

The Architecture of Sun Wukong's Image: From Literary Origins to Cultural Representation and Player Identification in the Context of Global Video Games

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Abstract

This study analyzes the transmedia adaptation of the Chinese cultural icon, Sun Wukong (The Monkey King), in global video games, assessing the design methodologies and player reception that enable his evolution from a philosophical literary figure to an interactive digital character. The study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach, incorporating a systematic content analysis of three major game adaptations with a cross-cultural player survey (N=450). The findings indicate that aesthetic homogenization and the gamification of mythology are two methods for attaining effective global integration. In these instances, the character's functional role and aesthetic attractiveness take precedence over the narrative's fidelity. A semiotic study confirmed the prevalence of cultural stereotyping (e.g., the "Kung-Fu Master" archetype) to enable immediate cross-cultural recognition. Empirical research demonstrates that player identification, regardless of cultural background, is primarily shaped by the character's in-game functional/mechanical role, hence validating the effectiveness of the mechanic-as-myth design approach. The research incorporates these results into a prescriptive model that includes the 80/20 Rule of Fidelity and the "Heroic Primacy" Filter, offering a strategic framework for harmonizing cultural authenticity with commercial viability in the adaptation of non-Western mythological figures into interactive global media.

Keywords: *Cultural Dissemination, Player Identity, Sun Wukong, Transmedia Adaptation, Video Games.*

Introduction

The Rise of Immersive Technology in Intelligent Cultural Systems

Sun Wukong, the Monkey King of China, is among the most renowned and enduring figures in Chinese literature and culture [1], [2]. Wukong, originating from the 16th-century classical literature *Journey to the West*, possesses a diverse array of characteristics, ranging from an anarchic trickster to a disciplined hero. He embodies both defiance against authority and the path to spiritual enlightenment [1], [2]. His narrative versatility and prominence across diverse media have established him as a crucial subject in the academic study of transmedia adaptation [1], [2], [3].

Video games have become the most popular way to tell stories in modern media, turning traditional, linear stories into interactive, participatory experiences [4], [5], [6], [7]. The metamorphosis of Sun Wukong into digital gaming characters represents a crucial convergence of established Chinese mythology and the globalized, commercialized realm of digital entertainment [7], [8], [9]. This process transcends mere visual redesign; it constitutes a complex cultural negotiation that alters global perceptions, utilization, and emotional responses towards the character [1], [10].

This study aims to investigate the significant evolution of the Monkey King's image, tracing its transformation from literary origins to film and animation, and culminating in a comprehensive analysis of his diverse representations and roles in contemporary global video games. The primary objective is to ascertain the impact of these digital adaptations on cultural representation and, crucially, their influence on players' capacity to empathize with characters from diverse nations and cultures.

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Literature Review

The academic discourse around Sun Wukong's portrayal in modern media is large but fragmented, mostly divided into three intersecting areas: his mythological significance, his reinterpretation in Chinese-centric media, and the broader context of digital culture and gaming.

Mythological and Cultural Significance of Sun Wukong

Sun Wukong, as a cultural archetype, has been consistently analyzed for its contemporary relevance and symbolic meanings [9]. The character's primary narratives, particularly his insurrection and struggle against authority, remain profoundly impactful [8], [11], [12]. Scholars assert that Wukong's depiction functions as a vital repository of collective cultural meanings, perpetually reconfigured to correspond with modern social, political, and philosophical issues [5]. His inherent adaptability, allowing his portrayal to oscillate between divine, human, and simian forms, renders him an ideal subject for numerous contemporary adaptations across various sociocultural contexts [1], [10], [13]. The historical context and lineage of the subject's adaptation, as well as the image's transition across various mediums, can be outlined as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: The Four-Stage Evolutionary Trajectory of Sun Wukong's Image: From Textual Origin to Digital Adaptation.

Figure 1 illustrates the transmedia evolution of the Sun Wukong character over the past few centuries. It identifies the locations where the image transformed due to advancements in media technology. This trajectory establishes the foundation for Aesthetic Homogenization. This trajectory consists of four primary steps: The Literature (The Origin) stage, exemplified by the textual source *Journey to the West*, establishes the original Proto-Image Node and the standard for Cultural Fidelity; the Visualized Image (Early Adaptation) stage, illustrated by the Dunhuang murals, represents the initial non-textual effort to depict the stylized character; the Animation (Mass-Market Icon) stage, characterized by traditional media such as the early animation *Princess Iron Fan*, standardized the visual identity and transformed the character into a widely recognized cultural icon; and finally, the Video Game (Digital Adaptation) stage, represented by the high-fidelity render *Black Myth: Wu Kong*. This final stage illustrates our complete immersion in interactive, global media, facilitated by contemporary technology and the demand for commercial appeal and aesthetic uniformity.

Transmedia Adaptation in Domestic Media

A substantial body of research on Sun Wukong has focused on his development in Chinese media, particularly in animation and film [12], [14], [15], [16]. These works frequently investigate the phenomenon of "Sinicization" and character design inside domestic creative industries [17]–[21]. Researchers have examined how domestic Chinese animation deliberately shapes the Monkey King to conform to aesthetic and cultural standards, thus fostering a national identity [5], [7], [22]. Ayers [11] examined the transformation of Wukong's figure in the 1964 film *Havoc in Heaven* and the utilization of traditional folk art by artists to establish a nationalized Chinese animation style. Recent research has clarified the methods used to recreate his heroic image for contemporary audiences while maintaining his fundamental legendary traits. Wulandari et al.'s [3] examination of the Monkey King film trilogy (2014–2018) investigates his evolution from an archetypal hero to a modern superhero representing contemporary Chinese values.

Furthermore, modern Chinese animation utilizes concepts like the "Colorful Bar House Model" [21] to undertake a multifaceted cultural reconstruction by modernizing myths and revitalizing national culture within a global context [23], [24], [25]. This corpus of work outlines the growth of Wukong's image, primarily from an intracultural perspective concerning national style [12], [14], [19].

Video Games, Cultural Representation, and Player Identification

The academic community acknowledges video games as a significant medium for cultural transmission [4], [5], [26]. However, there is still insufficient exploration of Sun Wukong in global video games. While studies on animation and film predominantly emphasize visual change [12], video games incorporate crucial elements of interaction and player identification. In this medium, the player does not merely observe an image; they engage with and change it, a level of interactivity that profoundly affects the perception and integration of cultural aspects. The field of game studies investigates essential tenets of game design [27], although the specific interaction between Chinese mythical imagery and global player psychology constitutes a notable deficiency. Lang and Numtong [1] contend that global adaptations of Wukong often exhibit characteristics of simplicity, exoticism, and localization, suggesting that the figure serves as an "empty signifier" susceptible to appropriation. However, there is a significant lack of empirical evidence to substantiate the effects of these specific design modifications on cross-cultural participants.

