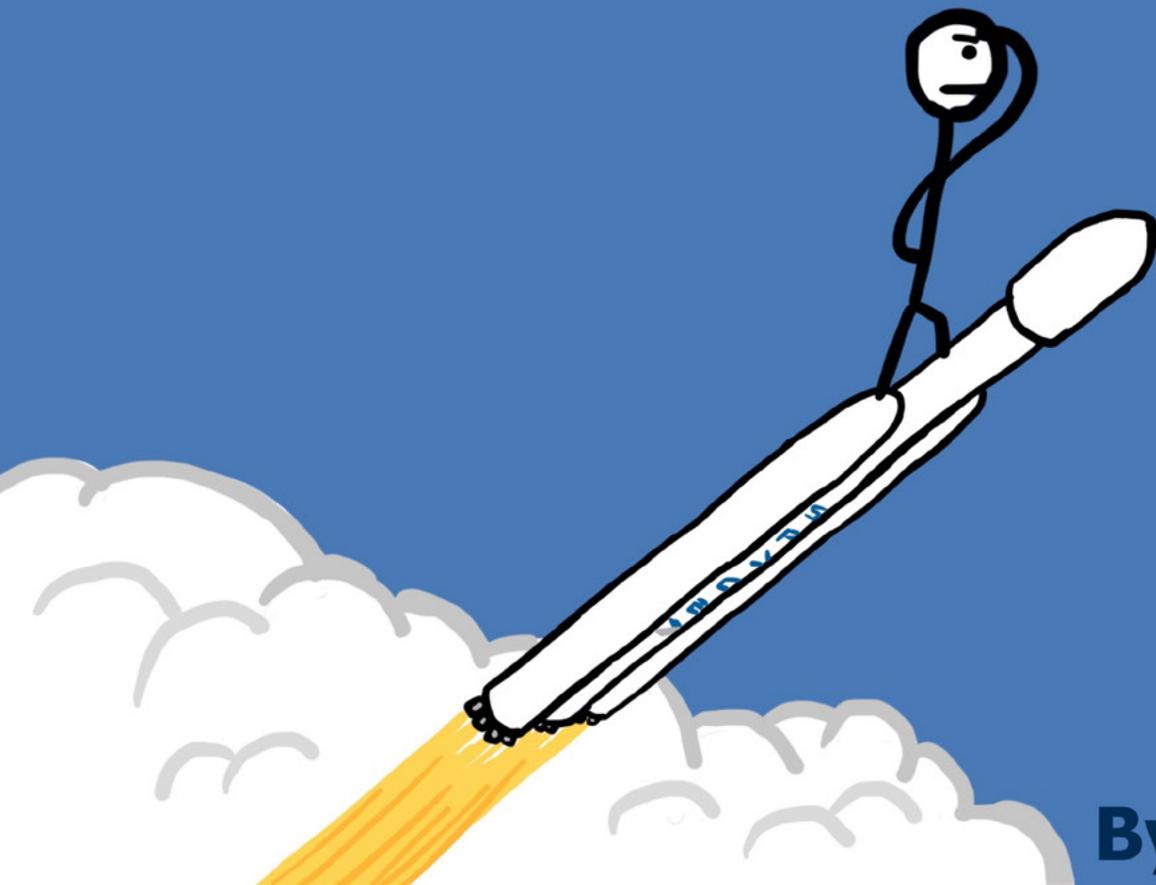




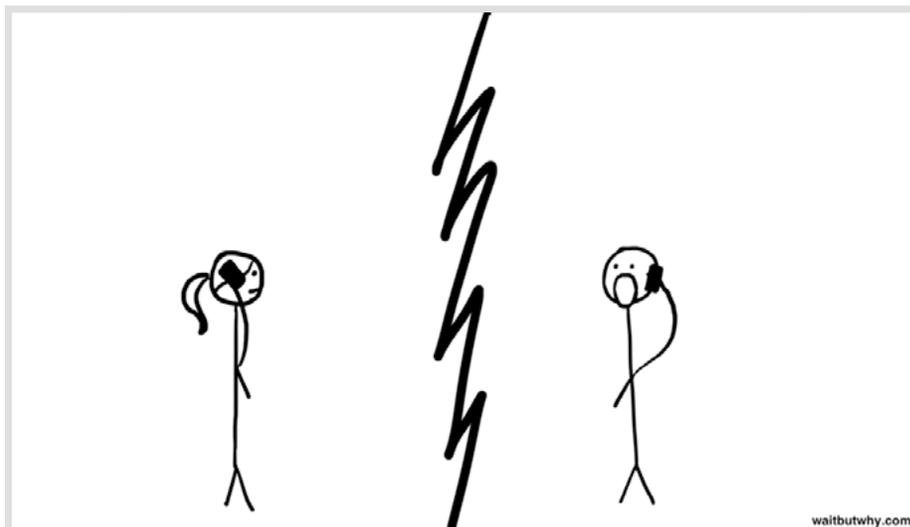
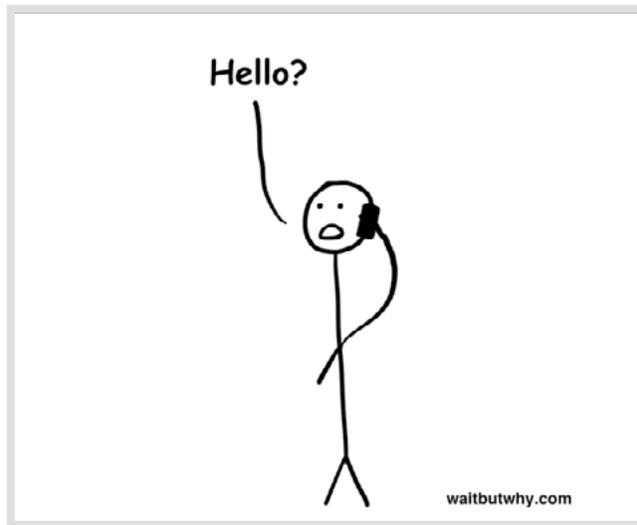
WAIT BUT WHY

