VES CAREER OPPORTUNITY GUIDE

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Who is this guide for?

Anyone who wants to move up in their career.

Anyone who wants to move into a new role within the VFX industry.
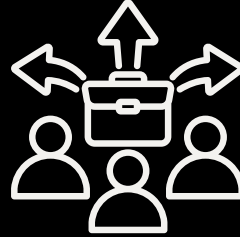
Experienced professionals working across the VFX field looking to make a career change and move into a new industry
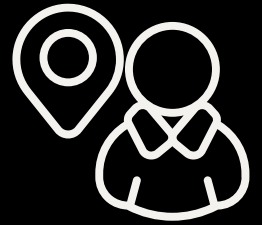
Anyone looking for new freelance gigs in VFX or a temporary change outside of VFX

Moving into New Roles Within the VFX Industry

Making a career transition is not just about moving to a new industry. Making a move within VFX can be a challenge, for example to move between departments in a VFX studio - especially if you are very good at your job and you tend to specialize. The most important thing is ensuring your supervisors and leadership are aware that you are capable of taking on a new role and you are interested in it. .

Improving your role and position

We all want to move up in our companies, but are rarely trained how to do this, and it is a skill in itself. Below are some useful tips for moving up in your career. For more information see these resources: *(link to available resources)*

Assessing your own strengths and weaknesses
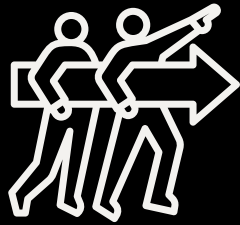
Approaching a career move should start with getting a clearer understanding of your own skill sets. Taking a personal SWOT analysis can reveal personal strengths and weaknesses that can give you a good opportunity to promote yourself on your strengths, and focus on self improvement in areas of weakness.

Demonstrating leadership

Even if you are not in a leadership position in your studio, this does not mean that you can't demonstrate leadership. This starts by thinking about more than what you alone are tasked to do, and expanding that to thinking about the success of the team around you. You can demonstrate leadership by doing things like communicating with supervision on ways to improve your team, for example through training, promoting others work, or documenting best practice for your team to help others and onboarding. Mentorship is another great opportunity to demonstrate leadership. Offering to mentor juniors helps onboarding and team success and shows leadership that you value the success of your team, it also emphasizes critical leadership skills like listening, communication and developing talent.

Thinking in general "What would make your supervisor more successful in their goals?". This shows leaders and supervision that you are thinking about the success of your team, and makes the life of your immediate supervisor easier. You can then take this further by thinking about the success of your studio as a whole. Understanding what will help other departments, like Production or the downstream departments from yours and helping to improve their lives signals to leadership that you are thinking on the same level that they are, and this is a crucial part of being promoted in any company.

Upward trajectories

A common myth in the VFX industry is that the only option you have to be promoted into more responsibility and a higher salary after becoming a senior artist is to take on a managerial position. While this may be true at some studios, there are many companies that have multiple career paths for people who do want to get into people management, and other paths for people who want to go deeper into their craft as an individual artist. This may be referred to as being a "Principal Artist" or the like, where you are still a focussed artist, but you are working on tougher, more complex shots or assets, and you are often tasked with working with leadership to improve the company practice in your field, and perhaps representing your company at the industry level when it comes to your craft.

Making your intentions clear

Just because you have been at a studio for a set amount of time, or working in the industry for X number of years, this does not automatically qualify you for a leadership position (unless tenure is a key factor in promotion at your studio). It is important that your supervisors are aware of your interests. Don't be afraid to talk to your supervisor and studio leadership and let them know your goals in 1:1s, feedback sessions or reviews.

Addressing gaps

There are a number of Leadership and management training options out there, including assistance provided via the VES Members Assistance Program (MAP) and seminars posted by the VES. Taking a training course on the side to improve your leadership skills and to learn about management is a great way to improve your chances of a promotion and success as a leader. Many companies offer this training to employees if requested.

Image Source: Louis Hansel

The Elephant In The Room: Economic Upheaval In The Entertainment Business (Staying Relevant In A Changing World)

At the time of writing, the VFX industry and many adjacent industries like animation and games are facing large scale layoffs, studio closures and a reduction in work. This is significantly impacting VES members and the creative community at large. That said, industry market forecasts still predict growth in VFX and signals point to recovery. Furthermore the market for creative content has never been larger, so we remain confident that despite a lot of change, creativity will continue to be a growth market in the future with job opportunities for hardworking VFX professionals. Like previous industry crises, this too shall pass, and knowing your value and the scope of opportunity in front of you is a critical aspect to developing your career.

It's not just the VFX industry that is facing challenges, many industries around the world are facing accelerated change. In times of upheaval what's clear is that the people who tend to stay employed, are the ones who embrace versatility and lean more towards being a generalist. The more you know and the more you are capable of pivoting, the more you can be indispensable as requirements and situations change. While finding a job often requires specialization, keeping that job (especially in times of change) requires generalization. So we encourage VFX practitioners to strengthen their skill sets by expanding their scope and embracing learning new skills in other departments and as new technologies appear. And consider that if you invested heavily in a particular technology or skill that becomes less relevant due to technological change, you CAN pivot by applying those valued soft skills you learned along the way. A great example of this was the many talented artists who pivoted to learning new digital tools in 3d animation and rendering when these skills eclipsed traditional practical techniques.

Making the leap to a new career

Making changes in your career is not easy. It is often that people make these changes through chance opportunities that come their way, or through overwhelming force due to life changes. This does not mean that you can't intentionally make a change in your career though.

There are three important steps to moving into a new field:

- First you need to have a solid idea of the job you want to move into (and this is often the hardest part).

- Once you have an idea of a job you want to explore, it's important to have a clear picture of the value you can bring to the table in this new role, along with any gaps in skills, training or certification that you might be missing to help you.

- And lastly, you have to get your foot in the door.

You will find details on approaching these steps on the next page.

For a more detailed discussion, VES hosted a great panel on this topic of "Re-inventing yourself" here: https://www.vesglobal.org/video/reinventing-yourself-after-a-layoff/

A recommended text on the subject for those really interested in a deep dive on career transitions is "Working Identity" by Herminia Ibarra: https://herminiaibarra.com/working-identity-book/

Image Source: Mapbox

Finding the right option

Often the most challenging part of making a career change is knowing what you want to transition into. We've listed some suggestions below, but without working in those industries, it can be a challenge to make an informed choice.

Most people who make career changes do so through small steps, like starting with freelance work or attending a conference to "try on" a new role. It is rare that someone wakes up and says "I'm an event pyrotechnic now!". So if you are asking yourself "What do I do next?", the best bet towards a sustainable career transition is to try and explore new options through learning and experimentation. It's important to note that the hardest move is changing both your title and your industry at the same time, so starting with an adjacent industry that offers similar job descriptions can make for a smoother transition and make it easier to get your foot in the door. Pay careful attention to job descriptions as well, as some industries have different names for what are essentially the same, or very similar roles. For example, producers will find that their day to day is quite similar to that of a "project manager".

Another great approach here is to ask yourself questions like "What am I good at?" or "What do I like to do?". These are important questions to answer in this process, but it's important to note that they don't leave much opportunity for change, as they are rooted in what you currently do and know. So another good question to ask is this: "What do I value?".

Answering this can clarify a lot when searching for a new role. Perhaps you value working closely with people to solve tough problems. Or you value creativity in your work. Or you value helping others to improve and succeed. These factors can often be a better predictor of success in a new role, and give you a great set of questions to ask a potential employer when applying. They also make it easier to pick an industry or role to focus on when you are faced with multiple good options. For many people in VFX, this process may be daunting – the values we often hold in VFX that center around producing "movie magic" and creative storytelling might seem like they don't exist in other industries, but as you dig deeper into new careers you will likely find that there is opportunity make "magic" happen in many fields.

Once you have an idea of an industry you would like to explore, it can be helpful to devise a "career roadmap". Starting by researching as much information as you can regarding your target industry, look at job postings, talk to whomever you can, watch industry videos etc. to get you to a picture of what your individual success in that industry would look like. Then map out the steps you need to take. You might need to restructure your employment package and demo reel to favor values in that industry. You might need training or certification in that industry or education, or a contact in the industry (for example). Most importantly, search your own network for people who may be in or connected to that industry, and let everyone around you know you are seeking contacts - you never know who has a sister or an uncle who could help you out. It is also important to understand that there are many similar jobs across industries but names and titles might be different, so keep an open mind and explore everything to understand what a role actually entails.

