

RuckSackNY's Four-Day Thanksgiving Challenge becomes 'Texting' PSA:

New York, NY November 24th 2013. Manhattan based RuckSackNY has just completed a Public Service Announcement in response to the growing number of texting-related car accidents.

RuckSackNY created a thirty-second spot entitled: "Why did the turkey cross the road?"; with the aim of educating the audience about the dangers surrounding texting while driving or walking.

Both Fred and Natasha Ruckel, the creative directors working on the 'Texting' PSA, spend a significant amount of time driving between the city and various shoot locations, encountering, like many of us, drivers swerving and veering precariously, sometimes at high speed, while scrolling through their text messages.

"It scares me to be on the road at times", noted Fred Ruckel, "Because a car could just slam right into you". Natasha, Fred's wife and business partner finds the situation stressful, often telling Fred "There's nothing you can do about it, don't let it get to you."

After a few near misses, Fred decided that there had to be something that he could do about it. "I wanted make a Public Service Announcement video to help raise awareness", explained Ruckel.

Having finished wrapping a few RuckSackNY projects, Fred originally planned to back up all their systems, due to impending maintenance on their equipment during the Thanksgiving holiday season. Instead, something bigger was about to take over.

It dawned on Fred, that Thanksgiving contributed to the biggest travel days of the year. This equated to more drivers on the roads, more kids playing in the streets and a greater potential for road accidents.

At this point, Fred and Natasha decided to create a video about Thanksgiving and road safety. The Ruckels conducted some research about texting related accidents, the numbers were staggering.

It was on the morning of Tuesday November 19th, that the Ruckels decided that they needed to come up with a clever concept that they could execute in just four days. Their goal was to get the PSA public by Monday, in time for Thanksgiving travels.

The PSA opens with an animated turkey walking down main street, texting as he goes. Cut to the car driver, unbeknown to him, he's heading towards the turkey, as he rushes home for Thanksgiving, while texting and badly steering his car.

The Ruckels decided to use a goofy character-animated turkey, to appeal to a wide audience, young and old alike. The town is shaded white, creating a canvas-like generic main-street environment. The Ruckels wanted the viewer to associate the main street with their own hometown.

The two characters are in color, differentiating them from the main street, allowing the viewer to focus, and associate themselves with one of the characters.

Needless to say, the journey doesn't end well. A collision between car and turkey sends the turkey flying into the air; the hit-and-run driver speeds off into the distance. The final part of the animated sequence draws to a conclusion when the dying turkey, drops his cell phone. His last text: "texting kills" and "it can wait" is briefly seen. The closing shot cuts to the hero billboard: "Don't text and drive". The R and V contained within the word 'DRIVE' fade revealing: "Don't text and die". Goose bumps are felt, when we hear the spine chilling sound-effect of a flat line at the conclusion of the PSA.

This remarkable 'four-day challenge' took root around lunchtime on Tuesday. The Ruckel's goal was to draw in younger viewers, by using a 'simple, fun look' yet make a harsh impact, targeting the next generation of drivers.

It was decided early on, to create a commercial using 3D character animation. The storyline came together, following a brainstorming session, evolved through sketches on the whiteboard walls of the RuckSackNY Manhattan's office.

In their heads, the Ruckel's could visualize the turkey character animation coming to life and waddling down main street. In the interest of time, Natasha searched online for basic wire-mesh 3d character models, that could be purchased and animated within one of the 3D animation packages used at RuckSackNY – Cinema 4D.

While Natasha identified character models that fulfilled the requirements of her whiteboard sketches, Fred worked closely with their animator, Manny, directing him to create a main street 3d environment, 'the set' for the commercial, if you will.

"Our first objective was to see if our concept would work", said Fred Ruckel. "We quickly blocked up shots with a simple camera movement, exporting playblasts from Cinema 4d".

Once the scenes were mocked up, as basic wireframes, Fred took them into Adobe Premiere and cut the different camera angles together, in a similar fashion to an editor working a multi-camera car commercial shoot. By end of day Tuesday, Fred had assembled a rough vision for the pacing and shot sequences needed for the commercial to effectively narrate the story.

Inspired by Fred's initial cut, the team expeditiously got to work on Wednesday, knowing that time was not their friend. "We had just three days left to create an entire

commercial completely in 3d, not to mention that we were still fleshing out the concept as we working on each of the scenes”, comments Fred.

