



**"I'M NOT A BOY ADVENTURER ANYMORE":
SUCCESS AND 'FAILURE' IN THE VENTURE BROS**

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Jackson Publick and Doc Hammer, co-creators of the Venture Bros., both describe it as being a show "about failure." In recorded DVD commentary, Publick describes the "big picture" failure of the technological utopianism of 60s pop culture – "the death of the jet-age promises."¹ Hammer's take is more granular and character-driven: "It's about the beauty of failure. It's about that failure that happens to all of us."²

The Venture Bros. is also an homage to, and parody of, the 60s action-adventure cartoon Jonny Quest. More than any other adventure series, Jonny Quest provides the structural framework on which The Venture Bros. is built. This second theme is the key to understanding the ways in which the show is not about failure, but success.

The thing that always struck me about *Jonny Quest* is: What kind of parent brings his kid to the Amazon so that yetis can throw boulders at him? We were playing with that, that kind of callous disregard for proper parenting in the name of the pursuit of science.³

From the start, The Venture Bros. re-cast the Jonny Quest trope, most significantly by fleshing out the character of Doctor Thaddeus S. "Rusty" Venture. In the show's opening credits, the Venture family sits in the cockpit of their

¹ Commentary for Season 1, Episode 7 (*Home Insecurity*) available at http://www.asitecalledfred.com/quickcasts/venture_bros_1x07_lost_commentary.mp3

² *Id.*

³ Reason.com, interview with Jackson Publick (April 17, 2007).

jet, the X-1, in an image directly taken from the intro credits to *Jonny Quest*, with Doc in the place of Jonny's father, Dr. Benton Quest. But Doctor Venture (Doc) is also Rusty Venture, Boy Adventurer – his own father, Dr. Jonas Venture, played the Benton Quest role a generation earlier, shepherding his son around the world for adventures that were adapted into a Rusty Venture cartoon show. Doc is a former child star in the world of superscience, and the experience left deep psychological scars.

However, the Venture Bros. universe also crosses over explicitly with the world of *Jonny Quest*.⁴ In *Twenty Years to Midnight* (S2E05, 2006), we meet Action Jonny, the Venture-verse's *Jonny Quest*. Action Jonny, like Doc, is now middle-aged (he describes himself as being older than Doc in the season 4 episode *Self-Medication*) and fatherless. Jonny, like Doc, spent his childhood as a famous boy adventurer. The show thus has two "Jonny Quest" types. Comparing them, it is clear that when Hammer and Publick call Doc a "failure," they are considering a very specific aspect of his nature.

Doctor Venture

Doc is initially introduced to the audience as Hank and Dean Venture's father. Hank and Dean, Hardy Boys-esque adolescents with a yen for mysteries and adventure, adore their distant, inattentive dad. The boys are kidnapped,

⁴ These occurrences are discussed in greater detail in "The Contours of the Venture-Verse." Bensen, N. *Journal of Venture Studies*. 01.01 (2013).

shot at, tied up, and poisoned – but the real damage seems to be done at home, where their wide-eyed adoration of their father is met with crabby disdain.

The psychological trauma inflicted on Hank and Dean, however, is nothing compared to the picture of Doctor Venture's own childhood that forms over the course of the show's four seasons. Jonas Venture, far more than his son, comes to represent the oblivious cruelty of the Quest family model. By the fourth season, Doc is describing deliberate, spiteful pranks orchestrated by his father in an apparent (and apparently successful) attempt to destroy Rusty's self-esteem.⁵ These revelations, seeded throughout the show's run, give Doc's behaviors context. He is "kind of an asshole, but somebody that you eventually grow to love."⁶

Action Jonny

Action Jonny, on the other hand, is so traumatized by his death-defying, adventuresome childhood that he is barely functional. Locked alone in the Quest family's bathysphere and helplessly addicted to prescription drugs, Jonny screams inarticulately at the slightest mention of his father.⁷

⁵ *Assisted Suicide* ("What happened today was 'like' a nightmare. What happened when I was sixteen? That was my *life*.") (S4E06, 2009).

⁶ The Onion A.V. Club, interview with Jackson Publick (May 30, 2008).

⁷ *Twenty Years to Midnight* (S2E05, 2006).

