

Which Project Do You Prefer — The One With or Without the Manager?

by Thursby Pierce



It's dark. There's a chill in the air. You enter a dimly lit labyrinth where a slight haze is hovering above the floor. Music plays softly in the background. Character 1 appears on a screen in front of you seemingly out of nowhere. He tells a story about how the hero can save you if you follow his lead. You step onto the platform and board the ride vehicle to begin the journey.

Ok, so I'm not a scriptwriter. You can laugh. I'm just trying to get you

to put yourself into the creative and planning process of a fictitious attraction optimistically scheduled to open in the next two years on a foreign continent in some theme park in a galaxy far, far away from here.

Your firm was hired to develop this attraction (Let's call it Project A). You have the creative concept finished. You know you have the most thrilling, never-been-done-before, dark ride concept on the planet. You have been working with the hottest attraction designers and

architects in the business. You have the base building drawings in your hand. Now how do you make it all happen?

You had better hire a good project manager. If you want to bring this attraction to life as the quality guest experience you know it can be, without destroying the finances and the timeline of the owner, this is the critical time — after concept and prior to execution — for the project manager to get involved. The PM will help you fully develop the project scope, schedule and budget for

the different vendors, i.e. who does what and when, how much space and time they need to do it, and what is it going to cost. Your PM will hire knowledgeable staff that will write the RFP's for the different disciplines of the project. Your PM will negotiate the contracts, help acquire permits, wade through the mountain of paperwork required for the local authorities having jurisdiction. Your PM will also quell worker uprisings; make arrangements to repair the turf that got ruined by the cement trucks during the super flat concrete pour. Sometimes your PM will even grill steaks for the mid project barbecue.

Continuing with our hypothetical Project A, the PM you hired is very experienced. Once you have familiarized her with the project, she sets to work immediately on your behalf, skillfully coordinating all of the show and ride vendors' schedules. She holds the general contractor to his schedule for the base building. She schedules and conducts regular progress meetings to enable the process to go smoothly with as little conflict as possible, and make sure everyone is up to date, aware of their responsibilities and deadlines, and interfacing with the other team members as they should. The ride testing and certification will be completed with enough time to adjust the programming for the content changes the VP of creative wanted to add at the last minute. As a result, your dark ride is opening on time and on budget to the acclaim of theme park blogs and critics everywhere, and the owner is pleased.

Now, let's look at another hypothetical situation (Project B). Your colleague's firm was hired to develop a museum project where the decision was made not to hire an overall PM. He has been dealing with vendors pointing fingers at each other over whose fault it is that everything is late. He's fielding

questions from his superiors about why he is 35% over budget. Not only is he dealing with his usual work load, he's wading through the myriad of change orders that are pouring in. Lacking a properly coordinated schedule, this project will open late and may even have a few exhibits that don't work as they should at opening. Instead of helping to build public interest in the finished project, the media and bloggers are reporting on its latest setbacks.

To be successful, today's world of themed entertainment attractions and venues, like all businesses these days must operate as efficiently as possible, and hiring a good project manager to organize the process is critical to this success. But before

going any further, let's discuss the project manager universe:

On large projects, each major supplier or creative discipline on a team will have its own designated project manager. One manages the planning and site coordination of the general contractor's activities for the base building. Others work with the facility mechanical and electrical systems, the ride system, control systems, AV, lighting, special effects and scenic elements. These project managers each manage their own portion of the project — the pieces of the puzzle, but not the whole puzzle. They report to the overall project manager, the one who keeps the entire process running smoothly for the developer and owner (the one you need to hire).



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(left) The Tastes exhibit at the New World of Coca Cola museum in Atlanta. This area is where you can try all of the soft drink brands Coke sells around the world. We did the display monitors around six columns above the soda fountains.

(right) Smithsonian National Zoo project Asia Trail exhibit based around the Panda's and other Asian animals at the zoo. These are three interactive kiosks we did as part of the installation.

