The Goddess, the Serpent and Video Games: at the Origins of the Monomyth

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All mortal things, by necessity of Nature, revolve in a wheel of changes. ... When they are born they grow, and when they are grown they reach their height, and after that they grow old, and at last perish. At one time Nature causes them to come to their goal in her region of darkness, and then again out of the darkness they come back into mortal form, by alternation of birth and repayment of death, in the cycle wherein Nature returns upon herself. — Hippodamus the Pythagorean, 5th century BC (Stobaeus 1822: 167.)

Abstract

Joseph Campbell's Monomyth, designed in the 1940s, popularized in the 1980s as the Hero's Journey, reshaped by Christopher Vögler and applied to the film industry in the 1990s, has become the standard narrative template for video game designers globally. As the gaming culture is spreading worldwide, as game experiences are becoming increasingly immersive, as whole communities of gamers are following the path of the Monomyth, it is time to re-examine the validity of this model and ask ourselves: what are we really talking about? Let us plunge into the abyss of our long-lost but most sacred rituals and initiations. Meet the coiled serpent.

Key words: Goddess, serpent, monomyth, video games, Marija Gimbutas, Joseph Campbell.

The Monomyth was first evoked by James Joyce in the 1930s and was thereafter developed by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* in the 1940s. George Lucas's *Star Wars* Trilogy of the 1970s widely exploited the concept, which was then popularized by Bill Moyers's film documentary, *The Power of Myth* in the 1980s. Subsequently adopted as the go-to storyline at Disney Studios and indeed for movie-making in general thanks to Christopher Vogler's influence in the 1990s, the Monomyth has today become the industry standard in the world of video games, game developers now having appropriated this model which had amply proven itself in Hollywood.

Also known as "The Hero's Journey," the Monomyth is particularly well-adapted to the gaming world where Campbellian archetypes now inform the principal character types. The figures of the hero, mentor, threshold guardian, shapeshifter, trickster, herald, ally and shadow are easily transposed and incarnate both playable and non-playable characters. These archetypes which Campbell credited to the works of Adolf Bastian and the depth psychology of C.G. Jung,[1] who themselves owed a debt to the Platonists, allow gamers to readily identify character types, thus creating shortcuts and accelerating comprehension of gameplay. These archetypes give the characters substance and hark back immediately to ancestral things, their global usage fostering intertextuality as characters from different video game series and games echo one another. The circular structure of the Hero's Journey, just as easily reproduced, makes it possible to give

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[1] Campbell 1949:13.

meaning to the hero's quest because it incorporates the three principal stages of tribal rites of passage as identified by French ethnologist Arnold van Gennep: the separation from the group, liminality—involving a symbolic death—and reintegration into the ordinary world by the now initiated individual.[2]

The Monomyth, which Campbell identified as handily in the most ancient origin myths as in contemporary religion and perennial philosophy, according to the principle expressed in the Vedas that "Truth is one, the sages speak of it by many names," has become a narrative framework of nearly biblical proportions.[3] The fact that he abstains from explicit reference to any particular religion has won over an international and multicultural gaming public generally removed from churches and traditional beliefs but nonetheless actively interested in a non-dogmatic lay spirituality as demonstrated by F. and J. Storey in "Spirituality and Video Games: Reinventing Initiation in the Digital Age."[4]

The timeless, universal quality which, according to Campbell, qualifies the Monomyth, has given a familiar shape to the spiritual or philosophical quests that many stories describe. This would explain why, in the more and more secular context of the post-war period to the present, the Monomyth has found a strong echo in popular culture. Video game designers have very logically embraced the Monomyth as it offers them not only a perfect model for easily identifiable characters to evolve in well-structured, familiar, though potentially very

complex epic adventures, but it also opens doors onto very engaging gaming experiences that resemble rites of initiation.

The symbolic quest of the elixir, which is emblematic of the hero's journey and represents the whole purpose of the adventure, has often been transposed literally in video games, for example in the arcade game *Elixir* or in the role-playing video game *Bloodborne*. Recent studies on mirror neurons in the context of neurosciences have shown that these rituals are not experienced virtually by the brain, as the identification process with one's avatar, i.e., the online customized character, is far stronger than previously imagined. Robert M. Geraci observed the phenomenon in a gaming context and concluded: "We do not fully sever our consciousness in game from our conventional sense of self."[5]

Studying the new gaming experiences offered by massive multiplayer online environments, Geraci comes to the conclusion that the immersive quality of the games now on offer (soon to be further reinforced by virtual reality), along with the sense of belonging to a community of players (materialized by the guilds), the epic proportions of the games, as well as the sheer number of players, have allowed gamers to increasingly identify with their avatars. We can therefore infer that the ritualistic pattern of the Monomyth is experienced by players to greater proportions than in other media that do not require such full, active and emotionally engaging participation of the hero/player.

