

## **An extended and illustrated version of [my talk](#) at the Decade of Web Design [Conference](#) in Amsterdam, January 2005**

Deutsche Version in Telepolis [Teil I](#) [Teil II](#) [Teil III](#) [Teil IV](#)

Version Español in A Minima magazine [pdf](#)

[Vernacular Web 2](#), published in August 2007

 [Vernacular Web 3](#), published in July 2010

# **A Vernacular Web**

## **The Indigenous and The Barbarians**

When I started to work on the World Wide Web I made a few nice things that were special, different and fresh. They were very different from what was on the web in the mid 90's.

I'll start with a statement like this, not to show off my contribution, but in order to stress that -- although I consider myself to be an early adopter -- I came late enough to enjoy and prosper from the "benefits of civilization". There was a pre-existing environment; a structural, visual and acoustic culture you could play around with, a culture you could break. There was a world of options and one of the options was to be different.

So what was this culture? What do we mean by the web of the mid 90's and when did it end?

To be blunt it was bright, rich, personal, slow and under construction. It was a web of sudden connections and personal links. Pages were built on the edge of tomorrow, full of hope for a faster connection and a more powerful computer. One could say it was the web of the indigenous...or the barbarians. In any case, it was a web of amateurs soon to be washed away by dot.com ambitions, professional authoring tools and guidelines designed by usability experts.

I wrote that change was coming "soon" instead of putting an end date at 1998, for example, because there was no sickness, death or burial. The amateur web didn't die and it has not disappeared but it is hidden. Search engine rating mechanisms rank the old amateur pages so low they're almost invisible and institutions don't collect or promote them with the same passion as they pursue net art or web design.

Also new amateur pages don't appear at such amounts as ten years ago because the WWW of today is a developed and highly regulated space. You wouldn't get on the web just to tell the world, "Welcome to my home page." The web has diversified, the conditions have changed and there's no need for this sort of old fashioned behavior. Your CV is posted on the company website or on a job search portal. Your diary will be organized on a blog and your vacation photos are published on iphoto. There's a community for every hobby and question.

This is why I refer to the amateur web as a thing of the past; aesthetically a very powerful past. Even people who weren't online in the last century, people who look no further than the first 10 search engine results can see the signs and symbols of the early web thanks to the numerous parodies and collections organized by usability experts who use the early elements and styles as negative examples.

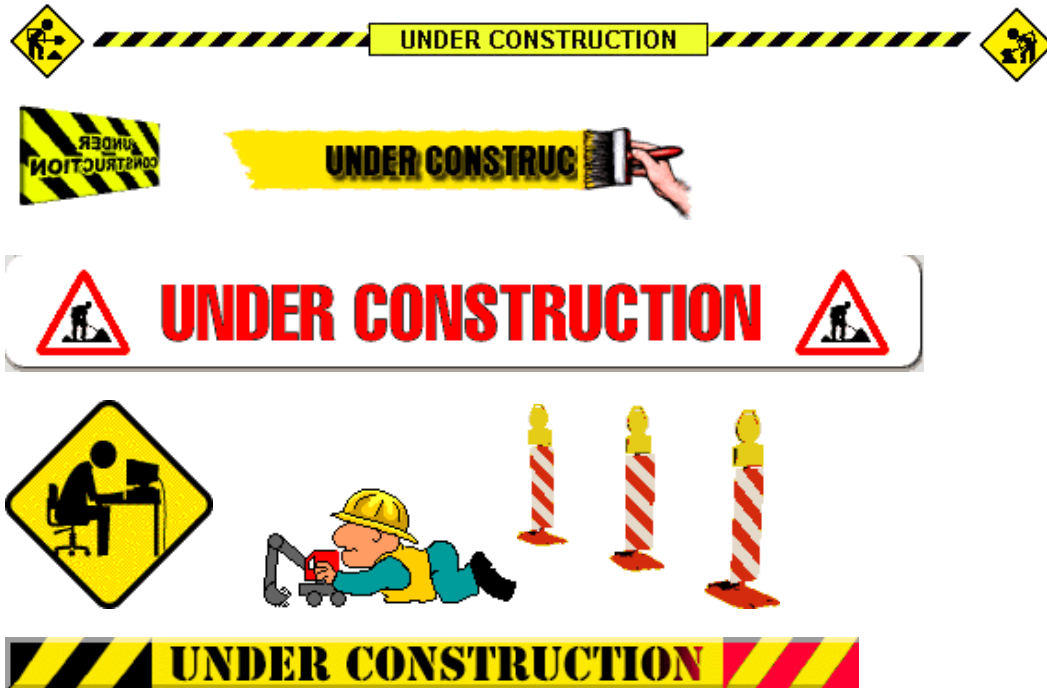
Just as clothing styles come back into fashion so do web designs. On a visual level things reappear. Last year I noticed that progressive web designers returned to an eclectic style reincorporating wallpapers and 3D lettering in their work. In the near future frames and construction signs will show up as retro and the beautiful old elements will be stripped of their meaning and contexts.

