

Original Paper

Narrative Strategies and Confidence Building of Chinese Traditional Culture in the Global Context—A Case Study of the Game *Black Myth: Wukong*

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Abstract

Black Myth: Wukong, as a highly influential game, has garnered significant attention in the current era of increasingly frequent global cultural exchange. In terms of narrative strategies, the game employs transmedia storytelling, utilizing diverse media forms to expand cultural dissemination channels. It promotes a fusion of global and local narratives, skillfully integrating Chinese mythology into universal narrative structures, thereby preserving local cultural characteristics while resonating with international audiences. Through interactive storytelling, it allows players to deeply participate in the story's development, enhancing the cultural experience. *Black Myth: Wukong* not only inspires domestic public recognition of traditional culture but also elevates the global influence of Chinese culture. It provides valuable insights for the international dissemination of traditional culture in aspects such as content creation, dissemination strategies, and talent development, effectively contributing to the construction of China's cultural confidence. Focusing on this, this paper provides an in-depth analysis of the Chinese traditional culture embedded within it and its narrative strategies and confidence construction within the international context.

Keyword

Black Myth, Wukong, narrative strategy, confidence building

1. Introduction

As a domestic AAA single-player Action Role-Playing Game (ARPG) based on the Journey to the West theme, Black Myth: Wukong was released on August 20, 2024. Within just three months of its launch, it achieved over 22 million copies sold on the Steam platform, generating 8 billion yuan in revenue. It received a perfect score from IGN China and a nomination for The Game Awards's (TGA) Game of the Year, establishing itself as a representative work of Chinese games "going global" in recent years. Based on Journey to the West, the game narrates the subsequent story of Sun Wukong abandoning his Buddhist status after the pilgrimage and facing renewed conquest by the heavenly court. Through its immersive presentation of Journey to the West and creative transformation of cultural elements, the game has become an internationally recognized cultural symbol. In the context of globalization, the international dissemination of traditional culture requires precise narrative strategies to achieve value resonance and demonstrate cultural confidence. This paper uses Black Myth: Wukong as a case study to explore its narrative strategies and pathways for building confidence.

2. Narrative Strategies of Chinese Traditional Culture in the Global Context

In the global context, narrative strategy is crucial for disseminating Chinese traditional culture. Narrative organizes events, characters, and plots through language, structure, and forms of expression to convey themes, values, or cultural connotations to the audience. Narrative strategy refers to the combination of methods, techniques, and means employed during the narrative process to achieve specific communication goals, tailored to different audience groups, communication channels, and cultural backgrounds. Its core lies in how to make stories reach audiences more effectively and evoke their understanding, identification, and resonance.

2.1 Transmedia Storytelling

2.1.1 Cross-media Narrative Linkage Between Games, Literature, and Film

Journey to the West provides Black Myth: Wukong with profound cultural heritage and a comprehensive worldview. While respecting the original novel's essence, the game introduces innovative adaptations. Through interactivity, it allows players to delve into the world of Journey to the West from the perspective of the "Destined One", experiencing quests such as subduing demons. The film medium, with its mature audio-visual language, aids in the game's dissemination. Furthermore, this cross-media linkage is evident in the evocation of cultural memory. For instance, allusions to the 1986 television series Journey to the West evoke childhood memories for audiences, attracting them to further explore the game's world. Simultaneously, it enables international audiences to experience traditional Chinese stories from different dimensions, deepening their understanding and awareness, thereby expanding the cultural influence of traditional Chinese culture.

2.1.2 Multi-channel Storytelling Utilizing Social Media and Online/Offline Activities

Social media platforms have become the frontline for Black Myth: Wukong to interact with a global audience. The game's official accounts on globally recognized platforms such as Facebook released character design art and captivating game clips, which swiftly sparked widespread attention, discussion, and sharing among international players. The exquisite application of elements from traditional Chinese clothing, weaponry, and makeup in the character designs ignited international players' curiosity and enthusiasm to explore traditional Chinese attire and martial arts culture. Regarding offline activities, themed exhibitions organized for the game provided international audiences with opportunities to experience Chinese traditional culture firsthand. International players could not only try the game on-site and feel its unique appeal, but also gain a deeper understanding of traditional Chinese culture through interaction by participating in these cultural experience activities. This enhanced their sense of connection and identification with it, achieving a transition from online engagement to offline deep immersion. This approach constructs a comprehensive, multi-layered cultural dissemination network, improving the effectiveness of spreading traditional Chinese stories within the global context.

2.2 *Localization and Globalization Integrated Narrative*

In the global context, disseminating Chinese traditional culture through purely localized presentation often struggles to overcome cultural barriers. The integrated narrative strategy of globalization and localization practiced by Black Myth: Wukong provides a model for balancing cultural authenticity and international acceptance.

