

CREATING THE IDW-VERSE

IN CONVERSATION WITH JAMES ROBERTS



The Definitive Collection's Simon Furman sat down with James Roberts to talk about putting the 'more than meets the eye' back in TRANSFORMERS comics.

SF) 'Chaos', in the ongoing series, gave you a chance to seed many of the characters you were going to be using. Can you give us an insight into the somewhat offbeat character selection for MTMTE?

JR) The combination of characters was key because MTMTE was, first and foremost, an ensemble book (a first for TRANSFORMERS, I think). There were two key reasons why I chose lesser-known characters. Firstly, I wanted the bulk of the core cast to be — well, to be a bunch of losers, to be honest, a group of misfits and oddballs. It's impossible to do that with characters that in earlier stories have been shown to be heroic and/or famous among their ranks. Secondly, using relative unknowns meant that their backstories — and to an extent their personalities — were as yet un-established, and that gave me lots of freedom to improvise and explore.

I also needed characters with specific functions, established or otherwise: medic, security expert, weapons engineer, archivist — even psychiatrist. If I couldn't find an existing G1 character with the function I was looking for, I invented one, or, as in the case of Chromedome (a mnemosurgeon), found someone whose old function was close to what I was looking for. Finally, I tried to mix-and-match different G1 eras — so you have Ratchet from 84, Skids from 85, Magnus and Cyclonus etc from 86, a couple of Headmasters from 87... and then, later, Getaway and Nightbeat (88), and Thunderclash (92). I would have put a Micromaster in there, but in the IDW Universe [as you know, Simon!] they weren't 'regular' Cybertronians.

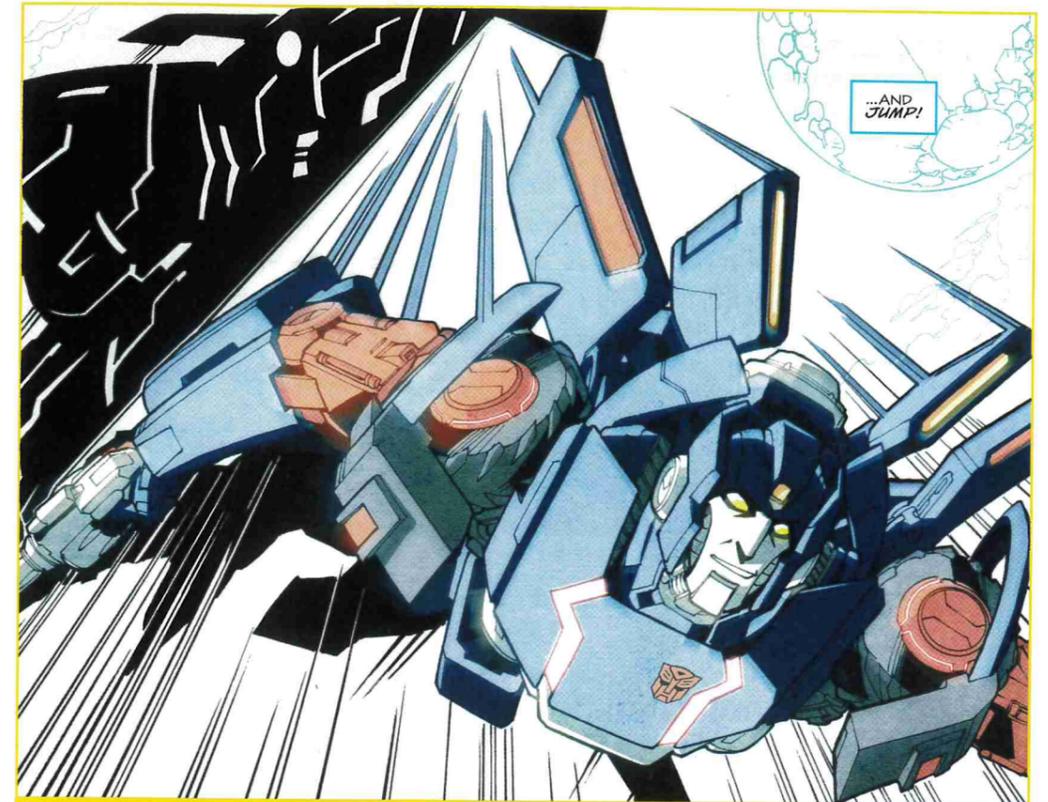
SF) Did you see this as a chance to take the IDW universe off in new directions?

