

Semiotic Remediation of Cultural Identity in Black Myth: Wukong's Transmedia Journey

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Abstract. The global reception of Black Myth: Wukong highlights the potential and tension in the export of Chinese cultural heritage to international gamers. This study fills the gap in current literature as it dissects in-game semiotics based on individual design components, including characters, narratives, and environmental elements, and adopts a more holistic approach to media studies that connects interactive games with traditional journalism. The research methods include visual coding of twenty central game elements, comparative mapping of five questlines with Journey to the West, and thematic coding of over fifty Western media reviews. Results indicate that the game has successfully compressed Chinese culture into a globally accessible product, but numerous cultural nuances in the original work, such as the moral complexities of the characters and the hidden religious messages, also risked being misinterpreted or neglected. Western media framing also, inadvertently or not, exacerbates this one-sided interpretation by emphasizing the visual experience over the philosophical depths of the game, which oversimplifies it into a far more combat-oriented, Westernized version than originally intended. These results inform the understanding of transcultural media flows and are a basis for more culturally sensitive design strategies that balance accessibility with the preservation of symbolic richness.

Keywords: Cultural semiotics, Ludic orientalism, Transcultural design, Narrative reduction, Game localization

1. Introduction

As Black Myth: Wukong becomes the new cultural icon for Chinese exports with its popular reception, the need to understand how the design of the game remediates symbols that are traditionally nuanced and culturally high-context to suit the appetites of a global audience, and how Western media framing of the game, limited by a lack of cultural sensitivity to fine Chinese traditions, in turn affects the reception of the game, has become increasingly paramount. Drawing on Panofsky's iconological stratification, Bhabha's third-space hybridity, and Said's Orientalism 2.0, this paper focuses on three interrelated dimensions: character iconography, environmental remediation, and narrative mechanics [1-3]. Methodologically, visual deconstruction of twenty key visual assets will be performed, alongside the mapping of five primary questlines onto Journey to the West texts to trace narrative reduction. In addition, a critical discourse analysis of over fifty Western media reviews—from IGN and PC Gamer to The New York Times, CNN, and The

Guardian—examines recurring dominant tropes. The paper explores how "Chinese-ness" is selectively remixed through Western paradigms, the tensions between accessibility and cultural coherence, and the reinforcing or disruptive role of Western media discourse. By bridging game studies and cultural discourse analysis, this paper aims to contribute to more culturally sensitive design practice and greater understanding of transcultural migration in the realm of media and communication.

2. Character design in Black Myth: Wukong: semiotic negotiations of cultural identity

2.1. Reimagining the Monkey King

Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, serves as the central figure of cultural renegotiation in the whole game. Core signifiers from Journey to the West—such as the golden headband and the Ruyi Jingu Bang—serve as coded iconic messages instantly recognizable in Chinese mythology: that Wukong is subjugated to the Celestial Court but possesses the power to topple those at the very top [4]. However, these traditional markers are reimagined through a “dark fantasy” aesthetic: a tattered cape, scarred black fur, and semi-human facial features, all aimed at crafting a battle-worn, rugged persona that is demanded of the Monkey King [5]. As shown in Table 1, on the denotative level, these visuals depict a gritty, uncompromising “destined one,” rebelling against the oppressive deities; connotatively, they evoke the archetype of a “savage hero” rooted in Wukong’s rebellious valor as a “demon” based on the novel’s descriptions. The third order of signification (the mythic layer) is best observed in the game’s dynamic visual effects, particularly Wukong’s glowing eyes and the particle animations during intense fight scenes, which have transformed Buddhist wisdom from an underlying logic that guides characters towards self-realized salvation to a series of flashy on-screen spectacles. The same graphical tricks also improve how players progress in the game; for example, “shadow navigation” uses light and dark cues to guide players through different levels, effectively subverting the Buddhist concept of enlightenment into a redactable game feature [6]. Concept art, such as “The Birth of the Splashing Monkey,” also blends Ming Dynasty-inspired iconography with modern effects, though this adaptation may have diluted Wukong’s philosophical complexity for commercial appeal [7].

