Creating The Hero

An Honors Thesis

by

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May 2009

May 9, 2009
Abstract

Heroes have played a large role in our world since mankind has started telling stories and making artwork. As both a student and an artist, hero creation has played a large role in my education and artistic process. In this project, I study the history of hero construction, and then work to design my own heroes. I follow the idea of classical hero archetypes and also tie in well-known heroes to my research. I finished this project with three sets of pieces that depict the heroes I created.

Acknowledgements

- I want to thank Andy Beane for advising me on the creation of my demo reel for this creative project, and the work for my senior project in general.

- I would also like to thank Scott Anderson, who helped me to develop my set of concept art.

- Thanks also go to David Hannon for guidance on my works done in painting.
Creating the Hero

Hero creation has played a large role in the world of art and storytelling throughout the history of mankind. The goal for my creative project was to explore the history of hero creation and then to experiment with the construction of my own heroes following classic hero archetypes. When beginning this study, I first looked back to traditional literature and studied the different kinds of heroes that could be found in various works. I then worked on coming up with five different characters that I could develop, each with their own unique personality and history. After that, I continued to expand upon my ideas for these characters by drawing upon my knowledge of existing heroes in both classical literature and popular culture. Once I had finalized the core personalities of my characters I began to design them for my creative project. I completed a suite of concept drawings for the first pair of my characters, the other three I modeled in 3D using Maya software, and I made a suite of paintings with all five characters. Reflecting upon the work I completed, I feel that I have just touched the surface of the process of hero creation, and in the future, I hope to create even better concepts for heroes.

The research side of this project started with me referring back to key pieces of classical literature that have influenced my vision of heroes. Many of these stories were part of the curriculum for my humanities sequence, which also played a large role in my interest in hero creation. I found that I favor hero myths about the ancient warrior cultures of Greece and Rome namely The Iliad, The Odyssey, and The Aenead. I felt that these stories developed interesting characters that had a wide range of personalities. There were two qualities that were present in all of the heroes featured in these stories that helped me to solidify some core ideals about my heroes. The first being the need for hamartia which is a Greek term for character flaw developed by Aristotle. These were always made blatantly obvious, often times at the cost of human life,
and they were the most interesting part of the characters for me. Many times in modern stories the main hero is often portrayed as being invincible, and if they have any flaws they are minor. This lack of realism detracts from the quality of the character being developed. Flaws are necessary for humans to continue to improve as individuals. It is only through making mistakes that people may become greater than what they were before. The second trait that I found interesting about the ancient hero was the way they often had superhuman qualities while at the same time remaining mortal. All heroes have to retain the vulnerability of dying; this is a constant that separates them from the gods frequently present in epics from ancient times. This weakness is what allows these mortals to become greater than anything the Gods could achieve. It is the fact that they go into battle where they could die that makes them superior, because they choose to take the risk. Even if they are destroyed they are honored for their sacrifice, and through this they gain immortality greater than that of the gods. These points helped me develop my foundation for my heroes, and from here I began to work out their separate personalities. It was at this point that I began selecting specific heroes, not just from classical literature but also from some more current works, and studied their nature in order to create heroes with specific archetypes.

My first character I started developing is Cory, a young man who, through no choice of his own, has been forced into a leadership position. While he is more than capable of filling this role, he is quite reluctant to accept his part as leader, feeling that others could do better. This reluctance to accept his responsibility as leader is a reflection of his character flaw, which is a lack of confidence, not just in his abilities but in himself as a person. Cory's super-human like quality comes from his powers that deal with the spiritual realm. His story is set in a world that is less developed industrially, and therefore still has more of a connection with the natural world.
Consequently the community he is a part of has a religion that is closely related to the ideas of shamanism and animism. Meaning that the people believe in animal totems, and that everything in the world has a spirit. Their spiritual leaders are Shamans who use both meditation and possession to communicate with spirits. Cory is actually the grandson of the village Shaman and has inherited the ability to enter the Spirit Realm and see totem animals through meditation.

