

# The state of the nation: Freelancing in SA's visual effects and animation industry

 By [Bradley Stilwell](#)

22 Jun 2013

Let me start by saying that I am not an animator per se. I can, model and rig a character, and, nine times out of ten, convey the intention needed in a creative brief, but the subtle, challenging demands of emotion through performance via a computer generated character? No.

My strengths and expertise lie further down the animation pipeline. I shade, texture, light, render and composite images, to produce what are hopefully considered good-looking images. As a Supervisor or Technical Director I am also involved in look-development and much of the technical planning needed to execute shots successfully later in the schedule, and further down the pipeline.

I have been fortunate to work abroad on major feature productions (Aardman's Oscar nominated 'Pirates! Band of Misfits' & Animal Logic's 'Legend of the Guardians'), as well as locally on many commercials. I've been doing this for a few years now, and I've managed to acquire a healthy perspective of the South African animation and visual-effects industry.

There is a lot going on in the film and animation industry, both in S.A. as well as abroad.

I'm tempted to label some of it 'good' and some of it 'bad' but experience has taught me that these terms are simply the point of view of the writer. So I will attempt to take a balanced point of view in the interests of both the 'Captains of Industry' as well as its 'Crew'.

I hope this article will be a straight-forward and honest appraisal of the state of visual-effects and animation in South Africa and will be of some value to young artists and technicians entering, or considering a career in, animation or film in South Africa.

One disclaimer I must make up front is that this article does not include the production service industry in South Africa. I have not worked in that part of the industry and know little about it. This article applies to the animation, post-production and visual effects industry in South Africa.

## A global perspective

In general, the visual-effects and animation industry is in a turbulent state.

Several well established studios have recently shut their doors, notably Mill TV and Rhythm and Hues. Digital Domain is

closing its Florida studio. Dreamworks is laying off 350 artists and Pixomondo has undergone major restructuring.

In addition, the global recession is hitting Europe (and in turn SA) hard.

'Emerging' industries like India and China are challenging established municipalities and, with the knock on effect of such technical sectors, the ripples extend outwards into greater economic effect, affecting the larger balance of 'power'.

Technology is ever-changing. Off-the-shelf software solutions result in more high-end animation and visual-effects becoming easily available to content producers. Smaller studios are doing great work and freelancers are finding it a frenetic time.

Africa, in particular Kenya, is becoming more attractive to foreign IT and technology investment. IBM recently set up Africa's first research lab in that country.

The social and online worlds are having a tremendous impact on entertainment as a whole. Crowd funding vehicles like Kickstarter are allowing individuals to raise comprehensive film budgets by themselves. Video on the web, through vendors like YouTube and Vimeo, have empowered any single person armed with a phone camera. Individuals like Freddie Wong are finding unique and inventive ways of connecting and communicating with audiences.

Some things however have not changed.

Skilled artist are still the most sought after commodity in the industry.  
Audiences still demand great entertainment.

Perhaps most pertinent, artists still consider career satisfaction a priority.

## **The state of the nation**

Locally, South Africa has a lot going for it. Our industry, although very small, is very fluid. Artists can, with perseverance and hard work, rise very quickly to become senior artists.

We don't have any unions and while some would count this a negative, in my experience unions stifle initiative and individual contribution. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the mining and transport sectors of South Africa.

We have the ear of our Government. The regional film commissions (CFC, GFC), national bodies like the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) as well as the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) are generally aware of the value of the film and post industry (see <http://nfvf.co.za/document/nfvf-south-african-film-industry-economic-baseline-study-april-2013>) and are engaging these sectors productively.

Our government generally takes a beating in the media but these bodies have been vital in helping many productions see the light of day. (Zambezia and Khumba, Cannes and Annecy marketing trips).

The difficult economic climate abroad could mean bountiful times for S.A. Foreign producers will be looking to cheaper markets to produce their content. Yes, we'll be competing with much larger industries and IT sectors like India and China but S.A. is primarily English speaking, in a more accessible time zone (for Europe anyway) and generally does not battle with piracy on such a grand scale. Add to this the fact that South African's have a reputation as hard workers, have many great stories to tell and a beautiful country to set them in, and we're in a good position to grow our industry.

