



# FROM THE ARCHIVES

RETRO GAMER DIGS UP THE FILES OF THE CLASSIC COMPANIES OF OLD

# Hudson Soft - Part 1

One of Japan's most respected videogame firms and the first company to pledge support for Nintendo's 8-bit dream, Hudson Soft has a rich and varied history. Join Damien McFerran as he takes a look back at the early days of this famous gaming brand

It's surprising just how many of the videogaming world's most famous firms actually started out in completely unrelated industries. For example, Commodore was initially established to repair typewriters, Nintendo originally created playing cards, and Coleco started out producing leather for shoes. Japanese veteran Hudson Soft is another company with unusual origins. Before it stepped into the realm of interactive entertainment, the firm specialised in art photographs, telecommunication devices and radios transmitters.

Founded in 1973 by brothers Yuji and Hiroshi Kudo while they were still in college, Hudson made a modest income, but its penchant for modern technology eventually drew it into far more interesting areas of business. "When Yuji Kudo visited the US to market his communication tools, he saw personal computers on sale for the first time," recalls Toshiyuki Takahashi, Hudson's famous PR man, also known to Hudson fans as Takahashi Meijin (which means 'master' or 'famous' Takahashi). "He saw a huge potential in these machines and knew that this kind of technology would be utilised around

## INSTANT EXPERT

**The company name** was inspired by a train that used to pass by the home of the founding brothers

**When the Kudus** started out, they had ¥500,000 capital and sold telecommunication devices and art photographs

**The bee logo** was inspired by the island of Hokkaido's radio identification number. In Japanese, the word for the number eight is 'hachi', which is also phonetically the word for 'bee'

**Hudson was the** first company to sell games for personal computers and the first third party to sign up to Nintendo's Famicom console

**Bomberman was released** in the West in 1984 under the title *Eric And The Floaters* (UK) and *Don Pape Y Los Globos* (Spain)

**Between them,** *Bomberman* and *Momotaro Dentetsu*, two of Hudson's biggest franchises, have sold over 10 million copies worldwide

**Hudson Soft employee** Toshiyuki Takahashi could hammer a fire button 16 times in one second. However, recent tests have shown that age is catching up with him and he can only manage 12 times a second. Still pretty impressive

**The plot of the original** *Bomberman* involved a robot working in a bomb factory, who wishes to escape his boring job and become human

the globe in the near future, so he brought one home to Japan and started to become deeply involved in programming.

At the same time in Japan, NEC launched the first one-board microcomputer, followed by MZ-80 series from Sharp. Back then, when someone mentioned the word 'program' it meant they were inputting the codes for computer programs written in magazines and as a result typing mistakes became a problem. Therefore, to make that process faster, Hudson put the programs into cassette tapes and started to sell them. This became a phenomenal hit, which started the software sales business." This simplistic idea marked a turning point in the fortunes of the company, and Hudson left behind the old radios of the past and threw itself into the emerging world of software publishing.

Sharp's aforementioned computer platform was the main focus of Hudson's attention at the time, and the company's work rate was prolific. "We launched as many as 20 titles a month," explains Takahashi. "Early programs featured videogames mainly. Basically, they were the programs using BASIC and machine languages." However, while selling computer programs may have generated quite a profit for the time, Hudson's next venture turned the company into one of



the most influential Japanese software houses of the Eighties.

## Hudson And Nintendo

"While developing games for the Sharp MZ-80 series, we were also creating a development language called Hu-BASIC," remembers Takahashi. "Some time later, Hudson created the operating system for the Sharp X-1." Hudson's expertise with programming caught the eye of another Japanese hardware manufacturer that had recently launched its own console.

with Nintendo marked the beginning of a new chapter for the firm. "Hiroshi Kudo started learning about the Famicom while Hudson was creating Family Basic," says Takahashi. "That's how we got interested in the Famicom and joined Nintendo as a third party."

This relationship blossomed and Hudson was tasked with porting several of Nintendo's titles - including *Mario Bros* and *Donkey Kong 3* - to the NEC PC-8801. The company also held the distinction of being the first third party to sign up to develop

**“Famicom started on the back of Atari's collapse and every software company was writing it off”**

JOHN LEE, EX-VICE PRESIDENT OF SALES AND MARKETING, HUDSON ENTERTAINMENT

That company was Nintendo and the console was the Famicom, which went on to become the Nintendo Entertainment System when released in the West.

