Understanding Visual Novel as Artwork of Visual Communication Design

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Visual Novel adalah sejenis permainan audiovisual yang menawarkan kekuatan visual melalui narasi dan karakter visual. Data dari komunitas pengembang Visual Novel (VN) Project Indonesia menunjukkan masih terbatasnya pengembang game lokal yang memproduksi Visual Novel Indonesia. Selain itu, produksi Visual Novel Indonesia juga lebih banyak dipengaruhi oleh gaya anime dan manga dari Jepang. Padahal Visual Novel adalah bagian dari produk industri kreatif yang potensial. Studi ini merumuskan masalah, bagaimana memahami Visual Novel sebagai karya seni desain komunikasi visual, khususnya di kalangan mahasiswa? Penelitian ini merupakan studi kasus yang dilakukan terhadap mahasiswa desain komunikasi visual di lingkungan Universitas Indraprasta PGRI Jakarta. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan masih rendahnya tingkat pengetahuan, pemahaman, dan pengalaman terhadap permainan Visual Novel, yaitu di bawah 50%. Metode kombinasi kualitatif dan kuantitatif dengan pendekatan semiotika struktural digunakan untuk menjabarkan elemen desain dan susunan tanda yang terdapat pada Visual Novel. Penelitian ini dapat menjadi referensi ilmiah untuk lebih mengenalkan dan mendorong pemahaman tentang Visual Novel sebagai karya seni Desain Komunikasi Visual. Selain itu, hasil penelitian dapat menambah pengetahuan masyarakat, dan mendorong pengembangan karya seni Visual Novel yang mencerminkan budaya Indonesia.

Kata kunci: Visual novel, karya seni, desain komunikasi visual

Visual Novel is a kind of *audio*visual *game* that offers visual strength through the narrative and visual characters. The developer community of Visual Novel (VN) Project Indonesia indicated a limited local *game* developer that produces Visual Novel of Indonesia. In addition, Indonesian Visual Novel production was also more influenced by the style of *anime* or *manga* from Japan. Actually, Visual Novel is part of the potential of creative industries products. The study is to formulate the problem, how to understand Visual Novel as artwork of visual communication design, especially among students? This research is a case study conducted on visual communication design student at the University Indraprasta PGRI Jakarta. The results showed low levels of knowledge, understanding, and experience of the Visual Novel *game*, which is below 50%. Qualitative and quantitative methods combined with structural semiotic approach is used to describe the elements of the design and the signs structure at the Visual Novel. This research can be a scientific reference for further introduce and encourage an understanding of Visual Novel as artwork of Visual Communication Design. In addition, the results may add to the knowledge of society, and encourage the development of Visual Novel artwork that reflect the culture of Indonesia.

Keywords: Visual novel, artwork, visual communication design

Visual Novel or occasionally called as Sound Novel is a type of visual communication design work that combines elements of *game* with a framed story, which presents narration with many story lines and various visual characters. In Indonesia, the presence of Visual Novels is still considered as a new visual *game* form. But in Japan, Visual Novel has been growing since ten years ago. The *manga* style of the Japanese comics inspired not only animated films, but also gave birth to various interactive *game*s, such as Visual Novel. It is estimated that Japan is able to produce four creations of Visual Novel in one month (Kusnawi and Firmansyah, 2015: 5.7-5).

As a type of interactive *game*, Visual Novel is a design product that is applied through *audio* visual media. Visual Novels can be played on personal computers, Windows, Mac, Android, browsers, or other gaming devices that have console. Narrative backgrounds and visual characters are presented in graphical form, images, and text sequences in a box with voices to explain stories, scenes and dialogues, complemented with music.

As it's based on the *manga*, the Japanese *anime* style also dominates many Indonesian's Visual Novel production. The observations of Indonesian's Visual Novel that is Published through the VN Project Indonesia website (developers vessel and Visual Novel Indonesia players) generally feature visual characters that displayed Japanese *anime* visual style, especially from the depiction of *manga*-style visual characters through facial, body, and costume elements. The general narrative is also made in English language so it is able to reach the global market. Data from the VN Project Indonesia website also shows the limited number of *game* developers, whether individual, studio, or community that produce Visual Novel with Indonesian cultural background. Local *game* developers, whether indie developers, communities, or studio companies tend to produce *game*s with romance, comedy, or historical stories spiced up with action.

