

The Fifth Wall: An Examination of Humor in *Homestuck*

Ask anyone who attended a comic convention in 2012, and they'll remember *Homestuck*. If not the name, they'll absolutely recall the hordes of excitable teenagers with grey skin and horns. But this labyrinthine webcomic is responsible for so much more than several major establishments banning body paint. Without ever being advertised, or becoming anything resembling "mainstream media," it has pushed the bounds of literature and spread its message to millions of fans. Most era-defining works of the past, as nuanced as they may be, can be contained within a sentence. *Star Wars* changed the face of science fiction, but it can be defined as such; an anti-authoritarian classic fantasy masquerading as sci-fi. *The Lord of the Rings* and related works are high fantasy, written by an English professor who wanted a history to explain the languages he invented. *Homestuck*, on the other hand, is something new entirely, and it is its own definition.

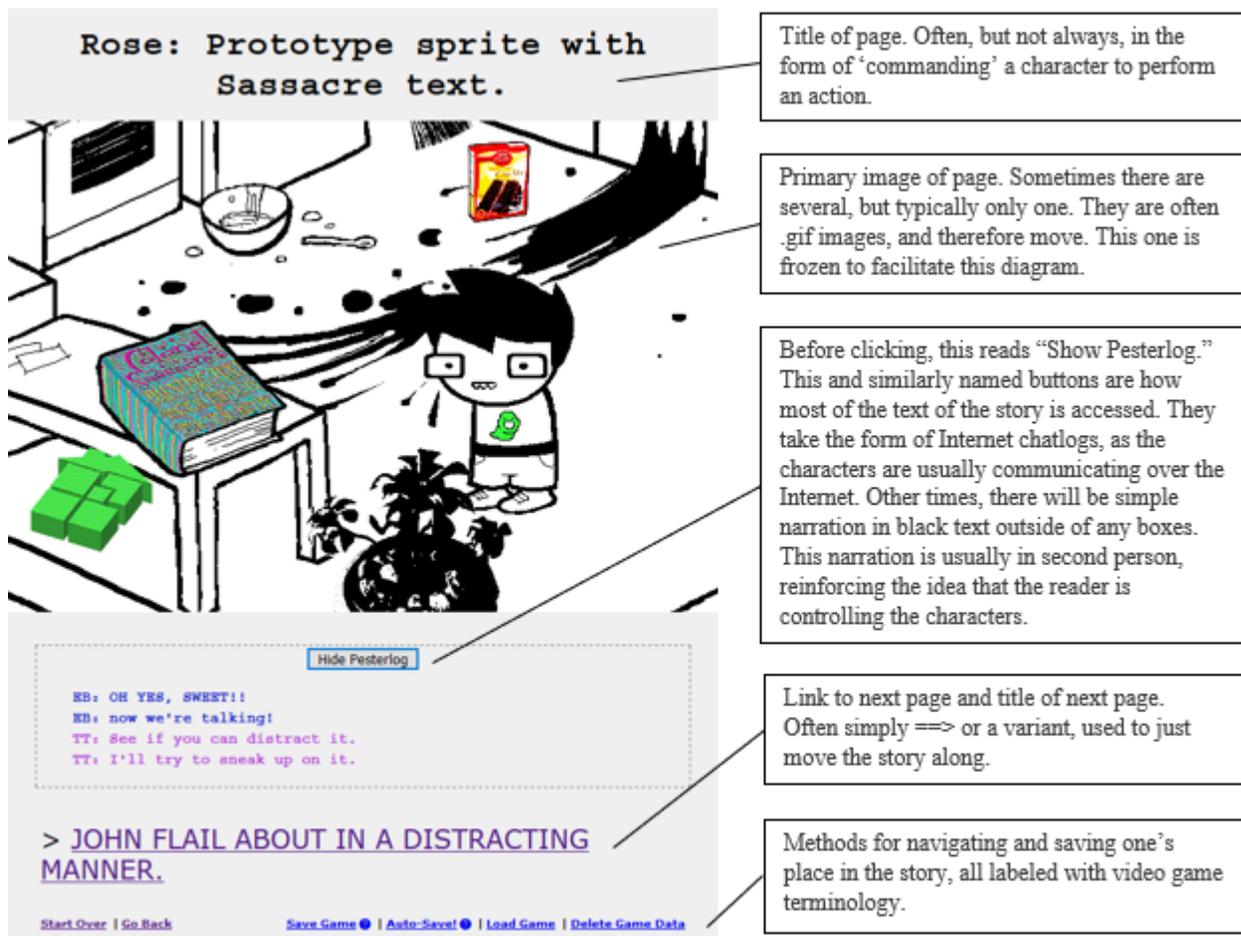
Any summary will be lacking, as its complexity is part of its identity, but it's possible to give some basic overview of what forms the initial plot. The narrative follows four children, all longtime Internet friends, who play a mysterious video game that first allows them to manipulate each other's physical environment, then sends them into a new dimension in which they must work to defeat all adversaries in their path and win the game. They take the first part of this in remarkable stride. The second part is greeted with understandable alarm, as they barely escape Earth before meteors devastate the surface of the planet. It is at this point the events of the story begin to take on cosmic significance, and it only grows in scope from there. Created by Andrew Hussie, *Homestuck* proper spanned seven years, from April 13th, 2009, to April 13th, 2016. Made primarily in Adobe Photoshop, it consists of seven acts, 817929 words, and a little over four hours of video content. By official word count alone, it's possible to finish *War and Peace* and be well into a reread in the time it takes to read all of *Homestuck*. It's worth noting that the above statistics do not include words within video content or the occasional interactive games (neither words inside the games, nor the time it takes to play them). These figures, and more besides, are meticulously recorded in a separate fan-made website devoted to the task.

