



THE VFX EXPLOSION

THE DEMAND FOR VISUAL EFFECTS OFFERS OPPORTUNITIES FOR PRODUCERS WHO KEEP ABREAST OF THE EVOLUTION OF THE SECTOR.

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It can seem that visual effects are exploding everywhere both on *and* off screen as entry-level producers as well as seasoned producers move to get on board the world of computer-monitored effects.

VFX has also had a “geeks shall inherit the earth” moment in that what was once stereotyped as fringe or extremely complicated has moved into the mainstream. Relevant credits racked up by PGA members include visual effects producer, visual effects production supervisor, co-visual effects producer, executive producer of visual effects, visual effects coordinator, visual effects production manager and visual effects supervisor. Some members began in VFX, while others transitioned later in their producing career. If someone wanted to follow that lead, what should they know to successfully navigate these waters and discover opportunities within the VFX sector?

THE LEARNING CURVE

With a hypercompetitive media market that needs to give audiences seemingly flawless content at breakneck speed, it's no longer a question of, "Can we fix it in post?" as much as "How much will this cost us to fix it in post?"

"Most of the time, the answer today is yes, you can probably fix most everything. But that doesn't mean it's easy to fix or inexpensive to fix," says Raymond McIntyre Jr., a seasoned VFX artist and a 2024 recipient of the Visual Effects Society Award for Outstanding Supporting Visual Effects in a Photoreal Episode for his work in the HBO series *Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty*.

McIntyre, who runs the LA-based visual effects house Pixel Magic with general manager Ray Scalice, says that as recently as half a decade ago, productions started increasing their postproduction visual effects work in order to make their filming days go faster.

The caveat here, he says, is that "once you start having hundreds of fixes and post shots that you didn't budget for or allow for, then you're going to have a big issue. It doesn't matter how simple they are when you start having hundreds upon hundreds of them."

Visual effects can, and should, be an integral part of production design, such as when VFX producer Parker Chehak and other members of the PGA Award-winning team behind Prime Video's period comedy *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* recreated Technicolor-style picture postcards of 1962 Miami. But these producers often have to think beyond a day's shot list.

McIntyre cites another period project where the location manager had secured two street blocks that production design would convert to a different time and place. But modern cars and other buildings could still be seen in the distance. McIntyre knew that eventually he'd be asked to make them disappear.

YOU GOTTA KNOW THE TERRITORY

This is why it's key that someone who understands costs, budgets and deadlines—someone who is also a good communicator—be involved with visual effects production. These are the hallmark traits of any professional producer.

"It's management skills; you need people skills to deal with clients and to be on set," says Elizabeth Hitt, whose recent credits include serving as a visual effects producer for such TV series as *Frasier* and *Magnum, P.I.*, and visual effects production supervisor for the film *The Boys in the Band*.

For someone looking to segue into VFX, those management skills must be complemented by solid knowledge of the arena. "You need to make sure that your crew, the people that you're working with, have the confidence that you know what you're doing."

In these cases, she suggests taking a slightly lower role until the person gets their bearings because inevitably there's going to be a day on set when a client asks how much a VFX change or fix is going to cost.

"If you don't know all the steps involved, you could misquote and put yourself and the company at risk and ruin some relationships," Hitt says.

This isn't to say that a visual effects producer has to have the same knowledge of the technology as a visual effects supervisor, who is on set and in charge of all the VFX shots and therefore knows how to modulate and build out computer-generated worlds.

"The technology that's used is complex, but as a producer, you just have to have an understanding of what is being done in the pipeline," says Thurman Martin III, a visual effects producer with the New York City-based creative studio The Artery, whose credits include the Apple TV+ comedy



Palm Royale and the upcoming film adaptation of the Colson Whitehead novel *The Nickel Boys*.

VISUAL V. VIRTUAL V. SPECIAL

Susan Zwerman, a seasoned VFX producer and educator who got into this part of the industry after years as a unit production manager, points out that visual effects production shouldn't be conflated with XR—virtual effects production and filming in front of an LED screen that will incorporate CGI sets and real-time edits. Those come with a different understanding of budgets and skill sets.

"VFX producers have to learn how to break down a script in terms of what can be practical, on-set effects or what has to be visual effects created in post," says Zwerman, who is the co-author of *The Visual Effects Producer: Understanding the Art and Business of VFX*.

It's both a blessing and a curse that the technology itself is, as Chehak puts it, "an ever-changing landscape" where everyone has to keep up with the times.

"I think that there are a lot of preconceived notions that people have of what's doable and what's not, and that can go both ways," he says. "You have these articles now about how AI de-aged Indiana Jones (for the 2023 film *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny*). But it's not viable on a practical level. It's not that the results aren't as good; it's just new technology that's not quite there yet."

EXPENSIVE PUZZLE- SOLVING

Chehak says that VFX can do a lot and that there's no right or wrong way to



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do anything, but that it's a matter of what can be done with what we have in terms of time, money and technology.

