Into the Woods: A Practical Guide to the Hero's Journey

By Bob Bates

Link has been on many a journey.

For the past several years I've been going to talks and reading books about the Hero's Journey, but the concept always seemed vague to me. There are all these stages that the hero may (or may not) have to go through, and all these characters whom he may encounter: the Mentor, the Threshold Guardian, the Shape Shifter, the Trickster, etc.

But then we're told that he may not have to meet them after all, or that different mythical characters can be combined into one individual, the whole thing seems so confusing that it's hard to know what to make of it. Interesting reading, but how does it help?

So our question for today is, "what practical use is the Hero's Journey to us as story tellers and game writers?"

Why The Hero's Journey Is Important

What makes the hero's journey so important? Why should we bother with it?

It's important because myths are important.

Myths convey the values of society. Myths are how we teach each other who we are and how we should behave.

Myths actively guide our actions. They're not dusty old stories in a book, or crumbling temples in a far-off land. 62% of people in America say they believe in the literal truth of the Bible, and that became a critical factor in the election of George Bush to the White House. Suicide bombers in Iraq believe by blowing themselves up in their holy cause, they will go directly to Paradise and will this day be with Allah. Game developers believe that if we work just a little bit harder, we'll soon see fat royalty checks.

In *The Cry For Myth,* Rollo May points out four areas where myths are still active in modern life

- Myths give us our sense of personal identity, answering the question, "Who am I?"
- Myths make possible our sense of community. We are thinking mythically when we show loyalty to our town our nation or our team. Loyalties to our friends or community are the result of strong myths that reinforce social bonding.
- Myths are what lie underneath our moral values.
- Mythology is our way of dealing with the inscrutable mystery of creation and death.

It turns out that myths are wired into us. The fields of evolutionary biology and psychology tell us there is an adaptive advantage to myths.

Evolutionary biologist William Hamilton discovered and proved the theory of "kin selection." Until Hamilton , "fitness" was measured by whether a particular creature passed on its genes - the familiar "Survival of the Fittest." Hamilton introduced the idea of "inclusive fitness," which is to say that the true measure of evolutionary fitness is a *gene's* ability to promote the survival of copies of itself, perhaps in siblings or in cousins.

Steven Pinker writes: "The vast majority of altruistic acts in the animal kingdom benefit the actor's kin. The most extreme examples are social insects like ants and bees, in which the workers give their all to the colony."

Applying that to humans, I would say that people who figured out where the dangerous animals lived and how to avoid them survived longer than people who didn't. And people who banded into tribes to *tell* each other what they had learned, survived even longer. But the *genes* of the people who *acted* in ways to preserve their tribe (as opposed to just themselves), are the genes that ultimately survived the longest, and those are the genes we all carry within us today.

Tribes that found ways to encourage people to act for the good of the tribe, rather than for the good of the individual, are the tribes that survived. How did they accomplish this? Through myths, parables, and stories - not just the stories about where the wooly mammoths hang out and what the best way is to kill them, but parables, like the Good Samaritan, which tells us we should always look out for the other guy, and epic tales like Beowulf, who doesn't just give us a good story, but who becomes a model for our behavior.

In his book, *The Key*, James Frey writes, "Beowulf's heroic deeds convey to the other members of the tribe how they must act. They, like Beowulf must be self-sacrificing, and brave, fight evil, and so on. Heroes are our models: their stories convey to each succeeding generation the cultural values of the tribe."

If you can convince an individual to go to his personal death so the group has a better chance of living, that's a *very* powerful and effective societal tool.

By definition, we are the biological descendents of the tribes who told stories to survive.

Carl Jung argued that mythical motifs are structural elements of the psyche. In fact he went further to argue that there are patterns that are biologically present in our brains. He gave these patterns the name "the collective unconscious." Just as Pinker believes humans have the capacity for grammar wired into our brains, waiting for a particular language to come along and imprint itself upon us, Jung believed we have mythic structures built into us, waiting for a particular belief system to be imprinted upon us by the culture we grow up in.

