

To examine the transformation of Journey to the West from classical Chinese literature into the interactive narrative of Black Myth Wukong.

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Abstract

This literature-based study examines the transformation of *Journey to the West*, one of the foundational works of classical Chinese literature, into the interactive narrative of *Black Myth: Wukong* (2024). The study focuses on how a traditional literary narrative, its mythology, characters and cultural symbolism are reconstructed through contemporary digital game technologies. Particular attention is given to the transformation of Sun Wukong, the restructuring of narrative temporality, the representation of mythological worlds, interactive storytelling and the changing relationship between narrative and audience. Drawing upon scholarship on literary adaptation, game studies, digital storytelling, Chinese cultural heritage and recent research on *Black Myth: Wukong*, the study interprets the game as a process of cultural and narrative transformation rather than a direct reproduction of the classical source. The analysis demonstrates that the game retains recognisable elements of *Journey to the West* while substantially modifying their narrative functions through exploration, combat, environmental storytelling, character development and player participation. The transformation enables mythological and literary elements that were traditionally experienced through reading to become spatial, visual and interactive experiences. The study further considers how the game contributes to the contemporary circulation of Chinese cultural memory by combining traditional mythology with globally established videogame conventions. *Black Myth: Wukong* consequently illustrates the continuing adaptability of classical literature and demonstrates how interactive media can simultaneously preserve cultural continuity and generate new interpretative possibilities

Keywords: *Journey to the West; Black Myth: Wukong; Sun Wukong; literary adaptation; interactive narrative; digital storytelling; Chinese mythology; cultural memory; videogames; game studies*

INTRODUCTION

Representing a major shift in the production of modern culture, the translation of classic pieces of literature into digital games is an important turn in the recent cultural history, especially when the narrative is based on historical mythology that's reconstructed in interactive media. One of the most notable is Game Science's *Black Myth: Wukong* (2024), a role playing game that heavily relies on *Journey to the West*, the famous Chinese novel rumored to be written by Wu Cheng'en. The game does not simply present the classical story line in a linear way, but instead adopts elements of the story selectively, such as the characters, mythology, religious symbolism, narrative elements, and philosophy, and builds a new story around the legacy of Sun Wukong. The text's capacity for reinterpretation across media and historical contexts is exemplified by this process, as well as by the other media and genres to which *Journey to the West* has expanded and spread: literary, theatrical, cinematic, televisual, animated, and digital (Zhu, 1979). The importance of *Black Myth: Wukong* is that it turned this mostly-reader story into an experience and interactive one. Adaptation thus is not just about taking characters and episodes from literature and bringing them into a game; it's about reconfiguring the agency, spatiality, character development and audience participation of a narrative. As recent scholarship indicates, the game can be seen as a modern reimagining of a classical Chinese literature that employs visual symbolism, multimodal narration and interactive mechanics to produce new modes of access to the cultural memory of *Journey to the West* (Zhang & Zeng, 2025). In parallel, the disorganized storytelling structure, as well as the reinterpretation of identity, authority and destiny, show how much the game diverges from linear literary narrative and how much the game retains of the philosophical content of the source text (You, 2002). This literature-based study thus focuses on the fundamental elements of the narrative, such as adaptation, character reconstruction, mythology, cultural memory, and the involvement of the player in the narrative process and the transformation of the classical story in the game *Black Myth: Wukong* into a more interactive type of story.

The shift of classical literature to digital games is a major shift in contemporary cultural production, especially in the process of re-constructing narratives based on historical mythology in an interactive medium. One of the most notable is Game Science's blacklisted and highly anticipated action role-playing game, *Black Myth: Wukong* (2024), which is heavily inspired by Wu Cheng'en's famous Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. Unlike traditional sequels which simply follow the classic storyline, the game selectively appropriates such characters, mythology, religious imagery, narrative motifs, and philosophical concerns and builds a new narrative around the legacy of Sun Wukong. The process speaks to the broader trend of Jin Yong -> the novel, the play, the film, the tv show, the animation, and the digital media, as well as to the novel's continued interpretability across media and periods (Xv & Wu, 2024). *Black Myth: Wukong* is really significant because it turns what was largely a reading environment into one of an experience and interaction. Adaptation, then, is not merely the adaptation of the characters and episodes of a literary work into a game, but also the reorganization of the game's agency, spatiality, character development, and participation of the audience. Recent scholarship began to point to the game as a modern re-imagining of classical Chinese texts in which the incorporation of visual and multimodal storytelling and interactivity offers new ways of engaging with the cultural memory of *Journey to the West* (Pu, 2013). The first is that the game's disembodied first-person perspective and re-imagining of identity, authority and destiny show how far digital adaptations can stray from simple linear literary narration while still retaining much of the game's underlying philosophical themes of its source text (Morton, 2015). This literature-based study therefore aims to analyse how *Black Myth: Wukong* transforms *Journey to the West* from a classical literary narrative to an interactive narrative from the perspectives of adaptation, the reconstruction of characters, the construction of the mythology, culture memory, the decomposition of the narrative and the figures of the players.