The use of the Monomyth in games has thus been almost universally validated and the model has been progressively adopted as dogma. Christopher Vögler's popularization of the hero's journey for adaptation to the cinema has been described as *the new industry Bible* for video-game designers by Spy magazine.[6] It

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[2] Ibid.: 23. Campbell called them "separation – initiation – Return." Describing the three main stages (x, y and z) in his circular representation of the hero's journey, he explains: "A hero ventures forth from the world of a common day in a supernatural wonder region (x): fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won (y): the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (z)."

[3] Ibid.: xiii.

[4] Storey and Storey 2016: 151-161.

[5] Geraci 2014: 69.

[6] Vögler 2007: xv.

should then come as no surprise that numerous university programs specialising in video-game development are stressing the importance of myth studies and in particular the Monomyth.[7] It can safely be said that the Monomyth has today become one of the pillars of game design on an international scale and that despite a few critics claiming that the model is antiquated and that it reinforces patriarchal, among other, stereotypes, its future is in no jeopardy. At a time when video-game turnover has surpassed that of the film industry and is expected to reach 140 billion dollars before 2020,[8] when technological advances are allowing for increasingly immersive and collective gaming experiences, it seems legitimate to ask ourselves the question: what are we talking about really?

What is the Monomyth, and where did it come from?

One might expect the answer to be self-evident given the incalculable number of books, articles and blogs that have dwelt on the Monomyth. And yet the question of its origins is one rarely considered. As a specialist on religion and comparative mythology, Campbell spent infinitely more time describing the Monomyth in myth and religion and observing the recurrent traces of it in our belief systems, psyche and cultural production than he did embarking upon the more perilous path of exploring its possible origins. Following anthropologist Adolf Bastian and psychoanalyst C. G. Jung, he rightly observed, like a palaeontologist comparing bones taken from around the globe, that "elementary ideas" (Bastian) or "archetypes" (Jung), as well as identical narrative structures, emerged from myths coming from diverse cultural systems distantly separated in time and space and having had,

according to mainstream historians, no documented contact with one another.[9] A student in the Platonic tradition, Campbell advanced theories regarding what he believed corresponded to a single, recurrent and universal history that had left its imprint for all of eternity upon our narrative, mental and spiritual structures. He represented what he defined as a *cosmogonic cycle of regeneration* in the form of a circle (Figure 1):[10]

Figure 1: "The Cosmogonic Cycle of regeneration" (after Campbell 1949: 210).

In Campbell's opinion, this cycle might issue from the alternating phases of waking and sleeping, between the ordinary world and the extraordinary world of dreams which must have significantly influenced consciousness and the human soul since the dawn of time.[11] He also

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[7]Southern New Hampshire University, Full Sail University, Université Côte d'Azur, to name only a few.
[8] https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/new-gaming-boom-newzoo-ups-its-2017-global-games-market-estimate-to-116-0bn-growing-to-143-5bn-in-2020/

[9] However, many scholars have postulated the existence of civilizations much older and scientifically advanced than we imagine, which would be found in the myths common to many cultures. This type of work has often been strongly criticized by mainstream researchers, whereas it deserves to be explored instead of being rejected with contempt. See, e.g., de Santillana and von Dechend 1969.
[10] Campbell 1949: 210.
[11] "The cosmogonic cycle is to be understood as the passage of universal consciousness from the deep sleep zone of the unmanifest, through dream, to the full day of waking; then back again through dream to the timeless dark. As in the actual experience of every living being, so

surmised therein as a probable explanation the cycle of life, death and re-birth which constituted the deepest beliefs of our most distant ancestors which the ancient philosophers sometimes designated using the terms Palingenesis or Metempsychosis.[12]

Published in 1949, the same year as *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of Eternal Return* rendered explicit this vision of the archaic world in which only sacred acts, reiterating at precise times and places the creation of the world, were imprinted with meaning because they alone could participate in the regeneration of the world. The goal of archaic man, far removed from that of modern man and his desire to leave some historical trace, was, according to this myth, to participate in "rites that symbolically repeat the act of Creation."[13] Any act that did not implicitly adhere to the primordial time of creation had, very simply, no reality of its own. The ancients, according to Eliade, represented themselves in a cyclical temporality, participating through their sacred rites in the infinite wheel of time and seeking to escape the linearity of History.[14] The exemplary archaic man then dutifully repeated the regeneration rituals, perpetually reactualising a divine archetype in the a-temporal mythical moment, and avoiding any individual mark which might valorise an historical process of memory. Archaic societies had, according to Eliade, a

common perspective: "the need … to regenerate periodically through the negation of time… Like the mystic, or religious figure in general, primitive man lives in the continual present."[15]

