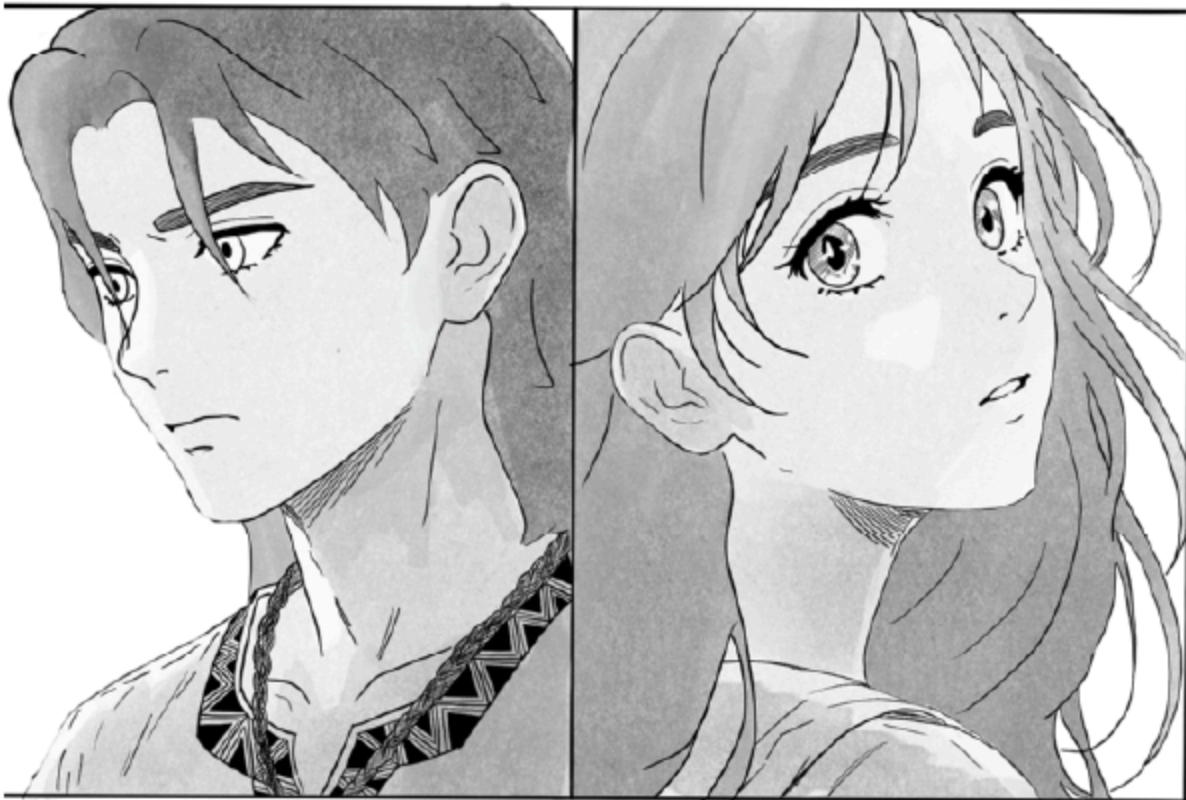


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JULIAN CARBONELL

HIRAYA MANAWARI: FROM FRAGMENTS TO THE FRAME

Carbonell, Julian Reginald

2026

Exegesis in support of practice-based Thesis

Master of Design

Auckland University of Technology

Abstract

Hiraya Manawari: From Fragments to the Frame is a practice-led research into the revitalisation of Philippine pre-colonial mythology through contemporary visual media—specifically 2D hand-drawn animation and an original Philippine komik employing anime and manga-influenced aesthetics. Rooted in a decolonial framework drawing on Walter Mignolo and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and following Hazel Smith and Roger Dean's Iterative Cyclic Web Model, the research asks: *How does transitioning oral stories to contemporary media and storytelling, including animation, comics, and manga, help revitalise cultural identity and heritage?*

The project centres on the Apolaki-Mayari and Bakunawa myths—documented by Landa Jocano, Maximo Ramos, and Damiana Eugenio—as foundational world-building elements, from which original characters are developed. Rather than retelling existing myths directly, the work positions Philippine mythology as a living creative resource capable of sustaining new narratives and new emotional worlds, drawing on The Witcher franchise and Hargrave's analysis of Cartoon Saloon's Irish Folklore Trilogy as precedents for mythological world-building and indigenous animation as decolonial practice.

Theoretical grounding is drawn from Scott McCloud's frameworks of iconic abstraction and panel transition logic, Thomas Lamarre's account of limited animation as philosophical mode, Mizuko Ito's concept of participatory media culture, Richard McGuire's formal innovations in layered sequential art, and Susan Napier's analysis of Miyazaki's mythological practice. Together these inform both the critical and the creative dimensions of the work.

The research argues that anime and manga aesthetics—deeply embedded in Filipino popular culture as documented by Bernadette Canave Bravo and Gutierrez—represent not cultural colonisation but strategic remediation: a form of cultural agency through which Philippine pre-colonial mythology can be made accessible to all Filipinos, in the archipelago and across the diaspora. This is not a work of preservation. It is an act of participation. Filipino stories, told through a visual language Filipinos already love, made by a Filipino who grew up receiving those stories in fragments.

Keywords: Philippine mythology, Filipino diaspora, cultural revitalisation, decolonial practice, animation, anime aesthetics, manga, graphic novel, practice-led research, , strategic remediation, komiks

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Julian Carbonell

23 / APR 2026

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Hiraya Manawari,

Julian

Chapter 1: Introduction & Researcher Positioning

1.1 Positioning the Researcher

As a Filipino designer and animator, my relationship to Philippine pre-colonial mythology exists in a space of both connection and distance. Growing up, I encountered Philippine folklore primarily through fragmented retellings here and there from children's books and the occasional local television series. The vibrant cosmologies of the chief god, Bathala, the obscure aswang narratives, and the rich tapestry of regional deities reached me as whispers rather than declarations, surviving in our minds as vague children's stories and tales our elderly tell us at night. This disconnection is not unique to my experience; it reflects a broader cultural erosion that has affected generations of Filipinos both within the archipelago and across the globe.

My journey to this research began with a recognition of absence. In contemporary media, I observed the proliferation of Greek, Norse, and Japanese mythologies in animated form, yet Philippine pre-colonial narratives remained largely invisible or relegated to folkloric curiosities. This absence is not accidental but rather the consequence of what Walter Mignolo (2011) terms "the darker side of Western modernity," where colonial processes systematically devalued and suppressed indigenous knowledge systems. As I developed my practice as an artist, I became increasingly aware that the medium I had chosen—animation and *komiks*—could serve as a vehicle for cultural reclamation.

This research emerges from a personal stake in revitalising these narratives, not as an act of nostalgic preservation but as a dynamic engagement with living cultural heritage. From within the Philippines to communities situated in other countries, I have witnessed Filipinos struggle to find their identity. My position as both insider and outsider—being Filipino yet geographically removed, and heavily immersed in Western design traditions yet seeking an identity in a field saturated by dominant art styles—shapes my methodology. This liminality, on the contrary, becomes a productive space for what Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) describes as decolonising methodologies, where the researcher acknowledges their positionality while working toward cultural sovereignty and self-determination. Despite having a rich history and culture, many, if not most, Filipinos struggle a lot with cultural identity and appreciation. This project is, in some

sense, an attempt to move from those fragments toward something whole, to build a frame around stories that were never allowed to fully settle.

1.2 Project Overview

Philippine pre-colonial mythology represents a complex system of beliefs, cosmologies, and narratives that existed across the archipelago before Spanish colonisation in the 16th century. These stories, as documented by scholars such as Landa Jocano (2018) and Maximo Ramos (1971), encompassed creation myths, heroic epics, cautionary tales, and explanations of natural phenomena, all embedded within sophisticated cultural frameworks. The myths were not merely entertainment but served as repositories of indigenous knowledge, moral instruction, and community identity. Figures like Bathala, the supreme deity; Mayari, the moon goddess; Apolaki, the sun god; and a pantheon of regional spirits reflected the diverse cultural landscape of pre-colonial Philippines.

However, centuries of colonisation—first Spanish, then American, then Japanese—systematically eroded these narrative traditions. As Joseph Baumgartner (1980) notes, folklore became "the forgotten mirror of Philippine culture," displaced by Catholic doctrine and Western educational systems. In Virgilio Almario's (2018) talk, "Recovering the National Memory: The Quest for a Pre-Colonial Filipino," the Library of Congress's examination of recovering the national memory highlights how colonial powers deliberately suppressed indigenous beliefs, labelling them as primitive superstitions incompatible with Christian civilisation. This cultural violence extended beyond religious conversion; it reshaped language, social structures, and collective memory. Philippine mythology and folklore incorporate themes of ancestral reverence, balance, and spiritual interconnection. These narratives are akin to parables that contain lessons on social relationships, environmental stewardship, and ethos that predate colonial influence and are timeless in their value. Today, many Filipinos are more familiar with European fairy tales and American popular culture than with their own ancestral stories.

My creative response to this cultural erosion involves transitioning traditional oral narratives into 2D hand-drawn animation and an illustrated novel, specifically employing anime and manga-influenced aesthetics. The work I have developed centres on reimagining pre-colonial deities and mythological narratives in an alternate modern fantasy world through contemporary

visual storytelling techniques. Rather than creating museum pieces or ethnographic records, I aim to produce engaging, emotionally resonant narratives that can compete in the contemporary media landscape. The choice of medium is deliberate: as Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000) argue, new media remediate older forms, and both animation and illustrated works offer unique affordances for visualising the fantastical elements inherent in mythological storytelling.

The anime and manga aesthetic influence requires careful consideration. While some might view this as another form of cultural colonisation, replacing one foreign influence with another, I argue that anime itself emerged from Japan's own process of cultural synthesis and technological adaptation. The visual language of anime has become a universal icon, particularly resonant with younger generations. Bernadette Canave Bravo (2012) documents the extensive Japanese cultural influence in the Philippines through anime's popularity and pervasiveness, noting how anime has become deeply integrated into Filipino popular culture. This cultural familiarity makes anime aesthetics particularly effective for reaching Filipino audiences. Herbeth Fondevilla (2007) further explores how manga has established its own identity within Philippine popular culture, demonstrating Filipino audiences' sophisticated ability to adapt and integrate Japanese visual conventions while maintaining distinct cultural sensibilities. By employing these aesthetics to tell Philippine stories, I engage in what might be termed “strategic remediation,” using familiar visual codes to make unfamiliar narratives accessible while maintaining their cultural specificity and decolonial intent.

Mizuko Ito's (2012) work on otaku culture and transnational fandom further contextualises why anime aesthetics represent cultural agency rather than passive adoption for Filipino audiences. In *Fandom Unbound: Otaku Culture in a Connected World*, Ito argues that engagement with anime and manga is fundamentally participatory, meaning, audiences do not merely receive these media but actively extend, reinterpret, and remake them through fan creation, community discussion, and cultural translation. Filipino audiences have engaged with anime in precisely this way for decades: producing fan art, writing, and komiks that draw on anime visual conventions while telling distinctly Filipino stories. This project belongs to that tradition. Employing anime aesthetics to tell pre-colonial Philippine mythology is not imitation but participation, a continuation of the active, creative engagement Filipino audiences have always brought to these media forms.

It is important to state clearly what this project is for and who it is for. This is not a work made exclusively for indigenous Filipinos, for scholars, or for those already steeped in pre-colonial tradition. It is made for Filipinos everywhere, in the archipelago and across the diaspora, in cities and provinces, online and in classrooms. It is made for the Filipino teenager who knows more about Greek gods than about Bathala, for the diaspora kid who has never heard Mayari's name spoken aloud, and for anyone who has ever felt the particular ache of belonging to a culture whose stories were handed to them in pieces. What I want to make is something recognisable to the masses: Filipino stories, told through a visual language Filipinos already love, made by a Filipino who grew up feeling that same distance. The ambition is not preservation in a museum sense, instead it is a participation. To make Philippine mythology feel like something that belongs to all of us, not just to history.

1.3 Research Question & Sub-questions

The central research question guiding this practice-led investigation is: **How does transitioning oral stories to contemporary media and storytelling, including animation, comics, and manga, help revitalise cultural identity and heritage?** This question positions contemporary media not merely as a representational medium but as an active agent in cultural revitalisation. The term "revitalise" is crucial here as it suggests not the resurrection of a dead culture but the reinvigoration of living traditions that have been suppressed or marginalised.

This inquiry necessitates several sub-questions that frame the research parameters. First: How have pre-colonial Philippine stories survived colonisation? This question addresses the resilience of oral traditions, the role of folkloric scholarship in preservation, and the contemporary manifestations of these narratives in komiks, literature, and emerging media. As Damiana Eugenio's (1985) comprehensive documentation demonstrates, these stories persisted through adaptive strategies, primarily through syncretism with Catholic narratives, preservation in regional languages, and transmission via oral and performative traditions. Understanding survival mechanisms informs how we might strengthen these narratives for future transmission.

Second: What role do contemporary media forms, including animation, comics, and manga, play in cultural storytelling? This question engages with how multiple visual narrative media align with mythological storytelling needs. Animation offers visual metaphor, character design, world-building, and emotional resonance through movement and sound. Comics and manga

provide sequential visual storytelling that allows for reader-controlled pacing, detailed world-building through paneling, and more accessible production and distribution. Both media forms have proven effective for mythological content globally. Ng Wai-ming (2002) demonstrates that Japanese comics and animation have had significant impact across Asia, creating shared visual literacy that transcends national boundaries. As Ami John (2025) articulates, these visual media have evolved into global cultural forces shaping how contemporary audiences engage with storytelling. Works like *Trese* (Budgette Tan and Kajo Baldisimo, 2021), which began as a *komiks* series before its Netflix animated adaptation, demonstrate how Philippine mythology can be effectively presented through both sequential art and animation. Emerging projects such as *Mitolohiya* (Del Mundo et al., 2022) further illustrate this approach. Anna Katrina Gutierrez (2014) examines how Filipino comics and picturebooks have emerged as "glocal" forms, synthesizing global visual conventions (including manga and American superhero aesthetics) with distinctly Filipino content and sensibilities, demonstrating that Filipino creators have developed sophisticated approaches to visual storytelling that bridge traditional narratives and contemporary media forms.

Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) provides a further theoretical basis for why comics and manga function as particularly effective media for this kind of cultural work. McCloud argues that simpler, more stylised characters invite stronger reader identification than realistic ones, a process he terms "masking," in which the reduction of a face to essential lines allows readers to project themselves into the character (McCloud, 1993, pp. 30–45). This has direct implications for a cultural revitalisation project aimed at all Filipinos: a stylised Filipino character rendered in anime-influenced linework is not less Filipino for being abstracted, but potentially more universally accessible across the diaspora and across generations. McCloud's semiotic framework—his spectrum from realistic to iconic image-making—also explains why the visual language of manga generates such strong reader engagement with mythological and fantastical content (McCloud, 1993, pp. 28–59): the iconic image invites imaginative participation rather than passive observation, which is precisely the relationship this project seeks to cultivate between Filipino audiences and pre-colonial mythology. The goal is not to show Filipinos their mythology from a distance, but to make the door wide enough that they can walk through it.

Third: How can 2D hand-drawn medium serve as a decolonial practice? This question situates the creative work within critical theory, drawing on the work of decolonial scholars such as Mignolo (2011) and Linda Smith (1999). Animation and comics becomes more than representation; it becomes an act of reclaiming visual sovereignty, of asserting indigenous narratives within media spaces dominated by Western and East Asian productions. The hand-drawn aspect is significant as it emphasises craft, artistic labour, and a connection to traditional art forms like indigenous tattooing and weaving, which also operated as visual language systems. This question also considers how those specific medium can resist colonial gazes and present indigenous perspectives on their own terms.

1.4 Paradigm & Significance

This research operates within a decolonial framework, recognising that cultural revitalisation cannot occur without addressing the ongoing effects of colonial epistemologies. Decoloniality, as theorised by Mignolo (2011), seeks to challenge the structures of power and knowledge production established during colonial periods and perpetuated through modernity. In the Philippine context, this means acknowledging how centuries of Spanish and American colonisation systematically devalued indigenous knowledge systems, replacing them with Western frameworks that positioned Philippine culture as inferior or primitive.

Animation and *komiks* emerges as a particularly potent medium for cultural revitalisation for several reasons. First, it is a contemporary medium with significant cultural currency, particularly among younger generations who are often most disconnected from traditional narratives. Second, animation and *komiks*' capacity for world-building allows for the visualisation of pre-colonial cosmologies in ways that live-action cannot economically achieve. Third, as Soledad Reyes (2009) notes in her book "The Komiks and Retelling the Lore of the Folk," visual narrative forms have particular resonance in Philippine cultural contexts, suggesting continuity with indigenous visual storytelling traditions. Animation extends this lineage into digital space. Bien S. Mabbayad (2011) demonstrates how contemporary Filipino graphic novels engage with myth, modernity, and globalization, showing how Filipino creators have long negotiated between traditional narratives and contemporary media forms. His analysis reveals that Filipino popular heroes in graphic form serve as sites where indigenous mythology meets global visual culture, creating distinctly Filipino hybrid forms.

The choice of anime aesthetics requires theoretical justification beyond mere stylistic preference. Anime represents a non-Western visual language that has achieved global recognition and cultural prestige, demonstrating that alternatives to Disney-dominated animation paradigms can succeed. For Philippine stories, anime aesthetics offer several advantages: they are familiar to Filipino audiences who have grown up consuming Japanese media; they demonstrate that Asian narratives can be commercially viable and culturally influential; and they provide established visual vocabularies for depicting the fantastical elements inherent in mythological storytelling. Hidayat and Hidayat (2020) demonstrate how anime functions as a form of Japanese intercultural communication, particularly among Asian youth demographics, suggesting its effectiveness as a medium for cultural exchange and identity formation. Liya Hughes and Richard Gregor (2024) further explore how contemporary animation bridges Eastern and Western cultural values, demonstrating animation's capacity to navigate cultural tensions while creating meaningful cross-cultural dialogue. Fondevilla and Chua (2021) examine how the Philippines has been "overlooked by soft power and media mix," despite the country's rich engagement with Japanese popular culture, suggesting that Filipino adaptations of anime and manga aesthetics represent a form of cultural agency rather than mere passive consumption.

Works such as *Your Name* (dir. Shinkai, 2016), *Weathering with You* (dir. Shinkai, 2019), and *Spirited Away* (dir. Miyazaki, 2004) demonstrates anime's capacity for integrating folklore and spirituality into contemporary narratives, providing models for similar approaches to Philippine material. Francesca Arnavas and Mattia Bellini (2023) examine how Miyazaki's films employ *kishōtenketsu*—a four-part narrative structure emphasizing harmony and balance rather than Western conflict-driven plots—demonstrating how anime can embody distinctly non-Western storytelling philosophies that may resonate with Philippine oral narrative traditions, which similarly emphasize cyclical patterns and balance over linear conflict resolution.

