

TRADITIONAL GAMES AS NARRATIVE ELEMENTS IN INDONESIAN ANIMATED SERIES

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Abstract

Traditional games represent an important part of Indonesia's intangible cultural heritage, yet their presence in contemporary society has gradually declined due to the increasing dominance of digital entertainment. Animation has emerged as a potential medium for preserving cultural heritage by incorporating traditional cultural practices into visual storytelling. Research on animation has largely highlighted cultural representation, whereas the narrative role of traditional games remains less examined. This research aims to analyze how traditional games function as narrative elements in Indonesian animated series. A qualitative case study approach was employed using qualitative content analysis of three Indonesian animated series: Desa Timun, Doyok Otoy Ali Oncom (D.O.A.), and Entong. Data were collected through repeated visual observation of scenes featuring traditional games and analyzed based on their narrative position, mode of presentation, and level of exposure. The findings reveal three distinct narrative functions. In Desa Timun, traditional games serve as narrative drivers that shape plot progression and character development. In D.O.A., they function as everyday narrative activities that support social interaction and reinforce the realism of daily life. In Entong, traditional games primarily act as cultural markers that strengthen local identity and narrative settings. The analysis shows that traditional games contribute to animated storytelling in diverse ways beyond their role as visual representations of culture.

Keywords: Animation; Indonesian animated series; Narrative function; Traditional games; Visual storytelling.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional games in Indonesia are more than recreational pastimes. They embody social values, collective knowledge, cultural symbols, and modes of interaction passed down through generations (UNESCO, 2003). As cultural practices, these games reflect local identities and community life, while also sustaining social bonds and cultural continuity. Traditional games should be viewed not simply as leisure activities but as cultural expressions that preserve norms, values, and collective memory within society (Fitri et al., 2020).

Despite their importance, traditional games face growing challenges in modern contexts. The rapid expansion of digital entertainment, online gaming, and mobile technologies has reshaped children's play habits, reducing opportunities for direct

engagement with traditional forms of play (Chik, 2014). Consequently, many traditional games are becoming less visible in everyday life, particularly among younger generations. This decline has motivated efforts to preserve and reintroduce traditional practices through digital media and creative industries. Digital technologies can play a crucial role in safeguarding cultural heritage by making cultural knowledge more accessible and relevant to contemporary audiences (Giaccardi, 2012).

Animation is a medium that has strong potential as a medium for cultural preservation (Giaccardi, 2012). Animation integrates visual communication, storytelling, movement, and sound to create immersive experiences. Unlike static media, animation can dynamically present cultural elements, enabling audiences to witness practices, environments, and narratives within contextualized story worlds (Wells, 2002). Some research highlights animation's dual role as entertainment and as a tool for cultural education and preservation. Through engaging visual narratives, animation can introduce traditions, folklore, myths, and cultural values to wider audiences, especially younger viewers (Furniss, 2016).

The intersection of animation and cultural preservation has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Studies have examined how animation communicates local wisdom, folklore, myths, and regional identities through visual storytelling (Napier, 2001). Research on educational animation suggests that animated media can enhance audience engagement while transmitting cultural knowledge (Mayer, 2009). Animation has thus been recognized as an effective platform for presenting cultural heritage in ways that are accessible and appealing to contemporary audiences (Bendazzi, 2015).

In Indonesia, the animation industry has grown significantly with rising efforts to incorporate local cultural content into productions. A growing number of Indonesian animated productions incorporate local cultural elements, including folklore, customs, and traditional practices, into their narratives (Fitria, 2022). This trend reflects a broader movement within creative industries to balance entertainment with cultural representation. By embedding cultural elements into stories, animation can preserve, adapt, and communicate heritage to modern audiences. Such practices are particularly relevant in multicultural societies where cultural transmission increasingly occurs through mediated experiences rather than direct participation (Anderson, 2016).