A career counselor can help a lot with exploring a career roadmap and identifying the best options for transition, and the good news is that as a VES member, you have access to career guidance through the Member Assistance Program.

Understanding the value you bring to the table

It is often that we get caught up in the day to day of our jobs and measure our contributions by metrics like the number of shots we deliver. These indicators may be easy to measure, but they do not give a complete picture of what we contribute on the job. While doing "Nuke VFX Compositing" is a skill, it is a very domain specific thing, but the reality is that there are many **soft skills** hiding in our careers that are highly transferable:

- Communication
- Teamwork
- Time Management
- Problem Solving
- Creativity & Artistic Skills (Composition, Color, Expression, Realism, Perspective etc.)
- Adaptability & Resilience
- Leadership
- Relationship Building
- Business Development

These are skills that take experience to learn and are of high value to astute employers. But it's not just soft skills that are transferable. There are many industries that use imagery to communicate or visualize, or do simulation to test and prototype. Many of the tools and techniques used in VFX are commonly found in different industries like the adjacent industries of Games, Animation and Motion Graphics, but even in less adjacent industries like scientific and medical visualization. For example common 3D DCCs like Maya, Houdini and Unreal can be found in Architecture or Scientific/Medical visualization, or you find photogrammetry a key element in crime scene reconstruction. We are storytellers at heart, and there are so many jobs out there that come down to communicating a story.

Breaking into a new industry

Once you know where you want to go and what you can bring to the table, breaking into a new industry can also bring challenges. Your network is the most powerful tool you have, and it's often "who you know" that can help in finding a job, so this becomes a big challenge when you don't know people in that industry. Your network of people that know you and what you are capable of may not be able to help you with a direct reference in this case, but they can recommend you to someone else they know in another industry.

Image Source: Brooke Cagle

So one of the best things you can do is to let your network know that you are seeking work in another industry and to ask if they know anyone who can help connect you. You would be surprised how far this can take you. And don't forget that being part of the VES can help connect you to other members who can help. Reaching out to your local VES board of managers is a good start, and applying for mentorship in the VES mentorship program are great ways to connect with people you don't know already. If you don't have a contact you can leverage, a good approach can be reaching out to a leader in the field you are approaching and simply asking if they have a moment to chat. People genuinely like to talk about their careers so reaching out with a genuine interest can be a great ice breaker, just make sure to do your research and come to the table with legitimate questions to answer.

Job finding is often a game of numbers. You need to be the right person in the right place at the right time (when a prospective employer is hiring). So the more you apply, the more people you talk to, the more opportunities you approach - the more likely you will be to land a job. This can feel daunting when you've applied to many jobs and not gotten a response, but knowing that this is often a matter of timing can help push through that frustration.

Self-Promotion and thought leadership are a critical part of this as well. Your decades of experience will not speak for themselves as they do in your current industry, so don't be afraid to beef up that Linkedin profile and show off the skills that you feel are relevant to your target industry and ensure that the VFX industry jargon and lingo is toned down. You will also need a resume focused on the industry that you are approaching and built around the transferable skills you feel are relevant. There are numerous services available to help you craft a resume for a target industry. Your cover letter as well can clearly indicate those transferable skills that could apply to a new field, and your ability to learn the missing hard skills quickly. In general, it is best to focus on outcomes that you achieved, rather than individual tasks assigned to you. For example, if you improved productivity of your team through implementing a new technique, this can be a more obvious and accessible quality to an employer in a different field.

Moving from a leadership level highly experienced role into a new industry can also be challenging in that you are no longer the expert in the room. But your experience in learning and adapting is what is going to set you off on the right foot in a new industry. Knowing how to listen and identify the right people to ask for help are key, and you will discover quickly that "expertise" is far more about the transferable soft skills that you have developed in your career, rather than the domain specific knowledge that you may have acquired, and it's often that training can fill in those gaps in domain knowledge quickly when needed. Keeping an open mind is critical here.

Below we highlight some opportunities in adjacent industries, but the key message we heard during this exploration was that VFX practitioners are champions of visualization and visual storytelling. They are highly creative and adept at technical problem solving. They have to become experts in whatever they are re-creating thus it's a job that requires quick learning and deep curiosity. All these skills are highly applicable across many fields. To back this up, the World Economic Forum Future Jobs Report for 2025 listed "Analytical Thinking", "Creative Thinking", "Curiosity & Lifelong Learning" and "Technological Literacy" among the critical core skills of greatest importance to workers. Skills that are table stakes for VFX professionals.

Career Transitions Within Media & Entertainment (M&E)

Adjacent industries in M&E offer some great options for people with a VFX background to directly apply their honed skills.

If you are unsure where to start, a common idiom applies here: "Follow The Money". Research where investors are injecting money and how your skills might be useful in these new and exciting opportunities. A great example of this is Location Based Immersive Media - a space that is seeing a large investment as localities are seeking to incentivize tourism and events post pandemic and immersive exhibits are draws for tourists.

It is important to note that the definition of "VFX" as a career varies depending on the locale and who you talk to. Some might move fluidly between animation, games, music videos, web video etc. while others might know an industry entirely focussed on Film and TV alone. At one point Motion Capture used in virtual production was seen as an adjacent industry, but quickly became considered part of VFX. That growth and expansion suggests that many of the opportunities we are highlighting as "adjacent" are indeed part of the VFX industry, or will surely be seen as part of VFX in the future.

Image Source: Ion Ivan Sipilov
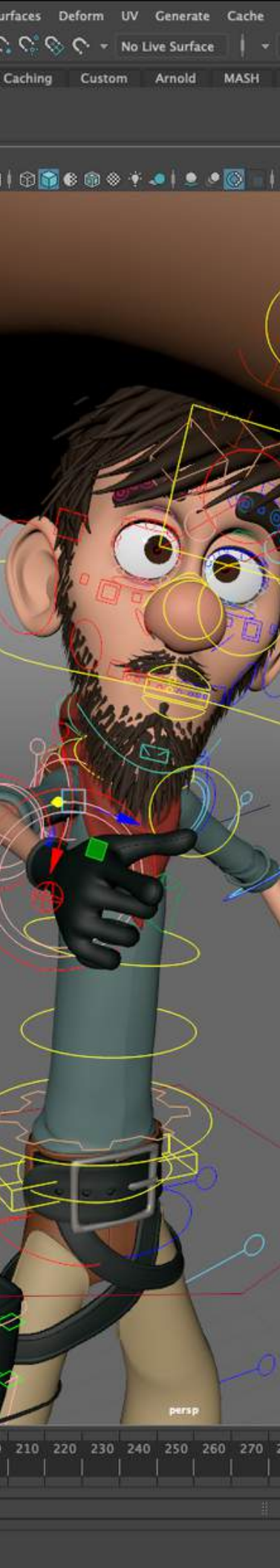
Animation

There are already many VES members who are in Animation, or have been in the past as there is a large amount of overlap in skills, roles and departments between the two industries. This makes animation a relatively easy transition to VFX and vice versa. Many VFX studios even have feature animation departments, making it possible to explore a move within your own studio.

While the obvious difference is that VFX works with live action footage, while animation focuses on full CG output. The under-pinning skills in animation will steer more towards artistic intent. Demonstrating that you can produce work to a concept (rather than a photographic reference) will help make you more attractive to employers in Animation.

Classical Animation Principles are critical and may not be as emphasized in VFX. Anticipation & follow through, exaggeration, squash & stretch, appeal, timing, solid drawing, etc. need to be commanded with confidence. VFX animators will be able to bring their knowledge of the rules of physics and dynamic animation to make believable character animation. Animators also employ non-physical "tricks" to develop performances like wipes and smears, duplicate images and comedic timing (past-and-back, cartoon hang time or overlapping action).

Acting is a critical skill for animators. Giving unique personalities and motivations to characters is essential. Shooting reference video of yourself acting and then mimicking it with an animated character is a great thing to have on a demo reel. Practicing improvisation is another great way to learn critical skills for animators as you need to be comfortable acting on camera, speaking voices and sharing your performance with a team. Dialogue and lip-sync are often required in the animation industry as characters do a lot of talking, and is an art in itself utilizing different styles like slapstick cartoons or emotionally subtle features. This is another important example of a skill to demonstrate on a demo reel.