While Campbell was likely unaware of Eliade's publishing project on the Myth of Eternal Return at the time he himself was writing, he was certainly familiar with the myth itself and he demonstrates on numerous occasions that he had integrated it into his thought, as in the following passage:

> [T]he point is not that such-and-such was done on earth; the point is that, before such-and-such could be done on earth, this other, more important, primary thing had to be brought to pass within the labyrinth that we all know and visit in our dreams. The passage of the mythological hero may be over-ground, incidentally; fundamentally it is inward—into depths where obscure resistances are overcome, and long lost, forgotten powers are revivified, to be made available for the transfiguration of the world.[16]

This myth of the Eternal Return is, according to Eliade and Campbell, to be found in all the ancient religious and spiritual traditions, particularly so in the Egyptian *Pyramid Texts* and *Book of the Dead* or *Amduat*, which are among the oldest known complete and coherent written texts. They are upwards of 4,500 years old but are certainly inspired by elements transmitted through oral traditions from much greater antiquity. These texts present formulae and incantations, and even illustrations, which constitute a veritable recipe for participating in the divine archetype, the process of transcending the temporal through a repetition of the cosmogonic act—a recipe that can be divided into three specific and distinct stages.

For the Egyptians, the pharaoh—an archetype of the divine, like the sun god Ra on

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in the grandiose figure of the living cosmos: in the abyss of sleep the energies are refreshed, in the work of the day they are exhausted; the life of the universe runs down and must be renewed" (ibid.:228).

[12] "Only birth can conquer death—the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new. Within the soul, within the body social, there must be—if we are to experience long survival—a continuous ʿrecurrence of birthʾ (*palingenesia*) to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death" (ibid.:12).

[13] Eliade 2001: 21.

[14] Eliade proposes toʿconfront the 'historical (modern) man' who knows himself and wants to be a creator of history, with the man of traditional civilizations who had a negative attitude towards history" (ibid.: 158).

[15] Ibid.:103-104.

[16] Campbell 1949: 22.

his bark (Figure 2)—would descend every evening in the West (and also into death) into the perilous depths of the Duat where he must perform ritual steps in a process, utter the magic words written on the papyrus in his sarcophagus, face the judgement of the Goddess Maât (the weighing of the souls), and finally, through the circle of the serpent Mehen (which is why mummification was so important), return to his body, which is the crucial step in the voyage, to be reborn in the East, like the sun or the new-born.

Figure 2: The Sun God Ra on his bark surrounded by the serpent Mehen (*Book of Gates*, Tomb of Ramses I, KV16, c. 1290 BC).[17]

The Duat, like the Monomyth, represented as a wheel, simultaneously night and death and thus a mirror of the diurnal world and the sun's journey, illustrates both an archetypal birth and the regeneration of the world, completing the cycle: "Full circle, from the tomb of the womb to the womb of the tomb, we come."[18] As such, the hero's journey, that of the pharaoh in this case, was a model to emulate so as to be reborn each morning and to allow life to continue in its eternally revolving cycle of regeneration. The hero, any individual having effectively transited through the phase of death, must then precisely follow this preordained model in order to

participate in his own regeneration—and that of the world—in a cyclical and ritual process of repetition.[19] Let us also note that the term "regeneration" is etymologically significant here indicating a process of personal and biological, but above all cosmic and collective, re-birth. *It is not so much the individual as all the vital forces of nature that are regenerated.*

Archaic man was thus to live his daily life as though he were reborn each morning only to prepare himself for the voyage of the night and the dream stage, a perilous labyrinth wherein he must slay the Minotaur thereby attempting to annihilate Time. For archaic man, the heroic figure was thus a model to follow, not as in the modern vision to mark the pages of history, but rather quite the contrary, to enter a cyclical, a-temporal process. Seen this way, the life of the individual is approached as the repetition of a mythical model, an initiating path of separation, liminality and reintegration, a path preparatory to death and re-birth. As Campbell reminds us:

> [W]e have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the centre of our existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.[20]

While the analogy is never made explicit in the works of Campbell, Vögler or Eliade, it seems evident to us that the Monomyth is the narrative equivalent of the Myth of the Eternal Return, the tool *par excellence* for participating in a cosmic, regenerative and a-temporal cycle, the framework of a primordial life-model

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[17] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Book_of_Gates_Barque_of_Ra.jpg.
[18] Campbell 1949: 8.

