

APPLYING BALINESE PHILOSOPHY "RWA BINEDA" CONCEPT ON CHARACTER & ENVIRONMENT DESIGN IN 3D ANIMATED VR SHORT FILM "GEDE"

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ABSTRACT

A distinctive and unique conceptual character and environment design, especially in animated films, is important as to separate itself from plethora of generic animated films out there. A deep understanding of local culture and how the philosophy shaped its culture could create a new way to visualize its world, and a more faithful representative of its world. In this modern era, concept about the dichotomy of positive and negative aspects is often overshadowed by western thinking of dominance, that one must defeat the other. Eastern thinking about this issue is somewhat different, whereas the balance between the positive and negative is a common concept in Asian cultures and society. The Balinese understood this concept as Rwa Bhineda or two opposition, where both the aspects in life must co-exist in harmony.

This paper will examine how the Rwa Bhineda concept could become a theoretical foundation to design characters and environments, using animated short "Gede" as the subject matter. The story of "Gede" is based on the myth of Barong and Rangda as both mythical characters are the physical forms of Rwa Bhineda concept. We will see how the concept is applied on the worldbuilding, character proportions, gateway designs, lands layout, and character and environment visual elements. In the end, we can conclude that a good understanding of local wisdom could produce

a new approach in character and environmental design.

*Keywords: Rwa Bhineda, bali, character design, environment design,
animated short*

RWA BHINEDA PHILOSOPHY AS FOUNDATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR NEW DESIGN THEORY

In this globalized world, modernism brings a structure of universality to the conception of design principles and theories, as it was spread from western perspective. For more than seventy years, this shapes art and design schools in the world. But as this universality create a standard for artists and designers to work in art and design industry, especially in animation industry, there is a need to look for fresh perspective in creating design. With the rapid growth of animated film industry there are plethora of films available, competing for audience's time and attention to be consumed. In this post post-modern era, where digital medias provide platforms for many films and animated films, fresh and unique visual and story could be the answer for an animated film to stand out among others. The importance of distinctiveness aspect in design become more and more notable. On the other side, the need to present themselves as a faithful work of art, good animated films would need to be grounded in its setting and not become shallow artworks.

One of the ways to create distinctiveness and being grounded in its concepts is through utilizing local wisdom. Indonesia, with its hundreds of different cultures, have local myths and cultures that are rich with untapped unique visual, story, and philosophy that could be used as a theoretical framework to create new design approach. At the most basic level the rich traditional visual culture could have a role in creating unique visual style, using cultural artefacts as direct references in visualizing a character or a world. However, by going through a deeper research beneath its cultural artefacts there are philosophical concepts that are distinctively different with western understandings of things, such as the concept of harmony, proportion, layout, and balance.

Balinese culture is one of the infamous and popular culture in the world yet it is rarely portrayed in popular media such as animated film. Balinese philosophy could be a representative of eastern culture that could bring new perspective towards design, as it consists of Javanese *kejawen* philosophy, remnants of Majapahit Kingdom and its culture, Hinduism religion and aboriginal Balinese pagan mysticism. One of its iconic myths is the folklore of *Barong* and *Rangda*, where it contains one of the important concepts of harmony in Balinese philosophy, *Rwa Bhineda*. *Rwa Bhineda* is the harmonic relationship between

the positive and negative aspect in life that has become a central understanding of way of life in Balinese society. The concept put emphasis of the balancing these two aspect of life, and it shows in its daily life. The *Rwa Bhineda* philosophy shapes a tolerant, empathetic society that are open to differences (Gonda, 1973). This dynamic shows a differing understanding with western philosophy of the positive and negative aspect of life (concept of good and evil) shaped by Classical Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian doctrines, in which one of the aspect tends to dominate the other (Eisman, Jr., 2009).

One of the manifestation of *Rwa Bhineda* in daily life is the through the application of *Tri Hita Krana*. *Tri Hita Krana* (literally means three aspects that bring happiness) is a way of orienting life that is based on the grouping of threes. This grouping of threes represents the three aspects of good, evil, and the center point between where human resides. In Hinduism human doesn't have the obligation to purge evil but to live alongside good and evil. Balinese society are rooted in this believe and they live to ensure the balance is maintained (Pitana, 2010). From cosmology to designing irrigation for rice fields, this concept is applied to many daily aspect of life in Bali.

