



Representation of Javanese Mystical Beliefs in the Visual of the Pamali Game: A Roland Barthes Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze how the visual sign system in the game Pamali: The White Lady represents the mystical beliefs of Javanese society through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. Amid the growth of Indonesia's digital game industry and the persistence of Javanese mysticism in contemporary life, this game has not yet been examined specifically through Barthes' framework, leaving an analytical gap that this research seeks to address. This study employs a qualitative descriptive-interpretive method using Barthes' two-order signification, namely denotation, connotation, and myth, enriched with Javanese mythological literature as a cultural-symbolic framework. Data were collected through visual documentation of gameplay and a literature review, focusing on eight main visual elements: the White Lady character, the 1990s Javanese house setting, sesajen (ritual offerings), a baby doll, hair in the bathroom, jenglot, a garlic necklace, and a banyan tree. The results indicate that each element operates in layers: denotation as realistic representation, connotation as a carrier of cultural meaning, and myth as the naturalization of Javanese mystical beliefs in everyday life. These findings affirm that Pamali: White Lady functions as a cultural text and, at the same time, a medium for preserving Javanese mystical beliefs in an interactive digital format.

Introduction

Indonesia's digital game industry is growing rapidly as a subsector of the creative economy, although the market share of local developers remains below five percent and is dominated by foreign products (Hudrasyah, Briantono, Fatima, & Rahadi, 2019). Amid these conditions, local developers increasingly draw on culture, mythology, and folklore as narrative and visual foundations for building an Indonesian game identity. This effort is evident in the proliferation of games that feature mythological figures and supernatural beings of the archipelago, such as *kuntulanak* (a female ghost), *pocong* (a shrouded corpse ghost), and the Balinese *leak*, as the basis of characters and stories. Games are considered capable of serving as an informal educational medium as well as a means of cultural diplomacy for international audiences (Sulaiman & Rosyidah, 2025), as seen in the figure of Nyi Roro Kidul, modernized into the character Kadita in *Mobile Legends* (Alfian & Kusumandyoko, 2020). Although cultural representation in local games still tends to be symbolic (Agung, Kartasudjana, & Permana, 2021), this phenomenon demonstrates the potential of games as a tool for preserving collective

cultural identity. More than mere entertainment, such games have the potential to become living cultural archives that store and transmit local knowledge to the digital generation. Javanese mystical beliefs are not merely a relic of the past, but remain alive and negotiated in contemporary life. Animistic and dynamistic practices are still strongly held by Javanese society; a study of a Javanese mystical-story column shows that beliefs in guardian spirits such as *genderuwo* and *wewe*, in haunted places that must not be disturbed, and in sacred sites believed to bring fortune (*ngalap berkah*) remain firmly held (Widiastuti, 2023). Rituals at Parangkusumo as a manifestation of the myth of Kanjeng Ratu Kidul show that the mystical world is difficult to separate from the everyday life of Javanese society (Yuwono, 2023), even as a spectrum of responses emerges, ranging from skepticism to active preservation (Asy'arie & Roibin, 2024). Rather than eliminating mystical reasoning, the digital ecosystem has instead become a hybrid medium that expands its space of expression. Javanese mystical traditions are maintained because they play a role in preserving the social order (Wardhani, Arditama, Noe, & Narimo, 2021), and popular media consistently re-represent them in formats relevant to the contemporary generation (Ihsana & Urfan, 2024).

It is precisely at this meeting point of digital technology and myth that the game *Pamali: Indonesian Folklore Horror*, particularly the chapter *The White Lady*, revives the *kuntilanak* mythology through a blend of *pamali* (cultural taboos), myth, and interactive visual technology (Setyawati, Retnowati, & Nugraha, 2021). The game comprehensively constructs cultural signifiers through its character design, a 1990s Javanese house, and symbolic objects charged with mystical meaning, as a creative reinterpretation of its designers' ideal cultural concepts (Fauzhan, Alvian, Andreanto, & Amzy, 2020). The dim lighting, dark color palette, and audio composition in this game collectively create a horror atmosphere rooted in local spiritual experience, yet built within a digital environment using Unreal Engine 4, thereby blurring the boundaries between reality, myth, and fantasy (Setyawati et al., 2021). Since its release in 2018, the game has gained recognition at both local and international award events and is widely available on the Steam platform, indicating that the cultural representation within it is intended not only for local consumption but also reaches cross-cultural audiences. In Javanese culture, the *kuntilanak* is not a stand-alone entity, but part of a web of myth containing layers of meaning about trauma and the social dynamics of women (Luniar & Febriana, 2022), just as other chapters in the *Pamali* series represent folklore through denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings tied to the collective memory of society (Ahmad Thabathaba'i S & Putra, 2021).