A drawing portfolio is another key part of an animator portfolio, although not necessary, it demonstrates a lot of valuable skills. Many studios host life drawing sessions, or you can often find hosted sessions in your home town.

While animation can be self taught by watching online tutorials, studying the masters and learning from authors like Walt Stanchfield, Richard Williams, and the seminal text "The Illusion of Life", you may find deeper success in taking online courses from online schools like Animation Mentor or joining online communities like Agora.

Advertising & Motion Design

The VFX industry heavily overlaps with the Advertising industry when it comes to live action commercial production, with similar departments and roles and tools, making it an ideal candidate for those looking to explore an adjacent industry.Turnaround times are much shorter in advertising with projects lasting weeks instead of months, so generalist and problem solving skills are highly valued in this space. Quite often motion design work can range from working with advertising agencies, car dealerships, and many small or large CGI studios. Working in this field is beneficial as it increases your generalist skills quickly, and allows you to explore various roles of CGI you might not have been given the chance to explore in your current VFX role. Building out a portfolio in motion graphics can help you reduce being typecast for roles, and increase your interest in other software packages.

Motion Design or Motion Graphics shares a lot with VFX as well. While VFX focuses on realism as its primary language, Motion Design centers around Graphic Design. So training in this area and adding more graphic design focussed work in your portfolio will help a lot to approach this space. Many similar roles are present, from modeling to animation, simulation, lookdev and lighting. Software in use is often Cinema 4D with renderers like Redshift or Octane and compositing and 2d animation is done in Adobe After Effects. More and more Houdini and complex simulation are present in this space along with other common VFX tools and techniques. "FUI" or "Futuristic UI" work is a common feature in films that engages the motion graphics industry and could be an approach to a career change. Work is often done on a freelance basis and it's important to build strong relationships with studios, so reach out to as many studios as you can and start small to get a foot in the door. Focussing on your personal creative vision and a look in your artwork that is unique will help you sell yourself and stand out here.

Games

Real-time technology is already commonplace in many VFX studios, making moving to games a natural leap for VFX artists. Much of the work done in games deeply overlaps with work done in VFX, from sculpt, asset through animation to lighting and FX - making it a great choice for a career change for a VFX artist.

Learning about the games pipeline and how game engines work and how data is optimized is not only crucial to success in the games industry, but in growing areas of application in VFX as well - like Virtual Production LED volumes (see below).Luckily there is a large amount of learning material available online around source control mechanisms like Perforce and game engines like Unreal Engine or Unity. Making a simple game as part of your employment package to illustrate that you have explored these aspects will help attract employers.

At the front of the pipeline, Art Director and Concept artist roles are quite similar but bring the need to consider gameplay mechanics and engine performance as factors in your design work. Your skills as an artist producing detailed and photo-realistic assets are highly desirable in games. Animators will be crucial both in crafting cinematics and animation clips and cycles for game characters, and mocap experience is highly applicable. FX simulation is becoming more commonplace in real-time in game engines when baked into game engine friendly techniques. Layout, Lighting and Environment artists will find a lot of opportunity in games as builders of worlds and lighters of cinematics. Producers, coordinators and project managers will find similar challenges and opportunities in games, understanding game release structures will help to smooth the transition.

The list of overlap is wide in this space making games a great candidate for a transition.

Education

Many colleges, universities and training centers will have programs for VFX, animation and games. They will often value industry experience - making teaching an ideal route for industry members looking for a change. Not only are you putting your years of experience to good use, you are also helping the industry by teaching its next members. While some universities will prefer candidates with university degrees, most colleges or training centers will rely on your years of experience as sufficient credibility.You probably know a co-worker already who is teaching part-time and can help you apply for open teaching positions. Depending on the school the hours available to teach may depend on your hiring status (full time vs part time), but it is often that you can find evening part-time teaching options, providing opportunities to try out teaching while still at work and get a foot in the door. Many part-time teachers we talked to felt that by teaching on the side (e.g. one evening a week) it helped reinvigorate their love of VFX and helped them keep their skills sharp. Teaching fills gaps in one's knowledge as you have to understand what you are teaching in a broad fashion that may not be required in a particular company or role.

Timing for hiring will usually start a month or two before the start of a school's first semester, and will usually be executed by the school's program coordinator. Schools will differ in their hiring practice, but you will usually need to provide a resume and demo reel, a reference and potentially need to do a "teaching demo", which is usually a short in-person demonstration in front of school administrators where you will teach a simple concept. Schools will also often ask for your transcripts from post-secondary education. It is important to note that just because you are a great VFX artist, it doesn't automatically make you a great teacher, so it is recommended that you do some training in education and pedagogy to be successful. Most schools will offer this kind of training to their teachers.

Moving into a full-time role as a teacher is often more challenging than a part-time role as some schools will be looking for higher education (e.g. a masters degree) or a dedicated teaching degree.
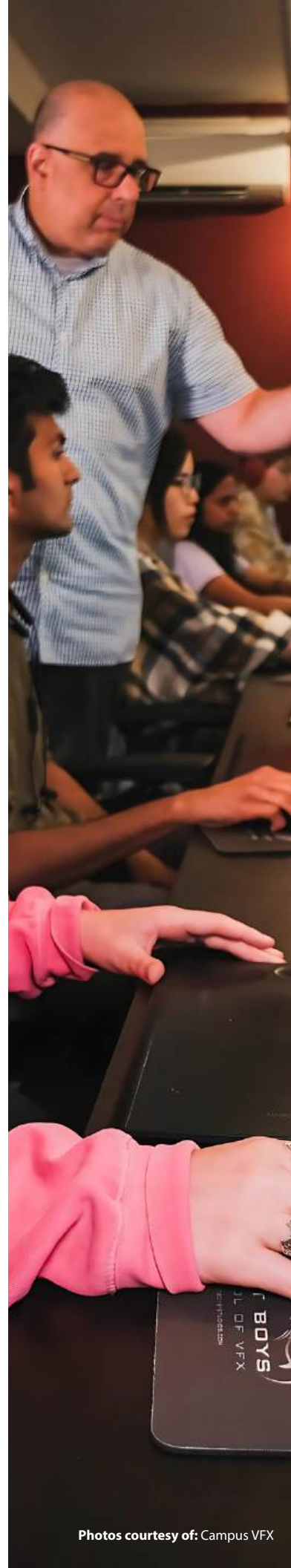
Virtual Production, ICVFX & LED Volumes

"Virtual Production" has historically involved many approaches and technologies that bridge VFX techniques and filmmaking, including Motion Capture (MoCap), Virtual Camera / Cinematography (Vcam), Simulcam visualizing with real-time graphics or real-time green/blue screen keying. All of these techniques essentially allow filmmakers to visualize the result during the filming process, so they can be essential to the filmmaking process and are common on many productions today. The introduction of customizable high output LED panels has made filming in a real-time display and lighting environment possible, and we see Virtual Production LED volume stages opening in many major filming centers. The global virtual production market was valued at approximately $2.55–$3.37 billion in 2023 and is projected to grow to between $8.42 billion and $10.07 billion by 2030–2032, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) for the sector estimated between 14% and 18.6% through 2030.

Virtual Production in LED Volumes using ICVFX (In Camera VFX) brings many skills from VFX practice. Much like the games industry, Virtual Production here relies on real-time playback of footage or 3d environments and provides multiple different career opportunities for VFX professionals:

- Previs and Layout artists along with Concept and other pre-production roles will find a lot of opportunity in this space to help build a tight plan for the volume as pre-production and planning are crucial to effective shoots.
- VFX artists in Environment, Asset and Lighting will find opportunities in the VAD (Virtual Art Department) building environments for the LED wall. This is often done using real time game engines like Unreal, so learning to build environments in Unreal is a great step to exploring this career. Where things get really interesting is that the LED volume often has practical elements on the stage that need to be consistent with the rendered elements in the background - so the VAD is often working tightly with practical set build and decoration.
- Art directors and VFX supervisors will find similar roles in the LED volume, but an even tighter collaboration with the practical on set effort and engineering.
- Engineers and IT professionals are critical to deliver the networking, motion tracking, display quality and tight synchronization required to get quality in camera results in the LED volume.
- Producers and coordinators will also find similar roles, orchestrating a tight connection between all the departments that need to work together to keep the volume running.

