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Goofing Around With Your GIFs

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Tired of using someone else's animated GIF files? Want to do more than just display a simple image in your Visual FoxPro form? This month's hidden treasure is a set of three tools that allow you to create your own animated GIF files and to morph one GIF file into another. If you have any artistic inclinations at all, you'll want to check out these tools.

*\\ Farion, I've included the images in this file; you can rip them out, but I wanted to make sure you saw what I was seeing as I'm putting together kind of late <g> You might want to shoot the EA on this past me before posting it.

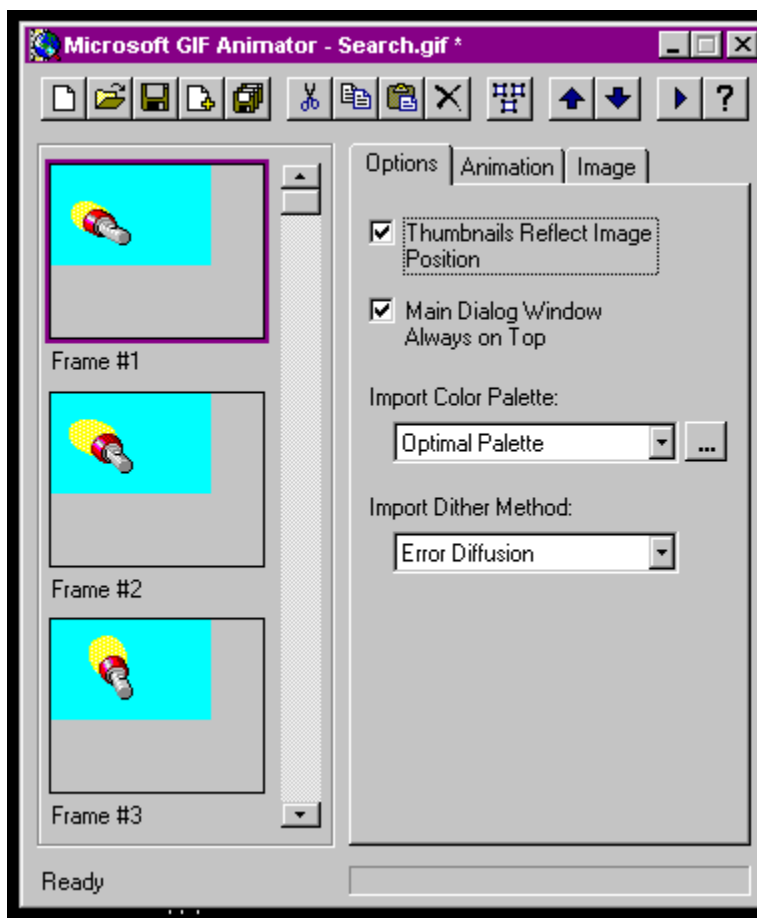
We've just about all tried our hand at a web page by now. And you've probably hunted down or found a set of animated GIFs for your page. There's a set that comes with the Value Pak of Office 97, for example, another set in the CLIP2 directory under FrontPage 98, and there's probably a million of them out on the Web. But you're a Fox developer, which means "not invented here" is your rallying cry. You'd rather do it yourself. You've got a set of pictures of your cat, for example, or your kids running through the sprinkler, or this really cool effect of a command button gyrating. How do you take that series of GIFs and create a single animated file that you can place on your web page?

The first tool I've used is Microsoft's GIF Animator. Now a part of FrontPage 98, I've included an early standalone version with this month's Subscriber Downloads to give you a feel for the tool. I like utilities that don't require a lot of homework before using them, and the GIF Animator is a wonderful example of how this can be accomplished. The main screen shown in Figure 1 is pretty self-explanatory, wouldn't you say?

The area in the lower left of the screen displays the images you have selected to make up your "movie", while the toolbar at the top allows you to generally manipulate both the entire movie and the images within it. The page frame on the right side allows you to set attributes for the movie you're making.

You can specify, for example, the height and width of the movie as well as the number of images, whether or not the animation will run once or loop, and how long each image will display.

