L3 Interactive Interview

3: Could you first tell our readers a little bit about L3 Interactive and what you do?

L3: L3 Interactive is a company which is totally dedicated to the presentation of instructional material in forms which consumers have never seen before. Through the use of interactive learning cube interface, we feel we have perfected the use of the technology available to us right now to teach people effectively.

3: How long have you been in business?

L3: We started in December of 1993. At that time we perfected the learning cube interface and created our first two titles for the 3DO platform.

3: So with your beginnings in December of 1993, this makes you one of the first companies to support the 3DO platform. Your first title was Mathemagics, how did it come about?

L3: Mathemagics was the title which showcased our learning cube in a wonderful way. Up to this point people have given instructional software a bad rap. It usually thought about as something mundane or boring. This view seems to be especially prevalent when speaking of mathematics. Math is something that so many people have phobias about. They are so afraid of it. We found that through Professor Arthur Benjamin, the star of Mathemagics, his whole thesis that math should be fun. He feels there are easy ways to look like a math genius by understanding the methodology. By presenting it with the learning cube, it is fun to access the information and people see the math as fun. This is our main objective with the learning cube, to make the learning fun.

3: How did you connect with Dr. Benjamin?

L3: We had read his book by the same name, Mathemagics. We contacted him and asked if he would be interested in taking his book and creating an interactive product.

3: Are you doing titles for any other platforms?

L3: Currently we are not but we do plan to port our titles to other platforms essentially Mac and PC CD-ROMs. We're also creating MPEG titles only for PC MPEG but hopefully also for 3DO MPEG. This only makes sense as you can see our titles are video intensive, so it would only make sense to take advantage of the MPEG technology.

3: Do you know when that will be as we keep getting dates that do not happen?

L3: You mean MPEG in general? No, as we keep getting the same dates you do. However, that does not change what we are doing. The fact that our company is totally dedicated to using the learning cube interface and creating a single type of product allows us to streamline what we are doing. The bulk of our energies is on content, so if its tweaking the end our production flow to digitize it for 3DO MPEG, its just an adjustment at the end of the process. What we are really focused on is the content. We don't have to reinvent the wheel for every title we create, we have the interface and the core code complete. It is a proven interface. It is receiving good acclaim. Kids like it as well as adults.

3: What was your background before coming into L3 Interactive?

L3: I come from a background of no real formal education. I took a test after half of the 10th grade and got out early. Then I traveled and essentially did not attend any university, although I did take some classes but decided that was not the route for me. From very early on I have fooled around on computers and worked with computer software. At the age of 18 I started my first software company. I created another company maybe three years later which was an aviation software company which created software for pilots. That led me to L3 Interactive which was formed in 1993. L3 was such an incredible product concept which got so big that I dissolved my aviation software company.

3: Are you a pilot?

L3: I am a pilot.

3: Was the aviation product training software?

L3: It was reference software, especially for pilots. It was for them to locate data or information on safety, or aircraft, or weather phenomenon. Essentially almost every private pilot subscribes to at least three or four aviation magazines and you don't want to throw these magazines away as they have good information and reference material inside. So you end up with a big stack of magazines which become relatively useless as far as trying to access the data needed. So our software was an index for Macs and PCs where pilots could locate articles within the six most popular aviation magazines using keyword searches or subject searches.

3: From there you went on to create L3?

L3: Well, the transition from one to the other was sort of interesting. We were running a successful business and I was enjoying it as my personal hobby was aviation. My brother, John who founded L3 with me, had created a learning cube of his own. John's passion in life has always been communication and understanding how people learn things. Since my background was business administration or small business administration I approached him about making a product out of it. So that is how L3 was born. After it was clear that L3 was going somewhere, I dissolved my aviation software company which was not an easy decision to make.

3: The L3 Interactive cube itself was designed when?

L3: That was done in mid-1993 by John. He did the original cube and the concept of a learning cube.

3: So it was completed sometime after that when you became involved with the 3DO platform?

