

Simon Furman Q&A: Cougar, TFAuctions, and More

Contributed by Dr Fang
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The Allspark has recently had the opportunity to get some question and answer time with Simon Furman, who is currently at work on a not-quite-official Transformers-related project, fleshing out the trademark mascot character of friend of the Allspark TFAuctions.com. In the past, we've reported on the possibility of a fully-realized comic featuring Cougar, TFAuctions' mascot (with art by Guido Guidi, colors by Liam "Limabean" Shaloo, and character designs by The Boo), and now we have the distinct opportunity to report back Simon's answers to the questions we posed to him a few days ago.

The Allspark: Let's start with some background on this project. Tell us the how the idea for Cougar came about, and how it progressed into wanting to do a full-blown comic series?

Simon Furman: Cougar began life as a mascot/figurehead for the online auction site TFAuctions. The idea was to have a resident transforming robot (rather than a "Transformer" per se) and to have that character's personality/modus operandi somehow fit with the site's buying and selling ethos. David Ravenscroft, the site's founder and administrator, always had in mind that Cougar would be based on an actual vehicle (like in the Alternators line of toys), and as he owned a replica Jeep Wrangler, that seemed like the natural choice. Artist Guido Guidi did the job of turning the jeep into an upright bipedal character in his own right and I tipped in with a fully fleshed out character profile/biog, one that painted Cougar as a kind of cross between an archaeologist and an adventurer, a la Indiana Jones, one who procured rare and valuable artefacts (often from hostile and dangerous environments) and then sold them on to the highest bidder.

AS: The "Cougarverse" represents one of the biggest rival transforming 'bot stories since the Gobots, cousins and rivals to the Transformer franchise in the '80's. Being as involved as you are with the Transformers franchise, is it hard for you to lend your talents to a "competing" storyline?

SF: I honestly don't think Cougar is much of a rival to the mighty Transformers empire, and we're taking pains (apart from the whole transforming bit) to make him (and his adventures) as stylistically different from Transformers as possible. There's no war, no rival factions, and Cougar isn't really a warrior as such (though there will be flashbacks to his less than glowing "mercenary" days from time to time). Right from the off, David was keen to have Hasbro's seal of approval (as TFAuctions was loosely sponsored by the toy company) on the character, so there was no conflict of interests down the line. It's actually proving (one script in) to be a refreshing change of pace from Transformers. I think, when people read the first issue, they'll come to appreciate that Cougar is a very different "beast";

AS: Tell us about Cougar and his main arch-rival, Fenrir. How were the characters developed, both from a design aspect and in terms of their personality and histories?

SF: We were all so pleased with the way Cougar came out that it seemed only natural to introduce/devise some kind of arch-nemesis for him. This was long before we were thinking in actual comics or story development terms. Fenrir emerged from a competition run on the TFAuctions site, which asked members to devise/design a bad guy for Cougar to spar with. The winner was Tyler Siloski, with his design and profile for Fenrir, and based on his sketch/biog, we refined and defined the character (again, Guido did the final art and I pitched in with a polished version of Tyler's biog, one that tied Fenrir in more comprehensively with Cougar's own back story).

AS: Speaking of histories, when will the comic delve into Cougar's back story? Here we have a character who lives in a base on Earth, has a spaceship, and gets into conflict with other giant robots. Surely there's a wealth of back story to explain how all this came to pass!

SF: We'll absolutely be dipping in and out of Cougar's sometimes shady past. There's definitely more than one skeleton in his closet, and some of his past indiscretions will come back to haunt him in a big way. Much of this revolves around his days as a mercenary and those he fought alongside or against. Whatever noble ideals Cougar started out with, they got kind of lost along the way, and when things went bad, they did so in a big way. How/why he came to Earth will also be explored in due course.

AS: The mythological wolf Fenrir was charged with devouring the earth during Ragnarok, the end of all things. Does this Fenrir's moniker imply similar traits?

SF: Fenrir's a badass, no two ways about it, but in many ways he and Cougar are two sides of the same coin.

Fenrir's ruthless and self-serving and he likes to win at all costs. Which isn't a whole lot different to Cougar, and certainly Cougar's done and still does some questionable things. This is not a black/white, hero/villain kind of deal. And how much Fenrir is like Cougar will give our lead character some considerable pause for thought as their story unfolds.

