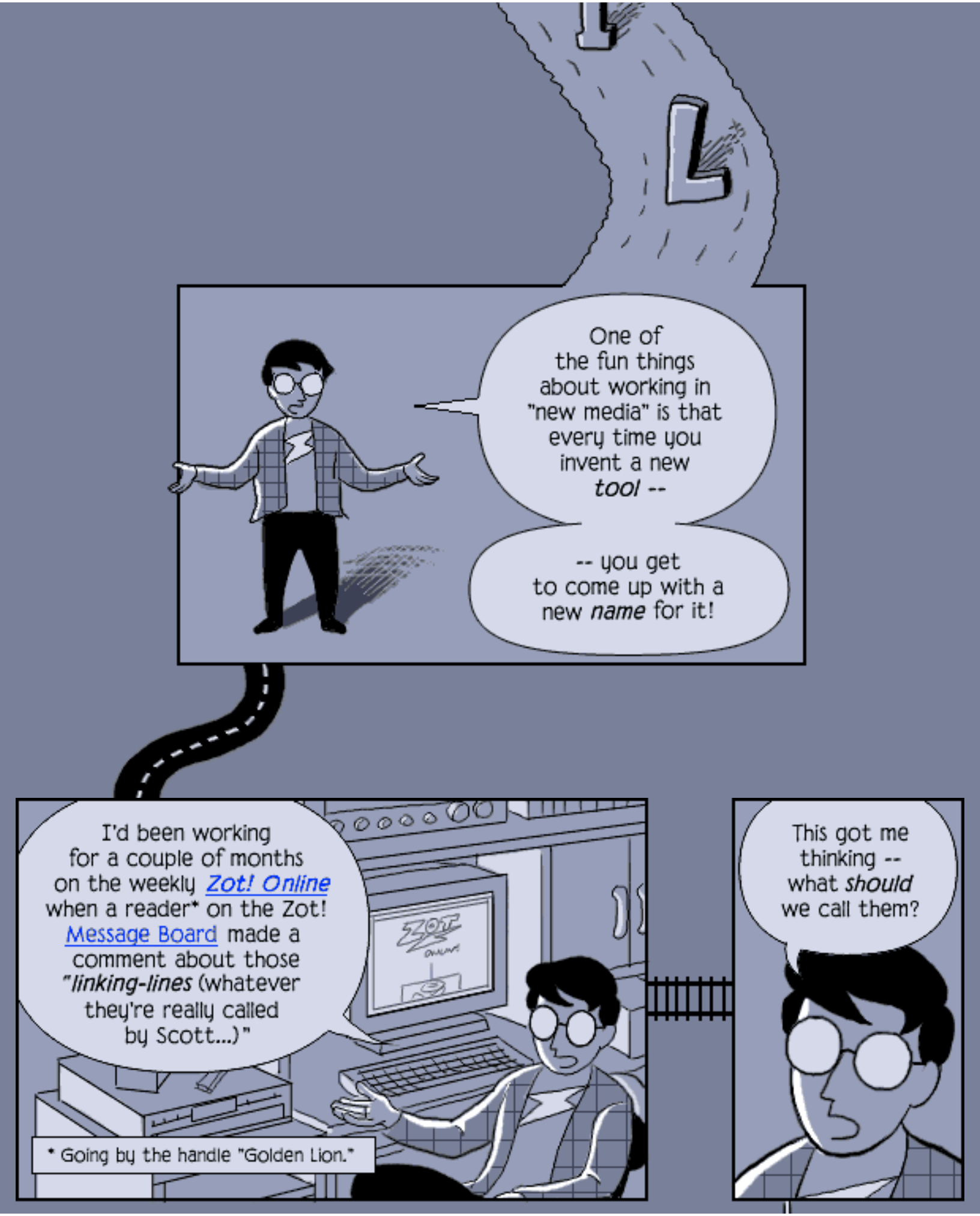
