

Cultural Preservation in Black Myth Wukong : A Gameotics-Based Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract

This paper examines how the action role-playing game Black Myth: Wukong preserves and reinterprets Chinese cultural heritage through a semiotic lens. Adopting the Gameotics framework, which cross-analyzes Peircean sign categories (icon, index, symbol) with digital game elements (aesthetics, mechanics, narrative), conduct a close reading of the game's content to identify and clarify its cultural signifiers. By refining a previously complex semiotic matrix, our analysis highlights clear examples of iconic, indexical, and symbolic representations of Chinese mythology and traditions within the game. The findings indicate that Black Myth: Wukong faithfully integrates classic Journey to the West characters, settings, and themes into its design, thereby acting as a digital medium of cultural preservation and soft power. At the same time, the game balances authenticity with modern gameplay conventions, illustrating both the potential and the constraints of using Gameotics for cultural analysis. This paper conclude with a discussion of the method's limitations in capturing dynamic cultural nuance and the implications of cultural adaptation in game design.

Keyword : Black myth Wukong, gameotics, cultural preservation, semiotics, digital games

1. Introduction

Black Myth: Wukong is a Chinese action RPG that has attracted global attention for its rich integration of Chinese cultural heritage into modern gaming [1]. Drawing on the 16th-century classic Journey to the West, the game reimagines the tale of Sun Wukong through immersive gameplay and striking visuals, creating an experience that is both innovative and deeply rooted in tradition. Hailed as a “cultural tribute” by critics and scholars [2], it has also earned praise from cultural authorities, such as the Shanxi Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, which noted its faithful digital recreation of historic temples and relics that spurred renewed public interest in those sites [3]. This reception highlights video games' potential as vessels for cultural preservation and global dissemination.

To achieve its authenticity, the development team combined extensive cultural research with cutting-edge technology. They 3D-scanned dozens of historical temples, sculptures, and artifacts to build a digital archive featuring 36 real-world locations (27 in Shanxi Province) with meticulously preserved

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details, including weathering effects [4][5]. This method not only enhances in-game fidelity but also enables players to connect with tangible heritage.

Given this ambitious fusion of tradition and interactivity, *Black Myth: Wukong* was selected as an ideal case study for examining digital cultural preservation. The game's unique combination of a revered classical narrative with next-generation game design (e.g., photogrammetry and advanced graphics) distinguishes it among contemporary titles. By marrying deep cultural roots with modern technology, it provides a rich context to explore how interactive media can conserve and reinterpret heritage. Accordingly, this paper applies the Gameotics method—a semiotic framework tailored for game analysis—to examine how the game's aesthetics, mechanics, and narrative each contribute to cultural preservation [6]. By linking design elements to iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs, the analysis reveals how *Black Myth: Wukong* balances authenticity with creative adaptation, preserving the essence of Chinese cultural heritage in an interactive medium. As an analytical approach, this semiotic lens allows us to interpret not only what cultural content is present, but how it functions within an interactive context to generate meaning.

2. Literature Review

Video games have increasingly been identified as modern conduits for myth and folklore. Vandewalle observes that mythologically themed games often function as mythography, allowing players to engage with mythic storyworlds actively. Such games “present different myths... as interactive mythology museums” [7]. This approach can preserve mythological knowledge by embedding it in popular media that reach wide audiences, especially younger generations. Indeed, one study found that students who played history-themed games showed increased curiosity in historical topics [8][9][10].

Beyond myth, games now serve as vehicles for preserving both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. DaCosta suggests that many commercial titles play a vital role in cultural heritage by not only depicting historical contexts but also raising awareness about them [11]. Franchises like *Assassin's Creed* and *Civilization* immerse players in culturally significant scenarios and decision-making, while collaborations between developers and cultural institutions further heritage education. Camuñas-García et al. found that numerous heritage-based games integrate historical sites, artifacts, folklore, and traditions into their design [12]. For example, *Never Alone*, developed with Alaska Native storytellers, is praised for effectively preserving Iñupiat lore and providing a platform for authentic cultural expression [13]. This interweaving of gameplay with culture exemplifies how games can function as repositories of

cultural knowledge - in effect, playable archives of language, myth, and ritual.

