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Art and Expression

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**SOCIAL
HUMANITY**



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INTRODUCTION

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VISION

Art and expression as aspiration towards stylistic and artistic practices

MISSION

- To enhance the culture of research and academic publication among academician and artist for international recognition
- To promote intellectual, cultural and knowledge sharing through artistic expression
- To celebrate the diversity and differences in arts practices thus creating and intellectual platform for artist to express their interest in art

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CLASSICAL MALAY LITERATURE AND FOLKTALE CHARACTERS IN FICTIONAL FANTASY COMIC

An Artist's Interpretation

a chapter by

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Classical Malay Narratives and Character Design in Fantasy Comic

The classical narratives of Malay tales, myths, legends and hikayat have been passed down for generations in varied methods either to disseminate values, information of cultural heritage or as a form of entertainment for escapism and distractions from life's struggles. Thus, new stories spawned from the antecedents and are presented or adapted in various approaches. Previous researches performed on storytelling have recognized the practice of consolidating interdisciplinary areas such as arts, history, anthropology, and literature in the presentation of the Malay classical narratives. Hence, adaptations are not uncommon in contemporary artistic practices and that artistic creations and recreations are the products of other arts in any forms (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013). Consequently, methods and presentations of stories have evolved since the early cave painting era to the more sophisticated technological advances of the 21st century. With more modern methods of presentation, storytellers and creators utilize every varied technology available with renewed interests in storytelling. Importantly, every story passed on through these various methods are intended to immortalize every aspect of the stories for years to come including the characters that they introduced or reintroduced.

Therefore, this study will showcase some pertinent characters from different Malay classical literary narratives in an attempt of reintroducing and representing them to new challenging audiences in the form of fictional fantasy graphic story of 'Liga Pendekar: Perikatan Adiwira' (League of Warriors: The Legion of Heroes) (Azhar Abdullah,

2008). It will further identify and describe the elements of character design utilized by the artist in interpreting discursive texts to design the identified characters for the comic. Subsequent sections will elaborate the processes which the artist had employed and the contributing factors in the process of developing character design for the comic. The comic shall be referred to as 'Liga Pendekar' in the subsequent sections.

'Liga Pendekar – Perikatan Adiwira' (League of Warriors: The Legion of Heroes): Adapting Classical Characters into Contemporary Fictional Fantasy Comics

Malaysia experiences a significant influence of comics from Hong Kong, Japan and the USA since the early 1990s, stroking locally produced comics with new challenges to attract ardent readers and devoted followers. Heroes and superheroes from Hong Kong comics which mostly depict the Chinese martial arts world have received boundless followers from young to more mature readers and greater influence with the Malay language translation versions. Not only that, the Japanese manga also takes its stand in the local favourite reading lists with Malay and English translations. The superhero comics from the USA also have a predominant fans platform in Malaysia with its immense global aficionados. Comics from these three nations have impacted the local comic industry in various strand including market value, content, storyline and character design.

Stories from classical Malay literature and folktales have been presented and adapted into comics since the 1960s (Rudi Mahmood, 2020). However, they are slowly fading in time as

readers have wider variety of comics lists with the selections from Hong Kong, Japan and the USA. Classical tales from Malay literature and folktales are passed down to fulfil various purposes not only for the aesthetics but also values portrayed by characters in the stories (Muhamad Azhar, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial that these parts of the Malay culture are not to be forgotten as cultures evolve with time. The comic 'Liga Pendekar' (Figure 1) shall reintroduce and showcase prominent characters from classical Malay literature and folktales which were once much used in storytelling either for education purposes, commercial content or for the sheer joy of story time in domestic settings. Some of these stories and characters are still given their due limelight while others are fading in time.

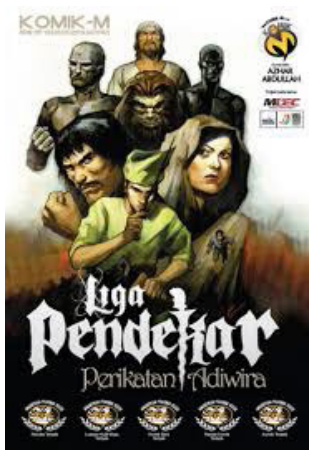


Figure 1: *Liga Pendekar*' (Azhar Abdullah, 2008).