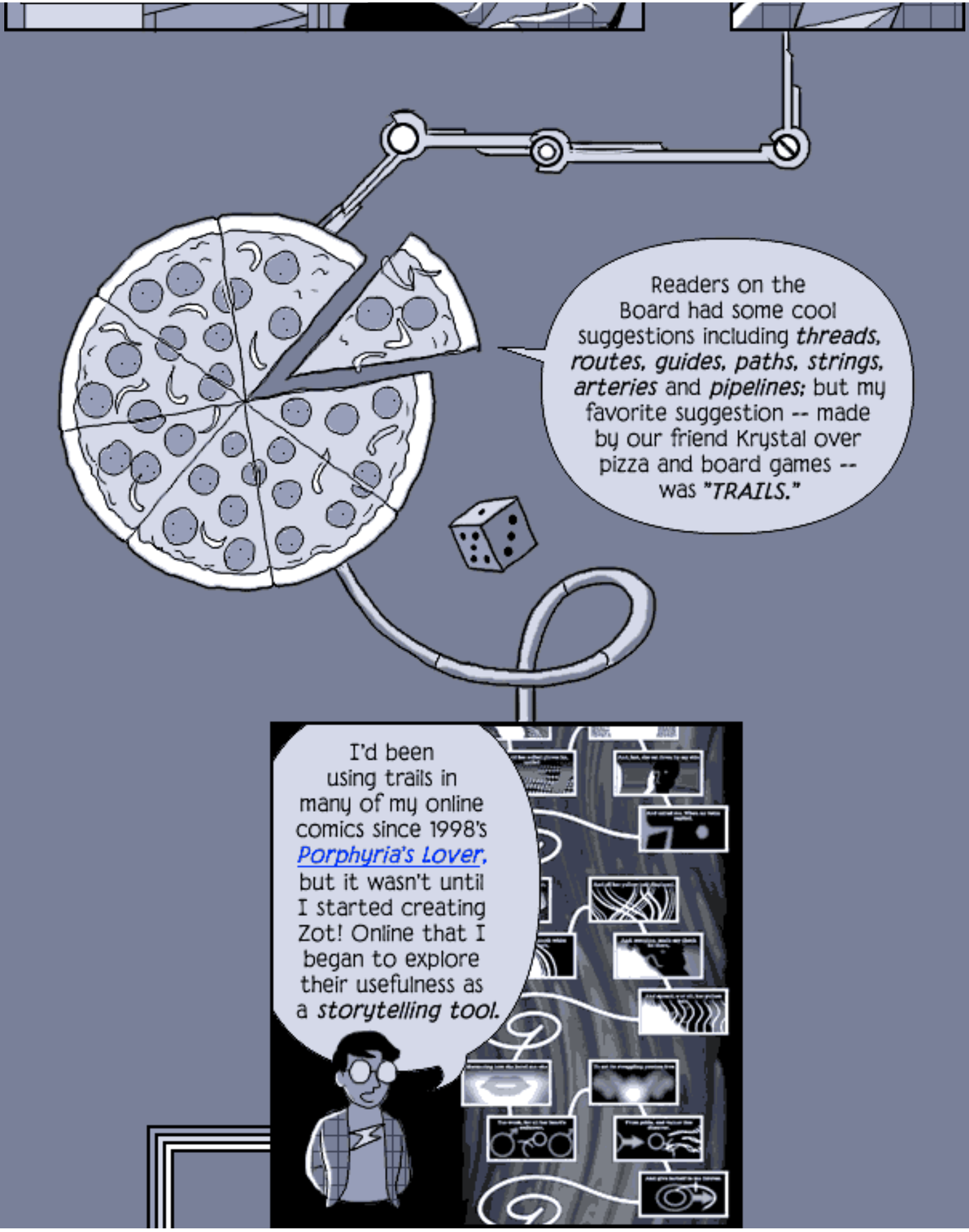
#4 FALL/WINTER 2000

