

Immersive Animation Practices in Malaysia: Integrating Cultural Narratives and Emerging Technologies

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ABSTRACT

This paper is conceptual in nature. It does not aim to present empirical findings, but rather to construct a theoretical and contextual foundation for understanding immersive animation practices in Malaysia. Immersive animation represents a convergence of technology, narrative, and sensory engagement that transforms the way we tell stories. Drawing upon existing literature, global frameworks on immersion and presence, and selected immersive events in Malaysia from 2020 to 2025, the paper seeks to articulate how immersive animation can be understood as an emergent field at the intersection of animation aesthetics, technological mediation, and cultural storytelling. Besides, this paper will contribute to the understanding of how immersive media serve as a bridge between traditional Malaysian narratives and contemporary creative practices. This paper will provide a foundation for future research, practice-based exploration, and policy development in the growing field of immersive media for cultural experiences.

Keywords: Immersive Animation, Immersive Events, Malaysia, Cultural Mediation, Transmedia storytelling

INTRODUCTION

Immersive technologies have continued to shape various realms of the arts and have driven the latest paradigm shift on the internet. Many researchers, art practitioners, and professionals across multiple disciplines and industries have begun to navigate the hype surrounding immersive technologies, which have arguably huge potential. Driving the potential and growth in immersive technology, it is no surprise that tech giants like Google, Microsoft, and Meta are investing heavily in this technology. Immersive technologies, including Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), Mixed Reality (MR), Haptic gloves, 360-degree video, and Spatial Audio, as well as project mapping, enable audiences to fully experience the high level of interaction and immersive experience (Dwivedi et al., 2022). From a phenomenological standpoint, immersive animation is not solely the extension of cinematic representation, but the act of viewing that is transformed into an act of being. It allows the user to emerge through movements, spatial participation, and effects rather than the traditional method, which detaches spectators (Uhm et al., 2024). With the expanded field, animation is no longer a sequence of images, but rather paving the way towards becoming more spatialized, interactive environments, with form and embodiment. This industry is shifting from an emphasis on spectatorship towards an immersive, participatory, and embodied experience.

In the Malaysian creative and cultural landscape, animation has long been utilized as a vehicle for storytelling, heritage interpretation, and the articulation of national identity. Between 2020 and 2025, the creative industry in Malaysia has flourished and is adopting strategies to capitalize on the fluid, contemporary, and adaptable nature of all platform-based platforms that are present. Additionally, the Malaysian government is working to strengthen this creative industry by allocating RM 20 million, specifically for the Digital Creative Ecosystem, as announced in the 2026 budget for the animation and gaming industries in Malaysia (Joseph, 2025). The large number of incentives for local animation and gaming industries indicates that the government is now poised to prioritize technological advancements. Furthermore, Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC), under the purview of the Ministry of Digital, is actively working to position Malaysia as the digital hub for high-quality and innovative digital content production by 2030 in ASEAN. These align with Malaysia's National Agenda to strengthen the creative digital industries (Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation, 2025).

Additionally, there has been a proliferation of large-scale immersive events and installations in Malaysia since 2020, indicating an emerging ecosystem of growth in immersive practice driven by animation experiences, that undergoing a paradigm shift from representation spectatorship towards embodied participation. Although many of these projects and events are fuelled by advancements in immersive technologies. Yet it remains relatively underdeveloped and under-theorized within Malaysian animation practice.

This paper aims to map and theorise immersive animation practices in Malaysia between 2020 and 2025. Drawing on global immersion and presence, animation theory and cultural media studies, it will use a curated list of Malaysian immersive events as contextual anchors to propose a conceptual framework. This will delve deeper into how immersive animation operates at the intersection of technology, narrative, and cultural identity within Malaysia. By doing so, this study aspires to contribute to situating the country within the global conversation on immersive media.

Background Of Research

Immersive Technologies, Presence, and Phenomenology

The early 2020s have witnessed a dramatic shift in global creative media, with immersive technology such as VR, MR, and AR becoming increasingly central to contemporary cultural production. The concept of immersion refers to the sensation of “being there” within the mediated environment. Early forms of immersive art emerged through panoramic painting and cinematic environments, but with the advent of these immersive technologies, these possibilities have expanded into dynamic, multi-sensory storytelling (Champion, 2019). Scholars describe this transition as a shift from fixed spectatorships to embodied participation (Cho, 2023). In contemporary creative industries, immersive design has become integral to animation, game design, and digital exhibition, reflecting a shift from representational to experiential storytelling (Rose, 2012).