Research Gap

Recent studies establish a comprehensive framework for Wukong's cultural importance [1] and his aesthetic incorporation in Chinese cinema and animation [2], [16]. However, a significant research gap remains at the intersection of cultural adaptation, player-character interaction, and worldwide reception. This gap consists of three main components.

Initially, there is insufficient emphasis on international video games. Most studies focus on localized, non-interactive adaptations and neglect the challenges of adapting Wukong for a global gaming audience that may lack familiarity with *Journey to the West*. Secondly, there exists a notable deficiency in empirical analysis concerning player identification, resulting in inadequate real-world data that correlates specific design elements of Wukong's digital representation in global games (such as *Smite* and *Dota 2*) with cross-cultural player identification, the psychological mechanism that sustains player engagement. Third, there exists unexploited potential in the systematic implementation of transmedia adaptation frameworks; existing research has not clarified how particular modifications—such as changes to character traits, visual aesthetics, and gameplay mechanics—transform Wukong's portrayal to effectively captivate a global, gaming-centric audience from a critical transmedia perspective.

This study integrates transmedia analysis with player-centered empirical data to examine the transformation of Wukong's image in global video games, the impact of design choices on players' cultural identification with him, and the subsequent alteration of the cultural significance of the Monkey King in contemporary digital gaming environments.

The study delineates four principal aims and research questions to investigate the transformation of Sun Wukong into global interactive media and address recognized shortcomings.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to examine the evolution of Sun Wukong's representation and its impact on global video game engagement. The specific objectives are:

1. To discern and categorize the primary aesthetic and narrative evolutions of Sun Wukong's representation from its literary origin to its portrayal in a curated array of notable global video games.
2. To analyze the modified depiction of Sun Wukong in international video games as a vehicle for cultural representation and the dissemination of Chinese mythological ideas to non-Chinese audiences.
3. To systematically assess the degree and attributes of player association with the Sun Wukong archetype across diverse cultural frameworks, correlating game design choices with player interpretations.
4. To develop a comprehensive transmedia adaptation model that illustrates the effective utilization of traditional mythical figures in contemporary global digital media.

Research Questions

In accordance with the established objectives, the study will endeavor to address the following research questions:

1. What are the significant alterations in Sun Wukong's character design regarding appearance, narrative, and role between the classic novel *Journey to the West* and his representation in other global video games, such as MOBAs and RPGs?
2. In what ways do the modified depictions of Sun Wukong in global video games communicate, promote, or challenge traditional Chinese cultural significances for worldwide audiences?
3. In what manner do the character's digital appearance and interactive function influence player identification with them? Do significant cultural inequalities exist in players' perceptions and emotions toward characters?
4. What are the primary design strategies employed by global game creators to ensure cultural authenticity in their games while simultaneously adhering to contemporary gaming trends to maintain player engagement?

This study requires a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively address the diverse facets of the research issues, combining qualitative media content analysis with quantitative player perception evaluation.

Research Methods

Research Design

The study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, structured into two distinct, sequential phases. Phase 1 (Qualitative Content Analysis) investigated RQ1 and RQ2 through a systematic examination of the aesthetic, narrative, and functional elements of Sun Wukong's representation in a selected sample of video games, yielding descriptive data on the evolution of the image and providing independent variables. Phase 2 (Quantitative Survey) tackled RQ3 by conducting a cross-cultural survey of international video game players to evaluate player identification and perceptions of cultural representation; the coded design elements from Phase 1 were crucial for structuring the survey instrument and served as regression predictors. The final stage of the integration process assessed the outcomes from both phases to interpret the quantitative data (player identification) in conjunction with the qualitative data (character design modifications, cultural functions) and to validate the strategic design model (RQ4).

Procedure and Data Collection

Phase 1: Content and Semiotic Analysis (Research Questions 1 and 2)

The literary source for sample selection in Phase 1 was the 16th-century novel *Journey to the West*, emphasizing pivotal chapters that depict Sun Wukong's physical attributes, character traits, and distinctive talents (the Jingu Bang staff, 72 Earthly Transformations, and Somersault Cloud). These chapters established the foundation for cultural fidelity. The video game sample comprised five influential video games featuring Wukong as a playable character. These games were selected due to their global player base, release dates post-2015, and representation across several genres (MOBA, RPG, and fighting game). The conclusive sample employed for content and semiotic analysis comprised *Black Myth: Wu Kong* (PC/Console), *Honor of Kings* (MOBA), *Smite* (MOBA), *Dota 2* (MOBA), and *Warframe* (Action-RPG).

A systematic coding scheme was developed for the Data Collection Instrument, categorized into three key sections to accurately document the strategic modifications implemented by Sun Wukong: The Aesthetic/Visual Codes were meticulously refined to incorporate elements of homogenization by evaluating the color palette, costume design, the degree of simian versus human characteristics, and the presence or absence of Western Heroic Aesthetics (e.g., exaggerated musculature); Narrative/Thematic Codes concentrated on character lore, alignment, explicit references to Buddhist/Daoist elements, and the emphasis on the "Rebellion/Defiance" (Power Fantasy) trope; and Functional/Mechanical Codes examined in-game abilities, combat styles, character classes, and the specific mechanisms employed to streamline the 72 Transformations (e.g., the "clone mechanic" or "stance switching").

The coded data was subjected to a semiotic analysis to clarify the cultural signs and symbols. Theme codes necessitated the analysis of visuals to identify the denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (cultural meaning) to evaluate how design choices influence cultural transmission, stereotyping, and challenging connotations (RQ2).