In the past few years I've also been making work that foregrounds this disappearing aesthetic of the past. With these works I want to apologize for my arrogance in the early years and to preserve the beauty of the vernacular web by integrating them within contemporary art pieces. But this is only half of the job.

Creating collections and archives of all the midi files and animated gifs will preserve them for the future but it is no less important to ask questions. What did these visual, acoustic and navigation elements stand for? For which cultures and media did these serve as a bridge to the web? What ambitions were they serving? What problems did they solve and what problems did they create? Let me talk about the difficult destiny of some of these elements.



## Under Construction



The "Under Construction Sign" is a very strong symbol of the early web. It reminds us of the great times shortly after the scientists and engineers finished their work on the Information Highway. Ordinary people came with their tools and used the chance to build their own roads and junctions. Work was everywhere and everywhere there was something that wasn't ready, links were leading to nowhere or to pages that didn't quite exist and there were signs on the pages that warned of broken connections and the lack of navigation.

Step by step people were developing pages into a functioning web and it became less necessary to warn us, especially using road signs, about missing information. But they didn't disappear. Instead, "Under Construction" images changed their meaning from a warning to a promise that this page will grow. The symbol became a hybrid of excuse and invitation. It could appear on an empty or properly functional site as a sign that the project was growing and being updated. Often you could see the newer sign, "Always Under Construction."

**ALWAYS UNDER  
CONSTRUCTION**

**always under construction**

"Always Under Construction" didn't mean the site would never work but actually the opposite. It informed users that there was somebody who was always taking care of the site so it would be interesting to return again and again.

This was a very important message because it was crucial to really insist on the idea of constant development and change but the sign was wrong. The association with broken roads and obstacles on the way didn't illustrate the idea of ongoing development. Around 1997 the sign turned into a meaningless footer and became a common joke. Even the mainstream press

wrote that the web was always under construction so, after a while, people stopped putting it everywhere.

Neither the "Under Construction" sign nor the idea of permanent construction made it into the professional web. The idea of unfinished business contradicts the traditional concept of professional designer-client relations: fixed terms and finished products.

There was some follow-up though. The phrase, "This site is currently undergoing redesign" became an elegant substitute for blinking road lamps. New ways to show the project was constantly updated appeared as well: current news on the first page, a "Last Updated" notice, or the ridiculous -- but still very popular -- solution that creates a magical effect of actuality and telepresence: put a clock on the web site showing the current time.

So what's with the very idea of web construction? Is it still around and how does it show itself today? I'd say yes. The "Under Construction" signs have unexpected followers, the "Verified XHTML" buttons. You can see them on more and more pages of modern web users.



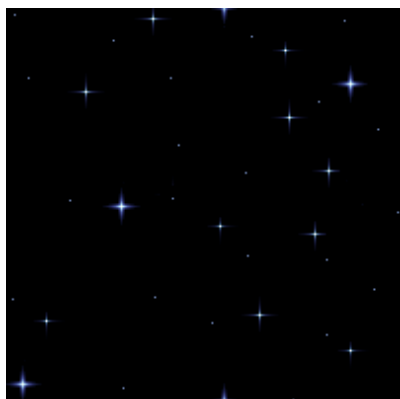
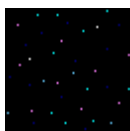
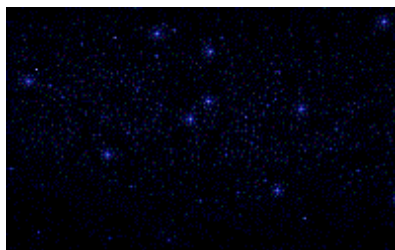
They are there, (to quote the W3 Consortium), "To show your readers that you have taken the care to create an inter-operable Web page." In other words, the new sign says the developers of the sites are taking care to reconstruct the web to meet new standards and to bring the "world's biggest trash pile" into a faultless, clean and clear code environment.

