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# MORE THAN STORYTELLING: WORLDBUILDING

by Hugh Schulze

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When George Lucas sold his *Star Wars* universe to Disney for \$4 billion dollars in 2012, he wasn't just leaving a legacy of Jedis, droids, Sarlacs, lightsabers, Death Stars, and Darth Mauls, he had fundamentally changed how studios make movies. Through cultural osmosis, he also changed how creative businesses from advertising and design agencies to HR departments talk about storytelling. This is a good news/bad news story.

The upside has been a more systematized way to think about story to evaluate scripts, pitches, and potential nine-figure investments in films. It's helped the aforementioned advertising and design agencies craft memorable punchlines and moving thirty-second melodramas too.

But, like any successful formula, a slavish devotion to storytelling can stifle or misdirect creativity and risk-taking. You can track the rise of formulaic superhero movies to themes established in *Star Wars* decades earlier. Complexity of character has given way to more Manichean tales of Good vs. Evil. A recent example of where worlds collided and story was not enough to save the day was Pepsi's "Celebrate Diversity" spot. The fairy tale world of celebrity princess Kendall Jenner forsaking the castle to join the masses in protest collided with the real world: people are turning out in record numbers for real issues in real protests. Our guess is that a documentary of the celebrity's active commitment and participation would have played better than a tone-deaf puppet show.

While storytelling still provides useful narratives for branding and marketing, new business realities in a disrupted business landscape are forcing marketers to take a step back and examine larger landscapes. Uber and AirBnB are more new realities than new stories. Worldbuilding is a way of fashioning a shared experience in which your customer is able to interact with your brand to help shape the landscape.



# You're a    I'm a    We're all **HERO. HERO. HEROES!**

The mythologist, Joseph Campbell, spent his academic career analyzing the common themes among myths and legends from around the world. He wrote extraordinary books linking myths from Japan to ancient Greece and MesoAmerica. One recurring storyline he encountered was what he called "The Hero's Journey." This journey (outlined below) followed a relatively naïve character who receives a "Call to Adventure!" This story cycle then takes the character through a series of challenges and transformations until the character returns older and wiser. Or in the case of George Lucas: a Jedi Master.



It's a resonant story. Don't all of us at some point imagine ourselves as heroes in our own movie? Hoping for a little supernatural assistance?



By the time journalist Bill Moyers interviewed George Lucas and Joseph Campbell as part of his PBS series *The Power of Myth*, producers, directors and scriptwriters in Hollywood were actively emulating “The Hero’s Journey.” It became a blueprint across history and genres. And the focus on storytelling became a way to talk about—and validate—a particular way of thinking, empathizing and connecting to personal stories of day-to-day challenges, changes, and transformations.

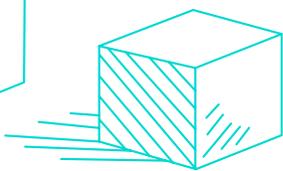
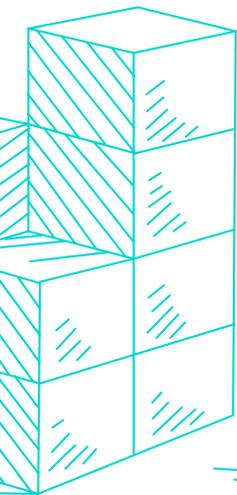
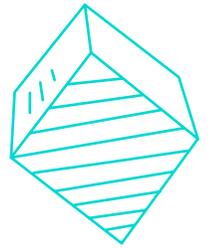
For a more in-depth treatment of storytelling as a creative tool, we’d recommend **Christopher Vogler’s book** (now in its Third Edition). Our purpose here is to take a step back and examine how to go beyond just storytelling and tap into deeper emotional elements that can connect with your target audience. Just as “The Hero’s Journey” taps into psychological elements of our own internalized journey, that empathy and relatability are also key to comics and the comedies of Charlie Chaplin and Louis C.K. There’s more than storytelling that is connecting on a deeper, emotional level.

Put differently, we believe people are still posting “May the 4th be with you!” memes on social media, not because of the Hero’s Journey storyline, but because of the richness of the experience created.

## World **BUILDING**

Two minutes and ten seconds into *Star Wars*—after the 20th Century Fox logo, after the crawling text which gives backstory on a Civil War in space—we tilt down from the stars to three planets and a spaceship enters the top of the frame. As it moves slowly forward, it fires at something behind it, a ship in pursuit.

I am old enough to remember the intake of breath that went through the theater when the pursuing ship enters the frame—because it keeps on entering the frame, growing and growing in size, a hundred times larger than the smaller craft, for a full 10 seconds.



This David and Goliath battle cuts suddenly to the interior of the beleaguered rebel vessel. Three robots—not humans—stumble down the corridor. Here again, Lucas makes a critical decision: the opening dialog is uttered by two robots (one of which communicates only in whistles and beeps!) These specific details are what draw us into the world Lucas is building.

**At three minutes and forty seconds, stormtroopers board the ship.**

**Exactly one minute later, Darth Vader makes his entrance.**

This is not simply storytelling. These details are worldbuilding. All of the decisions made in under five minutes of the film establish the tone of what will happen throughout this movie. Indeed, throughout the franchise, right down to the uniformly faceless, armored Stormtroopers who easily take out Resistance fighters dressed in bike helmets and Eddie Bauer vests and khakis.

Take another well-known example: Shakespeare did not create the stories of *Romeo and Juliet*, of *Hamlet* or of *King Lear*. He appropriated them from history and folklore. But through character development, by applying his experience as an actor with conflict and dialogue, through development and mastery of language and meter (coining words like “sea-change” in *The Tempest*), he made those stories Shakespearean.

## The applied art of **WORLDBUILDING**

Advertising and design agencies that focus on the primacy of storytelling for brand building put the cart before the horse. Before you can tell the story, you must describe the world in which that story takes place.

“To compose a map from a story is weary business.

-J.R.R. Tolkien





In the 17 years between *The Hobbit* and his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, J.R.R. Tolkien doodled, sketched, and drew maps as he wrote. He drew topographic lines to define elevations of mountains and valleys. As the book *The Art of the Lord of the Rings* describes it, he pasted pages on top of pages and even scaled maps (1 mm equaled 5 miles) so that he could “calculate the motions and locations of Frodo and Sam.”

Tolkien wrote specifically to the primacy and importance of world making: “To compose a map from a story [is] weary business.” For this master storyteller, the world came first.

Building a brand from a story is dreary business. The exploration of color palettes, soundscapes, company voice, architecture, corporate culture and other exquisite details that are a part of the brand’s world need to happen while the story is developed. Or before. Tolkien was able to write richer, deeper novels that have connected with millions because he was doing more than moving characters from one point to another in a story.



## What’s your **DESTINATION?**

HBO is more than a network. It’s an entire galaxy of worldbuilding. It’s there in the DNA of their early brand. Long before the layered realities of *Westworld* or *True Detective*, before the many kingdoms of *Game of Thrones*, HBO’s tagline proudly announced it was a world unto itself: It’s not TV. It’s HBO.

What are the maps of your company’s brand? What is its topography? Sandy shoreline or vast mountain range? If your company had a playlist, what would it be? Sure, they’re supposed to be fun questions you talk about over coffee or an adult beverage—that’s how you discover what draws your customers to your brand. They’re ways to talk about customer experience before forcing them on an enforced march about your history or selling presentation. Questions like these and the detailed answers they can reveal will help you engage your customers on a more intimate level of human experience.

