

Monkey Magic: Game Science's adaptation-cum-sequel of *Journey to the West* is an engaging and gorgeous deep-dive into Chinese mythology.

Over the years, there have been countless attempts to adapt *Journey to the West*. From *The Monkey King: The Legend Begins*, *Ether Saga Odyssey*, *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West* all the way back to *Mega Man*, but all of failed to capture the spirit of Wu Cheng'en's sprawling 16th century novel. It's not just video games, there have been TV shows, films and, bizarrely enough, an opera from Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett of Gorillaz too.

So when *Black Myth: Wukong* was announced back in August of 2020, there was a justifiable amount of skepticism. *Journey to the West* has largely entered the pantheon of seemingly un-adaptable novels; stories you simply can never do justice to.

But what set *Black Myth: Wukong* apart from its contemporaries wasn't its bold Unreal Engine presentation, but the fact that the game would be developed by a Chinese developer (itself a fairly unusual move, given the popularity of mobile games in China over console experiences) Game Science, themselves total newbies to the industry.

Over the past four years, gameplay videos and sporadic updates have made been drip-fed out to the public, but now, exactly four years to the day after its initial pre-alpha build trailer, *Black Myth: Wukong* is finally here.

It is impossible to talk about *Black Myth: Wukong* without first mentioning much of the noise surrounding the game. The game has had its fair share of controversies, from the suspended release on Xbox Series S|X (as of publications he game still doesn't have a release date on the platform), allegations of sexist work environments among the core development team, accusations of undisclosed exclusivity deals with Sony, a review window in which only PC codes were released to reviewers and a bizarre laundry list of streamer dos and don'ts, which included a ban on mentioning "feminist propaganda".



Such a strange collection of controversial PR disasters would normally spell dead on arrival for most video games, but *Black Myth: Wukong* appears to be the exception to the tried and tested PR disaster tsunami that has engulfed so many of those that came before it.

As of the time of writing, the game has sold a mind-blowing 18 million units worldwide, as well as reaching a peak concurrent player count on Steam of 2.2 million, making it the second-most popular game on the platform ahead of major AAA games like *Cyberpunk 2077* or *Elden Ring*.

So the question here is how have Game Science, who's only games prior to *Black Myth: Wukong* were two largely unremarkable mobile games, managed to crack the code and deliver one of the most engaging video games of the past 10 years?

The answer? A little bit of Monkey magic.

If you were asked to define *Black Myth: Wukong*, you'd like pool from a large selection of potential influences. Game Science have repeatedly rejected comparisons to "souls-like" adventures such as *Bloodborne*, *Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty*, *Lies of P* or the aforementioned *Elden Ring*, but, after playing it, its easy to see why such comparisons have been made.

The increasingly difficult boss encounters (and the game's overall fixed difficulty), not to mention various "shrines" throughout the game world that act as your spawn point after each death, hostile level design and inter-connected map, it honestly feels like splitting hairs to argue that it isn't.

But equally, while the clear influence of various souls-likes can be seen throughout *Black Myth: Wukong*, its also clear to see other games have had their influence too, such as the recent *God of War* reboots, *Nioh 2* or *Ghost of Tsushima* among others.

Before we dive too far into the game's mechanics, its worth giving a brief overview of the game's story. *Black Myth: Wukong* is effectively a sequel to the original novel of *Journey to the West*, or at



least, a continuation of that story. Reading the original novel is not essential to enjoying the game, but will deepen your appreciation of the story as you progress.

Black Myth: Wukong opens with Sun Wukong, the protagonist of the original novel, being confronted by the Celestial Court after escorting Tang Sanzang on his perilous journey to the West. Though *Journey to the West* ends with Sun Wukong finally attaining Buddahood, *Black Myth: Wukong* picks up some time after the Monkey King's apparent retirement on Mount Huaguo. Confronted by an army led by Erlang Shen, Sun Wukong is defeated and before he is sealed by the Court, Sun Wukong releases his six senses into the mortal world to be recovered at a later date.

You play as "the Destined One", a monkey who has grown up on Mount Huaguo knowing the stories of the cheeky monkey's exploits over the years and sets out on a quest to unite the relics.

The story is perhaps *Black Myth: Wukong*'s weakest point. Its pretty threadbare at best and despite some genuinely welcome cameos from many characters from the original novel, its glorified McGuffin hunt does little to expand on the brilliance of *Journey to the West*, nor does it especially enrich the text or the characters who re-appear.

Normally, a weak story is made up for by its characters, but *Black Myth: Wukong* instead opts to make the player-character, the Destined One, silent. There have been countless games that have handled silent protagonists over the years, from *Dead Space*, *Half-Life*, *DOOM*, *Portal* and *The Legend of Zelda*, but each have been supported by a strong cast of supporting characters as well as a generally far more cohesive and engaging story. *Black Myth: Wukong*, however, offers neither.