A complex attraction wherein the owner is spending \$130M to \$150M needs this kind of specialized function. The services the overall PM provides are crucial for coordinating the intricacies of realizing a world class attraction. But an overall PM is critical for many smaller projects, too. This person is simply your best hope for maintaining your budget, rolling out your project and building up your professional reputation.

There are varying opinions about when to get the overall project manager involved. My thinking is you should bring in the PM as soon as you have the concept finished. Other situations warrant the PM assisting as you pitch the idea to the client. Their experience may help close the deal. Having experienced project management as part of your team can help put the client at ease knowing that their money is being managed and spent wisely. Either way, this person will be a sounding board and will help formulate the methodology of how

to actually implement the execution phase of your project.

To find a good project manager, consult your colleagues in the industry for recommendations. When you have a list of candidates, look at the projects they have completed and inquire into how they were managed. Sometimes you don't need to hire your PM from outside - the owner may have someone qualified within their team. Alternatively, the design firm may recommend a freelance project manager, or another team member - possibly one of your project vendors or the general contractor - may have a person able to step up to the task. Notify your vendors prior to submitting their bids so they can include the PM costs in their proposals.

So, who would you rather be? The happy developer of Project A, with the satisfied client, good press reviews and enthusiastic public? Or the downtrodden developer of project B, the one with the cost overruns, negative press coverage and a product that doesn't live up to

expectations? Project management is integral to success, so start thinking about it early on and incorporate it in your overall work plan. When your project is staffed with a great creative team that has a great idea, you need a great PM to make it a reality. The creative team realizes the vision, the vendors succeed in their tasks, and the business objectives of the owner are met — in other words, everyone wins. ★

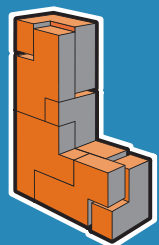


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Between Theatre and Themed Entertainment, the Influence Goes Both Ways

by David Barbour



I had a revelation the other day. I was editing an interview with John Haupt, who has done just about everything that one can do at Disney. When asked to name the major professional influences on his career, the first name out of his mouth was Jo Mielziner.

Jo Mielziner? Anybody? Okay, for the younger among you, he was Rodgers and Hammerstein's favorite scenic and lighting designer—and, before that, he was Rodgers and Hart's favorite. His extraordinary resume includes the original productions of Pal Joey, The Glass Menagerie, Annie Get Your Gun, South Pacific, Gypsy, and 1776, to name a very, very few. For two generations, he was one of the dominant names in professional theatre design.

But, really, why was I surprised? In the course of nearly two decades of covering various forms of entertainment, I've learned one thing: Every-

body, but everybody, gets their training in theatre school. It's true of designers, directors, and producers; once they have their degrees, they branch out into film, television, and, yes, the experience industry. (Yes, there is film school, but so many people get their start in theatre first.) Some of them find a career in the theatre to be too daunting, precluding a stable life with a family; others want to work on a bigger canvas. Still others want the chance to experiment with the latest technologies.

Whatever the reason, I always think the best entertainment experiences are informed by a theatrical panache—whether it's the skillful lighting of a dark ride, the stunning reveal in a museum exhibit, or the all-encompassing installation that creates a unique world of its own. It's all theatre.