Crucially, effective cultural preservation in games requires more than surface-level representation; it demands integration of deeper symbolic and ritualistic elements. Building on Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, which identifies play as foundational to culture, scholars have compared gaming experiences to rituals or liminal journeys [14]. In adaptations of narratives such as *Journey to the West*, the progression of challenges is seen as a ritualistic path toward self-purification and enlightenment [15]. Therefore, a game preserving this narrative must also preserve its ritual logic and symbolism - otherwise it risks losing the deeper cultural message in translation. Games like *Black Myth: Wukong* strive to maintain not only narrative fidelity but also the ritual logic and symbolic depth intrinsic to their source material - a notion reminiscent of Barthes' insights on modern mythologies: new media carry forward core cultural significations (underlying values and concepts) even as they change the signifiers (the form or medium) [16]. In short, for a video game to function as a medium of cultural preservation, it should operate on multiple levels, faithfully representing narrative content, embodying cultural aesthetics and symbols, and enabling ritualized or meaningful participation. This ensures that both the letter and the spirit of the cultural source are sustained.

To analyze such multi-layered cultural representation in games, researchers have increasingly turned to semiotic methodologies. Semiotics offers tools for dissecting how games encode cultural narratives and meanings. For example, Araújo and Hildebrand's *Gameotics* approach correlates Peircean sign categories with game elements to provide a structured model for game analysis [6]. Likewise, Cassone and Thibault's HGR framework demonstrates how historical content is translated into game form through layered sign processes, highlighting the semiotic mechanisms behind the representation of history in games [17]. These frameworks show that video games can be systematically examined as sign systems, a perspective particularly useful for evaluating their role in cultural preservation. Korean scholarship has also engaged with this approach; Baik [18] proposed a semiotic analysis methodology for video games to help build a theoretical foundation for game studies, underscoring the broad applicability of sign-based analysis in interactive media.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

According to Sebeok's modeling systems theory, humans interpret the world through layered systems of signs that model reality. In this view, no single form can convey meaning in isolation; meaning emerges from the interrelation of signs within a system. Models serve to recognize patterns in the world

and stand in for real objects or events as simplified representations. Human culture operates through such modeling systems at multiple levels - from basic sign use to complex cultural narratives. Language, for instance, can be seen as a primary modeling system, and mythic or artistic narratives as higher-order modeling systems built upon it [19]. In this perspective, a video game can be viewed as a modeling system that remediates cultural material via an interactive sign environment.

To systematically analyze this modeling process, the study employs the Gameotics framework as the primary analytical tool. In this model, the intersection of the three Peircean sign types (icon, index, symbol) with three fundamental game elements (aesthetics, mechanics, narrative) forms a 3×3 analytical matrix [6]. We first clarify these terms in the context of *Black Myth: Wukong*:

1) Aesthetics refers to the audiovisual presentation of the game - its graphics, art style, character and environment design, music and sound. This dimension captures the look and feel of cultural elements.

2) Mechanics refers to gameplay systems and player interactions. How the player engages with the game rules, combat, exploration, and abilities. Here we consider mechanics that carry cultural meaning.

3) Story (Narrative) covers the plot, characters, dialogue, and lore of the game, and how these reflects or adapts the source mythology.

Within each of these dimensions, we identify signs that are iconic, indexical, or symbolic with respect to Chinese cultural referents:

1) An iconic element in the game directly resembles a cultural referent. For example, a character modeled after a figure from *Journey to the West* or a temple that visually mirrors real Chinese temples functions iconically, the game sign looks like its cultural source.

2) An indexical element has a direct connection or causal link to a real-world cultural referent. This can include artifacts created through recording or scanning of real objects, or narrative events triggered by historical events.

3) A symbolic element conveys meaning through convention or metaphor. These are often more abstract references, e.g., language, names, or emblems that require cultural knowledge. These are understood via cultural convention rather than physical resemblance.

By categorizing content in this way, we can articulate how the game embeds cultural references: whether by mimesis (iconic depiction), direct reference (indexical linkage), or interpretive representation (symbolic meaning) [20]. Many game elements overlap categories - a single element can carry multiple layers of meaning [21][22] - but for clarity we emphasize each example's primary semiotic mode.

