CHARACTER DESIGN IN INDONESIAN ANIMATED SERIES: ESCAPING THE SHADOW OF FOREIGN HEGEMONY

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Abstract: Whilst animated series, whether it's a TV series or web series is a relatively new media in Indonesia, it has gone through a significant process. One of the interesting aspects that we can observe from it is the development of the character design. It's undeniable that foreign hegemony contributed in major parts of the design but we can't overlook the efforts in finding Indonesia's very own unique character design and how it affects the successors. This paper will study the character designs of Indonesia animated series from the earliest known to the latest to date when this paper is written. The method used is comparative descriptive case study, the research focus is the design character of contemporary Indonesian animation and then compared with foreign animation character design, in this study primarily is animation of Japan and the United States as the dominant power in both areas. By conducting case studies, this study aimed to develop in-depth analysis of the subject matter of the character designs in terms of aspects that enrich the visual and qualitative approach.

Keywords: character design, Indonesia animation, animated web series, animated TV series

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to portray the journey of character design in Indonesia animation and how the journey contributes to develop current character design in Indonesia animation.

Animated films with different themes increasingly have been flooding cinema and television screens for the past 25 years. With a diverse audience ranging from small children to adults, animated films, especially those that use 3-dimensional technique, became very popular even rival the popularity of live action movie. This is evidenced by the success of the animated film Wreck-It Ralph produced by Disney, which topped the list of box office in the United States and Canada in the first week of November 2012, as reported by Maya Sofia (Sofia 2012).

Compared to other parts of the world, animation is a medium that is relatively new in Indonesia. Nevertheless, the tradition of visual literacy Indonesian cul-

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Fig 1. Shadow Puppet "Wayang"
(Source: http://suog.co/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Gambar-wayang-kulit.jpg)

ture can be traced from the presence of reliefs on the temples, ancient artefacts, as well as the performing arts like shadow puppet "wayang". Character design is an important part in animation. Character is not just an "actor" but at the same time also an ideological representation of animation creator that is designed in such a way to be able to communicate in a more intimate and intense through specific visual language. Character, consciously or unconsciously, have a fundamental role as an ambassador of messages and ideas that are being built by the animation. The success of an animation is often determined by the character. Unfortunately, attention to design characters in animation in Indonesia is still limited to the visual exploration that are often shallow and easily forgotten because it is not believable enough. For the in-depth review of the design of the characters with the enrichment in non-visual aspects such as psychological and semiotics is very important to find a formula in order to bring characters to life. Character design in Indonesia has not been able to escape from the shadow of trends and visual style of foreign hegemony. Character design in Indonesia is still struggling in the literal visual translation (read: hurry and superficial) of what is referred to as local content, Indonesian characters appear in a

variety of visual packs follow the trends that dominate the industry and very few characters who were born together with the typical characteristics of Indonesia in the truest sense.

The method used is comparative descriptive case study, the research focus is the design character of contemporary Indonesian animation and then compared with foreign animation character design, in this study primarily is animation of Japan and the United States as the dominant power in both areas. By conducting case studies, this study aimed to develop in-depth analysis of the subject matter of the character designs in terms of aspects that enrich the visual and qualitative approach.

Definition of Character Design

According to Michael Erlhoff in his book Design Dictionary: Perspective on Design Terminology (2007), the term "character design" is mainly used in the context of animated films, comics, and games in which there are one or more fictionalized characters with whom the audience is meant to identify. In addition to determining the character's physical appearance, the process may involve fashioning his or her patterns of speech, body language, actions, and so on. Fully developed character designs are an important part of production process in these contexts, and may ultimately determine whether or not the final product is successful on the market.

Character designers utilize a variety of techniques, most of which are dedicated to figurative representation. In 3D animation, characters are designed using three-dimensional methods such as maquettes character models, and motion tracking. In recent years, as the rise

of Internet has increased interest in the field, the definition of character design has expanded to include character-driven designs outside of the film, comic, and game industries.

Tom Bancroft (2006) classifies character designs into a hierarchy based on their level of complexity:

1.) Iconic

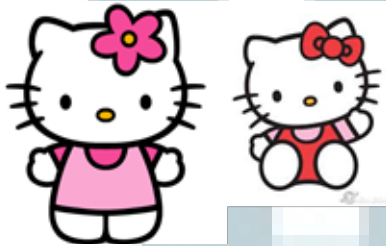Very simple, easy to remember, but not too expressive.

