

Fringe City

Editors' Introduction

Our third section focuses on visual effects workers, the wizards behind many of the most popular films worldwide. It may seem odd to characterize VFX as a fringe activity given the current ubiquity of computer-generated imagery in explosive action flicks and franchise films featuring favorite comic book characters. Indeed, visual effects now account for one third of an average studio production budget, and three out of four shots in an award-winning feature like *Life of Pi* (2012) are computer generated. Still, the sector remains on the margins in numerous ways.

Historically, visual effects came of age on the cusp of the tech bubble in the 1990s, giving it an origin story disconnected from the old studio system in Hollywood. Its work routines and organizational cultures owe much more to the entrepreneurial ethos of the digital start-up firm than to the creative and technical hierarchies of screen media production. After all, tech jobs in the 1990s represented the future at a time when workers, especially fresh college graduates, placed a premium on individual autonomy, flexible workplaces, and portfolio careers. Youthful, enthusiastic, and eager, the confident VFX worker (who also was predominantly white and male) was laser focused on his own professional passions, and with good reason. He had access to top-line technology, worked in a cutting-edge industry, and produced highly sophisticated screen-media imagery. By comparison, the industrial mode of production and rigid division of labor that defines film and television production must have looked like the work his parents did, and union membership like a relic of a bygone era.

Although Los Angeles VFX shops thrived during the early years of computer-generated imagery, global competition began to escalate after the turn of the century. National and local policies that aimed to refashion human creativity

and innovation into mechanisms of economic regeneration and urban renewal focused their attention on service and information industries. Economists, politicians, and other thought leaders approached the visual effects sector as part of this broader strategy. By cultivating the sector through tax incentives and other subsidies, they wanted to link their cities' fortunes to the global knowledge economy. These developments gave rise to new creative centers and circuits of production, which then made it possible for producers to leverage one hub against another through a fiercely competitive bidding process. Moreover, the end product of visual effects work makes it especially prone to outsourcing, since digital files can travel long distances at great speed. It doesn't matter if the work is done in Los Angeles, Vancouver, or Bangalore.

The precarious conditions for visual effects artists are a product of intense competition among firms and unrelenting demand from studios. With more than five hundred visual effects firms worldwide serving six major clients, the power imbalance is astounding, and the toll it takes on workers excruciating. Producers use the competition to their advantage by demanding lower costs and threatening to take the work elsewhere. Firms bid for work with fixed prices, meaning they enter into a contractual agreement with producers to deliver the required imagery on a fixed deadline at a guaranteed price. There are no allowances for the additional time or resources a firm may require because of production delays or requested changes.

Decision makers, like directors, often misunderstand the complexity of visual effects labor, a likely consequence of those artists being so far removed from the site of physical production. It's not uncommon for an anonymous director, producer, or studio executive to dismiss a finished graphic—sometimes months in the making—or request changes without realizing that even the slightest tweak may take days to complete. As our interviewees elaborate, many of these decision makers assume that visual effects artists are simply button pushers or geeked-out fanboys happy to work into the wee hours of the morning for free pizza.

The reality is much more stark. Given the fixed-price bidding, visual effects artists face tremendous productivity pressures to deliver perfect imagery under intense deadlines. Many do so with no overtime pay, health care benefits, or other protections such as sick days or vacation leave. They often work in isolation for long hours in a small cubicle or toil away at long worktables that are reminiscent of piecework stations in sweatshops. Some of the more egregious incidents our interlocutors share include reports about digital surveillance and abusive bosses. But job security remains the paramount concern. The vast majority work as freelancers, hired by a firm for a particular project and then terminated when the project ends. To make matters worse, the sector is characterized by constant bankruptcies, with some firms closing shop before the artists are fully paid. Those at the top of their game face an endless cycle of displacement, bouncing from one firm to another, and often one city to another. Less-fortunate artists are trapped in low-wage

positions, hoping there is enough incoming work to at least ensure some continuity of employment before the firm goes bust.

Recall the fresh-faced techie in the 1990s who was swept up in the excitement of the dot-com boom. Like many of his colleagues, the VFX worker still speaks about his craftwork (notably, most refer to it as an art) with significant passion. Yet today he is in his thirties or forties with a family and bills to pay. Employment gaps are more difficult to straddle, and the prospect of moving abroad to the latest visual effects hub wreaks havoc on one's personal life. The scenario is even worse for women. Much as we have heard from other workers in this collection, structural factors make it difficult for women to accommodate the demands of the job alongside the additional domestic burdens they are disproportionately expected to shoulder. They furthermore must cope with a culture of chauvinism among colleagues and dismissive line managers, all of whom operate under the assumption that women are out of place in the tech industry. Maternity leave, we learned from one interviewee, was a privilege rarely granted and seldom requested.

Sadly, there is little recourse for either firms or workers. Employers at VFX shops are at the mercy of studios and producers. With such a small client pool, firms worry that organized labor would jeopardize their chances at securing more contracts. It's simply too easy to take the project to another provider. Meanwhile, visual effects artists often suffer in silence. Workplaces are defined by a culture of fear that prohibits speaking out against violations lest it jeopardize an individual's chances at finding or keeping a job. Tellingly, most of the individuals who talked with us are no longer in the business. They still speak about their art with tremendous enthusiasm and in great detail, but have turned their attention to other jobs while still remaining part of growing movement for reform, one that is actively debating ways to alleviate the sector's downward spiral. Options such as trade associations, unionization, and legal action are described in this section. But any productive solution must be global in scope in order to fully intervene in the structural conditions wreaking havoc on the visual effects business. Fortunately, the digital savvy of these artists and activists has opened the door to transnational deliberations about the state of the industry. It's a tentative but necessary starting point for serious reform.

Today, visual effects work is arguably the most geographically dispersed aspect of film and television production. Los Angeles was once the world's leading VFX hub, but has been completely hollowed out by the migration of firms and artists to a growing number of worldwide locations. Once a metaphorical fringe city of Hollywood, the business has now scattered to literal fringe cities around the globe. Always at the margins of the production process and at a distance from studio decision makers, workers struggle to develop a nascent labor consciousness to address the abuses common to the industry. The workaday experiences that our interviewees share reveal the extremes to which visual effects artists have been

pushed, both personally and professionally. Although in many ways they labor at the fringes of the motion picture industry, their experiences represent the most severe manifestation of nearly every issue raised in this collection. In fact, listening to their voices feels very much like carrying a canary into the coal mine. We can learn a lot from those on the fringes.