From a narrative perspective, cultural elements in animation are not merely decorative. Narrative theory emphasizes that objects, activities, and practices embedded in stories perform specific functions that shape plot development, character interaction, and audience interpretation (Chatman, 2019). Narrative elements help construct meaning by influencing how events unfold and how relationships are formed. therefore, Traditional games can be understood not only as cultural representations but also as narrative devices that actively contribute to

storytelling (Herman, 2009). As structured social activities, traditional games involve rules, goals, competition, cooperation, and participant interaction (Sovieti et al., 2026). These features provide animators and writers with opportunities to use traditional games in developing conflicts, introducing characters, establishing relationships, or advancing storylines.

Studies on animation and culture mostly focus on representation, identity, education, or preservation. Within this context, research shows that animation can effectively present cultural features and strengthen identity through visual storytelling (Abd Mokmin et al., 2026; Giaccardi, 2012; Wells, 2002). However, limited attention has been given to the specific role of traditional games within narrative structures. Existing studies often examine how cultural elements are visually represented rather than how they function narratively. This leaves a gap in understanding how traditional games operate as storytelling devices in animated series.

Although previous studies acknowledge the educational and cultural functions of animation, most have focused on cultural representation, identity, or educational value rather than narrative structure (Bendazzi, 2015; Napier, 2001; Wells, 2002). Studies on traditional games similarly emphasize their importance as cultural heritage, educational resources, and vehicles for character development (Fitri et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2003). However, limited attention has been given to how traditional games function as narrative devices that contribute to plot development and storytelling within animated series. This limitation is also evident in studies of Indonesian animation, which mostly discusses the representation of local culture and identity, while providing little analysis of how cultural practices shape narrative construction. Therefore, this research examines traditional games not only as cultural objects but also as narrative elements that contribute to story development.

Narrative elements are crucial in shaping audience understanding of cultural content. Cultural representation theory suggests that meaning is produced not only through visual appearance but also through the contexts and relationships in which cultural elements are embedded (Hall et al., 2025). Examining the narrative role of traditional games provides deeper insight into how animation introduces heritage. Traditional games may function as central plot drivers, everyday activities, or symbolic markers reinforcing cultural settings. These roles influence how cultural information is integrated into stories and communicated to audiences.

This study highlights the narrative functions of traditional games in animation to examine cultural heritage in animation. By analyzing how these games shape story construction, this can demonstrate their role not only as cultural references but also as active storytelling devices. The analysis further shows that cultural practices can serve diverse narrative purposes, ranging from central plot drivers to contextual elements that enrich the setting. In doing so, this research emphasizes the link between cultural representation and narrative structure.

This research focuses on three animation series, namely Desa Timun, Doyok Otoy Ali Oncom (D.O.A.), and Entong. These three animations feature traditional games in their narratives. Using qualitative content analysis, this research identifies and compares the narrative functions of traditional games across these series. The findings are expected to enrich animation studies, visual culture studies, and cultural heritage research by offering a narrative perspective on traditional games in animation. Additionally, the study provides practical insights for creators seeking to integrate heritage into storytelling while maintaining narrative effectiveness.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative case study design to explore how traditional games are used in the stories of Indonesian animated series. A qualitative approach was chosen because the goal was to understand how this game is positioned within the story (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research focused on three Indonesian animated series: Desa Timun, Doyok Otoy Ali Oncom (D.O.A.), and Entong. These series were selected based on two criteria: (1) each series clearly included traditional games in its narrative, and (2) the games appeared in ways that made it possible to observe their role in story development. These three series represent different approaches to using traditional games in animation, making them suitable for comparison (Patton, 2015).

Data were collected by watching episodes that contained scenes of traditional games. The main data source was the audiovisual material from the selected animated series. The observation focused on both visual and narrative aspects, including the type of traditional game presented, its duration of appearance, and its relationship to the surrounding narrative. Each scene was documented and categorized according to its narrative role, following the principles of qualitative content analysis, which emphasize systematic coding of meaningful units within visual media (Krippendorff, 2019; Schreier, 2013). The level of exposure was determined by considering the frequency of appearance, the duration of game scenes, and the extent to which traditional games contributed to the progression of the narrative. Based on these observations, the exposure was categorized into three levels: high, medium, and low.

