

Photography: Joby Sessions

# Smith & Foulkes

Location  
London,  
UK

Britain's leading animation directors tell **Garrick Webster** about the challenges of high-profile ad campaigns

**"Our office is a bit like a cab office," says Alan Smith, one half of Smith & Foulkes, pointing out that the top half of one wall is a glass panel that allows them to look into a waiting area outside.**

However, they don't send drunken revellers home from here, on the second floor at Nexus Productions. Instead, Smith & Foulkes dispatch some of the most creative commercials on TV. Often these ads aren't just taken down the road to be broadcast, but extend their journeys on to the world's biggest advertising awards ceremonies.

Their 2004 Honda *Grrr* commercial, which promoted the company's cleaner diesel engines, was the most

awarded advert made between 1999 and 2008. It collected two D&AD Black Pencils, two Cannes Lions, including a Grand Prix, two Clios, and another 33 gongs at various international awards ceremonies. "Not every job is like that, not every script is like that," says Smith. "You could do an amazing job on an ad that gets onto TV for a week and then is forgotten about. It's just if things come together at the right time."

Smith & Foulkes got the job from Honda's UK agency, Wieden+Kennedy. →







01



02

→ "They had written a song already," explains Adam Foulkes. "So they came with that, which was quite good, and maybe a six-panel storyboard. A world of positive hate. We just went off for a couple of weeks and thought of some ideas."

Smith picks up the story: "They had this whole idea of dirty diesel engines that would be destroyed in a wave of positive hate. The idea was that we could form a narrative structure for how that would progress, and then set about designing that world. So we sent in all kinds of reference stuff about Augusta National Golf course, Liberace and Chinese propaganda."

Bollywood movies and the kaleidoscopic dance sequences shot by 1930s director Busby Berkeley also influenced the style. The pair set about creating test animations of a coughing, spluttering engine. While the song remained the same throughout, they came up with a stunning sequence full of craft and visual punch. The narrative depicted the rebirth of the diesel engine via floaty, nature-loving animation. Its beautifully crafted explosions of flowers, peacocks, dolphins, humming birds and an ornate glass dragonfly have doubtlessly inspired designers, illustrators and animators around the world.

01

The **Honda Grrr** ad's visual style was influenced by Busby Berkeley musicals, Chinese propaganda, Bollywood and Liberace

02

Wieden+Kennedy asked Smith & Foulkes to come up with a **visual concept** based on the 'Love something, hate something' song

03

Despite receiving **a number of awards**, Smith and Foulkes believe that even today very few car manufacturers would

risk making an advert as adventurous as **Honda Grrr**



03



"If every single commercial was like Honda Grrr then that would be the norm," says Smith. "It would almost be too much. You wouldn't know what it was all about. It has to sit in a world of fairly straightforward commercials to actually stand out."

