# 'VFX'

## https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5J-EHWUyRY

As sad as it may be, one of my favourite kinds of days are those where I get to spend 6+ hours in front of After Effects. I started learning AE back in January 2016 and after getting over it's initially intimidating arsenal of effects and possibilities it soon became my favourite piece of software. Over the past 4 years I'd say I've gotten quite good at navigating it's UI and using it to sculpt neurological creative visions into collections of pixels that resemble my ideas. What I love about AE is once you get a hang of the fundamentals it really allows you to get creative with experimenting and, thanks to the incredible plug-ins you can get if you have the admin password to your own computer, you can come out with some great visual content. So it was quite foolish of me to choose VFX as one of my units as I was far beyond beginner level.

What I expected to get out of the VFX unit was the opportunity to learn about expressions, more advanced camera tracking and compositing. Instead what we got was a man who still uses Final Cut Pro X out of choice. There was nothing inherently bad about Paul and in a way I felt sorry for him as he had been put in a position of high expectation that Philip Osboure had secured last year. He had assembled a suitable beginners course for After Effects, ranging through all the basics like animation with bezier keyframes and your typical disintegration effects, but there was nothing on the syllabus that I didn't already know. In fact for the one lesson that I stayed until the end I fixed 3 students' problems that he didn't know how to solve. Plus when he said that even he didn't know what we'd be marked on for final output it didn't put us in any state of confidence in him.

On the first lesson we learnt how to create a 3D cube and animate it bouncing in and eventually coming to a stable position. I could've sworn I uploaded the export of this Pixar-rivaling animation to my Google drive but I can't seem to find it anywhere, so just believe me when I say that John Lasseter would've been quaking.

The steps to doing this were:
1. Create a Null layer in the centre to use as the control for all sides of the cube
2. Create 6 540 x 540 white solids and make them 3D layers
3. Follow the routine of moving a solid layer 220 pixels in the Z axis, parenting it to the Null and then rotating the Null 90 degrees (4 times in the X axis and 2 times in Y axis)

4. Then animate the control Null's position properties with easy ease keyframes to come in from the top of the screen, bounce on the floor and diminish it's bounces until it comes to a stand still.

When we were told that what we'd be marked on for the VFX unit would be a 30 second (minimum) title sequence I was initially vexed. This had nothing to do with VFX, which turned out to be unintentional false advertising, as it turned out this unit should've been called Motion Graphics. Making a 30 second title sequence would've been a waste of time for me, as I had nothing to make a title sequence for and even if I did, 30 seconds is wayyyyyyyyy too long for a student film. Even Breaking Bad managed to be the best show ever with a 10 second title sequence. My skills would've been better utilised fulfilling a much needed task that had been haunting the course for years… Updating the course ident.

Because Rosie had given no incentive whatsoever for anyone to actually take the time to update it (other than saying it would look good), I decided to propose to Jeremiah that I would create a new course ident as a replacement for the 30 second title sequence I was meant to make for this unit and thankfully he agreed. This made me care a lot more about this unit as there were actual stakes to what I was creating. I wanted to make something stylish that showed off the courses' ambiguous and experimental nature whilst also being minimalist enough to fit before any piece of promotional material regardless of the content. It also needed to be good enough to finally put the old ident 6 feet into the earth for the dignity of every FDA student. Even at an open day 3 years ago I remember thinking how bad it was. It's problems included having no motion or development for 10 seconds and looking like the result of someone who had just discovered displacement maps in AE. Plus it contained the unanimously biggest FDA cliche: generic glitches for basic bitches. Somehow it even managed to transcend it's poor design beyond the realms of sight by having one of the most annoying sound designs that somehow made the following obnoxious dubstep feel like a sonic rescue. Even my mum, who usually has no opinion over the nuances of visual content, said that the sound of tuning a shortwave radio was simply annoying. If you can't tell, I felt very passionately that it needed to be updated.

