



# Reconfiguring Chinese shadow puppetry in digital media

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## Abstract

Chinese shadow puppetry is a visual performing art that has a distinct visual language and storey traditions. UNESCO has recognised it as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity. Shadow puppetry has found its way into the digital media world in recent years. It has been used in animation and video games. This paper is devoted to the digitalization of Chinese shadow puppetry, and the topic of authenticity evocation in animation and games. The research uses a qualitative comparative approach, the researcher chose five representative cases, including kung fu panda 2, Shan Hai Jing Qi, Honour of kings, Gujian III and Justice. The research findings reveal the distinctions among the media. Animation focuses on visual language, emotional dramatisation and authenticity via stylised modelling and way of telling storeys. The video games are focused on interactive mechanisms. The game incorporates the shadow puppets into the gameplay mechanism. Participants actively engage in making culture. Participatory authenticity is shaped by the process of participation. Authenticity is offered as moving culture process, it between classical performance and online media. Traditional art forms are re-shaped on digital platforms, and cultural values lie at the centre of transformation.

**Keywords** Shaanxi shadow puppetry · Youth engagement · Digital heritage · Living inheritance · Intangible cultural heritage · Thematic analysis.

## Introduction

Chinese shadow puppetry is one of the oldest living popular theatres in China, having a history of over one thousand years. In 2011, Chinese shadow play was included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO,

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with a view to its exceptional cultural importance as well as its growing susceptibility in the modern world (Shi et al. 2014). The UNESCO status has increased awareness. Nevertheless, ancient customs are on the decrease. Live shows are losing their market share. Entertainment infrastructure has transformed. The primary types of entertainment have now become animation, video games, and streaming media platforms. The digital media technology is evolving quite fast, it has already become a novel cultural experimental space: film and TV production companies, game development workgroups, digital artists are making their works to be more engaging, providing audiences with the emotional depth and cultural depth they expect of it (Selmanović et al. 2020).

Shadow puppetry is characterized by its silhouette figures and mythological narratives. This visual language has gradually transformed into a recognizable cultural symbol within the context of digital media. *Kung Fu Panda 2* uses shadow puppetry to construct a mythological backdrop in its opening prologue, enhancing the legendary atmosphere and narrative tension. *Shan Hai Jing Qi* restructures historical imagery to highlight a national narrative stance and cultural construction goals. These two works exhibit significant differences in their visual borrowing and cultural expression approaches.

On the interactive side, the mobile game *Honor of Kings* collaborates with Shaanxi shadow puppetry; the RPG *Gujian III* embeds entire storylines in a Chinese puppetry format; and the social game *Werewolf* releases a series of cosmetic skins based on puppetry aesthetics. These examples illustrate how shadow puppetry has shifted from a local performance practice to a transmedia cultural symbol (Sungkono 2025).

This shift has triggered ongoing discussions about meaning, context and authenticity. After entering the film landscape or the game commodity system, the ritual function, community relations and historical depth of shadow puppetry are all facing redefinition. The cultural connotation is adjusted in the new media environment, and the original structure is transformed accordingly. The cultural context changes in the cross-media flow (Brehm 2023). Intangible cultural heritage should not be considered static remains. Heritage is getting closer to a constantly dynamic cultural process. This process is constantly shaped by social and technological factors (Dinler 2021; Li 2025; Yang et al., 2025). From this perspective, digital adaptation is neither a simple copy nor a direct restoration. Digital practice represents a new path of symbol reorganization. During the transition process, traditional elements become abstract and stylized. The original context eventually weakens. New aesthetic, emotional, and participative functions are developed (Brehm 2023).

Existing heritage studies primarily address safeguarding strategies (Yang et al. 2018), while media studies often discuss remediation and intermediality. Yet cross-media analyses that compare animation and games through a unified authenticity framework remain scarce. The categorization of shadow puppetry by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage places it in the context of living inheritance. Such a categorization reflects not only the significance of its past, but also the need to preserve it for the future through means such as digital media. Ethical concerns become even more relevant in the process of digital transformation amid the advancement of artificial intelligence. Issues of justice, responsibility, and transparency arise along with the implementation of new technologies in social practices. Concerning the use of

technology in the field of shadow puppetry, such concerns gain particular relevance. What is missing is a cross-media, theoretically grounded analysis that examines how shadow puppetry is transformed into a symbolic resource across different digital platforms specifically animation and games, and how these platforms' respective media affordances lead to fundamentally different reconfiguration outcomes for intangible cultural heritage. This article asks: How do medium-specific affordances in animation and video games differentially shape visual, emotional, and participatory authenticity when reconfiguring Chinese shadow puppetry?

This study contributes:

- (i) A cross-media analytical framework for authenticity.
- (ii) Comparative cases that demonstrate spectacularization (in animation) and proceduralization (in games).

## Conceptual framework

This paper aims to examine the digital reconstruction process of Chinese shadow puppetry in animation and video games. Therefore, this section integrates the research on intangible cultural heritage (ICH), media theory, and animation and games. It aims to outline the key theories in these fields and provide a theoretical context for the subsequent comparative case analysis. The analytical perspective adopted in this research identifies three forms of truth, which are visual, emotional, and participatory. Each form has unique standards against which to compare animation and video games. The typology is presented in Table 1. The term "heritage resonance in sound" pertains to how accurate the sound is designed in terms of its reconfiguration into the shadow puppetry process. The traditional show employs instruments such as drums, gongs, and strings that deliver rhythmic beats. In digitalized versions, the use of synthetic sounds or film score creates authenticity through cultural atmosphere.

A significant difference exists between visual cultural fidelity and participatory authenticity. Visual cultural fidelity is concerned with recognizability of certain aesthetic forms, such as silhouettes, carvings, texture of parchment, and decorations, which establish the connection between the digital image and puppet. On the other hand, is concerned with how much agency and enactment an audience or player gets. While visual cultural fidelity rests on seeing and recognizing something, participatory rests on enactment and experience of certain events or actions.

## Heritage as a living process and authorized discourse

In the 21st century, the protection of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has become a broad international concern, marked by adoption of UNESCO conventions on ICH. Intangible cultural heritage lives in performances, oral traditions, and community practices. Therefore, its survival depends on recording, documentation and the ability to remain relevant and meaningful in contemporary contexts.