The unit of analysis was each scene depicting traditional game activities. Using scenes as the unit of analysis to examine how traditional games functioned within narrative situations in every episode (Krippendorff, 2019). The selected episodes that have traditional games in it were viewed repeatedly to ensure consistent identification of visual details, narrative patterns, and contextual meanings, a practice commonly recommended in qualitative visual research to improve the credibility of interpretation (Rose, 2016). Scenes were coded and classified according to their narrative functions. The analysis looked at how traditional games contributed to plot development, character interaction, setting, and cultural representation.

To guide the analysis, several categories were created based on the observed characteristics of the games: (1) the position of the game in the narrative, (2) the way the game was presented, and (3) the level of exposure in the story. These categories helped identify patterns and differences across the three series (Schreier, 2013).

Exposure level was determined based on the frequency of appearance, duration of gameplay scenes, and the extent to which traditional games influenced narrative development. Games that appeared repeatedly and played a significant role in plot progression were categorized as having high exposure, while games with limited appearances and minimal narrative involvement were categorized as having low exposure (Krippendorff, 2019; Yin & Campbell, 2018). The coded data were systematically compared across the three animations. Through this comparative process, similarities and differences in the narrative use of traditional games were identified, which then enabled the study to outline broader tendencies and to establish conceptual categories regarding their role in Indonesian animated storytelling.

To ensure credibility, the analysis was conducted iteratively, with repeated viewing and re-coding of relevant scenes, following the principles of qualitative inquiry outlined by Creswell & Poth (2018). Interpretations were grounded in direct evidence from the animated texts, ensuring consistency between the data and the conclusions. This approach provides a reliable examination of how traditional games function as narrative elements in the three animations selected.

RESULT

Desa Timun

Desa Timun is a children's animated series based on digital shadow puppetry (aniwayang), produced by Aniwayang Studio in Tangerang in 2024 under the direction of Daud Nugraha. The series tells the daily lives of three young mousedeer characters named Cila, Cili, and Cilo, who live in an imaginative village called Desa Timun. The story is set in a rural community that is simple yet rich in values of togetherness, family, and cooperation (Oktavianggi, 2023). Observation of Desa Timun shows that traditional games are placed at the centre of the narrative. The traditional games in Desa Timun animation drive the story forward. Several episodes build their conflicts, challenges, and resolutions directly around traditional games, making them essential to the plot. Desa Timun gives the most extensive exposure to traditional games. The games are shown in full sequences, including preparation, the playing process, participant interaction, and outcomes. This detailed presentation demonstrates that the games are not simply cultural references but are central to how the story unfolds. Table 1 presents the observation results for Desa Timun.

Table 1. Observation Results of Traditional Games in Desa Timun

No.	Analytical Category	Observation
1.	Position of the game in the narrative	Central narrative element
2.	Way the game was presented	Complete gameplay sequence integrated into the main plot
3.	Level of exposure in the story	High

Source: Primary data (2026)

The observation also shows that traditional games are frequently positioned as the main activity around which episodes are organized. In several episodes, the introduction of a traditional game serves as the starting point of the narrative, followed by character participation, the emergence of challenges, and eventual resolution. This recurring pattern indicates that traditional games are structurally embedded within the storytelling process rather than functioning as incidental cultural references. The traditional games also play a key role in initiating and resolving conflicts. Problems faced by characters often arise from game situations, and the completion of the games directly influences the resolution. In this way, gameplay becomes a narrative mechanism that shapes the direction of the story (Chatman, 2019).