Within Roland Barthes' semiotic framework (in Nofia & Bustam, 2022), visual signs are read at three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. This approach is relevant because visuals in digital media operate as a layered sign system (Damayanti, 2023). Within Roland Barthes' semiotic framework (in Nofia & Bustam, 2022), visual signs are read at three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. This approach is relevant because visuals in digital media operate as a layered sign system (Damayanti, 2023). Several prior studies have approached related objects, yet each leaves a distinct gap. Luniar and Febriana (2022) applied Barthesian semiotics to the *kuntilanak* in the film *Mangkujiwo* and convincingly traced its meaning from denotation to the myth of feminine trauma; however, their object is film, a linear and one-directional medium, so their findings cannot account for how meaning is produced in an interactive medium in which the audience actively participates. Damayanti (2023) employed Barthes' visual semiotics to examine cultural identity in game characters, but the analysis remained at the level of isolated character design and did not address a culturally specific Indonesian belief system as an integrated sign network. Fauzhan et al. (2020) did analyze the visuals of *Pamali*, yet they used Plato's theory of mimesis, which frames the visuals merely as an imitation of an ideal cultural reality and therefore cannot reveal the ideological, myth-

making layer that Barthes' framework foregrounds. Setyawati et al. (2021) examined the same game through Baudrillard's hyperreality, focusing on the blurring of reality and simulation rather than on how cultural signs signify and naturalize belief. Meanwhile, Suroyo et al. (2025) mapped Javanese mystical entities within cosmology and social norms, but from an anthropological rather than a semiotic-visual standpoint, leaving the visual sign system of digital media unexamined.

Taken together, these studies leave two fundamental gaps. Theoretically, Barthesian semiotics has been applied almost exclusively to static or linear media such as film and book covers, so it remains unclear how myth is signified in an interactive medium in which the player actively co-produces meaning; moreover, the studies that do examine *Pamali* rely on mimesis or hyperreality, frameworks that capture imitation and simulation but not the naturalization of belief into a seemingly natural reality that defines Barthes' concept of myth (Lagopoulos et al., 2024; Danesi, 2026; Arifoğlu, 2026). Methodologically, no prior work has systematically read the game's visual elements as an integrated, layered sign system tied specifically to living Javanese mystical beliefs. The present study addresses these gaps by applying Barthes' three-order signification to a structured corpus of eight visual elements of *Pamali: The White Lady*, thereby advancing existing knowledge in two respects: it extends Barthesian semiotics from static media into an interactive digital medium, and it demonstrates that a video game operates not merely as imitation or simulation but as an active mechanism for naturalizing Javanese mystical beliefs.

The urgency of this research lies in three points. First, visual semiotic studies of Indonesian local horror games are still very limited, even though this medium has developed into a significant means of cultural representation in the digital era. Second, the Javanese mystical beliefs that form the foundation of this game constitute a living cultural sign system that continues to be reproduced in society's life, so that its representation in a digital medium deserves to be examined critically and systematically (Pamungkas et al., 2024; Nurziana & Firdaus, 2025; Nadhif, 2026). Third, on a practical level, understanding how a game's visual elements represent local beliefs can serve as an empirical reference for designers in presenting cultural identity accurately and with dignity, while also strengthening the position of video games as a medium for preserving intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, this research offers novelty in the form of integrating Barthesian semiotics, game visual representation, and the Javanese mystical belief system within a single cohesive analytical framework. Its objectives are to identify the visual elements in *Pamali: White Lady* that carry cultural signs, to analyze their denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings through Barthes' framework, and to reveal how the entire visual sign system represents the mystical beliefs of Javanese society through an interactive digital medium.

Method

Research Approach and Design

This research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretive design. This approach was selected because the object of the study, namely the visual sign system in *Pamali: Indonesian Folklore Horror Chapter 1: The White Lady*, represents an interpretive cultural phenomenon whose meanings cannot be adequately reduced to numerical or statistical categories (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The descriptive-interpretive design enables the researchers to describe the visual elements presented in the game and subsequently interpret their cultural meanings through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The research focuses on the representation of Javanese mystical beliefs through visual signs embedded in the game's characters, settings, ritual objects, and visual atmosphere. The analysis therefore emphasizes

the relationship between visual representation and the cultural meanings associated with Javanese mythology and mystical beliefs.

