

The Game-mediated Communication Path for Chinese Culture Going Global through the Success of Black Myth: Wukong (Postprint)

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Abstract

Objective: The Chinese-made game, Black Myth: Wukong, has achieved remarkable success since its release, and its creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese culture merit discussion. **Methods:** This paper conducts a content analysis of literature on game development and the game text of Black Myth: Wukong, discussing the influence of various factors in game development on game innovation. **Results:** The game's creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese culture encompasses innovations in narrative content, visual design, and game mechanics, among other aspects. **Conclusion:** Through discussing the innovations of this game, this paper proposes that games can serve as an important communication pathway to effectively promote Chinese culture globally, tell China's stories well, and showcase the spirit of Chinese culture.

Full Text

Preamble

A Game-Based Communication Path for Chinese Culture's Global Expansion: Lessons from the Success of *Black Myth: Wukong*

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Abstract

[Objective] The domestic Chinese game *Black Myth: Wukong* achieved remarkable success upon release, offering valuable insights into the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese culture. **[Method]** This paper

conducts a content analysis of literature on game development and the game text of *Black Myth: Wukong* to examine how various factors in game development influence innovation. **[Results]** The game's creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese culture involve innovations in narrative content, visual design, and game mechanics. **[Conclusion]** Through discussing the innovations in this game, this paper proposes that gaming can serve as an effective communication pathway to promote Chinese culture globally, tell Chinese stories well, and showcase the spirit of Chinese culture.

Keywords: *Black Myth: Wukong*; gaming; Chinese culture; innovation; pathway

1. PEST Analysis of *Black Myth: Wukong*'s Success

The success of *Black Myth: Wukong* is first and foremost closely related to the broader environment of the gaming industry's development, including political, economic, socio-cultural, and technological factors. These external conditions provide game developers with more opportunities and resources, enabling the industry to smoothly inherit and innovate Chinese culture.

1.1 Policy Level

The Chinese government has long prioritized the development of the gaming industry. In 2004, the General Administration of Press and Publication launched the "Chinese Ethnic Online Game Publishing Project." In 2014, the State Council adopted policies to promote the integration of cultural creativity and design services with related industries, with gaming designated as a sector for definite support. In 2021, 17 ministries and commissions jointly issued the "Notice on Several Measures to Support the High-Quality Development of National Cultural Export Bases," which "encourages outstanding traditional cultural products, creative cultural products, and digital cultural products such as films, television dramas, and games to 'go global'" [2]. These cultural industry policies consistently demonstrate national-level attention to the gaming industry. Simultaneously, local governments have continuously increased their support for overseas dissemination of Chinese culture through games. Beijing, Fujian, Guangdong, Shanghai, and other local governments have introduced relevant policies that explicitly encourage gaming companies to create original games containing Chinese cultural characteristics, actively promote the overseas expansion of domestic games to spread Chinese culture, and form upstream and downstream industry clusters in the gaming sector.

1.2 Economic Level

Games can drive economic development and provide employment, so in industrial economic development, gaming is incorporated into categories such as the information industry, digital publishing industry, or cultural and creative industries. Since 2008, China's online game publishing industry has shown counter-

trend growth, becoming one of the “locomotives” driving China’s internet economy [3]. Through development, China’s gaming industry has evolved from initially contracting and outsourcing for foreign manufacturers, to operating as agents for foreign games, and then to independently developing original games, continuously achieving remarkable results. In 2023, the actual sales revenue of self-developed games in China’s domestic market reached 256.375 billion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 15.29%, with the number of gamers reaching 666 million. In 2023, the actual sales revenue of self-developed Chinese games in overseas markets was 16.366 billion USD. Notably, the primary target markets for Chinese gaming companies’ overseas expansion are mostly developed countries. According to 2023 statistics, the U.S. market accounted for 32.51%, the Japanese market for 18.87%, and the Korean market for 8.18%, with these three countries combined accounting for 59.56% of the overseas gaming market share that year [4].

