



THE CONTOURS OF THE VENTURE-VERSE

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At the 2012 San Diego Comic-Con International, [Doc Hammer](#) referred to the setting of his and [Jackson Publick](#)'s creation as the Venture-Verse. Defined as a unified object in this way, this setting begs certain questions. How does it relate to the settings it parodies and references? How do the recastings of various different media within it interact with one another? What does it mean for Thaddeus Venture and Jonny Quest both to exist in the same universe? And finally, as it continues to expand significantly in each episode, when will the Venture-Verse brush up against natural boundaries and what will those look like? Hammer and Publick have described their creation's themes as "the beauty of failure" and "the death of the jet-age promises" ("Home Insecurity," Commentary). This latter postmodern theme affords us a starting point from which to begin answering these questions. If *Jonny Quest* and *Scooby-Doo*, and to a lesser extent the whole corpus of Hanna-Barbera productions and Silver Age comics, form the US' idealized image of itself and its future, then the Venture-Verse is a referendum on that image.

This essay's three sections will tackle the first three questions put forth above – concerning the settings that inspired the Venture-Verse, the dynamic between those two major settings, and interactions between original "jet-age" characters and their parodies created by Publick and Hammer. Its conclusion will attempt some predictions about the shape of the Venture-Verse to come. Essentially, it will make the case that the parodies who most resemble their original characters form one natural "boundary" to the Venture-Verse, and the Guild of Calamitous Intent another.

Wiping a Shit-Eating Grin onto Mount Rushmore

The primary barrier separating *The Venture Bros.* from its source material is the transition from modernity to postmodernity. That barrier is a fuzzy line at best, but sociologist Robert Keel and others peg the US as having crossed it with the demolition of the St. Louis Pruitt-Igoe housing projects, throughout the years 1972-76 ([Pruitt-Igoe and the End of Modernity](#)). These buildings were considered a marvel of modern engineering, including prominently its ability to bring vast resources to bear via hierarchical modes of organization. They were a modern world wonder, and it was hoped that they would harken the end of abject poverty in the United States. Instead, they bore all the characteristics of living spaces designed by people totally disconnected from those for whom they were designed. Crime and drug abuse ran rampant in them, and corners cut during their initial construction cost the State of Missouri untold millions as the years bore on. Agrarian studies scholar James C. Scott has described dozens of similar rude awakenings in *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. His examples are truly global, including the utopian planned cities of Brasilia and Magnetogorsk, and such utterly failed agricultural reforms as Tanzania's ujamaa villagization campaign and China's Great Leap Forward.

The settings gradually accreted by Hanna-Barbera's, Marvel's, and DC's myriad writers throughout the 50s and 60s were also utopian projects. These visions of the past, present, and future had very little overarching system to unify them in any logical way, but each had its own unique willful ignorance that pervaded every character, every situation, and every

moral intended for conveyance. These worlds were without systematic oppression. In them, the powerful deserved to be powerful, and the weak could count on their national governments – or even on the kindness of strangers – for protection. Drug abuse, pedophilia, sociopathy, blinding national pride, unforgivable but socially acceptable violence, and a host of other inadequacies in the human condition were all absent from this American self-image doled out to the children of World War II veterans.

These very same human habits are *The Venture Bros.*' bread and butter. In some respects it inverts its subject matter, and in others all it does is fill in glaringly obvious gaps. How *did* Benton Quest keep his fortune restocked even while spending it in fits that would make the International Atomic Energy Agency blush? Implicitly, US taxpayers footed his bills by buying the products of his intellect for purposes of their own national defense. Hence Thaddeus Venture makes his money the same way, but with an air of fear and desperation we all find more familiar than Dr. Quest's easy living, and with bloodthirsty raving military officers as intermediaries between him and his source of funds. Where *did* The Mystery Gang get its food, and was their only reliable source of shelter really The Mystery Machine? *The Venture Bros.* answers with a resounding, "Drugs kept their appetites suppressed," and a resigned, "How could they afford anything else?" The whole problem of their lifestyle is both answered and turned on its head by the following exchange in the episode "[¡Viva los Muertos!](#)," between Fred analogue Ted and Daphne analogue Patty.

Patty: Ted, you said I could see my parents.

Ted: This was on the way, Patty.

Patty: We've been driving to my parents' house for ten years. You promised.

Ted: Patty, being out of your box isn't a right, it's a *privilege*. You don't want to go back in your box do you?

