

HP and Vancouver Film School

How one of the world's best known film schools helps graduates meet industry expectations



Vancouver Film School

- A global leader in education for film and animation, feeding graduates into companies like PIXAR, Digital Domain, and Sony Imageworks
- Located in Vancouver, BC Canada (www.vfs.com)

The challenge

Replicate what's happening in the entertainment industries to enable graduates to meet employer expectations.

The solution

- Over 200 HP workstations on campus, including HP Workstation xw8000 with dual Xeon processors

We talked to Marty Hasselbach, Managing Director of the Vancouver Film School (VFS) about the school's use of HP workstations as hands-on tools for student film projects.

Q. Tell us about your background.

A. My background is in audio production and I know what it's like to survive in the real production world. I've also been in private media education for about 25 years. When I joined VFS in 2000, the decision was made to take the school to another level in terms of its international cachet, and to finish developing the educational offerings in a way that allows us to be a significant player globally.

Q. What is the Vancouver Film School?

A. VFS offers 13 different disciplines. We have 2D or classical animation: traditional hand-drawn images that get scanned and completed on computer. We have 3D animation, which involves visual effects and character animation. We have film production, digital design, game design, sound design for visual media, acting, writing, makeup and entertainment business management programs. In 2002 and 2003,

VFS expanded existing programs, added two new full time programs (Sound Design and Foundation), and built out and equipped a new, 40,000 square foot campus. We currently have about 1,300 full-time students and 3,000 part-time students across four campuses. Our 12-month curriculum is a very unique system educational model. We have six eight-week semesters, with students starting every two months. If we determine that there needs to be a change in the education, curriculum, hardware, or software to meet industry requirements, we can implement that in a two-month period of time and see the results very quickly.

Q. What were you looking for in your technology and what led you to HP?

A. VFS is a place where results matter. The students here create a finished product as a portfolio that is representative of what they can do to go out into the industry and work. We function more as a studio that teaches than as a university or an academic environment. The experience that students get here is that we know what the industry wants from our graduates. So we ask: Are these technologies consistently being used in the industry, and are they supported with the types of applications that we would be using, that are similar to what's happening in the industry?

We run 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. We have to know that we have support behind the hardware we choose, so we don't run into problems associated with downtimes or difficulties. Students create over 900 productions a year, and have deadlines in many cases stricter than a lot of big studios. HP is well represented within the industries we train in, coupled with the relationships that we've developed on a service and support level. HP actually thinks about us as a unique business and not just as a certain number of cartons out the door at the end of the quarter.

Q. How many workstations are used inside the school and what type of applications are students running?

A. We probably have in total over 200-250 workstations, primarily used for high-end 3D animation, digital graphics, game design, and non-linear editing. Typical applications are XSI and Maya, Avid editing technologies, and more standard graphics such as the Adobe suites and all the Macromedia products. We are set up with a key-server scenario with a lot of this software, so we draw from it with all the different workstations in our campuses.

The newest workstations—HP Workstation xw8000 with dual Xeon 2 processors—are used in our 3D animation program. We have several generations of workstations throughout the school, and all are dual Xeon processors. The workstations are pretty well maxed out on the highest end SCSI drive system. We render on the workstations, so processor speed and hard drive speed is important in the configuration.

Q. What is the project turnaround time for the students?

A. It's a year-long program. The first half is spent primarily learning and developing the tools. The second half is spent developing the finished product. The timelines are extremely tight. Usually the students in programs like 3D are working 18 hours a day, six or seven days a week. So downtime is an issue, waiting for screen redraws, rendering time, all those sorts of things eat up creative time. At SIGGRAPH recently, there was a comment from some industry leaders on our advisory board (PIXAR, Digital Domain, and Sony Imageworks) about the quality of our students' 3D animation continually improving. A lot of that is the result of students having more time to focus on the creative and less time waiting for the machines to catch up to their ideas.

Q. How is the usability for the student end users?

A. Most students have had some computer experience, but they haven't made up their minds [about] the kinds of technologies they are comfortable with. We found over the years that they want equipment that works, doesn't crash, doesn't cause problems, or slow down the process. We also found that when they have spent a year of very intense time using the technologies, they gain a comfort level that they carry with them when they go out on their own. Nine times out of 10, they will purchase an HP computer because that's what they have worked on, and they haven't experienced any problems.

Q. Have you graduated to the next level faster because HP machines are ahead of the curve?

A. We have disciplines ranging from high-end to minimal computer requirements. We can put the fastest and most current technologies where they are most needed. Our students are always using the most appropriate technologies for each application, which allows us to make sure that we are always introducing software faster than other institutions might, because we are always maintaining the current level of computing power.

Q. What are the new technologies in education?

A. More software vendors are moving to license key server technology, which is really beneficial for an organization like ours, especially when you look at all the software being used in all of our areas—except not at the same time. It was prohibitive for us to load every machine with an individual license. The key server technology has created an opportunity for us to centralize applications and have a certain number of seats available based on what we use.

Q. What other technologies do you use?

A. Another recent technology is remote graphics. When you consider the sheer number of computers, boxes, and monitors that have to physically be in a facility as large as ours, using remote graphics will allow for centralized machine rooms. [Minimizing] real estate at the desktop is very innovative and is going to make a difference in what we do and where things go. That's an example of HP being innovative and helping with the educational challenges that we face.

Q. How will remote graphics affect deployment speed?

A. We just installed 120 new computers, so we will move probably 500 computers around in a short amount of time. That would be simplified considerably with a remote system, so that you're only moving monitors, or not even moving monitors. It would really change the complexity of how we work. We're excited about where that is going. I think we will start integrating some of that technology within the next six months to a year. We definitely like to push the envelope rather than drag it.

Q. What's important to you about the HP relationship?

A. The strong correlation between HP philosophy and business practices and how we see things at VFS. Our vendors must not only have equipment that is current and relative to what the industry uses, but also have service, innovative thinking, and problem solving—always coming up with results that make a difference. That's really been our experience with HP.

At the end of the day, it's about the relationships, about making sure that people look at what you do and how you interact as something other than as a number on a balance sheet or a piece of paper. HP people are problem solvers; they come to the table when situations arise. They're quick to provide solutions and ideas, and that's the kind of school we are, so it's nice for us to have that kind of relationship.

For more information, visit www.hp.com/workstations

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