Character development is also supported through these games. As Bal (2017) explains, character participation in such activities reveals traits such as cooperation, competitiveness, problem-solving, responsibility, and perseverance. These interactions highlight individual personalities and relationships, showing that the games contribute both to plot progression and character identity. Overall, Desa Timun uses traditional games as narrative drivers. They form the central framework of storytelling, integrating cultural heritage naturally into the narrative rather than presenting it as supplementary information (Herman, 2009).

Doyok Otoy Ali Oncom (D.O.A.)

Doyok Otoy Ali Oncom (D.O.A) is a 3D animated series produced by MPic Animation Studios, a subsidiary of MD Entertainment, and first aired on MNCTV in 2018. The series is adapted from the popular comic strip Lembergar, which was previously published in the daily newspaper Pos Kota. It takes the form of a situational comedy (sitcom) and portrays the everyday lives of three main characters such as Doyok, Otoy, and Ali Oncom (Kusumanto, 2021). They live in urban Jakarta and experience its social dynamics. Traditional games in D.O.A. are woven into the everyday experiences of the characters rather than serving as the main focus. While the games are visible throughout the narrative, their role is more supportive than central (Abbas & Ryan, 2004).

The exposure of traditional games in D.O.A. is moderate. The games appear as routine activities during social interactions, leisure, or informal gatherings among

children. Their inclusion reflects childhood experiences and community life. By showing games as ordinary activities, the series creates familiarity and authenticity. They enrich the social environment but do not dominate the storyline. Instead, they function as background elements that make the narrative world more realistic (Bal, 2017). Table 2 presents the observation results for D.O.A.

Table 2. Observation Results of Traditional Games in D.O.A.

No.	Analytical Category	Observation
1.	Position of the game in the narrative	Supporting narrative element
2	Way the game was presented	Everyday activities within children's daily interactions
3.	Level of exposure in the story	Medium

Source: Primary data (2026)

The traditional games often appear alongside other routine childhood activities such as conversation, exploration, and social interaction, a point emphasized by Lathifah et al. (2025) who note that traditional play naturally integrates with everyday practices of children. The games therefore operate as part of a broader representation of daily life. Their appearance contributes to the continuity of the narrative environment and helps establish a sense of familiarity within the story world. The games also facilitate character interaction. They provide opportunities for communication, cooperation, competition, and humor, which strengthen social relationships (Firdaus et al., 2026). While they do not determine the plot, they support engagement among characters.

Traditional games in the animation D.O.A. are naturally integrated into routine activities. This approach allows the audience to encounter cultural practices organically, as part of everyday life. Thus, in D.O.A., traditional games function primarily as everyday narrative activities. They enrich the social environment, support character interactions, and enhance the realism of the environment (Herman, 2009).

Entong

Entong is a 3D animated series created by MNC Animation and released in 2020. The story centres on a Betawi boy named Entong, who is portrayed as smart, cheerful, and curious. The narrative follows his everyday experiences with family and friends in a Betawi village called Kampung Kite. Through these daily adventures, the series weaves in moral lessons, humour, and Islamic values, often conveyed by a Muslim character, Ustad Somad, who guides the children in their interactions and choices (Amalia, 2015). In Entong, traditional games receive the least exposure. Their appearances are brief and do not significantly affect plot progression or character development. Table 3 presents the observation results for Entong.

Table 3. Observation Results of Traditional Games in Entong

No.	Analytical Category	Observation
1.	Position of the game in the narrative	Background/cultural element
2	Way the game was presented	Brief visual appearances as part of the setting
3.	Level of exposure in the story	Low

Source: Primary data (2026)

The games act primarily as cultural markers. Their presence helps establish the cultural setting and reinforces local identity. Even short appearances provide recognizable references that situate the story in a specific social and cultural context (Hall et al., 2025). In most cases, the games appear as brief visual references within larger scenes depicting community life. Although they receive limited narrative attention, their inclusion helps distinguish the setting from a generic urban environment. Through these references, the animation communicates local cultural characteristics that contribute to the overall identity of the narrative world. The traditional games are not used as narrative mechanisms. Instead, they function symbolically, enriching the visual and cultural atmosphere of the story. They support the representation of community life and traditions without becoming central to the plot (Abbas & Ryan, 2004). This symbolic role is most evident in scenes emphasizing cultural environments. The games contribute to world-building by offering visual indicators of local culture. These indicators reinforce authenticity and cultural identity, even when narrative involvement is minimal.

