



GETTING A+ VFX

Visualize this, you indie feature mader dazzled with top-notch visualeffects. Well, that might not be far from reality

BY IAN FAILES

THE AVERAGE indie movie-maker: “Visual effects? Not on my budget.”

Not so fast. Independent features can make the most of visual effects by using them in smart ways. We asked some of the best visual effects artists in the field to burst some misconceptions and reassure your producers: Hey, that sequence *is* possible!

DO YOU NEED VFX?

HEAR “VFX” and people think immediately of CG characters and out-of-this-world environments. But there are a plethora of other uses for visual effects: stunts, green-screen and blue-screen compositing, simulating natural phenomena, bullet hits and many more.

How you use visual effects, and how much

^ DIRECTOR STEVE GOMEZ'S VFX EXPERTISE ALLOWED HIM TO EFFICIENTLY SHOOT SCENES THAT INVOLVED CG ROBOTS AND VEHICLES ON *KILL COMMAND*

you use them, will of course depend on the story you want to tell, and on your budget. Yet our experts all say that you shouldn't immediately presume visual effects are going to be expensive. Indeed, VFX can sometimes save money on production. Ultimately, working out what visual effects to use within your budget isn't really that much different from working out what locations to shoot and what costumes you need. It's all about planning.

“We do a lot of work on replacing signage in the backgrounds of shots where there might be legal clearance issues,” says visual effects supervisor Matt Bramante from Los Angeles VFX studio Locktix. “We can come up with solutions in production that indie moviemakers might not be thinking about, because they're concentrating on making sure they can get everything in the can.”

GET STARTED, EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY

THE ADVICE we heard time and again? Get the VFX team involved *early*.

“Talk to a VFX supervisor you trust early in the process,” says director and visual effects

supervisor Bruce Branit, who has worked on countless TV and film projects and directed shorts such as “405” “It's as important a position in pre-production as the DP or art director. Get them all working together, early. The more you can get in camera, the better the soil will be to grow great VFX in. Trust them to find the best ways to parse your effects needs into a shootable budget.”

Branit cites an example: “I advised on a small indie film recently that needed a huge reveal shot of thousands of kennels of sick dogs. The budget involved was about a twentieth of what we needed for CG animals. So I recommended doing a shot with one or two practical dogs and a zoom out to show the kennels at an angle that wouldn't show the dogs—maybe a set extension effect to sell the massive amount of kennels and cages—and then pulling the rest off with sound effects of thousands of dogs barking.”

OK, but won't it cost more to get a visual effects supervisor in early? Not necessarily, says Matthew Graham, a producer on 2015 Australian indie *Infini* and the upcoming *Science Fiction Volume One: The Osiris Child*,

COURTESY OF STEVE GOMEZ

and co-founder of Orb VFX. “It’s obviously going to cost something to hire a VFX supe, but the benefits of not going overtime during the shoot and in post *always* outweigh the alternatives. Just being able to turn to the VFX supervisor for a ‘can we do this shot or can’t we?’ helps. Some early previs means you also know exactly what days the supervisor needs to be on set—i.e. how many days you need to pay him or her.”

Graham worked alongside director Shane Abbess and VFX supervisor Steve Anderson, who devised a practical technique where a small stepper motor attached to a table provided just the right amount of vibration (enough to synchronize with the frame rate of the camera) to make blood appear to be ooze forward and backward. A similar technique incorporating the motors was used to provide motion to jelly-like alien fingers, too.

Graham wants moviemakers to be conscious of their needs. “There is always something to remove, extend, enhance,” he says. “The sooner it’s planned for and budgeted for, the less pain and cost in post. All too often I see a ‘non-VFX’ film require 100 VFX shots with little to no money put aside.”

DON'T DISCOUNT THE BIG GUNS

PLENTY OF VFX studios that work on the major film franchises offer their services to independent productions at scaled-down rates.

Vancouver-based Image Engine’s visual effects executive producer and general manager Shawn Walsh offers this advice: “Seek out partnerships with visual effects studios whereby you can leverage existing talent, pipeline technology or portfolio capability and current crewing to achieve your effects. By being strategic with where and when you place your work, you can take advantage of things you’re not paying for—the intangibles of what the studio has accomplished to date, and its availability.”

