WEBCOMICS

tools and techniques for digital cartooning

STEVEN WITHROW & JOHN BARBER

ILEX

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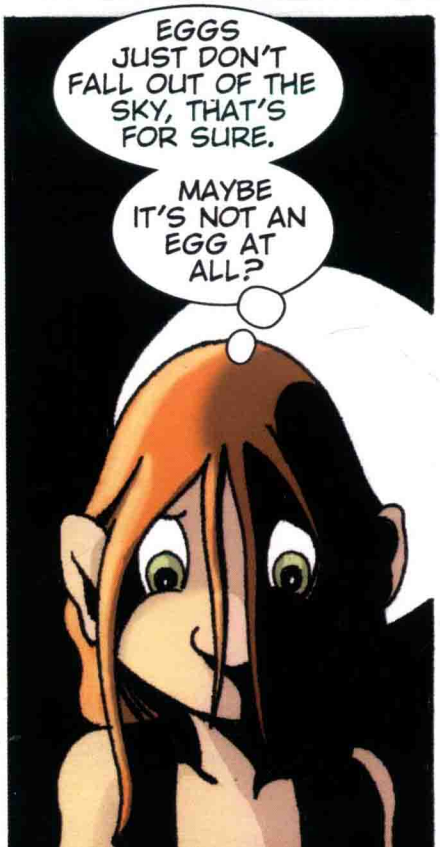

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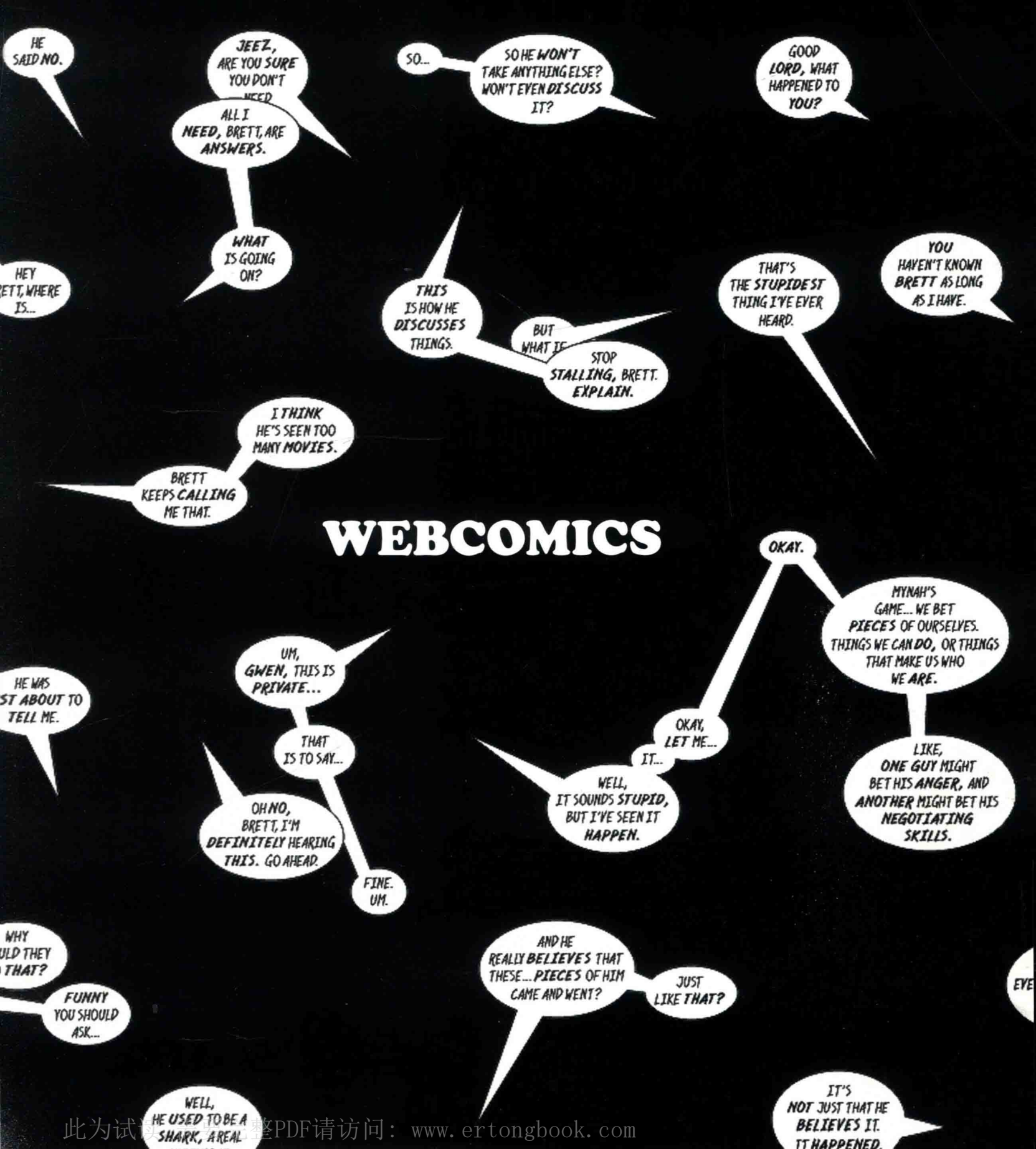

