...trend

by Jesse Ashlock

Back to the Future
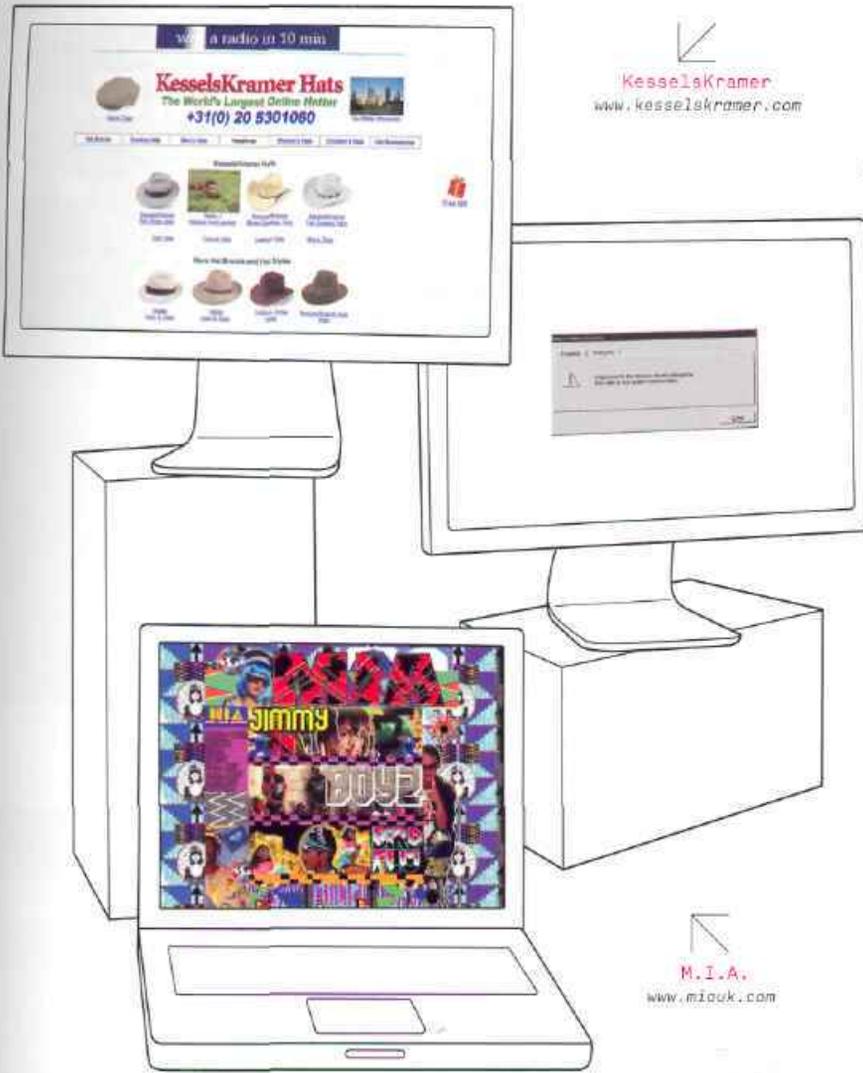*Why are so many web designers partying like it's 1996?*

Beige
www.post-data.org/beige

2x4's Anisa Suthayalai
www.bydefault.org

Paper Rad
www.paperrad.org

Remember what the early web looked like? If you've forgotten, you could use Archive, org's Wayback Machine to time-travel to 1996, when Netscape Navigator was the browser of choice and amateur web enthusiasts were still publishing "home pages." Or you could roam today's web, where designers are increasingly embracing the values and aesthetics of the Clinton-era internet.

This atavistic impulse is most apparent on the sites of a loose network of art geeks-including the programming ensemble Beige (www.post-data.org/beige), the artist collective Paper Rad (www.paperrad.org), and the web art club NastyNets (www.nastynets.com)—with a shared interest in reclaiming obsolete technologies. Their aesthetic, sometimes referred to as "dirt style," is visually hyperactive and almost willfully antagonistic: a riot of animated GIFs, tiled backgrounds, underlined blue hyperlinks, images with borders, and old-school blink tags. Used now, the graphics evoke the noisy amateurism of the early web, but they're also a rejection of today's glossy, professional site design, which tends to efface the medium rather than celebrate it.

