

DOOM!

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DOOM

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DOOM!

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DOOM!

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SEEN AND HEARD

LETTERING A COMIC BOOK REQUIRES EXACTING ATTENTION TO DETAIL, BUT DESIGNING SOUND EFFECTS ARE WHERE LETTERERS LET THEIR CREATIVITY SHINE.

You know onomatopoeia when you see it: Pow! Zap! Boom! But also KABOOM! BOOONGG! And BUH-KOW! Sound effects have become the clichéd language of comics in popular culture, but they're still a source of pure imagination for the people who design them. "Sound effects are a part of the process that has still remained pretty creative in lettering," explains Chris Eliopoulos of Virtual Calligraphy, a lettering studio that often works on Marvel books. "It's the one place where you get to make up your own rules."

Those rules circumvent conventional understandings of what the written word is able to do. Comics are a silent medium, but sound effects get around that limitation by playing a clever trick on our brains. When a reader sees a CRASH on a page, for example, they're not actually hearing the sound of a car smashing into a brick wall—rather, they're processing the word alongside the art to create an evocative narrative that fills in the gaps. "I don't know about you, but I don't know how to vocalize a building crashing in letters," says Eliopoulos. "I've never heard a building crashing on somebody go BRACKABADOO, but in your head it totally works."

That mental shift can shape how a letterer approaches the design of a sound effect. Words can mean different things in different contexts. Sounds, too, have their own associations, according to famed letterer Tom Orzechowski: "A slap is a quick, sharp sound, but it's not as hard as crunch, with its Ks," he explains. "If air is being sucked out of a room, or if someone's sneezing—we expect these things to sound different." And look different, too. A loud sound often translates to large text, while a quiet sound receives a more subtle treatment. But not all onomatopoeia are literal visual interpretations of the sound they're representing.

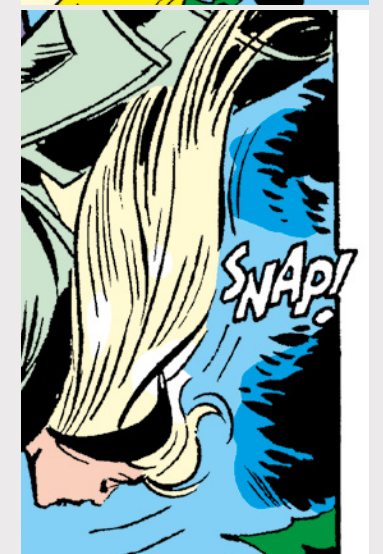
Eliopoulos references John Workman's lettering on Walter Simonson's mid-'80s run of *Mighty Thor* as an example of sound effects that break the rules in order to create something

iconic. Starting in issue #337, Workman lettered a string of expressive DOOM sound effects, as a nod to the sound of Thor's hammer slamming down. With each iteration, Workman gave DOOM a new style, ranging from art deco text to Norse-style letterforms. "He did these wonderfully graphic sound effects that would just cover an entire page," Eliopoulos says.

While Workman's lettering is bold and graphic, Orzechowski takes a more calligraphic approach to his sound effects. Orzechowski says he often designs his own sound effect fonts, but he's also been known to scour other sources of expressive lettering, like circus fonts, wedding invitations, and musical posters, to find inspiration. Some of his favorite display lettering that he's created was born from his fascination with European opera posters designed by the likes of Alphonse Mucha. "I started incorporating some of the [calligraphic] style into what I was doing, and no one told me to stop, so I just kept going," he says.

Sound effects are often designed to impart a stylistic mood to a story and they can also be a source of humor. Ariana Maher, a letterer at Virtual Calligraphy, says some of the best sound effects are there to make readers laugh. During a fight scene between Thor and Hercules in *Incredible Hercules* #136 (2009), Thor gives Hercules a twist of the nipple—a purple nurp—that letterer Simon Bowland expressed with a purple-toned NURP. "This book had me in stitches, and it was all thanks to the sound effects," she says. "It taught me how versatile comics can be."

That's a lesson that Orzechowski likes to teach young letterers who are curious about what it takes to design onomatopoeia. Not every sound effect needs to steal the panel. Often, the best ones simply are part of the panel's flow. "I tell young letterers to buy a *Fantastic Four* or *Spider-Man* from the 1960s and just look at how they were bouncing the sound effects around," he says. "Because letterforms are one part of it, and the other is how they syncopate. It's like jazz singing."



6

1-4 John Workman's iconic Doom lettering for *Mighty Thor*. 5 The *Incredible Hercules* series used sound effects to comedic results, such as in this purple "Nurp" from *Incredible Hercules* #136. 6 Sound effects don't need to be boisterous to command attention. A small sound effect, as seen in *Amazing Spider-Man* #121, can have a large impact on the story.