The limited production phenomenon of Indonesia Visual Novel becomes an interesting thing to be studied, because this *game* product is part of potential creative industry to be developed. The competitiveness of Indonesia Visual Novel to reach local and global markets must compete tightly with foreign Visual Novel products. This problem also builds the assumption that the limited production

of Visual Novel Indonesia can be caused of the production that generally takes months and even years. The low production of Indonesia Visual Novel can also be caused by the limited understanding of that interactive *game*s, especially among design students as creators.

This study is an urgency, because as James Newman (2004: 3) says, there are three things that determine the importance of doing the study of *game*s, the rapid growth of video *game* industries, the popularity of video *game*s in a society that continues to encourage creativity, and the interaction between humans and computers that continue to grow, especially in the era of information technology as it is today.

To analyze the problem above, this study formulates research question, namely: how to understand Visual Novel as an artwork of visual communication design? The purpose of this study is based on three interests, that the development of Indonesia Visual Novel products competitiveness still needs to be improved, afterwards as a solid evidence in adding insight and scientific reference in the field of Visual Communication Design, especially about the type of interactive *game*s among design students, along with increasing the knowledge of society and become a booster for the creators of Indonesia Visual Novel to be more productive and competitive by still putting forward the values of Indonesian culture.

The discussion of this study is using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods with structural semiotics approach. Quantitatively, rendition is the result of case studies obtained through the dissemination of questionnaires to 150 students of Visual Communication Design at the University of Indraprasta PGRI Jakarta. For quantitative data results, the Guttman Scale is used to look for decisive positive and negative answers, especially to obtain data on students' knowledge, understanding, and experiences about Visual Novels. While qualitatively, the description includes a discussion to understand the design elements and structure of the sign contained in Visual Novel.

VISUAL NOVEL AS ARTWORK OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN

Dani Cavallaro in his book titled "*Anime* and the Visual Novel" (2010) said that, the mid 1990s were moment of transition for *anime* designers to begin

creating *game* designs due to budget reduction for TV animation production. For decades, the *anime* style had inspired a lot of video *game* creation for kids, until at the end of 2005, a kind of computer *game* called Visual Novel appeared particularly for adults. Visual Novel then continues to be developed as a kind of animation *game* with narrative text display, and a series of dialogue of characters accompanied by musical accomp*anime*nt.

The term of Visual Novel, in *anime* culture and Japanese context is called *bijuaru noberu*. Visual novel is not a simulation, but an adventure *game*. This type of *game* is characterized by the interaction of various visual characters that present the mystery of the storyline. The delight in the Visual Novel *game* lies in the right and quick action to respond the dialogue and story line selection as the entrance to the next narrative and scene branch. The players can choose the time and with whom they want to interact, thus affecting the next response (Cavallaro, 2010: 9).

Visual Novels can be considered as visual communication design artworks because they integrate graphic design skills, visual characters design, visual narratives, as well as constructing an interactive communicative storyline through *audio* visual media. In Visual Novels, elements of art and design are intertwined thus creating *game*s that bring beauty to those who see them, such as line, shape, field, color, texture, texture, space, and motion. The unification of the whole element still has to follow the principles in art and design, such as harmony, balance, contrast arrangement and harmony as the necessary proportions, to the visual dominance that will be the point of attention.

In Visual Novels, the strength of the story is also the distinctive attraction, because it invites players like reading a story with various "endings" that is full of mystery, and sound effects and colorful images. The choices through the action response and dialogue of the visual characters provide a series of non linear adventures. In the Visual Novel story with historical background, the presentation of the story line is generally more factual and fictional. In fact, the names of figures and historical data are not changed, but the appearance of additional characters in the plot can be regarded as fiction.

From a number of Indonesia Visual Novel that has been Published, there is Indonesia Visual Novels

with historical background such as *"Tikta Kavya"* with *Majapahit* history setting, the work of *Mojiken* Community from Surabaya. The Visual Novel that has been produced since 2014 until the year 2016 is still being developed because it has not been completed. Production of *Tikta Kavya* has been studied by Brigitta Rena Estidianti and Rahmatsyam Lakoro from the Institut Teknologi Sepuluh November entitled "Designing Visual *Game* Character Novel *Tikta Kavya* with Visual *Bishonen* Concept" had been Published in the Journal of Science and Art Pomits Vol.3 No.2 year 2014. The visual characters in *Tikta Kavya*'s historical background are tailored to the tastes of the young generation today.

Then, there is also Visual Novel "Twist *Majapahit*" produced individually by Kawamata Hiruma, Indonesian creator. Discussion about Twist *Majapahit* was written by Kusnawi and R. Firmansyah in Proceedings of National Seminar on Information Technology and Multimedia 2015 at STMIK AMIKOM Yogyakarta (2015: 5.7-5). In the interpretation, it was explained that Visual Novel with history background can basically become an educational media, as an effort to encourage the youth interest to study Indonesia history through a communicative *game*.

