

Empirical Analysis of the Integration of Chinese Cultural Elements in Games: Enhancing Emotional Resonance and Immersion

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Abstract: "Black Myth: Wukong," China's inaugural AAA game, is inspired by the famous Chinese novel "Journey to the West" and incorporates numerous Chinese cultural aspects. This essay examines the exceptional AAA game "Black Myth: Wukong," concentrating on the particular expressions of Chinese cultural components that enhance emotional resonance and immersion for players. The research examines the game utilizing theories of emotional resonance and immersion, bolstered by interview findings for corroborative analysis. Analyzing the character design of the chosen one, plot structure, the amalgamation of Chinese traditional architecture with gaming environments, and the distinctive utilization of classical instruments in the game, while investigating their influence on emotional resonance and player immersion. The research revealed that the creative manifestation of cultural intellectual properties, the novel interpretation of narrative art, the design of historical architectural environments, and the augmentation by classical instruments in the game significantly boost players' emotional engagement and immersion.

Keywords: Black Myth, Emotional Resonance, Immersion, Chinese cultural Elements

1. Introduction

In the current era where digital media is reshaping cultural cognition, games, as the "ninth art," are becoming important carriers for the innovative expression of traditional culture. As a groundbreaking work among domestically produced AAA games, "Black Myth: Wukong," since its release on August 20, 2024, has broken concurrent player records on the Steam platform, becoming the second largest game in the platform's history, with over 2 million players. It has become the best-selling buy-to-play game in China's history and the top-selling game globally for the year. The game integrates Chinese cultural elements into its creation, enhancing players' gaming experience from two aspects: emotional resonance and immersion. This article mainly studies the specific manifestations of how the integration of cultural elements in games affects players' emotional resonance and immersion. However, most research has primarily focused on the expression of traditional Chinese culture in this work. For example, the research by Shule Cao and Xuanbo Liu focuses on the evolution of Sun Wukong's image in contemporary games, elucidating the connection between game genres in different periods and the changes in Sun Wukong's image over time [1]. Huan Sun and Wenjia Liu deeply analyzed the significance of the integrated development of games and China's excellent

traditional culture, but lacked an explanation of "how the integration of Chinese cultural elements into games enhances players' emotional resonance and immersion" [2]. This study utilizes the theory of emotional resonance and the immersion experience model, employing a mixed research methodology that integrates theoretical analysis and in-depth interviews to examine how cultural elements augment players' gaming experiences through game characters, narrative techniques, scene design, and audiovisual effects. This study offers theoretical validation and practical exemplification for the transmission of intangible cultural heritage via game media.

2. Emotionally resonant bonds

Emotional resonance is a concept in psychology that refers to an individual's tendency to have the same or similar emotional response when stimulated by another person's emotional expression or the situation in which they find themselves. Humans are born with the ability to empathize, and emotional resonance is more likely to develop when both parties share the same perceptions or beliefs about things.

2.1. Innovative shaping of cultural IP

As a role-playing game, the characterization of the player's control is a key factor in the game. Since the launch of *Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong has become a household name and a classic character, and his character traits of bravery, wisdom, and justice have made him one of the most mass-communicated IPs in China. The Monkey King's image is based on ancient Chinese mythology, and he is one of the most popular traditional Chinese cultural elements in game creation. The Monkey King is a mythological hero with Chinese national temperament, national style, and national spirit, as Yuchen Sun argues [1]. The appearance of the game's "Man of Destiny" is consistent with the original: also yellow hair and golden hoops, golden eyes; wearing a straight jacket of cotton cloth and a tiger-skin skirt at the waist; holding an iron rod with a golden hoop in his hand; stepping on a pair of suede boots under his feet [2]. By integrating classic characters from Chinese mythology into the game's character design, the innovative remodeling of the Monkey King's cultural memory causes a "strangeness effect" that brings players a new emotional awareness [3]. In addition to the classic characters, the game also introduces original characters such as Lingi Bodhisattva, Shi Pioneer, Underworld Demon King, and Wolf Sword Instructor. As for the player's character "Heaven's Mandate", he is not the Monkey King himself, but rather the Monkey King's residual soul in the world. In the game, the "Man of Destiny" is only a monkey from Mount Huaguo, and his image is designed based on the Monkey King, restoring the classic appearance of the Monkey King, combining modern aesthetics and giving the character unique values of the times, such as the awakening of personal consciousness, breakthroughs, and the development of the Monkey King. The character's aesthetic is modernized and the character is endowed with unique contemporary values, such as the awakening of personal consciousness, the potential to break through difficult situations, the spirit of resistance, and the pursuit of freedom, which makes his image more three-dimensional and vivid. In addition, the skills of the Destiny Man are highly similar to those of the Monkey King. In combat, he employs a stick or lance-like weapon, utilizing techniques such as chopping, standing, and poking strikes, among others. Players can amalgamate several stick tactics to achieve diverse attack effects. Upon the player's adept mastery of these movements—rolling and maneuvering—while executing a series of tiger and tiger stick techniques, one will experience the essence of Wukong's primary form. The game preserves the original Monkey King's "seventy-two transformations." The Destined One possesses numerous spells akin to those of the Monkey King, including Fixation, Copper Head, Iron Arm, and the Out-of-body Body Technique, which evokes an unprecedented sensation while controlling the Monkey King character in prior games [4]. In the game,