JR) I relished the idea that by heading off into space the crew were detaching themselves from Cybertron and the 'main' continuity; there was definitely a sense of freedom to tell quirky, offbeat stories. In fact, the series outline from IDW was (wonderfully) vague: [In response to a schism within the Autobot ranks] "Rodimus and Drift gather up some Autobots and head off in search of the Knights of Cybertron." That was it. No other characters mentioned, and who or what the Knights were had yet to be determined. Fantastic!

The explosion in issue #1 — which takes the Lost Light far off course and into uncharted



Photo by Nick Hardy



Skids drops in in MTMTE #2, his appearance marking the first of many links to the fractured warning message from the end of issue #1.

territory — was intended to signal that we were venturing far off the beaten track, literally and narratively. If you look at the first twelve issues of MTMTE (I was told not to think too much about what might happen beyond the first year in case MTMTE failed to take off), the stories deliberately jump from genre to genre. After the pilot (split over two issues) you have a sparkeater-focused monster-of-the-week episode in issue #3; a zombie/medical drama mash-up in issues #4 and #5; a hostage/bottle episode in #6; and then body-horror in #7 and #8, police procedural in #9, conspiracy in #10, heist in #11, and an experiment with form (jumping back and forth in time) in #12.

SF) While not a reboot in any sense, MTMTE feels like a fresh start. Was it a conscious decision to impose a very different approach to both the story and the storytelling itself?

JR) Not unreasonably, IDW wanted MTMTE and its sister title, *Robots in Disguise*, to attract new readers, including people who knew nothing about TRANSFORMERS, and I think MTMTE (thanks to the series' conceit, not my skills as a writer) made for an easier jumping on point: a group of mismatched unknowns jump on a spaceship and have adventures. You don't need to

know anything else. But yes, that sense of writing for a new audience definitely influenced the tone of the series, especially as far as the humour was concerned. TRANSFORMERS had 'done' humour before, but not often. While some of the later black and white stories in *Transformers UK* were lighthearted, self-referential and quirky, and didn't take themselves too seriously, there'd never been a whole series like that — and, without making it sound too calculated, I thought that a series rooted in humour would be less intimidating to new readers.

The biggest influence on MTMTE — outside of the UK *Transformers* comics — was undoubtedly Maguire and Giffen's *Justice League International*. Reading JLI in 1987 made me rethink superhero comics. Characters talking like real people, domestic drama overshadowing the supervillain stuff, that collision of action and silliness... it was a (good) sitcom in comic form.

SF) Were you and John Barber bouncing ideas off each other or just resolutely ploughing your own respective furrows?

JR) More the latter, I think. It would have been different had we intended the two series — or their respective casts — to merge or overlap. We didn't know there'd be a crossover — in the shape of 'Dark Cybertron' — until about eighteen months in. At the very beginning we compared notes, and of course John was my editor then, so he knew (and sanctioned!) what I had planned. In the process of co-writing *The Death of Optimus Prime* we'd decided what the Cybertronian state of play would be following the events of 'Chaos' — with the NAILS coming back, etc — but it was for John to decide what would happen to the planet under Bumblebee's leadership, and for me to decide what lay ahead for Rodimus and Co.

SF) Issue #1 ends with a whole lot of foreshadowing of future plot lines. Did you have a clear plan of where you were going or were they just nuggets of ideas you'd address/flesh out in due course?

JR) A mix of both. I was able to map out the first year of issues and the overall series myth-arc in some detail. "Don't go to Delphi" is a reference to events in #4 and #5. "Don't let them take Skids" refers to the 'Remain In Light' series finale (#17 onwards). Obviously "don't look in the basement" refers to Overlord, foreshadowing his discovery in #6 and his escape in #14. The message itself proved problematic for me, though, because of the way it was framed: I'd privileged dramatic conceit over story logic. Why would a caller from the future not be more specific? Why only vague, cryptic hints? And when I came to actually write the Delphi two-parter, and Overlord's escape, and Skids' kidnap, I found that the nature of the warnings didn't make sense either. If they hadn't gone to Delphi they'd not have saved certain people. If Skids had not been taken... well, what would the consequence have been? It wasn't clear. I won't go into details because of spoilers, but suffice to say that when, halfway into Season 2, we witness the message being sent through time, I lampshaded the absurdities above.