Here Scooby's pals are pulled out of the past and filled out by the addition of abuse and power relations, which all of us experience in a less hyperbolic form than this, and which *Scooby-Doo's* original viewers were meant not to expect in their adult lives and in the utopian future of their society.

The Plucky Teenage Detective and the Hyper-Intelligent Evil Gorilla

These two sources of inspiration for *The Venture Bros.* – Silver Age comics and the Hanna-Barbera corpus – have a similar utopian strain, but other than that do not much resemble one another. The Hanna-Barbera canon was a world of do-gooders and no-goodniks, whereas even amidst the innocence of the Silver Age, comics had a noticeably more mature subject matter. People were killed in them, some of the world's evils were recognized, and something akin to real struggle was required for the good guy to come out on top. In addition, calling either of these settings a canon, or even a contained and organized setting, is an exaggeration. Characters from one show or comic would have cameos in another, crossovers and spinoffs would be created, but no one was really ensuring that it was all coherent or consistent. So how, within *The Venture*

Bros., do the parodies of these two dissimilar settings interact?

In [an interview with libertarian rag Reason.com](#), Publick laid out *The Venture Bros.*' division of labor:

Doc Hammer came up with the Guild [of Calamitous Intent]. I avoided creating something like that just because I had written *The Tick*, which was a superhero parody show, and we came up with reasons for these villains to do what they do. That is the more superheroish side of our show, of *The Venture Brothers*. Doc comes in at that exact angle: Why the hell do these idiots do this stuff?

Hammer and Publick, then, each specialize in parodying one of the two main sources of material for *The Venture Bros.* Publick created the show as a response and update to Hanna-Barbera style cartoons, along with the *Hardy Boys* series and other such pulp fiction, and Hammer added to the show its superhero flair.

The show has three organizations that mirror groups in comic books: The Office of Secret Intelligence or O.S.I., based both on Marvel's S.H.I.E.L.D. and on *G.I. Joe*; the Guild of Calamitous Intent, which draws on inspiration from a host of villainous supergroups in comics, like HYDRA and the Secret Society of Supervillains/Legion of Doom/Injustice League; and Impossible Industries, the vehicle for billionaire super-genius Richard Impossible that very much resembles the corporate resources at Reed Richards', A.K.A. Mr. Fantastic's, disposal.

The first and last of these organizations are heroic and thus darker than those they are based on, much in the same way The Mystery Gang are. O.S.I. manipulates the American government and tortures agents of Sphinx. Reed Richards' habits of ignoring his family and lording over other heroes are ballooned out into pathological traits – until he becomes a full-fledged villain. Costumed heroes throughout the Venture-Verse receive something of a *Watchmen* treatment, with their violent double lives, false promises, and deep-seated psychological problems on prominent display. The Guild, on the other hand, is a characteristically tame and limited version of megalomaniacal comic book groups.

In another sense, the Guild does not resemble anything in comics, and this is a feature that can actually distinguish the shape of this setting from those it bases itself on. The Guild is beneath and behind more familiar villains and groups of villains, regulating them and implicitly doing so in concert with the O.S.I. By its presence, the Venture-Verse is in many respects deeper and wider than any comic book setting. It serves both as a longrunning comment on such settings, and as a guess as to how the characters that populate them could ever function in the real world. At its simplest, the Guild is an answer not to the question Publick poses above, but to its corollary, "*How do these idiots do this stuff?*" More abstractly, it forms one boundary to the Venture-Verse by placing supervillains in a slightly more believable and systematic world than comic books and cartoons exist in.

Other characters who act alone or in small groups and are not deeply entrenched in a wider organization – like Dr. Byron

Orpheus, his ally Jefferson Twilight, or "[Bright Lights, Dean City's](#)" Brown Widow – have a more purely comic role. Neither is meant to convey all that deep an observation on the well-loved characters Dr. Strange or Spider-Man; for the most part Publick and Hammer just mine those characters' bodies of literature for jokes. In Twilight's case, they mine the small body of literature surrounding the Marvel character Blade.

The Existential Horror of Meeting One's Own Doppelganger

All of this would make for a rather straightforward premise if not for the complications Publick and Hammer continuously add to the show. From the second half of season one onward, actual Hanna-Barbera characters begin to appear. Brock Samson meets Race Bannon, Jonas Venture Jr. meets a very adult Jonny Quest, and Thaddeus Venture goes into boy hero group therapy with him and the Hardy Boys. Though Brock Samson states that the boys' face-to-face encounter with their own clones sends them into "some kind of saw-your-own-clone coma," these other equally identity-defying meetings don't seem to test the defied identities of their participants ("[¡Viva los Muertos!](#)"). These characters are much closer and more particular parodies than the show's main cast, and can be thought of as a natural boundary to the Venture-Verse, in that no character can legally resemble one outside the setting any more than these do.