My first idea when designing the animation of the ident was that it would take very little change to rework UCA into FDA. The U becomes the F by extending a line and rotating it 90 degrees, the C becomes the D by rotating 180 and adding a

line and the A is already conveniently present. The problem I encountered with this was that the whole 'Film and Digital Art' phrase would have to be in the same style as the UCA logo, composed of separate blocks. I went into Photoshop and visualised what this would look like with the word 'Film' and immediately decided to avoid using the block style as it looked too angular and unusual. Instead I decided to do some research into what font the UCA logo used for it's 'University for the Creative Arts' phrase. I found this article from 2015 that talked about the (thankful) change of the UCA logo and it said that Spin, the company who made the logo, used 'Lineto's Circular' as their font. Seeing 'Film and Digital Art' in Lineto's Circular it was clear that this was an obvious choice that complimented the UCA logo that would precede it in the animation. I had to customise the typeface slightly to resize the letter 'i' so it would be less significant in the phrase and also moved around some letters so they were closer together and would all fit on a singular baseline. You can see the differences between the original typeface (left) and my altered version (right).
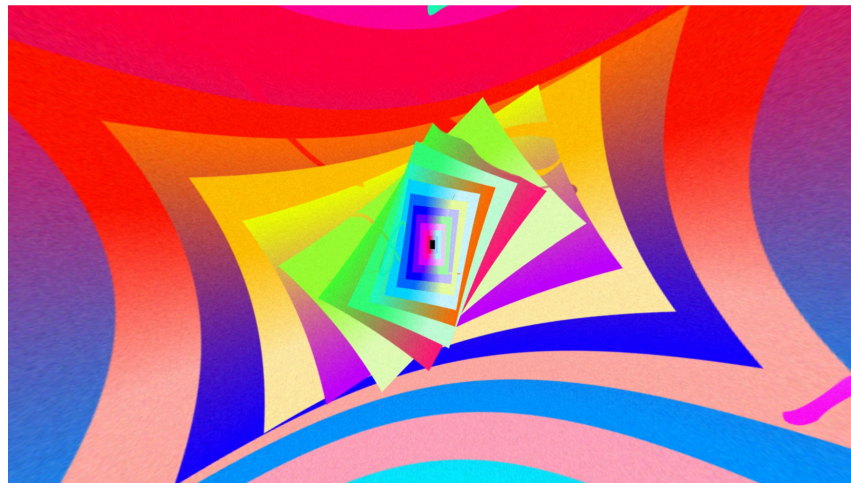


I'm a massive sucker for unbroken sequences, so for the course ident I knew I wanted to create a way for the ident to transition seamlessly into whatever video it preceded. My initial idea was for the viewer's perspective to turn into a 1st person POV in some sort of VR environment after the words had finished animating. They'd look down at some glowing hands and then walk up to the D of 'Digital' and open it like a door to transition into the next video. After some thought this seemed over complicated and a little gimmicky so I decided to change it to something coming out of the door and sucking the viewer in. Whilst researching for my dissertation proposal I came across an artwork by Artie Vierkant called 'Image Objects' that I found incredibly visually satisfying. Although the minimalist sculptures consisted of basic shapes and basic colour combinations they somehow looked so stylish that they inspired me to base whatever came out of
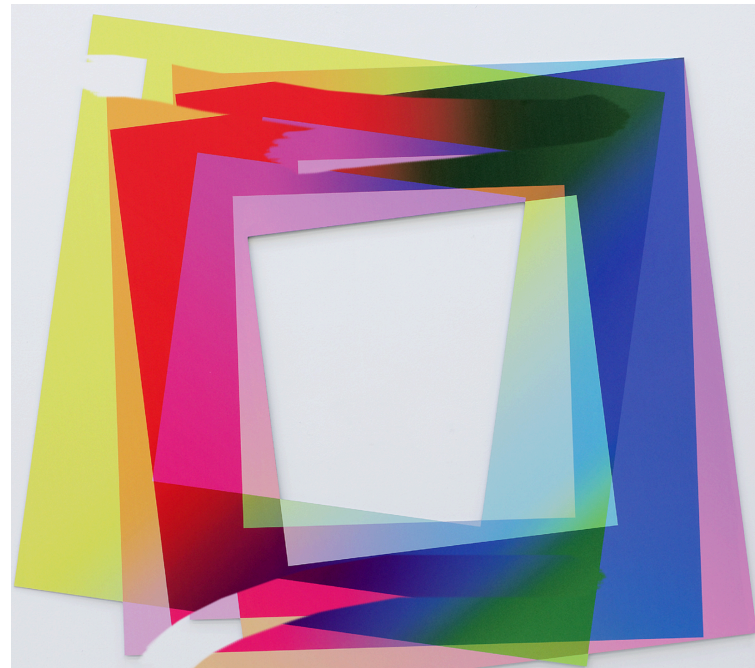
the door on 'Image Objects'. Plus the subtext to Artie Vierkant's sculptural series seemed very relevant to FDA as it existed between the physical object and the mediated digital image, and through its existence highlighted the increasingly fluid boundary between the two. According to Net Art Anthology "The sculptures responded to a moment in which contemporary art audiences began to experience exhibitions primarily through its online representation. For Vierkant, this moment marked a decisive shift in the definition of the work of art, which now included these online images as well as any further variations generated by audiences". I thought this was very fitting to the interdisciplinary nature of our course and also to the moment we currently live in where online connection is necessary to replace what was once physical.

