

Media Lab on a private mission

A tour of its facilities leaves IAN CAMPBELL in no doubt about Media Lab Europe's ability to invent and innovate, but how will it cope in a cut-throat commercial world caught in recession?

Nearly two years have passed since Bertie Ahern officially opened Media Lab Europe (MLE) for business in Dublin's old Guinness brewery, a period in which the tech sector fell into recession forcing many companies into a battle for survival. "We could not possibly have picked a worse economic climate to start the lab," admitted Dr Rudy Burger, chief executive of MLE, an organisation that relies on private funding.

When the Irish government invited the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to set up a European arm of its Media Lab in Dublin, its mix of highbrow educational research with a no-nonsense quest for commercial funding seemed a perfect match for a country that was looking to improve its own knowledge-based credentials in a changing IT world.

Such was the enthusiasm for its arrival that the surrounding area has now become The Digital Hub, an attempt at establishing a cluster of like-minded companies to create an Irish version of Silicon Valley.

But how would a university-level research and education centre cope in

hard times? Burger admits that MLE has had to undergo a series of changes to ensure its survival. The first was to wean itself away from its traditional dependency on information and communications technology, the sectors that have been particularly badly hit by the downturn.

Next, it has set about creating different types of research programmes, scaling down from expensive projects that only companies with billion dollar turnovers could

afford to fund. It is even working on a funding model to get SMEs (small to medium-sized businesses) involved.

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Thirdly, MLE is now on the trail of EU funding, prompted by the European Commission knocking at its door with a specific project in mind, the details of which will be announced shortly. Many European research organisa-

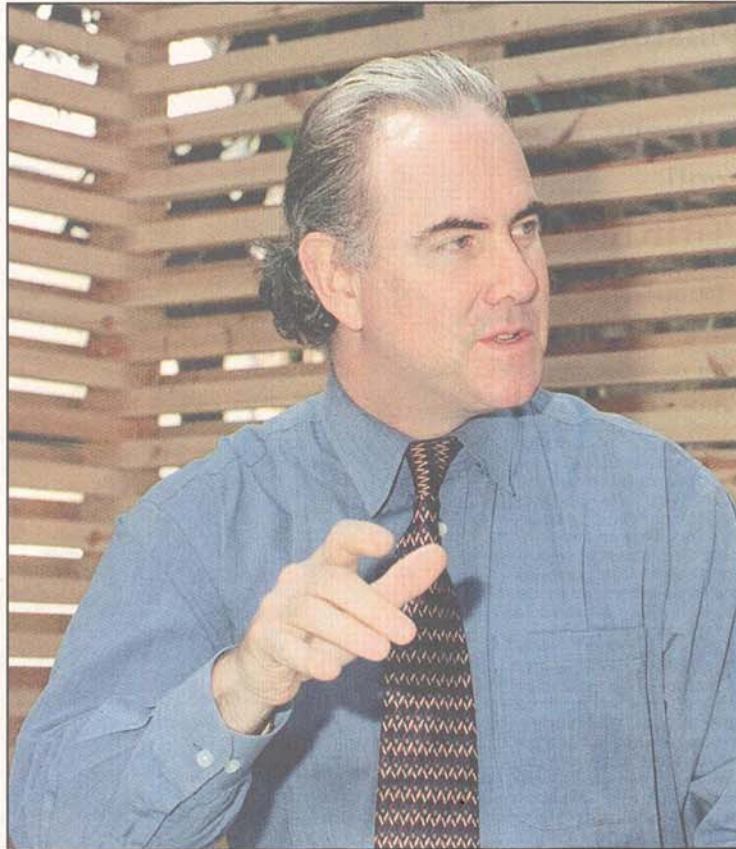
tions already depend on EU funds and the prospect of becoming one of them goes against the grain at Media Lab where a prime objective has always been to marry campus research with private investment.

"I would rather we were entirely company funded," said Dr Burger. "If the majority of funding ends up coming from the public sector it will be a failure."

The lab occupies a unique and admirable space in the

technology sector, but its self-imposed brief of open-minded research paid for by private companies could be under threat in a climate where companies are more interested in the bottom line than big ideas. But Dr Rudy Burger had no doubt where the priorities would continue to lie.

"My concern is in the university space, not in the



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corporate space," he said. "Companies talk about research and they talk about return on investment. But if you know the ROI, it's not research — it's development."

Despite its roots being firmly set in academia, MLE wants the best of both worlds

with Dr Burger quick to stress that his organisation has the acumen to survive in the cut-throat commercial world.

"Over the last decade the most common cause of start-up failure is the failure to differentiate between a good product and a good business

idea," he said, explaining that this is where Media Lab Ventures (MLV) comes in.

MLV is the business-savvy wing of the organisation, self-funded and set up with sponsors on a one-to-one basis to bring ideas to commercial fruition. Companies are even

encouraged to bring their own employees into the lab to help commercialise the technology.

The three-floor MLE complex is reminiscent of the kind of New York loft apartments featured in endless yuppie movies back in the 80s. The ambience, however, is definitely new millennium. There is no shortage of hardware and hi-tech gizmos. Big screens take up vast wall space, showing surreal images from strange games, a curious video montage and a continuous web broadcast from MIT offices on the other side of the Atlantic.

The MindGames Group is working on harnessing the youthful appeal of computer games for more educational and therapeutic applications. It shows a game where participants win a race by being more relaxed, a far cry from the adrenalin rush of most PlayStation titles. Two players are wired up with the same technology as a lie-detector, whereby their pulse rates determine the speed at which the game characters move. The more relaxed the player, the more likely it is that his or her dragon will win the race.

The Palpable Machines Group is exploring how to extend human senses, such as touch, over distance. One model enables two hands on two different sets of rollers to make movements that the other can feel and respond to.

The Human Connectedness group is experimenting with different forms of video communication, exploring how remote connectivity can be enhanced to encourage human interaction in new and more sophisticated ways.

What was noticeable on a whistle-stop tour of different projects was that they all had commercial potential that the researchers were resolute in playing down. Dr Stefan Agamanolis described one Human Connectedness project as "a bit like videoconferencing", but he argued that using such a label would move away from the point of it. Similarly, a suggestion that a Palpable Machines' project would go down a storm with games consoles was also regarded as a distraction from what was actually intended.

If Media Lab sometimes seems to suffer from a higher calling that might prove hard to sustain if the recession drags on, it's difficult not to admire its fresh take on technologies. Take one of its wireless projects for example. In India, a Media Lab academic was looking at a problem that will be all too familiar to Ireland: how to deliver broadband services to rural communities. It is a challenge that is compounded in India by extreme poverty and non-existent infrastructure. However, the scientist observed that every small village had one thing in common — a daily bus service. In an experiment, these buses were equipped with IEEE 802.11b, the wireless network standard, complete with a pick-up node on the back of the bus. With each village given access to a compatible 802.11b computer they could enjoy 11MB connectivity to the outside world, albeit for a few minutes each day. Who needs ADSL and Eircom? Call Bus Éireann and let it take broadband to the regions.