Beige co-founder Coiy Arcangel, an art-world star who recently led a dirt-style workshop at New York media arts center Eyebeam, believes the aesthetic reflects a conscious decision to show the bones of the internet: "It's the true look of the web," he says. He insists the style isn't about nostalgia, citing as proof his own site, which has retained the same look and feel for 10 years. "I'm the sort of person who got into Nirvana two years

KesselsKramer
www.kesselskramer.com

Martin Margiela
www.maisonmartinmargiela.com

M.I.A.
www.miauk.com

backgrounds, flashing "under construction" signs, MIDI background music—Lialina makes a case for bringing back the populist aesthetics of the early web. Sites today might be more usable, but she believes they're also more antiseptic, because web design is now so often confused with graphic design. "Designers never learned to love the browser," she says, "to use its disabilities and not try to make fixed layouts, to be modular, to make it a little more dirty and imperfect."

Jakob Nielsen, a usability expert whose text-based site Useit.corn is pure 1996, compares these tactics to the Dogme school of filmmaking, with its strict set of constraints. "I think it reaches back to the real nature of the web, which is simple interaction," he says. However, he doesn't see the style becoming a part of the mainstream again. "People won't think a bank really cares about small businesses because it has a homemade banking site," he observes—though in her research, Lialina has collected numerous links to particularly raw-looking small business sites, which she files under the heading "Made by son of owner." (Dutch ad agency KesselsKramer spoofs these on its site with a collection of clumsily designed, flat HTML pages that promote imaginary companies, like KesselsKramer Hats, KesselsKramer Mini-Racing, and the KesselsKramer Fortune Teller; www.kesselskramer.com.)

But when used on purpose, Lialina observes, primitive sites can be especially successful in "sending a message to those who know"—broadcasting to other insiders an air of conceptual playfulness for artists, a DIY ethos for musicians, a deconstructed avant-garde aesthetic for fashion houses, or a stripped-down simplicity for designers. It's fundamentally a message that communicates that these creators exist "outside the neutral palette of web design," Lialina says.

Of course, as Nielsen points out, "if too many people do it, it stops being edgy." Arcangel, for his part, has a contingency plan. "As the fashion wheel rolls, you have to roll," he says. "I'm considering making an early Flash site next."

ago," he says. "It's the same thing with design or technology—let's wait for the buzz to die down, and then see what's going on."

But a new buzz is building around this old tyle. The most prevalent adherents are band ites, including London rapper M.IA's eye-ileeding cacophony of graphics (www.miauk. com), Baltimore experimental collective Wham City's retro frameset (www.wharncity.com), Port- and indie band Menomena's cheerfully kinder-;artenish online home (www.menomena.com), and even Radiohead's pointedly primitive ite for the group's new album *In Rainbows* www.inrainbows.com). There are also con-eptual fashion sites like Martin Margiela **www.maisonmartinmargiela.com**) and Ksubi (vmw.ksubi.com), which call attention to the browser and the technology behind it. And there are the minimalist sites of against-the-grain designers like 2x4's Anisa **Suthayalai,**

who tiles her portfolio work inside a frame (www.bydefault.org), and multidisciplinary New York firm Stiletto, which offers up only long columns of GIFs ("an anti-site site," says partner Julie Hirschfeld; www.stilettonyc.com). The approach is even evident on a well-trafficked site like The Drudge Report, whose stubbornly outmoded layout is a visual rebuke to mainstream news destinations (www.druclgereport.com).

Russian net artist Olia Lialina, a professor of new media at Merz Academy in Stuttgart, Germany, deserves particular credit for pushing the move to preserve early web ephemera via projects like 2005's "Some Universe," an online digital artwork composed entirely of those outer-space backgrounds that once populated users' Geocities and Tripod pages. In her creative work, and in her recent essays about the "vernacular web" that affectionately catalog the internet's bygone artifacts—garish

*Jesse Ashlock is o **contributing editor at ID.***