

NURTURING ASPIRING YOUNG ARTISTS FOR THE ANIMATION VFX INDUSTRY: A SINGAPORE PERSPECTIVE

Jae-Eun Oh¹

¹LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore, oh.jaeun@lasalle.edu.sg

ABSTRACT

In the recent decade, a downward trend of employment has been observed in the animation and VFX industry globally. This trend is observed in Singapore as the domestic industry is integrated through international studios and markets.

Tertiary institutions in Singapore, particularly media related courses, turn out a pool of talented graduates every year. Of those, only two tertiary institutions are equipped to cater to students seeking a career in animation and VFX industry in Singapore. The industry has become increasingly competitive; calling for a need for educators to question if institutions provide adequate resources for students' career sustainability.

Through e-mail interviews with industry professionals, fresh graduates and current students, this study will present first-hand insights into awareness and real-world strategies for career sustainability in the industry. Findings seek to educate policy makers and educators on how to better prepare students for future careers.

Keywords: Singapore, Education, Animation

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of many animation and VFX companies within the media conglomerates of Fox, Disney, Viacom and Dreamworks, the past decade saw the closure of key animation companies and departments within this conglomerate. Dreamworks (Amidi 2015), Disney, Fox and Nickelodeon (Smith 2015) have closed their studios partially or entirely within this decade alone. In addition, major VFX studios, Rhythm and Hues was shut down after *Life of Pi* and Digital Domain was sold to two Chinese companies Sun Innovation and Galloping Horse due to bankruptcy (Cohen 2013). Noting this trend, it would be difficult to predict the longevity of any animation and VFX company given the current state of the industry.

Interestingly, even in this negative climate, these studios roll out new projects consistently within the media conglomerates as they see a need to maintain their statuses within the industry in spite of the reported closures or downsizing of departments. This trend appears to aid incoming graduates by creating career opportunities for them. However, this is untrue as 'new talents'

groomed in these large studio projects are least often retained by the company (EDB 2009). This trend has become a norm within the industry (Ward 2013, p. 327).

Major studios have set up their Asia headquarters in Singapore. With a blossoming media industry, Singapore is becoming a media hub in Asia. Internationally recognized studios such as Industrial Light and Magic (ILM) and Double Negative have taken this opportunity to set up a base in Asia with intentions to negotiate co-productions with 11 local, home-grown animation studios (MDA 2013). Ideally, this creates opportunities for local, Singapore-trained talents to contribute to the industry both locally and on an international scale.

Despite these potential opportunities to co-produce with renowned international animation and VFX companies, local companies have found it challenging to stay financially viable and sustain their presence in the local market. This is not caused by a singular factor, but several contributing factors that include an increased cost of living, hence forcing the increase of salaries for artists, as well as a small local market size (MDA 2004).

There is an over-reliance on foreign talents within the industry in Singapore. This is antithetical to the increasing number of local talents graduating annually from VFX courses in local universities. No studies have been conducted to address these issues. Hence, through in-depth interviews with students and professionals in the local animation and VFX industry, this paper seeks to explore this trend and bridge the gap from an educational perspective to understand the needs of the industry better, enabling institutions to better equip students with valuable tools for career longevity.

Education for media and animation in Singapore focuses heavily on technical skills. These skills taught by institutions provide foundations for individuals seeking to pursue a career in the industry. However, schools lack programmes that go beyond technical skills. There is a shortage of internship and networking programmes in institutions for students to understand the industry on a first-hand basis (Ren 2013).

Educators in local institutions that provide degrees in animation and VFX have been noted to combat this by pushing for courses on career longevity for students. However, this paper notes that a 'one-size-fits-all' curriculum has little impact on students, as the animation and VFX industry is highly dynamic and career developments of individual artists do not follow the same linear repetitive pattern (Ward 2013, p. 327). As a result, this paper suggests that institutions need to educate students on how they can create an adaptive approach to seeking opportunities for personal development and career growth.