I wanted the colour tunnel that came out of the door to have some sort of physical effect on the letters around it. To do this in a physically accurate way I decided to use Newton 3, a physics engine for motion graphics in After Effects, to simulate how all of the letters would individually react to a repelling magnet in the centre of the frame getting stronger. The result looked really cool and gave a new dynamic layer to the animation that added to the idents complexity whilst not overpowering the rest of the visual elements in the scene.

The colour tunnel was composed of a collection of really simple effects that worked together to sell the illusion that it was 3D. All it was was 18 solid layers (each 1920 x 1080 pixels) that got progressively smaller. I needed exactly 18 layers as to complete the full RGB spectrum at 20 degree intervals you need 18 20 degree intervals (as there are 360 degrees of hue value). The biggest rectangle needed a scale property of 10%, 11% to fill the door and as I needed 18 equally smaller versions of that initial rectangle each one would need to be 0.6% smaller in the Y axis before it would get to 0 (11 divided by 18 = 0.6111 rounded down to 0.6% so that the final rectangle would only just not be 0). Then I had one Null that contained the scale and rotation keyframes that I duplicated 18 times, each one with a 2 frame offset. Then I just had to parent each solid layer to its respective Null and then manually change the final scale keyframe so it would only just fill the frame. Then to emphasise the scaling momentum I applied an optics compensation effect over a pre comp of the colour tunnel so that the corners would warp outwards and speed up the motion. Then to fake the illusion of the length of the corridor behind the door I just had all 18 solid layers behind a black solid that got slowly smaller so it looked like the corridor was lighting up with the colours.

The colour lines that come out of the door were from an animation pack that I like to use called 'Liquid Elements'. I changed the stroke width and colour of them to fit the style of the animation and then used corner pins to fake them being 3D by distorting their perspective so they got

bigger as they got to the edge of the frame. Then I used them again as an alpha matte on a version of the colour tunnel pre-comp that only had every other layer turned on so that I'd be able to have the lines animating in the appropriate colour scheme as the colour tunnel. The final After Effects MASTER timeline looked like this.
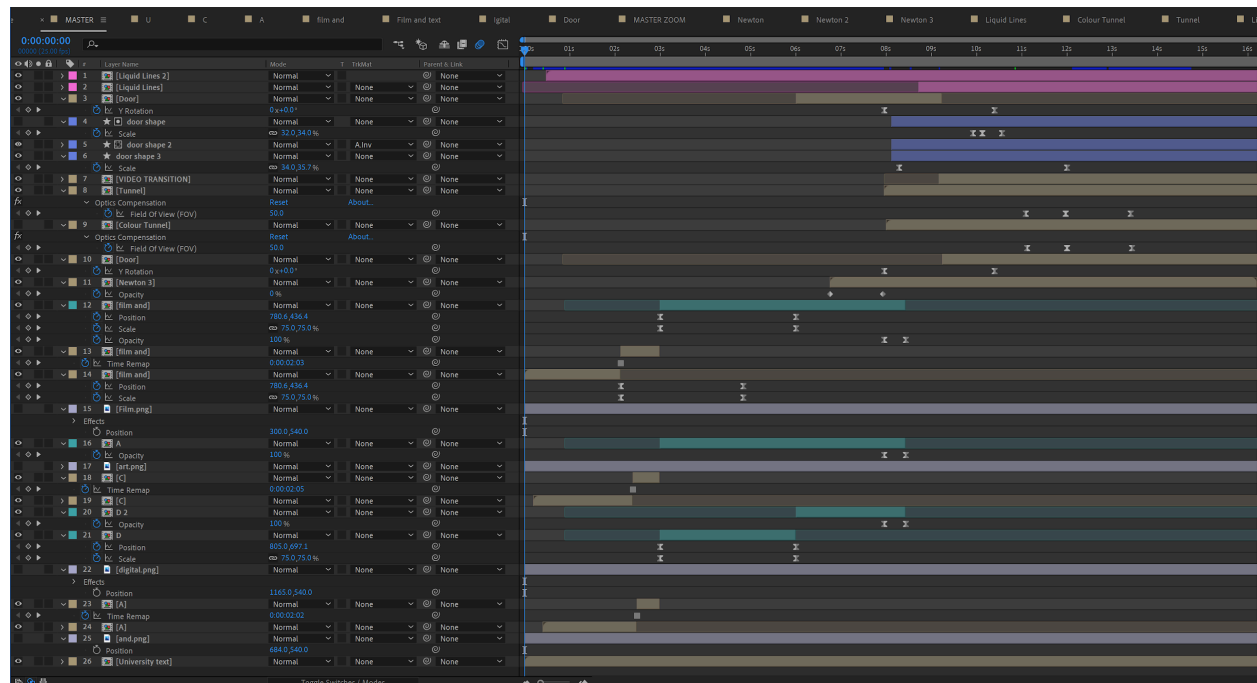


