

From Pulp to Webpage: *Homestuck* and Postmodern Digital Narrative

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Abstract

Homestuck by Andrew Hussie is a work developed entirely as an experiment in using the internet as a storytelling medium. In order to analyze this drastically new form of story, born and grown on the internet, I must initially analyze the two genres it best fuses; *Homestuck* is published serially and episodic, and largely contains media elements of the Graphic Novel. However, *Homestuck* also mixes into the story areas where reader choice and interactivity, animated cut scenes, and music in a fashion that imitates a video game. I'll be examining *Homestuck* as a primary text, first inspecting its form and narrative vehicle through a comparison against traditional Graphic Novels in order to establish some boundaries of digital narration. Then, I'll examine the more advanced multimedia elements that appear throughout *Homestuck*, namely the longer animations and interactive game segments, in order to establish what is lost and gained through digital interactivity within a narrative. Finally, I examine the core of the mythos and meaning behind the plot of *Homestuck*, and its concern with breaking boundaries between what we perceive as the scope of our digital reality on our physical existence. Ultimately, *Homestuck* illustrates through its development and narrative a positive, yet wary, support of our ever expanding digital existence.

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Section 1 – Introduction – “Let Me Tell You About *Homestuck*.”

The internet is a postmodern realm of electronic representation where nearly any element of reality can be digitally abstracted and displayed back as some form of electronically represented bit of media. Amidst the shift from physical page to web page, new forms of stories are being created capitalizing on the potential of postmodern mixing, combining, and processing media that digital media allows. The internet has not been fully examined as a realm for storytelling however, and more often than not, narrative is thought to just be *displayed on* the internet but not *created within it*. Challenging how we engage with digital media is crucial for our understanding of how we fit within the ever growing digital networks that encompass our lives. When we closely examine these new forms of digital narratives, we find they are unique and not just digitized print media. Instead, by being created within the digital, a realm defined by connectivity, digital narratives can challenge our notions on how information can be controlled, shared, contained, and produced, while also bringing attention to how we view ourselves are growing more interconnected, engaged, and embodied within the digital world.

Homestuck is a webcomic by Andrew Hussie and is a genre-fusing postmodern epic designed for and produced through the internet. It is a digitally produced story that resembles a graphic novel while imitating the interactivity and language of a video game. It is a story about a boy and his friends who decide to play the fictional computer game Sburd together, which, as they soon find out, is a game with incredibly high stakes - the fate of the entire universe. It has been called “the internet’s *Ulysses*,” which is a large claim to make when comparing it to James Joyce’s masterfully complex and contested

work of English language storytelling (Brown 0:03). However, it is not an invalid comparison, as *Homestuck* is an extremely dense and expansive work requiring dedicated effort to successfully navigate, similar to *Ulysses*. *Homestuck* is the largest digital narrative to emerge from the internet to date. *Homestuck* combines traditional narrative with images, animation, and short interactive games. Meant to be viewed from an internet browser, it has its own unique digitally crafted method of story progression, visual presentation, and audience engagement. The processes behind *Homestuck*'s production, its combined comic and video game genres, and its intrinsic digital themes reveal deeper questions regarding what it means to experience a world increasingly defined and shaped by our relationship with digital media technology. *Homestuck* exists as an experiment in long form, digital multimedia storytelling, evolving over time. It is a self-referential narrative; Hussie brings in audience involvement while simultaneously responding and catering his story for his audience, often breaking the fourth wall and making audiences aware that he is explicitly attempting to explore new narrative territory. As a fusion of digital and physical literature, it comments positively on the postmodern shift our identities and bodies undergo when confronted with our presence within an ever expanding and complex digital world "breaching" into our existence.

Analyzing *Homestuck* must be done in stages, as it is an expansive work covering a wide cast of characters, a myriad of themes, and a plethora of content for a single story. By analyzing the structure initially, I plan to frame *Homestuck* as a narrative work that inhabits a unique cross-section of digital and analog media forms – the comic book developed online. My first chapter will dive into the deeper history and structure behind *Homestuck* and the methods of its author, referencing webcomic histories and traditions.

Theories from illustrator and author Scott McCloud's as outlined in his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* will be used to dissect the format of *Homestuck*; emulating a graphic novel digitally via a webpage is not a perfect media translation, and key examples of the differences between physical and digital graphic novel formats force us to question how we engage with images and text digitally.

For my second section, I'll examine the various animated and interactive elements found in *Homestuck*: the musical interludes, fully animated sequences, and interactive game panels that highlight peaks and climaxes in the story. As a narrative, *Homestuck* both lampoons and imitates classic adventure-style and role-playing games, to the point of adopting a mock-game vehicle built into the narrative. I'll refer to video game theories and tropes in order to examine how *Homestuck* has become more complex and intricate in both its narrative and its presentation over time. It utilizes digital media in interactive and dynamic patterns that create new ways for readers to collectively engage with and react to the ever evolving digital narrative. These multimedia excursions are atypical to anything possible in printed narratives, revealing new levels of audience engagement possibilities in not only experiencing the narrative but actually help shape and mold it.

Finally, for my last section, I will open with a brief analysis the bulk of *Homestuck*'s internal mythos, characters, and narrative examining specific themes and tropes. An understanding of the game world of Sburb will be established to show a blended breach of digital reality into physical reality, while an exploration of the character's interconnected fates references a symbolic digitization of our modern bodies. Finally, one particular repeated image, the window and screen, will be of particular focus; the window both blocks and allows open connections in physical space, while the screen

forms a barrier between people over distances, separated by technology. In many respects *Homestuck* seeks to shatter these screens that bar us off from one another through digital connection. As a story that's housed on the internet and encompasses many media formats, its very existence reflects the way postmodernity in Western culture is leaning towards making narrative a digital collective experience. Digital and postmodern theorists like Frederic Jameson will be referenced as we question what *Homestuck* accomplishes as an ever growing multimedia narrative phenomenon, and how it comments on our understanding of our modern subjectivities, split between both a physical and digital components.

The remainder of this introductory section, I will use to sketch the background behind *Homestuck*'s production and rise in popularity in order to establish a baseline with which to analyze and understand the work from an outside perspective. At its core, it is a story specifically designed to be told on the internet, and I argue Andrew Hussie seeks *Homestuck* to be a story designed to challenge how we perceive ourselves within the internet. Thus, understanding how it first was conceived and constructed as an online narrative is critical.

The Past Procedures of *mspaintadventures.com*

The main body of the work, up to its latest update, is housed at *mspaintadventures.com*. At the time of this writing, *Homestuck* features over six thousands "pages" of content, all published serially since April 13th 2009 (MSPA ? viewlog=6)*. The name itself "mspaintadventures" as the site's domain refers to the "lie" that Hussie draws the comics using only the basic Windows illustration software

Microsoft Paint. In reality, no panel other than the first panel of his first comic was actually drawn in Microsoft Paint (MSPA ?viewpage=new). This lie, tied forever into the site's presentation, challenges how we perceive content on the internet; the lie is not intended for belief, and many readers soon recognize the complexities the internet as a medium allows within the story's formation. *Homestuck* could never be created entirely through Microsoft Paint, and readers are quickly made aware that more techniques and technology are utilized in the creation of *Hoemstuck*. Even early on, Hussie plays with reader expectations, taking freedom when possible to undermine or reroute those expectations. This is but the first initial narrative sleight of hand and one of the earliest instances of *Homestuck* being self-referential. Hussie employs with creating his works, illustrating the self-aware and somewhat irreverent methodology behind crafting the story.

All of Hussie's digital works play with the online relationship between the author, the reader, and the final produced digital narrative. Over the course of *Homestuck*'s production, there has been an increase in complexity of the story's narrative, media presentation, and the various degrees of reader interactions. Its length and narrative scope are sectioned into "acts" (MSPA ?viewmap=6). Currently there are over six acts, with several "intermission" segments. These intermissions initially seem to reveal unrelated plotlines, but as the story progresses, the act structure becomes more complex and the intermissions more relevant with regards to developing subplots.

* The abbreviation MSPA is used in referencing specific pages within Andrew Hussie's website *mspaintadventures.com*, the hyperlink provided in the in-text citation can be appended to "<http://www.mspaintadventures.com/>" to reach the referenced page.

Homestuck has been a largely serial publication, averaging roughly five new “pages” a day, and each page is accompanied by the date of its original online publication. Quotations are used here, since each “webpage” can usually be equated to a “panel” of a traditional graphic novel, usually including one or several illustrations or panels alongside narrative text or dialogue. The occasional interactive or multimedia pages typically follow pauses ranging from a few days to extended hiatuses in production, the breaks usually done in preparation for the animated “end of act” climaxes within the story.

Andrew Hussie has adapted and altered his narrative process from his previous works at *mspaintadventures.com*. One completed story and two online narrative experiments written by Hussie precede *Homestuck*, and have allowed him to become simultaneously an author, illustrator, director, and developer despite having a degree only in programming. His previous works are still viewable on his main site, and remain as showcases of early tests in drawing and narrating a story guided directly by his readership (MSPA ?viewpage=archive). His process has always been driven by those reading his story, though his approach to their interaction and influence on his stories has changed drastically but fluidly because of the exigencies of increased audience numbers.

Because the story is produced and are released digitally in real time, and housed on a public site, a reader can experience the story “live” as it is being created, and in theory, direct the story’s path while also experiencing the real time publication delays. This creates a the possibility of different reader experiences depending on when a reader engages with Hussie’s narratives; by reading the stories after they are finished no actual reader input is available, and the outcome and progression through the story is solidified.

The role as a reader “playing” the narrative to progress with a chance of directly influence the story is limited once the work ceases production, forcing future readers to follow the paths already determined by Hussie’s narrative tug of war with his audience.

Imitating a Video Game

Although ultimately it can be seen as a graphic narrative, *Homestuck* is deeply entrenched within the visuals and forms of a video game. All of the works on *mspaintadventures.com* follow a design façade that mimics the earliest type of computer “text adventure” games (MSPA ?viewpage=new). These early computer games were largely text based and the person playing the game would input direct commands to progress through the game, such as “Go North” to attempt to travel North, “Pick up Apple” to acquire an apple described in the game, “Eat Apple” to eat an apple previously acquired, etc. In early text based adventures, the game was preprogrammed as a puzzle, with the game accepting and responding to reader commands, with the narrative being explained and constructed as you play through the game. Different players can enter different commands and potentially experience different narrative path towards a same goal – the challenge is finding the correct commands to create the proper path to complete the game.

Within *mspaintadventures.com*, the archaic text adventure model is integral to the story’s formation and progression. Each page is connected to another by a “reader command,” a link that is supposed to direct the progression of the story from panel to panel. Hussie’s comics are presented as games, and thus the role of the reader becomes similar to that of a player inputting commands to proceed through a story while at the

same time “determining” what happens. These commands then are “given” by the reader to the story itself, which seemingly acts as a semi-conscious, semi-involved omniscient narrator disguised as the very game the audience simultaneously “reads” and “plays.” The narrative pretends to be a game that is reacting to the decisions and actions of the reader interacting with the story by giving exposition and directing the current focus of the narrative. Hussie says he acts as the “text parser” of his narratives, digesting reader feedback and propelling a story in a fashion not normally allowed by non-digital works (Hussie “Interview”).

All stories on *mspaintadventures.com* prior to and including *Homestuck* can be “saved” by clicking a link below each panel that stores website information on the reader’s personal computer browser (see Fig. 1). This feature acts as an bookmark, allowing readers to resume the story at the exact page where they left it, a nod to saving one’s progression when playing through video game and the fact that most of his comics cannot be read in one sitting. This “digital bookmarking” is comparable to a physical bookmark, but also the tendency of digital media to allow one to “pause” their progress, to be resumed later. This small feature is a subtle clue that the digital experience of *Homestuck*, or any of Hussie’s works, is structured around how it is viewed through the internet, specifically around its host website which is the primary portal linking the reader to his story. The reader is not just presented with a story, but with a unique and customized method of digitally experiencing and progressing through it, and becomes an “active” player in the story as they proceed through it.

By referencing and recreating the text adventure’s archaic and simplistic game model digitally, Hussie shows a certain degree of restraint in exploring this playable

narrative hybrid. The game format and Hussie's approach to *Homestuck* provides a reduced form of play that seems to fondly recall the text adventure model it is emulating; narrative comes before the game, and while many interactive and animated areas appear, there is a respect to the traditional forms found in older video game narratives and tropes. In *Homestuck*'s case, the game segments are an interesting addition in that they are intended to give audiences a new mode of experiencing and exploring a narrative, but the game elements not mandatory, complex, or challenging. If anything, Hussie may be less excited about complex and over produced game structures, and instead seeks more realization of the narrative and interactive potential in modern digital gaming and other narrative vessels. This notably different from the state of modern digital games where narrative progress can seem at ends with the enjoyment of playing the game. Hussie reveals his nostalgia towards the archaic text adventure game vehicle and its focus on telling a good story that can be played; the structure of the narration, although it emulates reader interactions for much of the text, it reduces their actual input to further the narrative design. The struggle of control is critical, and who is directing the story is a central feature in Hussie's "game narratives."

The Suggestion Box and Dynamic Directing

Early experimental webcomics by Andrew Hussie include *Jail Break* and *Bard's Quest*, which set the website's structure and are referenced by Hussie's later works (MSPA ?viewpage=new). These early experiments remain as largely unfinished storytelling exercises in the "reader driven" nature of Hussie's works. At first, Hussie took direct commands from actual readers, producing the story in direct response to their suggestions. These commands were always structured in terms of guiding a particular

character through a series of puzzles or challenges; the audience of active readers gave suggestions readily, hoping to influence the progression of the story. The initial results for his early audience directed webcomics were, as could be expected, humorous and often nonsensical, rife with silly tangents and non-sequiturs. However, suggestions were selectively chosen by Hussie, and the plotlines were more or less created as Hussie received reader direction, after establishing a simple initial narrative structure, i.e. a man locked in a jail cell. These early comics were moved from the online forum he originally posted them on to his new domain at *mspaintadventures.com*, where he developed further stories.

At the official website, suggestions for the story and where it should proceed from the situations presented in the current panel could be submitted by any reader to a suggestion box, and Hussie would pick suggestions he liked. The suggestion box is currently defunct, and almost entirely absent in *Homestuck* (MSPA ?viewpage=new). Suggestions were anonymous, and reflect a blurring boundary between one reader, the collective audience, and the author collaborating to continue production of an in-progress story. The suggestion box was an early contract for shared control of the story's direction between author and reader; the author allows the reader to direct the final product of the story by actively suggesting the progress of the player who is "playing" the game. When done during the story's "live" production, a reader could both experience and influence the story in real time. A particular level of control was established by Hussie in directing the suggestions, picking the most entertaining ones or the suggestions most favorable to the progression of the story he envisioned. The author mediates between the narrative and the reader, and thus maintains the structure and has final control of the story, but allows

the readers to contribute, influence, inspire, and guide the narrative's development. The difference that emerges is a level of flexible "playable" area within the narrative, something not found in traditional print narrative, which is typically never "in-progress" when audiences engage with it.

Hussie's only fully completed webcomic to date, *Problem Sleuth*, was finished shortly before *Homestuck* began (both *Jail Break*, and *Bard's Quest* remain unfinished). It took exactly one year to complete and is Hussie's second longest story; *Homestuck*, although not finished, is many times longer than *Problem Sleuth*, a reflection of his digital works having a direct proportion between story length and the time it took to fully produce the story. *Problem Sleuth* is the most complete example of Hussie's early method involving direct emphasis on reader-submitted progression. It is a story of a detective, the titular Problem Sleuth, who is locked in his office. Immediately, readers are presented a loosely pre-structured narrative situation with puzzles and goals to be "solved" by the reader suggestions, progressing the story, and allowing more challenges and narrative elements to be introduced in response; this culminates with Hussie creating a final enemy within the story that takes the protagonists nearly half of the story to fight and defeat (MSPA ?viewpage=new). *Problem Sleuth*'s narrative puzzles were drafted and revealed in somewhat real time, making the narrative not only a complete story but a complete game developed in response to those actively reading it as it was being developed. It was a more direct, but somewhat limited democratic method of creating a story; more popular suggestions would guide the story's characters, but there was a limit to what suggestions would properly solve the puzzles and situations presented by the narrative. Near the end of the story, only suggestions that "made sense" to Hussie would

be chosen to guide the narrative to its proper completion, and eventually Hussie would take the reins of the narrative away from his readers and instead follow suggestions he crafted himself in order to propel the narrative. (Hussie “Interview”).

