

A TRANSFORMATIONAL FIGURE: OPTIMUS PRIME IN POPULAR CULTURE 2006–2018¹

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ABSTRACT

Since the introduction of the Transformers franchise in 1984, the character of Optimus Prime has served as the leader of the heroic Autobot faction, but also as the “face” of the series in popular culture. This paper explores the character’s conceptual origins as a superhero robot, and takes an in-depth look at various representations of Optimus Prime in Transformers media during the pivotal years 2006–2018. Particular attention is paid to the various roles Prime serves in fiction, from idealistic journeyman to all-American action hero to war-weary veteran to wise mentor. The character’s status as a celebrity is also discussed.

Keywords: Transformers, toys, franchise, transmedia, veteran, action hero.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 2011 White House Correspondents’ Dinner holds a noteworthy place in American political history, often represented as a pivotal event in Donald Trump’s decision to run for President of the United States (Roberts 2023; Kirk 2016). It was the zenith of the “birther” conspiracy, an allegation that then-President Barack Obama was not a native-born US citizen and thus ineligible to hold office (Taddonio 2016). As a spoof of the conspiracies, Obama was introduced to the crowd not with “Hail to the Chief” but with Rick Derringer’s “Real American,” a bombastic rock song and walkout music for pro wrestler Hulk Hogan. A video package superimposed patriotic images over the American flag; Uncle Sam, cowboys and Mount Rushmore alongside a bouncing copy of Obama’s “long form” birth certificate. The joke was clear—Obama was indeed a “real American.” As the video

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continued, the images of classic Americana were replaced with more contemporary icons; basketball legend Michael Jordan, 1970s stuntman Evel Knievel, and Optimus Prime, fearless leader of the heroic Autobots from the 1980s *Transformers* cartoon (C-SPAN 2011). Two years later, Miss USA 2013 Erin Brady appeared in the Miss Universe Pageant “National Costume Contest” wearing a red, white, and blue ensemble seemingly inspired by the cinematic version of Optimus Prime. Despite Brady’s excitement at “becom[ing] a [T]ransformer” (Miss USA 2013) the outfit was largely met with puzzlement and mockery in the media, referred to as “Optimus Sub-Prime” and questioning what American sensibilities a “Japanese toy” could possibly represent (Styles 2013; Gutierrez 2013).

The association between Optimus Prime and American values was not novel at that point; a 2009 issue of IDW Publishing’s *The Transformers* comic series reimaged artist Shepard Fairey’s iconic “CHANGE” poster to feature the Autobot leader, captioned “CHANGE INTO A TRUCK” (Doyle 2009), while multiple pieces of official art have featured Prime posing with the flag of the United States (Coller 2009; Su 2004) or in the guise of Uncle Sam (Milx and Su 2005). Beyond that, many aspects of the character are quintessentially American—he is an immigrant, he sports the red, white, and blue colors of the US flag, he speaks with an American accent, and the 18-wheeler is itself an American symbol (Wilson 2012). Even the character’s Japanese name, “Convoy,” evokes the 1978 trucker movie, which was a massive hit in that country (American Film Institute 2021). This paper explores the enduring nature of Optimus Prime as a *character* beyond his status as cartoon hero or action figure. Successful marketing of Optimus Prime and the *Transformers* franchise in the 1980s created room for a revival in the early 2000s, propelling the character of Optimus Prime into a celebrity in his own right.

With forty years of content to draw from, our focus needs to be narrowed. 2006 was chosen as a starting point as it represented a shift in how the brand was marketed. From 2001-2006, the main *Transformers* series (*Robots in Disguise*, *Armada*, *Energon*, and *Cybertron*) were toy-driven and kid-oriented. The cartoons followed the toys, focusing extensively on play features and regularly introducing new products as was done in the 1980s. Meanwhile, the growing influence of the adult *Transformers* fandom was becoming clear; Dreamwave Productions had a successful licensed *Transformers* comic between 2002 and 2004, and a series of reissued 1980s figures were sold at Toys ‘R’ Us. The most important element of using 2006 as a starting point, however, is the development and production of Michael Bay’s *Transformers*, arriving in theaters in July 2007. Rather than attempting to accurately depict the toys on-screen, these toys would be based on the film’s designs. This “media-first” approach would become the ‘new normal’ for the franchise going forward.