Animation sits at the intersection of this transformation. Globally, immersive animation has expanded across cultural and artistic institutions. Some notable projects that are widely recognized are Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience, TeamLab Borderless, and Future World at Singapore’s Art Science Museum. These projects have refined audience engagement and cultural storytelling, fostering demand for multisensory and participatory experiences (Chang & Suh, 2025). Those projects have underscored how immersion extends beyond technology and has represented the new narrative paradigm on built participant, effect, and environmental storytelling.

Malaysia’s Emerging Immersive Ecosystem

Against the global backdrop, Malaysia's creative industries have also begun to adopt immersive media as both a cultural and commercial practice. Between 2020 and 2025, numerous immersive events and installations have been launched across the country, signalling a significant shift in creative direction toward experience-driven storytelling.

Figure 1: Immersive events and Projects running in Malaysia between 2015 to 2025

YEAR	EVENT / PROJECT	LOCATION	MEDIUM
2025	Immersify Kuala Lumpur	The Labs Bukit Bintang City Centre (BBCC) Kuala Lumpur (Permanent Gallery)	Projection mapping, motion sensors, and interactive elements
	Malaysia Animation Film Festival (MAFF) 2025	GSC CINEMA	Local Animated Films
	IMMERSE KL 2025	Kuala Lumpur	Conference of digital content creation within immersive technologies (AR/VR) and Web3
	RiaReality by Experiential Design Team (EDT)	Johor Bahru	Mat, Headset

	TERANG 2.0: Warisan Projection Mapping Showcase	Museum Telegraph in Taiping	Projection Mapping Artworks
	TERANG	George Town's historic Town Hall Pulau Pinang	Projection Mapping Artworks
	Keluang Man (Film)	Nationwide	Film
2024	IMMERSIO 2024	Kuala Lumpur (GMBB, Level 5)	Projection Mapping Artworks
	Malaysia Jazmine-In the Zoen	You tube	Virtual Influencer
	AugmentedReality Festival Kuala Lumpur 2024	1.Jalan Hang Lekir 2. Jalan Tun H S Lee 3. Jalan Sultan 4. Lorong Panggung 5. Kwai Chai Hong 6. Jalan Petaling 7. REXKL 8. GMBB	The AR Experience + Mural
		National Art Gallery	
		Dataran Merdeka/ National Textile Museum/ Victoria Fountain	https://www.8thwall.com/
		The Starhill, Bukit Bintang	The AR Experience + 3D
2024	TERANG 2024: Explore a World of Cultural Futurism	Malaysia Tourism Centre (MaTiC) KL	Projection Mapping Artworks
2024	IKAT 2.0: Tapestry of Tradition	George Town, Penang, Malaysia	Immersive Knowledge and Textile,
2023 - 2025	REXPERIENCE	REX Kuala Lumpur (Permanent Gallery)	Projection mapping, motion sensors, and interactive elements
2023	WarisanXR	Kuala Lumpur	Volumetric Capture/ Augmented Reality/ Virtual Reality, Interactive visual mapping
	Dream Forest Langkawi	Langkawi, Kedah	Interactive digital technology, vibrant illuminations, and atmospheric soundscapes.
	George Town Festival	George Town's historic Town Hall, Penang	Projection Mapping Artworks
2022	DIVRSE Makyung in Metaverse	spatial.io	Immersive theatre performance: MakYung
	Cahaya XR	Penang	XR storytelling. From virtual (VR) and augmented reality (AR), to mixed reality experiences and mobile storytelling
	Sunway Malls x Abdul Rashade x Peugeot Raya Augmented Reality	Sunway Pyramid & Sunway Putra Mall, Kuala Lumpur	Augmented reality (AR)
	Van Gogh Alive	Pavilion Bukit Jalil Kuala Lumpur	Immersive Art Exhibition Of Vincent Van Gogh

	VANS : The Lizzie Wonderland Interactive Volcano	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Mixed Reality, Physical Installation
2021	Sumpahan Ikan Tapah AR App	Nationwide	Augmented Reality (AR) Book
2020	Baskin Robbins "Dance Lion Dance" - AR Retail	Digital / Smartphone	SparkAR and deployed via Facebook and Instagram.
	Gua Cerita at Karnival Upin Ipin - Interactive Colouring Activation	Kuala Lumpur	Interactive Digital Installation
2015 to present	Le Petit Chef	Grand Hyatt Hotel Kuala Lumpur	Immersive Dining Experience

Based on Figure 1 and the data lists, it is evident that the pattern of immersive projects is gaining attention from various disciplines. All the projects collectively represent an immersive ecosystem in Malaysia spanning from commercial, artistic, and heritage applications. From tourism, cuisine, education, and cultural preservation, these projects demonstrate the potential of immersive animation to transform cultural engagement in Malaysia, transcending traditional forms of storytelling to create interactive and participatory experiences.

Collectively, these events signal Malaysia's growing engagement with immersive media as both cultural spectacle and creative research site. While they reflect global trends toward multisensory and participatory media, the conceptual underpinnings of how immersive animation operates as a cultural practice in Malaysia remain underexplored. This gap justifies the need for a conceptual framework that situates Malaysian immersive animation within the intersecting domains of technology, narrative, and heritage representation.

Despite these advancements, scholarly literature still identifies a conceptual gap: Malaysia lacks a comprehensive framework linking immersive animation practices with local identity construction, audience reception, and participatory cultural engagement (Mahzan et al., 2024). This gap highlights the need for a systematic investigation into how immersive media can both preserve and contemporaries' Malaysian heritage through animation and digital storytelling.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Immersive Media and Animation Practices

Globally, immersion is viewed as a six-dimensional experience which has been described by Sarah Lynne Bowman's adaptation of Gordon Calleja's layers as spatial, narrative, affective, kinaesthetic, shared, and ludic. She notably divides immersion into environments, narrative, character, activity, community, and games. Meanwhile, Michal Mochocki (2025) aligns them into verbs as "Sense," "Think," "Feel," "Act," and "Relate".

According to Dixon in his book, immersive technologies have expanded the boundaries of traditional visual narrative. It has emerged as a transformative paradigm in digital storytelling, characterized by its capacity to create multisensory and spatial experiences (Dixon, 2007). Within the animation discipline, these technologies have enabled creators to move beyond linear storytelling into a participatory environment that allows the audience to engage together, interact, and feel a sense of presence.

Immersive Is the New Cultural Narratives

In our contemporary media culture, it seems difficult to disconnect from immersion. The concept features prominently in much of the marketing for new audiovisual tech, from earbuds to video game controllers and 4K projectors. Exhibition spaces, design studios, and event production firms frontload it in their branding strategies. Immersion sells, in theory. 2016 was widely presented as "The Year of Virtual Reality" in the trade press, fuelled by the techno-optimism of major industrial players finally jumping headfirst into the VR adventure, hoping to make their new headsets the most desirable option for moviegoers, video game players, and office procrastinators (Therrien et al., 2025).

The Film Directors' Association of Malaysia (FDAM) Datuk Afdlin Shauki emphasized that empowering media and films is vital, as it pays tribute to a nation's history and fosters patriotism, while also strengthening Malaysia's cultural identity on the silver screen (Bernama, 2025).

Within this ecosystem, animation is present both in artistic technique and cultural interface. The flexibility of animated form enables the representation of intangible heritage. When combined with immersive technology, the elements become spatially embodied, allowing users to experience the cultural narrative more naturally. The evolution always demands new conceptual tools to articulate the relationship between presence, aesthetics, and cultural meaning.

Cultural and Institutional Drivers in Malaysia

Several factors have catalysed the growth of immersive events and projects in the Malaysian landscape. First, the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) has prioritised immersive content under its Creative Technology and Innovation Strategy 2024-2030, which frames XR development as an economic and cultural priority (MDEC, 2024). Secondly, the role and presence of collaborative art community hubs, such as Filamen, which specializes in expert visual mapping, and the interactive entertainment company Experiential Design Team (EDT), which focuses on creating virtual characters and spaces, are actively involved in collaborations for immersive projects.

