

Control Systems for Live Entertainment

Text: / Andy Ciddor

ISBN: 978-0-240-80937-3

Title: Control Systems for Live Entertainment (Third Edition)

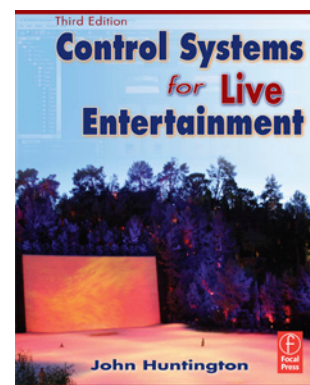
Author: John Huntington

Publication date: October 2007

Publisher: Focal Press

www.focalpress.com

US\$44.95 from Amazon.com, A\$92.99 from fishpond.com.au



CONTROL SYSTEMS FOR Live Entertainment may seem like an odd choice of book to review in a magazine for audiovisual professionals. That's probably because the title is about as concise as any current definition of the terms 'audiovisual', 'live entertainment', 'live production', 'themed environment' or 'corporate theatre'. The author, John Huntington, comes from an engineering and live production background, but early on he was sucked into the murky world of show control, from which he has never fully emerged. Essentially, this book is written for show control people, but the many definitions of 'show control' are even less concise than those for AV. Fortunately, most of the content is very concise.

Huntington defines show control as the "combined control of more than one production discipline". So if you push up a mic fader while running the video replay and fading down the lights to a pool on the lectern, then you're already in the show control business. This book addresses the technologies and control protocols involved in controlling and co-ordinating live (as distinct from recorded) productions and events, and that does sound a lot like what many of us do.

The book is a serious attempt to cover the entire range of disciplines, technologies and control systems that are involved in production. Of course, no book could hope to cover all of these fields in both enough depth to satisfy

the high-level professional, and with enough introductory explanation to bring a beginner up to full operational knowledge. Huntington is well aware of this and uses his website at www.controlgeek.net as a major supplement to the book, with extended bibliographies and links to a wide range of reference and tutorial materials.

Parts 1 and 2 cover a range of basic concepts in control systems, system design principles before moving on to look at the fundamental control concepts in each of the major production disciplines (audio, video, lighting, atmospheric effects, stage machinery, etc). These sections form a great introductory read for new arrivals in the industry or for those of us who may not have yet worked with animatronics, lasers, pyrotechnics, show control, etc.

Part 3 is a good general introduction to data communications and networking technologies. It begins with a reasonably gentle look at the basics of numbering systems, and data terminology and progresses all the way up the complexity tree to TCP/IP and ethernet. Unfortunately, the early chapters of this section seem to make a few over-generous assumptions about the prior knowledge of the reader. On the other hand, those chapters don't have sufficient depth to stretch or extend the knowledge of an experienced working AV tech, so it seems a little unclear exactly who they're for. Some readers new to control systems may find they will

need some support from other texts or a nearby IT/communications guru to get the most out of these chapters.

Even on its own, the section on control standards and protocols would be worth the book's purchase price (which will probably vary wildly due to recent currency fluctuations). This section covers the spectrum of control protocols used in virtually every form of production. From MIDI show control to RDM and ACN, to Pioneer DVD control. There are detailed and careful explanations of the protocols, their applications and practical implementation. While not attempting to be an exhaustive manual on the implementation of each protocol, enough ground is covered to make you aware of its use and how to approach the process.

The final section of the book is a series of hypothetical examples in designing and implementing show control systems for a range of production types. These exercises cover various approaches to designing control systems and provide valuable insights into the questions that must be asked to arrive at good working systems.

While most of us will never design a full show control system, we constantly design, build and operate multi-discipline systems. We can all gain insights from this book into how we can co-ordinate and simplify our everyday control applications. ↵