I CAN'T STOP THINKING!

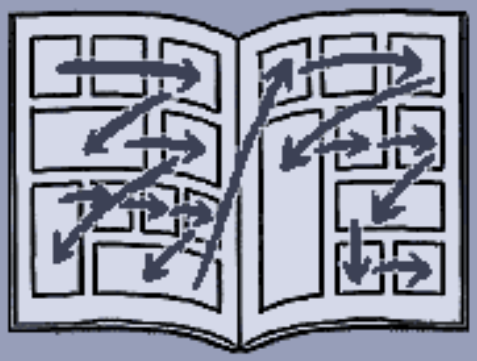
Continuing the work of Reinventing Comics by Scott McCloud.

F O L L O W T H A T T R A I L


One of the fun things about working in "new media" is that every time you invent a new *tool* --
-- you get to come up with a new *name* for it!
I'd been working for a couple of months on the weekly *Zot! Online* when a reader* on the Zot! Message Board made a comment about those "*linking-lines* (whatever they're really called by Scott...)"
* Going by the handle "Golden Lion."
This got me thinking -- what *should* we call them?


Readers on the Board had some cool suggestions including *threads, routes, guides, paths, strings, arteries* and *pipelines;* but my favorite suggestion -- made by our friend Krystal over pizza and board games -- was *"TRAILS."*
I'd been using trails in many of my online comics since 1998's *Porphyria's Lover,* but it wasn't until I started creating Zot! Online that I began to explore their usefulness as a *storytelling tool.*

Trail-based comics are a radical departure from the old left-to-right and up-to-down protocol of traditional *printed* comics.



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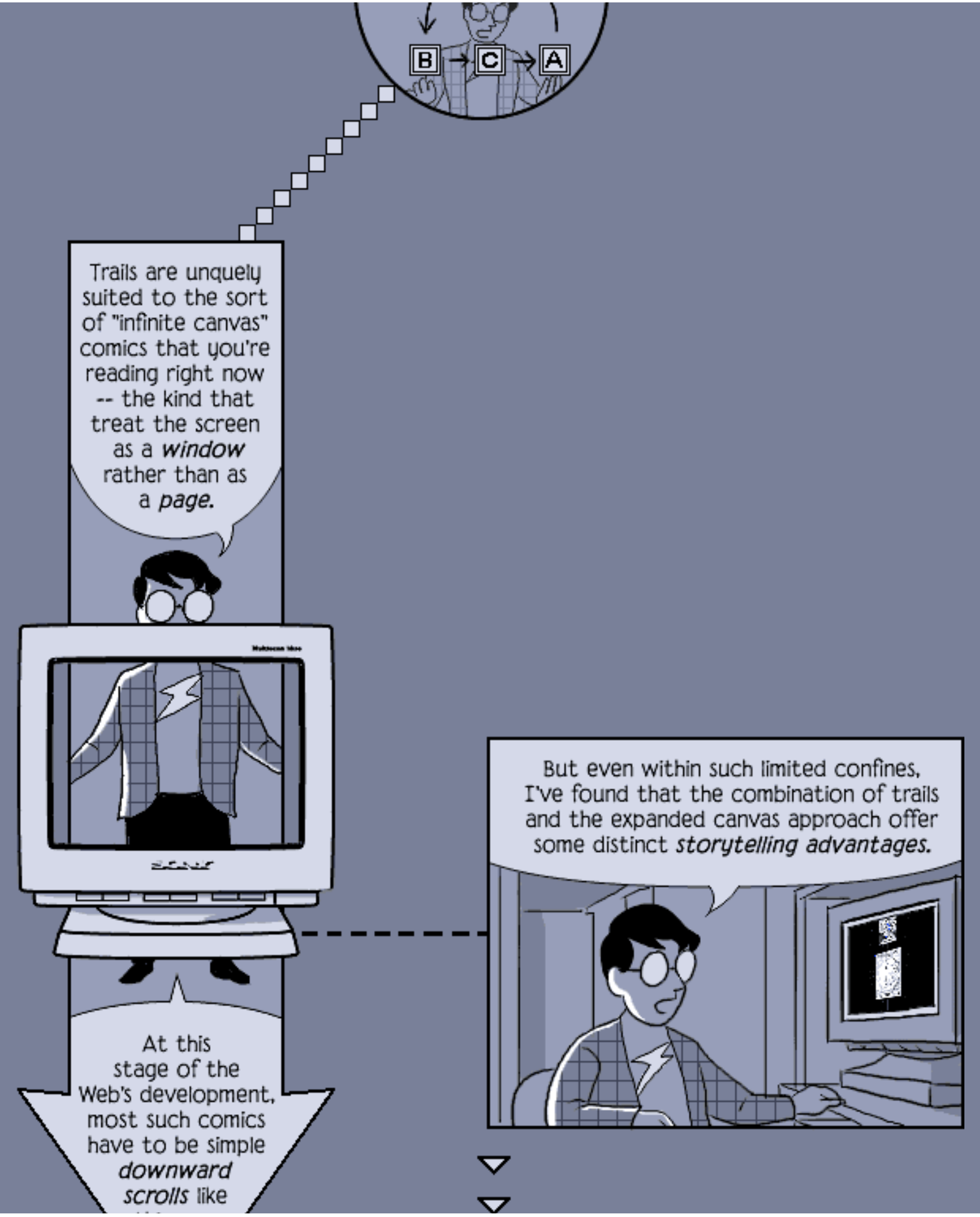
to it --
-- it's as simple as *A B C!*