The deep integration of the practical on-set with real-time VFX in this space means that VFX artists here need to understand on-set film departments like cinematography. Understanding lighting, composition, technical cinematography and photography really help to bridge knowledge and produce the best result (as they do in many aspects of VFX).

There are numerous sources of detailed education on this space. The VES has published a handbook on Virtual Production, maintains a website covering VP resources and has hosted a panel discussion on transitioning into this space from more traditional VFX roles. Connecting with local Virtual Production stages, and learning a real-time engine like Unreal are great starts to approaching this space. A smart phone with AR capabilities and a computer monitor are enough to explore Virtual Production techniques at home to get a feel for this space.

XR (VR + AR)

Extended Reality (XR), which includes both Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR), is a VFX adjacent space with plenty of overlap from both Games and Virtual Production. It is generally delivered by head mounted displays (HMDs) or through AR devices like a smart phone, but major improvements are being made in the wearable display space making XR more accessible by the day.

With a market share currently estimated at ~$180B and projected to reach ~$1.6T by 2032 (as of time of writing), XR is an industry poised for explosive growth built on a growing desire for unique experiences. Given XR's nascency, you may also benefit from the relative lack of senior players in the space, and more readily secure for yourself a foothold in this emerging industry.

Where to find XR:
- Entertainment: XR is reshaping modern storytelling through immersive experiences in games, interactive films, and virtual concerts or events. VFX artists can leverage their skills to build rich environments, realistic characters, and engaging visual effects.
- Training & Simulation: From education to medical training to industrial simulation, XR is used to create realistic, interactive environments and immersive animations for skill-building and problem-solving.
- Advertising: Brands use AR experiences for promotional campaigns, product visualization, and interactive storytelling.
- Architecture: Virtual walkthroughs, AR-assisted design processes, and digital twins are becoming mainstream in architecture and product design.
- Education: Interactive learning experiences are made more engaging and accessible through AR and VR technologies.
- Healthcare: XR is used for medical visualization, physical rehabilitation, mental health treatments, and patient education.

This 2025 article on SXSW XR experiences does a great job of illustrating the many different opportunities in this space.

For VFX professionals, XR offers many opportunities to explore due to its reliance on common core skills such as
3D asset creation, environment building, animation, lighting, rendering, and scripting.

Getting started in XR is quite accessible. Start by learning a game engine. Unity is (as of the time of writing) leading when it comes to XR and working with common AR devices (like the smart phone in your pocket), so this is a good place to build a foundation. You will notice many parallels between Unity and DCCs like Maya, Houdini or Blender and game engines like Unreal, so don't be afraid to jump in. Then build a portfolio, demonstrating a perfunctory knowledge of game engines while showcasing how your typical VFX work can shine in an XR format. Explore the unique ways an immersive experience can communicate an idea, and make sure to apply all the same imagery making skills that set you apart.

The XR industry is a lively place, and it will help you get your foot in the door by making connections in the industry. Attend XR events such as SXSW, VRTO, AWE or MIT Reality Hack, and join online communities such as XR Hub. You can keep up with the rapidly evolving XR landscape by following news sources such as XR Developer News or This Week in XR.

Real Time Location Based and Live Entertainment

Extending the generation of imagery into occupied spaces to tell a story has become a growing area of industry. What was once limited to theme parks, is now becoming more commonplace in cities as people want more unique experiences to visit outside of their home or when travelling. This growth has been supported by major improvements in accessibility to real-time technology like Unreal Engine, Unity, and spatial 3d capabilities on common smart phones. Growth here is being further propelled by a lot of investment from localities seeking to improve tourism. Some great examples can be seen here in this VFX Voice article: https://www.vfxvoice.com/experiencing-the-rise-of-immersive-entertainment/

The crossovers between VFX and location based entertainment are significant, allowing VFX artists to bring skills in asset creation, layout, FX simulation, lighting, 360 compositing, and more to a real-time space. Games and VFX artists with real-time engine experience will find a lot of opportunity here to apply their real-time in-engine skills, and engineers will find exciting challenges to apply mechanical and robotic techniques to produce unique live experiences.

Being a relatively young industry with unique challenges does require a strong capability for problem solving, and a passion for solving both creative and technical problems. Creators in this space are always facing new challenges in storytelling around digital, hardware and physical spaces - making it a chaotic, but exciting space.

Approaching this industry, one should get familiar with a real time engine like Unreal and try making a simple project using a smartphone and AR to show off capabilities in this space. Live visualization tools like Touch Designer or Notch are great to explore as well. Researching the many companies that are active here is a good start. Touch designer in particular has its roots as an early version of Houdini, but adding a real time component which is extremely powerful. Learning how to do lidar scanning and projection mapping for a space is a great start as well, and takes advantage of skills found in many areas of VFX.

Non Real Time Theme Park and Live Entertainment

This area is similar to the above with the main difference being that the work is all pre-generated. You can find opportunities here in many places including theme parks, live events, exhibitions, museum displays and even kiosks in stores or malls.

This work is often done by generalists who could be doing a mixture of motion graphics and photoreal CGI work. Much of the motion graphics work in this space is done in Cinema 4D and After-effects. For theme park work it's often part of a pre-show, but sometimes it's needed for the "main show" where it's more common to see much larger canvases (8k at 60FPS is not uncommon).

The more photoreal work is much closer to the traditional VFX workflows using Maya & Nuke, often with existing VFX studios familiar with the IP doing the main production. However, there is a lot of work creating previs here, and doing the installation that is typically done by a generalist team onsite. The onsite work is critical since so much of this work is found in the integration of the content into the overall show, since the media might only be part of the show, and you will need to be working with lighting, music and other effects to complete the whole picture.

The onsite aspect to this work is both exciting but also challenging, as you have to deal with the constraints of the space or outside factors, like you could be working a night shift outside in the winter. At the same time it can be extremely satisfying, challenging work that has a huge range and variety of challenges.

Skills that are useful here include a good understanding of illusions, particularly the "Pepper's Ghost" effect, as well as projection mapping. A generalist's skill set is invaluable here, since you could be prevising in Maya or Unreal one day, and doing final color correct in Nuke or After-effects the next, or even learning to animate a robot. To get started, you can try out Pepper's Ghost with a smart phone.

A tangential field in this space is the production of real-time or prerecorded visuals for performances, such as musicians and raves. Quite often this work involves the same workflows that you would encounter in a studio setting when creating full CGI scenes, and often involves working in programs such as procedural real-time apps like Touchdesigner, Notch or Resolume and the more familiar apps like Houdini, and Unreal. Artists might be tasked to "Video DJ" real-time or pre-recorded graphics live as part of the production, or just to provide pre-rendered content for a performance.

Challenges in this space present themselves in formatting and displaying the visuals for specific venues and orchestrating the interactions that the artist and audience will have with them. Learning about on-set AV skills will help you be closer to the action on the stage. Artists in this space often partner with a musician or stage performer, build custom graphics for them, and build their experience customized to different touring schedules. Having a unique look and creative vision can help you stand apart in this space.
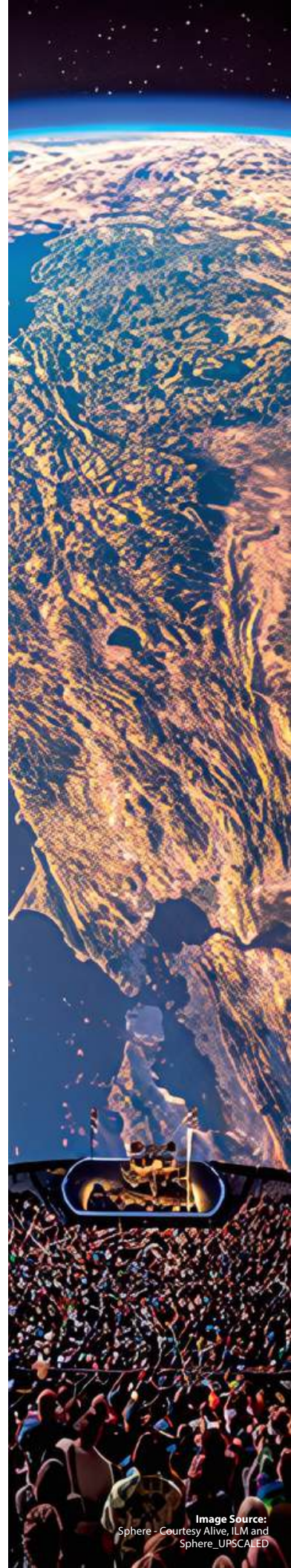
Virtual Human / Virtual Influencers

VFX artists kickstarted the Virtual Performer industry via the Tupac "hologram" at Coachella in 2012 bringing the skills that we have in digital doubles to a new venue. Today, Virtual Humans, Performers, and VTubers represent a rapidly expanding segment of the Entertainment landscape and perhaps a more tangible part of the growing "creator economy".