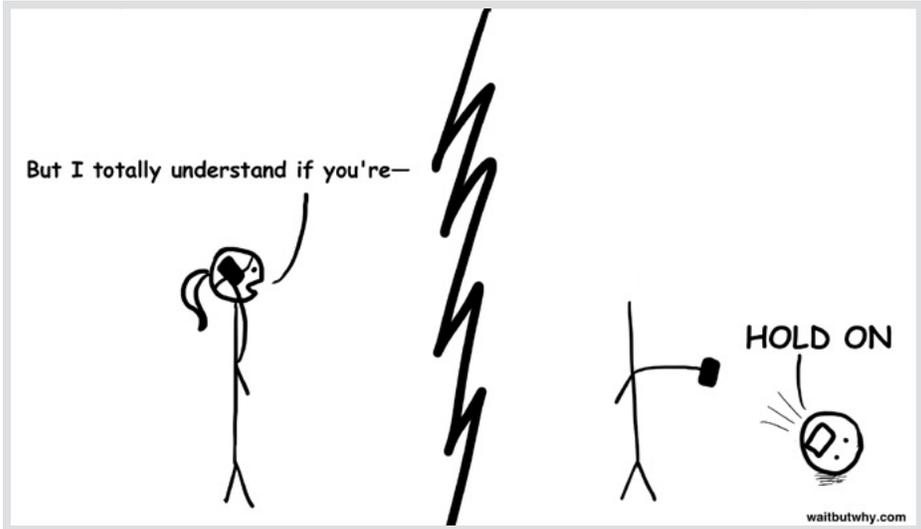
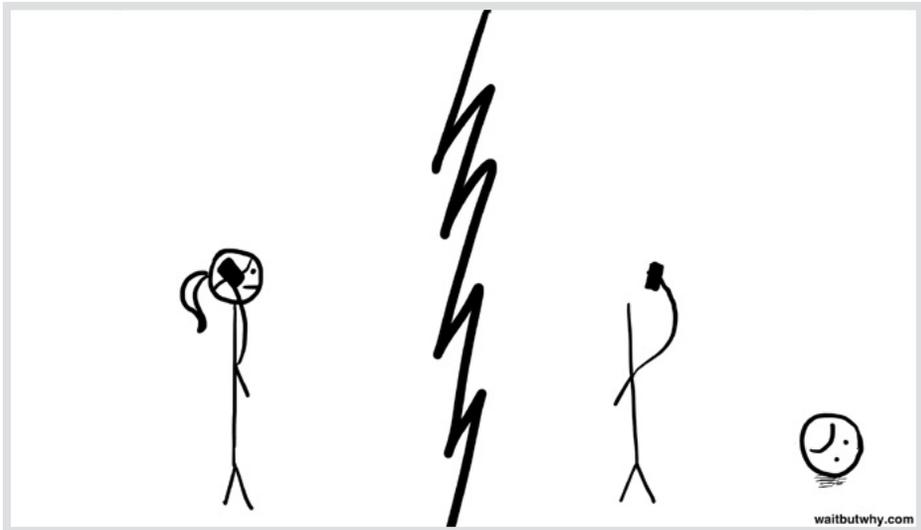
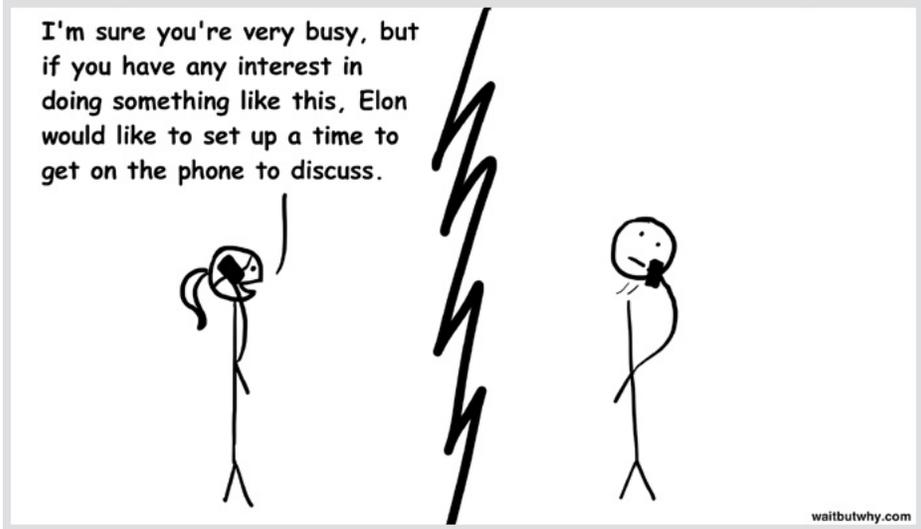
Elon Musk: The World's Radddest Man

