

The Importance of Non-Technical Skills in Highend Visual Effects Careers

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Abstract

Schools are getting much better at presenting students with the technical skills they need to succeed in high-end visual effects and feature animation. But often it is a lack of non-technical skills that scuttles a digital artist's career.

This panel will address what those "other" skills are and how important they are to an individual's success. Skills to be addressed range from traditional art skills to presentation and communication abilities to working well with others.

Panelists will include professionals who earn their keep in these industries; studio recruiters, visual effects producers and supervisors, art directors and digital studio presidents. These are the people who decide who succeeds and who doesn't. All panelsits are also actively involved in education.

1 Purpose and Premise

The purpose of this panel is to outline for educators and students what non-computer skills are necessary to succeed in the collaborative arenas of visual effects and animation – and to underline the importance of said skills. This panel is intended for anyone involved in teaching, curriculum or program development and student counseling in digital media programs. Students will also benefit from this discussion.

The production professionals who make up this panel will work to impress upon educators and students the importance of skills other than being able to use computer graphics software in the production of high-end visual effects. Panel members are all involved in hiring and/or supervision of artists on a daily basis. They are well-aware of what skills make for success in this collaborative industry. They are also involved in and understand education.

In their presentations they will outline their personal experiences in hiring and supervision. They will detail what skills are needed to work collaboratively in this left-brain/right-brain industry.

Pointed questions will be aimed at clarifying why these skills are so important and the results of having or not having them. Discussion will address specifics on what abilities prospective artists need to develop and what areas the industry feels that current digital media programs are not addressing.

There will be time for questions at the end of the session. The issues presented in this panel will be addressed by the forum on Imparting Non-Traditional Skills in Digital Media Students.

2 The Panelists

Pam Hogarth, [moderator] Director of Industry Relations at Gnomon School of Visual Effects, has been in the world of computer graphics for over 19 years. In that time she has done marketing, public and industry relations, and training for a wide range of companies and educational institutions. She has taught at The American Film Institute, Otis College of Art and Design, and

Digital Media Institute (where she was Director) and has lectured on computer graphics, digital careers and visual effects at various international conferences here and abroad. Pam has twice been elected to the Board of Directors of the Visual Effects Society. She is Co-Chair of the VES Education Committee and a co-founder and steering committee member of the Alliance of Digital Effects Production Trainers (ADEPT). For the past two year she has served on the SIGGRAPH Computer Animation Festival committee. She holds a BS in Fine Art from Springfield College and an MED in Vocational Counseling from Kent State University.

"In my role as Director of Industry Relations, I spend much of my time talking to members of the production community. These professionals continually tell me of the importance of non-technical skills in the success of the projects they work on and the individuals working on those projects. The artist with communication, cooperation, presentation and artistic skills will beat out the pure CG technician every time. It's so important for education professionals to understand this reality."

Frank Gladstone has been working as a professional animator, producer, director, writer and teacher for more than twenty-five years. From 1973 to 1989, he managed his own Emmy award-winning studio, Persistence of Vision, Inc., producing commercials and educational films, and has since worked for the feature animation divisions at Disney, Warner Bros. and DreamWorks. Besides his studio credentials, Frank has spoken on animation at schools and institutions around the country, in the Caribbean, Europe and Asia and has taught various animation and cinematography courses and workshops for the University of Miami, VIFX, Cinesite, UNICEF, Gnomon School of Visual Effects, Vancouver Film School, Nickelodeon, UCLA, San Jose State, Stanford and USC. Frank has designed courses and helped train literally hundreds of people who work in the animation industry. Currently, Frank is the Head of Artistic Development at DreamWorks SKG Animation.

Additionally, Frank serves on several school advisory boards, philanthropic and educational organizations, produces public service television commercials and is a member of the City of Glendale Arts and Culture Commission.

"My job as Head of Artistic Development at DreamWorks is all about making sure that, in the continuing rush to stay up with the technical advances that seem to happen continuously in animation, we do not forget the aesthetic, cinematic and performance aspects of our films. It is easy -- sometimes deceptively so -- to think that once the software is perfected and learned, the artistic process is a fait accompli. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the fact is that there is still no substitute for highly-developed fundamental artistic and/or cinematic skills, whether those skills are applied to a 2D canvas or a 3D space."

