Character design for the Tapel Saga mobile game inspired by Malangan masks and Urban Legends

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ABSTRACT

Character design is a crucial aspect of video games, requiring a solid understanding of design principles and an appreciation of the sources of inspiration, mainly when aiming to promote traditional culture, such as the Malangan masks. "Tapel Saga" attempts to interpret the esoteric aspects of Malangan masks and urban legends into a mobile game format. The representation of traditional cultural values can be visualised in character design by adhering to character design principles and considering the tastes of the target audience, namely the younger generation. The literature review on Malangan masks and Malang urban legends is limited; therefore, most data on Malangan masks was obtained through observation and interviews with practitioners and enthusiasts in the Malang region, specifically Jabung. Characters in the mobile game were created using character design methods that consider design principles such as the utilisation of basic shapes, target audience characteristics, and sources of inspiration from traditional culture. The development of the Tapel Saga mobile game character design serves as an actualisation of conventional culture, providing a reference for visual creativity and expanding ideas for the growth of Indonesia's video game industry, which is currently experiencing significant growth.

Keywords: *character design, Malangan mask, urban legend, mobile game, young generation*

ABSTRAK

Desain karakter menjadi bagian penting dalam video game, tidak hanya membutuhkan pemahaman desain namun juga pemahaman tentang sumber inspirasi, terutama jika bertujuan mempromosikan budaya tradisional seperti topeng Malangan. Tapel Saga mencoba menginterpretasikan aspek esoteris dari topeng Malangan dan urban legend ke dalam format mobile game. Representasi nilai kebudayaan tradisi ini dapat divisualkan dalam desain karakter dengan memperhatikan prinsip perancangan desain karakter dan selera target audience yaitu generasi muda. Kajian pustaka tentang topeng Malangan dan urban legend Malang tidak terlalu banyak, oleh karenanya data tentang topeng Malangan sebagian besar diperoleh melalui observasi dan wawancara dengan praktisi maupun pemerhati yang ada di wilayah Malang khususnya Jabung. Karakter dalam mobile game diciptakan dengan menggunakan metode perancangan desain karakter yang memperhatikan prinsip desain seperti pemanfaatan bentuk dasar, karakteristik target audience, serta sumber inspirasi yaitu budaya tradisi. Pengembangan desain karakter mobile game Tapel Saga menjadi bentuk aktualisasi budaya tradisi yang dapat menjadi referensi kreatifitas visual dalam memperluas ide untuk perkembangan industri video game Indonesia yang saat ini sedang mengalami pertumbuhan signifikan.

Kata Kunci: *desain karakter, topeng Malangan, urban legend, mobile game, generasi muda*

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INTRODUCTION

The Malangan masks represent an endemic cultural treasure that once thrived in Malang, East Java. According to Kamal (2010), one of the *abdi dalem* (king's servants) of the Majapahit Kingdom who resided and served as an assistant to the regional leader in Malang developed the craft of mask-making and dance performances in the area. Malangan masks and dance art were renowned during the colonial era, particularly from 1934 to 1965, and experienced a significant revival in the 1980s. The characters depicted in Malangan masks are drawn from the epics Mahabharata, Ramayana, and the Panji stories, which are believed to originate from the Kakawin by Mpu Dharmaja, written during the Kediri Kingdom (1042-1222).

The aesthetic elements of Malangan masks are balanced with the philosophical meanings carved into their shapes and implied in their colours. According to Hidayat (2014), the mimesis applied to Malangan masks is not limited to human faces but includes natural objects to convey specific meanings. The stylisation of visual elements in Malangan masks heavily draws from Javanese *wayang kulit* (leather puppet) iconography, such as the gabahan eyes derived from rice grains. This icon is typically associated with knight characters like Panji Inu Kertapati to convey patience. Additionally, colours have specific meanings, such as green faces symbolising peace and growth.

Malangan masks encompass aspects of character education, moral values from the depicted figures, and an inseparable spiritual aspect. Based on data collected by Melany (2015), the mystical-spiritual element is crucial in making high-quality Malangan masks. The natural forces and reverence for ancestral spirits form part of the aesthetic expression of Malangan mask artisans. Esoterically, masks created through special rituals, such as fasting, are believed to protect individuals, families, or homes from harm.

