

Allspark Interview with Greg Sepelak and Trent Troop

Contributed by lonegamer8
Friday, 20 February 2009

The Allspark has recently had the chance to chat with Greg Sepelak and S. Trent Troop, two of the writers in Fun Publication's arsenal. These fan-favorite writers are the minds behind most of the Transformers Collectors' Club vastly-popular prose stories, as well as the animated short, "Theft of the Golden Disk" that debuted at Botcon 2007. They've also put their pens to non-Transformers fiction, including the Direct to Cobra (or "DTC") comics coming to the GI Joe Collectors' Club Store this year.

Without building further suspense, let's get to the interview already!

Allspark: Fans have come to love how you two work in relatively obscure characters, McGuffins, and events in your stories. Are your nods something you come up with before you start writing, or do they tend to pop up when you get to that part of the story? In other words, do you make a list of obscurities that you want to write into the story, or do they pretty much just happen?

Trent Troop: It goes both ways. Sometimes we have a specific character or group of characters we want to expand on. That was how Withered Hope came together, we both really wanted to explore the potential of the G1 Gobots crossing over into a TF story. In other cases, there may be a role that needs filling and we find a good match. In I, Lowtech, I wanted to explore the idea that, when stripped of his high status, a Transtech might become a serial killer. Greg suggested Bulletbike, as he was about as 'lowtech' as you could get, design-wise, and no one had done anything with him.

Typically, I'm not going for obscure to be obscure. In many cases, that's where the fertile ground is for storytelling. Prime, Megatron, Starscream and Grimlock are all very iconic characters but they've been explored extensively for 25 years. The Jackpots, Crystal Widows and Bulletbikes don't have that kind of history and they have a lot of potential because of it.

Greg Sepelak: There's an undeniable urge to shine the light on the unexplored corners of Transformerdom, but a lot of it really does hinge on the needs of the story. Axiom Nexus needs to have the characters rarely-to-never used brought into the limelight to reinforce its vastness and exotic nature. It's a driftnet for the Multiverse, and you certainly won't get that impression if it's the same group of guys who were around in 1985 in the spotlight. On the other hand, "Swindle, Swindle and Swindle" just flat-out wouldn't have worked with anyone else, would it? For the Shattered Glass universe, the "focus on lesser-knowns" just doesn't work. Some obscurities will definitely show up there, since it's US writing, but the focus is definitely taking the comfortably familiar and putting it through the funhouse mirror.

Sometimes, there are just obscure things we've wanted to write about for a while, and a story idea presents us with a role that's perfectly-shaped for that obscurity. Jackpot and Hubcap are a duo I've been playing with since the 90's, envisioning Hubcap as the Autobots' Penn Jillette, and Jackpot as something like Lupin III (specifically, the goofy, gabby, pun-hurling Tony-Oliver-voiced version). When Trent presented the raw idea for the plot of "Gone Too Far", I immediately nominated them because I thought they'd make a great "buddies on the run" pairing. Crystal Widow's energon abilities and (yet unrevealed) back-story was something I'd been fiddling with in my head basically since the toy came out, and it made her a good fit for the Bogart role in the Casablanca-esque "Withered Hope". I will say that we do dig up obscure minutia on the wiki to pepper stories with, like the mention of Syk as a controlled substance. It helps make things feel a bit more cohesive to use already-existing minutia whenever possible.

AS: And are the limitations on the characters that you can use? Can you pull just about any character from Transformers fiction (most likely with the exception of the Marvel Super Heroes) and plop them down in one of your stories?

TT: There are some characters we avoid using, at least directly. In the text stories we have the advantage that we can imply involvement without being blatant, but in some places IP is split between Hasbro and other companies and we try not to complicate those issues.

GS: Text stories are wonderful for subtle nods like that, but yeah. You can probably guess the regions we're going to tread very carefully around. Which really made the chance to write "Bee in the City" for BotCon all the more special. And the decision to "ban" Primes and Megatrons (and certain others) from Axiom Nexus was based on both what made sense within the framework of the TransTechs' "offworlder" society and, well, a specific urge to steer away from having to have those archetypal characters come into play.