The year 2018 was chosen as the end date because it represented another large-scale reset for the franchise; IDW Publishing’s long running “neo-G1” comic universe

concluded, *Bumblebee* represented a dramatic reset of the live-action film series, the animated *Rescue Bots* and *Robots in Disguise* series both ended, and Hasbro launched a major redevelopment of the collector-oriented *Transformers: Generations* toy line. In short, 2006-2018 represents a decade of significant experimentation and transformation for the franchise, and Optimus Prime was a central part of that process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMING

The *Transformers* franchise can be understood using Jenkins' (2009) concept of "transmedia storytelling," where "integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purposes of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience." Specific characters can then become transmedia figures in their own right; Thon & Pearson (2022) identify Sherlock Holmes as a well-known and long-running example. Such characters can be understood as a template for storytellers; while critical elements of Holmes remain constant (e.g. the name "Sherlock Holmes" or a recognizable variation and the role of "detective/crimefighter") other elements are mutable; Holmes has been portrayed by men, women, and Muppets, depicted as young and muscular or old and feeble, worked alongside Dr. Watson, Batman, and the Ghostbusters, and so forth. Meetings between these variants of a character are sometimes part of the narrative itself; *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* is a recent example. Such stories, for Jenkins, reward fans for their "mastery" and knowledge of the source materials beyond the pleasures inherent in the story.

2.1 THEORIZING TOYS AS TEXTS

Jenkins (2009) identifies *Star Wars* action figures as a "minimal" aspect of that franchise's transmedia delivery but acknowledges that stories may emerge through play. *Star Wars*, however, began as a film first and then expanded outward while *Transformers* began as a toy line, with fiction emerging from various transmedia marketing efforts. To further explore Optimus Prime as a toy and as a transmedia character in his own right, I draw upon three primary concepts; narrativization (Fleming 1996), toyesis (Bainbridge 2010) and Critical Action Figure Studies (CAFS) (Alexandratos and Yezbick 2018). The first of the three, narrativization, primarily applies to toys that represent characters from an extant work. The narrative is "baked into" the toy and informs how the end user will engage with it. Fleming uses the example of GI Joe, the original "action figure." The 1960s GI Joe was largely a narrative-free toy - indeed, the name itself indicated a degree of genericism—but the 1980s *GI Joe: A Real American Hero* franchise presented a narrative where each figure represents a distinct character (1996, 162–63). The toy is not just "a sailor," "he" is Hector X. Delgado, codename Shipwreck. Similar to Jenkins, Fleming observes that keeping track of the myriad characters and factions requires dedicated knowledge

on the part of a child, with a degree of complexity that allows kids to explore adult themes and “transcend... bleakness while nevertheless recognizing it” (1996, 146).

“Toyesis” refers to the way a toy can have “multiple origins across multiple media platforms, generating the production of more media texts around them” essentially fusing transmedia storytelling with narrativization (Bainbridge 2010, 33). The original “Generation One” era (1984–1991, “G1”) of the *Transformers* franchise did this from the start via cartoons, a comic book series, a theatrical movie, and other ancillary material, all providing slightly different interpretations of what *Transformers* “is.” Bainbridge links this practice to G1 but also to the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe; the *Guardians of the Galaxy* characters were obscure prior to the film’s release, but through a multi-pronged toyesis approach, Rocket Raccoon was simultaneously re-introduced in a comic book from Marvel, an action figure from Hasbro, and an episode of DisneyXD’s *Avengers Assemble*, ensuring that by the time the film hit theaters, core audiences would recognize the spunky rodent (Bainbridge 2016).

Finally, CAFS explores action figures as a distinct form of material culture. Action figures are “spreadable,” extending official stories and enabling consumers to create their own imagined adventures. Product lines continually expand to reflect the narrative. Batman brings along Robin, the Joker, and the Batmobile; each Bat-series will inevitably reimagine and reproduce such elements. As nostalgia increasingly drives the development of action figures, they become “less toy-like and more redundantly iconic through perpetual reboots, overhauls, and reimaginings” (Alexandratos and Yezbick 2020, 112), losing “playable” action features (lights and sounds, “kung-fu grip”) in favor of increasing fidelity to source material. The initial waves of “Marvel Legends” toys (2002-2006) were designed to reflect specific “famous moments” from the comics, relying on fans’ knowledge of the source material as marketing tool. A final element is a paradox; toys are both disposable ephemera and collectible investments. Dedicated collectors become akin to museum curators, organizing their collections in ways that reflect their individual preferences and knowledge of the material (see Figure 1 below for a modest example). Toys can take on speculative/commodity status as well, drawing significant sums on eBay or at collectible shows.

2.2 TRANSFORMERS IN ACADEMIC LITERATURE

Dalkavouki (2018) identifies three primary areas of research on *Transformers*. First, exploring the international production (Fast and Örnebring 2017; Zhao and Murdock 1996; Owczarski 2017; Lukinbeal 2019) and transmedia distribution of the brand (Fleming 1996; Cowan 2023; Wolski 2022). Second, content analyses of the fiction, particularly American/Western anxieties about technology (Varney 2002; Wilson 2012), militarism (Cserkits 2021; Mirrlees 2017; Banglani 2018), and masculinity (McNamee and Miley 2017; Weigard

2011; Bacon 2011, 2012). Third, the *Transformers* fandom; focused largely on nostalgic adult collectors in Western societies (Meakins 2014; Fast 2012; Geraghty 2008, 2010, 2011).

