

Beyond the Screen: How Black Mythology: Wukong Transforms Cross-Cultural Communication Through Interaction

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Abstract. Representing a huge cultural shift, Black Myth: Wukong is the first AAA video game from China. This is the first time profit-driven digital content is being shifted to a culturally significant digital export. This paper aims to analyze this game's ability to create cross-cultural communication by looking at the cultural craftsmanship and the interactive mechanics of the game and how they work together. Four-stage imagology model and Media Richness Theory were utilized to guide this analysis. This research argues that Black Myth's game architecture, character design, and game music, create an audiovisual design, which uses traditional Chinese culture, specifically from the Journey to the West, a 16th century novel. The game also uses a level of difficulty in the combat system to create a flow state in the player. Besides, this paper claims that this motivates players outside of China to immerse themselves in the culture, and is not a system designed for players to only observe the culture. It is argued that for many of these players, their first experience is some level of immersion, which creates curiosity and ultimately results in cultural immersion at some level. AAA video games are the only media that really create cultural environments and provide a way to transform cross-cultural communication from a one-way model, to an interactive model.

Keywords: Black Myth Wukong, Cross-cultural communication, Interactive immersion, Cultural encoding

1. Introduction

Evolution in China The digital content industry in China is diversifying from a purely profit-driven method toward one that is more culture-focused and oriented toward quality [1]. With further advancement in quality digital content production, China is looking to further contribute to the global marketplace. In order to achieve this, China must transition from a commercial-local focus to a cultural-global focus, while also cultivating the export of digital media. This highlights the significance of video games in cultural diplomacy and soft power of countries and the necessity to create video games with integrated Chinese cultural elements for global market promotion [2]. The cross-cultural communication has the potential to break down barriers between diverse cultures and languages. Under this situation, a Chinese game company released Black Myth: Wukong (BMW),

an action role-playing game. This game is primarily designed for single-player action and has quickly gained global popularity since its release on 20 August 2022 [3]. It has been doing exceptional business after leading the world's sales chart on Steam. Its financial success has provided Game Science with enough capital to generate an AAA game, meaning it has high development costs, long development cycles, and high post-release sales expectations. The game has sold 20 million copies, which has propelled the game to being among the top fastest-sold games in history. It has dethroned other popular games such as Counter-Strike and Elden Ring for having the highest number of players (2.4 million) on Steam. On Metacritic, over 54 different publishers rated the game at 8 or over on a scale from 1 to 10. This game was the first game to be developed in China to win Game Awards and Action Game Awards at the American Game Awards in 2024.

Even though film and television have been major mediums for cultural export, they have not been great at encouraging deep intercultural engagement due to passive viewing and cultural discount, meaning that some audiences will find the stories being told inaccessible or even irrelevant [4]. This is where video games can excel. Unlike passive film viewing or even television watching, where cultural stories are told, video games are fully engaged, active, and participatory so they can potentially motivate players to engage with the game regardless of the culture or stories being told. While cultural films tell stories, cultural games give players the autonomy and agency to engage with or even attempt to change the story being told. This all results in the players experiencing the story and culture rather than just watching it. There is an interesting paradox with video games. Despite probably being the most creative medium, they have, at least so far, maintained the limitations and boundaries of intercultural engagement. This is probably why so much attention has gone to how video games can do what so much of traditional audiovisual media has failed to do. Video game movies, especially *Black Myth: Wukong*, have also done quite well, but probably not as well as the video game, which is probably why it has received so much attention. *Black Myth: Wukong* is especially interesting because, unlike so many films and TV adaptations of the Monkey King story, it has been able to create the level of cross-cultural discussion that has been its intended purpose.