This paper will examine the application of *Rwa Bhineda* philosophy through the application of *Tri Hita Krana* concept on animated film, focusing on character design and environmental design. The application will be examined through a 3D animated VR short film titled "*Gede*" directed by Putu Widyayana Putra and Priscilla Agatha and written by Tri Winarti. Being a 3D animated film created for virtual reality experience, how the concept of *Tri Hita Krana* applied to virtual reality storytelling will also be examined.

Gede is a short film adapted from the Barong Traditional Dance, where the dance tells a tale of the never-ending conflict of *Barong* (manifest of good) and *Rangda* (manifest of evil) (Dibia & Ballinger, 1990). In the adaptation, the short film tells a children story of Gede, a Balinese child that is faced with internal conflict of facing the opportunity to do evil deeds of stealing his neighbour's cake. This internal conflict is shown through a mystical event where Gede transported to the other realm, *Niskala*, where he met *Barong* and *Rangda* who duked it out to win Gede's mind. In the end, as how a Balinese resolve a conflict, Gede put a stop to this fight and made peace with both his good and evil side of him, and then transported back to the real world, *Sekala*, to find the cake mystically disappeared.

TRI HITA KRANA CONCEPT APPLIED TO THE DESIGN OF 3D ANIMATED VR SHORT FILM “GEDE”.

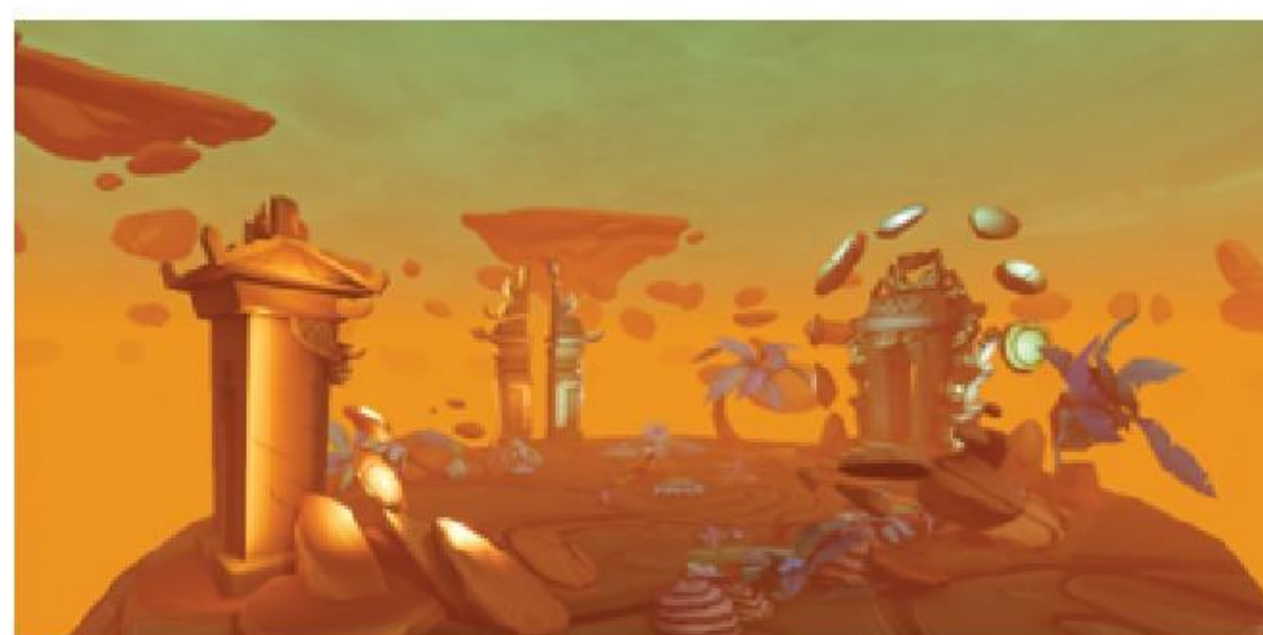
Throughout the five minute long film, there are three visual aspects of the film identified to be based on *Tri Hita Krana* concept. These visual aspects are: the worldbuilding, the layout of the lands, and the character designs.