Susan Napier's (2023) study of Miyazaki's life and work illuminates precisely why anime has proven such an effective medium for mythological storytelling. In *Miyazaki: A Life in Art*, Napier argues that Miyazaki's films succeed not by treating Shinto animism and Japanese folklore as exotic historical material but by presenting them as living moral and spiritual frameworks that speak directly to contemporary anxieties about nature, community, and human responsibility. His forest spirits, river gods, and ancient curses are not decorative mythology but active participants in the moral world of each film. This is the model this project seeks to follow

with Philippine pre-colonial cosmology: not to present Bathala, Bakunawa, and the diwata as artefacts of a vanished world, but to restore them as living forces with genuine stakes in a contemporary narrative. Napier's analysis suggests that audiences respond to this treatment with emotional recognition because the underlying values of balance, reciprocity, and spiritual interconnection are not culturally exclusive but humanly resonant.

This image has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

Figure 1-3. Makoto Shinkai, *Your Name*, 2016, film stills, Retrieved from Crunchyroll

This image has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

Figure 4. Hayao Miyazaki, *Spirited Away*, 2001, film stills, Retrieved from Netflix.

This research contributes to the preservation of Filipino culture by demonstrating how creative practice can serve as a research methodology. Following Hazel Smith and Roger Dean's (2009) articulation of practice-led research, the animated work itself generates knowledge about cultural revitalisation processes. Additionally, this work contributes to design practice by exploring how visual design decisions, such as character design, colour theory, and environmental design, can encode cultural specificity while remaining accessible to global audiences. The research addresses gaps in the literature regarding the representation of Philippine mythology in contemporary media and provides methodological frameworks for other cultural practitioners engaged in similar revitalisation efforts.

Chapter 2: Contextual Review of Practice and Influences

2.1 Pre-colonial Philippine Mythology & Folklore

Pre-colonial Philippine mythology represents a complex tapestry of belief systems that varied significantly across the archipelago's diverse linguistic and cultural regions. Jocano's (2018) comprehensive outline identifies several common structural elements despite this regional variation: creation myths explaining the origins of the world and humanity, a hierarchical cosmology typically featuring supreme deities alongside numerous regional and specialised gods, and rich traditions of heroic epics and cautionary tales. The supreme deity Bathala occupied the highest position in Tagalog cosmology, governing creation and cosmic order, while other regions recognised different supreme beings such as Kabunian in the Cordilleras or Kan-Laon in the Visayas. This regional diversity reflects the pre-colonial Philippines' lack of political unity, where each community maintained distinct yet interconnected cultural traditions.

The mythology encompassed not only celestial deities but also what Ramos (1971) terms "creatures of Philippine lower mythology," a vast pantheon of spirits, supernatural beings, and nature guardians that populated the landscape and daily life. These included the aswang, shape-shifting, vampiric monsters; the diwata, nature spirits associated with specific locations and natural phenomena; and the anito, ancestral spirits who mediated between the living and the divine. Demetrio (1978) emphasises that these beings were not merely folkloric entertainment but represented sophisticated philosophical systems for understanding human relationships with

nature, community, and the cosmos. The mythology provided explanatory frameworks for natural phenomena, encoded moral instruction, and reinforced social cohesion through shared narratives.

Key mythological narratives include creation stories such as the tale of Malakas and Maganda, the first man and woman who emerged from bamboo; the story of Mayari and her siblings battling over who would rule day and night, explaining the moon's dimmer light compared to the sun; and numerous regional flood myths that parallel global deluge narratives yet maintain distinctive cultural characteristics. Heroic epics like "Biag ni Lam-ang" from the Ilocano tradition or "Darangen" of the Maranao people combined mythological elements with cultural values, demonstrating ideal behaviours and social structures. These narratives were not fixed texts but living traditions that adapted to incorporate new experiences while maintaining core cultural values.

Oral tradition served as the primary mechanism for transmitting these narratives across generations. As William Henry Scott (1992) notes in his examination of prehispanic Filipino societies, pre-colonial societies possessed rich oral literary traditions despite lacking widespread written systems. Storytelling occurred in multiple contexts: ritual ceremonies where creation myths and deity narratives reinforced cosmological understanding; communal gatherings where epic poems and heroic tales provided entertainment and moral instruction; and everyday interactions where cautionary tales about supernatural beings regulated social behaviour. The oral nature of transmission meant stories evolved through each telling, with storytellers adapting narratives to specific audiences and circumstances while preserving essential cultural knowledge.

Contemporary written compilations of these oral traditions began during the Spanish colonial period, largely through the work of missionary ethnographers. However, these early recordings were often filtered through colonial and Christian perspectives, which distorted indigenous meanings. More systematic scholarly documentation emerged in the 20th century with works by Eugenio (1985), whose comprehensive collection of Philippine folktales provides crucial primary source material. Eugenio's (1985) introduction to Philippine folktales establishes taxonomies for understanding the diverse narrative forms while acknowledging the challenges of translation and cultural interpretation. More recent scholarship by Jocano (2018) and contemporary cultural practitioners like Gaverza (2014) seeks to recover and present these

narratives with greater cultural sensitivity and indigenous frameworks. These written compilations serve dual purposes: preserving stories for future generations while making them accessible to Filipinos disconnected from oral transmission networks, particularly diaspora communities and younger generations educated primarily in colonial languages.

The themes running through Philippine mythology reflect pre-colonial values and worldviews. Reciprocity between humans and nature appears repeatedly, with narratives emphasising respectful relationships with land, water, and natural resources. Balance and harmony feature prominently, whether in creation myths that explain cosmic order or cautionary tales that warn against excessive pride or disrupting natural equilibrium. Community and kinship obligations structure many narratives, reflecting the bayanihan social system and extended family networks central to pre-colonial Filipino life. These themes contrast sharply with the individualism and dominion over nature embedded in Western cultural narratives, representing distinctive indigenous philosophies that decolonial practice seeks to recover and reassert.

2.2 Colonial Impact & Cultural Survival

Spanish colonisation, beginning in 1565, initiated the systematic suppression of indigenous belief systems as part of the Catholic evangelisation project. As Almario's (2018) Library of Congress examination documents, colonial authorities viewed pre-colonial spiritual practices as demonic paganism requiring eradication for salvation and civilisation. Indigenous religious practitioners were persecuted, ritual objects destroyed, and participation in traditional ceremonies criminalised. However, as Baumgartner (1980) observes, this suppression was never total. Geographic barriers, linguistic diversity, and insufficient colonial infrastructure allowed many communities, particularly in highland and Muslim regions, to maintain traditional practices beyond Spanish control. Even in areas of heavy Spanish influence, indigenous beliefs persisted through strategies of adaptation and concealment.

Syncretism emerged as a primary survival mechanism, with indigenous beliefs merging with Catholic doctrine in ways that preserved essential elements while appearing compatible with Christianity. The veneration of anito transformed into devotion to Catholic saints, with communities attributing indigenous spiritual qualities to Christian figures. Folk Catholicism in the Philippines thus contains layers of pre-colonial cosmology barely concealed beneath Christian terminology. Bender's (2021) examination of "uncolonial ontologies" reveals how even

texts produced under colonial conditions contain subversive elements that maintain indigenous worldviews. The aswang, for instance, persisted in folklore despite, or perhaps because of, colonial attempts to use such figures to characterise indigenous beliefs as demonic. These creatures became sites of cultural resistance, carrying pre-colonial knowledge systems forward in disguised forms.

American colonisation from 1898 brought different but equally destructive pressures on indigenous culture. While Americans did not conduct religious suppression as aggressively as the Spanish, their cultural assimilation project through the education system proved devastatingly effective. English became the language of instruction, curriculum-centred American and European content, and Filipino culture was presented as a backward tradition requiring modernisation. Scott's (1992) work recovering prehispanic Filipino history demonstrates how American colonial education deliberately obscured pre-colonial achievements, portraying Filipinos as primitive savages requiring American civilisation. This epistemological violence shaped how Filipinos understood their own history, internalising colonial narratives that positioned indigenous culture as inferior to Western modernity.

The Japanese occupation during World War II, though brief, further disrupted cultural transmission. The focus on survival during wartime and the subsequent national rebuilding efforts in the post-war period meant traditional cultural practices received minimal attention or support. Bravo (2012) notes that the post-war period also saw the introduction of Japanese cultural products, including anime and manga, which would eventually become deeply influential in shaping Filipino popular culture and media consumption patterns.

Post-independence nation-building projects in the Philippines often prioritised economic development and political consolidation over cultural preservation. When cultural heritage received attention, it frequently emphasised more recent colonial-influenced traditions, such as Spanish colonial architecture, Catholic festivals, rather than pre-colonial indigenous practices. This reflected the deep internalisation of colonial values among post-colonial elites educated in Western systems.

Despite these successive colonial impositions, pre-colonial narratives endured through multiple channels. Oral transmission continued in rural communities and among indigenous groups, who maintained traditional lifeways. Regional languages preserved mythological narratives that might

have been lost had Spanish or English been the sole languages of cultural transmission. The komiks industry, which flourished in the mid-20th century, became an unexpected vehicle for folkloric preservation, with serialised graphic narratives adapting traditional stories for popular consumption. Reyes's (2009) analysis demonstrates how komiks creators drew on folk traditions, even when filtered through contemporary sensibilities and commercial pressures, keeping these narratives circulating in popular culture. Mabbayad (2011) extends this analysis by examining how contemporary Filipino graphic novels negotiate between myth, modernity, and globalization, demonstrating that Filipino creators have consistently used visual narrative forms to maintain cultural connections while engaging with global media trends.

Post-colonial recovery efforts accelerated in recent decades as Filipino scholars and cultural practitioners recognised the urgency of documenting endangered traditions. Academic projects, such as those undertaken by Jocano (2018) and Ramos (1971), systematically recorded mythologies across different regions. Cultural organisations worked with indigenous communities to preserve oral traditions through audio and video documentation. Contemporary writers and artists began incorporating pre-colonial elements into their work, reimagining these narratives for modern audiences. Sugue and Reyes's (2022) literature review on rediscovering Philippine mythology for schools demonstrates growing recognition that cultural education requires engagement with pre-colonial heritage. However, significant challenges remain: many narratives have been irretrievably lost, younger generations often lack interest in traditional forms, and the dominance of Western and other foreign media makes indigenous content struggle for attention.

2.3 Contemporary Media as Cultural Medium

Both animation and comics has historically served as a powerful medium for cultural storytelling around the world, capable of visualising mythologies, folklore, and cultural values in ways that resonate across generations and borders. Examples around the world demonstrate animation's capacity to present cultural narratives to broad audiences while maintaining cultural specificity and authenticity. Disney's *Moana* introduced Polynesian mythology to mainstream international audiences, albeit with controversy surrounding cultural representation and the commodification of Polynesian culture. Pixar's *Coco* (dir. Adrian Molina and Lee Unkrich, 2017) engaged deeply with Mexican Day of the Dead traditions, demonstrating how animation can visualise spiritual

beliefs and cultural practices with emotional resonance. Netflix's *Klaus* (dir. Sergio Pablos, 2019) reimagined Santa Claus' origin stories through Sámi cultural elements. These examples reveal both animation's potential for cultural representation and the risks of appropriation when powerful media corporations control indigenous narratives.

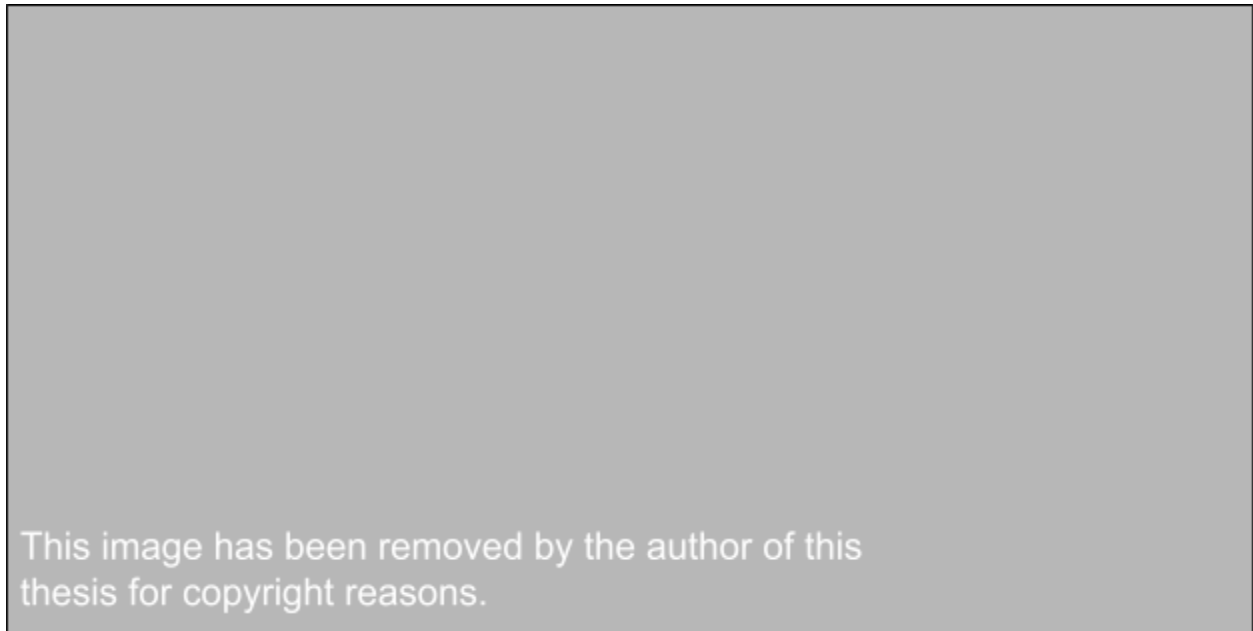


Figure 5. Sergio Pablos, *Klaus*, 2019, film stills, Retrieved from Netflix

Anime's influence on global animation is undeniable. Japanese animation developed distinctive aesthetic and narrative conventions that differentiated it from Western animation traditions, which were dominated by Disney. Ng (2002) traces how Japanese comics and animation expanded their influence across Asia throughout the late 20th century, creating new forms of regional cultural exchange and shared media literacy. This expansion was not merely commercial but represented a form of soft power that demonstrated non-Western media could achieve global influence. Works by directors like Miyazaki have demonstrated that animation can address complex philosophical and spiritual themes, integrating Shinto and Buddhist concepts into narratives that resonate globally. *Princess Mononoke* (dir. Miyazaki, 1997) weaves folklore elements with anti-war messaging; *Your Name* (dir. Shinkai, 2016) and *Weathering with You* (dir. Shinkai, 2019) incorporate Shinto spirituality into contemporary settings, presenting indigenous Japanese beliefs as living traditions rather than historical curiosities. Arnavas and Bellini (2023) analyze how Miyazaki's narratives employ *kishōtenketsu* structure—introduction, development, twist, and reconciliation—rather than Western three-act structures centered on conflict and

resolution. This narrative approach emphasizes harmony, balance, and contemplation, values that resonate with many Asian cultural traditions including Philippine concepts of cosmic balance and communal harmony. Anime's success demonstrated that non-Western animation could achieve both critical acclaim and commercial viability, challenging the assumption that Western animation paradigms represented the only successful approach.

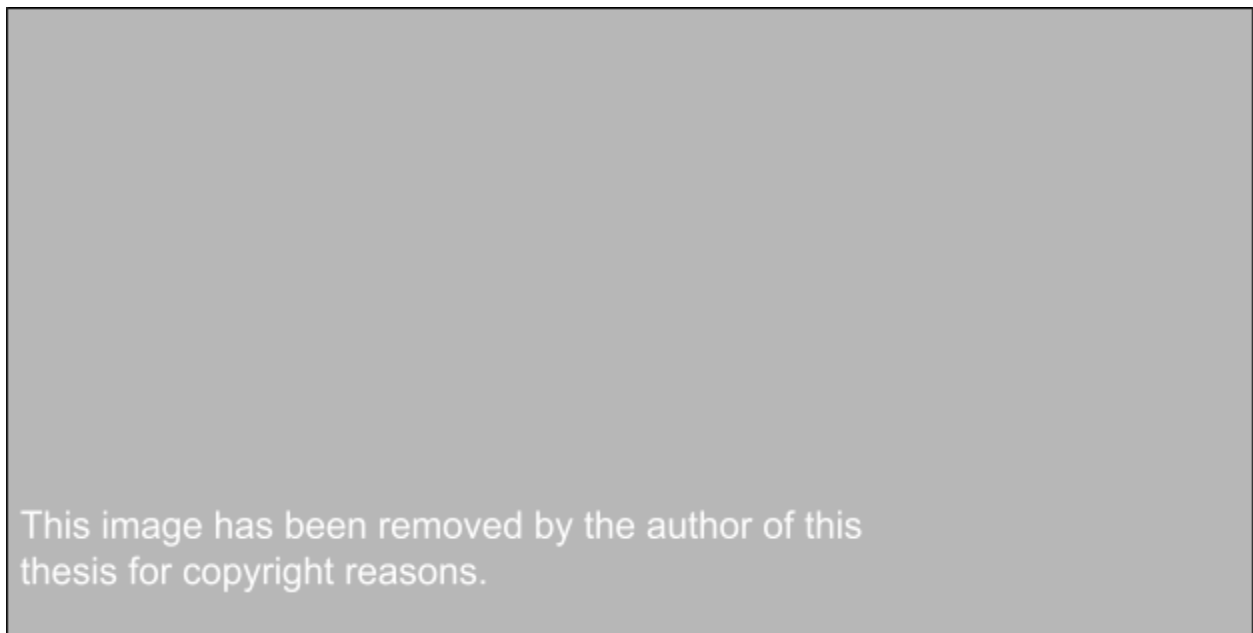


Figure 6. Hayao Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, 1997, film stills, Retrieved from Netflix

Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) offers a foundational framework for understanding why manga and Western comics produce such different reader experiences, and why that difference matters for this project. McCloud identifies meaningful structural differences in how Japanese and Western comics handle panel transitions, particularly the prevalence in manga of what he terms "aspect-to-aspect" transitions, which move not between actions or moments but between different facets of a place, mood, or idea, inviting the reader to dwell rather than advance (McCloud, 1993, pp. 80–90). This contemplative pacing is structurally aligned with the *kishōtenketsu* narrative model discussed above, and with pre-colonial Filipino storytelling traditions that prioritise balance and reflection over linear conflict resolution. Where Western comics tend toward action-to-action and subject-to-subject transitions that sustain momentum, manga's willingness to slow time—to hold a sky, a hand, a moment of stillness—creates the emotional register this project draws on when visualising mythological worlds where atmosphere and cosmic mood carry as much narrative weight as plot. This is not a

stylistic preference but a structural argument: the visual grammar of manga is better suited to mythological storytelling rooted in cyclical, contemplative traditions than the forward-driving grammar of mainstream Western comics.

