Nottingham speeds research

DIGITAL

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The University of Nottingham has become a key player in the global challenge to define the next generation web.

The university has just signed a master agreement with Adobe Systems, the fourth largest computer software company in the world, for joint research into all aspects of digital documents and web graphics.

The agreement, the first for Adobe outside the United States, forms part of a wider-ranging plan by the Silicon Valley-based company to collaborate on research projects with a handful of top-flight universities.

David Brailsford, head of the electronic publishing research group at Nottingham, said that the agreement would build on many years' collaboration between the advanced technology and Acrobat engineering groups at Adobe and his group.

He said: "I'm very excited by the decision. It is not everyday that a top US company proposes to invest in the UK.

'We have been involved since the earliest days in using the Adobe Portable Document Format as part of our research. We are now well-placed to assist the company in moving forward to a new generation of documents that involve Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG), structure and metadata."

The first year of the agreement will involve research into the development of tools to enable interoperability between leading graphics products and the web.

Professor Brailsford said that Nottingham would be developing public domain tools available for free download that would allow users to test and check their SVG creations.

The agreement has been driven in part by the demands from publishers, designers and consumers for a different set of methods for electronic document delivery.

Professor Brailsford said that document creation and transfer over the web lacked the subtlety and scope required by digital information developers.

At present, the control of typography and image delivery over the web is ensured by bitmap graphics that bloat information delivery times. There is also limited facility for detailed image delivery that allows the user to focus in on finer details of elements of the graphic, for example a small part of a medical instrument or car transmission.

The Nottingham research will, in part, contribute to the development of the SVG specification that will allow for richer design with sophisticated typography, high-resolution artwork, dynamic content and faster downloads.

Content will also be displayable on a much wider range of platforms, including small mobile devices. This work is being driven by the World Wide Web Consortium's SVG working group, headed by Chris Lilley. The SVG standard is expected to be completed by the end of the summer.

Tom Malloy, head of the advanced technology group at Adobe, said that the company had chosen to identify, encourage and support the best researchers in the academic community, tapping into the best minds on faculty and students. The research at Nottingham would draw out the best from previous standards to help develop the best standards being sought by the W3C.