

Myth meets modern mechanics: This M'sian game blends folklore with innovation

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In Mastra, two teams engage in fierce battles with the primary objective of destroying the enemy's base. — Photos: Todak Studios

Malaysia's presence in the world of video games has grown steadily, yet the country is still working to establish itself as a significant global player.

Mastra, an ambitious project by Todak Studios, aims to help redefine this narrative by blending local and regional folklore with cutting-edge game technology.

This fusion not only brings cultural heritage to the forefront but also offers players an immersive experience that combines traditional storytelling with modern interactive design, creating a compelling entry in the gaming landscape.

"Todak Studios' upcoming multiplayer online battle arena (Moba) game, *Mastra*, is deeply rooted in South-East Asian culture, particularly from the seventh-century Nusantara region, which encompasses modern-day Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and parts of Indonesia and Thailand," says Ahmad Fadli Ahmad Dahlan, aka Neo Todak, CEO of Todak Studios and vice president of Todak Gaming. (Nusantara is an old Javanese word for "outer islands" referring to the Indonesian Archipelago and the Malay Peninsula.)



By embedding local myths into the game, Neo Todak hopes to create a title that resonates deeply with regional players.

Neo Todak, an avid gamer, brings a wealth of experience to the gaming industry through his dual role as a game developer and a member of a professional esports organisation, giving him a unique perspective from both sides of the industry.

He says: "By drawing inspiration from our rich regional and cultural heritage, *Mastra* introduces players to a world filled with ancient warriors, mystical forces and epic battles set in the legendary city of Kataha. This backdrop not only provides a unique gaming experience but also serves to educate and immerse players in the diverse histories of South-East Asia."

The Management and Science University grad adds: "By embedding local myths and histories into the game's narrative and design, the studio aims to create a title that resonates deeply with players from the region. Todak Studios envisions *Mastra* as a catalyst for uniting gamers across South-East Asia, fostering a sense of regional pride and cultural appreciation.

"This approach not only differentiates *Mastra* in the global gaming market but also contributes to Todak Studios' broader vision of elevating South-East Asian culture on an international platform."

The game, which has been in development since 2022 and is now in its closed beta stage, has not yet had its release date announced. It has, however, been showcased at various festivals in the region, including the Indonesian Game Festival (IGF) 2024 and the Tokyo Game Show 2024.

Mastra's journey

Game designer Fareez Shafiq Hussain shares that the team behind *Mastra* wanted to create a game that celebrated Nusantara's rich history and culture, offering players an experience that feels both unique and authentic. So the Todak team integrated key cultural elements directly into the gameplay.

Sakka, or spirit animals drawn from folklore and local fauna, is associated with each hero, influencing their abilities and play styles, showcasing Nusantara mythology.

This includes the Two-Headed Gate, inspired by traditional Nusantara architecture, replacing the standard single-turret towers to add a fresh visual and strategic twist; and the Element Combo Mechanic, a system where players combine elemental powers to create unique effects, bringing both strategy and creativity to the game.



Menjaya is a compassionate healer who carries the weight of a tragic past while pioneering innovative approaches to healing for her tribe.

Mastra introduces a diverse roster of characters, each with a compelling backstory, such as Menjaya, a compassionate healer who carries the weight of a tragic past while pioneering innovative approaches to healing for her tribe; and Rakai, the fearless Hero of Kataha, a loyal Samudra warrior celebrated for his military acumen and dedication, even in the face of moral conflicts.

Fareez says: "The process of putting all of this together was a year-long journey, requiring in-depth research, collaboration with cultural experts and innovative game design. Our goal was to strike the perfect balance between respecting cultural heritage and maintaining the competitive thrill that players expect in a Moba."



Fareez says one standout feature of *Mastra* is the Chakra Vein, which simplifies how players upgrade their characters. — Photos: Todak Studios

In *Mastra*, two teams engage in fierce battles with the primary objective of destroying the enemy's base. Players must complete map objectives and push into the enemy's lane by destroying gates and towers. Unlike traditional Moba games, however, *Mastra* offers a fresh strategic twist.

"We reimagined and simplified the format to make *Mastra* more accessible. Instead of the usual three lanes, *Mastra* features two main lanes, with the middle area transformed into the jungle.

This reduces the complexity of navigating the map, making it easier for newcomers to enjoy the game. Additionally, it results in quicker matches, catering to mobile players who prefer shorter gaming sessions while still enjoying the action-packed strategy of a

Moba.

"Think of it as simplifying the playing field," he explains. "It will be less overwhelming for beginners but still engaging and strategic enough to challenge experienced gamers. This design ensures *Mastra* remains approachable and fun for everyone, whether you're a seasoned player or completely new to the genre."



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Fareez, who studied at Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM) and has spent three years at Todak Studios, adds that another standout feature of the game is the in-game stats upgrade mechanic called the Chakra Vein.

"Unlike popular Moba games like *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB)*, *Wild Rift*, and *Dota 2*, *Mastra* replaces in-game items and gold systems with Chakra Vein. You can upgrade your stats directly into strength, agility, focus or nimbleness, simplifying the player's build without the need to understand item mechanics."

Not always easy

Studio director Muhammad Hanis Abdul Rahim admits that the road hasn't always been straightforward. "In the earlier stages of development, the biggest challenge definitely was recruiting the right talents for the project.

"There aren't many developers available locally who are familiar with the development of competitive multiplayer games for the mobile platform. We had to build up our own talents. Fortunately, we had the experience of building another multiplayer mobile game, *Police Sentri*."



Muhammad Hanis, who studied architecture, was drawn to the game industry due to his love for comics, animation and game development.

He adds that as the team began building up *Mastra*, with many sessions of playtesting during different stages of development, generating data for characters and game balancing posed a constant challenge, especially as more characters were introduced. He does, however, add that things got easier to manage over time.

Despite these challenges, Muhammad Hanis is grateful for the fact that Todak Studios has always been committed to authenticity.

"We had a team of writers and creative designers who did extensive research and digging on history, legends, cultural beliefs and fashion design for our reference. We also teamed up with local experts from Indonesia to create the character and lore of *Mastra*."

Muhammad Hanis, who studied architecture, was drawn to the game industry due to his love for comics, animation and game development. He has been with Todak Studios since 2021, serving as the studio director and game director for multiple titles under the company.

How does he keep things running smoothly? "I believe creativity really thrives within limitations. That is why it is important to create a design brief before starting each task. We have different departments handling different aspects of the game, such as concept art, animation, 3D assets creation, game design, and so on. We have milestones and weekly goals to achieve.



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"Cross-department QC is also always important. For example, when a concept artist designs a character, they cross-check with the writer during QC. When game designers propose a game feature, they discuss it with the technical artist and programmers so it is optimised for production. We also have regular discussions with the business development and marketing department because, at the end of the day, we know that the end user will not be us but our players out there."