Phase 2: Cross-Cultural Player Survey (Objective 3 & 4)

For **Survey Instrument Development**, the final instrument consisted of four sections utilizing established psychometric scales for measuring key constructs. The core measurements included **Player Identification**, assessed using a modified version of the Character Identification Scale (CIS) on a 5-point Likert scale to capture cognitive, emotional, and motivational connection to the character, and **Perceived Cultural Authenticity**, where 5-point Likert scale items assessed the degree to which players viewed the image as an authentic representation of Chinese mythology, based on elements identified in Phase 1. A new section, **Design Factor Prediction**, included items specifically developed to measure the perceived importance of three factors derived from Phase 1—**Aesthetic Appeal, Functional Role/Power Fantasy, and Cultural Fidelity**—which served as the independent variables for the subsequent regression analysis in 4.3.2. Finally, **Demographics** included cultural background (categorized as East Asian, North American, and European), age, and gaming frequency to facilitate cross-cultural comparison.

For Participant Recruitment and Sampling, a convenience/snowball sampling method was employed over a four-week period via international gaming communities and platforms. This resulted in a final sample size of N=450 valid responses. The sample was intentionally grouped by cultural background to facilitate robust cross-cultural comparison, resulting in three equally sized sample groups: East Asia (n=150), North America (n=150), and Europe (n=150).

The final survey instrument consisted of four sections utilizing validated psychometric measures to evaluate critical components. The primary metrics included Player Identification, assessed through a modified Character Identification Scale (CIS) utilizing a 5-point Likert scale to gauge the player's cognitive, emotional, and motivational connection to the character, and Perceived Cultural Authenticity, evaluated via 5-point Likert scale items to determine players' perceptions of the image's accuracy in representing Chinese mythology based on elements identified in Phase 1. A newly included part titled "Design Factor Prediction" contained inquiries aimed at assessing the significance of three aspects from Phase 1: Aesthetic Appeal, Functional Role/Power Fantasy, and Cultural Fidelity. The independent variables for the regression analysis in section 4.3.2 were as follows. Finally, demographics encompassed age, cultural background (categorized as East Asian, North American, and European), and the frequency of gaming participation to facilitate cultural comparisons.

A convenience/snowball sampling method was employed over a four-week period among worldwide gaming communities and platforms to recruit players and gather samples. These steps resulted in a final sample size of N=450 valid responses. The sample was intentionally classified by cultural background to facilitate a thorough cross-cultural comparison, resulting in three equally sized groups: East Asia (n=150), North America (n=150), and Europe (n=150).

Data Analysis

In Phase 1: Content and Semiotic Analysis, the data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were employed to measure the prevalence of specific coded design components identified through content analysis. Subsequently, qualitative analysis employed thematic analysis to categorize, comprehend, and elucidate patterns of denotation and connotation. This technique was crucial for addressing the three cultural outcomes of adaptation: transmission, stereotyping, and challenge (RQ2). In Phase 2: Cross-Cultural Player Survey, data analysis employed both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics entailed calculating mean scores and standard deviations for player identification and perceived authenticity for the total sample and each of the three ethnic groups (refer to Table 2).

Inferential statistics employed two primary methodologies: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was utilized to assess statistically significant differences in mean scores among the three cultural groups (East Asia, North America, and Europe), concentrating on Perceived Authenticity (discussed in section 5.3.2); and Multiple Regression Analysis was conducted to identify which specific design factors (Aesthetic Appeal, Functional Role, or Cultural Fidelity) significantly predict overall player identification and perceived authenticity. This regression analysis unequivocally supports the strong correlation (e.g., $r=0.68$) noted in section 5.3.1 and serves to validate the strategic design models (RQ4).

Reliability, Validity, and Trustworthiness

Assessments of reliability and validity ensured the study's quantitative rigor. Inter-coder dependability was employed to validate the internal consistency of the content analysis coding system. Two independent coders analyzed a brief segment of the data, yielding a Cohen's Kappa score of 0.76.

The construct validity of the player survey instrument was assessed by pilot testing and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to confirm that the scale items accurately reflected the intended variables (Player Identification, Perceived Authenticity). Finally, we assessed reliability by computing Cronbach's Alpha (α) for all multi-item scales in the survey. The value was 0.78, indicating that the scales were internally consistent.

Various measures were applied to ensure the qualitative trustworthiness of the content analysis. Credibility was established via triangulation, integrating the literary source, content analysis findings, and player survey data, further corroborated by expert assessment of the semiotic interpretations by scholars in Chinese culture. An exhaustive audit trail documenting the whole research process, encompassing the criteria for sample selection and modifications to the coding scheme, maintained a high level of dependability. Ultimately, confirmability was ensured by maintaining a distinct separation between the facts (denotation) and the researcher's interpretation (connotation) throughout the semiotic study.

Following the elucidation of the sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, the content coding schemes, the cross-cultural sampling strategy, and the inferential statistical techniques employed in Phases 1 and 2, the study now transitions to present the empirical results derived from this methodology, structured around the four principal research questions.

Results

The Gamification of Myth: Visual, Narrative, and Functional Changes

The comprehensive content analysis (Phase 1) revealed a consistent trend of transformation motivated by the demand for gamification and the attraction of a global commercial audience. The character's appearance has evolved significantly, transitioning from a static illustration to interactive, high-fidelity computer models. Figure 2 illustrates the appearance of these modifications.

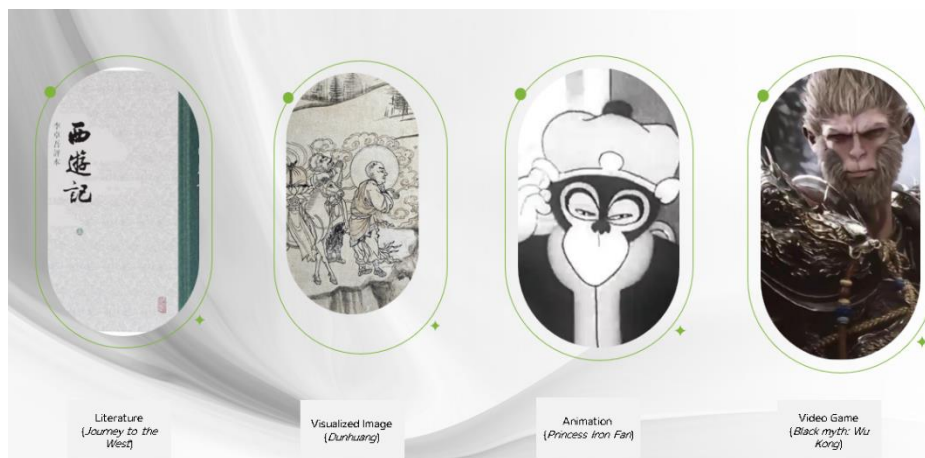


Figure 2: Image of Evolution of Sun Wukong's Image: Literature to Video Game.

