

Interview with Yamazaki Masahiko, Transformers Marketing Staff

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"Drawing Together a World Transformed"

What the 25th year of Transformers communicates to the present day.

Looking back from the movie release to the present

Were there any overall changes to the environment surrounding Transformers that came about with the movie's release in 2007?

The Japanese market is pretty tough on movie merchandise. We had been concerned that people drawn in by the movie would drift away afterwards. However, when the movie finished its run there were naturally many who bought movie toys, and also those who went on buying the Henkei! line afterwards. That was a rather fortunate coincidence. There's the sense that thanks to the movie, the Transformers brand was granted new life.

It seems as if it's permeated the general market.

We're very happy about that. As big a project as it was, we were confident that it would be a hit, but we were mainly considering moviegoers around 30 in the so-called "G1 generation." We thought it might be difficult for kids to take in, so to be honest we didn't focus it so much towards children. And yet when it premiered, so many kids went to see it. Just from my own experience, my friend's son who is about six years old has watched the DVD practically enough to wear it out. He remembers all these minute details, saying how he doesn't like Ironhide because he got peed on and such. (Laughter) Around half of those who purchased the toys from the movie were children under 10. It might be because their dads knew the toys, but we were surprised by the number of parents and children who could enjoy the toys together, and it really allowed us to rethink things. To us, you could say the movie is actually something of a fond rival. We don't want to lose out to it. Rather than simply rely on the movie, we strongly hope to use our ideas and strengths to deliver new creations to everyone.

Last year did appear to show a strong expansion of the line, even outside of the movie.

It was around the Wonderfest 2007 winter event that we really felt our perseverance had changed the flow of things. We were thinking of setting something up prior to the release of the movie, which became the limited edition Binaltech Black Convoy. Galaxy Force had finished and there was no anime airing in 2006. I myself had been away from Transformers for a while, so I wasn't sure how highly they were regarded in the market. So we very cautiously put out Black Convoy, and it got a great response with lots of people lining up for it. Masterpiece Megatron and the Sports Label collaboration with Nike also did strongly. We really confirmed once again that if we create appealing ideas, people will recognize them.

Has it become easier to take part in collaboration projects due to the rise in recognition?

Part of it has led to increased sales, but more important is that the word "Transformer" has become common knowledge in the business world. When using the example of previous Transformers products in a proposition, you always had to start off by explaining what Transformers themselves are. Now the basic knowledge has been established that they're transforming super-robot life forms that conceal themselves from humans, so that shaves about 30 minutes off of meetings. (Laughter) Along with that, there was plenty of new development. I think that in 2009, we'll be able to show off many items that have been born from this new growth.

Birth of Alternity

Can you let us in on the details of how the "Alternity" collaboration began with Nissan?

Takaratomy had carried out various collaborations with Nissan before, having Lika-chan appear in their PR and such. For the debut of the GT-R, rather than just the flashy image of a sports car or supercar, Nissan wanted to make it accessible to families as well. We worked out the idea of Takaratomy playing a part in that, using ChoroQ or Tomika to create a GT-R that both parents and children could enjoy. Within that, I suggested the idea of using Transformers, and they were very eager about it. Being that I brought it up after the release of the movie, the idea really connected. They had all seen the movie in theaters.

How did it come about to approach transformations into existing cars?

One part of it was that the existing concept of "robots in disguise" transforming into realistic vehicles had been strongly reestablished with the release of the movie. However, the cars appearing in the movie had been entirely American brands, so we wanted to do something that would use cars appealing to Japanese fans. It didn't necessarily have to be only Japanese cars, but I wanted to work with something more flexible. Also the Binaltech we had previously made were 1/24 scale, so they're a bit large. They display well separately, but bringing them together takes up a lot of space. (Laughter) We had originally wanted to make them 1/32, but Hasbro requested them to be larger. Thanks to the movie we were given another chance to attempt this kind of merchandise, and I hope to continue releasing it periodically.

The growth of collaborations

What was it that gave rise to the Disney Label?

It started half in jest. (Laughter) Disney had previously said that some sort of collaboration with Transformers would be a fun thing to do. They probably meant it half as a joke, but we were dead serious. (Laughter). I think the same was true with Nike, but things that make people say "no way!" create the biggest response. Wanting to generate that response made for this rather lofty and serious joke.

The transformation seems simple enough that children can play with it.