2.2.1 Modernized and Internationalized Adaptation and Presentation of Traditional Cultural Elements

The application of traditional Chinese cultural elements in Black Myth: Wukong is not merely a superficial accumulation of symbols, but rather an innovative transformation through modern artistic techniques and technological means, making them more aligned with the aesthetic preferences and cognitive patterns of international audiences. In character design, Sun Wukong's core identifiers—such as his simian facial contours, the Golden Headband, and tiger-skin skirt—are all derived from traditional imaginings and folk memories in Journey to the West, serving as distinct carriers of localized characteristics. Building on this foundation, the game employs modern design approaches in costume textures and silhouette lines, allowing the characters to retain their cultural recognizability while also possessing a contemporary flair and three-dimensional dynamism.

The same principle applies to environmental design. Settings within the game—such as temples, palaces, and caves—meticulously recreate core features of traditional Chinese architecture, including upturned eaves, dougong bracketing, and mortise-and-tenon joints, along with carved window lattices. Simultaneously, leveraging advanced lighting and physical rendering technologies, the game enables these traditional structures to exhibit realistic light-shadow variations and spatial atmospheres under different weather conditions and times of day. This transforms traditional cultural settings from subjects of subjective imagination into tangible immersive experiences for players.

2.2.2 Narrative Expression Based on Universal Emotions and Values

While cultural differences may be significant, humanity's pursuit of shared emotions and values often overlaps. In narrating a Chinese story, *Black Myth: Wukong* skillfully connects traditional cultural core themes with universal global motifs. Through its interpretation of universal values such as courage, justice, and growth, it evokes emotional resonance among international audiences. In the game, Sun Wukong's primary quest of "subduing demons and vanquishing evil" is fundamentally a steadfast commitment to "justice". This pursuit of fairness and righteousness represents a shared human ideal transcending culture and era.

Simultaneously, the protagonist's journey of growth is a continuous thread throughout the narrative: from a naive understanding of his mission upon first entering the world, to a gradual comprehension of the weight of "destiny" through repeated failures and struggles, and finally to learning to accept responsibility and confront his fate. This developmental arc echoes the hero's journey narrative pattern familiar to international audiences, allowing players from diverse cultural backgrounds to see reflections of their own growth in the character, thereby forging a deep emotional connection. This value-based narrative constructs an "emotional bridge" for traditional Chinese cultural stories, enabling international audiences to naturally absorb cultural messages through resonance.

2.3 Interactive Storytelling

In the digital media era, interactivity has become a vital characteristic of cultural dissemination. Leveraging the unique advantages of the gaming medium, *Black Myth: Wukong* constructs a multi-layered interactive storytelling system, transforming international players from mere "observers" of traditional cultural stories into active "participants", significantly deepening the reach and impact of cultural transmission.

2.3.1 Interactive Narrative Mechanisms in Gameplay Design

Through meticulous gameplay design, *Black Myth: Wukong* integrates interactivity into the narrative itself, enabling international players to deeply engage with the interpretation of traditional Chinese cultural stories through their actions and decisions. Throughout the game, players frequently face various choices: at key narrative junctures, different dialogue options may lead to divergent plot branches; in combat scenarios, the decision to overpower enemies with sheer force or to utilize the environment and exploit enemy weaknesses for a tactical victory not only affects battle outcomes but also subtly conveys traditional Chinese philosophies such as "balancing strength and flexibility" and "assessing the situation to act appropriately". This mechanism, where "player choices influence plot development" breaks the linearity of traditional storytelling, ensuring each player's experience is unique. This sense of agency motivates international players to more proactively explore the cultural connotations behind the storyline, thereby deepening their understanding and appreciation of traditional Chinese culture through interaction.

2.3.2 Community Interaction and Player-Generated Content

Beyond the game itself, community interaction and player-generated content form an extended dimension of interactive storytelling, promoting the diversified development of traditional Chinese cultural narratives in the global context. The global player community of Black Myth: Wukong has become a vibrant arena for cultural exchange: international players share walkthroughs, discuss plot foreshadowing, and delve into the cultural elements within the game. These spontaneous interpretations and explorations enrich the layers of traditional cultural narratives from diverse cultural perspectives.

Player-generated content further deepens this interaction. Numerous international players create fan fiction, comics, animations, music, and even cosplay based on the game's content. Reinterpreting the image of Sun Wukong and the Journey to the West story through their own cultural backgrounds and aesthetic perspectives, these creations represent both an acceptance and identification with traditional Chinese culture and an innovative expression within a cross-cultural context. When these derivative works spread across global social platforms, traditional Chinese stories are no longer confined to a single "official narrative". Instead, through the interactive participation of players, new meanings continuously emerge, forming a virtuous cycle of "official guidance—player co-creation—global dissemination". This process enables traditional Chinese culture to adopt a more dynamic narrative form in the international context.