Table 1. Sun Wukong’s semiotic signifiers

Element	Denotation	Connotation	Mythic Function
Golden headband & staff	Coded regalia and size-shifting weapon	Subjugation and authority	Ritualizing obedience and limitless potential
Tattered cape & scarred fur	Ripped fabric, worn fur texture	Rebellion as a savage hero against the establishment	Embodying anti-establishment heroism through gameplay

2.2. Supporting characters as cultural signifiers

The cultural identities of secondary figures also undergo semiotic renegotiation similar to Wukong’s:

Zhu Bajie is not merely a fallen hero attempting to turn his life around in this adaptation; instead, he is recast as Wukong's energetic sidekick, whose oversized potbelly and elastic slapstick make every interaction a sincere moment of affection. Instead of avoiding his reputation as a glutton, the designers embrace it, making every hungry-eyed gesture and humorous gaffe an opportunity for players to laugh with him rather than at him. Once a symbol of moral conflict, the nine-toothed rake now serves as a multifunctional tool. Its spinning arcs reveal secrets about the environment or set off

physics-based puzzles, promoting imaginative experimentation over strict allegory. The game achieves a balance between well-known narrative beats and an instantly approachable combat system by transforming Zhu Bajie's redemption into entertaining, rule-driven challenges.

Guanyin enters the world through sound and space rather than a sermon. The first item the players can observe upon entering her temple are, same as the original text, lotus petals engraved into the marble floor, which, when characters walk on them, would pulse with gentle light, thereby releasing the healing energy of Guanyin's mythological power. As a game mechanic, each rotating interactive prayer bead releases a soft wave that heals nearby wounds, allowing the character to feel her compassion. The beads are suspended from low pillars. Above all these, a pipa melody also permeates the entire atmosphere, its gentle plucks easily settling players into a state of peace. Rather than diminishing her spiritual depth, these design decisions infuse each player action with Buddhist symbolism, symbolism that has been transformed from a type of mythic power to actionable game features that can better impart the sacred message that would otherwise become transculturally inaccessible. This innovation creates a virtual world where interactive storytelling and religious tradition can perfectly coexist.

3. Environment design in Black Myth: Wukong

3.1. Buddhist grottoes as interactive spaces

Black Myth: Wukong transforms iconic Buddhist grottoes such as Yungang, Mogao, and Longmen into immersive and functional gameplay environments. Towering Buddha statues and carved niches in the Yungang-inspired Five Huayan Caves are depicted with high-fidelity textures and ambient lighting to evoke a sense of spiritual grandeur [4]. These areas are often traversed by players, who can fight or solve radial mandala puzzles that mimic the grottoes' customary circumambulation routes. In a similar vein, Longmen's Vairocana statue anchors a boss arena, thus delicately fusing tension in battles with reverence for the religion, which is contrasted with Mogao's tiered cliffside layout, which, with its vertical platforming levels, tends to be understood as the spiritual ascent of pilgrimage. According to Murray, this procedural rhetoric incorporates Buddhist ideology into the game's rule-based frameworks, but it also runs the risk of misrepresenting sacred spaces as primarily action-oriented stages, which may be misleading for Western players engaging with Chinese traditions [8, 9].

3.2. Daoist cosmology in spatial mechanics

The game's world design incorporates elements of Daoist cosmology, such as the Thirty-six Heavens and yin-yang duality. The Three Pristine Heavens are reflected in Flower-Fruit Mountain's stratified areas, where the characters climb by spending stamina in order to gain dao qi skills tied with moral development [4]. Based on the Five Agents model, hexagram-inspired puzzles procedurally actualize cosmic equilibrium via elemental harmonies like fire and water [5]. Duality in philosophy is reduced to switch-like interactions within the Yin-Yang Fish boss fight arena, which uses light-dark cuts that mandate players to adjust to transition states. Though they reduce intricate Daoist principles into successful gameplay mechanics, such mechanics, as argued by Salen and Zimmerman, can enable true interactive gaming through linking the actions of the players to observed effects [10].