"In 1983 Nintendo requested that we create a programming language called Family BASIC," Takahashi reveals. "This request came as a result of the fact that Hudson was the only software house that owned its own OS." Hudson's involvement

for Nintendo's new 8-bit console. It might seem like a no-brainer with hindsight, but it's important to remember that back in the early-Eighties the videogame industry was still reeling from the crash caused by the implosion of Atari's 2600 hardware. "The Famicom started on the back of Atari's collapse and every software company was writing it off, saying that it was never going to work," explains John Lee, former

## BY THE NUMBERS

- There have been **66** Bomberman games on various formats, not including spin-offs
- 62** games were released for the ill-fated PC-FX system
- The 1985 Hudson Caravan took place in **60** venues across Japan
- Konami increased its holding of Hudson stock in 2005 with the purchase of **3 million** shares
- Japanese gamers voted PC-Engine title *Tengai Makyou II: Manjimaru* the **12th** best game ever
- Hi-Ten Bomberman* allowed **10** people to play at once
- 5** players could hop into a game of *Super Bomberman 5* - the most available on SNES at the time
- 1.2 million** units of Famicom *Lode Runner* were sold after its release
- The TurboGrafx-16 sold **2.5 million** units in the United States





[Famicom] The bizarre sounding Nuts & was Hudson's first Famicom release.

## “The original 2D Bomberman works because it is simple and elegant”

JOHN LEE, HUDSON ENTERTAINMENT

vice president of sales and marketing for Hudson's American division, Hudson Entertainment. "But Yuji Kudo saw the Famicom and thought 'this is genius, this is beautiful, this is going to be huge'. Hudson knew that this was going to be a hit."

Naturally, for such a move to be successful Hudson needed to produce software that was good enough to stand out from Nintendo's own first-party output. The company decided to port Douglas E Smith's 1983 computer classic *Lode Runner* to the machine, partly because the arcade hits of the era were difficult to shoehorn into Famicom's humble technology. "Most games sold in Japan were developed by arcade makers



16-Shot Takahashi's ability to hit a fire button 16 times a second came in handy when playing early Hudson titles like *Super Star Soldier*.

themselves," explains Takahashi. "These games were too large to be put into the ROM of the Famicom, so we picked some computer games and discussed which would be better suited for the machine. We all agreed that *Lode Runner* would be the best." The title was also attractive because it had a proven track record and therefore offered the least risk to the fledgling publisher. "Back then *Lode Runner* was a big hit across Japan on personal computers," says Takahashi. "This was because of its action-based nature, with a puzzle element included. Hudson was sure that this would be accepted by all gamers in Japan – even by kids who owned Famicoms."

This surety of success was vital to Hudson at this delicate stage. "There was no margin for error so a certain amount of guaranteed sales were estimated with *Lode Runner*," reveals Takahashi. "We did create other games as a backup plan, but the number in sales differed phenomenally mainly due to the fact that most promotional activities were focused on *Lode Runner*." However, despite Hudson's best efforts, the game almost never saw the light of day. "When Douglas E Smith saw it for the first time, he said 'this is not *Lode Runner*,'" says Takahashi. "The original game utilised small characters, which we thought our game users – children – would not find attractive. Therefore, we decided to make the characters bigger, which inevitably made the maze wider and required a side-scrolling screen. However, I understand that Mr Smith finally agreed and was satisfied with our game style after thorough discussion."

