

# The Existential Significance of Goals in Campbell's Hero's Journey

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## INTRODUCTION

There have been many attempts by designers and scholars to critique Joseph Campbell's hero's journey as a player's journey, whether authors are redescribing the hero's journey stages in videogame terms (e.g., Bartle 2005; Lebowitz and Klug 2011), adapting the stages to direct players to perform the hero's journey (e.g., Delmas et al. 2007), or comparing the hero's journey to other theories that better suit videogame play (e.g., Ensslin and Goorimoorthee 2020; Reay 2023). However, these discussions always begin with Christopher Vogler's interpretation of the hero's journey.

Vogler's (n.d.; 2007) hero's journey was inspired by Joseph Campbell's ([1949] 1968) *Hero with a Thousand Faces* but was based on popular films and written for Hollywood screenwriters. Vogler presents a fixed unilinear sequence of stages prescribing events that happen to a hero: The hero leaves an ordinary world, enters a special world, encounters challenges, succeeds against a significant ordeal, is rewarded, and returns. Vogler's interpretation does not draw on any further theory and proposes no causal connections to justify this sequence. The reason for leaving the ordinary world is not necessarily related to the challenges, the final ordeal, the reward, nor the reason to return. Rather than beginning with Vogler's film-based interpretation, I propose we examine Campbell's original hero's journey. In this paper, I draw on existential ludology to interpret and adapt Campbell's hero's journey as a phenomenological player's journey.

Existential ludology uses existential philosophy and existential phenomenology to examine how we engage with and experience videogames. When engaging with a virtual environment, if the virtual situation is "absorbed into [our] consciousness as an existential situation [i.e., facts influencing one's existence]," then we invest ourselves into a virtual subjectivity and we experience the virtual environment as a meaningful world in which we can plan and act (Vella and Gualeni 2019, 118). Ludic subjectivity, more specifically, is one's existence towards a gameworld. It is structured by the ludic subject-position, which includes our basic bodily anchorings, the capabilities and limitations we are granted over the digital environment, the fit between our abilities and the environment, the ways we can be acted upon by the digital environment, and the goals or projects we set for ourselves (Vella 2021, 440).

Borrowing from Sartre and Heidegger, Vella and Gualeni (2019, 118) say "human existence is always oriented towards future possibilities." Our projects give our

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subjectivity form and direction (Vella 2021) and it is only through a projectural disposition that things are meaningful as obstacles, as equipment we can employ, or as sub-goals contributing to our project (Vella and Gualeni 2019). Existential philosophy's discussion of projects and subjects is very similar to Campbell's discussion of goals and heroes. Whereas Vogler's hero's journey is a sequence of stages, Campbell's hero's journey is better described as the relationship between a hero and a goal. A hero is only a hero if they have a goal. That goal discloses things as help or hindrance, progress or regression, success or failure, and this forms the hero's journey.

Videogames present goals, reward goals, and make certain goals possible or easier. However, this does not guarantee a player will adopt any particular goal (Vella 2021) and a player's goals are determined not only by the videogame's materiality but also by their wider context, such as their cultural capital and gender norms (Vella 2024). Singleplayer videogames are playful artefacts onto which gameness is projected (Leino 2012) and the projects that give form and direction to our ludic subjectivity are "a function of [our] subjective engagement with the facticity [i.e., the set of contingent facts] of the game" (Vella and Gualeni 2019, 117). Goals are not important in Vogler's hero's journey. Authors adopting Vogler's hero's journey into videogames assume the player already wants to play the game as intended and the "call to adventure" is merely a formality (e.g., Bates 2005; Carlquist 2002; Dena 2017; Ip 2011; Rollings and Adams 2003). On the other hand, Campbell's hero's journey only exists when there is a clear goal and the "call" is important for both making the hero/player aware of the goal and persuading them to accept the goal and their hero subjectivity.

Existential phenomenology provides a theoretical foundation to ground Campbell's hero's journey and existential ludology in particular allows us to interpret Campbell's hero's journey for videogame play. By examining the existential significance of goals in the hero's journey, this paper aims to present a more detailed and productive player's journey that can describe how hero's journeys arise and recede during play as goals are identified, adopted, and abandoned by the player.

## BIO

Jacqueline Moran received her PhD from Swinburne University of Technology in Australia, where she teaches game studies and writing for interactive narratives. Her research focuses on the hero's journey, particularly Joseph Campbell's work and the way it is (mis)understood and (mis)used in game studies and design, with a special interest in narratological and phenomenological approaches.

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