AS: What or who has been your favorite obscure Transformers item or character to write into one of your stories?

TT: Oh, that's rough. I'd have to say that Jackpot and Hubcap were a great pair. The characters developed 'chemistry' for lack of a better term and were tons of fun to write. Of course, I love any instance of snappy dialog. A close runner up would be Brushguard. Unrepentant mad scientists are no end of fun.

GS: Whoof. Tricky. Jack and Hub are undeniably up there. And the Malignus are a blast, even if we never really explore them on an individual basis. Though it's not from Transformers, throwing the Winslow ('Hi!') into Ego's collection is probably my favorite Easter Egg all told. It helps that it's patently ridiculous even if you don't know what the hell it actually is.

AS: The Club has announced that with the new year they'll be making a transition from Transtech to Shattered Glass. How do you feel about this transition? Has it been easier to write one over the other, or do they present fairly similar opportunities?

TT: I won't mince words: I love the Shattered Glass universe and I'm excited about where we're going to be taking it. As to ease of writing, that depends on the story. Sometimes the cast and setting make you work harder to get a good story and that's true of any setting. Shattered Glass does have some unique challenges to it, though, since we are reinventing everything while still maintaining a twisted reflection of the original. It can be difficult making the doppelgangers interesting without letting them be obvious.

GS: It's definitely a story-by-story case. As much as I love the idea that we can write about just about anyone in TransTech (plus, I like exploring the 'Techs themselves, we have idle thoughts on what we'd do if we re-open that universe), there's a lot of fun in twisting the familiar in weird directions inherent to Shattered Glass. In general, our goal for the Shattered Glass stories is to evoke the original cartoon, down to the pacing and the 'commercial break cliffhanger' moments; which presents its own challenges, since it's a little more rigid a format, but it does help us keep things snappy and moving along briskly.

AS: Speaking of Transtech, what was your favorite Transtech story to write? And which was your favorite character?

TT: Oh, tough one. I'm going to have to say Withered Hope. Thanks to Monzo's incredible data-gathering powers I was able to put in a lot of research on the GoBots for it. I watched about 80% of the Gobots series going into WH. Most of the characters were vague, which gave us a lot of room to expand them in their new setting. Of the characters, Bad Boy was my favorite. His anti-social anti-establishment fervor was fun to write.

GS: It really is a toss-up between 'Gone Too Far' and 'Withered Hope', with the edge going to the former, what with the 'since the 90's' deal mentioned before. Also, you don't often get to do a Transformers story where the heroes never fire a single shot, can't fight for crap, are outclassed physically no matter where they go, and everywhere they go they're in peril; yet they survive through wit, luck, blatant cowardice, and good old-fashioned deceit. The GoBots were really great to write for too, and exploring Transformers as a race from 'outside' I think put a fresh spin on the whole thing. I'm really happy with the first-person-present-tense perspective in 'I, Lowtech', but that was a real challenge to write. Definitely something I'm glad we attempted; but I don't think we'll do that again. Whoop.

Pinning a single favorite character would be hard, but I'd certainly pull Cheetor into the pool of contenders. This is the Cheetor we all know and 'love', only after a few centuries of hard knocks to beat a few lessons into his head; even if they weren't the ones his superiors wanted in there. 'Cynically compassionate' amuses me.

AS: And one last shot at the Transtech-verse before moving on. We've seen a head shot for Ego from I, Lowtech. Can you possibly describe what the body that would go with this head would look like?

TT: Well, we described him as having a permanently shifting form, with panels moving and reconfiguring constantly. I would say that his body would look like a cross between a Movie Transformer in continual transformation and a gothic cathedral that learned to fly. He was 'pretty' and chose his design based on aesthetic sensibilities. Like all good fashion plates Ego was always updating his look, so he might be totally different hour-by-hour.

GS: At the moment, Ego probably looks like something really, really horrible. H.R. Geiger with a migraine. We were not kind to him.

AS: When the Botcon comic came out this past year, and you two got your first look into the Shattered-verse, what was your original reaction to the story? Did it instantly trigger story ideas in your heads, or was it something that you had to soak in for awhile?