4. Narrative design

4.1. Innovative narrative structure

Black Myth: Wukong reimagines Journey to the West as a sequel narrative that unfolds after the novel's events, with the “Destined One”—a silent, Sun Wukong-inspired protagonist—taking center stage. While the original text focus lies in Buddhist spiritual enlightenment achievable through pilgrimage, the game’s six chapters—Black Wind Mountain, Yellow Wind Ridge, The New West, The Webbed Ridge, Flaming Mountains, and Mount Huaguo—each offer self-contained yet interconnected stories of legacy, rebellion, and ultimately, self-discovery [11]. These episodic quests parallel the novel’s “81 trials” but are reframed through RPG conventions of exploration and combat. In Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridity, this narrative hybrid occupies a “third space,” in which Chinese myth is re-contextualized to be more digestible and appealing to Western gaming markets, as it finds a middle ground between cultural authenticity and modern narrative approaches [2].

4.2. Fragmented narrative and player agency

Another storytelling innovation of the game is its fragmented, multi-perspective narrative, which is an application of the postmodern theory of The Death of the Author, wherein the story is primarily driven and composed by the players, who thus become more empowered in actively “constructing” rather than passively “receiving” the story [12]. Unlike Journey to the West's linear storytelling, the game first uses environmental storytelling: moss-streaked statues symbolize forgotten deities and half-erased murals, all becoming visual cues that hint at the larger story, tempting the players to find out. Modular story units are also used to guide players in assembling the thread to form their own version of the story, which is complemented by animated cutscenes that conclude each chapter, with love, grief, and revolt being some of the themes. For instance, the final cutscene uses reverse-chronological flashbacks to depict Wukong's duel with Erlang Shen and being sealed in stone, each backward step symbolizing Wukong’s diminished trust with the Celestial Court; this helps to strengthen players’ emotional investment in the game [13].

Player-driven choices, such as pursuing secret quests like ringing three bells to unlock the Ancient Guanyin Temple, create “meaning” in players’ interaction with game features and thereby increase players’ sense of co-authorship and, in return, improve their engagement, which, as Ni notes, adds interest and flexibility to a narrative that has its roots in obscure Chinese philosophy: karma, free will, and the cosmic order [5, 14]. With the deconstruction of the rigid, one-dimensional myths, the game’s narrative design not only preserves its philosophical core but also interrogates and expands it by inviting the players for their own interpretation.

4.3. Dialogue and thematic analysis

In the game, action-oriented exchanges are prioritized over philosophical depth, with approximately 70% of the novel’s introspective content reportedly omitted [15]. In the original, characters like Sun Wukong engage in extended debates on karma and enlightenment, whereas Black Myth: Wukong features concise, combat-driven lines that align with action RPG conventions. As shown in Figure 1, combat (50%) and quest triggers (18%) are the predominant themes; other themes include backstory, character depth, thematic/philosophical nods, and world-building. This confirms that Black Myth: Wukong’s dialogue is indeed tuned for rapid pacing and eliciting player action. According to Schell,

frequent, bite-sized conversations between characters can minimize cognitive interruption, which, to a significant extent, helps sustain an active “fight or quest” mindset in players; rather than prompting reflection like the original novels intend, the game prompts the players to avoid thinking and rely on their basic instincts [16]. A further look at the data can yield even more interesting insights. With only 9% of lines touching on fate or desire, the game is a stark contrast to Journey to the West’s extended karma and enlightenment debates. Designers often sacrifice narrative fidelity for gameplay economy, which is understandable: lengthy philosophical exchanges are contextually inappropriate for real-time combat, where concise, functional dialogue is better in keeping the flow and intensity of the battle. This somewhat reductionist approach, however, risks displacing crucial cultural or spiritual motifs that are key to understanding the socio-historical contexts of the game. By trimming 70% of the novel’s introspective content, the game also becomes far more accessible to an audience that is diverse and global: mythic, obscure cultural mores are recast, or democratized, as universal gaming mechanics like combat, exploration, and reward, essentially exemplifying cultural hybridization in transnational game design [17].