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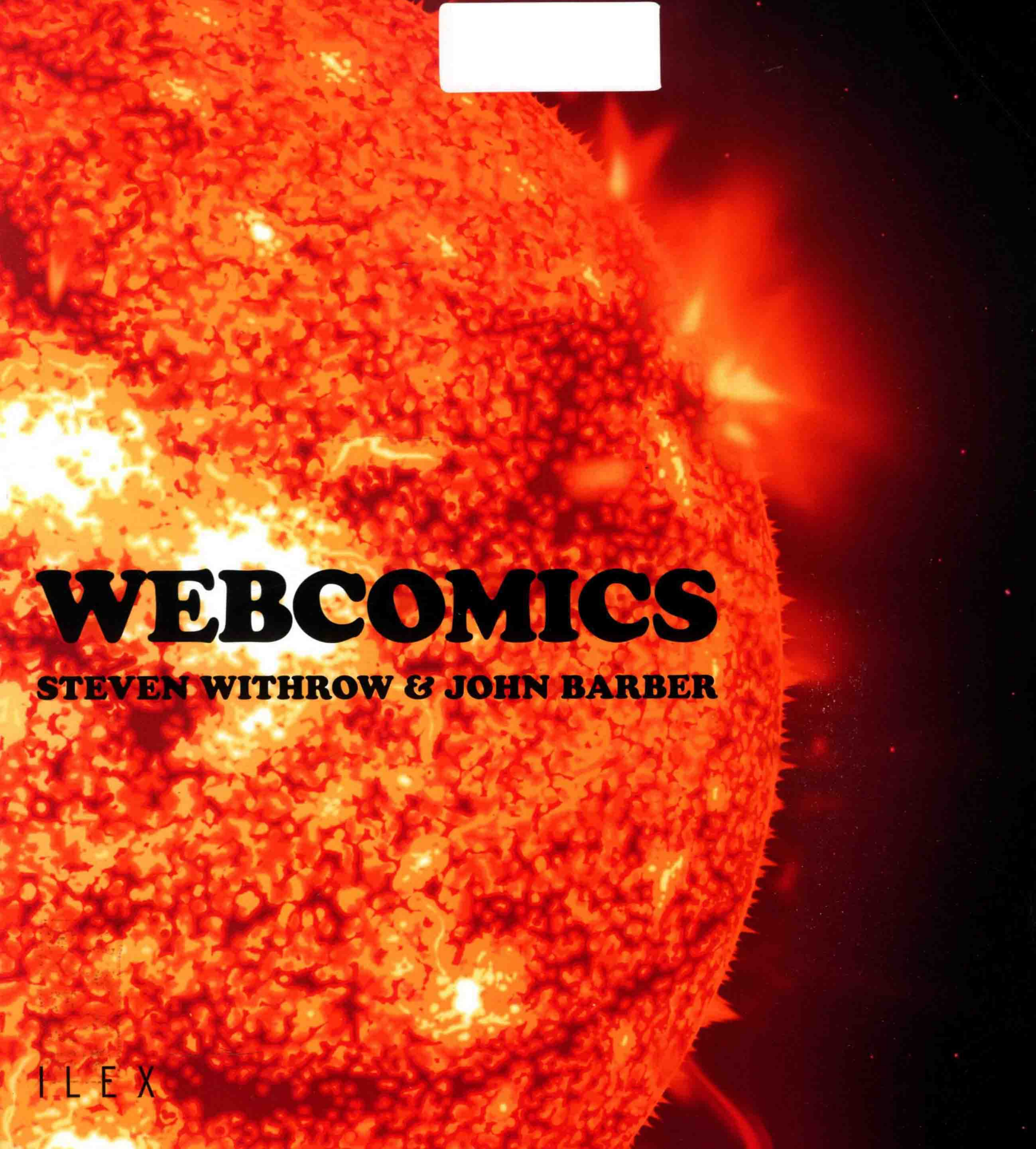

