

Concept of Visual Simplification of Characters: Wayang Pandawa Gagrak Yogyakarta in the perspective of Gestalt Theory

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Abstract

This research revitalises wayang kulit, Indonesia's shadow puppetry, by visually simplifying the Pandawa characters in the Yogyakarta style. The traditional visual styles are often too complex for younger audiences. Gestalt principles (closure, figure-ground, proximity, similarity, continuity, and common fate) are applied to enhance visual clarity while preserving cultural meaning. Using practice-based, qualitative research, the study involves observing original wayang, conducting visual explorations, and integrating Jung's archetypes to strengthen character identity. Key visual elements are retained to ensure the characters' recognisability. This simplification strategy offers a modern design approach with potential applications in various media, making wayang more accessible today.

Keywords: Simplification; Gestalt; wayang kulit, pandawa; character design

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1.0 Introduction

Wayang kulit was once a major form of public entertainment in Yogyakarta, particularly before the expansion of modern media in the 1990s. One popular venue was the courtyard of the Kedaulatan Rakyat newspaper office, which often drew large audiences for its rich moral and philosophical content. Wayang kulit was recognised by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity on November 7, 2003 (Fibiona et al., 2024). As part of Javanese puppetry, it serves not only as entertainment but also as a medium for passing on traditional wisdom.

In epic narratives such as the Mahabharata, the Pandawa characters Yudistira, Bima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sadewa are central figures who often represent virtue, determination, and heroism (Purwadi, 2024). Their wayang kulit forms are distinguished by specific body proportions, ornaments, and deeply embedded symbolic details. Although drawn from Indian epics, wayang kulit has been thoroughly localised in Indonesia. In the context of local genius, the people of the archipelago not only accepted Indian stories as they were but also absorbed, modified, and ultimately incorporated them into a unique local cultural identity (Sumawinata et al., 2022). Today, the Pandawa are seen as symbols of Javanese ideals. This transformation shows how external influences can be reshaped into culturally distinctive forms. With its rich visuals and timeless messages, wayang kulit remains relevant across generations in both cultural and educational contexts.

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Fig. 1: Visual Image of Interview
(Source: Jakti et al., 2025)

Wayang characters, such as the Pandawa, face challenges in engaging modern audiences. Modern society, particularly the younger generation, tends to be more familiar with simple and intuitive visualisations that are readily accepted (Devi et al., 2025). Initial interviews were conducted by showing Fig. 1 in May 2025 with seven ISI Yogyakarta design students and showed that they could not recognise the Pandawa characters from the picture. These results highlight the importance of maintaining a consistent visual identity while enhancing its appeal. Visual simplification, which reduces detail without compromising meaning, offers a way to connect traditional visuals with modern expectations, making wayang more accessible while preserving cultural integrity.

This study employs the Yogyakarta *gagrak* (signature style), selected for its aesthetic and historical significance. While generally similar to the Surakarta style in body structure and movement, there are some distinguishing characteristics, one of which is the use of softer and more dynamic moustaches on wayang characters (Akbar et al., 2024). This style also conveys emotions more vividly, making it more suitable for adaptation. In addition, Yogyakarta is one of the centres of wayang preservation and innovation in Indonesia (Manik et al., 2024; Legino et al., 2024). Archetype theory provides a psychological foundation for narrative and character structure. Archetypes such as The Hero, The Mentor, The Innocent, and The Ruler are not just character models but reflect universal patterns in the collective human consciousness (Olejarczyk, 2018). In wayang, the Pandawa align with these types: Yudistira as the Ruler, Bima as the Hero, Arjuna as the Lover, and Nakula-Sadewa as the Everyman. The categorisation based on the archetype supports the retention of identity in simplified forms. The simplification process applies Gestalt Theory to retain recognisability and cultural meaning. In addition, the practice-based research approach is employed as the primary methodology, as the main output of this research is visual work produced through a systematic and reflective design process (Marsh, 2023), and also how social, environmental and cultural aspects were considered (Suwarno, 2024). The outcome has vast application potential in media such as souvenirs, comics, animation, and educational platforms aimed at younger and international audiences.