1.3 Socio-Cultural Level

Public understanding and participation not only affect whether the gaming industry can obtain policy support and promotion but also influence whether the industry can continuously attract high-quality professional talent, which in turn affects the effectiveness of cultural dissemination through games. Therefore, public attitudes toward gaming are closely related to the development of the gaming industry. Chinese society’s understanding of video games and the gaming industry has undergone a process from rejection to support. Beginning in the 1980s, people took a strong opposing stance toward the newly emerged electronic game machines (arcades), believing that elementary and middle school students playing electronic games affected their academic performance and physical health. After 2000, as games further spread on the internet, accusations about the negative effects of electronic games reached their peak, with the public believing that online games promoted violence, were used for gambling, induced crime, spread harmful ideas, and involved pornography, calling on relevant departments to strengthen regulation and management [5]. However, with continuous economic development, rising per capita disposable income has led to greater recognition of knowledge, education, and entertainment, and social cognition of games has also deepened. Especially after media provided positive guidance on the socio-economic functions, cultural construction, and communication functions of games, the public’s negative attitudes toward games have generally shown a gradual decline [6]. In this process, e-sports was also established as the 99th official competitive sports project by the State General Administration of Sports. China’s gaming industry has completed the transformation from foreign introduction to independent originality. Public perception has also begun to view gaming as a new “cultural and entertainment method” for the general public, evolving from “cultural industry” to a new medium for inheriting culture, and becoming a new way for people today to establish social relations and construct identity.

1.4 Technical Level

Among all cultural products, games are most closely integrated with technology. The rise of information technology in the 1950s and 1960s laid the technical foundation for the development of the electronic game industry. By the late 1990s, with the development of the internet, online games emerged. Subsequently, game engines continued to mature, and the gaming industry developed rapidly, which in turn promoted the industrialization and marketization of information technology or digital technology. Currently, technical aspects such as game engine design, code writing, and visual rendering are continuously upgrading [7], with functions like physical simulation and artificial intelligence making the game production process visualized and lowering the threshold for creating virtual worlds. Under gamers' increasingly high demands, gaming-related software and hardware equipment is also constantly updated. Additionally, the development of virtual technology has endowed games with new possibilities, greatly enhancing interactivity and vividness, as seen in augmented reality mobile games like *Pokémon GO* [8]. In the scene modeling process for *Black Myth: Wukong*, the development team adopted new technologies such as spatial computing, ray tracing, motion capture, image rendering technology DLSS 3.5, and panoramic ray tracing to further enhance the game's graphical effects and visual experience [9].

2. Cultural Innovation in *Black Myth: Wukong*' s Breakthrough

Produced by the Chinese game developer Game Science, *Black Myth: Wukong* is based on the Chinese classical novel *Journey to the West* and is considered a landmark 3A game masterpiece representing the rise of domestic Chinese games [10]. The gaming industry typically refers to high-quality single-player games that require massive time investment, high-cost production, and substantial resource input as AAA games, which are also generally considered the highest standard truly representing the level of the gaming industry [11]. Many foreign AAA single-player game masterpieces have deeply embedded historical and cultural elements from various countries, indicating that premium games are an inevitable direction for China' s cultural industry to go global. As a milestone success case in China' s gaming industry, cultural innovation is an essential factor in its success.

2.1 Innovation in Narrative Content

The game selects the story of the Chinese classical novel *Journey to the West* as its background, which is a typical game development approach based on traditional culture [12]. However, *Black Myth: Wukong* does not simply appropriate the content of traditional literature but achieves excellent innovation. First, on the basis of respecting the original work' s spiritual core, it incorporates a modern perspective interpretation, telling a story about resurrection and resistance.

The game sets up the “Destined One” to retrieve the lost five senses and combine them into one to resurrect Sun Wukong. From a pure storytelling perspective, the entire plot is full of ups and downs and is quite interesting. This has led some netizens to excitedly claim while watching game livestreams that its plot and graphics quality are worthy of being called a film. The game’s plot development and characters are closely tied to the original *Journey to the West* while also containing many innovations and expansions. This not only helps gamers, especially overseas players, understand the game characters and plot but also attracts players to explore unknown stories and unlock new experiences through new narratives. As the “Destined One,” players will encounter various demons and challenges while searching for Sun Wukong’s senses and also learn about the destinies and stories of various immortals and gods. The entire game is rich in innovation, challenge, and strong participation, allowing gamers to experience abundant traditional Chinese culture.

2.2 Cultural Integration in Visual Design

In visual design, the game’s art team conducted meticulous design for characters, costumes, props, scenes, and other elements. For example, Sun Wukong’s battle robes, from the tiger-skin skirt to the brocade scale battle robe to the golden embroidered shirt design, are exquisitely stunning, drawing on more than ten types of ancient Chinese costume designs. Additionally, many characters in the game, such as the 造型设计 of various “Land Gods” and the 形象设计 of BOSS demons like the “White-Clothed Scholar” in various levels, all innovatively integrate the images of monsters from ancient Chinese mythology and legends. Beyond this, the game team uses digital technology to present traditional cultural scenes to players in a more realistic and three-dimensional manner, including magnificent architecture in game scenes, rap music matching the plot, and other details, all containing rich Chinese culture that makes Chinese players feel intimately familiar and provides foreign players with a visual and auditory feast.

