



2007 Rubik's World Speedcubing Championship



'25 years on' ERNO RUBIK INTERVIEW

This interview can be used in whole or in part.

*It is the **only one** to be made available during the run-up to the October 2007 Rubik's World Speedcubing Championship, to be held in Budapest, Hungary.*

We are happy for it to be edited down or adapted to the third person – but PLEASE DO NOT CHANGE PROF. RUBIK'S ACTUAL QUOTES.



The rapid art of Speedcubing

This autumn, over the weekend of 6th/7th October, the beautiful and historic city of Budapest will host the official World Championships of a sport whose participants need the dexterity of a virtuoso concert pianist and the problem solving abilities of a chess grandmaster.

They also require nerves of steel, and an appetite for practice that would make Tiger Woods look like the laziest of lazy Sunday golfers. That sport is

Speedcubing – completing the multi-coloured plastic puzzle known as the Rubik's Cube in the fastest time possible.



And by fast we mean fast: to be in with a shout of winning, competitors at this year's Championships will probably need to average well **under 15**

seconds per solve on the 'standard' 3x3x3 Cube. Anybody who's ever picked up one of these intriguing objects and given it a twist or two will have some idea of

quite how tough a challenge that is. Anybody who hasn't need only consider that the Rubik's Cube has more permutations than there have been seconds in the entire history of the universe... to get a handle on the degree of difficulty involved in solving it at all.

The Cube is coming home - and Erno Rubik wants to be there to welcome it.

The Rubik's Cube conquered the planet back in the early 1980s, and in recent years has experienced a resurgence that sees all-year-round dates on the official Rubik's international competition calendar, with events taking place everywhere from Finland to Korea to the Czech Republic. What makes the puzzle so compelling? Why has its popularity endured for so long? And what exactly is it that turns a good cuber into a Champion Cuber?

What better person to ask than the Cube's creator, **Professor Erno Rubik** himself. Fiercely protective of his privacy, the Professor rarely speaks to the press these days. But he has agreed to meet me to talk about the forthcoming World Championships, taking place in his beloved Budapest over the weekend of 6th/7th October, where he will be putting in an even rarer personal appearance.

It is the second time I have interviewed Rubik, and once again we are sitting in his office at the Rubik Studio. I am keen to discover his views on Speedcubing, and the extraordinary times its devotees are recording these days. But first I ask him whether he ever imagined the Cube would become the global phenomenon it has.

The Professor settles himself in his leather armchair, smiles wryly. He has trodden this ground countless times in the past. But, like a rock star who's always being asked to reprise his biggest hit, he is used to being quizzed about the genesis of his famous invention, and responds with well-rehearsed politeness. "I was sure it was something very interesting and important in my life," he says, in heavily-accented but precise English, "But I was not thinking about its commercial potential. For me it was a curious object, a puzzle for solving. However, I was trying to develop it as a product, because if you only have ideas, you can't share them with other people. If the Cube had remained a concept, well, we wouldn't be here now," he adds, axiomatically.

Neither, one imagines, would Rubik have become what he is now – one of the richest men in Hungary, with his name in the Oxford English Dictionary and a permanent Rubik’s Cube exhibit in New York’s Museum of Modern Art.

But he had to fight hard to get there. When, in 1974, he first dreamed up the idea for the Cube, which he used to demonstrate his theories in 3D design to his students, he was working as a lecturer in the Department of Interior Design at the Academy of Applied Arts and Crafts in Budapest – behind the Iron Curtain. Whilst word-of-mouth had led to the initial version of the puzzle, then called the Magic Cube, gaining considerable popularity in Hungary, exporting it, and getting it accepted by the hard-nosed western toy industry, posed almost as big a problem as the Cube itself.

“Everybody said it wouldn’t work,” states Rubik. “It was much too hard, they said; it didn’t make any nice noises, whatever. There was no market for it, basically. In the end, one company (*the Ideal Toy Corporation*) was willing to give it a try. They thought we might sell a million Cubes in the first year if we were lucky; as it was we sold five million, and it just took off from there.”

Did it ever. The Cube has shifted something like 300 million pieces since its international launch in 1980, and within two years, its popularity was such that it was able to sustain a World Championship – held, naturally enough, in Budapest. 2007 is the 25th anniversary of that inaugural competition, and once again the contest will take place in the Hungarian capital. That must make the Professor proud, I venture.

“Yes, of course. I think it’s time to do it again. When we held the first one I had no idea we would still be holding them 25 years later. It’s difficult to predict what will happen with a toy, and for me this aspect of the Cube – the competitions, I mean – wasn’t something that I was thinking about at the beginning at all. Usually a puzzle is a solitary pursuit,” explains Rubik. “You are alone, you have time to work on it; you are not forced by the clock. So for me it is very interesting, this Speedcubing thing.

“Myself, I have solved the Cube,” he continues. “That was a proud moment for me at a time when very few people could do it. Back then my task was to prove that it could be done, because people said it couldn’t. But now these ...” he pauses, searches for the right word, “...these *wonder-boys* can do it much faster

than I was able to. In the 1980s my average time was about one minute. But now, I would have no chance to be a contestant in the Championships," he laughs.