Research Object and Scope

The object of this research is *Pamali: Indonesian Folklore Horror Chapter 1: The White Lady*, developed by StoryTale Studios and released on 28 December 2018 through the Steam platform. The research is limited to this single game as the primary object of analysis. The selection of the game was based on three considerations. First, *Pamali: The White Lady* explicitly and comprehensively incorporates Javanese mystical beliefs into its visual and narrative systems. Second, the game has received international recognition, making its representation of Indonesian and Javanese cultural beliefs relevant to cross-cultural interpretation. Third, the visual representation of Javanese mystical beliefs in the game has not been specifically examined using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, indicating an analytical gap that this research seeks to address.

Data Corpus and Units of Analysis

Because this research uses a qualitative approach, the concept of population and sample is replaced by a visual data corpus and units of analysis. The research corpus was initially organized into four categories of visual data: White Lady character design, including costume, color, gesture, and facial expression, Setting and environment, including Javanese house architecture, traditional properties, and lighting arrangements, Pamali symbols, including sharp objects, *sesajen*, and ritual objects; and Overall visual atmosphere, including dominant colors, visual effects, and spatial ambience. From these four categories, eight specific visual elements were selected as the final units of analysis: (1) the White Lady character, (2) the 1990s Javanese house setting, (3) *sesajen*, (4) a baby doll, (5) hair in the bathroom, (6) *jenglot*, (7) a garlic necklace, and (8) a banyan tree.

The selection of these elements was based on three inclusion criteria. First, prominence and recurrence, meaning that the element appears repeatedly or occupies a visually salient position in the documented gameplay and therefore indicates deliberate visual emphasis by the developer. Second, cultural specificity, meaning that the element has an identifiable referent within Javanese mystical beliefs or folklore that can be verified through scholarly literature, such as the *kuntilanak*, *sesajen*, *jenglot*, and banyan tree. Third, semiotic richness, meaning that the element conveys meanings beyond its literal visual appearance and therefore provides potential for connotative and mythical interpretation. Only elements fulfilling all three criteria and collectively representing the four corpus categories were retained as the final units of analysis. This selection was intended to provide a representative corpus of how the game encodes Javanese mystical beliefs through characters, spatial settings, ritual objects, and visual atmosphere.

Data Sources and Research Materials

The research does not involve human informants because the data consist entirely of digital visual objects. The primary data were obtained through visual documentation of gameplay available on the Steam Community platform and gameplay videos uploaded by players on YouTube. These sources were used as visual representations of the game's original appearance. The main research materials consisted of gameplay screenshots, academic literature concerning Javanese semiotics and mythology, and previous studies in game studies and Visual Communication Design (VCD). The use of gameplay documentation from multiple sources also enabled the researchers to verify the consistency and authenticity of the visual elements analyzed.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted through two complementary procedures: systematic visual observation and literature review. First, systematic visual observation was conducted by documenting gameplay and identifying the visual elements relevant to the research objectives. Screenshots were collected for the eight predetermined units of analysis and subsequently organized according to the four visual corpus categories. Second, a literature review was conducted to obtain theoretical and cultural references relevant to the interpretation of the collected visual data. The literature search focused on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, Javanese mystical beliefs, Javanese mythology and cosmology, the *pamali* system, and previous studies in game studies and Visual Communication Design. The literature review was used to support the interpretation of the connotative and mythical meanings identified in the visual corpus (Christopher & Leuszler, 2023).

Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, particularly his two levels of signification. The first level concerns denotation, referring to the direct relationship between the signifier and signified and describing the literal representation of the visual sign. The second level concerns connotation, in which the sign acquires cultural, emotional, ideological, and socio-cultural associations. At this level, the connotative meaning may develop into myth, namely a culturally constructed meaning that becomes naturalized within a particular society (Barthes, in Nofia & Bustam, 2022). The analysis was conducted in four sequential stages. First, inventory and classification. All collected screenshots were inventoried, organized, and classified according to the four predetermined visual categories. Each potential visual element was labeled and evaluated against the inclusion criteria before being incorporated into the final analytical corpus. Second, coding and layered reading. Each selected visual element was analyzed using three analytical codes recorded in an analysis matrix: Denotative code: identification of the literal visual characteristics, including form, color, position, gesture, spatial arrangement, and accompanying objects; Connotative code: interpretation of the cultural, emotional, symbolic, and social associations generated by the visual sign; and Mythical code: deconstruction of the naturalized cultural beliefs and ideological meanings represented through the visual sign. The analysis matrix served as the primary coding instrument and audit trail for the interpretation. The resulting matrix was subsequently presented as an analytical table in the Results section.