Despite the gravitas inherent in a work of such magnitude, it is not primarily designed to be dramatic, or hopelessly complex, as some inattentive readers like to claim. The focus of this sprawling tale is humor, and as explaining all that *Homestuck* is and does in a single essay is simply impractical, that is the lens through which I shall be examining it. I subscribe to the Benign Violation Theory of humor, as examined by McGraw and Warren in 2009 (2). To summarize, something is typically considered funny when it disrupts expectations in a way that can be considered 'benign' or morally neutral. *Homestuck* repeatedly defies all expectations, including those it creates for itself. *Homestuck* heralds a new age for literature, in which the new mediums presented by advancing technology and increasing societal complexity are fully utilized. It is easiest to see this in the varied ways it forms humor, through creation and subversion of tropes, weaponization of its own complexity, and manipulation of the medium in which it exists.

I have diverged from the typical method of citing pages in this essay, instead opting to hyperlink words within a sentence (as well as pictures) to the pages they reference. This is

primarily to encourage the reader to actually visit those pages, in order to promote a deeper understanding of the text being discussed. It's also a far more direct and convenient method of in-text citation than the traditional form. As the entire story is hosted on a website with no barrier to access, and each page has a separate URL, it is a simple matter to present all the necessary information without including entire pages from the text in the body of the essay. That would be cluttered at best and disruptive to the reader's understanding at worst. Some more critical pages and dialogue are included directly as images, so it is certainly possible to read this entire essay without clicking a single link. I simply felt it proper to provide an avenue for greater comprehension in the cases where it could be found easily, as well as emulate the author's own style. When recapping his story, creator Andrew Hussie did much the [same](#). *Homestuck* is equal parts text and images, and both are required to fully examine any aspect of the work.

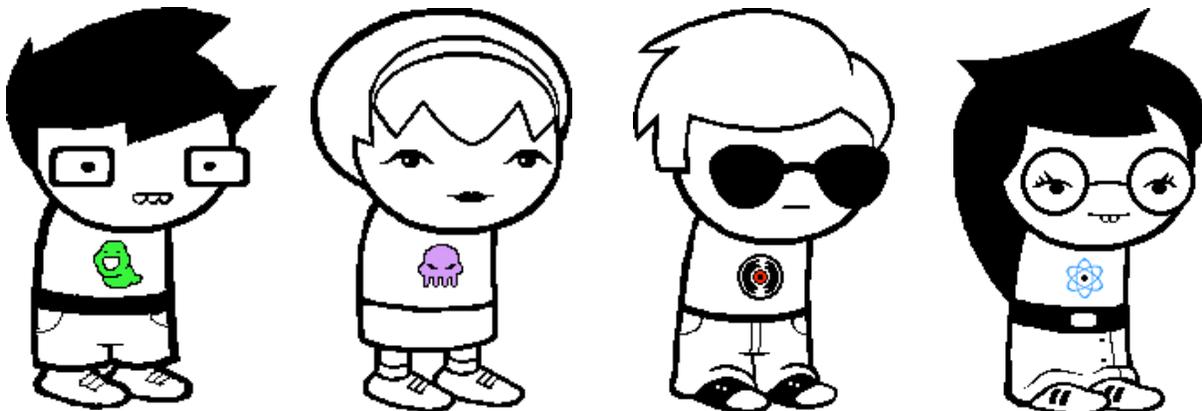
The key thing to understand about *Homestuck* is that it pretends to be a video game. It acts as if the reader is the one submitting commands for these characters to act out, and this illusion is actually based on some level of reality. Before we go any further, it is necessary to examine the diagram I have created below, which breaks down a page of *Homestuck*.