Homestuck is Hussie’s most popular webcomic, but actually reverses his traditional reader-focused method by reducing the necessity of reader suggestions for narrative progress. At around the first year into the story, Hussie began taking more direct actions in reducing reader’s direct progress through the narrative, first by eliminating the suggestion box. This gave Hussie full narrative control and allowed him to form the story’s basic structure and carefully shape its development, rather than crafting the narrative in fluid response to his readers. Instead of a basic narrative riddled with situational puzzles for readers to solve, *Homestuck* is a complex pre-planned narrative filled with themes, characters, events, and an involved plotline. The readers of *Homestuck*, instead of seeking to directly influence the story’s progression as a method of playing it, find themselves in a more traditional role of a reader understanding and engaging with the lengthy and complicated narrative; completing the story is the challenge in itself, and the challenge extends beyond simply grasping the plot, but actually navigating through it, watching the animations, playing the interactive sections, etc.

The scope of *Homestuck*’s intricate narrative makes it an experiment in effort justification similar to completing and digesting Joyce’s *Ulysses*, where merely navigating and comprehending the expansive story is accomplishment enough for many readers (Brown 2:30). For many readers, the complexity and unique media interactions found in a free story sitting on a website allowed its popularity to increase steadily over

its production time. However, despite *Homestuck* migrating away from direct reader control of the narrative progression, the narrative still becomes shaped in response to the audience. Dedicated fans and readers can become active in newer multimedia ways that assists in creating the atmosphere of *Homestuck* through the creation of art and musical assets that Hussie integrates into the larger body. Thus, the author allows readers to shape the final narrative still while scaling back the actual impact on plot development.

The Growth of a Movement

The focus on being “reader driven” in production terms categorizes Hussie’s webcomic works on a tier different than most comics and narratives, which are crafted with the reader in mind as an end of the creative process, rather than an involved part of the means of creation (Hussie “Interrogative”). By being reader driven, the author is placed into a role of responsibly “hosting” the story and catering it’s progression for the reader, who must navigate and help create the story – this is not unique to most serial works. Be it a television show or a series of short stories published in a magazine, the author requires audience engagement over time, and must anticipate how the story is to progress before it is put out for display. It is up to the author to determine how much of the story is presented or developed at any moment in order to balance audience involvement and their desire to continue with a story that has no clear end. In *Homestuck*’s case, this feedback loop between the author and readers is heightened due to the interconnected nature of fans and any new publications to the story.

It can be argued that *Homestuck* could only have been successful in the internet’s current climate and state of development. In an interview done in 2000 with Marie-Laure

Ryan, a scholar of narrative theory and digital texts, she predicts an emergent possibility within new forms of what she describes as “hypertext narratives” where the reader clicks through a narrative presented digitally through a computer screen, with the computer guiding the story and responding to reader input:

Now imagine that the system takes over most of the responsibility for creating the script-that it is endowed with a "narrative intelligence" that enables it to create an interesting dramatic action around the user's often unpredictable actions. This would be interactive drama. (Ryan 2)

Her prediction of the path of digital narrative did not have comics on the internet in mind, and is largely an examination of digital narratives presented like games. However, all of Andrew Hussie’s works are presented as reduced facsimiles of an actual video game, with Hussie taking the role of the computer system responding to reader input. Prior to *Homestuck*’s popularity, webcomics and other digital works incorporating methods similar to Hussie’s focus on reader interaction and intervention on the actual story was not a known or mainstream phenomenon on the internet (Ryan 3). *Problem Sleuth* was successful in popularizing *mspaintadventures.com* and Hussie’s unique narrative fusion of game and comic, but even then was not as successful or as widely received as *Homestuck* is now. Ryan suggests at the time of her 2000 interview, that beyond just interactive digital text narratives, a truly successful one will need to be “visually pleasurable” (Ryan 1). Somewhat correctly, she predicts the movement of interactive digital stories needing to embrace media and imagery beyond simple textual input and feedback, which all of Hussie’s works employ. However, Hussie’s form of interactive digital narrative does not feature an all-encompassing reactive computer intelligence

responding specifically to each separate reader. Instead, he created a unique digital medium in which he, an active author, responds to his wider audience.

The timing for *Homestuck*'s creation and acceptance is not just a reflection of the advances in internet and networking technologies, but how in Western cultures we are increasingly more connected and conditioned to the physically displaced digital world of the internet. Hussie's method of responding to his audience has evolved, but his audience too has evolved in response to his methodology. By the time *Homestuck* began accelerating in its popularity in the middle of its second year, Hussie's audience had shifted to a largely young adult based readership, as he describes in an interview with graphic novelist Bryan O'Malley, author of the *Scott Pilgrim* graphic novels:

I think the site really did tend to attract more people in [their 30s] or a bit younger, due to a much more clearly telegraphed parody of text adventure games and those people would dig it for that reason -- the nostalgia and novelty surrounding that particular storytelling mechanism. [...]

Homestuck added a lot more elements, more engaging story and characters, very much in the vein of young adult content [...] For most of them, I do think the text adventure elements were either lost on them or were just something that had no appeal other than something that is an acquired taste [...] But at the onset, that archaic gaming parody stuff, and the slow, peculiar pacing it entails, tends to just be one of the many, many barriers to overcome in engaging with this and learning how to enjoy it.
(Hussie "Interview")

Hussie's readership is the important "other half" to his storytelling equation, and while at first readers could control and engage the story more directly; *Homestuck* alters audience involvement, resulting in different forms of readers engaging the digital work beyond simply experiencing it. His younger audience, connected only through the internet by the same digital story, would find a collective voice and means of expression through the shared experience of reading *Homestuck*. Social networking websites have allowed a scattered young digital audience to share a specific lexicon entirely unique to *Homestuck*, allowing a strong following of young and enthusiastic readers to emerge and interact with each other. Since the story's narrative is relatively decided and suggestions are not used, Hussie has allowed fans to contribute art, character names, and music for the story that he ultimately selects. A large section of *Homestuck*'s fans engage in a number of community activities, such as writing fan fiction and engaging in real life costumed roleplaying of any one of the story's wide character roster. These activities are common with young audiences, who construct fan homages and interpretations that challenge the established canon of the work, interacting with and somewhat embracing the postmodern shifting valuation of concepts and experience over substantive materials (Thomas 1).

How to tackle Homestuck – a Summation

For many, it is a looming challenge beginning *Homestuck* after more than six thousand pages of content, and for others getting more people to engage the story and the vibrant readership is part of their own experience. *Homestuck* fans have become something of a niche online community of those dedicated and passionate enough about the story. The titular phrase of this introductory section is "let me tell you about

Homestuck” - something of a shared joke among fans, well aware that they can be seen as overzealous and odd in their passion for this obscure internet story, much akin to other science fiction or series subculture, such as Star Trek. But, ultimately, *Homestuck* is more than a story with a dedicated and somewhat exclusive and below the mainstream fan base. It is a unique narrative experience that can only truly be shared and experienced through the internet, one that fosters fandoms, but also new associations between narrative spaces and audiences, and allows a discussion on how we grapple with the boundary of our digital identities. *Homestuck* is a self-referential pioneer in successful digital literature, fully embracing and developing from the internet, gaming, and computing cultures it was born out of, but tries to bring a narrative focus to it in a serial fashion. It is, at its roots, a graphic novel, but requires a certain level of engagement from readers that moves experiencing the story into a realm of animation and gaming.

Examining *Homestuck* allows us to reflect on the potential to be found in these multimedia digital works and the differences allowed by digital storytelling. By drawing out the covert implications in digital storytelling, we can also begin an examination of the digital world we reside in today. What freedoms are found and what restrictions are in place in digitized media? What does it mean when one becomes a part of the digital experience and allowed to interact with a narrative? What implications are there to a world that is becoming increasingly digitized?

Section 2 – Webcomics and The Graphic Novel – “= =>”

With an understanding of the format and process behind *mspaintadventures.com*, we can now advance the analysis into the particular content of the comics themselves. Before we engage with the more abstract and complex elements of the story’s plot, a closer examination of its structure will reveal insights into *Homestuck*’s existence as a digital work and what changes for readers who engage a story online or in any other digital medium. There are two broad structural and visual vehicles within *Homestuck*’s multimedia narrative: the moments when it is a narrative being told and the moments when it is a game being experienced. This section focuses on the elements that help convey *Homestuck* as a narrative; the two main static visual media channels of image and text. While there are disconnects between when the terms “comic books” or “graphic novel” should be applied, I support considering *Homestuck* as a new enigmatic digital combination of both forms under the general “graphic narrative” heading, but its focus on a longstanding plot makes it more of a novel than a comic. *Homestuck* draws upon and simultaneously breaks conventional graphic novel and comic book conventions while enacting more complicated media forms, such as animation and games, (Ian, 186).

For this section I’ll begin to dissect the visual aspects of *Homestuck* that allow it to be classified as a graphic novel by first briefly exploring what graphic narrative traditions are followed and what trends are broken. I’ll then closely examine the structure of the contents of typical pages, panels, and the website itself, which is arguably the “book binding” of the story, and how *Homestuck* digitally reproduces a “page flipping” effect. I’ll also discuss areas where creative digital freedoms are taken and patterns are copied and inverted, so to speak. The traditional combination of the written text and

images become displaced from the page and put into a digital realm where they can be altered and recombined in newfound narrative forms. In *Homestuck*'s case, the illustrations and text of traditional graphic narratives are digitally altered, and are capable of various new and varied forms that allow an audience to engage with digital narratives.

Graphic Novels, Comics, and Webcomics.

The main presentation structure of *Homestuck* is that of a comic, though its length and narrative complexity allow it to be considered a graphic novel. How we consider *Homestuck* compared to traditional comics and graphic novels is critical, and to begin I will use Scott McCloud's simplified definition of what a comic is: "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 20). The comic is a form of visual media, and a graphic novel utilizes the comic form as a genre to convey a longer narrative featuring a collection of comic panels that use images, icons, illustrations, and text separated visually and spatially to achieve an artistic effect. Sequential narrative and images can be said to have its roots in early cave paintings, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Mayan pictographs (McCloud 11). A more traditional comic form, closer to our modern conception, began with the Swiss artist and scholar Töppfer during the 19th century, but images alongside text have been a central mode of conveying information in a variety of cultures globally (Tabachnick 8). Modern comic strips and graphic novels are a more recent standardized convention of the medium, but the core principles remain unchanged: by combining story and images, comics move the reader through an interwoven narrative and visual space.

Then, what does it mean to be a “webcomic?” The question seems to have an obvious and simple answer: a comic on a website. Yet this is an important question needed if we are ever to properly dissect *Homestuck*, and there are two primary distinctions between traditional comics and webcomics: webcomics are comics that originate *on the internet* with no original goals or designs for popular print publication (Fenty 6). The Underground “Comix” movement began in America in the 1960’s, countering the mainstream comic productions of the time. Small comics would be created cheaply and in bulk, circulated through head shops and other underground and counter-culture scenes gathering small but dedicated groups of fans and collectors (1). At first, the internet helped strengthen interest in non-mainstream methods of comic production by allowing the spread of digitized versions of original Underground Comix and allowing the still active Comix authors a contemporary method of distribution. Early original webcomics would often experiment visually and usually appeal to niche-communities or sub-cultures; most webcomics emphasize internet, gaming, and other “geek cultures,” a trend described by Sean Fenty:

While Underground Comix often parodied gender relations, drugs, and popular culture, webcomics frequently parody popular culture, video games, and table-top role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* (Fenty 7)

Homestuck continues many of the tropes found in these underground and early webcomics. *Homestuck* is by no means immune to this classification of its content, yet it is one of the first webcomics to throw off the shackles of obscurity associated with these Underground Comix and become a successful non-mainstream comic (3). The internet, as

a location of publication, allows obscure works to not just sprout, but blossom, and allows non-traditional comics to be produced and reach an audience despite being considered publishing “risks”(6). *Homestuck* follows the traditions of Underground Comix and other webcomics by relying on a defined schedule or methodology of publication. Unlike traditional print comics and other webcomics however, *Homestuck* is produced serially but not on a set schedule. *Homestuck* is created and released in real time, but the end result is aimed at creating a unified story so it is more akin to a graphic novel. *Homestuck's* longer continued narrative structured around a main plot readily contrasts to the small reoccurring cast with a narrative that doesn't directly have a plot connecting each strip, as seen in Jim Davis' *Garfield* or Tim Buckley's webcomic *Ctrl+Alt+Del* (6).

Page and Panel Layout

The narrative of *Homestuck*, like any other narrative, is filtered through its medium of presentation that forces a specific interaction among readers in a process called focalization:

More so than illustrated and picture books, graphic narratives rely on an even blending of semiotic modes to convey meaning. The quasi-endless diversity of pictorial styles and techniques begs the question of how visual narrative [limits] narration as opposed to focalization [...] (Horstkotte 331)

Constructing a graphic narrative that successfully tells a story through multiple media channels without sacrificing story is difficult in traditional graphic novels. Traditional

graphic narratives tell stories not only visually, but with words, and must always present a lens through which the reader to interpret the story. These challenges are both enhanced and somewhat eliminated through the digital medium, which provides new possibilities through opening multimedia channels of presentation and digital interaction. The reader's involvement alters their framework of perception of how they fit within the story not just as readers, but as players.

Homestuck readily contests typical comic formats and utilizes the website it is housed within to its fullest. As described in this paper's introduction, *Homestuck* features over six thousand *webpages* of content and each page can be thought of an expanded "panel" within the larger graphic narrative. The typical formula for a standard page in *Homestuck* does not immediately appear to imitate a graphic novel, but each individual page in the comic can be thought to represent a complete panel of an image sometimes accompanied by a form of text (see Fig. 1). Most pages feature one image, although some pages feature multiple; the images are largely uniform in size, and most are static images with the occasional dynamic image that shows characters or objects in motion. Many panels feature text as integral parts of the picture where instances of symbols, onomatopoeia, and labels that are displayed as a montage (McCloud 154). However, the bulk of the primary narration and dialogue takes place in parallel with each panel's image, below the image but just before the "command" that links the reader to the next page and directs the actions of the current character. The website becomes standardized to a degree in how it lays out most panels, but there are instances later in the story where this breaks down for varying effects.

Homestuck is particularly varied with regards to some visual aspects such as the illustrated environments, yet very rigid in other regards such as what specific colors and symbols represent. As we'll examine later, templates are invoked frequently and many images are recycled; the art style employed in *Homestuck* seems deceptively simple at first, despite existing through the digital medium that grants layers of narrative and representational freedom. This initial restraint of style dissolves as the story progresses, as can be seen when comparing the first few panels which are strict with their template-like imagery when compared to panels with more stylized depictions (see Fig. 3). However, even from the beginning the simple visuals are counteracted by liberties allowed by being digital rather than printed.

Motion, Progression, and Closure: Telling Stories through Images

One layer of freedom granted to *Homestuck* by its digital construction is the motion and animation in any given panel versus using multiple panels. During the early pages of the story's first act, many pages are function as tutorials to familiarize readers; John, the story's protagonist, alongside the reader, undergoes an initial "training course" in the story's first Act. These earliest moments in the narrative focus on mundane actions undertaken by both the reader and the story's somewhat self-aware character in an unfamiliar digital game world that relays the narration. An enlarged image of a generic computer cursor is seen interacting with John and moving within the panel as part of the image, imitating the reader's actions (MSPA ?s=6&p=001906). Not only does this make transparent that this story is to be seen as an obvious digital game, but it also casts the reader as a "player" of the story, learning the abstract terminology and game procedures. This unique combination of playing and reading emerges in the visual cue to the reader

that he or she attempts to move forward through the narrative by moving his or her cursor forward. At this point, the narration then chides the reader for not inputting a traditional command for John to follow. Although the reader does not get to actually type these commands, the actual mechanism for progressing through the story and guiding the characters through the reader commands is made clear through the failure of facsimile cursor in properly interacting with the “world” of *Homestuck*.