[19] Campbell writes: "The cosmogonic cycle is normally represented as repeating itself, world without end" (ibid.: 224).
[20] Ibid.:18.

possessing sacred and magical powers that have resided in each of us, as much in our collective, as in our cellular memory, in our deep spiritual psyche, since the dawn of time. It is evident that in contemporary Western culture these beliefs—in which death was seen as both a collective and individual test and initiation ritual and birth, the ultimate sacred experience possessing cosmic dimensions, beliefs which certainly dictated the lives of our distant ancestors—have been at least partially lost.

Nonetheless, while the Monomyth is then a schematized narrative representation of the mythic story of the Eternal Return, it is without question the moment of separation from the world of the living up until the reincorporation and return among them, that occupies a place of singular importance. Life, which corresponds to the diurnal phase of the hero's journey, must be but the reflection of death, the nocturnal phase, the passage through the Duat.[21] But the most crucial moment of transition through the Duat introduces the traveller into a circular space, that of the serpent Mehen, whose name signifies 'the coiled one' and who envelopes the defunct thereby allowing him to regain his physical body.[22]

It is our contention that the serpent Mehen, referred to as a 'god' (masculine) in Wikipedia and in the majority of works on mythology, must have originally symbolized the great regenerative matrix, and the same can be said of the serpent Ouroboros, also referred to in the *Pyramid Texts*, and more generally, of all serpent deities. This circular and regenerative serpent was masculinized over time (and we shall soon see why) but in our original belief systems it represented the uterus and elements linked to the female body such as the umbilical cord and her menstrual cycles.[23] Gestation and birth, not to mention the mother and the new-born, would thus have possessed sacred dimensions for ancient people. The hero of the original myth, who crossed the dark waters of the Duat, is none other than the new-born, and it is clearly upon him that Campbell and Vögler and so many others have focused the Monomyth. But it would seem to us that their model of the Monomyth has completely erased the central importance of the regenerative principle itself, the Great Goddess of the ancients.

Meeting the Great Goddess

In Campbell's Monomyth, woman occupies a very important place. As a "primal element," "mother of the world," "world-bounding frame," "shell of the cosmic egg" and "universal Goddess,"[24] she represents the totality "of what can be known."[25] It is the womb/tomb as well as the labyrinth which is being referred to in these citations. Despite this, she is nonetheless reduced to a single one of the seventeen stages of the hero's journey which he labels "Meeting with the Goddess"; it is she who initiates the hero during the *hieros gamos*, the sacred marriage, which allows the hero to regenerate himself, and it is for this reason that so many critics have said that the woman cannot be the heroine of the hero's journey. Feminist critics have thus felt the need to re-appropriate Campbell's model adapting it to women, a good example being Maureen Murdock's *The Heroine's Journey* (1990).

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[21] "We can make the analogy between the Duat that contains the matrices and the negative of a photo, the positive being our world below" (Schwarz 2010: 48).
[22] See https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dou%C3%A2t

[23] Numerous studies establish the analogy between the snake and the body of the woman, such as by Marija Gimbutas, Chris Knight, Carl Gustav Jung, and Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, among others. Explanations of this analogy propose that the snake has the shape of the umbilical cord and is the link with the mother. At the same time, it represents a potential danger because it can smother the baby. It may also have represented menstruation for many peoples (e.g., Native Americans), like the snake that sheds its skin.
[24] Campbell 1949: 255, 259.
[25] Ibid.:97.

Campbell establishes an obvious link between the hero's journey and the cycle of life, death and rebirth and implies that an encounter with the feminine is an inevitable stage of the journey. This is where we diverge from his thinking in that he distances himself from the original myth without developing the evident analogy between the Monomyth, the matrix and the perilous voyage of the fœtus and the new-born during gestation and birth, elements to which he nonetheless frequently alludes. One might imagine that chapters 4, "The World Navel," and 11, "The Virgin Birth," of his book might pursue these avenues of investigation explicitly and thus establish that for the ancients, as woman corresponded to the path itself, the representation of the divine must have been feminine. No such discussion is undertaken. Campbell's analysis is clearly dominated by Christian paradigms as evidenced in stages of the hero's journey bearing such labels as "crucifixion," "father atonement," and "apotheosis."[26] The florid metaphorical language employed also leaves little doubt that the "flow of life" is not a reference to birth, but rather to semen.[27] Woman is relegated to being a stage of the journey but is in no way considered the journey itself.