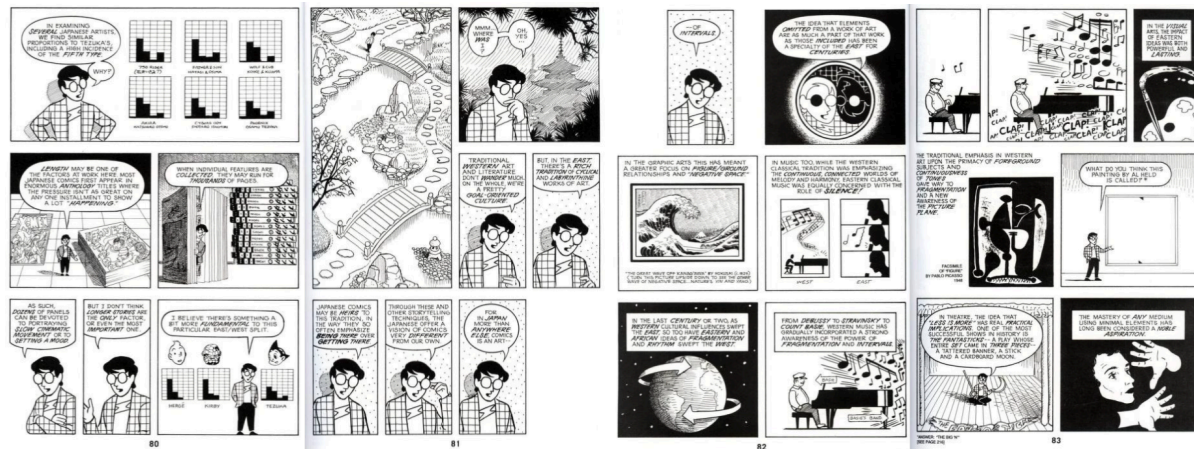


Figure 7-8. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* pp. 81-84, 1994, Book, Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/understanding-comics>

Thomas Lamarre’s *The Anime Machine* (2009) provides a foundational theoretical account of what makes anime a philosophically distinct medium. Lamarre argues that anime’s use of “limited animation,” selective movement, held frames, and expressive stillness rather than continuous fluid motion, is not a cost-cutting compromise but a fundamentally different mode of engaging the viewer with the image . Where full animation, typified by Disney, produces an illusion of seamless life, limited animation draws attention to the frame itself, inviting a more contemplative, layered engagement. This aligns directly with the aspect-to-aspect panel logic discussed above, and with the pre-colonial Filipino storytelling values this project seeks to embody: stillness as meaning, not absence. Lamarre’s framework also reframes the ideological significance of the hand-drawn approach adopted in this project. He argues that the anime image produces a particular kind of “openness,” a relationship between character, background, and movement that differs fundamentally from the totalising world of full animation, creating space for the viewer’s imagination to participate, which is precisely the relationship this project seeks to cultivate between Filipino audiences and pre-colonial mythology.

The anime aesthetic offers particular advantages for mythological storytelling. Character design in anime allows for stylisation that can represent supernatural or divine beings without requiring photorealistic rendering. Environmental design creates fantastical worlds that viewers accept as spaces where mythological events occur naturally. The medium's embrace of the supernatural

and spiritual as narrative elements, rather than requiring scientific explanation, aligns with how mythologies function culturally. Hidayat and Hidayat (2020) examine how anime serves as intercultural communication among Generation Z and Y audiences, demonstrating the medium's particular resonance with younger demographics who increasingly construct identity through transnational media consumption. Series like *Frieren: Beyond Journey's End* (Yamada, 2023) demonstrate contemporary anime's continued engagement with fantasy world-building rooted in folkloric traditions. For Philippine mythology, these aesthetic and narrative conventions provide established vocabularies for depicting indigenous cosmologies to audiences familiar with anime's visual language.

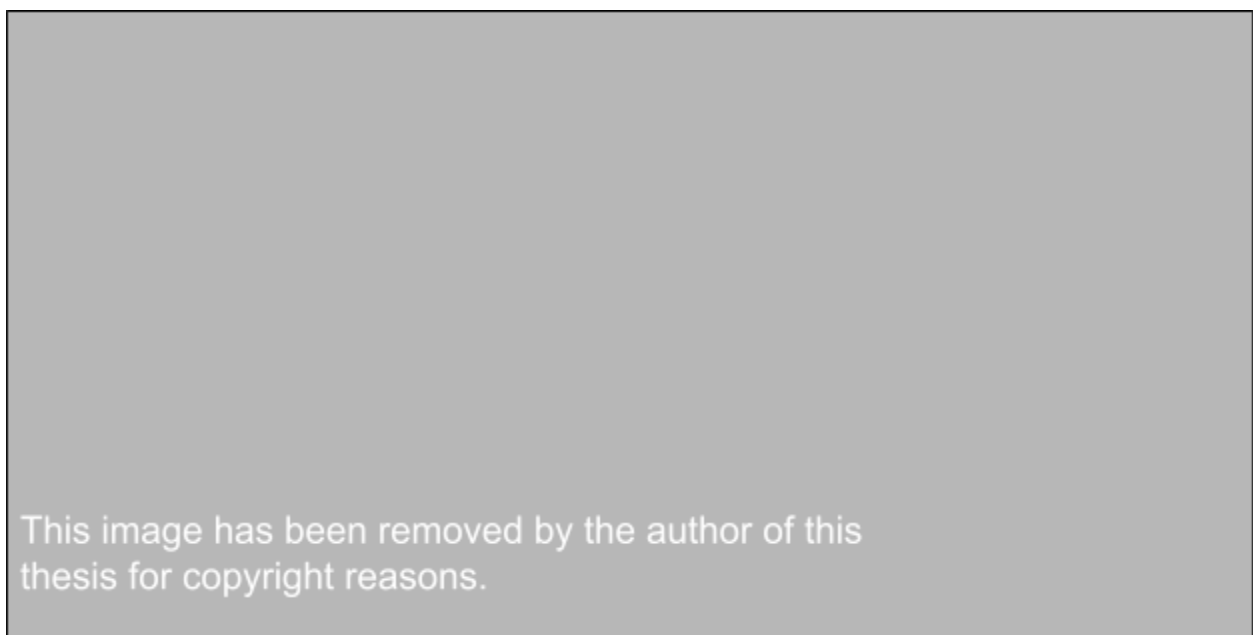


Figure 9. Cartoon Saloon, *Wolfwalkers*, 2020, trailer still, Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BL_RH3P6Cz0

The Filipino animation industry has historically operated primarily as an outsourcing hub for foreign productions, with Filipino animators providing skilled labour for American, Japanese, and European projects. This economic relationship mirrors broader colonial patterns where Filipino labour serves foreign interests rather than developing independent cultural production. However, in recent years, there has been an increase in investment in original Filipino animated content. *Trese*, adapted from the comics by Tan and Baldisimo (2021), achieved international recognition through Netflix, presenting urban fantasy narratives rooted in Philippine mythology. The series demonstrated market viability for Philippine mythological content in animated form, though its noir aesthetic and mature content targeted adult audiences rather than the broader

demographic that might benefit from cultural education. Gutierrez (2014) examines how Filipino comics creators have developed "glocal" approaches that synthesize global manga and superhero aesthetics with Filipino cultural content, demonstrating that Filipino audiences and creators possess sophisticated media literacy capable of navigating multiple cultural influences.

This challenge of positioning indigenous animation against dominant Western paradigms is not unique to the Philippines. Hargrave, a scholar of decolonial animation practice, examines Ireland's Cartoon Saloon—a small, independent Irish studio whose hand-drawn films drew on Celtic mythology and folklore to challenge Disney's global dominance—as a case study in indigenous cultural reclamation through animation. Her analysis demonstrates how a studio rooted in local myth can carve out a distinct identity within an industry long colonised by Western aesthetic standards. As Hargrave observes, Cartoon Saloon used “distinctly Irish culture, themes, history, and art styles to decolonize their animation industry and create a distinct animation industry that competes against Disney's dominance despite their small size.”¹ The studio's success offers a compelling precedent for Filipino animators: that indigenous mythology, when treated with creative seriousness, can achieve both critical recognition and international reach without sacrificing cultural specificity.

Emerging projects, such as *Mitolohiya*, as documented by Del Mundo et al. (2022), represent the younger generations of Filipino creators who use animation to engage with pre-colonial deities and narratives. Their interactive hybrid animation project focusing on Tagalog gods and goddesses exemplifies how digital media allows for innovative presentations of traditional content. Similarly, Adiao et al.'s (2023) *The Sky Deity* employs 2D animation and soundscape design to improve mythological representation through fantasy worldbuilding. These projects demonstrate a growing interest among Filipino creative practitioners in reimagining mythological narratives through contemporary media forms. However, they also face significant challenges: limited funding compared to foreign productions, competition for audience attention in markets saturated with foreign content, and the need to balance cultural authenticity with commercial viability.

Animation's accessibility to younger generations makes it particularly valuable for cultural revitalisation. Contemporary youth consume vast amounts of animated content through streaming platforms, social media, and gaming. Traditional forms of cultural transmission—oral

storytelling, written texts, academic study—often fail to engage digital natives accustomed to visual, interactive media. Animation meets audiences in spaces they already inhabit, using media forms they already consume. John (2025) argues that the anime phenomenon has fundamentally transformed how contemporary audiences engage with narrative media, creating expectations for visual storytelling that traditional educational approaches struggle to meet. Galeon's (2020) discussion of reimagining Filipino mythology for modern audiences emphasises this need to present traditional narratives through contemporary media to remain culturally relevant. Animation allows myths to compete for attention alongside the foreign content dominating youth media consumption, potentially sparking interest in deeper cultural exploration.

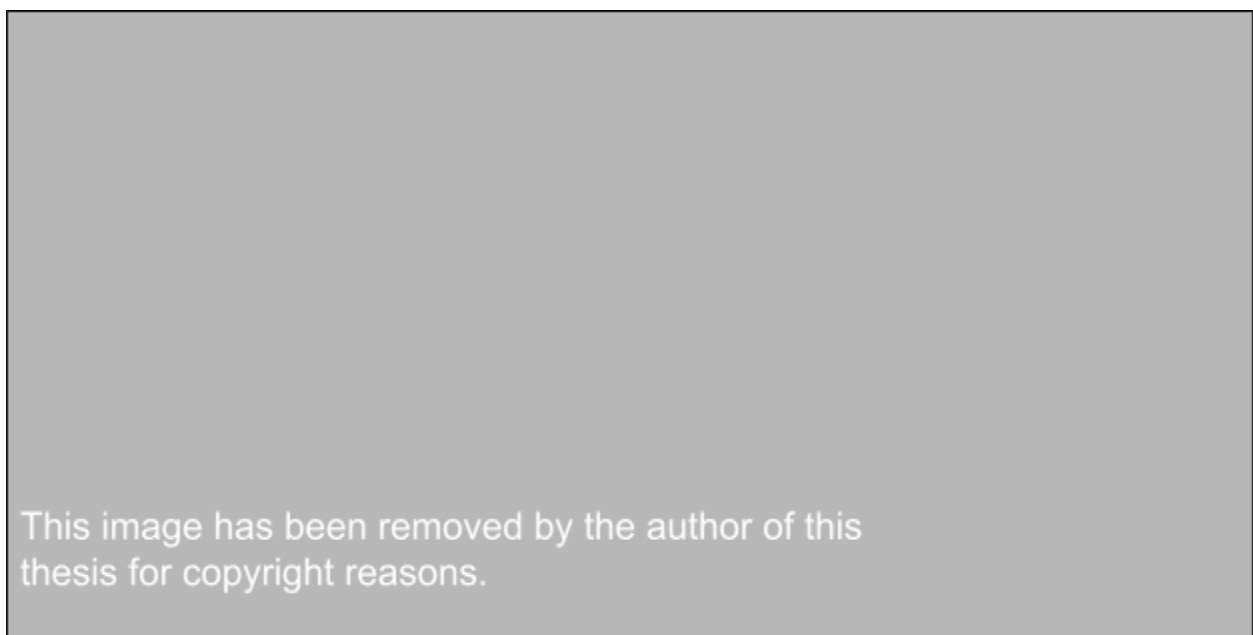


Figure 10. Budget Tan and Kajo Baldesimo, *Trese*, 2021, episode still, Retrieved from Netflix

2.4 Decolonial Theory & Cultural Revitalisation

Decolonial theory provides critical frameworks for understanding cultural revitalisation as resistance to ongoing colonial structures. Mignolo's (2011) articulation of "the darker side of Western modernity" argues that colonialism was not merely a matter of political and economic domination, but an epistemological project that positioned Western knowledge systems as universal while delegitimising indigenous ways of knowing. Colonialism established a "colonial matrix of power" that persists beyond formal political independence, continuing to shape how knowledge is produced, validated, and disseminated. In the Philippine context, this manifests in

education systems that privilege Western history and literature, media landscapes dominated by American and other foreign content, and cultural hierarchies that position indigenous practices as backward traditions rather than sophisticated knowledge systems.

Linda Smith's (1999) foundational work on decolonising methodologies emphasises that research involving indigenous peoples and cultures must be conducted on indigenous terms, centred on indigenous concerns, and beneficial to indigenous communities. She critiques Western research traditions that treated indigenous cultures as objects of study, extracting knowledge for academic benefit while providing little value to the communities researched. Decolonising methodologies require researchers to position themselves within the research, acknowledge power relationships, and ensure research serves community self-determination rather than external interests. For cultural revitalisation projects, this means indigenous communities must control how their narratives are represented, who benefits from this representation, and how representations align with or challenge colonial distortions.

Cultural identity in post-colonial contexts is characterised by a complex negotiation between indigenous heritage and colonial influences. Rather than seeking pure recovery of pre-colonial culture, an impossibility given centuries of cultural transformation, decolonial practice recognises hybridity while working to centre indigenous epistemologies. This involves what Bender (2021) terms "uncolonial ontologies," ways of being and knowing that resist colonial categorisations and assert indigenous philosophical frameworks. For Filipino cultural identity, this means acknowledging Spanish, American, and other influences while refusing to allow these influences to define the essence of Filipino culture. Pre-colonial narratives offer access to indigenous worldviews that existed before colonial impositions, providing frameworks for imagining Filipino identity beyond colonial definitions.

Hughes and Gregor (2024) explore how contemporary animation navigates the tensions between Eastern and Western cultural values, demonstrating that animation can serve as a bridging medium that neither erases cultural difference nor reinforces cultural hierarchies. Their analysis suggests that animation's capacity for visual metaphor and symbolic representation makes it particularly effective for presenting cultural worldviews in ways that invite understanding without demanding assimilation to dominant frameworks. This perspective informs how anime aesthetics might be employed for Philippine mythology: not as cultural appropriation or

colonisation, but as strategic use of a visual language that has proven capable of representing Asian cultural perspectives to global audiences.

Hargrave's study of Cartoon Saloon's "Irish Folklore Trilogy" offers a documented case study of animation functioning as decolonial practice. She argues that the studio's emergence after the collapse of American-owned animation studios in Ireland represents "a reclamation of the industry from a colonizer by a colonized, indigenous group," with each film actively challenging colonial erasure of Irish mythology through visual and narrative strategies.³ Crucially, Hargrave identifies how Cartoon Saloon employs what she terms "magic realism," grounding fantastical indigenous narratives in real historical locations and objects, to assert the continued relevance of pre-Christian Irish cosmologies alongside modernity. This approach is instructive for the present project, which similarly seeks to position pre-colonial Philippine mythology not as historical curiosity but as living, contemporary narrative.

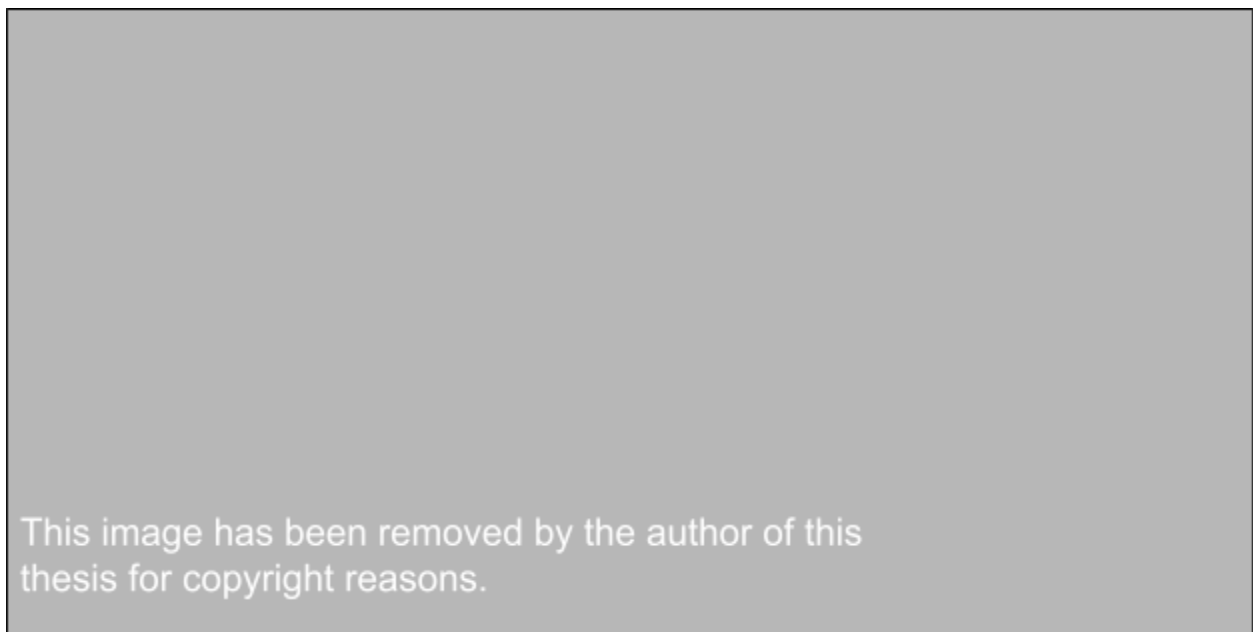


Figure 11. Cartoon Saloon, *Song of the Sea*, 2014, trailer still, Retrieved from <https://www.cartoonsaloon.ie/song-of-the-sea/>

Design as decolonial practice extends these theoretical frameworks into creative production. Visual representation carries ideological weight; design decisions about how bodies, spaces, and narratives are depicted encode cultural values and power relationships. Colonial art historically depicted colonised peoples through orientalist and primitivist lenses that reinforced colonial hierarchies. Decolonial design practice requires conscious rejection of these visual languages, developing instead representation strategies that honour indigenous aesthetics and perspectives.

Salvador-Amores's (2002) documentation of Kalinga tattooing traditions illustrates how indigenous visual systems served as complex communicative forms that conveyed cultural knowledge. Contemporary creative practitioners can draw on these traditions, not through superficial appropriation but by understanding their underlying principles and applying these to contemporary media forms.

For this research project, decolonial theory informs every aspect of creative practice. The decision to focus on pre-colonial mythology rather than colonial-influenced narratives centres on indigenous knowledge systems. The employment of anime aesthetics, while potentially controversial, represents a strategic use of a non-Western visual language that challenges Disney's dominance while remaining accessible to Filipino audiences who have grown accustomed to consuming Japanese media. The practice-led research methodology, drawing on Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner, positions creative work as a form of knowledge generation rather than merely illustrating pre-existing theory. The goal is not to create ethnographic documentation of Philippine mythology, but to produce living, engaging narratives that assert the continued relevance and value of indigenous cosmologies. This represents cultural revitalisation as an active process, transforming heritage from a museum artefact into a dynamic cultural force.

Chapter 3: Methods & Methodology

3.1 Methodological Framework

This research employs a dual methodological framework that positions creative practice as both a research method and a research output. The first pillar is decolonial methodology, drawing on Smith's (1999) foundational work on decolonising research practices and Mignolo's (2011) articulation of decoloniality as resistance to the colonial matrix of power. The second pillar is practice-led research, following Smith and Dean's (2009) Iterative Cyclic Web Model, which theorises the reciprocal relationship between creative practice and theoretical understanding. Together, these frameworks enable an approach where animation production becomes a means of generating knowledge about cultural revitalisation while simultaneously enacting that revitalisation through the creative work itself.

