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Cultural Heritage and Chinese Digital Games

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Abstract

Digital games history has been dominated by Japan, North America, and Europe, both as major producers and consumers of games. However, China is now by far the largest digital games market on the planet, both in terms of player numbers and expenditure. This exceptional growth is naturally reflected in the local production of games, which, despite their large numbers and player base, are only now having more resonance in the West. This paper examines what role Chinese cultural heritage plays in the characterization of its games, as well as the similarities and differences with the Western and Japanese traditions of game arts and development, both from a ludological and aesthetic point of view, with a focus on the role-playing genre.

Keywords

Introduction

Digital game history has been dominated by Japan, North America, and Europe, especially the former two, both as major producers and consumers of games since the very inception of the medium in the 1970s. Digital games from different countries started to elaborate specific styles as they became more visually and narratively complex, and despite the usually global aspect of the

medium, even today there are design philosophies and art styles that can clearly ascribe a game as originating from a specific region. Needless to say, digital games did not evolve in a vacuum, and they are influenced by other media and the culture within which they are developed. As multimedia products by their own nature, they can incorporate multiple aspects of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, from music, to architecture, text, and even acting and dance.

Until now, the main duopoly in game development and aesthetics has been between the Anglo-Saxon influence in the West, and Japanese in the East, as a natural reflection of the major producers and consumers of digital games. Indeed, the most popular China-themed digital games in the West are not developed in China at all, such as the long-running *Dynasty Warriors* action-games series (Omega Force, 1997–2018), based on the classical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and the recent *Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty* (Team Ninja, 2023), set in a fictionalised fall of the Han dynasty, both developed in Japan, and strategy game *Total War: Three Kingdoms* (2019), by British outfit Creative Assembly.

However, in recent years, China has become the largest digital game market on the planet in terms of player numbers, and second only to the US for revenue (Newzoo, 2022). Naturally, this enormous player base has prompted a burgeoning explosion of game development as well, with many titles, especially in the mobile sector, being steadily at the top of the most-played charts worldwide. Research on the Chinese gaming landscape has in fact focussed mostly on its business models (Kim and Kang, 2021) and governmental policies (Jiang and Fung, 2019), while, despite its richness, game culture and content is still an under researched area (Chew, 2019, p. 196; Zhao and Liu, 2023, p. 38). This quite sudden and rather unprecedented—in the relatively brief history of digital games—establishment of a massive new centre of development begs the question as to whether the quantity of production and consumption has been accompanied by a similar development in terms of game aesthetics, both from the ludological and visual perspectives. Moreover, how does Chinese cultural heritage influence digital game aesthetics? In order to answer these questions, it is first useful to draw a brief overview of the use of cultural heritage in games and the differences and similarities between Western and Japanese games.

Cultural Heritage in Digital Games

Cultural heritage is relatively difficult to define, and has changed considerably in the past decades. The 1972 World Heritage Convention, which forms the base

for how the term is usually interpreted, defines cultural heritage as monuments, groups of buildings, and sites, including natural ones, of "outstanding universal value" (UNESCO, 1972, art. 1). In 2003, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage added the "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (UNESCO, 2003, art. 1). Since then, the term cultural heritage is intended to include both tangible and intangible heritage by most organizations, including ICOMOS, ICCROM, and IUCN (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2023). As such, the concept of cultural heritage itself expanded noticeably in the past decades, going solely from monuments and the visual arts, to include elements such as performing arts, rituals, and traditional crafts. Indeed, there are calls for digital games themselves to be considered cultural heritage (Guay-Bélanger, 2022), but their status as such is beyond the scope of this paper. For the current analysis, we will consider cultural heritage all cultural forms and expressions, visual or otherwise, which are inherited and passed on, but also contemporary practices in which cultural groups take part. In relation to digital games, it can be represented by the reconstruction of tangible heritage such as buildings or clothing, but also performances and visual styles.

Therefore, based on its current understanding, most digital games carry depictions of cultural heritage, visually or otherwise. Be it on account of the cultural upbringing or indirect inspiration of the game artists and writers, or precise locations, texts, or events portrayed in games, it is hard for a game to be completely devoid of cultural influences and connotations. Indeed, it can be argued that most of the successful games are rich in cultural heritage representations (Copplestone, 2017). Depending on the game genre and design, cultural heritage can be implemented in different ways and to various extents. From fantasy games that only draw on vague hints and allusions from real-world cultures, to fully fledged historical reconstructions. The most glaring example of the latter is the *Assassin's Creed* series (Ubisoft, 2007–2023), a third-person action-adventure game set in various historical epochs, from Ptolemaic Egypt to Renaissance Florence, which recreates in great detail real-life locales such as cities and monuments that players can explore freely. The heritage aspects of *Assassin's Creed* that set it apart from many other games is the level of detail and expansive reconstructions of whole cities and locations, the possibility of closely interacting with and freely exploring every building in the areas, as well as the cleverly interwoven real historical events within the fictional framework of the games. Albeit not entirely historically accurate (Aroni, 2019), the scope and spectacle of *Assassin's Creed* reconstructions

