



Designing a Narrative System Architecture for Serialized Mythological IPs in Animated Films

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Abstract. With the rapid growth of China's animated film industry, the Nezha franchise has emerged as a prominent example of Chinese mythological IP development, distinguished by its unique serialized narrative strategies. This study takes the Nezha series as a case to examine four narrative dimensions—construction, structure, presentation, and form—through the lens of transmedia storytelling. It aims to explore the narrative strategies employed in the serialization of Chinese mythological IPs in animated films and analyze how these strategies effectively facilitate IP development. The findings provide a systematic theoretical framework for advancing the creative expansion of Chinese mythological IPs.

Keywords: Transmedia storytelling; Serialized narrative model; Mythological IP system; Visual-cultural integration; Cross-platform narrative design

1 Introduction

In recent years, China's animated film market has experienced rapid growth. Among its developments, the Nezha franchise—based on the mythological figure from Chinese folklore—has emerged as a focal point due to its distinctive narrative style. As an innovative reinterpretation of a classic Chinese mythological IP, the Nezha animated film series skillfully integrates ancient mythology with modern elements such as art and technology. It has repeatedly achieved commercial success and become a landmark phenomenon in domestic animation.

The success of serialized films lies not only in their commercial performance but also in the unique narrative mechanisms that underpin them. These mechanisms

transcend conventional storytelling constraints, reimagining the traditional character of Nezha with contemporary values and attributes. Through a multi-layered and expansive narrative system, the series provides audiences with immersive and multidimensional experiences, facilitating the wide dissemination of cultural values. Given the narrative success of the Nezha series, as shown in Figure 1, this study adopts a transmedia storytelling perspective to examine its serialized narrative strategies across four dimensions: narrative construction, narrative structure, narrative presentation, and narrative form. Ultimately, the study aims to identify the key factors driving the effective development of Chinese mythological IPs.

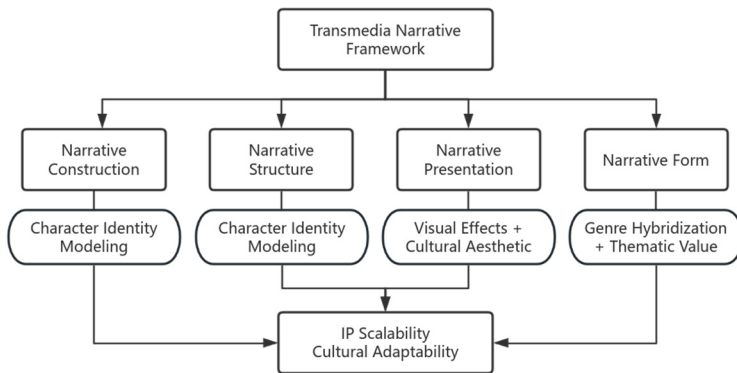


Fig. 1. Transmedia Narrative System Architecture for Serialized Mythological IPs

2 Serialized Narrative Strategies in the Nezha Animated Franchise

2.1 Character-Centered Continuity in Serialized Narrative Construction

Within the theoretical framework of transmedia storytelling, building a narrative universe around a central character often involves negotiating a fundamental tension between the changing narrative lines across media platforms and the stable preservation of the character's core identity. The consistency or transformation of a character's "existential identity" and "fictional identity" directly affects the coherence of the narrative and the success of transmedia storytelling.^[1]

Serialized storytelling addresses this challenge by maintaining consistency in a character's existential identity while expanding the diversity of its fictional identity. This approach enables a balance between the character's internal attributes and external portrayal. Moreover, by integrating narrative strategies across diverse media forms, character centralization reinforces symbolic continuity within expanded narratives, allowing the character to convey coherent symbolic meaning across platforms and elicit emotional resonance from audiences.

Consistency of Existential Identity and Diversity of Fictional Identity

In the Nezha animated film series, the consistency of Nezha’s existential identity provides a stable foundation for audience recognition. By creatively redesigning this existential identity, Nezha demonstrates layered dynamism within modern narrative contexts. According to Paul Bertetti, a character’s existential identity comprises both image identity—such as physical appearance, name, and skills—and thematic identity, which refers to the narrative functions a character fulfills in different storylines.^[2]

Compared with earlier animated adaptations like *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979) and *Legend of Nezha* (2003), the recent Nezha films exhibit a strong continuity in image identity. The iconic visual features—such as holding a fire-tipped spear, riding on wind-fire wheels, and wearing the red silk sash—have been retained. Thematic identity also remains consistent: Nezha is always portrayed as the son of Li Jing and Lady Yin, the disciple of Taiyi Zhenren, and a rebellious hero who refuses to accept a preordained fate. This visual and thematic continuity helps audiences quickly recognize and relate to the hero, while preserving the core spirit of the Nezha myth.