Decolonial methodology fundamentally reorients research priorities and processes. Smith (1999) argues that Western research traditions have historically treated indigenous cultures as objects of study, extracting knowledge for academic purposes while providing minimal benefit to the communities researched. A decolonial approach centres indigenous knowledge systems, treating them not as anthropological artefacts but as living, sophisticated epistemologies with continued relevance. For this research, centring indigenous knowledge means privileging pre-colonial Philippine cosmologies and narratives as the primary source material, consulting contemporary Filipino cultural sources and practitioners, and ensuring the research serves Filipino cultural interests rather than merely academic ones.

Challenging colonial narratives represents a crucial aspect of decolonial methodology. Centuries of colonial education and media representation have distorted the understanding of Philippine mythology, both among Filipinos and international audiences. Spanish colonial records filtered indigenous beliefs through Christian demonology, characterising indigenous deities as demons and traditional practices as primitive superstition. American colonial education positioned pre-colonial Filipino culture as backwards, requiring Western civilisation for advancement. Contemporary representations often exoticise or trivialise these narratives, reducing complex cosmologies to folkloric curiosities. This research actively challenges these distortions by presenting pre-colonial narratives with the gravity and sophistication they deserve, positioning them as foundational cultural knowledge rather than quaint traditions of historical interest only.

Reclaiming cultural voice through creative practice extends decolonial methodology into production processes. Bender's (2021) work on "uncolonial ontologies" demonstrates how Filipino literature can resist colonial impositions by asserting indigenous ways of being and knowing. Animation offers similar potential: every design decision, narrative choice, and aesthetic consideration becomes an opportunity to assert Filipino cultural perspectives. This means making conscious choices about visual representation that honour indigenous aesthetics rather than defaulting to Western animation conventions, developing narrative structures that reflect oral storytelling traditions rather than Hollywood dramatic formulas, and creating work that speaks to Filipino experiences and values rather than attempting to translate them for Western consumption.

Practice-led research, as theorised by Smith and Dean (2009), positions creative work as a legitimate form of research that generates knowledge through making. Unlike traditional research models where creative work merely illustrates pre-existing theory, practice-led research recognises that the act of creation itself produces insights unattainable through theoretical analysis alone. The Iterative Cyclic Web Model articulates how theory and practice exist in reciprocal relationships, each informing and transforming the other through cyclical processes. Initial theoretical research shapes creative decisions, but the act of making reveals complexities and possibilities not apparent in theory, which then necessitates returning to theoretical frameworks with new questions and understandings.

This cyclical process manifests practically in how this research unfolds. Theoretical research into Philippine mythology and decolonial frameworks informed initial creative decisions about which narratives to adapt and how to approach representation. However, the practical challenges of visualising these narratives through animation—determining how to depict deities, designing pre-colonial environments, translating oral narrative structures to visual storytelling—generated questions and insights that sent the research back to theoretical sources with new awareness. Each iteration of the creative work prompted theoretical reconsideration, while theoretical insights sparked creative revisions. Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner undergirds this approach, emphasising how practitioners generate knowledge through reflection on practice, identifying problems, and developing solutions through iterative experimentation.

The integration of decolonial methodology with practice-led research creates a distinctively positioned approach to cultural revitalisation. The creative work is not merely about Philippine mythology but enacts decolonial practice through its production processes and outcomes. Similarly, the theoretical framework is not applied to practice but emerges through practice, with insights from animation production deepening understanding of how cultural revitalisation operates. This methodological fusion allows the research to address both academic and cultural objectives simultaneously, contributing to scholarly discourse while producing culturally valuable creative work.

3.2 Specific Methods

The choice of 2D hand-drawn animation as the primary production method carries both practical and ideological significance. Hand-drawn animation connects to traditional Filipino art forms in

ways that digital or 3D animation cannot. Salvador-Amores's (2002) documentation of Kalinga tattooing demonstrates how indigenous visual systems encoded complex cultural knowledge through hand-crafted marks on bodies and materials. Traditional weaving patterns, pottery designs, and architectural ornamentation all functioned as visual language systems created through direct human craft. Hand-drawn animation extends this lineage of mark-making as cultural communication. Each frame represents intentional artistic labour, mirroring the craft traditions of pre-colonial Filipino culture.

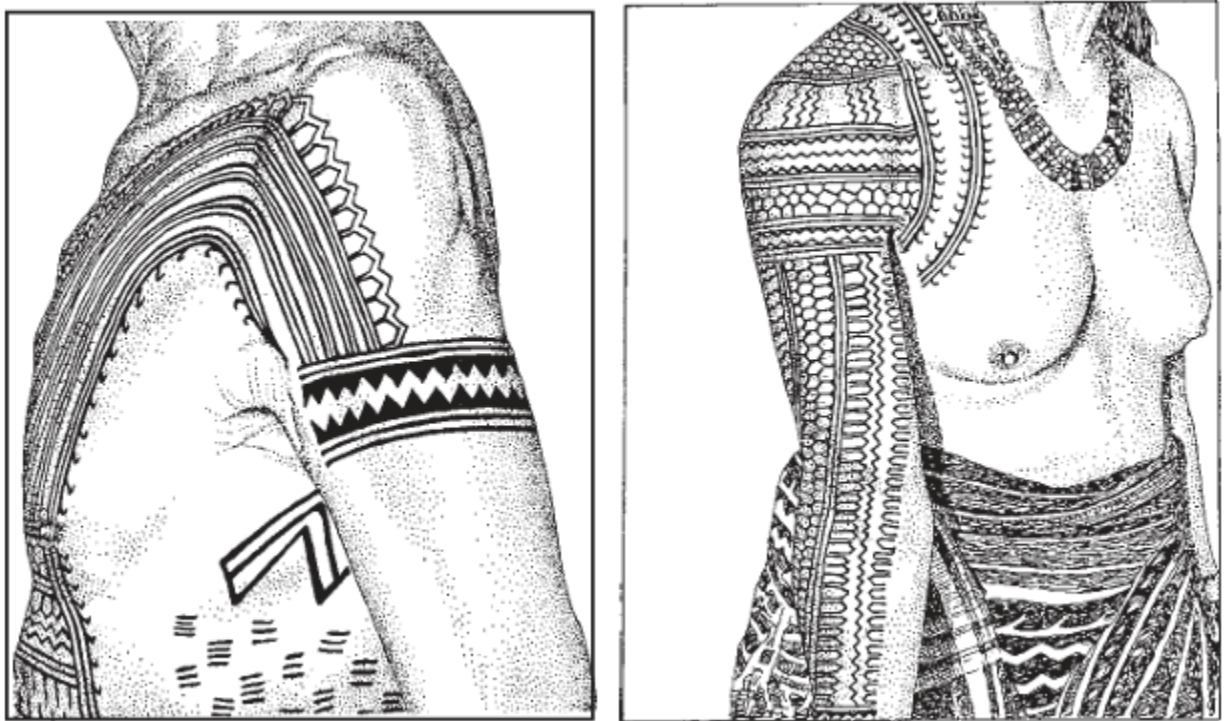


Figure 12-13. Analyn Salvador-Amores, *Batek: Traditional Tattoos and Identities in Contemporary Kalinga, North Luzon Philippines* pp. 130-136, 2002, Book, Retrieved from <https://scispace.com/pdf/batek-traditional-tattoos-and-identities-in-contemporary-4p6bv21jiq.pdf>

The hand-drawn approach also carries decolonial implications. Contemporary animation industries increasingly rely on digital technologies and 3D rendering that require substantial capital investment and technical infrastructure. This creates barriers favouring well-resourced Western and East Asian studios while marginalising practitioners from less economically developed contexts. Hand-drawn animation, while labour-intensive, requires minimal technology beyond basic drawing tools and software, democratising access to animation production. This aligns with decolonial commitments to accessible, community-controlled cultural production rather than dependence on Western technological systems. Hargrave's analysis of Cartoon Saloon

reinforces this point: the studio's insistence on hand-drawn animation in the face of industry-wide CGI adoption was understood by critics as evidence that "Irish animation does not need to pander to global pressures demanding cultural ambiguity and digitally-rendered polygons."⁵ The refusal of dominant technological modes becomes, in this reading, a statement of cultural sovereignty as much as an aesthetic one.

Furthermore, hand-drawn animation possesses aesthetic qualities particularly suited to mythological storytelling. The visible trace of the artist's hand creates organic, lived-in visual textures that feel appropriate for narratives rooted in oral traditions and pre-industrial cultures. The slight imperfections and variations inherent in hand-drawn work convey authenticity and intentionality, suggesting these are stories told by human voices rather than algorithmically generated products. This aesthetic consideration informed the decision to maintain visible line work and textural qualities rather than pursuing the hyper-polished finish characteristic of major studio productions.



Figure 14. Julian Carbonell. Character Design for 'Nito' based on Anito sculptures, 2026, exported image, Auckland

Cartoon Saloon's hand-drawn trilogy provides a parallel example of this logic in action. Hargrave notes that Cartoon Saloon's rejection of CGI in favour of hand-drawn animation parallels "a dedication to keeping indigenous stories alive through the films," with the visible craft of each frame reinforcing the cultural authenticity of the narratives being told.² This alignment between production method and cultural intent strengthens the argument that hand-drawn animation is not merely an aesthetic preference but an ideological commitment, one that this project shares.

The twelve principles of animation, articulated by Disney animators Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, provide foundational techniques for creating believable movement and engaging visual storytelling. While developed within Western animation contexts, these principles address fundamental aspects of how animation communicates through motion and can be adapted to serve diverse cultural storytelling needs. Principles particularly relevant to this project include squash and stretch for creating organic, expressive movement in supernatural beings; anticipation and follow-through for establishing rhythm and weight in character actions; staging for clearly communicating narrative information through composition; and timing and spacing for conveying emotion and cultural specificity through movement patterns.

Cultural adaptation of animation principles involves recognising that movement patterns carry cultural meaning. Western animation often emphasises exaggerated, dynamic movement reflecting individualist cultural values. Japanese anime developed different movement aesthetics, including limited animation techniques that use stillness and subtle movements to create contemplative moments. Hughes and Gregor (2024) demonstrate how animation can bridge cultural values through thoughtful adaptation of technical principles to serve different cultural storytelling needs. Philippine cultural contexts suggest other movement possibilities rooted in indigenous dance traditions, martial arts like arnis and kali, and gestural communication patterns specific to Filipino social contexts. Applying animation principles through culturally informed movement vocabulary allows the work to feel authentically Filipino rather than like Western or Japanese animation with Filipino superficial elements.

masks and Roda's (2021) *The Painted People* demonstrated contemporary approaches to visualising pre-colonial culture.

The storyboarding process translated narrative content into visual sequences, determining shot composition, camera movement, character positioning, and pacing. This phase revealed narrative elements requiring expansion or clarification for visual comprehension, demonstrating how transitioning from oral/written to visual form necessitates creative interpretation. Character development involved iterative design processes, beginning with research into how figures appear in textual sources, developing initial visual interpretations, and refining designs through feedback and cultural consideration. The anime aesthetic influence manifested in character proportion systems, eye designs, and movement styles, adapted to incorporate Filipino facial features, body types, and cultural aesthetics rather than defaulting to Japanese character design conventions.

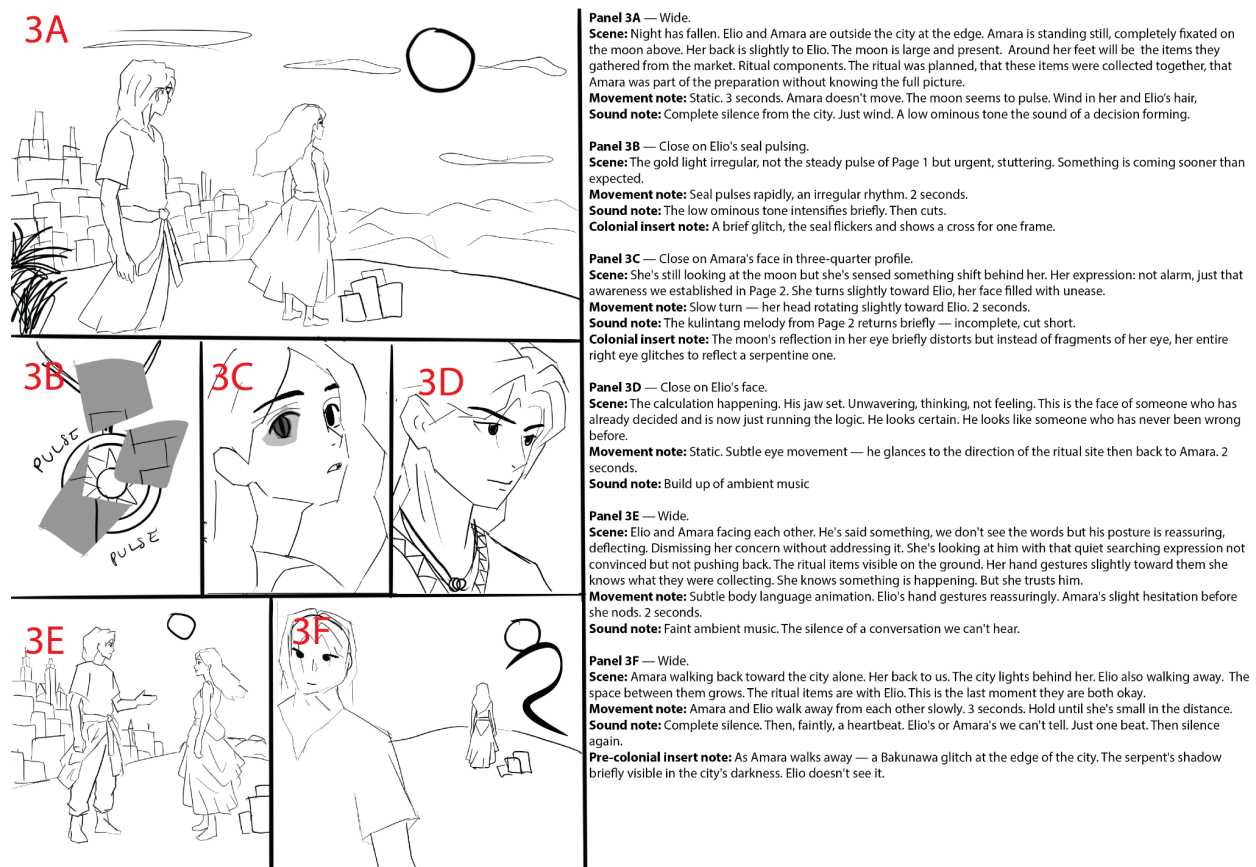


Figure 21. Julian Carbonell. Storyboarding, 2026, exported image, Auckland

McCloud's (1993) analysis of how panel shape and size convey time and motion informed the graphic novel's compositional decisions. McCloud demonstrates that a tall, narrow panel compresses time and creates urgency, while a wide horizontal panel slows and expands a moment into something the reader inhabits rather than passes through (McCloud, 1993, pp. 90–100). In practice, this framework shaped how scenes were structured: wide, borderless panels were used for moments of stillness and grief while tighter, more fragmented panels carry the instability and chaos of the possession sequence. McCloud also establishes that the comic page itself is a unit of time, not merely space, meaning that layout decisions are always also pacing decisions. This principle directly informed the dual-medium structure of the project: the graphic novel's pacing was designed to breathe in ways that animation, governed by a fixed frame rate, cannot always achieve, with each medium doing what it does best rather than one simply illustrating the other.

McCloud's (1993) treatment of speech balloons, sound effects, and typography as visual elements, not merely textual ones, also shaped the graphic novel's approach to lettering (McCloud, 1993, pp. 130–140). Rather than treating text as information layered over image, the project treats it as part of the visual composition: the weight, placement, and shape of a character's words contribute to emotional tone in the same way line quality and shading do. A whispered line sits differently on a page than a shout; silence, rendered as an empty balloon or no balloon at all, is as meaningful as dialogue. This is consistent with manga conventions in which lettering is understood as drawing, and it reinforces the argument that the graphic novel is not a secondary document to the animation but an equal creative output with its own visual grammar; one that participates in the broader project of demonstrating that Philippine mythology can sustain multiple forms of contemporary visual storytelling.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Approaching Philippine pre-colonial mythology as a diaspora Filipino designer carries ethical responsibilities regarding cultural representation. These narratives are not generic public domain content but sacred stories belonging to specific communities and cultural contexts. While the geographic and cultural distance of diaspora existence prevents direct consultation with source communities in many cases, this research maintains ethical commitments through multiple strategies. First, privileged scholarly sources produced by Filipino researchers like Jocano

(2018), Ramos (1971), and Eugenio (1985) ensure Filipino voices guide understanding of these narratives. Second, consulting contemporary Filipino cultural practitioners through their published works and digital platforms like LigayaCaballes' blog, The Pinay Writer, provides guidance on respectful representation.

The tension between authenticity and creative interpretation requires careful navigation. Complete authenticity is impossible as these oral traditions existed in specific performance contexts that cannot be fully recovered, regional variations mean no single "authentic" version exists, and the act of transitioning to animation inherently transforms the narratives. However, this does not justify arbitrary invention or distortion. The research maintains cultural essence by preserving core narrative elements, incorporating visual references from pre-colonial material culture, and ensuring creative additions serve cultural revitalisation goals rather than Western commercial considerations. Where creative interpretation extends beyond source material, this is acknowledged and justified in terms of making narratives accessible to contemporary audiences while honouring their cultural significance.

Additional ethical considerations involve ensuring this research benefits Filipino cultural preservation efforts rather than merely extracting cultural material for academic credentials. The animated work is designed to be accessible to Filipino audiences, particularly younger generations disconnected from traditional narratives. Making the work available beyond academic contexts—through online platforms, cultural centres, educational institutions—ensures it serves community cultural needs. The research also aims to model methodologies other Filipino creative practitioners might employ for cultural revitalisation work, contributing to broader movements for indigenous cultural recovery in the Philippines.

Chapter 4: Critical Reflections

4.1 Introduction to Creative Process

The animated work produced through this research creates a new narrative by interweaving multiple Philippine myths into one cohesive tale, using the Apolaki-Mayari conflict and the Bakunawa myth as foundational elements. Rather than creating direct adaptations of existing mythology, this approach follows a model similar to how Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher* series (Sapkowski, 1993-2013) and its subsequent game adaptations by CD Projekt RED

(2007-2015) handled Polish and Slavic mythology; taking mythological elements, creatures, and themes as building blocks to construct an original narrative world populated by new characters whose stories unfold against a backdrop steeped in cultural mythology.

The Apolaki-Mayari myth of Bathala's children battling for cosmic rule provides the celestial framework and establishes the cosmic order governing the world. The Bakunawa myth—the ancient serpent-dragon who devours moons and causes eclipses—serves as the narrative's antagonistic force and source of ongoing conflict. By weaving these foundational myths together, the narrative creates a world where the cosmic balance achieved through Apolaki and Mayari's compromise remains perpetually threatened by Bakunawa's hunger for celestial bodies, generating dramatic tension and narrative stakes that extend beyond the mythological past into a continuing present.

