Reimagining Cultural Heritage in Games: Black Myth: Wukong and the Art of Mythological Adaptation

Poki Chan

Concordia University

1515 Rue Sainte-Catherine

Montréal, Quebec H3G 2W1, Canada

(+1) 514-577-9513

poki.chan@mail.concordia.ca

Keywords

Cultural Adaptation, Mythology in Games, Historical Simulation, Game Design, Narrative Design, Interactive Storytelling

ABSTRACT

Black Myth: Wukong (2024) represents a significant evolution in how games can adapt and simulate cultural heritage, transforming classical Chinese mythology into an engaging contemporary experience. This paper examines how it's innovative approach to adapting Journey to the West (Wu, 1993), one of China's Four Great Classical Novels, demonstrates new possibilities for translating historical and mythological narratives into interactive playful experiences.

The study employs a dual theoretical framework augmented by the concept of cultural presence (Pujol & Champion, 2012) to analyze Wukong's (2024) cultural adaptation strategies. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Cole, 1998; Engeström, 1987; Nardi, 1996) provides analytical tools for understanding how game systems mediate between historical cultural practices and contemporary player experiences (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2009). Building upon this sociocultural foundation, the MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics) framework (Hunicke et al., 2004) structures the analysis of how cultural elements are transformed into interactive systems - examining how the play in Wukong aligns with the mythology. The cultural presence framework further enables analysis of how these design choices contribute to authentic cultural engagement through gameplay (Champion, 2016, 2022). Through this combined analytical lens, the study examines core gameplay systems, level progression structures, and audiovisual design elements to understand how cultural heritage is integrated into functional gameplay components while maintaining cultural authenticity.

This methodological approach enables systematic examination of both the technical implementation of cultural elements and their broader sociocultural impact, allowing the study to address how games can effectively bridge historical cultural content with contemporary interactive experiences. The findings provide valuable insights for game developers and cultural heritage professionals seeking to create meaningful interactive experiences that preserve and transmit cultural heritage to global audiences.

Through analyzing global player responses to these adaptations, this study reveals how creative reinterpretation can enhance rather than diminish cultural transmission. By reimagining classical elements through a dark fantasy lens while maintaining their cultural significance, Wukong (2024) creates an experience that resonates with both traditional and contemporary sensibilities. This balance between innovation and tradition challenges conventional approaches to cultural heritage games, which often prioritize strict historical accuracy over engaging interpretation (Mortara et al., 2014).

The game's widespread international success validates this approach, demonstrating how thoughtful adaptation can transcend cultural boundaries without compromising authenticity. Players internalize cultural knowledge organically through gameplay mechanics rather than didactic instruction, suggesting a new paradigm for heritage games - one where meaningful interaction and contemporary resonance take precedence over rigid historical recreation while still preserving the essence of cultural traditions (Champion, 2016; Chapman, 2013; Sweeting, 2019).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Black Myth: Wukong. (2024). [Video Game]. Game Science.

Champion, E. M. (2016). Entertaining the similarities and distinctions between serious games and virtual heritage projects. *Entertainment Computing, 14*, 67–74. Q2. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.entcom.2015.11.003

Champion, E. M. (2022). *Playing with the Past: Into the Future* (2nd ed. 2022.). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10932-4

Chapman, A. (2013). Affording history: Civilization and the ecological approach. In M. W. Kapell & A. B. R. Elliott (Eds.), *Playing with the past: Digital games and the simulation of history* (pp. 61–73). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Cole, M. (1998). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Harvard university press.

Engeström, Y. (1987). An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research. *Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit*.

Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M., & Zubek, R. (2004). *MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research. 4*(1).

Kaptelinin, V., & Nardi, B. A. (2009). *Acting with technology: Activity theory and interaction design*. MIT press.

Mortara, M., Catalano, C. E., Bellotti, F., Fiucci, G., Houry-Panchetti, M., & Petridis, P. (2014). Learning cultural heritage by serious games. *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, *15*(3), 318–325. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.culher.2013.04.004

Nardi, B. A. (1996). Activity theory and human-computer interaction. *Context and Consciousness: Activity Theory and Human-Computer Interaction*, *436*, 7–16.