AS: Any villain worth his salt has sycophants or henchmen. Where do V-Tol and Road-ripper come into play in Fenrir's command structure?

SF: They're pretty much his 'be seen and not heard' henchmen. They're Fenrir's blunt instruments. Fenrir, though he's a very powerful 'bot in his own right, doesn't much like to get his hands dirty, and feels that combat and violence are somehow below him. So, when he wants combat or violence, he sends in V-Tol and Road-Ripper. Both are borderline sociopaths, with a whole lot of directionless rage and sadism that Fenrir directs/exploits. When Cougar falls foul of Fenrir, it's V-Tol and Road-Ripper he has to deal with, at least initially. They are, as we'll see, not the sharpest tools in the box.

AS: You recently posted on your blog that Cougar would rather engage in guile and subterfuge than engage in a full-on conflict. Do you see Cougar as more of a heroic character or more of a villain?

SF: He's certainly not a hero. But Cougar does have lines he won't cross. What he does often calls for a dubious morality, and while he may call it archaeology or salvage, often it's plain stealing. But his almost golden rule is he 'gets out clean or doesn't get out at all,' meaning he won't leave corpses in his wake. It's not the way he operates. Not any more. I've always liked characters that walk a fine line between good and bad, and how Cougar rationalises his 'role' in the cosmic scheme of things will crystallise as the series progresses.

AS: You also said recently that Cougar is the type to dislike having a sidekick...a real lone wolf. How will that affect his demeanor towards Kickstart, the obligatory sidekick in the story? Will Cougar initially see him as a threat to his survival, a resource to be exploited, or an unknown factor?

SF: Having worked in a unit before (back in his mercenary days), Cougar is reluctant (in the extreme) to team up with anyone. But Kickstart just won't be put off. He hero-worships Cougar and his way of life and will do anything, no matter how many knock-backs or discouragement he gets, to be Cougar's sidekick. In fact, how far he does go will surprise even Cougar. Really, Cougar just doesn't want him around, and does everything he can (largely by giving him utterly thankless jobs and outrageous tasks) to get Kickstart to leave him alone.

AS: Will we be seeing some of our favorite FSEs? (Furman Sound Effect? i.e. Spoom!, Sheeak!, etc.)

SF: Oh, definitely. Possibly even a SPAKROOM!

AS: What other plans are in the works for Cougar? We've heard word about a statue and a lithograph, among other things. Will fans be able to purchase Cougar merchandise at their local comic store, online, etc?

SF: Best ask David whatever other merchandising stuff he has in the works. Lots of plans kicking around in that head of his!

AS: One last Cougar question that will probably be on many people's minds as they read this. How do you think Hasbro will respond to a comic featuring a character that looks an awful lot like a Transformer?

SF: As far as I know, Hasbro are cool with Cougar. You might as well ask how Hasbro reacted to the recent Citroen adverts with a transforming robot. Imitation, as they say, is the sincerest form of flattery.

AS: What are your thoughts on the movie, now that it's been released?

SF: An amazing visual spectacle, but the story was kind of overwhelmed by the action. Shia LaBeouf was great, Megan Fox was easy on the eye, but otherwise the human characters (of which, in my opinion, there were too many) just seemed like padding. But, the special effects and the robots themselves truly blew me away. My full review of the movie can be found in the current issue (#203) of Comics International. Eventually, I may publish it on my blog (<http://simonfurman.wordpress.com>).

AS: What are your thoughts on the new UK-exclusive magazine comic? What's it going to allow you to do that you can't do on the IDW books?

SF: It gives us another means to broaden the whole movie-universe, exploring stuff that isn't in either the movie or the prequel comics. The new originated stories in the UK comic are very much character-led, so we get to really showcase their unique personalities. Also, as the stories come in manageable 10-page chunks, we can use a variety of different artists, some of newer guys and many of those who were, back in the day, drawing TF for the Marvel UK comic (such as Geoff Senior).

AS: If you'll indulge yet another War Within question, how would "Age of Wrath" have ended, had the series been able to conclude?

SF: Grimlock would have returned. But that probably will come as no great surprise to anyone.

There you have it, gentle readers! The Allspark will continue to bring you interviews with all of the heavy hitters in every aspect of the fandom.