Frey writes, "When a human encounters some version of a myth, he responds at a very deep level, subconsciously, and he is powerfully drawn to it as by magic. The force of myth is irresistible. Mythic forms and mythic structures are the foundation on which all good stories are built; these forms and structures are the key a good storyteller can use to create powerful fiction."

So storytelling, as a way to make sense of the world, is wired into our brains. It is something we are compelled to do, in the same way that spinning a web is wired into a spider and building a nest is wired into birds.

How powerful are myths? Without them to guide our lives, we are lost.

Rollo May writes that to remain sane, every individual must bring order and coherence into the stream of sensations and emotions entering his consciousness. "Each one of us is now forced to do for ourselves what in previous ages was done by family, custom, church, and state - namely, create for ourselves the myths that will let us make some sense of experience."

May further says, "Myths carry on the essential task of trying to create meaning out of our lives and actions, *in a world that doesn't notice or care"* (emphasis added).

If you take away a man's myth, the result is mental illness, depression, and the loss of the will to live. Each of us needs to believe that we matter, that our lives have meaning. We find that meaning in the personal myths we create for ourselves. And we actively seek out activities that reinforce those myths.

The best-known traditional myth-reinforcing activity is storytelling and literature. I believe that games also fall into that category and will argue for that in a minute. But first let's take a look at the function of literature.

In his book *Myth and Modern Man*, Raphael Patai wrote: "Literature has the power to move us profoundly precisely because of its mythical quality... because of the mystery in the face of which we feel an awed delight or terror. The real function of literature in human affairs is to continue myth's endeavor to create a meaningful place for man in a world oblivious of his presence."

Literature proves there is order in the universe. It says that, in life, moral choices lead to outcomes. In fiction, there is meaning to human events. Because myths help us create meaning in our lives - in the face of a universe that doesn't even know we're here - the myths in our stories reaffirm the values of our culture and teach us "the way we should be."

It turns out there is a universal mythological structure underlying good and popular stories, and the Hero's Journey is the most useful way to get at that structure and use it to create new stories.

Why is this important to games? Rollo May has postulated that narcotics are myth-substitutes because they allow people to assert control over their environment, even if only for a short period of time. I contend that games are another example of myth-substitutes.

In the book " *Killing Monsters*," Gerard Jones wrote how playing violent games actually helped one young boy named Jonathan: "Games gave Jonathon control over events where he and others felt none and, perhaps even more important, they gave him control over his own feelings. With these games Jonathan no longer felt as helpless. He was not as scared of others or of his own feelings."

So here is the heart this talk (and academics take note, because this may be new). I believe games are essentially myth-reinforcing activities. And I believe that players tend to choose the kinds of games that reaffirm their own personal myths.

For some it might simply be a need to bring order out of chaos. For them, *Tetris* is a fine way to re-assert that belief, for them to assert some control over an otherwise chaotic world.

But *Tetris* can't reinforce the belief, for example, that " *The good of the many is more important than the good of the one* ," or that " *it is better to have loved and lost, then never to have loved at all.* " If you want to want to reinforce deeper, more complex myths, which in turn can create deeper and more satisfying gameplay experiences, then you need to turn to stories

To write those stories, you need to understand how myths are put together and communicated. And *that* is why the Hero's Journey is important!

What Is The Hero's Journey?

A professor named Joseph Campbell analyzed thousands of myths and found that some common elements kept popping up. No one myth has been found that contains every one of these elements. But in categorizing them, he tells us that the more of them a narrative has, the more likely it is to strike a deep mythological chord with the audience.

Campbell summarizes these elements, which became known as the Hero's Journey, in these words:

> *A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.*

Campbell goes on to make an exhaustive list of all the possible steps in the Journey. But we don't need to write a game that contains every motif ever to appear in a mythical story. Instead we're going to focus on the most important elements - the ones that have to be there. These are:

- Establishing the hero's world
- The call to adventure
- Entering the mythological woods
- Trail of trials
- Encountering the evil one
- Gaining the hero's prize
- Returning that prize to the community

How Can We Use The Hero's Journey To Build Stories?

