

VFX COMPOSITOR

CAREER SPOTLIGHT PANEL NOTES



Most of VFX (Visual Effects) is part of post production, but it also includes on-set roles. On large productions, VFX work can involve hundreds or even thousands of people, sometimes working in different studios across the world. This includes the following roles:

Production Management

- Includes VFX Producers and Coordinators
- Manage schedules, budgets, and keep communication flowing between artists, clients, and directors

CG (Computer-Generated) Artists

Involves a wide variety of roles, including:

- 3D Modellers: create digital objects, characters, environments
- Animators: bring the models to life with movement. On large projects, there may be separate departments for human and creature animation.
- Matchmove/Tracking Artists: replicate camera movements so the computer-generated elements match the live footage
- Effects Artists: simulate effects like smoke, water, dust, etc
- Lighting Artists: replicate the lighting as it was shot with the camera
- Roto and Prep Artists: isolate and clean up elements so digital effects can be added

Compositor

- bring all the above elements together
- remove blue/green screen and fine tune colours/lighting



VFX roles are available both during production and in post production, and working conditions vary quite significantly between the two. Jobs in post houses/studios will include longer-term contracts, and regular hours. Entry-level post roles will include Runner, which involves office support, and is a good way of meeting people and learn through observation. Workers employed by studios may work on several projects at once, or move between projects as needed. On set roles include VFX Supervisor or (entry-level) VFX Wrangler. They will be on shorter contracts, with working days around 10 hours. Some roles will include a mixture of on-set and post work.

VFX COMPOSITOR

CAREER SPOTLIGHT PANEL NOTES



Why is there a skills shortage in VFX, especially compositing?

There are a lot of misconceptions about VFX:

- VFX departments involve a wide range of roles, and most people do not understand the remit of each role. There is a misconception that most workers are generalists (VFX generalists are artists with broad range of skills and knowledge across the entire VFX pipeline).
- VFX, especially VFX compositing, can feel “invisible”: especially when it is well done, when we watch a film we don’t realise how much work has done by entire teams of people to put it together. It doesn’t just render out of the computer.
- VFX compositing can seem “hard”: it requires a balance of artistic and technical ability, and often involves working under pressure and meeting tight deadlines. But it is also a very rewarding role, where you see everything come together.
- In a school setting and on a college production-level where students work in small group, it is not possible to replicate the scale and workflow of a professional film or TV project. The skill set required for entry-level roles in VFX can seem high, and it can be hard to find enough time within the curriculum to teach it.
- Learning VFX takes times: you have to develop your eye, and it takes hours of practice to get it right. Motivation and willingness to learn is key.

Training

Do you need to go to university to get into VFX?

- No, but be mindful of what kind of learner you are: if you struggle with self-motivating & self-teaching, university will give you a structure and deadlines to meet.
- University will also give you an opportunity to meet like-minded people give you networking opportunities, which you will have to seek out more actively if you self-teach. Overall, university will help you develop soft skills more than hard skills.
- But there is no one route into the industry: soft skills such as communication & teamwork can be developed by working in tech support or retail, for example.

VFX COMPOSITOR

CAREER SPOTLIGHT PANEL NOTES



Skillset

When people imagine working in VFX they often think of software and technical skills. In fact, soft skills are just as important.

Soft Skills:

- Communication: the role will involve giving and taking feedback (from supervisors and/or colleagues), being able to ask questions and take notes effectively; it is also important to be able to explain things in an accessible way: you may be communicating with people in production who have no idea about how VFX works, or what software is used for what.
- Teamwork: VFX is not a solo effort. You are always working with other artists, producers and clients. Being a good team player and being respectful and supportive of other members of the department is key. Being able to manage and compromise between different or opposing opinions is also important. This may come from higher-ups (this is called managing up): for example, the producer may tell you one thing, the director another, and the editor another.
- Time management: you will need to meet tight deadlines, and be able to prioritise your workload. Never give false expectations and be reasonable about your ability to deliver things.

Hard Skills:

VFX required a broad base of knowledge and understanding, including:

- A command of key software (see list on the next page)
- An understanding of the VFX pipeline
- An understanding of camera & lenses, lighting, composition and visual storytelling. VFX compositors have a strong sense of what makes a good image
- Knowledge of spreadsheets: entry-level roles such as VFX wrangling, for instance, involves a lot of data logging.
- Knowledge of key paperwork such as scripts and shot lists
- Knowledge of project management software, such as [Shot Grid](#)
- Coding experience can also be advantageous

VFX COMPOSITOR

CAREER SPOTLIGHT PANEL NOTES



Relevant software

- [Blender](#) (open access, great for learning)
- [Houdini](#) (traditionally used for effects such as explosions and simulations, but can also be used for the entirety of the VFX workflow; paid, free limited version and discounted student version available)
- [Maya](#) (paid, education licenses available)
- [Nuke](#) (the industry-standard software for compositing; paid, discounted education licenses available)
- [After Effects](#) (more accessible; paid, education licenses available)

For compositing specifically, it used to be recommended to focus only on Nuke, but now a broader knowledge base is seen an advantage.

Developing a portfolio

A portfolio is a short video compilation of your best work, and is an essential careers document for VFX. Some top tips:

- Make sure it is easily accessible, and share it on social media (eg. LinkedIn, so recruiters can see it)
- Focus on quality over quantity: keep it to 1-2 mins. 3 or 4 great shots is better than 10 average shots.
- Structure is key: put your best shots at the beginning and at the end, so you start with impact and leave the viewer with a lasting impression.
- Make it look professional: keep fonts consistent and in the same place, and use a simple, professional-looking font. Add your name, contact info and the role you are in at the end.
- Look at professional examples: search for VFX companies such as ILM (Industrial Light & Magic) or Framestore on LinkedIn. Look up the artists working there and watch their showreels, which will usually be on their profile page.
- For aspiring Compositors, include one good example of each of the following: green screen keying shot, CG integration shot, projection shot.
- For aspiring Prep & Roto Artists, include good cleanup shots.
- If you are using tutorials to develop showreel materials, make sure to add your own spin to it rather than simply copy the tutorial. You will stand out from others who might have used the same tutorial.

VFX COMPOSITOR

CAREER SPOTLIGHT PANEL NOTES



For film & media teachers

Thoughts from the panel on embedding VFX in media teaching, particularly building relevant soft skills:

- Striking the right balance between being supportive and honest in feedback
- Focussing on building professionalism and setting the tone from day one, including reinforcing the significance of deadlines
- Following industry-standard workflows, eg. on productions, students must submit risk assessments and budgets, even if no money is involved: this teaches students about going rates, but also that time & effort should be remunerated.
- Teaching by doing: spending less time on classroom instructions, but instead have students learn through production briefs, etc
- Teaching not just software but also computer/productivity skills, such as keyboard shortcuts

For students

Advice for students to develop their skills outside of the curriculum:

- Start with a film you like or something you've seen online. Ask yourself how they did. Then look at concept art, and digital map painters.
- Teach yourself some of the key software: there are lots of online tutorials for Blender, for example
- Play with cameras and lenses, and learn how things look on camera. VFX is not replicating real life, it is replicating how things *look* on camera (eg. how a lens flare looks on a certain lens).
- Try shooting your own short video and practice adding a simple VFX element to see how it all comes together
- Read into related subjects: lighting, photography, etc
- A great place to start for networking and opportunities is [Access VFX](#), and you can find a full list of VFX roles on the [Screenskills](#) website

With huge thanks to our panellists: Vish Patel, Dolapo Okubojeyo and Philip Dyas