## **Power *is* the people**

I recall an interesting conversation I had with Grant Freckleton, the Art Director on 'Legend of the Guardians', at the wrap party. He told of the evolution of Animal Logic's HR philosophy. He said that at some point Animal Logic realised that there

wasn't always going to be an endless supply of talent that they could simply burn through. It was at that point, and I'm paraphrasing here, that they realised the true value of their talent.

This is critical. It is at this point that a company, or indeed an industry, becomes sustainable and viable as a long term industry.

The animation and visual-effects industry in South Africa is, I believe, at that crossroads.

Corporately, we are battling to metamorphasise into our next incarnation. I use the word 'battle' because we are not completing the transition convincingly.

Animated feature production is a complex and mammoth undertaking. The investments are enormous and the returns take a long time to come in. And even then, success still depends on a range of capricious factors. In short, making animated films is a big gamble.

A successful feature however, is a beautiful thing to be part of, especially to the bottom line. Successful features make a lot of money.

Cape Town based animation studio Triggerfish recently completed not one but two animated features: 'Zambezia' and 'Khumba'. This is a magnificent achievement. But while completing production successfully is worthy of praise, in the global film market, a debut animated feature must make a decent profit to ensure the survival of the producing studio.

This is because animation studios are very expensive to run. Apart from specialised hardware and software, they depend on large numbers of very skilled, very expensive people.

Good films take skill to make, and skill does not come cheap. The greatest expense on any movie, animated or fx-heavy, by far, is its crew.

Enter the freelancer.

Big budget movie succeed because they are able to achieve detail and complexity unavailable to small scale and episodic productions. They are able to do this because they are scalable. This means that studios are able to scale up according to their production requirements. Generally, studios invest in proprietary infrastructure and systems, employ dedicated core staff and then bring in skilled 'guns for hire', freelancers, that can push out the production as fast as possible according to the highest quality money can buy.

This is where South Africa is coming up short.

Don't get me wrong. We've got great talent in this country. I've seen world-class work being produced in Cape Town.

We just don't have enough of it.

There were close to 500 people employed at Animal Logic in the making of 'Legend of the Guardians'. There were less than 100 people employed at Triggerfish. (Triggerfish is the leading independent animation producer on a cost to box-office return ratio.)

When production wrapped on Khumba those contracts came to an end and those artists were released into the industry as freelancers.

Many of those artists have gone on to form collectives, while others have started small studios themselves. Most of them have remained freelancers and are looking for work in South Africa and abroad.

So is this a bad thing? Well yes and no.

'No' because cultivated talent is a good thing. The industry benefits when our people grow in skill and experience. This will draw more work which will, in turn, bring more growth, skill and experience.

'Yes' because there is not much feature work in South Africa at the moment. In fact there are no animated features currently being produced in South Africa. Apart from commercials and a few series being shot here the local industry is in a bit of a slump.

## **So what's the solution?**

Apart from more productions, South Africa needs more large scale animation studios. When a studio completes a feature there is generally a gap between production. With only one studio in operation, like Triggerfish, this means a lot of skilled talent being dumped onto the market with no means to support themselves. If there were more studios in operation, then talent could be rotated, sustained and grown. This would ensure skills transfer and a growth in expertise. At the moment many of our artists are having to seriously consider alternative means to support themselves. Many of them are leaving the industry altogether. South Africa needs to hop on to the 'CG Circuit'. This happens abroad on an international basis between the major studios. Artists constantly refer each other for new projects so there is a circuit of sorts that artist travel. From Sydney one might sign up for a project in Singapore or London. From London one might have a colleague calling for talent on a project in Vancouver, or at a European studio. India and China are becoming exciting prospects for artists as well.

South Africa needs to plug into this circuit. But for this to happen we have to achieve a certain critical mass. As I see it this has to happen in 3 key ways: Foreign and local investment through efficient Government assistance, long term plans to educate IT sectors and deepen expertise in these markets, and finally plans to retain people and their hard-earned skills.

## **Investment through efficient Government assistance**

Governmental agencies like the dti and the NFVF have done a great job in assisting several studios with their productions. But is the private sector not missing an opportunity to capitalise on the industry?