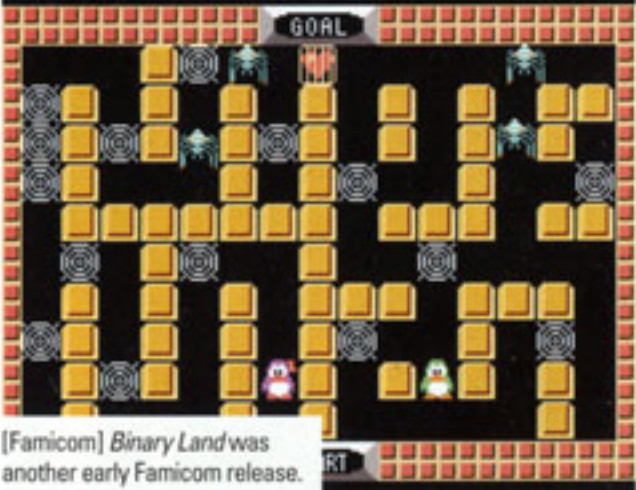
which allows players to see if they can do the same. As Hudson has expanded into the mobile phone and iPhone market, Takahashi has become heavily involved with promoting such ventures in Japan.

**John Lee**  
The very definition of an industry veteran, Lee has worked at Sega, Konami, THQ, Bethesda and Eidos, where he helped launch brands such as *Star Wars*, *Tomb Raider*, *The Elder Scrolls* and *WWE*. As well as being particularly marketing-savvy, he's also a keen gamer and proudly states that he can complete *Super Mario Bros* in seven and a half minutes. Lee was instrumental in securing Hudson's recent return to the US market, but his next project, Bardo Entertainment, will be his most challenging yet.

[PC Engine] The superlative *Gunhed* – produced alongside Compile – proved how capable the developer was with shooters.



SCORE: 009600 TIME: 550 ROUND: 04



[Famicom] *Binary Land* was another early Famicom release.

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?



Toshiyuki Takahashi

John Lee

**Toshiyuki Takahashi**  
The man who provided the inspiration for the character of Master Higgins is still employed by Hudson in Japan. He is heavily involved with marketing the company's titles and even writes his own blog on Hudson's Japanese site. Still revered as a gaming legend able to hit a button 16 times in one second, he's even released a gadget called the Shooting Watch,

## SIX OF THE BEST

### Bomberman (PC-Engine)

While the NES version is often cited as a fan favourite, PC-Engine *Bomberman* revealed how addictive the concept could be. Introducing the important multiplayer mode, thanks to the multitap adaptor, four players could indulge in a bomb-hurling deathmatch. "When the game was ported to PC-Engine, you could say this was the beginning of the *Bomberman* that you see now," states Takahashi.



### Adventure Island (NES)

Based on Sega's ultra-successful arcade machine *Wonder Boy* (programmed by Escape, later known as Westone), *Adventure Island* featured the same brilliant gameplay, but had a different lead character, Master Higgins. This baseball-cap-wearing cave boy was in turn based on Toshiyuki Takahashi's alter ego, Master Takahashi, due to the fact that Takahashi was becoming very famous in Japan at the time.



### Star Soldier (NES)

Also released on the MSX home computer, this vertical shooter has gone down in history as a great example of the genre. The game contains a high score mode known as Caravan mode, which inspired Hudson's All-Japan Caravan Festival, in which players compete against each other to see who can achieve the best tally. *Star Soldier* owes a debt to Tecmo's *Star Force*, which also saw release on NES.



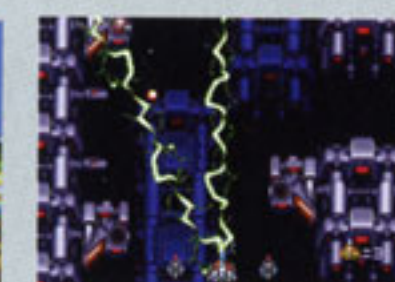
### Jackie Chan's Action Kung Fu (PC-Engine)

Usually, it's advisable to give games that feature famous celebrities a wide berth, but this 2D action platformer, which – as the title suggests – showcases the talents of a certain Mr Chan, is absolutely fantastic fun. The action is tight and enjoyable and the presentation is top-notch. A NES version also saw the light of day and retains the knockabout appeal of the PC-Engine version, but the visuals are markedly inferior.



### Super Star Soldier (PC-Engine)

*Star Soldier*'s popularity in Japan ensured that a sequel was inevitable, and with the additional power of the newly released PC-Engine Hudson (along with Inter State and Kaneko) was able to create something truly jaw-dropping. The graphics were stunning, easily rivaling those seen in the latest coin-op hits. The game is available on Virtual Console and represents an essential download.



