July 2018

# Now and On Earth:

# The evolving geography of pop culture production and consumption.

## The case of the “Transformers” comics

**POST-GRADUATE DISSERTATION**

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# Abstract/ Περίληψη


## Abstract in English

To understand the evolution of mass culture production and consumption, this study inspects the geographic, demographic and cultural identity of its participants through the triptych of official creatives, fans, and some of the latter who were integrated into the former. Mainstream comics, an unconventional creative industry, have had a complicated history of changes to their production model and evaluation. Fandom, a group of individuals deeply invested in a cultural product, has also been studied for the interactions amongst its members and their relationship to their artifact of interest. For this thesis, the focus was narrowed to a case study in terms of property: the "Transformers" multi-media franchise and its fan base, observed initially through the recent comics series by IDW Publishing. The reasons for this choice have to do with the property's highly commercial nature, its stable, decades-long presence in popular culture and the critical attention the recent comics have been receiving; additionally, its fandom is relatively small but dedicated (thus easier to observe) and hearths have developed outside its (primary) countries of production. The aim of the thesis is to examine the development of a particular group of artists over the course of the last twelve years, the cultivation and expansion of a world-wide network of fans with their own cultural baggage, the communication between the two groups, the presence of women and persons of diverse gender identity in spaces and narratives traditionally thought of as masculine and the place of comics in the tapestry of multi-media cultural production. What is finally observed is the cultivation of a stable, distinctive artistic scene with its own long history and in close (if sometimes ambivalent) communication with its followers, the gradual, almost invisible influx of a diverse fan base, later partly reflected in the creatives shaping the property, and the liminal position of comics as rejuvenator and fringe medium, but of growing importance.

The methodology for this undertaking is briefly detailed below. On the side of the "official" creators, a combination of netnography (the observation and record-keeping of public digital data by a researcher without interfering with the studied population) and ethnography (the approach and interviewing of four subjects, three artists and one writer/editor) were used to understand their training, networking and creative processes. On the side of the fans, a digital variation of the "snowball technique" was formulated, that produced a digital survey of three hundred and two responses. An additional fifty (e-)interviews with some of the participants -a combination of written text (40), live text talks (3) and live voice chats (7) over digital communications platform Discord- were conducted to illuminate the various individual fan practices and responses to the media property. Bringing the two together, a large-scale, multi-year (2007-2012), collective webcomic project was also inspected with netography tools, to understand the state of the fandom in an earlier time, as well as the potential for training of artistic talent it allowed.

Περίληψη στα Ελληνικά

Για την κατανόηση της εξέλιξης της παραγωγής και κατανάλωσης της μαζικής κουλτούρας, αυτή η έρευνα ελέγχει την γεωγραφική, δημογραφική και πολιτισμική ταυτότητα των συμμετεχόντων της μέσα από το τρίπτυχο των επίσημων δημιουργών, θαυμαστών και ορισμένων από τους δεύτερους που ενσωματώθηκαν στους πρώτους. Τα δημοφιλή κόμικς, μια αντισυμβατική δημιουργική βιομηχανία, έχουν μια σύνθετη ιστορία αλλαγών στο μοντέλο παραγωγής τους και την αξιολόγησή τους. Οι θαυμαστές, μια ομάδα ατόμων βαθειά αφοσιωμένη σε ένα πολιτισμικό προϊόν, έχουν επίσης μελετηθεί για την επικοινωνία μεταξύ των μελών και την σχέση τους με το αντικείμενο ενδιαφέροντός τους. Για αυτή τη διπλωματική εργασία, η έρευνα εστιάστηκε σε μια περίπτωση μελέτης με όρους σειράς: το franchise πολυμέσων των "Transformers" και την βάση οπαδών του, που παρατηρήθηκαν αρχικά μέσα από τις πρόσφατες σειρές κόμικς της IDW Publishing. Οι λόγοι για αυτή την επιλογή σχετίζονται με την εξόχως εμπορική φύση της σειράς, την σταθερή, πολυετή παρουσία της στην μαζική κουλτούρα και την προσοχή της κριτικής που έχουν λάβει τα πρόσφατα κόμικς· επιπλέον, η βάση οπαδών του είναι σχετικά μικρή μας αφοσιωμένη (άρα πιο εύκολη στην παρακολούθηση) και εστίες της έχουν αναπτυχθεί έξω από τις (κυρίως) χώρες παραγωγής της. Ο στόχος αυτής της εργασίας είναι η εξέταση της ανάπτυξης μιας συγκεκριμένης ομάδας καλλιτεχνών κατά τη διάρκεια των τελευταίων δώδεκα χρόνων, η καλλιέργεια και επέκταση ενός παγκόσμιου δικτύου θαυμαστών με τα δικά τους πολιτισμικά φορτία, η επικοινωνία ανάμεσα στις δύο ομάδες, η παρουσία γυναικών και ατόμων με ποικίλη ταυτότητα φύλου σε χώρους και αφηγήσεις που παραδοσιακά θεωρούνταν αρρενωπές και η θέση των κόμικς στην ταπισερί της πολιτισμικής παραγωγής πολλών μέσων. Αυτό που τελικά παρατηρείται είναι η καλλιέργεια μια σταθερής, διακριτής καλλιτεχνικής σκηνής με την δική της μακρά ιστορία και σε στενή (παρότι μερικές φορές αμφιλεγόμενη) επικοινωνία με τους ακόλουθούς της, την σταδιακή, σχεδόν αόρατη εισροή μιας ποικίλης βάσης θαυμαστών, που αργότερα αντανακλάται μερικώς στους δημιουργούς που σχηματοποιούν την σειρά, και την οριακή θέση των κόμικς ως αναζωογονητής και μέσο στο περιθώριο, αν και με σημασία που μεγαλώνει.

Η μεθοδολογία αυτού του εγχειρήματος περιγράφεται σύντομα παρακάτω. Στο πεδίο των «επίσημων» δημιουργών, χρησιμοποιήθηκαν ένας συνδυασμός netnography (η παρατήρηση και καταγραφή δημόσιων ψηφιακών δεδομένων από έναν ερευνητή χωρίς ανάμειξη με τον υπό μελέτη πληθυσμό) και εθνογραφίας (η προσέγγιση και καταγραφή συνεντεύξεων με τέσσερα υποκείμενα, τρεις καλλιτέχνες και έναν συγγραφέα/επιμελητή) για την κατανόηση της εκπαίδευσης, της δικτύωσης και των δημιουργικών διαδικασιών τους. Από την πλευρά των θαυμαστών, διατυπώθηκε μια ψηφιακή παραλλαγή της «τεχνικής της χιονοστιβάδας», που παρήγαγε μια ψηφιακή έρευνα με τριακόσιες δύο απαντήσεις. Συμπληρωματικά, πάρθηκαν πενήντα (ηλεκτρονικές) συνεντεύξεις από ορισμένους εκ των συμμετεχόντων –ένας συνδυασμός γραπτού κειμένου (40), ζωντανών ομιλιών με κείμενο (3) και ζωντανές φωνητικές συνομιλίες (7) στην πλατφόρμα ψηφιακών επικοινωνιών Discord- για να διαφωτίσουν τις διάφορες μεμονωμένες πρακτικές των θαυμαστών και τις αποκρίσεις τους στη σειρά. Φέρνοντας τις δύο ομάδες μαζί, ερευνήθηκε ένα πολύχρονο (2007-2012), μεγάλης κλίμακας συλλογικό πρότζεκτ διαδικτυακών κόμικς με

εργαλεία netnography, για την κατανόηση της κατάστασης της βάσης οπαδών σε προηγούμενο χρόνο, όπως και την δυνατότητα εξέλιξης καλλιτεχνικού ταλέντου που επέτρεψε.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Identification of Objectives and Research Questions

In today's multi-media art scene, few figures are as public yet as invisible as the mainstream comic book creator. Despite having their name displayed on the product -the cover of a floppy, the spine of a trade collection etc.-, most are ignored by the casual reader, who is usually attracted only to one -that of the writer. While there are specialized institutions for their education, people from a variety of fields have been able to join its industry. Contrary to the soaring popularity of adaptations of and merchandise based on their craft, the art form that they champion borders on the avant-garde, with a complex history and a specified, aging audience. Their social presence seems to be split between the festive gatherings of conventions and social media in-jokes. A female minority demands the same opportunities and recognition as their male co-workers. And their (geographical and cultural) origins are lost to the outsider as they bow before Men of Tomorrow, Dark Knights and Sentinels of Liberty, all perennial symbols of American exceptionalism.

Though not nearly as paradoxical, the life of the mainstream comics fan is just as full of contradictions. For the foreign fan in particular, who feels both attracted to and repulsed by their local community, language skills become the ticket to a whole new world of media. After confronting the (national) stereotypical assumptions of laymen about the medium -and learning not to call them "Mickey Mau"[1] ever again-, the uninitiated enthusiast gets networked, develops tastes through personal journeys from title to title and starts writing almost immediately on their platform of choice. Social media becomes both a second home and a minefield –one practical strategy amongst some women used to be the selection of gender-neutral handles to repel unwanted attention. Distances are nullified on the Internet; even now, when social media has become so commonplace, yours faithfully always gets apprehensive when stumbling across the Twitter account of a personal favorite. And when one digs deep enough to discover a creator's past amateur beginnings, there is a swell of both pride and jealousy. English and other languages, knowledge and ignorance, distance and proximity, visibility and anonymity, the spectrum of gender identity: these are but some of the questions and dilemmas the average fan comes to grips with on an almost daily basis.

These two worlds –the professional artists and the amateur audience– often intersect in this particular art world; but how *exactly* does one affect the other? How have they changed separately for the last fifteen years? And what is the place of comics in this tapestry of materials? The answers, apart from enriching the already diverse literature on mass culture, comics and fandom, could offer a new understanding of the evolution of mass culture production and its (worldwide) consumption.

[1] In Greece, Disney licensed material (and their flagship character Mickey Mouse, the star of the company's most circulated periodicals) are so ingrained into pop culture that the art forms of animation and comics have been metonymically baptized as works of "Mickey Mouse" by the public. The form of the name cited above is a (sometimes used by non-geeks) failed attempt at conjugating the noun.

Summing up the above, the main research questions of this project are the following:

- What is the demographic (in terms of gender and residence) and cultural (in terms of origin, role, experience and education) profile of comic book creatives in the American mainstream industry? How has it changed over the last decade?
- What is the demographic (in terms of gender and residence) and cultural (in terms of media preference, values and language use) profile of the consumers of American pop culture products? How has it changed over the last decade?
- What is the relationship between these two groups? How does one influence the other? Have there been cases of members of the fandom joining the workforce, and if yes, which factors enabled or hindered that transition?

## 1.2. Literature Overview

Although the foundations of this project can be traced back to a previous project by the same research team, a great percentage of the time spent in the creation of the current one was poured into reading on previous literature and deciding on a frame of reference for fieldwork. The comics industry, fandom and even the case study have managed to generated a sizable volume of publications, despite their relatively short lifespan and some fixed (academic and not only) prejudices. The major findings of research so far are summarized and pointed out in this next section, along with the omissions that this dissertation aims to fill in.

The starting point of the thesis was the art form of comics, which has been defined by multiple artists and academics (Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1993; Hayman & Pratt, 2005) as a synthesis of pictorial and linguistic elements in sequence. Sharing a common lineage with comic strips (Witek, 1989) and pulp magazines (Duncan & Smith, 2009) and naturalized as an American art form after its first major scene was created in the US in the 1890s (Lopes, 2009), comics and its various formats have developed some peculiarities in comparison to most commercial art: the creation of different markets –the direct, bookstore and online ones being the three major fields (Norcliffe & Rendace, 2003; Kogel, 2013; Moorefield-Lang & Gavigan, 2012)- and being theorized as closer to literature (Round, 2010) than art. Their other major trait is their (more often than not) collaborative creation, in which multiple individuals (pencilers, inkers, colorists, letterers, editors and cover artists) contribute to one text (Murray, 2013). Although isolated case studies of works, artists and scenes have been showcased, little research has been done on an industry-wide scale, leaving many of the art form's differentiator in the dark.

Another way to conceive of comics creators would be to think of them as artists, since they fit Markusen's (2013) criteria, and go through the socio-economical and geographic literature on their placement in space. While geography and art have studied jointly for over eighty years (Pieper, 1936), Florida's (2004) theory of the rejuvenation of urban centers with the help of the "creative class" is one treatise that has received significant attention recently. Practical research has doubted this reasoning, as artists can create urban clusters based on a variety of factors (Andersson et al, 2014; Debroux, 2013),

migrate (Bennett, 2010) or gather in rural centers instead (Mitchell, Bunting & Piccioni, 2004), or even defy any kind of generalization altogether (Markusen, 2006; Alfken, Broekel & Sternberg, 2015). Other creative industries with a similar structure –the regular use of sub-contractors, the development of social economies and the sharing of knowledge amongst clusters- has shown both metropolitan (Storper & Christopherson, 1987), rural (Kotkin, 2000) and mixed (Scott, 1999) concentrations, raising even more questions.

Comics have followed a rather different (and evolving) model from all the above, which has been studied from the perspective of media geographies. Starting from New York in the 1920s (Wright, 2001), they were produced in a Fordist model, in which every creative contributed in sequence under the instructions of an editor (Rendace, 2001; Sabin, 1996). Production was brought in-house in the 1950s and specific styles were employed by the editors on artists, while the distinction between the roles also became more apparent (Round, 2010; Norcliffe & Rendace, 2003). This changed again from the 1980s and later, with subcontracting and long-distance employment becoming more prevalent for a number of reasons; the result is a scattering of artists working from their personal studios or homes and contacting their partners through a coordinator-editor in the publisher's main offices (Norcliffe & Rendace, 2003; Dittmer, 2016). This complicated history has impacted the social and financial landscape of comics with unique power dynamics between the various creatives. The initial stigma attached to comics work (Wright, 2001), the numerous moral panics (Sabin, 1996) and its mechanical production (Ro, 2004) compelled a lot of individuals to work freelance, resulting in remarkably little earnings in relation to the popularity of their creations. This was only changed in the 1970s, with artists imagined under a new role, demanding credit and ownership of the material (Round, 2010; Dittmer, 2016). Even with the changes made in pay and royalties, however, comics evaluation has remained imbalanced: since the 1980s, writers have received disproportionately greater attention and praise than artists, as comics were reimagined as a literary rather than visual art (Murray, 2010; Murray, 2013; Round, 2010). While comics journalism has attempted to rectify this by showcasing individuals from all the roles and they have talked about their craft on social media and podcasts, academia has yet to thoroughly grasp those complexities in the contemporary market.

As for their geographic component, there has been little research on the workforce's location and relation to its working environment. On the issue of cultural influence, the American, French and Japanese scenes have been singled out as the trinity that has defined the art form on a global level, affecting all others (De La Iglesia, 2010), however unevenly – the supremacy of American exports is undisputed (De la Iglesia, 2007). As for the geographic distribution of its workers worldwide, the one study on the phenomenon (Norcliffe & Rendace, 2003), while outdated and focusing only on one publisher, has been enlightening. This paper showed that, already from the start of the 2000s, comic book creatives had been dispersed, both on the national (within the US) and international levels (in Europe, Oceania, the Americas and Asia), even if still clustering on mostly industrialized countries in contact with American pop culture; the reasons for it were thought to be the previously mentioned stigma of comics work and the advances in long-distance technologies, as well as some (local) social economy elements. These findings can be updated for the following decade, as social media and digital art production have definitely impacted the field even further.

Women have been thought to occupy a precarious position in this hierarchy and history. In terms of participation, multiple female workers have been identified and had their work studied in generations, from the first strips (Robbins, 2002) to the independent pioneers of the 1960s (Robbins, 1999) and later, and recently there has been interest in their recent visible mainstream participation and its offerings (Brown & Loucks, 2014). Since thematic examinations have often been made through a feminist lens, the ridicule of the women's suffrage (Goodman, 2001), the historic "gender stylization" to the point of parody (Robbins, 2002; Hayton, 2014) and ignorance of the liberation movement (McRobbie, 1991), particularly in superhero comics (Gavaler, 2014; O'Brien, 2014), has been criticized, establishing the (male-dominated) mainstream as unfriendly territory, even in its exceptions (D'Amore, 2008) and recent works (Brown & Loucks, 2014; Priego, 2016). Instead, some scholars have instead turned to the "feminized" field of "indie" and self-published comics, which allowed far more controversial material (Robbins, 1999). This hostility towards feminity has been thought to have affected its popularity with female fans –comics fandom has been thought of as almost entirely male for years, despite little substantial proof (Brown, 1997; Parsons, 1991; Lopes, 2009)-, who have only recently become visible thanks to the Internet and devoted (often feminist) spaces for "transformative" criticism (Scott, 2013). The above, though substantiated -women have historically enjoyed less visible positions in the industry until recently-, creates a chasm between the different fields and roles of the art world and its enthusiasts, and is well worth exploring for verification.

Meanwhile, comics have been involved in trans-media storytelling, as media franchises –cultural products springing from a common property source (Johnson, 2011) that tend to be continuously reintroduced to audiences (Geraghty)- have increasingly prominent over the twentieth century (Anderson, 2006; Saler, 2012). Along with the importance of fan creativity in them (Murray, 2005; Gray, 2010), their most important characteristic is transmedia storytelling, the narration of stories in many mediums that also causes a migration in viewership (Jenkins, 2010; Jenkins, 2006a), whether for financial (Aarseth, 2006) or artistic reasons (Mann, 2009). Works of sequential art have often (and for decades) been included in this parallel production (Morrison, 2011), and comics based on pre-existing, non-comics properties (involving the payment of a licensing fee to the rights holder) have been dubbed "licensed comics" (Hibbs, 2016; Lynch, 2017). While this category has also been considered of as subpar (Fingeroth, 2008) or repetitious (Jenkins, 2006a), it has recently been reevaluated for its ability to expand the source material in artful ways (Gough, 2007; Pillai, 2013) and the new underage audience it brings to the art form (Pillai, 2011; Kashtan, 2017). It has also been noted to (within limits) allow the promotion of devoted (borderline illegal) amateurs into the mainstream and thus the rejuvenation of these properties (Ng, 2006). The temptation to broaden the literature on licensed comics would be enough on its own, but the potential for renovation they offer was another excellent reason to focus on them.

The second pillar around which the project is centered is fandom, defined as a group of individuals passionate for a particular subject and their culture (Verba, 2003). Dating back to the 1920s in their contemporary form (Coppa, 2006), fandoms have been the subject of varied research, though at first were considered entirely passive consumers (Adorno, 1991; Jenson, 1992; Gray, 2007). Some consider fandoms to be structured around knowledge of

their interests, which could be considered a form of power used by the disempowered to resist (Bourdieu, 1986) and criticize cultural industries and their producers (Jenkins, 1992; Fiske, 1992). This has led to the new conception of fans as active and productive consumers (Gray, 2007) and a renewed interest in their culture, such as their practices (Lamerichs, 2013), language (Godwin, 2015), hierarchy (Walls-Thumma, 2015) and internal struggles (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 2006b). They have also been studied from sociological perspectives, as relaxed, supportive communities of people with similar values (Oldenburg, 1989; Shefrin, 2004; Geraghty, 2008; Meakins, 2014) and as gendered spaces, inhabited by men often considered feminized, irrational or insufficiently masculine (Jenkins, 1992; Godwin, 2015; Gray, 2003). Of all the above, while the individual demographic evolutions of fandoms and the interaction between official creatives and fans have been touched upon, they haven't been deeply looked into, and this is where this project will contribute.

The Internet augmented the above significantly in terms of demographics and spatiality. From the 1990s and onward (Hillesund, 2007; Bury, 2003) and until Web 2.0 and social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), fandom has gained many additional members and some new (or pronounced) characteristics. The most studied ones include: increased exposure of "geeky" topics and a lowered bar of entry into them (Kahn & Kellner, 2005); the easy, non-spatial networking of unrelated individuals (Dodds, 2006; Hills, 2002) and the collaborative creation of knowledge spaces (Jenkins, 2002); the growing visibility of female fans (Bury, 2003); and the circulation of fan content (Bolt, 2004; Lam, 2010). Even if the above is not as democratized as believed –online communities have foundations in physical ones (Lazar & Preece, 1998) and most Internet users are still North American, East Asian and European (Castells, 2002; Norris, 2001)- fandom populations have grown significantly and can be reached through alternative ethnographic methods.

The third and last pillar of this thesis is the production of a specific media franchise: the "Transformers", owned by Hasbro and TakaraTomy. Beginning in 1984 and continuing to this day, its main narrative hook –a violent civil war between two camps of shape-shifting robotic aliens and the relationships between them– has remained unchanged but has been updated in numerous variations (Meakins, 2014; Harms & Spain, 2016). Its steady production of toys, animation, films and other media, its continued success with multiple generations (Fast & Örnebring, 2015) and the recent interest it has garnered for IDW's comics made it an ideal candidate for the questions raised at the start of this section. Due to its close ties to merchandizing and presumed worthlessness as a commercial product (DiPaolo, 2011) and influenced by the academia's widespread confusion when it comes to action figure fandom (Godwin, 2015), it was legitimized for scholarly analysis only in the last decade (Fast, 2012), and this thesis continues that trend or reevaluation.

In spite of the sizable literature on the franchise, the intense focus on its two most popular iterations –the 1980s cartoon and the ongoing live-action film series- has resulted in limited insights, which are worth noting down nevertheless. From its past demonization (Hesse & Mack, 1991; Eaton & Dominick, 1991) to its present (elliptical) understanding as a timestamp and relic of the 1980s only (Crawford, 2009; Johnson, 2013; Smith, 2014), academia has been either hostile or ignorant towards "Transformers" for long, an injustice that has (to an extent) been rectified only recently. The franchise's transmediality (Fleming,

1996; He, 2013), complicated artistic identity –split between American cartoons and comics and Japanese *anime* (Broderick, 1996; Poitras, 2008; Clements & McCarthy, 2012)- has been investigated, rendering a complex, trans-national tapestry of battling corporate interests (Cross & Smits, 2005; Johnson, 2013; Tschang & Goldstein, 2004; He, 2013; Owczarski, 2015) and the pressure of capitalism on the final products (Ryan, 1992; Marburger, 2015). Even with its past moralizing, omissions of media and preoccupation with the nationality of the product, these texts were enough for the formulation of a basic framework for this thesis, which strives to improve upon them in turn.

