



Research article

From Epic to Digital Game: *Black Myth: Wukong* as an Archontic Extension of *Journey to the West*

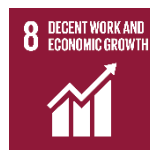
Richa Kumari  

Research Scholar, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Punjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract

First published in the sixteenth century, *Journey to the West* has persisted for centuries through retellings, adaptations, and reimagining across literature, theater, animation, and popular culture. While many of these forms reinterpret the epic within the confines of adaptation, *Black Myth: Wukong*, developed by Game Science (2024), advances its narrative by functioning as an archontic extension that continues the story beyond the original. This paper argues that the game preserves the epic's mythological and philosophical core while extending its narrative and moral dimensions through digital gameplay. An archontic extension is a work that situates itself within the same story world as its source while extending its archive through new additions rather than reproducing its structure. This paper builds on Abigail Derecho's idea of archontic literature, which is based on Jacques Derrida's idea of the open archive. The paper suggests that archontic extension is a more accurate framework to explore works that go beyond the limits of adaptation. This framework is further strengthened by Henry Jenkins' concept of extension, which emphasizes how new media contribute distinct layers of meaning rather than reproducing existing narratives. By employing this method, the paper examines how the game retains core elements of the epic, including Sun Wukong, the celestial order, and the tension between authority and freedom, while advancing the narrative through player agency, interactive systems, and digital world-building. It argues that *Black Myth: Wukong* demonstrates itself as an archontic extension of *Journey to the West* by expanding its archive through new modes of engagement and storytelling and displays how digital games can function as sites of narrative continuation.

Keywords: *Journey to the West*, Archontic Extensions, *Black Myth: Wukong*, Digital Games, Transmedia Storytelling.



Contact: Waseem Richa Kumari. Research Scholar, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Punjab University, Chandigarh, Email: richa.thunyan@gmail.com

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Introduction

Over centuries, many texts perish into non-existence, while some live on forever. Such texts survive through their distribution across time via different media forms. *Journey to the West*, a Chinese masterpiece traditionally credited to Wu Cheng'en, serves as a perfect example of a legendary work that people read throughout the world even today. The character of Sun Wukong from the novel stands out among its diverse characters that continue to captivate audiences. Various forms of media, including cinematic films, drama, and animation, have adapted the framework of the novel and its characters. This persistence raises a major question: how can such texts create meaning without succumbing to continuous repetition?

Traditional methods of adaptation look at new works as just retellings of the original, focusing on how closely they follow it. This framework presupposes the stability of the original text, while later works are examined on their proximity or deviation from it. This model, however, becomes inadequate to address texts like *Journey to the West*, whose narrative and thematic systems resist stability and closure. The novel functions as a fluid system that invites continuation rather than existing as a fixed text.

Recent developments in digital media, especially narrative-driven video games, have introduced new ways to revisit classical works. An excellent example of this shift is *Black Myth: Wukong*, developed by the Chinese gaming company Game Science (2024). The video game takes place in the world of *Journey to the West* and includes many of its famous characters but does not retell the sequence of the pilgrimage. The game continues the story after the journey ends, and players have to play the game as the Destined One. The game situates itself within the novel but extends its philosophical tensions through its interactive game system, positioning it as a continuation rather than a derivative work. Adaptation models work effectively when the works are easy to define with fidelity to the original, but works like *Black Myth: Wukong* are challenging to define as they continue the work and expand its narrative archive.

Much scholarship on transmedia storytelling and narrative expansion examines how stories move across different media forms, but not much has been studied about how video games function as sites of narrative expansion within an archival framework. Existing studies mainly emphasize adaptations and franchise development but tend to miss their potential as a continuation of a classic text. As a result, a gap remains in understanding how video games participate in the ongoing path of literary archives, not as adaptations, but by contributing to the narrative.

This paper fills that gap by arguing that *Black Myth: Wukong* functions as an archontic extension of *Journey to the West* by contributing to the expansion of its narrative archive while preserving the novel's core mythological and philosophical themes. The paper argues that digital video games do not merely extend narrative at the level of their story but also enhance the archive itself through interactivity, player agency, and gradual game progression. In this sense, the archive is not just expanded but also transformed into a space one can navigate and experience variably.