In the early days of the comic, before the plot and fandom reached astronomical proportions, users on a forum would submit suggestions for what the characters would do next, and the author would pick from among those. Andrew Hussie created and directed the story, but some

nonsensical [early tangents](#) that became long running gags were the result of some anonymous denizen of the Internet saying something funny enough for him to take notice. However, the illusion of *Homestuck* as a video game only goes so far. Characters will often refuse to carry out actions that they [disagree with](#) or [find unpleasant](#). The [very first page](#) in *Homestuck* asks the reader to name the main character, as one would their player character in a role-playing game. Out of control of the reader, something rude is submitted, and the character [rejects it](#). This pattern is repeated throughout the comic, though is subverted in its [third](#) and [fourth](#) instances, and a [few times thereafter](#), though eventually it falls into disuse. This is a source of further humor, rooted in the idea that these characters truly did not have names until they were given to them. And yet, once they had them, that had always been their name. “Once created, has always been” is a key idea for comprehending both *Homestuck*’s humor and intricate timeline, and is [pointed out](#) by the author through a character while describing one of the game’s mechanics. (It’s in the dialogue box.) The characters’ interactions with the world are often dictated by video game mechanics, such as their individual inventory systems. An inventory system in a video game is how the character’s cache of items is managed. In reality, they run the gamut from simple and convenient to needlessly complex. The various ones in *Homestuck* are, almost without exception, [the latter](#). [Mishaps arising from misuse](#) of their own inventory systems are rampant in early *Homestuck*. Some are plot critical. Most characters appear to be incapable of interacting with objects in normal ways, and express [confusion](#) upon being told to do so. This lends an air of absurdity to the comic in its early stages, but a sharp reader will be quick to accept this new normal. They will then be taken aback by departures from it, such as when a [character](#) is introduced who has no inventory system. The line “[you just pick it up](#)” has no reason to be amusing, except that the reader has been trained to expect something entirely different. *Homestuck* creates its own rules, and then breaks them for fun.

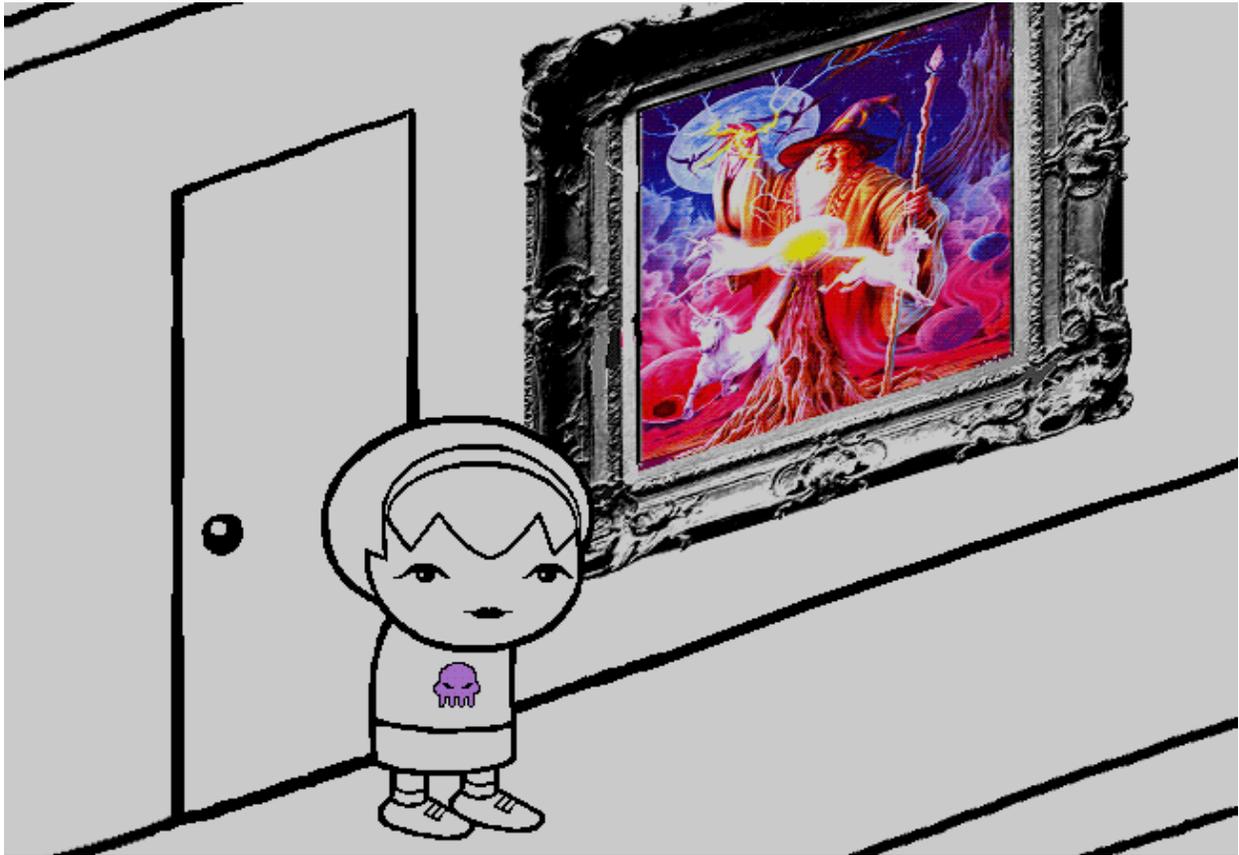
A great deal of comedy in *Homestuck* is derived from its vagueness. As is often the case in video games, much of the artwork is simply a representation of more complex forms.