The simple process of John, selecting his items and nailing a poster to his wall is split between several pages (MSPA ?s=6&p=001918). Particular images within each corresponding page show John struggling alongside readers to grasp the inventory system John and other characters employ, and the specialized language required to use it. Animations illustrate each action involved: John’s inventory system opening, items fusing, and objects being acquired. After several pages of individual motions, combining John’s hammer, several nails, and a poster finally allows him to put a poster on the wall – it is a fanciful and humorous excursion with no initial plot significance, but it serves to illustrate mechanics of the game world *Homestuck* exists within, and the nature of *Homestuck*’s mechanics as a digital work. These moments are important early on, as they allow a shared visual and verbal lexicon to emerge that is important to understanding the story as taking place within a mock-video game. In its earliest days, these commands were mostly reader submitted, reflected through the inventory misadventures and the perceived “low” level of the player understanding of the story and its mechanics. The motions and visual clues give an early tongue-in-cheek illusion of an early interactive computer game, pretending that we actually are interacting with the characters, controlling them and the story’s progression.

This scene with the poster is also one of the earliest of many instances where an action can be condensed within one page via animation versus being spread over several pages. The hammer scene described above features simple animations of the emphasized actions within panels, but it does draw out each action explicitly in separate panels. In between these two pages is the text command “John: Nail poster to wall” that directs John to use the poster and nails he has picked up (MSPA ?s=6&p=001919). We cannot measure the time it takes John to do these actions in a temporal sense, but the nuances of each action are deemed important enough by the author to warrant a slower progression between each image and action in order to assist readers in understanding the world of the story as a game world. Later, when these story and game elements are better established, we find shortcuts in these actions, with characters accessing their inventories and using items with little to no narrative fuss and even less visualization of the actions involved.

An example of a busier panel featuring several animations can be found on page 2537, a panel appearing a few months into *Homestuck*'s production. In contrast to the humble colors and simpler motions seen at an early point in the text, we see John using a hammer he crafted in his game session of Sburb to attack an imp (s=6&p=002537). Here, we have a variety of interconnected visual elements such as motion and the onomatopoeia “BOING” that flashes green describes the particular instant where John's attack lands and he is sent flying. There is a dual natured complexity allowed by incorporating motion in an image that, if it were not digital, the image would need the information encoded in the motion to either be assumed by the reader or outlined by individually depicted moments of the motion (Horstkotte 336). The integration of

movement within an image of a particular panel can either assist in the compression of information or help draw focus or a sense of time to an otherwise static image

This notion of the “space and time” between each panel is referred to as “closure” in standard comics and graphic narratives (McCloud 65). Closure refers to what is done in between visuals to “close the gaps” for the reader and allow them to connect the visuals as continued story rather than disconnected images. Usually closure in traditional comic forms is largely a mental process done by readers and occurs when a reader sees one image and follows it to the next; how much and what form of closure is ultimately decided upon by the comic’s author. There are a variety of closure types, ranging from a slow progression of moments of a motion, to action oriented progressions or scene shifts. Some panels can be connected purely by an abstract or thematic connection. Most comics heavily follow the “action to action” method of closure, where one panel may depict a man picking up a phone, the next of him dialing, the third of him speaking into the receiver, etc. (McCloud 70).

Homestuck features examples of every form of closure as illustrated by McCloud, something also common in traditional graphic narratives. The hammer scene depicted above is depicted through a more direct “action to action” form of closure, but the usage of animations complicates McCloud’s understanding of closure which is defined with static comics in mind. It could be said that each particular frame in an animation, much like frames in a film, are forms of moment to moment closure within that particular animation, but the animations and transitions in *Homestuck* are far from uniform, even within a particular image.

By itself, the actions and information within a single page are meaningless without the pages prior to and following it. This is what's known as "braiding," a typical effect of graphic narratives where individual panels are only valuable in proper sequence and are thus interwoven in meaning (Horstkotte 336). Placing and relating panels that are next to each other is important in any graphic narrative as this juxtaposition fosters the necessary visual closure, but *Homestuck* achieves braiding in a different way that takes advantage of the website structure allowed by the internet medium. Between each panel in a traditional comic exists the visual space where closure normally occurs; the "gutter" of comics is traditionally the blank space on a page that resides between each panel (McCloud 66). The gutter is important as a form of division within traditional sequential comics, and usually helps direct the closure involved by putting control of connecting the individual panels to the reader. The connection between each image is described by the type and amount of closure, and each image is generally separated by visually by the gutter. However, since most images in *Homestuck* reside on different webpages as standalone panels rather sharing space on a single page, progression between panels is not guided by visual breaks. Pages are arranged and developed in sequence according to each page's real-world publication date, but the continued narrative of *Homestuck* is often non-linear; particular moments in the story follow characters at different moments in time and space, and panels jump between particular timeframes, characters, or locations frequently. As a result, closure can be somewhat difficult to achieve if the connections were left to be purely between the images, no longer juxtaposed near each other.

In line with Ryan's suggestion of "hyperlink narratives," a webcomic structured like *Homestuck* has a gutter that does not reside in visual space but in the textual space consisting of the commands that must be clicked to drive the story and its characters. Here the reader is subject to the author's decided direction between each panel, and the blank space that would otherwise separate an image is replaced by these particular commands between panels. We can anticipate the connection between the current panel and the following panel by the command in between either, but the command only indicates direction and does little to completely predict or determine the story's progression. An example command of "Dave: Take sip of the apple juice, despite what John said" draws upon existing knowledge of John and Dave's conversation regarding his possession of apple juice (MSPA ?s=6&p=002239).

Yet the command does not entirely guarantee how the panel progresses: Dave may drink the apple juice, or he may have his doubts. By having a textual gutter, rather than a purely visual one between images placed side by side, we're forced to move and engage with each individual page as an individual panel contained within the language of the website. The gutter is displaced outside of the page as the abstract idea of the reader "commanding" the story to proceed, and the story reacting in turn, rather than the story being split up visually by blank spaces in a predetermined fashion. This method fosters progression through the story in the sense you can "predict" where the story will go, but are not in full control of how and where the progression unfolds. This creates instability within the narrative structure, and while a similar method of textually splitting panels could be adopted for a print graphic novel, the full effect of loading each page and "commanding" the next one into existence is diminished.

Not every connection between pages is an overt command given by the reader. Many pages are instead connected by Hussie's signature "forward" command that generally determines that the next page is a direct continuation of the present page. This form of textual gutter usually indicates a more linear and consistent progression through the story, indicated by "=>" commands. These commands usually bridges panels separated by a continued series of events as they unfold or actions done by a character spurred by an initial command. They are not moments where the reader can be thought of "directing" the story, but are conversely moments where the story is progressing on its own terms with the reader simply accompanying the progression. Compared with the other major form of commands, which mimic a player directing an avatar in a game, these simple textual gutters connecting related actions and moments within the narrative unfold steadily over the course of several pages. The reader can assume that if the link between one page and the next is the "=>" command, that the next page will take the current one into account and expand on it. Hussie considers these commands more akin to the traditional act of "turning the page" of a book (Hussie, "Interview"). The progression of events between these forward commands is entirely facilitated by Hussie's role as narrator of the story. The complexities involved in conjoining the particular pages in *Homestuck* allow new forms of narration to emerge focused on the reader's experience in navigating the digital page of the story and its connection to other pages, rather than the particular relationship between the media elements within one page.

Template Imagery and Repetition

Exploring the progression of pages and narrative allows an understanding of the mechanics involved in directing readers through a digitally framed narrative; however

one cannot overlook the art styles used. The art of *Homestuck* seems, at first, simplistic and unchanging. Much of *Homestuck*'s visuals are understated until later in the story, where Hussie began to take more artistic license with visualizing the characters during critical moments and from different points of view. The characters themselves first appear simplistically – they appear to lack even arms, a fact the narrator makes perfectly clear (MSPA ?s=6&p=001906). The characters were constructed first as similar, but distinct templates. They are not explicitly given a race despite having white and gray skin colors, but do illustrate distinctly set genders, appearances, and interests (see Fig. 2.)

Alongside the four main Human Kids on Earth, (John, Jade, Rose, and Dave), we later discover a troupe of similarly aged teenagers who reside on a different planet altogether, entangled with the fate of the Earth Kids by means of the mysterious Sburd game that ushers in much of the plot. They are a race called Trolls, a reference to the term “internet troll” used to describe less than pleasant people online. They are visually similar to the Human Kids, but each one adopts a particular visual motif that reflects the interests of notorious internet groups and fandoms (see Fig. 4). Visually, the Human cast and Troll children are similar, sans the Trolls being gray in skin tone and sporting unique horns that reflect their associated astrological signs, the symbols of which they wear on their shirts.

None of these young adult characters are depicted realistically when first introduced, and instead are restrained cartoon reflections of their prescribed interests and personalities. For example, Dave's passion is remixing as a novice DJ, so his shirt features a record symbol. Additionally, the character's standing “default” pose does not depict their arms, despite them actually having arms. These initial template-like designs are a visual simplification that is essential in cartooning according to McCloud, as it

allows meaning to exist more clearly beyond the visuals, meaning which can later be amplified and put to a particular use (McCloud 31). We see this amplification later, as the characters within the story fit the proportions and shapes used in the initial templates, but their actual illustrated appearance begin to vary over the course of the story. However, Hussie does break the template character designs in particular situations and for dramatic effects, for example an up-close shot of Dave reading a message with his computational glasses (MSPA ?s=6&p=004734). The shading surrounding his glasses and the subtle flicker of light gives a believable glow to this more realistic depiction of Dave's face, complete with his nose, a feature often left absent. Despite the ability to draw more realistic characters, templates can be used to represent a wide spectrum of identification among readers by keeping their designs simple and non-intrusive to the game world. Each character's universality and appeal for readers is increased by simplifying their visual style initially.

The character's simple designs allow readers to readily empathize "by de-emphasizing [...] the physical world in favor of the idea of form [and] the world of concepts" (McCloud 40). For any visual narrative, using characters that can be shaped internally through the story yet are simple enough to allow easy identification with readers reinforces reader engagement with the narrative (41). The characters, rather than distracting audiences as realistic human teenagers covered in superfluous details, instead become a reduced character template. For the characters, and fans alike, the depicted human form becomes deconstructed in a sense by becoming a template for a roleplaying "game" experience as an avatar. However, the Kids remain human, not tainted or fused with technology in any fashion that threatens their believability as humans. Most

characters can be identified by hairstyle and wardrobe (typically, a symbol on their shirt). This is important for *Homestuck* as a digital work because it encourages empathy through experiencing each character in terms of abstract depictions – this crosses over for fans of *Homestuck* who can become their favorite character by simply donning a wig and a shirt emblazoned with their favorite character’s associated symbol.

Similarly, the parental guardians of each of the Earth Kids appear with diminished features, some lacking eyes, nose, or a mouth, as well as appearing far taller than either kid. This places a distinction of detail between the kids and the parents; the parents for the most part remain enigmatic characters operating on their own, and at no point can they be “donned” by the reader and given narrative commands. Visually they are reduced into a concept of “non-playability” despite having very important roles within the narrative, they are characters who never are playable and as such never find a voice through direct narration, until much later on in the plot when the parental guardians are depicted as teenagers themselves, putting the focus back on the younger characters who are intended to be the main characters to be “played” through *Homestuck*.

Consistent with Hussie’s penchant for template-oriented character imagery, an important part of his style is to repeat visual cues while also slightly altering them, something seen in each character’s introduction page. There is reliability with how each character is initially revealed: standing alone in their room in their template stance, ready to be directed into the story. Each character’s room says more about their personality at first, accompanied by a description of the character and their interests, for example John’s love for movies depicting the end of the world can be seen in his neatly contained room (MSPA ?s=6&p=001904). Compare this to Dave’s introduction, his room a mess

and splattered with his interests in photography and music (MSPA ?s=6&p=002212). Repetition of detail and visual moments is crucial in solidifying thematic elements and moments of importance in the story, and is something found commonly in popular graphic novels such as *Maus* or *Watchmen* (Horstkotte 337). Standardizing particular events with visual and thematic patterns makes gives readers a reliable place to start with each character in a story featuring dozens, while also giving a standard language for how every character begins their journey through the story of *Homestuck* entails – beginning in their rooms with a visual reflection of their interests alongside their unique physically distinguishing features.

The recycling of other works is a creative staple in many digital works, and is a symptom of digital media's penchant for remixing as a feature of postmodernism. While most images are hand drawn by Hussie, simple objects and public domain images dredged from internet searches are borrowed, edited, and collaged from online sources in a true postmodern digital fashion that displaces and reorients visuals with new meaning. As an example, John's house can be seen littered with harlequin and "prankster" imagery, illustrating John's dad's penchant for all things comical. As John exits his room, the narration points out that one of the "paintings" resembles the actor Michael Cera, an otherwise non-sequitur moment explaining to readers that they "always thought he looks a lot like Michael Cera," despite the narration's implication that it likely is not an image of him (MSPA ?s=6&p=001947). This self-aware moment in the story reflects a tongue-in-cheek joke regarding Hussie reusing basic imagery for scenic but otherwise trivial effect. Much later in the story we encounter a scene that visually and narratively echoes this previous moment, although this time the painting and the narration make it

unequivocally certain that this time, the painting is of Michael Cera (MSPA ? s=6&p=006095). Interestingly, an actual picture of the actor is used, and the panel more or less re-uses the visual and narrative theme of the original panel. While traditional graphic narratives can feature recurring imagery, *Homestuck* is significantly more self-referential about its own imagery, directing our attention to a digital culture in which where images are easily repeated, replicated, and sometimes misconstrued.

Breaks in the Visual Patterns

Homestuck features a certain consistency in most of its panels, and as a whole the form of *Homestuck* is largely that of a graphic novel with a reliable form based in static media. Yet the areas where the typical image and text pattern break down, changes format, or includes more advanced multimedia, are all worth examining since the narrative method is intrinsically tied with how the story is visualized and experienced. Areas of the text where previous patterns are unceremoniously cast aside are used to further the narrative, even under the veil of gaming. This forces readers to reevaluate how the story becomes contextualized within the internet as a medium capable of including play within a narrative that is largely orchestrated. Particularly, areas of the story where the narrator becomes displaced are of interest, as it explores where digital narration can become unreliable, misleading, or misdirected in the face of someone new “playing” the narrative part of the game.

Complete acts and sections of the story follow the basic format of website heading, panel, and text as seen in figure 1. But particular areas and moments in the text extend and alter the scope of each panel’s placement and purpose on the page. These

sections that break the typical layout format are often done to emphasize narrative shifts within the text, particularly around whomever is actually narrating at that point in the text. There are relatively few moments in the story where the standard disembodied “voice of God” game narrator is replaced by another character, one who is an active antagonist and one of the proposed orchestrator behind much of the narrative’s plot. In these sections, the eloquent and omniscient character known as Doc Scratch “hijacks” the narrative and acts as a disruptor to the established patterns in the layout (see Fig. 5). His text is entirely white, something of an annoyance for both readers and the characters, who admit that they must actively select and highlight what he has written in order to read it (MSPA ?s=6&p=004156). Having to highlight only his text plays with his nature as an all-knowing entity entrenched in obfuscation; he tries to be anonymous, but readers can identify him through this anonymity. Readers who *don’t* play into his narrative game and highlight his text are not privy to his information and may not know his direct influence on the narrative.

When he is not actively interfering with the progress of the other characters, he assumes a role of narrator, addressing the readers directly and assuring them he has full knowledge of what is transpiring within the story, even if the reader may not. His sections replace the background with a dark green overlay, and feature an additional, narrower panel above the main one. This allows a visual simultaneity between otherwise disconnected events, directed for us by Doc Scratch himself. During his sections as narrator, he not only continues to interact within the story as a character, he steers readers through the murkier and less clear sections of the narrative. His commands are preceded by [o], referencing his cue-ball like orb head that contains his all-knowing persona that

cannot be penetrated or outmatched. Since no other characters besides the true narrator, Andrew Hussie, take over as narrator, the sections outlined by Doc Scratch stand out as catering to a new narrative force, one not concerned with leisurely telling the story, but crafting it, shaping it, and knowing how it unfolds before it actually does. This second narrator, and his active changes to the story's layout, gives an impression of an alternative force within the story concerning itself with how the narrative unfolds.

