Signs
of Life
GRIFFITH OBSERVATORY®

6 Secrets to Surviving the New World of Remote Workflows

Ten VFX and animation industry pros reveal how creative productions have adapted to life in the virtual studio. And as the world emerges from months of lockdown, we learn how "the new normal" is likely to transform the business of storytelling forever.

SHOTGUN

The production industry has been hit hard by COVID-19 as on-set filming halted abruptly and studios were left empty. Overnight, high-stakes processes usually executed in person and reviewed in real time moved to remote workflows, many from home. At Shotgun Software, we have the privelege of working with the world's largest and most influential creative studios, and this has given us a valuable perspective into how the industry has problem-solved during this time. We have also been privy to the actions studios are taking to insulate their businesses against future derailments. Together with our customers, we're finding ways to do more with fewer resources, use less digital waste, streamline processes, and—ultimately—converge digital workflows with physical on-set processes. Here are tactics and strategies being used by some of our friends in the business of storytelling.

Colin Cupp
Senior Product Marketing Manager, Amazon Web Services

Sarah Hodges
Associate Vice President and General Manager, Shotgun Software

Christian Deiss
Head of Pipeline, Magnopus

Viktorija Ogureckaja
VFX Producer, Pixomondo

Georg-Sebastian Dressler
CG Supervisor, Axis Studios

Will Pryor
Head of Rigging and CFX, Axis Studios

Dawn Fidrick
Producer, Griffith Observatory

Thomas Rousvoal
Character Artist, Rousvoal Pictures

Jacob Gonzales
Pipeline Supervisor, Untold Studios

Stephen Schick
Technical Art Director, Electronic Arts

COVER

An image featuring Enceladus, the icy moon of Saturn from Signs of Life, the new show in Griffith Observatory's Samuel Oschin Planetarium that premieres in 2021. © 2020 Griffith Observatory.

Go "*all in*" on the cloud.

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When the entire supply chain turns to the cloud to help them coordinate efforts and integrate their pipelines, a virtual workspace can easily make up for the lack of a physical one.

"We have people working in London, Spain, Lithuania, Germany, and different places in Europe. We work with an HMR data company in New York. We've been proud to be entirely cloud-based with AWS since the beginning, but we never thought that only 14 months later it would come in so handy. When we had to shelter in place, we were able to transfer the studio from normal to fully remote within a couple of days—or even instantly. Before COVID-19, I was working from home very often and we already had remote workers that were working in the same exact way.

Rather than uploading files or sending files, the team just logs into our system and works with our setup; we communicate through our pipeline."

Jacob Gonzales
Pipeline Supervisor,
Untold Studios

"The main objective for cloud-based systems, or interaction, at Pixomondo is our ability to focus on the actual execution rather than maintaining hardware in this new reality of working remotely.

All our cloud interactions—from a cloud-based project management system, cloud email systems, cloud storage, and cloud rendering—in addition to paramount data security, enable us to move data and creative ideas in a much easier manner. Along with faster scalability and instant connectivity, which are vital for our new social distancing reality, the cloud empowers our artists and global productions with the speed and tools required for maintaining high-quality work. Ultimately, the cloud allows smoother day-to-day collaborations."

Viktorija Ogureckaja
Visual Effects Producer,
Pixomondo

"We are seeing a surge of interest in cloud-based workflows and a desire to rethink the production process to see what workflows can be enabled by the cloud and done remotely. The cloud is enabling geographically dispersed remote teams to remain up and running for parts, or in some cases all, of their production process. This helps them keep their production moving. In addition to virtual workstations, render, and storage, AWS is helping to accelerate some of the remote review and approval workflows in Shotgun to keep teams up and running during the absence of the 'over the shoulder' in-studio reviews. And this really is just the beginning."

