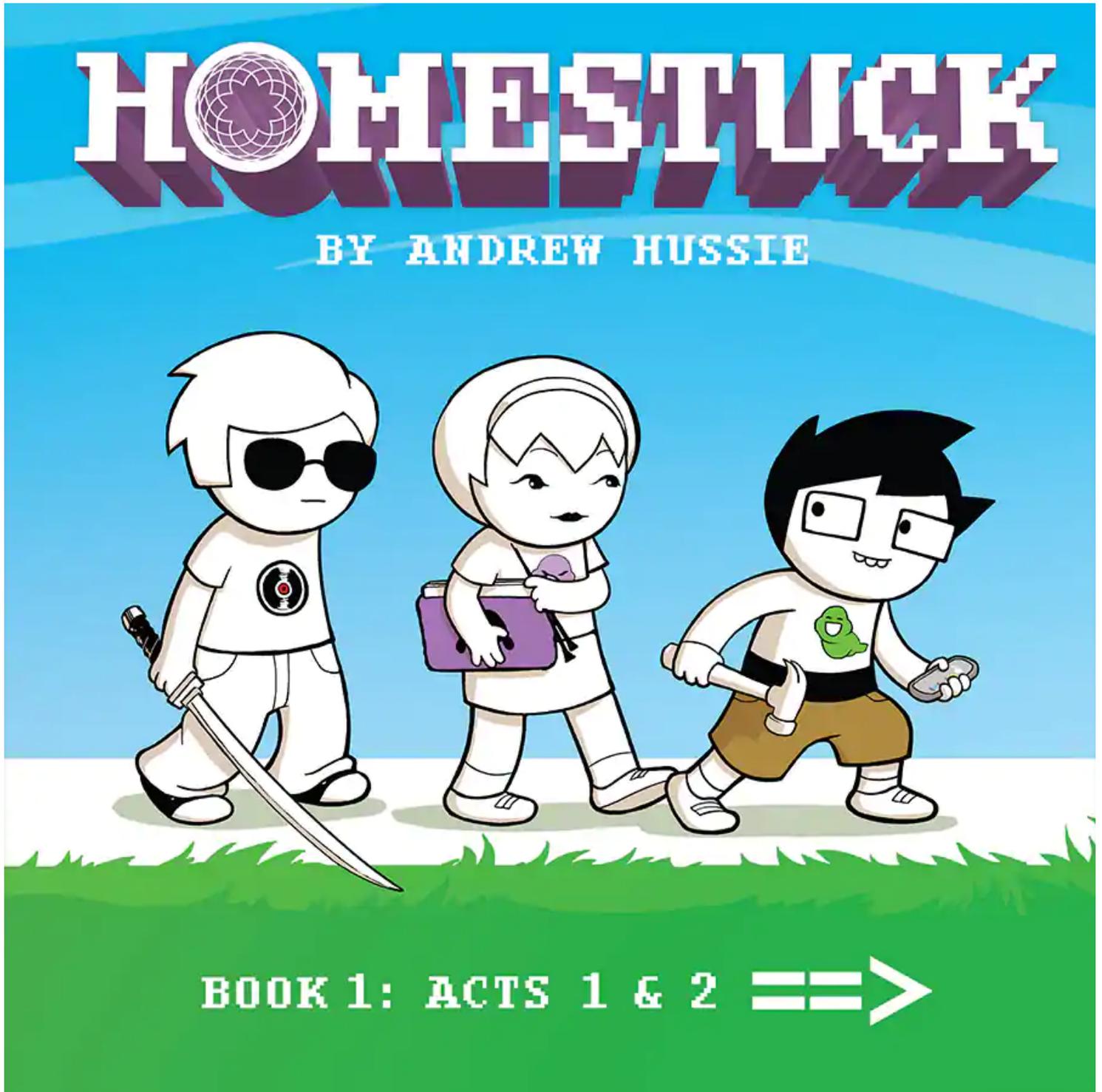


Comic Riffs

'Homestuck' creator explains how his webcomic became a phenomenon



Andrew Hussie/VizMedia 2018 (by Andrew Hussie / VizMedia 2018)

By [Michael Cavanaugh](#)

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"**HOMESTUCK**," the epic, seven-year "[Ulysses](#)" of a [webcomic](#) by Andrew Hussie, was a life-or-death funhouse that couldn't help but reflect on its own existence. It might have started as a tale of a birthday boy and the beta version of a computer game he and his friends install, but it immediately became an adventure in form and format, as if the creator — raising his artistic baton to signal his symphonic command — unleashed more than 800,000 words guiding more than 100 characters through realities that could seem to collapse in on themselves. Life could be cheap in young John Egbert's world, but the reader experience was staggeringly rich.

