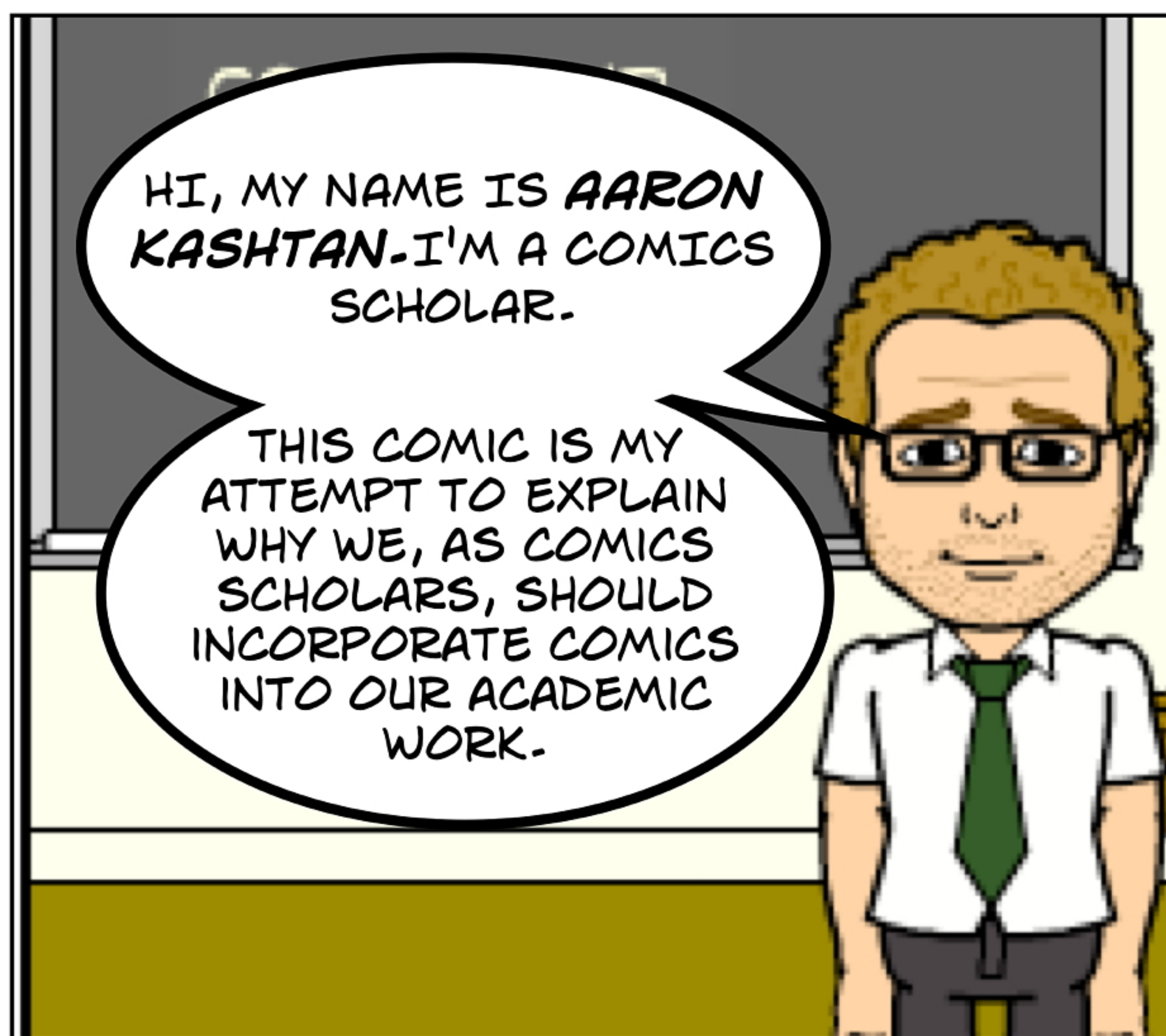


Materiality Comics



LET'S START WITH A BASIC OBSERVATION: FOR ME, HALF THE PLEASURE OF READING COMICS IS THEIR MATERIALITY.



I DON'T COLLECT COMICS FOR FINANCIAL REASONS. YET I OFTEN BUY OLD COMICS WHOSE STORIES I ALREADY HAVE IN REPRINT FORM, SO I CAN OWN THE "REAL THING."



THIS IS NOT UNIQUE TO ME. FOR MANY FANS BUYING AND READING COMICS ARE OLFACTORY AND TACTILE AS WELL AS VISUAL EXPERIENCES. ALVARO ALEMÁN REFERS TO:

this "yielding" of the comic book to sensual experience (which includes the experience of juvenile purchasing power in the form of nickel and dime plunking on counters and the anticipation of reading pleasure that follows snatching the copy from the stand, opening the pages for the first time and taking in that unique comic book smell).

OF COURSE, THIS IS NOT UNIQUE TO COMICS. I AM SIMILARLY OBSESSIVE ABOUT BOOKS.

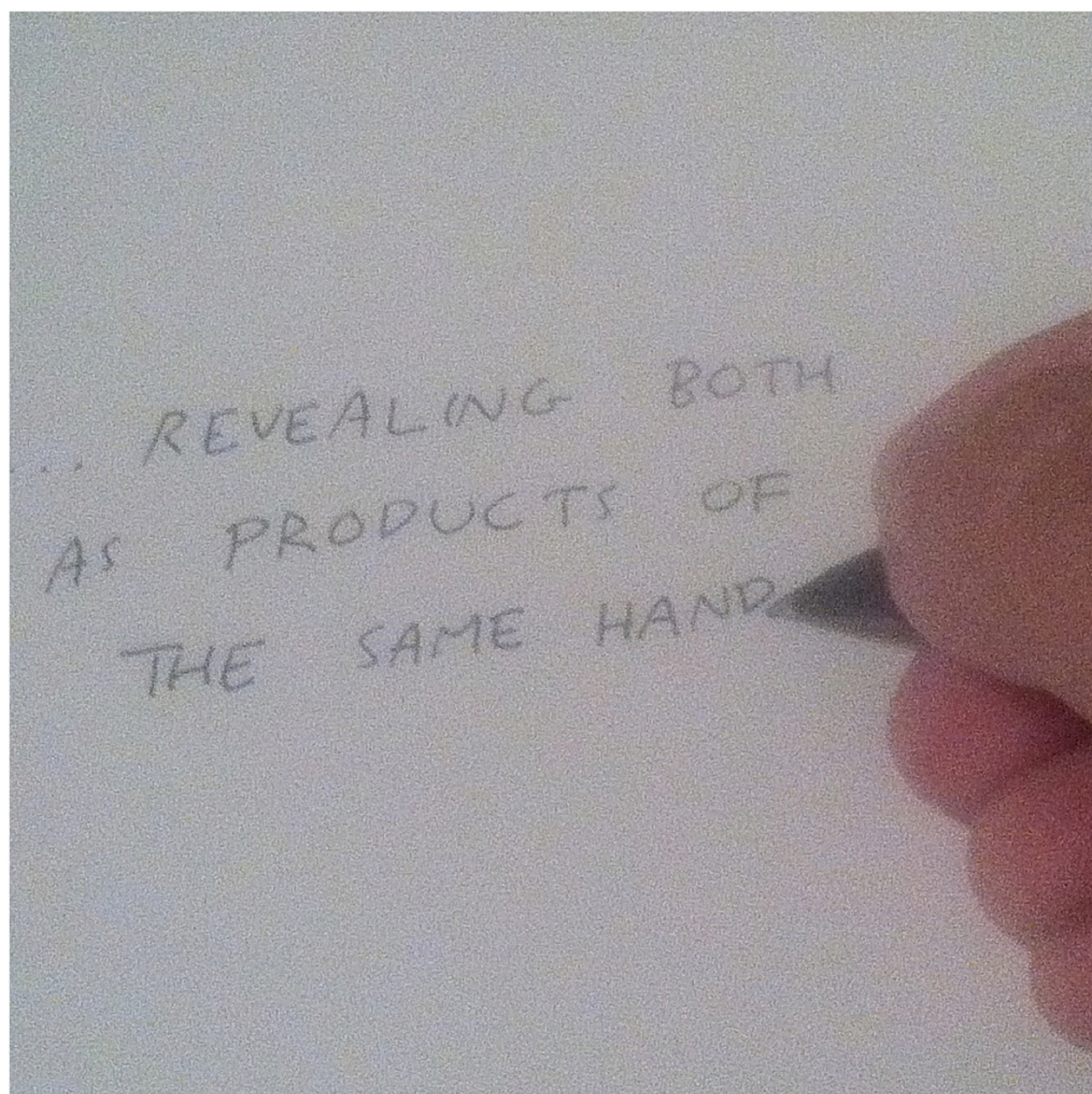
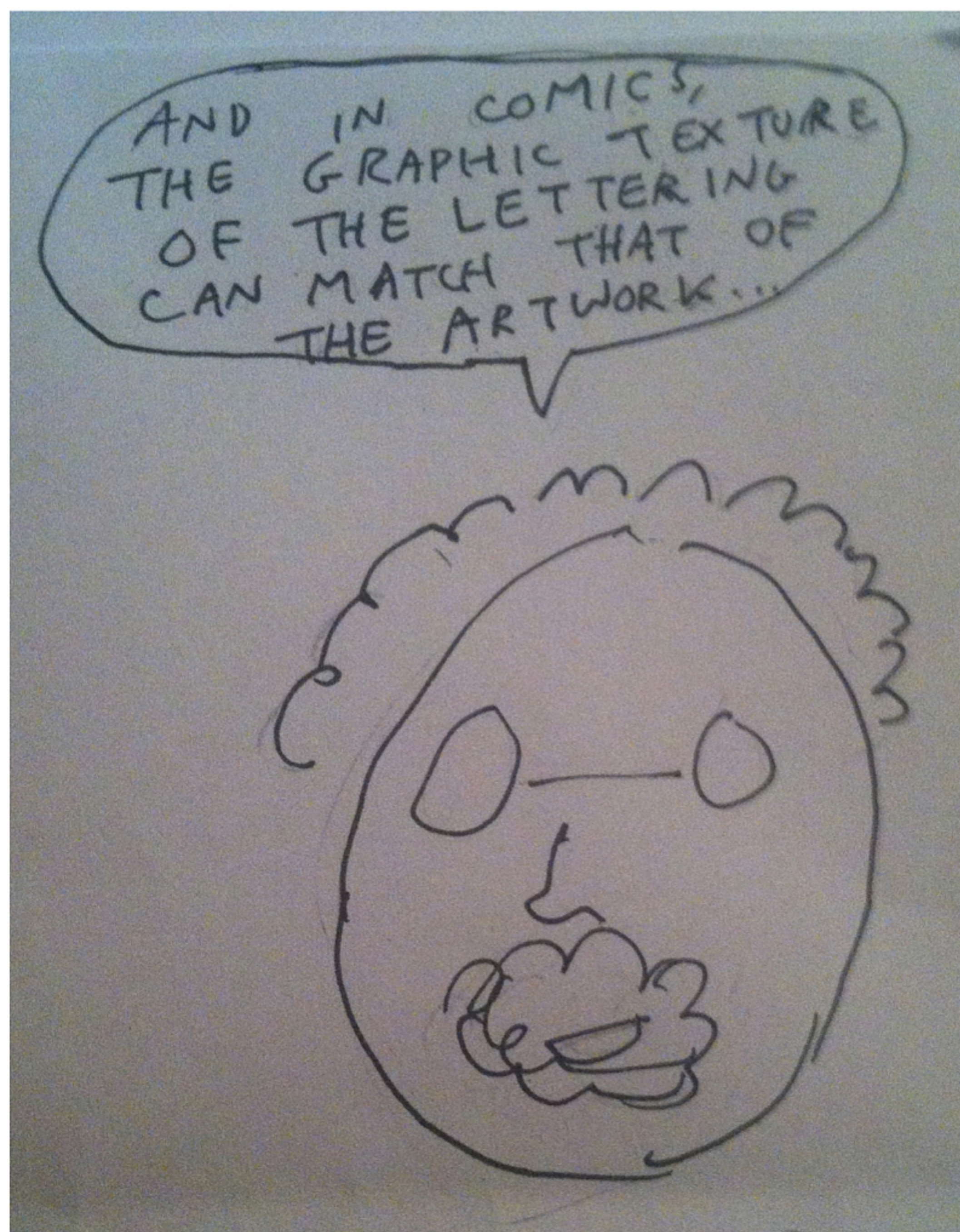


YET FOR ME, THE PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE OF READING SEEMS TO **MATTER** WITH COMICS MORE THAN IT DOES WITH CONVENTIONAL BOOKS. ALTHOUGH WE MAY THINK OF READING AS A PURELY MENTAL EXPERIENCE, IN FACT **ALL** FORMS OF READING ARE SENSUOUS, EMBODIED EXPERIENCES. AND YET I'M MORE AWARE OF THIS FACT WHEN I READ COMICS THAN WHEN I READ PROSE.



Another related thing I love about comics is their richness from a design perspective. The best comics are not only beautifully drawn, but beautifully designed. In such comics, graphic design, typography and coloring combine to produce a harmonious and elegant whole.

COMICS ARE AMONG THE FEW ART FORMS WHERE HANDWRITING IS STILL A STANDARD MEANS OF LETTERING.



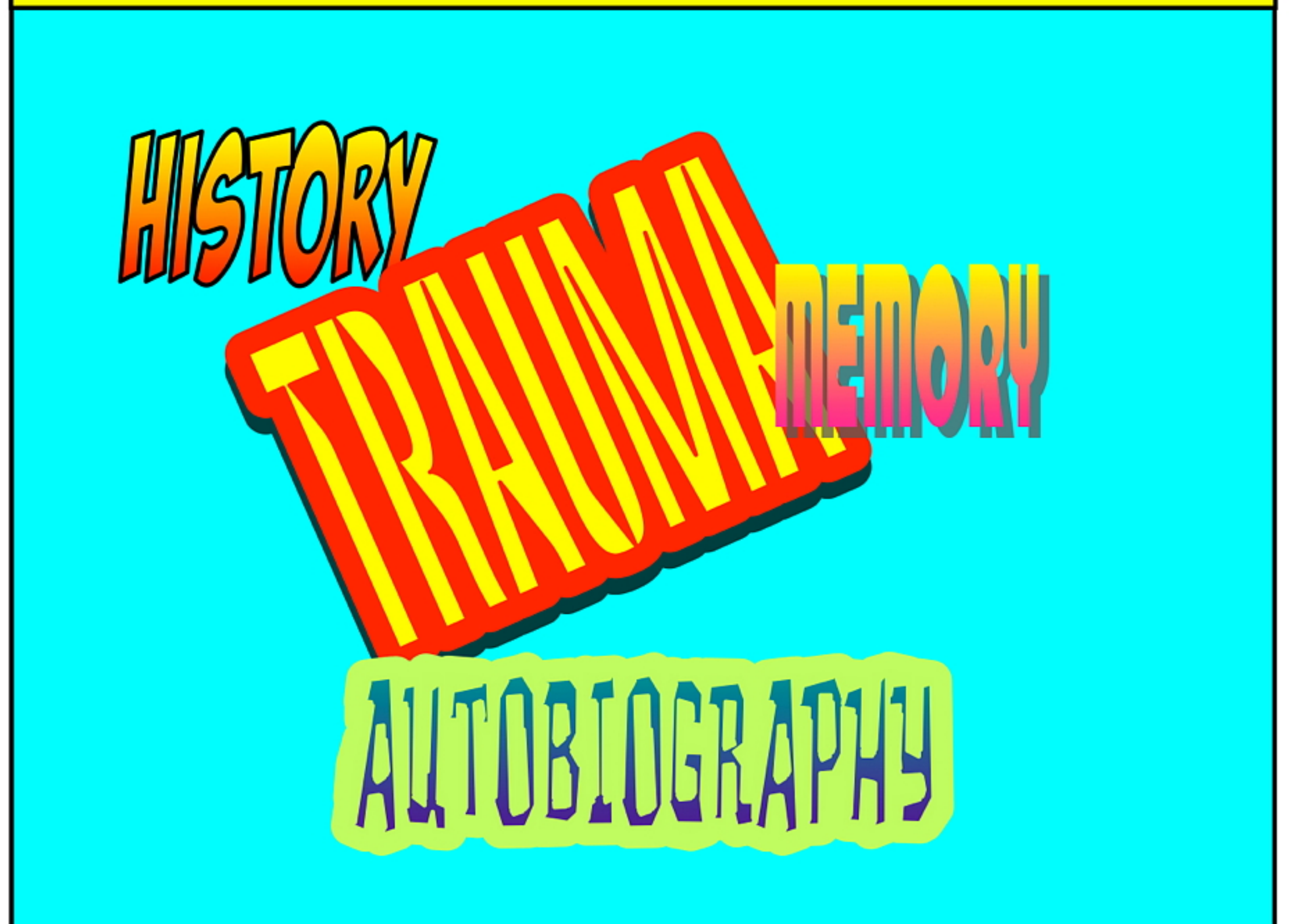
To summarize what I've been saying on these two pages: For me, a big part of the appeal of comics is what I've elsewhere called *material richness*. Comics are haptically and visually exciting artifacts. And in comics, everything contributes to the aesthetic experience -- not just the artwork in the panels, but the lettering, the panel borders, and everything else. (More examples of this later.)