Judy Prins, Leader of Deloitte Sport, Media & Entertainment explains that when compiling the (NFVF industry) report a multiplier of 2.89 was used, this means that for every R1 spent in the film industry, an additional R2.89 is generated in the industry and ancillary industries. This places the South African film industry mid-range when compared to the economic contributors of 99 other industries in the country.

The government benefits from the 2.89 multiplier which means for every R1 that they invest in the industry, the industry generates an additional R2.89. From the government's point of view, the industry is worth supporting. However, points out Prins, the private sector does not necessarily use the multiplier as an indicator of the return on its investment and hence it is more reticent about investing in the film industry.

Prins says that private investors base their return on investment (ROI) on the amounts received back from the film via the various revenue streams. "Currently, due to the fact that the distribution mechanisms are not generating sufficient funds back on the films, the ROI to private investors is fairly poor."

I'm not going to go into why these distribution mechanisms are not functioning optimally. I'd like to stay focused on the freelancers. But I think it's clear that investment, especially private investment, can help grow and sustain much needed talent in the industry. This in turn would enable healthy short and long term returns through original IP (Intellectual Property) for those investors. Creative talent is a lucrative thing but it all starts with those who have the means to invest.

## **Plans to grow animation & technology skills and expertise in South Africa**

There are a few good animation schools in S.A. These institutions train a number of people each year, but what happens once these graduates land in the workplace? Inevitably it is left to the commercial industry and facilities to provide employment and salaries to them. If not they are left to fend for themselves as inexperienced freelancers, and apart from [Animation SA](#) and [Safrea](#), (and I'm not sure how much these entities benefit freelancers) there isn't much in terms of growth and experience that can be gained. The only way for this to happen is for these new recruits to be exposed to large scale feature production. We need to see more international feature coming to these shores. The recent post-production rebate is a great move in the right direction. This Department of Trade and Industries (DTI) initiative allows 20-25% of foreign budgets to be claimed back from the government. There is also a local film incentive for local companies to benefit as well. [click here for details](#)

This is all good news and will most certainly bring more work our way, but does it benefit the man on the ground, the hard-working, independent South African artist or freelancer?' Yes' in that this means more work will coming their way allowing for the aforementioned growth and skills. 'No' in that freelancers salaries will still stay the same with only established companies and corporations enjoying the financial benefit. It's really up to the freelancer to look after themselves financially.

## **Retaining skills and personnel**

There are really only two reasons why people leave the country or the industry: money or stress. I believe stress comes as a result of bad financial management. So, in my opinion, it's really the fault of money. Or lack thereof.

Let me just say this up front: artists also like money.

Not only do we need it to feed and house our families, but we also like to enjoy our lives and live comfortably and do the things we like to do. We enjoy travel, and we enjoy art (I think artists enjoy this more than most), and we enjoy holidays. Some of us enjoy cycling, surfing, dining out, jogging on foreign shores, diving tropical reefs and discovering distant cultures. Others prefer foreign film festivals, European art museums, skiing, treating their family to a vacation, or simply renovating their home.

This might sound like stating the obvious but it's worth mentioning. There still exists, in the South African creative industry, a sense that freelancing as an artist is not a viable long term occupation. In speaking to freelancers I hear them say that they don't think they can raise families, own property, live comfortably, as an animator, digital artist or compositor. For many, it's something to be done before taking on the 'serious' mantle of producer or director.

This is untrue.

What we do, creating animated images and content, is a highly specialised skill. It takes years; decades even, to master the craft, to learn the fine balance between the technical, creative and logistical. We work in large teams, seeking harmony among the many moving parts that is animation and visual-effects production. Where a photo retoucher would focus on one image to a high degree, our projects require thousands of images to be completed by multiple teams specialised in different disciplines including organic and hard surface modelling, texture and shader development, character rigging and technical animation, fluid, fire, water and ocean simulations, fur and hair solutions, complex lighting, rendering and intricate multi-layered compositing, and all of this according to the language of film and photography.

How can anybody think this can't be a life-long love, a life-long career?

And with this realisation will come the willingness to value our people accordingly, and to pay them their due worth.

This is the fundamental shift that we face presently, in South Africa. This is how we keep our people.