Our data for analysis were gathered from the game's released content, including gameplay footage, trailers and demos, cutscenes, artwork, and official developer disclosures. We also draw on secondary

sources to corroborate certain interpretations. For instance, media reports and developer statements confirm that the game's environmental art was created with photogrammetric scans of real Chinese locations, and that its storyline heavily references classic mythological episodes [23][24]. These sources help verify that the identified signs are intentional and meaningful within their cultural context.

In conducting the analysis, we followed a qualitative close reading approach similar to methods used in game studies for cultural content analysis. This involved playing through available sections of the game (and preview builds), observing details of design and narrative, and noting instances of cultural reference. Each instance was then aligned with the Gameotics matrix. Rather than exhaustively cataloging every cultural reference in *Black Myth: Wukong*, we focused on representative examples that illustrate the game's approach to cultural preservation. Key scenes and elements were selected to cover a broad range of content - from character designs and boss encounters to environmental exploration and narrative cutscenes - ensuring that each dimension (aesthetic, mechanic, story) is represented by prominent examples. This selective focus, aimed at manageability, prioritizes clarity of illustration over quantity of examples.

Throughout the analysis, we maintain a critical perspective, noting not only how the game succeeds in preserving cultural elements, but also how these elements are transformed or constrained by the interactive medium. Notably, the Gameotics framework incorporates game mechanics (player actions and rules) in addition to audiovisual and narrative elements, thereby addressing the interactive nature of games. While our analysis centers on the game's designed representations, we do not overlook the role of player interaction. The visuals, mechanics, and story elements analyzed here establish the symbolic groundwork for meaning-making before players even pick up the controller. By examining how *Black Myth: Wukong* encodes cultural meanings in its design, we illuminate the framework within which players engage and derive significance. In this way, focusing on pre-interaction representation complements potential reception studies, ensuring that the cultural symbols and references intended by the game are well understood as the foundation for any interactive experience that follows.

4. Analysis: Cultural Signifiers in *Black Myth: Wukong*

4.1 Aesthetic Dimension: Visual and Audio Heritage

The aesthetic dimension of *Black Myth: Wukong* is steeped in the imitation and evocation of Chinese cultural heritage. The game's art design from both mythology and historical records. Iconic representations abound, for instance, Sun Wukong is rendered as a staff-wielding monkey warrior in a

manner that replicates traditional depictions, complete with golden chainmail armor, a phoenix-feather cap, and the magically expanding iron staff like [Fig. 1](Ruyi Jingu Bang). Other mythological figures, such as Princess Iron Fan and Red Boy, are also portrayed with fidelity to their canonical descriptions, allowing players familiar with the mythos to recognize these cultural icons immediately.



[Fig. 1] The image of the Monkey King (left) in the 1986 version of the Journey to the West TV series, with the image of the Destined One (right) in the Black Myth: Wukong.

Beyond character design, the environmental art draws on classical Chinese shan shui painting. The landscapes, replete with misty mountains, bamboo groves, and ancient temples, are often modeled after real-world sites captured through advanced 3D scanning. This technique yields indexical signs: the in-game structures have a direct physical link to real cultural artifacts (the digital models are derived from scans of real temples). When players explore a monastery in the game, they are not only seeing an artist's fictional design, but effectively a reproduction of an actual Chinese temple, down to the curvature of its roof eaves and the motifs on its tiles. The presence of these indexical elements enhances the authenticity of the setting; it is as if the game environment bears the “footprint” of real Chinese heritage, blurring the line between the virtual and real worlds of cultural sites.