This paper shifts the connection between a source text and a later text from one of hierarchy to one of continuity by considering the later text as an archontic extension rather than a derivative adaptation. Additionally, video games are situated within this framework to showcase gameplay mechanics such as combat structures, game chapters, and decision-making processes that serve as mechanisms through which the expansion happens. The archive is then no longer just textual or static but rather becomes experiential and procedural. The paper therefore puts forward the central argument that digital video games can function as archontic extensions that preserve classic works not by retelling them but by continuing the story further. The case study of *Black Myth: Wukong* demonstrates that narrative continuity in this digital age is not limited to fidelity to the original text but also to its capacity to expand its archive in new meaningful ways. The structure of the paper follows this argument. The first section examines *Journey to the West* as a living archive that has survived through centuries by remaining open to expansion. The second section differentiates adaptation from archontic extensions that will establish the conceptual base for this analysis. It is then followed by the analytical framework that brings together thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Abigail Derecho, and Henry Jenkins to establish the concept of archontic extension. The subsequent section then analyzes how *Black Myth: Wukong* preserves key elements of the epic and how it extends them through its story and gameplay mechanics. This section ends by considering the wider implications of digital media, such as video games, as forms of archival media. The paper contributes to the ongoing discussions in literary and media studies about the relationship between classical texts and their contemporary forms by situating *Black Myth: Wukong* within this framework. It proposes a shift in understanding preservation by not safeguarding a fixed past but instead actively creating new narrative futures.

***Journey to the West* as a living archive**

To position *Black Myth: Wukong* as an archontic extension, it is necessary to re-evaluate the narrative status of *Journey to the West*. Instead of treating it as a closed, fixed text, this paper approaches it as a living archive, one that remains systematically open to multiple retellings and reinterpretations. This shift is highly important, as it allows us to understand how future works do not just adapt to the text but emerge from its continuous expansion.

Traditionally attributed to Wu Cheng'en, though there are multiple speculations regarding the real author, *Journey to the West* (Xiyou ji) is a product of narrative accumulation, drawing loosely on the travels of the famous monk Xuanzang, who had traveled to India from China in search of Buddhist scriptures (Sun, 2018, pp. 3, 6). The novel itself has derived inspiration from various old narrative stories, historical accounts and Chinese

folklore.¹ It has combined multiple narrative strands into a single text while also leaving space for further development. This multiplicity, sitting at the core of the novel, denies the notion of a single original version and positions the work as part of an evolving narrative archive.

The episodic nature of the pilgrimage, which is marked by encounters with demons, mountains difficult to pass through, local deities, and trials every other chapter, creates a pattern of repetition and variation rather than allowing a linear progression towards closure. Each episode functions as a self-contained unit with different demons to fight every time, but it still connects to the overall journey. This system allows individual arcs or episodes, characters, and conflicts to be reinterpreted or retold in different ways without compromising the coherence of the larger narrative archive of the novel. Thus, the text is readily available to invite extensions across media and contexts.

At the heart of this archive stands the figure of Sun Wukong (Monkey Awakened to Emptiness), whose significance and popularity far exceed the role he was originally assigned to in the novel. The novel's main premise revolves around the pilgrimage taken up by the monk Tang Sanzang, who is accompanied by his three protectors and disciples, namely, Sun Wukong (Monkey King), Zhu Bajie (Piggy), Sha Wujing (Sandy), and the white dragon prince (Bai Long Ma) serving as his noble steed. Wukong's journey in the novel moves from his defiance against the celestial authority to his eventual reluctant submission to the court. He is a character who must tackle the balance between rebellion and discipline, chaos and order, throughout the course of the novel. However, many of these tensions never completely resolve themselves. The Buddha imprisons Wukong under the Five Phases Mountain for 500 years, yet there is no explicit mention of the 500 years Wukong stayed under the mountain, and no discussion appears anywhere. The story quickly jumps to the life of the Tang monk until he frees Wukong; the time in between only has an unexplainable void (Sun, 2018, p. 18). These instabilities or temporary resolutions ensure that Wukong remains a site of reinterpretation, helping later works to revisit and attempt to resolve these matters and his relationship with the celestial authority.

The cosmological aspect of the novel is equally important, as it is where the narrative unfolds. The world of *Journey to the West* is established in a complex relationship between Buddhist and Taoist ideologies, where gods, demons, and humans coexist in a hierarchical order. The hierarchy establishes a moral and metaphysical order that governs both humans and non-human beings. This order is frequently challenged or disrupted and intervened within the story by many of its characters, particularly Wukong, which produces a constant tension between stability and transgression. This further enhances the text's openness, leaving questions about justice and authority unresolved.

¹ For discussions of the diverse narrative, folkloric, religious, and popular traditions that preceded and informed the development of the sixteenth-century *Journey to the West*, see Dudbridge (1970) and Yu (2012).

The conclusion of the novel also leaves these tensions unresolved. While the novel ends with the completion of the pilgrimage and the three disciples attaining Buddhahood, the novel is unable to eliminate the underlying conflicts that are important in the text. Wukong was tricked by the Buddha and imprisoned under his palm after wreaking havoc in heaven. During the journey, Bodhisattva Guanyin made Wukong wear a fillet on his head that tightened under a spell used by the Tang monk whenever Wukong defied his orders. The spell caused Wukong to experience severe migraines, which rendered him helpless as the circlet tightened around his head. He had to keep the Tang monk safe, even if it meant killing demons, whom he once used to call his brothers. The reconciliation between Wukong and the celestial court remained ambiguous, raising possibilities for his submission to the court as provisional rather than absolute. The ambiguous nature of the plot invites future narratives to reinterpret and intervene in and expand the story beyond its apparent ending.

