

Writing Stories on the Web with “The Hero's Journey”

Alan Levine

Maricopa Community Colleges, USA

"The Hero's Journey" is an on-line creative writing environment created for storytelling. It features a detailed reference section based upon the work of author Joseph Campbell, with linked examples from mythology, student writing, the movie "Star Wars", and other popular culture forms. A section designed for teachers to share activity ideas on how the site can be used. The main activity is the writing tool, where students create their own stories guided by the framing questions of the Hero's Journey. A series of initial questions helps the writers develop the characteristics of their primary character. For every step of the Hero's Journey, writers can choose to add media from a library of images and sounds to include in their work. This presentation will demonstrate the project and discuss its collaborative development effort by faculty, technology specialists, and art students who design new images for the writing area. (<http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/smc/journey/>)

Introduction

The art of telling stories is interactive, common to every world culture, and long pre-dates the concept of interactive computer applications. A story told is not only shaped by the skills of the teller but also by the participation of the listeners. We created the Hero's Journey web site to meld the potential of the Internet with the innovative application of storytelling as an instructional tool. What evolved from a vague initial idea is an exciting example of how faculty, technology specialists, and students mix in a creative design process. The Hero's Journey web site provides an environment for learning the classic mythical story structure and where anyone can write original stories or analyze classic ones that follow this structure.

In this paper we will describe the development of the “Hero’s Journey” and present the features of the web site writing environment we developed as a prototype in 1998, and which since more than 3000 persons have created their own unique “journey” of writing. We will also present our rationale and describe the features of a newer version currently in development.

This project was developed at the Maricopa Center for Learning & Instruction (MCLI) a unit that supports innovation in learning for the ten colleges in the Maricopa Community Colleges, Phoenix, Arizona. The largest community college district in the USA, Maricopa provides two-year degree programs for university transfer or occupational certificates, as well as adult education to more than 240,000 students per year.

How the Journey Started...

The seeds of the project began when the MCLI supported the strategic planning for the Storytelling Institute (<http://www.storytellinginstitute.org/>) at South Mountain Community College (<http://www.smc.maricopa.edu/>). A college-wide effort to integrate storytelling as a teaching tool across many disciplines, the Institute also provides a community service to help local to become better connected with their cultural heritage. The Institute supports a wide range of activities including yearly festivals, training of local teachers in the primary and secondary levels, and supporting faculty in efforts to integrate this approach into their courses. In addition, they offer a 21-credit program in storytelling that provides “knowledge of the humane, literary, dramatic, and historical perspectives, which are the foundation of story.”

A year after the Storytelling Institute was formed; our office began discussions with several faculties about ways we might integrate modern technology to the ancient art of storytelling. A team of faculty agreed to meet and help brainstorm ideas. At first they were reluctant as they viewed the process as one very dependent on the participants, where different audiences strongly influence how a story is told.

Our approach was to suggest that the technology should not dictate the application, so we said, “Just tell us what you would like to do, and we will figure out a way to make it happen.” But the faculty response was, “We don’t know what is possible, why don’t you tell us what we can do with technology.” We described this as a circular “two-step” dance that never went anywhere.

Then we asked the faculty about the activities they currently used in the classroom and this is what clicked for them. Liz Warren, faculty in Mythology and Anthropology described a creative writing activity she conducted with her students based upon The Hero with a Thousand Faces by Joseph Campbell (1990), where the steps of the Hero’s Journey provide a structure for students to write their own stories.

Immediately we saw that an online version of this activity would allow people from anywhere to not only write but to share and comment on their stories—an also might allow visitors to see similarities and differences in stories written by people from different world cultures. We could house a large collection of stories built online.

About the Hero’s Journey

Campbell’s work defines a universal story structure that is common to almost every classic myth. The “hero” is not necessarily heroic, but is the central character of the story. The same steps appear in popular culture as movies and are typically how screenwriting is taught—the movie *Star Wars* is famous for strictly following Campbell’s structure.

