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Making a monkey out of kids, worldwide

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After clamorous success abroad, "Monkey See, Monkey Do" finally comes here, premiering on Hop! on April 10.

Dora the Explorer? Feh! Bob the Builder? Who needs him? Mickey Mouse? Old school – and old hat! You may not know it, but Israel is the birthplace of one of the cartoon world's up and coming stars – Monkey, a fun friend who will have your kids singing, dancing and following along, using a special educational method developed by psychologists.

On TV, the Web and even on the App Store, Monkey is all about teaching preschoolers motor skills and social concepts – as opposed to certain other cartoon franchises, which often appear to be more about selling parents stuff.

"I got the idea for Smartoonz about six years ago," says Yuval Levy, Smartoonz CEO and inventor. "Tamar, my wife, is a specialist in child education and development. I came from production and animation and owned an animation studio. We decided to work together and produce quality content for children. When I was asked by the new Baby cable TV network here in Israel for help in creating content, we sought ideas by looking at programs that were being broadcast elsewhere, but we didn't find the kind of valuable educational content and interactivity we hoped for."

Realizing that there was a dearth of programming for preschoolers that is both educational and entertaining, Levy began speaking to experts on translating important educational concepts into an entertaining format that would hold the interest of preschoolers.

The result was Monkey See, Monkey Do, an animated series about the adventures of its aforementioned star. A typical episode shows Monkey getting into all sorts of adventures in his jungle, where he gets help from his youthful (human) companions, who are integrated into the cartoon courtesy of advance CGI technology on HD format. Stories take place in one of five venues – Jungle, Farm, Pond, Savannah or the Arctic – and each episode includes at least three songs, since kids learn better when they are engaged with song, Levy says.

Levy is a well-known animator, who produced programs and movies for his Zeppelin Animations, and network executives contacted him for help on developing content for the new Baby channel.

"We worked with specialists on every step, from conceptualization to post-production.

We applied their expertise to every detail, from the character design to the dialogue and story lines," Levy says, and the network liked what it saw and ordered several programs.

“In 2006 we visited Mipcom, presented our new six pilots and received great feedback from major broadcasters and distributors in the market: Disney, Warner, Nick, CN, HIT Entertainment and more. This made us think that we should go ahead and produce some of the shows, and the first of them was Monkey See, Monkey Do. It took us about a year to produce the first season of Monkey, with a limited budget and a lot a passion.”

Now, Monkey is broadcast to kids around the world, including in France (France 5), Canada (TVA, TVO and Knowledge), Eastern Europe (Minimax), Latin America (Disney Latam), the Far East (PBS Thailand) and the US (PBS Kids Sprout).

To spread the word, Levy also set up a YouTube channel for all of Smartoonz pilots, with more than 21 million viewers so far. In the US, meanwhile, the Monkey series is rated among the top 15 programs on PBS Kids Sprout. And now, Smartoonz is setting up its own Internet media site, a partnership with Navigaya's Smartoonz.tv to get a head start on the new Internet TV revolution, which is where TV will eventually migrate, says Levy.

The series finally comes here this week, premiering on the Hop! channel on April 10, and Levy has begun work on the series' second season.

BESIDES TV and the Internet, Smartoonz is bringing its message of quality preschool content to the new media devices. This year, Levy released an interactive iPhone/iPod touch app featuring Monkey and all his friends. Developed by top app design house Snappsi, the new app offers fun 3D animation, which is triggered when interacting with Monkey. Users can poke Monkey, tickle him until he asks them to stop, offer him bananas, rock him in his hammock until he falls, tease him with a fly, etc. Talking to Parrot, one of the characters in the series, will make him repeat everything the user says when speaking to the device, to wake up Monkey.

Kids can even use the iPhone/iPod camera and take a photo of themselves and integrate it into a postcard, as if they took a real photo with the characters and share it on Facebook or save it to their device's photo album. And they can also watch clips from the show. The basic app (featuring Monkey's Savannah adventures) is free, while the full app, with six different scenarios and upgraded interactivity, costs 99 cents.

“I'm thrilled with this opportunity to take Monkey out of the screen and make him more accessible for the entire family,” Levy says. “This move is consistent with Smartoonz's strategy to develop its content for both old and new media.”

So what's the appeal of Monkey? “It's not just passive viewing, it's an activity,” Levy says. “Energetic preschoolers are able to practice their motor skills, learn new words and definitions, and identify with the live-action kids they're watching on-screen.”

And Levy is just getting started; several months ago, he attended a meeting with the leading decision makers of major media companies in Los Angeles (the ones we think of when we think “Hollywood”) as a part of Yossi Vardi's New Media Delegation to share his achievements and in search of a strategic partner. They all expressed great interest in working with Levy on future projects. Meanwhile, kids around the world are having a rollicking time, singing and dancing along with Monkey – courtesy of Israel's Smartoonz.

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