TT: I had been putting 'Mirror, Mirror Transformers' on my Botcon suggestion form for a couple of years at that point and had gotten Aaron Archer to sketch me up an Evil Bumblebee portrait at the previous Botcon, so my mind was already working on that sort of thing. Some of the basic ideas came quickly, but others took a lot of discussion (much of it still going on!)

I wanted to do a story called "Dungeons and Dinobots" ever since Greg let me get away with naming a city after Gary Gygax in the New World. The background Ben Yee and Pete set up for Grimlock made the mirrorverse the perfect setting for it.

GS: I'd been aware of Trent's yearly requests, but hadn't put much thought along those lines before. Once we found out that was the theme for 08, though, the gears started turning and turning fast... especially when I found that normal Cliffjumper was our "window" to the world. I'm really fond of stories where the main character is thrust into weird situations through no fault of their own, and manage to actually make things worse for themselves through their own personality flaws before finally managing to set things right, or at least close enough to pass. It's the early Rumiko Takahashi influence at work there. While Cliffjumper won't be the focus of every story (what fun would that be?), he's usually be lurking around just because mental anguish is funny.

AS: In our interview with Pete Sinclair, he shared with us two preview images for upcoming Shattered-verse prose stories; one that features the Dinobots (which we now know to be from Dungeons & Dinobots), and another with Blaster. Can you shed some light on the prose stories that this image will accompany? Here's a link to that interview: <http://www.allspark.com/content/view/3708/16/>

TT: I can't say much, but I'll toss you the working title for that story. It's called Blitzwing Bop and focuses on the musical Transformers... and Blitzwing, of course. Blaster makes his debut, however, in Do Over.

GS: Ah, evil Blaster. One of the fun parts of these stories is finding the characters' "voices" so they come across better in text, and not needing direct notation to figure out who's talking every line. Some are... more distinctive than others. And Blaster is quite distinct.

AS: Also in the interview with Pete Sinclair, we were made aware of the fact that there will be 6 different artists working on the art for the Shattered Glass prose stories. Can you confirm how many stories these 6 artists will be working on for Shattered Glass?

TT: One per story. Shattered Glass is going to be one rich background.

GS: There's some definite style experimentation going on with the various artists throughout the course of the year, which I really think is a positive. Keeps things fresh. "Do Over" brings Yuki Oshima back to art duties, since Ricochet is the main villain. I love his rendition of Ricochet from the BotCon bio card, very Joker-ish, and mixed with the mechanical detailing, it's gorgeous stuff. "Blitzwing Bop" does have a looser, cartoony style to its art, which perfectly matches the looser, cartoony feel of the story.

AS: Now comes the fun part for most fans...Speculative questions! Is there any chance of seeing other Transformers eras in the Shattered-verse? After all, if they have a G1, couldn't they have a G2, Beast Wars, or Beast Machines?

TT: I'd say, yes, there's a chance. The SG universe has its share of secrets and surprises, as the inclusion of Side Burn may indicate.

GS: Odds are I'm going to work Rapido in there somewhere. G2 doesn't get enough love. Where, I don't know yet.

AS: We've heard that parts of Shattered Expectations will be written into the Shattered-verse. Does that happen to include Dirge's "Pretender" shell, or certain goateed Gobots (we have already seen Crasher after all!)?

TT: We have plans to expand further in this direction, but we didn't want to do it all at once. There's plenty of time for other characters from SE to show up in later stories. Some will be sooner than others. I don't want to spoil the surprise.

GS: Like the "obscures", it all hinges on the needs of the story. Grimlock going super-genius was central to the plot of "Dungeons and Dinobots", but we did temper it with his intelligence being tied to his form... simply because that makes him a bit more interesting and versatile a character. Some elements were included as early as the BotCon comic, like Jazz's Mr. T mannerisms. Other elements from SE are in the stories, but not blatantly wacky, like Astrotrain. If you have the Club Astrotrain toy, you have Shattered Astrotrain as well, and his role (and the roles of his Micromaster partners) will be expanded upon in future stories.