Pujol, L., & Champion, E. M. (2012). Evaluating presence in cultural heritage projects. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *18*(1), 83–102. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2011.577796

Sweeting, J. (2019). Authenticity: Depicting the Past in Historical Videogames. In *Transtechnology Research Reader 2018* (pp. 62–83). TT OA Papers. https://researchportal.plymouth.ac.uk/en/publications/authenticity-depicting-the-past-in-historical-videogames

Wu, C. (1993). *Journey to the West* (W. J. F. Jenner & C. Shi, Trans.). Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.

AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

Poki Chan is a PhD student in Design and Computation Arts at Concordia University, Montréal. With a background in interaction design and entertainment technology from Hong Kong Polytechnic University, her research focuses on innovative methods of preserving historical and cultural heritage through game design and interactive technologies. As a Hong Kong native and a diaspora researcher, she brings a unique perspective to the intersection of game studies, cultural preservation, and Hong Kong studies. Her work challenges traditional notions of historical representation and emphasises the power of personal accounts in shaping our understanding of the past.

Traces in the snow: *Cool Boarders* and the formation of snowboarding

Abstract by David Ogborn submitted to the International Conference on Games and Narrative 2025

In the mid 1990s, when *Cool Boarders* (UEP Systems 1996) was released for the first iteration of the PlayStation, snowboarding was in various respects still a young sport, with many aspects of its various definitions and cultures in great flux. This paper presents a case study of this specific "early adaptation" of snowboarding to the video game medium, with special attention to the ways in which the game's features can be read as modest interventions in the ongoing solidification of snowboarding itself as a cultural formation, and not only as simple reflections of that culture. Roughly speaking, the game (as well as all of the other early snowboarding video games) was released during the time period in which competitive snowboarding was recognized in various high-profile ways (between the birth of the competition-focused International Snowboarding Federation in 1990, and the entry of snowboarding into the Winter Olympics in 1998).

This case study is an early step in a larger project aimed at understanding and interpreting snowboarding video games as snowboarding culture. At the time of writing, Wikipedia's list of snowboarding video games contains 104 entries (spanning from 1990's *Heavy Shreddin'* for the NES to 2022's multi-platform *Shredders*). Yet despite this continuous production of snowboarding video games over the past 35 years, such games typically do not receive acknowledgement as key forms of snowboarding culture, or even that much acknowledgement as forms of snowboarding's "mediation" (compared to snowboarding magazines, for instance, which are a perennial mainstay of accounts of snowboarding's history). Ultimately, the agenda of the larger project is to understand snowboarding as a trace or arche-sport (Bogost 2013) for which video game "adaptions" represent key iterations (conveniently, the history of snowboarding as snowboarding roughly parallels the history of video games as video games, with numerous apparent "origins" distributed over the 1960s and 1980s).

Following Aarseth's early methodological suggestions (2003, p. 9), the present case study is based on observations drawn from "a balance between free play, analytical play, and non-play." Specific points of focus include: the use of language intended to be understood as snowboarding slang; the absence of representation of contrasts and tensions with the more established and accepted sport of skiing; questions of safety and injury; the ways in which limited choices for customizing the player's body and appearance reinforce the then (and still) hegemonic whiteness and maleness of snowboarding (Scott 2024); the ways in which other limited choices for choosing and customizing the virtual snowboards used during the game point to and relate to the commercial imperatives of snowboard

manufacturers, whose alliance and rivalry characterized the sport practically from the beginning, as with the Burton/Sims rivalry that features strongly in Eric Blehm's account of snowboarding's early years (2024); and last but not least, the ways in which the terrain of the mountain is constructed and navigated in the videogame, and how the spatial and visual rhetoric of that construction speaks to wider uncertainties about the definition of snowboarding.

Works Cited

Aarseth, Espen (2003). "Playing Research: Methodological approaches to game analysis." *artnodes* (January).

Blehm, Eric (2024). *The Darkest White: A Mountain Legend and the Avalanche That Took Him*. New York: Harper.

Bogost, Ian (2013). "What Are Sports Videogames?" in Mia Consalvo, Abe Stein, and Konstantin Mitgutsch, eds. *Sports Videogames*. New York: Routledge. pp. 50-66.

