

"One Set of Lines to See, Another Set of Lines to Be":
Andrew Hussie's *Homestuck* as a Case Study on
Author & Audience Authority in Participatory Hypertext

By

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"Storytellers in all media know that a sure indicator of audience involvement is the degree to which the audience identifies with its story's characters. Readers [of graphic novels] mask themselves in a character ... One set of lines to see, another set of lines to be."

Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*

Homestuck, a multimodal webcomic created by author and artist Andrew Hussie has been long cited as an excellent example of modern hypertextual, participatory literature. Despite its ostensible audience participation and its potential to function as an activist space by uplifting marginalized voices, the work takes a significantly more conservative approach to the coauthoring between writer and readership. By performing a detailed analysis of *Homestuck* through the lenses of Reader Response Theory and Post-Structuralism—specifically the lenses of Critical Race Theory, paired with Gender Studies and Queer Theory—we can gain insight into the mechanics of power structures and their influence on the clash of authority between the author, audience, and the social norms that shape their perspectives through their consumption and interpretation of literary texts. The Interpretive Communities that shape the worldviews of both readers and writers are ultimately the key force in determining the meaning of a text. Neither the author nor their audience is a single authority, and by remembering this fact, we may become more cognizant of what it means to engage with literature in a meaningful and socially conscious way.

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Chapter I: Literature Review

Part I: Introduction To *Homestuck*

This portion of the thesis will provide a general overview and analysis of *Homestuck*'s genre and the ongoing critical conversation surrounding *Homestuck*, identifying major trends within the small but varied body of critical attention the text has received throughout its initial decade of publication history. It will additionally address the effect of the work's form, specifically its structure as both a graphic and hypertext novel, on the aforementioned discourse.

Homestuck is a multimodal hybrid work of literature combining aspects of a digitally serialized prose narrative and internet-based graphic novel. The work employs an uncommon multimodal structure and a participatory narrative. The work has been actively serialized for upwards of a decade. *Homestuck* is the highly experimental brainchild of artist and author Andrew Hussie, who utilizes the multimedia aspects of *Homestuck*'s online environment to create a unique reading experience. Given its uncommon formatting, *Homestuck*'s literary genre is a point of both contention and confusion among critics and scholars. There appears to be no consensus definition of its classification in the critical conversation surrounding the work throughout its decade of publication history. However, when describing its subject matter, each author lists some aspect of the text as falling under the umbrella of speculative fiction and digital hypertext. The work additionally functions as a participatory narrative given its dependence on, references to, and discussions of audience reactions to its content. In this way, *Homestuck* ostensibly prompts an inescapable collaborative construction of meaning between reader and writer, thus complicating the meaning of authorship. However, due to practices by Hussie and the rest of the creative team, which intentionally limit the extent to which reader suggestions are

incorporated into the work, it skews toward a deliberately more conservative model which privileges the creators' contributions over the consumers'.

Homestuck follows four teenagers, John Egbert, Rose Lalonde, Dave Strider, and Jade Harley, who unwittingly initiate the apocalypse through the installation of SBURB, a supernatural computer game. The four must subsequently rebuild a new universe in the wake of Earth's destruction with the help of various alien races and the game mechanics of SBURB itself. Along the way, they are faced with an even greater challenge, to forestall the annihilation of the whole of reality at the hands of Lord English, the ultimate power in *Homestuck's* narrative. As the singular entity representative of societal ills and fascist megalomania, Lord English uses time travel to establish a societal climate of oppression across the several different planets and alternate universes inhabited by the protagonists and their friends. *Homestuck* is formidable in scope, with the primary installment encompassing 817,929 words, 14,915 individually drawn comic panels, and approximately four hours of animation (Bailey).

Homestuck is by no means a perfect model of participatory fiction or even speculative fiction. For example, the text tends to take a conservative approach to the explicit inclusion of racial and gender diversity. It has a history of prioritizing the participation of certain audience perspectives over others. Nonetheless, studying how *Homestuck* promotes reader engagement in an open-ended way and the positive and negative implications of that audience participation can teach us a great deal. Applying literary criticism to this work offers insight into the mechanics of power distribution within communities of readers, how the line between writer and reader becomes increasingly blurred in contemporary participatory fiction, and the transformative potential of such storytelling methodologies.

Part II: Context & Criticism

Despite its multimedia nature, *Homestuck* is promoted as a webcomic, defined by the Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary as "an online comic strip or cartoon, especially one that was originally published online." Indeed, in both its native digital form and in its printed editions, *Homestuck* maintains the characteristics of a comic. Comics are most commonly defined as "juxtaposed pictorial or other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information [and] produce an aesthetic response in the viewer," according to Scott McCloud, author of *Understanding Comics* and its companion books. *Homestuck* may be further classified into a subset of comics referred to as graphic novels. Christopher Murray, author of *Champions of the Oppressed?: Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda in America During World War II*, states that the graphic novel subset of comics contains "long comic narrative[s] for a mature audience ... [and] serious literary themes." *Homestuck*'s subject matter, particularly later into the narrative, as well as its page count, seem to place it firmly into the aforementioned category. However, upon further examination, *Homestuck* has less in common with the traditional graphic novel and more in common with a lesser-known artform: hypertext. In order to properly understand the nature of the critical conversation surrounding *Homestuck*, attention must be paid to its genre and structure, as they play a vital role in its perception by critics and scholars.

Part III: *Homestuck* As Hypertext

In order to understand the nature of modern hypertextual works such as *Homestuck*, one must understand the medium's evolution. Hypertextual works generally meet at least two of the following three criteria: interconnectedness in the form of self referentiality or allusion,

ergodicity, and usage of participatory storytelling. In the following section, various aspects of the structure of popular categories of hypertextual works will be examined, beginning with printed hypertext novels, and followed by manifestations of hypertext in the digital realm. *Homestuck* draws from each of these types of hypertext to an extent, and these facets of the work inform criticism. Throughout this section, particular emphasis will be placed on the means by which the reader engages with various types of hypertext, as each one allows the reader to shape their experience with a narrative in a unique way. *Homestuck* draws upon each of these three attributes in its structure, all of which are recurring points of discussion in the critical discourse surrounding the work.

Section I: Interconnectivity

Hypertexts can be broadly defined as a text which links to other texts in some way. These links may occur within the work itself, accessed through references of various kinds, or they can exist as references to outside material, sometimes in the form of allusions. These references allow the reader to move through the story at their own pace as they discover new connections throughout the work. In some cases, readers' decisions can even affect the outcome of the narrative as the reader subjectively experiences the narrative, as seen in hypertext works utilizing branching narrative paths. While it can be argued that any piece of media containing these references is a form of hypertext, hypertext literature is a specific manifestation of such.

Janet Murray, in her book, *Hamlet On The Holodeck: The Future Of Narrative In Cyberspace*, broadly defines this format cum genre as "a set of documents of any kind ... connected" (80). Murray refers to these individual nuggets of content as lexias, a term originally employed by her contemporary, George Landow, in his book, *Hypertext 3.0: The Convergence*

Of Contemporary Critical Theory And Technology. Landow further clarifies that in hypertextual works, given their inherent multimodality, lexias may take the form of "text composed of words or images" (3). Murray expands this definition to include additional hypermedia including "charts, tables, video clips" and other ephemera (85).

Incorporating almost every form of hypermedia disseminated online, *Homestuck's* lexias are kaleidoscopically varied. With each multimedia addition to the narrative—including a soundtrack, branching hypertextual storylines, and playable games—*Homestuck* broadens its scope as a piece of multimedia storytelling. Kevin Veale, in his article "'Friendship Isn't An Emotion, Fucknuts': Manipulating Affective Materiality To Shape The Experience Of *Homestuck's* Story," asserts that "*Homestuck* is a textual and experiential chameleon that manipulates its own structure to shape the audience's affective experience of the story." In describing *Homestuck*, Veale defines the project as a "transmodal" narrative. Veale contends that Hussie's integration of additional media forms enhances rather than interferes with the audience's comprehension and enjoyment of the story by adding variety to its presentation.

In addition to its multimodal nature, *Homestuck* also embodies hypertextuality in its navigation via hyperlinks. As Landow notes, in hypertexts, lexias are typically "linked ... by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality" (3). Landow notes that while one might peruse the contents of a hypertext work in something of a linear fashion, it is much more likely that the audience would engage in a more disjointed manner. Landow derives the appellation lexia from the writings of French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes, who originally coined the term to refer to an individual unit of content connected to others through various webs of interdependent meaning. In his influential 1970

essay, *S/Z*, Barthes describes an ideal text as working similarly, describing a such an "absolutely plural text" as having several interconnecting networks of meaning, which "interact without any one of them being able to surpass the rest," allowing the reader to "gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one" (5). This absence of a singular ingress and presence of varying entry points are elegantly achieved through the native format of the digital hypertext works.

While the majority of hypertexts are digital, various analog versions can be found. An interesting parallel is presented with *Homestuck*, which has been published both in its native digital format, but also in a printed form. *Homestuck* was initially released in print form in 2011 by Topatoco. The *Homestuck* books have recently been re-released by VIZ Media, a company well known for publishing comics, specifically manga, and are now widely available from mainstream retailers. *The Homestuck Epilogues* is a prose-only continuation of the main installment which works as an analog hypertext novel.

Printed hypertexts typically take the form of either experimental or avant-garde literature, which *The Homestuck Epilogues* easily demonstrates through metatextuality, branching storylines, and unabashed demolition of the fourth wall. *The Homestuck Epilogues* and the comic proper, when read in its printed form, take inspiration from one of the most well-known print hypertexts, James Joyce's *Ulysses*. *Ulysses* is a labyrinthine novel following Dubliner protagonists Stephen Dedalus and Leopold and Molly Bloom. The narrative follows the three as they navigate their individual and interpersonal responses to the central conflict, Molly's extramarital affair, in the space of a singular day. *Ulysses* earns its moniker as a hypertext due to its unusual organization. The work initially appears as a seemingly disjointed series of anecdotes,

each written in a different style ranging from script to stream of consciousness. In order to navigate these offbeat lexia, the reader must acquaint themselves with the lexias's complex, self-contained interconnectivity. In addition to the events of the story itself, the narrative is rife with myriad cultural references to everything from the ritual allusion to Greco-Roman mythology to the modern Irish slang. *Ulysses*'s hypertextuality is, therefore, dependent on both the reader's recall of events throughout the book as well as their wider cultural knowledge. This thesis will explore why cultural knowledge—or lack thereof—matters and should matter to an even greater degree in terms of our wider discussions around *Homestuck* and the discussion of participatory fiction in general. For instance, cultural knowledge matters in understanding the concerns of marginalized communities and how this text, and conversation around it, can illuminate and address those concerns.

References and allusions are a common theme throughout hypertext works. E.A. Savochkina and B.E. Ledeneva, in their scholarly article "Interactive Online Comics: Vertical Context," draw attention to this system of allusion in hypertext works. According to Savochkina and Ledeneva, much of the humor present in *Homestuck* relies on the literary concepts of intertextuality, particularly pastiche. They posit that through the subsummation and reintegration of other texts, new meanings can be synthesized (90). Savochkina and Ledeneva describe the semiotic layers of a reference provided in the narrative of hypertexts like *Homestuck* as "vertical context," a term initially coined by O.S. Akhmanova and I.V. Gubberenet. Savochkina and Ledeneva practically outline vertical context as the background knowledge a reader must be aware of to fully parse an author's intended meaning in any given text. This information may be

"philological," consisting of "quotations, allusions, [and] idioms," or "historical," encompassing "culture-specific terms, proper names, [and] place names" (Savochkina and Ledeneva 90).

