THE ANISHAMAN *PRESENTS GILGAMESH*: WHERE RAP MEETS ANIMATION, INTERACTIVITY, AND FOG

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Abstract

With the advent of the internet and the ever-increasing capabilities of digital technology, today's society is in the midst of a golden era of interactive storytelling. While digital innovations have facilitated and accentuated interactivity, it has always been a crucial aspect of storytelling. Existing millenniums before the written word, oral tradition is the earliest form of storytelling and arguably the foundation of interactive storytelling. At oral tradition's core is a live human interactivity, emanating from the chemistry between the storyteller and the participatory audience. The practice is multi-disciplinary utilising a vibrant array of performative and visual arts, such as songs, dances, masks, and jewellery.

This research proposes that digital innovations can play a role in reinvigorating oral tradition for contemporary audiences, and in doing so rediscover the roots of interactive storytelling. *The Ani**sham**an Presents Gilgamesh* is a live one-man rap retelling of *Gilgamesh*, wherein the storyteller conjures animation on a fog display and rear projection screen and interacts with their audience via mobile phone surveys. This paper reports on the trials and tribulations of mounting such a multi-disciplinary unwieldly beast.

Gilgamesh is central to this project, due to its status as one of the first oral traditions ever written down, emanating from Sumerian oral traditions as old as 2500 BCE. While *Ani**sham**an*'s adaptation is arguably unhinged, the format is shaped to leverage oral tradition's interactive attributes, namely: performance, participation, malleability, and voice. Performance is embodied by the show's performative influences: the magic lantern show, Étienne-Robertson's *Fantasmagorie*, Winsor McCay's *Gertie the Dinosaur*, and the Japanese *benshi*. These directed the project towards a synergy between the showman and the screen. Participation and malleability are modernised through the use mobile phones interactivity to augment the connection between storyteller and showman. Lastly, voice is embodied by the contemporary verbal art of rap. Naturally, these elements influenced the production pipeline, which culminated in two live performances of *Ani**sham**an*. Overall, the project's blending of narrative techniques and technology supplements and augments the interactive attributes of oral tradition, ultimately reconciling the oldest form of interactive storytelling with the latest iterations.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, Interactive Storytelling, Interactive Media, Animation, Benshi, Gilgamesh, Magic Lantern, Rap, Performance Art, Mobile Interactivity

Introduction

Oftentimes when one thinks about interactive storytelling, digital technologies, such as console video games or XR experiences are the first to come to mind, due to their prominence in today's day and age. However, interactive storytelling precedes any digital technology. Interactivity scholar Nicolas B. Zeman (2017) hails oral tradition as the earliest form of interactive storytelling. He notes the source of the interactivity as "Bi-Directional storytelling", where the story emerges from the chemistry between the audience and storyteller. This resulted in an active and participatory experience, where storytellers adjusted their tale to the live feedback of their audience. Researcher Minna Skafte Jensen writes, "If they [the audience] show signs of being bored, he [the teller] introduces something exciting or, on the contrary, abbreviates his narrative and hastens to the end" (Jensen 2005, p. 47). In short, the storyteller watched the audience as much as the audience the storyteller, which resulted in a malleable storytelling experience. No telling was identical. Most audiences today are simple viewers, who passively consume their stories via phones, laptops, or cinemas reducing the direct connection between the storyteller and audience.

This paper presents portions of a doctoral research project that seeks to restore this connection by proposing that digital animation can play a role in reinvigorating oral tradition for contemporary audiences, and in doing so rediscover the roots of interactive storytelling. How can we rework oral tradition for contemporary audiences?

Within the original thesis, oral tradition was reworked in two manners:

1) Reworking the medium of oral tradition itself; that is, reinvigorating its live storytelling format for a contemporary audience by incorporating modern technology and storytelling techniques. This is referred to as *medium reworking*.
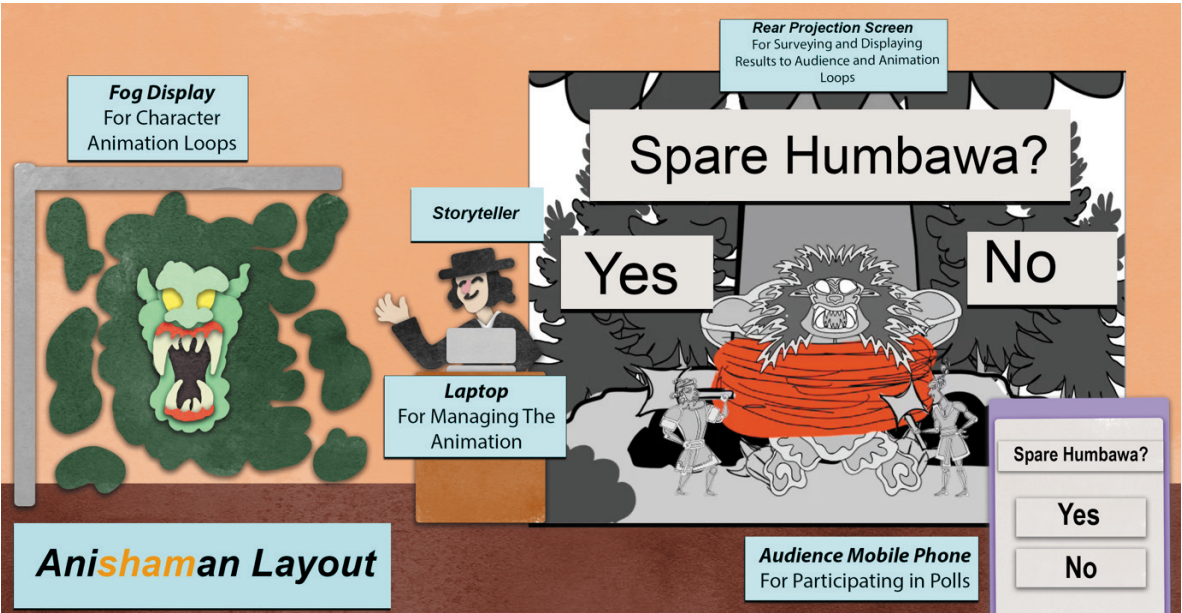

Fig.1 Anishaman Layout, Yoel Hill, 2023.

2) Reworking the narrative of an oral tradition for a contemporary audience, that is, adapting the themes and story for modern times. After all, this malleability is a central feature of oral tradition, where stories are continually revised in response to the audience and times. This is referred to as *narrative reworking*.

These reworkings culminated with the research project *The Anishaman Presents Gilgamesh*: a live one-man rap retelling of *Gilgamesh* adapted with a green message where the storyteller conjures animation via a fog display and rear projection screen and surveys their audiences' response via mobile interaction.

Within this project, the performer themself is the Ani**sham**an; a shorthand for Animation Shaman. As scholar David Abram observes, among oral cultures, the shaman was positioned as the mediator between the human realm and the natural world (Abram, 1997). Consequently, the Ani**sham**an is the mediator between the physical and animated world, or more technically speaking, between the audience and the screen.

This paper will open with a concise overview of the methodology required to achieve such a project. This will be followed by a brief historical and literary context on Gilgamesh to justify its relevance for adaptation to offer a general context on the narrative reworking. While both reworkings were paramount to the project achieving its final form, this paper will focus only on the medium reworking, which is embodied in the Ani**sham**an format. To better understand oral tradition as a medium, its interactive attributes (performance, participation, malleability, and voice) will be introduced, and its multidisciplinary nature will be explored. The first interactive attribute to be examined is performance. This section will demonstrate animation's compatibility with live performance by surveying three key influences on the project: the pre-cinema magic lantern show (1659) with an emphasis on Étienne-Gaspard Robert's *Fantasmagorie* (1792), Winsor McCay's 1914 vaudeville show *Gertie the Dinosaur,* and the Japanese *benshi*. Each survey will examine the relationship between the showman

and the screen to not only justify animation's compatibility with oral tradition but demonstrate the ways these influences shaped the project. Participation and malleability will follow suit with an examination of how the project utilises mobile interactivity to achieve these. Next, voice will be explored through rap. Lastly, the creative process of constructing such a multidisciplinary Frankenstein will be explored beginning with preproduction and concluding with an analysis on the final performances. Then the paper will close with a reflection on the multidisciplinary impact of the research.

