

pure genius

*Stroll ten minutes out of Dublin
city centre, past the elegant stores
and brassy bars, and you reach the
run-down fringes of the city.*

*Here the only tourists are those
who've come to take snapshots of the old
Guinness brewery, and horses still
pull carts along the cobbled streets.*

Welcome to the future.

Words: Stephen Kingston Photographs: Frank Bauer







The project is one of many that illustrates Media Lab's unusual approach to innovation. The original MIT Media Lab was founded in Massachusetts in the mid-1980s after a group of academics decided that invention and convention didn't go together. So they gathered together every lost genius they could find, from brilliant scientists to Internet artists, and made it happen. Some of the most popular recent innovations, from DVDs to karaoke machines, started life there.

The European arm opened almost three years ago as a ten-year venture, backed by a £22-million grant from the Irish government. Ever since, top young guns from the US, Europe and Ireland have flocked there, attracted by its uniqueness – unlike all the other hi-tech companies looking for the next big money-spinner, it's a not-for-profit organisation. There are no products for sale and its inventions don't even earn it royalties.

Hard at work in the Lab is Brendan



Donovan, who is developing *Amble Time*, a multi-dimensional city map that uses Global Positioning Satellite technology to show your location and how far you can walk in a specific time. Another of his projects is *Wait Lifter*, an application that transmits real-time public transport information by text message to mobile phones. It tells you exactly when your bus or tram will arrive at the local stop so you don't have to wait around in the cold.

Brendan is typical of the kind of specialist lured by the Lab. "What attracted me was the human element being inserted into the technology," he says. "The last job I had was researching smart bomb technology, which is the complete opposite."

Unsurprisingly, some of the largest corporations in the world want in. Last year Orange signed up as a research partner for the next three years, joining big-name companies like Swatch, Saab, and the BBC. For Paul Phillips, Orange's Head of Brand Futures, the benefits are obvious: "Any business that believes in the future needs to invest in it. We expect this

The setting couldn't be less likely. Yet in the midst of Dublin's suburbs is possibly the greatest concentration of bright minds and big ideas this side of the Atlantic: Media Lab Europe. Housed in a stone warehouse that was once a Guinness grain store, Media Lab is an organisation with a mission as off-the-wall as its building: 'to expand human potential through invention'.

"Our core philosophy is the creation of ideas that will change the world and make our lives better, not just ideas that are marketable," says Ronan Smith, Director of Corporate Relations, who apologises for wearing a shirt and tie. "Media Lab has always attracted the world's best minds, but they're not the type of people who

would fit into the standard academic or industrial environment – they're visionaries but not 'mad professor' coneheads."

One of these non-geeky geniuses is Daragh McDonnell (above), who today is demonstrating a computer game with a difference. *Relax To Win*, as the title suggests, is no fast-paced shoot-'em-up. Instead you strap two fingers to a sensory pad that measures your stress levels. Only by chilling out can you make your 3D dragons walk, run and eventually fly. You can try and beat your previous performances or even play a friend.

The game has proved highly effective in Dublin's Mater Hospital, helping children with anxiety disorders treat themselves. "We can help those with problems," says Daragh. "Games can have a very positive effect on the player."



new partnership to be fruitful because Media Lab's research is very relevant to our business." Partners can watch the work of the researchers and even take away ideas and develop them, but they don't direct anything that goes on. For big business, it's a different way of working.

Although each section of the Lab feeds into and crosses over with the others, there are six full-time research groups. Palpable Machines is looking into the future of touch technology. Dynamic Interactions is experimenting with wireless connections for communities. MindGames, the birthplace of *Relax To Win*, aims to affect the human mind through sensory immersion. Wellbeings is concerned with hi-tech human health, while Everyday Learning explores how people can get more in touch with their environment and includes *Amble Time* and *Wait Lifter*.

Finally there's Human Connectedness, which aims to 'foster a sense of community between human beings'. The group's studio overflows with playful and

thought-provoking projects. A cutting-edge Internet TV has been rehoused in an antique Bakelite case, complete with knobs and slide controls. A screen called *Palimpsest* (below) captures images of people walking past and replays them on a loop, creating a layered human mosaic. A mirror called *Reflexion* allows you to sit and watch a film or football match with people from anywhere in the world – your images and voices appear like human subtitles on the bottom of the picture.

"We're working on how we can capture intimacy," says Stefan Agamanolis, principal research scientist. "Many of the technologies that were invented during the last century isolated us from one another in various ways. We're trying to look at technology that reunites us."

So perhaps it's fitting that this research palace is based in a ramshackle Dublin suburb. The technology developed by Media Lab's finest minds may be state of the art, but its purpose is a purely human one. ■



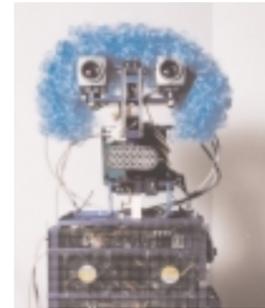
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Coming soon? Three Media Lab projects to watch



Office voodoo

Change the emotions of the characters in an office sitcom at will. To make them lustful, bored or put them on the verge of a nervous breakdown, all you do is shake and prod the voodoo dolls.



Anthropos

A walking, talking robot that can see shapes and colours, and even respond to questions. His blue afro and 'eyes' help to break down barriers between humans and robots. Last year his sister Josephine Robot performed in a ballet in London wearing a dress and floral butterfly wings.



iCom

See what is happening in the world of distant friends and family. iCom uses a projector, cameras and the Internet – all you have to do is click on the screens to see what's going on and talk directly to people at the other place. It's ideal for keeping in touch as it's cheap and works on broadband.