Many classical Malay literary texts and folktales have been adapted, re-presented, and reprinted over the years either in the form of short stories, comics, films, and animation in pursuit to keep the characters to be remembered if not for the original full stories. These include 'Sulalat al-Salatin Ya'ni Perteturan Segala Raja-Raja' ('Genealogy of Kings') also known as 'Sejarah Melayu' or 'The Malay Annals', 'Hikayat Hang Tuah', 'Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa', 'Hikayat Malim Deman', 'Mahsuri', and 'Badang'. However, as more adaptations are being produced to suit modern audiences, many of the traditional elements are expunged in many prints or time lapsed productions. Not only that, there have also been discussions among industry practitioners and academics alike on the elements fitting to describe the Nusantara or of the Malay

Archipelago character design in both print and film medium (Aussie, Urai, & Yanti, 2017; Faryna & Normah, 2017; Tengku Intan Marlina, Hashim, Madiawati, & Nur Hamizah, 2014).

It was highlighted by Morris Beja that three quarters of the Academy Awards for best film since 1927 are those of adaptation (Wan Hasmah, 2018) suggesting that adaptation does have its value in visual narrative and entertainment. The characters which are showcased and adapted for the 'Liga Pendekar' comic will also give exposure especially to students and the younger generation about culturally legendary characters from classical Malay texts. As highlighted by Faryna and Normah (2017), students demonstrated the lack of sense towards local identity and gradually drowning the cultural sentiment through their final animation projects. Therefore

, the authors consider it necessary to observe character design in the Malaysian Malay context before legendary characters in the classical Malay narratives diminish with time.

Methodology

The artist's interpretations from the discursive textual descriptions of characters are carefully selected from the identified texts. Importantly, the preliminary readings and process of identifying and selecting the appropriate characters to assemble for a fantasy action Malay superhero story with fictional fantasy setting is most crucial. Despite being fictional and of fantasy backdrop, it is elemental for the creator to have a setting which is not too foreign for the readers especially the much-intended Malaysian readers who are expected to be familiar with some of the descriptions. Additionally, the artist also had diligently followed the basic principles in character design as suggested by Tillman (2019) namely; (i) archetype, (ii) character back-story, (iii) originality, (iv) shapes and silhouettes, (v) reference, (vi) aesthetic, and (vii) WOW factor.

The eight characters identified for the 'Liga Pendekar: Perikatan Adiwira' (League of Warriors: Legion of Heroes) comic are; Hang Tuah, Badang, Tanggung, Kebayan, Orang Minyak, Kelembai, Awang Kenit, and Malim Deman. These characters are carefully selected to

not only re-introduce and re-present them in a new form of storytelling but also to suit the intended storyline the artist drafted. References from prior published works were used to provide some background information of stylistic approaches which have been used including medium and techniques which the artists adopted.

Discussion

Archetype

It is essential that the characters are unique with its own traits not only 'good' to the eyes but also recognizable throughout the story. Even when the characters appear in other medium such as a fan-art, such traits should be recognizable to the artist's original design of the character (Tillman, 2019).



Figure 2: Pak Tua (Hang Tuah) adapted as a wise experience Pendekar in his late 60's.

In fictional narrative either in books, comics, animation or feature film, sometimes a wise teacher, mentor or a guiding figure are included to suit the storyline just like in the tales of Merlin the wise sorceress and Arthur Pendragon. Figure 2 illustrates the supporting character Hang Tuah or Pak Tua, the wise old man that embodies the sagacious archetype who always guides, assists, and motivates the protagonist. The artist's interpretation of Hang Tuah, a prominent classical legendary Malay pendekar is depicted as a warrior in his late 60s that carries the distinctive characteristics of someone with wisdom and knowledgeable attributes.



Figure 3: Badang, the muscle guy of 'Liga Pendekar'

Meanwhile, 'Liga Pendekar' also brings forward the legendary character known as Badang who may be considered as the classical Malay version of the mythical Hercules in terms of might and strength. Badang (Figure 3) is not a demi-god but he attained his super strength after an encounter with a djinn-like creature. This character is mentioned in the prominent classical Malay text 'The Malay Annals' (Chapter V) (Tun Seri Lanang, 1997). The character embodies the typical archetype of a strong man who is heavily muscular, burly and athletic. He may carry similarity to the modern legendary superheroes such as 'Conan' or 'The Hulk', that is more visually identifiable as the prominent strong character in design and narrative. Therefore, it is deemed necessary for an artist to take into consideration that the archetype for each design should make the character more visually and graphically dynamic. It has been appropriately accentuated by Gibbons and Pilcher (2017) that the artist needs "to get a feel for who the character is, what they do and what they look like" (p. 34). Essentially, it needs to be cautioned that as the characters would appear in many different frames, it is pertinent that consistency is maintained when illustrating the same characters in different poses and settings as shown in the sketch from Figure 4.