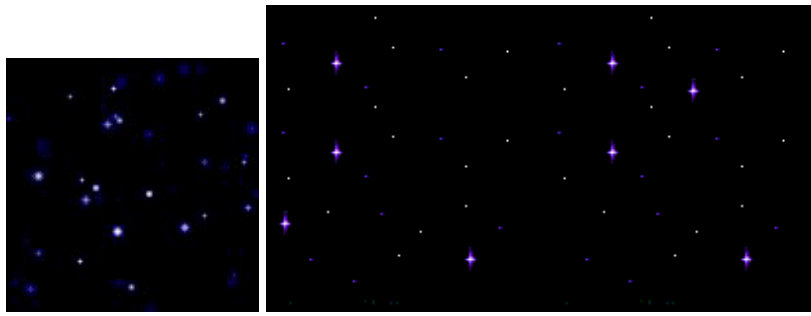
I'm not a fan of this development but I do like the appearance of the XHTML buttons. They manifest the power of end developers and show the great intention of participating in the global construction or reconstruction of the whole environment simply by making your own site.



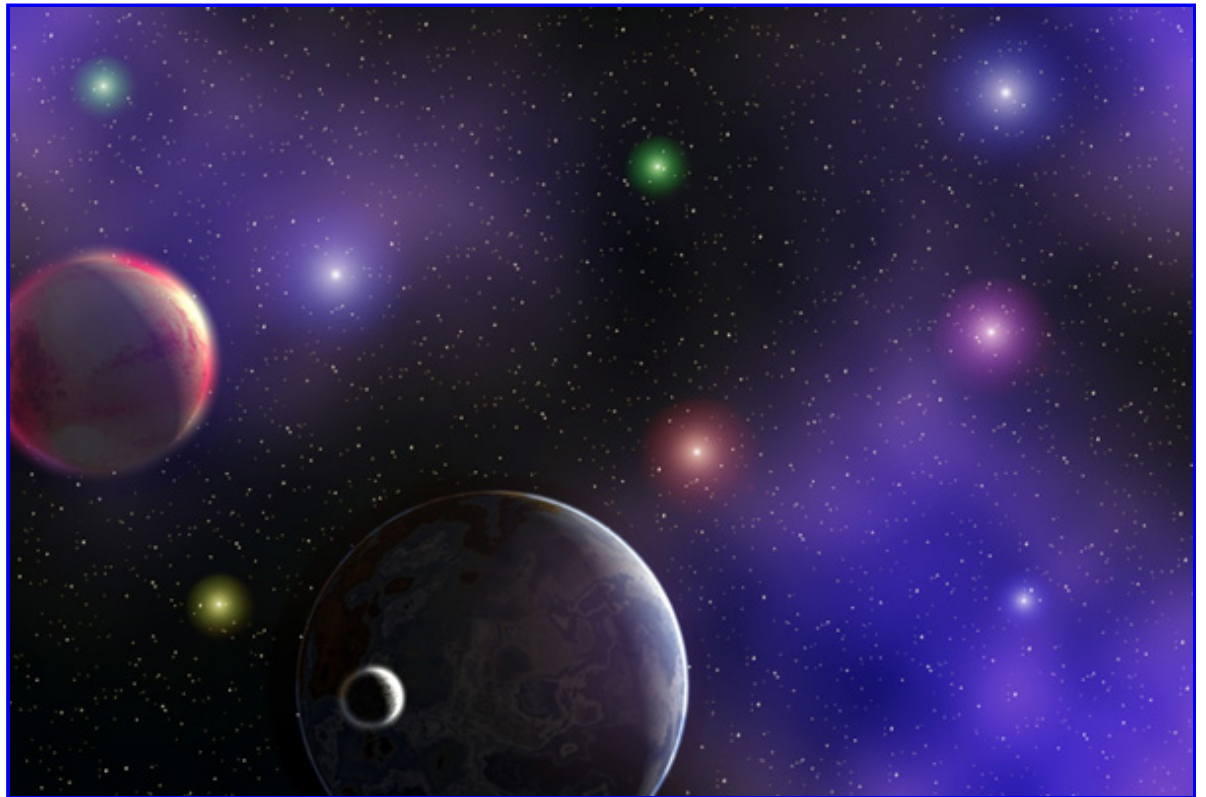
## The Starry Night Background

Another heroic element of the vernacular web is the outer space background, also known as the "Starry Night." Ordinarily it's a black, dark blue or purple image tiled through with light static or blinking particles. It was very popular with the first web makers probably because there were a great number of science fiction and computer game fans among them.





