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## Reframing Animation Relevance in the Southeast Asian Platform Era: An Industry Perspective

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### Abstract

This article presents an industry perspective on the shifting paradigms of animation in Southeast Asia. The dispute over two-dimensional (2D) versus three-dimensional (3D) animation is typically framed in terms of technological innovation, realism, and production sophistication, with a preference for global blockbuster standards. However, for younger audiences in Malaysia and Southeast Asia, animation relevance is increasingly driven by platform-based consumption, cultural connection, creative economics, and production sustainability rather than visual quality. This conceptual article examines the relevance of 2D and 3D animation for Generation Z (Gen Z) and Generation Alpha (Gen Alpha) audiences within Southeast Asian media ecosystems. Using a qualitative synthesis approach, the paper integrates convergence culture, representation theory, youth media psychology, and creative industries perspectives to analyse how animation styles perform across cinema, streaming, social media, and interactive platforms. The analysis argues that while 3D animation remains dominant in high-end cinematic and franchise driven context, 2D animation has rebounded strongly in the region due to its expressive stylisations, cultural flexibility, lower production barriers and cost, also the alignment with short form and creator led platforms. Rather than viewing 2D and 3D as competing hierarchies, this article asserts that the relevance is context dependent and increasingly hybrid, particularly in Southeast Asian production environments. The article concludes that future animation strategies in the region should prioritise audience-platform fit, cultural resonance, and sustainable production models over technological hierarchy.

**Keywords:** Platform logic, Creative economics, Non-Photorealistic Rendering (NPR), Southeast Asian animation, Audience relevance, Production sustainability

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## **Introduction**

### ***Animation in a Platform-Driven Southeast Asia***

Southeast Asia's animation industry operates in a media landscape characterised by digital convergence, mobile first consumption, and participatory culture. Young audiences in Malaysia and neighbouring countries are primarily exposed to animated entertainment via mobile-first platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and regional streaming services, creating a fragmented media consumption pattern according to regional industry reports (e.g., MDEC). This shift necessitates a move away from traditional broadcast metrics toward platform-specific engagement.

For Gen Z and Gen Alpha, animation serves as a visual language through which identity, humor, emotion and social belonging are negotiated. Short clips, reaction edits, memes and fan generated animations circulate rapidly, often detached from their original narrative contexts. Under such circumstances, animation style becomes a key determinant of visibility and engagement rather than a purely aesthetic choice.

### ***Two-Dimensional (2D) vs Three-Dimensional (3D)***

Globally, 3D animation has emerged as the dominant industry standard associated with technological advancements in realism and commercial success. Hollywood studios and the game industry have reinforced this notion, establishing international benchmarks for animation quality and professionalism (Manovich,2001). In Southeast Asia, this global perspective has had an impact on studio investment, educational curriculum and talent development where 3D skills are often prioritised as pathways to international competitions. This focus often mirrors the 'work-for-hire' model prevalent in the region, where 3D proficiency is tied to international outsourcing rather than local IP development.

In contrast, 2D animation has frequently been framed as traditional, stylistic or niche. In some regional contexts, it is regarded as less commercially viable or technologically sophisticated. However, the revival of stylised 2D animation across digital platforms challenges this assumption and reveals a gap between industry perspective and audience behavior.

### ***Why Southeast Asia Requires Contextual Analysis***

Many animation scholarships are based on Western production models and consumption habits. On the other hand, Southeast Asia operates under different structural conditions such as smaller production budgets, fragmented linguistic markets, strong mobile penetration and rapidly rising creator economies. These factors influence how animation styles are created, distributed and sustained.

According to Flew (2012), creative industries are deeply shaped by local economic and cultural conditions. As a result, assessing animation relevance in Southeast Asia requires a localised perspective that takes into account cultural proximity, platform logic and production capabilities rather than assuming global standards as universal benchmarks.

### ***Problem Statement and Research Gap***

While existing literature examines technological advancement, a significant research gap exists in how Southeast Asian youth audiences prioritise emotional expressiveness and shareability over photorealism. Current scholarship lacks a systematic link between animation stylisation and the platform logic of the region's creator economies.

### ***Research Aim and Questions***

This article aims to examine which animation style, 2D or 3D, is more relevant to Gen Z and Gen Alpha audiences in Malaysia and Southeast Asia by analysing platform alignment, aesthetic communication, and production sustainability.

