



BILLY'S ROBOTIC HAND:
CREATING A MYTHOLOGY BY ACCIDENT

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Two of the most important recurring characters on *The Venture Bros.* are Billy Quizboy, a hydrocephalic 37-year-old "boy genius", and his friend Pete White, a slacker albino former talk show host. They first appear as rivals to Dr. Thaddeus "Rusty" Venture in *The Terrible Secret of Turtle Bay*, the Flash-animated pilot that aired a year and a half before the first season of the show. The pilot also includes the first appearances of The Monarch, the primary antagonist of the show, and future series regulars Dr. Girlfriend, Professor Impossible, and General Manhowers.¹ These cameos, combined with allusions to off-screen characters who become important later in the series, give the impression that the creators of *The Venture Bros.* had outlined a detailed mythology² and story arc before the series was even greenlighted. The fascinating truth, revealed in DVD commentaries, interviews, and convention appearances, is that Billy Quizboy, Pete White, and even The Monarch were meant to be throwaway characters who never appear again outside of the pilot.

In fact, Pete and Billy are not even given names in the pilot. They are "Albino Scientist" and "Hydrocephalic Child Scientist," human-shaped bundles of visual quirks who wander on stage briefly to deliver a couple of lines in funny voices. (Pete has an exaggerated New England accent,

1 "The Terrible Secret of Turtle Bay." *The Venture Bros.* Adult Swim. N.d. Television.

2 Stories that take place in a setting dramatically different from the real world often have a "mythology," which explains the rules of the world and how it came to be the way that it is. Mythologies are particularly common in stories with science fiction or fantasy elements.

and Billy has a pronounced lateral lisp.) Series creators Doc Hammer and Jackson Publick described the genesis of the characters at San Diego Comic-Con in 2011.

Doc: "These guys [Billy and Pete] really came from the background."

Jackson: "Background guys from the pilot, and we just always wanted to make everybody look as interesting and weird as possible. Oh, what's that guy's story? We'll never know. And then we turn them into main characters. [Laughs]"³

Billy's appearance is a dramatic reflection of this: In addition to being a hydrocephalic dwarf with a lisp, he is missing his left eye, which he covers with an eyepatch, and his left hand and lower arm are robotic. For a walk-on walk-off character, this is a just a bit of visual flair. But when Billy Quizboy became a recurring character, his missing eye and robotic hand became mysteries that viewers wanted to have explained. Taking a look at the mystery of Billy Quizboy's robotic hand will help us understand how *The Venture Bros.* developed an intricate mythology almost by accident, as a natural byproduct of the episode-by-episode writing process.

There have been 55 episodes of *The Venture Bros.* so far, along with three holiday specials. With the exception of Season Two's *iViva Los Muertos!*, written by Ben Edlund, and two early episodes where Edlund receives a story credit, every episode was written entirely by series creators Doc

3 "SDCC 2011: The Venture Bros. Panel." *Adult Swim*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Jan. 2013.

Hammer and Jackson Publick. Doc and Jackson also direct and edit each episode, draw character designs, perform many of the voices on the show, and contribute visual effects and music.⁴ Their creative control over every aspect of *The Venture Bros.* is comparable only to the control Louis C.K. has over *Louie*, another unusual, low-budget cable comedy (albeit a live-action one) that attracts critical plaudits and an intense fan base. Both shows are products of a fracturing television landscape, where mass-market appeal is no longer as necessary for a show to get renewed, and a show that reflects the uncompromising vision of its creator⁵ can thrive, even if that vision limits the potential size of the audience. Adult Swim, the Cartoon Network division that produces *The Venture Bros.*, is particularly well known for giving showrunners extraordinary creative control.⁶

One consequence of this is that the creators of *The Venture Bros.* understand their side characters more intimately than writers on shows with larger creative teams, since every piece of action and dialogue is written by Doc and Jackson personally. Doc has said, “[For] every background character, people that you might not even notice, we have an obsessive list of what these people do every day.”⁷ On a

4 “Full Cast and Crew for 'The Venture Bros.'” *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 30 Jan. 2013.