Fig 2. Hello Kitty
(Source: http://paperbotz.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/hello_kitty001.png)

2.) Simple

Simple but has more expressive facial expressions. 3.)

Fig 3. Characters from The Flintstones
(Source: http://talkingclassics.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/the-flintstones.jpg)

3.) Broad

More expressive than the two previous hierarchy. Not designed for dialogue, which highlighted the movement and expression that are likely to have facial features, so exaggerated impression of the cartoon humor can be achieved.

Fig 4. The Wolf from Tex Avery Cartoon
(Source: http://satira.fr/imgs/tex-avery_wolf.png)

4.) Comedy Relief

Not having too prominent facial features, but able to create humor from acting and dialogue.

Fig 5. Mushu from Mulan
(Source: http://fc05.deviantart.net/fs49/i/2009/219/0/9/Mushu_by_Joel_Swedish_Dragon.png)

5.) Lead Character

Has very realistic facial expressions, acting, and anatomy in order to connect with the audience.

Fig 6. Aurora from The Sleeping Beauty
(Source: http://www.4kraftykidz.com/
aurora.jpg)

6.) Realistic

This is the most realistic type of character but still have the element of caricature in its design.

Fig 7. The Princess from Shrek
(Source: http://c10566323.r23.cf2.rack-cdn.com/03-28-39_princess-fiona_original.jpg)

Importance of Character Design in Animation

Character design is an essential part in movie and animation production process. Every well-designed character

has to be unique and must be able to show his/her personalities and background story to the audience. Therefore, a well-prepared concept is necessary to create a unique and memorable character.

In the year 1914, Winsor McCay released his 'Gertie the Dinosaur' which was to become the very first example of true character animation. Then, in the 1930s, Walt Disney gave special focus to character animation in his studio, and showcased them in mini cartoon reels. His creations Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, among many others, went on to become some of the most loved and remembered cartoon characters around the world, besides creating a multibillion dollar franchise.

It is said that animation without good caricature is like a body without a skeleton. If the element of character design is lost or weak, animation becomes a pale imitation of live-action. Great character designs can not only help to make a product look more interesting, they can also help to create huge franchises, build up companies and even shape the landscape of the industry.

Super Mario Bros., Max Payne, Sonic the Hedgehog and Angry Birds are just a few examples of the effect that quality character design can have on its creators and the final product. A 1996 game featuring an intelligent, athletic, and driven woman as the central character, Tomb Raider, became so successful that a Hollywood blockbuster starring Angelina Jolie was released under the same franchise.

Good character design ensures that the general public will be able to recall the character. The better the recall, the

better sales the franchise can hope to achieve with box office, merchandising and brand endorsements.

According to Leah Hoyer, former director of development for Disney Television Animation, "The story is not always about the plot but about the character. It's the human element in the story which really completes it. How your characters interact with each other is extremely important."

John Kricfalusi (2007) and Eric Noble (2009) wrote on their blogs, good character design must have these six fundamental aspects:

1. Functional – understandable logical form, simple sensible forms, can be moved easily.

2. Aesthetic – pleasing balance of shapes.

3. Recognizable – distinct from other characters.

4. Personality – allowing the viewers to know the characters' personality simply by the way they look.

5. Original – not a knock-off of the previous characters.

6. Believable – allowing the viewers to believe in the story you're telling or the world your characters reside in.

Early Indonesia Character Designs in Animated Series

Various sources state that the first Indonesian animation produced in 1950s. Ardyansyah (2013) states that according to Amoroso Katamsi (Director of Perum Produksi Film Negara/ National Film Production 1988-2002 period), animat-

ed films were started to be produced in 1955. At that time, Dukut Hendrotomo, an artist who is often called as Mr. Ooq was back from learning at Walt Disney Studios in Burbank, California, USA. Early animated films were patterned propaganda films, with 2D drawing techniques, using transparent cells, black and white. This was disclosed by senior animator Gotot Prakosa. The first animated film in Indonesia is titled: Si Doel Memilih (Doel Voted). Unfortunately, it is very hard to find documentation of this political themed animated film so it is unknown how the design of the characters used in the animation.

