



When Old Becomes New

by Dinah Tolton

Every day and late into most evenings, Bruce Richardson can be found at his Videolink headquarters on Gerrard Street in Toronto. Bruce and his employees are self-described “artistic computer geeks”.

His office is stacked with video games like *Quake*, *Age of Empires*, *Tribes* and *Diablo*. It’s a “no-tie zone”, where friends often drop by to talk about what’s happening in the industry. Once an animation is set up to be rendered, they’ll go play video games and put back a few beers.

Videolink is a primary Canadian supplier of upgrades and repairs for Video Toaster cards and Newtek software. They also work on the new Toaster NT on the PC platform, supplying tools for animation, video editing and web streaming.

AN APPRENTICESHIP BEGINS

Dylan McIsaac was 19 when Bruce discovered him. He worked for a set design company which sublet from Bruce a portion of a 14,000 square foot building located on Toronto’s Lucy Avenue. In his spare time Dylan fashioned sculptures out of wire and plastic.

When Bruce met Dylan, one of the first things he noticed was the young artist’s two thick sketchbooks filled with his Graphitti-style art. Then the Videolink guys showed Dylan LightWave 3D software. Since he was working so intensely in 3D sculpture they figured that it would be natural for him to transfer this talent to computer modeling.

That was in 1996. Dylan continued working for the set design company, but in the evenings he would hang out at Videolink. VL was nine years old at this time and employed three people.

AMIGA’S DOWNFALL IS VIDEO LINK’S PROPELLER

In the mid-1980’s Commodore made the Amiga, regarded by many as the ultimate multimedia computer. In fact, Commodore had multitasking before the Mac, and a Windows-style GUI long before Microsoft. An interesting Canadian historical note is that the company was founded in Toronto in the 1940’s as a manufacturer of typewriters and filing cabinets; the Amiga was the first computer to include a CD-ROM, called CDTV.

When Commodore went bankrupt in 1994, it wasn’t because of its product. Rumour had it that management was their downfall; the president was purportedly milking the company dry.

After Commodore went broke, Newtek took over the LightWave software and began producing versions for other platforms. By 1995, capitalizing on Commodore’s misfortune, Videolink was able to expand, now dealing with Macs, PCs, SGI and DEC Alpha. Bruce’s strategy was to contact all the Amiga dealers in Toronto and outlying communities, purchasing their Amiga equipment, parts and software. By doing so, he virtually captured the Amiga market in Canada. That helped boost Videolink’s gross income by tenfold in ten years.

Videolink’s Bruce Richardson uses revamped Amigas to teach new digital artists old tricks

Meanwhile, LightWave had quickly become the number one choice of television and film animators. Today it continues to rule the market, similar to 3D Studio Max's reign in game creation. For example, LightWave has been used exclusively by the producers of *Star Trek*, as well as for *Earth Final Conflict*, *Starship Troopers* and *X-Files*, just to name a few.

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A SLIGHTLY WILD AND CRAZY PAST

Before 1987, Bruce was involved with radio stations in London and in Sarnia, using analog systems. He produced radio commercials, talk shows and live concerts which he covered and mixed. After this, as he moved more into video editing, he started Videolink. For six or seven years he ran the operation on his own, starting off by fixing clients' Video Toasters, which ran on Amiga and

was the first video editing system for desktop computers.

"I drove a Harley and was more undisciplined than I am today," Bruce recalls. "Now I can do an 18-hour day on digital stuff; digital technologies channeled my creativity. In 1993 larger companies like Rogers, Shaw, Disney, Warner and MuchMusic were using Toaster, as were independent producers. Some guys were producing animation art and some were doing television on LightWave. The Toaster made editing simple, and it came with an animation package. It was a complete system—and still is today. The Amiga hardly ever crashed and film editors liked it because it was simple and dependable."

In 1999 Bruce moved Videolink to 2284 Gerrard Street where he occupies about 3,000 square feet. The front of the building houses a retail store specializing in animation and video editing tools. In the back is the studio for animation projects.

Videolink provides training for LightWave and video editing on various systems. Customers who buy LightWave or video editing hardware and haven't mastered the full learning curve can come back to VL and subcontract the work.

TRAINING IS COOL

Videolink has worked with the Board of Education for the past five years, teaching high school students.

"Coming from high school, they seem to have a better knowledge of new software available than the older students," observes Bruce. This year Videolink has had one student for the summer who has been learning work skills. Part of her course has been to do co-op marketing for Videolink, and in return Bruce has been training her on various kinds of multimedia software.

Stephen Leacock High School usually sends two students who come in from nine to four and learn web development as well as video editing and animation.

"The kids come in here for training and at the same time they teach me a lot," Bruce remarks. "The kids in grades 10 and 11 are really different—they're the first fully digital generation."

When he comments on his protégés, Bruce reveals the personal interest he takes in each of them. "Dylan is a very talented young man. We just gave him digital training to complement his sculpting and artistic abilities. Each young person coming in here is unique. The students seem very motivated and excited by what we call multimedia magic."

Dylan McIsaac still spends time at Videolink in the evenings, putting his mentor's tutelage to good use by creating imaginative 3D images (like the one that accompanies this article).

In this day and age of constant high tech updates, it's reassuring to know that there are many computer artists still learning and working with their old proven Amigas.

You can find Videolink on the Internet at www.videolink.ca or contact them by telephone at 1-800-567-8481. For additional information on LightWave 3D and Video Toaster Flyer, just visit www.newtek.com. ■