Divine and Sublime: A Gothic Examination of Impossible Hero's Journeys in *Eternal Ring*

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INTRODUCTION

In *Eternal Ring* (FromSoftware, 2000) there is a forest. This forest is only mentioned once: "Don't go past the bridge. That forest is too dangerous for you right now." This warning is never retracted. Nothing instructs you to enter the forest. No one mentions the forest again. You may complete the game without seeing the forest at all. This forest full of mist, monsters, and winding paths seems endless but fan-made walkthroughs and maps reveal it is deceptively small and has no final reward, sign of completion, nor apparent purpose. You must either leave the forest or die in the forest. This rewardless detour seems antithetical to Christopher Vogler's film-based linear hero's journey (Vogler, 2007), but it demonstrates the divine world of Joseph Campbell's original maze-like hero's journey (Campbell, 2004). This paper uses Gothic scholarship to examine *Eternal Ring*'s forest as a Campbellian divine world where the player, as hero, can only fail.

Campbell describes the hero's journey as an adventure out of the human world where "men who are fractions imagine themselves to be complete" (Campbell, 2004, p. 201) and into the divine world of "strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delights" (ibid., p. 53) that cannot be comprehended by rational minds. In this "fateful region of both treasure and danger" (ibid., p. 53) the hero encounters "darkness, horror, disgust, and phantasmagoric fears" (ibid., p. 111). To survive, they must endure "the terrifying assimilation" (ibid., p. 202) of the "absolutely intolerable" (ibid., p. 99) or escape back to the human world.

These descriptions bear a striking resemblance to Gothic literature. Gothic stories take place in settings "excluded by rational culture" (Botting, 1996, pp. 21-22), such as gloomy forests and craggy mountains where darkness, supernatural incidents, and infinite power inspire awe, terror, despair, and expand human knowledge. Gothic settings, scenes, and objects evoke "not only repugnance, disgust, and recoil, but also engage readers' interest, fascinating and attracting them. Threats are spiced with thrills, terrors with delights, horrors with pleasure." (Botting, 1996, p. 6)

Campbell's hero, unlike Vogler's, can fail the adventure and Campbell gives many examples of mythic heroes who fail. However, Campbell insists the horrors of the divine world are "not as brutal as they seem" (Campbell, 2004, p. 119). Heroes who

"know and trust" (ibid., p. 66) will be "gently carried along by the guiding divinities" (ibid., p. 201) and assimilate the divine world's misunderstood horrors in what Campbell calls the hero's "apotheosis" (ibid., p. 138f). Heroes who fail are "lesser men" (ibid., p. 106) who did not correctly submit to "the initiatory tests" (ibid., p. 34) laid before them. An insufficient hero "beyond his depth" (ibid., p. 77) must flee the divine world in a "magic flight" (ibid., p. 182f) or be "crucified, like Prometheus" (ibid., p. 34).

A player can neither complete nor succeed in *Eternal Ring*'s forest. Campbell does not dedicate much discussion to unworthy heroes beyond their role as cautionary tale. There is also little scholarly work examining Campbell's ideas (Moran, 2024; Rensma, 2009; Segal, 1987). This paper draws on Botting's (1996) discussion of Gothic literature, Krzywinska's (2015) discussion of the Gothic in videogames, and Mishra's (1994) discussion of the Gothic sublime to analyse *Eternal Ring*'s forest as a Campbellian divine world that can neither be mastered nor assimilated.

The Gothic sublime is associated with "grandeur and magnificence" on a scale "beyond rational knowledge or human comprehension" (Botting, 1996, p. 2). The sublime is unrepresentable, inexplicable, and "threatens our very capacities of cognitive judgement" (Mishra, 1994, p. 16). Unlike Campbell's optimistic assurance that the divine world can not only be mastered but doing so will release the hero from desire and fear, Mishra (1994, p. 19) says the Gothic sublime "is always an overglutted sign, an excess/abscess, that produces an atmosphere of toxic breathlessness."

Gothic scholarship offers a more nuanced discussion of Campbell's divine world as "the unthinkable, the unnameable, and the unspeakable" (Mishra, 1994, p. 23) rather than as a puzzle to be solved and allows us to consider the magic flight as an act of survival rather than a failure. While Campbell is wholly optimistic, the Gothic emphasises ambivalence and the impossibility of resolution. From a Gothic perspective, Campbell's glorification of mastery is hubris. The knowable parts of *Eternal Ring*'s forest seem a small fraction of "an idea too large for expression, too self-consuming to be contained in any adequate form of representation" (Mishra, 1994, pp. 19-20). To grasp the forest in its entirety would mean a "surrender of the law of reason" (ibid.) *Eternal Ring* is merciful in not allowing us to see it.

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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