Savochkina and Ledeneva posit that when used to humorous effect, as in *Homestuck*, "vertical context" relies on the reshuffling of ideas from the outside world referenced within the story, or elements of the story itself being recombined in much the same manner, to generate comedy through the conjuration of irony (90-94). Other critics agree with elements of their conclusion. *Polygon*'s John Funk, author of "Land Of Memes And Trolls: The Epic And Ridiculous Self-Aware World Of *Homestuck*," is one of many critics in agreement with Savochkina and Ledeneva, and refers to the comic as being "ludicrously metatextual." Funk cites several instances wherein characters and objects from the fictional world in which the story takes place interact directly with the audience's prior knowledge. One major example of this is the regular integration of nineties pop culture as well as references to diegetic occurrences within the comic itself. Funk describes the work as "astoundingly referential," stating, "Not only is [*Homestuck*] referential to bits of pop culture like *The Neverending Story*, *Hook*, and *Con Air* ... but it's staggeringly referential to itself ... Hussie has produced a numbingly-high amount of running gags and material to reference in an endless recursion of self-produced visual and textual memes."

Specific instances of privileged understanding of the comic's humor based on several layers of outside textual references are elucidated by Savochkina and Ledeneva, who note that it is important to realize that certain viewpoints, both the authors' and those of specific portions of the readership are privileged through jokes and references embedded in *Homestuck*. *Homestuck*'s intertextuality with other existing properties, such as pop culture and other works by Hussie, are

not neutral; that is, the jokes will be funnier to members of certain social groups. Savochkina and Ledeneva's chosen example is a gag in which a character's abrupt entrance into a room is compared to the way the mascot of KoolAid, a popular nineties drink mix, would burst through walls in commercials for the aforementioned product. Savochkina and Ledeneva note that in order to understand this reference, the reader would need to meet a number of demographic qualities. These criteria include being of an age to remember these commercials and having occupied a region and in which they were broadcast, specifically the United States. This presents a barrier for younger or older readers, as well as readers from different regions. A further example of intertextual references within *Homestuck* and Hussie's other work includes a joking reference to the protagonist, John, being christened Zoosmell Pooplord by the readers. This is a callback to a series of absurdist comics Hussie drew several years earlier, entitled *Zoosmells*. The premise of *Zoosmells* was based in surreal humor, with the comic's characters being fanatical about the stench of large animals and going to absurd lengths to indulge their obsession. This reference in *Homestuck*, and a great many like it, are thus specifically geared towards prior readers of Hussie's work rather than newcomers.

Section II: Ergodicity

Homestuck, like *Ulysses*, contains numerous narrative threads from different characters' perspectives which all eventually interweave at critical points throughout the story. Additionally, the two texts are alike in their similar patterns of self-referentiality and dependence on the audience's understanding of outside allusions. In PBS Idea Channel's "Is *Homestuck* The *Ulysses* Of The Internet?", Mike Rugnetta draws comparisons between *Homestuck* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Rugnetta argues that the two texts are comparable in narrative complexity and, as such,

both take a similarly concerted effort to complete. He posits that readers' enjoyment of both works results partially from overcoming the challenges posed by these daunting texts.

The phenomenon of hypertextual literature being deliberately difficult to navigate and sometimes even decidedly unfriendly to its readership is common in the genre. This difficulty was formally identified by Espen Aarseth in *Cybertext: Perspectives On Ergodic Literature*. In this article, Aarseth describes ergodic texts, works with which the reader must actively interact through varying means in order to experience. Aarseth contends that the structural organization and narrative technique found in hypertexts tends to prompt readers to actively engage with the works on an intellectual level, often prompting the significant investment of mental energy. This is different from ordinary reading experiences as, according to Aarseth, as with a typically formatted work, "the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no ... responsibilities placed on the reader except, for example, eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages" (2).

When discussing *Homestuck* critically, scholars place a great deal of emphasis on its hypertextual intricacy and the effort one must put forth to peruse it. Mordicai Knode discusses the issue in his essay "*Homestuck* Is The First Great Work Of Internet Fiction," published within several days of Rugnetta's 2012 video. Knode, writing on behalf of Macmillan Publishers's *Tor Books*, describes the comic as including a "level of detail and complexity that can certainly be maddening, even brutally so." This discussion thread has continued over the years, with journalist Lilian Min of *Vice News* considering the issue relevant enough to reference it in the title of her 2016 article, "Goodbye To *Homestuck*, The Most Elaborate Webcomic You've Never Heard Of."

While *Ulysses* employs a generally standard novelistic format, thus limiting its ergodicity, other works of hypertext employ more complicated systems of navigation, thereby making their ergodic nature even plainer. One such work is Mark Danielewski's novel, *House Of Leaves*. The novel tells the story of Johnny Truant, a man who documents a family's experiences of the sudden manifestation of a mysterious, dimensionally transcendental space in their home. Following this discovery, the protagonist is drawn into a web of conspiracy. Unlike the poetry and prose found in James Joyce's work, Danielewski documents his thriller through myriad media, including letters, documentaries, and academic essays. Throughout the book, readers find themselves confronted with recursive, self-referential footnotes and other subversions of typical literary formatting. By including instances of doubling back and manipulation of the printed text requiring one to turn the book sideways and even upside down, Danielewski deliberately complicates how readers access the novel's contents.

Ergodicity is an important part of any hypertext, and is absolutely critical to experiencing *Homestuck* fully. *Homestuck*, as an ergodic text, privileges the meaning-making ability of the reader to a degree unseen in traditional texts, employing both more static forms of hypertext, such as that seen in analog hypertext novels, *and* more active forms, such as those seen in text parsers and gamebooks. Much like the works it references in both form and content, *Homestuck* presents itself as a puzzle to be solved: a textual and conceptual Gordian Knot of sorts. The reader gains satisfaction from involving themselves in the multiple layers of meaning and solving the mysteries embedded in the narrative.

Part III: Participatory Storytelling

While the nature of ergodic, hypertextual works may seem intimidating, when packaged for a younger or more casual audience, they become highly accessible. A tamer form of analog hypertextual literature, and the kind upon which *Homestuck* is initially based, can be found in the widely popular gamebooks typified by Vermont Crossroads Press and Bantam Books's *Choose Your Own Adventure* series. According to gamebook bibliographer Demian Katz, gamebooks can be broadly defined as works wherein "the reader participates in the story by making choices which affect the course of the narrative," allowing readers to partake in a "role-playing game solitaire adventure." This singleton reading experience is akin to its multiplayer counterpart, *Dungeons & Dragons*, in the fact that both allow audience participation in either a prewritten or improvisational narrative by implementing mechanics such as dice-based role-playing elements.

While gamebooks may lack detailed allusions and complicated self referentiality, they demonstrate an enhanced sense of participatory storytelling. Gamebooks prompt the reader to take a far more active role in determining their own subjective experience with the narrative. While the previous examples prompted the reader to observe the story in the third person through several different perspectives and forms of lexias, gamebooks place the reader directly into the story. These works typically use second-person narration in order for the reader to feel as if they are a character within the work; they also employ present tense so as to make the action feel more immediate. Furthermore, the connected lexias in these works typically appear as varying branches of the story rather than as interconnected references. This showcases a different method by which a hypertext may be perused and structured.

Edward Rothstein, in his article, "Reading And Writing; Participatory Novels," refers to these works as "participatory novels," "interactive fiction," and "participa-stories." Participatory storytelling can be broadly defined as any form of entertainment in which the creator of a work specifically designs their creation to be consumed in such a way that the audience may make active choices that alter their subjective experience of the narrative, as found in hypertextual literature of all kinds. Rothstein, whose article was written in the artform's infancy, describes the concept as not only being exemplified by analog texts, but digital media. In his article, Rothstein details his interactions with text-based computer games such as the 1979 Infocom mystery thriller title *Deadline*, written and programmed by Marc Blank. *Deadline* is a text parser adventure game, a digital interactive storytelling experience in which the player inputs descriptions of actions via text and the program returns information describing the effects of these actions on the world of the game.

Despite their pulpy outward appearance, Rothstein observes that *Deadline* and similar works of electronic, participatory storytelling are, "in fact, more like a genre of fiction than a game." Indeed, according to Robin Beery, in his article, "Infocom: In The Beginning, There Was *Zork*," *Deadline* and other Infocom titles, such as the seminal *Zork* fantasy adventure series, benefitted from a "chief strength: the complexity of the storytelling and the quality of the prose." Infocom's series included not only hard-boiled detective stories and tales of sword and sorcery, but science fiction, thriller, and horror, demonstrating the wide range of mature genres participatory fiction could be adapted for (Beery). Given their widespread popularity, works like these introduced the basic format of the digital, hypertextual novel to the masses. Beery notes that the digital participatory narrative has maintained its popularity well into the twenty-first

century, stating, "In recent years, much has been made of the potential for an interactive fiction revival, given that our smartphones and tablets have people reading and typing more constantly than they have in decades." The medium has continued into the modern day, albeit in slightly different forms. *Homestuck*, being recently adapted and optimized for perusal not only on desktop computers, but mobile devices, demonstrates this well, allowing a higher degree of accessibility for first-time readers.

Not only are hypertext novels widely consumed by the general public, they also function as an art form in and of themselves. As an art form, the hypertextual novel reaches its peak in digital works like Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, A Story*, in which the readers move through a complicated web of interlocking lexias at their own pace to unearth the truth about a car crash leading to the demise of the protagonist's wife and child. Coded in StorySpace, a software engine specifically designed for the creation of interactive fiction, Michael Joyce's work is self-referential and nonlinear, meant to simulate the recollection of memories through an emotional haze. When weaving their way through the work, readers often come upon recurring passages that become clearer with additional context provided by the story's branching paths. Given their complicated, dreamlike narrative structure, Michael Joyce's hypertextual works are to their mass-market counterparts as arthouse films are to mainstream cinema: "of an experimental nature or having an unconventional or highly symbolic content, aimed typically at a limited audience" ("Art Film").

Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin contend, in their article, "'I know what it was. You know what it was.': Second-Person Narration in Hypertext Fiction," note that more avante-garde and literary works, like *Afternoon, A Story*, "follow considerably more ambitious poetic trajectories

and feature significantly more sophisticated parsers." Furthermore, Bell and Esslin note that these works have a propensity toward including instances of text meant to break the figurative fourth wall and prompt responses between the work and its audience, particularly metalepsis.

Metalepsis, as defined by Gérard Genette and Jonathan Culler in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay In Method*, is an "intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse," referring to any combination of a work's characters or narrator communicating between themselves or with the reader. This interaction thus "produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical ... or fantastic" (Bell and Ensslin, Genette and Culler 234–35). *Homestuck* is no stranger to metaleptic interludes of varying types, cementing it again as a work inspired by avant-garde interactive fiction. Examples include intermission chapters, wherein Hussie directly communicates with his creations, along with said creations speaking directly to the audience. Additionally, the audience, represented by an everyman character, has one-on-one conversations with the characters of *Homestuck* in both the comic proper and its tie-ins, *Namco High*, *Pesterquest* and *Hiveswap Friendship Simulator*.

Homestuck straddles a line between the two extremes presented above. While it emulates the style of simpler text parser games and printed gamebooks, it features complex themes and allusions on par with more literary works. Despite the complexity that manifests in later portions of the work, *Homestuck* attempts to emulate these more reader-friendly texts by presenting itself as a game akin to the above. *Homestuck* engages the reader through the use of the second person, present tense narration common to gamebooks and text parser games, which allows the reader to project themselves onto the protagonist of the work. That second person narration "informs the

reader about the basic building blocks of the game world and allows [them] to co-construct this domain" (312).

Homestuck is explicitly aimed toward a similar audience as the aforementioned adventure books and games: young adults and casual readers. Brigid Alverson of *School Library Journal*, a monthly educators' periodical, rates the early installments of the comic as being appropriate for youth in grades nine and up, approximately ages fourteen and above. Subsequent additions to the work, specifically *The Homestuck Epilogues*, contain material that may be suited to an older audience, eighteen and above, or approached with caution by younger teenage readers and their mentors or guardians, as announced by the *Homestuck* creative team (@Homestuck). Further, VIZ Media, the company currently publishing *Homestuck* in the form of a hardbound book series, rates the work as "Teen Plus" given depictions of topics intended for mature readers including "intense ... violence, sexual content, frequent strong language, alcohol, tobacco and/or other substance use" (VIZ Media). As seen in Figure 1, *Homestuck* Audience Age Variance Over Time, the core audience of the comic—as measured through various surveys undertaken by both readers and the work's creative team—has fluctuated between the youth and adult demographics throughout its run.