Third, triangulation. The credibility and trustworthiness of the interpretations were established through source triangulation and theoretical-cultural triangulation (Noble & Smith, 2025). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing the same visual elements across multiple gameplay sources, including Steam Community screenshots and gameplay videos from different YouTube players. This procedure was intended to confirm that the identified visual elements were authentic, consistent, and not merely artifacts of a single recording. Theoretical-cultural triangulation was conducted by comparing the connotative and mythical interpretations with scholarly literature concerning Javanese mythology, cosmology, and mystical beliefs. Particular attention was given to the concepts of *jagad lelembut* and *pamali* as a cosmological and cultural boundary (Zulkifli & Fitria, 2023; Wardhani et al., 2021). In addition, the interpretations were discussed among the authors to minimize individual interpretive bias. Fourth, synthesis. The findings from the denotative, connotative, and mythical readings were integrated into an interpretive narrative. This synthesis connects the formal visual characteristics of each sign with the broader cultural context of Javanese mystical beliefs. Consequently, the analysis does not merely identify visual signs but also explains how the game constructs and communicates cultural meanings through its visual system.

Results And Discussion

The Richness of Indonesian Horror Folklore

Indonesia is a country with an extremely diverse wealth of horror folklore, formed from hundreds of oral traditions that have developed across various ethnic groups and regions. Mystical figures such as *kuntilanak*, *pocong*, *genderuwo*, and *wewe gombel* are part of the archipelago's heritage of folktales, passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition. The local wisdom contained in these stories can continue to be explored through various contemporary media, including digital games, as seen in efforts to preserve elements of Indonesian culture in local horror games aimed at a global audience (Wibowo & Suyudi, 2024). This diversity of folklore is not limited to the national level but also develops in local variations in each region: Javanese society knows *banaspati* and *wewe gombel*, Balinese society has the *leak*, while the people of Kalimantan know the *kuyang* as a mystical entity characteristic of their region. More than merely a list of supernatural entities, this wealth of horror folklore functions as an archive of social values and norms passed down through generations, in which these mystical figures are essentially not always interpreted as purely evil entities, but serve an educational function as a reminder for people not to violate the social norms that apply within society.

This wealth of horror folklore holds great potential as a source of ideas in the development of Indonesian local games. The visual and narrative elements attached to each mystical entity, from the distinctive iconography of the *kuntilanak*, the eerie atmosphere associated with old houses and large trees, to the system of taboos or *pamali* that accompanies societal beliefs, provide a rich content base that has not yet been fully explored in the national game industry. This potential has been concretely utilized by StoryTale Studios through the series *Pamali: Indonesian Folklore Horror*, which explicitly builds each of its chapters upon one specific folklore entity: White Lady (*kuntilanak*), The Tied Corpse (*pocong*), The Little Devil (*tuyul*), and The Hungry Witch (*leak*). This game demonstrates that Indonesian horror folklore is not merely static cultural heritage, but a narrative and visual resource that can be creatively reinterpreted into a contemporary interactive medium, while also potentially serving as an instrument for introducing local culture to a younger generation familiar with the digital ecosystem.

Visualization of the Game Pamali: White Lady

The game *Pamali: Indonesian Folklore Horror Chapter 1: The White Lady* was developed by StoryTale Studios, an independent game studio based in Bandung, Indonesia, and officially released on 28 December 2018 through the Steam (PC) platform, built using Unreal Engine 4. This game is the first part of a four-chapter anthology, each of which features one Indonesian folklore entity, with the first chapter focusing on the *kuntilanak* (The White Lady). For the uniqueness of its approach, the game earned recognition as an Official Selection at the Game Prime Awards 2018 as well as Most Favorite Local Game at the Kincir Game & Movie Awards 2018.

