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Not So Tiny Anymore

David Kwok made a bet on 3d Animation that is paying off in a big way



SINGAPORE, 20th June 2013 - Mr David Kwok is surrounded by the future. He juggles an Android tablet with a three-dimensional screen and a pair of 3D goggles from Sony, showing off products that are not even for sale yet.

What ties them together is the content that Mr Kwok's animation company, Tiny Island Productions, is producing for them.

In just over six years, Tiny Island has grown from a small player to one of the leading lights in the 3D animation industry. Its shows have been broadcast on major television networks in the United States and won it international acclaim.

Last year, the firm won the inaugural Best 3D Animated Programme award for Ben 10 Destroy All Aliens at the Asian Television Awards and, just earlier this week, it snagged the best 3D animation honour at the Asia Image Apollo Awards. But it is its foray into what the 42-year-old CEO terms the "future-proof content" that will drive the company's growth.

"If you create content just for the television or DVD market, it gets stuck there. But with new platforms, there are a lot less restrictions. We are partnering international players to produce 3D content for gadgets the world has never seen," Mr Kwok said.

The company is currently in talks with media giants such as DreamWorks, Sony, Hasbro and Warner Bros. What landed Tiny Island in such a plum position was a gamble it took several years ago to make shows based on an emerging 3D technology that did not require glasses.

He also decided early on not to compete on price and structured his company to offer a complete solution to clients, from developing storylines and characters to production and distribution. The company now attracts private equity firms from the US willing to make multi-million-dollar bets on 3D animated shows it produces.

Growing pains

After five years working for the Government, Mr Kwok quit his job in 2000 to pursue a career in computer animation, having spent many hours after work and during the weekends learning the craft. Over the next few years, he experienced almost every aspect of the business, from being a visual effects artist to a line producer and eventually setting up a studio from scratch.

In 2007, he decided to devote himself full-time to Tiny Island, a company he had founded a few years earlier as a platform to do freelance work but had since remained dormant.

Its first breakthrough came that year, when a client in Thailand commissioned it to produce three episodes of a series called Shelldon. But before signing the deal, the client wanted to visit Tiny Island's office, which proved a problem as everyone worked from home. The next three weeks saw Mr Kwok and his team embark on a frantic extreme makeover of a 2,000 sq ft office space on Beach Road.

"My wife and I maxed out our four credit cards to pay for everything. We bought everything from Ikea, and I painted the walls while others were laying cables," he recalled with a chuckle. "In the end, the client came in and was impressed, so we got the deal."

What impressed even more was the quality of the work it produced, and Tiny Island ended up doing the entire 26-episode series, which was eventually broadcast on US television network NBC. The company leveraged that success to get more work, but Mr Kwok realised that the path to the top lay in creating its own show.

That epiphany resulted in Dream Defenders, which is now the platform upon which the company plans to make its mark on the future of broadcasting. The show tells the story of twins Zane and Zoey, who defend the real world from nightmare monsters from the Dreamworlds. The 3D animated series is set to premiere on popular video streaming website Hulu next month.

To keep up with its rapid growth, Tiny Island moved to a sprawling 10,000 sq ft premises at Redhill that now houses up to 120 employees, a year after starting operations. But even that might not be sufficient. The company is negotiating a deal that, if successful, would see its staff strength surge to 250 and require a space twice the size of its current premises.

But Mr Kwok's ambitions go beyond just the success of his own business. He started Tiny Island in part to help raise Singapore's standing in the global animation industry. To help groom local talent, he runs an animation school that takes in four batches of between 15 and 20 students a year under the government's Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) scheme.

Indeed, graduates from his first batch of students in 2007 were among the first employees of the company and some are now heads of departments. Around 90 per cent of his company's employees are WSQ graduates.

"In the early days, I used to sit around the coffee shop with other animators dreaming of Singapore doing Star Wars. Now it's coming true."