In addition to sharing aspects of its targeted audience with other well-known forms of hypertext, *Homestuck* shares its core literary genre. The closest attempt provided to defining *Homestuck's* genre in the critical discourse surrounding the work is Knode's explicit identification of text as "postmodern." However, by comparing information relevant to the genres of other hypertextual works, such as those discussed prior, it can be concluded that the similarities are there. Additionally, as a work explicitly intended for youth, *Homestuck* embodies

the description of a postmodern young adult novel. According to Joan L. Knickerbocker and Martha A. Brueggeman, in their article, "Making Room on the Shelf: The Place of Postmodern Young Adult Novels in the Curriculum," postmodern literature actively rejects the ideals of its precursor—modernism—specifically the idealistic notion that metanarratives can be used to understand oneself and society at large, along with a general distrust in the idea of absolutes and regulations. Knickerbocker and Brueggemann posit several criteria for postmodern young adult novels.

Knickerbocker and Brueggeman argue that postmodern young adult novels contain several characteristics which are readily illustrated in *Homestuck*. These include the the presence of nonlinearity, which is easily observed through the myriad universes and timelines present in throughout the story; the presence of multiple perspectives, illustrated by Hussie's unusual second person narration; and the presentation of a nontraditional structure or format, exemplified by *Homestuck's* multimedia integration. Other signifiers of youth fiction being postmodernist include intertextuality, self referentiality, and an appeal to irony and contradiction for the creation of comedy. The last three concepts are heavily interrelated and can be related back to the key identifiers of a hypertextual work as well.

Of Knickerbocker and Brueggeman's criteria, perhaps the most relevant to *Homestuck* is the process of co-authoring, which is demonstrated by Hussie's active collaboration with readers to generate the comic's initial narrative. Veale describes *Homestuck* through the lens of the fandom's engagement with the text, noting that due to the high degree of audience participation, *Homestuck* can be likened to other forms of interactive fiction in which readers' affective experiences with the text are dependent on its structure. In the early stages of its publication, the

audience dictated the actions of the characters in *Homestuck* through a forum-based suggestion box. Hussie encouraged readers to send him writing prompts to move the story forward and would then illustrate the results of the commands he chose from the pool. Funk posits that, in essence, Hussie was acting as a Dungeon Master à la *Dungeons & Dragons* ("*Dungeons & Dragons: Basics Of Play*").

Veale interprets this command structure as being akin to the "call-and-response dynamic that is familiar to the mode of engagement associated with playing [text based adventure games] ... despite being part of a webcomic." Funk notes that even as Hussie began steering the narrative in a specific direction, eventually taking full control of the narrative, he was still influenced significantly by *Homestuck's* enormous and vocal fanbase. Veale describes this as the incorporation of memetic fandom in-jokes and theories into the comic's canon, thereby allowing readers to "influence it en masse via the force of their existence and fandom." *Homestuck's* engagement with fans is not limited to narrative input, however. As observed by Funk and Min, *Homestuck* has become a collaborative project wherein members of the fandom are occasionally invited to join Hussie, creating musical and graphical assets.

Participatory storytelling in all its forms is an inherently postmodern concept, as it prompts the audience to pull apart and examine the author's narrative in various ways rather than encouraging them to take its metanarrative concepts at face value. While *Homestuck's* execution of audience participation is not necessarily handled on a basis in which all readers' suggestions are taken into account, it is notable that Hussie takes the movements of the readership into account and enfolds their antics into its overall story, thus increasing the comic's depth and complexity. By doing so, Hussie has created a memorable, ergodic reading experience which

continually leads its audience deeper into its labyrinthine puzzle of a narrative, a fact almost universally remarked upon by casual readers and literary critics alike.

Part IV: Conclusion

The current critical conversation surrounding *Homestuck* is largely preoccupied with the fact that its plot is widely considered to be indescribably complex. Additionally, much analysis focuses on the notion that, although *Homestuck* is superficially a graphic novel, the additional multimedia aspects of its formatting place it in a tier removed from its contemporaries. Furthermore, critics pay particular attention to the unusual process of co-authoring with the audience used to generate the narrative through the utilization of participatory storytelling. While critics do not identify a consensus genre for the work, the broad traits recognized in the discourse surrounding the work indicate it fits the definition of a postmodern speculative fiction graphic novel marketed to young adults.

One major aspect of the conversation surrounding the comic, however, appears to be missing. Despite the common threads of discourse centering on *Homestuck*'s use of multimedia elements, audience participation, and the references it contains to other media, there is virtually no analysis of *Homestuck*'s narrative and characters themselves. A major element absent from the dialogue is the discussion concerning the transformative potential of speculative fiction for members of marginalized groups. *Homestuck*'s storytelling architecture ostensibly enables this to a high degree, but in the critical conversation surrounding the work, little attention is paid to the contents that facilitate this. In fact, according to Knode, "what *Homestuck* is and what *Homestuck* is about are two entirely different things." As a groundbreaking work in terms of length, scope, and multimedia integration, *Homestuck* is remembered by critics for its structure

rather than its substance. However, form and content are not discrete but constitutive; focusing only on one aspect of a text's constitution limits our ability to perceive it as a multifaceted work. By examining *Homestuck* in terms of not only its structure but also its content and how the two interact to create the work's essence, we can better determine how well it functions as a space for advocacy and representation, and we can learn more about how works blurring the line between creator and consumer can positively or negatively impact marginalized reader populations.

Chapter II: Literary Criticism

Part I: Rationale

The theoretical frameworks of literary criticism that I will apply to my analysis of *Homestuck* include Reader Response Theory—specifically in its manifestations through the lens of Critical Race Theory and the lens of Gender Studies and Queer Theory—and Post-Structuralist Criticism. I will analyze how *Homestuck* takes a significantly more conservative approach to its ostensibly progressive storytelling endeavors than it purports to. Adilifu Nama, in "R Is for Race, Not Rocket: Black Representation in American Science Fiction Cinema," introduces the idea of speculative fiction as a means to critique modern society through the lens of critical race theory and other lenses applicable to marginalized populations. According to Nama, works falling into the realm of speculative fiction—the supergenre containing subgenres of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and alternate history—are powerful tools for increasing positive minority representation, particularly in the realms of race and ethnicity. Nama contends that speculative fiction is fertile ground for representation, stating, "[These works], with their fantastical plots and far off worlds have the opportunity to present any kind of character or social system within the confines of their narratives" (1). However, just because

speculative fiction is capable of functioning as an activist space does not mean it necessarily does so. In participatory works like *Homestuck*, the means by which the interaction between the audience and the author happens can either limit or facilitate the function of a text as such. The following section will introduce and rationalize the two forms of literary criticism I will be applying to *Homestuck*, Reader Response Theory and Post-Structuralist Criticism.

Part II: Reader Response Theory

According to John Anthony Bowden Cuddon in his book, *A Dictionary Of Literary Terms And Literary Theory*, Reader Response Theory can be broadly defined as a form of literary criticism "concerned with the relationship between text and reader and reader and text, with the emphasis on the different ways in which a reader participates in the course of reading a text and the different perspectives which arise in the relationship" (589). In recent years, Reader Response Theory has become the basis for a majority of intersectional lenses through which scholars view literature. In her article, "The Reception Of Reader Response Theory," Patricia Harkin observes, "Today it's fair to say that Reader Response conceptions are simply assumed in virtually every aspect of our work" (413). Harkin notes that the disappearance of Reader Response Theory is consistent with an attempt to move the field of literary criticism in a more elitist, empirical direction, with the ubiquity of Reader Response Theory losing its novelty as it began to be widely understood and began to form the backdrop for new schools of thought. Like Harkin, I feel that Reader Response Theory is an important part of understanding the way audiences make meaning from texts, especially contemporary works blurring the line between creator and consumer. I feel that it is important to consider Reader Response Theory in *Homestuck*, particularly in terms of the dialogue between author and audience.

In *A Reader's Guide To Contemporary Literary Theory*, Raman Selden employs the analogy of a visual brain teaser to describe the myriad perspectives many readers may have of one work. Selden likens Reader Response Theory to the "Rabbit/Duck Puzzle" employed by American psychologist Joseph Jastrow in 1899 in research related to perception and subjective experience. This puzzle employs a drawing of an ambiguous creature facing sideways, with a round head and two protrusions tapered extending from its right side. The image may be interpreted as a rabbit looking to the observer's right or a duck looking to the observer's left. During research on the influence of motivational expectancy of perception, it was noted that various contextual factors, such as the time of year, had a tendency to influence the observer's perception of the illustration as one animal or the other.

According to Peter and Susanne Brugger, in their article, "The Easter Bunny in October: Is it Disguised as a Duck?", when the illustration was shown to subjects during the spring, it was generally perceived as a rabbit. Conversely, when shown in the autumn, it was typically interpreted as a bird. The difference in interpretation from one circumstance to the other was largely attributed to the cultural bias introduced by the fact that Western culture, particularly American, typically observes the Easter and Thanksgiving holidays during those seasons. Selden uses this example to further the point that "the reader is active and not passive in the act of perception," which he likens to the optical puzzle, stating that in both cases "only the receiver can decide how to orient the configuration." Similarly, when a reader is presented with any given text, their interpretation will also vary based on contextual details.

For example, literary theorist Stanley Fish, in his lecture, "How To Recognize a Poem When You See One," delivers an anecdote about how the conditions under which a person reads

a text may influence the way they think about it. Fish describes an occasion when he was teaching a lesson on seventeenth-century Christian poetry. He recounts having written a list of names on the chalkboard during a previous class: major authors relevant to the lesson and the connections that they had to one another. Though his first class of pupils understood this as an educational visual aid, Fish chose to deliberately complicate his second class's understanding of what the list was. "I told them that what they saw on the blackboard was a religious poem of the kind they had been studying and I asked them to interpret it," Fish recounts. "Immediately, they began to perform in a manner ... that was more or less predictable" (00:12:55).

Fish's article describes in detail how his students made various connections to the literal meaning of the author's names, the overall shape of the list, and other leaps of logic, all informed by the notion that they were interpreting a text of a specific genre. After repeating the experiment multiple times with various other classes, Fish concludes, "Given a firm belief that they were confronted by a religious poem ... students would have been able to turn any list of names into [this] kind of poem ... because they would have read the names with the assumption that they were informed with Christian significances" (00:24:15).

Thus, meaning is not made by either the reader or the writer of a text, but by both in a way influenced by hegemonic structures of power that define the subjective reality of each. In his 1980 book, *Is There A Text In This Class? The Authority Of Interpretive Communities*, Fish further expands his argument. Fish refers to epistemologically similar groups influenced in this way as Interpretive Communities. Interpretive Communities can be broadly defined as relationships among individuals that shape their worldviews and thus their process of textual meaning-making. These relationships can be forged deliberately or may be incidental. For

instance, an Interpretive Community may be created deliberately between an individual and a group of other people whose opinions that individual values. An instance of such a consciously organized Interpretive Community might be a college course focused on Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Alternatively, the relationship may be more abstract and unintentional, such as the relationship between an individual and the societal phenomena that affect that individual's perspectives. An example of this might be a youth's experience growing up in a racially segregated suburb, a circumstance they had no control over, but which shaped their worldview regardless.

Fish states that when individuals who share similar approaches to understanding the world around them and the media they consume come together, they may begin to create a shared meaning for a given text collectively. Fish argues that "if the understanding of the people in question are informed by the same notions of what counts as a fact, of what is central, peripheral, and worthy of being noticed—in short, by the same interpretive principles—the agreement between them will be assured, and its source will not be a text that enforces its own perception but a way of perceiving that results on the emergence to those who share it" (Fish 337). Ultimately, then, it can be concluded that it is neither the reader nor the writer alone who make meaning of a work. Instead, meaning is ultimately determined by oppressive and normative assumptions and power structures, including racial injustices, which influence the worldview of both author and audience. Therefore, the notion of co-authoring, as elucidated by Knickerbocker and Brueggeman, and the freedom of the audience to make decisions that shape the trajectory of any given work, particularly participatory texts like *Homestuck*, is brought into

question. Who holds the authority to determine the meaning of a text? The author, the audience, or the Interpretive Communities that shape their worldview?