Figure 4: Sample draft of character design in different poses.

Character Back-story

The character back-story is pertinent in developing a character design as it develops throughout the plot of the story. This would also ease the development of the story for the character while maintaining consistency of the character's identity. Not only that, the back-story would help the artist to really be immersed in or with the character (Tillman, 2019; Eisner, 2008a; Eisner, 2008b). A successful character design may also be influenced by the character's interesting back-story that should be engaging for the audience. An appealing character design is also enhanced by its atypical back-story that can compel and attach the audience to its characteristics. Hence, Tillman (2019) cautioned character designers to be conscientious when drafting the character's back-story with the six popular Wh-questions of who, what, when, where, why, and how (p. 28). Furthermore, character designers are also reminded to be judicious of the extend in withholding information about each character (Tillman, 2019; Gibbons & Pilcher, 2017; Eisner, 2008a; Eisner, 2008b). These are especially important when the characters are developed through adaptation from popular texts and perhaps common.

Hang Tuah, is one of the most well-known classical characters especially from the classical texts of 'Hikayat Hang Tuah' and 'The Malay Annals'. These two texts are the main references for the artist and comic creator in interpreting the characteristics of Hang Tuah to design Pak Tua. There are of course various other publications

that focus on Hang Tuah, a legendary Malay pendekar, and an Admiral from 15th century Malacca with his other four legendary friends namely; Hang Jebat, Hang Lekir, Hang Lekiu and Hang Kasturi. However, the artist's take on Pak Tua character is based on Hang Tuah's infamous last combat where he unexpectedly went missing. For the purpose of the 'Liga Pendekar' fictional fantasy adaptation, Hang Tuah's back-story put the character return into action after twenty to thirty years of his disappearance. He returned to Malacca as an old man in guise simply to be known as Pak Tua. His past background as a legendary silat warrior and experience become one of the most recognizable characters for the team of 'Liga Pendekar'. Pak Tua's back-story is illustrated in Figure 5. It needs to be highlighted though that Tillman (2019); Anderson, Cady-Lee, and Mengert (2019); and Gibbons and Pilcher (2017) had suggested that an artist could successfully create the ideal character design if the artist could intensely understand the character back-story, and able to immerse with the character.

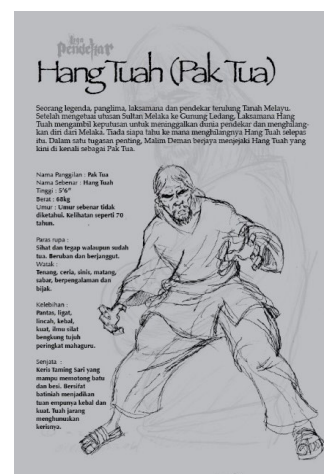


Figure 5: Character back-story of Pak Tua (or Hang Tuah)

Originality

Although originality in any design field is always arguable; however, in the field of character design, Tillman (2019) reminded that any elements which could be found to be similar to that of other references could be due to its 'usual occurrences' to the things or people we see around us regularly. However, it is crucial for artists to give their own twist to what seems usual or familiar in their design by adding their own

unique element and art style. This is visible in the character of Orang Minyak (Figure 6) from the 'Liga Pendekar' who is generally known as a villain in the horror folk tale but is on a journey to redemption in the adapted fictional fantasy comic narrative.



Figure 6: Orang Minyak.

Orang Minyak is a man who made a deal with the devil but broke his promises that turned him into a black oily figure who must ravish on forty virgins in order to be himself again. Made popular in the 1958 feature film 'Sumpah Orang Minyak' ('Cursed of the Oil Man') (Hassan, 2013), it becomes a very famous modern urban legend. Nevertheless, the artist's interpretation of the character has a plot twist to its back-story by giving the character a virtuous characteristic towards finding redemption. This back-story helps the artist to visualize the character while giving further details of the world that the character inhabits, its goals and personality, style and other relevant details to be added deemed necessary within the context of the story (Anderson, Cady-Lee, & Mengert, 2019). Regardless, Tillman (2019) forewarned that an artist should ensure that the necessary research has been undertaken with regard to the subject matter so that what is already known or exist on the character will not devastate the artist's attempt at giving his own twist.