The elements of unresolved conflicts and layered episodic structure, when taken together, demonstrate how *Journey to the West* acts as a generative archive rather than a fixed, closed text. It maintains a set of identifiable elements while remaining open to future transformations. This duality of being a stable and fluid text enables continuous reinterpretations across time. This approach to looking at *Journey to the West* changes the critical framework from one that focuses on adaptation to one that focuses on archival continuity, like archontic extensions. Future works do not stand outside the border of the original texts; instead, they participate in extending the archive by drawing on its major elements while introducing new material. Such a perspective is important for analyzing contemporary works like *Black Myth: Wukong*, which do not just seek to retell the original epic but also to engage with its unresolved possibilities.

Before discussing the important topic of differentiating between adaptations and archontic extensions, we must recognize that the conditions for an archontic extension already exist within the source text. *Journey to the West* has survived through centuries not because it resists change, but because it constantly invites change itself. Its status as a living archive makes sure that it remains historically and culturally grounded while staying open for continuously generative new narratives without losing its core themes.

From Adaptation to Archontic Extension

Critical discourse surrounding works derived from *Journey to the West* has primarily relied on the framework of adaptation. The source text maintains a hierarchy over its subsequent works, which are evaluated based on their fidelity to the original. This approach may be useful for examining many subsequent retellings but proves to be insufficient when confronted with works that do not seek to reproduce the original but operate beyond its narrative realms.

Adaptation, in its basic sense, is primarily defined as a creative salvaging of a notable work that has an intertextual relationship with its original work (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 8). Whether through expansion, retelling, or reinterpretation from one genre to another, adaptation retains the core narrative structure of its source text. Most adaptations of *Journey to the*

West focus on the story of the pilgrimage, the fights and trials with demons, and the end goal of enlightenment. The story still follows the same path, even when it introduces changes to its style or ideas. Adaptation, as a result, reaffirms the hierarchy of the original text, positioning it at the center as a reference point through which all other works are evaluated.

This framework, however, becomes inadequate, as it can incorrectly classify works that do not just retell the source narrative but extend it further. *Black Myth: Wukong* does not simply reinterpret the events of the epic but assumes them as a prior narrative plot that has already ended. The game does not recreate the pilgrimage of the Tang monk and his disciples. Instead, it draws upon the already established textual world: its characters, thematic tensions, and cosmic elements. The game creates a story that starts beyond the scope of the original. This trajectory shifts the relationship between source texts and derivative works from that of reproduction to continuation.

This shift requires a different conceptual framework that can be applied to works like *Black Myth: Wukong*. Archontic extension, in contrast to adaptation, emphasizes addition over reproduction. It situates the source text as part of an ongoing archive and contributes new material to it. The original is not replaced or merely retold; it is rather preserved through the expansion of its narrative. The source text is no longer a fixed entity but rather an evolving archive. Its archontic extensions are not considered secondary or derivative but part of the source text's open archive.

Adaptations often seek coherence with the original by maintaining consistency in the narrative, whereas archontic extension allows the many possibilities of divergence. Continuity in narration is achieved through the retention of key elements that keep the narrative within the same archival framework rather than strictly adhering to the source text. *Black Myth: Wukong* represents familiar characters like Sun Wukong, Red Boy, Bull Demon King, and various others in a different way than the novel. They are positioned within the transformed narrative of the game that assumes their prior existence. Characters are depicted as existing even after the novel ends, continuing the myth. The game relies on the player's knowledge and recognition of the novel but does not confine itself to its narrative limits.

This allows for the simultaneous occurrence of preservation and transformation together without privileging one work over the other. By reframing works like *Black Myth: Wukong* as archontic extensions rather than naming them as adaptations, this paper challenges the assumption of treating new media texts as derivatives of literary texts. This approach offers a more precise critical term for analyzing contemporary works, freeing them from the confines of adaptation studies.

After establishing this distinction, the next section will present the analytical framework that makes the conceptualization of archontic extension possible. Drawing on the works of Jacques Derrida, Abigail Derecho, and Henry Jenkins, the archive will be defined as an open, expanding system, situating archontic extension within the broader discussion of narrative in media.

Analytical Framework

This paper develops archontic extension as its central framework to examine how *Black Myth: Wukong* engages with the archive of *Journey to the West* and expands its narrative limits. Archontic extension is used as an analytical tool that enables the study of works that operate within existing narratives. The framework is created through a synthesis of three complementary theoretical concepts: the archive as a future-oriented structure, the concept of archontic literature, and the concept of extension and transmedia storytelling. Together, these create a perspective on works that are not derivatives but instead continue to expand their archive, keeping it open.