Scott, Jacqueline L. (2024). "Snowboarding while Black: race, aesthetics, and Jamaican migrant workers." *Leisure Studies* (in press), DOI: 10.1080/02614367.2024.2405094

UEP Systems (1996). *Cool Boarders* (PlayStation game).

Author's Statement

David Ogborn is an artist programmer and researcher, based at the southwest corner of Lake Ontario (Cootes Paradise, near Hamilton, about 60 km south of Toronto). He works as a Professor in McMaster University's Department of Communication Studies and Media Arts, where he coordinates the Networked Imagination Laboratory (NIL), and teaches and supervises courses and work related to audio, game design, and code. He has led the development of the Estuary platform for collaborative live coding since its inception, and is the creator of the Punctual language for audiovisual live coding. In recent years, he has attended and presented work at the Canadian Game Studies Association.

Recreating the Myth of the Family Farm: Stardew Valley's Adaption of the Idyllic Farm

Landscape

By Sid Heeg

The term 'farming simulator' is often equated with that of another: 'cozy games.' There is none more infamous than that of *Stardew Valley* (2018), which incorporates a rich farm landscape for players to create their own desired home, get involved in romantic and platonic entanglements with the local town's inhabitants, and fulfill the desire of escaping from city living to a quiet, rural countryside. It's this escape that starts the game where the player leaves their office job by inheriting a farm from a recently deceased grandparent. This escape is framed as something desirable and attainable and that with a little hard work, patience, and luck, a thriving family farm is within each player's grasp.

This fulfillment and sense of escapism positions the family farm as the solution to problems encountered with urban environments, which Sutherland (2020) characterizes as emptiness and frames the family farm as "a return to the simple life, where repetitive farming practices and interactions with local people heal the trauma of the urban rat race" (p. 7). Bódi (2024) takes this a step further and argues that cozy games like *Stardew Valley* provide players with a sense of agency in response to our anxieties spurred on by neoliberal ideology. This is practiced by *Stardew Valley* in how it "oversimplifies both our relationship with and responsibility for natural resources" (Bódi, 2024, p. 55).

But this oversimplification of farming feeds into the narrative of the myth of the family farm as theorized by Vogeler (1981), who asserts that the family farm is nothing more than myth and that this myth only services the interests of capitalists and business ventures; thus, turning the farm landscape from a place of escape to a place of exploit.

Stardew Valley presents a carefully curated farm experience that choose only to adapt this idyllic farm experience, void of hardship and the reality of which many farmers experience. The reality of farmers is much bleaker, which is characterized by the compounding effects of climate change, an inherently unsustainable financial market, and suicide rates that are higher than the national average in many countries (Jones-Bitton et al., 2019). I argue that the adaptation of the farm landscape within games like *Stardew Valley* choose only the positive views of farming that feeds into the narrative that if we all escape to the farm and country that our pressing problems largely caused by capitalism will be solved.

The goal of this paper is to apply an autoethnographic lens to critically examine how the farm landscape has been adapted within *Stardew Valley*. Having grown up on a family farm and being aware of the day-to-day struggles of farmers, I will analyze how *Stardew Valley* attempts to mimic the reality of farming through the use of different mechanics: such as the seasonality of farm activities; the different aspects of animal husbandry; and forms of land management; to show how *Stardew Valley* wholly sanitizes the reality of farming that seeks to further perpetuate the myth of the family farm.

Works Cited

Bódi, B. (2024). The Duality of Cozy Games: Cozy Agency, Neoliberalism, and Affect. *Replay. The Polish Journal of Game Studies*, *11*(1), 51-64.

Jones-Bitton, A., Hagen, B., Fleming, S. J., & Hoy, S. (2019). Farmer Burnout in Canada. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *16*(24), Article 24. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16245074

Sutherland, L. A. (2020, January). Eliciting Affective Responses Through Sentient Encounters in

a Farming Computer Game. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2020 Conference: Play Everywhere*.

Vogeler, I. (1981). *The Myth of the Family Farm: Agribusiness Dominance of US Agriculture*.

Westview Press.