This study aims to revitalise wayang through a contemporary lens, enabling the creation of new, culturally grounded works. It explores how the Pandawa characters from the Yogyakarta *gagrak* can be simplified without losing their meaning and how integrating Gestalt and Archetype Theory reinforces their visual and symbolic identity.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Simplification and Gestalt Principles

In the visual design process, understanding how humans perceive form and structure is crucial for creating recognizable and meaningful works (Vusić & Geček, 2025). Gestalt Theory, developed by Wertheimer, Köhler, and Koffka, provides a robust framework for explaining these phenomena. According to its fundamental principle, “the whole is different from the sum of its parts” (Wertheimer (1938) in (Khamis et al., 2023)), human perception depends not only on individual elements but on the overall impression of an object. This theory is crucial in simplifying the wayang characters for maintaining recognisability. Applying the six main Gestalt principles (closure, figure-ground, proximity, continuity, common fate, and similarity) allows visual elements to be structured and aesthetically, ensuring the message remains understandable to contemporary viewers. These principles enhance not only clarity and recognisability but also support the effective delivery of narrative and cultural values. As shown in Darmawan et al.'s (2025) research titled Gestalt Simplification: Bible Story Animation “The Prodigal Son”, the Gestalt approach succeeds in visualising moral messages in depth through a harmonious visual composition that is easily understood by the audience. The theory confirms that simplification is not about removing meaning but rather about distilling form while preserving its cultural and emotional essence.

2.2 Theory of Cognitive Psychology

Visual perception is a key stage in cognitive psychology for processing information. Humans do not perceive the world as a set of random details; rather, they tend to organise visual elements into meaningful patterns (Kohler & Clarke, 2021). How humans perceive something occurs quickly and intuitively, helping to reduce cognitive load in understanding visuals or narratives. Gestalt theory explains this process well. Basing itself on the assumption that “the whole is more than the sum of its parts”, Gestalt explains how humans

naturally seek simplicity and wholeness in their perception (Trujillo & Holler, 2023). Principles like closure, proximity, continuity, and figure-ground help the brain interpret partial visuals and form coherent images. In *wayang* character simplification, for example, the closure principle allows viewers to recognise Arjuna's face with just a few lines drawn from memory to complete the image. This example demonstrates that simplification does not eliminate meaning but rather enhances cognitive accessibility.

In this research, integrating Gestalt principles with Pandawa characters helps preserve their familiarity and cultural identity while making them more visually accessible and relevant to broader, especially younger, audiences. The integration supports tradition through a form that aligns with modern cognitive preferences.

2.3. Visual Simplification in Character Design

Visual simplification is not merely a reduction of details but a strategy to strengthen the essence of the form, ensuring the visual message remains clear and easily accepted by the audience (Vitello & Salvi, 2023). In the simplification of *wayang* characters, key elements such as body proportions, head shape, crown, and symbols are preserved. Research by Darmawan et al., (2025) also shows that the use of colour blocks and dynamic motion transitions can strengthen character emotions in animation, making characters more relatable for younger audiences.

2.4. Character Archetypes and Narrative Meanings

Every character in a story has a psychological archetype that reflects universal patterns in the human collective consciousness (Syamsul Bahri et al., 2024). The Pandawa, although originating from an Indian epic, has been internalised by Javanese society as an ideal representation of Indonesia's noble values and local wisdom. In the context of this study, the Pandawa characters are categorised and integrated with the following archetype theory to help build visual characters that are not only aesthetically recognisable but also possess psychological depth. The division of these archetypes can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Archetypes of Pandawa

Character	Archetype	Definition
Yudistira	The Ruler	Calm and Wise
Bima	The Hero	Big, Strong, and Firm
Arjuna	The Lover	Gentle and Graceful
Nakula	The Everyman	Commonality, Loyalty, and High Solidarity
Sadewa	The Everyman	

(Source: Jakti et al., 2025)

2.5. Local Genius and Cultural Adaptation

Wayang characters, though rooted in India, have been deeply adapted in Indonesia through the concept of local genius, which actively transforms foreign elements into a local identity. This process is evident in Javanese culture, where local values are used to filter and adapt Hindu-Buddhist, Islamic, Chinese, and European influences, resulting in an acculturation that enriches local culture without compromising its original identity (Darmoko, 2017). The Pandawa, once Hindu figures, are now also symbols of Javanese virtue. Thus, visual simplification must still reflect these local values to preserve cultural meaning, even in modernised forms.