Their desire to make the web look like the futuristic backdrop of their favorite pieces was justified. Not only by their taste but by the hope the new medium was offering. The Internet was the future, it was bringing us into new dimensions, closer to other galaxies. So the look of the internet had to be an appropriate one like in *Star Crash* or *Galaga*. It had to be like the inside of a computer or somewhere out there. Space wallpapers made the Internet look special. This was obviously a space with a mission that other media could never accomplish.



*A Starcrash-style spacescape by Andrew Glazebrook*



*Galaga. On the linked page you'll see that one of the recognizable space backgrounds was actually taken directly from the game.*

A great feature of the outer space background was that it could be just a two colors, maybe half a kilobyte in file size, but it would instantly give a futuristic mood for your page. So a bandwidth problem was solved as well.

However, the tragedy of outer space backgrounds is that, although they are magnificent, they don't fit with any concrete idea. They never did. Scientific texts, personal home pages, cinema programs, pathfinder image galleries, it's always wrong. Even the starships don't look authentic because it's wrong to hang pictures in the sky and there are no letters in outer space. Even if there were letters in outer space it would be impossible to read them. The dot over an "i" could be a star or a % sign and as for meteors...they're just too easy to confuse.

If you ever designed anything you know that an outer space background only looks good if nothing else is placed on it. If you were ever asked to redesign a page made at the end of the 20th century the first thing you did was remove the starbck.gif.

One of the latest, and thus documented, star removal surgeries happened in 2004. Here you see the 90's look of an online video shop.





Follow the link to see a newer look: <http://www.video-online.net/>

One of the last survivors is <http://www.kinoservice.de>, a weekly updated website with the cinema programs for Stuttgart and Frankfurt. Every time I type this address I'm afraid that I'd find it remade without the stars.

Day by day the hope for an extraterrestrial web future was giving way to the present reality of newspapers, magazines, electronic offices, online business, and other serious intentions. "Starry Night" backgrounds reduced proportionately; from being a symbol of the future they were turning into a sign of the web's early years. Its meaning shifted to the opposite: from future to past.

And it reminds us of the army of amateurs who, like [Anni und Jens](#) made a few pages in the last century and then forgot about them.

This is a very strong and recognizable association. I recently came across a professionally made promo site for the [Renault Megan II Car of 2004](#), and it plays around with the spaceship design of the car. It looks like the work of a Renault fan and not a corporation because the use of stars on a website -even stars with Flash- stands for amateurs, not outer space.

Since stars shine outside of mainstream web culture they fit well with subversive or alternate projects and easily support the prefix "anti". Take the [unamerican.com](#) site for example, it's a sticker shop and antiamerican ideas portal. Stars give weight to this concept by placing the author in outerspace, viewing the whole picture, being objective.

And [my projects](#) page at the Merz Akademie, where I teach, is heavily decorated by outerspace motifs to stress that this is entirely my space and has nothing to do with the corporate identity of the institution.



See:

- Art.teleportacia projects inspired by starbackgrounds  
[Gravity](#)  
[Some Universe](#)  
Design for the [Raiders of the Lost ArtBase](#) exhibition.
- [Net stars](#) show at artificial.dk. And my interview [Stars Fading on the Web](#) there with some more thoughts on starry nights
- Rich, elaborately categorized [collection](#) of sparkles, started in 2001. After reading my article the owner of the collection disagreed with me:

*"IMO Stars are actually in bigger demand than ever before. No, not star backgrounds so much, but stars themselves. Designers all around the www use stars to get effects for animations and for stills. Placing a star or stars in different places on each frame of a animated image to get the image to sparkle or glitter. I doubt the interest in that will ever go away.*

*I do agree that the old style albeit the first style of star backgrounds are losing ground in popularity as in the 1st place most desirable background position. However, the higher quality star backgrounds are not. High quality star backgrounds are in bigger demand."*

вперед

## Free Collections of Web Elements

Outer space backgrounds aren't the only images we have from the amateur web; paper, glass, water and wood themes came later. Background collections were formed and images were used to set different tones and celebrate different occasions like weddings, Christmas or Halloween. Themes for web sets vary from [music](#) to [X-files](#) and [victorian berry babies](#). I could pay a compliment to each one. Collections of web graphics expanded to include buttons, bullets, dividers, animations and "Welcome to My Page" headers. They were a source you could use to build, structure and decorate your site.