Black Myth: Wukong, the AAA game under analysis, is considered a possible example of how AAA games as a form of intermedial cross-cultural communication can encourage international game players to construct meaning regarding the Chinese cultural context, and to actively engage with it. The first question posed is how, via the manipulation of the game's audio-visual design and the player's perception of the game's design, the focus is ultimately on the intended meaning of the game's design. The second question is how, via the manipulation of the game's audio-visual design, the player's perception of the game's design is affected. The second question centers around AAA game player psychology and the extent to which gaming experience serves to enhance the player's entertainment and the player becomes a culturally active participant. Finally, the global player community's feedback, conversations, and fan works will provide a basis for analyzing the extent to which Chinese culture is understood, valued, and appropriated cross-culturally.

2. Literature review

The starting point of these literature reviews is the Media Comparison in Cross-Cultural Communication. This paper examines the distinctions between film or television and video games in terms of cross-cultural communications. Previous studies demonstrate the differences between passive media and active media in cross-cultural communication. Films and television series distribute cultural narratives widely but face what is known as 'cultural discount' [5]. This is where the foreign audience does not fully grasp the cultural context of the film or series. Video games, on

the other hand, overcome this problem because of the interactivity. As Meng states, in games like *Black Myth: Wukong*, the mechanics of the game create a strong interest in players and, therefore, the players' social and cultural learning becomes active and participative [6]. Further, Wang et al. contend that video games are not merely devices of storytelling, but rather they are 'cultural simulators' [7]. This provides players the opportunity to actively experience and learn a culture that is different from their own. From the Game Studies Perspectives, this paper discusses the previous work on Interactivity, Immersion and Cultural Encoding. Some scholars, for instance, Yuan using the lens of imagology, have examined how video games transform elements of a culture into something interactive [8]. Yuan's model, which moves from proto-image to image realization and reception, explains how *Black Myth: Wukong* embodies the literary Sun Wukong so that players can experience a culturally significant engagement.

Zhang and Zhang explain that immersion can be sustained and flow experienced through challenging "Souls-like" gameplay which creates stronger emotional and cognitive connections with the game's cultural context [9]. The article gives an example of Audiovisual Design in Games focusing on Narrative, Symbols, and Emotional Engagement. Games, with their rich multi-sensory experiences, represent an extremely potent medium for Cultural Transmission. Yuan reviews *Black Myth: Wukong* and how it utilizes genuine coding with parts of Chinese classical art, architecture, music, and mythology inspired character design [8]. These are woven into the gameplay, and thus, the cultural components are made active and meaningful. Evidence from player reviews, despite the interpretive challenges, users from other nations, expressed their admiration and intrigue for these components [9]. This blend of aesthetic interactivity compels players to seek out relevant cultural knowledge that exists beyond the game's confines. While the literature is emerging on the role of games in promoting intercultural communication, there is a lack of research on the intersection of game design, player interactivity, cultural context coding, and their synergy in the effective transmission of culture.

Research concerning the results, like economic results, reception, or the representation of culture in the games, overlook the process and psychological mechanisms within the process of cultural cognition in games. This inconsistency in the literature shows a need for developing a more micro analytical approach to the understanding of culturally embedded games, in particular for non-Western AAA games of higher production value and complexity.

3. Theoretical framework

In order to comprehend how *BMW* conveys the Chinese culture embedded in the narrative of its main character, *The Destined One*, a cross-section approach to the game's imagery of presentation, including, but not limited to, visual, auditory, and tactile stimuli, is helpful. Previous studies have posited a four-stage framework for the study of the cultural imagery of video games, consisting of proto-image, image ontology, image realization, and image reception. Proto-image denotes the first image that comes to mind with an object; image ontology refers to the initial origin of an image; image realization entails how that image is converted into a form of media; and image reception refers to the comments people make concerning that image. Concerning *BMW*, the prototypical image is the mythical figure Sun Wukong. The image ontology is the 16th-century novel "*Journey to the West*", and is culturally representative and narratively foundational. The most prominent of all these stages in the context of this research is the image realization stage of converting the narrative into a multimodal video game through the use of audiovisual elements, narrative reorganization, and the design of playable elements.

