



TELLING STORIES

AS TOLD TO JACQUELYN CHEOK

Pretty much like its playbook *Extraordinary Jenny Jones*, Paperplane – a Singapore story studio that makes original playbooks and learning games – is nothing like your run-of-the-mill tech startup. Founder Chrissy Lim (centre, with executive producer Lynn Lim, left, and creative director Teresa Ong, right) was trained and worked as a lawyer, later got into advertising, and successfully battled cancer some 10 years ago. She says that her motivation behind Paperplane was to tell a good story and empower people to make a dent in the universe – just like her idol Steve Jobs. The snazzy founder also dreams of winning a Caldecott Medal or Academy Award someday, and building a creative startup ecosystem here.

HOW DID PAPERPLANE TAKE OFF?

It was when the iPad was invented. What a game changer. I remember reading *Wired* magazine (on the iPad), and was blown away by how interactive and different the experience was from reading a (physical) magazine or from a computer screen. You get to touch and move things, oh my god, that was just massive inspiration.

At that time, I was working in advertising and I wanted to start Paperplane as a passion project, a soul-saving kind of business. I've always been a huge reader since I was a child growing up in the UK. When reading, I was almost able to create a whole new world for myself.

The sad thing is that books have been losing a bit of ground these days. Children, if given a book or a game, will rather play the game because games are so engaging, interactive and stimulating. So when the iPad came out, I thought finally, maybe books have a chance again.

WHAT'S WITH THE NAME?

It goes back to whole idea of stories. I like the idea of a paper plane. It starts off as a piece of paper – so simple. But yet something so simple can achieve incredible heights and be such a feat of engineering. In many ways, the alphabet is the same – the power of words in telling a story. Things that are so simple can be so expansive.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR WORKS.

We've got two playbook apps on the market; the first is *Extraordinary Jenny Jones*. It's about a girl who sees as

square what others see as round – a classic story about celebrating differences. It has got games on every page designed to enforce the messaging. It emerged as one of the top 10 books on Apple's iBookstore in the US with over 25,000 downloads. It costs S\$2.99 per download.

In the near term, we're launching a short film adaptation of *For Readers* that celebrates my amazing primary school English teacher, Mrs Kow, who inspired me to write. It will be set in Henry Park Primary School, my primary school, and which will hopefully star Petrina Kow, Mrs Kow's daughter. I'd love to get this act – which explores the connection between readers and writers – together in time for SG50.

ANY EXCITING MILESTONES OR PLANS?

We were one of the startups chosen to host Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the launch of the JTC LaunchPad @ one-north in late January, because we're a creative business and we have a nice office. We bootstrapped this office. We made the lights, painted the floor, and upcycled all our furniture. It's a nice startup story.

The event was spectacular; the team at JTC worked so hard. But honestly, everything was eclipsed by PM Lee's visit. We're such fans of PM Lee. He was so nice and suffice it to say – we're bigger fans than ever.

But really, my greatest pride is reserved for the team who worked so tirelessly and passionately. We conceptualised and built a pop-up story exhibition in a week to tell the story of Paperplane in a creative way.

The last three years have all been about portfolio building. From this year and over the next five, it's about getting our books and stories out to the greater public. We hope to start working with a publisher, as marketing and content distribution are really another planet.

HOW IS BUSINESS?

We're self-sustaining – we do all the printing in-house – and have not opted to raise venture capital or funding yet. Our creative business has been sustained mainly through commission from helping companies and brands tell their story, through films for example. Our biggest client is (software company) SAP.

Our commissions bring in more money than our creative products. So we really want to balance that out, and therefore are in talks with publishers and the NAC (National Arts Council) to push our products out.



◀ ONCE UPON A TIME
No matter how rich the literary world is, there's always room for new books, says Ms Lim

YOUR THOUGHTS ON SINGAPORE'S STARTUP ECOSYSTEM?

Wow. The startup ecosystem here in Singapore is amazing. We were so, so, so lucky to have been able to squeeze into Block 71 (at LaunchPad). I think we were one of the last tenants in our "batch". JTC, MDA (Media Authority of Singapore), NAC – all of these organisations have been incredibly supportive.

I would personally love to see more growth in the 'creative' startup ecosystem. There is a huge focus on tech, especially here in LaunchPad, but story-tellers, film-makers, directors, artists – especially artists – need encouragement too because times are changing, and the old notion of "starving artists" no longer needs to be true.

There are a lot of creative, fun people here. But they're little islands, fragmented, and I don't think they enjoy the same support as tech startups do. Maybe it's because they're not scalable. But a creative startup ecosystem will change many things, such as the mindset that there're no prospects for creative people.

WHAT IS YOUR DREAM FOR PAPERPLANE?

I want to win a Caldecott Medal or an Academy Award.

If we manage to build a big enough library of apps, what we really want to do is to find a way to deliver insights about kids to parents. With the iPad and apps, there is so much insight you can pull from a child: from the words or things that they like or the books that they read that can let their parents understand their child better, in terms of strengths and weaknesses. For example, if your child is a fairy princess kind of girl, but suddenly she starts reading darker storybooks, parents will know.

I hope our stories are different from those in the mass market. They are designed to make you think and feel. There's nothing like reading a book when you're conflicted or confused. And when a book or character is able to communicate and touch you, that's really magical.

No matter how rich the literary world is, there's always room for new books. Even with all the movies and content out there, there's still room for a creative genius. As long as human beings evolve, there'll always be space in the market for stories, because stories are reflections of human behaviour.

Stories are also the only way we can connect past, present and future. They will never ever die, only the methods of delivery will differ. ■



PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIN

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– Paperplane founder Chrissy Lim