### Challenger (Famicom)

An enhanced version of Spectrum game *Stop The Express*, this Japan-only release expanded the concept by adding more levels, boosting the visual quality and adding an Indiana Jones-style plot involving hidden treasures and kidnapped princesses. The game was a huge hit in Japan and has been released on the Japanese Virtual Console, as well as being ported to mobile phones.



### Bomber Time

With a mini-drama averted, Hudson found that its optimistic predictions were accurate and *Lode Runner* went on to sell 1.2 million copies. However, it was Hudson's next big hit that proved more significant. Whereas *Lode Runner* was a Western game tailored for a Japanese audience, *Bomberman* proved a true classic of Far-Eastern design.

The Famicom version of the game was released in 1984 and quite literally had an incendiary effect on the Japanese videogame market. However, rather than being a completely original release, *Bomberman* was in fact inspired by one of Hudson's earlier computer-based efforts. "*Bomberman* is based on the game known as *Bakudan Otoko*, which was developed for the Sharp X-1," explains Takahashi. "One of our programmers, Mr Tanaka, created this game in which the main character – a man with a bowler hat – wiped out balloon-shaped ghosts. The main character used ticking time bombs to destroy enemy characters, just like in *Bomberman*. The game was actually sold in Western territories on the ZX Spectrum as *Eric And The Floaters*."

Hudson programmer Shinichi Nakamoto took this original concept and skilfully updated it for the Famicom market, laying down the template that the series has stuck to so slavishly for the past few decades. "The game itself had simple, easy, fun gameplay," gushes Lee. "To this day it retains the same qualities. Any time you try to do *Bomberman* in 3D it never quite works because of the simplicity

### START YOUR PC-ENGINES

To many, the PC-Engine remains one of Hudson's most important ventures. Produced in conjunction with NEC, this 8-bit machine boasted a 16-bit graphics chip (designed by Hudson itself) and upon its release in 1987, made Nintendo's dominant Famicom technically obsolete. It would prove to be a massive success in its native Japan – where it challenged Nintendo and kept Sega's Mega Drive in third place – but failed to translate the success in the US, where it was rebranded as the TurboGrafx-16. Hudson was also responsible for creating the unique HuCard storage system, which allowed the company to produce software on thin, credit card-style carts, adding further to the appeal of this dainty machine. Hudson and NEC would go on to work on numerous subsequent hardware projects together, including the Super Grafx, PC-Engine GT, Duo and PC-FX.