After establishing the core of Cory's personality using the two main points I decided to base my heroes on, I then considered which hero archetype to work with when developing his story and personality. I chose to work with a destined hero archetype, and for my hero, I chose to use Aeneas from Virgil's *The Aeneid* for comparison. Aeneas’ development as a hero falls directly into the destined hero archetype as he is chosen to be the future leader of the surviving Trojans that flee to future Italy. Throughout his quest, Aeneas is guided and protected by his divine mother Aphrodite, and he is never allowed to stray from his destiny. Cory is likewise guided by a figure of power in his life and kept on his destined path. Unlike Aeneas who was willing to follow his path, Cory had to be forced to accept his role as leader.

The second character I worked to develop is actually Cory’s mentor figure. His name is Carn, and he is both Cory’s animal totem and spiritual guide. Creating Carn was an experiment in testing the boundaries I had decided upon for my hero creation. While he filled all of the requirements I had laid for myself, he also pushed them to the limit. Carn’s flaw is his lack of empathy. The fact that he is essentially an animal spirit masquerading as a human explains his strange behavior, but it does not excuse his often cruel treatment of Cory. The requirement for the hero to remain vulnerable was a little bit harder to fill with the concept for this character. Carn was required to be a spirit in order to fill the role of Cory’s supernatural guide. However, by tying Carn to Cory as his totem animal, I was able to apply some of that susceptibility. Carn is
The hero archetype I attribute to Carn is the trickster hero, which works quite well with his role as an animal spirit. It was only fitting that the hero I chose for inspiration would be Coyote, the trickster god from Native American folklore. Both characters embody the carefree and often cruel nature of the trickster hero, who cares little for the plight of others and only looks after their own interests. The only difference in their situations is the added vulnerability of Carn’s situation, which influences his whims accordingly. Coyote has no such boundaries and is able to do as he pleases. In this instance, I feel that this added layer to Carn’s character enriches an otherwise selfish existence making him ironically a noble trickster.

My third character I came up with is a woman named Jade, a soldier by trade. Jade’s situation hinges on the fact that she chose to become a soldier. In her world, a dystopian future where humanity is fighting against an alien invasion, no one chooses to join the armed forces. This is due to the danger that comes with the job, soldiers rarely live to see their twentieth birthday. Instead recruits are drafted unwillingly from the remaining population, sometimes even going as far as taking children from orphanages. However, Jade chooses to put her life on the line, and this makes her stand out from the others, which is not always to her advantage. Jade’s super-human quality is her uncanny ability to earn the loyalty of those around her. This is a trait that serves her well while she works on a force filled with those who have little trust for anyone, since the government views them as expendable tools.

Jade is human, but she does have a bit more protection afforded to her due to the fact that she needs it to combat her nonhuman foes. This comes in the form of a suit of high tech armor that she wears. While this aids her in battle, it by no means makes her immortal, thus maintaining
her vulnerability. Jade’s flaw is that she is too willing to forfeit her life for the cause she believes in. While she fights for a noble cause, a return to freedom for the people, her dying for it would do more harm than good. Without Jade there would be no guiding force for the rebellion against the government. She is the only person who can empathize with those who are in the army and the free citizens. So without her these two groups would be unable to work together towards change. Jade would fall into the category of a sacrificing hero archetype, mainly because of her character flaw. The character I draw upon for inspiration is Hector from *The Iliad*. These two characters both fight for the sake of their people, and in Hector’s case he dies for them. Jade does become severely wounded and probably would have died if not for the intervention of her partner. Jade and Hector are also similar in the fact that they are natural leaders, which draws people’s admiration. While Hector’s story is tragic, Jade is given a second chance which allows her to rise up from her defeat and win freedom for the people.

The fourth character I worked on creating is Sable; he is from the same world as Jade and is actually her partner in combat. While Jade may be a unique circumstance in their world, Sable’s case is sadly a bit more usual. He was orphaned at a young age, and shortly after that he was inducted into the armed services. When it comes to exceptional abilities, Sable’s would be his extreme intelligence. The government has taken advantage of Sable’s intellect and forced him to create weapons for the war. His usefulness has led to him being separated from those who are also forced to serve in the army, and he is even given special treatment over others, which of course leads to his comrades resenting him. This unfortunate occurrence of events leads to the development of his character flaw, which is his difficulty with normal social interaction. Sable was already seen as a bit eccentric to most people in this army environment due to his extreme
intellect, and the further separation from his peers only augmented the problem. His partnership with Jade has helped him to deal with this flaw, but he will never be rid of it.