The other branch of literature on the franchise has been content analyses on the major themes and influences of various pieces of the franchise's fiction output. While its mythological motifs and its diverse science fiction inspirations (Fleming, 1996; Coladilla, 2007; Bainbridge, 2016) have been mentioned, the political interpretations of the two most visible iterations have been more popular subjects. Most researchers were of the opinion that the franchise perpetuates known American sociopolitical concerns –the triumph of liberalism, technophobic/technophile tendencies, interventionism (Underwood, 2013) and paternalistic leadership (Harms & Spain, 2016)- and has had close ties to the military complex in more ways than one (Hawthorne, 1989; Bishop & Phillips, 2003; Pardy, 2016; Mirrlees, 2017). Explorations of gender, the present case study excluded, have mostly associated "Transformers" with masculine artistic lineages –"boy's cartoons" (Lenburg, 2009)-, interests –the fetishization of technology (Wilson, 2012)- and presentation tactics (Dobrow & Gidney, 1998; Wilson & Moore, 2017), with the assumption being that they construct a male audience for the brand (Beck, 2009; Fast & Örnebring, 2015). The idea that boys would not be interested in female characters resulted in their small numbers (Eaton & Dominick, 1991; Harms & Spain, 2016) and their contradictory depictions as both confronting and conforming to stereotypes of traditional feminity created a legacy that survived in the live-action series. There have been exceptions, such as the complex masculinity of major character Optimus Prime (Underwood, 2013; Meakins, 2014). However, the greatest divergence has been considered the recent comics line by IDW, for its introduction of multiple, not-stereotypical female characters, and especially comic book series "More Than Meets The Eye", for its inclusivity of explicitly queer characters and relationships (Marburger, 2015). This last paper pondered the possibility of an LGBTQIA+ fan-base being generated thanks to this newfound inclusivity, and one of the goals of this project is to test that theory.

Though it has often been of tangential or partial interest, enough research of "Transformers" has been dedicated to its fandom that one can formulate some of its major characteristics. From corporate-approved club in the 1980s (Underwood, 2013) to dispersed worldwide online network in the next decade (Rivera, 2008), they are a sizable presence with their own gatherings in America and Europe (Fast, 2012). They have been described as emotionally attached yet flexible in their appreciation, active information-seekers, proficient Internet users and diverse in their fan activities (Hidalgo, 2011; Fast, 2012; Meakins, 2014), as well as having an awareness of their impact on the brand (at least the figure-buying adults). Their numbers include people of all ages, and while mostly assumed male (Fleming & Sturm, 2011), there have been women in fandom research samples (Zhao & Murdock, 1996; Rivera, 2008; Fast, 2012; He, 2013; Fortunati et al, 2015). Although their trans-national

character has been emphasized more (Johnson, 2013), isolated case studies have spotted particularly active populations in America, Europe, Asia and Oceania (Geraghty, 2008; Fast, 2012; He, 2013; Meakins, 2014).

Three major thematic units have interested social scientists with them, starting with the politics of nostalgia (longing for the past), which have been examined by multiple individuals, though centered entirely on reminiscence for the 1980s iteration of the brand. Motivated (or fueled) by the "retro boom" of the mid-2000s (Rivera, 2008), the way the children of the 1980s –and present-day adults- have used the narratives to relive their childhoods in a community (Geraghty, 2008) and defend their appreciation against a corporation (Geraghty, 2011; Fast, 2012) has defined the property in major and minor ways. The 1980s cartoon and 1986 film in particular have been reevaluated as superior animated offerings (Geraghty, 2008) or traumatic childhood events (Bainbridge, 2016) respectively and thusly canonized in popular consciousness (Fast & Örnebring, 2015). The creation of a parallel adult market for the franchise is another common conclusion from many unrelated papers (Bainbridge, 2010; Rivera Rusca, 2011; Bainbridge & Norris, 2012; Rimmer & Roberts, 2012), even if their exact financial contributions are nebulous. Nostalgia –and the formation of a "collective memory" (Halbwachs, 1992) from it - has been studied in Asian (Chinese) audiences as well, though for a slightly different group –the One Child Generation- and separate socio-political reasons (He, 2013). Although of great interest, this group will not be the only one studied here, although its existence opened up doors for communication and familiarization with the rest of the community.

Hearths of fans have been cultivated due to specific socio-economic factors, such as the transition from Maoism to capitalism during the first years of the Open Door and One Child Policies in China (Zhao & Murdock, 1996; He, 2013) and the influence of "robot culture", the production of brand-new materials and the (aging and closed off) *otaku* subculture in Japan (Rivera, 2008). A similar phenomenon has been observed in Europe, and specifically the UK: comics subsidiary Marvel UK produced additional material for their weekly reprints of the original Marvel comics run (Bainbridge, 2016), weaving new plots, employing local artists and nurturing a devoted fan-base. This body of work supplied the franchise with arguably one of its most historically important and consistent creators, Simon Furman, and became influential (Rimmer & Roberts, 2012; Thomson, 2009). The impact these specific conditions have had on the fictions and fans over time could be the subject of their own paper entirely, and for that reason they are included here.

The final trait that set this fandom apart from others is its seemingly greater power over the official product. Apart from the indirect pressure of fan content (Rivera Rusca, 2011; Fast, 2012; Arunrangsiwed, 2015) and the symbolic power fandom wields when criticizing the official product, some believe that Trans-fans can be relegated to consumers with passive fan-like tendencies (Fast, 2012). This has changed in recent years, with the cooperative creation of characters, the fast incorporation of feedback into the recent comics (Marburger, 2015) and the employment of fans into curator roles (Bainbridge & Norris, 2012). While it could be argued that the closeness of the two groups is a product of the franchise's niche status and eclectic nature, these exchanges between creators and consumers are nevertheless worth exploring.

Combining all the above, a case study was decided: the recent “Transformers” comics published by IDW Publishing, starting from 2005 and ending in April of 2018. While relatively recent, there have been mentions (Underwood, 2013) and partial examinations –from the perspective of gender and the use of allegory in science fiction narratives (Marburger, 2015)– of them, along with a burgeoning interest from comics-specific (2015; 2016) and mainstream press (Kibble-White, 2016). Most of these write-ups mentioned series “More Than Meets The Eye” for its progressive stance on social issues, and the revelation of a long-term homosexual relationship between two characters has been remarked upon. A brief synopsis of all the texts is provided, to make their total innovations in relation to the rest of the franchise’s production apparent. After an initial period of familiar themes –(first covert and then open) battles over resources, science fiction and space opera, technology and its impact on humanity etc.-, a team of consistent creators abandoned the traditional two-faction conflict by ending it with a definitive victory for one side. In its place, they brought new plots and sensibilities, resulting in hues of gray for the characters and a pluralism of opinions. The expanded pre-history steeped in inequality, the social background for the civil war, the grueling reconstructive effort after its end, independent populations with their own cultures and prejudices, constant dialogue with the past and a new focus on female and LGBTQIA+ characters are some of these new themes, which could have affected the way the narrative is received and its potential audience. Despite starting from a familiar point -reimagining the “Generation One” concepts and characters for the modern day-, these stories have differentiated themselves enough to deserve a closer look, both as stand-alone narratives and as gateways into a cultural production that has been dealt with in broader strokes and an often maligned media franchise.

## 1.3. Scientific Approach

The issues mentioned in the previous section, while worthy of examination, were too broad for a thesis of this level, so a tighter focus was needed. In the interest of time, a case study was chosen: the “Transformers” licensed comics and the fandom developed around the media franchise. This pick, apart from showcasing an underrepresented but steadfast community of artists and fans, allowed the close inspection of one specific scene, its evolution over a relatively long period of time (thirteen calendar years).

After this decision, a dual methodology was used for the collection of data. Both approaches were based on ethnography, a discipline chosen for its detailed results and close yet sensitive approach to cultural phenomena. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data was thought of as best, as most research on fandom tends to prefer the latter only, although one of its most useful tools, the in-depth interview, proved invaluable (Mack et al, 2005). The snowball technique (more below) was an alternative for both fans and professional creators, and field notes were kept throughout the duration of the project to further evaluate new questions, hypotheses and conclusions (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2013).

Since this project would be carried out through the Internet, an adjustment of the above was necessary. Netnography, a technique used for the analysis of online cultural data

(Kozinets et al, 2010), has been proposed as ethnography's online counterpart, for unifying its traits with new methods of data collection and the advantages of speed and discretion (Beaulieu, 2004). Cultural entrée was also different, with one example for familiarization being "lurking", i.e. following an online community as an outside observer and understanding its codes before joining it (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2013; Beaulieu, 2004). In addition to that, being updated on the recent fictions and accumulating increasing knowledge of franchise narratives to keep up with the subject's interests was vital.

The first part of the project followed elements of netnography in the collection of (quantitative and freely available) data without any intervention into the community studied (Myers, 1999). Most of it was archival data –anything that can be gathered from the Web and wasn't created by a researcher's involvement or prompts (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2013). Some personal information (gender, country of residence and artistic experience) was written down, as found on publicly available digital registries (Bruckman, 2006).From that technique came the creation of two samples: one for the "official" comics creators (writers and pencilers), and one for the fans involved in a specific (yet popular and far-reaching) webcomic project. Some digital tools were also used for analysis, but all final decisions were made in "traditional" fashion (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The snowball technique (Everitt & Howell, 2005), a method for tracing vulnerable or invisible populations (Kaplan, Korf, & Sterk, 1987; McNamara, 1994), was used for the second part of the project. Since it has recently become applicable to online environments as well (Bowen, Williams & Horvath, 2004), it was chosen for its speed and affordability, its incisiveness in spotting alienated individuals and the attention it draws to personal relations (Sadler et al, 2010; Sadler et al, 2006). A "source" –a group of initial interlocutors with some authority in the community (Groger, Mayberry & Straker, 1999)– was spotted thanks to familiarity with online fan activity, and the project was directed to persons with similar traits -fans with an interest in participating in the research- using their (online and offline) social networks. This allowed the participation of greater numbers than expected (Pollok & Schlitz, 1988) and the attraction of willing subjects (Sadler et al, 2010).

The descriptive, qualitative data needed was collected through e-interviews at the next stage, with an invitation included as the last survey question. A variety of interview types were used to accommodate as many people as possible and combine their various strengths: via e-mail (Bampton & Cowton, 2002), instant messaging (Fontes & O'Mahony, 2008) and online live interviews that were traditionally recorded and transcribed (Bryman, 2004). Throughout, the anonymity of the subjects was protected and the research engaged with them in a friendly, approachable yet knowledgeable -in "Transformers" matters and not only- manner (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2013; Meho, 2006; Jenkins, 2018). Some eponymous guests –professional comics workers from the line in question and one outsider to it– were invited after the encouragement of the initial interlocutors and were interviewed in the same ways. In the end, multiple samples from two separate 6-year-long periods of time were created and processed, and 54 people were interviewed for their involvement with the "Transformers".

## 1.4. Thesis Structure

Finally, a brief outline of the thesis is provided before the main text, for the easier navigation of each chapter and section. Chapter One has been a general introduction to the project, outlining its initial reasoning, basic questions and goals. In addition, some initial literature on the subject is provided, as well as some abridged definitions of concepts that will be used for the remainder of the thesis.

Chapter Two will be devoted to a more thorough inspection of pre-existing literature on the subject matter. Split in two units, it concerns comics, their production and relationships to other media; and fandom, its synthesis and functions. Geography, gender and culture will be emphasized in all cases, and brief historical synopses will be provided for certain corners of activity, such as the production model of comics, the changes in their appreciation, the evolution of fandom technologies and understandings of gender etc.

A separate part of the thesis, Chapter Three, will introduce "Transformers", a multi-media property with a long history and conflicting interpretations. Its academic content examinations, the studies of its fandom and an overview of the case study –a specific line of comics series– will be provided, with once again a consideration for topics relating to gender, geography and culture (e.g. the UK-only strips, the Chinese fandom etc.).

Chapter Four will include both the methodological tools used for the project and an analysis of the results they yielded. Amongst the tools analyzed will be netnography and data collection, (online variations of) the snowball technique and e-interviews. This will be followed up by the mapping and organization of quantitative data in graphs, and the quotation and categorization of quantitative data (i.e. interview excerpts).

These findings will discussed in Chapter Five, mostly by being compared to previous literature on the subject matter. In particular, the evolution of "Transformers" fandom (the reasons for their attraction, their medium of choice, their relationship with comics old and new, their gender and their language of use in relation to country of residence) and official creatives (with a more thorough look into their beginnings, education, influences and growth), the interactions between the two groups and the role of comics in sustaining both will be looked into in detail.

Finally, Chapter Six will present the final conclusions of the thesis. Possible new avenues of research and future refinements on the basic methodology will also be suggested.

# 2. Literature Review: The culture of comics and their place in art production

This thesis will examine a topic that intersects some major areas of both cultural production and academic inquiry, two of which are comics and fandom. Each will be separately defined and discussed for its history and various examinations so far. Geography, culture and gender will be the major focus points, but some history of technology will also be provided for fuller understanding.

## 2.1. Comics: Their definition and production

Since this thesis examines the production of comic books, our first task should be to define the art form[2]. A multitude of definitions have been proposed over the last thirty years, and one of the first attempts was made by Will Eisner (1985), a renowned creator, who saw them as "sequential art" and a particular form of expression. The first definition to gain scholarly attention and traction belongs to Scott McCloud (1993), whose formalist description of "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" has been both praised and disputed since its proposition (Hatfield, 2010). Despite the fact that no single definition has been widely adopted or dodged accusations of being ahistorical (Meskin, 2007), for the rest of this dissertation we will use a proposed modification to McCloud's own by Hayman and Pratt (2005): "X is a comic if and only if x is a sequence of discrete, juxtaposed pictures that comprise a narrative, either in their own right or when combined with text". The reasons for this choice are the existence of detailed defenses and its inclusivity towards more difficult evaluative cases (Lanari, 2015).

Despite the fact that narration using words and pictures in unison has historically appeared in many civilizations around the globe (Mazur & Danner, 2013), there are two main popular historical narratives about the origins of the comic. The first concerns nineteenth century Swiss artist Rodolphe Töpffer's work on cartoon caricatures and the rules he defined on their construction (Kunzle, 2009). The other considers that the modern form of the art has its infancy in comic strips, a regular feature of newspapers in the USA since the 1890s. The explosion of new titles and genres of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the reprinting of popular strips in a magazine-like format, were two of the factors that enabled the rise of the comic book. Their influence is obvious in the earliest works of comics, and this exchange of talent would continue in later years (Lopes, 2009). Although there is an

[2] The attempts at defining comics (and therefore shaping their worldwide history, charting the object of study and the disciplines who can do so, and deciding which examples of the form to highlight or exclude) have been numerous and contested, especially concerning the North American comics literature, for a few reasons (audience unfamiliarity, a fixation on formalism, the demand for critical and cultural acceptance etc.). There has even been substantial backlash by artists and academics alike against some of the most popular ones, or the supposed need for absolute definitions altogether. For a more detailed view of the discussion, see Hatfield (2010).

evolutionary hypothesis connecting them, we should note that they are two separate "literary forms": the former is usually brief, humorous, self-contained and has a rigid lay-out to fit in a newspaper, while the latter have more freedom in themes and layout and can tell more complex stories (Witek, 1989). Another added influence in terms of creators, investment capital and narrative conventions are pulp magazines (Duncan & Smith, 2009).

Comics come in a variety of formats in the English-speaking world, and since the materials of our research range somewhat, we will devote some space to defining them. The one most familiar to laypersons is the "comic book" or "floppy", a booklet of 24 pages, which contains one story or a part of one. The second one is the "graphic novel" or "trade paperback"[3], a long collection, reprint of single issues (from four to twelve) or new material altogether, printed on paper of higher quality (Round, 2010). A form similar to the second one is the way "manga" is often used: while in Japanese it is the word used for all comics art, the lineage of which begins with 17th to 19th century *ukiyo-e* scrolls (Nakamura, 2003), in English literature it refers almost exclusively to translated comics by Japanese artists, and in particular those sold as volumes in bookstores (MacWilliams, 2008). The last form worth bringing up is the "webcomic", possibly the single most impactful development in the field of comics since the advent of the Internet and changed their formatting, availability and content. While a variety of definitions have been proposed[4], the one used here is that of Kogel (2013), who synthesized elements of both Hayles' ideas of Internet texts (2003) and McCloud's (2000) own definition: a webcomic is a digital comic "meant to be read on a computer" (therefore some works that are produced for print are included as well) and viewed on the Web. The reason why these differences are pronounced has to do with the creation of individual artistic scenes, distribution and consumption systems for them and around them; therefore, rather strict divides seem to exist between them, in terms of personnel, audience and academic focus.

These formats have also historically flourished in separate (yet dynamic) distribution and marketing channels throughout the years, culminating in the creation of several parallel comics markets. Single comics issues were sold at newsstands and drugstores until the mid-1970s, and came with a sale-or-return policy like magazines. Similarly to them, they had a mostly casual readership that treated them as disposable. This changed in the 1980s, with the advent of the direct distribution system (also known as the "direct market") and the specialized comic book store. The first was a system allowing store owners to purchase

[3] Round (2010) defines the graphic novel (also known as "a 'prestige format' single issue") as "a 'permanent' comic: it is often longer than the usual 24-page single-issue comic and consists of new material" and mentions that "Trade paperbacks use the graphic novel form to collect and reprint single issues", differentiating between the two formats. The two terms will be used interchangeably in this thesis.

[4] Some other propositions include: "comics that travel as pure information" (McCloud, 2000), "comics produced primarily for the web rather than for print […] made by an independent creator or creators, without an original 'print version' or corporate sponsorship" (Hicks, 2009) and "Comics that are made first for the web, made by an independent creator, who may be working with others, but who all have no originary print version and no corporate sponsorship [and are] unfettered by the rules of syndication and sponsorship" (Fenty, Houp & Taylor, 2004). Each of these emphasize different aspects, such as their ties to "smart" technologies; web prioritization, creative diversity, audience interactivity and activism; and production, economy, the separation from print and creative independence respectively.

lower-priced books from the publisher with a no-return policy, so it encouraged a more devoted audience of collectors (Round, 2010), while the second let comics share space with retailing promotional items and various genre film or role-playing paraphernalia (Norcliffe & Rendace, 2003)[5]. While the 1990s were a period of increased sales, it was boosted by collectors' investments and the market crashed; the model is thought to experience a crisis ever since (Lopes, 2006), and the fact that the monopoly in the distribution belongs to one company since then (Diamond Distribution), after the collapse or buyout of its competition (Raviv, 2002), is not considered encouraging. However, further shifts have occurred in recent years, when comics became more recognized as an art form: comics are now reprinted in collections with higher-quality paper and sold (sometimes at high prices) in bookstores, and graphic novels aimed at mature (even intellectual) audiences have reached a wider, mainstream audience through them (Norcliffe & Rendace, 2003; Gravett & Stanbury, 2006)[6]. The latest seismic change came courtesy of the Internet, which aided the creation of companies like Thrillbent, who distribute their books exclusively online (Spiller, 2013), special subscription services compatible with multiple devices like Comixology and digital comics imprints from "traditional" publishers, like First Second Books and California-based publisher IDW[7] (Moorefield-Lang & Gavigan, 2012). The above are thought to offer additional freedoms in creating comics and an alternative to the (often called stagnant) direct market (Costello, 2012).

Regardless of differences in formats, distribution or artistic schools of thought, most scholars can agree on one of the fundamental characteristics of comics: they are a hybrid, collaborative art form. The staff of comic book making in mainstream companies usually consists of multiple specialists, defined as pencilers, inkers, colorists and letterers, and even editors and cover artists contribute to the final product (Murray, 2013). In this particular thesis, we will focus on some of the various production models of comic books and their impact on media geography. To do this, we will first briefly detail the historical evolution of the division of labor within the comics industry.

### 2.1.1. The geographic and cultural production of the arts through comics

Of all the "eclectic" literature on comics, in which a great number of researchers from many different disciplines and with diverse methodologies have examined the art form, its history, its business practices, its demographics and its cultures (Heer & Worcester,

[5] On the fringes of this system grew another, peripheral market: the independent ("indie") scene, mostly by artists attempting to sidestep the content-controlling Comics Code Authority. The counter-culture movement of the 1960s can be considered its origin, when "comix" preoccupied with taboo subjects (LGBTQIA+ issues, environmentalism etc.) were sold on "head shops" (Estren, 2012), university campuses, street corners and other social networks until the 1970s. Although the movement collapsed by the end of the 1970s, it rose in a new form in the 1980s (Sabin, 1996) and the books have since been sold on specialist comic book stores.

[6] The high sales of manga (Lopes, 2006) and the creation of new comics imprints by non-comics publishers (Mulholland, 2007) are further indication of the importance of this distribution channel.

[7] The complete name of the publishing house is Idea and Design Works, LLC, though it is also often shortened to IDW Publishing. For the sake of brevity, the publisher will be simply called IDW for the rest of this thesis.

2009), this overview will focus on the latter three, starting how the artist has been examined in geography and later the relationship between geography and production methods. Another topic that will additionally be focused on is the historical evolution of the division of labor within the comics industry, and the impact is has had on the study of the art form and media geographies as a whole.

Although comics workers haven't been considered artists in previous literature, we can assume them to be through Markusen's (2013) definition, since "artwork is their primary occupation by numbers of hours worked a week and including self-employment"; it also offers some precedent for study, as there has been some inquiry about the geographical patterns of artists and their impact unto the rest of society. Following a trend of the last two centuries (Debroux, 2013), the role of the artist changed considerably in the twentieth, thanks to the easy mass-production of culture and the control they could exert on their work as a result (Howkins, 2001; Florida, 2004). In addition, the creation of new cultural products and the transformation of previously utilitarian goods and services into forms of entertainment and indicators of social status (Scott, 1997) gave them increased economic significance. While the first treatise on geography and art was Pieper's (1936), recent literature has shown interest in their proposed role of urban renovators belonging to the "creative class" (Florida, 2004) in European, North American and Australian case studies. Opinions are split on whether the spatial organization of artists follows (or forms) patterns or not. Some (Andersson et al, 2014), studying mostly inner city groups, considered working opportunities, access to customers and fellow professionals, affordable housing and environmental factors as important, others (Bennett, 2010) have found elements of creative migration to more well-known artistic centers (nationally or inter-nationally), and a third group (Mitchell, Bunting & Piccioni, 2004) have discovered rural concentrations and a counter- urbanisation movement. The retort to them claims that artists are way too heterogeneous to be grouped together (Alfken, Broekel & Sternberg, 2015), and that their patterns are way too complex to be formulated, dependent on many more important factors –local education, development and showcasing spaces and networks, employment and funding opportunities, personal migration decisions (Markusen, 2006), lack of competition, historical factors and larger patterns of gentrification and internationalization (Debroux, 2013), population growth and crime. That said, while they move across state lines more often than other occupations (Alfken, Broekel & Sternberg, 2015) and, as Markusen (2013) stated, "artists work everywhere", most literature so far has ignored trans-national activity and has mostly focused on national or local case studies.