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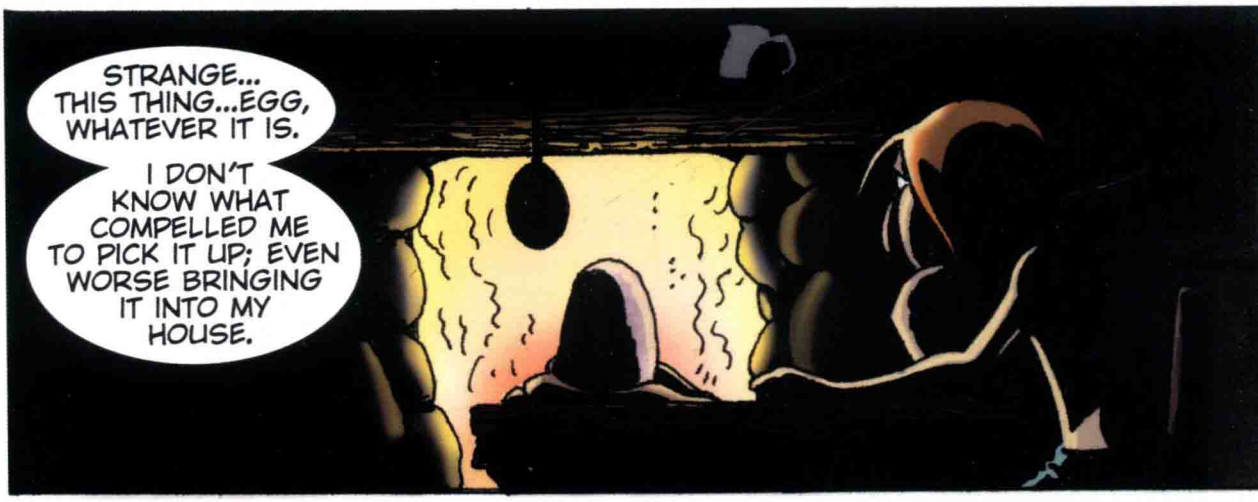

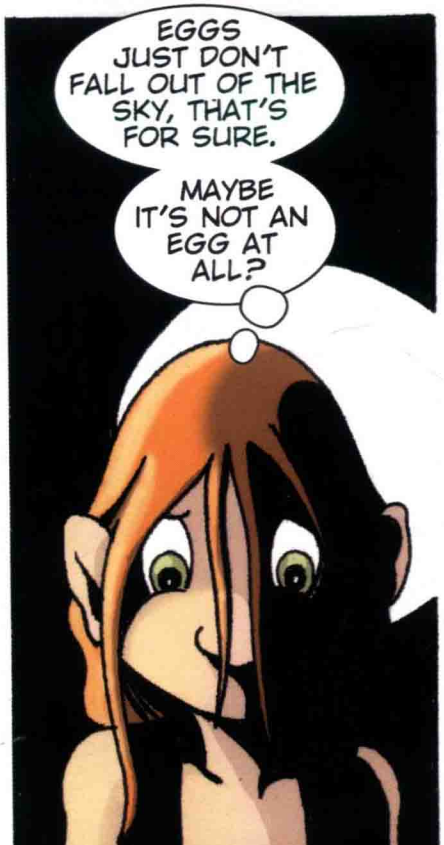

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FOREWORD

In the mid-1990s, cartoonists began to envision a culture on the Web: new work constantly in rotation, an audience once hampered by bad distribution now finding their favourite comics and searching them out as part of their daily routines, an uninitiated audience finding pleasure in a new art form spreading before their eyes. And then: paperless paper rolls, cartoon strips on our mobile phones and PDAs, state-of-the-art screen resolutions, and aggregate sites and filters to sort the whole thing out. A new audience with no nostalgic affinity for the smell of paper, the turn of the page, the ritual of the cramped and difficult distribution/retail network. And finally: geniuses for whom paper is no object, who craft as easily in electrons and pixels as our earliest practitioners did in ink and line.

A friend once said to me that the World Wide Web was a cobbled-together contraption: nothing but wires and springs and jury-rigged code. We would be lucky if anything came to fruition as quickly as we were all hoping it would.

The more I think about this, the more I see that it applies to just about everything in life. Things progress and evolve much more slowly than we imagine they will. Our small projects, our community's dreams, our global visions are all snail-like in development.

Now, it shouldn't be that way with pixels, light, and electrons, but alas, because people are behind it, the Web's development, like my friend suggests, isn't much faster.

But this isn't such a bad state of affairs. Today, audiences for a scant few strips are enormous, and most strips and stories still only capture a tiny niche audience. Thousands of new readers are not necessarily being won by the sudden universal nature of our favourite art form on the Web. Cartoon stories on our mobile phones are rare, and strips for our personal devices are tough to read and difficult to find.

But look around. Many of the artistic/creative ends of these dreams have actually come true, or are working themselves out at a comfortable pace. We have thousands of cartoonists out there, working in pixels and light more easily than with pen and paper. We have brilliant individuals who are creating unique, screen-based (will the screen, too, become antiquated?) experiences. To thousands of hopeful creators, the Internet has given them the chance to create, learn, explore, experiment, grow, share, and shine, while readers numbering in the tens of thousands – and growing every day – feed their healthy addictions to cartoon art – fixes that aren't being satisfied in daily newspapers, in magazines, in local stores, or anywhere within the reach of our slow and stubborn molecules.