VISUAL CHARACTERS AND VISUAL NARRATIVES IN VISUAL NOVELS

As mentioned above, the two things that become the strength of Visual Visuals are visual characters and visual narratives. Research on video *game*s by Dr. Robin J.S. Sloan also once underlined the function of visual characters. In his book titled "Virtual Character Design for *Game*s and Interactive Media" (2015), two important reasons for the creation of visual characters are mentioned: First, the characters in computer media is infinite. Second, the character can have the potential to exist which builds the imagination and the involvement of its users thoughts and emotions.
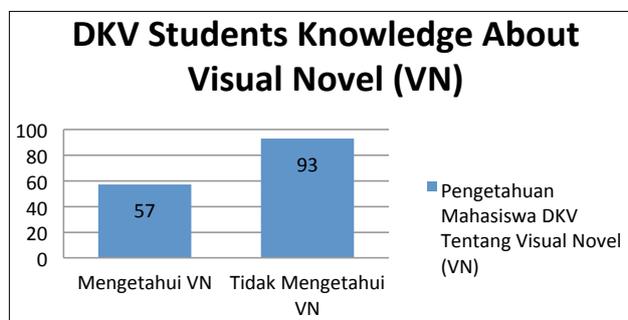
To design visual character, a visual style is required. Visual style is the result of illustration or drawing which becomes an important element in design. Illustrations or often referred to "image" can provide a certain impression through the incorporation of line elements, shapes, textures and colors. Illustrations with certain visual styles on visual characters are considered capable of representing ideas about the society's cultural values.

Visual narrative can be presented by looking at various aspects of human life, whether it is developed from psychology aspects, politics, or social culture. It depends on the message that want to be conveyed through the story line. As a type of *game* with a nonlinear framed story line, as Beiman (2007: 5) says, nonlinear stories focus on creating psychological effects from the audience's emotions. The framed story line in Visual Novels is the frame of a number of events that form unity by integrating the forward and backward storyline.

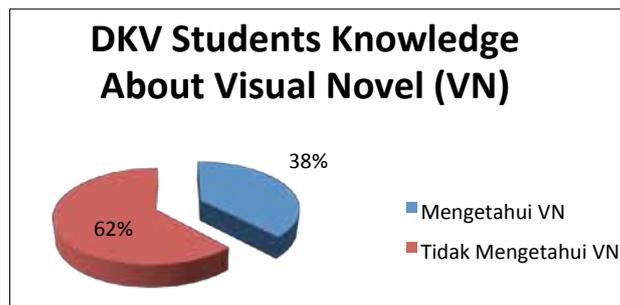### KNOWLEDGE, COMPREHENSION, AND VISUAL NOVELS EXPERIENCE ON VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN STUDENTS

Based on the assumption that the limitations of the local Visual Novel production are related to the knowledge, comprehension and experience of Visual Novel by Indonesian designers or creators, this study conducted questionnaires dissemination of 150 students of Visual Communication Design (DKV) at Indraprasta University PGRI, Jakarta. The questionnaire posed a number of questions related to the indicators of knowledge, comprehension, and experiences of respondents to Visual Novels. The questionnaire model uses the Guttman Scale calculation, which sets the calculation of positive and negative answers through the number 1 for the "yes" and the "0" for the "no" answer.

The results of questionnaires for knowledge indicator indicate that only 57 students (38%) know the Visual Novel interactive *game* type, while 93 students (62%) do not know about it. Knowledge indicators are measured through their knowledge of product names and terms.
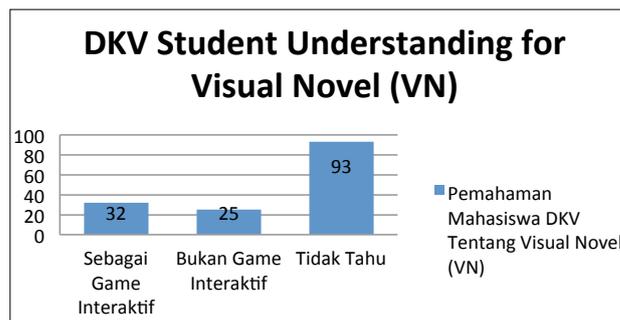

Picture 1.1. Visual Communication Design Student Knowledge on Visual Novels (VN)