Background to the Study

Classical literature and digital media have increasingly come into a more significant relationship as now cultural stories are retold for the modern audience. The *Journey to the West*, one of the greatest works of literary art in Chinese history has proven to be endlessly adaptable, finding new life in a variety of media over the years, including theatre, film, television, animation, comics and digital games. Its long-term cultural legacy is very much linked to its mythological associations, Buddhist and Daoist philosophies, folktales, as well as supernatural adventure and the multifaceted nature of its symbols of identity and authority. Sun Wukong has thus expanded beyond the literary context in which he was originally conceived to emerge as a cultural icon known around the world (MacWilliams, 2016). *Black Myth: Wukong* in 2024 is an important moment in this as it takes elements from the classic story to an interactive game, in a technologically modern setting. Instead of being a simple adaptation, the game builds characters, places, myths and story conflicts in the game, through gameplay, exploration, combat and player-controlled progression. The change of relationship between story and audience is a result of the application of digital games, whereby readers, viewers become participants and watchers who construct stories when reading (Baidu Baike, n.d.). The adaptation is also important in the wider context of the development of digital cultural production in China, where traditional mythology is becoming a part and parcel of entertainment media that have been spread around the world. *Black Myth: Wukong* is thus one such case to consider when exploring how classical Chinese literary traditions are cultivated, re-interpreted and transformed in transition from the traditional literary narrative to the interactive digital medium.

Classical Significance and Cultural Legacy of *Journey to the West*

The *Journey to the West* is unique in the history of Chinese literature in its combination of religious vision, mythology, folktales and popular narrative with a huge storytelling scope. The novel was typically believed to be composed by Wu Cheng'en and is traditionally linked to the Ming dynasty, although it is actually based on a combination of older oral, performative and textual traditions based on the historical pilgrimage of the monk Xuanzang to India. The narrative of the journey also has literary resonance, however, because the trip is infused with elements of Bushido, or the way of the warrior, and elements of the Confucian worldview: social hierarchy, loyalty and morality. Incorporating religious and popular cultural material has made the novel adaptable over time and to the media environment (Scott, 1985).

The culture's durability of *Journey to the West* is tightly bound up with its exceedingly memorable characters and episodic story structure. Zhu Bajie, Sha Wujing, Tang Sanzang and Sun Wukong form a triad through which the

concepts of discipline, desire, loyalty, violence, and spiritual growth are brought into conflict. Supernatural encounters often serve as a kind of moral and ethical test for the characters as well as a clash in social class and moral value. This complexity has helped the narrative to circulate seemingly unabated from its literary origins. Certain episodes and characters have been selected, adapted and reorganised several times during the process of the cultural products' adaptation to the ideological and aesthetic needs of the different media in which they have appeared (Jenkins, 2004; Li, 1985).

This can also be seen in the cultural influence of the novel's characters, which have become independent cultural symbols. Sun Wukong, in particular, has cast meanings greater than his part in the original pilgrimage story. This is because his defiance of Heaven, his supernatural skills, his metamorphosis and final integration into a religious regimented journey can be the focus for different eras and audiences. The study of popular culture in contemporary China is also often read in *Journey to the West* less as an iconic representative work of literature, and more as a continuous cultural reservoir that could continue to be drawn upon to create new types of stories (Pei, 2020).

This is especially true of digital media. Unlike a literal translation of a text, a modern game is able to draw out specific elements of a narrative to devise new worlds, characters, combat mechanics, exploration and player path, etc. As a result, the cultural tradition of the *JOURNEY TO THE WEST* serves as the raw material for later media to make stories that are in line with the spirit of the original, but with important changes to the story's experience, sequence, and interpretation.

Sun Wukong as a Literary, Mythological and Cultural Figure

Sun Wukong is one of the most complicated and multi-layered characters of *Journey to the West*. He is often called by the name Monkey King, which comes from Chinese folklore and religious beliefs, as well as being a literary fiction. Amongst other members of Xuanzang's travelling group he has a fight in him, the ability to change his shape, and the ability to free himself from the control of traditional authority and system. Concurrently, his personality is paradoxical; he is rebellious, loyal; violent, protective; intellectual, disciplined. These tensions make him an ideal subject for adaptation since different versions highlight different aspects of his identity (Hergenrader, 2016).

