

Mythmaking in Star Wars I

The Hero

Matthew Grau

An Introduction

Over the last fifty years, more and more writers have begun to deliberately use what Joseph Campbell coined the monomyth. Through extensive study, Campbell came to believe that nearly all myths, even if from radically different times or places, kept to the same basic structure with the same basic stages. In essence, the monomyth speaks to all people in all places in all times because it represents a commonality of human experience and understanding. It is a powerful storytelling tool when used properly.

George Lucas made deliberate use of the monomyth when creating *Star Wars*, which is part of what has made these space opera stories become modern myths that have endured now through several generations. In fact, the monomyth and its elements have become so central to the *Star Wars* franchise that if it were missing, whatever it was missing from would not be *Star Wars*.

This series of articles will explore the monomyth and its elements as they apply to *Star Wars* and teach you how to use them in your *Star Wars* roleplaying games. Adopting them as practice will not only make your games more epic, they will take on an undeniable character that can only be part of the modern myth that is the *Star Wars* franchise.

In this first article, we will explore the nature of the Hero and then go on to look at other character archetypes in the following two. In articles four and five, we will explore the various stages of the hero's journey, and article six will look at how to use the monomyth as a tool to design your games. At each step along the way, we will show how these concepts were used in different pieces of the *Star Wars* franchise.

The Masters

It is Joseph Campbell that is credited with bringing the monomyth to the world in his book *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. In more recent times, Christopher Vogler expanded on Campbell's work for the film industry in his book *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. It is from these two seminal works that the majority of this material is drawn. There are also several interviews with Joseph Campbell available on DVD, for further research.

The Hero

Hero. The word conjures many images in our minds the moment we hear it. For some, it is the red-caped Superman, racing to save the planet from certain destruction. For others, it is the two-fisted adventurer exploring places unknown. For some, it is the soldier bravely serving his country in a foreign land. And for others, it is the fireman risking his life to save people from the burning rubble of the Twin Towers. The word itself is Greek, meaning "to protect and serve." In nearly any example we can think of, this is what our heroes do. They are the ones that save us when no one else can. They are the ones that put their lives on the line for the good of those around them.

What we discover in the monomyth is that, regardless of culture, all of our heroes have things in common. This is absolutely true in *Star Wars*. The Exile, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Vader's secret apprentice, Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Cade Skywalker, and a host of other heroes from the many eras of *Star Wars* all fit the following criteria which make them fit the label hero.

Most apparently, heroes do things. They do not accomplish great things by sitting around and talking about or contemplating things. Certainly, thought and counsel are important factors in making good decisions, particularly when sizable or difficult consequences hang in the balance, but action is what is required of the hero in order to overcome the things that face him. Obi-Wan does not sit in his hut on the edge of the Dune Sea contemplating what Leia's message might mean to the galaxy. Anakin Skywalker does not wonder what General Grievous will do with the captured Chancellor Palpatine. They spring into action, because that is what is needed.

Heroes live on the razor's edge. To them, death is not some faceless thing that is years yet coming. They face death on a regular basis, defying it in unbelievable ways. To the hero, each moment is precious and nothing can be taken for granted. Each day may very be the last. This may not be the case at every moment during the hero's life, but it is the case in all the points that make the epic stories of which they are a part.

As our (the audience's) window into the story, there is always something with which we can identify about our heroes. There are things about them that are universal, whether it be their personal traits or history, or their motivations. We can see something of ourselves in them. Luke Skywalker begins his journey as a young farmer who seeks something grander than what he has and, as an adoptee, some answers about the family he never knew. Starkiller, Vader's secret apprentice, struggles with his sense of self – should he follow the ways of his corrupt "father" or should he follow his heart as he is drawn to the light. Obi-Wan Kenobi is a patriot, fighting for a way of life in which he deeply believes. Life and family, personal identity, conviction – these are but a few examples, but ones with which we, regardless of culture or age, can identify. Through that identification, we can experience the story more fully for we understand it more fully, regardless of trappings.

Furthermore, no hero is perfect. As there are traits or history or motivations that are universal, each hero also has some kind of understandable flaw. After all, we are all flawed and it allows us to further identify with our heroes if they suffer the same human frailties as the rest of us. As they say, we might like or even lust after perfect people, but we fall in love with those who are flawed – not in spite of the flaws, but because of them. Luke Skywalker is brash and impatient, like many other young men his age. Starkiller is, fundamentally, the product of an abusive household and his ideas of how the world works are simply off. Obi-Wan Kenobi is an idealist and an optimist, sometimes blinded to the corruption and treachery right under his nose. We all suffer from being young at one point, many have had to deal with the tragedy of abuse, and most people want to see the best in others. Their flaws are ours.