Methodology

Overall, this research project utilised a mixed method approach, comprised of a research-led practice utilising scholars Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean's iterative cyclical web, where a continual iterative dialogue between academic research and creative practice occurs throughout the research to fine tune the project (Smith & Dean, 2009). The creative practice phase utilised Linda Candy's reflective-practice-based framework (Candy, 2020), where the findings are embodied in a creative artefact, namely *The Anishaman Presents Gilgamesh*. Then, to ascertain the audience perception of the show,
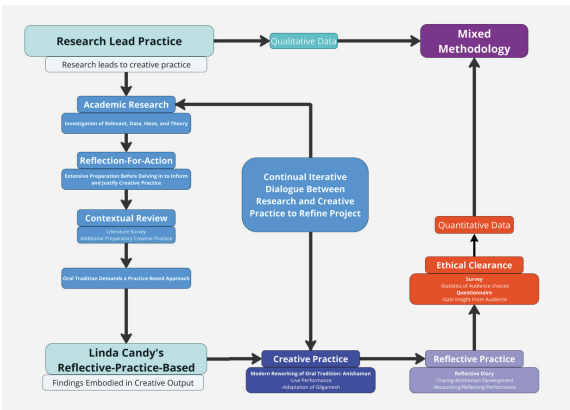

Fig. 2 Summary of Methodology. Original image by the author, adapted from Smith and Dean (2009) and Candy (2020), 2025.

questionnaires were utilised, which introduced a degree of quantitative data, which were analysed via a combination of Lin Norton's quantitative frequency counts and qualitative thematic analyses (Norton, 2018). This research adopted a mixed-methods approach, incorporating a contextual survey, the development of a creative artefact, and a follow-up questionnaire. The pipeline of this methodology is visualised in the figure 2.

Gilgamesh Historical and Literary Context

Why place an ancient Sumerian king at the centre of this project? For historical context, King Gilgamesh reigned over the Sumerian city of Uruk circa 2700 BCE in what is now Warka, Iraq (Tigay, 2002, p. 3). The surviving cuneiform tablets of the Gilgamesh epic date back to 1600 BCE (Gardener and Maier), and yet the story is still older than that. Sumerologists like Thorkild Jacobsen (1976) speculate its origins in oral traditions dating back to 2500 BCE, making it possibly one of the first oral traditions ever written down given that the Sumerians invented writing (Podany, 2018). Scholar Amalia Gnanadesikan reports that, between the years 3000 and 2400 BCE, the Sumerians developed cuneiform from a simple memory device to a sophisticated writing system (Gnanadesikan, 2009). Historian Amanda Podany (2018) attributes cuneiform's development to the rising administrative demands of the Sumerians' burgeoning cities. Consequently, the time the historical Gilgamesh lived would have been a period of continual urban growth, after all, Gilgamesh's Uruk was the metropolis of its day (Podany, 2018). Thus, scholars like Patrick Barron (2002) and Louise Pryke (2019) consider humanity's relationship with the environment key themes of Gilgamesh. Thus, the story maintains a powerful relevance for contemporary audiences given its relevant themes.

Anishaman's version of Gilgamesh is driven by this environmental theme. This represents the narrative reworking, where *Gilgamesh* was reworked to address the contemporary climate crisis by examining the relationship between humanity and the natural world. This adaptation was informed by several ancient near eastern scholars to produce a strong foundation in the historical, cultural, and literary themes of the tale. Scholars Marie Neurath (1964), Evelyn Worboys (1964), Elizabeth Lansing (1971), N.K. Sandars (1972), Thorkild Jacobsen (1976), Samuel Noah Kramer (1979), John Gardiner (1985), John Maier (1985), Stephanie Dalley (1989), Bernd Jager (2001), Patrick Barron (2002), Andrew George (2003), Susan Ackerman (2005), Amanda Podany (2018) and Louise Pryke (2019) were instrumental to this grounding. *Anishaman*'s adaptation is summarised by the following logline I wrote:

> Desperate to immortalise his legacy, Gilgamesh the tyrannical King of Uruk obsesses himself with constructing the world's grandest city regardless of the human and environmental costs, but when the gods intervene by sending the wild man Enkidu as his animistic counterbalance, Gilgamesh is forced to question his place in the world.

This logline emphasises the environmental angle of the adaptation, yet maintains the key existential themes of its source material. To further connect the narrative with its origins, the entire art direction was directly influenced by Mesopotamian clay cylinders as seen in Figures 3 and 4.

Overall, *Gilgamesh* was appropriate as this research's subject matter, due to its oral roots and relevant modern environmental themes. In a way, this project seeks to restore Gilgamesh to an oral tradition. Naturally, this would require a thorough comprehension of oral tradition itself.

Fig. 3 (Left) Cylinder seal and modern impression: male worshiper, dog surmounted by a standard, ca. mid-2nd millennium B.C. Mesopotamia. Carnelian, H. 1 x Diam. 3/8 in. (2.46 x 0.95 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of The Right Reverend Paul Moore Jr., 1985 (1985.357.44*).* This image is licensed CC 1.0 Universal, Please embed the link to the license into the "CC 1.0 Universal" https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/

Fig. 4 (Right) King Gilgamesh in Ani**sham**an, Yoel Hill, 2024.

The Interactive Attributes and Multi-Disciplinary Nature of Oral Tradition

Within this research, many scholars have been crucial to attain an understanding of oral tradition. Through surveying the works of oral tradition scholars, Jan Vansina (1965), Catherine H. and Ronald M. Berndt (1994), Sean Kane (1994), David Abram (1997), L.R. Hiatt (1978), David C. Rubin and Minna Skafte Jensen (2005), John Miles Foley (2007), Peter Gainsford (2010), Lynn Kelly (2017), Nickolas B. Zeman (2017), Nēpia Mahuika (2019), and Clement Adeniyi Akangbe (2021), I determined the interactive attributes of oral tradition to be: performance, participation, malleability, and voice. *Anishaman* utilises a multidisciplinary approach to achieve each one of these attributes, thus these attributes will be further in the following sections with their relevant multidisciplinary counterpart. The scholar whose work was most influential was Lynne Kelly.

In Kelly's *The Memory Code* (2017), she examined a variety of oral cultures across the globe and their respective techniques,

revealing oral tradition to be a multidisciplinary practice. Kelly notes that "Orality. . . was about making knowledge memorable. It was about using song, story, dance and mythology to retain vast stores of factual information when the culture had no recourse to writing" (2017, loc 91). Thus, oral tradition is not purely verbal knowledge preservation and transmission, but a diverse multi-disciplinary practice supplemented by a variety of graphic and performative techniques. Within earlier oral tradition scholarship these performative and graphic attributes were misinterpreted as superfluous (Vansina, 1972). Rather, Kelly (2017) demonstrates that these seemingly superfluous elements were either critical knowledge themselves or an essential memory aid. For example, Kelly (2017) cites a First Nation Australian kangaroo dance, noting that the dance itself encodes crucial hunting knowledge by imitating the kangaroo's behaviour. She also describes a Lukasa, which is a board adorned with beads used by the Luba People of the Congo as a memory device, encoding knowledge into each bead (Kelly, 2017).

The multi-disciplinary nature of oral tradition accentuates the craft by becoming an additional mnemonic device, enabling further knowledge to be stored. Thus, incorporating a vibrant art like animation is appropriate.

While scholar Sean Kane (1994) agrees with the diversity of oral tradition, he emphasises the human voice as the instrument of oral tradition and the key attribute to it. Kane writes, "….the gathering point of all these activities is the told story. And the instrument of the story is voice" (1994, pp. 186-187). However, this is not at odds with Kelly (2017) as she notes that an oral tradition is truly stored within a person. Thus, despite the diversity of oral tradition, a live human performer is always at its core. Scholar Clement Adeniyi Akangbe assigns the performer a crucial layer of responsibility: organisation; "…it is the performer's ability to creatively unify the different bits of his performance to make a unified whole" (Akangbe 2021, pp. 73-74). While oral tradition is often a multi-disciplinary approach, it is channelled and unified by the storyteller. This unification ultimately results in the interactive attribute of performance.

Performance: *Ani**sham**an*'s Embrace of Animation's Roots in Showmanship

Oral tradition is a live human-driven performance. Initially one might assume animation is at odds with the concept of live

Fig. 5 Lukasa memory board, from the collection of the Brooklyn Museum. This image is licensed CC BY 3.0., Brooklyn Museum (2012). https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.en

performance, given its meticulously pre-planned nature, the passive method by which it is consumed by contemporary audiences, and the spatial separation of the screen. However, the screen and the showman have successfully collaborated several times throughout history. This section will demonstrate animation's compatibility with live performance by revealing the various synergies between the showman and the screen, namely the magic lantern show and Fantasmagories (notably Robertson's 1797 *Fantasmagorie*), Winsor McCay's vaudeville act *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), and the Japanese *benshi* (c. 1896-1937) (Barnouw, 1981; Dym, 2003; Fujiki, 2013; Nathan & Crafton, 2013). How each performative element influenced *Ani**sham**an* will also be explored, presenting the project's multi-disciplinary approach.