A critical point of Dalkavouki's overview is the myopic focus on the 1980s cartoon and the live-action films to the near-total exclusion of other iterations. Expanding the literature into other parts of the franchise is an explicit goal of this paper; the discussion of *Transformers: Animated* that follows is effectively the first peer-reviewed material covering that series. I add a developing line of inquiry; Optimus Prime as referential symbol. These papers rarely interrogate the franchise but reflect the impact of Optimus Prime in popular consciousness. Several computer science researchers utilize Prime as an example of a "benign" artificial intelligence due to his honor, integrity, and "human" personality (Banks 2020; von Davier 2019; Reich 2009), while child psychologists consider his status as a role model for children, exploring what utility that popularity might have in educational contexts (Round, Baker, and Rayner 2017; Ohtake 2016; O'Byrne et al. 2018).

3. WAR DAWN: OPTIMUS PRIME'S SUPERHERO ORIGINS

While this piece focuses on Optimus Prime, the broader origins of *Transformers* are deeply tied to superhero fiction. The toy sold worldwide as Optimus Prime began in Japan as "Battle Convoy," released in 1982 by the Takara corporation as part of the *Diaclone* toy line. A Hasbro employee attending the 1983 Tokyo Toy Show spotted the toys and *Diaclone* along with several other Japanese lines would be licensed and integrated into the first two years of the *Transformers* franchise (Bainbridge 2010; Geraghty 2010). Other converting-robot toy lines would be sold in the West, most notably *GoBots*, but none were as impactful or long-lasting as *Transformers* (Varney 2002; Bainbridge 2016).

One explanation for this success is the role of Marvel Comics in creating the core narrative. Editor-in-chief Jim Shooter developed the franchise's premise, with writer Bob Budiansky single-handedly drafting character profiles for the entire product line over the Thanksgiving 1983 holiday weekend (Shooter 2011a; 2011b). This seemingly rushed origin was perhaps the secret ingredient—the *Transformers* were robotic superheroes, not clumsy *Buck Rogers* throwbacks. Their names were evocative; "Bumblebee" and "Starscream" as opposed to "Reekon" or "Tank." Each toy's packaging described the character's personality and powers, plus statistics representing their physical and intellectual capabilities. The disparate toys were given a unified pseudo-*anime* aesthetic by artists Shohei Kohara and Floro Dery. Optimus Prime's character model ended up becoming particularly iconic - a powerful, red, white, and blue physique, protective facemask, smokestack shoulders, truck window chest and chrome grill abs; visual traits that would later be identified as "essential brand elements" to the character (Transformers Global Brand Team 2017). Much like Superman's cape, costume, and "S" symbol, these elements can vary stylistically across iterations but remain a consistent part of the template.

These character concepts and designs formed the story bible for the *Transformers* cartoon. The show was co-produced by Marvel and Sunbow Productions, a division of Hasbro's advertising agency, and distributed by Claster Television, a Hasbro subsidiary. Arriving in September 1984 during Reagan-era deregulation of TV advertising, *The Transformers* joined *GI Joe: A Real American Hero*, *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, and other show-length toy commercials in the rapidly developing space of first-run syndication (Geraghty 2010; Brown 2023). *The Transformers* was an enormous success, despite criticism from parents' groups and academics about the show's violent content and relatively mature plotlines, which were intentionally designed to set it apart from the competing *Challenge of the GoBots* (Aitken 1986; Geraghty 2010). This marketing push culminated with 1986's *The Transformers: The Movie*, which continued the cartoon's narrative, introducing new characters/toys and killing off discontinued products including Optimus Prime in the process. A letter-writing campaign from outraged children (and parents) allegedly pushed Hasbro to resurrect the Autobot leader, making it clear how popular the character had already become (Horgen 2006; Lonergan 2015; Brown 2023).

One last aspect of Optimus Prime's popularity during the initial phase of *Transformers* fever was actor Peter Cullen's vocal performance, which he described as "tough enough to be gentle" (Sicard 2023). This element was important enough that producers of the 2007 film brought him back to the role, in part to address fan anxieties about the reimagining of the franchise (Ryan 2012; Geraghty 2011). Cullen then leveraged this importance to the fans, stating he would not have participated if the film had not met his own standards for the character (Breznican 2007). Cullen would voice Prime in almost every significant piece of *Transformers* media between 2007 and 2018, creating an "aural continuity" between incarnations. When Cullen was not used, the role was usually filled by voice actor Jon Bailey, doing a carefully honed impression (Internet Movie Database, n.d.). In 2024, Cullen was recognized with a Lifetime Achievement Emmy Award "for his enduring contributions as a voice actor in television and film," specifically citing his work as Optimus Prime (and as Eeyore from Disney's *Winnie the Pooh* franchise) (Moye 2023).

