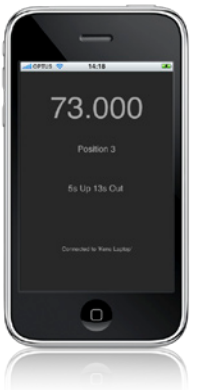
What Cue Are We In?

There are no question marks hovering over What Cue?'s ability to manage cue data.

Text:/ Andy Ciddor



What Cue?'s iPhone app displays the current cue number, fade times and cue description

It all started out because Melbourne-based lighting designer Ken Roach was constantly being bombarded during technical rehearsals by stage management asking the question, "What cue are we in now?" Admittedly it is a valid question, but that doesn't make it any less annoying or distracting from the process of checking the lighting cue states. This is of particular interest to Roach whose work as assistant lighting designer for Cameron Mackintosh and the Really Useful Group on productions such as Phantom of the Opera, means that he only moves productions between venues a few times each year, and therefore doesn't actually have all the cue numbers memorised.

Roach thought that it would be great if everyone could simply check on a locally-available computer display to get the cue number, description and timing directly from the lighting desk, so he developed the What Cue? system. Not only does What Cue? keep stage management informed, but it also assists lighting designers to keep their notes in order when watching public dress rehearsals from a seat in the house.

In its latest version, What Cue? also incorporates pop-up reminders for designated cues to alert the lighting designer to aspects of the cue state in question. Roach sees this being used to keep track of such matters as checking the tricky focus for a special, a note to the console operator about specific visual cue timings, a reminder about a forthcoming spot cue and similar fine details.

What Cue? works by collecting cue data live from the lighting console into a Mac desktop computer where it's processed and translated then made available via WiFi. Roach selected Apple's iPhone/iPod Touch as the display device because of its wide adoption in the production community, its effortless interface with WiFi networks and the ease of software development using Apple's iPhone Software Developers Kit.

WOT? – GETTING THE CUE DATA

Lighting consoles may incorporate a vast range of output options, but they're generally intended either to stream DMX512 control data or to provide status and operational information to monitor screens. However, lurking deep inside many lighting consoles there is a powerful, but frequently-overlooked capability: MIDI Show Control (MSC). Developed in 1990 in a joint effort between the US Institute for Theatre Technology's Sound Commission and the MIDI Manufacturers Association, MSC uses the MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) protocol to send cueing and control messages to coordinate production equipment ranging from pyrotechnic devices to stage machinery and lighting controllers to atmospheric effects.

What Cue? uses a lighting console's MSC interface to send out a message each time a cue is executed. The MIDI message is translated into a data string by a standard MIDI-to-USB adapter and passed on to the Mac desktop computer for processing. As each cue is executed, its information is added to the cue list for the production and sent out via WiFi for display.

To obtain a full cue list without the need to step through every cue in the console, What Cue? takes full advantage of the cue list report available from the grandMA family of consoles. For other, less endowed consoles, Roach has exploited another piece of 1990s control technology to obtain the cue lists.

Once upon a time, as the age of digital co-operation was dawning and control manufacturers had actually agreed on a single digital control protocol for all dimmers and control desks (DMX512), the idealists at the USITT came up with the idea of a standard interchangeable format for cue lists. The idea behind the *ASCII Text Representation for Lighting Console Data*, was that every console would be able to export its cues in a text format that could be read by humans and imported by any other console. The format represents each lighting cue as a series of text lists of levels and fade times.

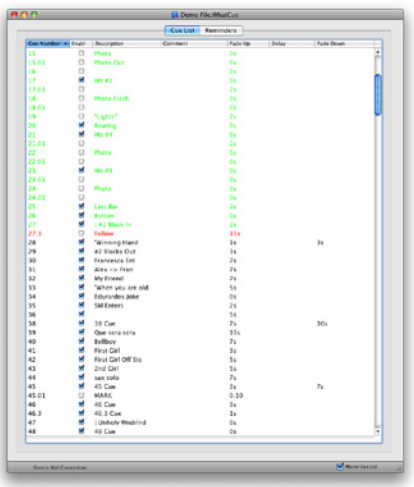
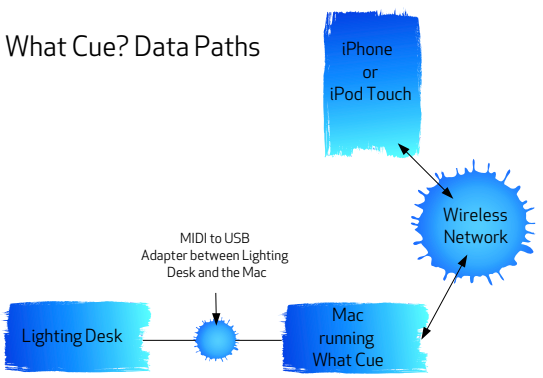
While the ASCII data protocol is quite useful for shows with static lighting states, it doesn't deal brilliantly with multi-part fades and is completely overwhelmed by the kinds of continuous ongoing data changes that result from using moving lights and effects engines. Although many theatrical consoles still have an ASCII output capability, it is a technology that hasn't ever gained widespread acceptance. What Cue?, however, can take the ASCII cue format data from a suitably-equipped console, such as an ETC EOS or one of the many Strand consoles, and use it to build the cue list for a production, before the first cue is ever run.

Although What Cue? has been released for sale, Ken Roach continues to enhance the system to improve the working lives of lighting designers and console operators.

Info

A 30-day free demo of the MacOS component is available from www.hardedgesoftware.com.
As an intoductory offer, registration costs US$39.95, but will go up to US$69.95 in October

The iPhone/iPod Touch component is available free from Apple's AppStore,
www.hardedgesoftware.com



What Cue?'s desktop screen shows all available cue information plus user-defined pop-up reminders assigned to each cue.