5 Although *The Venture Bros.* has two creators, Doc Hammer and Jackson Publick often joke that they are actually one person, sharing the same brain.

6 Cohen, Alan. “Swimming Against The Tide.” *Fast Company*. N.p., 1 Jan. 2005. Web. 30 Jan. 2013.

7 “Venture Bros. NYC Comic Con Panel '10.” *Adult Swim*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Jan. 2013.

serialized show with a large staff, characters are written in a more fragmented way. First, the writers must come together to agree on the role of the characters in the overall story arc, or receive marching orders from a showrunner. Then, they break into pairs or solo teams to write the actual episodes, where much of the personalities of the characters will be defined. It is usually the role of the showrunner or lead writer to fit these disparate pieces together. On *The Venture Bros.*, there are only two writers, and they are working directly with each other at all times. As a result, throwaway characters are able to evolve into major characters without breaking a story arc planned out in advance, and the writers don't need to struggle to understand unfamiliar characters created by someone else. Discrepancies in characterization are common in serialized stories with multiple writers, and tend to grow more pronounced the longer the series runs. *The Venture Bros.* jokes about this phenomenon in the Season Four episode *Pomp & Circuitry*, where Hank Venture lists "Batman" twice on his list of ideal careers, explaining, "Number three is Golden Age Batman, and number four is Post-Crisis Batman. They're like two completely different Batmen."⁸

The only reason a quirky, nameless walk-on player can grow to the point that he can be made the main character of a series-defining mythology episode, which we'll get to in just a bit, is that there is very little friction in the writers' room. On a show with a larger staff, a writer

8 "Pomp & Circuitry." *The Venture Bros.* Adult Swim. N.d. Television.

would need to fight hard to justify the existence of a character like Billy Quizboy, and it seems unlikely that Billy would survive the battle.⁹

So, let's return to the mystery of Billy's robotic hand. As a practical matter, the reason Billy has a robotic hand is because the creators thought it would look weird and interesting. But as the series progresses, and Billy makes more frequent appearances, the robotic hand seems to call out for some sort of explanation. On a show with a consciously developed myth arc that drives the plot, like *Lost* or *The X-Files*, the writers would need to come up with a backstory that explains why Billy has a robotic hand, or at least claim that such a backstory exists.¹⁰ Since *The Venture Bros.* is a comedy, the creators can take the backstory less seriously, and even joke about the inexplicable robotic hand in the Season Two episode *Victor. Echo. November.*

Dr. Venture: [Looking at the hand.] "How'd you get that thing?"

Billy Quizboy: "That's an excellent question, I have no idea."

Explaining the mysteries of the show in a satisfying way is far less important in *The Venture Bros.* than making the

9 In fact, Doc Hammer and Jackson Publick mention in the DVD commentary for Season One that they received notes from Adult Swim producers urging them to use Billy Quizboy and Pete White less often.

10 David Lynch, the creator of the mythology-heavy series *Twin Peaks*, claimed throughout the show's run that he had a grand design for the plot, but admitted after the series ended that he was making it all up on the fly.

audience laugh. The creators of the show don't need to come up with an explanation for Billy's hand, or any of the other mysteries that pop up over the course of the show, as long as the jokes are funny. This makes *The Venture Bros.* very different type of show than *Lost*, where an admission of cluelessness by the writers would infuriate fans.

Where the writers of *Lost*, *The X-Files*, *V*, and similar shows consciously planned their mythologies, carefully planting clues for viewers, the creators of *The Venture Bros.* created their mythology in an improvisational way, telling standalone stories and then fitting the characters together in unexpected ways after the fact. Comedies have more flexibility in this respect than dramas, and recurring jokes and characters in a comedy have a way of accreting into a backstory on their own. Doc Hammer and Jackson Publick described part of their writing process in the commentary for the Season One episode *Home Insecurity*.

Jackson: "This was the first episode after you made them [Henchmen 21 and 24] characters. And I went, well, I have to use them now..."