4. CHILD'S PLAY—OPTIMUS IN THE TOY AISLE

The original Optimus Prime toy was removed from shelves after 1985, a decision given narrative context via *The Transformers: The Movie*. As noted above, Hasbro course-corrected and in 1988 "Powermaster Optimus Prime" was released. An ad for the *Transformers* comics told viewers that Optimus was returning as a "Powermaster" and to read the comic book to discover how, while a later ad displayed the toy's action features. As one of the first *Transformers* toys to represent a "returning" character; Powermaster Optimus Prime had to establish visual continuity with what Optimus Prime "looked like." The windscreen-and-grille look of Prime's torso was created through sculpted detail rather than parts of the truck mode, reinforcing them as part of the character's "look." Over the

next thirty-five years, toys sold as Optimus Prime would offer variations on the theme, with concurrent fiction presenting each iteration as “Optimus Prime,” all sharing core personality traits and story elements (brave, strong, Autobot leader, dying to protect Earth). In this way, the 1984 Optimus Prime toy created a template from which future toys and narratives could be iterated. Figure 1 serves to illustrate this consistent, yet varied, aesthetic process.



Fig. 1. An armada of Optimus Prime figures from the author's collection. A reproduction of the original 1984 figure is roughly in the center. Note the use of “essential brand elements”—color schemes, chest windows, and helmet designs. Photo by the author.

In 2006 with the live-action movie nearing release, Hasbro invested in putting the G1 characters back on store shelves. Two different Optimus Primes were released in the *Transformers: Classics* line, a smaller figure meant to directly evoke the 1984 release and a larger one with a bulkier build, styled after a modern cabover truck. These two toys would then be marketed as “G1 Optimus” alongside later film- and television-based figures. While the live-action films and television series discussed below had their own dedicated product lines, packaging, and branding, the *Generations* toy line (2010-ongoing) actively relied on fans’ transmedia knowledge. The initial series included an Optimus Prime based on the *War for Cybertron* video game, an updated version of G1 Decepticon

Thrust, and newcomer Autobot Drift, who had recently been introduced in the IDW comics. In this way, the *Generations* branding could serve as nostalgia bait or to promote the less-visible transmedia elements of the franchise.

5. OPTIMUS PRIME IN FICTION

This section will focus on three areas; the IDW Publications comics, where Optimus Prime is a morally-conflicted figure who explores questions of power and ideology; the live-action films, where Optimus Prime is an aggressive action hero, and the various television series from the era, where Optimus Prime varies in portrayal from a superheroic defender of near-future Detroit to film-inspired weary warrior to a revered mentor for the next generation of Autobots. This section is not exhaustive, but offers an overview of significant English-language elements of the franchise.

5.1 CHAOS THEORY: OPTIMUS PRIME AND THE IDW COMICS

IDW's "Phase One" (2005–2012) reinvented the Autobot/Decepticon war as a conspiracy thriller before culminating in a Decepticon conquest of Earth with the Autobots laid low. In these stories, Optimus Prime remains strong and fearless, although he is occasionally gripped by doubt as his forces are outmatched by the Decepticons. Following a final epic battle, IDW's "Phase Two" storylines (2012–2018) explores the origins of the Transformers' war as well as what happens when that war finally ends. This era is considered by many fans to be the peak of the franchise's storytelling and garnered significant critical acclaim (Sims 2015; 2016b; 2016a; Dalkavouki 2018).

Phase Two's pre-war stories feature Orion Pax, a police officer who will one day become Optimus Prime. Transformer society is governed by an elaborate caste system tied to whatever one converts into; aircraft are high-status, animals are worthless—a metaphor for how human societies treat those who are "unable to contribute," according to writer James Roberts (Kibble-White 2016). Pax chafes under this unjust system, befriend- ing the dissident proletarian author Megatron. Their friendship ruptures over political applications of violence, leading inevitably to war and Pax's transformation into Optimus Prime, Autobot leader.

After the war, Prime must come to grips with the destruction his war unleashed on the galaxy. Transformers are a pariah species, as other civilizations consider their mere *presence* to be a threat. Shaken by the violence carried out by those who trusted a "Prime," he resumes life as Orion Pax for a time, before new threats lead him to reclaim the title, in the hopes he can create a new legacy of peace. However, Prime's deep desire to atone for the destruction of the war leads him to forcibly annex Earth into a *Star Trek*-like alliance of Transformer worlds. Prime becomes increasingly authoritarian as his most loyal followers begin to regard him as a sort of god-king. In the final story arc, Prime

abandons violence and chooses the path of compassion, sacrificing his life to save Earth from recurrent *Transformers* antagonist Unicron. This is an admittedly extensive summary of thirteen calendar years' worth of comic books, but it is important to demonstrate the potential depth of characterization that can be applied to Optimus Prime.