have rendered them so popular that the last games of the series have released separate editions called *Discovery Tours*, where users are free to explore the game locations accompanied by explanations, without having to engage with the narrative and action of the game proper, a clear sign of interest towards the cultural heritage displayed in the games. *Assassin's Creed* is worth mentioning as the most well-known example of a popular digital games series which prominently incorporates cultural heritage elements, and how these elements favoured its success, however, it is of note how the numerous games in the series—thirteen main entries at the time of writing—have been created by multinational game developer Ubisoft, mostly in its Canadian and French studios. As such, despite the well-researched and, in the panorama of digital games, unusual historical settings of their games, it is hardly an example of the expression of local development and cultural heritage. Indeed, Tourism Ireland teamed up with Ubisoft to promote the country's location portrayed in the game *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2020), which delivered £3.7 million in equivalent advertising value (Blake, 2021).

Another, more appropriate example is *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios, 2018), a role-playing game (RPG) by Czech developer Warhorse Studios, which, unusually for these kinds of games, is set in a precise historical context, rather than the usual fantasy world common in RPGs. Warhorse Studios made the historical accuracy and lack of fantastic elements one of the selling points of the game, moreover, they decided to set the game in the very country where it was developed. *Kingdom Come* recreates an area south of Prague as if it were in the early 15th century, both in terms of visual representation, and historical events (see Figure 1). Warhorse Studios even employ a full-time historical

FIGURE 1   The Sázava Monastery Basilica as it looked under construction in 1403, at the time the events of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* take place © Warhorse Studios 2018.

consultant to help blend the necessity of developing a playable game with the aim of historical accuracy (Neumann, 2019). The game attracted notable attention already during its development, as it was partly funded through a crowd-funding campaign that largely surpassed its initial objective, mostly for its unconventional—for a RPG—approach to a realistic depiction of the historical past (Iwaniuk, 2016). *Kingdom Come* sits within a certain line of Mitteleuropean role-playing games design school, which usually depicts a rougher and darker Middle Ages environment, compared to the traditional Tolkienesque high fantasy typical of most RPG s, an aspect that is reflected in the game design as well, with more complex game mechanics and a generally higher difficulty (Schules et al., 2018, p. 123). This trend was initiated with the *Gothic* videogame series (Piranha Bytes, 2001–2023), developed in Germany, but the most relevant for the present analysis, as well as what is arguably the most popular example of European RPG s, in contrast to the Anglo-Saxon and Japanese ones, is *The Witcher* (Cd Projekt Red, 2007–2015). *The Witcher* series is also particularly relevant to the topic at hand, as its game design choices became so popular worldwide that they ended up influencing Chinese digital game development as well, as we will soon see.

The aforementioned *Kingdom Come* and *The Witcher*, as well as most of the examples of Chinese digital games that we will soon analyse, pertain to the genre of role-playing games. This genre is particularly apt to analyse the portrayal of cultural heritage, as well as specific local development praxes, since it is usually very rich in plot and character development, and often draws from history and folklore. In order to delve deeper into the differences and similarities between Eastern and Western role-playing digital game development, a brief parenthesis about the history of both is appropriate.

The Silk Road of Role-Playing Games

As mentioned, the two main producers of digital games have historically been Japan and the US. This dichotomy is most exemplified in the role-playing genre, where the differences between the two game design approaches gave birth to gameplay and artistic styles which became specific genres in themselves. Indeed, in the usual jargon, the term JRPG—the "J" standing for "Japanese"—is used to differentiate role-playing games with certain game mechanics and visuals, which originated in Japan, even though in time they came to be used by Western—and, as we will see, Chinese—developers, as games such as the French *Edge of Eternity* (Midgar Studio, 2021) and Québécois *Sea of Stars* (Sabotage Studio, 2023) demonstrate.

For the most part, when the term *fantasy* is used in Western RPG s, and media in general, it is connected to games that are inspired, if not directly based, on Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974), which in turn borrowed heavily from *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954) for its settings and look, and established many canons that are still followed today, so much so that the adjective *Tolkienesque* (Stevenson, 2010) is often used to describe them. Naturally, since the former is an American product, and the latter a British one, the general aesthetics reflect Anglo-Saxon styles. Digital games also followed the same path, not only because they took inspiration from the aforementioned *Dungeons and Dragons* both in mechanics and aesthetics, but also because the majority of the most important and influential role-playing digital games were mainly developed in North America, from the *Ultima* series (Origin Systems, 1981–1999) to the more recent *Dragon Age* (BioWare, 2009–2014). Instead, JRPG s differ both in terms of gameplay mechanics and aesthetics, such as the long-standing series of *Final Fantasy* (Square, Square Enix, 1987–2023) (see Figure 2).