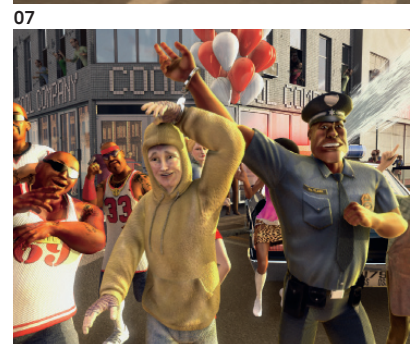
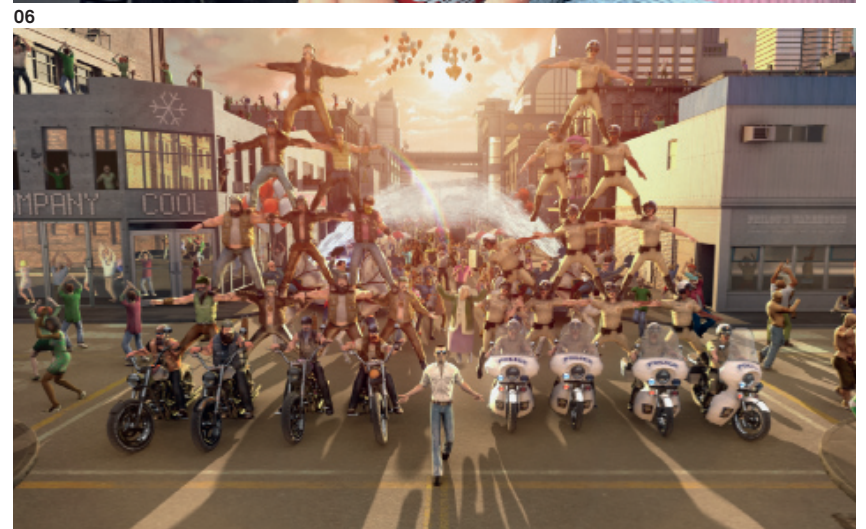
Yet with their passion for animation and directing skills, Smith & Foulkes never seem to be the ones caught making straightforward commercials. Having directed as a team for the last 12 years, their curriculum vitae includes spots for Coke, Comcast, Motorola, Orange, Robinsons, the

**In the early days** Alan Smith and Adam Foulkes met at the Royal College of Art on a post-grad course in Animation. They didn't work together until they were asked to make animated loops for U2's PopMart tour in 1997. At the same time they had both started talking to Chris O'Reilly of Nexus Productions about joining the team.

Department for Transport and Virgin Atlantic. On the big screen, they created the animated opening sequence for Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* for Dreamworks. Their own short movie *This Way Up* was nominated for an Academy Award earlier this year, and they are currently writing their own feature film.

Ironically, their collaborative process begins with individual brainstorming. "Initially, we just kind of have a little chat about it. We're always mulling things over, but we do go off to private spaces to just →

**01** Honda Grrr has to sit in a world of fairly straightforward commercials to actually stand out



06

07

08

09

**04** After years of waiting and putting ideas aside, *This Way Up* was the chance for Smith & Foulkes to create a **short film of their own**

**05** *This Way Up* was intended to be two or three minutes long. The final film was **over eight minutes long**, and won a series of awards

**06** This Coke commercial, *Videogame*, was **debuted during the Superbowl**. As such, it was also reviewed by US television networks

**07-09** For *Videogame*, Smith & Foulkes decided to take *Grand Theft Auto*-style characters and settings and **give them a Coke twist**



10



11



12

→ write our own little lists, just purely out of our own heads, which we then bring to the table and discuss before we go on to the stage of actually fitting everything together," explains Smith.

"In the same way, we go for a certain style as well," continues Foulkes. "We might just get some reference stuff together and say, 'I'm quite liking this there.' And if it goes down well we might pursue it."

There's no real division of responsibilities, but it's Smith who usually finds himself thinking more about the broader atmosphere of a piece, while Foulkes concentrates on characters and faces. When disagreements occur – and they do – each of them knows intuitively when to argue their point and when to concede. Sometimes it's

just down to whichever of them feels most strongly about something. As Smith points out, it's a subjective business and often no idea is right or wrong. Most of the time, it's not a question of where the animation is heading in general. It's usually more a case of tweaking how a mountain looks, or changing somebody's chin.

"It actually comes down to smaller things than the direction the whole thing's going in," says Foulkes. "If we're down with someone who's animating a certain performance, one of us thinks it's one way, the other thinks it looks better the other. It's little things like that."

The pair joke around a lot, and like many creative duos, one often completes the other's sentences. When they're in their flow,

**ib** We're doing a job for the agency, the client, the client's dog and beyond

10-12

Sometimes, to spark their own creativity or to bring a new look to their work, Smith & Foulkes will collaborate with an external

illustrator or concept artist. For this Comcast ad, with its **isometric background**, they worked with illustrator Chris Martin

the way they collaborate is based on evolving ideas and bouncing things back and forth rather than making hard and fast decisions. After all, when clients review the work there are bound to be changes.