But comics scholarship has failed to take into account the material richness of comics, either at a theoretical or at practical level.

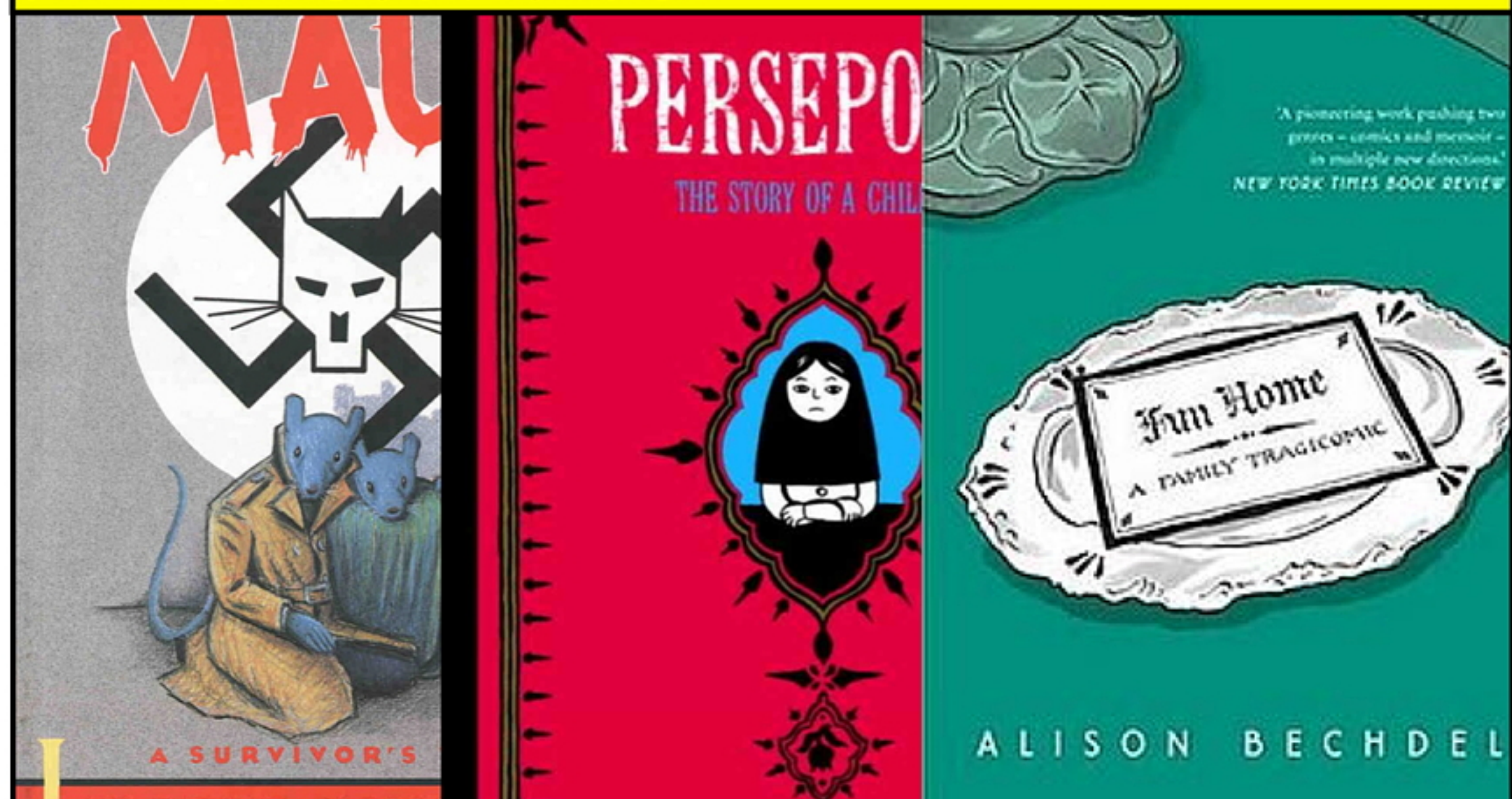
COMICS STUDIES IS FINALLY STARTING TO GET SOME INSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION.



YET ACADEMIC COMICS STUDIES HAS TENDED TO FOCUS ON A NARROW RANGE OF TOPICS.



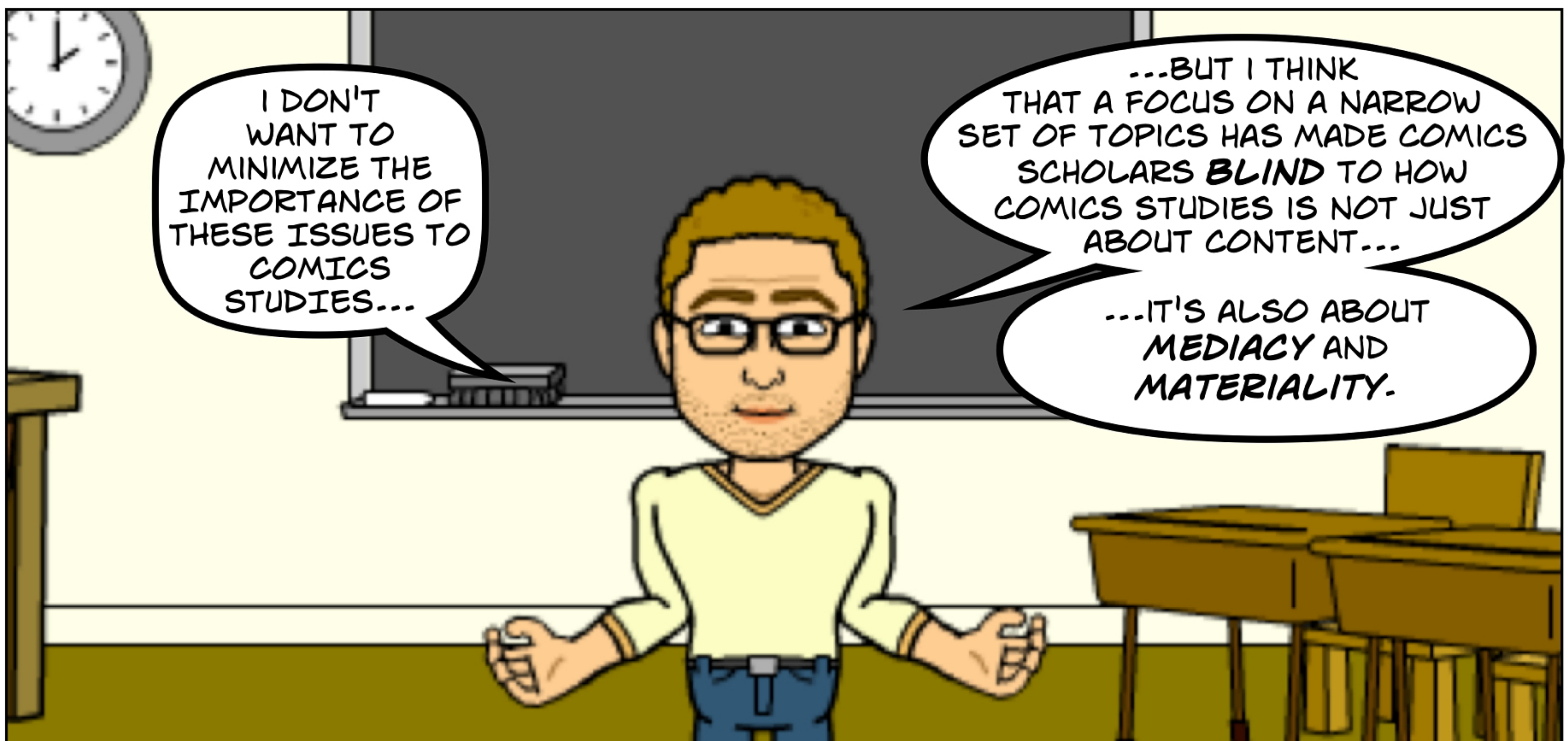
THE ACADEMIC COMICS CANON HAS COALESCED AROUND A SMALL SET OF WORKS, ALMOST ALL OF WHICH ARE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL.



IF AN INSTRUCTOR USES JUST ONE COMIC ON A SYLLABUS, IT'S PROBABLY ONE OF THESE THREE.

AND HILLARY CHUTE HAS EVEN COME CLOSE TO ARGUING THAT FEMINIST AUTOBIOGRAPHY IS THE ONE THING COMICS ARE **UNIQUELY GOOD AT**:

The form of comics has a peculiar relationship not only to memoir and autobiography in general, as I will note, but to narratives of development... The force and value of graphic narrative's intervention, on the whole, attaches to how it pushes on conceptions of the representable that have become commonplace in the wake of deconstruction, especially in contemporary discourse about trauma.



A further problem here is that essays in comics studies frequently look like this page: expanses of gray text relieved only occasionally by images, if at all. (And often not even in an **interesting** font.)

This is of course not unique to comics studies; essays that look like this are equally common in film studies, television studies, art history, and other fields whose objects of study are visual in nature. As James Elkins points out, there are legitimate reasons why scholarship on visual texts may not itself be visual (e.g. Deleuze's cinema books are mostly unillustrated "because his central interest is the representation of time"). Moreover, in some ways, comics studies faces greater barriers to the use of images than other visually oriented fields, given the notorious reluctance of certain publishers to provide image permissions, and the lack of a disciplinary consensus as to what constitutes fair use.

Furthermore, many of us Anglo-American comics scholars have a background in the study of literature -- a field where the scholarship tends to look much like its objects of study. If most works of literary criticism are expanses of gray text with minimal images, then so are most of the works that literary critics write about.

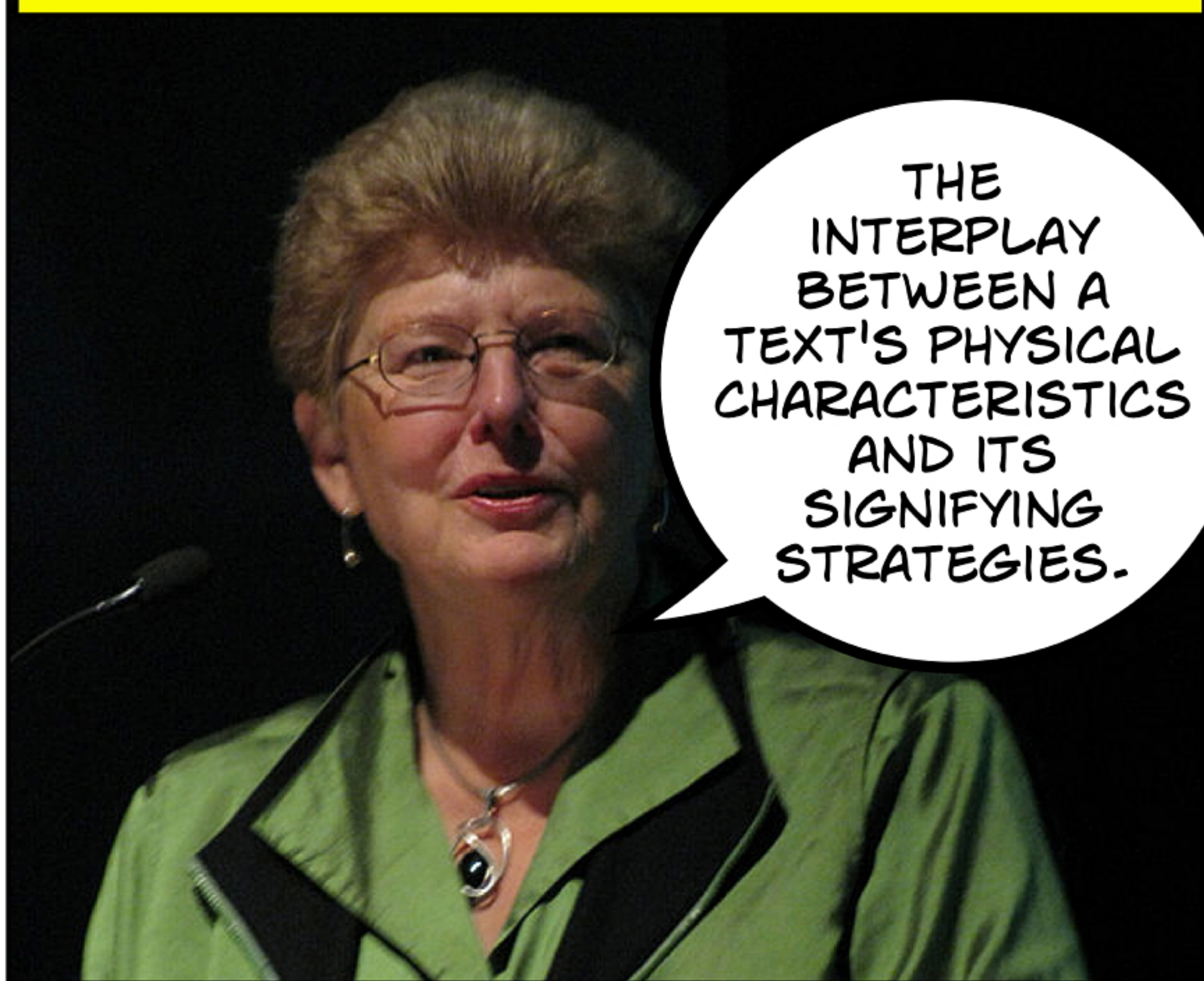
Notice this page uses panel borders instead of paragraph breaks; does that mean even this page is a comic?

However, literary scholars are increasingly recognizing the importance of materiality in literary studies. And literary theory itself is increasingly becoming multimodal thanks to the rise of DH and related scholarly approaches. Maybe comics studies has something to learn about materiality from literary studies.

And maybe the reverse is also true. Maybe literary studies has something to learn about materiality from comics, because the role of materiality tends to be much more visible in comics than in text-based literature.

Those are my key points. But to demonstrate them, I need to explain what materiality is.

KATHERINE HAYLES DEFINES MATERIALITY AS:



THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN A TEXT'S PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND ITS SIGNIFYING STRATEGIES.

AS A VERY BASIC EXAMPLE:



THE LAST PANEL WAS A PHOTO. THIS ONE LOOKS LIKE A DRAWING, THOUGH IT'S ACTUALLY NOT. WHAT RHETORICAL DIFFERENCE DOES THAT MAKE?