If try to use Campbell 's observations as a template for story building, they suddenly become elusive. Are there 12 parts of the Journey, or only 8, or some number in-between? Must the hero encounter all of Campbell 's archetypical characters, or is it OK if he skips a few?

The Hero and his prize.

We are continuously cautioned against using the Hero's Journey as a template. This is right. Campbell 's work is *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. His job was different than ours. What he was trying to do was catalog common themes, not demand that they all be present in a new story. If that's true, how can we make practical use of it? What are we supposed to put in, and what can we leave out?

When these questions are met with a shrug and the answer, "It depends," we're tempted to leave the whole business to the academics to analyze later, because we've got deadlines to meet and a game to design, and theory is nice, but it doesn't get the script written by Friday.

First let's take a quick look at two things NOT to do.

- Don't look at all the possible steps in the Hero's Journey and make sure you've got them all in there and in the proper order. Fiction is flexible.
- Don't make a list of all of Campbell 's mythological characters and try to find a spot for each of them in your story. The Herald, the Threshold Guardian, the Trickster, the Shape Shifter, etc. Just create the characters you need to tell your story and you'll be fine.

So what DO you do?

Step #1: Pick Your Premise

First, pick your premise - your theme, your myth.

Myths and stories consciously or subconsciously influence behavior. So you must decide what you think is important and make your game about that.

You must decide how you want people to behave or think **differently** *after* playing your game than before.

This is not a license for preaching. It's the emotional connection you will create with the gameplayer, built up through time as he experiences the different facets of the issue that you have built into the game.

Lajos Egri says in *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, "The premise tells you what you need to include and what you need to leave out. The premise is a tyrant."

Step #2: Create Your Hero

Next, create a hero who can embody that premise. Match the hero to your premise.

Some people say we should have started with the hero and the villain first and then build the story around them. Personally, I prefer to start with a premise, and then create a hero and villain who will bring the premise to life. So, for example, if you start by creating an obsessed sea captain and a big white whale, you'll find yourself in trouble if what you really want to write about is that "Love Conquers All."

A hero is a myth in action. Heroes are how the myths are brought to life.

In *The Key,* James Frey says in addition to being a great dramatic character, the hero usually possesses many of the following qualities:

- The hero has courage (or finds it in the course of the story).
- The hero is clever and resourceful.
- The hero has a "special" talent.
- The hero is an "outlaw," living by his or her own rules.
- The hero is good at what he or she does for a living.
- The hero is a protagonist (takes the lead in the action at some point in the story).
- The hero has been "wounded" (maimed, disgraced, grieving for a lost loved one, etc.) or becomes wounded in the course of the story.
- The hero is motivated by idealism (at least at some point in the story).
- The hero is sexually potent.

STEP #3: Create a great villain.

Next, create a great villain.

It's an old writer's saying that, "The strength of your villain is the strength of your story." There's no point in having your hero triumph over a weak villain. Your audience will say, "So what?"

Great villains are memorable characters, Often much more memorable than the heroes themselves. (Think of Darth Vader and Hannibal Lecter).

The greatest myth-based stories are those of the self-sacrificing hero pitted against the self-centered Evil One.

Here are some characteristics of the Evil One that Frey outlines in his book:

- Traits similar to hero
- May be full of hubris
- May be an outlaw
- Clever and resourceful
- May be wounded
- May have a special talent
- May have great sex appeal
- Traits dissimilar to the hero
- Motivated by greed, avarice, lust for power, vanity, narcissism, and so on.
- Never acts out of idealism, although he may have an evil cause he believes in.
- Is often cruel
- May win by luck, which the hero never does
- Is not forgiving
- Might quit - but only at the very end
- May whine and grovel, which the hero isn't allowed to do.
- May not be stoical like the hero
- May not be loyal
- Usually not physically superior - though his or her sidekick may be
- No special birth or special destiny, though he may falsely claim one

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STEP #4: Show The Hero's Regular World

Once you have your premise, your hero, and your villain, you need to show the hero's regular world. This is tricky. You don't necessarily need to start the game here. It may be better to start in the midst of the action, and show the pre-threatened state in a flashback.