Looking back through these early collections of web graphics you recognize some images that made it into a lot of pages and became famous: rainbow dividers, the "New!" sign and Felix the Cat, a cult figure and perfect animation.

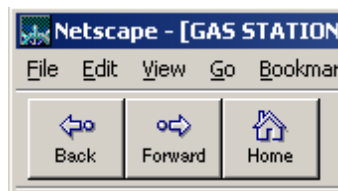


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NEW NEW NEW NEW NEW NEW NEW NEW NEW NEW

Some elements and sections of these free collections remind us of the historical peculiarities of the early web. For example "back" and "forward" buttons are part of the design set for non-professionals who ignored the corresponding buttons on the browser. Indeed, how could you delegate such an important navigational issue to the browser, an application that had a new version released every six months!





The same is true for so called "bullets", the small images used to replace the standard html list elements. It was a historical feature of the amateur web to prefer expression over structure. Early web makers were inspired by the possibility of using images and gladly substituted dull lists with spectacular graphics.



- |   |   |                |
|---|---|----------------|
| • |   | unordered list |
|   | ○ | unordered list |
|   | ■ | unordered list |
|   | ■ | unordered list |
|   | ○ | unordered list |
|   | ○ | unordered list |
|   | ○ | unordered list |
| • |   | unordered list |
| • |   | unordered list |

As we're reminded by the various "Best Viewed With..." buttons, the choice of browser was a big aesthetic and philosophic issue for web makers.

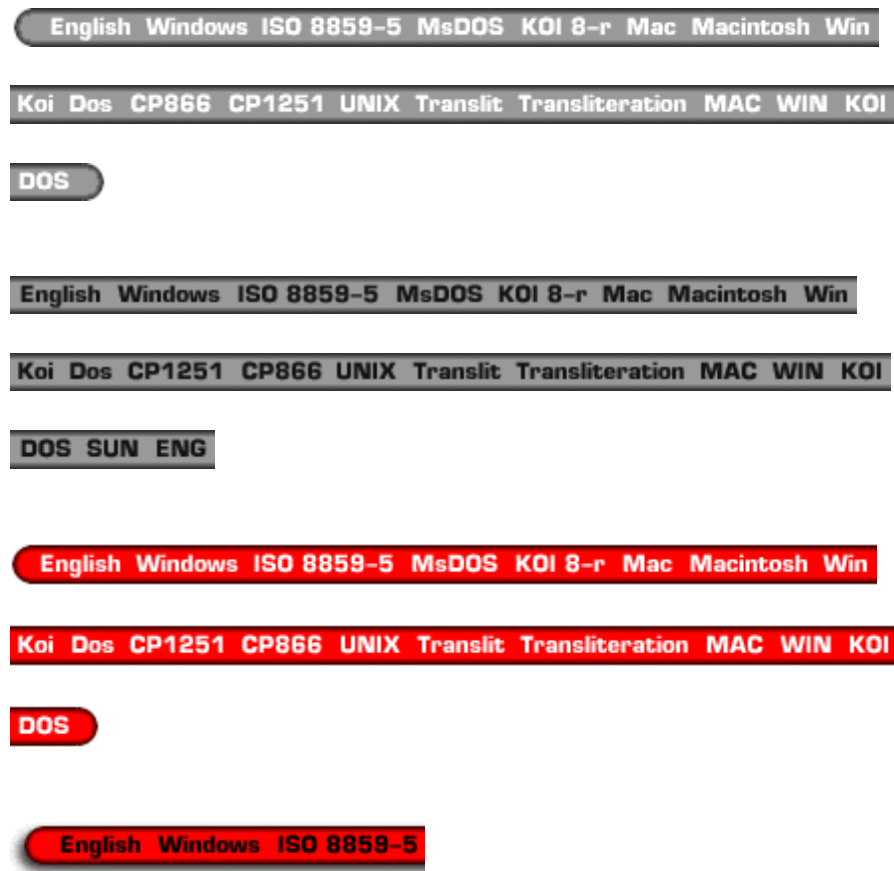


<http://sillydog.org/netscape/now.html>

Another important problem for Russian speaking Internet users, or more precisely writers using Cyrillic script, were the numerous character encodings. On the first page of a Russian site you had to choose the appropriate encoding system. These encoding buttons

were "a land of opportunity" for designers and a lot played around with them making their own modifications.

