



The Visual Effects Producer: Understanding the Art and Business of VFX

by Charles Finance & Susan Zwerman

Reviewed by Stephanie Austin

“Visual effects are never finished; they’re abandoned.”

This aphorism and many other light-hearted observations cleverly illustrate one of this fine book’s premises: arm yourself with knowledge, but always keep your sense of humor. Well written and constructed, *The Visual Effects Producer* is not only the ultimate “how-to” book but also a comprehensive resource for all filmmakers. Whether you are a novice, journeyman or master of the art of filmmaking, this is a compendium you should not be without.

Finance and Zwerman speak with authority about the evolution of visual effects — from analog “special photographic effects” to the current digital world of CG. They provide detailed descriptions, fleshed out with examples and photographs, of everything from stop-motion techniques to forced perspective to motion control to the relationship between special mechanical effects and visual effects. They cover aerial camera systems, high-speed photography, motion capture, cyber scanning and structured light scanning, set

surveys and lighting references. In clear prose they compare 2D vs. 3D, miniatures vs. digital models, and advise how to best determine what method is right for a particular project. Monitoring vendor performance, shot delivery schedules, interaction with editorial, film and digital workflow, and finishing the film — all are covered, and augmented with pertinent graphics and charts.

You will never have to explain to another studio executive that you can’t just “push a button” to create these images. One of the book’s many illuminating sidebars illuminates the “staggering complexity” of today’s VFX: “Consider that each frame of the 35mm Academy film format is made up of almost 2½ million pixels, and that each pixel is assigned its own numeric value to describe its position, density and color, and you begin to get an appreciation of computing power needed to calculate, say, a three-second shot consisting of 100 layers or elements.” This may provide a handy quote when someone asks, “What’s taking so long?”

Storyboarding and pre-visualization are explored in depth — including the merits and the hazards of each. We’ve all had

that sinking feeling when we see pre-vis that contains a virtual camera move that cannot be replicated in the real world, but that the director has fallen in love with. As the writers point out, this is all the more reason to be discriminating when bidding and hiring; know the skill set, track record, strengths, and weaknesses of those you intend to work with. The “Business” of VFX is thoroughly covered, but they don’t forget to remind us about the “Art.” It all comes back to the quality of the artists, who have to “first imagine all the details, then model, build, texture, paint and light,” whether in the real world of wood, paper and paint, or in the digital world, pixel by pixel.

Finance and Zwerman provide tutorials on how to: create a VFX breakdown, estimate shot costs, calculate ancillary digital costs such as scanning and recording, analyze vendor suitability, and solicit and secure vendor bids. They explain how to use Microsoft Excel, Movie Magic (EP) Scheduling and Budgeting software, and how to adapt the software for specific requirements, as well as how to create the VFX database using FileMaker Pro. They emphasize that these are essential tools for the VFX producer’s job, but also

note that they are critical for communication. They give savvy advice about limiting your distribution lists and striking the right balance between "not enough" and "too much" information, and the most diplomatic way to deliver it.

One of the strengths of the book is that the voluminous technical detail is backed up by contextual examples. They offer suggestions about how to communicate, collaborate, and interface with the main unit 1st AD, director of photography, production designer and others, emphasizing the importance of the data, but not neglecting "good people skills." With wisdom that is only achieved through experience, the authors pose real-world scenarios and discuss approaches one can use to defuse potential fireworks. They discuss the need for skill in conflict resolution and managing expectations, and even address the delicate politics of dealing with the director.

The book provides an important, if ancillary, overview of the evolving role that visual effects play in film production today. What was once firmly designated part of post-production is now undeniably part of pre-production and principal photography. On VFX-heavy features, it is now common for a producer to bring in a visual effects producer in the preliminary budget and board phase to help identify the potential VFX costs. During the shooting period, both the main unit and second unit may now have to encompass visual effects and other special shooting units, threatening to blur set dynamics and lines of authority. VFX are among the last elements to be completed on a film and the visual effects producer is there through delivery — longer than anyone except the director and producer.

The authors' experiences are buttressed by the anecdotal remarks in the "Success Stories" which are sprinkled throughout the book. Not only will you get an introduction to the best VFX producers working today, but, you will gain a great deal of insight from reading their personal stories. I contacted VFX producer Jenny Fulle, who shared: "I am very impressed by the thoroughness of topics covered in The Visual Effects Producer. Nothing has been left out... While there is no shortcut to experience, this book is a must-have for all aspiring visual effects production folks and everyone on my team will be getting one for the holidays."

Finance and Zwerman are extremely generous in sharing and helping standardize methodology that has been developed over many years by a multitude of people. They certainly succeed on that level, but, after reading the book, another response is to acknowledge how complex the art and business of visual effects is — and how absolutely essential an experienced VFX producer is to many successful films.