

Transformers official site

"The Transformers! Robots in disguise! The Transformers! More than meets the eye!" If you're of a certain vintage, that hummable theme will transport you back to a world of epic battles between the heroic Autobots and evil Decepticons. Which began 40 years ago. Blimey.

And it's still going strong. What began as a gimmick in Japan - robots that turned into vehicles, tools and household objects - became a cultural giant. We've now had four decades of toys, comics, films and games. So let's pour one out for Prime and pals and see how the franchise itself has transformed over the years.

Transformers has its roots in several Japanese toy lines. Hasbro snatched the concept and mashed it into a single brand. Which explains why Optimus Prime had spots for pilots (he was originally a mech) and why the chibi-like mini Autobots looked so weird next to the likes of Jazz and Prowl.

Early designs were basic - medical officer Ratchet didn't even have a head. But the line evolved, ramping up details and gimmicks until Hasbro went a step too far with non-transforming Transformers - an ignominious end to the original line.

Revamps and reboots ensured the property never stayed away for long. The 1990s gave us Beast Wars. In 2003, ludicrously detailed (and complicated) Masterpiece Transformers made collectors drool. But even the more affordable sets have transformed from their basic origins, such as the Studio Series and the intricate yet wallet-friendly Cheetor.

However, if money's no object, there are all kinds of new Transformers experiences to try. RoboSEN will sell you a self-transforming, programable Transformer that costs as much as a phone. Lego has an Optimus Prime. And Hot Wheels will relieve you of 80 bucks for a tiny 1:64 scale Optimus. All while laughing maniacally, like Megatron sitting atop a pile of gold.

The toys had the gimmicks but the comics brought the lore. Bob Budiansky expanded his toy-box mini bios into a four-issue limited series of good vs evil. And it might have ended with the Autobots triumphant had it not sold so well. Instead, Shockwave - whose alt form was a massive space gun - unexpectedly showed up and blasted the Autobots to pieces.

Then things got weird. Optimus's brain was saved to a floppy disk. Decepticon leader Ratbat hit upon hypnotising humans with his "car wash of doom". (Seriously.) Thankfully, the UK comics were keeping things interesting with superior fill-in stories, and chief scribe Simon Furman eventually took over the US title until its conclusion - "#80 in a four-issue limited series".

His penchant for increasingly sophisticated themes took root and informed subsequent Transformers comics,

which are now mostly aimed at adult fans. IDW's lauded run used giant robots to explore everything from identity to redemption. Skybound recently rebooted the property yet again, to critical acclaim. Although don't get attached to any of your old favourites - because it's clear writer Daniel Warren Johnson has other plans.

Back in the 1980s, every toy line needed a cartoon, and Transformers was no exception. The exploits of the giant robots were goofier than in the comics, with a safety net that ensured the Autobots would always emerge triumphant while Decepticon leader Megatron would growl that he'd win next time. He wouldn't. Well, not until 1986.

By that point, Hasbro was eager to replace its line of toys, and cunningly planned to wipe out the old guard in a feature-length movie. The Decepticons suddenly learned how to aim. Within single scenes, scores of old favourites were mercilessly slain in gruesome fashion. Just to drive the point home, Megatron executed a defenceless Ironhide at point-blank range. So much for "PG".

Two decades passed before the collective psyche of Transformers fans had healed enough for another feature-length outing. Michael Bay's live-action take started well, with a tense opening scene of a helicopter approaching an army base, before - Surprise! - it transformed and murdered everyone.

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