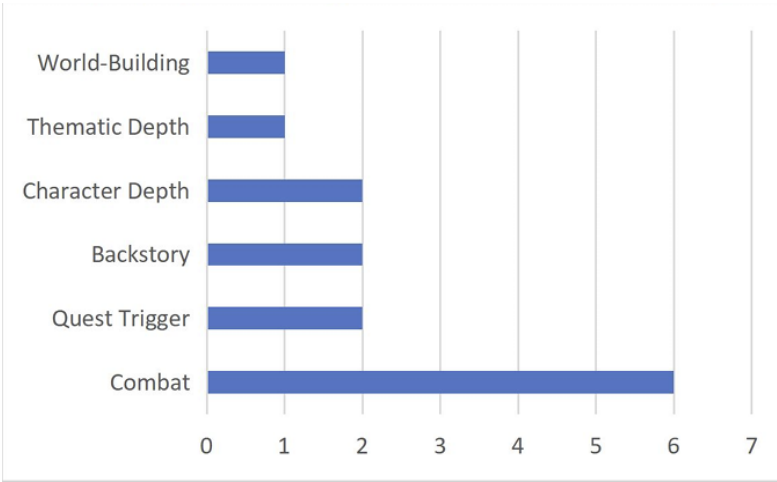


Figure 1. Distribution of thematic types of dialogues in Black Myth: Wukong

Table 2. Thematic analysis of key dialogues

Character	Dialogue	Thematic Role
Yellowbrow	“Zhu Bajie and Sha Wujing are fugitives now.”	Backstory
Zhu Bajie	“I fell for a spider demon’s charms once.”	Character Depth
Keeper of Black Wind Mountain	“A fire raged at Guanyin Temple long ago.”	World-Building
Guangzhi	“This staff won’t save you!”	Combat
Whiteclad Noble	“You’re no match for my blade!”	Combat
Elder Jinchi	“The temple’s secrets are mine!”	Backstory
Violet Spider	“You remind me of that foolish pig.”	Character Depth
Red Boy	“I’ll burn you to ashes!”	Combat
Bull Demon King	“You seek Wukong’s relics? Prove it!”	Quest Trigger
Treasure Hunter	“Those bats nearly got me!”	Quest Trigger
Green-Capped Martialist	“Show me your strength!”	Combat
Erlang Shen	“Wukong’s legacy ends with you!”	Backstory/Combat

Table 2. (continued)

Rakshasi	“My flames will consume you!”	Combat
Taoist Mi	“You cannot escape fate!”	Thematic Depth

Note: “Erlang Shen” (Backstory/Combat) was counted under Combat, as the line’s primary function is a pre-battle challenge.

5. Western media discourse: reinventing the "mystic east"

5.1. Methodology of thematic analysis

Table 3. Thematic analysis process of some of the selected western media quotes

Media	Quote	Initial Code	Axial Code	Final Theme
IGN	“I had to look online to understand who Zhu Bajie was...”	Unfamiliar with mythology	Somewhat mystifying Chinese traditional culture	Exoticism
The Guardian	“A deep dive into a landscape of Oriental mystery”	Use of “Oriental”	Reinforcing exotic, and Oriental stereotypes	Exoticism
The Sunday Diplomat	“Can I go to China to visit them?”	Fascination with cultural sites	Somewhat exoticizing cultural sites and mystifying traditions as faraway and untouchable	Exoticism
PC Gamer	“Black Myth: Wukong is a Soulslike with a Chinese twist”	Cultural specificity as variation	Simplifying cultural roots	Cultural Authenticity
Campaign Asia	“The power of authentic, culturally rooted narratives”	Praise for cultural fidelity	Highlighting cultural depth	Cultural Authenticity
The New York Times	“Wukong proves China can compete on all technical fronts”	Focus on technical achievement	Prioritizing technology over culture	Technological Triumph
Forbes	“Black Myth: Wukong has been one of the flashiest previewed games in some time”	Emphasis on visual spectacle	Celebrating technical achievement	Technological Triumph
IGN Japan	“Darker reinterpretations of celestial figures”	Complex character portrayals	Misunderstanding hints on hierarchy	Moral Ambiguity
Kotaku	“An obtuse, fragmented storyline”	Narrative complexity as confusing	Misinterpreting cultural narrative (same as above)	Moral Ambiguity

Although Black Myth: Wukong has achieved a certain degree of success repackaging traditional Chinese heritage into a playable, immersive gaming experience for a global audience, most Western media outlets tend to emphasize the “Mystic East” aura more than the specific cultural context of the game. To analyze and measure Orientalism in Western media, a thematic coding protocol was developed based on Sihvonen’s framework. Primary texts were collected from 50 Western sources published between August and December 2024 [18]. After inductive open coding of the articles’ narratives, axial coding refined themes into four dimensions: Exoticism, Cultural Authenticity, Technological Triumph, and Moral Ambiguity. Codes were validated through intercoder reliability

checks ($k=0.82<1$) before selective coding consolidated core themes. This coding process is encapsulated in Table 3.

