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# Lighting & Sound international

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# Classic Gear: Oska

Rob Halliday takes a nostalgic but instructive look back at the tools that have shaped the industry . . .

If last month's Q-File provided one reminder that recent technological advances are in fact often not so recent, this month's classic provides another: Oska, a lighting control system for which the primary control interface was a 21" colour touch screen. That's big, by current standards. It was positively gigantic at the time of the console's debut back in 1986.

As with all important developments, Oska's creators, Rowland Hughes and Mick Martin, arrived at the touchscreen not because of any desire to push the boundaries of technology for its own sake, but because it provided an elegant solution to the paging problem - how to label controls that could be paged to different functions, as they'd had on custom controllers they'd created previously. Displaying the information behind the control itself seemed like the ideal solution.

To achieve that did take some pushing at those boundaries, though. They arrived at the 21" screen size because the low touch resolution available at the time meant that was the size required to give the number of control points needed. No-one made a touchscreen that big until Elonex, then leaders in the field, were persuaded to have a go. It took perseverance to get consistency, and the screen (a CRT, of course, not an LCD as now) was expensive.

Below the touchscreen were sixteen continuous wheels with bar-graph displays; used as faders, speed controllers and more they gave the tactile feedback that operators demanded when 'playing' light. These, too, were custom manufactured by precision engineers; they actually cost more than the screen. However, that was it for the physical interface, no other buttons at all - the console was intended to have hidden delights, its name an abbreviation of Matrioska, the Russian dolls hidden nested inside each other.

Behind the scenes was a set of custom electronics powered by four 8-bit 8MHz Motorola 6809 processors, one dedicated to driving the graphics chip, plus 14 separate integrated circuit boards housed in a 19" rack-mount CPU unit. One of the new 3.5" floppy drives provided backup.

Of course, a lighting control is nothing without lights to control. Here, too, Oska pioneered, one of the first consoles to feature the fledgling DMX standard and capable of running one whole universe worth. Oska could drive lights from any manufacturer, giving light-jockeys integrated control of the entire rig in large nightclubs, exactly as conceived by Tony Gottelier who, desperate to find a system physically small enough yet powerful and flexible enough for the



Camden Palace, had first inspired the console's creation. It also became the tool of choice for the emerging moving light manufacturers, each seeking to top the other with the most spectacular trade-show lightshow.

Though Oska's software theoretically imposed no limits on the number of cues, scenes or chases it could run, the ultimate limitation was memory, with no easy way of expanding it as shows grew. Realising how quickly expensive custom hardware dated, the team explored alternatives - Apple, Amiga, Archimedes, Atari - before switching to the IBM PC as the engine for their next product, ShowCAD.

Distributed by Pulsar, Oska's time ran from 1986-1990, with its price - £14,000 in the UK - meaning it was never a mass-market item, with less than 50 sold.

None are active any more - yet Oska's influence can be seen in every touch-screen based lighting controller on the market today - even, arguably, in the phone in your pocket. Not just a classic, then, but quite a pioneering classic.

Oska from LSI's archives: > //plasa.me/oska

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