The Magic Lantern and the Fantasmagorie

Animation's roots begin with the showman as far back as 1659, when Dutch polymath Christiaan Huygen invented the Magic Lantern (Manonni, 2000; Robinson, 1996). Historian Laurant Manonni describes this new invention as "a box fitted with lenses which allowed the magnified projection of images on painting glass" (Manonni, 2004, p. 44). This enabled Huygens to create animation by shuffling the glass slides (p.44). Naturally, this invention bore much promise and would be embraced well into the following century by a diverse crowd from missionaries to scientists (Stafford & Terpak, 2001). However, its most notable wielders were itinerant showmen, who would wander from town to town (Heard, 1996). Scholar Andre Gaudreault observes that the narrative of these shows relied on the performer's showmanship skills rather than the slides themselves (Gaudreault, 1990, p. 276). Without the performer, the slides lack meaning; it was the performer that manually animated the slides and provided narration, unifying it into a story. Animation in its infancy relied on a showman.

These performers could have quite the influence on their audience. Heard (1996) recounts that throughout the 18th century various magic lantern grifters would emerge, who would seemingly conjure ghosts and spirits to frighten their marks. In reality, they were merely projecting images on smoke via rear projection. For better or for worse, this trend demonstrates the power a showman could have when paired with a screen. Heard observes that the influx of grifters would invite a "master showman" to expose their trickery (1996, pp. 26-27).

In Paris of 1792, German Magician Paul Philidor performed his *Fantasmagorie*, which exposed several contemporary spectral magic lantern tricks (Heard, 1996, pp.26-27). Despite the show's early success, it came to an abrupt halt when Philidor vanished from Paris without a trace, which Heard (1996) speculates was likely politically motivated. However, another showman would fill in his shows and build *Fantasmagorie* into the mainstream staple that would define Magic Lantern shows for decades to come (Barnouw, 1981; Heard, 1996).

Magician historian Erik Barnouw recounts that in Paris of 1797, Belgian Magician Étienne Gaspard Robert performed his own *Fantasmagorie,* under the stage name Robertson (Barnouw, 1981). Utilising the same technique of rear projection and smoke, Robertson conjured his own spirits (Barnouw, 1981). Building on Philidor's initial exposé, Robertson wore the persona of scientist and magician (Heard, 1996). Mannoni describes how the phantasmagorias changed the landscape of the Magic Lantern Show:

> The magic lantern's traditional procession of images, as used since the seventeenth century, was abandoned. Everything became very elaborate: projections from behind the screen; projections on smoke; animated and multiple images, growing or shrinking as the lantern was moved on rails like a film camera in a tracking shot. (2004, p. 45)

The Magic Lantern had evolved from a side-show novelty to an elaborate theatrical production. Robertson had an elaborate set, staging the show in an abandoned convent. Scholar DJ Jones raises Robertson above all other contemporary showmen. He writes:

> Schröpfer, Philidor and others may have employed ancient castle buildings (in Dresden), circuitous meanderings, smoke, cabinets de physique and the services of live actors as well as the lantern show. Yet the Belgian's spectacle made distinctive use of a site linked both with Revolutionary dread and Gothic conventual associations. . . No other phantasmagorist did this or gave prefatory speeches with anything like the same ambition and width of reference as Robertson. No other lanternist juxtaposed speeches from Der Geisterseher with images of Lewis's Bleeding Nun and Fuseli's nightmarish imp . . . No other lanternist used a fashionably exotic Egyptian door (probably based on the Mensa Isiaca) to bear out Terrasson's ideas regarding the Pharaonic origins of the mysteries or referenced these in his speeches. Robertson's grounding in Jacques Alexandre Charles's science lessons and experience in painting miniatures would certainly have helped him in presenting the cabinet de physique and 'dark paintings' (Jones, 2011, pp. 68-69).

This represents Ankangbe's oral tradition concept of organisation where every element is unified into a single performance. Robertson took a diverse multi-disciplinary approach, where every element and creative aspect of Robertson's Fantasmagorie was carefully audited to converge into a seamless performance and cohesive message all mediated by a live performer. His key message was that of Philidor, a cautionary exposé on illusions (Jones, 2011, pp. 68-69) However, audiences left with so much more. Whether new scientific or literary knowledge (Jones, 2011, pp. 68-69)

Robertson utilised animation in a unified multidisciplinary approach that shared the telos of all oral tradition storytellers, that is: to transmit knowledge. Overall, Robertson's *Fantasmagorie* demonstrates how all multi-disciplinary elements must be unified into an extension of the showman.

Anishaman as a Fantasmagorie

While it would be logical to presume that the Ani**sham**an is a direct response to Robertson's *Fantasmagorie*, it was actually Dr. Helen Papagiannis' *The Amazing Cinemagician* (2010) that initially directed the research towards this apparatus, wherein she projected George Melies' films onto fog. Papagiannis writes, "*The Amazing Cinemagician* integrates Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology with projections onto fog, linking the emerging technology of the Fog Screen with the pre-cinematic magic lantern and phantasmagoria spectacles of the Victorian era" (Papagiannis, 2010). Consequently, Robertson's work is influential, and he was arguably the original Ani**sham**an; however, the Ani**sham**an is less interested in spirits and more interested in granting the illusion of corporeality to animation.

With a fog display, an animated character can occupy the same space as the live performer, enabling the audience to participate more broadly within a real space as opposed to via a digital portal. This participation is further enhanced when one considers the materiality of the fog, which grants the animation a physical tangibility in reality.

Naturally, a particular art direction would be required to achieve the illusion. Consequently, the foundation of the style was developed through a fog display test, while maintaining the key reference point of Mesopotamian clay cylinders. The final results were clay tablets on the main screen, which would burst into spirits when they entered the fog display.

Yet in hindsight, this rationale for projecting on fog is not too unlike all the showmen who came before, in that it is a spectral spectacle. The Ani**sham**an's role as the mediator between this world and the animated realm can be seen as an extension of the mediation that Robertson achieved with his *Fantasmagoria*. The name is also parallel to Robertson's sentiments on fraud conjurers. Every time Ani**sham**an is written, the word sham is highlighted. This is not only to directly reference how animation is all an illusion, but to openly disclose the Ani**sham**an's status as conjurer and storyteller; they do not claim to have any mystical powers. Thus, the title Ani**sham**an shares Robertson's own disdain for frauds. Additionally, the show is attempting to transmit knowledge within an oral tradition and similar to Robertson,

Fig. 6 Photo of author next to the fog display test of Aruru, Photo by Miriam Dynevor, 2021.

Fig. 7 Ani**sham**an Style Comparison of Ea god of Water and Wisdom, Yoel Hill, 2024.

but rather than exposing fraudsters, they transmit didactic knowledge in the form of a green message. Ultimately, Ani**sham**an achieved something quite akin to Robertson's *Fantasmagorie*, namely, the amalgamation of several diverse creative elements (notably animation) into one cohesive show.

Gertie the Dinosaur

While the magic lantern show established the roots of animation's synergy with live performers, vaudeville would produce perhaps the greatest experiments between live action and animation. The most notable is Winsor McCay's 1914 vaudeville act *Gertie the Dinosaur*. Live on stage, McCay acted alongside an animation of Gertie the Brontosaurus in a subversion of the tired animal vaudeville act (Nathan & Crafton, 2013). By acting as Gertie's tamer, McCay himself became a mediator between the audience and the screen. This was a pioneering effort in character animation, Gertie to this day represents excellent characterisation and timing. Thus, animation can be seen to not only enhance a live performance, it can also co-star in it. In their study *The Making and Remaking of Gertie*

the Dinosaur, animation historians Nathan and Crafton summarise the secret to the Gertie's success:

> Thinking about McCay's act as a complete entertainment experience, we can imagine that the audience's focus would not be on the cartoon per se, but on the interaction arising from the onscreen performance, McCay and the spectators (Nathan & Crafton, 2013, p. 40).

Ultimately, it is not the animation that makes the show, but rather how the animation, the performer, and the audience must converge into one unit to succeed. Like the magic lantern show, vaudeville itself often relied on a multi-disciplinary approach. Animation historian Hank Sartin (1998) notes that vaudeville performers were multitalented, weaving as many performative aspects to their acts as possible. Much like a storyteller in oral tradition, McCay as a vaudeville star was able to take several artforms and seamlessly organise them into a unified performance.

Gertie herself demonstrates animation's unique potential within oral tradition. Nathan and Crafton theorise that McCay

chose to animate a brontosaurus…" because no one has ever seen a dinosaur… It is about making the unknowable into something tangible through anthropomorphism" (Nathan & Crafton, 2013, p. 42). Animation can make the unknowable knowable. Think of all the unknowable gods, fantastical creatures, and monsters that inhabit various oral traditions, let alone the ones from *Gilgamesh*. Animation can not only visualise them but endow life to all these vibrant characters. Paired with the fog display, they can inhabit our world alongside the performer. Gertie demonstrates animation as a worthy addition to the already rich trove of graphical and performative arts within oral tradition.