B → C → A
Trails are unquely suited to the sort of "infinite canvas" comics that you're reading right now -- the kind that treat the screen as a *window* rather than as a *page.*
But even within such limited confines, I've found that the combination of trails and the expanded canvas approach offer some distinct *storytelling advantages.*
At this stage of the Web's development, most such comics have to be simple *downward scrolls* like

scrolls like this one.

Distance Pacing is one such narrative tool. If you follow the basic tenet of sequential art -- that to move in *space* is to move in *time* -- then increasing or decreasing the *distance* between images can strongly influence the passing of *time* within a story.

Tight pacing = Close images.

Slow pacing = Distant images.

Click on the image at left to see how this effect was used

see how this effect was used in Zot! Online week 2.

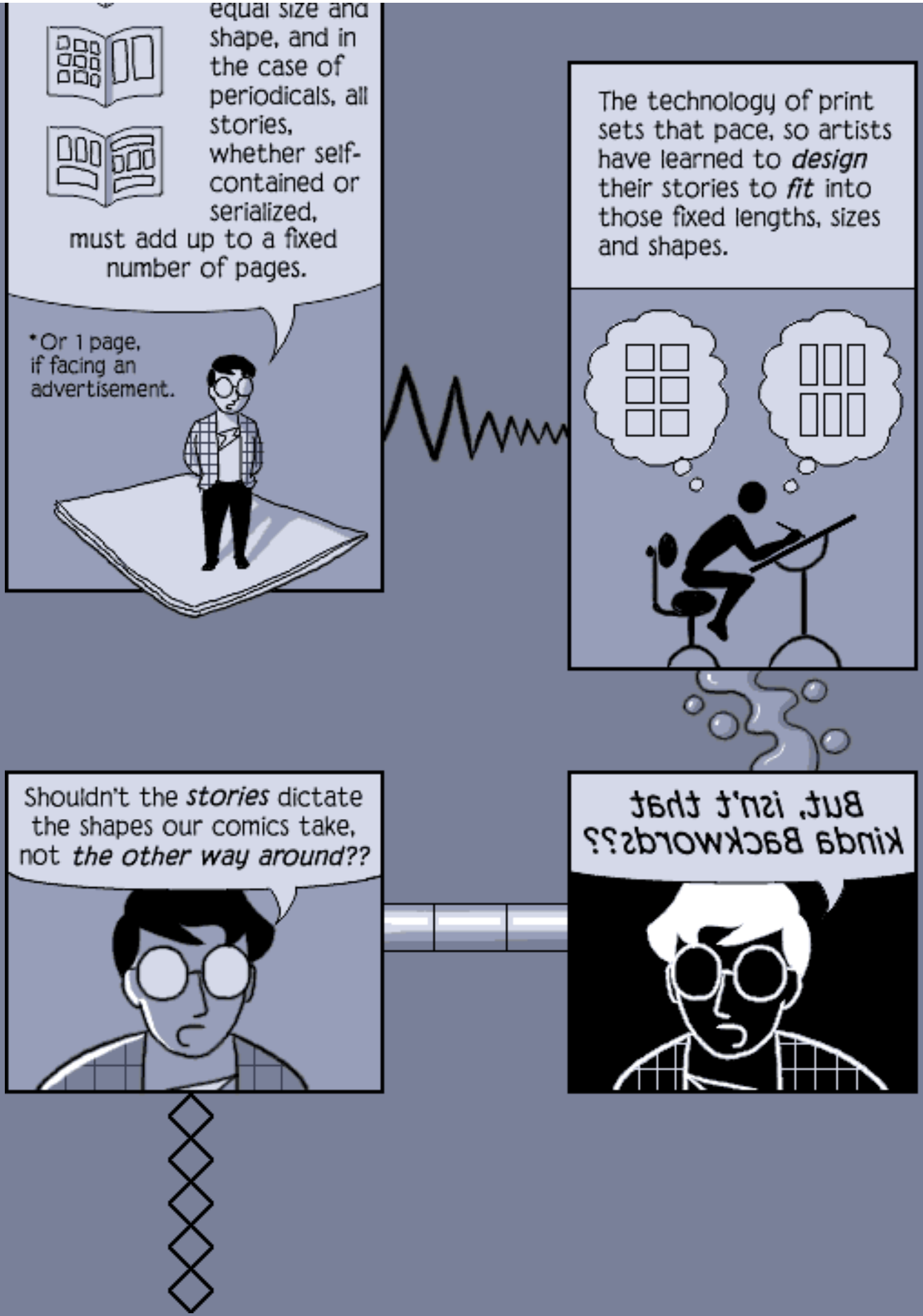
Just try that in *print*, though, and your audience will scream *bloody murder!*