Shapes and Silhouettes

In a much earlier prominent reference to character design, McCloud (2006) has cautioned that visual distinction is important in character design. By having distinctive elements in a character, it would assist readers in identifying

and differentiate the different characters which exist in the story. Additionally, it has also been highlighted by Tillman (2019) that shapes are the foundation in defining characters which include both facial and body descriptions. Therefore, it is essential that silhouettes need to be considered just as much in character design for recognizability reasons (Tillman, 2019; Gibbons & Pilcher, 2017; McCloud, 2006).

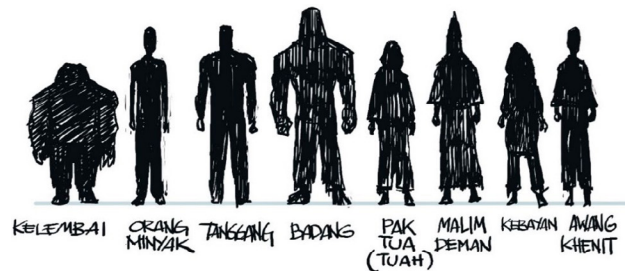


Figure 7: Character line up of silhouettes of the main character of 'Liga Pendekar'.

In reference to Figure 7, the silhouettes demonstrated different forms and shapes that make the characters more dynamic and rhythmic. When the characters are put together in a shot or in a scene, the characters could be instantly recognisable and distinguishable. By working with the silhouettes, it is easy to determine the use of shapes and forms that would prompt in the identification of the character's personality. The artist's impression of strong and bulky characters is displayed in 'Liga Pendekar' with the square shape and a mix of the triangle which are visible in the characters Kelembai, Tanggang and Badang.

Reference

In being creative with character design it is still important for creators and illustrators to have references. This is not only for the purpose of re-inventing or creating a totally new characters based on solely one's imagination but to ensure that details of the character design are accurate throughout the story and importantly – consistent. Every frame would have different perspectives of the characters which would affect how the shapes and silhouettes of the characters would look (Anderson, Cady-Lee, & Mengert, 2019; Tillman, 2019; Gibbons & Pilcher, 2017; McCloud, 2006). It is evenly important that details of the characters' bodies with and without

their costume to be given a point of reference.



Figure 8: Malim Deman, with a traditional classic Malay attire.

Malim Deman (Figure 8) is portrayed as a noble Malay pendekar chosen by the Sultan of Malacca to lead the ‘Liga Pendekar’. He is also the only character depicted that wears the classical Malay attire with the tengkolok (head gear) and sampin (men’s brief sarong). With this look and reference towards classical Malay look, it will also exhibit the culture and value of Malay classical noble men. With the comic set in 15th century of Malacca Sultanate, it is also part of an effort towards the preservation of the Malay culture.

Aesthetic

Visual appeal is significant not only because it is elemental in producing an artwork but in storytelling, it needs to be suitable for the target audience. Using different art style and medium would affect a lot to the appeal of the characters because Song, Kwak and Kim had suggested that there is an interactive influence of painting content and complexity on familiarity-novelty preferences and aesthetic appreciation (2021). Also, this would provide some projection of market value to the story as Song, Kwak and Kim (2021) further asserted that sensory features and art medium have effects on the audience’s aesthetic appreciation and preferences. Essentially, character designers will also need to consider temporal changes in the character design as this will affect the audience’s engagement. Interestingly, Song, Kwak and Kim (2021) have identified that art viewers demonstrated

dynamic preferences to novel artwork but it was cautioned that preferences could also be manipulated through repeated presentations of the same artwork or familiar art style. This may be recognizable when the producing or publishing companies or stakeholders have their own set of templates that artists are bound to adhere.