At its foundation level, the archive is understood as Derrida (1995) views it: an open, future-oriented structure. The archives act more as a beginning rather than as an endpoint, as they are never self-contained (p. 109). The archives are not treated as static repositories of preserved texts but as structures that remain active, oriented towards future additions. Within this structure, meaning is not fixed but is constantly changed by retellings and new interpretations. This enables the paper to examine *Journey to the West* not as a completed work but as an open narrative archive that facilitates its continual growth. The persistence of the epic is not located in its textual closure but rather in its capacity to generate new narratives across media and time. Similarly, *Black Myth: Wukong* is analyzed for its archival continuation of the epic, examining how it reintroduces several of the epic's elements within new narratives and media contexts.

The archive's openness is further specified through the concept of archontic literature as formed by Derecho (2006). Archontic texts enter existing textual archives and contribute new materials to them. Unlike intertextuality, archontic texts explicitly position themselves in their source archive and extend it. Every text is understood as part of a dynamic archive that is open to expansion by subsequent works. Through this framework, works like *Black Myth: Wukong* are not considered secondary to their source texts but rather an integral part of continuing the archive. Archontic literature is crucial for this paper, as it helps define archontic extension as works that enter an existing archive and contribute to its expansion.

To account for the role of medium in this process, the framework incorporates Jenkins' work on transmedia storytelling (2011) and his concept of extensions (2017). He argues that contemporary narratives unfold across multiple platforms, and each medium contributes something unique to a larger story world. Rather than repeating the same narrative in different forms, extensions introduce new facets and perspectives that develop the plot and enhance the overall narrative. The emphasis on medium becomes crucial when considering digital games. Unlike other narrative forms, video games are not limited to representation, as they enable active engagement of players in unfolding the narrative.

Building on these frameworks, archontic extension proposes how particular works participate in an ongoing archival process. It perceives texts as entering existing narrative systems and contributing to their expansion from within. A work is no longer a derivative of its source text; instead, it is part of the same narrative archive. Archontic extension thus

shifts the question of originality to that of how texts sustain and expand an existing narrative structure.

Archontic extension consists of two important interdependent processes: preservation and transformation. These processes do not operate as opposites but as dynamics that coexist, and together, they enable the archive to stay open. Preservation involves retaining specific key elements in the archontic extension from its source text, so it is situated within the same story world it wants to expand. These can include recognizable characters, narrative structures, and overarching themes. Through preservation, the archontic extension maintains continuity with its source text, ensuring that it stays connected with it. This continuity then allows the archontic extension to enter the archive, situate itself in it, and add to its evolving structure.

Transformation, on the other hand, refers to the introduction of new narrative plots, patterns, mediums, and modes of engagement that transcend its source text. Such transformations can occur through the creation of extended plotlines, the introduction of new characters, and the reinterpretation of existing elements under newer contexts. This process does not require the exclusion of its source archive. As Abigail Derecho explains in her work, archontic texts “do not violate the boundaries of the source text; rather it only adds to that text’s archive, becoming a part of the archive and expanding it” (2006, pp. 64-65). Through transformation, the archive receives new meanings and multiple possibilities that extend its reach to broader contexts and media platforms while staying connected to its source text.

Transformation ensures that the archive does not stay fixed and become rigid, which can lead to its creative stagnation; it rather helps the archive to remain open. Henry Jenkins makes a related distinction between adaptation and extension, arguing that “an adaptation is understood as a version or retelling of the original, whereas an extension goes beyond the original” (2017). He further explains that extensions gain legitimacy by fitting “into the world as previously constructed” while encouraging audiences to “look at that world through new eyes” (2017). The interplay between preservation and transformation is what helps in defining archontic extension as a distinct analytical framework. Preservation without transformation leads to repetition, while transformation without preservation severs the connection to its source archive. Archontic extension functions directly at this intersection, where continuity enables change, and change sustains continuity. This interplay allows the archive to function as a living structure, capable of creating new forms without losing its coherence.

Based on this interplay, archontic extension emerges as a critical framework that redefines how subsequent texts engage with their source material. It allows us to move ahead from models that privilege originality or fidelity to focus on how these narratives persist through retention and expansion. Preservation and transformation are foregrounded as its core dynamics that provide archontic extension, a structured way to understand how exactly a work remains anchored to its source while extending it simultaneously. The video game preserves the novel’s mythological structures and themes while transforming them

through new narrative plots and gameplay. This showcases how the archive is not just maintained but also expanded.

The following section utilizes this framework to analyze *Black Myth: Wukong* as an archontic extension of *Journey to the West*. The game is examined in terms of how it preserves the key elements of the epic while expanding the narrative through gameplay, combat, story arcs, and the player's interaction with it.

Preserving the Epic Archive

For *Black Myth: Wukong* to function as an archontic extension of *Journey to the West*, it must establish its continuity with the archive it wants to expand. Archontic extensions do not operate by replacing the major elements of their source texts; rather, they depend upon the recognizability and persistence of those elements. The archontic extension must remain faithful to the same narrative even if it generates new material. Preservation does not oppose transformation; it is a necessary condition for it.