This synthesis allows for the creation of new characters, both mortal and divine, whose personal stories intersect with these mythological forces. Original protagonists navigate a world shaped by cosmic conflicts, encountering creatures from Philippine lower mythology (aswang, tikbalang, diwata, manananggal) reimagined as inhabitants of a lived-in fantasy world rather than isolated folkloric curiosities. Just as *The Witcher's* Geralt encounters Slavic mythological creatures as part of his world's natural ecosystem, the original characters in this narrative encounter Philippine mythological beings as integral parts of their reality.

The creative strategy serves multiple cultural revitalisation purposes. First, it demonstrates that Philippine mythology possesses the depth and complexity to support expansive world-building comparable to European or Japanese mythological fantasy. Second, by creating new narratives rather than merely retelling existing myths, it positions Philippine mythology as living creative resource rather than static cultural artifact. Third, the approach allows exploration of pre-colonial Filipino values and worldviews through character-driven narratives that engage contemporary audiences emotionally while educating them about cultural foundations.

The project timeline spanned twelve months, beginning with intensive research into multiple mythological sources and world-building development (months 1-3), progressing through visual development and character design for both mythological figures and original characters (months 4-6), and culminating in animation production and post-production refinement (months 7-12).

4.2 Story Selection & Mythological Synthesis

The decision to use the Apolaki-Mayari narrative and the Bakunawa myth as foundational elements emerged from research into how these stories could create complementary thematic structures. The Apolaki-Mayari myth, documented by Jocano (2018) and Eugenio (1985), addresses cosmic order, divine authority, and the establishment of balance through compromise. The Bakunawa myth represents the forces that threaten cosmic balance; the ancient serpent-dragon whose attempts to devour celestial bodies cause eclipses and cosmic disturbances.

In my new narrative, the world is divided into realms that are governed by mortal humans and protected by 7 chosen avatars of each god. Rather than using Apolaki and Mayari themselves, they are instead represented by their chosen avatars. These avatars serve as pillars of order and balance while primordial beings like Bakunawa, who isn't represented by an avatar, threatens that dynamic. This opposition creates perpetual narrative tension; the cosmic balance achieved through the siblings' compromise remains fragile, requiring ongoing maintenance and defense.

The narrative weaving extends beyond these two foundational myths to incorporate creatures from Philippine lower mythology (Ramos, 1971). Aswang, tikbalang, diwata, and other beings populate the world as natural inhabitants whose behaviours follow folkloric logic while functioning as coherent parts of a fantasy ecosystem. This dynamic parallels The Witcher's use of mythological backstory that creates ongoing narrative stakes in the present. For instance, a narrative draft I have establishes that everytime Bakunawa or a primordial being awakens, cosmic balance teeters, certain supernatural creatures become more aggressive. This integration connects cosmic mythological events with lower mythological creatures, creating a world where all mythological elements interact rather than existing as separate folklore samples.

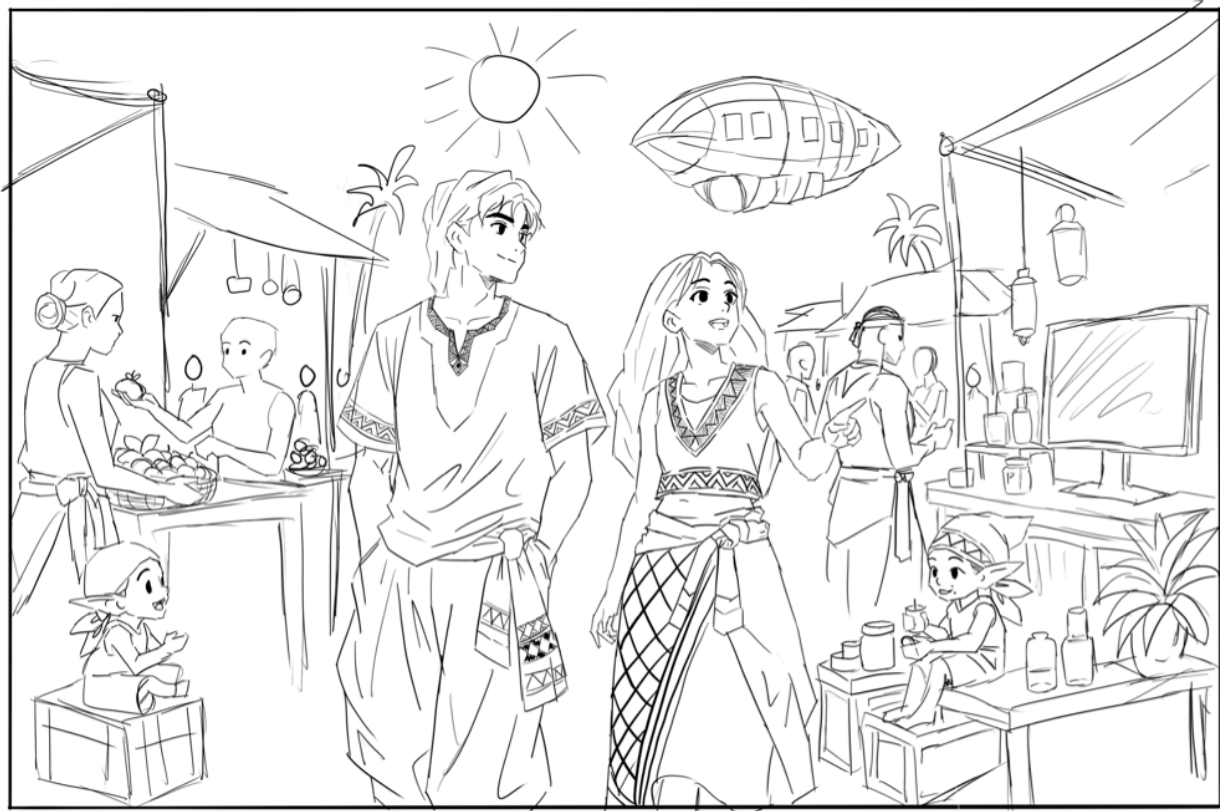


Figure 22. Julian Carbonell. *Scene Design*, 2026, exported image, Auckland

The narrative introduces original characters whose lives intersect with these mythological forces. Following *The Witcher's* example, where Geralt encounters mythological creatures while pursuing personal goals, this narrative creates Filipino protagonists with their own arcs and internal conflicts. One original protagonist, Elio—chosen avatar of Apolaki—a celebrated and revered warrior who stands as a pillar of hope for the realm. Another original character, Amara—Mayari's 6th chosen avatar—a babaylan who has vowed to bring justice to her fallen predecessors. She is headstrong, fearless, wise, and is arguably the finest warrior in the realm.

The *Witcher* series provides crucial precedent for how to handle cultural mythology in fantasy narratives without reducing it to decorative exoticism. Sapkowski's approach took Polish and Slavic mythological elements seriously as world-building foundations while creating new stories rather than merely retelling existing myths. Several specific strategies from *The Witcher* inform this project: treating mythological creatures as ecological reality; integrating cultural values into world structure; creating moral complexity rooted in competing legitimate values; and making mythology lived rather than legendary.

Hargrave's reading of Cartoon Saloon's trilogy identifies a comparable strategy in Irish animation, where each film treats mythological creatures—selkies, wolfwalkers, fairy folk—not as isolated folkloric specimens but as ecologically integrated inhabitants of a coherent world shaped by indigenous cosmology.⁷ What Hargrave terms "mythopoeic" animation—the use of the medium to generate new mythological narratives from existing traditions—aligns closely with the creative ambitions of this project. Where Cartoon Saloon builds a thematic trilogy across three time periods to narrate Ireland's colonial experience through folklore, this project uses the Apolaki-Mayari and Bakunawa myths as a generative foundation for new characters and storylines, similarly positioning Philippine mythology as an active, living creative resource rather than an archive.

Research into source materials revealed variations across different regional traditions of both core myths. The approach adopted involved synthesising elements from multiple variants to create coherent narrative logic while acknowledging regional diversity. The core Apolaki-Mayari narrative retained the physical confrontation and Mayari's injury as central events while incorporating the compromise resolution. For Bakunawa, the synthesis incorporated the serpent-dragon form, the connection to eclipses, and the cosmic threat requiring both divine and mortal responses.

Decolonial considerations in mythological synthesis involved examining how colonial interpretations had potentially distorted narrative meanings. Spanish colonial documentation sometimes portrayed Bakunawa through Christian demonological frameworks, reducing a complex cosmological force to simple evil. This research sought to recover pre-colonial narrative values by presenting both myths according to indigenous cosmological logic. Bakunawa's destructive power doesn't represent moral evil but cosmic chaos; a force that exists according to its nature rather than choosing evil, reflecting pre-colonial Filipino cosmologies where not all forces are benevolent from human perspectives but all have roles in cosmic balance.

4.3 Visual Development

Character design presented the complex challenge of balancing cultural authenticity with anime aesthetic conventions across both divine beings and original mortal characters. The solution emerged through research into indigenous Filipino visual traditions and their underlying design principles rather than superficial visual elements. Salvador-Amores's (2002) documentation of

Kalinga tattooing revealed sophisticated geometric patterns and symbolic systems that became integrated into character designs as fundamental design elements shaping silhouettes and visual identities. Since there are no surviving works on how deities looked like, they are fairly open to interpretation, though they must still have influences from pre-colonial Philippine aesthetics.

Elio's character design drew on solar symbolism while avoiding clichéd representations. Rather than literal sun imagery, the design employed warm colour palettes, radiating compositional elements, and aggressive angular shapes suggesting solar intensity. His look referenced pre-colonial warrior garments adapted through anime aesthetics to create dynamic, movement-friendly forms in addition to the traditional tattoos that represent his status and prowess as a warrior.

Mayari's design required particular care to avoid both Western princess aesthetics and anime magical girl conventions. Her colour palette employed cool lunar tones—silvers, deep blues, subtle purples—creating visual contrast with Apolaki. Her silhouette emphasises verticality and strength rather than curved, diminutive proportions common in anime female character design. She will also be adorned with symbolic tattoos and her garments also hold patterns referenced traditional textile motifs, specifically weaving patterns from Northern Luzon.



Figure 23-24. Julian Carbonell. *Character Design for Elio and Amara*, 2026, exported image, Auckland

Cartoon Saloon's approach to visual encoding of indigenous culture offers a useful comparative model here. Hargrave documents how the studio developed a visual shorthand—recurring Neolithic spiral patterns drawn from megalithic Irish sites—that functions across all three films as a consistent marker of indigenous magic and pre-Christian identity.⁶ Rather than relying on surface-level ethnic costuming, this strategy embeds cultural meaning into the formal grammar

of the animation itself. A similar logic guided the integration of Kalinga tattooing patterns and traditional textile motifs into character designs for this project: cultural specificity is carried not through decoration alone but through the underlying visual principles shaping silhouette, composition, and symbolic detail.

During early designs I tried not to default too heavily to Japanese anime facial structures, though, in all honesty, it's hard to pin down a "Filipino" look since we're all so diverse with how we look. Subsequent revisions incorporated rounder heads and faces, flatter and rounder noses, and darker skin tones reflecting Filipino physical characteristics. Bravo's (2012) documentation of Japanese cultural influence in the Philippines helped contextualise how Filipino audiences have developed sophisticated literacy in reading anime aesthetics, suggesting that Filipino visual elements could be successfully integrated without compromising anime's appeal.

McCloud's (1993) framework of iconic abstraction offers a theoretical grounding for why these character design decisions matter beyond aesthetics. His spectrum from realistic to iconic image-making demonstrates that the further a face moves toward stylisation, the more it functions as a vessel for reader identification rather than as a fixed individual (McCloud, 1993, pp. 28–45). A fully realistic face says: this is a specific person. A stylised, iconic face says: this could be you. For a project whose stated aim is to reach all Filipinos—not only those already steeped in pre-colonial tradition—this distinction is not trivial. The decision to render Elio and Amara in anime-influenced linework places them at a productive point on McCloud's spectrum: specific enough to carry cultural markers—skin tone, facial structure, tattooing, traditional garment references—and yet open enough that a wide range of Filipino viewers can recognise something of themselves in these characters. Cultural specificity and emotional universality are not opposites in this framework; the iconic image is precisely what holds both at once.

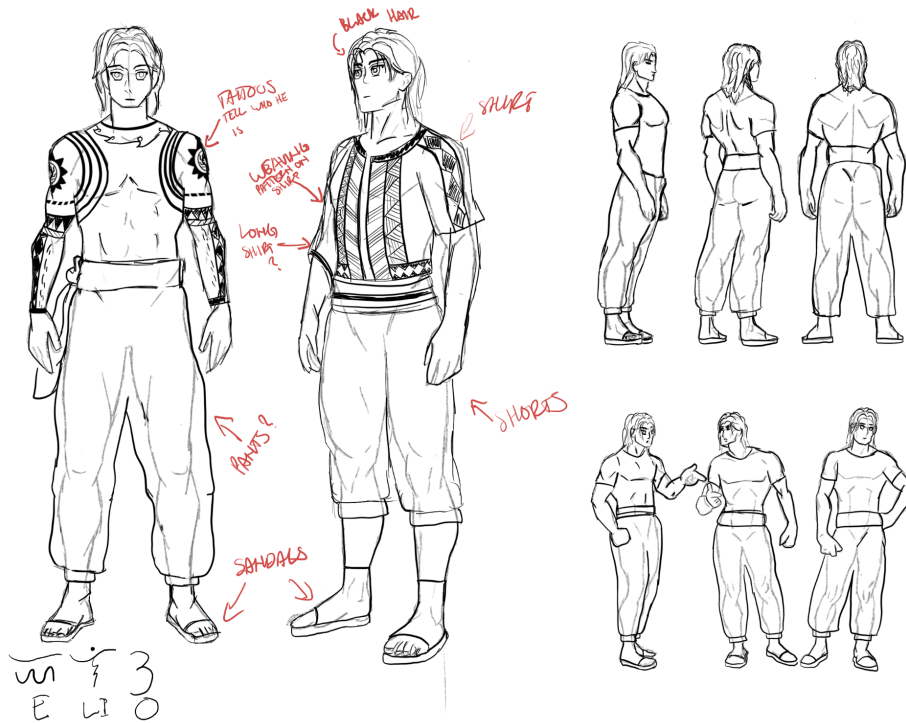


Figure 25. Julian Carbonell. *Character Sheet for Elio*, 2026, exported image, Auckland

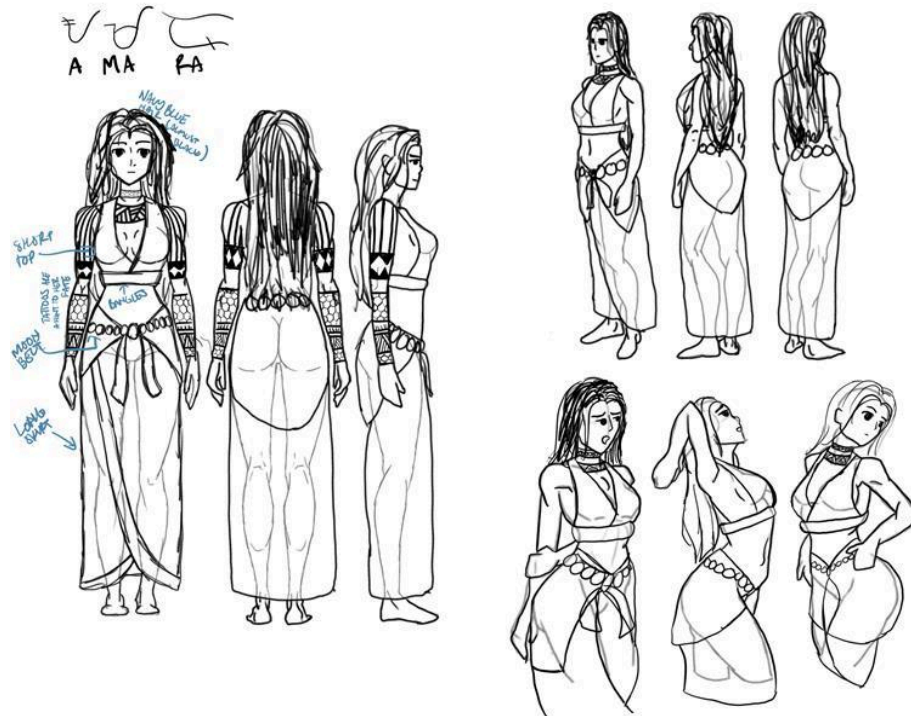


Figure 26. Julian Carbonell. *Character Sheet for Amara*, 2026, exported image, Auckland

Should I be given the chance to further expand on this world, other character and world designs will be a modern-fantasy blend. So, architecture and garments will be a look of a "what if the Philippines was never colonized?"

On the other hand, Bakunawa will not be fully detailed in. I thought of keeping the serpent-dragon a silhouette to keep the feel of a great threat that's looming over the characters. That way, when he appears on screen, he has an ominous and dark vibe.

Colour palette development proved crucial for establishing cultural atmosphere and narrative meaning. Primary colour systems were developed for different aspects of the world: celestial/divine palette (saturated, high-key colors suggesting cosmic brilliance); mortal realm palette (naturalistic but vibrant colors from Philippine environments); Bakunawa/chaos palette (deep sea colors that create visual contrast); and supernatural creature palette (muted, slightly desaturated natural colors). The colour relationships between these systems create narrative meaning, with colour-based cues providing subliminal storytelling.

4.4 Animation Production Process

The animation production involved a lot of experimentation of different styles. I even dabbled into 3D animation using Blender. Despite exploring other styles, I ended up going back to my original preferences of using an anime-inspired style. I wanted to stick with a visual and narrative style that, despite being mainstream, is away from Western stylistic standards.

