OCCUPATIONAL OUTLOOK HANDBOOK

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Special Effects Artists and Animators

PRINTER-FRIENDLY

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Summary

Summary

Quick Facts: Special Effects Artists and Animators	
2021 Median Pay	$78,790 per year $37.88 per hour
Typical Entry-Level Education	Bachelor's degree
Work Experience in a Related Occupation	None
On-the-job Training	None
Number of Jobs, 2020	62,400
Job Outlook, 2020-30	16% (Much faster than average)
Employment Change, 2020-30	9,900

What Special Effects Artists and Animators Do

Special effects artists and animators create images that appear to move and visual effects for various forms of media and entertainment.

Work Environment

Many artists and animators work in offices; others work from home.

How to Become a Special Effects Artist or Animator

Special effects artists and animators typically need a bachelor's degree in computer graphics, art, or a related field to develop both a portfolio of work and the technical skills that many employers prefer.

Pay

The median annual wage for special effects artists and animators was $78,790 in May 2021.

Job Outlook

Employment of special effects artists and animators is projected to grow 16 percent from 2020 to 2030, much faster than the average for all occupations.

About 7,800 openings for special effects artists and animators are projected each year, on average, over the decade. Many of those openings are expected to result from the need to replace workers who transfer to different occupations or exit the labor force, such as to retire.

State & Area Data

Explore resources for employment and wages by state and area for special effects artists and animators.

Similar Occupations

Compare the job duties, education, job growth, and pay of special effects artists and animators with similar occupations.

More Information, Including Links to O*NET

Learn more about special effects artists and animators by visiting additional resources, including O*NET, a source on key characteristics of workers and occupations.

What They Do

What Special Effects Artists and Animators Do

Special effects artists and animators create two- and three-dimensional models, images that appear to move, and visual effects for television, movies, video games, and other forms of media.

Duties

Special effects artists and animators typically do the following:

- Use computer programs and illustrations to create graphics and animation (images that appear to move)
- Work with a team of animators and artists to create a movie, game, or visual effect
- Research upcoming projects to help create realistic designs or animation
- Edit animation and effects on the basis of feedback from directors, other animators, game designers, or clients
- Meet with clients, other animators, games designers, directors, and other staff (which may include actors) to review deadlines and development timelines

Special effects artists and animators create two- and three-dimensional models and animation.

Special effects artists and animators often work in a specific medium. Some focus on creating animated movies or video games. Others create visual effects for movies and television shows. Creating computer-generated images (known as CGI) may include taking images of an actor's movements and then animating them into three-dimensional characters. Other animators design scenery or backgrounds for locations.

Artists and animators can further specialize within these fields. Within animated movies and video games, artists often specialize in characters or in scenery and background design. Video game artists may focus on level design: creating the look, feel, and layout for the levels of a video game.

Animators work in teams to develop a movie, a visual effect, or an electronic game. Each animator works on a portion of the project, and then the pieces are put together to create one cohesive animation.

Some special effects artists and animators create their work primarily by using computer software or by writing their own computer code. Many animation companies have their own computer animation software that artists must learn to use. Video game designers also work in a variety of platforms, including mobile gaming and online social networks.

Other artists and animators prefer to work by drawing and painting by hand and then translating the resulting images into computer programs. Some special effects artists use storyboards or "animatics," which look like a comic strip, to help visualize the final product during the design process.

Many special effects artists and animators put their creative work on the Internet. If the images become popular, these artists can gain more recognition, which may lead to future employment or freelance work.

Work Environment

Special effects artists and animators held about 62,400 jobs in 2020. The largest employers of special effects artists and animators were as follows:

Self-employed workers	59%
Motion picture and video industries	11
Software publishers	9
Computer systems design and related services	4
Advertising, public relations, and related services	3

Many artists and animators work in offices; others work from home.

Special effects artists and animators frequently work in offices.

Work Schedules

Most special effects artists and animators work a regular schedule; however, when deadlines are approaching, they may need to work nights and weekends.

How to Become a Special Effects Artist or Animator

Special effects artists and animators typically need a bachelor's degree in computer graphics, art, or a related field to develop both a portfolio of work and the technical skills that many employers prefer.