Briefly described in Table 1, the steps of the Hero’s Journey can be used to analyze a classic story. Was Jack of Jack and the Beanstalk fame a hero? When did Perseus receive the call to adventure? Theseus met the Minotaur on his road of trials. What was his ultimate boon? But the Hero’s Journey is also a guide for writing original stories. As a classroom activity, the first task is to answer a series of questions that help define the hero’s childhood and traits that shape their character.

Table 1. Summary of the Steps of the Hero’s Journey (Copyright 1999 Liz Warren)

A. DEPARTURE
1. The Call to Adventure is the point in a person’s life when something important happens that sends the person in a new direction.
2. Refusal of the Call. Sometimes when a person receives a call to adventure, he or she refuses to go. The future hero might be afraid, or feel like he or she can’t leave responsibilities, or might not feel strong enough or smart enough to start an adventure.
3. Supernatural Aid. Once the hero has started the adventure, a guide or magical helper appears to provide help. The helper does not have to be human.
4. The Crossing of the First Threshold is the point when the person actually begins his or her adventure. The hero leaves his or her familiar neighborhood and normal life and goes into unknown and dangerous places where the rules are not known.
5. The Belly of the Whale At this point in the adventure, the hero is truly between worlds. The familiar world has been left behind and the world of the adventure lies ahead. For many heroes this is a very

frightening moment when they feel all alone and very aware of challenges to come. He or she may truly realize what an important task they have taken on.

B. INITIATION

1. The Road of Trials is a series of tests, tasks, or ordeals that a person must undergo as part of becoming a hero.

2. The Meeting with the Goddess After surviving the road of trials, the hero may experience a great love. In many stories it is a romantic love. Or it may be the warm heart filling love we feel for friends and family. It may also be an experience of a divine love. Either way, the hero gains strength and wonderful feeling of well being from the experience.

3. The Temptation. At some point in the adventure, the hero will be tempted to quit the journey and go home.

4. Atonement is the center point of the journey. All the previous steps have been moving in to this place, all that follow will move out from it. In this step the person must face whatever holds the ultimate power in his or her life.

5. Apotheosis. After facing and surviving the great power in his or her life, the hero may have an experience of the oneness and beauty of the universe. For some heroes it is like being in heaven. Of course, if the hero did not survive the encounter with the great power in his or her life, he or she may actually be in heaven. It is a period of rest and reflection before the return journey is made.

6. The Ultimate Boon is the achievement of the goal of the quest. It is what the person went on the journey to get.

C. RETURN

1. Refusal of the Return. Sometimes, when the adventure has been a glorious or very satisfying one, the hero refuses to come back to normal life. If the hero is concerned that his or her message will not be heard, he or she may also refuse to return.

2. The Magic Flight. Sometimes the hero must steal the boon and then make a daring escape. It can be just as adventurous and dangerous returning from the journey as it was to begin it.

3. Rescue from Without. Just as the hero may have needed a magical guide or helper to set out on the quest, sometimes he or she must have help to come back to everyday life.

4. The Crossing of the Return Threshold. The hero crosses a threshold to return just as when the adventure began. The hero's task at this point is to remember what was learned during the quest, and to use it to make life better for him or her and others.

5. Master of the Two Worlds. At this point in the journey, the hero has learned how to be comfortable with the everyday world and the world of adventure. The hero is comfortable with him or herself and with the rest of the world, too. He or she is equally comfortable in both places, and may be ready to be a guide for someone else.

6. Freedom to Live. When a person has survived a great adventure, and has learned to accept him or herself, they often become free from the fear of death.

For each step of the journey, a series of probing questions helps the writer develop their story lines, for example in the step for the Call to Adventure, the author is asked to consider:

- At what point in your character's life is the story going to begin? For example, does it start at a certain age, or perhaps after the loss of someone important?
- What do you see coming next for this character?
- What might make your character set out on an adventure?
- What is happening to your character when the call to adventure comes? Is it an accident, a mistake, something planned, or hoped for? Is the character looking forward to it or afraid of it?

