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The strange story of Jetfire, and other Transformers toys

Feature | [Ryan Lambie](#) | 15 Jul 2014 - 06:08 |

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Hasbro's Transformers toys are 30 this year. Ryan looks back at their strange origins, including Jetfire's complicated history...

In 1984, Hasbro launched the *Transformers* on an unsuspecting public, resulting in a multimedia phenomenon which still thrives today. At the franchise's heart was a toy with a simple idea behind it: miniature cars, planes and other familiar objects which could turn into action figures. Robots in disguise. It was an ingenious concept, and brilliantly marketed - so much so that the Transformers became a global best-seller for several years, and a franchise that still thrives 30 years later.

It's unlikely Hasbro could have predicted the magnitude of its property's success, much less its longevity. But then the story behind the *Transformers'* existence is perhaps even more surprising than the mass market phenomenon it would quickly become.

For one thing, the Transformers owe their existence, at least in part, to Ronald Reagan.

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Before 1984, American television stations were closely regulated, and the promotion of any product within the body of a TV show was forbidden by the Federal Communications Commission. All that changed under the Reagan administration in 1984, when children's television was



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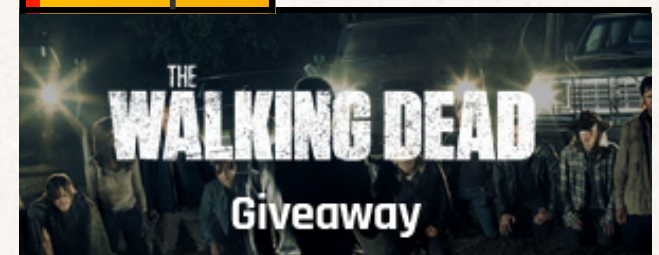
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deregulated as part of a wider bid to boost the American economy. In his first speech as president in 1981, Reagan famously said, "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to the problem. Government is the problem."

The release of *Star Wars* had sparked a boom in action figures and merchandise in the late 70s and early 80s, and companies including Mattel and Hasbro adopted a similar approach to selling toys in its wake. Hasbro launched a new line of *G.I. Joe* figures in 1982, which was supported by an animated TV series and a comic book published by Marvel Comics.

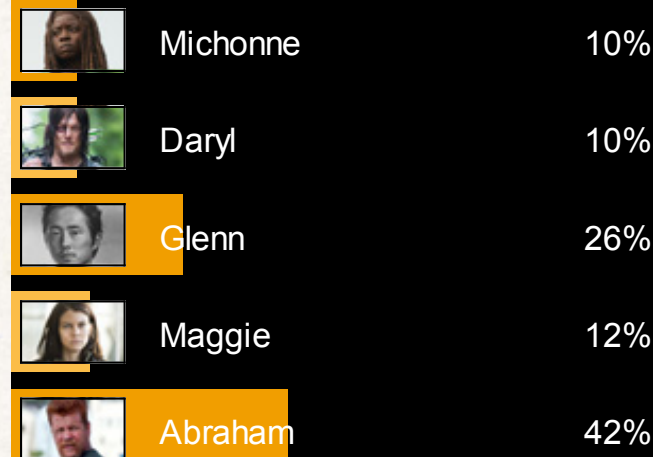
Hasbro's rival Mattel, meanwhile, had an enormous hit with its *He-Man* range of fantasy action figures and the animated show which promoted them. A war for the attention of America's youngsters had begun, and Hasbro started searching around for a new toy idea to win it. Something futuristic. Something kids hadn't seen before.

That search ended in 1982, when executives from Hasbro attended the Tokyo Toy Fair. There, they were reunited with Japanese manufacturer Takara - a company Hasbro had originally dealt with in the 1970s, when Takara licensed some of Hasbro's *G.I. Joe* action figures to sell as Combat Joe in Japan.

Takara were showing off a range of figures from its Microman line of toys, which it called Diaclone and Micro Change. Although the two ranges of toys were different, they shared a common idea: robots that could disguise themselves as vehicles or ordinary objects. Struck by these designs, Hasbro hatched a deal with Takara to sell them in America.

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Unlike other companies, such as Joustra or the Mega Corporation, who'd previously sold Takara's toys overseas, Hasbro did more than merely just sell the products in redesigned packaging - they united the lines under a single banner, *The Transformers*.

As they had with *G.I. Joe* in 1982, Hasbro turned to Marvel to help flesh out the *Transformers*' back story. The idea of having two opposing forces of good and evil robots came from Marvel's editor-in-chief, Jim Shooter, while legendary comic book writer and editor Bob Budiansky was responsible for another important innovation: the *Transformers*' names and personalities. It was Budiansky who came up with such names as Optimus Prime, Hound and Jazz. Most importantly, he gave each robot a memorable character quirk, such as Grimlock's arrogance or Starscream's constant plans to usurp Megatron as leader of the Decepticons. Budiansky even wrote the little biographies which appeared on the back of each *Transformers* box - a clever means of giving personality and depth to what could have been just another toy.