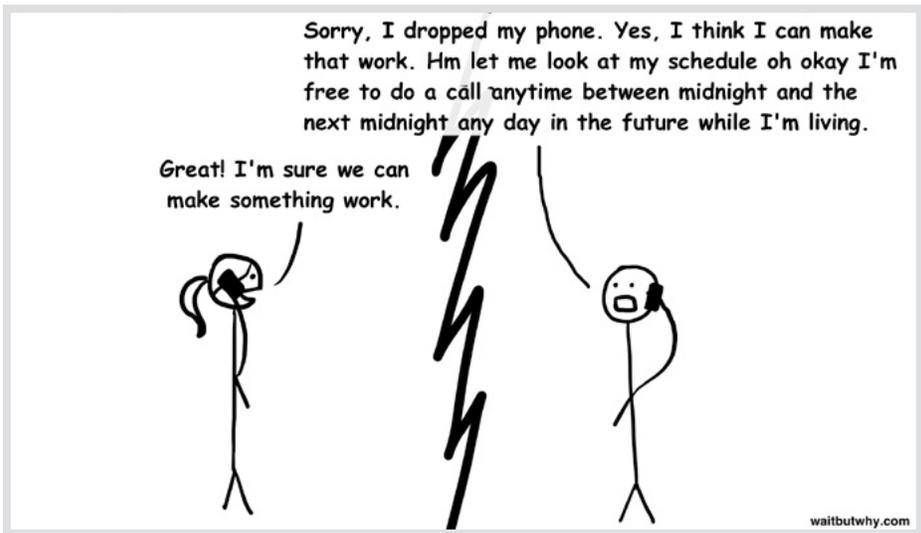
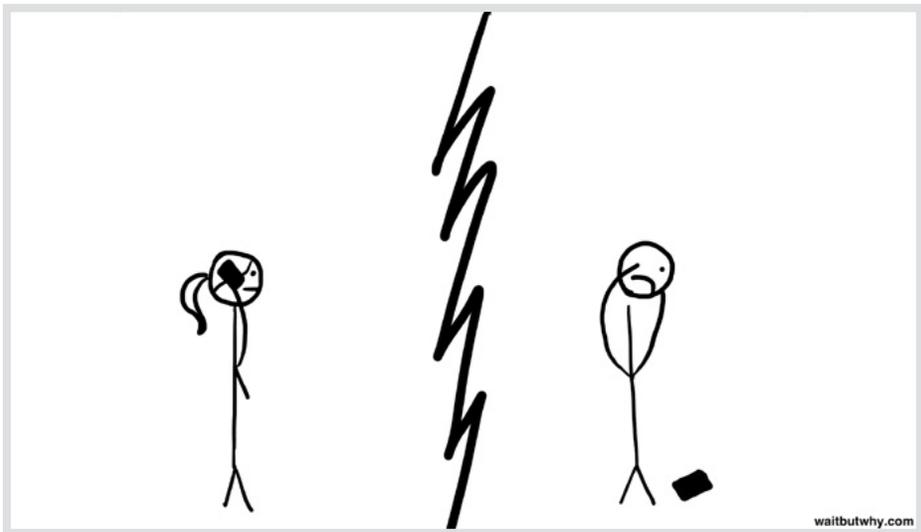
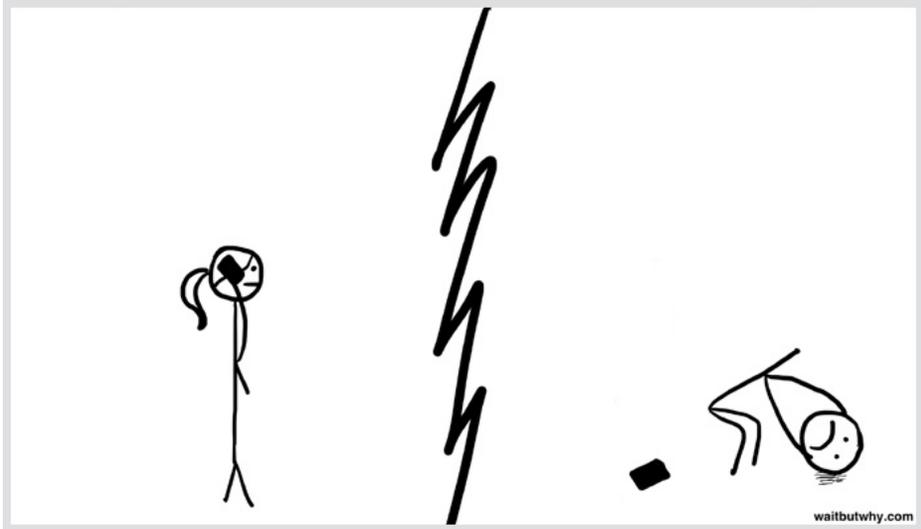