This book is a celebration and investigation of the techniques and processes of the creators who have adopted, embraced, and built this new medium. Here is that opportunity to look around: a survey of the state of affairs in a very interesting medium at a very exciting time.

Tom Hart
New York City, 2004

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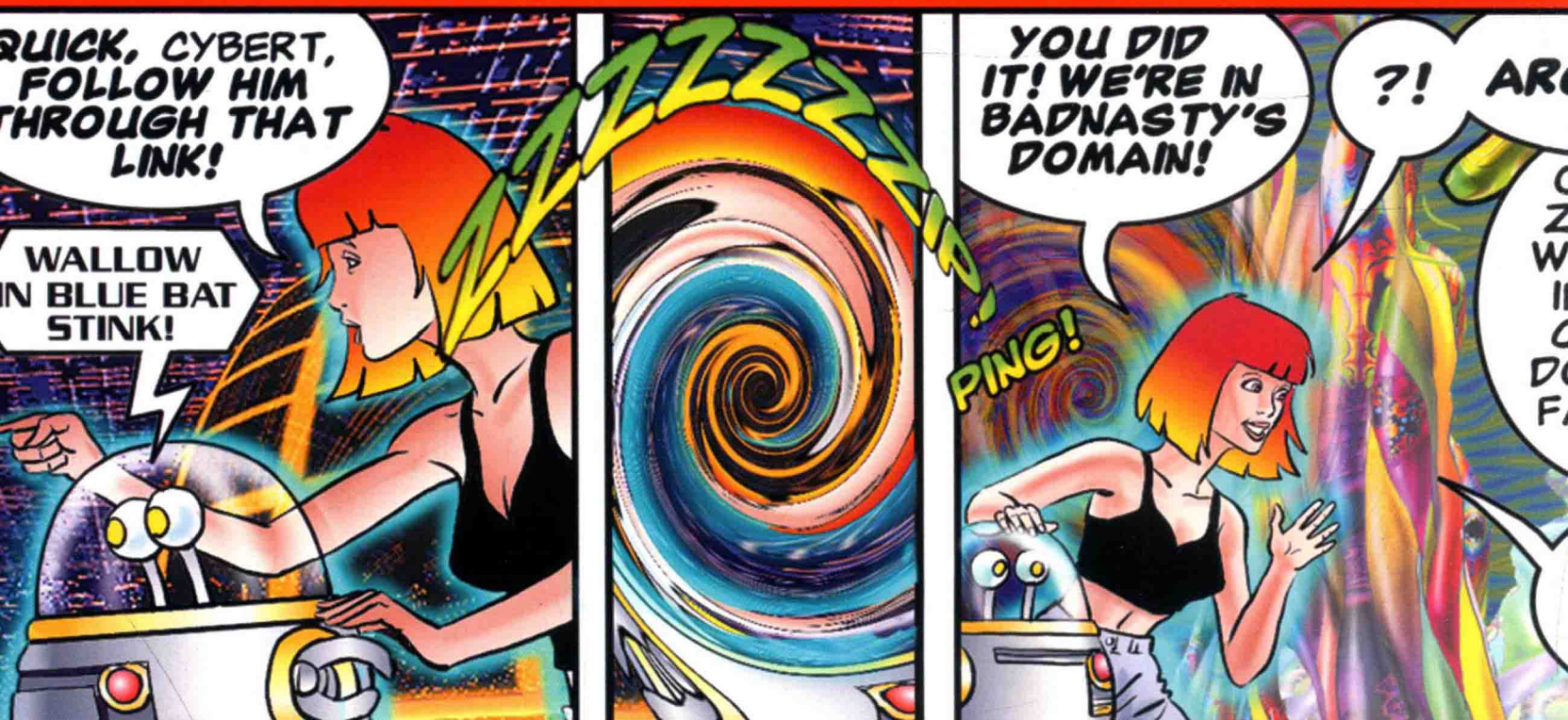
THIS SHOULD BE A FLASH-HACK.
SAY,... DO YOU HEAR ANY...
NOPE. NO BACKGROUND MUSIC.
OH.
DOESN'T HURT TO ASK.
OK! I'VE HOTWIRED THE FINDER, LET'S SEE HOW THIS...


QUICK, CYBERT, FOLLOW HIM THROUGH THAT LINK!
WALLOW IN BLUE BAT STINK!
ZZZZZZZZ!
YOU DID IT! WE'RE IN BADNASTY'S DOMAIN!
PING!
?!

#ONE

A NEW DAY FOR COMICS

'I link, therefore I am!'

This twist on Descartes' famous quote not only introduces Charley Parker's pioneering webcomic, *Argon Zark!*, but also encapsulates the electric, here-there-and-everywhere spirit of online cartooning. This book aims to show how, each hour around the world, webcartoonists are busy working and reworking our basic definition into a thriving art form with qualities unlike any other.