The point is that the player must see the hero's world that he is trying to save. Near the beginning of the game, you should *show* the player an example of how the hero is flawed, so that at the end of the game, he can see how the hero has been transformed.

STEP #5: Disrupt The Hero's World

Now you've got to bump the character out of his normal world and get to the good stuff.

You've got to threaten the hero, his way of life, or something he holds dear. You've got to force the hero into action, otherwise you have no story.

This is Campbell 's Call to Adventure. When the disruption shows up in the form of a person, Campbell calls the person the Herald. Campbell also says that the hero may refuse the call, but that doesn't really apply in the game world.

Your task here is basically to get your hero up a tree, and anything at all will do: a meteor strike, the sudden death of his parents that puts the family business in his hands, the bite of a nuclear spider, and so on.

The Prince finds his world disrupted when he releases the Sands of Time, thus beginning his journey.

STEP #6: Enter The Mythological Woods

Now we go into the mythological woods for the trail of trials. We do this pretty well in games, usually by taking the player from one level to another. But we usually don't pay enough attention to character growth.

Each level should show some incremental growth, or even a stumble, in the character's overall development. In every scene in a movie or book, one of the characters ends up in a different place than he started. That's how it should be in levels as well.

These mythological woods can be either a physical or a psychological place. It is the place where the hero must endure his inner and outer struggle. The outer struggle is to achieve some victory. The inner struggle is to discover himself and transform his character.

As we progress through levels, we have to see the hero changing. Giving him betters toys at the end of each level is a good idea, but it just isn't enough.

STEP #7: Confront The Evil One

And now we have to confront the Evil One.

This is sometimes described as going into "the belly of the beast," or fighting the bad guy in his "innermost lair." But what is important is that your hero confronts evil in whatever form you have chosen to present it, and defeats it.

Ideally the hero should overcome his inner struggle in order to be victorious in the outer struggle.

STEP #8: Acquire The Prize

Next is the acquisition of the prize: the Grail, the Elixir. Remember your premise? That's the prize. This is the thing that was worth fighting to acquire. This is what makes the journey worthwhile for the hero, and for the player. It's not the Grand Foozle, or the Seven Magic Stones of Farlandia. It's the realization that "Love conquers all," or "Fate rules our lives," or "Fate *doesn't* rule our lives." Perhaps you're trying to show that "We all have to go our own way," or "We *can't* go our own way - to survive we have to be a part of a team."

Whatever the idea was that kept you up all those late nights through all those months of development, that is the Hero's prize, and you have to let the hero, and the gameplayer acquire it. That's the whole point of doing a story in the first place.

STEP #9: The Hero's Return

Finally comes the return. In a way, this is optional, but in a way it's not. If the hero acquires the prize, you've done your job of delivering it to the community (i.e., the gameplayer and by extension, our world). Whether or not your hero survives to deliver it to *his* community depends on the kind of story you want to tell.

By the end of your story, Egri says you will have moved the character "from pole to pole."

Through the mysterious phenomenon called identification, the transformation of the hero has a profound psychological effect on the audience. The hero's struggle becomes our struggle. The hero's triumph becomes our triumph. This really is magic.

The Three Act Structure

So far in this talk, I've ignored another pillar of storytelling, which is Aristotle's Three Act Structure.

I find this structure enormously helpful in plotting out stories, and I find that it works fractally, which is to say that it's good to break down levels and scenes into three acts as well, to make sure you're keeping the interest level up throughout.

The way I think of the Three Act structure is:

- In the First Act, you get the hero up a tree
- In the Second Act, you throw stones at him (in other words, you make things harder for him)
- In the Third Act, you get him down out of the tree.