Finally I set up a precomp in the AE project so that all you have to do is insert a video into the precomp and in the MASTER composition it will automatically scale and rotate in to complete the seamless transition between the ident and proceeding video. PLEASE use this in the future as I do **not** want to see some lazily edited showreel where the reel just opacity crossfades in from blackness.

For the sound design I decided to repurpose various synth rings I've used in previous projects from EpidemicSounds.com. I went back into those old premiere projects and just copied and pasted the sound designs into a new sequence called 'all sound designs' and then found the effects that I liked and created an ambiguously atonal synth soundscape that complimented the motion of the animation. I'm actually really pleased with how this turned out as its reverby effects make it quite interesting to listen to and the sound of the colour tunnel sucking the viewer in crescendos with a growling bass tone that vibrates my desk really nicely when coming out of my subwoofer. The final sound design timeline looked like this.
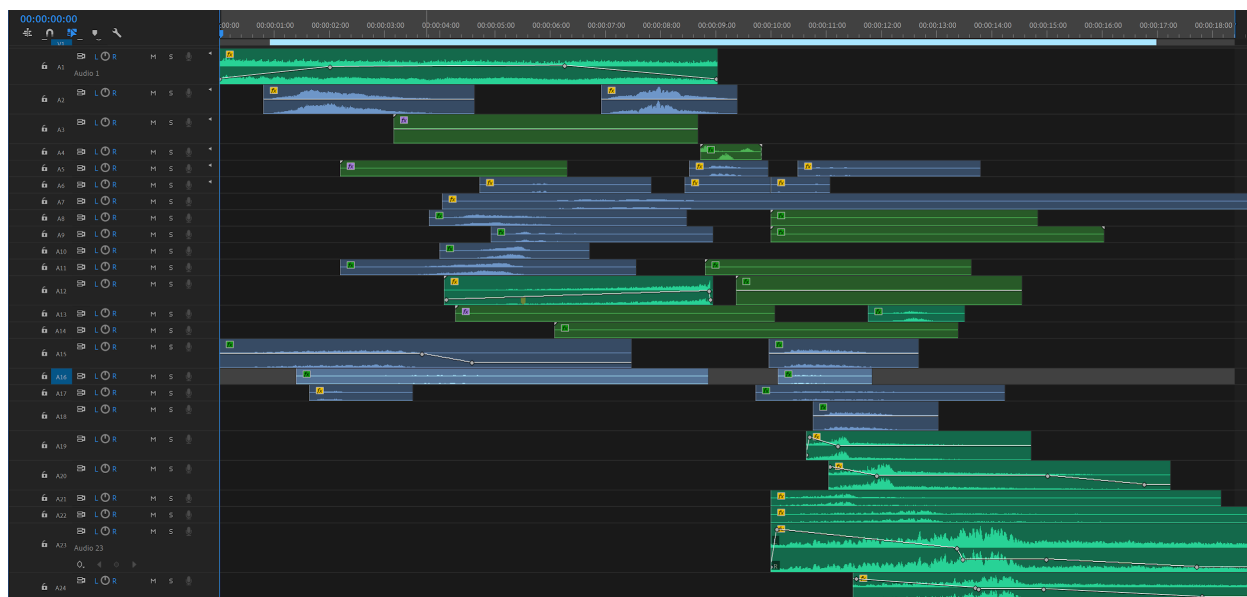
In terms of time management, I decided to save completing this unit until I was near the end of all my 2nd year work. This is because I wanted some creative aspect to look forward to so I didn't have to end the year with all the written work that I like the least. So I made a to-do list and decided to complete as many blogs as I could before I started tackling the course ident. This also gave me more time to think about what I wanted to make for the course ident. This was a good approach as it meant that by the time I started the course ident I had already completed the written aspects of the Avid unit, studio shoot, professional development and my dissertation proposal… all of them being tasks I would've normally put off until it caused more stress than it was worth.