Sable falls into the archetype of the intellectual hero due to his preference to use his mind to solve problems rather than force. I relate his character to Sherlock Holmes from the various stories and novels written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The intelligence of both characters is the first obvious connection between the two. However, a much stronger connection that I feel the two characters have is their eccentric behavior that can be alarming to other people. Holmes was also famous for eccentric behavior and often behaved in a fashion that was uncomfortable for other people. A prime example of this would be his tendency to look like he was ignoring someone when he was really listening intently. The other link between the two characters is the support they gain from their partners. While Sherlock may not necessarily rely on Watson to solve mysteries, I would argue that he relies on him for moral support and protection, the same things Sable relies on Jade for.

The final character that I developed is a man named Michael who lives during the old west. Michael used to be a drifter who traveled simply to keep moving with no real motivation or destination. He really has no driving force unlike my other characters. Nothing has occurred to give him a purpose in life, so he simply exists from day to day. Strangely enough his character flaw is the thing that causes his life to change from this meaningless journey to an existence with a purpose. This character flaw is his unpredictable and often-times quickly triggered temper. Michael can be easily irritated by those around him, especially people who are rude to him or look at him funny. While passing through one of the many small towns he travels through, Michael ends up picking a fight with one of the local gangs of ruffians. He ends up winning the fight and driving the men away, and in doing so, he endears himself to the town folk, who
demand that he become their sheriff. He ends up accepting the position simply because it took too much effort to dissuade them. Michael’s special ability, which is the uncanny knack for shooting and fighting, allows him to become a very successful sheriff.

The hero model I chose for Michael was the warrior archetype. This is due to his natural fighting aptitude, and his loner nature. The character I relate Michael to would be Achilles from The Iliad who was a great warrior at Troy. I can connect them through their skills in the area of combat and also through their reclusive tendencies. Both men are also similar in the fact that they care little for the community they are a part of. Achilles, during a bout of pride over the fact a woman was taken from him, allowed many of his companions to be slaughtered because he would not fight at Troy. While Michael is not as spiteful as Achilles, he would also allow for his own interests to cloud his judgment.

Once all of my research and character development was completed, I finally began to work on my creative projects. The first thing I completed was a set of concept drawings that depict key points in the lives of Cory and Carn. Each drawing was created using ink for the background and cante crayon for the figure drawings. The ink allowed me to have fluid and almost dreamlike backgrounds, while the cante gave me control when I was drawing the characters. I experimented with showing their personalities in the scenes that I chose, through their facial expressions, body language, and poses. Image A is an example of this. Carn is the upright figure who is leaning over Cory. Carn’s body language is far more aggressive and confident than Cory’s, which reflects the personalities that they have.

The next work I completed was the 3D models that appear in my demo reel. In this part of the project I used Jade, Sable, and Michael. Each of them was modeled completely in 3D using Maya software. Then textured and lighted appropriately, using Z-Brush to hand paint
textures and Maya to light the scene. All three of these characters are fighters so this is echoed in the poses I chose for them. Since I modeled these three characters I created in 3D they can be studied from all angles. This is especially useful for Jade and Sable since the armor I developed has interesting pieces that would be absent in a 2D representation.

The final part of my creative project was a suite of oil paintings that depict each of my five characters. I once again worked with body language and facial expressions in order to bring across their personalities. This time I also used color to create moods for my audience while they view the pieces. In Image J which features Cory, I used a lighter color green in the background compared to Image H which is Cam’s portrait. I did this to evoke a lighter calmer feeling for the viewer when they saw Cory’s piece.

Hero creation plays a large role in the world of entertainment today just as it has for thousands of years. This project allowed me to study the history of this tradition, and then apply it the creation of my own group of heroes. Traditional literature helped me to construct standards for the heroes I endeavored to create. Each of these creative projects were fulfilling for me as an artist since they allowed me to continue to hone my skills in a variety of media. They were also interesting for me as a scholar when I was applying my research in order to bring across characterization. This was an interesting introduction to the world of hero creation for me, and I hope in the future to develop more heroes using some similar methods.
WORKS CONSULTED


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