New Workflow in VFX Industry during Pandemic: A study among Digital Artists

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Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic has hit every aspect of human society from business to education and profession. Cinema and television industry are not out of it. Entertainment industry has undergone drastic transformation with respect to its content production and delivery. Thousands of technicians and Artists lost their job, which could not opt to online or their job relevance goes down in the digital distribution platforms. However, the viewership and media content consumption increased in multi fold. At the same time the need of cinema and television was increased because of the sudden blooming of OTT platforms. Lot of production companies wants to complete post production work at the earliest. But because of the work nature of VFX artists who plays major role in postproduction part, the projects get delayed.

VFX artist cannot work effectively online. Since they need to work from home because of pandemic, they have faced many challenges like sharing huge files on the internet, handling the original footages securely, installing the required hardware and software in their home computers, increasing the storage capacity of the system and transferring the finished content without any data loss. Especially in quality checking the finished output, the team leader struggles to judge the quality of output by sitting remotely. The entire work is moved to cloud.

This paper tries to analyse the working pattern of VFX artists and related impact on the project output. The study specifically looks into the status of work and business for VFX artists during pandemic, the technical and physical challenges faced by the artists, the transformation took place in the work flow, suitability of the online platforms for the artists to develop and execute their work, strategies adopted to overcome the challenges and overall adaptation done in the VFX field.

Present study is qualitative in nature. To accomplish the objective of the study the researcher will collect primary data through the structured interview among the 100 VFX artist within the region of Chennai. Chennai is located in the southernmost part of India has numerous VFX studios working for the high budget films all over the world and particularly it is a hub of VFX industry. The data also will be enumerated from VFX industry owners and the people who seek for VFX work such as film directors, serial producers, game developers etc.

This study is deemed important as there is very less work on Indian VFX industry status and challenges. Thus the study will provide different perspectives on VFX artist and business atmosphere.

Keywords: Visual Effects, VFX, VFX during pandemic, VFX during COVID-19.

I. INTRODUCTION

The VFX industry is one of the fastest growing entertainment industries in the world. With cutting edge technology, the boom in this arena started with the introduction of Computer Generate Graphics (CGI) which was used in projects – The Adventure of Andre and Wally B way back in 1984. Visual Effects usually abbreviated ad VFX is primarily illusions and trick used in motion pictures to create effects or to surprise audiences. It was in 1857, when a 32 parts of negatives was turned into a single image by Oscar Rejlander that gave birth to the concept of VFX. VFX today is severely used in mostly big budget cinemas especially Hollywood. The highest-grossing film of all time, *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), used VFX expansively. Around ninety percent of the film utilised VFX and CGI. Other than films, television series and web series are also known to employ VFX. The readiness of affordable compositing and 3D software's fashions a trend amid the amateur film makers to contain these methods in their films too.

According to one estimate by Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) there was a 39% growth in consumption of children's content during the lockdown. Some channels such as the Zee 5 Kids witnessed growth of 200% in viewership during the lockdown. Others such as the VOOT saw increase of about 700% in viewership.

The antiquity of Indian Visual FX epochs to the silent era, when Dada Saheb Phalke's film Kalimardhan was being filmed in 1919. His 1912 shot film *The Growth of a Pea Plant* was based on the concept of time lapse photography, with one frame shot per day. However, it is the film Mayabazaar that truly caught the attention of the Indian audience as far as VFX is concerned. However, In 2015 the coming of *Baahubali: The Beginning* was a sort of a success story that speaks volumes about the capacity of VFX and CGI industry in India. The Indian animation and visual effects industry, which grabs around 10% of the global market share, has the possibility of reaching 20-25% growth by 2025 as per entertainment industry report by Confederation of Indian Industry. Talking about the quality of the projects delivered-

"The artists are used to working in groups which helps them at various levels, may it be technical or creative, and breaking that work culture and working in isolation is a new system for which the artists may need some to adopt."

Reliance Animation COO Tejonidhi Bhandare

In the past, Indian companies have been praised for their visual effects design in numerous Hollywood movies. Double Negative (DNEG), a Prime Focus group company has won the Oscar four times for films like Blade Runner 2049, Interstellar, Ex Machina, and Inception among many others. Also, Thor: The Dark World, was subcontracted to one India's Prana Studios Ltd and Bengaluru-based Mr. X contributed to 2018 Oscar winner The Shape of Water.

It is time that these professionals started doing more of this for our own films so that the use of animation and graphics in Indian films grows manifold.

(Prakash Javadekar, 2020)

The growth of VFX in India is only getting steadier by the day as there are more and more audience who await the coming of newness in celluloid.