The initial four main characters. Compare these to [the images linked here](#). In order, those are all the same characters, albeit in different outfits. The more complex forms are used to create emotion or lend importance to a certain panel or moment. Or, in [some](#) instances, arguably less complex forms are used for similar reasons.

The usual renders of all characters have no arms, and as such they are [instructed](#) to [retrieve](#) this [crucial part](#) of their [bodies](#) on [numerous occasions](#). This is another reference to video games, contrasting the primary “sprite” used in gameplay with the more detailed version of the character used in cutscenes. Twice, this classic form of presenting a character is [directly referenced](#), once

by a character within the fiction. A particularly notable instance of this phenomenon, in which objects may or may not be as they appear, is found fairly late in the story.



There were a lot of these kinds of pictures in this girl's house. All of them appeared quite extravagant.

It's not unreasonable to assume, using basic context clues reinforced by the [full view](#) of the house, that the wizard painting on the wall is as elaborate as its frame implies, and that its apparent crudeness is only due to the limitations of the medium in which it is being presented. Much, much later, this is revealed to be [absolutely not the case](#).

```
TG: (callie check him out)
UU: ..- --
TG: (that aint even a painting)
TG: (ahaha its so shitty)
TG: (did someone like)
TG: (grab a random ass low res wallpaper off the internet)
TG: (of a jolly wizard doing what appears 2 be the worlds
dumbest spell)
TG: (and saved at low quality then just like)
TG: (printed it way too huge)
TG: (lmao)
UU: ---... --
TG: (its not even scaled proportionately)
TG: (its stretched extra wide to fit this expensive as fuck
frame)
TG: (is that shit like)
TG: (literal solid gold)
TG: (ahahahahah i cant even deal)
TG: (whoever did this was a wonderful genius)
```

Don't mind the character speaking in Morse code. Interestingly, the person responsible for this crime against interior décor is in fact the person fawning over it here, but in an entirely different timeline. The version of the character speaking here thus has no memory of doing so. This is business as usual for *Homestuck*, and a great source of dramatic irony.

To explain the joke in a more coherent fashion, or at least in a less pink one, the painting was not a painting at all. Instead, it was a very low resolution, heavily pixelated computer wallpaper, which was then stretched out of proportion, printed, and put in an outrageously expensive frame. This is *Homestuck* at its finest. The reader is never certain which objects are exactly as they appear and which are representations. Sometimes, the characters even [interact directly](#) with inventory abstractions, or are confused upon realizing certain objects are or are not real.

```
DAVE: show me your badges and you can see mine
DAVE: i want to scope out this universal specibus badge that
sounds pretty cool actually
JADE: dave
JADE: we both know neither the kiddie camper handysash nor the
badges sewn onto it are real objects
DAVE: oh yeah
DAVE: its pretty easy to forget sometimes tho
JADE: yeah...
```

Jade is currently speaking in black instead of her usual green due to being under mind control. This is an excellent example of how *Homestuck* uses unique forms of communication to create tone, which is discussed in the next section.

Other objects randomly shift between two different forms. “Weapon-object duality,” as it’s referred to by the *Homestuck* wiki, is a running gag from Hussie’s previous comics. It is typically used to engineer comical situations, such as [this one](#) from *Problem Sleuth* in which a character unlocks a safe by shooting it with a gun. Only moments ago, the gun had been a set of keys, and in fact the narration still refers to it as such. Later, the same character is commanded to open a lock with their gun, and instead throws their keys at it. [This foolish action](#) costs them some ammo. There are a few such objects in *Homestuck*, such as this [gun/wand](#). “Can’t very well use magic when your wand is out of bullets” is a statement which makes perfect sense in [this context](#), yet is on the surface quite funny to consider.