Anishaman: Gertie the Bull of Heaven

Within Ani**sham**an, Gertie is parodied within the sequence "Gertie the Bull of Heaven". In Gilgamesh, the Bull of Heaven is an anthropomorphising of the constellation taurus, which the gods send to destroy Gilgamesh's city of Uruk as punishment (George 2003). Within Ani**sham**an, the whole brutal ordeal is treated as a novelty vaudeville act with the showman praising Gertie's act of destroying an entire city block. Before Gertie comes on stage, she experiences a bit of stage fright, but after a quick pep talk with the Ani**sham**an and an applause from

Fig. 8 Gertie the Bull of Heaven excerpt, photo by Angus Kirby, 2024.

the audience, she comes crashing down onto the fog display, laying Uruk on the main screen to waste. Gertie herself was animated in AutoDesk Maya by friend Leon Warren, utilising a an Autodesk Maya bull rig purchased online from Truong CG Artist. Designating a separate animator to Gertie enabled her animation to be pushed to the characterisation worthy of her namesake. Thus Ani**sham**an pays tribute to McCay's efforts and channels his multidisciplinary showmanship in bridging the animated world and the physical.

While *Gertie the Dinosaur* was a brilliant show, it does not leave much room for narrative outside the novelty of an animal act parody. *Gilgamesh*, on the other hand, is quite a complex narrative, which can utilise novelty, but needs to engage audiences for a longer duration and in various levels of meaning. Fortunately, there is a showman that can speak to narrative films.

The Rise and Fall of the Benshi

The *benshi* of Japan were essentially the Japanese version of the film narrator (Anderson & Richie, 2018), but at their height they would evolve into their own unique narrative art. Like their Western counterparts, they emerged from a thriving tradition of showmanship and exhibition (Akihiro, 2018). Aspiring *benshi*s either came equipped with traditional storytelling skills from the Japanese magic lantern tradition of *utsushie* (Sazaki, 2015) or they were experienced in the showmanship of a fairground barker (Akihro, 2018). According to scholar Yoriaki Sazaki (2015), the most popular *benshi* utilised professional storytelling endowing each performance with a theatrical cadence. As a film narrator, they were tasked with conducting the audiences' attention and emotion and explaining the film (Dym, 2003). However, as many incoming films were Western, the *benshi*, much like a travel lecturer, would explain cultural nuances as well. Additionally, even when intertitles came into play, the *benshi* remained. Historian A.

Gerow explains, "Most Japanese companies, however, since they usually bought only one print from foreign dealers for a few large theatres, did not have the economic incentive to make up a new Japanese-titled print. The *benshi* were a more convenient alternative" (2010, p. 32). Ultimately, *benshi* were a cultural translator.

The *benshi* were the show and drove the screening experience. Sazaki notes that the *benshi* could command the live orchestra, the projection speed, cut intertitles, and change the story itself to enhance their performances (Sazaki, 2015). The *benshi* was not an extension of the film, rather the film was an extension of the *benshi*. This was no problem to Japanese audiences, who flocked to cinemas based on the status of the *benshi* performing rather than the esteem of the film (Ōmori, 2009). In advertising, the *benshi*'s name was featured more prominently than the director, the actors, or the film title itself (Anderson & Richie, 2018). In short, the *benshi* was a star, having developed their own dynamic participatory narrative artform.

Now for the first two decades of the *benshi* (1896-1916), they were front and centre sharing the stage with the screen. A *benshi* would open the show with a pre-screening *maesetsumei*, or introductory remarks (Dym, 2003). As the earliest films were short cinemas of attraction, *maesetsumei* initially consisted of a technical explanation on the machinery and description of the content (Dym, 2003; Fujiki, 33). However, scholars Kitado Jeffery Dym (2003), Hideaki Fujiki (2013) and Akihiro (2018), emphasise that this was no dull intro but a vibrant performance that showcased the *benshi's* storytelling skills, lured the audience into the performance, and most importantly mediate the audience to a new media. These early *maesetsumeis* were an attraction as performances in and of themselves lasting up to thirty minutes (Dymn, 2003, p.41; Fujiki, 2013, p.33). However, as film lengths increased by the 1910s, the *maesestumei* was reduced to five minutes to give more attention to the film (Dymn, 2003, p.41; Fujiki, 2013, p. 33)

Nonetheless, the *benshi* would be far from silent, remaining the centre of the show. During the screening, the *benshi* would perform the *nakasetsumei* or parallel narration. This could range from something as simple as basic commentary on, or translations of the intertitles, to improvised performances depending on the film and audience. (Dym, 2003; Fujiki, 2013). Fujiki (2013) highlights how the *benshi* developed his oral craft carefully utilising intonation, rhythm, tempo, poetry, and clarity. They were essentially movie bards, utilising film and the oral arts to enhance their performance.

However, they were not without criticism even during their height of popularity. A group of cinephiles and filmmakers known as the Pure film Movement campaigned against the *benshi* (Akhiro, 2018). Critic Tanizaki Jun'ichiro claimed that the *benshi*'s influence corrupted all film (Akhiro, 2018). After all, *benshi*s often discarded a films' own accompanying intertitle and improvised (Sazaki, 2015). Consequently, the *benshi* often twisted and diluted the director's vision, ultimately appropriating authorship (Akihiro, 2018; Gerow, 2010). Ultimately, the Pure Film Movement resented their stardom, as *benshis* overshadowed the status of filmmakers, diluting their work.

Eventually, the Pure Film Movement would have their wish granted with the inevitable introduction of the talkie. While pockets of *benshis* would remain throughout Japan as late as 1937 (Fujiki, 2013), Fujiki (2013) and Michael Raine (2020) observe that the talkies would ultimately make the *benshi* redundant, removing them as the cultural force they once were. Eventually, the *benshi* were all but a memory.

During their prime, the *benshi* exhibited a showmanship that could enhance narrative films for the joy of countless audiences. This demonstrates that even a pre-recorded medium like film can be shaped into a vivid multidisciplinary performance by a showman. The key criticism that would lead to

the *benshi*'s subordination to film was the assertion that they were merely presenters and appropriated authorship.

The Anishaman as a *Benshi*

Were the *benshi* and the filmmaker to be one in the same, as in the case of this research project, the performative and narrative aspects could arguably be pushed further. Thus, *benshi* conventions informed Ani**sham**an's format. The stage set up harkens back to the golden age of *benshi*s, with the Ani**sham**an front and centre alongside the screens. By centring the *benshi* between the fog display and rear projection screen, he literally becomes a mediator between those screens, continually directing the audience's attention to action unfolding across the screens.

By directing and addressing the audience, the Ani**sham**an maintains a dialogue with them. He is continually lit by stage lights and a small lamp on his desk, to ensure his gestures are easily read, his presence noted. Like a *benshi*, his costume is formal evening wear consisting of a bowler hat, vest, paired with a dress shirt, pants, and shoes. The formality of the evening wear gives him an air of authority confirming his role as the master of ceremonies.

The show itself reflects a *benshi* performance. The show opens with a *maesetsumei*. Given the unorthodox nature of Ani**sham**an, a *maesetsumei* is an incredible asset to ease the audience into the performance. Ani**sham**an's *maesestsumei* reflects the later 5-minute length ones. But, in those five minutes, the audience are introduced to oral tradition, *Gilgamesh*, why the story was being told, and introduced to the mobile interactivity. The remainder of the show is *nakasestumei*, where the Ani**sham**an provides parallel narration to the screens. The majority of the show consists of the Ani**sham**an directing the animation in accompaniment of his raps. The rap is complemented in certain scenes with spoken word explanations, where the Ani**sham**an breaks down key aspects of the story's themes, enabling the educational aspect of the *benshi* to shine through. Ultimately, the Ani**sham**an serves the same function as a cultural translator, as the ancient near eastern myth of *Gilgamesh* is presented for a Western 21st century audience.

Considering dynamism of the *benshi*, the participatory charm of McCay's *Gertie the Dinosaur*, and the spectral spectacles of the *Fantasmagorie*, the Ani**sham**an draws on a lineage of nearly 240 years of the showman and the screen. Not only does it build on said predecessors, but Ani**sham**an reintegrates animation with performance and by extension oral tradition.

Fig. 9 The Ani**sham**an between the displays and audience, photo by Angus Kirby, 2024.

Fig. 10 The Ani**sham**an Yoel Hill, 2024, Photo by Angus Kirby.

However, despite building upon animation's rich performative multidisciplinary roots, a key concern for the performer is the possibility of a static and repetitive performance. Even though the entire show is performed from memory, the key challenge for the performer is to keep the narration fresh and relevant.

