MISSING your buddy in New York? Instead of poking him on Facebook, simply lift your egg-shaped Roly Poly device at home, and across the world, your friend’s device tilts too.

Switch on the light on the device, and continents away, your friend’s device will light up simultaneously.

“Think of it as bringing 3-D into social interaction and networking,” said Associate Professor Yen Ching Chiaan, head of the Division of Industrial Design at the National University of Singapore. “You can chat on the Net, Facebook, but it’s very flat and virtual, so we experimented with design and ideas to see if we can translate interaction into the actual physical world.”

The deceptively simple but ground-breaking idea wowed the curators at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York enough that the prototype will be part of its new exhibition, Talk to Me, which opens tomorrow—scoring a first for Singapore.

Running till Nov 7, the exhibition dwells on the communication between people and objects, and will feature a wide range of objects, concepts and visualisations from all over the world.

Other contributors to the Talk to Me exhibition include heavyweights like the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa), and the people behind Macintosh home computers and Apple icons.

Students and alumni at NUS’ Design Incubation Centre—which comes under Prof Yen’s division—spent the last three years exploring the idea and creating a prototype.

Prof Yen said the devices form a private link between two people, and require only an Internet connection.

There are no additional devices involved.

“The Design Incubation Centre is about rethinking how things can work—whether we can help industry or explore new ways that can make life better—through design.”

Local concepts

Also part of the exhibition is another of the centre’s projects which involves technology to help people read. The idea revolves around putting sensors on a person’s fingertip as he traces the words he is reading.

Prof Yen said the sensors are meant to detect when there is hesitation in the finger movement, and relay the sounds, translations or meaning of the word under the reader’s finger to a device placed near the ear.

This, however, remains very much in its conceptual stage, but it has piqued interest from the curators as it has refreshed the conventional way of learning and reading, said Prof Yen.

For now, there are no plans for commercialisation as the projects are still in the research stage.

But is it enough that the centre has made it to the big league?

“It’s very prestigious and we are honoured to be part of MoMA. It was really hard getting through the selection process.

“I am very happy for us because it also shows benchmarking—that we can stand alongside the big players in design out there,” said Prof Yen.

**globetrotter**

Shake a device in S’pore and move it in another country. This innovative device (above) earns a place alongside NASA in New York exhibition

*PICTURES: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE*