A squonking, pink-tongued ball of kittenish delight. A sage-cat deigning to enlighten us with his musings. A Scotch-loving dust bunny intent on world domination.

A perpetual sourpuss voicing everyone’s inner grump. A piano-playing prodigy with her own Catcerto. Meet five felines whose Internet stardom leaves no doubt as to which is the superior species.
It’s a cat’s world. We’re just renting space in it.

Nowhere is that more evident than on the Internet, which, according to those who analyze these sorts of things, is made of cats. A daily tsunami of cartoons, Vines, memes, and GIFs celebrates every facet of cat character, from cute to conniving, carefree to “couldn’t care less.” And then there are the videos: In 2012, the first Internet Cat Video Festival, sponsored by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, drew 10,000 submissions from around the world; 10,000 people soaked up the rock concert atmosphere.

They’ve got us by the claws, those cats. The mildly amused among us may chuckle at a new video during a coffee break; hard-core addicts check in on the humor website I Can Has Cheezburger 50 times a day. Or take Bob (not his real name), a software developer busted in 2012 for outsourcing his assignments to workers in China so he could surf the Net all day. He spent his mornings watching cat videos.

What’s the explanation for our fixation? We’ve had meowing media stars before: Felix, Sylvester, Garfield, Hello Kitty, and Morris, the finicky eater of 9Lives cat food and first in-the-flesh feline phenomenon, whose volume of fan mail required a personal secretary to respond to it. But Morris’ star pales in comparison to the blinding glare from today’s cyber sensations, whose fans are as devoted as any rock star’s.

For many, the appeal lies in the disconnect between a cat’s appearance and his behavior. “Cats are just funny,” says blogger Angie Bailey, author of Whiskerslist: The Kitty Classifieds. “They have to be serious and dignified all the time, yet they do these crazy things that are so out of character with that. It’s unexpected.”

Dogs are adorable but predictable; you know what they’re thinking. “They just want to please you,” Bailey says. “But cats—they’re totally unappreciative. You can throw a ball for them; maybe they’ll chase it, maybe they’ll start licking their butts.”

Another theory is that the Internet has become a virtual gathering spot for cat owners the way dog parks are for dog owners. “We’re allowed to wave our freak cat flags,” says Anne Marie Avey, owner of Colonel Meow. “So it’s now cool to be a crazy cat lady.”

The Internet can turn a cat into an overnight wonder, bringing fame and sometimes unforeseen fortune. A few—such as Grumpy Cat, Colonel Meow, and Keyboard Cat (who actually passed away more than 20 years ago)—have grown so big that they have professional managers to run their business and purr-sonal affairs. Some cats’ deals are so lucrative that their owners have been able to quit their day jobs. Many have shared the wealth with animal shelters and rescue groups.

But Internet stardom is as unpredictable as a cat. All of the owners interviewed here say the same thing: They never set out to make their cats famous; it just happened. “I wouldn’t say … it’s impossible to have a plan,” says Henri’s owner, Will Braden. “But I will say that it has to come from something about the cat. … If you have some sort of idea and you want to conform it to your cat, it’s never going to work. They’re not good enough actors, and your heart won’t be in the right place.”
Love at first sight is how Mike Bridavsky describes his introduction to the tiny stray kitten who would go on to become Lil Bub, a supernova in the Internet feline firmament.

Bridavsky wasn’t looking for a cat. In fact, the Bloomington, Ind., resident hadn’t been looking for the four he already had—they all found him in various ways. But a friend whose mother was caring for the kitten texted him, saying “she’s perfect for you.” Attached was a photograph of a minuscule brown tabby with enormous green eyes and a pink tongue peeking out of her mouth.

At the time, Bridavsky was behind on the rent on his recording studio and contemplating bankruptcy. Bub changed all that. In May 2012, he posted photos and videos of her on a social media site, and people fell in love with her feisty spirit; her squeaks, chirps, and squonks; and the perpetual look of delight on her kittenish face. Bub went viral.

Now Bub has the world at her paws. The former stray is the subject of a documentary, *Lil Bub and Friendz*, that won the top prize in the online division of the Tribeca Film Festival. Robert De Niro and Whoopi Goldberg are fans. She’s published an autobiography (*Lil Bub’s Lil Book*), starred in a gallery exhibit of fan art, and has her own Internet chat show called (what else?) *Lil Bub’s Big Show*.

Fans call her their reason for getting up in the morning. They wait in line for hours to meet her at appearances and book signings. “They’re extremely emotionally attached, which is very touching and amazing,” says Bridavsky. “Some people … drop to their knees crying. It happens regularly.”

What has people so emotional? It’s not just her irresistibly cute face (“Had to punch a wall to feel like a man … but really really CUTE,” wrote one poster on Facebook) but her triumph over adversity. Her permanent kitten look is the result of a number of genetic defects, including dwarfism, an underslung jaw, and lack of teeth. She also suffers from osteopetrosis, a potentially life-threatening condition that causes her bones to overgrow and become dense. At one point in 2013, her veterinarians didn’t think she had much longer to live, but electromagnetic pulse treatment has restored much of her mobility. None of this fazes Bub; she doesn’t know she’s different and doesn’t act like it, says Bridavsky.

People are equally moved by the love and devotion of Bridavsky—her “Dude”—and by his generosity to the cat rescue community. All of Bub’s videos end with a message about spay/neuter and adoption, and Bridavsky has raised more than $100,000 for shelters through the sale of merchandise and donations at personal appearances.

“This just happened to me by accident,” he says. “I can’t take too much credit for it. I’m just doing what I think a responsible, good person would do in this situation with the resources I have.”
Several years ago, piano teacher Betsy Alexander and her artist husband Burnell Yow! (not a typo) heard music emanating from the piano room. One of their six cats, Gabby, walked on the keyboard now and then, but this was not the random, discordant sound she typically made. This was … deliberate.

Sitting on the piano bench with her paws on the keys was Nora, the plump gray tabby they’d adopted from a shelter as a kitten the year before. And Nora was playing. Not Beethoven, certainly, but an intentional depression of chosen keys.

Alexander, a Philadelphia resident, wanted to show her niece in Wyoming what Nora was up to. A student suggested she make a video and put it on a new website called YouTube.

Then strangers started watching the video. It weirded Alexander out. “I didn’t even understand that other people would be able to look at it, that’s how out of it I was.” The buzz built. “Seventy people were looking at my video. … Then it was 1,000, and then it was 10,000, and then the phone starts ringing and it’s 100,000 and then we start getting phone calls from media, and it just went viral. But there wasn’t even a word for going viral back then.”

Seven years later, the video and sequels have racked up millions of hits, and the list of outlets that have covered Nora is longer than both your arms laid end to end. “This year we heard from France Has Talent,” says Alexander. “They wanted us to bring Nora to Paris.” (Nora dislikes traveling, so Alexander declined.)

In 2009, Lithuanian conductor Mindaugas Pieciaitis created a four-minute composition featuring the tabby’s musical stylings. While the orchestra plays, a screen overhead displays Nora patiently waiting for her part, her cat housemates looking on. Catcerto, which has been performed 17 times in various venues, whipped up even more media frenzy.

Which is all fine by Nora, now 10, who Alexander says has been a bossy little diva since kittenhood. Her adoption story is familiar: Alexander wasn’t looking for another cat, but when she spied Nora at a PetSmart adoption center, “I had this compulsion. … It was like she ordered me to adopt her.”

During recitals, she steals the spotlight, adding her own encores when the students have finished. Of the two pianos in Alexander’s home, Nora prefers the shiny black Yamaha. As a kitten, she ran in circles on top of it, chasing her tail until she got dizzy and fell off. Now, if anyone dares to play it, she glares until they vacate.

Like her fellow feline Internet stars, Nora gives back to the cat rescue community, as well as organizations promoting music. “That’s what Nora’s all about,” says Alexander. “If she can help other animals find homes … then we’re all for it.”

FACEBOOK LIKES: 220,000+
TWITTER FOLLOWERS: 5,200+
YOUTUBE VIEWS: WE LOST COUNT

Little boys are made of frogs and snails, little girls of sugar and spice. Colonel Meow is made of “Persian, Himalayan, Chuck Norris, owl, blue things, dust bunnies, and glow-in-the-dark beads,” as he described himself to Catster.com.

Well, that certainly explains things. It’s hard to imagine actual cat DNA at work—the piercing yellow eyes, frightening scowl, and Don King fur put one more in mind of a flying monkey from The Wizard of Oz.

His online persona is equally fearsome. The hard-drinking fur tumbleweed—Scotch is his quaff of choice—hates birds, thinks his doggy housemate Boots is
It’s not me. It’s you.

In April 2012, a tiny kitten was born in obscurity in Phoenix. She looked nothing like her mom, a rescued calico belonging to Tabatha Bundesen. Her cream coloring—her dark Siamese points hadn’t developed yet—reminded Bundesen’s daughter Crystal of a common seafood condiment, and the kitten was promptly named Tardar Sauce (excuse the spelling; Crystal was only 10).

Feline dwarfism gave Tardar an unusual physique: small body, shortened legs, flattened face, and a downturned mouth that lent her a permanently disgruntled expression. But in all other respects, she was a normal kitten, playful, inquisitive, and affectionate.