The Web offers unprecedented opportunities for author–audience interactivity, creator collaboration, and perhaps even the creation of a thriving industry. Webcartoonists have adapted to the online environment in delightfully unexpected ways – proving to be some of the world's most innovative digital artists. A look at the emerging history, as well as the now-global breadth of webcartooning, reveals three fundamental threads that are likely to guide the future of the medium:

1. Technological adaptation
2. Formal experimentation
3. Cultural expansion

INTRODUCTION

The mere concept of online or digital comics, by virtue of being relatively new and largely untested, defies simple classification.

While we the authors acknowledge that all theories are both descriptive and prescriptive, we have sought as inclusive a definition of webcomics as is useful for our purposes in the context of this book.

Our theory of webcomics is that there exists a continuum of artistic, communicative, and/or narrative works that are bonded (though by no means *bounded*) by the following two properties:

1. Delivery and presentation through a digital medium or a network of digital electronic media

2. Incorporation of the graphic design principles of spatial and/or sequential juxtaposition, word–picture interdependence, and/or closure

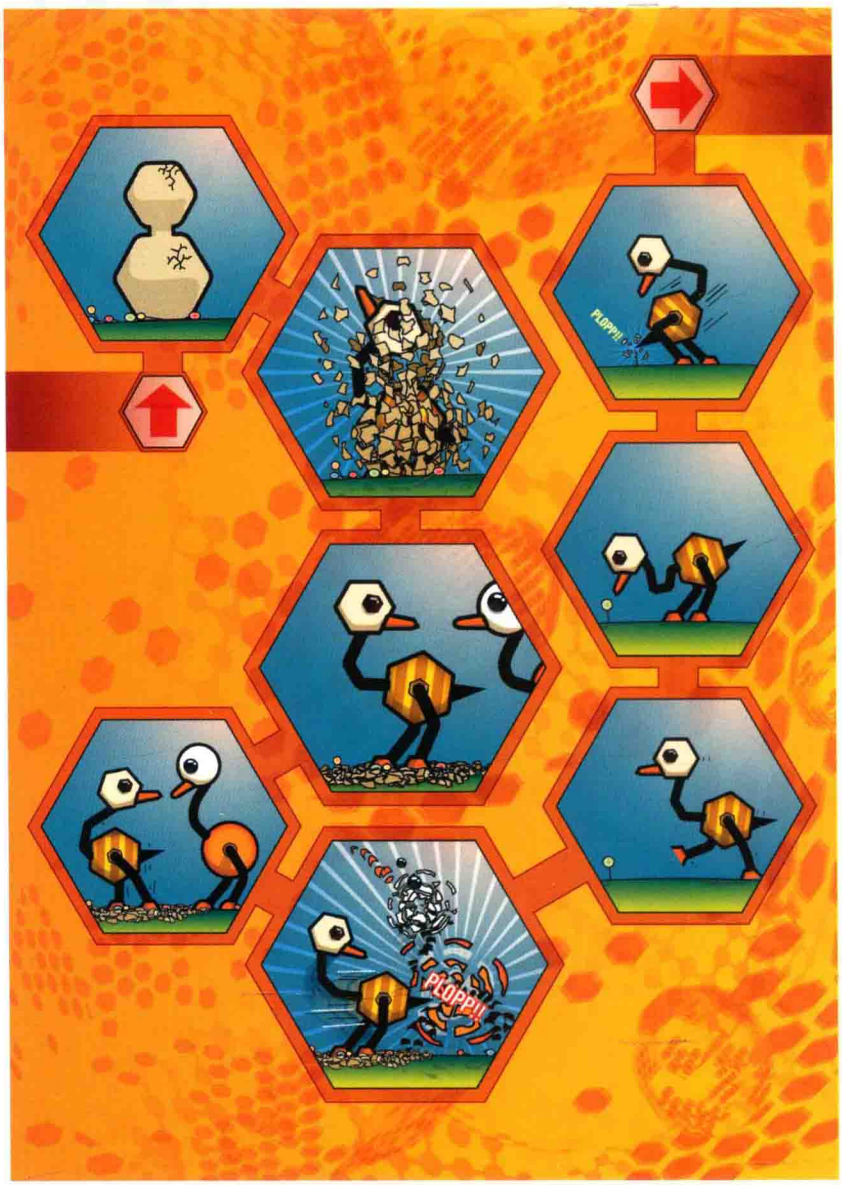
Given this definition, one might group webcomics with related works in print, on film, in broadcast media, or elsewhere online. However, we stress that webcomics have developed, in their little more than a decade of existence, a discrete identity, malleable though it may be, that allows for coherent discussion.