Colin Cupp
Senior Product Marketing Manager,
Amazon Web Services
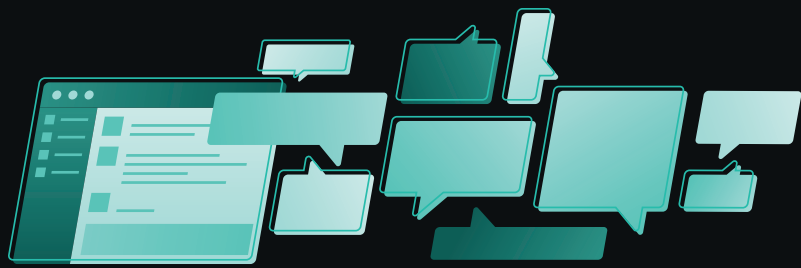
Make communication a cornerstone.

Placing team collaboration at the top of the priority list pays dividends when working remotely. Successful studios know: The right combination of tech tools and human interaction reduces unnecessary iterations and stress and increases job satisfaction and innovation.

Image Courtesy of Rousvoal Pictures.

"In VFX, communication is absolutely critical. You can't work, especially if you're not in the same building, if you don't have a hub where all the data gets pushed by different people and so they can all read that same data. That could be a movie, an asset, a shot, or a description for a comment, a task—anything. Everything is pushed to us and to one hub, and everybody has access to that hub. And when you're signed out and something is published into that hub, you actually receive a Slack notification. That cycle of communication is vital.

No matter the circumstances, personal communication—the experience of being one-to-one and next to each other—shouldn't disappear completely. Face-to-face communication is the most important type of communication, because very often great things spark out of a random talk. But now we are able to use technology to overcome situations like this. Because we're able to do that, we're able to then have experiences where we can actually have colleagues who are not physically in the office or even in the country, but who contribute equally to the quality of the work. This also gives us access to any kind of talent, wherever they are in the world."

Jacob Gonzales
Pipeline Supervisor, Untold Studios

"Normally if you're in the same studio, you would just pull up stuff from the server and go into a room and comment and review. But with COVID-19, all of a sudden we didn't have that anymore, and we needed a way to look at the work together. I think that's where Shotgun really excels. You can just quickly distribute the work and everybody can see it. It's so fast, you can almost have a discussion on it via the comments."

Georg-Sebastian Dressler
CG Supervisor, Axis Studios

Image Courtesy of Axis Studios.

Secure it, then forget it.

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In the overcomplicated world of risk assessment and security clearance, it's a wonder new studios are ever able to ramp up and compete. Striking the right balance around security compliance and confidence in industry standards can make or break the future of the production industry.

"We've added layers of visibility protection within our production management platform so that we can have multiple vendors working within a single project who are invisible to each other—for both ethical and legal purposes when working with IP.

By managing permissions, we've been able to foster trust and strengthen our relationships with vendors so that no matter their location, they feel a part of the EA team.

Stephen Schick
Technical Art Director, Electronic Arts

"The movement to shift processes and data into the cloud will be expedited now. Remote workflows have proven security can still be guaranteed. And now studios can save money because they don't need to provide as many resources on site."

Christian Deiss
Head of Pipeline, Magnopus

"Security is top of mind for everyone working in the cloud. Fortunately, our industry is learning a great deal from the proven processes of leading technology and security experts. Organizations like the Trusted Partner Network (TPN)—a joint venture of MPAA and CDSA—are providing guidance, standards, and prequalification of adherence to best practices. Having clear benchmarks of what great looks like ensures us there will be significant benefits in the raised awareness this brings to the industry. As we build confidence in securing our best kept secrets, it frees our minds to focus on creative innovation."

Sarah Hodges
Associate Vice President and General Manager, Shotgun Software

"Working on the cloud is a no-brainer, but in VFX, clients are concerned about security. Quite often they will not let you run on the cloud because they're scared— even though the cloud is totally secure. It's more about clients being willing to fully jump onboard themselves. I believe this era of remote workflows has broken a psychological barrier that will actually continue after the pandemic.