Education

Special effects artists and animators typically need a bachelor's degree in computer graphics, animation, fine arts, or a related field.

Bachelor's degree programs in computer graphics often include courses in computer science in addition to art. Programs in animation often require classes in drawing, animation, and film. Programs in fine arts may include courses in painting, drawing, and sculpture. Schools also may have specialized degrees in topics such as interactive media or game design.

Employers usually prefer to hire candidates who have a good portfolio and strong technical skills, both of which students may develop while earning a degree.

Advancement

Special effects artists and animators who show strong teamwork and time-management skills can advance to supervisory positions, where they are responsible for one aspect of a visual effects team. Some artists might advance to leadership or directorial positions, such as an art director or producer or director.

Other Experience

Skills in graphics and animation can be honed through self-study. Special effects artists and animators can develop these skills to enhance their portfolios, which may make it easier to find job opportunities.

Important Qualities

Artistic talent. Animators and artists should have artistic ability and a good understanding of color, texture, and light. However, they may be able to compensate for artistic shortcomings with better technical skills.

Communication skills. Special effects artists and animators need to work as part of a team and respond well to criticism and feedback.

Computer skills. Many special effects artists and animators use computer programs or write programming code to do most of their work.

Creativity. Artists and animators must be able to think creatively to develop original ideas and make them come to life.

Time-management skills. The workdays required by most studio and game design companies can be long, particularly when there are tight deadlines. Artists and animators need to be able to manage their time effectively when a deadline approaches.

Employers look for workers who have a good portfolio of work and strong computer programming skills.

<- Work Environment   Pay ->
Pay

Pay

The median annual wage for special effects artists and animators was $78,790 in May 2021. The median wage is the wage at which half the workers in an occupation earned more than that amount and half earned less. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $46,000, and the highest 10 percent earned more than $131,370.

In May 2021, the median annual wages for special effects artists and animators in the top industries in which they worked were as follows:

Advertising, public relations, and related services	$87,540
Software publishers	84,540
Motion picture and video industries	78,790
Computer systems design and related services	77,740

Most special effects artists and animators work a regular full-time schedule; however, when deadlines are approaching, they may need to work nights and weekends.

Special Effects Artists and Animators

Median annual wages, May 2021

Special effects artists and animators	$78,790
Art and design workers	$48,220
Total, all occupations	$45,760

Note: All Occupations includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics

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Job Outlook

Job Outlook

Employment of special effects artists and animators is projected to grow 16 percent from 2020 to 2030, much faster than the average for all occupations.

About 7,800 openings for special effects artists and animators are projected each year, on average, over the decade. Many of those openings are expected to result from the need to replace workers who transfer to different occupations or exit the labor force, such as to retire.

Employment

Much of the projected employment growth in this occupation is due to recovery from the COVID-19 recession that began in 2020 and is likely to occur early in the decade.

Projected growth will be due to increased demand for animation and visual effects in video games, movies, and television.

Consumers will continue to demand more realistic video games, movie and television special effects, and three-dimensional movies. This will create demand for newer computer hardware, which will enhance the complexity of animation and visual effects. Additional special effects artists and animators will be required to meet this increased demand.

Special Effects Artists and Animators

Percent change in employment, projected 2020-30

Special effects artists and animators	16%
Total, all occupations	8%
Art and design workers	4%

Note: All Occupations includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program

Further, an increased demand for computer graphics for mobile devices, such as smart phones, will lead to more job opportunities. Special effects artists will be needed to create animation for games and applications for mobile devices.