It is of interest to note that in Vögler's more modern version written nearly a half-century later and comprising twelve rather than seventeen steps, the stage of the Goddess disappears entirely. It is replaced by the "inmost cave." In the introduction to his third edition, Vögler briefly evokes the "gender problems" that have been raised by the hero's journey,[28] and he tries to remain politically correct throughout his book. It seems to us however that he is very simply throwing out the baby with the bath water, and the expression is particularly

appropriate here, because *removing woman from the hero's journey denatures its significance entirely*. Worse still, it is intellectual fraud tantamount to anthropo-spiritual plagiarism because it consists in '*borrowing' the frame and archetypes of humanity's primordial narrative while silencing its origins and profound meaning*. Vögler is more reticent than Campbell even when it comes to exploring the origins, and no mention whatsoever is made of gestation or birth. At best he proffers that the Monomyth might have its origins in the laws of physics, but the laws of biology are conspicuously absent.[29] And yet this is an analogy that we feel clearly merits being developed, as hormonal and menstrual cycles, the stages of birth, cardiac sinus rhythms, and even DNA itself possess properties and representative shapes clearly reminiscent of the Monomyth itself.[30]

Another semantic shift occurs in Vögler's version of the Monomyth having to do with the goal of the quest itself. Campbell adopted the term "Elixir" alluding to the quest of the alchemists who sought to indefinitely prolong life. Through its liquid connotation, it could also refer to a magic potion, and while Campbell does not say as much, we see a potential parallel

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[26] Ibid.:210.

[27] "The waters of the abyss, which are the divine life-creative energy and substance of the demiurge, the world-generative aspect of immortal being" (ibid. 32).

[28] Ibid.:xxi.

[29] As Vögler points out, "The Hero's Journey is not an invention, but an observation. It is a recognition of a beautiful design, a set of principles that govern the conduct of life and the world of storytelling the way physics and chemistry govern the physical world" (2007: xiii). It is interesting to note that the new sciences in biology would tend towards a model of human evolution that is at least as much internal (structural) as only external (by natural selection and all the adaptive solutions to the environment). Here we refer the reader to Jean Staune's compilation work in *Explorateurs de l'Invisible* (2017). The Monomyth, a structural model of the story of the origins, already allows us to say that these theses on the structure of life are to be taken very seriously.

[30] The analogy between the stages of childbirth and those of the hero's journey, however, seems so obvious that a delivery method, based on the Monomyth, has been developed in recent years, called Birthing Through the Hero's Journey. http://www.birtharts.com/birthing-through-the-heros-journey/

with amniotic fluid. In Vögler's 'textbook,' the elixir is summarily transformed into a 'reward.'

Above all, although he confirms that the Monomyth is circular and even cyclical, Vögler, like Campbell, ultimately arrives at a narrative template that is linear in nature, leading conveniently from point A to point B. They both justify the cyclical nature of their models of the Monomyth by pointing to the fact that the hero in each case returns to the point of departure, but no mention is ever made of the recurrent or transformative dimension of the adventure. The end of the hero's journey is clearly a definitive end, and not the beginning of a new cycle, and yet this is an element that is fundamental and intrinsic to the original model. Vögler's graphic representations demonstrate to what extent, more so than Campbell, he is uncomfortable with the circle of the Monomyth. While one of his schematics is indeed circular, he represents it elsewhere in the form of a lozenge, a mountain, or a chronological frieze in three acts.[31]

It seems to us, then, that in so transforming the circle into a linear representation, Vögler completely adulterates the model giving individual historical action a predominant importance, utterly undermining the essential cyclical dimension by erasing references to natural or biological cycles. For our ancient ancestors, this cyclicity had to have been intimately linked to the feminine. The cyclicity of the seasons and the celestial bodies, and particularly the phases of the moon, replicated the female cycle; archaeological evidence suggests that lunar and menstrual cycles were the calendars of reference in prehistoric times and this may even, according to some researchers, be at the origin of human culture.[32] Eliade suggests in his book that the

moon may have served the ancients not only as a calendar but as an archetype of the eternal return of living things.[33]

With Vögler's model, even more so than with Campbell's then, we grow further away from the cyclical, spiritual, regenerative and feminine dimension of the Monomyth. We are some distance from the original model, this magical travel guide which is the Amduat which signifies "that which is in the underworld." Trying to understand the possible reasons for these shifts will help us further understand the original model. Vögler proposed his Monomyth at a time when, for numerous reasons that cannot be developed here, any allusion to biological differences between men and women in relation to their cultural or social roles was frowned upon. Following the wave of gender studies, there was an implied consensus that this type of question was better avoided. As a result, any critical and especially any scientific approach based upon said differences was likewise to be avoided.[34]

Research in mythology and archaeology have suffered from equally regrettable prejudices and biases. An eloquent example has been the lack of interest for research into the Great Goddess. The works of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, heavily criticised to this day,[35] opened the door to a very rich domain for

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[31] Vögler 2007: 25, 157, 8.