Part III: Post-Structuralist Theory

Homestuck purports the creation of a democratic environment in which readers of diverse backgrounds can have a say in the work's direction; however, in truth, the work's content is directed largely by the intentions of its creators. According to Hussie, "[MS Paint Adventures] stories [are] largely 'reader-driven', in the sense that most of the text commands were supplied by readers through a suggestion box. I would select a command from the list, and then illustrate the result of the command" (Hussie, "Hey! Welcome To MSPA!"). As such, I have chosen to take a Post-Structuralist perspective toward this text in order to understand this contrariety better. In *Beginning Theory: An Introduction To Literary And Cultural Theory*, Peter Barry describes Post-Structuralism as a form of literary criticism wherein the critic engages in "textual harassment or oppositional reading, reading with the aim of unmasking internal contradictions or inconsistencies in the text, aiming to show the disunity which underlies its apparent unity" (69). In order to lay bare the contradiction within the text, I will juxtapose the ostensible intent behind *Homestuck*'s participatory nature and the reality of its audience involvement. In examining the comic's history of reader interaction, I infer that Hussie and the writing team of *Homestuck*'s expanded universe demonstrate a tendency to take heavy liberty with the suggestions given by the audience. I will also discuss how identity politics, a form of social justice activism based in racial, religious, ethnic, social, or cultural identity and representation, rather than larger political party ideology, comes into play in participatory media, with *Homestuck* as a case study.

Oftentimes, certain reader perspectives, particularly those of historically marginalized group, such as people of color and queer individuals, are privileged or excluded in favor of moving the story forward using the creators' own ideas. This complicates the idea that *Homestuck* is a revolutionary work in terms of audience participation and co-authoring.

Furthermore, the work demonstrates that, despite being an ostensible attempt to stand against traditional narrative structures, repressive power structures very much influence *Homestuck* as a whole. Thus, *Homestuck* exhibits a more autocratic than democratic approach to audience input. The audience is not so much an active participant in the co-authoring of the work as they are passive spectators offering opinions that are occasionally considered by the authorship. *Homestuck* contains a great deal of language and symbolism dealing with the concepts of freedom of interpretation and meaning-making, while simultaneously attempting to steer the text with an active agenda, telling the author's story rather than the audience's. The juxtaposition of these conflicting impetuses indicates a disconnect between *Homestuck's* intention of audience participation and actual implementation.

Homestuck ultimately has mixed to limited success as a site for representation and advocacy because its meaning is not so much a function of pure interaction between reader and writer, as it is a function of power through Interpretive Communities from which both reader and writer originate. The societal norms which shape both parties shape the meaning of the text, leading it into the present-day conflicted situation. *Homestuck* actively promotes a model of reading in which readers are encouraged to draw their own conclusions, but only up to a certain point. In this way, *Homestuck* interferes with the interaction between author and audience by

both consciously and unconsciously allowing the power structure bias to limit audience participation.

Homestuck's form, if used in a way with more inclusive audience participation, has the potential to include diverse perspectives and move towards the creation of a progressive, activist space. Postmodern, participatory storytelling has the prospect to function as an effective utilization of the speculative fiction and participatory fiction formats as a space for the inclusion and representation of marginalized reader populations. Ultimately, *Homestuck* is a bold experiment that attempts to harness several uncommon literary components, creating a unique brand of participatory speculative fiction storytelling fuelled by the input of its readers. However, because of the power structures shaping its internal engine—the Interpretive Communities from which its writers' and readers' viewpoints—*Homestuck* experiences limited to mixed success in acting as a truly transformative piece of participatory media.

Part IV: Reader Response Theory & Post Structuralist Theory: Specific Lenses

Section I: Critical Race Theory

As literary theory has progressed, Reader Response Theory and Post Structuralist Theory have become the bedrock for the majority of approaches to literary criticism, particularly those dealing with identity politics. Literary analysis dealing with marginalized identities is inherently Post Structuralist in the fact that it requires the critic to deliberately seek openings and inconsistencies within a text in order to explore how power moves through a work. For example, according to Purdue University's summation "Literary Theory And Schools Of Criticism," published on via the Purdue Online Writing Lab, Gender Studies and Queer Theory "emerge from post-structural interest in fragmented, de-centered knowledge building (Nietzsche, Derrida,

Foucault), language (the breakdown of sign-signifier), and psychoanalysis (Lacan)" ("Literary Theory & Schools Of Criticism: Gender Studies & Queer Theory"). Furthermore, specific forms of criticism dealing with various marginalized groups can be understood as having a basis in Reader Response Theory in the fact that they deal with the specific ways in which hegemonic power structures affect readers of different, marginalized demographics. For this case study, I will be employing two specific forms of literary criticism that have emerged in this way: Critical Race Theory paired with Gender Studies and Queer Theory.

Critical Race Theory can be described as "a theoretical and interpretive mode that examines the appearance of race and racism across dominant cultural modes of expression" ("Literary Theory & Schools Of Criticism: Critical Race Theory"). By adopting this lens, critics can "understand how victims of systemic racism are affected by cultural perceptions of race" and how these populations are able to combat prejudice through activism, community involvement, and representation. I have chosen to employ Critical Race Theory in this case study given one of the major issues seen in *Homestuck*'s approach to inclusion: the decision to make its protagonists aracial. Based in the problematic philosophy of racial colorblindness, *Homestuck* leaves its central characters' races entirely open to interpretation, a controversial move enabling white supremacy and diminishing the experiences of readers of color.

Part II: Gender Studies & Queer Theory

The second set of lenses through which I will be examining *Homestuck* are Gender Studies and Queer Theory, successive schools of thought expanding upon the foundation of Reader Response Theory which "explore issues of sexuality, power, and marginalized populations ... in literature and culture" ("Literary Theory & Schools Of Criticism: Gender

Studies & Queer Theory"). I have chosen to include Gender Studies and Queer Theory for a similar reason; despite *Homestuck* having a degree of positive representation for non heterosexual, heteroromantic, or cisgender readers, its creative team's inability to effectively manage certain nuances of the subject led to the dissolution of the *Homestuck* project as a whole. Numerous members of *Homestuck*'s creative team resigned due to toxicity and harassment from the hegemonic extremes of its readership over the decision to include the popular reading of its central protagonist, John, as transgender, specifically transfeminine.

Chapter III: Analysis

Part I: What Kind Of Hypertext Is *Homestuck*?

The way a reader engages with a hypertext in the form of a novel such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Danielewski's *House Of Leaves*, or Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, A Story*, is markedly different than how they engage with a more interactive work, such as Blank's *Deadline* or an analogue gamebook. No one form of hypertext is superior, but they all involve different modes of engagement. Although it may seem surprising, *Homestuck* has more in common with the former works than the latter, despite its aesthetic presentation suggesting the opposite. As I have discussed, *Homestuck* presents itself as a love letter to text parser games and gamebooks, while simultaneously employing the kinds of interconnected lexia, postmodernist sensibilities, and ergodicity characterizing a more traditional hypertext novel. This, combined with the concept of a work directed by readers' suggestions, too, suggests a piece which combines the best of all forms of participatory fiction in one impressively multimodal package. When discussing *Homestuck* as a hypertextual work, however, it is important to note that its multimedia

sophistication and professed audience participation does not necessarily mean it is as interactive as it appears.

Members of *Homestuck*'s creative team, including Hussie himself, note that perfect reader representation is far from the primary goal of the work, and, oftentimes, not the target at all. In order to gain a better understanding of *Homestuck*'s behind-the-scenes complexities, especially as they relate to audience participation, I interviewed several members of its writing team in addition to drawing on existing interviews with Hussie and his staff. I reached out to Aysha Farrah, contributor to *The Homestuck Epilogues*, *Hiveswap Friendship Simulator*, *Hiveswap*, *Homestuck²: Beyond Canon* and Narrative Director for *Pesterquest* and Max Xamag, long-time *Homestuck* art contributor and head of *Homestuck²: Beyond Canon*'s Art Team. Additionally, I communicated with a third member of the *Homestuck* creative team wishing to remain unnamed, henceforth referred to as Anonymous. According to Anonymous, *Homestuck*'s reader commands were not truly as interactive as the audience was led to believe. As Anonymous explains, "the control rested entirely with [Hussie]; he was at liberty to pick and choose which reader suggestions to use, especially once the number of submissions reached a certain scale ... Not only that, but he was free to fabricate suggestions wholesale with no possibility of discovery."

In *Homestuck*, reader interpretation is given weight, but in practice, that weight is decided entirely by the author. Aysha Farrah, co-writer on several installments of *Homestuck* contests this, stating, "*Homestuck* has always been more of a call and response than most stories." While this may be the case to some extent, as it is clear that some level of dialogue between author and audience exists, the creators are free to respond to the consumers' calls in any way they like.

Contributing artist Max Xamag corroborates this, noting, "I think regardless of the readers' contributions, it's still undeniably a work of its creator. The user commands were cherry picked, the art and music team had specific directions, and not only couldn't affect the plot points, but usually didn't even have the context for what they were working on at the time." In the spring of 2010, Hussie announced his intention to close the audience suggestion box indefinitely, stating, "I'll still be harvesting input through the forum community in more subtle and unpredictable ways" (Hussie, "Suggestion Boxes Are Locked Until Further Notice"). Anonymous states, "The notion of the comic being 'reader-driven' was a mostly aesthetic one, and Andrew's decision to end the submissions process partway through ... was merely a choice to be frank about it."

Interestingly, within recent years, *Homestuck*'s creative team has been made up of former readers. According to Farrah, "Recently Homestuck's creative team has been drawn exclusively *from* its readership. Hussie is still the one to shape the broad strokes of the story, but he also gives [them] a lot of creative control." Despite *Homestuck* being written by ascendant fans, the position of being an author is still a privileged one. According to the MS Paint Adventures Wikia, a knowledge base curated by the comic's readership in a manner similar to online encyclopedias like Wikipedia, members of *Homestuck*'s creative team "have generally been either employed by *Homestuck* media company What Pumpkin Studios, or else are brought on as independent contractors, and are often recruited from the MSPA fan community" ("Writing Team"). These choices are deliberate on Hussie's part, as, when seeking contributors for any project, individuals with experience with the subject matter are typically preferred. The readership, having been led to believe all contributors were equal, saw Hussie's preferential choice of experienced collaborators as a type of nepotism. Because the selection process was not

plainly laid out, major portions of the audience became confused as to why some readers were recruited and some were not. As no divide was made clear between what constituted a reader and what constituted a writer, the readership became restless and attempted to tightly control or criticize what the members of the creative team recruited from their ranks were producing.

Homestuck, then, is an interesting case because it refuses to clarify its true nature as a conservatively written narrative wherein authorial content is privileged. It attempts to masquerade as an interactive hypertext, when in reality, it is not. *Homestuck* is indeed a hypertext, but not one that allows any meaningful choice for the reader apart from reinterpreting the story by learning about various aspects of characters explored in different, alternate, timelines. In this way, despite its medium having the trappings of an advanced digital hypertext, *Homestuck* has more in common with the first, and most basic hypertext discussed in this thesis, a novel.

Despite the fact that *Homestuck* has some degree of branching story paths, there is only one which truly leads to a positive ending. If the reader makes the wrong decisions when choosing their path through the story, they will be greeted with a dead end. This is most evident in the tributaries to the main story found throughout *Homestuck*'s primary mode of publication, its webcomic form. Unlike other examples of hypertext, such as gamebooks or text parsers, each unfavorable ending is disregarded as the reader progresses. This is especially evident in the adventure game and visual novel game series typing into the main narrative, *Hiveswap*, *Hiveswap: Friendship Simulator*, and *Pesterquest*. In order to continue playing, the assumption is made that the reader has disregarded any paths except the one favored to keep the story progressing in the creators' predetermined path.

