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## CREATING THE IDW-VERSE

IN CONVERSATION WITH JAMES ROBERTS



*The Definitive G1 Collection's* Simon Furman continues to test the memory of MTMTE's James Roberts in the second part of our exclusive interview (part 1 can be found in *Liars, A To D*).



Photo by Nick Hardy

**SF)** Very quickly, MTMTE starts to play like the sequel to *Last Stand of the Wreckers*. Was that high on your 'to do' list when MTMTE was in the planning stages?

**JR)** It was – partly because I was proud of what Nick Roche and I had achieved with *Last Stand*, partly because I wanted fans of that series to feel invested in MTMTE. But, looking back from a safe distance, I think I was also conscious that I didn't have much of my own canon to fall back on. I knew I wanted to reconnect with the Furman-era IDW continuity, but in terms of my own material, or the material I'd worked on with Nick... it was only *Wreckers* and 'Chaos Theory' (the latter being very much a 'backdoor pilot' for MTMTE). As we move beyond MTMTE "Season 1" (issues #1 to #22) there's much less reliance on *Wreckers*-era continuity, and the series starts to feed off its own momentum and build on its own concepts, characters and situations.



Promotional mini-posters for *More Than Meets The Eye* – released online to publicise issue #1.



More characterful mini-posters for *More Than Meets The Eye*'s eclectic cast.

**SF) There's a sense in 'Shadowplay' of you trying to rationalise, augment and fill in gaps in the bigger 'history' of the IDW-verse. Was that something you'd been itching to get to grips with?**

**JR)** I'm a sucker for world building, and, after Mike Costa had established that the IDW Autobots and Decepticons had been at war for four million years (a concept familiar to older fans but unique to the original G1 continuity), I was eager to sketch out what might have happened in that time. Tailgate, trying to learn about the war having literally slept through it, was a useful vehicle for imparting that information.

The other gaps I wanted to fill were conceptual/canonical. Early MTMTE issues in particular attempt to give an in-universe explanation for things that fans, myself included, tended to take for granted. Why are some Transformers more powerful than others? Why do some Transformers have special abilities? What makes a Phase Sixer? What happens when all the cool names run out?

**SF) 'B-list' characters like Swerve, Tailgate and Pipes get a lot of love from you and got a very strong and favourable response from readers. Did they quickly start to feel like 'your' characters?**

**JR)** In issue #3, Rodimus, Trailcutter, Magnus *et al* are standing around a brain-less corpse – one of the Sparkeater's victims – and discussing how he died; and I vividly remember, when writing that scene, how the characters suddenly felt real and alive and 'mine'. I think because it was the first time our core cast had faced a common threat and properly interacted.

In terms of the MTMTE nobodies becoming fan-favourites, I felt that their 'blank canvas' status worked to my advantage. I could give them slightly larger-than-life personalities, and



play up quirks and foibles, and not have to worry about contradicting earlier portrayals. But yes, it was satisfying to see TF fans take these obscure characters to their hearts; years down the line, it's easy to forget that, not that long ago, it would have been absurd to think of Swerve, Whirl, Brainstorm, Getaway, Skids etc getting new toys. You see fans cosplaying as Chromedome

and Rewind and you have to think, hang on, before 2012 that just wouldn't have happened. It's a good feeling!

**SF) There's a lovely amount of reference to things from the very first phases of the IDW-verse – the characterisation of Ultra Magnus, Ratchet's holo-driver, Cyclonus's non-allegiance, etc – did you set out to reunite MTMTE with those founding/grounding stories?**

**JR)** Absolutely. I'm a TF-UK fanboy, and so I've always liked the idea of an organic, interconnected, cohesive TF universe. It had felt to me that with the *All Hail Megatron* soft reboot, and to a lesser extent the launch of the first ongoing, the IDW universe had become a little more compartmentalised and a little less cohesive. But more than that, your core foundational concepts were so interesting, and so ripe for further exploration, that I'd have been foolish not to weave them into MTMTE.

**SF) Very quickly we get the Scavengers and the DJD. Were you keen to build your own unique set of antagonists to sidestep any possible clash with *Robots in Disguise*?**

**JR)** The lack of proper baddies in the postwar universe was a problem, albeit not as much of a problem as I thought at the start. Both MTMTE and *Robots In Disguise*, the latter maybe more so, dealt in shades of grey, with the Autobots in particular losing their uncomplicated good guy status (which is why, incidentally, I had the crew of *The Lost Light* perform some old fashioned heroics in issue #12, when they saved an alien race). I wanted to introduce some Decepticons that were violent and sadistic enough to make even the morally grey Autobots seem straightforwardly 'good'. I had it in mind that, if MTMTE lasted the distance, the DJD would be the main threat in Season 2. The main influence on the DJD was the Galvatron of 'Target: 2006'. I'd never read a story where the villain seemed so unstoppable, and therefore the threat to our heroes so great, and I wanted to recapture that sense of awe and dread in MTMTE.