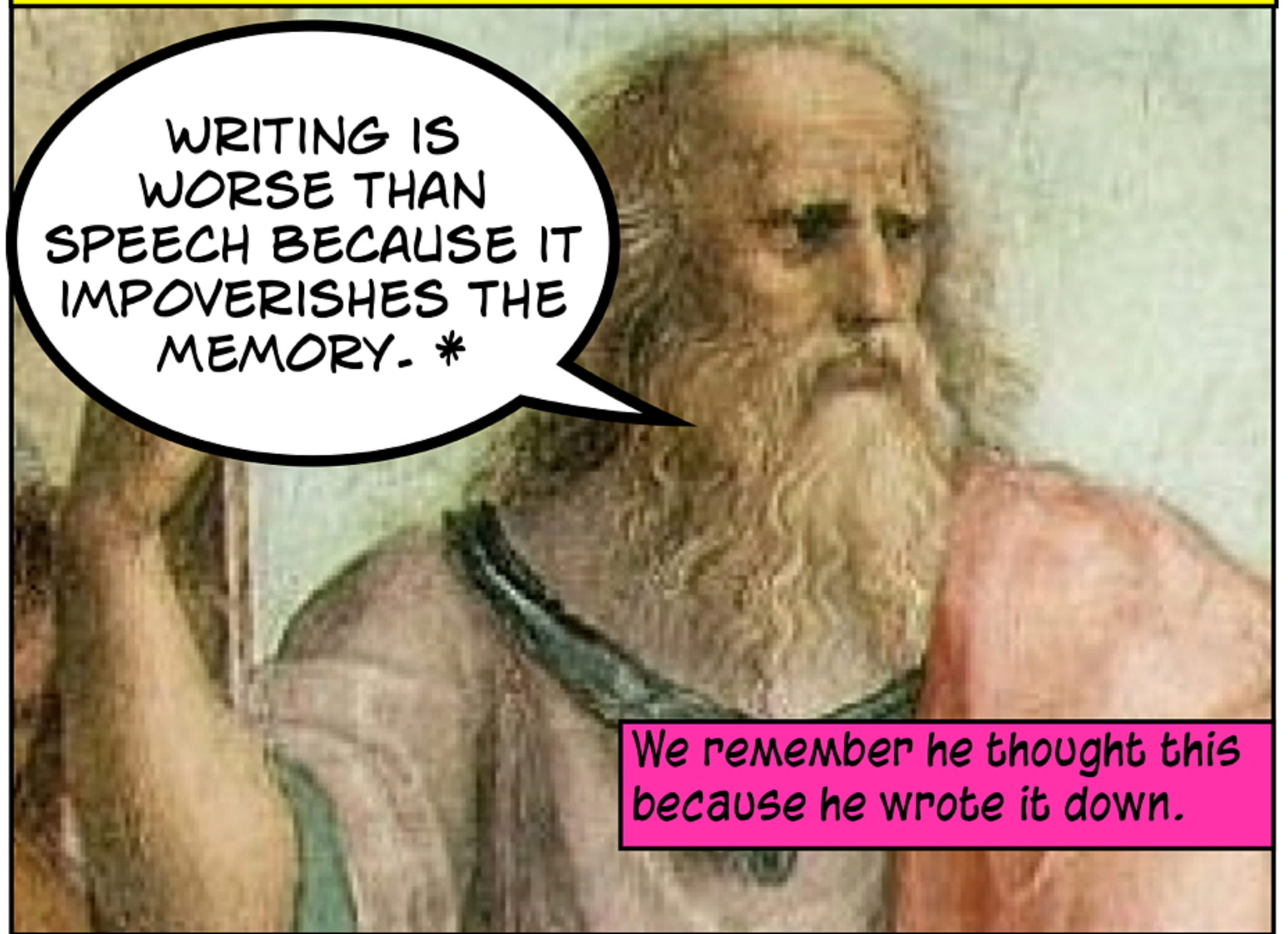
SIMILARLY:



Here I am "speaking" in a different font and in mixed-case lettering instead of all caps.

How does that change the way you "hear" what I'm saying?

THOUGH THE THEORY OF MATERIALITY GOES BACK AT LEAST TO PLATO'S PHAEDRUS...



WRITING IS WORSE THAN SPEECH BECAUSE IT IMPOVERISHES THE MEMORY. *

We remember he thought this because he wrote it down.

...IT HAS EMERGED AS A HOT TOPIC IN MEDIA STUDIES.



Not pictured: Kirschenbaum, Mechanisms

SO LET'S EXAMINE WHY MATERIALITY IS IMPORTANT, USING LITERATURE AS A CASE STUDY. FOR REASONS OF SCOPE AND EXPERTISE, I'M GOING TO FOCUS ON COMPARING THE FUNCTIONS OF MATERIALITY IN COMICS STUDIES AND LITERARY STUDIES, THOUGH MATERIALITY IS ALSO AN IMPORTANT TOPIC IN OTHER FIELDS, LIKE FILM STUDIES.

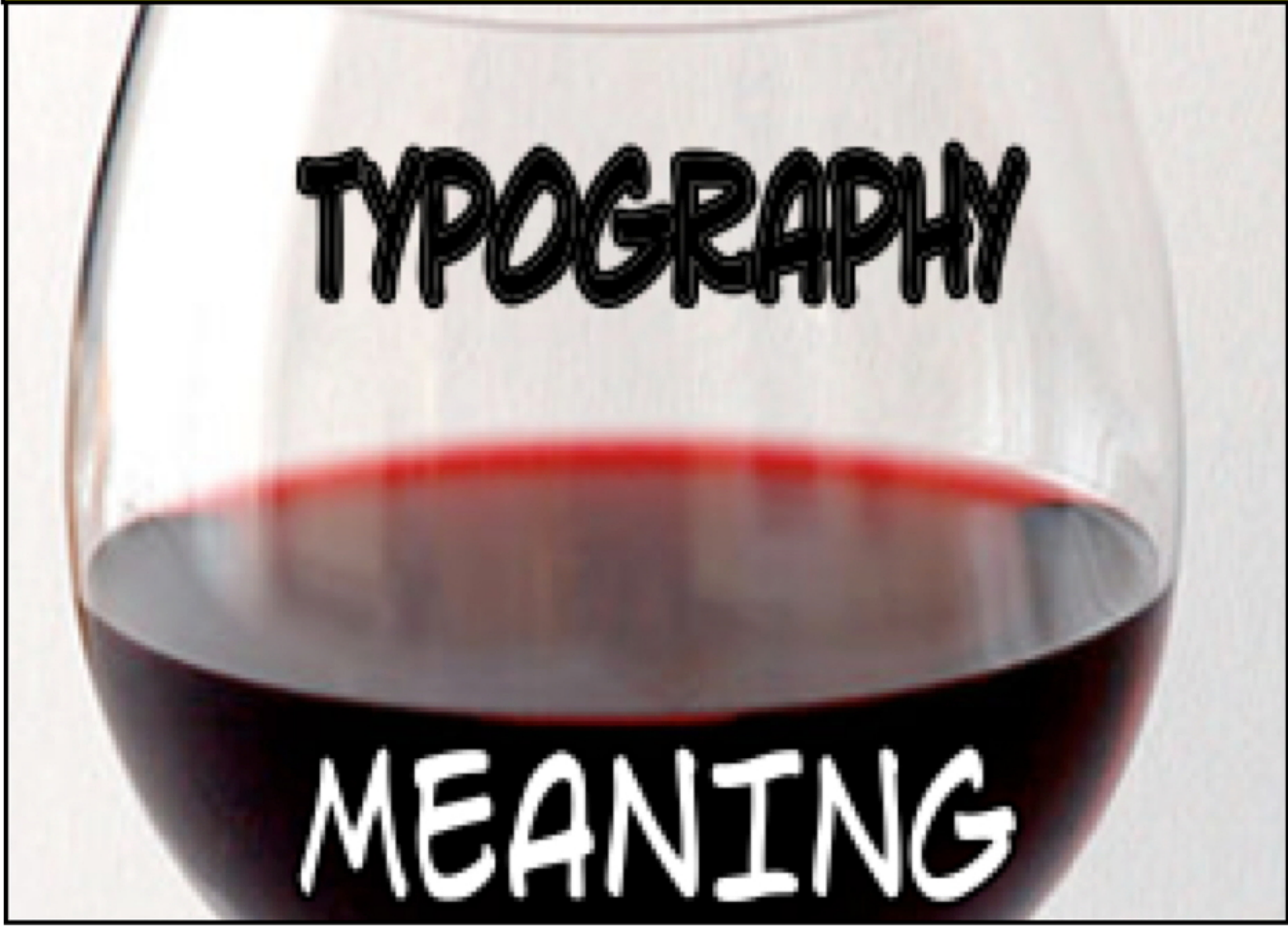
MOST OFTEN, WHEN WE READ A PRINTED TEXT, WE IGNORE THE VISUAL AND HAPTIC PROPERTIES OF THE TEXT, FOCUSING INSTEAD ON ITS SEMIOTIC MEANING.

THIS IS NO ACCIDENT. ACCORDING TO THE STANDARD "CRYSTAL GOBLET" PHILOSOPHY, TYPE SHOULD BE A TRANSPARENT VEHICLE FOR THE PRESENTATION OF MEANING.

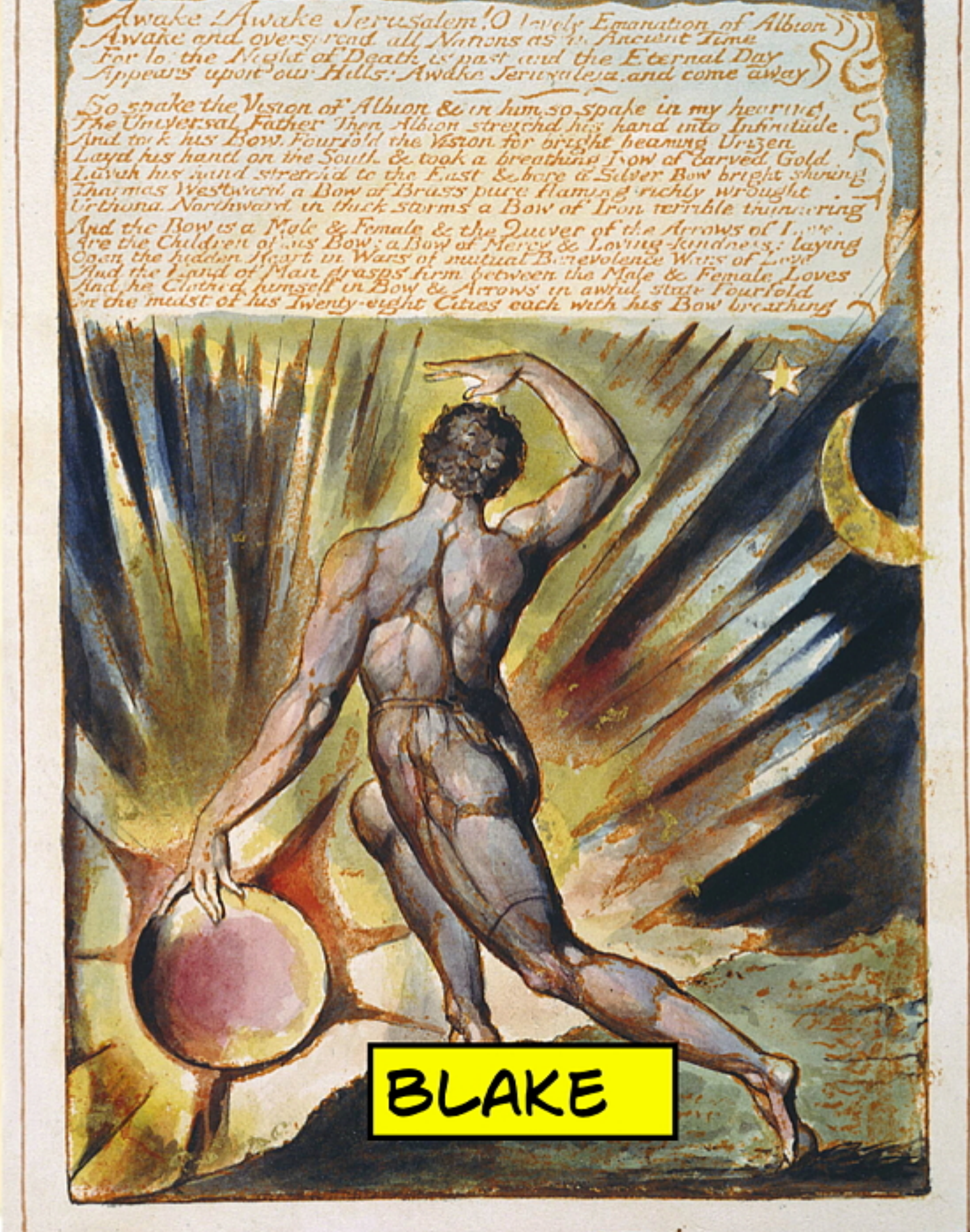
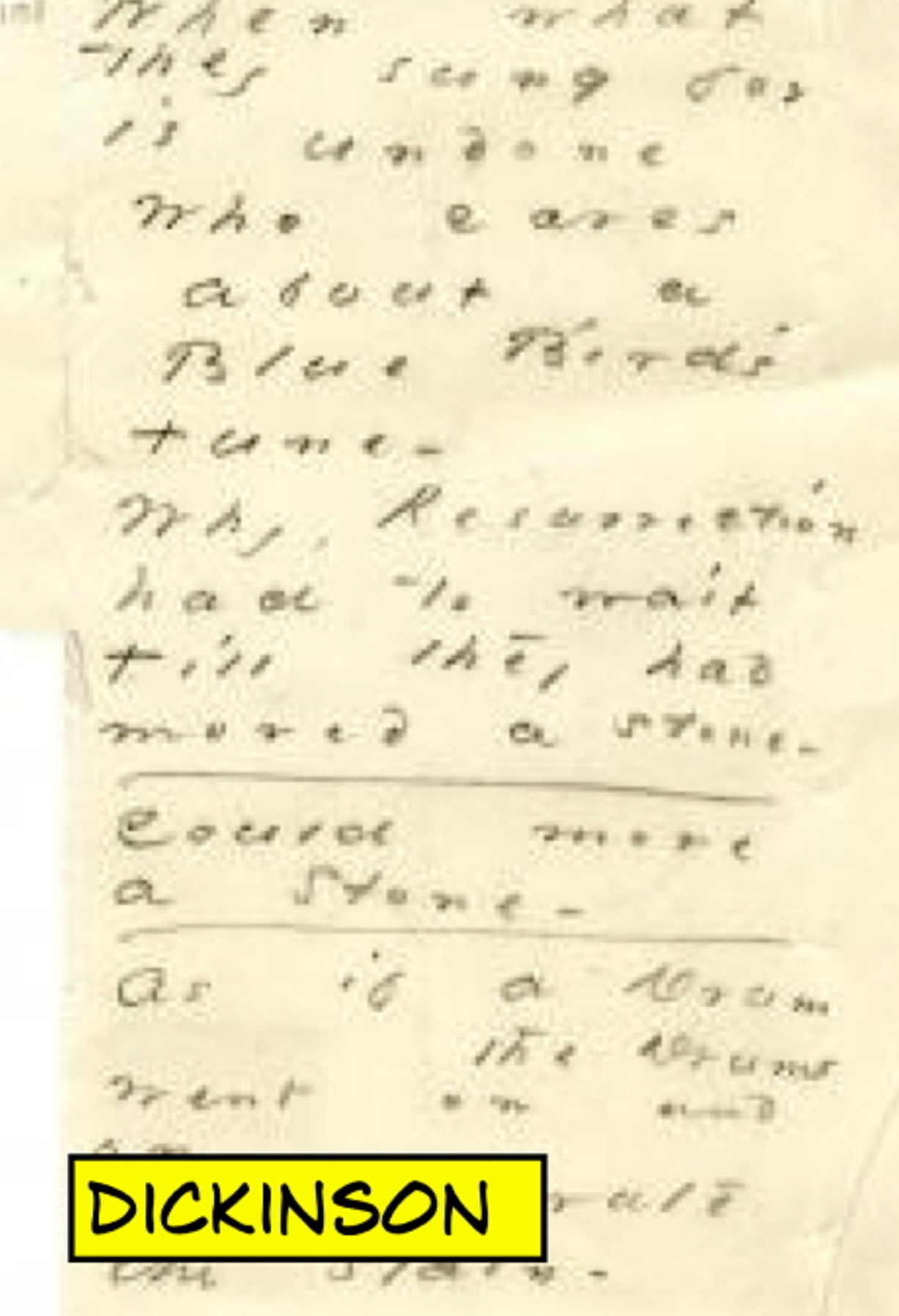
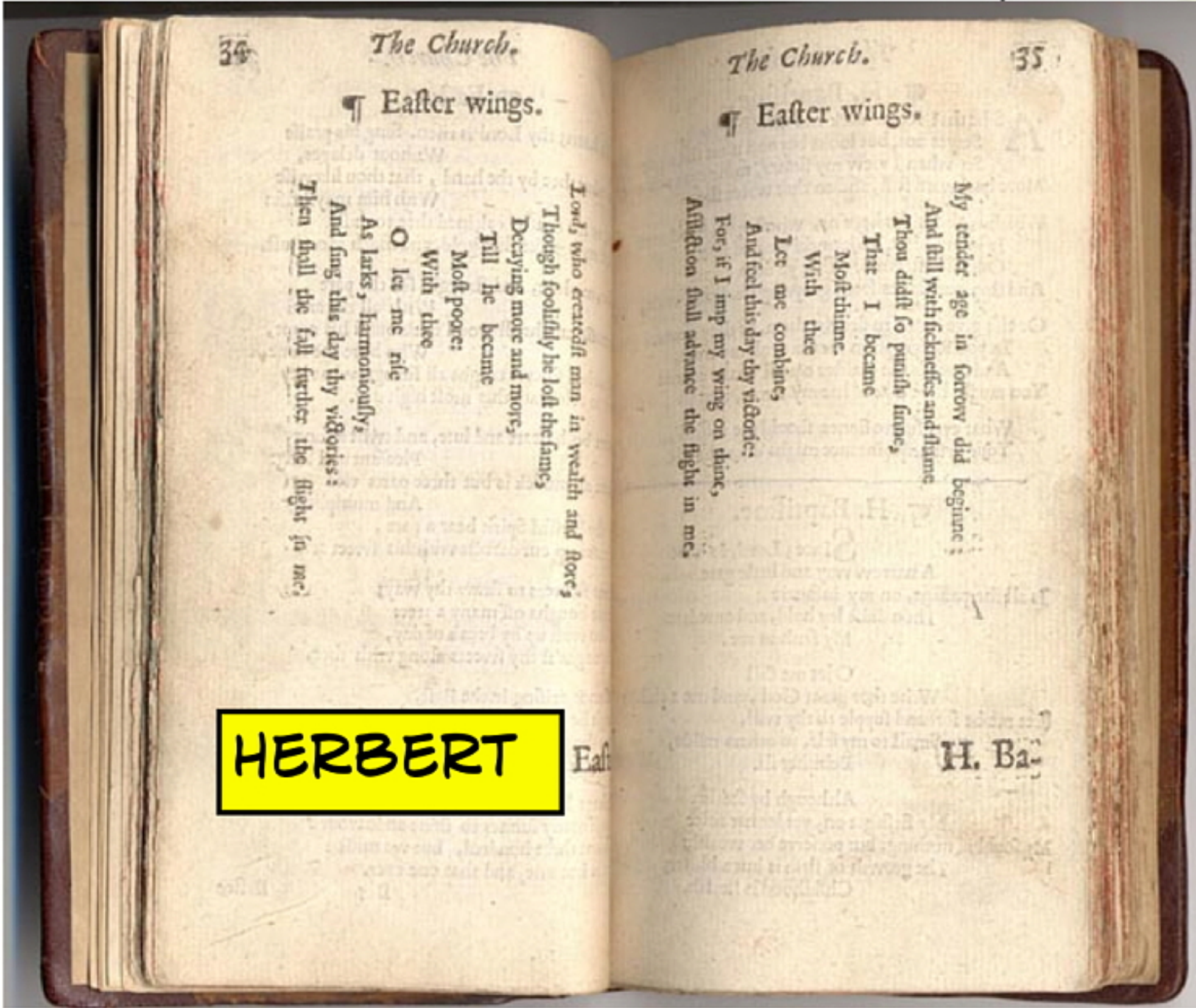
On the page:

The owl sat on the tree branch.