Designing a character for representation will still need to consider its naturalistic qualities and the artist’s expressive projections. Novelty in character design may be influenced by the artistic style expressed through colours, lines, and artistic strokes but the audience’s appreciation for the character’s aesthetic value could still be grounded by some elements and characteristics that are perceived on regular daily basis. This has to be carefully thought of as illustrated for the character Kebayan (Figure 9) as the character from the original classical narrative is unlike what is re-presented in the ‘Liga Pendekar’ comic. Nevertheless, aesthetic appreciation in character design from the viewers are also influenced by various factors including knowledge in arts and perhaps any forms of training-related experiences. This is because, viewers with inadequate experience with art are more inclined to focus on more recognizable elements in an artwork (Song, Kwak, & Kim, 2021).

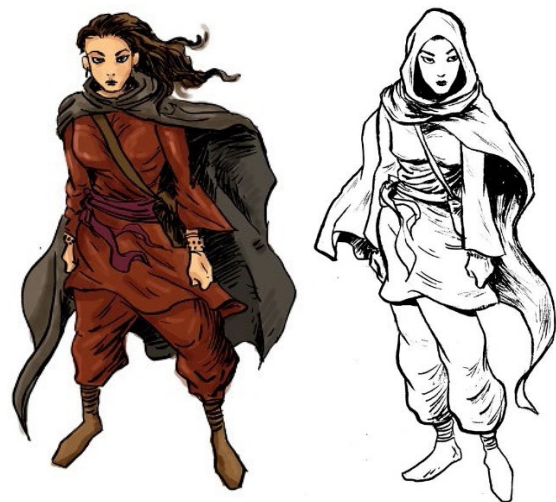


Figure 9: The different sketches for the character Kebayan.

WOW Factor

Despite having good and beautiful artwork, a story needs to have a good plot. Therefore, McCloud (2006), Eisner (2008b), Eisner (2008a)

and Tillman (2019) have cautioned that good character design would still require a well-executed story which shows development of the characters throughout the story; hence, the character back-story is essentially important alongside the narrative development. It has to be considered that the audience's variance needs to be closely analysed and ruminated especially with longitudinal project completion as market trend for commercial purposes may fluctuate.

Interestingly, viewer's gaze index affects how they perceive and value an artwork (Song, Kwak, & Kim, 2021). Viewer's fixation counts could be an indirect indicator of aesthetic appreciation and the authors believe that it is a reliable predictor in ascertaining the artistic WOW factor and the aesthetic appraisal of the character design. Designing for the character *Badang* (Figure 10) may have certain familiar characteristics to other known and popular characters especially those of US comic and animation superheroes.



Figure 10: *Badang*

Conclusion

Renewed interest and the rise of storytelling in the form of graphic novels in modern days is said to have started by Will Eisner with his title 'Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories' published in 1978 (Weiner, 2012). A different approach to the traditional novel writing, the narrative style used by Eisner was captivating enough to include elements of art, life and culture in storytelling. Since then, many graphic narratives surfaced and

received renewed interests along with devoted readers and followers. In re-introducing classical characters through fictional fantasy narrative, creators need to understand that 'adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication' (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013, p. 7). As Bolter and Grusin (2000) had asserted that repurposing may involve taking a "property" from one medium and reuse it in another but, it should be accompanied by the necessary redefinition and conscious interplay between media may be absent. However, they further contended that the interplay can occur with readers or viewers who might know the different versions and are able to make comparisons (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 45)

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“An Initial Attempt: A Synthesis of Cultural Adaptation and Representation in Animation” (2020).

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Fairul Hafiz Razali is a comic and graphic artist and writer with substantial experience in character design for comic art and comic publication. He also has experiences in giving workshops for comics creation. His other credits include comic anthologies in local newspapers and indie comics, with comic creation of Malay cultural content and the Malay ‘pendekar’.

Authors Brief Biography

Muhamad Azhar Abdullah is a senior lecturer with the College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) at the Department of Digital and Imaging Arts: Animation. He is also an active comic artist with multiple publications to his name, illustrator, writer, storyboard artist, and concept artist. Muhamad Azhar also has substantial experience in the pre-production stage for animation including the animated series ‘Ibn Batutta’ and the animated-philharmonic presentation of “Lat’s Window to the World” (PETRONAS Philharmonic presentation, 2009). He is also the concept artist and storyboard artist for motion pictures including ‘Tanda Putera’, and ‘Pulang’. His latest academic publications include “Searching for the ‘Pendekar Silat’ in Malaysian Visual Media: A Prefatory Insight Towards Sustainable Cultural Heritage” (2022) and

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