

IT'S HARD AND NOBODY UNDERSTANDS: Annotations and
Commentary on Andrew Hussie's *Homestuck*

By Fletcher Wortmann

Version history:

1.02.14, V0.82. More revisions. Added proper citations to Kierkegaard and Foster Wallace that I'd somehow forgotten to include first go-around.

I suspect this will be the final revision of this document for some time, likely until Andrew Hussie finishes the comic. As of right now, I'm partway through annotations on Act 6, as well as some additional reading on critics and thinkers whose work seems relevant to MSPA. When *Homestuck* is finished, I hope to release v0.9 of the annotations as an eBook, with complete commentary on Acts 1-7 of the story.

Thank you all for your suggestions and support through this project!

6.28.13, v0.81. Did some cleanup, correcting spelling and grammar errors. Added sources by Jenkins and Kennedy about the protagonist as audience cipher in modern media, and how John relates to this trend. Noted a telling moment in Jade's Alchemization binge as suggested by Silthead on Tumblr.

4.14.13, v0.8. Posted annotations through Act 5 Act 2.

INTRODUCTION:

It's a webcomic. It's a serial illustrated novel. It's a record label for indie electronica. It's the worst RPG sourcebook ever. It's *Infinite Jest* meets *Scott Pilgrim* meets 4Chan. It's Suda 51's game adaptation of David Lynch's remake of *Spy Kids 3D: Game Over*. It's one of those Scholastic Book Club videogame novelizations/"strategy guides" they made in the 80s for stuff like *Castlevania*, about the greatest videogame of all time, except the videogame doesn't exist. It is a memetic parasite that drags its host into isolation and obsession like something from Lovecraft.

Homestuck, brainchild of *MS Paint Adventures* mastermind Andrew Hussie, is the story of John Egbert: a kid playing a videogame that can alter the fabric of his universe. With the help of a co-player, who interferes with John's environment using a giant green cursor, John builds a portal and enters a videogame world - complete with vicious monsters, hapless villagers, and a heroic destiny. Together, John and his friends set out to conquer an evil kingdom and take their rightful places as rulers of a new realm.

And that's when things go wrong. Catastrophically wrong.

The circumstances of the adventure, the "rules" of the game, are complex and frequently obscure. Time-travel, parallel worlds, alternate selves and extradimensional travel eventually come into play - and Hussie trusts his audience to read between the lines and parse out his world's dizzying mythology. At the same time, the complexity of *Homestuck*'s universe is matched by the ceaseless innovation of Hussie's storytelling. *Homestuck* does things with words and pictures I have never seen before, in comics or any other medium, ever. The formal experimentation here allows Hussie to play with perspective, continuity, and metatextuality - in ways that deepen the story's exploration of adolescence, creativity, solipsism, irony, and the conflict between free will and determinism.

For these reasons, *Homestuck* is very difficult to get into, and even veteran readers may miss critical information. I've written these annotations with a new reader in mind, and I hope you'll find them helpful in orienting yourself in *Homestuck*'s dizzying world.

What this guide is not:

Up 'til now, despite it's massive, loyal and financially lucrative base of readers, no one's attempted serious criticism of *Homestuck*. This is a vast and intricate work, and one worthy of serious consideration by diverse intellects.

I am not diverse intellects. I'm working off of a three-year-old undergraduate degree in English Literature and a couple of Wikipedia pages. There are entire schools of criticism that could be productively applied to *Homestuck* that I'm just not qualified to employ. What I'm trying to do here is start a conversation about the work, its merits and its flaws - but it's only a start, hopefully not a conclusion.

This also means that I have not attempted to catalogue every instance of a particular turn of phrase or image composition over the course of the series. Such an undertaking might be useful, but it's beyond the scope of what I, one bro, can accomplish.

In addition: this document is not intended an apologia for *Homestuck* or for Hussie. As I'm sure Hussie would be the first to admit, *Homestuck* is an experimental and improvisational work, and as such is vulnerable to digressions and to editorial oversight. When I notice contradictions, or unclear storytelling, or problematic themes, I will point them out and pick them apart and try to make sense of them in the context of the whole. *Homestuck* is deeply flawed, but even its flaws can be instructive.

And that's why I'm convinced that critical analysis of *Homestuck* is so important. *Homestuck*, as both a text and a phenomenon, is unprecedented. If you are interested in the bleeding edge of comics storytelling and graphic lit, you need to read *Homestuck*. If you care about the future of popular fiction and serialized fiction, you need to be reading *Homestuck*. If you're a major publisher and you despair of readers supporting your work in an age of rampant piracy and free digital content, you need to be reading *Homestuck*.

It's a steep climb, and we'll be making it together - I hope I can keep you from missing a step and taking a tumble. But if you do, remember, you knew exactly what you were getting into.

I warned you about stairs, bro.

I told you, dog.

What this guide is:

I have an academic background in literary criticism and creative writing. I'm also a longtime comic book fan, and I've done some reading on sequential storytelling. So my criticism of *Homestuck* will focus on a couple of areas:

- Recurring themes (some of which I listed above, some of which we'll explore over the course of these annotations), particularly engagement with and criticism of contemporary internet and youth culture.
- Character development and subtext. I'm of the DotA, close reading school, so we'll be picking apart little stuff (turns of phrase, off-hand moments) to see what it implies about the characters, intended or not.
- Sequential storytelling. Like I've said, I'm a comics fan. The MS Paint Adventures format isn't quite like anything else I've encountered in graphic literature, but Hussie employs many of the tricks we see in print comics and traditional media - or finds clever ways to incorporate sound and animation.

With all that out of the way..

...let me tell you about Homestuck.

THE ANNOTATIONS:

ACT 1

1901 -

...the opening words instantly transport me into a new world. All the words that come after in each work do no more than give me further information about a realm I have already entered. The words are radically inaugural. They are the creation, in each case, of a new, alternative universe. These words are a miniature, secular, all-too-human version of God's "Let there be light" in Genesis.
- J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature*.¹

From the very beginning, Hussie's *Homestuck* alludes to the mechanics of videogames and interactive fiction, while denying the reader any kind of meaningful participation in the narrative.

This is a fundamental rule of the story's presentation: *Homestuck* is told in the second person, with the audience as "player," directing the actions of the characters in the story. Except obviously we aren't actually controlling anything - *Homestuck* is a comic, not a videogame, and no matter how badly we want to we can't choose this beady-eyed fellow's name.

And the format is unique as well. You get one "panel" per "page" - but this single unit of storytelling (very handy for annotation purposes, incidentally) could be anything from a still image, to a short animation, to an interactive game, to a music video. Text and art are usually separate, and many pages feature simple illustrations but huge blocks of text.

The other unique thing about *Homestuck* is that the reader will always move forward by clicking the link at the bottom of the page; the mere process of proceeding through the narrative implicates the reader in its progression in a way that, say, reading a book or a comic doesn't, and the author will employ a variety of ingenious ways of exploiting this over the course of the text.

Moving on: *Homestuck* was published on April 13th, or 4/13. 413 is kind of the *LOST* number of *Homestuck*, appearing again and again so suggest some kind of creepy cosmic synchronicity. I tried, and eventually gave up, on

¹ J. Hillis Miller. *On Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 25.

documenting every instance of this number in the comic. But they are there if you want to look for them.

1902 - "Zoosmell Pooplord." Already we're getting into "trolling," which, for the uninitiated, is a very peculiar sort of perversity in discourse unique to the internet. The practice is named after troll fishing, in which a net is let out to drift through the ocean, allowing passing fish to entangle themselves. Online trolling started when clever agitators learned to set traps on message boards by posting particularly incendiary comments, then to sit back and enjoy the chaos as infuriated commentators tried to engage with their nonsense. From here, trolling has expanded to encompass any exploitation of the anonymity and reach of the internet to stir up trouble. Start a conversation online and I guarantee: someone, anonymously, will respond with the most inappropriate answer imaginable. And you'll have no idea whether they mean it, or whether they're just trying to mess with your head.

Tellingly, here, the author blames this choice of name on his readers - it is taken for granted that, were we given such a level of control over the comic, we would try to derail the narrative by giving the protagonist the most ludicrous name possible..

1903 - "John Egbert."

...except we aren't allowed to. The author makes it clear immediately who's really pulling the strings. Note John's response to both suggestions: he grimaces at the first and smiles at the second. Even though he may not have control over his destiny (any more than we, the audience, do) he is at least allowed an emotional reaction to his circumstances.

The (immediately retracted) offer to the reader to pick John's name plays with an increasingly common convention in popular media, especially videogames. In a conversation with Mary Fuller, Henry Jenkins (legendary scholar of fandom and online culture) observes some common ground between the heroes of contemporary videogames and those of historic records of exploration:

Nintendo®'s central feature is its constant presentation of spectacular spaces (or "worlds," to use the game parlance). Its landscapes dwarf characters who serve, in turn, primarily as vehicles for players to move through these remarkable places. Once immersed in playing, we don't really care whether we rescue Princess Toadstool or not; all that matters is staying alive long enough to move

between levels, to see what spectacle awaits us on the next screen...

...characters play a minimal role, displaying traits that are largely capacities for action: fighting skills, modes of transportation, preestablished goals... The character is little more than a cursor that mediates the player's relationship to the story world. Activity drains away the characters' strength, as measured by an ever shifting graph at the top of the screen, but it cannot build character, since these figures lack even the most minimal interiority.²

That's why so many games let you pick your character's name: Nintendo protagonists like Link and Mario aren't really compelling heroes on their own, but ciphers that allow the reader access to the land of Hyrule or the Mushroom Kingdom.

And in a 2003 article for *The Boston Globe*, arts and entertainment writer Louis Kennedy extends this trend to the protagonists of contemporary sci-fi franchises, characters like the heroes of the *Pokémon* anime or Neo of *The Matrix*.³ Even though both series include non-interactive media (the *Pokémon* anime, the *Matrix* films and supplemental comics), their lead characters are still generically heroic but otherwise poorly defined, to better allow audiences to fantasize about living out their adventures. Well-developed characters are harder to imagine yourself as, after all. Better to give your hero only a few distinct traits (white dude, nerdy, vaguely heroic) so that the largest possible portion of your intended audience can pretend to be him.

With John Egbert, Hussie toys with this strategy, though he ultimately moves past it. At the start of the story John is basically translucent, a cipher like Link or Mario, or even the titular Problem Sleuth of Hussie's previous *MS Paint Adventures* project - an understandable choice, to help the reader get used to *Homestuck*'s twisted suburban universe and idiosyncratic storytelling. But the moment Hussie stops us from picking a name for John, it's clear this kid isn't just gonna be an avatar for us to pilot

² Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins. "Nintendo and New World Travel Writing." *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (1995): 57-72. Fuller & Jenkins: Nintendo and New World Travel Writing. Stanford University. Web. 15 Apr. 2013. <http://www.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Cyberspace/FullerJenkins_Nintendo.html>.

³ Louis Kennedy. "PIECE OF MIND: FORGET ABOUT BEGINNINGS, MIDDLES, AND ENDS. THE NEW STORYTELLING IS ABOUT MAKING YOUR WAY IN A FRAGMENTED, IMAGINARY WORLD." *Boston Globe* 1 June 2003: N5. Print.

through *Homestuck's* world: he has an identity and story of his own, and as the narrative continues and the cast expands and we see John in the context of his friends and allies, we'll get a better sense of his character. For the first leg of the narrative, Hussie will play coy with John's personality - but keep an eye out for details in the narration and environment that hint at a more developed character.

1904 - Our first glimpse at John's dubious taste in entertainment.

1905-7 - We get a bit of business involving the abstract representation of John's "sprite" and the message is clear: reality is fluid in *Homestuck*, and visual and gameplay abstractions can be employed or ignored by the author at whim to serve the needs of the story. John is both a thirteen-year-old boy with a family and history, and at the same time a videogame character with no prior existence who needs to be named by the reader.

The device of the reader helping John move his cake is a little incongruous, and is quickly abandoned by the comic - although at this stage of the story it's likely employed as a way to further disorient the reader re:his or her agency - we see an icon representing "our" mouse when really all we can do is keep clicking on the next command. Also, shades of this concept will remain in the interface of the SBURB game.

The narrative refers to John's "Captchatalogue" and "Sylladex" for the first time: a videogamesque item storage system, with quirks that will figure prominently in the antics of the first few acts. Oddly, when referring to these devices the narrator tells John: "You have no idea what that actually means though." This is quickly contradicted, as the story establishes that John and all other characters have access to this system and have since birth. But the statement is also true in a sense: we the readers haven't heard these words before, and as the hero in the alleged "videogame" the reader is "playing", John hasn't either - he did not exist prior to our "booting up" the game and "naming" him.

1910 - John tries, and fails, to use his prop arms, due to gameplay mechanics neither he nor the reader quite understands...

1915 - ...and here he sends the damn things flying out uncontrollably. I hope you find idea amusing, because we'll be seeing a lot of it for the next five-hundred-odd

pages. I'll try to indicate where you can safely skip past this stuff without missing anything important.

1916 - "Squawk like an imbecile and shit on your desk." Perversity, again, as the reader instructs John to do the most horrible and inappropriate thing possible at the moment. And yet John refuses; he has some integrity of character, it seems, and though the reader (or more accurately, the prewritten commands attributed to the reader) can instruct him we can't force him to do anything he wouldn't otherwise.

(Now, that being said - at this point of the story the author was still incorporating reader commands and suggestions into the narrative. But there's no indication which commands were suggested, versus which were invented by the author, so I'll be approaching *Homestuck* as a late-arriving reader with no to no knowledge of this aspect of the storytelling. It seems fair to take the archived narrative at face value, and many of the commands that seem to have been sent in by frustrated or impatient readers are incorporated to further the work's subversion of audience expectations and it's theme of predestination vs. free will - so it all fits together fine.)

(And SA forums user Bobulus has informed me that this particular command was also included as a tip of the hat to an MSPA-style fan adventure, featuring a parrot wizard.)

(And finally, although this was almost certainly unintentional, as someone who suffers from intrusive thoughts OCD I can't help but notice that John's horror at this inexplicable image and his inability to get it out of his mind both suggest the symptoms of this disorder. That said, I doubt this was deliberate, and in any case all characters struggle with these sorts of horrible fleeting figments over the course of the narrative [as most people do, OCD or not], so we aren't learning anything special about John's psychology.)

1921 - John loves mediocre movies. That said: in the quality of the media he enjoys and the unhealthiness and intensity of his fascination, he hardly the worst character in the comic.

1924 - John's browser is "Typhesus" and his IM program is "Pesterchum." The latter, along with the replacing of the "Start" command on his menu bar with "Actuate", demonstrate the author's fondness for unnecessarily verbose synonyms. This is a well we'll be returning to.

1926 - First appearance of turntechGodhead, aka Dave Strider. Note each character has a unique typing style and text color - given comic's expansive cast, this is a smart way to help the reader instantly identify who is speaking to whom.

1930 - John's discomfort interacting with his father, his begrudging attitude towards his friends, his sense of being "stuck" in his room - to me, these all suggest social anxiety, that John is not a kid that gets out much. John seems pretty normal, but it's conspicuous and probably deliberate that he doesn't seem to have any offline friends.

1931 - The author integrates some of his previous works into the comic as fictional videogames. This self-referentiality *Is A Thing* - *Homestuck* will eventually introduce a library of fictional stories, games and films, many of which will intersect with multiple levels of reality in the narrative.

1935 - Dave knows how the Sylladex works. This is indicative of the slightly murky nature of the "game mechanics" at this point in the story, and John's role as "player character" - he doesn't know this stuff even though it's apparently common knowledge, because we, the "players" of the game, don't. Here Dave's adopting the role of a helpful NPC, like the forest elves in *Zelda* who teach the player to press B to swing the sword, even though as characters inside a videogame they have no context for understanding what a "B Button" is and anyway Link should already know how to swing a damn sword himself.

1941 - Here's one of our first examples of (terrible) media and culture within *Homestuck* - the "Game Bro" magazine.

1947 - ...and another with Dad's love of creepy "harlequins."

1948 - Repeating flash animation is used frequently in *Homestuck*. I find pages like this, where a simple loop of a flame in the fireplace, to be effective at enhancing the atmosphere of a scene without being too showy; pages that show complicated animations of characters inevitably lose a little of their impact when they loop and start again.

1950 -

"The moon's an arrant thief, and her pale fire she snatches from the sun." -Mark Twain. You are almost certain Mark Twain said that."

John is wrong, as the author presumably knows - the quotation is from William Shakespeare. (Although since

Mark Twain is the model for John's favorite old-timey jokesmith, Col. Sassacre, the misattribution is significant.)

The line also provided the title for Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, another innovative work that utilizes different kinds of media (a poem by a fictional author, and annotations on that poem by a fictional academic) and engages in multiple levels of fiction and reality (it is suggested that the supposed annotator is in fact an invention of the poet).

You may also be familiar with MGMT's "Kids" - a 2008 single that combines lyrics about the wonder and horror of children's inner lives with danceable synth music (exploring similar emotional and musical territory to *Homestuck*). I bring this up because the band's music video for the song starts with a Nietzsche quote misattributed to Mark Twain. Now, this installment of *Homestuck* was published in April of 2009, preceding the MGMT video by a couple of months. But I suspect it's unlikely (though not impossible) the band was inspired by *Homestuck*, and that this isn't some case of weird cross-media pop synchronicity.

1961 - "Examine 3rd and 4th walls of room." A winking reference to the metafictional elements of the story, and a reminder of John's highly suspect taste in cinema.

1963 - First appearance of Rose Lalonde, our tentacle therapist.

John's absolute earnestness is his most distinguishing quality (observe in this installment his extremely lame prank, which Rose gamely tolerates). He's pretty much an open book at this point, and more complicated and interesting characters will rapidly eclipse him - but his sincerity and emotional transparency will make him, if nothing else, a reliable foil for other, more devious personalities. Already we see a little tension as he interacts with sarcastic Dave and sophisticated Rose.

1969 - First excerpt of *Colonel Sassacre's*. The old-timey pastiche language seems to owe something to Chris Onstad's *Achewood* (as does Dave Strider's hip-hop vernacular, for that matter).

1970-81 - A bunch of sylladex nonsense, not important.

1982 - Consider this excerpt:

"The streets are empty. Wind skims the voids keeping neighbors apart, as if grazing the hollow of a cut reed, or

say, a plundered mailbox. A familiar note is produced. It's the one Desolation plays to keep its instrument in tune.

It is your thirteenth birthday, and as with all twelve preceding it, something feels missing from your life."

Maybe a little overwritten, but I consider this passage to be as good a summation of the melancholy at the core of *Homestuck* as anything the text provides us: it evokes the loneliness of growing up in American suburbia and building friendships over distances mediated by information technology. That's what the title of the series evokes, I think: to be at Home, to be somewhere that is supposed to be same and nurturing and comfortable, but to be Stuck there.

Google informs me this quote is taken from the Maxims of François de La Rochefoucauld - the obvious misquotation undermines the poignancy of the preceding paragraph, a technique we'll see used again over the course of the narrative. Hussie is fond of subverting serious moments - appropriately for such a fragmented story, *Homestuck* frequently juxtaposes pathos with comedy, and comedy with horror. It can be very effective, but there are a few instances where it feels like the author's trying to cover his own ass after a moment of sincerity with a "jk, lol".

1984 - ...and any trace of poignancy or subtlety remaining is thoroughly extinguished by John's sudden impulse to poop in the mailbox. Because the fake Walt Whitman quote wasn't enough, I guess.

1990 - Here's one of *Homestuck*'s most impressive devices - the fake RPG battle.

I love *Homestuck*'s fake RPG battles. They are impressive bits of programming that take advantage of the story's multimedia format and express, interactively, several of the story's key themes:

1. They make a complete mockery of the mechanics of the RPG genre. In most role-playing games, the player participates in codified turn-based combat, selecting attacks and techniques from a menu to strategically beat down his foes. Of course, in many games, the tactical element is superfluous, and the whole process is reduced to mindless repetition, as the player character grows stronger while enemies become weaker and weaker and just selecting "FIGHT" is enough to win with fanfare and spoils aplenty. It all gets to be a bit hollow and pointless.

Homestuck's RPG combat sticks a knife in this. Your attacks don't do *anything*, and you can *never* win - only select the same techniques over and over again until you give up and artificially end the "battle" by moving to the next page. There's no resolution, you haven't accomplished anything, and you receive no reward or commendation for it.

2. They suggest the infantile psychology of the player characters - John can't conceive of this interaction with his father as anything *but* a conflict, and a conflict based on a child's videogame at that, even though a clear-eyed appraisal of the situation shows that Dad just wants to wish his son a happy birthday. John looks pretty bad at the end of this - it's the clearest criticism we've seen yet of the character and his worldview.

3. Again, they taunt the player with the possibility of agency and interactivity, except the choices offered are all meaningless - frustrating the player and suggesting *Homestuck's* theme of predestination. If you can't deal with being mocked as a reader/player (or even worse, if you don't recognize the criticism of the audience here), you probably won't enjoy *Homestuck*.

1992 - The mechanic of the "Prankster's Gambit" is another example of John's need to quantify abstract experiences - conflict can only be understood in numerical, videogame-derived terms.

1993-2008 - More sylladex nonsense of dubious relevance. Skim if you like.

2010 - First appearance of Jade, the garden Gnostic. Hussie plays this character close to his chest, so we won't get much from her except for cryptic remarks and general enthusiasm for a long time. GG, as you may know, is an internet acronym for "good game" - perhaps a nod to the character's cheery demeanor.

2012 - First appearance of the Midnight Crew, who appear as a feature on the in-comic version of the *MS Paint Adventures* website, but later show up as actual characters in the story. The key to this is the in-comic presence of Hussie himself, but that's a whole other headache so we won't bother with him for a while.

2016 - Parody/pastiche of the "For Dummies" books.

2017-31 - SO much sylladex nonsense, although John's reaction to his accidental desecration of his McConaughey poster is amusing.

2035 - John isn't the brightest, is he?

2037 - This is an extended reference to the opening sequence of the original Will Wright "Sim" games, which featured similarly nonsensical "loading..." comments.

These games, and "The Sims" in particular, were apparently a major inspiration for the SBURB (i.e. Sim-Suburb) game system.

2038 - "TT: Select magic chest." For the first time, we've adopted the perspective of tentacleTherapist, aka Rose Lalonde.

INTERLUDE: I think there could be some value, for new readers, in explaining the arcane mechanics of this bit of the SBURB game. John and his pals figure this out as they go along anyway, but if you're having trouble following here's the progression:

1. The Cruxtruder produces a "Kernel Sprite." This Sprite can be combined with an object to produce a helpful spirit guide. Doing so increases the complexity of the in-game Battlefield (a good thing, and necessary to win the game) and imbues in-game enemies with attributes from the object (a bad thing, giving them extra powers and making them tougher to beat).
2. It also begins a countdown, summoning deadly meteors to destroy the player's homeworld (a very bad thing). (This cannot be stopped - by starting the game you have doomed your world.)
3. Finally, it produces a cylinder of cruxite.
4. The cruxite can be used with the totem lathe and a pre-punched information card to create a totem.
5. The totem can be used with the alchemeter to produce an artifact that, when destroyed, teleports the player and his or her home into the Medium (the game world).

END INTERLUDE

2041 - **EB: :(**

Poor John! The emoticon is, incidentally, one of the neat advantages of the IM format of *Homestuck's* dialogue - emoticons have the power of hieroglyphics, as visual representations of a character's emotional state interspersed amid verbal information. It's something I wish more comics creators would try - comics are made of words and pictures and it's cool to see them interact in an unexpected way.

2060 - John's denial of his "pent-up frustration with [his] father" gives us a sense of how this kid deals with unpleasant emotions - by burying them under layers of optimism and enthusiasm. It's not a particularly healthy coping mechanism, and it's one we'll see him struggle with over the course of the story.

2064 - TT acts haughty and superior, but for the first time we see her get a little flustered as she messes something up.

2074 - Like John, TT seems anxious to avoid interacting with her parent.

2114 - And our formal introduction to Rose Lalonde, aka TT. Note the poster on her wall, Sigmund Freud with a Cthulhu head - a literal tentacled therapist.

2129 - Irony, again, as it relates to the Lalonde family intergenerational dynamics, and wizards.

2146 - John receives his cruxite artifact, an apple. He bites into it, leaving his childhood neighborhood and entering the game world. The Edenic symbolism here is pretty obvious.

2147 - END OF ACT 1

2148 - First appearance of WV, the Wayward Vagabond. His backstory, and that of his home and indeed species, is too complicated to get into here, so we'll leave him for now. It's worth noting that his interlude opens up a new narrative in a new tab, using browser functionality to locate him outside of the kids' narrative.

2149 -

"My introduction will be sparse. There will be no majestic prose blustering into the sails of a galleon as we embark on this voyage together. Nor will there be any hamfisted prose whipping its limbs under the bedsheet like a retarded ghost, for that matter. I won't set the stage, or dim the lights. The mood, you see, will be set soon enough."

Geez Louise, Rose. What would have happened if you tried to write a *deliberately* wordy introduction? "The mood, you see, will be set soon enough" is in particular a *completely ridiculous sentence*. This is a reminder that, while Rose seems sophisticated compared to John, she's still thirteen, and prone to saying and doing ridiculous things.

2150 - Welcome to the Medium.

2151 - John is harassed by a mysterious voice...

2153 - ...who will turn out to be WV. Make sure to click the "control" icon as soon as you start this interactive installment, otherwise you'll have the little "click this!" icon in the corner of your screen the entire time.

It's challenging to talk about this scene in particular without revealing WV's backstory, so here's just a bit of exposition: WV is a Carapacian, a friendly in-game NPC. As part of the game, after the players' homeworld has been decimated by meteors, a handful of Carapacians are sent to the ruins; there, they set about rebuilding civilization, and access Game technology to communicate backwards through time with the players. These guys are called "Exiles," and we'll see more of them.

I bring this up because I think it's worth taking a look at the complex, recursive web of narrative the author has spun. We're reading a comic, and one that takes many of its presentation cues from point-and-click adventure games and Japanese RPGs. Within the comic, we the readers and "players" are symbolically aligned with WV, who also watches John and spurs him forward in his quest. But at the same time, WV is a product of the Game.

So we're reading a comic about playing a videogame about a videogame character guiding a kid playing a videogame.

Except in this excerpt, where we actually control John as a videogame character; here we're playing a game within a comic, as a friendly NPC directing a young boy playing a videogame (BOY. OPEN THIS DOOR AND WALK THROUGH IT).

I hope that clears things up.

A few additional notes: although the captions are in second person, they vary between expressing John's inner monologue ("You wonder what happened to your DAD?") and messages back to WV ("THIS IS NO TIME FOR LAUNDRY." "You're right. Thank you for being sensible about it.").

And we have a bit of understated foreshadowing as John examines his grandmother's ashes ("you would probably benefit from her elderly wisdom now").

Finally: it's my duty to inform you that you can access the "Trickster Mode" nonsense in this flash. It's ctrl-T in Windows... I have a Mac and this doesn't work in Chrome but shft-cmmd-T works in Firefox. Uh, enjoy?

2166 - Note here, WV uses a double arrow command to direct John forward..

2167 - ...and here, someone tells him "Just one ==> command will suffice. Thanks." It's unclear if this is John or Hussie himself, reminding us of an additional level to the narrative.

2170 - Apparently when WV gets impatient he uses additional arrows to demonstrate his displeasure.

2171 - And here's the reveal of WV's identity. Sorry for spoiling that for you. Again, notice how the comic opens in a new tab, locating WV outside of John's story.

2172 - Meanwhile, on GameFAQs, Rose lays out the game mechanics in greater detail than I have.

2175 - A quick reminder: the Sprite will take on the properties of whatever it is "prototyped" with, as it took its appearance from the mangled harlequin doll. So John and Rose are trying to upgrade it.

2185 - I just want to point out that I love the use of looping animation on this page. Poor John is left almost catching sight of his Granma's sprite, potentially in perpetuity. Free him from this purgatory by clicking the next page.

2186 - John, so infatuated with ghosts and monsters, has found himself victim to one of the hoariest tropes in horror - a spook that the audience can see but that stays

just outside of the protagonist's field of vision. Of course, that the spook in question is the protagonist's own grandmother reincarnated as a playful harlequin spirit guide defuses the tension a bit.

2193 - Jade is the least differentiated of the four main child heroes in *Homestuck* - her voice is at this point almost indistinguishable from John's, and her hook is "mysterious girl" rather than anything distinct or compelling about her personality. For my money, Jade is the major character it takes Hussie the longest to get a handle on. Right now, she just brings out John's own precociousness, and the two of them together become annoyingly twee.

2194 - There are some weird racial issues in *Homestuck*, which we'll get to eventually, but I think Dave's complaint about the cliché of African-American presidents in science fiction is fair enough.

2197 - "There are some dark forces you just don't want to mess around with. You understand this better than most." Rose briefly considers equipping her pseudo-necronomicon as her weapon. I'm sure I don't have to tell you this is foreshadowing.

2201 - This is a pretty effective parody of Lovecraft, if not especially subtle (but then, since when has Lovecraft had anything to do with subtle?). Showing a bunch of the previous page's "ultimate horror" bouncing around the new monster on each page is a particularly nice touch.

Several of these monsters appeared in Hussie's previous adventure, *Problem Sleuth*.

2205 - This page appears to be another reference to *Problem Sleuth*, where electronic windows served as gateways between dimensions, and could be unplugged for a variety of effects. We'll eventually see such devices in *Homestuck*, although not for quite a while.

2207 - Hussie is no longer even trying to make his misattributed quotes plausible. The quote, of course, is from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

2208 - And here's Dave Strider, in the flesh.

2212 - Pay attention to the posters on Dave's walls: the green guys and the robots will both appear again.

The line "You like to rave about BANDS NO ONE'S EVER HEARD OF BUT YOU" suggests Dave is intended as an archetypal hipster, in the same way that John is a nerd and Rose is

kinda gothy. The characters outgrow these stereotypes pretty quickly, but Dave is a special case: his alleged identity as a music connoisseur and online tastemaker is dropped entirely in favor of his self-conscious ironic embrace of everything terrible. That said, Dave kinda needs the narrator to vouch for his hipness. With his collection of crappy mail-order Japanese weapons and his terrible webcomic, he comes dangerously close to looking like an actual nerd, not an ironic one.

2214 - This page establishes that we're watching Dave a while before John and Rose booted up the game. The nonlinear storytelling here prepares us for the introduction of time travel later in the comic.

2215 - The "sudden compulsion to do something horrible" device returns, and it breaks through Dave's unflappable cool, just a little.

2216 - ...but not for long. "You will however contemplate bleating like a goat for IRONICALLY HUMOROUS purposes at a later date."

2218 - If I understand Dave's irony calculus here: his glasses are from the mediocre Stiller and Wilson vehicle *Starsky and Hutch*, a film he enjoys only ironically. However, his ironic appreciation of their origin makes the glasses valuable and thus legitimately, unironically cool - if only as they allow Dave to express his contempt for and superiority over Stiller, Wilson et al by wearing them.

(For a more in-depth explanation of Dave's understanding of irony, check out the annotation for page 2348.)

Irony is a tricky beast, and its use throughout *Homestuck* is complex and pervasive. Dramatic irony (in which the reader is aware of important information the characters are ignorant of) is employed throughout; you might make a case for Bro's hostile mentorship of his kid brother as a kind of Socratic irony (supported by the fact that, in another time and place, Bro uses a pseudonym inspired by one of Plato's dialogues). But I'm hardly an expert on the subject - so instead, I'd like to draw attention to two particular definitions of irony, and how they might relate to *Homestuck*:

The first is Soren Kierkegaard's early exploration of irony. I've only dabbled in Kierkegaard's work, and I haven't reviewed this part of his writing in depth, but I am interested in the definition of irony he gives here:

...irony [is] the infinite absolute negativity. It is negativity, because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not.⁴

There's something there, I think, that resonates with *Homestuck*, and particularly its exploration of negativity/perversity through internet trolling. That's something to bat around as we read: the idea that irony, like trolling, offers criticism without any kind of constructive argument. It can only tear down, and never create anything new.

The other writer I'd like to touch on is the great David Foster Wallace, and his essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction". In this piece, Foster Wallace identifies the snarky, self-mocking tone prevalent in many sitcoms and successful advertisements, and then argues that this ironic tone flatters the viewer into letting his or her guard down; the best way to get someone reasonably intelligent to watch something awful, it seems, is to admit up front how lousy it is, and frame the whole thing as a shared joke (as a fan of NBC's meta-sitcom *Community*, this hits a bit close to home). But, touching on Kierkegaard, Foster Wallace adds that such ironic material has little intrinsic value of its own. Foster Wallace quotes critic Lewis Hyde: "'Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage.' This is because irony, entertaining as it is, serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing... But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocracies it debunks."⁵

Obviously this contemporary definition of irony resonates with the Strider siblings. *SBaHJ* is hilarious, sure, but why does Dave devote so much of himself to something so inconsequential and deliberately awful? You might argue that Strider's wholehearted embrace of irony is a little bit self-destructive: it's a flawed tool, a crutch he uses to cope with the loneliness and disappointment that

⁴ Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong. "The Concept of Irony." *The Essential Kierkegaard*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000. 28. Print

⁵ David Foster Wallace. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*. Boston: Little, Brown and, 1997. 67.

Homestuck identifies as the central emotional challenge of modern adolescence.

2222 - A little more humanization of Dave the insufferable badass: he's really fond of John, and actually wants to wish him a happy birthday "in his own cool, sort of roundabout way of course." It isn't just that Dave has a friend that makes this sympathetic; it's that this consummate hipster is friends with the most guileless, enthusiastic, dopey character in the comic.

2223 - Dave's browser is Hephaestus - a continuation of the Greek mythology riff we saw with John's browser, Typhus.

2224 - Hussie repeats a conversation we already read on 1926. This locates us a little more precisely on the series' timeline - John hasn't even left his room yet. Later on, when Hussie has reason to repeat a chatlog, he'll just provide a link to the previous log rather than pasting it into a new entry.

2226 - lets talk about *SWEET BRO* and *HELA JEFF*.

SBAHJ started on the penny arcade forum, and the original thread is still available here: <http://forums.penny-arcade.com/discussion/85435/higher-technology/p1>. The comic was conceived in response to another user's godawful submissions, and many of the staples of *SBAHJ* were developed to parody specific elements of the original strip: the two main characters, the half-lidded eyes, and the infamous "Y-SHAPES" mouths. *SBAHJ* is notable for being a pastiche of the absolute worst elements of webcomics: the lazy and crude references in place of jokes, the repetitive art... the "i cant wait to be a useless piece of shit all day and play these games" in the second comic is a pretty pointed attack on the lack of ambition Hussie finds in many of his peers.

The difference, of course, is that *SBAHJ* is anything but lazy. Hussie has stated that the visuals in *SBAHJ* take more work than those in *Homestuck* proper - the illustrations are fine-tuned to be as offensive and aesthetically irritating as possible. The comic pushes the ironic hipster fashion for the outdated and garish to uncomfortable extremes. *SBAHJ* isn't like an old TV show or bad eighties rock album; it is just *totally, offensively awful*, in ways that will never look good on a distressed Urban Outfitters t-shirt. It's like the sound of nails on a chalkboard.

Here's an old installment of Hussie's Forumspring where he addresses the importance of *SBAHJ*:

It's clearly rooted primarily in jackassery which no doubt is not for everyone but it's presence in the story does have an ACTUAL LITERARY PURPOSE.

It is an invention within the universe for the kids to reference amongst themselves endlessly. Friends on the internet do this all the time. Instead of using memes from reality, I made this one up as a satirical project of one of the characters. The strip provides the core of memes that fuels much of their banter, and that core is added to as I (Dave) make(s) more comics. Certain memes upon reaching a critical density begin to accumulate an entire vocabulary to slip into during casual banter amongst those familiar with it. That is what has happened, and the density is such that the vocabulary has even permeated the narrative itself.

Those who don't care for *SBAHJ* much or merely "put up" with its presence in HS most likely are not appreciating the fact that it is mostly another device employed for rigorous universe building. In no way is its attachment to HS just a vehicle for hocking it as one of my asinine side projects. If it strikes many as a viable standalone form of entertainment it is only because it has that effectively served my purpose for it, which is to build this universe.

And more than just an amusing footnote or a device for "universe building," *SBAHJ* exists in conversation with *Homestuck* in two important ways: first, it provides a very distinct aesthetic that Hussie can fall into for a punchline when needed (and, as we'll see, he's not afraid to do this after a particularly serious or horrifying moment that needs to be deflated). The second is that, in a story so fascinated by terrible art and our relationship to it as consumers, *SBAHJ* provides a sort of absolute zero of aesthetic quality. Whenever Dave directs us to a new installment of his opus, Hussie's telling us: "This is as bad as it gets."

I suspect, in a few ways, Hussie identifies with Dave more than any of his other characters, specifically "Dave as ambivalent creator of sometimes-terrible art, consumed enthusiastically by a sometimes-terrible audience".

We'll (eventually) address the *SBAHJ* canon in an appendix at the end of these annotations.

2238 - Dave is a DJ. This interactive segment is reminiscent of in-game music features in a number of videogames, particularly the *Legend of Zelda* series: there's a long-standing tradition of fans using in-game instruments to replicate actual compositions or produce new

ones. Although in a characteristic twist on this tradition, you can't actually play any music you want - only remix prerecorded music, once again limiting the player/reader's agency.

2240 - John, despite his childlike ingenuousness, proves a pretty effective troll. He knows how to get inside your head.

2244 - "You glance at one of the many RADICAL PUPPETS in your BRO'S collection and nod in approval.

Is there anything not awesome about your BRO? No, you think not."

Dave's relationship with his Bro is fraught with weird tensions. Most important, and at the same time sort of sad and endearing, is how Dave uncritically accepts his brother's strange hobbies as completely valid and healthy and awesome - and when he can't do this, when Bro is just too damn weird, Dave excuses him by insisting they're part of some complicated ironic performance art. He never allows himself to consider the possibility that Bro might be a genuine weirdo, legitimately fond of his terrible puppets. It speaks to how we make excuses for the failings of the people we look up to - and how Dave, despite his superior attitude, is still an insecure kid in many respects.

2245 - Note the exaggerated 1990s hip-hop outfit of this puppet (backwards cap, wallet chain, boxers showing over baggy shorts). The puppets aren't just creepy - they're also kinda tacky and embarrassing in a way that should be anathema to our cultural maven Dave, but that he can almost approve of *ironically*.

2256 - I love the tiny, tiny blinking exclamation point used here to mark Dave's displeasure. Shades of *Metal Gear Solid*, a stealth-action game where alerted guards display an exclamation icon over their heads before they start to gun you down.

2258 - In case it isn't entirely clear, Rose's claim that she hates wizards may not be entirely legit. Methinks she doth protest too much.

2273 - Rose's conviction that her mother is secretly mocking her is dubious, at best. It's interesting that Dave always gives his brother the benefit of the doubt (his creepy hobbies are ironic, his bullying is only to toughen Dave up) Rose always paints her mother in the worst possible light (her attempts at connecting with and

praising her daughter are sarcastic and passive-aggressive).

2286 - John almost falls victim to another cheesy horror trope (as he did in 2186) but Dave snaps him out of it. "of course there are monsters in your house".

At the same time, though, John calls Dave out on his bullshit regarding his brother:

EB: that's fine, you are entitled to your opinion, i am just saying that being a white guy who is a rapper with a ventriloquist doll is not cool by any stretch of the imagination or by any definition of word cool, ironic or otherwise. that's all i'm saying.

TG: yeah bullshit

TG: cal is dope

TG: puppets are awesome

TG: john egbert blows

TG: the end

Lil Cal is... well, he's Lil Cal. He's a puppet, not the brother, in case that was unclear. But we'll get there when we get there, and not one instant sooner, because I'd prefer to keep Cal out of my mind for as long as possible.

Moving on...

EB: that's fine, you are entitled to your opinion, i am just saying that being a white guy who is a rapper with a ventriloquist doll is not cool by any stretch of the imagination or by any definition of word cool, ironic or otherwise. that's all i'm saying.

Criticism means examining something from all angles, even the ones that are uncomfortable. Which means we're about to touch the button so hot it will burn your finger: RACE (hissssss) (this is the sound of our fingers burned by the hotness hissssss).

There was actually a little tempest in a teapot around this installment. It began when a fan asked Hussie what race the characters were: the author responded that the designs were intentionally made to be racially ambiguous and while they probably couldn't be interpreted as African-American, anything else was fair game for fan depictions.

Furthermore: if you read *Homestuck* and ASSUME that the characters MUST be white because of the numerous white cultural signifiers (suburban dwelling, businessman dad in a porkpie hat, woozy alcoholic mom with a 50s haircut, station wagon in the driveway, etc. etc.) then it is YOU, reader, who is the REAL RACIST.

Readers immediately called him out on this, pointing to official art in calendars and such that showed the kids as

white, as well as the passage above. Hussie then chose to spite them by replacing the word "white" in the passage above with a scrambled gif of unreadable letters. This didn't really solve anything, of course, and wasn't supposed to, and in any case the author seems to have reverted to the original text in the intervening months.

Here's the real problem with race in *Homestuck*: the author insists that coloring his characters chalk-white he renders them racially neutral.

It doesn't.

At all.

The suggestion that the characters' races could be swapped around, without changing how the characters are perceived or how they present themselves or how society sees them or a million other complicated variables associated with race in America - that's nonsense. Even if their designs are abstract enough to be ethnically ambiguous, the human characters in *Homestuck* are indisputably *culturally* white. To ignore that and claim they represent some kind of race-transcending blank state is disingenuous at best, and falls into the "everyone's white by default until you hear otherwise" trap at worst. Meanwhile, the only black characters in *Homestuck* are celebrities (Snoop Dogg, Barkley, Dutton) who, like all celebrities in *Homestuck*, are there to be mocked. Combine this with the mockery of rap and hip-hop (by the exclusively white protagonists) and you can see why some readers get a little queasy, or try to ignore the issue entirely.

That's not to say that *Homestuck* doesn't make some insightful points about race and racism. I pointed out Dave's comments about the "black president" cliché above. I think Geromy in *SBAHJ* is probably the most hilariously on-point takedown of the "black best friend" cliché in media I've ever seen. And even if the humans in *Homestuck* are all white, the work still has interesting and valuable things to say about the meaning of whiteness in America. I think the heart of *Homestuck* is its depiction of the profound loneliness at the core of modern American adolescence. *Homestuck* suggests that you can have everything going for you (security, comfort, access to technology - and yeah, the wealth of privileges that come with being white and living in the suburbs in America) and still be lonely and unhappy. I think that's a useful contribution to any conversation about race in America:

that even the supposed beneficiaries of an unjust system can still be hurt by it.

The strangest part about all of this is that Hussie WILL LATER INTRODUCE genuinely race-neutral characters in the form of the Trolls, whose bizarre alien culture is completely divorced from our own and who have invited a variety of depictions by fans. And, happily, Hussie eventually put his money where his mouth is, and licensed official art and merch depicting the human kids as races other than white - giving his blessing to fans who prefer to read the kids with different racial backgrounds.

Thus we remove our bone-scorched digits from that infernal button, the stink of melting flesh rich in our nostrils, and call 911 for treatment of our symbolic 3rd-degree burns. What color is the skin that was scorched? *Only you, reader, can answer that question - for yourself.*

2287 - First appearance of the imps, the Goomba/Octorok/Goblin-level adversaries of the Medium. Note that the little guy has taken on the properties of the harlequin doll - as we discussed before, any attributes prototyped onto the sprite before entering the Medium are transferred to certain in-game characters and enemies as well.

2288 - The appearance of the character's symbol in the background during an attack (as seen with John in 1990) is reminiscent of the super moves in the Capcom Vs. series.

Another point for Rose's mother legitimately trying to win her daughter's love, despite Rose's insistence that she's being passive-aggressive - she got Rose a pony! C'mon!

The horse, Maplehoof, has a tattoo on her flank reminiscent of those from the much-beloved-by-the-internet *My Little Pony*. Amusingly, this page was published long before *MLP* achieved infamy.

2290 - Rose, you WUV that pony. Begrudgingly, yes, but you still WUV it.

2297 - Trickster Mode works here - enter 024913 in the box when prompted.

2305 - Another way in which *Homestuck* mocks RPG conventions - the ranks John can achieve on his "echeladder", usually a way for a videogame to flatter the player, all have wildly condescending names like "Gadabout Pipsqueak."

2320 - You may not have noticed, yet, but we've yet to see two characters actually converse face to face in *Homestuck*.

We won't officially for a while yet, either - but for now, Hussie cheats just a little and shows us a direct conversation between John and his dead grandmother - technically a game construct at this point.

2322-28 - Quickly summarizing the mythology in these next few updates:

1. Skaia, or the battlefield, is a big planet in the center of the game universe.
2. On this battlefield, the Carapacian armies of dark and light are locked in eternal stalemate.
3. When you enter the medium, the kernelsprite's enhancements aren't just applied to in-game monsters: they also add enchantments to the royalty of Skaia (tied to their magic rings), and cause the battlefield to expand exponentially.
4. The player travels upwards, through the gates above his home, to reach Skaia, for some as-yet undetermined purpose.

2332 - "In fact, you're not even sure where you found the time to write what's already there!" This suggests that some time shenanigans were involved in the creation of Rose's GameFAQs document. We'll keep an eye on this to see if it goes anywhere.

2339 - What unlocks the food capsule? CAPS LOCK, of course.

2342 - GG seems to have knowledge of the future.

2344 - Despite *Homestuck's* clean, minimalist style, Hussie effectively evokes a torrid summer cityscape here. That's a Snoop Dogg line, incidentally. But you either knew that or didn't care.

2348 - This is actually a pretty succinct explanation of Dave's sense of humor, which may (or may not) be shared with his Bro:

It's your brother's MR. T PUPPET, which of course is kept in the apartment with a sense of profound humorous irony. But as usual with your BRO's exploits, this is no ordinary irony, or anything close to a pedestrian TIER 1 IRONIC GESTURE which is a meager single step removed from sincerity. This is like ten levels of irony removed from the original joke. It might have been funny like eight years ago to joke about Mr. T and how he was sort of lame, but that was the very thing that made him awesome and badass, and that his awesomeness was also sort of the joke.

But in this case, the joke is the joke, and that degree of irony itself is ALSO the joke, and so on.

Only highly adept satirical ninjas like you and your BRO can appreciate stuff like this. It's cool taking stuff that other people think is funny but you know really isn't, and making it funny again by adding subtle strata of irony which are utterly undetectable to the untrained eye.

We'll make an (ill-advised) attempt at such high-level ironic operations ourselves, a little further on, in the annotation for 2512.

2350 - Note the wizard puppet, and the ...distressing image of baby Gonzo from Muppet Babies.

2351 - ...and here's Lil Cal. Your annotator visibly shudders.

2360 - "Bunraku" is a form of Japanese puppet theater. The term was probably chosen because it sounds similar to "bukake." (If you don't know what that is I'm not going to tell you.)

A marotte is a fool's scepter with a bauble or puppet head on the end.

Señor Wences is a famous Spanish puppeteer and ventriloquist.

Chinface is a comic performance accomplished by sticking googley eyes on your chin, turning the camera upside down, and covering the rest of your face, creating a character with an upside-down mouth.

I feel inexplicably dirty after Googling all of that.

Finally, the chat box in the corner is a reference to the single greatest page in the entire MS Paint Adventures canon, found here:

<http://www.mspaintadventures.com/extras/ps000026.html>

2369 - Another conversation we've read before, from 2319, from Rose's perspective.

2384 - I warned you about *SBAHJ* Bro! I told you dog!

2399 - This voice announces the return of WV, far more polite and genteel now that he has access to a manual of human etiquette and isn't trapped in CAPS LOCK.

2410 - Rose's quotation on the 12th image appears to be a quotation from Gogol's story *Dead Souls*.

2422 - We'll see this conversation again on 2511 from Dave's perspective. And what a perspective it shall be.

2423 - *Homestuck* as collage: I find this to be a pretty clever use (both visually and in the context of the narrative) of those irritating CAPTCHA spambot checkers.

2442 - "From now on it will probably go without saying that you'll nab any grist lying around without making a big fuss over it." This is Hussie's way of telling us the narrative won't bother painstakingly detailing the accumulation of grist (the raw material used for in-game alchemy). This will be a recurring theme as we continue *Homestuck* - in-game tasks that were once time-consuming for the characters will demand less of their (and the audience's) attention.

2465 - This comic was created by Hussie as part of a gauntlet laid down by a forum troll posing as the serial killer Jigsaw from the *SAW* films and demanding tasteful Muppet Babies erotica. You can go look it up on Google if you want. Uh, good luck with that.

2467 - Observe that Bro, in a fit of pseudo-paternalistic pride, has attached a picture of Sweet Bro (or Hella Jeff - I refuse, on principle, to learn which one is which) to the refrigerator. Note that that's a Game Bro magnet, not an actual magazine cover with *SBaHJ* on it - thanks to Triskelli of Something Awful for pointing this out.

2468-504 - This is a bunch of sylladex nonsense, and not desperately relevant. But we get to see Dave 1) almost impaled by sharp objects, 2) come up with increasingly unwieldy names to fit objects into this consonant/vowel-based inventory ("Wheeled Ride"?) and 3) be increasingly distressed by sexy puppets. So I recommend you read and enjoy.

2508 - There is no other way this could have ended. This is also, incidentally, the first time I remember laughing out loud at *Homestuck*.

2511 - Callback to 2422 from Dave's perspective.

2512 - **where doing it man**

WHERE MAKING THIS HAPEN

So here Bro references his little brother's masterpiece as part of a challenge to duel. As you may recall, Bro is the Buddha of irony, capable of weaving threads of insincerity so subtle and fine they are imperceptible to the untrained eye. Considering the context of his message to Dave, let's consider some of these possible layers:

SINCERITY (Irony lvl. 0): Bro references *SBAHJ* because he thinks *SBAHJ* is legitimately awesome and hilarious, not as a parody of terrible webcomics but as a funny and engaging webcomic in and of itself. This is purely hypothetical, of course, because no one could read *SBAHJ* without either recognizing its satirical intent or recoiling at its visceral shitiness.

REGULAR IRONY: Bro is on the same level as Dave, and recognizes *SBAHJ* as a joke, and likes that joke enough to repeat it back to his little brother. Like the previous level, this suggests the note is intended as a compliment for Dave (albeit one concealed amid an avalanche of puppet anatomy).

DOUBLE REACHAROUND IRONY: Bro recognizes *SBAHJ* is a joke, but still thinks it's stupid. Here he's quoting it to mock Dave's juvenile attempts at satire as part of his challenge. Given Dave's extreme sensitivity with regards to his older brother, it seems likely that this is how Dave would read the note, even if that isn't how Bro intended it.

TRIPLE IRONY (or "trirony"): At this level Bro understands Dave and recognizes that Dave would perceive the quotation as an insult. But he intends the note, not as an insult to Dave and *SBAHJ*, but as an affectionate jab at his kid brother. It's like how you might call one of your friends a "knucklehead" or something.

QUADRUPLE IRONY: But perhaps Bro actually holds Dave in contempt, and is feigning affection in order to ridicule even the idea that he would ever experience any kind of affection for this obnoxious little poseur?

QUINTUPLE IRONY: But perhaps Bro is merely *adopting* this stance of condescension and contempt in order to express his genuine respect for his brother, as if to tell Dave "you know I think better of you than to try something like this"?

SEPTU6LE IRONIRONY: BUT DAVEBRO DAVE BRO IRONIC IRONY 6
IRON IRON 666

...that's as many levels as I can extrapolate, before we move into some kind of extremely abstract irony calculus only comprehensible in the fifth dimension.

But hopefully you get the idea. It's kind of like using double negatives in a sentence - it's easy enough to figure out what someone means when they say something "isn't

without merit", but "isn't not totally not meritless" is a little tougher to parse.

2536 -

EB: well bottom line is...

EB: he's awesome

EB: that's really all there is to say on the matter!

That doesn't really explain anything. This line will reappear in some form or another throughout *Homestuck*... an expression of apparent sincerity in a work infused with irony (although it's unclear whether the author agrees with his character's summation of the much-maligned program).

2542 - The division of this image into panels may seem arbitrary, but it serves to 1) reinforce the WV's perspective, watching John's adventure through a small window, 2) maintain visual consistency with the rest of the work and 3) slow the downward pan by encouraging the reader to focus on the first two panels, increasing the drama of the ogre's appearance in the third.

2551 - Prophetic dreams are a common trope in fiction, so common that authors don't always feel obligated to explain *why* their characters can see the future in otherwise mundane narratives - so I want to reassure you that John's portentous visions here *will* eventually be explained.

2552 -

GG: just keep listening to your grandmothers advice!!!

EB: yeah, you're probably right.

EB: but, um...

EB: i don't think i mentioned nanna to you, did i?

GG: oh uhhh.....

GG: i dont know didnt you???

EB: hmm, i dunno, maybe you talked to rose or dave about it or something.

GG: yeah maybe that was it!!

EB: they're really weird when they talk to me about you, like they're always trying convince me you have some spooky powers, but i'm always like no she seems like a pretty regular girl to me!