Malleability and Participation Through Mobile Interactivity

The next two interactive attributes of oral tradition can mitigate the preceding concerns: malleability and participation. Malleability accounts for how the story can be revised and repurposed for an audience and time. This enables a nearly 5000-year-old story like *Gilgamesh* to be relevant for a 21st century audience, allowing a story to survive centuries beyond its origins. However, malleability does not merely occur within the composing of the story, but within the telling itself. This concept was earlier introduced as Zeman's Bi-Directional storytelling, where the interaction between the audience and storyteller shapes the story (Zeman, 2017). The storyteller is continually responding to the live feedback of the audience. This chemistry of the audience and the storyteller is the interactive attribute of participation. Thus, malleability arises from participation, as the performance, and story, changes over time to meet the needs and cognisance of the audience.

To be as authentic as possible to oral tradition's interactivity, bi-directional storytelling must be achieved. However, the modern screening experience presents a barrier to such dynamics given its passive nature. People attending a screening expect to silently sit in the dark. The challenge is to overcome these conventions without creating discomfort in the audience. The solution is to meet them halfway through a non-threatening participation via their mobile phones. However, to ensure participation even at this level, writer Rob Reid notes that Johan Huisinga's 'Magic Circle' must

be established. The Magic Circle is a play space wherein the rules of engagement are established with the audience; participants are enabled to forgo their ordinary behaviour and to take up the rules of the "game" (Reid, 2021). The *maesetsumei* serves this function by introducing the mobile interactivity, as the Ani**sham**an leads the audience through a simple test.

The gameplay loop of Ani**sham**an's interactivity is as follows. The Ani**sham**an directly addresses the audience with a question and provides potential answers. Then the Ani**sham**an gestures to the rear-projection screen, where a QR code appears. The audience scans the QR code, which opens a Google Form Page with a poll. The Ani**sham**an allows a few moments for people to access the QR code. As the audience is visible, the Ani**sham**an can see when people have stopped scanning QR codes. Once the Ani**sham**an observes the audience is done scanning the QR code, he shows the live results on the rear projection screen. The live results are demonstrated through a bar graph with the most popular vote becoming apparent.

As this occurs the Ani**sham**an comments and speculates on the results as they fluctuate. However, after a few moments, i.e., once the bars have stabilised, the Ani**sham**an announces
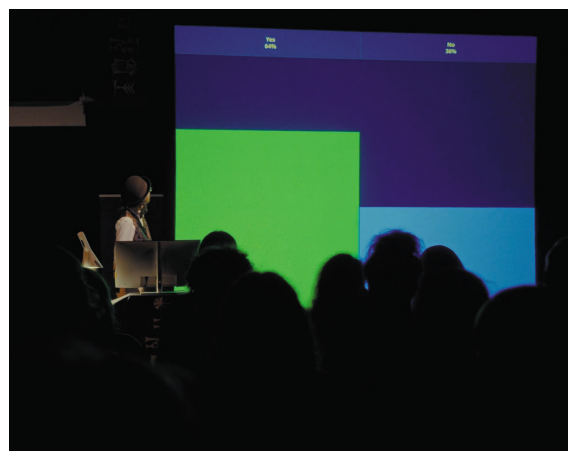

Fig. 11 The Anishaman Surveys the Audience's Response, Photo by Angus Kirby, 2024.
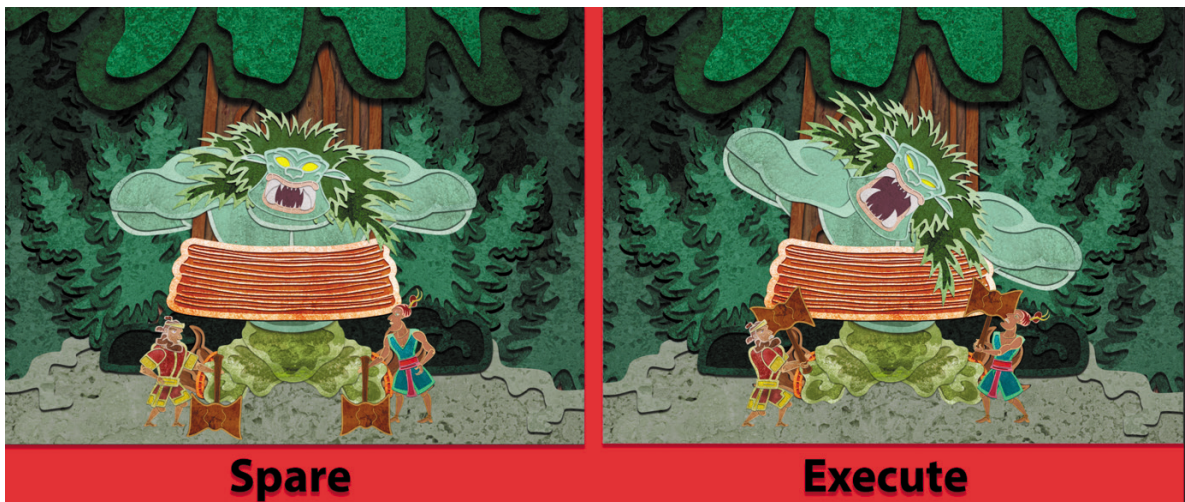
Fig. 12 Gilgamesh and Enkidu either sparing or executing Humbawa, Yoel Hill, 2025.

'phones down', prompting the audience to examine the results. The results are visible to all, and the Ani**sham**an comments on the consensus. This connects not only the Ani**sham**an to the audience, but the audience to their fellow viewer, instilling a sense of community. These operations are powered by TouchDesigner, which enables the polling results to manage the following video. My father Ernest Hill is a programmer and was this project's developer, handling all the programming needs of TouchDesigner.

The polls grant a level of agency to the audience by enabling them to directly interact with the narrative. For example, when the ogre Humbawa[1] begs for mercy from Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the audience can choose whether to spare or kill him. Gilgamesh and Enkidu will either take up or lay down their axe in response.

Consequently, the audience's engagement is rewarded. That said, this agency is by necessity limited, for the story will always converge back to the main path. After, there is still a key message and story to be told. Humbawa dies regardless of the choice, but the colours and textures of that demise differ; the vote engages the audience and promotes chemistry with the storyteller even when the deck is stacked. On the question: What is Gilgamesh's Proper Counterbalance? the Ani**sham**an proudly announces that all the answers were right and wrong at the same time, which on one night resulted in both boos and cheers. Even though the audience may not change the course of the story, they interact via nuances, and can review their collective responses and attitudes onscreen.

These polls are also utilised to expand on the story's themes, echoing the *benshi*'s function as an educator. For example, the first poll in the story is on how the gods are to deal with the tyrant Gilgamesh, to which the audience is offered three choices: to execute him, to send heavenly sanctions, or to send him to therapy. For each choice, the Ani**sham**an has a separate image and monologue on hand, enabling a playful

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1   Within *Anishaman*, Humbaba, the guardian of the cedar forest, is known as Humbawa. This is a blend of his Akkadian name Humbaba and his Sumerian name Huwawa (George, 1999, p. 223). This was changed because it rolled off the tongue better than either preceding name individually.

mocking of their choices and subsequent explanation. This space is utilised to further unpack historical and cultural themes of the story. Further, these sections are freely spoken to give the audience a breather from all the rap in which to better contemplate the narrative's themes. Ultimately, Ani**sham**an utilises three poll types, as seen in the table below.

Although each poll type engages with the narrative on a different level, the end of each is the same: participation and

Table 1 Polls types used in the show.

POLL TYPE	PURPOSE
Choose-your-own-adventure	Grant audience agency to directly affect the narrative.
Benshi	Unpack and expand upon crucial narrative themes.
Audience voice	Simply survey the room.

malleability.

In summary, Ani**sham**an's mobile interaction affects participation for a contemporary audience by instigating a dialogue between audience and performer. Whether their choices change the narrative does not matter because they are interacting with the performance regardless. They are adding texture and nuance to albeit set themes and plots, and importantly, space for further explanation and embellishment. The dialogue begins the moment they vote. The variety emanating from the audience's votes guarantees a different experience each performance, thus keeping the Ani**sham**an on his toes with fresh iterations, in service of malleability, and ultimately persistence of the story across time.

Voice

The final interactive attribute is Voice. Oral tradition is composed and transmitted by the human voice as its integral instrument. Rap scholar Imani Perry notes that hip hop developed counter to "musician's music" due to a lack of available musical learning spaces for many African-American children, due to desegregation and budget cuts (Perry, 2004, p. 67). Consequently, rap developed with the human voice as its primary instrument. Like oral tradition, rap is a verbal art. While freestyle rap may better reflect a pure oral composition, written raps can be seen to adhere to oral composition —scholar Erik Pihel refers us to freestyle rapper Supernat:

Supernat maintains that all written raps are freestyles before they hit paper…because the source for all rap is the oral improvisation of freestyling. While we need to maintain the distinction between freestyling and written raps, the two styles influence one another and are becoming increasingly intertwined. While written raps have a wider narrative range because of the writer's ability to revise, freestyling provides more varied rhythms and unexpected rhymes," (1996, p. 268).