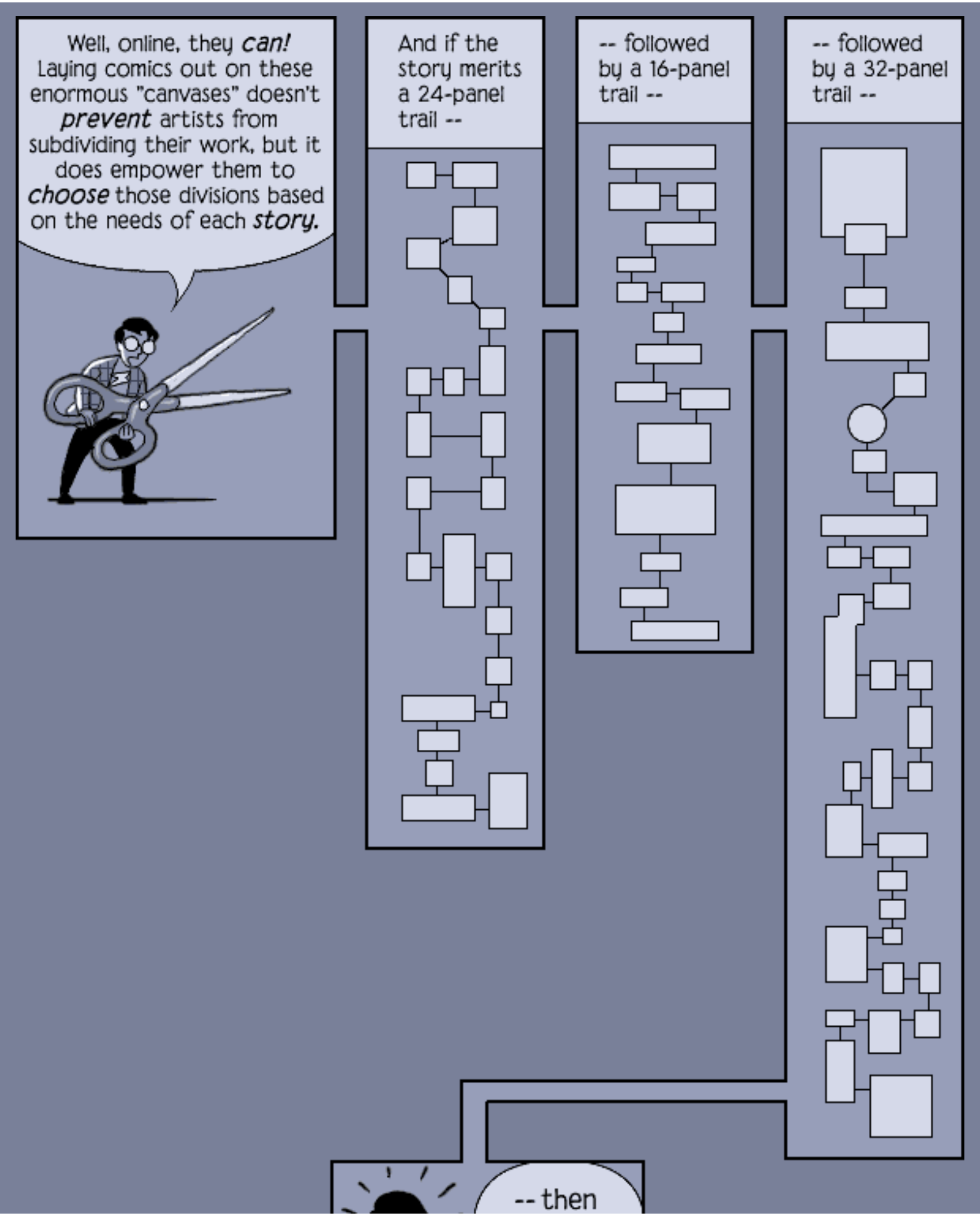
Hey! These pages are half blank!