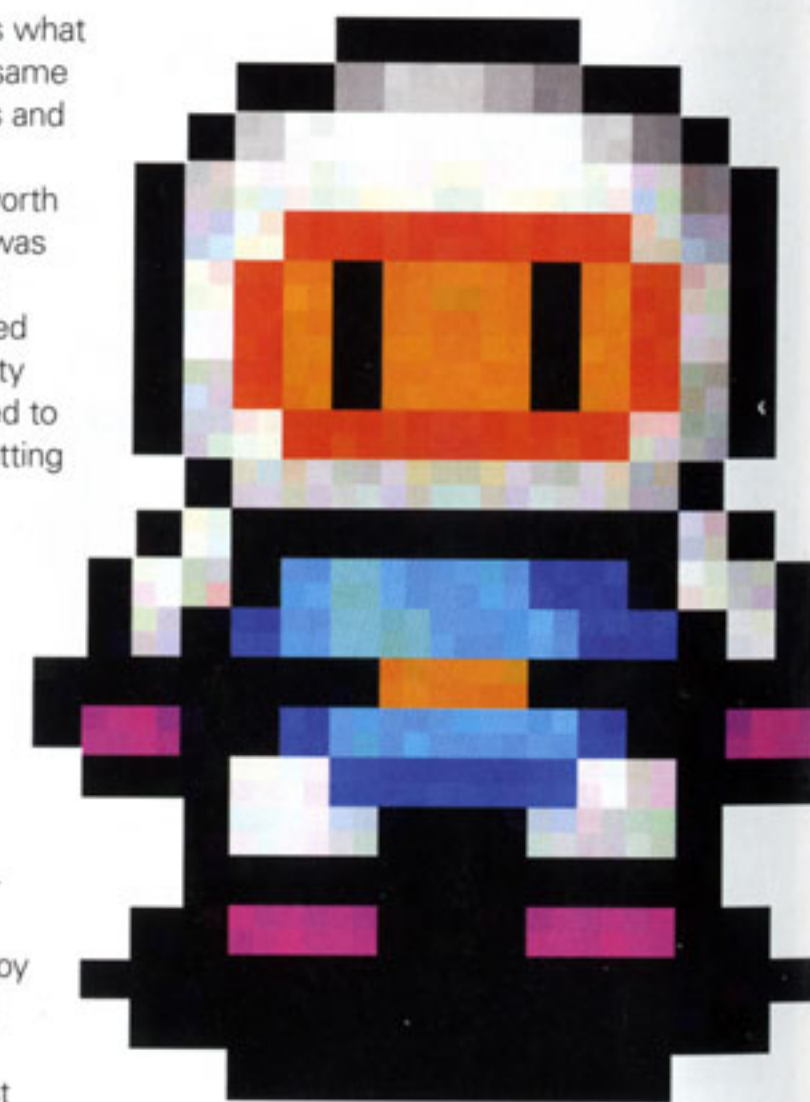


and elegance of the original. That's what makes it so great – you have that same game selling well for over 20 years and it doesn't need to change. It's the ultimate game compliment." It's worth noting, however, that this version was a resolutely single-player affair and that the series wouldn't be propelled into stratospheric levels of popularity until multiplayer options were added to subsequent versions. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

### 16-Shot Takahashi

It was around this time that Takahashi started to become something of a celebrity among Hudson fans. "In 1985 the Hudson Game Caravan was held in which I toured around the southern region of Japan as South-Caravan Chief," he explains. "The event was held to help children enjoy Hudson games with lots of friends across Japan. By setting a goal of choosing the best gamer in Japan, we successfully got children involved in the event with high enthusiasm. Before the game tournament took place, I gave game demonstrations in front of children to make the Caravan more exciting. I believe that was when I became known as 16-Shot."

This somewhat unusual nickname came about thanks to Takahashi's ability to pummel the fire button of a joystick 16 times in one second – a talent that served him well with Hudson's early shooters, such as *Star Soldier*. Such was



Takahashi's fame that he eventually ended up as the lead character in Hudson's next big hit, *Adventure Island*, which was essentially a port of the 1986 Sega coin-op hit *Wonder Boy*. Although the arcade game is credited to Sega, the company only owned the rights to the characters. The code itself remained the property of developer Escape (better known as Westone). This meant Escape was free to work with Hudson on porting the popular title to NES, albeit with different character sprites. "When we were developing *Adventure Island*, I visited the development team with Hiroshi Kudo, who was vice president at this stage,"



## SIX TO MISS



### Milon's Secret Castle (NES)

Despite its cult following, this NES platformer is dull, drab in visual terms, and so frustrating you'll want to wrench the cartridge from your console and hurl it out the nearest open window in the hope that it lands beneath the churning wheels of a passing HGV. Milon's bubble attack is about as much use as a chocolate kettle and some of the puzzles are so obtuse it's impossible to progress without a guide.



### Mickey Mousecapade (NES)

Although this Capcom-published platformer is unique for its era for offering two-player simultaneous play, the game itself is so poor that it's unlikely you'll be able to entice any of your friends or relatives to actually play it. The levels are samey, most of the sprites are ripped from other Hudson titles and the hopelessly loose controls make this an exercise in aggravation.



### Adventures Of Dino Riki (NES)

Initially, you might assume this is some kind of vertical-scrolling forerunner to *Joe And Mac: Caveman Ninja*, but once you pick up the pad it soon dawns on you that it's nothing of the sort. Terrible graphics, a steep learning curve and an over-reliance on power ups (lose them and you may as well reset the game) result in a title so poor it's not surprising no one's heard of it. And there are hardly any dinosaurs in it.