The concept of the original creator as a privileged contributor to meaning making—not so much an author as an auteur—is integral to *Homestuck*. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the idea of a central authority deciding what potential story beats are viable and which are not is, in fact, baked into the work's structure. According to Hussie and other members of *Homestuck's* creative team, anything and everything can happen in an offshoot timeline, thus enabling all reader interpretations to be valid. However, as with most things in the work, there is a catch. The many different timelines are placed into competition, and are ultimately doomed if they do not meet a certain set of diegetic criteria characterizing what is referred to as the alpha timeline. In order for *Homestuck's* central antagonist, Lord English, to be defeated, a series of stable time loops need to be fulfilled ensuring his existence and demise. This series of actions is referred to as the Alpha Timeline, and any diegetic actions taken by the characters that do not adhere to this timeline are rendered moot. These offshoot timelines are referred to as being doomed and therefore irrelevant.

This concept is played with and subverted diegetically throughout the latter part of *Homestuck*, with characters depicted as actively rebelling against the construct of the Alpha Timeline in the story itself. The gimmick is entertaining, but it is not to be forgotten that the characters are written constructs and are not autonomous entities acting out the will of the readers. All actions are ultimately determined by the writers rather than the readers, whose interpretations are studied and brought in selectively.

Homestuck's lack of true reader interactivity is not necessarily bad. Similar narratives are fully functional in the fact that they provide a compelling and self-contained environment for the reader to explore. These works succeed by prompting a multifaceted reading through widely

distributed lexia and the deliberate withholding of information. The reader interacts with the text, but the text does not interact with the reader. Works like choose your own adventure novels and text parser games demonstrate the text interacting with the reader in a meaningful way. Based on the reader's choices as they navigate through the various lexia presented, different, and equally valid, endings can be achieved. For example, in a gamebook, each story path begins with the same premise, but based on how the reader chooses to progress through offered prompts—such as choosing to enter a certain area or interact with a non player character—the story changes. For example, if an adventurer is faced with a choice to either attack or spare an initially neutrally aligned character, their relationship with that character may change, leading to two valid paths, one in which the character becomes an ally and one in which the character becomes a rival or antagonist.

The difficulty comes into play when readers take it for what it appears to be on the surface, an interactive experience, rather than for what it actually is, a narrative determined by the author with minimal audience participation. This fails because the readership, no matter their Interpretive Community, expect their preferences to mean something in the narrative, when they do not. *Homestuck's* disingenuous approach to audience interaction, with readers not truly having a say in the direction of the narrative, despite the continuing statements to the contrary, is ultimately deeply detrimental to the relationship between author and audience and the project as a whole. By deliberately muddying the waters of what is accepted as official content and what is not without a plan for dealing with the inevitable clash of opinions resulting from a diverse readership does bring attention to the work, boosting its notoriety, but is an ultimately unsustainable gimmick. Through the creation of what appears to be a space with a democratic

approach to storytelling where one does not exist and encouraging multifaceted and sometimes even conflicting readings when, in reality, a singular reading is the only option, any potential for satisfaction on the part of an audience seeking representation on their own terms in any way is unattainable.

Part II: Codifying Authority In *Homestuck*

How, specifically, is authority codified in *Homestuck*? Given the work's unique combination of touting itself as participatory and encouraging readers to externalize their interpretations, while simultaneously being more conservatively crafted behind the scenes, this question is inevitable. As it happens, *Homestuck* has an interesting relationship with its story as presented in the text and as interpreted by its readership, specifically what can be described as being canon. As described by Eugene Ulrich in his essay "The Notion And Definition of Canon," canon, as "in the sense that the term has been used in the history of Christian theology and within Judaism after it borrowed the term from Christian usage, is the definitive, closed list of the books that constitute the authentic contents of scripture" (34). In terms of audience engagement with media, the concept of canon is similar, with canon works being defined by Keidra Chaney and Raizel Liebler in "Canon Vs. Fanon: Folksonomies Of Fan Culture" as, "from a pop culture standpoint, ... the official storylines and backstories invented by the creators of television shows, movies, and books" (1).

As discussed earlier, when readers engage with a piece of media, particularly media such as hypertext, which encourage interpretation, the conclusions they come to are bound to vary. These audience interpretations, when externalized in forms such as art, writing, or analysis, are typically referred to as fanworks. Fanworks are broadly defined by queer speculative fiction

author and *Fanlore* contributor Julie Bozza as "creative works produced by one or more fans, generally intended for other fans." Bozza observes that in all types of fanworks, "some element of a canon work, the source text or event, is taken and incorporated into a new creative piece ... The taken element can be the characters, world setting, plot ... or something else from the source." Transformative works in this context are explained by Alexis Lothian in "Archival Anarchies: Online Fandom, Subcultural Conservation, and the Transformative Work Of Digital Ephemeria" as being fan-created media representative of reinterpretations of established works. Thus, transformative works bring to light novel meanings gleaned from a relevant text through recontextualization in an inherently postmodern, personally relevant way, thereby transforming the original text based on the reader's reaction to it (Tischer).

Given *Homestuck*'s broad appeal and the fact that, on its surface, it prompts readers to actively contribute, stories expanding on its mythos are common. In this way, readers synthesize their own meanings and political messages in what can be argued to be externalizations of their subjective experiences of texts. By penning fanworks, readers literally transform the narrative of *Homestuck*, a work arguably representative of ostensible the power of a single author over a narrative, updating it to reflect contemporary issues and concerns relevant to their lived experience.

On occasion, interpretations introduced in fanworks may permeate the general consciousness of the readers of a work. Thereby, these shared ideas become accepted as fanon, defined by Chaney and Liebler as "the ideas and concepts that fan communities have collectively decided are part of an accepted storyline or character interpretation" (1). Oftentimes, however, when a reader base is as varied as *Homestuck*'s, discrepancies are bound to arise, especially in

groups with opposing ideologies. Because of certain decisions in *Homestuck*'s storytelling architecture designed to enable interpretation, much of what some portions of the readership accept as valid fanon, others reject vehemently. This is primarily because a work's readership can rarely be interpreted as a monolith, as disparate factions have epistemological frameworks originating from very different, and sometimes directly opposed, Interpretive Communities. As Anonymous of the *Homestuck* creative team notes, in regard to the multifaceted nature of the fandom, "it's misguided to talk about the sum total of the people who read the comic as a single homogeneous entity."

When dealing with a work employing callbacks and references to fanon works, poor handling of audience participation can not only generate toxicity in spaces frequented by readers, but also brew decay within the work itself. This is particularly evident in the way identity politics manifest in the discourse between the creators and consumers of *Homestuck*, specifically in regard to issues of race and gender identity. As such, the work acts as a case study demonstrating the potential issues that may arise when a creator with a limited understanding of the conditions of minoritized individuals attempts to actively acknowledge and even rely upon audience participation within a reader base split between subversive and hegemonic Interpretive Communities.

Section I: Depictions Of Race in *Homestuck*

A discussion of works that depend largely on audience input, such as Andrew Hussie's *Homestuck*, needs to include a description of how the demographics of the audience shape their understanding of the work. A key example of this in *Homestuck* is Hussie's mishandling of the signifiers dictating the protagonists' races and ethnicities.

In an effort to make *Homestuck* more appealing and widely accessible, Hussie declared his human characters aracial, giving readers liberty to interpret the characters however they chose. Hussie's conception of his characters as raceless was likely a deliberate attempt to prompt readers to interpret characters as tabula rasa. This was, most likely, Hussie's attempt to promote the fannish practice of the creation of headcanons in order to encourage audience participation. Andrew Scahill defines headcanons in his article "Fanfic'ing Film: Queer Youth Cinema Reclaims Pop Culture": "In fanfiction culture, a headcanon refers to a fan's personal interpretation of a character's identity and backstory, particularly as it runs counter to the official or canonical source material" (121).

This decision has interesting ramifications when taking into account the fact that Hussie originally conceived of his characters as white, even going so far as to state that he envisioned them as such "if bothering to imagine them corporeally," rather than conceiving of their personalities alone or imaging them as anything more than literal cartoons (Hussie, "Andrew Hussie's ForumSpring, 'Ask Me About MS Paint Adventures'"). Despite the characters' apparent raceless nature, there remain residual instances of them being explicitly coded as white. Notable is an instance in which Rose, a lead character, is described as having "skin as white as a ghost" and one in which Dirk, a secondary protagonist, is described as being "a white guy who is a rapper" (Hussie, *Homestuck* 2696, 386). These characters were initially written as white, and any further racial coding was not implemented in their characterization. Hussie's choice upholds a status quo in which whiteness can be considered the baseline.

Although the ostensible intention to increase the characters' relatability may be considered meritable, its fundamental premise is flawed. The concept of araciality in any sense is

largely a biased concept based on a fundamental misunderstanding of racial privilege rooted in the concept of racial colorblindness. Racial colorblindness is defined by researchers Evan Apfelbaum, Samuel Sommers, and Michael Norton in their article "Seeing Race and Seeming Racist? Evaluating Strategic Colorblindness in Social Interaction" as the deliberate avoidance of "talking about race, or even acknowledging racial difference," often employed by white individuals "as a strategy employed in the effort to appear unbiased during social interaction" (918).

Apfelbaum and his colleagues assert that by eliminating conversations about race and ethnicity, white individuals, regardless of demographics or political alignment, tend to avoid potential social faux pas by "regulat[ing] the appearance of prejudice during social interaction" (918). "However," they continue, "research indicates that people are not, by any means, actually colorblind perceivers in most instances" (919). Due to the shared hegemonic Interpretive Communities from which Hussie and his initial audience hail, along with a baseline attitude towards the uplifting of inflammatory, prejudiced humor, the retaliation of longtime readers against more progressive movements within the comic becomes clear. With the expansion of *Homestuck*'s readership to include a sizable subset of racially minoritized readers, a potential reasoning for *Homestuck*'s wholesale avoidance of the topic of racial injustice begins to cohere. *Homestuck*'s deliberate disentanglement with racial issues indicates a probable attempt to distance the work from its coarser predecessors and to evade any interaction with racial discourse at the risk of appearing similarly prejudiced and sectarian.

According to Derald Wing Sue and Madonna Constantine in their essay, "The Invisible Whiteness Of Being: Whiteness, White Supremacy, White Privilege, And Racism," "In our

society, whiteness is a default standard; the background of the figure-ground analogy from which all other groups of color are compared, contrasted, and made visible" (15). I surmise that the majority of these complications arise from a mishandling of textual signifiers involving ethnicity and race and a misinterpretation of how the readership surrounding the work will respond to those decisions.

The fact that the status quo is a major source of influence on readers' worldview does not appear to be something Hussie initially predicted. A great deal of Hussie's juvenalia, such as *Team Special Olympics*, a self-published comic strip running from 2003 to 2008, features deliberately offensive, sophomoric punchlines. These comics feature crude sexual and scatological humor, along with gags involving racism, sexism, and the stereotyping of other marginalized groups (*Team Special Olympics*). One particularly egregious example includes an unflattering depiction of African American character slam dunking a welfare check through a basketball hoop. This punchline references the concept of welfare royalty, defined by National Public Radio journalist Gene Demby in "The Truth Behind The Lies Of The Original 'Welfare Queen'," as "a term is seen by many as a dogwhistle, a way to play on racial anxieties without summoning them directly," referring to imaginary "indolent black [individuals], living off the largesse of taxpayers." This brand of humor recurs throughout Hussie's projects preceding *Homestuck*. In her 2018 book *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard For White People To Talk About Racism*, Robin DiAngelo notes that this type of humor has a pattern of being associated with individuals who lean toward conservative politics, particularly those upholding patriarchal and white supremacist views (57).

While there is a vocal and growing cohort of readers who originate from antiracist, counterhegemonic Interpretive Communities, specifically neurodivergent and disabled readers, readers of color, and readers who are not heterosexual, heteroromantic, or cisgender, the population of the audience which actively embraced the indiscreet and disrespectful punchlines of Hussie's juvenilia cannot be ignored. This conservative portion of the readership, given its roots in communities of harm, represents a schism in *Homestuck*'s audience brought on by the comic's attempted movement toward a more politically progressive stance in terms of inclusivity; some readers actively embrace the work's forward momentum, while others cling to its regressive past. It is unsurprising that *Homestuck*'s readership indicates the presence of a substantial white audience, with a much smaller audience of nonwhite readers. This can be observed in Figure 2, *Homestuck* Audience Racial Variance Over Time. Interestingly, there is a slight decline in the overall presence of nonwhite readers from 2014 to 2019, which I speculate may be due to a dissatisfaction with *Homestuck*'s insensitive portrayal of people of color.