In Balinese traditional culture, it is known that there are three realms where human and mystical beings reside: *Sekala*, *Niskala*, and *Sandikala*. *Sekala* is the external world, a realm perceptible to human senses, could be seen, heard, smelled, and touched. This human world is bound by time and cannot escape the cycle of time. *Sekala* represent to positive element. Whereas *Niskala* is the internal world, where it cannot be directly perceptible and can only be sensed spiritually. It is eternal, not bound by time, and incomprehensible to human understanding. It represents the negative element. At the center point, there is *Sandikala*, a sacred and mystical time at evening twilight where *Sekala* (light) and *Niskala* (dark) meet. In Balinese society, children are not allowed to go out in *Sandikala* time (Eiseman, Jr., 2009).

This concept of realms become the basis of the worldbuilding for the film, where there are three realms in the film. The story started in *Sandikala* time, where the sky is depicted in purple color to signify astronomical twilight (see Picture 1). This mystical time allowed the supernatural things happens to the protagonist of the film. There are notable dust particles in the air to denote the unnatural atmosphere in natural world. The *Niskala* is shown as a magical floating land where rule physics doesn't work (see Picture 2). The background is shown as vast infinite space as a connotation of the timelessness aspect of the realm. The use of unnatural color and light also contrast itself with the *Sekala* realm. The *Sekala* realm itself is built as natural world setting modelled after a neighbourhood in Jimbaran, Bali, where things like houses, *warung* stall, flower offerings on the floor, *Sedahan Karang* altar, *Dwarapala* guardian statue, and others such as bottles and chairs is being put to represent the *Sekala* world (see Picture 1). The area of *Sekala* realm, the village is designed to be a more compact to show the tightknit society of Balinese people, and to create contrast of space with the *Niskala*. Apparently the *Sekala* realm is not shown in the film to adhere to the narrative structure of a short film, where to accommodate time constraint the film had to skip the exposition and start with inciting incident (Luhn, 2014) which is when the protagonist went outside in *Sandikala* time.



Picture 1. *Sekala realm in Sandikala time (Source: Documentation of Priscilla Agatha)*