Other notable change in layout can be found in much more recent updates, particularly in act 6, which narratively breaks itself into smaller acts structured similarly to the previous pattern of acts and intermissions. This meta-formatting of the act may seem confusing, but essentially it compresses the final moments of conflict within the story as the characters at this point have finally come together. This layered act structure breaks apart the action that is split over the course of several dozen characters, timelines, and universes – a complex approach to a complicated narrative structure that harkens back to the interconnected array of plotlines before these final moments in the penultimate act.

During this act, the page layout undergoes several changes at crucial moments. When particular characters undergo a super powered transformation known as entering “trickster mode” – essentially enabling a cheat within the game that turns them from their traditional depictions into candy coated, nonsensical, and nigh invulnerable versions of themselves, the page layout reflects their visualization changes by coloring the website with bright rainbow colors and candy icons. Not only does trickster mode subvert the established race-less-ness of the characters by temporarily making them look and feel hopelessly positive and “Caucasian,” the brightly colored theme leaks from the characters

into the page layout itself (MSPA [trickster.php?s=6&p=007618](#)). The bright colors and drastic attitude shifts that come with the trickster mode makes the notion that the characters can simply cheat their way to victory into a farce; By giving them the ability to transcend, albeit in the most absurd way possible, we find they don't want to win the game in this fashion. Here we find that the original format and the character's original abilities are preferred to this "cheating" method that washes the narrative with a colorfully absurd optimism.

One final method of layout disruption occurs shortly later, again in the final act, when two pages are placed simultaneously, side by side within the site's layout (MSPA [ACT6ACT5ACT1x2COMBO.php?s=6&p=007688](#)). The entire page is duplicated in this view, not just the panels themselves. This combined act view occurs after the characters engaging in trickster mode are released from its spell, and just before the other main characters arrive within the story. This split screen within the page reads top to bottom, left to right for each panel, and allows two scenes to unfold simultaneously despite being in different locations. The command links that progress the story forward in this section are two pairs of "=> ==>" links, one of which appears askew and if clicked merely pushes the page to focus the reader's attention onto the second panel on the page. We get a sense the characters are together, despite being on different respective planets. This partitioning of the page layout also creates the interesting appearance of a screen when multiple panels are placed in the page – here, a more traditional gutter can be seen as splitting the image, but the gutter does not foster a transition between to be constructed between the images in an attempt to build closure. To some degree, this gutter merely

acts as a line of separation for the panels, and creates a four paned effect in some of the combined panels.

Dialogue and Narrative Prompts

Another major factor that makes *Homestuck* unique among graphic narratives is its depiction of the textual bulk of the story. Despite being a comic, *Homestuck* has a large word count comprised of lengthy expositions and long exchanges of dialogue between characters. Most non-dialogue prose is done by the game's narrator, previously described here as a semi-aware and reactive force in the story. The narrator has a sense of humor, is somewhat aloof, and does its best to keep things linear while trying to steer the reader through the expansive story. Occasionally, "famous" quotes are referenced but attributed incorrectly; T.S. Elliot's infamous opening line from *The Wasteland* is misattributed to basketball player Charles Barkley as a humorous reference to the nature of information versus misinformation on the internet (MSPA s=6&p=002207). This type of whimsical attitude allows the narrator to be seen more or less an extension Hussie himself, acting as a character within the story but is not altogether an influential force in the narrative events. Hussie's narrative avatar seems more responsive to the story as it unfolds, and does not pretend any knowledge of the plot that isn't already established.

The textual body of *Homestuck* is open to various freedoms allowed by digital presentation. Key plot terms become highlighted or emphasized with glowing colors or bolding, such as the "Ultimate Reward" to be found for any players completing the game (MSPA ?s=6&p=004517). Compared to non-digital mediums, important terms can be animated, and symbols are used within the written narrative or dialogue. The text, while

largely static and capable of translation out of a digital medium, features formatting elements and variations not often seen in printed media, with these variations used towards an enhanced narrative effect.

Unlike the quick and shortened narration usually included interdependently within the space of a typical panel in a graphic novel, *Homestuck* places almost all written dialogue and narration outside the image. There are a few moments within the story where long “recaps” happen that recall and contextualize the story’s events up to that moment with a tediously long summary. We are still meant to take each page as a unified visual and text, but the image itself is largely free from literary narration. This is not a difference of presentation that necessarily relies on *Homestuck* being digitally constructed, but it reflects the freedom of visual space within a particular webpage, where there is room for more lengthy sections of prose among short descriptions.

Dialogue is not dictated by the game’s narrator or the reader’s commands; the characters are written as entities on their own, with unique personalities. They do not speak for much of the story to each other, and instead communicate by typing messages to each other. Before they physically meet and speak, the dialogue mechanism the characters use emulates online instant messaging, as described by Hussie:

The instant messaging style definitely draws from 1999 more than 2009. AIM and ICQ rather than Skype and whatnot. This too is a bit of a technological throwback, like so much of the gaming satire. [...] It's a type of interaction which has given rise to some totally distinct kinds of social relationships, blossoming out of nowhere in the late '90s, early 2000s, and

they have actually become the defining types of relationships for so many young people today. It's almost unbelievable to consider how many young people there are now who consider their best friends to be people online, who they've never met. (Hussie, "Interview")

The main characters all know of and communicate with each other primarily through text based digital means within the confines of the narrative. The two main messaging utilities, called Pesterchum and Trollian, are the main tools of communication for the characters. As Hussie mentioned above, these elements are crucial in a narrative sense since *Homestuck*, as a work of literature and as part of its plot, focuses on bringing distant youths together through their digital adventure, moving beyond the fanciful exchanging of jokes and ideas to complex plans and plots, all typed out and sent to each other textually for most of their adventure.

These characters do not get to meet in person for quite some time, finally "unlocking" the ability to talk directly to each other much later in the story (MSPA ? s=6&p=006194). This is a joke referring to the very fact that nearly all of any character's dialogue is not actually spoken, but typed and sent between each other through their preferred online chatting program. But this is also reflective of digital communication on the whole, which is still largely textual despite advances in video and voice communications online. The characters' dialogue appears as a transcribed "chat logs" of the characters conversations in panels where characters talk, each character's text in its own distinct color, each with their own username, and each with their own grammatical style and typing quirks which give the very words of each character a distinct visual accent that is not usually emphasized in most graphic novels. Here we find that the text

itself becomes accented by the character's typing style, giving their typed words more of a unique voice even within a homogenized textual form of interaction.

This uniquely digital form of communication between characters also has implications within the narrative, such as when characters cannot get to a computer to respond to another inquiring on their whereabouts. Interestingly enough, presenting dialogue through chats and messaging logs is not a dialogue device that requires the story be told or published digitally; however within the story it is a dialogue form that can only be carried out in some sort of digital fashion, be it computer or cell phone. The entire mechanism for dialogue between characters reflects a connection and friendship that is both entirely digital and entirely textual; their voices are not spoken but typed. Similarly, they do not seem to speak to their parents, who instead opt to communicate via note (MSPA ?s=6&p=001912). This places an emphasis on digital and textual communication, heightening the physical distance between characters and heightening how friendships grow and react if carried out primarily textually; the kids are modern day digital pen pals, however the flow of their exchanges are not handwritten letters with weeks of delay between responses, but a fast, immediate notification for either characters communicating.

Besides dialogue, the story's narrator is the primary purveyor of information in the story. As previously mentioned, the narrator is an aware extension of Hussie managing the story's progression. The narrator also is something of a character in the story, represented by an avatar of Hussie acting as an entity with the "voice of God," reacting to the readers and characters through the narrative text. The narrator is presented in a persistent sense of aloofness regarding the plot and the characters, sometimes

encouraging their progress while at other times questioning their efforts. The narrator claims having no direct influence on the narrative, asserting that the reader, i.e. the player, is still guiding the characters through the story, and that the story reacts and grows in response to the reader.

This omnipresent sense of narration may lead one to think the narrator is directing the story's progression, but this is not so clear-cut. Rather, the narrator directs how the story is *written* and *described*; by having the narrator contain a unique voice within the story as something of a commentator or spectator, a sensation develops when reading that the story unfolds as you proceed, rather than merely being a predetermined structure. This sensation is more akin to a dynamic narrator or directing force found in story-driven video games, refocusing the player on their current mission or goal. There is one time where Hussie admits that his self-aware narrator does have an impact on the story, but limits that impact to the space of "one yard," which we later find is an actual distance relevant to how the characters all come together in the final act (MSPA ? s=6&p=005558).

The narrator also provides the clearest notion for readers that the story they are reading is attempting to imitate a game. Whenever a character becomes introduced, the narration says "you are now this character" and asks "what will you do?" The following command links will then supposedly guide the character into that action, and the narrator commenting in turn on the results. By directly addressing readers like this, the reader has a stake in the character's actions and how those actions translate over the course of the narrative. When the command linking to the next page is not acting as a command given by the reader, the command is an arrow symbol denoted by "=>". These command links

indicate the narration is continuing its part in divulging the story's progression, as opposed to reacting to the reader issuing commands. The narrative voice is in itself very important for keeping the tone and format of *Homestuck* as a written narrative imitating a game clear. This is crucial, as the narrator consistently creates an illusion that the story actively and dynamically involves readers as it progresses, but creates expectation instability when navigating across panels.

More than Comics on a Webpage – in Summation

Visually, *Homestuck* features many essential elements of graphic narratives. The artistic style and character depictions appear to be largely cartoon based, but the very nature of *Homestuck* as a digitally crafted story allows for a wide amount of variety and flexibility in its presentation. Much of the story progresses through standard “panel” pages, combining a simple image with some sort of narrative text or dialogue. Elements of typical comics translate to a degree, but *Homestuck* is created aware of the potential provided by digital production. A high level of image editing and recycling takes place, and the page layout organizing the story is just as important as the content within the page.

Through just images and text, there is much variance found in how Hussie tells his online tale – at its heart, *Homestuck* is a long standing graphic narrative. But the internet allows for more traditionally static media types, text and images, to find new contexts and relationships that simply cannot be duplicated on a physical page, and *Homestuck* finds creative ways to break out of traditional graphic narrative patterns.

Navigating a comic shaped like a website (or a website that is shaped like a comic) is an entirely different experience from a physical book. Yet, the standard methods and practices in creating a successful comic are not lost digitally, and can actually be amplified for a greater effect. The format of bringing graphic narratives online has the potential to allow readers to engage and experience the story presented to them in uniquely. As we continue, we will begin to find is that the inclusion of animated panels only foreshadows the longer length animated and interactive segments. Ultimately, *Homestuck* complicates its graphic narrative core with multimedia elements, partly for entertainment and reader engagement model, but the classic foundation of the narrative lay within the realms of a graphic novel fusing with a digital format. In a broader sense, *Homestuck*'s adherence to the graphic novel format for most of its story is somewhat conservative – Hussie himself may be resistant to adopt an entirely animated or interactive mode for what he hopes to accomplish with *Homestuck*, and perhaps the digitization of his story, while vital to its unique structure, leans for a simpler nostalgia found in simpler, more traditional media.

Section 3 – The Video and the Game – “Ascend”

Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell, in their paper on the shifting features of digital literature, nicely sum up the effects of fusing games and narratives within digital works:

[O]ne of the most significant and exciting tendencies within the realm of digital creativity has been the amalgamation of narrative and ludic elements. As in the case of the infinitely re-definable and thus

controversial concept of the “cyborg” (hybrid creatures situated on a continuum between nature and technology), we are dealing with a spectrum of creative artefacts, which are located somewhere in-between the two poles of rule-based “game” and story-driven “narrative”. Likewise, the concept of literary “textuality” has never been so open to multimodal, multilayered semiotic analysis, and the interpretive importance of visual (static and animated), auditive and haptic elements in text interaction cannot be emphasised strongly enough. After all, due to its underlying matrix – the binary digital code – digital textuality not only invites, it demands inclusive interpretation so as to make medium-specific semiotic interplay more than just the sum of its individual elements.

(Ensslin and Bell)

With digital media, the term digital stems from the fact that all electronic data is that of binary code, zeros and ones, on and off pulses firing incredibly rapidly in complex patterns that can be transmitted and broken down via network. The very notion of digital media pivots on this fact that the media is no longer tangible, but what can be called *informational*. The contents of a physical book and that of an e-book are similar in terms of the pure information found within either format, but the structure or methodology of relaying that information differs. This different structure then both allows and requires a different level of reader interaction and engagement, dependent on the media forms utilized. The information can be the same, but its transmission changes.

Reader interaction has been shown to have less of a direct narrative impact on *Homestuck*, although the format still presumes the reader as a “player” of the narrative

game. While there is specific game related language and terminology used, *Homestuck* is not itself a video game and still is largely read and experienced passively. However, readers still do interact with the *Homestuck* experience on two other, non-narrative driven fronts, a contributory interaction (mostly with art and music contributions from fans that are included in the narrative) and a experiential interaction (engaging with the multimedia areas of the narrative that require interaction to “progress” through the narrative). In this section, I will analyze the dramatic and important leaps in the media complexity within the story within the context of the narrative itself, and with our experience of digital media at large. *Homestuck*, as it progresses, not only becomes more narratively complex, but incorporates animated, audio, and interactive game segments to provide context and reader engagement that could not otherwise be achieved. This complication places the narrative experience and control into a realm of “analog/digital translation” as T. Brown neatly summarizes. This realm is a realm of many modern digital media forms, and *Homestuck* embraces this boundary and continues to blur traditional narrative media forms of text and image with animation, audio, and sound, in order for readers to further engage with the breach of digital media forms merging into the typically physical and analog world of text and graphic (Brown, 1).

Moving Pictures

Already we can see how *Homestuck* features elements that allow it to be called a graphic narrative – it features images and text to convey a complete narrative experience, one that is uniquely digital and representative. However, *Homestuck* in its current form does not readily translate to a static image and text experience, as within the narrative

there exists the full length animated and interactive segments that make *Homestuck* an amalgam of digital media narrative experience.

Animation has an intrinsic relationship with the static image. Most animation is merely just a series of images played in rapid succession to create the illusion of movement. The simpler panels of *Homestuck* that feature motion reflect this, but each animated panel is itself made of many separate image layers strung together and played back. But with the sometimes slow, sometimes erratic, and sometimes imperceptible moving panels, these animated panels are more or less stiff – they could lose their motion aspect and retain much of the same information. To differentiate, animation is connecting drawn images strung together to imitate motion, whereas video is a collection of quick photographs in succession. Both attempt to imitate a flow of time between their images for readers to experience during live viewing; this imitation is facilitated by the controlled timing between frames, as opposed to the less pronounced gutter connections found between traditional comic images (Sobchack 145). Both animation and comics attempt to draw relation between images in juxtaposition, but it is animation that has the image become a new one to be experienced in real time, rather than a second static image one must progress to.

Homestuck does not feature any recorded video, and instead is peppered with animations. The smallest ones are interchangeable with the smaller movements found in animated panels; the largest animation thus far is well over ten minutes long, occurring at the story's climax. Many animations feature sound, but not all: the ones that do have their leading commands preceded by a [S] to indicate sound is available on said page.

Compared to the simple moving .gif images, the animations are done in Adobe Flash; the

interactive game segments also are created and coded through Flash, although the animating is largely done by Hussie, with coding left to others on his creative team. Initially, *Homestuck* was to be entirely created through Flash, but Hussie began and ended this format experiment briefly before reverting to his illustrative roots, saving the animations and interactive moments for more vital locations (Hussie FLASH).

Animations allow those viewing the narrative to experience important moments alongside the characters that are depicted in a real time fashion (Sobchack 147). Animation, similar to any motion picture, allows readers to view and experience the events of the narrative *as they are explicitly unfolding*. Within *Homestuck*, animations tend to appear only when required, or when images alone cannot suffice for readers to grasp the events at hand. Since most quick actions are accomplished by the quicker animated .gif images, the flash animations are usually reserved for more complex action as well as wherever sound is deemed necessary. The decision on how to present a particular panel is under Hussie's jurisdiction entirely, and the early reader commands could only do so much in terms of triggering an animated segment. An example of a simple command resulting in a more complex animated panel can be found on the first page with sound, when John displays a proficiency in playing piano (MSPA ? s=6&p=001977). While the animation is a simple loop of John's hands moving across the piano keys, the music that accompanies becomes something of a theme for John throughout the story. Audio often is used to create another layer of digital connection and association, as a book could not readily associate a particular musical energy to events or characters in the narrative.

