SOFTWARE EDGE: NTU has come up with software which will save a lot of drawing and time for anime animators. With the program, the cost of an anime production can also be reduced by up to 40 per cent.

NTU seals software deal with anime studio

BY LEUNG WAI-LENG

THE next animation series by top Japanese animation studio Anime International Company (AIC) will be made with Singapore.

A Memorandum of Understanding to co-produce 13 episodes of a new sci-fi anime, or Japanese animation, was signed yesterday between AIC president Toru Miura and the dean of the School of Computer Engineering at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Dr Seah Hock Soon.

AIC is the studio behind anime hits such as Ah! My Goddess and Tenchi Muyo!

What the NTU team will bring to the table: software that will save a lot of drawing — and time — for animators. With the program, an animator rendering a character taking a step, needs to draw only two key frames — the point when the character lifts his foot and when he sets it down. The software automatically fills in the frames in between.

Previously, animators would have had to do this “in-betweening”, that is, draw every frame of the character’s movement through that one step. A typical anime episode done that way could cost more than US$150,000 ($244,300) and take 50 animators six months to do.

To cut costs, Japanese anime studios have been outsourcing manual “in-betweening” work to South Korea and China, where labour costs are lower. But AIC chose to tie up with NTU because of this software, which Mr Miura described as “unbelievable, a dream come true”.

The software, which took two years, three professors and four PhD students to develop, can cut the time and cost of anime production by up to 40 per cent.

This saving on time — and therefore, cost — will free animators to focus on the higher-end, creative aspects, such as the art and storytelling, said Dr Seah, who led the software’s development team.

He said since Singapore could not compete on costs with South Korea and China for manually rendered work, it offered technology instead. Mr Miura, who believes the software to be a world first, said Japanese software designers were working on something similar, but had scored no concrete results yet.

The tie-up, the first of its kind between Singapore and Japan, will speed up Singapore’s push to create hit content for global audiences, said the creator of the Mr Kiasu comic strip Johnny Lau, now AIC Asia’s associate director.

He said: “In terms of selling content overseas and industry maturity, if we don’t work with Japanese companies — who are leaders in animation — it will take a few more years. Now, we’re going straight to Japanese TV.”

The anime is slated to be completed by next year, with production and research staff split between both countries. AIC is working on getting it distributed internationally.