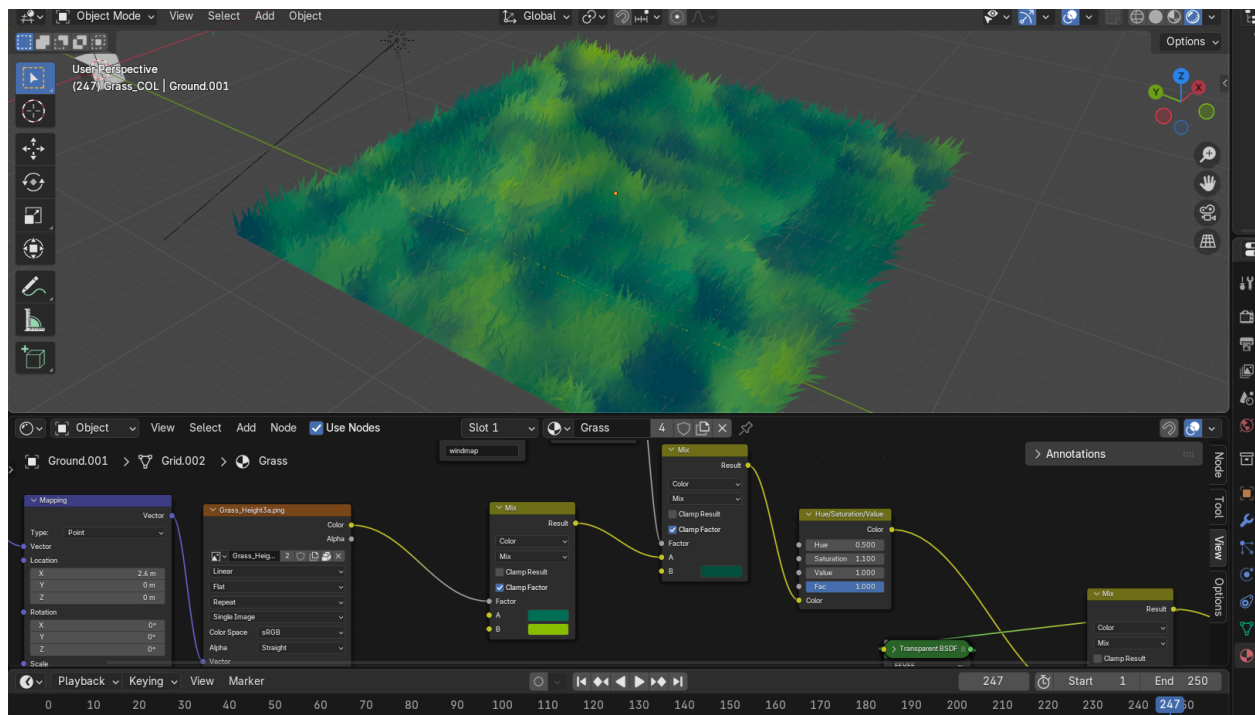


Figure 27. Julian Carbonell. *Blender 3D experimentation documentation*, 2025, screenshot image, Auckland

At first, I drew key frames that served as a bullet point for parts of a story, then I just animate in between the frames to bring them together. Eventually, I found that making it this way with no coherent narrative made the initial animatics disjointed and confusing to watch. Instead, I then decided to create a graphic novel that helps frame my narrative into a linear story line. This addition to the project serves multiple strategic purposes beyond practical production needs. First, the graphic novel represents the comics/manga dimension of contemporary media for cultural revitalisation—demonstrating that Philippine mythology can be effectively presented through sequential visual storytelling alongside animation. The graphic novel format allows for story expansion beyond animation's time constraints, enabling deeper exploration of character backstories, world-building details, and mythological nuances that strengthen the overall narrative. Second, the panels serve as detailed storyboards for animation, creating visual continuity between the two media forms. Third, the graphic novel connects to the strong tradition of Filipino komiks that historically preserved folkloric narratives, positioning this work within that cultural lineage while employing contemporary manga-influenced visual aesthetics familiar to younger Filipino audiences. This dual-medium approach demonstrates that Philippine mythology possesses the richness to support both sequential art and animated storytelling, the

same multimedia approach that has proven successful for Japanese and Western mythological content.

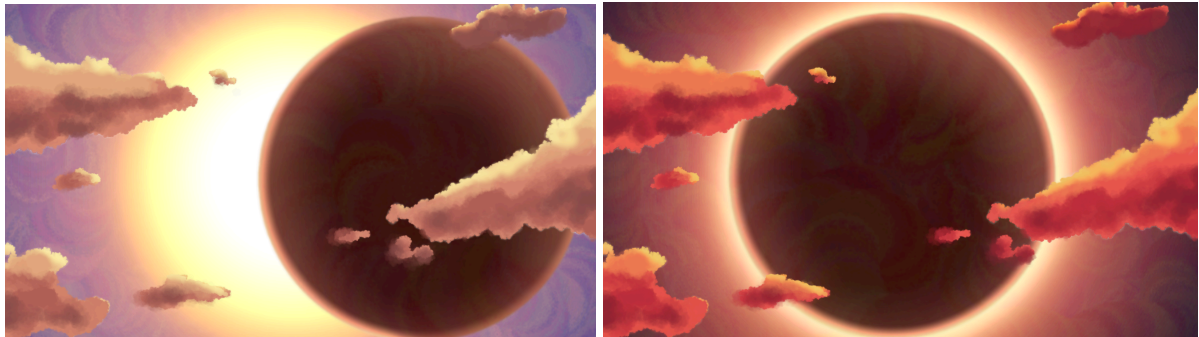


Figure 28-29. Julian Carbonell. *Keyframes-Eclipse*, 2025, exported images, Auckland

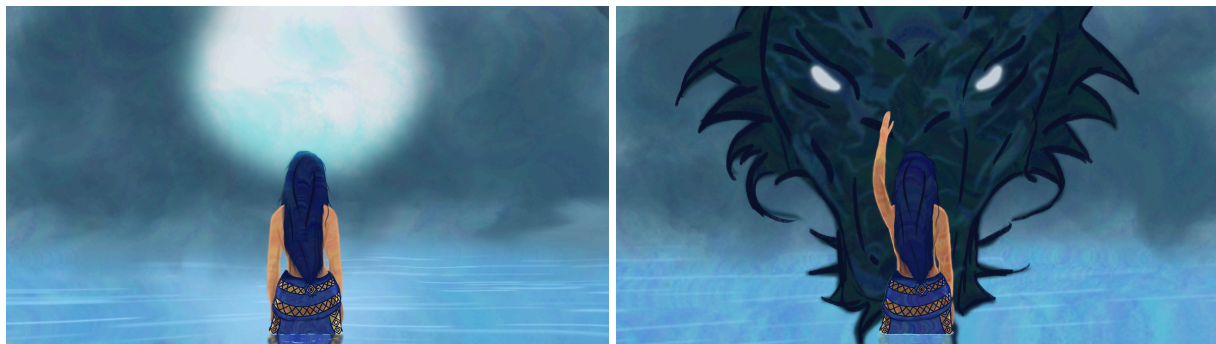


Figure 30-31. Julian Carbonell. *Keyframes-Pact*, 2025, exported images, Auckland

Ultimately, I turned to combining the two mediums. Instead of having two outcomes, I would instead be creating a *Cinematic Motion Manga*. This way, the workload will be lighter, and there is a compromise between creating a full-fledged animation and a graphic novel.

The decision to produce a cinematic motion manga was shaped by both practical and cultural considerations, with the latter ultimately proving the more significant. The project had moved through several formal iterations—from an ambition to produce a pilot episode for a potential series, to a short animated trailer accompanying a printed graphic novel—before arriving at this form. While time and scope constraints made the earlier iterations unachievable within the remaining production window, the cinematic motion manga represented more than a pragmatic compromise. Encountered through examples on YouTube and Instagram during this period of recalibration, the format resonated immediately as the most culturally coherent expression of the project's intent. When presented to supervisors, it was endorsed as a workable approach that preserved the project's visual and narrative ambitions.

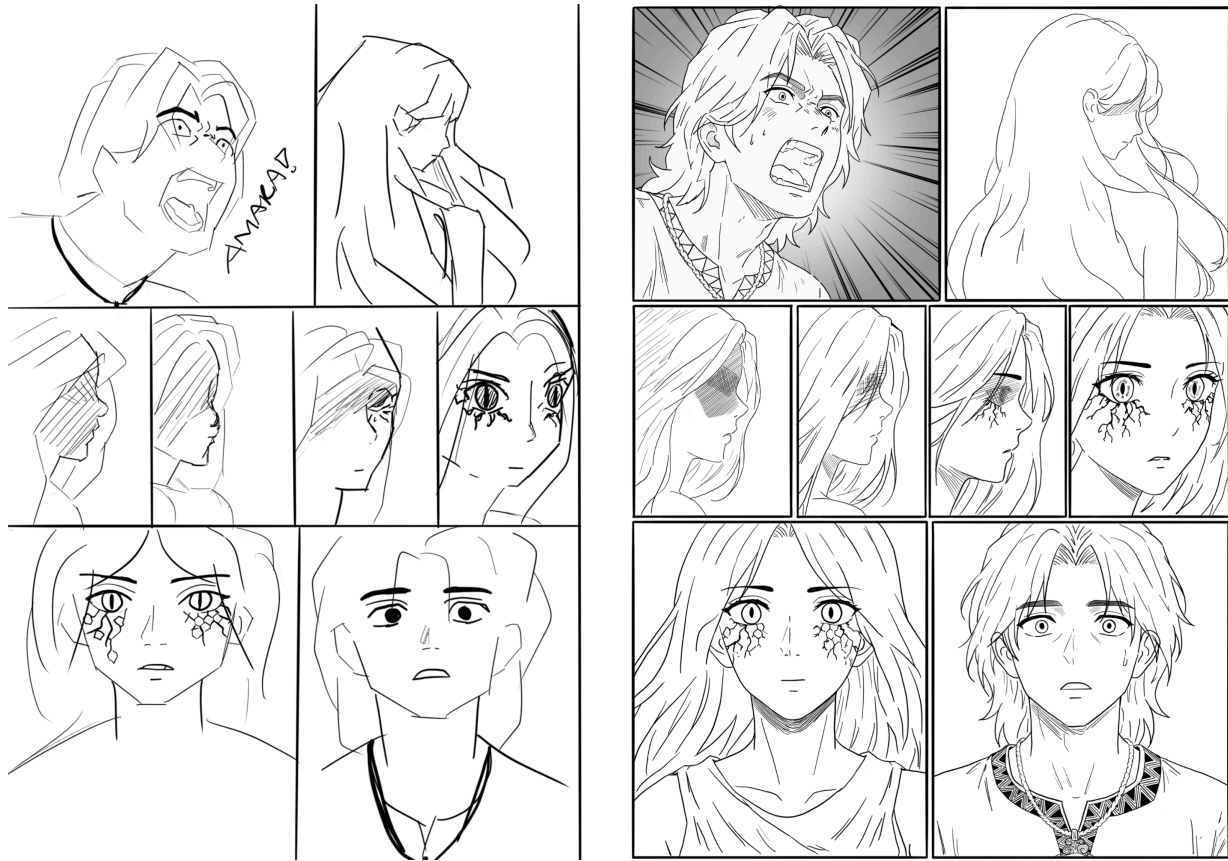


Figure 32-33. Julian Carbonell. *Storyboard* (left) and *Polished Page* (right), 2026, exported images, Auckland

The cultural resonance of this decision deserves fuller articulation. Manga as a visual storytelling form has been deeply integrated into Filipino popular culture for decades—as documented by Canave Bravo (2012) and Fondevilla (2007)—not as passive consumption but as active participation. Filipino readers and creators have engaged with manga's visual grammar, its panel logic, its use of silence and interval, and its integration of text as a visual element, reinterpreting and extending these conventions through distinctly Filipino sensibilities. I grew up within that cultural context, encountering manga alongside Filipino komiks as part of the same visual literacy. The decision to produce a cinematic motion manga is therefore not an adoption of a foreign form but a continuation of the participatory relationship Filipino audiences and creators have long maintained with this medium—what Ito (2012) describes as the active, creative engagement of audiences who do not merely receive media but extend and remake it through cultural translation.

In this sense, the cinematic motion manga form is itself an enactment of the project's central argument. Just as the project uses anime aesthetics—a visual language the Filipino people have adopted and made their own—to tell a Filipino story, the motion manga format embodies that same logic of strategic remediation: taking a form introduced through Japanese cultural influence and making it distinctly Filipino through the stories told within it. The form and the content argue the same thing. For me this is participation, rather than imitation, and by extension, an act of cultural agency consistent with the decolonial commitments articulated throughout this research.



Figure 34-35. Julian Carbonell. *Animation snippets*, 2026, exported images, Auckland

This formal decision also aligns with Thomas Lamarre's theoretical account of limited animation as a philosophically distinct mode rather than a production compromise. Lamarre's argument that selective movement, held frames, and expressive stillness constitute a different relationship between viewer and image, one that invites contemplative engagement rather than passive reception, finds direct application in the cinematic motion manga form, where panels breathe and hold rather than continuously animate. The format extended the panel transition logic already developed through McCloud's framework: aspect-to-aspect transitions that slow time and invite dwelling became the dominant grammar of the final output, consistent with both manga's

contemplative pacing and pre-colonial Filipino storytelling values that prioritise balance and reflection.

The visual treatment was similarly shaped by constraints transformed into deliberate aesthetic decisions. The choice to maintain greyscale rendering throughout was initially determined by time limitations; however, the selective introduction of colour in the characters' eyes, reflecting the inner nature and emotional state of each character, became a meaningful expressive strategy. The eyes function as the primary site of colour in the animation, grounding emotional legibility in the one feature most central to character interiority.

The dialogue and haiku sequences—two of the final output's most distinctive textual elements—emerged late in production. The dialogue was written in real time during the animation process, with each line developed in direct response to the visual context of the panel being animated rather than scripted in advance. The haiku sequences were conceived and added during the final week of making. Both decisions reflect a responsive mode of creative practice consistent with Schön's (1983) reflective practitioner model: meaning emerged through making, and the written elements were shaped by the visual rather than preceding it. The influence of extensive engagement with manga and Filipino komiks throughout the project, their narrative compression, their use of silence and interval, their integration of text as visual element, is visible in how these textual additions function within the panels: neither explaining the image nor duplicating it, but adding a layer of resonance that only words can provide.

McCloud's (1993) taxonomy of panel transitions provided a working vocabulary for structuring the graphic novel's sequence logic. His six transition types—moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect, and non-sequitur—describe not only how comics move through time but how they construct emotional and narrative meaning through the gaps between panels, what McCloud calls the “gutter” (McCloud, 1993, pp. 70–80). Rather than defaulting to action-to-action transitions, which drive narrative forward efficiently but at the cost of atmospheric depth, the graphic novel sequences prioritise aspect-to-aspect and scene-to-scene transitions. A panel of Amara watching the water. A panel of the night sky. A panel of her face, not moving, simply present. McCloud's framework validated this as a deliberate structural choice rather than a pacing problem: aspect-to-aspect transitions are

the grammar of contemplation, of worlds felt rather than merely described. This directly informed how the animatic was then storyboarded from the graphic novel, carrying the same transition logic into the animated sequences, moments of stillness in the animation tracing back to panels held open in the graphic novel, both media working in concert to create a sustained emotional register rather than competing for narrative primacy.

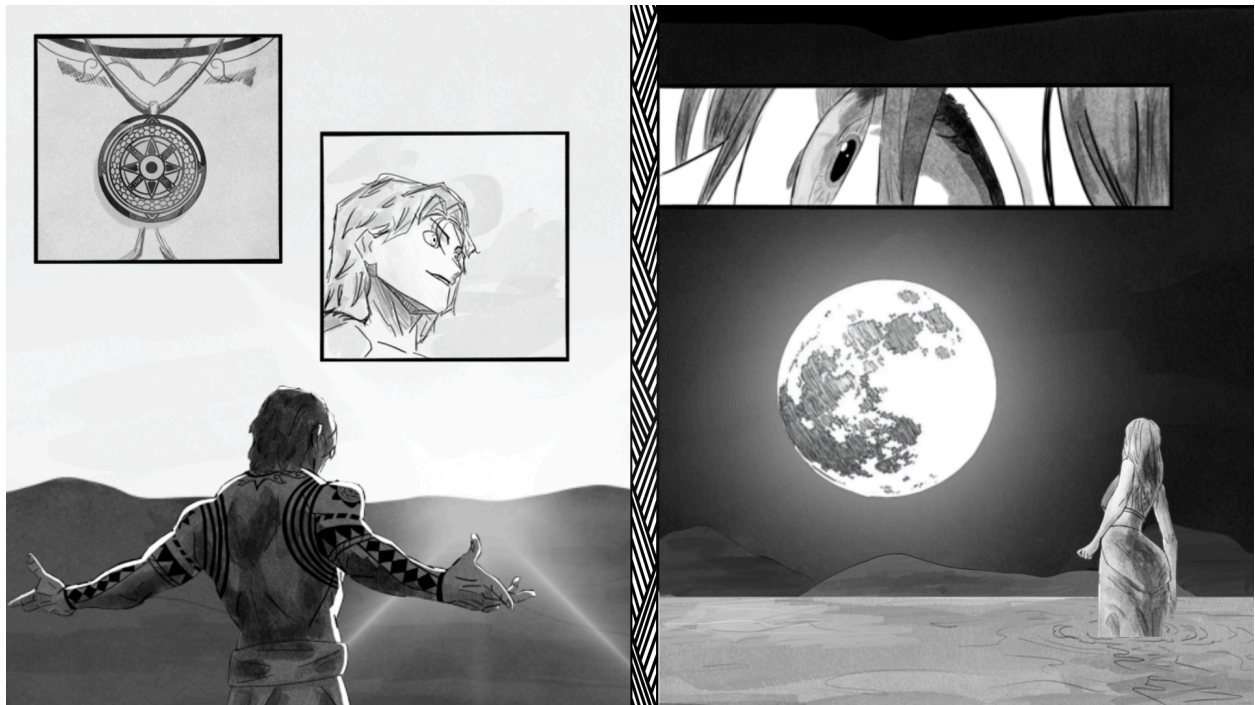


Figure 36. Julian Carbonell. *Style frame*, 2026, exported images, Auckland

The influence of McGuire's *Here* (2014) is also visible in specific compositional decisions within the graphic novel sequences. McGuire's use of inset panels, smaller frames placed within larger ones, showing a different time or perspective without interrupting the primary scene, informed the approach to scenes where mythological history surfaces within present-tense narrative moments. A panel showing Amara in the present can carry, within its frame, a smaller window showing a previous avatar's fate: not as flashback, not as digression, but as the weight of history made simultaneously present. This is the formal grammar of a world built on mythology; the past is not behind the present but inside it.

4.5 Narrative Adaptation and Integration

The narrative adaptation challenge extended beyond translating single myths from oral to visual form to encompass weaving multiple mythological sources into coherent storytelling. This

required developing narrative logic explaining how different myths connect—how the Apolaki-Mayari establishment of cosmic order relates to Bakunawa's ongoing threat, how creatures from lower mythology fit within the cosmological framework.