AS: Our last "what-if" question. We swear. If the Autobots do make it to Earth, is there any chance that the humans will be Shattered-like as well? In other words, an evil power-hungry EDC is already looking to the stars for domination of

other worlds, Dr. Arkeville is a lone freedom fighter trying to take on the corrupt government, etc?

TT: Whatever has made this particular universe unique is present across the whole universe. Shattered Earth is definitely not going to be the same old place TFs have been slamming into since 1984.

GS: It's practically have to be "Shattered" Earth to be A) interesting and 2) funny. Otherwise, we'd be telling the same "first contact" tale all the non-Shattered tales have told, only with some slight role reversal.

AS: This one is mainly for Trent. When Theft of the Golden Disk debuted there was talk of yet another Dawn of Future's Past pre-quel that would take place before Golden Disk. Has this idea progressed at all, or has it been left in the scrap yards?

TT: If I did anything else along those lines, it would probably be in a still rather than animated format. Theft was a major undertaking. I'd love to do something like that again, but the circumstances would have to be right for it. In some ways I miss the Ahab-like obsession that drove that project but in other ways I don't. Plus, my lip-synch software for 3dStudio is out of its free trial period now.

Of course, anything that lets me do more with Cryotek is always a temptation.

GS: To chime in... it's probably need to be a really interesting story to get a new animation going. REALLY interesting. Prequels are tricky things, and I think the bulk of the "action" leading up to the first episode of Beast Wars has been told. Part of me wouldn't mind exploring, say, what Primal and Rhinox and Rattrap and Cheetor were up to before they got thrown together for the Axalon mission, but I don't think that's really something best told in animation, since I really don't think they were up to anything epic.

AS: And back to the both of you. As you continually build the number of prose stories that you've authored from Shattered Glass to Wreckers, fans continue to download PDFs. Is there any chance at all of the prose stories coming out in print? The PDFs provide instant access to the stories, but occasionally it's nice to have actual physical representations to read.

TT: This is more of a question for Pete. There are a lot of variables that would have to be addressed. I'd personally love to see a printed collection. If you're interested in buying a printed collection of the Club prose, let Pete know and he'll pass it on up the chain of command.

GS: Oh, indeed, I'd love to have a collected print volume. There really is something special about holding the physical product in your hands... and seeing it on the shelves of a comic store. Definitely clamor for it if you want to see it.

AS: Finally, with you two writing the prose stories, and receiving strong support from the fans who read them, have you ever felt like asking to take on the task of writing one of the Club's comics?

TT: I try and leap on any writing opportunity that comes along. We're not just TF fans. We're into multiple properties, 80s and otherwise, as I think the various shout-outs in the Transtech stories can attest. While we haven't gotten onboard for any TF comics yet, Greg and I are writing some comics for the G.I.-Joe Collector's Club (Direct-to-Cobra Parts 1 and 2), working with David Lane (Pete's counterpart in the Joe Club). We go where we're needed.

As with anything, the club listens to the fans, so that support is well appreciated on our end.

GS: Wherever there's trouble, we'll be there! (Causing it.)

We've been in the periphery of the TF comics over the course of the last year, with dialogue tweaks and other suggestions to stories not yet told. I kinda hounded Pete to throw "Ponderous, slaggin' ponderous" into "Shattered Glass". The upcoming G.I. Joe comics we've done for FP were actually a lot of fun to write, and a really refreshing change of pace on several levels. (I'd also like to note that one of the responses to the first issue's story and cast outline on the Joe forums was "No Duke or Snake-Eyes? I'm in!" That made me smile.)

AS: Thank you for your time, and your answers!

TT: Thank you for the opportunity.

GS: May the forces of evil become confused on the way to your doorstep.

The duo was also kind enough to share a few images with us. The first two are the covers from Direct to Cobra issues #1 and 2, the last image is a preview of what's to come in the next Club prose story, "Eye in the Sky"!

Click the above thumbnails for the full-size images. Pencils and inks for the cover to DTC #1 by Dan Khanna, colors by Thomas Deer. Pencils and inks for the cover to DTC #2 by Tim Seeley, colors by Thomas Deer. Art for Eye in the Sky by Tom Whalen.

And once again we give our thanks to Greg Sepelak and Trent Troop for sharing with us their valuable time!