

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

This year is going to be epic. Three massively huge sci-fi fantasy franchises are going to come to a conclusion.

On April 14th, Game of Thrones will air its final season – which is six episodes -- but they are going to be six massive, 90-minute episodes that have taken years to make. I can't even imagine the budget.

CLIP: GAME OF THRONES TRAILER

On April 26th, Avengers: Endgame comes out, which is the sequel to last year's giant crossover movie Infinity War, and it's reportedly going to be the end of the line for the original Avengers team after 20-something movies.

CLIP: AVENGERS ENDGAME TRAILER

And in December, Star Wars Episode IX will conclude the new trilogy, and the entire Skywalker saga that began in 1977.

But the thing that I'm really excited about is the fact that so many characters – heroic characters -- are going to wrap up their stories. I can't wait to find out -- are they going to die? If they do, is it going to be a heroic death, or is their death going feel unfair and need to be avenged? If they survive, will they get endings that allow them to live on in our collective imagination – or in other media? Or are we going to be disappointed? Are we going to spend months hashing out why their endings were a big let down?

And throughout all of this, I keep thinking about The Hero's Journey – and by that I mean the idea of the concept of The Hero's Journey, as it was first introduced by Joseph Campbell in his 1949 non-fiction book, "The Hero With a Thousand Faces."

Joseph Campbell was a professor of literature at Sarah Lawrence College from the 1930s to the 1970s. He was fascinated by the way mythology from around the world, and throughout time, all have similar ideas and

characters. For instance, every culture throughout the world has a myth that's very similar to Noah and the great flood.

Campbell didn't think that was a coincidence, but he didn't see it as a sign of God either. He believed in the theories of Carl Jung – who was a psychiatrist at the same time as Sigmund Freud – and Jung believed that human culture is created by people tapping into a collective unconscious network of ideas.... a shared universe if you will.

By the time he retired, Joseph Campbell's work was well respected but fairly obscure. And then George Lucas cited *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* as one of his inspirations for *Star Wars* – specifically Campbell's idea of the mono-myth, the myth of a hero who goes on a journey.

Suddenly this retired liberal arts professor became an overnight sensation. People were treating Joseph Campbell as a guru with sagely advice on how to live their lives. He appeared in a series of interview shows on PBS with Bill Moyers.

MOYERS: Why are there so many stories of the hero or heroes?

CAMPBELL: Because that's worth writing about. A hero is someone who has given his life to something bigger than himself, or other than himself.

And if you're thinking, the hero's journey – I feel like I know this – what this is again? Trust me, you know it. You've seen it a thousand times.

The hero's journey begins with an ordinary person living an ordinary life.

AUNTY EM: Find yourself a place where you won't get into any trouble

DOROTHY: Some place where there isn't any trouble. Do you supposed there is a place?

Suddenly, there's a call to adventure.

HAGRID: You're a Wizard, Harry, and a thumping good one I'd wager. if you trade up a little.

HARRY: No you're made a mistake, No I can't be a wizard, I'm just Harry.

The hero is yearning for something more but the call to adventure scares them. They don't want to go at first.

BEN: You must learn the ways of the force if you come with me

LUKE: Alderaan? I can't go to Alderaan, I've got to get home.

BEN: I need your help, Luke. She needs your help.

MORPHEUS: Welcome, Neo. As you no doubt have guessed, I am Morpheus.

The hero accepts the call to adventure and crosses into a new world with the help of a wise mentor and a supernatural element.

MORPHEUS: After this there is no turning back, the story ends, you wake up in your bed, and believe whatever you believe. You take the red pill, you stay in wonderland, and I how you how deep the rabbit hole goes.

GALDALF: You must leave and leave quickly

FRODO: Where do I go?

GALDALF: Head out of the Shire and head to the Brie

Along the way, the hero makes new allies.

HAN: Han Solo, captain of the Millennium Falcon.

HERMONIE: I'm Hermonie Granger, and you are?

RON: Ron Weasley.

The hero faces new enemies, with tests of mental and physical endurance.

KATNISS: Katness Everdeen, district 12.

SFX: Shoots arrow, laughter.

The hero stumbles along the way, and has to resist temptations to turn around and give up.

DIANA: I killed him but nothing stopped you kill the god of war, you stop the war

STEVE: Exactly what we have to do

DIANA: No, this should've stopped! Why are they still fighting?!

Finally, the hero reaches the cave of darkness where all hope seems lost.

BRUCE: What have I done, Alfred? Everything my family, my father built

ALFRED: The Wayne legacy is more than bricks and mortars, sir

BRUCE: I wanted to save Gotham. I failed.