2.6. Yogyakarta's Gagrak as a Visual Style Reference

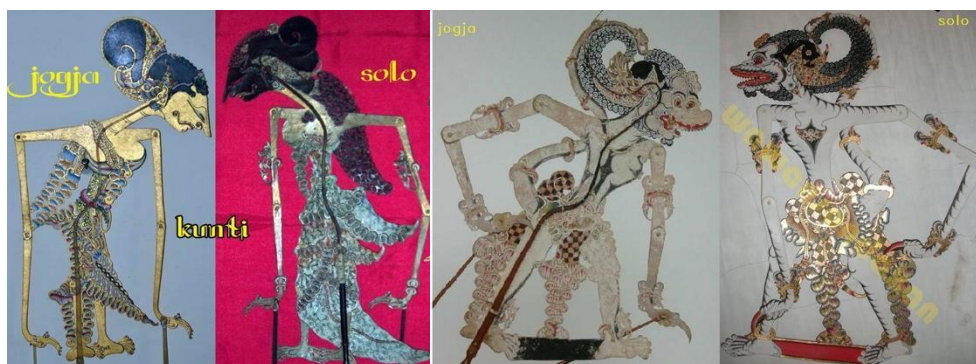


Fig. 2: Comparison of Wayang Styles between Solo and Jogja

(Source: <https://klubanet.wordpress.com/2015/06/09/tips-membedakan-wayang-jogja-dengan-wayang-solo/>)

As previously mentioned, Yogyakarta's *wayang kulit* has its characteristics when compared to the Surakarta style. The image shown in Fig. 2 presents the visual differences between wayang from Yogyakarta and Surakarta. Although both share similarities in body proportions and anatomical structure of the characters, the Yogyakarta style is more dynamic and expressive in depicting emotion and movement (Hakim & Kusumastiti, 2022). Furthermore, the Yogyakarta style employs more curved lines and concise silhouettes, making it a suitable basis for visual simplification. By choosing Yogyakarta's *gagrak* as a reference, the researcher aims to emphasise that the *wayang* tradition is still alive and relevant to current developments in visual design.

3.0 Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research approach, with practice-based research as its primary framework. It focuses on simplifying the wayang characters of Pandawa, making the creation process an integral part of the research process and the generation of new knowledge (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). Each stage not only produces visuals but also fosters reflection and theoretical insight into the application of perceptual psychology in traditional character design.

The study explores the meaning, context, and application of Gestalt Theory in simplifying traditional visual forms. It emphasises both outcomes and the process of understanding visual principles, audience perception, and embedded cultural values. Data were gathered through visual observation and literature review. Physical and digital references to Pandawa figures were analysed, focussing on distinct elements such as body proportions, facial lines, crowns, weapon symbols, and posture that ensure character recognition. The literature review provided theoretical grounding, drawing on scholarly sources related to *wayang*, Gestalt principles, and visual simplification practices. These references informed the conceptual framework and supported design decisions.

The practice-based research approach was used because it prioritised the process of creating visual works as a means of exploration, reflection, and knowledge formation (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). The design process is carried out in stages as shown in Fig. 3:

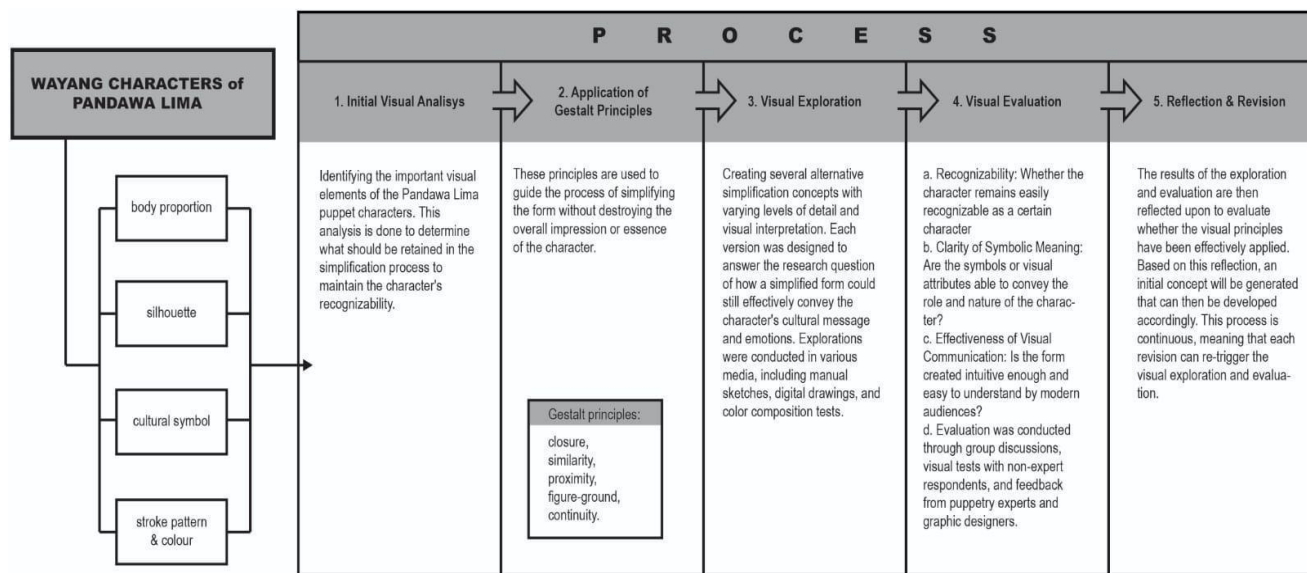


Fig. 3: Research Flow Process
(Source: author adapted from Candy & Edmonds, 2018)

4.0 Findings

The visual simplification of Pandawa wayang characters used an interdisciplinary approach, combining Gestalt principles, cultural symbolism, and modern design techniques. The goal was to make the visuals more relevant to young audiences while preserving the recognizability and symbolic meaning of each character.

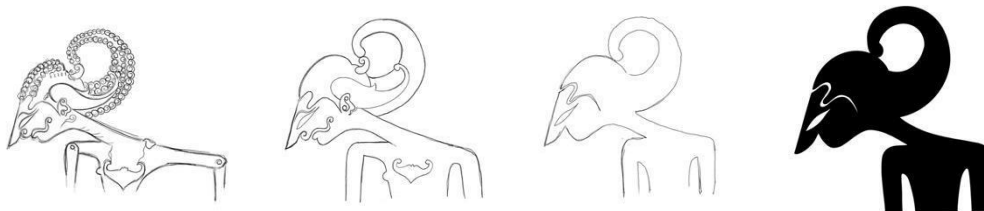


Fig. 4: Character Simplification Process
(Source: Jakti et al., 2025)

Guided by the Gestalt theoretical framework, the simplification process as seen in Fig. 4 does not simply remove details; instead, it retains the visual essence that makes the character still recognisable. In addition, the application of cognitive psychology theory helps in understanding how the human brain processes visual information intuitively and effectively, so that the final result can directly resonate with the emotions and understanding of the audience. In the early stages of creation, observations were made of the original Yogyakarta wayang kulit characters, where elements such as body proportions, ornaments, colours, and facial expressions were recorded as basic references. After that, the team conducted a visual exploration, using the Gestalt principle as the main guide to compose a harmonious and meaningful visual composition.

4.1. Application of Gestalt Principles in Visual Simplification

A key challenge in simplifying traditional characters is preserving recognisability and symbolic meaning. Gestalt Theory principles guided the reduction of detail, ensuring both visual and narrative coherence, as in the example seen in Fig. 5.

