



The Indian Exodus *an industry op-ed by Steve Wright*

There is much concern in the VFX industry about our jobs being outsourced to India, and even China. Indeed, India is rapidly booting up a visual effects industry and has a vast pool of low cost artists to staff it with. Since I have been to India five times to conduct VFX training (the most recent being a two-month visit to two different facilities) I am often asked about the “lay of the land” there. While India has much potential, they do have some systemic problems to overcome.

In the Indian culture, education is highly prized as the road to financial success. Teachers and instructors are honored and admired. As a result, training institutes are big business in India. The problem is that many of them are less than stellar. Their focus is on blasting the student through as many different apps as possible so that their education is “well rounded.” The problem is that the graduate has not spent enough time with any particular app to become truly proficient. The Indian digital artists may have learned the “button pushing” but they usually lack the depth of knowledge to put together a real visual effects shot. Knowing how to operate Maya does not make you a character animator.

Part of this is due to the teaching philosophy of the training institutes and part of it is due to the instructors. Most of the training institute instructors are themselves simply graduates of other training institutes and do not have any real production experience so they cannot pass it on to their students. Further, when the digital artist gets a job most of the artists around him are similarly trained and short of real-world experience. In America, if you are not sure how to approach a problem you can always turn to the guy next to you for advice. Not so much in India.

This emphasis on operating the app also causes them to neglect the artistic side of visual effects. I remember at Cinesite, when we were looking through resumes for new-hires, one of the things we looked for was an artistic interest. Any artistic interest - sculpting, photography, drawing, anything. We knew that an artistic eye was just as important as knowing your tools and craft. A technically well assembled visual effects shot that is poorly composed, badly lit with inept color correction is still a bad visual effects shot.

Of course, the obvious advantage of the Indian talent pool is their low cost. You may be interested to hear that they are rapidly losing that advantage. Here’s why; since setting up visual effects in India has become the “hot new thing,” everybody is setting up a visual effects operation there because there is no shortage of investors. There are now more VFX studio workstations than artists. As a result, they are poaching each others’ staff.

In order to poach staff from another company, they have to offer more money. In some cases, artists can double their salary by jumping to the new venture. You can see that it will not take very many doublings to inflate salaries to the point of



non-competitiveness. There are actually some senior compositors in India now making \$60,000 per year. That would be like earning \$250,000 a year in the USA.

Where the Indian talent pool can obviously be very effective is the low-end production tasks - roto, wire removal, and the like. These are things that a recent grad from the training institute can do reasonably well right out of the box and with the lower pay grades it can be quite competitive. As you move up the VFX food chain, however, the talent gets thinner and the salaries rise disproportionately.

Another difficulty with Indian talent is the tendency for young people to get into it because that is where the money is. As a result, many of them don't have the "fire in the belly" that most of the digital artists that I know have. Like most of my colleagues, I got into VFX because I loved it. I was willing to work the long hours and weekends that it took to make deadline. Less so in India.

The influence of Bollywood on their visual effects industry is less than you might expect. In theory, the Indian VFX industry could build up their muscles on Bollywood films then take on Hollywood films. The thing to understand about Bollywood is that they are not big on visual effects. There are two reasons for this. The first is financial. Bollywood films are notoriously low budget. Second, is the type of films they make. They are highly formulaic romance films - boy meets girl, boy loves girl, family hates boy, sing, dance, fight, dance, sing. There are exactly five dance numbers in a movie. Not four, not six. Five. They will even shoot two or three movies at the same time utilizing the same crew and talent. Hopefully, with at least a costume change.

However, there have been a few Bollywood VFX films and they have done well at the box office. These have given the local talent real feature film experience so over time I would expect the budgets to get bigger and the VFX to get better. Eventually they will gain the experience and artistic skill required to take on a Hollywood film. My guess is they will offer a serious alternative in about 10 years.

So what does all this mean to the worried domestic VFX artist? If I were a junior artist with only roto or paint skill I would be worried. The lower the skill and artistic requirements for a job the more vulnerable it will be to taking the exodus to India. To keep our well-paying domestic jobs we will need to continually upgrade our technical and artistic skills. Don't just be a compositor. Be a lighter-compositor. Be the "shot finisher" with superb color correction skills. Get into stereo. Take some art classes and have an artistic hobby to show a potential employer. Bottom line - the higher up the VFX food chain you are the more secure your job is.

Steve Wright