

Latest Henson Co. puppet uses hands-free high-tech process

By Gail Pennington
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Kermit the Frog would be green with envy. A kid named Sid, making his debut Labor Day on PBS, doesn't have to ride on a puppeteer's hand when he performs.

As the newest star from the Jim Henson Co., Sid is a lifelike cartoon kid who inhabits a three-dimensional world made possible by head-spinning advances in digital puppetry. He'll appear in 40 episodes of the new PBS Kids preschool series "Sid the Science Kid" (week days starting Monday) produced with a system the Henson company — now run by Henson's kids Brian and Lisa — calls revolutionary and proprietary.

"This is actually a process that's not being done by anybody else," Lisa Henson told TV critics during a visit to the "Sid" soundstage last month. "We've done some early, small shoots with it, but doing 40 half hours with the digital puppetry and live animation system has really proven to be an exciting breakthrough for our company," which is devoting all its resources to the process.

"Sid" is shot in a motion-capture space ringed by sensors. Two members of Henson's performance unit — Misty Rosas, who does the body, and Drew Massey, who speaks for Sid and animates his face, including synchronizing his lips — bring Sid to life.

Rosas is a body-movement specialist whose work corresponds to motion capture used for a decade in movies. But Massey is a puppeteer who, via a computer program, controls Sid with his hands, just as he would with a puppet hoisted over his head. The combination of techniques

is one thing that sets the new process apart, Henson said.

Watching themselves on monitors as they perform, Rosas and Massey communicate with the director and with one another seamlessly.

"They've been working together on this character for more than six months," Henson said. "So when a director is directing the animated characters, he can give a direction to Sid. Drew and Misty will both perform in concert because they're psychic now." Without storyboards and with a live director, the process actually resembles a sitcom more than traditional animation, Henson said.

"All the performers perform the blocking and the characters' physical animation right here on the soundstage," she said. "We actually direct the animation as if it's live action, using a director who calls out shots and takes just like a live-action director." Also as with live action, "Our camera moves live," Henson said.

Preschoolers who watch "Sid the Science Kid" won't see the technology at work. Instead, PBS and producing station KCET in Los Angeles hope, they will engage with both the characters and the concept as energetic and inquisitive Sid asks such questions as, "Why do bananas get mushy?" then sets out to get the answers with the help of family, friends and his teacher.

"Science is out front and center," said Joyce Campbell, KCET's vice president for children's programming. "We're not sugarcoating it. We don't have to because science is so exciting. Every day Sid says, 'You're a scientist. Try this, too.' Science learning is something that you want to start doing from a very early age, and you really can."