After Si Doel Memilih, most of animations in Indonesia were used to produce advertising materials, credit title, or the necessity of complementary graphics on documentaries. Although not many animations in serial format at that time, but in the field of advertising animation shows significant progress. One of the studios that made a lot of animated advertising is Anima Indah, its founders is a US citizen and he provided opportunities for his crews to study animation in various countries such as: England, USA, and Japan.

Animator like (late) A. Denny Djoenaid was one who had the opportunity to study in the studio of Richard William, one of the leading animator in England. Upon his return to Indonesia, he and colleagues of his generation successfully given birth to many works of animation for commercial advertising purposes. Character designs used were also diverse and can be fairly exploratory though they could not escape the effects of influence from other artists. Denny A. Djoenaid for example, because he had worked with animator Art Babbitt who was a senior at Disney, his animation

and character design was heavily influenced by the style of Disney. One of the most famous animated TVC by Djoenaid Denny A. is the ice cream Street's Paddle Pop.

The 80s period can be regarded as the golden years of animation Indonesia. At this time a lot of animation studios were founded in various regions in Indonesia and animated films which are still frequently discussed up until now emerged, such as: Rimba Si Anak Angkasa (Rimba The Space Boy) by Wagiono Sunarto, or Si Huma (1983) initiated by PPFN (Perum Produksi Film Negara/ National Film Production). At that time, the character designs in the animations were limited by technology so that its form is simple, relying on outline (Line) and colors with virtually no shading. The design of Huma character was inspired by the appearance of Indonesian children at that time. Although the design is unique, I find it not pleasant enough aesthetically.

Fig 8. The Character Design of Huma and Windi, The First Animated Series in Indonesia, by Andri.H, 2012 April 22, retrieved from : http://upload.wikimedia. org/wikipedia/id/d/da/Huma_dan_Windi.jpg

The next decade, animation in Indonesia evolved over the growth of television chanels. Animated film appeared very diverse with better techniques such as: Legenda Burisrawa (Legend of Buriswara), Nariswandi Pilliang, Hela-Heli-Helo

which is the first 3D animated TV series in Indonesia, as well as various short animation with local folklore themes such as: Timun Mas (Golden Cucumber), Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih (Onion and Garlic), or Petualangan Si Kancil (Adventures of the hare). At this time also, many Indonesian animators were outsourced by other countries, especially Japan. The design of the characters that appear in this period were also quite diverse, obviously background and experience affect the character design.

The character design for Hela-Heli-Helo was a bit straight forward. Facial features like eyes and mouth were added to the simplified 3D models of helicopters and jet planes. For color, they used contrasting color blocks. Unfortunately, I don't have enough information to know the development of their personalities.

Fig 9. Some of The Characters in Hela-Heli-Helo by HM Yuwono, retrieved from: https://www.youtube. com/watch?v=pmt9lqNDWow)

The characters in the folklore series were always different for each episode but the design concepts were the same. The design was too generic so it's easily forgotten. Similar with the character design in Si Huma, it relies on outlines and colors with virtually no shading, but with more complex forms.

Fig 10. Character Design of Timun Mas' Mother and Baby Timun Mas in Folklore Series, retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_eIjWoxRQM

In the 2000s, Indonesia still didn't have an iconic animated series. But in fact at this time there are several important achievements such as: the animated Indonesia folklore which were packaged as a gift for a milk product (Dancow) were quite managed to get the attention of the audience and was aired on television. The character design was influenced by the trending visual style at that time which was the Japanese animation

Fig 11. Character Design of Prince Palasara in Dancow's Folklore Series, retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66ozGT1MUz8

with some modifications and development. Also in this period, Indonesia had the first big-screen animation through Janus Prajurit Terakhir (Janus The Last Warrior) (2003) and Homeland (2004) produced by Kasatmata Studio from Jogja.

Character Designs in Indonesia Animated Series After 2004

Interest in animation increased significantly in Indonesia since around year 2004. Not only because the popularity of Japanese and American animation among the young generation, but also because noticeable local animations have started to emerge since Homeland (2004).

Animation schools became very popular and eventually increased in number and quality across the country. Animation festivals like Hellomotion, INAICTA, and Animafest also contribute in encouraging young animators to produce animated films. Their background and new technology affect the character design in their animation.