One of the most significant forms of continuity lies in the centrality of the character of Sun Wukong. In the novel, the protagonist is Tang Sanzang, but it is Sun Wukong who takes all the spotlight from him. The novel itself starts with the birth of the stone monkey, who is later named Sun Wukong by Master Subodhi. Only after he is defeated by the Buddha does the novel proceed with the birth and life of Tang Sanzang. His rebellious nature is a fan favorite as he wreaks havoc in heaven after being mistreated. He declares himself as the Great Sage Equal to Heaven, and his mighty power is immense, as he singlehandedly defeats the armies of Heaven with ease. His aloof nature, complex relationship with the heavenly court, and his constant desire for absolute freedom make him a dynamic figure within the archive of the novel. As evident in the game's title, *Black Myth: Wukong* is centered around Sun Wukong, not as a mere companion of the larger journey, but as the focal point of the game's narrative action. Bringing Wukong to the center does not disturb the archive; it rather amplifies the notion of Wukong as being one of the most generative elements of the entire novel.

Another crucial aspect of the novel preserved in *Black Myth: Wukong* is its cosmological framework. The world of *Journey to the West* is structured around a system of Buddhist and Daoist ideologies, with heavenly and supernatural beings, demons, and humans, all existing together. This cosmology sets the story's moral logic and governs character interactions and the consequences of their actions. In the game, this cosmological dynamic remains intact. The presence of divine hierarchies, supernatural enemies, and spiritually led environments ensures that the game operates within the same cosmological order as the source text. The game's world-building preserves the epic's archive, ensuring continuity across media.

Throughout the game, the player encounters many supernatural creatures or yaoguais that are categorized in terms of difficulty, from easier to harder enemies: lesser yaoguais, yaoguai chiefs, and yaoguai kings. Tang Sanzang faced threats from many of these yaoguai enemies, as depicted in the novel. In the novel, the Tang monk is constantly abducted by various monsters who want to eat his flesh to gain immortality; one such

case is of the Tiger Vanguard, who is then defeated by Wukong and Bajie. Similarly, the players, assuming the role of the Destined One, encounter his two sons, who must then be defeated to proceed. Likewise, the heavenly court engages with the Destined One to prevent the player from obtaining Wukong's relics. The players also encounter several celestial beings, like Erlang Shen, Bodhisattva Lingji, Crane Immortal, Supreme Inspector, Maitreya, and many more, some of which play major roles in the novel.

The preservation of characters further solidifies this continuity. Many figures from the novel reappear in the game, not as static reproductions of their earlier forms but as recognizable elements within the archive. Their inclusion signifies engagement with the novel, allowing players to situate the game within familiar conflicts and relationships. These characters contribute to the identification with the archive, ensuring that the archontic extension remains anchored within the same narrative world. The game, set after the novel, explores what happened to many of its characters. Thus, it is an archontic extension where the story continues after it has already ended.

In the game's first chapter, titled "Black Cloud, Red Fire," the players encounter the chapter's boss, who is none other than the Black Wind King, also known as the Black Bear Guai. In the novel, the Black Bear Guai stole Tang Sanzang's treasured kasaya and ran away with it. With the help of Bodhisattva Guanyin, Wukong defeated him, and the Bodhisattva took the bear guai away (Wu Cheng'en, trans. Yu, 2012, Chapters 16, 17). In the game's journal, it is explained that after serving under the Bodhisattva for many years, he was set free to come back to the Black Wind Mountain. At the Old Guanyin Temple location, the players can encounter a tragic boss, Elder Jinchi.

In the novel, Elder Jinchi was a monk obsessed with material things who wanted to steal the Tang monk's kasaya. He set fire to his temple while the Tang monk was sleeping so he could obtain the kasaya. Wukong foiled the plan by covering the Tang monk with the fireproof mantle and diverting the fire away. The fire spread throughout the temple, and his disciples perished in the flames. Elder Jinchi, after realizing his mistake, bashed his head on a wall repeatedly until he died (Wu Cheng'en, trans. Yu, 2012, Chapter 16). This raises a question: if Elder Jinchi had died in the novel, how is he alive in the game? The answer to this question lies in the game's journal, with entries for each character after you defeat them. In the Black Wind King's journal entry, it is written that he had learned a spell of revival while he was under the guidance of the Bodhisattva. On returning to his mountain, he tried the spell to revive his long-lost friend, Jinchi, but what revived instead was a golem fused with the monk's spirit and the gold and silver coins he had buried, signifying his lingering attachment to material things even after his death.

