

East Meets West: A Comparative Study of Female Stereotypes in the Video Games *Black Myth: Wukong* and *The Witcher* Series

Introduction

In 2024, video game developer *Game Science* released the role-playing game *Black Myth: Wukong*, which became China's first AAA game to achieve global success, selling 10 million copies within a week ("Black"), demonstrating both China's commitment to high-end gaming development and its attempt to use video games as a soft cultural export (Brinkhof para. 9-14). Similarly, *The Witcher* series, adapted from Polish folklore, has achieved global acclaim with 200 Game of the Year awards and over 50 million copies sold (Heritage 1). Both games are rooted in cultural classics-*Black Myth: Wukong* draws from the Chinese classical novel *Journey to the West*, while *The Witcher* Series adapts Andrzej Sapkowski's fantasy novels-making them ideal for cross-cultural analysis of how video games reflect their cultural heritage. While research on gender portrayal in video games has focused mainly on Western games, there is a huge gap in research on Asian games, especially Chinese games. Thus, the recent release of *Black Myth: Wukong* provides a valuable opportunity to study the portrayal of female characters in Chinese game development. My research question asks: What are the commonalities and differences in the portrayal of female characters in *Black Myth: Wukong* and in *The Witcher* series, and how do these games reflect culturally specific gender stereotypes? Given the limitations of space, this paper focuses on analyzing the main female characters: Violet Spider in *Black Myth: Wukong* and Yennefer in *The Witcher* Series. Based on existing theoretical frameworks, I will conduct a qualitative comparative analysis of their personalities and character development.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

Research on gender bias in video games highlights persistent stereotypes, particularly in Western gaming industries. For example, Rennick et al.'s corpus study of 6 million words from

13,587 characters in 50 RPG games found that male characters dominate dialogue in RPGs (2-3), with male characters possessing nearly twice the amount of dialogue as female characters (8). The quantitative difference reflects a more profound industry bias, as DeWinter and Kocurek point out, in which the games industry continues to position men as the “core gamer” even though the gender ratio of gamers is almost equal (58–60). Dietz’s seminal study, though conducted in 1998, remains relevant in its findings that most female game characters are portrayed as objects, prizes, or victims, with only 15% assuming heroic or action-oriented roles (433–437). These patterns exemplify how female characters in Western games are often sidelined or designed to cater to male audiences, perpetuating exclusionary and stereotypical portrayals.

In Western fantasy RPGs, these gender biases often intersect with genre-specific tropes. In *The Witcher* series, male characters are usually of diverse careers such as king, warrior, or sorcerer. In contrast, female characters are usually “sorceresses,” a term that refers to women’s careers and is relevant to traits in fantasy RPGs as well as in the wider fantasy literary genres (Heritage 5). While *The Witcher* challenges traditional depictions of sorceresses as cruel or evil (Nairn and Piatti-Farnell)-common in Western fantasy media such as *The Wizard of Oz* or *Baldur’s Gate 3*-it nevertheless confines female characters to advisory or secondary positions, reflecting a “glass ceiling effect”: they are only ever advisors and cannot act as leaders (Heritage 7). Moreover, this portrayal suggests that women can achieve power and fame through study and education; however, it simultaneously reinforces the expectations of hegemonic masculinities by implying that women lack physical strength. Female characters are either explicitly depicted as not possessing physical power, or the possibility of them having such power is entirely omitted (Heritage 7). In contrast, Asian cultural frameworks reveal different but equally constraining gender stereotypes. Hofstede analyzed data from major Asian cities and found significant cultural differences in gender expectations (536-537). In more masculine Asian cultures, femininity is expressed as caring and gentleness, are expected to be passive and modest, with a shy and delicate appearance, and leadership traits such as responsibility, assertiveness, and ambition are less often seen as feminine traits (Hofstede 538). Furthermore, countries with a higher degree of masculinity, such as Japan, show stronger gender stereotypes, while countries with a higher degree of femininity, such as Thailand, show

more flexible gender roles (Hofstede 540). This feminine ideal in relatively masculine Asian countries is embodied in the “Lotus Flower” stereotype— a representation of women as gentle, obedient, fragile, and beautiful (Pires 3). The “Lotus Flower” reflects the fact that the identity of Asian women is often constructed around and subordinated to male, rather than through their own independent development (Pires 3-4).

These frameworks from both Western and Asian perspectives provide analytical lenses through which to examine female characters in video games. To further explore these ideas, the following sections will analyze two specific female characters: Yennefer of Vengerberg from *The Witcher Series* and Violet Spider from *Black Myth: Wukong*. These characters were selected because they embody the unique cultural representations of female characters in their respective games as central figures, allowing for meaningful cross-cultural comparisons.