Tardar and her family would have gone on living in obscurity had Bundesen’s brother Bryan not paid a visit from Galion, Ohio. He snapped a photo of the 6-month-old cat and posted it online with the caption “Meet Grumpy Cat.” The Internet ignited.

Within 48 hours the meme was seen by more than a million viewers and set off a cascade of clever captions, the most famous of which graces Grumpy Cat T-shirts as well as her Facebook page and website: “I had fun once. It was awful.”

Several people commented that they didn’t believe Grumpy was real, that the picture had been Photoshopped. To prove her existence, Bryan posted a video of Grumpy wrestling with his fingers, and the Internet burned even brighter. “In the first 36 hours, we had over 1.5 million viewers,” Bryan says.

Since then, life has been a nonstop whirlwind for Grumpy and the Bundesens: trips, television appearances, interviews, awards, worldwide outpourings of love for the cat-who-won’t-be-pleased. And the deals, oh, the deals! Grumpy is under contract to star in a movie.

Grumpy Cat: A Grumpy Book, her instruction manual for putting more grumpy in your life, made the New York Times best-seller list. She has her own brand of bottled coffee drinks, and her
Friskies cat food endorsement deal made a splash on business news websites.

Why has the world so wholeheartedly embraced this sourpuss who rains on everyone’s parade? “Grumpy Cat represents those feelings that you have during the day,” says Bryan. “You can put the words over her picture and it just fits perfectly.” In other words, Grumpy can safely express what you don’t dare say to your boss or spouse or anyone else who’s really ticked you off.

Behind the grimace, however, is a sweet personality, docile and calm; her black-and-white brother, Pokey, is actually the grumpy one, says Bryan. During personal appearances, Grumpy Cat often reacts to the adoration of her fans by falling asleep. And she likes other cats as well as people, though a meeting with Lil Bub backstage at the 2013 Internet Cat Video Festival didn’t go so well. Lil Bub flattened her ears and kept her distance, although eventually they fell asleep on the same bed.

Of course, a photo of the pair studiously ignoring each other became a meme unto its own. “Friendship,” it reads, “is overrated.”

FACEBOOK LIKES: 145,000+
TWITTER FOLLOWERS: 25,000+
YOUTUBE VIEWS: INFINITE

Henri le Chat Noir was born of desperation. Film student Will Braden had an assignment due the next day and, being a typical student, had procrastinated until the 11th hour. He decided to make a short documentary featuring his black-and-white longhaired cat, Henry, in the French film noir genre the class had been studying. “I thought … if I do a parody of some of those old films we’ve been seeing and I make it funny enough, they won’t notice I didn’t really follow the assignment,” says Braden, a Seattle resident.

Henri le Chat Noir explores a cat’s inner life, which revolves not around food, naps, and sunbeams, as humans imagine, but around the inequity of the feline’s forced coexistence with morons and idiots, including his owner “the thieving filmmaker” and his kitty housemate l’imbecile blanc (“the white imbecile”). Boredom, disdain, and self-pity run rampant through the black-and-white short, filmed in French with English subtitles.

Braden got an A.

That was back in 2006. It sat on the shelf until 2010, when Braden posted it on a Facebook page he created for the film’s star. Henri’s fans loved his sardonic observations (“It is a sad yet intriguing moment when you realize that the soft, constant whirl you hear in the background of life, is actually life itself. Or, I suppose it could be the refrigerator.”) and demanded another video. In 2012 Braden debuted a sequel, Henri 2, Paw de Deux, and the Internet community lost its mind. “I got a million views in one week, I think,” he says.

Paw de Deux snagged the grand prize that year at the first Internet Cat Video Festival, and Henri’s career has only grown. The videos keep coming, his eponymous book of musings is published in two countries, and the thieving filmmaker has made numerous appearances on Henri’s behalf. Braden was also invited to give the commencement speech at his alma mater.

Henry, now 9, stays home, not because he’s antisocial, but because he doesn’t enjoy traveling. He’s actually the total opposite of his character, says Braden. “He’s certainly not suffering from existential crisis. He is really a very happy cat. … If you just saw the raw footage, it’s usually just him purring and me snapping my fingers.”

Managing Henri’s affairs has turned into almost a full-time job for Braden; the character’s financial success also allows him to donate funds to animal shelters, honoring Henry’s adoption as a kitten from a Seattle shelter. Braden has a long relationship with PAWS in Lynnwood, Wash., and he also asks Henri’s fans to suggest shelters in need.

As for the future, Braden says there may be a visit from a puppy—or a kitten trying to usurp Henri’s place in the household. Sacre bleu!