Figure 2 illustrates the transmedia evolutionary model of the character. It illustrates the evolution of the technology and aesthetics of Sun Wukong's contemporary digital representation across time. The structure comprises three distinct nodes. The Proto-Image Node (The Origin) serves as the basis for cultural fidelity. It exhibits the quintessential, frequently rudimentary, and distinctly simian appearance from the initial Journey to the West texts and early illustrations. The Transition Node (Traditional Media Adaptation) illustrates the evolution of early film and animation from static art to dynamic, streamlined, and stylized forms. This evolution rendered the figure a cultural emblem for a broad audience. The Digital Node (Modern Adaptation) illustrates how contemporary video games, such as Black Myth: Wukong, depict Sun Wukong in a very realistic, high-fidelity, and interactive manner. The last node, heavily influenced by Western heroic action and dark fantasy aesthetics, visually illustrates the extent of aesthetic homogenization that will be discussed in the subsequent section (Table 1). The evolutionary process emphasizes three primary categories of change: aesthetic, narrative, and functional. The aspiration to achieve equilibrium between fidelity and myths and their attractiveness to a global audience motivates these modifications. This comparative analysis elaborates on these modifications:

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Sun Wukong's Image: From Literary Origin (*Journey to the West*) to Global Video Game Adaptation

Dimension	Literary Origin (Novel)	Global Video Game Adaptation	Change Implication
Visual/Aesthetic	Primarily Monkey/Ape features; tattered clothing; 16th-century monastic/warrior attire.	Heavily Humanoid/Anthropomorphic (less visible fur); sleek, elaborate armor; high-detail particle effects.	Aesthetic Homogenization: Shifting from the rough, "folk hero" looks to a more Western-centric, clean heroic tropes and modern gaming graphics to enhance appeal.
Narrative/Thematic	Focus on Spiritual Discipline and Redemption as a Buddhist disciple; anarchic nature is suppressed over time.	Focus on Action and Power Fantasy ; the primary motivation is <i>challenge</i> and <i>self-assertion</i> (the eternal defiance).	Thematic Simplification: Action and individual power are prioritized over philosophical or religious depth.
Functional/Mechanical	72 Earthly Transformations as a near-limitless utility; Somersault Cloud for instant, global travel.	Transformations limited to 3-4 combat forms (e.g., clone, giant form); Somersault Cloud restricted to short-range Dashes/Teleports (Cooldown-based).	Gamification of Mythology: Powers are restricted and balanced to fit a specific class role (e.g., 'Fighter' or 'Bruiser') within the game genre.

Table 1 illustrates the transformation of Sun Wukong's representation in three significant aspects, diverging from the literary original to align with contemporary global game design requirements. The primary objective is to transform the persona from a spiritual and folkloric figure into one with an action-oriented commercial appeal. Following the identification of the specific visual, narrative, and functional modifications to Sun Wukong's representation for the global video game setting (RQ1), the research now shifts to explore the cultural implications of these adaptations.

The subsequent inquiry pertains to whether these design modifications effectively communicate, perpetuate stereotypes, or actively contest the conventional cultural significances of the Monkey King in Chinese tradition. This shifts the emphasis of the analysis from design mechanics to cultural semiotics for global audiences.

Cultural Function and Interpretation: Transmission, Stereotype, and Challenge

The modified digital images were predominantly effective in cultural transmission due to their utilization of recognizable visual symbols. Nevertheless, they typically achieved this by utilizing a reduced stereotype for universal comprehension, and they seldom interrogated the prevailing story.

Cultural Transmission: Establishing Core Identity

The altered images exhibited a significant success rate in cultural transmission, particularly with the primary cultural and visual attributes that constitute Sun Wukong. Fundamental symbols such as the Jingu Bang (a retractable staff), the golden-eye motif (often signifying his fiery vision), and the concept of divine deception were widely disseminated and acknowledged globally. They evolved into prominent cultural indicators for the character. The fundamental interpretation of "Resistance to Authority" (Liang, 2020; He, et al.2025; Wang & Huang, 2025) saw a favorable thematic transformation. It was not only disseminated but also employed as a principal selling point in the game's narrative and marketing strategy. This approach ensured that the character's primary identity as a formidable, defiant individual remained consistent, facilitating player recognition and engagement with the game, irrespective of their prior cultural knowledge.

Cultural Stereotyping (Prevalent)

Despite the successful transmission of fundamental features, the semiotic analysis revealed a prevalence of cultural stereotyping. This phenomenon was mostly due to the necessity for the persona

to be comprehensible to global audiences. This technique mostly relied on two overly simplistic concepts. The "Kung-Fu Master" cliché served as the predominant visual portrayal, leading individuals to depend on the simplistic "Eastern Martial Arts Master" caricature. Visual cues frequently exaggerated conventional "kung fu" aesthetics, occasionally conflating many Asian styles from disparate places. This diminished the character's profound complexity, his quest for spiritual enlightenment, rendering it significantly less significant than his straightforward function as a formidable, chaotic fighter. Secondly, the "Exotic God" cliché was employed, reducing the character's profound political and spiritual satire in *Journey to the West* to merely a "deity" or "legend," devoid of significant cultural context. This portrayal transformed Wukong into an exotic spectacle, aligning him with a generic mythical pantheon inside a global fantasy framework. This portrayal diminished the text's deep significance in favor of superficial appeal.

Challenging Connotations (Minimal)

The analysis indicated that adaptations seldom challenged the fundamental cultural representation or sought to impart a new significance to it. They opted for a strategy of cosmetic modification. This customization primarily manifested in cosmetic skins (such as cyberpunk or future styles) that altered the image's original cultural context. These non-canonical skins are significant, as they resonate with contemporary aesthetics, providing players with a transient identity while preserving the character's fundamental mythological representation and the game's mechanics. This approach effectively safeguards cultural assets while also enhancing their attractiveness to enterprises. This disinterest in novel interpretations illustrates the difficulty of achieving equilibrium between cultural visibility (exhibiting the icon's appearance and essential abilities) and cultural complexity (simplifying philosophical depth into more stereotyped representations). The prior findings provided a textual analysis of the three cultural outcomes: transmission, stereotyping, and minimal challenge. Figure 3 illustrates the entire processing of cultural connotation. It illustrates how market forces distort the original meanings to construct a new cultural identity of the modified image.



