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Society

# “Skinny Fish,” a Small Project with a Big Goal: a Cambodian Style in Animation



*An artist of the Phare Creative Studio works on a scene of the film “Kaun Trei” (“Skinny Fish”).  
Photo: provided*

By:

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**PHNOM PENH** — The project that, in the near future, will lead to producing “Kaun Trei” (“Skinny Fish”)—the first animated feature film ever done in Cambodia and whose first 2-minute clip is now on social media—is a tale that began in mid-2025 when Brett Harston was travelling from Siem Reap to Battambang.

“I noticed, you know, that some of these rice fields were populated by adults and also small children working alongside them,” he said. “I thought these kids should be in school. And then, watching a little longer, I noticed...there were these parents, and their kids were not there because they were unloved...they were actually there because they were loved.”

Parents had brought them along so they could watch over them, Harston said. At the same time, the children were helping with the work. “It was a necessity...subsistence,” he said, as everyone had to do his share so they could survive.



Scene from the upcoming animated feature film “Kaun Trei” (“Skinny Fish”). Photo\_ provided

Harston, who is from New Zealand, started in life as an actor who spent his first 10 years in theater and later on switched to film and television. However, he said, “I was always more interested in what went on behind the scene with the technical side of things, you know, the crew and the lighting and the boom lift and camera... So I eventually sort of moved out of acting and went into video production. I had my own little business in New Zealand for a while.”

Then Harston went on to teach video production at the Wellington Arts Centre Trust, a non-profit organization, training students for work in the film and television industries in New Zealand. “And I had 99% success rate of getting my students employment in the companies once they graduated,” he said.

Harston later retired in Australia, wrote and self-published three novels. He has since relocated to Siem Reap where he had been working on his fourth novel when he made that trip to Battambang.

What Harston saw in the rice fields, he said, “stayed with me. And in my mind, I developed the seed of an idea.” This featured a young boy from the provinces, born in flooded ricefields and struggling in poverty, his mother being ill. “An opportunity arises when he meets a traveling salesman who has a client on the coast looking to hire young boys to dive for supposedly lobster...However, that promise is not kept once the boy gets to the coast.”

Harston soon realized that shooting this film would be too expensive in the current economic climate. But making it an animation would work. So, after doing some research online, he came across the work done at the Phare Creative Studio, which had been launched by the NGO Phare Ponleu Selpak and whose work he found outstanding.



Scene from the upcoming animated feature film “Kaun Trei” (“Skinny Fish”). Photo\_ provided

Harston’s first two attempts to contact the studio led to polite “thank you” responses with mentions that its people were too busy with ongoing projects to take on a new one. He then sent the script and, the next day, was asked if he could come for a meeting, which took place in September 2025.

As Osman Kawaja, Phare’s executive director, explained, Phare Creative Studio was launched for students and teachers to do graphic design and animation work. When the school expanded its program and became a visual applied art school in addition to its circus-training and other art programs, the studio became a social enterprise along with the Phare Circus in Siem Reap, providing jobs for some Phare graduates and helping to fund the NGO’s free education programs, he said, that have been offered to poor children for several decades

“Given the studio’s strength in animation, we've always had a dream to do more original content to put Cambodian Khmer creativity on the international stage and at the same time develop a unique Khmer



identity when it comes to animation,” Kawaja said. “But getting a good story is not easy. And also, it's a massive investment...As you know, animation can take many, many, many hours...even professional studios take two years or more to complete [a production].

“But when the script was put forward to us by Brett, it was like, wow, this is a really good script...it's a Cambodian tale, it captures really good messages,” he said. “All the creators, all the animators read it and said this is great...They could imagine bringing it to life. So we were very happy to get it started.”



Artists of the Phare Creative Studio are working on scenes of the film “Kaun Trei” (“Skinny Fish”). Photo\_ provided

“We all loved it,” Chan Pagna said. “So we started talking with the writer [about] producing this feature film into animation...And then we started to do the trailer.”

A graduate of Phare, Pagna obtained a grant in 2012 to study 2D animation in France at the Ecole Pivaut, which is specialized in this field as well as in illustration and graphic novel. He is currently project supervisor at Phare Creative Studio and has also helped train students as well as teachers in graphic design and animation.

“This film ‘Skinny Fish’ is very special,” Pagna said. “The technique in animation that we chose is the frame-by-frame animation.” Unlike rigging, which consists of drawing the structure and parts of a character and then move these parts like a digital puppet on the computer to fit the various scenes, he said, “we draw in frame-by-frame...directly in the computer [also using tablet], and it takes 24 [frames, that is, images] for one second.”

One of the goals of the Phare Creative Studio team is to give the film a signature style that will reflect Cambodia, Pagna said. “Right now, around the world, there is a style that represents Japan, a style that represents Disney [Animation Studios in United States], and so on.