Deluxe’s Method Studios is a VFX heavyweight that has leapt into independent filmmaking, most recently with *Swiss Army Man*. That movie’s directors, Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, already had extensive VFX knowledge from prior music videos and commercials, which let Method accomplish many shots so smoothly as to be unnoticeable, says VFX supervisor Eduardo “Alvin” Cruz.

“We did green-screen comps, wire/rig removal, full ocean replacements, fire and smoke, as well as matte paintings, a 3-D bridge and stunt double facial replacements,” he says. “Animals like bears, raccoons and birds were also manipulated in post.”

DIP YOUR TOE IN, TOO

DIRECTOR AND visual effects supervisor Steven Gomez pitched his sci-fi action film *Kill Command* to Vertigo Films. The film’s array of CG robots and complex compositing work was made easier by Gomez’s pre-existing handle on visual effects, via his studio Bandito. On set, it meant that the director knew what could be achieved in computer graphics or with careful compositing. “There were occasions where I would say, ‘Well, we don’t have time to shoot the reverse shot of the robots. Let’s just take a load of pictures in that direction and we’ll move on.’”

Even if you don’t have Gomez’s expertise, however, you can learn to think like a VFX supervisor and at least have some knowledge of commonly used apps.

Branit recommends spending some time with Adobe After Effects, The Foundry’s NUKE or Blackmagic’s Fusion. And for inspiration, “watch *End Days* on Netflix, the first film by Gareth Edwards [*Monsters*, *Godzilla*]. He cut and did all the VFX in After Effects himself from his apartment. It’s no *Rogue One*, but it is inspired in its resourcefulness.”

There are plenty of ways to get a grip on core visual effects principles online. Here are a couple of sites that provide a crash course in the basics:

- **Pluralsight** (pluralsight.com): A few years ago, this site acquired Digital Tutors, a range of mostly software-centric training videos and courses. There isn’t necessarily one catch-all beginners’ guide to VFX, but there are many introductory courses available.
- **fxphd** (fxphd.com): This site streams classes by high-profile VFX artists. Some courses are specifically tailored to software, while others are centered on specific projects (for example, on the VFX of Stephen Hopkins’ Jesse Owens biopic, *Race*), so you can follow along as if it were your own.
- **VFX for Directors from Hollywood Camera Work** (hollywoodcamerawork.com/vfx_index.html): This series of DVDs, also available as downloads, is a comprehensive overview of VFX fundamentals with lots of shooting examples.

In the end, the lesson is to not think of VFX as a process relegated solely to post. It will inform your entire journey on a film.

“People tell me how they loved the aliens we created on [Neill Blomkamp’s] *District 9*,” says Image Engine’s Walsh. “But I bet

they don’t realize how efficiently Neill used those shots—never wasting a frame of screen time on something that wasn’t in service of the story. That aspect was just as key to the execution of the aliens. Prioritize visual effects needs, and validate them as a good spend in support of story.” **MM**

VISUAL AIDS

The tools that aid effects go far beyond CG modeling, animation and compositing software. Our VFX experts list their other favorites.

Bruce Branit: “Check out **Pro-lost Boardo** (proloststore.com/products/boardo) by Stu Maschwitz for ripping together a quick animatic within After Effects.”

V.W. Scheich, director (*Interwoven*) and producer at Locktix Visual Effects: “Use **FrameForge Previz Studio** (frameforgepreviz.com) for previs and moving storyboards. You don’t have to be an animator or a modeler—it’s just drag and drop, and you don’t have to be photo-accurate. You can do almost anything with all the data.”

Alvin Cruz: “I use **Setellite** (planetx.nl/setellite) as an on-set VFX organizer. It gathers all the information that you’d need at the post stage. The **My Measures Pro** app (mymeasuresapp.com) is always on my iPad. In it I collect all the measurements I take with the **Leica Disto** laser distance meter.”

James Hattin, creative director and co-founder of VFX Legion: “With a remote workforce, keeping this as ‘face to face’ as possible is important. We use a lot of **cineSync** (cinesync.com) and **Zoom** (zoom.us) to chat with our filmmaking partners.”

Matthew Graham: “We use **ftrack** (ftrack.com) for in-house scheduling. It’s constantly evolving and integrates with our **NUKE** and **Maya** pipe. You need to keep up with advancements, but not be on the bleeding edge of technology in the midst of production.”