

# Interpreting Traditional Malay Shadow Play Spaces in a Multimedia Environment

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**Abstract.** *This paper presents a research on the techniques of traditional Malay 'shadow play' used in developing new concepts for representing interactive media. This funded research by the Selangor State Library is developed based on a book collection on the aural history of Sabak Bernam, one of the counties in Selangor located in the West Peninsular of Malaysia. It considers the domain of conceptual spaces within the shadow play setting and spaces by addressing the typology of the design. Representation of different character and environmental styles related to the Malay cultures were developed as multimedia content involving more than fifty local villages. It suggests form for background consideration of possible metaphors, the space arrangement of the elementary and actors, spatial relationships, audiences and the techniques of puppetry in the design for multimedia environments.*

**Keywords:** *Shadow play; multimedia environment; Malay.*

## Introduction

The emergence of new computer technologies and capabilities allow digital interfaces for a variety of applications. In the context of interactive design, it is a part of human experiences (Shedroff, 1999; Packer and Jordan, 2001) that have been developed and demonstrated through the form of architecture, art, cinematography, photography and theatres. Many researchers expand this knowledge and apply the principles to form a digital domain such as virtual architectures, virtual arts, virtual theatres and computer games. According to Ozcan (2002), throughout history, different cultures had different techniques for the art of interactive performance, in parallel

with the available technology. He further explains that if we can understand the philosophy behind the techniques of different cultures, we can produce interactive designs that go beyond the limitations of the current two-dimensional (2D) designs. The challenge is re-interpreting the early performance techniques and using this to suggest new dimensions of interactive media.

Shadow play, one of the oldest forms of display originated in South East Asia around 1000 B.C. and later became very popular in the 17th century through out its regions namely Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, and some other European countries and Turkey (Ozcan, 2002), is powerful to suggest new insights within the multimedia environment.

This paper will demonstrate our exploration in particular the Malay shadow play (also known by the local as the 'wayang kulit Siam' – the Siamese shadow play) through stylization of spaces, forms, decorative props, characters and depth of illusions. The multimedia environment was designed to manifest within the shallow space. Color palette was carefully chosen to project depth of field and different importance of characterization. The concept of simplicity in manipulating spaces within the multimedia environment enables a designer creating innovative ideas of info-spaces designs such as for museums and exhibitions. The forging of traditional culture and interpretation of its experience will better serve the design objective and help produce a clear goal with better result.

## Spaces of shadow play and multimedia design

According to Yousof (2001), four styles of shadow play are active in the Malay peninsula: 'wayang kulit Siam' (Siamese), 'wayang kulit Melayu' (Malay), 'wayang kulit Gedek' and 'wayang kulit Purwa'. He further explained that while all the four styles developed as a result of importation and localization, only 'wayang kulit Siam', evolved into a unique form specific only to the province of Kelantan and to Malay majorities territories immediately north of Kelantan in Southern Thailand. Most of the 'wayang kulit' (leather puppet) or shadow plays in the Asian regions were established with performance consisting of a screen, spectators in front of the screen, and a light source and artist (known as 'Tok Dalang', the storyteller or puppeteer) behind the screen. The storyteller created shadow portraits, which were cast onto the screen.



*Figure 1*  
A typical shadow play performance by the Tok Dalang (the storyteller).

with stories that depict and adopt local folklores and royal stories. Audiences usually range from kids to adults, presented in villages particularly around Eastern of Peninsular Malaysia at night as one of the most popular 'traditional' theatre art forms. In this type of shadow play, different characters, sets and objects are creatively used by the artist to tell stories and even can direct the 'in promptu' performance according to the spectators' response. A simple wood dwellings are built on stilts, raised about one meter above ground level with several houses clustered together in the area, often surrounded by paddy fields (Figure 1, [http://allmalaysia.info/msiaknow/arts/wayang\\_kulit.asp](http://allmalaysia.info/msiaknow/arts/wayang_kulit.asp): 19 May 2008).

Figure 2  
The way of viewing in the Indonesian 'Wajan Koulit' shadow play.