The academic community has gradually changed its understanding of heritage. Early studies emphasised the fixed form of, while new studies emphasised the contin-

**Table 1** Typology of authenticity in digital shadow puppetry

Authenticity Category	Definition	Criteria
Visual	Faithfulness of aesthetic representation to traditional shadow puppetry forms.	Recognisable silhouette contours, carved outlines, parchment textures, decorative motifs, fidelity to traditional colour and pattern schemes.
Emotional	Fidelity of narrative immersion and affective resonance with audiences.	Mythological storytelling, dramatic atmosphere, cultural symbolism, ability to evoke heritage-linked emotions and narrative depth.
Participatory	Fidelity of interactive engagement where audiences/players enact or co-create cultural meaning.	Player agency, rule-based enactment of puppetry logic, interactive performance processes, transformation from passive spectatorship to active participation.
Sonic	Fidelity of sound design to traditional instrumental music and its cultural resonance.	Use of traditional instruments, rhythmic cues, live performance textures vs. digital soundscapes, synthesized audio, interactive sound effects.

uous transformation process. Scholars regard heritage as a dynamic practice, rather than a static result. Shadow puppetry is characterised by silhouette shapes and legendary narratives. This visual discourse gradually turns into a recognisable cultural signifier within the digital media landscape. *Kung Fu Panda 2* (DreamWorks, 2011) takes advantage of shadow puppetry to develop a mythological setting in the prologue of the first segments, which enhances the mythological theme and the national narratives goals. The restatement of the historical pictorials by arranging the three-houshaldis carried out in *Shan Hai Jing Qi* to focus on the national stance on the history and the construction of the culture as the purpose. The two texts stand apart in regard to visual borrowing and cultural articulation. Smith introduced the title *Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD)* (Thouki and Skrede, 2025) which shifts the attention to a socially meaningful context and community involvement as opposed to preserving the material.

The material-focused view weakens the social practise attributes. Critical perspective revolves around the construction process. To create heritage, it is through the negotiation of identity, memory and belonging. This process view plays an important role in Chinese shadow puppetry. Traditional shadow puppetry has been used in religious ceremonies and in festivals and is also a way people in the area tell or narrate a storey. Modern shadow drama has depended enormously on government-subsidy, and sightseeing performances have now become the most common form of presenting it. Shadow puppetry is slowly turning into a digital activity. This form of thing makes heritage a variant of expressing it, and digital action blurs the line between preservation and reproduction.

## Digital remediation of intangible heritage

When applying to a digital realm of intangible cultural heritage, media studies can provide useful theoretical tools that alter its form and meaning (Selmanovic et al., 2020). According to remediation theory, the process through which new media interacts with old media is one of perpetual assimilation and transformation (i.e., the ways through which new media transforms old media). (Karantalis and Koukopoulos 2024) underscore the connection between cultural heritage and digital media in providing inclusive education to refugees through digital transformation that helps bridge cultural identity and social inclusion. Even though old media is present, new media reconfigures and reuses their forms and functions (Omar 2017). This is essential in appreciating how shadow puppetry has evolved in the digital age. Digital technology has expanded the reach of shadow puppetry, allowing it to reach a wider audience. At the same time, the digital environment has driven its restructuring and re-creation. Movies, cartoons, and video games are now major areas for re-mediation. This study build upon the scholarly literature about digital China by taking a transnational approach, stressing the impact of global perspectives on digital cultural practices. This research brings to light the connection between national identity and the globalization of the cultural product (Zhao & Fang 2023). The study is concerned with the integration of the traditional Chinese shadow play into digital art and its effects on domestic and international audiences by (Zhang 2023).

Semiosphere theory locates cultural expressions within a constantly changing semiotic milieu (i.e., the cultural sphere in which signs and meanings are generated). In this environment, symbols constantly flow and transform, generating new meanings through cross-contextual interaction. (Ovcharenko et al. 2022). Within this theoretical framework, shadow puppetry is presented as a continuously operating symbolic system, rather than an isolated cultural object. Shadow puppet elements constantly flow in the global symbolic space, adjusting their form across different media platforms. At the same time, shadow puppet symbols also enter new cultural contexts during cross-media communication, and their meaning structures are transformed accordingly. The symbolic meaning shifts throughout cross-media circulation, while acquiring a new social status.(Prayoga et al., 2020; Sungkono 2025; Wang & Yu, 2022).

The theory of cultural commodification provides an important explanatory path for this transformation process. Cultural objects acquire new value forms within the global commodity circulation system. When shadow puppetry elements are incorporated into works such as Kung Fu Panda and Honor of Kings, they transcend media boundaries and enter the international market structure. In this process, the shadow puppet form assumes symbolic meaning and simultaneously becomes a tradable cultural commodity. Digital dissemination has increased the global visibility of shadow puppetry and strengthened its contemporary cultural relevance. At the same time, market logic may drive the simplification of symbolic expression. Cultural images are aesthetically processed during dissemination and gradually solidify into a Chinese style visual label for global consumption. Building on these theoretical foundations, how specific media affordances produce divergent reconstruction paths.

## Media affordances and participatory authenticity

Based on the theoretical foundation presented above, this study investigates how media variables influence the reconstruction path of shadow puppetry.

Animation and video games, as distinct types of digital media, have developed their own expression systems and meaning mechanisms. The media characteristic has emerged as a crucial feature in understanding the contemporary expressive form of shadow puppetry. (Karmakar et al. 2024; Saniya, 2025). Through stylised visual design, animation can retain the recognisability of cultural symbols (such as the silhouette contours and patterns of shadow puppets) while creating an attractive spectacle using modern audiovisual language (Vidal 2023). Explore cultural authenticity in computerized shadow plays through the lens of artistic gene analysis. This research connects traditional elements to new innovations, as shown by the ability to measure cultural authenticity through computation while allowing for innovative adaptation (Lin et al. 2025). Due to the linear nature of animation, however, the audience's main role in this process is that of a passive spectator. They can only participate by watching and feeling what is happening (Thorn et al. 2020). (Sun 2025) looks at the process of digitally reconstructing shadow puppetry animation through the use of 3D engines and focuses on dissemination processes that ensure cultural visibility and authenticity in digital media contexts.

The main thing that makes video games different from other media is that they are interactive. Scholars in game studies have noted that games do not just narrate stories; they recreate experiences through rules and systems, a phenomenon Ian Bogost refers to as procedural rhetoric (Sajeev et al. 2021). According to this, games might be able to turn the logic of cultural heritage into rules and behaviors that people can follow. Therefore, games offer new ways to achieve a level of participation that goes beyond passive watching when re-creating performing arts like shadow puppetry. However, scholars have also noted that this participation itself exists on a spectrum (Cavalcante 2023). On the one hand, games can commodify heritage elements, making them aesthetic products available for consumption, such as character skins or decorations (Eklund et al. 2024). This kind of participation takes the form of a consumer behaviour. On the other hand, games can also deeply embed the performance process of heritage into its core gameplay and narrative mechanism, turning players from consumers into actors in an interactive process.