Objectives of the study:
1.   To analyse the working pattern of VFX artists and related impact on the project output.
2.   To understand and analyse the status of work and business for VFX artists during pandemic

II.   METHODOLOGY

From a mass media research point of view, Rubin (1981) asserts that survey research is a predominant tool in studying the uses and gratifications method that has been consistently validated by past studies. This underscores the choice of an analytical survey design in conducting the present study on uses and gratifications of internet. The research design used in this study is a survey method employing collection of data through structured questionnaire. The questionnaire will aim at exploring the primary understanding of the respondents' use of VFX by artists for work. The survey involves a study concerned with obtaining information by interviewing or administering a questionnaire to a sample of 100 VFX artists in Chennai.

Statistics and graphical representation of variables which are useful for the study is described in percentages and frequencies for easy understanding. In the initial stage of data representation, this procedure is easy to learn the things. The percentage is presented and it will provide value for the hundred in each group selected with frequencies.

For the study a total of 100 respondents were selected out of the 125 questionnaire that was distributed. Only questionnaire that had thorough responses for all the statements were considered for the study.

III.   DATA ANALYSIS

It is clear from the table that VFX professionals, who are women, find themselves working within an unregulated part of the industry are quite less compared to that of men. 23.1% are women as per the study conducted and 76.9% are male. There is definitely a gender gap that exists between male and female VFX artists. Issues of equality are revealed in a broader sense when we realize VFX artists need to be recognized more as equivalent creative partners due to their amplified reliance upon and rank in the modern digital workflow of content creation and visual storytelling.
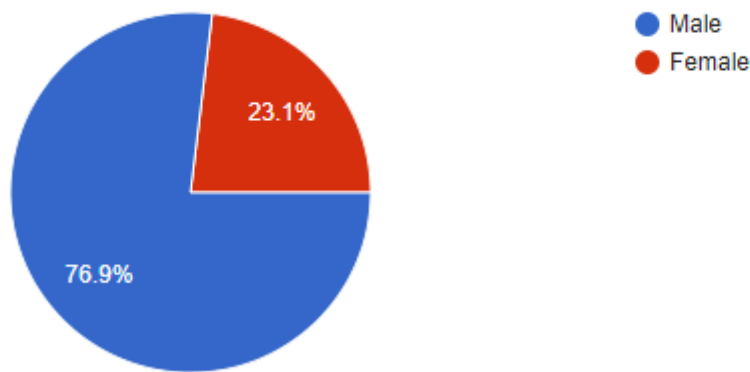
Graph 1: *Graph representing male and female ratio of VFX artists*

The year 2020 faced an extraordinary health crisis that presented trials to the safety, technology and security of workers working on projects. Many employers were forced to take radical action. The majority of VFX work requires on-premises infrastructure for some combination of security, technical and economic reasons. The main solution to tackle the challenge involved extending the desktop workstation experience to the user's home. This required remote display solutions, so that no actual production files needed to leave the facilities' networks. This solution transfers the display of secure office workstations directly to home computer screens over an encrypted data stream. However, it is evident from the *graph 2* that majority of the VFX workers did not have highly configured systems (40%). The other minor issues include not having storage facility, sufficient bandwidth, signal strength in the internet connect among many other problems.
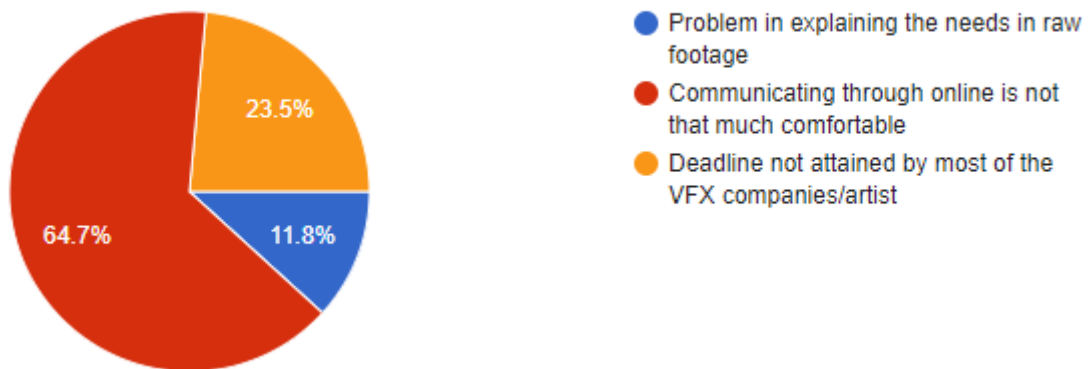
As per graph 3 it is evident that VFX artists used broadband connection mainly for carrying out their work while still a large portion of VFX artists had to depend on mobile data for their work (42.9%).
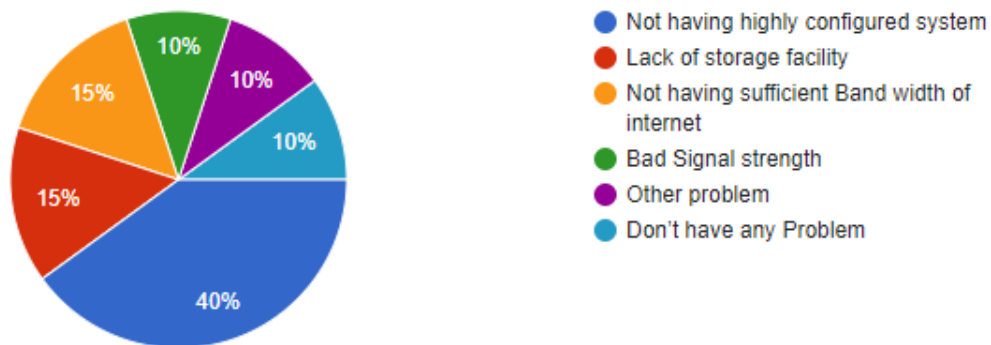
***Graph 2:*** *Graph representing problems encountered by VFX artists*
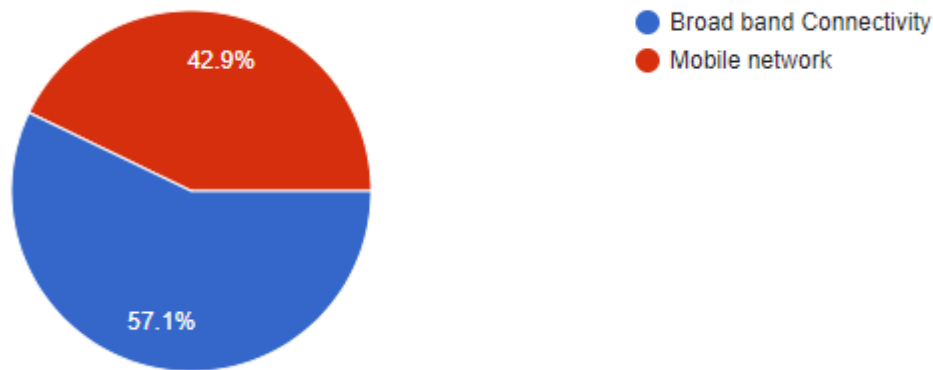
Graph 3: *Graph representing type of internet connectivity used by VFX artists*