3. The Role of Black Myth: Wukong in Building Chinese Cultural Confidence

Black Myth: Wukong has become a powerful engine for building Chinese cultural confidence through its sophisticated narrative strategies. Its appeal lies not only in technological breakthroughs but also in its successful revitalization of Chinese mythology for contemporary audiences. Through gaming as a global medium, it deepens cultural identity at the intersection of virtual and real worlds, expands the boundaries of cultural influence, and ignites the spark of cultural innovation. This construction transcends mere cultural display, demonstrating a confident posture rooted in deep interaction and innovative expression.

3.1 Strengthening Cultural Identity: From Virtual Experience to Identity Affirmation

The foundation of cultural confidence lies in profound cultural identification. Through immersive experiences, Black Myth: Wukong transforms mythological symbols into catalysts for identity formation, embedding the genetic code of Chinese culture in the hearts of players both domestically and internationally.

The game constructs an astounding "mythological universe". What players enter is not merely a game scene but a tangible space embodying the essence of Eastern aesthetics: the upturned eaves and intricately painted beams of majestic palaces are not just visual spectacles but also a renewed manifestation of ancient Chinese architectural wisdom and philosophy (such as the harmony between heaven and humanity, and hierarchical order). The demon images drawn from Classic of Mountains

and Seas and Journey to the West, such as the “Red-Buttocks Horse Monkey” and “Hundred-Eyes Demon Lord”, with their bizarre forms and unique designs, are not mere elements of curiosity but creative transformations and ultimate audiovisual translations of the abstract mystique found in ancient texts. During exploration and combat, players unconsciously achieve embodied cognition and emotional resonance with traditional myths, giving rise to a sense of pride in the magnificent depth of their culture. The cultural genes are quietly awakened and reinforced through interactive experiences. For the Chinese diaspora scattered across the globe, Black Myth plays a crucial role as a cross-cultural empathetic space. Meticulously restored festival scenes (such as village layouts imbued with specific celebratory atmospheres) and the divine charm flowing with Eastern melodies instantly activate deeply buried cultural memories and nostalgia. These familiar symbols become emotional keys bridging physical distances. Global Chinese players actively engage in online communities (such as Discord and NGA forums), forming unique cultural interpretation communities through fervent discussions and research on topics like the dialect lines of “Ben Bo’er Ba” and the folkloric origins of “Earth God Temples”. This communication and sharing, based on a common cultural background, is not merely a transmission of cultural knowledge but also a process of identity affirmation—a confirmation of “who I am” within various contexts—significantly strengthening the cultural belonging and heritage consciousness of the diaspora. The game becomes a robust bond that maintains cultural lineage and counters identity anxiety.

3.2 Enhancing Cultural Influence: From Breaking through in Gaming to Reshaping Discourse

Black Myth: Wukong has broken the monopoly of Western AAA games with its top-tier quality, becoming a “phenomenal” vehicle for the global dissemination of Chinese culture and reshaping China’s image in the international cultural discourse arena.

The work impacted the global gaming market with a disruptive approach. Its cutting-edge graphics technology—such as physics-based lighting and rendering, and sophisticated hair simulation—presented an Eastern fantasy world that shattered international players’ stereotypes of Chinese games being “mobile-dominated” and “technologically backward”. More fundamentally, its profound impact stems from its deep cultural roots: a dark narrative grounded in Journey to the West yet boldly deconstructed and reimagined, exploring character destinies through Buddhist and Daoist philosophical lenses (such as destiny versus rebellion), and the pervasive ambiance of Eastern aesthetics (like the ink-wash artistry of cloud-wreathed mountains and the expressive rhythm of combat movements). This perfect fusion of “technical prowess” and “cultural soft power” made it one of the highest pre-selling single-player games in global gaming history, signaling the formal entry of China’s game industry into the top tier of global development. Its success has injected strong confidence into the entire Chinese game industry, enhancing its international bargaining power and discourse authority, and demonstrating the feasibility and immense potential of creating world-class IPs based on local cultural resources.