Employment projections data for special effects artists and animators, 2020-30

Special effects artists and animators
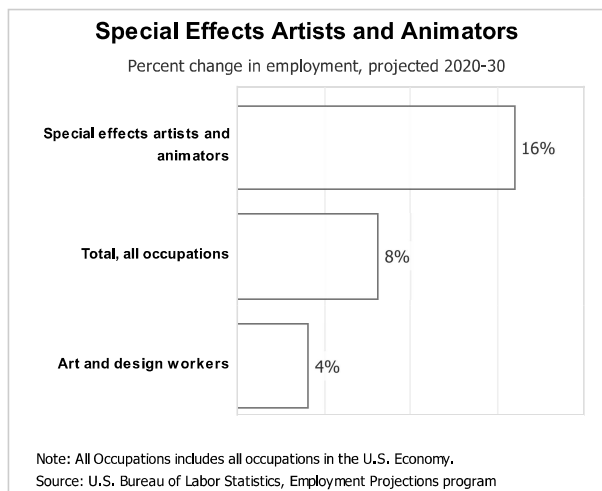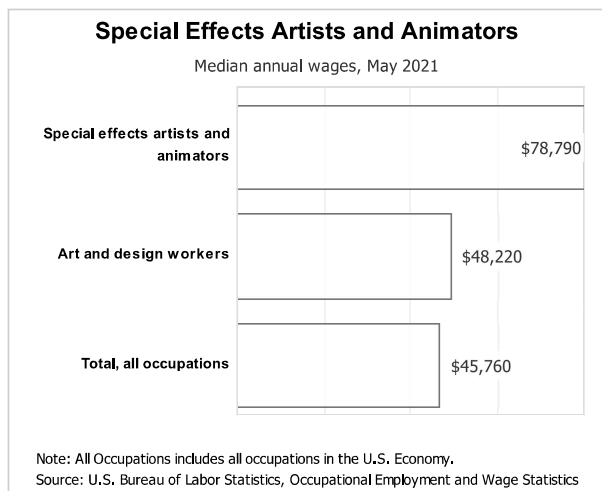
SOC Code:
27-1014

Employment, 2020:
62,400

Projected Employment, 2030:
72,300

Change, 2020-30 (Percent):
16

Change, 2020-30 (Numeric):
9,900

Employment By Industry:
Get data

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program

State & Area Data

Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS)

The Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) program produces employment and wage estimates annually for over 800 occupations. These estimates are available for the nation as a whole, for individual states, and for metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. The link(s) below go to OEWS data maps for employment and wages by state and area.

- Special effects artists and animators

Projections Central

Occupational employment projections are developed for all states by Labor Market Information (LMI) or individual state Employment Projections offices. All state projections data are available at www.projectionscentral.com . Information on this site allows projected employment growth for an occupation to be compared among states or to be compared within one state. In addition, states may produce projections for areas; there are links to each state's websites where these data may be retrieved.

CareerOneStop

CareerOneStop includes hundreds of occupational profiles with data available by state and metro area. There are links in the left-hand side menu to compare occupational employment by state and occupational wages by local area or metro area. There is also a salary info tool to search for wages by zip code.

Similar Occupations

This table shows a list of occupations with job duties that are similar to those of special effects artists and animators.

Art Directors

Job Duties:
Art directors are responsible for the visual style and images in magazines, newspapers, product packaging, and movie and television productions.

Entry-Level Education:
Bachelor's degree

2021 Median Pay:
$100,890

Computer Programmers

Job Duties:
Computer programmers write, modify, and test code and scripts that allow computer software and applications to function properly.

Entry-Level Education:
Bachelor's degree

2021 Median Pay:
$93,000

Craft and Fine Artists

Job Duties:
Craft and fine artists use a variety of materials and techniques to create art for sale and exhibition.

Entry-Level Education:
See How to Become One

2021 Median Pay:
$49,960

Film and Video Editors and Camera Operators

Job Duties:
Film and video editors and camera operators manipulate moving images that entertain or inform an audience.

Entry-Level Education:
Bachelor's degree

2021 Median Pay:
$60,360

Graphic Designers

Job Duties:
Graphic designers create visual concepts, using computer software or by hand, to communicate ideas that inspire, inform, and captivate consumers.

Entry-Level Education:
Bachelor's degree

2021 Median Pay:
$50,710

Producers and Directors

Job Duties:
Producers and directors make business and creative decisions about film, television, stage, and other productions.

Entry-Level Education:
Bachelor's degree

2021 Median Pay:
$79,000

Web Developers and Digital Designers

Job Duties:
Web developers create and maintain websites. Digital designers develop, create, and test website or interface layout, functions, and navigation for usability.

Entry-Level Education:
Bachelor's degree

2021 Median Pay:
The annual wage is not available.

More Info

Contacts for More Information

For information about accredited schools of art and design, visit

National Association of Schools of Art and Design

For more information about careers in video game design, visit

Game Career Guide

O*NET

Special Effects Artists and Animators

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