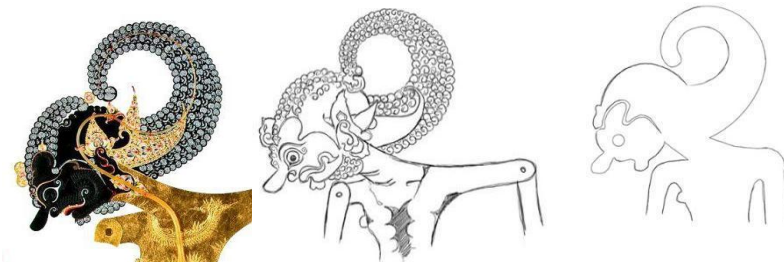


Fig. 5: Simplification Process of Bima Character
(Source: Jakti et al., 2025)

- a. Closure
The closure principle explains that humans tend to complete incomplete forms. In Arjuna's character design, for example, the complex crown is simplified into minimalist lines, yet still conveys the impression of knightly splendour. Despite the reduced details, the viewer's brain naturally "completes" the shape because it already has prior visual experience.
- b. Figure-Ground
This principle is crucial in ensuring that characters stand out even in complex or simple backgrounds. In digital animation, a strong colour contrast between the character and background enhances visual focus. For example, Bima's character remains easily identifiable through its large silhouette and upright posture, even when depicted solely in black and white.
- c. Similarity and Proximity
These two principles are used to establish visual consistency between characters. The use of basic geometric shapes for weapons (such as Kyai Karawelang's spear and Kyai Tunggulnaga's umbrella) is maintained because their shapes are similar to representations of other knights' weapons (similarity). At the same time, their position close to the character's hand helps the audience understand the object's relationship with the character (proximity).
- d. Continuity and Common Fate
The principle of continuity is used to guide the viewer's attention through the flow of body lines or movements, ensuring a seamless visual experience. For instance, the curvature of Arjuna's back is intentionally designed to convey elegance and a dynamic impression. Meanwhile, the common fate principle is employed in group scenarios, such as those involving Nakula and Sadewa, whose synchronised movements evoke a sense of solidarity and emotional cohesion.

The application of Gestalt principles results in creating characters that are simpler yet still strong in their recognisability and depth of meaning. The Gestalt approach is expected to be effective in conveying deep moral messages through harmonious visual compositions that are easily understood by modern audiences.

4.2. Key Visual Elements Retained

During the simplification process, not all visual elements can be removed. Some key elements become the primary identity of each character and must remain so that the audience can immediately recognise the character, as presented in Fig. 6 below:



Fig. 6: Process Maintaining Yudistira's Key Visual Elements in the Hair Ornamental Part
(Source: Jakti et al., 2025)

- a. Body Proportions
Each member of the Pandavas has unique body proportions and identity markers. For example, Bima has a large body and a proportional head that is larger than his body, while Arjuna is slender and handsome (with a more pointed nose and sharper eyes). This difference is maintained even in a simplified form.

b. Symbols of Identity

Crowns, weapon attributes, and skin colour are important elements that mark the status and personality of the characters. The black colour of Bima's skin is maintained as a symbol of strength and anger that is positive in the world of puppetry. The same goes for the weapons that characterise each character.

c. Facial Expression

Although many facial details are removed, the basic expression of each character is still considered. Arjuna is still depicted with a calm and confident expression, while Nakula and Sadewa, as the youngest brothers, have a softer and more humble expression. These elements serve as the visual foundation for simplifying the characters, ensuring that the final result retains strong cultural recognition and meaning, as described in Kwak's (2024) study on visual identity. This approach enables simple forms to enhance the potential for interpretation by modern audiences.

4.3. Integration of Cultural Meanings and Character Archetypes

As Indian epic figures that the Javanese community has internalised, the Pandawa are not only story characters but also representations of noble values that are part of the local culture. Therefore, the integration of Jung's archetype theory becomes one of the strategies for building visual personas that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also have psychological depth, as mentioned in Table 1, so that visual simplification can be carried out as presented in Fig. 7.



Fig. 7: Concept Simplification of Pandawa Characters with Gestalt and Archetype Principles

(Source: Jakti, et.al., 2025)

This integration aims to increase the emotional resonance and moral understanding of the audience. The use of the Archetype Theory helps to reinforce the moral narrative without relying too heavily on the verbal narrative.