The fastest fingers on the planet...

Too right he wouldn't. The **World Record** for a single solve, set by 17-year-old French prodigy **Thibaut Jacquinot** at the Spanish Open in May of this year, is a staggering **9.86 seconds**. Wonder-boy, indeed. Already, at least 250 competitors from more than 30 countries have registered for the event, a testament to the Cube's international appeal. The Professor expands on this theme: "One of the main characteristics of the Cube is that it has no national character," he says. "It's about a human being trying to solve his or her problem."

Has the internet made a difference, I wonder? Rubik nods emphatically. "The internet makes a difference to everything. It makes a difference to life. Nowadays the Cube has such a wide audience via the internet. And they're not just an audience, they're an interactive community: they are listening, telling and showing what they have done."

We talk about the fact that the Cube has endured despite the massive global popularity of video and computer games. Although it is possible to solve virtual Cubes using computer programs, and people do, Rubik believes that human beings will always respond to the particular tactile, sensory appeal of the physical puzzle.

What, then, does he think about artificial intelligence, and computers generally? "I see computers as tools, really wonderful tools. Right now it's time to learn how to modify them so that they become even more useful. So the way we interact with them, the human interface, that's the most important thing."

Does he think computers will ever be as intelligent as humans? The Professor smiles. "That's a question that's connected to the greatest question – what is intelligence? So it's very difficult to define, or to say what it means. Certainly computers can do a lot of things we can't, and vice versa. I don't see it as a fight between the human brain and the artificial one. It's more like a joint venture. We can work together. We can give what we know, and they can help, help us to do what we can't – or can't do fast enough."

So is the Cube a test of intelligence, and what is it that makes somebody good at solving it? The Professor responds elliptically. "I don't know. It's very difficult to define. It's not any one thing. The Cube is a test, sure, but in my view, well, the whole of life is a test." He continues in similarly philosophical vein for a while, and I realise that there never was going to be an easy answer to that question.

Maybe, like the writer who doesn't question his muse for fear it'll desert him, the Professor is reluctant to try and deconstruct the mystique that surrounds the Cube. Or, more likely, he simply doesn't know what makes a Thibaut Jacquinot, any more than he'd know what makes a Steve Redgrave (winner of 5 Olympic gold medals for rowing, in consecutive Olympics), a Gary Kasparov – or a Mozart even. You can practice hard, sure, practice harder than anybody else in the world. But if you don't have that special, indefinable 'something', you'll never be a world-beater...

Following his philosophical lead, I ask the Professor if he is optimistic about the future, and for the future of the human race. "Yes, I am optimistic. I believe in the power of the human mind, of human culture. I'm sure we can survive. In different ways, in different parts of the world, we have survived all sorts of things. Now we have to face the most difficult task, that of surviving ourselves."

The World's gone Cube-shaped

And the Cube? Will it survive? Professor Rubik leans back, shrugs his shoulders. **"If it's capable of living for almost 30 years, it's probably capable of living forever."**

Judging by the enthusiasm of the burgeoning global Speedcubing fraternity, whose elite members are set to flock to Budapest, armed with their favourite competition Cubes – and maybe the odd can of silicone spray, used to grease the puzzle's internal mechanism so it spins faster – he could very well be right. Who knows, in a few years' time Speedcubing might even become an Olympic event. You heard it here first ...

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NOTES FOR JOURNALISTS AND BROADCASTERS:

2007 WORLD RUBIK'S SPEEDCUBING CHAMPIONSHIP

If you want some really cool facts about Speedcubing, visit The World Cubing Association's site – www.speedcubing.com – which, apart from telling you all about the World Championship, is fully up-to-date with all the fantastic Cube records, including the fastest time for solving the Cube blind-folded, underwater, one-handed – even for solving it with your feet!! There are also mountains of other sites dedicated to this finger-twisting phenomenon – and you can find loads of interesting facts and solution ideas at the **official 'Cubist' website** – www.rubiks.com.

**For more information/high resolution pictures,
please contact our Worldwide Press Officer:**

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London-based David Hedley Jones, Worldwide Director of the Rubik Brand, is available for interview... as is Dan Harris, the UK Rubik's Speedcubing Champion – he can do it in **13.06 seconds.**

Please call us to arrange a date/time.

We have produced a brand new Rubik's World Championship B-roll of useful footage – including an **interview with ERNO RUBIK himself, sequences from the last World Championship, archive shots, Budapest panoramas, etc. (see over)**



To access the

RUBIK'S WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP B-ROLL

please go to www.thenewshub.net

LOG IN: **Username:** rubik2007
 Password: worldchampionship

Click on '*Video Production*'. Then click on '*View Footage*'

Once viewed, to request hard copies of this footage please contact James Myers at the Television Consultancy:

james@tvconsultancy.co.uk Tel: + 44 (0) 207 535 5800