The first character is Jaka Sunarya, the character played by the player from a first-person perspective. Jaka is an urban youth from Jakarta who returns to his hometown in West Java to sell the family house that has long been empty. Visually, the representation of Jaka is minimal; the player does not see Jaka's body directly but only learns his identity through an old photograph found inside the house. This design choice was made deliberately to strengthen immersivity: the player does not merely observe Jaka but becomes Jaka, so that every decision regarding *pamali* feels like a personal decision.



Figure 1. Photograph of the Character Jaka Sunarya Found Inside the House. Source: i Scream Games Network (2022), <https://youtu.be/SrFLsF31tdI>

The second and visually most dominant character is Nenden Endah Sunarya, Jaka's older sister, who transforms into the White Lady, or *kuntilanak*. Nenden's visual design refers directly to the iconography of the *kuntilanak* in Javanese belief tradition: a female figure wrapped in dull white clothing, long black hair hanging loose and covering the face, a rigid posture, and an inhuman way of moving, in one condition standing upright and threatening, in another able to float. The design approach chosen by the developer is subtle horror: dread is built not through excessive visual shocks, but through distorted cultural familiarity, a figure who is known (an older sister) appearing in a form that can no longer be recognized.



Figure 2. The White Lady Character Appears When the Main Character Approaches the Doll in the Corridor. Source: Steam Community (2018), <https://steamcommunity.com/app/854570/screenshots>

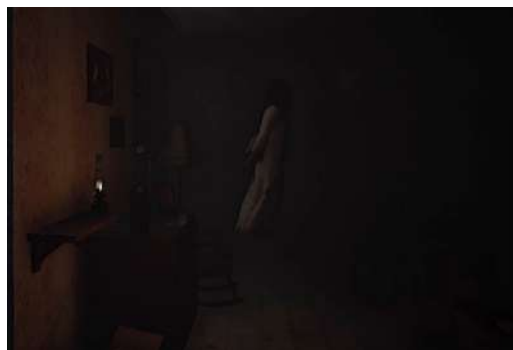


Figure 3. The White Lady Character in a Floating Position. Source: Steam Community (2018), <https://steamcommunity.com/app/854570/screenshots>

The game's visual atmosphere is constructed through a consistently dark, desaturated palette (dark brown, dull green, gray, and black) and minimal lighting. In a representative corridor scene, the sole light source is a small table lamp that deliberately illuminates a framed photograph of the deceased Nenden, directing the player's attention to her. Rather than serving conventional horror shock, these choices already carry meaning: the faded palette signifies a space from which life has departed, while the selective lighting foregrounds the figure whose presence still lingers.



Figure 4. The Game's Dominant Color Palette in the Main Room of the House. Source: Steam Community (2018), <https://steamcommunity.com/app/854570/screenshots>



Figure 5. The Lighting System in the House Corridor. Source: Steam Community (2018), <https://steamcommunity.com/app/854570/screenshots>

The interior reinforces this through elements characteristic of a 1990s Javanese house, mold-stained ceilings, bare bulbs, worn furniture, and floating dust, that connote a home long abandoned yet not entirely vacated. Outside, the house appears as a dark silhouette wrapped in fog, blurring the boundary between the reachable and the unreachable and evoking the liminal space between the human and supernatural worlds. These environmental signs establish the atmospheric ground on which the eight symbolic elements analyzed below operate.



Figure 6. Interior Design of the Living Room of a 1990s Javanese House. Source: Steam Community (2018), <https://steamcommunity.com/app/854570/screenshots>



Figure 7. *The Exterior Atmosphere of the House at Night*. Source: Steam Community (2018), <https://steamcommunity.com/app/854570/screenshots>

Beyond its visual design, the game is built on a branching-narrative structure driven by player choices across three nights in the family house, in which the central mechanic is the *pamali* system, a set of Javanese cultural taboos (e.g., not misplacing sharp objects, not discarding garlic or amulets, and performing the *sesajen* procedure correctly) that the player must observe. Obeying or violating these taboos generates different narrative branches leading to one of 35 possible endings. This design is significant for the present analysis because it positions Javanese belief not as a decorative backdrop but as an active system the player must engage, so that the visual signs examined below are experienced within a participatory rather than a passive mode of reception.



