TECHNOLOGY

# Digital media industry buzzing with activity

Backed by $500 million of research funds and a goal of creating 10,000 jobs by 2015, the fast-growing IDM sector is grabbing attention of both foreign and local players, reports **ROLAND LIM**

JUDGING from the barrage of activity in the interactive and digital media (IDM) industry this year, Singapore's quest to be a regional interactive and digital media (IDM) hub that generates $10 billion of value-added contribution to the country's economy appears to be on track.

Championing the government's efforts to boost the local IDM industry is the Media Development Authority of Singapore (MDA), which also aims to add some 10,000 new jobs by 2015.

MDA is backed by a $500 million injection from the National Research Foundation, which is aimed at giving research in the IDM industry a shot in the arm. The funds are being managed by the IDM Research and Development Programme Office, that is set up within the MDA, and has already got down to work.

Some of the schemes that it has launched include the $40 million Microfunding Scheme targeted at nurturing individuals and small groups with innovative ideas in the digital media space, as well stimulate the business incubation of the industry. This is expected to benefit some 750 to 1,000 projects over the next five years.

Earlier this year, MDA's 10-member International Advisory Panel (IAP) had also recommended that Singapore exploit the music and publishing sectors, as well as look at enhancing the use of IDM technologies in sectors like education, medicine and science, some of which are already seeing active interest from the industry.

To fuel the demand for human resources in the industry, local tertiary institutes have started a slew of initiatives aimed at producing talent for the industry.

Just earlier this month, SIM University (UniSIM), which targets adult students, announced that it will collaborate with local digital game developer Playware Studios Asia to enhance the university's gaming curriculum.

This adds to the momentum in the industry, which has already seen local polytechnics such as Republic, Ngee Ann, Temasek, Nanyang and Singapore Polytechnic all offer IDM-related courses. Additionally, Nanyang Technological University's School of Art, Design and Media, its School of Communication and Information, and Singapore Management University also offer IDM-related courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

## More investment

Earlier this year, the National University of Singapore (NUS) also unveiled plans to invest $11 million to start a new Interactive and Digital Media Institute.

And besides the local institutes, established institutes such as United States-based DigiPen Institute of Technology's first Asian campus is also expected to kick off an undergraduate programme at Fusionpolis starting later this year.

Established local IDM companies are also getting into the act, with the Egg Story Digital Arts Academy, part of Singapore-based animation studio Egg Story Creative Production, offering a two-year diploma course in the digital arts.

Beyond addressing manpower issues, the IDM industry is gearing up for more buzz. Fresh from hosting the Asia leg of the World Cyber Games competition, Singapore will now host the inaugural SIGGRAPH Asia 2008, a computer graphics conference and exhibition organised by the world's largest society on computer graphics, the Association for Computing Machinery's Special Interest Group on Computer Graphics (ACM SIGGRAPH).

The growing momentum is also translating to commercial success. Singapore companies like animation houses Scrawl Studios and Peach Blossom Media are making their way into overseas markets. And earlier this year at international trade show MipTV 2007, homegrown firms like the digital media arm of Singapore Technologies Electronics went on to score deals worth some US$128 million.

The IDM industry has also been attractive to international digital media firms such as Electronic Arts and Lucasfilm, whose operations here support the regional or global marketplace. Japanese gaming studio Koei's Singapore operations has also unveiled the company's first made-in-Singapore game which will eventually be sold globally.

And with EDB estimating that about a dozen more digital media firms will be setting up operations in Singapore, by the end of the year, Singapore's strategy to create more buzz in this industry certainly seems to be on the right path.