Most of Optimus Prime's appearances in Phase Two were written by a single author, John Barber. This continued and consistent authorial focus allowed for a deep exploration of the character, an identifiable "voice," and expansion of the "template." This Optimus Prime contains multitudes; the traditional red-white-and-blue good guy, a conflicted hero questioning his own legacy, and a self-righteous zealot. Most intriguingly, the storyline where Optimus Prime becomes increasingly fascist in his attempts to protect Earth occurs in parallel with a storyline where Megatron renounces violence and seeks redemption for his acts of galactic tyranny. By flipping the roles of these two leaders, both are given new levels of depth and nuance, exploring questions of power and politics usually far beyond a "toy comic."

5.2 PURE BAYHEM: OPTIMUS PRIME AND THE LIVE-ACTION FILMS

Much has been written about how Optimus Prime is portrayed in the live-action films. One line of academic inquiry explores Prime as a patriarch or father figure; Bacon (2012) situates the Autobot/Decepticon conflict as a battle over reproductive power, with Optimus Prime representing a masculine desire to control the Decepticons' feminized reproductive capability. Wilson (2012) presents a similarly Freudian-Lacanian take on the character, with Optimus Prime described as a sort of living phallus, "[p]atriarchal, machinic, ultraviolent, gigantic, all-powerful... the ultimate 'vehicular vehicle'" (354). Weigard (2011) addresses Prime's role as a father figure to Shia LeBoeuf's Sam Witwicky, particularly compared to Sam's buffoonish human father, an analysis that dovetails with Wilson's observation that *all* of the male characters across Michael Bay's broader cinematic career are "intellectually one-dimensional" and "manly (but chronically unmanned)," (Wilson 2012, 362) a panoply of goofballs and bunglers.

Revisiting the question from the introduction, Wilson specifically identifies Optimus Prime as hyper-American. "He has an American-English accent; he is a Mack Truck... and his exterior boasts the bright colors of the American flag" (354–55). The live-action film series as American political project is the other recurring topic of academic discussion. Mirrlees (2017) situates the films in the broader context of the relationship between Hollywood and the United States Department of Defense. In *Revenge of the Fallen* and *Dark of the Moon* (2011) Optimus Prime and the Autobots explicitly subjugate themselves to the oversight of the military, working to hunt down and execute rogue Decepticons. Banglani (2018) connects this alliance to post-9/11 narratives about Muslim immigrants, arguing that Optimus Prime, despite his seeming American-ness, still must answer to

humanity for the actions of his enemies, and only has value to his allies in the US government until the Decepticon threat is neutralized.

Director Michael Bay identified 2014's *Transformers: Age of Extinction* not as a fourth film in the series, but rather as the first film in a "new trilogy," with dramatic changes to the casts; virtually all the Transformers aside from Optimus Prime and Bumblebee were replaced with new characters/toys (Alter 2014). In this quasi-reboot framework, Optimus Prime's physical appearance changes dramatically; while the "essential brand elements" remain broadly consistent, his overall design is more reminiscent of a medieval knight, complete with massive sword and shield, his color palette is darker, and his truck form is significantly more aggressive. The Decepticons are largely absent in *Extinction*, supplanted by a sinister CIA faction dedicated to hunting and killing all Transformers on Earth and their allies; a tech company using Transformer corpses to build military technology and the rogue Transformer assassin Lockdown. At the end of the film, Prime launches himself into space, promising to find and destroy his own creators. In the fifth film, *The Last Knight*, Optimus is absent for much of the first act before returning to Earth as a corrupted servant of an alien villain. Only Bumblebee's courage can snap him out of this state, just in time to confront a resurrected Megatron and prevent the destruction of Earth.

In these two films, not only does Prime's appearance change dramatically, but so does his attitude towards humanity. Hunted by the very humans he fought to protect, Optimus Prime is seething with anger and a desire for revenge, a trait that is unusual for the character, but a common one for action-movie protagonists (e.g. John Wick, The Bride from *Kill Bill*, etc.). Lukinbeal (2019) ties this reimagining of Optimus Prime's motives to the broader success of American action films in international markets. Revenge, it seems, is an internationally-spoken language.