However, the preservation of traditional masks is declining due to the lack of interest from the younger generation. In Malang, only four active Malangan mask dance communities remain Pakisaji, Tumpang, Jabung, and Kranggan. Interest in Malangan masks is segmented among practitioners and enthusiasts, with few buyers outside performance practitioners. Only two craftsmen in Jabung remain, who create masks based on uncertain orders, primarily from dancers and collectors, with rare orders from the general public. Knowledge about Malangan masks is also shallow. Although the Malang government often uses this icon to promote its endemic culture, the understanding of Malangan masks is not widely disseminated, especially among the younger generation. Preservation efforts must target the younger generation to raise awareness of traditional culture and foster appreciation.

Strategies to preserve Malangan masks must consider the target audience's characteristics: high school to college-aged youth. The target audience's affinity for gadgets suggests that mobile games are a favoured medium. According to Liputan6.com (accessed June 20, 2024, at 15:45 WIB), Indonesia ranked third in the global mobile game market with 3.45 billion downloads in 2023, an increase of 320 million from the previous year. This indicates a high interest in mobile games among Indonesians.

This medium will effectively convey messages and increase awareness of Malangan masks. Tapel Saga will introduce Malangan masks through character designs integrated into the concept. These character designs can embody the local wisdom found in Malangan masks, providing character education that is crucial for the younger generation. To make it more engaging, the game's concept and story will include Javanese mystical elements and urban legends from Malang, which are also reflected in the character designs. The esoteric aspects of Malangan masks make this integration relevant. Supernatural stories are always popular among Indonesians; the most popular podcast genre this year on Spotify, according to validnews.id (accessed June 18, 2024, at 20:25 WIB) is a mystical story. According to Gadjah Mada University Cultural Anthropology Professor Mada Heddy via CNN Indonesia.com (accessed June 18, 2024, at 22:10 WIB), mystical beliefs remain prevalent due to the solid magical thinking that explains everyday situations.

Materials on Javanese mystical elements will use the book *"Dunia Hantu Orang Jawa"* as a reference. At the same time, data on urban legends in Malang will be obtained through interviews with Malang residents. According to Cantrell (2010), urban legends are a form of modern folklore,

often containing little to no truth. Urban legends are spread by word of mouth, and not all are believed by the public. In modern times, these stories often involve inexplicable or mystical elements. Many mysterious stories and sightings have captivated the people of Malang. Although empirical evidence of these urban legends is questionable, they can inspire the development of Tapel Saga's story and characters.

Tapel Saga is a 2D action video game featuring combat and story modes involving numerous characters. The character designs apply principles that transform traditional cultural elements into a modern medium, considering the characteristics of the younger generation to enhance their interest in Malangan masks.

METHOD

The character design process for Tapel Saga can be divided into two main stages: conceptual and visualisation. The conceptual stage includes ideation, goal setting, target audience analysis, and data collection. This design initiative arose from concerns about the low interest and awareness among the younger generation regarding Malangan masks despite the high potential for developing this traditional cultural heritage. Introducing Malangan masks through mobile games by incorporating these cultural elements into character design is seen as a viable approach. The esoteric aspects of Malangan masks make them well-suited to be combined with urban legends and Javanese mystical elements, which can be significant in developing the story and characters. The target audience for Tapel Saga is high school to college-aged youth, significantly influencing this mobile game's visual, narrative, and presentation approaches. Data were obtained from literature reviews and, most importantly, interviews and observations conducted in various regions of Malang, such as Jabung.

The book "Fundamentals of Game Design" by Ernest Adams was the primary guide in developing the Tapel Saga mobile game, including its character development stage. However, the selected materials were tailored to meet the needs of Tapel Saga, which features a story mode with a visual novel-like presentation, a type of video game that focuses on storytelling. The guidelines include character design objectives, visual appearance, character physique, clothing, weapons, symbolic objects, names, character depth, roles, attitudes, values, character development, and character types. Joseph Campbell's theory in "The Hero with a Thousand Faces," featuring the hero, mentor, trickster, etc., was also utilised. Additionally, the story of Tapel Saga employs Carl Jung's archetype theory, including the self, shadow, anima, animus, and persona, which are also visualised in the character designs.

