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TV & MEDIA

With funding boost of \$4.6 million, TPT begins work on new animated series, 'Mashopolis'

The locally produced series hopes viewers will root for kids as they construct their own city.

By Neal Justin Star Tribune | OCTOBER 1, 2020 — 2:54PM



RICHARD TSONG-TAATARIH Y RICHARD.TSONG-TAATARIH@STARTRIBUNE.COM
 Momo Hayakawa, the lead consultant on TPT's new "Mashopolis" animated project, is shown in 2019 testing responses to TPT's "Hero Elementary" program.

Twin Cities Public Television is doubling down on its adventures in animation.

Just four months after the premiere of "Hero Elementary," then the most ambitious project in TPT's history, the St. Paul-based station has announced plans to create "Mashopolis," a cartoon series aimed at kids ages 5 to 8 who will strengthen their cognitive skills by living vicariously through animated characters building their Paradise City.

Like "Hero," the new show is being funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Ready to Learn initiative, which develops media designed to help children do better in school.

TPT will receive \$4.6 million for the first year of development, with the expectation of renewed funding over the following four years.

Momo Hayakawa, the lead consultant on the project, estimates that producing 40 half-hour episodes, along with digital resources, will eventually cost around \$38 million, about \$1.3 million more than the total budget for "Hero."

Back in March, Ready to Learn invited teams to pitch ideas that would serve their latest mission: help kids develop executive-function skills that will serve them well in the future job market.

Through a series of Zoom calls, writers Chrissy Ferraro and Eric Peterson presented the idea of Mashopolis, a city designed by kids with touches like a roller-coaster train and a jukebox fountain. The features may be whimsical, but creating them takes real work — and real planning.

The three protagonists, who will jump from live action into a 2-D world at the start of every episode, will be joined on the animated side by a worker bot named Glitch who helps them unlock the tools they need to build their dream digs.

Ready to Learn approved. The only other company to receive new funding this year was the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which got more than \$24 million to begin work on "Wombats!," a series about three marsupial siblings exploring their "treeborough," and "Liza Loops," in which a kid inventor teams up with her fuzzy blue sidekick Stu to solve problems in their urban neighborhood.

The CPB grant also includes a commitment to develop another literary-themed TV show and manage community-based programs at 40 PBS member stations.

TPT hopes to have "Mashopolis" on the air by 2023. "Hero" faced a number of obstacles that delayed its premiere by two years. Hayakawa hopes to avoid a similar fate this time around by getting feedback from more kids earlier in the development phase.

"You have to listen to the audience up front, from the very beginning, and that includes diverse voices," said Hayakawa, a research and analytics specialist at TPT since 2017. "We made changes with 'Hero' episodes because of things kids would tell us. I think there needs to be more of that in general."

It's the biggest project yet for TPT president and CEO [Sylvia Strobel](#), who took over the reins in January.

"We are committed to using creative thinking, 21st-century skills and collaborative partnerships with experts across the country — all to make a difference in children's lives," Strobel said this week in a news release.

The new series will be supervised by Carol-Lynn Parente, a former "Sesame Street" executive producer who also oversees "Hero." TPT is partnering with Oasis Animation, a Montreal-based company that has worked on PBS' "Arthur" and "Martha Speaks," as well as the very adult cartoon, "F is for Family."

Hayakawa said the name of the series, "Mashopolis," is not a nod to Minneapolis.

"That would have been cute," she said. "We didn't even think of that."

Neal Justin covers the entertainment world, primarily TV and radio. He also reviews stand-up comedy. Justin is the founder of JCamp, a non-profit program for high-school journalists, and works on many fronts to further diversity in newsrooms.

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