In summary, the existing literature has laid the foundation for this study. It establishes the theoretical premise of regarding intangible cultural heritage as a dynamic process, provides theoretical tools for analysing its cross-media flow, and discusses the different focuses of animation and games in the reproduction of culture. However, the systematic comparative analysis of the reconstruction strategies of the same intangible cultural heritage (shadow puppetry) in the two media and the different aspects of is still an academic gap to be filled. The case study in this research will be based on these theoretical foundations and will explore in depth how the spectacularisation path of animation and the processualisation path of games unfold in practice.

Therefore, the following sections will apply these theoretical perspectives to systematically analyse a series of comparative cases, aiming to reveal how the unique media attributes of animation and games respectively lead to the spectacular and pro-

cedural paths of cultural reconstruction. Shadow puppetry is also being disseminated through social media platforms like TikTok and Bilibili as well as live streaming. According to (Kidd 2018), this process is known as transmedia heritage, whereby cultural forms travel across various platforms and develop new meanings as they become circulated. (Gibbs et al. 2015) stress the importance of platform vernacular, which refers to unique modes of expression that develop due to the unique characteristics of a particular platform. Regarding the discussion on participation, using the ludological approach known as Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics (MDA). “Mechanics” involve the game’s formal elements, such as Quick-Time Events and Free Combat; “dynamics” relate to the manifestation of these mechanics during gameplay; while “aesthetics” focus on the player’s experience and emotional reaction towards them. Using the MDA model enables us to explore how various gameplay designs facilitate different levels of authentic participation, ranging from mere consumption to cultural performance. Animation relies on spectacularizing, creating visual spectacle through stylized audiovisual design, while games employ procedural rhetoric, embedding cultural logic into interactive rules and systems. Together, these distinct strategies show how media affordances shape authenticity: spectacle through representational fidelity and procedure through participatory enactment, forming a unified comparative framework.

Animation stresses the importance of creating visual and auditory spectacles, whereas game developers use procedural rhetoric to create cultural logic within the gameplay system. From the illustration, it is evident that the two media technologies reconstruct the concept of shadow puppetry using varying approaches, which makes it easier to distinguish the theories as shown in Table 2.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study approach to investigate how animation and video games reconstruct Chinese shadow puppetry and shape different forms of authenticity. A qualitative design is suitable because the research concerns symbolic meaning, cultural interpretation, and media-specific reconstruction processes. The study does not seek to measure audience responses or quantify behavioural patterns. Instead, it aims to understand how cultural elements operate within

**Table 2** Comparative framework of spectacularizing in animation and procedural rhetoric in games

Dimension	Animation (Spectacularization)	Games (Procedural Rhetoric)
Mode of Representation	Stylized audiovisual spectacle, collage aesthetics	Interactive rules and systems
Cultural Strategy	Emphasis on mythological motifs and visual fidelity	Embedding cultural logic into gameplay
Audience Engagement	Passive viewing of spectacle	Active participation and enactment
Authenticity Dimension	Representational fidelity (cultural fidelity)	Participatory enactment (heritage resonance)
Outcome	Reconstructed shadow puppetry through spectacle	Reconstructed shadow puppetry through procedure

digital media and how different structures of mediation influence the expression of intangible heritage.

While prioritising interpretive depth, the study also acknowledges the relevance of empirical perspectives in examining how younger audiences engage with interactive digital platforms. Empirical investigations focusing on youth interaction patterns across animation streaming environments, video games, and participatory media spaces provide measurable insights into engagement behaviour, cultural interpretation, and user experience. Methods such as surveys, user analytics, or experimental observation reveal how digital heritage elements are received, interpreted, and enacted by contemporary audiences. Such empirical dimensions provide additional insight by linking symbolic interpretation with observable patterns of media use among younger audiences.

The comparative case study design provides a coherent framework for connecting individual examples with broader analytical questions. Animation and games differ in narrative organisation, audience engagement, and representational strategies. Yet both serve as major platforms for the contemporary circulation of traditional culture. The comparative design therefore offers insight into how different media affordances guide the reconstruction of visual identity, emotional resonance, and participatory experience. Each case is examined as a situated media text, and its representational strategies are evaluated in relation to the wider cultural context in which it circulates.

Case selection follows a purposive strategy. The selected animation and game works all use shadow puppetry as a central visual or narrative element rather than a minor decorative feature. The animation cases (*Kung Fu Panda 2* and *Shānhǎi Jīngqí*) represent global and domestic production contexts. These cases demonstrate the impact of institutional status and cultural motive on the alteration of heritage symbols. Different institutional backgrounds and industrial surroundings have influenced their respective expressive styles. Symbol display is influenced by both cultural values and market positioning. The study involves a mixed method of textual analysis and cultural discourse analysis. The inner structure of any work is guided by textual analysis. It examines the visual composition, the formal structures, the organisation of the narrative, and (where applicable) the interactive mechanisms. This criticism demonstrates how medium-specific methods warp shadow puppetry. The focus used in animation is emphasised on silhouette figures, colour combinations, rhythmic motions and how they are incorporated into storey lines. Games discuss interactive activities, player agency, rule structures, and system feedbacks. These points illustrate how the gaming procedural rationality contributes to the opportunities of participatory that opposes the immersive but observational structure of animation.

The doctrine of cultural discourse analysis complements the textual reading, embedding every media text in its institutional and social context. Official commentaries, statements of production teams and promotion documents demonstrate how creators place the cultural significance of their work. Open digital spaces give the information on how these meanings are perceived, negotiated, or subverted by the audience discourses. Such an analytic layer shows that there is a sense of the text that the cultural meaning is not fixed but is made through the process of transmission, interpretation and institutional framing. It is also used to describe the mobilisation of heritage to commercial, educational or symbolic goals.

The analytical process is not a procedural process but a process confined to an iterative process. Each case is read as an independent text and cross-media compared. The analysis will concern three dimensions of authenticity: visual, emotional, and participatory. These aspects are not rigorous kinds but interpretation glasses that help in the arrangement of results. Visual cultural fidelity consists of aesthetic fidelity and recognisability. Emotional is concerned with mood, mood, and storey resonance. Participatory authenticity concerns the degree of agency and experience. Through these dimensions, we are able to see the differences between animation and games without losing the coherent analytical focus across cases. This hybrid methodology presents a balanced solution. It can be moulded to fit cultural and media research demands, but has a definite analytical purpose. It allows the analysis to move between the close readings of media texts and a more general account of culture, and it maintains a comparative frame which correlates medium-specific affordances and the multiple ways of demonstrating authenticity in the production of shadow puppetry reenactment.