You could call it "light adult," but when we make something that appeals to those who don't normally buy transformers, I think it's important to give it the sense of being "cute," as girls would say. We had people calling the Nike Transformers cute as well. Whether it's in music or in movies, things that become hits are those that are appreciated by women as well. I suppose that for things that appeal exclusively to males, even with good performance there's a certain limit... Of course, we don't intend to market the products exclusively to females, so we took care not to make the design too girly.

It does have a strong robotic feel to it.

Disney was surprisingly vocal about that. We were prepared to go all out with making it cute and very Disney-like, but they requested that we make it more subdued and Transformer-looking. Normally we are trying to hold onto the identity of our products, but this time was very much the opposite effect. Disney showed their respect for Transformers products, and we showed our respect for theirs. As a result, I think we were able to come up with a product that brought out the best in both. Perhaps we were able to bring out a previously unrealized appeal in Disney products, and Disney was able to do the same for Transformers.

So you both had quite a lot in common?

Disney and Transformers are both global characters. Disney is of course number one throughout the world, and I'd expect that Transformers are the most well-known robot toys around the world.

The EXILE collaboration was a surprise.

One day we received a call from their agency, LDH. Apparently they had seen our Music Label iPod Speakers advertised. They said that they wanted to produce an EXILE version to spice up their EXILE Perfect Year 2008 product line. We've received proposals for other such future promotions.

You're also planning the wristwatch-based Chrono Label for the label series.

We're producing it in collaboration with Seahope, the watch maker who had produced licensed merchandise from the movie. Within our products centered on functioning devices, we had formed plans for a wristwatch a long time ago, but we knew that rather than developing it on our own, cooperating with a top maker would definitely be the way to go. Thinking in the Transformers reality, if one of them was going to transform into a camera, I'm sure they'd want to scan one made by Sony or Canon rather than a Takaratomy camera. (Laughter) The president of Seahope also acts as a designer, and is a really creative individual with an interest in Transformers. We brought it up half jokingly, but he was very enthusiastic about it, and that's how Chrono Label was realized. We aspired for the very best both as a watch and a toy. Although being a watch it is a bit pricey, I'm fully confident in it.

Masterpiece Grimlock is coming out too.

As for why we picked Grimlock, he's got enough character power to stand up to our earlier Convoy, Starscream, and Megatron. We also wanted to bring out "innovation" with Masterpiece, so we decided to go with a character that transforms into something other than a vehicle or device. That really made Grimlock ideal. I thought the dinosaur motif would be great for bringing new surprises to the Masterpiece line, and it's also got more features than any other

Masterpiece toy preceding it. I think accessories like the optional apron that give it a funny image also have an unusual appeal.

Everyone is wondering who the next character will be.

To be honest we haven't entirely decided who the next release will be, but we've selected a number of possibilities. Rodimus Convoy might work well, or it might be exciting to use something from the movie. The Masterpiece line was originally intended to end with just one release. Good things we assigned a number to it anyway. (Laughter) It takes so much time, effort, and budget to develop one of the toys that new molds only come once every two to three years. However with the positive response from fans, I'd like to continue producing this high-end Transformers line. I'd like to really show everyone just the extent to which Takaratomy can bring life to transforming robots.

Speaking of fan-centered products, there's also "Transformers: Encore." How do you determine which characters will be reissued?

Actually, this line was also derived from the movie. When people watched the movie and wondered, "Was our Convoy really like this?," I wanted to have an answer on hand. That's why the line is centered on characters appearing in the movie. Encore began with us wanting to let the fans obtain the roots of Jazz, Ironhide, Ratchet, and so on. We'd like people to take them in their hands, and allow them to feel the history of the Transformers line. I think that being able to show both the original and the most recent version simultaneously is something that makes Transformers so great.

The releases of Sky Lynx and Omega Supreme were huge surprises.

We went with something that was heavily requested by fans. It really surprised me that we were able to find the molds for them. We searched our factories around the world, and finally they turned up in Tochigi prefecture. Japan's a big country! (Laughter) We plan to continue periodic releases of this sort of fan-oriented item this year as well, so I hope everyone looks forward to it.

The Henkei! line is also growing, isn't it.