Even though writing is utilised as a tool, the process is still oral, which is best summarised by the rap I wrote below.

You Sow Your Rhymes in Ink Hoping They Flow
But You Won't Know, til the Voice Goes.

In other words, one cannot write rap without reciting it; the writing process is oral. When writing *Anishaman,* my rhymes (and consequently rhythm) primarily arrived from repeated

verbal improvisations. Often, once I discover a rhyme, I will rhyme it until the rhyme runs out. This is to produce rhythm, because Ani**sham**an does not utilise music. A single rhyme already produces a natural rhythm; therefore, the more you chain, the longer the rhythm lasts. This guarantees an inherent rhythm to the verses and enables the performer to discover and improvise a natural cadence and flow. If one listens to the raps of the show, they will discover the raps all maintain a rhythm and cadence despite there not being a single musical beat. Naturally, this produces a dense rhyming scheme. For example, observe the opening rap of Ani**sham**an. The rhymes are visualised by matching colours.

> Set your sights on those Distant Days
> When the Sky and the Earth were one and the same
> Until the highest name,
> Enlil, Lord of Wind and Haze
> Built up his hoe, and split the terrain
> And, Lo and Behold, the World Got Made
> Out of the Sea, came Ea, Lord of Waterways
> Driving the waves, bringing forth the rain.
> Sprouting everything from grains
> To trees that make the shade.
> And Lo and Behold, the Plants Got Made.
> Mother Arurru, the one who Sustains
> Picked up a lump of clay
> Spun it like a vase into every living shape
> Including something named, the Human Race
> And, Lo and Behold, We Got Made
> Every single clan, tribe, and mob came to be
> Out of Utnapishtim and Ki'ulturim
> Father and Mother of All Humanity.
> Their time on earth proved their worth
> So the gods adorned em with Eternal Life
> On the shores of Dilmum, the Isle of Paradise
> There they remain, setting their sights on the coming days.

Although the rhyming scheme becomes more varied in the final stanza, preceding it are a total of 19 rhymes, which are highlighted in red above. Naturally, arriving at such concentrated rhymes does require writing to focus and polish bars. However, the flow and rhyme come forth with the voice. Writing is a tool, not the means. Most of my rhymes came from this improvisational method, but, like many, I could suffer from writer's block, so occasionally I would utilise a rhyming dictionary. However, I would discover firsthand that while a rhyming dictionary can add some fresh ideas, it cannot be relied on. According to Freestylist T-Love, raps are not just rhymes; they need to be coherent (Pihel, 1996, p. 254). Erik Pihel explains:

> A freestylist's rhyme skills show how well he or she can overcome obstacles and transform a structural challenge into verbal art. The freestylist must come up with as unexpected a rhyme as possible because predictable rhymes create dull poetry. . . (1996, p. 255).

Freestyle or written, good rhyming requires the mental ability to improvise creative yet coherent connections between words. Without these abilities, a rhyming dictionary will only result in predictable, forced rhymes and poor flow. Thus, the skill relies on creative mental improvisation.

Importantly, rap is an excellent narrative medium. As per oral tradition, rap narratives are often utilised for education. Perry writes, "Many songs serve as advisories or encouragements for the listener to comprehend a given idea" (Perry, 2004, p. 80). For example, MC Lyte's *Poor Georgie* recounts the tragic tale of a former lover who perished in a car crash. MC Lyte closes the song on a cautionary message, where she calls the listener to appreciate their loved ones while they are around and to not take life for granted (MC Lyte & UPROXX, 2011). MC Lyte would be one of many influences upon *Ani**sham**an*.

Upon hearing the raps of *Anis**ham**an,* one will instantly hear Lin-Manuel Miranda's influence, given his heavy reliance on a "non-stop rhyming scheme". Miranda is exceptional when it comes to rap narrative, having constructed the two brilliant rap-driven Broadway shows *In the Heights* (2008) and *Hamilton* (2015)*,* Naturally, he would be the biggest influence on the project, considering that growing up most music I listened to were Broadway showtunes. What I loved about showtunes were their lyricism, how these lines of poetry converged to tell a story. Consequently, Miranda was my true gateway into the medium of rap. However, to further develop my rap voice, I performed rap studies of over 30 albums of a slate from the work of pre-rap pioneers such as Gil Scot Heron's *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (1970) to contemporary experimental rappers such as clipping's *Visions of Bodies Being Burned* (2020). A rap study entailed focused listening, where I would read the lyrics as the rap played to continually analyse the rhyming schemes and wordplay at hand. The four most influential were Lin-Manuel Miranda, clipping's Daveed Diggs, KRS-One, and Ari Lesser, each embodying nuances of narrative rap. While these four narrative rappers would be the most influential, overall, every rap album studied shaped *Ani**sham**an's* lyrical voice, enabling me to adapt *Gilgamesh* into a rap narrative, embodying the verbal composition and recitation of oral tradition.

Preproduction: From Script to Animatic

All these multidisciplinary elements required to construct Ani**sham**an into a modern oral tradition would impact the pre-production process in their own way. This section will cover the script, thumbnails, and animatic to reveal how the multidisciplinary performative nature of the show influenced the preproduction elements.

The script was written with the *benshi* in mind, opening with a *maesetsumei* and the majority a *nakasetsumei* in the form

of rap. The show's rap dependency resulted in a playscript, due to its focus on dialogue and with minimal stage directions. However, the animated nature of the film contributed to this lack of stage directions as well. On my previous animation projects, storyboarding tended to define the staging and character action. Therefore, the script was written to give freedom to the storyboarding process. The resulting script was 34 pages long with the final show running for about an hour and ten minutes. Overall, the performative nature of the show from both a performer and character animation perspective resulted in the script resembling a playscript more than a screenplay.

The final film would utilise DUIK AfterEffects rigs and limited animation. Consequently, I watched Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008) and *Seder Masochism* (2018) as reference points for the animation before beginning the thumbnailing process. Both films are juke-box musicals utilising stylised 2D character rigs with limited animation. These films served as excellent reference points on how to make the most out of visual compositions within limited 2D rig animation. Paley often utilises a playful anachronism. For example, in *Seder Masochism*, when the Israelites are approaching the Promised Land, Paley comedically depicts it with a photo of a bear-shaped honey bottle and a jug of milk (Paley, 2018). This is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the bible's consistent description of the Promised Land as a land of "milk and honey". An example of *Anis**ham**an's* usage of this Paley-esque playful anachronism is how Gilgamesh's lack of an earthly equal is depicted by Gilgamesh weighing down a seesaw against several Urukites.

Overall, Paley's style was instrumental to the visual storytelling style of *Anis**ham**an*, inspiring me to embrace a playful anachronism and work within the limitations of 2D rigs. Thus, throughout the storyboarding process, an irreverent playful visual storytelling emerged.

Fig. 13 Seesawing Gilgamesh, Yoel Hill, 2024.

Fig. 14 Example of storyboarding the Anishaman, Yoel Hill, 2025.

For thumbnailing, I took a traditional paper approach, taping each sheet to a whiteboard and storyboarding there. Although the boarding took a traditional approach, it had to be adapted to the multi-display and performative nature of the show. The process consisted of boarding three elements in parallel: the fog display, rear projection screen, and the Ani**sham**an himself.

I used yellow Post-it notes for the fog display and simple thumbnail drawings for the rear projection screen. Utilising sticky notes enabled me to stack images like a flipbook to manage boarding two screens at once. Meanwhile, drawings of the Ani**sham**an usually sat between the screens, as I needed to plan where they would be directing the audience's attention to and when they would hold a mask. Masks were used as a tool to indicate which character was speaking. For example, if Gilgamesh was speaking, then the storyteller held up a Gilgamesh mask during the lines. Although boarding the showman was simple, boarding the fog display and rear projection screen required careful attention, due to the parallel nature of the display. Overall, thumbnailing took several months as I essentially had two sets of storyboards to complete for what would become a feature length show.
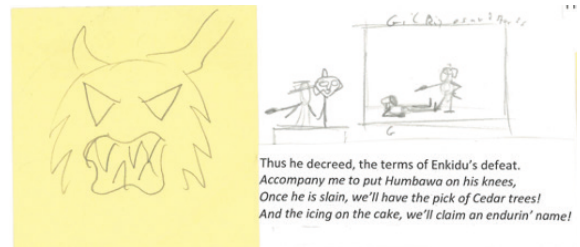
Once the thumbnails were complete, I began production of the animatic using StoryboardPro. Unfortunately, there is no internal method for boarding three screens at once, so I divided one long board into three quadrants: fog display, Ani**sham**an, and rear projection screen. Although the compositions were established within the thumbnailing stage, they were fleshed out and solidified in this animatic phase. However, the performer's planning remained limited to simply screen direction and masks because they would take shape in the performance. Thus, a strong foundation for animation production was established, with the animatic running at about 47 minutes. Naturally, the show would extend beyond the animatic's original runtime, due to the live performative and interactive nature of the show.