This integrated methodology provides a balanced approach. It maintains the flexibility suited to cultural and media research while offering clear analytical direction. It allows the study to move between close reading of media texts and broader cultural interpretation, and it supports a comparative framework that links medium-specific affordances with different expressions of the reconstruction of shadow puppetry. Ethical deliberation also guides methodology. When researching AI-mediated media, scholars need to account for the role of algorithms and social intelligence in representations and participation. Thus, the comparative approach will not only focus on cultural reconstruction but will also be cognizant of its ethical dimensions.

## Case studies

### Heritage as cinematic spectacle

As discussed above, the core advantages of animation as a medium lie in its powerful visual expression and emotional narrative ability. This section case study compares and analyses *Kung Fu Panda 2*, produced by Hollywood, and *Shānhǎi Jīngqí*, produced in China, to demonstrate how the animation medium prioritizes the realization of high visual cultural fidelity and emotional, but at the same time limits its participatory authenticity to the level of passive viewing.

#### Case 1: *Kung Fu Panda 2*

DreamWorks' *Kung Fu Panda 2* (2011) provides a highly influential example of remediation of shadow puppetry for global audiences. The film does not use the shadow puppet style throughout but deliberately shifts between the art styles of 3D animation and shadow puppet animation in the key opening prologue. This visual shift is clearly illustrated in the stylized opening prologue (Fig. 1), where the film adopts parchment textures and flat silhouettes.

The opening of the movie is aesthetically tilted towards a Chinese shadow puppetry. Light is illuminated over parchment- Esque layer and intricate 2D silhouette

**Fig. 1** Stylised shadow-puppet prologue in Kung Fu Panda 2, showing parchment textures and flat silhouetted forms



figures are animated over it. These images are accompanied with the Digital Chinese folk music. Such procedures are reproduction of important aesthetic traditions of the tradition. Outlines, narrative in form of a tableau, and flatness are some of the most apparent features. It is not the imitation that is only terminated by the sequence. The medium animation does not recline. Rather, it concentrates on the difference between the old media and the new one with a willingness to do it. There are dramatic differences between the hand-painting and the 3D CG between 2D and 3D. Digital tools enable doing justice to the form of art; however, they also enrich it. Multi-layered depth of field is built up and floating camera patterns emerge. Dynamic lighting also plays a role. Traditional opera stages cannot achieve these technical effects. Narratively, this self-conscious style frames Lord Shen's backstory as ancient legend. A clear boundary emerges between the mythical past (shadow puppets) and the story's present (3D world).

Analysis of director interviews and production notes confirms that this strategy was intentional. According to Stuart Hall's theory of encoding, the producers actively constructed between the film and Chinese heritage in public discourse. Director Jennifer Yuh Nelson confirmed in public interviews that these 2D flashbacks were intentional, these scenes were from Po's perspective and were a tribute to Chinese shadow puppetry. By using an art form that has the texture of ancient legends and childhood imagination to answer this core emotional question, the production team successfully encoded it as the emotional core of the story. This strategy was highly successful at the decoding level. Critics generally praised the film's lavish opening, its visual splendour, and its accurate identification of the play-within-a-play's narrative function.

The reconstruction in the film achieves a high degree of visual cultural fidelity. Its aesthetic style is highly recognisable and is endowed with a powerful narrative function, generating strong emotional resonance by mythologising the background story. However, the medium's power remains linear and one-way here. The role of the audience is always that of passive recipients of the spectacle, or what this study defines as passive spectatorship. Shadow puppetry is reconstructed as a refined visual and narrative spectacle, and its traditional community, on-site and interactive nature as intangible cultural heritage is completely stripped.

## Case 2: Shānhǎi Jīngqí

If *Kung Fu Panda 2* represents the Orientalist aesthetic appropriation in the context of globalisation, then the animated film *Shānhǎi Jīngqí* produced by China Central Television (CCTV) represents another cultural logic, a remediation that serves the construction of local culture and national identity. The characters' carved outlines and forceful linearity can be seen clearly in Fig. 2.

The distinctive visual style of Zhu Long and Qie Zhi, as shown in Fig. 2, demonstrates how the film adapts traditional carving aesthetics into digital form. *Kung Fu Panda 2* represents Orientalist aesthetic appropriation within globalization. In contrast, CCTV's *Shānhǎi Jīngqí* follows a different cultural logic. The specific redemption is the building of local culture and national identity. It also includes the traditional theatre of shadow puppetry as part of the digital production. Such a process leads to the procreation of gods and monsters of the old Shan Hai Jing. *Kung Fu Panda 2*

**Fig. 2** Characters Zhu Long and Qie Zhi in *Shānhǎi Jīngqí* (CCTV, 2024)



gives a visual eulogy. Ignoramus, though, is after something weightier. The film uses some techniques in core icons. The information is displayed densely with a bold line. The portrait of Zhu Long and Qie Zhi hints at this sort of aesthetics. No digital curves are used in producing character outlines. Instead, the shapes are defined by violent, hard forms. The lines mimic the historical shadow puppet carving process. The animation is also used with different patterns and colours. These are the characteristics that make each beast unique. The Zhu Ling features complex patterns. These are not biological scales. The forms are instead applied as decorative motifs. Patterns resemble cloud patterns and scroll grass patterns of Ming and Qing dynasties. These patterns become marks of identity. The pictures are not literal but figurative.