We the influx of interest from children seeing the movie, we designed the packages with a young demographic in mind. There were previously a lot of requests from fans to release the Classics line here in Japan, but from a marketing standpoint it was very tricky. It doesn't have an anime, and despite targeting the G1 generation, it doesn't use the actual designs from G1. At worst, it could have come off as "mediocre." We thought that it would have a very limited market. Part of it is that there are more fans now, but the movie really expanded the image of Transformers for us. It just blew away all the existing conceptions people had of Transformers. I think that if there hadn't been the movie Optimus Prime, people would have just gotten caught up in the differences between Henkei! Convoy and the original. But after seeing Optimus Prime, people were able to feel that this is Convoy. (Laughter) I'd say that after the distinct movie designs, the more orthodox Henkei! design looks like the familiar Convoy. It's allowed people to be secure in that, which is why we brought out Henkei! after the movie.

There's also a lot of hope for a Japanese release of Animated, which is current being broadcast overseas.

There are some hurdles involved with an anime-based line, but I think the toys and show are both incredible. We're working on arrangements for it, and I would like to bring it out at some point, but the timing is tricky. You could say that just as with the movie toys, they come from a totally unique design standpoint. When the time is right, I would like to show Japan the appeal that Animated has to offer.

Drawing together a world transformed

Tell us about your aspirations for this year.

First comes the sequel to the movie. With the previous movie we didn't know whether it was bound to succeed or fail, so we felt a certain trepidation although we gave it everything we had. We were able to succeed with it, and since hopes are extremely high for the sequel, we plan to bring even greater surprises this time around. Last time there were people who missed out on the chance to buy the figures when they sold out too fast, so we are adjusting our production numbers to prevent them disappearing from shelves too quickly. 2009 just happens to be the 25th anniversary of the Transformers line. Even when the 30th, 40th, and 50th anniversaries roll around, I want to make it such a great year that people look back and say how awesome the 25th anniversary was.

We also redesigned the Transformers logo. It's being used on the Alternity line, so be sure to check it out. Everyone can look forward to Transformers items like the Chrono Label line that expand the boundaries of toys. Our marketing theme for the 25th anniversary is "drawing together a world transformed." Not completing it with just one line, but rather bringing a variety of things together is what will truly make it exciting. With the Transformers that are born from these connections, I hope to see the bonds between Japan and the world, friends, and parents and their children all grow stronger.

Profile

Yamazaki Masahiko

Joined Takara in 2002, supervising marketing of Micron Legend. Served as animation producer for Galaxy Force. He left the post in order to oversee new projects, returning again in 2006. He is currently hard at work expanding all areas of the Transformers world, from high-end items to collaboration projects.

Hydra's comments

Now we get to see into the mind of one of the key members of Takaratomy staff, who have certainly surprised Western TF fans in 2009 by announcing unique releases such as the Disney collaboration and Chrono Label series. We assume that Takaratomy has lots of freedom in the way that they schedule their releases, but it's interesting to see just how strategically they need to plan their timing in order to make a line successful. We all regarded the Classics line as a very solid series, but it seems that it was actually difficult to market effectively in Japan, despite its ultimate success with Henkei. Also, it's not as if we didn't know how important the 2007 movie was in expanding Transformers recognition, but we can now see that this was very much the case in Japan as well. Perhaps this may have been true to a greater extent in Japan, as Transformers was less of a pop culture phenomenon due to the massive presence of other very popular robot anime.

While we've all certainly wondered if Takaratomy knew what the hell they were doing with Transformers releases at points in recent years (yes, I mean Kissplayers), Yamazaki seems to have his head on straight. With his emphasis on high-end collector focused releases and the importance of making reissues of the originals available, I think we can all see that he treats the TF line its history with a lot of respect. While there have been complaints from stateside fans that there aren't many special products from Hasbro to commemorate the 25th anniversary aside from the normal movie releases, it seems as if Takara is putting some effort into this department.

Finally, Yamazaki's strong interest in Animated is sure to please a lot of fans both in Japan and overseas, where many were startled by the line's conclusion. The interview seems to indicate concrete plans for a future release of the line, although the date is up in the air. Most likely it could end up as a main line when the movie winds down, perhaps in 2010? I think a lot of people would be happy to see the line get the Henkei! treatment, with refined paint schemes and new recolors. I personally have only moderate interest in the next full year of movie-style releases that looms before us, but the prospect of a Japanese Animated release will be the light at the end of the tunnel for my collection.