Often characterized by puppeteered avatars, "holographic" performers, and most recently AI-driven characters, this industry is growing at an impressive pace. What may seem niche has already solidified itself as a $6 billion industry with a compound annual growth rate of 42%, projected to reach $117 billion by 2032. Virtual characters are selling out stadiums, topping music charts, and even landing fashion deals.

This emerging field presents an exciting opportunity for VFX artists to expand their skill sets and pioneer new forms of storytelling and engagement.

Related Fields
- **VFX**: Particularly when it comes to character pipelines, lighting, and fx, our experience is not only transferable but instrumental in building this new generation of virtual entertainers.
- **Virtual Production**: Skills in real-time rendering, motion capture, and digital compositing have direct applications in creating real time characters, props, and environments
- **Location-Based Entertainment:** Virtual performers can augment real-world events, such as concerts or exhibits, through interactive holograms or AR displays.
- **Games**: Virtual performances can also happen in-game, or even be simulcast to real-world venues.

Building upon the common skills in sculpting, capture, rigging, texturing and CFX, this space embraces real-time display, so learning Unreal Engine for building and animating high-quality real-time avatars and environments is a great start. Disguise is a common tool for integrating live visuals and including real-time rendering with physical stage productions, and Performance Capture is a critical aspect in generating performances for these digital avatars, so understanding how to record and drive real-time character performances is also crucial.
There are many ways to approach this opportunity. Some will build a highly developed digital human and start an Instagram channel for them to exist in, in an attempt to go viral. Connecting with businesses exploring this space is another great approach as many know that the human form is a powerful tool for communication, but lack the skills to take advantage of this.

Potential Career Transitions Outside Of Media & Entertainment

Moving outside of the umbrella of Media & Entertainment is often the more challenging and mysterious transition, but in the process of editing this guide we talked to several people who have done exactly this, bringing the skills they built in VFX to the table in entirely different industries.

When we asked how they ended up in these spaces it was never an overnight transformation but a gradual move that starts through a connection or a shared interest. For example a VFX artist might find themself as a "subject matter expert" working at a software development company building apps for the VFX industry, and discover a love of software development in general that ends up being applied in building software for other industries like architecture, connecting them to this new space and more opportunities. Maintaining an open mind to these new opportunities is crucial, but more concretely there are some important steps you can take to help you along this path:

1. **There's no better way to learn than to do something in practice.** Dipping your toe into techniques and practices from this new industry, even if it's purely on an experimental basis, is a great way to understand a new career and show some initial thought leadership in this space. Experimenting online can go a long way to getting people's attention and it's an opportunity to apply your existing skills and knowledge, and it serves as a great topic of discussion when networking. An example of this might be learning basic game development and building a small game on the side.
2. **Connect with people in that new industry.** Get out to public events in that industry, meet people and introduce yourself, similarly join online communities like on Reddit to try to connect with people and learn. Let your network know you're interested in exploring this new industry, you never know who might have past experience or a friend who can help you get connected, or bring you as a guest to an industry event.
3. **Find leaders in that industry and try to connect with them for a chat - you would be surprised how much people like to talk about themselves.** A quick remote call or chat over coffee can often be had with the right approach - which is usually asking about that person and their insights. It helps a lot here to really do your research and come to the table with an inquiry that you know that person will be excited to talk about, and you are genuinely interested in learning about.

Image Source: Tom Claes

The Importance Of Mindset When Moving To A Completely New Industry

You will surely face some discouraging challenges when approaching a new industry, so it's critically important to maintain a strong and positive mindset. For example, you may find that recruiters do not immediately see the value you bring to the table. Preparing for this, and ensuring you speak to the deep soft skills and applicable hard skills you bring to the table will help, and finding leaders in your target company that can see the value you bring can help the hiring process as well. Be ready to explain roles that are similar between industries even though the job title sounds different.

Even when you manage to land a job in that new field, you may find the first few months immensely challenging. "Imposter Syndrome" where you might feel that you don't belong or deserve the opportunity you have built for yourself may set in, but know that at some point in their careers almost every person around you has experienced this, no matter how senior they are. It's a natural part of challenging yourself and it's a positive sign you are leaving your comfort bubble. Keeping this in mind it will help to get through it.

When you first start in a new field, take the time to listen, ask questions, and learn. Don't feel you have to be a top producer right away. You will find knowing the ins and outs aren't the hardest part of most industries, it's the intuition and soft skills that take time to build, and you bring a lot of that to the table already.

Image Source: Sage Friedman

Software Development and Tech

There are numerous jobs in Software and Technology development that are suitable for VFX industry pros. Starting with software companies that specialize in software for the VFX, Animation and Games industries is an obvious first step, as they often hire industry experts to help design and test software (often called "SMEs" or Subject Matter Experts). Many VFX artists have found themselves working in software development helping to design new features in applications, or in the QA (Quality Assurance) department testing out software in real world scenarios. Pipeline developers and Software Engineers can often make an easy transition to software development, especially if they are familiar with the target application and its APIs. There is opportunity in Product Management, bringing industry connections and knowledge to the table to guide roadmap priorities and interface with customers, or in Sales helping to connect with customers and understand their problems and needs. Even Documentation can benefit from industry experience when combined with training in technical writing skills.

Managers, Producers and Coordinators have opportunities in software development to help manage teams of developers and other business functions as Project Managers, Product Owners and Scrum Masters (all very similar jobs to what Producers do today in VFX). It can be beneficial to seek out training and certification in these spaces as the common certifications like the Scrum Alliance are widely recognized.

The Software and tech industry offers more opportunities than just in the businesses that focus on VFX. With the introduction of Machine Learning and AI to common practice, the need for training data in every field has grown significantly and a common approach to this is to synthetically generate this data (SDG) via common VFX and games methods to produce content. Many industries in AEC (Architecture, Engineering, Construction) are building "Digital Twins" – highly realistic and accurate models and simulations of real-world systems like a factory or building - including many aspects of that content, like airflow or human traffic patterns. These digital twins are used to simulate and test concepts and innovations, produce educational explainer videos and even train AI models. A good example of this might be simulating a real-time city to train self driving cars in different weather conditions or generating many different part renderings to train computer vision models for factories. In these cases, building flexible and procedural assets is key along with technical problem solving via scripting. Hiring companies will be looking for these skills in your demo material. In this field, accuracy is the priority, for example a digital twin of a car must have every car part rendered and catalogued in exacting detail. That said, there is still ample room for creative expression and storytelling as often these assets are used in visual presentations and other forms of visual storytelling. Given the massive investment in Generative AI research and development at the time of writing, there are also opportunities here in assisting in R&D efforts that often require the skills of VFX practitioners especially when their focus concerns image, video and 3d asset generation. Toolmakers in this space are actively seeking VFX professionals.

Furthermore, you may simply be passionate about solving a problem, and working on software to help solve that problem can be challenging and rewarding. Your problem solving and technical skills that come from VFX are highly desirable in a software development environment, so don't be afraid to approach companies working on problems you want to see fixed.

Much like other industries, breaking into software and technology can be a challenge, and "who you know" can make a big difference in getting your foot in the door. Let your network know you are interested in working in software and you might be surprised who can help connect you and act as a reference. People in technology are often excited to talk about their work and to meet new people, so you would be surprised how successful reaching out to a stranger and asking for a quick chat can be. From there it's important to show thought leadership in your online presence when applying for technology jobs. Focusing on technical problem solving demos on your Linkedin profile will go a long way to getting attention and remember that titles and roles might not be clear to other industries, so try and tailor your resume to the language used in your target industry.