Another series of prototypes one could refer to could be other creative industries, no matter their poor definition so far. Norcliffe and Rendace (2003) note that most literature on the geography of cultural production has studied mostly the concentration of activities in metropolitan areas, which happens for three main reasons: the use of subcontractors by major enterprises, the collaborative social economies built amongst them, and the sharing of knowledge leading the tightening of clusters. One such example was Storper and Christopherson's (1987) three-stage analysis of the Hollywood movie industry, whose centralized craft production system became one of mass production, then one of backward and forward integration and finally was disintegrated vertically via the subcontracting of production to independent producers. Their combination created a robust social economy of linked networks with a focus on niche markets (Scott, 1996). On the flipside of this, Kotkin

(2000) observed "rural Valhallas" and development outside cities. As a combination of the two, Scott's (1999) two-tier analysis (including both large firms and independent ones) of the music industry showed both concentrations in Los Angeles and New York and scattered centers across the United States. Same as with individual artists, the discovery of a common pattern in the geographical dispersion of artistic activities and personnel is hard; more research is needed to clear the issue.

Even then, despite the similarities, the comic book industry has evolved past the models mentioned, and a quick historical overview could show this progression. Comics have been studied from the perspective of art history and its social implications, in the sense that the art form is perceived differently in various scenes around the globe. While comics as an art form and social phenomenon have appeared in many civilizations (Mazur & Danner, 2013), they can be said to originate in their modern, recognizable form from the American newspaper strip in the beginning of the 20th century (Belk, 1987). The United States, therefore, became the first major art scene of the form, setting the template for its development and affecting its perception elsewhere. France (and Belgium) and Japan are the other two major ones, as they have been creating products with distinct identities for many decades. De La Iglesia (2010) thinks that this trine shapes the art form for the most part, having satellite-scenes (the UK and Canada; Switzerland; China and South Korea, respectively) and "other comic-producing regions are usually influenced by [them], or even stylistically dependent". Factors that are thought to have aided in the emergence of national comics cultures are: exchange with neighboring countries (e.g. Japan and South Korea) or the censorship and banning of imported work, political and language divides and the conservative, culturally-defined tastes of the audience. Individual differences in various elements (e.g. formatting, with comic books and albums being preferred in the States and Europe respectively) aside, the influence of the US has been particularly intense: peripheral comics scenes have been aided by importing and translating foreign material, and so comics were considered a purely American phenomenon there (De La Iglesia, 2007)[8]. The other two scenes have also had a rocky path to outside recognition due to the geographically uneven globalization of publishing: Franco-Belgian comics were first translated in the 1960s, and the popularity of *manga* exploded in the 1990s (Dittmer, 2016). In other words, while "comics are a global phenomenon", "The dynamics [...] of their production and reception, has developed differently in different countries" (De la Iglesia, 2007); this exact dissonance will be inspected in this thesis, examining the spread of the American production ideal globally.

But what of its history and evolution? Wright (2001) mentions that, during the 1920s and the World War II years, comics production was geographically centered on New York City and had adopted a Fordist, assembly line-like model, with each task done by a different artist (usually art school graduates). Based on the 'bullpen' model, the first of which was

[8] The mainstream American comics industry in particular has almost been synonymous with superhero comics, despite the long existence of multiple industries within it (Dittmer, 2016). Starting with 1937's "Action Comics" #1, the genre became extremely profitable in the 1940s and 1950s, and returned to prominence in the 1960s due to low competition (Sabin, 1996). Since then, two major genre publishers have dominated the market, nicknamed "The Big Two": DC Comics and Marvel Comics (Lopes, 2006). Their prevalence in America and import into other countries has caused the entire medium to be considered escapist juvenilia that promotes illiteracy to young readers (Lopes, 2009).

established in 1937 by Will Eisner, it mandated the inception of the story by an editor and its execution by the rest of the staff, following the former's vision (Norcliffe & Rendace, 2003; Sabin, 1996). This model has been heavily criticized by legendary workers such as Will Eisner and Carmine Infantino, who used words like "galleys" and "sweatshops" to describe their working conditions at the time (Lopes, 2009). During the 1950s, publishers got more control over the process by bringing the production in-house, utilizing and implementing specific artistic interpretations of the characters ("house styles") for all artists. This was also the time when the distinction between pencilers, inkers and colorists became apparent and new processes, such as shooting the final product on film before printing it, were introduced (Round, 2010; Norcliffe & Rendace, 2003). Chief among the advantages of this system was its practicality: it allowed workers "to hand paper back and forth to each other as it was produced" and editors to survey the entire process and intervene when necessary (Dittmer, 2016).

However, a series of factors –cost-cutting by hiring subcontractors (Norcliffe & Rendace, 2003), the increased agency of artists during the 1980s and 1990s, the development of submarkets and the need for artists with specialized skills, the progress in communication technologies (especially the Internet)– have contributed to a shift in production methods, what Dittmer (2016) "an assemblage composed of geographically situated components" with dynamic roles. This model is post-Fordist and decentralized (and at odds with modern interpretations of the production of culture in North America), in that the creatives can live and work in different areas, with a possible precursor being the clandestine production and distribution of independent comics in the 1970s. The present model, meanwhile, involves the coordination of creatives residing in different places from where they work, even countries or continents apart[9], months before publication. Communication is maintained through editors (and sometimes translators) that approve or adjust the material, residing in the USA, usually in central offices in New York, Los Angeles or Portland. The result is "dramatically new geographies of production" that greatly benefit freelance illustrators (Norcliffe & Rendace, 2003). As a result, most mainstream comic-book stories since the 1950s have been crafted not in the bustle of busy offices, but "in the silence of the freelancer's homes" (Howe, 2013).

What also needs to be addressed is the distinction and socio-economic complications that arise between the various creators that play a part in making a comic. At its inception, the comic book industry and its workers were disgraced or considered substandard, and so most worked freelance (Wright, 2001) or under pseudonyms to shield their identities and future chances of employment (Lopes, 2006). The assembly-line-like system of production was also a factor that contributed to a lack of individual creative credit for the creators and the acquisition of the rights to the characters by the publishers, and affected negatively the financial earnings the former received after the success of their creations (Ro, 2004). At that time, the only way of finding out the identity of an (uncredited) artist was through discussion amongst readers in the letter columns, which led to more work for the artist and increased prestige for them, even to some credit for their work. The

[9] In this dissertation, the comics in question will be considered products of the United States, since this is where they are usually assembled (Dittmer, 2016).

stigmatization of the comics industry, its products and customers did not stop after the end of World War II, but took the form of moral panics that led to the market shrinking multiple times, in the 1950s and 1960s (Sabin, 1996). Comics creators started officially receiving credit in the 1970s, while also demanding ownership of the material. This new view of the creator –that of an individual and not of a cog in a corporation- allowed for more meaningful collaboration between artists and writers and helped the proliferation of new, authoritative voices (Round, 2010; Dittmer, 2016). One could argue that even promotional materials such as the 1970s Stan Lee-penned "Marvel Bullpen Bulletin" newsletter that created a mythologized version of the creative process at Marvel Comics led to the familiarization of the audience with the various specialists involved in making a mainstream comic (Murray, 2013). Copyright law and its implications have also gotten renewed importance in recent years, as both writers and artists receive pay and creator royalties for freelance on corporate-owned characters, which employs the majority of the workforce (Dittmer, 2016). In contrast, "the lion's share of most royalty money goes to creators in creator-owned projects" (Round, 2010), which also allows more creative freedom but limited promotion.

These tensions have been heightened in recent years, due to the selective evaluation and celebration of the individuals credited for comics work. The mid-1980s saw the rise of British "superstar" writers (such as Alan Moore and Grant Morrison) with literary influences and themes, thanks to their recruitment by mainstream publisher DC Comics (and editor Karen Berger), a phenomenon later dubbed the "British Invasion" (Mazur & Danner, 2013). Although artists were also hired (in this and next "waves" of creators), such emphasis was placed on the writing part of the process, that Murray (2010) calls the event a "Lit Invasion". The followings years saw comics reimagined, promoted and packaged as an art form closer to literature (Round, 2010, to the point when their name is considered a selling point for a title (Gravett & Stanbury, 2006). Murray (2013) attributes this to the "nervous bids for legitimacy" that comics attempted and the use of the "close reading" methodology in the examination of literary texts. As an example, he showcases writer Alan Moore, who is often viewed as the sole mastermind behind the books he worked on, at the expense of his collaborators. This view of art has its roots in the Romantic imagining of the artist as a solitary genius and was reworked thanks to the works of scholars like Stephen Greenblatt and Jerome McGann (1985) in the 1980s; the latter especially advocated that the placement of artistic products in the critical and cultural contexts of their time would better their examination. This prioritization seems to upset artists: according to a study by Harper (2015) with a 186-strong sample, 82,5% of the participants believed they are mistreated by the industry and the fans. They attributed this to the writer-centric view of the entire scene, as well as ignorance over the collaborative nature of the work, in which they are considered "cogs in a machine" instead of equals with them, and the aforementioned conception of the writer as the "main" creator of a comic. This, however, is not static: since the 1990s and the founding of independent publisher Image Comics by a team of ex-Marvel artists, readers seem more willing to follow creators instead of characters (Round, 2010). To amend this

view, the present project will focus equally on the role of artists (pencilers[10]) and writers, who will be considered as equal co-creators of each comic book.

Finally, although the exact geographic distribution of comic book professionals hasn't become a popular topic of study, Norcliffe and Rendace's (2003) paper on publisher Dark Horse Comics provided a first look into certain trends, and that that "the main geographic trend of comic book production has been dispersion, rather than concentration". Owing to the introduction of neoartisanal production methods, the frequent employment of subcontractors and the creation of periodical social economies, this result goes against the ideas of Scott (1996) and Storper and Christopherson (1987), who hypothesized on artists clustering around cultural and financial centers. Within the US, the extent of this dispersion was impressive, ranging from metropolitan (southern California, Los Angeles, New York) to rural concentrations (close to Chicago, Portland), as well as new, "nontraditional centers of activity" (Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, Washington, Wisconsin). These patterns showed up in English-speaking countries with similar comics traditions, such as Canada and the UK (the greatest center outside the Americas), with both rural and metropolitan clusters; to them, one could also add Australia and New Zealand. Even most of the other countries where artists lived –in the rest of the Americas (Mexico, Uruguay), Europe (Croatia, Denmark, France, Spain), Asia (Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines[11]) and Oceania- were English-speaking, industrialized and familiar with American pop culture. These results were thought to be affected by the stigmatization of comics employment in the US (as opposed to the Asian markets) and the development of long-distance technologies, seemingly implying that "The locational decisions that these freelance workers make are based on personal preferences". An additional element that helped this dispersion was the existence of specified intervals (Wednesdays when the new issues come out, once a month or during yearly conventions) in time during which artists could socialize with fans and each other in an "alternation of solitary creative work and social exchange"; these meet-ups helped the cultivation of new talent, the networking with editors and audience, and thus created their own time-geography. This paper captured a transient moment in comics history in 2003 and provided a sturdy basis for the present project in terms of methodology and findings; amongst other things, the present thesis aims to update its results and inspect a more clearly defined group of artists over a longer period of time.

### 2.1.2. Gender issues in comics: professional workers, characters and themes

Following the "British Invasion", there has been an ongoing interrogation about (American) comics and its surrounding culture, but only one portion of this will be examined in this thesis: gender inclusivity[12]. A brief overview of the historic participation of women[13] in

[10] It should be noted that even this view could be considered reductive, as it omits several key collaborators –inkers, colorists, letterers etc. This was done in the interest of saving time, and next projects should include fuller credits for the creative teams.

[11] On that note, there was a smaller participation of artists from "advanced Asian countries" than expected, which Norcliffe and Rendace (2003) believed was caused by "the strength of the national comic book industries in these countries".

[12] While this thesis focuses largely on the American comics scene, research has been done on the gender politics of comics in other national scenes, focusing both on their history and recent

comics will be made in the next paragraphs, with a (historically justified, if disproportionate) large interest in the "indie" scene. After that, mentions of how issues of gender identity and women's rights have been handled will be made. In both cases, the industry –in both the mainstream and underground scenes– seems to have shown a rather antagonistic face to its female contributors, although they have survived for multiple generations and seem to have been integrated into the big publishers as of this decade.

While comics have long been characterized as "a masculine domain", due to their association with the (traditionally thought of as) masculine genre of superheroes and the majority of its (celebrated) workforce (in mainstream, independent and strip comics) and fandom being male (Brown & Loucks, 2014), there have been multiple generations of women that have managed to fit in it or its margins. Female creators were part of the creative process almost from the beginning of the art form: Robbins (2002) mentioned early women cartoonists Nell Brinkley, Ethel Hays, Tarpe Mills and Dale Messick, who worked in strips as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, followed up by pioneers such as Dalia Messick, June Tarpé Mills, Jackie Ormes and Lily Renée in the 1940s through the 1960s (Brown & Loucks, 2014). The underground comix movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s allowed the rise of feminist comics and creators who became used to self-publishing (Robbins, 1999), although Sabin (1993) thinks of them more as a reaction to it than its outgrowth, since the scene's sexist themes and inaccessibility to female contributors made it unappealing. From that time and later, Trina Robbins and Carol Tyler are two historically significant figures, and their independent ethos was continued by creatives like Jessica Abel, Alison Bechdel, Gabrielle Bell, Lilli Carré, Vanessa Davis and Phoebe Gloeckner (Brown & Loucks, 2014). A generation of women who balanced mainstream recognition or participation with personal, independent work have been sporadically studied, like Colleen Doran (Lavin, 1998), Mary Jo Duffy (David-West, 2012) and Carla Speed McNeil (Wolk, 2008). Finally, although Robbins (2002) noted that mainstream comic book artists were "almost entirely male" and that female artists could "be counted on the fingers of one hand", there has been a slew of recent writers (Marjorie Liu, Gail Simone, G. Willow Wilson) and artists (Amanda Connor, Nicola Scott, Fiona Staples) working for Marvel and DC Comics, which is but the confirmation of a larger historic trend, and shows that women have been capable of entering the industry and express themselves through their art despite its institutionalized sexism (Brown & Loucks, 2014).

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production. Of particular mention is the Japanese production, with the genre of shojo, or comics for girls (Ueno, 2006) and its ambiguity in regards to gender in the figure of the bishonen (Buckley, 1991; Welker, 2006). On another genre, for the sexualized depiction of women in specific gender roles in comics for young boys (shonen), see Cooper-Chen (2001). Finally, for the work of female Asian (from Hong Kong) comics creators, see Wong and Cuklanz (2002).

[13] This introduction is limited to cisgender or transgender women as opposed to other gender identities, because there has been very little research in regards to their participation in comics. While the (mostly independent) creators who display their non-mainstream gender identities on their social media accounts are becoming increasingly common, this void has yet to be filled by reliable scientific publications as of this writing. Another interesting discussion is the depiction of asexuality in comics (Miller, 2017), but it is mostly preoccupied with asexual characters as opposed to creators and their visibility and survival so far.

In terms of their fictional presentations and themes, on the other hand, there has been a varied, evolving and contradictory history. From humor strips ridiculing the women's suffrage movement in the early twentieth century (Goodman, 2001) to promoting patriarchal values (traditional feminity, consumerism) in tandem with other girl-oriented periodicals in the 1960s (McRobbie, 1991), the writing of mainstream comics has been hostile towards anti-establishment ideologies, especially feminist ones. The male-dominated superhero genre[14] was no different: the early work of writer Stan Lee perpetuated "stagnant" gender stereotypes (Gavaler, 2014) and anxieties regarding feminity and motherhood were expressed from the (patriarchal) point of view of Jack Kirby (O'Brien, 2014). That is not to say, however, that these works haven't been studied through a feminist lens and found positive. One example is superheroine Sue "Invisible Woman" Storm, who has been interpreted as a commentary on the increased visibility of women's rights in the 1960s. Despite starting out defined purely by her male peers and relatives –"Wife to Reed Richards (Mister Fantastic), sister to Johnny Storm (the Human Torch), and colleague/caretaker to Ben Grimm (the Thing)" (Scott, 2013) and having an entirely passive superpower (invisibility), she managed to create force fields that render others (men included) invisible and become an equal to her fellow team members. Shifting from the "undercompensated and unrecognized" '50s housewife to recognized force amongst men, her story reads like a "classic feminist victory", although it was created by men and pushed for through the letter's column (D'Amore, 2008). A more conscious answer to the above came from the underground "comix" scene that dealt with themes of gender discrimination, sexual violence and reproductive rights, and offered a different perspective from the domesticated roles female characters enjoyed in mainstream publications (Robbins, 1999). In more recent years, these themes are being echoed in the mainstream, with the increased success, presence and popularity of diverse superheroines dealing with a slew of previously unexplored topics -lesbian Kate "Batwoman" Kane, Pakistani-American Muslim Kamala "Ms. Marvel" Khan (Brown & Loucks, 2014; Priego, 2016), wheelchair user Barbara "Oracle" Gordon until 2011 (Cocca, 2014a) etc.

A similar trajectory has been observed in regards to the visual representation of gender, although a number of studies correlate the gender of comics creators and the ways they depict it in their work, following traditions of a projected (heterosexual) male gaze into female forms from other popular art forms, e.g. cinema (Mulvey, 1999). The comic strip, one of the art form's closest predecessors, employed some visual "gender stylization" as shorthands: in 1909, George McManus introduced the visual trope of the beautiful woman and her unappealing partner, which could be considered another instance of comics' using stereotypies to fit a lot of meaning in little space and communicate it quickly (Walker, 1994). It was adopted by many later serials, by both men and women -the "Brinkley Girls" and "Gibson Girls" archetypes became particularly famous, though the latter also rendered men as equally attractive-, and non-human female characters also became identifiable through certain exaggerated minor features (eyelashes, lips etc.). This lineage of sexualization (and support of the heterosexual hegemony) under male pens crossed genres (from war-time pin-ups to superheroes) and eras (Golden Age to Dark Age of Comics), even if it could be

[14] Even more recent, "indie" work has not been immune to this criticism, such as the Robert Kirkman-written "The Walking Dead" (Gavaler, 2014).

hypothesized that second-wave feminism hampered its development in-between those two epochs (Hayton, 2014).

Superheroes in particular, male and female alike, were "depicted as physically flawless human beings", modeled after Superman, but by the late 1980s, "certain sexual characteristics on both the male and female characters" were being wildly exaggerated. Men became overtly muscular, with thick necks, small heads and oversized chins, while women, clothed in "bottom-baring thong bikinis", grew long legs, thin waists and swollen, spherical breasts larger than their heads. The latter were also posed in such a way as to emphasize those traits. This changed towards the end of the 20th century through the – staffed with women and thus "feminized"- independent or small press ("indie") American comics scene, where the style can be "realistic or broadly cartoony" and both binary genders tend to be drawn similarly. In the opinion of feminist critics, therefore, male cartoonists are thought to conceive of women as "the impossibly beautiful, unattainable other", exposing "personal sex fantasies on paper" when drawing them. Female cartoonists, on the other hand, were "simply accepting both men and women as equal humans". The contorted bodies of superheroines in particular are called "sex fantasies of adolescent boys who have little or no experience with real women". This isn't the case with the indie scene, in which "male indie cartoonists also now seem to depict women as equals", implying its relative artistic maturity (Robbins, 2002). Given that research on the topic has been continuous, despite the changes observed (Cocca, 2014b), it seems the aesthetics of mainstream comics work are still an ongoing debate.

Instead of summarizing the above segment, a list of female creatives involved in the past comics of this dissertation's case study in more than a passing role will be mentioned, to prove the point made in this section. The most prominent of them, as found through archival editions and online databases, include Marvel UK's editors (Sheila Cranna), colorists (Gina Hart, Josie Firmin) and letterers (Annie Halfacree) (Cranna, Rimmer & Roberts, 2011; Rimmer & Roberts, 2012; Rimmer & Roberts, 2013) and parent company Marvel's inkers (Marie Severin) and colorists (Sarra Mossoff) (Furman et al, 2002; Furman et al, 2003), from the inception of the brand and some of its first works in sequential art. Dreamwave employed one regular inker (Elaine To) (Furman & Figueroa, 2007) and multiple additional inkers and colorists (McDonough et al, 2008a; McDonough et al, 2008b) for their books. More obscure were colorists (Crystal Reid) from the Devil's Due mini-series (Seeley et al, 2006) and the 3H and Fun Publications comics (Krista Ward), the last of which was only known through the Transformers Wiki website (2018). All those women have been employed in positions of relative obscurity; their work hasn't been extensively studied, or found to be for a material that's male-oriented to the extreme (see below); and they are remembered through a community that is thought to be male in its majority (more below), exclusive but not impenetrable. The very interest a female researcher is showing in their work right now could be a sign of change in and of itself, but more terminology needs to be defined before any premature conclusions are reached.

### 2.1.3. Media franchises, transmedia storytelling and licensed comics

While comics have been a stand-alone, (relatively) profitable and respectable art for decades, they have also become entangled in the increasingly complex tapestry of culture production of the twentieth century; for that reason, a few more terms will be defined here, starting with "media franchise" (or "franchise"). Despite the newness of the term, the idea predated its inception: it was applied for the first time to a series of characters in television and film (along with accompanying merchandize) of the late 1980s driven by profit rather than creativity (Johnson, 2009) and to properties like "Batman", "Star Trek" and later "Transformers", the case study of this particular thesis, originating respectively in 1930s comic books, 1960s television series and 1980s toys[15]. Incipiently, the term on its own referred to a business model "involving independent dealers of branded merchandise" (McDermott, 2015), as well as a broader set of social and cultural practices that sprang from it, with efficiency, consistency, familiarity and predictability being prized (Ritzer, 2004). That said, while there hasn't been a concrete definition of "media franchise" yet, the one proposed by Johnson (2011), who defined them as "serial production of culture from a shared, well-designed intellectual property resource", will be used hereafter.

Little space will be devoted to the study of media franchises, but some of their basic characteristics can be summed up here. Geraghty (2008), referring to "Transformers", wrote that media franchises typically belong to the science fiction or fantasy genres, as they allow for the constant creation of productions and characters, those aimed at children undergo continuous remarketing and rebirth, and the intertextual relationships and meanings created through them have an important social function[16]. Additionally, many researchers stressed the importance of fan activity in a franchise's evolution: while the term implied strictly commercialistic corporate interests and an exploitative rigidity of intellectual property laws, fan participation has been observed, even encouraged, in them (Murray, 2005) and academics sometimes included it amongst a franchise's auxiliary materials (Gray, 2010). In the end, franchises result from negotiations between multiple cultural industries and can thus be considered a cultural process on their own (Johnson, 2011), have adopted a fluid production frame, with constant exchange of ideas between different media, creatives and a dynamic fan-base, and have a significant social impact that hasn't been extensively studied yet.