In the reader's head:




BUT FOR CENTURIES WRITERS HAVE VIOLATED THE CRYSTAL GOBLET ETHIC, USING TYPOGRAPHY AND DOCUMENT DESIGN AS TOOLS FOR MAKING MEANING.




SUCH EXPRESSIVE USES OF TYPOGRAPHY AND DOCUMENT DESIGN HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY COMMON IN RECENT AMERICAN LITERATURE, PERHAPS BECAUSE LITERATURE NEEDS TO COMPETE WITH THE VISUAL APPEAL OF OTHER MEDIA.




"Driven by a nameless fear, a whisper in the dark behind me, I flee ahead of I know not what. Whenever I turn, there's nobody behind me. And yet someone is clearly stealing the ketchup. WHY?"



Rooty Jr.
A kids only¹⁹ version of our house signature Rooty Tooty. One scrambled egg, one strip of bacon, one pork sausage link and one fruit-topped buttermilk pancake.



¹⁹The decision not to hyphenate "kids only" is likely connected to the omission of the serial comma.




and whipped topping.

¹⁸Nightmares again. I wake up covered in sweat, and what seems to be a thin sheen of maple syrup

WHO IS MOHAWK GIRL?

Ham & Egg Melt
Grilled sour-dough bread stuffed with ham, scrambled eggs, Swiss and American cheeses.²⁰



²⁰Ordered this at an IHOP in Rochester, New York. There was blood on the floor. Some of it was mine.

XKCD parody of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* used instead of the real thing for copyright reasons.

ENOUGH WITH YOUR PANCAKES ENOUGH WITH YOUR GOD DAMN PANCAKES

LITERARY SCHOLARS HAVE LONG SINCE RECOGNIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF MATERIALITY IN THIS SENSE. IN 1977, D.F. MCKENZIE WROTE:

The book itself is an expressive means. To the eye its pages offer an aggregation of meanings both verbal and typographic for translation to the ear.

HIS KEY EXAMPLE WAS THE WORK OF WILLIAM CONGREVE.



THE EARLY QUARTOS OF CONGREVE'S PLAYS WERE PRETTY SHODDY-LOOKING (THIS IS A SLIGHTLY LATER EDITION).

IN HIS 1710 COLLECTED WORKS, CONGREVE ADDED THINGS LIKE TYPOGRAPHICAL ORNAMENTS AND ORNAMENTAL CAPITALS, CREATING A GREATER SENSE OF REFINEMENT.

THE Double-Dealer.

ACT I. SCENE I.

A Gallery in the Ld. Touchwood's House with Chambers adjoining.

Enter Carelets, Crossing the Stage, with his Hat, Gloves, and Sword in his Hands; as just risen from Table: Mellefont following him.

Mel. **N**ED, Ned, whither so fast? What, turn'd Flincher! Why, you wo' not leave us?

Care. Where are the Women? Pox I'm weary of guzling, and begin to think them the better Company.

Mel. Then thy Reason staggers; and thou'rt almost Drunk.

Care. No Faith, but your Fools grow noisie—and if a Man must endure the Noisie of Words without Sense, I think the Women have the more Muscal Voices, and become Nonsense better.

Mel. Why, they are at the end of the Gallery; retir'd to their Tea, and Scandal; according to their Ancient Custom, after Dinner.—But I made a Pretence of following you, because I had something to say to you in private, and I am not like to have many Opportunities this Evening.

Care. And here's this Coxcomb most Critically come to interrupt you.

Enter Brisk.

Brisk. Boys, Boys, Lads, where are you? What do you give Ground? Mortgage for a Bottle, ha? *Careless*, this is your Trick; you're always spoiling Company by leaving it.



THE DOUBLE-DEALER.

ACT I. SCENE I.

A Gallery in the Lord Touchwood's House, with Chambers adjoining.

Enter Careless, Crossing the Stage, with his Hat, Gloves, and Sword in his Hands; as just risen from Table: Mellefont following him.

MELLEFONT.



*N*ED, Ned, whither so fast? What, turn'd Flincher! Why, you wo' not leave us?

Care. Where are the Women? I'm weary of guzling, and begin to think them the better Company.

Mel.

THE REVISED TYPOGRAPHY OF THE SECOND EDITION HELPED TO SHIFT CONGREVE'S IMAGE, DEPICTING HIM AS A REFINED NEOCLASSICAL AUTHOR, NOT AN UNSAVORY POPULAR ENTERTAINER.

Well, here's an example -- and i'm sorry if I'm belaboring this point. Compare this panel to the next panel. Can you tell the difference? Probably, because you're looking for it. But normally, if you looked at one of these panels and then later looked at the other, you'd perceive them as the "same" text. In prose text, things like typography, lineation and paragraph breaks seem (the key word is "seem") to be accidental features that don't impact the meaning of the text. Indeed, the whole point of crystal goblet design is to make us ignore the rhetorical effects of design features.

Well, here's an example -- and i'm sorry if I'm belaboring this point. Compare this panel to the next panel. Can you tell the difference?

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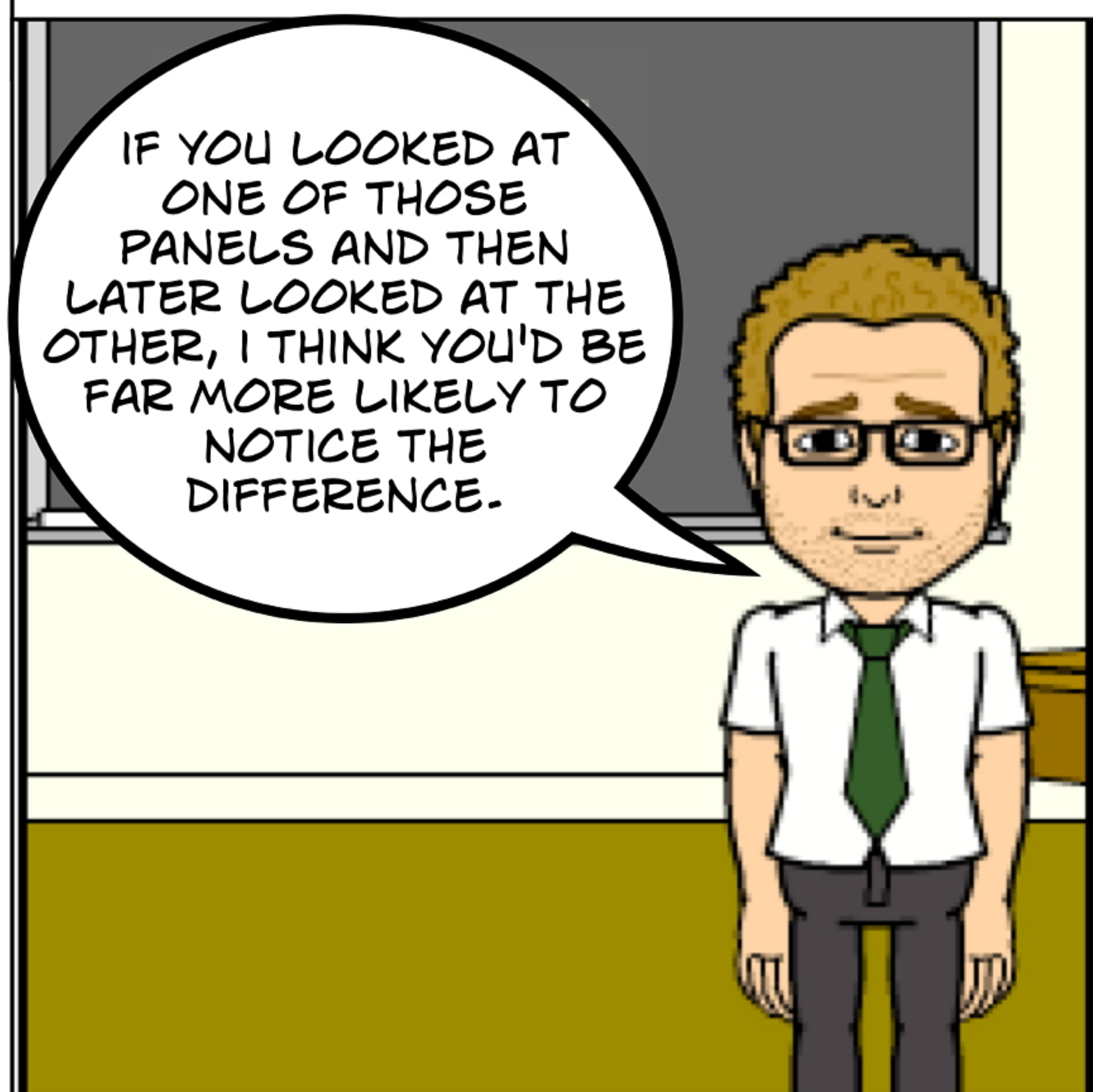
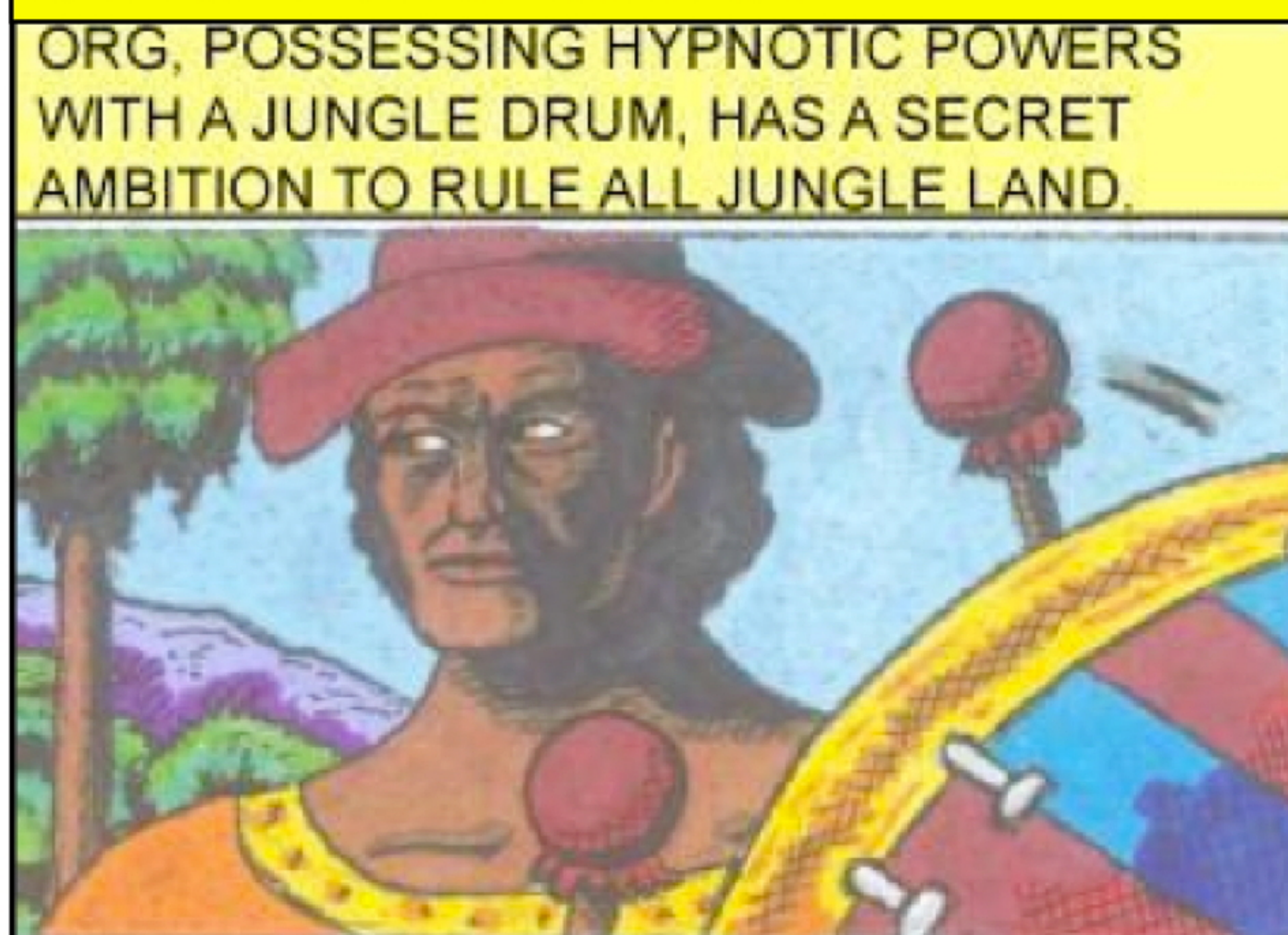
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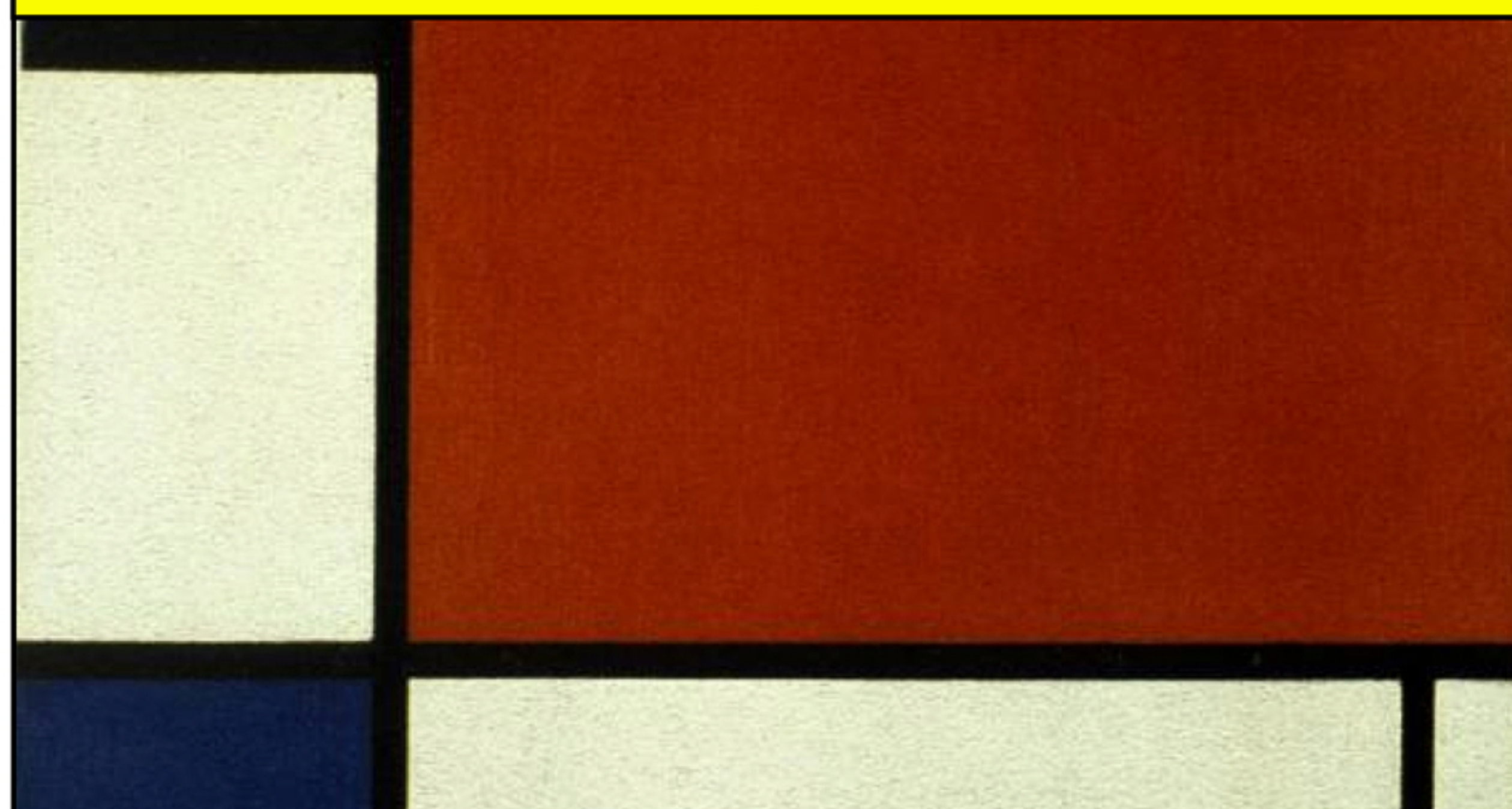
BUT NOW COMPARE THIS PANEL BY FLETCHER HANKS...



