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Contents

Mission

MARVEL Has A VFX Problem

By Daniel Chin - The Ringer

Despite mixed reviews from critics and audiences, Thor: Love and Thunder has been yet another box office hit for Marvel Studios. Even with a precipitous 68 percent drop-off in its second weekend in theaters—a record decline for an MCU movie—the fourth Thor installment tacked on an additional $46 million after earning $144 million in its opening act. However, for the studio at large, a bigger problem has emerged during the film's rollout than its reviews or box office margins. Love and Thunder director Taika Waititi has recently taken some heat over negative comments he made about the CGI in a particular scene in the film, which comes at a time when VFX artists had already been speaking out against Marvel Studios about poor working conditions. Waititi's comments came during a scene breakdown video he did for Vanity Fair last week along with actress Tessa Thompson, who plays King Valkyrie in Love and Thunder. "OK, does that look real?" Waititi asks Thompson, referring to Korg, the rock warrior whom Waititi voices in the film.

"In that particular shot, no, actually," Thompson responds with a laugh.

"Doesn't he need to be more blue?" he then asks, before pointing to Thor and asking: "Well, does he look real?"

"No, none of us do," Thompson replies, before adding that "something looks very off" with her character.

While it's certainly not a good look for a director and one of his actors to poke fun at the CGI in their own movie, the ensuing controversy is less about the comments themselves than it is about th e larger VFX issues at Marvel Studios. Waititi and Thompson may not have meant to cause such a stir when they mocked the work done by the film's VFX artists, but they effectively drew more attention to a studio- and industry-wide problem. And Marvel needs to address it now more than ever. Visual effects artists—in the entertainment industry at large and those working with Marvel Studios in particular—almost never get the credit they deserve. Consider the role that VFX plays in a movie like 2018's Avengers: Infinity War, the fifth-highest-grossing film of all time. Out of more than 2,700 shots in Infinity War, only 80 didn't feature any visual effects, according to VFX company Industrial Light & Magic (ILM). That means less than 3 percent of the 2.5-hour movie was created without the aid of visual effects. The film nabbed an Oscar nomination for Best Visual Effects, among many other accolades from various voting bodies, but the award cycle failed to recognize or reflect the sheer volume of VFX work involved in the production; only Marvel Studios and a handful of the VFX supervisors really received that award recognition. (Just take a scroll through the visual effects section on Infinity War's cast and crew page on IMDb

to get a sense of how many people worked on it. It's quite a workout for the fingers.) And for all the stunning CGI shots, or scenes that viewers may not even realize feature VFX, it's often the moments when the CGI quality is lacking—such as Bruce Banner's head floating above the Hulkbuster suit—that garner much of the attention.

Thanks to dramatic advancements in technology, CGI has gotten so good that it's often easy for viewers to take it for granted. And it's even easier for it to be distracting when it's unconvincing, whether it's an un-lifelike Egyptian jackal rising out of the ground in Moon Knight, villains crumbling into cartoonish skeletons in Ms. Marvel, Doctor Strange growing a third eye in Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness, or pretty much the entire She-Hulk: Attorney at Law trailer. As someone who frequently writes about Marvel Studios projects, I've shared my thoughts on lackluster CGI when I've seen it, as have many other viewers on Twitter and elsewhere. But what I'd imagine myself and many others can't see or fully understand is what goes on behind the scenes of these MCU projects when it comes to the visual effects process. And VFX artists have recently made it clear that the studio has been setting them up to fail.
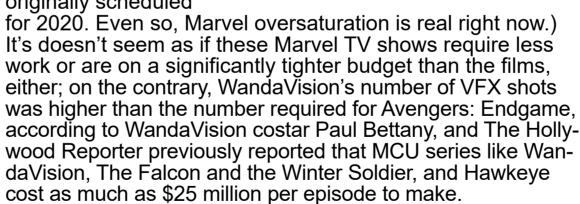
Many of the allegations made against Marvel started appearing a couple of months ago on the subreddit r/VFX, an online community where artists from across the industry have shared their negative experiences working with the powerhouse studio. (Marvel doesn't handle any of its VFX in house, so it hires various VFX studios to work on its projects, such as frequent collaborator ILM; more than a dozen VFX houses contributed to Infinity War alone.) In a thread titled "I am quite frankly sick and tired of working on Marvel shows," a Reddit user named Independent-Ad419 got the conversation started. "Marvel has probably the worst methodology of production and VFX management out there," the Reddit user wrote. "They can never fix the look for the show before more than half the allocated time for the show is over. The artists working on Marvel shows are definitely not paid equivalent to the amount of work they put in."