Given the initial audience of Hussie's early work, it is unsurprising that the Interpretive Communities surrounding *Homestuck* consist partially of individuals who are inclined to view the main cast as white and who may attempt to defend this interpretation zealously. As *Homestuck* has evolved, Hussie has attempted to critique individuals who view his characters as being white based on an inherently racist and prejudicial worldview. At one point in the comic, Hussie introduces the concept of Trickster Mode, a videogame style power-up that the characters can use in order to increase the magical abilities gained through SBURB, the supernatural video game they play. Characters initiate Trickster Mode by licking a magical lollipop that gives its users candy-themed accessories and color palettes and induces a state of egocentric mania.

Additionally, the characters' complexion changes from blank to a peachy, pinkish hue. When Jane, the character who initially engages Trickster Mode on herself to overcome a state of depression, approaches another character, Jake, and tries to get him to use it, she extols the power-up saying, "I feel so great! I feel so alive! I feel so Caucasian!" (Hussie, *Homestuck* 5720-5723).

The lollipop is provided by *Homestuck's* main antagonist, a reptilian alien cherub, Caliborn, the villainous, time travelling Lord English's teenage self. Caliborn, and his future adult self, are allegorical representations of a worldview glorifying racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. In a conversation between his author avatar character and Caliborn, Hussie describes Trickster Mode as being inherently detrimental to its user because it gives a heightened state of power and superficial confidence and accomplishment at the cost of personal struggle against adversity. Specifically, Hussie tells Caliborn, "You can't just force [humans] to settle all their issues with insane psychotropic game power-ups. They have to face all those issues themselves, or they will never learn and grow as people" (Hussie, *Homestuck* 5781). It can be argued that Trickster Mode, then, was meant to function as a commentary on white privilege, specifically the fact that white individuals do not readily recognize their own societal advantages as members of a majority and self-centeredly tend to disregard the perspectives and struggles of marginalized groups.

A notable portion of *Homestuck's* core readership exhibited confusion over this allegory, particularly those readers whose Interpretive Communities did not allow them a conception of the work as a space for antiracist activism or political commentary. This faction of the audience used a surface level reading of Trickster Mode to claim that the characters were canonically

white and to use it as a justification to harass and antagonize readers of minoritized groups who interpreted the characters as being people of color. Social media posts of this type were rampant, with examples including a comment on Reddit reading, "Did anyone actually think that Jane *wasn't* white?" (/u/TheRealRobertLiddy). Similarly, a Tumblr diatribe concludes, "Honestly, I find the idea of Dave being anything *but* white a little odd, since his character was originally intended to be the lame white rapper" (Heretichromia). Hussie eventually changed the word from "Caucasian" to "Peachy" as an attempt to calm the tensions between different audiences rather than facing the flawed baseline concept of his characters' racial distinctions (Hussie, "Andrew Hussie's ForumSpring, 'Ask Me About MS Paint Adventures'"). This attempt was met with little success, as there were those within the readership who claimed his attempt to calm the aforementioned tensions was pusillanimous. A Reddit comment on the matter reads, "Bullshit. [Hussie] shouldn't give in to whiny bitches" (/u/Sp8der).

Ultimately, the decision to make *Homestuck*'s protagonists aracial as an attempt at inclusivity was deeply flawed as it did not consider the dynamics of power structures and racial tensions, especially with regard to the existing audience. Hence, *Homestuck* failed to effectively address the creation of aracial characters in light of the fuel it would give to a politically conservative audience looking to bolster its own perspective. This decision granted power to privileged readers in the audience from which the audience of Hussie's previous works emerged.

Section II: Depictions Of Gender In Homestuck

Although *Homestuck* has had a history of difficulty with representation in terms of race and ethnicity, it has achieved some success with representation of individuals who are heterosexual, heteroromantic, or cisgender. In their AutoStraddle article, "Bisexual Trolls and

Non-Binary Sprites: The Power of LGBTQ Visibility in *Homestuck*," queer creator Creatrix Tiara describes the work as unexpectedly successful, given its nature as "a media product primarily produced by a straight [cisgender] man." Tiara praises its "wide range of relatable narratives for LGBTQ readers, allowing [the audience] to find not only themselves but also friendships, communities, lovers, and family welcoming of their gender and sexual identities." Indeed, a wide majority of the characters in the work, particularly the alien trolls and cherubs, are presented as having traits inherently subversive to majority heteronormative and cisnormative culture. Tiara notes that the troll characters, in particular, are "particularly notable for their default bi/pansexuality; gender is not a factor in their highly complex [polyamorous] 'quadrant' relationship system" and draws attention to the cherub characters, members of an androgynous, intersex species, who deliberately choose to adopt gender.

Indeed, as seen in Figure 3, *Homestuck* Audience Gender Variance Over Time, the number of readers identifying as nonbinary has increased substantially in recent years, equalizing with the male and female demographics for the comic. Furthermore, as noted in Figure 4, *Homestuck* Audience Cisgender & Transgender Variance Over Time, the percentage of the audience identifying as transgender in some capacity has steadily grown, rising from 16% in 2013 to 17% in 2017. As of 2019, the last year this question was featured in surveys of the readership, transgender readers made up 32% of the surveyed audience. Figure 5, *Homestuck* Audience Sexuality Variance Over Time, further demonstrates the rising popularity of the work with queer audiences, indicating a dramatic rise in those with nonheterosexual preferences from 40% of the surveyed readership in 2011 to 86% in 2020.

When questioned on Twitter regarding the majority of *Homestuck*'s characters exhibiting some level of same gender attraction, Hussie responded favorably to the idea. According to Hussie, "Everything is gay, and getting gayer by the second. *Homestuck* will eventually reach a gay singularity. Mark it down. It will make Korra look like Republican propaganda"

(@AndrewHussie, "Homestuck will eventually reach a gay singularity ... "). Hussie's latter sentence is an allusion to the titular heroine of Nickelodeon's animated series, *Avatar: The Legend of Korra*. The character's confirmation as being attracted to women in the series's finale was notable as being one of the first depictions of same gender attraction in mainstream American comics and animation. Later, in reference to questions raised about the implications that Dave and his troll partner Karkat were romantically involved, Hussie confirmed the coupling on Twitter, stating, "Gay. Singularity. Did people think I was joking or something?"

(@AndrewHussie, "Gay. Singularity. Did people think I was joking or something?"). Hussie's allusion to the concept of singularity refers to the speculative fiction concept of humanity and technology combining into one whole; in this case, he means that, eventually, all of *Homestuck* would become queer in some way or another. Despite Hussie's penchant for sarcasm when engaging with his readership, the high degree of LGBTQ representation and the positivity with which it is depicted, demonstrate that while the phrase "gay singularity" may have been intended as a humorous phrase, there was sincere sentiment behind the promise.

One phenomenon related to the great deal of constructive queer representation in *Homestuck* is the fact that a significant portion of the readership's interpret *Homestuck*'s central protagonist, John Egbert, as being transgender. This interpretation of the character is based on a series of signifiers from the comic that are envisaged to indicate John's potential to identify as

female rather than the assumed gender assigned at birth, male. As nothing regarding the character's status as transgender has been explored diegetically, I will continue to use the protagonist's name as it appears in the text, John, while employing gender neutral language.

The interpretation of John as transfeminine began with *The Homestuck Epilogues*. In this novel length postscript, John, after having finished playing SBURB, returns to a relatively normal life, but feels depressed and out of place. In an interview sponsored by VIZ Media, in regard to John's emotional landscape during *The Homestuck Epilogues*, Hussie rhetorically asks, "Is John Egbert happy? *No!*" (Hussie, "Andrew Hussie Interviews Himself"). John's predicament resonated with a sizable population of queer readers who came to the realization that they were transgender later in life. In particular, John's experience may be attributed to displaced gender dysphoria, the phenomenon of "distress and discomfort that occurs as a result of how one is viewed by society" with specific relation to "gender incongruence ... experienced by transgender individuals and others whose gender does not align with the gender they were assigned at birth" ("Gender Dysphoria"). The concept of John potentially being transfeminine originated on Twitter, with its first major appearance occurring in a nonofficial vignette written by David Turnbull, of the *Homestuck* creative team, wherein John discusses encounters with feminine alternate selves from offshoot timelines with Rose (@TraceExcalibur, "John: Hey, Rose ... ").

Tumblr user TomatoGrater, well known in the *Homestuck* fandom for analysis on the comic's central characters with respect to gender and attraction, characterizes John's experience with low self esteem and melancholia as being "exactly like ... depression caused by unrecognized dysphoria" (TomatoGrater). This conclusion is supported directly by members of *Homestuck's* creative team. According to author Aysha Farrah, contributor to numerous

Homestuck projects, and Narrative Director for *Pesterquest*, in an episode of *Homestuck*'s audio commentary, *The Perfectly Generic Podcast*, *The Homestuck Epilogues* demonstrate "an extremely trans narrative, like this feeling of ... 'Oh, something's wrong, and I don't know what it is, and it has to do with me.'" ("Evil Women" 00:32:42). In addition, transgender speculative fiction author Kate Mitchell, a writer for several *Homestuck* side projects including *Pesterquest* and *Homestuck*²: *Beyond Canon*, voiced support for the idea, "John is constantly running from introspection ... And what does that make you think maybe John might be? Maybe trans?" ("Evil Women" 00:32:20).

Much of the speculation that John might be transfeminine is based on interactions John has throughout the comic regarding the subject of gender. For example, at one point, John, having a penchant for japery, impersonates Rose via text chat as a practical joke on Kanaya, Rose's troll rival-cum-partner (Hussie, *Homestuck* 1714; TomatoGrater). A similar incident occurs during a conversation between John and Jade on renaming a gender indeterminate anthropomorphic rabbit sidekick character previously owned by Jade. Specifically Jade's line, "I gave [the rabbit] a girl's name when I was very young, but now she is a different bunny, and also a boy I guess? It's up to you John, he is your bunny" (Hussie, *Homestuck* 2868; TomatoGrater). Finally, the close contact that John has with Vriska, a feisty troll who acts as a guide for John throughout the protagonists' journey while playing SBURB, is later confirmed to be transfeminine in the second route of the sixth volume of *Pesterquest*; *Clowns and Corsairs*, "The Scourge Of The High Seas." A coincidental but nonetheless significant observation is the fact that John's surname, Egbert, can be connected to the idea of "cracking the egg," a colloquialism within a number of both real life and online transgender spaces (Smith).

inexplicably standing outside of a cave, holding said candy ("Andrew enjoys a fine Toblerone on occasion ... "). Upon the retrieval of a candy bar, Hussie hinted that he would reward the finder, specifically by enabling them to "ask for a wish to affect future Homestuck canon" ("Toblerone Wishes Granted By Andrew Hussie ... "). On August 25, 2019, Twitter user Placeholder4ABN, discovered one of the items. She publicly messaged Hussie, stating, "Thank you all, having proven myself both conscientious and invested, I declare June Egbert real," calling her proclamation "the direction of the will of the fans" (@Placeholder4ABN). Hussie replied, stating, "you were the first to find my treasure, and so it will be done" (@AndrewHussie, "You were the first to find my treasure ... "). According to Anonymous, the member of the *Homestuck* creative team wishing to remain unnamed, Hussie and his cocreators fully intend to integrate John's gender transition into the narrative, essentially making the fan theory official within *Homestuck's* continuity. They confirm, "Andrew ... revealed our plan" (Anonymous). John has long been associated with the concept of edits being made to *Homestuck's* diegetic timeline and the work's metatextual narrative, at one point obtaining the ability to travel to any point in the story (Hussie, *Homestuck* 6098). Given this association, Hussie's choice to retroactively reconnect some of the dots throughout John's character development in order to implement an arc about transition follows logically.