...TO THIS MODERN REMASTERED VERSION CREATED BY RYAN VALENTINE.



AND THE REASON WHY IS BECAUSE OF SOMETHING WHICH I THINK IS A CENTRAL AFFORDANCE OF COMICS --

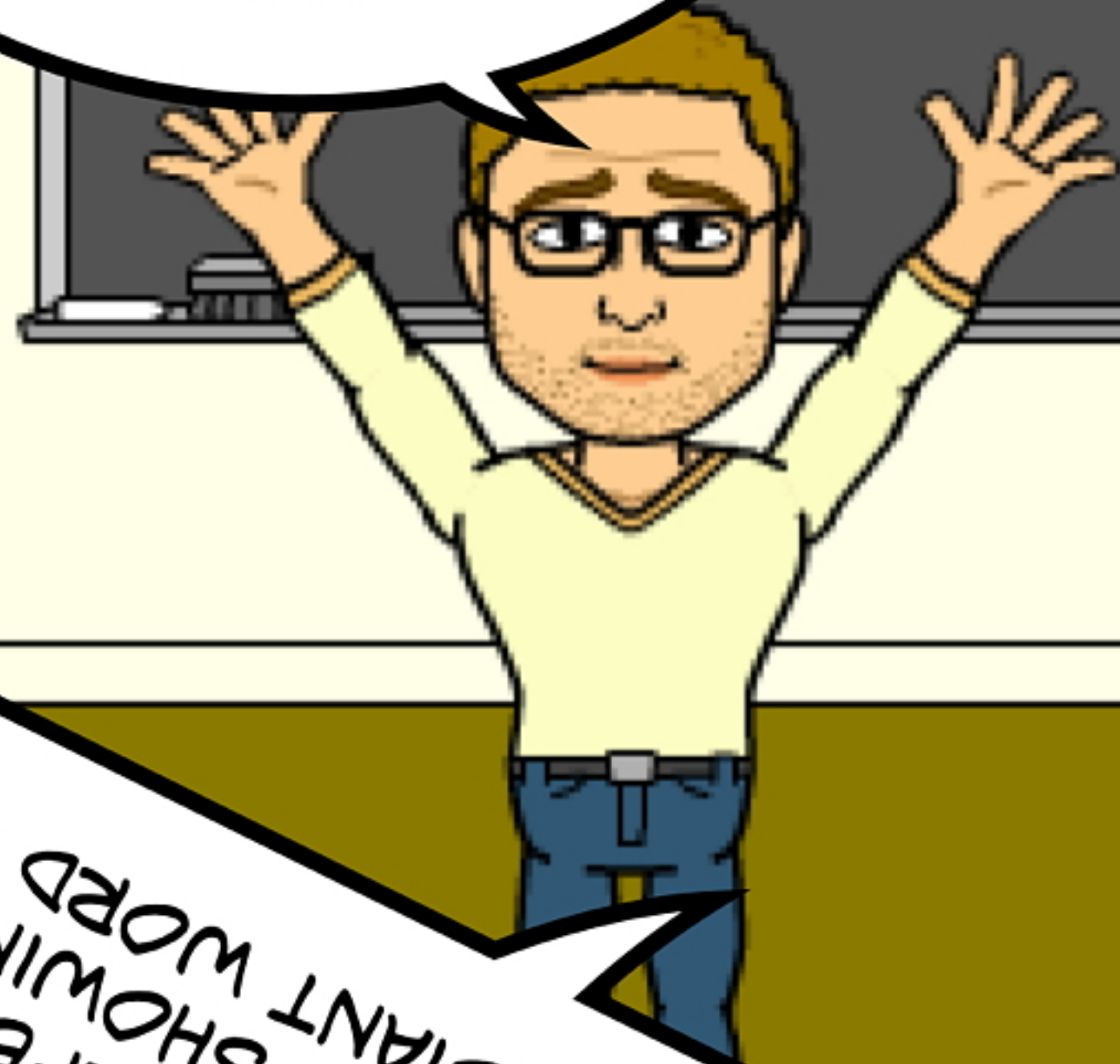


THEIR EMPHASIS ON *FLATNESS* AND *SURFACES*.

COMICS ARE TWO-DIMENSIONAL; THEY DEPICT EVERYTHING, INCLUDING WORDS AND IMAGES, AS EXISTING ON A SINGLE VISUAL PLANE. WE USUALLY ASSUME THAT WORD BALLOONS DON'T EXIST ON THE SAME LEVEL OF REALITY AS THE IMAGE, BUT THAT'S JUST A CONVENTION. FOR INSTANCE, IT MAKES PERFECT SENSE TO READ THIS PANEL AS SHOWING ME BEING CRUSHED BY A GIANT WORD BALLOON.



AND IN THIS PANEL, I'VE MANAGED TO LIFT THE GIANT WORD BALLOON AND FREE MYSELF.



THIS PANEL MAKES PERFECT SENSE TO BE CRUSHED BY A GIANT WORD BALLOON. IT EXISTS ON THE SAME LEVEL AS THE IMAGE. FOR INSTANCE, IT MAKES PERFECT SENSE TO BE CRUSHED BY A GIANT WORD BALLOON.

THIS GAG WORKS BECAUSE IN COMICS, **EVERYTHING** IS A TWO-DIMENSIONAL VISUAL PHENOMENON.



COMICS AND REALITY

INCLUDING SOUND EFFECTS.

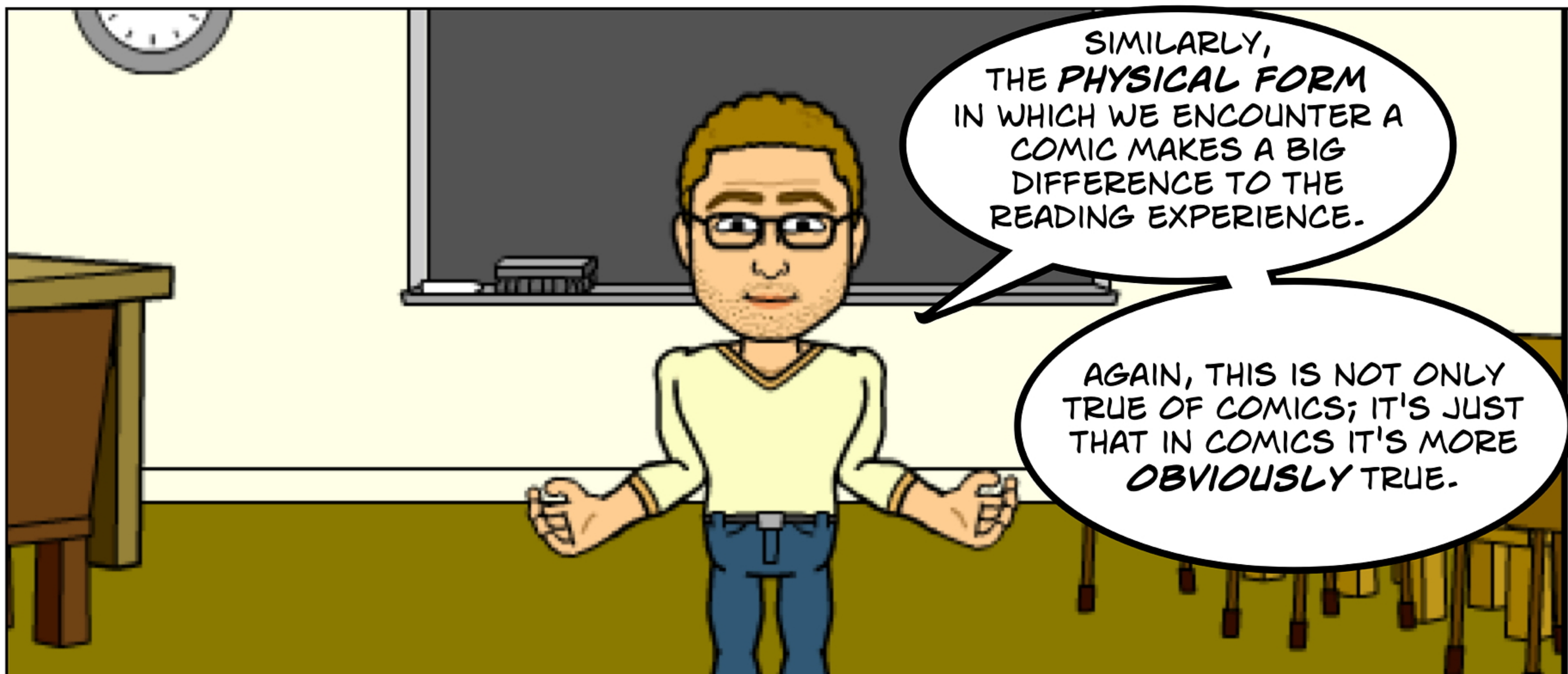
KABOOM!

OR PANEL BORDERS. SUDDENLY I FEEL A BIT CLAUSTROPHOBIC.

BECAUSE A COMIC IS A FLAT, TWO-DIMENSIONAL TEXT, EVERYTHING IN A COMIC HAS THE SAME ONTOLOGICAL STATUS, AND OCCUPIES THE SAME VISUAL PLANE.



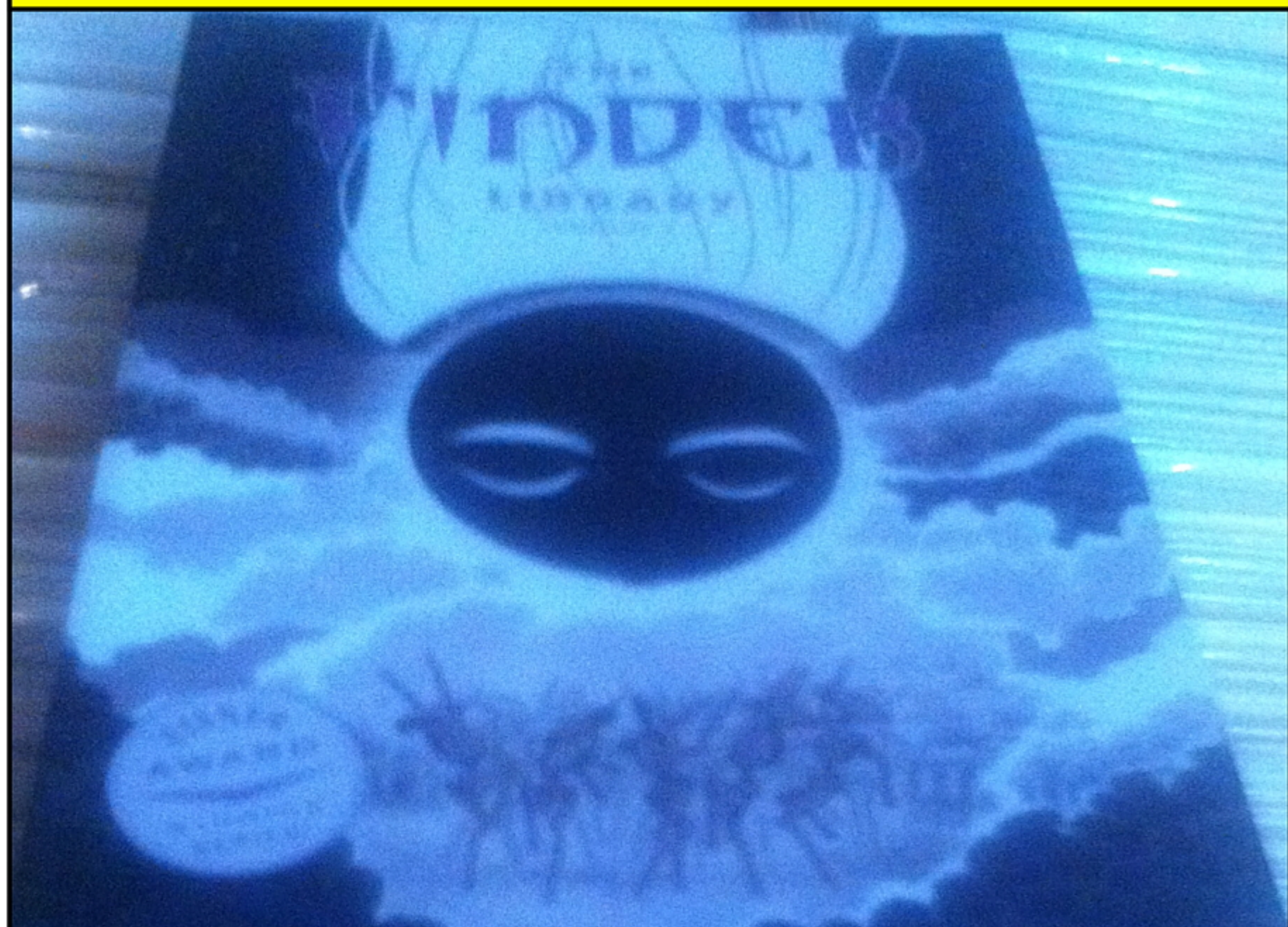
TO PUT IT ANOTHER WAY: IN COMICS, **EVERYTHING MATTERS**. WORD BALLOONS, PANEL BORDERS, ETC., CONTRIBUTE TO THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF THE COMIC AS MUCH AS THE ART DOES.