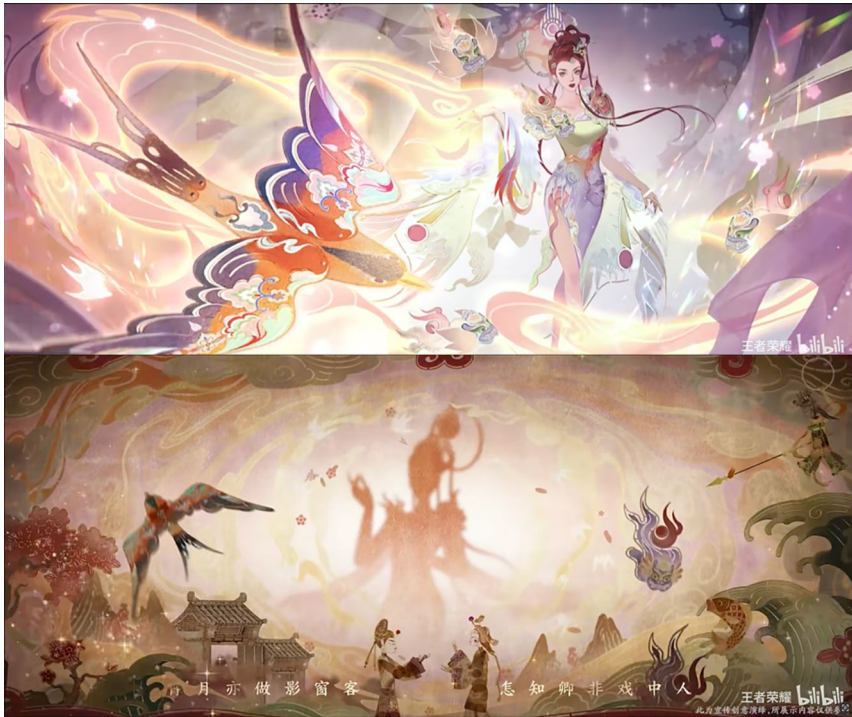
Discourse analysis highlights the specific positioning of the text. The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* functions as a national-level cultural project. China Media Group planned and launched the initiative. The production aims for a unique synthesis. The film combines the aesthetic value of Chinese style with the entertainment of animation. The content also integrates educational. This constitutes a typical case of the Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) as defined by Laurajane Smith. Here, the national media organisation (CCTV) as the authority, dominated the creative transformation process of intangible cultural heritage. To ensure the rigour of this authorised discourse, the main creative team not only invited Professor Chen Lianshan, a mythology expert from Peking University, to participate in the text creation, but also searched for shadow puppet literature and finally determined to refer to the shadow puppet texture styles handed down from the Ming and Qing Dynasties. This discourse strategy aims to encode the animated film as an authoritative media product with educational and cultural heritage functions, and its purpose is to promote the excellent traditional Chinese culture and enhance cultural confidence.

### **Heritage as interactive process**

In sharp contrast to the linear reconstruction path of animation, the interactivity of video games has opened up a new dimension for the reconstruction of intangible cultural heritage. Video games can not only replicate spectacles but also reconstruct heritage as a process. However, this participation is not monolithic but rather a spectrum from superficial to deep forms. This section will reveal how games reconstruct the authenticity of participation in different ways by analysing three cases: *Honor of Kings*, *Werewolf*, and *Gujian III*, shaping heritage into consumable aesthetic commodities and interactive processes that can be deeply experienced.

### **Honor of kings and werewolf**

The commodification of visual symbols of intangible heritage is a common strategy in digital games. The collaborations between *Honor of Kings* and Huaxian shadow puppetry, and between *Werewolf* and Shaanxi artists, exemplify this model. They jointly reveal how heritage is transformed into an aesthetic product for consumption. The stylised pup-pet-silhouette animation used in the promotional video is shown in Fig. 3.

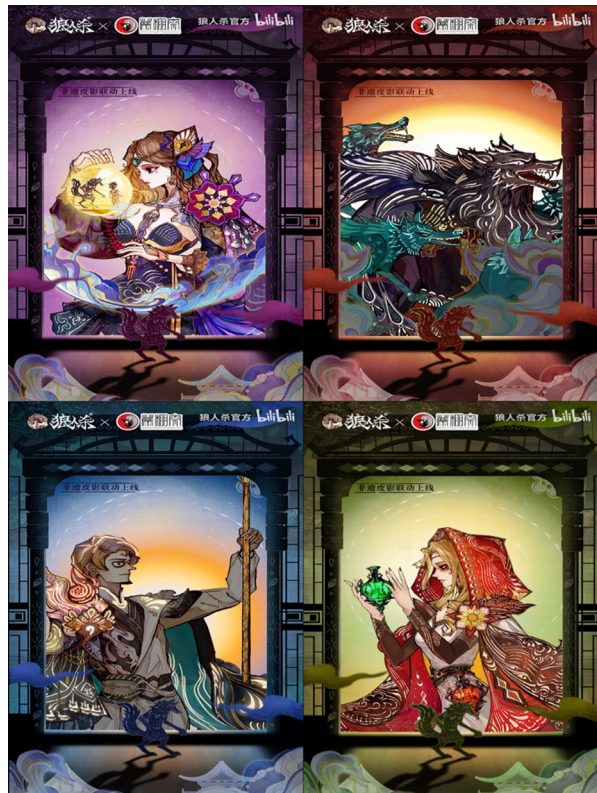


**Fig. 3** Stylised character Mi Yue in Honor of Kings' shadow-puppet collaboration video

The Werewolf collaboration skin strictly imitates the form of shadow puppetry. As shown in Fig. 4, design concepts reference the traditional profile silhouette. To match this style, the art team boldly attempted a full-side character design. The appearance is also marked with observable lines and eye-catching colours that desire the heritage. However, the mechanical dissonance of the game is evident. The stylised shadow puppet design cannot be described as fitting the very texture of the game, and the economics of play in a game is the most crucial aspect of interaction among players. The players purchase virtual items largely to obtain objects of symbolic importance. This phenomenon is a strong validation of the theories of cultural commodification: the market displaces symbolic value to the antique art and culture turns into digital products, able to be bought and sold.

At the level of discourse analysis, this commodification strategy is packaged under the grand narrative of cultural inheritance. According to Stuart Hall's encoding theory, the producers actively construct this cultural connection in public discourse. For example, the official promotional materials for Werewolf define its cooperation with shadow puppetry artists as the inheritance of light and shadow and a dialogue between light and shadow spanning thousands of years, aiming to explore the traditional charm of intangible cultural heritage. The promotional video of Honor of Kings also emphasises the spirit of craftsmanship and poetic narrative, positioning this linkage as the creative cultural re-source development of intangible cultural heritage. This discourse strategy, a form of commercialised Authorised Heritage Dis-

**Fig. 4** Werewolf collaboration skins in shadow puppetry style



course (AHD), frames commercial behaviour as an act of heritage protection, in order to give consumer goods more cultural depth. At the decoding level of the player community, the reaction is more diverse. On the one hand, many players appreciate this aesthetic integration; on the other hand, this interaction mode also strengthens the identity of players as consumers. Players express their cultural taste and identity by purchasing and equipping skins.