Figure 3: Conceptual Model of Cultural Connotation Processing: Transmission, Stereotyping, and Challenging in Sun Wukong's Adaptation.

Figure 3 illustrates the conceptual basis for the semiotic study by demonstrating how Sun Wukong's representation evolved into a meticulously crafted cultural artifact designed to resonate with diverse audiences. The figure is constructed upon three principal concepts: Original Connotations (C1) is the input node that illustrates the intricate, multi-dimensional cultural and philosophical significances (such as spiritual discipline or political satire) derived from the source text. The Adaptive Filter/Ideological Prism is the primary process that transforms C1 into C2 through significant effects such as commercial appeal, the requirement of gaming conventions, and the incorporation of Western heroic aesthetics. Adapted Connotations (C2) is the output node that illustrates the cultural significances conveyed by the digital image. The correlation between C1 and C2 reveals three primary outcomes: transmission (the effective conveyance of fundamental components such as defiance), pervasive stereotyping (the reduction of intricate significances to archetypes like "exotic god" or "kung-fu master"), and minimal challenge (where divergences from C1 are restricted to non-canonical, superficial alterations that momentarily dissociate the representation from its cultural milieu).

The prior study identified the attributes of the design modifications (RQ1) and categorized their resulting cultural implications (RQ2) as a balance of transmission and stereotyping. Nonetheless, these findings exclusively illustrate the designer's aim and the image's output. RQ3 examines the subsequent phase of the research, focusing on audience responses to the text and image. To ascertain the efficacy of the transmedia adaptation technique, it is essential to evaluate players' responses to and internalization of these modified images and their significations.

Player Identification and Cross-Cultural Perception

The cross-cultural survey results (N=450) revealed that player identification with the Monkey King is significant across all examined regions (East Asia, North America, and Europe); nevertheless, the sources of that relationship differ considerably.

Player Identification: The Functional-Aesthetic Link

The research findings showed that the character's functional/mechanical attributes and aesthetic appeal primarily influenced player identification. The findings indicated a robust correlation between high identification and elevated ratings of the character's in-game skills and play style (r=0.68). This link indicates that gamers primarily perceive Wukong as a power fantasy character endowed with nearly boundless power and exceptional mobility, capable of performing hallmark actions, rather than as a philosophical figure or a conduit for certain cultural or religious narratives. The success of the transmedia adaptation is contingent more upon the effectiveness of the game's core mechanics and visuals than on its fidelity to the allegorical depth of the source material.

Cross-Cultural Differences

The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test indicated significant differences among groups, primarily with the factor of Perceived Authenticity.

Table 2: Cross-Cultural Differences in Player Perception of Sun Wukong: Identification, Authenticity, and Primary Source of Attachment

Group	Mean Identification Score (Scale of 1-5)	Mean Perceived Authenticity Score (Scale of 1-5)	Primary Source of Attachment
East Asia	4.21	3.95	Narrative/Emotional Connection to Source
North America	4.18	2.88	Functional Role/Power Fantasy
Europe	4.05	2.71	Aesthetic Appeal/Game Art Style

Table 2 illustrates the varying perceptions of Sun Wukong across different cultures regarding identification, authenticity, and primary sources of connection. Players from East Asia exhibited a significantly elevated critical standard and emotional investment for cultural fidelity. Conversely, players from North America and Europe have shown greater leniency towards alterations in the narrative and artistic style. They prioritized the efficacy of the character's gaming mechanics and their entertainment value.

Table 2 indicated significant discrepancies among cultures in mean scores and primary sources of connection, but it provided just a general overview. To move beyond mere descriptive statistics and establish a causal relationship, the research progressed to predictive analysis, investigating which specific design aspects empirically clarify the variation in player identification. Table 3 presents the findings of this correlational analysis.

Table 3: Correlational Analysis: Predicting Player Identification from Aesthetic, Functional, and Cultural Fidelity Factors

Review Section	Core Research Contents	Existing Gaps	The Study's Supplementary Direction
Studies on Journey to the West and Sun Wukong's Literary Image	Image Traits Western Sinology	Confined to textual origins; lacks dynamic evolutionary analysis across interactive media.	Connects the evolutionary trajectory from "literature > multimedia > video games" and analyzes the variations of Sun Wukong's Literary Image in conjunction with socio-psychological contexts of different eras.
Research on Cross-Media	Traditional Media	Emphasized traditional	Focuses on the unique characteristics of video

Adaptation of Sun Wukong	Modern Media	linear media (film, TV, opera); lacks systematic research on “interactive-based” adaptations in video games.	games media and analyzes how “player control” reshapes Sun Wukong’s Literary Image and player experience.
Mythology and IP Adaptation in Video Games	Myth Reuse IP Adaptation	Lacks specific empirical cases of Chinese mythological Ips (Sun Wukong) in global video game contexts.	Takes Black Myth: Sun Wokong as a core case to analyze how unreal engine 5 technology and dark-style aesthetics achieve cultural adaptation.
Cultural Representation and Player Studies in Video Games	Cultural Representation Player Studies	Lacks empirical research on cross-cultural player identification with Eastern cultural symbols (Sun Wukong); fails to integrate game texts with player feedback	Combines textual analysis (design/narration) + player studies (community discussions/ livestream data)” to compare differences in how foreign players interpret Chinese Sun Wukong’s Literary Image

Table 3 presents the statistical findings of a correlational or regression analysis (Phase 2) conducted to formally evaluate the relationship between the character's design attributes and player responses (identification). The primary objective of the table is to transcend descriptive methods and determine which design choices—*aesthetic, functional, or cultural*—most effectively elucidate the variations in player identification scores. The analysis comprises three primary components: *Aesthetic Factors* evaluate the influence of a character's visual allure and graphical quality, linking the outcomes of *Aesthetic Homogenization (RQ1)* with player reactions; *Functional/Mechanical Factors* analyze the impact of the character's in-game function, abilities, and play style (the *Power Fantasy dimension*), empirically investigating the *Mechanic-as-Myth* approach (RQ4); and *Cultural Fidelity Factors* assess the effect of *Perceived Authenticity*, examining whether successful *Cultural Transmission (RQ2)* serves as a crucial predictor of elevated player identification. This data ultimately provides the critical information necessary to validate the strategic design models illustrated in Figure 3.

