

Computer graphics carry star shows into year 2000

By Suzi Kruse

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, rebel fighter pilots planned the destruction of the Imperial Death Star.

In the darkened briefing room of Gen. Ackbar's star cruiser, a computer graphic of the man-made planet flashed on the viewed screen.

Lando Calrissian, Han Solo, Chewbacca, Princess Leia and millions of "Return of the Jedi" fans studied the detailed two-dimensional diagram, plotting the demise of Darth Vader and the Empire.

Technology capable of creating the Death Star diagram may seem as fanciful as Luke Skywalker's light saber, but Jack Dunn, coordinator for the Ralph Mueller Planetarium, has seen it.

Digistar 1, a new computer developed within the last four years, can project images in two dimensions, creating them with dots, lines and alpha numerics, Dunn said. Digistar 1 produced the graphics for the "Jedi" scene and created the "Genesis effect" demonstration in "Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan."

Digistar 1 "Hoped For"

Dunn saw Digistar 1 at a conference several weeks ago in Richmond, Va. Digistar 1 projects images of stars for planetarium shows, but could be used in many different fields, including chemistry, medicine, engineering and even football simulating actual plays and games, he said.

At this time, Digistar 1 is only something Dunn "can hope for." If purchased, the computer could benefit the whole university, not just the planetarium, he said.

Comparing Digistar 1 to equipment currently used at Mueller planetarium is like "comparing the Model-T to the Saturn Five," Dunn said. "They are different generations of rocket design."

The planetarium uses the Star Projector in its shows. It is adequate for the present and has given many years of good service, Dunn said.

One main difference between planetarium presentations given with Digistar 1 and the Star Projector is the way they simulate the night sky.

With the Star Projector, the night sky is seen as it is from earth. With Digistar 1, the sky can be seen from any point in space. The image can be rotated, so specific parts of the sky can be examined in more detail or totally eliminated from the image.

Educational programs

Mueller Planetarium runs multimedia programs that incorporate the Star Projector, music, slides, movies and laser light shows.

"They are basically slide format combined with special effects," said Lisa Hooker, assistant for educational services at the planetarium.

Shows are sometimes produced live because existing sky conditions are interesting to many people, Dunn said.

Planetarium shows provide educational and entertaining information about astronomy that is presented on a general, not technical level, so it can be easily understood, Dunn said. The September program is on black holes, a subject that could get very technical, Dunn said. But it has been written in general terms so any audience can understand it.

Dunn has worked 11 years at Morrill Hall, where the planetarium is located. He has a bachelor's degree in science from Midland College in Fremont and a master's degree from UNL.

Hooker received her degree in speech communication and public relations from UNL last May. She has worked at the planetarium for two and a half years in educational and public relations. She coordinates shows for high school and elementary groups and writes publicity notices and scripts.

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