From ‘Human Pacman’ to Global Leader

Researcher who created ‘Human Pacman’ is one of two men in S’pore on the Young Global Leaders list

When Associate Professor Adrian Cheok donned a spaceman-like backpack computer and digital goggles to become a human “Pacman”, he never thought that he would one day be mentioned in the same breath as the founders of Google.

On Wednesday, the researcher was one of two men in Singapore named as prominent young leaders by the World Economic Forum, a Switzerland-based association devoted to economic and social issues.

They were among 245 people below 40 who were selected this year as Young Global Leaders for their professional achievements and potential to shape the world. Past winners include Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin and, from Singapore, Members of Parliament Teo Ser Luck and Penny Low.

Prof Cheok, 37, who is director of the Mixed Reality Lab at the National University of Singapore (NUS), is well known for research which melds real-world objects with those in the virtual realm.

His most famous game is “Human Pacman”, which has a user carrying a backpack computer and wearing goggles who “chomps down” virtual dots on Singapore streets, while being pursed by “ghosts” like those in the original arcade game.

Developed in 2005, it earned plaudits worldwide. The same year, the respected Wired magazine listed it as one of the world’s top inventions and invited Prof Cheok to exhibit it at Wired NextFest, a showcase of new technologies.

Though he is seen as a leading light in the field, Prof Cheok told The Straits Times he was surprised when told of his win because he did not know he had been nominated.

“Since it’s a global award, it will focus attention on Singapore and show that we are doing something that impacts the world,” he said over the phone from Japan, where he is on a business trip.

Prof Cheok, who is also deputy director of research at NUS’ Interactive and Digital Media Institute, said he planned to expand on his work this year.

“With the Internet, we seem to have lost something in the way we communicate,” he said.

“You can have a nice glass of red wine in Paris, but you can’t use text or video to explain to your wife how it smells and tastes; so hopefully, we can in future register scent and send it over a phone to loved ones,” he said.

Besides Prof Cheok, the other winner for Singapore was Mr Hur Saehong, deputy managing director of petrochemical firm GS Caltex Singapore.

The firm is a subsidiary of GS Caltex Corporation, the second-largest energy firm in South Korea.

Mr Hur, 39, who is in charge of crude supply and petroleum product export here, declined to be interviewed.