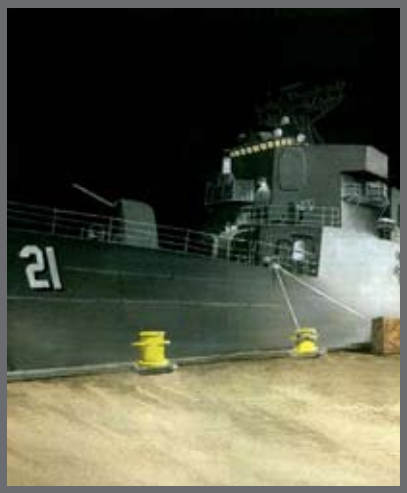

Award for Outstanding Achievement
Battle Stations 21
visualizing the future

by Brian Edwards & Roberta Perry

We have been in this industry 30 years (each) and have seen many changes of attitude towards our trade. What we do (technical integration) has sometimes been titled "infrastructure," sometimes called a "cost of doing business" - a pretty picture but not fully recognizing the special skill that a tech integrator brings to a project. We hold the keys to bringing a project to life, to animating the inanimate, to teaching, to evoking emotions, and, most importantly… to connecting the project to the guest.

Each project we work on has an agenda, and perhaps none has had a more important agenda than our recent work for the US Navy - a 12-hour training experience simulating a ship located 1,000 miles from any ocean - referred to as the unluckiest ship in the Navy, but more formally known as the USS Trayer, or Battle Stations 21 (BS-21).

Although it uses much of the technology and skills we associate with high-tech entertainment, the goal of this venue was not to entertain, but rather to seriously train people in property- and life- saving scenarios, within a virtual environment. All of the work we have collectively done over the past three decades was put to test in this venue: every ride, show, and gag that we have done seemed to have been in preparation for this project.
The irony of the situation came to light during an initial session with many of the top brass at the Navy Base. The issue of reliable control came up. Our response was to point out that the arts of simulation we practice in the entertainment field were first adapted from military training simulation. Some years ago, the military developed the basic control systems; then, our industry perfected and made them cost-effective, and now, it was time for the Navy to reap the benefits of technology transfer in the reverse direction.

This project is exemplary of the importance of AV in today's world. Briefly, BS-21 is the culminating training experience in a recruit's eight weeks of basic training. The recruits earn their "Caps" and the ability to move onto their first assignment only after completing – and passing - the BS-21 training. The virtual experience consists of a 12-hour, simulated ride on the USS Trayer, where scenarios like the IED explosion of the USS Cole are recreated to train recruits how to react. (In fact, extensive training was credited for saving both the ship and many sailors' lives on the real-life USS Cole.)

So how do you recreate 20 different scenarios and four copies of each, all operating asynchronously 360 nights a year, with a reliability factor of over 95% - and the ability to recover from a complete loss of all data within about six hours? If that is not hard enough, how do you communicate the system design intent in a language and written format that are unlike anything you have ever been trained to do? The last sentence refers to the Navy's form of documentation and process, which were not written with the entertainment industry's unique creative methodology in mind. Certainly, we faced a challenge - and one that we believe the team successfully met.

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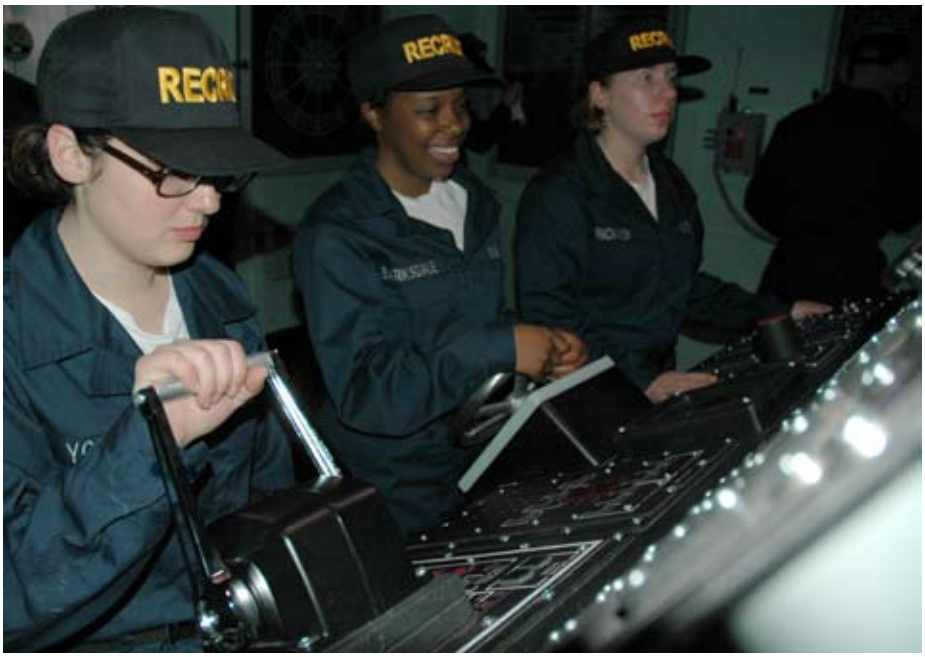

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At the end of the day, the solution lies in the process we integrators must go through to be successful. It begins with the big picture: the goals of the project. We like to take a conceptual leap forward in time, and then, looking "back," ask the team, "What did we create? Were we successful?"

Obviously, a project of this scope requires all of the digital tools we have access to, the audio and video servers, the digital audio processing, the signal routing, the system networking and, of course, the show control. This last item is most challenging, as we now find it more problematic that everything is programmable and therefore requires a programmer to perform the most basic function we used to take for granted. In some ways our boxes are more intelligent and in others they are stupid, an interesting paradox in the digital world.

To successfully develop this kind of complex interdependent yet independent system the integrator must look into the future and visualize how the AV system will interface and behave in such an environment. With no room for failure, the integrator must perform an in-depth "what if…" exercise to make sure that the stuff you did not know you did not know does not become the show-stopper in the eleventh hour. The role of the integrator has moved to center stage - seeing as how our equipment has become the last word in the chain of expression. We must not, therefore, be formulaic in our approach. We must and do look for the unique ways our skills and experience can make a project come to life.