Following the confirmation of the upcoming storyline regarding John as transgender, several references to John's realization of transfemininity were integrated into the comic. One of the most conspicuous is a retroactively added flashback in the fourth installment of *Pesterquest*, *The Loneliest Girl In The World*. The scene depicts an interaction between John and Rose in which she is painting John's nails. John is depicted as being surprised and pleased, implying the

experience of gender euphoria, defined by Adrian Silbernagel, in his article "Gender Euphoria: The Bright Side Of Trans Experience," as "the feeling of satisfaction, joy, or intoxication, with the congruence, or rightness, between one's internal and external reality." Other, more explicit references include John's decision to shave and stated desire to find a new, and more appropriate outfit than old, ill-fitting clothes in the chapter "Welcome to my Secret Lair" in *Homestuck*²: *Beyond Canon*. In this installment, John also has an in-depth conversation with Roxy, a character depicted in varying timelines as alternately questioning gender or adopting a bigender identity consisting of being nonbinary and transmasculine.

The creative team's recognition of the fan theory generated a schism similar to the one created by Hussie's assertion that the human characters did not have defined races. Proponents of John's status as transgender actively and wholeheartedly embraced the concept to such a degree that they became colloquially known as "Junebuggers," described by videographer Jojo "Funk" McLovin, in his fandom microdocumentary, "Who Is June Egbert?", as individuals "insistent enough about June's canonicity to bug people about it." Indeed, the ambiguity of John's status as transgender, given the fact that it was only nominally confirmed, led to another instance of worldviews butting heads within *Homestuck*'s readership. Given the level to which the readership had been encouraged to identify with the characters, an issue as important as a character's gender identity and presentation changing caused backlash. As well-known fandom contributor Roxy L. Wakraya writes in her essay, "Ruining of a Fandom: Subjectivity & Entitlement," when John's transfemininity was confirmed, "instead of being happy, people who headcanoned [John] [a different identity] [became] hostile, they [took], somehow, representation stemming from the author's own read of a character and their own experiences, as an attack on themselves."

On the conservative side of the aisle were readers such as Reddit user /u/5945883, a self avowed radical feminist, who vehemently denied the possibility of John's transfemininity, stating, "I'm tired of people being attacked over calling him John instead, or being called transphobic for drawing John ... You know, the protagonist of *Homestuck*." In addition to denial, other readers poked fun at those supporting the idea of John as transfeminine, taking it as some sort of joke. These behaviors can be attributed to several factors, primarily past, facetious declarations of canonicity Hussie has made in the past and, similarly to the issues with racial representation, the fact that *Homestuck* has priorly treated issues relating to identity politics as a punchline.

A large portion of *Homestuck*'s audience is drawn to the complex relationship dynamics of the comic's sprawling cast. A common pastime within the fandom is the creation of transformative works that depict one or more of the main characters in relationships with one another. According to Gemma Bothe, in her article, "'If Fandom Jumped Off A Bridge, It Would Be Onto A Ship': An Examination Of Conflict That Occurs Though Shipping In Fandom," this is typically referred to as *shipping*, a truncated, verbal form of the word *relationship*. Bothe notes that, given the inherently subjective and varied nature of audiences' responses to media, "an individual can ship characters whose relationship is canon compliant, or in many cases the ship can be not represented or only marginally represented within the canon" (5). At one point, given his tendency to poke fun at the audience, Hussie declared, "As an act of unprecedented magnanimity and good will, today, I declare [that] all ships are officially canon." Because of this, and other, similar statements, readers often argued that John's transition had no basis in canon and was therefore meant to be some kind of ironic twist poking fun at a marginalized group as Hussie had done in the past.

In addition to the concept that John's being transgender was meant to be ironic based on Hussie's previous approaches toward canon, the history of sexuality, particularly fetishism, in *Homestuck* further exacerbated the issue. Given its enmeshment with internet culture, it is unsurprising that *Homestuck* regularly features references to the world wide web's seedier domains in addition to its allusions to the 'net's more banal communities and content. In addition to satirizing popular internet subcultures, *Homestuck* also pokes fun at fetish erotica produced and distributed in underground online communities. From the beginning, Hussie has had a strong history of integrating jokes related to sexuality and fetishism into his comics. This can be seen with notable characters such as Damara Megido, an exaggeratedly unhinged and promiscuous schoolgirl character acting as a lampoon of the yandere, a character trope common in media influenced by Japanese pop culture and Equius Zahaak, a caricature of muscle fetishists.

Hussie's decision to include sexually suggestive humor in his work—particularly with paraphilias as the punchline—contributed to the transphobic backlash more conservative readers demonstrated towards John's transfemininity. Such priming led to conservative portions of the readership to take any discussion of gender and sexuality as a joke, they had reason to believe the existence of a transfeminine character might be a reference to harmful tropes which ridicule the experiences of transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. These include gender nonconforming dress as being synonymous with transvestic fetishism, or the desire to transition socially or physically from masculine to feminine as being the result of autogynephilia.

Finally, as with the representation of race, gender, particularly in the sense of characters who transition from masculine to feminine in some way, has not been handled well through Hussie's career. For instance, in a previous work, *Problem Sleuth*, Hussie's male protagonists are

each depicted as having comedic genderbent feminine counterparts, with unflattering names such as Nervous Broad and Hysterical Dame. The existence of these characters, despite playing a crucial role in the story for a significant period of time, nevertheless trivializes transfeminine individuals.

Strong proponents of John's transfemininity put up a fierce defense against the naysayers, actively rallying against those failing to accept the concept, to the point of defending the fictional character as if a real person, perhaps due to the story's resonance with them. Fiery and vitriolic statements were common, with pertinent examples arising on social media. Twitter user @RibbitPiano stated, "I refuse to misgender and deadname June to appease the cis, calling her 'Egbert' ... is misgendering and deadnaming. Her name is June." Similarly, @Jentha_Briati, in respect to juxtaposing the names John and June for the same character in order to avoid ambiguity or using gender neutral pronouns, responded, "I hate it, I hate it", and urged others to "stop fucking saying [it]."

Like the issue with the ambiguous portrayal of race in *Homestuck*, the concern of John's ambiguous gender generated toxicity. However, in this instance, the virulence was problematic not only within the readership, but for the creative team as well. Mitchell, and several other queer creators working on *Homestuck* abandoned the work due to the pressure from aggressive readers. In addition to transphobia and other prejudice against queer individuals, more liberal fans exerted negative pressure as well. In personal correspondence with one of said staff members, Anonymous, they detailed their experience as follows.

We were repeatedly asked if we had transfeminine team members who would be able to make sure she was 'handled correctly'. This is an extremely sinister line of

questioning to be subjected to. Not only is it demanding to know a very private detail about a complete stranger ... potentially exposing them to unwelcome attention by that fact alone; it is also an implicit threat, one which says that the person in question had better do a good job, or the consequences will be severe ... As it transpired, I was this special transfeminine team member who would supposedly ensure a favourable depiction of ... June, and it was such an overwhelming pressure that I eventually determined to have nothing to do with this facet of the story at all.

The level of pressure from both extremes of *Homestuck*'s readership, in both vehement denial and zealous acceptance of John's transfemininity reached such an extreme, that *Homestuck*'s latest installment, *Homestuck*²: *Beyond Canon*, has been placed on indefinite hiatus so that the creative team could finish the project without outcry from the fandom. In an update to the *Homestuck* Patreon fundraising page, Hussie wrote, "I think there's a line where criticism crosses over into more abusive expressions, and I've observed this has happened way too often" (Hussie, "Future Approach to *Homestuck*"²). In an update regarding *Homestuck*, Hussie elaborated on his decision to simply end the project's active update schedule, stating, "I've never really known what to do about this, because it's very difficult to control fandom behavior, and if you ever try to police anyone's conduct it usually just backfires." Thus, in the end, given the exceptional pressure from the readership regarding decisions about characterization and development of the central protagonist, Hussie chose to cease actively updating the project in real time until its eventual completion behind the scenes.

Part III: Conclusion

Examining *Homestuck*'s evolution, a critical reader develops the understanding that Hussie's early forays into comics, graphic novels, and later into animated cartoon literature, encouraged him to develop an appreciation for the nuances required in his approach to diversity in his creative world-building over time. His earliest juvenalia made use of crass and often inappropriate descriptions of characters' race and ethnicity, among other marginalized traits, as humor. Later attempts to allay the criticisms of these devices by fans were often ineffective. In his more recent manuscripts, Hussie attempts to employ more mature and socially acceptable descriptors of his characters and their aracial status.

Homestuck's Trickster Mode story arc, the canonization of its central protagonist as transgender, and other instances of the friction between Hussie, his coauthors, and his audience exemplify this disconnect and the way it has continued throughout the life of the work. The Trickster Mode plotline, when interpreted as a form of failed societal commentary, can offer a great deal of insight into how inexperienced writers from a majority population interact with marginalized readers in works that involve audience participation. Despite this tendency, *Homestuck* has, nonetheless, retained a readership of marginalized individuals and majority populations who ally themselves with this audience. In this way, some of Hussie's attempted progressivism is efficacious, allowing *Homestuck* to function in a limited way as a space for representation and activism.

Unfortunately, *Homestuck* implicitly endorsed its conservative readership despite the conservative readership's active harm toward minoritized readers by continually implying that both points of view were equally valid. This emboldened prejudice in the audience to such a

degree that a high number of minoritized readers felt unsafe and either removed themselves from actively participating in community activities or became bitter and defensive, assuming bad faith at every turn. Furthermore, members of the creative team routinely distanced themselves from the project due to the volatile and hostile atmosphere. These levels of unsustainable toxicity due to the failure to mitigate prejudice stemming from readers of conservative Interpretive Communities led to the project's downfall.

By performing a detailed analysis of *Homestuck* through the lenses of Reader Response Theory and Post-Structuralism, we can gain insight into the mechanics of power structures and their influence on the clash of authority between the author, audience, and the social norms that shape their perspectives through their consumption and interpretation of literary texts. The Interpretive Communities that shape the worldviews of both readers and writers are ultimately the key force in determining what a text means. In the case of *Homestuck*, this phenomenon can be observed through the readership's negative reaction to Hussie's attempt at antiracist or queer positive commentary. So much of *Homestuck's* audience responded in the same way because of their status as products of the same culture, products of the same Interpretive Communities. Neither the author nor their audience is a single authority, and by remembering this fact, we may become more cognizant of what it means to engage with literature in a meaningful and socially-conscious way.