These cases achieve high visual cultural fidelity. Medium emotional authenticity through the cultural nostalgia created by marketing discourse and promotional materials. However, their participatory authenticity is narrowed to a consumption behaviour, that is, an aesthetic product as defined in this study. Heritage is reconstructed as an attractive product with cultural added value. The advantage of this model is its wide dissemination and high commercial value, but its risk is that it may simplify the profound cultural heritage into a visual style that can be easily consumed and replaced.

### Gujian III

In the domestic single player role-playing game *Gujian III*, by contrast to the above cases, shadow puppetry is not only used as a decorative element, but also as a deeply embedded narrative and game mechanism, showing a higher level of possibilities for



**Fig. 5** Dragon Palace environment rendered with puppet-style decorative motifs in Gujian III



**Fig. 6** Night pearl projection triggering shadow-puppet silhouettes in Gujian III (Aurogon, 2018)

participation. The aesthetic of the Dragon Palace environment, with its flat decorative motifs, is shown in Fig. 5.

Figure 6 illustrates how the Night Pearl projects silhouettes that activate narrative progression. At the level of textual analysis, this case focuses on the Dragon Palace storyline segment. Here, heritage is not a purchasable product but a mandatory narrative mechanism that players must activate and experience, the interactive mechanism is visualized in Fig. 6. A core plot is entirely unfolded in the form of shadow play. In terms of form, the environmental design of the game scene is full of gorgeous, flat decorations and stylised patterns. These motifs are reminiscent of traditional shadow puppets in texture. The key here is the design of the game mechanics. Unlike passively watching an animation, the shadow puppet show here requires the player to

actively interact with (by activating a prop called Night Pearl) trigger, which gives the player a sense of control and narrative agency. More importantly, the game dynamically switches between the regular 3D exploration gameplay and the 2D shadow puppet show. This design constitutes what Bolter and Grusin call hypermediacy. The game does not attempt to hide the traces of the medium but deliberately highlights the juxtaposition of the two media forms of 3D gameplay and 2D shadow puppetry, allowing players to realise that they are both explorers and viewers and facilitators of the play-within-a-play.

At the level of discourse analysis, since *Gujian III* is a single-player game, its coding practice is mainly reflected in its carefully designed. This decision shows that shadow puppetry as an artistic form is intended not only to provide players with visual spectacles, but also to immerse them in a unique narrative experience. In the decoding of the player community, this design has been widely praised. Many reviews suggest that this innovative narrative approach has greatly enhanced the game's cultural heritage and aesthetic appeal is a successful exploration of cultural expression in domestic games. Players generally believe that this interactive form is more immersive and ritualistic than simple cutscenes and effectively creates an atmosphere of operatic singing and ritual storytelling.

*Gujian III* achieves high visual cultural fidelity in 2D performance and 3D environment design, it also provides higher emotional authenticity by deeply binding the core plot in the ritualised performance. During the game, players are no longer consumers of heritage, but actors in the process of its digital reproduction. Their agency activates heritage in the game world. This model goes beyond superficial commodification and demonstrates the potential for deep integration of heritage as a meaningful interactive narrative experience.

### Justice online

If *Gujian III* achieved the interactive process through narrative embedding, then NetEase's mobile game *Justice Online* (2023) pushed this concept to the extreme at the textual level. In its Chinese National Style Folk Custom Season version update, the game was no longer satisfied with letting players trigger or watch performances but instead tried to make players become performers. This case represents the highest form of participatory authenticity, procedural reenactment.

The main storyline of the game includes a shadow play that requires players to enter the game and perform in person. As shown in Fig. 7, the player's 3D character and perspective are transformed into a 2D side-scrolling digital stage, and the characters and enemies controlled by the player are rendered as shadow puppets with clear outlines, flat textures and a sense of joints. Accompanied by the ancient opera singing and dialogue, players need to punish the evil and promote justice through the core combat mechanism of the game, to personally interpret this ancient legend.

This design provides a clear example of Ian Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric. The argument made by the game's rules and interactions (the procedure) is that you are no longer a spectator; you are the performer. Unlike *Gujian III*, where the player's agency is mainly reflected in the initiation of a narrative segment, in *Justice Online*, the player's agency is reflected in the re-enactment of the legend through combat



**Fig. 7** Justice online screenshot

operations. Each attack and dodge of the player is a programmed performance of the hero in the shadow play, so that the performance process of the intangible cultural heritage is completely overlapped with the core gameplay of the game.

At the level of cultural discourse analysis, the developer's encoding intention is clearly explained in the public publicity materials. The official announcement clearly positioned this update as a game content with a strong sense of participation, a strong cultural atmosphere, and a deep cultural heritage. Its core goal is to transform players from playgoers to people in the play. This constitutes a carefully crafted performance of authenticity, positioning the game as a legitimate carrier of cultural communication. At the decoding level, the heated discussions in the player community about soul-transmigration into ancient operas indicate that the intention of this immersive role-playing has been successfully received and actively responded to by players.

Justice Online has achieved high visual cultural fidelity through its specially built 2D digital stage. By allowing players to play the protagonist of the story and experience the ups and downs of the plot, it has created extremely high emotional authenticity. Most importantly, it has achieved the highest level of participation authenticity in this study case. It has surpassed the consumption level of Honor of Kings and the narrative trigger level of Gujian III, and entered the performance simulation level, providing a powerful new model for the digital revitalisation of intangible cultural heritage.

**Table 3** MDA framework applied to shadow puppetry games

Game	Mechanics (Rules/Systems)	Dynamics (Play Process)	Aesthetics (Player Experience)	Degree of Interactivity
Honor of Kings	Cosmetic skins, character abilities	Consumption-driven, purchase/use	Visual novelty, symbolic heritage	Low
Werewolf	Shadow puppet skins, side-view design	Decorative integration, limited game-play impact	Cultural recognition, aesthetic appreciation	Low–Medium
Gujian III	Narrative quests, free combat, puppetry storylines	Emergent play, active role enactment	Immersion, cultural performance	High

The MDA model is used to analyze a few selected games in shadow puppetry, showing the extent of their integration with elements from their cultural heritage. While Honor of Kings and Werewolf only involve surface-level integration and shallow engagement, Gujian III exhibits greater authenticity through the inclusion of game quests and battle systems, making it possible to perform cultures through gameplay shows as Table 3.