[32] In his work, Chris Knight (1991), relying on the many artifacts, such as the lunar calendar sticks and the various Venus figurines, such as Laussel's, dating back at least 25,000 years, proposes the theory that, until the last ice age, women would have synchronized their menstrual

cycles with the phases of the moon, which would have helped to develop the lunar calendar at the origin of cultures.

[33] Eliade 2001: 105.

[34] Gender specificity has been effaced in order to posit instead a 'human standard' taking into account one sex only. A flagrant example which illustrates the consequences such thinking has had upon scientific research is that to this day, pre-marketing trial tests in pharmacology involving human subjects generally involve male subjects only. For example, women are not adequately represented in drug trials, as many studies show. See: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nov/pmc/articles/PMC4 800017/.

[35] After Gimbutas changed the title of her book from *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe* (1974) to *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* in 1982, her work

research. Nevertheless, an important aspect of Gimbutas's theories has recently been verified thanks to ancient DNA analysis. Her "Kurgan theory," which hypothesizes three successive waves of Indo-European warriors (she called them Kurgans in reference to their mortuary rites), who invaded Europe from the Pontic-Caspian steppes roughly 6,000-4500 years ago, seems now to have been accepted by the scientific community, at least in terms of the third Kurgan wave. In Gimbutas's view, these people of the steppes, the Indo-Europeans, summarily eradicated the civilisation of Old Europe. Distantly pre-dating the Sumerians, the Old European civilization was matrilinear, had already developed agriculture, worshipped the Great Goddess, was highly evolved, and was characterized by men and women cooperating in a peaceful, egalitarian society. Their mortuary sites, among others, suggest that it was not what some might call a "matriarchal" society (an adjective that Gimbutas neither used nor condoned) in which one gender would have dominated the other, contrary to the Kurgans whose male chieftains were highly glorified. In her book *The Living Goddesses*, which was published in 1999, Gimbutas explains how the Minoan civilization was the last to disappear some 3,500 years ago, following the Indo-European Mycenaean invasions and finally the tsunami resulting from the explosion of the volcano Thera.[36] As for Goddess culture in Egypt, its destruction was insured by the almost simultaneous invasions of patriarchal peoples—the Semites from the Syro-Arabian desert, and the Indo-Europeans from the north—both warrior and socially very stratified

cultures.[37] According to Gimbutas, after the destruction of Old Europe, local female goddesses, each symbolising aspects of the Great Goddess, were incorporated into the patriarchal pantheons of the invaders. Some were later morphed into subaltern warrior goddesses, sometimes incarnating only evil and dark forces. As Gimbutas points out, the Great Goddess was not only a fertility goddess. She incarnated first and foremost the principle of regeneration, of which the destructive and obscure forces are an integral part. Cyclicity and repetition were the hallmarks of the Goddess, and the analogy linking the tomb with the womb was by no means arbitrary. Gimbutas explains that the funerary monuments of Old Europe

> provide us with invaluable information on the artefacts, symbols, and contexts we need to explore the Neolithic view of death and transition. Tombs and graves exhibited a variety of forms and designs, but even in widely separated areas of Europe a remarkable underlying similarity marks the religious beliefs they express. These monuments show that the Old European view of the processes of death and transition fundamentally differed from the view of death held by many later cultures. In ancient Indo-European and Christian religions, a person's soul maintained its individual identity and traveled to the land of the afterlife. In Neolithic religion, the processes of death and transition are cyclical. As in the organic world, where new life grows from the remains of the old, birth, according to the Old Europeans, was part of a cycle that included death. Just as the goddess's womb obviously gave us birth, it also took us back in death. Symbolically, the individual returned to the

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started being heavily criticised by specialists, especially as it was enthusiastically embraced by a whole community of non-specialists. An obvious example of the fact that her work still remains ignored today by the mainstream scientific community is the recently published French *Critical Dictionary of Mythology* (Le Quellec and Sergent 2017), in which there is at best scant reference to her ground-breaking research work and publications.

[36] Gimbutas 1999: 148-149.