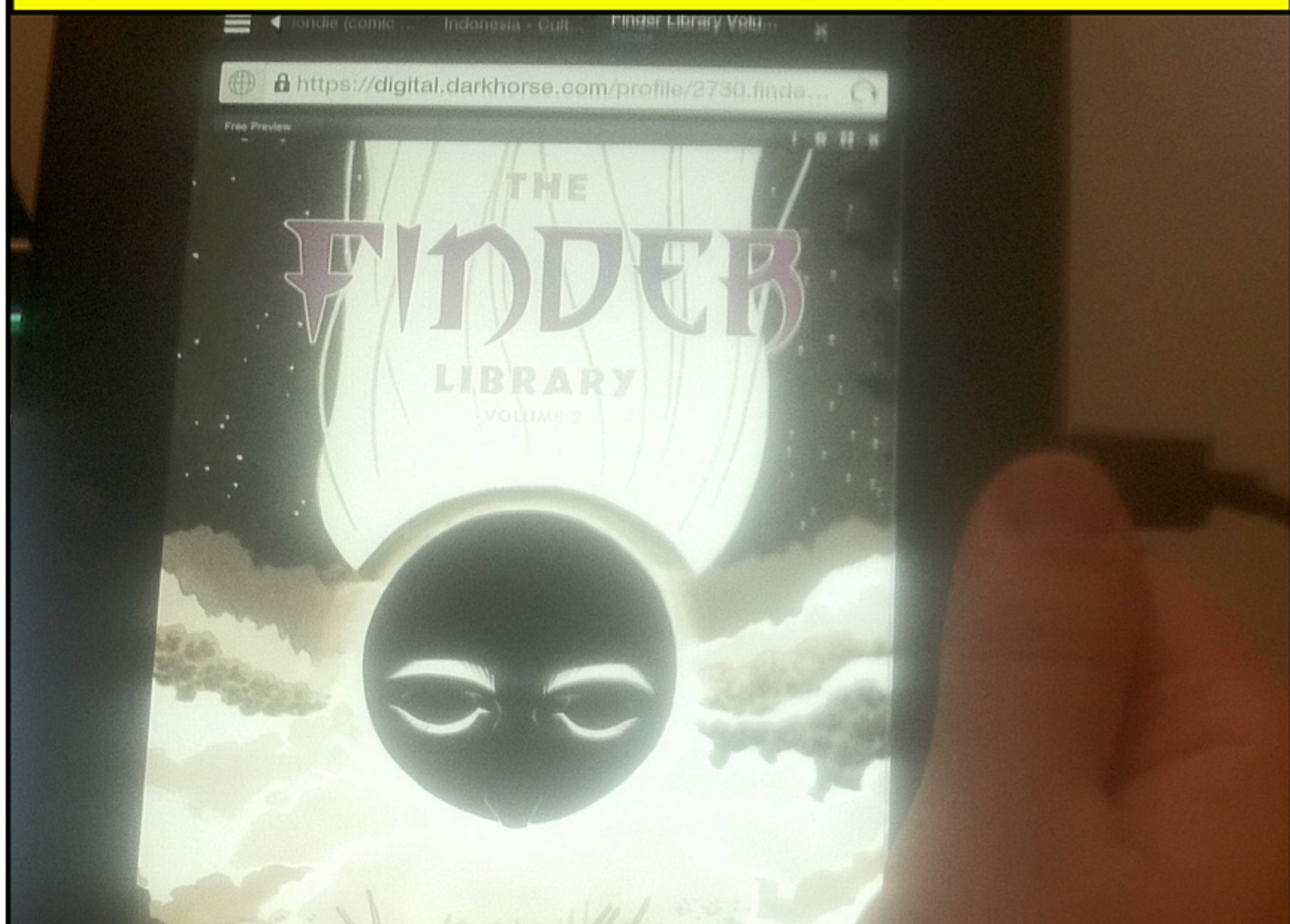
FOR EXAMPLE, READING COMIC BOOKS IS A VERY DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE FROM READING A TRADE PAPERBACK --



--EVEN ONE THAT REPRINTS THE EXACT SAME COMIC BOOKS.



WITH DIGITAL COMICS, THE EFFECTS OF FORMAT UPON THE READING EXPERIENCE ARE EVEN MORE STRIKING.



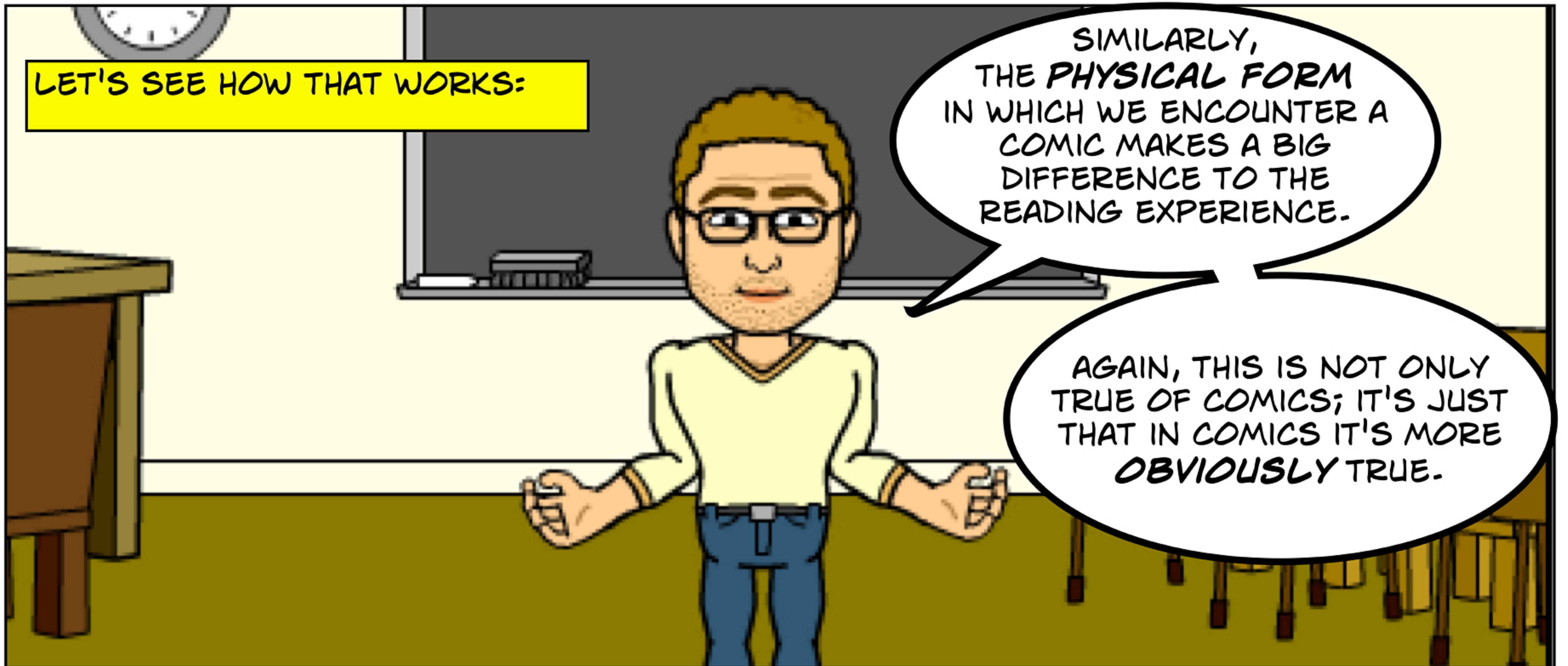
FOR EXAMPLE, MANY DIGITAL COMICS APPS INCLUDE A "GUIDED VIEW" FUNCTIONALITY, IN WHICH EACH PAGE IS DISPLAYED ONE PANEL OR SECTION AT A TIME, RATHER THAN ALL AT ONCE. FOR READERS USED TO READING COMICS IN PRINT, THIS IS HARD TO GET USED TO, BECAUSE IT FRAGMENTS THE PAGE INTO A MULTIPLICITY OF INDIVIDUAL PANELS, AND MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO VIEW THE PAGE AS A COMPLETE UNIT.

GUIDED VIEW IS NOT INHERENTLY BETTER OR WORSE THAN MORE TRADITIONAL METHODS OF READING COMICS; IT JUST OFFERS A DIFFERENT READING EXPERIENCE.

LET'S SEE HOW THAT WORKS:

SIMILARLY,
THE **PHYSICAL FORM**
IN WHICH WE ENCOUNTER A
COMIC MAKES A BIG
DIFFERENCE TO THE
READING EXPERIENCE.

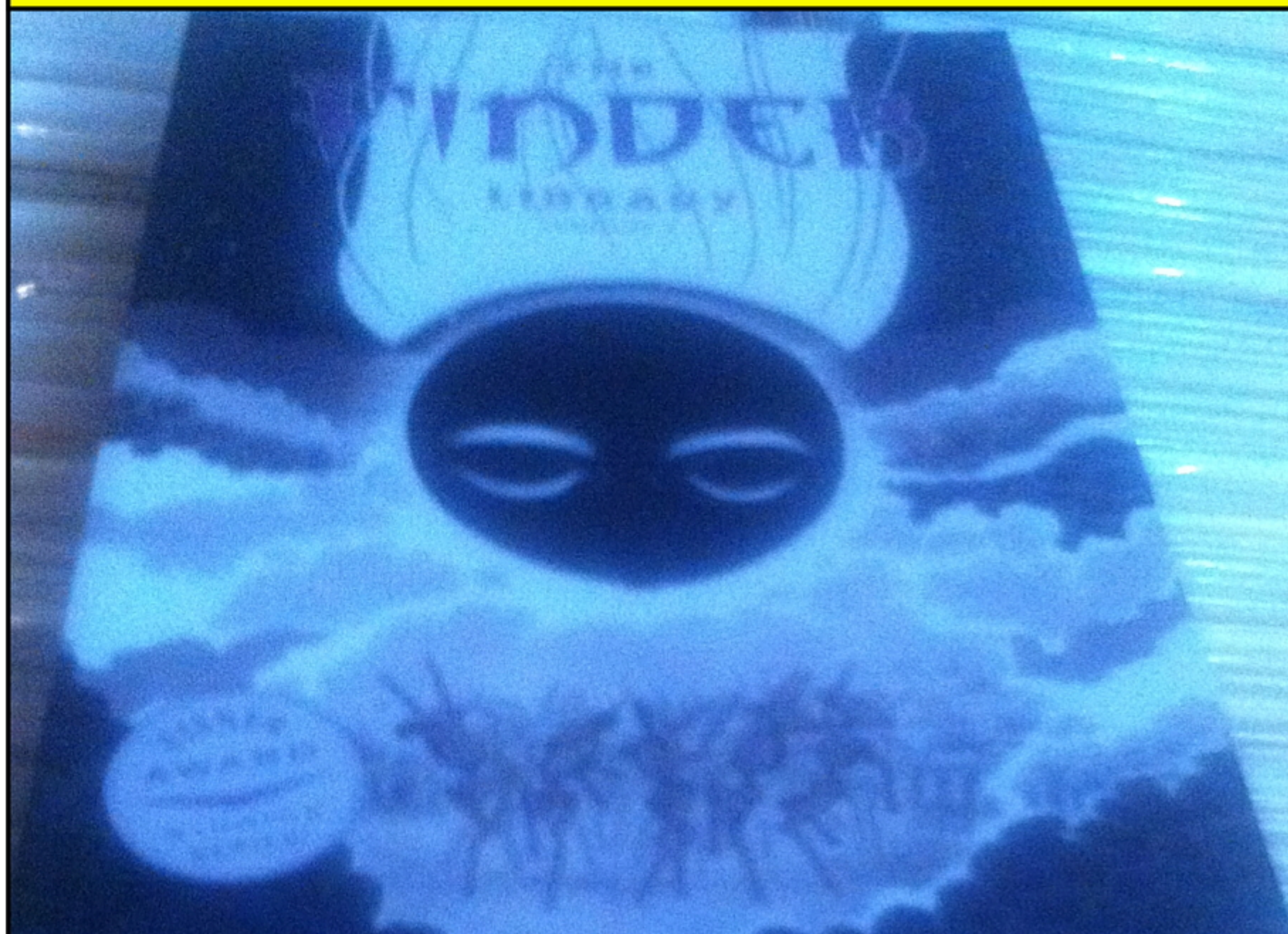
AGAIN, THIS IS NOT ONLY
TRUE OF COMICS; IT'S JUST
THAT IN COMICS IT'S MORE
OBVIOUSLY TRUE.



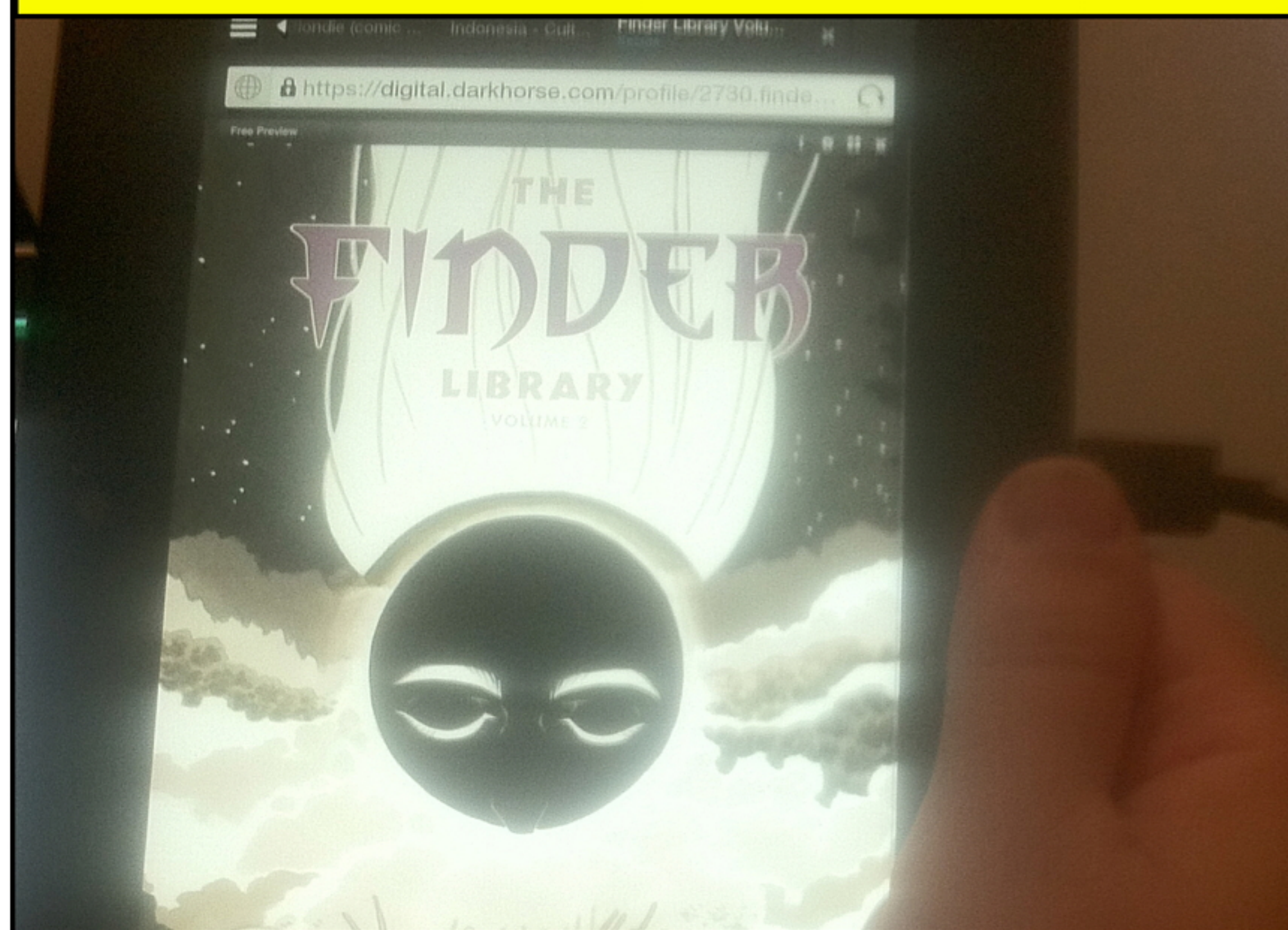
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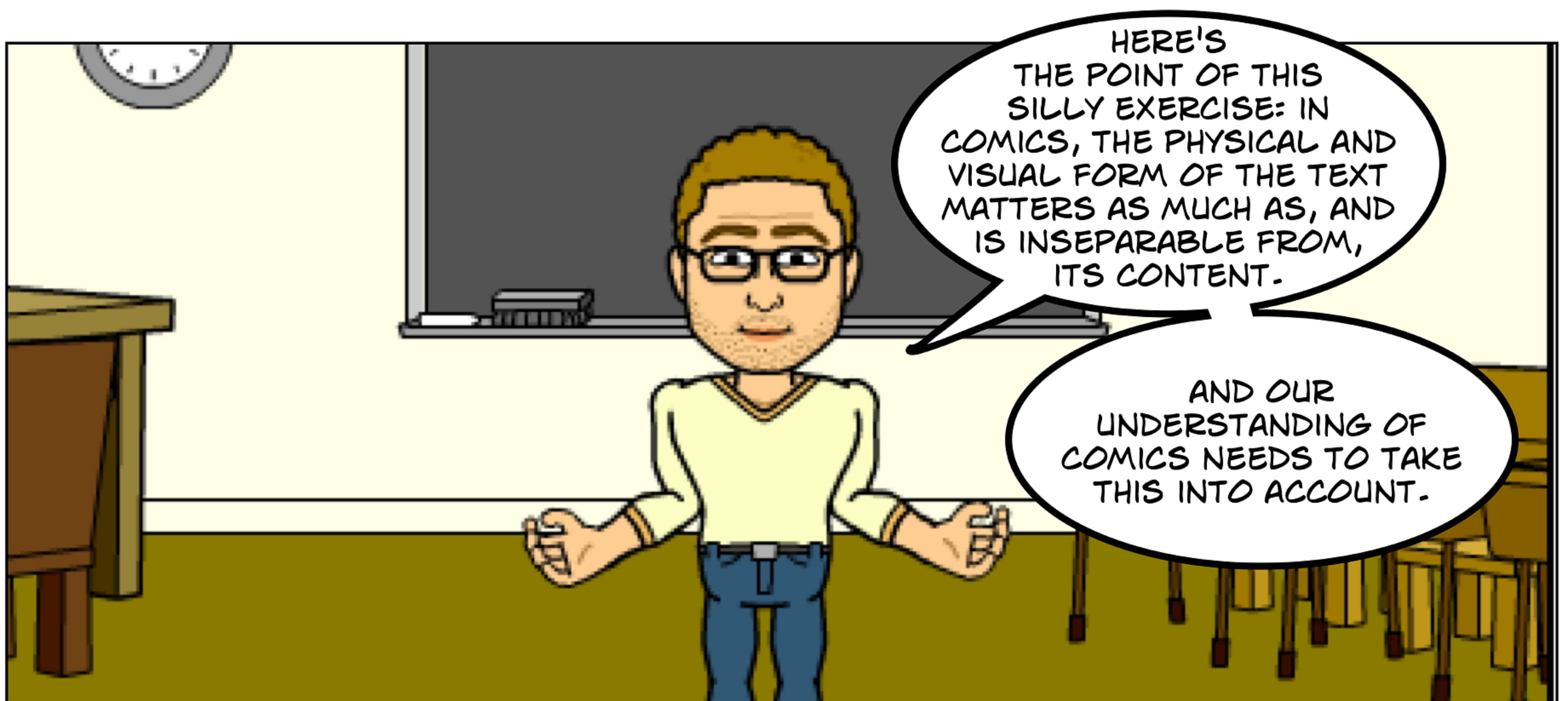