Others quickly chimed in, citing unreasonable deadlines and intense pressure imposed by poor management, with several commenters sharing that they'd requested to not work on Marvel projects in the future. "They expect a smorgasbord of options so they can change their mind 3 more times," one user wrote. By early July, the thread had grown enough that The Gamer posted an article—published on the same day that Vanity Fair happened to post their Love and Thunder scene breakdown—covering the rising number of claims made against Marvel Studios. A former VFX artist named Dhruv Govil, who worked on Guardians of the Galaxy and Spider-Man: Homecoming, then shared the article on Twitter, writing: "Working on Marvel shows is what pushed me to leave the VFX industry. They're a horrible client, and I've seen way too many colleagues break down after being overworked, while Marvel tightens the purse strings."

Govil's tweet has been liked over 85,000 times. In another comment, he added: "Because a lot of folks have mentioned it, this has been the case since the earliest days of the MCU. It didn't start recently, and it's not because of [Disney CEO Bob] Chapek. The issue is Marvel is too big, and can demand whatever they want. It's a toxic relationship." These issues of extreme workloads and a culture of crunch are reminiscent of those that developers have long faced in the video game industry, where a labor movement is currently underway to improve work conditions. And between Waititi's comments, the article by The Gamer, and Govil's tweets, Marvel's VF X issue is starting to become too big for the studio to ignore.

According to Govil, at least, this isn't a new issue. But it's one that has likely become even more prominent in recent years as the studio's success has grown and as its increased output on both the big and small screens has made its appetite for footage more acute. For context: Phase 1 featured six films across four years, while Phase 4 has already tallied six films and six live-action TV shows over the span of a year and a half. (That content pileup may also have something to do with pandemic-driven production delays that postponed releases originally scheduled for 2020. Even so, Marvel oversaturation is real right now.) It's doesn't seem as if these Marvel TV shows require less work or are on a significantly tighter budget than the films, either; on the contrary, WandaVision's number of VFX shots was higher than the number required for Avengers: Endgame, according to WandaVision costar Paul Bettany, and The Hollywood Reporter previously reported that MCU series like WandaVision, The Falcon and the Winter Soldier, and Hawkeye cost as much as $25 million per episode to make.

Even though it seems Marvel's VFX issues can be traced back to the early days of the Infinity Saga, the faltering quality of CGI and VFX in the studio's TV shows and movies has been more glaring and subject to criticism in Phase 4, in part because the quality of recent projects has varied overall. There have been plenty of bright spots, but the MCU is

facing both a quality and a quantity problem, and without

any real indication of where the franchise is heading as this phase comes to a close, it's becoming less crucial—and more challenging—to keep up with everything that Marvel releases. (Although it seems like the MCU is working toward a Secret Wars crossover event, and Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige has promised that Marvel's master plan will come into focus soon enough, the so-called interconnected cinematic universe has not been building toward a common goal as effectively as it did in the Infinity Saga.) Given how dominant a force Marvel has remained at the global box office as audiences have returned to theaters—last year's Spider-Man: No Way Home made over $1.9 billion at the box office on its way to becoming the sixth-highest-grossing movie of all time—Phase 4 may ultimately be regarded as an awkward transition between the Infinity Saga and whatever the next chapter will be. But as middling reviews come more frequently, and the second-weekend box office dropoffs—like Love and Thunder, Multiverse of Madness, and Eternals all just experienced—become more pronounced, superhero fatigue appears to be hitting the masses, leading to diminished patience for suspect CGI.

As long as Marvel Studios continues to rake in revenue at the box office, it may well wait out this VFX controversy until the VFX industry takes some form of collective action, such as unionizing to fight for better equity and working conditions. Attempts at forming unions and trade associations have failed in the past, though, revealing the challenges of establishing solidarity within a global industry that has only grown more competitive.

Still, given all the attention this issue has received in recent weeks, Marvel's CGI and VFX will likely be scrutinized even more closely as long as the MCU stays in this creative limbo. And with She-Hulk—a series that features several characters made almost entirely of visual effects—approaching in August, this VFX conversation may soon get louder still.

