

‘Magic’ story gets a godfather

Businessman injects \$1m into NUS researcher’s mixed reality company

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IT TOOK four months of negotiations, answering phone calls after midnight, making presentations and attending countless and endless meetings.

All this, while juggling between his day job as a researcher and lecturer.

But to Dr Steven Zhou Ziyang, the effort was well worth his time.

The 28-year-old’s fledgling start-up MXR Cubes (www.mxrcubes.com) has just landed a handsome \$1 million windfall from a businessman who wishes to remain anonymous.

This is the largest amount of private funding secured by a National University of Singapore (NUS) student start-up.

Dr Zhou – who recently completed his PhD at the NUS – said the money “opens up many opportunities” for his mixed reality company, which was formed last year with the help of \$40,000 from NUS’ Fund for University Student Entrepreneurs.

With finances secure for the time being, Dr Zhou is counting the months before MXR Cubes rolls out its first commercial product – a story-telling cube-shaped device targeted at children aged between three and eight.

Named the Magic Story Cube, it is comprised of cubes made of wood or plastic and is imprinted with a pattern of designs.

When a user launches the accompanying software and places these cubes in front of a computer, the patterns are detected via a web camera and an animated story plays on the monitor.

Dr Zhou said children would understand a story better through this added physical interaction.

“The content of books and videos are fixed when you read or watch them, there’s no involvement with the user. But our cube allows the child to learn and absorb through 3-D graphics, music and narration,” he said.

So far, only two stories – *Noah’s Ark* and *Elves* – have been prepared.

Dr Zhou is now busy sourcing for more content locally and overseas. He expects the



COOL CUBES: MXR Cubes – invented by Dr Zhou – is an electronic story-telling device for children. The \$1 million is the largest amount of private funding secured by a NUS student start-up.

first product to be launched by July or August this year. The storybook, computer software and cubes will cost around \$50.

The NUS filed patents for the invention in the United States in May.

Dr Zhou’s dream is to secure the rights to a household name such as Harry Potter and develop the story so that it can be used with the Magic Story Cube.

“If I can get such a big name on board, it will provide the platform for my company to grow. I will use existing stories first and then come up with original content,” said Dr Zhou, a China-born Singapore permanent resident.

Eventually, he plans to launch his product in Europe and the US too. However, setting up a branch office in China next year is on top of his agenda.

Dr Tan Boon Tiong, the director of NUS Venture Support – which supports technology start-ups founded by its staff, students and alumni – said he hoped more people would be inspired to take risks and start their own business.

“We will do all we can to encourage and nurture the talent that we have. Who knows? – one day we might churn out the next (Creative Technologies chief executive) Sim Wong Hoo or (Hyflux Group founder and president) Olivia Lum.” said Dr Tan.