The saga doesn't end there, however. Behind some of those *Transformers* toys which appeared in stores across America and Europe in 1984, there's a strange and sometimes complicated story. Here are a few of those stories, which together create a snapshot of the *Transformers*' formative years.

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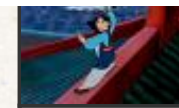
Ratchet



Little kids receiving their first Transformers in 1984 and 1985 might have been a bit confused by Ratchet, and his red cousin, Ironhide. Sure, he looked fine in his disguise as an ambulance (or a van in Ironhide's case), but as a robot? He could be charitably described as ungainly. And why didn't he look like the far cooler-looking robot in the TV series? And why didn't he have a proper head?

The reason: Ratchet and Ironhide began life as a Diaclone toy, and unlike the Transformers, the Diaclone robots were 'operated' by little humanoid figures. We have the designer Koujin Ohno to thank for the design of these and other robots from the Diaclone Car-Robots line - you can even find the patent for his 'reconfigurable toy' [here](#).

The original Diaclone versions of Ratchet and Ironhide each came with a figurine, which sat in the driving seat in both their vehicle and robot modes. Hasbro had no use for these in their Transformers range, however, and rather than waste money on changing the original moulds, the company came up with a cheap and simple solution: they provided a decal with a robot face on it, which could be applied to the now empty passenger seat.



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As he did with the other Transformers, Bob Budioansky came up with the names, character roles and personalities for these almost identical robots. Ratchet became the Autobots' chief medical officer, while Ironhide was written as the faction's military captain. Both Ratchet and Ironhide's designs were completely overhauled for the TV series and comics.

One final, hilarious fact about Ratchet: Budioansky revealed in a 2004 [interview](#) that he named the Autobot after the formidable Nurse Ratched from the 1975 film, *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*.

Megatron



When it came to fusing Takara's disparate Diaclone and Microman toy lines under the *Transformers* name, Hasbro and Marvel had a bit of a problem. The Micro Change robots were designed to be actual size, with their disguised forms modelled on ordinary objects like tape recorders and microscopes, while the Diaclone robots were supposed to be full-size vehicles that

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could blend in among ordinary cars and trucks in any early-80s city. The creators of the comics and TV series got around this by having, say, Decepticon leader Megatron change size between his robot and gun forms - a plot contrivance that seemed to glide by most of us as kids.

Megatron actually began life with the less memorable name, Gun Robo - P38, or in a variant form called Gun Robo - P38 U.N.C.L.E. This latter version, as its name implies, was inspired by the hit TV series *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, and came with a range of accessories designed to make the gun resemble the Walther pistol seen in the show. It was the U.N.C.L.E variant, with its stock, scope and silencer, which ultimately became Megatron, albeit with a few modifications.

The Japanese version of Megatron was originally capable of firing little red plastic pellets, which probably thrilled children at the time but made Hasbro understandably nervous. The pellets and the firing mechanism were quietly removed from the Transformers version of Megatron, along with a dangerously pointy-looking sword, which came packed with some versions of the original Gun Robo.

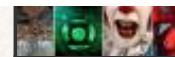
Even so, the toy remained a worryingly lifelike replica of a Walther P38, and it's hard to imagine a toy quite like it being made today. According to a list published on Fark in 2002, Megatron is still on a list of items that are strictly forbidden to be carried on to aeroplanes in America, and according to [this website](#), it's illegal to import Megatron into Australia without a license.

In a 2009 [news story](#), a 24-year-old man ended up being surrounded with an armed tactical response unit when he foolishly pointed his Megatron Walther at his neighbours.

"It's a Transformer," the man protested. "It turns into a Luger [Sic]. It's an 80s-style Transformer... He's had a really bad day. People are treating him like crap."

Even in real life, Megatron has something of a villainous reputation.

Shockwave





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Arguably one of the coolest first-generation *Transformers*, Shockwave was an imposing Decepticon who could transform into a futuristic laser gun. Some Transformers fans may have wondered why, among the G1 robots, Shockwave seemed so different - he didn't disguise himself as a familiar car, plane or other object like other Transformers, he had flashing lights, and made chirpy laser gun noises.

The reason Shockwave was so different was simple: he wasn't originally from the Diaclone or Microman toy lines like the other robots, but manufactured by a Korean company called ToyCo. They'd been making Shockwave, under his original identity Astro Magnum, since the late 1970s, and despite a change in colour (the Astro Magnum was originally made from grey plastic) and an alteration to the shape of his trigger (it originally looked quite phallic, poking out from between the robot's legs as it did), he was pretty much the same.