Data

Yennefer’s background and development reflect a complex character whose arc is shaped by both empowerment and vulnerability. Born with physical disabilities and partial elf blood, Yennefer undergoes a magical transformation during her training at Aretuza, a school for sorceresses. This transformation enhances her appearance and grants her immense magical power, but it comes at the cost of her ability to bear children. Over time, Yennefer rises to prominence as a politically influential sorceress, serving as an advisor to the King of Aedirn and later mentoring young mages at Aretuza. Despite these achievements, her story is also defined by personal struggles, such as her quest to regain her fertility and her tumultuous relationship with Geralt of Rivia. Yennefer’s character embodies independence and ambition but also reveals moments of vulnerability, as seen in her desire to balance personal fulfillment with societal expectations. These traits highlight the dual pressures of strength and conformity placed on female characters in Western fantasy narratives.

Violet Spider’s story draws heavily from traditional Chinese cultural values, intertwining loyalty, sacrifice, and tragedy. Originally a celestial maiden in the Heavenly Palace, she was known as Chang’e and served as a palace attendant. She fell in love with Marshal Tianpeng, a high-ranking deity, but when he was demoted to the mortal realm and transformed into Pigsy, she followed him to the human world. Her transformation into a spider reflects her devotion to

Tianpeng, even as she becomes one of the seven spider sisters tasked with obstructing the protagonist. Unlike her sisters, Violet Spider's motivations are personal: she chooses to remain in one place, awaiting Pigsy despite the tragic reality that his new identity prevents him from acknowledging their past relationship. Her narrative concludes with her death from old age, cared for by the child she bore with Pigsy. Violet Spider's story exemplifies traditional Chinese ideals of feminine loyalty and sacrifice, reinforcing cultural expectations of women's subordination to male figures.

Analysis

The characters of Yennefer and Violet Spider embody distinct cultural perspectives on female representation. Yennefer's quest for transformation through education and magic, which changes her physical appearance and grants her power, mirrors Western values of self-determination. However, as noted by DeWinter and Kocurek (58–60), Yennefer's transformation aligns with traditional female stereotypes—her beauty is enhanced, and she is sexualized within the game narrative. This reinforces the idea that female power is often linked to physical allure, a concept that ties into Laura Mulvey's notion of the "male gaze" in media, where female characters are objectified for male pleasure (11). Despite her magical prowess, Yennefer remains framed within this gaze, her appearance and relationships central to her character arc rather than her accomplishments. In contrast, Violet Spider in *Black Myth: Wukong* reflects traditional Chinese values of loyalty, sacrifice, and feminine submission, aligning with Hofstede's analysis of masculinity and femininity in Eastern cultures. In more masculine cultures, such as China, women are often expected to embody traits of gentleness and passivity (538). Violet Spider's transformation from a celestial maiden to a spider symbolizes her loyalty to Pigsy, embracing her fate with acceptance rather than regret. This resonates with the "Lotus Flower" stereotype, a representation of Asian women as gentle, fragile, and self-sacrificing (Pires 3). Unlike Yennefer, Violet Spider does not seek personal power or transformation for herself, but her story revolves around her devotion to a male character. Her narrative reinforces the idea that women in Chinese cultural contexts are often defined by their relationships with men and their willingness to sacrifice for them.

Both characters also demonstrate the “glass ceiling effect,” wherein their power is restricted despite their abilities. Yennefer, though influential in political and magical spheres, never ascends to a leadership position, while Violet Spider’s role as an antagonist is limited to supporting the male protagonist, Wukong. Despite their strength, both characters are confined by the structural limitations imposed on them by their respective cultures and narratives. This reflects the broader gender biases in both Western and Chinese storytelling, where women, even in powerful roles, are constrained to secondary positions.

Finally, both games assume a male-targeted audience, reinforcing gendered stereotypes. As DeWinter and Kocurek argue, the gaming industry is largely male-dominated, and female characters are often designed through a male lens (58–60). In *The Witcher*, this is most evident in the sexualization of female characters like Yennefer and Triss, whose bodies and relationships with male characters are emphasized to cater to male fantasies. *Black Myth: Wukong*, while less overtly sexual, still defines its female characters in relation to male figures, positioning them within subordinate, sacrificial roles.

Conclusion

This comparison shows how culturally specific gender stereotypes shape the female characters in *Black Myth: Wukong* and *The Witcher* Series, with Violet Spider representing Chinese values of sacrifice and loyalty and Yennefer representing Western ideals of empowerment limited by sexualization. These portrayals, while differing in context, perpetuate persistent gender biases, limiting female characters to roles defined by their relationships with men. Future research could explore how game adaptations of traditional literature might subvert these stereotypes, offering more nuanced and independent representations of female characters. Achieving true diversity in video games is still a long-term goal, despite the ongoing efforts of the modern gaming industries. (1681 words)

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