It turns out the cloud was always secure, but people needed to believe it. When you're put in a situation where you have to work remotely, you have no choice but to trust the system. It has worked for us; there have been no leaks on content. Our tech team believed AWS was the best option, and it has proven to be true."

Jacob Gonzales
Pipeline Supervisor, Untold Studios

Make the world your workforce.

There's nothing like having team members in every timezone to keep those deadline wheels turning. And listing "global offices" on your website sure does have a nice ring to it. It's a small world, after all.

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"The biggest advantage of being in the cloud isn't just that we work remotely, it is that we can easily scale the studio up and down. With remote workers, the advantage is that we can hire the best talent wherever they are based, or at least within a proximity from which they can work for us easily. Studios have started to realize: *Actually, it's not so bad having people all over the world doing the work, because we can do this now— we have pipelines and we have infrastructure*."

Jacob Gonzales
Pipeline Supervisor, Untold Studios

"We've streamlined our onboarding process for new talent. Whenever we have a new studio join EA or we bring on a new vendor, we share basic documentations and automations so we can immediately set them up on their own Shotgun site or on our main EA-wide site. Many individuals and teams we onboard have already used Shotgun or are familiar with it, and it's an easier learning curve to adopt a tool that is so prevalent in the industry. Our simple onboarding process has also facilitated a seamless transition for teams and vendors who have had to go offline or work from home."

Stephen Schick
Technical Art Director, Electronic Arts

Morale matters—*a lot.*

Staying upbeat is difficult when a global pandemic halts global travel and forces entire workforces out of shared spaces. That's especially true of collaborative VFX and animation work that hinges on meeting tight deadlines.

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"Team spirit is vital when it comes to getting the work done. You build a relationship with the team, and that's really what makes them stand out. You feel more like family rather than coworkers, and I think that's a very great thing for morale."

Georg-Sebastian Dressler
CG Supervisor, Axis Studios

"While working remotely, my morale is sometimes affected by the lack of social contact that provides good energy during the day. Keeping a rhythm, eating well, and reserving a moment in the day to be myself gives me positive energy to stay organized in my mind and in my work."

Thomas Rousvoal
Character Artist, Rousvoal Pictures

"When COVID-19 hit, Shotgun really helped us come together. It happened about four weeks until the end of a project, and we were delivering our last animations. Major hats off to our IT department, since they pretty much had the entire team up and running within a day of our having to vacate the offices.

Everybody and all the information you need is on [Shotgun], and people can give you feedback and commentary. Even if you'd previously worked on your computer in the studio, you can still open up Shotgun from your home computer. Without that functionality, it would have been really hard to get everything done in four weeks."

Will Pryor
Head of Rigging and CFX, Axis Studios

Take your vitamin P—
process—daily.

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All projects are unique, and both vendors and audiences have certain expectations about what their beloved characters and creatures will look like when brought to digital life. A streamlined review process minimizes drama when you're trying to please, well, everyone.

"It is clear that the pandemic has had—and will continue to have—a great impact on the production industry. Remote work is one aspect, but it's also important to look for operational innovation in overcoming the obstacle of physically gathering. For example, at Griffith Observatory, we are very interested in pursuing VR technology in our review and playback process."

Dawn Fidrick,
Producer, Griffith Observatory

"The priority is to enable artists to work efficiently at all times, so we have developed an automated file caching mechanism. When artists report slow file transfer performance, their support requests are prioritized."

Christian Deiss
Head of Pipeline, Magnopus

"Being able to collaborate with the client is fantastic. Working with Shotgun, we're able to get such instant feedback on what we're doing. On our last project, having that close connection with the client on a regular basis really helped with the process and made things much smoother than they might have been otherwise."

Will Pryor
Head of Rigging and CFX, Axis Studios

Working from remote locations or side-by-side, it's clear today's VFX industry can benefit from

- **Compatibility and consistency between tools and technologies**
- **Off-the-shelf solutions that work for every unique workflow**
- **A reference pipeline that can be implemented anywhere, including the cloud**

Armed with these solutions and our collective creativity, we can handle anything. SG

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