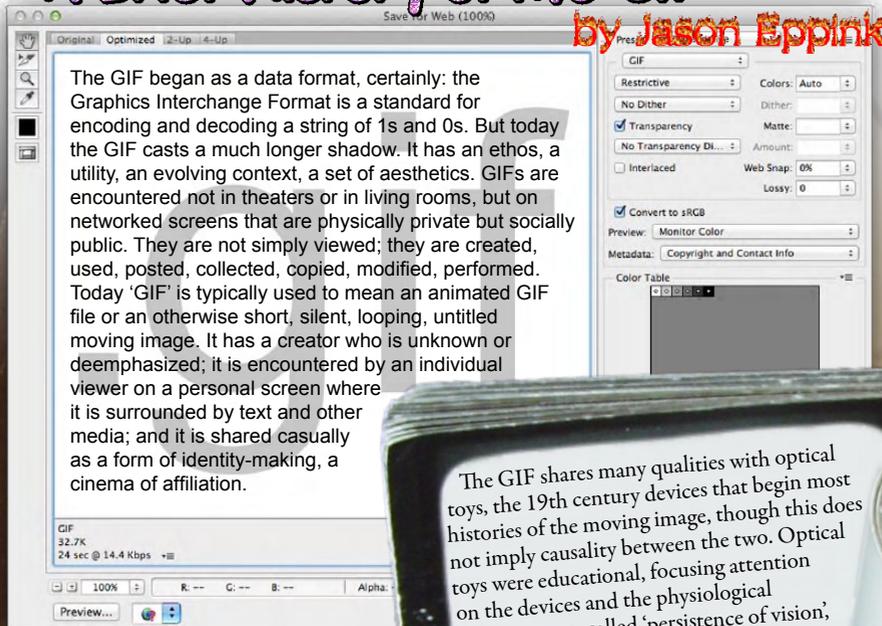


A Brief History of the GIF (SO FAR)

by Jason Eppink



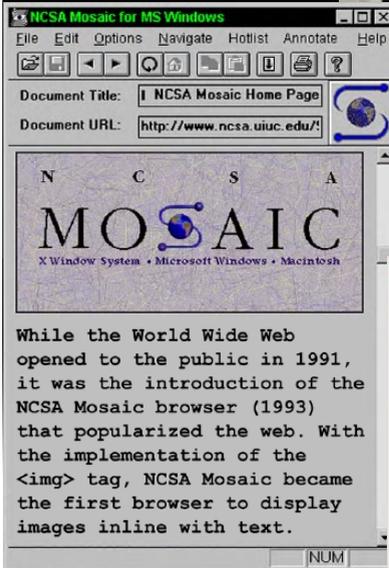
The GIF began as a data format, certainly: the Graphics Interchange Format is a standard for encoding and decoding a string of 1s and 0s. But today the GIF casts a much longer shadow. It has an ethos, a utility, an evolving context, a set of aesthetics. GIFs are encountered not in theaters or in living rooms, but on networked screens that are physically private but socially public. They are not simply viewed; they are created, used, posted, collected, copied, modified, performed. Today 'GIF' is typically used to mean an animated GIF file or an otherwise short, silent, looping, untitled moving image. It has a creator who is unknown or deemphasized; it is encountered by an individual viewer on a personal screen where it is surrounded by text and other media; and it is shared casually as a form of identity-making, a cinema of affiliation.

The GIF shares many qualities with optical toys, the 19th century devices that begin most histories of the moving image, though this does not imply causality between the two. Optical toys were educational, focusing attention on the devices and the physiological phenomenon, called 'persistence of vision,' they revealed.¹ But they share similar 'limitations of storage' with the GIF, so it is useful to compare the similarities born of these affordances.²