Other than the foes of Wukong, we have an exceptional character who is brought back in the game: Zhu Bajie, the second pilgrim and protector of the Tang monk. Zhu Bajie was a close friend of Wukong, and they had a brotherly bond with each other, constantly fighting and teasing one another as they completed the journey to the West. In the game, players encounter him in chapter 3 after freeing him from the golden cymbals by using Kang Jin Star's horn to open them. This is a direct reference from the novel when Kang Jin Star rescues Wukong from the same golden cymbals, who is trapped inside them. The

Destined One frees Bajie, and he joins the team to help collect the relics, as he too wants to resurrect his sworn brother. In the novel, he aided Wukong in the journey to the West to obtain the scriptures; in the game, he aids the Destined One to collect all the relics. The aesthetic continuity of the narrative further contributes to this preservation. The visual and narrative design of the game echoes the blending of the sacred and the grotesque, along with the rich mythological imagery prominent in *Journey to the West*. From the Black Wind Mountain to Yellow Wind Ridge, through the Flaming Mountains back to Mount Huaguo, the game takes the players on a journey to these locations that are described in the novel. These elements ensure that the affective experience of the novel is sustained, even when the medium changes. The game replicates key visual motifs from the epic and transforms them into a digital form that resonates with their symbolic nature. For archontic extension, preservation does not imply fidelity in a narrow sense. The game does not copy the events and dialogues from *Journey to the West*; instead, it preserves the deep structure of the archive that includes its characters, cosmology, and thematic tones. This form of preservation is selective, as it allows the archontic extension to remain connected to the original while also creating space for innovation. By maintaining these elements, the game establishes itself as part of the archive of *Journey to the West*. The archive is not displaced or overwritten; it is carried forward into a new medium, where the foundational structure of the novel remains operative. This continuity is what allows the subsequent expansion of the narrative to be recognized as an archontic extension rather than a departure. Having established how *Black Myth: Wukong* preserves the epic archive, the next section will examine how it moves beyond preservation to actively expand it through gameplay.

Extending the Archive Through Gameplay

Archontic extensions are secured not by continuity alone but also by introducing new narratives that move beyond the limits of their source texts. *Black Myth: Wukong* achieves expansion not only through narrative progression but also through gameplay. The game transforms the archive from a representational structure to an interactive process. The most immediate form of the game's expansion lies in the game's temporal positioning. The game focuses on a story that happens after the novel's narrative has ended.

The prologue of the video game starts with Wukong confronting an army of celestial warriors, under the command of Erlang Shen, the sacred divinity. Through the dialogue exchanged between Wukong and Erlang, it is revealed that after he attained the title of The Victorious Fighting Buddha, Wukong went back to his mountain, living a free life, away from Heaven. Erlang demands that Wukong submit to the celestial court once again and admit his wrongdoings, and if he fails to do so, Erlang will subdue him and destroy his mountain. Wukong then battles Erlang, and they match each other equally. Wukong transforms into a bird using his transformation technique, and Erlang gives him a chase. While flying, Wukong surprisingly experiences the tightening of his headband, which shouldn't exist after the end of the pilgrimage. This allows Erlang to defeat him, and with this defeat, Sun Wukong's last tale comes to an end (*Black Myth: Wukong*, 2024, Prologue).

Instead of revisiting the pilgrimage events, the narrative unfolds in a world that assumes those events have already concluded. This shift from mere retelling to continuation is crucial. By situating itself beyond the closure of the novel, the game opens a space where the unresolved tensions of the novel can be explored deeply.

The temporal expansion is closely tied to the reconfiguration of Sun Wukong's narrative trajectory. In the novel, Wukong's story ends with his submission to the Buddhist authority and his integration into the celestial order. While this resolution provides a form of narrative closure, it does not fully eliminate the tensions that define his character, most prominently his desire to be free. *Black Myth: Wukong* builds on this ambiguity by reawakening Wukong as a figure whose relationship with the celestial authority remains unstable. The game not only revisits his past, but it also opens up to his future. By doing so, it transforms a concluded character's story into an ongoing process, extending the archive further.

After Wukong is defeated, there is a time shift where an old monkey atop Mount Huaguo recounts the events of the battle to a group of young monkeys. The old monkey explains that, though Wukong's body was broken, his spirit still endures. Wukong's six senses turned into six relics that all went into hiding. Now it is up to the players who play as the Destined One to recover all six relics of Wukong, and upon their return to Mount Huaguo, "he may yet rise again," finally free from heaven's constraint (*Black Myth: Wukong*, 2024, Prologue). The tension between heaven and Wukong persists. As the Destined One collects Wukong's relics, the heavenly court interrupts the path repeatedly to stop the revival of Wukong. The game is set to decide Wukong's future, whether he will resurrect without the control of heaven or obey them once again. The player's choices throughout the game determine his fate.