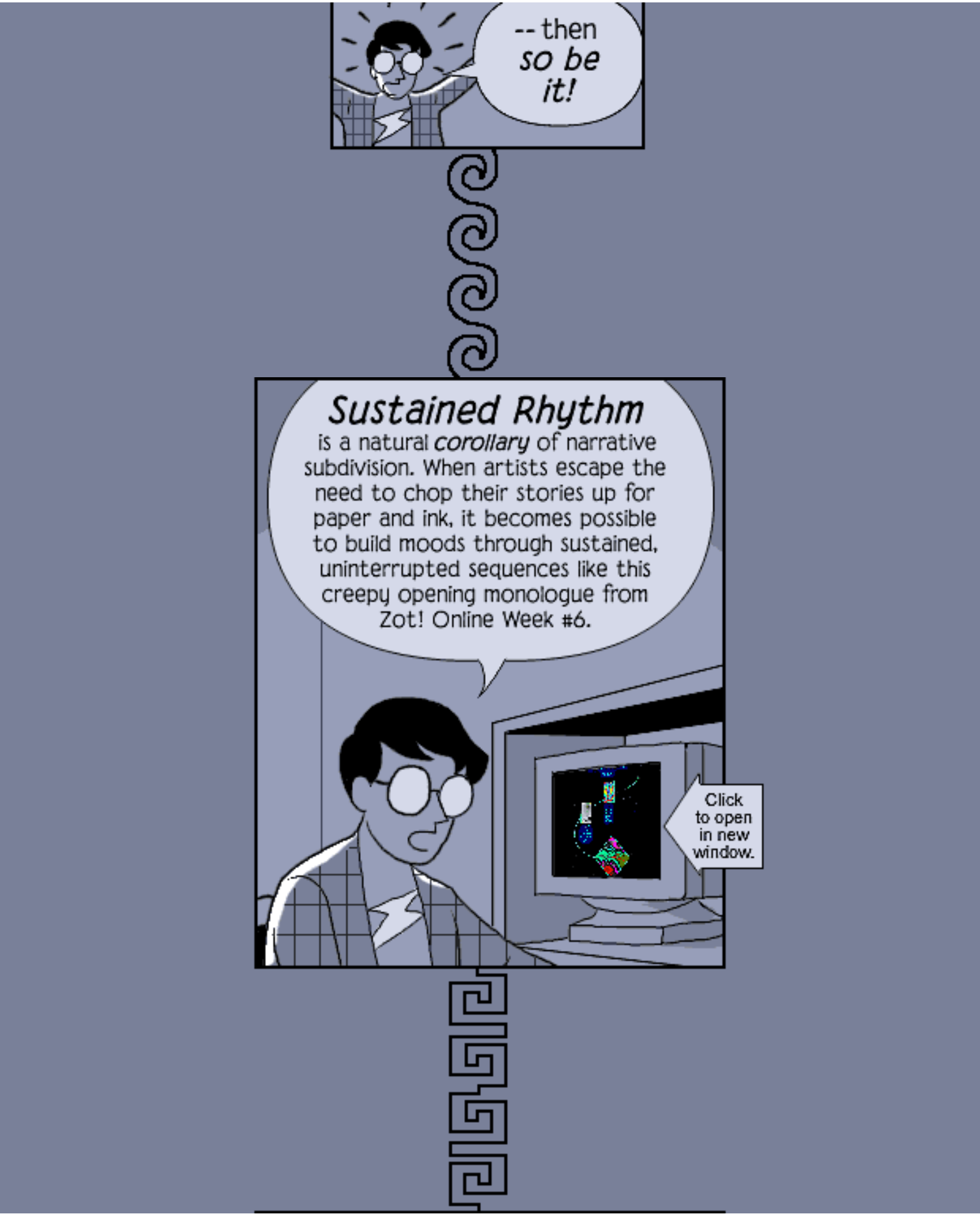
I paid $3.50 for this comic book!