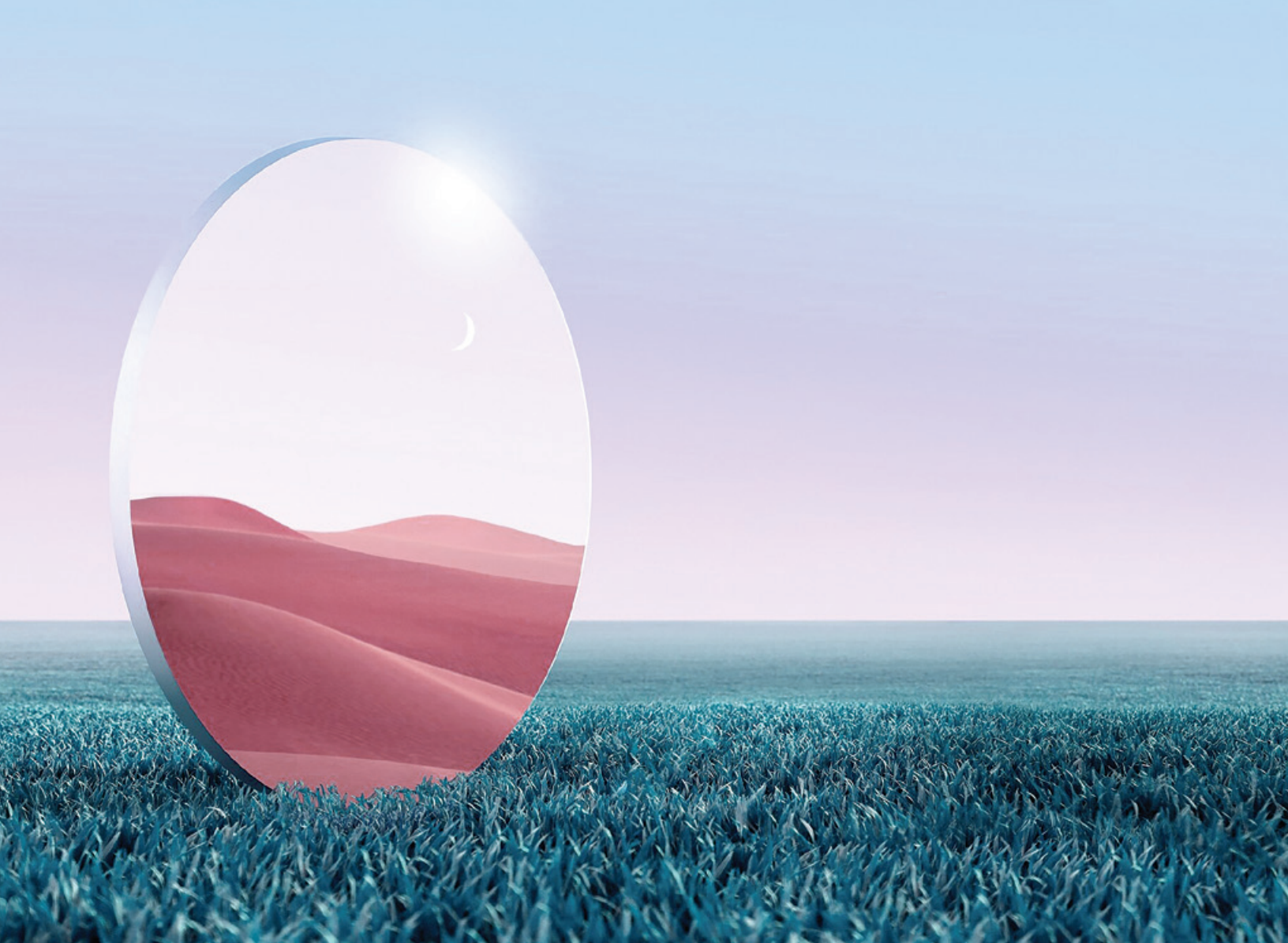
Taste is also important. This section of the industry is so fastidious that a minuscule change can make a world of difference. It can be like a very expensive puzzle-solving game.

"Any visual effects shot goes through a long process of revisions, and the devil's in the details," Chehak says. "The difference between an acceptable shot and an excellent shot is very small. Figuring out what's wrong with

something and pushing it over the line is what makes shots great."

From his perspective, there's no accepted right way to do anything in visual effects like there's a right way to do things in most aspects of our industry.

"It's all about being careful and clever in the choices that you make, and being able to pivot very quickly," Chehak says. "It's a lot of the same producer skills that any producer would have, just hyperfocused on this one aspect of the end product."



THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING CURRENT

McIntyre has worked in VFX since the 1980s. But he says that if you're not the type of person who is constantly learning, then "This probably isn't the side of the industry to be in, because it does constantly change."

McIntyre adds: "I read a lot. I pay attention to what other people like myself do, and I try to learn from them if they're doing something different." At the time of this interview, he was learning about the 3D radiance rendering program Gaussian Splatting. "We used to do it with photogrammetry," he explains. "Now, there's a new methodology. If I don't start learning about it right away, I will be behind."

Expertise in VFX can be as much about how to use these tools as it is about when to use them—how to explain to directors and other creative heads that doing it a certain

way will save money and time, and knowing what a production shouldn't do as much as what VFX can do.

"There are plenty of movies and other examples where they shot in front of a virtual production screen, then rotoscoped every single character and replaced the background. So they paid for it twice," McIntyre says.

Zwerman says she takes seminars, both in person and online, to learn about such topics as the changes happening in artificial intelligence and technology. She also practices the dying art of calling people on the phone to ask them about their work. Working in VFX is also about being pragmatic about how technology may eliminate jobs.

"It's going to impact the business somewhat," Hitt says of AI in particular. "People will lose some jobs. But you can educate yourself and learn software, and if you are really good, you can get hired almost anywhere."

Plus, Hitt adds, software makes mistakes. "You need a human to look through footage and go, 'Oh, look, there's a microphone still attached to a tie,'" she says. ■