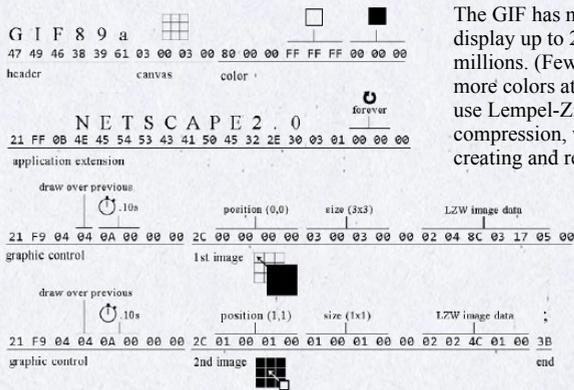
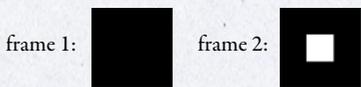
Phenakistoscopes (1832), zoetropes (1834), and praxinoscopes (1877) offered primarily symmetrical and seamless loops, often illustrations of people or animals in motion. These drawn or printed figures looped continuously until the device lost momentum or was stopped by the viewer.³ More narrative formations emerged from flip books (1868) because of their linear nature. All of these objects were viewer-activated, intended for an audience of one or few in close proximity to the image.

Both the electric kinetoscope (1894) and the hand-cranked mutoscope (1895) offered short, silent, photographed moving images as objects of entertainment. Early subjects included actualities (documentary-like footage of people and events) and loose, often sexually charged narratives.⁴ Kinetoscope and mutoscope viewership was both a personal and collective experience: machines were found in social environments like parlors and pleasure piers but only accommodated a single viewer at a time.

Flip books and mutoscopes remained popular throughout the first half of the 20th century, but cinema and television quickly became the dominant moving image forms. If looped animated images saw any innovation, it was as public advertising: 'spectaculars' or other electric animated signs. Physically proximate encounters with moving images became uncommon until the introduction of video games and personal computers.

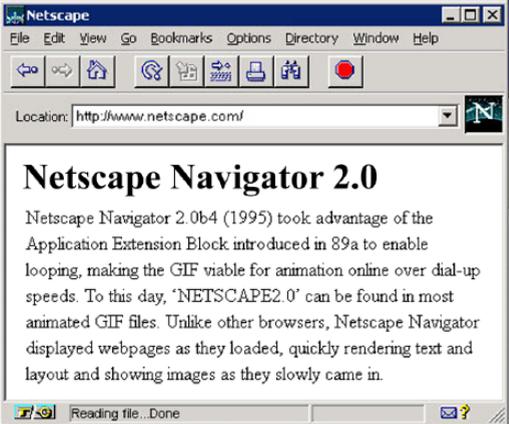


While the World Wide Web opened to the public in 1991, it was the introduction of the NCSA Mosaic browser (1993) that popularized the web. With the implementation of the tag, NCSA Mosaic became the first browser to display images inline with text.



87A
 CompuServe Information Service (CIS) was one of the biggest information network systems before the web, offering hourly subscription services that provided access to email, forums, file transfers, and chat. Subscribers wanting to view images downloaded them and used a separate viewer application like the shareware program CompuShow. In 1987 CompuServe released GIF 87a, a standard defining color raster image information that emphasized interoperability between computer hardware platforms (a significant problem at the time).⁵ The format was designed to display information as it was received and to hold more than one image, not for animation, but to save memory by eliminating redundant data. The GIF standard functionally replaced CompuServe's RLE, a monochrome format with a maximum resolution of 256x192 pixels. CompuServe released the specification as an open format to encourage its proliferation and create more demand for their services.

89A
 An update to the specifications in 1989 added several features including transparency (designating one color in the defined palette as invisible) and frame delay, which could specify the duration (in 100ths of a second) that each image should display on screen.⁶ Significantly, the specification did not allow for an animation to repeat, so a GIF could only cycle through its frames once. CompuServe Monthly Status Reports suggest the first implementation was a time-lapse weather map.



Netscape Navigator 2.0

Netscape Navigator 2.0b4 (1995) took advantage of the Application Extension Block introduced in 89a to enable looping, making the GIF viable for animation online over dial-up speeds. To this day, 'NETSCAPE2.0' can be found in most animated GIF files. Unlike other browsers, Netscape Navigator displayed webpages as they loaded, quickly rendering text and layout and showing images as they slowly came in.