The piano scene is arguably the first flash segment in the story, but the first true animation appears early in the narrative, when John exits his house to gather a package from the mailbox. The piano scene does not place much emphasis on the movements involved, and the image of John at the piano could be static with music simply playing in the background. However, a few pages later, John exits his house for the first time in the story. While outside, John can be seen removing his poor disguise and staring at the empty streets in his neighborhood. The scene pans from John glancing at his surroundings to a shot of the homogenous neighborhood itself, before zooming away from the boy in his driveway, finally settling on a patch of blue sky for which the animation to end; the animation is less than thirty seconds long. The story's title appears and the animation ends up resting on a blue sky with a stylized sun icon that proves to be essential to the *Homestuck* mythos later in the story. Accompanying the animation is the faint sound of wind blowing and wind chimes ringing. When the animation finishes, the sound continues playing and a button appears in the bottom right allowing the reader to replay the animation if they so choose (most animations feature this ability) and beneath the animation is a standard chunk of narrative description:

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. (MSPA ?s=6&p=001982)

Already we see an early effect of media forms combining for a cohesive narrative effect. Reading the description of the emptiness surrounding John is only emphasized by

the looping sound of the wind as it sets off the wind chimes. His curious stare out into the barren streets heightens the already emphasized phrase: desolation. The effect overall makes John seem very insignificant, a part of a sprawling and generic community of homes that seem devoid of life. The final effect of this animation is one of isolation, an effect achieved fully by the short surveying animation and the accompanying sounds. This introductory animation subordinates the world surrounding John, so that he appears to be highlighted in an empty neighborhood. While we do not know for certain if his neighbors even exist, this animation at least makes clear they will not be an important part of the John's story to come. The animation alongside the narrative description makes it clear John and the other characters are relatively alone when compared to the world at large; their journey won't be through the emptiness of their neighborhoods or the world at large, but a more personal journey to find meaning and purpose amidst a physical world that they seem removed from, or at least, seems removed from their largely digital world.

Most animations are shorter - less than a minute. Animations only typically appear when action is required alongside sound. In most cases, the animations allow a single complex scene or series of actions to be given to the reader within one panel, as opposed to several. This affects how the story is experienced, as animations typically have a lot more information included within them at faster paces, and for most of them cannot be paused. Some animations do loop though, as seen in a scene where Jade, a friend of John's, consults one of her rubber band reminders regarding John's future battle with some ogres (Jade has the ability to some of the early events in the story). This animated scene features John, well equipped and angry, fending somewhat poorly against two giant ogres, which at that point in the story are the largest enemies he or anyone has

encountered. The animation features a frantic rock and roll rendition of John's theme from the previous Piano scene, and is looped as a constant scene of John attempting to attack, being thwarted and nearly downed before being revived and heading back into the fray. Not only does the animation begin somewhat unexpectedly after an initial image of Jade consulting her reminders, but it loops seamlessly, as if the battle had no real beginning or end. This solidifies this scene as something of an ethereal memory, an animation in position as being both a reminder for Jade and a depiction of John's struggle – the animation we see could in fact be what she remembers of her premonition, or it could be a loop of one of John's locked in one of his many "battles of futility." Animations become used as a means to revisit and reconstruct events in the narrative that aren't shown or explained directly.

For readers confronted with an energetic animation breaking the rhythm of the text, the animations not only allow for more to be done through the character's actions, but provide a non-static vantage point into the story itself. Animations break the expectations of how the narrative is told and progresses, and Hussie has a particular taste for playing with various forms. We're not just watching moving images of the characters in their rooms, but experiencing their memories, dreams, what they see, what they encounter in a real time fashion. Through animations we can also get a dynamic form that allows the abstract game world to emerge for readers as an extension of the narrative's self-aware nature that it is, at its core, a story within a website. Within such a long standing narrative consisting mostly of passive images, seeing the physics and characters of the world of *Homestuck* in motion allows readers to engage with the story on an active level, both allowing immersion and separation between the narrative, the characters, and

the readers; at particular points in the story, this focus can be highlighted or discarded through the animation. Animation puts the reader in a passive viewing role, but *Homestuck* could not exist purely in an animated form; the experience provided by navigating it as a traditional text allows digital input to keep the passivity of the reader low and engagement high (Sobchack). Thus, the moments when animations do occur create energy within the narration and a realm of experience for audiences that is valuable for important moments but not every moment within the narrative.

The Audio Addition

Sound and music go hand in hand with most modern animation, and *Homestuck* features audio additions that extend the reader experience and creates thematic backgrounds for characters, as well as allowing an extended realm for fans to play with the elements introduced in the narrative. As seen before, the sounds used can influence the mood of the animation and help emphasize a particular emotion or action within a particular panel – this is a given with audio in many media, but *Homestuck* allows audio to be formed for the story externally, as well as using audio as a structure for animations. Many longer animated segments feature sound, and the process with introducing sound into the story is an example of a contributory effect of the audience; most of the sound and music found within *Homestuck* is contributed by fans and independent artists (MSPA [soundcredits.html](#)). For shorter animations and interactive segments, the music is often an accompaniment that helps illustrate the emotions and actions of the particular scene. With both longer or shorter musical additions, the songs and sounds used emerge from fans that arrange and contribute their music, but do not know in what way it will be incorporated into the story (if at all). This inclusion of a digitally connected fan base and

their art allows a relationship between the narratives continued progress and the creative contribution of the audience, if they choose to contribute and are chosen. This newfound encouragement for contributory creativity is a newfound and often underappreciated quality of our connections with the digital world; connectivity and digital forms allow an and encourage us to connect, collaborate, create, and share.

The music is often designed and created to create the official soundtrack to *Homestuck*. Beyond what songs are featured in pages, readers who are musicians have created a large number of official *Homestuck* albums and volumes of songs that exist to illustrate the universe and atmosphere of the world within the story. While the songs that will be used in particular pages are commissioned with specific timing and sounds in mind, Hussie leaves the artists to their own efforts when creating the music. The songs can all be purchased and the artists compensated through the official sound portal that can be found through a link on *mspaintadventure.com*. The musical arrangements used in the animated and interactive segments are notable in that Hussie shapes much of the animation around the ebb and flow of the music (MSPA ?viewpage=new). The digital facilitates here a positive contributory connection between current and talented fans, the narrative, and other fans listening to the material. This new introduction of a bridged digital relationship is good on a new digital economic fashion, but also one completely aided by digital ease of information.

Homestuck is not unique for combining animated segments with music, but within the confine of a large mostly static narrative, areas that feature animation and sound stand out. While the benefits of animation can allow readers to engage with complex scenes in a more manageable fashion, the effect of sounds and music are less required. However,

the inclusion of sound in *Homestuck* reflects both areas of reader interactions, where readers contribute the soundtrack for other readers to experience. In a sense, the soundscape of *Homestuck* is entirely that of the fans and audience, and since Hussie times his animations around the pacing of the songs, the music that accompanies the narrative is one designed for the narrative entirely by a creative force that is not the author. The audio layer is one of the crucial ways fans of *Homestuck* were invited into its production process, as the audio accompanies the narrative but doesn't explicitly shape the plot. Rather, it helps shape the multimedia form that reflects the digital realms ability to reinvigorate how digital media fosters connectivity. The soundscape and digital artist community is created alongside its fan base, all from a digital connection fostered by *Homestuck's* inclusion of fan created music.

An Aside – Instrumentation, and Remix

As we've seen with John, each of the four main characters plays an instrument that is reflected within the story through musical themes that become repeated and remixed as each character progresses in the narrative. As we saw previously, John's piano scene is but an example of a scene where the sound is used to help characterize a character. Rose, the second main kid to be introduced, plays the violin (MSPA ?s=6&p=002122). Jade, the final of the four main kids to be revealed, plays the flute and "eclectic" guitar, which is a highly modified electric guitar fastened with robotic and machine augmentations (MSPA ?s=6&p=002722). Dave, who's introduced officially as the third man Kid, is something of an aspiring DJ and instead plays and mixes samples on a digital sampler. His musical page is one of the more intriguing, as instead of showing the characters playing their instrument, we are given a page where the reader can play

with his sampler and produce looped songs based on the pre-programmed samples (MSPA ?s=6&p=002238).

Not only is this a reflection of Dave's future role in the story as someone consumed with looping through time travel, it is one of the simpler and earlier areas where the interactive Flash animation is more focused on readers playing around with the interactive page, rather than just displaying an animation with sound. Dave's sampler allows for more of an interactive instrument page versus Rose's violin or John's piano, and it reflects the sampler being an instrument of timed loops, buttons, and switches. It's a postmodern instrument focused on remixing, and by giving players a hands on control of this instrument, we see a different experience to be found between classical instruments and modern music production. Particularly, many of the established songs and themes introduced early in the narrative become fodder for remixes and reinterpretations by other musicians. This reflects the fluidity of media in our current culture, where songs produced for one effect can inspire and become material for another artist's effect, and it's unusual to see this mechanism used and even encouraged to create a dynamic and evolving "sound scape" that accompanies the narrative's continued progression.

Animated Ascension

The animated segments are few and far between within the main body of the narrative, but critical moments do happen within animations that would result in a misunderstanding or lacking of a complete understanding of the story. These crucial animations typically are the ending cap to the main acts, unofficially titled "end of act"

animations. These animations historically take a long time to produce, putting the story in temporary hiatuses and placing large real time gaps between points in the story for readers following the story during its production. For a digital story that is post production, this hiatus is never felt, but it is an immediate effect on readers of the story as it is “live.” This distinction and blurring of immediate and delayed digital gratification is only fitting given our ever growing cultural desire for constant feedback and gratification.

The “end of act” animations appear at pivotal points in the story, with each act’s ending trying to tie together the previous act while laying groundwork for the story’s progression into the next. Unlike other animations and panels, which seem to emerge from the result of the reader’s progression through the text, these animations often exist as a summarization of the effects of the previous act’s conflicts while introducing the next act to be explored. The links leading to every “end of act” animation merely show the title of the animation. These animations are given titles related to the growth and progression of the story itself and the characters, with names like “Ascend,” “Enter” “Descend” and “Cascade.” These titles reflect typical directions in narratives; Cascade is arguably the climax of the story thus far, and as the longest and most developed animation, its effects on tying together the narrative will be explored in this sub section.

For longer sections of narrative, particularly following the complex events of the previous Act, the “end of act” animations are crucial for audiences and provide a neatly wrapped package to both cap the Act and lead into the events of the next. While most “end of act” animations accomplish the intended and similar effect, the most important and complex animation occurs at arguably the climax of action in the narrative. This animation, entitled “Cascade” again exists outside the realm of user interaction – it is not

the result of a command from the prior pages (MSPA cascade.php?s=6&p=6009). The pages prior to Cascade actually undermine the “command” process, featuring links displaying the standard “= =>” arrows in a disjointed fashion, for example “= >= <<” (MSPA ?s=6&p=006005). At this point in the story, many different timelines are intertwined, and the narrative process itself has become altered by Doc Scratch’s narrative interlude, who takes over when the Kids actively break the game world in order to try to change their seemingly doomed situation. The broken look to the links reflects that the game is breaking as the plot continues, but also reflects a loss of any semblance of reader control; it’s as if the inertia from the multitude of plots and subplots are instead guiding the action, to the point of almost breaking the website’s game-like façade.

When Cascade first plays, it begins as a standard looking animated sequence, but compared to previous animations within the narrative, it is vastly longer in scope. After the animation first loads, we can begin watching it, or jump ahead to a particular section of the animation. Clocking in at near 14 minutes long, Cascade is the culmination of many questions and rising tensions for the characters, and the sections it is broken up into mirror the Act structure of the entire story. As a point of interest, the hiatus before Cascade’s initial release and the expected influx of readers watching the large animation drove Hussie to seek external hosting resources so the animation could be smoothly uploaded and viewed by fans. Instead, the sheer influx of viewers crashed the animation hosted on Newgrounds.com, a website noted for it’s large amount of user created flash animations and games (Hussie “Newgrounds”). The animations are not only anticipated for their entertainment value, but for their important role for readers seeking a conclusion to the events of the previous Act.

Its loading screen mirrors previous loading screens related to the game world of Sburb, showing a spirograph design that spins and shifting in appearance, as the animation loads “game assets,” loading the actual animation but acting as if it were gearing up to boot a game. Unlike most prior animations, Cascade’s sheer length within the broad narrative warranted giving readers an ability to pause the animation. Its page is uniquely structured, allowing room for the animation to grow and fill the screen as it progresses – a first for the narrative and a reflection of its importance and scope as a climactic animation. The expanding animation also creates an effect that the animation is “breaking” the typical layout and boundaries of previous animations, both to highlight the animation’s importance and also echo the effect of it “overtaking” the website. The animation divulges information and advances plot similarly to the other animations in the narrative, compared to the effort behind trying to sum this critical moment across several panels. Cascade features several different songs mixed together that play over the course of each “section” of the animation, with each section covering a different plotline and connecting it to the other plotlines, connecting them at the climax of the animation and the narrative itself. However, Cascade is unique because at this pivotal moment, we not only get a wrap up of many wandering plot points within one animation, but we once again fall victim to the narrative’s penchant for misdirecting our expectations and playing with the feelings of the reader.

Without delving deep into the plot depicted, Cascade represents the flow and collision of all the plotlines in a critical moment. The Earth Kids and the Troll children conspire to form a plan to try to fix the damage that has been done to their game sessions and gain an advantage over the seemingly omnipotent and unbeatable opponent they have

unwittingly created. However, much like the reader progressing through the narrative, the Kids and Trolls soon discover their attempts to save their game session were predetermined and orchestrated by Doc Scratch, calling both them and the reader “suckers” for thinking their dilemma would be solved so easily. In fact, the events depicted within Cascade do resolve some of the tensions and problems created through the narrative’s first 5 Acts, but not favorably. Instead we find at this climactic moment that although many strands of tension are resolved, there is more to this story to be had. Only an animated sequence could within the scope of a few minutes cover so much ground in an emotionally impacting way, not only showing the kid’s efforts seeming all for naught, but the reader’s belief that things may initially improve. This reflects the struggles found so often in *Homestuck*, where the author and the reader seem at odds with whom actually is controlling the story.

As an animated sequence, Cascade is far greater in scope than any animations before it. It is a short film somewhat embedded into the overall graphic novel-like narrative. It is a revealing summation to the many questions readers may have, while also creating an atmosphere of futility surrounding the machinations of the characters, and by extension, the reader themselves who have indirectly “controlled” and “commanded” the characters to this point. It’s an involved and important area of the narrative and neatly ties up the narrative, albeit in a disorienting fashion. It is the quintessential animation of the narrative, and for a work like *Homestuck* that fuses graphic narratives, animation, and games, it is only fitting the most complex and tension filled moments within the narrative be explored through a lengthy animation.

Playing a Narrative

After exploring some of the examples of animation and its effect on broadening the narrative scope, the remainder of this section I'll discuss some additional interactive segments within the narrative, including two larger game-like panels, in order to argue that as full realized games within the narrative, readers are extended a level of controlled interaction that enhances how the text unfolds. These pages typically allow the reader to actively control the character through the interactive Flash animation on the panel. In stark contrast to the perceived control the narrative vehicle offers, these game segments allow more controlled interaction and direction of the characters throughout the narrative. There are two main types of game pages in *Homestuck*, those that act simply as interactive "toys" embedded into the narrative, and those that present a game to be explored or solved for the narrative to properly proceed.