5.3 OPTIMUS PRIME AS FUTURISTIC SUPERHERO: TRANSFORMERS: ANIMATED

Transformers: Animated (2007–2009) aired concurrently with the first two live-action films as well as the tail end of IDW's Phase One comics. *Animated* presented the Autobots as superheroes, protecting Detroit from costumed supervillains and the Decepticons. Optimus is reimagined in several ways; while the essential visual cues remain, the overall design is highly stylized in a manner reminiscent of *Batman: The Animated Series*. Instead of an 18-wheeler, he is a fire truck, using a high-tech firefighter's ax instead of the character's familiar "ion blaster" (a large black rifle). He is not voiced with the gravitas of Peter Cullen, but with youthful verve by David Kaye, previously known in the franchise as the voice of Megatron in the *Beast Wars* and "Unicron Trilogy" cartoon series. Most significantly for the narrative, this Optimus Prime is an inexperienced junior officer, easily overmatched by even a single Decepticon. Throughout the series, he follows a Campbell-style "hero's journey," culminating in a final battle where, in true superhero fashion,

Prime refuses to kill Megatron, instead forcing him to stand trial for his crimes. More than any other iteration of the character, *Animated* Optimus Prime hews the closest to the traditional conception of a “superhero.”

Despite being met with controversy due to its radical aesthetic shift, *Animated* is now regarded by fans as one of the best series in franchise history, beating *The Transformers* (1984) and *Beast Wars* in a large (but wholly unofficial) online fan poll (TFWiki.net: The Transformers Wiki, n.d.; Sixo [@SixoTF] 2024). The series is deeply underrepresented in academic literature; Glascock’s (2013) study of verbal aggression in children’s programming is the sole work involving the series; at least one episode was included in the data set, but specifics of the show (including identifying how many episodes under review or which ones were selected) are not discussed in the paper.

5.4 TYING IT ALL TOGETHER(?): THE ALIGNED CONTINUITY AS TRANSMEDIA EXPERIMENT

The “Aligned” continuity was an attempt to create a singular transmedia narrative for all *Transformers* fiction; videogames, comics, and cartoons would all tell pieces of a single story, start to finish. Developed by then-Hasbro employees Aaron Archer and Rik Alvarez, the 354-page “Binder of Revelation” production bible combined elements from prior eras of *Transformers* into a coherent whole, and it would have driven the franchise for a decade. Central to this plan was “The Hub Network,” a 2010 venture between Hasbro and Discovery Networks. The Hub was a family-oriented cable network with transmedia Hasbro franchises as flagship programs, most notably *Transformers: Prime* and *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (“Hub Network - Transformers Wiki,” n.d.; Discovery Communications 2010). For a variety of reasons beyond the scope of this paper, the plan failed, but much of the fiction released between 2010 and 2018 can broadly be fit into its narrative. While this era of *Transformers* fiction ran for the better part of a decade, it is significantly under-researched in the literature. The animated series have been included in broader analyses of children’s programming without being directly commented on (Godsey 2022; Kol 2021). Only an article on the tie-in *Transformers: Exodus* novel explores any narrative themes. That text focuses on the novel’s depiction of the political origins of the Transformers’ war, particularly the use of violence against corrupt governments (Mutia and Sandika 2022).

The *War for Cybertron* (WFC) video games (2010’s *War for Cybertron* and 2012’s *Fall of Cybertron*) feature Peter Cullen as Optimus Prime, one of a rotating cast of protagonists, as the narrative switches between individuals and factions. A significant part of Prime’s role in the game is a moral dilemma: Can he defeat Megatron without destroying Cybertron in the process? Otherwise, he is generally his “classic” self—war-weary but determined, committed to the safety of his troops at the risk of his own life.

Transformers: Prime attempted to adapt the intense tone of the films to television; the pilot begins with the execution of Autobot Cliffjumper by Decepticon Starscream.

Prime was more willing than any of its animated predecessors to deal with the reality of war, at least on a level suitable for a TV-Y7 rating (Pruitt 2012). Cullen retains the role of Optimus Prime, tired of war but determined to defend Earth against the Decepticons and the ever-present evil entity Unicron, dying and being reborn and then dying again, something that had by this time become an accepted part of the Optimus “template.”

The other two television series that make up the Aligned continuity, *Rescue Bots* and *Robots in Disguise* have a very different take on Optimus Prime. *Rescue Bots* was explicitly aimed at preschoolers and the plots revolve around “rookie” Autobots learning to coexist with humanity. Prime acts as a “special guest star” with his appearances treated as “event” episodes, with his role largely reduced to sagely warning the cast of some impending danger—or introducing a new Autobot to the cast.

Robots In Disguise, while officially a sequel to *Prime*, has a dramatically different animation style and tone, bright and cheerful where *Prime* was moody and grim. Optimus Prime is dead, and the show focuses on Bumblebee, who leads a small team of Autobots. Nevertheless, Bumblebee spends much of the early series anxiously second-guessing himself as to what Prime would do. Eventually, Prime is reborn (again) but recognizes Bumblebee’s growth, appointing him leader, and serving as an advisor instead. This “distant mentor” version of Optimus would become more common in *Transformers* fiction post-2018, particularly as Bumblebee is increasingly centered as a “best friend/big brother” to young audiences.

