SONY CONQUERS THE SHOW

PlayStation

Towers

Above the Competition

Mark Alexander

Anyone entering the 1999 Electronic Entertainment Expo in the West Hall of the Los Angeles Convention Center would immediately spot the exhibit that everyone would be talking about.

The Sony PlayStation exhibit, which featured a preview of PlayStation II, dominates the view, covering 38,000 square feet (190x200)—and that's only the ground level.

"We actually had more space—44,800 square feet—at last year's E3," explains Chris Olberding, president and cofounder of Pinnacle Exhibits of Hillsboro, OR. A young up-and-coming company, Pinnacle Exhibits was founded in 1998 by Olberding and Rob Roth, veteran exhibit producers who have managed some of the largest exhibits in the country. They are particularly proud of this year's Sony PlayStation exhibit.

"Since we had fewer square feet on the ground, we decided to go vertical. So in our design, and working with several fabricators, we added two more stories for an extra 12,000 square feet. This is the first three-story exhibit built in the LA Convention Center. We also built four sets of stairs, a three-story elevator—another first in the LA Convention Center—and a flying walkway around one-quarter of the exhibit. The precision needed for placing the main structure was strict. If we were off

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by 2 degrees, we would have extended 18 feet into a neighboring exhibit."

Olberding gets more excited as he talks. "We have one portion of the exhibit, for GTQ Racing with PlayStation's Grand Tourismo, where we've actually procured a Shelby Cobra, a 4GT40, and other rally cars, real cars, and we've stood them on end and put them 25 feet up in the air. Everyone has been very impressed with the variety of the exhibit. Something new turns up around every corner."

THE SONY IMAGE

Because Sony desired an extensive array of video monitors for both individual gaming, videowall gaming and video programming, one of Pinnacle's primary considerations for the initial design was the A/V vendor. They chose AVHQ, headquartered in Rancho Dominguez, CA.

"Audio Visual Headquarters is always at the top of a short list," reveals Olberding. "When we began designing the Sony PlayStation exhibit, our thoughts went immediately to AVHQ. They always have the latest equipment that we need. And the people are highly creative whenever they're faced with a significant challenge. Also, since they have facilities in nine major convention cities throughout the US, they give us even greater confidence when we bid on major national exhibits."

AVHQ has been an intricate part of the Sony PlayStation Exhibit for the past five years by providing audio visual equipment and technical support throughout almost every facet of the exhibit program. As Sony's needs have grown, so has AVHQ's involvement. This partnership has proven so successful that now Sony works with AVHQ to provide A/V for other events hosted by Sony. This year AVHQ provided gear not only for Sony's PlayStation exhibit for E3, but also for the Sony Awards Show and an all-night Sony Party.

All three events were produced by Richanbach & Associates, a technical production and management company, headquartered in Millbrae, CA. AVHQ also provided A/V for last year's E3 Sony PlayStation exhibit, which has won Exhibitor Magazine's 1999 Silver Award for exhibit design.

BRINGING IT ALL TO PLAYSTATION

The main Sony PlayStation exhibit requires lots of equipment and constant monitoring. The AVHQ control room is packed with 29 Sony CRV players that run 14 distinct tech areas throughout the booth. Larry May, the AVHQ project manager, describes the A/V requirements for the exhibit: "We have provided over 351 monitors of various sizes throughout the exhibit, with distributed audio throughout. We have over 14 miles of audio and RGB video cable laid out under the carpet. We use a Datatone system off our AirFax 8 to route anywhere in the booth. And we use a PM 3500 with two other larger boards to handle all the audio-over 50 EAW CAM300 cabinets flown throughout the exhibit directly off the exhibit-wide truss. Between the booth and the gear, over 60 tractor trailers were required to get everything here."