Despite this, there are some genuinely unique things on display here from Game Science. At the end of each level/biome, the player is treated to a pre-rendered cutscene. These cutscenes aim to explain the story of the final boss of each level and is told either through general anime or stop-motion animation. While the story the game generally falls flat, these cutscenes shine. The production value is extremely high, not to mention the engaging way they weave music into their



narratives, not too dissimilar to how Remedy weaved different media types into their story-telling throughout last year's excellent *Alan Wake II*.

The presence of these jaw-droopingly stunning cutscenes bring us onto the game's strongest asset: its presentation. Originally developed on Unreal Engine 4, the Game Science team made the choice to switch to UE 5 (resulting in a slight delay to the project's release) and it feels all the better for it. Each biome is teeming with life and dense foliage that you could easily mistake for a real-life photograph.

The bar for graphical perfection is raised every year. From *The Last of Us Part: II*, *Horizon: Forbidden West*, *Hellblade 2*, *Alan Wake II*, *God of War: Ragnarök*, *Cyberpunk* 2077, *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League* and more, *Black Myth: Wukong* has once again raised the bar even further. It will be interesting to see how developers who pride themselves on their graphical presentation, such as Remedy Entertainment, Rockstar, Naughty Dog and more will react to the incredible display put on show here by Game Science.

Graphics are an important part of modern video games. In many instances, it has been known to save video games from total humiliation at review stage, such as *The Callisto Protocol*, who's lacklustre combat and weak story was largely saved by its exceptional graphics and presentation.

Black Myth: Wukong is in no such need of bailing out, however. While *The Callisto Protocol*'s combat fell flat on its face, *Black Myth: Wukong*'s is truly exceptional.

Like *The Callisto Protocol* before it, *Black Myth: Wukong* does not actually feature a block or counter function. The player simply dodges incoming enemy attacks (with perfect dodges leaving a hologram-like shadow of the player in their wake). Certain abilities can be unlocked later in the game that give the appearance of parrying, but this is on a strict one-use basis and cooldown times can vary depending on how you've used your upgrade points (or "Sparks" as they are known here).

The Destined One will attain most of Sun Wukong's abilities as they progress through the game, allowing the player to use magic in combat, as well as transformations, invisibility and the ability to clone themselves to add some back-up to their attacks. As you move through the beautifully rendered biomes, you'll encounter a large array of enemies, allowing you to take possession of their spirits once they are defeated. These transformations can range from blink-and-you'll-miss-it one use transformations used for dealing large amounts of damage, and full-blown transfiguration, in which the Destined One will take the form of a downed enemy and begin to fight until their might runs out or until the transformation is killed.



Various spells are littered throughout the game as well, such as “immobilise”, which freezes enemies in place; “cloud step” which leaves a projection of the Destined One behind while you become invisible, allowing the enemy to focus their attacks on the projection while you flank them; “pluck of many” which calls in cloned back-up; “ring of fire” that places a protective wall around the player and damages enemies that get to close and many more.

There are three main bars to keep an eye on: health, mana (a blue bar depicting how much magic is available to be used at that time) and stamina. Player health can be supplemented by use of the Destined One’s “gourd” and the health-saving potion inside it.

Much has been said about *Black Myth: Wukong*’s status as a “boss rush” game. To many, this is seen as a potential dig on Game Science’s approach, but its a fairly accurate depiction of how the game operates. Levels are full of low-level enemies (yaoguis, or creatures with supernatural abilities) you can easily dispatch with little trouble, but the bosses are scattered everywhere. Some of these are fairly easy to deal with, while others are far more troubling.

These bosses are entirely optional, but defeating them is generally worth your while, if only because you are able to use their spirit as a potential transformation later, but also because they are likely able to provide a key item that will allow you to access previously inaccessible areas.

Exploration is a big part of *Black Myth: Wukong*. In my first play through, I couldn’t help but lament the lack of a map. Yes, that is true by the way, there is no map of any kind in *Black Myth: Wukong*. Initially, I thought this might deter me from exploring too much, especially in pursuit of the game’s Platinum trophy, but it actually isn’t as bad as I initially thought. Each level has a generous amount of shrines to rest at and most areas are fairly easy to find from there.

Despite its lack of a map, *Black Myth: Wukong* actively encourages the player to explore their surroundings and discover as much as possible. Each level has a “hidden area” that the player has to find, which normally contains a very tough boss who deals un-Godly amounts of damage. The reward for finding these areas and defeating these bosses is usually a rare crafting item or a key item for finding newer areas.

Finding hidden areas is essential for unlocking the game’s “secret ending”. To be honest, its worth doing for the Platinum trophy, but after that, the ending isn’t too much to write home about and the grind to get there does make it a little unappealing, although the resources offered do help.