2.3 Cultural Innovation in Game Mechanics and Design

In terms of traditional culture usage, the game production team does not simply copy and reproduce traditional culture but integrates it into every detail of the game design through innovation. For example, the levels or missions set in the game contain a large amount of traditional cultural knowledge, and players must understand this knowledge to obtain clues for passing levels and unlock new content. Additionally, many mechanics and skill settings in the game incorporate traditional Chinese cultural elements while also being designed according to the game’s own characteristics. For instance, Sun Wukong’s attack skills, such as the pole-prostrating Buddha strike and staff-blocking, all come from Chinese classical literary works. It is precisely these innovations that have made this game perform astonishingly and become China’s first truly meaningful AAA game product. Its exquisite graphics, unique artistic presentation, wonderful role-playing, exhilarating combat, and moving plot have brought gamers

a splendid Chinese cultural experience. This also demonstrates that in the process of the gaming industry's global expansion, gaming enterprises must attach importance to the integration of traditional culture into games. Meanwhile, AAA game products from around the world all deeply embed their own historical and cultural elements. For a gaming enterprise, being rooted in fertile cultural soil is both the experience for achieving good economic benefits and its corporate responsibility to undertake cultural exchange and communication.

3. Challenges and Strategies for Domestic Games in Overseas Dissemination of Chinese Culture

While discussing the success of *Black Myth: Wukong*, we also see that its creation process was extremely difficult. In the process of the gaming industry's global expansion, we still need to invest substantial effort to address existing problems in international communication and propose corresponding countermeasures.

3.1 Challenges in Domestic Games' Overseas Dissemination of Chinese Culture

3.1.1 Technology and Team Building Technical challenges have always been a major difficulty in China's gaming industry development. In media interviews with *Black Myth: Wukong*, production staff mentioned: "The production difficulty of the Black Wind Mountain level in the game exceeded most people's imagination" [13]. Creating a good game is no longer a question of creativity being the decisive factor but rather how to realize the creative vision. All "desired elements" involve corresponding technologies and industrial processes. The development team actually spent two to three months just to adjust a character's sword-drawing action to the smoothest and most visually pleasing degree. Nevertheless, there is still a certain gap compared with top-tier works from overseas major studios. Without such a massive basic motion library, the technical level largely determines the design level and development capability. There is still considerable room for optimization and improvement, such as the game crashes, combat mechanics, "invisible walls," and map guidance that appear in the game. Therefore, the key is to have a professional and stable team. Development teams at foreign leading gaming companies generally reach scales of over a hundred people, while *Black Myth: Wukong*'s initial production team had only 13 people, which later expanded as production needs required. In terms of the final player experience, this also indirectly confirms that the game team's experience still has shortcomings. For example, regarding problems in the game process, some players complained that "developers should place obstacles in front of invisible walls to hide them." In response, game designers admitted that they had indeed been inconsiderate in the design and would optimize the game. All this demonstrates that domestic production of AAA games still lacks a complete industrial process and corresponding professional talent and experience.

3.1.2 Need to Strengthen Traditional Culture Translation Effects

Currently, using domestic digital games to disseminate traditional Chinese culture has become a consensus, with over 40% of games spreading traditional Chinese culture, including most popular mobile games [14]. However, a considerable portion of these games merely adds elements of traditional Chinese culture to the games without considering whether foreign players have difficulty identifying and understanding these elements. Additionally, players from different cultures have different cultural backgrounds and knowledge structures, resulting in significant obstacles and differences in their cognitive and understanding processes of Chinese culture in games. For example, regarding the cognition of mythological figures in games, players may only know that they are figures from traditional Chinese mythology but do not understand their cultural significance or the roles they play in mythological stories. An excellent overseas game must undergo a series of design integrations by the producers regarding the game's spiritual core, gameplay mechanics, visual elements, and language translation to achieve the desired effect in dissemination.

3.1.3 Lack of Investment Confidence Currently, a paradox in China's gaming industry development is that while overall gaming industry revenue shows an upward trend—reaching 302.964 billion yuan in 2023, a year-on-year increase of 13.95%—institutional investment in the animation and gaming industry has generally been declining since 2015 [15]. Additionally, Chinese gaming companies have consistently focused on mobile online game projects with large investment returns and quick results, rather than being willing to invest in AAA games that are difficult, have long cycles, and uncertain returns. From the perspective of international gaming industry development, both “large-scale single-player projects” and “large-scale commercial projects” progress simultaneously, but China's major game development companies “do not have the accumulation of the former” [16], thus clearly lacking confidence in going global through this path.