5.2. Thematic analysis

Exoticism remains a dominant lens through which Western media portray the game. Across IGN and Kotaku reviews, descriptors such as “mystical,” “fabled,” and “otherworldly” recur; this tends to reduce Chinese mythology to a mysterious, alluring backdrop rather than acknowledging its philosophical and cultural nuances and values. For instance, The Guardian referred to the game as “a deep dive into a landscape of Oriental mystery,” which has inadvertently sided with colonial-era Orientalist rhetoric that frames the East, especially China, as ineffably strange [18].

Paradoxically and almost curiously, Western media also heaps praise on Black Myth for its “authentic feel,” particularly the almost picture-perfect recreations of Shanxi’s Xuankong Temple and Dali’s Three Pagodas in the game [19]. Yet, while PC Gamer commends “lush forests modeled on real heritage sites,” little attention has been paid to the Daoist and Buddhist philosophies that together serve as the spiritual basis of the site [19]. This highly selective and misinformed authenticity, that is, celebrating aesthetics while ignoring the more important religious environments of the game, is responsible for reinforcing a strongly visualist appreciation that may marginalize living cultural traditions.

The technical mastery of the game, specifically the ray tracing, motion capture, and AI-driven NPC behavior, is highlighted in reviews in The New York Times and CNN, positioning Black Myth as a turning point in Chinese 3A development. Wukong “could be driving a critical shift in the global balance of technological power,” according to The Conversation [20]. Despite their seemingly positive tone, these narratives effectively “flatten” myth into visual standards by treating cultural content as secondary to technological spectacle [21].

A subtler theme lies in the neglect of moral and narrative complexity. IGN’s Japan branch notes “darker reinterpretations of celestial figures.” What it does not take into account is the game’s subversive portrayal of Heaven’s bureaucracy and oppression. Similarly, Kotaku remarks on the game’s “an obtuse, fragmented storyline” that has its roots in Orientalist expectations of inscrutability; by misconstruing the game’s hints at the broken system of law and order of the Celestial Court, Kotaku misses the bigger picture of Chinese cosmology and the critique of hierarchal power [21].

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that to satisfy global audiences, Black Myth: Wukong designs procedural authenticity and narrative simplification. Character design condenses supporting characters like Zhu Bajie and Guanyin into instantly recognizable archetypes while molding amorphous Sino-Buddhist and Daoist logics that are the core of the game, such as Sun Wukong’s particle-based “mystic vision” and wuwei-based stealth tests, into actionable gaming mechanics. Holy grottos are transformed into dynamized spaces by ecological locations reinterpreted in Panofskian iconology: animated guard statues and engageable lotus puzzles bring cultural icons to life without removing their referents. Consalvo’s ludic reduction appears in narrative progressions, which simplify moral and metaphysical concepts into rule-set “sin meters” and checkpoint resurrection. While a modest percentage of reviews acknowledge the game’s more philosophical foundations, Western media text critical discourse analysis continues to demonstrate how coverage likewise generally favors tropes of “kung fu spectacle” and “mystic China.” Such prejudice is reinforced by promotional trailers,

where spectacular exoticism is prioritized over reflexive inquiry through the allocation of the majority of screen time and imagery to dragon battles. These results address the research questions, demonstrating that while design methods successfully balance player access and cultural fidelity, they tend to sacrifice subtle depth in favor of immediacy. This effect is further exacerbated by Western media discourse, which positions Black Myth as Orientalist action-fantasy in place of intercultural dialogue. The limitations of this research are that it is based on published reviews and trailers, which might not capture recent criticisms outside of English-speaking countries or among gamers. Future research will need to examine player reception data from qualitative forums and quantitative surveys to evaluate how well design choices are received across different cultural contexts. Apart from this, examining official developer posts and modding communities can also yield additional insights into how design intent and player agency can meet in practice. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the potential and the risk of digital games as cross-cultural communication spaces, encouraging design frameworks that respect the cultural complexities and appeal to a broad and eclectic audience.

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