[15] It has been suggested that "transmedia properties" can be dated back even earlier than that, with titles such as "The Shadow" jumping from pulp magazine to radio show and film as soon as 1931 and its publishing house already having 50 years of experience with that kind of entertainment across print products (Anderson, 2006). Moreover, the creation of a property's world doesn't necessarily end with the original author's death, but can continue for decades after the fact, three famous examples being "Sherlock Holmes", "Lord of the Rings" and the Cthulhu mythos, usually with significant interplay between the "original" creators, the later ones and readers/fans (Saler, 2012).

[16] The very idea of a "franchise" is often a gendered one: Johnson (2011) argues that the economic value of franchises is often associated with male audiences, especially when considering popular press coverage. He also believes that the academia indirectly perpetuates this view: a lot of scholarship has been devoted to franchises within convergence research, which tend to have ties to the sci-fi, action and adventure genres and thus zoom in on traditionally masculine, computer-literate audiences.

But how did story narration actually change within a media franchise? Jenkins (2010) suggested the term "transmedia storytelling" for the phenomenon, "the narration of stories in multiple mediums" and the "movement of content throughout media" (Jenkins et al, 2009), such as the simultaneous narration of stories on television, cinema, comics, literature, video games, web pages etc., and with each new medium contributing a different aspect of the narrative according to its strengths (Jenkins, 2010). However, the real reason why this change is important is how it related to audience reaction and participation. Jenkins (2006a) suggested that these connections between media are the result or the symptom of "media convergence", the "flow of content throughout multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want", and the term has been used to describe the technological, industrial, cultural and social aspects of the phenomenon. The reasons for it were disputed: some claimed that it is for reasons of increased creative freedom and maximum profit (Picard & Fandango, 2008); others thought that the convergence of media was the result of an industrial one, achieved by a series of strategical corporate decisions (Arsenault & Castells, 2008); finally, a third group considered this "flow" of content an effort to counter the rising costs of entertainment production and advertising (Jenkins, 2006a) and the culture industries' attempt to minimize ricks by branching out to multiple mediums instead of one (Aarseth, 2006). No matter the motivation, the result was the creation of multiple layers of storytelling and authorship (Mann, 2009) that added to a product's narrative complexity (Schauer, 2007) and retroactively or prospectively influenced its interpretations (White, 2012) in a process that was ongoing instead of finalized and often driven by fan content after its official ending (Johnson, 2009).

Another useful term is that of the "paratext". Gray (2010) used it to refer to merchandise, trailers and other products considered ancillary to a film, such as posters, trailers, toys and games, making-of videos and bonus features, but also fan content such as miscellaneous creations and commentary. However, he didn't treat them as secondary, but argued about the prominent role they play in shaping the interpretation of the central text: "a proper study of paratexts [...] challenges the logic of 'primary' and 'secondary' texts, originals and spinoffs, shows and 'peripherals' [...] [rather] they often play a constitutive role in the production, development, and expansion of a text". It should finally be noted that comics are some of the oldest and most interesting ones: comics and other media properties have had a long history from before the start of the twentieth century[17] , and it was this trans-media presence that truly helped turn some comics protagonists into the juggernauts of popular culture they are today, such as Superman (Morrison, 2011).

One special –and somewhat misunderstood– piece of the transmedia puzzle of materials is "licensed comics". Lynch (2017) defined them as "comics produced for an already established franchise", though comics critic and retailer Brian Hibbs (2016) explained further: "From my point of view, a licensed comic is one featuring a character, or characters,

[17] Gravett and Stanbury (2006) mention 1898 music hall tie-ins as the first example of a comics adaptation from another medium and Kashtan (2017) brings up the 1899 adaptation of "The Brownies", Palmer Cox's children's book series.

that are not native to comics, that a publisher is (likely) paying a fee to a third party that holds the trademark or copyright on that property." This brought a number of issues to the forefront other than the journey of characters and stories from one medium to another: the inequality between the rights-holder and publisher (and subsequently the creatives working on the title) and the financial strain of maintaining that relationship through licensing fees for the latter. This description was reliant on economic as opposed to artistic merits and was therefore problematic, as these works tended to fall outside the broadest definitions offered for comics.

Pillai (2013) attempted to narrow down their characteristics by burrowing terms from Clarke's (2009) work on film novelizations, noting some of their similarities. Both are products that must create new content within strict parameters set by the licensor, and although they are not integrated into "canon", they nevertheless have to comply with the official timeline, and in some case replicate the source material's atmosphere. Alternatively, they offer opportunities for parallel narratives without a direct connection to the parent medium. According to Clarke, a successful tie-in author writes "with a fan's attention to detail, replicating the tone of the series and the 'voice' of the characters, while providing 'value-added', such as a focus on subjectivity and interiority accompanied by 'experiment[s] with temporality'". The end result is a story that "must establish its unique but precarious relationship to the source medium, respecting and enriching the meta-text, without contradicting other components".

Other researchers have added to these traits with additional observations, mostly by examining case studies. Historically, they have mostly been viewed as children's comics, as mid-century Dell Comics Disney adaptations (Gordon, 2010), famous examples from the 1990s ("Batman: The Animated Series") and recent (2004 to 2014) offerings from IDW ("My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic") and Boom! Studios ("Adventure Time") have been based on youth media, but have attracted diverse audiences of both children and adults. Their profitability was apparent: Dell was by far the most successful publisher of the 1950s, and more recently, IDW and Boom!, two relatively young publishers, have managed to establish themselves firmly in the market thanks these titles, as the fourth- and sixth-best seller respectively. Content-wise, while aligned with or dependent on the look and narrative trappings of their parent program, they can expand upon the material of the cartoon by telling stories that could only work in sequential art unhinged from budget constraints, by spotlighting minor characters or deepening the audience's understanding of familiar ones. They can also be playful in their formatting, aware of both sequential storytelling history and television narrative conventions, or even meta-textual, referencing their own fictional and commercial nature. All that can be done without compromising quality, ambiguity or the understanding of the characters and their world, for a wide audience of both comic and other media fans (Pillai, 2011; Kashtan, 2017). Furthermore, by reaching to a different audience through varied distribution venues, some hypothesized on their potential in renewing the (traditionally thought of as overwhelmingly male and aging) comics readership and helping it develop media literacy skills (Kashtan, 2017). Similar findings applied to the cases of more adult-oriented series: Gough (2007) examined the "translation creativity" of narrative beats, visuals and stylings from the original film in the "Aliens" series by Dark Horse Comics and Pillai (2013) underlined the creative risks taken by the "X-Files" comics by

the Topps Comics and Wildstorm publishers and considers them viable continuations of the original properties.

All the previously mentioned works have been legally licensed comics, but an interesting wrinkle was added to the examinations with fan works created *without* the blessings of the licensor and the ensuing relationship between the two parties. Ng (2006) studied the case of the numerous (at least sixty-five) illegal "Street Fighter" and "King of Fighters" comics that were produced and circulated in Hong Kong for fifteen years (1991-2006) and multiple issues capitalizing on the success of the arcade games, a testament to their popularity with male, lower-class gamers. On the one hand, he witnessed the merging of Japanese video games and Hong Kong kung-fu comics, novels and films: characters and fighting skills from the games were enriched with local elements –names, plots, settings, characterizations, narrative tropes, fighting and artistic styles, slang terminology-, resulting in a hybrid culture "from below", not initiated by Japanese companies. On the other hand, he saw both the struggle between the "legitimate" handlers of the license and the fans –forcing the cancelation of certain titles or driving creators to change the names of the characters-, but also the (at least partial) endorsement of specific creators (like Xu Jingchen), who ended up creating official products. Even if creatively compromised, these new comics expanded upon the mythos of the games and drew from the experience of a creator in amateur circles, meaning that the employment of fans is possible and a potential gateway to the creative renewal of a property.

These explorations, however, are recent and often take a defensive tone; due to their commercial nature -sub-products in the limbo between "impure" texts and merchandise (Pillai, 2013)-, licensed comics have a bad reputation and very little research has been done on them. On the side of academia, comics historians have rejected them, calling the majority of them "relatively unremarkable and of little interest to anyone other than die-hard fanboys looking to fill the gaps between TV seasons with peripheral stories of their favourite screen characters" (Fingeroth, 2008). Even Jenkins (2006a), one of the academics who defined and legitimized transmedia narratives and who rejects the notion of the single source or 'ur-text' (2007a), believed that a successful fictional world is one that is coherent, with each addition making "further development of the storyworld through each new medium", prioritizing the primary text and favoring "integration and coordination" between properties, finds that licensed media are usually redundant, reiterative or contradictory. Certain creatives within the comics industry have been even less charitable: independent company Image Comics publisher (and writer) Eric Stephenson's opening speech during Image Expo, July 23rd 2014, brought up "licensed comics based on old movie and TV franchises" as proof of a struggling, backwards industry. He accused the industry of "Grave robbing the past in an attempt to pump new life into decades-old characters" and dismissed them as "mere marketing materials for movies, toys, and video games". While he accepted that they can be of high quality thanks to the talents involved, he insisted that "no matter how good those comics may be, no matter how great they may be, that's not the future" (Salazar, 2014).

The reasons behind this rejection can be explained in part by a historical overview of the literature produced for them. On the one hand, the same fate has befallen almost all

mainstream comics periodicals, which are often thought of as less "literary" than the taught (and thus canonized), studied and analyzed graphic novels (Murray, 2013). Furthermore, an unofficial comics *intelligentsia* has tried to validate the art form's worth by focusing on its more experimental and abstruse offerings (Pillai, 2011). On the other hand, testimonials of their low quality occasionally cropped up via childhood recollection, although some of the oldest titles have developed a nostalgic audience amongst amateur culture historians (Eury, 2012); the comparison made to the better, more recent offerings was thought of as a sign of maturity and evolution for the industry (Kashtan, 2017). That said, this view has recently started to change: Gravett and Stanbury (2006) chronicled their long history and Jenkins (2007b) reconsidered the value of webcomics as valuable, additive content released simultaneously with a series during its original broadcast.

In a way, licensed comics encapsulate and summarize all the contradictions and conflicts of interest involved in media franchising and transmedia storytelling: financial gain versus artistic inspiration, mainstream versus fringe media, young versus old fans. From being derided as "afterthoughts in a film or television programme's marketing strategy" to declarations of their artistic merit, the academia and the industry alike have had a complicated relationship to them. In the end, though, "Artistic achievement is not always a casualty of the culture industry" (Pillai, 2011), and these works can definitely shed a spotlight on the behavior of geek media industries and audiences of the twenty-first century.

## 2.2 Fandom: its definition, function and evolution

The next section will be devoted to fandom and its functions, beginning with its definition. A neologism based on the words "fanatic" and "kingdom" that has been used for both the people that are passionate about a given object and their practices (Verba, 2003), it was first used for 19$^{th}$ century theater enthusiasts, but took its contemporary meaning in the 1920s. Coppa (2006) identifies the inclusion of a letter's page on science fiction magazine "Amazing Stories" as the moment of its first modern manifestation, as that element of interactivity gradually allowed fans to start conversing with one another directly. Jenkins (1992) defines "fandom" more strictly as "a participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community". As a last observation, Meakins (2014) points out that "The term fandom is interchangeable with the term 'fan community'". Since this view is supported by many of the members themselves, the two terms will be considered as interchangeable for this thesis as well.

One way of understanding fandom revolves around how it is structured around knowledge of its chosen subject and how it uses it; to do this, one can refer to Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theories on capital, which have been applied to show how consumption can be a vehicle for social positioning. Starting from the hypothesis that taste is not universal but is shaped by economic and social factors, he describes culture as "a site in which various forms of 'capital' are 'accumulated' and 'invested'". These are thusly used in the establishment of a social status that is reproduced and naturalized. Social space is organized along two hierarchies, one describing the amount of capital one has and the other its form,

which can be economic (monetary wealth and property) or cultural (knowledge and understanding or use of cultural goods) and thus symbolic; an additional form, social capital, refers to social ties and networks. While his conclusion was the unequal distribution of all forms of capital across social classes and within them, as well as its dominating use by the upper classes and the impediment of the lower ones' social mobility, his concepts were used by subsequent researchers to discuss fandom and its practices. In particular, Bourdieu's idea of "popular cultural capital" as a way to illustrate these differences in power between those who have access to (economical and thus cultural) power and those who do not is worth mentioning. "Popular cultural capital" is "the cultural capital of the disempowered, consisting of the meanings and pleasures which allow people to resist forces of domination and dominant ideology", a unique value system forming a "bottom-up" type of social power. The final concept Bourdieu introduced was the notion of "capital conversion", the idea that fan knowledge or skills may be converted into wealth for the fans themselves, although it has usually been connected to the entertainment industry's attempts to capitalize on free consumer work (Fast, 2012). One final observation is that the aggregation of cultural capital can transform it into economic one with the employment of fans thanks to their skills and knowledge (Hills, 2002), which will be important for later stages of the thesis.

Inspired by the above, researchers added new dimensions and expanded upon them to talk about the characteristics and role of fandom. Initial scholarly work on fans portrayed them as passive consumers, slaves to cultural industries (Adorno, 1991), and they were later painted as abnormal, easy to manipulate and unintelligent in academia, mass media and the press[18]. Even the first research done on fans studied them as a pathological and maybe dangerous "Other" (Jenson, 1992; Gray, 2007). Contrary to all that, Fiske (1992) claimed that fandom is thought to develop around cultural products –pop music, romance novels, Hollywood actors, comics etc. – that the dominant value system considers sub-par, and is therefore associated with disempowered groups of people in regards to gender, age and race along with social class. This helped change the negative opinion most academic circles had about fandom, and a new conception of it was counter-presented: that of a site of power struggles against the cultural elite[19], attended by an especially "resistant" and active audience[20], the practices of which were "creative, thoughtful, and productive" (Gray, 2007). Fans often mingle with the original text, and their activity "stretch[es] its boundaries to incorporate their concerns, remolding its characters to better suit their desires" (Jenkins, 1992). They can also engage with multiple sources of material (literature, cinematic

[18] Fiske (1992) argues that this might stem from the traditional place of popular culture as the "lowest" kind of culture, attracting only the "least critical" segments of the populace.

[19] This method of producing meaning can be observed even in radical and "authentic" subcultures as well. Hebdige (1979) showed that punks, mods and skinheads appropriated materials of commercial culture, creating new, antithetical meanings from them, in a process called excorporation. Fiske (2010a) writes that, for a subordinate population, this usage of industrial resources is the alternative to an "authentic" folk culture, and so this practice "makes do" with whatever materials is available.

[20] Jenkins (1992) notes that these struggles are unequal: "Within the cultural economy, fans are peasants, not proprietors, a recognition which must contextualize our celebration of popular resistance".

adaptations[21], video games etc.) and create fandom-specific archives, becoming competent interpreters and commentators of culture in the process, while using pre-existing texts (Walls-Thumma, 2015). These practices are uncommon for the larger mainstream audience, but the differences between the two groups are nebulous (Jenkins, 1992). The result is that the popular text becomes a "site of struggles for meaning": the interests of consumers and producers clash in a feedback loop, with the economic power (and interests) of the latter being undermined by the semiotic one of the former (Fiske, 2010b) and their resistance to the meanings "imposed upon them by their borrowed materials" (Jenkins, 1992).

Another view of fandom is that of a community that satisfies emotional needs prior to or along with intellectual ones. Distinguishing community from other human groupings is difficult and there are many (and conflicting) definitions for it, but we will follow one of the most basic ones, coined by Mason (2000): "a group of individuals who communicate and come together because of something that they share, either by personal choice or unavoidable circumstances". According to Mason, a community is also recognized by four basic aspects, which do exist in fandoms (Meakins, 2014): shared values and moral codes – the fascination with a media texts and the moral codes fans can draw from them-, similar lifestyle – due to participating in similar activities outside their varied main lives- , empathy amongst members -thanks to common experiences (Geraghty, 2008)- and recognition -from displaying their identity in external appearance and specific language (Shefrin, 2004). From the perspective of social science, fandoms are a third space, a liminal place -both literal and figurative- of social equality, where one can relax in an accessible, inexpensive and open environment, socialize in an unserious atmosphere but also receive psychological support (Oldenburg, 1989), somewhere "between the private and public spheres of life" (Morris, 1998). Finally, Meakins (2014) also proposes that fandoms could have a (psychological and moral) guidance function, the "ability to provide an individual with hope and support and direction in times of need and the power to deal with moral and ethical dilemmas [...] similar to that offered by religion"[22], after seeing their commonalities (even if "these core elements are simply by-products of the fandom community development"): both are structured around acts of devotion, use the power of narratives effectively, promote moral values like charity, forgiveness and good will through them, offer services of support and counsel and finally share stigmatization for the more radical elements in their midst.

Since fandoms are social structures, they have been examined for their internal moral codes, hierarchies and survival strategies. Firstly, both Meakins (2014) and He (2013) agree that the individual fans appear first and the fandom comprised of them follows later. In the fans' engagement with the texts, one often comes across activities such as online fiction, amateur comics (sometimes named doujinshi), costume creation (cosplay) (Lamerichs, 2013) drawings, edited video creations (Pearson, 2010) and more, processes which are dynamic with time. Furthermore, to accommodate themselves, fans develop specialized vocabularies for their interests, usually involving terminology that doesn't make

[21] Walls-Thumma (2015) underlines this with her research into a Tolkien-inspired fan-fiction community, which experiences spikes of activity, especially by new writers, around the release of new films. It remains to be seen whether something similar applies to the "Transformers" fan-base.

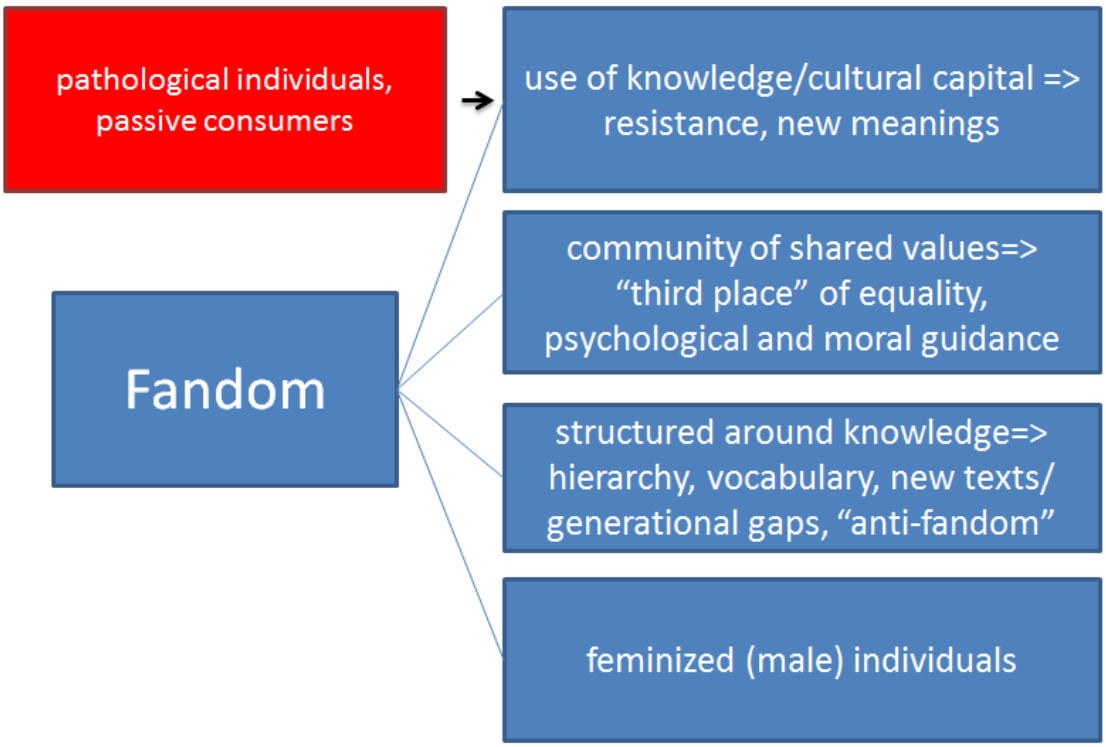
[22] For a more complete comparison between religion and fandom, with the latter existing between 'cult' and 'culture', see Hills (2002).

sense to "outsiders" (Godwin, 2015). Fandoms have an internal hierarchy: greater knowledge of the original texts means a greater status and fuller participation in the community (Walls-Thumma, 2015). Not that they are free from internal tensions: fans develop a possessive relationship over the objects of their fandom (Fiske, 1992), its expanded scope and entrance of strangers can leave the older members alienated (Jenkins, 2006b), and negative stereotyping has led to the development of defense mechanisms, such as the creation of "anti-fandom" and the devaluation of specific (and sometimes gendered) behaviors and practices (such as writing fan fiction and sewing), in an effort to distance themselves from further victimization (Godwin, 2015; Jenkins, 2006a).

Finally, fandom has been examined through the perspective of gender. The very term "fan" has an interesting, gendered, almost pathological aspect: Jenkins (1992) writes that fans are "feminized and/or desexualized through their intimate engagements with mass culture". Even the accumulation of fan knowledge can be classified as trivial and useless, even "feminized", and exhibit behaviors "perceived as fundamentally irrational, excessively emotional, foolish and passive" (Godwin, 2015). Moreover, the prevailing mainstream image of the male fan is that of an unattractive, sexually inexperienced young adult of limited interests, the farthest thing away from "functional" masculinity (Gray, 2003). Even before the gender of the participants enters the picture, therefore, pop culture geeks are defined as out of line with the prevailing masculine ideal, and so some feel the need to shield themselves from further harm.

The graph that follows (Graph 1) organizes the chapter:

**Graph 1: A summation of the evolution of fandom and its major characteristics, as seen in literature so far.**



From the above, it is easy to see an evolving appreciation for fandom as a group of active, thinking individual with specific codes of language, behaviors, habits and values (with all the contradictions and disagreements that all groups have, obviously). In particular, a lot has been made of their critical function that feeds into official material in the form of (direct or indirect) feedback. However, what hasn't been explored, despite the observation that fan artistic activity can be beneficial for the development of skills (Black, 2006; Black, 2009), is the exchange of individuals between official creators and fans: is it possible for a fan to become a professional, and if yes, can this be done through the activity of fandom?

### 2.2.1. The case of comics fandom and gender

Gender in the comics industry has been at the forefront of many discussions about comics in the last few years, but so has that of its fandom. This distinction is made here due to the relatively large boy of literature on comics fans specifically and the thesis' focus on a fandom that includes comics in its media diet (among other texts). While the discussion is mostly framed around the participation of women in comics circles, this fascination seems to stem –at least partly- from the assumption of the fandom's assumed overwhelmingly male numbers. In both cases, the connection between the fans' (binary) gender and comics is a long one, and is worth an overview.

