



PET CONTROL: As "J" the hamster chases a pipe, its movements are recorded and they control the actions of an in-game character.

Video gaming turns into 'pet' project at NUS centre

New institute uses digital media to test how humans can play games with pets

BY THAM YUEN-C

A VERY different kind of gamer is stealing the show at the new Interactive and Digital Media Institute (IDMI).

She does not tap on a keyboard or click on a mouse, but controls her in-game character by chasing after a moving pipe in a 1m-by-1m plastic cage.

"J" is a hamster, and the star of an IDMI project which uses digital technology to allow interaction between animals and humans.

The objective is to see "how we can use digital media technology to play games with pets",

said Associate Professor Adrian Cheok, IDMI deputy director and head of the Mixed Reality Laboratory in charge of the project.

The lab is one of eight – including the Sociable Robotics and Arts and Creativity laboratories – being overseen by the IDMI, which was opened on April 20 at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Started with \$11 million in seed funding from NUS, the institute aims to bring digital media technology to not just entertainment, but also education, tourism, health care, homeland security, arts and culture.

It will build up a team of 160 researchers – from here and overseas – and also oversee the NUS Hollywood Lab in Los Angeles, set up last year to facilitate partnerships with Hollywood giants like Disney.

The project in which "J" stars has been selected for this year's

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IDMI BOARD CHAIRMAN HANG CHANG CHIEH, on the kind of interdisciplinary collaborative research the institute hopes to promote

Wired NextFest – a prestigious international IT show to be held in Los Angeles this September.

The game is a joint research effort by students from NUS' engineering, biology and art departments – exactly the kind of inter-

disciplinary collaborative research the IDMI hopes to promote.

Said institute board chairman, Professor Hang Chang Chieh: "We want to leverage on technology, art and the social sciences to come up with cutting-edge research in interactive and digital media."

For a start, the institute has identified 17 projects that are slated to be launched within the year.

It is now on a global search for an interactive and digital media expert to head the research institute.

The IDMI's eight labs are currently located in different buildings but will move into one place on the campus sometime next year.

The Government has set aside \$500 million to be spent over the next five years to develop a strategic research programme for the interactive and digital media sector.

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