To be continued...

Change #1 to include ANIMUS and have Skids refer to being an "Eyebrow."

Chromedome: "I've decided to check the other people." "May other people check."

More Than Meets The Eye Issue 2 "The Chaos of Warm Things" PAGE 1

Panel 1
Exterior of the Lost Light, sitting on its launch pad. The following scene takes place about 20 minutes before take off.

1 CAPTION: The Lost Light. Then.

Panel 2
Inside the Lost Light. The engine rooms. The Duobot named ORE is talking into a communicator.

2 ORE: ^{by the generators.} What do you mean? You couldn't change his mind? ^{But I thought you and Chromedome used to work together.}

3 ORE: Hey Prowl, you should've threatened to **blow up** the--

4 PROWL: That's not even funny. Look, this was always a possibility. We proceed to Plan B, as discussed. That's 'B' for--

5 ORE: Basement. Yeah, I get it. But isn't it a bit late for that?

6 PROWL: Don't worry. I've already made the necessary **modifications**. All you two need to do is load the cargo.

7 ORE: ^W I think I'll ask Shock to do the honors while I'm putting the tracer on the quantum generators. ^W He should be done...

Panel 3 ^{Description needed.}

8 CAP: "...in about twenty minutes' time."

9 SHOCK: Ore? Cargo's on board / Is it too late to tell Prowl that he's **out of his mind**?

10 ORE: ^{crackle} Given that we've just taken off, I'd say yeah.

Panel 4
We see the Lost Light in flight, in a replica of the panel in issue 1 (Page XX, Panel XX), but from the opposite angle: this time, it's coming straight towards us, thrusters blazing.

Panel 5
As Panel 4, except this time: (a) there's a massive explosion behind the spacecraft as one of the thrusters explodes; and (b) the spacecraft itself is faded, like a ghost, and

The process: extracts from James Roberts' hand-annotated script for MTMTE #3 (which began life as issue #2).

More Than Meets The Eye
Issue 2
"The Chaos of Warm Things"

PAGE X 4, PANEL 4

Panel 1

RODIMUS: I didn't think they were real.

RODIMUS: I thought they were like the Shimmer or the Necrobot or the Seething Moon.

DRIFT: Oh, they're real alright. Sparkeaters, Cybervores, Lifeleeches... "The nightmare with a thousand names."

TRAILBREAKER: Yeah, but has anyone actually seen one before?

RED ALERT: You know what I heard? I heard they kept one in captivity on Garrus 9. For "interrogation purposes." Not that they'd ever admit it.

REWIND: ^{But what about you, Rewind? Cut him in and receive internal deletion?}
I've got about three minutes of footage that's supposed to show a sparkeater attacking the Gimlin Facility on XX. Grainy as hell, though.

Panel 2, PAGE 5

MAGNUS: I once arrested a Decepticon who ^{said} he was a sparkeater. Remember the Morphcore Murders?

MAGNUS: He called himself the Clawed Avenger, Devourer of Souls.

MAGNUS: His real name was Blip.

MAGNUS: He wasn't a sparkeater.

Panel 3, 2

REWIND: And don't forget Roadbuster. I heard he somehow managed to--

RATCHET: Enough!

RATCHET: Enough -- prattle!

RATCHET: Has everyone forgotten the dead Autobot?

REWIND: (Ore. I think his name's Ore.)

RATCHET: Because while you're all busy blaming the boogiemán, I'm looking at a robot who's suffered a massive internal trauma. And sadly, having been in this game as long as I have, that isn't particularly unusual.

PANEL 4, 3

Trailbreaker holds up the brain module.

Roberts are his

This script extract is part of the Sparkeater story from MTME #3, specifically where members of the crew discover the brainless corpse.

TRAILBREAKER: ^{You don't think this is wrong?}
What about this?

TRAILBREAKER: A brain module sitting outside a body without any head wound. Now I'm no doctor, but that strikes me as incredibly wrong.

REWIND: Wait. He vomited up his own brain?

REWIND: Can we go home now?

CHROMEDOME: Rossum's Trinity. ^{Right, aren't I, doc?}

REWIND: ^{Say what?}

RATCHET: The spark, the brain module and the Transformation Cog are interlinked. Damage to one can cause the others to shut down.

DRIFT: So the sparkeater disconnected the brain before feasting on the spark. To XX? Very... conscientious.