The study addresses the following research questions (RQ):

1. RQ1: How is relevance defined as the intersection of audience engagement, cultural resonance and platform suitability constructed within Southeast Asian ecosystems?
2. RQ2: What strengths and limitations characterise 2D and 3D animation for younger audiences in the region?
3. RQ3: How do different platforms shape the relevance of each animation style?
4. RQ4: What are the implications for animation creators, studios, and educators in Southeast Asia?

## **The Convergence Framework**

Convergence culture describes the flow of media content across multiple platforms and the increasing participation of audiences in circulation and meaning making (Jenkins, 2006). In Southeast Asia, convergence is intensified by mobile-first behavior and algorithm-driven discovery systems. Animation content is often encountered in short, fragmentary formats, where immediate visual impact determines engagement. This immediacy is often achieved through Non-Photorealistic Rendering (NPR) or '2.5D' techniques that bridge the gap between 2D expressiveness and 3D depth. This platform's logic encourages content that is visually appealing, emotionally engaging, and easily remixable.

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According to representation theory, media does more than just reflect the reality. It also creates meaning through aesthetic and narrative choices (Hall, 1997). Cultural proximity is especially important in Southeast Asia where the audiences respond more strongly to familiar humour, emotional expression and visual language.

2D animation allows for flexible stylisation allowing the creative juices of the creators to incorporate cultural cue or references without requiring photorealistic accuracy. This flexibility enables culturally grounded storytelling across diverse Southeast Asian cultures. In contrast, obtaining culturally nuanced realism in 3D animation often require higher production costs and resources which may limit the capability and accessibility for smaller studios that have limited budgets.

Research on youth media consumption suggests that Gen Z and Gen Alpha audiences exhibit shorter attention spans and heightened sensitivity to visual identity (Manovich, 2001). Emotional clarity, recognisability, and expressive exaggeration often matter more than realism, particularly in fast-scrolling environments.

The use of line, shape, and exaggerated motion in 2D animation allows for immediate emotional readability, making it useful in short-form applications. While 3D animation can provide delicate acting, emotional complexity sometimes requires longer viewing times to completely register.

Sustainable cultural creation is emphasised as a major priority in creative industry framework (Flew,2012). In Southeast Asia, where many small studios operate with limited budgets and small team members, the production efficiency directly affects relevancy. 2D animation offers lower entry barriers and rapid iteration, while modern 3D pipelines increasingly utilizing real- time rendering engines that support long term scalability through asset reuse and cross- platform deployment. Both types play complimentary roles within regional creative ecosystems.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

This study adopts a conceptual qualitative synthesis approach. Rather than measuring audience preference empirically, it integrates theoretical perspectives from media studies, representation theory, and creative industries research to analyse animation style relevance within Southeast Asian platform

ecosystems. The synthesis specifically draws upon a thematic analysis of five regional animation case studies and MDEC industry white papers (2020-2025) to provide empirical grounding. The five regional animation case studies utilised for this thematic synthesis are categorised by their primary style and platform alignment in Table 1.

Table 1. Regional case study classification by platform alignment

| Case Study               | Country  | Primary Style | Key Platform Alignment     |
|--------------------------|----------|---------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Upin &amp; Ipin</i>   | Malaysia | 3D            | Cinema & Premium Streaming |
| <i>BoBoiBoy</i>          | Malaysia | 3D            | Franchise & Games          |
| <i>Mechamato</i>         | Malaysia | 3D / Hybrid   | Global Streaming           |
| <i>Ejen Ali</i>          | Malaysia | 3D            | Cinema & Interactive       |
| <i>The Rabbit's Tale</i> | Regional | 2D / Stylised | Social & Short-form        |

### ***Analytical Dimensions***

The analysis compares 2D and 3D animation across six dimensions:

- a. Audience engagement and emotional readability
- b. Circulation and remix potential
- c. Platform suitability
- d. Production sustainability
- e. Intellectual property (IP) scalability
- f. Cross-platform Technical Interoperability

### ***Scope and Limitations***

As a conceptual study, this paper does not claim universal audience preference. Instead, it provides an analytical framework that can guide future empirical research, including audience studies, platform analytics, and production case studies.