“We do not copy any style...we want to create a style that reflects Cambodia’s identity,” he said. “So we are doing research on character design, and also on the background as we like using texture...We have been trying different options, and this has led to the teaser.” This 2-minute clip, meant to give the public an idea of the film to come, is now on social media.



Caption\_ Scene from the upcoming animated feature film “Kaun Trei” (“Skinny Fish”). Photo\_ provided

One other member needed on the team for such a project is the person helping with business and funding matters who, at Phare, has been Richard Sanviti. A Frenchman with university degrees in law, business management as well as cinema, he worked in 2017 and 2018 as a volunteer for Pour un sourire d’enfant (for the smile of a child), an NGO in Phnom Penh providing poor children and teenagers with food, basic care and education in several fields including cinema. Having returned to France in 2020 where he worked for a free cinema school, he was contacted by Phare in 2022, and has worked with Phare first at its Battambang office and in recent months going back and forth between France and Cambodia as business development manager.

“Phare meant to develop this production studio, which is its second social enterprise beside the circus [Phare, The Cambodian Circus in Siem Reap],” Santivi said, the goal being to provide work for Phare’s graduates in several fields and also help support the NGO. The COVID

19 pandemic had greatly affected the circus as few visitors came to the country during those years while the studio had fared better, he said.

The studio mainly focuses on developing visual communication campaigns for international and Cambodian organizations with development and social agendas such as UNICEF, the World Health Organization and so on, producing visual material ranging from videos to illustrations to reach people through the media and on social media, Sanviti explained. Along with this, he said, “we’re trying to develop more and more original works because the studio and the whole environment of Phare are artists, creative people who therefore want to create and produce original works. This is the ultimate objective and also the dream.”



Scene from the upcoming animated feature film “Kaun Trei” (“Skinny Fish”). Photo\_ provided

To help embark on this animated-film project, Phare contacted Sam Daro, a reputed, professional digital artist who has worked on 2D digital, design, animation, comics, games as well as book projects. So far, Daro and the team have done, he said, “a lot of experimenting and a lot of research on, for instance, the background paintings and character design... Also, we try to introduce some new techniques, add some new elements. Like for example, our story focuses on the water, so we try to put in some water effects in the background.”

Being on the project for a limited time due to other obligations, Daro said, “I'm trying my best to get all the things done... So I try to make sure that the team has guidelines to follow...to make the background, the characters look nice on the screen, things like that.

“That's one of the most challenging projects that I've experienced,” Daro said. “But it's a really good project. And I'm really glad to be part of the team because it's the first full feature animated film in Cambodia.”

Making the first Cambodian feature film of animation is coming with a great many challenges and responsibilities, Chan said. In addition to creating these characters and a story that must resonate with people, and especially for those who have been in situations similar to the one described in the film, he said, “we want the project to, not only in Cambodia but...also in Europe, the United States and other countries around the world, show a story of Cambodia, and also Cambodia's style—I mean not necessarily profound or polished, but Cambodia's.”

“I hope that Cambodian people will be proud of it and, after this first one, we can start to make more for cinema,” he said.



An artist of the Phare Creative Studio works on a scene of the film “Kaun Trei” (“Skinny Fish”). Photo\_ provided

“The bigger vision [regarding this film] is to really engage the Cambodian community, to have children in communities and schools able to have a part in the creation of this animation,” said Osman Kawaja, Phare executive director. On the “Skinny Fish” page on social media, Phare has been asking people to make comments, to say for example why a scene picked as the favorite by most viewers inspires them. And their responses, he said, “can become inspiration for the animation itself.”

Moreover, he said, “we encourage anyone to...give their sample voiceovers for the animation and post it on social media so that other people can see it.”

And as the film funding continues, Kawaja said, “the idea is that...it's a community project...people only need to give very little, even \$1, \$5. If many people do so, if you have 10,000 people give \$5 each, that's \$50,000, which would cover a big portion of the production and the entire pre-production phase.”

In the meantime, Phare has asked Harston to help train tomorrow's screenwriters in Cambodia. “They've roped me into doing script writing courses for their visual arts students,” he said. “So, I'm doing those as well.”

For information on the making of the animated feature film “Kaun Trei” (“Skinny Fish”):

English: <https://www.skinnyfishfilm.com/about>  
(<https://www.skinnyfishfilm.com/about>)

Khmer: <https://www.skinnyfishfilm.com/copy-of-about>  
(<https://www.skinnyfishfilm.com/copy-of-about>)





A STORY WRITTEN BY BRETT HARSTON  
 IN COPRODUCTION WITH PHARE CREATIVE STUDIO  
 WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF PHARE PONLEU SELPAK



Poster of the Cambodian animated feature film “Kaun Trei” (“Skinny Fish”) currently being made. Photo\_ provided





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