These findings suggest that cultural preservation in animation does not always require extensive narrative exposure. Brief appearances can still communicate cultural meaning when positioned strategically. In Entong, the significance of traditional games lies in their symbolic contribution to cultural identity rather than their role in plot development (Furniss, 2016).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Comparative Analysis

By conducting a comparative analysis of the three animations, it is seen that traditional games occupy different positions in the narrative of Indonesian animated series. Although all three series incorporate traditional games as cultural elements, their narrative functions vary significantly. To summarize these differences, table 4 presents the main narrative functions and levels of exposure identified in each animated series.

Table 4. Comparison Narrative Function and Exposure

No.	Animated Series	Narrative Function	Exposure Level
1.	Desa Timun	Narrative Driver	High
2	D.O.A.	Everyday Activity	Medium
3.	Entong	Cultural Marker	Low

Source: Primary data (2026)

This study shows that traditional games take on different narrative roles across the selected animated series. While all three incorporate these games as cultural elements, their contribution to storytelling varies. The comparison highlights three main functions: traditional games as narrative drivers, as everyday activities, and as cultural markers. This indicates that traditional games should be viewed not only as visual references to cultural heritage but also as narrative components that actively shape the construction of the story.

In Desa Timun, traditional games serve as narrative drivers. They are directly tied to the unfolding of conflict, character actions, and the resolution of the plot. In this way, the games become the central force propelling the story forward. As (Chatman, 2019) argues, narrative elements can operate as structural components that influence plot development. The games create challenges, inspire decisions, and determine outcomes, making them essential to the overall narrative framework.

This role illustrates how cultural practices can be transformed into narrative resources. By positioning traditional games at the heart of story development, Desa Timun embeds cultural heritage directly into the plot. Audiences encounter these games not as isolated cultural lessons but as meaningful actions that propel the narrative forward. In this way, cultural knowledge is communicated through active engagement with the story, making the practices more memorable and accessible.

A different pattern can be seen in D.O.A., where traditional games primarily function as everyday activities. Here, the games provide a natural context for character interaction and portray ordinary life. As Herman (2009) points out, narrative meaning often arises from routine activities that shape social experiences and relationships. In D.O.A., the games foster communication, cooperation, competition, and humour among the characters.

Traditional games reflect familiar childhood experiences and reinforce the social environment of the characters. The series presents these games as a natural part of everyday life, embedding cultural practices into routine activities in a way that feels organic and accessible. Consequently, traditional games contribute to character development and social interaction while simultaneously transmitting cultural knowledge.

In Entong, traditional games serve a symbolic function. Their appearances are brief and exert little influence on plot progression or character development.

Nevertheless, they enrich the cultural atmosphere of the narrative. As (Hall et al., 2025) explains, cultural meaning is produced through representation and contextual associations. In this series, the games act as recognizable cultural markers that reinforce local identity and establish the setting. This symbolic role illustrates that narrative meaning does not always depend on prominence. Even with limited screen time, the games support world-building by offering visual cues of local culture. Their presence helps audiences situate the story within its social and cultural environment. Thus, traditional games communicate cultural meaning even when not directly involved in narrative action, contributing to authenticity and cultural identity.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that traditional games function as flexible narrative resources. Depending on creative aims, they may operate as plot devices, everyday activities, or symbolic references. This versatility shows that cultural practices can serve multiple storytelling purposes beyond mere visual display. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how narrative function intersects with cultural representation. While earlier research has tended to emphasize visual aspects of traditional games in animation (Bendazzi, 2015), the present analysis highlights that representation also takes shape through narrative integration.