Hasbro, surprised by the success of its robots in disguise and keen to expand its line of toys as quickly as possible, purchased the Astro Magnum design from ToyCo and added it to the Transformers range. Unfortunately, ToyCo had already licensed the design to the company RadioShack, who **released it** in its original grey form as Galactic Man. This figure was also released in a UK store called Tandy, which was part of RadioShack.



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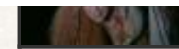
This slightly confusing licensing deal - and others like it, with Takara's toys sold by companies like GiGi and Joustra in Europe - partly explains why Hasbro introduced the heat sensitive stickers, called Rubsigns, to its Transformers from 1985 onwards. These stickers would help to distinguish genuine Hasbro Transformers from its competitors, or dodgier companies who sold knock-off version of robots like Shockwave, Soundwave or Grimlock.

At any rate, Shockwave remains a popular character in the Transformers universe, and he still exists in toy form, albeit very different from his original 70s-80s incarnation. Legend has it that Bob Budiansky based Shockwave's character on that of Mr Spock from *Star Trek*, with his cold, calculating personality and his motto, "Clarity of thought before rashness of action. Shockwave was, Budiansky once said, "my attempt to take Spock from *Star Trek* and make him into a Decepticon."

Ultra Magnus



For most of us in the western hemisphere, 1986's *Transformers: The Movie* marked our introduction to the Autobot commander, Ultra Magnus. The toy, which came out around the same time, was a great one, too: as well as a particularly large robot, he could turn into a car transporter, which could be used to tow the rest of your Autobot vehicles around your living room



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carpet.

There was something slightly strange about Ultra Magnus, though. The cab was effectively the same as Optimus Prime, except painted white instead of red, and when transformed, connected to the trailer to make Ultra Magnus. That Ultra Magnus was effectively two robots in one was never mentioned by the comics or cartoons, which meant we spent a fair bit of our childhoods staring at this white Optimus Prime clone and wondering exactly who he was.

As it turns out, Ultra Magnus began life as a Diaclone robot called Powered Convoy, and he was intended to complement the original Optimus Prime figurine, then called Battle Convoy. Some youngsters may also have noticed that Ultra Magnus's head could also be connected to the chest plate to create a battle craft - something originally described in the original Diaclone instruction manual, but left out of the one printed by Hasbro in 1986.

Jetfire



Finally, we come to the Transformer with the strangest history of all. A robot capable of transforming into a fighter jet, he was much larger and more intricately designed than his Decepticon rival, Starscream. Fans of Japanese anime would have immediately spotted why Jetfire

looked so different from the other Transformers: he originally appeared as a Super Valkyrie Fighter in the series *Super Dimensional Fortress Macross*, which first aired in 1982.

Designed by Shoji Kawamori, the Super Valkyrie was one of the most iconic mecha creations of the 1980s, and it's little surprise that the company Takatoku rushed a transforming toy based on it as the series took off. Hasbro clearly recognised how popular the Valkyrie design would be in the west, so they purchased the design from Takatoku, renamed the robot Jetfire, and added it to the Transformers family, alongside a number of other designs from the company, such as the Deluxe Insecticons.

(Interestingly, there's another link between *Transformers* and *Super Dimensional Fortress Macross*. Designers Shoji Kawamori and Kazutaka Miyatake, who would later design *Macross*, had been contracted by Takara to help create the Diaclone toys back in 1980.)

Problems arose when Takatoku went out of business in 1984. Japanese giant Bandai bought up Takatoku, and with a *Macross* movie renewing interest in the series, Bandai decided it wanted to re-release the Valkyrie toys in Japan. The following year, *Macross* appeared in America (albeit in modified form) as part of the Harmony Gold series *Robotech*, which meant that kids across the country would see the Jetfire design in an entirely different context.

The complex issue of who owned the rights to the Valkyrie design in what country led Hasbro to change Jetfire's appearance and name in the comics and television show; according to the *Transformers* [story bible](#), intended to help the writers on the comics and TV show, "JETFIRE has been "transformed" into SKYFIRE - with a different model - due to legal reasons. Do not use this character unless necessary".

Like the rest of the Transformers, Jetfire (or Skyfire, as he was later known) would change greatly as toy lines came and went and the accompanying story behind them meandered in different directions.


The story behind the Transformers' formative years, then, is an unusually complex one. But ultimately, it boils down to two defining factors: the ingenuity of a varied group of Japanese toy designers, and the cunning of Hasbro, who, in conjunction with Marvel, created an enveloping mythos which is still being told today.

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