



"PAPA SMURF HAS A F****ING BEARD":
VENTURE BROS AS FAN THEORY

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Narrative as Logical Calculus

Universes developed in fictional narratives embed within them an implicit logical calculus: an underlying system of rules and assumed axioms about how that imaginary space operates.

There is nothing mystical about this assertion. In order to make a narrative communicative and cognizable to an audience, the author needs to provide some consistent ruleset for the narrative to stand on from one fictional moment to the next.

This is not to say that the fundamental logical calculus of a narrative must be static, or wooden in its application. The wide scope of narrative fiction embraces an entire spectrum of more or less volatile calculii.

Sitcom television (see, e.g. *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, the *US Office*) lies on one end of this spectrum, in which the rules of the game change infrequently, if ever at all. Each episode is simply an expression that operates within the bounds of the axioms and formal rules that are fixed at the inception of the fictional universe. No matter how wacky the antic or dire the straits, the characters return to their initial positions again before the curtain goes up on the subsequent episode.

To the middle of the spectrum lies fictional universes operating with a defined narrative arc. Movies -- with their limited time to tell a complete, self-contained story -- often permit significantly higher variance in their narrative calculus. The villain is the protagonist's father, the goofy bookshop owner marries the famous celebrity, the dinosaurs escape from their

cages, and so on. Despite these changes, some aspects of the scenario described remain fixed over the course of the story.

At the furthest other end of the spectrum are highly unstable imaginary spaces, in which the entire underlying formal calculus is changing from moment to moment. Surrealist works capture this space, aggressively undermining the efforts of the audience to place the events described into a sensible order.

The short paper explores this general concept to understand the phenomena of the *fan theory* and -- specifically -- its application as a key to understanding what is going on underneath the surface of Adult Swim's *The Venture Bros.*

Fan Theory in the Calculus

An individual narrative story only ever reveals one possible manifestation of its underlying set of rules. It is, to wit, an *incomplete* manifestation of the underlying narrative ruleset. The frame of the text (or, in the case of film or television, the literal frame of the screen) limits the audience to only seeing the particular story the author permits the audience to see.

However, any given narrative calculus makes possible any number of stories, far more than the original author might contemplate or have energy to even complete. Fan fiction appropriates these rulesets to tell entirely new stories entirely encapsulated within the imaginary space that the original narrative takes place in. In short, fan fiction explores the creative and narrative space made possible by a given set of assumptions and axioms.

The aim of the *fan theory* is quite different. Rather than constructing new expressions with a given ruleset, the fan theory aims to compute the logical outcomes of the axioms and rules of the imaginary space itself. Rather than exploring the narrative space that operates under the aegis of the rules as in fan fiction, the purpose is to provide a more complete theoretical description of the underlying ruleset that makes those stories possible. It also may provide alternative rules consistent with and running parallel with the plotline that may give an entirely different interpretation to the events of a given storyline.

The results of this analysis can be quite surprising, of course, because the obvious fact is that these imaginary universes are just that, imaginary. The universes they create are mere stage sets designed to work for the purposes of the narrative. There is no demand that the underlying rules or axioms governing the fiction be fully functional in all respects. Quite the opposite, the attempt to "complete" these rulesets often leads to the finding that the assumptions about the fictional universe are ultimately conflicting and incoherent.

In the very least, this analysis may necessitate certain conclusions that seem absurd in order to "fix" the functioning of the imaginary space described in a narrative. The fan theory process reveals the cracks in the sets of assumptions that make a fictional story momentarily believable for the duration of the novel, film, or episode.