The characteristics of Western RPG s are rather varied, and defining them precisely is quite difficult, especially since in recent years, due to their popularity, the term has been increasingly used by digital games publishers to advertise their games, and developers added RPG characteristics to genres that usually did not display them, such as the presence of an inventory, or a "skill tree" that characters can develop. However, due to their roots in the *Dungeons and Dragons* tabletop RPG, characteristics such as the customization of the player character, non-linear world exploration or the ability to choose different narrative paths are often present in the genre, if not put together, at least in some combination. The widely popular Western series *The Witcher*

FIGURE 2   A scene from *Final Fantasy XV* © Square Enix 2016.

(Cd Projekt Red, 2007–2015), for example, presents a fixed player character with limited customization, but an explorable open world and the possibility to alter the plot. JRPGs, on the contrary—and again, with the obvious exceptions—traditionally feature little character customization and little open-world exploration, contrasted by a generally more elaborate storyline and character development (Holleman, 2018, p. 1). Aesthetically, JRPGs have a strong Japanese appeal, which often draws from the tropes and design of Japanese manga and anime (Huber, 2014). The Japanese *Dragon Quest* series (Square Enix and Enix, 1986–2019), in fact, had famous mangaka Akira Toryiama, author of the worldwide success *Dragon Ball*, as the main character designer for the series since the first installation was published in 1986. Despite *Dragon Quest* being relatively Western-oriented in its depiction of a fantasy world, with dragons, castles, and armour-clad knights, the graphic style is unmistakably Japanese. *Dragon Quest* was already an established brand when the first *Final Fantasy* came out in 1987, and was the title that, thanks to its success, *de facto* established the standards of JRPGs. Since then, *Dragon Quest* has been considered the "traditional" JRPG, including *Dragon Quest XI* (Square Enix, 2017), the last instalment of the main series, which sports the usual— albeit updated—turn-based combat which drew comments from the critics regarding its at times excessively safe approach to the JRPG genre (Parkin, 2018; Schilling, 2018). However, it is mostly the *Final Fantasy* franchise that exported the JRPG genre to the West, whereas *Dragon Quest* has maintained a constant and great success in the domestic Japanese market.

In this regard, there was a recent diatribe about the use of the JRPG term, started by *Final Fantasy* producer Naoki Yoshida, which in fact touches on several of the elements we just discussed. In Yoshida's view, the term has a negative connotation, as it encapsulates visual and gameplay elements which have, in his opinion, been badly perceived by a global audience:

> I remember seeing something 15 years ago which was basically a definition of what a JRPG was versus a Western RPG, and it's kind of like *Final Fantasy VII*, and it has this type of graphics, this length of story, and compartmentalizing what we were creating into a JRPG box, and taking offence to that because that's not how we were going into creating. We were going in to create an RPG, but to be compartmentalized, they felt was discriminatory […] Travelling around the world, speaking with fans and media about their image of the franchise, they would always give the same answer: that it's turn based, that it's anime like, these teenagers saving the world, 'very JRPG'. This was the image for all the *Final Fantasy*. This was turning off some players because they thought it could only be

that and that was a reason to not get into it. On top of that, you have a generation of new gamers who were raised on FPS and games like *GTA* where input is always direct. For those players, the thought of having to wait before you act is kind of a disconnect for that young generation. So with our goal to expand the series and broaden the audience, bring back players but also welcome new players, we realised we had to evolve the series and change it up from what people expected.

> YOSHIDA, 2023

Hideki Kamiya, game designer and former Platinumgames director, author of the famous Japanese action series *Bayonetta* (Platinumgames, 2009–2023), in an interview, shared an opposite opinion on the matter:

I have a positive sentiment when it comes to the term JRPG. Indeed, I think it's something that we should be proud of [...] Looking at *God of War* and other western action games, those are great experiences and very original, made by creators in their respective regions, and it's something we could not replicate even if we tried [...] If *Bayonetta* was labelled as a 'J-Action' game, I would not have anything against that nomenclature. We are very proud of *Bayonetta* and the character we came up with because she is the essence of our kind of unique creativity as Japanese creators [...] So when it comes to the term 'JRPG', this is something that ties into this—these are RPG games that, in a sense, only Japanese creators can make with their unique sensitivity when it comes to creating these experiences. I think it's certainly something that should be celebrated moving forward, and someone should actually aim to make a 'king of JRPGs' game to express that. As Japanese game creators, we're very proud of the actual term JRPG.