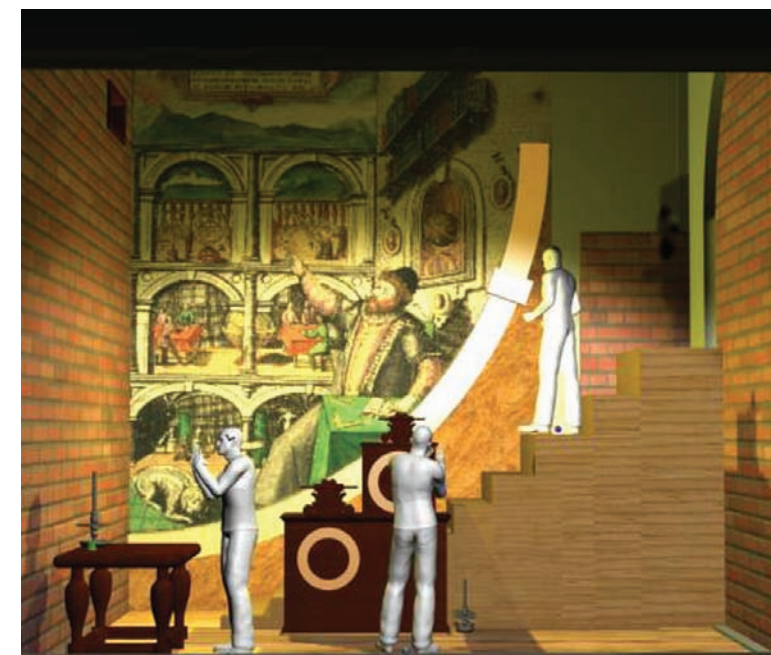
Nowadays, of course, we find the world of themed entertainment is, in

return, influencing the theatre. The most notable example is the emergence of the Disney organization as a major producer of Broadway musicals. It's typical of Disney, I think, that, to mark this endeavor, the company restored an ailing Broadway house, The New Amsterdam, creating the perfect, larger-than-life environment for its shows. And, of course, the Disney shows are known for their astonishing designs and effects, from The Lion King's animal parade to Mary Poppins' airborne nightly ride through the auditorium. (By the way, it has become fashionable to denigrate the so-called "Disneyfication" of the Times Square District; as someone who lived in that neighborhood in the 1980s, when it was a teeming mass of grind house, sex shops, and massage parlors, I assure you, we can only be grateful to Disney for helping to spearhead the rescue of this storied neighborhood.)

Consider also the case of David Rockwell, one of the top designers of restaurants, museum exhibits, and just about anything else you can think of. I remember the first time he told me that what he really wanted to do was design a Broadway show. I said nothing, but my skepticism was sky-high—what are the chances of that happening, I wondered to myself. Now Rockwell is, in addition to everything else, a sought-after Broadway designer, thanks to his work on The Rocky Horror Show, Hairspray, and Legally Blonde. The man who creates environments with a theatrical flair also creates set designs that are like little worlds of their own.

In a way, it's almost inevitable that there should be so much two-way traffic between the theatre and the experience community. It's a reflection of what I think is the biggest fundamental change in American society since World War II: The rise of the culture of entertainment. As anyone reading this knows, almost

Shuttle Launch Experience at Kennedy Space Center (at left), photo courtesy BRC Imagination Arts; (below) Peter Pan live show at Universal Studios Japan (top right), photo courtesy USJ; Object theater at Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles (right), photo courtesy Mad Systems Inc., Horizon Theater at the National World War I Museum in Kansas City (far right), photo courtesy Electrosonic.



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everything in our lives has been transformed into an entertainment experience—shopping, dining, travel, even the act of worship. A theatrical sensibility now informs our daily reality, a fact that makes a major challenge out of each new entertainment project. How do you astonish an audience that has already seemingly seen it all?

There's another sense in which Jo Mielziner anticipated what's going on in the world that is now called themed entertainment, and that TEA has helped to define. In addition to his design duties, he was also a sometime producer, at a time when a Broadway producer was the driving creative force behind a show. So it is with so many TEA member creatives, who take the wispiest of ideas and flesh them into 3-D experiences with fully formed narratives – excuse me – fully formed *stories*. In a very real sense, TEA members are taking theatre in new directions, making it meaningful to people who have never seen a play—who maybe never will. That's a remarkable achievement. ★

(above right) Another picture of the Horizon Theater.

(below right) Another object theater at Griffith Observatory.