L3: Correct. We really solidified and put it together on the 3DO unit. It was one of the reasons we chose 3DO as our first platform.

3: Mathemagics came out when?

L3: Mathemagics came out in late October of 1994.

3: Your latest release is called Slopestyle and was released when?

L3: It was released in mid-February 1995.

3: Are you looking to do a new title every four to six months.

L3: Definitely not. What we have done in our first year of operation, although on the outside it looks as though we have produced two titles, internally we have done a lot more. We've created the infrastructure to produce learning cubes at a much more aggressive rate. Since all of our titles are going to be learning cubes and the learning cube itself is going to evolve as an interface independent of individual projects it will have an evolution. It enables us, now that we have the core code complete we are able to produce these things at a much quicker rate. Our challenge is to find what people want to learn about, find the greatest teachers on that subject and create a title using the existing learning cube interface and show that information to consumers in a way that will be effective. Our production schedule is ramping up at a pretty aggressive rate. We have eight different titles scheduled for production this year. Next year we have 24 titles scheduled for production.

3: Can you give us any advance information on what titles we are likely to be seeing?

L3: The one thing I am trying to avoid in this company is the vaporware syndrome of generating a lot of hype about our titles before they are ready. What I want people to do is to expect a steady stream of educational titles, superior instructional titles on an incredibly wide array of subjects. The next one the we are producing right now is going to be called the Real Line on the 3DO platform. This is going to be a hot new instructional video on In-Line skating. This should be out before June.

3: Your titles tend to be a little esoteric, in that we have a snowboarding title, an in line skating title and a math title with the math title being the wider based of the three, any comments on that?

L3: Definitely. I think the best way to answer that is to explain a little bit about what the learning cube is. The learning cube was created under the realization that learning is a multi-faceted experience. Different people learn things in different ways. It doesn't matter what the subject is. Some people benefit from an experiential understanding of a subject. Some people see the video, they want to hear the music, they want to feel what it is like to feel what the muscles are doing. Another person might be more comfortable seeing that lesson in more of a point by point form where there is a narrator talking about it and telling them exactly what he is doing. Another may want to see it in text form so that they can literally see step 1, step 2, and step 3 written out in words with graphics or diagrams. The idea is that the same piece of content can be approached from many different angles. This is essentially what the cube is through the metaphor of a 3 dimensional cube. People intuitively hunt around, play with the information, and access the information in exactly the way that is best for them or best suits them. So we don't want to limit the cube to just sports titles or math titles. We feel it is the interface that the industry has been looking for. Up until now out of a hundred different CD-ROM titles you essentially had to learn 100 different interfaces to get to the content. In many instances those interfaces were cumbersome or complicated or oversimplistic and sometimes the content just wasn't there. We feel that this interface allows people to concentrate on the content. We don't want to limit our demographic or title base. You're also going to see titles on music, science and comedy. The interface is a great podium for presenting information and we intend to exploit it to its fullest.

3: The titles that you have picked so far have been narrow, any comments?

L3: Yes, I guess the thing that looks like it is narrowing it is the in-line. I mean at first when you see math and then snowboarding, your first impression is that it is an extremely wide range as you couldn't find two things much further apart.

3: Well, I was thinking more along the lines of how many people who own 3DO units would be interested in snowboarding or in-line skating?

L3: Yes, I see what you mean. Basically as a company our mission is to build a learning cube library into an extremely comprehensive place where people can go to learn what they want. We want people to feel that there will be a title in the learning cube library for whatever they are interested in. The fact that we are so dedicated to just creating learning cubes has enabled us to create product in a more efficient manner with less overhead. This allows us to attack the market as no other software company can afford to attack it. If another software company has to spend four times the amount that we do to create a sports title then they are not going to do a title on surfing that is not going to sell well enough to support their overhead. Since we are so streamlined and dedicated to the creation of learning cubes enables us to explore some of these markets and help the people that want to know more about surfing. Even though it may not be a blockbuster title it enables us to grow as a business and our library becomes richer. The volume of the library grows and it becomes more comprehensive. This was built into our business plan and our mission.