> KAMIYA ET AL., 2023

In continental Europe, aside from the recent, explosive success of Belgian Larian Studios' *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023)—which is however directly based on the American *Dungeons and Dragons* IP, and a sequel of the eponymous game series developed by Canadian BioWare—*The Witcher* is arguably the series of games that has been mostly influential in the past decade in the panorama of RPGs. The series is based on the *Wiedźmin* novels by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski and has been running since 2007. The digital games series as a whole has sold more than 20 million units as of 2016, half of which came from the last entry (Makuch, 2016), *The Witcher 3* (Cd Projekt Red, 2015), and was the recipient of over 800 awards (thewitcher.com, 2016). The player impersonates

Geralt of Rivia, the titular Witcher, a beast hunter with superhuman capabilities developed through training and body modifications at a young age.

The Witcher series draws heavily from Polish folklore in its themes and story, which is reflected in the game aesthetics as well (Dzik, 2017), as explained by game director Konrad Tomaszkiewicz:

> We're proud we can show Polish nature and its atmosphere, unique to gaming, because most games offer cookie-cutter worlds. Our team, by using folk themes, offers something one of a kind.
>
> 2015

The training of the artists involved in the development of the game played a part in the characterization as well, as explained by Jan Marek, senior concept artist at Cd Projekt Red:

> Our artists brought up in Slavic culture were raised on works by the likes of Jan Matejko, Stanisław Wyspiański, Aleksander Gierymski, Olga Boznańska, and Jacek Malczewski, but I would classify that as visual knowledge, rather than direct references we used.
>
> M. STEC ET AL., p. 60

The Slavic visual characterization of *The Witcher* is relevant for multiple factors: firstly, it has arguably been one of the most commercially successful games of the past decade, and secondly, it demonstrated that there is an interest for a folklore and settings beyond the traditional D&D-inspired fantasy, even though, admittedly, the landscape and characters of *The Witcher* differ from Anglo-Saxon fantasy in a smaller measure than traditional Chinese folklore. That said, *The Witcher* is arguably the only example of a *third pole* of role-playing games outside Japan and North America/UK, whose success had repercussions both in the East and the West.

Chinese Role-Playing Games

The first digital games arrived in China in the early 1980s, not much later than in the West and Japan, but at the time there were still no domestic developers or console manufacturers. The first Chinese RPG proper, which spurred a long-lasting series, was Softstar [大宇资讯]'s *Xuan-Yuan Sword* [軒轅劍] in 1990, but the great success came by five years later from the same developers with *The Legend of Sword and Fairy* [仙剑奇侠传] (1995), also known as

Chinese Paladin, or simply *Sword and Fairy*[1] (see Figure 3). *Sword and Fairy* of course drew inspiration from the contemporary classics of the genre, but, in a fashion that will distinguish Chinese game development, looked both at Japan, with references to *Chrono Trigger* (Square, 1995) in its gameplay, and at the West, to games such as *Ultima VIII* (Origin Systems, 1994) in its visual style. The equivalent to the fantasy genre in China is called qihuan [奇幻], an umbrella term that includes other subgenres, such as science fiction [kehuan 科幻], Wuxia [武侠] and Xianxia [仙侠]. Chinese RPGs, as most other fantasy productions, such as TV shows, are deeply rooted in the Wuxia and Xianxia genres (Cao et al., 2023, p. 2; Shao, 2018). Broadly speaking, Wuxia are stories focused on the deeds of martial arts heroes, whereas Xianxia adds mystical and magical elements to the story, usually based on Taoism or ancient folklore such as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* [山海经], a classic text of Chinese mythology. Modern Wuxia became particularly popular in the 1950s with the novels of Jin Yong, narrating stories of warriors traveling the land to right wrongs with the power of their martial arts, and exploded as a genre in China in the 1980s. While sharing similar literary origins, Xianxia refers to the more

FIGURE 3   A screenshot from the initial scene of the first *Sword and Fairy* © Softstar 1995.

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1 The games' title would roughly translate as *Tales of Fairy Sword and Strange Masters*, and was initially officially translated as *The Legend of Sword and Fairy*, but changed to *Chinese Paladin* with the fourth entry of the series. It can now be found on Western digital storefronts under the title *Sword and Fairy*, aside from the sixth entry, which still retains *Chinese Paladin* in the title.

ancient canon of Zhiguai xiaoshuo [志怪小说], literally translated as "records of anomalies" or "tales of the strange," dating back to the third century and considered one of the first examples of Chinese fiction (Chiang, 2005).