RATCHET: Shush. No one speak until I've examined the body properly.

Ratchet examines the body.

Ratchet stands up.

RATCHET: It's a sparkeater.

RATCHET: If that's what you want to call it, that's what it is.

RATCHET: ^{As for a sim camera, it's}
Technically, it's a robocarnivorous entity - a vagrant parasite that infects an unsuspecting host and sustains itself by feeding off...

DRIFT: Off sentience itself.

CHROMEDOME: Rewind would like all that explained in simpler terms.

REWIND: Oi!

RATCHET: It's a disease on legs.

RODIMUS: Chromedome? I'd like a second opinion.

CHROMEDOME: And here was me hoping I wouldn't be needed.

CHROMEDOME: ^{Never...}
Would you mind putting his brain module back in his head? This is macabre enough already.

DRIFT: ^{PANEL 5}
What's he doing?

REWIND: Something I hoped he'd given up.

PAN 4

PAN 3

PAN 2

PAN 1

PAN 1

PAGE X

PANEL # 11

PANEL 2, 1. PANEL 5 + 6.

PANEL 6

INSERT: Stick a stick in a hole

INSERT: How'd it get in brain?
R: I guess a Neurobot got infected. They mention seeing him in base in footage from Ore's win. The question you ask him. Typical NAIL. Assuming we're ignoring the past war.

to remove head him -

Roberts' process was to write his scenes entirely by hand as a first draft, and then type those up into a rough second draft of the whole issue.

PANEL 125

REWIND: Chromedome is a mnemosurgeon - a neuroscientist who specializes in memory.

DRIFT: Oh, mnemo with as in mnemonic. With an m. It's just when you say it out loud, it sounds like -- anyway. What were you saying?

REWIND: He knows he way around the brain so ~~intuitively~~ intuitively, that he's able to read memories and --

DRIFT: But he's dead. He's just a slab of metal.

CHROMEDOME: Yeah, that makes this tricky. Not impossible, but -- tricky. Provided he's still warm, cerebrally-speaking, I should be able to interface with his brain...

(P6)

CHROMEDOME: It's just that after they die, the details...

CUT TO MONTAGE: ~~PAGE SEVEN~~ 7/4 page

CHROMEDOME CAP: ...start to get a bit sketchy.

CHROMEDOME recoils. Rewind checks he's OK. EXCUSE

CHROMEDOME: Okay, so if by 'sparkeater' you mean freaky dead-eyed psychopath who floats above the ground with half his head missing and XX, then yeah, we've got a positive ID.

PAGE 7

RATCHET: Okay, so that's officially not good. It's in its resurgent phase. Extracting Ore's brain was a precursor to its first feed in millennia. Now it's rediscovered its taste for fresh sparks - now that it knows there are others on board - it won't be so delicate.

Rewind looks at Shock's mutilated body.

REWIND: That was him being delicate?!

RATCHET explains about death touch, blindness etc.

DRIFT: This is a bad omen. Sparkeaters are drawn by negative energy. Bad things must have happened on this ship. Bad, bad things.

RATCHET: With all due respect, Drift, that's such a pile of--

REWIND: Shock!

REWIND: I said Ore, I meant Shock. His name's Shock. Sorry.

When Whirl sees what the sparkeater has done to Animus:

WHIRL: Messy eater.

RATCHET: Speeches have different emphasis depending on the intention. Rewind's a brain like Ratchet's only he's not supposed to be able to do that by himself alone.

This is the stuff in so energy - hanging I'm gonna be the damn any well some essential functions. Look a? → Equilibrium. It's strong. It'll debilitate you. → Ratchet! → It will also have the power to kill you by itself alone.

Roberts would make copious hand-written notes and amendments to the scenes before outputting the next draft.

RATCHET: With all due respect, Drift, that's such a pile of--

(L) REWIND: Shock!

REWIND: I said Ore. I meant Shock. His name's Shock. Sorry.

RATCHET: It's disoriented after gorging itself. Once it finds its bearings it'll go after the brightest spark.

If it gets close to you it ~~can~~ ^{it} suck your spark out in seconds - it doesn't even need to touch you. And from what Chromedome's saying, it's carrying at least one unguarded, undigested spark - so best not shoot at it. Container is key A SPER.

Aw, what?

You hit that spark you could set off a chain reaction that could destroy half the ship.

So how do we kill it?

RODIMUS: We don't kill it. We contain it. Right, Trailbreaker?