Image reception is concerned with how global players process and respond to these realized images, a phenomenon that can be traced through player reviews and online discourse [9]. This helps propose a framework for systematically studying the processes through which meaning is constructed in relation to the game. In addition to the framework, the Media Richness Theory aids in explaining why video games facilitate cross-cultural communication. Media Richness Theory classifies communication within a certain medium according to its effectiveness in communicating a certain idea with the least amount of possibilities for misinterpretation [10] and the most amount of communication. The creators of Media Richness Theory, Daft & Lengel, outline four factors that define the level of richness a medium possesses: these are feedback, the number of channels, the variability of language, and the degree of social presence. Under the same context, video games can be seen as the most comprehensive representatives of the various types of rich media. Users can receive feedback via the combat systems and progression systems in the game, and the required stimuli can be provided via simultaneous use of visual, auditory, and even haptic cues. It uses both symbolic and procedural code to narrate a story and create personalized experiences that lead the player to emotional attachment.

4. Discussion

4.1. Two channels of cultural communication: visual and audio elements and cultural encoding procedure

A There are two channels, or two methods, that the producer of BMW utilized to immerse player into a virtual world that is rich in encoded culture derived from a Chinese classic literature. In BMW, these aspects take form through instantaneous battle reaction systems, culturally relevant audiovisual compositions, and the intimate sensation of personifying The Destined One. This type of theoretical blending allows for the fusion of Yuan's visual cultural studies and the Media Richness Theory and its focus on the distinct particularities of the individual means, thereby creating the conditions to examine how BMW's variety of interactions cultivates culturally passive observation and fosters physically active and engaged observation. BMW's primary means of facilitating and communicating culture is its audiovisual richness. The game's 'image realization' is the result of precisely harmonized genuine cultural elements to form a unified aesthetic environment. The game's visual design is primarily based on the aesthetics of Chinese ink wash painting and, more specifically, on the front cover of the Ming Dynasty review book "Mr. Li Zhuowu's Criticism of Journey to the West" [8]. In addition, the development team used contemporary 3D laser scanning to collect data of real Chinese historical sites, such as Shanxi Buddhist temples, to design real, as opposed to imaginary, structurally based environments [11]. This cultural encoding reaches character and sound design as well.

The boss named "Dark Moon Demon Lord" exemplifies a number of Chinese cultural examples when blended semiotically. For example, the boss uses the chicken (yang) and centipede (yin) duality of monsters, creating a blend that is frightening and culturally rich [8]. Also, the game's soundtrack utilizes the music of the Pipa (a traditional Chinese musical instrument) and uses a melody from a version of the theme song from the TV drama "Journey to the West," which evokes a common cultural memory for the Chinese easily while offering a unique sound for other audiences [8]. These examples are not ornamental and comprise the real culture that stands to be touched while players are made to move "The Destined One" (the only "role" they are granted) in BMW.

In general, paintings, architectures, instruments, and characterization of Bosses are the byproducts of the gaming mechanism. Talking about its essence, the gaming mechanism of BMW is

built on 3D combat and NPC interacting system; the player controls a fictional character in a fictional world, utilizing combat and puzzle-solving systems to unlock positive reinforcements. These positive reinforcements usually appear in the form of new scenes, enemies, plot, upgraded equipment, and so on, and are designed to continue players' interest in the game. As technology progressed, modeling techniques and motion capture enabled the production of authentic reinforcements, with vivid details resembling real-world experiences. However, following the plotline of the game till the end, players who gain all the awards divert their attention to other things in the game; a portion of them. This kind of shift in focus can happen at every stage of game playing, from the start to the beginning. In order to satisfy players' shift in focus, game producers add "meanings" to the character's surroundings and also to the positive reinforcements. Other than following the major plotline to unlock more positive reinforcements, game players are given a second path to explore, which is to interpret the "meanings" around their character in-game. For a game producer, among all the meanings waiting to be selected, they tend to choose meanings that are rich in cultural elements and values, and are derived from a part of national history. In practical cases, 3A game producers will directly initiate the meaning-adding process in the early stage of development. Game Science, the group that developed BMW, started this process before they began to program the game. They selected meanings from a well-known Chinese traditional fiction, "Journey to the West," and created the game's surroundings based on content from the book; this design can be exemplified by many forms, such as narratives in plotline, artwork, architecture, boss design, and cut-scene music discussed previously.