Collaboration between agencies has also driven and sparked the development of immersive projects. For example, IKAT 2.0: Tapestry of Tradition, in 2024, bridges the wisdom of traditional textile artisans with the creativity of contemporary artists, designers, and technologists. It's a project presented by Yayasan Hasanah, in collaboration with the Experiential Design Team (EDT), which offers a new perspective on reinterpreting Malaysian heritage textiles through new media and immersive experiences, making them relevant and accessible globally (Ikat Malaysia, 2024).

Immerse KL was launched in October 2024 by MDEC to showcase various current trends of digital technology, and the IP360 Metaverse Platform was a groundbreaking initiative to showcase digital innovation globally. These projects, launched in January 2025, aimed to promote Malaysia's rich heritage, for example, the Virtual Theme Park, which focuses on the Ejen Ali and Didi and Friends Digital IP projects. Another project was the Digital Museum, which focuses on Malaysian culture, the legacy of artifacts, and provides holographic traditional dance performances. Alongside this mission, the Ministry of Culture (MOTAC) has mapped 'Malaysia a Culturally Rich and Sustainable Destination into their vision. These ministries and agencies in Malaysia are actively taking progressive and groundbreaking initiatives to support cultural preservation. Many funding and grants are provided to spark enthusiastic exploration among designers and artists in the creative field, integrating with today's technology trends.

Despite all this, agencies in the creative, academic, and cultural sectors are working hand in hand to align with Malaysia's Creative Industry Roadmap 2021–2025, which highlights immersive and digital innovation as strategic growth areas for cultural content development (MDEC, 2021). Many universities, such as Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Multimedia University (MMU), ASWARA, and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), have initiated research projects focusing on digital heritage, animation-based storytelling, and immersive visualization.

METHODOLOGY

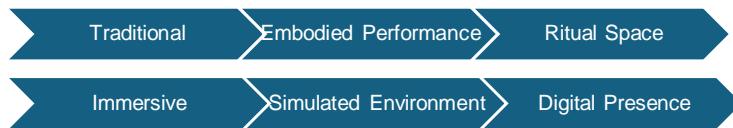
Traditional Storytelling vs. Emerging Immersive Practices

Traditional Malaysian storytelling, such as hikayat, wayang kulit, and pantun, relies on linear narration, where stories unfold sequentially under the control of a single narrator. The storyteller's role is central, guiding the audience through moral and emotional progression.

In contrast, immersive practices adopt a nonlinear and experiential structure. Audiences are given opportunities to navigate the stories spatially and explore multiple perspectives or outcomes themselves. The locus of control

shifts from storyteller to audience, making storytelling a co-created experience rather than a singular, directed one. Figure 2 below visually conceptualizes how the traditional being is converted into a digitalized one.

Figure 2: Differences between Narrative Structure: Linear vs Experiential



Practice observation on Audience Role: Observers vs Participants

Furthermore, this research will also analyze how immersive animation practices are being transformed and adapted into immersive technologies, driven by a few key factors.

Key Drivers	Traditional	Immersive
Narrative Structure: Linear vs. Experiential	Passive Reception of Story Flow	Active Participation in Story Space
Medium and Materiality:	Embodied Performance	Simulated Environment
Physical Performance vs. Digital Environment	Ritual Space	Digital Presence
Audience Role:	Observer-Based	Participatory
Observers vs. Participants	Guided Interpretation	Exploratory Experience
Temporality and Memory:	Fixed Moral Structure	Dynamic Adaptation
Preservation vs. Reinterpretation	Oral Repetition	Visual Reinvention
Emotional Engagement:	Mental And Emotional Immersion (Imagination)	Sensory And Spatial Immersion (Embodiment)
Symbolic Resonance vs. Sensory Presence		
Cultural Transmission:	Communal Transmission Within Culture	Mediated Transmission Across Digital Networks
Oral Heritage vs. Digital Mediation		

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptualisation of immersive animation roles as integrated practice merges aesthetic, technological, and cultural processes to produce embodied meaning. It moves beyond the traditional definition of animation, which represents imagery, towards a phenomenological and participatory mode of cultural communication. The collective events and projects in Figure 1 have marked a transitional phase of the national digital creative scape where animation principles are intersecting with immersive technologies to create embodied cultural experiences. Analysing beyond the method above, it is demonstrated that these projects exemplify how embodied presence, spatialized narrative, and cultural resonance manifest in diverse creative contexts.