Fig 12. Upin & Ipin Characters, retrieved from: http://icink96.mwb.im/files/upin-ipin.jpg

With the popularity of Upin & Ipin (2007), an animated TV series from Malaysia, Indonesian TV stations has also started to produce local animated TV series. Independent animators founded small studios and produce animated film in short or web series format.

Here is the timeline of prominent animated series emerging since 2008 (web and TV):

1. Mahabharata (2006)

Fig 13. Character in Mahabharata Animated Series
Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=120&v=2eaNyiS1IGc

This animated TV series is an adaptation from a comic book by Indonesian famous artist, R.A. Kosasih. R.A. Kosasih is well known for his comics that depict Wayang stories.

Fig 14. Panels from R.A. Kosasih's Comic Book, retrieved from: http://www.anelinda-store.com/images/sampel/NWK001-1.jpg

The style of his comics was too complicated as an animation so alteration has to be made. The character designers added western touch to the adapted version of the design. We can easily see the influence by the exaggeration of the body proportions.

2. Kabayan dan Lip Lap (Kabayan and Lip Lap) (2008)

Fig 13. Character in Mahabharata Animated Series
Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=120&v=2eaNyiS1IGc

This animation portrays Kabayan as a diligent, honest, and thoughtful 10 years old boy. Kabayan has imaginary firefly friend called Lip Lap who always follows and accompany Kabayan wherever he goes. Lip Lap often encourages Kabayan when he's desperate, and warned the boy when he does something wrong.

The character design of this animated TV series is simple, not having any textures in it. They don't have prominent facial features but the designer tried to give Indonesian characteristic through the design of the clothing and other attributes.

2. Si Hebring (2009)

Fig 16. Hebring 2009 (left) and Hebring 2015 (right)by Andi S Boediman, retrieved from: https://andisboediman.files.wordpress.com/2009/10/hebring.jpg?w=216)

Si Hebring is a story about local superhero who is a bit absurd and funny. Si Hebring was first appeared as sequels in animation festivals but later aired in TV stations.

The character design in the first 3 sequels (left) and the character design in the TV series (right) are very different in term of style. The design in the sequels was influenced by American superheroes who have bulky body build, while the character design in the TV series has a much more slender body build to achieve comical humor. The change of the design might be influenced by the collaboration with Japanese TV stations. Both of the designs are 3D but they also have different shading style.

Hebring's character design has a great potential. It was designed very well in

aspects of psychology, physiology, and sociology.

4. Vattala Sang Pelindung (Vattala The Guardian) (2010)

Fig 17. Characters in Vattala Sang Pelindung Series, retrieved from: http://klikanime.weebly.com/uploads/1/8/5/4/18545184/9032381.jpg?1368979473

Vattala is 2D animated TV series adapted from comic book. The creator tried to maintain the style from the original comic book into the character design.

The character design in this animated TV series is influenced by American style but with modification and addition of subtle traditional ornaments on the characters' costume.

5. Uwa and Friends (2012)

Fig 18. Uwa and Friends Characters, retrieved from: http://uwaandfriends.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/istirahat-lah_uwa.jpg

Uwa and Friends is an educational animated web series for preschool children. The characters in the series are Indonesian endemic animals like Orangutan, Sumatra tiger, and Ujung Kulon rhino.

Compared to other existing Indonesian animated series, the style is very different. The character designs are very cute and really suits the concept. But by seeing the character designs and the visual of the animation, we can immediately see how the design was heavily influenced by South Korean preschool animated series Pororo The Little Penguin.
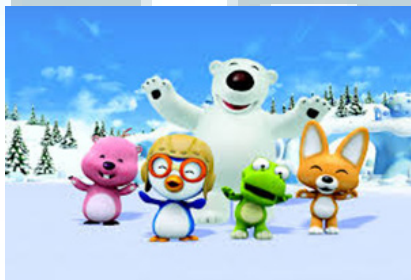

Fig 19. Characters in Pororo The Little Penguins, retrieved from: http://cartoonsimages.com/sites/default/files/field/image/Pororo-et-tous-ses-amis.jpg

6. Dufan Defender (2012)

Fig 20. Characters in Dufan Defender, retrieved from: http://assets.kompas.com/data/photo/2012/03/10/1635315620X310.jpg

Dufan Defender teaches audience to appreciate and protect the resources on earth. Dufan and friends formed a group to protect the Earth, The Earth Defender, against evil criminals, The Destroyer, who wants to destroy the existing resources on earth.