Then I spent 17 and a half hours of focused work over 3 days creating the ident. I like to plan out all of my working time using a method of time management I learnt in Cal Newport's Deep Work book. Each line represents half an hour and in those allocated time slots I have a strict no phone/distractions rule. It allows me to be far more efficient with my work time and is a tactic I've used for all my work for the past 2 years. You can see my work diary for those days below.
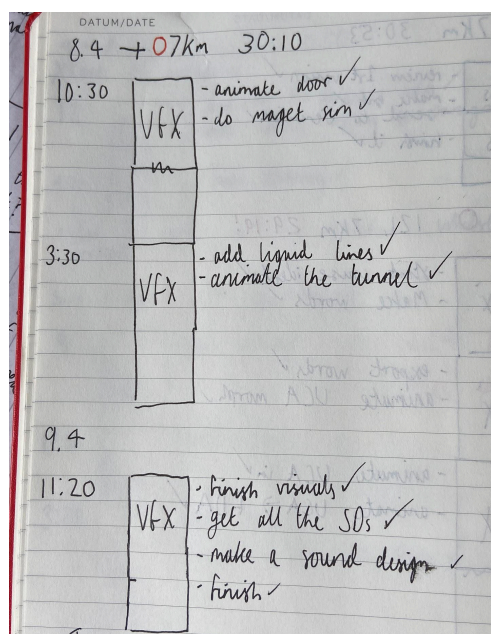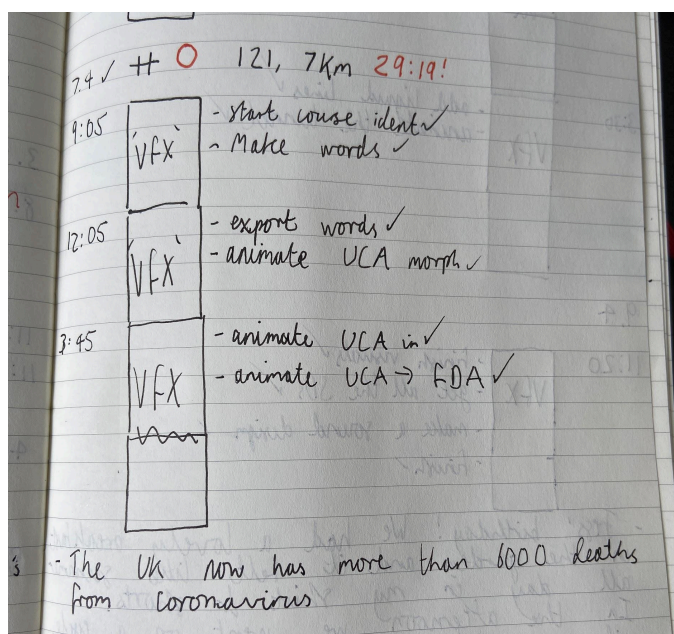
Overall I'm really happy with what I managed to create for the new course ident. I think the success criteria I established of it being both stylish yet simple in its minimalism has been achieved and the atonal sound design compliments the visuals in a non distracting way. Although I didn't learn anything new from this unit I still thoroughly enjoyed the 3 full days I spent creating the course ident and look forward to it being shown to prospective students in the future. I don't think there's anything I would've done differently for this unit and I'm looking forward to the upcoming online workshop with Angie Taylor.