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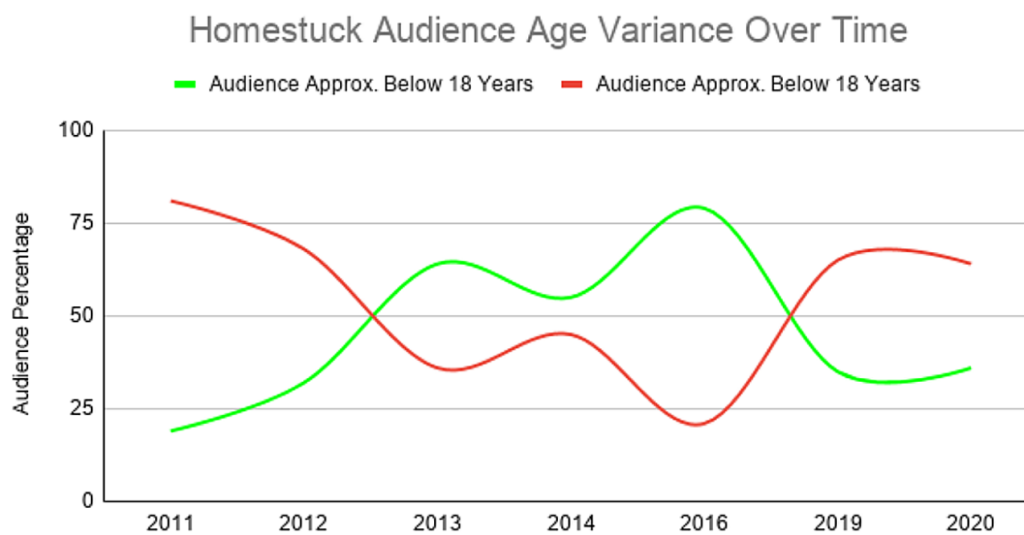
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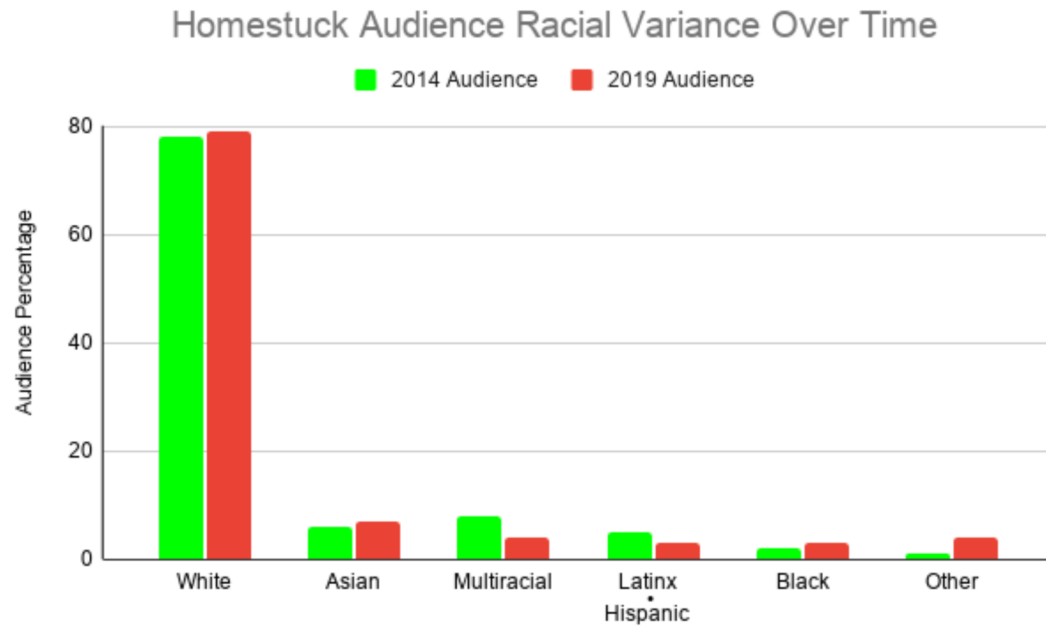
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Appendix: Charts & Figures

Figure 1: *Homestuck* Audience Age Variance Over Time

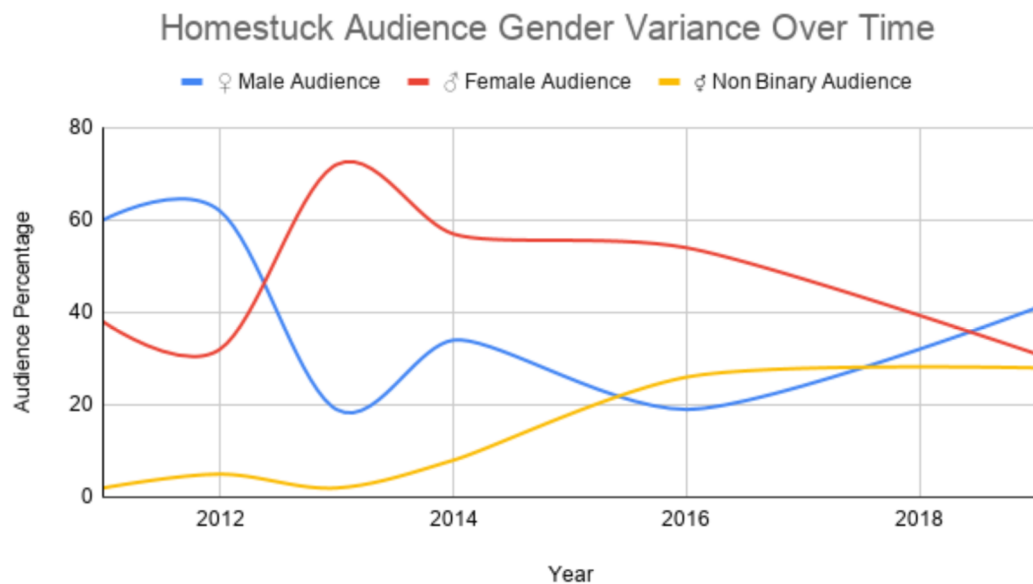
	≤ 18 Years	≥ 18 Years	Percent
Year	Percents	Percents	Totals
2011	19 %	81 %	100 %
2012	32 %	68 %	100 %
2013	64 %	36 %	100 %
2014	55 %	45 %	100 %
2016	79 %	21 %	100 %
2019	35 %	65 %	100 %
2020	36 %	64 %	100 %

	≤ 18 Years	≥ 18 Years	Total
Year	Responses	Responses	Responses
2011	49	51	252
2012	133	213	417
2013	362	204	566
2014	1862	1523	3385
2016	2851	758	3609
2019	1853	3441	5294
2020	3547	6307	9854

Figure 2: *Homestuck* Audience Racial Variance Over Time

Race	2014 Percents	2019 Percents
White	78 %	79 %
Asian	6 %	7 %
Multiracial	8 %	4 %
Hispanic • Latinx	5 %	3 %
Black	2 %	3 %
Other	1 %	4 %
Total	100 %	100 %

Race	2014 Responses	2019 Responses
White	2621	4090
Asian	192	344
Multiracial	278	227
Hispanic • Latinx	182	166
Black	55	154
Other	32	139
Total	3375	5169

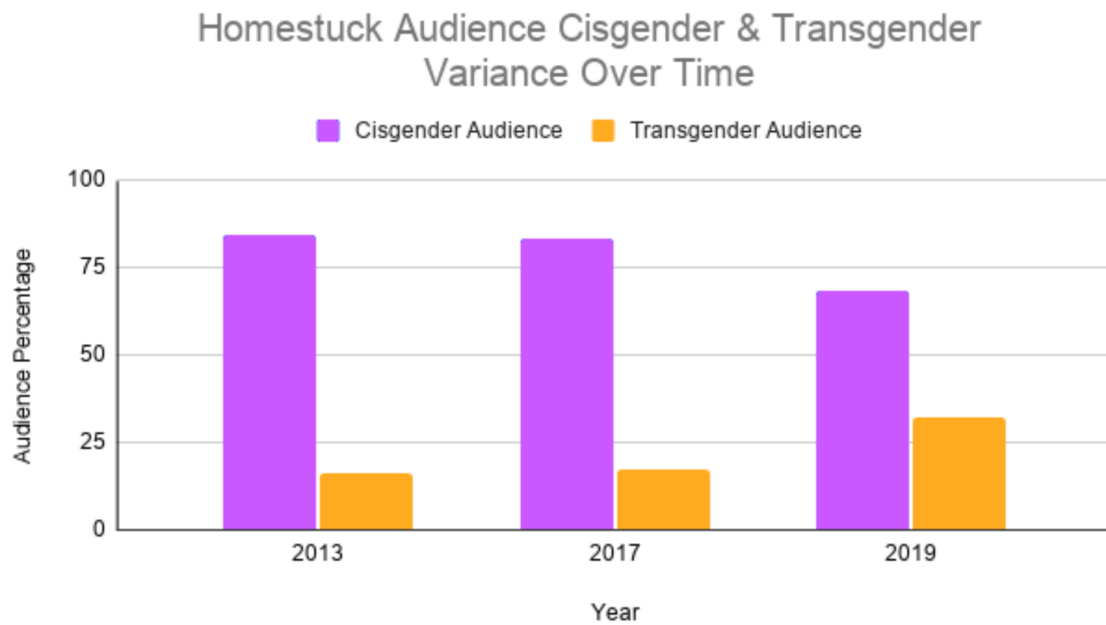
Figure 3: *Homestuck* Audience Gender Variance Over Time

Year	♀ Percents	♂ Percents	♀ Percents	Response Totals
2011	60	38	2	252
2012	62	32	5	417
2013	19	72	2	575
2014	34	57	8	3203
2016	19	54	26	3608
2019	41	31	28	5231

Year	♀ Responses	♂ Responses	♀ Responses	Percent Totals
2011	152	96	4	100
2012	259	133	28	100
2013	107	412	56	100
2014	1082	1841	280	100
2016	692	1961	955	100
2019	2148	1619	1464	100

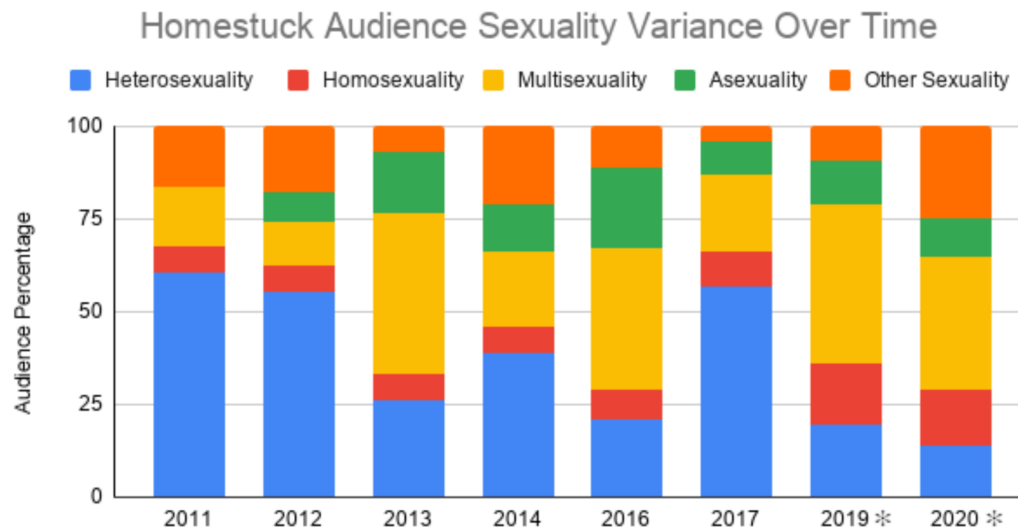
Color & Symbol Key
Male: ♀
Female: ♂
Non Binary: ♀

Figure 4: *Homestuck* Audience Cisgender & Transgender Variance Over Time



Year	Cis. Percents	Trans. Percents	Percent Totals
2013	84	16	100
2017	83	17	100
2019	68	32	100

Year	Cis. Responses	Trans. Responses	Response Totals
2013	483	92	575
2017	83	17	100
2019	3412	1636	5048

Figure 4: *Homestuck* Audience Sexuality Variance Over Time

Year	Hetero. Percents	Homo. Percents	Multi. Percents	A. Percents	Other Percents	Percent Totals
2011	60 %	7 %	16 %	0 %	16 %	100 %
2012	56 %	7 %	12 %	8 %	18 %	100 %
2013	26 %	7 %	43 %	16 %	7 %	100 %
2014	39 %	7 %	20 %	13 %	21 %	100 %
2016	21 %	8 %	38 %	22 %	11 %	100 %
2017	57 %	9 %	21 %	9 %	4 %	100 %
2019 *	25 % *	21 % *	54 % *	15 % *	12 % *	127 % *
2020 *	14 % *	15 % *	36 % *	10 % *	25 % *	100 % *

Year	Hetero. Responses	Homo. Responses	Multi. Responses	A. Responses	Other Responses	Response Totals
2011	153	18	41	0	40	252
2012	234	29	50	33	75	417
2013	151	43	249	90	41	574
2014	1308	246	690	437	702	3385
2016	750	289	1386	792	391	3608
2017	57	9	21	9	4	100
2019	1299	1105	2794	791	344	6333
2020	1799	1986	4661	1281	3292	13019

* Note:

In the data for the years 2019 and 2020 regarding audience reported sexual orientation, the numbers total to more than 100%, with the total being 127%. This indicates that slightly more than one quarter of the respondents provided multiple answers in each of the categories. It is not possible to determine where multiple responses were made. Additionally, the data has been made anonymous so that no identifying characteristics of respondents can be ascertained. Therefore, it is only possible to use the data as reported and make determinations on this basis. This information thus indicates a general overview of the readership's sexual orientation trends for the years 2019 and 2020 rather than being a comprehensive reflection.