6. OPTIMUS PRIME, CELEBRITY

As the *Transformers* franchise has grown in popularity, Optimus Prime is akin to Darth Vader or Kermit the Frog, fictional transmedia characters who are treated as celebrities. His “wheel prints” can be found in cement outside the TCL Chinese Theater in Los Angeles alongside Peter Cullen’s handprints (BeyondTheMarqueeShow 2014). Optimus Prime is the second individual (and first robot) presented with a “Lifetime Achievement Award” from Nickelodeon’s “Kids Choice Awards” (Nickelodeon 2023). Visitors to the Universal Studios theme parks can meet him daily outside *Transformers: The Ride-3D* (Ricci 2021). As this article was under revision, television series *The Masked Singer* held a *Transformers*-themed episode where Optimus Prime interacted with the cast and provided clues as to performers’ identities (Byrd 2024).

By the time *Transformers* hit theaters in 2007, the concept of a fictional character as a celebrity was fairly well-rooted; McGowan (2019) details the ways that animation studios in the early twentieth century presented Betty Boop, Bugs Bunny and the like as “movie stars” in their own right. Donald Duck received an honorable discharge from the U.S. Navy in 1984, having joined up in 1941’s “Donald Gets Drafted” (Shales 1984). In an unusual and enlightening example, Della Carpini and Williams (1994) cite 1990’s *Earth Day Special*, where Bugs Bunny and the Muppets are credited on equal standing with

Bette Midler and Robin Williams. Celebrity astronomer Carl Sagan appears as himself, while *Ghostbusters*' Egon Spengler (Harold Ramis) and *Back to the Future*'s "Doc" Brown (Christopher Lloyd) are presented as Sagan's scientific equals.

Beyond serving as ambassador for the franchise, there is an entire subcategory of Optimus Prime toys which convert into officially licensed replicas of other products. The 2006 *Transformers: Alternators* figure is a 1:24 scale Dodge Ram SRT-10, which Takara insisted be sold as Optimus Prime since pickup trucks are otherwise unpopular in Japan. Similar products from this era include Optimus Prime as a Nike sneaker, a Sony PlayStation, and an iPod dock. Simply mixing a product with the *Transformers* franchise is not enough, the "star power" of Optimus Prime is part of the appeal.

Disney Label "Mickey Mouse Trailer" (2009) is particularly noteworthy for *not* being Optimus Prime. The robot mode resembles Mickey Mouse wearing an Optimus Prime costume; the bulbous feet, gloved hands, and head shape are Mickey while the chest windows, abdomen grill, and general color blocking are Optimus Prime. Even the Autobot icon is altered into a likeness of a mouse's head. Mickey himself is perched atop the robot's head. In truck mode, the vehicle resembles Optimus, but Mickey is in the driver's seat. Here at last we see the limits of Optimus Prime's "celebrity" status; the face of *Transformers* is reduced to a (literal) vehicle for Disney.

7. CONCLUSION—OPTIMUS PRIME, PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Two very interesting Optimus Prime toys were announced together in August 2023; "Missing Link" Optimus Prime is a highly-detailed update of the original 1984 figure with contemporary engineering and articulation, while "Toyota Lunar Cruiser" Optimus Prime converts into the likeness of a Japanese Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) moon buggy (Fallon 2023). Missing Link Optimus refines a toy of the past to the standards of the present, while Lunar Cruiser Optimus looks to the future. Both toys maintain visual continuity with one another; despite the real Lunar Cruiser being white with massive grey tires, the Optimus Prime version achieves the familiar red/grey/blue robot mode by cleverly stowing the vehicle's exterior panels.

Across the nearly 40-year span of the *Transformers* franchise, Optimus Prime has remained a central figure. One key to Prime's longevity as a pop-culture icon is his mutability. Optimus Prime can serve whatever needs the story requires; all-American action hero, Christlike martyr, political activist, war-weary veteran, wise father figure, or celebrity spokesmachine, while retaining his core characterization of strength, courage and dignity. He can become a sneaker, a pickup truck, or a sports car and remain a recognizable robot thanks to his superhero-like visual elements. This mutability is in many ways a direct consequence of the transmedia nature of the franchise, transforming (pun *very much intended*) a clever robot toy into something more, much more, than meets the eye.