## **So what is to be done?**

If you are a freelancer in the South African animation and vfx industry this is what I suggest:

- 1. Be confident:** Don't under value yourself. If you are starting out don't be unrealistic in your expectations but if you've been around for a while and do good work don't be afraid to set your rate and/or negotiate hard for a better rate. Be confident in your self belief too. Nobody is going to believe in you for you. If you are fresh out of college then your work is not going to be Pixar level. That's OK. Show off what you got and what you can do. This will get you to Pixar, or the like, someday.
- 2. Enjoy your work:** Creativity will be stunted unless you are happy in your work. It's up to you to make yourself happy. If this means shifting furniture around to make your home office more comfortable for yourself then do it. If it means politely stating your unhappiness with the way your current job is being handled then do it. If it means asking for more money because you are being exploited then do it. Politely, but do it.
- 3. Network and collaborate with your peers:** 90% of my work comes through referrals. It might be a personal friend or it might be a linked-in contact but people will call you because you come to mind. Sitting at home doing great work is one thing but getting your name out there is another.
- 4. Create your own content:** Stimulate yourself and your own work. Create for the pure pleasure of it. Your professional career will flourish accordingly.
- 5. Quote every job:** And ensure your terms are clear on the quote. Terms can include working hours, whether or not your work weekends and public holidays, how and when you expect payment (including if you require 50% upfront). A quote accepted is like a contract. With a clear quote and comprehensive terms you may not need an employment contract (although it is still advisable to get a contract no matter how short the job)
- 6. Back up all work once you've done a job:** When a company outsources work to a client they are saying that they trust this part of their business to you. Treat it as if they would if they did it in-house. If a client calls at a later stage with further requirements or changes, you should have the material ready unless they explicitly stated that they would hold all material. This should all be stated and signed by the client either in your quote or in a contract offered upon your acceptance of the job. If a client has problems getting hold of material after the job is complete it is unlikely he will outsource work again.
- 7. Establish a web and social media presence:** You're in the business of images. Nothing does a better job of selling you than your work itself. A website is doing this even when you're sleeping. Social media is the vehicle that will carry your work to people and people to your work. Use it. If you are a shy person see the first point of this list.
- 8. Market yourself:** See point 1. Then get your work out there. Web, social, newsletters, show reel, personal calls. Get creative but get your name out there.
- 9. Establish relationships with your clients:** This is vital. Clients call the people they like first. Don't be superficial but try to establish a rapport with potential clients. Identify common interests and go work from there. Look after existing clients. This is vital and to be honest I still haven't mastered this one. I've let clients down because the job was done and I was too busy on the next one. These clients are precisely the ones you'll be itching to call when the work dries up but you'll know what they'll say.
- 10. I suggest keeping time sheets:** This is especially if you are working late nights and over weekends. Even if you aren't getting paid over time it's simply a professional way of managing your time. It also helps communicate your efforts to your client. As a supervisor I find it very helpful to know how much time an artist is using on a shot. This can be compared to the quoted time and can assist in schedule adjustments, compensating or foreseeing any slippage. I have included a sample time sheet at the end of this article.
- 11. Look after yourself:** Freelancing can be stressful, especially when you are out of work. Eat well, get some exercise, ensure you are comfortable in front of your computer. This includes a comfortable seat and eye level monitor. This

becomes more important the older you get but it's crucial to start out with good habits. Manage your time and don't hesitate to let your client know if you think they are making unrealistic demands of you and your time.

**12. Set your terms:** The best way to do this is up front. When you quote or accept a job, be clear as to how you plan to complete a job in the quoted time. Your quote should cover the brief but your terms explain that anything extra or outside of the brief requires a new quote and will be considered a new job. This is a bit of a balancing act because you will want to go the extra mile to keep clients happy so they will call on you again but sometimes, as a freelancer, you can't afford to keep working on a job that overruns. This is why it's so important to quote well and have your terms explained well before you start the job.

These are my Terms and Conditions I use on my quote:

*TERMS AND CONDITIONS: This is an estimate and subject to a 10% variation. Acceptance of this estimate indicates acceptance of the costs and gives approval for production to go ahead. Any changes to the nature of the work performed will result in an additional revised estimate being submitted. Authors corrections, overtime and duplicate materials charges will be billed in addition unless specifically included in this estimate. This estimate shall remain valid for fourteen days from date of preparation thereof. A maximum of two (2) reverts is included in this quote after which additional costs will be incurred. Copyright in respect of any work commissioned will remain the property of Bradley Stilwell until such time as the full cost thereof has been paid for by the client. Errors and omissions excluded (E&OE).*

You may also want to specify a limited number of reverts for clients to make changes. I've had clients making endless changes to the same job. If you allow 2 or 3 reverts and state this in your quote then the client is aware of how much they can change. A revert is one cycle of incoming notes/comments/changes to address and the outgoing amended product. Any more reverts after the allotted amount means a new quote is issued.