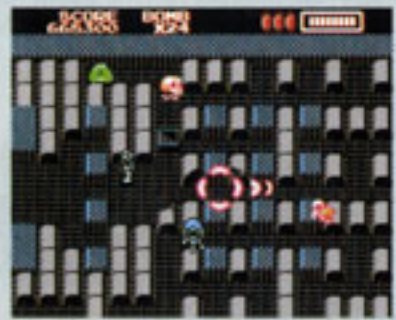
### Princess Tomato In The Salad Kingdom (NES)

Despite the stupid title, there's a lot of love for *Princess Tomato* among the NES faithful. After all, it was one of the first RPG-style titles for the console and it arrived at a time when this kind of adventure game was popular. Sadly, the puzzles display a complete disregard for any kind of logic, which isn't a shock when you consider the hero is a cucumber.



### Keith Courage In Alpha Zones (TG-16)

Hudson took the iffy PC-Engine title *Mashin Eiyuden Wataru* and renamed the main character Keith. The gameplay was essentially the same, which was no good thing as the Japanese original was nothing to write home about. *Keith Courage* was a pack-in for the TG-16 and the fact it made *Altered Beast* (the Mega Drive's bundle game) look impressive speaks volumes.



### Robowarrior (NES)

Known in Japan as *Bomber King*, this top-down action title was intended as a spin-off of the *Bombberman* franchise, and its more mature tone pre-dated the train wreck that was *Bombberman Act:Zero* on 360 by several years. The presentation is pretty decent and the music is way above average for a NES title, but the often-insane difficulty means this is a game for sadomasochists only.



[ZX Spectrum] *Bomberman*'s history can be traced back to *Eric And The Flooters*.

## “ NEC had quite a bit of success in Japan and Hudson was certainly a big part of that ”

JOHN LEE, HUDSON ENTERTAINMENT

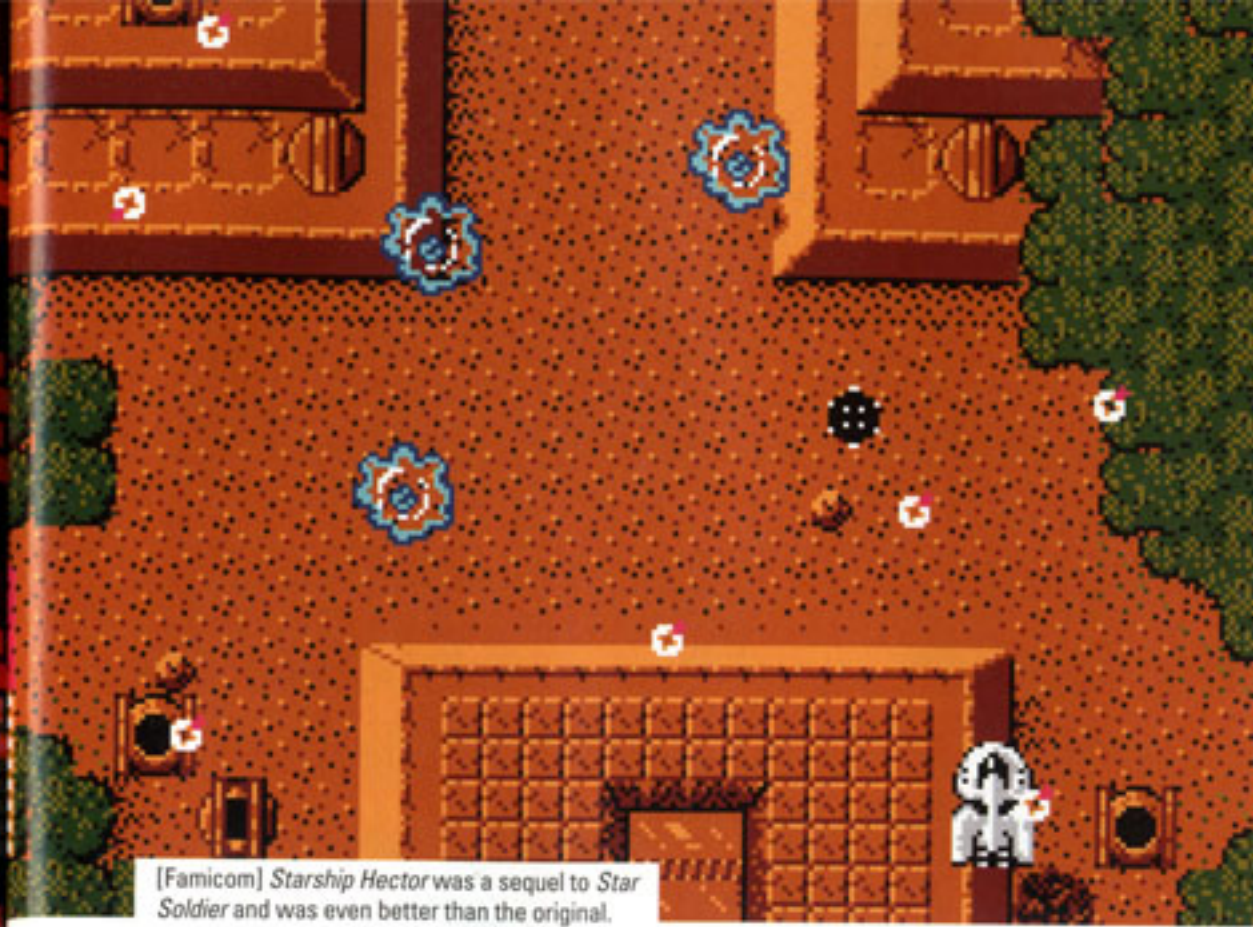
explains Takahashi. “As I became popular among gamers, Mr Kudo said ‘Why don’t we use you to replace this Wonder Boy character for *Adventure Island*?’ That was the beginning of Master Higgins.”