Figure 8. *The Branching Decision-Choice System at a Crucial Point in the Game*. Source: Miawaug (2018), <https://youtu.be/Lop7xPE64Uk>

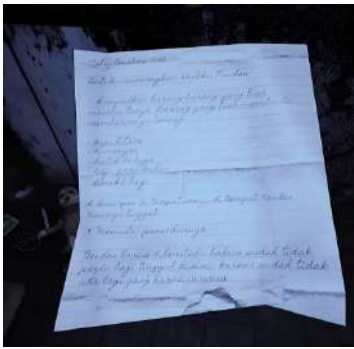
Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis of Visual Symbols

Building on this visual context, the core of the analysis lies in reading the eight selected elements through Barthes' three orders of signification. Table 1 presents this reading systematically: for each element, the denotative layer records its literal visual form, the connotative layer interprets the cultural and emotional associations it evokes, and the mythical layer identifies the Javanese belief that the sign naturalizes. The table therefore constitutes the primary research finding, while the preceding description functions only as the necessary context for these interpretations.

Table 1. Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis of the Visual Symbols of the Game *Pamali: White Lady* (StoryTale Studios / Steam, 2018)

No	Visual Element	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
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1	  The White Lady Character (<i>Kuntilanak Nenden</i>) Source: <i>Steam Community</i> (2018)	A female figure in dull white clothing, long black hair hanging loose and covering the entire face, pale skin, white eyeballs, a rigid posture, hands holding a doll.	The color white connotes death and mourning in Javanese tradition. loose hair is the <i>kuntilanak</i> iconography deeply rooted in Indonesian folklore. The unnatural body movement connotes that this figure is no longer a living being.	The spirit of a woman who died in childbirth and is unable to move on to the next realm, representing feminine trauma and Javanese society's anxiety toward unnatural death (Suroyo et al., 2025).
2	 Interior Setting of a 1990s Javanese House Source: <i>Steam Community</i> (2018)	Old wooden furniture, a vintage tube television, a small oil lamp, dirty patterned ceramic floors, walls with faded paint, dust particles floating in the air, yellow-colored lighting, many old paintings.	Worn furniture connotes an era frozen in the past. The dusty and neglected condition connotes that life has long departed from this place.	An abandoned house in Javanese belief is not merely empty property, but a space vulnerable to being inhabited by supernatural entities (Suroyo et al., 2025).
3		Seen from above the table are black coffee, a coconut shell, and a wedding dress. A sheet of handwritten lined paper dated 12 September 1998 contains ritual instructions for calming Nenden with five objects: black coffee, incense, a coconut shell, a	The arrangement of objects placed deliberately connotes conscious communication between humans and spirits. The procedure paper reinforces this connotation: there is a clear system and intention, not a spontaneous ritual.	The <i>sesajen</i> ritual naturalizes the belief that the relationship between humans and spirits is two-way and can be managed through correct ritual action (Fauzhan et al., 2020).

	 Nenden's Sesajen and the Procedure Paper Source: <i>Windah Basudara (2022)</i>	wedding dress, and a baby doll.		
4	 Baby Doll Source: <i>Windah Basudara (2022)</i>	A pale white baby doll with a face of faded painted features, lying inside an old rusty baby cradle together with a star toy hanger.	The broken and pale doll connotes a loss frozen in time; a toy left behind not because the child grew up, but because the child was once born.	The doll as a medium for a spirit to reside in, becoming an object connecting the human world and the spirit of Nenden, who is not yet at peace (Fauzhan et al., 2020).
5	 Hair in the Bathroom Source: <i>i Scream Games Network (2022)</i>	A dense, irregular clump of black hair lying on the bathroom floor, close to a reddish-brown stain on the ceramic.	A large clump of hair connotes that something unnatural has occurred. The stain on the floor reinforces the impression that this space holds traces of a painful event.	The iconic sign of the <i>kuntilanak's</i> presence in Javanese folklore, a trace of the presence of a supernatural entity that is unseen yet real (Fauzhan et al., 2020).
6	 Jenglol Source: <i>Windah Basudara (2022)</i>	A very thin and elongated figure, hands crossed on the chest, lying on a dark wooden floor together with a clay jar and	A body that is dead yet does not decay connotes something that defies the natural process of death. The deliberate hand position connotes special	The <i>jenglol</i> in Javanese belief is a mystical artifact containing supernatural power and serving as a bridge between the human