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.

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 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.

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

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

RODIMUS: I'm not going anywhere.

MAGNUS: So how do we play this?

RATCHET:

PAGE XX

12 →  
PAGE 11 + 12 1/2  
Animus killed.

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

Liftshaft, ending with "Engine rooms! Now!"

PAGE ?

Panel 1

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

PAGES 12 - ??

It's the other way  
brighter spark  
it should head  
back down here to  
even out.

D h R: We should  
see you for  
a place in  
safety.  
R: I'm not going  
anywhere.  
R: If it see come...

R: Oh, to see M.  
been seen at all in  
down it should be  
reasoning we consider.  
We spread out but  
keep in contact.

I will  
look in it up  
There's a  
something here  
You can find as  
a to know  
was he  
even it  
might be  
low we  
can get response it.

Red wearing  
DRIFT'S SWORN

Panel 1?

Drift and Pipes getting fixed.

1 CAP: F.P.'s Journal entry 002

2 CAP: Did Pharma fall to his death? Did he fly to his death? I don't know. Fresh snowfall hampered our search for his body. Besides, we didn't look too hard: we were too busy saving everyone's lives.

Panel 2

Flashback panel: Ratchet's holomatter avatar hovering in midair some distance down the side of Delphi's tower, holding up its hands to catch the falling test tube.

4 CAP: Godness knows where Ratchet got the vaccine. He said it just fell into his hands.

5 CAP: We administered it to everyone who was still clinging to life, and guess what? It worked. No more red rust.

Panel 3

6 CAP: But it was when we were en route to the Lost Light that Ratchet dropped his bombshell.

FIRST AID: Chief Medical Officer? Me?

RATCHET: What can I say? You impressed me. Your world was falling apart but you remained calm, decisive and compassionate.

RATCHET: And if you hadn't blown the whistle on Pharma's malpractice, his plan - insane as it was - might have worked.

Panel 4

FIRST AID: You got the datalog? I sent it weeks ago, after I discovered some irregularities in the ward deaths. I didn't know who was to blame, so couldn't send an open message in case it was intercepted.

FIRST AID: No one else around here was a Wreckers fan, so the datalog network was the closest thing to a coded frequency. How did you know it was me who'd sent it?

RATCHET: I didn't - not until XX, when you started quoting Fisitron. All that "XX"

The process: extracts from James Roberts' hand-annotated script for MTTE #5 (which began life as issue #4).

Excerpts from MTTE #5, featuring the conclusion of the issue and Rung's sessions with Red Alert.

2 RUNG CAP: Keeping to the shadows, <sup>sun</sup> He told me that he'd reached a crossroads in his life. He said he'd made mistakes, ~~not~~ all of which could be blamed on "them". The Institute was mentioned - a sure sign of creeping paranoia.

Panel 4 THUNDER

Montage

RUNG CAP: <sup>like he was my patient for six centuries, but</sup> The road towards his mental rehabilitation was long, but I remember each breakthrough as if it were yesterday.

RUNG CAP: Session 6 † he told me his name.

RUNG CAP: Session 15 † he showed his face for the first time.

RUNG CAP: Session 26 † he said he'd stopped recording our conversations.

RUNG CAP: Session 33 † he told me his real name.

RUNG CAP: Session 52 - after the feedback incident, he apologized and said that was the last time he would record our conversations.

RUNG CAP: <sup>52</sup> Session 61 † he stopped recording our conversations.

Panel 5

RUNG CAP: <sup>Eventually,</sup> It took me the best part of six centuries, but I helped him recognize, resist and ultimately overcome his paranoia, and as a result he rose steadily up the Autobot ranks.

RUNG CAP: In 21st Cycle 301 he was made Director.

The script (and scenes) began life hand-written, before being typed up into a rough second draft.

PAGE 87

Panel 5 PAN. 1

RUNG: I'm happy to talk about Sunstreaker - and Bob - later on, but for now let's focus on these noises. Noises only you can hear...

RED ALERT: I know how that sounds, <sup>but</sup> my audio receptors are **phenomenally** sensitive - that's what happens after a lifetime of **eavesdropping**.

RED ALERT: You think this room is soundproofed, but right now - let's see... right now I can hear [Rewind/Chromedome friendship; Skids; **music** coming from Ultra Magnus' quarters].

Panel 6

RED ALERT: So **yes**. Best ears in the business.

RUNG: You know, often, a certain noise or song will resonate because it is synonymous with a particular time or event. But it can happen both ways -

RED ALERT: <sup>place</sup> <sup>place</sup> Anyway, we <sup>place</sup> I heard the noises (I think I was imagining them). I went back to the sparkdealer's cell and found the source of the noise. <sup>just to be sure - and to make</sup>

RED ALERT: There was a crack in the floor, <sup>- I think it</sup> and the noise - the noise was coming up through the crack.