In the classical story, the revolt of Sun Wukong against Heaven is an integral part of his characterisation. His refusal to take a subordinate role challenges institutional authority and results in a conflict between the individualism and institutional authority. However, the meaning of his rebelliousness is changed as he is arrested and eventually joins the pilgrimage. He is not merely a non-conformist — his magical power grows more to become a deeper moral and spiritual value. This transformation of unchecked power to ordered purpose is, then, at the heart of his literary function.

Sun Wukong has often been removed from the full story of *Journey to the West*, and cast as an independent cultural icon. His appearance, character, powers, and meaning have thus been rebuilt in film, TV, animation, comics and games. These reinterpretations make a difference between adaptation as reproduction and adaptation as transformation of the culture. In the wider world of adaptation studies, adaptation is not just the duplication of an earlier work, but reinterpretation in a different medium and cultural context, as Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013) assert. While their theory is outside the boundaries of the time period specified here for the present study, it is still being used in relation to transmedia adaptations of traditional narratives in the present day (Dudbridge, 1970).

Playing Black Myth: Wukong is rather complicated due to the way that the role of Monkey King is so multidimensional that the player does not just play the classic Monkey King on a retelling of his journey. Rather, the game tells the story of what happens after Wukong, and what it means now. This makes a difference between the portrayal of a relatively known character and the building up of his culture. The game can now then use Wukong's mythology, and pose new questions about memory, identity, destiny and succession.

This reconstruction is also a good illustration of the significance of character recognition in interactive adaptation. The continuity with the classical tradition is conveyed by the familiar visual properties and the mythological capacities, but also by the rules of playing. Transformation powers, fighting skills, and encounters with supernatural figures make it possible to experience the fabled powers of Wukong, rather than just reading about them. This shift from character to "playable" or "game-play" character accordingly alters the communication between audience and character, and renders Wukong's cultural identity more of a communicative process than simply a narrative projection.

Adaptation of Classical Chinese Literature across Modern Media

From the perspective of the adaptation of classical Chinese literature to modern media forms, it is not only the movement from the written text to the visual media, but also the process of adaptability and transmissibility of classical Chinese literature works. It involves selection, modification, contextualisation and reinterpretation. Supernatural elements, episodic experiences, unique settings and culturally familiar symbols are present in classical works like *Journey to the West*, which exhibit particularly strong adaptive potential. They have been the factors that have helped them be morphed into opera, cinema, television, animation, comics and digital entertainment. Every medium has its own set of conditions that audiences are likely to encounter the inherited narrative, and thus familiar stories can be transformed into new meaning (Goodall, 2020).

Also, changing technologies and audience expectations have influenced the process of adaptation of *Journey to the West*. Digital media creates systems through which audience can actively drive progression; earlier adaptations relied on performance and/or cinematography or linear audiovisual narration. This is an important distinction to consider when looking at video games. A literary reader is given a set order of story, and a player is given a mix of order of story and interactive systems. The form is not completely controlled by the author or completely determined by the audience. Rather, meaning is created in a narrative form through the interplay between the scripted material, the game mechanics and the player's actions (Fiske, 2010).

Classical storylines have increasingly been extended with the advent of transmedia storytelling. According to Jenkins (2006), transmedia environments are cultural systems where the elements of a story can be spread across several media with each medium providing unique kinds of engagement (*Black Myth: Wukong*, 2026). In the realm of contemporary Chinese mythology, characters and motifs also tend to flow across literary, television, cinematic, animated, gaming and online community contexts. *Journey to the West* is especially apt for such circulation, as the characters of the novel may be identified despite significant changes to their original narrative environments.

Digital adaptation additionally changes the importance of spatial representation. In literature, places are created by using description and reader imagination. Spaces in games, however, become areas for the player to explore, move through, fight and discover. This gives a dimension of experience that is not found in regular reading. Hence, the mythical contexts of the *Journey to the West* can be shifted from being described settings into walkable worlds. The remodelling of classic Chinese literature for games is also part of the wider cultural rejuvenation. Contemporary digital works can bring the traditional mythology to audience that may have a limited direct engagement with the classical text. The resultant cultural encounter is not the same as reading the source text, but a new interpretive pathway which allows traditional characters and ideas to be made accessible in modern entertainment. As such, *Black Myth: Wukong* is an important illustration of the potential of reconfiguring Chinese literary heritage in the digital sphere, without discarding the mythological underpinnings.