As seen earlier in the discussion on audio, many smaller interactive segments coincide with opportunities for the audio landscape of *Homestuck* to emerge. These smaller interactive pages often serve to do little than entertain the reader and perhaps disrupt expectations within the narrative. One quirky, but exemplary page comes within the narrative shortly after John enters the game and encounters the game world's pesky but relatively harmless imp enemies. These enemies make no short work of ransacking John's home, and when John notices the imps playing with his pogo ride outside, we're given a small animated page where we get to play as the imps riding John's pogo ride in his yard (MSPA ?s=6&p=002376). This page prompts us with something of a mini-game embedded into the narrative; the challenge is to hit the arrow keys on the reader's keyboard in order to direct the imp's bouncing on the pogo ride, with a fanciful score

counter that goes up as one presses keys, and an arbitrary 30 second limit is placed.. After bobbling the imp upon the ride for a few moments, the reader must resume the normal narrative. Being that we never control enemy characters directly, putting their only player controlled interaction in a non-critical page only reinforces the imps as an entity within the game world the kids enter, and they are not to be controlled, directed, or “played” as the normal characters appear to be. The imps are, for all intents and purposes, just imps, and are not avatars with which readers can directly play or adopt as an actual entrance *into* the game world. The smaller interactive pages exist to reflect an idea of digital distractions, giving a brief excursion for readers within the confines of a larger narrative without impacting the narrative itself.

Beyond the smaller interactive pages, there are also longer game segments where the reader finally is able to act as the “player” of *Homestuck*, and guide the characters through a series of narrative events while playing an actual explorative game. These panels are structured that as the reader explores and interacts with them, the narrative continues as planned; skipping these game pages could result in missing important narrative information. These moments where the narrative does allow for longer extents of play help foster a role playing experience for readers. Although the narrative is structured as if we’re commanding the characters, the few interactive animations where we can actually “embody” the characters directly, move them through their world, and interact with the environment and other characters in the narrative as if we were actually donning the character’s skin and entering the events in the narrative. Compared to a traditional passive reading, where readers must do the work inside their heads to draw the events of the narrative, the digital allows the narrative to exist as a world already

available for the readers to further explore. This extends a new “reality” from the narrative, a realm to be experienced by the audience rather than merely giving the ingredients for them to imagine the reality of the narrative (Crockett 223).

There are two main roleplaying game sections worth examining as they put the reader in an area of play within the narrative at hand.. The first occurs not too long before the smaller imp mini game, appearing just after Act 2 begins and we find that John has successfully entered the world of the game (MSPA ?s=6&p=002153). What we discover is that alongside his own entry into the game world, his house was also transferred into the game. This page allows the reader to navigate John’s house freely, entering and exiting any room. The keyboard or mouse may be used to direct John, and objects can be examined. When objects are clicked, a prompt appears as if someone is asking John about the object, to which clicking the object elicits a response from the narrative itself, speaking for John. The animation features a minimal user interface for readers, with a button that explains the controls to the game. Readers are expected, and encouraged here to engage with the narrative in a more involved play, and exploratory fashion, further complicating who’s actually in “control” of *Homestuck* and its inclusion of digital interactivity within a complex narrative structure.

Although it does seem like we’re directly controlling John, what we find is that we’re merely acting as another character that is currently viewing and interacting with John via text commands. The commands that seemingly guide John through this interactive panel are usually preceded with phrases like “BOY” and “YOU THERE.” Here, it’s as if the character that is controlling John seems to lack knowledge on humans and their customs, for example the command that asks John about a potted plant refers to

it as a “vegetable” if the plant is clicked. This phantom character, through which we are vicariously directing John, is later revealed to be one of the entities of the Sburb game world. These characters are called Exiles, whom have an entangled role in the plot and are given terminals with which they can direct the main Kids by imputing their own commands through a computer terminal.

The structure of this animation is then done largely for a narrative purpose, so we can witness that the Kids cannot be directly controlled by us, the reader, but can actually be controlled by a similar mechanism to the “suggestion box” dynamic by *other* characters in the narrative. This occurs at other points where we direct John through the first area of the planet his home was transported to, although another Exile seems to be the one “directing” John at this point (MSPA ?s=6&p=003258). This page allows the audience to not only control John, but allow him to attack and engage the roaming imps while also interacting with the environment.

Although there are important narrative developments and plot elements that get explained in these exploration games, they are not presented as challenges for the reader. These animated game pages exist largely as areas for exposition to occur. They also can be skipped, to the detriment of the reader’s understanding, but on the large scale exist as something of a fan service, giving readers a sliver of the experience of *actually* playing *Homestuck* as it might exist as a game. But these exploratory games also are important, as they allow the reader’s exploration and effort to translate to a more canonical understanding of the larger mythos at hand, and further complicating the idea of who really is “in control” of *Homestuck*’s progression.

The alternative form of longer interactive game can be seen later in the narrative, where the reader again assumes control of a character, exploring their world and interacting with other objects and characters. The difference emerges in the few interactive areas that are structured as games with puzzles requiring solutions in order to properly progress the narrative. The goal is not just exploration and exposition, but one with a directed and planned challenge for readers seeking to fully engage the narrative at hand through a meta-experience of the Sburb game and its puzzles. The avatar of Jane allows players to act as her in the narrative, sleuthing the clues and figuring out a puzzle that the supposed world of Sburb is rife with.

One important series of this type of game occurs at the beginning of Act 6 Act 3. Jane, who is John's counterpart and technically the Kid version of John's deceased grandmother, enters her own game session of Sburb. Unlike any of the planets we've thus far seen, Jane's planet seems devoid of life and is peppered with cryptic ruins (MSPA ? s=6&p=006720). After the animation shows her entrance to the planet, instead of being able to actively control her motions, we see arrows that appear in the animation that readers can click and direct Jane to the next area in the animation. The exploration done here is not purely for exposition again, as Jane must try to locate a way of reaching her home after becoming separated from it – her entrance into the digital world of the game is a bit different from John's, who enters “stuck” in his home. In this game, readers click the arrows to direct her across areas of the planet, scoping a path through the ruins, requiring her to gather specific keys and position lanterns in a specific fashion in order light up the proper path. For one of the first interactive games with a more cryptic design, it requires players to experiment with the game's puzzle in order to progress through the

narrative, and its concern with illumination and exploration only fit the further idea of a necessary experimentation with multimedia digital and analog forms.

What's interesting is that the puzzle built into this point of the narrative can be skipped; when Jane's exploration panel is completed, clicking the final door loads the next page for the reader, at which point the narrative asks if you have actually reached the end of the previous page's game. If the player was unable to progress, a step by step walkthrough for the game is given (MSPA ?s=6&p=006721). This form of game is the most direct example of presenting an actual solvable puzzle type game for the audience, but is followed by the narrative giving a means to bypass the puzzle. Unlike a typical game, where exploration and puzzle solving are intrinsic to the gaming experience, *Homestuck*'s main goal is to tell a story. If areas of interaction stifle the reader or actual impede progression through the story, then their effect on readers is not a positive one on the flow of the narrative. For these exploration segments, skipping them is not advised for narrative reasons, so ensuring all readers are able to navigate them is crucial. The narrative can be receptive, encouraging, or at least accessible for most readers through its digital design; the staggering nature of the plot or the complexity of game elements need not be a barrier for the audience. Digital experiences, be it narrative or interactive games, can be expansive but also receptive and conditioned to particular needs of the audience – a huge jump from the static uniformity in print which requires uniformity in its readerships engagement..

Here we find *Homestuck* at the limits of its role as a game for readers, but still fuses multimedia, interactivity, and game elements to create an entirely new narrative presentation. *Homestuck* adopt the interactive and entertainment aspects of a game. Like

the animated segments, the interactive moments within *Homestuck* contribute to the larger narrative at hand, extending a unique commitment for the audience reading the text. However, interactivity can only go so far to drive and develop a complex plot and particular narrative events. The areas opened up for readers to interact with are largely staged as areas of exploration and exposition in areas new and unfamiliar, allowing more background on other events and concepts within the narrative. There is no point within the narrative experience where the audience ever shapes events to come; however, by including interaction and games in particular moments within the narrative, there are many examples where digital narratives can expand the experience from traditional exposition. The readers cross into the role of the character “in” the game with a particular challenge or task at hand to accomplish. As we try to understand our relationship to the character we’re exploring the game world with on the screen, we find ourselves already within the digital dilemma at large, tasked with understanding and refining this connection between our own digital and analog identities.

Multimedia Disruption – a Summation

As *Homestuck* takes liberty with its digital format, we find that mixing media types puts readers in new roles of interaction and narrative engagement and reflects changes within our digitizing culture at large. Brief miniature pages of animation or game-like interaction help break up the flurry of standard panels, while longer game segments give readers a direct experience of the story and allows for a non-critical but useful vessel to give the audience a more involved experience in the narrative. Controlling characters and clicking the panels of a narrative allows a certain digital embodiment, where immersion is key to continuing the sustained interest required to

push through an otherwise lengthy and complex narrative. We find *Homestuck* achieves a more involved literary immersion through controlled areas of interactive segments (Andrews 54). Readers who play the narrative do so to understand the narrative, not out of a drive to win or overcome the narrative. If challenges are present within the interactive segments, these challenges exist as a vehicle of narration, pacing the reveal of information.

As with including sound and animation, the video game infusion within *Homestuck* allows it to shine as a hybrid digital work that focuses readers into a particular relationship between the narrative's normal progression and the reader's method of engagement. At some point, the reader must acknowledge they are taking a narrative break to explore the character's game world, and that their exploration exists primarily as a form of literary immersion. The reader explores John's house and solves the puzzles of Jane's world because of the narrative puzzle that *Homestuck* is, rather than existing as an actual playable game. Just as animations and music help paint a world of events within the narrative, the interactive segments too act as an extension of *Homestuck* using digital media forms to draw readers into the narrative while still keeping them outside and aware of the narrative's primary delivery through a website. Digital media strengthens the uniqueness of *Homestuck*, while also drawing awareness to its enigmatic nature as something of a new Chimera of digital narration that challenges how readers experience a narrative, and to a broader extent, how we understand and adapt to the encroaching digital boundaries on our non-digital lives, and how we continue to face worldly representations in a digital medium.

Section 4 – The Internet and Digital Experience - “The Medium.”

With a foundation now in the media and formats used in telling the story and creating the experience of *Homestuck*, we are left with two final areas to explore: the narrative itself and the larger questions the narration explores regarding our relationship with digital realities. To begin, an overview of the plot structure, in relation to the segmented acts of *Homestuck* will be required. In analyzing the plot, characters, symbols, themes, and other important elements will need to be explored to some degree in relation to the larger purpose of *Homestuck*. In no way can I succinctly sum the entire plot, so a more nuanced approach to dissecting it must be done. Initially, an overview of the plot is needed, followed by exploring the large character cast, the game world they inhabit, and the more cryptic mythos of the narrative hidden within particular visuals.

A Quest of Futility?

As I’ve briefly sketched out in the onset of our examination of *Homestuck*, the plot can be boiled to one line: *Homestuck* is about a boy and his friends playing a game together online. At face value, this definition could render any number of different tales, and could not prepare readers for the torrents of subplots and entangled timelines that emerge, but it is a nice overview to keep in mind. At its surface, *Homestuck* is about a modern day rite of passage for many young people, making and sustaining online friendships, at a time when life becomes particularly complicated quickly. This pacing of young digital lives parallels the initial pacing of *Homestuck*.

The main Kids in the story are John, Dave, Rose, and Jade. Much of the first few Acts of the narrative concerns the kids actually entering the game world; John is first,

then Rose, followed by Dave and finally Jade. Their entrances are not without complication, from Rose losing internet connection due to a storm, losing the vital discs that allow the games installation, and complications from each kids' parent, known as a Guardian. We also begin to learn of the Troll Kids, seeming antagonists for the kids who discourage them and seem to know deeply of their quest before it even occurs.

These first acts allow readers to engage with the game world and their characters in a slowly revealing pace – as the narrative unfolds, more of the game world and the concepts behind *Homestuck*, such as the complex inventory system, becomes second nature for readers. As the narrative progresses, the readers become more aware of the mounting misfortunes and complications surrounding the main Kids' session of Sburb. By way of predestined bad luck, we learn the Kids accidentally render their game unwinnable by creating an unbeatable boss, one that we find disrupts the Troll Kid's session in another universe.

As the Kids scramble to enter their session, battle the growing threats, and formulate a plan of survival, we get a bit of exposition on the Troll Kids, their culture, and their events leading up to their interaction with the Kids on Earth. The introduction of Trolls contrasts Earth culture by highlighting extremities of Earth rituals, but soon find that their bleak situation is not merely due to the misfortune of the Earth Kids, but a larger and more systematic failure of the Sburb game itself ushered in by Doc Scratch, who acts as an extension of his boss's will. This giant, time travelling demon is referred to as Lord English, and his machinations appear to extend as early as the first few panels.

After setting off a plan to successfully reset the Earth Kid's game session, the Kids escape before they are trapped in the reset, and both they and Trolls spend several years travelling through their disconnected game universes to locate a means to defeat Lord English and eventually combine forces. Although the narrative is currently unfinished and on an extended Hiatus after entering its 4th year, we're at a point where Lord English, the final antagonist who set into place the many misfortunes that prevented the success of the Earth Kids, the Trolls, is not only revealed, but explored as a character himself, a controllable "Kid" character much like the Trolls or Humans. As we learn of his conquest, before he sets off on his journey to disrupt the game world of Sburb, and the fabric of existence itself, the final Acts explore the newly reset Earth Universe, its development, and the staging of the final conflicts as loose ends become tied.

At its core, there are many more subplots and important characters that interact with all the Kids, Earth or Troll. The main narrative itself is incredibly dense, but the overall plot follows a pattern of complication. Before a concept of the game becomes fully explained or clear, problems surrounding that concept emerge. Particularly, we find veins of causality that link much of the conflicts within the plot – every character becomes interconnected, and the stakes continue to grow higher, from the fate of Earth, to the fate of the Universe, to the fate of *all potential universes*. The main point to get from the brief summary that *Homestuck* is about "a boy and his friends who play a game together" is that the game they become entangled with is an entrenched system by which the Universe "reproduces." This isn't a game without stakes; *Homestuck* explores a breakdown between digital and real barriers not only within the narrative, but our culture at large. In many cases these breakdowns are confusing and destructive, but they are also

positive and can ultimately facilitate the final success of all the story's characters over the final, almost insurmountable, antagonist embedded into the game that undermines their entire existence. Much like the Kids struggling to overcome incredible odds and an antagonist who's existence is tied to their own, we can find that breaking down distinctions and embracing our new digital culture can be the way to create a better future.

With a basic narrative structure in place, there are three main areas related to plot I'd like to explore. First, we must explore the enigmatic game world of Sburb itself, how it reflects the scope and impact of our growing digital culture. Then, we must examine the characters from a relational standpoint through Sburb, and how their intersecting fates reflect modern networked cultures and digital identities. Finally, I'll examine the multilayered but vitally important recurring symbolic themes of screens, windows, and homes. Depictions of windows frequent *Homestuck* as a counter to the concept of a screen; one allows entry while another allows depictions, however in *Homestuck* they are both frequently represented in somewhat interchangeable fashions, allowing comparisons to be drawn to how we currently relate to worlds on the other side of a window's pane, both real and digital. The suggestion seems to be that the passage allowed by a window parallels the passage to be found through screens; for *Homestuck* the delineation between digital and physical realities is not readily distinct, but areas of separation rich for investigation.

Sburban Jungle

Within the overarching plot of *Homestuck*, a central element to much of the story and its progression is the game world the kids enter by playing Sburb. Sburb, was named as “a sort of deliberately ugly word reminiscent of the name of a Sim game” and was actually a contender as an original title for *Homestuck* (Hussie “Interrogative”). It is highly anticipated by John and several of the other kids as the hot new computer game, despite the fact the Kids have little information prior to its release (MSPA ?s=6&p=001922). When John first receives the game via the mail, it is several days after its initial release. Although reviews for the game were lacking, other players had managed to scrounge together walkthroughs of their initial game experience (MSPA ?s=6&p=002078). However, the kids largely approach the game blind, confused to the gameplay elements that appear immediately before them.

Sburb, as stated earlier in my introduction, is a game concerned with the fate of the universe itself. Although it doesn’t advertise itself as such, Sburb is a game that exists as an intrinsic element to every planet destined to have intelligent life, and appears on every planet within said universe (MSPA ?s=6&p=004153). It is also a game concerned with the creation of entirely new universes if successfully completed; the ability for successful players to create a new universe is what is referred to as “the Ultimate Reward” (MSPA ?s=6&p=004528). This reflects the struggle in contemporary culture to create something “new,” and the desire for every generation to reinvent the world of the previous generations that created them.