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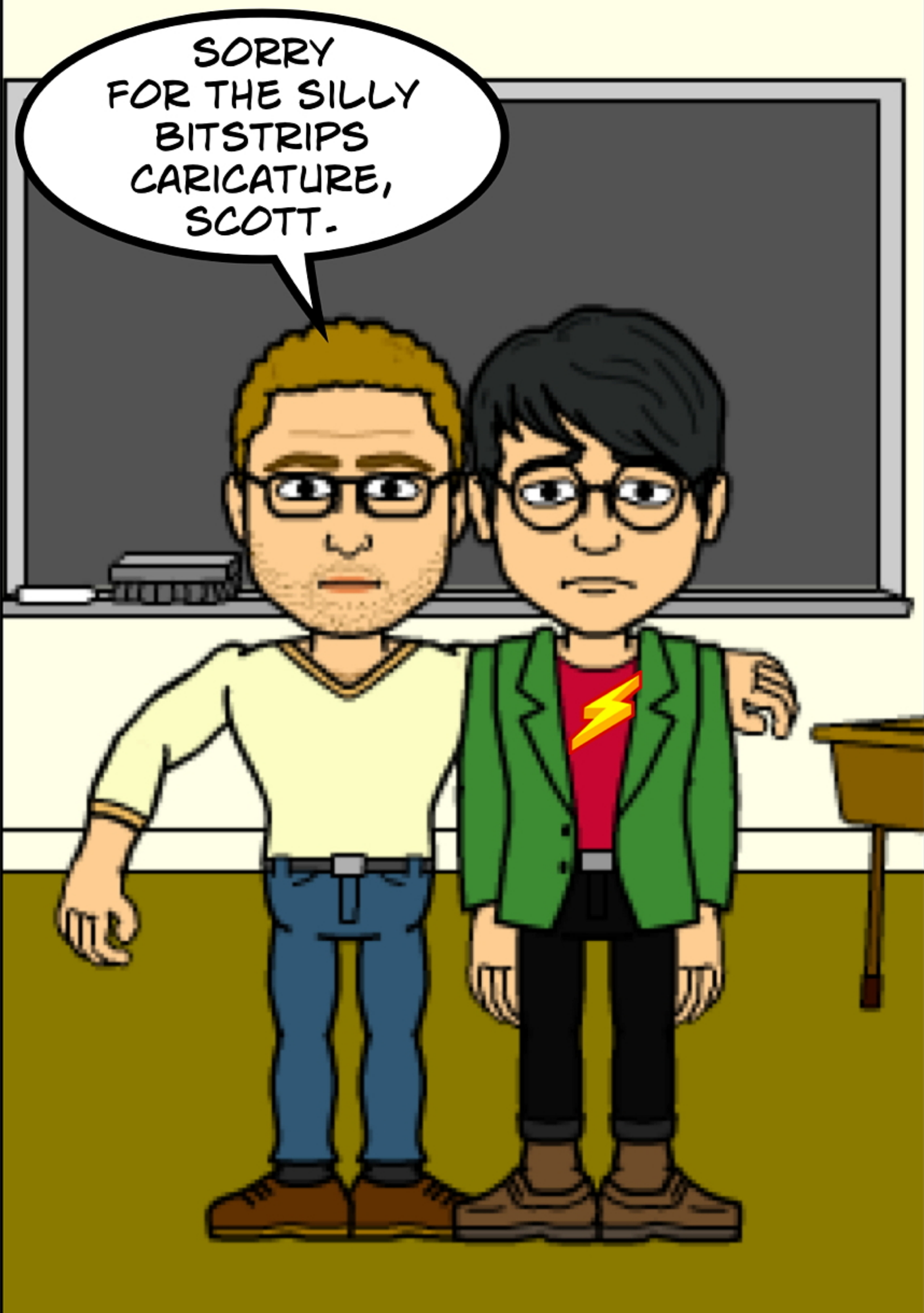


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GUIDED VIEW IS NOT INHERENTLY BETTER OR WORSE THAN MORE TRADITIONAL METHODS OF READING COMICS; IT JUST OFFERS A DIFFERENT READING EXPERIENCE.



STANDARD DEFINITIONS OF COMICS, LIKE MCCLLOUD'S "JUXTAPOSED AND OTHER IMAGES IN DELIBERATE SEQUENCE" OR GROENSTEEN'S "RELATIONAL PLAY OF A PLURALITY OF IN OF INDEPENDENT IMAGES," TEND TO PRIVILEGE IMAGES OVER WORDS.



IS A COMIC WITH NO PICTURES EVEN POSSIBLE? IF SO, THEN WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE?

BUT DYLAN HORROCKS, THROUGH THE MOUTH OF EMIL KOPEK, A CHARACTER IN HIS COMIC BOOK HICKSVILLE, OFFERS A RADICALLY DIFFERENT DEFINITION: COMICS ARE TEXTS THAT...



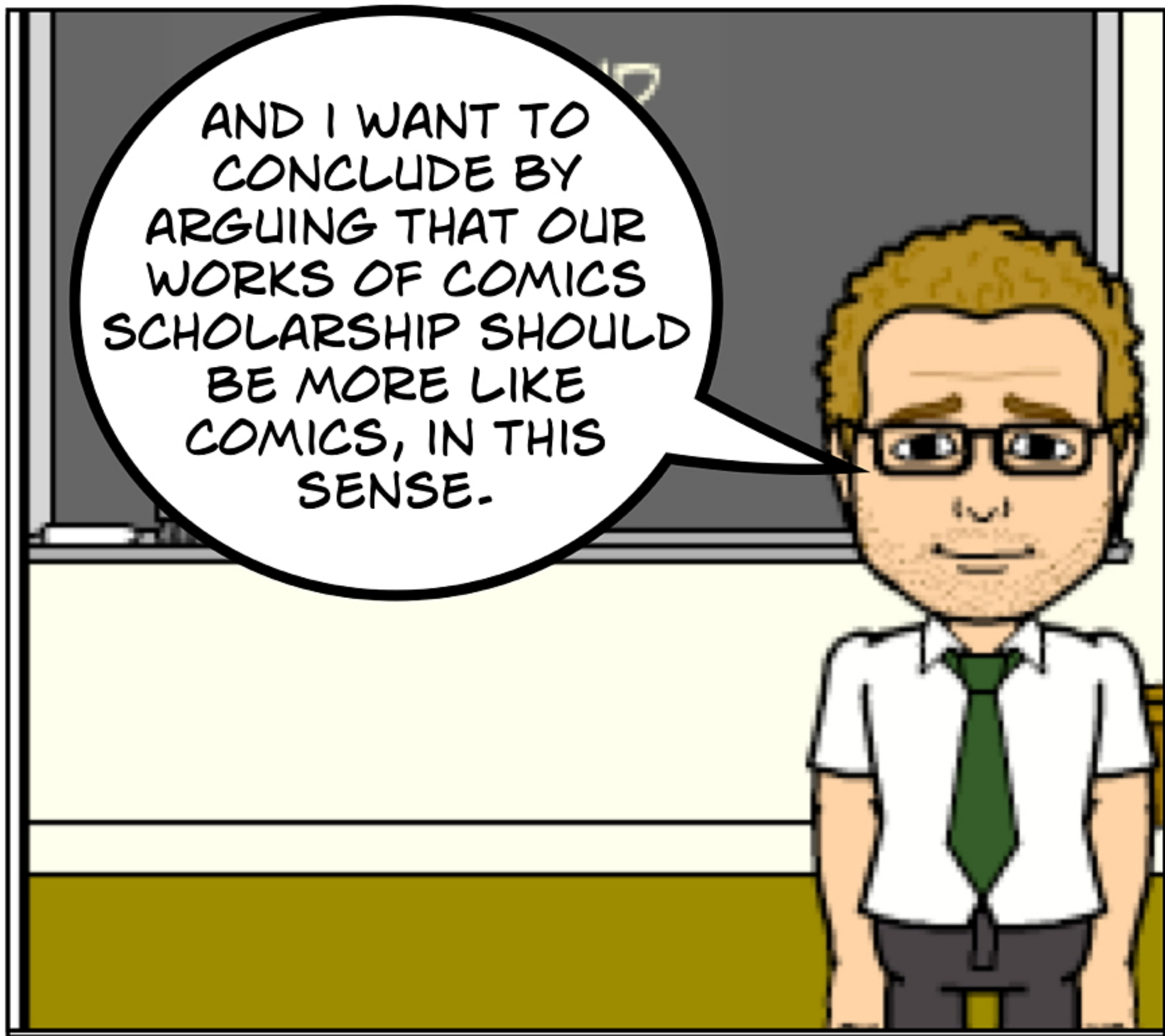
WHEN REMINDED THAT SOME COMICS HAVE NO WORDS, KOPEN REPLIES:



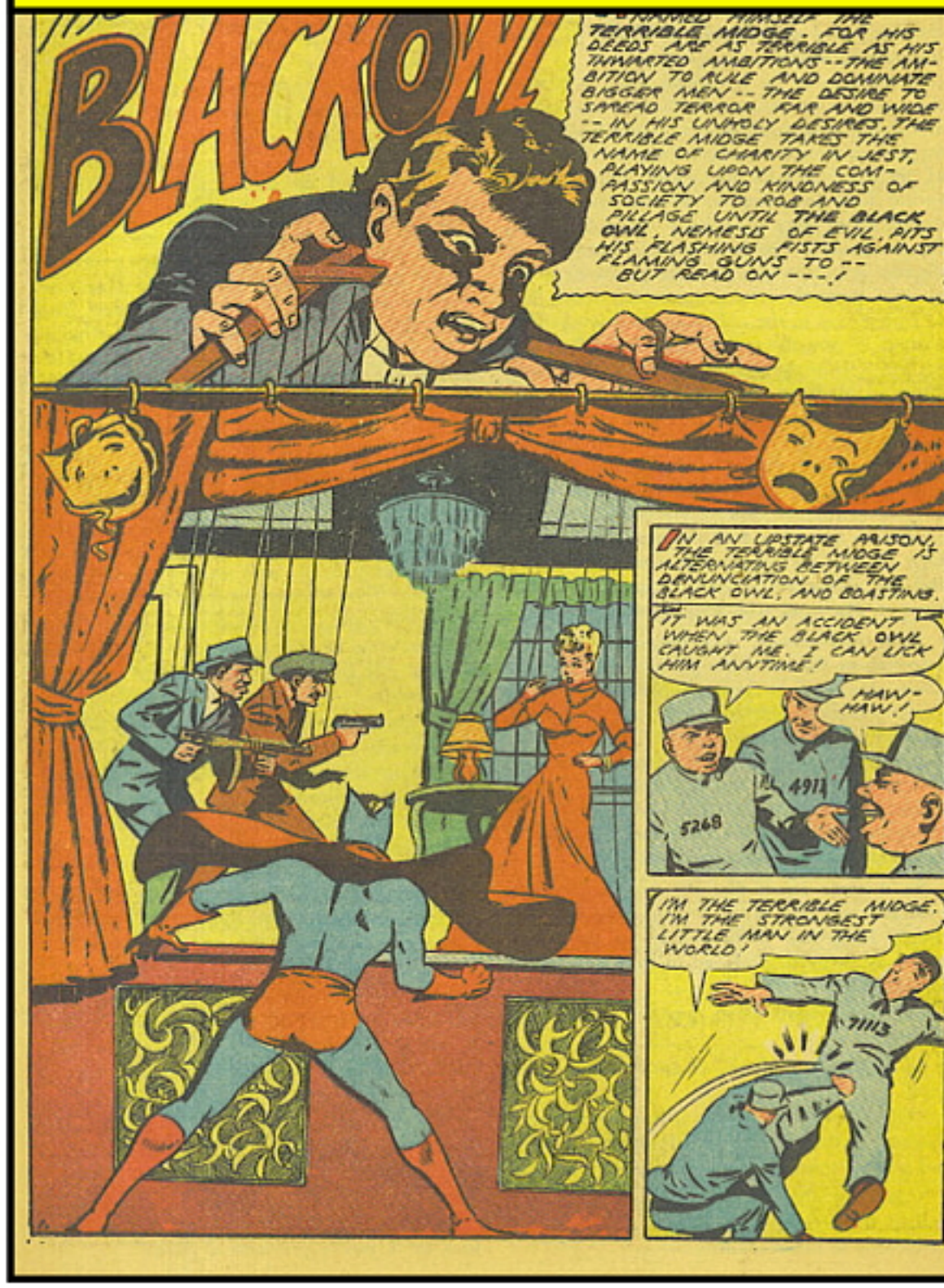
Maybe when we think of a comic without pictures, we might imagine a text which is composed solely of words, but in which the physical form and appearance of the words are as important as their semantic meaning.

A text which could not be remediated into a different format without significantly altering the reader's appearance.

Maybe that's ultimately what a comic *is*, whether or not it includes pictures.



IT'S UNFORTUNATE WHEN THE VISUAL AND MATERIAL RICHNESS OF OUR SCHOLARSHIP DOES NOT MATCH THAT OF OUR OBJECTS OF STUDY.



Batailleist 'powerful communication' in *The Black Owl*

Aaron Kashtan
Department of English, Miami Univer

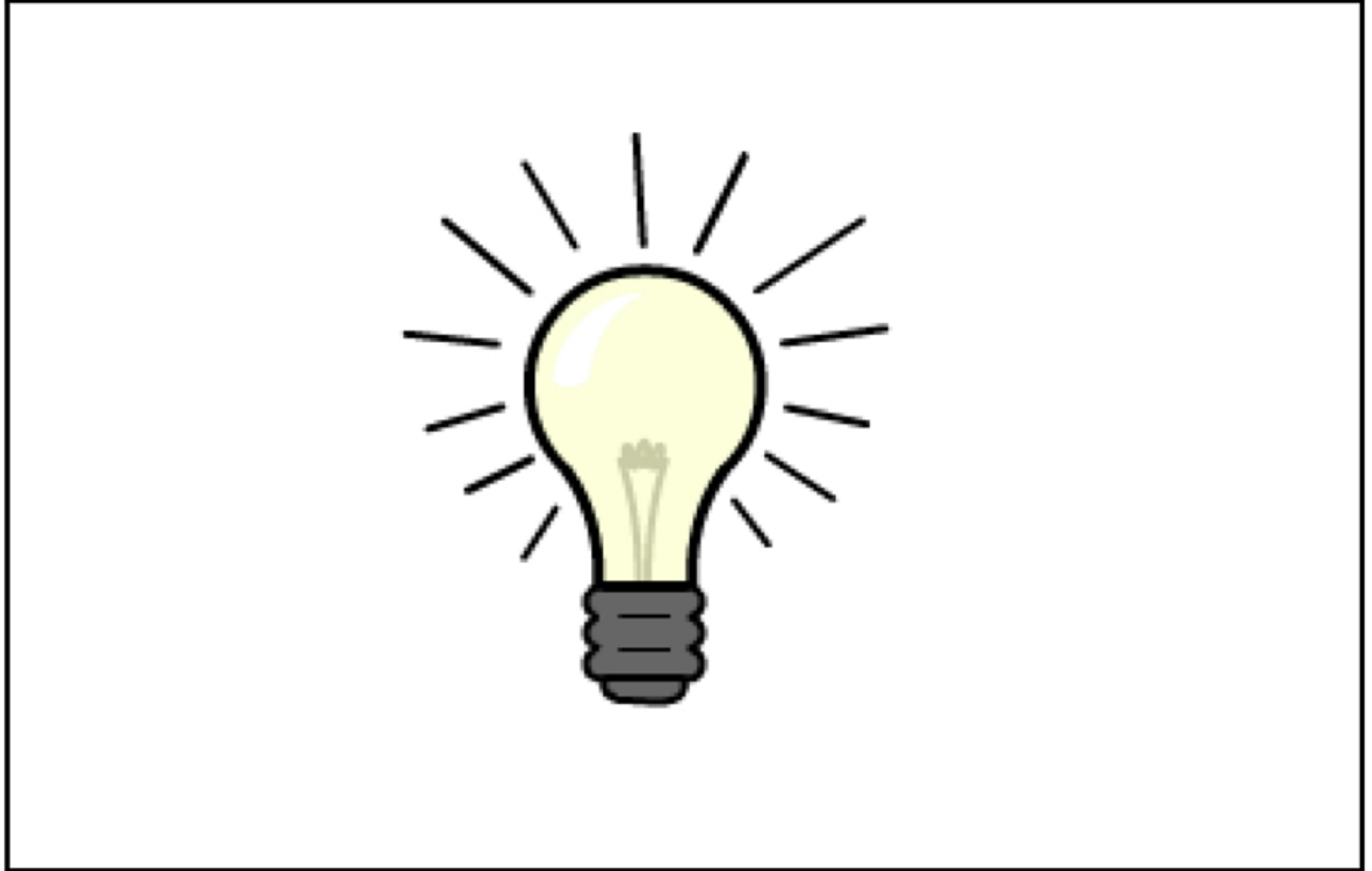
1. Contexts of fatal flaw

"Narrativity is part of the dialectic of culture," says M however, according to Hamburger[1], it is not so mu narrativity that is part of the dialectic of culture, but r the stasis, and hence the defining characteristic, of narrativity. Bataille promotes the use of Batailleist 'p communication' to modify society.

