Gothic Forests and Magic Flights: Examining the Gothic False Hero in Campbell's Hero's Journey

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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. If you do enter this forest full of mist, monsters, and winding paths it may seem endless but fan-made walkthroughs and maps reveal it is deceptively small with no final reward, sign of completion, nor apparent purpose. This rewardless detour seems antithetical to "the hero's journey", a chronological sequence of stages leading a hero through trials to success and reward. However, this popularised hero's journey is actually Hollywood story analyst Christopher Vogler's (2007) 1980s interpretation of Joseph Campbell's 1949 *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Moran 2021 2024). This paper argues *Eternal Ring*'s forest is an example of Campbell's divine world and demonstrates the hero's journey's Gothic potential.

Campbell argued mythic heroes transcend human limitations and achieve enlightenment by symbolically crossing the threshold from the human world, where "men who are fractions imagine themselves to be complete" (Campbell 1968, p. 216), and into the divine world of "strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delights" (ibid. p. 58). In this "fateful region of both treasure and danger" (ibid. p. 58), the hero must assimilate the "absolutely intolerable" (ibid. p. 108) "darkness" and "otherness" (ibid. p. 17) to free themselves of ignorance and fear. Unlike Vogler's hero, Campbell's hero can fail. For "the overbold adventurer beyond his depths" (ibid. p. 84) who cannot, or will not, correctly submit to "the initiatory tests" (ibid. p. 37), the divine world remains "unfriendly" (ibid. p. 246). A failing hero must escape the divine world in a "magic flight" (ibid. p. 196) or be "crucified, like Prometheus" (ibid. p. 37).

Campbell (1968, p. 129) insists the divine world's horrors are "not as brutal as they seem" and will dissolve if one submits to divine instruction, if one plays the game correctly, but in *Eternal Ring*'s forest there is no way to win. The forest can only be

endured and escaped. While Campbell only describes failed heroes as daring yet spiritually unprepared "lesser men" (Campbell 1968, p. 115), Gothic scholarship offers more insight. Campbell's description of the divine world is reminiscent of the Gothic, particularly its use of the sublime: 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. However, in contrast to Campbell's optimism, Gothic texts embrace this ambivalence, obscurity, and terror. To examine and expand on Campbell's hero's journey, this paper analyses *Eternal Ring*'s forest by drawing on Parker's (2020) discussion of the ecoGothic, Krzywinska's (2015) discussion of the Gothic in videogames, and Aguirre's (2013) interpretation of Victor Frankenstein as a false hero.

The ecoGothic is a genre and critical framework where Nature is actively foregrounded and human life is rendered insignificant (Parker, 2020). Parker's description of Gothic forests aligns with *Eternal Ring*'s forest and a failing hero's experience of Campbell's divine world: a landscape of trials and obstacles that can only be survived and escaped but never mastered. We fear what is hidden in its depths but, unlike Campbell, Parker (2020, p. 277, emphasis in original) concludes it is "something that we *should not* learn" because what we truly fear is "uncovering, or bringing to light, its secret." Krzywinska (2015, p. 70) explains Gothic videogames position the player-character as "far more hapless than heroic and stumbles unintentionally from the sphere of normality into nightmare" as a victim of claustrophobia, inaction, panic, and dread. In *Eternal Ring*'s forest, the player can only be a "false hero", "a liminal figure marked by ambiguity and a tragic destiny" (Aguirre 2013, p. 11). Just as Victor Frankenstein's unheroic quest to violate nature could only end in tragedy (Aguirre, 2013), *Eternal Ring*'s forest is unwinnable. This forest demands we accept our ignorance and embrace our fear.

Eternal Ring's forest denies success, forcing players to fail an impossible hero's journey and either flee or die in the hostile divine world. While Campbell undermines the divine world's terrors by insisting they are conquerable and knowable, a Gothic approach allows us to explore the divine world as ambivalent, sublime, and unconquerable. This paper aims to examine Campbell's hero's journey beyond Vogler's interpretation and beyond heroic videogame quests by exploring the Gothic potential of the divine world and the magic flight.

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