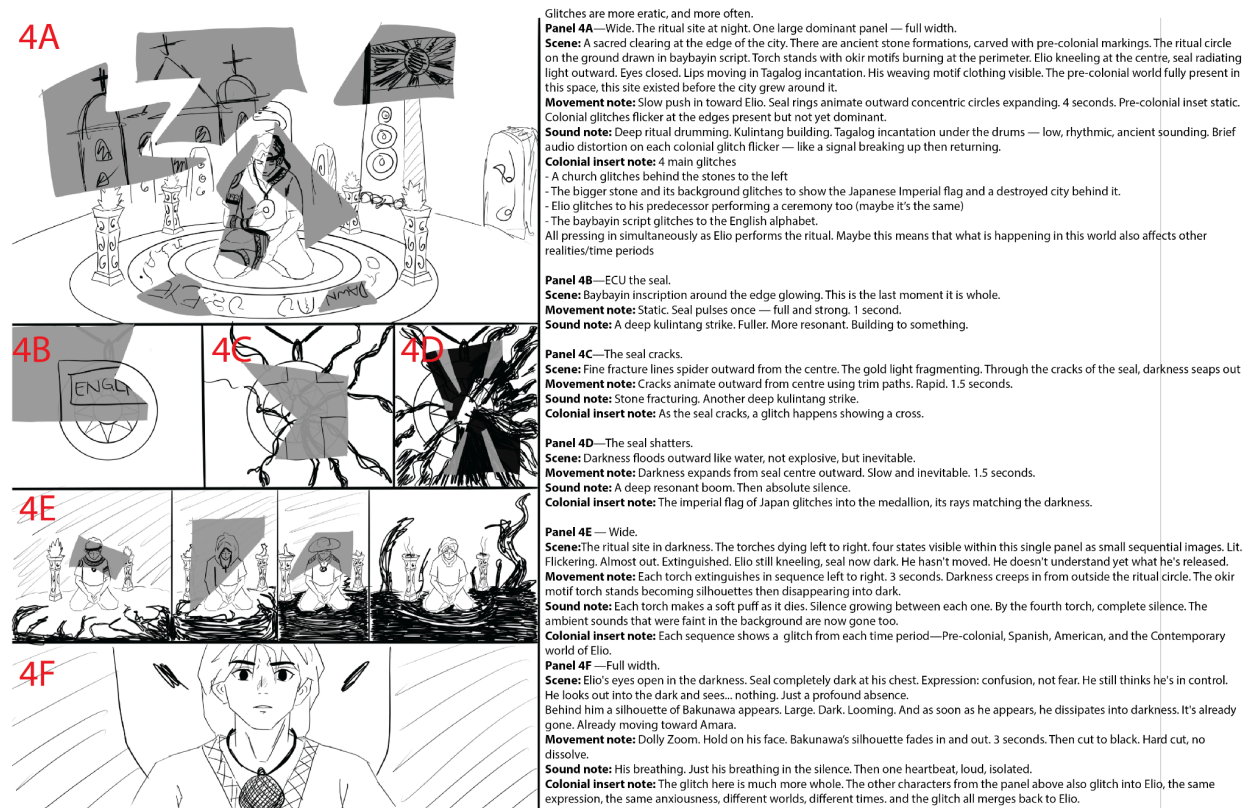


Figure 37. Julian Carbonell. *Storyboard snippet*, 2025, exported images, Auckland

The solution drew on *The Witcher's* narrative strategy of creating coherent world history where different mythological elements occur at different points in time or function at different scales simultaneously. The narrative establishes a world that has been drastically changed with the arrival of the divine into the mortal world. Hundreds of years would have passed between the point of the gods' arrival and the time of the narrative's start. Multiple avatars of Mayari have died in the past hence why Amara is her 6th avatar due to Bakunawa's attacks on them. These attacks represent recurring threats continuing into the narrative present; lower mythological creatures exist as natural world inhabitants affected by cosmic balance; and other ordinary beings live in the present moment shaped by ancient mythological events while facing current manifestations of cosmic forces. Arnavas and Bellini's (2023) analysis of *kishōtenketsu* narrative structure in Miyazaki's works provides a useful framework for understanding how this approach

differs from Western conflict-resolution patterns, the narrative emphasizes balance and cyclical harmony rather than linear progression toward climactic confrontation.

The original character storylines needed to honor mythological source material while creating narratives with their own integrity. Elio's arc, from revered warrior to tragic hero, and Amara's arc, from a pillar of order and stability to a suffering and desperate protector, parallels Apolaki and Mayari's journeys while exploring themes through human-scale challenges and expanding upon their story from the original myths.

4.6 Iterative Cycles & Key Insights

The research process's most significant pivot involved moving from conceiving myths as separate adaptations to recognizing their potential as integrated world-building elements, and creating a second medium to aid in further expanding the story. This shift, inspired by studying *The Witcher's* methodology, represented a fundamental reconceptualization of the project's approach to cultural revitalisation through animation.

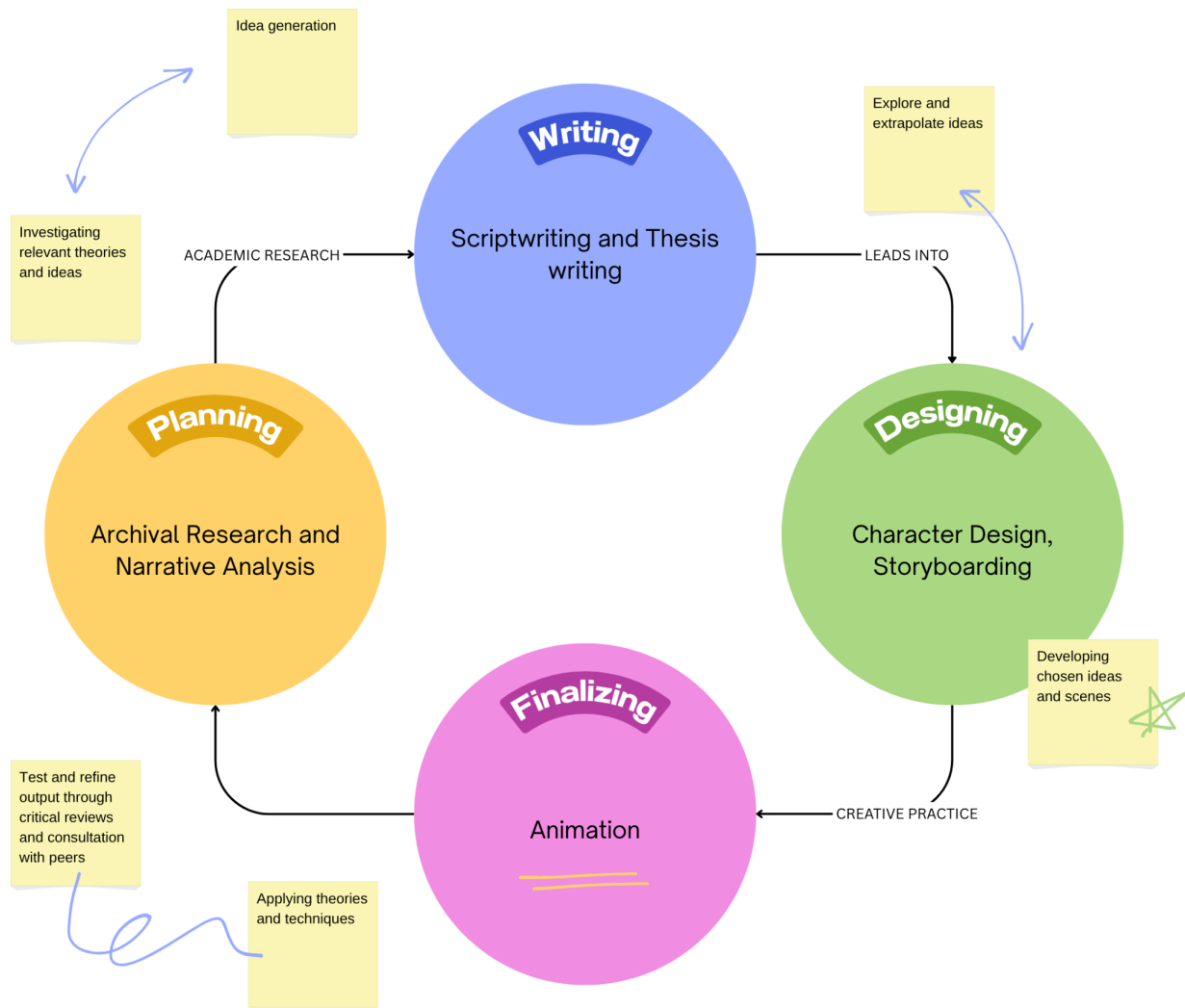


Figure 38. Julian Carbonell. *Iterative Cycle derived from Smith & Dean's model*, 2025, exported images, Auckland

Initial development conceived separate episodes adapting different myths. In addition to the time constraint, this approach, while potentially creating comprehensive coverage, lacked narrative cohesion and failed to demonstrate mythology's capacity for sustaining complex world-building. The breakthrough came from analysing *The Witcher*'s success in positioning Slavic mythology as the foundation for commercially viable fantasy. The key insight: mythologies function more powerfully as world-building foundations than as isolated narratives.

This pivot required extensive rework but ultimately strengthened both creative outcomes and cultural revitalisation goals. The integrated approach demonstrates Philippine mythology's depth and complexity more effectively than separate adaptations would have, positioning Filipino

culture as capable of supporting fantasy world-building comparable to European or Japanese traditions.

A second major iteration involved negotiating the balance between original creative work and faithfulness to mythological sources. Initial anxiety about creating original characters stemmed from concerns about authenticity. Research into successful mythological fantasy franchises revealed this anxiety was misplaced. The Witcher's success came from creating new stories that honored mythological traditions while addressing contemporary themes.

The breakthrough understanding: cultural revitalisation requires demonstrating mythology's living creative potential, not preserving it in amber. Creating original characters and stories within mythologically-grounded worlds shows that Filipino mythology functions as a generative resource for endless new narratives, exactly the demonstration needed to position it as a vital cultural force rather than a historical artifact.

Key discoveries emerged through these iterative cycles. First, the recognition that cultural authenticity operates at multiple levels, not just content accuracy but aesthetic principles, movement vocabularies, and design philosophies derived from indigenous traditions. Second, the understanding that accessibility to contemporary audiences requires translation strategies that honor source material while employing contemporary media literacy. Hidayat and Hidayat's (2020) research on anime as intercultural communication informed this understanding, demonstrating how visual media can facilitate cultural exchange when approached with cultural sensitivity.

Third, the realisation that animation's capacity to visualise the fantastic and spiritual makes it particularly suited to mythological narratives, potentially more effective than live-action for representing indigenous cosmologies. Fourth, the recognition that creating original narratives within mythological frameworks serves cultural revitalisation more effectively than direct adaptation alone. Direct myth retellings risk positioning mythology as historical artifact; original narratives demonstrate mythology's continuing generative capacity.

Fifth, the understanding that The Witcher's success provides crucial precedent for Philippine mythological fantasy's commercial and cultural viability. For decades, fantasy franchises drew primarily on European or Japanese mythological traditions. The Witcher's success demonstrated

Slavic mythology could compete commercially and culturally, suggesting Philippine mythology possesses equivalent potential.



Figure 39-41. Julian Carbonell. Storyboard for unused Manga pages, 2026, exported image, Auckland

The relationship between practice and theory throughout this research demonstrates how creative work generates theoretical insights. Theoretical research into decolonial frameworks provided conceptual guidance, but the practical challenges of making design decisions, solving animation problems, and creating culturally authentic yet accessible work revealed complexities of how decoloniality operates in creative practice. When character design iterations revealed that cultural specificity required fundamental design principles rather than superficial decoration, decolonial theory provided frameworks for understanding why this mattered for cultural revitalisation.

The expanded scope taught crucial lessons about sustainable creative practice. The decision to create an interwoven mythological narrative created significantly more work than single-narrative adaptation would require, testing the limits of individual practice-led research capacity. However, the expanded scope also demonstrated that complex mythological world-building remains achievable with limited resources through strategic focus, concentrating resources on foundational elements while other elements receive sufficient development to establish coherence. This strategy creates a foundation for future expansion while completing a coherent work within current constraints, paralleling how The Witcher franchise began with short stories before expanding to novels, games, and television.



Figure 42. Julian Carbonell. *Initial Character design for Elio, 2025*, exported images, Auckland

A significant iterative cycle centred on character design and the challenge of achieving cultural specificity without defaulting to visual conventions that would render the characters generically Japanese rather than distinctively Filipino. Early character designs, when shown to peers and external reviewers, were consistently described as reading as "too Japanese" in their facial structures, proportions, and expressive conventions. This feedback initiated a sustained design research process focused on identifying visual principles rooted in Filipino material culture that could inform character representation at a structural level rather than as surface decoration.

Research into pre-colonial Filipino visual traditions initially pointed toward tattooing as a primary design resource, particularly the documentation of Kalinga tattooing in Salvador-Amores's (2002) work. However, deeper engagement with the cultural and regional specificity of these traditions revealed an important limitation: tattooing practices were not geographically uniform across the Philippine archipelago, and applying them broadly risked

misrepresenting or homogenising regional cultural diversity. Weaving patterns, by contrast, emerged through this research as a more geographically inclusive visual tradition, present across a wider range of Philippine regions and cultural contexts. The decision to centre weaving motifs, alongside wood-carving patterns and selected tattooing references, as the primary design vocabulary for character clothing and ornamentation reflected this research finding. These motifs were integrated not as decoration but as carriers of character information: the specific patterns applied to Elio and Amara's garments communicate their status, their cultural positioning, and their relationship to the mythological traditions they embody.

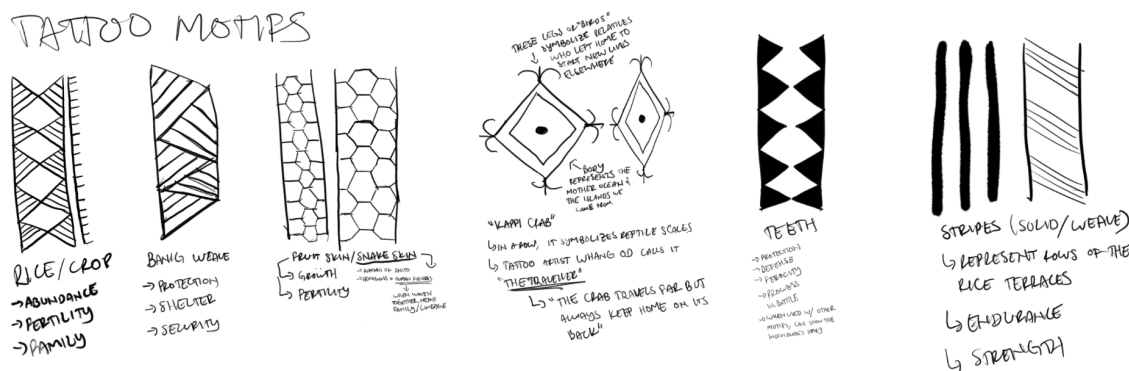


Figure 43. Julian Carbonell. Traditional Philippine Motif study, 2026, exported images, Auckland

This approach carried ethical dimensions that required careful navigation. Pre-colonial Filipino motifs hold significant cultural and spiritual meaning for the communities from which they originate, and their use in a contemporary creative work requires awareness of their significance beyond aesthetics. While direct consultation with indigenous communities was not achievable within the constraints of diaspora research, the decision to prioritise scholarly sources produced by Filipino researchers, and to use motifs as structurally meaningful elements rather than decorative exoticism, reflects a commitment to the ethical principles articulated in section 3.3.

A parallel iterative challenge involved developing the narrative itself: synthesising two mythologically distinct source materials—the Apolaki-Mayari conflict and the Bakunawa myth—into a coherent original story following Sapkowski's world-building framework. Both myths, as documented by Jocano (2018) and Eugenio (1985), are relatively short and structurally straightforward in their oral forms. Generating an original narrative with the complexity, moral weight, and world-building depth required by the Witcher framework demanded significant

creative development beyond what the source material explicitly provided. Jocano's (2018) comprehensive documentation of Philippine mythology and Jean Karl Gaverza's (2014) contemporary scholarship on Filipino mythological narratives served as primary guides for determining which narrative elements to preserve, which to synthesise across variants, and where original creative invention was both necessary and culturally defensible. The resulting story—in which Elio and Amara serve as mortal Aspects of divine forces, navigating a world perpetually threatened by Bakunawa's return—honours the cosmological logic of the source myths while generating new characters and narrative stakes that demonstrate the mythology's capacity for contemporary world-building.

Chapter 5: Critical Reflections & Conclusion

5.1 Addressing the Research Question

The central research question guiding this investigation asked: **How does transitioning oral stories to contemporary media and storytelling, including animation, comics, and manga, help revitalise cultural identity and heritage?** The creative work and process documented in this exegesis demonstrate that contemporary visual media—specifically animation and sequential art forms like comics and manga—serve cultural revitalisation through multiple interconnected mechanisms. First, these media make pre-colonial narratives accessible to contemporary audiences, particularly younger generations, by presenting them through forms these audiences already consume and value. The animated adaptation and accompanying graphic novel position Philippine mythology alongside other global mythological narratives—Greek myths in Disney films, Norse mythology in various anime and comics, Japanese folklore throughout Studio Ghibli's work and manga series—asserting that Philippine narratives deserve similar treatment and cultural visibility.

Second, the process of creating both animation and comics requires deep engagement with source material, generating knowledge about cultural content. The necessity of making concrete design decisions—how deities appear, how they move (in animation) or are framed in panels (in comics), what the pre-colonial cosmos looks like—forces rigorous research into cultural sources. This research process itself constitutes cultural revitalisation work, recovering and synthesising knowledge that colonial processes fragmented. Both the animated work and graphic novel then

Third, both animation and comics/manga offer unique affordances for visualising the supernatural and fantastic, making them particularly effective for representing mythological cosmologies. Animation provides movement, sound, and temporal flow; comics/manga offer reader-controlled pacing, detailed paneling for simultaneous narrative threads, and intimate reader engagement with sequential images. Oral and written narratives describing celestial deities and cosmic battles require imaginative visualisation; these visual media provide that visualisation, making abstract cosmological concepts tangible. This demonstrates that indigenous Filipino spiritual systems possessed sophistication comparable to any global mythological tradition, countering colonial narratives positioning pre-colonial Filipino culture as primitive.



Figure 44. Julian Carbonell.Storyboarding Process, 2026, exported image, Auckland

Evidence from the creative process demonstrates how animation serves these revitalisation functions. The iterative design development for Bathala, Apolaki, and Mayari required synthesising textual descriptions with visual research into pre-colonial Filipino material culture, resulting in character designs that honour source material while creating visually compelling contemporary representations. The incorporation of indigenous design principles, like geometric patterns from tattooing and textiles, and colour relationships from traditional arts, demonstrates how animation can encode cultural specificity at multiple design levels.

The accessibility dimension proves particularly crucial for cultural revitalisation among younger generations. Contemporary Filipino youth often possess greater familiarity with Greek, Norse, or Japanese mythology encountered through Western and anime media than with their own cultural heritage. By presenting Philippine mythology through anime-influenced animation—a visual language this demographic already understands and appreciates—the work creates entry points for cultural engagement. The animated narrative's dramatic storytelling and visual spectacle compete for attention in contemporary media environments dominated by foreign content, potentially sparking interest in deeper exploration of Philippine cultural heritage. Several test viewers reported seeking additional information about Philippine mythology after viewing the animation, demonstrating its capacity to catalyse cultural curiosity and learning.

5.2 Critical Reflection on Outcomes

The research achieved several significant successes in demonstrating animation's capacity for cultural revitalisation. The character designs successfully balanced cultural authenticity with contemporary visual appeal, creating representations that Filipino viewers recognised as culturally specific while remaining accessible to audiences unfamiliar with Philippine cultural contexts. The narrative adaptation maintained the mythological content's spiritual significance and cultural values while creating emotionally engaging storytelling that held viewer attention. The integration of anime aesthetics with Filipino cultural content demonstrated that these need not be contradictory but can work synergistically when approached thoughtfully, with anime's visual language providing accessible entry points to Filipino cultural content.

The decolonial methodology proved effective in several respects. Centring indigenous knowledge systems throughout the research process—privileging Filipino scholarly sources, consulting Filipino cultural practitioners, allowing pre-colonial cosmological frameworks to

shape creative decisions—ensured the work served cultural revitalisation goals rather than merely extracting Filipino content for academic credentials. The conscious challenging of colonial narratives through design decisions that honoured pre-colonial Filipino aesthetics and values created work that actively resists colonial cultural erasure. The commitment to making the work accessible beyond academic contexts, through online platforms and potential educational applications, demonstrates research outcomes serving community cultural needs.