A Taxonomy of the Fan Theory

This preceding description is a bit abstract. Fan theories come in a variety of different flavors. We attempt a basic taxonomy below to clarify:

- Fan theories can be *atomistic*, that is, they limit themselves to the set of rules embedded within a given story or series of stories created by an author. The scope of the fan theory simply attempts to understand in more depth a single imaginary space. These theories include, for instance, [the theory that the character of Totoro in My Neighbor Totoro is, in fact, the Angel of Death](#). It might also include the theory that the character of [Ferris Bueller in Ferris Bueller's Day Off is a mere figment of the protagonist Cameron's mind](#).
- At the other end of the spectrum, fan theories can be *unifying*, in the sense that they create a framework that allows multiple imaginary universes from multiple authors to exist under the aegis of a single underlying ruleset. Most notable here is [the Tommy Westphall Universe theory](#), which argues that the ending of the 1980s medical drama *St. Elsewhere* suggests that all the characters from that show were simply imagined events from the autistic mind of Tommy Westphall, a character in the show. And, since the characters from *St. Elsewhere* appeared on other shows, it suggests that those universes are in turn in the imagination of Tommy Westphall, as well. At last count, the theory links together 282 television shows over the last three decades. Similar theories linking smaller sets of universes also include the concept that the Cartoon

Network's [Samurai Jack and The Powerpuff Girls exist within the same universe.](#)

- Another way of differentiating fan theories is by the outcome of the theory. Fan theories can engage in a *deductive* reasoning process. That is, they reason from broad general principles towards identifying specific facts within a fictional universe that are never explicitly revealed within a narrative. One theory, for instance, argues that [the parents in Toy Story are divorced or separated](#) based on sets of specific incidents that take place over the series of movies. It also includes the [theory that the Disney movie "Aladdin" takes place far in the future.](#)
- Fan theories may also operate *inductively*. That is, they work from specific instances in order to come to broad overarching general propositions about the state of a fictional universe. This includes such theories as, for example, [the concept that the eponymous cat in the Garfield comics has been dying since 1989](#) based on a series of comics from that period. It also includes theories that [the point of the Jedi order is to die in front of Luke Skywalker](#), that Smurfs are Krishna propaganda (from Linklater's *Slacker*) or [communist metaphor](#), that [Oz is a metaphor for the gold standard battle](#), that [James Bond is a codename and not actually a person](#), or that [R2-D2 was a long-standing rebel spy.](#)

Venture Bros as Unifying Fan Theory

Against the backdrop of fan theory, *Venture Bros* is a unique entity -- an evolving narrative calculus existing not as its own static exposition in the form of a nerdy blog post or message board discussion, but taking the form of an episodic television show.

Venture Bros plays out as ambitiously unifying fan theory. While the obvious reference point of the show is *Jonny Quest*, the life of the show swallows up a vast swath of popular culture -- fictional and real -- from the 1960s and 1970s. The numerous *Jonny Quest* references exist alongside an equally vibrant universe of linkages to *The Fantastic Four*, Led Zeppelin, *Scooby Doo*, Cobra Command, Hunter S. Thompson, the Hardy Boys, and David Bowie, to name just a few.

But these are more than just mere parodies and one-off references. The show attempts to develop an imaginary space in which all these different popular culture narratives can feasibly exist within the same universe. As a result, the show becomes an engine for fan theoretical deduction: each episode endlessly churns out the logical implications of individual fictional universes.

For example, the episode "Viva Los Muertos" reveals *Scooby Doo's* Mystery Machine shambling onwards decades after the original show, its members burned-out versions of their former selves. "What Goes Down Must Come Up" reveals that a sufficiently expansive super-science laboratory would contain large unused portions entirely forgotten by its owners.

The Venture Bros. is also engaged in working out the implications of having these universes work in parallel as well. Making such a broad body of popular culture "work" within a single imaginary universe cannot be done using the canon itself. Creating a coherent narrative calculus necessitates all sorts of innovations on the part of the show's creators. A system of permitting and regulated villainy in the form of the Guild of Calamitous Intent, for instance, allows for and explains the existence of such stable pairings of hero-villain rivalries seen in old Hanna-Barbera cartoons. "Powerless in the Face of Death" deduces that a father would feel comfortable taking his children on *Jonny Quest*-style super-science adventures only if his children were also fungible, easily recovered clones.