users imbue their subjective feelings into the narrative, forge a novel emotional connection rooted in the characters' collective essence, and assume the roles of the principal protagonists in the "Road to the West." [5]

2.2. New chapter in narrative art interpretation

Journey to the West is a classic of Chinese divine and magical novels, reaching the peak of ancient long romantic novels. Since its release, Journey to the West has been available in English, French, German, Italian and other languages, and is one of China's most globally influential classic novels, as well as one of the representative IPs of the excellent traditional Chinese culture. The wide dissemination of Journey to the West through the mass medium of television triggered the public's preference and interest in the related works, in line with the "long-term, subtle influence of the media on the audience" revealed by the theory of enculturation [6]. The game takes Journey to the West as the blueprint and boldly breaks through the original framework to provide players with brand new emotional resonance and cultural understanding. The game does not directly reproduce the Journey to the West story of the four masters and disciples, but in the form of the Journey to the West after the biography of the Sun Wukong became a fighting god Buddha, not wanting to be bound, the pursuit of freedom, but was hunted down by the court of heaven in the form of the destruction of the body into the "six roots" of the story. This change is a subversion of the traditional linear narrative, which is in line with the postmodern narrative of "the awakening of the character's subjectivity". In addition, the six roots of the name from the "Journey to the West" the original 14th "the heart of the ape return to the right six thieves without a trace" in the Wukong master and his disciples encountered the name of the six robbers, but also the Wukong master and his disciples traveled to the west to obtain the first of the nine hundred and eighty-one difficulties of the robbery. The game's primary narrative is distinctly structured; the practice of monasticism aims to purify the six roots of the fruit, but the central theme contrasts this by seeking the six roots to revive the Great Sage. The game is segmented into six chapters, with each chapter representing a root that undergoes thorough growth. Players must create a "destiny man" to ultimately vanquish the primordial monsters and locate the six roots to resurrect the Monkey King, which constitutes the primary objective of the game. The game refines the stories of the supporting characters in the original story and enriches the details of the side quests. The game's spin-off chapter animation, Six Kinds of Love, showcases the backstories and emotional entanglements of multiple characters, helping players better understand the game's background and the inner world of the characters. Every game experience and choice of the player in the game affects the direction of the plot and triggers the hidden ending. Xuguang Chen and other scholars point out that "movie-game fusion" is "the integration of the two media, movie and game, in the process of development, in terms of thinking, narrative, style, content, industry, technology, etc." [7]. The chapter animations use different animation styles to incorporate into the six chapters of the game, combining the game's scenarios and interactive mechanisms to build the player's emotional resonance. After passing the game, it is like a movie that has just finished screening, reviewing the whole game experience, the player as the director, screenwriter and actor to complete this masterpiece that pours out time and emotion.

3. Creation of immersion

Immersion is also a psychological state that refers to the fact that when a person participates in a certain activity, he or she is completely devoted to the current situation and feels pleasure and satisfaction, as if he or she has forgotten the real environment in which he or she is living. With the gradual improvement of game technology, more and more games incorporate a large number of cultural elements, and players feel the charm of culture in the game experience.