For the main curved facade of the exhibit, AVHQ provided two 3X3 Clarity LCD videowalls designed by Clarity Visual Systems, Inc. These used WN-5220 VIP-300 Clarity cubes, each only 28.5 inches deep and weighing only 120 pounds. "The Clarity videowall is
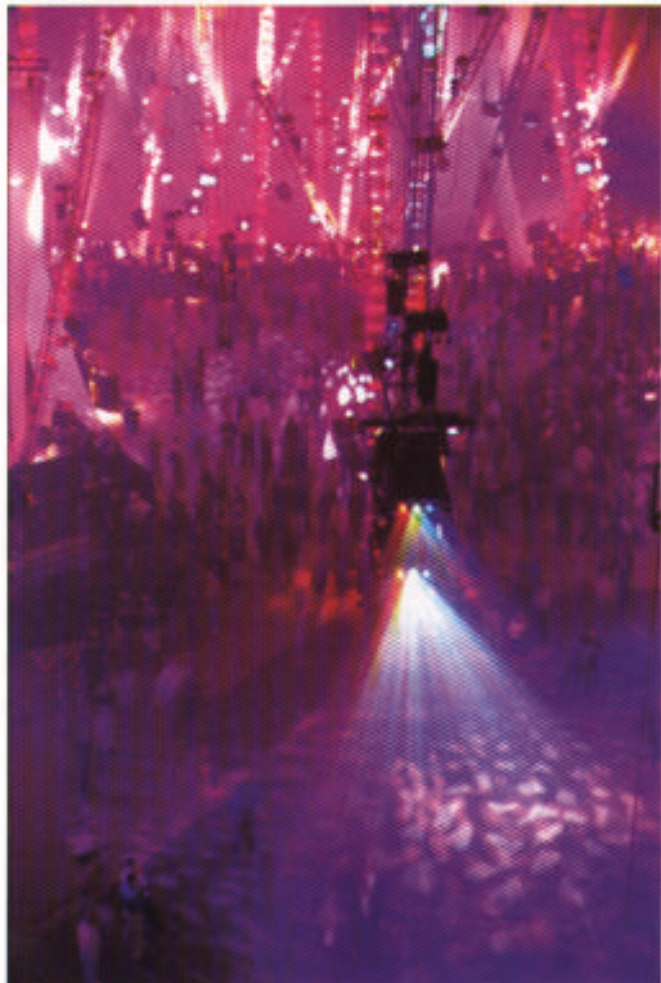
"We have provided over 351 monitors of various sizes throughout the exhibit, with distributed audio throughout."

incredibly thin," explains AVHQ's director of sales Frank McMinn. "With 52-inch diagonal screens, the images are much larger and brighter. Besides being 45% brighter, the videowall has a mullion that is much thinner overall, a 1.5mm space that is invisible from a viewing distance of 10 feet or more. Also, we used Tektronix Profile video disc recorders as the two broadcast quality generating sources," he said.

Besides the main facade and dozens of individual gaming kiosks scattered throughout, AVHQ has provided equipment for five distinct areas of the exhibit:

The main entrance showcases the PlayStation II in a 12-foot, 4-sided pyramid. For effect, armed guards flank two sides where people line up to play at one of the two demo stations. The audience can watch on four 36-inch Sony Vector monitors on each side. Four speakers point out from the transparent top of the pyramid. Flanking both sides of the pyramid, a raised platform supports four giant air-filled PlayStation characters, with a fifth flying over the center entranceway.

The front left quadrant of the booth displays two new Sony PlayStation games, Ape Escape and Unjammer Lammy. For Ape Escape, AVHQ generates 10,000 lumens using two Digital 5DV video projectors converging onto one Stewart 7X10-foot high Optiwave hard-rigid maticular screen. McMinn laughs. "If that doesn't melt the plastic, I don't know what will." For Unjammer Lammy, AVHQ provides a 4X4 videowall using Sony 400 RVP 400Q cubes with a standard Imtech Ultra processor as the source. Each station runs pre-programmed video until someone approaches the giant waist-high PlayStation controls. AVHQ installed

a proximity switch to detect someone's approach, which then kicks the video into gameplay mode. In addition to Ape Escape and Unjammer Lammy, proximity switches are used for three other gaming stations: Spyro, Crash Bandicoot, and Grand Tourismo.

The right rear quadrant of the exhibit displays a raised competitive gaming area with four game kiosks called the Arena. For a scoreboard effect, three SANYO 750s video projectors are flown overhead shooting onto three 6-foot-high by 8-foot-wide Optiwave hard-rigid maticular screens with three EAW speakers.