For examples of this step we can look to mythology, where Gilgamesh's call is the death of Enkidu, the wild man. Or in the Bible, the call to adventure for Moses was the burning bush. From the movie *Star*

Wars, Luke Skywalker received his call to adventure when the “droid” R2D2 projects a hologram of Princess Leia pleading for aid.

Development of the Hero’s Journey Web Site

With an activity now in mind, we worked with our faculty team to design a project flow chart. The site we envisioned featured the following components

1. **About-** Information that describes the site and why it was developed
2. **Reference-** a comprehensive reference section that described the concept of the Hero’s Journey (along with examples from mythology, movies, books, and previously written student stories).
3. **Story Tool-** writing environment that would prompt students with questions for each step and would also store all of the written work online. At any time a writer can jump to the reference section.
4. **Examples-** a listing of stories in development or completed available for viewing by anyone else.
5. **Ideas-** a place for teachers to post ideas about how they use the Hero’s Journey

Our next step was to develop a paper prototype; a series of sketched screen layouts we presented the faculty in a three ring binder. Each “screen” has certain “hot” buttons that would indicate another screen to connect when selected. This process was critical in defining the navigation structure and shaping the final design flow. In this step we added features such as a library of images and sounds that writers could add to their stories.



The suitcase graphic welcomes the entry to the Hero’s Journey site. Smaller icons link to the major sections.

As a metaphor, the site uses a worn suitcase that is covered with stickers that represent the “steps” the hero has visited. Icons of suitcases are the buttons for the five main sections.

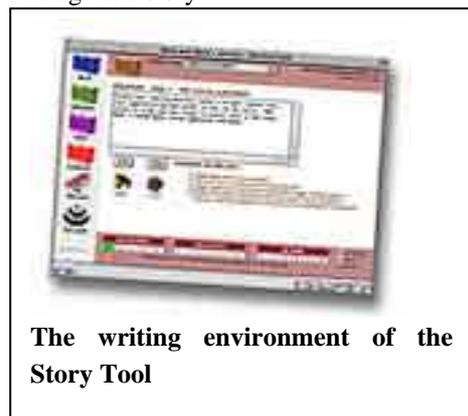
We then created a working prototype as a web site (<http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/smc/journey/>) where all of the interactivity was programmed as JavaScript, which could provide most of the functionality except for saving and retrieving the work from the web server. The final version was completed with a collection of web server CGI scripts written in Perl to handle the user accounts and storage of written work.

Visitors wishing to use the site create accounts based upon their email address (we provide links to places where anyone can get a free email address, but they could also enter a fake email address as well). An author then decides if they will analyze a classic story or write an original one. Next, they complete the questions that help define the character and then they can start writing their story.

The Story Tool features a navigation bar that allows writers to jump to any step in the Hero’s Journey, so they might write the ending before the beginning or the middle.

Buttons provide links to a library of images or sound files that can be added to each step. All of this information is saved as part of their account on our web server.

Story writers also have options to mark their story as “private” so it cannot be viewed from the listings in the Examples section. Or they can mark a work in progress as



The writing environment of the Story Tool

“preview” to allow others to read and comment. And finished stories can be marked as “final” ready for public reading.



The Hero's Journey Reference

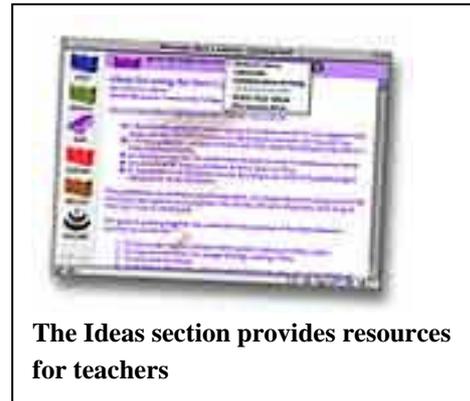
section describes the steps

At all times, story writers have access to our reference section. This includes a description of each step, supplemented with an explanatory quote from Campbell's original book. Linked under each step are examples for the step from mythology, *Star Wars*, other popular culture, and from original stories written by other students. The reference section also includes a Bibliography and a collection of related web sites, a “Webliography”.