Hence, this paper will argue that there is a need for more holistic programmes with a long-term focus to guide students on the know-hows for career sustainability. Industry reports have been key sources of information on career longevity of talents, however no academic studies have been conducted on this topic. This paper therefore aims to bridge this gap while gaining a better understanding of the industry climate and students' preparedness for careers in animation and VFX in Singapore.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CHALLENGES OF THE SINGAPORE EDUCATION SYSTEM

With the move from a Skills-Based labour and capital-intensive economy between the 1960s to the 1990s towards a Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE), education has been a key tool in leveling the imbalances of literacy and income apparent in the population by equipping students with technical know-how before entering the workforce in Singapore. (Goh and Gobinathan, p.31-32)

The skills-based training administered in schools were successful up to the sustaining of the KBE in the mid-2000s. However, it can be observed that through policies administered during the move towards a KBE, schools were still equipping students with technical skills instead of industry skills in order to prepare them for the workforce (Chan 2008) and collaborate across the creative cluster. These education policy decisions contradicted Singapore's extensive Media 21 Plan (MDA 2005) to 'develop Singapore's media sector into a driving force both in the region and globally' (MDA 2005, p.3).

Currently, the education system has evolved from one-size-fits-all system to one that creates opportunities for students with different talents/abilities to experience a semi-customised tertiary vocational institution such as opportunities for further education. Efforts have been put into such institutions to provide diploma courses on design, animation and media studies (Saw 2008, p.114). For example, the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) and Polytechnics were created to accommodate students more inclined towards hands-on and practical work in media, design and the arts, creating potential to open doors to the creative industry.

This paper acknowledges these efforts and policy changes in order to prepare students for a ground-up approach to adapt to the global shift towards the KBE. There has been no published study conducted in Singapore on the state of affairs in adapting the education policies to the creative cluster. The paper argues that compared to other countries where Arts and Design industry is profound and robust, art education in Singapore is lacking both support and manpower.

INTERACTIVE AND DIGITAL MEDIA INDUSTRY BOOM IN SINGAPORE

Since the Economic Development Board (EDB) brought LucasFilm, established in 2005, and Double Negative, one of the biggest UK visual effects studio into Singapore in 2009, the sub-sector of media - Interactive and Digital Media (IDM) industry - has been elevated (Onscreen Asia 2009).

EDB prospected this sub-sector which includes animation, video games, online/mobile media and new forms of digital entertainment to create more jobs, to be a centre for producing new content, a platform where East meets West and the broadcast hub of Asia (EDB 2009). Policies undertaken during this period kept a positive outlook and saw the nation-state's influences from both Asian and Western cultures as an advantage for the industry that 'targeted to generate 10,000 new jobs and create a value-add worth S\$10 billion by 2018' (EDB 2009).

The successes of this move can be illustrated by the growing number of Hollywood films created locally, and the local media industry becoming more vibrant with these major studios in Singapore. According to MDA, major studios looked to collaborate with local animation studios (MDA 2013).

This growth influenced policies to encourage education institutes to develop courses relevant to the VFX industry.

However, problems of sourcing out local talents for these industry is a direct result of existing problems in the local Art and Design education system. The small but growing VFX industry is still in need of substantial support from the government to offer a proper platform for students to learn and showcase their works. This paper acknowledges these challenges and notes that the small market size creates workforce issues within the sector.

CHALLENGES FACED BY VFX FRESH GRADUATES

The landscape of educational sector has been re-shaped over the decades especially with the booming of IDM industry. Vocational training schools with Diploma and Degree programmes have put efforts into media related courses such as animation and special effects, producing many graduates annually. Yet graduates are finding difficulties in securing employment due to the differences in expectations between the self and the industry. Furthermore, based on the Singapore model, students have technical skills but lack communication know-how to share their ideas. This creates barriers to entry for fresh graduates seeking to broaden their horizons and contribute to the VFX sector in Singapore (IDA 2006).

This trend is observed in the IDM industry globally. Paul Ward (2013) notes that major studios today are using their clout to lure promising young talents in hopes of decreasing running costs. This changes the traditional trainer-trainee dynamic, with studios committing to short-term contracts that risk the job stability of the apprentice (Ward 2013). This is a similar trend demonstrated by the VFX industry in Singapore.

Hence, Singapore is experiencing the effects of the sudden VFX industry boom; however there has been no academic articles on this issue from a Singapore perspective. Taking these considerations, this paper seeks to examine how education sector could prepare students for career longevity in this unstable industry.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Taking into consideration the initial literature review, this paper will have two key objectives. Firstly, the paper hopes to identify ways institutions can aid students seeking entry-level jobs in the VFX industry and construct solutions to nurture and prepare students for the erratic changes in the industry.

IDENTIFICATION OF INSTITUTION-BASED JOB-SEEKING STRATEGIES

The VFX industry in Singapore is small and unable to accommodate the influx of graduates from schools every year. However, this paper proposes that students can be exposed to the industry at an earlier stage through internships and networking sessions in order to build relationships required for job-seeking after graduation. Education and Industry professionals have voiced out needs for technical skills taught to be attuned to contemporary times and the growing demands of the industry. Wells and Arcadias (2007) notes that there is a growing need for creative workers and not 'worker bees' as the industry grows (p. 75).