Black Myth transcends the category of mere entertainment, functioning as a highly effective “cultural ambassador”. Its communicative power lies in “experience first”: international players are initially captivated by the exquisite combat (like the multi-stage transformations of the Golden Cudgel) and breathtaking scenes (such as Ziyun Mountain), and through immersive gameplay, they naturally encounter the embedded core of Chinese culture. The game’s visuals extensively employ the delicate lines of traditional Chinese Gongbi painting and the misty, suggestive emptiness of ink-wash painting, creating a unique visual sensibility. The soundtrack, utilizing instruments like the shakuhachi, guzheng, and Chinese bass drum, conveys a profound Eastern charm. The narrative presentation of philosophical concepts like “destiny”, “karma”, and “self-cultivation” provokes deep reflection transcending cultural backgrounds. Player communities have seen a massive emergence of content such as “Analyzing Chinese Mythology in Black Myth” and “Appreciating Eastern Art Styles”, generating waves of secondary dissemination and cultural identification. This effectively counters international perceptions of Chinese culture as “ancient and mysterious yet distant” or “stereotypically symbolic”, instead showcasing its vibrant, complex, profound, and highly aesthetically modern aspects, significantly enhancing the global appeal and reputation of Chinese culture.

3.3 Inspiring Cultural Innovation: From Resource Activation to Paradigm Innovation

Black Myth: Wukong provides a groundbreaking paradigm for the modern transformation of traditional cultural resources through its pioneering cultural innovation practices. The work completely transcends the simplistic stacking of cultural symbols, achieving a creative transformation and innovative development of the classic Journey to the West IP through deep narrative reconstruction and aesthetic reinvention. Narratively, the game shifts the focus to the “Destined One” stripped of divine halo, injecting contemporary existentialist philosophical depth into the ancient myth through a modern narrative of rebelling against fate and seeking redemption. This approach not only preserves the original work’s spiritual core but also, through humanized character portrayal and elevated thematic exploration, revitalizes traditional cultural resources with a new vitality that resonates with global audiences’ aesthetic expectations.

Visually, the game creatively integrates the meticulous detail of traditional Gongbi painting, the ethereal mood of ink-wash art, and the majestic color palette of Dunhuang murals, constructing a unique “Neo-Eastern Fantasy” aesthetic system. Instances such as the organic fusion of swirling yellow sand and Feitian imagery during the Yellow Wind Sage battle not only highlight the profound heritage of traditional art but also achieve a revolutionary breakthrough in visual presentation through technology. In character design, the game undertakes a bold yet well-researched modern reinterpretation of classic figures like Sun Wukong and Zhu Bajie. While maintaining cultural recognizability, it endows them with more impactful visual presence and more complex human dimensions, allowing these traditional characters to step into the view of contemporary audiences in an innovative posture.

This cultural transformation model of “deep excavation of traditional essence paired with innovative contemporary expression” has set a benchmark for the domestic cultural and creative industries. More importantly, it has successfully shaped a new international image of China’s cultural innovation vitality. The game demonstrates through its technological breakthroughs that Chinese teams possess the capability to lead global developments in the interactive entertainment industry. Its unique artistic style showcases a powerful capacity for creative transformation based on traditional aesthetic systems. Furthermore, its philosophically profound narrative highlights the potential of China’s rich culture to nurture stories with universal value. The success of Black Myth effectively counters international stereotypes of Chinese culture as “conservative and stagnant”, presenting to the world a contemporary China that is deeply rooted in 5,000 years of civilization yet brimming with innovative dynamism. This perfect integration of “ancient civilization” and “innovative frontier” not only facilitates the effective conversion of “cultural repositories” into “cultural capital” but also provides the most compelling support for Chinese cultural confidence on a global scale. The innovative paradigm established by the game is now inspiring more cultural creators to explore traditional cultural resources with equal confidence and creativity, collectively building a new image and discourse for Chinese culture in the global context.

4. Conclusion

Black Myth: Wukong strengthens cultural identity among Chinese audiences worldwide by creating a deeply immersive “mythological universe”, breaks through the global gaming market structure with its top-tier quality, and serves as an effective “cultural ambassador” to enhance the international recognition and reputation of Chinese culture. Furthermore, as a paradigm of “creative transformation”, it inspires innovation within the cultural industry and reshapes the international image of Chinese culture as dynamically innovative. Its grand and profound narrative system not only vividly recreates the magnificent imagination and spiritual core of Chinese mythology but also, through a narrative approach imbued with contemporary awareness and global resonance, transforms traditional stories into artistic expressions of universal significance. The game’s practice profoundly demonstrates that building cultural confidence is rooted in deep identification with and appreciation of one’s own traditions, key to which is embracing modern technologies and the global context with an open attitude for innovative expression, and hinges on creating cultural products with world-class influence. Black Myth: Wukong is not merely a masterpiece of gaming but also a vivid demonstration of how Chinese culture can establish a confident balance between the local and the global, the traditional and the modern, and inheritance and innovation, thereby illuminating the path for building and globally disseminating Chinese cultural confidence in the new era.

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