ALFRED: Why do we fall, sir? So we can learn to pick ourselves back up.

That's when the hero finds an elixir, which could be a magic item but usually it's knowledge or insight that helps them complete their journey.

OBI-WAN: Use the Force, Luke! Let go, Luke!

MORPHEUS: He is the one!

After their victory, the road back offers redemption or resurrection. And the hero realizes what they set out to find was not the same as what they needed to learn.

TIN MAN: What have you learned, Dorothy?

DOROTHY: Well, I think that it wasn't enough to want to just want to see Uncle Henry and Auntie Em, and if I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my backyard.

You might have noticed that most of the heroes in that montage were men. That's not a coincidence. In the original mono-myth laid out by Joseph Campbell, the hero was always a guy. Women showed up as either a goddess or a temptress. There's no reason to stick those gender roles today. Captain Marvel is heading towards a billion dollars worldwide.

You might have also noticed most of the movies I chose were from the last few decades. That is not a coincidence either.

In 1980s and '90s, a new generation of screenwriters took Joseph Campbell's ideas and distilled them into bullet points, and turned those into screenwriting manuals. It started with Christopher Vogler's *The Mythic Journey*, followed by Robert McKee's *Story* and Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat*, and many, many more.

I studied the hero's journey when I was making students films. And for ten years, I used it blueprint to try and become a screenwriter. Outside my day job, I went to countless writing classes in L.A. and New York. I read those books, and I went to seminars by some of the authors.

And I don't think people who teach the Hero's Journey as a formula, or the writers who follow it, are being cynical. They sincerely want to tell great stories, and they want to empower other people to tell great stories.

In fact, I put a call out to my listeners on social to hear your thoughts on the hero's journey. And some of people said it was crucial for understanding stories, and even life itself.

LISTENER 1: I took a class in college that was about applying looking at all the different movies that have the hero's journey in it and looking at the narrative and the structure than applying at your own life. And it really helped me because at the time my mom had just died and I had left full-time Ministry in the idea of kind of seeing my life in the hero's journey was just eye-opening and super helpful and then you know to be able to compare myself to different character's stories was just really insightful and helped me get through some like crazy difficult times. So I think it's a very very very useful tool and when used well is just fantastic and inspiring.

LISTENER 2: I've been working with middle school and high school youths for over ten years teaching immersive narrative theater through the lens of the hero's journey, and I can still every year find new and amazing gems and art and art literacies through it. So I'm very much strongly opinionated about the hero's journey as a positive tool and perhaps if not the kind of blueprint of evolution itself.

But not everyone felt positively about it.

LISTENER 3: When storytellers leaned too heavily on it, there's tropes that that we lean into. The other problem is to that it tends to be very predictable. Ultimately, the whole goal of the stories to change the character and the audience gets to watch it along the way. But what's happening is that that structure has been done so many times over and over again that that it's become repetitive and predictable and boring and a lot of times as a filmmaker, film festivals will be turned off to something like that.

I've started to question the hero's journey too, or at least the way we think about it.

Joseph Campbell did not set out to create a set of rules for how to make a movie. He was just pointing out a pattern that he noticed. If anything, he

wanted modern Western readers to understand that stories and traditions from other cultures or from the past that may seem strange or even repulsive to us actually spoke to the human condition just as much as the rituals in our daily lives that we take for granted.

And the best writing teachers will tell us that The Hero's Journey is a tool for writing, not a rule.

And I've seen every Marvel and DC movie – I'm usually there opening weekend. And if they're done well, I get so excited when the hero emerges from the cave of darkness and comes into their full potential. But more often I'll see a movie like Guardians of the Galaxy, which felt like a breath of fresh air back in 2014, but the storyline for the main character, Peter Quill, to me felt like a paint-by-number hero's journey – like that was price of admission for all the other stuff in the movie – the moments that I actually remembered afterward.

So has The Hero's Journey worn out its welcome? Or is it full of eternal truths but the problem is that people aren't being creative enough with it – through a lack of imagination or because of pressure from the studios?

I don't know the answer, but I talked with two people who have an interesting take on this subject.

We'll hear from them just after the break.

BREAK

Abraham Reisman is one of my favorite pop culture journalists. He covers comics for the website Vulture. And he's working on a biography of Stan Lee, which will come out next year.

Abe is a geek through and through, but he hopes that Game of Thrones, The Avengers and Stars Wars will mark the end of an era – the end of The Hero's Journey as the major paradigm for sci-fi fantasy storytelling.

Although there was a time when he really believed in it.