Picture 1. Main character design process

The character design methodology also employed "The Character Designer," a book by 21 Draws that contains material from various professional artists, emphasising the importance of visual language or forms in character design. Furthermore, Clara Lundwall's module "Creating Guidelines for Game Character Designs," which provides systematic procedures for character

design, especially identifying character types, was used. Character design extends beyond the character's form to all their attributes, including clothing, weapons, symbolic objects, and even names. In Tapel Saga, everything is heavily influenced by the visual elements of Malangan masks, performances, and their source stories, namely the Panji tales. The design of masks and weapons combines traditional and modern elements tailored to the preferences of today's younger generation. Some characters wear modern attire but incorporate many conventional cultural symbols, particularly in colour, especially for the main characters.

The character design process for the Tapel Saga mobile game was conducted entirely digitally, using a pen tablet with Sai Paint Tools software. The images produced are bitmap or raster type, with the visualisation stage involving sketching, creating line art, colouring, shading, and finishing.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

The belief in the spiritual value of masks has existed in Indonesia since the Stone Age when masks were used as a medium of demonstration in traditional ceremonies and as magical decorations. This historical background forms the basis for the story concept and gameplay mechanics of Tapel Saga, which seeks to interpret the esoteric aspects of Malangan masks and actualise Javanese mystical elements and urban legends into a mobile game.

Tapel Saga narrates the story of Inu, a second-year high school student who has a mental illness due to past trauma. One day, he enters the supernatural realm and meets a mysterious figure named Reni, who changes his life. Inu gains mystical powers and becomes the Heir, a person who can use magical masks and is tasked with eradicating *Dedemit*, supernatural beings that disturb humans and originate from the astral world or another dimension of Malang city. Reni continually guides Inu in his struggle to restore world balance and recover his mental health towards self-realisation.

In Tapel Saga, numerous characters appear, especially *Dedemit* or enemies, but only representatives from a few categories will be discussed here. *Dedemit* in Tapel Saga consists of two factions: Dedemit Purwa, which has existed since the era of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms, and Dedemit Kekinian, which emerged with Western influence, especially post-New Order and is still believed in by the public. Each faction has levels: low-level *"kroco"* and high-level "bosses".

The gameplay of Tapel Saga combines RPG elements with visual novel aspects, with the story conveyed through character conversations. Players only need to tap the screen to read the alternating dialogues. Players will encounter multiple-choice options throughout the conversations, affecting other characters' responses and the storyline. However, the story in Tapel Saga remains linear, although it will have three different endings depending on the player's choices to spare or eliminate the bosses they defeat.

Picture 2. Display of story mode and battle mode

In the battle mode, characters are depicted in a chibi or diminutive form to facilitate game navigation, but the bosses appear in their original proportions. Inu is positioned on the left side of the screen, while enemies approach from the right. Inu and the enemies automatically attack each other, but players must use Inu's skills (double attack and agility boost) to defeat opponents more effectively. Energy Balls of various colours will appear, each with a different function, such as green balls that heal health points. These Energy Balls are manifestations of natural energy that can be collected to aid the Heir in his battle against *Dedemit*.

Inu

Picture 3. Inu character design

The character concept represents the primary target audience, namely high school students. Inu is designed using elements of Panji Inu Kertapati, the main character in the Panji stories. Panji Inu Kertapati is the crown prince of the Jenggala kingdom, a knight with an adventurous spirit who is always eager to learn new things. He is depicted as always wanting to defend the truth and not remain idle in the face of evil. At the beginning of Tapel Saga, Inu has not yet gained his powers, which is reflected in his design. As a cowardly and troubled teenager, he wears a shabby hoodie, has messy hair, a distressed expression, and a slouched posture. After becoming the Heir, Inu changes his appearance, donning sporty attire, a popular hairstyle among the younger generation, and incorporating several icons representing Panji Inu Kertapati. This transformation in Inu's appearance also visualises his character development towards self-realisation. In the story mode, Inu has a wide range of expressions according to his situations, especially since the *Tapel Saga* story is not flat but filled with surprises, sadness, anger, and so on. Inu wears the Wijaya Kusuma flower emblem, a symbol of luck for Javanese kings, which is also one of Panji Inu Kertapati's identities. Green is Inu's characteristic colour; he wears a green mask, the most common version of Panji Inu Kertapati, symbolising growth and youth. The Malangan mask performance costume is an essential reference in the design of his main outfit. He also wields a glowing green keris with seven curves *(luk)*, symbolising luck. He is named Sukma Wilis (Green Soul). Inu has a long green scarf resembling the scarf of Malangan mask dancers. Inu wears a mask during his *Dedemit* hunts, with its design modified but retaining the uniqueness of the original. This mask design has two versions: story mode and battle mode. Inu will also acquire various other masks, each providing different abilities. A unique feature explains the story, characters, and, of course, the masks.