TRAILBREAKER: Just point me in the

D h R: We should see you to a place of safety.

DRIFT (to Rodimus): Let's get you to a place of safety.

(3)

RODIMUS: I'm not going anywhere.

R: I'm not going anywhere.

MAGNUS: So how do we play this?

R: It is not over...

RATCHET:

PAGE XX

(6)

Ratchet: Oh, to see M. been so close to all in that it should be remaining in container. We spread out that

12 → PAGE 11 + 12 1/2
Animus killed.

PAGES 12 - ??

Trailbreaker forcefield. PAGE 12 1/2, 17, 14.
Rung office.

It's the one bright spark it should have been the one to... I will not look in its cell. These sparks are something more than you might think - and a lot better than what we've seen.

Liftshaft, ending with "Engine rooms! Now!"

PAGE ?

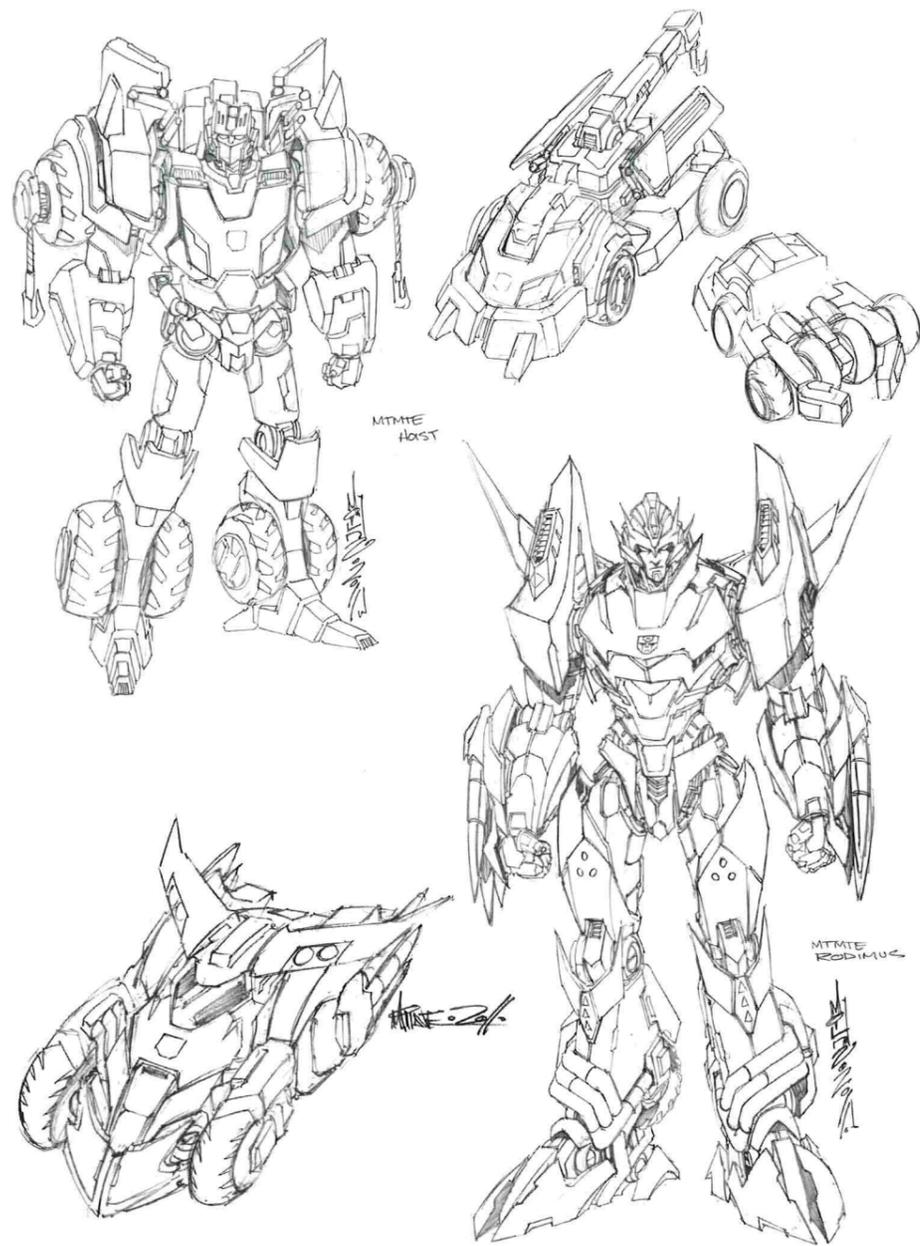
Panel 1

Cyclonus and Tailgate sitting side by side, staring straight ahead.