ABE: I realize actually probably the most recent time that I really fell into that trap was in college when I sort of rediscovered Star Wars, I had kind of abandoned it

as childhood nonsense and then in college the Star Wars DVDs first came out which really dates me. And I remember watching them and suddenly feeling like oh my God this is the best way to live my life is to try and think about every single test that I take and every paper that I write as just another step along my path to greatness. And you know growing up with a million heroes journey stories I'm sure sort of broke my brain to a certain extent to the point where that was the way I motivated myself.

To play devil's advocate. I mean you know what people will say like a lot of people in Hollywood will you know say, yeah but I mean you know these are these are tools not rules. And also it works. People love it. What's the harm and giving people what they want?

ABE: I would say the harm is the mono-myth is a machine designed intentionally or not to make you a narcissist. The mono-myth is all about how a singular entity has the entire universe laid out for him or her – of course usually him -- and everything that happens is only relevant in so far as it affects him. That's a mindset that the older I get the more I think is the cause of a lot of problems in the world it leads to this sense of avarice and covetousness and I just think it's not healthy to constantly be exposed to Heroes Journey stories.

You what also too, I remember, I mean the first Matrix movie is a classic. I loved it. But I remember the moment that that rubbed me the wrong way and I still think about it 20 years later is when Neo asked Morpheus about what about all these other people that I'm killing you know like the guards at this bank or whatever. And he has well they're not evolved. You know don't worry about them.

ABE: What's funny is maybe this is too niche a reference but I feel like one of the great subversions of the hero's journey is the great comic series written by Grant Morrison, The Invisibles. And the Invisibles famously very early on shockingly early on in its narrative has this standalone issue that explores the entire life cycle of this rando guard who gets shot by the heroes early on in the story. And Grant Morrison included in issues shortly after that, that's just about the nuanced difficult life that this guard had experienced and his just abrupt death and how completely unjust that is, and I feel like -- you know now that we're talking about it, I'm realizing there's a lot in profile writing, in nonfiction that gets Hero's Journey-ified. You know it's easy to fall into the trap of going like, he came from nothing and then he you know had this spark of talent and then he faced all these problems and then eventually he overcame them and now he's reached his peak.

And then he also had to go into the cave of darkness

ABE: You're right, you know the long dark teatime of the soul as Douglas Adams would put it exactly.

We're going to get back to Abe later, but first I want you to meet someone else.

When I was looking for interesting critiques of the Hero's Journey, I came across a fascinating blog post from a musical theater composer in Australia named Peter J. Casey. He thinks the hero's journey has taken over Broadway. And I've always liked musicals. Living in New York, I see a lot of them, but that had never occurred to me.

He first noticed this trend when he was reading books on how to write musicals.

PETER: I think what really struck me was what music theater writers call the I want song or the I wish song and it's now treated as if it's almost an obligatory part of a musical and it just isn't. There are some great musicals that uses them, My Fair Lady has a song that starts with all I want is a room somewhere so it's certainly not the case that they don't belong in musicals. They do but they don't belong in every musical. And there are some great musicals that don't have them but it's now very difficult to find, especially with the show that's been adapted from a movie, the first two numbers are, this is the world we occupy and the second number is here's your plucky hero or heroine and here's what he or she wants.

But isn't that an old formula that goes back as far as Broadway theater?

PETER: It certainly doesn't go back to shows like say Showboat and it doesn't go back to shows like Oklahoma or I mean Oklahoma introduces you to your hero first off he walks onstage and sings about how great the weather is. It's at no stage does he say you know I can't like it here in Oklahoma but I sure do wish we were a state. Like at no stage does he announce what he's going to drive him for the rest of the show. Boy I sure would like to take Laurie to that box dance – that happens but it doesn't happen in the way that we expect these things to happen in a musical now. And the problem for me is that it's often forced onto a narrative where it doesn't necessarily belong. For example the movie of Aladdin the Disney animated movie had a song called "Proud of Your Boy" which was cut. It was decided that it slowed down the narrative and that it was pretty clear what Aladdin wanted without him having a whole song devoted to it. And now in the stage show that song is back. That song is now back and occupies that spot. And I'm confused as to why in one example it slowed down the narrative and in the other it did not. But I think it's just the ubiquity of the I want and the necessity of having the lead characters stand before the audience and say very boldly, here's what I'm after this evening.

SONG: PROUD OF YOUR BOY

I asked Peter if he could name a popular musical – something more recent than Oklahoma -- that wouldn't exist in its current form because it doesn't conform to the hero's journey. And he pointed to the longest running show in Broadway history: Phantom of the Opera.

