

A Film Major's Guide to VFX

On behalf of the entire SCAD VFX department, please, please, please read this article.

Collaboration is crucial in bringing to life a lot of student's visions for their work. However, the film and VFX departments are located quite far from each other on campus and, therefore, tend to lack communication...even though they heavily rely on each other. Film students often require VFX in their films but lack the understanding of how to go about getting that work done. Time and time again, I hear frustration due to a lack of knowledge from one department about the other. So, here is your official film student guide to VFX in short films.

Evaluate

The first step in getting VFX on your film is deciding if you actually need it. Due to the smaller nature of student films, it is often easier to spend a few more hours creating a practical effect rather than scouting out VFX, which could take hours/more money to accomplish the same result. To summarize, Keep VFX for the shots you absolutely cannot achieve in real life.

Preplan

People often think of VFX as a post-production job. However, to achieve your desired results, a VFX supervisor must be found before filming begins. They need to be involved in every meeting and expectation for the film. While the majority of the work is done in post, pre-production planning is also key to getting good results. Some shots can simply not be done without pre-planning or extra shots. Below, I've broken down the process of finding an artist into simple steps.

1. Find VFX artists to work on your film before production begins through resources such as RenderQ or the SCAD Production Office. Reach out to professors for student recommendations for even more options.
2. Declare a VFX Supervisor for your film who will be involved in every meeting and decision-making process. Rely on them for any and all VFX advice or questions you have.
3. Plan to give VFX artists all the information they need well before the shot is taken.
4. Be flexible with us; VFX artists don't have you do extra work for no reason. Anything we ask for is precious to us.
5. Make sure spreadsheets for VFX shots have the shot number, a short description of the shot, lens, shot length (without extra frames), notes links to footage/examples of what's needed/etc.

Expectations and Budget

After deciding VFX is necessary, you need to go in with realistic expectations. VFX artists here at SCAD are talented, but certain things cannot be done in a student's free time. We are used to seeing VFX on the big screen, but that is the product of huge teams of VFX artists with hours and hours of time. So, remember a few things.

1. Keep your expectations realistic!
2. Decide how flexible your budget is. VFX artists may need to buy assets in order to accomplish what you want. Decide if you have any wiggle room in your budget. Sometimes, things can only be done with a budget allotted to VFX.
3. Be prepared for a planned shot that might not work out. Be patient with your VFX supervisor if they tell you the shot can't be done or did not go as planned. They want what's best for the film as well.
4. Always have a backup plan if you are unhappy with the results or if a VFX shot is very ambitious.
5. Sometimes, shots are simply not possible with the time and resources we have available.

Be specific

BE SPECIFIC when communicating with the VFX artist. Telling a VFX artist that you want them to do VFX for your film is like telling them you are going to use a camera to shoot; there are so many things that go into it. Give them all the context they need for the shot you want. Ask things like...

1. What type of shots do you need, and what is the context for each of them?
2. How are you shooting? (camera, f-stop, lens, frame rate, ISO, measurements, sensor size, aspect ratio of footage, and if there's going to be a crop, indicate it)
3. Is any FX going to be involved (particles, magic, etc)?
6. REFERENCE IS EVERYTHING. Give your VFX artists all the references you have for your vision. References are important to have on set, too.
7. Make sure both you and your VFX supervisor have a physical or digital outline of the shots and how they will be achieved.

Timelines

VFX is not a quick post-production job. It takes time, and VFX artists have their own classes to work on. It can't be rushed if you want a good result.

1. Tell your artist when you need the shots so they can plan and let you know if it is realistic.
2. Things take a LOT longer than you may think! Some shots can take a few hours, some a few days.
3. DON'T give VFX artists shots that could or will be cut. Everything should be picture-locked before VFX artists touch it.

4. Prepare time for on-set. Clean plates are going to take time to shoot.

On Set

Now that you've allotted time on set and communicated with your supervisor, it is time to go on set.

1. Don't go on set with the idea that things can easily be "fixed in post." Make your best attempt to get the shot first. If it is inevitable then talk to your VFX supervisor about what can realistically be done.
2. TAKE CLEAN PLATES ON SET. You need clean plates of every VFX shot. Clean plates are shots of what you just filmed but with no people. It is a clean plate of the background. Keep the camera in the same place, and don't touch it. These should be taken immediately after getting the shot so the lighting is also consistent.
3. Come onto set with a large gray card or ball. After taking a clean plate shot, take a shot with the object. This helps VFX artists ensure that the color and light of the shot can be replicated in post-production.
4. A VFX artist may ask for an HDRI of the shot in order to replicate the setting of the shots. HDRIs should be done right after the shot is done to ensure the lighting is consistent.

Green Screens

There is a good chance that if what you are looking for requires any VFX, that you may need a greenscreen involved. A lot more goes into working with a green screen than you would think. As a VFX student, I was surprised by how a small mistake could lead to hours and hours of post production work.

1. Do independent research on how to work with a greenscreen. Watch brief YouTube videos before going on set. You don't need to be an expert, but some basic knowledge allows you to know what your supervisor has to get done.
2. Research what kind of screen is best for you before buying or renting equipment. Talk to your VFX supervisor for their advice if you have any confusion.
3. Lighting a greenscreen is everything and can take a lot of time.
 - a. No shadows on the green screen
 - b. Actors should be 5 feet in front of the green screen
 - c. No creases or folds in the green screen
 - d. Take a clean plate of the green screen
 - e. If using tracking markers, talk to your VFX supervisor for details about how many are needed and what they need to look like

Deliverables

What is delivered to the VFX artists after the shot is taken is very important. Messy or wrong deliverables could result in many hours of unnecessary work and could slow down post-production.

1. Shots should be labeled in sequence of the film
 - a. Ex: 010_myfilm_takename_####.exr
2. Clean plates can be labeled like this: 010_myfilm_Cleanplate_####.exr
3. Use frames. One of the major industry standard programs, Nuke, works best in frames
4. When giving VFX artists a shot, there should be 5-10 frames of wiggle room.
5. Each camera has a different color space. When giving VFX artists the shot, give it to them BEFORE color grading and tell them the color space used!!
6. Give the shots in their most native form so it's easiest to match the environment and eventually make the deliverables clear for the colorist.
7. Have the colorist and artists communicate with each other as soon as possible!

Congrats! You've now received your VFX shots back from your VFX artists without anyone pulling their hair out in the process! Yay!

The VFX and Film departments will continue to become more intertwined as they grow. Being more informed about each other will help us to collaborate more seamlessly and create some pretty fantastic work. Cheers to the VFX and Film department!

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