I'm a VFX Artist, and I'm Tired of Getting 'Pixel F------' by MARVEL

Interview by Chris Lee -

It's pretty well known and even darkly joked about across all the visual-effects houses that working on Marvel shows is really hard. When I worked on one movie, it was almost six months of overtime every day. I was working seven days a week, averaging 64 hours a week on a good week. Marvel genuinely works you really hard. I've had co-workers sit next to me, break down, and start crying. I've had people having anxiety attacks on the phone.

The studio has a lot of power over the effects houses, just because it has so many blockbuster movies coming out one after the other. If you upset Marvel in any way, there's a very high chance you're not going to get those projects in the future. So the effects houses are trying to bend over backward to keep Marvel happy.

To get work, the houses bid on a project; they are all trying to come in right under one another's bids. With Marvel, the bids will typically come in quite a bit under, and Marvel is happy with that relationship, because it saves it money. But what ends up happening is that all Marvel projects tend to be understaffed. Where I would usually have a team of ten VFX artists on a non-Marvel movie, on one Marvel movie, I got two including myself. So every person is doing more work than they need to.

The other thing with Marvel is it's famous for asking for lots of changes throughout the process. So you're already overworked, but then Marvel's asking for regular changes way in excess of what any other client does. And some of those changes are really major. Maybe a month or two before a movie comes out, Marvel will have us change the entire third act. It has really tight turnaround times. So yeah, it's just not a great situation all around. One visual-effects house could not finish the number of shots and reshoots Marvel was asking for in time, so Marvel had to give my studio the work. Ever since, that house has effectively been blacklisted from getting Marvel work.

Part of the problem comes from the MCU itself — just the sheer number of movies it has. It sets dates, and it's very inflexible on those dates; yet it's

quite willing to do reshoots and big changes very close to the dates without shifting them up or down. This is not a new dynamic.

Some of the problems I mentioned are universal to every show and every project. But not every client has the bullying power of Marvel.

I remember going to a presentation by one of the other VFX houses about an early MCU movie, and people were talking about how they were getting "pixel-fucked." That's a term we use in the industry when the client will nitpick over every little pixel. Even if you never notice it. A client might say, "This is not exactly what I want," and you keep working at it. But they have no idea what they want. So they'll be like, "Can you just try this? Can you just try that?" They'll want you to change an entire setting, an entire environment, pretty late in a movie.

The main problem is most of Marvel's directors aren't familiar with working with visual effects. A lot of them have just done little indies at the Sundance Film Festival and have never worked with VFX. They don't know how to visualize something that's not there yet, that's not on set with them. So Marvel often starts asking for what we call "final renders." As we're working through a movie, we'll send work-in-progress images that are not pretty but show where we're at. Marvel often asks for them to be delivered at a much higher quality very early on, and that takes a lot of time. Marvel does that because its directors don't know how to look at the rough images early on and make judgment calls. But that is the way the industry has to work. You can't show something super pretty when the basics are still being fleshed out. The other issue is, when we're in post-

production, we don't have a director of photography involved. So we're coming up with the shots a lot of the time. It causes a lot of incongruity.

A good example of what happens in these scenarios is the battle scene at the end of Black Panther. The physics are completely off. Suddenly, the characters are jumping around, doing all these crazy moves like action figures in space. Suddenly, the camera is doing these motions that haven't happened in the rest of the movie. It all looks a bit cartoony. It has broken the visual language of the film.

Things need to change on two ends of the spectrum. Marvel needs to train its directors on working with visual effects and have a better vision out of the gate. The studio needs to hold its directors' feet to the fire more to commit to what they want. The other thing is unionization. There is a growing movement to do that, because it would help make sure that the VFX houses can't take bids without having to consider what the impacts would be. Because a lot of the time, it's like, you get to work on a Marvel show, and you'll work on that for cheaper just because it's cool.

Some of the problems I mentioned are universal to every show and every project. But you end up doing less overtime on other shows. You end up being able to push back more on the directors. When they say something like, "Hey, I want this," you can be like, "This doesn't make sense." Not every client has the bullying power of Marvel.

