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SimGraphics hopes to break into market here

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NO SOONER than Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad mooted the idea of the world's first multi-cultural content centre for digital entertainment within the Multimedia Super Corridor, a US graphic animations company is already making its presence felt on Malaysian shores.

California-based company SimGraphics is the outfit behind the show-stealing "Nasaruddin Suparman" - a computer-created character "who appeared talking and dancing" on a large video screen at the recent Anugerah Industri Muzik '97 (AIM) held in Kuala Lumpur at the weekend.

It was the first time such "live" technology was used in the country as opposed to pre-programmed computer animation previously. Quite appropriate, seeing that the theme for the awards ceremony was Malaysian Music in the Digital Age.

SimGraphics, a provider of real-time cartoon animation systems and services for television and live events, is the proprietor of a computer system that records the facial and body movements of real actors and animates a 3-D character based on these movements instantly.

It has used this technology to create a new entertainment market for amusement attractions in which guests can interact with live animated characters.

The company is now raising capital to expand its technology base and to market its products and services around the world.

Business Times managed to catch company president David J. Verso at the weekend and asked him about his plans to catapult SimGraphics into a strong strategic player.

"We are looking for capital to integrate with our technology and vision," said Verso. Keen on expanding operations to Malaysia, SimGraphics is looking for partners either on a joint venture or an equity-financing basis.

Malaysia, he said, has a lot of potential, especially since Astro is beaming its shows to the region. According to Verso, the shows can be created locally but have the animated characters speak in different languages for transmission to the region.

As in the case of "Nasaruddin Suparman", many more characters can be localised to meet local taste and requirements. "Global in scale but local in nature," as Verso put it aptly.

That would answer the Prime Minister's call for localising digital entertainment relevant to Asia. Dr Mahathir, speaking to a group of Beverly Hills entertainment leaders during his recent tour to promote the MSC, said the increasingly affluent developing nations will want more local content for their entertainment.

"The themes may remain universal but Asians will increasingly prefer entertainment more localised in its language, myths, characters, music, allusions and locations," the Prime Minister said.

SimGraphics prides itself on the ability to produce large volumes of network-quality television animation quickly and cost-effectively. "Our system has the cost-advantage compared to the traditional 2-D animation," Verso said.

For example, the company's 3-D Vactor registered system created animation for 26 episodes of "Secrets of the Cryptkeeper's Haunted House", which has become the mainstay of CBS' Saturday morning line-up, in just

one week.

The company has in the past year done sophisticated characters for US television and trade shows for its corporate customers. "Corporate customers tend to use the same system, thus it is not an exponential cost for them," Verso said.

SimGraphics is also the only company to provide real-time animation for customers in out-home entertainment locations and live events, for example, at theme parks, stadiums and touring shows. The Mirage Treasure Island in Las Vegas and the CAA/Intel Media Centre in Beverly Hills use SimGraphics animation.

Another growth area for the company is the Internet. With personal computers in another two generations having sufficient graphics power, this represents an opportunity for the company to provide real-time on-line animation over the World Wide Web, Verso said.

The company has projected steady growth in the television and location-based entertainment markets over the next few years what with more advanced systems and higher animation performance.

According to Verso, production of the animation itself or providing people the necessary tools to do the production themselves represents its two-pronged strategy.

It is not difficult for locals to learn how to operate the system, said Verso. "The person operating the system for AIM was from Astro".

However, SimGraphics prefers to get itself involved in the production of shows so that "we know the problems together with our customers".

The company has been in this line of work for six years now but acknowledges that "nobody is ahead of others in this game". "Eventually everybody is going to do the same stuff," Verso conceded.

But SimGraphics is banking on its technological edge to create new characters faster and animate them with better facial elasticity and body motion and have them delivered to customers at a lower price.

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