The game's audio design and linguistic choices further reinforce its cultural preservation. Voice acting employs classical forms and idiomatic expressions drawn from literature, while the musical score integrates traditional Chinese instruments like the guzheng and erhu. These sound elements are symbolic in that their significance relies on cultural convention - a global player might simply find the music exotic or atmospheric, but a Chinese listener will recognize it as reminiscent of period dramas or opera,

genres closely associated with mythological storytelling. Even the use of Chinese characters (writing) in the game's interface and lore items underscores symbolic meaning: ancient calligraphic scripts appear in scrolls or inscriptions, providing not just flavor text but a visual symbol of antiquity and authenticity [Fig. 2]. One striking example is the appearance of a sutra written in Classical Chinese on a scroll, which the player's character unrolls during a cutscene - this is a symbolic sign of the Buddhist lore that underpins Journey to the West, linking the game to the religious and philosophical texts of the culture.



[Fig. 2] Portraits, to supplement a character's backstory

While the aesthetics are primarily faithful to tradition, they are also stylized to meet modern expectations. Hyper-realistic graphics and idealized embellishments (vibrant colors or pristine temple renderings) enhance visual appeal, though they may introduce a romanticized view of cultural heritage. This beautification is a common practice in game design [25], where finding an appealing visual style is paramount to immersing players. In *Black Myth: Wukong*, such aesthetic choices are generally in service of highlighting cultural beauty (the ornate details of armor, or the elaborate ornamentation of a palace). They remain icons of culture but with a cinematic screen. The risk, as identified by prior research, is that this can sometimes present a romanticized version of culture - one perhaps more extravagantly beautiful than historically accurate. Nonetheless, the core aesthetic elements (architecture, costume, symbols, music) stay true to Chinese tradition, thus preserving them in digital form. The aesthetic dimension of *Black Myth: Wukong* operates on all three semiotic levels to preserve culture: iconic

visually directly replicate cultural artifacts and characters, indexical techniques anchor the game's environments in real heritage sites, and symbolic audio-visual cues convey deeper cultural moods and meanings.

4.2 Mechanical Dimension: Interactive Cultural Expression

The mechanics of *Black Myth: Wukong* integrates cultural elements by reenacting mythic abilities drawn from *Journey to the West*. The game enables the protagonist (“mirroring” Sun Wukong) to perform transformations (e.g., morphing into a cicada) and wield a dynamically resizing magic staff, directly echoing the Monkey King's 72 Transformations and fantastical combat in the original tale. Such iconic mechanics allow players to actively perform culturally significant actions, transforming gameplay into a form of immersive cultural engagement.

Indexical elements in the mechanics are subtler but present. One could argue that certain game mechanics have a direct, causal link to cultural practices or physical reality, thereby serving as indexes. For instance, the combat system features martial arts-inspired moves, with animations captured from real practitioners, linking the game's dynamic actions to authentic Chinese martial traditions. The cause-and-effect in the game's physics also often adheres to realistic logic (for example, water douses fire attacks), which indicates an underlying index to natural laws even amid magic. While these physical logics are universal rather than uniquely Chinese, certain environmental interactions are culturally specific - for example, ringing a large temple bell in the game causes nearby demons to retreat or behave differently, indexing the real-world use of temple bells in spiritual rituals (bells are traditionally rung in temples to purify evil). This mechanic (bellringing affecting demons) has a direct cause-effect relation drawn from cultural belief, thus acting as an indexical sign of that belief within the game world.

It must be noted that the game's mechanics are constrained by the need for balance and player experience. While Sun Wukong's lore endows him with near-limitless powers, the game moderates these abilities through design choices like stamina limits and cooldown timers. These design choices illustrate what Balela and Mundy termed “game dynamics rule design decisions”: the need for a fun, fair game can override complete authenticity [25]. In context, this means the mechanics symbolize the myth rather than replicate it fully. The transformations might be fewer in number and limited in duration for gameplay reasons (whereas Sun Wukong theoretically had an unlimited bag of tricks). This adaptation underscores the tension between mechanical authenticity and modern action RPG conventions.

Overall, the mechanics of *Black Myth: Wukong* not only reenact cultural narratives through iconic and indexical gestures but also imbue gameplay with symbolic meaning, providing players with a

unique, kinesthetic appreciation of Chinese mythological heritage.