Later in the book, we will present some of the formal 'grey areas' that webcartoonists are now exploring – for example, the narrowing gap between webcomics and digital animation or between webcomics and online games. But here at the start, it suffices to say that webcomics in their most common format are comics that you read on the World Wide Web.

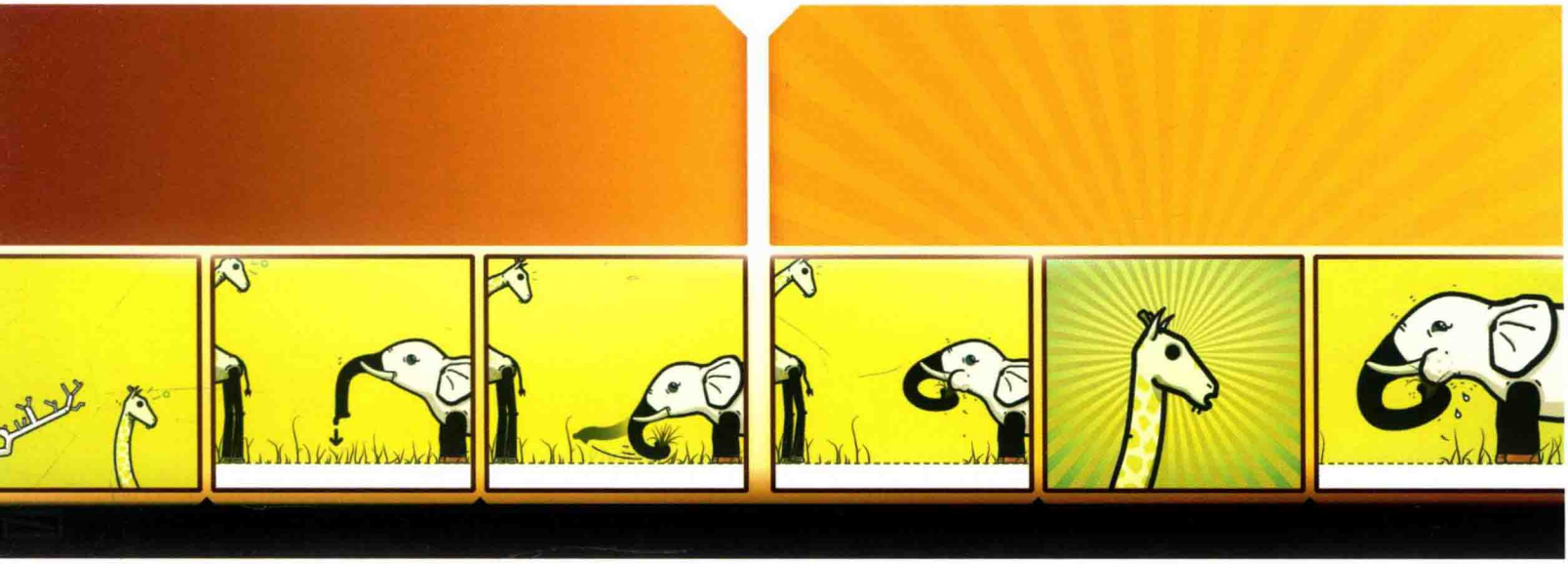
In other words, webcomics exist as binary code and can be stored as digital files and also transferred from person to person through a network of digital devices such as online computers, PDAs, and mobile phones.