Showing generalist skills will be more attractive in this space, so don't be afraid to demonstrate your versatility. It is recommended to strip out specific M&E software references from resume and cover letter if not applicable to the job you are applying to and make sure to highlight your experience that makes you valuable, such as programming, problem solving and interpersonal skills. If you do have non-proprietary coding examples, make sure to highlight them on a GitHub account. And looking into the many Open Source projects out there that are looking for volunteers to help with coding as this can be a great opportunity to gain exposure, contribute to great causes and show your skills to a potential employer.

Architecture, Engineering & Construction

To be able to build anything requires visualizing it. In many architecture firms for example, you will find artists working in Maya, Houdini and Unreal to visualize buildings for concepts, municipal submission requirements, lighting or traffic studies and more.

Your skills at creating highly believable and great looking images are desirable in this space. The visual language is moving away from "off the factory floor" renders to realistic renderings of products being used in their real world spaces - like showing tractors hauling heavy things and caked in mud. The big difference in this space is that 3d model work needs to be compliant with the manufacturing processes. So training in this space is important to being successful.

A growing practice in the AEC is space is the development of a "Digital Twin", effectively a simulation of a real-world construction or process, like a building or factory manufacturing process. The goal of a digital twin is to simulate and forecast real-world results to help improve outcomes, and to provide a collaborative visualization in "metaverse" applications. This practice not only involves detailed photo-real visualization, but also simulation of real-world phenomena - bringing distinct opportunities for VFX skills to be applied. An example here might be building a real-time digital city to train self-driving cars virtually.

For people who build physical things in the film industry there are numerous opportunities in AEC (Architecture, Engineering, Construction) where creative and technical engineering skills are highly desirable. If you know rapid prototyping, electrical or other sought after building techniques, your creative on-set problem solving skills and solid work ethic is applicable to many spaces that build things.

Image Source: Robert Klank

Science & Medicine

Medical Visualization can range from simple 3d animations to explain something, to highly advanced simulations. It involves much of what we do in VFX including high quality rendering, simulation and artistic practice using similar tools like Adobe Creative Cloud, Cinema 4d, Zbrush, Maya or Houdini and real time engines like Unreal. Essentially any medical process, be it the chemical reaction of a drug, or research around a biological process in the body often require an "explainer" animation to help illustrate it to the scientific community or businesses like pharmaceutical companies.

These animations could be used to sell a new product, educate insurers, patients and physicians, or seek investment. Medical animation studios might produce content for medical conference booth displays or museums as well. Perhaps the most common projects are 3D 'mechanism of action' (MOA) animations explaining molecular and cellular pathways in health and disease, and the mechanism by which new drugs, therapies or surgical procedures address these issues. This space even overlaps with film and television in examples like Mad Microbe's work in the popular CSI televisions shows to illustrate medical forensic clues in a crime investigation. Pharmaceuticals is a big player here and Oncology is a massive space, where every major innovation will need to be clearly explained in various venues.

Work in this space is often done by smaller medical animation studios or freelancers, with relatively simpler pipelines allowing artists to work more individualistically. Artists are almost exclusively generalists that can work in both 3d and 2d (similar to motion graphics) where an artist is responsible for all aspects of a shot. Projects tend to have smaller scales and budgets, aiming for 3-5 minute edited animations. Outputs can vary as well across projects, ranging across animation, illustration, storyboarding, graphic design, video editing, AR/VR displays and even 3d printing.

Creating medical visualizations does benefit from having knowledge of biology, anatomy and science to ensure you are visualizing correctly. It is common though for artists to work with science advisors who bring this knowledge, so it is not a requirement in most studios to have a license or background and many artists working in this field are not certified, and VFX skills tend to be highly valued in this space. For those who do choose to study biology, a common route is to do a relevant bachelors followed by a 2 year masters in Medical Illustration. The AMI offers certification as a Medical Illustrator and highlights the requirements for a candidate. Having a medical illustration degree does aid in advancing to more senior positions like being a creative director. Despite this requirement for scientific accuracy in this field, there is ample room for creative freedom to develop innovative visual representations and art direction outside of hyper-realism. Often artists are given a lot of creative input into projects, from storyboarding, art direction and cinematography.

Approaching this industry is no different from applying to any artistic career, start with your network to see if you know anyone involved, and start to expand your reel with animations illustrating organic concepts and show that you can learn and visualize technical concepts accurately. Be sure though to illustrate your skills in a way that doesn't break scientific accuracy and focus more on technical skills and illustrating your ability to learn. Medical animation studios tend to be prevalent in cities that have dedicated medical illustration programs via universities, so checking which locales have these programs is a good place to start. The AMI hosts a meeting in late July that can be a great way to connect with people in this industry as well.

Image Source: Digitale

Managing the production of Scientific and Medical visualization can be very similar to production and project management for VFX. Producers and management in general will find opportunity in these spaces via project manager roles. Project management here often involves managing multiple smaller teams and is less structured, and Project Managers might be involved in discussions with clients to ensure project success (depending on seniority and studio practice).

Visualization here doesn't just revolve around medical visualization but also scientific, educational examples for the public through planetariums, museums, and short video content. Astronomers for example will need to translate raw data from various sources (like telescopes) and translate those findings into simulations and data-driven animations using tools like Blender and Python. The goals of this visualization work is both to deepen scientific understanding and captivate a broader audience.

Quite often this requires a baseline knowledge of importing and exporting datasets (e.g. downloading molecular protein data sets from research databases) and Github data through your chosen 3D program. Filmmaking skills in general help scientists illustrate and explain their hypothesis or discoveries through simulations or motion graphics illustrations (like graphs) to help visualize complex data sets. Creativity here can face challenges as in the scientific community accuracy is paramount, but the need to communicate and explain to non scientists is growing, and connecting with Universities to explore partnerships with scientists or astrophysicists could yield opportunities for contract work.

Image Source: This is Engineering

Policing & Military

The Policing and Military industries both rely on visualization and simulation to tell important stories. For example, photogrammetry is heavily used in crime scene reconstruction, and military battle simulations will rely heavily on common VFX and games techniques to visualize a battlefield, often using the same software like Maya, Houdini or Unreal Engine. Visualization is key in equipment design and marketing.In both spaces, industry practice is regulated and training and certification are likely the best options for making a move into these industries smoothly.

Military Animators specialize in creating animated content for the defense industry to address multiple visualization requirements including training, visualization of concepts, strategies, operations, equipment or vehicles. These animations require detailed accuracy and clear visual communication.

A background in CG animation is a great platform here, and being a military animator requires generalist skills including modeling, rigging, animation, dynamics simulation, lighting, rendering and compositing.

Opportunities for Military Animators are found in both the public and private sectors. Defense Contractors require training content or marketing material for presentations. Government agencies will hire Military Animators to produce similar content for internal use, or material for public outreach. Military Training Facilities use Military Animators to produce content for training exercises or to visualize complex combat scenarios. Accuracy and precision are critical factors in this work so simulation plays a key role in ensuring accurate visualizations.Moving further into technology development in the defense contractor space, VFX skills are often useful in developing simulators for vehicle and weapon systems.

Public sector opportunities exist in Policing in areas like Forensic Visualization, where VFX skills like photogrammetry, animation, simulation and 3d rendering are used to recreate crime scenes. These jobs prioritize accuracy and precision as well, as they are often used to help investigators or to display to jurors in court visualizations. The work in this space tends to be on a freelance, per-project basis. University and College courses exist in Forensic Visualization, and certifications exist for Forensic Video Analysis that could be useful to approach a career in this space.

Similar to Military applications, Police training requires simulating and visualizing real-world scenarios. Police Departments also engage in public outreach requiring visual communications for education, safety and crime prevention strategies.

The private sector offers similar opportunities from private companies that service the Policing industry, for example developing training simulations or creating visual aids for court cases. This work is often done on a contract basis.

Automotive

Most major automotive companies have in-house post production departments that specialize in creating spec commercials allowing for the early marketing of vehicles that haven't been produced yet. These departments operate very similarly to a VFX studio, modeling, animation, sim, lookdev, rendering, lighting and compositing.

They work closely with vehicle designers so are often specialized in processing technical vehicular model data like from Autocad or Alias. Artists in this space are often more on the generalist side and work in smaller teams that handle multiple roles in the VFX pipeline, and use common apps like Maya, Houdini, Nuke and After Effects.

"Explainer" videos are produced to illustrate many aspects from the automotive space to educate, market and train. For example to illustrate safety feature videos of a new vehicle. Even the graphics for in-vehicle display panels are produced by artists applying common Motion Graphic skills.