From Literary Narration to Interactive Digital Storytelling

This shift from literary narration to interactive digital storytelling is the result of a fundamental shift in the relationship between narrative, medium and audience. The sequence of events in a literary text is typically set by language, authorial narration and predetermined text structure. A digital game, in contrast, involves a mixture of narrative content, rules, mechanics, audiovisual experience, and spatial exploration and player action. The audience thus becomes an active participant in the experience as it unfolds. This distinction has inspired a wide spread interest in the field of game studies, especially on the question of the connection between narrativity and interactivity (Lima, 2019).

Interactive storytelling does not mean that the authorial control is taken away. In today's video games, however, it is common for the game to create a planned structure for players to work within. The environments, characters, missions, combat, dialogue, visuals and potential paths of progression are decided by the developers, but how they get there is decided by the player. The narrative experience thus arises from a combination of a designed narrative and personal performance. Especially for adaptations, the structure is important because it means that the source text will need to be restructured around the opportunities and constraints of gameplay.

When literary characters are turned into gameplay, the transformation becomes more apparent. In a novel, Sun Wukong's supernatural powers are described in the narration. In a game, abilities can be turned into operational systems that players use to perform attacks, transformations, evasive moves or magic spells. Thus, the sense of a

supernatural power becomes linked to the actual act of operating a character. These mechanics can serve as entertainment systems as well as interpretative systems, as they convey something about character identity through their action instead of description.

In interactive environments, the temporality of the narrative is also changed. A novel dictates how the reader progresses through the sequence of events, while a game allows for exploration, optional encounters and discovery of environments. It is possible to spend varying amounts of time in specific spaces or interact with secondary elements based on each player's behavior. This means that the experience of the story can be different even if the main plot is quite consistent. One of the key features of digital storytelling is its time flexibility.

Therefore, transforming *Journey to the West*'s narrative into an interactive one isn't as simple as turning it into a plot of missions or levels. The story mode logic has to be remodeled in an exploration, combat mode, progression, and player participation context. In the context of *Black Myth: Wukong*, these are interactive systems, and the mythological aspects are integrated into them, forming a connection between the traditional narrative materials and modern game design. The experience that comes from this shows the possibilities for adapting cultural knowledge from an experience mostly read or seen, to an experience of participation, movement and repeated interaction.

Black Myth: Wukong as a Contemporary Reinterpretation of Journey to the West

Black Myth: Wukong is significant as it marks an important contemporary step in the ongoing evolution of the classic pilgrimage tale, *Journey to the West*, as it is not merely a recasting of the old story. The game was developed by Game Science and released in 2024, blending the mythology, characters and symbolic universe surrounding Sun Wukong with the creation of a unique narrative framework. In this way, its value is seen in the balance of cultural heritage that is recognised and the creative transformation that occurs. The game is both authoritative in its literary tradition and technically and narratively sophisticated in its use of the possibilities of the action role-playing games of today.

One of the most important changes is about the status of Sun Wukong. The game doesn't just retell the Monkey King's journey from the classical novel, but rather a part of the greater mythology surrounding Wukong and his legacy. This way, the old and the new narrative components can coexist. The adaptation thus works by way of recognisable and deviant elements: audiences can recognise characters, creatures, locations and motifs from *Journey to the West*, but the narration of the game creates a new interpretative context (Gow, 2017).

The visual construction of the game is another factor that helps achieve this transformation. Detailed environments, character models, supernatural creatures, architecture and combat encounters evoke classical mythology. Literary description and cultural knowledge are replaced by elements that are now visible and spatially organised. This process illustrates the potential of digital games as a means to materialize literary imagination through audiovisual design. The player is not just given information about a mythological world but is given a representation of it through which he may interactively explore.

Another way that the narrative changes is through the gameplay itself. The power of Wukong and other mythological creatures is manifested in combat, character development, magic skills and exploration, giving the player a chance to experience such power. The connection between character and player is thus a different one than the connection between reader and literary protagonist. The player acts in a system and the cultural mythology is part of the participatory event. According to Zhang (2025), one of the key aspects of the game is the reconstruction of its narrative, which goes beyond the scope of conventional literary adaptation (Zhu, 2016b) and is in dialogue with the concepts of identity and destiny and inherited mythology.