The animatic was not the final stage of preproduction, performing it was. After all, Ani**sham**an is a live performance. Ultimately, this was the most crucial part of preproduction as this would not only determine whether the multidisciplinary elements of *Anishaman Presents Gilgamesh* would come together, but whether it functioned like oral tradition. Remember the multidisciplinary approach of oral tradition accentuates oral tradition's telos of making knowledge memorable. Through the process of memorising and performing the animatic, I'd experience this. The raps rhythm and flow acted as a mnemonic device that was enhanced by the visuals of animation. I found myself reacting and reading the screen, pacing myself to visual cues. However, the operation of the visual

Fig. 15 Excerpt of Ani**sham**an animatic, Yoel Hill, 2025.

Fig. 16 Animatic Performance, Photo by Kasey Lee, 2023.

mnemonic hinged on movement. There were shots that were intended to be idle, such as character stance loops, but due to a lack of motion I found it difficult to keep pace with these shots. If they featured spoken word instead of rap, timing was particularly challenging. Thus, when I entered the animation production stage, I spent time replacing the idle loops to dynamic key poses that responded to each line, which in turn made the scene easy to perform. Consequently, I was to consider the animation itself as a memory aid and extension of

my own oral arts. This enabled me to not only memorise a 47-minute animatic but to be able to perform it within a week.

Overall, preproduction built upon a typical animation production pipeline, but each phase was adjusted for the multi-disciplinary live performative demands of the project. Rather than a typical animation screenplay, a hybrid between a *benshi* and play script was produced, due to the dialogue driven nature of the show. The storyboards tackled the three focal points of rear projection screen, fog display, and showman, while leaving room for the performance's improvisation. Meanwhile, the compositions themselves were informed by simple yet playful compositions of Paley's animated films. Lastly, the animatic itself demanded a live performance, revealing animation's prowess as a mnemonic device. These elements would guarantee a fruitful production.

Animation Production and TouchDesigner Tools

Animation production itself would present its own challenges to accommodate for the unorthodox nature of Ani**sham**an. After all, animation had to occur parallel on both the fog display and rear projector screen. Despite the parallel nature of the animation, both screens had to be animated

separately to accommodate for lag as each screen had a resolution of 2048x2880 with each final video file having a resolution of 5760x2880. This was achieved by animating one screen and then exporting it as an image sequence. This said image sequence was then used as a backdrop and the remaining screen was animated in response. Most of the film was animated utilising DUIK Rigs in After Effects. The animation process itself reinforced my recollection of every line, as, for timing, I was animating to scratch dialogue on a loop for hours. Once both screens were animated, they would be exported into a unified video as seen by the figure below.

TouchDesigner would then isolate the animation to its respective projector. Overall, the animation process represented technical challenges to accommodate for the multi-screen nature of the show rather than the live performance as those decisions were primarily made throughout the pre-production stage of the show. TouchDesigner itself is where the performative considerations would take dominance.

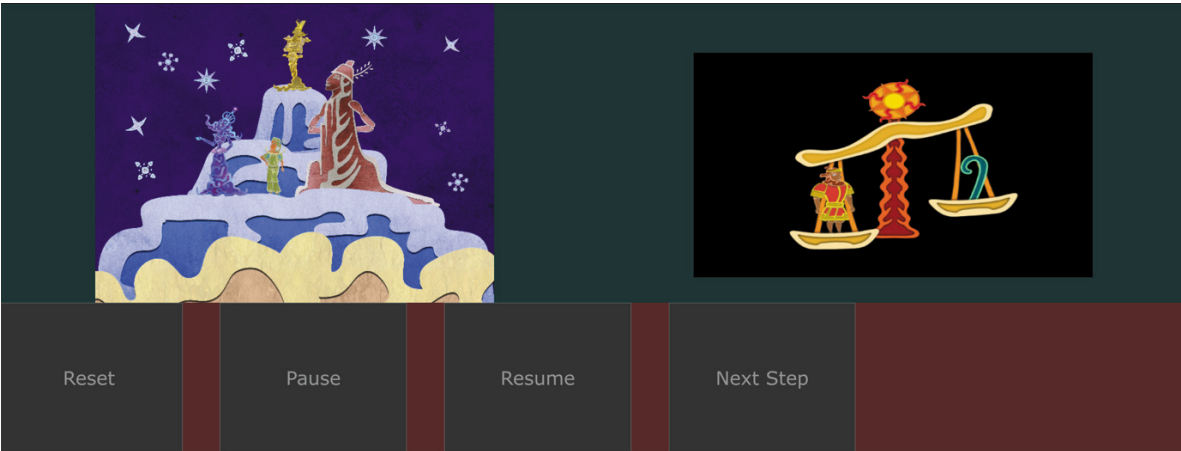Fig. 17 Excerpt of a Final Video Export of Anishaman, Yoel Hill, 2024.

Fig. 18 TouchDesigner Control Panel with Rear Projection and Fog Displays, Ernest Hill, 2025.

Ernest Hill created custom tools in TouchDesigner to accommodate for the live performative nature of the show, allowing the performer to pause a video if a break was needed or skip to the next video file if a delivery finished early. These operations were to be controlled from a computer on the Ani**sham**an's desk.

To ensure the Ani**sham**an always spoke to the audience, rather than to the screens, the main computer functioned as a control panel with a mini version of both screens playing alongside the controls. That way the Ani**sham**an only needed to glance down at a monitor, keeping his voice towards the audience. This was all sorted out during the week of tech rehearsal before the performance.

Overall, the animation pipeline focused more on accommodating towards a multi-screen approach, while TouchDesigner enabled the showman to control the animation in a live setting.

Showtime

While the Ani**sham**an bore promise throughout all its production, nothing would be confirmed until a live audience was in place. Thus, the show was performed for two nights to a collective audience of about 48 people. The audience response was gauged from live first-hand observation and an optional anonymous post-show survey via email. Given that the research reworks oral tradition in both medium and narrative, the questions were catered to assess whether the audience engaged with the format of the show and how the narrative resonated with them. At 24 responses, half of the total attendees offered their feedback. Ethical clearance was approved by the Griffith University Ethics Committee well before any data collection to ensure an appropriate research conduct (GU Reference Number: 2023/908). Overall, both nights were deemed successes with each revealing various strengths of the Ani**sham**an format.

Opening night proved the success of the mobile interactivity connecting the audience and storyteller. It was a quieter, more conservative but nonetheless responsive audience: every time I would introduce the polls with the playful remark "The choice is yours", the audience would give a laugh and eagerly lift their phones. They tended to choose the more violent options, which was playfully addressed by the Ani**sham**an to much laughter. The interactivity gradually eased them into a livelier participatory nature. The following attendee's comments best summarises the success of the mobile interactivity:

> (…) I felt connected with the other audience members whenever our choices would influence the direction of the story. Or when there was a clear choice among the audience. It was fun hearing everyone laugh and cheer when our choices were chosen (Anonymous, 2024).

Overall, the mobile interactivity did achieve its function of facilitating a communal storytelling experience. However, the following night would reveal the showman to be the true facilitator of communal storytelling.
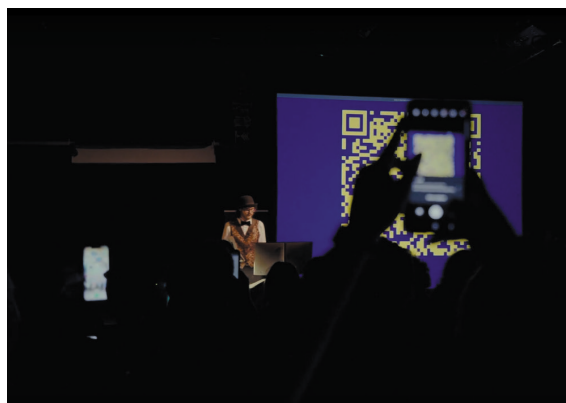

Fig. 19 The audience scans a QR code, Photo by Angus Kirby, 2024.

The second night was full of technical mishaps, testing the improvisational skills of the Ani**sham**an. Initially, the fog display malfunctioned. Instead of panicking or halting the show, I embraced it. I claimed that the gods must have been angry and playfully stalled as the problem was shortly resolved. Then on the third poll, the live results stopped feeding into TouchDesigner. Fortunately, if there are no poll results, TouchDesigner will play the first choice by default, so the performance went on, where I blamed Enlil, regent of heaven and jealous god for the ordeal. Although the interactivity did not work for the rest of the evening, in its place was the recurring joke and a playful interaction with the audience. As one attendee described:

> The polling did not work well the night I attended, but Yoel did brilliantly with his professional "moving right along" attitude. He never forgot that it is story first and tech way below that (Anonymous, 2024).