Unlike literature or cinema, where narrative progression is fixed, digital games introduce a participatory dimension in which the players have an active role in unfolding the story. Mark J. P. Wolf defines interactivity as "that aspect of user participation commonly referred to as interactivity, in which the players choices determine the course of the game" (2006, pp. 78–79). Through gameplay, players navigate through different chapters, engage in combat, and make decisions that progress the story. Each playthrough introduces variation in the players' experience without letting the narrative deviate from the archive. This interactivity enables a form of narrative multiplicity that is difficult to achieve in non-interactive media. While *Journey to the West* presents a linear progression of the story, *Black Myth: Wukong* allows for divergence within the narrative by unfolding unresolved tensions.

Black Myth: Wukong offers two endings: the default (bad) ending and the secret (true) ending. The game's ending chapter focuses on reviving Wukong, but it is the Destined One who will take up the legacy of Wukong after imbibing his relics. In the final battle, the Destined One fights with Wukong's broken shell to prove himself worthy of taking up Wukong's legacy. After defeating the Great Sage's broken shell, the body dissipates into a golden circlet, which the old monkey picks up. The return of the golden circlet is highly significant when read alongside the novel's conclusion. In the novel, Wukong's attainment

of Buddhahood marked the removal of the golden fillet, the very object that compelled his submission to the celestial court. When he questioned its continued presence, the Tang Monk explained that it was necessary to discipline his earlier rebellious nature and would no longer be required after his spiritual transformation. Wukong's realization that the circlet had vanished signified not only narrative closure but also the resolution of the tension between freedom and control (Wu Cheng'en, trans. Yu, 2012, Chapter 100, pp. 383).

The game revisits and extends this element, suggesting that such closure is not final. Its constant existence reveals that, even after attaining Buddhahood, Wukong remained bound to celestial suspicion. The circlet is used as a hidden means of control that can be reactivated when necessary, as seen in the prologue of the game, where it tightens and enables Wukong's defeat. The circlet thus becomes a site of narrative rebirth, transforming a resolved aspect into the basis for further conflict and expansion. This reconfiguration becomes central to understanding how the game's multiple endings play out.

Wolf distinguishes between choices that have little consequence and those that significantly affect the course of a game, noting that some choices "may be trivial and have little or no consequences," while others carry consequences that can determine the outcome of the game (2006, pp. 82–83). This distinction is particularly relevant to *Black Myth: Wukong* as the player's choices decide the ending of the game. In the default or bad ending, the old monkey picks up the golden circlet and puts it on the head of the Destined One, symbolizing the control of the heavenly court once again sitting on Wukong's head, resulting in continuing the cycle of control. The game ends with the Destined One bound in the stone, like Wukong, waiting for the True Destined One (*Black Myth: Wukong*, 2024 Chapter 6).

The secret or true ending can only be achieved after the players have discovered and defeated all hidden bosses, which leads them to the final secret boss, Erlang Shen. After defeating Erlang Shen on Mount Mei, the Destined One receives the sixth core relic, which is Wukong's mind. With the sixth relic in his possession, the Destined One fights Wukong's broken shell and defeats him. This time when the old monkey picks up the golden circlet, he does not put it on the Destined One's head, finally freeing Wukong from celestial control (*Black Myth: Wukong*, 2024 Chapter 6). The Destined One, now Wukong, has obtained all his relics without the constraining headband. He opens his eyes and lasers emit from them, a direct reference to the birth of Wukong. In the novel, when Wukong emerges from the stone, he bows to the four cardinal directions, and as he opens his eyes for the first time, lasers emit from them and reach the heavens, startling the Jade Emperor (Wu Cheng'en, trans. Yu, 2012, Chapter 1, pp. 101–102). These variations do not fragment the archive; rather, they contribute to its expansion by introducing multiple pathways through which its themes and conflicts can be explored.

Another important element of transformation in the game lies in the embodiment of narrative through mechanics. In the novel, Wukong's abilities, including his transformations and other magical abilities, are described thoroughly in the narrative. The video game transforms these abilities into mechanics that players can acquire through

gameplay. As *Destined One*, the players can acquire Wukong's abilities like A Pluck of Many, Cloud Step, Rock Solid, and Immobilize to fight enemies and defeat them. These abilities are not merely referenced but mobilized through gameplay. The game allows players to perform them, expanding them beyond their limited narrative description.

Similarly, players can obtain crucial items after defeating specific bosses. These items contain Rakshasi's Plantain Fan, The Weaver's Needle, and the Fireproof Mantle. The novel elaborates on these important items that aided Wukong in defeating his enemies. In the game, players can experience these mythical items by using them in combat, turning them into a part of the game's mechanics. The archive is thus expanded not only through new events but also through new modes of engagement, where meaning is generated through interaction rather than mere description. The novel's narrative elements are preserved, but it is also rearticulated as a dynamic process, allowing the archive to evolve through gameplay.