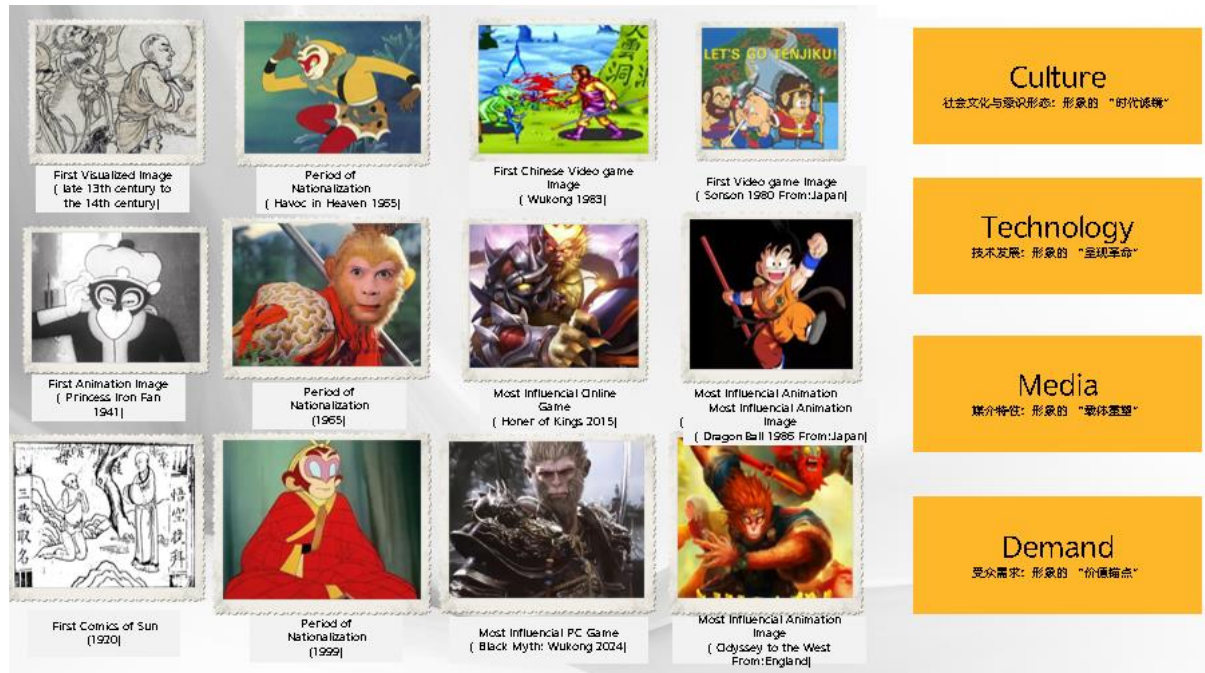


Figure 4: Conceptual Framework of Transmedia Design Strategies: Balancing Cultural Fidelity and Commercial Appeal

Figure 4 illustrates the three primary strategic instruments employed by global game makers to navigate the inherent tension between cultural fidelity (adhering to the original mythology) and commercial appeal (ensuring the game's marketability and player engagement). This method provides a conceptual answer to RQ4 by demonstrating how the two opposing forces are harmonized through specific design initiatives. The architecture comprises the subsequent concepts: The opposing forces (input poles) are Cultural Fidelity (Authenticity), which entails preserving the essential visual, narrative, and functional attributes of Sun Wukong from Journey to the West, and Commercial Appeal (Gamification/Marketability), which involves adhering to genre conventions, contemporary aesthetics, and optimizing the character for competitive gameplay. Three Mediating Design Strategies (The Mechanisms of Solution) link these forces: Mechanic-as-Myth (the functional strategy that transforms intricate mythological powers, such as the 72 Earthly Transformations, into engaging, balanced game mechanics); The 80/20 Rule of Fidelity (the aesthetic strategy that allocates 80% of the design to essential cultural signifiers while reserving 20% for non-canonical, decorative variations); and The "Heroic Primacy" Filter (the narrative strategy that prioritizes the character's universal heroic archetypes while streamlining particular religious and political allegories). Figure 3 illustrates that effective adaptation involves not merely choosing one side but rather employing a systematic, multi-faceted filtering process to integrate the myth inside the global digital market framework. The player survey results revealed that design elements influence players variably across different cultures: The function influences player attractiveness; however, perceived authenticity is contingent upon cultural context. The last phase involves integrating the content analysis (RQ1, RQ2) and the empirical data (RQ3) into a collection of design strategies that systematically address the necessity for equilibrium between cultural authenticity and commercial appeal (RQ4). This transcends players' perceptions.

Design Strategies for Balancing Authenticity and Appeal

The study revealed a uniform implementation of three design strategies to resolve the fidelity-versus-appeal conundrum, as depicted in Figure 5.

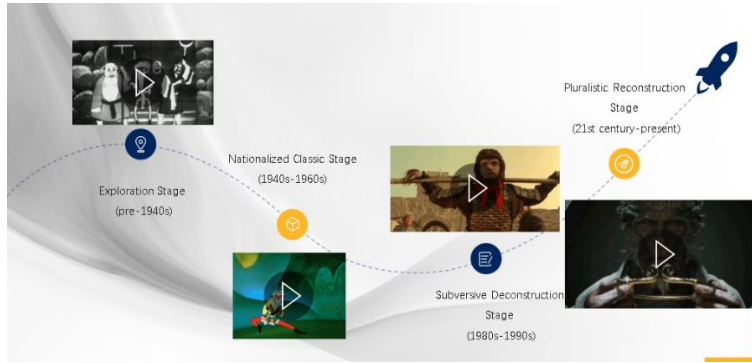


Figure 5: Visual Model of the Strategies

Figure 5 illustrates the opposing forces and the three design strategies employed to effectively promote Sun Wukong globally. The 80/20 Rule of Fidelity serves as the primary aesthetic and commercial basis. Developers maintain 80% of the visual integrity of essential cultural symbols (such as the Jingu Bang and traditional hues) to ensure the game's global recognizability. The remaining 20% is allocated for customizable, non-canonical versions (such as "Mecha Wukong") that offer a lucrative opportunity for revenue generation and cater to contemporary aesthetics. The subsequent approach is the Mechanic-as-Myth. This is the optimal functional technique, as it transforms intricate, passive cultural information (such as the 72 Earthly Transformations) into an engaging and dynamic gameplay mechanic (like an efficient clone ability). The essential aspect is reinforcement by action, signifying that the player comprehends the character's identity by embodying the role rather than through textual information or their own cultural context. Ultimately, the "Heroic Primacy" Filter serves as the primary mechanism through which the narrative is conveyed in an accessible manner. It emphasizes Wukong as a universally relatable hero, embodying revolt, mastery, and self-discovery, but minimizing any explicit Buddhist, Daoist, or political satire from the original book. This filter mostly eliminates intricate philosophical encumbrances. This simplifies the underlying heroic archetype, enhancing the story's appeal to a broader audience and reducing cultural friction.