## **Platform Based Relevance of 2D And 3D Animation**

### ***Cinema and Premium Streaming***

Cinema and premium streaming platforms prioritise immersive experiences and high production values. In these environments, 3D animation remains dominant due to its capacity for spatial depth, dynamic camera movement, and cinematic spectacle. These features align with global audience expectations shaped by blockbuster franchises. However, the rise of ‘stylised 3D’ (e.g., the Spider-Verse effect) demonstrates a hybrid aesthetic that challenges the traditional 3D realism hierarchy.

### ***Social Media and Short-Form Platforms***

Short-form platforms such as TikTok and YouTube Shorts prioritise immediacy, recognisability, and share-ability. In these environments, 2D animation often performs strongly due to its expressive stylisation and meme potential. The relationship between animation style and platform context is summarised in Figure 1, illustrating the alignment of 2D, 3D, and hybrid animation forms.

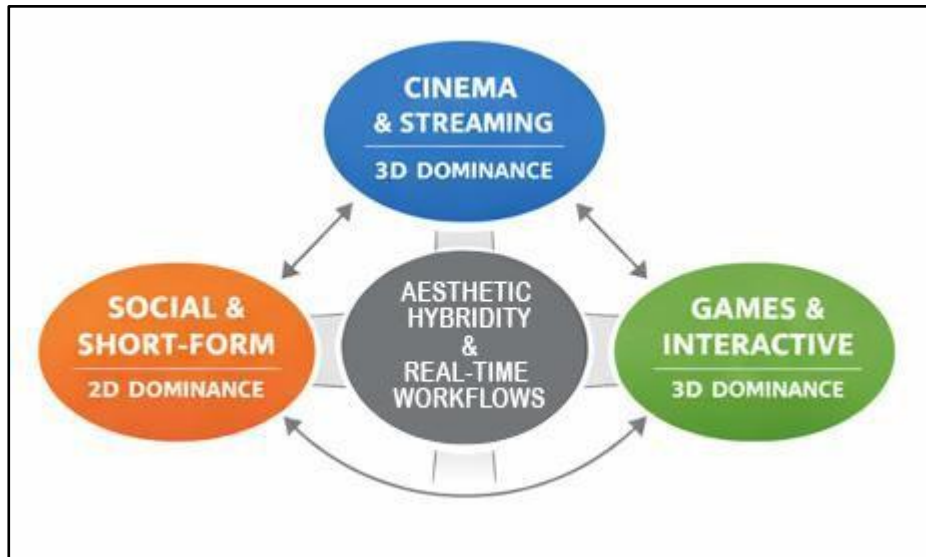


Figure 1. Platform Relevance Model Illustrating the Dominant Domains of 2D, 3D and Hybrid Animation Across Cinema, Streaming, Social, and Interactive Media

### ***Games and Interactive Media***

In the interactive domain, 3D animation remains the industry standard for spatial navigation and immersive environmental interaction. However, within the Southeast Asian mobile-first ecosystem, 2D animation is increasingly vital for user interface and user experience (UI/UX) clarity and narrative ‘cut-scenes’. Because mobile screens provide limited visual real estate, the expressive stylisation and immediate emotional readability of 2D assets ensure that key narrative information is registered by the user even in fast-scrolling or small-scale interactive environments. The effectiveness of these visual choices is rooted in the broader development of the Malaysian creative multimedia landscape, where aesthetic choices are increasingly tailored to local consumption habits. Furthermore, the strategic application of these stylistic choices functions as a tool for affective game design, where visual elements are specifically tuned to foster deep player engagement within the constraints of regional “bedroom-coder” game production (Ng et al., 2026). This necessitates a hybrid approach where 3D depth is balanced with 2D visual cues to optimise user engagement.

### **Production Pipelines and Industry Sustainability**

Production pipeline differences have a big impact on animation’s relevancy. As illustrated in Figure 2, 2D and 3D workflows prioritise drawing, timing and compositing, allowing for faster iteration and lower costs. This benefits independent creators and small studios common in Southeast Asia.