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Seven Steps of Tech Design Success

by Steven J. Thorburn, PE, CTS-D, CTS-I



Inside the StoneFire Pizza Company family restaurant and entertainment center

Technical systems design is integral to today's themed attractions and leisure projects – for that matter, it's integral to modern architecture. Entertainment systems, security systems, life safety systems, audio, video, control systems, acoustics and building infrastructure all fall into this category. We won't go into detail on all of them here; rather, we'll focus on the broad strokes: What are some primary things that designers, architects, general contractors, project developers and project managers need to know when it comes to technology and technical systems design? Here are seven points that help facilitate good understanding and teamwork and pave the way to a quality result.

1. Even the most problem-solving genius of a tech designer cannot overcome the laws of physics. Light will only travel about 300 million meters per second in our current

environment. Likewise sound will travel at about 340 meters per second in areas that humans would like to be in. This means that when your tech designer tells you something like, "it will sound bad that way," or "the image cannot be that big or bright given the constraints," you have run up against certain rules outlined by Newton, Einstein and Maxwell.

2. Technology requires space. Creating that high quality image requires space for the projection equipment and the projection cones as well as viewing space. The projection process and the image size are factors that dictate optimal viewing distances, sightlines and projection throw distance. If it comes down to size versus quality, a decision has to be made. And while audiovisual equipment and computers are getting smaller, our rack rooms and server rooms still

need to be the same size so we can keep up with all of the extras that have been added to the systems. You must locate these rooms properly within the facility, to house the gear that makes the magic. They require special power and air conditioning. Your tech crew needs a hut in the center of the venue so they can get their systems out and utilities in to the rack and server rooms.

3. Wireless (as in battery operated) is for short term events only – parade floats or concerts, for instance. You need power. Without an un-interruptible power source, wireless systems will fail. (Just take a look at all of the travelers re-charging their wireless devices next time you are in the airport.) Are you sure you want to gamble on the guest's experience with what should amount to a disposable (but recyclable) battery?

4. Technology takes time. The tech crew will always be the last crew on site. Because their wires and equipment are delicate, a clean and air-conditioned space is needed before you even consider turning on the system. If the gear is exposed to too much dust, things fail later on. If the gear gets too hot, things fail. The commissioning process can take weeks and it usually cannot be shortened. If your tech designer estimates during the design phase that it will take six weeks of time on site to bring a system online, it will likely take six weeks, even if you triple the manpower (on a technology project, multiplying the manpower seems to decrease efficiency and lengthen the timeline rather than shorten it).

5. Technology fails over time. You cannot afford a system that will not fail. Even with the best systems, there will be failures. Therefore, you must implement a regular maintenance and testing schedule. (When was the last time a steel ride was installed without the cars, track and systems being checked on a

regular basis? Technology requires the same consideration.)

6. Wire is wire. We are seeing our wiring systems simplified to computer network cables. What is run on the network cables can be entirely different from one system to the next, but it all uses "wire." It is the equipment at either end of the wire that creates the magic, so the quality of your presentation depends on the quality of this equipment – the playback source and projection, the loudspeakers and amps, the control system, lighting, etc.

7. Get the whole team at the table early, including the tech designer. Technical problems that might threaten a

project in later stages can be anticipated and solved early, in the development stage, by a tech specialist. Your team will be able to address important technical issues at the formative stages and incorporate them into the design. This helps to make the best use of the square footage available, facilitate an efficient construction schedule and conserve the budget.

Ultimately, be realistic – technology is essential to experience design, so learn what you can and can't expect, and how to get the best results. Applying a double standard is unproductive, so know that technology fails. (I challenge you to go a day without a technical glitch

somewhere – if it's not on your computer or company network, it will be your phone, the GPS in your car, or perhaps the touch-panel on your dishwasher.) The laws of physics can't be denied – neither in terms of what the technology can do, nor in terms of the space your systems require and the timeline your crew needs. To paraphrase a past client, for best project results, you and your tech designer need to cultivate the serenity to accept the things you cannot change (laws of physics), the courage to change the things you can (innovative moxie), and the wisdom to know the difference (professional judgment based on experience and observation). ■



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Inside the New London Presbyterian Church in New London, PA.