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COMMENTARY

Hanks: Vehicular Easter eggs: Now that's a smashing concept!

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In America, love is a many-fendered thing. Like no other people on earth, Americans adore their autos, embrace them and identify with them. This love affair started with Ford's first Model Ts and progressed as Americans were urged to see the USA in their Chevrolets. It continues unabated, despite gas creeping near three bucks a gallon. Autos are seen as representing literal and metaphorical freedoms. Why else would the purchase of a little red sports car be the definitive cliché of the male midlife crisis?

So perhaps it was inevitable that we now have a product tying our beloved autos to the holy day of Easter. This year the PAAS egg-dyeing company introduced the VehEGGles egg decorating kit, allowing consumers to dress up their plain ole Easter eggs to look like: an ambulance, police car, fire truck and school bus. According to PAAS product brand manager Michelle Soutter, 39, the VehEGGles have been one of this season's biggest sellers, with some 175,000 kits rolled out across the country.

As powerfully symbolic as cars are in America, eggs predate them as symbols. In many cultures the egg is seen as emblematic of spring's renewal.

"Eggs were colored, blessed, exchanged and eaten as part of the rites of spring long before Christian times," the Egg Nutrition Center's Web site tells us.

Yet for many modern Americans, the car might be a more powerful symbol than the egg. As I hold undergraduate degrees in both English and philosophy, I couldn't wait to see what happened when one symbol crashed into another. I gave the kit a test drive.

After boiling my plain white eggs, I set out to make the dye, which the package promised to be red, yellow and denim. The instructions said that for brighter colors, I should dissolve the tablets in vinegar. My personal design philosophy being "more is more," I didn't hesitate using my rice wine vinegar to jump start the colors. After all, this wasn't the Betty Crocker test kitchen.

The result: eggs in the standard Easter shades of pink, blue and a watery yellow-green. Perhaps the rice wine vinegar wasn't such a good substitution after all.

The wheel-base assembly was next, and the little plastic wheels snapped into place with a satisfying click. At my husband's suggestion, I hot glued the bases to the eggs, making them into real toy cars.

Then it was time to decorate! I laboriously pried the many teeny-tiny stickers off the page, and struggled to fit them all on my eggs (size large) in my attempt to make

them resemble the cartoonish picture on the kit. By the time I squeezed the back bumper onto the ambulance egg, I was weary of the craft project and wondering why I had bothered. They looked like lame eggs with stickers.

Thinking that I was seeing the eggs through cynical adult eyes, I assembled two unscientific focus groups. How unscientific? I talked to some kids that my next-door neighbor knows.

My female focus group, comprised of Starnisha "Star" Bodie, 12, Sharell Walker, 12, and Alexandria Williams, 11, convened at the North Austin apartment of Bodie's mother, Yolanda Simmons, 34. The group sat in a semicircle on the beige carpet and gingerly picked up the eggs. The girls found the eggs "cute," but said that if the manufacturer really wanted to appeal to girls, they'd make the vehicles luxurious limos with Bratz doll stickers, rather than utilitarian fire trucks and police cruisers. When they were discussing other possible improvements for the eggs, Williams had an idea.

"Somebody can play chicken with them," Williams said. I quickly packed up my eggs before I was forced back into the test kitchen to make another round of vehEGGles.

My equally unscientific male focus group was comprised of brothers Tanner Thompson, 11, and Jarett "Bear" Thompson, 8, (but as he quickly pointed out, nearly 9). The brothers found the egg-cars "cool," but Tanner said that they would be cooler with more decorations — such as flames.

"Pimp my egg" said Bear, neatly capturing the cultural zeitgeist with his reference to MTV's car customization show, "Pimp My Ride." (On the show, people have their old cars gussied up with paint and gizmos.) Yet, upon more reflection, while rolling the blue "police" egg up and down his leg, Bear suggested another use for the cars: "Playing chicken."

Bear's statement meant two kids in two focus groups independently came to the same conclusion. Perhaps only in America could we transform the egg — a nearly universal symbol of renewal — into a contest of mutual destruction.

Perhaps next Easter I'll have Bear and Williams play chicken with each other, using large and fully "pimped out" goose eggs. With the chicken eggs, it would be like trying to pimp out a Kia, with no room for the flames.