The aforementioned observation regarding the lack of female talent has been transplanted on to the audiences for years, in an attempt to explain its own lack of female members. Aligning with the very conception of subcultures as masculine (McRobbie & Garber, 1977) or the exclusion of women from cult movie fandoms (Hollows, 2003), Robbins (2002) was he first to note the small ratio of female-to-male comics readers (women readers of superhero books were "rare"), and observed they tended to gravitate towards the offerings of indie publishers (especially those of women), due to their more down-to-earth portrayal. She considered that this had "feminized" independent comics, while mainstream ones remained unapproachable to women readers and creators the field of independent comics alike. This view has been complemented by the direct market's animosity to curious readers: its present state, along with the specialized comic book store, has been theorized to have comics off from the wider print distribution market (Lopes, 2006) and created an insular male fan base of knowledgeable insiders (Dittmer, 2016). While this had the unintended consequence of making comics from a popular medium to "a fringe (even an avant garde) form of entertainment" (Jenkins, 2006b), some view this through the lens of gender, going as far as to consider that the entire direct market (the "floppy" format and the industry's support of it) has historically mistreated "female creators, characters, and consumers" (Scott, 2013).

While it is true that comics fandom has long been portrayed as stereotypically male in academia and popular knowledge alike, and that the unflattering depiction of women as disposable may have played a part in their unfriendly reputation (Simone, 1999), the numbers provided are largely unsubstantiated. The idea that the fandom's composition is almost entirely male -90-95% (Brown, 1997; Parsons, 1991; Lopes, 2009)- is based on limited and unreliable data: the "imperfect indicators" of historic market studies and reader surveys

(Gabilliet, 2010), problematic questionnaire completion in current ethnographic research (Tankel & Murphy, 1998), and the oversimplified, essentialist presumptions about women's tastes in comics –e.g. post-war romance comics (Lopes, 2009) that were in fact deeply misogynistic (Wright, 2001), reinforced a "pink ghetto" (Radway, 1984) or were non-canon to the rest of the superhero line. Both ignored the engaged mainstream superhero readers and dismissed gender as an axis of analysis (Scott, 2013), were largely a-historical -it has been mentioned that in the 1940s, during the medium's greatest popularity, comics were equally popular with children, regardless of gender (Gabilliet, 2010)- and painted the female readership as additional, as opposed to pre-existing; in that light, even its aforementioned affection for the "feminized" indie scene could be considered a stereotype.

Although research on even contemporary female audiences for mainstream comics is limited –due to the companies only wanting to "maximize profits within the existing system, rather than seeking to extend the readership of comics" (Gabilliet, 2010) or confirm their pre-existing biases, as was the case with the 2011 reader's poll conducted by DC (Polo, 2011)-, anecdotal evidence suggests a growing readership over the past decade through the Internet and the evolution of discourse surrounding gender in geek circles, which is reflected in the attendance of comic book conventions. The broadening of the mainstream audience, along with changes in the surrounding culture -film adaptations of comics, influences from television and cinema, more prevalent science fiction and fantasy television series (Round, 2010), merchandising and licensing spin-off products, the migration to independent comics (Norcliffe & Rendace, 2003) etc.-, have prompted more thorough examinations of diversity. Female fans, already active via web zines such as 1997's "Sequential Tart" (Jenkins, 2006a), now use the Internet, "social media platforms like Twitter, a growing network of feminist blogs devoted to geek culture, and the emergence of crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter", to counter their seeming invisibility. Possibly the most famous example is fan-turned-professional-writer Gail Simone's (1999) website "Women in Refrigerators", which listed female comics characters than had been "depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator", the wives and girlfriends of superheroes that became damsels in distress excluded. The list was widely circulated and led to Simone's hiring by DC Comics; she has since become an outspoken advocate for female representation in mainstream comics[23].

Female fans are thought to have thusly been empowered with a "transformative drive" and an analogous (potentially feminist), critical impact on comics culture, both on an individual and an industrial level[24]. Critical activities have ranged from specific criticism of poses, costumes and covers to the creation original, crowd-funded material that elaborate on female creativity while continuing the DIY ethos of "indie" production –e.g. the

[23] Simone's inclusion into DC Comics' workforce, however, has been criticized itself, as it has been used as a tokenist example of the industry's inclusivity dubbed the "Gail Simone defense" to deflect criticism (Scott, 2013).

[24] The gendering of fandom has been the subject of previous scholarly work, with past researchers both noticing trends and warning about more essentialist views. Bury's (2003) research on mid-1990s "X-Files" fans suggests that female online communities can be created because its members had been previously harassed and felt offended by the male fans they interacted with (even if they tend to be the exception), and while she suggested there are gender differences in fan practices (women preferred character development, men were more interested in the paranormal, plotlines and conspiracy theories), she points out the error of stereotyping and talking in absolutes.

“Womanthology: Heroic” comics anthology series initiated by Renae De Liz featuring short pieces by female artists about (gendered) notions of heroism, additionally supported by IDW. One could even add elements of performance to this activity, such as the Stephanie “Batgirl” Brown cosplayer inquiring about the lack of female talent in DC’s then-recent “New 52” relaunch initiative in the San Diego ComicCon of 2011. That incident, along with a series of small or large controversies in the beginning of the 2010s (Scott, 2013), shed a spotlight on how the convention space is a gendered one, reflecting and affecting “the ways in which gender is constructed and understood”, suppressed and controlled (Massey, 1994).

When browsing through existing research, the evolution of view on the subject is apparent. As the female comics readership (and its broader intersection with geek culture) has been recognized and grown over the past ten years, literature has followed suit, by disproving past rough estimates and dismantling gender stereotypes. Even if still following some essentialist hypotheses –“feminized” indie comics, female fan activity as transformative, combined with a lack of insight into male fan works– and with an overemphasis on female activity –possibly as a counter-argument to their presumed invisibility in previous years-, comics fandom is now far more clearly understood. In any case, they prove the existence of some (progressively tighter) relation between comics fandom and professional creators already from the 1990s, with the aid of the Internet.

### 2.2.2. Fandom and the Internet

The Internet is a factor so important in the function of modern fandom that has to be talked about on its own. While the first modern computer system was developed in the later 1960s as an idea-sharing platform (Hall, 2011), it had been in development for decades before that point and was originally designed for much different uses. In the following decades, computers became affordable for larger communities, first businesses and later individual users and families (Haigh, 2006), but possibly the greatest leap forward was the 1991 creation of the World Wide Web, which continued to evolve in the next decades (Hillesund, 2007). The beginning of online fandom was hindered by low connection speeds, meaning that websites were designed to be as light as possible to allow basic information retrieval. One of the first steps towards their spread and democratization was the discussion board system Usenet created by Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis in 1979, which allowed members to post public messages and led to the creation of the first online communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In Usenet specifically, discussions were mostly gathered in the alt (alternative) section and they were some of the largest and most popular of the sub-boards, which often led to the creation of specialized mailing lists for the participants (Bury, 2003). Over the next years, the technology evolved and more fan projects appeared (content sites, personal fan pages, encyclopedias etc.), until the advent of Web 2.0 in 2004, “a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion”. Social media, “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of usergenerated content”, also sprang up around that time, as they blended social interaction and cutting-edge technology (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As of this writing, mobile

technologies and devices continue to change the way people communicate and consume content (Milligan, 2012; Goodbrey, 2013), meaning that the next transformation in communication could be around the corner.

The effect these shifts had on fandom culture was profound. On the one hand, it brought out a general greater interest in "geeky" topics: discussions on television series and film have since become popular online (Kahn & Kellner, 2005), and this has definitely increased their visibility outside the Net as well. It additionally enabled non-physical communication of many different people without prejudice amongst members, under the guise of anonymity and (at first, at least) lack of visual contact (Dodds, 2006). The gathering of fans and varying digital "tools" has helped fans organize themselves better and create knowledge spaces through collaboration, such as archives or databases (Jenkins, 2002). It has also lowered the bar for entry into a fandom, especially for productive individuals: the circulation and production of fan content has become cheaper and processes like printing or coloring are almost free (Bolt, 2004; Lam, 2010). All these could be done with little regard for exact physical location, as these groups became able to express themselves collectively and form global fan cultures (Hills, 2002). And yet, for many fans, the virtual communities functioned with the intimacy of physical ones: Walls-Thumma (2015) described how online gathering spaces made fans "feel welcome, safe, and familiar with the culture and customs", and small and active fandoms in particular could fulfil the emotional needs of their members adequately (Zhivov, Scheepers & Stockdale, 2011). It is clear that the organization of people non-spatial communities[25] can be done, and so they can be worthy fields of research; however, this apolitical, border-free notion of cyberspace can be misleading, even harmful. According to Lazar and Preece, (1998), many online communities had their foundations in physical ones, since many of the linkages in them evolved from existing geographical associations, with the added intention of expanding it. Furthermore, Castells (2002) used the term "digital divide" to describe the overwhelming digital presence of people from Europe, East Asia and North America at the expense of those from areas such as Sub-Saharan Africa. This was backed by Katz and Rice (2002) and Norris (2001), who pointed to the substantial inequality in digital access: of the estimated 378 million global Internet users, 266 came from North America and Europe, and Bolt's (2004) research on fan fiction writers found their biggest concentrations to be in the US, Europe and the UK, Canada and Latin America and finally Australia and Oceania. Additional factors that could affect Internet use are access, such as skills level and other time commitments (Dodds, 2006).

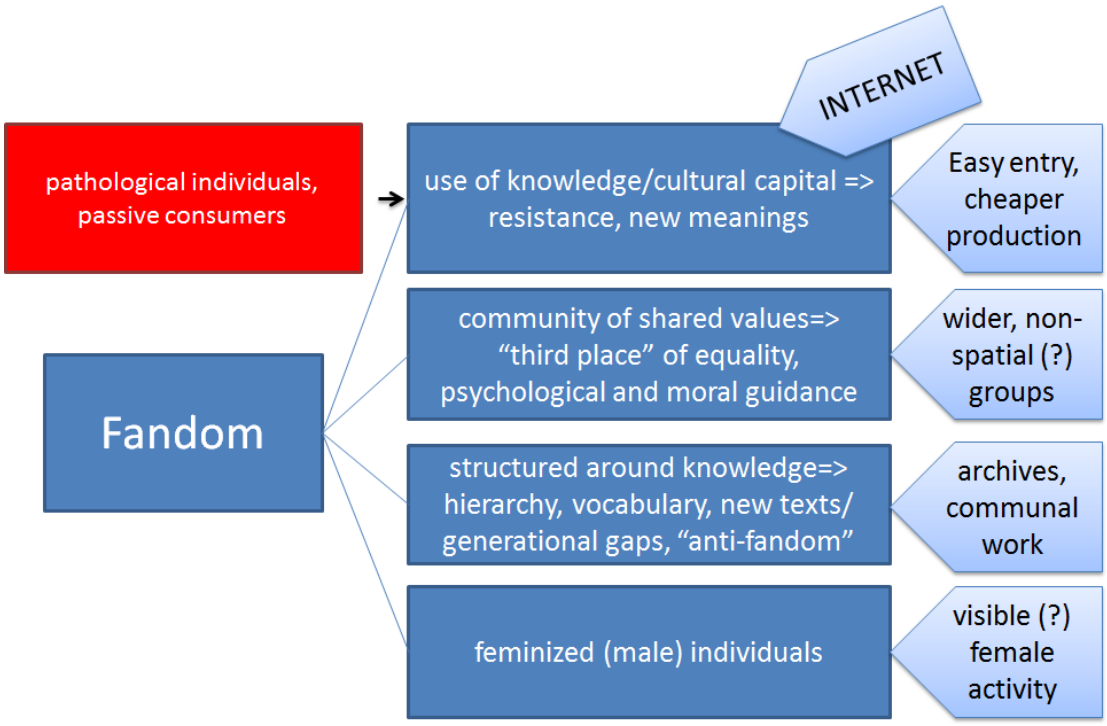
Two parameters often not taken into consideration with Internet use are gender and class. According to a 1994 survey by the Georgia Institute of Technology, ninety-four percent

[25] That said, communities had long been hypothesized to be non-spatial even before it. Although older definitions of community pride a concrete sense of place as one of its definition characteristics, that was already changing by the time of Gusfield (1975), who called it not only "a network of individuals drawn together by geographical location – neighborhood, town, and city", but also a relational effect with "quality of character of human relationship, without reference to location". Even before this, Durkheim (2014) had observed that modern society generates community based on common interests and skills rather than location, and this phenomenon has really flourished with the advent of the Internet (Zhivov, Scheepers & Stockdale, 2011), only with technologies supporting communications and creating boundaries (Lazar & Preece, 1998).

of all Internet users identified as male and were possibly computer professionals, and therefore they created a specific culture, one that women had to adapt to with a variety of strategies. That said, this homogeneity was not universal: Bury (2003), in her 1996, long-year ethnographic survey of an "X-Files" mailing list, was in contact with nineteen heterosexual, white women who had attended at least two years of post-secondary education, twelve of which had or were completing master's degrees and thirteen were between thirty and forty years old. Despite these objections, more recent publications show that Internet-based samples can be just as representative as those of traditional research, if not more, at least in terms of age and gender, due to the Internet's democratization in the last fifteen years; still, they still tend to be geographically biased towards North American populations and exclude socially vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the illiterate and those living below the poverty threshold (Gosling et al, 2004).

In summarizing this subsection, a new version of the previous graph will be used, to show how the Internet has updated the existing state of fandom (Graph 2):

**Graph 2: A summation of the impact the Internet has had of fandom and its major characteristics, as seen in literature so far.**




Even when the findings are doubtful (participants still seem to come from industrialized, English speaking countries, women are more visible but sometimes segregated), the changes are obvious, even if more of an equalizing nature. The basic structure and function of fandoms remains, but their reach, scope and numbers have definitely grown. Even then, each fandom is a microcosm that needs to be understood separately, which is why the next section is all about one specific media franchise and its own, separate fandom.

This section summarized a portion of literature on the comics industry and fandom, in their evolution and expansion to continents, genres and genders. However, while the above investigated industries and their fandoms generally, individual properties are known to develop their own, independent cultures, and so certain findings might not be applicable to them. One such franchise, with a long history and healthy production over multiple media, and its (equally resilient) fandom, will be examined in the next chapter: the "Transformers" and the research done on their content and fans, as well as a quick overview of their resent comics production and case study of this thesis.

## 3. The case of the "Transformers": analyses, fans and comics production

Having explored some basic ideas of comics culture and production and the nature of fandom, an introduction to the larger media franchise the case study of this thesis is attached to will be made, to better set up the framework for its examination. After a general historical overview (including aesthetics, as seen in Figures 1 through 3), some main thematic explorations of its content and fandom will be presented. Finally, details about the case study and its relation to the rest of the web of materials in terms of length and content will be provided.

**Figure 1: A view of major character Optimus Prime in three different "Generation One" media.**


"Transformers" began as a series of action figures[26] issued by American game company Hasbro Inc. (alongside the Japanese TakaraTomy) in 1984. Originally produced as two different Japanese lines -"Diaclone" and "Micro Change"[27]- that went unnoticed in the US due to a lack of media exposure, Hasbro used the experience they had gained with the reboot of the "GI. I. Joe" brand in 1982 to compete with the success of movie-inspired toy lines, particularly "Star Wars"[28]. Hasbro bought the license in 1983 and developed a new storyline to support it in cooperation with Marvel Comics -writer and editor Bob Budiansky developed names and biographies for almost all first-wave figures (Hidalgo, 2011). The product was advertised with a (at the time) revolutionary strategy that circumvented the

[26] The term is used to describe toys for boys and appeared for the first time in the 1964 "G. I. Joe" line (Godwin, 2015). For a discussion on the gendered use of the masculine phrase "action figure" instead of the feminine word "doll" by Hasbro, customers and fans for these and similar toys, see Michlig (1998). For a brief historical examination of the gendering of child's play and toys (specifically the discouragement of boys' interest in pastimes seen typically as feminine and their framing as masculine by the surrounding industry), see Godwin (2015).

[27] Later waves included licensed figures from other companies (Hidalgo, 2011), but most were designed by a joint division of the two companies that persists to this day (Underwood, 2013).

[28] The "Star Wars" films are considered responsible for making both high concepts and toy merchandizing a big part of a movie's success (Wyatt, 1994).

regulations on advertising for children's products (Bainbridge, 2010) and benefited from their relaxation in the same year (Scott, 2009), a triple promotion (apart from traditional marketing strategies like television or print ads) that included a television cartoon[29], a monthly comic book[30] and packaging materials describing the personalities and biographies of the characters called "tech specs" (Fast, 2012). These tactics, combined with the compelling narrative built around them and the unique transformation gimmick of the toys, made them best sellers for the next years. Subsequently, the iteration with the greatest staying power into popular consciousness is usually thought to be the 1984 to 1991 run, retroactively labeled "Generation 1" (and often shortened to "G1"), and it defined the fundamental elements of the brand to this day (Underwood, 2013; Meakins, 2014).

**Figure 2: A brief overview of the aesthetic evolution of the property in audio-visual media, 1996-2003.**

The property's popularity has fluctuated since that initial rush, but it has always been kept alive through multiple reinvigorations. Due to a combination of factors (worsened ratings –a common problem with toy-based programs– and toy sales, increased competition, complaints by consumer rights groups and changes in legislation in 1987, the comic's cancellation at issue #80), "there was not a significant new Transformers animated series in the United States for nearly a decade", but efforts were made to reinvent the property. After a failed attempt at a re-launch advertisement campaign in 1992, the rejuvenation of the brand came with "Beast Wars: Transformers", a new toy line and a television series, respectively in 1994 and 1996. The latter, a very expensive venture produced by Canadian animation studio Mainframe Entertainment and the second animated series produced entirely with computer-generated graphics, proved very successful and ran for three seasons. Since then, world-building has continued in the *anime* trilogy of "Armada", "Energon" and "Cybertron" (Rivera, 2008) and comics from companies Dreamwave and IDW (Fast & Örnebring, 2015) and, in part, thanks to close coordination with broadcasters (Fast, 2012), the franchise experienced renewed interest at the start of the 2000s. This attention

[29] The show was produced by Claster Television, a Hasbro subsidiary (He, 2013), and made to order by Toei Animation from American scripts (Clements & McCarthy, 2012). To this a feature-length film can be added, released in August 1986, directed by Nelson Shin and co-produced by Hasbro and Marvel Productions (Owczarski, 2015).

[30] Initially a four-issue mini-series by Marvel, it was expanded to an ongoing written by Budiansky and drawn by various artists. The latter third of the run was written by Simon Furman (Fast, 2012).

culminated in a live-action, Hollywood-produced series of films starting in 2007[31] that made the series a sales juggernaut once again (Rivera Rusca, 2011). Since then, multiple more animated series, figures, comics and tie-ins have been produced (Johnson, 2013), the most important and popular of which are arguably "Transformers: Animated" (2007-2009) and "Transformers: Prime" (2010-2013).

**Figure 3: A brief overview of the aesthetic evolution of the property in audio-visual media, 2007-2017.**

Despite the existence of multiple iterations across many mediums since its inception, from video-games to reference catalogues (Underwood, 2013), the most important of which (for this thesis) are shown in Graph 3, the core of its narrative remains largely unchanged: the civil war between two opposing factions of mechanical alien organisms from a distant galaxy. Originally inhabiting the metallic planet Cybertron, the titular creatures are fully sentient robots of humanoid appearance, capable of shifting into at least one different form (called an "alternate mode" or "alt-mode" that ranges from a vehicle to a device or even an animal) at will. Their peaceful existence is threatened when the faction of the Decepticons, often led by Megatron, forms and attempts to seize control of the planet. In turn, they find opposition in the Autobots[32], the troops of which are usually commanded by Optimus Prime. The war spreads to the rest of the planet and later outer space, where the warring armies struggle over resources, artifacts and the protection of more vulnerable worlds and the life forms that inhabit them -the Earth and human beings included (Meakins, 2014). Despite a focus on battles, many plots center on both leaders interacting with their respective subordinates and engaging in problem-solving (Harms & Spain, 2016).

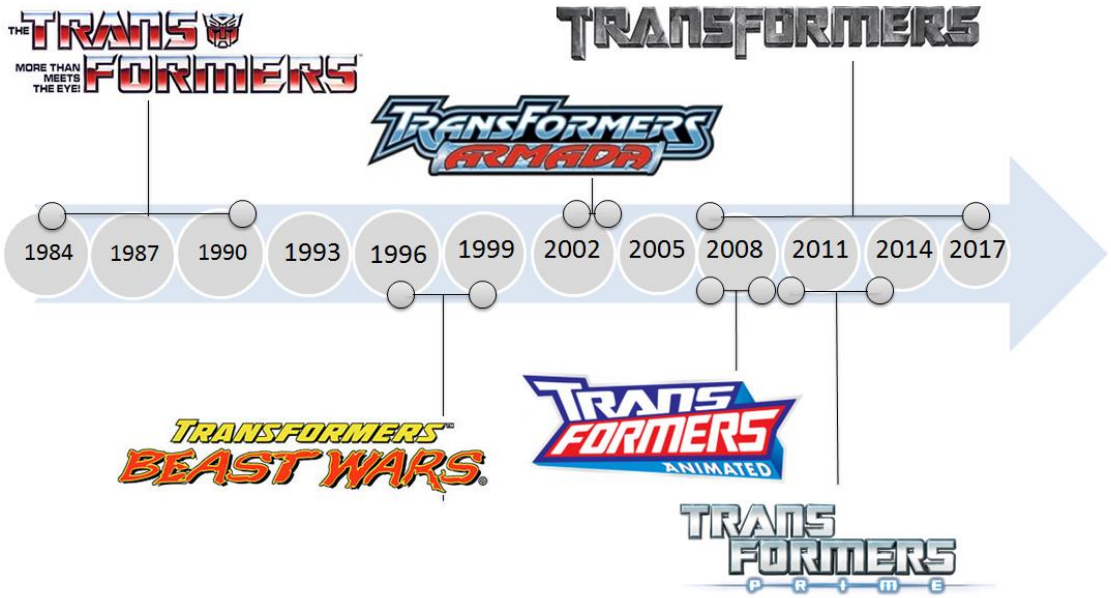
To secure its popularity in the long-term, the brand is rebooted every few (three to five) years, mixing up old ideas with new concepts and ensuring the satisfaction of both new and old fans. The details in each version can differ wildly: the protagonists and their backstories, the size of the armies and the technology at their disposal, whether their home planet is habitable or not, the tone of the series, the human companions, even the faction

[31] Although plans for a new feature-length film had been proposed since the 1990s, it wasn't until 2003 that the rights were acquired and the first draft of the script was written (Owczarski, 2015).

[32] Japanese releases used alternative terminology for the two factions –calling them "Destrons" and "Cybertrons" respectively- in all products (Clements & McCarthy, 2012) until the 2007 film. The American terms are utilized here due to their eventual prevalence and their wide use by the English-speaking public.

names ("Beast Wars" media reimagined the struggle as a fight between Maximals and Predacons), but the gist of the conflict has remained the same (Underwood, 2013).

