



Seek Higher Ground *an industry op-ed by Steve Wright*

Improving your survival in the vfx industry

Anyone who has been working in the vfx industry knows that more and more production jobs are drifting offshore and that there is less and less visual effects work to be found here. So the question that vfx artists that want to stay in the game are asking themselves is "what can I do to stay in the industry I love?" The answer is - seek higher ground.

The outsourcing of the labor intensive aspects of visual effects shots is, unfortunately, an inescapable act of nature. Like gravity, visual effects supervisors seek the lowest level in the fiscal terrain in order to produce their shots as cost-effectively as possible. This has always been true, but the sea change now, of course, is the massive low-cost labor force off shore, most notably India - for now. The Chinese, of course, are waiting in the wings gleefully wringing their hands over the opportunity to take over from the Indians as the low cost center of the universe.

The model is clear. First, the very low end, low skill, labor intensive work goes offshore, like rotoscoping. The rapid rise in stereo conversion work with its massive need for rotoscoping has caused an explosion in the rotoscoping work sent to India. Then comes the American roto leads and supervisors to India to set up the pipeline, teach the staff, and establish American quality control standards - a transfer of skill and technology. This stands the Indian companies up on their feet for roto work, funding the company further, allowing them to expand their offerings to include wire removal and stereo paint. Next comes clean plate construction, then finally, full up visual effects shots, cg and all.

Seeking Higher Ground

In the meantime, what is the American visual effects artist to do to keep working in our beloved industry? I heard it said best by Bob Coleman, president of DAA ([Digital Artists Agency](#)) who represents a great many visual effects artists finding work at VFX studios around the world. This gives him a very broad view of the industry. Bob's advice to artists is "To stay alive in this industry, seek higher ground. Expand the mastery of your tools, advance your technical knowledge, and improve your artistic skills."

As the number of domestic vfx jobs shrink you need a discriminator that separates you from the herd. And that discriminator must be an outstanding reputation for excellence and mastery of whatever your trade is. It also helps to add a specialization within your trade to develop a reputation around. In my world of compositing an example might be bluescreen and greenscreen keying, or perhaps photorealistic compositing of cg with live action. This is, of course, in addition to the basics of mastery of tools, technical knowledge, and artistic skill.

Another key talent to develop is *speed*. We are losing work to off-shore facilities because they are cheaper. So the more we can lower production costs the more work we can keep here. Improving your productivity is a key component of lower costs. There will soon be no room here for mediocre artists, so working on becoming fast is yet another discriminator you can develop to stay employed. If you want a job in this industry, you are soon going to have to fight for it.

Demo Reels

One problem vexing the modern digital artist is the difficulty in doing shot breakdowns for their demo reel. The studios have really clamped down on letting shot elements escape the post production studio. Shots are now awarded to post facilities wrapped in non-disclosure agreements and tied with security protocols. Many of the studios even include a security audit where they actually visit the facility to confirm that the stipulated security is in place.

One of the precipitating events in this trend occurred because of the theft of **The Incredible Hulk** (2008). The stolen version was not the final release, but a temp screening with temp vfx. This temp version was released on the internet, then the blogosphere took over criticising the effects, not realizing they were temps. Bad press ensued, ticket sales were disappointing, and the studios blamed the bad press (it certainly could not have been the movie!). Never again would vfx elements be allowed out of the post production facility.

How can an artist put together a shot breakdown in this environment? What digital artists resort to doing is ripping their shots from Blu-Ray discs. The problem with this is they don't have the bluescreens, matte paintings and cg elements that went into creating the shot. Some have taken to floating text over the shot calling out their part in the work such as "bluescreen keying", "camera tracking", or "rotoscoping".

An important evolution in the hiring process in our industry is the shift from providing demo reels (first VHS tapes then DVD's) to requesting a link to your website where your demo reel can be seen. With Vimeo you can now have full HD demo reels for on-line review. However, this has to be backed up with a bio, your CV (resume) and a written description of the shot breakdown detailing your specific contribution to the shot - most of them now being team efforts.

A Demo Reel and a Visa

One other way to survive in today's vfx industry is to go abroad. American talent and production expertise is highly valued overseas. Not just in Mumbai, but in London, New Zealand, Australia, and Europe. You could shop for a gig at WETA, DNeg, or Cinesite. Don't wait to get a passport as it takes a few weeks and you don't want to miss an opportunity waiting for your passport.

So get out there and seek higher ground! Improve your knowledge and skills. Add a specialty. Become fast. True story - when I got a job at Cinesite Hollywood some years back I quickly became the go-to guy for questions on the Cineon compositing software. How did I do it? ***I read the damn manual!*** Cover to cover. An admittedly bold concept, but you would be amazed at how many artists have never actually read the entire manual for the tools they use. But I'm sure you have.

Steve Wright