[37] From a conversation with Joseph Campbell, originally published in *Parabola* (1980), included in Campbell (2013): xxii, edited by Safron Rossi. She writes: "Gimbutas's work convinced Campbell even more deeply of what he was sensing, namely, that the Great Goddess was the central divine figure in the earliest mythological conception of the world, and that the powers outlined by Gimbutas were the roots of those that he saw in the earliest mythologies and sacred traditions" (2013): x.

goddess's womb to be reborn. Exactly what form this rebirth was imagined to take is unknown; what is clear is that Old European religion understood life and death as aspects of larger cyclic processes. Because the womb constitutes one of the most potent funerary themes during this era, we can think of the 'tomb as womb.' Vulva and uterus images, both natural and geometric, predominate. They can be found in the architecture of the tomb or as symbols of the tomb itself. Throughout Old Europe one finds structures that were both tombs and shrines. These structures took the shape of the female body."[38]

Marija Gimbutas further explains that it was during a much later period of our history that the ancient motifs evoking the tomb/womb analogy, in particular those of the labyrinth, the spiral and the coiled serpent were masculinized, transformed or vilified by warring peoples.[39] This would explain how the serpent, clearly linked to sacred feminine cycles and the cosmic regenerative cycle, could be transformed over time into an animal symbolising evil.

Gimbutas, and the many who subscribe to her theories, have no doubt that Goddess cults in their multiple local manifestations were central to Neolithic—and probably Palaeolithic—cultures. The serpent is one of the oldest representations of the Goddess, a theme Judy Grahn explores in her chapter entitled "Snake Is the Oldest Deity."[40] The reasons behind the emergence of patriarchal, hierarchical and clearly bellicose cults approximately 6,000 years ago are not known. Some posit significant climate changes during the Younger Dryas mini ice-age event which preceded and potentially disrupted existing social roles. While this hypothesis can be neither proven nor disproven

at the present time, we would like further to suggest that this change may have resulted from an evolution in our primitive understanding of the human reproductive system which would have transferred responsibility as principal or sole genitor from the female to the male. The natural consequence would then have been to evolve away from venerating a Great Goddess who reproduced spontaneously through partheno-genesis, like the Greek Athena or the Egyptian Neith who spawned all, towards a masculine Great God inseminator of empty vessels.

In this way, the serpent Mehen, very likely symbolising the matrix (uterus) or umbilical cord and representing the Great Goddess, wound up transformed into the 'simple' goddess whose role was to protect the voyager in the underworld or Duat. In this way, the serpent lost its symbolic regenerative dimension and its link to the sacred feminine. The Great Goddess Mehen of the ancients incarnated the tomb/womb cycle of pre-antiquity, a cord linking the regeneration principle and the protective vessel and guiding the bark of the sun-child who was re-born each morning. *She has been, throughout history and in the modern version of the Monomyth, plainly and simply erased, even though she represents the very essence of the original myth.*

The Sacred Game

Could it be then that the mysterious Mehen Game—numerous examples of which have been unearthed in archaeological digs in Egypt, as one of the first known board games—could it be that this "game," whose rules and manner of play remain lost to us but which it is theorized, was used by pre-dynastic cultures still venerating the Goddess, comes down to us from a time when the serpent, symbol of the initiation Goddess reigning over the passage through the Duat, was considered the ultimate sacred entity? (Figure 3).

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[38] Gimbutas 1999: 55.
[39] Ibid.:153-155, 164.
[40] Grahn 1983: 61. "[…] the Aztec creator goddess is Snake; the Greek earth goddess, Gaia, was a serpent, and in Egyptian writing the glyph for 'goddess' was a hooded serpent" (ibid.: 62).

Figure 3: The Game of the Snake – Mehen (Limestone, early dynastic period, c. 3000 BC, Egyptian Museum of Berlin, Creative Commons).[41]

Figure 4: Phaistos Disk (clay tablet, side A, 2nd mill. BC, Archaeological Museum of Heraklion).[44]

The history of games has shown that ancient societies did not distinguish between activities linked to sacred and profane domains,[42] and that the first board games were used toward religious and divinatory ends.[43] *The Myth of the Eternal Return* as well as other works by Eliade such as *The Sacred and the Profane* leave no doubt as to the veracity of this hypothesis.

Was the Mehen, then, used as a ritual tool based on biological cycles in preparation for the great regenerative voyage of which the Great Goddess was the pathway? Numerous objects that are similar in shape to the Mehen, in the form of a coiled serpent, such as the enigmatic disk of Phaistos in Crete, dating from Minoan times, and others that have been found in sites around the world, would suggest that this avenue of exploration would merit further attention (Figure 4).