In director Jiaozi’s version, Nezha maintains the traditional red motif, but his costume design is innovatively updated with leather, metal elements, smoky eye makeup, and casual postures like hands in pockets—emphasizing his rebellious and individualized characteristics. While his resistance to fate and pursuit of self-identity remain, the narrative introduces greater emotional depth through his affectionate relationship with his parents and sincere friendship with Ao Bing. Furthermore, the reintroduction of minor mythological characters, such as the steward and sea yaksha, establishes intertextual links between old and new texts, enriching the narrative.

In contrast, Nezha’s fictional identity evolves with the narrative across different films, expressed through variations in agentive, modal, and value identity. For instance, in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, Nezha’s fictional identity is that of a rebellious hero who defies his destiny as the demon orb incarnate. This symbolizes resistance against prejudice and fate, resonating with contemporary values of personal freedom and individuality. In *Nezha: Clash of the Deities*, Nezha’s fictional identity expands into that of a “guardian,” representing justice and peace, and embodying themes of responsibility and sacrifice. Meanwhile, the narrative theme evolves from personal redemption to collective responsibility, marking the character’s growth and adding depth to the storyline.^[3] This relationship is visually summarized in Nezha’s character identity matrix, as shown in Figure 2.

Character Identity Matrix: Nezha’s Dual Dimensions	
Existential Identity	Visual Traits: spear, wheels, red sash
	Parentage: Li Jing, Lady Yin
Fictional Identity	Mentor: Taiyi Zhenren
	Myth Role: rebellious divine child
	Demon child → Hero → Guardian
	Themes: resistance → justice
	Agency: grows across narrative
	Adds emotional depth and modern relevance

Fig. 2. Nezha’s Character Identity Matrix

Through the enduring consistency of his existential identity, Nezha retains strong recognizability and audience acceptance across the series. Simultaneously, the evolving fictional identity enables narrative innovation and ideological renewal. Together, these two identity dimensions construct a narrative foundation where traditional mythology merges seamlessly with modern serialized storytelling.

Character Centralization and the Symbolic Expansion of Narrative

Within the theoretical framework of transmedia storytelling, character centralization is a key driver for the continuous expansion of narrative systems. Its core mechanism lies in the shaping and evolution of iconic characters, which progressively deepen symbolic representation and enrich textual meaning.

As the foundational text of the franchise, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* clearly illustrates Nezha's transformation—from a misunderstood and stigmatized figure to a self-aware hero who challenges his fate. This developmental arc, driven by coherent plot progression, enables a dynamic reconstruction of Nezha's character identity and establishes a solid narrative framework for future installments. The film's remarkable commercial and cultural success triggered widespread attention and high audience engagement, a phenomenon that aligns with Marie-Laure Ryan's "snowball effect" [4]: when a narrative becomes especially popular, it often generates sequels, prequels, and spin-offs in response to public demand.

Consequently, *Nezha: Clash of the Deities*, as an extension text, builds upon and expands the core narrative logic by introducing new characters such as the Four Dragon Kings, Shen Xiaobao, and the Deer Boy. These characters not only enrich emotional and narrative possibilities for Nezha but also enhance the serial continuity of the overarching narrative.

Drawing on Marie-Laure Ryan's theory of "immersive poetics," [5] this process can be further explained: when audiences deeply engage with the symbolic system established in *Birth of the Demon Child*, they internalize character cognition into stable mental models. As a result, when encountering the open-ended questions and new character constructions in *Clash of the Deities*, they are able to extend their understanding of the narrative based on prior symbolic knowledge. The Nezha franchise, driven by the snowball effect, continually strengthens the symbolic identity of its central character by building tight intertextual links between installments, resulting in a progressively enhanced symbolic presence across the series.

In summary, the Nezha animated series strategically integrates the consistency of existential identity, the diversity of fictional identity, and character-driven symbolic expansion. This synergy enables a profound fusion of traditional mythological values and modern storytelling techniques. Through a gradual, snowball-like accumulation of symbolic meaning, each narrative node contributes to a coherent and evolving symbolic system. This process not only provides a replicable model for transmedia content development but also offers a sustainable strategy for serialized narrative construction.