The GIF has no maximum resolution and can display up to 256 colors out of a palette of millions. (Few computers were capable of more colors at the time.) It was designed to use Lempel-Ziv-Welch (LZW) lossless data compression, which encodes the image by creating and referencing a 'dictionary' of common patterns. A 'do not dispose' flag can further save memory by drawing over parts of a previously-displayed image.

The diagram at left deconstructs a 2-frame, 9-pixel animated GIF.⁸

burn all gifs

In 1995, CompuServe announced a licensing agreement with Unisys after learning the LZW compression method used in GIF was under patent. License changes in 1999 led angry webmasters to believe they would be charged for simply hosting GIF files. In response, the League for Programming Freedom launched a 'Burn All GIFs' campaign, encouraging GIF users to switch to patent-free PNG files (short for 'Portable Network Graphic', though unofficially 'PNG's Not GIF').⁹ The patent expired in 2003.

Frame Delay

10 frames Length: 1.00 s Size: 100x200 Loop: forever

Name	Size	Position	Disp.	Delay	Transp.
<p>Although the 89a spec allows frame delays as short as .01s, no browser supports this. Early versions of Netscape rounded any frame delay below .10s up to .10s, so many GIFs were created with short frame delays (often even .00s) with the understanding that they would be displayed at .10s (or 10fps).</p> <p>Browsers still support this legacy, though implementation varies widely. In 2007, Steve Humphrey compared contemporary browsers and noted that while many supported frame delays as short as .02s (Firefox, Netscape) or .06s (Internet Explorer), they continued to round up to .10s when frame delays were specified below those thresholds.¹⁰ A follow up in 2012 by Jeremiah Johnson found some consensus on .02s as the minimum supported frame delay (Chrome, Opera) though .06s is also common (Safari).¹¹</p>					



GeoCities - Microsoft Internet Explorer

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Back Forward Stop Home Search Favorites History

Address http://www.geocities.com/ Links >>

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

In 1995 GeoCities (originally Beverly Hills Internet) began offering 1MB of free ad-supported web hosting, directing 'homesteaders' to select 'neighborhoods' where they established rudimentary HTML websites from scratch (and later from templates), joined web rings, and added guestbooks and counters.

GIFs were primarily found on personal webpages like those hosted at GeoCities where they had a direct relationship with the page, often employed in a jubilant attempt to showcase how different a form the Web was from traditional publishing. Most GIFs shared an aesthetic with clip art (black lines and few colors) or echoed the popular 3D aesthetic of the time: rudimentary, shiny, untextured shapes. Many were created with transparent backgrounds so they could be used on a variety of background colors. Perhaps most well known are the cones, signs, barriers, and tools optimistically signifying that a web site was under construction. Later these would become the butt of jokes, littering tens of thousands of abandoned web pages.¹⁵

On a 56kbps modem, a 20KB file would take roughly 4 seconds to download, so many of the first animated GIFs had small file sizes (typically less than 100KB) with low resolutions (usually no wider than 200px), limited color palettes, and few frames (sometimes 2, though often between 3 and 12). Computers at the time generally supported resolutions no greater than 800x600.

Done Internet

Bandwidth Theft
Do Not Direct Link To The Animations Right Click & Save Them

The GIF's enduring ethos of the commons survives long after the internet has been colonized by commerce. Unlike most image specifications, GIF was published as an open format, hastening its availability and spread.

In the early days of the web, 'hot linking' (what contemporary web users call 'embedding') was considered rude because bandwidth was expensive. Website creators who wanted to include animated GIFs on their pages saved copies to their servers and hosted the files themselves. Many websites served galleries of GIFs, encouraging others to download and use them on their own sites with little regard for who originally created them. These creators were largely anonymous anyway due to the file's affordances: attribution could be embedded in the file, but no web browser rendered this information and few makers took advantage of this.

Even today, a successful GIF is one that is shared, eclipsing its creator to become an essential part of a cultural conversation. The result is a digital slang, a visual vocabulary unencumbered by authorship, where countless media artifacts are viewed, deployed, and elaborated upon as language more than as art product. Even though individuals process the pixels, communities make the GIFs.