By Tim Urban

Last month, I got a surprising phone call.







Elon Musk, for those unfamiliar, is the world's raddest man.



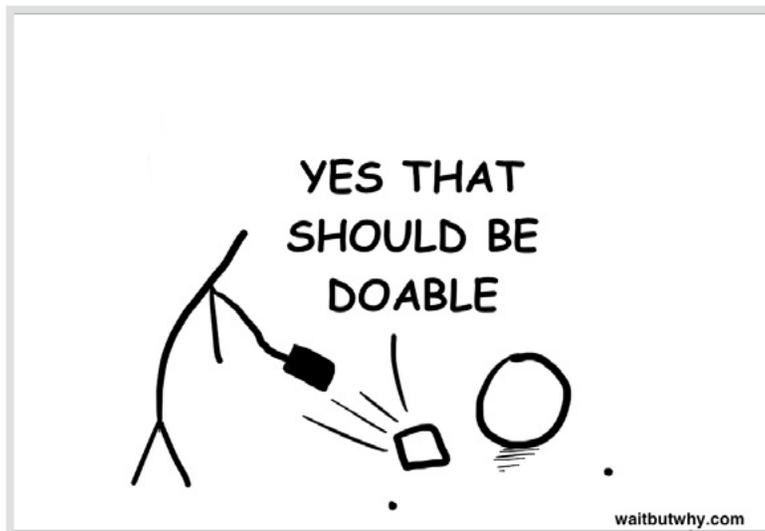
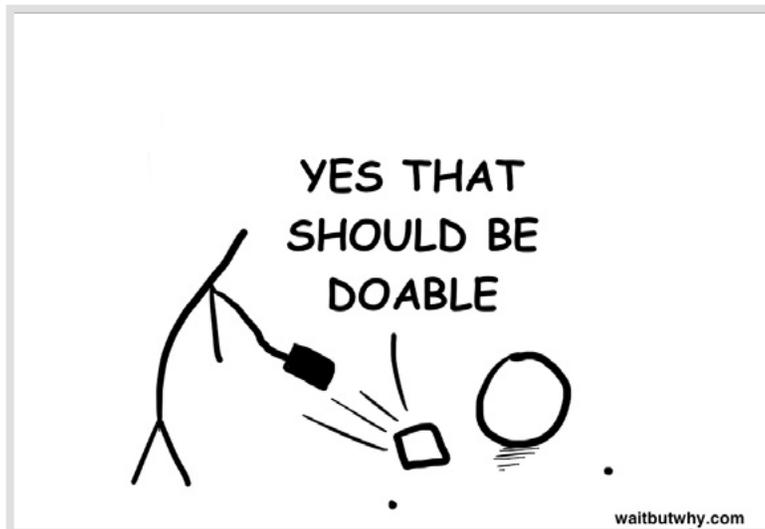
I'll use this post to explore how he became a self-made billionaire and the real-life inspiration for *Iron Man's* Tony Stark, but for the moment, I'll let Richard Branson explain things briefly:¹