2.2 Serialized Narrative Structure: Linear Main Plot and Hybrid Subplots

In serialized narrative structures, the combination of unidirectional causal logic and stepwise progression forms a rigorous narrative framework for the main plot. Within this structure, plot development and character growth are tightly interwoven, generating a sense of internal necessity and coherence.

At the same time, the inclusion of multi-threaded storytelling, convergent endings, and interconnections among core characters enhances the diversity and autonomy of the subplots. This approach facilitates the organic integration of multiple narrative threads, ultimately constructing a coherent yet expandable narrative system.

Unidirectional Causal Logic and Stepwise Progression in the Narrative Spine

The *Nezha* animated film series constructs a clear, unidirectional causal chain throughout its narrative. Each plot event and character decision is tightly interlinked. For example, in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, the story traces Nezha's internal struggle and gradual rebellion against fate. Every shift in Nezha's personality and behavioral choice emerges logically from earlier narrative setups and accumulated character depth. This tightly bound causal logic lends an air of inevitability to the character's development. It not only ensures structural coherence but also allows the audience to clearly perceive a cause-and-effect narrative trajectory.

A similar narrative strategy is evident in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, where character development also depends heavily on causally connected storytelling. Take the *Iron Man* franchise: Tony Stark evolves from a self-centered arms dealer into a self-sacrificing hero. His transformation is grounded in a series of causally linked experiences that shape his personality and decisions. By gradually revealing Stark's emotional changes and moral choices in response to pivotal events, Marvel creates a logical and convincing arc of character growth.

Building upon causal logic, the *Nezha* films also adopt a stepwise narrative structure, which unfolds events or character evolution in a sequential, hierarchical order that mirrors cognitive or experiential logic. This narrative technique highlights the developmental trajectory of the story while progressively unveiling character fates and plot direction (Liang, 2020) ^[6]. As discussed earlier, *Birth of the Demon Child* portrays Nezha's progression from confusion and despair to awakening, resistance, and finally self-redemption. Each stage of his growth is directly built upon prior emotional and narrative developments, with each phase foreshadowing the next.

This stepwise approach not only enriches the character's dimensionality but also offers audiences a clear cognitive path, guiding them through the deepening process of character transformation. The Marvel films utilize a similar structure: Tony Stark's growth—from early failures, through self-reflection and moral refinement—follows a logical progression, with each turning point serving as a narrative catalyst. This layered, ladder-like storytelling method skillfully fuses two narrative elements—causality and progression—to depict a character's rise from adversity to maturity, providing a structurally coherent foundation for future plot expansion.

Enhanced Multi-Threaded Storytelling and Convergent Endings in Subplot Design

The Nezha animated film series makes extensive use of hybridized subplots, which play a pivotal role in serialized storytelling. Centering on Nezha as the narrative anchor, the films interweave independent and stylistically distinct storylines that showcase the personal growth and transformations of various characters. This strategy builds a mythological universe that is both logically coherent and imaginatively expansive. In this mode of storytelling, characters such as Ao Bing, the Dragon Clan, and the citizens of Chentang Pass are interconnected through Nezha's perspective.

For example, in *Nezha: Clash of the Deities*, the war sequences introduce new characters such as the octopus and shark demon leaders, each of whom is given a backstory rooted in their earlier battles for the demon race. While the main plot focuses on Nezha's personal transformation, the subplots flesh out rich and nuanced backgrounds for supporting characters, thus broadening the narrative dimensions. A comparable approach is seen in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, where standalone storylines of characters like Ant-Man, Doctor Strange, Thor, and the Guardians of the Galaxy contribute to a vast and diverse narrative system.

After elaborating on multiple independent subplots, the Nezha series eventually reconverges these narrative threads around the central character. These intersections not only highlight Nezha's continued growth but also contribute to the mythological world's expansion and complexity. Similarly, in *Avengers: Endgame*, Marvel merges its many individual narrative strands, allowing character arcs to collide and interconnect at the climax of the overarching storyline. In multi-threaded narratives, each subplot offers unique narrative value, enriching the story from different perspectives. The convergent ending structure skillfully binds these disparate threads into a coherent whole, reinforcing narrative cohesion while maintaining thematic and structural richness.