4.3 Narrative Dimension: Storytelling and Mythic Continuity

The narrative of *Black Myth: Wukong* functions as the backbone for cultural preservation by directly drawing on and extending the story of *Journey to the West* [2]. Positioned as a post-canonical sequel, the game establishes an indexical relationship with its source material: its storyline is imbued with references to canonical events such as Tang Sanzang's pilgrimage and the subsequent transformation of characters like Red Boy [26]. Dialogues recalling the “scriptures that were carried to the East” and the altered roles of mythic figures serve as indices that connect the game's present to the revered past, while the reenactment of iconic episodes, such as the encounter with the White Bone Spirit and the duel between Wukong and Erlang Shen, functions as a digital folklore text that transmits storied episodes to a contemporary audience.

In addition to these indexical and iconic elements, the narrative weaves deep symbolic dimensions by carrying forward the allegorical and moral themes of the original myth. The introduction of the “Destined One”, a symbolic successor to Sun Wukong, encapsulates themes of cyclical struggle, redemption, and cultural continuity [27]. Buddhist and Taoist philosophies are integrated through references to the Wheel of Samsara and the illusion of reality [28], with even boss battles acquiring metaphorical significance that echoes the overcoming of inner demons. These symbolic layers, though not always explicit, maintain the allegorical richness of the source material.

Moreover, the narrative adaptation incorporates creative insertions to flesh out a full-length game narrative. New characters and scenarios absent from the original text are introduced while striving for thematic consistency. The game's darker, more somber tone, diverging from the often humorous original, reflects a modern reinterpretation that emphasizes tragedy and the cost of heroism, thereby aligning the myth with contemporary storytelling sensibilities. Overall, *Black Myth: Wukong* presents a tapestry of iconic retellings, indexical continuations, and symbolic explorations that are both faithful to its cultural roots and adaptive to the interactive medium, engaging players with a living narrative rich in historical and timeless human themes.

5. Conclusion

Through a Gameotics-based semiotic analysis, this study finds that *Black Myth: Wukong* embeds Chinese cultural heritage across its aesthetics, mechanics, and narrative. The game demonstrates iconic

fidelity through authentic character designs and meticulously recreated architecture, while employing indexical links (such as photogrammetric 3D scans and realistic physics) to anchor its fantasy in real-world Chinese artifacts and practices. At the same time, symbolic elements woven into both gameplay and story preserve the moral and philosophical subtext of *Journey to the West*, rendering the game a form of digital cultural preservation accessible to a global audience [29][5].

However, the analysis also identifies challenges. The game must balance cultural authenticity with engaging design; for instance, it employs a degree of “Hollywoodization,” dramatizing characters and settings by intensifying the ferocity of demons or the grandeur of palaces [30]. Such choices, along with a darker tonal shift and additional plotlines, illustrate a broader tension in cultural adaptation: to resonate with contemporary international audiences, the game aligns with familiar action-RPG tropes, potentially leading to a slight westernization or universalization of its narrative’s presentation [31].

Yet three limitations qualify these findings. First, the analysis is designer-centred: without player-reception data we cannot verify how diverse audiences interpret the encoded signs. For example, non-Chinese players might overlook certain symbolic cues (such as the significance of a lotus flower) that Chinese players readily understand [32]. Second, assigning each game element a single primary sign function simplifies its inherent polysemy; future work should test coding schemes that allow overlapping classifications. Third, the scope of our content analysis was limited. We examined a selection of representative scenes and features rather than the entire game exhaustively, partly because the full release is recent, so some cultural details may have been overlooked.

These constraints suggest three research paths: (1) empirical reception studies (e.g., cross-cultural surveys) to gauge how well the game communicates heritage; (2) comparative analyses of myth-based games from other traditions to map convergent or divergent semiotic strategies; and (3) methodological refinements that integrate Gameotics with narrative and user-experience models to capture complex, multilayered sign processes. Addressing these areas will clarify how interactive media can sustain, adapt and globalise cultural memory while balancing authenticity with engaging design.

Ultimately, *Black Myth: Wukong* stands as a notable example of cultural preservation through interactive media, demonstrating a creative negotiation between honoring source material and engaging a modern global audience. As the global game industry increasingly embraces diverse cultural narratives, analytical frameworks like Gameotics will be instrumental in assessing how these narratives are preserved, transformed, or transcended in interactive forms.

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