## Discussion

### Media affordances and the formation of authenticity

Digital media provide novel contexts to manifestation of intangible cultural heritage. The ways of presenting cultural symbols in animation and games are different, as each medium has its logic. These two types of media can be seen as a juxtaposition that clarifies how shadow puppets can be absorbed into other cultures and take on new significance. The aesthetic aspect of the shadow puppetry includes unmistakable forms, vivid colour, and beats. Animation exploits these qualities to create scenes that have a high aesthetic value. Games apply the same characteristics to encourage interaction functionality and player behaviour. These disparities are fundamental to both the structure of the mediums. Animation follows a linear order. Games, by contrast, facilitate direct action and movement. Mobility of characters and space are governed by the unique set of rules in both formats and the set of rules determines the appearance of authenticity. Authenticity is manifold. Authenticity is gauged by level of emotional resonance and visual restoration in animation. Engagement and involvement can build verisimilitude in games. Rhythm of the medium is taken into consideration when modifying heritage portions. Digital forms do not repeat customs but create experiences that can be integrated into the media system. This change sets a new meaning. The classical variant of shadow puppetry has a symbolic significance, and digital media projects this meaning onto new cultural backgrounds. Shadow puppetry involves ritual, storytelling, music and community contact. These dimensions are seen in restricted forms in digital media. Animation is more concerned with visual and narrative expression.

Games revolve around procedural action and user agency. The two media spotlight different aspects of the original practise. The shift between physical space and digital

space alters the social sense of the art. Nonetheless, this change does not diminish its cultural potential. It demonstrates the way in which cultural forms keep evolving with novel practises of production and interaction. Media affordances analysis assists in explaining the art transformation. The strengths of animation and games are not identical, and this is why they lead to cultural expression in different directions of authenticity. Visual and emotional values are elevated in animation since the audience reacts to picture and sound. Game-based participative qualities increase as the participant acts within the fictional world. These dispositions are not mutually exclusive. They demonstrate the involvement of various media in cultural circulation.

Shadow puppetry develops into an adaptable cultural element, and its interpretation expands with fresh form and experience combinations. This analogy demonstrates that authenticity is not based on wholesale replication of tradition. It relies on the correspondence between symbolic content and the structure of media. Images or actions acquire cultural power when they feel meaningful to a digital scene. Each medium presents a different avenue towards this sense of meaning. The current discussion is based on this concept and it provides a more elaborate description in the following sections.

### **Animation and the logic of spectacularisation**

Animation is the development of visual imagery. Shadow puppetry works well with fine lines and vivid colours. The purity of their unattractive lines relative to the coloured grounds leaves a sense of traditional puppetry. These traits assist animation to a well-known cultural image. The medium is easily able to expand or diminish the space of vision, and the spectator eagerly adapts to this stylisation—since the animation is below the visual laws of itself. This liberty has enabled animation to complement shadow puppetry as a figurative art. In animated scenes, emotion takes priority. The viewer is fixed to respond to rhythm and music. Puppet imagery can be seen in scenes where *pe-nuhi-tanya* play a crucial part in the narrative. The scenes expect recollection, fantasy, or ethical conflict. These meanings grow in the shadow puppet motifs since the visual representation shows that they are not operating in the normal time. They imply a mythic society or ancient times. This stance enhances emotional sincerity. We also are able to obtain the feeling of connexion between the image and the cultural meaning because the style presupposes an intense storytelling tradition. This effect is reinforced by cinematic composition.

Lighting, rock-like surfaces, and slow rhythm guide the eye. They create space for reflection. A clear interpretation is possible through visual details, and the mood of a situation influences emotion. These qualities cement the audience to the cultural roots and form a bond through narrative presence, though not necessarily involvement. The viewer is exposed to a stylised idealised image, of a symbolic world, where the symbolic richness facilitates sentimental intimacy. It is one-way form of intimacy. The audience is an observer of how the picture changes, and there is nothing they can do about it. The design fits into the animation mechanism. This medium directs the vision of the viewer in a programmed way and the context develops through the creation of the image. This sequence of paths adds even more unity to the entirety, not to mention restraining the audience. The audience does not participate in the process

of performance or even in the formation of the cultural form. They visualise and react to feelings. Verisimilitude is fabricated in feeling and sense.

The logic of spectacle is thus formed. Animation transforms cultural symbols into visual events. Visual events highlight the beauty of form, dynamic rhythm and narrative tension. Cultural forms become the center of attention. This transformation allows shadow puppetry to enter a new context of communication. Animated images bring art to the attention of global audiences. The images retain the clear contours and rhythmic characteristics of the original craft, and the symbolic meaning is continued in the process of transformation. Colour, line, music and narrative structure are combined with each other, and emotional meaning is generated in this combination.

Spectacularization is not the same as superficial application; it is a way of expressing oneself that focuses on visual experience. Animation relies on image movement, so it shows this way of expressing oneself. Heritage elements are changed in the flow of images. Authenticity is shaped by visual symbols, symbolic clarity, and emotional atmosphere. This authenticity helps cultural communication in the digital age and helps the audience understand the aesthetic value of traditional art.

### **P Games and the logic of proceduralisation**

Games encourage action, choice, and investigation, and these media features offer diverse avenues for cultural expression. Players engage in the digital world, and each activity generates new input and modifications, as well as new meanings over time. Cultural factors enter the system via rules, props, and spatial structure. When the game structure incorporates shadow puppet features into these procedures, authenticity gains additional experiences.

Visual signs still have a lot of worth. The screen shows shadow puppet shapes, motifs, and colours, but forgets what it was. Players must resettle people, activate machines or perform tasks connected to cultural demonstrations. Perception and action constitute a loop. Cultural contact in this process is deepened. Symbols do not remain extraneous decals; they are part of the action track. The shape of a shadow puppet will be eventually incorporated into the player movement pattern. Decisions and their consequences form the storey of the game. In shadow puppets, they are able to perform new tasks or gain broker information. Narrative development is associated with symbolic imagery. Visual meaning is no longer fixed. Meaning extends into action. Cultural motifs create narrative lines. This experience improves participatory authenticity. When the game allows the players to recreate the performing arrangement within the system, participatory authenticity is enhanced. The rhythm of movement, the battle mechanism and the structure of the lens can also be similar to classical shadow puppets. In the process of attacking, avoidance, or movement, the players create stage-like action lines. In this case, the mechanics of the game and cultural form cannot be separated. Players enter the shadow space and enact the logic of performance there.