Doc: "We don't have discussions, we just create on top of something that was already there. (...) Like Phantom Limb. Phantom Limb was just a drawing of Phantom Limb. And I go Phantom Limb is like *this*, and Jackson says Phantom Limb does *this*..."

Jackson: "A lot of post-justifying, though. Once we realize that they fit into each other better [it's like] oh, well, now they

all went to college together, too."¹¹

Jackson is referring to the late Season One episode *Past Tense*, which reveals that Rusty Venture, Pete White, The Monarch, Venture family bodyguard Brock Samson, and future supervillain Baron von Ünderbheit all went to "State University" together, and impressively stitches all of their origin stories into a single narrative. The same university is the setting for the Season Three episode *The Invisible Hand of Fate*, which addresses the mysteries surrounding Billy Quizboy and a great deal more.

The Invisible Hand of Fate is a bravura bit of improvised mythology-building. It takes what were two throwaway jokes – Billy Quizboy's robotic hand, and the fact that he doesn't know how he got it – and turns them into the foundation for the epic backstory of several major characters. The episode opens with Billy slipping in the bathroom of the trailer he shares with Pete White, and experiencing a flood of memories. The memories explain not just how he lost his hand, but how he got his robotic replacement hand, how he met Pete White, and how and why his memory was wiped. The episode also explains how Phantom Limb, one of the major antagonists of the series, gained his powers, and how Brock Sampson was assigned the guard the Venture family. It accomplishes all of this while briefly crossing over the backstories of several side characters, turning in some of the funniest scenes the series has ever done, and introducing Shore Leave, yet

11 "Lost Commentary" for "Home Insecurity." <<http://www.asitecalledfred.com/2006/06/23/quickcast-commentary-the-venture-bros/>>

another character who started as a one-joke throwaway but evolved into a regular player.¹²

Although *The Invisible Hand of Fate* is a very funny episode, there are many scenes in the episode that are played straight, including a dialogue-free sequence at the end of the episode showing Brock delivering a brainwashed Billy to his distraught friend Pete White. The miraculous thing is that these dramatic scenes are just as effective as the comedic ones. In only a handful of appearances in two short seasons, the creators of *The Venture Bros.* had developed Billy and Pete from strange, nameless one-offs into characters that viewers care about.

This may be the most important lesson television writers can take from *The Venture Bros.*: Create characters that you find interesting, and the story will come naturally. Most of the puzzlebox mythology shows that followed in the wake of *Lost* failed in their first season, and the culprit in each case was placing plot machinations ahead of character development. It's interesting to note that even *Lost* began as an episodic character drama. Each episode in the first season featured a self-contained short story about one of the people stranded on the island, while the mysterious serialized elements took place along the edges. Over time, following the pattern set by *The X-Files*, the serialized mysteries engulfed the character drama that was the heart of the show, and the finale inevitably left many fans unsatisfied. *The Venture Bros.* parodies this type of

12 "The Invisible Hand of Fate." *The Venture Bros.* Adult Swim. N.d. Television.

storytelling in the Season Three episode ORB, where the Venture family and a multitude of other characters go searching for a mysterious device that is promised to hold unimaginable power, only to discover in the end that the device was broken long ago.¹³ The mythology of *The Venture Bros.* isn't built like the clockwork innards of the ORB, it is made up of a series of messy and unexpected collisions between very human characters.

At a convention in 2010, a fan asked Doc and Jackson if there was an ultimate direction to the show. Doc answered that he thought there was. When Jackson was incredulous, Doc said, "I think it's ultimately the story of the people on the TV you watch. Is there a *huge* arc? Eh, I doubt it. Things happen to these people. There's constant change. So in a way, yes. I mean, at the end, do they find out it's a dream? Do you want that? Neither do we."¹⁴

13 "ORB." *The Venture Bros.* Adult Swim. N.d. Television.

14 "The Venture Bros Dragon*Con Panel 2010." *Adult Swim*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Jan. 2013.