

No lack of creative IT talent here



Grace Chng
 Digital Life Editor

Early last month, nine Singapore software houses learnt to build applications for the iPhone when they attended Apple's Worldwide Developers Conference (WWDC) in San Francisco.

When I met the participants there, they talked excitedly about their applications – or apps in short – which they had built or were building. These apps included games, online banking tools and restaurant reviews that could be played, read or used on the iPhone.

Apart from these nine firms which were part of an IE Singapore mission to the WWDC, there are about 50 other iPhone developers here who belong to two Facebook groups: Official iPhone Developers Singapore with 31 members, and the Singapore iPhone Developers with 21 members. These are the known ones. They are probably tens of others who are quietly building their own iPhone apps.

Their products are listed in Apple's online outlet called the App Store where they are among the more than 50,000 other applications available. They jostle for the attention of the 40 million iPhone and iPod Touch users in the world who can buy them for 99 US cents (\$1.45) upwards, or download them for free.

Revenue varies among the developers. In the US, some are making more than US\$100,000 a month.

Air Hockey, a game created by Singapore developer Personae Studios, has earned about US\$41,580 since the game was posted at the end of last year. Although Personae's studio head Sunny Koh declined to give revenue figures for Air Hockey, a back of the envelope calculation showed that given the game was downloaded about 60,000 times, that would bring in about US\$59,400. Apple takes a 30 per cent cut, which leaves the developer with the rest, or \$41,580.

Even though the revenue is not great, there is still a lot of interest in the App Store. In truth, I did not expect to see such a large number of iPhone developers here. Casting the net wider, I found many local companies in interactive digital media space like animation and video gaming who have also made their presence felt on the world stage.

The community of iPhone developers debunks the notion that Singaporeans lack creativity.

Take plan.pack.go – an app that helps travellers organise their packing for any kind of trip. Within five days of its launch in April, it climbed the charts and was ranked

26th out of the 1,760 apps in the travel category of the App Store, said an entry on April 15 by its creator Michael Tan in the Official iPhone Developers Facebook page.

Singapore companies in the info-comm technology and interactive digital media (IDM) areas have also created world-class products and services.

In 2007, for example, Mr Leonard Lin, a graduate from Singapore Management University, created Battle Stations, a popular Facebook game which lets members of this social networking site play online games.

In animation, local IT stalwart ST Electronics successfully teamed up with overseas production houses like Nelvana in Canada to create successful animated television series like The Future Is Wild, which has been shown on Discovery channel in the US and RTLII in Germany.

The company leveraged on its expertise in simulation which it developed for the last three decades for the defence industry, said Mr Seah Moon Ming, president of ST Electronics. With this knowledge, which also comprised animation and visual effects, it would not be impossible to move to the interactive digital media industry.

"So we decided seven years ago to do this. We began as an outsourcing house doing small projects in digital effects for overseas TV animation production houses like Nelvana."

Gradually, the company progressed to doing more of the animation work, including character de-

sign, colouring and lighting. Its confidence has grown such that it will be unwrapping its first animated feature film in 2011 in collaboration with popular film-maker Jack Neo.

Said Dr Christopher Chia, chief executive of Media Development Authority (MDA): "Creativity is not questioned today. Instead, we need to ensure that the content pipeline is full and that development teams can easily collaborate with overseas partners at any hour."

Creativity in IT and IDM would not have been possible without two fundamental strategies that Singapore has been developing over the last three decades: computerisation and government funding.

Twenty-eight years of computerisation produced trained manpower, turned Singaporeans into tech-savvy people and built a comprehensive infrastructure that connects Singapore to the world by submarine cables that have a whopping international Internet capacity of over 100 gigabits per second.

From fewer than 1,000 IT professionals when the national computerisation strategy started in 1981, there are now 139,000 professionals. Students and teachers use computers for learning and teaching. Office workers, housewives and the elderly have also become tech-savvy during this time, willing to spend on shiny new gadgets like cellphones and digital music players.

A society so ingrained with technology seeded an environment ready to accept new digital toys and threw up technopreneurs the

likes of the Facebook game firm, Tyler Projects, and IT firm ST Electronics that has branched out to produce animated TV episodes and feature films.

Government funding in the last five to six years for IDM and new media led to fresh ideas, start-ups and companies that are today aggressively pushing the envelope with innovative digital services that are sold on the world market.

The injection of \$500 million by the National Research Fund to create interactive digital media resulted in a slew of R&D projects in tertiary institutions as well as treaties with overseas institutions like the Chinese Academy of Sciences to develop technologies that can be used to create apps.

Initiatives by the MDA to kick-start IDM projects include \$50,000 microfinancing schemes to get potential technopreneurs to test their ideas.

Even in films and broadcasting, the MDA is playing catalyst as it aims to evolve the local industry from a cottage industry to a world-class business.

Early movie makers were one-man shows doing everything themselves.

The first MDA blueprint in 2004 addressed this as well as stepped up efforts to train manpower, export made-by-Singapore content like feature films and documentaries and matchmake Singapore companies with foreign ones so as to give them a leg-up in the world market.

Results have shown that the strategy is working. Made-by-Singapore content like Man-Made Mar-

vels debuted on Discovery Channel and Kylie Kwong: My China was sold to over 40 territories.

World animation giant Lucasfilm is among the many IDM and game companies that opened their local offices here. Singapore animators at Lucasfilm are contributing to the animation of the Star Wars: The Clone Wars TV episodes.

As these movies turn digital and with animated films being shot in 3D, the IT capabilities have proven useful. Techies know how to store movie rushes in digital format and transmit them, for example, in secure modes to foreign partners for collaboration. Or IT experts with programming skills are able to code algorithms for new games.

Then the broadband infrastructure that connects every part of Singapore to the world has big data pipes and high speeds which makes data transmission fast. Computer-generated graphics for a fight scene in an animated movie could be produced in a Singapore studio and then passed on to its partner in Amsterdam at night when the sun sets here and rises in Europe and vice versa. Coding becomes more efficient and productive. Overall this saves time.

Feature-films and animated movies have gained international attention, with nominations and special prizes at Cannes and other film festivals.

Singapore filmmakers such as Kelvin Tong, Anthony Chen and Jack Neo have all won nominations or awards at international film festivals.

Singapore still has much to do, for instance, getting more people trained to make new films, build new games or create new technologies. What we have today is a promising start.