Most popular Japanese RPGs in the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s followed the trend set by the *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* series mentioned in the previous section. Even other famous series with varied settings, such as Nintendo's *Mother* (Ape Inc., 1989) set in a modern American setting, or Sega's science fiction *Phantasy Star* (Sega, 1987), look and play in a similar fashion, with a 2D world explorable from a top-down or isometric perspective, and turn-based combat where players can select the action of their characters from a menu. Indeed, the first *Xuan-Yuan Sword* borrowed most of the graphic and game design system from *Dragon Quest*, replacing the Western medieval look and story with Chinese elements, mixing magic and martial arts in an early example of Xianxia game. Two years later, *Records of the Sword of Heaven* [天外劍聖錄] (Dynasty International, 1992) featured a much more elaborate plot than *Xuan-Yuan Sword* and other contemporary RPGs, with a Wuxia story written by Ye Mingzhang, and borrowed *Phantasy Star* combat perspective from behind the player character. *Records of the Sword of Heaven* did not receive a direct sequel, but spurred a popular trilogy called *Heaven and Earth Tribulation* [天地劫] (Hantang International, 1999–2002), which is still an active series of games today. Straight adaptations of literary works were present as well. *Legend of Condor Heroes* [射雕 英雄 傳] (Zhiguan, 1993) is an adventure game based on Jin Yong' eponymous novel and reminiscent of the Western *King's Quest* series (Sierra On-Line, 1980–1998). *Heroes of Jin Yong* [金庸群侠传] (Heluo Studio, 1996) takes inspiration directly from the titular author's Wuxia novels, and projects the player character, a contemporary game player, into the worlds created by Jin Yong, where he must learn martial arts and interact with the novels' characters, who will change their disposition based on the choices effected by the player, with a dynamic system reminiscent of Western RPGs such as *Ultima* (Origin Systems, 1981–1999).

The Xianxia genre proved particularly apt as an adaptation to existing RPGs, Japanese or otherwise, as most of them would prominently feature magic, both as story and gameplay elements. Depending on the game, specific characters are capable of magic abilities—usually in Western RPGs, based on *D&D* rules and Tolkien-inspired folklore—or magic is one of the types of attacks or support available to all player characters. While the absence of the magical elements does not prevent the development of a complex combat system in a game, as *Records of the Sword of Heaven* demonstrates, the turn-based system generally benefits from the more elaborate strategies that

players can enact with a combination of supernatural powers and physical capabilities.

Unlike Western fantasy, which as mentioned, at least in digital games, rarely refers to specific historical epochs or events, save for a general visual and narrative inspiration from Anglo-Saxon folklore and history, Chinese fantasy is ripe with direct cultural references. For instance, the Xuan-Yuan of the *Xuan-Yuan Sword* series is the Yellow Emperor, a quasi-mythical figure considered to be the father of Chinese culture, and the Warring States or the Three Kingdoms eras are common digital games settings. Indeed, Minghong Cai, one of the original creators of the first *Xuan-Yuan Sword* stated the importance of Chinese culture in his game in an interview:

> Game was born before its title. We (DOMO Studio) had the idea to create a (Chinese) cultural game with Chinese elements. We all agreed that the theme was great, but we didn't know what to name it after completing the production. We discussed it, but couldn't come up with a result. Later, I thought since it's about Chinese culture and we are all descendants of the Yanhuang (a historical self-identification of the Chinese nation), let's name it 'Xuan-Yuan Sword' (Xuan-Yuan represents the ancestors in the collective memory of Chinese people). At that time, we were all under twenty years old and didn't have much cultural knowledge, but we felt this name had profound meaning, so we decided on it.
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> CAI, 2013 (Translation by CAO ET AL., 2023, pp. 6–7).

Sword and Fairy, as much as *Dragon Quest* in Japan, from which its early entries inherit several gameplay and visual characteristics, established the RPG genre in China, and its history is very much relevant to how the genre took form in the country. Despite the success of the first *Sword and Fairy*, a sequel would not be worked on until the early 2000s. Creative differences in the team brough the split of Softstar, which established a new development studio in Shanghai, led by Yao Zhuangxian, lead developer of the first *Sword and Fairy*.[2] The two studios went on developing two parallel versions of *Sword and Fairy*, which are emblematic in representing the direction that future RPG development in China would take. These two games followed different design philosophies: what would become *Sword and Fairy 2*, developed by the Taipei studio, followed the look and gameplay of the original game, with 2D graphics and mostly Wuxia themes of martial arts, whereas *Sword and Fairy 3*, released

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2 I am thankful to Steam user 早乙女まりあ*'s Husband*, who kindly agreed to share his vast knowledge about the history of Softstar, the *Sword and Fairy*, and *Gujian* series.

a few months later in August 2003 by the Shanghai studio, sported an all-new fully 3D graphics and more fantastical Xianxia themes, adding more elements from Taoism and Chinese mythology. This evolution was indeed mirrored in Japan and the West as well, where RPGs were switching from hybrid 2D-3D to fully three-dimensional graphic formats, such as classical JRPG series *Tales of Symphonia* (Namco Tales Studio, 2003), and D&D-based *Neverwinter Nights* (BioWare, 2002).