Cultural meaning is constructed through the contexts in which elements are situated (Hall et al., 2025). This perspective helps explain the differences among the three series. In *Desa Timun*, cultural knowledge is communicated through participation and action. Audiences witness gameplay, character involvement, and narrative consequences. Meaning emerges through narrative experience rather than visual exposure alone.

In *D.O.A.*, representation is achieved through normalization. Games are incorporated into routine social interactions and everyday activities. Their presence requires no explicit explanation because they are shown as ordinary aspects of community life. This reflects a form of representation that emphasizes familiarity and lived experience. By depicting games as natural components of childhood, the series allows audiences to recognize practices as part of everyday reality rather than distant cultural artifacts.

Meanwhile, *Entong* relies on symbolic representation. Games function as visual indicators of identity and setting. Although their narrative involvement is minimal, they help establish atmosphere and authenticity. This supports the argument that cultural meanings can be communicated through symbolic references and contextual associations (Hall et al., 2025). In this case, games contribute to representation by reinforcing the cultural environment of the story.

These strategies show that animation provides multiple pathways for cultural communication. Heritage can be integrated through action, routine practice, or symbolic cues. Effectiveness is better understood through the narrative contexts in

which these elements are embedded. Cultural preservation through animation can occur through diverse approaches, each offering distinct ways of engaging audiences.

The findings carry meaningful implications for understanding the role of animation in cultural preservation. Previous scholarship has highlighted animation's capacity to visually represent traditions, folklore, and identities (Furniss, 2016; Wells, 2002). Building on this foundation, the present study demonstrates that preservation can also be achieved through narrative structures. The three series illustrate distinct approaches: *Desa Timun* places games at the center of narrative action, making them inseparable from story development; *D.O.A.* incorporates games into everyday experiences, normalizing practices through routine interactions; and *Entong* employs games symbolically to reinforce identity and atmosphere. Collectively, these approaches show that heritage can be communicated through multiple narrative strategies, each offering valuable ways to engage audiences.

For animation creators, the findings indicate that traditional games can serve as meaningful storytelling resources. Cultural elements may be presented as narrative devices that enrich plots, support character development, establish settings, and enhance authenticity. In this way, heritage can be integrated naturally while sustaining audience engagement. This research points to animation's potential as a medium for cultural sustainability. By embedding traditional games within narrative structures, animation introduces heritage to contemporary audiences in engaging forms. This approach may contribute to maintaining the visibility of traditional games in an era shaped by digital entertainment. Animation therefore operates both as entertainment and as a channel through which heritage can be preserved, adapted, and transmitted across generations.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how traditional games function as narrative elements in three Indonesian animated series: *Desa Timun*, *Doyok Otoy Ali Oncom (D.O.A.)*, and *Entong*. The analysis shows that these games are not only cultural visuals but also play different narrative roles depending on each series' storytelling approach. In *Desa Timun*, they drive the plot by shaping conflicts, character choices, and story outcomes. In *D.O.A.*, they appear as everyday activities that support social interaction and reflect children's daily lives. In *Entong*, they serve mainly as cultural markers, reinforcing local identity and atmosphere without strongly affecting the storyline.

The findings suggest that the importance of traditional games lies not in how often they appear, but in how they are woven into the narrative. Their flexibility allows them to act as cultural symbols, plot devices, or tools for character and world-building. This research also highlights the potential of Indonesian animation as a medium for preserving intangible cultural heritage. By embedding traditional games into narrative structures rather than presenting them only as visual references, animation can share

cultural values in ways that feel engaging and meaningful for modern audiences. This view encourages creators to treat cultural practices as active parts of storytelling rather than decorative elements.

Of course, this research is limited to three series and relies on qualitative analysis of narrative functions. Future studies could expand the scope by examining more animated works, exploring other cultural practices beyond traditional games, or analyzing how audiences interpret these narrative integrations. Such work would provide a broader picture of how animation contributes to preserving and communicating cultural heritage.

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