Action prolongs the idea of cultural engagement. Games also produce social spaces. Players share images, mission details, and cultural information. Implementation of interactive interactions boosts culture. The process of interpretation is no longer limited to personal experiences. Our understanding is influenced by community

participation. The different players come in with views. Cultural expressions thereby attain a broader range of expression. The cultural perpetuation is encouraged by continuous discussions within the online realm. The meaning-generating path is called the procedural mechanism. The form of rules provides a working basis to cultural forms. The game system defines the order structure. Players occupy this structure with their activities. Authenticity increases in time around the circulation. Authenticity is not about faking classic forms. The authenticity is based on a sense of action and presence. Cultural spaces are made real by experience. It is not animation but by the same breath it is complementary. Animation is picture structure and emotion. Games are concerned with both the format and the experience of acting. These two paths come together to the development of cultural meaning. The digital age has seen shadow puppetry taking a new twist. Cultural forms adapt to novel rhythms and seek novel audiences. Online expression shows how legacy can be ever-changing.

### **Cultural risks and broader implications**

Results indicate that the social intelligence of AI has an impact on the possibilities and threats surrounding the commodification of culture. Although online technologies increase access and engagement, they also pose questions relating to ownership, bias, and oversimplification. This should be considered to ensure that culture maintains its integrity within the digital age. Digital communication is bringing the new opportunities to the culture of shadowing puppetry, but it is really threatened. On the one hand, extremely bright display improves the art form recognition. On the other hand, the cultural level may even be susceptible to flatten in case the expression of images becomes predominant. This association between form and context will be watered down as the cultural aspects will not be re-linked with ritual backdrop, community association and physical practise. The audience can give the image a name, however, it may not be able to enter into the cultural world behind the image. As symbols are apparent when exchanging messages, they may as well fade away when it comes to transformation. Video games are not tension free. When cultural symbols get incorporated into the commercial apparatus, the direction of meanings is shifted to the logic of consumption. Shadow puppetry visual style is supported by the use of character skins, and festivals, which do not always require the retention of the whole social context. Apart from being used as game skins and movie preludes, shadow puppet art is also commodified in other ways such as merchandise, tourism, and streaming aesthetics. The creation of figurines and fashion accessories modelled after the puppets' designs can be seen in the commercial sector. In addition, streaming websites make use of shadow puppet effects to lure viewers. Shadow puppetry is further commodified by being included in advertisements to denote Chinese culture aesthetically. Gamers such as the beauty of design but less aware of the moral's relationships and groupings that traditional performances have.

Cultural meaning has not been reduced completely, only that room to articulate it has been narrowed down gradually and the level of interpretation shallow. Raw materials Digital producers always seek a golden mean between the visual and cultural depth. Other projects invite the specialists to work on research, apply traditional methods, and cooperate with artists. Such practises enhance the culture expressiv-

ity. Alongside, there is the pace of the digital production and the level of the rivalry within the market. New communicational situations demand cultural articulations to transform. One literature tries to over metalize the structure and others tries to over metalize the connotation. An endless range of expression is fulfilled by different directions. However, in spite of the dangers, the digital media has irrefutable advantages in the conservation of the intangible cultural heritage. The animation and games have enabled shadow puppetry to take new audiences. Live performances are new to most people. The digital works represent an initial encounter with the symbolic form, narrative structures and aesthetic experiences. Understanding is a process that is slowly formed by watching and experience.

Young viewers have their circles of rotating audiences that may be interested in learning the tradition further. Digital photography has given rise to the inception of contextual culture. Follow-up developments have a potential to increase the scope of participation. This enables one to navigate virtual and augmented reality applications to develop a more immersive shadow puppet experience and the veridimilitude of the audience digital space can be switched on or off at any given time. As is examined within the context of animation and game-development, each technical advance forms novel forms of expression. The form of creativity in the transmedia flow is also one in which it alternates constantly. The basic symbols have an unchanging value. With electronic tools, the lines of expression are broadened. Risks are always there and opportunities are always there. Digital works can create an awareness and potential help in ensuring the traditions are not lost when the creators are conscious of cultural value.

## Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that modern animation and games can be regarded as the new media, that preserves, as well as changes ancient Chinese shadow puppet. Movie makers and game creators fill the visual language and narration by creating flat silhouettes, peculiar pattern designs and mythological subjects. Films also exist in which stylised portions of the shadow puppet collage blend with the general format of the narrative to narrate folk storeys. Questions or character forms on shadow puppetry are placed in interactive plots in other games and so on. Through these forms of digital reconstruction, a new avenue of communication of traditional art is introduced. Shadow puppetry has penetrated into a wider international society. Access channels have been gained by the new generation. Conventional practises have been able to adapt in the context of the modern media. There are also a few questions involved in this discovery. The meaning that art has in culture may be not as apparent when it is simply viewed as constituting visual items or the gameplay. Human beings are more concerned with the appearance.

The local context is gradually fading away in functions like narration of the past, imparting morals, the ability to create community ties and so on. The producers even visit shadow puppeteers and view the indigenous materials. This practice is good for you. Viewing historical aspects as the description of the dress will raise the risk of people giving them the wrong idea. Additional liaisons with the concerned pro-

professionals should be carried out in future adaptive methodologies. The culture of digital works supposed to be clearly informed. Reproduction in digital form is supposed never to lose its authenticity. These findings confirm the fact that heritage is a dynamic discourse. It is also concluded in this work that shadow theatres are not in time stasis, but by the active process of contact with modern storytelling media. This is in coordination with cultural studies whose perception of traditions being dynamic and constantly rewritten. Even such basic aesthetic and narrative elements of the shadow puppetry can be retained further in a digital presentation, although some of them might be altered. The audience contributes an indispensable element in this process as well: as soon as it is animated by their vigour and interest, it can elevate the art; but, when apathy or misapprehension is witnessed, they will reduce the art to mere style. Such storytelling events could be enhanced with more cultural background and in-depth with the cooperation of game creators, movie producers, professional puppet artists, historians, and cultural educators.

Virtual reality and augmented reality technologies make it easy to perform virtual performances through shadow-puppets which preserves conventional forms of shadow puppetry, but digitalises it creating interactive forms of art, which can be engaged in. Furthermore, with a systematic audience research, the educational impact of such digital adaptations might be evaluated hence informing the best practises in media and intangible cultural heritage. The information obtained during this study could assist the artists and designers to be more culturally sensitive and reduce the number of misunderstandings during further adaptations. Generally, the Chinese shadow puppetry has proved very versatile in evolving with the new media. Since ancient times the spectators are interested in light and shadowing effect in villages and the palace yards. This mania reverberates on a worldwide scale on the digital screens today. This trend of the age is not only challenging but also a great opportunity. Through creative ingenuity with regards to intangible cultural heritage, both the manufactures and consumers can keep the practise alive but, in its essence, leave its effects to be experienced into later life.

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