While this is great for plot development, it doesn't give us much help with character development or character growth. But if we superimpose The Hero's Journey on top of the Three Act Structure, we can supply that dimension of character development that is otherwise missing: Our hero, flawed, starts in one place. He goes through a series of trials (not just random trials, mind you, but trials that help him work on his problem). And he or she comes out the other end a changed man or woman, with a greater truth about the world that we would all do well to learn.

What amazes me is how much we personally identify with heroes, that that identification actually exists at all. Identification is this mysterious ability people have to live inside the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others. It's what allows people to dream the fictive dream. This identification with the hero somehow unites the gameplayer with the hero, and they somehow become one.

The other surprising thing is how endlessly satisfying these stories are to us. We don't get tired of them. In fact, we revel in their repetition. Campbell said, "The more familiar the hero is, the more often we have watched him overcome ever-increasing dangers and challenges, the more we know what to expect of him --- the more we identify with him. The hero gains immeasurably from repetition." A myth confirms and reconfirms our most deeply held cultural beliefs.

These mythic patterns endure through time.

We believe today in the individual's power to defeat injustice. So we have created the myth of the tough-guy detective. But Frey tells us he is actually based on the older myth of the lone gunman in the Old West, who took the place of the older myth of the knight errant, who in turn was based on myths of Achilles and Ulysses. "Who is this hero?" Frey asks. "He is a fighter for justice. He has a quick gun or a quick sword, a big fist, a big mouth, and a soft heart."

And here's Frey again on how much we love our myths: "Over half of the novels sold in America today come from a single publisher. They are the Romance novels put out by Harlequin Books - and all of them are a variation on a single myth: love wins out."

Ganon, the quintessential Evil One.

So here are your tasks as a designer

First, you must grow your character. You have to show that your character is one way to begin with. You have to show the struggle he goes through and the gradual changes that this struggle wreaks upon him. You have to show the confrontation with the antagonist. And you have to show the character in his final changed state.

Second, you must prove your Premise. With a weak premise, or no premise, a game leaves the player feeling the story is out of control, and that is the biggest lack I see in game stories - usually games don't have a strong premise, a strong statement about life, or the way the world is, or the way the world *should* be. Instead, we get cardboard characters that are an inch deep that are given one mission after another until the damn thing ends. That's not a story. It's drudgery. Find something you believe in, and convince the player that it is so.

Using The Hero's Journey To Solve Problems

They say that for a scientific theory to be useful, it must be able to predict something that can be tested and proved. In that spirit, I would say that for the Hero's Journey to be of practical use, we should also be able to use it as an analytical tool to solve problems.

So let's look at some common game story problems and see if the Hero's Journey has anything to offer by way of solutions.

Does the game have stereotypical characters?

If so, they're probably not created in the service of an interesting premise. Someone might have said: "I know: We'll have a corrupt Mayor and a brash young cop and an old veteran who shows him the ropes."

That's not good enough.

If you wanted to prove the premise, "You can't fight City Hall," you'd make the old guy cynical, possibly corrupt, and you may have him try to sabotage the young guy in order to cover his own ass. But if you wanted to prove the premise, "Evil must fall of its own weight," then the old veteran will be a mentor to the new guy, he'll give him valuable information, and may even sacrifice his own life. Same characters, different premises, and the characters are saved from the fate of the stereotype.

Does the game have a flat ending?

Does the game end with a big boss battle and then fizzle out quickly from there? If so, then take a look at your hero's

prize. What is the magic elixir? What is the boon your hero has fought to acquire in the service of his community? Have you constructed the story in such a way that it is evident that the prize will be returned? The hero himself doesn't necessarily have to return, but he must be transformed, and the prize itself must survive.

Do the players not seem to be identifying with your hero?