Softstar Shanghai's *Sword and Fairy 3* was a success, unlike Taipei's *Sword and Fairy 2*, and this success influenced the future development of the series, which, much like the Chinese fantasy panorama at large, will focus more on Xianxia rather than Wuxia themes (Kong, 2021), and will also incorporate the most recent gameplay trends rather than remain anchored to tradition. In 2007, Softstar Shanghai is officially incorporated in Softstar Beijing, and Zhang Yijun, a former employee of Softstar Shanghai goes to found Aurogon, which will develop another of the most important Chinese RPG series: *Gujian* [古剑奇谭琴心剑魄今何在]. The first *Gujian* was released in 2010 to immediate success, selling more than 600,000 copies in one month (Gamelook, 2022), and marked the revival of the genre after a few years of stagnation (Cao et al., 2023, p. 30). The third instalment of the series (2018b) was the first to receive an official English translation, even though only one year after the initial release, following the numerous requests from non-Chinese speaking players. *Gujian 3* is indeed an emblematic case: a large production, profoundly imbued with Chinese cultural heritage, but with little interest in the overseas market. The game received some attention from the Western press before (Wong, 2018) and especially after its English translation (Chan, 2020; Romano, 2019), but at the time of writing there are no English-language reviews on reviews aggregator websites Opencritic and Metacritic. Despite that, there are more than 1,500 non-Chinese language user reviews to the game on digital storefront Steam, where the game is officially distributed in the West. A small percentage compared to the almost 40,000 total reviews, but a strong number for a game which received little to no media attention outside of China. This is indeed representative of a trend, which is rapidly changing, whereby Chinese developers expect Chinese-themed games not to be appreciated by a Western audience, as Matthew M. Chew explains regarding online games:

> Chinese developers still have not put much effort into re-designing game content specifically for Western markets. Consequently, the majority of China-developed online games that were published in the West contained unadorned pay-to-win features that many Western gamers find unpalatable. Chinese online games were indeed well received in several

> Southeast Asian countries, but it was not because they were meticulously redesigned for Southeast Asian tastes. Instead, they thrive in the context of Southeast Asian gamers' prior familiarity with Chinese wuxia novels, television drama, and film.
>
> CHEW, 2019, p. 208

In fact, globally popular online games developed in China, such as *King of Avalon* (FunPlus, 2016), inspired by the Arthurian cycle as the name suggests, or *Arena of Valor* (Timi Studio Group, 2016) were purged of the Chinese cultural elements present in the original *Honor of Kings* [王者荣耀], in favour of Western folklore.

Gujian abounds in cultural references, so much so that it is even directly stated in the English description of the game on the digital storefront Steam: "The story background of Gujian 3 is a fantasy world built upon the elements of ancient China, therefore, players will experience rich cultural context all over the game" (Aurogon, 2018a). Aside from the obvious visual inspiration of traditional Chinese architecture in its environments, one level is entirely realised in the traditional artform of Shadow Play [Piyingxi 皮影戏], where the main character moves along a 2D paper environment, with characters and dialogues based on the Beijing Opera (see Figure 4). Despite the unspecified dynastic setting of the game, direct references are multiple, such as the Yellow Emperor, and players can even find an excerpt from *The Travels of Marco Polo* in a library in the game, written in its original Italian language.

Gameplay-wise, we can see the influence of popular Western and Japanese RPG s, especially Polish *The Witcher 3* in its open world and real-time combat system, as well as Japanese *Final Fantasy XV* (Square Enix, 2016), an indication that major Chinese RPG productions are following the general worldwide

FIGURE 4   The Shadow Play level in *Gujian* 3 © Aurogon 2018.

gameplay trends, regardless if aimed to a local or international market, while still retaining strong cultural Chinese characteristics. We can observe a similar approach in *Sword and Fairy 7* (Softstar Technology Beijing, 2021), the latest instalment of the popular series, which presents itself as "[a]n action RPG based on Chinese art style", placing again the cultural heritage aspect at the forefront. After the success of *Gujian*, *Sword and Fairy* opted for a Xianxia theme as well, with deities, demons, and Taoist sects at the centre of the story, as well as a real-time combat system unlike its predecessors. Cultural heritage is again abundantly displayed visually, with traditional Chinese architecture and landscapes, and more direct references to real-world locations, such as the cities of Kaifang or Lulong, albeit not accurately reconstructed, and various existing Buddhist sects, without, however, striving for historical accuracy.