This TV series was commissioned by a theme park called Dunia Fantasy/ Dufan (Fantasy World). The main character of this TV series is the mascot of the theme park who is a bekantan (an endemic animal in Borneo island).

The character design in this series is not working. The design is "forced" and a bit uneasy to look at. The characters are also not supported with convincing facial expressions.

7. Garuda Riders (2013)

Fig 21. Naradja in Garuda Riders Animated Series, retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3APdSYGFngs

The story of this animated web series revolves around modified Indonesian ancient wayang folklore.

Although the theme of this web series is completely local, the design of the characters is heavily influenced by Japanese anime. You can see it from the style of the hair and the eyes. As a web series, the creator has more freedom in exploring the visual style of the characters. The format is 3D but you can still see the outlines and cell shading on the characters.

8. Si Entong (2013)

Fig 18. Uwa and Friends Characters, retrieved from: http://uwaandfriends.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/istirahat-lah_uwa.jpg

Si Entong is an adaptation of live action TV series of the same title. The story revolves around the life of a little boy named Entong and his friends.

The character design has sufficient amount of detail and enjoyable to watch as TV series. Although the style is not distinctive, we can still see Indonesian characteristics from the characters' costume and facial features.

9. Keluarga Somat (Somat's Family) (2014)

Fig 23. Characters in Keluarga Somat Series, retrieved from: http://aritunsa.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/klu-arga-somat.jpg

The story is about the simple but unexpected life of Mr. Somat and his family in the diverse neighborhood background.

The character design is similar with the character design from "Si Entong" but with fewer details. Mainly because the studio is smaller.

10. Adit & Sopo Jarwo (2014)

Fig 24. Characters in Adit & Sopo Jarwo Series, retrieved from: http://cdn.klimg.com/muvila.com/re-sources/news/2015/05/05/8313/paging/5141/592x342-dere-tan-serial-animasi-lokal-ini-ha-rus-berjaya-di-negeri-sendiri-150505s.jpg

The story revolves around the adventure of Adit and his friends versus the duo Sopo and Jarwo. Their disputes usually end with advice/ sermon from the respected community leader, Haji Udin.

The studio who produced this TV series is also the studio who produced Si Entong. That's why they have similar design. But the design in this series has improved visually. Not infrequently the characters are designed based on real person, which becomes a bit uncanny.

Fig 25. Comparison of Deddy Mizwar in Animated Version and The Real Photo, retrieved from: http://alvian-cs.blog-spot.com.au/2015/02/tokoh-asli-seri-al-adit-sopo-dan-jarwo.html

Fig 26. Comparison of Jokowi in Animated Version and The Real Photo, retrieved from: http://sumutpos.co/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Jokowi.jpg

Although this animated TV series still hasn't defeated the popularity of imported animation, it has slowly taken its place in the heart of Indonesian audience.

Conclusion

It is clear that the quality of character design in Indonesian animated series has increased since the first time it was created in 1980s. The design improves visually but still lack personality. There is no character who is memorable and unique enough to stand out in animated series. The frequent use of local content in the story has started to become a bit redundant. Indonesia animation becomes inseparable with local contents like Wayang, folklore, etc. Can an Indonesia animation be called true Indonesia animation without any local content in it?

Animated series in Indonesia, especially TV series nowadays are still trying to emulate the success of Upin & Ipin TV series. We can see the similarity in the theme and in the character designs. At the other hand, animated web series has more varied themes and style in the design.

Currently, Indonesia animation character design is still struggling to get a place in the heart of its audience. From the travel range of Indonesia animation, we can find a variety of styles, techniques, approaches and concepts that influenced the design of the characters. This proves that Indonesian character designers are actually quite rich and bold in exploring the character design. Obviously background and experience of the creators affect the character design.

Character designs in Indonesia animated series keep improving all these years and started to find its identity. Although animation character design in Indonesia cannot escape the shadow of foreign hegemony, character designers manage to add Indonesia characteristic by adding local content in the design.

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