3: Basically what you are saying is that because it is a lot less expensive to do these things you can do the more rarified title.

L3: Also, we are not counting on a blockbuster hit with record breaking sales to cover our costs of production. We have a long range plan which is to build a comprehensive library with moderate sales for each of the titles individually. These are not things that we feel are ever going to go out of fashion. Very often you can rate the value of a video game by the hours of play it is worth. For example, some games after 20 or 30 hours the user might be finished with it, they've seen the whole thing, they're finished with it, they're bored with it. Our products would have to be likened more to books. This is content that is never going to go out of fashion. Benjamin's method for multiplying in your head will be as valid 5 years from now as it is now. The proper style for preforming a jump on the snowboard is not going to change. Our title starts back with the basics of just buying equipment for the first time you are on the snow. Then the next season you can go back to the slopes and try some of the other jumps. We expect our products to be consistent, long term sellers with a tremendously long shelf life.

3: The metaphor of the cube really works because you have the balance of graphics and text with a very easy way to manipulate and access the information.

L3: The cube is an extremely intuitive tool. Our goal is with the cube is to create an invisible interface, so that you don't have to think about how to get the information but just think about what they want to know immediately get to it. For instance in the text section, there are many ways to access this section, suppose you were watching the Slopestyle video and it is being explained that when you are trying to carve your heel side edge and you don't understand something. With the click of a button you can interrupt his sentence and immediately see a glossary which will explain the last thing he said. You will get a transcript of what he said and access a glossary explaining heel side edge with graphics. Within that definition there may be words you do not know and you can cross reference those too until you are satisfied that you know what he meant. Then you can immediately jump back to the video and go on with the lesson. This is a use

of the technology as never before. This gives you an idea of how the cube works. It provides a link between the mediums of text and video.

3: It is also a linked format, sort of a hypertext format, that allows you to link to words within a text to other words further on in.

L3: Yes, it is a hypertext type glossary. We call it transpertext as we feel it goes a step further in its relation to the graphics. You can jump back and forth between the two without it being cumbersome or losing your train of thought on what you were learning.

3: how has the 3DO market been for you with this style of program?

L3: To be honest it has been tough. The reason we were developing on 3DO was not because of their massive base of users, although we do anticipate the user base to grow, but it was because it had the technology to showcase our product like no other platform could. The quality of the video and the ability to show the animations smoothly so it was the perfect medium for our product without limitations in terms of porting to other platforms.

3: Now in developing Slopestyle you took advantage of some personal connections, could you give us a little background on how it came about?

L3: We found through research that snowboarding was the fastest growing sport among the demographics of people interested in games. So we decided to try to wean these gamers onto something which was instructional but with a game feel to it. Slopestyle is something they are interested in and it also teaches them something. Further investigation led us to some world champion riders which convinced us to kick this thing into gear and make this. We had access to riders such as Tom Burton and the other riders we had in the video. In trying to decide to shoot this thing we really wanted the best of the best. So for instance, when we were shooting the section on powder, we wanted to shoot on real powder to give the users a feel for what it is like to snowboard on powder. We literally went all over the world to do this. We shot in New Zealand for a lot of the segments, we shot a lot in Oregon and we think we got these guys doing their thing.

3: That is considerable expense as it is like making a small movie.

L3: Exactly. We are sort of a hybrid between a software company and a production company. The programming on a project is not where the bulk of the effort goes. The bulk of the effort goes into an instructional title from scratch. We script these things specifically for the learning cube.

3: Is there anything I should have asked that I didn't?

L3: I think we have covered just about everything. I would just like to encourage the readers to contact us with ideas for future cubes as we love to experiment and we love that kind of input. We are also having a Slopestyle Sweepstakes. People can send in their registration cards and an entry form to win an entire snowboarding package.

3: Thank you for your time and we wish you the best of luck.