GG: heheheh :D

This is another Thing we'll return to: GG revealing information that suggests she has prophetic abilities, and her friends shrugging off or making excuses for how she could have learned that through conventional means. It's a weird twist on how characters in fiction are so quick to believe in supernatural elements introduced into a mundane world: here, in a world where fantastical things happen all

the time, John et al have a very small and precise blind spot with regards to GG's talents.

2563 - The Ogres wield the Sassafras joke book and the tire swing as weapons - keepsakes from John's childhood turned against him in violence, possibly to invoke the "it's hard growing up" theme of *Homestuck*.

We get another reference to *SBAHJ* during a rooftop showdown. The red text links to the relevant *SBAHJ* comic, and also transitions us to Dave's perspective on the next page.

2565 - "You stop being the other guy. You're not even sure what that meant anyway." Another weird glitch in *Homestuck*'s second-person narration. The first "you" clearly refers to the reader, the second is from Dave's perspective, which raises a number of stupid questions: to what extent do we, the reader, represent the actual consciousness of the characters? Are we actually (allegedly, since in reality we control nothing) supposed to be controlling these ciphers? Or is the "player" conceit merely a way to bridge transitions in perspective?

2565 - If I read this correctly, Dave captchaloguees the puppets as "muppet buttock mound." He also does a literal "acrobatic fucking flip" "off the handle." And take a close look at Lil' Cal's eyes: while most of the character is, like the rest of the comic, pixilated, his eyes are photorealistic plastic, a subtle detail which contributes to his uncanny appearance.

We get teased/trolled a bit at the ending of this animation: "You want to see the climactic fight you've been waiting for? Well, too bad. Instead you get to meet the mysterious 4th kid who hasn't been revealed yet... actually, no, let's just go back to this asshole instead."

2567-8 - Very clever use of the transition between panels/pages here for a joke.

2587 - This (slightly shoe-horned in) reference to WV's preference for democracy over monarchy winds up being relevant to his history and to the mechanics of the Game.

2599 - The development of Can Town also mirrors the Game's world.

2613 - This is, of course, a log of all of WV's transmissions to John. We're invited to peruse them here, their formerly obtuse nature a little less so now that we know more about WV and his priorities.

2616 - "You consider switching to SCREEN 4, but decide against it. You have a feeling that whatever's there would just confuse you even more, and you don't even really care all that much anyway." We're being trolled again - Hussie knows we want to see GG and taunts us for it.

2621 - As near as I can tell, WV is playing a legitimate game of chess here, with castling and pawns capturing diagonally and all of that. Note that he seems to resent the black king for winning (even though he was controlling both sides...)

2623 - Meet the Peregrine Mendicant.

2646 - Another glitch in the narration, if you think about it: the gag here is the "reader" making a perfectly reasonable assumption re:the utility of appearifiers/deappearifiers, and the author comically berating them for doing so. However, because both the reader and narrator's voices are expressed through WV, the poor little guy has to go through a fit of self-flagellation.

2651 - "Serenity the Firefly" is a reference to some Joss Whedon thing, but if you're reading this you're probably enough of a dork to know all about that already.

2653 - The MSPA wiki has translations of all of Serenity's dialogue from Morse code. I'll reproduce the important ones going forward.

2656 - We get teased with another cliffhanger, before Hussie realizes he's already juggling four: John and the ogres, Rose in the fire, Dave versus his brother, and GG's identity.

2657 - We're gonna need to watch that again.

Let's consider what we learn here:

- 1) It's confirmed that WV is on a post-apocalyptic earth, devastated by the meteor shower triggered by the initiation of the SBURB session.
- 2) SBURB also seems connected to a meteor shower in the distant past, related to the construction of a mysterious frog temple.
- 3) The capsule in which WV was imprisoned isn't unique: we see another where John's house once stood, intriguingly in the shape of an apple, the artifact John used to enter the Medium. This capsule may have

a connection to the Peregrine Mendicant we met not too long ago.

Finally, we see Dad escape from the imps, Mom rescue Rose from certain death in a forest fire, and Bro begin his rooftop showdown with Dave. And thus concludes the act.

END OF ACT 2

2659 - Nanna, evidently, knew about John's future adventures while she was still alive - suggesting she had some strange abilities or connection to SBURB even before her transformation into a sprite (she also seems to have possessed her trademark laugh before being hybridized with a harlequin doll). We also get our first reference to our four heroes' mythological roles within the game.

"Ascend" is a critical verb in *Homestuck*: it describes the literal upwards construction that John and his friends must complete as they play the game, as well as suggesting spiritual transcendence and the process of growing up.

2660 - And here's our mysterious fourth hero, the garden Gnostic, Jade Harley! The language here is kind of repetitive and circular, and calls back to Dave's introduction on 2209:

There's this really cool dude, ok? He's standing around being all chill, like cool dudes are known to do sometimes. A cool dude like this probably has a real cool name.

Jade's introduction as a "silly girl" also seems significant after the antics on the previous page, considering that IT WILL SOON BE SHOCKINGLY REVEALED that Nanna is the biological parent of both John and Jade through game-related time paradoxes.

2664 - The disappearing pumpkin is an incredibly silly and inconsequential recurring mystery in *Homestuck* that will have an incredibly silly and inconsequential resolution. It's apparently a callback to one of Hussie's older MS Paint Adventures projects, though not one I'm familiar with.

2668 - On Jade's official introduction page, we learn a lot about her passion for horticulture, but not much about her personality or circumstances. It takes Jade a while to develop a personality beyond "quirky, sweet and a little oblivious" - so much mystery has been built up around her, and her prophetic abilities, and her exotic home, that her characterization seems neglected as Hussie uses her screen time to unpack her mythology. You are advised to enjoy her goofy shenanigans and not to trouble yourself looking for depth of character just yet.

Also: pay close attention to the design on Jade's shirt.

2669 - This is silly but highly enjoyable. Pressing Z makes Jade fall asleep.

2674 - So here's Jade's rendition of *Homestuck*'s "make silly noises and do something obscene" running gag.

2675 - ...and *she actually does it*, in order to emphasize her carefree and childlike nature in contrast to the other protagonists. Of course, Hussie cheats, by having Jade "fertilize some plants" using actual fertilizer and not by doing something indecent - although, in doing so, he's saved us from a story with a heroine who runs around erratically crapping on things, so maybe we should be grateful for his restraint.

The narration goes from second to first person here, as it does so whenever necessary for effect or to emphasize a punchline, here to suggest Jade's delirious glee.

2689 - Check out the customized furry *SBAHJ* poster by Dave, and the plush hybrid creatures, which resemble the "Humanimals" of a previous Hussie project of the same name.

2692 - I like how Jade's choice of weapon subtly reinforces that she's on a different plane of reality. John and the others have weapons that an ordinary, middle-American kid could realistically acquire: a claw hammer, a pair of sewing needles, a shitty mall-store sword replica. Jade lives on a tropic island in an atrium full of sci-fi technology with her adventurer grandfather - it seems within the realm of plausibility that she's also a trained marksman.

2697 - A quick word to the blessed souls who are perplexed and amused by Jade's curious hobbies, instead of horrified: The "Furry Fandom", as Wikipedia demands I call it, is an internet subculture that revolves around depictions of anthropomorphic animal characters. Their interests range from weird sex stuff to relatively innocuous stories and art. On the internet, furies are universally despised for the perceived creepiness/low quality of their art and for their extreme sensitivity to criticism.

Thus, presenting Jade as someone who likes anthropomorphic animal stuff in an innocent and harmless way is a subversion of the expectations of Hussie's internet-savvy audience, who would expect a character with these interests to be ridiculed and dismissed. Hussie's having a little fun with Jade's interests ("You eat a weird bug and don't even care.") but she's hardly the scathing caricature you'd expect. (Not that we don't get there eventually... around page 4111, for those curious, Hussie's satire of furies gets much STRONGer).

2704 - The Magic Eight Ball is correct, of course - John wasn't "exactly" born on 4/13, although we won't learn more about this for some time. Also, we'll eventually meet

another character with a predilection for Magic 8 Balls and the violent destruction thereof.

2712 - This whole sequence directly acknowledges the audience within the story, of course, but what I like best about it is how Jade makes reference to a "cool interactive Flash application." Not only do we have no control whatsoever over the outcome of the matching game... but Hussie hasn't even prepared one of those cute pseudo-interactive Flash games! The story frequently makes reference to nonexistent gameplay, but on this page it refers to interactive features it's previously used... just not on this page.

2722 - Jade's lagoon should look familiar from 2567 (thanks to Popo from SA for catching a mistake in the citation).

2725 - Jade's browser is Echidna, Greek mother of all monsters. Compare to the other kid's browsers, all Greek mythical figures.

2726 - Note the "Trollslum" folder. How much would you like to wager that some of those names are significant? I'm not a gambling man - but if I was, I wouldn't bet against it.

2729 - Dave, bless him, articulates how most of the rest of the internet feels about "furries".

2731 - So in the *Homestuck* version of *MS Paint Adventures* Andrew Hussie is writing *Problem Sleuth 2* and included an intermission featuring a character similar to John Egbert of *Homestuck*. Later, Andrew Hussie will pause *Homestuck* for an intermission featuring the Midnight Crew, a set of characters similar to the guileless gumshoe from *Problem Sleuth*. Many disgruntled fans will complain that this advanced the plot in no relevant way whatsoever (they will be wrong).

The significance of "GT" will be explained in 2900.

2735 - Repeat of conversation from 2282.

2736 - Bro's background manipulation of Cal becomes subtler as the battle goes on, to the point it almost looks like Cal is moving on his own. Going forward, we'll occasionally see Cal zipping around the panel, with only a blur in the background to suggest the puppeteer.

2738 - Nanna mentions four mythological heroes in her letter on 2659. Considering Rose's predilection for the occult, and Jade's mysterious visions, we already have two obvious candidates for our "witch" and "seer."

2744 - You might recall this apple-shaped SBURB apparatus from 2557. If it's an apple, it makes sense that it has a worm - or a snake, if you prefer, drawing on the Edenic symbolism of John's entry into the Medium.

2746 - The first appearance of SkaiaNet Laboratories, the base of the company that released SBURB. It's presence here suggests Rose's mother has some connection to the development of the game. The name "SkaiaNet" is of course reminiscent of SkyNet from the *Terminator* films, the malevolent self-aware military network responsible for the decimation of mankind.

2752 - Weirdly, each level of Jade's Grandpa's collection includes duplicates of the items from the preceding level. I'm not sure if this is supposed to mean something or if Hussie just got lazy with Google Image Search?

2757 - You might recognize this creature as resembling Hussie's depiction the Greek monster Typhoeus, last seen as John's web browser.

2759 - Well, that certainly was a "troll," wasn't it? Who could this mysterious troll be? And what does he know about Jade's plans? It is a mystery. However, note the similarity of "carcinoGeneticist" (a play on "carcinogenic") to John's PesterChum handle, ectoBiologist.

2767 - Rose just runs over and janks the damn laptop from her sylladex - an understated visual gag that demonstrates the ambiguity of the abstract game mechanics in *Homestuck* in the context of the story. It'll be a while before we meet another character who can pull that off.

2771-2 - An obvious callback at the end - the composition of 2772 even mimics that of the final panels of the first *SBaHJ* strip.

2791 - This asshole is Jack Noir. We'll learn more about him later. For now, all we know is that he seems to be some sort of commandant for the Imps, and that he resembles our buddy the Wayward Vagabound.

2792 - A "fenestration" is a window - in *Problem Sleuth*, windows were electronic devices that served as portals between dimensions, and in *Homestuck* these "fenestrated walls" have some unusual properties as well.

Again, the missing "fourth wall" refers to *Homestuck's* metafictional qualities. But its disappearance begs the question: if the fourth wall was stolen - who took it? And what does that mean for *Homestuck's* reality?

2785 - A reminder that John hasn't read the inscription that we saw back on 2659.

2793 - "David Brinner" is a nod to an MSPA fancomic. Note PM has a tattoo similar to WV's.

2794 - PM is alluding to the mediocre Kevin Costner film *The Postman*, although unknowingly. This is made even more sad/ludicrous by the fact that, on a post-apocalyptic earth, the intended recipients of these letters are surely dead.

Tumblr *Homestuck* savant Lil Durandal suggests the significance of PM's postal affiliation in *Homestuck's* internet-centric cosmology:

This is a story about friendships formed via the internet, and we are all reading it via the internet. When you read *Homestuck*, your screen produces the light that carries the information to your eyes. Light can be information - knowledge - and it can also be the sharing of information: communication. It can be things that come about through information and communication: clarity, understanding, possibility... There are reasons for this (amazingly suggestive) page...

If you've read much cyberpunk, you probably realize that when the internet is an important part of a story, anyone whose job is to carry information - a bike messenger, a courier - is Symbolic As Fuck!⁶

2798 - PM will serve the same function for Jade, it seems, that WV did for John. With four players, and four windows on the terminals we've seen so far, you can probably tell where this is going.

2811 - The appearance of a mounted ogre among Grandpa's other trophies suggests a connection to the Game.

There are further references to Game elements we HAVE NOT READ ABOUT YET. The two-colored mantle of the fireplace resembles WHAT WE WILL EVENTUALLY LEARN ARE the two planetoids orbiting Skaia, Prospit and Derse. The portrait is of Jade's Dreamself. And the other trophies include two Basilisks (other in-game monsters).

2815 - There's another tangentially relevant *SBAHJ* waiting for you if you click on the red text, you lucky devil you.

⁶ Lil Durandal. "Aspects and Inversions: Light and Void." *Metatemporal Ethics*. Aug. 24 2012. Dec. 27 2012.
<<http://lildurandal.tumblr.com/post/30148976155/aspects-and-inversions-light-and-void>>

2818 - Another example of messing with audience expectations via Dave's art appearing on the preloader. Also, Grandpa is dead?

Z and / cause Jade to fall asleep, N makes her play her flute.

2819 - It's unclear to me, even on my third reading of *Homestuck*, why Jade insists on behaving as if her grandfather is alive, even though he's clearly been dead for some time - is she delusional, or playacting?

2831 - There's a little mystery set up here: young Rose seems to be playing around, demonstrating her early fascination with psychotherapy, and pretending to psychoanalyze her cat. But she also makes reference to the cat telling her a "secret" before his death, in a manner that suggests actual information was conveyed.

2832 - This is an important rule in *Homestuck* so we might as well address it here. You can use Skaia technology to summon people and objects from the past - but if doing so would create an irresolvable time paradox, the machine will instead generate a "paradox ghost imprint," a sample of ectoplasm with all of the biological properties of its parent.

2837 - Jasper's whereabouts will be revealed way down the road in Act Six, under circumstances so complicated I'm not going to bother explaining them now.

2838 - Be sure to click on the hoofprint that appears at the very end of this heart-wrenching video in the lower-right-hand corner of the screen for a delightful surprise!

2848 - If *Homestuck* is about growing up, then this video sequence illustrates one of the inevitable stages of that process: realizing your parents weren't the infallible demigod arbiters of the cosmos you thought they were when you were a little kid, and that they're just people, with their own flaws and frustrations. John takes this revelation poorly.

2852 - A callout to the famous line from *Jaws*, "we're going to need a bigger boat." Additionally ridiculous because, really, what does this guy even need a bigger safe for? To prevent burly men from pitching it out of his office?

2853 - "Spades Slick" is a member of the Midnight Crew and, as WE WILL COME TO LEARN LATER ON IN THE COMIC, the equivalent of Jack Noir from an alternate session of the Game. The fingers that appear in these two installments

are those of Andrew Hussie himself in his role as narrator, who takes a more active role in matters relating to Jack and the Midnight Crew. There's a logic to that, because Jack and his fellow Exiles are located as "players" controlling the human cast of *Homestuck*, one step removed from the narrative and closer to the author and audience.

2855 - The missing fourth wall is, of course, a gag about the comic's frequent direct addresses to its audience. Archagent appears to be a pun on "Archangel," suggesting Noir's Lucifer-like qualities, and FORESHADOWING HIS EVENTUAL transformation into a winged, quasi-divine being.

2857 - First appearance of the Hegemonic Brute, who resembles Hearts Boxcars of the Midnight Crew.

2862 - The reference to Jack's "carapace" reaffirms that, despite the level of abstraction employed in depictions of the human body in *Homestuck*, Jack and his fellows are not human. "Carapacian" seems to be the official name for their species.

2879 - If there's any chance you took John's revelation concerning his father even slightly seriously back in 2848, Hussie insists that you reconsider with this callback.

2880 - Meet Becquerel, Jade's "devilbeast" and staunch companion. Here's our first glimpse at his loyalty to his mistress and his godlike power over space and time. A "Becquerel" is a unit of radioactive measurement; and radiation works in *Homestuck* like it does in silver age comic books, in that it gives you superpowers instead of cancer (usually).

2885 - Practical, no-nonsense Rose forsakes John's histrionics when she breaks into her parent's bedroom - her relationship with her Mom is just as tense as John's is with his Dad, although not in the same way.

2893 - We can recognize Jade's dream outfit from her portrait over the fireplace in 2811.

2900 - ghostyTrickster was John's old screen name, fitting the G/T pattern of the rest of the kids (and the troll screen names briefly glimpsed on Jade's laptop). He apparently changed his screenname to hide from the same trolls who have been bothering the other kids.

So pattern behind the kids' (original) screennames becomes clear - they're all formed from the letters G and T. The only exception we've seen is the troll carcinoGeneticist (CG).

2901 - The Imps seem to have drawn themselves over John's beloved posters, prefiguring AN (AWESOME) LATER SCENE IN THE COMIC when John reenacts a scene from Con Air and imagines his friends' faces on the poster.

2910 - "Get ye rope" is a reference to the "Thy Dungeonman" series of text-based adventure games from Homestar Runner, a vintage internet comedy site and a clear predecessor to *Homestuck*.

2921 - First named appearance of Aimless Renegade.

2922 - We learn it wasn't Imps that defaced these posters, but apparently John himself, who was somehow psychological blocked from perceiving his own graffiti. *Homestuck* generally plays fair with its mysteries and mind games but Hussie is definitely cheating here. We've already seen John's room from Rose's perspective while controlling her - there's no reason we shouldn't have seen this graffiti as well, except for authorial negligence.

2924 - We get a tiny little baby piece of insight into John's character here: specifically his tendency to repress troubling emotions or experiences beneath his dopey exterior.

Rose's blind spots also come into play, as she fails to see the obvious parallels between John's Dad's attempt to bond with his son through their (apparently) shared love of clowns, and her own mother's obvious enthusiasm for wizards. This is actually significant because Rose (ALTHOUGH THIS WON'T BE CONFIRMED FOR A WHILE) isn't the party's Witch but its Seer - and her failure to recognize obvious signals from the people around her is a symptom of her inexperience with her abilities as well as her general immaturity.

2926 - First named appearance of Prospit, Carapacian Kingdom of Light and bright satellite of Skaia.

2935 - The past few pages serve as confirmation that WV, PM and AR are Carapacian beings from within the Game, somehow transported to the post-apocalyptic earth.

2949 - So it's probably time to explain how Dreamselfes work in *Homestuck*. In the interests of clarity, we'll be describing some mechanics that won't be explained in-text for a while, so you might prefer to skip ahead if you want to figure everything out for yourself, but there aren't any major character or plot spoilers. Ahem:

1. Each player has a Dreamself on one of the satellites of Skaia. The Dreamself isn't a psychic projection, but an actual physical body.
2. In a session, the players' Dreamselfs are split (more or less) evenly between Prospit and Derse. Very generally, the Derse and Prospit players' personalities seem to correspond to their planet light/dark, Apollonian/Dionysian duality of the two worlds.
3. As John shows us, your Dreamself begins its life asleep.
4. Once it wakes, then whenever your real-world body is asleep, you can have adventures on your Skaia satellite while dreaming - with your waking body's consciousness remote-controlling the second body.
5. Without explaining in too much detail, players have access to different contacts and sources of information, depending which kingdom they explore.
6. Again, without revealing too much, the second physical body has other uses within the Game, depending how the player proceeds. After death (although only in special circumstances), the player's consciousness can be permanently transferred to their second self, sort of like a 1-up.

Hopefully that's enough for now. We'll go into further detail as it becomes relevant.

2966 - If you haven't read *Problem Sleuth*, the main character has something of an affinity for candy corn, which he hides in his hat.

2967 - As of now, it's unclear what this mysterious superweapon might be, or if John will ever get around to building one.

2969 - My understanding is that this update (along with other characters' subsequent alchemization misadventures) occurred on Christmas (or Gristmas, as named by fans sharing Hussie's fondness for portmanteaus) 2009.

2970 - Visual motif: the spiraling heat in the background of Dave's cityscape resembles both his record logo and a single, all-seeing eye (that of the reader, perhaps?). Note that the vinyl on Dave's shirt somehow gains a lightning-shaped scratch as a consequence of this battle, a detail it will retain through the remainder of the comic.

And don't you worry: we haven't seen the last of Lil' Cal!
Oh, Lordy, we have not seen the last of that rascal!

2971 - The photorealistic iPhone here sticks out a bit, perhaps intentionally.

2973 - Yet another callback to an earlier conversation, although Hussie helpfully provides a link, meaning I won't have to. As a bonus, we also learn the source of Jade's mysterious precognition: as her dreamself on Prospit, she receives visions of the future projected onto the clouds of Skaia (as confirmed in 2975). (Remember, we first saw John receiving similar glimpses in 2551.) We also receive a hint to the origin of the powerful and mysterious Beq, although this won't be elaborated on for some time.

2979 - The origin of the harpoon that WV discovered jammed in the roof of the temple.

2984 - "It's like what are you made of time." You may recall a "Knight of Time" mentioned as one of the four heroes...

2993 - First appearance of grimAuxillatrix. We can see CG's name on the list of trolls, strengthening the hypothesis that we're dealing with a fixed set of characters here and not just a bunch of nonsense names. And all of the visible names have initials starting with G, C, A and T - shorthand for the four nitrogen bases that form DNA.

2999 - First appearance of adiosToreador. We don't learn much about him, but it's interesting that not all of the so-called trolls are actually that good at (or, as in GA's case, even interested in) trolling. It's worth noting that, despite all of the juvenile homophobic language here and elsewhere (and the story's flawed handling of race) we'll eventually meet several queer characters in *Homestuck*, and for my money they're developed with sophistication and sensitivity.

3000 - Note the hieroglyphs on the inside of the frog temple. These creatures (alligators, iguanas, salamanders, turtles, frogs) are all significant. The SBURB spirograph also appears.

3003 - The insignia on the ammunition cabinet (pith helmet, roguish moustache) suggests AR has discovered Jade's grandfather's armory.

3008 - Note AR's anger at so-called "illicit amphibious idolatry". Frogs are obscene creatures to black/Dersite carapace, for reasons we'll get into much later.

3020 - I think AR's "I AM THE LAW" shtick is a reference to the British comics antihero Judge Dredd.

3023 - ...poorly formatted text? Comics Sans? Do you know what that means? I think you do, dear reader. Click away.

3049 - Given *Homestuck's* exponential complexity, it makes sense that this Flash sequence, which uses the same loading screen from John's entry into the Medium, resolves four simultaneous storylines instead of one - also that while it took John and Rose pages and pages to get him into the Medium, Rose and Dave accomplish the same in a single Flash cartoon. The narrative is accelerating, and (for pacing and thematic reasons, as well as Rose's dire predicament within the story) we simply can't spend as much time on Game events we've already been through.

Rose's artifact is a bottle that must be smashed. Hussie has stated that each of the artifacts is symbolic of a new beginning - Rose's refers to the tradition of breaking a bottle on the hull of an embarking ship, while also suggesting her mother's love of drink.

3053 - This reveal, that John's house is situated on a single lonely spire on a mysterious planet, is another symbolic expansion of the narrative's scope - the world inside the Game is much, much bigger than we thought.

Also: END OF ACT 3.

3054 - Start of the Midnight Crew intermission. The transition, with the sky turning from blue to purple and the clockwork moon rising above the sun as the curtains open on an eerie green mansion, signifies that we're not only entering a different plane of reality from the preceding chapters but also a different kind of story - a hard-boiled, ultraviolent detective farce, after the kid-friendly shenanigans of the preceding chapters. The intermission also omits chatlogs, so expect a more propulsive story that relies a bit more on visual storytelling than dialogue.

3055 - This is Spades Slick, anti-heroic protagonist of the intermission. His name is likely a reference to Sam Spade, of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, as well as the suit of cards, considering the Crew's playing card motif.

There's a bit of misdirection going on here. Due to the striking change in style and content, as well as the previous appearance of the Midnight Crew as fictional characters within the world of *Homestuck*, it's easy to assume that this digression exists in a separate "reality" from John and his friends - even labeling it an "intermission" suggests we're reading something unrelated to the story we've been following. It looks like we've taken a detour into a film noir, set among adults, on an undestroyed Earth.

Without going into detail, I can promise this isn't the case. Consider SS's appearance, for instance; although at first blush he appears to be a cartoonish abstraction of a human mobster, on further analysis he quite closely resembles a couple of characters we've seen before in *Homestuck*, and one individual in particular...

Given Hussie's talent with color, I'm sure the green of the mansion was a deliberate aesthetic choice, chosen to complement the ink black of the Midnight Crew and the red flames (and blood!) that will soon engulf the mansion. (Of course, it's also the color of Felt on a pool table.)

3058 - Many of SS's actions here call back to Hussie's previous project, the whimsical *Problem Sleuth*, and the arbitrary, reader-suggested actions taken by the main character. I think that's also deliberate - partially to establish Spade as hateful and pragmatic compared to the virtuous Sleuth, but also to further mislead the reader to believe that we're reading a new detective adventure rather than a *Homestuck* side-story.

3059 - Confirmation that Spades isn't human.

3061 - Another callback to *Problem Sleuth*, where due to a supposed "glitch" in the narrative, certain weapons would become harmless items when pulled from the inventory (and vice-versa).

3064 - The licorice Scotty dogs are also a *Problem Sleuth* reference, as the hero kept a few pieces of his favorite candy in his cap. That said, as we'll see, candy plays a more unseemly role in the Midnight Crew intermission.

3066 - The Crosbytop mirrors John's Cosbytop. Bill and Bing represent pop-culture archetypes that resonate through *Homestuck*: the ultimate suburban dad and the slick Mafioso/gumshoe type.

3067 -

You don't know why you are wasting time on this website. It is for little children who poop hard in their baby ass diapers.

Also you don't understand what the hell is going on or who all these characters are. It's all a lot of nonsense.

Further misdirection - if Spades is reading *Homestuck* on MSPaintAdventures.com, then surely he can't exist in the same world as the kids, right? And we get another gesture at self-critique/distancing the intermission from the style and themes of the main narrative.

3070 - You might notice that these guys have a bit of a pool-ball theme going on. Each of the Felt gangsters here has a name related to their designated number: "Itchy" echoes the Japanese *Ichi*, "Doze" and "Tres" resemble the Spanish *Dos* and *Tres*, "Clover" is named after the four-leafed plant, etc. You can find a complete explanation of their names and attributes on the MSPA Wiki, which I would feel bad blatantly plagiarizing from, because I wouldn't have gotten most of these jokes/references on my own and I'd basically be copying their work into this document verbatim.

3071 - Wonderful use of limited animation here, with Spades' twitching face - whoever this Snowman guy is, it's obvious Spades is *pissed* that he can't murder him.

3092 - As should be clear by now, this intermission is especially bad about willfully misinterpreting the reader's commands.

3112 - I don't want to spend too much time going into the various chrono-powers of the Felt, because some of them are quite complicated and most of the important ones are explained. But in case it's unclear: Die has a voodoo doll

that lets him warp into alternate timelines where, *It's a Wonderful Life*-style, the subject of his curse is already dead.

3115 - Our first look at the surreal landscape of THE MYSTERIOUS PLANET WE WILL EVENTUALLY COME TO KNOW AS Alternia.

3121 - If it isn't clear by now, the Felt intermission deals with sexual themes a little more explicitly than the preceding acts. This kinda makes sense - despite their foul language, John and his pals are only thirteen, and the intermission's introduction of this sort of joke is another way of emphasizing that we're dealing with adult characters here.

3174 - Here's our confirmation of what's been hinted for a while now: Spades, the Midnight Crew, and Snowman are all SBURB Carapacian constructs. The intermission takes place on an alien planet, after a Session of SBURB, where the carapace have taken over and rebuilt civilization. When Spades says he made this town, he means he and his gang literally rebuilt civilization in the wake of a failed SBURB session, just as WV and company have been doing on Earth.

3177 - Poor Spades seems to have come down with a serious case of sprite flipping to go with his new scar.

3186 - Another case of toying with linearity and numerical representations of "game progress." The running tally of bad guys killed and objects destroyed is a very videogame-esque conceit. But the time travel nonsense employed through this chapter renders a linear log of Spades' progress incomprehensible.

3200 - It's unclear whether or not Hussie originally intended the scar to change sides whenever Spades' sprite flips, but obviously he decided to run with it.

3210 - The Intermission begins to lean pretty hard on callbacks at this point - we even get direct links to the older *MSPA* comics being referenced, something that hasn't happened before or since.

Also take a moment to appreciate the cartooning on Stitch's face. We'll see Hussie experiment with this kind of spidery, highly detailed linework later on with his human characters, where it looks a little grotesque - but that works to the art's advantage here.

3215 - I love this page. It's a great use of *Homestuck's* limited animation format to sell a joke: the pause before the animation is just long enough to convince us we're looking at a static panel, and the sudden movement (Boxcars is deadpan, then his jaw unhinges and his head hideously deforms, and then he's back to deadpan as if nothing happened) adds to the effect. (The droll caption, "Your attempt was an overwhelming success", adds to the incongruity.) It wouldn't be nearly as effective in a conventional comic strip, where we'd see a motionless image of Boxcars eating Eggs, and have all the time we liked to study it and recover from its shock value. Bravo.

3221 - It isn't as striking as it is in other places, but I'm sure Biscuits' death is a deliberate anticlimax - he's one of the last of the Felt that the crew manages to kill, but he has thoroughly underwhelming powers.

3223 - I think it's pretty impressive how, relying on second-person narration and without any direct quotes, Hussie gives a minor character like Clover a very distinct voice.

3232 - Make sure you click on the yellow rectangle! Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff await!

3233 - Another link to a callback, as we saw on 3210. Perhaps Hussie is trying to direct fans of the increasingly successful *Homestuck* to his past work?

3237 - Hussie's cheating again: there's no explanation of how, exactly, everyone else is killed but Spades and Snowman survive. It also prevents Hussie from having to write a resolution to those ridiculous calendar gags that disposed of Boxcars and Droog.

3245 - 3X ENTENDRE C-C-C-COMBO! If you can't figure out what the three meanings are I'm not going to tell you.

3246 - Note that Spades is now missing his left eye and right arm - much like Nannasprite. We'll see this particular pattern of mutilation again - it's mostly a visual motif, although there is (sort of) an explanation. I cannot help but think of Odin, the Norse elder god who traded his eye for wisdom: Spades doesn't quite fit that pattern, but we'll meet another character or two who does.

3249 - Another *SBAHJ*! Wonderfully, the previous link brought us to comic number eleven - this link takes us to comic number ten.

3252 - The pendant is a nod to the "David Brinner" fancomic by reader Mayonaka, who created the Midnight Crew and paid Hussie to use them in the comic. Hopefully all the rights issues were sorted out at the time, because it would suck to have that cause problems down the road.

3253 - Well, well. Who's this asshole?

3255 - A few notes, as light on spoilers as possible.

1) The terminal Spades accesses resembles the Exile terminal used by WV to advise John - his method of contacting this mysterious character is also familiar. We can surmise that Spades is guiding this character, who is presumably an SBURB player.

2) This is supported by the ghostly crab creature, who resembles a game Sprite.

3) More crab stuff: the symbol on this guy's shirt is the zodiac sign for Cancer (which may relate to a screenname we've seen before?).

4) I don't think it's spoiling too much to say that we will visit this character again extensively - although, when we do, his domicile will be portrayed quite differently. I guess Hussie redesigned it in the interim.

5) Finally, going back to Hussie's color witchcraft: neon yellow and orange look fucking awesome against grey and black. Who knew?

3256 - Confirmation that this guy is CG: the Troll carcinoGeneticist.

3257 - END OF INTERMISSION.

3258 - New interactive Flash! I recommend immediately clicking the blue button in the lower left-hand corner to zoom out and get a better sense of John's surroundings. If you click on anything, you'll get WV's advice and commentary, as in the previous Flash. You can also click on the spirograph to message Nannasprite.

Note that the underlings now display traits from John's harlequin doll and Rose's kitty/cthulhu/princess monstrosity.

You may also remember that salamander hieroglyphs appeared in AR's temple.

After you speak to a salamander to the south or the north of the start about the Parcel Pyxis system, Nanna will message you using the spirograph in the corner, and refer to John as the heir... confirming his title as the Heir of Breath we learned about earlier.

If you go south of the initial area, then travel west across the oil, then north again, you'll find a Pyxis containing a frog, which WV refers to as "illegal contraband." In the northwest corner of the initial map you'll find a defaced frog statue - John observes that "these guys must really hate frogs."

If you open all of the Pyxi (which I am now declaring a word) you can find a suspiciously familiar piece of amber containing Serenity the firefly.

If you go to the north and use your telescope on the point with the speech bubble, John can look back at the cliff where his house rests.

No trickster mode here, according to the MSPA wiki, which is great because I don't feel like booting up Firefox. However, John seriously flips his shit if you hold z and shift at the same time.

Finally, a few choice quotes: "Farmin' these goddamn mushrooms. Fuckin' pain in the ass." "'GLUB' can basically mean anything I want it to mean. It's really cool having a bullshit language." That's pretty pointed criticism of the inanity of non-player character dialogue in RPGs.

3276-8 This may be some kind of commentary on the inability of technology to process the charming idiosyncrasies of human behavior - we've already seen that *Homestuck* is very interested in the problems young people face when building relationships online.

3283 - The failure of the modus to process the image of the Squiddles may be related to their secret purpose as avatars of the Horrorterrors... I might be reaching, though.

3288 - This, of course, explains how AR found some of Jade's belongings in the temple.

3291 -

EB: if i were you i would take him out behind the woodshed and give him a big hug.

Oh, John. I can't tell if this (a take on the old cliché about bringing a pet behind the barn to shoot it) is intended to be self-aware or not. I think it it's more interesting if it is: it suggests John is at least a little bit aware of his aware of his Pollyannaish tendencies and is either self-deprecating or deliberately playing them up to amuse Jade.

3294 - CG's all-caps typing style may have been chosen to establish him as a foil to John, who types in all lowercase.

The "backwards conversations" thing is a reasonably clever way to explain why CG doesn't just explain everything to John at once: he gets tired of repeating himself, but every time John speaks to him we move a little further into CG's past and he provides a little more information.

Finally, the reference to "this human emotion called friendship" is an oblique reference to a very odd convention of CG's alien culture, which we'll come to in due time.

3298 - SA forums user nerdbot informs me that, with the publication of this page, Hussie announced that he would be closing user submissions for the characters and writing all future input commands himself.

3302 -

TG: i should probably text him soon

TG: see whats up

TG: because

TG: i love him

My best guess is that Dave's either self-deprecating about his bromance with John, or Hussie is deliberately trying to mess with the segment of his audience that looks for homoerotic subtext in everything, or both.

3304 - It kind of makes sense that Jade is weirded out by Bro. She's a total innocent who enjoys "furry" art while remaining oblivious to the sleazy subtext; Bro's entire

shtick is a thin film of irony covering a bottomless bucket of unfathomable perversion.

3305 - It's important to remember that Jade was raised by a dog. A clever, teleporting hellhound, but still a dog. While *Homestuck* is frequently absurd, it usually maintains a rigorous internal logic, and Jade's upbringing is one of the few places where I can't quite suspend my disbelief...

Or rather, I couldn't, until SA users aegof and Suaimhneas pointed out that Jade was very young when her Dreamself awoke on Prospit, meaning that every time she went to sleep she could hang out and learn from the native Carapacians. As our time with WV and especially the Prospitian PM has shown, Carapacians themselves are often quite childlike - that they were Jade's main caretakers growing up might help explain her aggressive silliness.

3307 - In case it isn't obvious, we're on Rose's planet, equivalent to John's Land of Wind and Shade.

3319 - As we learn here, it wasn't WV advising John back in the act 4 introductory flash, but PM. I apologize for misleading you at the time about an extremely minor and inconsequential spoiler.

3331 - Having entered the Medium, Rose receives counsel from her own exiled advisor, equivalent to WV for John.

3371 - The presence of Jade's Grandpa in the Medium has yet to be satisfactorily explained. So don't worry too much about it, I guess? He was an adventurer, and there are places in *Homestuck*'s universe where space/time has no meaning, which could provide access to the medium.

3379 - Regardless of what Hussie is insinuating here it is my duty to tell you that Barbasol is actually EXTREMELY FLAMMABLE.

3404 - So here's Dave's artifact! An egg, which corresponds to the egg vessel that just appeared in the exile's future. The egg suggests both maturity (the process of raising a child) and Dave's elemental aspect of Time, and the heat/flame motif of his environment.

3424 - Meet the gallowsCalibrator.

GC: Y3S 1TS 34SY TO FORG3T

GC: G1V3N OUR "R4PPORT"

GC: 4ND HOW MUCH W3 R34LLY H4V3 1N COMMON

There's not a lot to say about her, right now, but structurally her appearance is significant: in the same way

that CG is a foil to and counterpart of John, this new Troll invites comparisons with Rose. Immediately, GC's lack of subtlety or tact contrasts with Rose's eloquence, though her comment that "TH3Y 4LL THOUGHT 1 W4S CR4ZY" suggests she's faced the same kind of skepticism that Rose has for her occult interests. However, GC's remarks about the "irony" of the role of the exiles belie a hazy understanding of the concept, in contrast to Rose (and Dave's) regular employment of it. And her straightforward nastiness stands in stark contrast to Rose's passive-aggression and snide remarks.

The conversation also FORESHADOWS SOME FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS: "Mobius double reacharound" is a phrase that will be used to describe time paradoxes through the story. The examples CG gives of mythological classes are all titles held by Troll players. Rose's remark that she's "Still not sure if I'm being courted or trolled here" is actually quite perceptive, and speaks to the complexities of the Troll's cultural understanding of romance, which we won't get into for a while. Also take a look at this excerpt:

GC: DO3S 1T S33M L1K3 TH3R3 1S A SUBTL3 VO1C3 1N YOUR H34D URG1NG YOU TO DO TH1NGS

TT: Yes.

TT: It's not so subtle, actually.

GC: Y3S!!!!!!! >80

GC: FOR M3 TOO 1T W4S MOR3 LOUD 4ND CL34R TH4N FOR TH3 OTH3RS

GC: YOU S33 W3 4R3 M34NT TO B3 B3ST H4T3FR13NDS FOR3V3R

TT: A beautiful soulgrudge this cosmic was surely authored by the constellations.

I'm going to reveal a few IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS here: In discussing their relationship with exiled Carapacian advisors, we learn that both Rose and GC receive clear and distinct missives from their guides. That's because both play the Seer class. The way that the girls toss around "hatefriends" and "soulgrudge" further hint at the Trolls' unusual customs for romance and reproduction. And Rose's remark that their relationship being "authored by the constellations" is prescient: WE'LL EVENTUALLY LEARN IN A STUNNING DEVELOPMENT that the four human players' universe was indeed created as a result of the Trolls's Session, and that each of them is affiliated with a sign of the zodiac.

3425 - Confirmation that there are twelve Trolls. Also of note: in this flashback we see carcinoGeneticist, the Troll affiliated with the sign of Cancer, inspire John to change his screenname from ghostyTrickster to ectoBiologist. I see that change as a sign of John's transition from

childhood to adolescence; the name ectoBiologist is awkward and a little pretentious, the sort of name a young person might come up with to make a childhood interest sound more sophisticated.

It's also symbolic. As you may have noticed, each of the characters' screennames is derived from two of the nitrogenous bases found in DNA: G, C, A and T. The exception is John, who once had a name that fit the pattern, but changed it to something different. Hussie explained the significance of this in a deleted interview on his Forumspring account:

There is further rationale for John's defection from the pattern, from GT to EB, which possibly will never be explained in the story. What caused him to defect was the trolls, a group ostensibly lead by CG, whose name obviously implies cancerous disruption within a genetic system, or a DNA code. His cancerous influence causes a defect in the full string of genetic characters, from GT TT TG GG | CG GC GA AG AC CA TA AT TC CT AA CC to EB TT TG GG | CG GC GA AG AC CA TA AT TC CT AA CC. This is the nature of cancer, to corrupt genetic data. There may be additional relevance to the fact that John defected to ectoBiologist, the name of a pseudo-science sounding similar to carcinoGeneticist. In fact, I believe this will prove to be relevant later on.⁷

3428-30 - Here's our first glimpse at GC. Her hair is similar to Rose's - to the extent that kids have counterparts among the Trolls, the two of them are clear analogs.

3432 - The black Carapacian here is Diamond Droog but, critically, *not the same Diamond Droog we've met before*: in the same way that Jack Noir in the kids' game session is equivalent to Spades Slick, this guy is the kids' version of Diamond Droog.

3435 - The Black Queen of the kids' session. Note that, like the monsters (but unlike the other Carapacians) she displays physical traits that correspond to the kids' prototyped objects. We'll soon learn why.

3441-2 - A little bit of misdirection here: it's easy to read "a tiny sip couldn't hurt" and assume that Rose is about to tumble headfirst into her mother's drinking problem. But Rose's reaction should be familiar to anyone

⁷ Hussie, Andrew. "MSPA Formspring Archives." Ed. Nokob. MSPA Forums, 9 Oct. 2011. 08 Apr. 2013.
<http://dl.dropbox.com/u/40585720/Combined_Formspring_Web_Aug-28-2011.htm>

who remembers their first taste of hard alcohol as a teenager.

3443 - PM's initials are constant through both of her roles in the story (Parcel Mistress and Peregrine Mendicant), as are the other exiles'. With that in mind... who do you think the Windswept Questant might have been, in her previous life as a member of the Carapacians' chess-inspired monarchy?

3450 - You may recall "boondollars" being mentioned as an apparently useless currency that the players accumulate as they gain strength and experience: the Carapacians, constructs of the Game, apparently use it as legal tender.

3461-77 - Well as a matter of fact, second-person narration, it totally wasn't a waste of time! This sequence not only demonstrates our heroes' growing confidence with the game mechanics, but also allows the narrative (going forward) to skip the tedious process of detailing every step of item creation.

3488 - The ever-practical Rose demonstrates an uncharacteristic squeamishness with violence here. Admittedly, for all of her affected cynicism, she's still a suburban kid with a very sheltered background and likely little previous experience with murder. While she didn't have a problem with helping John in combat, she assisted him through the SBURB interface, a distancing mechanism that likely made it much easier to process her actions as "just part of a game." When asked to do the deed herself she gets uncomfortable.

I think it's also worth contrasting her behavior with John's - who, you may recall, only needed a little prodding to start massacring imps like there's no tomorrow. What both characters have in common is that they're more willing to participate in violence once it's contextualized by "gameplay" or other cultural explanations: Rose using the SBURB interface to fight for John, and John only getting really pissed at the imps after they stole his bunny and gave him the opportunity to pretend he's Nic Cage in *Con Air*.

Now, there's an obvious moral to take from all of this, but the idea that *Homestuck* is some kind polemic about how violent media creates violence is clearly ridiculous. Rather, I think these examples demonstrate a larger theme in the story about how cultural context (the internet, videogames, bad fantasy fiction, peer pressure, etc.) invite us to make bad choices that we might not have made

otherwise. This will be an especially prominent theme in the next act.

3489 - Meet the grimAuxilatrix.

Dave is being *hellaciously* heteronormative here (and also ignorant of word roots: *-trix* is a Latin suffix used to indicate ladyness, mostly unused today except in 'dominatrix' and names like 'Beatrix'). And though Dave's mostly being facetious when he refers to himself as "**like the pimpmaster hustledaddy of all snippy bookshrews**", there's a slight current of misogyny in his advice to grimAuxiliatrix: "**reverse psychology mind games all sorts of machiavellian bullshit**" reads just a little bit like VH1's *The Pickup Artist*. Dave's (possible) sexism is pretty innocuous, though, especially when compared to other characters we'll meet later.

3490 - This conversation is an obvious and deliberate inversion of the previous one, down to Rose misinterpreting AT's hostility as romantic inclinations. We get another pointless callback to Dave ironically bleating like a goat, and it's amusing how easily Rose mimics Dave's metaphor-mixing, hip-hop-inspired patois ("**Drop some hard, peer-reviewed motherfuckin' science on his ass**").

3495 - I'm getting a broken URL on the "Dave's red shirt" link.

It's worth noting that AT is shockingly not godawful at freestyling and actually produces a few kinda clever lines:

**AT: i AM GETTING OFF THE POINT, WHICH WAS,
AT: ABOUT THIS HOT MESS DAVE, THAT YOU GOT LANDED IN,
AT: LIKE THE COP i MENTIONED, BUT INSTEAD OF YOUR BADGE,
AT: AND YOUR GUN, IT'S YOUR ASS THAT YOU HANDED IN,**

But the content is basically ruined by AT's weird typing style, his constant self-deprecating interjections, his inadvertently homoerotic put-downs (**i'M FORCING YOU TO BE LICKING, (AND LIKING,) / gRAB MY HORNS AND START KICKING, LIKE YOU'RE RIDING A VIKING**) and the inherent awkwardness of trying to rap battle over a chat program. But it isn't completely terrible. As we'll see, "wasted potential" is sort of a theme for AT.

For those who are unfamiliar with astrology, AT's lines about bulls and horns refer to his zodiac sign, Tauros.

3504 - "Timey-wimey" is a reference to the venerable BBC science fiction franchise, *Doctor Who*. And as long as we're discussing British fantasy stories, the nightmarish image of John with GC's chattering teeth reflected in his

glasses may be a nod to the Corinthian, a character in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* comic book series.

3517 - We learn the White Queen's ring (and presumably the rings worn by other Carapacian royalty) is what grants her the prototyped traits of the player's sprites. THIS IS IMPORTANT.

3523 - Kind of a surreal non sequitur, here - but the turtles, we'll soon learn, are the local counterpart of John's salamanders for Rose's Land of Light and Rain.

3526 - Jaspersprite finally confirms that Rose is not the party's Witch of Space but Seer of Light - a bit of misdirection, considering Jade's visions, and Rose's witchy inclinations.

3543 - Having wasted our time with dozens of pages of Sylladex nonsense in the early stages of the comic Hussie shifts gears and burns through four months of a bleak alternate future in a single chatlog. It's a bit dizzying, but I think the decision makes sense - the alternative would have been to show months' worth of the adventures of doomed Dave and Rose, and then run the risk of Dave's time travel expedition to save John feeling like a cheat. It's also one of the first really obvious examples of *Homestuck* speeding up and omitting redundant or irrelevant narrative information. I don't think it's a coincidence that the page before last was titled "[S] Dave: Accelerate."

3556 - And just as quickly we get to a low-key resolution to this weird, dark little digression. The narrative purpose of Dave's time-travel is clear: it establishes the nature of "beta timelines" and answers the question of "if Dave can time travel, and the Trolls can give the kids advice from the future, why don't they go back and fix everything?" In this case, John's death produces a time paradox: it interferes with future events we already know have to happen (for one thing, if John's dead, he can't have the additional conversations that CG alluded to). And because of that, SBURB chops off the sequence at its point of divergence and deems the whole mess a "beta timeline."

But it's also an early hint at how *Homestuck* isn't afraid to go to some pretty dark places. We've just glimpsed an alternate timeline where Dave and Rose spent months living under a death sentence, preparing for a suicide mission that would erase their entire reality. We'll eventually learn that Rose started drinking heavily in this timeline, and "Orange Dave" certainly seems hardened by his experiences. It's a pretty depressing sequence of events,

and *Homestuck* (still in the "kids and fun" stage of the narrative) can't quite dive in to that kind of bleakness yet. But it's an early demonstration of the ugliness this story is capable of probing.

And to Hussie's credit, he allows it to have lasting repercussions on the main narrative. Davesprite is a very weird concept: a superpowered, bodiless, suicidal duplicate of one of our heroes from an alternate future. One can imagine another author shying away from the weird implications of Davesprite's existence, and writing the feathery aberration out of the story as soon as possible. But Davesprite's going to stick around.

Finally: the birth of Davesprite illustrates Dave's weird tendency to generate alternate selves. Being a Strider, apparently, means inadvertently spawning slightly modified copies of yourself.

3557 - In fairness to CG, Dave's associated classical element (as indicated by his color and the environment of his in-game planet) is fire. Perhaps there is an argument to be made that all of *Homestuck* is merely an elaborate allegory for *Captain Planet* (we will not be making this argument).

3558 - The Daves' discussion of the doomed ambition of a ten-part *SBAHJ* "Nacho Party" arc may be a tacit admission by the Hussie himself that the narrative has grown beyond his estimated plans.

3565 - Why is Snoop Dogg in the background? Well, John's being propelled back to earth by his flame-spitting jetpack, so you could say he's "dropping" while "it's hot".

3568 - So at the end of the day, Jack Noir's ascent could have been prevented if only the Black Queen weren't so insistent about enforcing a silly dress code. The pun on "archangel" finally makes sense, right?

We finally get a look at the writing on Rose's wall. Unlike John's graffiti, which suggests deep-seated psychological issues, Rose's scribbles are a genetic code for some as-yet unknown organism: it takes the form of the letters MEOW instead of GCAT because this code is the secret that Jaspers whispered to her.

We also see a bunch of neat monsters that won't appear again, suggesting a variety of that SBURB's in-game bestiary is much deeper than we get to see.

3569 - And here's Jack Noir's missing 4th wall. Fittingly, gazing through it shows Hussie hard at work on the comic. It's still unclear if *Homestuck* is consistent with *Problem Sleuth's* depiction of electronic "fenestrated walls" as interdimensional transporters. If that's the case, we can expect further metafictional shenanigans (likely the characters meeting the author, or the author directly interfering with his characters) to follow.

3574 - A recap! Which could be useful, except for the fact that you are currently reading these helpful and informative annotations/commentaries. The only new information presented is that Hussie admits he actually uses Photoshop instead of Microsoft Paint, rendering the comic's title a little disingenuous. (Though there is an alternate, in-story explanation for the title).

3576 - This Lil Cal is actually a replica a terrifying fan made for the author. I've seen more *accurate* ones produced since, but somehow its grotesque deformities make it an even more appropriate approximation of the fictional abomination it represents.

3584 - Although it's unlikely GC understands this, Troll culture does actually have a Christ analogue, WHO WE WILL EVENTUALLY LEARN IN A HELL OF A TWIST YOU COULD NEVER HOPE TO PREDICT is CG's genetic ancestor and spiritual predecessor engineered by the Game. I promise it will make sense in context.

3587 - Admit it, you were waiting for an animation, weren't you? Further trickery with the game/comic/multimedia nature of the narrative.

3590 - This is our first time we see two of the kids in the same room as one another - but Rose is asleep! This reinforces the theme of digital media imposing barriers to human connection: even when John directly approaches Rose, outside forces conspire to keep them from interacting. It will be very far into the comic indeed before any of these kids can have a proper conversation face to face.

3591 - "Dr. Meowgon Spengler" is a reference to Dr. Egon from *Ghostbusters*. Not one of John (or Hussie's) proudest accomplishments in punsmanship.

3592 - Orange creamsicle Dave certainly *seems* like he's a little hurt, despite what original flavor Dave says. It shows the differences between them: Davesprite has survived an apocalyptic future and transformed into a bodiless angel mutant, so he's a little more sensitive. Dave's inability

to empathize with his doppelganger shows his comparative immaturity.

3611 - "Shut Up and Jam" was a Charles Barkley Super Nintendo-era Basketball videogame. It also spawned an unofficial fan-created parody/sequel, "Shut Up and Jam Gaiden", which Hussie is referencing here.

3612 - Needless to say the two rabbits are the same, duplicated through time travel nonsense. I've read *Homestuck* three times and I'll admit I still can't follow the toy's wending path through the timestream, but fortunately it isn't critical to the plot.

3614 - From GA's perspective, this is her first conversation with "the Rose human", explaining her poor opinion during Rose's first actual conversation with her.

3615 - twinArmageddons is the "hacker" GC referred to a ways back. Note AT's horn on the left, and another mysterious Troll's on the right.

Apparently Trolls have a sex offender registry? Merely by typing that sentence, I despair I have planted the seed for the worst fan fiction in the history of civilization.

3619 - TA's gimmick should be pretty obvious by this point - especially since his sign is Gemini, the twins. His condescending attitude and sweet sunglasses suggest he's another potential foil to Dave.

3630 - Our first indication of the "Breeze" as a supernatural instrument of fate - surely significant, given John's title as Heir (air?) of Breath.

3640 - As of yet this has not been explained, and probably never will be.

However... remember that Dave's browser was Hephaestus.

3645 - This is apparently the mechanism by which the Trolls access different points on the kids' timeline. Note the "Chumproll" with the kids' screennames, presumably equivalent to the kids' "Trollslum".

3684 - The Droll, obviously, is the local dimensional equivalent of Clubs Deuce of the midnight crew.

3690 - Cute detail: CD hasn't actually been impaled by a sword, but is wearing two halves of a pretend one, kind of like those fake arrows that prop comics wear on a headband.

3696 - Another cute detail: The Prospitan in the background has swiped CD's hat.

3700 - The secret origin of the Wayward Vagabond..

3701 - It's a bit much to take in, but essentially, before he was stranded on post-apocalyptic Earth, WV led a joint revolt of Prospitans and Dersites against the Dersite monarchy - only to be thwarted by Jack Noir.

3715 - Rose, bless her, goes for the cursed eldritch wands over the cute wizardly ones.

3718 - The use of Jade's font and signature typing quirk here suggests we're getting a direct glimpse into her internal monologue, rather than one mediated through *Homestuck*'s layers of distancing narrative devices.

3719 - Secret first appearance of Ms. Paint, the true hero of *Homestuck*. Legend (i.e. the MSPA wiki) has it she was invented when Ryan North of *Dinosaur Comics* asked Hussie why, on a website named after her, we never actually saw the titular Ms. Paint. However, she will not get anything resembling a speaking role for like decades.

3724 - Another reference to frogs as "contraband."

3727-9 - Further erosion of the boundaries between reality and fiction in *Homestuck*'s universe: Dave is able to recreate the abominable art from his webcomic in reality.

3752 - I admire Hussie's commitment to verisimilitude, here, in producing a plausible pastiche of a literate thirteen-year-old's creative writing project. It would have been easy to go over the top and write something hilariously terrible - instead, Hussie sacrifices entertainment value for plausibility, and produces prose so bland yet impenetrable that my eyes instinctively unfocus whenever I try to read it.

3761 -

DAVE: the best thing about how i did that is how it in no way will ever come back to bite us in the ass ever

DAVESPRITE: dude our shit is SAFE

DAVE: so safe

DAVESPRITE: gonna sleep pretty sound tonight

DAVESPRITE: with that big fucking payload of safety you just got dropped on us

DAVESPRITE: gonna be all huggin my pillow and shit

DAVESPRITE: grinning like a goddamn bear full of honey

DAVE: safer than some flintstone vitamins in a bottle

DAVE: keep twisting junior all you get is clicks

DAVESPRITE: asshole thinks its candy

DAVESPRITE: doesnt even know he just stepped on a security rake and got a face full of fucking safety

We've discussed Hussie's technique of hilariously obvious foreshadowing, but as far as I'm concerned this is as bad/awesome as it ever gets.

3763 - I call bullshit on this. Dave is a trained hipster ninja with time travel powers and a sword-wielding sprite clone riding shotgun (and we know sprites can fight - we've already seen Nannasprite helping John in battle, and the Calsprite unleashing a tsunami of plasmic puppet penis). There's no reason he couldn't fight off a thug like DD - except for the fact that causality (and of course the author) has decreed it necessary for the story to proceed.

3771 - I don't see the need to walk through every single step of the ectobiological process, but I'll offer some brief notes just to be sure everyone's on the same page. Here, the SBURB equipment tries to summon John's Nanna from the past. It can't, though, without creating an irresolvable paradox, so instead it creates an ectoplasmic copy from her genetic information. We'll see this process repeated a few more times.

3779 - Dave's Bro carries with him a tiny pair of awesome sunglasses, suggesting that, somehow, Bro knew of and was prepared for the precious cargo carried by these SBURB-propelled meteors.

3782 - The name of the shop is, of course, the "Prankster's Gambit." Note that Rose's mother is described as a "professional lady" - it's unclear how that qualifies her to study rogue asteroids, outside of her destined connection to the Game, but we'll let that slide. We have a brief bit of fake foreshadowing here, as it seems Nanna is about to take a bad tumble and get beamed by the Sassacre hardcover...

3783 - ...but that isn't quite how it happens. It's not clear how Nanna's remains could be extracted and cremated after this, but we'll once again suspend disbelief.

3786 - Again, just making sure everyone's following this: we've collected genetic information from John's Nanna, Jade's Grandpa, Dave's Bro, and Rose's Mom. Dad is conspicuously absent from this.

3787 - And the four elders are cloned by the machine.

3789 - And the genetic sludge is mixed up, producing another quartet of suspiciously familiar-looking children.

So once again, John encounters Rose (and Jade, and Dave...) in real life, but under circumstances in which they're unable to have a face-to-face dialogue.

3792 - It's just a throwaway gag but it's still endearing that John's first thought when surrounded by a bunch of creepy clone-babies is to figure how to provide for them. This, along with John's treatment of Casey the Salamander, suggests one of his most admirable qualities: his instinct to care for those incapable of caring for themselves.

3795 - Shipping has a double meaning here, also referring to "matchmaking," as derived from the fandom term for imagining two characters in a (relation)ship. Here, Grandpa is facilitating John's Dad and Rose's Mom's reunion.

3803 - So yeah, John hasn't just created clones of himself, his friends, and their respective elders: through the miracle of time travel, *he is directly responsible for his own origin.*

This brings up thorny issues of free will and predestination, as CG brings up here:

CG: BUT WHAT ALL THESE LOFTY SYMBOLIC ALLUSIONS BOIL DOWN TO IS SOME GRANDER STATEMENT ABOUT WHAT YOU SEE HAPPENING HERE.

CG: THAT YOU WERE ALWAYS THE KEY TO SEEDING YOUR OWN EXISTENCE THROUGH THIS GAME.

CG: AND ANY HOPE THAT IT COULD HAVE PLAYED OUT DIFFERENTLY OR THAT YOU COULD HAVE AVOIDED THIS WHOLE MESS WAS ALWAYS JUST A RUSE.

[...]

CG: BUT ANYWAY, THERE'S A LOT MORE TO THE RIDDLE THAN JUST THAT, LIKE WHAT WE WERE JUST TALKING ABOUT LAST TIME WE TALKED.

CG: BUT THAT'S SORT OF THE GIST OF THE THEMES IT DEALS WITH.

Which seems like an explicit admission by Hussie that these themes will be central to the rest of the story.

At this stage in the game, John and CG seem to represent opposite perspectives on the problem. CG is really troubled by his lack of agency, while John is mostly taking it in stride. This adds a new dimension to CG's character, suggesting that his aggression and his love of fucking with people may be tied up in his own feelings of powerlessness in the face of destiny. And, with CG knocked a off-balance by these distressing realizations about the illusory nature of free will, John is actually able to commit a bit of (lame but effective) counter-trolling.

Hussie offers two ways for his characters to respond to the revelation of their lack of agency: acceptance, or bitterness. From this installment, it appears that "acceptance" has taken the prankster's gambit.

3807 -

EB: so that means...

EB: we are all sort of like superman?

CG: UH YEAH, I GUESS.

EB: cool!

CG: YOU ALL TRACE THE MYTHOLOGICAL FOOTSTEPS OF YOUR BELOVED HUMAN SUPERMAN WHO'S REALLY JUST A MUSCULAR CAUCASIAN ALIEN.

CG: IT'S HILARIOUS HOW HUMANS WORSHIP HIM AS A PINNACLE OF HUMAN HEROISM AND VIRTUE BUT HE ISN'T EVEN HUMAN.

CG: ACTUALLY IT'S INCREDIBLY PATHETIC.

CG: BUT ALSO IN A WAY KIND OF ADMIRABLE.

CG: BECAUSE IT MEANS DEEP DOWN YOU ALL MUST REALIZE WHO YOUR DADDY IS.

CG: WE ARE, BITCHES.

I can't help but read this as a tacit admission of influence by Hussie, and thus worth unpacking. I'll be getting into themes that run through the entire narrative, so YOU MAY WISH TO SKIP TO THE NEXT ENTRY if you don't want to be spoiled.

The big revelation (or at least implied revelation) here is that the Trolls are responsible for the creation of the kids' universe ("DEEP DOWN YOU ALL MUST REALIZE WHO YOUR DADDY IS."). That's why each of them is represented by a sign of the zodiac, and that's why we have so much popular culture in common (see CG's discussion of elves): as we get to know the Trolls better we'll see they have traits that apparently inspired mythological and superheroic figures, as well as characters from popular fiction.

John, bless him, listens to CG's critique and shrugs it off. He's acting oblivious but it's tough to tell if this is a put-on or not; if it is, it's another example of John accepting the bleak reality of the cosmos and soldiering on, in contrast to CG's cynicism and fatalism.

(Yes, Nick Cage did almost play Superman. He's a big comic book fan, and actually named his first-born son Kal-El.)

3814 - Now that we've seen the arrival on earth of the four players, we witness the origin of their four historical antecedents.

3818 - Mark Twain once famously quipped "rumors of my death were greatly exaggerated," further establishing Sassacre as a fictionalized version of the humorist. User Bobolus of

the Something Awful Forums noted that Twain was born during a visit from Halley's comet and died a day after the comet's next return - and that his dog, like Sassacre's, was named Halley.

3831 - When CG was referring to John "making a fool of himself" a few pages back, I suppose this is what he was referring to. Which means that CG was wrong.

This musical sequence, to me, is a big part of *Homestuck's* post-ironic emotional appeal. The video is, of course, totally ludicrous. And yet the image of John passing on toys to the young versions of his friends (friends he's technically only just met in person, who will not remember this encounter, and who he will not get to speak with face-to-face for a long time), manages to be strangely poignant.

The melodrama of John's performance is so hilarious and overwhelming that it's easy to overlook that the song explicitly addresses the loneliness at *Homestuck's* emotional center: the lyric "how do I live without you?" is a reminder of the struggle of young people who have grown up alone and who are trying, desperately, to connect with others, through technology and a shared love of pop culture (and "how do I *breathe* without you" may be a reference to John's aspect as Heir of Breath).

We recognize how silly all of this is (witness CG's horrified reaction, and the narration explicitly telling us "THIS IS STUPID") but there's still something sweet and winningly sincere about it.

3836 - Notice the relative positions of the timeline markers on AT's desktop - they let us place the chronological order of a few of his trolling attempts, if you care about such things.

3839 - GC's description of watching Dave "**ST4ND ON 4 T01L3T L00K1NG 4T YOUR OWN BLOOD FOR T3N M1NUT3S**" suggest he was more disturbed by stumbling on his own corpse than he let on (or than the narrative allowed us to see). Striders play their cards close to their chests.

3840 - A few important points that may not be immediately clear:

Dave's sequence with his Bro at the beginning is a flashback, explaining how he entered the Medium.

We learn that Beq's creation is also an aspect of the Game, created by combining the MEOW code from Rose's diary with a ghost clone of Halley, Nanna and Grandpa's dog.

Jade's dreamself is killed rescuing John's from Jack Noir's devastation, although the effect this will have on Jade's self-self remains to be seen.

3842 - This is the last we'll read of Rose's loquacious prose for some time. Contain your disappointment.

Instead, consider the following points:

1. Rose destroys a teleportation gate (her "first," as if of many to come). "I am not sure why I did it, really."
2. Rose declares "I am not playing by the rules anymore."
3. Rose seems to harbor resentment towards the Game. She calls Skaia "malevolent."
4. Rose acknowledges her "hubris", a word with origins in Greek tragedy: it refers to the excessive pride of mortals whose arrogance leads them to challenge the gods, with disastrous consequences.
5. Rose then somehow scrawls her initials in giant flashing letters across a .doc file.

I would suggest that none of these things bode well for our Ms. Lalonde's mental or emotional stability.

Also note the "Earth-bound" shout-out. Very subtle.

3855 - The identity of the author of this letter will not be revealed for some time - but let's make a note of it, so once we meet him we can return and see what we can learn about the guy.

3857 - Jade explains how Prospit dreamselfs can see prophetic visions in Skaia's atmosphere, in case anyone didn't pick up on that yet. It's a bit odd that Hussie didn't clarify this device sooner - we've finally received an explanation, but only after the mechanism has largely ceased to be relevant.

Of course, Jade's message is tragic and ironic in light of the death of her Dreamself. We'll be returning to this well (cheery notes from the deceased delivered post-mortem) several times.

3868 - We see AR condemned to death in order to secure John's safety - of course, he'll survive the meteor's

impact on earth, which is how he becomes the Aimless Renegade.

3872 - Poor Grandpa probably has no idea about how dreamselves work, and will go to his grave believing he knows the time and circumstances of his granddaughter's (well, ecto-plasmic clone daughter, but whatever) death.

3874 - Hey, it's Ms. Paint again! She's at the front of the crowd of Prospitans here.

3881 - The ever-reliable MSPA wiki's translation informs me that Serenity's dialogue is "Oh my!"

3888 - It's the END OF ACT FOUR. Another recap, which should help clear up anything I've omitted or been vague about. Once you're comfortable you're up to speed, turn the page for...

ACT FIVE.

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3889 - ACT FIVE.

Act five is where Homestuck blew up, in two ways.

The first is that the complexity of the narrative increases exponentially. We jump from one session to two, four protagonists to sixteen, and SBURB's mechanics become exponentially more complicated to accommodate the larger cast. Fortunately, we'll be working through this together, so hopefully no one will get too lost.

The second is that the proper introduction of the Trolls and their world was what really propelled the comic to internet infamy. A big part of this was the increased emphasis on interpersonal dynamics and teen drama, which offered new readers a more inviting entrance into *Homestuck's* hermetically sealed universe. If you've made it this far, you've probably grown quite fond of our quartet of heroes, but between Dave's hipster posturing and Rose's snark and John and Jade's cluelessness, they aren't necessarily the most likable or relatable protagonists. Act 5 introduces a dozen new characters, each a riff on a recognizable internet personality type and so ready to be adopted as a patron by legions of nerdy readers; and all of these characters are entangled in an intricate narrative tapestry of love, hate, alliances and betrayals, unrequited love, love-hate, robot duplicates, sloppy makeouts, and horse-fucking. "Hivebent" adds an element of soap opera to the *Homestuck* formula, and internet history tells us it was tremendously successful.

The introduction of the Trolls and their richly detailed, completely insane world also offered a new opportunity for readers to engage with the text through fan productivity. And by fan productivity I mean "shitty fantrolls."

I've noticed that a lot of the entertainment properties popular with young nerds include a big cast of characters whose traits and abilities can be quantified across a series of metrics (consider *Pokémon*, for example: each trainer has six monsters, each monster has offensive and defense statistics, an elemental alignment, four attack techniques, a couple of progressive evolutionary forms, and so on). I'm not sure why nerds love this stuff so much, but I think part of the reason is that it makes it easy to imagine new characters that would fit the parameters of a particular fictional world. Because we know exactly what qualities a Pokémon (or, as we'll see, a Troll) needs to possess, for a creative fan the opportunity to invent new characters and stories becomes irresistible. These

categories and limitations, ironically, are what inspire fan creativity, which in turn makes the fan even more invested in the story.

And for a series with no real interactivity and hence no need for gameplay stats, *Homestuck* has a hell of a lot of them. As Michael Peterson of the webcomic *Project Ballad* puts it:

Characters are unique, but you can array them on a spreadsheet... There are processes. On a structural level, there's a certain fascinating mathematic to it. And to a certain kind of fan, that is appealing on a level that is independent of the comic's quality.⁸

He's right. For instance, if you wanted (god knows why) to create your own shitty fantroll, you'd need to work out his or her traits along the following metrics:

1. Name (first and last, both exactly 6 letters):
2. Sign (an appropriately obscure symbol worn on the shirt):
3. Blood color (on a spectrum from crimson to fuchsia, each shade with a unique place in a complex caste system and associated superpowers):
4. Shape of horns (often symbolic).
5. Obnoxious personal typing quirk.
6. Lusus (an albino custodial familiar, usually an alien variation on a existing animal or mythical beast, or a hybrid of several).

And of course there are still the gameplay attributes we learned about in the preceding four acts:

7. Screenshot (two words, beginning with some combination of A, C, G and T).
8. Strife specibus (signature weapon)
9. Title (Such as "Heir of Breath," a class and an attribute, one syllable each).
10. Sprite (Something or someone dear and dead to serve as your spirit guide).
11. Exile (which of Hussie's cast of Carapacians will act as your character's Virgil).
12. Planet (Land of X and Y).

⁸Michael Peterson. "'Homestuck' for Dummies (By Request)." *Project Ballad*. 17 May 2012. 04 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.projectballad.com/2012/05/17/homestuck-for-dummies-by-request/>>.

The point is that all of this nonsense provides a blank template for creating a customized persona, like an empty Facebook profile, or a Dungeons & Dragons character sheet. And to top it all off: all of this takes place in a world without adult supervision. Alternia is Never-Never Land, with murder. Murder-Murder Land.

In *On Literature*, one of J. Hillis Miller's central arguments is that any effective work of literature is:

The creation or discovery of a new, supplementary world, a meta-world, a hyper-reality. This new world is an irreplaceable addition to the already existing one.⁹

And later, he draws an explicit connection between the transformative power of literature and the virtual worlds accessed in videogames:

A plausible case could be made for seeing my childhood submission to *The Swiss Family Robinson* as pernicious escapism. It was the beginning of a bad habit that has kept me in life-long subservience to fantasies and fictions rather than soberly engaged in "the real world" and in fulfilling my responsibilities there. I can, to tell the truth, still remember my mother's voice when she exhorted me to stop reading and go outside to play... Children nowadays who spend all the time they can watching television or playing computer games are not all that different from the habitual reader in the now fading heyday of print culture. A computer game is another kind of virtual reality, as is a network news program, not to speak of a television drama. These are no doubt less valuable fictive worlds, we inveterate readers of "canonical" texts would assert. The difference, however, is perhaps not so great as we might wish.

...I am saying that both a literary work and a computer game create an imaginary reality for those who read the work or play the game. I am also saying that both computer games and literature have irreplaceable social utility, though of a different sort in each case. After all, are not both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* modeled, in different ways, on games, the first a game of cards, the second on a chess game. For Carroll, at least, and me too, a deep congruence exists between storytelling and games.¹⁰

I think Miller (and Lewis Carroll, for that matter) would feel right at home with *Homestuck*. Alternia (painstakingly wrought, shamelessly indulgent) is as pure a demonstration of "literature as virtual reality" as any. It's a fantastic playground, reinforced by the language and logic of games, so painstakingly imagined that it's almost impossible not

⁹ J. Hillis Miller. *On Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 18.

¹⁰ Ibid, 96-7.

to dream about exploring it. Is it any wonder that the kids love this stuff?

3893 - We've spoken about *Homestuck's* ever-increasing scale. This is demonstrated here in a direct address to the reader - we don't have time anymore for the old gags and running jokes, because there are bigger things to worry about (spoiler alert: we actually will have time for old gags and running jokes, just not at this particular moment).

The Troll's sudden, violent reaction also serves to knock the reader off-balance a little, and to plant the idea that Alternia is a crueler, angrier world than our own. John got a little pissy when you tried to give him a silly name - Karkat Vantas is ready to cut a bitch.

3897 - Right away, Karkat seems aware of the flaws of his favorite media in a way that John wasn't.

3902 - The ~ symbol is called a "tilde": so the preferred Troll programming language is tildeATH, or "'til death." This isn't ominous at all!

Google informs me this quote *should* be attributed (in our universe at least) not to Troll Will Smith but to English writer and poet Arthur Dunkerly, pen name John Oxenham. I see a connection here with *Homestuck's* equivalence of fate with free will - living and dying are two sides of the same coin.

3903 - The scenery and especially the color palette used here immediately establish a visual contrast to the pastels used in the terrestrial homes of the four human players.

3905 - Karkat's angry outburst here tweaks not only John's poetic reflection way back in 1982 but also PM's romantic perspective on the mail. Again: this is Hivebent. This ain't your daddy's *Homestuck*. (Your daddy did not have a *Homestuck*.)

3910 - "**mY iNvErTeBrOtHeR**" is something of an anomaly - Hussie quickly eases up on the insect puns in Troll dialogue. Although oddly enough not on fish puns. Seriously, if you like fish puns, wait about 400 pages and I promise you'll be in hog(fish) heaven.

We don't learn a ton about terminallyCapricious quite yet - he's the Capricorn Troll, going by his symbol and user name. The references to his "horns" sound kind of unseemly, although we'll get a proper explanation soon.

3912 - So here's this motherfucker.

Gamzee is a Juggalo. If you do not know what Juggalos are, my description will be brief and only as disdainful as is absolutely required. Juggalos are fans of a horrorcore hip-hop duo called the Insane Clown Posse, a group whose embrace of the "scary clown" aesthetic (i.e. the Joker, Sweet Tooth from *Twisted Metal*, Steven King's *It*) and ...idiosyncratic lyrics have earned them widespread popular and critical disdain. Juggalos are known for being undiscerning in their musical tastes, for their rowdy, crude and dangerous behavior during the annual "Gathering of the Juggalos", for their inexplicable love of the off-brand Faygo cola, and for their uncritical embrace of the Posse's sophomoric philosophy. To learn more, visit your local library, or read this incisive and informative exposé by the fearless hipsters at Vice Magazine:

<http://www.vice.com/read/land-of-juggalos-v14n10>

You should probably also watch the band's "Miracles" video, a viral sensation so big it was eventually spoofed on SNL. The video features Windows '95 screensaver-quality CGI and insipid lyrics about appreciating the magic in nature, family, pet cats and dogs, and most infamously magnets. At first glance, it seems obvious what Hussie's doing here: poking fun at a widely mocked subculture, while at the same time developing a broadly sympathetic character who challenges some of the stereotypes. In reality, there's something a little more complicated and subversive going on with Gamzee, but we'll get to that later.

Gamzee's also a Troll without an obvious equivalent among the human players. His dopey attitude is similar to John's, and his love of hip-hop recalls Dave, but to say he's a direct counterpart to either is a bit of a stretch.

3913 - Gamzee's pretty chill, especially compared to the histrionic Karkat. But we get a little tiny glimpse here of a slightly more hostile side of his personality:

It is captchalogued through your MIRACLE MODUS. You have absolutely no idea how this thing works. And you don't want to know.

If you've been paying attention, this might remind you of the following exchange, from a few pages back:

**TC: No No BrO, i DoN't WaNnA kNoW, dOn'T eVeN tELL mE.
TC: kNoWiNg ShIt JuSt StEaLs Up ALL tHe FuCkIn MaGiC fRoM mY mIrAcLeS liKe a MoThErFuCkIn ThIeF.
TC: AnD tHaT aIn'T cOoL.**

Gamzee's a kid who doesn't like rational or scientific explanations - he'd rather enjoy the illusion of magic than

have it spoiled for him by the truth. It seems harmless enough, but in a story about growing up (and inevitably facing reality) it could lead to trouble down the road.

3917 - The oral ingestion of "sopor slime" is responsible for Gamzee's laidback, stoner attitude (the stuff is supposed to be absorbed through the skin during sleep to suppress nightmares - apparently it's a bit more potent when eaten). It's another way of establishing the character's identity, along with a little bit of world-building, but the question is implied right in his first appearance: what's this poor kid like when he isn't high?

3918 - "It is dangerous to leave unarmed" seems like a reference to the famous line (spoken by a sword-dispensing hermit) from the first *Legend of Zelda*: "It's dangerous to go alone! Take this!"

3927 - Karkat's interest in leadership is unexpected, although at this point it's easiest to attribute it to his ego and ambition.

His reference to "females" doesn't quite make sense in the context of Troll society - Troll romance is a complicated thing, which of course we'll cover in agonizing detail when the time is right, but it doesn't draw hard and fast distinctions with sexuality and gender.

Finally, the reference to "Kraft grubsauce" suggests that, on top of everything else, Troll civilization practices mass consumer cannibalism of their infants. You've gotta do something with all those culled babies, I guess.

3931 - And here's the lovely Terezi, she who calibrates the gallows.

Terezi is a tough character to get a handle on. Despite her first major contribution to the story being the accidental murder of the protagonist, she remains one of the most likable Trolls. Her most immediate and notable trait is her childlike, borderline psychotic glee in everything she does. And, fitting a character obsessed with law and justice, Terezi is absolutely certain in her judgment in all matters, and as such frequently displays a striking lack of self-awareness. She rarely second-guesses herself or expresses regret for her actions.

3932 - Here we have our first indication that Terezi isn't quite as out of it as she appears, and that she plays up her own eccentricities to annoy or befuddle others.

3949 - ...that said, even when she isn't exaggerating her peculiarities to vex her friends, Terezi is still plenty goddamn weird.

3955 - Aside from our first extended encounter with the Leo Troll, arsenicCatnip (three guesses what her gimmick is...) we get another example of Terezi's lack of self-consciousness. Furry role-playing is weird, apparently, but not if you do it *facetiously* - and in any case it's *totally* way weirder than performing elaborate mock trials, executing stuffed animals, and licking chalk monsters, while hanging out alone in your room. (Terezi's "ironic" embrace of weird internet activities goes a long way to explaining why she gets along with Dave.)

3965-7 - I'll skim over the brief glimpses of yet more goddamn Trolls - they were intended to intrigue readers of *Homestuck* as a serial, but the early appearances of the Aries and Aquarius trolls are barely noticeable when you're reading the archives and when the next installment is only a click away.

I think the Aquarius instalment might be a spoof of those anti-litering ads where you see a seagull caught in a sixpack ring or an Amerindian picking up a bottle and shedding a single tear. It's the first reference we've had to "land dwellers", anyway, which implies the existence of sea-dwelling Trolls.

3969 - Meet the *Lusus Naturae*, the zoologically improbable and highly allegorical custodians of juvenile Trolls. They don't make a lot of sense biologically, but they work perfectly in Alternia's heightened adolescent nightmare - here, parents are *literally* monsters, Karkat's parent actually *is* dangerous and *should* be avoided.

Homestuck's schizophrenic pacing is obvious here, as we get a big fat chunk of world-building Troll biology on a single page. It's reasonably interesting stuff but it would be difficult to dramatize without a major digression featuring dozens of subterranean grubs climbing to the surface world, like baby turtles crawling to sea.

3970 - Here the author flat out admits he'd started to prepare an interactive flash to introduce us to Karkat's crabdad before deciding it just wasn't worth it. It's kind of a shame, actually; it could have been an effective callback to the human players' struggles with their respective guardians. But it's hard to fault Hussie for burning through this stuff as quickly as he can.

3971-2 - The new Troll is is referencing the opening of the early 00s procedural *CSI: Miami*. The show always opened on a crime scene with David Caruso's Lt. Caine, who would make a terrible pun and then dramatically put on his sunglasses, cuing for the show's theme (The Who's "We Won't Get Fooled Again", beginning with Roger Daltrey's famous scream).

3976 - After a little bit of drama we are officially introduced to Sollux Captor, the Gemini Troll. Despite his clever name and kickass design, Sollux has 2 main purposes in the story:

1) His psychic eye lasers are a convenient plot device whenever something needs to be either levitated or blasted to bits.

2) Sollux is an obvious foil to Karkat. If Karkat is anti-John, then Sollux is Karkat's Dave; and unlike John and Dave, their relationship is defined by Karkat's obvious feelings of inferiority and an uneasy rivalry. Sollux borrows a lot from Dave: not only his coolkid sunglasses and technological prowess, but also the apparent bravado undercut by self-doubt.

So as a character Sollux is tough to warm up to. He's primarily defined by his bipolar tendencies (GET IT? HE'S BIPOLAR? 'CAUSE HE'S THE GEMINI TROLL?) and his sporadic bouts of self-hatred - but even this is never as funny or poignant as it is with Dave or especially Karkat, whose self-loathing is expressed and enacted through a really clever device we'll see later.

But although he doesn't get as much screen time as either of these guys, there's definitely some interesting stuff going on around him, if you pay close attention. We'll get into that later.

And as a side note, although I'm committed to not repeating Wiki stuff I'd also like to point out the supreme cleverness of his name, which manages to combine two words for "light" ("sol" or sun and "lux") while also referencing the mythological Gemini twins (Pollux and Castor).

3982 -

**GC: YOU 4R3 MR 4PPL3B3RRY BL4ST 4ND 3V3RYON3 KNOWS THOS3
4R3 YOUR F4VOR1T3 FL4VORS**

...is a pretty telling turn of phrase. It's a way of demonstrating through her vocabulary how Terezi perceives the world, i.e. through flavors and smells instead of colors; and it's another example of *Homestuck's* recurring

theme that these kids' understanding of reality has been defined by cultural detrius like advertising and junk food. Terezi's talent, we'll learn, is getting inside people's heads and predicting the choices they'll make. We see this in a small way here as she teases Sollux about his red/blue fixation.

3985 - For what it's worth, I've been told that depression is "anger directed inwards."

Sollux and AA are interesting together - both are plagued by prophetic visions of the end of the world but respond differently. Sollux seems to be taking a proactive approach, while AA is deterministic and fatalistic, denying any ability to influence the future.

3987 - Aside from the joke of the anticlimax, moments like these (where Hussie spoils the plot in advance) put us in the shoes of the characters - we have a certain amount of foreknowledge of the future, but are helpless to prevent it.

3992 - "The demon is already here."

And so, in a strikingly offhand manner, we are introduced to *Homestuck's* primary antagonist. The revelation is so casual and dismissive that as readers we're almost inclined to disregard it. This information is so shocking - that our heroes could fail so spectacularly, that the villain could win so absolutely, and that the author could reveal this information so carelessly - that really the only way to keep reading is to plow on and try to forget you even read this page.

But sadly everything the narrator describes in this installment is completely accurate, and the remainder of this Act will demonstrate how bad luck, short-sighted choices, and the intricate clockwork machinations of a sinister intelligence conspire to bring this nameless demon into the Troll's universe. And remember, because he's already here, it could never happen any other way. Troll society itself (with its rampant racism, slavery and infanticide) must be read as an extension of this monster's twisted psychology. This is a bad guy so big that he's damned to hell an entire civilization just to ensure, not only that he wins, but that even the possibility of his defeat is unthinkable.

4001 - Oh, Tavros. Poor, sweet, ridiculous Tavros, who will be mocked, punished and humiliated at every turn for his gentleness.

There's more to this, though, than the dark humor of watching an innocent and hapless character abused. *Homestuck's* sadistic treatment of Tavros has teeth. There's a reason for it. Without exploring it too deeply here, Tavros is a guy with serious personality deficiencies - he's often indecisive, cowardly, willfully obtuse and passive aggressive - and not in spite of, but as a direct consequence of, his "niceness."

These flaws are what allow him to be so abused and taken advantage of. That's not to say he deserves, karmically speaking, the misery the story so gleefully heaps upon him. But it's difficult not to conclude that he at least invites it...

4011 - ...as seen here. We've just witnessed a conceptually disturbing mashup of *Pokémon* with Ridley Scott's *Alien*, and again there's a point. "Fidusspawn" is a kid's game with a decidedly disturbing subtext - Scott was pretty explicit about the alien facehuggers as a body-horror metaphor for sexual violation, after all - made even worse by the cutesy depiction of the creatures involved. If I can engage in a bit of fannish speculation, I might wager such a game was designed to prepare young Trolls for the brutal, Darwinist reality of their planet's ecosystem, as well conscription in their species' galaxy-spanning military.

But Tavros doesn't care. He breeds a face-raping mutant hellbeast... and proceeds to have it cuddle with his animal buddy Tinkerbull. He is willfully ignoring the violent implications of the game and of his world in order to perpetuate a juvenile fantasy where everyone gets along. "Everyone wins." It's a fantasy the poor kid won't be able to sustain forever. And when it falls apart on him, the consequences will be disastrous.

(I haven't had any luck figuring out the etymology of "Fidusspawn". However, Tavros' first name is kind of clever - it's a combination of "Tauros" with "Davros", the wheelchair-bound inventor of the villainous Daleks in *Doctor Who*.

4017 - Tavros dreams of **"a beautiful paradise planet of legend, that has all sorts of fanciful stuff like pirates, treasure, a cruel villain with a missing arm and a missing eye, and these weird aliens called "indians"."** It's an obvious reference to Peter (or "Pupa") Pan but more importantly: we've already seen some of this stuff on the Troll's planet, and will soon see more, reinforcing the

idea that Alternia is a childlike fantasy world gone terribly wrong.

(A pupa, incidentally, is the fancy term for the cocoon stage that insects like moths and butterflies go through during metamorphosis. It's completely appropriate for Tavros, a young man with enormous potential who hasn't quite earned his wings.)

4021 - Another admission that, as the scale of *Homestuck* grows exponentially, stuff that seemed significant before (like the kid's adventures in the Medium) becomes less important and hence doesn't need to be repeated.

4022 - Our first encounter with aG, the Scorpio Troll. There's something ambivalent and disturbing about her banter with Tavros: it goes back and forth between friendly teasing (with eye-rolling, Nickelodeon-level puns like "Torreasnore") and genuine malice.

Tavros' nonsense strategy of personifying his self-esteem is something that will come up again, too.

4034 - And here's our official introduction to Aradia, aka apocalypseArisen, the Aries Troll.

I remember being surprised the first time I read this page (well, technically the previous one) by the depiction of Aradia "in a more symbolic manner." Part of the character's mystery is that so far she's only appeared in Hussie's more detailed, painterly style - never as a videogame-style sprite. For me, this had the effect of making her seem *older* than the other Trolls, who we've mostly seen depicted as squat, childlike sprites - so seeing her character reduced to this size came as a bit of a shock.

I see this more as a byproduct of Hussie's evolving visual style than as a deliberate choice. As *Homestuck* develops, Hussie relies less on the cut-and-paste photoshop hijinks of the early installments (think of how long we spent in John's room, on one "set", with one "actor") and uses more detailed art to suggest character and action. Aradia's appearance as a willowy adolescent flinging stuff around with her powers is a natural consequence of this increased visual complexity.

As for Aradia herself... she's less a developed character than a plot device right now, but her fatalistic attitude is little disturbing. As we spend more time with her we'll get a better sense of how she came to be this way.

4038 - We've seen the Troll's messing with the kids outside of chronological sequence, but unless I'm mistaken this is the first time we've seen a hint that the kids (or at least their technology) might have influenced the Troll's session, introducing the possibility of additional time paradoxes.

4039 - A nice moment for GA (remember her?), recognizing she can't dissuade her friends from their self-destructive actions but offering her support and friendship anyway. It seems GA falls on the "free will" side of the story's central debate, while Aradia unquestionably falls on the "determinism" side.

4044 - Little pun - Scorpio Troll "bugs" Aradia.

There's obviously a history here, and AG's confrontational and slightly forced "attitude" completely fails to shake Aradia. We'll see this relationship developed further.

4052-3 - Really effective use of Flash here. The jittery, flickering animations sell Sollux's inability to control his power. I especially like the surging red and blue power beams blinking in front of and behind each other on 4053.

4056 - And here's sweet little Nepeta, officially the Most Useless Troll. I'm going to pick on Nepeta in particular because I think she exemplifies a considerable flaw in *Homestuck*, as Hussie himself has admitted on his Forumspring:

"If you look up Expendable Character in the dictionary you would see a picture of Nepeta batting around a ball of yarn while looking as adorable as possible."¹¹

This isn't to antagonize Nepeta's legions (Leijons?) of admirers. Nepeta's a sweetheart and you can't hate her. But I hope I'm not spoiling anything when I tell you her impact on the narrative (as of this writing, spring 2013) is pretty insignificant. And yet she receives the same extended introduction and complicated iconography (33 is the atomic number of arsenic, which ties into her chat handle, and represents the smile of her double-jawed cat *Lusus*, and so on.) that the rest of her buddies do.

It's not that *Homestuck* includes minor characters that's a problem - after the claustrophobia of the first few acts,

¹¹ Hussie, Andrew. "MSPA Formspring Archives." Ed. Nokob. MSPA Forums, 9 Oct. 2011. 08 Apr. 2013.
<http://dl.dropbox.com/u/40585720/Combined_Formspring_Web_Aug-28-2011.htm>

with their laser-like focus on the four kids, the expanded cast comes as a breath of fresh air. But there's so much to learn about the Trolls, and one grows impatient in the company of those who aren't as interesting or plot-critical as their peers. A ruthlessly slashed *Homestuck* would certainly omit or combine some of the Trolls; but even a leaner second draft could profitably trim back the time we spend with some of the lesser players.

It's difficult to fault Hussie for any of this, mind you. The entire work is founded on a "more is more" approach to complexity and world-building - and *Homestuck*'s audience eats this stuff up. When going for popular appeal more characters are inarguably better: there are more distinct individuals for young readers to identify with, more clashing personalities, more romantic drama. But I don't think it's unreasonable to suggest *Homestuck* sometimes sacrifices clarity and coherence in order to incorporate every detail of the author's creation (no matter how superfluous) and play to the audience's hunger for escapism and soap opera.

4060 - As for Nepeta herself: she's very much a participant in the "furry" nonsense we glimpsed earlier with Jade. And, like Jade, she manages to be pretty endearing despite the sometimes unseemly nature of the real-world subculture. Nepeta is so wholesome and innocent that she borders on infuriating; again, I like Nepeta, but I can easily see her preciousness ("fountain of cute", "Pounce de Leon") irritating some readers. But that's likely intentional, and the good news is that if Nepeta annoys you you can just keep reading until horrible things start happening to everyone.

4061 - So in an extremely minor development I'm not going to bother to mark as a spoiler because it's *Nepeta*, who even cares, we eventually learn she has a crush on Karkat. She eases up on the role-playing around him, although in a cute character detail it's not that she deliberately tones it down in order to look normal - it's that she gets so flustered around him that she forgets to role-play, and keeps having to correct herself.

4062 - Without getting too much into Troll relationship nonsense: Nepeta and CT (might as well call him Equius) have a platonic relationship where one looks out for and restrains the other from causing trouble. In Troll culture, where bloodthirsty and psychotic individuals are

common, these pacifying relationships are as important for the propagation of the species as sexual ones.

Now, the obvious inference here is that sweet little Nepeta has buddied up with Equius to keep his smoldering racism and terrifying STRENGTH in check. But rereading their early interactions, as Equius bosses around Nepeta... it seems as if he's the one keeping her under control. Which is an interesting proposition, as it furthers the implication that Nepeta is at least a little unbalanced and dangerous. She does slaughter animals several times her size, and as for her emotional stability... well, we haven't seen the shipping wall yet.

4064 - Note the fate of poor Tinkerbull, still smiling. Little guy was a trooper 'til the end.

4067 - Between its awkward title and the threat of "real-world consequences," FLARP is clearly a parallel/predecessor to SGRUB for the Trolls. This is intriguing because it suggests (like Troll society's insistence that young Trolls learn to design their own hives) that somehow the Troll establishment is aware of SGRUB, and is grooming its children to play it. FLARP is important in that it reveals how these characters approach "games," which may give us some clue as to how they'll play SGRUB...

4068 - ...and it starts paying off right away. Right off we learn Aradia wasn't always so morose and fatalistic. We also learn that Tavros is what gamers call a "funhaver," who prioritizes enjoying a game rather than accumulating points or treasure.

4069 - The Flapstractions are another blurring of reality with gaming conventions, and evidently one that must be "turned on" (unlike the Echeladder or Sylladex, which are always "on"). That they hatch from eggs laid by a grub, and are evidently organic, only confuses matters further.

4072 - Careful examination reveals these monsters are semi-translucent, suggesting they're only holograms, and their spider-like attributes imply they were designed by AG herself. And here's where we learn something critical about AG: she cheats. Or at the very least, she isn't above rigging the game for her own benefit...

4075 - (Remember: a pupa is a cocoon. Butterflies can fly. Cocoons, sadly, cannot.)

4077 - ...and she's also legitimately malicious, in a way that none of the other Trolls we've met so far have been.

We've read a lot about how violent Troll culture supposedly is but none of the characters we've met (crabby Karkat, feral Nepeta, psychotic Terezi) have attacked their friends.

And while attacking Tavros, AG continues to employ the juvenile taunts and puns she's used before. Her juxtaposition of childlike mischief and homicidal malice continues to be disturbing.

4078 - Karkat, to his credit, immediately sees through AG's bullshit and wants nothing to do with her. It's gratifying to see him call her out - and frustrating (probably intentionally so, to further stoke the reader's resentment of the character) to see her get the last laugh.

It's also confirmed here that AG and Terezi used to be buddies, and used similar manipulative tactics against their foes. Keep an eye out for how Hussie develops the parallels and differences between these two.

4079 - There is nothing good on this page.

There is nothing we want any part of.

Hurry. Click. Please.

4087 - Recall that frogs are blasphemous to the black Carapacians of Derse. How might those guys respond to one being prototyped?

4090 - The frogsprite has a spiky thing around his neck like Kermit for some reason.

4091 - Also Aradia is a ghost.

There have been occasional hints to this effect: her spooky blank eyes, of course, and the fact that she remained invisible to Sollux back on 4046. Yet, as Aradia informs a surprisingly composed Nepeta, it's okay if you are blown away by this stunning revelation.

It's unclear exactly how or why Aradia returned as a ghost - the dead can be resurrected as sprites, of course, and there is an afterlife of sorts for SBURB/GRUB players that we'll learn about later. I think the implication is that Aradia's formidable psychic powers (which already allow her to commune with the dead) allowed her to maintain a presence on the physical plane after her death - although as far as I know there's never been a definitive answer.

4095 - I'll let the author himself officially introduce Vriska Sekret, the most trollish of Trolls:

When I was about to launch into the Hivebent arc, I thought one cool opportunity that presented was to introduce a very major character out of nowhere, who we had literally no foreknowledge of other than one shot of a strange looking horn cropped off panel. The entire profile of this character was always meant to be "someone who is in some way involved with practically everything", and the scorpio sign seemed suited to this. This aspect of her profile was conveyed up front in her introduction, and hammered repeatedly with almost every scene she's been in. Hivebent was a good introduction to the ways in which she entangles herself nefariously with everything, and slowly but surely, this has been revealed to be the case in the main plotline. It was unclear before, and indeed unclear that this was even a question that needed to be answered, because she had not been introduced yet. And personally, I think there's something kind of exciting which that proposition injects into a story.

Before Hivebent, most of the trolls were portrayed as incompetent at trolling. And when the roster was expanded, the question was begged: are any of these trolls any good at trolling? So part of her profile was also to serve as the ultimate troll. Karkat was an effective troll insofar as he was loud and angry and obnoxious, but that's about as far as it went. Vriska was designed to be a good troll in the purest sense of the word. She gets people legitimately riled up. Both in the story, and even more importantly, outside it. There is no other troll, or really even any other aspect of Homestuck, which generates more debate. This was intentional, and continues to be.¹²

4096 - It is sometimes suggested, among *Homestuck* readers, that Vriska is a sort of twisted "Mary-Sue" character - an idealized and obnoxiously perfect heroine who gets everything she wants, common in amateur fiction, often intended as an avatar for the author. Hussie has denied this and I'm inclined to agree with him: but it's clear that Vriska, in her megalomaniacal way, believes herself to be the "Mary-Sue" of her own story. Here's the author:

She lives her life as her own self-aggrandizing, wildly powerful self-insert character, always comes out on top, and never suffers consequences. She even sort of mocks her own intent on this on a meta level by "self-inserting" into the kids' story and influencing their events, as she said.¹³

We've already seen the kind of behavior this attitude leads to, including her abuse of her friends and her embarrassing obliviousness to her own faults. Her unprovoked torment of Tavros is a good example of the sorts of shenanigans we can

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

expect from Vriska - and of the dire consequences for anyone (wait for it) *ensnared* in her web (sorry).

4097 - Hussie employs a variety of characterization tricks to keep Vriska sympathetic - she wouldn't be very controversial, after all, if she were completely obnoxious and irredeemable. One of her sympathetic attributes is that she's frequently kind of bumbling and inept. She has her irons in the fire, but she's still only thirteen, and one imagines against a real master of manipulation she wouldn't stand a chance.

4099 - Vriska Sympathy Point #2:

When you get worked up about stuff you put 8's in places that don't really make a lot of sense phonetically.

Vriska is extremely and openly emotional, especially when her plans go awry. Your reaction may differ, but I find these tantrums to be endearing - it's another place where her puppet-master persona falls apart.

4102 - Vriska Sympathy Point #3: introducing an adversary even more obnoxious and inscrutable than she is. It's a classic trick, in any work of fiction with an anti-heroic protagonist: make the antagonist even more repulsive than the lead character. We don't know much yet about Mr. White Text, but his condescending attitude rankles - and his font color gimmick is inarguably the most annoying of any of the characters we've met so far, requiring the reader to scroll through and highlight his dialogue to read it (PROTIP: use ctrl+A to highlight all the text at once).

4104 - Vriska's interaction with GA is revealing: apparently calling her out gets her really riled up, filling her text with 8s to the point of unreadability. And yet again, we see GA is good at understanding her friends, and tactful (or at least as tactful as is possible around a volatile personality like Vriska) in her attempts to advise them.

4107 - Vriska Sympathy Point #4: giant fucking spider monster. Vriska got a pretty raw deal in the Lusus lottery: if you're so inclined, you can probably excuse a lot of her attitude as a defense mechanism used to distance herself emotionally from peers she knows she may need to offer up as spider chow.

4111 - Here's our long-awaited introduction to Equius. I'll be limiting my commentary on Equius, because sadly there's no way to write literary analysis on the sexuality of a teenage horse monster in a webcomic without looking

sketchy as hell. That's some serious "when you 100k into the Void, the Void 100ks also into you" shit. I'm not going there.

Anyway: If one reads *Homestuck's* Trolls as satirizing common types of internet trolls, then Equius is surely an exaggerated take on the Internet Tough Guy: the guy who talks a big game online, but who fails to follow through on any of his threats. Unlike most internet users, Equius is actually capable of beating the snot out of you, but probably won't, because of a litany of psychological hang-ups and paraphilias. In the heightened reality of Alternia, Equius is allowed to embody the hypermasculinity that those he satirizes can only aspire to... but his STRENGTH is inextricably married to his borderline-fascist attitude and demented sexuality.

Also that horse poster on the left cracks me up. "I LOVE BEING **STRONG**." Evidently it's the work of prolific fetish artist Kurt Logan, a long-time favorite of Hussie's.

4113 - Exhibit 1 of that "demented sexuality." Arthur is a callback to Hussie's "Humanimals" strips. Now, I love these goddamn things and recommend reading them, but if you can't deal: the gist of the strips is that they involve monstrous abominations who live, work, laugh and love in a mundane office environment. "Humanimals" strips only have three punchlines:

1) Something initially appears normal, but is revealed to be fucking horrifying, as seen here:

<http://www.andrewhussie.com/comic.php?sec=archive&auth=Blurbs&cid=blurbs/00085-h.gif&blurb=h>

2) Something appears pornographic, but is revealed to be totally nonsexual, as seen here:

<http://www.andrewhussie.com/comic.php?sec=archive&auth=Blurbs&cid=blurbs/00122-h.gif&blurb=h>

3) Something fucking horrifying is happening, but everyone treats it like the most ordinary thing in the world, as seen here:

<http://www.andrewhussie.com/comic.php?sec=archive&auth=Blurbs&cid=blurbs/00151-h.gif&blurb=h>

Arthur is clearly a product of punchlines two and three. There is nothing unseemly about a young Troll receiving a nutritious meal from his devoted Lusus... but it's difficult for the human reader, studying this wholesome tableau, not draw unsavory associations. This is the terrible,

hilarious genius of Equius Zahhak and his precious little life: Hussie imagines some horrible scenario and then tweaks just a few of the details, obscuring something disgusting and letting the reader's imagination fill in the gaps, implicating his audience in the 100dness. It's like the musclebeast posters a few pages back - somehow, pixelating the dongs makes them funnier and more horrible at the same time.

4116 - The twitching flash animations over the next few pages are really effective at depicting Equius' barely restrained machismo.

4118 - The reference to "mangrit" brings to mind John's father. Again, Equius is a model of conventional masculinity, exaggerated to repulsive extremes.

4121 - "Demented sexuality," Exhibit 2. There's something a little sad and messed up about Equius' masochism: he's internalized Troll racism to the point that he is aroused by it. Again, this is mostly implied rather than explicitly stated, in keeping with the author's *modus operendi* of deriving humor from disturbing implications. Also, much like how Vriska uses 8s more frequently when agitated, Equius uses shorter phrases with additional line breaks to suggest terse dialogue when he's hot and bothered.

4126 - This is obviously Equius' internal monologue, a shift from the second-person narration we've been reading for a while. His elaborate fantasy life is reminiscent of the Exiles, particularly WV and his Can Town. I think this is part of the reason this page comes across as goofy and ridiculous rather than creepy: we're tricked into identifying with Equius through the subtle change in perspective.

There's also some subtle linework going on here: notice how the robot is colored in Hussie's usual style while Equius himself is sketched, with colors bleeding over the outline. It's another trick that makes him seem silly and harmless rather than monstrous.

4127 - Let us not linger on what "**As if your own record is so spotless!**" is supposed to imply.

4130 - The link goes back to one of the donor commissions that introduced the Midnight Crew, if you're curious.

4131 - Another red herring? The "unbelievably shitty" doomsday device recalls Dave's swords.

4134 - The death of Spidermom was heavily foreshadowed, both by the death of the other Trolls' Lusi, and by Vriska's complaints about how she hated the monster and wouldn't it be *awful* if something happened to her; even the illustration on 4108, with the doomsday device dangling over Spidermom, foreshadowed her death.

4137 - Again, we're skimming over details that were important during the human kids' entry into the medium. Terezi's in and battling imps, which have prototyped traits from her dragon Lusus... but the focus is on the development of her relationship with Vriska.

4144 - White Text Guy lays out his *modus opperendi* here:

You were, and are, going to do this regardless.
I only ever place myself into positions of tangential involvement with events that will bring about my employer's entry into this universe.
I oversee the events as they take place, and ever so slightly nudge them into motion when necessary.

I don't lie.
Deception is only necessary for those like you to achieve their objectives.
I play with my cards face up.
Isn't it funny how during our various matches, I can tell you what my moves will be in advance, and still win?

His strategies are reminiscent of those employed by Terezi, who Vriska described as using "head games and politics" rather than superpowers to decimate her foes. And one of his last lines suggests he has a further advantage, setting him apart from the young Trolls he's manipulating: he calls Vriska a child.

That mean's he's an adult.

In a narrative focused on kids, about growing up, where all other adult characters have appeared as mute and faceless but generally benevolent authority figures: that sets him apart.

Also this quote:

AG: I'm 8eginning to think you really 8elieve that! So delusion81. You're just a path8tic, lonely gamer who 8uys into his own character profile 8S.

...is a bit on the nose as a description of Vriska herself.

4151 - This is obviously the turning point for Aradia, when she changes from the upbeat gamer we've glimpsed in flashbacks to the apathetic ghost we've seen later.

"**Arrivederci, Megido**" is typical Vriska, obnoxious and childish, and wholly unsuited to the cruelty of her actions (eliminating a rival by drugging and mind-controlling her boyfriend to murder her is some pretty coldblooded shit.)

4153 - Man, fuck this guy.

I'm playing into Hussie's hand, here, because every aspect of Doc Scratch's character is designed to provoke this reaction. He is omnipotent, omniscient, and condescending. He is an adult on a world of children. And he breaks the rules of the *Homestuck* text-based "game" the reader is supposedly playing by refusing the reader's commands. We've dealt with the conceit of *Homestuck* as a "game" for so long that the text commands are almost invisible at this point - so, when a character reminds us of this device and then deliberately breaks it, it comes as something of a shock.

Doc Scratch shares a number of traits with the other adults in *Homestuck*. Mom, Dad, Bro and Becquerel were all faceless and inexpressive, so Scratch takes this design trend to its logical conclusion; it's not just that he lacks facial features, he doesn't even have a recognizable human head. And while the human kids' guardians were all looking out for their wards' best interests, in one way or another, there's no reason to believe Scratch's motives are as benevolent.

It is also strongly implied, and later confirmed, that Doc Scratch shares both a role and super-powered DNA with Becquerel. But while Bec is a Good Dog, and also a Best Friend, Scratch is perfectly upfront about his nefarious plans for Alternia. He will protect the planet only as long as is necessary to incubate his master, Lord English. In a story concerned with themes of custodianship and responsibility, Doc is the ultimate Bad Parent, abusing and manipulating his wards for his own benefit.

4154 -

Guardians can never be told what to do. Neither the omnipotent kind, nor the ordinary kind who raise kids in houses. It's a universal law of reality.

When you're a little kid, after all, your parents look powerful and incomprehensible - only as you age do you come to understand that they're people, just like you. Inscrutable and nigh-omnipotent, Scratch is a little kid's nightmare of a grownup come to life.

4156 - The exchange about "Mr. Vanilla Milkshake" shows that this conversation took place before Terezi was blinded.

Terezi's ability to coerce Doc Scratch into doing her bidding is impressive. You need to be really good at manipulating people to trick someone who's omniscient.

4157 - Pre-blindness Terezi seems a little less deranged than the character who orchestrated John's death and executes plush toys for fun.

4160 - The "man in the green moon" is so obviously Doc Scratch that I don't even know why I'm bothering to write this.

4163 - Brilliant use of limited animation here. Seeing the normally unflappable Doc Scratch so completely unhinged is really distressing, and the animation is a big part of what sells it - especially the way his text manifests the same green energy effect as his body.

4172 - Vriska's magic dice really only make sense in the videogame-like reality of *Homestuck*. I can just about swallow superpowered hammers and magic needles that shoot fire, especially since they only come into play once John and Rose are in the Medium... and even telepathy and telekinesis, which are explained as genetic attributes of an alien species... but we never receive any kind of explanation of how the Octet works, only that they produce random reality-warping effects.