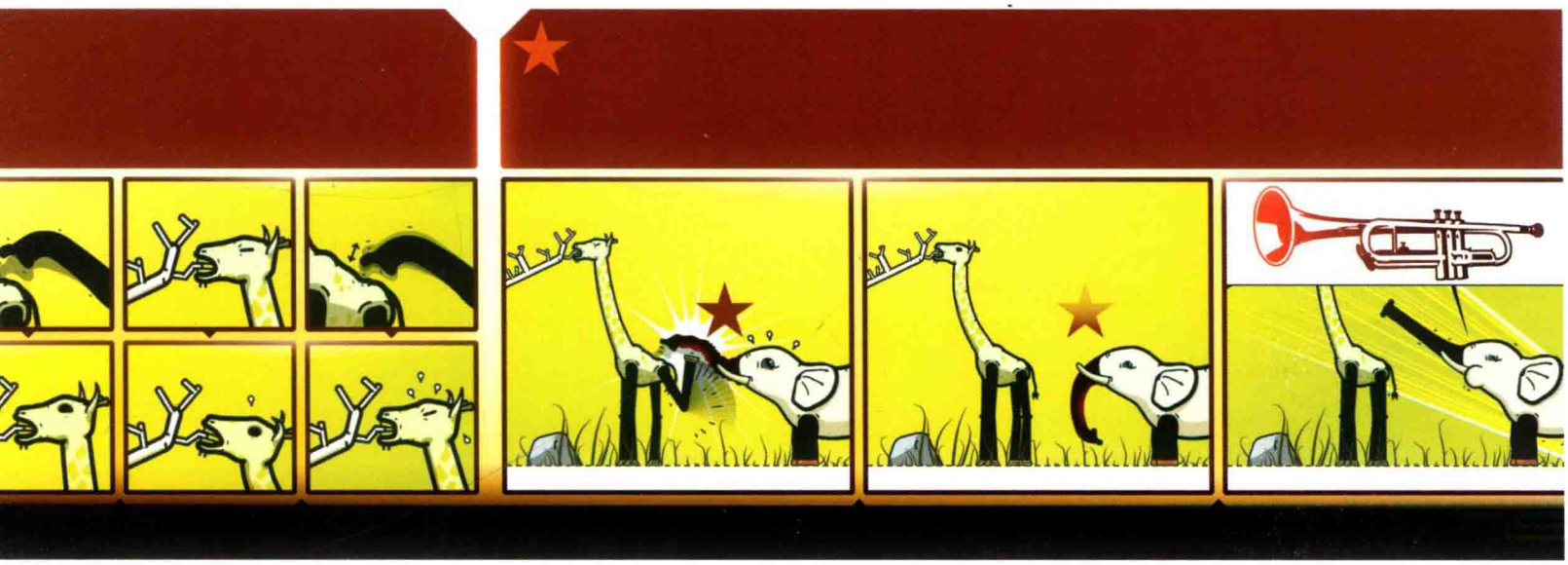
See the books of Will Eisner, Scott McCloud, and R.C. Harvey, as well as Dylan Horrocks's 'Inventing Comics' essay as cited in the bibliography, for further discussion of these principles.

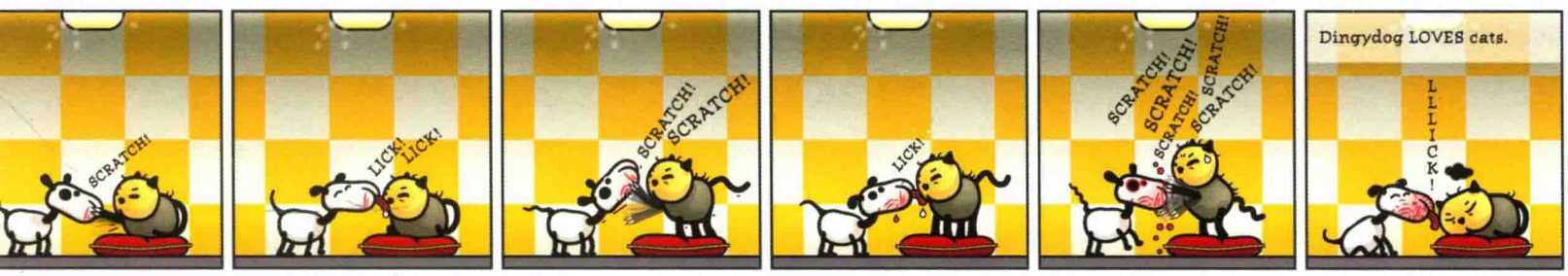
A LIGHTED WINDOW



Images on this spread were created by Swiss webcartoonist demian.5 (www.demian5.com).






SCRATCH!
LICK! LICK!
SCRATCH! SCRATCH!
LICK!
SCRATCH! SCRATCH! SCRATCH! SCRATCH!
Dingydog LOVES cats.
LLLICK!

T CAMPBELL A HISTORY OF ONLINE COMICS

Aesthetically, the first few webcomics had no template to follow – neither comic strips nor comic books were right for the challenges of low download speeds and a techie audience. The early online comic *Where the Buffalo Roam* was an adapted university newspaper strip, *Dr. Fun* was a one-panel joke in the vein of *The Far Side*, *Netboy* was remarkable for using Web issues as its theme, and *Jax and Co.* was notable for experimenting with JavaScript.

For lack of better terminology, this period, from about 1993 to 1996, was the 'Stone Age of Webcomics'. Its practitioners had plenty of pioneering enthusiasm, but bandwidth limitations and lack of training hampered the quality of the art, while the writing was directed either at too narrow an audience to prove popular – or at no specific audience at all.

Still, the Stone Age was a time when comics creators needed to try something new. The comic book industry had fallen into a terrible economic slump and the great comic strips of recent years – *Calvin and Hobbes*, *The Far Side*, and *Bloom County* – were all gone. These conditions make it a bit easier to understand why those who loved comics turned to the Web to practise their craft, even for an audience of only dozens, even for no money.

Webcomics kept developing, but the form was not generally recognized until 1996 and online cartoonists often didn't recognize one another. Even the word 'webcomics' didn't really exist yet. If you saw the word online in 1995, it probably referred to *Webcomics.com*, a creation of David de Vitry, who pioneered the webcomics collective years before its time.

