

Pahlevanan: From Concept Development to Project Management

An Exclusive Interview with Alireza Golpayegani, Producer of the Animated Series “Pahlevanan (The Heroes)”

By Iran Zehn Team
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Q1. When did you begin working on this project?

The initial concept and the proposal for producing this series were introduced in 2002 by Mr. Zarrin Abadi to the management of Saba and its Planning & Development Department. At that time, he was working at Saba on a project called Mr. Olympic. The proposal was approved that same year, and Mr. Zarrin Abadi decided to produce the project outside of Saba. He discussed the idea with me, and that was how the Key Movement Company was formed. He had written thirteen half-page initial story ideas. We decided to seek help from Dr. Ataollah Koopal, a professor of performing arts at the University of Art. Together—Mr. Zarrin Abadi, Dr. Koopal, and I—we formed the writers’ room and story development team for Heroes (Season 1). Over five to six months, those ideas were expanded into complete stories. Writing the screenplay was handled by Mr. Zarrin Abadi.

In 2003, once creative team members in various branches of animation—such as character design, environment design, background painting, animators, rough animation artists, colorists, and technical specialists—gathered, production officially began. It was an extremely challenging start because we had almost no experience working on a large team-based, long-term animation project. Most artists were accustomed to short films. Each episode was 30 minutes long, practically the length of a half-feature project. Writing the scripts and designing the visuals were intense processes. The first episode took roughly six months to complete. At that pace, producing the entire series would have taken years. But as we progressed, our experience grew, and production gradually became faster. Although I was teaching animation at the time, and others also theoretically understood animation and series production, once we entered the practical stage, we realized how much more experience, information, and group compatibility we needed. The project became a profound learning experience.

Q2. What was the most challenging part of producing this series?

The most difficult part of making this series was coordination, scheduling, and overall project management. Each team member, individually, was highly skilled — but aligning all of them to work in sync was extremely challenging. We also had to deal with issues related to running a company: managing 20 to 30 people in one space, something we had never done before. We couldn't predict production speed due to lack of experience. None of this exists in any book; we had to discover and create processes ourselves. There were many variables — some artists preferred short projects and were not prepared for long-term commitments. Personalities didn't always match, making teamwork difficult. Gradually, we created internal guidelines to standardize production — lip-sync rules, character layering, facial movement, proportions, etc. Financial challenges were also significant. We hired the best (and most expensive) artists and eventually faced financial crises, forcing us to borrow money. Managing 30–40 people throughout the project was exhausting. After finishing the first episode, we even considered stopping the project. But completing that episode became the foundation of everything that followed. Strategically, we began with Episode 4 instead of Episode 1 so that early weaknesses would not appear in the opening episode.

Q3. How much time did it take to produce each episode?

The first episode took about six months, including writing and revisions during production. Later episodes became faster as character designs and background banks were created. By Season Five, if the story and storyboard were ready, animation, compositing, and a soundless render of a 30-minute episode could be completed in about one month. For Season Six, with a larger team and new strategies, the goal was to complete more than one episode per month.

Q4. Tell us about the producing process and how the project's budget was estimated.

Producing and budgeting are extremely important. A producer is not necessarily an investor. In this project, I didn't finance production from my own pocket except in emergencies. The producer selects the story, writer, director, animators, and sound/music specialists. The producer makes final decisions because budget and schedule fall under their responsibility. Budget management includes determining who is salaried, who is hourly, and who is paid by output. Office rent and operational costs are also responsibilities of the producer.

Q5. Plans for the coming year?

A contract for 26 new episodes has been signed. COVID-19 increased production costs drastically. Despite this, production began. Character rigs were rebuilt in Moho, and visual quality improved significantly. Stories also became more engaging with new contributors like Ms. Hanieh Sadat Sarki. The team is now working remotely for the first time. Social media support has increased our sense of responsibility. Seasons Six and Seven are currently in production.

Q6. What technical skills are required for animation producing?

At first, I believed a producer must come from animation. But now I believe management knowledge is more critical. A producer must understand budgeting, scheduling, communication, psychology, economics, and investor relations. Artistic expertise is helpful but not essential and may even interfere with production. The industry needs producers with business-oriented mindsets. Walt Disney was the artist, but Roy Disney's financial mind built the studio — a fact often forgotten in our animation industry.

Q7. What are the challenges of managing an animation team?

Identifying the right story, the right project, and the right people is crucial. Like talent scouts in sports, producers must quickly recognize who fits which role. Predicting challenges and planning ahead is essential for smooth production.

Q8. How closely did your workflow match international standards?

There is no complete manual for animation pipelines — even major studios compartmentalize information. A colleague who worked as an animation supervisor in Canada visited our studio and confirmed that our workflow — storyboarding, story reel, scratch audio, animatic, layout, animation, and compositing — was very similar to international standards. Our designers were extremely strong; lack of time and budget were the main limitations.

Q9. Regarding a cinematic adaptation, have you planned for festivals or international competition?

We explored this idea during Seasons Two and Three and drafted several story concepts. But legal ownership belongs to IRIB, preventing independent production. Investors prefer children's content and believe adult-oriented animation does not sell. Also, 2D animation is not ideal for the big screen because it requires far more detail. Producing a feature is expensive and requires a global market.

Q10. What technique would you consider for a cinematic version?

A 3D approach would be more practical and visually appealing, and there are many skilled 3D artists available. Although Heroes is known for its 2D aesthetic, a cinematic version would likely be created in 3D.

Q11. Advantages and disadvantages of 2D for series production?

2D is visually charming and nostalgic but requires skilled artists, making it more expensive and time-consuming. 3D artists often rely on software rather than traditional art training. Each technique has strengths; Heroes has established itself as a 2D series, but a feature film would likely be 3D.

Q12. How is animation producing different from live-action producing?

Many aspects are similar — budgeting, choosing the director, pre-production, production, post-production. But managing animation teams is harder because artists are more individualistic and introverted. In live-action, stars drive visibility; in animation, studios drive recognition.

Q13. Advice for aspiring animation producers?

Producers should come from business and management backgrounds rather than art. They must understand budgeting, scheduling, team coordination, financial strategy, communication, marketing, and psychology. Artistic knowledge is helpful but secondary. Business-minded producers, like Roy Disney, are essential for studio success.