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by Clive Couldwell

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As a senior technologist, producer and artist, Emily Webster creates immersive, media-rich environments for theatre, film, dance and permanent installations. Webster integrates audio and video technologies seamlessly into architecture. She explores applications for display hardware and audio technology into the built environment through experimentation in a lab-like setting. Webster holds a degree in Architecture from the University of Colorado and a Masters from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program. She has worked for the photographer David LaChapelle, the Independent Film Channel, WET Design and the artist Jim Campbell, focusing on the artistic use of technology at an architectural scale.

What are your main responsibilities?

ESI Design creates immersive and engaging experiences and my role overlaps between hardware technology, software architecture, traditional architecture, and engineering. But that's AV. There are so many cross-over areas, especially if you're trying to innovate using experiences from different market areas and applications.

With my area of expertise being AV hardware and display technology, I design with this palette in mind and ask: "What's the best technology for the given experience?"

Because my background is in both technology and architecture, I have a unique viewpoint – one that understands how the physical and digital worlds must weave together seamlessly to create something compelling, and understands how to build it. When the time comes to build, I act as the link between ESI's design team and our systems technology integration partners. I become the technical director, ensuring the project is built as designed and the intended experience is not diluted along the way.

What's your design philosophy?

Despite the fact that I work in commercial grade AV and develop complex technical platforms as my profession, I am actually a very analogue person outside work. For example, at home I have a projector, but no broadcast cable television. I am, however, very interested in materiality and craftsmanship. My personal design philosophy strives to bring the idea of craftsmanship into the digital world so that technology truly feels like an architectural material.

Working at ESI Design, we have a multi-disciplinary approach to design. Our goal is always to create a memorable experience. We want people to interact with a space and with each other, rather than stand back passively. Flexibility is also important. With a mixed-use space, you can never assume you'll know every type of event that will take place, so you have to design the technology and the system platform to be as flexible as possible.

ESI Design is different than other design firms in that designers from different disciplines work together to devise the conceptual design, but we are also involved in what we call Production Oversight, overseeing how the projects get built as they move into construction. We make sure that when working with the integrator, architect, fabricator or software developer, what we put into the experience design stays true during the actual build – and that the functionality in the space works flawlessly and intuitively.

How has your role changed over the last few years?

When I started four years ago, I took on smaller projects – those spaces that typically had a single function or a pretty straightforward backend system. Since then, I have evolved to design larger, multi-use spaces which require a great deal of coordination or matrixing of inputs and a heavier reliance on custom software and media integration. In all these projects, I am pushing to be more experimental and to come up with ways to use either commercial grade hardware in a new way, or to create custom hardware that can be used in permanent installations.

I have also begun to take on the Design Lead role in our project teams. Although I am responsible for developing the hardware platform that supports the design, I also oversee all elements of the experience design vision, including the signage, physical elements, furniture, software and media content direction. This is not to say that I do all this on my own – I work with a team who are experts in their fields, but I guide the general direction for the project's design.

What's the most impressive technology you've used?

Well, high resolution LED is always fun to work with and use in non-traditional formats, but sometimes off the shelf products don't cut it. For the Beacon installation we did at PNC

Tower in Pittsburgh, we created custom LED boards that worked in conjunction with liquid crystal glass to create a custom video display. That project was fun to develop because it was all custom, from the circuit boards, to the software that drove the media. The technical platform was still driven by a traditional control system and standard CPUs, but the front-end display was customised to feel new and innovative. I like to combine custom and traditional systems to create something new – that's where technology platforms become really interesting to me.

What client challenges are you facing currently?

At ESI Design, we don't like to create a project that is a one trick pony meaning that the experience falls flat after your first visit. One way we do this is to look at ways that the hardware, software and media systems can be more dynamic.

We always aim to have what we call generative content which means that the content is created by pulling from live data feeds which are then visualised in realtime. As the data changes, the content or media changes keeping it fresh and different every time. To do this, you must have strong knowledge of software platforms and network reliances, so my role is evolving to become more of an expert in those areas.

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