Sburb is designed to be won cooperatively, and through a typical game session, the team shapes the universe that is created upon beating the game's final foe. The final reward comes from their entry into the new universe, keeping their newfound skills, powers, and equipment. This also means that every universe was ushered into existence by another set of players, of likely alien races on alien planets, who successfully completed the primary challenges of Sburb and "won" their game sessions. Already we have a fusion of reality and the impacts of the digital, as Sburb not only plays like a game, but has far reaching implications and effects on the very nature of existence for the characters. For them, there is nearly no separation for where the machinations of Sburb end and reality begins – it is the factor of existence, it is the means by which universes reproduce. Unlike our conception of the digital realm being a separation of our physical world, in a sense the characters all exist within a digital world constructed from another game session, their world already programmed to function with and house future Sburb "seeds" to be played and potentially create more universes.

When players begin to play Sburb, we find that not everyone is successful in completing the first main challenge for all players: leaving their planet and entering The Medium, the realm removed from a player's universe, where much of Sburb is actually played. This initial challenge begins as soon as a player launches their Sburb game client, which initially does not seem very impressive (MSPA ?s=6&p=002014). Every game of Sburb, in theory, requires at least two players, a client and a server player. Every player is both a server for someone else, and a client of someone else's server. Cooperation is mandatory for a successful game; through a user interface the server player uses on their computer, they can manipulate the environment of their client. Important resources and

game pieces required to proceed through the game can be dispensed, literally “placed” into the client’s environment at the cost of in game materials the client gathers through battles and adventures. This Ouroboros of gameplay gives a unique chain between client’s and players, whom can chain together in whatever fashion they need, but every player must serve another and must be served by another. As with any cooperative online game, in Sburb no successful player is alone, and no alone player can be successful. However, since Sburb exists where the reality of a videogame meshes with and is capable of altering reality itself, the game can have very real consequences for players who cannot cooperate.

Sburb offers no straightforward insight as to what players are supposed to do – the challenge is cryptic and imposing when the game first begins. Players must figure out the game mechanics fast, as Sburb is also a game which destroys the player’s planet (MSPA ?s=6&p=002156). Client players can have their servers administer several devices into the player’s environment which forms the initial puzzle players must complete to enter The Medium: discovering what the devices do before the timer runs out. When the timer reaches zero, a meteor collides with the client player’s house unless they and their server work together. All successful client players will release their Kernelsprite, a customizable game guide designed to assist the client, while also creating a unique predetermined object the client player must use to officially teleport into The Medium. Kernelsprites can become customized, or prototyped, by any two non-living objects; it’s something of a tradition for players to introduce a deceased relatives or friends as one of the objects that fuses into the Kernelsprite, which effectively brings the deceased back to life and allows the client to communicate properly with their guide

(MSPA ?s=6&p=003989). Sburb treats any object a character could “carry” as having an intrinsic case sensitive eight character code tied to that object; this code, when properly decoded using the in-game devices, produces a copy of this object. This in-game form of alchemy allows the object’s codes’ to be recombined in order to create new codes and hybrid objects; the idea that any unique object in existence can have a predetermined code allows every object to exist digitally, as information that can be recombined on an abstracted information level and decoded into reality. This is a highly postmodern depiction of reality, where information and data stored within an object becomes more valuable than the object itself, and within *Homestuck* part of the challenge for initial readers, and the characters within the narrative, is discovering how to navigate a world where digits, codes, and software seem to provide the building blocks of reality, akin to the concept of post-industrial capitalism’s redefinition and abstraction of substance (Jameson 224).

Stuck in the Middle

The initial turmoil John and Rose experience fumbling with the controls of Sburb over a bad internet connection nearly leaves John doomed; he successfully saves himself at the last moment in the end of Act 1, he and his house becoming transported to The Medium just before the meteor hits. However, when the characters finally are ushered into The Medium, we discover it is a realm removed from, but still connected back to the Kid’s main universe and planet. The Medium exists as a unique dimension separate from all universes, but is one that can communicate and interact with the player’s main universe. Entering the Medium before another player does not disconnect them from each other, as John can still communicate with his friends via the internet, and although

removed entirely from his neighborhood grid, his house still sports electricity. Once in the medium, the Kernelsprite, if it was prototyped before entry, shapes the session's enemies based on the customization done. John's Kernelsprite is customized before entering with an ill-received birthday present, a harlequin doll, and until his teammates enter the medium, John faces a series of imps and ogres sporting jester caps. Once entering the medium and exploring the house at the beginning of Act 2, John prototypes the Kernelsprite a second time after entering with the ashes of his deceased grandmother, fuses the essences of both to provide a helpful, albeit whimsical, explanation of the conception of The Medium:

“JOHN: what? ok, so what is the medium you are talking about?

NANNASPRITE: It is where we are now! A realm that is a ring of pure void, dividing light and darkness. It turns in the thick of The Incipisphere, a place untouched by the flow of time in your universe.” (MSPA ?s=6&p=002321)

John understandably is confused here; his house was teleported “inside” a new dimension created by a game, so he asks if they are actually inside a computer. John's grandmother corrects him, in the typically cryptic nature presumed by most agents of Sburb:

“NANNASPRITE: No, John. You are not inside a computer or software or anything like that! Try not to be so linear, dear. The software that brought you here was merely a mechanism that served as a gateway! Its routines in a way served to invoke this realm's instance, yet it stands independently of any physical machine, and somewhat paradoxically, always has! (MSPA ?s=6&p=002321)”

As we later find, the meteors that crash into Earth every time a player unsuccessfully tries to play Sburb only increases in frequency and severity, eventually covering the planet with craters and rampant destruction. We discover that those meteors are released as a result of the final battle in any game of Sburb, and teleported back in time to the players planet as the very meteors that destroy the planet as the players first begin their game session (MSPA ?s=6&p=003567). This discovery references the paradox of existence John’s grandmother discusses; the game that destroyed the Kids planet was always meant to be played by the players who survive and reach the end of their session of Sburb – the four main Earth Kids. Sburb creates the very existence in which it operates.. This is a reversal of our current experience with digital media and realities, which rely on users outside the actual inner workings of the technology experiencing its effects. Sburb not only blurs the distinctions between digital and physical realities when played, it establishes an *entry* into an alternate digital game dimension. The Medium as a name for this bizarre dimension references the internet itself as an artistic or narrative medium, a space of digital mediation that Hussie himself attempts to cultivate with *Homestuck*. Here, physical reality becomes a post humanist digital realm, indifferent to sentient beings, while a digital reality appears more palatable (Hollinger 208).

An Eternal Game

Sburb, and The Medium, posits players with the goal of reaching Skaia, a “dormant crucible of unlimited creative potential” depicted as an orb with a swirling blue sky with clouds. Skaia exists at the center of The Medium in every Sburb session, and as players begin entering their session, they find themselves on a planet structured primarily for them circling Skaia. The player’s planet and house are placed directly underneath

seven portals floating between their planet and Skaia. Server players must help client players build their homes in order to reach each gate, the game theoretically progressing and increasing in difficulty as players advance and continue to build towards Skaia. Upon finally reaching Skaia, at its center rests a battlefield designed after a chess board that grows in scale and shape with the number of players, where the forces of light and dark exist in an eternal stalemate, which eventually tips toward the side of darkness winning if players do not intervene in time.

Orbiting Skaia in every session are two planets, Prospit and Derse, which house most of the residents of both the light and dark Kingdoms respectively, as well as the “dream” version of each Sburd session’s player, which exists as a means for the player to keep playing while sleeping, and also acting as a “back up life” in case the player dies. The main kingdom residents though are not human; they appear to have a humanoid build covered in a shiny rigid carapace, where the name of their race “Carapacians” is derived. Members of either Kingdom can be equated with chess pieces, pawns in the fight for Skaia lead by their King and Queen. For the Kingdoms of Darkness on Derse, every session has four higher ranking diplomats, denoted by the four main suits of a traditional deck of cards and a general penchant for interfering with the player’s progress. Much of the structure and mythos behind the inner workings of Sburd as a game draw from other, traditional type games such as chess, blackjack, and billiards. Basing certain dynamics of Sburd on the ranking and classification systems found in other common games allows readers to find a familiar grasp on a somewhat complex and often not entirely clear structure behind Sburd.

Important Carapacians later become the Exiles mentioned in Section 3, banished to the player's dead planet, roaming aimlessly until they discover a terminal capable of controlling and directing the main Kids via a typed "suggestion." Ideally, exiles assist the players both during, and after their session in developing a strategy to defeat the Black King. If the Black King is defeated, the players have successfully beat Sburb, and Skaia acts as vessel for their new universe to be born within. In the events of *Homestuck*, no player session has yet to successfully complete their game – while the Trolls did defeat the Black King in their session, creating the Earth Kid's universe, the blunders of the Kids' session of Sburb force the Trolls to flee before claiming their prize of entering the new universe they had created. The Trolls scramble to a leftover meteor within their "completed" session of Sburb, and find themselves trapped in the medium indefinitely. As the Trolls soon learn that the problems both their sessions face are direr than imagined, requiring cooperation across sessions, they decide to cross the vast distances between each game session.

Crossing from one game session into another is trip through the maze of warped space time between each Session, but when navigated correctly, allows the Kids and the Trolls to bridge both their already intertwined fates across different universes. The larger half of Act 6 concerns itself with the Kids and the Trolls taking the time to merge in a shared physical space, while also meeting up with their alternate universe "ancestors." Any Sburb session that becomes "reset" using an in-game failsafe recreates the entire universe that first initiated that Sburb session, genetically recombining the characters' DNA to produce similar, but different alternate versions of themselves. The main Kids swap roles with their parent or grandparent guardian in the newly reset universe, with

their relatives becoming the new Kids in the newly reset universe;. We also learn that the twelve main Trolls are actually the result of their universe becoming reset by their unsuccessful ancestors. The ordeal and sheer time involved for the characters in their Act 6 journey to combine forces puts all eight Earth Kids and all twenty-four trolls on a collision course for a final battle. So we see that this ability to reset the game and finding methods of bridging distances digitally shows the power digital reality can have over a physical one, and although we cannot make such drastic resets in our lives, there are nuances to the digital connections and relationships we build. The characters have to cheat via digital means in order to fix the circumstances of their broken realities. We can reset and recreate our own digital realities as we and other experience them, not to the extent that it mirrors or merges actual reality, but we can influence the perception of actual reality through digital display.

Home, Screens, and Windows – the Separation Connection

In discussions regarding postmodernism, reality as it exists is displaced and replaced by a simulacrum of reality (Hollinger 201). Within the world of *Homestuck*, as we've seen, reality and the simulation of what reality is are not entirely discernible. Instead, *Homestuck* tends to treat its realities as simultaneous, working primarily as related forces that cannot be fully disentangled. However, even though the digital world of games and computers meshes with the entire fabric of existence for the characters, there are still divisions to be found, and these are largely pertaining to cultural and generational gaps between the main universes. Act 6 of *Homestuck* begins just as major barriers begin to break down, and is entitled "Through Broken Glass." Act 6 is where the

major plotlines begin to wind down, while new ones emerge in preparation for all the main characters, Troll and Human, meeting finally in a physical space.

Sburb's logo can be seen from the first panel on a poster in John's room (see Fig 1.) The logo becomes saturated throughout the text, repeated on official Sburb equipment and often used prior to animations as a loading symbol. It also appears as the design of the door the players must open to enter their newly created universe (the door at the end of the Troll's victory was destroyed before they could open it). The logo of Sburb visually fuses the three elements in this subsection's heading: the house, the window, and the screen. Visually, the Sburb logo shows what appears to be a symbol for a home, with four square sections divided from the main logo, with a triangular roof and chimney. One section has a smaller square cut from it, which often rotates and displaces other parts of the logo if animated. The Sburb logo's frequency allows recognition of moments or objects related to the more mysterious mechanisms of the game's inner workings. While screens and windows are easier to merge, the shaping of the symbol as a house reflects the importance of a player's home in his or her journey through a Sburb session; their home teleports into this game dimension, where players must build the home taller in order to properly advance. The case can be made that Sburb, as a game with deep seated ties with the narrative's world, urges an "opening" between players, readers, and anyone seeking connectivity with others through digital space. This opening then would be the displaced miniature square cut into one of the main sections, which may only exist in the universes and sessions covered by course of events in *Homestuck*, as the Sburb sessions involved are all broken to a degree, but in such a way that universes are no longer disconnected.

There are two variants to the logo worth discussing as they reflect *Homestuck's* motif of icons and images becoming rehashed digitally; each variation of the Sburb logo is associated with a particular Universe in the story. The Troll variant of Sburb, which they call "Sgrub", features a the similar fusion of a home and a window, but is purple, with twelve panes instead of four, with the extra eight panes being attached to each side of what would be the Kid's square logo. We also see a variance in the Sburb game released in the reset Kid's universe, which shows a reversed red version of the regular Kid's green Sburb logo. These variances doesn't advance the narrative other than help depict these universes, and their game sessions, are all different sessions, but connected and following the same initial Sburb game format. By being markedly different sessions, we learn that Sburb, while it is a game that is a given for every universe, and will be discovered by those meant to play it and start the challenge of creating a new universe; it is a game that is also shaped by that universe's unique creation circumstances that will shape the session to come. Sburb as a game is an existing construct, but one that is malleable and varied – the logos reflect this intrinsic but flexibly nature.

Basic windows have an important role throughout the main narrative, but not every window is particularly interesting. Every character has a window viewing the outside from their room, and for some characters, like Dave, the normal window may have some narrative impacts: for example, his window being open allows a crow to fly in, stealing Dave's copy of Sburb that he needs to install (MSPA ?s=6&p=002253). The windows still allows unannounced entrances and exits, as well as a means of viewing a world outside of a building; the most common buildings in *Homestuck* are, to say somewhat redundantly, the characters' homes.

The concept of a home is central to the overall narrative itself, as the characters largely interact from within their own homes, with Sburb putting an emphasis on their own home spaces. The home is typically a physical realm of safety for the characters, despite contentions with their guardians. The Troll hives, their term for a home, vary in that each Troll is given robots with which to build their ideal home when they are very young, so the exercise in building up their homes from a gameplay perspective is something of a second nature to them compared to someone like Rose, who had difficulty initially coming up with an elegant and economic way to allow John to keep ascending. The windows in a basic sense are a reflection of the home motif, and the idea that a home can have openings. But homes ultimately seem to act as something of a confining force, an obligation, something you must persistently improve in order to succeed. The character's home reflects the characters themselves, so the concept of the characters' home acts like a grounding force, an unshaking reminder of who they are. As we find later in the story, abandoning their houses when advancing to a certain point within the game reflects a personal growth for the characters, moving past their material homes.

However, the most important windows are the ones with a direct narrative impact. When the window image appears only as a viewing portal, it is largely done from the perspective of the ejected members of the Sburb game Carapacian, the Exiles. The Exiles, as described in my 3rd section, all discover terminals that allow them to directly control the actions of one of the players from the planet they are ejected to (MSPA ? s=6&p=002797). Here we see the Sburb logo fused into the computer terminal, attached to a keyboard, with four main screens in each "section" of the logo. Each terminal for the four main Earth Kids shares a similar form; the terminals for the Exiles working with the

Trolls in their game have twelve screens instead of four, reinforcing the suspicion that each screen can focus in on viewing on particular character, and in theory the Exiles can direct all the players within a particular session (?s=6&p=003253). When we see the logo as a screen here, one realizes the digital entities of the game are thrown forth into reality and put in a position of self-automation, and are able to direct control over the human “players” of the game.