5.0 Discussion

As practice-based research, the design process is central to generating new knowledge. Within this framework, the researchers assume dual roles, not only as designers engaged in creative production but also as reflective practitioners who critically evaluate visual decisions and their impact on audience perception. Challenges faced during simplification included:

- Balancing modern aesthetics with cultural authenticity.
- Ensuring that the removal of details does not damage the character's identity.
- Adapting the shape to various visual media such as vector, animation, or print.

These challenges provided valuable insight, forming the basis for future developments in both artistic and creative industry contexts. The resulting visual simplifications of the Pandawa characters mark the beginning of broader applications, including souvenirs, comics, digital illustrations, and interactive educational media.

This study contributes to the revitalisation of traditional culture through a contemporary visual approach. While earlier studies often emphasised formal or historical analysis, this research prioritises visual perception as the foundation of the simplification process. This strategy is still rarely explored in an interdisciplinary context. By combining theoretical insight and design practice, it offers academic relevance while reinforcing *wayang*'s cultural presence within the modern creative industry.

This research addresses current challenges in preserving *wayang kulit*, focusing on visually simplifying the Pandawa characters while retaining their recognisability and cultural meaning. Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines Gestalt Theory, cognitive psychology, and Jung's Archetypes, the study produces intuitive yet meaningful visual forms.

The findings demonstrate that Gestalt principles such as closure, figure-ground, proximity, similarity, continuity, and common fate effectively maintain visual coherence despite reduced details. Closure allows viewers to mentally complete simplified forms, while figure-ground ensures the character remains prominent within complex compositions.

Visual simplification here is not the removal of meaning but a method to clarify and emphasise form. As Kwak (2024) explains, the simple forms of modern society increase interest and interpretation among young people. The integration of cognitive psychology further supports the idea that humans naturally seek to organise information into patterns, making simplified visuals easier to process and more engaging. This approach to information organisation is particularly relevant in conveying moral and philosophical messages to younger generations, who have limited attention spans (Vitello & Salvi, 2023).

In a narrative context, Jung's archetype theory provides a strong foundation for the formation of Pandawa's visual personas. This integration not only strengthens the character's identity but also makes the narrative more emotionally accessible to the audience.

The simplification process is carried out while still referring to local values and the concept of local genius. Therefore, visual simplification should not eliminate the established cultural context. This simplified version of the Pandawa character has a wide range

of potential applications, including digital educational media, animation, comics, and souvenir products. The intuitive and recognisable design makes it suitable for implementation on various modern visual platforms without sacrificing traditional values.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study contributes to the revitalisation of traditional art by applying contemporary visual strategies. Unlike prior research focused on form or history, it highlights visual perception and cognitive psychology in the simplification process. Practically, the findings support the development of cultural learning tools for younger audiences and inform creative industry practices.

Its main contribution is the application of Gestalt principles to traditional character design, an area that is rarely explored. Backed by theory and reflective design practice, the research shows that simplification can preserve cultural and narrative meaning. As a practice-based inquiry, it not only produces visual work but also advances methods in culturally rooted design. *Wayang* is positioned not just as heritage but as a living tradition adaptable to modern contexts.

- a. Conduct a broader visual perception test, including non-Javanese or international respondents, to see if character recognisability remains high outside the local cultural context.
- b. Adapt the simplification results into an interactive digital animation format so that the characters can be explored more dynamically and respond to user behaviour.
- c. Explore the application of the same visual style to other *wayang* characters, both from the Kurawa group and antagonists, to expand the visual repertoire of wayang art in a modern medium.
- d. Develop a visual guide based on this theory as a reference for designers and animators interested in cultural preservation through a contemporary design approach.

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Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

This research contributes to visual communication, character design, and cultural revitalisation by integrating Gestalt Theory with traditional Javanese visual culture. It presents a new approach to visual simplification that maintains character recognisability and cultural meaning, focusing on the Pandawa figures in the Yogyakarta *gagrak*. The study also strengthens practice-based research by combining cognitive psychology, design principles, and cultural symbolism, offering value to both academia and the creative industry.

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