Narrative Subdivision is another area where such big-trail online comics offer new storytelling opportunities.

In print, comics are divided into a series of 2-page* chunks of equal size and shape, and in


equal size and shape, and in the case of periodicals, all stories, whether self-contained or serialized, must add up to a fixed number of pages.
*Or 1 page, if facing an advertisement.
The technology of print sets that pace, so artists have learned to *design* their stories to *fit* into those fixed lengths, sizes and shapes.
Shouldn't the *stories* dictate the shapes our comics take, not *the other way around*??
But, isn't that kinda Backwards??


Well, online, they *can!* Laying comics out on these enormous "canvases" doesn't *prevent* artists from subdividing their work, but it does empower them to *choose* those divisions based on the needs of each *story.*
And if the story merits a 24-panel trail --
-- followed by a 16-panel trail --
-- followed by a 32-panel trail --
-- then


-- then so be it!
Sustained Rhythm
is a natural corollary of narrative subdivision. When artists escape the need to chop their stories up for paper and ink, it becomes possible to build moods through sustained, uninterrupted sequences like this creepy opening monologue from Zot! Online Week #6.
Click to open in new window.

Another feature unique to such expanded canvas trail-based comics is what -- for lack of a better name -- I'm calling ***Gradualism***, the ability to gradually reveal an image or sequence of images as readers navigate through a story. Check out the 6-foot tall falling panel in Week #3 for an example of this principle.

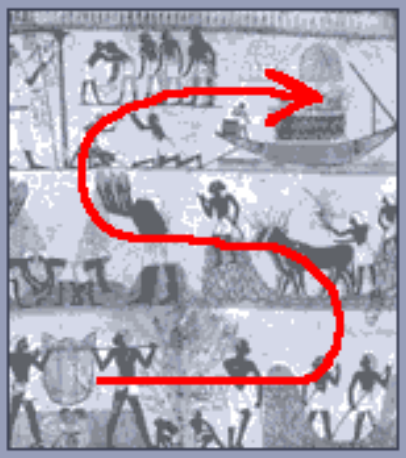
Click to open in new window.

Perhaps most importantly, by maintaining that *single unbroken reading line* that those strange new trailing scrolls afford --

-- we may be on the "trail" of a new form of *sequential art* --

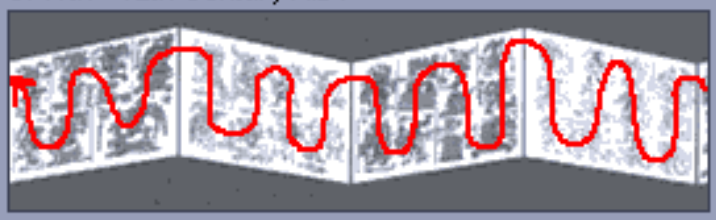
sequential art --

-- that recaptures the *pure expression* of comics' *pre-print ancestors* --



The Tomb of Menna the Scribe
c. 1300 B.C.

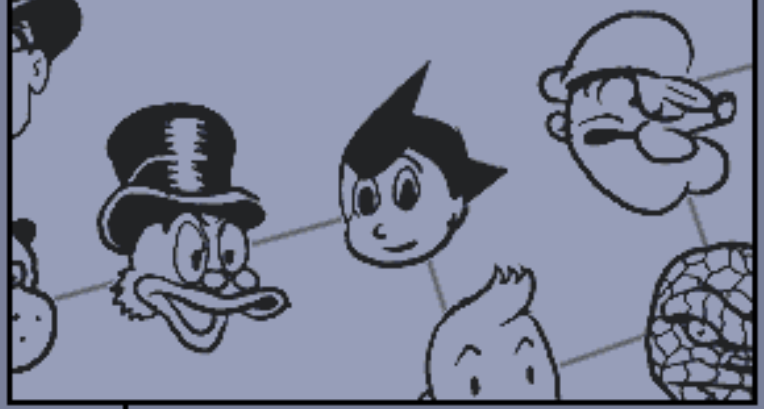
The Bayeux Tapestry
c. 11th - 12th Century A.D.