4176 - While Vriska has clearly (finally) started to feel a little remorse for her actions, her response is still very immature - she wants to make amends with Aradia in the most superficial way possible, and mostly for her own convenience. She doesn't seem to actually regret anything she's done. And when her half-assed attempt to fix things goes awry, she loses her temper at the very person she's trying to reconcile with.

4177 - When Equius is bossed around by a higher caste: he is turned on. When Equius gets to boss around someone of a lower caste: he is turned on. And when the low-caste person flips things around and starts boss around Equius: he still gets turned on. At this point it should be clear that Equius is neither a sadist or masochist in the purest sense, but a total freak who gets off on any sort of interaction with anyone.

4180 - This is part of a running gag where Trolls refer to ordinary household items by either complicated alien

"common" names, or by fancy proper ones that are actually ordinary English words. It's not really funny. Ah well, can't land 'em all.

4185 - Equius and Aradia get away with face-to-face conversation because she's a Sprite now and can utilize the Spritelog. The lengths Hussie goes to to uphold his arbitrary rules for dialogue are kind of impressive.

4188 - Aradia's anger here is immediate and shocking - evidently returning to a material form has reconnected her to her emotions, at least a bit.

4190 - Vriska threatened to do exactly this a few pages back as a demonstration of her contrition for murdering Aradia. It's unclear if Equius is horrified or aroused.

4195 - Oh Jesus, the shipping wall. As far as I'm concerned this is final, definitive proof that Nepeta is a little unhinged.

For the mercifully uninitiated, "shipping" is a fandom phenomenon in which fans of a particular piece of media advocate for a romantic relationship between a particular pair of characters. So for *Harry Potter*, for instance, there are fans who "ship" Hermione and Harry, Hermione and Ron, Ron and Harry, and basically every other possible combination of characters (unimpeded by gender, sexual preference, or blood relation). Fans (especially, at the risk of playing into a stereotype, young women of a certain age and disposition) get very invested in this shit. Having your ship declared "canon" and confirmed by the author in the original text is the ultimate vindication.

What makes Nepeta a little creepy is that she applies language and concepts typically reserved for matchmaking fictional characters to the relationships between her IRL friends. It suggests she can only perceive reality through the lens of fandom.

(Also, take a look at the note under the square featuring Nepeta and Karkat.)

4196 - As we learned way back at his introduction, Karkat is a connoisseur of (terrible) romantic comedies and sees himself as something of an amateur expert of Troll romance. Of course, that raises the question - if Karkat is such a master of Troll relationships, then what the hell is he doing giving Vriska control over poor Tavros' gameworld?

4197 - If you can be bothered to look back, Karkat's blood color is first suggested on 3807. Or just keep clicking, the reveal's coming soon anyway.

We saw Nepeta using a viewfinder back on 4194.

4205 - Karkat's mythological title in the Game is "Knight of Blood" - in fact, the image of Jack Noir/Spade Slick's wound flashing in his eyes on 4203 is the same as the symbol for the Blood aspect (now available on a hoodie in the What Pumpkin shop!). We won't learn exactly what Blood powers do - unlike Time and Breath, which are pretty straightforward. But if we look at Slick and Karkat's handshake on this page, it seems likely it has something to do with brotherhood, and "this troll disease called friendship."

4207 - The fact that Karkat's Black Queen is prepared to receive 12 prototype augmentations, not 6, is an indication that the two competing Red and Blue teams might not be as separate as we were led to believe.

4211 - We've just seen the secret origin of Snowman from the Midnight Crew intermission.

4217 - So yeah, the squabbling and drama of the two competing teams was sort of a shaggy dog story, and won't have any real effect on the plot. But it still served its purpose, in that it provided a conflict to propel the narrative during the lengthy introduction of (most of) the Trolls, and demonstrated how the Trolls resolve their differences (subterfuge, manipulation, betrayal, murder) in a relatively low-stakes conflict. Needless to say, none of this bodes well for their chances of cooperating once in the Medium.

4233 - At long last, we receive an official introduction of Kanaya, the grim Auxilatrix. Inspired by the Virgo sign, Kanaya represents the concept of "virginity" - a fundamentally passive concept and a tricky one to communicate in a YA-friendly story of kids and fun. Hussie riffs on this concept in a couple of ways in developing Kanaya's character.

1) Kanaya as virgin mother. It's right there in her surname, *Maryam*, and in the identity of her Lusus, a "mother grub" in a state of perpetual arrested adolescence. Kanaya's role as symbolic "mother" will be expanded on in the next act.

2) Kanaya as romance fan. Kanaya admits right off the bat she's a fan of novels of "rainbow drinkers". These are the

Troll equivalent of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* novels, which make a big deal of the "erotics of abstinence" and the heroine's inability to consummate her relationship with her dangerous vampire boyfriend.

3) Kanaya as "final girl." A frequent trope in horror films, the "final girl" is the one who refuses sex and lives to the end to confront the monster (anyone who takes their shirt off is doomed to an early and gruesome death). Kanaya's chainsaw (a staple in horror films like the *Evil Dead* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) and her hive's location among hoards of the nocturnal living dead both identify her with this character type.

4) Kanaya as lesbian. Although every other troll is bisexual to some extent, Kanaya likes girls exclusively. According to some weird and antiquated concepts of "virginity", gay sex doesn't "count", so her sexuality also ties into her astrological symbol.

And one other thing about Kanaya: Kanaya is an artist, and she's actually pretty good. In a story full of deluded fans, tortured purple prose, mediocre pop culture and allegedly ironic awfulness, she's something of an anomaly - Hussie uses his impressive skills in color theory and design to make Kanaya's designs aesthetically appealing. We've also discussed how association with bad art can be an indicator of myopia and moral degradation in *Homestuck* - Kanaya's creativity is fitting, then, because she proves herself to be one the most compassionate and mature characters in the story.

4227 - Neat touch: the cuttlefish lunchbox/laptop resembles Jade's Squiddles-branded one.

4228 - Our first glimpse of the mysterious Pieces Troll.

Kanaya's "Moirail" (a buddy she's supposed to keep out of trouble, just like Equius and Nepeta - more on that later) is Vriska, although Kanaya expresses some ambivalence about their relationship.

4237 - The "chastity modus" is of course another reference to virginity.

4240 - While Ms. Maryam is generally quiet, articulate and dignified, this does not prevent her from (like every other character in *Homestuck*) occasionally doing something very silly.

4243 - The first appearance of the Aquarius Troll. Kanaya's characterization of him as "**Vvery Overbearing**"

seems pretty astute. We basically get confirmation here that Kanaya is romantically interested in Vriska, but that they've fallen into a platonic Moirail relationship.

4247 - There's an inversion here of the first appearance of the Trolls - just as we had no reason to assume carcinoGeneticist and his cronies weren't human when they first appeared, Kanaya assumes Rose and the other kids were Trolls.

4250 - Vriska isn't as invested in the blood caste system as, say, Equius, but she isn't above busting out a slur like "[fudge8looded](#)" when she's angry. Basically she's only racist when it's convenient. The cosmic scales measuring the character's "sympathetic" and "obnoxious" traits just tilted a little in favor of "HUGE BITCH BLUH BLUH".

4251 - So this seems like a good time to talk about disability and *Homestuck*.

I've seen accusations of ableism in *Homestuck*, and it's easy to see why critics would be sensitive. *Ableism* refers to both prejudiced attitudes and societal structures that discriminate against the physically and mentally disabled. Now this is a much-abused term in certain corners of the internet, particularly your Tumblrs and Livejournals and such, where it's sometimes overused by young people seeking validation through highly spurious claims of (frequently fictional) mental and physical disabilities. Fortunately, I not only have a Bachelor's degree in English Literature, I am also a certified mentally ill person with a history of forced hospitalization at *McLean fucking Hospital* in Belmont MA, and I've taught a college-level course with a unit on ableism and disability studies. What this means is that I am more qualified to discuss ableism in *Homestuck* than anyone who has ever posted on Tumblr put together. Even the ones who claim that Karkat lives in their heads. (Especially the ones who claim that Karkat lives in their heads.)

Let's get this out of the way first: if you think that fiction aimed at teenagers shouldn't contain any disparaging portrayals of disabled characters, because teenagers are stupid and cannot perceive satire or complexity in fiction and will conclude it must be okay to make fun of *all* disabled people... then you have a pretty legitimate gripe with *Homestuck*, and I won't disagree. The fact is, we live in a society with preexisting prejudices against the disabled, and, sadly, merely portraying a disabled character in anything but a completely approving

and sympathetic light will probably reinforce those prejudices for some of your readers.

But, if you're willing to play along, there's some pretty interesting stuff going on with *Homestuck's* depiction of disabled characters. After all, it's rare for an action/adventure story to include even a single disabled character, let alone several, and compelling ones at that. It's not all good, but there's a lot to like in terms of diverse, relatable disabled characters, and it's all *interesting*, at least.

Take Terezi, for instance. It's a little irritating that she falls into one of the most common archetypes for blind characters in genre fiction: like Daredevil, Zatoichi, and the Who's Tommy, Terezi isn't realistically blind, because in order to participate in the plot she has to be super-independent in a way that compensates for and effectively nullifies her disability. She couldn't take part in the adventure if she couldn't run and fight.

But at the same time, *Homestuck* tweaks this cliché in some interesting ways. Instead of the supernatural poise of a character like Daredevil, Terezi must compensate for her blindness in visible and frequently inconvenient or uncomfortable ways - obviously her portrayal isn't totally realistic, but it's nice to see a blind character in a fantasy story who clearly has to *work hard* to make up for her impairment. And through her references to smells, tastes and textures, the audience really gets a sense of how she perceives the world. It isn't that Terezi is handicapped, but that she has *different* abilities - and not coincidentally, "differently abled" is a popular way of describing disability among scholars and advocates.

And at the same time, there's much more Terezi than her blindness - she's a fully developed character with virtues (unshakable sense of right and wrong, cleverness, wicked sense of humor) and flaws (hyper-competitiveness, stubbornness, a refusal to respect people's boundaries) that influence how she understands her disability. She can make self-deprecating jokes about her blindness, or get self-righteous and pretend to be offended to get under peoples' skin. Ultimately, she accepts blindness as part of her life, and recognizes that while it has a number of drawbacks it also gives her a unique and valuable perspective. She's a character who deals with blindness, who falls into some stereotypes and deliberately embraces

others and avoids others entirely. I think that's a pretty nuanced portrayal of a disabled character.

Tavros, while not as positive as Terezi, is similarly complex. At first blush he's a pretty insulting stereotype of a sad-sack handicapped kid: pathetic, resentful of his wheelchair, and the butt of cruel jokes. But the important thing to remember about Tavros is that he isn't a wimp because he's in a wheelchair - he was attacked and put in a wheelchair because his wimpy personality pissed off the wrong person. And, just as Terezi's confidence and sense of humor define how she understands her blindness, Tavros' wimpiness defines how he understands and copes with his own disability.

There's a very telling conversation later on, after Tavros has received robotic legs that allow him to walk again, where he claims that these legs have cured his self-esteem issues and that, now that he's out of his wheelchair, he's a perfectly competent and functional individual. This isn't meant to be taken at face value, but as a glimpse into how Tavros understands his disability, and in a more general sense how he deals with all kinds of setbacks and disappointments: he makes us excuses to explain them away, or he ignores them and promises himself they'll go away. If Terezi is an example of someone who's accepted her disability and matured through adversity, then Tavros is a perfect example of denial, which holds back his personal development. So we have a realistic range of disabled characters - again, I think, a good thing.¹⁴

(Terezi and Tavros have one other thing in common - both of them are disabled because of a deliberate attack by another person. That's the case with a number of characters in *Homestuck*, even those who have less obvious disabilities [consider Vriska's prosthesis, or how Aradia became a ghost], and we'll see additional examples down the line in Act 6. Examine these cases and a very odd pattern emerges: congenital disability does not exist in *Homestuck*. If you are disabled, it is because of violence. Honestly, I'm not quite sure what to make of that. The obvious explanation is that this is a consequence of growing up on Alternia,

¹⁴ (You might argue that Tavros' paralysis is intended as a visual representation of his personality problems, which would obviously be problematic. But I'd argue that Hussie neatly deflects that criticism by 1) eventually replacing the wheelchair with prosthetic robot legs and 2) demonstrating that Tavros' issues remain and are in some ways *made even worse* by this 'cure'.

where violence is commonplace and the congenitally disabled are culled at birth. But I wanted to bring it up because, although I can't quite pin anything down, I can't help but feel there's something more to it than that.)

Mental disability is a whole other topic and one we'll be returning to much later, in Act 6. I want to avoid the kneejerk temptation to diagnose the Troll kids with actual mental disorders¹⁵; while some of their quirks may resemble symptoms of mental illness, it's clear that Hussie did not write them as such, and the text makes no claims to clinical accuracy. But even without specific depictions of illness, the story has already engaged with issues of mental disability via the troubling psychic visions experienced by Aradia and Sollux - though not hallucinations, these are powerful, uncontrollable (and apparently genetically predetermined) psychological afflictions that impact both characters' emotional and mental health. And though neither character is as prominent as Terezi or Tavros, both have distinct personalities beyond their mental problems, and find different ways to cope.

There's a lot more to be said about disability in *Homestuck*, and we'll meet a number of other disabled and otherwise damaged characters over the course of the story. But for the most part, I'm willing to give Hussie my cautious approval for his depiction of the disabled: for diverse, imperfect characters, coping with disability in diverse, imperfect ways.

4253 - There's some actual psychological insight here, about how people who lack self-confidence will invent games and gimmicks to try to boost themselves up - but these fantasies can never solve the underlying problem of persistent self-esteem issues. It's something I know I've dealt myself, and it's something Hussie will return to with Tavros.

But not just Tavros. Many of the characters in *Homestuck*, especially the Trolls, adopt new identities to give themselves something to aspire to or impress others. (And again, my personal observations suggest such behavior is

¹⁵ Briefly: you probably could make a case for Aradia as suffering from PTSD and disassociation, Sollux as bipolar (duh), Vriska as borderline, Karkat as depressive in his self-loathing, Eridan as a narcissist and Gamzee as an addict. If you're stretching, you might attribute Equius' rigidity around colors and numbers to OCPD - and Karkat does refer to Nepeta as "autistic" at one point.

not uncommon among IRL teenagers.) So in a world of remorseless psychopaths like Vriska, poor Tavros is punished for not believing enough in his own bullshit.

Also: Rufio is apparently a character in the terrible Steven Spielberg-directed *Peter Pan* adaptation *Hook*, which I've never seen. Eventually, the actor who played Rufio way-back-when was coerced into reading *Homestuck*, and hilarity ensued.

4259 - This is the first we've seen of Vriska's fetch modus, a device that would have required pages and pages of examination had it been introduced in act 1... but that, in a refreshing break from Hussie's compulsive exposition, isn't even properly explained. How far we've come.

4269 - Again: Tavros plays games to have fun, Vriska plays to win.

4270 - Obvious callback to John's disastrous attempt on the life of his Denizen, encouraged by Terezi.

4279-85 - I think the most important development here is that, whatever Vriska's complicated (by which I mean Borderline Personality Disorder-inspired) feelings for Tavros, he does not seem to reciprocate.

But the most *interesting* thing is that, while Vriska initially resorts to a very Vriska-like solution (mind-controlling her reluctant paramour into sloppy makeouts) she ultimately pulls back and lets him go. Why? It's ambiguous, but the implication is that brainwashing someone into loving her wouldn't be gratifying; that sometimes Vriska finds breaking the rules to get what she wants to be unsatisfying. Tiny little baby steps towards maturity.

4289 - Confirmation that Kanaya is indeed crushing on Vriska. Also Troll tears seem to be the same color as their blood.

It should be clear by now that any commentary on this act of *Homestuck* requires some understanding of the fictional romantic dynamics of Troll society and the particular relationships of our band of protagonists. *Homestuck* fans eat this stuff up - again, the introduction of romantic tension and unrequited love to the story brought in a lot of new fans. Personally, I feel a little undignified as a grown-ass man writing annotations that are basically "SHE likes HER but can't tell HER because she needs to stop HER from murdering HIM who she LIKES."

But it's important to the story, and I'll do my best to make my commentary as brief, informative, and painless as possible.

4292-4302 - Oh oh oh oh,

Whoa-oh-oh-oh,

Oh, oh -

Caught in a *Troll romance*.

As if Hussie anticipated my weariness and decided to grind my patience into dust, we will now endure a comprehensive lecture as to the nuances and complexities of Troll love. Fortunately none of this nonsense is as complicated as it seems:

MATESPRITSHIP - Love.

KISMESISSITUDE - Hate-love, or sexually charged rivalry.

MOIRALLEGIENCE - One guy stops the other guy from killing people. Sometimes the would-be-murderer returns the favor and provides general emotional support to their buddy. Equius and Nepeta are presented as the ideal example (although as I've mentioned, it's a little unclear who is pacifying who in that case - so there is some ambiguity built into these relationships).

AUSPITICISM - One guy stops two others from murdering and/or hate-fucking each other.

The first two quadrants are romantic and sexual, and contribute directly to the "giant incestuous slurry" that is the Troll reproductive process. The latter two are important in that they pacify potentially violent or unstable Trolls - and considering how dangerous such individuals can be, these relationships are described as just as important for the propagation of the species as actual reproduction.

While Hussie makes a big deal of explaining these relationships in agonizing detail, and *Homestuck's* audience has certainly latched onto them, I don't think they should necessarily be taken for granted as a useful classification system for relationships in *Homestuck*. Remember, a recurring theme in *Homestuck* is how game mechanics are too simplistic to apply to real life - and the relationships that develop between the cast are certainly too complicated to fit into this very limited, card game-inspired, four-category system.

For one thing, the characters don't seem nearly as interested in any of the other quadrants as they are with Matespritship/romantic love. Take a look at 4467, for instance, where Karkat and Kanaya are comfortable discussing their fortunes in the other three quadrants... but get cagey about their respective red crushes. Even if all four quadrants are supposed to be equally important, the heart is clearly the one the characters are most vested in.

4296 - The buckets are never explained, thankfully. This is despite the efforts of the comic's creepiest fans, who have harassed the author at every opportunity demanding *the sexiest, *squishiest* details of Troll fuck-bucket reproduction oohlalala ssssluuuuurp ;)*

But the author has never coughed up the goods, and that's as it should be. The buckets are a *joke*, and the unseen Troll reproductive process is infinitely funnier if left to the readers' (overactive, corrupt, deranged) imaginations.

4303 - I mentioned above that relationships among the cast seem too complicated to easily fit into the four quadrants. Well, here's your proof, as Hussie demonstrates how weird and confusing the relationships are in practice.

That being said: as a PhD in *Homestuck*, I have deciphered this animation and can explain it to you (also I hate myself):

Pieces-Troll and Aquarius-Troll are soul-bros. Aquarius has a romantic crush on Pieces but she doesn't reciprocate.

Tavros and Vriska oscillate between love and hate-love. Kanaya steps in to stabilize their relationship. This positions Kanaya as Vriska's soul-bro, which is complicated by the fact that Kanaya has romantic feelings for Vriska.

Scorned, both Aquarius and Vriska are at risk of falling into a hate-love rivalry - so again, Kanaya steps in to keep them from slaughtering one another.

4305 - This image is the poster for "TROLL SERENDIPITY", which of course has a much longer and more complex canonical title.

4306 - Evidently even Hussie finally got fed up with the sheer number of Trolls he has to introduce, because he's introduced the last two together - and very effectively, arguably more successfully than some of the extended solo introductions we've seen. This sequence formally brings Feferi (the Pieces troll) and Eridan (Aquarius) into the story, and it not only gives us a sense of their

personalities but also their *relationship* to one another - more information than we got from, say, Terezi or Equius' introductions, as amusing as those were. Given that drama is the fuel that powers Hivebent's engine, it's a surprising Hussie didn't attempt a double-introduction before - it provides more information in a more engaging way.

4331-5 - We'll discuss this sequence in depth a little later, but I want to point out the terrific use of sequential pages to establish how jaw-droppingly huge Feferi's Lusus is. It's a nice moment of horror/comedy: the damn thing just keeps getting bigger.

4339 - Here's what you need to know about Eridan Ampora:

1) He is a racist, genocidal maniac who wants to slaughter all surface life.

2) He likes this girl, and she likes him okay too, but she doesn't *like him* like him.

So I think it's fair to say that Eridan's life is primarily defined by frustration, both political and personal; by thwarted impulses towards sex and violence. In fact, these two problems are explicitly and inextricably intertwined. He can't murder the surface dwellers because Feferi, his Moirail, holds him back; and Feferi won't date him because she's exhausted thwarting his genocidal schemes (...and also because he's an obnoxious, racist, psychopathic little twit). Eridan's a bit of a joke, and his romantic failures will certainly be played for comedy. But the kid's internal struggle is as serious as cancer, and just as dangerous.

That's not to say Eridan is without his charms. It's tough not to sympathize at least a little with a guy hung up on the wrong girl, and he gets one of the most poignant bits of dialogue in all of *Homestuck*:

CA: **kan its hard**

GA: **What**

CA: **being a kid and growwing up**

CA: **its hard and nobody understands**

It's trite and self-absorbed, sure, but it's also a naked confession of vulnerability that stands out in a story filled with irony and cynicism.

Moving on: Eridan's fondness for wizards and his character design are an obvious nod to the *Harry Potter* series. His fixation on blood caste might be related to *Potter's* conceit of racial strife between "pureblood" and "mudblood"

wizards; you could argue Eridan's racism is intended as a criticism of that series' parochial British class-based fantasy world, although that's a bit of a stretch. His screenname, *caligulasAquarium*, references not only the infamously depraved emperor but also the caliginous (hate-love) quadrant of Troll romance. Also, as a comic book fan, I'd be remiss not to mention that Eridan reminds me of Marvel Comics' Namor the Sub-Mariner, a water-based antihero with designs of conquering the surface world.

4341 - Here's what you need to know about Feferi: instructed to "**Do something adorable**" she takes the slaughtered parent of a recently orphaned and likely doomed seadweller, drags it through the water with a big dopey grin on her face, and feeds it whole to her pet Cthulhu.

Feferi, despite her likable qualities (and she's arguably the sweetest and friendliest of the Trolls) is weirdly oblivious to the suffering that surrounds her. Her planet is a nightmare world of reckless euthanasia, madness, and cold-blooded murder... but, privileged by her unique blood class and protected by her godlike *Lusus*, she never has to deal with any of that. Most of the other Trolls touch on myths or figures from popular culture, and Feferi is a pretty straightforward take on the fairy tale princess; she's held captive by a monster and a wicked stepmother, she's courted by a devoted prince. She's a Disney girl living in a Lovecraft world; she's whistling a happy tune while preparing virgin sacrifices for the world-ending monster.

Feferi, at first, doesn't seem to fit with the rest of the Trolls. The others are all recognizable as common online pests: power gamers, furies, creeps, sadists, arrogant hackers, all the rest. Feferi doesn't fit into any of these categories, and her total lack of malice seems to make her a strange choice for the final Troll.

Yet I see her as a critical piece of *Homestuck's* satire. We've talked a bit about privilege in *Homestuck*, and how by focusing on the Internet experience, the story limits its scope to the emotional world of upper-middle class and culturally white kids. When you hear folks talking self-deprecatingly about "first world problems" - those are the sorts of challenges that John and friends metaphorically face. John might be anxious around his father, he might have to grapple with his own burgeoning maturity and masculinity in a Joseph Campbell-esque videogame-inspired fantasy world... but he'll never go to bed hungry.

Feferi is as close as *Homestuck* can come to acknowledging that Internet problems don't really matter that much. She allows the text to admit that, while people like Fef are wrapped up in coming-of-age nonsense and Internet drama, others are out there suffering in ways you can scarcely imagine. So she's not malicious, and she certainly never sets out to "troll" anyone - but at the same time, her privileged lifestyle itself mocks the misery endured by kids like Aradia and Tavros. And while she's silly and sweet, it's tough not to resent her a little for her sheltered life.

A few other notes:

Both of the sea-dwellers are masterpieces of color. Look at the variety of hues in Feferi's outfit; it's bright and flashy, but it effortlessly complements the subdued Troll body colors of grey/black/orange. (Bell_ of the Something Awful thread on *Homestuck* also pointed out that the colors on Feferi's outfit are the same as worn by Prospit carapace - that's particularly strange because she's eventually revealed to be a Derse dreamer. Her visual affiliation with Prospit is another choice that illustrates her position between darkness and light and optimism.)

Gl'bgolyb's name is, of course, a riff on "glub glub." We also learn of the Troll empress, Her Imperious Condescension, also known as The Condesce. It's an unusual honorific. I've seen it misspelled "Condensation", an easy mistake to make given the character's association with water, but it actually refers to a condescending or haughty attitude towards others; appropriate, given The Condesce is (as we'll learn) quite vain.

For a different (and pretty persuasive, in my opinion) take on Feferi, Tumblr blogger Lil Durandal links Feferi's unwarranted optimism to her title, the Witch of Life:

Life can thrive in lakes of asphalt, in ice, in strong acids, under high pressures. There are fungi living in Chernobyl, apparently using melanin to capture the energy of gamma radiation, as plants use chlorophyll to capture the energy of solar radiation. Life comes up with strategies you wouldn't expect, and sometimes they even work.

Have you ever thought about how bizarre it was for Feferi to insist the answer to a problem in the A2 session lay in the B1 session [*which she'll do in Act 5 Act 2 - FW*]? It's as if I found a spider here in my bathroom in Washington State, and I insisted the solution was to call up my best friend in Belgium. In fact, it's even weirder than that - my friend could get on a plane to SeaTac, but traveling

between sessions isn't nearly so mundane. It's also the exact opposite of the Mage of Doom's opinion.

And yet the Witch of Life was right, thanks in large part to her foresight in asking for something few would have considered possible.¹⁶

Honestly, I like Feferi - I just think it's interesting how her presence in *Homestuck* seems to hint at one of the narrative's major omissions. And as for the development of her relationship with Eridan... well, I know the guy has his defenders, but as far as I'm concerned the text is unambiguous about what sort of person he is, and his behavior towards Fef is totally unforgivable.

4348 - Nice moment of establishing character relationships through dialogue - Feferi and Eridan toss lots of smilies and "glubs" into their conversation, but it's clear that they always understand one another. It shows how close they are that, even when they resort to aquatic onomatopoeia, each still gets what the other is trying to convey.

4449 - So Eridan is a "nice guy." Not actually a nice person - it's clear he's not that at all - but the sort of passive-aggressive young man who will become close friends with a girl he likes instead of asking her out. The most obvious parallel for Eridan among actual internet people is the fabled "White Knight" of the message board. "White Knight" is a derogatory term used for anyone who sticks up for someone else who doesn't necessarily deserve it, either out of misguided philanthropy or because he has ulterior motives - Eridan is already associated with nobility and white magic, so it's not too much of a stretch.

Now, you can read all sorts of sociological explanations of why white knights and "nice guys" aren't quite as noble in their intentions as they claim to be... but for now, for our purposes, it touches on the dangerous frustration that's the core of Eridan's character.

4365 - Again, at this point Eridan's romantic plight is pretty sympathetic, and the references to his schemes are so offhanded that it's easy to forget that, yeah, the kid wants to commit genocide. The narrative clearly wants us to read him as a harmless and even charming bumbler, but we

¹⁶ Lil Durandal. "Aspects: Life Finds a Way." *Master of Mythologie*. 11 Oct. 2012. 06 Apr. 2013.
<<http://lildurandal.tumblr.com/post/33407681379/aspects-life-finds-a-way>>.

haven't seen any solid evidence that that's true. At this point he could go either way.

4367 - That's right, Feferi! The fact that your entire species has been exterminated except for 12 damaged pubescents and you're all trapped in a surreal monster-infested dreamworld means that Eridan's genocidal instability no longer poses *any threat at all* to the future of your race. Geez Louise, kid.

Mind, it's easy to sympathize with Feferi for wanting to ditch Eridan. But her timing stinks, and serves as further evidence of the character's naivety.

Understandably, Hussie ditches both characters' typing quirks for their heart-to-heart - I find Feferi's stylized "H"s to be one of the toughest gimmicks to parse, visually, and the seriousness of the conversation might have been undermined a bit by fish puns. When Feferi reintroduces her gimmick, at the end of the chatlog, it's a clear sign that she's truly done with Eridan: she's let him down easy, and now she's free to loosen up and have some fun.

4372 - Another moment of Hussie's compulsion to undercut any moment of drama with silliness - it's very very difficult to take Karkat's angst over Sollux's death seriously when he's hanging out with Jack Noir and a mindlessly honking Gamzee in carnival purgatory.

4277 - As we've seen before with Gamzee, Hussie nods at the obvious jokes about Juggalos (i.e. that Faygo, their signature budget-brand soda, is terrible) before flipping the setup around and taking the joke in a completely different direction.

(Never tried the stuff, personally, but I can't imagine it's worse than any given supermarket-brand soda.)

4381 - This isn't just Feferi being gross - this is actually a new "gameplay" mechanic in *Homestuck* and one that will have major ramifications. Basically: if you have a living Dreamself on Prospit or Derse, you have a shot at an extra life when you die. Another player can kiss your corpse and your consciousness will be transferred into the dormant dream body. But this only works once, and if your Dreamself is destroyed (as happened to Jade) or you go too long without the kiss then the trick won't work.

4387 - Hussie himself is a Virgo, which explains his Troll outfit - although as the story unfolds he does demonstrate a special affinity for Kanaya. By this point, it seems, Troll cosplay had become so prevalent that Hussie felt the

need to spoof it in the comic itself - a pretty good indication that these characters, intended to derail the story and piss off readers, had been embraced by fans.

4391 - We go full circle meta on this page: from *Homestuck*, to Hussie as narrator, to a representation of the reader as a primitive stick figure in the style of earlier MSPA adventures like *Problem Sleuth*... which itself is a webcomic in *Homestuck*'s universe.

4393 - These are all references to *The Neverending Story*, a seminal 1980s children's film based on Michael Ende's novel. Like *Homestuck*, *The Neverending Story* takes place over multiple layers of reality and is concerted with the nature of fiction, authorship, and reading.

4395 - No, rereading all of this nonsense isn't compulsory. You could probably make a convincing case that this one page is the apotheosis of the Troll interlude, with its stated intention to irk the reader a little for comedic effect. Hussie even admits that he's trolling the reader in 4399.

4405 - The reasoning behind the assignment of characters Derse/Prospit is obscure, and will likely never be fully addressed in-comic.¹⁷ While Hussie doesn't provide a definitive authorial explanation (what fun would that be?), he does point out a number of factors in the text itself that could explain the split. Prospit is the "good" kingdom and is associated with defense, passive in-game classes, and light, while Derse is "evil", and trends towards aggression, active classes, and darkness. But no one explanation seems entirely satisfactory - Vriska is put on "good" Prospit, and characters with the same class (Seers Rose and Terezi, Heirs John and Equius) may not wind up on the same planet.

There's also some ambiguity if the kingdom each player is assigned to is intended to be descriptive or prescriptive (does it match who they are at the start of the Game, or who they should aspire to be?). Some of the assignments may not make sense right now, but as we progress in the story we'll find that those characters grow to embody the ideals of their kingdom, even if they didn't at first.

For what it's worth, when considering Prospit and Derse I find it useful to consider the Chinese Yin and Yang. Fair

¹⁷ Hussie, Andrew. ":o, REDDIT OR NOT, HERE WE DUMB." MSPAndrew. 2012. 08 Apr. 2013. <<http://mspandrew.tumblr.com/post/25156009290/reddit-or-not-here-we-dumb>>.

warning, this is based on vague memories of my senior religion seminar and a quick scan of Wikipedia, but my understanding of the concept is as follows: Yin (Derse?) is brooding, moody, reactive, and is associated with the elements of earth, water and darkness - Yang (Prospit) is assertive, dynamic, productive, and associated with flame, air and light. Good and evil aren't part of this equation. The glitch is that this seems to contradict Hussie's argument in the above article that Derse seems more active while Prospit appears passive - but as the author himself admits, his comments are only meant as observations, and aren't intended to be definitive.

4406-11 This is actually a pretty good example of how time paradoxes function in *Homestuck*. Or, rather, how the author avoids paradoxes by establishing stable time loops. CD (evidently Sollux's patron Carapacian - Clubs Deuce, get it?) tries to change history, yet his knowledge of past events is flawed, and because of this his attempt backfires and ironically triggers the events he was trying to prevent. We'll see other characters fall into this trap again and again.

You cannot hope to beat the transdimensional superstructure of space/time in a causality-off. When it comes to cause and effect, time is simply the best there is.

4414 - Welcome to Sollux's planet, LOBAF. I suspect Hussie's riffing on the phrase "mind on fire", which has been used for a collection of theological essays by mathematician Blaise Pasqual, and by Robert D. Richardson for his biography of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

4419 - It's appropriate that Vriska is thrilled at her bounty of Boonbucks, which everyone else recognizes as useless bullshit.

4429 - It's been a long time since we've seen an exiled Carapacian, but remember that their position in the story is basically the same as the reader's. So it makes sense that we see Terezi's words the same way the exile does: not as dialogue or a command, but as physical letters, written in chalk and viewed through a screen.

4432 - The Land of Little Cubes and Tea, or LOLCAT, is the best pun in the story. At the same time it reminds the reader that, even if you find Nepeta annoying, she could have been so much worse. *She could (and probably should) have talked like a Lolcat.* I'm dead serious: as awful as that would have been, it would have been completely relevant to the themes of the comic and totally justified.

Given Hussie's obvious pleasure in annoying his readers, I'm kind of stunned we dodged that bullet.

4443 -

PTA: dude don't worry ii wont fuck up your memo for long, ii ju2t cant believe thii2 wa2 the biig rea2on you wanted "future me" two help you open tho2e port2.

PTA: two ba2iicallly ju2t babble about paradoxe2 and argue wiith your2elf for hundred2 of page2 heheheh.

FUTURE carcinoGeneticist [FCG] 612 HOURS FROM NOW responded to memo.

FCG: GROAN.

FCG: THIS IS SO EMBARRASSING.

FCG: WHAT WAS I EVEN THINKING.

PCG: STFU!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

What you are privileged to witness is the genesis of a tour-de-force of misery. These memos release the songbird of Karkat's self-loathing from the cage of causality, allowing his total contempt for every cell of his own being to reverberate like church bells across the entire space-time continuum.

It would be simple enough to have past and future incarnations of Karkat argue, as Hussie does here, but soon enough we'll get to witness elaborate conversational time loops where Karkat viciously abuses himself... and then responds in a way that not only sets up these insults, but renders them temporally inevitable. It's not enough for Karkat to hate himself - the very fabric of Paradox Space conspires to perpetuate his self-hatred.

Of course he's also perfectly capable of making fun of himself without the aid of time travel:

PCG: CHOOSE YOUR CLASSES NOW! LEVEL 69 NOOKSNIFFER IS UP FOR GRABS, WHO WANTS IT.

PCG: NO THAT'S NOT AN INVITATION FOR YOU FUCKING NERDS TO COME IN HERE AND CORRECT ME ON YOUR GODDAMN FAIRY ELVES.

PCG: JUST DO ME A FAVOR AND KEEP ME BANNED FROM THAT ONE OK.

PCG: I'LL RETURN THE FAVOR IF YOU NERD UP MY MEMOS, I SERIOUSLY CAN'T BELIEVE HOW MANY FUCKING NERDS ARE ON THIS TEAM.

Here, Karkat seems totally unaware that he's mocking his comrades for their role-playing shenanigans while... he himself is playing an RPG.

4447 -

FCA: i got a problem

FCA: wwith feferi

FCA: and im really kinda sittin here in bad shape about it emotionally speakin

CCG: OK, WELL
CCG: I GET THAT, I HEAR YOU BRO
CCG: BUT THIS IS STILL NOT THE RIGHT PLACE FOR THIS SO I'VE
GOT TO BAN YOU.
CCG banned FCA from responding to memo.
CCG: BUT SERIOUSLY JUST GET IN TOUCH WITH ME IN PRIVATE
ABOUT IT, OK MAN?
CCG: WE'LL GET YOUR SHIT STRAIGHTENED OUT.

Karkat finally has an opportunity to use his alleged mastery of Troll relationships to help his distraught friend "GET [his] SHIT STRAIGHTENED OUT". They do eventually chat, although we don't get to see the conversation.

His memo also provides a forum for Vriska and Tavros to try to work through some stuff. But considering it plays out between them (Tavros' nonsensical apology shows how badly Vriska has broken him), it doesn't seem much is resolved.

"FAG" doesn't mean anything in Troll language, because all Trolls are bisexual and hence there's no homophobia (they make up for it in racism, and infanticide, and also straight-up murdering each other for no reason).

4450 - Is Hearts Boxcars playing the role of the comic's insatiable fanbase, demanding a resolution of the (mostly one-sided, frequently homicidal) tension between Tavros and Vriska? Also, this is the second time someone's invaded Tavros' mind (remember, most players receive their exiles' commands as subconscious psychic suggestions) to try to get him to kiss Vriska, and he still refuses.

4463 - This is the second of the Troll's exile stations we've seen (the first was crab-like machine CD used to advise Sollux, as seen on 4412). Remember, each station is built in the shape of a player's entry artifact - an object representative of growth or transformation that must be destroyed to move the player into the Medium. Presumably modeled after Kanaya's artifact, the Mother Grub skull is ominous, but its significance (like many of the details about the Trolls' SGRUB session) is left to the reader's imagination.

4465 - Note the scrambled name. The land's second feature is important, and shared with another player.

4467 -

FCG: IT TURNS OUT YOU CAN'T ALTER THE OUTCOME OF DECISIONS
MADE BY MORONS, NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU YELL AT THEM.

A fair summary of *Homestuck's* philosophy of time travel, and in particular Karkat's perspective on it. No matter

how you meddle with the past, an individual's values and personality are constants, and will always lead to the same choices. Karkat, being Karkat, sees this as a negation of free will and a cause for despair.

It's unclear what a "BEHEMOTH LEAVING" is supposed to be, exactly - although at one point Karkat claims that the only things his Lusus brought home were dead animals and literal feces. Anyway, it's apparently the Troll version of a Christmas tree.

WARNING: TROLL ROMANCE NONSENSE AHEAD

FCG: HONESTLY I DON'T THINK I WAS CUT OUT TO HAVE A KISMESIS, I THINK MY STANDARDS ARE WAY TOO HIGH.

FCG: DID YOU KNOW THAT...

FCG: THIS FEELS SO INSANE TO ADMIT, BUT

FCG: OVER THE COURSE OF THIS ADVENTURE, AT TIMES I ACTUALLY BEGAN TO SUSPECT I WAS MY OWN KISMESIS.

FCG: HOW FUCKED UP IS THAT???

I prefer to avoid discussing this foolishness wherever possible, but I think in this case we get an interesting insight into Karkat's psychology and his relationship with Kanaya.

Recall that a Kismesis is a Troll's archrival/lover: Karkat's admitting that he has a toxic fascination with and loathing for himself that borders on the erotic. The confrontations between his past and future selves are, by Troll metrics of sex and romance, literally masturbatory. (Karkat apologized to himself "platonically" on 4196 - are we looking at an escalation of his/their relationship?).

Also recall that Kanaya's thing is Auspicitism - stepping in between two feuding Trolls to stabilize their relationship and prevent them from becoming Kismesises and/or murdering each other. In advising Karkat here, Kanaya is mediating between his past and future selves - helping him gain perspective of and move past his self-obsession, and leading him to a (slightly) healthier place.

TROLL ROMANCE DISCUSSION TERMINATED - RESUME ACTUAL CRITICISM

I think Kanaya and Karkat both do pretty well for themselves in this entry. Karkat in particular - he drags himself out of the throes of despair to console a friend.

4471 - I'm not sure what to make of Terezi's apparently imbecilic Dragonsprite. I imagine it's a little disappointing not to be able to have a real conversation

with a creature she shared such a deep and rewarding psychic rapport with.

4475 - Karkat looks up to Jack Noir, and yet their relationship is clearly adversarial... is this because Karkat was raised by a giant crab monster, which has left him desperate for a real father figure and unsure what a healthy paternal relationship is like? Or is it some kind of platonic, familial permutation of Troll hate-love?

4475 - Karkat and Terezi's "**L1TTL3 MOM3NT**" is never followed up on, although sloppy makeouts are certainly implied.

4478 - The use of the characters' signs to establish the psychic chain of influence is pretty clever.

I think Vriska's little slide-kick animation across the bridge is a reference to the early Mega Man games. Also, Sollux's optic blasts in his faceoff with Eridan are reminiscent of Cyclops' in the *Marvel vs. Capcom* series (given Feferi's fondness for Sollux, it doesn't take a genius to figure out why there might be some tension between him and Eridan).

Neat tidbit - Kanaya's new chainsaw was designed by a member of the comic's art team, and the original concept was apparently that Kanaya alchemized her chainsaw with one of her own broken horns.

There's a pretty clear "cycle of vengeance/revenge is futile" thing going on in this installment - the "her" in "Make Her Pay" refers to both Vriska (smacked around by Aradia) and Terezi (blinded in the flashback).

4483 - "Make Her Pay" is identified as an exile command, given to Aradia by the stylish but sadistic Diamonds Droog. His satisfaction is troubling. The exiles are reader stand-ins, and by showing one so clearly pleased by unnecessary (although not unprovoked) violence between two of our heroes, we're asked to consider our own reaction: how badly did we want to see Vriska get her comeuppance? And how do we feel now that she's gotten it?

4487 - Aradia's getting a little feistier. Have we ever heard her say she was *not* OK with something before?

4491 - The static effect here is wonderful; subtle but evocative, and impossible in a traditional print comic. The sheer number of Beta Aradias suggests the Trolls have not been as cautious as Dave and company when it comes to preventing beta timelines.

4492 - A perfect example of *Homestuck's* use of "supercompression." By all means, the battle against the black king should be a major event... but because we already know how it works out, and because it's basically irrelevant to the outcome of the Troll's session, we only see it in passing (and from the perspective of the most apathetic character, at that). So we get the information we need, without getting bogged down in pointless detail demanded by conventional narrative expectations.

4506 - By now it should be abundantly clear that *Homestuck* is (among other things) about games, and how the modes of behavior games teach their players is not necessarily productive or useful outside the context of gameplay. And this might be the ultimate example of that. The Trolls, we've learned, are very, very good at SGRUB. They burned through their Session with the highest levels and nastiest weapons, and even defeated a massively overpowered final boss. But at the end of it they were confronted with a challenge that their mastery of games hadn't prepared them for.

And although the Trolls' skill at playing the Game isn't the reason for their ultimate defeat... karmically, it makes sense. AS WE'LL LEARN VERY SOON, the "ultimate reward" Aradia mentions is the creation of a new universe, which the victorious players can rule as demigods. So victory demands successful players must have the power to crush a newborn universe beneath their heels, but also the wisdom to rule it as responsible gods (not to mention the intimation of procreation and parenthood - even with all of the other lousy parents in *Homestuck*, Karkat and friends would have easily been the worst possible custodians for their progeny).

The Trolls, while they certainly had the skill and firepower to conquer the Game, were in no way prepared for the responsibility that follows victory. And so it's only appropriate that they were held back, and trapped limbo-like state where they couldn't do any harm to their offspring - but also where their own opportunities to grow and mature are limited.

4508 - And a big part of the Trolls' immaturity is that, while they're great at killing monsters, they aren't very good at cooperating. Socially, they all still have a lot to learn, and that's demonstrated by the way they spend time in the meteor laboratories - not talking with their

friends directly, but mediating their conversations through chat programs, even when they're all in the same damn room.

4524 - The real significance of the Trolls' Zodiac signs is revealed.

I don't care much about astrology, and I suspect Andrew Hussie doesn't either. Because despite the constellations of the zodiac serving as a conceptual framework for the twelve Trolls, *Homestuck* has very little interest in the belief system and extensive symbolism associated with these signs (I guess if you wanted to, you could argue that astrology ties into the story's themes of fate and predestination). I strongly suspect Hussie adopted the zodiac because 1) it provided him with a framework for the twelve characters he needed for his story (Okay, this guy's based on a centaur, how should he act... this girl's based on the virgin, what other cultural and mythological references to virginity can I find...) and 2) it establishes that, as the creators of our universe, the Trolls branded their memories into our collective unconscious - and that through our history we have attempted to retell their story through myth and fiction.

That's why the zodiac's important - that's *Homestuck's* explanation for why ancient astronomers looked at the sky and saw, in an undistinguished field of stars, the shapes of a crab, or a goat, or an arachnid. But more interesting to me (and, I think, more relevant to *Homestuck*, which is concerned with contemporary mythology) is how the Trolls shaped contemporary popular culture. The only reason we have *Harry Potter*, in *Homestuck's* world, is because we are trying to make sense of our genetic memory of Eridan. It's the same with *Twilight* (Kanaya), *X-Men* (eye-blasting Sollux, phoenix-like Aradia and wheelchair-bound psychic Tavros), *Pokémon* (Tavros), *Peter Pan* (yet again Tavros, and Pupa Pan), the Joker and *It* and the Insane Clown Posse (Gamzee), Two-Face and *No Country for Old Men* (Terezi), Will Smith (Troll Will Smith) and on and on and on...

What does all of this mean? It means that our society's ideals were established by the half-forgotten adventures of a ragtag band of losers, misfits and murderers. It means that the stories we look to for guidance and inspiration are based on people more damaged than any human could ever hope to be. It means that our popular culture, eternally aspiring to the supposed greatness of a bunch of fucked-up teenagers, is itself trapped in a state of arrested adolescence. *Homestuck* is more than just a spoof of

internet trends and culture - it's a no-holds-bared
takedown of the Campbell's "Hero's Journey" and everything
that follows, as a fantasy based on a lie based on a gang
of idiots.

So, finally, END OF ACT 5 ACT 1

4526-8 - So we've finally wrapped up Act 5 Act 1, and I'm a little relieved, because the exposition in that segment required a hell of a lot of annotating. That's not to say we're anywhere close to finished (the rest of the act is longer than everything else we've read so far) but by now you should have a solid grasp on these characters and their universe, and we can spend more time on analysis than explanation.

Now, on to Karkat and John's conversation. Going back to 4467:

FCG: NOT THAT I EXPECT YOU TO GIVE A SHIT BUT PERSONALLY I AM ALL TWISTED UP ABOUT BLACKROM STUFF ESPECIALLY.
FCG: HONESTLY I DON'T THINK I WAS CUT OUT TO HAVE A KISMESIS, I THINK MY STANDARDS ARE WAY TOO HIGH.

So Karkat believes he's found the perfect vessel for his unfathomable, unquenchable hate in John Egbert, the goofiest and most well-meaning character in the story. And it's pretty ironic that John is the one who, through his sincerity and good-natured enthusiasm, sends transdimensional ubertroll Karkat into fits, instead of the other way around.

Also: JOHN IS NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I'm pretty sure that revelation is another case of Hussie trolling (or at least directly addressing) his fans. You see, gentle reader (and many of you may wish to prepare for your monocles to pop from your eye sockets and shatter against the floor, so scandalous is the information I am about to disclose):

Many young ladies on the internet (for psychosexual reasons too complicated to explain here) thrill to tales of fictional boys finding love in the scrawny arms of other fictional boys. These tendencies are the genesis of the genre of "slash" fan fiction (as in Karkat/John where "/" means "banging"), and at this point in the comic's development I strongly suspect *Homestuck's* fandom was a seething cauldron of young women picking apart every homosocial interaction for signs of homosexy tension. (I personally can't fathom why anyone would fantasize about the copulation of a moron and a self-loathing devil-alien rage addict, but hey, whatever fills your bucket.) John's disclosure here can't stop any of that, of course, just set another barrier between the text and the audience's fantasies of Greek love.

4529 - We don't get a ton of character insight out of this mess, as amusing as it is (Feferi is nice, Gamzee is confused, etc.). I'm don't think we've seen Terezi and

Sollux interact before, though - it makes sense that he'd have little patience for her cheerfully malicious nonsense.

4530 - "Land already" is right - we last saw John on his hoverboard almost a thousand pages ago.

4544 - This image echoes the "Fly, Pupa, fly!" scene where Vriska sent Tavros flying off a cliff.

4553 - Vriska and John, respectively the comic's most devious and guileless characters, are natural foils for one another. And although Vriska steamrolled poor Tavros (one of John's surrogates on Alternia), John has wit and self-confidence that make him a much better sparring partner.

AG: Even though you were going to do this stuff anyway, it turns out I am the reason you were going to do it anyway in the first place!

AG: Your timeline is my we8, and suddenly you are all tangled up in it, wriggling and helpless.

AG: Isn't that cooooooooool????????

EB: meh.

EB: so, you seem to like 8's a whole bunch, and i guess you are like, kind of spidery themed or something?

AG: Yeah!

EB: haha, spiders are gross!

AG: Fuck you!!!!!!!!!!

Here Vriska explains her delusion of grandeur (it's telling she introduces herself as her overpowered Mary-Sue RPG character), and we see John effortlessly put her in her place. As we saw with Karkat, John's earnestness is a powerful defense against trolling.

4555 - Notice the Breeze delivers John's copy of Sburb.

4561 - Vriska calling Dad a "**meddlesome grownup squatter**" is an exaggeration of John's negative impression of his father at the beginning of the story.

4581 - Great lengthy panel here. It's been a long time since we've visited John's house, and it's a little shocking to see it so radically transformed.

4592 - Rose has always been the most diabolical of the four human kids. She's always been about getting inside your head and messing with you, about figuring out how stuff works and showing how ridiculous it is. She's always been a little nastier and a little more risqué (consider the pun in tentacleTherapist...).

So what we're seeing here is Rose evolved: Rose's love of subversion and sabotage backed up by supernatural firepower. It is not unreasonable to be a little scared by that combination. Indeed, her stated goal at the end of

the conversation (“**To do as much damage to the game as possible**”) suggests she’s gone from skepticism to outright nihilism.

4589 - No concern for the turtles... we’re a long way from the young lady who was squeamish about finishing off an ogre back in 3488. You might remember I talked about how the kids have seemed more willing to fight and kill the game’s creatures once they stop thinking of them as living beings, and start to think of them as enemies in a videogame. Rose’s new modus operandi, to hack SBURB itself, suggests she’s no longer concerned with the contrived mythology of the Game or the wellbeing of its inhabitants in any way.

4594 - *Of course* we don’t get to hear Karkat’s speech... at least in part because it would require him to speak face-to-face with his friends, something that violates the unwritten rules of dialogue presentation in *Homestuck*.

4603 - Is it blasphemous to suggest that Hussie did not have this development planned all the way back at Rose’s introduction?

This page locates Kanaya as a “Player” of the Game and thus as a member of the comic’s audience, which is a weird position for her to be in. There are definitely parallels between our experience as readers, enjoying *Homestuck* but unable to influence its direction, and Kanaya’s, watching Rose through Trollian but unable to say anything that hasn’t been predestined by Paradox Space. And if you think about it too much, there’s something a little voyeuristic and creepy about the way Kanaya develops a crush on Rose. As an audience/player surrogate, she’s a gamer who falls in love with a videogame character; as a co-creator of our universe, she’s a god in love with her creation, an author in love with her own fiction.

Anyway, I’m afraid Kanaya doesn’t come out of her rivalry/courtship with Rose looking very mature. Her attitude towards John and Rose is condescending and occasionally outright nasty. And she’s also using a videogame mechanic (the Snarky Horseshitometer) to try to quantify a dynamic and abstract human relationship - always a sign of immaturity in *Homestuck*.

4605 -

GT: ok well, just between you and me...

GT: SOMEONE here is getting trolled.

GT: and it just might be all three of us.

John, bless his heart, pins down exactly why the reader can't judge Kanaya too harshly for her behavior towards Rose. Because even if Kanaya temporarily assumes a position of agency over the human kids - she's still just another player trapped in the Game, and she's getting screwed around by predestination and time paradoxes just as much as John and Rose are. As a matter fact, we'll see their positions reversed very soon.

4619 - This installment works on two levels, and both of these (as a pivotal moment in Rose and Kanaya's relationship, and as a literal occurrence in the videogame-like reality of the story) reinforce one another. See, on one level, Rose's destructive attempts to hack SBURB's code have blown up Kanaya's little videogame-style scorekeeper. But at the same time, Rose's heedless and destructive use of magic has shown Kanaya that Shit has Gotten Real, and led her to abandon her previous metric for judging Rose (represented by the meter exploding).

4624-5 The juxtaposition of John/Vriska's misadventures with Rose/Kanaya's invites a comparison. Indeed, a number of their exchanges include lines or bits of dialogue that directly parallel the other pair's. I'll mark these out whenever I find them, but it's worth keeping an eye out for them yourself.

Now, I spent a while running over the conversations and trying to see if I could figure out *why* they were interspersed, and if Hussie was trying to say something about John and Rose through their interactions with their respective Troll pals. But eventually I realized I was attacking this from the wrong angle - comparing John and Rose here doesn't make nearly as much sense as comparing John with Kanaya, or Rose with Vriska.

Consider our two renegade Light players, Rose and Vriska. Both girls are powergamers, obsessed with victory at all costs, and both are players of the Light aspect, which has some ominous mythological associations: remember that Lucifer means "bringer of light". Indeed, Vriska's title, "Thief of Light," reminds me of Prometheus, who stole fire for mankind from the Gods but was tortured for the rest of eternity for his transgressions. Both characters have a reckless, malevolent streak - and if Rose is capable of the sort of things we've seen Vriska do, she could become very dangerous indeed.