The Smith & Foulkes creative process takes this into account. It's almost as though the client is part of the collaboration. "Coke Videogame – it's not our film," says Smith, using the 2006 ad as an example. "It's not exactly what we would have done for ourselves. We were doing a job for somebody, not just the agency but the client, the client's dog and beyond. Everyone has an opinion,

and everyone pushes it into a place that they want. We've done jobs that we thought were really good and the client said, 'Well, it's not working hard for our market.' So we've had to change something to suit a request for something else. Everything is a compromise in every commercial job you do."

Coke Videogame premiered during the Superbowl in 2006 – the prime slot in the American advertising schedule. It depicted Grand Theft Auto-style action, but instead of going on a killing spree the main character opened a can of Coke and went on a rampage of love and kindness. This year Smith & →



13



14



15

**13**  
Avatar, Smith & Foulkes' recent Coke ad, imagines a world where people's real appearance becomes that of their avatars in online games

**14**  
While they could have gone wild with the characters, the duo kept it low key and made sure the avatars looked digital

**15**  
Smith & Foulkes are both perfectionists. One of the Avatar characters was animated over 100 times. "If it bugs you now, it'll always bug you."



→ Foulkes created another Coke advert for Wieden+Kennedy. *Avatar* also premiered during the Superbowl. But instead of a fully-animated commercial they dropped digital characters into a live-action backdrop shot in Buenos Aires.

“For us it was fantastic, because normally if you animate something like *Videogame*, you’ve got some streets, and you’ve got a bus and you make it come through the streets. You control all of that,” says Smith. “Well, we were out on the streets of Buenos Aires with a bus full of people. It’s the same toys, just much bigger. All the

timing has to be the same. If it’s not quite right you just get the bus to go a bit faster. It’s exactly the same process.”

“Framing shots, timing and everything is the same,” agrees Foulkes. “The only problem was that it rained.”

“Yeah, it rained. It doesn’t tend to do that in 3D,” Smith continues.

While they’re not shy of live action, animation affords Smith & Foulkes a huge degree of control, and by their own admission they take full advantage of this. Although they have no interest in 3D software, they initiate the production process by creating an



16



18



20

**Inspired by Python**  
“There’s no way every person can collaborate with every person. The chemistry has to be right,” argues Smith. “I like how Monty Python split up into three pairs and wrote their sketches together, then presented them to the other groups. They collaborated on two different levels.”

21

**Two characters share one mouth** to hilarious effect in this spot, created by Smith & Foulkes for mobile phone giant Orange

animatic in After Effects. The characters may just be cubes moving through very rough environments, but this gives the animators at Nexus an overall design for each scene. Just like at Pixar or Dreamworks, the details of the characters, settings, lighting and animation are built up in phases. Success for Smith & Foulkes depends on how well the pair guide the other creatives on the project.

“We get a bit pissed off sometimes at live-action directors who seem to be great collaborators because they get great performances out of actors,” says Smith. “Basically, we get a performance out of

22

It’s not all 3D. Smith & Foulkes’ series of ads highlighting the natural aspects of Robinsons drinks used a **naïve style** to great effect



17



19



21



22

animators. The characters on screen are animated, but you don’t just press a button and there they are walking around – there’s all the comic timing and everything. The design of them is a huge thing. We do actually spend most of our time with the animators who are crafting what we want in the scene.”

16-17

*The Littlest Elf* was a **spoof movie intro sequence** created by Smith & Foulkes for Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate*

*Events*. At just under a minute long, it presents a syrupy-sweet elf setting up a rug-pull gag when the real, sinister story begins

18-19

These **adverts for the Department of Transport** were designed to promote awareness of road safety issues

20

Smith & Foulkes have directed three ads for Coke. *Unity* used basketball to tie in with the theme and message of the **Beijing Olympics**