Genshin Impact (Mihoyo, 2020) is arguably the most globally popular Chinese game to date. It is a most relevant example for this discussion for several reasons. Firstly, its massive success both in China and abroad, secondly, its distinctively Chinese characteristics, exemplified in the numerous collaborations with local museums and cultural institutions. Developed by Shanghai-based Mihoyo, *Genshin Impact* has been met with commercial success and critical acclaim, and it is indicative of three aspects: the level of sophistication and maturity that Chinese game developers have achieved, the interest that Western players have towards games developed and set in China—more than half the revenue of *Genshin Impact* on mobile platforms originated outside China in the first week after launch (Tassi, 2020)—and how digital games are an excellent vector for cultural exchange and promotion. At the same time, there are interesting choices to notice regarding *Genshin Impact*'s title. The original Chinese name of the game is actually *Yuánshén* [原神], and it is under this name that the game can be found in China. Developer Mihoyo decided to adapt the title to the various locations where it is distributed: it is known as *Wonsin* [원신] in Korea and *Genshin* [原神] in Japan, which are all transliterations of the original *Yuánshén* [原神]. The versions for the English and other Western markets still retain the Japanese romaji title *Genshin*. This can be easily explained by the established presence of Japanese digital games in the West since the late 1970s—the very beginning of the digital game era—albeit often with English or translated titles. It is not uncommon thus for Western players, and the public in general, to see and play Japanese games with Japanese characteristics and styles. The same cannot be said for Chinese games. *Genshin Impact* features in fact a distinct Japanese anime style in its aesthetics, while at the same time not shying away from Chinese features. For instance, Liyue, one of the locations that it is possible to visit in the game, portrays a traditional old Chinese city and landscape. In an interview, Haidi, Scenery Art Team Lead at Mihoyo, explains

the creative philosophy behind the China-inspired landscapes of *Genshin Impact*, for which they collaborated with the Zhangjiajie Museum:

> At present, open-world games with China-inspired features are few and far in-between. In creating Liyue, we wanted to Share our vision of the "Chinese aesthetic" with players all around the world. *Genshin Impact* combines an anime-influenced, cartoonish style that emphasizes a fresh and lively aesthetic with natural features and key elements of culture that evoke China. To showcase Liyue's core artistic vision then, based on those real-life reference points, we infused that artistic vision with fantastical elements to match *Genshin Impact*'s aesthetic and one of the most important elements while designing an aesthetic for an open-world game is the topography, which serves as a foundation for all other content. What natural features should have prominence in Liyue to represent the Chinese characteristics in front of the global player base and how to guarantee that those elements would be well-received.
>
> HAIDI ET AL., 2020, 0:45

Mihoyo also recently established a collaboration with the Sanxingdui Museum, where the story of the game characters is intertwined with the artefact exhibited in the museum, such as their ancient bronze masks, and players are invited to complete an online activity called *Ancient Treasures Unearthed* (Mihoyo, 2023b) related to the cultural heritage in order to receive additional game points (see Figure 5). Moreover, they developed a video series called *A Journey of Art and Heritage*, in which local artists and artisans crafted traditional art forms such as woodblock print and egg carving, based on *Genshin Impact* characters and environments (Mihoyo, 2023a).

But *Genshin Impact* is not the only game that arouses interest in the West. Other titles with more traditional Chinese stories and themes are starting to make headlines in Western media. *Black Myth Wukong* (Game Science, 2024) is a game developed by independent studio Game Science located in Hangzhou and inspired by the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. *Black Myth* took the world by storm with a technically impressive video that quickly went viral on the internet. Game producer Feng Ji affirmed that he wanted to include the name of protagonist Sun Wukong in the title in order to re-establish the original Chinese origin of the myth, mostly known in the West through the manga and anime adaptation of *Dragon Ball*, where the protagonist is named Son Goku (Young 2020).[3]

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3 Unfortunately, *Black Myth Wukong* was released too late for an appropriate analysis to be included in this article.
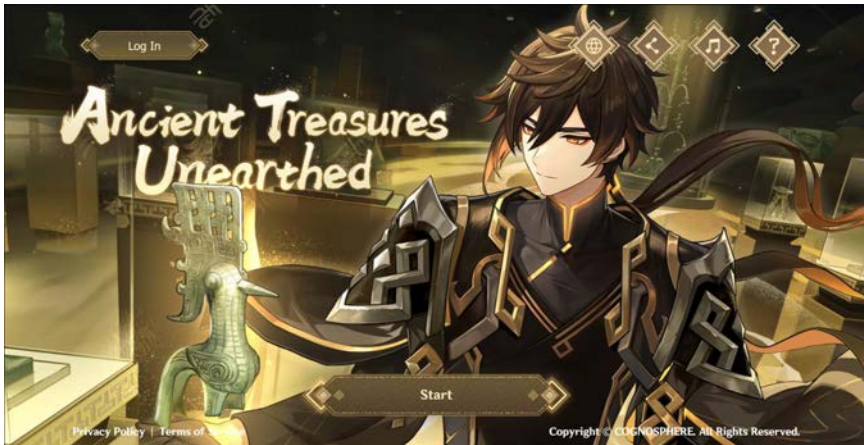
FIGURE 5   An image from the *Ancient Treasures Unearthed* web event of *Genshin Impact*
© Mihoyo 2023. Note the bronze bird sculpture in the hand of the character, an
actual artefact in the Sanxingdui Museum collection.