**Graph 3: A chronological diagram of some of the main (non-comics) iterations of the property, from its inception until the start of this paper, to show the continuous production of materials.**




In spite of the franchise's long history and status in popular culture, it is only very recently that academics and cultural critics have started investigating if there is more to it than meets the eye, even after the normalization of other "geeky" interests (Fast, 2012). A sizable literature criticized one or multiple iterations of the brand for its content or when comparing it to other, similar forms of pop culture, such as *anime*[33] (Clements & McCarthy, 2012), child's play and technological gadgets (Hebron, 2008). DiPaolo's (2011) scathing dismissal of "Transformers" as "flimsy material" possessing "little dramatic or literary worth" due to its inception as a vehicle "to help sell toys to young boys in an era when President Reagan relaxed restrictions against marketing to children" is probably the most prominent of these. One possible explanation for this reception is the same issue that has discouraged writings about other franchise properties originating as action figures: a combination of ignorance and their ambivalent place in a much larger debate about children's entertainment. Godwin (2015), writing about "G. I. Joe" and action figure fandom, theorized that discussions on the figures consisted either of ahistorical write-ups of the ways Hasbro's scripts vary –such as their crisis following the Vietnam War (Michling, 1998)– or dismissals of the variations the fans bring to them, thinking of them as the "castrated" toys' inability to live up to an imperialistic script (Hall, 2004)[34]. Secondly, one of the defining characteristics of

[33] For the perceived sense of superiority of Japanese popular culture over other forms of media (especially in comparison to North American cartoons) some fans exhibited until the late 2000s in North American and European (Finnish) fandom, see Allison (2008) and Ishida (2010) respectively.

[34] The literature for "Transformers" is not immune to this, either. Misconceptions –like Geraghty's (2011) claim that the fandom was all that kept the brand alive from 1987 until 2007, or Aitken's (1986) idea that the cartoon came after the toys; there was simultaneous and regular production of toys and other fictions in the intervening time (Underwood, 2013)–, omissions –like Wilson and

the property in popular discourse is its notoriety as a profit-making vehicle –the term "toyetic", a demeaning word "for a film or TV show that has the potential for spin-off merchandise" (Butcher, 2005), has been used to describe similar shows by concerned television critics. The overal result is, according to these critics, the continued dumbing-down of American youth culture and its negative worldwide impact on children, a trend which has historical presedent with Disney and comic strip characters (Kanfer, 2000) and continues to leave modern descendants, such as the 1990s "Pokémon" craze (Geraghty, 2008)[35]. These write-ups, though not insubstantial, can be countered and rebuked. First of all, they fail to view the phenomenon from the perspective of those most profoundly affected by it: children, who, like adults, "consume television programms in ways that articulate their own social relationships and identities" (Hubka, 2002). Furthermore, despite the industrial motivations behind their production (Geraghty, 2008), they open up avenues for a much greater discussion on the way children's culture is perceived, mediated and often ignored by adults unless it relevant to their interests (Antunes, 2015). Last but not least, Underwood (2013) reminded that even "these grounds are insufficient to disregard the franchise's ability to engage with political issues": every piece of fiction is produced in a specific socio-political frame and thus deserves to be analyzed and probed for its meanings, and the steadily growing body of literature on "Transformers" certainly proves that.

The few monographies and articles that have delved into or have mentioned "Transformers" have examined it through a few different viewpoints, either regarding many different incarnations of the property or focusing only on one. Articles, historical retrospectives (Johnson, 2013; Fast & Örnebring, 2015) and a few monographies (Swan & Shook, 2012), as well as a budding body of literature from self-professed aca-fans like Underwood (2013), Meakins (2014), Harms and Spain (2016), are the bulk of this corpus. From inside the industry, meanwhile, the contributions of specific creators have been reprinted, reevaluated and contextualized[36], like the early stories of influential comics writer Simon Furman and his artistic partners from the UK (Rimmer & Roberts, 2012; Bainbridge, 2016). Excluding the examinations of the entire transmedia narrative, the two most

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Moore (2017) crediting one character simply as "Deceptacon"; the faction's name is "Decepticons" and it is unclear which character they are referring to– or falsehoods –Miller (2007) misremembering that a young viewer needed to have both watched the cartoon and bought the figures to have a complete story; all fictions were separate and independent (Underwood, 2013)– did appear occasionally in papers, though not to the detriment of the overall conclusion of each particular thesis.

[35] In recent years, there have been numerous more positive pieces on the modern crops of children's programming and their associated products, especially "Pokémon". For a take on the didactic qualities of the "Pokémon" franchise and its encouragement of active participation, see Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2003). For its construction of environmentalism, see Bainbridge (2014); of friendship, see Bennett, (2011). For its use in education, see Bromley (2004). For its relationship to other mythical narratives, see Geraghty (2015). For a discussion of localization culture and globalization, see Iwabuchi, (2004). Finally, for an examination of the production of space in Japanese video games that uses it as a case study, see Δαλκαβούκη (2016).

[36] As of this writing, the most recent and complete reprints available (and the ones being referred to for their editorial commentary) are the "Transformers Classics UK" series of hardcovers by IDW Publishing, who have also reprinted the original US comic with minor alterations. Before that, Titan Books reprinted the near-complete US run, its "Generation 2" semi-continuation and part of the UK-original material from 2002 to 2006. IDW also reprinted the latter in their "Best of UK" series from 2007 to 2009. From March 2004 onward, the coloring of the Titan Books reprints was remastered.

dominant moments of the franchise's history, the 1984 cartoon and the 2007 live-action series[37] (Underwood, 2013), have the lion's share of literature. They will be listed below, according to some major thematic units of interest.

## 3.1. Content analyses and cultural examinations

Despite a prolific production schedule over the last 34 years, "Transformers" has mostly been examined through case studies of its most popular iterations; this selectiveness has inadvertently constructed it into a relic of very specific time, as opposed to an evolving institution. Most early literature on "Transformers" that attempted to analyze its content ended up demonizing it. Influenced by monographies on the perceived negative impact of television on children (Kaye, 1974; Davis & Baran, 1981; Bower, 1984) and the perpetuation of social stereotypies about gender, violence and class through children's programming (Harrison, 1981), researchers seemed more concerned with how the 1980 show's content, language and themes (often considered inappropriate) affected the attitudes and behaviors of its -presumed underage and mostly male[38]- audience (Aitken, 1986; Hesse & Mack, 1991; Eaton & Dominick, 1991). Later incarnations have been mentioned amongst sub-par and/or violent children's cartoons of their time in papers (Middleton & Vanterpool, 1999; Nikolaou, 2008), creating an enduring legacy of hostility from those outside its target demographic at the time, to the point that even the successful film series lies in a limbo between mainstream acceptance and a strange obscurity[39].

With the passage of time, the original characters have become either emblems of an entire decade or icons of popular culture, used as general symbols of (trans)humanity, politics and society; the ever-present 1980s incarnation in particular is nowadays familiar even to those born after its prime (Rivera, 2008). They have been used as metaphors for the consumption of culture (Milburn, 2012), change in teaching methods and practices (Mahiri, 2000; Carter, 2007) and the immigrant identity and experience in Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel "American Born Chinese" (2006) (Smith, 2014), introduced into slang dialects of the English language as metonyms for change (Casabal, 2008) and de-mystified (e.g. dealing with prostate cancer) thanks to the anarchic spirit of modern, adult-oriented animation like "Robot Chicken" (Crawford, 2009). Even the remaining negative (retrospective) criticisms of the franchise place it in a very specific socio-political timeframe, that of commercialization, mass production and media connectivity. The property has become a victim of historical

[37] The series, often called "Michael Bay's Transformers" due to the reputation of its director, is ongoing as of this writing, with the release of the sixth film slated for December of 2018.

[38] That said, Aitken (1986) researched the show by asking children of both genders and college-age volunteers to rate it and answer a questionnaire, possibly an early attempt to grasp the unisex appeal of the show and the differences in comprehension between children and adults of both genders, although according to their sources, few adults (fewer than for other cartoons of the time) watched it.

[39] For the conflicting critical evaluation of the films, see Bould (2008) and Hebron (2008) for negative pieces and Purse (2015) for positive ones. For Michael Bay's overall "smart", ironic and self-aware oeuvre, see Sconce (2002), Fradley (2013) for his films' relation to art installations, and Geraghty (2011) for his complex relationship with audiences. For analytical studies on the poor reception of the live-action film series in relation to its box-office earnings, see King (2007), Kennedy (2008), Jeon and Jiao (2012).

compartmentalization, still viewed as a "short-lived fad" that defined the decade (Johnson, 2013). Despite its popularity and increased presence in popular culture, "Transformers" seems defined by its past self, a paradoxical, popular niche, and, as Johnson puts it, "confined [...] to the cultural dustbin", its iterations treated as interchangeable, itself a static relic from an era of less sophisticated children's entertainment (Etter, 2011).

In almost all of the above cases, the assumed audience of the fictions is children and the renditions of the characters examined are their 1980s cartoon selves, as even examinations of transmediality in the franchise mostly focus on the interplay between child and toy and the importance of self-insertion in play (Fleming, 1996; He, 2013), or its inconsistent world-building (Fast & Örnebring, 2015). The one exception for comics has been a brief mention of the UK-exclusive storyline "Target: 2006", in which writer Simon Furman "played" in the gaps of the 1986 film and the comic using time travel to bring two casts of characters together in the UK strips. As a result, the 1986 movie cast of characters was promoted, and plot, characterization and advertising were all weaved into one, and the film became "a central narrative in two transmedia storylines", and all mediums –cartoon, comic, toy- informed the characters together (Bainbridge, 2016). That said, there has been little insight into what impact this has on the behavior of audiences after the 1980s iteration – how they approach the property, how they stay engaged and whether medium jumps are possible.

Another point of contention is the geographic, economic and thus cultural identity and origin of "Transformers": of what origin is it, and how does this play into its artistic identity? A number of Western commentators framed the 1980s iteration as an invasive "Asian" product in racist terms (Johnson, 2013); European and Asian researchers (Nikolaou, 2008; He, 2013; Arunrangsiwed, 2015) considered it an American, just as invasive and adaptive, export (Olson, 2004; Chu & McIntyre, 1995). If, however, one considered the original toys or cartoons Asian (Bishop & Phillips, 2003; Cross & Smits, 2005; Lent, 2009; Zhao & Murdock, 1996), then a lineage from *mecha*[40] *anime*[41] and other fictions with mechanical protagonists (Sturken & Cartwright, 2003) can be formed for it, starting with the early 1970s (Broderick, 1996), the gradual maturation of the programming to match a new target audience for television and merchandizing sales as a metric for success (Poitras, 2008). Since then, more "Transformers" *anime* have been commissioned and produced by Takara and sometimes dubbed in English, and even the decision to entrust Japanese

[40] The term "mecha", from the English word "mechanical", describes a specific and popular subgenre of *anime* and *manga* narratives, in which robotic, often manually-controlled, characters motivate the plot and are used in combat. Its most well-known representative in the West is often thought to be Hideaki Ano's "Neon Genesis Evangelion" television series and films (Bolton, 2008); other known titles are "Mobile Suit Gundam", "Super Dimensional Fortress Macross", "Voltron" and "Orgus" (Broderick, 1996).

[41] "Anime" is the Japanese name for the art of animation, but it has come to refer exclusively to the Japanese animation output in the English-speaking world. We define that after Clements and McCarthy (2012), only in the interest of highlighting its different artistic genealogy: "a work is Japanese if the majority of the main creatives (director, script writer, character designer, and key animators) are Japanese". They are set apart from western animation due to some stylistic choices and a broader range of subject matter (Bainbridge & Norris, 2012). The original "Transformers" cartoon is included in their "Encyclopedia of Anime" as "A U. S.-Japanese coproduction".

personnel and studios with the writing and directing of the 2002-2005 "Unicron Trilogy" series could be seen as a way to use the "*anime* boom" [42], with which it coincided (Clements & McCarthy, 2012), and capitalize on the "cool" that Napier (2008) had described as one of *anime*'s perceived characteristics[43]. Both of these readings, however, ignore the complex transnational production practices of the entertainment industry (Johnson, 2013), the established trade relationships between countries –such as the entrepreneurs in Japan and the United States that first imported Japanese entertainment products in the 1960s and 1970s (Cross & Smits, 2005)-, the exchange of "media-mix" marketing techniques (Daliot-Bul, 2014), the unequal relationship between the two industries, with the American one having the role of "the "globalizer" of franchises" (Rivera, 2008) and the varied local patterns of consumption and preservation -the resilience of the brand in Europe opened up the possibility of reinventions in 1993 (Johnson, 2013), for example.

On the purely economic side of the argument, this mixed identity has given rise to debates on external and internal financial and legal disputes. Outside the US and in an Asian production context, some reference the original show as a historical example of animation, a notoriously-labor-intensive process, being outsourced to increasingly cheaper (largely Asian, particularly South Korea and the Philippines) studios and the power imbalances this creates in terms of financing, connections and (both artistic and technical) know-how (Ahn, 2002; Tschang & Goldstein, 2004). Others bring up the defensive retaliation of other national industries, like some Chinese design companies, that tried to compensate for their deficiencies compared to the Japanese entertainment industry (Wang & Yang, 2013). Finally, a parallel industry of inexpensive imitations made in Taiwan or Guangdong developed in China in the late 1980s (Zhao & Murdock, 1996). These "knock-offs", "unauthorized, reverseengineered re-molding[s] of certain official toy[s], sold illegally without license, usually of inferior quality due to corners cut in the tooling process or cheaper materials or other reasons", have been known to exist and highlight class disparities between consumers since then, but became successes in local markets (such as the Chinese one) due to their affordability alongside the authentic items and may have aided their "explosive" popularity

[42] The "anime boom" is the name given by researchers, industry insiders and fans of anime to the first half of the 2000s. During that time -and thanks to advances in digital technologies that sped up and eased production and their profitability (Steinberg, 2012) -, the production of television animation in Japan reached a new peak. American producers distributed more shows than ever, to the astonishment of their Japanese creators (Kelts, 2006), while the illegal network of fansubs (Cintas and Sánchez, 2006) handled the unlicensed ones. Factors that affected the phenomenon were the established communication between American and Japanese companies since the 1960s, the underground popularity of anime for more mature viewers in the 1990s and the overwhelming success of "Pokémon". The boom was considered over by 2009, but it changed the international market of animation, as new marketing approaches and anime-influenced stories and aesthetics of animation blossomed. Moreover, by 2012, anime fans numbered more than ever and the medium became an established part of children's media worldwide (Daliot-Bul, 2014).

[43] The cultural identity and artistic ancestry of anime, however, has been itself disputed. Iwabuchi (2002) claimed that elements of Japanese pop culture are "*mukokuseki*", "racially, nationally and culturally integrated", and universality has been recorded to be the goal of multiple (and influential) native artists (Tezuka, 1983; Gravett, 2004). As a result, Japanese comics and animation could be absorbed into any domestic market by downplaying their origins to a specific aesthetic dating back to the 1770s (Shimizu, 1991) and emphasizing their globally-recognized characteristics (Bainbridge & Norris, 2012) and American and European influences (Kinsella, 2000).

(He, 2013). The 1986 law amendment also gave rise to *domestic* as opposed to *international* disputes, mostly over rights and profit, and the 2007 live-action series is one such example. The product of a (not untroubled) Paramount-DreamWorks merger with plans for long-term use, the film had to incorporate contradictory executive decisions, indirect marketing and product placement (by car manufacturer General Motors). The many companies involved in the production, financing and marketing of the "tentpole" film (to reduce the costs and the risk in case of failure) each had their own view of the film's value[44]. That troubled climate sparked conflicts amongst both producers and creative personnel and spilled over film news press, the only visible source into the inside mechanisms of movie production (Owczarski, 2015).

Finally, while the aforementioned case study is a big-budget Hollywood production, it begs the question of artistic integrity in a capitalist economic system first and a cultural franchise second; how does this production culture affect the content being presented? The difficulty of art creation and its compatibility with capitalist interests has been elaborated on (Ryan, 1992), but according to Steinem (2014), capitalism censors (or impedes) works considered political or provocative, to avoid controversy and upsetting the financers of projects (Russo, 1987). Amongst others, queer themes especially are still thought of as uncomfortable on major mainstream platforms like television (Keller & Stratyner, 2006), as it is controlled by sponsors with a specific, privileged perspective (Irvine, 2013). The development of texts in a capitalist system (making them for-profit but affording them greater circulation and coverage) can be read as a constant struggle against it or as a-priori transgressive act. In Marburger's (2015) example, parts of this franchise –specifically, the recent comics- have managed to exceed their role as merchandising-selling vehicles due to the creative freedom afforded to their makers, who are not content to hide their subversive elements to appeal to mainstream audiences. In the end, while capitalism does limit the texts produced in it, the genre "Transformers" belongs to could free up the creators and help them create meaningful (queer) narratives, but that discussion could certainly be influenced by the medium in which they would be narrated.

This hostile attitude aside, in terms of content analysis and its placement in the socio-political contexts of its time, academia has been fascinated by some basic themes appearing in the franchise, even if their scope is limited (largely focusing on one fiction at a time[45]). The earliest of these is the war story aspect of the franchise, approached mostly

[44] Despite her doubting this, Owczarski (2015) does mention that the multiple interests that the final 2007 film catered to are often held accountable for its "lack of coherence" – Dargis (2007) called the first film "part car commercial, part military recruitment ad, a bumper to bumper pileup of big cars, big guns, and, as befits its recently weaned target demographic, big breasts".

[45] Deviations from the above molds have been mentioned and studied to an extent, but are thought to be rare and valuable for it. Underwood (2013) touched on the evolution of official fiction with themes such as the imagined social impact of first contact, environmentalism, political and military corruption, oppression of minorities and post-war reconstruction in narratives outside his scope, urging for their further textual examination. The latest of these, recent comics series "More Than Meets The Eye", has attracted attention due to its purported unconventional place in that tapestry: apart from its inclusivity in gender and relationship variety, it stands out due to its complex treatment of war and politics, the layered psychology of its characters and its expansive world-building (Marbuger, 2015).

through the lens of its (signified as right-wing) politics and their relation to real-world geopolitical and ideological conflicts. The success of the first wave of toys was considered a sign of the "militarization of childhood" (Hawthorne, 1989), their similarities to multi-purpose, attachment-compatible trucks called “Military Bodies” individually and to a military soldier unit in general were noted (Bishop & Phillips, 2003). The militarism of the premise became more pronounced in the 2007 film, which promoted the US military and its practices in a positive light worldwide and was categorized as “militainment”, glorifying the armed forces and their technology in cinema (Pardy, 2016; Mirrlees, 2017).

From the view of (political) philosophy, Underwood (2013) contents that “the narratives presented in the original animation and live-action films offer a vision of then-contemporary American sociopolitics within the context of appealing to their targeted demographics”, interpreting the robotic civil war as an imagined dramatization of the rival political philosophies that defined modern America at two given moments in time: Kantian liberalism (Autobots) (Michaud, 2009) versus totalitarian fascism (Hayek, 2013) -nationalism, a specific view of communism- and contemporary terrorism (Decepticons). The role of the United States abroad as indispensable and moral global peacekeepers (Jackson & Nexon, 2003) is channeled through the Autobots and their struggle against the Decepticons -with foreigners/humans presented as too weak to handle the threat or as acceptable collateral loses-, while politicians are either absent or obstructive, following their post-Watergate cynical conception as self-serving liars. The combating impulses of capitalist consumerism and the conservative desire for a traditional past are explored in 1980s American technophobia and attraction to technology: the robots are equally capable of destruction (Tichi, 1987) and the betterment of humanity by the cooperation of the two (and its control over the machines). Lastly, the depiction of Arabic nations draws from stereotypes and “reduces Muslims and Arabs to lecherous sheiks with undeserved oil wealth or demonic Middle Eastern terrorists” (Zywietz, 2011) to justify the battle for resources at the center of the mythos; both stances are products of the Cold War and War on Terror eras. This ambivalence between paternalism and authoritativeness also plays into its understanding of leadership and followship: by contrasting the two impulses in a good-versus-evil struggle, the show focuses on exceptional individuals of great strength and intelligence who rise to the occasion –the “good guys” in particular win by fostering positive followship and sharing duties amongst their subordinates (Harms & Spain, 2016). The above paint the property as a mirror and attempt at perpetuating American ideologies, by framing the desirable and undesirable parties as heroes and villains respectively, but, while worth examining, it can be limiting.

Apart from those views, the most often brought-up aspect of the mythos of the series is its science fiction[46] and mythological roots. Some very fundamental concerns of the

[46] There have been many attempts to define the genre of science fiction (also stylized as sci-fi/SF), without limiting its scope or blurring the lines between it and fantasy. In this paper, the definition coined by Kingsley Amis (1960) will be followed, but generalized to any text and not just prose: "Science fiction is that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-technology, whether human or extra-terrestrial in origin." That said, this

genre have been pointed out to lie at the heart of the concept and appear at the comics -the human fascination with technology and its implications -dehumanization, automation etc. (Fleming, 1996)- and the "Star Wars" influence deserves to be mentioned separately (Coladilla, 2007), but also interesting are its artistic debts to mythological motifs (Hodge, 1988). Writer Simon Furman's own influences -Stan Lee's "cosmic" sci-fi output (Bainbridge, 2016), space operas- also helped shape the property, expanding its scope in space and time, after the initial restrictions by Hasbro and Marvel (Fast, 2012). The 1986 has also been singled out for it decidedly "anime and adult sensibility" that steered the1980s show into darker, more sci-fi territory. Even the repetition of and variations of one main story across years has been interpreted by some as modern myth-making, imbuing the characters and setting with an aura of mythology, and the existence of multiple, sometimes contradicting storylines and the appearance of a regular, almighty foe across multiple, unrelated texts, from the 1980s cartoon to the comics and the 2000s *an*ime (Bainbridge, 2016) suggest the existence of a "Transformers" "multiverse". In any case, the thematic backbone of the property seems to move in two axes, barring recent exceptions: politically conservative, US-centric military fiction and science fiction steeped in the genre's tradition of expansive stories and potential for (implicit) social commentary.