3.2 Gaming Development Strategies from the Perspective of Cultural Globalization

3.2.1 Strengthen Professional Talent Cultivation and Encourage Game Research China's gaming industry started relatively late and does not have the substantial financial and talent reserves of foreign gaming industries. Therefore, it should strengthen the cultivation of game development talent and improve their professional skills and cultural literacy. This is an unavoidable step for the gaming industry to go global and pursue an internationalized, premium development path. Specifically, in addition to offering relevant professional courses and training programs for game designers, it is also necessary to cultivate interdisciplinary talents with profound humanistic qualities and cultural backgrounds while strengthening professional education for game design talents in universities. Furthermore, we must vigorously promote research in game studies and actively encourage scholars to conduct

socio-cultural research on games. We should not merely view games as tools for entertainment and economic profit but should explore a series of issues in game design, operation, and dissemination, study the potential impacts of games on social development, and explore the positive roles of games in cultural communication and social construction. Only in this way can the gaming industry develop healthily and sustainably, producing game brands that can both meet domestic consumers' needs and attract international players' interest while carrying Chinese culture.

3.2.2 Improve Cultural Translation to Reduce Cultural Discount

When conducting cross-cultural communication, due to audiences coming from different linguistic cultures, historical traditions, and countries and regions with certain cultural differences and varying degrees of cultural cognition, their interest and understanding ability regarding cultural products will be greatly reduced. Therefore, many game developers consider adopting approaches that cater to players' cultures and values to localize products. However, this may lead to deviations in understanding when cultural translation fails to truly express the original cultural meaning. Thus, it is also necessary to properly handle conflicts between consumption needs and cultural values. Cultural translation is not simple literal translation but requires considering the cultural traditions and social-historical contexts contained in the product itself and truly expressing its core in appropriate language. Conduct review and adjustment of game content to ensure that different versions of the game conform to the cultural backgrounds and aesthetic standards of players in different regions, while simultaneously maintaining cultural confidence and preserving the expression of some unique meanings in Chinese culture. For example, in the English translation of the game, "Chinese dragon" is specially annotated as "Loong" rather than "Dragon" in English. "This attitude of focusing on Chinese discourse and Chinese narrative" demonstrates that "the new generation of game developers is more culturally confident" [17].

3.2.3 Focus on Social Interaction and Enhance Community Building

In the game *Black Myth: Wukong*, Chinese cultural elements are extremely dense, with even a simple Chinese character having its origin. This is not only a challenge for foreign players but also a cultural lesson for domestic fans. Many overseas players have begun to intensively study *Journey to the West*. In game livestream rooms, many fans spontaneously interpret some game settings. Simultaneously, there has even been a spectacular scene of tens of millions of fans watching the old version of *Journey to the West* together. Through these interactions, players share gaming skills and mutually supplement game knowledge. Therefore, to address communication effectiveness issues such as cultural interpretation barriers arising from insufficient cultural cognition in games, game developers should encourage players to team up to complete tasks, enhance social interaction, establish communication platforms within the game, or build dedicated game communities where players can share gaming experiences and

cultural insights. For example, the social system in *Justice Online* allows players to build their own homes in the game and invite other players to visit and exchange ideas. In this process, not only can players better understand the cultural spirit carried in the game, but social interaction among fans also generates stronger user stickiness.

3.2.4 Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Cultural Confidence On the basis of maintaining Chinese cultural characteristics, game developers can appropriately integrate some cultural elements from the game's target market so that the game can be accepted by more diverse cultural subjects and ensure the economic benefits of game development. For example, *Knives Out* launched a "Sakura Season" event in the Japanese market, which was welcomed by Japanese players. Additionally, according to the preferences of target markets, games should undergo innovative design and adjustment, such as when *Honor of Kings* was launched in the European and American markets, hero images and skills were redesigned to attract Western players. However, there must also be cultural confidence; we cannot blindly cater to players' interests and lose 坚守 of the original cultural essence [18].

3.2.5 Policy Guidance and Support The government should continue to strengthen encouragement and support for the research, development, and promotion of Chinese cultural games by introducing relevant policies, such as providing financial subsidies and tax incentives. Simultaneously, the industry should also adapt to changes by formulating new norms and standards to ensure the quality of game content and cultural correctness, avoiding undesirable content such as vulgarity and violence.

In summary, inheriting and developing excellent traditional Chinese culture has become a consensus among gaming enterprises. Through the creative transformation and innovative development of games, the gaming medium can effectively promote Chinese culture to the world, enabling more people to understand and appreciate Chinese culture. Through game research, development, and operation, we can demonstrate Chinese aesthetic style, promote traditional cultural knowledge, tell Chinese stories well, and showcase the spirit of Chinese culture.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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