One other thing to establish is your responsibilities. Make sure you know what to do and that you can do it in your quoted working hours. If a client starts asking you to do things you don't know how to do or don't have the time for, then you will be able to tell them that this is beyond the scope of your quote/contract.

**13. Save for a rainy day:** Try to accumulate approximately 3 months salary as a savings for times when work dries up. Not only will you be able to pull through the dry periods but you will also sleep better all year round.

**14. Be sure to include expenses such as medical aid:** Also include unemployment insurance, personal insurance and investment policies in your rates you charge. To do this calculate the monthly or annual expenses of these items and factor them into your monthly budget. Calculate your daily or hourly rate with these and other expenses in mind.

**15. Invest in your greatest asset: You!** We work in a big industry with lots of opportunity so be multi-skilled. Take up photography or art classes. Grow yourself and your skills.

If you are a producer or studio in South Africa this is what I suggest:

**1. Choose the right people:** Frustration is borne out of bad recruiting choices. To maximise workflow ensure you have the right person for the right job. This is your responsibility, not theirs.

**2. Invest in people:** Expensive software and fancy hardware does not a successful production make. Skilled artists do. If you are able to, offer training perks and packages. One way to do this is to have an online training subscription with digital-tutors, cmi-vfx, fxphd, gnomon or cgworkshops. You can then let employees and freelancers into these accounts either permanently or for the duration of the contract.

**3. Understand that, although they are not your client, or a big-shot director, your artists are people too:** They have families they need to get home to and will operate better if they are relaxed and well rested. It's vital to maintain a healthy relationship with each and every artist, either personally or through a strong HR department. If you do you will

foresee difficulty and be able to alleviate stress and disruptions. This can make or break your deadline.

**4. Schedule well:** Most of the unpleasant jobs I've worked on have been as a result of bad management. Expecting a contractor or freelancer to bail you out of a tight spot you didn't account for is bad form. Crucifying him for failing to do so is a downright sin.

**5. Don't expect the artists to pick up the financial slack:** If you're having to trim budgets, do it across the board. Driving your artists' rates down so you can keep your cut is going to harm your people, damage your product, and ultimately set you back anyway.

**6. People come first:** Cut budget wherever you need to but leave people for last.

**8. Pay well:** Take a look the world around you. Being tight-fisted is such a cliché.

**9. See the bigger picture:** You may get cheaper quotes in India or China, but are you going to deal with language and communication issues, piracy, travel & logistics, and most importantly creative quality? Sometimes it makes more sense to pay for quality.

**10. Consider medical plans and UIF:** Unemployment insurance fund, payment for contractors, especially if you are running long contracts are where these costs need to be considered. If the contractor has a plan then consider medical allowance to help pay for it. A decent HR department will know this.

**11. Be clear about responsibilities:** This is critical. There are 8-10 hours in a working day. A person can only do so much. Focus your talent to maximise efficiency and ensure you have an open channel with your people so they can tell you if they are drifting or getting stuck. Don't make unrealistic demands or bury your head in the ground. As producer you are responsible to make sure your money is not wasted by idle hands. If it is, then it's an incorrect recruiting choice (in which case HR is flawed) or you're not managing them properly.

**10. Love your people:** I say this tongue-in-cheek but I do mean it. True leaders don't pay for loyalty, they inspire it. Love and lead your crew (authentically) and they will be there for their captain when they are needed. (This does not mean you don't have to pay well)

The views above are mine alone. As an individual I'm sure there is a ton I may have missed or simply mistook. Please feel free to comment and feedback below. It is appreciated.

[Sample timesheet](#)

## Source:

<http://nfvf.co.za/article/a-good-investment>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema\\_of\\_South\\_Africa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema_of_South_Africa)

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Also see <http://www.bradleystilwell.com>

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