

Exploring Chinese Game Production Through *Black Myth: Wukong*

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Keywords

China, Game Development, regulation, independent, Black Myth: Wukong

INTRODUCTION

Black Myth: Wukong looms as the most significant development in Chinese videogame history. Not only does the game celebrate heritage and traditions that resonate deeply through Sinophone communities across Asia, but it represents the new high-water mark in China's standard of videogame design and execution. Accordingly, the journey of its production offers a quintessential example of how independent game development success appears within a mainland Chinese context. With Chinese games extending their footprint across Asia and Australia, and an increasing number of developers and researchers attempting to tap into Chinese markets, audiences, and scholarship, this paper offers key findings and up-to-the-minute insights on Chinese game production. The aim of this paper is to foster deeper literacy and greater understanding of videogames with Chinese characteristics (Tai & Lu 2021).

Inspired by the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West* and developed by Hangzhou-based independent studio Game Science, the action-role playing game *Black Myth: Wukong* launched to an enthusiastic reception in August 2024, selling more than 20 million copies and instantly growing China's videogame market by more than 15 per cent. Receiving high praise and critical acclaim at home and abroad, China's first AAA videogame was developed paradoxically by an independent game company. Just as *Black Myth: Wukong* is distinctly Chinese in its celebration of that country's cultural heritage, natural beauty, and folklore traditions, likewise exploring the games' development reveals much about China's unique game production sector.

The discourse surrounding *Black Myth: Wukong* has highlighted both the profound differences in Chinese game production and regulations to those found elsewhere in the world (Jiang & Fung 2019), but also all-too familiar instances of sexism and misogyny within AAA game development cultures (Butt 2022, Chee et al. 2022). Studying the game in terms of its innovation and regulation, and the balance of power between government, large corporations and more agile independent developers, reveals much about China's intricate games ecosystem. Using *Black Myth: Wukong* as a familiar lens, this paper unravels the complex interplay between regulation, commerce, and creativity within China's game development, unpicking some of the apparent contradictions that arise around the game, including:

- How can the developer Game Science be described as independent when they produced a AAA game with a budget of \$70 million dollars in partnership with Tencent, the worlds largest game company?

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2025

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- How was this game published within China’s notoriously tight videogame regulatory environment, especially given the game’s explicit violence and historical content?
- What lessons can be learnt from the production and distribution of this game that can be usefully applied in a broader global context as well as more specifically in the Australian setting?

Drawing on recent scholarship combined with ethnographic fieldwork, this article illuminates and expands understanding of China’s game sector and the position of independent developers within it. It details how Chinese game makers balance their passion for creative projects with remuneration for their labour against a challenging backdrop of CCP regulations and steep competition from enormous commercial competitors. While many of the tensions explored replicate game production issues experienced by Western game developers (Keogh 2021, Chia 2022), this paper works to illuminate aspects that are distinct to the Chinese context (Chew 2019, Jiang & Fung, 2019). What is revealed is that videogame regulation policies enacted by the Chinese government are experienced as both an obstacle but – in some cases – also a strategic opportunity for game makers (Davies, 2024).

In sketching out this complex ecology of game regulators, publishers, makers, and markets, revealed here is how *Black Myth: Wukong* presents an exception that proves the rule of Chinese game production and legislation. These findings will be of critical importance to Australian game scholars and game makers alike.

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