In 1996, the soon-to-be #1 Russian Web Designer made 20 encoding button sets for different backgrounds and tastes. Within a few months they spread to countless .ru domains and became naturalized in the Russian web landscape.



They had a short life. By the end of 1998 the encoding choice became automatic. Buttons disappeared from the pages and even the legendary collection itself has vanished into history at [archive.org/.../free/buttons/](http://archive.org/.../free/buttons/)

The great MIDI collections remind us how the web sounded in the mid 90's but more about that in the MIDI chapter.

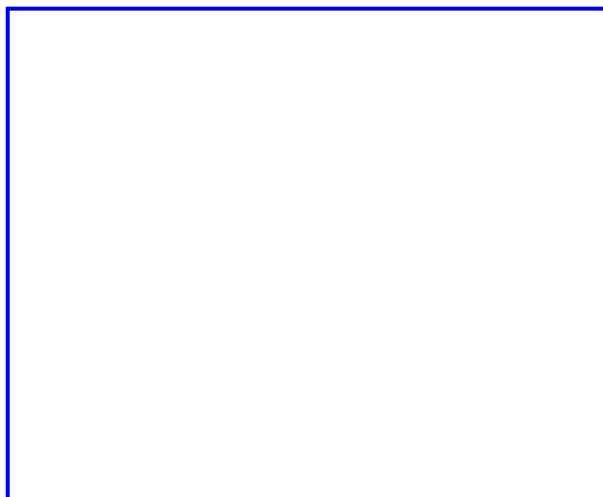
Free collections are the soul of the vernacular web. Lots of people were building their pages with free graphics and lots of people were making collections. The many-to-many principle really worked. Making your own site and building collections was a parallel process

for a lot of people. The early web was more about spirit than skills. To distribute was no less important than to create.

It's only a slight exaggeration to state that, because of the modular nature of web page construction, even those sites that never contained a web graphics collection were, in themselves, collections. Every element on the page, every line, figure, button and sound was on its own and could easily be extracted, if not directly from the browser then from looking at the source code to find the URLS of the files.

As soon as users divided into designers and clients free collections lost their attractiveness for both sides. Around 1997 professional web sites were distancing themselves from the amateurs with the complete opposite of modular design. Graphic designs victorious expansion on the web had begun. (It was so fast that a lot of designers and researchers believe that web design is a junior member of graphic design). Designs were produced in Photoshop and later adapted for the browser. A page was created as a block then sliced into pieces. These pieces can't be considered as modules since each piece only exists in relation to its neighbour. Extracting or reusing the pieces is meaningless and undesirable to the authors.

A very typical example is from the Mobile Telecom site, made by Artemy Lebedev in 1997. It's a picture created and sliced in Photoshop.



Actually, it's one of the first corporate sites in Russia made by a professional. It became famous and the design was stolen many times. Lebedev has a museum dedicated to the [clones of this piece](#). It's a very curious case, I think the people who stole the original design saw it more as a template: a guideline of how professional sites should now be created.

During the late 90's people were deleting links to the collections of files they had made or found. A lot of collections still exist because they weren't removed from the servers but they're difficult to find. So how can you find them if they're not linked? My favorite [collection](#) is no exception, there's no link to these pages so I better make one here.

On the other hand it would be very wrong to generalize and say that free collections are a thing of the past. If you search for "my