Whatever skeptics have said can't be done, Elon has gone out and made real. Remember in the 1990s, when we would call strangers and give them our credit-card numbers? Elon dreamed up a little thing called PayPal. His Tesla Motors and SolarCity companies are making a clean, renewable-energy future a reality...his SpaceX [is] reopening space for exploration...it's a paradox that Elon is working to improve our planet at the same time he's building spacecraft to help us leave it.

So no, that was not a phone call I had been expecting.

A few days later, I found myself in pajama pants, pacing frantically around my apartment, on the phone with Elon Musk. We had a discussion about Tesla, SpaceX, the automotive and aerospace and solar power industries, and he told me what he thought confused people about each of these things. He suggested that if these were topics I'd be interested in writing about, and it might be helpful, I could come out to California and sit down with him in person for a longer discussion.

¹ <http://time100.time.com/2013/04/18/time-100/slide/elon-musk/>



For me, this project was one of the biggest no-brainers in history. Not just because Elon Musk is Elon Musk, but because here are two *separate* items that have been sitting for a while in my “Future Post Topics” document, verbatim:

- “electric vs hybrid vs gas cars, deal with tesla, sustainable energy”
- “spacex, musk, mars?? how learn to do rockets??”

I already wanted to write about these topics, for the same reason **I wrote** about Artificial Intelligence—I knew they would be hugely important in the future but that I also didn’t understand them well enough. And Musk is leading a revolution in both of these worlds.

It would be like if you had plans to write about the process of throwing lightning bolts and then one day out of the blue Zeus called and asked if you wanted to question him about a lot of stuff.

So it was on. The plan was that I'd come out to California, see the Tesla and SpaceX factories, meet with some of the engineers at each company, and have an extended sit down with Musk. *Exciting.*

The first order of business was to have a full panic. I needed to not sit down with these people—these world-class engineers and rocket scientists—and know almost nothing about anything. I had a lot of quick learning to do.

The problem with Elon Fucking Musk, though, is that he happens to be involved in *all* of the following industries:

- Automotive
- Aerospace
- Solar Energy
- Energy Storage
- Satellite
- High-Speed Ground Transportation
- And, um, Multi-Planetary Expansion

Zeus would have been less stressful.

So I spent the two weeks leading up to the West Coast visit reading and reading and reading, and it became quickly clear that this was gonna need to be a multi-post series. There's a *lot* to get into.

We'll dive deep into Musk's companies and the industries surrounding them in the coming posts, but today, let's start by going over exactly who this dude is and why he's such a big deal. ²

THE MAKING OF ELON MUSK

Note: There's a great biography on Musk coming out May 19th, written by tech writer Ashlee Vance. I was able to get an advance copy, and it's been a key source in putting together these posts. I'm going to keep to a brief overview of his life here—if you want the full story, [get the bio](#).

Musk was born in 1971 in South Africa. Childhood wasn't a great time for him—he had a tough family life and never fit in well at school.¹ But, like you often read in the bios of extraordinary people, he was an avid self-learner early on. His brother Kimbal has said Elon would often read for 10 hours a

1

He was badly bullied in his early teens, including one particularly traumatic incident in which a group of guys who constantly picked on Elon attacked him in full force one day, pushing him down a flight of stairs and then beating him unconscious. He has breathing problems to this day because of the injuries.

² Orange footnotes are just for sources. Only bother with these if you want to see the source of a quote or fact or read more about the topic.