At first blush, our favorite designer-supermodel-lumberjack triple threat and the lovechild of Joseph Campbell and

Nicolas Cage have much less in common. But remember that one of the heroic qualities most important in *Homestuck* is taking responsibility for those younger and more vulnerable than you are. We've seen ample evidence of John's paternal tendencies (Casey the Salamander, the ectobabies), and Kanaya has a number of similar qualities (as everyone's reluctant moirail/auspitrice, as well as in her Virgin Mother role as the Virgo troll). John and Kanaya are admirable people because they care for those who cannot care for themselves - which makes them, perhaps, the best available candidates to try and sway Rose and Vriska from their respective paths of self-destruction. We'll see if either of them pulls it off.

Finally, John's statement here:

EB: it is so sweet, i look like link, if zelda was a quest about an elf scientist.

EB: i am the wind waker. it's me.

...is of course a reference to Nintendo's *Legend of Zelda* series and the Gamecube instalment, *The Wind Waker*, in particular; if you activated "trickster mode" in 2297, you saw John dressed up as the franchise's hero, Link. It's also a reminder of John's initial depiction as a mute *Zelda*-style protagonist.

4626 - A lot going on in this installment.

First, Kanaya's acting like a stammering fangirl, and her relationship with Rose has been flipped - instead of Kanaya as gamer and Rose as player character, we have Rose as author and Kanaya as fan.

It's nice to see some follow-up on the doomed timeline that generated Davesprite, and Kanaya's observation is a troubling one - Beta Rose was doomed, and if her consciousness was folded into that of our Rose, then does that mean her fate was transferred as well?

Kanaya's description of her time on Prospit is evocative, and offers a new perspective the differences between dreamers on the two worlds. Kanaya describes the visions in Prospit's clouds as like a mirror, reflecting and clarifying information she already knew. Compare that to Rose's rapport with the horrorerrors, whom learned new information from. This suggests an internal/external dichotomy between the two worlds, in addition to the active/passive split we've already discussed.

More Troll romance (huzzah!):

TT: To strive to pacify me as I scuffle down this black corridor.

GA: Wait

GA: Is That What Im Doing

It's pretty clear from this exchange that Kanaya doesn't want to get friend/moirailzoned by Rose the way she did with Vriska - which suggests she may have other designs...?

FINALLY: Rose asking Kanaya if all Trolls are so "fashion-minded" parallels Vriska on 4625: "**Trolls are an extremely fashion-minded race, John.**" Kanaya, who actually knows something about fashion, doesn't agree.

4642 - And here's team Strider/Pyrope to lighten things up a little. After pages and pages of showing how SBURB has brought out the worst in Vriska and Rose, Dave and Terezi show up to remind us of the ostensible premise of the comic: kids playing a game. So it should be fun, right? Remember, though, as weirdly charming as Terezi can be, she's a master manipulator.

Other thoughts: Note that Terezi drew Karkat's face in her comic and then scribbled it out. Trouble in troll paradise (trolladise?)? David Strider, you homewrecker.

"**[T]hat loud sound of shock you just smelled**" is a pretty fantastic turn of phrase.

Finally, we get further hints of Dave's inferiority complex compared to John - and his brother, if you feel like overanalyzing his response to Terezi's "**TH3 ON3 TRU3 STR1D3R**" quip.

4645 - Kind of an obvious pun, right? I think *Futurama* did this once.

4672 - Here we are treated to Hussie's nuanced portrayal of a young creator finding his voice. But *Cool Dude and Stoner Lou*, while obviously prefiguring Strider's later work, represents a fascinating misstep rather than a true lost masterwork. The puerile humor, while obviously intended facetiously, is perhaps a bit *too* obviously calculated to shock and so cannot cut as deeply as *SBAHJ*'s effortless juxtaposition of lewdness with searing banality, and the art employs comic exaggeration and narrative coherence - an approach Strider would later abandon in favor of *SBAHJ*'s mesmerizing shittiness. Truly, *A Portrait Of the Artist As a Cool Kid*.

And what of Terezi's role in this? Is she the unheralded genius behind Strider's achievement? Is she his muse, the Zelda Fitzgerald to his F. Scott? Or is she merely another

pawn that Paradox Space maneuvers to ensure the existence of the *Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff* across the omniverse?

4675 - The image is from the terrible, joyless 1994 animated movie *A Troll In Central Park*. Now, in order to have a comprehensive understanding of Hussie's narrative, the reader must familiarize himself with every text referenced in the work so as to fully comprehend the depth and breath of cultural allusion, and *A Troll In Central Park* is no exception. Your education begins here:

<http://www.youtube.com/results?q=a+troll+in+central+park>

However, you could watch this instead:

<http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/inside-the-actors-studio/2917>

4679 - Evidently a clip from the classic(?) sitcom *Silver Spoons*, featuring actor Ricky Schroder.

4680 - "**dudes will phalanx themselves agape**" seems to be a slightly tortured pun on Agape (pronounced ah-gah-pe), the Greek word for romantic love, used by Plato in his inventory of different forms of love in his *Symposium*. The concept of Troll romance may owe something to Plato's categorizations, and the reference to the romantic form here hints at how Dave and Terezi's partnership is developing.

4682 -

GC: 4ND MOST 1MPORT4NTLY, YOU WILL PROV3 YOURS3LF TO B3 TH3 B3ST HUM4N BOY OF 4LL

GC: W4Y B3TT3R TH4N TH4T DORKY 3GB3RT 4ND WHO3V3R M1GHT B3 M3DDL1NG W1TH H1M 4T 4NY G1V3N MOM3NT

The young lady inadvertently(?) (is anything Terezi does inadvertent?) reveals that her team-up with Dave is at least partially motivated by her desire to get back at Vriska. This puts her whole relationship with Dave in a more sinister light - as Seer of Mind, Terezi's always been extremely gifted at understanding others, and using that understanding to manipulate them. It's likely she's bombarding Dave with flirtation and terrible GIFs because she knows that's exactly what will keep him in her thrall.

4685 - ...and, to emphasize how both Terezi and Vriska are using the human players to perpetuate their rivalry, each gets a scene that ends the same way.

4687 - This installment is completely ridiculous, of course, but like much of what Hussie does the ridiculousness is grounded in consistent characterization.

Vriska is frustrated with wimpy Tavros, and intrigued by the more confident John. So it makes sense that, if she's attracted to decisiveness and self-reliance, she falls head-over-heels bonkers for Nic Cage, the paradigm of hunky befuddled manliness in *Homestuck*'s universe.¹⁸

4689 - "**shitty clip art who told you my weakness**". Oh, Dave. Your vices are transparent. And they will be your downfall.

4690 - I like how Dave completely sidelines Karkat and derails the conversation when John asks for advice on lady troubles. Dave demonstrates again and again that, despite his disaffected coolkid façade, John is still his bro.

This is as good a time as any to compare and contrast our two Knights, Dave (of Time) and Karkat (of Blood). On Tumblr, *Homestuck* reader Lil Durandal has some thoughts on the commonalities between their arcs:

Knights have an interest in using their powers to defend others. They are also deeply concerned about the way they are perceived by others. They construct facades to present to the world, and their tendency is to take their constructed public image [i.e. their armor - F.W.] to extremes: Knights try too hard.¹⁹

Given that both are trying to compensate for their lack of self-confidence, it makes sense for them to joust here (and for Dave, the less hot-headed of the two, to take the upper hand). To further develop the "knight" metaphor: Karkat and Dave are both competing for the affections of Terezi - a maiden associated with a dragon.

4692 - Oh, Jesus, it's one of these things.

Before I start complaining, I want to acknowledge that these walkaround interactive Flash games are a critical element of *Homestuck*. They are technically impressive, formally innovative, and thematically resonant. They definitively knock down the wall between "webcomic" and all of the other media that *Homestuck* has dabbled in; they are a thundering statement of intent, unlike anything else I've seen in a story in any medium. They provide sneaky character development and illuminate peripheral relationships without derailing the main story.

¹⁸ (As well as our own.)

¹⁹ Lil Durandal. "Asks: Cooltimenocturne on Knights of Doom." Master of Mythologue. 9 Nov. 2012. 05 Apr. 2013.
<<http://lildurandal.tumblr.com/post/35330521152/asks-cooltimenocturne-on-knights-of-doom>>.

And they are above all else a compelling realization of *Homestuck's* core themes: about being trapped by technology, Stuck at Home, playing games you can't win. This is illustrated by Vriska's "battle" with the two-headed chess monster: the fight accomplishes nothing, the "player" has only one real command to give the character they're allegedly controlling, and the heroine is so stupidly overpowered that the fight is over before it starts. It's also a pretty effective indictment of Vriska's "power gamer" mentality - she "wins", sure, but it's hardly challenging or fun.

And that's why I hate these damn walkarounds. Shit feels like work. Running around, chatting with everyone, switching up characters and chatting with everyone again, opening every door and treasure chest; it's far too much interactivity for too little narrative payoff (I think Hussie strikes a better balance with the Act 6 Flash sequences). So yeah, while I appreciate these Flash interludes, it's very difficult to *enjoy* them.

One final note on the Flash game format: this is the first time we get face-to-face dialogue between two of our 'player' characters, without needing to converse through a computer. Yet the conversation is still mediated by technology: the RPG-like dialogue boxes. While the Trolls have circumvented the restriction of their chat client, they're still inside of the text's pseudo-videogame format.

Now, a few additional notes on this particular Flash:

- Hussie works in a few digs at tired RPG/adventure game mechanics. Both the "battle" described above and the "puzzle" Terezi encounters on the way to her quarters are insultingly simplistic. The sequence also pokes fun at the arbitrary placement of key items in random treasure chests, encouraging obsessive-compulsive item hunting in players. On top of everything else, *Homestuck* is a heartfelt plea to game designers and players to start taking their shit a little more seriously.

- One of the teleport platforms leads to a circular room, with the Trolls' signs projected over a circle of additional platforms. I completely missed this my first time through so I'll mention it here: bring any of the three Trolls to their matching platform, and they'll be taken to a unique chunk of dungeon with unique items, jokes, and expository details.

- Among other things, exploring these passages shows that (like John) Karkat was ectobiologist for the Trolls'

session, and that (unlike John, who reacted to the appearance of ecto-babies with fatherly concern) Karkat wasn't very enthusiastic about it. We also learn that, despite her motivations in the present, Terezi seems to grow infatuated with Dave as time passes. (Nepeta teases her about liking "Akwete Purrmusk", a furry role-playing character Dave invented on 2729 - "hardest buttock in the jungle / tempered steel".)

- Some other character bits: we learn Eridan (repulsively cube-headed in animated form - a deliberate choice by the art team?) is reduced to hitting on anything that moves, with unsurprising results. And when Kanaya amputated Tavros' legs, she *might* have been taking out her frustration with Vriska.

- Finally, you can access Trickster Mode here, which grants access to a sultry female John portrait, some *Earthbound* cameos, and a sound test. It will also reroute all of the teleport pads into a new room - activate the Trickster command again to restore them and keep exploring.

4704-5 We're formally introduced to not one but two new art styles through this sequence. One of the great things about comics is that you can change the visual representation of the characters to suit the scene - artists Bill Sienkiewicz and David Macchuzelli are masters of this. But while both of these artists work on a spectrum, mixing abstraction with realistic depiction from panel to panel, Hussie's art in *Homestuck* is unusual in that he uses establishes a couple of distinct styles, with little interplay between them:

The first is the adventure-game-inspired visual style used at the start of the story, which employ thick linework and stylized pixelation, and *Homestuck's* iconic (big-headed, armless) sprites. The second is the more painterly, expressionistic work we've seen more and more frequently since the start of Act 5 - this mode depicts characters more fluidly, with more realistic proportions, and allows some expressionistic variation in linework (recall the image of Equius and his robot on 4126). (I guess you could count the childlike scrawlings Hussie sometimes uses for a punchline [HUGE BITCH BLUH BLUH] as being their own thing as well).

We first saw the *Earthbound*-derived 16-bit sprites with the interactive Flash segment on 4692 - here Hussie establishes he'll use them not only in interactive sequences but in single images as well. These RPG-esque sprites aren't much

good for action, so we'll mostly see them used to introduce conversation.

Far more intriguing is the much more detailed style Hussie introduces with the close-up of Rose. (Hussie has facetiously suggested this mode of representation be called "Hussnasty", in the same way that work reminiscent of great authors may be referred to as "Shakespearean" or "Kafkaesque," and although *Homestuck*'s fans have adopted this term, we'll avoid it in this ostensibly academic document). For the first time, we see Hussie attempting to combine his bold, stylized visuals with more sophisticated shading and linework. Often the effect is awkward - here Rose's extremely detailed nose and lips appear out of place on her oblong face. And yet, while these illustrations are weird and even repulsive, I think they have a place in *Homestuck*.

Remember, Hussie's heroes are young adolescents. Their bodies and proportions are stretching and changing in uncomfortable ways - visually, teenagers are all about gangly limbs, swollen faces, hunched shoulders. So it makes sense that Hussie's added a new mode of representation that emphasizes this awkwardness. The dissonance between the proportions and the detail in these images could be taken as a visualization of the characters' position between childhood (childlike proportions and simple, striking shapes) and adulthood (lined faces, a more sophisticated depiction of shadow and shades of grey).

(And anyway, if you don't like it, he'll phase it out after a few hundred pages.)

4709 - "***rand(413^612**". These "random" numbers that Aradia generates are of course the numbers assigned to the human and troll sessions. Much like a 13-year-old trying to sound "random" will inevitably pick from a small pool of words like "cheese", "monkey" and "ninja", Aradia's attempts at spontaneity are circumscribed - although in her case, not by a lack of imagination, but by the tragedy of temporal inevitability in *Homestuck*'s universe.

4718 - "**A DoUble mEtApHoR ALL ThE WaY AcRoSs sKaIa :o**" is a callout to the famous "Double Rainbow" video, which is a dude who lives on top of a mountain freaking about at seeing two rainbows at once (you can watch it here if you like: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQSNhk5ICTI>) (though I like the autotuned remix even better: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MX0D4oZwCsA>).

The original video's narrator shows an unself-conscious, goofy sense of enthusiasm and wonder that's completely appropriate for Gamzee. It's also a case of a Troll unknowingly evoking an Earth viral video - so it sort of reflects how Gamzee's religion and philosophy parody a human rap group that doesn't exist in his universe.

A group whose infamously terrible video he's about to watch.

4722 - Guys: I've got a theory. I've got a theory about magic.

It's time to talk about *miracles*.

For those of you unfortunate enough to have never seen Insane Clown Posse's "Miracles" video: I think the song is most interesting for how its platitudes about the wonder of everyday experiences...

If magic is all we've ever known
Then it's easy to miss what really goes on
But I've seen miracles in every way
And I see miracles every day

...and its hilarious juxtaposition of banal observations with nonsense profanity...

Pure magic is the birth of my kids
I've seen shit that'll shock your eyelids
The sun and the moon, and even Mars
The Milky Way and fucking shooting stars

...exist alongside a toxic anti-intellectual attitude:

Fucking magnets, how do they work?
And I don't wanna talk to a scientist
Y'all motherfuckers lying, and getting me pissed

Those are the song's most famous and widely derided lyrics, and with good reason, but they're also the most confrontational. They say: *I have a personal explanation for how the universe works, and if you present me with evidence to the contrary I will not reevaluate my beliefs: instead I will ignore you, or call you a liar, or even lash out.*

That is potent and dangerous shit right there. That's the justification used by religious hierarchies to persecute others for centuries; that's the Crusades and the Inquisition and radical Islam and Evangelical Christianity. The fact that this attitude is expressed in *Miracles* by nasty rapping clowns doesn't change that.

And in *Homestuck*? Well, *Homestuck* is about growing up, and a big part of growing up is about facing hard truths. And despite the story's fantastic setting, these are often the kind of truths that a lot of kids deal with: my dad is just an ordinary guy, the girl I like doesn't like me back, my older brother is not really a hipster performance artist but a puppet fetishist. There's a reason why so many kids start to question religion for the first time as teenagers.

Dave is trying to show Gamzee the truth: that his religion was inspired (in a metatextual sense, if not literally in *Homestuck*'s universe) by fat nasty trailer trash. But Gamzee wants ignorance, and Gamzee wants things to stay the same, and Gamzee will not abide criticism of his faith even (especially) if it has merit. Potentially, this makes him a hugely destructive force in the narrative.

But we'll see how that all plays out.

honk. ;o)

4723 - This is one of those bits between audience and author that doesn't really get explained in-story. Evidently, in interviews and such, Hussie had taken to referring to these more realistically proportioned illustrations (as opposed to the sprite-based ones) as "hero mode"; his fans latched onto this and quickly realized that, of all the characters, Gamzee was the only character who hadn't received one. After months of teasing, this is Hussie's acquiescence to their demands - of course, in the most obvious and anti-climactic way possible.

4725 - Dave's imagined rhymocracy here is clearly drawing on his recent conversation with Gamzee, as well as his issues with his brother. His "**sad trollian villains**" who make "**propositions to copulate to a spate of hemoerotic hotpix**" sound suspiciously like Terezi, with her aggressive flirtiness and fascination with blood colors, although he might just be making fun of Equius.

I'm puzzled by Equius' reference to "walking apocrypha", though - it sounds like he's referring to his robots, but that doesn't really square with any definition of the word I'm familiar with.

4727 - Dave and Equius are obvious foils for one another. Dave, like Equius, has trouble controlling his STRONGNESS. Equius' perversion is also a suitable challenge for Dave, who's dealt with similar creepiness from his brother all his life by laughing it off or denying it.

The art heightens this discomfort. This whole sequence (swords, stone pillars, Equius perspiring everywhere) is kinda sweaty and testosterone-drenched - the colors, and especially the red-and-black optical illusion in the background, are abrasive and uncomfortable. And while Hussie's intricately lined, hyperdetailed depiction of Dave again looks out of place, it's appropriate for a passage that wants to evoke the character's nervy adolescent energy.

4732 - Caledfwlch = Excalibur. (In fact, it's apparently an older name from the sword from Welsh mythology, and as an added bonus starts with the Cal- prefix). Equius makes the connection on 4727:

CT: D --> Giving up on the treasure so easily

CT: D --> It strikes me as an artifact rooted in universal lore of nobility

The Game is trying to encourage Dave to persevere and mature until he becomes a Knight worthy of wielding the blade.

...but Dave? Dave thinks outside the box. Dave straight-up rejects the mantle of heroism and half-asses the challenge so his reward, appropriately, is a half-broken sword. We're getting a glimpse into this kid's issues: he rejects the call to heroism because he doesn't believe himself worthy, on some level, and he's resisting the narrative's push for its protagonists to grow up. He's acting a little like his genetic sister, Rose, who also rejected the Game's plan for her.

But if Dave is consciously rejecting his Arthurian mantle, a number of the details of his situation (magic rings, the surname "Strider", a legendary broken sword [called the Royal *De-ringer*, no less!]) suggest he's being ushered down a similar heroic path - that of the hero Aragorn, from *Lord of the Rings*.

4733 - Dave's a little hostile to Terezi here - he's put off answering her as long as possible, dealing with two of the most irritating trolls first. It seems Karkat's insinuations have gotten under his skin.

Our Seer of Mind, meanwhile, hits the nail on the head with her analysis of Dave's emotional problems:

GC: BUT 1 H4V3 OBS3RV3D YOU D4V3

GC: YOU 4R3 4LW4YS G3TT1NG B41L3D OUT OF J4MS

GC: 4T F1RST BY YOUR BRO

GC: 4ND TH3N BY YOUR OWN FUTUR3 S3LV3S!

GC: 3V3N FUTUR3 D4V3SPR1T3 G3TS 1N ON TH3 4CT OF SHOW1NG UP

POOR OLD PR3S3NT D4V3

GC: WH3N DO3S PR3S3NT D4V3 G3T TO ST3P OUT OF TH3 SH4DOW OF
4LL THOS3 FUTUR3 D4V3S??

GC: WH3N DO3S H3 G3T TO B3 TH3 H3RO, TH4T'S WH4T 1 W4NT TO
KNOW >:D

4735 - This is exactly how the two Daves greeted each other way way back on 3551.

4736 - Hephaestus is both Dave's web browser of choice and his Denizen, the "final boss" of the Land of Heat and Clockwork. Of all of the Greek mythical figures available, Hephaestus feels like a particularly appropriate choice for Dave. Hephaestus was god of the forge and its flame, of tempering ore to steel - a process similar to Dave's egg-hatching mission pre-entry, and thematically related to Dave's time powers and fiery environs.

4748 - Yeah, that's some pretty unnerving shit right there.

One of the most effective techniques in horror is establishing a 'safe' environment for the audience and then slowly disrupting it with surreal elements (I'm thinking in particular of the work of David Lynch - his skewering of rural and suburban Americana in *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks* might have been an influence on *Homestuck*). Hussie gets a lot of mileage here by showing us a sickeningly cute Squiddles video and then disrupting it with the appearance of the horrorterrors. There's some unsettling dissonance going on with the depiction of the horrorterrors themselves, organic beings accompanied by the digital effects of video static and audio distortion. The final, silent image (of a dismayed Jade sitting on her bed) is an effective, understated capstone to the sequence - she's awoken from a nightmare that she (and the reader) knows was more than just a bad dream.

I like how Feferi's cuttlefish and Jade's Squiddles mirror one another.

4750 - Remember that Feferi is our foolish and naïve optimist. So her promise that the horrorterrors are "**not as dreadful as t)(ey look**" might not mean much.

4751-4 - This sequence seems to suggest Jade may be growing up a little. You'll recall one of my early complaints about her was that she seemed silly and superficial compared to the other four kids - not only does Karkat call her out ("**YOU HAVE A LOT OF IMPORTANT USELESS SCAMPERING AND GIGGLING TO DO**") but his insults seem to draw blood, and she gets legitimately angry. Having Jade toss away all

of her little finger bands might be a bit obvious, but the development is promising.

4762-3 - Er, how does the vegetable bed get out the window here? Does John open and then shut the window with his cursor between pages?

4768 - **EB: it is true, it is a fact from an alien.** And not just an alien, but a veritable expert of the romantic sciences. Q.E.D., Harley.

We also get a very weird little offhand exchange where John realizes that Liv Tyler, "**along with all the other glamorous movie stars who come out to shine on the silver screen**" must have been killed in the reckoning that destroyed the earth. It's an odd moment that reminds us that our heroes are in fact directly and personally responsible for the extinction of the human race, a fact that *Homestuck* mostly glosses over.

I think I get what Hussie's going for: *Homestuck* is a satire about kids who grew up on the internet, who neither know nor care very much the world outside of their personal bubbles, so it makes sense as a joke that they'd fail to notice even something as huge as the destruction of the earth by meteors. And it's a pretty great gag to start your story with the end of the world and have your heroes barely notice - Douglas Adams' famously used it in *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

And yet as with *Hitchhiker's*, I find it a little sinister how our heroes are totally unfazed by the destruction of human civilization. That's not to say *Homestuck* would be improved were John and friends curled up and weeping for 3,000 pages at the destruction of humanity - but when we watch John break down sobbing during a reenactment of a scene from *Con Air*, while failing to bat an eyelash at the deaths of seven billion, there's no conclusion to be drawn except that he and his friends are *completely psychotic*.

Honestly, I really can't think of a way for *Homestuck* to satisfactorily address the extinction of mankind. There's no emotional reaction we could get from the kids that would feel authentic without completely breaking the comic. Usually Hussie seizes every opportunity to pick at the snarls in the logic of his story, but he mostly leaves this contradiction alone, I think correctly.

4786 - It makes sense given that, as Dave continues to struggle with self-doubt, Davesprite is the one to step up alongside Bro for a climactic battle against Jack Noir.

4787 - Reading between the lines here, we can figure out that the mysterious Denizen of each kid's planet is the same as that kid's web browser (recall Dave and Hepheastus), and that Grandpa at one point hunted and killed a minion of John's end boss Typheus in the Land of Wind and Shade.

4800 - We've just gotten our first glimpse at Red Miles, a planet-wrecking attack connected to the Black Queen's ring. The name is a riff on 'Black Inches', Snowman's whip.

4808 - oh god what is that crocodile doing to that smuppet

4816 - This is apparently a reference to the death of the hero Atreyu's horse Artax in the film *The Neverending Story*. Although recognized as an emotionally devastating touchstone by all children of the 1990s, it must have seared itself into the psyche of a young, horseloving Andrew Hussie in ways we can only speculate.

4818 - Be sure not to miss the tweets by FedoraFreak, evidently one of the few human survivors on post-apocalyptic earth.

4822 - When she acknowledges that her wizard getup is "absurd", Rose is also moving into the realm of post-irony - embracing and attempting to transcend the ridiculousness of a cultural persona instead of mocking or rejecting it.

There's also this:

I presume an heir would be supplied with what's needed for his maturation, assuming he's looking for it.

Rose offers some speculation as to the role of the Heir in the Game, and suggests a growing awareness of the direction of the narrative; SBURB the Game, like *Homestuck* the story, is concerned with guiding its heroes to maturity.

4825 - It's been a while since we've heard from Karkat, but even so, this pissed-off, ranting incarnation of the character from the past is recognizably less developed than the slightly more thoughtful and sympathetic (but still ranting) guy he grows into. Notice that every time the younger Karkat shows up, he spends a while talking himself up before starting the conversation (which rarely involves any actual trolling).

4827 - Well, we finally know the identity of the "demon" who slaughtered the Trolls' dreamselves and blocked their entrance into the new universe. It also makes a little more sense that Karkat is emotional - he recognizes the Becquerel-powered Jack Noir as an incarnation of his

adoptive hate-father, Spades Slick, and even it isn't the same Jack Noir that perceived betrayal still has to sting.

A few more notes: Jade's entry item is particularly clever - a dog piñata that needs to be shot, representing the common literary device of a young person needing to kill a beloved but fatally injured pet as part of her coming of age (*Old Yeller*, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, etc). Jade's first impulse is to knock the piñata off with the butt of her rifle - only as her situation grows desperate does she do what needs to be done. And note that the (actual) destruction of (a symbolic representation of) her guardian coincides with the (symbolic) destruction of her (actual) guardian.

Becsprite's appearance, as a white dog with a lengthy tail, also resembles Falcor from *The Neverending Story* - one of several references in *Homestuck* to the film.

4828 - Very effective use of the "Show Pesterlog" button - we have a moment to study the image and process Bro's death, and then after the click we get Karkat's uncharacteristically sober and succinct comment to rub salt in the wound.

It's also significant that Bro is the one killed - of the kids' guardians Bro was always the most formidable, and his death forces the kids to acknowledge the human vulnerability of a seemingly faceless and invincible authority figure. It's a cruel reprise of John's realization that his father is an ordinary businessman instead of a professional prankster.

4830-1 - Bec Noir puts on the sunglasses and takes Cal, dressing up as a twisted mockery of Bro. *Homestuck's* character costumes and designs are fluid and Hussie frequently modifies his characters' visual traits to reflect their development. Here, the change is a thematic continuation of Jack's prototyping, where he took new visual elements from every object - except now he's collecting trophies from his fallen foes.

The "glorious gesture of meaningless suicide" will be explained later.

4834-42 In his classic *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud explores the various ways that verbal and visual information can be presented in graphic fiction. One example is the "parallel combination", where the words and images follow separate, non-intersecting narrative threads, relying on the human mind's natural segregation of

pictorial and symbolic information to lead the reader through two scenes unfolding simultaneously.²⁰ Alan Moore used this technique a great deal in *Watchmen* (a bloody fight in an alley juxtaposed with a dry TV interview with a retired superhero, for example) and Hussie employs it here.

Unlike in Moore's work, I don't see any particular thematic link between Karkat's description of the ascent of Bec Noir and the Exiles' discovery of the fourth SBURB terminal back on post-apocalyptic Earth. Rather, Hussie seems to be using the separate text and visual narratives to ease the reader back into the world of the Exiles, who we haven't seen for some time.

4850 - WV is technically correct here - John is being guided through the game by Vriska, the Thief of Light.

4862 - Notice the presumably symbolic image of Karkat's giant angry face from 4825 is captured by WV's monitor. It could be that Hussie's being lazy here, or that he thought it was funny. In any case, it reinforces WV's perspective as a "reader" of the comic - through his cameras he's seeing the same images as the audience.

4874 -

AG: All you have to do is dig deep down, find your hero powers, and get yourself out of this jam.

AG: You can do it, John. Be the hero!

AG: Just like in one of your movies about sweaty, rugged adult human males.

Despite her obsession with guiding others to achieve their potential, Vriska's advice is laughably simplistic. It's yet another example in *Homestuck* of how a young person's understanding of the world can be contextualized and hopelessly distorted by media.

4875 - "He is already here" - just like the demon, Lord English, referenced on 3992. Hussie's been using similar language to describe Bec Noir and the mystery boss Lord English, so you'd be forgiven for assuming they are one and the same - but a careful reading of the evidence shows nothing's been confirmed.

4876 - Once again we have personality as predestination - because of Vriska's overpowering ego, there's no way she could make any other decision.

²⁰ Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics - The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994. Pg. 154.

Vriska's expectation and desire that John should "8e even stronger than me" opens up some weird psychosexual stuff I'm not sure how to work through. From her relationships with Tavros and John, it's clear Vriska wants to mentor a neophyte until he achieves his potential, at which point he'll become a suitable mate. I'm not sure how to interpret that, but I'm sure someday some enterprising grad student with a dual major in Gender Studies and Vriskanalysis will get a thesis out of it.

4881 - Here we have John's first manifestation of his powers as the Heir of Breath. John's abilities are a bit flashier than some of his friends'; as the cast grows and we meet more characters with varied titles, we'll see characters who use their talents in subtle ways that don't involve such obvious displays of power. In that way it's fitting that John's supernatural abilities are straightforward - he's a pretty straightforward guy.

This seems like as good a time as any to discuss exactly what benefits a heroic title bestows on a player in *Homestuck*. At first blush it all seems a bit scattershot - some characters seem to get new superpowers related to their Aspect (like Dave's time travel, or Vriska's luck manipulation) but others get seemingly unrelated bonus powers on top of that (Aradia and Sollux's telekinesis, Rose's magic). And other characters don't seem to manifest any exceptional powers at all. The ever-reliable Lil Durandal, Master of Mythologue, takes a stab at sorting it out with a quote from page 3424:

And if you've asked me what a specific title "would do" or what "powers" it would confer, and I haven't answered your question because it's buried in my inbox (the volume of incoming questions has been far more than I can possibly deal with for some time now):

What can a hero of any title do?

GC: TH3Y 4LL THOUGHT 1 W4S CR4ZY

GC: BUT H4H4H4 1T TURN3D OUT W3 4LL W3R3 1N OUR OWN W4YS

GC: TH4T H3LP3D US R34LIZ3 TH3 P4RTICUL4R D3ST1N13S THE G4M3 PUT TOG3TH3R FOR US

GC: 1N TH3 VOC4BUL4RY OF L1K3

GC: TH3 HYP3R FL3XIBL3 MYTHOLOGY 1T T41LORS TO 34CH PL4Y3R GROUP

TT: You mean, for instance...

TT: If a player were to learn she was a "Seer"?

GC: Y34H 3X4CTLY! S33R OF M1ND P4G3 OF BR34TH KN1GHT OF BLOOD M41D OF T1M3

GC: 3TC 3TC 3TC

GC: 12 FOR US BUT OBVIOUSLY 4 FOR YOU

GC: 3V3RY S3SS1ON 1S D1FF3R3NT

If you have a hunch you know how the class you've chosen would interact with an aspect, and you have some idea what the aspect encompasses, you probably know as much as anyone who isn't Andrew Hussie.²¹

So your Title is about *what* you do, not *how* you do it, which may or may not involve flashy superpowers. Consider Nepeta, our Rogue of Heart. Right now we have no idea what a Rogue does or what the Heart aspect represents - but it seems a safe bet that her ceaseless matchmaking and especially her shipping wall have something to do with matters of the Heart, even without demonstrating superpowers related to her aspect. As we continue, keep an eye out for how characters interact with their aspects - not just by using powers, but also in mundane ways.

Moving on: the audience sees this from WV's perspective, not John's. It undermines the superheroic wish-fulfillment: instead of getting to fantasize about having awesome powers, we're a step removed from the action. (Also, calling John's impressive display "the windy thing" makes it seem much less badass.)

4887 - So apparently Charles Dutton has prophetic visions that allow him insight into the secrets of Skaia. (We'll later learn that other historical figures unrelated to the Game have prophetic dreams related to it.)

Dutton's quote includes a butchered bit of a famous *Hamlet* soliloquy: "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!"

4892 - So these dream bubbles, apparently established by Jade and Feferi working with the Horrorterrors, allow players from across the timeline to communicate with one another in their sleep - often by reenacting past experiences, or in surreal environments spliced together from multiple memories. In a way, this puts the characters in the same position as the readers, experiencing time in a nonlinear way, able to jump around and reexperience past events/installments at will.

4893 - AHHH!

4894 - AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

²¹ Lil Durandal. "Asks: Cooltimenocturne on Knights of Doom." Master of Mythologue. 9 Nov. 2012. 05 Apr. 2013. <<http://lildurandal.tumblr.com/post/35330521152/asks-cooltimenocturne-on-knights-of-doom>>.

I like how Hussie hides Feferi's creepy blank eyes until the reveal. And it's entirely in character that she's so cheerful about being dead - though when she calls Jade "stupid" and "retarded", she demonstrates a little bit unexpected arrogance, although that's not entirely unsuitable for a privileged heiress.

4907 - Bec's dialogue with Jade is a pretty good punchline and a great use of animation - again, this is something that couldn't work in any other medium. And conveniently, Bec's seizure-inducing attempts at communication mean that Hussie can continue to depict him as enigmatic and alien, instead of a helpful confidante like Nanna or Jaspersprite.

4915 - We've seen "**THIS IS STUPID**" a number of times before, usually accompanying a caricature of one of the heroes doing something ridiculous (remember John's Gushers freakout? Or Eridan and Feferi's fistbump?). Here, the illustration and typesetting are far more understated, expressing PM's frustration.

4925 - I'm have no desire to turn this document into an encyclopedia of *Homestuck* fan productivity, but I'd be depriving you if I didn't attach a link to actor and *Homestuck* fan Dante Basco's (Rufio of *Hook*) interpretation of Dave's (sublime) Pooh Bear monologue:

<http://rufiozuko.tumblr.com/post/24055423803/dave-talkin-to-jade-sh-t-was-funny-just-felt>

4926 - Funny that, while SBURB tries to stop players from copying certain objects, it also makes available technology explicitly intended to circumvent its own security measures.

4929 - Dave's explanation of establishing time loops is another example of *Homestuck*'s compatibilist perspective on free will and predestination:

TG: managing the loops is a balance of careful planning and just rolling with your in the moment decisions

TG: and trusting they were the ones you were always supposed to make

TG: by now im pretty used to having my intuition woven into the fabric of the alpha timeline

4946 - Kanaya's description of Eridan as a "**Noble Magician Of Pure Light**" (reflecting the character's Harry Potter-inspired getup) suggests he has an important role yet to play... but does any of that hero stuff sound like the Eridan we know? As Rose and Vriska have demonstrated, "light" isn't always a good thing in *Homestuck*.

4947 - The art on this page is a perfect illustration of the text's ambivalence in its portrayal of Eridan, and makes very effective use of deliberately garish and ugly elements. The light show is impressive as hell, but it's also a little tacky and obviously Photoshopped - appropriate for Eridan's theatrical, melodramatic style. And Eridan's horrible grimace is just as uncomfortable - is this a guy who should have access to that kind of firepower?

4955-7 -

AT: bUT WHAT ABOUT,
AT: mY ATTRACTIVE BRAVADO,
AT: aND IGNORING MY INSTINCTUAL COWARDICE HARD ENOUGH TO
SAY THAT i LIKE YOU,
AT: iSN'T THAT,
AT: sUPPOSED TO BE VERY ATTRACTIVE, aND ENCOURAGE THE MAJOR
HAVING OF FLUSHED FEELINGS IN OTHERS,

Tavros has some ideas about what girls like.

AT: bEING NOT PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED IS MOST CERTAINLY THE
KEY TO HAVING HIGH SELF ESTEEM,

Tavros has some ideas about his disability.

AT: i JUST WANTED,
AT: tO MAKE IT POSSIBLE SO THAT i WAS THE ONE INVOLVED WITH
BEING THE HERO THERE,
AT: tO SAVE YOU,
AT: LIKE, tO PUT MYSELF IN YOUR STORY, IN A BRAVE CAPACITY,
bECAUSE,
AT: tHAT'S WHAT FEELING GOOD AND POSITIVE ABOUT YOURSELF IS
ALL ABOUT,

And, perhaps most tellingly, Tavros is writing Mary-Sue fan fiction - artificially inserting himself into the human's stories at critical junctures.

At this point it is clear that Vriska has gotten her nasty little scorpion claws deep into Tavros' mind - so deep that, even after she's foresworn meddling with him, he's still copying her. This bit in particular makes Vriska's influence clear:

AT: i WONDER IF A TRULY SELF CONFIDENT GUY, WITH THE BEST
SELF ESTEEM THERE IS, wOULD EVEN NEED TO ASK,
AT: mAYBE THE BEST GUY WOULD JUST KNOW HE WOULD BE
SUCCESSFUL, aND WOULD DO IT ANYWAY BECAUSE IT IS FOR YOUR
OWN GOOD, aND EVERYONE ELSE'S,
GG: no way!
GG: that would be smug and arrogant and would make you a
bully!!!

And this makes Vriska's interruption at the end of the conversation very significant. We've seen evidence that

Vriska's obnoxious confidence is just a front to hide her self-doubt. So when Tavros tries to imitate Vriska, and fails, he's not just messing up like usual - he's acting out the things that Vriska dislikes most about herself. It's understandable that having to watch this would irritate her, and compel her to "tear into" him with even more rancor than usual.

4959 - Vriska's description of Jade as "8oring" and "pointless" echoes my early criticism of the character... although in such a cruel way that the reader can't help but feeling a little defensive of Ms. Harley.

Vriska also claims credit for Jade's narcolepsy...

4964 - ...and beta Dave's murder by Diamond Droog - as well as the creation of Bec Noir. Hussie explained Vriska's interference in the human kids' session on his Forumspring:

Additionally, everything she's done is just logical with respect to everything we know about her. She is presented with a room full of computers tapped into the session which unleashed their nemesis on them. She has 6 hours to do whatever she wants. Given everything she's done before, the thought that she wouldn't use her time to maximize her influence on that session in every way she can imagine, and every way which suits her megalomaniacal point of view, is pretty implausible. Of course she's going to secretly wreak havoc. We are just systematically discovering how she went about it. This was an ENORMOUS question begged by the Hivebent arc, considering her relevance there. Which was, now that we know about her, what was Vriska's role in the kids' session? This is a really striking point of curiosity, especially since we had never heard a peep out of her before Hivebent. It turns out, surprise surprise, that she had more influence than even the "main troll". The difference was, while he was very loud and stormed through the front gate (backwards), she kept a low profile and was more devious. And if we somehow discovered this WASN'T the case, it would actually strike me as a pretty bizarre development with no real meaning or purpose.²²

4970 - The author is reenacting the final scene of the beloved children's film *The Neverending Story*, where our hero Bastion returns from storyland to the real world and fucks up some bullies while riding on Falcor, the magic luck dragon. In retrospect, this scene of retribution in the original film is disproportionate and self-serving and a little disturbing - far more so than it seemed when I was 10.

²² Andrew Hussie. "MSPA Formspring Archives."

The differences here are that Hussie is wearing a single troll horn, and is apparently being mind-controlled by Vriska, and Falcor has flashing GIF Lord English eyes.

4974 - Also Falcor never barfed on dudes.

4979 - DON'T MISS THE SECRET WIZARD GROTTTO - it's north on the dark blue path to the mushroom farm, so it's easy to miss.

You can play as Dave in the mushroom farm by activating Trickster Mode and answering the prompt "pap:nak" with "shoosh:doof" Either John or Dave can kill the powerful teleporting Imp in the area, although doing so doesn't change anything.

4988 - So that's the final trick to attaining god tier - you have to die, and you return to life as your dream self. The Christ parallels are pretty obvious here - you can only ascend to your full powers as a Hero of the game by first sacrificing everything.

4991-8 - This is the first moment when Terezi's puppet-master manipulation begins to fall apart. In fact, her misreading of Dave is so inept that it risks being out of character. Consider her explanation of the challenge of achieving god tier:

**GC: 1T 1SNT 34SY FOR 4NYON3 TO F4C3 TH31R OWN D34TH
GC: 3V3N 1F TH3 CONS3QU3NC3 1S TO TH31R B3N3F1T
GC: NOT 3V3N 4NY OF US M4N4G3D TO DO 1T**

But she forces Dave to do exactly that - and not for Dave's benefit, but as the latest escalation in her rivalry with Vriska. Is it any wonder the kid is angry at her? It's odd that she didn't predict that, but by showing Terezi overreaching and screwing up badly, Hussie manages to humanize her a bit.

(Ricky Schroder is an actor from the film *Silver Spoons*, the source for Terezi's GIFs of the dancing kids a while back.)

5003-4 - As he prepares to kiss Vriska, Tavros exhales a familiar-looking symbol - as Page of Breath, he likely has a connection to the Breeze, but how his Class affects his powers and what the kiss might do haven't been explained.

5014 - Vriska is offering Tavros a choice similar to the one she gave John when she put him to sleep on 4982 - and her refusal to use her powers to force Tavros to kill her is consistent with how she declined to make him kiss her. She wants her potential beau to make decisions for himself.

And this might give us a little more insight into Vriska's self-doubt. Recall Vriska's dialogue in 4981, where she wished she'd had more control over her choices while playing the Game. Vriska's a character who values agency and independence, and it must sting to have those things taken away from her. So she refuses to make decisions for others, a rare instance of empathy from a frequently self-centered character.

5019 - Gorgeous, horrifying panel.

5020 - Again, Tavros' hesitation is ambiguous. Is he just squeamish? Or is he tempted to let Vriska suffer and die?

5023 - That Tavros has his hand forced (by Diamond Droog, of all people?) was probably inevitable. Tavros' tragedy isn't just that he's a wimp who avoids hard choices - it's also that, sooner or later, someone else makes those decisions for him.

5039 - If I understand it correctly, these installments were published around the winter holidays, which explains Jade's hemming and hawing about the date and the weather.

5040 - I love how the grotesque, childlike portrait of Karkat still has the subtle screen flicker effect we've seen on the other trolls.

5041 - Check out the little happy fruit faces decorating the tree. Haven't seen these guys for a while.

5043 - New *SBaHJ*. This explains Dave's jokes a few pages back - it's a rare case where we're only directed to an *SBaHJ* strip after the characters reference it.

5044-73 - Skimable alchemization nonsense, but there are some good punchlines, and after the horrible Vriska/Tavros assisted suicide sequence it's nice to have a break. Some of the grist requirements are little jokes that are easy to miss - the 8-ball requires eight black grist, for example, while the Diamonds Droog gun requires diamond grist.

In addition: Tumblr user Silthead suggested I take a closer look at pg. 5056, where Jade creates a transparent Magic 8 ball. The item's description seems to subtly criticize Vriska's obsession with chance: the translucent 8 ball serves as a perfect metaphor for the folly of putting too much faith in the free will of the individual.

We've spoken about compatibilism in *Homestuck*, and how even if one makes a choice freely, the choice is still constrained by one's personality and psychology. If you could see into a person's mind, then their decisions would

never really surprise you. And this throws new light onto Vriska's rivalry with Terezi, the Seer of Mind.

Finally, I remember reading somewhere that the cannon sprite was taken from one of the *Marvel vs. Capcom* fighting games.

5075-7 - When Jade asks Eridan if he was the Troll that was hitting on her, it's also possible she's confusing him with Tavros - although given Eridan's sexual frustration, maybe she's referencing another conversation we haven't seen. His vendetta against Jack Noir, for example, is head-smackingly Freudian:

CA: i got bigger ships to sink and soon wwhen im good and ready me and my luminous fuckin science stick havve got a date wwith jack noir

Along with the obvious symbolism of the "science stick", "Ships to sink" may be read as a reference to interfering with other peoples' relationships. But I think Eridan's most distressing statements are here, on 5076:

CA: all of her FRAUDULENT MAGICS cannot come close to posin threat to my mastery ovver the TRUEST SCIENCES

CA: an wwith my empiricists wwand i servve as the righteous hope that wwill incinerate delusion and the deluded alike

CA: my holy fire is the wwhite fury bled from the wwrath-wweary eyes of fifty thousand nonfictional angels

CA: and wwhen theyre finished wweepin they wwill bow before their prince

...and on the next page:

CA: fate isnt real

CA: its a lot of FAKE FUCKIN HORSEFEATHERS

CA: noww go and be cleansed by the light of truth purity nonfakeness hope and abovev all SCIENCE

There's a lot to chew on. I'm immediately struck by the parallels between Eridan's new will-to-power attitude and Gamzee's religious fervor - although one denies magic and the other embraces it, both cling to explanations of reality incompatible with what we know to be the truth. Magic does exist in the world of SBURB, even though (as Karkat described on 4467) it's "**GOOFY SCIENCEY MAGIC**" that follows its own rules and laws. So when Eridan claims his "science" gives him total mastery of the supernatural forces that rule the Game, he's as deluded as Gamzee is. Eridan has shaped his worldview to suit his purposes, denying complexities and ambiguities in order to prove to himself that he's in the right.

It's the same thing with fate - because fate (or at least compatibilism) *does* exist in *Homestuck*, and Eridan is

wrong, and his smug certainty in his rebellion is bratty and self-serving. *Homestuck* has its share of devilish figures but Eridan here reminds me in particular of Milton's Lucifer in *Paradise Lost*: lashing out at the universe in a predictable and ineffectual way, uncomprehending that his supposed rebellion was predetermined by the cosmic order. (Eridan's association with light, and his claim to command an army of angels, both reinforce this.) Not to give away anything, but at this point I think it's quite clear that things will not end well well Eridan.

Lil Durandal has a pretty convincing take on Eridan's new abilities and how they relate to his aspect, Hope:

It's powered by science because Eridan believes, truly believes, that science is both powerful and true, and it's powered by hope because Hope is Eridan's Aspect, and because to hope for something is to believe it is possible, to wish for it to happen, to will it to be so. We've seen items - Dave's time tables, Aradia's music box time machines... that are used by players to help them channel, or manipulate, or otherwise use their Aspect. This wand is Eridan's...

Hope is belief; his wand works the way it does because Eridan believes it will.²³

Which raises the question - if Eridan's abilities are fueled by his conviction in his worldview (which we've already seen is fundamentally flawed) then what happens when his belief is debunked?

Finally, Eridan also introduces the concepts of a Troll ancestors, "**wwho contribute to most of our genes above and beyond wwhat the grubs slurry does**". This will be important later. (Given Hussie's love of wordplay, I'm a little disappointed he didn't come up with a cleverer name for the Troll's historic predecessors.)

5086 - We were warned long in advance of Aradia's second death, and her stoic acceptance of its inevitability diminishes the emotional impact. But it still serves as a bit of a warning shot (along with Feferi's creepy ghost) that we've entered a new stage of the story. The kids aren't safe any more.

²³ Lil Durandal. "Aspects: To Hope Is to Believe." *Master of Mythologie*. 15 Aug. 2012. 06 Apr. 2013. <<http://lildurandal.tumblr.com/post/29472306325/aspects-to-hope-is-to-believe>>.

5091-3 - And here's the payoff to Dave and Terezi's interaction about 100 pages back: we see the master manipulator finally start to regret her actions. For the first time, she's acknowledged that her judgment is not infallible, and that she's done something *wrong* - something her Scourge Sister, Vriska, has yet to do.

5096 - Yet another tweak on the audience's perspective as we get a few hints as to what the other kids might be up to; once again we're observing events from a distance, mediated by another character in the story.

Bladekind Eyewear on Tumblr observes that this is a major turning point for Jade, who was for a long time neither Witchity nor Spacey enough to qualify for her title:

Witches are supposed to be powerful active classes, but toward the beginning, Jade was extremely passive. She used the knowledge Skaia granted her of the future, past, and present to advise her friends, conducting them from the sidelines (and "sleeping away half their session") rather than moving with a confidence that she'd have the courage to make direct, substantial differences. You could see her visible insecurity about this with Jadesprite, later on.

And what happens to be the inversion of a Witch of Space?

Why, a Seer of Time.²⁴

She's still acting way too passively, and she's surrounded by Seer of Time signifiers (her outfit is red, the color of Time, and her goggles' name includes the word "Sooth" - a synonym for "Seer"). But at least she's starting to get comfortable with her aspect-derived abilities, instead of relying on Skaia's visions.

5110 - Jade's weirdly cheery about killing her dog - although as we talked about before, she's already done it symbolically, so maybe the second time isn't as hard?

5117 - As with Davesprite, Hussie doesn't shy away from the uncomfortable implications of having multiple versions of the same character running around.

5119 - Gamzee's role as "the most important character in Homestuck" is ambiguous; though we'll later learn another character was present watching at this moment.

²⁴ BladekindEyewear. "Jade the Seer." **dons Reading Daggers**. 2012. 07 Apr. 2013. <<http://bladekindeyewear.tumblr.com/post/33401663798/jade-the-seer>>

If I'm correct, this segment was published on New Year's Eve, hence the references to "a new beginning" and the ball about to drop.

5133 - Hussie's crush on Ms. Paint is kind of unsettling and heretofore unexplained. Hussie often uses his authorial intrusions to poke fun at the story - perhaps he wanted to go a step further, by making his own avatar in the story look as foolish and creepy as his characters?

5142 - As Jade continues her conversation with Jadesprite, disturbing information becomes evident: we'd assumed that Dreamselfs were empty bodies that could be inhabited by the players' souls under certain circumstances, but it seems the truth is more complex. Jade's Dreamself had her own consciousness and identity that persisted after her death.

5146 - I think Jade's anger here is an important turning point for her character - we saw her angry with Tavros before but she couldn't quite bring herself to really let him have it. Here, though, Jade is forced to confront her own immaturity (or at least the immaturity of her half-dog doppelganger), and maybe that's what allows her to really get pissed off. While Jade is too sweet and gentle to really tear into a friend, she can get angry at herself - and now that she's opened that door, it's possible she'll express anger to others in the future.

5147 - The little animated emoticon is another nice use of graphic elements in *Homestuck*'s text.

5148 - The animation in these two panels is a direct callback to Aradia's outburst at Equius when she discovered he'd programmed her robot body to fall in love with him. Thankfully this sequence doesn't end with Jade making out with herself.

5149 - In the most recent recap, Hussie identified the other three pairs of human players and their patron Trolls: John/Vriska, Rose/Kanaya, and Dave/Terezi (the romantic tension in each pair can't be an accident). As far as I'm aware this is the first time Karkat's been officially identified as Jade's patron.

5151 - Karkat's calmed down enough to be represented by a semi-realistic portrait instead of scribbled nonsense.

5152 -

CG: I'M NOT AS MUCH OF A SCUMBAG AS I WAS SO DETERMINED TO MAKE OUT WITH MYSELF TO BE.

CG: FUCK I MEAN
CG: MAKE MYSELF OUT TO BE

Apparently Karkat also recognized the Aradia/Equius sloppy makeout callback. It's not just a weird Jade-on-Jade fantasy, though - it also echoes his own weird quasi-masturbatory erotic rivalry with his past and future selves.

(Never did I dream when I started this project that I would be exploring the sexual imagination of Karkat Vantas so intimately. This is *Portnoy's Complaint*-level shit right here... or dare I compare it to Henry Miller? The author of... *Tropic of Cancer*?)

5153 -

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.

The forces capable of killing imagination and turning it into nothingness are presumably Jack Noir, Doc Scratch, and Lord English; the mysterious power that would make everyone stop caring is Hussie directly interfering with the story. That's why Karkat instructs Jade to turn off the 4th wall (which, you may recall, was previously stolen from Jack Noir's office). It provides access to Hussie's narrator and - if the characters engage too directly with the author, the story itself will break down...

5154 - ...as Hussie demonstrates here.

This is as close as Hussie can come to a direct conversation with the heroes of his story, for the reasons he alludes to: it would undermine the characters' integrity by making textual the author's total control over their thoughts and actions ("**You wonder that because I said you did**"). *Homestuck*'s unusual in that it's a metafictional work that explicitly acknowledges and comments on the problems with metafiction - a meta-metafiction, if you will.

We've discussed how Hussie almost compulsively does what a storyteller isn't supposed to - subverting expectations, portraying tragic moments as farcical, taunting his readers at every opportunity. But here he does something much more interesting: he moves in that direction and then pulls himself back at the last moment, testing how far he can play with metafictional conceits without completely destroying the audience's investment in his story. It's a

delicate balancing act, but it's way more compelling than watching Hussie go all in and rampage through his intricate fictional universe like a bull in a chinashop.

5158 - There's an obvious visual parallel between the 4th wall device and the technology WV uses to peer in on John and friends. This page is also a callback to *Problem Sleuth*, which featured characters building and constructing little forts like this all over the place.