In summary, the Nezha series combines a linear main plot—structured by causal logic and stepwise progression—with hybrid subplots and convergent endings. While the main plot ensures narrative clarity and fluidity, the diverse subplots contribute depth and variation. The organic integration of these two narrative dimensions enhances the cohesion and continuity of serialized storytelling. It also mitigates the limitations of a singular narrative mode and establishes a stable yet expandable platform for future creative development in serialized animated storytelling.

2.3 Visual Innovation and Cultural Expansion in Serialized Narrative Presentation

In the presentation of serialized narratives, there exists a close interplay between breakthroughs in visual spectacle and the expansion of cultural meaning. Through continuous advancements in visual effects technology and the growing incorporation of Eastern fantasy aesthetics, traditional cultural elements are reimaged and revitalized. As a result, the works achieve a dual enhancement—stimulating the senses while deepening cultural value.

Advancements in Visual Effects in the Nezha Animated Franchise

The Nezha animated film series has continuously pushed the boundaries of visual effects through the use of cutting-edge technologies such as high-precision CGI, motion capture, and iridescent gradient rendering. These innovations align with contemporary audience expectations for immersive presence and enhanced narrative transmission. In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, over 1,800 shots were used, of which more than 1,400 involved special effects. In *Nezha: Clash of the Deities*, the total number of shots exceeded 2,400, with over 1,900 dedicated to visual effects.

One notable example is the portrayal of Nezha's body being fragmented into over 600 pieces under the curse of the "Heart-Piercing Spell." The production team spent nearly a year designing and refining this sequence using visual effects to accurately convey the symbolic depth of this traditional cultural motif, aiming to deliver a powerful and culturally grounded visual experience. Similarly, in *New Gods: Rebirth of Nezha*, the rebirth sequence uses alternating warm and cool colors and flowing light and shadow to enhance the emotional tension and symbolic meaning. It is evident that visual effects have become an important tool in contemporary animation to drive the narrative and express emotions.

In the current digital media environment, audience expectations have shifted from pure visual stimulation to a more integrated experience that combines sensory input with emotional resonance. Green (M.C.) posits that when individuals are deeply transported into a narrative, the real world becomes "less accessible," and their attention fully centers on the story, generating vivid mental imagery as if the scenes were real.^[7] The Nezha series, by fusing advanced visual effects with narrative structure, heightens this sense of immersion—allowing audiences to engage both cognitively and emotionally with the storyworld. This facilitates not only visual information processing but also emotional identification with characters and plotlines, producing psychological resonance that transcends the screen.

In contrast, Hollywood has long relied on technological innovation to create large-scale visual spectacles that drive box-office success. The Marvel Cinematic Universe, for example, uses visual effects not merely to display vast superhero environments but also as a form of "invisible narration." Visual effects in Marvel films function as narrative devices that communicate plot developments and character arcs. From meticulous shot composition to color palettes, every element supports the unfolding story, offering powerful visual cues for emotional and thematic interpretation.

Rather than relying solely on dazzling visuals, the Nezha series strategically integrates spectacle with storytelling to fulfill audiences' psychological needs for presence and narrative immersion. Its deep integration of technology and narrative allows for holistic enhancement across both visual and emotional dimensions.

The Increasing Integration of Eastern Fantasy Aesthetic Symbols

The Nezha animated film series distinguishes itself through a unique Eastern fantasy aesthetic, presenting rich cultural connotations and establishing a narrative paradigm imbued with strong cultural identity. This aesthetic foundation supports a global cultural communication strategy, powerfully affirming China's cultural confidence. Deeply rooted in Chinese traditional culture, the series transforms historical motifs into contemporary visual symbols.

In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, for example, the two bronze guardian beasts are crafted by seamlessly blending symbols from ancient Shu civilization—such as Sanxingdui and the Jinsha Site—with modern digital design. Advanced modeling and texture-rendering technologies breathe new life into these cultural elements, making them distinctive carriers of Eastern fantasy aesthetics. Similarly, in the opening scenes of *Nezha: Clash of the Deities*, the battle to defend Chentang Pass features architectural details like city walls, upturned eaves, and multi-tiered roofs. These are complemented by taotie motifs, which symbolize both divine authority and the power to ward off evil.