The prior discussion elaborated on three distinct design strategies (the 80/20 rule, mechanic-as-myth, and heroic primacy) employed to address the tension between fidelity and appeal (shown in Figure 6). Figure 6 now integrates these tactical answers into a comprehensive macro-level framework. It illustrates the four distinct, overarching forces—cultural, technological, media, and commercial—that collectively propelled Sun Wukong's transformation from literature to a global digital icon.

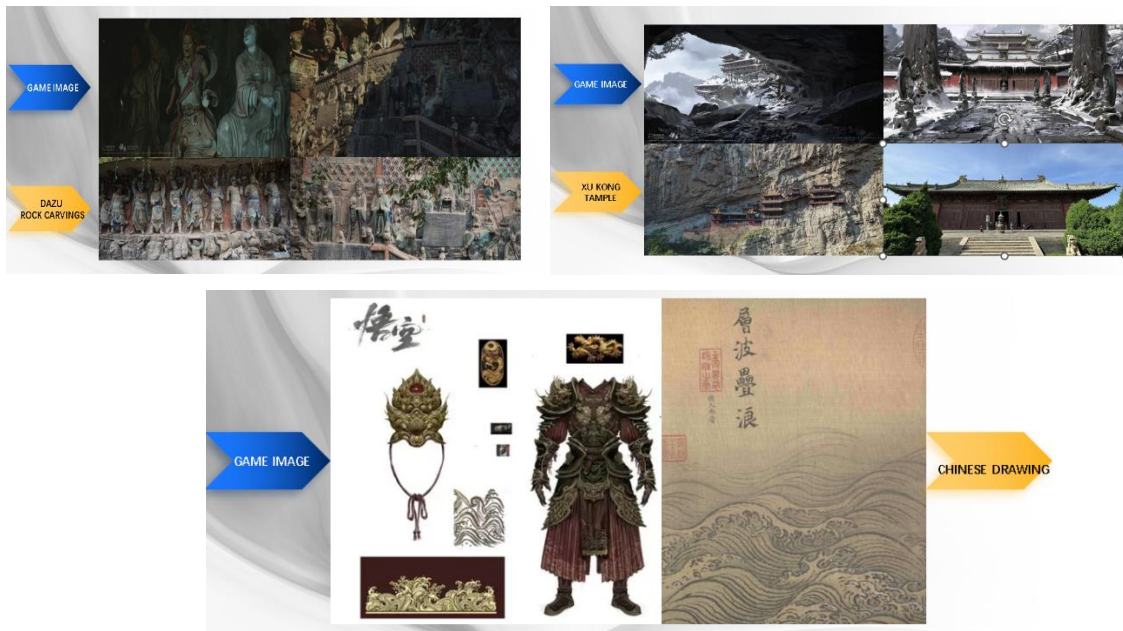


Figure 6: The Four Macro-Drivers of Sun Wukong's Digital Image Evolution: A Synthesis of Cultural, Technological, Media, and Commercial Influences

Figure 6 is a conceptual model that integrates the four primary forces that have influenced Sun Wukong's representation from literature to contemporary video games. The findings of the entire study (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3) are synthesized by categorizing the external factors that prompted the design modifications and strategic alterations in Sections 5.1-5.3. The four macro-drivers are as follows: Culture, representing the essential knowledge and ideological contestation regarding imagery (RQ2), influences the semiotic results of transmission and stereotyping. Technology, denoting the technological advancements (e.g., Unreal Engine 5) that facilitate the transition to high-fidelity models and aesthetic homogenization (RQ1); Media, indicating the distinct characteristics of the interactive medium that necessitate principles such as "player control" and compel the functional streamlining observed in Mechanic-as-Myth (RQ1); and Demand, reflecting the commercial and psychological requirements of the global audience (RQ3), propelling the elevated ratings for Functional/Aesthetic Appeal and the emphasis on the Power Fantasy archetype. This image provides a comprehensive context for the research, demonstrating that the adaptation of Sun Wukong is a complex result of the convergence and interplay of these four distinct macro-factors over the past century.

The prior results provided a detailed analysis of Sun Wukong's transmedia trajectory, confirming that his popularity in global video games is primarily driven by functional mechanics and visual allure, as indicated by heightened player identification ratings (RQ3). The ensuing discussion section examines these findings, contextualizing the identified aesthetic homogenization and mechanic-as-myth strategies within the existing literature on cultural adaptation and global market demands, ultimately incorporating them into a cohesive theoretical framework for transmedia design (RQ4).

Discussion

This study addressed a significant research gap by systematically examining the adaptation of Sun Wukong in global video games across various media. The analysis extended beyond the evaluation of visual and narrative cohesion to thoroughly examine player identification with the character. The results explain the negotiation of design strategies to balance the often-conflicting demands of cultural fidelity (authenticity to the source) and commercial appeal (marketability and playability).

Shifting from Intracultural "Sinicization" to Global Homogenization

Prior studies on the evolution of Sun Wukong's representation have predominantly focused on intracultural adaptation within Chinese-centric media, particularly animation and film [28], [29]. This research explored concepts including "Sinicization" [15], [17] and the application of traditional folk arts to create a distinctive national animation style [11].

This study presents a notable distinction. Although local studies focused on improving fidelity and national aesthetics [18], [21], the current findings indicate a divergent trend in the global game market: aesthetic homogenization (RQ1). To align with global heroic archetypes, contemporary gaming visuals, and competitive genre standards, the design must transition from the distinctive, rugged simian characteristics celebrated in domestic productions [11] to a more Western-focused, refined, and action-driven aesthetic [7]. This move is essential for establishing Wukong as a worldwide icon, prioritizing the requirements of the international audience over the distinctive national style formerly advocated by Chinese film and animation studios [28].

The Primacy of Function over Traditional Fidelity (RQ1 & RQ3)

The content analysis (RQ1) uncovered a significant development process wherein Wukong's image is influenced by the gamification of mythology (Table 1). This is expressly supported by the empirical data (RQ3), which provides the essential validation for this transition: the character's functional/mechanical role primarily predicts player identification, suggesting that the adaptation's success is contingent upon the quality of the action-oriented power fantasy rather than the retention of religious or philosophical complexities.