Next, the results of questionnaires for indicators of comprehension show that only 32 students (21%)
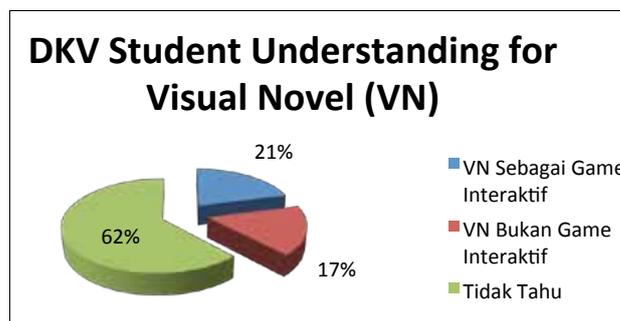

Picture 1.2. Percentage of Visual Communication Design Student Knowledge on Visual Novels (VN)

understand Visual Novel as an interactive *game*. As many as 25 students (17%) understand Visual Novel not as an interactive *game*, while 93 students (62%) do not know about it. Indicators of comprehension are measured through their understanding of the notion of interactive *game*s. Most students think Visual Novels as novel stories that are merely visualized graphically, and do not see them as a *game* through *audio* visual media.
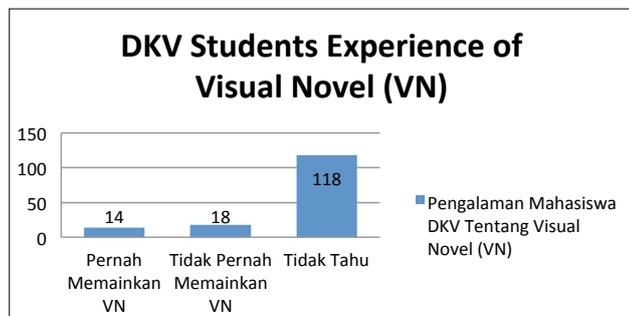

Picture 2.1. Visual Communication Design Students Comprehension on Visual Novels (VN)
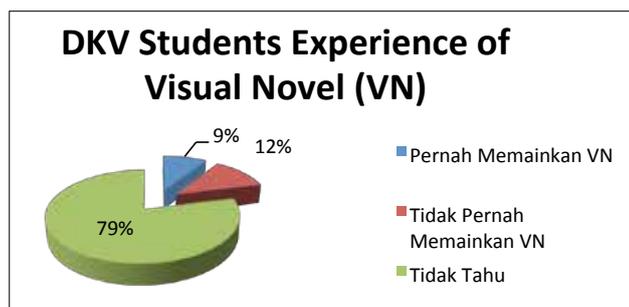

Picture 2.2. Percentage of Visual Communication Design Students Comprehension on Visual Novels (VN)

Next, the results of the questionnaire calculations for the experience indicators show that only 14 students (9%) have ever played Visual Novels. A total of 18

students (12%) answered never played Visual Novels even though they have tried to open it, while 118 students (79%) do not know about it. The experience indicators are measured through whether or not they play Visual Novels, how long they have played them, and what Visual Novel titles they have played as additional questionnaires.

Picture 3.1. Visual Communication Design Students Experience on Visual Novels (VN)

Picture 3.2. Percentage of Visual Communication Design Students Experience on Visual Novels (VN)

Based on the three pictures above, it can be concluded that the level of knowledge, comprehension, and experience of Visual Communication Design students in Indraprasta PGRI University is still very low, even below 50%, so it is still necessary to introduce and educate students about Visual Novels, especially in related courses. This learning process among others can be started by providing the knowledge of arranging related design elements in the creation of Visual Novel artwork, including the understanding to read the sign structure.

UNDERSTANDING SIGN STRUCTURE IN VISUAL NOVELS

The comprehension of sign elements reading in Visual Novels can use the Structural Semiotics approach. Roland Barthes (2010) said that the reading of sign structures can be analyzed according to informational meaning (through characters, costumes, backgrounds,

or relations between characters), symbolic meaning (of familiar symbols), and the meaning of images (from the sign that gives rise to interpretation).

In visual character design elements, characterizations in Visual Novel are built through physical appearance of body proportions and body type. This is to reflect certain characters and personalities of a tall, short, large, or small body shape, as well as indicating sex differences. Functions of characters in visual character consists of; protagonist or antagonist figure as a central figure who is always present and play a role in the story line. Also a subordinate figure as a supporting figure whose presence is necessary to support the central figure. Subordinate characters can appear many times depending on the player's choice of story, or appear once in a particular segment.

