

# The Definition Of Visual Effects and How We Should Use Them

We live in an age when information is available, suddenly everyone's an expert.

There are many views on visual effects from so-called "experts"(use, never use, only in certain cases etc). How should we navigate this sea of ideas and options? In the age of the internet, everyone's an expert. Who do we listen to?

You have 3 friends, Bob, Joe, Pete. Bob says that you should never use a screwdriver because it's dangerous. Joe says that a screwdriver is one of the greatest inventions of all time and should be used extensively. Pete says that you should only use a screwdriver in projects that also use a hammer. You have no experience with this tool. Who do you listen to? It would be useful to understand what a screwdriver is, and what the inventor had in mind for its use.

We can look to a pioneer of the craft, in this case George Lucas, one of the fathers of VFX. He has a great quote with a lot to tell about VFX.

*"A Special Effect is a tool, a means of telling a story. A Special Effect without a story is a pretty boring thing."* - George Lucas

Let's start to unpack the wisdom from this quote

- **What VFX Is**

The simple answer is:

## **A Tool.**

What is a tool?

"A device or implement, especially one held in the hand, used to carry out a particular function".

People say AI is magic. But it truly is a tool. You put something in, and the AI outputs something.

## **What is the key article used in the sentence?**

*Key word = "A".*

“A” suggests other tools(like a toolbelt). Tools are used to make something. They do not replace the thing. Imagine making a chair and then praising the saw and hammer you used to make it.

Within the tool there are subtools. Compositing and 3D rendering are subtools. They are parts of the tool. An orange can be an ingredient of a dish, and the segments are parts of the orange. VFX is so complex. Watching the credits of a movie you see a lot of names in the VFX field. What do they do?. They are all part of a pipeline. The pipeline goes something like this:

1. Plan
2. Shoot
3. Create Elements
4. Add Motion (Animation Simulation Tracking)
5. Light
6. Render
7. Composite

The tool should be working to create whatever thing is the desired result. It should be like a paintbrush which you use to paint your movie.

The tool should be aligned with the other tools and not competing with them. You don't use the same brush for the whole painting. You paint with different colors in different areas. The paintbrushes of Lighting and Props must also be used. A picture that was made of one color is not interesting. In a painting, the colors are working together to create something beautiful.

- **What VFX Does**

### **Why do we even need VFX?**

*Because throughout history, filmmakers have been using VFX to tell stories.*

VFX tells stories and has done so for a long time.

The reason we use lighting is because it played a part in filmmaking history, as does VFX.

What is a movie? It is a story shown to us visually. VFX is a tool to tell that story.

You start with a good story and move on from there.

George Lucas started with this idea to make Star Wars, but then he realized that he couldn't do it with the tools available to him so he had a team hired (which became ILM) to develop systems which later became known as visual effects. ILM is still a studio dedicated to telling stories such as Avengers and Jurassic using innovative cutting edge technology.

- **Note** It says means. It is a means to an end(the film). If this is not the case then you run into an issue which we will look at in a moment.

Many people think that VFX is the wrong tool to tell most stories. I believe that it can be used if you follow some safety guidelines.

- **Keep it Thoughtful**
  - We'll fix it in post is somewhat of a cliched statement but often the thought that goes into the decision to add VFX to a shot is too little. The VFX industry is not a machine to pour money in and get solutions out.
- **Keep it Moderate**
  - Just like with seasonings, moderation is key. You don't want too much visual effect in a movie so that the audience leaves the cinema choking on the VFX.
- **Keep it Subtle**
  - When people see VFX, the goal shouldnt be to get them to say "Great VFX". They should say "Cool Moment" or simply nothing, because it is not meant to be noticed

## **Conclusion**

*VFX should be used carefully to tell a story.*

- **What VFX Shouldn't Be**

A pretty boring thing. How would you like a project that you poured everything into to be called a pretty boring thing?

Visual Effects could be described as a dangerous road. Some people would tell you to never drive on the road, but with a little guidance, you can safely drive on that road.

Perhaps someone wise would tell you to avoid driving near the edge of the road and never drive at night or in the rain.

### **Avoid the VFX being:**

- **Storyless/Disconnected**
  - Imagine opening a children's book about a rabbit and a farmer and finding an illustration of the city of Tokoyo in the style of Van Gogh. Perhaps it would be a good piece of art but if it didn't fit the story, it has lost its value. A book's illustrations are to be illustre (Latin for Illuminating), they should help the reader to experience the story in a more complete way.

Make sure that all your effects have a story-driven reason. Once you lose sight of the story, it starts to feel like a showreel rather than a story.

- **The Focus**
  - Imagine you developed a system to simulate huge scale water simulations with mist and foam and bubbles. Now you have this technology, but nobody knows about it. Wouldn't you want to create a disaster movie in which a city gets flooded, to utilize these tools? The problem is that the story will be working for the VFX. You will be working the story to use all the features of the system. The story will suffer, and with the story, the movie.

These are 2 major things to avoid it becoming a *pretty boring thing*.

### **In conclusion:**

The goal today was to illuminate the true use of VFX and recalibrate our mindsets.

VFX is a **tool** that tells a **story**. Without this story, the VFX becomes a *pretty boring thing*.

1. What is VFX? - A tool.
2. What does it do? - Tell a story.
3. What shouldn't VFX be? - Storyless/The Focus

*Adapted from Samuel Collett - Unmasking Visual Effects*