1. Embodied Presence: Sensory and Participatory Immersion
2. Spatialised Narrative: From Story to Navigable Space
3. Cultural Resonance: Immersion as Heritage Mediation

DISCUSSION

Reframing immersion through Cultural Embodiment

Between 2020 and 2025, the Malaysian immersive ecosystem has exemplified a localized reframing of technological fascination beyond cultural embodiment. While the global scholarship often conceptualizes

immersion in terms of presence, interactivity or sensory, the Malaysian practitioners are mostly engaging the heritage, narrative, and identity through embodied experience.

Projects such as Langkawi Dream Forest, Langkawi, and Makyung in Metaverse have demonstrated that animation and immersion could converge to sustain cultural continuity. This resonates with Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity, in which global technologies are recontextualized or articulated within local identity. By animation heritage in spatial environments, Malaysian creators bridge the tradition into innovation.

Beyond Representation to Participant

Furthermore, it is seen that animation and immersive practices signify a paradigm shift in spectatorship. For example, in RXP's KL and Immersify KL, the audience has become part of the experience. Through kinaesthetic interactions, the audience navigates, triggers, and influences audiovisual sequences through bodily movement. This is due to the fact that the body has been transformed into a sensor and storyteller, aligning with Noriega's (2024) concept of expanded animation, where motion and presence serve as compositional elements.

This transition has significant implications for animation theory as it extends the animation's aesthetic principles, which are timing, motion, and exaggeration, into spatial and experimental domains. This situation suggested that animation is not only about temporal art, but also about spatial practice. For Malaysian practitioners, this means that immersive animation is less about mimicking cinematic realism and more about constructing experiential poetics rooted in local rhythms, sound, and cosmology.

Spatial Storytelling as Cultural Knowledge System

Projects like TERANG and IMMERSIO, running in Kuala Lumpur, are evidence that spatialized narrative is being used, which reflects the non-linear and experiential mode of storytelling grounded in Southeast Asian epistemologies. The same applies to the Dream Forest Langkawi, which constitutes a performative engagement through the mythic memory of local folklore. Through this, immersive animation in Malaysia serves not only as entertainment but also as a knowledge system, enabling the intergenerational transmission of cultural value through embodied experience. This presents an epistemological intervention where animation is a lived pedagogy, where learning, sensing, and remembering are intertwined within an immersive space.

For practitioners and cultural institutions in Malaysia, the paper figure

Despite the development, academic theorisation of immersive animation in Malaysia remains minimal. Existing studies tend to focus on technical production or digitalisation of heritage without interrogating the aesthetic and phenomenological implications of immersive animation. Based on observations of events and project running, it's believable that immersive animation in Malaysia represents not merely technological progression but a cultural reconfiguration

Policy and Pedagogical Implications

It is suggested that policymakers, such as MDEC, consider supporting practice-based fellowships and cross-disciplinary labs that pair animators, cultural experts, and XR technologists to develop locally resonant immersive animation projects rooted in local themes. Academia is also suggested to incorporate practice-based modules in animation curriculum, focusing on cultural mediation, spatial narrative, and presence measurement.

CONCLUSION

By demonstrating the nation's transition from traditional screen-based animation to experiential cultural media through exhibitions, installations, and XR heritage initiatives, Malaysian artists and studios are redefining how animation communicates culture, emotion, and identity. With the increasing interest from the public, a large-scale venue, and sufficient resources for technological capabilities, the intersection of this technology and cultural resonance presents an opportunity to explore.

Ultimately, by integrating immersive technologies with animation, Malaysian folklore and cultural heritage can be preserved, reinterpreted, and disseminated in engaging, educational, and interactive ways. This will provide a roadmap for interdisciplinary exploration and innovation in this emerging field for researchers, professionals, and policymakers alike. It is no longer merely about technology, but it is about the renewal of cultural imagination.

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