The comic’s affinity for ambiguity even extends to how the characters communicate. At first, they are speaking to each other entirely via an online messaging system, and as such it makes sense that they have their defined typing styles and even colors. This dialogue is contained within a box on the page that must be manually opened by the reader. On one occasion this is used explicitly to [mess with](#) the reader. Typically, however, it is an effective method of showing dialogue between characters, and is used even when characters are [clearly speaking](#) via microphone. This ambiguity is finally acknowledged at one point well into the story, when the characters “unlock” the [ability](#) to speak to each other without any sort of communication apparatus. Of course this is ludicrous and has no actual bearing on the story other than that the characters’ messages in the dialog box now begin with their proper names rather than their online usernames. Eventually, an entire new set of alien children, other players of the game which serves as the foundation for the story, arrive on the scene, and their form of speaking is even more esoteric. Each has what they call a “quirk.”

```
CG: ANYWAY, I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S UP WITH THAT.  
CG: MAYBE I'LL TALK TO HIM TONIGHT ABOUT IT. MAYBE I WON'T.  
CG: IT'S PROBABLY JUST ANOTHER ONE OF HIS PROJECTS THAT WINDS  
UP BEING COMPLETELY USELESS AND A HUGE WASTE OF MY TIME.
```

A fairly simple one: all caps. This character [is described as](#) speaking in an “ornery” manner, and is quite the loudmouth.

```
GA: I Wasnt Going To Think That  
GA: You Know What I Dont Think Even I Really Understand What I  
Just Said So Nevermind
```

Capitalizes first letters of words, eliminates all punctuation. She is [said to speak](#) very carefully and precisely.

```
TA: ok that2 ju2t 2ome per2onal priiivate emotiional ii22ue2 and  
iim dealliing wiith that, and hone2tly iid appreciate you not  
alway2 throwiing that iin my face every goddamn opportuniity  
you get.
```

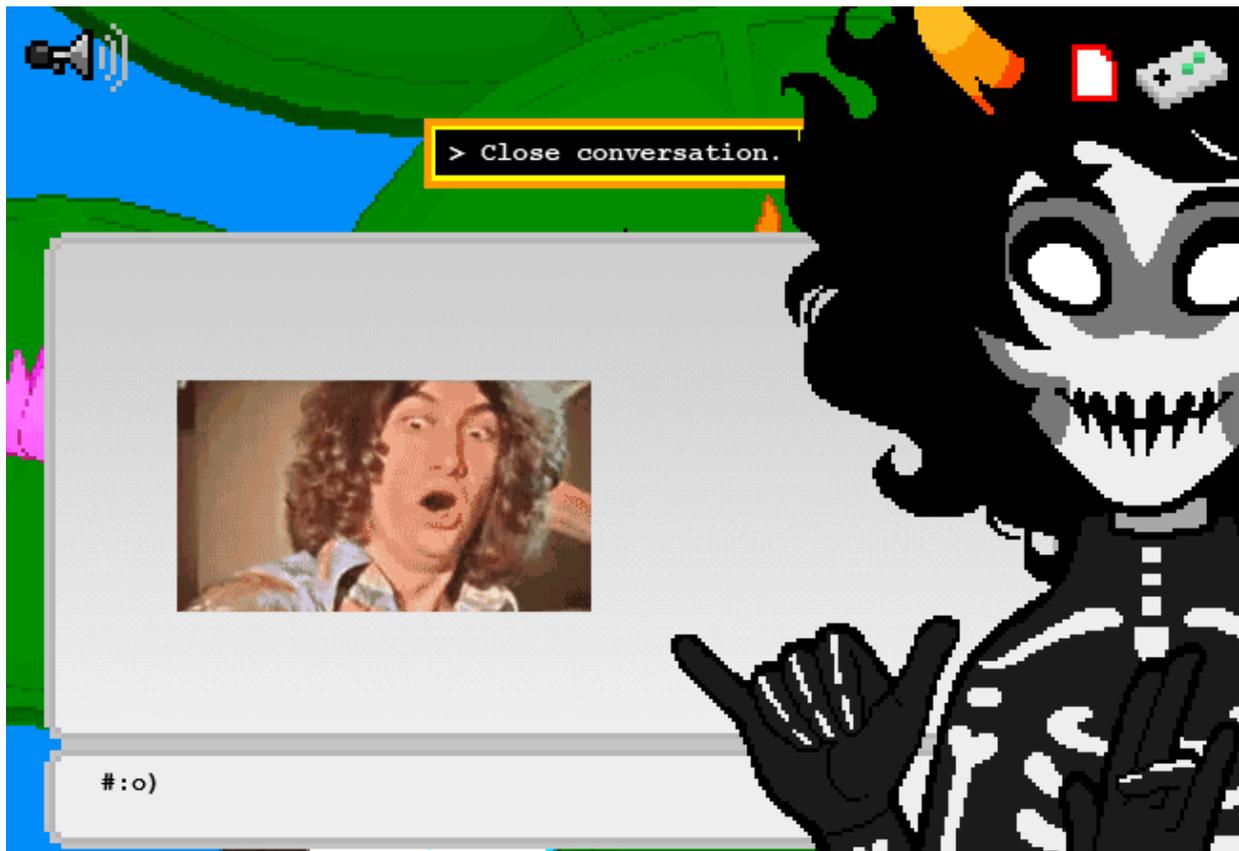
Replaces ‘s’ with ‘2,’ doubles ‘i,’ and (while this isn’t shown here) uses ‘two’ instead of ‘to’ or ‘too.’ This is one of the more complex ones, but far from the most difficult to read. This character [has a lisp](#).