The ancient Shu symbols, treasured components of Chinese heritage, evoke deep historical memory, while traditional architectural elements reflect the hierarchical order of ancient Chinese society and convey solemn cultural values. By integrating historical depth with modern design, the series not only preserves the essence of Chinese traditional aesthetics but also showcases the ingenuity and aesthetic sensibilities of ancient craftsmen. This creative fusion enhances audience identification with national culture and fosters a sense of pride in cultural heritage.^[8]

Built on this rich cultural foundation and distinct aesthetic expression, the *Nezha* series adopts a strategy of “global localization.” The continued enrichment of Eastern fantasy aesthetic symbols in the films aligns with international audiences’ pursuit of visual spectacle while meeting diverse aesthetic expectations. Simultaneously, the embedded traditional Chinese cultural content supports cultural diversity in the global media landscape.

Similar strategies can be observed in other successful global franchises: Marvel’s *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* integrates Chinese martial arts and Eastern visual styles, while *Black Panther* draws on African cultural motifs to construct the fictional nation of Wakanda. These examples illustrate the effectiveness of cultural localization in achieving international success.

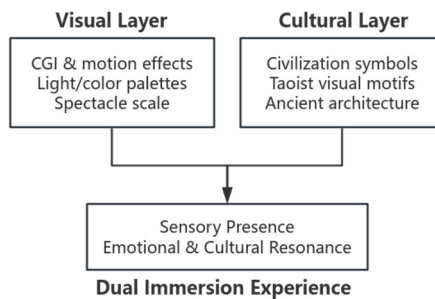


Fig. 3. Visual-Cultural Integration Model

In summary, through continuous advancements in visual effects and the growing incorporation of Eastern fantasy symbols, the *Nezha* franchise meets audience demands for immersive visual-narrative experiences while constructing a culturally resonant communication model. These dual strategies—visual innovation and cultural specific-

ity—mutually reinforce one another, expanding the scope and depth of serialized storytelling and significantly enhancing the franchise’s global appeal. As such, the Nezha series has become a powerful vehicle for promoting traditional Chinese culture on the international stage. Figure 3 illustrates how visual innovation and cultural symbolism are integrated into a coherent model of transmedia expression.

2.4 Genre Hybridization and Thematic Value in Serialized Narrative Forms

In serialized narrative forms, the integration of diverse genres and the articulation of thematic values go beyond the traditional constraints of mythological storytelling. This hybrid approach fosters a posture of openness that accommodates heterogeneous aesthetic expectations. It also enables a profound dialogue between the essence of traditional culture and the principles of modern ideology, thereby promoting the contemporary transformation of myth and the ongoing reproduction of cultural critique.

Thematic Fusion of Comedy and Suspense in Mythological Storytelling

In the mythological narrative structure of the Nezha animated film series, diverse genre elements are continuously integrated to construct a multidimensional textual system. This innovative fusion of themes not only narrows the emotional distance between characters and audiences but also addresses audience expectations for novelty in sequels and deeper emotional resonance. Specifically, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* incorporates comedic elements that, through modern narrative techniques, disrupt the traditionally solemn tone of myth. Building on this, *Nezha: Clash of the Deities* introduces elements of suspense and tension. The integration of multiple genres within the serialized narrative framework enables the films to cater to diverse aesthetic preferences across different cultural and generational backgrounds, thereby lowering the interpretive threshold of traditional mythological texts.

This thematic hybridization breaks away from a single-genre narrative mode and imbues the films with a cross-boundary quality that blends the traditional with the contemporary. According to Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of hybridity, hybridity facilitates significant breakthroughs and grants the text a unique discursive power. It embodies rupture, collision, and tension, yet generates new meanings within these complex relations (Wang, 2016) ^[9]. In the Nezha films, the fusion of comedic and suspenseful elements transcends mythological conventions and constructs an open hybrid posture between tradition and modernity, thereby engaging a broader and more diverse audience.

Moreover, this thematic fusion subverts audience expectations. By combining humor, urgency, and other modern narrative techniques, the films reframe mythological stories as more accessible and relatable narratives. This not only broadens the viewer base but also provides a practical model for the modernization of myth and innovation in narrative form.

Sustained Output of Contemporary Values Through Narrative Themes

The Nezha animated film series continually deepens the integration of traditional cultural essence and contemporary mainstream values. Through transmedia storytelling, it has gained broad audience recognition and facilitated the social dissemination of

modern value systems. The films portray a thematic trajectory evolving from individual self-redemption to the pursuit of social justice and fairness.