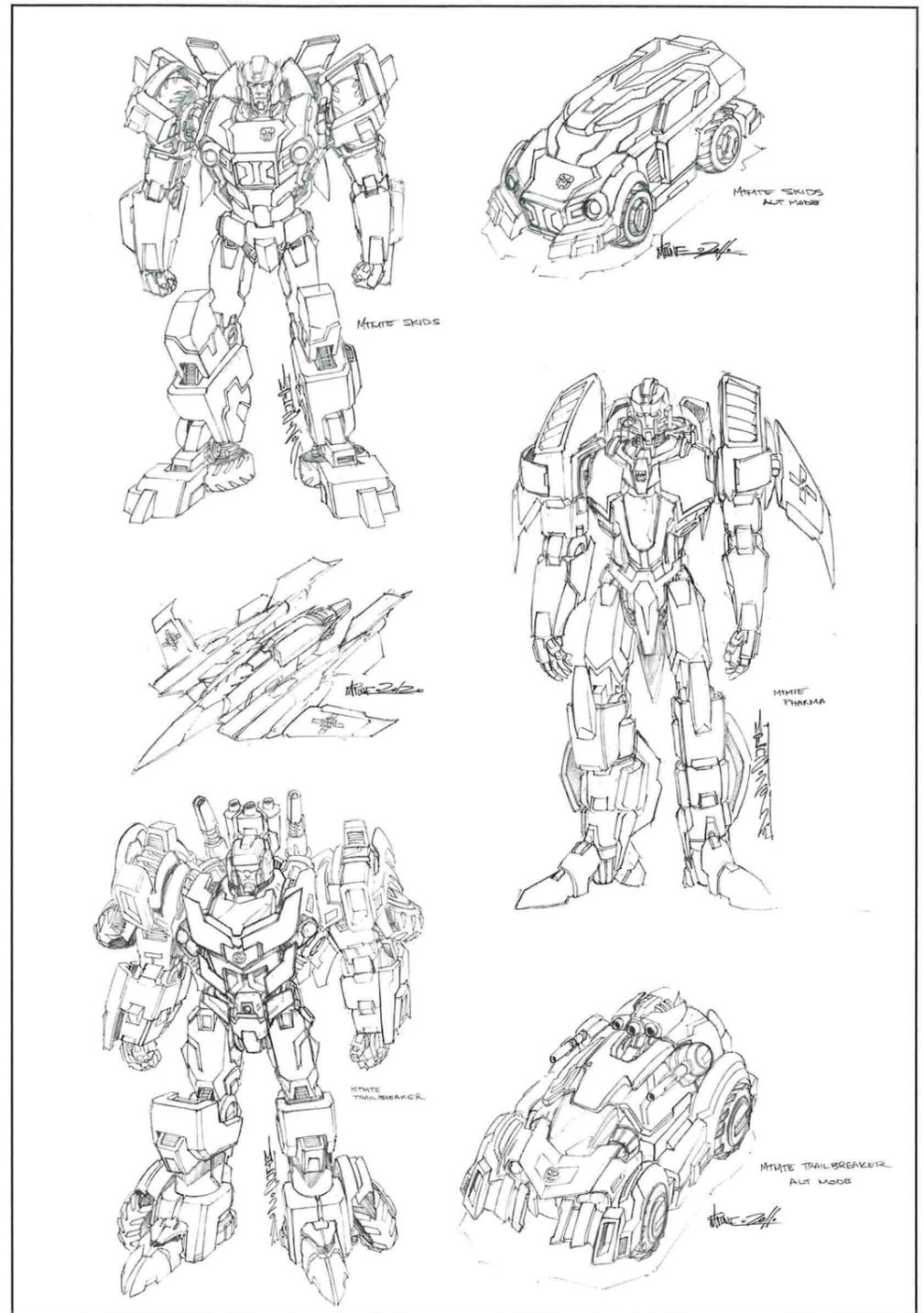
If you can find as much as you might have in him and can you recognize it. Ratchet watching DRIFT'S SWORN

The script pages re-presented here - in second draft form - are still at a very raw, formative stage. We then cut to a different scene (see our next volume, *Shadowplay*).

