

# Myth and Misattributions: Comparing Common Conceptions of the Hero's Journey against Joseph Campbell

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videogames, hero's journey, Joseph Campbell, Christopher Vogler

## INTRODUCTION

The hero's journey is prevalent in videogame discourse, whether advocated (e.g., Rollings & Adams 2003), applied (e.g., Buchanan-Oliver & Seo 2012), or criticised (e.g., Ensslin & Goormoorthee 2020). However, although authors consistently attribute the hero's journey to Joseph Campbell and his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968), I argue this is a misattribution. Instead, "the" hero's journey repeated throughout this discourse reflects Christopher Vogler's (2007) film-based interpretation for screenwriting.

Dena (2017) warns a reliance on external design grammars, such as the hero's journey, is in part responsible for the assumed incompatibility of narrative and games and Koenitz (2017) reveals the supposedly Aristotelian, yet academically unfounded, "story arc" causes problems for both games research and design. Following these arguments, this paper questions whether "the" hero's journey in videogame discourse accurately represents its source material.

Campbell (1968) and Vogler (2007) both take structuralist approaches, defining the hero's journey on the deep level of story (Herman & Vervaeck 2019), but the structures they propose differ. Vogler defines the hero's journey as a linear sequence of discrete events arranged in a specific order through which a hero progresses. The hero begins in their ordinary world, is prompted to act, refuses but is then convinced, crosses a threshold into an unknown world where they are tested and grow, they face an ultimate challenge, are rewarded, and return a better person.

Campbell defines the hero's journey more by the goal than by the events that happen. A person becomes a hero in a hero's journey when they have a goal that can only be achieved through transformation via appropriate means and failing to do so has destructive consequences. This "hero's journey motif" (Rensma 2009, 30-35) is a flowchart describing the virtual paths a hero may take in relation to their goal, including failure and repetition, without prescribing what events must actually happen nor any particular moment when the story should begin or end. Campbell's examples, as he retells them,<sup>1</sup> demonstrate these alternative possibilities, including heroes progressing easily (e.g., Krishna), ultimately failing (e.g., Gilgamesh), stopping before achieving the goal (e.g., King Muchukunda), losing the goal they already

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achieved (e.g., Jemshid), rejecting the goal entirely (e.g., King Minos), fleeing the consequences of a failed attempt (e.g., Izanagi), or suffering the consequences of being unready (e.g., Actaeon).

This paper collects more than 50 videogame publications that refer to the hero's journey, both advocating and criticising it, and compares each description against Campbell's. These publications are by designers and researchers and include books, websites, journal articles, and conference papers. Across these descriptions, there are three main qualities suggesting "the" hero's journey in videogame discourse does not represent Campbell's hero's journey. Firstly, the repetition of named and numbered stages. Secondly, describing the hero's journey as a single linear plot. Thirdly, defining the hero's journey as a story of spatial travel and physical conflict involving specific figures.

Despite "the" hero's journey's prevalence in videogame discourse, Campbell's hero's journey and *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* remain comparatively under-researched. Campbell was influential before Vogler's interpretation and his work is more complicated, contradictory, and controversial than current videogame discourse suggests (Segal 1987, 2004; Rensma 2009; Sandler & Reeck 1981). Our focus on "the" hero's journey distracts from potentially fruitful applications of Campbell's work, such as combining the hero's journey's emphasis on goals with player motivation and satisfaction (Moran 2021), and it overshadows enlightening investigations into the impact of Campbell's work on videogames, such as its authoritarian ideologies (Jennings 2022).

As Koenitz (2017) explains of the ghost-like "story arc", misattribution disrupts discourse. By untangling "the" hero's journey from Campbell's work, this paper aims to help clarify existing and future discussions.

This paper is based on part of the literature review from my PhD thesis and an in-progress paper. While my PhD analysed player experiences using Campbell's hero's journey and my in-progress paper focuses on the ways videogame designers and researchers alter Vogler's hero's journey to unknowingly bring it closer to Campbell's version, this paper focuses on representations of the hero's journey in videogame discourse.

## **BIO**

Jacqueline Moran received her PhD from Swinburne University of Technology in Australia, where she teaches game studies and interactive narratives. Her doctoral thesis investigated player accounts via Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to examine and redescribe Joseph Campbell's hero's journey as a phenomenological model for analysing player experiences and meaning-making.

## **ENDNOTES**

1 I specify these are Campbell's retellings because he has been criticised for misrepresenting stories (Hyman 1949; Segal 1987) and I use the term "stories" rather than "myths" because Campbell stretches the definition of "myth" to include fairy tales, practices, religions, and beliefs (Rensma 2009; Segal 1987).

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