Graph 4: *Graph representing major problems faced by VFX artists*

Graph 4 clearly reveals that majority of the VFX artists working from home faced some sort of discomfort communicating online. The government-mandated shutdowns across the globe meant the workers had to move thousand employees to operating from home leaving them at unease.
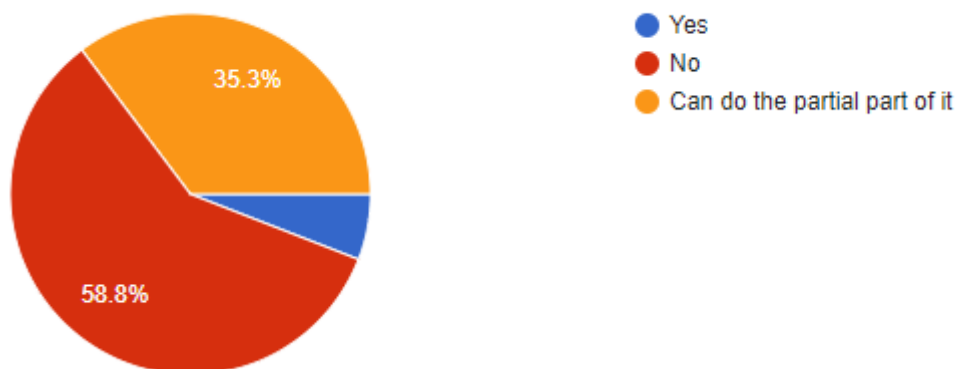
Graph 5*: Graph representing job that can be carried at home by VFX artists*

The older conceptions of VFX artistry as a work skill comes after the fundamental cinematography work. The devastating functioning is that that the VFX work though a new skill is compensated, credited and organised in the outdated framework. This new financial bargaining clout cannot be recognised if we don't engage with, educate, and change the dialog surrounding how other creatives in the industry view VFX artists and their critical roles.

IV. CONCLUSION

The visual effects (VFX) industry is a fast-growing sector in India. With the upsurge in domestic demand from high-budget movies and outsourcing of work to India from international clients on the rise, the future of the industry looks hopeful. Industry players have been slowly trying to move from low-end work towards higher-end projects through associations with film and entertainment businesses. Domestic players are progressively setting up offices overseas for improved amenity to the clients. By concentrating on key extents such as refining the ability of artists and increasing earnings to appeal better talent, there is sufficient scope for substantial progress in forthcoming days. Visual effects companies always have to stay on top of new technologies, which are also chances to gain market share in new entertainment stadiums, such as virtual reality and augmented reality. In today's arcade, just as the mid-budget movie has nearly been clasped out of survival, mid-sized VFX companies are more confronted than ever to keep afloat.

Problems of VFX artists must be recognised and a considerable work environment and proper payments must be made to improve the standards of VFX artists better in every sense. To create possible opportunities and technological amenities to create and excel in the field of VFX and animation.

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