It dictates both how they type and how they sound in person. In fact, it leads the reader to cast doubt on any perceived difference between those two things. The truth of the matter is that it

doesn't matter; they are speaking in the abstract manner through which their medium permits them to. In other words, the pesterlogs themselves are how they communicate. This allows for endless hilarious nonsense, as one character types like another in order to "sound" like them in a face-to-face conversation,

```
KARKAT: THAT SOUNDS SUPER! DOESN'T THAT SOUND SUPER KANAYA?  
KANAYA: No  
KARKAT: I THINK I SPEAK FOR KANAYA WHEN I SAY IT SOUNDS Really  
Fucking Super.
```

or another can only use images to communicate because they currently cannot speak,



or another is impossible to understand in person due to a nigh unreadable quirk.



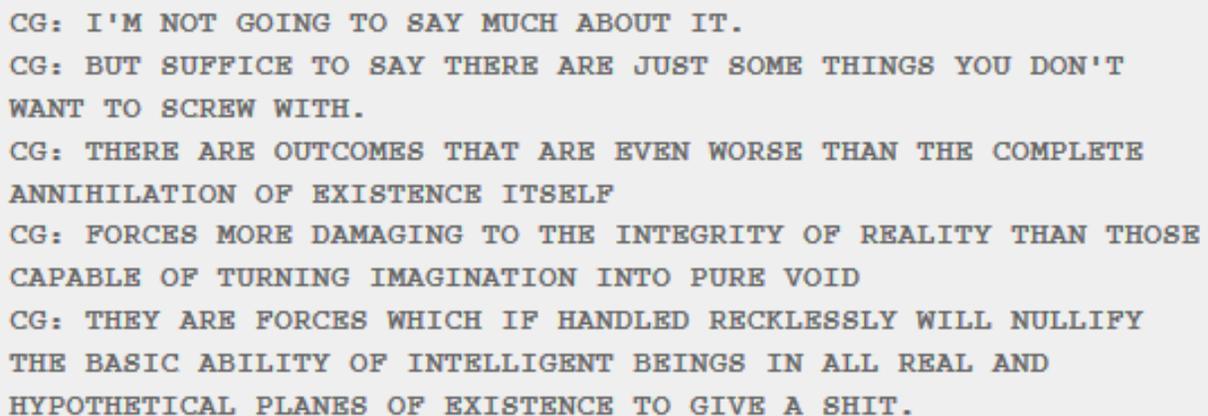
I could probably decode this text if I wanted, but this character isn't a particularly pleasant or important one. Whatever nonsense he has to say can remain hidden behind the natural obfuscation of his speech. The previous two images are cases where I'd recommend not clicking the link, as they lead to an entire game. Also, due to a missing image file which has not been replaced in *Homestuck* proper, I had to retrieve this image from an old YouTube video. Such are the hazards of documenting aging Internet literature.

By creating various abstract methods of communication for his characters, Hussie tampered with the very basics of storytelling. *Homestuck's* characterization, humor, and narrative as a whole were stronger for it.

Homestuck references itself constantly, and uses these references to control the reader's emotions, positive or negative. Textual callbacks abound. The very last spoken [lines](#) of the comic are pulled directly from a [conversation](#) from much earlier. The length of the time it takes for these connections to come full circle can in itself be a joke. On [page 32](#), it is remarked that a book is so heavy, it could kill a cat if it was dropped. [4468 pages later](#), in an entirely difference timeline, this finally occurs. (It's okay. The cat is brought back to life, and by the time it was shown how he was killed, he had already been revived long ago. This sort of thing happens with alarming frequency.) On its own, this would simply be an extremely delayed Chekhov's gun. After so long, and after the stakes had been raised by several orders of magnitude, it is just laughable. However, callbacks are not limited to words. As the comic was made in Photoshop, it was a simple matter for Hussie to swap a few things around and post the [same image](#) with [different characters](#). This forces recognition in the reader, for whatever purpose is desired. In fact, these are so numerous, it's difficult to find a single page which doesn't have ties to another, verbally or visually. This fact is explicitly [referenced](#) and [demonstrated](#) in the work by a

character. While direct, serious quotes from the author are relatively rare, and many that do exist are confined to an archive of a now-defunct website, there is commentary from him on this exact phenomenon dating back to 2010. “Triggering recognition is a powerful tool for a storyteller to use. Recognition is a powerful experience for a reader. It promotes alertness, at the very least. And in a lot of cases here, I think it promotes levity (humor! this is mostly a work of comedy, remember.) Controlling a reader's recognition faculty is one way to manipulate the reader's reactions as desired to advance the creative agenda.” *Homestuck* is not for the faint of heart. Brutal, on screen character death is not uncommon once the story is fully in gear. Children die, are revived, only to die again. Universes explode. Civilizations burn. The continuity of existence is at stake, and yet, as serious and dark as *Homestuck* can be, it never fails to be funny.