3.1. Fusion of ancient architecture and scenic art

The authenticity and immersion of the game experience is a key factor in determining the game's playability [3]. The success of Black Myth: Goku is due to the dedication of the game's science team. The team scanned more than a hundred ancient buildings and landforms in China, and used the real-life architecture of China's scenic spots as a blueprint to present them in the game in a reasonable way, so that players can feel a more realistic gaming environment as well as enough space for exploring and interacting with each other, which will in turn enhance the immersion of the players in the game. According to incomplete statistics, the scenes of Black Myth: Wukong are set in 36 architectural monuments in China, 27 of which are from Shanxi. The third chapter of the game is derived from "Journey to the West," when the yellow-browed king leads the Tang Monk and his pupils inside the little Leiyin Temple, resulting in an exhilarating adventure. The renowned scenario in the game "Why Don't You Worship When You See the Future" is inspired by the inside of the Daxiongbao Hall in Little Xitian, located in Xi County, Shanxi Province. Players will be captivated by the "Hanging Buddha Kingdom" scene in Little Leiyin Temple, which draws inspiration from Xiaoxitian in Xi County. The Thousand Buddha Temple was originally named after the thousand Buddha statues in the Great Hall of Great Heroes, and was later renamed Little Western Heaven because of the heavy doorway inscribed with the words "The Way to the Western Heaven". The hanging sculptures in the Daxiongbao Hall have 1978 figures and rare birds and animals, arranged on the walls and purlin pillars; the smallest is only the size of a thumb, which can be called the "hanging sculpture masterpiece" in the field of Chinese sculpture. The temple is staggered upwards and is known for its "smallness, ingenuity, refinement and curiosity", which retains the solemnity of traditional temples and increases the elegance of garden architecture. In addition, players will see a huge thousand-handed Goddess of Mercy statue in the side hall to the left of the transmission point of the Small West Heavenly Hall, the prototype of this statue from the Thousand-Handed Goddess of Mercy Niche in Chongqing's Dazu Bao Ding Mountain, more than seven meters high, more than twelve meters wide, and behind the thousands of hands, each holding a weapon of the law, a magnificent sight. The "Thousand-Handed Goddess of Mercy" was carved in the middle and late Southern Song Dynasty, and is sculpted, painted, and gilded in one piece, resembling a peacock's open screen, with a brilliant golden appearance. The Thousand-Handed Goddess of Mercy statue in the game is made more rustic by the old treatment. Ancient Chinese architecture abounds in Black Myth: Wukong, showing the charm of the excellent traditional Chinese culture from all angles and perspectives, which ultimately conveys and impresses the players' hearts. The digital game incorporates elements of ancient Chinese architecture into its scene design, thereby enriching players' comprehension of Chinese cultural aspects and significantly augmenting their sense of immersion.

3.2. Driven by both sight and sound

An immersive experience is a service model that combines the senses of sight, sound, and touch to provide an unforgettable experience that combines various audio-visual effects and multiple mediums to work on the whole body and mind [8]. Based on the latest Unreal Engine 5 technology, NVIDIA's panoramic ray tracing and the latest DLSS3 technology, Black Myth: Goku brings players an immersive gaming experience that combines audio-visual and cultural elements [9]. The beautiful visual design and auditory afterimages are the two-way driving force to enhance the immersion of the game. The music production in the game incorporates traditional music instruments such as suona, pipa, erhu, and so on, which infuses the game with the infinite vitality of ethnic music. Research has shown that the human brain receives external information through five main senses, with the proportions being 1% for taste, 1.5% for touch, 3.5% for smell, 11% for hearing, and 83% for vision [10]. From this, it can be seen that hearing is the second main sensory source to receive external

information besides vision. The music of “Black Myth: Wukong” is based on ethnic instruments and combines modern musical elements, so that domestic and foreign players can feel a fresh modern flavor, thus enhancing the overall sense of immersion. The soundtrack for the final trailer of Black Myth: Wukong, “Mantra of the Past Life”, is adapted from a Buddhist classic, utilizing Buddhist chanting melodies combined with modern rap elements to create a unique style of “Cyber Buddhist Sound”. Lyricist and composer Jinyan Zhai preserves the solemnity of the original mantra and gives it the rhythm of electronic music, bringing the ancient scripture to nirvana in electronic pulses. The sound effects of the pipa add the flavor of classical oriental instruments to the tune, and the mixing treatment of stereo and Dolby Atmos enriches the musical layers, creating an immersive and immersive experience for the player, with a more delicate emotional expression. The “Mantra of the Past Life” and the striking images create a dual audio-visual effect, enabling players to have a profound immersive experience. The “Mantra for the Future Life” holds significant importance in Buddhist culture, as it is believed to eradicate all karmic impediments and assist adherents in attaining Amitabha Buddha's Western Bliss. This mantra is intricately linked to the concept of “future life” and is said to alleviate all distress, fostering inner tranquility and joy during its recitation. In addition to the tense and exciting game battles, feeling the peace and contemplation brought by the “Pure Land Mantra for the Next Life” becomes an emotional link between the player and the game character, allowing the player to feel an unprecedented spiritual touch in the game world. In the second chapter of the game, “The Wind Rises from the Dusk”, the interpretation of “Shanbei storytelling” by the headless monk Lingji Bodhisattva perfectly integrates the game scene, plot and the characteristics of Shanbei storytelling. Shanbei storytelling is a folk art form mainly based on improvisation, as a kind of intangible cultural heritage inherited for millions of years, in the game through the AI NPC design and game screen perfect combination, make the headless monk's performance more vivid, at the same time, let the player in the interaction with the character can feel more real game experience, further improve the immersion of the game.