After all, the story exists within the teller rather than the technology, which is but an extension of the showman. This enabled me to make the malfunctioning tech work for me, but it also empowered me to go analogue at times, where I had the audience cheer and make noise for their choice. Despite and on account of these technical issues, I would say this was the better performance, where I embraced the true showmanship of the *benshi*. Consequently, it might be worth exploring more analogue modes of interactivity in the future, where the showman himself executes the following video rather than the polling system. However, the showman cannot take the full credit; the audience was a major factor in the success. From the beginning, this audience was far more boisterous and receptive to jokes. It is likely it was just the nature of the crowd; however, an additional contributing factor could also be that on the first night, I was more reserved and stiffer because of the opening night stage fright. During the second night, I had the success of the first night fuelling my confidence, further enhanced by the live responses of an extroverted audience, subsequently a reciprocal chemistry was achieved. Either way, a bi-directional storytelling experience was successfully achieved.

Ultimately, neither night was identical. Whilst the first night demonstrated how mobile interactivity can reconnect the audience to the storyteller, the second night revealed how storyteller makes the show. When asked whether the live performer or the mobile phone polling contributed to the communal viewing experience, most attendees attributed it to the showman as seen in the questionnaire data presented in the figure below.

Naturally, this preference is likely skewed, due to the malfunctions of the second night. However, other data from additional survey questions indicate the prominence of the showman.

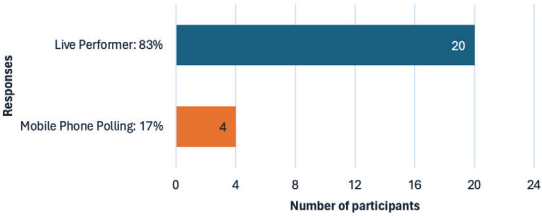Fig. 20 The Anishaman Performs, Photo by Angus Kirby, 2024.

Fig. 21 What contributed the most to a communal viewing experience survey results, Yoel Hill, 2025.
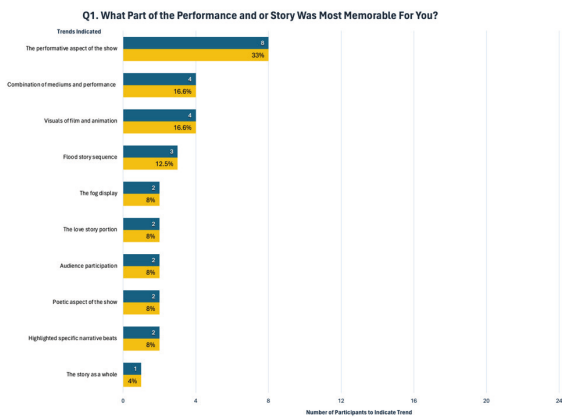
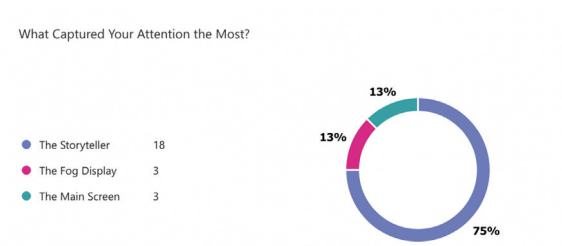Fig. 22 What part of the performance and or story was most memorable for you survey results, Yoel Hill, 2025.

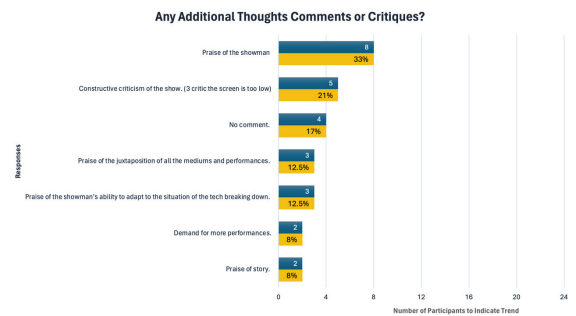Fig. 24 What captured your attention the most survey results, Yoel Hill, 2025.

Fig. 23 Any additional thoughts, comments, or questions survey results, Yoel Hill, 2025.
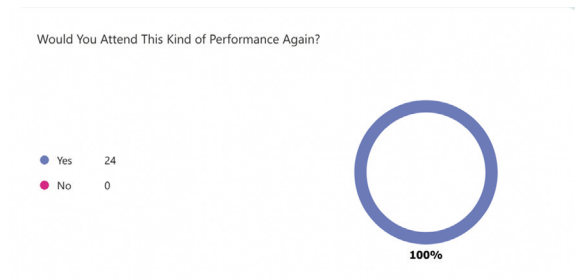
Fig. 25 Would you attend this kind of performance again survey results, Yoel Hill, 2025.

The data in the figure above reveal the performative nature of the show to be the most memorable aspect at one-third of participants. This is further verified by the data seen in the figure below.

When asked for an additional comment or critique on the show, one-third of participants again took a moment to praise the showman. This does indicate a dominance of the showman. When asked what aspect captured the audience's attention the most, three quarters of the audience indicated the showman, as seen in the figure 24.

In short, the data indicate that the showman was the focal point rather than the spectral spectacle of the fog display or the artwork of the main screen. Overall, when these three additional polls are converged, the showman's prominence over the mobile interactivity may not be as skewed as one would assume. As one attendee of the first night reports:

> The phone survey immersive device really brought the audience together as a whole and gave me a positive uplifting feeling even if we were predicting horrible events to befall on the characters. In saying that, the storyteller was the linchpin who really helped tie this all with his brilliant, bubbly presentation and how he linked everything together (Anonymous, 2024).

Fig. 26 The Anishaman introduces Gilgamesh to the audience, Photo by Angus Kirby, 2024.

Even when the mobile interactivity functioned, this attendee hailed the showman as the engine of the show. Further investigating would be required to truly affirm whether this represents the majority, but considering the preceding data it is quite the possibility. The key would be to put on more performances in the future. Regardless of the showman or mobile interactivity contributing to the communal experience, at the very least the performance was a success because the attendees unanimously indicated that they would attend such a performance again, as seen in the figure below.

*The Ani****sham****an Presents Gilgamesh* was well-received by its inaugural audiences, suggesting the promise of the Ani**sham**an as a performative format. This is affirmed by the fact that bi-directional storytelling was achieved both nights, albeit one night digital and the other night analogue. The key to this success is to converge all the units into one cohesive show and being light on one's feet. On the second night, a major unit broke down, yet the Ani**sham**an was able to take advantage of the situation and blend the mishap into a seamless performance. This suggests that while mobile interactivity facilitates bi-directional storytelling, it is ultimately the storyteller who invokes bi-directional storytelling. However, this should not be misconstrued as opposing forces, but rather

embraced as a collaborative synergy between tradition and innovation. Overall *Ani****sham****an* reveals that while the traditional live storytelling of oral tradition remains effective and relevant to this day, the digital can augment the experience to be more accessible to modern screening conventions by using technology to ease spectators into participants. This continues the multi-disciplinary tradition of oral tradition, where every element from mobile interactivity to animation is an extension of the storyteller.

A Multidisciplinary Impact

The *Ani****sham****an Presents Gilgamesh*'s multidisciplinary nature extends it beyond animation into several fields. While this took storytelling back to its roots in oral tradition, it also arguably emulated and modernised a silent movie-going experience, due to its synergy of the *benshi* and mobile interactivity. This bears opportunity for the studies of interactivity, performance art, and notably film history. After all, film scholar Martin Loiperdinger bemoans the scarce number of projects simulating a silent era viewing experience (2014). Consequently, *Ani****sham****an* is the latest contribution to an exclusive club of silent era performance art, such as the ambitious five-year *The Crazy Cinematographé* (2007-2011), film historian Vanessa Toulmin's 2008 Mitchell & Kenyon Collection film lectures, Kim Tae-yong's *byesona* (the Korean *benshi*) performance of 1934's *Cross Roads of Youth* for the Brisbane Asia Pacific Film Festival in 2014, or innovative live silent film remixes like DJ Spooky's 2004 *The Rebirth of a Nation* (Crew 2015; Loiperdinger 2014). All these projects represent different strategies for audience engagement and interactivity, each boasting a contribution to interactive media, performance art, and film history. However, what distinguishes *Ani****sham****an* from the preceding project is its synergy of mobile interactivity and analogue interactivity. In addition to this, *Ani****sham****an Presents Gilgamesh* was specifically written and animated as a multi-disciplinary animated performance, rather than solely

remixing pre-existing archival films like its predecessors (as effective as that may be). This presents a multidisciplinary approach for developing a hybrid between live performance and animation specifically, where performance influences the animation pipeline. Please visit www.anishaman.ink to see a trailer for the show.

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