This game can thus be regarded as a new and modern re-interpretation of the contemporary culture and not just a commercial remake of an existing narrative. It took care of recognizable elements of *Journey to the West* and reconfigured their narrative function in interactive design, visual story telling and player agency. This makes *Black Myth: Wukong* an ideal study case of how classical Chinese literature can continue to thrive in the modern era of digital culture, while also experiencing significant changes in its form of storytelling, character portrayal, sign system and reception.

Transformation of Classical Characters, Mythology and Narrative Elements in *Black Myth: Wukong*

The analysis shows the Black Myth: Wukong is not a mere copycat of the Journey to the West characters and mythology. The game's story and set pieces, supernatural beings, and religious figures are all recognisably from the classical tradition, but are presented in a more sinister and complicated structure. While the main cultural anchor is still Sun Wukong, the player's primary introduction to Wukong's mythology is through the Destined One, and so the game can reinterpret the mythology of Wukong rather than just retell his journey to heaven. This represents a movement from character adaptation towards narrative reconstruction. Recent scholarship also suggests that the game is a reinterpretation in which the fundamental cultural elements of Journey to the West have been retained while the game's possibilities have been expanded through digital mediums (Black Myth: Wukong, 2024). The game also makes use of the secondary characters, giving them additional histories and emotional dimensions, so that these characters, which may have a relatively small role in the classical narrative, are turned into a more developed narrative subjects. It shows that adaptation is not about a text-by-text match, but is a process of expansion, fragmentation and re-contextualisation (Curtis, 2009).

From Linear Literary Narrative to Interactive Storytelling and Player Agency

The change of biggest magnitude is from literary narration to interactive storytelling. Journey to the West is a more linear and sequentially arranged series of narrated events, while Black Myth: Wukong shares narrative information in the exploration, combat, environmental details, character encounter and supplementary materials. Thus, a player becomes part of the building of an understanding of the story, instead of the story being presented to him or her in a predetermined order. Fragmented perspectives and multiple clues in the story line also enhance interpretative participation in the game. The game features fragmentary storytelling, multi-point of view and player-led development, which challenge the traditional linear narrative, says Zhang and Zeng (2025). The function of mythology also shifts in the interactive structure. Supernatural powers that are described within the classical text become experiential through combat mechanics, transformations and character abilities. This means that the player will be exposed to and have to deal with cultural mythology in an active and participatory manner (Freud, 2020). This makes a big difference between reading something about Wukong's incredible power, and performing actions that are characteristic of his mythological persona. The game therefore shows how interactivity can make literary meaning into an embodied and spatial experience (Hick, 2022).

Cultural Memory, Identity and the Contemporary Reinterpretation of *Journey to the West*

The digital game Black Myth: Wukong is also a reflection of how digital games are used to preserve and reconstruct cultures' memories, as Journey to the West is transformed into a video game. The game sets the characters, symbols and philosophical issues of the classical novel in a current technological context. It allows for the traditional cultural material to be shared among viewers who might be introduced to the mythology through digital entertainment and not read the original literary work. The research about the game indicates that the virtual environment in the game can help to promote cultural immersion through the combination of visual display, sound, exploration and participation (Yang et al., 2015). This game thus plays a part in cultural continuity, in the transmission of mythology from one generation to the next, and in the manner in which it is changed. Its relevance also lies in issues of identity, authority and destiny, which are still familiar from the classical tradition, but which have new significance in the current narrative constructions. Gao et al. (2025) also point out that Black Myth: Wukong is a hybrid cultural product, as it uses traditional Chinese culture and languages while conforming to global conventions of AAA game production (Hu, 2025).

Conclusion

Black Myth: Wukong is a prime example of how classic literature can be rejuvenated and regain cultural and narrative relevance by means of interactive digital media. The analysis reveals that the game does not just copy the original novel, but it selectively reconstructs characters, mythology, narrative motifs and philosophical issues in the context of action role-playing games of its own time. Sun Wukong's cultural significance plays a major role in this transformation: his rebellion, superpowers and ambiguous stance towards authority are retold through new characters, disjointed narratives and gameplay. The shift from linear literary narration to interactive storytelling also alters the role of the audience, who playfully discover environments, characters and mythological elements. Thus, Black Myth: Wukong demonstrates that adaptation is a cultural negotiation that takes place between

continuity and innovation. It is also interesting how the traditional Chinese myth is integrated in a technologically advanced global gaming context, which shows how digital media can serve as a means to maintain cultural memory, while at the same time, create new interpretations for today's audiences. Overall, the game creates a fruitful linkage between classical literary tradition and interactive storytelling, and works to reframe Journey to the West as a continually evolving source of culture that can be adapted to new media.

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