Most of the well-remembered material from the Stone Age, though, was either well connected to the world outside webcomics or was an obvious and skilled celebration of the Web itself. The 'connected' strips included *Salon.com*'s *Kevin and Kell*, created by Bill Holbrook, who already had two syndicated newspaper strips. *Filler* was a little bit of both: this regular feature from the high-profile webzine *Suck* profited from an audience drawn in by *Suck*'s text articles, which shared *Filler*'s cheerfully anarchic cynicism about the Web (and everything else).

Helen, Sweetheart of the Internet by Peter Zale went directly for the Web audience. The eponymous Helen was a master of hardware, and the strip provided real insights into techie life without becoming indecipherable to the non-techie user. She was a woman who 'got' the Web, and that made her desirable to the strip's characters, online readers, and eventually to newspaper groups.

Finally, attention must be paid to the greatest visual feast of the Stone Age, *Argon Zark!* The title character starts experimenting – on himself, naturally – with 'Personal Transport Protocol', which sends him and his companions on a journey into the pages of the World Wide Web. This plot allows artist Charley Parker an opportunity to celebrate the Web as a thing of beauty.

By 1997, strips like *Zark* were getting attention from the mainstream press, even as print comics giant Marvel released a special 'cybercomic' featuring Spider-Man. Meanwhile, readers were beginning to surf for comics and compare their findings.

All this attention signalled the end of the Stone Age, and the next age, the Golden Age, was heralded by the introduction of five comics sites that would define the webcomics scene for the next three years and remain important parts of it to the present. Call them the Five Horsemen: *Sluggy Freelance*, *User Friendly*, *PvP*, *ScottMcCloud.com*, and *Penny Arcade*.

The Five Horsemen were each a commercial success – five of the very few such successes online. This made them influential in both the art form of webcomics and its developing commerce. And tellingly, each of them began its first strip in front of a computer screen.

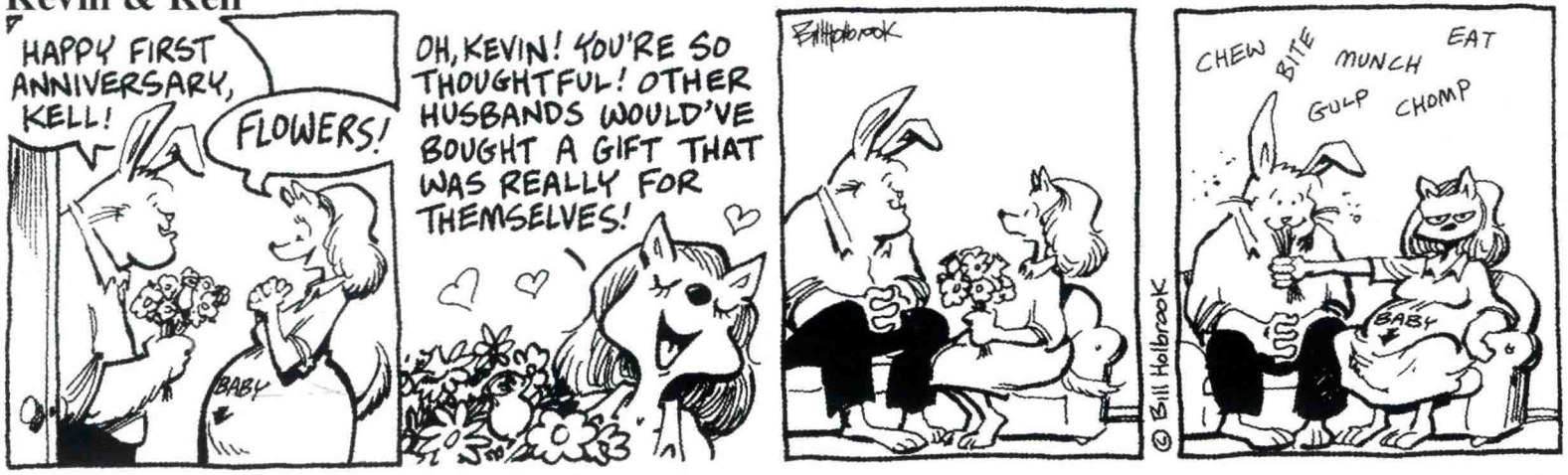
Sluggy, for some years the world's most popular webcomic, is difficult to pin down. Its stories have sometimes been shaggy dog tales about the Internet, but cartoonist Pete Abrams has stirred in film and television parodies, melodrama, horror, holiday mythology, and more. The real constants seem to be Abrams's prodigious production rate and his special flavour of humour.

Despite their newness, webcomics have already attracted the attention of comics historians and critics, such as T Campbell, who have sought to mark their beginnings, chart their progress in multiple areas (formal, technological, cultural, economic, etc.), and predict their future as a form.

Sluggy Freelance

SLUGGY FREELANCE

Kevin & Kell



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