Steve Wilhite, principal engineer of the GIF, pronounced the acronym 'jif'. Engineers at CompuServe are said to have frequently quipped 'Choosy Developers Choose GIF' (a riff on Jif Peanut Butter's slogan 'Choosy Mothers Choose Jif').¹⁷ Nevertheless, as the format caught on, users began pronouncing GIF with a hard 'G' likely due to its derivation from the word 'Graphics'.

Oxford American Dictionaries named 'GIF' the 2012 Word of the Year, accepting both pronunciations.¹⁸ Upon being honored for Lifetime Achievement at the 2013 Webby Awards, Steve Wilhite responded 'IT'S PRONOUNCED 'JIF' NOT 'GIF''.¹⁹ Heated arguments continue to rage online over the issue as users signal status and group affiliation based on their pronunciation. Although no known scientific data exists, online polls for the *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* suggest that a majority of users pronounce the word with a hard 'G' by at least a 2-to-1 margin.^{20 21}

Internet Art (1994 -)

Artists including Olia Lialina, Jodi, and Vuk Ćosić were working with GIFs at the dawn of the web, though mostly as elements of larger web-based works. GIFs began appearing in art institutions, like the 2000 Whitney Biennial and SFMOMA's '010101: Art in Technological Times', in this capacity.^{22 23} It was surf clubs of the mid-00s--group blogs that focused on decontextualizing found digital objects--that spurred a closer examination of the GIF on its own terms. Rhizome's 2006 'The Gif Show' was one of the first exhibitions to shine a spotlight on the GIF as a burgeoning artistic form.²⁴

Subject: smileys/smilies

The mid-00s saw a proliferation of smileys on bulletin boards, in instant messaging programs (ICQ, AOL Instant Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger, MSN Messenger), and in emails. A smiley is typically an anthropomorphic, genderless yellow circle, 16 pixels in diameter, whose face composes its entire body. Smileys frequently bounce or otherwise move to express emotions like excitement, frustration, or embarrassment. Later versions were more elaborate, employing props and costumes and interacting with other smileys.

The visual form of the smiley can be traced to Harvey Ball's famous yellow happy face, created in 1963 and popularized throughout the 60s and 70s.²⁵ However, it is emoticons--faces and bodies created from punctuation marks to express emotions online since 1982--that modeled how smileys would be used.²⁶ Smileys were often activated by typing a set of characters that would be replaced with a GIF once an instant message was delivered or a bulletin board message was posted.

Smilies



Glitter GIFs

About MySpace:

MySpace, most popular between 2005 and 2008, prompted users to submit key information about themselves rather than create their own pages with HTML. Though this information was ordered in a fairly rigid template, users could optionally include CSS to adjust a profile's look, offering some level of customizability. The results were notoriously messy and chaotic.

Glitter GIF Details	
Used as:	digital stickers, badges
Description:	imitates sparkling glitter, jewelry
Subjects:	cartoon characters, butterflies, graphical text, romantic icons (hearts, roses)
Dimensions:	flat, static
Locations found:	own profile, friends' comments

ADD ME!

As the popularity of photographic GIFs grew on websites like 4chan, b3ta, and Something Awful in the 00s, new sites emerged to host these GIFs and help users create new GIFs from online videos. Many sites added watermarks to the corners of the images in black or white text. As a result, GIFs can be found bearing marks like GIFSOU.PCOM, HilariousGifs.com, SENORGIF.COM, 4GIFs.com, and gifbin.com.



jasonpink ↻ tumblr

Launched in 2007, Tumblr presents users with a 'waterfall' of endless content inside their dashboards, aggregated from accounts they follow. It is often within this context that animated GIFs are encountered: glimpsed briefly in an algorithmically assembled, steady stream of images. Reblogging allows users to publish others' posts (with optional commentary) to their followers, affiliating themselves with the content with minimal effort.

6 notes



Facebook and Twitter, launched when MySpace was at its peak, have resisted supporting animated GIFs, distinguishing their platforms from MySpace's amateur aesthetic. Tumblr, however, has allowed users to upload GIFs with file sizes as large as 500KB since launch, increasing that limit to 1MB in 2012. Because of the way Tumblr processes uploads, GIFs that are overly saturated (especially with magenta and cyan), too bright, or have more than approximately 50 frames fail to post.

