

S'pore program helps kids write e-books

They can make their pictures move and shoot videos to go with stories

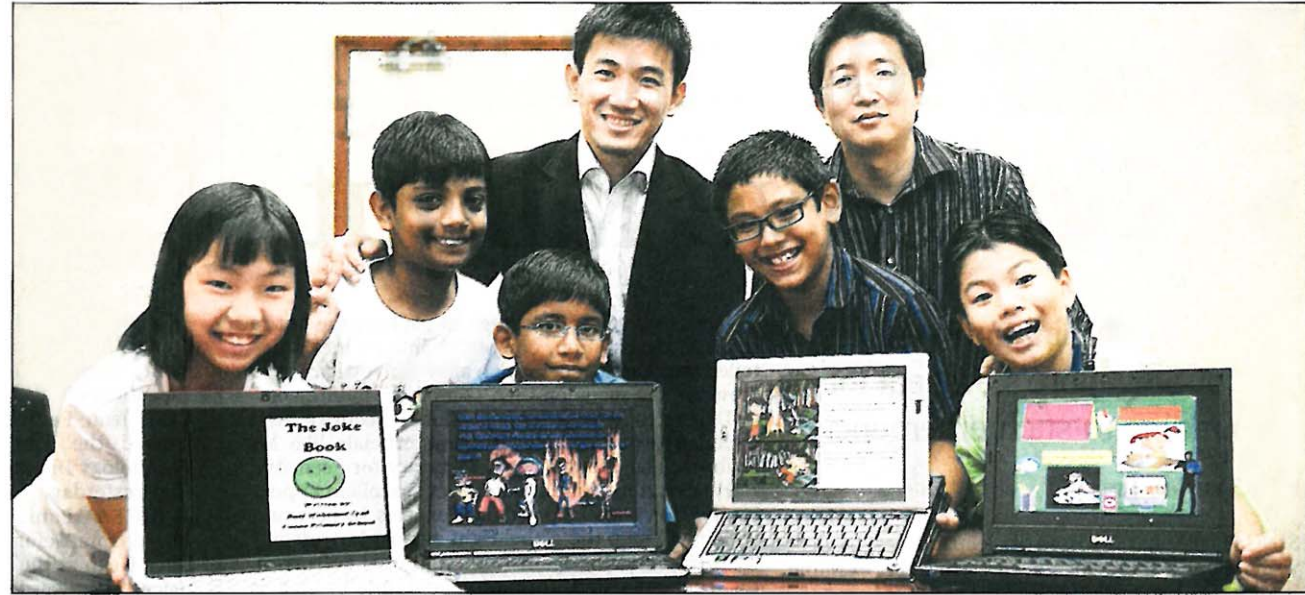
keying in commands, so they do not need to know how to use the more-complex Adobe Flash animation software.

KooBits came about as a by-product of an unrelated project in 2004 among then electrical engineering undergraduate Stanley Han, computer engineering researcher Chen Xiangdong, and robotics professor Sam Ge.

They were then creating a computer program to teach people how to dance. The project did not pan out, said Mr Han, 28, who graduated from the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 2005, but it did leave the trio with one takeaway – that many people were deterred from creating digital content because it was too difficult.

The idea for KooBits came to them when they were introduced in 2005 to a group of teachers in charge of information and communications technology (ICT) in their respective primary schools.

One of them, Mr Melvin Yeoh, Ahmad Ibrahim Primary's ICT head of department, said: "I believe we can encourage weaker pupils to like writing if they can



Two of the brains behind KooBits, Personal e-Motion general manager Stanley Han (left) and chief technology officer Chen Xiangdong. Their program, with its easy-to-use multimedia features, is a hit with young users (from left) Lorraine Ge, 10, Bani Muhamad Iyad, 12, Abdul Qadir Jailani, 10, Ryan Noel Bangras, 10, and Tommy Tan, 10. There are currently 80 Singapore schools using the program. ST PHOTO: JOYCE FANG

create e-books with pictures and animation.

"But the software available cost thousands of dollars and were complicated to use. It was very disheartening."

The teachers were looking for a "one-stop" program that would enable pupils to create multimedia content easily, said Mr Han, a Chinese national and Singapore permanent resident. "We thought, 'Hey, we could do that.'"

The rest is history.

KooBits' founders put \$30,000 into their new baby, which has since grown into a \$5 million company, Personal e-Motion, which owns KooBits.

Plans are afoot to introduce the program – which costs \$50 for the basic version and \$100 for the premium one – to more schools in China this year, and to the United States next year.

The program has also received a nod from the Media Development Authority, which came this year in the form of a grant to offset its development and marketing costs. KooBits and four other new media projects got a total of \$7.6 million.

KooBits is now used in schools not only to teach English, but also science, mother tongue and mathematics.

An inter-school contest for students' KooBits-created e-books, organised by

the NUS and Hwa Chong Institution, is already in its second year.

The versatility of the program and the pride of becoming published authors keep users coming back for more.

Primary 6 pupil Bani Muhamad Iyad from Eunos Primary School has written about 10 books since he started using KooBits two years ago.

The 12-year-old said: "It is fun writing the stories. There are many pictures to choose from and I can shoot my own videos. I want to write as many stories as possible and share them with all my friends."

CHILDREN can now write and publish their own e-books, complete with videos and animation, courtesy of a computer program designed in Singapore.

KooBits, as it is called, has caught on like wildfire in schools here and overseas. Three years ago, only four schools here used it; that number has now grown to 80. About 80,000 budding writers in Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia and China are users.

The program's appeal lies in its host of easy-to-use multimedia features, said teachers and students.

Students write stories and illustrate these by picking from a gallery of licensed clip-art images. A patented technology enables them to animate the images by