In order to communicate much of the gait and movement of the turkey to their animator, Fred and Natasha took turns to waddle and plod through their office demonstrating how they would like the turkey to bobble along. Although their animator had little experience with character animation, Cinema 4D has some incredible features built-in that apply a walking motion to the models, the parameters within the ‘walking’ feature, such as stride length, etc. meant that Fred and Natasha were easily able to describe and get the moves they required.

Fred’s many years of experience as a Flame operator and special effects direction, allowed him to help focus his animator’s efforts on creating both differing camera and lighting moves as well as other techniques that would be applied within a real-world production commercial environment.

During construction of the animation Fred initially requested that the turkey slide into the scenes to simulate where the direction and timing of the ‘walk path’ would be. Once the initial move was created within Cinema 4d, it was immediately taken into the edit to see how the angles and timing would play out within context of the story. And so the fun began...

Fred’s past lives, including editor, colorist, and last, but not least, special effects creation meant that when he took all the material into the edit he was able to use his experience to apply the ‘magic’ of real-world post-production to it.

The edit was not a simple cut, it was not a case of just chopping 3d scenes together. In Fred’s mind, the story was evolving and building. The pacing brings the audience to a climax and resolution. Being able to sit beside and direct his animator, (as though he were his hands), allowed Fred to achieve the results that a director could obtain from attending and controlling a ‘live’ shoot.

“I knew we were building an entire environment from scratch”, explains Fred “I also knew we could put cameras into the environment, attach them to moving objects, film extreme angles and use high frame rates to create cinematic effects”.

“Both Fred and I wanted the climax scene to have a huge impact and lots of power.” explains Natasha. “When the turkey gets hit by the car, we wanted to re-create that look that’s synonymous with ‘The Matrix’ style warp-effect, using a smooth slow-motion camera rotation around the ‘frozen-in-time’ turkey. We were careful to include details, for example, ‘frozen’ feathers ‘encapsulated’ in space and time too”.

Fast cuts reveal the end billboard. A rip effect, a camera shake, plenty of subtle nuances, all were planned and added to help the viewer relate to the impact. As we

cut to the other side of the billboard, hand-drawn graffiti, written by Natasha reads: "texting kills". Finally when the turkey dies, we cut quickly to the dropping phone.

In the absence of time, the Ruckels decided to send the animation to a render farm. The animation sequences took an amazing one thousand, seven hundred and thirty-six core hours to render. In total, the thirty-second spot encompasses twenty-four scenes. Using a render farm ensured that the spot was rendered in a couple hours, vs. several days, enabling a quick review and completion cycle.

While the visuals successfully narrate the story, it wouldn't be complete without sound. The sad, lamenting piano air, reminiscent of a nocturne set in a minor key, was composed and played by Natasha. "We just couldn't find a piece of music that captured the somber, reflective nature of the narrative. Inspired by the powerful yet pensive nature of a composer such as Chopin, I sat down at my piano, looping the sequence on my laptop, until I'd managed to construct an original score that complemented the severity of the message".

As any good sound engineer will tell you, recording a grand piano comes with its fair share of difficulties. It took Fred and Natasha several attempts, at their upstate location, to place the microphone in the prime spot, and successfully capture the acoustics correctly. Avoiding what could sound like a recording made from within a fish tank!

The sound design too is extensive, bringing the environment and effects to life through a plethora of noises. As time was against the Ruckels, and there was no 'paid-for' budget, Fred decided to take on the challenge of creating the sound design himself. "I won't lie," said Ruckel, "I loved doing the sound design for the piece. Once I got into it I was addicted, I might have found my true calling" says Fred.

The sound design is truly multi-layered. On the climax scenes alone, there are over thirteen simultaneous tracks that re-create specific effects. For example, during the climax crash scene, we can hear the sounds of a skidding car, crash impacts, glass breaking, a baby crying, a woman screaming, a man groaning and even a dog barking, all mixed into an ambient bed of city sounds.

But where did the sounds originate? "Well, we took turns and stood in front of our microphone, while we screamed, wailed, and even cried like a baby" explained Fred, "We even went as far as re-creating a police-style communication by recording the output of us shouting into a walkie talkie!"

"Once the idea sparked, we all just dove in. It was such a challenge pulling this all together so quickly", noted Fred. "We created this piece from concept to finish in just four days! Yes four days! In normal situations, this kind of thing would take a lot longer to complete a thirty-second spot, the creative alone on a commercial like this could

easily take a week. But at the end of it all, and more importantly, we hope that this video message will have an impact on those travelling this Thanksgiving”.

#SafeThanksgiving