Inevitably, these innovations spawn numerous implications of their own, such that *Venture Bros* after some time even becomes a fan theory of itself. This happens on the smallest level -- the "H" tattooed on Sergeant Hatred's face turns out in later episodes to be part of a full "HATRED" tattoo running down the length of his chest. It also stretches to the most expansive levels, such as the later-revealed plot point that all the major characters attended college at the same time.

As the show attempts to work out the implications of such a universe, the characters are similarly wrapped up in efforts of their own to understand the fictional world constructed around them. In addition to dealing with collisions with characters from other popular culture canons (and the resulting explosions) that face them, they are often seen debating and probing the very cultural fabric that makes up the universe of the show.

To that end, the show is at once a fan theory, but is also a show about fan theorists as well. The show often diverts to show the characters arguing over these finer points. Henchmen 21 and 24 debate the possibility that Smurfs are egg-laying reptiles in "Are You There God? It's Me, Dean." Doctor Orpheus off-handedly notes the issue that Aquaman has no secret identity in "Fallen Arches." And, "Return to Malice" features an argument over whether purported sea monsters Nessie or Champ would win in a fight. Claims over the relative merits of music albums appear incongruously in "Showdown at Cremation Creek (Part II)" (over the David Bowie discography) and "I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings" (over the Led Zeppelin canon).

The Epic Challenge of the Very Mundane

As unifying fan theory, *The Venture Bros* is insatiable, ingesting so much popular culture from a period that the scope of the show rapidly embraces the whole of the period. To that end, *Venture Bros* might be argued to be more a fan theory about the 1960s and 1970s writ large, rather than a fan theory about any given set of fictional universes.

To that end, what emerges from the *Venture Bros* is counterintuitive. The show imports all the expressions of epic and iconic narrative. We have super-science, super-powers, super-villains, super-heroes, and fantastic adventures in wild exotic settings (and time periods).

However, in attempting to unite all these elements successfully into a coherent fictional universe, the *Venture Bros* seems to find that the only underlying calculus of rules and axioms that "work" are ones that leave all these heroic elements a

pathetically poor fit for the mundane problems they face. "Are You There, God? It's Me, Dean" - begins with a thrilling adventure with Grover Cleveland's Time Machine, and spends the remainder of the episode facing off against testicular torsion. "Escape to the House of Mummies (Part II)" begins with a parallel universe crossing adventure, but spends most of the time in a petty debate between science and sorcery. Earlier episodes set up a mysterious backstory to Billy Quizboy's mechanical hand, and "The Invisible Hand of Fate" reveals it to be the result of a botched entry into a dogfight. And so on.

In all these cases, the massive might of technology and the individual talents of all the characters face off against comparatively minor and mundane problems. As the two-episode "Showdown at Cremation Creek" shows for the present, and "Now Museum - Now You Don't" shows for the "past history" of the *Venture*-verse, the characters are still quite epic when they conflict with one another. They are interoperable with the mega-conflicts of the world of heroes and villains, but non-functional when it confronts the world of tiny problems. In fact, often the only way the characters of the *Venture Bros* can solve (or, simply deal with) the mundane problems is by making them into problems more consistent with the epic fictional universes they hail from. "Tag Sale - You're It" - begins with Doctor Venture attempting to hold a simple tag sale, but ends with a hail of bullets and complete implosion.

This makes sense: these superhero worlds that are unified through the fan-theory-as-universe of the *Venture Bros* are specialized tools, designed for resolving epic conflicts and problems. The only place to run -- the only challenges that

would provide a driving narrative arc in a universe chock-full of these types of characters and settings -- would be the mundane challenges that strike at the blind spot of these imaginary universes.

This is fan theory as induction. As *Venture Bros* engages in a multi-season attempt to "solve for" a universe sufficient to encompass all the heroic and showy elements of 1960s and 1970s television and music, the universe that emerges as a logical consequence is the dusty, obsolete wreck of the Venture Compound. Mundane problems, like the problems of time and aging and just basic neuroses about things, become the ultimate threat.