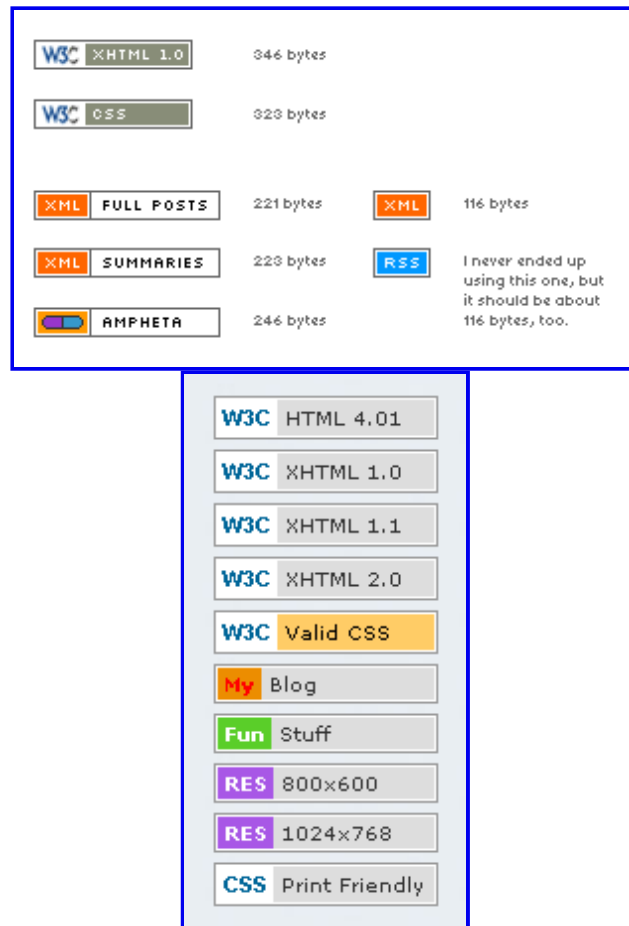
collection of web graphics" you can still find a lot of special collections though not necessarily retro ones (btw "my" is a very important key word, leave it out and you'll be sent to commercial pages). They're upgraded and updated and there was even a moment of revival in 2001 when the section "God Bless America" was added to the private and public libraries of US users of all skill levels who wanted to demonstrate patriotic feelings on their home pages.

<http://snogirl.snoville.com/MemorialIndex.html>

<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Plains/4601/patriotic.html>

<http://www.geocities.com/Pentagon/9787/maingraf.html>

And a fresh market for free button makers is the "Verified XHTML" sign. The variety is still small but constantly growing and variations are needed to fit new design styles.



There are also examples at <http://www.gifsamlung.de/>, <http://juanna.ch/>, <http://gifwelt.laureon.org/>, <http://gif.10000.ru/>. They show that some have managed to bring their hobby to a higher level. Their libraries are huge and alive, life is in full swing in their forums



and guest books. These are valuable sources for archivists and those who still prefer to build modular websites using available elements. Like a couple of London based media producers who compiled their [wedding web site](#) from appropriate graphics.

In 2004 British designer Bruce Lawson made a contribution to [css zen garden](#) (a collaborative effort to prove that CSS is a standart of web beauty). His [GeoCities 1996](#) theme build of public domain gifs is a perfect reminder that real spirit will find its way around standards.

22.02.07: A big topic for collections today is new generation of counters.



They remind you and inform the visitors of your page about age of your child or supposed date of childs birth, number of days left till next marriage anniversary, christmas or what ever. [On the Russian young mothers forum](#), you can see several counters as a signature to one posts or a comment.



## Links

The World Wide Web was constantly developing and when we say it looked different 2, 5 or 10 years ago we should also say it was conceptually different. The competence of early adopters, passionate amateurs and ambitious professionals, the dot.com hype and the mass distraction of the second wave (i.e. the blog) were all adjusting the way the web was built and interconnected. The way it looked was derived from the underlying architecture.

Let's forget about the visual appearance of the vernacular web and think about how it worked. What were the principles of its growth? The obvious answer is links. A lot of links. Links on every page.

Ten years ago every web site had a section of external links because people felt it was their personal responsibility to configure the environment and build the infrastructure. The many-to-many principle showed itself in linking strategies as well. A site was not complete without links to other sites.

On some pages links were gates to additional information, on others to unrelated information. The way you looked for information was time consuming but rewarding. By following the links you could find much more than you were looking for.

The vernacular web was fascinated by the power of links and often ran to extremes. Sites composed of lists of links, long pages of unclassified and annotated links, webrings or published bookmarks.html files from the Netscape browser.

Since the late 90's linking wasn't that hip any more. Search engines, portals and catalogues took over the linking responsibilities making searches faster and less surprising. In the quest for order and hierarchy the web changed completely. Sites with no external links at all became the norm and now constitute the facade of the mainstream web. Users jump back and forth between search engines.

Links -- the once typical means of conveyance -- have lost their infrastructural importance.

In today's web blogs compensate for over precise search engines by delivering a constant stream of surprise links. It's an interesting evolutionary paradox when you remember that old-school link collections were created to compensate, through human intervention, for the rough search engine results. In the end both cures delivered the same: a link to an address new to the user; an unknown topic, a surprise, an action, a deep web.

