



Sun Ridge Systems, Inc.

## What Color is Your CAD?

*by Tony Richards*

Recently, one of our customers sent us a calendar he'd received from one of our competitors. No, we don't send out calendars, I told him, but we'd be happy to take up the practice if he didn't mind a small increase in support fees to help cover the cost of printing and mailing 10,000 full color calendars. He didn't seem to be enthusiastic about the idea.

He commented that the screen shots in the calendar pages showed a very attractive system. As I looked at it, I had to agree with him - they were pretty. I also realized that when looking at CAD systems (or any software for that matter) what strikes you first is how the screen "looks." That is, does it have a pleasing layout, are the colors attractive, does it appeal to the eye? Later you look at what's actually on the screen. And even though that's what really counts, it's easy to fall in love with the packaging.

The popular design with CAD today is "everything on one screen." That includes units, incidents, reference information, and a place to display or enter a call. With the modern Windows look this is usually designed as multiple tiled (not overlapping) windows with the appropriate information in each. Telling people that the windows can be moved around to suit their taste is also a crowd pleaser. Such screens are very attractive at a glance. After all, everything is always right there, right in front of the dispatcher, all the time, just what you want. . . but be careful and look a little closer.

### *Something Missing?*

Often when you look closely at these screens you notice a few flaws in the design and the more you look the more problems you see. First, you notice you really can't move the windows around much because there is only one way they fit together. If you move the tiles around so that the available units screen is next to the open incidents screen, for example, then you lose the space allocated for the map images, and so on.

Next, you notice what's missing. When you confine, for example, a call entry form to one quarter of the screen, there's a space shortage and the designer and ultimately the user has to compromise what's shown. Want lots of room for comments? Sorry, no room. Want cross streets, map pages, and other geographic reference information? Sorry, no room.

Want reference information - previous incidents at the location. Sorry. History for the caller? Sorry. And so on.

The same is true for the unit and incident status displays. Sure they will have a list of units, but information for each unit will be limited. They also may only show six units, but there's that cute little scroll bar. And when you have 20 units on duty you really won't mind working the scroll bar to find a unit. Will you? Of course you will! And that's the point. In the real world the last thing you want to do when in a hurry is fiddle with scroll bars.

That's why RIMS CAD has evolved over the last 16 years to the product it is today. We don't try to squeeze everything onto one screen (but we do have options to come pretty close if you are willing to invest in a high resolution 21" screen). The RIMS unit status display automatically switches between a one and two column format, depending upon the number of units, and shows up to 30 units at once. Want more? Try the separate status monitor option.

We do use every bit of screen real estate available for our CAD displays. For example, the call entry screen alone has 44 information fields, seven buttons, plus areas that show information for the most recent six incidents at the location and the six most recent contacts with the caller. Then there's the list of up to eight recommended units that pops up as soon as you enter the incident location and type. With RIMS the emphasis is strongly on providing complete information automatically and immediately to the call taker or dispatcher.

#### *Records Management Anyone?*

Another common failing of all-in-one CAD screens is the absence of immediate access to records management information — basics such as people and vehicles. Yes, there are still systems that completely separate CAD and records and just provide an "interface" between them to transfer CAD information to an officer report. But even those that purport to truly integrate the two seem to have a wall between them. An easy way to tell is to look at a CAD screen and see if there is a single menu item at the top of the screen that says "Records." That means selecting that item switches you to the records system, usually a "master menu" of some kind. Navigate the menu and eventually you'll get to that person, vehicle, or warrant. And guess how much access to CAD you have once you're in that records menu tree?

Looking up a person is a common function performed all day long. There should be a quick and easy way to do it. With RIMS that means menu items like "People," "Vehicles," and "Citations." CAD and records are part of one system. No switching systems.

#### *Too Much Windows*

An unfortunate consequence of Windows is the mouse. That sounds strange to say, but for many dispatchers struggling with CAD systems that are slavishly designed like all other Windows software, it is true. In an attempt to be modern some CAD system have

completely abandoned those standbys of CAD's yesteryear, the command line and the function key.

For some, the mouse/command line/function key argument is personal. They hate the mouse and always will. However, beyond the fanatics, it's easy to make a case for retaining these old favorites. Consider entering a call for service. Do you want to want to grab the mouse, move it across the screen, click on a pretty little "call entry" icon, and then return to the keyboard to type in the call? Or would you rather press the F6 function key and continue typing?

In RIMS we vote for F6. We also vote for the command line. But we can vote multiple times so we vote for the mouse too. Status Change? Two mouse clicks . . . or a command line entry. Display an incident? One mouse click or a command line entry. Dispatch a unit? Same choice. Most common CAD functions can be done either way, your choice, including a traffic stop.

There is no right and wrong in the mouse vs. keyboard argument, unless you provide only one choice.

#### *Dancing Police Cars*

Another "modern" concept we've seen more than once is "drag and drop" dispatching: To dispatch a unit you click on the unit and while holding the mouse button down drag a little icon across the screen and release it on the target incident. One system even shows a tiny police car rolling across the screen. It looks great in the demo. But wait, this is public safety dispatching, not a video game! It's supposed to be quick and easy, not a test of hand-eye coordination. What's easy? How about click on the unit, then click on the incident — skipping the hold down the button and drag. And don't forget the command line either.

#### *Take a Closer Look*

Yes, CAD systems are changing, and strongly for the better compared to just a few years ago. But, be careful the next time you look at a CAD system, check out what's there, and also what is not. And think about what it would be like to actually use it for an eight, ten or twelve-hour shift.

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