The analysis demonstrates how *Black Myth: Wukong* does not merely reinterpret *Journey to the West* but actively expands its narrative and conceptual archive. Through the transformation of narrative into gameplay, the reconfiguration of mythological conflict, the introduction of multiple endings, and the procedural embodiment of Wukong's abilities, the game sustains continuity while generating new narratives within the epic's world. Rather than retelling established episodes, it assumes the prior existence of the epic and advances the story through player-driven progression. It preserves the epic's ethical tension of authority vs freedom, while relocating it to a participatory framework. The archive thus remains open, not stabilized by a single narrative conclusion but expanded through multiplicity and engagement. This analysis, therefore, establishes *Black Myth: Wukong* as an archontic extension of *Journey to the West*, demonstrating how digital gameplay can function as a mechanism for the continuation of narrative traditions. If the archive can be extended through interactivity and procedural engagement, then digital games are uniquely positioned to function as archontic media. The importance of *Black Myth: Wukong* resides not only in its role as an archontic extension of the epic but also in its illustration of how the medium facilitates newer forms of narrative continuity. The following section builds this idea by examining video games as archival media, looking at how they sustain and expand narrative archives beyond the limits of textual and cinematic forms.

Digital Games as Archival Media

The preceding analysis has established *Black Myth: Wukong* as an archontic extension of *Journey to the West*, displaying how the game preserves and extends the epic's archive through gameplay mechanics. This case study brings a broader implication of digital games functioning as archival media that enable archontic extensions by transforming how texts are accessed and continued. Unlike other forms of media, where narrative progression is fixed, video games operate through interaction and variation, allowing the archive to remain open. The narrative is not simply revisited but is reproduced through

engagement, ensuring that continuity is maintained through expansion rather than repetition.

The capacity of games to keep the archive open relies on their procedural nature, where systems like combat progression and environmental interaction create meaning. In *Black Myth: Wukong*, the mythological elements such as abilities, items, and conflicts are not merely represented but are used as mechanics that the player can engage with. The game introduces a procedural form that helps archontic extension in expanding the archive through enactment rather than mere description. The player becomes a central figure in this process as each interaction with the game contributes to the unfolding of various narrative possibilities. The archive is thus expanded through the processes of the gameplay, where repetition, trial and error, and mastery generate new configurations within an existing mythological structure.

Digital games maintain archival openness via narrative multiplicity. Different endings, secret locations, optional encounters, and divergent pathways prevent the formation of a stable, single version, allowing the archive to accommodate conflicting possibilities. As demonstrated in *Black Myth: Wukong*, the outcome of the game extends the epic's unresolved tensions rather than solving them. Even after obtaining freedom, it is not guaranteed whether the celestial court will intervene again or not; the tension persists, leaving the archive open. In this sense, digital games enable archontic extensions by maintaining continuity while leaving room for transformation, positioning the medium as capable of sustaining the archive as an evolving, open structure.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how *Black Myth: Wukong* extends the *Journey to the West* archive in ways that go beyond the usual limits of adaptation. Through gameplay mechanics, the archive of the source text is not only preserved but also expanded, allowing its central tensions between authority and freedom to exist under new contexts. The analysis has shown that archontic extensions not only operate at the narrative level but also through the transformation of the narrative from representation to participation. Describing *Black Myth: Wukong* as a retelling would overlook the ways in which the game assumes the prior existence of the epic and moves beyond it. The game shows how narrative continuity does not depend on repetition but rather on the capacity of a text to generate new possibilities within an existing archive. In this sense, archontic extension provides a critical term for identifying works that both preserve and transform their source texts, without reducing them as derivatives.

This paper also suggests that digital games are particularly effective as sites for archontic extensions, as they enable the archive by letting the players interact with the story rather than remaining passive readers. The archive is no longer looked at as a fixed body but rather as a system that evolves through engagement. This argument has broader implications for studying narratives across media, as it points toward forms of storytelling in which meaning is not only interpreted but actively produced. Therefore, the archive

persists as a dynamic entity whose structure is maintained through continuous reconfigurations.

This paper opens the possibility for future archontic extensions, both in terms of creative works and critical approaches. By categorizing *Black Myth: Wukong* as an archontic extension, the paper does not close the archive it examines but rather participates in its ongoing expansion, inviting future analyses that will explore other works using the same framework. As the game itself suggests, “That Wukong you know will never return... The universe will always bear him a successor, one who shall carry on his name and nature” (*Black Myth Wukong*, 2024, Chapter 6). This statement of succession reflects the wider logic of the archive, where narratives persist through renewal rather than closure. Similarly, the declaration that “you will hear a tale which no one has ever known” demonstrates the potential of archontic extensions, pointing towards the creation of new narratives that will continue to reshape the archive. This implies that the study of archontic extensions redefines how we understand existing texts and anticipates future narratives and the forms they will take.

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Richa Kumari is a doctoral research scholar in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at Panjab University, Chandigarh. Her research develops the concept of archontic extension as a framework for understanding how narrative continuations generate new meanings within evolving narrative archives.