We also intended the site

to be a resource for teachers who used or visited the site, so under our “Ideas” section, we list activity ideas, a web form for adding new ideas, and a threaded discussion list.

In September 1998, Hero's Journey web site was ready for use by Liz Warren's students. We also announced its availability on two education-oriented email lists. Word spread quickly and we soon had more external users than internal, ranging from middle school students in Texas to adult writing classes in Spain and many other people from who knows where.



The Ideas section provides resources for teachers



The Examples page is updated every hour to list the current collection of stories created on our site.

All of the stories created on our site are listed on the Examples section, although if a writer marks their story as “private” the story cannot be viewed by anyone other than the author.

One semester later we developed an idea that adds resources to the site. We solicited two different art classes from Paradise Valley Community College and Chandler-Gilbert Community College to have students create graphics for Story Tool section. The art faculty we approached agreed to make this an assignment for their classes—to do so, the art students had to learn about a particular step from the Reference section and/or read

stories listed in the Examples section. We built a feature so students could submit their graphics directly to us via a web form, and we acquired more than 40 new images from our own students plus more sent by other visitors.

The Next Iteration

As of this writing the web site lists more than 2200 original stories and 300 classic stories analyzed, ranging from only titles to full stories 20 pages long. This project has been highly successful for what started as an experiment. The web site suffers some problems because of the complexity of the web server programming as well as effects when students get frustrated at network sluggishness and click buttons many times in succession.

As an outreach project of a local newspaper, the Tribune in Education (<http://www.aztrib.com/TIE/>) project published in the Spring 2000 a 24 page activity supplement for teachers written by Liz Warren

(South Mountain Community College) and Pat Oso (Tribune Newspapers). The TIE also supported a series of workshops to show Teachers how they might use the Hero's Journey. Since our original project was written for a college student audience, we saw a need to re-write the content to reach a broader range of audiences.

Many of these teachers also referred a version that did not rely on the Internet and out of this discussion we began design of a CD-ROM version of the Hero's Journey that could be used offline or online (when online, writers could post their finished stories to our web site). With this version we can provide a much richer media experience, though what we lose is the ability to store all of the stories online so we can evaluate how it is being used. Details for the newer version are available at <http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/proj/hero/>

Summary

Through a collaborative, team-based approach, we were able to transform a sound classroom activity idea into an Internet based application that is available for anyone, anywhere to use for creative writing. The Hero's Journey has proven valuable as a source of reference information, but more so as a place that encourages creative writing. Quite a few teachers have shared with us activity ideas they have developed in conjunction with this web site.

The Hero's Journey web site is an example of a project we developed initially for use within our own system, but by providing it for free to the world at large, we have been able to create connections with teachers and students across the globe.

Most of the territory of the web is purely informational—when a worthy activity idea can be deployed via the same network, we can provide a deeper, rich experience that is creative and expressive.

References

Campbell, Joseph. The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Princeton University Press, Princeton. 1990.

Contact Details

Hero's Journey Web Site

<http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/smc/journey/>

Alan Levine

Maricopa Center for Learning & Instruction

Maricopa Community Colleges

2144 West 14th Street

TEMPE, AZ 85281 USA

(480) 731-8297

alan.levine@domail.maricopa.edu

Liz Warren

South Mountain Community College

7050 S 24th St.

Phoenix AZ 85040-5806

(602) 243-8000

liz.warren@smcmail.maricopa.edu