In the vehicle design process, you will find aspects of VFX, like using simulation to generate complex and interesting shapes and simulating various processes to prototype vehicles allowing stakeholders to refine and approve designs before committing to a costly manufacturing process. "Digital Twins" used in immersive experiences are becoming more commonplace and providing renewed opportunity for those with VFX skills. Along the way every aspect of the design process is visualized, using apps like VRED or Unreal, and detailed renderings of in-design vehicles are produced to support many phases of the design process for internal review and marketing.

Automotive companies will also engage VFX studios that specialize in automotive work, like Mackevision (part of Accenture Song). Work here includes commercials and marketing materials, like online car configurators, power walls for dealerships, or custom VR experiences. In this space accuracy is paramount, and studios will maintain detailed databases of all the parts and configurations of a vehicle to support this work.

To approach this space, it's important to focus on accuracy and learn how to support manufacturing processes - for example by using Class-A surfacing practices (NURBS is alive and well in automotive). You will find parallels to the apps you know from VFX in common automotive apps like Alias or Rhino for precision modeling and VRED for automotive visualization. Illustrating a focus on precision and accuracy in combination with photo-real vision will ensure your work is attractive in this space. Realistically and cinematically integrating CG vehicles into real-world environments will be a great start, but remember that in automotive, precision is everything. Whatever you do has to look exactly like a real car model, down to the nuts and bolts. Visualizing in real-time apps like Unreal is a great advantage as well.

Image Source: Harrison Hargrave

Supplemental Careers

Many VFX artists have found stability in downturns or industry changes through developing second careers in entirely different industries. Learning a trade like construction can provide a great sense of stability and give future options.

Applying VFX techniques like photogrammetry can provide freelancing options in several industries like GIS or Real Estate.

Hobbies and Passions that we explore in down time have become another source of income through social media channels like Youtube and TikTok. Some VFX artists have actually made their Youtube channel their full time job once they reach a certain level of viewership. It's important to note though that getting a social media presence to a state that generates income is essentially a full time job.

It's also never been easier to self-publish on platforms like Amazon. Not only does this provide the general benefits of sharing knowledge, if you find the right niche it can be a good source of income. It also shows expertise and thought leadership to potential employers.

Credit: Bobby Chiu: Youtube.com/Chiu-On-This

More Opportunities Coming soon

Discussions continue to expand this document and will include additional areas like Mechanical Engineering, Volumetric Video Production, Gen AI opportunities and more. Stay tuned for new versions soon.

Career Transition Success Stories

Here you will find stories of career transition in the author's own words, exploring the opportunities and challenges faced. More Inspirational Career transition examples will be coming soon.

Image Source: Maxim Tolchinskiy

Tara Donovan
Animation Supervisor

I'm an Animation Supervisor from Montreal, Canada. My long and eclectic career transitioned several times as the industry changed, our son grew up and our parents got older.

After graduating from Sheridan in Classical Animation I went to the UK to work on Richard Williams' last feature, then went into advertising, TV, and shorts at International Rocketship in Vancouver, which was my dream job. I loved that quirky NFB style and hoped to make a short of my own. My hand-drawn animation career ended suddenly when the industry collapsed while our son was still a toddler. I had to quickly teach myself how to use Maya and dive headlong into high-volume 3D kids TV starting on Backyardigans. Shortly after that I had about 1 day to learn digital 2D. Throughout I had a side gig teaching college-level Animation classes which was high-paying and very gratifying. Thanks to that income I was able to juggle parenting and part-time freelance work from home. Remote work gave me the chance to keep animating while raising our family.

For years I longed to switch to something with higher detail and lower quota - either feature performance or VFX. My friends in those sectors seemed to be working copious amounts of overtime, which seemed impossible while I still had a young child. Then I was offered some commercials animating realistic creatures. I went for it, even though it meant leaving my lucrative teaching gig. It became a stepping stone to later VFX opportunities at Scanline VFX on Godzilla vs King Kong, Justice League, Aquaman, and at Rodeo FX on Stranger Things.

Along the way I started getting leadership roles - Chuck Gammage gave me 6 shorts to direct, which was a lot of fun and threw me back into 2D again! I ended up directing and leading animation on some really fun shows - an Ice Age short, Detective Pikachu, and supervising animation at Game On and Rodeo FX Montreal.

"My hand-drawn animation career ended suddenly when the industry collapsed while our son was still a toddler. I had to quickly teach myself how to use Maya and dive headlong into high-volume 3D kids TV."

Tara Donovan
Animation Supervisor

My motivation, aside from gainful employment, is curiosity. I'm fascinated with motion, different styles of animation, realistic, cartoony, experimental. As a powerlifter and trainer with a gymnastics background, I'm always keen to learn more about physics, anatomy, and biomechanics. I also love working in teams with artists of other disciplines, combining our skills to make something greater than the sum of its parts. I'm always learning and adjusting my course to stay current as the industry changes. The only constant is change.

My biggest challenge was rebranding myself as a computer animator after years of planning a career in hand-drawn animation. A lot of very talented artists didn't make the transition. In CG I felt like a fish out of water for many years.

My successes are the same as my challenges - I tackled huge transitions in every decade of my career. The payoffs didn't always follow until much later. My career trajectory from an aspiring 2D indie filmmaker to feature VFX Animation Supervisor is a heck of a timeline.

"I tackled huge transitions in every decade of my career. The payoffs didn't always follow until much later."

If I had the chance to do it again, once I realized I wanted to work in movies I would have taken steps to get there sooner. I thought it would require too much sacrifice and keep me from putting my family first. Surprisingly, VFX turned out to have a much better work-life balance and better compensation. Sometimes I wonder how much different my career might have been had I made the jump earlier.

Andy Cochrane
Immersive Creator and Consultant

I wanted to be a Director from age 10, when I was finally allowed to use the family video camera by myself and discovered the wonderful world of moviemaking. I loved camera tricks and practical effects, and devoured every book on the subject that our local library had. This led to making movies in high school and then film school, and upon graduation I assumed I would start a career as a movie director in Hollywood. I ended up stumbling into VFX, where I worked on feature films and commercials for over a decade, moving up slowly from PA to camera tracker to CG artist to VFX supervisor.

In 2010 I landed at Mirada, a brand new "transmedia" production company founded by Guillermo Del Toro. I was the only supervisor with both traditional and new media experience, having formed a high-tech improv troupe that turned into a successful early web video group [my nights-and-weekends hobby during the decade of VFX]. So I ended up leading the projects that were not for film, TV, commercials, or music videos, this included VR, AR, installations, apps, and live events – sometimes as a technical supervisor and often as both the creative and technical lead. I spent six and a half years at Mirada steadily moving out of VFX and into immersive and interactive entertainment.

While I came to LA to work in the movies, I realized around 2012 that the film business (and especially VFX) had changed from what I fell in love with in the behind the scenes specials I saw when I was 10, it had become a commodity business with little room for anything new. I love immersive and interactive, it is a wide open field with few established rules and incredible freedom to experiment, invent, and create something new. Every project is like a blank sheet of paper with unique creative goals that require bespoke pipelines and multi-disciplinary teams to pull off something truly unique. It feels like the film industry they told us about in school: a wild west with endless potential.

"Immersive and interactive is a wide open field with few established rules and incredible freedom to experiment, invent, and create something new."

Andy Cochrane
Immersive Creator and Consultant

Everything I do now is a result of being an endless student. I try every technology I can get my hands on and I constantly read papers and do software tutorials and test projects. As generative AI started to become usable in real productions I dove in and tried to learn as much as I could about it. I read papers and used it on projects and figured out what it was good and bad at, and built workflows around and with it. This has been my approach to learning Unity, Unreal, Touch Designer, Disguise, Notch, and so many other tools for manipulating data and pixels in real-time. The best part about immersive and interactive projects is that there are no veterans, everyone is new and coming from a parallel industry. These projects reward curiosity, provide self-actualized creatives and technicians with autonomy, and fully embrace testing and experimentation.

The main challenge of getting into this part of the entertainment industry is that it did not really exist until recently. There were multimedia and interactive projects in the late 90's, but it was not until the mid-2010's that it became financially viable for enough people to transition and make a career in it. There is no established path into or even within this corner of media entertainment, it requires a leap into the unknown that can only be justified by a conviction that this is what you want to do for a living. Faith and passion are all anyone has when they get into interactive and immersive.