PETER: I think you could rewrite Phantom Of The Opera to be a pretty standard Hero's Journey, but as it stands it's an odd parable about a young talented woman who falls in love with a sexy murderer/mentor. She's attracted to him, and they don't get together and it's he really is a killer. And she said I don't know kind of redeems him with her kindness because she's not put off by his physical disfigurement and then he disappears in a way that we assume is death although given that Phantom has a sequel, I guess we were all wrong. And I don't know what hero's journey that could possibly be when she really only takes action at that one point. It's at that point where she refuses to be put off by his disfigurement. She has one act of kindness, the rest of the tile is her being pursued and her passively waiting for things to happen like for her boyfriend to turn up and rescue her. And oddly that show still runs and runs just fine. It's doing it's doing great business.

And remember when Abe said that magazine profiles often follow the hero's journey? Well, Peter thinks the same thing is true for the current trend of biographical musicals.

PETER: And you see it again and again with bio musicals, which is we'll start with Cher, or we'll start with Charlie Chaplin, but we'll start with our historically accurate figure but we'll start at the point where they deserve, and we in the audience, it's a cheat because we know they'll succeed or we wouldn't know the name of the musical we're watching.

Although he doesn't put Hamilton in that category -- he sees it more along the lines of Wicked or Into the Woods and Wicked where the heroes announce at the beginning what they want but go on to discover that life is messy, and be careful what you wish for.

So how did the hero's journey take over Broadway? Peter thinks it started with Howard Ashman and Alan Menken. They were a pair of composers, who had a big hit with Little Shop of Horrors. In the late '80s, Disney hired

them to write songs for The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast and Aladdin. Those movies were such big hits they brought Disney animation back from the dead, and they brought Disney to Broadway. And of course those movies are now being remade as live action films. And the current generation of Broadway composers grew up watching those Howard Ashman and Alan Menken Disney movies. That was their Star Wars.

PETER: I think what Howard Ashman re-taught Hollywood, these numbers can be both entertaining and emotionally involving, and if we're dealing with as it was then ink on a cell it's even more important that it be emotionally involving so it's quite extraordinary what they pulled off with the opening number of Beauty and the Beast. It's what I call an Ashman opening because there's both the This is the world we're in, and this the central characters I want moment but it's all encompassed in the one song So Belle doesn't get a completely separate song about how much she loves books and how much she'd like to go off on an adventure somewhere that's actually within the first song. So it's very compressed and it's very it's a very economical way of telling a story.

SONG: BEAUTY AND THE BEAST OPENING

PETER: And I think Hollywood learned the wrong lesson from that in terms of what fed back into musicals. I think that they took away the idea that the characters should have an "I want" moment and the idea that we should establish the world that we're in and sadly because Ashman died and he died quite young. I don't think he was around to say oh now we don't do it the same way. That's not what I meant. I think he would have said we achieved these things but we achieved them in a way that suits the story we're telling not we achieved them in the same way regardless of the story we're telling.

Another factor in bringing Hollywood to Broadway: real estate prices. Mounting a show is more expensive and riskier than ever. That's why so many musicals are based on familiar movies, which follow the hero's journey.

PETER: If we're now charging routinely triple figures even to see the flops, we have to ask ourselves well what does an audience get for that? And a movie is much cheaper to go and say. And this is a one off live event. I can't watch it again and again at my leisure, there is no Netflix for theater so we have to ask ourselves well what are we giving the audience and are they right to expect more

and if they do expect more can we get away with that formula or do we need to be ahead of our audience be more creative than they expect us to be.

Yeah it reminds me of the Robert Altman movie The Player – which was a satire of Hollywood. Altman used to say the villain in that movie was not Griffin Mill, the sleazy movie studio exec, it was the audience, every time anyone tried to do anything creative or new, audience was is like, no, no, we really like the thing we're familiar with.

PETER: Yeah, sometimes the audience is the villain and we are responsible for them being the villain I think if we continue to tell the same story in the same way for the same ticket price in the same size room in the same cities of the world.

The same could be said for Game of Thrones, The Avengers, and Star Wars. They're too big to fail.

Although Game of Thrones could give us a totally messed up ending – because its TV, and TV is where things are starting to change, especially with smaller shows that have to take risks so the shows can stand out.

For instance, one of my favorite shows last year was Cobra Kai, which is streaming on YouTube TV. The show is a sequel to the Karate Kid, which is one of the classic hero's journeys of the 1980s. They got the original cast back, but Cobra Kai is about the villain from The Karate Kid – Johnny Lawrence – who is trying to redeem himself. The hero from The Karate Kid, Daniel Laruso, is kind of the antagonist of the show. But neither one is really a hero or a villain. And the show constantly subverts my expectations.