Hence educational institutions need to provide students with various platforms to hone both technical and soft skills. These skills will then enable students joining the VFX industry in Singapore to be more than just trainees – that they will be valuable assets to the organizations.

CONSTRUCTING SOLUTIONS TO NURTURE STUDENTS FOR THE INDUSTRY

Furthermore, Animation as a field of practice and academic inquiry has undergone enormous change in the past few decades. It has moved from being a craft-based industry, with apprenticed positions to induct people into the practice of animation, to a global industry worth billions a year. This trend is similarly observed in the IDM Industry.

There is a rapid growth in animation and media-related courses in tertiary institutions globally ranging from short courses designed to impart specific skills, Diploma, BA degrees, to postgraduate research degrees (Ward 2013, p.335). However, observations suggest that successes do not require instantaneous investments in time and support from key organizations. The change of cultural mind-sets signal a discrepancy in priorities and aspiration of the artist himself and adaptation to the realistic needs of the creative cluster.

Hence to achieve these objectives, the following questions are proposed:

- (1) What are the the assumption about employment in the animation and VFX industry
- (2) What are the problems fresh graduates face in terms of a sustainable career?
- (3) How did your institution help you develop qualities that can aid career longevity in the industry?
- (4) Is education preparing students adequately for the industry?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research under the interpretive school of thought was undertaken as a methodology. This was chosen as the aims of interpretive research matched the objectives of the researcher – the making of meanings of face-to-face interactions that occur in the wider society.

For this research, two groups representing industry were chosen and email interviews were conducted with a total of 23 interviewees. To better understand industry needs, the first group consisted of 11 industry professionals from both local and international VFX studios based in Singapore. The second group consisted of 12 students currently enrolled in a VFX-related degree programme in Singapore with clear intentions to enter the creative industry upon graduation.

Consent forms were provided and answers did not affected class credit, nor were any other benefits were given. Interviews were conducted by a secondary independent researcher who has never had contact with the participants in prior instances. Email interview transcripts were further analysed by both researchers. Some interviewees have chosen to be anonymous.

RESULTS

Based on the results of the email interview, both students and industry professionals stated that local animation and VFX industry is either 'stagnant' or declined while the 'global industry is achieving slow growth'. Interviewees have expressed that the local industry is 'still struggling to

survive and go big because of competition with the big industry from overseas', painting a bleak picture Singapore animation professionals and students.

MDA has proposed grants for the VFX and animation industry (MDA 2013). However industry professionals have cited that 'a grant system for animation industry of MDA has not been announced or launched and not many number of local animation studios are left after all'.

Furthermore, interviewees were aware that Double Negative recently announced a move of key divisions to Canada and laid off local production crew and administrative staff. Artists interviewed have echoed that the 'local industry has been shrinking and they need more support from government that can help to stabilize the community'.

Students have expressed that they are 'afraid to go into animation because they perceive it as hard to secure animation jobs in the local setting' and are aware that the local industry has declined as 2D animation field has 'limited' jobs paired with a market that has been 'saturated with a high demand of 3D artists'. All students interviewed expressed that to acquire a good standing in the industry, there is a need to use the time in school to 'master more software' in order to be technically-abled with higher chances of employability.

Furthermore, students interviewed have expressed the discrepancies in education received to prepare them for the industry. Half of the students interviewed expressed that the curriculum placed a larger 'emphasis on knowledge and theories than craft', creating rifts in between the skills required by the industry and those honed by students. In addition, interviewees from government-aided tertiary institutions expressed that the education received was inadequate for the industry:

'We had to take modules that were prescribed by the education ministry. These modules were irrelevant and in the end didn't do much to help.'

- Fresh graduate from a local tertiary institution

Others interviewed stated that their institutions have encouraged them to 'hone their craft and push their creativity and individuality as artists'. These responses are significant as it highlights the lack of communication between institutions and with the industry so as to adequately prepare students for careers in VFX and animation in Singapore.

However these responses highlight the short-sightedness of students and their lack of understanding of career longevity in the industry. Schools need to prepare students to be aware of change of industry globally and locally.

While fresh graduates and students believe the need to emphasize on owning an extensive technical skillset, industry professionals believe otherwise - networking, lifetime learning and creative thinking are more important for career sustainability. Business sense is encouraged to move into content creation, and generate a supporting market for animation industry and work with overseas productions.