'The Visual Effects Crisis': New Video Essay Examines Tenuous State Of Modern VFX Industry

Video by TheRoyalOceanFilmSociety

Revealing 'Rhythm & Hues: Life After Pi' Doc Exposes Grief, Anger and Troubled Business (Video)

By Carolyn Giardina – The Hollywood Reporter

A new documentary traces the fall of leading VFX house Rhythm & Hues and is packed with information that explains the problematic VFX business model, and also features some revealing moments that expose how the troubles have impacted those involved.

"We run this company for the people. To have hurt them so badly, it's really the antithesis what we wanted to do," says a tearful John Hughes, the company's beloved founder, in one interview recorded around the time of the bankruptcy.

Rhythm & Hues is the visual effects company that in 2013 filed for bankruptcy roughly two weeks before its work on Life of Pi won last year's VFX Oscar. "It's still hard to talk about," says a choked-up animator as she recalls the layoffs, which started by phone on a Sunday night.

Rhythm & Hues: Life After Pi explains that there's a bigger problem, as 21 VFX companies closed or filed for bankruptcy between 2003 and 2013. The high profile R&H bankruptcy, however, exposed the industry's troubled business model to a wider audience and mobilized the global VFX community to try to make it right. Among the activities of the past year, more than 500 people demonstrated on Hollywood Boulevard on the day of the 2013 Academy Awards, and a similar rally is planned for the day of this year's Oscars. Two who will be in attendance at that rally are Scott Leberecht, an art director at R&H; and Christina Lee Storm, an R&H alum who currently serves as executive director of Act One. They are the director and producer, respectively, of the documentary.

Filming occurred as the events were unfolding. "We were blindsided," Leberecht said. "We wanted to document it so we could maybe understand it some day. Everyone was so traumatized. We wanted to get people's feelings about what they were going through. I was afraid we would forget the details." So the filmmakers let the R&H team know that they wanted to hear from them. "A lot wanted to be interviewed," Leberecht said. "Some decided not to; I

think on an emotional level."

But a year later, the pair — and the VFX community — are still looking for answers and solutions. "Do I understand this more clearly? Maybe a few things. But I have more questions," admitted Leberecht.

The 30-minute Life After Pi documentary — funded by the filmmakers and made with the help of many who donated their time — can now be viewed online. "It's a great tool for discussion," Storm said, adding that she hopes it will also be used for screenings and evaluation of the business model. It is also the first chapter in an upcoming feature-length documentary titled Hollywood Ending: Why the Movie Capital of the World Is Forcing Filmmakers to Leave.

"Ironically I think the fact that the microphone got cut off has done more to get the message to the public than had I got to say it onstage that night," admitted Westenhofer in the documentary. The film explains many of the factors contributing to the VFX industry's "broken business model," including the impact of production delays, production subsidies/incentives, and fixed bid practices. In the documentary, Hughes related that he knew R&H needed to raise money in early 2012, and he made multiple trips to various Chinese cities in search of an investor.

"Twenty months of delays at $1.2 million to $1.6 million per month is anywhere from $24 million to $30 million of ad-ditional costs that we had to take on," he said, though the sound bite doesn't reveal what project or projects he was referring to. (Last year, word on the street was that R&H's other project that earned a 2013 VFX Oscar nomination, Snow White and the Huntsman, had some delays. Hughes said in the documentary, "I was prepared to sell my shares of stock for $1 if somebody would invest the $15 [million]-$20 million we needed."

Said R&H exec Lee Berger, "Then we had investors standing by who fell out at the last second."

"Everything was signed," added former board member Prashant Buyyala. "Then come Monday, the money just didn't show up."

Hughes lamented that prior to the bankruptcy, he had considered additional options that would have affected the employees, including laying off the team and altering their employment agreements. "I felt those would have so dramatically altered the culture of R&H, that they would have destroyed R&H. And instead we're in bankruptcy, so I ended up destroying R&H anyway," he said.

Looking back, Storm said, "we are still very much a family, despite the devastation. It's like you have gone through a war together." Last March, a wholly owned subsidiary of Prana Studios bought R&H in a bankruptcy auction. Hughes resigned after the sale, and sources say today there are fewer than 100 employees in the Los Angeles base (it also still has an operation in Vancouver). At the time of the bankruptcy, it had an estimated 1,400 employees worldwide.

The documentary concludes with three words: "Change starts now."

30:02

Rhythm & Hues: Life After Pi

Video By HollywoodEndingMovie