As you move through the game, you'll acquire skill points, referred to in game as "Sparks". Perhaps one of the few arguments against *Wukong* being a souls-like is the fact that the player does not lose any experience points or sparks at shrines after dying. While the game's difficulty can be punishing the fact that you retain all of your sparks at the end of a run does make it slightly more palatable. These sparks can be used to upgrade various abilities, spells or transformations - however, Game Science have taken the unique approach of allowing you to totally re-spec your character whenever you visit a shrine. If you feel a particular build isn't yielding the kind of results you'd like to see, then you can simply un-upgrade an ability and re-invest its resultant spark elsewhere.

As mentioned in my introduction to the game's systems, one of the game's main points of contention upon release was the fact that review codes were only available on PC. Reviewers seemed to report a bit of a mixed bag in terms of performance. Some encountered no issues of any kind and called it a sleek and stylish production, while others reported multiple crashes and bugs.

I played the game on PlayStation 5, and the lack of a PS5 review code (something that CD Projekt Red did with the ill-fated launch if *Cyberpunk 2077*) was highly conspicuous and worrying. Though Game Science did release a brief 4K video of PS5 gameplay a few days before release, it wasn't enough to quench the idea that the game may not be as smooth on PS5.

In my experience, I will say that the performance is not perfect. There have been far worse (such as the aforementioned *Cyberpunk*), but generally, *Black Myth: Wukong* was a pretty steady game. I had one or two un-welcome crashes, but all in all, these were pretty few and far between.

Your tolerance for these kinds of issues may vary. I generally have a fairly high tolerance for performance issues, so these weren't really issues for me, but the game did struggle with frame rate drops a lot, especially in dense areas with lots of enemies or when there are a large amount of particle effects on screen, something that is all-too-common with games released on Unreal Engine 5.

That being said, it can feel weird to have experienced a lot of games of similar scope, size and ambition that have released in the past few years that have run far better. Sony's output for PS5 has hardly been extensive, but the AAA games they have released this generation, such as *Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart*, *Returnal*, *Horizon: Forbidden West*, *God of War: Ragnarök* and their



various remakes of *The Last of Us* and *Uncharted*, have all been far better optimised than *Black Myth: Wukong* and its disappointing that a game as good-looking as this isn't as polished as it could be.

Another issue that I mentioned in the pre-amble was the request from the developer for those streaming the game to refrain from "feminist propaganda". That will, no doubt, be in reference to the review from ScreenRant, in which the issue of representation was mentioned as being a potential con of the game.

Having played *Black Myth: Wukong*, I find myself agreeing with ScreenRant's observation. *Black Myth: Wukong* is a largely male-dominated game, with most yaogui chiefs and bosses largely being male with very few feminine characters thrown into the mix.

To many, this may seem like a rather pointless observation, but I can see the point ScreenRant are making. *Journey to the West* is a rich and diverse story which features a wide cast of characters and it is disappointing too see that that net was not cast as wide this time around. With video games already being a fairly unwelcome space for female gamers, I can see why *Black Myth: Wukong*'s lack of female-centric characters could present an issue.

Returning to the game's presentation, another aspect of *Black Myth: Wukong* that is sure to be cleaning up at any award ceremonies this year is in its audio presentation. I played *Black Myth: Wukong* with the English dub. Given that Game Science are a Chinese developer, I wasn't too surprised to see that the English dub is not given its own lip-sync, but the voice-acting is good enough that you won't really pay too much attention.

The game's second biome, a barren, *Mad Max*-style wasteland, features the accompaniment of a headless monk playing the sanxian as the Destined One moves throughout the level - these sections, regardless of your language choice, are all performed in native Chinese, as are the songs at the end of each level.

The music in *Black Myth: Wukong* is truly stunning. Damon Albarn's score for the *Monkey: Journey to the West* opera was excellent, but was a more Western take on Eastern music. This time around, Zhai JinYan and Xiong Zhuying are on-hand for the game's score and they're in real danger of stealing the show. Each biome has its own unique flavour sonically and adds to the game's sense of place. Mercifully, each song can be found in the game's menu (as well as their



accompanying music videos, if they have one) to listen to whenever you want. The score particularly ramps up in the boss battles.

These battles are tense enough as it is, but the score makes you feel like a real action hero as you desperately look to put some distance between yourself and your adversary.

Western game development has come under intense scrutiny over the years. Whether it be a reliance on tried and tested game tropes, the pursuit of the all-important high Meteoritic score or the size queens that take up far too much space on generous hardware, its refreshing to see a game from an Eastern developer come and dominate the market in the way it has.

Black Myth: Wukong was always facing an uphill battle. Another AAA souls-like trying to compete in an over-saturated market depicting one of the most beloved Chinese novels if all time, is always going to be a tough sell. And yet, it has come out swinging from the moment the bell dinged and has created one of the main contenders for Game of the Year in 2024.

It isn't perfect, but *Black Myth: Wukong* is a breath of fresh air in an industry in major need of shaking up.