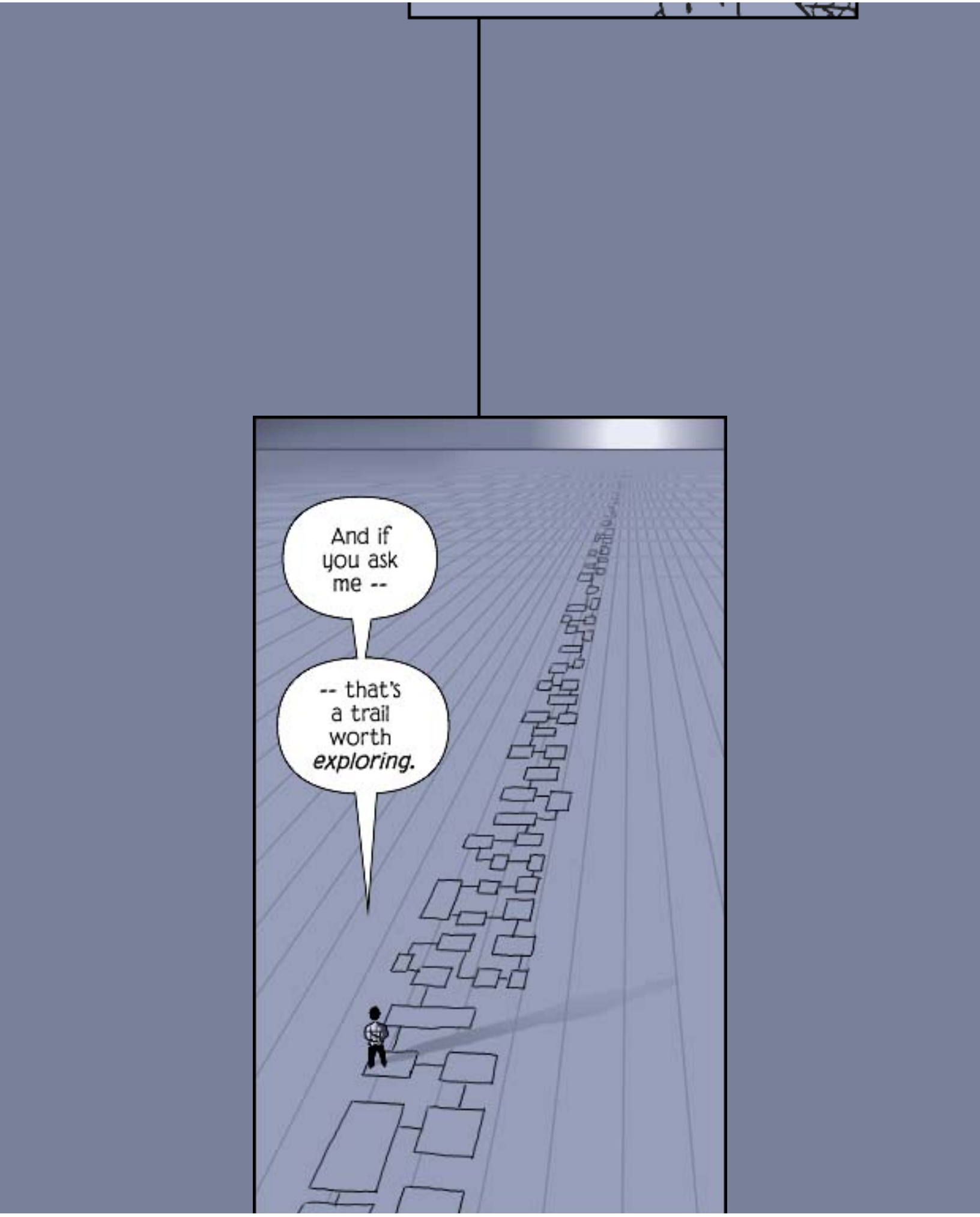


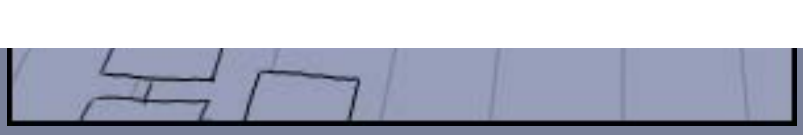
The Codex Nutall
"discovered" c. 1500 A.D.

Trajan's Column
c. 100 B.C.

-- while building on the *best ideas* of a century of modern comics *storytelling.*




And if you ask me --
-- that's a trail worth *exploring.*



--Scott