5169 - The Wiki's translation of Serenity's message:

"Help! My friend is stuck inside the big can, inside a small house he built! You must hurry, he is not very bright and he doesn't understand it when I blink! Are you watching me? Oh no, don't blink me you don't understand blinking either!!! How do you people even exchange ideas without luminous rear ends!!!!!!"

5172-5190 - As we know, when SBURB players dream, they aren't just experiencing visions drawn from their subconscious, but are actually doing game-related stuff as a dreamself on Prospit or Derse. But WV isn't an SBURB player, and doesn't have a dreamself in the medium. Hence the change in style, which indicates that what we're seeing isn't literally happening, and is just a series of figments from WV's subconscious. And given how simple-minded WV is, the scribbled pictures (reminiscent of his own chalk drawings) seem appropriate.

The Wiki has translated Serenity's speech, an apparent callback to Jade's internal monologue on 2697:

What a daring dream,
to combine the finest qualities of humanity with the
elegance and nobility of the animal kingdom.
How you wish you could know their world.
To hear one night those muted pawpads traipse up your
stairs.
A low but friendly growl unsettles your slumber,
And as the sopor seeps from your eyes
They detect a sharp pair of ears cutting moonlight.
A mysterious wolven tongue invites.
Wouldn't these ears suit you?
Would not this proud long snout assist you in the hunt?"

It makes sense that WV would be nervous about accepting the power of the prototyped ring, and not only because it reminds him of Jack's slaughter of his people. WV, as we've learned, believes in democracy and mistrusts

monarchy. It's understandable he'd be concerned about being corrupted by powers bestowed by a royal ring.

5192 - Vriska's a psychic, and although we haven't seen her do so before, it doesn't seem like too much of a stretch to imagine she could project her consciousness into someone else's dreams. Here's her dialogue, according to the Wiki:

Hey you!!!!!!! Just what do you think you're planning on doing with that ring?

Whatever it is, forget it. The slayer is miiiiiiiiine. :::)

Now w8ke up!

I said W88888888KE!

5197 - The circumstances surrounding Aradia's resurrection aren't really clear from the text, so I'll let Hussie explain what he was going for:

She did have an extra life. She had a dream self all along. It just wasn't in a tower. It was sleeping in a crypt in the center of Derse, which essentially functioned as her Quest Cocoon.

She is a special case with respect to having a dream self (like Sollux was, who had two), and also with respect to the god tier resurrection.

The same rules couldn't apply to her, since she's the only character who's been dead since long before beginning the game. She couldn't resurrect the usual way because she was already dead.

So she has a different set of rules to suit her unique circumstances. We were lead to believe she didn't have a dream self, because she was dead, and because she didn't have a tower. But she was in the crypt the whole time, on her sacrificial platform, looking pretty corpse-like. Was her dream self dead too? There's no need for a definitive answer. But it would be reasonable to view her slumber as a state of undead-like stasis, like a vampire in a crypt.

Her resurrection demanded that her dream self be killed on the platform. And so it waited there for the entire session until Jack destroyed Derse, and was consumed by fire. This woke her up, and restored her to life for the first time in years. Her robot exploded as her soul un-disembodied itself. She then attained the god tier as the Maid of Time.²⁵

I think Hussie's cheating a little here... but that's not really what we're here to talk about, is it?

When asked about his sudden enthusiasm for murdering characters, Hussie responded:

²⁵ Andrew Hussie. "MSPA Formspring Archives."

Another approach would have been to treat this cast like that of a syndicated cartoon, with amusing but basically static lives. Antics happen, hijinks are afoot, everyone is pals and things are ok forever. Tune in next week! I don't deny there's entertainment value in that, with the content leaning on characters and relationships above anything else. This is actually the reality of this work echoed by the collective consciousness of fan artists, who cast all these characters in a perma-living state playing out amusing scenarios with each other. It's fun. Doesn't serve the bigger story much! Not one with a complex architecture headed in a very specific direction, but fun nonetheless. It would be prioritizing character far beyond the overarching story. I'm not doing that. Certainly not with characters always designed to play a transient role.

The bottom line is, I had plans, and I stuck to them. I wouldn't change them midstream because I got the sense that some people would rather Homestuck be "Trolls! The Sitcom."²⁶

Character integrity is critical to *Homestuck*. And not just to the telling of the story - as we've discussed, *Homestuck* advocates a compatibilist view of fate, where the characters' paths are contingent on their free (but consistent, and so predictable) choices.

Consider Tavros. We've seen him try to stand up for himself and take a more active role in the story, particularly in his interactions with Jade, but these plans have been undermined by the fact that he's still a wimp. Given the sort of person he is: is there any way his (admittedly quite brave) attempt to stop Vriska could be successful?

Consider Vriska. We've seen before that she doesn't hesitate to injure or kill people who get in her way. With John around, Tavros is no longer her most attractive romantic prospect - and, worse, he's getting in the way of her master plan. Given the sort of person she is: is there any way she could go much longer without murdering him?

The sad fact is that we've been building to this moment for a long time. As a character and in *Homestuck's* meta-narrative, Tavros has always been ancillary to Vriska. Tavros was introduced before she was only so he could provide cover for her behind-the-scenes manipulation, and he's been mocked and abused by Vriska and by everyone else ever since. And even when he tries to act more assertively, like when he interfered with Jade, he can only manage a pathetic imitation of Vriska.

²⁶ Ibid.

I like Tavros. I like most of *Homestuck*'s cast, and I can't deny it would be fun to see a comic like the one Hussie describes where they all hung out and had adventures together in perpetuity. But Tavros and Vriska both had irreversible trajectories, their final confrontation was a long time coming, and it would have been cheap to circumvent it just to keep the cast intact and the audience happy.

Adios, Toreador.

5203 - Our new, improved, more assertive Jade is borrowing vocabulary from Karkat. It's a little obnoxious, but also endearing, and it suggests Jade might be maturing from a "silly girl" into an actual teenager. Her imitation of Karkat also contrasts with Tavros' recent, failed attempts to become more confident by copying Vriska's behavior.

5204 - Obvious callback to similar panels of John's house. Dave is apparently a much more sensible architect than Rose.

5212 - I can't help but be reminded of Karkat's motivational speech from way back, which we never got to see either.

5219-20 - There isn't a whole lot to take from the cloning process we've read about for the last few pages, but this is the big payoff for the frog stuff that we've been dealing with since the beginning of the story. At the end of the session, the frog bred by the Space player becomes the new universe that the players will enter and inhabit.

"Vast Croak", of course, is just another way of saying "Big Bang".

5220 - Kanaya's description of Scratch as "**A Stranger Who Dressed And Spoke In White**" is actually sort of poetic.

I don't think I need to go on too much about the obvious parallels we're seeing between Kanaya and Jade, especially when the characters themselves comment on them. But a big one that neither of the girls picks up on is that both were groomed by the respective First Guardians (Bec and Scratch) of their worlds.

5521 - Feferi and Sollux are kind of an odd fit. Not only did he just lose his estranged ex-girlfriend, but the two occupy polar positions in the Troll caste system: Sollux is one of the characters who suffered the most, with traumatizing psychic visions and constant abuse by the highbloods. It does make sense as part of Feferi's

fairytale narrative: she's rejected the snobby Prince she was intended to marry, and fallen for the noble commoner instead. Still, I can't help but imagine an Alternian version of Pulp's class tourism ballad "Common People" (ideally covered by Troll William Shatner).

Sollux and Eridan's battle resembles the graphics from the *Scott Pilgrim Vs. the World* videogame (Sollux's powers evoke those of psychic vegan Todd Ingram, while Eridan bears an uncanny resemblance to Ramona's douchebag ex Gideon Graves).

5233 - I've made it clear I find Feferi, though sweet and charming, to have a number of unsympathetic qualities. But has she done anything at all that would necessitate her death? This is the moment when Eridan becomes irredeemable, when his long-simmering misogyny is made explicit: "If you don't love me, I'll kill you." The murder is Eridan's long-time-coming enactment of the nasty sense of entitlement behind his "why don't girls go for nice guys like me" posturing.

But while it was heavily foreshadowed, it's quite shocking: for a long time Eridan's racist beliefs and genocidal aspirations were backgrounded, and he was portrayed as a loveless dork, what Hussie described as a "one-note gag character". Even Feferi, his former moirail, assured us that he was really a decent guy underneath it all.

But Feferi was always prone to unwarranted optimism, and we never saw any evidence that Eridan stopped being genocidal. In retrospect, it seems plausible that his loneliness and near-constant humiliation since starting SGRUB made him even angrier, and more frustrated, and ultimately more dangerous.

5241 - Even when facing certain death, Kanaya's first thoughts are to protect those she is responsible for.

5243 - Consider Eridan's words in the 5521 Flash game: "Gotta help Kanaya out with this thing after your business is done here. Hope is your jurisdiction on this meteor."

5247 - Kanaya was shot through the stomach - the Virgo sign is supposed to symbolize the entrails (and therefore the womb) of the virgin.

By killing Feferi, Eridan already proved himself a total bastard - but if any audience members retained any sympathy for him, his needless murder of the much-loved Kanaya should put stop to that. (It didn't, of course, because *Homestuck* fans are crazy.)

In keeping with the comic's perverse treatment of death, both Feferi and Kanaya are humiliated immediately after their murders: Feferi falls into the stupid horn pile, and Kanaya is immediately eulogized by a special Halloween *Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff*. (Jeff's appearance as a vampire in this installment is an obvious tribute to the recently departed Kanaya's passion for terrible Alternian "rainbow drinker" novels, and certainly has no other significance whatsoever.)

Finally, and I don't want to go too deep into this because it's really uncomfortable and gross re:gender and sex so consider yourself warned: when we consider Eridan's "nice guy" chauvinism and his creepy entitlement about deserving a relationship with Feferi... *maybe* there's supposed to be something sexual about how he kills the girl he wanted but couldn't have *and* the virgin gay girl by shooting holes through their bodies with his phallic magic wand.

...ew ew ew ew.

I don't know if Hussie did that deliberately or if I'm just reading gross subtext into a children's story. (If it matters, Eridan himself already invited the phallus/wand comparison with his Freudian slip back on 5076.) But considering the pattern of misogynistic villains in *Homestuck* (the worst of whom we'll meet soon) I think it's a defensible reading of the scene.

5258 - guys:

I'VE GOT A THEORY.

i've got a theory about magic.

IT'S TIME TO TALK

about

MIRACLES.

CG: I REALLY CAN'T STAND YOU AND I HATE HOW YOU TYPE, IT JUST BOTHERS ME SO MUCH, HAVE I MENTIONED THAT?

TC: YoU SaY iT pReTtY mUcH eVeRy TiMe We TaLk YeAh.

TC: but uh, i don't have to...

TC: uhhh see?

TC: but i mean man this feels so motherfuckin unnatural and shit.

TC: YoU jUsT gOt To Be GoInG wITh wHaT fEeLs RiGhT aT wHeRe YoUr HeArT's Up In, YoU kNoW?

That's from way way back at 3910, Karkat's first conversation with Gamzee. In some ways, Gamzee's villain turn is even more predictable than Eridan's was: Gamzee is and always has been a heavily-sedated religious fanatic who

worships insane murderous clowns. That never stopped being a thing.

It's impressive how *Homestuck* has taken the tired figure of the "evil clown" and turned him into something genuinely menacing. I think this was accomplished by portraying stoner Gamzee and sober evil Gamzee with the same post-ironic characterization: Gamzee was initially written as goofy and delusional, and the comic made all the obvious jokes at the character's expense (evil clowns are stupid, Juggalos are idiots and stoners, etc.) until we felt safe around him. Only then did *Homestuck* return the focus to his sinister qualities...

5260 - ...but at the same time, even though Gamzee's murderous tendencies are being emphasized at the moment, he never stops being ridiculous in the present or in the past.

While watching horror stories, audiences can use humor to put distance themselves from the disturbing parts of the narrative - the monster isn't nearly as scary when you and your friend are joking about how he's just a guy in a rubber suit. But by making the villain deliberately and inherently ridiculous, the comic has prevented us from using that defense. You can't really laugh at Gamzee for being goofy, because the story's already doing it for you - but his goofiness never stops him from lurking around and killing people. If anything, these reminders of Gamzee's prior foolishness make his violence even more horrifying.

And the conversation over the next few pages shows that the other characters have also been misled by Gamzee and Eridan. Trollian's four-dimensional messaging capabilities give *Homestuck* the opportunity to employ a particularly perverse twist on the old "why aren't the phones working" horror trope: Karkat can easily get in touch with his endangered friends, but he always reaches them before the danger is obvious enough to be taken seriously, or after it's too late. Feferi popping up to chirp at Karkat after her murder is the most obvious example of this.

5261 - Karkat's reaction to the deaths of Feferi and Kanaya mirrors that of the audience. We're shocked by Feferi's death, not because we felt that strongly about her, but because it's such an unnecessary and horrible thing for Eridan to do. But (like Karkat) we're genuinely fond of Kanaya, and angry at Eridan for her death.

5262-5283 - Since we cut away immediately after Tavros' death, we didn't have a chance to callously and inappropriately mock him afterward like we did with Feferi

and Kanaya. But the notion that Paradox Space's favorite punching bag might retain some shred of his dignity in death is patently ridiculous, and so Tavros' body is subject to Terezi's *Law & Order: SVU* investigation.

(The panel of Terezi poofing Tavros' face with the stuffed animal's ass is particularly hilarious/awful.)

(And to Terezi's credit, despite the slim chance of success and her obvious distaste, she goes for the corpse-smooch to revive Tavros anyway.)

5286-91 - To further twist the knife for any readers still reeling from the cruel and disrespectful treatment of their favorite trolls, Hussie compares Tavros' death to that of a ridiculous supporting character from a terrible movie. Hussie's overblown emotional reaction to Rufio's death is a clear message to his audience: Tavros, like Rufio, was a dumb secondary character who didn't matter. Are you emotional about his death? Well, sorry, but THIS IS STUPID.

It's a little cruel, and I'm sure if you pressed him Hussie would say Tavros was indeed a sympathetic character with some admirable characteristics, and it's understandable if you're angry that he died. But at the same time, *Homestuck* never misses the opportunity to say the worst or most inappropriate thing, especially when it will rile up its readers.

5301 - *Homestuck* has gone beyond mere callbacks - we're now self-consciously pointing out the callbacks as they occur.

5314 - Aside from the obvious reference to the *SBaHJ* linked at the bottom of the page, I'm also reminded of the "the sock ruse was a DISTACTION" strip where one of them steals the other's car.

5316 - That John refers to WV as "**neither a chauffeur, nor a familiar... just a new friend!**" is another example of how, though nominally the kids' leader, he's reluctant to see anyone as an inferior.

5320 - When John referred to the boring guy blinking a few pages back, I sat and watched the GIF for like 5 minutes trying to see if there was an intermittent animation I'd missed. But presumably this is what he was referring to.

5323 - It's an odd choice, cutting between the claustrophobic horror story on the meteor and John on Skaia. Huge vistas, open sky, soothing colors - all of these should be anathema to horror, but they actually help

to increase the tension. It's easy to imagine a first-time reader skimming over the John sequences as quickly as possible, frustrated with the story's leisurely pace, and increasingly disturbed by the ominous hints we get about Karkat and friends' fate.

5325 - And the jokes here have a similar effect - ordinarily we'd be amused by an *SBaHJ* reference, but here it seems excessive and mean. You'd imagine humor would lighten up the horror scenes, but jokes like this have the opposite effect, evoking pity for the much-abused Trolls.

5326 - Even when Hussie isn't subjecting his characters to jarring slapstick, the arch tone of his narration implicitly mocks them. When the narrator describes Karkat (and the reader, too - don't forget the second person narration implicates the audience too) "**consumed by unspeakable horror**" it's at least a little facetious, even though it's an accurate description.

5331 - Equius is ambivalent about Karkat's orders. This does not bode well.

5333 - Terezi unwittingly echoes Kanaya, who sampled the jade-colored blood of her deceased Lusus back on 4240.

5336 - Well, the implications of *that* are pretty clear, aren't they? This is why you should never turn your back on the body.

5338 - I don't have much to say about this Flash segment except that it's a really effective piece of interactive storytelling. There are a lot of effective choices here with pacing (Nepeta pausing at the first two grates builds tension before she stops to stare in wide-eyed horror through the third) and atmosphere (the creepy honking amid the background music in the corridors leading to Gamzee, blurring the line between SFX and soundtrack - taking the gag of the horse and cat noises from the music earlier in the Flash but making it ominous instead of goofy).

It's also a chance for us to watch Nepeta and Equius do their thing together for the last time, and remind us why we like the characters. Their dress-up antics are cute, but they also hint at the rules for Nepeta's class (Rogue) and aspect (Heart), and even suggest what Nepeta's purpose (*Nepeta had a purpose?!*) in the Trolls' session might have been.

(WE'LL BE GOING OVER SOME CLASS/ASPECT STUFF THAT WON'T BE OFFICIALLY REVEALED TIL ACT SIX, so skip ahead if that bothers you.)

See, being a Rogue in *Homestuck* is a lot like being a Thief, but instead of stealing stuff for her own benefit (the way Vriska does) Rogues are supposed to swap things around to benefit their friends and allies. Tumblr blogger Lil Durandal does an excellent job explaining the significance of Nepeta and Equius' hatswap:

Nepeta is a Rogue of Heart: she steals/redistributes 'self,' 'soul,' or 'essence of being,' and she does so for others' sake more than for her own. When they roleplay, Nepeta puts on Equius' glasses - symbolically, she tries to look at the world the way he does* - and she has him wear her hat. (Hats are perfectly capable of representing 'essence of being' or 'self' in at least some circumstances. Stitch's juju-effigies were tied to the life of a person through that person's hat.) Oh, and when Equius left to seek the highblood, he took Nepeta's hat with him.

No one ever said a Rogue can't steal from herself for the benefit of others.²⁷

I'd add one more definition to Durandal's explanation of Heart in *Homestuck* as "self, soul, or essence of being": *identity*. And I think this adds some meaning to Nepeta's silly role-playing.

Identity is a big deal for teenagers. Being a teenager is all about figuring out what clothes to wear, what music you like, who to be friends with - trying to figure out *who you are*, and what sort of person you want to be for the rest of your life. And identity is a very big deal for *Homestuck's* cast of characters. Think of Vriska's role-playing as Mindfang, and Tavros' dreams of being Peter Pan, and John's hero-worship of Nicolas Cage. Think of Dave's half-ironic playacting as a nineties-style "cool kid", and Karkat's desperate need to be feared and loved as a leader, and even Gamzee's struggle to remain a good and faithful Juggalo. So many of these kids are wrestling with who they are, and who they want to become - and that ties in with the series' overarching metaphor of adolescence as an RPG/chatroom, where a teenager can pretend to be whoever they like.

So as a Rogue (*redistributor*) of Heart (*identity*), Nepeta might have been a valuable ally to her friends and teammates, and a powerful stabilizing presence - helping them try on different masks (or hats, or glasses, or whatever) in order to figure out who they are and what they

²⁷ Lil Durandal. "11/3/12 update." *Master of Mythologue*. Nov. 3 2012. Mar. 6 2013. [<http://lildurandal.tumblr.com/post/34937977995/11-3-12-update>]

want to become. (For instance: maybe Vriska's character would have developed differently if she'd had a different, kinder role model to emulate?) We can even read Nepeta's goofy, furry-inspired role-playing as an early stab at performing this role. Alas, it wasn't to be.

5348 - *Homestuck* is a coming-of-age story. This isn't just implied - this is explicitly recognized as an element of the Game by Vriska on 5368:

AG: I think the game knows it's always gonna be played by kids, and it always rigs it so they enter right around the cusp of sexual maturity, whatever the race is.

AG: Which kinda makes sense, since if they succeed, they've got their whole lives ahead of them to do whatever the hell they're going to do in their universe, like start repopulating and whatnot.

AG: That means the game also knows it's got to deal with all these damn kids who are coming of age while playing it!

AG: I really think how successfully they mature is tied to success in the game. It challenges the players in all the ways they need to be challenged to grow, which is different for every individual, and veeeeeeery different for every race.

This begs the question: what does SBURB (and by extension *Homestuck*) do with players who refuse to grow up? It seems reasonable, at least from the dispassionate perspective of the Game, that they have to be eliminated. Of the characters we've seen killed so far, Tavros and Equius's deaths most clearly play this out: both of these guys got one last chance at growing up, but they blew it. (Feferi, the princess who abdicated her responsibilities, arguably qualifies. Kanaya doesn't really fit, but she's a special case we'll return to later.)

Equius was a mess. He had big problems with undue deference to illegitimate authority, and with masochism, and with internalized racism. If Equius were to really grow and change as a person, he'd need to challenge and eventually overcome these prejudices. That would be a complete, satisfying dramatic arc for the character.

But as Hussie explains, that was never in the cards for Equius:

Lot's of people thought he had depth beyond his gags, and that's definitely true. But that wasn't what was relevant about him, to me personally. He was always the troll personification of everything like Humanimals I ever did and put on the internet... That's why I was STRONGLY committed to maintaining the integrity of his arc, as I defined it. It was more important by far for me to adhere

to his role as the fucked up dude who embodies all that stuff than have him blow it by doing something heroic. He believed he died a death of supreme integrity. And so do I.²⁸

One final bit of foreshadowing: in Equius' first conversation with Gamzee on 4121, Gamzee muses: **"iF i CoULD mAkE yOu SmILE iT'd Be ThE bEst fUcKiN mIrAcLe I eVeR dId PaRt Of."**

5356 - Hussie acknowledged Heath Ledger's Joker from 2008's *The Dark Knight* much earlier in the story, when John was inspecting his father's clown collection; one of the Joker's visual signatures was the way his clown makeup ran and smudged over the course of the film, coming to resemble some kind of skin infection, visually representing his moral degradation. I bring this up because I suspect Hussie might be attempting something similar with Gamzee here. "Did I ever tell you how I got these scars?"

5357 - We won't actually see conclusive evidence of the catgirl's demise for several pages - Hussie seems to have a "Shrodinger's cat" joke on the tip of his tongue, although he decides not to go through with it.

What can be said about Nepeta? Sometimes she was cute and sometimes she was annoying. She was a furry and a shipper, and she was a Leo, so she covered an additional star sign and she appealed to critical internet demographics; she increased the breadth of the narrative, although not its depth. And in the end, tragically, she choked: the slaughterer of countless wild beasts was slain in single combat by the juggler's clubs of a rascally clown.

There's just not that much else to say about her. Even the circumstances of her death are kinda half-assed, lacking the pointed irony of the deaths of Feferi, Tavros and Equius: Nepeta wasn't done in by a tragic flaw because she really didn't have any interesting flaws to begin with. (The best I can do is that she died because she hesitated instead of attacking, much like how she held back and played matchmaker instead of going for the guy she liked.) (There might also be some kind of "curiosity killed the cat" thing going on here - she only encountered Gamzee because she didn't heed Equius' advice and hide - but I see this more as Equius' failure to protect his Morail than Nepeta's.)

²⁸ Andrew Hussie. "MSPA Formspring Archives."

Nepeta's cat shtick was endearing and her crush on Karkat was sweet and I wouldn't have minded if she stuck around and developed into someone interesting. But given the character's trajectory, I can't blame Hussie for offing her. She was, and will always remain, the Most Useless Troll.

5357-61 - I like how Gamzee's "HONK. honk." starts in the illustration and then echoes in the command text for each page this sequence. It's a visual rendering of the creepy ambient honking we heard in "Equius: Seek the Highb100d".

5366 - John learning Dad and Mom are in another castle is probably an echo of Toad's famous refrain from *Super Mario Brothers*: "Sorry, but the princess is" etc.

5367 - **"Too 18 to kiss me. Too 18 to kill me."** Sex and death, Eros and Thanatos, seem associated on some level for many Trolls and especially for Vriska: her frustration that **"It would 8e difficult to explain exactly how killing is viewed on our planet with all the nuance involved"** implicates the pointless complexity of Troll romance.

On the other side of the conversation, John's increasingly terse responses do a good job of conveying his horror as he realizes Vriska is a very, very different person than he thought she was. To be fair, she isn't doing a great job of selling her case - the off-handed way she brings up Aradia's death, for instance, is pretty disturbing, especially if you don't know the whole story.

5368 - Vriska's observation about Karkat suggests he played the same role in the Trolls' campaign that he did in the creation of the kids' universe - that, with nothing but the best intentions, he doomed the whole enterprise from the start.

And we get a revealing moment of hypocrisy from Vriska - after dismissing Troll society as hopelessly fucked up, she calls Karkat a "weirdo" for failing to fit into their arbitrary and racist caste system.

5370 - A better title, of course, would be "carcinogeneticist".

Karkat's ruminations about the young Trolls sent back in time are eventually proven quite wrong - with out revealing too much, WE EVENTUALLY LEARN that these kids had their own shot at the game, and they screwed up royally.

5375 - From Vriska's story, and drawing a little from Eridan's take on the Troll tradition of ancestors from

5076, we can infer that the Marquise is not only Vriska's inspiration but also a close genetic relative. So whenever we read about the Marquis (and, by extension, any of the other Troll's Ancestors) we're not just reading family history - we're reading about how Vriska might have grown up, if she were allowed to mature in Troll society without being derailed by SGRUB. It's not a flattering portrait.

5376-7 - Sollux doesn't seem to realize that, though he had a lisp, he was never actually obligated to reproduce his speech impediment while typing.

Sollux's torment by the "**v0ices Of the s00n t0 be dead**" may be related to his role as Mage of Doom, or his mustard-blood psychic powers, though nothing's been confirmed.

5381-5389 - First a bit of internet slang, from 5387. "Welp", a misspelling of "Well", is used to indicate bemusement or speechlessness. On this page it's used as part of a visual/verbal one-two punch, following a shocking image (enhanced by fully-illustrated pictures of Dave and Aradia after a series of sprite pages) with an uncharacteristically succinct description.

And Dave is probably justified in being a little dumbstruck. When Dave asks if Aradia thinks he's made of time, and she smiles, it's not just a little wink at his powers as Knight... it's also because this Dave has all the time in the world, because this Dave is dead.

We're finally getting a comprehensive explanation of *Homestuck's* peculiar afterlife: the Dream Bubbles. Dream Bubbles are a shared psychic space, built from locations and situations drawn from the memories of the deceased, where blank-eyed ghosts hang out and sometimes entertain the living, who can visit them in dreams.²⁹

Now, Aradia clearly sees this afterworld as a place for closure and contemplation. That's a very common way to depict life after death in fiction, and Aradia seems so cheery about the whole situation ("**i have discovered there is no reason to grieve!**", "**its time to move on**"), that it's easy to take her at her word that this is a satisfying resolution for our fallen heroes. On 5390 she advocates an

²⁹It doesn't seem to be the *only* afterlife, though. It doesn't include the ghosts of any non-player characters, and it doesn't explain how Sollux and Aradia could commune with the deceased before the Game even started.

almost Buddhist philosophy of acceptance and detachment to Dave, who's a bit shaky about facing eternity:

AA: there is plenty of time for just about anything
AA: lots and lots of time
AA: enough time to understand that time isnt much of anything at all
TG: it isnt
AA: time is like a game
AA: just one fun game in realitys cupboard which is full of them
AA: its the one we are the best at!
AA: while other people are better at the other games
AA: but when all the games are back in the cupboard everyone is about the same
AA: and games are fun but sometimes you dont realize how much fun you were having until theyre all over

But let's think this through a little more. For one thing, the existence of Dream Bubbles is potentially pretty upsetting scenario for Alive Dave. It's one thing for Dave to be assisted by a ghost/angel/samurai version of himself - but imagine learning about an afterlife filled with potentially dozens of alternate versions of yourself, all dead, all suspended in their memories like insects in amber.

And it's even more disturbing from Dead Dave's perspective. SBURB is a game about reaching your potential, because *Homestuck* is a coming-of-age story. But Dead Dave is in an artificial reality, endlessly reliving his own history. Does this sound like a place where you could to grow and mature? Does that sound in any way like a pleasant way to spend eternity - trapped as a thirteen-year-old?

I don't think Aradia is malevolent or manipulative. She's clearly **ok** with everything that's happened to her, and it's satisfying to see her finally at peace. And she genuinely seems to think that Dead Dave and his fellow ghosts can find the same kind of peace in the Dream Bubbles. But there's an undeniable tension between Aradia's acceptance and the rest of the narrative's thrust towards transformation and self-actualization. I think the optimism and *joie-du-vivre* Aradia shows us here:

AA: i am very much alive
AA: and i intend to stay that way :)

...is deeply intertwined with her creepy fatalism:

AA: we have to be prepared to die a thousand deaths before our quest is complete
AA: the master we serve demands it

5391 - Tavros here is a pretty good example of the problems with Dream Bubbles. His friendly exchange with Dave here feels superficially cathartic. But while Tavros' premature death was tragic, trapping him in a purgatory where he'll stay a wimpy preadolescent forever is just cruel.

5397 - I like the visual interplay between John's God Hoodie and the wind spiral.

5400-3 - Dad and Mom's dialogue here is sweet. Notice how Hussie writes the dialogue in third-person, which follows the rules he's established for narration, while conveying a coy, genteel tone.

5405 - Visual foreshadowing here, as the red spots of wine resemble bloodstains when reflected in Noir's glasses. Hussie uses a harsher line to depict Jack - notice the little spots of color at the edge of his wings and ears, giving him a ragged appearance.

5406-10 - There's a lot going on here in Mindfang's journals, but none of it really eclipses the fact that you are now reading pirate lesbian erotic fanfiction that's been folded into *Homestuck's* narrative canon. Here's Hussie, addressing the content of the journals on his Forumspring account:

All of it was an accurate historical account of events from her perspective. She does not need to embellish on anything because she is the real deal. A very successful and nefarious troll pirate who exploits her powers in battle and romance.

This is one of those things that is equal parts serious and silly (well ok maybe not totally equal). It is in part serious in the sense that you can view it totally straight and read it as a series of events that literally happened, and has implications for the story. It is also in part COMPLETELY FUCKING RIDICULOUS because you are truly, literally reading an excerpt of trashy romance, involving pirates like some Fabio novel, all parsed through a grim troll culture and the strange multi-dimensionality of troll romance.

Once all the dust WTF settles, you can look at it from a variety of angles.

Since this is the ancestor Vriska idolizes, this is probably the exact type of character she'd grow up to be, if left unfettered in troll society. If there is any departure in her inclinations, this is the template she is departing from. We've already seen her try to do her Mindfang impression a few times with mixed results. She tried to get Tavros to kiss her with mind control, but couldn't go through with it.

When put into the perspective of more severe adult troll attitudes, I think it helps make everything the trolls have done so far seem more childish in retrospect. It was hard to gauge, because adult troll life was completely abstract. Hearing a little from one adult's perspective through this romfic shows how big the gap was between their youthful antics and what they were really trying to become.

It also puts a little perspective on why certain relationships are the way they are, seeing how their ancestral counterparts interacted (in this case, Vriska and Eridan, whose ancestor was Dualscar, which was the name of his RP character as well). But we still only have the one example to go on so far.

And on the topic of Vriska reading this thing for inspiration, to me it's kind of got the feel of a cross between a kid learning about a relative she looks up to, delighting in reading some unapologetically trashy romance novel, AND the troll equivalent of stumbling on her parent's porn stash. Which is not to say the entire journal is full of smut. But hey, there it is.

And lastly, you can look at the log as further insight into the nature of troll romance, their near-universal bisexuality, their apparently casual attitudes toward the multiple partners the quadrants demand, the tension surrounding the potential of hopping quadrants and the meaning of envy in this regard, an element of mysterious affection that still seems to surround the hate-based black relationships, and a certain degree of open promiscuity implied by the actions here. IF YOU CARE!³⁰

He returned to the subject answering a reader question on his Tumblr account:

Mindfang's journal entries were always intended as narrative departures in which I would deliberately drag the story into what I call "The Bad Fanfiction Zone." Without necessarily laying it on TOO thick (because holy shit, fanfiction can be REALLY bad), I specifically emulated some common impulses of fanfiction writers to open this backstory portal, to fill in some world building details and contextualize the arcs of the troll kids. It's kind of bombastic, character-aggrandizing, uncomfortably erotic, and florid. I wanted to leverage the Bad Fanfiction Zone for useful story purposes, primarily because this was a funny idea to me. It's one of those gags which I don't expect the majority of readers to pick up on. Some people LOVE the Mindfang stuff because, among other reasons, they're often the sort of people who genuinely like to read fanfiction! Whereas some others HATED the journals, probably without even fully understanding why. The reason is because I bombed my own story with bad fanfiction, and

³⁰ Ibid.

tricked them into reading it. This is absolutely the most hilarious consequence of this gag.³¹

There's not a lot I can add to that: the interlude achieves Hussie's purposes as world-building, pastiche, and metafictional commentary, and adds an element of tragic inevitability to the Troll kids' actions.

But what interests me the most is how the journals develop character. *Homestuck*'s universe is prismatic: by the nature of the story, we see a number of variations on each of its major players, and each new variation illuminates another aspect of the character. So the journals give us a few additional lenses through which to understand Vriska:

1) Mindfang, is, as we've discussed, more or less genetically identical to Vriska: so Mindfang's story shows what sort of person Vriska might have grown to become, if she was allowed to live a normal life on Alternia. And apparently a grown-up Vriska, in full control of her powers, could be a total monster.

2) We also learn a little more about what sort of a person *our* Vriska is, because we know Vriska read Mindfang's memoirs and, instead of being horrified, decided they were awesome and something she should emulate. The second quote above goes on a bit long but I kept the whole thing because there was one bit that stuck out to me: "Some people LOVE the Mindfang stuff because, among other reasons, they're often the sort of people who genuinely like to read fanfiction!"

So if *Homestuck* readers who genuinely like fan fiction enjoy the Mindfang journals, and if Vriska likes the journals enough to construct her entire personality around them... then Vriska herself is just another silly teenager who loves smut and bad fanfic. In the same way that all of the Trolls are caricatures of common internet dwellers, Vriska has revealed herself to be a megalomaniacal, murderous exaggeration of an ordinary fangirl.

This also adds to the parallels between Rose and Vriska: there are some obvious stylistic similarities between Mindfang's prose and Rose's wizard fiction and

³¹ Andrew Hussie. ":o, Ok I Answered Some More Questions." MSPAndrew. 23 Feb. 2012. 10 Apr. 2013. <<http://mspandrew.tumblr.com/post/18106704483/ok-i-answered-some-more-questions>>.

GameFAQs guide. In *Homestuck*, imagination and creativity are linked to integrity, and we've already seen how obsessive fans and derivative artists can be shady if not outright dangerous. Both Rose and Vriska can be read as demented fangirls, short-sighted and solipsistic, acting out their adolescent fantasies not on message boards but in the real world.

3) Mindfang used her psychic powers for creepy mind-control makeouts, but we've seen Vriska resist the temptation to do the same thing with Tavros. And Mindfang kills, indiscriminately and without remorse, while Vriska has demonstrated increasing discomfort with murder. Now, we don't know anything about Mindfang's childhood, but we do know Vriska's had several influences that Mindfang probably lacked: she's read Mindfang's own journals (showing her the ultimate consequences of Mindfang's actions), and she's played SBURB (forcing her to try to play nicely with her teammates, and perhaps most importantly exposing her to John and the other humans). It's possible these factors alone might have been enough to sway Vriska from Mindfang's path.

(And finally, we also get a glimpse at Eridan's clone/ancestor/prototype and learn our favorite luckless yet genocidal aspiring wizard could one day be just as horrible as the adult Vriska.)

5413-4 - Nice use of the panel/page transition here - we expect the camera to pan up on Gamzee but instead get to see his ancestor, the Highblood. Hussie's employing some deliberate *Watchmen*-style parallelism: Gamzee's arrival in the illustrations echoes the Highblood's disruption of Dualscar and Mindfang's courtship in the text.

A relevant bit of dialogue from 5258, right after Gamzee snaps:

TC: I AM GOING TO MOTHERFUCKING KILL ALL YOU MOTHERFUCKERS.

TC: and paint the wicked pictures with your motherfuckin blood.

TC: FROM YOUR VEINS WILL DRIP MY MIRACLES.

If you look closely, you can see lime-colored blood on the walls of the Highblood's throne room. The limebloods would have fallen between Sollux's yellow and Nepeta's olive on the hemospectrum, but we haven't actually met any of them - although fans speculate that if Karkat hadn't been born a candy-blooded mutant, he might have been a limeblood.

Finally, the Highblood's design becomes significantly less imposing when you examine his face and notice... I think that's a Fu Manchu moustache? Am I the only one who sees that?

5417 - We last saw Terezi on 5376, fully conscious. Evidently our mystery vampire is thoughtful enough to bandage the marks she leaves on the necks of her living(?) victims.

5418 - The gallows behind Terezi's ancestor resemble the Libra sign.

At this point it should be obvious that the Troll ancestors all have 8-letter titles (Dualscar, Mindfang, Redglare).

5419 -

But I am so confident she will play no relevant role in my future, I won't even bother peering into my oracle to satisfy my curiosity.

Even the ancestors, in their gothic tale of romance and intrigue, are not immune to painfully obvious foreshadowing.

5420 - The music and pacing of this animation are intended to evoke an Old West showdown, complete with an empty bottle of Faygo instead of a tumbleweed.

Even though we have three very dangerous characters facing off, it's telling the short is bookended with Gamzee's honking and paint effects. It's pretty clear which kid we're supposed to be the most afraid of. (Or perhaps he's recognizing that this is panel number **5420 MARIJUANA SMOKE WEED ERY DAY.**)

5421-23 - It's an odd choice, to use full animation and music for the buildup before the fight, and then to go with stills and limited animation for the battle itself. That said, the sequence of images has a very cinematic feel, thanks to clever image composition and pacing - the panels show those moments you'd naturally expect a camera to linger on during a film. I'm going to break down the storytelling in this sequence, and then at the end we'll return to discuss its impact on the narrative.

The first three panels are particularly effective. Again, it's a very cinematic sequence, but what makes it uniquely arresting is the use of the MSPA format. We start with Kanaya trudging towards her enemies, slow but determined. This is a page where having a seamlessly looping animation is crucial for achieving the desired effect - showing

Kanaya scampering from one side of the panel to the other, and then pausing for a second, and *then* running across again would kill the drama and foreboding of her approach. Because of *Homestuck's* format, the reader can take as long as they need to study the animation; the movement continues for as long as you need it to, something unachievable in film or in traditional print comics.

This is followed by a completely motionless image of Gamzee and Vriska: their stillness emphasizes their shock, while the panel composition makes them look small and vulnerable, overwhelmed by the black background. And finally, we see Kanaya break into a full-on sprint - the image is easier to figure out here, and the rapid movement encourages the reader to push forward, so I suspect most will move on rather quickly to...

5424 - ...the punchline. One of the advantages of comics is that an illustrator can choose to freeze an image that would only last a fraction of a second in real life, and hence be very difficult to emphasize in film (at least without cheesy Zack Snyder slo-mo). By capturing that image in a panel, the audience can study the composition of the shot and absorb the impact of a pivotal moment: this is the instant of Kanaya's attack, frozen in time, the objects quivering in the air just before they go flying off. The glow effect, a visualization of Kanaya's anger, immediately captures the reader's eye - which I find skips down to her glowing right hand and then finally to her exposed ankle, right where her foot makes contact with Gamzee's crotch.

But despite the skill of the composition and animation: it's also a very silly image. We have a sparkly *Twilight* vampire kicking an evil clown in the nuts so hard his shoes fall off, à la Charlie Brown beaned with a baseball or Hobbes tackling Calvin. But then, *Homestuck's* never been afraid of making its characters look ridiculous, even in moments of tragedy or triumph.

4528-9 - The coloring here is sketchier, a little more slapdash - except for Kanaya's glowing skin. This gives Kanaya's fist a kind of solidity, as a point of light cutting through darkness and swirling colors, that emphasizes the force of the blow.

Notice the continuity of the angle and force of the punch across these two pages.

5431-2 - A subtle effect here: Kanaya's glow is brighter than Eridan's wand.

5435 - Hussie adopts his scribbled, childlike style here, purple blood everywhere like fingerpaint...

5436 - ...and then in the immediate aftermath we get a very crisp, stylized, *Sin City*-inspired high-contrast image of the two characters' silhouettes...

(Lil Durandal offers a typically incisive interpretation of how this panel's art emphasizes the visual symbols related to Eridan's downfall:)

Eridan's cape was modeled after Dualscar's, and when he turned his wand against an ally, he threw his cape away. Kanaya used the discarded cape to cover her gaping wound, and it became stained with the blood of a friend Eridan had unconscionably murdered.

Here, Eridan's gory death is represented bloodlessly, but the cape still bears the jade green stain that is proof of his guilt. The length of the cape as it trails behind Kanaya is exaggerated dramatically; in fact, the cape seems to be following the path of her chainsaw. The discarded cape is symbolic of Eridan's discarded fate, and visually, the cape cuts him in half; when Eridan threw away his destiny, he destroyed himself.³²

5436 - ...and finally, the characteristic "DEAD" is scrawled out in Eridan's blood, another neat use of text in the art. These two panels are a very deliberate visual response to Eridan's murder of Kanaya, way back on 5242-7.

5438 - The animation on this page is slow, choppy and underwhelming, and you have to scroll down a bit to see the whole thing. I imagine this was deliberate, to punctuate the visceral, stylized action of the last few panels.

5445 - Now that all that technical stuff is out of the way, fuck yeah! Kanaya's back! Everybody loves Kanaya, and it's gratifying to see her return from the dead and take out a couple of bad guys - especially Eridan, who had it coming.

Asked about Kanaya's transformation into a sparkly *Twilight*-style vampire, Hussie had this to say on his Forumspring:

A dig??? Try a CELEBRATION!!

Of its terribleness!!!!!! <laughs happen>

³² Lil Durandal. "The Knight of Blood and the Bard of Rage." *Master of Mythologue*. 20 Oct. 2012. 06 Apr. 2013.
<<http://lildurandal.tumblr.com/post/33949050755/the-knight-of-blood-and-the-bard-of-rage>>.

But then, I haven't read it, so what do I know? Maybe it's great! Sparkly vampires, damn what a cool idea.³³

He's being facetious, but there is a little bit of truth. Hussie isn't celebrating *Twilight*, but he's clearly celebrating and empowering *Twilight* fans.

Full disclosure: I have never read any of the *Twilight* books, either, and I have no intention of doing so, but I've read a lot of criticism because I find it fascinating how one sexless housewife's neurosis has enthralled a generation of young women. But I've been led to understand that the books are basically garbage: not only poorly written but full of sexism, racism, backwards religious thinking, pedophile apologia, and glorification of abusive relationships. So it would be quite difficult, even for Hussie, to celebrate *Twilight*. Right-thinking people hate the series and with good reason.

But at the same time, I think part of the reason that the reaction to *Twilight* has been so absolutely toxic is that it's a series written by a woman, and popular with women. Yes, *Twilight* is sexist and just terribly written in general, but so are any number of TV shows, films, comic books, and anime series that *Twilight*-hating geeks have no problem with. Shrieking teen *Twilight* fangirls begging for Robert Pattison to drink their blood are creepy and annoying, but so are sweaty fanboys slobbering over actresses and cartoon characters.

So while I don't think Hussie is trying to advocate for *Twilight*, I do think he's trying to take a stand for *Twilight* fangirls. If it's okay to be a teenage boy and enjoy terrible Nicolas Cage movies, then it also needs to be okay to be a teenage girl who loves stupid romance novels. Kanaya's heroic resurrection as a sparkly *Twilight* vampire is similar to how Hussie makes Gamzee frightening because he's a Juggalo, not in spite of it, or makes Nepeta cute because she's a furry. These characters all belong to despised subcultures (*Twilight*, ICP, furry culture), but Hussie is hellbent on humanizing them, even while he's mocking them. And when they do have their big moments, Hussie finds ways to make the kids look badass or frightening or sympathetic on their own terms - using the language and symbolism of their widely-mocked hobbies.

Also: there's a very clear and I think convincing feminist reading of this scene. The condescending misogynist, after

³³ Andrew Hussie. "MSPA Formspring Archives."

murdering women in a creepy sexualized manner, is hunted down and slaughtered by one of his victims (using a weapon emblematic of trashy horror films that often feature sexualized violence against women) who has returned to life with power evocative of the (written by women and for women) supernatural romance fiction she loves. Stuff like that is why I give Hussie more credit on gender than on race.

Moving on, the MSPA wiki suggests that Kanaya's transformation might have been triggered by Karkat's failed revival kiss. There's nothing in the text to support it (and we'll later learn that Kanaya's abilities are hereditary) but it's an intriguing proposition that plays on Karkat's role as the Knight of Blood. If he was responsible, he not only transformed his friend (friendship and alliance are another interpretation of the Blood aspect) on a genetic (i.e. *blood*) level into a *blood-drinker*, he also reversed his mistake in dooming the kids' universe, by triggering a mutation to defend instead of destroy.

Finally, Lil Durandal examines this scene as the payoff to Eridan's arc:

Empiricism means trusting the evidence of your senses, and he was having his senses present him with the information that a girl he knew he'd killed had just burst into the room, swiftly, stealthily, and glowing like a lightbulb; that her guts were prevented from spilling out by his own discarded scarf, knotted around her waist; that she was proceeding to take out, in seconds, both the trolls he'd been facing off moments before. His science had no place in it for rainbow drinkers to be real, and yet empirical evidence was telling him otherwise.

To debunk a belief is to expose it as false, or as flawed, but Kanaya needn't have bothered. The wand wouldn't have worked even if Eridan had tried to use it...

This is not the face of someone sure in his belief. This is the face of someone who thought his belief was an untouchable citadel, and who has just discovered it was actually more like a house of cards. Eridan said he'd destroy delusion and the deluded alike. As it turned out, he was talking about himself.³⁴

³⁴Lil Durandal. "Aspects: To Hope Is to Believe." *Master of Mythologue*. 15 Aug. 2012. 06 Apr. 2013. <<http://lildurandal.tumblr.com/post/29472306325/aspects-to-hope-is-to-believe>>.

5446-52 - We've seen *Homestuck's* juxtaposition of tragedy with humor directed at the deceased before, but for my money this is one of the most effective moments. On the one hand, Jack has just murdered Mom and Dad, two likable supporting characters who were extremely important to our heroes. But on the other hand, Jack has no idea what he's done, and goes about his business in his usual amusing manner: collecting trophies from the deceased, throwing childish tantrums, acting like he just wiped out another pair of nameless carapaces. The cognitive dissonance the reader experiences, between amusement at Jack's antics and righteous anger for the people he's murdered and desecrated, is powerful; we resent Jack for killing innocents and resent him more for making us laugh about it.

5462 - We get a better sense of Jack's interior life here. I refrain from calling this "character development", because in a comic full of layered personalities Jack is deliberately simple-minded. He's like a child, consumed by his desire for stimulation (which, for Jack, means nonstop destruction). He's not a complex villain, but his motives (escaping boredom) are comprehensible.

5466-8 - In case it isn't clear: Aradia has hijacked Jack's teleport to send herself to the Green Sun, the source of Jack, Bec, and Doc Scratch's First Guardian powers.

5480 - I like the splotchy coloring on Aradia's skirt. This is a visual reference to an earlier image of Jade - the comparison suggests we're seeing a younger, more carefree incarnation of her Aradia, before her fight with Vriska traumatized her.

5482 - Aradia's use of a whip quotes Indiana Jones, and may also be a nod to the subterranean adventurers of the Belmont family in Konami's *Castlevania* series. It's a weapon/tool we've never seen Aradia or any other character use - and a hint at how she might have played SGRUB, had she entered the game without dying.

5491 - It's very clever that our Aradia's interruption causes Beta Aradia to remember her true identity and hence change the color of her font - differentiating their dialogue visually, and making it clear who is saying what. The pair of red and blue Aradias also suggest her ex-boyfriend Sollux's favorite colors.

In case you had trouble picking through that time paradox: Jack tossed Cal and Dad's wallet at the Beta Aradia, and then the two were smacked by a meteor and routed through a Skaia portal to the frog ruins in Alternia's past - where

they would be discovered by Aradia, and help set in motion the chain of events that led to the objects' arrival in the Troll's universe in the first place.

5492-9 - I confess I find this whole sequence a little tedious, which is strange, because it's the first time we've seen a number of major characters sharing the same space (albeit in their dreams) and interacting. I think a major problem (aside from the cutesy hide-and-go-see bits) is that the important parts of the conversation are basically a long monologue of exposition by Aradia, with the other assembled characters chipping in occasionally - this limits the potential for substantive dialogue and interaction. It also doesn't help that the players involved (Aradia, Jade, Sollux, Kanaya) are among the more subdued personalities in *Homestuck*; there's simply not as much potential for sparks as there would be in, say, a Dave and Karkat powwow.

It's pretty charming, though, how Kanaya attempts to tactfully critique Jade's insane and hideous anime dress.

5500 - I'm going to comment on each of these pages individually, and then once I'm done we'll talk about what it all means.

You may wonder why Tavros writes with a "1" instead of an "I" - Hussie posted an answer on his Forumspring account, which basically comes down to Tavros falling between Aradia (zero) and Sollux (two) on the Zodiac/hemospectrum, and subconsciously manifesting this in a typing quirk as he copied down his code.

5501- There's an intriguing detail here, as Aradia reveals the second part of the t1ck t0ck code she and Tavros wrote together:

AA: completing the phrase of legend
AA: the persisting sounds said to accompany the ultimate demise of the tyrant less an arm and an eye

...aside from being a Peter Pan reference, could also refer to either of two antagonistic characters we've encountered so far (Vriska or Jack Noir). Might this explain Spades Slick's instinctive hatred of clocks?

5503 - Vriska's three symbols (8r8k, or "break") suggest her habit of smashing magic 8 balls.

5504 - The phrase "**why the scale was tipped in this way between sisters**" is a clear play on Terezi's Libra sign. Terezi's sequence (H34DS) is also a nod to her coin-flipping gimmick.

5507-10 - Beta Aradia's story is troubling. Reading between the lines, it sounds like her Gamzee went mad much earlier and slaughtered his teammates, before transcribing his code in the ~ATH manual. That's the manual roboAradia carried back into the Alpha timeline.

5513 - So what can we make of this? It's obviously a parallel to how Rose transcribed Bec's DNA sequence, leading to his creation, but there are a few details that seem sinister:

1. The codes rattling around in the troll kids' subconscious minds seem to have influenced their habits and personalities. Most obviously, Vriska and Terezi's tics seem inspired by their codewords; Vriska's word might also explain her compulsive risk-taking and rule-8r8king. Aradia's use of the zero in her code suggests cognizance of her impending death. Tavros is trickiest, but you might make an argument that his repressing the "1" from his subconscious code in his typing quirk is a product of his low self-esteem.

2. Gamzee's contribution deserves a closer look. Gamzee's clown fixation is an obvious manifestation of his code; it's also transcribed with the words alternating between upper- and lower- case, the same gimmick he's adopted since quitting sopor slime. What I take from this is that Gamzee's murderous tendencies were always lurking in his subconscious - and that this was expressed visually by his scrambled capital and lowercase letters.

3. Remember that Rose didn't invent her code - she heard it from Jaspers, and it buried itself in her subconscious mind. From this we can extrapolate that some unseen power planted the codes in the minds of the young trolls. That's a disturbing idea, made more so by the fact that the codes seem at least possibly responsible for the Trolls' emotional problems: Aradia's fatalism, Tavros' uncertainty, Vriska's recklessness, Terezi's single-mindedness, and Gamzee's psychosis. How could you grow up normal, if someone was chanting break, break, break ceaselessly in your subconscious? It seems that someone has been manipulating these kids, encouraging their worst tendencies and sewing misery among them.

4. And finally, it seems there's something sinister in the code itself. Beta timelines are not supposed to interact with the Alpha one; they only exist as a result of players making uncharacteristic choices or trying to cheat the Game, and anyone who escapes a Beta timeline is marked for

death. So the fact that a big chunk of the Alternian Guardian's code comes from a doomed Timeline, written in the blood of murdered children, suggests a corrupting outside influence - much like how Karkat doomed the kids' universe. Perhaps there's a similar cancer inside of Doc Scratch?

5514 - Fuck this smug asshole in hell forever. I hate him so much, guys.

We first met Scratch back on 4153, but this is our first extended encounter with him. Like Vriska, Scratch has clearly been crafted to be as irritating as possible - but while Vriska has enough charm to (sometimes) get away with shit, Scratch is totally insufferable.

Here, Scratch takes control of the narrative and wastes no time in twisting the MSPA format in several ways that are *just* irritating enough to constantly remind you of his presence. Aside from the obvious white text, surrounded by brackets, Scratch replaces the traditional arrow with an "o" (representing his own cue ball head) and takes over the narrative in the first-person. You can keep reading, sure, but only on *his* terms.

We'll take a more in-depth look at Scratch and his particular brand of vileness on 5983. I don't want to give too much away here, but the Doctor's opaque surface conceals a level of evil we haven't seen before in *Homestuck*. Thematically, he's a terrific villain.

5515 - "He is already here" has been used to describe Scratch's employer, Lord English.

5516 - Again, Scratch feigns class but his language reveals his condescending nature. Anyone who lacks total omniscience is "handicapped" (shades of ableism?) and hence a "sucker". (Scratch hates on "suckers" the way Vriska does "losers".)