Race Bannon first appears in one the show's high-paced and mildly surreal opening gambits, that precluding the episode "[Ice Station Impossible!](#)" He succeeds at escaping a plane full of Nat King Cobra's henchmen and leaving a grenade in it, only to have its wing hit him on the way down. His parachute lands

him safely on a suburban block, where children unceremoniously play with his body and spy gadgets, but he still dies of his injuries soon after Brock Samson and the boys discover him there. As a first-season event this is significant: within moments of seeing an original Hanna-Barbera character for the first time, we watch him treated utterly without dignity by children, and then listen to his parody speak of having worked with him, and finally watch the boys' faces twist with disgust when his bowels unclench at the moment of death. In a later flashback, Bannon is depicted cleaning himself up after some casual and brutal torture of a Sphinx agent (["The Invisible Hand of Fate"](#))

Between Bannon and Brock Samson, as it were, stand a whole slew of characters who are depicted as literally being adult versions of the characters they parody, who are much more similar to those characters than Richard Impossible or Byron Orpheus are to those they parody, and who likewise have much more similar names. From *Jonny Quest* come Action Jonny, Radji, and Dr. Z, standing in for Jonny himself, Hadji, and Dr. Zin, respectively. From the *Hardy Boys* series come Dale and Lance Hale. Jonny is a sort of washed-up child star whose daddy issues and pill addictions dwarf those of Thaddeus Venture. Radji is seen only once, working in a call center for Jonas Venture, Jr. and hosting Jonny at his house against his wife's wishes (["The Doctor is Sin"](#)). Dr. Z appears in several episodes that feature Jonny, and like many a villain in *The Venture Bros.*, seems to have a much happier life and to understand the performative nature of the "arching" lifestyle much better than heroes tend to. Lance and Dale Hale, voiced expertly by Seth Green and Jon Hodgman respectively, attend

one "boy adventurer group therapy" with Thaddeus, Jonny, Captain Sunshine's former ward Wonderboy, and the enigmatic Ro-Boy. Characteristic of heroes in *The Venture Bros.*, Lance and Dale hate each other, aren't any good at sleuthing or fighting, and had so unhealthy a childhood that Lance is implied to have murdered their father ("[Self-Medication](#)").

All of these characters other than Dr. Z share a dysfunctionality that surpasses most of the more conventional parody characters on *The Venture Bros.*, but this is generally true of heroes on the show compared to villains. Aside from their dark undersides, all of them – and most especially Race Bannon – are so similar to the characters they parody that no character could legally resemble them more than these do and be featured in the show. This makes them another natural boundary, in a different way than the Guild of Calamitous Intent.

We can conclude from these investigations that no new characters will be introduced to the show who are closer to those they parody than Race Bannon's is. We can also conclude that any villains introduced who do not willingly accept Guild restrictions – the type that Sphinx supposedly specializes in combating, even though none have been focused upon as yet – will be more realistic than any that have so far been introduced. Finally, it's worth anticipating that the Guild vs. O.S.I. superstructure, in any case, will not be abandoned or overcome throughout the show.

The very notion of characters who do not endorse 50s and 60s American morality overcoming those who do, and of the latter

being shown up as shallow, dishonest, or naive, pervades the show and will certainly continue to do so. This relationship to *The Venture Bros.*' parodied material may not be as close to the heart of the show as many realize, however. Some fans may be surprised to learn that, in [that same Reason.com interview](#), Publick stated that *The Venture Bros.* is

me voicing my disappointment that we don't have that kind of magic going on any more, that level of enthusiasm and hope. That extends to the kind of cultural stuff that was going on in the 60s, a youthful generation thinking they could change the world. I'm voicing my displeasure at having been born in a time when some of that magic, for lack of a better word, is gone, and some of those promises that were made in all of our pop culture were never met.

If he's displeased that we no longer act like we did in the heady early days of the Baby Boom era, why do he and Hammer consistently punish characters who seem to – like General Treister, one-time head of O.S.I., and the writers' distinct rendition of Race Bannon? It's a question they'll have to answer at the next convention's installment of "Let's All Smoking."