		several sheets of paper.	treatment toward this figure.	world and the supernatural world (Suroyo et al., 2025).
7	 Garlic Necklace Source: <i>i Scream Games Network</i> (2022)	A string of garlic strung vertically forming a necklace and hung against the wall; beneath it is an old wooden chair, and to the right is a large floor lamp.	Garlic strung and hung deliberately connotes an active protective function, not decoration, but a defense against a threat that the homeowner is aware of.	Garlic as a repellent against the <i>kuntilanak</i> is a belief deeply rooted in the Javanese mystical tradition, presented as a traditional protection system (Fauzhan et al., 2020).
8	 Banyan Tree in the House Yard Source: <i>Steam Community</i> (2018)	A large tree with a thick trunk in a yard blanketed by thick fog; beneath it hangs an old rusty wooden swing, empty and neglected.	The large old banyan tree connotes something that has long existed, watches over, and cannot be moved; its presence in the house yard is not merely a natural element, but a marker that this location has a long and heavy history. The fog enveloping it reinforces the impression that this tree stands between two worlds.	In Javanese mystical belief, the old banyan tree is the dwelling place of ancestral spirits and supernatural beings; the boundary between the human world and the supernatural world at that location is very thin (Suroyo et al., 2025; Lestari et al., 2024).

Image source: Steam Community. (2018). *Pamali: Indonesian Folklore Horror Chapter 1: The White Lady*. <https://steamcommunity.com/app/854570/screenshots>; Windah Basudara. (2022). *AKHIRNYA AKU MELANJUTKAN PAMALI KUNTILANAK!* *Pamali: The White Lady*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/live/T6mliHJIFeo>; *i Scream Games Network*. (2022). *Pamali Indonesian Folklore: The White Lady - Full Longplay Walkthrough Gameplay*. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/SrFLsF31tdI>

Based on the analysis of these eight elements, a consistent pattern was found: each element operates in layers, through denotation as a realistic representation of physical objects and space, connotation as an emotional and cultural charge referring to Javanese society's anxiety toward death and the supernatural world, and myth as the naturalization of Javanese mystical beliefs in everyday life.

Myth Naturalization through Interactive Mechanics

The layered denotation–connotation–myth pattern found in the eight visual elements shows that the game *Pamali: White Lady* does not merely present a horror aesthetic, but operates visual signs as an active mechanism of mythologization, as conceptualized by Barthes (in Nofia & Bustam, 2022): Javanese mystical beliefs are presented in such a way that they appear as natural reality rather than a cultural construction. This finding strengthens and, at the same time, extends the argument of Ahmad Thabathaba'i S and Putra (2021) that the *Pamali* series reformulates the way society views the supernatural within an interactive media format. Unlike film, which is one-directional, this game naturalizes myth through the *pamali* mechanic that is actively played, so that the player does not merely watch the myth but also participates in producing it through every branching decision taken.

Pamali Objects as an Ethical System

The elements of the baby doll, *jenglot*, and *sesajen* specifically show how cultural connotation is formed from the collective anxiety of Javanese society toward unnatural death, consistent with the finding of Suroyo et al. (2025) that Javanese mystical entities are rooted in cosmology and social norms. However, this research finds a nuance not yet revealed by previous studies: the *pamali* objects in this game function not only as passive markers of that anxiety, but as an interactive mechanic that forces the player to take a moral stance, whether to respect or to violate the taboo. Thus, Javanese mystical beliefs are not merely represented as a story backdrop, but are functioned as an ethical system that the player must negotiate throughout the game, a modification of the understanding of Fauzhan et al. (2020), who view the visual elements of *Pamali* primarily as a mimetic reproduction of ideal cultural concepts.

Video Games as a Medium for Cultural Preservation

Generation Z and millennials, as the primary players of the digital game ecosystem, grow up in a paradox of identity: on one hand, they are massively exposed to the currents of globalization, yet on the other, they still need a connection to their local cultural roots. This generation demonstrates a high adaptive capacity in creatively using digital media to re-present local culture (Fitri et al., 2025), and the game *Pamali: White Lady* arrives precisely at this intersection, making Javanese mystical beliefs, which are often considered outdated, the core of its playing experience. Through the branching-narrative mechanic based on the *pamali* system, the player undergoes a process of cultural literacy different from formal learning: the player is forced to recognize the logic of Javanese taboos and to bear the consequences of every violation, consistent with the finding of Aprilianto, Wijayanti, and Chamid (2025) that games based on folktales can bridge the gap between traditional values and the preferences of the digital generation.

