on my homepage, I configured the camera to show a square grid giving me a sense of composition. Eventually I opted for the selfie camera so I could see the recording while looking into the camera. I remembered some lessons [from my amateur acting escapades](#), emphasising facial expressions and the power of looking at the audience. I recorded over 12 minutes of footage, producing a 7.3 gigabyte video file.

Pushing Tech

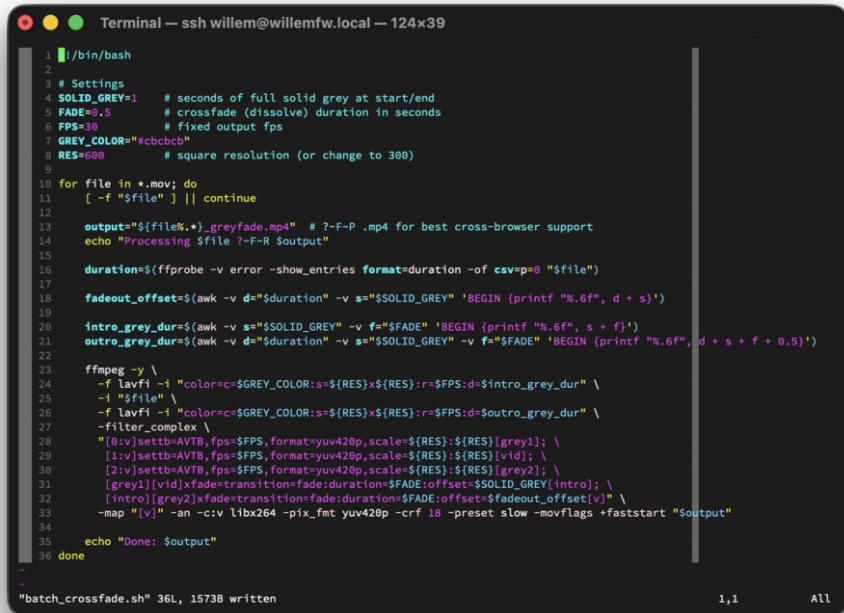
While it appears to be a simple whimsical thing, delivering high resolution video instantaneously on a high traffic homepage is a formidable challenge in encoding and performance engineering. To make it work I came up with several things:

- **short fragments instead of long video:** I cut the 7.3 gigabyte original footage in small chunks, producing clips of just a few seconds each.
- **cropping into a square:** there is no need to load pixels that you cannot see, square video footage is sufficient to fill my intended round target frame
- **dropping audio:** with an international audience I didn't want to deal with speaking in different languages as it would complicate things, therefore I could safely drop audio data

- **greyscale and crossfader:** all fragments start and end with a solid grey tint, making it possible to seamlessly shuffle the footage, adding to the magic of unpredictability
- **aggressive encoding:** I pre-process individual clips using serious compute power to minimise file size, making clips as small as just one megabyte, some even smaller!
- **integrated player:** to minimise loading external sources, I created a video player with shuffle and scheduling support that is integrated right in the homepage's HTML



Instead of one large video file, I use many different short, square, grey and audio-less clips