The procedure of meaning-adding in digital games has evolved from passive-adding, a response to players' lack of reinforcement, to active-adding, an awareness that player stickiness will be sustained by the cultural elements encoded in the character's surroundings. When this procedure is combined with a reinforcement mechanism, players will be consistently motivated to utilize the combat system in RPG to gain experience and immersion into the game. As the reinforcement mechanism constructs a highly-focused scenario for the player and makes it hard for them to quit, players with enhanced stickiness to the game will actively seek extra meanings for staying in the game. At this stage, the cultural meanings being added to the character's surroundings through the evolved procedure will be excavated by players to study and interpret, forming the final step of culture dissemination.

4.2. The interactive system as the engine of engagement globally in Chinese video games

The interactive systems, and most importantly, the systems themselves, are the culmination of the preparation that goes into the design to maintain interest. Player reviews reflect this by result of Combat Design Perception as well as Challenge & Difficulty Perception most commonly by citing the terms boss, combat, and hard. This Souls-like game design (high emphasis on difficulty) is also known as a reinforcement system design and is extremely important. Challenging tasks engage a cognitive cycle of "challenge-feedback-adjustment" leading to focused absorption and enjoyment [9]. The cognitive cycle of BMW gives the player controlling the character a sense of enjoyment and encourages them to seek more. The cognitive merger also assures the player that through effort, defeating the boss is possible. Boss fights are the main antagonists in "Souls-like" games, and their defeat unlocks new content. This also distinguishes this experience from traditional media. The frustration of a boss fight is not simply a test of ability; it involves the player in the game world. The more someone tries to complete a boss fight, the more valuable the associated cultural narrative becomes. The game's technological structure, as Meng describes, reinforces this type of engagement

[6]. Unreal Engine 5, ray tracing, and motion capture above 30fps not only increase quality of graphics, but also increase the ability to communicate and immerse culturally.

When participants perform combat actions with the same fluidity involved in real-world martial arts, they embody what Luo and Han refer to as cultural knowledge, the feeling that through the gameplay, the culture of the Chinese martial arts is not being represented, but actually lived [11]. As player reviews show, the most memorable encounters [9], and the most significant from the perspective of the cultural synthesis of the visceral experience, are the boss fights [8]. Take the Black Bear Demon as an example. His design incorporates Buddhist symbolism of avarice, and his combat patterns punish aggressive players, thereby encoding an interactive philosophical critique. As Wang et al. proposed, engaging with combat design and progressing through the game are interdependent, which means that learning the culture is necessary rather than an optional background consideration. Players, therefore, must internalise the values of the game, as combat design is a means of value integration [12]. This explains the cultural values that keep players engaged with the game. Meng cites culture as the primary reason for the engagement of more than 75% of players; culture within the game is a challenge, not mere visual aesthetics [6].

Reception of Chinese culture in the BMW by international players. The reception of Chinese culture by English-speaking players has been active. Player engagement with the game shows cultural negotiation and collective meaning creation. This has been quantitatively demonstrated through analysis of the 18,916 comments posted on the BMW Steam page as of April 2025. The comment analysis shows a remarkable use of culturally relevant terms such as Wukong, Chinese, and Journey to the West, illustrating their active engagement with the culture embedded in the game.