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Hussie is now publishing [the newest volume in the series](#), the comic's images and games and Flash animation and "pesterlogs" (in-character chats) collected and adapted for the limitations and posterity of hard-bound book form. In the process, the creator finds himself reliving the world he devoted himself to from 2009 to 2016 — an online experience that drew as many as a million unique visitors daily.

And when Hussie discusses such acts of adaptation, he speaks with the hyper-awareness of a puzzle master who knows just where every existential trapdoor and portal is hidden in his time-skipping life maze — and why. Yet he didn't set out to create such a monster saga.

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"Once a project goes on a few years, it starts to consume an appreciable percentage of your actual life span," Hussie tells The Washington Post's Comic Riffs. "And life is a chaotic thing. If you let a project take up a significant part of your life, then life has a way of returning the favor by intruding on the project. And the intrusion stretches the project out even further, thus perpetuating the grim cycle.

"I doubt there's anyone who's working on an ambitious creative project who doesn't relate to this somewhat," he continues. "Those of you with that unfinished thing sitting on your computer, nagging at you: What's taking so long to finish it? Sounds like life's been messing with you."

Reflecting on the origins of "Homestuck," he considers the organic nature of his storytelling, which allowed for reader response.

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“The way the story worked was, I set up some basics and a few initial conditions, readers gave feedback — ‘commands’ — I updated the story very rapidly in response, and it just goes where it goes,” he says. “There were measures of planning and design, but it was largely improvisational and fluid — a sort of ‘creative conversation’ with the story’s readership.

“The narrative was shaped in response to these factors, and so were the characters. So characters, just like the story, are really just initial profiles that are meant to be pliable, shaped over time in surprising ways.”

Because “Homestuck’s” original teenage protagonists had to build a new world for themselves, Hussie followed the open-ended nature of adventurous possibilities. “As a coming-of-age story, the kids grow and evolve as everything else develops along the way,” he says. “Kids can turn out to be anything. The prolonged, chaotic narrative gives them sort of an extended environment in which to discover who they are, which I think leads to some relatable experiences for a lot of people.”

Adapting “Homestuck” to book form, too, meant reconsidering why his style of storytelling resonated with a large audience — especially so many young readers.

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“In these books, I write commentary on every page, which has resulted in a lot of reflection on all this stuff,” Hussie says. “Figuring out what to say about it all in order to make the books worth reading has brought back a lot of the original ideas that went into it. This is one topic that seems to keep surfacing as I retrace the steps: This game the kids play together, and later, even the narrative itself they exist in, is a hostile, confining medium, which can be viewed as analogous to life.

“Life messes with you,” the cartoonist continues. “It can feel like an antagonistic, nihilistic continuum, broken in ways, actively sabotaging you in others — yet appears to have demands of you, hoops to jump through, comparable to the rules of a sadistic game, or the structure of a stunted narrative. I think life can feel this way, especially to young people figuring things out.”

And so “Homestuck” defies conventional storytelling to great effect. “It comes across as a dysfunctional, actively hostile encompassing reality that a bunch of fictional kids are stuck in for a long time while they confront the truth about themselves,” Hussie says. “It shifts most of the focus on character, less on the usual beats of story.

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“They respond to these pressures similarly to how young people growing up respond to the pressures of life, which for the most part is a disastrously messy process.”

As “Homestuck” grew in scope and popularity, so did the demands on Hussie.

“The bigger the fandom got, the more controversial everything was,” he says. “Practically everything that happened was a serious point of contention — a reason to argue, discuss, to generate pages and pages of heated dissertation on what everything means, and why certain things are good or bad.

“All of this was supposed to be part of the experience. It was part of the cat-and-mouse game between the author and reader.”

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Hussie, however, makes a point to remind readers that the goal was to have a great deal of sly, absurdist fun — albeit by creating material that for Hussie carries “a sort of somber, deeply spiritual gravity.”

“When I answer questions or make notes in books, you come away with the sense that there’s a lot of serious stuff going on — themes, complex ideas, characters with emotional depth, stuff about growing up, life, the nature of reality,” Hussie says. “But in the end, the best way to view it is still probably as a huge farce.”

Yes, he says, it was all a “metafictional farce that never fully escapes its own ridiculous nature — its whimsical tendency to warp the boundaries of its medium or subvert the expectations surrounding it.”

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As he notes this farcical nature, Hussie then feels compelled to elaborate: “Certain things shouldn’t be taken at face value, or as seriously as you might otherwise be inclined to. But the ending isn’t funny, per se — it’s quite a deadpan, lavishly animated but

fairly minimalistic presentation of what I'd describe as the story's meta-theological thesis.”

“A farce is just a kind of riddle — one that you aren't sure is even being asked, until you start encountering phrases like ‘meta-theological thesis’ being used with a straight face,” he says, “at which point you start becoming understandably suspicious.”

“Homestuck” was forever a visual feast of varied forms — yet it was always about more than meets the eye.

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