Have you *shown* the world from which he was driven out? (Showing, rather than just telling, is important.) Have you given him the qualities of a hero? For example, have you given him a wound to make him sympathetic? Have you made him clever and resourceful, or someone with a special talent?

Have you taken your hero "from pole to pole?" Have you demonstrated his character growth in the course of the story? Have you shown how he is different at the end than he was at the beginning? If not, go back and build that progression into your game.

Does working your way through the levels become tedious?

If that's a problem, I would ask, "Is your villain strong enough?"

A really good villain will be creating obstacles for your hero at every turn. And he'll be making them harder as the hero gets closer. If the player is falling into a rut, then perhaps your villain isn't being active enough.

Have you looked at your levels fractally?

Each level should be a mini-story. It should start with the hero is one state or condition, disrupt him in some fashion so he is once again tossed into turmoil, and it should end with him having achieved something meaningful, and perhaps having changed in some small way.

The Hero's Journey isn't a box of tools you can use to fix every story problem. But it's somewhat similar to a circuit tester. You can clamp the leads around a problem spot in your story and check to see if there's enough mythical current flowing. And if you don't have enough juice, it can help point out the source of the problem.

The Game Designer's Journey

Someone once told me, "All writers are revolutionaries." And I believe this. If we were satisfied with the way things are, we wouldn't be driven to create stories and go through the pain that writing involves.

As game makers, we have to pick the myths that we think people should believe in and embody them in our games. Or if we think there are myths that are harmful, that people *shouldn't* live by (which is more often the case), then our games should destroy those myths, and then give players new myths to live by.

As a game writer, the myths you create have the power to change lives.

So I want to end by saying that as a designer, you have to take this Hero's Journey yourself.

You have to leave our common world, fight your way through the terrors of your own mythological woods, acquire your hero's prize, and bring it back to the rest of us.

Each of us has a slice of truth, a way we see the world that no one else does. Storytelling is how we let the world know about that slice of truth. It's important for us to do so, and we can't just put a notice in the newspaper. ("Item: Truth found.")

We have to make our case, persuade our audience by *showing* a person for whom something has become true. Only then will we reach the player's heart and convince him that he, too, can arrive at this truth.

The tough part is, you must venture into the woods over and over again, and it's dark and scary in there.

The reason it's dark and scary is that you're the one who built those woods, and you built them specifically as a warning to yourself *not to go in there* .

But you have to.

What you confront in there is your own fears and inadequacies. It is some comfort - but not much - to know that this is the same for everyone. Here's an author writing in his diary. "It's just a run of the mill book. And the awful thing is that it is absolutely the best I can do. . . . I've always had these travails. . . I never get used to them." -- John Steinbeck while working on *The Grapes of Wrath*

These woods are dangerous.

It's T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland.*

It's the land of despair.

Dante had to go into the Inferno before he could get to Paradise . Ulysses had to travel to Hades before got to go home. After Christ died, he descended into hell before he went into heaven. And before you can acquire something really worthwhile to give to the rest of us, you're going to have to go through your own personal hell. These heroes all died or faced psychological death, and you will have to do the same.

This is not for the faint-hearted. Writers and artists are particularly susceptible to depression. A lot of us don't come back

once we've gone into the woods. The number of writers who have committed suicide out of despair for their lives is uncounted.

We are assailed by doubts that our work is good enough. We look at the work that others have done and know in our hearts that we will never be that good. We feel guilty about accolades we receive that we know we didn't earn; and we get angry when our good work actually goes unnoticed.

But on the other hand, we can be sustained by faith that the knowledge and the journey are worthwhile, and that our efforts will be of value.

And that brings us to my own personal myth: *Do the work*, and everything will be OK. *Do the work*, make it as good as you can, and eventually you will be rewarded. You can always hope for the best, but not unless you first, *do the work***.**

So as the desk sergeant used to say in Hill Street Blues: "Let's be careful out there." But if you do decide to make the journey, and if you do come back with a prize that enlightens the rest of us, then you will make a great game, and you will be a hero.

Sources and Further Reading

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