

What is a visual effects supervisor?



In pre-production, the VFX supervisor analyses the script to determine VFX needs

The visual effects supervisor has two main tasks. Firstly, to create digitally the images and action that cannot be achieved in live action filming, and secondly to enhance the images that are acquired live in the camera.

Although computers have been used in film and television post-production since the early 1990s, there has been a rapid increase in the last five years. The screen industry has embraced digital cameras and digital distribution in cinemas, and at the same time there has been growth in the power and storage capacity available, and in the speed and accuracy of moving digital images and sharing files around the world.

Australian visual effects companies are very successful internationally and the skilled work they achieve can be exchanged with international production partners. Australian digital effects work can be seen in films like *The Great Gatsby*, *Gravity*, *The Wolverine*, *Australia*, *Unbroken* and *Gods of Egypt*. Employees in the VFX industry are highly mobile, with many Australians working overseas and many international employees coming to Australia to work on the big, effects-heavy movies mentioned.

VFX supervisors primarily have a background in film editing, computer animation, compositing, production or producing.

They are technically experienced, creative and also well versed providing direction and leadership to film crews.

The VFX supervisor is the linchpin between what the director, cast and crew can achieve on set, and what the VFX team can do in post-production.

Depending on the complexity of the film and its budget, a VFX team can range from one to several hundred people. The size and scale of the film is established when the film is broken down at the initial script stage. At this point the VFX supervisor, the VFX Producer and the film's producer can make an estimate of the VFX budget.

It is normal that the VFX supervisor and VFX producer will then approach a number of VFX companies to study the script breakdown and provide competitive bids to produce the VFX scenes. Each VFX studio gauges how big a team is required and the time frame required to complete the work. This information is fed back to the VFX supervisor and Producer who then re-assess and see how the quoted work will fit into their overall schedule and budget.

The VFX supervisor and producer work out which studio is best suited to the production and commission the work. Some VFX studios may be best known for a particular kind of work, and have a digital pipeline that's already been developed for water simulation, or dust storms, or are just overall better suited to big complex builds. This process saw an Australian company chosen to do the burning dress in *The Hunger Games*.

Case Study: The Great Gatsby

The Great Gatsby was a unique set up. It was designed on the basis of employing a small group of visual effects artists, dubbed the SWAT Team, and a large VFX company.

The SWAT team was part of director Baz Luhrmann's production company. It included thirty people all highly skilled and specifically employed for their craft. They worked very closely with the VFX supervisor producing all the previsualisations, technical visualisations, temporary composites, smaller computer generated builds and composites as well as setting up the entire colour pipeline. It gave the VFX supervisor flexibility and full control which was important as the scale of the film increased and the number of VFX studios involved also grew.

Larger companies were employed to produce the heavy lifting CG builds and shots that required large render farms and fast infrastructure. Each of the studios was specifically employed to produce certain sections of the film that the VFX supervisor and producer felt they were best suited to.

In total, *The Great Gatsby* featured over 1500 shots produced by seven visual effects companies around the world.

Depending on the nature of the film, the VFX supervisor can play a significant role in development, working closely with the director and the producer to create characters and plan action sequences.

Previsualisation is an essential part of visual effects. With the assistance of computer animation a scene can be totally planned and edited well before shoot. This provides information for all departments on how the scene is to be shot - such as the use of blue/green screens, models, matte painting and lighting - and what production requirements are necessary for the shoot. Ultimately it shows the director, the

production teams and the actors what coverage is necessary to achieve the final VFX shot. Previsualisations sometimes form part of the package that a producer will pitch to investors to raise finance for the film.

Once the film is financed, the work intensifies. The VFX supervisor works with every department to ensure the live action crew can shoot all the elements necessary to achieve the director's intention for the visual effects:

- they liaise with the production department to decide on scheduling, costing and budgetary decisions
- they work closely with the first assistant director to develop the schedule, decide on crew and any other special requirements
- they work closely with the camera department to ensure technical requirements are met
- they also work with the art department to ensure that the construction of sets and props works seamlessly with visual effects shots
- **lidar scanning** provides information on how many vehicles are required in a shot, and where they need to move from and to.
- in the film *Australia*, the visual effects supervisor consulted with the animal wranglers to create a vast cattle stampede
- provides the stunt coordinator detailed information on how a scene is intended to play out, and what personnel and equipment will be required
- often work together with actors to capture performances required to create digital characters, like these examples from [Dawn of the Planet of the Apes](#) and [The Hobbit](#)



VFX Supervisors often need to recreate past eras



In addition, the VFX department itself is busy at work, creating complex models and or builds that require months of preparation before the first shot turns over. They are also sourcing reference shots, creating backgrounds and working on more detailed previz and tech viz for each of the departments.

On a live action film that will use significant visual effects, the VFX supervisor ensures that a member of his or her team liaises with production to ensure that all the requirements are on the call sheet whenever a VFX scene is scheduled, and is on set for the shoot.

During production, the VFX team continues work on previz and tech viz throughout the shoot, as required. They will also start on post-production. If there are shots that require a full computer generated build, the designs, previz, concepts and duration of the shot length is worked out meticulously and turned over to the VFX team to start on during the shoot, so that the shots are ready to be included in the first cut.

In many cases, and certainly in big VFX films, the VFX teams will be working on specific shots while the film is being edited. The process of passing the effects shots to the editor is called turn over, and is closely monitored. The edit is checked daily to be sure that no shots are omitted from the scene or extended. A database of all shots is logged and each

shot is given its own unique identification. At the point of turn over the VFX supervisor and VFX producer work closely with the VFX teams, supervising and overseeing the builds, and direction of each shot.

The VFX supervisor has a wide understanding of both technical and creative decisions, and stays with the film to the very end of post-production, refining and polishing effects through the grade and online process until the master is produced. The work may not end there, the VFX team may be involved in the creation of websites and games to support the film's release.

In contemporary filmmaking, the VFX supervisor has a crucial role, and a vast war chest of skilled artists, technicians and electronic weaponry to create an amazing screen experience.

[Click here to view interview with visual effects supervisor Chris Godfrey](#)

Useful resources:

- [Wikipedia: Visual effects supervisor](#)
- [Get in Media: Visual effects supervisor](#)
- [VFX of the Hobbit](#)

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