Examinations of gender deserve a mention apart from the rest, as "Transformers" is indicative of the way gender[47] stereotypes[48], "set portrayals of sex-appropriate interests, skills, behaviors, and self-perceptions" (Tuchman, 1978), are communicated, mimicked and perpetuated through television (Harrison, 1981) on children's media, and has been part of a recent, much larger debate about racism, (queer) erasure and cultural memory in pop culture, through the conflation of in-universe presentation and real-world representation (Marburger, 2015). As a popular male-dominated text of the 1980s, the original cartoon series has often been noted to be part of a particular artistic lineage: alongside "G. I. Joe", "He-Man and the Masters of the Universe" and others, it was produced and marketed as a "boy's cartoon" (Lenburg, 2009), establishing many binary gender coding norms for children's animation in its time and thereafter. These shows featured warriors equipped with powerful arsenals to combat specific organized villainous forces, framed as an eternal good-versus-evil struggle, as opposed to "girl's cartoons", which promoted interpersonal relationships, involved didactic problem-solving through encouragement and teamwork and featured an aesthetic of "rainbows, ponies and the color pink" (Perea, 2013). From there sprang the misconception that female characters would not be popular with the target demographic, and so there is a dearth of them in the early cartoon, despite their first

definition is not absolute, and it doesn't imply the genre cannot be interspersed with thrilling or romantic elements (He, 2013).

[47] Tuchman (1978) uses the term "sex" to refer to the same idea, which has since been since substituted with "gender" in most literature.

[48] A stereotype is defined as "a one-sided, exaggerated and normally prejudicial view of a group, tribe or class of people, and is usually associated with racism and sexism" that is "resistant to change or correction from countervailing evidence, because [it] create[s] a sense of social solidarity" (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 2000).

appearance in 1985[49] (Eaton & Dominick, 1991; Harms & Spain, 2016), noted even by the earliest analyzes of the property (Aitken, 1986).

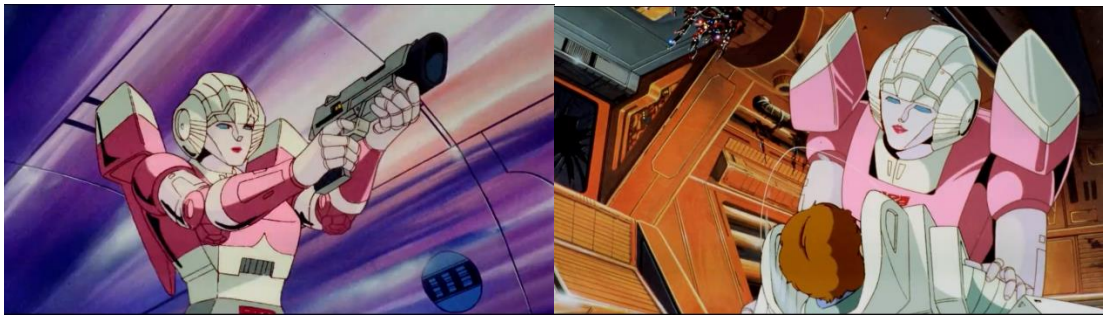
This observation isn't unique to the 1980s iterations, however. Similar complaints – few female characters, the contradictory depiction of leading women as both sexual objects and independent action heroines, negotiating traditionally masculine pursuits and feminine beauty[50], the director's "perceived poor attitude toward women"- have been directed at the 2007 live-action series and have led to accusations of misogyny (Underwood, 2013). Others (Wilson, 2012) have commented on its fetishization of technology and male identity as alien bodies become (literally) vehicles of sexuality and its construction of an ideal (collectively consumed), playful young masculinity -its audience are called "boys" by Beck (2009)- comprised of "the delights of mechanisms, of vehicles, of great personal power and invulnerability [...] the thrill of demolition, of collision, explosion, and destruction". The connection between the characters and (traditionally-defined) masculinity only has been made through audio and vocabulary choices: Wilson and Moore's (2017) sample of manipulated voices for fictional characters (that included three characters from the franchise) concluded that the characters' "robotic" and "alien" vocalizations were codified as male, being heavily manipulated, low-pitched and using background noise and effects (Rose, 2012). This finding is also applicable in the 1990s cartoon series "Beasts Wars", whose predominantly male cast spoke in electronically altered, low, gruff voices (Dobrow & Gidney, 1998), and whose "boy-oriented" toy commercials emphasized competition, agency and destruction (as opposed to passivity and limited control) and actions over emotions, featured speakers with exaggerated, aggressive qualities that used of the word "power" and its signifiers. All the above are thought to reinforce existing dominant ideologies on gender (Johnson & Young, 2002), and specifically perpetuate stereotypes about aggressiveness and male behavior (Middleton & Vanterpool, 1999); they have also constructed an enduring legacy for the franchise's "masculine" status (Fast & Örnebring, 2015), poor attitude towards women (Marburger, 2015) and a world geared towards boys (Aitken, 1986).

[49] Since then and according to Underwood's (2013) estimation, there had been only 138 female-designated characters out of the thousands that have been created, with the in-story justification of one sole female mythological progenitor from a group of thirteen in the continuity of the "Transformer: Prime" 2010 television series. Their rarity led Marburger (2015) to erroneously claim that there were "almost no female characters".

[50] Few analyze human masculinity in the films. Underwood (2013) devotes a section of his thesis to this theme, highlighting the emasculation of "hero-nerd" and evolution of main character Spike and his juxtaposition to William Lennox's more traditional action hero. Charlotte Mearing, another female character of import, is also analyzed and found not to confirm to stereotypical standard of beauty but also masculinized, possibly as a side-effect of her being in a position of power.

In spite of the above, the depiction of gender norms in beings whose "entire concepts of gender and sexuality are, in the most literal way, constructed" is more complex (Underwood, 2013). Attention has been called to the dominant media, their feminine (Figure 4) and masculine characters (Figure 5). More recent fictions have also been examined for their female representation (Figure 6) and their inclusion of queer characters (Figure 7).

**Figure 4: Arcee in her double role of action heroine (left) and maternal figure (right).**



In depicting female characters, the 1980s cartoon iteration followed several recognizable trends of the decade from a wide array of sources. In line with the other "boy's cartoons" of the time and the sexualized image of women in science fiction cinema – specifically Maria in "Metropolis" and Princess Leia in "Return of the Jedi" (Coladilla, 2007)– Arcee, the historically important sole female protagonist in the 1986 movie (Bainbridge, 2016) and the show's third season, conformed to a (male, slightly sexual) idealized notion of feminity: sleek yet curvy, brightly colored and with the impression of high heels. She is also the object of affection of two of her fellow (male, presented as heterosexual) teammates. The other traditionally feminine role she has is that of the protector, as she serves as a surrogate mother for young human boy Daniel. Simultaneously, she is equal to her comrades, an undisputed member of High Command and a capable fighter, in the same vein as the emerging female action heroes Sara Connor, Ellen Ripley and Red Sonja, but without their more masculine physique. She is, therefore, "a contradictory set of images of female desirability, a sexualized female image that emphasizes physical strength and stature" (Tasker, 1993) and a time capsule of the changing role of women in American society in the 1980s. Teenage human lead and MIT graduate Carly largely follows in her footsteps, independent of men until the birth of her son (Underwood, 2013).

**Figure 5: Two different iterations of Orion Pax/Optimus Prime.**


Masculinity seems to be more flexible, and Optimus Prime, the most prominent character of the series and an enduring icon of manhood across mediums and decades,

exemplifies this. In the original cartoon and the live-action series, Prime sports a traditionally idealized (hyper-)masculine mechanical body, a spectacle in and of itself. He is "a robotic equivalent of Arnold Schwarzenegger, or Sylvester Stallone, or Jean-Claude Van Damme" and a love letter to (thought of as male) car culture, while also a self-portrait of American values -compassionate, but capable of defending himself. However, unlike other Reagan-era heroes, Prime advocates diplomacy over violence. He's more moral and paternalistic in that sense, a father figure to the audience. Furthermore, this is not the only interpretation of his character: in the 1980s cartoon, Prime was rebuilt from naïve dock worker Orion Pax, a weak, less muscular robot with a smooth design and young voice (that of actress Laurie Faso). All these are substituted for the familiar armor-like muscular build later, part of his transformation into a leader strong both in mind and body (Underwood, 2013). Orion has appeared in other stories without the overtly masculine connotations of his upgraded form but his strength of character, and his journey towards leadership has been found interesting and even personally affecting by fans (Meakins, 2014).

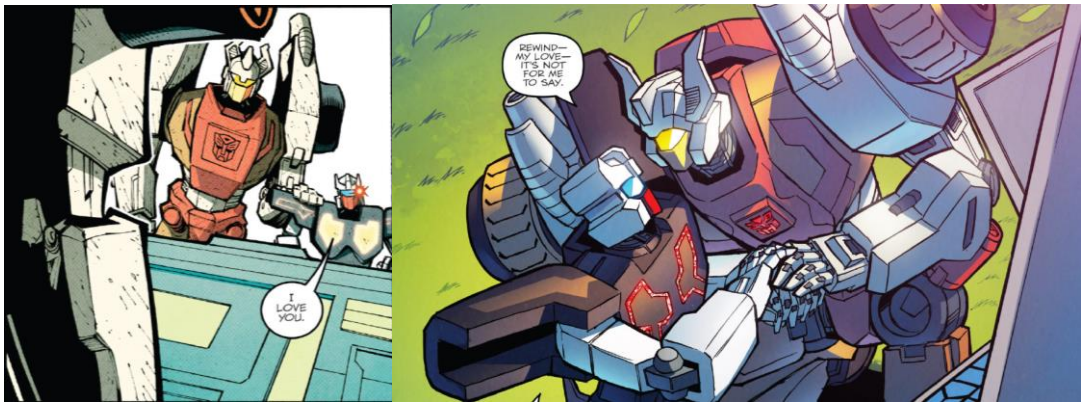
**Figure 6. Arcee in 2008 (left) and two new female characters in 2014 (right).**


The only piece of media to reverse the aforementioned "bleak" view on gender diversity is thought to be the more recent line of comics by IDW, thanks to the efforts of writers John Barber and James Roberts, who added to the already existing world-building foundations and established multiple female characters at once, in contrast to other fictions in the franchise that excused the overwhelmingly male numbers. Before then, the sole female character of the universe (a version of the aforementioned Arcee) had been donning stereotypically female features -sleek figure, lipstick-like colorations- and had been given a backstory some deemed problematic in its depiction of (forced and traumatic) gender reassignment from male to female[51]; her feminity seemed, therefore, unnatural compared to the male standard. This was changed with the introduction of three non-hypersexualized female characters in the 2014 event storyline "Dark Cybertron" -one character from the 1980s cartoon, one new fan-created figure (see below) and one original creation-, though Barber and Roberts had initially wished for a less conventional (cis, binary) presentation (Marburger, 2015).

[51] This was muddled by the in-universe description of the event: the character in question monologued that this change "introduced gender into [the Transformers'] species" (Furman & Milne, 2008), supporting writer Simon Furman's (2008) stance that the robots are by nature genderless beings.

Queer relationships hadn't been discussed at all, due to the franchise's (assumed) juvenile audience, but that changed with recent comics (Figure 7), which became the focus of Marburger's (2015) thesis:

**Figure 7: The historic first homosexual couple in the series in two indicative panels.**



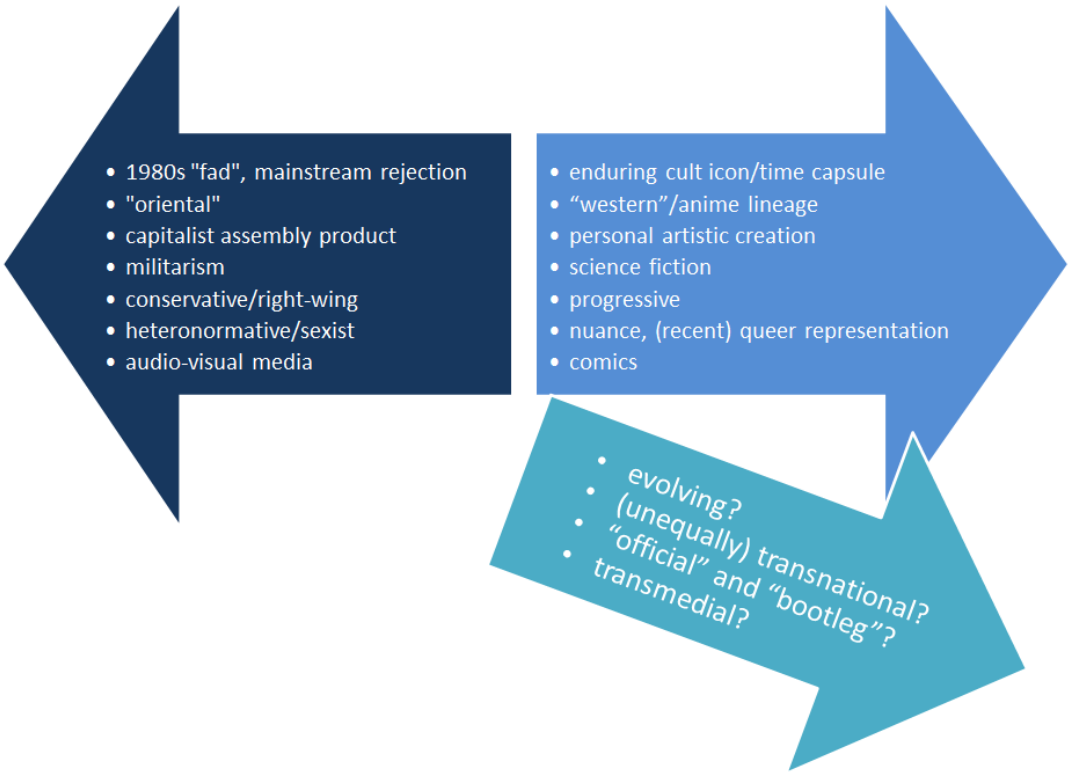

"More Than Meets The Eye" was a series that started in 2012 as part of IDW's "Phase Two" of their line (and continues as of this writing as "Lost Light"), taking place after the (official) end of the four-million-year-long Autobot-Decepticon conflict and following a cast of misfits in search of a mythical group of philosopher-knights to restore their society to its (disputed) pre-war glory. The series featured a wide array of relationships amongst the cast, but of special note was its attention to queer representation through a "worldbuilding analogue", "a depiction that clearly resembles a known queer identity but is structured differently, existing only in the in-world logic of a supernatural universe". This conceit is unique to science fiction, using the genre to showcase queer characters and not erase them "by conflating queerness with the unnatural or ignoring it altogether" (Marburger, 2015).

At the same time, it allowed for explorations of human concepts and the critique of human norms using the otherworldliness of the setting for a safe distance between the two (Earnest, 2007). More specifically, the series featured the first-ever canonical homosexual relationship in the franchise (married couple Chromedome and Rewind) but no heteroromantic ones, unconventional female characterizations, the invention of new forms of elective kinship and their further interrogation both in dialogue and through traditional science fiction concepts, like alternate timelines, in which gender identity was constructed in a divergent manner. Asexuality and queer relationships were normalized alike (due to the absence of sex) by being depicted as a non-issue, and matters were complicated with the human-looking hard light avatars the characters used on occasion, since they could use a different gender identity than the predominantly male one and thus complicated their interpretation. All these were capped off by how human the cast behaved, making its parallels to real-life situations clear but also supporting multiple interpretations –Roberts often refered to the characters as gay, while the researcher considered them asexual. The series also upended some homophobic conventions, like the killing of gay characters, but reinforced others, like excluding polyamourous bonds, and some villains displayed queerphobic traits close to stereotypes like the "predatory psychopath homosexual" (Russo, 1987). Despite these issues, the encoding of characters in accordance to cisgender norms and the male dominance, the series subverted the dominant, hostile *status quo* of the real

world and some speculative fiction (Greven, 2009), thanks to writer James Roberts' tight control over his text and the creative freedom afforded to him by editors and Hasbro executives.

The above examinations are summed up in the next graph (Graph 4):

**Graph 4: The contradictory examinations of "Transformers" in literature until today.**




It seems hard to summarize this sub-section and not stumble upon a set of contradictory dyads, but a new branching path has been recently opened as well. There is a recognizable split between older literature on "Transformers" and newer studies; one could argue there is an attempted pushback against the property's conception as an intimidating Reagan-era relic, a capitalist offshoot, a kitschy cartoon with little value or multi-million dollar sexist "militainment" movies. The expansion to more media and newer content, as well as a rediscovery of old material under new perspectives has certainly helped, as well as a new understanding of continuous multi-national production cultures and their local adaptions. Even in all its gaps in its history and evaluation, the literature on "Transformers" proved enough to at least set some standards for further examination in this project.

## 3.2. "Transformers" fandom: geographic and cultural elements

As with most successful sci-fi franchises, a fandom has been created by people who enjoy "some aspect (if not all) aspects of the Transformers franchise, and who participate[s] in some way in the Transformers fandom", and who sometimes self-identify as "Trans-fans" (Meakins, 2014). Their history is synchronous to that of the brand itself: the earliest mention of a fan club for the property was the Hasbro-founded "S.T.A.R.S" (Secret Transformers Autobot Rescue Squad) in 1985, which evolved into a more orderly group, the benefits of

which included exclusive figures and the fictions that supported them (Underwood, 2013). In later years, the organization of the official annual convention "BotCon" from 1994 till 2016[52] was another one of their functions (Hidalgo, 2011). Parallel to that, an unofficial, worldwide fandom developed in pockets of both "casual" fans and hardcore "geeks" (children of the 1970s and 1980s who consumed media with raised expectations). Their existence was recognized in the 1990s through new media and mostly the Internet, which became one of their major connective tools: gathering at first via Usenet, the fandom has developed a significant online presence, with some important global sites[53], some region-specific sites, personal pages (numbering the thousands before the release of the 2007 film) and several peripheral ones with a focus on a wider range of geek and entertainment media (Rivera, 2008). To the aforementioned BotCon one can add numerous unofficial or related real-life meet-ups, such as Auto Assembly in the UK, NordCon in Denmark and Auto Assembly Europe (Fast, 2012)[54]. It is evident from the above that the "Transformers" franchise has gathered a large global audience, second only to "Star Wars" and "Star Trek" from the big science fiction fandoms, but seems to be ignored due to the insufficient science behind its fantastical elements and its perceived childishness (Swan & Shook, 2012).

While there has been no definitive study of the "Transformers" fandom yet, it is possible to gleam some of their general characteristics by multiple papers that devote the periphery of their studies to them. First of all, they consider the differentiator between them and simple consumers to be their attention to the continuous narratives and active information-seeking about the brand. When asked about the reasons behind their love, they cite the simple but meaningful conflict of good versus evil, the (relative) realism of the war story, the interesting and expansive world worth discovering, the large number of intriguing characters and their alien yet human nature, the multiple points-of-entry and the diversity of stories. They have been described as equally diverse in their practices: the time and money they devote to the fandom and the texts they produce (fan-art , fan-fiction and video production, figure and merchandise collecting and modification, animation, reviewing, character creation, role-playing, socializing with fellow members of the community) differs greatly. These can be done both online and in conventions, with the additional options of interacting with representatives and creatives involved with the brand (actors, comics creators, toy designers, video game developers etc.), following workshops on fan content creation and maintenance, producing cultural histories (Arcangeli, 2013)[55], showcasing

[52] As of this writing, the license for the BotCon convention has expired (2016), and the future of an official Transformers-exclusive convention is unknown.

[53] The most important of these, as listed by interlocutors and literature alike, are TFW2005.com (which also has a close relationship with Hasbro), Seibertron.com, TFormers.com, Allspark.com and TFwiki.net. The last one in particular was used extensively by the researcher for her familiarization with the property.

[54] The convention space (particularly the official one) has allowed a kind of sanctioned –and, according to Fast (2012), progressively tighter– interaction between fans and producers is a mutually beneficial relationship, as the latter can gauze the reactions of the former (both adults and children) for the purposes of marketing research and the further development of the brand (Meakins, 2014).

[55] The term "cultural history" has been used to refer to "a particular approach to history", one that "could be applied to any object" and is "concerned with the sense men and women from the past gave to the world they lived in" (Arcangeli, 2013). It has been used to refer to the historical evolution of the arts, but also everyday practices.

cosplay and participating in contests there (Hidalgo, 2011; Fast, 2012; Meakins, 2014). To serve their needs, fans have also created a specified vocabulary that is now used by official sources, with terms like Seeker, Gestalt, alt-mode etc[56]. (Hidalgo, 2011). They are also savvy as to their position in relation to the official creators and the capitalist climate the brand is developed in, aware of their (financial and textual) importance to them (for some, verging on exploitation), but also able to articulate criticisms (mostly regarding the live-action films and recent figure lines). The Internet plays a big role in their being fans, allowing them (especially the loneliest ones) to share content and socialize and so they have a deep emotional attachment to their community, although there are those who prefer not to interact with anyone. Finally, and while they have been painted as very conservative and resistant to any change and deviation from the original cartoons and comics[57], the production of new materials is crucial to their engagement and they are willing to embrace new elements, while at the same time having a dynamic relationship with the property that can fade or be revitalized with one text or the other (Fast, 2012).

Their demographic characteristics have been only glimpsed by various papers and not been the focus of any one study, except for passing references. Their age varies considerably: multiple researchers have interviewed and interacted with children (Fortunati et al, 2015), college-age young adults (He, 2013), young adults and adults from 18 to 40 years old (Fast, 2012), men in their 30s and 40s but also diverse groups ranging from 7 to 70 years (Rivera, 2008). A similar uncertainty applies to the fans' gender identity: while usually considered male (Fleming & Sturm, 2011), most researchers have recorded at least one exception –woman or girl– amongst their interviewee sample (Zhao & Murdock, 1996; Rivera, 2008; Fast, 2012; He, 2013; Fortunati et al, 2015). There has been no consideration of geographical or cultural factors that could contribute to this, except for the existence of the nostalgic male adult audience (more below) and the "trans-generational" (Johnson, 2013) marketing strategy to bring new customers into the franchise, renewing it; even then, these are either the main focus of a specified portion of the fan-base or a general observation.

While few in number, papers examining the fandom of "Transformers" in depth in the last few years; their results will be summarized below, in three major thematic units, starting with the politics of nostalgia[58], possibly the most popular topic of discussion in "Transformers" literature. More specifically, in the overwhelming majority of studies, the object of the audience's –or the researchers' (Ganreau, 2016)- reminiscence is the 1980s iteration and especially the cartoon, to the point that the survival of the entire brand after

[56] To these, one could add the various nicknames for characters and concepts: the property is often called "TF" for convenience; Optimus Prime's name can be shortened to the initials "OP"; Megatron has been jokingly referred to as "Megs" etc.

[57] This notion has been parodied by the fans themselves in at least one of their major online gathering spaces, TFwiki.net, with the tongue-in-cheek article "Ruined FOREVER" (2018), in which almost every major change of direction for the brand has been considered its downfall.

