Playing the Othered Self as Wukong: a Resilience in Speculative-Mythological Games

Yifan Wang
Independent Scholar
Kowloon, Hong Kong
wong_yifan@hotmail.com

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Wukong is a popular mythical figure worldwide, represented across various media. He embodies rebelliousness, fearlessness, and playfulness. Among modern adaptations, the recontextualisation of Wukong within speculative and futuristic worlds is particularly noteworthy. The playful character is strikingly explored as a cyborg and expelled Wukong in science fiction and video games. Wukong functions as mythological symbolism for a haunted past, an extended present, and alternate futures in the speculative landscape.

Speculative mythology, coined by Hungerford (1941), inclines with structuralist mythology, the reconstruction of mythological symbolism, and an Eliadean eternal return. The process of speculation in digital mythography is not fully unfolded until engaging with the speculative design of building science-fictional worlds. This is how myths are entangled with futures. Playing Wukong as a hero is nothing exceptional, however, playing as Wukong in alternative histories and futures, as othered and marginalised, is fascinating. Why are we drawn to playing Wukong even when doomed to failure, death, and exile?

This paper posits speculative-mythological worldbuilding via Wukong in the science fictional framework, which is foreshadowed by Chen Leng's Late Qing futuristic science fiction *Neo-Journey to the West* (1909) and Ken Liu's speculative fiction *The Litigation Master and the Monkey King* (2013). It analyses how this speculative-mythological landscape is performed in three single-player action-adventure games: two indie games explore Wukong fighting robots and machinery in *Sun Wukong VS Robot* (Bitca, 2019) and a cyborg Wukong battling in a futurist, post-apocalyptic world to retrieve power and order in *The Crown of Wu* (Red Mountain, 2023); alongside an alternative creation of mythical history in *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science, 2024). It argues that the juxtaposition of historicism and futurism addresses multilayered self-exploration and perplexed self-interpretation as a form of resilience to endure existential crisis under oppression, marginalisation, and bewilderment in a shifting techno-society. While historicism preserves cultural memory and trauma, futurism

propels myths into adaptive transformation. Speculative Wukongs thus become a site of temporal friction for both archiving and redeeming.

The Monkey King does not manifest to the mundane life but is role-played by a low-class litigator, who seeks justice for the poor, the grassroots, and the miserable against evil and abused governors and the wealthy. The Wukong in this speculative historical world has been resolved and incarnated into the human body of an anti-hero of ordinary people. Every person can play a grand role in protectiveness and righteousness to others, the past, and the future. This alternate history stages a reflective "what-if", when someone heroically preserves the historical records for humanity and a common future. This othered litigator, Wukong player and martyr, illuminates the grave sacrifices and magnificent significance of remembering the past.

Historicism in speculative and science fiction is "to make us aware of the problems we have in imagining it" (Aguirre, 2011). Particularly, when speculation is conducted via a mythical figure, it appeals to collective unconsciousness in a persuasive approach. Beyond offering resolutions, mythological speculation invites transformative play to imagining scenarios of layered and hybrid identities across clashing (trans)cultures, and to experiencing crises of modernity and posthumanism.

When the late Qing Chinese science fiction arranges the mystic meeting of Wukong and electricity——astonishingly unbelievable to the past, it expresses the excitement, bewilderment, and even fear towards the near future. In the history of modern Chinese literature, Wukong's encounter with modernity could be interpreted as disenchantment, as he loses his magic power, mythical identity and socio-historical recognition in the enlightenment of technology and modernism. Through the lens of science-fictional speculation, however, this moment precisely demonstrates the reenchantment of the bewildered present haunted by both a mythical past and an unavoidable future, simultaneously. To adopt science fiction as a method and heterotopian alternatives for invisible voices (Song, 2023), speculation provides an analogous framework to review historicism, futurism, and othered selves in video games.

Players encounter the myth, the past, the future, and the present in video game worlds.

Wukong awakens in a mechanical maze, and the only escape is to destroy robots. In retro pixel Metroidvania style, Wukong confronts robots in a futuristic myth interwoven with the Greek mythical semiotic of Maze, where Theseus faces the monstrous Minotaur. Freedom is achieved through overcoming monstrousness. Metaphorically, in side-scrolling mechanics, players are liberated from the machine's otherisation. In *Crown*, an action-adventure with puzzle-solving inspired by *Dark Souls*, the future-past cyborg Wukong is wronged, misunderstood, and othered. Players redeem Wu's honour and identity during gameplay. Two indie games are not rich in narrative, but the mechanics and gameplay——jumping, moving, and fighting as Wukong to retrieve freedom, justice, and identity——are eloquent.

Whether playing the self or the alienated others, players experience the resilient self. *Black Myth* is not specifically set in a futuristic environment, yet it constitutes an alternate mytho-history. Players are bestowed as the Destined One of the incarnated Wukong to recover the self in resistance of good and evil, fate and struggling. In this

sense, the "black" in this soul-like, story-rich *Black Myth* implies gothicism in myth-retelling, the speculative realm to review the resilient self.

How digital gaming achieves ludic subjectivity (2020), transformative play (Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum, 2015), a cyborgian and posthuman integration (Keogh, 2018) has been discussed. Yet how mythical narrative facilitates players' self-perception and lived experience connecting to collective memories in speculative landscapes remains underdeveloped. This paper questions how in-game worldbuilding, through strange and tensioned encounters of mythical and futuristic time-spaces, generates non-binary identifications but perplexed, layered, and bewildered experiences of selfhood. As the mythical and posthumanist Wukong, the neglected and oppressed are speculatively imagined in the struggling of existential crisis. Playing may not necessarily be an Odyssean self-exploration, but rather a perception and solicitude for the fragmented, multilayered, and plural self. Thus, playing in speculative worlds as Wukong becomes an affective declaration of resistance and resilience.

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