Based on the elements in the design, the function of characters in the visual character can be built with two important elements, such as line and shape. Lines and shapes can present personalities, emotions, expressions, and represent identities such as gender, social class, and cultural values through clothing illustrations. According to Sloan (2015: 26-27), lines are not only responsible for deciphering the form in character design, but also taking into account the following:

1. Line thickness
   The consistency of line thickness, or loose and rough, can convey precision, clarity, honesty, seriousness, triviality, and ambiguity.
2. Line orientation
   Line orientation influences perception of character appearance. Horizontal lines impress stability, emphasis, or character enhancement. Vertical lines give impression of tall, balance, and importance. Diagonal/oblique lines can give dynamic impression, movement, and instability.
3. Line position
   The position of the line has the visual power to direct the view to the key features, and creating connections between elements and present metaphors. Combination of horizontal-vertical lines can give a stronger impression.
4. Line type
   There is straight and curved line type. Straight line gives the impression of strength and consistency. Curved lines impress more natural, energy, and dynamic. Inner curve impression soft, sensual, and feminine.

Table 1. Line Element Arrangement In Visual Character Sign Structure (Sloan, 2015)

Sign System	Design Elements	Visualization	Value Association
Visual Character	Line element arrangement	- Line thickness	- Precision, clarity, honesty, seriousness, triviality, as well as ambiguity.
		- Line Orientation	- Horizontal lines: stability, emphasis, and character enhancement. Vertical lines: give impression of tall, balance, and importance. Diagonal/oblique lines can give dynamic impression, movement, and instability.
		- Line position	- Directing to the key features, creating connections between elements and present metaphors
		- Line type	- Straight lines: strength and consistency. Curved lines: more natural, energy, and dynamic. Inner curved impression soft, sensual, and feminine.

Table 2. Form Element Arrangement in Visual Character Sign Structure (Sloan,2015)

Sign System	Design Elements	Visualization	Value Association
Visual Character	Form elements arrangement	- Circle form	- Youthful and kindness, ideas communication, childishness, innocence, positive attitude, balance, unity, protection, and nature.
		- Triangular form	- Stability, strength, instability, energy value, temperament value.
		- Squares form	- Strongest, stable, masculinity, security, rationality, orthodoxy, purity.

Table 3. Visual Narrative Element Arrangement in Visual Novel Sign Structure

Sign System	Design Elements	Visualization	Value Association
Visual Narrative	Background space element arrangement	- Main background scenery - Supporting background scenery - Outside building background - Inside building background	- Informational - Symbolic - Images
	Background setting element arrangement	- Past time setting - Present time setting - Transitional setting - Morning, day, and night setting.	- Informational - Symbolic - Images

Broadly speaking, the understanding of line element's arrangement in visual character sign structure in Visual Novel can be seen in the following table:

Next, the visual element of the form can also be used to define the internal elements of a character. Shapes can not only produce a distinctive character appearance, but also the connotation of the character type and personality. The three primary forms are (Sloan, 2015: 28):

1. Circles
   The connotation of the circle tends to depict youth and goodness, communicating ideas such as a play, childishness, innocence, positive attitude, balance, unity, protection, and nature.
2. Triangles
   The triangular shape communicates the idea of stability, strength, pressure, and instability. Its

meanings can be grouped into categories of energy (dynamic expression, speed, and displacement) and temperament categories (expressions of patience, aggression, hostility, and sexuality).
3. Squares
   Squares form give the impression of the strongest, stable, and are associated with masculinity, security, rationality, orthodoxy, and purity.

Here is the table about comprehension of form element arrangement in visual character sign composition in Visual Novel:

While the narration in Visual Novel with historical themed can be built in accordance to the existing historical facts, amidst them referring to the historical figures and data sequence of events as a story interlacement. The description of the background

of space and setting is needed to explain where and when the event occurred. The background space in the context of history can be visualized through the form of buildings and scenery, while the background setting can be visualized through changing settings that indicate past or later periods, or time based on morning, noon and night weather.

CONCLUSION

This study has successfully showed that the limitations of Visual Novel Indonesia production can be due to low knowledge, comprehension, and experience of local designers or creators. As Visual Communication Design artwork, Visual Novel can be a potential creative industry product. Case study of visual communication design student at Indraprasta University PGRI Jakarta, shows the level of knowledge, comprehension, and experience on Visual Novel *game* is still below 50%, so there is still the need of understanding design elements and ability to bring sign structure inside Visual Novel. A deeper knowledge of Visual Novel through the understanding of sign structure, can help students to start developing the creation of Visual Novel artwork. This study can also be a scientific reference for Visual Communication Design students, local creators, as well as community of interactive *game* lovers through *audio* visual media. This study is also expected to encourage Visual Novel creations that represent the values of Indonesian culture.

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