Despite their universal characteristics, heroes are always separate. There is something in who they are, perhaps their destiny, that sets them apart from those around them. Han Solo is a smuggler, but also a former Imperial officer who fled the Empire after being exposed to its corruption. He is a criminal, but one with a heart of gold, and this makes him different from the blood-thirsty scoundrels that are a part of his world. Cade Skywalker never fully fit into a life of bounty hunting and piracy, as he was a former Jedi and heir to the Skywalker legacy. His predecessor Luke grew up on Tatooine, a desert planet on the Outer Rim, dreaming of becoming a pilot and leaving the provincial world his fellows found comfortable. Little does he know he is set apart further as the only son of Darth Vader. In every case, the destiny that draws heroes to great things does not let them simply fit in with the world.

Sacrifice is essential to heroism and there is always some element of it in the hero's journey. Heroes must give of something of themselves, something of which they love, or simply suffer mind, body, and soul in order to overcome the great odds that face them. Their journeys are not those of everyday mortals and as such the things they have at risk are so much greater. Princess Leia suffers the loss of her homeworld Alderaan and the cold-blooded murder of every man, woman, and child on that peaceful planet. Starkiller must give his life in battle with the Emperor in order to save the existence of the nascent Rebel Alliance. Luke Skywalker loses his aunt, uncle, and mentor to the Empire, nearly loses his friends, and loses a hand in order to finally bring down Darth Vader and Emperor Palpatine. When the game is great, so are the stakes and sometimes the heroes lose. However, triumph is nothing without setbacks and joy is nothing without tragedy.

Through their journey, heroes grow. They are never the same after their adventure. These changes are not simply cosmetic either, though such changes may be a part. They are fundamental, the kind of things that change the very core of who the heroes are. Luke Skywalker transforms from a whiny kid from a backwater planet with big dreams into a full-blown Jedi Knight who resurrects a nearly extinct tradition. Starkiller grows from his roots as a child raised in the ways of the Sith to turn his back on his ways and become a Jedi and an integral part in the formation of the Rebel Alliance. Cade Skywalker transforms from a young Jedi and witness to terrible tragedy to a self-serving bounty hunter back into a Jedi with powerful healing abilities. In the *Star Wars* roleplaying game, players have another measure of growth – character level. As heroes in the roleplaying game grow, their experience is translated literally into game statistics. However, advancement in game statistics is something that should only be used as a tool to the greater story and not an end unto itself. They can easily be used to facilitate the characters' growth as heroes as part of their epic journeys.

Though obviously called by destiny, heroes may be willing or unwilling to answer. All heroes, as we'll explore in the third article in this series, have a moment of pause before they launch on their adventure and this is different from being unwilling. For example, Luke Skywalker has a moment on Tatooine where he questions whether leaving his family to follow Obi-Wan is something he should do. Ultimately, after his family is killed by Stormtroopers, he willingly leaves. On the other hand, Han Solo was dragged into Luke and Leia's story against his will. He was firmly committed to his life of crime and simply picked up Luke and Obi-Wan because he

needed to pay off Jabba the Hutt. Next thing he knows, his ship is being pulled into the Death Star and the rest is history.

Some heroes don't immediately appear to be what most would consider to be heroes on the surface. They are anti-heroes, characters that perform heroic actions while not being heroic themselves. Again, Han Solo is an example of this. He braves death to rescue Princess Leia aboard the Death Star, going above and beyond the call of the simple mercenary, even though it appears his only motivation is financial gain. Cade Skywalker might be another example, who is drawn to heroics despite having embraced a life of bounty hunting and piracy. On the flip side, Starkiller would not be an example of an anti-hero. He begins his story arc as a villain, who undergoes a change of heart as he is exposed to the greater universe. When he becomes a hero, he becomes a hero.

While in many myths of the West the heroes are loners (or close to it), heroes of the East most often come in groups. *Star Wars* more closely follows the myths of the East in the this regard – heroes always come in groups. In the *Knights of the Old Republic* era, the reformed Revan travelled with Carth Onasi, Bastila Shan, Mission Vao, and others. During the *Rise of the Empire* era, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker fought with Padme Amidala, Ahsoka Tano, R2-D2, Commander Cody, Captain Rex, and others. During the Rebellion, Luke Skywalker fought with Leia Organa, Han Solo, Chewbacca, R2-D2, C-3PO, and more. Even Starkiller, though supposedly a lone Sith apprentice, had his people – the droid Proxy, Juno Eclipse, and eventually Rahm Kota. This norm works perfectly with the *Star Wars* roleplaying game, where players gather with groups of characters, all who are intended to be the heroes.

Keeping all this in mind, at the center of your story are your heroes – the characters your players have created. The *Star Wars* roleplaying game provides you with all the mechanics to create heroes of all kinds. This analysis of heroes should give you a better base from which to build the non-mechanical aspects of your characters, so that they are truly befitting the mantle of *Star Wars*.

In the next article, we will begin to look at character archetypes, as found in story and psychology, and how they apply to the monomyth.

Discuss this article on the [Forums](#)