Theoretically, this finding strengthens the position of video games as cultural texts capable of representing local belief systems in a complex and layered manner (Ahmad Thabathaba'i S & Putra, 2021). Practically, this finding provides a conceptual framework for game designers to utilize iconography, color, and mise en scène as strategies for constructing meaning rooted in local wisdom, replacing generic aesthetics, while also affirming the potential of games as a

medium for preserving intangible cultural heritage amid the pressures of modernization (Ihsana & Urfan, 2024). Nevertheless, cultural representation in games remains at risk of simplification for the sake of market interests, as shown in studies of other Nusantara cultural representations that remain symbolic and not yet philosophically profound (Agung et al., 2021); this very risk drives local developers such as StoryTale Studios to continually refine the accuracy of the cultural representation they present.

Theoretical Implications and Contribution to Prior Research

When situated against previous research, the findings reveal clear points of both convergence and divergence. They converge with Ahmad Thabathaba'i S and Putra (2021) and Suroyo et al. (2025) in confirming that the *Pamali* series and Javanese mystical entities encode a coherent cultural cosmology rather than arbitrary horror imagery, and with Luniar and Febriana (2022) in showing that the *kuntilanak* is signified through a layered progression from physical denotation to the myth of feminine trauma. The findings diverge, however, in two respects. First, whereas Fauzhan et al. (2020) read the visuals of *Pamali* as a mimetic reproduction of an ideal cultural reality, this study demonstrates that the same visuals do not merely imitate belief but actively naturalize it as myth, thereby shifting the analytical emphasis from imitation to ideological signification. Second, whereas Luniar and Febriana (2022) and Setyawati et al. (2021) analyzed meaning in media where the audience remains a spectator (film and hyperreal spectacle), this study shows that in an interactive medium the player is positioned as a participant whose choices co-determine which mythical readings are actualized. These divergences mark the specific contribution of the present study to both visual semiotics and game studies.

Theoretically, these findings carry an implication for the application of Barthesian semiotics itself. Barthes' model presupposes a reader who decodes a relatively fixed text a photograph, an advertisement, or a film frame in which the myth is already inscribed and awaits interpretation (Capra & Floridi, 2023; Lombardinilo, 2024; Vezza, 2025; Avnaim, 2025; Michell, 2026). In an interactive medium such as *Pamali: The White Lady*, however, the sign system is not fully fixed: through the *pamali* mechanic and the branching narrative, the player does not only decode pre-existing myth but also participates in enacting and reproducing it, since each decision to honor or violate a taboo actualizes a particular chain of signification and a particular ending. Myth, in this context, becomes performative as well as interpretive. This suggests that when Barthes' framework is extended to interactive media, the classic relationship of "text-reader" must be reconceived as "system participant," in which meaning is co-constructed through action rather than merely received. Recognizing this shift is the principal theoretical contribution of this study and opens a direction for future semiotic research on games and other participatory media.

Conclusion

The game *Pamali: Indonesian Folklore Horror Chapter 1: The White Lady* is an adventure-horror game by StoryTale Studios that builds its entire visual and narrative system upon Javanese mystical beliefs. Through the White Lady character (the *kuntilanak* Nenden), the 1990s Javanese house setting, and the *pamali*-based game mechanic that produces 35 possible endings, this game makes cultural belief not merely a decorative backdrop, but a functional element that actively shapes the playing experience itself.

Based on Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis of the eight main visual elements, it was found that each symbol operates in layers through the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, answering the research question and objectives formulated at the outset. At the denotative level, these elements appear as realistic representations of physical objects and space. At the

connotative level, these elements carry emotional and cultural charges that refer to Javanese society's anxiety toward death and the supernatural world. At the mythical level, the entire visual system naturalizes Javanese mystical beliefs, including the existence of the *kuntilanak* as the spirit of a woman who died in childbirth, as something natural and inherent in everyday life, rather than merely a horror element.

This finding affirms that the game *Pamali* functions as more than merely a horror-entertainment medium, but also as a cultural text that proves Javanese mystical beliefs can be transmitted through an interactive digital medium without sacrificing the authenticity of their meaning. This research strengthens the position of video games as an instrument for preserving Indonesia's intangible cultural heritage, while also serving as an empirical reference for local game developers in designing accurate and dignified cultural representation, and enriching the application of the Barthesian semiotic framework to the interactive medium, which was previously used more on static media. Future research is advised to expand the study to the entire *Pamali* series or to consider an empirical player-reception approach in order to enrich the understanding of the representation of Javanese mystical beliefs in the game medium.

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