Picture 4. Panji Inu Kertapati's magical mask design

Reni

Picture 4. Reni character design

Reni represents the mentor or wise figure who propels the main character from their initial state. In Tapel Saga, her role extends beyond this, though still shrouded in mystery. Her name is taken from a highly respected Malangan mask artist during the late colonial era. Reni wears a black outfit, traditional Malang attire, and always dons the Potrojoyo mask. Her mask design has also been modified but retains the character's distinctive features. In the Panji stories, Potrojoyo is the servant of the knight or prince, especially Gunungsari. Reni helps Inu in his self-improvement process, albeit in her way. She is usually friendly and often jokes with Inu but can be stern when necessary.

Tebo

Picture 5. Tebo character design

Tebo is inspired by Genderuwo, whose name is derived from a viral person a few years ago. He is called a genderuwo child due to a physical abnormality. In *Tapel Saga*, Tebo has two vastly different forms in story and battle modes. His first form resembles the standard description of Genderuwo, which, according to the book *Dunia Hantu Orang Jawa* (2004: 155-156), is a colossal figure with a reddish-black body. In 2006, there was a mass hysteria incident at a cigarette factory in Malang, linked to the king of Genderuwo. In *Tapel Saga*, Tebo's battle form is a giant, heavily furred creature with horns and sharp fangs, wielding an electric pole as a deadly weapon. In story mode, Tebo is a handsome man with an athletic build, wearing masculine attire that reflects his giant form, such as black clothing, reddish fur, and a horn-like necklace. This handsome form concept is inspired by the myth of Genderuwo, who can transform into humans to seduce women, especially wives. Although initially an opponent of Inu, in *Tapel Saga*, this contemporary Dedemit becomes a grey character who is not entirely evil.

Brajawara

Picture 6. Brajawara character design

Another deadly combatant from the *Dedemit Purwa* faction is Brajawara. Inspired by supernatural guardians of temples and ancient sites like Srigading, Brajawara has a muscular reddish body in a silat stance, a balanced technique for defence and attack. His design draws inspiration from ancient kingdom-era champions, who wore traditional Javanese and Balinese clothing like headbands, arm bracelets, waist belts, and metal hand and foot protectors. When Inu faces Brajawara, he retreats each time he loses, only to return with new, more challenging, deadly powers.

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Sundel Bolong

Picture 7. Sundel Bolong's character design

Sundel Bolong, according to the book *Dunia Hantu Orang Jawa* (2004: 163), is described as a woman with a hole in her body, sometimes on her back, stomach, eyes, and so on. In Malang, female ghosts have been seen in residential areas like Puskopad Buring. In *Tapel Saga*, Sundel Bolong is interpreted as a beautiful zombie woman with green skin, many nails stuck in her head, wielding a machete and sickle, and wearing a tattered white dress with additional hands on her back. When facing Inu, she flees upon defeat but returns with slight design changes, such as weapon swaps, roots emerging from her dress, and hands on her back altering their pose to reveal a blooming Rafflesia flower. These design changes also affect her attack patterns, with Sundel Bolong attacking with roots and the flower on her back releasing deadly toxic gas.