4. Discussion

4.1. Method

The purpose of this interview is to explore how the Chinese cultural elements in Black Myth: Wukong can enhance the emotional resonance and immersion of gamers, and to carry out one-on-one face-to-face communication around five interview questions: cultural IP, narrative art, ancient architectural scenario design, and classical musical instrument design. The interviewees were all gamers of Black Myth: Goku, with an age range of 20-26 years old, including 6 undergraduates and 4 graduate students, all specializing in the field of computer science. Based on the following five questions respectively, they expressed their personal game experience and real feelings. Chart 1 is the main content of this interview:

Table 1: Organization of interview questions

1. The game recasts Sun Wukong as the 'Man of Destiny', do you think this adaptation subverts traditional perceptions of cultural IP or gives new life to the myth?
2. What moment in the game (scene/plot/combat) made you suddenly feel a deep connection to the 'Man of Destiny' (Monkey King)?
3. Which unit story in Six Kinds of Love reminds you of a real-life emotional experience? Is this 'emotion into reason' narrative more immersive to you than just fighting? If the emotional strands are removed, is the game reduced to a generic action game?

Table 1: (continued)

4. Do the ancient buildings in the game (e.g. Hanging Temple, Leiyin Hall) remind you of real cultural landmarks (e.g. Hanging Temple at Hengshan, Dunhuang murals)? Does this 'interweaving of reality and illusion' design reinforce the realism of the scene?
5. Does this 'outsider narrative' enhance the authenticity of the story as the storyteller from northern Shaanxi tells the 'Journey to the West' in dialect? Does the switch between dialect and Mandarin produce a sense of 'time travel'?

4.2. Result

According to the summaries of the perspectives of the ten interviewees, they predominantly assert that “Sun Wukong is the pioneer, and the Destined One is the successor.” The depiction of the Destined One in the game not only demonstrates respect for traditional heroes but also instills in players “a sense of mission to become an inheritor.” The respondents emphasized the setting of the Destined One in the game, stating that “it not only gives new life to the mythology but also blurs the boundary between the player and the character. Players follow in the footsteps of the Heaven-fated One, gradually learning about many mythological figures, and grow together with the character, forming an immersive emotional identification.” As players transition from consumers to participants, their emotional investment evolves from “passive reception” to “active dissemination,” ultimately transforming them from “bystanders” to “inheritors” through emotional resonance, thereby developing the sustainable vitality of cultural IP. Respondents indicated that during game battles, they gradually clear a sense of responsibility to “complete the unfinished things of the Great Sage,” shifting the focus of battles from operational challenges to value choices and deepening emotional resonance from “interesting” to “meaningful.” Evaluations such as the Land God's “It looks like him, it really does!” and the Erlang Shen's “You do bear some resemblance to him” enable players to produce a sense of honor as if they are recognized by the mythical world through the acknowledgment of authoritative characters. This external recognition resonates with players' internal self-identification, deepening their connection with the characters. Four interviewees proposed a dual ending design of “wearing/not wearing the golden hoop,” which deconstructs the traditional symbol of the “curse” into a modern individual's choice of freedom and responsibility. This translation gives new life to the cultural IP, and the players complete the contemporary interpretation of the “Great Sage Spirit” in their choices. Three interviewees mentioned that “the architectural design of the Leiyin Hall and the Faust Tower in the third episode of Night Born White Dew also gives people a sense of immediacy as if they were in a real-life temple”, and also pointed out that “the game has added artistic modifications (such as exaggerated proportions of the Faust Tower and the enhancement of the color of the mural paintings) while restoring the real-life buildings, which not only identifies the cultural archetypes but also creates an aesthetic tension of ‘strangeness and familiarity’. This not only recognizes the cultural archetypes, but also creates a shocking experience that transcends reality and creates the aesthetic tension of “strangeness and familiarity”.” Interviewees are mentioned in the game Shanbei storytelling clip, “brainwashing accent and music to deepen the background memory, this artificial sound source (storytelling) + natural soundscape (wind sound) of the composite design, to build a three- dimensional auditory space.” Two interviewees were affected by the poignant recollections of the plot, despite their incomplete comprehension, and they believed that the narrator's voice-over “enhanced my focus on the narrative details, and this narrative technique not only preserves the sense of isolation characteristic of traditional storytelling but also immerses the player in the story through the intimacy of the dialect.” The interviewers noted that the game's “third-person narration” enables traditional Chinese classical musical instruments to acquire a

modern communicative context, allowing players to subconsciously absorb cultural values during the immersive experience.

5. Conclusion

After analyzing the innovative reinvention of Sun Wukong and the new chapter of Journey to the West in Black Myth: Wukong, the study found that the cultural IP and narrative art established a deep emotional connection with the players, which enhanced the emotional resonance between the players and the game, and the ancient architectural scenario design and the fusion of classical musical instruments in the game provided the players with visual and auditory immersive experiences. By meeting face-to-face with ten gamers, the Chinese cultural elements in the game greatly enhanced the players' emotional resonance and immersion by combining the players' real gaming experience and feelings.

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