In a third season episode, Jonny is seen in the background as Rusty's brother, Jonas Venture, Jr. (J.J.), talks on the phone to Hadji, Jonny's former boyhood companion. In a button-down shirt and tie, Hadji explains to J.J. that Jonny "is in a bad way," as Jonny flails about the office in his underpants, shrieking.⁸

Later that season, Doc – always on the lookout for new ways to cash in on his boyhood fame -- organizes a "boy adventurer" themed day camp at his superscience compound and prevails upon a number of his more adventuresome acquaintances to host booths and games at the camp. At the "Meet Action Jonny" attraction, Jonny paces and rants incoherently onstage:

Fathers are caring and protective men,
and I don't have one of those, no, no.
But who cares? Who cares, who cares,
who cares, who cares, who cares... Maybe
I did kill the dog!!! All right? Maybe
I was the lizard man who stole your
precious serum! [screaming] You loved
that serum more than you loved me!
FATHER! FATHER!!!⁹

The Banality of Success

If we look at The Venture Bros. in this way, a completely different thematic structure emerges. Venture Bros. focuses on characters that are good at their jobs. They have friends and family reliably present in their lives.

⁸ *The Doctor is Sin* (S3E02, 2008).

⁹ *The Buddy System* (S3E05).

Doctor Venture, in spite of everyone's insistence that he is a complete disaster as a superscientist, invents a series of functional devices that improve upon or modify the older technology left behind by his father.¹⁰ Doc has his own business and his own family. His sons love him, and their bodyguard Brock Samson, by some time in the show's second season, explicitly describes the Venture family as "my family" and has a warm, if totally insane, relationship with Doc and the boys.

Much of Doc's perceived failure results from his attempts to fill his father's shoes in a postmodern world that no longer pays much attention to superscientists, boy adventurers, and costumed villains. Objectively, comparing him to his most obvious counterpart – Action Jonny – Doc is by no means a failure. He has overcome the alarming trauma of his childhood and emerged more or less intact as a person. He may not be a good man, but he's not a bad one, either.

The definition of failure as a kind of self-reflective inability to live up to one's own admittedly distorted ambitions leaves open another interpretation: that failure is in the mind, and that persistent failure is characterized by nothing so much as an inability to be objective about one's strengths. Failure, as Hammer and Publick use the term, is associated more closely with

¹⁰ Beginning with the Oo Ray in the series pilot, the list of Venture's functioning inventions includes the Joy Can, the Metasonic Locator, Venturestein, the Walking Eye (a personal favorite), Guardo, and, arguably, Hank and Dean themselves.

banality than incapacity. Nowhere is this association more apparent than in Hammer and Publick's description of themselves as failures:

Growing older is all about learning how much everything sucks. Learning how all the magic that you believed in when you were a kid is either explainable, or doesn't exist. Or is stupid.¹¹

Venture's life is a regular success, it's just not a super-scientastic one. Nowhere is this more stark than in the Season 3 episode *The Doctor is Sin*, in which the magical life coach Dr. Henry Killinger shows Doc the way to super-science success – a vision of the life he could have if he switched sides, joined the Guild of Calamitous Intent, and became a supervillain. Doc is oblivious to the direction Killinger's guidance is headed until the last possible moment, and after refusing Killinger's proposal stammers to his bodyguard:

Doc: He... he thinks I'm a... Brock, am I a *bad person*?
Brock: What the hell just happened?
Doc: *Am I, Brock?*¹²

Doc's trauma, his pill addiction, his freaky nightmares – they're the price of his father's fame. When confronted with a similar choice, Doc pulls back. On some level, he's failed again; Killinger's assessment of his suppressed

¹¹ Commentary for Season 1, Episode 7 (*Home Insecurity*) available at http://www.asitecalledfred.com/quickcasts/venture_bros_1x07_lost_commentary.mp3

¹² *The Doctor is Sin* at 20:30 (S3E02, 2008).

anger and jealousy is pretty accurate. Doc has the petulant, callous makings of a supervillain and could be good at it. But on another level, he's passed Killinger's test. Doc is unwilling to destroy the almost-normal existence he's struggled to attain his whole adult life.

"I'm not a boy adventurer any more."¹³

The failure that characterizes Hammer and Publick's creation is the failure of dreams, or ambitions, or pie-in-the-sky promises. It is the failure of adulthood to live up to the dreams of childhood – which is a reasonable interpretation, if you start from the assumption that perpetual childhood is the best anyone can hope for.

A core of ironic truth keeps The Venture Bros. rooted in reality, in spite of its absurdity. Doc feels like a failure because he grew up, but his circumstances are such that growing up makes him anything but a failure. In the words of his creator:

Don't forget that failure isn't the catastrophic end of people—failure is how people learn. ... The way we deal with failure is that people try, and sometimes their attempt is bad but they move on. Sometimes they learn from it, sometimes they repeat it. ... Inside of failure is your only chance for doing anything good.

-- Doc Hammer

¹³ *Self-Medication* (S4E06).