### Hudson Hardware

With a few 8-bit successes under its belt, Hudson began to spread its wings and decided to explore the realm of hardware creation. “Since 1984, Hudson had been engaged in developing for the Famicom, but there were few people who could write programs for CPU of the console,” recalls Takahashi. “Therefore, at the beginning of 1986 we started developing a chip for a game console that utilised the most popular Z80-series CPU and whose

programs could be easily written.” Hudson approached various manufacturers with the design. “Hudson is an unusual software company in that it has maintained separate business divisions dealing with software, middleware and hardware,” says Lee. “This has allowed it to be of great help to other companies that required such varied fields of expertise. In the late-Eighties Hudson had developed a hardware platform and a media format, as well as development tools to create a gaming environment, but the company wasn’t in the hardware-publishing business. So we eventually licensed the technology to NEC and the PC-Engine was born.”

It was a match made in heaven, with Hudson providing both knowledge of the



[Famicom] *Starship Hector* was a sequel to *Star Soldier* and was even better than the original.



The annual Hudson Game Caravan was a massive success and helped the company to promote its output.



Hudson has resurrected the Hudson Caravan concept, with Toshiyuki '16-Shot' Takahashi once again at the helm.



industry and its cutting-edge chip design, while manufacturing behemoth NEC brought incredible production might and a reputation second to none. For both parties, such a relationship brought with it incredible benefits. “One of the reasons NEC got into the gaming business was that they wanted to educate young people on the name of NEC, so you grew up having NEC in your lexicon,” says Lee. “They wanted to reinforce their warranted image as a top electronics company to a new generation. NEC had quite a bit of success in Japan and Hudson was certainly a very big part of that.”

### I'm A PC-Engine

The PC-Engine launched in 1987 and quickly carved out a chunk of the Japanese game market for itself. However, going toe-to-toe with the already dominant Famicom console wasn't easy. “There were times when getting support from publishers was difficult,” recalls Takahashi. “Therefore, for a certain period of time, we manufactured the game cases and

manuals ourselves in order to facilitate the game-launching process.” Hudson went to great lengths to secure as much support for the new system as possible, but in the end all it took was one arcade conversion to truly tip the balance and turn the PC-Engine into a runaway success that even managed to outsell the Famicom during its second year on sale.

“As far as Hudson is concerned, the most important factor was *R-Type*,” says Takahashi. “A lot of users were quite surprised to see that *R-Type* on PC-Engine was of the same quality as the arcade version.” Indeed, this superlative port of Irem's much-loved coin-operated classic made it abundantly clear to the hordes of Famicom-owning gamers out there that a new era was dawning. Nintendo's dominance of the Japanese videogame industry was seriously threatened.

