

# The Hero with a Thousand Misattributions: Scrutinizing the Hero's Journey in Videogame Discourse

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## Keywords

Joseph Campbell, hero's journey, Christopher Vogler, videogames, misconceptions, misattributions, citation errors

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Joseph Campbell's hero's journey is prevalent in videogame discourse. As a design tool it is advocated (e.g., Schell 2020) and criticized (e.g., Nicklin 2020). In scholarship, it is used in analysis (e.g., Pugh 2018) but is also criticized as a rigidly linear and restrictive plot about an individual hero destined to succeed (e.g., Ensslin and Goorimoorthee 2020). However, these authors are not actually referring to Campbell's work. They are instead discussing Christopher Vogler's hero's journey, a significantly different interpretation based more on film than on Campbell.

Joseph Campbell first described the hero's journey in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in 1949 (Campbell 2004). Christopher Vogler circulated what he called a "practical guide" to Joseph Campbell's hero's journey as a memo in 1985 and then as a book in 1992 (Vogler 2007). Campbell's book is a dense, meandering psychoanalytic exploration of the purpose and meaning of myth, ritual, folklore, fairytales, and stories more generally. Vogler's book presents a linear adventure plot and characters typical of popular movies, with only passing references to myth and psychoanalysis.

Videogame scholars and designers appear unaware of this distinction and continue to credit Campbell whilst using Vogler and without engaging with either book. This misconception disconnects videogame discourse from Campbell's work, Vogler's book, and from critiques of Campbell's work in other fields such as religious studies (e.g., Segal 1987). This leaves current arguments about the hero's journey in videogames superficial and insubstantial. This paper aims to correct these misconceptions by comparing depictions of the hero's journey in videogame scholarship and design publications against Campbell's book and Vogler's interpretation.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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This paper is specifically concerned with the hero's journey's reputation in videogames as a plot structure. In narratology, structuralism is concerned with the chronological events that happen and the actants involved in those events as they exist on the deepest level of a story (Herman and Vervaeck 2019). Vogler's (2007) hero's journey is a linear sequence of 12 chronological stages, similar to Propp's (2013) morphology describing Russian fairytales as a linear 31 functions. In contrast, Campbell's (2004) *Hero with a Thousand Faces* describes the rules and processes by which a hero may approach an existentially significant goal. Campbell's hero's journey is best understood as a maze with many paths leading to repetition, stagnation, and failure as well as success, similar to Brémond's (1970) tree diagram reconstruction of Propp's (2013) morphology to include functions that may or may not occur within a larger cycle from deficiency to sufficiency.

To investigate the hero's journey's reputation in videogame discourse, 57 publications about the hero's journey in videogames were gathered between 2000 and 2024: 21 journal articles, 9 books, 5 book chapters, 12 conference presentations, and 10 web articles all published between 2000 and 2023. These publications include highly ranked academic journals (e.g., *Games and Culture*), books assigned in university courses (e.g., Brathwaite and Schreiber 2009), industry conferences (e.g., Game Developers Conference), and popular games news outlets (e.g., GameDeveloper.com). These publications were compared to identify how they describe the hero's journey and who they cite.

53 of the 57 publications credit the hero's journey to Joseph Campbell and 45 specifically cite *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Only 24 mention Christopher Vogler, only ever alongside Campbell and only ever credited as a popularizer of the hero's journey. Yet the hero's journey they discuss has far more in common with Vogler's hero's journey than Campbell's. Not only do all publications describe or imply the hero's journey is a linear plot, but 27 publications claim the hero's journey specifically comprises 12 stages (e.g., Rollings and Adams 2003) or 17 stages (e.g., Costiuc 2016), with consistent stage names and order. The names and order of the 12-stage version matches Vogler's 12 stages, and even the 17-stage version matches Vogler's interpretation of Campbell's chapter titles as a chronological plot, even though Campbell's chapters are not dedicated to discrete events and do not follow a strictly chronological progression. 11 publications described a linear plot with a different number of stages, but these were almost always truncated versions of either the 12-stage or 17-stage version given by others and use similar names in the same order (e.g., Ensslin and Goorimoorthee 2020). These stage names even appear in publications that do not explain the hero's journey in full or list all 12 or 17 the stages (e.g., Jennings 2022).

Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* may seem well-understood and even over-discussed, but more than 20 years of videogame discourse suffers from the same citation error. Authors believe they are discussing Campbell's hero's journey but they are actually using, advocating, and criticizing Vogler's. Meanwhile, Campbell's work is barely acknowledged. Arguments about the hero's journey either apply to Vogler but not to Campbell, such as criticisms of linearity (e.g., Koenitz et al. 2018), or they are accurate but incomplete and need further engagement with Campbell's work, such as criticisms of its authoritarianism and misogyny (e.g., Jennings 2022). This error must be recognized and corrected before the hero's journey can be meaningfully examined and critiqued. Much like how Braxton Soderman's (2021) reexamination of flow critiques its ideologies, history, and cultural impact to "trouble the monopoly of flow"

(p.15), this paper examines the hero's journey's origins and history to problematize the assumptions that continue to trouble game studies.

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