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# Fresh From the Internet's Attic

By ALEX WILLIAMS

The Internet, it seems, has found its version of vinyl chic.

Just as the LP has enjoyed a second spin among retro-minded music fans, animated GIFs — the choppy, crude snippets of video loops that harken back to dial-up modems — are enjoying an unlikely vogue as the digital accessory of the moment.

Hypnotically repeating GIFs are popping up in art galleries in Berlin, Miami and New York. In fashion advertising, they are suddenly as hot as ironic brogues, popping up in [online marketing campaigns](#) for brands like Burberry, Diesel and Jack Spade. Online, there are GIF contests both highbrow and low, and “Best of” GIF roundups.

And social media sites like Tumblr have entire pages devoted to viral GIFs plucked from the biggest news events of five minutes ago (political speeches, awkward awards-show moments and other pop-cultural flotsam), which instantly circulate as must-see memes.

“For people in their 20s, GIFs are a relic of their childhood, so it makes sense they would come back as a fashion statement — just like ’70s fashion came back in the ’90s, and the ’90s are coming back around now,” said Jason Tanz, the executive editor of Wired.

It’s an unlikely renaissance for a geeky computer format that dates to 1987, the Internet’s Paleozoic era. That was when CompuServe, the Internet service provider, developed the “graphics interchange format,” as a way to bring a little color and movement to the Web.

Thanks to the animated GIF, first-generation Internet memes like the [dancing baby](#) (later appropriated by “Ally McBeal”) were spread.

The format has since grown up. Artists and photographers have used GIF technology to push far beyond the lo-fi. Consider the [Wigglegram](#), a craze on Tumblr, which creates a jaunty 3-D effect by looping multiple images shot from different perspectives, like an old-fashioned stereopticon.



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In addition to looking more fluid and professional, GIFs are becoming easier to create, thanks to Web-based apps like GIFSoup and Gifninja, which allow people to create them in an instant, said Brad Kim, the editor of [Know Your Meme](#), a site that tracks Web fads of the moment.

And in a world where so much daily communication takes place by text, GIFs are being used by Web geeks as a visual way to drive home a written point. To celebrate good news, they might insert a dorky celebratory dance from “[The Office](#).” If they are feeling flirty, Amanda Seyfried’s [coy wave](#) from “Mean Girls” will help make the point. In this sense, GIFs function as glorified emoticons to punctuate a point when, say, typing out a blog comment.

These pop-cultural GIFs have gained cultural currency as a way to distill big televised moments into short visual bites, often with a humorous bent. Such GIFs are often live-edited by editors at social news sites like BuzzFeed, and disseminated instantly, one step ahead of tomorrow’s water-cooler topics, said Mike Hayes, the social media editor of BuzzFeed.

Recent examples include [Taylor Swift](#)’s singalong to a Bob Marley tune during last weekend’s Grammy presentations, Beyoncé avoiding a wardrobe malfunction at the Super Bowl and Michelle Obama’s apparent [eye-roll](#) at John Boehner at last month’s post-inauguration luncheon.

“A lot of viral GIFs we see these days are real-time snippets of what’s trending in the viral video circuit, news and pop culture,” Mr. Kim said. “In a way, GIF is taking over TV shows like ‘The Soup’ or ‘Best Week Ever’ as the more accurate pop culture barometer of our time.”

The cultural currency of GIFs has not gone unnoticed. The august Oxford American Dictionaries voted “GIF” as the word of the year for 2012, beating out “Eurogeddon” (the potential financial collapse of the euro zone) and “superstorm.”

“The GIF has evolved from a medium for pop-cultural memes into a tool with serious applications including research and journalism, and its lexical identity is transforming to keep pace,” Katherine Martin, the head of the United States dictionaries program at Oxford University Press, was quoted as saying.

The GIF has also captured the attention of the art world. To mark the format’s 25th birthday, Tumblr and Paddle8, an online auction house, held a GIF festival called “[Moving the Still](#),” where public submissions were curated by a panel that included the artist Richard

Phillips, the musician Michael Stipe and the writer James Frey. Fifteen of more than 3,500 submissions were chosen and exhibited in a 35,000-square-foot warehouse during [Art Basel Miami Beach](#) in December.

The Museum of the Moving Image in Queens has been examining the format in installations, including the current [Under Construction](#), which features a 50-foot seamless projection in the lobby featuring thousands of old GIF files preserved from GeoCities, the once-popular Web hosting service.

To Carl Goodman, the museum's executive director, the GIF provides a link between today's technologically sophisticated visual culture and the 19th century, before movies, when short bursts of looping motion captured the public imagination on moving-picture devices like the zoetrope.

“The GIF,” he said, “occupies very fertile ground between the still and the moving image.”