Needless to say, there is some major damage done to the fourth wall in *Homestuck*. Multiple characters show rare moments of eerie awareness, such as having a [breakdown](#) over how meaningless their “arc” is. [One](#) even has the mysterious ability to punch people out of the panel in which they currently exist, and into another. But it goes far, far deeper than that. At one point, a villain gains access to the computer terminal from which the story is being written and begins hitting it repeatedly with a crowbar. The effect this has on the website itself, including periphery elements like the menu bars, is [striking](#). (Even if you have ignored every link thus far, I implore you to click that one. Make sure you have the sound on your computer turned on, but not too loud.) While never quite getting out of hand, *Homestuck* plays fast and loose with the fourth wall. The fourth wall is actually a very important object within the story, which is both a joke and literally what the object is. A character that has no business knowing anything about it says the following on the subject.



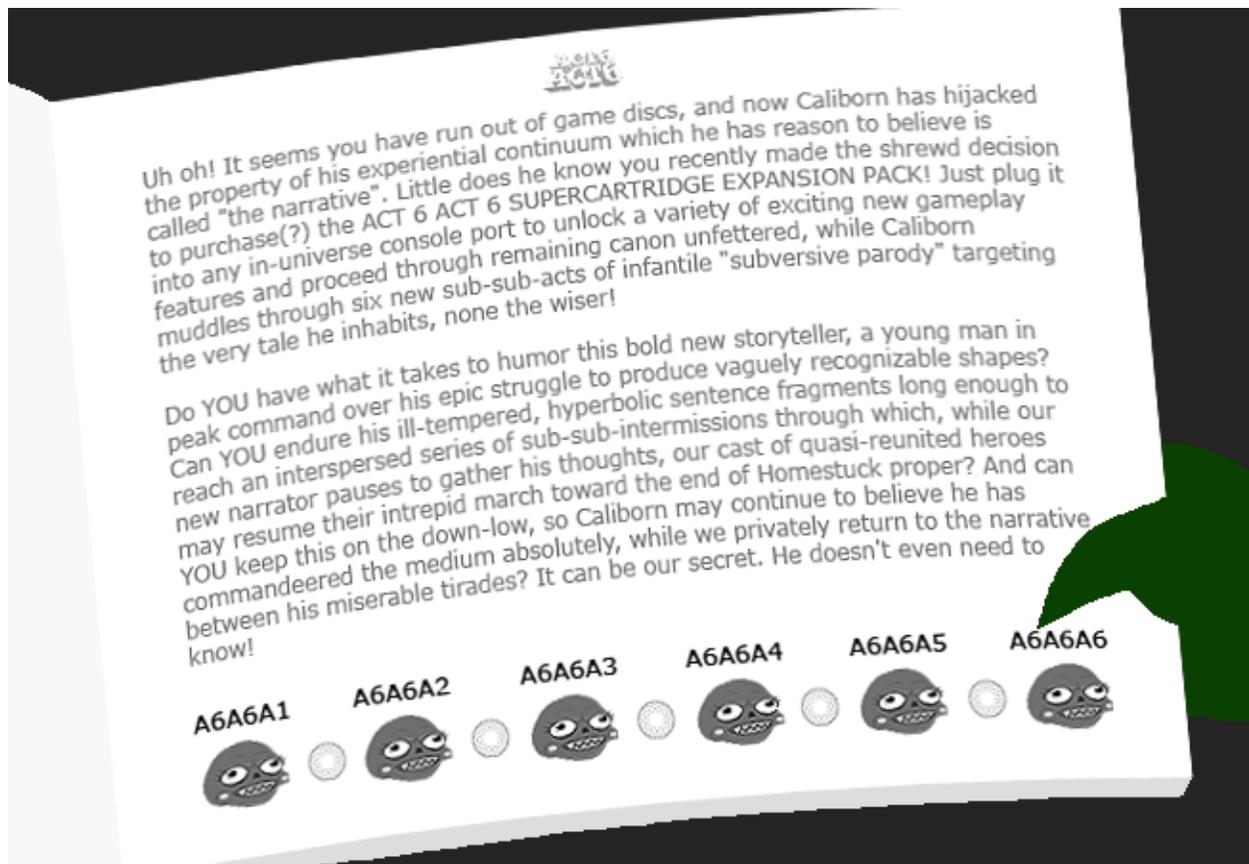
```
CG: I'M NOT GOING TO SAY MUCH ABOUT IT.  
CG: BUT SUFFICE TO SAY THERE ARE JUST SOME THINGS YOU DON'T  
WANT TO SCREW WITH.  
CG: THERE ARE OUTCOMES THAT ARE EVEN WORSE THAN THE COMPLETE  
ANNIHILATION OF EXISTENCE ITSELF  
CG: FORCES MORE DAMAGING TO THE INTEGRITY OF REALITY THAN THOSE  
CAPABLE OF TURNING IMAGINATION INTO PURE VOID  
CG: THEY ARE FORCES WHICH IF HANDLED RECKLESSLY WILL NULLIFY  
THE BASIC ABILITY OF INTELLIGENT BEINGS IN ALL REAL AND  
HYPOTHETICAL PLANES OF EXISTENCE TO GIVE A SHIT.
```

It would take some time to explain the image accompanying this conversation. Might be best to not click this one either.