5517 - Scratch, like Hussie himself, delights in misdirection, as we were clearly led to believe we were waiting for either Jack/Bec Noir or Lord English. The appearance of Spades Slick, complete with the arm and eye he lost in his confrontation with Snowman, locates Scratch on Alternia after the events of the Felt intermission.

5518-21 - There's an implicit comparison drawn between Scratch and the comic's previous archvillain, Beq Noir (or at least his surrogate, Spades Slick) - and against

Scratch, Slick/Noir looks childish and ineffectual. As we've seen before, he's basically a big, angry kid who's most dangerous when he's bored and cranky. Doc Scratch, on the other hand, is composed, calculating, and... well, not really charismatic, but certainly slick, far more so than the character that bears that name.

5523 - The supply is bottomless, of course, because it's a looping GIF and Slick will continue stashing away liquorice dogs until you move to the next page.

5527-8 - An important fact about Scratch: he doesn't lie. He always tells the truth. But his isn't above careful omissions, or misrepresentations, or presenting a piece of information at precisely the moment when a party is prepared to misinterpret it, as he explains on 5528:

The plans you were making were based on assumptions and fabrications of your imagination. You were writing more stories, much like those about your false magical men.

5529 - Sarcasm, from an omniscient being who claims to never lie:

TT: Then please at least try to sound more sarcastic when you do it.

Oh sure, I am really going to do that. Yes, very likely.

TT: ...

Yet Scratch is implicating himself in further deceit here, either way. If he is sarcastically exaggerating, and doesn't actually plan to employ more obvious sarcasm, then that's a lie. And if he's not being sarcastic, then he's promising Rose that he'll continue to employ more sarcasm - more lies. All of this, mind, is completely consistent with his favored tactic of using misdirection and half-truths to manipulate others into doing his bidding without technically lying:

Lies of omission do not exist.

The concept is a very human one. It is the product of your story writing again. You have written a story about the truth, making emotional demands of it, and in particular, of those in possession of it.

Your demands are based on a feeling of entitlement to the facts, which is very childish. You can never know all of the facts. Only I can.

And since it's impossible for me to reveal all facts to you, it is my discretion alone that decides which facts will be revealed in the finite time we have.

If I do not volunteer information you deem critical to your fate, it possibly means that I am a scoundrel, but it does not mean that I am a liar. And it certainly means you did not ask the right questions.

One can make either true statements or false statements about reality. All of the statements I make are true.

And yet there's also a note of ambiguity to this exchange, one that will remain even after Scratch's agenda is finally laid bare and all his secrets are revealed. He's made clear he needs the Scratch event to occur, in order to perpetuate his employer's plans - and yet he's the first to suggest to Rose that she and her friends might find away to survive the Scratch and live to fight another day, perhaps challenging his boss later down the line:

Unless you can discover a way to preserve yourselves. But it's not really my place to advise you on that. After you have dealt with the Scratch and the sun, what happens to you is not any of my business.

Might the kids' continuing to exist after the Scratch reset play into Doc Scratch and Lord English's plans? That's difficult to say, but letting a powerful group of players survive to challenge him again in a remade universe seems a foolhardy move for English - though it's too early to guess at his strategy.

5530 - When Scratch says he doesn't like spoiling things for people, and that speaking in white helps avoid this, he's referring to the common online courtesy of posting plot spoilers for a story in the same color as the background - thus preventing the uninitiated from stumbling on them, unless they deliberately choose to highlight them.

On Scratch's predictions about his own death: Scratch isn't a player and isn't god tier, so the heroic/just resurrection mechanic doesn't really apply, but you could argue that Scratch can never die in a heroic or a just way - he's a villain who unquestionably deserves to die for his crimes, but because his death will usher in an even greater evil it's impossible to claim that killing him is "just".

5531 - We'll come back to this page later, when we do our retrospective on Scratch. But for now note that he goes out of his way to suggest to Rose that English is the lesser of two evils, and that the kids have a better shot at beating English than they do Bec Noir:

But the danger he poses is sanctioned by paradox space. It is a known quantity. His very existence in a universe will mean it will inevitably be torn apart. But there are rules to his entry, and his grim procession through paradox space is rather orderly. The present equilibrium has accounted for him, and will continue to. Jack however is a loose cannon. He will not stop until he destroys everything he encounters. Additionally, his existence is your responsibility.

More insinuations, intended to guide Rose to a particular decision, without confirming anything. And he's pulling out a guilt trip as well, returning to his role as Bad Parent.

5532 - Scratch and Rose dance around the nature of "magic", here, suggesting (as we've seen before) that the "goofy sciencey magic" is not mystical or supernatural but another game system. He also drops a series of tantalizing rhetorical questions on Rose:

Would it be so difficult to believe the power you've found to devastate your planet and create shortcuts through your session is not entirely by your own device? [redacted]
Would it be so difficult to believe a young lady could be unwittingly apprenticed by more powerful entities who meant her potential to be realized later through some arbitrary trigger? [redacted]
What would you say if I said a dutiful girl raised in the daylight was protected by a bulb-headed guardian, and learned to glow in the dark after death? [redacted]
What would you say if I said a vengeful boy on a path of nihilism was taken under the wings of fearsome angels, and learned to destroy hope with their light? [redacted]
What would you say if I said a reserved girl enamored by what dwelt in shadow was selected by the horrorterrors for service, and did their bidding at every step while convinced of her own autonomy? [redacted]

Obviously we can't take anything here at face value. The first, second and final questions seem to refer to Rose, and imply (in a magic ballet shoes-style twist) that the occult powers Rose has channeled aren't from her chintzy wands but were in fact Inside Her All Along. Again, because these are presented as rhetorical questions and not definitive statements, we can't take this for granted as true, but they seem consistent with everything else we know about Rose and her powers so far.

But I'm most interested in the third and fourth questions here, which obviously suggest Kanaya and Eridan. Why does Scratch want to talk about these two? Rose knows nothing about Eridan's rampage or Kanaya's unlikely resurrection.

My suspicion is that Scratch dropped these tidbits not for Rose, but for the reader. Scratch isn't just trying to swindle Rose with his misleading questions - he (and Hussie, who has demonstrated repeatedly that he loves jerking around his readers) is taking the opportunity to mess with the audience as well.

But to what end? It isn't clear. As far as his "fables" go, his tale about Eridan that's most intriguing - another

reference to the mysterious angels and their supposed conspiracy to "usher in the end", as Sollux explained way back when.

But the nastiest part of the conversation comes towards the end, when he cannily guides Rose down the path towards grimdark corruption:

Haven't your friends already shown concern for your recklessness and your increasing sense of detachment from the party, the team objectives, and not to mention those of your personal quest?
Does this worry you? Is there a part of you left that's able to worry?

Scratch is "concern trolling": he's pretending to worry about Rose's health to convince her that she's going bonkers. Scratch's questions are just that, *questions*, and yet by the end of their conversation his insinuations have sent Rose just a bit closer to a breakdown - and, unless we read carefully, without the reader's suspecting his scheme.

5538 - We get immediately get confirmation that Scratch has succeeded in getting inside Rose's head:

TT: I should have gone looking for her.
TT: Why didn't I?
GG: umm
GG: because you were busy trying to make the best of this situation?
TT: John was too. But he went to look for his father.
TT: It would have been normal of me. I can't remember what I was trying to prove anymore.

As soon as she learns her mother died, Rose blames herself, and interprets her failure to prevent this as proof that she's lost touch with her humanity - an idea that might never have occurred to her had Scratch not suggested it.

Rose's thoughts about her mother are also worth examining. As we've discussed before, an important touchstone when growing up is realizing your parents are people too, with flaws and vulnerabilities - Rose is experiencing a much more intense version of the lesson John learned when he entered his father's bedroom for the first time. But more than that, Rose's vision of her mother as a heroine HINTS AT A BIG DEVELOPMENT DOWN THE LINE - that Mom, as the inimitable Roxy Lalonde, will take over Rose's place in the Game after she and her companions use the Scratch to reset it.

5542-3 - As should be obvious to anyone with half a brain, this sequence is intended for laughs. (The especially ripe

prose describing Rose's transformation seems to poke fun at Lovecraft and at Clive Barker's *Hellraiser*, and her skull-on-black shirt suggests a little girl version of Marvel Comics' vengeful killer, the Punisher.) But like so many other funny moments in *Homestuck*, it's an uneasy, nervous laughter - that Rose looks very silly with her shadow aura and bright pink Chuck Taylors does not detract from the fact that she's lost a loved one and that her grief has sent her into a homicidal rage. Moments like this strike me as the inverse of scenes like John's monologue way back in the first chapter, where we followed a contemplative bit with rude and inappropriate humor - here, the story's playing a tragic event for farce all the way through, trusting the audience's investment in the character and story to make the tragedy clear even while cracking jokes.

Rose's transformation has been heavily foreshadowed. We've seen the grey skin effect before, on 4813 and as recently as 5532, used to indicate shadow. (While there's a clear visual similarity, I can't really draw any connection between Rose's grimdark state and the comic's other grey-skinned dramatis personae, the Trolls.) We also have Rose's line from 4822: "I'm not actually trying to caricaturize a grim sorcerer."

The power Rose is manifesting is also a representation of how far she's strayed from the Game's intended path. Remember: Rose is a Seer of Light. Far down the road on 5733, our buddy Doc Scratch will explain what a Seer is supposed to do:

A Seer would support her allies in battle not with her weapons, but her vision. She would sift through dross of her comrades' poor tactical inclinations and examine the grim consequences. A Seer would not charge into the fray headlong but direct it as a conductor with a baton. She would have the sight to eschew the obvious gambits, and find the path to victory disguised cleverly as setback, or even imminent defeat. She would behold the fortunes of friends and foes in totality, and appraise the contrivance of luck itself. She would know its mines were not to be plundered, but simply explored and charted carefully.

But Rose isn't eschewing obvious gambits or carefully charting hostile territory. In fact, she herself is "charging into the fray", and making a series of very poor tactical decisions.

The aspect of Light is a little more elusive. Tumblr blogger Lil Durandal has some compelling ideas about player titles in *Homestuck*, and the meaning of Light:

This is a story about friendships formed via the internet, and we are all reading it via the internet. When you read *Homestuck*, your screen produces the *light* that carries the information to your eyes. Light can be information - knowledge - and it can also be the sharing of information: communication. It can be things that come about through information and communication: clarity, understanding, possibility.³⁵

Is Rose clarifying, understanding, discovering possibilities? Quite the opposite - she's surrounded in shadow, and blocking Kanaya's attempts to view her. Grimdark Rose's imagery and actions suggest the element of Void (so far, only referred to in passing as Equius' favored aspect):

Void is arcane, occult, esoteric; it is knowledge obscured, information corrupted, communication prevented. It is inscrutable to those it does not choose, but Rose was chosen for service by gods who dwell in the void of the Ring...³⁶

And the last few installments have been filled with imagery of obfuscation and corruption as well as specific references to the Void aspect. Tumblr user *BladekindEyewear* lists a few. Consider, for instance, the image on 5540 of Rose's screen going dark, as reflected through Equius' glasses:

Why did Andrew cut to Kanaya re-viewing this in this manner, for only two pages before cutting back to Rose? To show the above symbolism, Kanaya viewing Rose through the cracked dark shades of a Hero of Void!³⁷

And *Eyewear* goes further, examining how Rose's emotional breakdown leads her to an "inversion" of her intended role in SBURB:

Rose's weaponized, aggressive Void-assaulting demeanor was that of the opposite of a Seer, understanding traded for power... If Rose inverted along the active/passive designation and the class purpose dichotomy, along with her aspect... It'd make her akin to a Witch of Void!³⁸

³⁵ Lil Durandal. "Aspects and Inversions: Light and Void." *Metatemporal Ethics*. Aug. 24 2012. Dec. 27 2012. [<http://lildurandal.tumblr.com/post/30148976155/aspects-and-inversions-light-and-void>] (Durandal's post is excellent, with a wealth of supporting quotations from the work I can't repeat here without spoiling new readers - but I strongly recommend it once you've made your way through the parts of Act 6 explaining Void.)

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *BladekindEyewear*. "Rose the Witch." *dons Reading Daggers*,. 2012. 04 Apr. 2013. <<http://bladekindeyewear.tumblr.com/post/32167602634/rose-the-witch>>.

³⁸ Ibid.

Eyewear's referring to his "inversion theory", which posits a series of axes that characters can cross over as they stray from their intended path - we've already seen this with Jade, who forsook her duties as Witch of Space to take up a Seer-like role. It's complicated, and I can't say I agree with all of it, but I think Eyewear's onto something with the two girls.

The purpose of the Game is to guide its players through a process of maturity and self-realization: classes and aspects are assigned to help the players become the adults they are supposed to be. But instead of strategizing, Rose is crashing heedlessly into danger; instead of spreading light she's dragging the world into shadow. She's regressed to a (literally, we'll soon see) preverbal, infantile state. The inversion of her powers from Seer of Light to Witch of Void is a literalization of her emotional state in *Homestuck's* videogame reality - she's in a very bad place, and it's tough to imagine it turning out well.

5544 - Check out the lovely visual interplay here of Rose's sash with the trails of shadow.

5548-58 - And here's the totally flippant punchline that completely undercuts the drama of the previous scenes. It's not enough that poor Rose's breakdown is told in sub-*Call of Cthulhu* purple prose: her grief following the death of her only parent will now be depicted *SBaHJ*-style, while the reader is reminded that Rose herself is but a fictional character by the text's sneering author.

Hussie's previously allowed his characters to express concern about the story veering into full-on double mobius reacharound metafiction (recall Karkat's monologue on 5153, which Hussie quotes here). It's a little disorienting to read Hussie's writing through a filter of *SBaHJ*-style typos and JPEG noise, but the gist of his statement is this: he *will*, at some point, interact directly with the protagonists of this story, but his interference will be limited to three nanoseconds of time and one yard of physical space.

5566 - John's escape here uses the same animation as Rose's a few pages back.

5575 - Remember Jade's letter from her pen pal, back on 3855? At this point the clues suggest that the pen pal is Jade's grandson... who bears a suspicious resemblance in his manner and interests to her grandpa. As John points out on the next page, the prevalence of time paradoxes in the

story mean that these two guys could very well be one and the same.

Terry Kiser portrayed the title character in *Weekend at Bernie's*, in which a rich guy dies and some rowdy troublemakers have to pretend he's still alive by waving his corpse around like a grotesque marionette, I've never seen it but they make jokes about it on *The Simpsons* sometimes.

5579 - This is John's canonical singing voice, from which his canonical speaking voice might be deduced. I refuse to entertain any theories to the contrary.

5581-2 - This short sequence illustrates John's great strength and weakness as a leader - his earnestness and compassion and willingness to see the best in people sometimes lead him to overlook the obvious, i.e. that WV ate the damn eyeball.

5594 - It's unclear why Vriska's even bothering to send a missive, knowing that John won't receive it. But to make an INNOCENT OBSERVATION THAT IN NO WAY FORESHADOWS ANY FUTURE EVENTS... it would certainly be tragic if this were Vriska's last chance to talk to John.

5595 - There are some really wonderful visuals in the animated introduction to this flash segment: the black rain falling into the pools of blood, the plumes of smoke that coalesce into tentacles, the shot of Rose descending over the skull-like visage of her squid symbol, suggesting her fracturing psyche. The colors of the sequence (white, black, grey, pink) are limited to Rose's own palette, suggesting that her powers are (perhaps unconsciously) painting her emotions onto the world around her.

There's an immediate moment of horror, too, once we take control of Rose and instruct her to examine the bodies of the dead parents. *She doesn't react.*

Hell, we don't even *hear* her non-reaction, we only hear secondhand from the narrator that Rose sees no evidence of Jack and must continue to pursue him. It's a subtle but terrifying effect that emphasizes Rose's total disassociation. (It will be further developed, too, over the course of the Flash - Rose passes over the belongings of the slain guardians, which the narrator cheerily refers to as "trophies"... in contrast to his overblown reaction to the slain hoofbeast.)

The whole sequence is a very effective blend of comedy with dramatic irony, especially when we get to John - who

remains cheerfully oblivious to the terrible news that Rose, in her nonverbal grimdark state, cannot communicate. The fate of the Carapacian survivors, after you return with John, is also disturbing in how understated it is.

Moving on: be sure to examine the banners that display the kids' symbols. The prophecies all hint at the roles the kids still have to play - even Dave's, with the Snoop Dogg lines. John's paraphrases the de la Rochefoucauld quote from 1982.

It's also worth checking out the bookshelf - some of the titles are gags but others are intriguing. The reference to the "yellow yard", for instance, not only recalls "red miles" and "black inches" but also the yardstick that will measure Hussie's own involvement in the story.

5598 - Dave, once again, articulates his crippling self-doubt. It's actually kind of sad, watching Terezi needle him without getting how Bro's death has affected him, and hearing Dave's usual wit cut with frustration and bitterness.

5603 - That was, of course, the only way this could go down. At least Dave's humiliation knocks him out of his self-pity: after all, **"downplaying feelings is the chief rule of cool"**.

(We get a profoundly anticlimactic callback to Dave's long-ago vow to at some point bleat like a goat ironically all the way back on 2216. I swear to God, Hussie, if we never actually get a spectacular and hilarious payoff to Dave's goat-related ruminations I will be completely disappointed.)

5609 - So yeah, Dave's exile is the Aimless Renegade, once the Authority Regulator, which explains his sudden fascination with justice and punishment. It's kinda sad that, when for the first time Dave does express interest in stepping up and seizing his heroic destiny as a Knight, it's only because a pyromaniac Carapacian martinet is broadcasting these ideas into his brain.

5610 - Note the Carapacian war-beast, enhanced with traits from Gamzee's Capricorn lusus, silhouetted in the background. An ominous reminder that Gamzee's still lurking about, ready to kill? Or a cruel taunt, teasing us with the ironic goat noises we will never hear?

Terezi says that Dave is "too cool", which suggests an almost-subliminal pun that I'm nonetheless smacking myself on the head for never noticing before. Dave's shtick as a

"coolkid" is detachment and ironic distance, but his world in the medium and much of his imagery relate to heat and flame. Dave is "cool", in other words, while his planet, powers and weapons are "hot". If the Game is a gauntlet designed to push players towards maturity, perhaps it dropped Dave into the Land of Heat and Clockwork to encourage him to drop his aloof persona and embrace his passions.

5610-3 - Terezi's monologue is presented like a closing argument in a trial. Terezi knows that justice demands she punish Vriska, but she's still ambivalent - so she's making a final argument, ostensibly to explain her predicament to Dave, but really to convince herself to do what has to be done.

Now, exploring Terezi's predicament by having her explain her conflicted feelings isn't very subtle. But for her decision about Vriska to have any impact, it's critical that we first understand her reasoning, and this exchange does a lot to illuminate the seeming contradictions in her character. Consider this bit of dialogue from 5612:

GC: 1 GU3SS
GC: 1 4M NOT SO MUCH WORR13D 4BOUT NOT B31NG R34DY
GC: 4S 1 4M TH4T...
GC: 1 M1GHT NOT 4CTU4LLY W4NT TO B3 R34DY
GC: M4YB3 3V3R
GC: M4YB3 TH3R3S SOM3TH1NG WRONG W1TH M3
TG: i dont understand
TG: i thought you were insane kinds of apeshit over the macabre stuff
TG: like being all cutesy about executions and smelling cherry blood and such things contrived to get a guy feeling vaguely uncomfortable
TG: was that all an act
GC: NOT 4N 4CT
GC: JUST FUN!
GC: 1 L1K3 FUN, D4V3, 4ND 1 4LSO L1K3 G4M3S
GC: DONT YOU L1K3 FUN 4ND G4M3S?
TG: of course the fuck not
GC: L14R!!! >:O
TG: didnt you say youve killed people before
GC: TH3R3 1S 4 B1G D1FF3R3NC3 B3TW33N M4N1PUL4T1NG P3OPL3 TO TH31R DOOM W1TH TR1CK3RY, 4ND K1LL1NG SOM3ON3 BY YOUR OWN H4ND

Terezi's love of violence and sick humor has always seemed at odds with her sense of justice, and here she makes a go at reconciling them. Like the other Trolls, Terezi was raised in a cruel and unjust world - and, without any way of escaping the violence, she decided to contextualize everything through dark humor and "games" to make it easier

(another parallel with her Scourge Sister Vriska). But now, right after surviving the murders of her friends, and obligated for reasons of both justice and self-preservation to take the life of someone she has deep and conflicted feelings about... Terezi finds that her games and sick jokes don't really make her feel any better. And even if the exposition is a little obvious, it's still hard not to feel sympathy for her.

Also notice how each page draws back from Terezi, depicting her with less and less detail: from a close up of her stylized silhouette, to a frame of her feet as she stands over Nepeta's body, to a tiny image of her in the cavernous darkened lab, and finally an animated sprite of her walking away from the camera.

5614 - A small capstone indicating the end of the story's second year.

5615 - Remove disk one. Way back in the dawn of the 32-bit videogame console era, lengthy RPG-style games often needed to be spread over two disks. Hussie's having a little fun with this idea, while poking fun at himself for the unwieldy size of his current project.

5617 - So try moving Terezi. The "OBJECTION!" icon is from "Phoenix Wright", a lighthearted Japanese series of legal adventure games that combine puzzle-solving and investigation with courtroom melodrama.

Prohibiting the audience from "controlling" Terezi, either literally through an interactive Flash sequence or through the narrative prompts, is an odd choice: this is usually done to emphasize that character's "otherness" in relation to the audience and the main cast (as seen with the parents, Doc Scratch, and Hussie's own avatar). This is the first of several incidents that suggest the narrative has gone subtly awry because of the scratched disk, building up to a major shift in narrative mode.

(That said - if the first disk really has run out, surely we shouldn't be able to see Terezi at all?)

5618-9 - And the laws governing the text continue to unravel, as a space previously shown only as an Easter Egg (the "Trickster Mode" secret room from 4692) is now a physical location accessible to the characters - and the narration goes out of its way to point out the incongruity. (Terezi's spinning drop animation is also a reference to some goddamn Super Nintendo RPG, although for the life of me I cannot remember which one.) (Note that our supposed

inability to control Terezi has been forgotten, as the narration resumes its second-person perspective, and the command lines continue to give instructions to the character.)

5620 - Gamzee's too-fast-for-the-naked-eye puppetry is like Bro's. But Bro, mostly benign, only used Cal to tease and occasionally train his younger brother. At the moment it's unclear exactly what Gamzee's playing at, ALTHOUGH MUCH LATER IN A STUNNING AND HEARTBREAKING DRAMABOMB CONCERNING THE RELATIONSHIP NONSENSE YOU CARE SO MUCH ABOUT Terezi and Gamzee wind up hate-dating, so it's easy to read this as flirtatious in retrospect.

5627 - "This douche bag" is Eddie Morton, who recorded the original version of "I'm A Member of the Midnight Crew" we heard way back in 1909.

5628 - Trolls don't use CDs, as far as we know - remember Sollux shared SGRUB with his friends over the net, no physical copies required.

5630 - The scratched CD now resembles Dave's shirt.

5642 - More Mindfang. The biggest development here is that we get to meet Terezi's ancestor, Neophyte Redglare, the inspiration for the younger Pyrope's plucky little outfit. (The bit that doesn't quite add up is Mindfang's description of Redglare's *lulus*, the original Pylalspite: she claims the dragon is big enough to swallow her own *lulus* whole, which sounds pretty damn big assuming Mindfang also had a giant spidermom, but isn't consistent with the image of Redglare riding her dragon on the next page.)

5644 - Another Bro/Gamzee comparison: Gamzee's note mimics Bro's note to Dave on 2512. If Gamzee's the Joker, does this make Bro *Homestuck's* Batman? He did have those batarangs lying around the apartment.

5651 - Mindfang: "**we'd have torn red miles across the land and sea**". She's musing how, while she and Redglare did hate one another, it wasn't a case of Troll hate-romance. After all, a hate-relationship couldn't continue for long if both partners were trying in earnest to murder the other. As you may recall, Nepeta once opined on her shipping wall that she thought that Vriska and Terezi should be hate-GFs - these little references seem intended to squelch speculation that Terezi and Vriska's rivalry is romantically inspired.

5653 - We first saw His Honorable Tyranny as a drawing in Terezi's hive back on 3932. In what may be a stylistic

callback, the illustration here (scrawled red-on-black) is reminiscent of that chalk drawing.

5654 - His Tyranny has black blood - an anomaly, among the Trolls and other Alternian wildlife.

5655-6 - Equius' ancestor. Mindfang alludes to him committing some treason against the highbloods - an unthinkable act for our Equius, but it suggests that (under different circumstances) he might have found the courage to challenge the Troll hierarchy and confront Gamzee. Mindfang's alliance of convenience with him also recalls Vriska conspiring with Equius in the first part of Act 5.

5657 - Mindfang alludes to dealings with Doc Scratch. Also, Darkleer is "**surrounded 8y such a void in the Doctor's awareness**" - recall that Equius' heroic title was Heir of Void.

5658 - Tavros' ancestor, the Summoner. His red Mohawk and striped pants recall Rufio from *Hook* - he also has the translucent wings characteristic of Troll god tiers. He seems to share Tavros' animal communing abilities. And finally, Mindfang has learned from her Magic Cue Ball that she will fall in love with him, and that he will kill her.

Most importantly, however, the appearance of the Summoner suggests what Tavros might have become, had he lived to fulfill his potential: a legendary hero instead of a self-defeating twerp. We've seen butterfly wings as a symbol of maturity and ascension for the insectoid Trolls, so the Summoner's power of flight is an ironic counterpoint to Tavros' developmental and physical paralysis.

A few more cryptic hints in this segment: Mindfang deviates from her quirk as she makes reference to "**the heretical sym691s**", suggesting the sign worn by another Troll. And we get a little information about the Troll's Empress, apparently handpicked as ruler by some mysterious entity until it conscripted "**another little witch to serve**" - remember Feferi's lusus, the emissary to the Horrorterrors, and her title in the Game.

5659 - You may have noticed the glitched graphics on the last page - they're impossible to ignore here.

Mindfang's thoughts about the future are uncharacteristically introspective for a character who, like her descendant, is usually obsessed with victory and survival at all costs:

But as I sit here deciding what to do with the damna8le little sphere, I understand my error. It was not in failing

to chart a course through future events to turn my fortune's tide, even so many sweeps from now. It was in believing the future was mine to know, and fortune mine to control.

Up to this point, Mindfang has been portrayed as a caricature of Vriska, exaggerating her worst tendencies. That she's able to accept an unhappy future adds an interesting wrinkle to her - and suggests that Mindfang might be more mature than Vriska in ways other than her increased appetite for sex and murder.

5660 - Note the headless torso collection, and Gamzee's assembled jury of his peers. Dude's doing something with the bodies, but what?

On Terezi's threats: following up "this is serious business" with "I brought my cool cane sword and scratched coin" is not the most persuasive argument.

Finally, with Terezi's proposal we've got a potentially interesting collision of superpowers: Vriska's luck vs. Terezi's intuitive understanding of psychology. Vriska claims it's impossible for her to lose the coin flip... but would a result that leads everyone getting killed by Jack really be "lucky"? And Terezi says that her Seer of Mind powers have convinced her that this is the only possible outcome for Vriska's decision... but are her predictions accurate enough to circumvent Vriska's luck manipulation? Is it possible Terezi's powers are missing something?

5664 - Welcome to the Scratch intermission.

We've spoken at length before about how Doc Scratch deviates from the rest of *Homestuck*'s cast: he's an adult, he's omniscient, he ignores the readers' commands, he types in obnoxious white-on-white text, etc. And we've already seen him hijack the narration on 5514.

But with the Game disk in his possession we're totally at Scratch's mercy. This time he modifies the layout of the website itself to suit his purposes. Pay attention to the panoramic view of his apartment in the top banner.

5666 - Scratch starts to drop alternating ticks and tocks on the command line of each page. If you have a mouse button that clicks loudly enough, the effect can be uncanny, especially when you run through a series of panels without dialogue and only spend a second or so on each - the mouse clicks become rhythmic, as if Scratch were manipulating you into providing sound effects for his

narration. Probably not intentional but creepy nonetheless.

5669-77 - Scratch helpfully lays out each girls' chain of decisions as Vriska prepares to depart. Although Scratch claims he'll only provide a brief outline of events, his narration unpacks this scene with a level of detail that not possible through any of *Homestuck's* other narrative modes - Terezi and Vriska aren't actually speaking, so there's no opportunity for a Pesterlog.

5682-7 - On the other hand, Jack and Rose's battle is something the reader would probably like to see more of, and we might reasonably be a little frustrated by Scratch's abridged telling. But it's not like skimming over major events is unprecedented in *Homestuck*, especially when its outcome is predictable. Rose is clearly powerful and totally bonkers, but if Vriska can't beat Jack, what chance does our wayward Seer of Light have?

5688 - More screwy emphasis, as Scratch reveals that Rose is killed in a startlingly offhand fashion...

5690 - ...and then makes a big show about John's resurrection, something we could have anticipated (getting shanked by a flying dog is neither heroic nor just, and as Scratch reminds us, we've already seen John survive).

5693 - John takes Rose's Needlekind specibus. What major, game-changing event requires a needle...?

5694 - Scratch "can't give you my assurance" John won't die a scoundrel, but thinks it's a safe bet he'll die as a hero. It's an ambiguous turn of phrase - is he being cagey, or is John's future another of his blind spots?

I'd also like to point out the striking image of the Land of Heat and Clockwork as seen through Scratch's figure: notice how the curve of the Beat Mesa runs parallel to the underside of Scratch's head. Also take a moment to appreciate the coloring: the glare of the television allows us to discern the contours of Scratch's body without obscuring the image, and as always red looks great (if a bit Christmasy) against Felt green.

5695-6 - It's also unclear who John's "mentor's mentor" is. His mentor is Vriska, obviously, but Vriska herself was advised or influenced by several women (Snowman, Mindfang, Kanaya) who all received tutelage from Scratch.

It's intriguing that Scratch occasionally drops uncharacteristic, Hussie-like turns of phrase - note

"What's her deal?" on 5696, as well as the SBaHJ riff on 5686-7. The effect is a little jarring, considering the lengths Hussie has gone to distinguish Scratch's narration from his own. Is Scratch humoring the readers with familiar references and gags (he is, after all, an excellent host)? Are *SBaHJ* references and callbacks just another immutable element of the MSPA format, like the panels with text under them, which Scratch has to indulge? Or is Hussie the author trying to draw some parallel between Doc Scratch and Hussie the character?

Finally: Vriska first "bugged" Aradia back on 4044.

5697-707 - Be sure to check the banner above, where Scratch appears - it's easy to overlook, but we'll eventually see critical narrative information conveyed up there. Over the next few pages, he and Spades will repeat their interaction from 5517-24, as Vriska's adventure continues below. It's a visual representation of Scratch's omniscient perspective, perceiving multiple threads of the narrative simultaneously.

Vriska's disappointed appearance on 5707 echoes Terezi's right after she lets Vriska go on 5677.

5708-9 - OH SHIT.

I'll give Hussie credit here: that's a trick I've never seen an author use before, even in works that acknowledge their own fictionality, or that allow characters to directly address the audience. It's a simple trick of narrative foreshadowing and manipulating the reader's perspective but it's still a little eerie how Hussie and Scratch involve the reader in the story's weird time shenanigans, if only for a moment.

And it serves a purpose, too: it gives us a taste of space-time from Doc Scratch's omniscient perspective. Moments like this, combined with the two views of Scratch's apartment, suggest an elevated view of *Homestuck's* universe; where all events occur simultaneously, where all points of space are observable from a single location, where cause and effect are an ouroboros, a snake eating itself.

Finally, **"it is a well known fact that past and future selves tend not to get along"** is probably a reference to Karkat.

5710-3 - "Circumstantial simultaneity" is a hell of a concept to try to wrap your head around. Here's the Doctor's explanation:

Circumstantial simultaneity is a concept more complex than its temporal analogue, and is valuable for examining the properties of paradox space. It is the agent responsible for the major cosmic event which pre-extinction Alternians came to refer to as The Great Undoing. The same concept rules the innumerable lesser events by which this critical moment shall be catalyzed, including the break, my employer's arrival, the detonation of a very powerful bomb, and my own death. It is an abstraction weaving together the fortunes of otherwise perfectly disparate chronologies, such as those bound to a pair of distinct sessions.

A useful (or not?) way to think of it is this: in our universe, where time is linear, we call events simultaneous when they occur the same moment on our linear timeline. You might arrive at the corner store just as I am leaving, for instance. Now, these events could be related by cause and effect, or they might not be - but they have something in common in that they both are located in the same point on the timeline.

That works okay for linear time. But in *Homestuck*, we're asked to consider nonlinear time: where cause and effect can generate one another in stable loops, where irresolvable paradoxes can occur and then be erased from existence. You can't graph *Homestuck's* narrative onto a timeline - you'd have to use something like a *grid*, instead, which would allow you to chart the story's progress across multiple universes. On this graph of "meta-time", there might be moments where distinct timelines pass close to one another without actually touching. These events might be considered simultaneous, not because they occur during the same moment (a meaningless statement) but because they describe two moments that occur in the same narrative (or *circumstantial*) space.

Don't worry if that's a bit much to wrap your head around, because I'm rereading the last paragraph and I'm still not sure it makes any sense, and in any case there's a much more straightforward narrative purpose: Hussie is providing a context within *Homestuck's* universe for all of the story's recurring gags, callbacks and references. When the story refers back to itself, or when events in separate universes are juxtaposed: that's circumstantial simultaneity.

Helpfully, we immediately get that example the Doctor promised: two heroes of Light challenging Jack Noir immediately after the murder of two bystanders (morbidly, Jack's theft of Terezi and Karkat's corpses shows he's

still collecting trophies - but now it's *bodies* instead of traits or possessions).

5715 - This version of the ~ATH manual includes Gamzee's code written in Troll blood, including that of characters he hasn't killed (...yet). We can assume it's the same beta version of the manual we glimpsed before.

Kevin Czapiewski (of the webcomic *Project Ballad* and blog *Comix Cube*) observes that Scratch's manual, which tells the story of *Homestuck* through a series of sequential still images, is basically a comic book.³⁹

5719-22 - Two consecutive *SBAHJ* references - "Flip it turnways" and then the 8^y smiley.

5723 - Scratch leaves the room depicted in the top banner - Hussie adds a new panel beneath Vriska and Jack's fight to show what he's doing. Looking at the empty room, I can't help but think of a webcam, which provides a similar view when the subject leaves the room but lets the tape keep running - another deliberate evocation of online media? And of Scratch's creepy, voyeuristic perspective?

5725-31 - This is Matchsticks of the Felt, summoned by Doc Scratch to put out the fire. Hussie clarifies Matchsticks' powers on his Forumspring account: Matchsticks can use fire as a portal through time, and carries a fire extinguisher so he can douse the flames afterwards.

Also Vriska becomes Mindfang.

This was probably inevitable. And if it had to happen, now's the time. Jack is likely the most powerful antagonist the Game can produce under normal circumstances. He exists because several Game features (a First Guardian, the Green Sun, prototyping, the queen's ring) combined in ways sanctioned by the Game's rules - in a real videogame, he'd be a secret boss with 9999 as every stat, with the most powerful attacks and magic spells available.

How do you beat an enemy like that? You cheat. Remember, aside from being Vriska's literal ancestor, Mindfang is also the direct inspiration for Vriska's role-playing persona. This Mindfang is Vriska's Mary-Sue character - she's the coolest, wickedest, most dangerous badass Vriska

³⁹ Kevin Czapiewski. "An Excellent Host - A Pioneering Webcomic." *Comix Cube*. 24 Aug. 2011. 04 Apr. 2013. <<http://comixcube.com/2011/08/24/an-excellent-host-a-pioneering-webcomic/>>.

could imagine. Jack can teleport anywhere in space in a nanosecond of time... but as Aradia told us on 5390, Time and Space are just two games in reality's cupboard, and Vriska is a hero of Light. She's playing a different game. So it really is a toss-up, whether Vriska's rule-breaking Light/luck powers can overcome Jack's awesome but intrinsically limited abilities.

5632 - Clover is holding one of Quarter's (Felt member #14) magic coins. Let's have the author explain how Quarters' odd powers work:

Quarters (14) has a collection of coins like the one Clover flipped. Each has numbers on either side, corresponding to a member of the Felt, most separated by 10, with a few exceptions. i.e.

1, 11

2, 12

3, 13

4, 14

5, 15

6, 9

7, 10

8, 8

When you flip the coin, it summons the member whose number is face up, from some place in space and time. If the opposite member is present during the flip, he trades places with that member, which is why Clover swapped for Quarters when he flipped 14.

If you flip your own coin, and the result is your own number, you die. As such, Quarters entrusts his own coin with Clover, who is so lucky, he will never flip a 4. He uses it to summon Quarters when things get too hot to handle. It's not advisable to let Snowman flip her own coin.⁴⁰

5733 - We're getting a direct comparison of Vriska with Rose (and Terezi, if the appearance of the Mind-aspect neurons is any indicator).

5734 - Scratch's comments about situations where luck doesn't matter at all also apply to Clover's coin toss, predetermined by his incredible luck.

5735 - OH SHIT WE WERE IN A BETA TIMELINE THE WHOLE TIME.

5738 - The effect of blood spreading across Vriska's shirt is a visual callback to John's death and ascension on 5596.

⁴⁰ Andrew Hussie. "MSPA Formspring Archives."

Which raises the question: Vriska, like John, is a god tier, and will only remain dead if her death is deemed either heroic or just. How will SBURB judge this death?

5745 - Sollux is wearing Feferi's goggles. This is another instance where the murdered Trolls' continued presence in the story is represented by their signature items of clothing (we've already seen Gamzee wearing trophies from Nepeta and Equius, and Kanaya uses Eridan's cape to staunch the bleeding he caused). *Homestuck* frequently uses visual signifiers to indicate changes in the characters - here, the accessories of the dead trolls are used to show how they continue to influence their surviving friends.

In this case: Lil Durandal observes that Sollux is now seeing the world through the eyes of Feferi, a Life player, which might be part of the reason for his new, more optimistic attitude - and that attitude will soon help him make an important choice to secure his friends' future.⁴¹

5749 - A reprise of Vriska's message to John on 5594.

5751 - We saw this clock before when John revived. If the clock lands on Prospit gold, you died a hero, and if it lands on Derse purple your death was just. If it stops in the middle it was neither and you're good to revive.

Vriska is tactfully omitting that she's the one who stabbed Tavros through the chest - and that his death, trying to stop her from going on a suicide mission and dooming the rest of their friends, was itself actually sort of heroic.

5752 - So the "Stop" on the previous page was both a description of John's god tier clock AND a verbal command from Doc Scratch to to Spades Slick. The command inputs for the next few pages will continue Doc's entreaties to Spades.

5759 - No need to repeat Vriska's messages over the past few pages, but clearly Hussie isn't being shy about hitting the reader's emotional buttons as we wait to learn Vriska's fate by reminding us of her most likable traits - especially through her endearingly and uncharacteristically timid invitation to John to go on a human d8.

5760-3 - So Spades broke Vriska's resurrection clock, which looks to be stuck in the "Just" position, meaning she's dead.

For real.

⁴¹ Lil Durandal. "The Knight of Blood and the Bard of Rage."

Did she deserve it? Here's Hussie, on his Forumspring, responding to a reader who asked that very question. Hussie acknowledges the ambiguity of the text, walks through the various factors to be considered regarding the story's judgment of Vriska (without providing a definitive answer), and finally explains the reasoning behind the ambiguity:

The story provides no conclusive answer to this, and I personally cannot provide the scoop either. Not that I am withholding it to be coy, but to take my word for it one way or another would be missing the point. The destruction of the clock is another element among many for you to weigh when considering these events.

First, there's the consideration of whether her death was just, heroic, or neither. The clock appeared to be leaning toward "just", when it was interrupted by the crowbar. Maybe it would have landed there. Or if given the chance, maybe it would have swung back and settled somewhere else. We don't have a definitive ruling. All we know for sure is she's dead.

So we can conclude that either:

1) The clock itself has no bearing on her life directly, much as clocks merely measure time without influencing it. Which would mean if given the chance it definitely would have landed on either just or heroic, but not in the middle. The proof is her death.

or

2) The result of the clock does have direct bearing on her life, and by knocking the clock over so that it stuck on "just", Slick inadvertently killed her for good, regardless of where it may have landed. But to be fair, if he knew it was going to kill her, he might be hitting it harder. You could consider it delayed revenge for his exile, which Vriska and Snowman coordinated. It's safe to assume Slick would have found her death to be quite just, and may have been weighing in on the matter through circumstantial serendipity.

If 2) is true, there is another wrinkle to consider. Recall that the crowbar he is using (from the intermission) has the property of being able to nullify the effect of whatever "enchanted" object it destroys. If the clock's power is to decide whether she resurrects, then by destroying it, he eliminates that power. Since there's no longer a force enabling her to resurrect, she remains dead. This is another way to look at it, but again, only if the clock itself has that power over her life.

If not, then the destruction of the clock becomes more a violent gesture of punctuation to accompany this "divine ruling", like nails being driven into a coffin. Or, like a tolling bell. It's jarring, sudden, and carries finality.

If you are convinced her actions are what decided her death, and not the destruction of the clock, then you are left to consider what outcome is most suitable, without having an absolute ruling on it. The clock did appear to lean "just" an instant before, and there are plenty of ways to argue in favor of a just death. There are many mitigating factors as well to supply a counter argument. It would not be that interesting if it were absolutely unambiguous, where everyone could all easily agree that her death was just. Or if everyone agreed there was no justice in it at all. There are enough factors in play where you have reason to think about it a bit, and such that it leaves plenty to discuss. You may consider the evidence and draw a conclusion. You may even feel very strongly about your conclusion! But for either the story, or me, to provide a categorically "right answer", immediately following the establishment of all the things that made it interesting to consider, shortchanges all that, I believe. For the clock to settle unceremoniously on "just" I feel would come across as a nonconstructive, compact ethical lecture, quickly nullifying all there was to evaluate and talk about.

Was this comeuppance for all her past killing? For killing friends like Aradia and Tavros? Was there mitigation in her upbringing? In her remorse, and desire to change? Was it justice for insisting on playing a role in the creation of Jack so that she could beat him, to serve her ego? What of the ignored warning from Terezi? Flying off in spite of it, endangering them all, again in service of ego? What of the doomed timeline she creates by doing this? Is there justice alone in killing her to prevent not only the death of all her friends, but an offshoot reality that can only fail? Is human morality in play here? Troll morality?? Or is it a higher agency, like that permeating Skaia? In a framework of Skaian morality, is there justice in sacrificing one life to help ensure the creation of an entire universe? This paragraph has been a thumbnail sketch of all the discussion which has already taken place across the internet, minus all the notes ranging from fan fervor to outright dementia.

Of all the arguments to make, it's difficult to come up with a solid rationale for a heroic result. Most people debating it would choose between "just" or "not just", i.e. die or live. Note that this means those who believe her death was not just are in fact arguing that the destruction of the clock is actually what killed her!!! There is nothing in the story which rules this out.

Regardless, the result is the same. She's dead. Out of the story for good? Who knows...

She was always a polarizing character. Shouldn't be too surprising she's more polarizing than ever in death. It's almost as if that polarity was given concrete expression through the rules dictating whether she lived or died.

HM.

...;) ⁴²

While the author's explanation of Vriska's death is thorough and thoughtful, it's also a little misleading. Hussie clearly wants each reader to weigh all of the character's actions and judge whether he or she believes Vriska deserved to die. It's an interesting question for any reader to consider. But despite what Terezi might like to believe, the idea of a "just" punishment is itself deeply suspect in *Homestuck's* moral universe, where predestination and free will aren't as easily distinguished as we'd like. There's an old fable that seems wonderfully relevant here:

A scorpion enlists a frog to take him on his back across a stream, even though the frog is astute enough to protest that the scorpion "will surely sting me and I will die." The scorpion points out that if he stings the frog, he will die too. The trusting frog thus takes on his passenger, is stung by him, and the two creatures drown together. But before the frog drowns he asks, "Why did you sting me, Mr. Scorpion, even though it costs us both our lives?" to which the Scorpion replies, acceptingly, "It is my nature."⁴³

Although Terezi had to stop Vriska from dooming the timeline, it doesn't necessarily seem reasonable or productive, let alone "just", to *condemn* her for acting in a totally predictable way. Vriska is the scorpion. She stings. It's her nature.

But if we can avoid getting sidetracked by the temptation to cast judgment on a fictional teenager, and instead compare the circumstances of her death to those of other deceased characters, we might get a sense of why *Homestuck's* narrative logic demanded Vriska's death.

We have seen several other members of *Homestuck's* cast die, and a few of those even return from death. John, Rose, Sollux, Aradia and Kanaya have all come back after dying; while Tavros, Feferi, Eridan, Equius and Nepeta all (seem to) have died permanently. Looking over the second list, all of the kids *Homestuck* has killed off fall into one or both of the following categories: either they were minor characters who died to reduce the cast and push the story forward, or they were static characters who refused the story's call to grow up and were punished for it (the exception might be Eridan, a nuanced and layered douche who

⁴² Andrew Hussie. "MSPA Formspring Archives."

⁴³ Frank Pittman. "The Scorpion and the Frog". *Psychology Today*. Dec 16 2009. Dec 30 2012. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/reel-life/200912/the-scorpion-and-the-frog>

might have developed further - but at the same time, his complexity developed from his stubborn, childlike narcissism). Meanwhile, the characters we've seen revived all have dynamic, evolving personalities, and in a few cases (Kanaya, Aradia) their return from death was itself a pivotal moment in their development.

So seeing Vriska die suggests either she was incapable of change and had to be taken off the board... or that her death will lead her to a transformation and eventually a resurrection. Right now it's too early to say. We saw a great deal of evidence that Vriska was at least aware that she needed to change, and may even have wanted to - but at the same time she was even more invested in her personal mythology than characters like Eridan and Equius were.

Did Vriska die a just death? You can debate all you like but it's *literally impossible* to say, because the circumstances of her death were deliberately and explicitly engineered by the author to be ambiguous. So rather than asking if she was a good or a bad person, we should ask if she was a *static character*, whose death was demanded by *Homestuck's* themes and structure. That's also a tricky question, but it's one that *Homestuck* will eventually have to answer definitively, one way or the other.

For now, only one thing's clear: Vriska's story isn't over.

5764 - Scratch's humiliation of Spades Slick continues. Not only does he beat the stuffing out of Slick, demonstrating he's tougher as well as smarter - recall that he nonchalantly predicted the beatdown way back on 5524.

5765 - The photographs spilling from Scratch's book illustrate the conversation between John and Karkat.

5766 - Doc Scratch seems to be shoryuken-ing Slick.

We skip John's flight and jump to Karkat reinitiating the conversation. It's a reminder that we, as readers, share Karkat's extra-temporal perspective on the narrative - skipping around, picking and choosing which moments to read and reread, but not quite omniscient the way Doc Scratch is.

5769 - The 'deudly firearms' *SBaHJ* reference in the Doc Scratch panels parallels the munitions mishap in the top banner.

We know frog breeding is the Space player's task - is it coincidence that Karkat and Dave were the ones to help

them, or is this another responsibility of the Knight class?

We get another reminder of John's limited perspective when he has to ask who Kanaya and Aradia are.

5770 - This page might be another example of Hussie's "circumstantial simultaneity", as it draws connections between a few events across the story's timeline(s). The Hero of Breath revives the Seer; the Seer fails to revive the Hero of Breath. The Knight fails to revive the Hero of Space; the Hero of Space revives the Knight. The "kiss her/kill her" thing also echoes Vriska's line on 5367 ("Too 18 to kiss me. Too 18 to kill me.").

It's ominous that Rose's Void aura, a consequence of her corrupted Light powers, remains even after she revives.

5771 - Beta Dave also got Hephaestus' hammer through "shenanigans."

The statue seems to represent Echidna, the denizen of Jade's world.

I'm not going to tell you what phrase Karkat mistranslated as "yellow lawn ring", but it's one we've heard before, and one of the photographs contains a clue.

5772 - Jade seems to have made friends with the horrorterrors, despite her initial horror (and terror) in dealing with them.

This snippet at the end:

```
CG: YEAH, BUT CAN I JUST SAY SOMETHING IN MY DEFENSE BEFORE  
THAT HAPPENS?  
CG: I DON'T ACTUALLY HATE YOU, AND I NEVER DID. I WAS  
DELUKING MYSELF.  
CG: DEEP DOWN I'M SURE I WAS ALWAYS PRETTY OK WITH YOU.
```

...refers to Karkat and John's first conversation all the way back on 4528, at the beginning of the act.

5774 - The narrative goes nonlinear for a bit. For all of *Homestuck*'s gestures towards interactivity, this is notable as perhaps the first case where the reader a meaningful choice about how the story proceeds, though critically *no influence over the actual plot* - we can choose the order these events are revealed in, but cannot change the events themselves. In a sense, we're a little like Scratch or Rose or any other character in *Homestuck* with precognitive visions - we catch isolated glimpses of a future we cannot change, and can only hope that things won't seem so dire once we can see the whole picture.

To make citations easier, I'll be tackling these according to page number - of course, you can jump to a particular installment by manually typing the page number into your browser. Of course, feel free to pick the scenes in whatever order you like.

5779 - Dave's dream is prescient: it's an able metaphor for his struggle as Knight of Time to stay on the Alpha timeline, with the Davesprite-like crow representing his beta selves (and thus his failures).

Rose's claim that she "**can think of no literary or historical precedent for that sort of folly whatsoever**" wrt Dave unwittingly banging his own hot mom is, of course, a reference to the myth of Oedipus. The second *SBaHJ* comic provides further evidence of Dave's Oedipal anxieties.

The final image, of Dave as crow flying into the sun, is disturbing, both for its evocation of the Icarus myth and for how it suggests the duo's disturbing motives for their shared suicide mission:

TT: So, if hypothetically you were to accept such a mission, or even insist upon one, it wouldn't be in the spirit of genuine sacrifice, but of escape?

5781 - Note that John's still using his ghostyTrickster SN, indicating we're back quite a ways on his personal timeline.

5782 - John means he can't tell his ass apart from a pumpkin - but he can't say so, because in another one of the comic's obtuse long-running gags you may or may not remember, noticing or naming a pumpkin in *MS Paint Adventures* causes it to disappear.

5794 - Odd that Hussie attempts to develop poor, useless Nepeta *after* her death. But her conversation with Jaspersprite ("**so, youre saying that maybe i will have to die to get to be with him?**") suggests her unfinished business with Karkat may yet be resolved.

5796 - Rose's diagnosis is pretty far off the mark - "antisocial personality disorder" is the medically correct term for psychopathy or sociopathy, and is characterized by a low tolerance for boredom and a lack of empathy for others (you might accuse Dave of the former, but never the latter - he demonstrates more concern for Jade's peace of mind than for his own survival in this very conversation).

5804 - In case it wasn't clear - Dave and Rose have both separately died and returned as their dream selves on Derse. Rose is piloting Derse's moon towards the Green Sun

to destroy it with the Tumor bomb, and the moon is physically passing through a dream bubble - Dave, safe and sound back on Derse proper, is visiting the dream bubble in his sleep. And, apparently, Dave finally had his moment of undeniable heroism, attempting to dissuade Rose from her own heroic sacrifice/suicide plot by knocking her out and jumping on the grenade himself.

5808 - Here we have another intimation of the intense loneliness of agoraphobic suburban living that *Homestuck* can imply but never quite articulate:

GT: these are my neighbors, who live in a lot of same looking houses as mine.

GT: i never see them. i think they're all really busy people with a lot of serious business to attend to.

It's sad that John can only conceptualize the lives of his neighbors in death and in dreams.

5812 - And here Vriska articulates similar feelings, although filtered through an alien perspective:

AG: Anyway, my design kind of got boring as I got older. A huge castle hive sounds great, but it starts feeling pretty cavernous and lonely after a while. There were so many blocks I never even used!

AG: Your tastes change, but you get stuck with growing up in a place suited to your earliest, most juvenile inclinations.

In case you didn't pick up on that, she's saying you get STUCK at HOME.

5816 - Once again, Vriska's history with Tavros drives a wedge in her relationship with John - although here it's her early, unsuccessful attempt to kiss him, rather than the eventual murder.

John's comments about how the hoverchair looks familiar hint at where he entered the dream bubble from... but Vriska's too flustered about Tavros to pay any attention to that.

5825 - It's a very clever stroke to give Vriska a bittersweet afterlife meeting with John - but, critically, *not with our (or her) John*. She's been speaking with the beta timeline John that Terezi killed off back in Act 4. The revelation adds a note of disappointment and frustration to the whole encounter.

5827 - Returning to Jadesprite, while also checking in with beta-John and Vriska, puts her plight in a slightly different context. Jadesprite was upset because she'd settled into the afterlife only to be rudely returned to

life - because she'd achieved closure, only to have it taken away from her. And it's the subsequent feelings of whiplash that have caused her such unhappiness and prevented her from contributing meaningfully to the adventure.

We keep coming back to the idea that closure isn't always a good thing: it can make you complacent, and it can rob you of your emotional investment a situation you should still be involved in. Something to consider as we follow Jadesprite, and Vriska, and other characters as they flit through *Homestuck's* afterlife.