"Faith and passion are all anyone has when they get into interactive and immersive."

If you enjoy solving creative and technical challenges, exploring new mediums, or trying new things to discover what is possible, then this is a great playground. The flip-side is that there is no job security, no stable incumbent to work for, and every project is a mini battle in an endless war against fragile technologies, skittish financiers, and nearly non-existent audiences. This can be unsettling for many people, but is the reason there is so much opportunity right now – anyone comfortable with riding the chaos has more freedom to write their own career path than any "safer" alternative offers.

Kristine Middlemiss
Technology Leader

I'm happy to share my experience transitioning in and out of the VFX industry. I've navigated roles across gaming, animation, software development and now diving into the music industry, which has highlighted how versatile our skills can be. My experience in software development—particularly with coding and pipeline management—has been invaluable. Skills in Python, Agile methodologies, and plugin development are highly applicable in many business development and tech roles. Many business development and tech roles value these skills for building efficient systems and optimizing workflows. My work in gaming as a Technical Artist and with real-time graphics translated well to VFX and vice versa. For anyone with skills in simulation, animation, or compositing, there's strong overlap with gaming or XR. Teaching in areas like AI and machine learning allows me to stay engaged while mentoring emerging talent. Skills in communication and curriculum development are valuable in educational and corporate training contexts.

In summary, I recommend focusing on your transferable skills—such as problem-solving, collaboration, and technical proficiency—that can apply across different industries. Identifying these common threads can ease your transition into new roles.

Some tips I have learned along the way - In interviews, steer clear of VFX terms and even names of software, keep it as transferable as possible, other industries don't care about big company names, so I even shy away from them. Also, I have multiple resumes with various focuses- for example, AI focused, not M&E (unfortunately, there is not a Maya software name to be found), and Software development manager, Director, etc. I have been finding people in my town in tech, and having coffee meetings, and contracts are coming from these, and they are the farthest from the VFX industry, but as Fran said, follow the money.

But I love VFX, so I am keeping one foot in the door with trying to share my knowledge on any educational opportunities. I joined VES Academy, I met so many people and learned a lot about the industry and how it's continuing to move forward, keep educating yourself. I often change my job titles when applying to positions outside the media and entertainment industry. For example, I'll modify "Technical Artist" to "Software Developer" and "Pipeline Supervisor" to "Software Development Manager." Many in other fields may not understand the specific roles and responsibilities associated with these titles, so adjusting them helps convey the relevant skills and experience more clearly. It's a way to ensure my qualifications resonate better with potential employers.

"Our skills are more transferable than we think—I've moved from VFX to gaming, software development, and now music."

Gustavo Sanchez Perez
VFX Professional & Baking Dad

I have worked in different roles and sectors within the VFX industry, from animation to FX and tools/software development, and from games to TV and movies over the last 25+ years.

I recently took yet another leap of faith and jumped back to games, and I am now working as a VFX Artist for Ubisoft Junction Cinematics in Toronto, after over two years as FX Supervisor at RodeoFX.

My background is in Computer Sciences and a Master in Computer Animation back in 1998. I had tried to finish my Computer Sciences degree while working at the family restaurant. This experience would help me immensely across the years when making decisions and jumping into different paths in my career.

Curiosity definitely has served me, that and staying eager to learn. I still remember my favorite teacher in uni saying 'you would not be what is said in your degree, you will be manual experts!' . That also became one of our moto's when entering a professional career, give us time and docs and we will figure things out. Every new task becomes a challenge that way and we don't get bored, basically.

First pro job I wanted to be a modeller, got hired as an animator for a kids tv show in the UK. I asked why, they said… we liked your animation from your reel. I guess back in the days things were simpler, less pigeon holed and more CG Generalist vibes all around. I jumped from animation to tools programming in TV animation, to NURBs modelling for Film VFX then Videogames modelling, MEL scripting and even a bit of C++ coding for PS2. Sometimes in life the 'right place, right time' happens I guess. From Videogames I went back again to VFX and I suddenly saw myself working on a Harry Potter movie, for my first ever effects job that would spark my career.

"Curiosity definitely has served me, that and staying eager to learn."

A few years and jobs later, and to be a bit closer to family having had our first kid, we went back to Spain and the opportunity to have a better work/life balance came in the form of working for a software company: Next Limit Technologies (maker of RealFlow). What started as a consultant/technical support job with RealFlow, quickly became a great opportunity to learn new skills, management, event planning, public speaking… and in no time I accepted the role of Product Manager.

Again, a computer sciences background was helpful to lead a development team, the soft skills from my family upbringing in a restaurant did wonders when travelling the world and meeting with clients at events. But what ultimately made the difference from the beginning was my first hand knowledge of the VFX industry, and having used the RealFlow in production. Stan Lee's cameo on Xmen3 was the first water sim for us.

Gustavo Sanchez Perez
### VFX Professional & Baking Dad

The biggest challenge while transitioning to the software world was to go from working on a fast paced, deadlines and client request driven environment to a more 'relaxed', almost doing things at your own pace, one. Trying to explain to the developers the complexity of VFX layers of approval was another tough one. Also, the fact that it wasn't the artist but the end client giving approvals was a tricky concept for them to understand at the time. Luckily, we introduced the idea of taking developers on the road and they could start talking to clients first hand, visiting studios and hearing clients ideas, and complaints, which created a closer bond between product and users. We earned the trust of our 'audience', clients/artists, because we communicated in a language they could understand, and they knew we could transmit their feedback to the developers more precisely. We could also plan roadmaps based on the users and industry needs.

Still, like with any other job, one's personal growth can start to be limited, and my VFX bug was starting to crawl back, so after 7 years at Next Limit our family decided to emigrate again and moved to Canada for my next career chapter with MRX.

If I was gonna do a similar move from VFX to Software today, I would probably be more adventurous when it came to leading bolder changes into the software. Even though we tried to follow our own path with client requests included where we could, I would have liked to have our software evolve faster with industry needs.

Today there are more options than ever to learn new skills and technologies.I get joy these days playing with photogrammetry and Gaussian splats, learning Unreal Engine, and recently took an intense 12 week microcredential for Virtual Production. Don't be afraid of change. I always said 'change is always for the best'. You won't regret any of your changes if you try to find something positive in them, learn something, whatever it might be. #neverstoplearning #betonyourself

"Still, like with any other job, one's personal growth can start to be limited, and my VFX bug was starting to crawl back, so after 7 years at Next Limit our family decided to emigrate again and moved to Canada for my next career chapter with MRX.
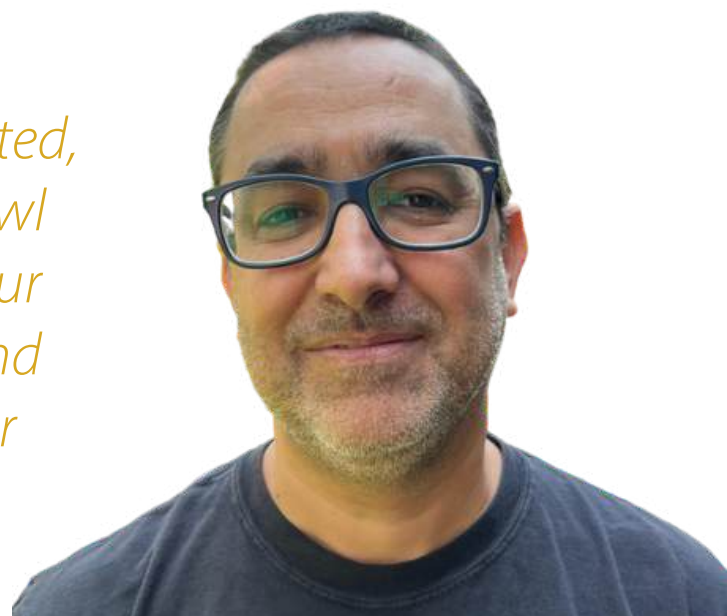
Thank you for reading this far! This guide was put together by Laurence Cymet who is a member of the VES Education & Outreach committee.

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If anyone wants to help expand this document, don't hesitate to reach out to your local VES section and ask to connect with the Education & Outreach committee. We'd love to hear from you.

Change is a given, but with the right tools we can manage it and prosper. The VES wishes you the best of luck in your career path.

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