It becomes crucial, later on, for some of the characters to break through the fourth wall in order to escape their reality being erased. They pass briefly through the author’s reality, and thankfully, abiding by his [previous pledge](#), he does very little to interfere with them. (The text on that image is particularly difficult to read, as the author ran it through a number of image-corruption tools as a joke. In short, he swore that despite his presence in the story, he would refrain from taking any real part in it.) Unfortunately, his pledge had already been broken, when Hussie’s self-insert avatar, [previously](#) used to write recaps, [smashed](#) through the “fifth wall” (look at and scroll the mouse over the top banner) and [proceeded](#) to smack a villain with a

broom. The fifth wall had been [mentioned](#) earlier by said villain, and most readers naturally disregarded it as a joke.

Homestuck is defining a new literary term here, used to denote the barrier between two different omniscient narrators of the same story rather than between the characters and the audience. In fact, when accused of breaking his pledge, Hussie responded that he hadn't touched the fourth wall at all. "It should be noted that by breaking the 5th wall, I am not interfering with the story. I am interfering with the way the story is currently being told." As with most things in the comic, however, this new concept is presented primarily for humor. The author's motivation for attacking said villain was that the villain had taken control of the narrative from him, and he wanted it back. The villain had said control due to [ownership](#) of the game disc. *Homestuck* is a video game, remember? Some time before, the story had been [interrupted](#), a CD referred to as "Disc 1" was ejected, and the "player" was told to insert the second disc. This second disc was revealed to be missing. After this point, the reader "loses control" of the characters. What appears to be another [game](#) loads, but when the reader attempts to use the arrow keys to direct the character as usual, they are informed that they cannot play *Homestuck* without the game disc. A character [finds](#) the missing disc, [damages](#) it, and then [stores](#) it away, at which point the reader is free to try to use it. The mutilation of the disc causes numerous glitches and effectively renders *Homestuck* "[unplayable](#)." The reader is [forced](#) to deliver it to someone that can repair it: the villain. Immediately upon gaining ownership of the disc, the villain [takes over](#) the narrative prompt and even the website color scheme. This is restored to normal only after the author physically beats the life out of him and retrieves the now repaired disc. A similar incident occurs later in the story, with a different villain. The difference is that this time the author is "killed" by the villain, and the villain takes control over the story until the very end.



No, the reader doesn't have to buy this. That's another joke. *Homestuck* is completely free to read.

All of this is patently ridiculous. Nothing about it adheres to typical storytelling conventions, or even common sense. It aligns perfectly with the Benign Violation Theory of humor, subverting every expectation of how stories are meant to operate without ever becoming what the average reader would consider morally improper. Thus, all of it is hysterical.

There had never been anything like *Homestuck* before. It is possible that there will never be anything like *Homestuck* again. However, considering the influence it holds over a significant portion of the rising generation, I doubt the latter. Hussie sparked an advancement in humor and in storytelling in the modern age, and I am enjoying sitting back and watching it unfold. I see traces of *Homestuck* here and there in casual speech, in new works of fiction, and in how people think about stories. This is a difficult thing to quantify in most circumstances, as references to *Homestuck* are often so subtle as to be unclear if they are references at all. Alluding to the comic in increasingly cryptic ways is a frequent pastime of the fandom to this day. Nevertheless, *Homestuck* does have direct links to the acclaimed, and far more mainstream, indie video game *Undertale*. The creator of *Undertale*, Toby Fox, contributed a great deal of music for *Homestuck*, and his game references it both explicitly and thematically. *Homestuck* is also bleeding into popular culture as its fans began producing content of their own. The official Twitter of NBC show *The Good Place* referenced the comic as recently as September 12th, 2018. Multiple modern children's cartoons have known *Homestuck* fans on their writing staff, including the well-received *Steven Universe*. What *Homestuck* has inspired in others, more than anything, is the drive to create stories of similar depth and ingenuity. It's possible for a narrative to be gut-

wrenchingly hilarious, fascinatingly complex, and deeply moving in a single moment, all without adhering to any of the paradigms of the past. *Homestuck* proves that, and most of its readers understood. That may have been Hussie's goal all along. "I am making the kind of thing I would want to read. I am making the kind of thing I wish existed, but doesn't. Yet." Of the future of comedy, of Hussie's next project, of the evolution of literature, I have only the highest of expectations.

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