5837 - It's kind of sad how Dave and Rose use their usual nonsensical banter to try to distract themselves from Rose's immanent death.

The Stanley Cup is the championship trophy for the National Hockey League. The Vince Lombardi trophy is awarded to the winner of the NFL's Super Bowl. It's funny how, in a story so interested in both games and fandom, professional sports don't come up that often.

5853 - Vriska shares her denizen Cetus with Rose, the other hero of Light.

Again, John's ability to make friends instead of initiating conflict seems to have been significant in dealing with his denizen - although we don't actually get to see his meeting with Typheus.

5854 - Remember FedoraFreak? One of the last living humans on earth after the Reckoning, we last checked in with his saga of post-apocalyptic survival on 4818.

5855 - It's not entirely clear, but it sounds an awful lot like FedoraFreak just found his quest bed?

5856 - The secret history of Nanna and Grandpa has something of a fairytale air, with an absent father, a wicked stepmother, and a heroic destiny. This might just be because it's presented as a bedtime story told by a grandmother. In any case, it's another mode of narrative pasted into *Homestuck's* collage.

It also seems that the nefarious Betty Crocker has been upgraded from a modestly amusing running gag to a significant plot point. If she isn't human, what could she be...?

5860-2 - Here's a sight rarely seen in *Homestuck* - actual dialogue bubbles! Although we aren't getting actual dialogue, just short choppy sentences spliced together with

graphics. It's an effective technique for the Carapacians, whose childlike demeanor fits the simplified language, and who don't yet have a method to directly address one another.

5872 - Geez, Karkat, tell us how you really feel about yourself.

5875 - Karkat once opined that stabbing was Spades Slick's way of saying hi - it's appropriate his canine doppelganger does something similar.

5877 - Karkat once again alludes to the appropriateness of his SN. He's not an "ecto scientist" - he's a carcino-geneticist.

5878 - It's amusing how Karkat's preconceptions cause him to completely misinterpret what Jade and Kanaya are telling him - the very *idea* of vampires is so far beyond the limits of his perception of reality that he assumes the girls are just talking about Kanaya's trashy novels. He's falling into the same horror-comedy cliché that Dave made fun of back on 2286:

TG: fuck you mom and dad how many times are we going to watch this trope unfold it wasnt goddamn funny the first time i saw it

TG: just once id like to see dad crap his pants when a kid says theres a vampire in his closet

5879 - Jade approaches the final frog while her dreamself looks up at Skaia - compare to how Terezi was blinded by looking at Skaia in a dream, as her terrestrial self stared directly into the red Alternian sun.

5886 - Gamzee's riffing on the lyrics of the original "Miracles" by the Insane Clown Posse - although a comparison of the two versions reveals Gamzee's is filled with even more gratuitous swearing and non-sequiturs. The line "**FuCKIn dArKnEsS OuTsIdE, bUt tHe lIgHt mAkeS yOu wInCe**" summarizes Gamzee's philosophy of choosing comforting falsehoods and empty spirituality over painful truths - and his attempt at faith healing Tavros shows how well this works.

5887 - Gamzee propositioning Tavros is surprising for two reasons. The first is that, from his initial depiction as a joke character to his 180 degree pivot to serial killer, we haven't really seen Gamzee depicted as a sexual being before. (In the comic. I'm certain on the internet there are entire communities *dedicated* to depictions of Gamzee as a sexual being).

The second is that, while the Trolls are allegedly pansexual and we've seen plenty of same-sex attraction between female characters, *Homestuck* hasn't given much consideration to gay male relationships, except as an occasional joke (Karkat's infatuation with John, Eridan's desperation). American media (and especially sci-fi and fantasy fiction) is definitely more comfortable with lesbians than with gay men, so sadly this isn't surprising, but I'm not going to give Hussie too much grief about it because the next act features a very prominent (albeit dysfunctional) gay relationship.

Also - now that we know about Gamzee's crush on Tavros, you have to wonder if Tavros' death was one of the things that helped push him over the edge.

5888-94 - In case it wasn't obvious, we've just seen how WV was exiled and came to wander the earth "years in the future, but not many" as the Wayward Vagabond.

5901 - Sollux's eyes here show that he's half alive (the right eye, black to represent his blindness) and half dead (the left eye, white like other ghosts). As Aradia comments, this is appropriate for Sollux's bifurcation gimmick.

5905-17 - More parallel storytelling via words and pictures in this sequence, although the thematic link is much more explicit: Karkat tells us about the genesis of the kids' doomed world, while Jack and the exiles prepare for its end.

And one last time: you guys get it, right? Carcinogeneticist. Like *cancer*.

5924 - There's a circle of destruction here between the two universes - Karkat programs Beq Noir (the "cancer") into the kid's session, only for Beq to escape and fuck up Karkat's own universe after.

5925 - Noir preps his Red Miles attack, which manifests from the (so far unexplained) red blood coating his hands. The blood ties the destruction he causes to Karkat (the freak red-blooded troll, and Knight of Blood in SGRUB).

5927 - Hussie returns to a few of his favorite riffs with Gamzee in this conversation. We touch on comforting ignorance versus harsh truth:

TC: BUT NOW.

TC: because of you.

TC: BECAUSE OF ALL YOU AND YOUR FUCKING OUTRAGEOUSNESS.

TC: you stole up all my miracles away by revealing at me how the wicked shit was really kicked.

...and sincerity versus irony, as Gamzee arrives at the same kind of post-ironic discourse Dave himself favors:

TG: i cant even tell if youre trying to troll me with this or if you actually are having some weird emotional problem

TC: can't it be motherfuckin

TC: BOTH THINGS.

When Dave sends Gamzee the ICP video, he mentions the song won't be released for another year or so - that's because the actual *Miracles* video was released in 2009, and although *Homestuck*'s been running for over two years at this point, the kids still haven't moved past their first day inside of SBURB (and Dave's sunglasses indicate this is a flashback set further back still). I applaud Hussie's decision to maintain ICP (insane canonical plausibility) with his incorporation of contemporary pop culture into *Homestuck*.

Also: notice the brown gunk on Gamzee's mouth.

;0)

That's what you get when you turn your back on the bodies.

5928 - Notice who originally sent Dave the link to the damn *Miracles* video - the sinister power behind Betty Crocker has, like Vriska, been working behind the scenes.

5930 - While Karkat has taken the blame for the failure of the kids' session, this page reveals that Gamzee also played a part by somehow planting a phobia of clowns into John's subconscious. As Hussie's pointed out on his Forumspring, John's clown drawings convinced Dad to start collecting harlquins in order to connect with his son... which led to one of these dolls getting prototyped in John's kernelsprite... which meant Jack Noir had to dress up as a clown against his will... which was what pissed him off enough to go on an multi-dimensional rampage.

Gamzee's interference might have something to do with his Bard of Rage title, or the as-yet-unexplained "chucklevoodoo" powers possessed by purple-blooded trolls - the power to instill subconscious fears would certainly be useful for a religious caste looking to maintain control over the masses.

But perhaps the best way to assign blame here is to recognize that several of the Trolls were involved in shenanigans that made victory impossible: Karkat created the Tumor, Gamzee planted the seeds for Noir's tantrum,

Vriska gave Noir First Guardian powers. In *Homestuck's* extradimensional narrative, where cause and effect are difficult to separate, it's tough to name anyone primarily responsible (did the Tumor doom the session? Or did the Tumor only develop because the session was doomed to begin with?). Instead, it's probably more probably more productive to understand the kids' universe as a collaborative failure, intrinsically broken as an expression of its creators' dysfunctional personalities.

5931 - This is an interesting conversation not because it necessarily reveals anything new about Gamzee or Dave, but because it demands a direct comparison between the two. We've seen them interact before, and Dave rightly regarded stoned Gamzee as a total joke - as we were just reminded by the flirt/rap-off with Tavros, stoned Gamzee was well-meaning but terminally oblivious, and no match for Dave's cynicism and quick wit. And you might remember back on 4023, stoned Gamzee had **"one of the worst rap-offs in the history of paradox space"** with his invertibrother (and unrequited crush) Tavros.

Sober Gamzee is an entirely different animal. Instead of fawning over Tavros he's making out with his severed head - instead of spouting goofy rhymes about clowns and miracles he's expressing existential doubt, plotting murder, and challenging Dave to **"one of the best rap-offs in the history of paradox space."** By any standard, the new Gamzee is a worthier rival to Dave and more effective lowercase-t troll.

(And at the risk of revealing some supplementary information about SBURB/GRUB's fictional game mechanics, the new Gamzee is finally fulfilling his destiny as Bard of Rage: we'll later learn Bard players take a passive, entropic role, either indirectly allowing their aspect to be destroyed, or allowing their aspect to wreak havoc and destruction. Stoned Gamzee wasn't a very good Bard, but the new Gamzee [luring Nepeta and Equius to their deaths, sewing the seeds of Jack Noir's ascension, pissing off Kanaya hard enough that she kicks him in the crotch] is much more effective at inviting destruction through Rage.)

But we can't help preferring the old Gamzee - especially because the comic just reminded us how silly and charming he could be. Comparing the gentle, harmless goofball Gamzee used to be to the corpse-snogging nihilist he's become, the reader can't help but wish the character had stayed a big, goofy kid. There's a bit of tragedy to

Gamzee. It's *Homestuck's* acknowledgment, even while its pushing all its characters to grow up, that maybe things would be easier for everyone if some of them just stayed kids.

5934 - Here's Hussie's explanation of what we're seeing here, via Forumspring:

Through the 5th wall, you can see me positioning two 4th walls facing each other, exactly one yard apart. English's coat is still draped over one. I put that there a while ago to obscure Jade's view of me. Remember?

A 4th wall is an object that when broken or compromised, allows an author to interact directly with the audience or characters in the story.

A 5th wall is a partition separating two omniscient narrators, which when broken, allows them to mess with each other.⁴⁴

5935-52 - We've seen Scratch use violence before (against Slick) and even seen him lash out impulsively (when he detonated the Magic Cue Ball, scarring Vriska) but Scratch's condescending, patriarchal attitude towards the Aradia-like Troll girl and the casualness with which he attacks her make this scene uniquely disturbing. I think it reveals a lot about Scratch, his character, and his role in the story. As such, I'd like to refrain from discussing it any further until we learn Doc Scratch's fate, after which I'll present a comprehensive overview of his character.

5953 - The secret history of Alternia: it's the result of a rebooted session of the Game, reset using the same Scratch protocol John and the other kids are trying to activate in their own Session. After the scratch, the original players were scattered through time to become our Troll's legendary ancestors (Mindfang, Redglare and all the rest), and Doc Scratch installed himself at the dawn of history, where he could use his omniscience and First Guardian powers to shape Troll society to his master's liking.

Scratch expelled the Trolls from paradise and cursed them to live in a fallen world; *Homestuck* has a variety of devil-like characters, but this is the first time Scratch has been shown as explicitly satanic. True to his demonic inspiration (as well as his own preferred methods), Scratch used omission and misdirection to hide his diabolical nature in plain sight. Even his name is a hint - "Old

⁴⁴ Andrew Hussie. "MSPA Forumspring Archives."

Scratch" is a nickname for the devil in early American literature and folklore.

"The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist" - Cyrus "the Virus" Grissom, *Con Air*.

So Doc Scratch is the devil. But if he manipulated Alternia to repeat the biblical fall - who will be its redeemer?

5954-5 ...Karkat's ancestor. Karkat's ancestor was Troll Jesus.

"His Righteous Leggings" are a blink-and-you'll-miss-it canonization of a particularly goofy running joke among *Homestuck*'s fandom. One page 5748, Hussie depicted Karkat from a distance, with no visible arms and with a shirt the same color as his pants. *Homestuck*'s readers, used to scrutinizing even the most trivial details of their text, immediately latched onto the image of Karkat wearing a big ol' pair of pants hiked up to his armpits. What's notable is how skillfully Hussie incorporates the nod into the text - if you weren't aware of the fans' joke, the "Righteous Leggings" seems like a reference to the Shroud of Turin, deepening the Christ parallels while adding a little absurdity to the solemn depiction of the Signless' crucifixion. It works on multiple levels, and it doesn't detract from the scene if you don't get the callback.

Furthering the parallels, the long gash in the Sufferer's side suggests the wound where Christ was stabbed by the Spear of Longinus after his death, as well as the the symbol for the Blood aspect (previously seen on Jack's slashed hand on 4203, to demonstrate his affinity with Karkat).

(Also, check out Hussie on the 5954 banner. He's jokingly identified his SBURB title as the Waste of Space - hence the Space-aligned God Tier outfit.)

5956 - ...But the most interesting implication of this scene is the idea that, just like with the other Trolls, if Karkat had been allowed to grow to adulthood on Alternia, he could have turned out like his ancestor. And if Karkat's predecessor and genetic duplicate was Jesus... that makes Karkat *the Second Coming of Troll Christ*. At first glance, a foul-mouthed self-loathing misanthrope seems an unlikely candidate for a messiah. But further consideration reveals this fits what we know about Karkat, while deepening his character considerably.

The previous page describes how, although the Signless started his career preaching a Christ-like message of compassion and forgiveness, during his crucifixion

the Sufferer's compassion for his people underwent a divine transformation, into limitless, burning rage. It burned hotter than the irons shackling him to the imperial flogging jut, and redder than the blood soaking his Righteous Leggings. When he was finally killed, his anger rung through the cosmos with his last breath. This Vast Expletive was his final sermon, and somewhere encoded in its wavelengths was the truth in his teachings

While the Sufferer's benedictions and saint-like teachings don't sound like anything Karkat would say, his final expression of fury - his literal curse on those who persecuted him - sounds an awful lot like the younger Vantas. And if it was disappointment and anger that drove the Sufferer to abandon forgiveness and just bitch out his fellow Trolls, maybe Karkat's constant raging and swearing might come from a similar place: profound empathy curdled by sadness and pain.

Remember, this is the kid who tried to talk Eridan through his conflicted feelings for Feferi, and who seethed at him after he murdered her; who put up with Equius, Nepeta and stoned Gamzee, and tried to rally them to victory despite their annoying quirks; who cried openly at Sollux's death, despite Jack Noir's derision. This is the kid who, despite his friends' countless fuck-ups, still reserves his deepest, bitterest scorn for himself (during his self-loathing diatribe on 5872, Karkat suggests the following:

"PLEASE HIKE THESE PANTS UP TO THIS GUY'S ARMPITS, CHAIN HIM TO A FLOGGING JUT, AND MAKE A FUCKING EXAMPLE OUT OF THIS SORRY SACK OF SHIT."

That's not just an unknowing echo of his ancestor's crucifixion - it's Karkat's insistence that he himself deserves the same treatment). We never heard that big inspirational speech that Karkat made, but we haven't heard any of the Sufferer's sermons either.

And recall Karkat's title: Knight of Blood. We've spoken before about how the Blood aspect in *Homestuck* seems to symbolize loyalty and fraternity, but the Sufferer's identity adds an explicitly spiritual dimension to it: Christ's spilled blood symbolizes his boundless love for humanity, and the sacrifice he made to save them. Karkat loves his friends, damnit, even though they constantly screw up and disappoint him, and his profound self-loathing similarly reflects his own willingness to suffer for them.

So although it may seem funny, there's a rigorous logic behind the revelation of Karkat's origin. It clarifies a lot of what we've seen about him, and deepens his pathos.

...also, the banner illustrations have returned. They're easy to overlook, with all these heady religious allusions going on, but they'll soon depict a couple of critical scenes so I'm going to point them out now. As the animation indicates, hover your mouse over the image to reveal alternate text.

5957 - Continuing our parable, Kanaya's ancestor is revealed as the Mary to the Sufferer's Christ - suddenly the Virgin Mother imagery surrounding the character makes sense as something other than a nod to her Zodiac sign.

(Hussie uses the history of the Signless to add some additional meaning to the Troll's Zodiac symbolism - witness the use of the Cancer sign for the Sufferer's shackles, and the incorporation of the Virgo sign into the virgin mother's dress.)

The MSPA wiki informs me that "Dolorosa" means "painful" in Italian, and is likely used here in reference to the Virgin Mary's title of "mater dolorosa", or "grieving mother".

(And returning to the young Trolls for a second - isn't it peculiar that one of blood-offering Karkat's closest friends is the blood-drinking Kanaya?)

5958 - It seems Karkat's affinity with Sollux also has a hereditary component. And this installment makes poor Nepeta's pointless death even sadder - if the Sufferer and his Disciple are any indication, if she'd just had the courage to approach Karkat, the two of them might have really hit it off.

5959 - More prefiguring of the present day Trolls - here we see Equius' relationship with Nepeta, and Nepeta's shipping wall. The Dolorosa's fate suggests (although this is never confirmed) that she eventually became Mindfang's jade-blooded sex slave from 5407.

5960 - The enslaved Helmsman wears Pieces goggles, much like how Sollux took Feferi's goggles after her death.

5961 - Now, what does THIS suggest? A trident symbol, stylized to resemble the logo of the Betty Crocker corporation, which in *Homestuck*'s universe is run by an alien witch masquerading as a baking maven? HMMM.

(The Troll's interstellar empire is unexplored in *Homestuck* - pages like this suggest their universe was populated by

other alien species, all of which eventually fell to the Trolls' military might, but we never learn anything about these other races.)

5963 - Now, what are we to make of the identity of Feferi's ancestor?

Not that it's a surprise - Feferi's rare fuchsia-blood and role as heiress of the Troll empire were defining elements of her background, and when the concept of ancestors was first introduced it didn't take too much guesswork to figure out who hers might be. No, the big question here is how we can reconcile Feferi's personality with that of her predecessor.

I've mentioned that I prefer to read the Troll ancestors as genetic copies of the contemporary players. As the identical twins of our Trolls, they offer a glimpse into how the characters we've spent so much time with might have turned out under different circumstances, raising questions about nature versus nurture and whether these kids can escape the shadow of their forerunners. You lose that if the ancestors are similar, but not perfect clones.

The text itself is ambiguous. On 5076, you might remember, Eridan describes how **"wwe all got indivvidual ancestors wwho contribute to most of our genes abovve and beyond wwhat the grubs slurry does"**. But **"most of our genes"** allows for a lot of wiggle room, as do the Troll players' unique ectobiological origins, and it's still possible the ancestors are closer to parents or siblings rather than genetic twins. And while all of the ancestors we've met so far are recognizable as corrupted (Dualscar, Mindfang) or mature (the Summoner, the Sufferer) versions of the kids we know, it's difficult to imagine how sweet, bubbly Feferi could grow up to be Fish-Hitler.

Tough but not impossible. Perhaps Feferi's sweetness can be attributed to her naivety and youth, and she would have become a tyrant once she took the throne. We'll later see the Condese using a mind control device to pacify a potential heiress, so perhaps she did something similar to Feferi - psychically lobotomizing her to remove her as a threat without provoking Gl'bgolyb's wrath by killing her outright.

Or perhaps (and this is the explanation I find most convincing) Feferi became a gentle idealist to rebel against the oppressive empire she was supposed to inherit - and had that society not existed for her to define herself in opposition to, she might have grown up to become another

Condesce. (So on a peaceful world, Feferi's spunk could have led her to become, I dunno, some kinda sassy punk girl? Just speculation.)

All that being said: if the text allows multiple plausible interpretations, I'll always choose the one I find most interesting, even if the evidence is stronger for another. If you felt like it you could make an equally strong argument for how the ancestors are supposed to be parents or close relatives instead of clones. But given the choice, I prefer to read the Condesce as a vision of a corrupted Feferi, adding shades of darkness to an otherwise likable but shallow character.

5964 - A while back I argued that Feferi dating Sollux was a little weird, because of the social privilege she had over him. The Condesce's treatment of Sollux's ancestor reinforces the idea that there might have been something a little possessive about their relationship.

5970-1 - Describing the climactic battle between the Handmaid and Condesce, Scratch uses the future tense - technically correct, given that this showdown will happen in *his* future, but still a little jarring considering both ladies persist across epochs and universes.

5972 - Scratch dedicates the final moments before Hussie strikes to verbose monologuing. And, amusingly, Hussie's internal monologue in the banner alt-text is just as verbose, reminding us that our two narrators are more alike than different.

5973 - No question, seeing Hussie take down Scratch while berating him is satisfying, especially after being subjected to Scratch's nonsense for all those pages.

(...and yet ...that alternate text, on 5975 ...why is it so *green*...?)

On format, note the direct continuity between the panels in the banner and the main illustration in each page of this sequence. Before this, Hussie's used the banner space to show parallel scenes, rather than sequential ones.

5976-7 - Right after he offers us the catharsis of watching Doc Scratch get beaten and abused, Hussie snatches it away - the "Booyeah" followed by a bemused "Hmm" articulates the likely audience reaction, from triumph to the gradual realization that something is not quite right here.

5978-81 - And here's our first glimpse of Lord English, with his enormous lime-green text and seizure-inducing pool

ball eyes. It's not much to go on (and fans immediately went to town with terrible, manga-inspired interpretations of his design) but these details convey his aggression and his raw, surging power.

5982 - *SBaHJ* intermission, which lasts a single page. It's unlikely there's any significance to this other than an "uh oh, here we go again..." gag, but it does call back to Hussie's memorable intrusion on Rose's grimdark episode on 5548-58. If so inclined, you can also modify the url of this installment to view any page in the *MSPA* canon through the *SBaHJ* filter.

5983 - And so the terrible reign of Doc Scratch comes to its long-overdue end. I've made no secret of how much I hate this guy, nor of how effective I think he is, both as a villain and as the personified antithesis of *Homestuck's* themes of self-transformation and youth overcoming adversity. He's a very effective antagonist, and now that we've seen the last of him (short of a brief coda), I'd like to take a little time to pick apart his role in *Homestuck*.

1. Scratch as Bad Gamer

Among other things, *Homestuck* is about how people play games, and about how young people might behave in an environment that blurs the lines between games and reality. Yet among *Homestuck's* cast of scoundrels, nihilists and murderers, Scratch stands out as uniquely malicious.

In his 1996 article "Hearts, Diamonds, Clubs, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs," Richard Bartle identifies four types of players. There are achievers, who prioritize progress within the game's systems (Vriska is a classic example). There are explorers, who enjoy charting a game's physical environments, and later testing its physics and rules (like Rose, before her grimdarkness). There are socializers, who play to hang out with other players and make friends (John, Nepeta, even Karkat though he'd probably never admit it). And there are killers, who play entirely for the pleasure of screwing with other players.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Richard A. Bartle. "HEARTS, CLUBS, DIAMONDS, SPADES: PLAYERS WHO SUIT MUDS." Richard A. Bartle: Players Who Suit MUDs. N.p., 28 Aug. 1996. Web. 02 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/hcds.htm>>. The article assigns each type of player to a suit in a deck of cards, but I've omitted this in hopes of avoiding confusion with *Homestuck's* use of these same symbols.

Doc Scratch is a killer - appropriate for a character partially based on an old-West gunslinger. And although SBURB is a game that encourages personal growth and transformation, designed for achievers and socializers, Scratch has no interest in any of that. He takes pleasure in derailing the game for his own purposes, and cares nothing for his fellow players aside from expressing mild amusement at their distress. He's a lowercase-t troll, and he's the worst kind: the one who uses trickery, loopholes and underhanded tactics to manipulate others without technically cheating. He's the griefer you can't kick, because he while he's bent the rules to the absolute limit he hasn't broken them.

2. Scratch as Bad Hero

But Scratch is much scarier than a sadistic gamer who enjoys interfering with other player's adventures; he's a personification of stagnation and entropy, an undying manchild who's immune to the Game's process of growth and change. He's immortal and unchanging; he's virtually omniscient, and so never really learns anything new; he's brilliant and powerful and never challenged by any of his adversaries; he's sexless, castrated, incapable of and totally uninterested in romantic love or procreation; and finally, his ultimate goal is not self-actualization but suicide.

Scratch is the embodiment of everything our heroes are trying to overcome; and yet, like Hussie and the young Handmaid, even when you think you've escaped him you're still entangled in his plans.

3. Scratch as Bad Fan and Scratch as Bad Artist

Sneaking up on Scratch, preparing to deliver the *coup de grace* on his rogue creation, Hussie overhears Scratch expositing about the Troll ancestors. As author, Hussie has no patience for Doc Scratch's esoterica (On 5958: "Oh, hell no. He's talking about ancestors, isn't he") and given Hussie's own pathological inability to edit himself that's really saying something. On 5963, ready to strike Scratch down, Hussie demands Scratch "stop clogging up my story with your troll fan fiction".

It's a weird accusation, and it's not the only time Hussie's made it: remember the Forumspring response where Hussie described the Mindfang journals as a pastiche of bad fan fiction. While a fan-fic parody was probably inevitable in *Homestuck* (it's already examined pretty much every other aspect of fandom and online culture), it's not

immediately clear why Hussie chose to depict the Troll ancestors in the style of fan fiction. How can the ancestors be "fanfic" if they literally existed as Alternian historical figures, long before any of our kids were born?

First, if we think outside chronological time (as *Hometuck* frequently encourages us to do), there's a sense in which the Mindfang journals and Scratch's history lessons are fanfic - or at least derivative. Reading *Homestuck* in real time, Karkat and friends were written and introduced into the text first; Mindfang and co. were brought in later as historical parallels, evoking and contrasting with the contemporary characters we'd already met. The ancestors are sexually explicit, melodramatic, and all-around uncomfortably adult ripoffs of previously existing characters. And here Hussie's parody is dead-on: from what I've seen, it's not unusual for fan fiction writers to overstep the limits of their talent and their source material, trying to make silly characters "darker" and "more mature" by indulging in purple prose, melodrama, and creepy sexuality.

But the piece of the satire we were missing was Scratch's role in Alternia's secret history - how the whole planet is really a rebooted version of a previous, utopian Troll world, corrupted by Scratch. Unsatisfied with the Troll's original pacifist society, Scratch made a copy better suited his tastes, sowing strife and cranking up the sex and murder. Alternia is Doc Scratch's fanfic universe, a lurid ripoff of the first Troll civilization. Despite his posturing and smooth-talking, Doc Scratch is just another internet hack, writing lousy amateur fiction.

Now, Doc Scratch is hardly the only connoisseur or creator of bad art in *Homestuck*. *Homestuck* frequently references or pastiches bad art - bad movies, lame hip-hop, cheesy romance novels, half-assed webcomics, ridiculous amateur fiction, etc. We laugh at the characters who love this stuff, because the objects they fawn over are so self-evidently terrible. But there's also a sinister side to bad art. Imagination is celebrated in *Homestuck* - we are specifically told that Skaia is a construct of "unlimited creative potential". And if imagination is good, then its absence is evil - we've already seen characters obsessed with derivative or mediocre art as an extension of their own stunted moral development (think about how Gamzee's love of ICP drives him to violence, or how Vriska almost gets her friends killed playing out her deranged Mary-Sue

fantasies). It's no coincidence that on 5153 Karkat refers to the players' most dangerous enemies as "**FORCES... CAPABLE OF TURNING IMAGINATION INTO PURE VOID**": turning creativity into nothingness.

And what makes Scratch uniquely dangerous as a bad fan/artist is that, unlike Gamzee and Vriska and Rose, he isn't a kid but a First Guardian. Unlike the other characters, who playact their fantasies and try to force them on others (with limited success), Scratch has the power to remake reality to match his demented imagination. He doesn't just pretend to be Mindfang - he kicks off centuries of slavery and genocide in order to ensure that Mindfang exists, so that he can enjoy and benefit from her exploits. On a world of children, he's the only adult, and there's no one to stop him from indulging his perverse, derivative fantasies.

4. Scratch as Bad Grown-Up

There's really no delicate way to say this:

Doc Scratch is a child predator.

Not literally, thankfully.⁴⁶ *Homestuck*'s atmosphere couldn't sustain a literal depiction of child abuse, but it's still a story about children on the internet, and it would be dishonest if it did not at least acknowledge our culture's fascination with (and the very real danger of) online child predators.

And whatever else you want to call him, Scratch is undeniably a predator. He's just *creepy*, first of all, and the text calls him out on it - His "**I will be here. Watching.**" on 5538 seems a direct callback to an early appearance by Equius, one of the comic's sketchiest characters. But again and again, Scratch's behavior goes past "creepy" to suggest dangerous perversion. Consider

⁴⁶I can think of no other topic in our cultural discourse that inspires as much willful denial, moronic "dark" humor, self-righteous indignation, victim-blaming, and covert fetishization as the sexualization/sexuality of children. And there's something about the subject that tempts genre writers (and almost always *male* genre writers) to try to address it, with results that are at best well-intentioned but uncomfortable and at worst totally reprehensible (consider George R.R. Martin, Stephen King, Alan Moore, Piers Anthony, Orson Scott Card, etc). It's basically impossible to include child molestation in a fantasy story (let alone one about candy-blooded space trolls) without the results being jarring for readers and totally disrespectful to real-life victims.

this exchange from 5527 (where Rose, who has been depicted as a lanky teen as recently as the previous page, returns to her rounded childlike appearance from the earliest chapters of the comic:

I've always had a soft spot for young ladies.

TT: Hmm.

TT: That's a little creepy.

No it's not.

TT: Yes it is.

No it's not.

TT: It kind of is.

I have looked into the future and determined that we would continue in this manner pointlessly for some time, so I am putting an end to it here.

TT: That doesn't make sense.

TT: Was that the other joke?

Yes.

TT: Heh. Good one.

Thank you.

TT: How young are the ladies you typically take a shining to?

TT: And does this mean you are attracted to me?

TT: Suddenly this conversation is kind of terrible.

Of course I am not. Not in the way you mean.

And anyway, you are applying standards of conduct frowned upon for your kind which make no sense to apply to me.

I am an immortal entity with a large cue ball for a head, and no biological means of reproduction.

TT: ...

TT: Really.

Also, if you were millions of years old, you would find that nearly every lady you encounter is quite young, relatively speaking.

There should be no reason for you to feel uncomfortable with this interaction. Try to think of me as one of your kindly human uncle figures.

In fact, if I were in your presence now, I would offer you candy to prove it.

TT: Oh my god.

Just a few pages later, on 5531, he calls his Magic Cue Balls his "seeds" - suggesting male fertility - while the page's illustration depicts Rose dwarfed by Lord English's billowing coat, as if about to be swallowed up.

And, like an abuser, Scratch does lasting damage to the young women he interferes with. He manipulates Rose into blaming herself for her mother's death and then falling into darkness; he lashes out at Vriska, leaving her less an eye and an arm. But his treatment of the young Handmaid is the clearest example, both because of his paternal authority over her and the needless cruelty of his abuse. On 5948, Scratch and the Handmaid reprise an early confrontation between Rose and her Mother, with Scratch in

the "Mom" role - but unlike Rose, the desperate Handmaid makes an "ACTUAL SUICIDE THREAT". Scratch's faceless design mirrors the stylized depiction of adults like Mom and Dad, and his treatment of the Handmaid shows him as an evil parent: "I would raise the girl to be groomed for her calling. My lessons would emphasize obedience, mastery of the clockwork majyyks, and being locked in a room" (5968).

And here, again, the specter of pedophilia shadows Scratch's behavior. When Hussie finally takes out Scratch, on 5975, he shouts: "You have locked up your last asian schoolgirl, you sick fuck". It's an unambiguous reference to the kind of predator Scratch represents (while also implicating the internet's exotification of Japanese women and fetishization of youth and innocence... but that's a whole other issue).

Doc Scratch is a spiteful bastard, an evil genius, a demented fan, a stunted manchild and a cunning predator. Moreso than addled Gamzee, clueless Eridan, brute Jack; Scratch is the most devious and effective antagonist in *Homestuck*'s epic fifth act.

...but not the most devious and effective antagonist in all of *Homestuck*. There's another, greater villain we haven't discussed yet. And though I'd tell you we've yet to be introduced to him, actually... well, you know how that guy rolls. He is already here.

5984 - Check out the website within a website. You don't have to click anything - the next page will load automatically when it's ready.

5985 - Note the three Trolls' reactions to Gamzee in the aftermath of the murder spree. Kanaya's looking to get her auspicious on, Terezi's hate-crushing on Gamzee, and Sollux is spastically vacillating between love and hate-love for no plausible reason other than his unshakable commitment to his bipolar gimmick.

Each of the surviving Trolls is shadowed by the image of their ancestor - Karkat has assembled the descendants of the Signless' apostles, with Terezi as Neophyte Redglare subbing in for Nepeta and the Disciple. Notice how none of the other portraits changes as the camera spins, but Karkat's shifts from the robed Signless offering a benediction to the bloodied Sufferer in the middle of his Vast Expletive. This bodes poorly for the outcome of the confrontation.

5986-95 - First of all I want to take a second to appreciate the cartooning and the use of limited animation in this sequence: Gamzee's sudden relapse and the immediate resolution on 5991-3 is wonderful.

Now, as for the resolution of Gamzee's murder spree: shortly after these panels were published, a number of fans expressed frustration and anger that Gamzee wouldn't be punished for murder, desecration of corpses, and general creepiness. Here's Hussie's response:

Gamzee was really just a ridiculous clown who killed some people. Was there any actual pathos there? Everything surrounding the Gamzee-goes-crazy stuff was just kind of hilarious frankly. The hug-it-out conclusion was equally hilarious. And that was more conclusory with respect to Karkat's arc than Gamzee's, which barely even existed.

BUT GAMZEE HAS TO PAY FOR HIS CRIIIIIIIIMES!!!! Man, who gives a fuck.⁴⁷

And as a joke, it mostly works, because the comic has gone to such lengths to convince the reader that something tragic and horrible was about to occur and it's a major subversion of those expectations. We've seen a number of red herrings pointing towards Gamzee's death; aside from the ominous images of the ancestors in the 5x Showdown animation, on 5767 a future iteration of Karkat heavily implied that he was forced to kill Gamzee.

So the hug is a joke, a punchline after a lot of misdirection, and on that level it works. But, as Hussie alludes to, it's also narrative payoff for both characters involved.

I think the reason so many fans resent Gamzee is that, while he's almost a totally flat character, he has *just* enough complexity to train the reader to expect some kind of karmic retribution as the culmination of his arc. Gamzee's mostly interesting in that he starts as one kind of flat character (Juggalo parody) and then flips into another, equally flat character (psycho clown serial killer). It's that moment of transformation that gives Gamzee dramatic resonance: the handful of scenes when he's not a buffoon or a remorseless killer, but a confused kid shaking off a drug addiction and wrestling with religious angst. Yet that sympathetic figure, post-sobriety but pre-derangement, is likely the least important of his multiple personas.

⁴⁷ Andrew Hussie. "o, Ansrews (*ansrews)." MSPAndrew. 2012. 12 Apr. 2013. <<http://mspandrew.tumblr.com/post/13493681410/ansrews-ansrews>>.

Gamzee's most important attribute is his fluidity. At any given moment, Gamzee can be portrayed as a total cipher or demonstrate a little more complexity, all depending on the needs of the story. The trick to appreciating Gamzee is to *recognize* the tension between the stereotypes he embodies and the more nuanced character that seems to exist in the space between them, *without trying to resolve that tension*. Gamzee's a joke, but he's a joke told in a way that pokes a little bit at the readers' sympathies, in order to make the punchline hit harder. That *Homestuck* makes you care even a little bit about Gamzee, a totally ridiculous stoner devil-alien Joker rip-off, is itself part of the humor.

The obvious criticism here is that Hussie isn't playing fair with his audience; that he shouldn't add depth to gag characters before flipping them around and treating them like jokes again, and that he shouldn't set up likable characters just to subject them to pointless, undignified, tragicomic deaths. But *Homestuck's* satire wouldn't be nearly as sharp if it didn't engage its readers' emotions, because by doing so it implicates them in its critique of media fandom. *Homestuck* makes fun of people on the internet who care too much about stupid fictional characters; and one of the ways it does this is by introducing stupid characters and then persuading us, the readers, to care way too much about them. The story's supposed failure to punish Gamzee for his rampage is all part of the plan.

And, with the benefit of hindsight, one can't help but notice that the body count for "Horrorstuck" was actually pathetically small. Eridan murdered Feferi, as the culmination of his entitled "nice guy" arc, and was killed by Kanaya in turn. We lost Vriska and Tavros through the tragic, inevitable consequences of Vriska being Vriska. Do the math and it seems that for all his sulking and cranium collecting and necrophilia Gamzee only managed to actually *kill* two people - Equius (whose erotic asphyxiation at the hands of a highblood was the logical endpoint for his character) and Nepeta (who never matters ever). That's six dead Trolls (who aren't even really gone, thanks to *Homestuck's* afterlife), with six still kicking around (including two, Kanaya and Aradia, who died and were *resurrected* over the course of the Act) plus the four original kids.

But that's just Gamzee's side of the story. As Hussie himself acknowledged, this scene is also a pivotal development for Karkat, one of *Homestuck's* most important

and best-loved characters - and one that sees him embracing the legacy of his Christ-like ancestor. Christ, after all, practiced radical and unconditional forgiveness. He hung out with thieves, prostitutes, corrupt politicians, and heretics, so I doubt even a shitty murder-clown would be beyond the pale for him. This is a big step for Karkat: a reversal of his ancestor's "vast expletive," transforming outrage back into compassion.

5999 - If you need a recap of *Homestuck*, feel free to peruse the previous 200 pages of this document.

6000 - We're back to selecting photographs, although there's only one path to choose this time.

6001 - Note that (because of the generally disheveled state of doc's apartment) the command arrows get scrambled up over the pages leading up to..

6009 - CASCADE

Cascade was released on the 25th of October of 2011, about three months after the last instalment of the series - anticipation was so high that fans crashed MSPaintadventures.com, forcing Hussie to upload the animation to the games and animation site Newgrounds, which also crashed, at which point the author threw up his hands and made the whole thing available for download on some sketchy file-sharing sites.

Cascade was a huge deal for readers at the time, and even though there are some problems with the animation and storytelling (especially apparent in retrospect) it's still an impressive achievement. As its title promises, this is an incredibly dynamic sequence, the payoff to thousands of pages of setup that sends dominos toppling everywhere. Even the format acknowledges that this is something momentous - not only does the video allow readers to pause or skip chapters, but early on we see the screen itself expand beyond its usual borders, as if the canvas that was sufficient for the story so far just isn't big enough anymore. There's a lot going on and not all of it is totally clear, so my notes will mostly focus on explaining the events as they transpire, with some commentary as needed.

We open on John, finally performing the Scratch. His effortless destruction of the monsters at the Beat Mesa is another indicator of how far the kids have come. Notice he wields a new, Vriska-inspired hammer.

We cut to Jack Noir, regarding the corpse of his beloved/hated mistress Jade - and then flash forward to Jack in the Troll's universe, furious, using Red Miles backed up by Bequerel's power to give Billous Slick cancer.

Meanwhile, on the future Earth inhabited by the Exiles, the Carapacians prepare to destroy the SBURB facilities (the Wiki informs me this is to thwart Jack Noir - I'll take them at their word because it's been forever since we've seen these guys and for the life of me I can't remember what they were trying to accomplish here). Not far from here, the White King finally emerges from his untold ages confined in the time capsule with only *Complacency of the Learned* for company, which isn't as bad as it sounds - remember we first learned the White King enjoys Rose's wizard fiction on 5162.

Back to Jack - who, after depositing Jade on her quest bed (and ensuring her resurrection as a god tier Witch of Space) makes for the meteor containing the seeds for the Frog Temple as it's hijacked by Skaia to Earth's distant past. Jack awakes from his own time capsule right after the White King, and given Jack's low tolerance for boredom (he didn't even have any wizardly literature to help pass the time) he's predictably displeased. The circumstances of Jack Noir's escape into the Troll's session are finally revealed - as is the origin of the red blood staining his hand.

(Hussie makes extensive use of split screens here - the viewer's attention is repeatedly pulled back and forth between scenes, cleverly distracting from the limited frames of animation).

We cut to Rose and Dave's suicide attempt turned suicide mission. They activate the bomb, revealing two containers of red and blue fluid - recall red and blue are the colors that signify the Troll and human universes. These capsules contain the liquefied remains of both universes after their respective deaths.

On Alternia, after the events of the Felt intermission and Scratch's narration, Spades Slick finally kills Snowman. Recall that killing Snowman was said to end the Troll's universe - and the bullet piercing her blue heart does exactly that, leaving behind the blue crud that will fill half of the Tumor.

Jade returns to life as a god tier, inhabiting the body of her dreamself - who you may recall was fused with Becquerel to become Jadesprite. So Jade is now scary-powerful, with

the abilities of a God Tier Space hero, a First Guardian, an SBURB sprite (and a regular dog I guess?) all at her command. She subsequently prepares to propel John, herself, Davesprite, and all of the planets from the Kids' Medium into the new session.

(A note on this development: Michael at *Project Ballad* has an excellent post about Jade and the *Wizard of Oz* signifiers that have surrounded her through the entire story:

Jade is herself split into the full set of heroes from Oz:

Jade's stuffed dreamself is almost a literal scarecrow,

Jade's dreambot is the same, for a tin woman,

Jade's dreamself sprite is furry and completely defined by fear...

Jade's identity is divided! These distancing tricks have subsumed her, and to self-actualize, they need to dispell, because Jade cannot be Dorothy. Why? Because Jade Harley is destined to be a witch - the Witch of Space! ...however you slice it, Jade needs to "collapse the waveform," resolve all these selves - and these symbols - in order to shed the Dorothy role and accept her true mantle, Dorothy's opposite. For Jade, The Wizard of Oz, a reference, an idea, a meme in the original sense of the word, is representative of that which holds her back.⁴⁸

The original post has some spoilers for late Act 6 developments with Jade, though, so read at your own peril.)

PM snags the White Queen's ring, granting her the same powers as Bec Noir. She'll use it to set off after Jack Noir, and attempt to avenge her friends.

We return to the shot of Gamzee as "the most important character in Homestuck", "witnessing the miracle of a new beginning". In addition, the panoramic camera reveals for the first time another party present: Lil Cal. Gamzee peers at Doc Scratch's corpse (notice his cueball head forms the nose of Gamzee's signature smilie), then reveals the Doctor's ominous final white-text message to the Trolls: "Suckers."

Rose and Dave detonate the double-universe bomb, expecting to fulfill their suicide mission and blow up the Green Sun. What they don't realize is that they've been swindled - Doc

⁴⁸ Michael Peterson. "Meme as Meme: The Wizard of Oz and Homestuck." *Project Ballad*. 4 Mar. 2013. 04 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.projectballad.com/2013/03/04/meme-as-meme-the-wizard-of-oz-and-homestuck/>>.

Scratch implied they'd be destroying the Sun and depowering Jack Noir, when in fact they've just *created the damn thing*. Derse is destroyed and both kids are killed.

All is not lost, however: because they were standing on their hidden quest crypts in the heart of Derse, both Rose and Dave ascend to God Tier, just like Aradia did. (Rose and Dave's resurrections were foreshadowed by Doc Scratch, referring to Terezi and Karkat at the time, on 5736: "What sort of story would this be, with our Knight and Seer made to stay cadavers? Certainly not one the alpha timeline would allow.") In the furthest ring, they meet up with Aradia and the half-ghost dream bubble Sollux, as the meteor (carrying the rest of the surviving Trolls) approaches.

And finally, Jade propels the battleship and all its passengers through the Fourth Wall teleport window, into the Felt Manor, and then through the opposite window into the new Scratched session.

This is Hussie's famous "one yard" of direct authorial interference with his characters, as promised on 5551. Of course, his involvement is a little more important than he implied it would be. By moving the portals between the Beta and Alpha Universes to face each other, he facilitates the miniaturized battleship's journey into the scratched universe... but considering this is something *any* character could have done - and not some misguided metafictional abuse of his influence as author of the story - I'd say he's kept to the spirit of his promise as well as the letter. *Homestuck's* in-text incarnation of Hussie is still a glorified narrator, and his involvement in the story doesn't invalidate his characters' agency or actions.

6010 - End of Act 5 Act 2. And it only took 100 pages of notes on almost 1500 pages of text! There's just one little loose end to tie up before we move on to Act 6..

6011 - Don't look so surprised. Doc Scratch told us, over and over, that he was "an excellent host."

Here's Hussie on the big reveal.

So LE is the Hulk in suspenders with a Cal skull for a head..... really????

Yes, really. I think his appearance is not what most were expecting, nor what some desired, but this is a consequence of hype factor alone. It's inevitable, keeping a mystery such as this dangling out there for almost two years. People start to get attached to what they envision. There is no creative advantage at all to hype. When hype is

significant, you can only hope to meet it at best, or more likely fall short. I felt pretty fortunate that by and large the hype surrounding EOA5 was met for most people. I'm doubtful it was surpassed for many, by much, considering the two month pause caused people to guess SOMETHING big was coming. Now imagine instead of a two month delay, there was none at all! Bam, 13 minute animation out of nowhere. The difference in reader perception in such a case is so extreme, it can't even be communicated. Conclusion: hype sux.

This is exactly how I pictured LE looking before I even made the Felt intermission. I think if I revealed him then, practically everyone would say, yeah that's about right. Just a nasty, monstrous looking mob boss with some gaudy accoutrements. In time, as the mystique surrounding him accumulates, people get other ideas. I think some wanted a more suave motherfucker to bust onto the scene, someone perhaps sleek, dapper. This doesn't fit the concept at all, nor suits anything we knew about him previously. Doc Scratch is his smooth, well mannered counterpart. He already fills that role. LE as Scratch 2 is a really boring idea to me. LE as a big, no-nonsense brute, functioning as Mr. Hyde to Scratch's Dr. Jekyll, is much more interesting. (Hey, there's another bullet point for the reference slurry, if you're taking notes, re: Jekyll/Hyde.) So instead of some elegant dude too dashing for words who exploded from the screen of the yaoiest anime you ever saw, he looks a bit like this and this and maybe some of this and a smidgeon of this and oh yeah some of this and a whole fuckload of this and just a pinch of this, ok wait maybe not that last thing.⁴⁹

(The images linked to in the last sentence of the original post include Mike Hagar of Capcom's beat'em'up *Final Fight*, the Incredible Hulk, Spider-Man's adversary the Lizard, Hugo Weaving as the Red Skull in 2011's *Captain America: The First Avenger*, a broken link I deduce must have shown Snoop Dogg as Huggy Bear in the Stiller and Wilson big-screen remake of *Starsky and Hutch*, the fan-made plush Lil' Cal, and finally a fan illustration of Lil' Cal as a slim and sexy anime androgyne.)

So Lord English is a big dude.

This makes him, not exactly a rarity, but certainly an interesting contrast to many of the most prominent antagonists in popular fiction over the past decade. For whatever reason (increased militarism after 9/11? reactionary homophobia in response to the increased

⁴⁹ Andrew Hussie. ":o, LE Factoids." MSPAndrew.tumblr.com. 2011. Web. 23 Mar. 2013. <<http://mspandrew.tumblr.com/post/12341136347/le-factoids>>.

visibility of LGBTQ culture? Hollywood's assimilation of anime's aesthetic and tropes? the Sekhmet hypothesis, which posits cyclical trends in popular culture between inclusivity and hostility?) we're coming off a decade of clever, conniving, and frequently *girly* villains in pop culture. For most of the 2000s, America liked its heroes burly and bullheaded: consider *300*'s *Leonidas*, the Nolans' take on Batman, the protagonists of games like *Halo*, *Gears of War* and *God of War*, even friendly Quiditch jock Harry Potter. And, appropriately, the villains we've dreamed up to challenge these heroes have been sophisticated, cunning, and often quite androgynous. Think of Xerxes in *300*, Heath Ledger's Joker, Ralph Fiennes as Voldemort. The apotheosis of this trend was 2012's big-screen adaptation of Marvel Comics' *Avengers*, where it took half a dozen manly-man superheroes to beat up Thor's fey kid brother, Tom Hiddleston's Loki. (And we can't forget *Homestuck*'s already featured another villain in that mold, the whiny, wannabe-Byronic aristocrat Eridan.)

Lord English bucks this trend. He's clearly not, as Hussie suggests, "some elegant dude too dashing for words who exploded from the screen of the yaoiest anime you ever saw". He's less Joker and more Darkseid, less Sephiroth and more King Koopa, not a delicate fallen angel like Lucifer but a snarling, hellfire-spitting Satan.

It's understandable this came as a shock to much of Hussie's young audience, trained by anime and fanfiction to expect sexy, waifish villains. And English's design also confounds the expectations established by Doc Scratch, a manipulative and *literally* androgynous bastard. But aside from defying expectations, there are also solid thematic reasons for Lord English to look this way.

Homestuck is a story about children becoming adolescents; young teenagers are awkward, too tall or too short, sexually immature, voices too high or suddenly too deep. We discussed before how Doc Scratch was presented as a grown-up gone bad - and English doesn't just possess an adult intellect but also an adult body, and represents a fleshy, hyper-masculine, very *physical* danger to our pubescent heroes. He isn't necessarily capable of outwitting them (indeed, as Hussie suggests in the Q&A cited above, he seems to have lost Scratch's cue ball-derived omniscience - not unlike how Henry Jeckyl and Bruce Banner lose their intelligence when they transform), but he could physically *crush* their frail, liminal bodies.

And as such, English represents a very different kind of threat to the young men and the young women of *Homestuck*. Our male heroes are still boys, after all, relying on weapons or special powers instead of their scrawny teenage muscles (well, with the exception of Equius) to best foes - and many of them (from John and Tavros's idolization of pop culture heroes to Dave's struggle to live up to his brother's example to Equius' difficulty controlling his hideous STRONGNESS) are wrestling with childhood ideals of masculinity, and deciding what kind of men they want to become. For the boys, Lord English isn't just the biggest, swolest bully on the playground - he's also a terrifying vision of the adult male body gone wrong, virility coexisting with death (his skull-like visage) and disfiguration (his missing leg).

And for the girls - well, we already know English is a "pimp," in the sense that he employs and exploits women, and we've just learned that he evolved from the patronizing, abusive Scratch. If English continues to treat women the way his predecessor did, he'll be a terrible enemy for our heroines.

So that's why Lord English *looks* the way he looks. As for his character - well, we haven't seen enough of him yet to make a call. We know he has problems with women. And we know he's the true architect of the misery and senseless violence of Troll society on Alternia. But we'll have to wait until the next act to get a sense of his history, personality, and motivation.

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About the Annotator:

Your name is FLETCH WORTAM, and you are eleven sweeps old. You have suffered since childhood from a variety of TROLL MENTAL ILLNESSES which are like human mental illness but with PSYCHIC DEATH RAYS and THE CRIES OF THE DAMNED. After two years at TROLL SWARTHMORE COLLEGE (a factory farm for masochistic nerds) you had a nervous breakdown, and were committed to a TROLL MENTAL HOSPITAL (which is not a hospital as much as a haunted crypt/sadist's dungeon/sanctuary for dangerous beasts). Somehow, you survived, and have established a modest career as a freelance writer. You are currently pursuing your MFA, in hopes of securing a sweet gig as a tenured EDUCASTRATOR at a prestigious university. In private moments, given the nakedly confessional and emotionally lacerating content of your writing, you like to think of yourself as a SCRIBE of HELL.

In another world, in the past, but also the future: you are a human male named FLETCHER WORTMANN. After graduating from high school in 2005, you entered Swarthmore College (a factory farm for masochistic nerds). Following your sophomore year, you were diagnosed with crippling Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). After receiving extensive treatment at the OCD Institute at McLean Hospital in Belmont, MA (which is actually a really nice place that helped you a lot), you returned to Swarthmore and went on to receive your Bachelor's degree in English Literature in 2009. You are the author of *Triggered: A Memoir of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder*, available from St. Martin's Press; you have also contributed to *Huffington Post.com*, *Cracked.com* and *Psychology Today.com*.

The Only MSPA Character Theme Playlist You Ever Need:

John Egbert:

"Sprawl II (Mountains Beyond Mountains)" by the Arcade Fire

Rose Lalonde:

"Spellbound" by Siouxsie and the Banshees

Dave Strider:

"Daylight" by Aesop Rock

Jade Harley:

"Atomic" by Blondie

Aradia Megido:

"Graveyard Girl" by M83

Tavros Nitram:

"Ambling Alp" by Yeasayer

Sollux Captor:

"Cellz" by Doom

Karkat Vantas:

"Ecce Homo" by Titus Andronicus

Nepeta Leijon:

"Animal" by Miike Snow

Kanaya Maryam:

"The Mother We Share" by Chvrchs

Terezi Pyrope:

"Heads Will Roll" by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs

Vriska Serket:

"Youth Without Youth" by Metric

Equius Zahhak:

"Hold the Line" by Major Lazer

Gamzee Makara:

"Nowhere To Run, Nowhere To Hide" by Gravediggaz

Eridan Ampora:

"Ways To Make It Through The Wall" by Los Campesinos!

Feferi Peixes:

"Superfast Jellyfish" by Gorillaz

Jane Crocker:

"Let's Get Out Of This Country" by Camera Obscura

Jake English:

"This Charming Man" by The Smiths

Roxy Lalonde:

"You're the One" by Charli XCX

Dirk Strider:

"Lil Boy" by Death Grips

Meenah Peixes:

"AQUABABE" by Azealia Banks

Aranea Serket:

"We Are The Dead" by David Bowie

Caliborn:

"The Two Snakes" by Fucked Up

Calliope:

"Angels" by The XX