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PERTINENT *TRANSFORMERS* MEDIA & PRODUCTS:

1982. *Diaclone* “Battle Convoy” action figure. Manufactured and sold in Japan by Takara.
- 1984–1987. *The Transformers* animated television series. Produced by Marvel Productions and Sunbow Productions, distributed in the US by Claster Television. Syndication.
- 1984–1991. *The Transformers* comic series (US). Written by Bill Mantlo (1-2), Ralph Macchio (1), Jim Salicrup (2-4), Bob Budiansky (5-55) and Simon Furman (56-80) Marvel Comics. 80 issues.
- 1984–1985. *The Transformers* “Optimus Prime” action figure. Manufactured and sold internationally by Hasbro under license from Takara.
1986. *The Transformers: The Movie* animated film. Produced by Marvel Productions and Sunbow Productions, distributed by De Laurentiis Entertainment Group.
1988. *The Transformers* “Powermaster Optimus Prime” action figure. Manufactured and sold internationally by Hasbro under license from Takara.
- 2005–2006. *The Transformers: Infiltration* comic series. Written by Simon Furman. IDW Publishing. Six issues.
2006. *Transformers: Alternators* “Optimus Prime” action figure. Manufactured and sold internationally by Hasbro under license from Takara.
2006. *Transformers: Classics* Voyager-Class “Optimus Prime” action figure. Manufactured and sold internationally by Hasbro under license from Takara.
2007. *Transformers* theatrical film. Directed by Michael Bay, distributed by Paramount Pictures.
2007. *Transformers Sports Label* “Convoy featuring Nike Free 7.0” action figure. Manufactured and sold in Japan by TakaraTomy.
2007. *Transformers Music Label* “Optimus Prime –speakers for iPod” action figure. Manufactured and sold in Japan by TakaraTomy.
- 2007–2009. *Transformers: Animated* animated television series. Produced by Cartoon Network Studios and Hasbro Entertainment, broadcast by Cartoon Network.
2007. *The Transformers: Spotlight Optimus Prime* comic book. Written by Simon Furman. IDW Publishing. One issue.
- 2008–2009. *The Transformers: All Hail Megatron* comic series. IDW Publishing. 16 issues.
2009. *Transformers Disney Label* “Mickey Mouse Trailer” action figure. Manufactured and sold in Japan by TakaraTomy.
2009. *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* theatrical film. Directed by Michael Bay, distributed by Paramount Pictures.
2010. *Transformers: War for Cybertron* video game. Developed by High Moon Studios, published by Activision (Windows/Playstation 3/Xbox 360).
2010. *Transformers: Generations* “Cybertronian Optimus Prime” action figure. Manufactured and sold by Hasbro under license from Takara.
2010. *Transformers: Exodus* novel. Written by Alex Irvine, published by Del Rey Books.
- 2010–2013. *Transformers: Prime* animated television series. Produced by K/O Paper Productions, Darby Pop Productions, and Hasbro Studios, distributed by The Hub/Discovery Communications.
2011. *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* theatrical film. Directed by Michael Bay, distributed by Paramount Pictures.

- 2011–2016. *Transformers: Rescue Bots* animated television series. Produced by Atomic Cartoons, Darby Pop Productions, and Hasbro Studios, distributed by The Hub/Discovery Communications.
2011. *The Transformers, Volume 5: Chaos Theory* trade paperback. Written by Mike Costa and James Roberts. IDW Publishing.
2011. *Transformers: The Death of Optimus Prime* comic book. Written by James Roberts and John Barber. IDW Publishing. One issue.
2012. *Transformers: Fall of Cybertron* video game. Developed by High Moon Studios, published by Activision (Windows/Playstation 3/Playstation 4/Xbox 360)
2012. *The Transformers: Autocracy* digital comic. Written by Flint Dille and Chris Metzen. IDW Publishing. Twelve issues.
2012. *Transformers: The Ride—3D* theme park attraction. Universal Studios Hollywood.
2014. *Transformers: Age of Extinction* theatrical film. Directed by Michael Bay, distributed by Paramount Pictures.
2015. “Optimus Prime featuring Original PlayStation” action figure. Manufactured and sold in Japan by Takara.
- 2015–2017. *Transformers: Robots in Disguise* animated television series. Produced by Darby Pop Productions and Hasbro Studios, distributed by Cartoon Network.
- 2016–2018. *Optimus Prime* comic series. Written by John Barber. IDW Publishing. 25 issues.
2017. *Transformers: The Last Knight* theatrical film. Directed by Michael Bay, distributed by Paramount Pictures.
2018. *Transformers: Unicron* comic series. Written by John Barber. IDW Publishing. Seven issues.
2024. “Lunar Cruiser Prime” action figure. Manufactured and sold in Japan by TakaraTomy, US distribution by Hasbro Pulse.
2024. *Transformers: Missing Link* “Optimus Prime” action figure. Manufactured and sold in Japan by TakaraTomy, US distribution by Hasbro Pulse.