Editing Outside (and Inside) the Box on Hollywood Squares

Editor Ron Diamond Segues Into Editorial Autonomy With Avid Xpress Pro

Flashback, 1992:
Ron Diamond, former technical director, audio engineer, and linear online editor with Boston's WHDH-TV and recent transplant to Los Angeles, sees his first demonstration of an Avid Media Composer system. Wowed by the possibilities that nonlinear editing represents, he is inspired to change careers and become a full-time Avid offline/online editor and consultant. Great success ensues.

Cut to 2002:
Ron Diamond is recruited to edit King World/Viacom's *Hollywood Squares* for the start of its revamped fifth season, just around the time that prices for professional-grade editing systems fall into the personally-affordable range. In hopes of enhancing both his freelance business and his new game show gig, he purchases Final Cut Pro, only to reluctantly conclude that it isn't quite capable or robust enough to withstand the demands of a five-show-per-week, multimillion-dollar series such as Squares. Fast forward a year later: he jumps on the opportunity to acquire the newly unveiled Avid Xpress Pro system and the Avid Mojo accelerator. Great success ensues.

More specifically, when postproduction for *Hollywood Squares* moved into Los Angeles-based Keep Me Posted's newly modernized Burbank facility, Diamond felt the time was right to take advantage of the switch and bring in his new Avid Xpress Pro system to cut the show. Since it offered project and media compatibility with Keep Me Posted's in-house Avid systems, as well as multicamera support, and the reliability he'd come to expect from more than 10 generations of software development, he knew it'd be an ideal fit. "Without having to risk the show on an unproven platform, I knew I could improve my efficiency - and I wouldn't have to ask for a new equipment budget," he says.

Better still, when he's not working on the show, Diamond is able to take his Avid Xpress Pro system with him in many forms – desktop or laptop, Mac or PC - making him a more valuable and flexible player in the postproduction market.

Photo: Courtesy of Ron Diamond

Ron Diamond with executive producer Henry Winkler in Studio 33 at CBS Television City in Hollywood.

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— Ron Diamond, Editor

Smooth Operator

"[Assistant editor] Kevin Deselms and I spent a long time brainstorming the new workflow," says Diamond. "Ironically, the ultimate proof of our success was that no one else – not the producers, our online editor, nor our Pro Tools mixer – would know that we were doing anything differently." After making the switch to his Avid Xpress Pro system early in *Squares'* 2003 season, Diamond was more enthused than ever – and his superiors were pleased that adding the new system didn't sidetrack the show's schedule or adversely impact its quality.

One tweak to the workflow involved transferring media from Keep Me Posted's Avid Unity MediaNetwork shared storage solution to Diamond's own FireWire drives, for use with the Avid Xpress Pro system. He notes, "When I showed everyone an entire week's worth of dailies on a drive that fits in a shirt pocket, it really blew them away."

The Upside

For Diamond, the differences in his edit bay were immediately apparent. The first thing he noticed was how quiet the new work environment was. "We had been using big, noisy media shuttles and racks of gear," he says. "The Avid Mojo is tiny, as are the FireWire drives. There are no noisy fans. Now I can pay much closer attention to sound when I'm cutting. Overall, it's a very civilized way to edit."

Speed also improved. "I now have more real-time streams at my disposal. Even just stepping through the timeline seemed so fast at first, that I actually had to slow down the computer's keyboard repeat rate in order to avoid overshooting shots," he notes, obviously taken with the new system's performance.

The effects capabilities of the Avid Xpress Pro system also help Diamond deliver a more polished result. He explains, "Though this show isn't obviously effects-intensive, I take advantage of the real-time effects to invisibly composite shots together to fix mistakes, tighten pacing, and finesse comic timing." Also appealing to Diamond – an accomplished Avid Symphony editor – are the software's color correction capabilities. "It's a powerful subset of the Symphony's functionality, and I'm thrilled to put those tools to work on my very own machine."

Today, more than 200 episodes later, post supervisor Sondra Zaharias sums up the transition: "We took a chance changing a workflow that was working perfectly. But with Avid Xpress Pro, it works exactly the same – only now it's more flexible."

Photo: Courtesy of Ron Diamond

If needed to meet a deadline, Diamond can edit easily while traveling (note the FireWire "media" drive in the seat-back pocket).

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One Step Beyond

While the Avid Xpress Pro system's seamless fit into the Hollywood Squares workflow clearly benefited the show, Diamond's decision to purchase his own system went beyond Squares: "As a professional editor, I wanted the next generation," he says. "I wanted a system that was mobile, so I can cut from anywhere - and compatible, so I can collaborate in any number of professional environments. Having my own Avid Xpress Pro setup allows me the kind of versatility that, until now, I'd only dreamed of."

Diamond's "personal editing suite" runs on two Windows-based HP workstations with flat-panel displays and a Macintosh Powerbook laptop. He can run Avid Xpress Pro software on any of those systems and across platforms by simply moving the dongle. He notes, "I had no idea how immensely valuable this cross-platform capability would turn out to be."

Diamond houses one of his desktop systems at Keep Me Posted, using it exclusively for Squares. The other is set up at he and his girlfriend's out-of-town retreat, near Joshua Tree National Park. "I can cut other projects right there and not miss a weekend away because I'm tied to a facility," says Diamond. "I've experimented with editing at home, on planes – a number of places where I might need to edit in the future. I even cut one test sequence at a Denny's restaurant. These days, it's truly, 'Have Xpress Pro, will travel.' "

By investing in his own Avid Xpress Pro system, Diamond feels he has made his current situation more productive and positioned himself well for the changing demands of professional editing. "Avid has done a fantastic job bringing all of this functionality into such a cost-effective solution," says Diamond. "Avid Xpress Pro is capable, elegant, and fast – and it fits right into any Avid postproduction environment. If you have the skills, you can take that package to a show or a facility, plug it into their workflow, and just go. That's a very powerful combination."