Users working within these limitations have developed a distinct visual aesthetic of darker, desaturated GIFs. A significant majority of these are photographic, mainly excerpted from films or TV shows, frequently with superimposed dialogue, and sometimes broken into several GIFs displayed within a grid.²⁹ Pornography makes up 11% of Tumblr's top-visited sites despite being hidden behind a 'safe search'.³⁰

Tumblr is also responsible for igniting mainstream interest in the GIF as an aesthetic form, curating search results for the #GIF tag that foreground and cultivate original works created for their own sake. These are commonly 2D or 3D geometric shapes and patterns; striking collages or montages; and sharply-colored illustrative, glitch-based, or 8-bit works, usually in seamless loops.

GIFs Go Mainstream

The maturation of the photographic GIF has spawned a number of distinct aesthetic forms and practices, with even major news outlets employing GIFs in their reporting, most notably the 2012 Summer Olympics and presidential debates.^{31,32}

Wobble GIFs

Wobble GIFs rapidly alternate between two or more images to produce a stereoscopic effect. While this technique dates at least to Ken Jacobs' Nervous System film performances of the 1970s, Jim Gasperini used GIFs to achieve this effect in his 2002 'Time for Space Jiggle' series.³³ In 2012, the New York Public Library released the Stereogramimator to facilitate the creation of wobble GIFs from the library's stereograph collection.³⁴

Apps and Services

★★★★☆ (803)

Mobile apps like 3frames, Gifboom, and Cinemagram harness the phone's camera to easily create photographic GIFs. Similarly, Twitter's Vine and Facebook's Instagram operate as mobile-only platforms for recording and sharing square, looping videos up to 6.5- and 15-seconds long (respectively), but they also record sound. Other platforms like Pop and Coub focus on remixing and sharing short looping videos. Away from the phone, Giphy aggregates GIFs from around the Web to make them more searchable and easier to post to various social media platforms. Meanwhile, hosting service Gfycat is working to transition the GIF to HTML5 video, offering playback controls and smaller files.

Cinemagraphs

Coined (and trademarked) by fashion photographer Jamie Beck and designer Kevin Burg in 2011, the cinemagraph is an animated GIF in which most of an image remains still while one element moves in a seamless loop.³⁵ The result is a haunting moment seemingly stuck in time that typically fetishizes a consumer good or identity.

Listicles

GIFs are regularly deployed between short declarative sentences, often in the second person.

They tell a short story or describe situations readers may intimately identify with.

These list-based articles, called 'listicles', were popularized by Buzzfeed.³⁶

They reflect to readers their self-identities, juxtaposing list items with still images or GIFs.

These images humorously serve as reactions, visual metaphors, or illustrations.

Reaction GIFs

Around 2011, GIFs started to be posted in response to, and often in lieu of, text online. These brief loops of bodies in motion, primarily excerpted from film and TV, are used to playfully express common ideas and emotions. 'Actual' reaction GIFs occur in comment threads like on Reddit, message boards, and email chains when someone posts or sends a GIF to directly respond to what someone else wrote. 'Hypothetical' reaction GIFs are when a writer proposes a hypothetical situation then posts a GIF to perform a reaction, frequently on Tumblr as HIFW (How I Feel When) or MRW (My Reaction When). The role of these GIFs is not primarily aesthetic; they are gestures, performed reactions that are not fully realized until they meet their catalysts. While the users of these reaction GIFs do not typically create the files they post, their use constitutes its own form of authorship.³⁷

Conclusion

For most of the history of the web, companies and organizations have tried to improve on the GIF without understanding the affordances that have made it successful. The format's lack of audio and playback control, frequently cited as shortcomings, enforce a silent and non-interactive form that doesn't demand as much attention as a full-featured video player. A GIF can be embedded directly in a webpage, where it loads immediately without plugins or third-party players, because it's an open format. And as simple files, GIFs are promiscuous and frictionless, with low barriers for viewing, possessing, and sharing. It is largely *because* of its limitations that the GIF thrives nearly two decades after its introduction, sustaining a renewed interest in the loop.

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