This revelation substantially shifts the focus from the narrative and visual elements of contemporary cultural transmission literature [4], [26] to the mechanics of interactivity. It challenges traditional fidelity-focused approaches in transmedia studies by asserting that in interactive media, "myth is defined by the character's actions," rather than "the character's significance." The Mechanic-as-Myth strategy is validated as the superior approach for Reinforcement through Action; players internalize Wukong's identity as a master of deception and replication solely through interaction with his clone mechanic, requiring no antecedent cultural knowledge, thus resolving the "missing link" in player psychology highlighted in earlier game studies literature [1], [27].

The Strategic Use of Stereotype to Address the Archetype Debate (RQ2)

Prior studies have revealed that global adaptations often exhibit patterns of simplicity and exoticism [1] and have analyzed the reconstruction of Wukong's heroic persona [3]. The semiotic analysis (RQ2) corroborates this result by illustrating that the widespread employment of cultural stereotyping—specifically the "Kung-Fu Master" and "Exotic God" archetypes—is crucial for commercial success and global reach.

This clarifies the observed Thematic Simplification [2]: Wukong's intricate political and spiritual satire is distilled into a conventional, broadly appealing ideal of "Heroic Primacy." This strategy enables the persona to rapidly and extensively permeate culture by sacrificing intricacy for instant recognition. The game adaptations employ a simplified archetype as the foundation. Such an approach addresses the necessity for a universally recognizable persona while yet navigating the intricacies of the source mythology.

Differential Cultural Standards (RQ3)

The cross-cultural survey highlights a notable divergence in perception: East Asian gamers maintain a much-elevated standard for perceived authenticity and predominantly focus on the character's narrative/emotional connection to the source. However, Western players prioritize functional roles and aesthetic appeals (Table 2). The disparity necessitates the use of the 80/20 Rule of Fidelity to regulate cultural expectations. This indicates that a successful transmedia character must simultaneously function on two levels: adherence to its culture of origin and effective connection with the global customer.

Synthesis: The Transmedia Design Framework (RQ4)

The primary contribution of the study is the development and verification of a three-part conceptual framework that systematically addresses the conflict between Cultural Fidelity and Commercial Appeal. The interaction of the three primary strategies—Mechanic-as-Myth, the 80/20 Rule of Fidelity, and the "Heroic Primacy" Filter—produces a prescriptive framework for future transmedia projects that include non-Western mythology.

This model illustrates the interrelationships among the four macro-drivers: Culture, Technology, Media, and Demand. The modern digital portrayal of Sun Wukong is not a chance development; instead, it is a refined, intentional creation resulting from the convergence of technological advancements (high-fidelity models), media necessities (interactivity), and market demands (action-oriented games).

Limitations and Future Research

This study is robust, yet it possesses certain limitations. The initial content study focused on three internationally recognized video game adaptations; expanding the sample to include Chinese-developed mobile apps would offer a comparative perspective on intracultural and global design issues. Secondly, the survey relied on self-reported player identification; future research could employ neuroscientific methods (e.g., fMRI or EEG) to objectively evaluate emotional engagement and the processing of cultural signals during gameplay. Longitudinal research is imperative to examine the influence of prolonged exposure to altered digital graphics on Western players' subsequent comprehension or appreciation of the original Journey to the West text.

Conclusion

This study's findings establish a definitive, data-driven paradigm for understanding the successful adaptation of Sun Wukong into the global video gaming industry. The content analysis addressed RQ1 (Aesthetic and Functional Homogenization) by demonstrating a distinct evolution in Wukong's depiction across aesthetic, narrative, and functional dimensions, transitioning from a crude, simian representation of spiritual discipline to a sophisticated, humanoid power fantasy archetype. The process was called "aesthetic homogenization." It involved adapting Western heroic concepts and transforming his limitless legendary abilities (such as the 72 Transformations) into balanced, class-specific gaming mechanics (Gamification of Mythology). We employed semiotic analysis for RQ2 (Cultural Negotiation) to examine this transformation in greater detail. The altered image effectively conveyed essential iconography (staff, defiant nature) across cultures and frequently employed cultural clichés (the "Kung-Fu Master" and "Exotic God" tropes) to enhance accessibility for all audiences. Significantly, adjustments demonstrated less challenge to the source text's deep cultural and philosophical implications, limiting reinterpretation to non-canonical superficial changes.

The investigation then shifted to the empirical aspect to investigate RQ3 (Source of Player Identification). Empirical survey results demonstrated that heightened player identification among all cross-cultural groups (East Asia, North America, and Europe) is primarily predicted by the character's functional role and aesthetic appeal (high correlation, $r = 0.68$). This study demonstrates that player identification is contingent upon the character's efficacy as a fantasy power, characterized by their ability to do formidable and engaging actions, rather than their alignment with philosophical or religious narratives. East Asian players possess a much-elevated standard for perceived authenticity; nonetheless, the character's role and aesthetic contribute to his worldwide commercial success.

Ultimately, the study synthesized all the data to formulate a prescriptive response for RQ4 (Strategic Design Model). It demonstrated the existence of three distinct and consistent mediating design strategies that can be utilized to reconcile cultural fidelity with commercial appeal. The 80/20 Rule of Fidelity (an aesthetic strategy that maintains 80% of cultural markers as recognizable), Mechanic-as-Myth (a functional strategy that transforms mythology into engaging gameplay mechanics to guarantee reinforcement through action), and The "Heroic Primacy" Filter (a narrative strategy that positions the character as a universally relatable hero of rebellion and mastery, minimizing intricate cultural or religious allegory for global market appeal) exemplify these strategies.

In conclusion, our research indicates that for cultural characters to thrive in interactive, globalized digital media, they must possess both utility and aesthetic appeal. Our significance surpasses that of possessing a meaningful narrative or philosophical authenticity. The successful transmedia adaptation of Sun Wukong is not a mere replication; instead, it is a complex outcome shaped by the convergence and interaction of four overarching factors: culture, technology, media, and commercial demand. Future research should focus on longitudinal analyses of the perceived cultural significance of the "Heroic Primacy" archetype across diverse genres, as well as assessing the applicability of the 80/20 Rule and Mechanic-as-Myth framework to other non-Western mythological entities in the global gaming market.

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