On the other side of the pond, meanwhile the situation was rather different. PC-Engine was redesigned and launched as the TurboGrafx-16, and it struggled to find a foothold in a

## ON THE RIGHT TRACK

Although many Japanese companies take Western-sounding names in order to increase their appeal in the global market, the American-sounding Hudson actually takes its name from the locomotive that once passed by the childhood home of its founders. “A long time ago, the C62-type locomotive ran on the Hokkaido mainline through the town of Niseko where the Kudo brothers lived,” explains Takahashi. “Hiroshi liked the locomotive very much and wanted to make use of it in some way in the future. When he started his own business, he picked it up for his company's name. The locomotive's axle was called the ‘Hudson’ type.” This train went on to become an essential part of the company, as Lee explains: “After Hudson became successful, they brought that train back and have used it as a tourist attraction.”

market that was being carved up by the incumbent NES and the newly released Sega Genesis/Mega Drive. While Sega skilfully adapted its software line-up to include games that would appeal to Western tastes, the TurboGrafx-16 software selection comprised titles that had a distinctly Japanese flavour. Sega also pushed the boat out in terms of marketing spend, and this strategy helped the company push both the NES and TurboGrafx-16 into the shade.

During this period, Hudson's American branch, which was founded in 1988, continued to churn out titles for Nintendo platforms such as NES, Game Boy, and – when it was eventually released – Super NES. The company was in a rather awkward position: it naturally had a vested interest in the commercial performance of the TurboGrafx-16, but the console wasn't in a strong enough position to offer the vital revenue streams that were afforded by Nintendo's platforms. American gamers, therefore, had two choices. They could invest in new and expensive hardware in order to play graphically stunning versions of Hudson hits such as *Bombberman* and *Adventure Island*, or they could simply stick with their existing NES consoles and pick up Hudson's self-programmed conversions of these same titles. To many, it was a no-brainer and the TurboGrafx-16's fortunes suffered as a result. However, the poor performance of the machine in the US did little to slow its meteoric rise in its homeland. For Hudson, the good times were set to continue for some time to come.

Join us next month for part two when we'll be bringing the Hudson story bang up to date.

## TIMELINE

- 1973 HUDSON SOFT IS FOUNDED BY BROTHERS YUJI AND HIROSHI KUDO
- 1975 THE COMPANY MOVES INTO SELLING COMPUTER CODE ON TAPE
- 1978 HUDSON STARTS WORKING ON GAME PROGRAMS FOR JAPANESE PERSONAL COMPUTERS (THE FIRST COMPANY IN THE COUNTRY TO DO SO)
- 1982 TOKYO OFFICE OPENS IN CHIYODA-KU
- 1983 NINTENDO APPROACHES HUDSON WITH THE INTENTION OF CREATING A PROGRAMMING TOOL FOR ITS FAMILIAR CONSOLE. *BOMBERMAN* IS RELEASED ON PERSONAL COMPUTERS
- 1984 HUDSON'S FIRST FAMILIAR TITLE, CALLED *NUTS & MILK*, IS RELEASED. *LODGE RUNNER* HITS THE SHELVES IN THE SAME YEAR AND BECOMES A SMASH HIT, EVENTUALLY SELLING 1.2 MILLION COPIES
- 1985 THE FAMILIAR VERSION OF *BOMBERMAN* IS RELEASED AND QUICKLY BECOMES A FIRM FAVOURITE. *CARAVAN ROAD SHOW* MAKES ITS DEBUT
- 1986 HUDSON BEGINS WORK ON ITS OWN 'C62' CHIPSET DESIGN, WHICH IT HOPES TO SELL TO OTHER COMPANIES
- 1987 AFTER BEING REJECTED BY NINTENDO, HUDSON ALLIES ITSELF WITH ELECTRONICS GIANT NEC AND RELEASES THE PC-ENGINE CONSOLE
- 1988 MOMOTARO DEBUTS/IS PUBLISHED ON FAMILIAR. IT GOES ON TO BECOME ONE OF HUDSON'S MOST ENDURING BRANDS – BUT ONLY IN JAPAN
- 1989 THE TURBOGRAFX-16 IS RELEASED IN THE US