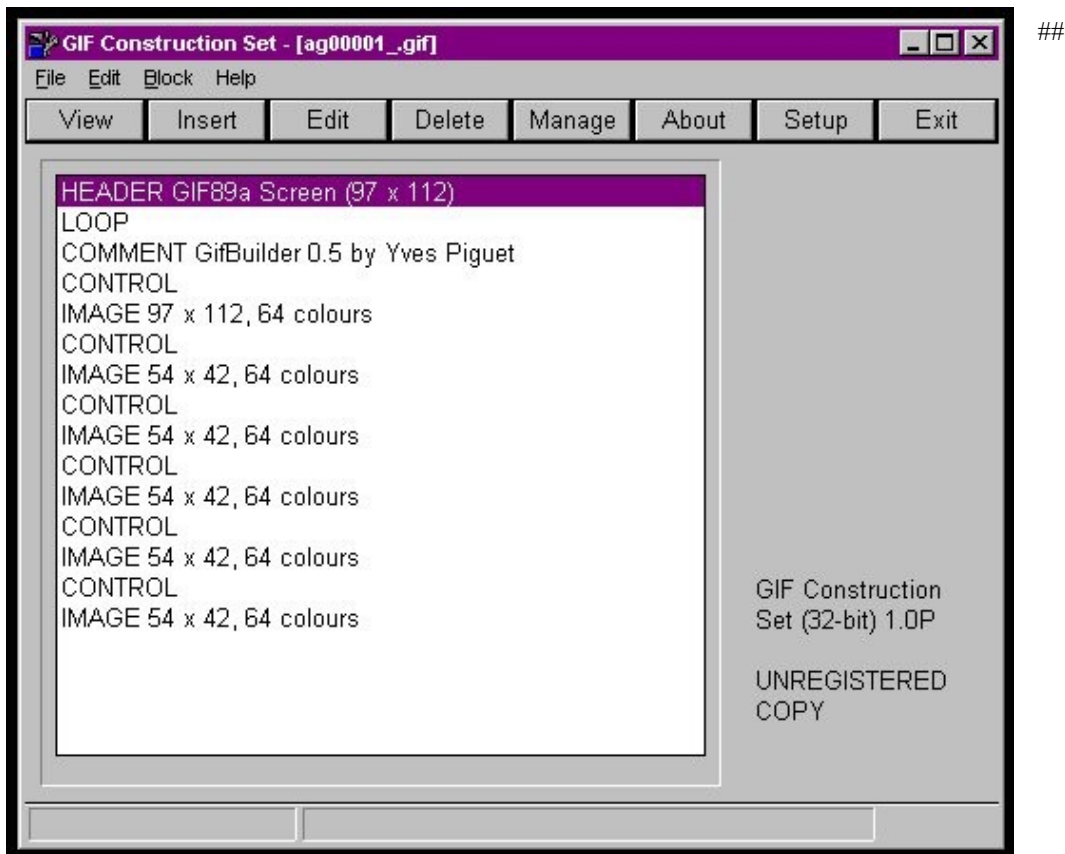
My only complaint is common to all of these tools; they are all rather particular about the images they can handle. Evidently there is no single "standard" GIF format, and each of these can only read and process certain types of GIFs.



08COOL01.BMP

Figure 1. The main screen for Microsoft's GIF Animator is easy to understand and use.

The other tool I've used to build animations is Alchemy Mindwork's GIF Construction Kit. I'm predisposed not to like this one as much because it was harder to use "out of the box" and I don't think the user interface is very friendly. See Figure 2. However, on the flip side, it has a pretty nifty Animation Wizard that walked me through the steps in a matter of minutes, and it seemed to deal with GIF files that GIF Animator wouldn't read.



08COOL02.JPG

Figure 2 While the GIF Construction Kit was more flexible in handling a variety of images, the interface isn't as intuitive and many functions were more awkward to use.

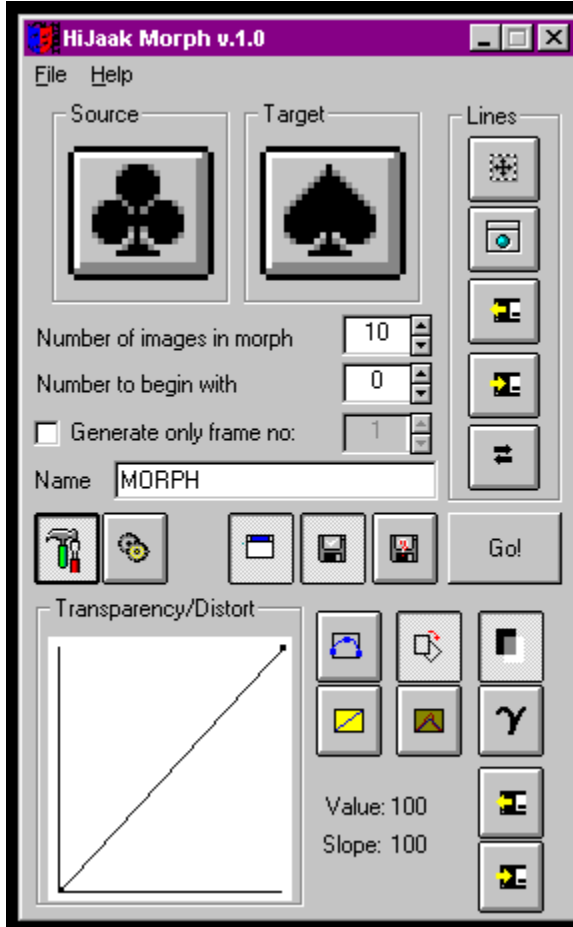
So far, so good. But I kind of side-stepped the issue of where these series of GIFs you're going to animate come from, just blindly assuming that "they were out there." But what if they weren't? Suppose you only had two GIFs, a "before" image and an "after" image. Wouldn't it be nice to have a whole series of GIFs that you can use to make your animation movie?

HiJaack Morph might be the answer you're looking for. This is a very cool tool, and I love playing with it. As the screen shot in Figure 3 shows, you can pick "source" and "target" images, and then set a series of parameters that will enable you to create a number of intermediate files that morph attributes of the source image into the target.

This process is actually more technical demanding than it may initially seem and you can get rather sophisticated if you want. As you can see in the bottom half of the HiJaack Morph screen in Figure 3, there are number of complicated settings you can manipulate. Furthermore, as with the other tools, it's somewhat picky about the images it will accept as input.

Nonetheless, it's a blast to play with; I took an image of a man with jeans and a long-sleeved white shirt sitting in a chair and morphed them into a woman dressed in jeans and a white short sleeve blouse sitting in the same chair. Then I animated the series of images. It was really pretty spooky.

If you have any graphic manipulation tools you like, drop me a line and I'll take a look at them. We don't have to work with names and addresses all the time, you know!



08COOL03.JPG

Figure 3 HiJaak Morph allows you to create a series of images that seem to convert one image to another one.

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Whil Hentzen is editor of FoxTalk.