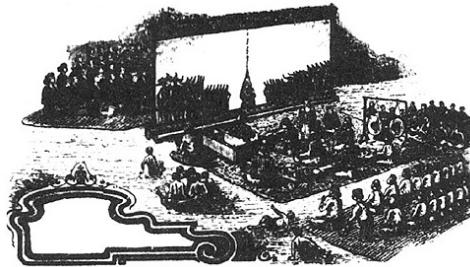


Figure 3  
A performance of the Wayang Lamah shadow play.

Ozcan (2002) in his research of shadow play categorized four different types of performance in the shadow play that may help us to improve the conceptualization of modern, interactive media design:

- a. Viewing from both sides of the screen: Similar to the eastern and Turkish shadow play, the spectators will watch from both sides which consist of the males watching from behind the screen and the female watching from the front (Figure 2, Ozcan, 2002).
- b. Spatial viewing: In ancient times in Asia, some of the techniques of the shadow play were developed during religious ceremonies that the participants sat around the fire. A huge rock, a tent or a wall served as a screen onto which the shadows were projected.
- c. Performing without the screen: The 'Wayang Lamah' shadow play, found in Indonesia-Bali, is

performed in daylight and without a screen. The actors carried a huge 2D puppet and the shadows were projected onto the ground as part of the show (Figure 3, Ozcan, 2002).

- d. The interaction between the actor and image: This type of shadow play (quite widespread in European theatres) used the actors' shadows as part of the props, cast in front and behind the screen, and the actors physically participated in the show. New techniques adopting this concept appeared in the form of lighting and water screen projections.

The four techniques of concept of spaces in shadow play described by Ozcan (2002) are potential to be adapted in today's interactive media in particular multimedia design. The spaces are not just limited to computer screen but may be extended to take advantage to spectators, storyteller and objects as the spatial arrangement within the multimedia



environment. He added that different screen placements and ways of viewing the shadow play could be analyzed in order to make them more attractive when combining them with today and tomorrow techniques.

### Storytelling in Malaysian society

Traditional storytelling among races in Malaysia, in particular the Malays, have been presented in many forms of art and literatures through myths, legends and folktales. This creation of art form is continuously developed mostly for the communities, presentation purposes and individual demands. The carriers of the tales are known by many different names but play similar functions – they are storytellers who are able to enthrall their listeners (Norhayati and Siew, 2004) commonly known as a ‘Penglipur Lara’ (the ‘Soothe of Cares’) (Osman, 1988).

New digital tools allow storytellers nowadays to explore and creatively represent stories in a more effective and interesting way using multimedia technology. Digital storytellers, artists and writers who are passionate on combining traditional arts with new and powerful tools of multimedia technology offer an enhanced level of communication flexibility, multi-medium distribution, interactivity, freshness and engagement as summarized below (Norhayati and Siew, 2004):

a. Non-linear flexibility: The ability to have stories in a separate modules, allows audience with

feedback, customization and present based on individual choices.

b. Multi-medium distribution: Digital stories can be both broadcast and narrowcast via multiple media including computer screen, Internet, Intranet, CD-ROM, DVD, VHS, television, and projections.

c. Interactivity: Digital stories provide the quite time in between story modules that permit real-life storytelling, audience feedback and a respondent of new information based on the audience inputs.

d. Freshness: The nature of the digital platform allows instant updating with form of text, graphic, video, animation and video.

e. Engagement: Digital storytelling engages audience with the multimedia content with creative storytelling technologies and techniques.

### Interpreting traditional Malay shadow play in a multimedia environment

The ubiquitous Malay storytelling lied on the generations or pioneers who have stayed in a place for a certain period. The stories may be based on a close observation, an individual experience, myth, legend and historical feature or cultures of the places. Concerning the importance of preserving oral storytelling, the ‘Perbadanan Perpustakaan Awam Selangor’ (Selangor State Public Library Holdings, PPAS) in collaboration with the Discovery Research Consultant