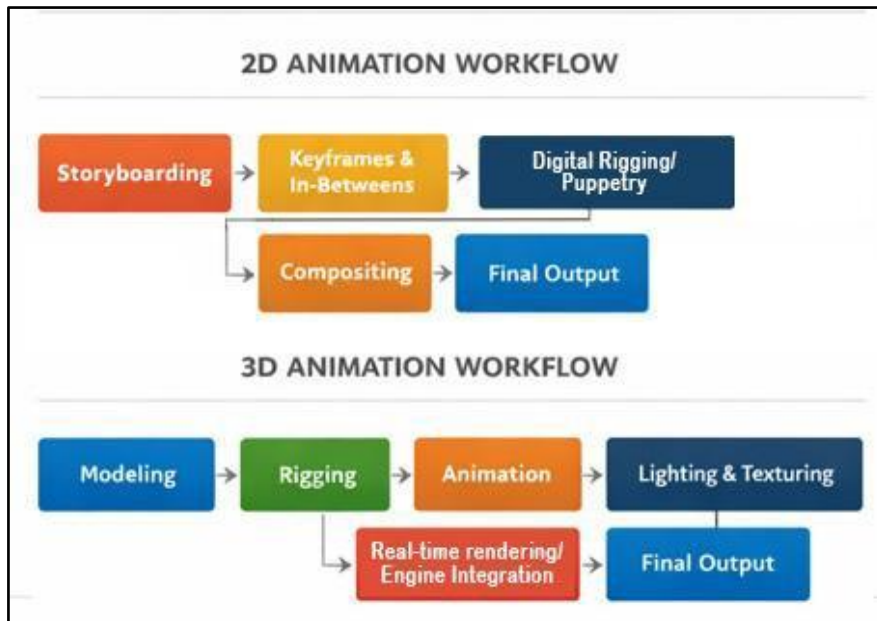


Figure 2. Comparison of 2D and 3D Animation Production Pipelines, Highlighting Key Stages and Workflow Complexity

In contrast, 3D pipelines require higher initial investment in modelling, rigging and rendering but support long term scalability through asset reuse. This makes 3D advantageous for large scale IP projects but less accessible for experimental or short-form productions.

## Discussions

The findings indicate that asking whether 2D or 3D animation is “more relevant” over-simplifies current animation practice. In Southeast Asia, relevance is determined by cultural proximity, platform logic, and production feasibility rather than technological hierarchy. 3D animation dominates immersive, franchise- driven situations, whereas 2D remains the primary vehicle for culturally specific humour and viral short-form content. The relevance of these styles is therefore a function of platform-audience fit rather than a linear evolution of technology. Hybrid tactics are increasingly bridging these fields, reflecting convergence rather than competition.

## Implications for the Regional Ecosystem

The transition from a technological hierarchy to a platform-based relevance model carries significant implications for regional stakeholders. For creators, success depends on selecting animation styles based on platform-specific audience behaviour rather than following global technological trends. Studios must shift toward ‘agile’ pipelines that prioritise the repurposing of 3D assets into 2D-stylised content to maximise IP visibility across fragmented social media landscapes. Finally, educators in Southeast Asia must move beyond software-centric training to produce ‘platform-literate’ graduates

who understand the intersection of visual storytelling, mobile-first design, and the management of hybrid production workflows.

## **Limitations And Future Work**

As a conceptual qualitative synthesis, this article provides a preliminary framework rather than a longitudinal empirical study. While the study integrates regional white papers and a thematic analysis of five primary case studies (see Table 1), the conclusions are limited by the rapid evolution of platform algorithms and real-time rendering technologies. Future research should utilise data-driven platform analytics and direct audience studies among Gen Z and Gen Alpha cohorts to validate the proposed relevance dimensions. Additionally, further investigation is required into the specific economic impact of Non-Photorealistic Rendering (NPR) on the sustainability of independent Southeast Asian studios.

## **Conclusion**

The persistent 2D versus 3D debate within the Southeast Asian animation industry should no longer be framed as a technological hierarchy. In the current platform era, animation relevance is constructed through a precise alignment of audience behaviour, platform logic, and cultural resonance rather than visual fidelity alone. By evaluating styles across the six dimensions of audience engagement, circulation, platform fit, sustainability, scalability, and technical interoperability, creators can better navigate the fragmented media ecosystem. For Southeast Asia to remain competitive, industry practices must prioritise hybrid, flexible, and culturally grounded models that leverage both the expressive immediacy of 2D and the scalable efficiency of modern 3D workflows.

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