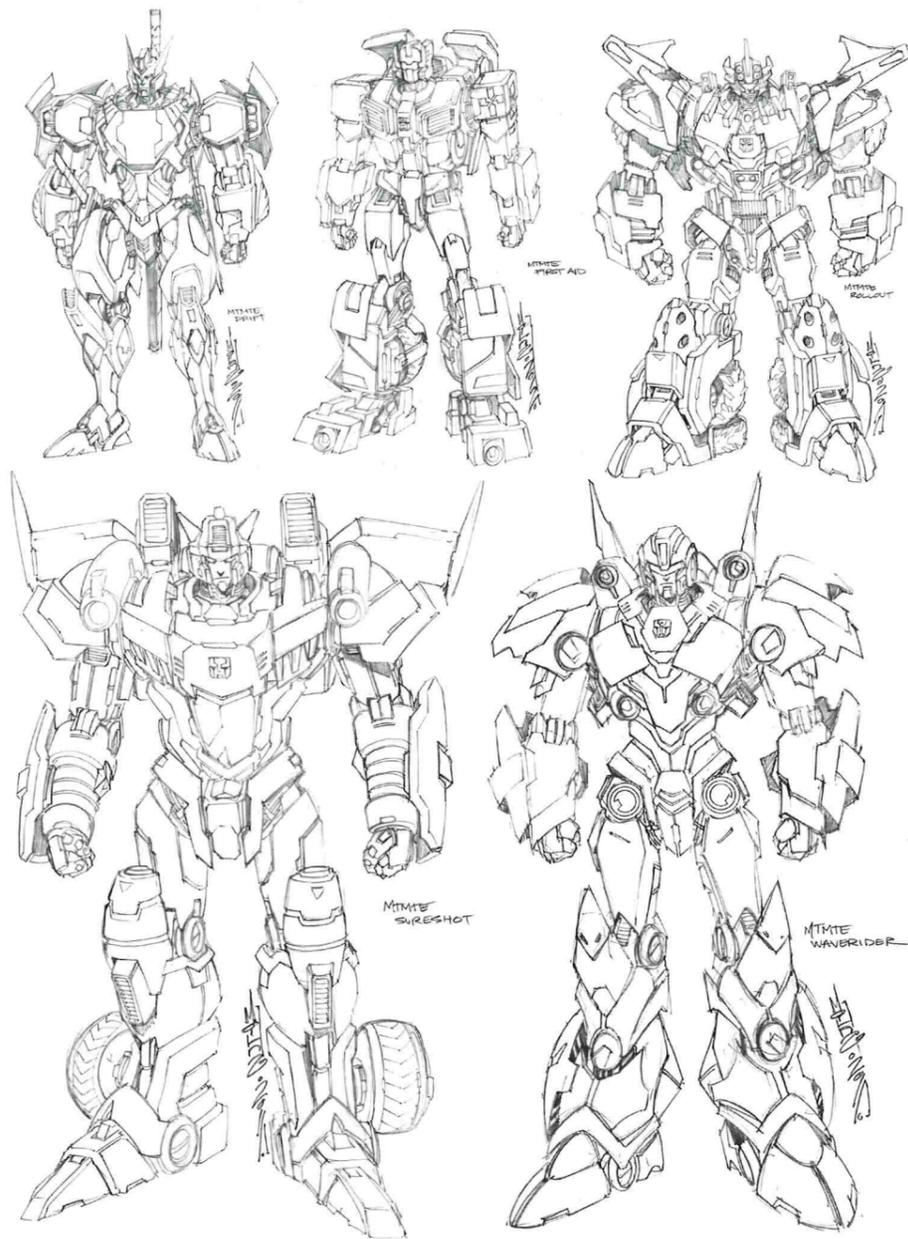
<sup>Was caused by the</sup> <sup>quarters explosion on</sup> <sup>1st quarters jump -</sup>

<sup>It was the exact one</sup> <sup>where the noise</sup> <sup>was coming from.</sup>

Right now - let's see... right now I can hear  
Whirring ~~anyway~~ with talking to hand hearing an argument with -  
with ~~hand~~, ~~conduits~~... ~~to see how~~ ~~skids~~ leaving some ~~see~~ in  
neighborhood... <sup>skids is</sup> ~~and~~ ~~falling~~ ~~to~~ ~~surface~~ ~~what~~ ~~a~~ ~~memoria~~  
door... and ~~Reverend~~ ~~is~~ ~~Rud.~~ ~~is~~ ~~acting~~ ~~Reverend~~ ~~to~~ ~~be~~  
explicit. We <sup>video</sup> ~~of~~ ~~decide~~ ~~the~~ ~~I~~ ~~found~~ ~~in~~ ~~his~~ ~~personal~~ ~~quarters~~.

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

# ALEX MILNE SKETCHBOOK



Updated Alex Milne MTMTE designs for Drift, First Aid & Rollout (top) and Sureshot & Waverider (below).