DANIEL: I heard you beat up a bunch of teenagers.

JOHNNY: I didn't beat up any teenagers. I kicked the shit out of a bunch of assholes who deserved it.

DANIEL: Wow. Johnny Lawrence calling someone an asshole – that's rich.

JOHNNY: What's that supposed to mean?

DANIEL: Look, I'm not here to re-hash the past. Just stay away from my daughter's friends.

JOHNNY: You're daughter's friends? That makes sense. Nice company she keeps.

DANIEL: What's that supposed to mean.

JOHNNY: It means those friends of hers were wailing on a kid half their size. Maybe you don't know your daughter as well as you think you do. Get your house in order, Laruso.

DANIEL: Who the hell do you think you're talking to?!

Abe Reisman says ironically, comic books are another good source for experimental storytelling because unlike comic book movies, actual comic books are made quickly and cheaply. And the characters can't really age.

ABE: Superhero comics are a fascinating fictional laboratory because they're this place where you have to generate so much content that if you have a trope that's really tired, people are just not going to be interested in it because there's such a blizzard of other things that are available to them and because you have to tell so many stories that if you keep using the same story over and over again, it gets really old really fast. That doesn't mean there aren't heroes journey stories in comics but I feel like they're much more uncommon than they are in comic book adaptations on the big screen.

Abe says another great source of storytelling about heroes and villains is professional wrestling.

ABE: In professional wrestling in order to keep things interesting, you'll very often have somebody who is a good guy also known as a face or a baby face become evil and become what is called a heel. That's sort of the villain in professional wrestling and that's called a heel turn, and that's very common in professional wrestling and to a lesser extent common in superhero comics and very common in real life.

Well it's interesting because I feel like a lot of politicians especially when they're running for president. It starts with the purity of the hero's journey and then by the time they have been president for at least two years let alone four to six to eight years.

ABE: I know. It's amazing. It's like you know Tommy Carcetti in The Wire where like he starts out as the young idealist and then you hear the older politicians and operatives telling him like at some point you're going to have to eat your first bowl of shit, and people are going to hate you for it.

What do you think will break this? I mean the fact is that this formula makes money and it's reliable.

ABE: Oh yeah, people love it.

And so what would break the cycle do you think?

ABE: I think if you could have less caution in coming up with your stories about superheroes and other epic protagonists if you could have people who are willing to roll the dice a little bit more you could see some gradual trend slightly away from the hero's journey. You know Logan is the end of a hero's journey and Logan's one of my all time favorite superhero movies.

CHARLES: Logan, Logan! You still have time

LOGAN: Charles, the world is not the same as it was, we're taking a risk hanging around here, and where we're going, Eden, doesn't exist. A nurse got it from a comic book. It's not real.

ABE: You know it's tremendous, and you can do stories like that really well, it's just you can also do them very lazily and more often than not, I think they fall into that category.

What else could break the cycle? Looking at the way people tell stories in other cultures, which is something that Joseph Campbell encouraged.

In fact, I was telling Abe, one of the reasons why I think the animated movie Into The Spider-Verse felt so fresh new to so many people was because the movie was heavily influenced by Japanese anime.

ABE: My favorite anime is kind of a pedestrian choice but it's a masterpiece nonetheless is Katsuhiro Otomo's Akira, which is you know a tremendous manga and an amazing anime as well and that's not a Hero's Journey. I mean if anything it's a deep subversion of it because it's about a few characters, one of whom discovers he is sort of the chosen one but he's this awful, destructive force that people who are very much not the chosen one have to combat and as he overcomes obstacles you really wish that the obstacles were even harder to overcome. And I think you're right. I mean there probably are cultural differences that influence the way those stories are told and it'd be nice to see you know more borrowing of that sort of thing or you know you think about Aboriginal myths in Australia where everything's kind of cyclical and it's not a linear story from beginning to end. You know you have the dreamtime and this notion that everything just sort of repeats with variation and you don't have you know an end to a story where everything is put into place.

But after all these years, The Hero's Journey is what audiences come to expect, especially with sci-fi and fantasy. It's easy to give them what they want. It's harder to make them want something else.

Well that is it for this week, thank you for listening. My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. Special thanks to Abe Reisman, Peter J. Casey and everyone who called in and left a message.

What are your thoughts on the Hero's Journey? You can also let me know on the show's Facebook page. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. The show's website is imaginary world podcast dot org. And if you want to get the full back catalog of Imaginary Worlds, and listen to the show ad-free by subscribing to Stitcher Premium. And you get the first days of binging for free if you use the promo code Imaginary.