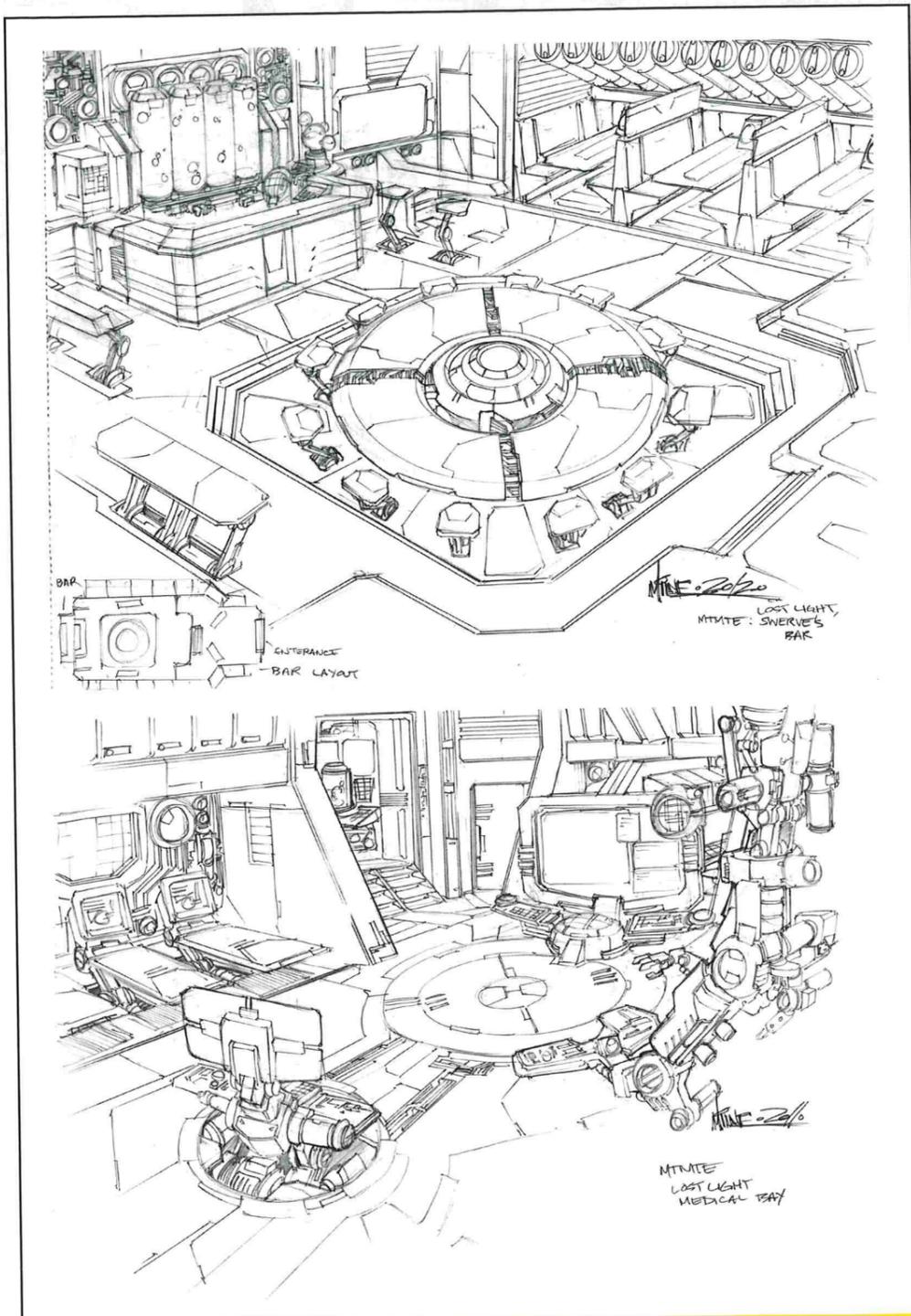
ALEX MILNE SKETCHBOOK



Updated Alex Milne MTMTE designs for Rodimus and Hoist, along with their alt. modes.



More designs from Alex Milne's sketchbook - Skids (top), Pharma (middle) and Trailbreaker, aka Trailcutter, (bottom).



Location designs for Swerve's Bar and the Medical Bay. Art by Alex Milne.