It is not just the large Chinese productions that are becoming popular in the West. Smaller, independently published games, so called *indie games*, are also making headlines. This trend is an extension of the growing support that independent productions are benefiting from in China (Cao et al., 2023, p. 2), which is reflected overseas as well, and evidently a genuine interest in Chinese games on part of players worldwide, despite the usual lack of language support. Nevertheless, successes such as 太吾绘卷 *The Scroll Of Taiwu* (ConchShip Games, 2018), which achieved more than a million sales within a year and is strongly rooted in Wuxia tradition and imagery, is still relying on the fan-made English translation for non-Chinese speakers. However, the trend is rapidly changing even for smaller productions ripe with Chinese culture. To wit, *The Rewinder* (Mistymountainstudio, 2021) is a pixel art adventure game based on Chinese mythology, which again does not shy away from its Chinese origins and visual style (see Figure 6), as explained by Mistymountainstudio artist Hongzhe Ma: "*The Rewinder* is based on Chinese mythology, we really want our players to have that feeling when they play it. Our style now combines the Chinese ink painting with pixel art." (Wei and Ma, 2020 3:28)

The Rewinder received press coverage and reviews in the West as well, and was received favourably by the players, with over 5,000 positive reviews on digital storefront Steam at the time of writing.

FIGURE 6   A screenshot from *The Rewinder* © Mistymountainstudio 2021.

Conclusions

Chinese digital games indicate specific characteristics that are the results of internal and external cultural heritage influences, related both to visual representation and gameplay. As evidenced, tangible and intangible heritage characterize the visual aesthetic and narrative of several Chinese games, which sets them apart from their Western and Japanese counterparts. Games such as *Gujian* root their visuals and stories in Chinese myths and folklore, while displaying influences from Japanese games in their art style, as well as Western ones in their gameplay, with a mixture that characterises Chinese game production. Unlike Western and Japanese digital games, which display—as always, with numerous exceptions—relatively established cultural influences, both in the narratives, as well as in the visuals, Chinese games are demonstrating an innovative approach, deeply rooted in local culture, but not isolated from international trends.

It is of note that Chinese-developed RPGs displayed a strong Chinese cultural connotation from their onset. As we have seen with games developed in the early 1990s such as *Xuan-Yuan Sword*, despite the obvious influences from foreign—especially Japanese—games in terms of graphics and gameplay, the story, characters, and settings are almost always translated into Chinese ones. This is an interesting aspect of Chinese games, as it is hard to observe the same for instance in Europe, where even genre-defining games, such as the French-developed *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames, 1992) which established the survival

horror genre and is set in 1920s Louisiana, or German-developed *Gothic* (Piranha Bytes, 2001–2023), which, while establishing a certain Continental style of RPGs, do not display distinctive German or Continental European cultural heritage elements.

The interest for Chinese games is evident both in the country itself and worldwide. With the constant expansion of digital games in new markets, such as the Middle East and India, the production and demand for cultural representation that strays away from the canons which we have been used to in the past decades will continue to grow. As demonstrated by *The Witcher* and *Kingdom Come* in the West, there is indeed room and interest for fantasy perspectives and storytelling that do not fit the usual mould of *The Lord of the Rings* or *Dungeons and Dragons*. Naturally, large digital games production being a very expensive and risky endeavour, it is understandable that publishers are careful with proposing products that might not be culturally well received. For instance, Cao et al. stress how the Wuxia elements so prevalent in many Chinese fantasy products present "a high level of inclusivity in the Chinese gaming market" but also "present challenges in terms of global distribution and localized translation" (2023, p. 39). Nonetheless, with China strongly and rapidly positioning itself as the third—not in order of importance—global centre of game development together with the United States and Japan, and with its growing cultural influence, it has the opportunity to concretely shape the course of digital games worldwide. The strong presence of cultural heritage elements in Chinese games is a great opportunity for cultural diffusion and promotion, as exemplified by initiatives such as Mihoyo's *A Journey of Art and Heritage*, and the interest shown by non-Chinese players toward games barely publicized and translated into English such as *Gujian* demonstrate that there is fertile terrain for cross-cultural pollination. With plenty of cultural, technical, artistic, and production capabilities, China is bound to leave a mark in the digital games panorama.

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