Although the exiles don’t assume full control or abuse their positions, this reversal of the Kid’s control conflicts with their willpower and amplifies the dehumanizing aspect of screen culture. Unlike the screens of the Kids computers, which they control and can interact with another’s environment, by existing within the game world and having terminals capable of controlling them, the “free will” of these characters becomes undermined when placed in the screen. We know that they are characters in a narrative, and although the narrative imitates a game and heavily features the Kids engaging with a video game, they are only able to lose direct control when being examined behind a screen, when their digital presence becomes a vicarious viewing for another. However, *Homestuck* is not fearful that exploring and connecting through digital space means surrendering any ability to self-direct, on the contrary the ability to have others direct the Kids almost always benefits them, and the Exile involvement becomes critical to the Kids maintaining an advantage and their resolve as they progress through Sburb (MSPA ?s=6&p=005604).

Beyond the window image as a screen, where the panes represent a viewing and control of the main kids, we also see the window trope appear as an actual window “portal” between universes. Where the window as a screen allows a digital voyeuristic

connection, where mutual viewing can allow mutual cooperation and communication over distance, the window as a portal eliminates the distance entirely. The technology for these windows appears to be an element intrinsic to any universe destined to have a fruitful session of Sburb. These portal windows do not typically appear in the fashion of the Sburb logo, instead looking like a removed window pane with wiring attached at the side (MSPA ?s=6&p=002690). The window as a tool of transportation is a call back to *Problem Sleuth*, where windows can be picked off of walls and can transport the detective and his cohorts to a monster-laden dream world if the window is not “plugged into” an electrical outlet. This function of the window is not lost in *Homestuck*, however none of the main Kids have the proper know how and technology to activate one of these windows (MSPA ?s=6&p=002205).

The windows, referred to as “fenestrated walls” in the narrative, can allow characters to look through other windows to which it is connected, if both are powered on. The highest level Derse official, named Jack Noir, owns four fenestrated walls that create a “cubicle of vigilance” for him to observe all the happenings within the Derse kingdom, however it appears one of his walls went (MSPA ?s=6&p=002855). When properly connected, two windows, or “fenestrated walls” can act as a visual portal with a similar effect of the screen, but also an actual portal between the two window panes. For those viewing someone’s entrance and exit through a portal, it would appear instantaneous, but the person who travels through the windows is routed through the Furthest Ring, the vast dark areas of void, ghosts, and supernatural demigods that exists outside of all universes and as the area between all instances of *The Medium* during Sburb sessions. (?s=6&p=006411). Through a series of well-timed and planned events

aided by a subtle but direct interference by the narrator character (Hussie's self-aware role in the narrative), two fenestrated walls in both the main Earth universe and the universe after it resets become aligned in such a way provides an escape for the main characters into the newly reset universe alongside the arrival of the other characters and trolls. Here the window portals officially reunite and complete the cyclical relationship between the universes. The digital bridge of these screen windows allows the characters to finally enter a shared space in preparation for a final battle.

These window portals not only allow a chance of victory and escape for our heroes, but are a potent metaphor for digital connectivity. The kids, separated not just in different universes, but different alternate versions of that universe, manage to "break" out of their doomed Sburb session towards an actual chance at victory. The confines of Sburb's orchestrated misfortunes had to have been broken, and if only briefly, the Kids technically break out of the game and the narrative structure to survive in reality as they hurtle towards entering the game world of Sburb, albeit a different and likely more promising session for defeating Lord English. Although, from Hussie's perspective, they only travel between the two walls in his study for a few nanoseconds, for the Kids travelling between each window's pane, their trip takes several years to complete from their perspective. By using an advanced connection technology for this direct type of transportation through the screen, they break out of their digital existence to spend a few (long) nanoseconds not directly in the grasp of Sburb. The effect could be compared to sending an email that is to be received at another computer around the world. While the arrival may seem instantaneous, the conversion to another reality, the time spent there, and the conversion back could take far longer, and exists in the abstract realm of

electrical information. The digital in many ways can facilitate instantaneous actions in the present, but is itself an abstraction of the initial information that must be encoded then decoded by computers. However, these abstractions aren't always obvious in our multimedia reality where digital and analog forms of interactivity coincide, and in many respects digitization is not seen as such, but merely an extension of our perceptions of what is real. The email is not physical, but the message and its journey from sender to recipient is real.

While we are not at a point yet as Humans where we need grapple with the questions of digital transport, but the notion of breaking out of one realm of existence into another is crucial for our contemporary culture stuck between physical and digital representations. Although *Homestuck* exists as a world dominated by the physics and structure of Sburb sessions, which fuse digital and physical worlds, the moment the Kids break out of their session is pivotal, happening right at the end of Cascade, with their arrival in the new universe not felt until much later in Act 6. Breaking free from their session shows that we can, and might need to, break down our distinctions between the "universes" we envision within our own world, and further explore that the reality we perceive behind the screen is a space where connections can be made, although we cannot enter it physically.

Dissolving Digital Distance – a Summation

What if you could break down the barrier between your reality and the reality behind the screen? What would change about us if we entered a digital realm? What could be the consequences encoding then decoding our physical forms? Or allowing

digital manipulations on reality? *Homestuck* here says that the only way for success and any hope is to seek the reality on the other side of the screen, through the screen. Digital connections can unify the world, but not if we just sit behind our screens. The screens must be used and digital connection has to occur in today's digitally dominated culture, but we must seek to "break through" the barriers separating us from each other rather than simply looked through the barriers. Our future survival may depend on our ability to use digital connections as a stepping stone for fostering understanding and cooperation in the physical realm. The less like we feel the other people we're engaging with online exist in other universes, the more we can feel like the person on the other side of the screen is not really that separate or different.

Homestuck depicts interactions between different locations, separated by any distance but connected digitally, as both positive and necessary in today's world stage, where parts of the world very far from us can have direct impacts on our day to day life. The Medium becomes a facilitating technological realm where digital and physical realities aren't distinguishable thanks to Sburb, which predetermines the very existence of any player's universe. However, digital and physical perceptions of reality are already becoming blended, but there are still important areas of human digital interaction that doesn't neatly fuse or connect digital and physical experiences – a text message cannot duplicate a conversation, although it allows you to converse with those you may want to chat with who are not close. The implication here isn't that the internet and other digital connections doesn't provide a good realm for human interaction; rather, the force that continues our exploration into internet and networked technologies should be derived from the innate human desire to connect with each other, relate, and cooperate, should be

a model for what drives humans forward in a time where technological boundaries are becoming less and less defined from our physical bodies. We are increasingly reliant on technologies that allow for interactions, but *Homestuck* shows we can grow, adapt, and change both on personal and collective levels if given the proper digital facilities; we cannot lose our core drives for cooperation, safety, happiness and companionship, the true things that make us successful as a species, no matter what level of technological advancements we find dominating our cultural landscape.

Section 5 – Conclusions, and the Future of Homestuck – “Hiatus-Stuck”

Homestuck is a modern digital enigma. Although I readily classify it on par with a graphic novel, it is something entirely unique and removed from any traditional print media. *Homestuck* exists as a digital pioneer in narrative. Its general scope and large amount of themes allow a far richer examination than I can provide here, but has a general focus on the issues of identifying, interacting, and ultimately growing up in a reality that can seem more digital than physical. For the characters of *Homestuck* their reality and the digital world is not entirely separated.

Visually, *Homestuck* employs many traditional graphic novel elements to tell a visual narrative. Although the cast and world are drawn in a cartoonish fashion, the simplified visual world of *Homestuck* allows quick production and a template for reader identification. Being created and published digitally, pages and panels come to mean different things when the story is crafted through a web page. This digital creation and presentation allows the images and text to interact in a unique fashion focused on format

and making the reader engage with the website format. Layout becomes a more important factor than the visuals themselves for a graphic narrative being told digitally, as the internet allows format jumps and breaks that can assist and complement the narrative at hand. How *Homestuck* blends formats here shows that digital representation can add to the subject at hand, or at least allow a transformation of subject.

But the digital nature of *Homestuck* allows for more than just words and images to tell a story. Sound and music puts fans of the story in control of fleshing out the audio landscape of the narrative, and gives readers a greater sense of atmosphere and identification with certain repeated elements. Animations disrupt the reading experience by giving readers moments where the narrative directs itself in a more pronounced fashion and allowing for otherwise complex and critical moments of action in the narrative to be displayed for audiences in a clear and connected fashion. And although the narrative mocks the basic structure of playing a game, there are areas where readers actually do get to play the narrative, for entertainment or exposition. Animations and games offer new breaks in the narrative flow at important moments in the narrative, but also force readers to actively work more to progress through the narration at hand. Here, interactions with the digital realm allow readers to experience the narrative actively but also forces a question of control within the narrative and reflects the larger question of how do we actually control our digitally constructed realities from a physical perspective.

Perceived physical reality and digital view ports of the world collapse and recombine in *Homestuck*, creating a hybrid universe where a digital game impacts and shapes the course of all events in that universe. For the young characters, there is no difference between “winning” the game and “saving” reality. Their digital and physical

realities become intrinsically and cyclically intertwined, putting the kids in the position where survival in the digital game world equates to surviving in all realities. As a work of digital narrative, *Homestuck* exists at the boundaries of digital and physical realities. It is a perfect hybrid medium, largely existing as a graphic novel, but with areas where digital media and interactivity complicate the narrative. This complication is done to the narrative's benefits, I argue, since readers become more engaged with the narrative and the narrative itself both shapes and becomes shaped by its digital presentation.

For *Homestuck*, it has already displayed much of the potential of a hybrid digital narrative, exploring the boundaries between how a game and a narrative can fuse. Both experiment with a level of control between readers and audience from a predetermined perspective, with a story that must be told for the audiences experiencing the medium. All that is left for *Homestuck* is its long anticipated resolution, with readers wondering where Hussie might drive the final loose ends of the plot, satisfying readers hungry for a neat resolution, or baffling fans with another narrative sleight of hand. As it is still in production, the narrative can go however Hussie directs. Current readers must wait to continue to play this narrative game they themselves cannot control; future readers may be able to pace through *Homestuck* in a complete form soon enough.

But on the horizon, post-*Homestuck*, we find ourselves back at the internet itself. As we continue to discover how our bodies and identities can readily translate and simultaneously clash with digital embodiment, our lives exist at the same boundaries between digital and physical life that *Homestuck* depicts and embodies as a piece of digital literature. Reflecting this bizarre reality of digitally produced worlds and narratives, existing and future print adaptations of *Homestuck* are in production; as

physical adaptations of the narrative that can be experienced outside of the website, what will this digital story lose when translated into a more static medium? And if Hussie's grand media scheme continues, an actual full video game adaptation of *Homestuck* will be produced in the future, complicating the narrative boundaries of a game further by actually allowing an audience to experience the game world of *Homestuck* first hand.

The questions *Homestuck* raises about how it resides online, how to classify its postmodern blend of media styles, and the digitally focused content of the narrative itself all speaks to the transitional stages we currently find our world undergoing between living digitally and physically. Digital media continues to evolve and grow in scope, redefining and reprogramming our view of reality and the actual landscape of our reality, as we experience it with our bodies compared to how we perceive it. We live in a world dominated by screens, and *Homestuck* explores what sort of connections can be found through the screens that separate us from each other, from the narratives which we can experience and from a digitally aware and integrated world perception.

This digital separation is not a limitation, but rather a window into another realm rich for exploration. The screen, and the digital world on the other side, is a reflection and expansion on our own reality through which distances can be crossed and new worlds can be crafted and experienced. *Homestuck* ultimately, will stand as a profound and important digital work, a champion for depicting and viewing the internet as a positive realm of connection, interaction, and creative potential at a suspended modern crossroads where our lives are saturated with digital media, but we do not yet fully control or grasp our relationship with the digital space. *Homestuck* gives hope in the face of the ever increasing digital net draped across our lives. And although our physical existence may

Fig. 2 - All the main (human) characters from their introductory pages. Note their generic but similar artistic style, their stylized chat handles, and the symbols on their shirts.

Graphic compiled using images taken from the fan-run wiki at

http://mspaintadventures.wikia.com/wiki/Homestuck_Kids

Character designs belong to Andrew Hussie.



John Egbert
*ectoBiologist/
ghostyTrickster*



Rose Lalonde
tentacleTherapist



Dave Strider
turntechGodhead



Jade Harley
gardenGnostic



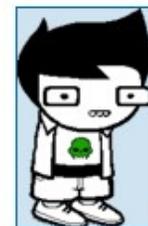
Jane Crocker
gutsyGumshoe



Roxy Lalonde
tipsyGnostalgic



Dirk Strider
timaeusTestified



Jake English
golgothasTerror

Fig. 3 – a simpler panel from that depicts John in a kicking motion (MSPA s=6&p=004579). Note the continued use of his t-shirt symbol in further clothing, and the less rigid structure of his design compared to the previous template versions. Many panels depict the characters in a similar fashion, still non-realistic and resembling their cartoon templates.

Illustration owned by Andrew Hussie.



Fig. 4 – The first twelve Troll kids, from their introductory pages. Note the similarity to the Earth Kids, as well as the more pronounced visual styles, and again the emphasis on symbolic associations for characters. Graphic compiled using images taken from the fan-run wiki at <http://mpaintadventures.wikia.com/wiki/Troll>

Character designs belong to Andrew Hussie.



Aradia Megido
apocalypseArisen



Tavros Nitram
adiosToreador



Sollux Captor
twinArmageddons



Karkat Vantas
carcinoGeneticist



Nepeta Leijon
arsenicCatnip



Kanaya Maryam
grimAuxiliatrix



Terezi Pyrope
gallowsCalibrator



Vriska Serket
arachnidsGrip



Equius Zahhak
centaursTesticle



Gamzee Makara
terminallyCapricious



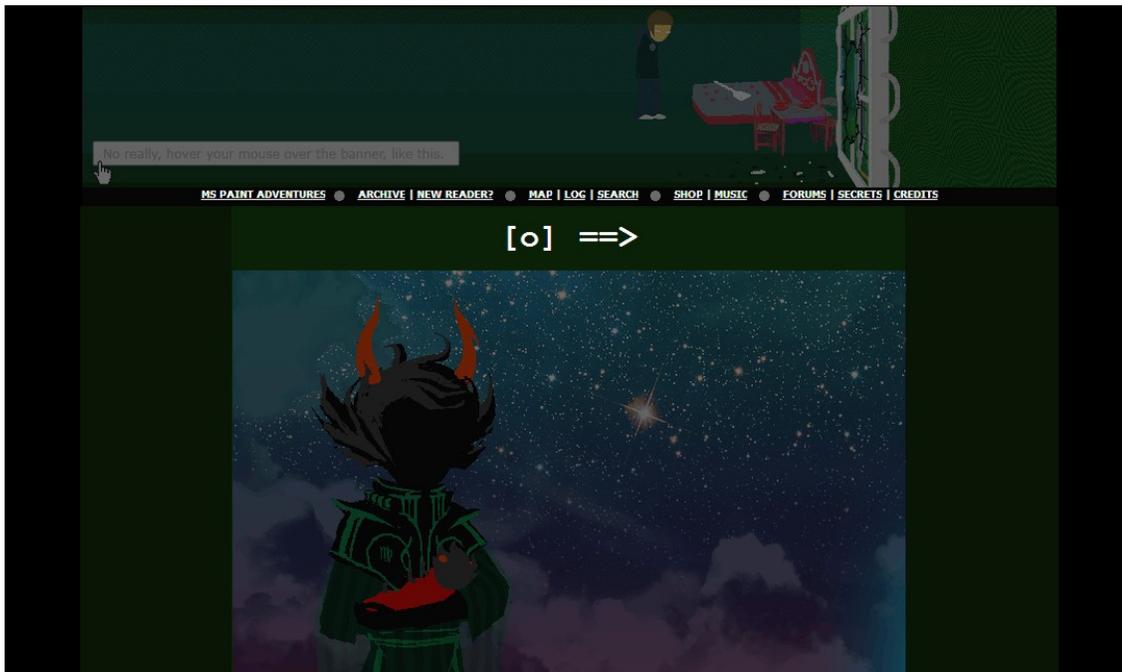
Eridan Ampora
caligulasAquarium



Feferi Peixes
cuttlefishCuller

Fig.5 – An example of a panel during the Doc Scratch narrative sequence, where the pages feature an additional panel above the main one showing related and simultaneously occurring events as Scratch narrates. Note the larger main panel, the experimentation with alt-text (messages that only appear when your mouse hovers over an image), and the darkened green layout overhaul.

Screenshot captured by me, all content in image belongs to Andrew Hussie



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