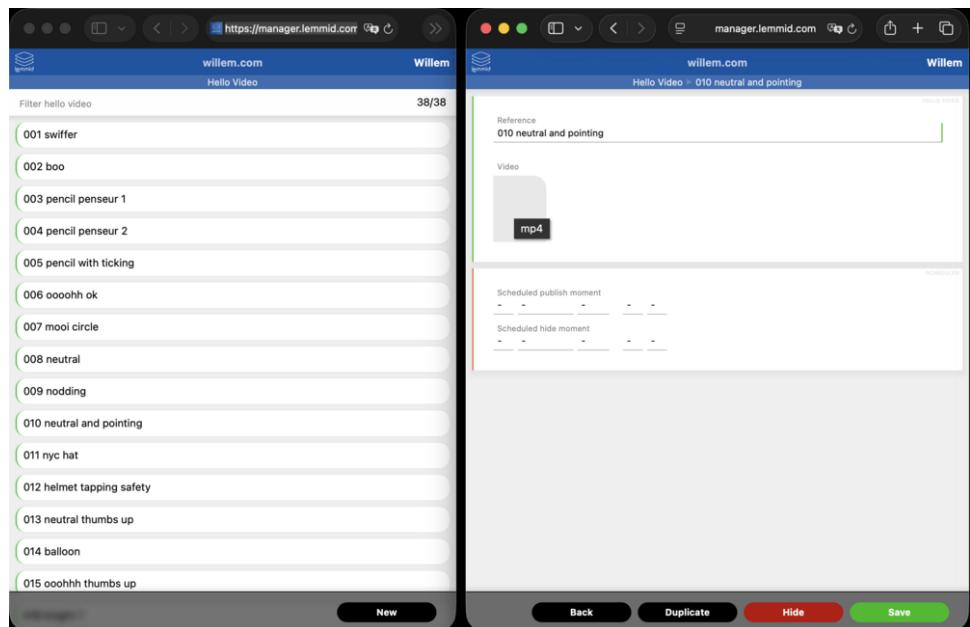
```

1 #!/bin/bash
2
3 # Settings
4 SOLID_GREY=1      # seconds of full solid grey at start/end
5 FADE=0.5          # crossfade (dissolve) duration in seconds
6 FPS=30           # fixed output fps
7 GREY_COLOR="#cbcfcf"
8 RES=600          # square resolution (or change to 300)
9
10 for file in *.mov; do
11     [ -f "$file" ] || continue
12
13     output="${file%.mov}_crossfade.mp4" # ?-F-P .mp4 for best cross-browser support
14     echo "Processing $file ?-F-R $output"
15
16     duration=$(ffprobe -v error -show_entries format=duration -of csv=p00 "$file")
17
18     fadeout_offset=$(awk -v d="$duration" -v s="$SOLID_GREY" 'BEGIN {printf "%6f", d + s}')
19
20     intro_grey_dur=$(awk -v s="$SOLID_GREY" -v f="$FADE" 'BEGIN {printf "%6f", s + f}')
21     outro_grey_dur=$(awk -v d="$duration" -v s="$SOLID_GREY" -v f="$FADE" 'BEGIN {printf "%6f", d + s + f + 0.5}')
22
23     ffmpeg -y \
24         -f lavfi -i "color=c=$GREY_COLOR:s=${RES}x${RES}:r=$FPS:d=$intro_grey_dur" \
25         -i "$file" \
26         -f lavfi -i "color=c=$GREY_COLOR:s=${RES}x${RES}:r=$FPS:d=$outro_grey_dur" \
27         -filter_complex \
28         "[0:v]setpts=AVTB,fps=$FPS,format=yuv420p,scale=${RES}:${RES}[grey1]; \
29         [1:v]setpts=AVTB,fps=$FPS,format=yuv420p,scale=${RES}:${RES}[vid]; \
30         [2:v]setpts=AVTB,fps=$FPS,format=yuv420p,scale=${RES}:${RES}[grey2]; \
31         [grey1][vid][grey2]xfade=transition=fade:duration=$FADE:offset=$SOLID_GREY[intro]; \
32         [intro][grey2]xfade=transition=fade:duration=$FADE:offset=$fadeout_offset[v]" \
33         -map "[v]" -an -c:v libx264 -pix_fmt yuv420p -crf 18 -preset slow -movflags +faststart "$output"
34
35     echo "Done: $output"
36 done

```

"batch_crossfade.sh" 36L, 1573B written

All clips begin and end with a solid grey cross fader that I automatically add to the footage upon batch processing and encoding with ffmpeg



Individual clips are managed and scheduled via a tailored backend system, driving the integrated video player on the homepage

Why it matters

Instead of a sterile interface, the imperfect goofy clips illustrate the human element behind the formal story. The smile, the nod, the wave, they all provide an opening for connection. It's the perfect "hello".

The end result as seen on [my homepage](#)

Conclusion

You don't need a multi-million marketing budget to deliver a smile, a simple thing can get you a long way. By embracing human imperfection in short video clips, I set the scene for connecting in a better way than a perfect photo can.