In contrast to the Marvel Cinematic Universe—which often situates its heroes in global crises and emphasizes personal sacrifice and teamwork to safeguard international security—the *Nezha* series grounds its narratives in the adaptation of Chinese mythological tales. It highlights *Nezha*'s resistance against fate and his personal awakening, while also critiquing the unjust power structures of the world. For instance, *Captain America: Civil War* portrays internal divisions and conflicts of responsibility among superheroes. In contrast, *Nezha: Clash of the Deities* uses the metaphor of the celestial elixir to expose issues of resource monopolization. These cases illustrate two distinct narrative logics: Marvel focuses on collective action in response to global threats, while *Nezha* embodies a more critical reflection of socio-political inequality rooted in mythological allegory. This divergence reflects the unique cultural consciousness embedded in the *Nezha* franchise's approach to justice and modernity.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital posits that cultural capital is accumulated through concrete forms such as culture, education, and personal refinement. It entails a process of materialization and embodiment, demanding active participation from the individual.^[10] In the case of *Nezha*, *Birth of the Demon Child* attracts audiences through a differentiated narrative centered on individual awakening, and further reinforces cultural identity through socially oriented values such as familial affection and responsibility. This dual strategy transforms narrative content into replicable cultural capital, infusing the franchise with long-term creative potential and market vitality.

In summary, by fusing diverse thematic elements with contemporary values, the *Nezha* franchise breaks free from the limitations of monolithic mythological storytelling. It appeals to a broad demographic across cultural and generational lines, while continuously advancing the thematic transition from individual awakening to collective social ethics. These mutually reinforcing mechanisms not only fulfill audiences' dual expectations for narrative novelty and emotional resonance, but also construct a hybrid narrative model—one that blends the poetic legacy of traditional myth with a modern critique of social values.

3 Conclusion

This study, from the perspective of transmedia storytelling, takes the *Nezha* animated film series as a case to explore the serialized narrative strategies employed in the development of Chinese mythological IPs across four dimensions: narrative construction, narrative structure, narrative presentation, and narrative form. According to Henry Jenkins' theory of "convergence culture," The success of media content lies in the integration of technology, industry, and audience engagement.^[11] In this sense, transmedia serialized storytelling fosters multi-layered media experiences and offers diversified pathways for IP innovation.

Based on this framework, the study further analyzes how transmedia serialized narratives facilitate the development of Chinese mythological IPs and investigates the key factors contributing to their successful positioning in the global cultural industry.

First, the continuation of character centralization ensures narrative consistency and coherence, which is vital for long-term IP development. This approach constructs a stable cultural core and symbolic system, fostering strong brand memory and user loyalty while laying a sustainable foundation for product iteration and market expansion. Second, the integration of a unidirectional main plot with multiple hybrid subplots builds a serialized narrative platform that is both structurally stable and expansively scalable. This foundation supports subsequent textual development, spin-offs, and cross-industry collaborations, thereby expanding the boundaries of mythological IP and revitalizing its market presence. Third, continuous advancement in visual technologies and the expansion of cultural meaning enhance the emotional connection between content and audiences. The increasing use of Eastern fantasy aesthetic symbols provides the IP with distinct cultural characteristics and strengthens its recognizability in international markets, ultimately boosting the global competitiveness of Chinese mythological narratives. Finally, the fusion of genres and the expression of thematic values contribute to the creation of a hybrid narrative mode—one that blends traditional culture with contemporary social values. This model not only broadens the audience base but also enhances the cultural discourse power of mythological IPs, thereby reinforcing their long-term cultural influence. Through this, the narrative form realizes an efficient transformation from cultural capital to IP assets. As Pierre Bourdieu observed, cultural capital may, in many contexts, outperform economic capital in its capacity for long-term accumulation. In this light, the symbolic memory and value recognition embedded within mythological IPs can continuously accumulate and eventually convert into tangible economic capital. As illustrated in Figure 4, this process forms a cyclical value creation loop that supports the sustainable development of serialized mythological IPs.

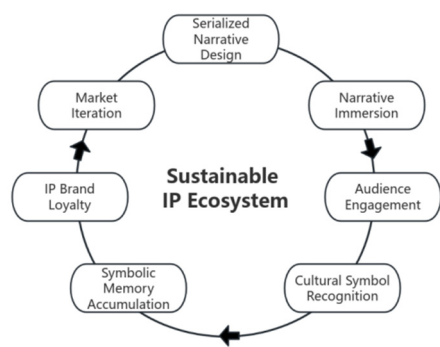


Fig. 4. Serialized Narrative Value Creation Loop

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