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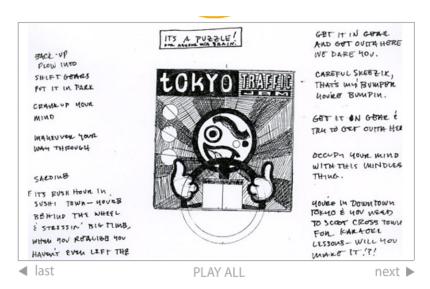
Chapter 1 – Getting Started

Rush Hour came to us to evaluate in 1995. The famous Japanese puzzle inventor Nob Yoshigahara paid a visit to our offices at Binary Arts Corporation, which was ThinkFun's name back then, and he brought with him his Tokyo Parking puzzle. It wasn't obvious back then, seeing it for the first time, that this would become the amazing Rush Hour… although right from the start we did know it was special. We licensed the puzzle from Nob and started our development work.

We started our work by framing out a set of concepts for what we wanted the puzzle to become. We had a general idea about the overall design, we knew we needed to develop a grid for the cars and trucks to slide in, and that we needed to package it in a sturdy box. We decided to put the challenges into a separate card deck and organize them from Beginner to Expert to give everyone a chance to play. We also had an idea for how the cars and trucks should look, sort of goofy-friendly and as easy as possible for little fingers to hold and move them.

All this flowed pretty naturally for us… our company was more than 10 years old by that point, and we were already recognized as the world's best creators of logic puzzles and mind challenging games. Framing out the Rush Hour design and general appearance was the easy part. It was when we looked to develop the puzzle theme and create the packaging artwork and message that we ran into some difficult issues.

Follow along to chapter 2 of the Rush Hour Story to hear how we nearly lost Rush Hour before it even began!

Chapter 2 – Design Crisis *(go back to top)*

Every great game or puzzle has a theme, a story line that puts the player into a frame of mind and brings texture and meaning to the play experience.

When we went to give Rush Hour its theme, we started in a wrong direction. Our first ideas were about the frustrations of a full parking lot, the anger and negativity. If we had gone this way it probably would have killed the product, this was just a bad message. But luckily, we figured out our message and Rush Hour has become a huge success around the world.

To start, let's remember that the puzzle came to us as "Tokyo Parking", which is a pretty good metaphor for the most frustrating driving experience you can imagine. Our design team picked up on that frustration theme, looking to empathize with the terrible feelings of being caught in a terrible traffic jam.

We focused on "BAD". We played around with this and then started to formalize it. Next we hired an independent designer to present concepts for the package cover. And when the concepts came back, we got very good work that emphasized exactly the effects we had asked for, in a higher dose than we were expecting.

When I first saw the grimacing Japanese gentleman's face being proposed as the package cover art for our really cool new puzzle, I knew this wasn't the right direction.

It's not the ThinkFun Way to emphasize frustration or anger; actually it's just the opposite. What we stand for, what our games stand for, is a celebration of the great feeling you get when you stretch yourself to solve a mental challenge and then just nail it. So the artwork we received was very good, it was high quality and was what we had asked for. But it was the wrong message. We needed to make a hundred and eighty degree change.

Follow us in chapter 3 to learn how we pulled it out of the fire.

Chapter 3 – Tailfins and the American Dream *(go back to top)*

While the designers were debating "bad", I put my own focus during this design process on tail fins. I happen to believe that American automobiles of the mid-to-late 1950's represent the highest and best design expression of the American Spirit that has ever been… and I see tail fins as being the essence of this expression. Our Traffic Jam Escape Car needed to have tail fins, this was very important to me.

Think about it. The American Spirit is restless. As a country we're moving, we're growing, we're hungry for challenge and to take charge of the future. Tail fins aren't just objects… they are icons, they represent this spirit. Yes, they're beautiful in themselves… but more importantly, they take you places. They take you to the American Dream. The Escape Car could do this for us, and more importantly it could do this for our puzzle playing customers.

We needed to convey these ideas on the package cover, and not the negative ideas we had been working with. I sketched out a rough concept for our design group to use to head in a new direction.

The first artboard that came back was weird, I'll leave it at that… we had a creative group back then. But at that point we started talking about who the escape car driver was, and what values he stood for. This changed everything… we realized that we could define the driver's personality to match our message and build from there. Since we had decided we were searching for the American Dream, we needed to create the American Everyman.

From there, everything just fell into place. We moved away from Tokyo Parking and decided to call the puzzle Rush Hour, and we cast the puzzle as the American Story, the story of Rush Hour Joe. Joe, who figures things out and lives on top of the world while others complain about their situation. Joe is you… and Joe loves playing Rush Hour, it is just so much fun when you solve a really hard challenge and use your mind to play!

Rush Hour joined Binary Arts, Binary Arts became ThinkFun, and the rest became history.