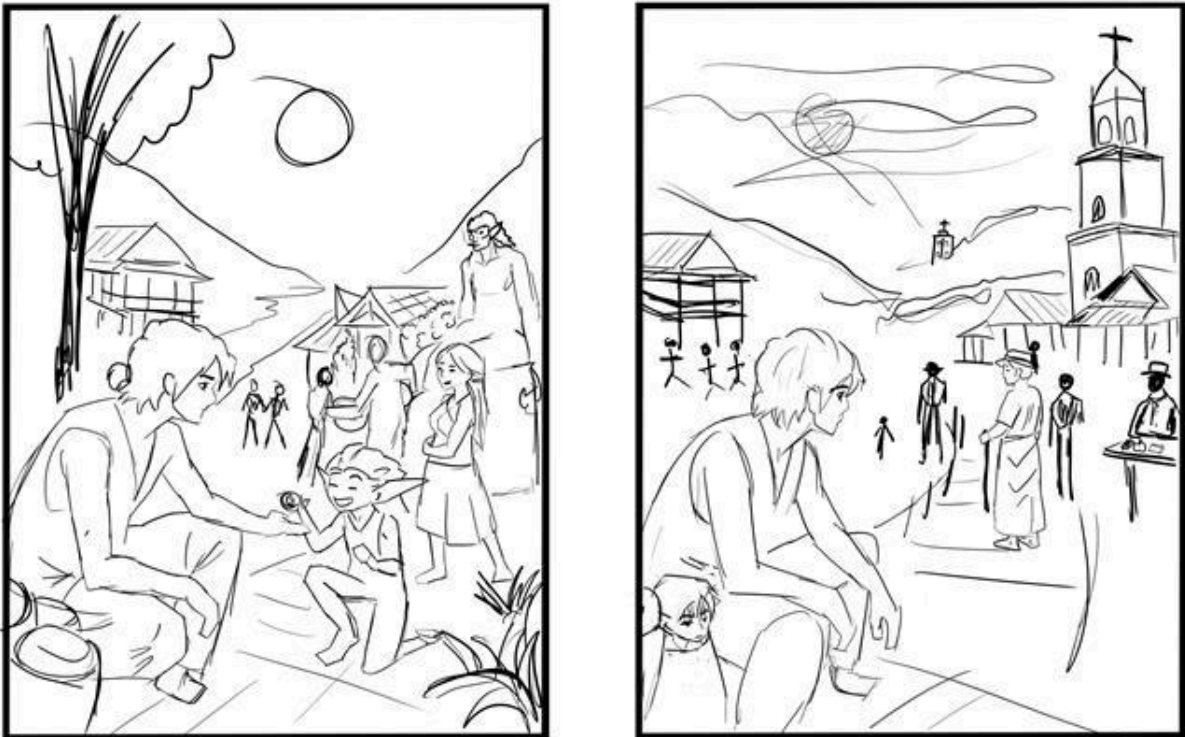


Figure 45. Julian Carbonell. Concept Art, 2026, exported image, Auckland

However, significant limitations and challenges must be acknowledged. The diaspora positionality that shaped this research, both enabling certain critical perspectives and limiting direct community engagement, meant some cultural consultation occurred through published sources and digital platforms rather than face-to-face interaction with Filipino cultural practitioners and communities. While this reflected practical constraints of diaspora existence and academic research timelines, more extensive community consultation would strengthen cultural authenticity and ensure the work better serves Filipino community interests. Future iterations should incorporate more direct collaboration with Filipino cultural experts, particularly practitioners maintaining traditional oral narrative traditions.

Technical and production limitations affected the creative outcomes. Time and resource constraints necessitated scope reductions that, while resulting in a more focused narrative, meant some cultural content and visual development received less attention than ideal. The hand-drawn animation approach, while carrying cultural and ideological benefits discussed in Chapter 3, limited the animation's length and visual complexity compared to what might be achieved with larger production teams or different technical approaches. These limitations suggest that while individual practice-led research can demonstrate cultural revitalisation concepts and methodologies, larger-scale cultural impact requires expanded resources and collaborative production structures.

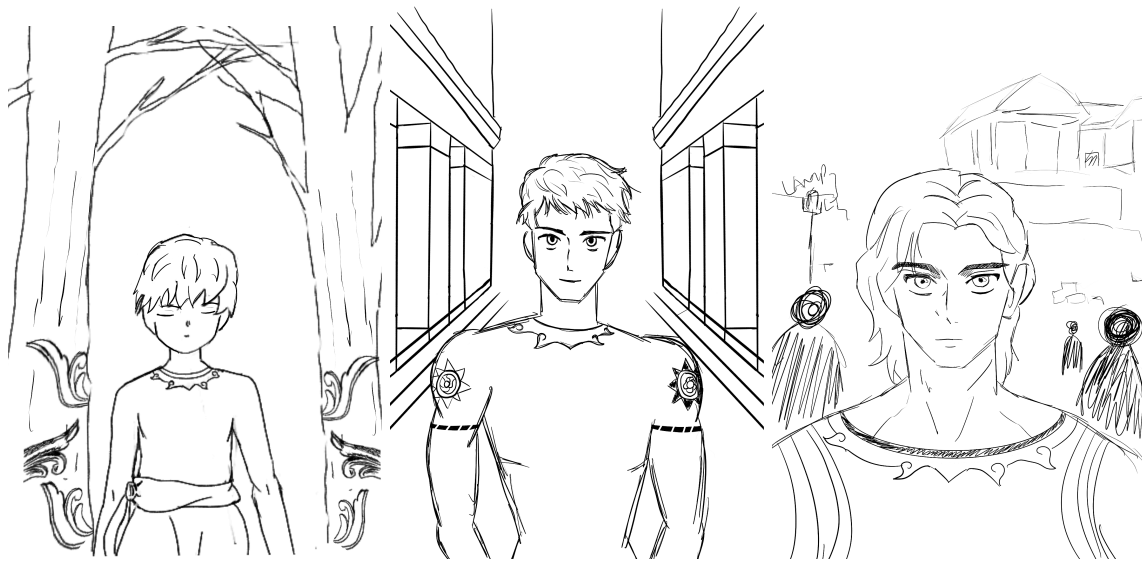


Figure 46-48. Julian Carbonell. Storyboard for unused time progression sequence, 2026, exported image, Auckland

The effectiveness of anime aesthetics for Filipino cultural content, while generally successful, revealed some tensions requiring ongoing negotiation. The risk of audiences perceiving the work as Japanese animation with Filipino content superficially applied rather than genuinely Filipino creative work requires careful attention to how anime influences are adapted rather than merely adopted. Future work might explore how to further develop distinctively Filipino animation aesthetics that learn from anime but create visual languages more uniquely rooted in Filipino visual traditions. The work documented here represents an important step in this direction but not a final resolution of these aesthetic questions.

Smith and Dean's (2009) Iterative Cyclic Web Model proved highly valuable for understanding and conducting this research. The model's articulation of reciprocal relationships between

practice and theory accurately described how the research actually unfolded, with creative challenges prompting theoretical investigation and theoretical insights generating creative approaches. The model's emphasis on iteration and reflection encouraged productive revision cycles that strengthened both creative outcomes and theoretical understanding. The framework validated practice as legitimate research methodology, providing structure for documenting and analysing the knowledge generated through creative work.

5.3 The Role of Community and Consultation in Shaping Practice

A dimension of this research that is not fully captured in the methodological framework but proved decisive in its development was the role of informal consultation with Filipino creative practitioners and industry figures. Linda Smith's (1999) decolonising methodologies emphasise that research involving indigenous and marginalised cultures must be conducted in relationship with those communities, and while the constraints of diaspora research meant that formal community consultation was not always achievable, conversations with Filipino artists working at the intersection of animation, mythology, and cultural identity provided guidance that shaped the project's direction in ways comparable to formal academic mentorship.

Two consultations proved particularly significant. Ian Santa Maria, a Filipino artist whose practice engages with Filipino cultural identity and visual storytelling, offered perspective at a moment when the project was navigating significant institutional pressure to reframe its approach. His encouragement to trust creative instincts and resist the impulse to translate Filipino stories through frameworks designed for other cultural contexts reinforced the decolonial commitment articulated in the exegesis: that Philippine mythology told on its own terms, for Filipino audiences, in a visual language Filipinos already inhabit, is itself a legitimate and sufficient research position. This affirmation arrived at a critical juncture and enabled the project to proceed with greater clarity about its cultural purpose.

Daniel Enriquez, a member of the Animation Council of the Philippines (ACPI), contributed a different but complementary form of guidance: historical and industry context for Filipino animation practice. His account of Philippine animation history—the long tradition of Filipino animators working in service of foreign productions rather than developing indigenous creative output, and the emerging movement of practitioners reclaiming animation as a vehicle for

Filipino cultural expression—grounded the project within a living professional discourse rather than positioning it as an isolated academic exercise. Like Santa Maria, Enriquez affirmed the value of trusting the creative and cultural knowledge the researcher brings as a Filipino practitioner, rather than seeking external validation for choices that are internally coherent within Filipino cultural logic.

These conversations illuminate a dimension of decolonial practice that formal research frameworks do not always accommodate: the knowledge that circulates through communities of practice, between Filipino artists, animators, and cultural practitioners, constitutes a form of expertise that is not always documented in academic literature but is no less valid as a research resource. Bender's (2021) concept of uncolonial ontologies, ways of knowing that resist colonial categorisation, extends naturally to these modes of informal cultural transmission. The insights gathered through these consultations were not incidental to the research but were, in some respects, among its most formative methodological inputs—shaping not only specific creative decisions but the researcher's fundamental orientation toward the work and its purpose.

This reflection also acknowledges a limitation: these conversations and their influence on the creative work were not adequately documented in the written exegesis as submitted, because many of the most significant exchanges occurred in the final phase of production, after the written component had been finalised. The amendments to sections 4.4 and 4.6 of this document represent a partial correction of that gap, bringing the written record into closer alignment with the actual creative process. Future practice-led research within similar cultural revitalisation frameworks would benefit from building structured consultation documentation into the methodology from the outset, ensuring that community-based knowledge inputs receive the same scholarly treatment as formal literature sources.

5.4 Contribution to Knowledge

This research contributes to multiple fields and discourse communities. For Filipino cultural preservation efforts, it demonstrates how contemporary media production can serve cultural revitalisation goals, providing a model for other practitioners seeking to engage with indigenous heritage through creative practice. The methodological framework combining decolonial theory with practice-led research offers scaffolding for similar projects addressing other pre-colonial

narratives or cultural traditions. The specific creative outcomes—character designs, narrative adaptation strategies, visual development processes—provide concrete examples of how to balance cultural authenticity with contemporary accessibility, addressing challenges that other Filipino creators undertaking similar work will encounter.

For animation studies and practice, this research expands understanding of how animation functions as a cultural medium beyond entertainment or commercial purposes. The work demonstrates animation's capacity to encode cultural knowledge through design decisions, movement vocabularies, and aesthetic choices, contributing to discourse on animation as cultural practice. The exploration of anime aesthetics applied to non-Japanese cultural content addresses questions of globalisation, cultural hybridity, and media literacy relevant to contemporary animation theory and practice. Hughes and Gregor's (2024) framework for understanding how animation bridges cultural values provides theoretical grounding for this contribution, demonstrating that animation's cross-cultural potential extends beyond commercial exchange to meaningful cultural dialogue. The documentation of hand-drawn animation processes in digital age contexts offers insights into sustainable independent animation production.

For decolonial theory and practice, this research provides a case study of how creative practice can enact decolonial commitments beyond theoretical articulation. The specific challenges of applying decolonial principles to design decisions, production processes, and distribution strategies generate insights into how decoloniality operates in creative contexts. The research demonstrates intersections between decolonial theory, indigenous knowledge systems, and contemporary media production, contributing to understanding of how cultural revitalisation functions in post-colonial contexts shaped by ongoing colonial epistemologies.

For design research methodologies, this work contributes to understanding of practice-led research processes. The detailed documentation of iterative cycles, the articulation of how creative challenges generate theoretical questions, and the reflection on successful and unsuccessful approaches provide insights valuable for other practice-led researchers. The integration of decolonial methodology with practice-led research demonstrates how creative research can address social justice and cultural equity concerns while maintaining rigorous research standards.

The intersection of traditional storytelling and contemporary media represents a particularly significant contribution. As globalisation and digital media reshape how cultural narratives circulate and how communities maintain cultural identity, understanding effective strategies for transitioning traditional narratives to contemporary media forms becomes increasingly crucial. Ng's (2002) documentation of anime's impact across Asia and Bravo's (2012) examination of Japanese cultural influence in the Philippines contextualise this research within broader patterns of media-driven cultural exchange, suggesting that strategic adaptation of popular media forms for indigenous content represents a viable path for cultural preservation in globalised contexts. Mabbayad's (2011) analysis of Filipino graphic novels engaging with myth and modernity demonstrates precedents for this approach within Filipino creative practice, while Gutierrez's (2014) examination of "glocal" Filipino comics shows how Filipino creators have developed sophisticated strategies for synthesizing global and local cultural elements. This research provides frameworks and examples applicable beyond Philippine contexts to other indigenous and marginalised communities seeking to revitalise cultural heritage through media production.

5.5 Future Directions & Applications

This research opens multiple pathways for continued investigation and expanded creative practice. The most immediate direction involves developing the single animated narrative into a series exploring additional pre-colonial Philippine mythologies. The Bathala-Apolaki-Mayari story represents one narrative among vast Philippine mythological traditions awaiting contemporary animated adaptation. Future work could explore creation myths from different regional traditions—Visayan, Bicolano, Ilocano, Mindanaoan—demonstrating the diversity of pre-colonial Filipino cultures while creating a comprehensive animated mythology series. This expanded scope would require collaborative production structures involving Filipino cultural practitioners, animators, and scholars from various regions.

Educational applications present particularly promising directions. The animated work could be developed with accompanying curriculum materials for Philippine schools, providing engaging resources for cultural education. Sugue and Reyes's (2022) research on rediscovering Philippine mythology's value for schools demonstrates the need for such resources. Animation's accessibility to younger students makes it effective for introducing cultural heritage in ways that textbooks alone cannot achieve. International Filipino diaspora communities could also utilise

such materials for heritage language and culture education, helping diaspora youth maintain connections to ancestral culture.

Cultural tourism applications suggest additional possibilities. The Philippines' tourism industry has increasingly recognised cultural heritage as an economic resource, with initiatives promoting indigenous traditions, historical sites, and cultural festivals. Animated adaptations of regional mythologies could support tourism development in areas rich in cultural heritage, creating visitor interest while generating pride in local traditions among community members. However, such applications require careful ethical consideration to ensure tourism development benefits local communities rather than merely commodifying culture for external consumption.

Research applications point toward potential PhD-level investigation. This master's research has raised questions requiring more extensive investigation: How do different regional Philippine mythologies translate to animated form? What are the most effective collaboration models between academic researchers, creative practitioners, and indigenous communities for cultural revitalisation projects? How do Filipino audiences of different ages and cultural backgrounds respond to animated Philippine mythology, and what factors influence cultural engagement? Comparative research examining how other Southeast Asian cultures have approached mythological animation could provide valuable insights. These questions suggest rich possibilities for expanded research contributing to both academic knowledge and practical cultural preservation work.

The impact on my personal design practice moving forward will be significant. This research has fundamentally shaped understanding of design as cultural practice with ethical and political dimensions beyond aesthetics or commercial considerations. The skills developed through this project—cultural research methodologies, iterative design processes, animation production techniques—will inform all future creative work. The commitment to decolonial practice and cultural revitalisation will guide project selection and execution, ensuring creative work serves social and cultural purposes rather than merely personal expression or commercial success.

More broadly, this research reinforces understanding of creative practitioners' responsibilities regarding cultural representation. In globalised media environments where cultural narratives circulate rapidly and widely, creators possess significant power to shape how cultures are understood and valued. Filipino creative practitioners particularly carry responsibility for

ensuring Filipino culture receives respectful, authentic, sophisticated representation in media spaces. This research demonstrates that such representation is possible when practitioners engage seriously with cultural heritage, consult appropriate sources and communities, and apply rigorous creative methodologies. The hope is that this work inspires and enables other Filipino creators to undertake similar cultural revitalisation projects, contributing to broader movements for Filipino cultural sovereignty and indigenous knowledge recovery.

The ultimate measure of this research's success will be its contribution to keeping pre-colonial Philippine narratives alive and relevant for contemporary and future Filipino generations. If the animated work helps even a small number of viewers discover interest in Philippine mythology, if the methodological frameworks assist other cultural practitioners in their revitalisation work, if the research demonstrates that Filipino stories deserve and can achieve the same cultural visibility as any global mythology, then the project will have achieved its decolonial cultural revitalisation goals. Animation is not merely entertainment or technical craft but a powerful medium for cultural communication and preservation. This research has demonstrated that potential; future work must expand and deepen these contributions.

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Appendices



Figure 46-47. Julian Carbonell. Character Designs for Amara (left) and Elio (right), 2026, exported image, Auckland

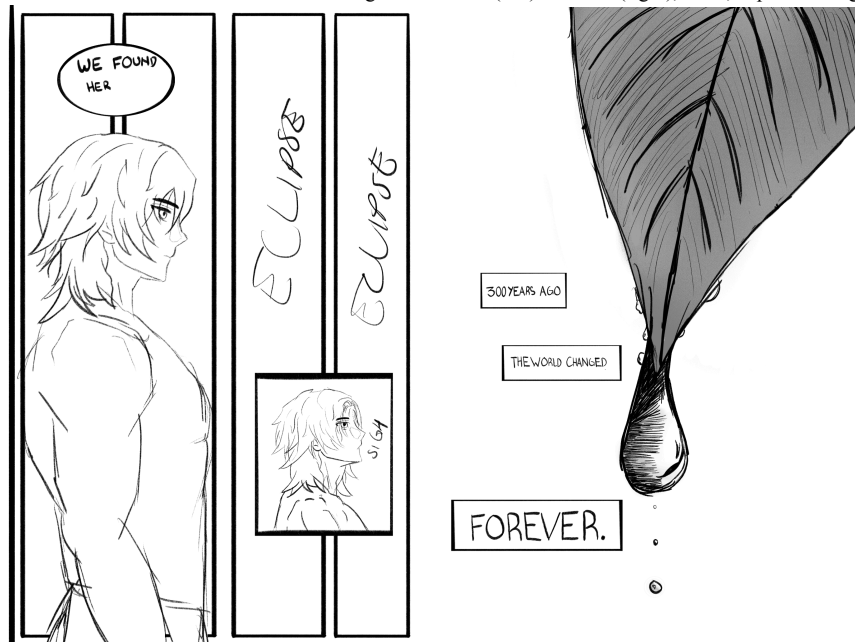


Figure 48-49. Julian Carbonell. Initial Graphic Novel pages, 2026, exported image, Auckland



Figure 50: Julian Carbonell. Concept Art to incorporate colonial insertions, 2026, exported image, Auckland





Figure 57-59. Paul Chapman. Exhibition Day, 2026, photograph, Auckland



Figure 60-62. Paul Chapman. Exhibition Day, 2026, photograph, Auckland



Figure 63-65. Paul Chapman. Exhibition Day, 2026, photograph, Auckland