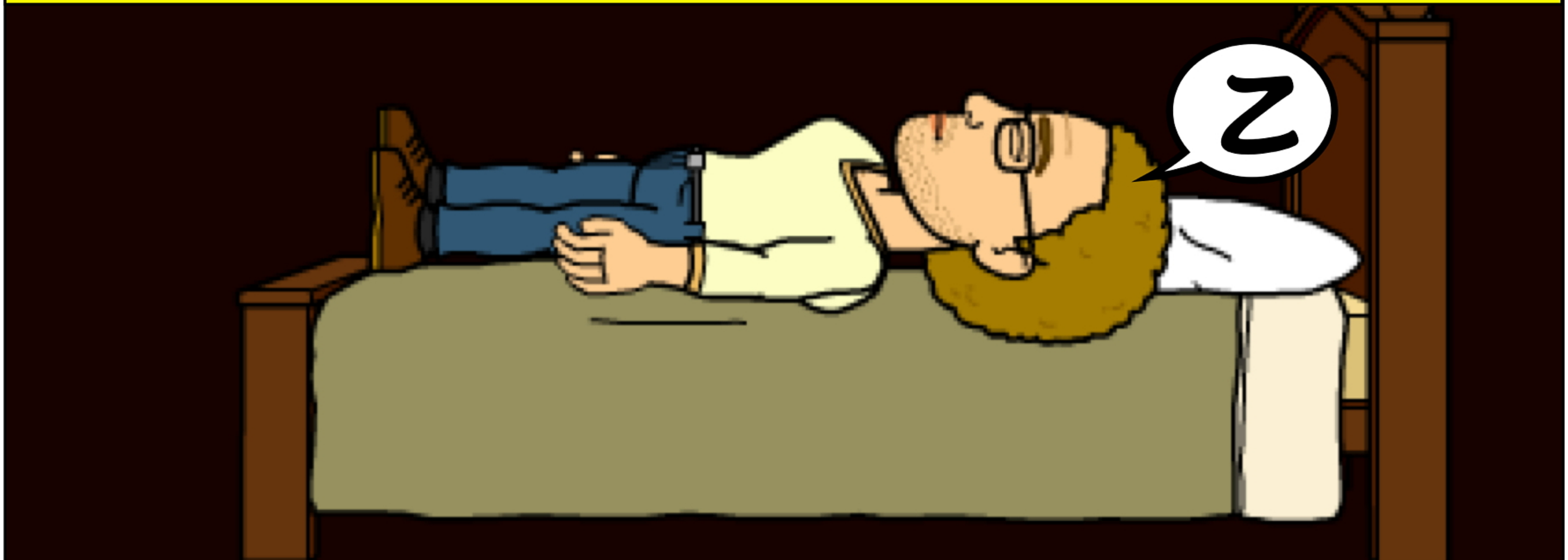
If one examines the presentist paradigm of reali

This is especially unfortunate when our objects of study are texts that carefully integrate form and content. Throughout this paper I've tried to demonstrate how the meaning of comics comes not just from the artwork or the text, but from page layout, publication design and typography. In comics, every aspect of the text is carefully designed to achieve the maximum rhetorical effect (which is also true in other types of text, of course, but not in an equally visible way). In our research on comics, I think we ought to take lessons from this aspect of the texts we study.

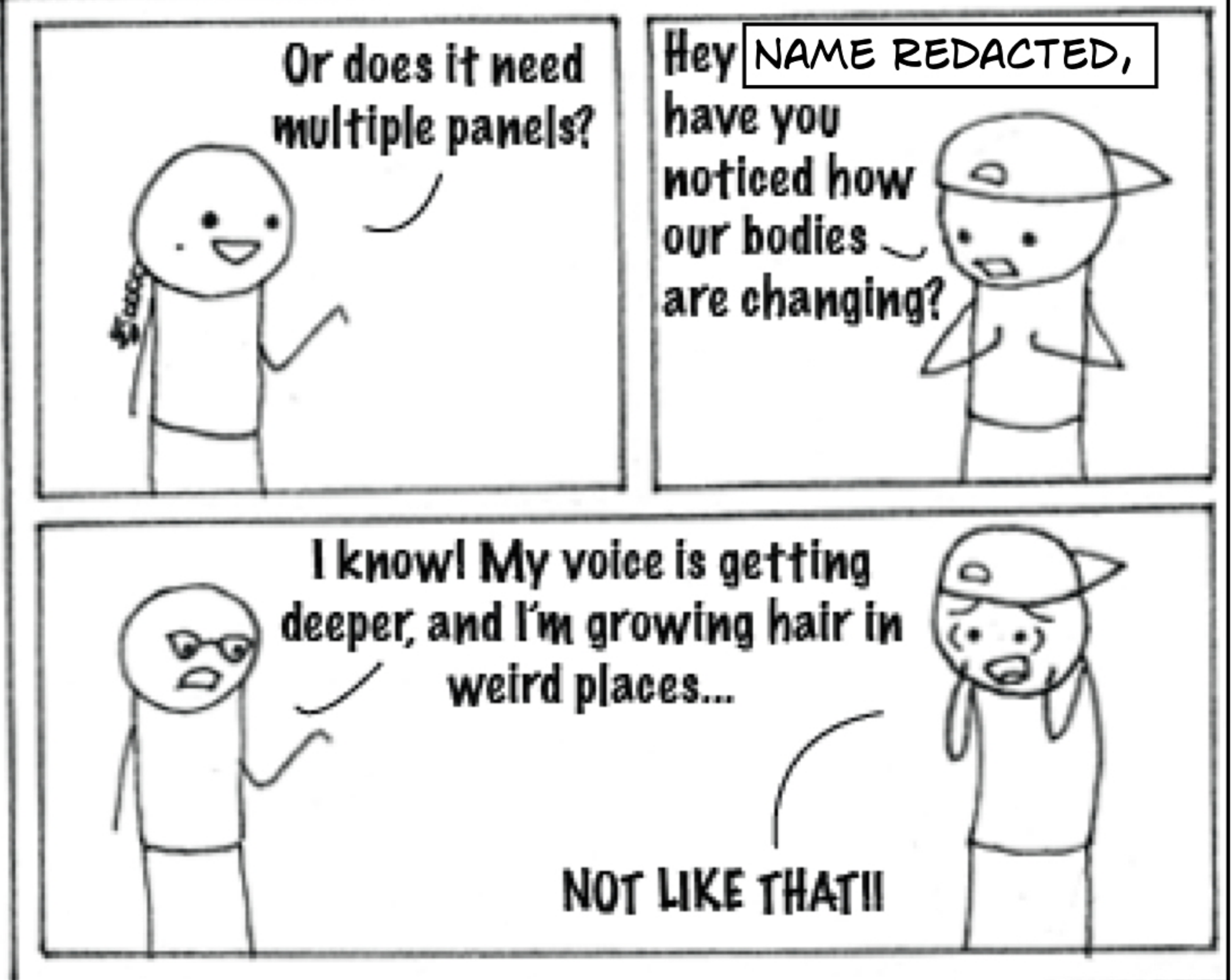
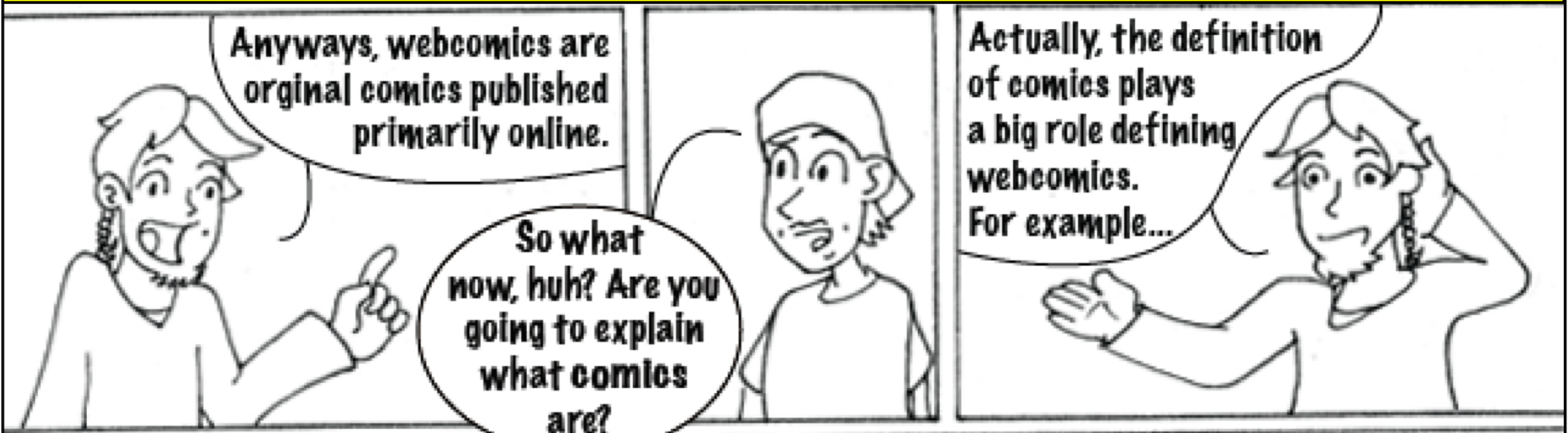
FURTHERMORE, WHEN WE MAKE COMICS, WE DEVELOP INSIGHTS THAT ARE DIFFICULT TO ACHIEVE WHEN WE THEORIZE ABOUT COMICS IN AN ABSTRACT SENSE.



FOR EXAMPLE, IT TURNS OUT THAT MAKING COMICS IS VERY HARD WORK. THIS HAS BEEN THE MOST DIFFICULT SCHOLARLY PROJECT I'VE EVER DONE.



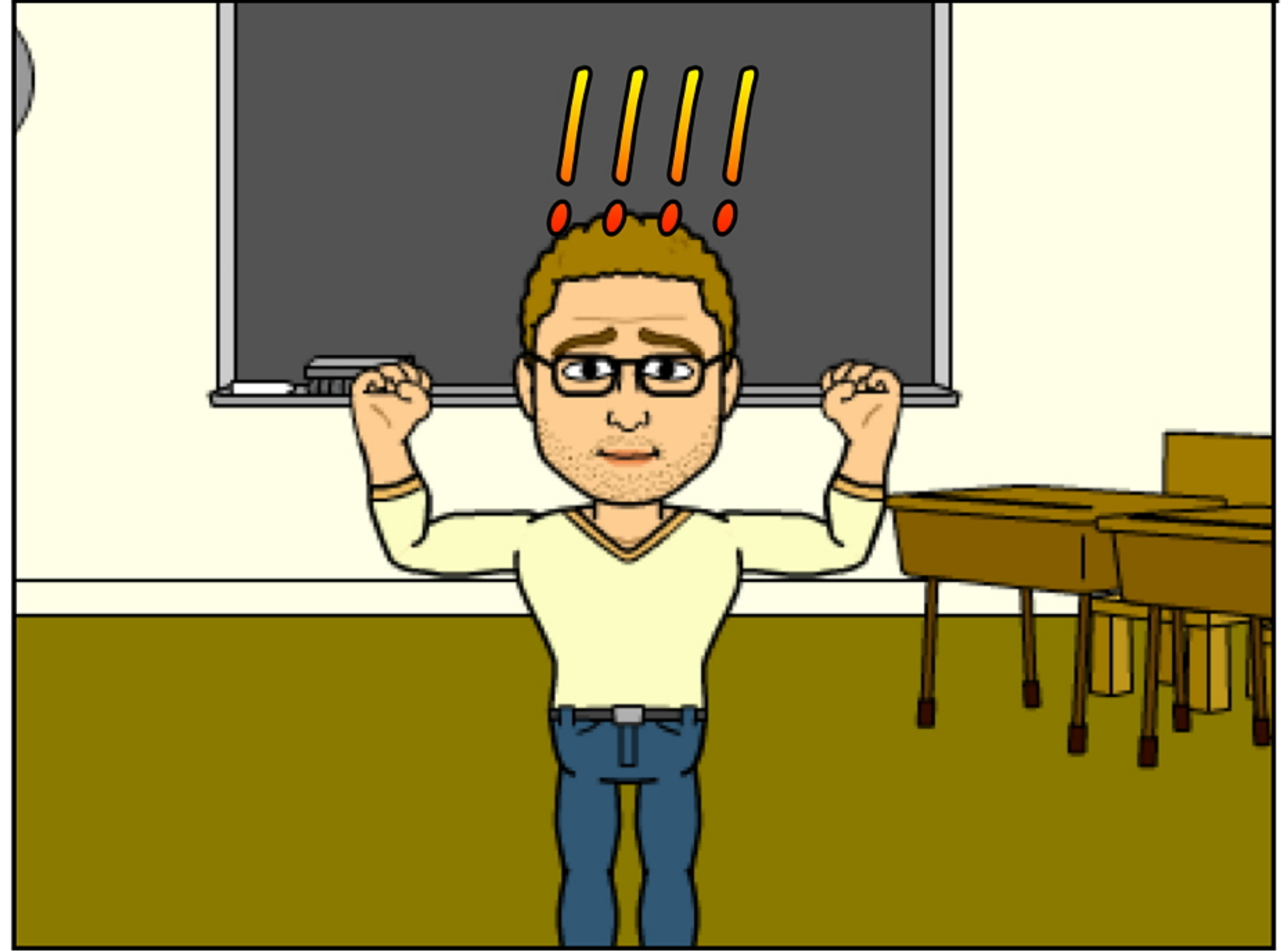
WHEN TEACHING COMICS, I ASK MY STUDENTS TO FORMAT THEIR PAPERS AS COMICS, BECAUSE I FEEL THAT THEY LEARN MORE EFFECTIVELY BY WRITING WITH THE MEDIA THEY WRITE ABOUT.



THAT IS JUST AS TRUE FOR ME AS IT IS FOR THEM. HOWEVER, I RESISTED DOING THIS SORT OF WORK MYSELF, LARGELY DUE TO A LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN MY DRAWING AND CODING ABILITY.



BUT I'VE DONE MY BEST TO CIRCUMVENT THESE LIMITATIONS.



IN SUMMARY: IF WE, AS COMICS SCHOLARS, WRITE *WITH* AS WELL AS *ABOUT* COMICS, OUR WORK WILL HAVE GREATER MATERIAL AND VISUAL RICHNESS. AND IF WE DO SO, WE WILL ALSO DEVELOP A LEVEL OF FIRSTHAND KNOWLEDGE OF COMICS WHICH IS UNAVAILABLE OTHERWISE.

PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH IS AN EXCITING DEVELOPMENT IN MANY AREAS OF THE HUMANITIES, BUT IT'S PARTICULARLY RELEVANT TO OUR FIELD. AND IT DOESN'T REQUIRE ARTISTIC ABILITY, JUST A WILLINGNESS TO EXPERIMENT.



The End