Additionally, the emotion analysis shows players' curiosity and admiration are often paired with interpretive confusion, the tension which paradoxically fuels further intercultural exploration, including some players reading the source novel to deepen their comprehension [9]. This step from perceptual recognition to active inquiry is a good example for the image reception stage, in which players recognize and personalize cultural elements. The statistical analysis of Steam comments supports the hypothesis that the game design, in which immersive audiovisual elements and interactive gameplay are combined, is capable of transforming players from a passive phenomena to active seekers, interpreters, and emotional investors toward the cultural narratives, which supports the BMW burning argument that the game fuels real transnational cultural interaction through its cultural coding and immersive gameplay. The players' emotional reception topology shows even more complex phenomena than sheer affirmative reception. Zhang and Zhang's sentiment analysis of Steam comments shows that admiration and confusion are frequent companions, with players describing both aesthetic appreciation for cultural elements, and frustration of their incomprehensibility [9]. This tension, however, paradoxically drives deeper engagement. As Wang et.al mentioned in their review study, players of video games who face interpretative problems tend to seek out other means of learning, with YouTube videos and Reddit threads being utilized as informal educational resources [12]. YouTube content creator @Williamsweeb, for example, has created a multi-part series on Black Myth: Wukong that discusses the game's Buddhist mythology and philosophy, and has received millions of views demonstrating an example of this need [13]. This also exemplifies the cultural reinvention of the process of globalization that Meng describes. With the crossing of culturally authentic elements and foreign audiences, there is not simply an acceptance or rejection of elements; instead, they are reinterpreted through an active process of collaborative discussion [6]. Thus, the Steam comment data that shows comprehension problems for about 18% of overseas players represents more of a cross cultural learning process than a failure of communication. Han describes this informal interpretative activity as a playful form of resistance to

the shallow cultural appropriation, and the players actively construct their own interpretations from the game instead of passively receiving predigested content [13]. The game thus serves as what Wang et al. term a cultural simulator' means not because it opaquely transmits meaning, but because it fosters environments where meaning can be constructed through active engagement and collaboration [12].

5. Conclusion

Black Myth: Wukong demonstrates a synergy between form and content in cross-cultural communication. Through its authentic audiovisual design, it successfully realizes Chinese cultural images in a digital space. More importantly, by embedding these cultural elements within a deeply engaging and challenging interactive system, it motivates international players to transition from passive observers to active participants and co-creators of cultural meaning. The game's journey, from its literary ontology to its digital realization and its receptive embodiment by a global audience, proves that triple-A video games are not merely entertainment products but powerful, immersive media for cultural transmission. BMW offers a compelling model for how digital soft power can be exercised not through overt messaging, but through the intrinsically motivating language of play, challenge, and storytelling.

Future research must build on the study's findings and address the current study's shortcomings. This paper uses the imagology model and Media Richness Theory to analyze the potential for Black Myth: Wukong to offer an immersive experience and apply authentic cultural encoding to cross-border intercultural communication. In contrast to the majority of contemporary video games, the contemporary video games Wukong actively encourages international players to engage with the culture. This also demonstrates successful cultural participation. There are, however, many more that remain to be answered. Addressing the previous study's need to measure culturally induced curiosity about China outside of the game context, longitudinal studies would be an effective method. Considering the reception cycles of the game, it may be appropriate to consider research of other games, particularly other games oriented in Chinese mythology, in determining the applicability of the title mythology based game to Black Myth: Wukong. Compared to other cultural video games, Black Myth: Wukong may be a cultural video game based on Chinese mythology and perhaps the same could be said of other cultural video games. The overt positive/negative sentiment analysis of the game and the interview study, in a way, may be a study of the overseas players. The analysis of the game intervention, where it is supposed that the players are from the West or East Asia, especially in order to find the larger cultural horizon of the players, may be attributed to the cultural phenomenon of the game in the cultural space of the players. This study may help in understanding the phenomenon of the players possibly being from the West. Lastly, upcoming studies may delve into how meta-players contribute to national and personal cultural stories, as this is vital for comprehending how video games function as a medium for intercultural dialogue in an evolving global context of video game publishing.

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