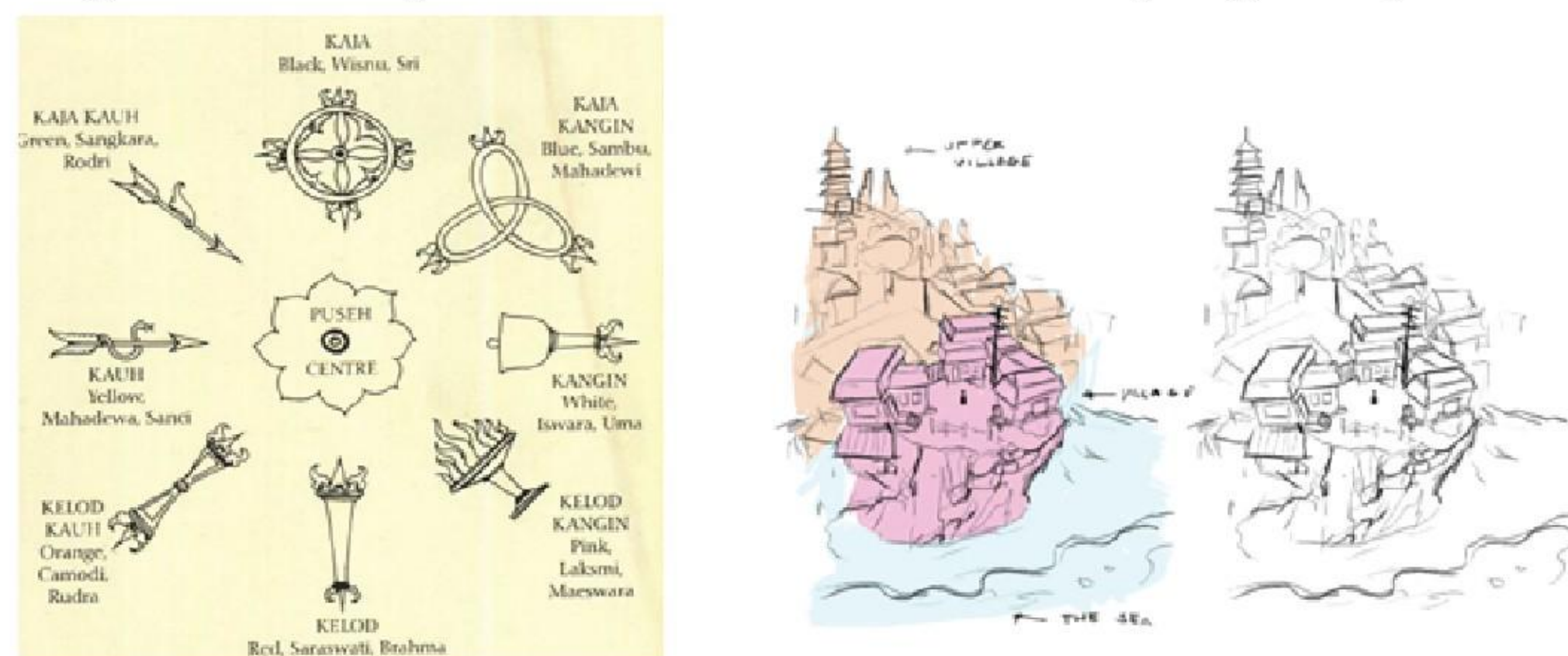


Picture 2. *Niskala realm (Source: Documentation of Priscilla Agatha)*

In Sekala realm, the layout of the lands also adheres to the concept of *Tri Hita Krana*. One of the essential forms of *Tri Hita Krana* is its concept of orientation. In Bali, orientation doesn't only refer to physical space, but also related to its cultural and spiritual space. Based on its sacredness, orientation is sorted as such: north (*kaja*), east (*kangin*), west (*kauh*), and south (*kelod*) (see Picture 3). North orientation (*kaja*) is directing to north towards in Mount Agung, where Hindunese gods resides. This orientation is considered sacred as it pointed towards heaven (positive). South orientation (*kelod*) is directed towards the sea, as the south orientation signifying filthiness or impurity (negative). East and west as the center point between the positive and negative is where the society lives. East orientation (*kangin*) is directing towards sunrise, represents the rise of God. West (*kauh*) is a less sacred place than the east orientation (Eiseman, Jr., 2009).

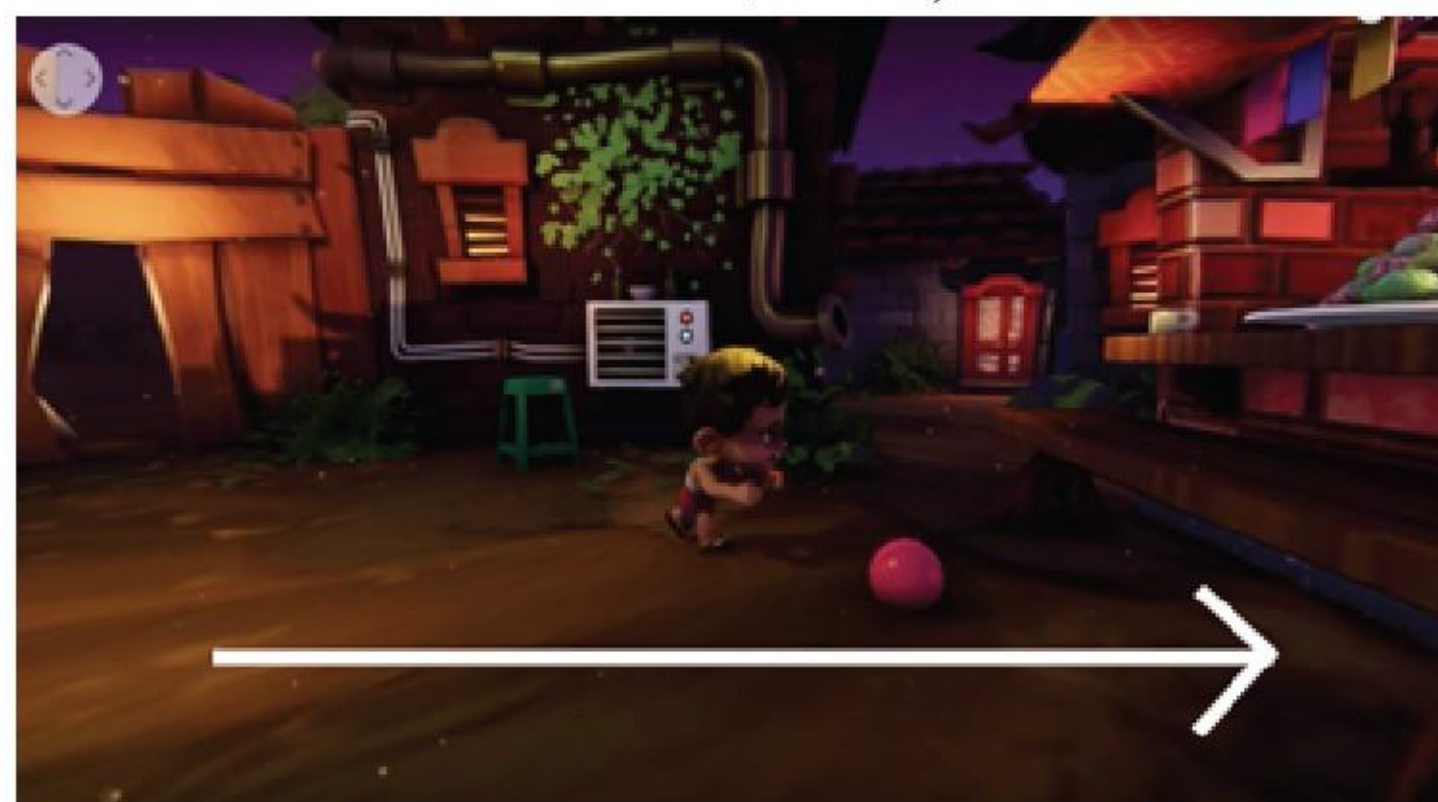
The understanding of orientation as a form of harmony is crucial to design the layout of the lands and objects. In *Sekala*, the level of sacredness is portrayed through the linear height leveling of the lands, from the highest point the mountain, and then the upper village where there are temples, then the lower village where commonfolk lives (and becomes the setting of the film story), and finally the sea at the bottom (See Picture 4). In the lower village, the layout of objects and storytelling strictly follows this concept of orientation. On the first act there is a direction through the movement of the protagonist from left to right. The doorway is set to the west (*kauh*) as the warung is set to the east (*kangin*). This signifies an attempt to go have a higher understanding of wisdom through spiritual approach (see Picture 5). In *Niskala*, *Barong*'s temple gate is located in the north as he represents the good or positive element, *Rangda*'s temple gate is located in the south as she represents the evil or negative element, and again, the humanity's temple gate is located in the west, between the good (north) and the evil (south) (see Picture 6).