Professor Gareth Owens's research team in Crete has recently confirmed the interpretation of the disk of Phaistos first proposed by Sir Arthur Evans in 1909: "The Inscription Possibly [is] a Religious Chaunt in Honour of the Anatolian Great Mother."[45] While these ideas are now garnering significant support, they are still today linked to a great many taboos—a term which seems doubly appropriate as the word "taboo," like the word "ritual," has been suggested to have its etymological origins in references to menstrual blood, according to Judy Grahn.[46] Could it be that the wheel of the Monomyth corresponds to what Grahn refers to with the term *metaform* ("physical metaphors that embody a comparison to a menstrually based idea")?[47]

[41]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mehen_(game)#/media-/File:3000_Abydos_Spiel_der_Schlange_Mehen_anagoria.JPG
[42] Mäyrä 2008: 38.
[43] In particular according to Emile Durkheim, in Clark 2012: 88.

[44] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Crete_-_Phaistos_disk_-_side_A.JPG
[45] Evans 1909: 272-293. Gareth Owens's team thinks they have been able to decipher the disc and think that the glyph corresponding to the Great Goddess is repeated several times. For more information: https://www.teicrete.gr/daidalika/pages/page.php?page=home.
[46] "The word comes from Polynesian *tapua*, meaning both 'sacred' and 'menstruation'. . . *R'tu* means menstrual, suggesting that ritual began as menstrual acts" (Grahn 1983:5-6).
[47] Ibid.:22.

It seems plausible that—as is the case with the Mehen, the disk of Phaistos, and the circular labyrinth—the Monomyth, a model common to all our ancient beliefs and narratives, in its form and in its cyclicity, allowed the ancients to repeat, at moments corresponding to the beginning or end of a cycle, and in places symbolising the matrix, the great story of the origins, so as to relive, prepare and reactivate the regenerative energies of the Great Goddess. The structure itself of the Monomyth, its stages and its cyclical form, are carriers of the magic and sacred flow of the origins. Reusing it equates to subscribing to the Myth of the Eternal Return and thus to participate in the regeneration of the cosmos. This sacred path is none other than the matrix, the Elixir, deliverance. The hero of the Monomyth is none other than the new-born who has traversed the salt waters of the life-sea, that of the Goddess Tiamat, Mother Goddess of the ancient Sumerians, participating in the renewal of the world.

These hypotheses would have to be verified, but the fact that these interpretations have not yet for the moment been considered in the scientific community shows to what degree the current paradigm has left certain considerations aside. It seems to us that the scientific community would do well to open itself more willingly to transdisciplinary approaches and to examine domains which have for the moment been judged to be minor.

Let us complete our own cycle and return now to the context of the video game. Within the perspective we are proposing, the use of the Monomyth appears particularly adapted to the context of games and specifically to video-gaming, which calls on the motif of the path, the hero and cyclicity. Algorithms could also participate significantly in emphasizing this cyclicity within the gaming experience. The cycle of death and rebirth, which the player experiences in 're-spawn' mode and which is nearly a pre-condition for advancing to the next stage of the game, shows that video games are particularly well adapted for reproducing cycles. Some games, like *Bloodborne*, for example, have even made of the menstrual cycles of the Great Goddess the hero's quest itself, demonstrating that the gaming community might be less closed-minded than some others when it comes to broaching these questions. But we must not lose sight of the fact that the current model of the Monomyth, provided essentially by Vögler, as it is used by the community of game designers and thus players around the globe, is a modern version of the Monomyth.

Having become a template for an individual and linear journey of success, *the Monomyth of today is a denatured version of the spiritual tool par excellence that it represented for the ancients, of a mode of belief that accorded a much greater place to the feminine, to birth and death, to initiation and to the collective*. The changes it has undergone for 6,000 years make of it a model which has lost its most essential and fundamental part, its substance. It seems to us even that it contributes, to a certain degree, to a global culture which tends to under-represent women, even subjugate them, whereas it is inherited, paradoxically, from a culture that Gimbutas has identified as egalitarian, matrilinear and cooperative.

We must therefore re-appropriate the Monomyth, the vestige of our most ancient beliefs in the Eternal Return, the ultimate initiation pathway, magic invocation, ritual and eternal cycle of renewal in the world.

We must, in fact, recapture the quintessence of the Monomyth and envisage a change in the spiritual paradigm based on greater cooperation between the sexes, a greater awareness of the profoundly sacred nature of natural and human cycles and perhaps above all of our individual role participating in the renewal of the world, through our "heroic" deaths, births, deliveries and spiritual births. But the image of the hero has itself been so altered

these last millennia, it has lost much of its sacred dimension. Therefore, we propose that the term "heros journey," which reinforces the idea of linearity, be abandoned in favour of the term "cosmogonic cycle," a term coined by Campbell himself. The term Monomyth, a legacy of James Joyce, seems to us perfectly adapted, nonetheless, for undertaking this change because it evokes our uniqueness, our ancient cults, and the magic power that stories have held for us since the dawn of time.

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