Author Statement

Sid Heeg is a PhD candidate at the University of Waterloo within the Sustainability Management program. Heeg is an interdisciplinary scholar whose main work revolves around mis- and disinformation in rural farming communities. As a social media specialist who straddles rhetoric, media studies, and narrative interpretation, they have published in media studies, games studies, and in Canadian and global Indigenous literatures—focusing on decolonization of genres and intangible cultural heritage. They have presented on the topic of horror within games including "Horror as Medium: Wicked Problems and Environmental 'Non-Horror' in *Resident Evil V, VII*, and *VIII*" at the 2023 International Conference on Games and Narrative; "Horror as Medium" at the 2024 Beyond Play Conference; and in the forthcoming publication "Horror As Medium: An Examination of Environmental Horror in Video Games" in the edited collection *Epistemic Genres: New Formations in Digital Game Genres*.

Apocalypse and Utopia: Transculturalizing Eastern European *Fallout* Mods

The concept of apocalypse is a difficult and often misconstrued one. For future studies scholar, Walter Warren Wagar (1982), the origins of the eschatological imaginings of apocalypse lie in the religious-historical tradition of prophetic vision and the desire for prophecy, suggesting that apocalypse should be as much about revelation as it should be about visions of a devastated future. As the study of utopia is often associated with visions, dreams, or desires of a better time and place, the study of modern eschatology similarly favours visions that foretell a better tomorrow rather than doom and damn the future. In 2010, sociologist Krishan Kumar famously claimed that utopia was a dead genre and pointed to what he saw as the erosion of enduring utopian imaginaries. Kumar argues that the desire for escapist fantasies has essentially replaced historically conscious science fiction and instead relies entirely on nostalgic longing over transformative desire. Kumar further asserts that utopia, as a concept in popular culture, has been utterly replaced by apocalyptic longing.

That said, many scholars (Suvin 2010; Williams 2010) have long asserted that utopia and apocalypse are concepts that are in fact carefully integrated into one another. Even in some examples of apocalyptic fiction, where all inhabitants are doomed to perish, there are still fleeting utopian moments. To suggest, as Kumar has, that utopian fiction has been dead for many decades and that apocalyptic fiction is completely unhopeful of life and transformative power would seem to be a little presumptuous, especially given the enduring power and popularity of apocalyptic narratives and experiences in video games.

To what extent then, are games about the apocalypse useful to the concept of utopia? How can games about the apocalypse encourage unique cultural contexts through which we may envision novel utopian forms? To these ends, this paper presentation explores the classic post nuclear role-playing games, *Fallout* 1 and 2 (Interplay Productions 1997; Black Isle Studios 1998), as unique transcultural experiences from the perspectives of players, designers, and modders from the former Eastern Bloc. Utilizing Mikhail Epstein's and Ellen E. Berry's (1999) transcultural interference framework, I argue that Interplay's *Fallout* games emphasize "an open system of symbolic alternatives to existing cultures and their established sign systems" (24) as demonstrated by classic *Fallout* mods, such as *Fallout: Nevada* (Nevada Band Studio 2015), *Fallout: Sonora* (Nevada Band Studio 2020), and *Fallout: Resurrection* (Resurrection Team 2013). Each of these mods, produced by developers from the former Eastern Bloc, are exemplary transcultural negotiations that seek to transcend Fallout's predominantly apocalyptic American cultural forms in order to produce utopic transcultural imaginaries.

References

Abu-Er-Rub, Laila, Christiane Brosius, Sebastian Meurer, Diamantis Panagiotopoulos, and Susan Richter, eds. 2019. *Engaging Transculturality: Concepts, Key Terms, Case Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.

Avellone, Chris. 2002. *Fallout Bible 6*. Self-published.

Bartter, Martha A. 1986. "Nuclear Holocaust as Urban Renewal." *Science Fiction Studies* 13 (2): 148–158.

Champion, Erik. 2012. *Game Mods: Design, Theory and Criticism*. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press.

Dragostinova, Theodora. "1989 Twenty Years On: The End of Communism and the Fate of Eastern Europe." *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, December 2009. https://origins.osu.edu/article/1989-twenty-years-end-communism-and-fate-eastern-europe.