The way the film is presented using virtual reality approach where the audience is put inside the film's space, the position of the viewer also designed according to this concept of orientation. As in both *Sekala* and *Niskala*, the viewer is put in the center point of the area. Because of the restriction of the virtual reality medium, where apparently the designer wanted to hold the storytelling on one side of the area in *Niskala*, the practicality of it makes the humanity's temple gate cannot be placed in the center point of the area and had to be moved to the west side, as the center point is where the viewer being put. However as the camera layout is being set with the humanity temple gate as the center of the composition as the default position when the scene moved from *Sekala* to *Niskala*, it can still be perceived as being the center point between the other temple gates (see Picture 7).



Picture 3. Concept of Orientation in Balinese Culture

(Source: Fred B. Eiseman, from the book *Bali: Sekala & Niskala: Essays on Religion, Ritual, and Art*, 1985)



Picture 4. Sketch Drawing of Sekala World (Source: Documentation of Priscilla Agatha)

Picture 5. Orientation on Lower Village - Sekala World

(Source: Documentation of Alfiansyah Zulkarnain)



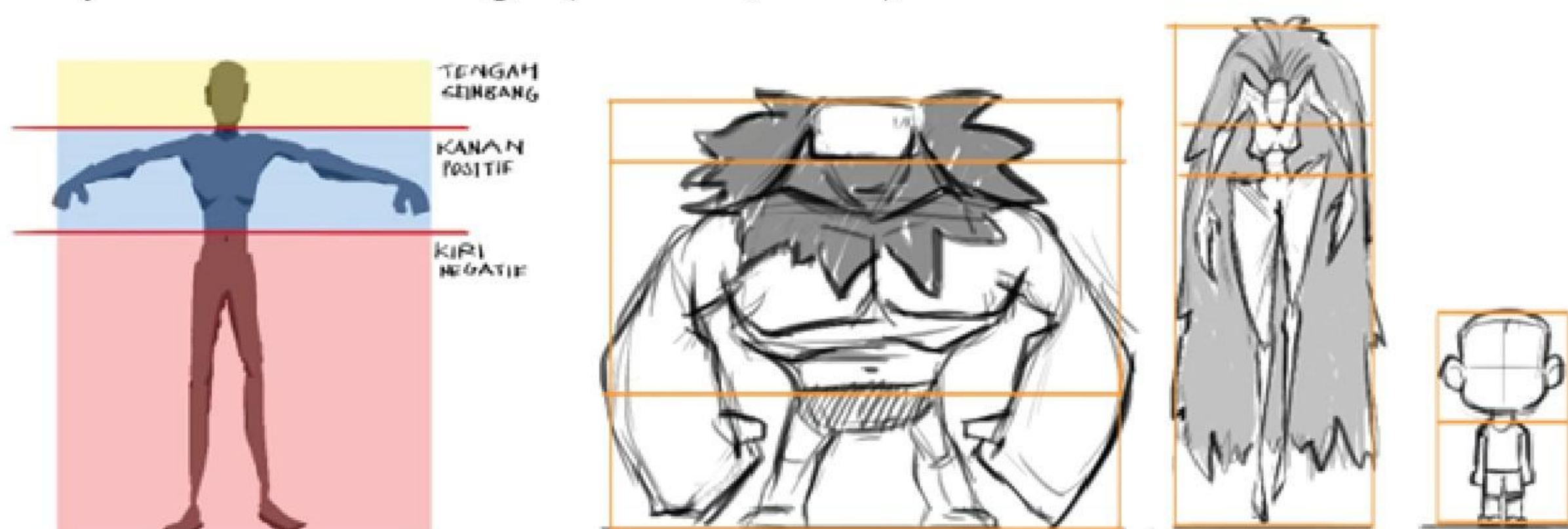
Picture 6. Layout of Niskala realm from above (Source: Documentation of Priscilla Agatha)

Picture 7. Composition for humanity temple gate

(Source: Documentation of Alfiansyah Zulkarnain)

The characters' proportion are being design using another forms of *Tri Hita Krana* called *Bhuana Alit*. Literally means the small universe, *Bhuana Alit* concept explains the structure of human body spiritually. There are three parts of human body, the head, the upper body (torso, upper stomach and arms) and the lower body (hip, lower stomach, and legs). These parts echoes the understanding of the larger universe in Balinese philosophy and Hinduism, in which there are upper world where the heaven resides, the middle world where human lives, and hell in the lower world (Eiseman, Jr., 2009). In the case of human body, the upper body represent the positive, the lower body represent the negative, and the head is the central point where it is used to create balance (see Picture 8).

In the design of the characters, we can identify this through the character proportions. *Barong*, the representative of goodness was given emphasis on its broad torso and gigantic arms, as in Balinese philosophy it is believed that good deeds are being done using arms and hands. *Rangda*, the manifestation of evil was designed with long legs. Legs are body parts closest to earth and considered as filthy. Gede, the human child protagonist was designed with large head in relation to its body to adhere to *Bhuana Alit* concept. The different proportions create contrast between the characters and help distinguish their personality and role visually (see Picture 9). Through basic division of human body into three parts, and adjusting each parts to create a distinct character, this concept merge nicely with the Law of Thirds theory of character design (Matessi, 2012).



Picture 8. *Bhuana Alit* concept of human body division

(Source: Documentation of Putu Widyayana Putra)

Picture 9. The application of *Bhuana Alit* on the characters according to their personality and role in the story. From Left to Right: *Barong*, *Rangda*, *Gede*

(Source: Documentation of Putu Widyayana Putra)

Based on the analysis above, we could conclude that research on eastern, in this case Balinese, philosophy and its conceptual application in *Tri Hita Kirana* and *Bhuana Alit* concepts of balance, harmony, layout, and proportion could enrich and produce a fresh yet faithful way to visualize character and environment design. In the end, the understanding of local wisdom could benefit as a fresh building block in creating visual design, producing a fresh approach of design that is different with traditional theory of visual arts rooted in

western concepts. Conversely, the concepts of *Rwa Bhineda*, *Tri Hita Krana*, and *Bhuana Alit* could also become a framework for a new design theory that could produce distinct visual solution. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that there are still many other concepts that could be dug from Balinese culture and philosophy to be adapted to create designs. However, to propose it as a more rigid theory, these concepts still need to be tested to more design problems through animated film stories that both contain Balinese culture and outside of it.

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