Chris Shaw, Head of Animation at LASALLE College of the Arts highlighted that students require a 'strong theoretical understanding of their discipline and the ability to contextualize their work' and

the understanding that schools can train them to be ‘versatile and have the ability to adapt and respond to a variety of subject specific problems’. Shaw made the following observation with regards to synergizing technical skills:

“In addition to training students how to use these tools, schools need to challenge themselves and consider how to provide suitable opportunities for students to demonstrate their abilities beyond technical training... to instill in students the aptitude to demonstrate intelligence through the ability to independently synergies knowledge and technical skills”

CEO of Tiny Island Productions, David Kwok echoed these views, adding that there is a ‘need [for students] to attend commercial events and build good connections with those working in the industry.’ These networking events sought to help students understand the industry both from local and global perspective in order to achieve career longevity.

Hence, from the interviews conducted it can be observed that technical skills are the foundations that students must possess in order to seek employment. The need for technical skills is well understood by students; however, they have not identified the need to establish good working relationships with industry professionals. This facet is crucial to success within the dynamic industry internationally. The responses obtained from the interview have identified the gaps between education and industry, calling for the need for solutions to close this gap.

DISCUSSION AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Possible Platforms provided by institutions	Method	Description
Mentorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Industry professionals ● Alumni ● Case studies ● Educators 	Students have one-to-one mentorship session with those who can provide specific knowledge, skillset and inspiration.
Expose students' work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Festivals ● Social Network (Facebook, Youtube, Vimeo, Vidsee, Blog, Devian Art) ● Industry night ● Exhibition 	Students are able to promote and brand their own work through these channels.
Long term aspiration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Masterclasses ● Guest speaker ● Workshop with renowned artists from industry 	Put these items in the course curriculum and make them as recurring events. This long term aspiration can help students to have entrepreneur mind-set for the long term career planning.
Government Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Incubating system with Grant programmes tied 	Government that cares for nurturing local talents and fresh graduates with different

	<p>with school system</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tax incentives ● Encourage potential markets to generate a need for animation and VFX industry eg. Advertising, Mobile animation, TV animation for children. 	<p>supporting programmes.</p> <p>Government must acknowledge what the ingredients for the industry's growth and development.</p>
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Table 1: Summary of Proposed Solutions

Based on interview responses, this paper seeks to propose solutions to further encourage students seeking careers within the VFX industry locally. For career longevity, it is still imperative that students acquire technical skillset, however this paper proposes that institutions can help beyond that.

Many schools emphasize needs for technical skills but often overlook possible platforms they can provide for students to be exposed to industry and professional practitioners. Industry professionals and educators have expressed that these networking skills should not be taught, but 'instilled habitually – which is why schools should challenge themselves to develop learning methodologies and opportunities' (Chris Shaw).

Based on the researcher's experience as an educator and interview responses from industry professionals, schools can adopt a mentor-mentee programme with partnerships with the industry. A suitable mentor can be one who has a 'holistic view of the person's development' (Ward 2013, p. 330) and has potential to set students in the right directions of their specific crafts. One possibility of a mentorship programme as proposed can be a one-to-one session for both student and industry mentor prior to internships at studios (Table 1).

Possible collaborations with commercial and governmental entities can be encouraged to stimulate support for the industry. The overview of Singapore animation and VFX industry history grew fast and this had been a part of government agency's agenda for the last decade. However, as learnt from the interviews, interviewees saw that current governmental support is insufficient.

Government must encourage the community to form a robust market which supports local animation and VFX industry through improved tax benefits and incubating systems to nurture young artists. Institutions, industry and government need consolidate efforts to bring benefits to local industry as a whole and work together for the platforms which help young aspiring artist seek career longevity in the industry.

CONCLUSION

Having the animation/VFX industry involved with institutions is inevitable, however, the perception of the course should be more than training workforce to provide the needs of industry. It will assist employment in the short term, but is unable to ensure job security in the long term. For

example, Double Negative was a big industry partner with educational institutions locally, until the global studio decided to move out of the Singapore market.

Hence, students need to be nurtured by educators to have the mind-set for seeking sustainable careers not by merely seeking for jobs to serve industry needs. In order to forge relationships between the industry and fresh graduates, schools need to look into solutions for students to seek these networks. In light of this, this paper hopes that findings and suggestions will aid educators in forging networks and encourage policy makers and local industry professionals to work together to nurture our young aspiring artists.

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