Valerie Delahaye, General Manager of Buf LA, came from France 16 years ago with the ambition of becoming a graphic designer. She began working on 3D using a BOSCH 2000, which by now probably belongs to a museum! She was then trained at

the company Softimage where she demonstrated new software to clients. She then went to CBS and worked on movie openings before joining the team at R. Greenberg and Associates working extensively on videos, films and commercials. After Greenberg closed down its film division, Valerie went to Disney Buena Vista Studios. In 1994, she accepted an offer at Digital Domain as a 3D manager for the film, video and commercial department. There, she worked on films such as: *Dante's Peak*, *The 5th Element*, *Titanic* and *Red Corner*.

Now, Valerie works for BUF, L.A. as a Production Supervisor. BUF is an award-winning company, well known as a trendsetter both artistically and technologically. The company started using photogrammetry and stereoscopy ten years ago in works such as: the commercial SNCF, the video "Like a Rolling Stone" and the movie *The City of Lost Children*. BUF was the first to use mental image rendering system, which allowed them to create beautiful and realistic images (ie. The Flea for *The City of Lost Children*). BUF's latest work in the U.S includes the MasterCard Campaign, The Paramount logo, as well as the movies *Fight Club*, *The Cell*, *Panic Room*, *One Hour Photo*, and *Human Nature*. With BUF, Valerie went back to her first love, which is a combination of art and technology.

"This is one of the most important topics too often disregarded. In VFX we have a very difficult task, we need to be artists and technicians. We are in a visual industry and we are surrounded by artists, producers and visual fx supervisors that sometimes cannot recognize major visual symbols, not to mention styles or artists because they got a very good technical background but did not get an artistic education. Directors are often very visual and speak in metaphors or explain their ideas quoting famous artists or cinematographers. They feel very uneasy when they see the team of digital artists in front of them with a completely blank look on their faces."

Debbie Pashkoff is currently a Lighting/Art Director at Rhythm & Hues Studios having come to the company in 1994 as a lighting Technical Director. Her education includes art degrees from the School of Visual Arts and the University of Florida. From there, she worked as a Technical Director for HDCG and Magic Box Productions before coming to Rhythm & Hues. Her training, during a time when the industry was still forming, necessitated a solid understanding of both artistic and technical skills, both of which she continues to use today. Her credits include Coca-Cola Polar Bear commercials, as well as many others, and recent films such as *Cats & Dogs* and the upcoming *XMen 2*.

"A Technical Director with a good eye will always have a better "first pass" at a shot or task than someone with a purely technical eye. It is often the case that the purely technical person will present something that they believe is "correct," while someone with a better eye for the aesthetic will present work that was correct to begin with but then altered to create a better look."

Stan Syzmanski's experience covers a wide range of visual effects experience on the creative, managerial and administrative sides of the business, including stints as a department manager, visual effects producer, and production manager of the largest department at Sony Pictures Imageworks. His department includes computer graphics supervisors and digital artists of all types. Before joining Sony Pictures Imageworks, Stan was Director of Operations for Pacific Ocean Post, where he supervised the digital film division and line produced the digital post-production of over 200 visual effects. Prior to this, Stan served in a variety of roles for MetroLight Studios, a CGI production company. He started as the Digital Production Manager, quickly expanded his role to include post production supervision and was later named Director of Production. Stan

began his career in the Los Angeles visual effects industry as a Graphics and Effects Producer for Editel/LA. While there, he worked on a variety of award-winning broadcast commercial spots for numerous clients.

"As Vice President of Digital Production for Sony Pictures Imageworks, I interview, hire, promote, mentor and advise a large number of highly-skilled technical artists. While most of them understand the need to be the best technically or artistically (or both), few of them grasp the importance of communication, accountability, collaboration, mutual respect and an open demeanor. I have observed many talented artists bypassed for opportunities and promotions because of weak skills of their own or other team members in these other areas."

Andrew Orloff, President and Co-Founder of Zoic Studios. Formerly Lead 3D artist at Radium and 525 Post Production. Andrew was Visual Effects Supervisor on the award-winning Linkin Park music videos. He has also created music videos for Cake, Mariah Carey and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, as well as effects for the television shows "Angel" and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer". His ad campaign credits include Skittles, Coca-Cola, Intel, Chevy Tahoe, Carl's Jr., Taco Bell and many more. He teaches Animation and Visual Effects at Gnomon School of Visual Effects and is a member of their Advisory Board. He is a graduate of the UCLA School of Theatre Film and Television.

"As a Visual Effects Supervisor, I have worked with many different teams which have used technical tools to create projects that are someone else's artistic vision. The most successful effects artists are those who can do more than use the technical tools. The successful individual also has traditional artistic, communication and presentation skills."