Epstein, Mikhail, and Ellen E. Berry. 1999. *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Haraway, Donna. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. 1st edition. New York: Routledge.

Kránicz, Bence. 2019. "Humans No More: Apocalypse and the Post-Socialist Condition in Frozen May." *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 10 (3): 257–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/2040350X.2019.1615806.

Kumar, Krishan. 2010. "The Ends of Utopia." *New Literary History* 41 (3): 549–569. DOI:10.1353/nlh.2010.0016.

Kazimirko-Kirillov, Nikolaj. 2024. (YouTuber, @Warlockracy), in discussion with the author. June 11–15, 2024.

Musajew, Bartłomiej. 2016. "Stop Calling Eastern European Videogames Pessimistic." *Kill Screen*, June 24, 2016. https://killscreen.com/previously/articles/stop-calling-eastern-european-videogames-pessimistic/.

Ortiz, Fernando. 1995. *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. Translated by Harriet de Onís. Durham: Duke University Press.

Rossignol, Jim. 2011. "On The Importance of S.T.A.L.K.E.R." *Rock Paper Shotgun*, December 10, 2011. https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/on-the-importance-of-s-t-a-l-k-e-r.

Suvin, Darko. 2010. *Defined by a Hollow: Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction and Political Epistemology*. Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang.

Švelch, Jaroslav. 2018. *Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Underwood, Ron, director. 1990. *Tremors*. Universal Pictures. 1 hr., 36 min.

Wagar, W. Warren. 1982. *Terminal Visions: The Literature of Last Things*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Warlockracy. "Fallout: Nevada." YouTube Video, 56:01. September 25, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qyzknCE0hoI.

Warlockracy. "Fallout: Resurrection (a Czech Fallout game)." YouTube Video, 41:54. November 10, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ict9c1Diix8.

Warlockracy. "Fallout: Sonora (a Mexican-themed Fallout game)." YouTube Video, 1:15:25. August 25, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7lifTfHA7o.

Welsch, Wolfgang. 1999. "Transculturality – the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today." *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, edited by Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash. London: Sage.

Williams, Raymond. 2010. *Tenses of Imagination: Raymond Williams on Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia*. Edited by Andrew Milner. Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang.

Game References

Atom Team. 2018. *ATOM RPG*. Microsoft Windows. Cyprus, Nicosia: Atent Games LTD.

BioWare. 1998. *Baldur's Gate*. Microsoft Windows. Irvine, California: Interplay Productions.

Black Isle Studios. 1998. *Fallout 2: A Post Nuclear Role Playing Game*. Microsoft Windows. Irvine, California: Interplay Productions.

GRATUIT PRODUIT. 2019. *The Sum*. Microsoft Windows. Saint-Zacharie, Québec: GRATUIT PRODUIT.

GSC Game World. 2007. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*. Microsoft Windows. Agoura Hills, California: THQ Inc.

Interplay Production. 1997. *Fallout: A Post Nuclear Role Playing Game*. Microsoft Windows. Irvine, California: Interplay Productions.

Nevada Band Studio. 2015. *Fallout: Nevada*. Microsoft Windows. Barnaul, Siberia: Nevada Band Studio.

Nevada Band Studio. 2020. *Fallout: Sonora*. Microsoft Windows. Barnaul, Siberia: Nevada Band Studio.

Nevada Band Studio. 2023. *Fallout: Sonora—Dayglow*. Microsoft Windows. Barnaul, Siberia: Nevada Band Studio.

Obsidian Entertainment. 2010. *Fallout: New Vegas*. Microsoft Windows. Rockville, Maryland: Bethesda Softworks.

Resurrection Team. 2013. *Fallout: Resurrection*. Microsoft Windows. Prague, Czech Republic: Resurrection Team.

Author's Statement: Alexander Hurezeanu is a PhD Candidate at Toronto Metropolitan University in the Communication and Culture Graduate Program. He also teaches communication and game studies courses as a full-time faculty member in the Centre for Preparatory and Liberal Studies at George Brown College in Toronto, Ontario. His research examines cultural production and representation in video games. Alex is particularly interested in how gameplay experiences produce new opportunities for transcultural aesthetics and transcultural communication in Eastern and Western cultural contexts.