Sukati

Picture 8. Sukati character design

The final boss Inu faces is Sukati, a *kuntilanak*. According to the book *Dunia Hantu Orang Jawa* (2004: 162-163), a kuntilanak is a female ghost that likes to disturb women, especially those who are pregnant. Malang reportedly has locations with kuntilanak sightings, such as the Sulfat

Bridge and Ijen Street. In *Tapel Saga*, Sukati is depicted as a beautiful woman with long hair, wearing a blood-stained white dress, with her hands covered in blood. Like other bosses, she has three forms: a standard form, another with four hands, and a final form where her body transforms into multiple tentacles with sharp-toothed mouths emerging from her abdomen and her face dripping with blood. Each form has different attack patterns corresponding to its appearance, such as the final form, where Sukati can unleash deadly attacks. The main character inspires her name in the 1988 film *Malam Satu Suro*, starring legendary horror queen Suzanna. In the *Tapel Saga* story, Sukati makes Inu suffer, especially mentally. Sukati can read human thoughts, so players must pay close attention to the story to choose the correct responses when facing her.

Other Enemies

Picture 9. Other enemy's character design

Other enemies in Tapel Saga are also inspired by folklore and urban legends, with concepts combining artistic aspects of wayang setanan (demon shadow puppets) with a modern style. *Lintah Arang* and *Lintah Darah* are inspired by leeches that suck happiness. Genderowo Arang is another representation of Genderuwo. Buto Aruna is inspired by Javanese demons that also appear in shadow puppetry. Kalong Arang represents the bat demon. Tuyul Bocil is a minor demon who likes to steal. Dek Kunti is a type of kuntilanak with a cute but evil appearance.

Supporting Magical Creatures

Picture 10. Supporting magical creature character design

In battle mode, players can be assisted by magical creatures called *Khodam*. Inu has a Khodam named Cinde Laras, inspired by folklore and part of the Panji stories. In *Tapel Saga*, Cinde Laras is depicted as a cute yellow chick with fluffy neck feathers resembling clouds, representing the wind element. Cinde Laras can be summoned in battles to increase Inu's attack speed. Additionally, there is the Legendary Spirit of Panji Inu Kertapati, a celestial being that is the spirit of Panji Inu Kertapati. This spirit is a handsome man with attributes like a Malangan mask dancer in a dancing pose. The Legendary Spirit can be summoned to launch attacks on all enemies on the screen.

CONCLUSION

The Malangan Masks possess philosophical value and contribute to character education, remaining relevant today by fostering a desire for learning, courage, and perseverance. The esoteric aspects of Malangan masks can be harnessed to generate ideas for media design that appeals to younger generations, such as mobile games. If these moral and spiritual values are well-packaged, the younger generation will be more inclined to appreciate and engage with local culture, which is equally fascinating as foreign cultures. The mobile game Tapel Saga attempts to introduce Malangan masks, mainly through its character designs. The esoteric aspects of Malangan masks are well-suited to be combined with urban legends and mystical elements in Javanese beliefs to develop the storyline and gameplay mechanics of Tapel Saga. The character design of the Malangan masks is crafted by adhering to design principles and incorporating cultural elements from Malangan masks and the Panji stories. These elements are not presented in raw form but are modernised to appeal to the young target audience. This approach aims to attract the younger generation to take pride in their local culture and inspire those looking to develop this topic further.

In Tapel Saga, Inu, the main character, represents Panji Inu Kertapati, an essential figure in the Panji stories. Elements of Panji Inu Kertapati, such as the mask, colours, and the Wijaya Kusuma flower, are embedded in Inu's character design symbols. Similarly, Reni's character design represents Potrojoyo. The enemies Inu faces on his journey toward self-realisation are inspired by urban legends from Malang, such as *genderuwo* and *kuntilanak*, and are designed with modern elements.

Tapel Saga seeks to explore the potential for visually revitalising Malangan masks in the form of a mobile game while maintaining local wisdom values combined with modern elements like pop culture. Game designers must integrate the uniqueness of traditional cultural objects into the gameplay system, storyline, and character design, ensuring these elements interact conceptually and are not merely visually appealing. The biggest challenge in developing media based on Malangan masks and urban legends is sourcing data through interviews and observations due to limited literature. Without thorough research, the designed media will lack deep cultural concepts. Furthermore, the character design in *Tapel Saga* not only promotes and innovates traditional Indonesian culture but also expands ideas for developing the Indonesian video game industry, which is experiencing significant growth.

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