The left rear quadrant of the exhibit holds the main three-story structure. Besides security, the AVHQ Technical Control Area, and an employee dining area, the ground floor holds a dozen meeting rooms, each with a simple Sony VTR and monitor.

Stairs flanked by silk-blown torches lead people up to the second level where Final Fantasy VIII, one of Sony's hottest video game attractions, dominates the enclosed area. A 2-foot-high by 3-foot-wide Clarity videowall captures the audience, displaying Final Fantasy in a 16X9 aspect ratio with video looped to attract people as they arrive at the top of the stairs. Twelve gaming stations scattered around the videowall await Final Fantasy gamers.

The invitation-only third floor provides a cafe for VIPs. While enjoying refreshments, they can continue playing on laptops provided at each table.

AVATAR INTERACTION

Also on the third floor are two Avatar performance platforms that connect to three 50-inch plasma monitors on the exhibit's right flank on the ground floor. "We work with AVHQ to help live actors create interactive, live-action Avatar characters based on Sony game characters through our Modern Cartoons RealTime Animation system," says Aaron Slavic, executive producer for Modern Cartoons of Venice, CA.

The Avatar system is an electronic-field type suit worn by the live actor. Each suit has electrodes going to several body areas—legs, hands, torso, and face. Face electrodes connect to the eyebrows and the sides of the actor's mouth so that when the actor smiles and raises his eyebrows, the face of the computer-generated character follows. When the actor moves his fingers, turns around, or bends over, the actual computer character does the same.

AVHQ has provided five hand-and-tilt robotic cameras flown from the truss throughout the booth. Camera controllers can zoom in on a character area, such as the main entrance, where people are and then display them on the monitors. Each of the three plasma monitors also has a lipstick camera and a spy cam microphone so that the Avatar character can interact with people walking past.

Slavic likes what he sees. "Do you want to know why we always go with AVHQ? Because when we don't everything goes wrong, and when we do, everything always works right."

SONY AWARDS AND PARTIES

The Awards Show took place at Sony Pictures Entertainment Studios in Culver City, Studio 27, the Wednesday before E3 launched. The all-night Sony Party, an invitation only party for 5,000 of Sony's closest friends, was staged on Friday night and featured the rock group Beck.

"For the Awards Show we brought a digital video facilities truck with seven digital broadcast video cameras to capture every aspect of the event," explains McMinn. "One of the cameras topped a 25-foot jib camera boom. Then we had three Stewart front high-gain screens, two 15-foot-tall by 20-foot-wide outbound screens, and a 20-foot-tall by 30-foot-wide center screen. On each screen we have converged two Hughes JVC 370FC video projectors."

They hung a variety of Sony video monitors, 8-inch, 13-inch, 20-inch, 25-inch, and 32-inch—all from 70-foot ground-supported truss trees that went high up into the support system up in the roof. "All had different angles so they really look like trees," reveals McMinn. "Each had different branches of truss that come out, so that the 114 monitors looked like apples hanging in the trees." (The trees were not fully utilized for the Sony Awards Show. They were mostly hidden and revealed at the Sony Party on Friday night.) For the audio control area they provided 14 Eastern Acoustics Works (EAW) KF850 loudspeakers, 16 EAW JF260s speakers for delays, and eight EAW subwoofers.

For the Friday Sony Party, AVHQ revealed the truss trees from the Awards Show. And instead of the EAW speakers, AVHQ provided a flown V-DOSC Entertainment Audio System, which has been used for the Academy Awards and the Emmy Awards. Each V-DOSC system holds twelve speaker cabinets, curved to target the room in such a way that no delay speakers are needed. Also hung from the truss trees were twelve added video projectors for video wallpaper.

In a neighboring sound stage used for overflow, AVHQ provided three 9-foot-high by 12-foot-wide front projection screens with two BARCO 9200s on each (projecting graphics on digital playback as well as image magnification). Everything was flown, including twelve EAW KF300s for delay speakers and eight KF850 subwoofers.

The Sony Party did not end until 4 am, leaving everyone exhausted but happy on the morning of the last day of E3. ❧■

Audio Visual Headquarters is headquartered in the Los Angeles area with additional full service operations in nine major convention cities throughout the US.

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