

INTERACTIVE TV

Disney World's *Millionaire* Exploits Digital Technology

By James Careless

One of the beauties of digital technology is not only the high tech wizardry of interactive TV or webcasting, but the ability to extend brands into new areas in a more effective way. ABC and Disney World have done just that with the incredibly successful *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* franchise.

As the host of the ABC hit show, Regis Philbin was beside himself on a recent trip to Disney World. He could swear he was on the New York set of *Millionaire*. Every flashing light, every bit of metal—even his signature swivel seat and monitor—they were all there! But Regis wasn't in New York. Instead, he was on the site of Disney's *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire Play It!*, a new attraction at Disney World based on an exact working replica of the real show's set. This attraction lets thousands of people a day play the replica of *Millionaire* live. The luckiest ones—those with the fastest minds and fingers—can even end up in the hot seat. Once there, they can win everything from custom pins and clothing, to a trip to New York to see an actual taping of the show.

For Disney, the *Millionaire* attraction is the ultimate in cross-promotion. Having created a ratings winner in the TV version, the Mouse is now translating that success into additional guests and additional revenues.

In fact, since the 600-seat attraction opened on April 7, 2001 at the Disney-MGM Studios theme park near Orlando, the attraction has been packed. "The one thing we could have never imagined was the popularity of it," Keith Dyer, *Play It!*'s producer observes. "We didn't realize that people would be willing to line up all day; not just to try it out, but then to get a second chance at sitting in the hot seat."

For broadcasters in general, who are always looking for ways to boost revenues, *Play It!* represents a new and innovative marketing tactic. After all, if *Millionaire* can be translated to a theme park attraction, then surely other shows can be too.

"There's all kinds of people who watch the show at home, and think they're much smarter than the guy on the TV," quips Dyer. "We allow them to make that dream come true." Of course, replicating the *Millionaire* set was a big challenge. To do so, Dyer and his people scrutinized the original set's blueprints, and spent a lot of time at ABC New York with the show's designers. What they came up with, and built in two existing, audio/video-equipped sound stages, is a



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carbon copy of the original. *Play It!* includes everything seen on its TV counterpart, such as the computer-controlled lighting and audio effects, while being run by a handful of technicians in real-time. That's a big advancement over the TV show, where a large crew stops and starts as needed during the taping. In contrast, *Play It!* runs 12 live shows a day, and does so on a schedule.

So how does Disney do it? One word: automation. "Our five Sony cameras are controlled by a Telemetrics automation system, so that one video operator can control all of them at once," says Dyer. "Our video comes from an Adtec hard disk playback system, which is interfaced with a Panja show control system which operates the lights and sound effects."

All of this is controlled by the Game Play system developed by England's Unicum. "It's the same one used for all 59 versions of *Millionaire* on TV around the world," explains Dyer. "The Game Play computer talks to the Panja, and it talks to everything else. It's so sophisticated that we don't even need a lighting technician on site. Instead, the

control room staff simply triggers the right cues, and the automation does the rest."

Mindful that people don't come to theme parks just to watch other people play, Disney upgraded the A/B/C/D button boxes used by the TV studio audience. "On the network version, these buttons are only used to let the audience offer advice to the main contestant," Dyer says. "In our version, each person is able to play along with the game as it unfolds. At the end of the round, the person with the highest score combined with the fastest reaction gets to be next in the hot seat. In this way, everybody gets to be a contestant." *Play It!* also has live hosts, drawn from the ranks of Disney's experienced cast members.

Hosting *Play It!* is a real challenge. On the one hand, it's spontaneous. On the other, because it's an event that's on a schedule and tightly integrated with the effects, there's a real need for scripting. Otherwise, the people in the control room might not be able to provide the necessary dazzling effects on cue.

To cope with this, Dyer developed a modular script: one that allows the talent to jump from response to response, as needed. "We had to workshop this with our hosts, to make it flow," he says. "Our network partners couldn't understand how we could work it." But they did, and today, in Orlando, 7,200 people daily are getting a chance to be a "Millionaire."

So is *Play It!* a new money-making model for broadcasters? "It really depends on the popularity of the show," comments Dyer. He's right. One can't imagine an audience participation version of *Meet the Press* garnering big crowds. But *The Price Is Right*, or *Jeopardy!*? Well, clearly there's money to be made by opening these hits to the public.

James Careless is a contributing writer for DigitalTV.