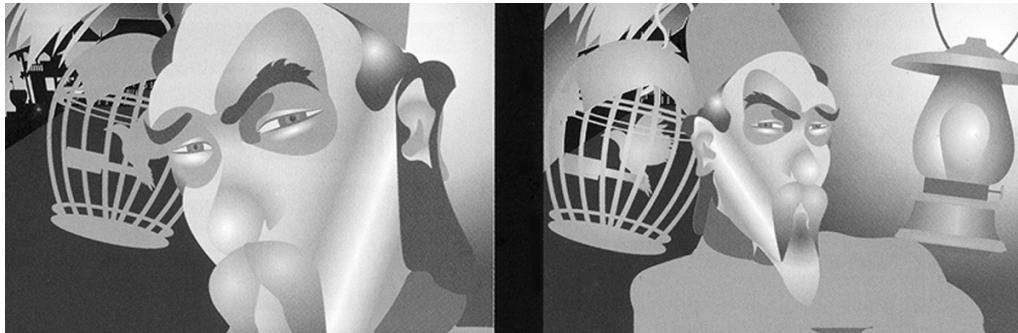


Figure 4  
A ‘Penglipur Lara’ (a storyteller) used in the opening of each scene as part of the overall storyline.

Figure 5  
A sample of body gestures in  
a scene.

Management Sdn Bhd and Selangor State Economic Planning Department decided to archive oral histories of villages in 'Sabak Bernam' (one of the counties in Selangor) (Nazirah et al., 2008). Based on the available resources, fifty-three short stories were collected and further developed in multimedia environment. This project involved the storytelling concept of idea development through sketches (thumbnails), storyboards, character modeling, animations and audio manipulations (voice over, sound effects and background music).

### Visualization

In order to accommodate information hierarchy gained from the oral storytelling, books, articles, interviews and location surveys, the production team suggested to combine and represent the idea on two folds – the 'factual' and 'imaginative' reality (Figure 4, Nazirah et al., 2008).

Among the challenges that we faced in this project include:

- a. Ways to represent the information that is easier to understand particularly for the target group – secondary schools (13 to 18 years old) to adults.
- b. Ideas on simplification of establishing characters and sets for the fifty-three different stories.

### Multimedia space utilization

Concerning these challenges, we divided the overall film spaces within the multimedia environment into the followings:

Shadow play metaphor: Using the concept of spaces utilization within the traditional shadow play, we formalize the overall multimedia design as 'silhouette animation'. All characters and sets were established with different hierarchies and developed using Flash animation. Certain level of details in terms of color and texture for the royals and commoners were established in each scene. For most scenes, body gestures enhanced the plotlines (Figure 5, Nazirah et al., 2008).

The design of form and shape based on the traditional shadow play was implied to suggest key



scenes. The principles of Gestalt perception (Skaalid, 1999; <http://www.users.totalise.co.uk/~kbroom/Lectures/gestalt.htm>: 23 May 2008) applied were summarized below:

- a. Closure: The mind may experience to see complete figures even when part of the information is missing.
- b. Similarity: Objects that share visual characteristics such as form, shape, size, color, texture, value or orientation will be seen as belonging together.
- c. Proximity: Spatial or temporal proximity of elements may induce the mind to perceive a collective or totality.
- d. Symmetry (Figure ground relationships): Symmetrical images are perceived collectively, even in spite of distance.
- e. Continuity: The mind continues visual, auditory, and kinetic patterns.
- f. Common Fate: Elements with the same moving direction are perceived as a collective or unit.

Shallow space: Using the fundamentals of Gestalt theory, we incorporated layouts in three major spaces. These spaces were:

- a. Foreground: Certain objects in different sizes, scale and color (often dark color or figure ground contrast) used to establish the overall location, environment that the scene taken place. This included portraying the visual culture as the mnemonic device in the multimedia environment.



- b. Middle ground: These were the zones where the characters were positioned to anchor the story.
- c. Background: Objects with different sizes and environments complemented the overall scene location. The unifying elements such as balance, form, shape and texture completed the overall design.

Samples of the shallow space are as shown in Figure 6 (Nazirah et al., 2008).

## Conclusion

This paper suggested ways to develop multimedia content using a shadow play metaphor. The key to the typology of the traditional shadow play is the arrangement of spaces between the screen, actor (storyteller) and audience, plays an important role to the success on this type of performing art. The information hierarchy gained from the oral storytelling and other forms suggested a rich content creation through factual and imaginative reality. Although this concept may not seem to target interactive media, the spaces within the multimedia environment help designers to incorporate original and creative ideas gained from traditional shadow play.

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Figure 6  
A sample of shallow spaces  
in a scene.