[58] Nostalgia, defined as "sentimental longing for things that are past" by the Oxford Dictionary of English (2010), is a term that originates from psychology. The phenomenon has recently developed literature in media studies, either in examinations of postmodernism (Dika, 2003) or preservation and resistance (Bohn, 2007). In the case of reception studies, the focus is usually on individual recollection (Staiger, 2005). In "Transformers" literature in particular, it has been the driving force for some researchers and has been used as an ice-breaker for conversation with interlocutors (He, 2013).

the 1990s has been attributed to the Internet-initiated "1980s retro boom" that peaked in the mid-2000s (Rivera, 2008). Given the estimated age of the audience who claim to be children during the 1980s to have caught up with the original broadcasts, we can safely assume that there is an additional audience for the brand: adults who enjoyed the toys as children and now have independent income, a voice (Bainbridge, 2010) and the networking of an active fan community (Owczarski, 2015).

The phenomenon has been explained with two main arguments about the fans' emotional and intellectual needs, and has had a significant impact on the overall direction of the franchise. The first proposed cause is that nostalgia allows for audiences to explore, reclaim -and for (male) academics to re-contextualize (Fleming & Sturm, 2011)- their era-specific (Johnson, 2013)[59] childhoods in an online community (Geraghty, 2008). The second one is that it uncovers the tensions between audiences and cultural industries regarding the former's feelings of ownership, as shown by the objections a portion of fans[60] online had over the live-action series' creative personnel, aesthetics, changes to the (1980s) series 'canon' (Geraghty, 2011) and marketing materials (Fast, 2012); these people felt the film challenged their own, authentic appreciation of a property they had remained loyal to through fan channels -what Jancovich (2002) called "cult distinction" when referring to cult movie fans.

As a result of the above, these fans, through evaluations based on individual memory, have created a parallel market and contribute to the (financial) success of the property, in toy (Rivera Rusca, 2011), DVD (Bainbridge & Norris, 2012), comic (Rimmer & Roberts, 2012) and film form (Bainbridge, 2010). This older generation have also "canonized" the 1980s iteration (and some would argue the franchise in general), creating their own value system for it through the "memorialization of the mythos" in an exclusive community (Geraghty, 2008) and conceiving theses incarnations of the characters as the "original" ones (Fast & Örnebring, 2015)[61]. Some of its members have since become curators and historians of local pop products, "cultural custodians for [anime] and eighties animation" in markets even outside the US (Bainbridge & Norris, 2012), and even fiction writers have contributed to this indirectly by mythologizing it (the 1986 film in particular[62]) in the new texts they produce (Bainbridge, 2016). Even in amateur circles, fan creativity and the new texts it produces –e.g. videos that substitute computer effects with toys (Geraghty, 2011) or edit pre-existing footage- are emblematic of Jenkins' (1992) ideas of resistant fandom, incorporating the imagery of Hollywood to subvert it, or substitute it with their own, and can thus be a form of indirect criticism, and along with practices resistance such as

[59] It is only McDermott (2015) who partially critiques this assertion, claiming that it is the popular press articles making an association between "Transformers", the 1980s and commercialism, rather than firsthand observation.

[60] Their display of vitriol matches Gray's (2003) definition of the "anti-fan", someone who "strongly dislike[s] a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel".

[61] Deviations from the portrayal and appearance of characters in those incarnations had been a point of contention for fans long before the 2007 film (Fast & Örnebring, 2015)

[62] "Transformers: The Movie", featuring the shocking deaths of many protagonists, has remained infamous amongst the fandom and has enjoyed a traumatic reputation since its release (Bainbridge, 2016).

alternative meaning-making and critical reading, they are examples of fans exercising symbolic power over the property (Fast, 2012).

Nostalgia has been observed in Asian audiences as well, and is thought to result as a reaction to violent socio-political changes. He (2013) investigated a specific group of consumers with significant power that had been fostered since the original cartoon's broadcast and who she believed (inspired by connections made by local media outlets) has a strong overlap with the Chinese "Transformers" fandom: the "Only Child Generation" (OCG)[63]. While the property has been a fixture of popular culture ever since, she focused on the 2007 film's reception amongst her peers through audience-generated online texts and discussions with a group of interlocutors (all people around their thirties in age) and discovered the group's strong emotional (and almost possessive) resonance to the film due to its connections to their past. The 1980s cartoon series and the toys became, therefore, "an anchor to which the Transformers fans clung to maintain their connection to the past" and the 2007 film acted as a trigger for memories. In this, she sees the formation of what Halbwachs (1992) calls "collective memory", with (socially constructed) individual recollection being affected and reshaped by that of the group, maintaining that continuity of remembrance through specific social strategies -the glorification of the past, the cultivation of a sense of belonging and extensive Internet presence- and influencing the way the new material is perceived. As for the reasons for this formation, the researcher thinks they spring from the stark contrast between the OCG's childhood and adulthood and China's fast modernization and turbulent social change[64], and thus they find solace and escape from the pressures of adulthood in the idealized memories of the past. Therefore, even nostalgia pouring out of the growth of an audience can be set in social, cultural and geographical terms.

Another branch of literature has focused on the property's culture-specific consumption in various case studies around the world beyond North America, despite the creation of a "global consumer base" (Fast & Örnebring, 2015) with growth *across* national borders (Johnson, 2013). The first window to this could be the box-office earnings of the recent live-action films, which have performed admirably in China, the UK and Japan (He,

[63] He (2013) defines this (diverse) group as "the only-children born in urban China between 1979 and 1990", meaning the generation after the urban-population-controlling law that passed in 1980, and who, according to a recent census, constitute almost 80 per cent of the urban population of their age group. Apart from encountering some of the most dramatic social changes in recent Chinese history (the first decade of the Open Door Policy of 1978 that re-established cultural communications with the rest of the world), they became the primary centers of family spending, gaining the pejorative moniker of "little emperors" and being portrayed as "spoilt, self-centered and despotic" in the media, while also having their activity monitored to receive as many educational advantages as possible (Zhao & Murdock, 1996). During their upbringing, they became more individualistic, but also felt a great sense of responsibility for the future of their families (Fong, 2004), and, due to early media exposure, are influenced by popular (imported) culture and more willing to consume and spend (McNeal & Yeh, 1996).

[64] These challenges include: a massive baby boom that created competition, changing gender roles (Liu, 2006), education reforms, disappointing experiences with family (Ding, 1989) and compulsory education, job-hunting, rising house prices and an abundance of cultural stimuli, such as a better acquaintance with the English language through education and more access to foreign culture and entertainment (Bian, 2009).

2013), or assuming a connection between the content-producing countries of the franchise – Japan, Canada and the UK (Bainbridge, 2016). Along with anecdotal references to case studies at conventions –Australia (Bainbridge & Norris, 2012; Meakins, 2014) and Northern Europe (Fast; 2012)-, these help spot some fundamental nuclei of fan activity over the globe, although they largely didn't interrogate the local cultural specificities of each geek scene and focused on the two most prominent fictions.

The Asian audience of the franchise has been seen in greater detail through the two cases of China and Japan. In the case of the former, it has been studied in the context of the transformation of Chinese society from Maoism to capitalism. The 1988-1989 success of the original toy line was influenced by many region- and time-specific factors: the implementation of the Open Door Policy that encouraged foreign investments; the influx of western promotional and entertainment culture[65]; the legislation of the One-Child Policy in urban areas and its complication of Confucian family values[66]; the rise of television (in urban areas); and their timely release coinciding with major holidays (Zhao & Murdock, 1996; He, 2013). They also gave rise to tensions between authorities, the press and families over the franchise's (high) financial cost, content and relationship to traditional values, and showcased how uneven the process of "cultural globalization" truly was for the country (Zhao & Murdock, 1996). At the same time and while certainly influenced by their surrounding cultural framework, local audiences were able to create new meanings and not be victims of American "cultural colonialism" (He, 2013): the young consumers used the figures to reach out to peers, took up roles in groups and roleplayed for the benefit of the group, in an appropriation and localization of foreign popular culture that is not unique to this instance (Ng, 2006).

As for the latter, its relationship to the *otaku*[67] market and its own evolution was investigated by Rivera (2008). Its prior establishment and the competition the series faced from local "robot culture" products meant "Transformers" has remained an underground favorite, although more material was produced for it past its 1987 cancelation into the 1990s. After the "Unicron Trilogy" of *anime* series and the 2007 film, he found a sub-culture that is "beginning to seep in and gain recognition within the mainstream", but is held back by a series of factors endemic to the Japanese entertainment complex: its increased visibility and trans-generational nostalgia struggle against the solipsism of the *otaku* scene (which might not even be sustainable, instead merely a capitalist offshoot). While influenced by

[65] For more on the participation of Hollywood in the Chinese market with mixed results and varied responses since 1994, see Rosen (2002).

[66] According to Confucianism, which had experienced resurgence after Mao Tze Tung's death despite the shift to a nuclear formation, the group comes first rather than the individual, family is the center of social activity, its hierarchical structure is shaped by age, the virtue of "filial piety" is considered of paramount importance and the child is seen as the symbolic embodiment of its hopes and dreams, helping improve its social standing or contributing to its downfall. Finally, education is considered the ultimate vehicle for happiness (Zhao & Murdock, 1996; He, 2013).

[67] The term "otaku" as used in Japan refers to "animation and comic book fans, toy and model kit hobbyists, computer and gadget enthusiasts, and more recently, consumers of pornographic videos" (Rivera, 2008). In English literature, it has been associated with Japanese animation and comics enthusiasts specifically, and a subset of them uses it in self-definition, even in non-English-speaking environments (Δαλκαβούκη, 2016).

different (historic, financial, social) factors than their fellow fans in the US and UK, Asian fans have faced a similar negativity for their hobby in the past, but have also found new meanings in it and vie for its future expansion.

The case of the UK (Figure 8) has also been highlighted and chronicled, mostly in terms of historical content overview and analysis:

**Figure 8: An assortment of covers from the UK "Transformers" comic featuring region-exclusive content.**


Bainbridge (2016) brought up the differences between formats of the UK edition of the Marvel comic series, which was originally made with a very pragmatic concern in mind: building a backlog of gaps for the weekly, fragmented reprints of the aforementioned American monthly comic material. These UK-original reprints, made by local subsidiary Marvel UK, featured new stories in the periphery of the American one but of equal (if not superior) importance, scope and artistic merit, were the first work of writer Simon Furman, whose voice defined the property for years to come, and built a dedicated local fan-base, in part thanks to the magazine's lively editorial voice. Also worthy of note is the observation of differences between the creative teams by the young readers, who started anticipating the UK-exclusive content. The Marvel UK run was so influential that the editor of the reprinted editions attributes his being a fan and writer of the present-day comics to these stories (Rimmer & Roberts, 2012), a fan fiction group based in the UK was inspired to create continuations of the shared universe and helped new comics talent grow (Thomson, 2009) and a new run tying into the 2007 film by Titan Publishing aspired to have the same effect (Johnson, 2013).

Finally, the power this fandom has over the official product has been questioned, excluding fan-created materials that one could argue exercise their own kind of pressure[68].

[68] Three of the most visible of these are "third-party" manufacturers, businesses (some run by fans) who design and produce their own toys and accessories, tiptoeing the line between fan acceptance and endorsement (Rivera Rusca, 2011), fan-made trailers satirizing disliked elements of the 2007 film (Fast, 2012) and fan-created erotica, with the pairing of Megatron and Starscream thought of as a popular (western) one in fan art (Arunrangsiwed, 2015). These practices, though possible, require resources and community networks, symbolic and social capital respectively (Bourdieu, 1986) and are outside the scope of this thesis.

Fast (2012), investigating the involvement of fans in the marketing campaigns of the 2007 film, examined "endorsed" consumer participation, such as the "Sector Seven" experience (which included solving puzzles and hunting for clues) and the interactive official website and contests, all "semi-official" paratexts (Gray, 2010) that run parallel to the "official" texts. She concluded that there was an uneven distribution of power amongst producers and consumers, and while the latter have some, it was mostly symbolic and they were relegated to "data providers", even if there were also possible subversions of this dynamic". "Transformers" is still a corporate-owned property[69] over the production of which considerable control is exercised (Ryan, 1992; Gray, 2010), and companies have only become aware of the value of consumer activity and welcome the free labor it entails (Van Dijck, 2009), bordering, according to Fast, on its exploitation.

That seems to be changing in more recent years, with fan reaction having greater impact on certain official products and fictions, especially in comics (Figure 9):

**Figure 9: An assortment of covers highlighting characters created in cooperation between official creatives and audiences in IDW's comics line.**

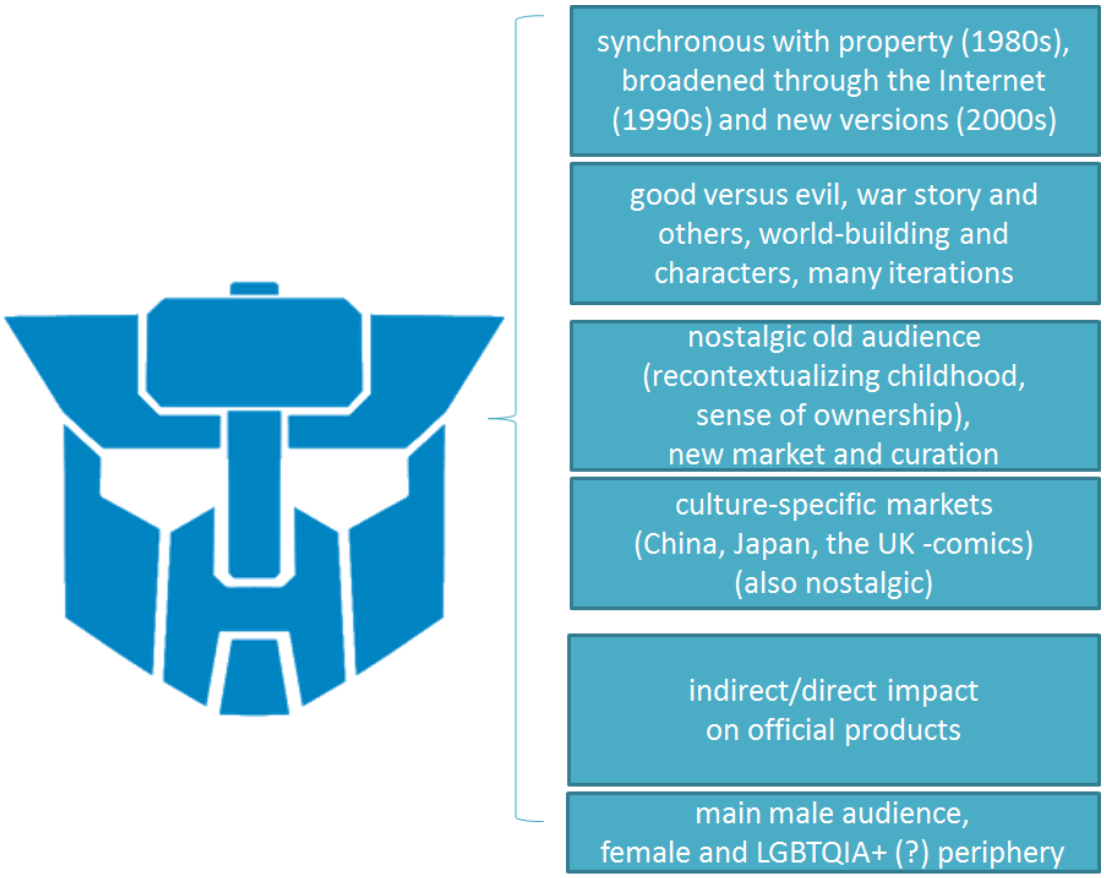

Marburger (2015) mentions two contests (the "Fan Built Bot" and "Fan Built Combiner" polls) organized by Hasbro in 2013 and 2015 and hosted on social media, both for the creation of brand-new toy characters. The resulting figures (Windblade and the *gestalt* figure Victorion consisting of six more characters) were voted female, and were later transplanted into the ongoing stories by IDW, to widen the diversity of the cast and toy lines (Truitt, 2015). Another project where fan input has been significant is the aforementioned "More Than Meets the Eye" series, in the form of both commentary and eventually a light form of creator and fan collaboration. Writer James Roberts, who is active on social media, acknowledged the feedback he received, supported the diverse interpretations of fans, and even made slight alterations to elements perceived as unpopular and troubling in the trade

[69] Another indication of the precarious balance between the two groups is the wording used by official creators to describe them. In the case of the 2007 movie and its pre-production buzz, fans were called from "whiny" disturbers to helpful providers of networking, information and feedback (Fast, 2012).

paperback edition of the series (Marburger, 2015). Thirdly, some fans have been employed in some capacity with the official product, even if not in a directly creative role, but in curation. The releases of the complete "Transformers" DVD collection in 2007 and the release of one of the follow-up *anime* by Australian company Madman Entertainment were driven by fan interest in the properties (and thus were logical commercial steps) and were made with a "by the fans for the fans" mentality, even hiring people "who are passionately involved or experts in particular aspects of the business" (Bainbridge & Norris, 2012). Through this, they create "networks and partnerships" and interactive relationships are formed with their consumers-turned-users (Hartley, 2012). From the above, the effort to include the opinions of fans is apparent, even if it requires the additional interest of the official creators, capital conversion (Bourdieu, 1986) is possible, and at least in the case of the comics, the creative process can be considered an evolving dialogue between creator, commentators and fans.

A summary of this subsection is shown below (Graph 5):

**Graph 5: The main characteristics of the "Transformers" fandom, as studied in literature so far.**




Though not long or exhaustive, the literature on "Transformers" fandom has managed to capture some of its most important features and served as a springboard for this paper. It has recognized the reasons for their attraction, the existence of multiple generations and their multiple ways of entry, even if an emphasis is placed on the tactics and values of those who were children in the 1980s and trying to explain their nostalgia. Some first nuclei of culture-specific fandoms have been discovered, as well as a possible

breakthrough for the LGBTQIA+ community to enter it. This thesis, while drawing from the methodologies and findings of these previous projects, is set apart from them in a couple of major ways. First of all, it is not preoccupied solely with the nostalgic adult fan-base, but wants to witness the cultivation of a newer generation through active engagement with contemporary materials. According to Fast and Örnebring (2015), one of the main goals of the 2007 film's production was, through a series of changes, the expansion of the older, passionate consumer base to a decidedly more mainstream and young one: 15-34 year olds and women (with the addition of a romantic subplot), as well as parents and older siblings through the video-game tie-ins. This potential renewal of the fandom by the invitation of new people into the property tends to go unnoticed, even if it was one of the in the first place. Moreover, the mistake of showcasing only a small section of fans and a few examples (McDermott, 2015) will be amended: the scope is broadened and the number of interviewees grows considerably. Lastly, an attempt will be made to inspect lesser-known hearths of geek activity on a world-wide level, as well as their relationship to the main content producing ones.

## 3.3. Case study description: the IDW Publishing "Generation One" line

The branch of the property this thesis will focus on is its recent comics, and more specifically, the series published by IDW from 2005 onwards. Starting in 2005, the year IDW Publishing purchased the license from Hasbro (Tramountanas, 2005), they take place in a "parallel continuity" (Pillai, 2013) inspired by the 1980s renditions of the world and characters, but follow a divergent path. This longevity[70], coupled with the award nominations they have amassed - specifically the Stan Lee Eagle Awards of the UK industry (2014) and the True Believer Awards (2014)-, the popularity polls in websites dedicated to comics criticism they have won (2015; 2016) and the participation of recognizable comics names –what Hibbs (2016) refers to as "A-level talent", in which we could include industry veteran Phil Jimenez and Eisner Award nominee Magdalene Visaggio (2017)- make them ripe for scholarly examination.

While these stories haven't yet had theses explicitly devoted to them, there have been mentions or partial examinations in previous "Transformers" literature. Underwood (2013) commented on the significant volume of comic book issues released, and Marburger (2015) examined one of the more recent titles through the lens of gender theory (as detailed above). In the case of the latter, as well as other press articles (Kibble-White, 2016), attention has been called to a shift in the content of the fictions, and more specifically, its inclusivity of LGBTQIA+ characters. The political significance of the first canonical homosexual relationship in the franchise did not go unnoticed by fans; the more inclusive storytelling choices are often thought to have piqued the interest of gay readers who may not have checked the series out otherwise (Marburger, 2015). To better understand this change, a brief synopsis of some of the most important events and trends will follow (shown

[70] As of this writing, the end of the line has been announced for autumn of 2018. At 13 calendar years of continuous publications, it is the single longest narrative in the history of the property, and a comics story with significant endurance even outside of licensed material.

pictorially in Figures 10, 11, 12 and 13), split between the two large epochs defined by the publisher as “Phase I” (2005-2011) and “Phase II” (2012-2018).

**Figure 10: An assortment of covers highlighting some major themes of IDW’s “Phase I”.**


Beginning in December 2005, the plot of the first half of the series followed the largely Earth-based struggle between the two familiar factions, away from their devastated home-world, up until their return to it. Initiated by a miner named Megatron and growing out of an underground blood-sport circuit, the civil war was later revealed to be much more ideology-based, sparked by his observations on the deeply classist Cybertronian society (Costa et al, 2011). Not all citizens agreed to join, and a specific pacifistic sect left the planet to establish a secret colony on its own (Furman et al, 2011). The conflict spread to outer space and was by the mid-‘00s a clandestine battle for resources, following strict protocols and using subterfuge to destabilize or defend the native populations. In the case of Earth, protocol was broken by a secret organization that experimented with alien technology, leading into open warfare (Furman et al, 2016) that coincided with an invasion of possessed ancient explorers from a malevolent realm (Furman et al, 2011). Secrecy was abandoned during the Surge, a massive, galaxy-spanning offensive by the Decepticons that almost brought the Autobots to their knees and resulted in one billion human casualties (McCarthy et al, 2017). In its aftermath, the Autobots remained stranded on Earth, continuing the war and trying to mend relations with humanity, with little success (Costa & Figueroa, 2010; Costa et al, 2010; Costa et al, 2011; Costa & Cahill, 2012). After repelling another attempted alien invasion on Cybertron, the planet was rejuvenated by the energies of an ancient artifact (Costa et al, 2012). The war ended officially with the detainment and disarmament of several high-ranking Decepticons, the mass return of upset “Neutral” refugees who had refused to fight in the war and Autobot general Optimus Prime stepping down from his role to prevent further violence (Barber et al, 2014). Throughout all these events, inter-factional tensions remained a constant: various Decepticons vied for supremacy amongst themselves, and members of Autobot High Command turned out to be negligent or amoral (Roche, Roberts & Guidi, 2012). Another common trait of these stories was the focus on military or scientific personnel; the entire cast was also male, with the exception of a warrior who had her gender reassigned by an unscrupulous scientist (Furman & Milne, 2008). In any case, the

already mentioned genres and subjects of cosmic science-fiction, space opera, military fiction (and its arguable glorification) and mankind's relationship with technology, all in a male-dominated environment, have been mentioned above, meaning that the comics were inspired by or continuing the themes of previous iterations of the franchise.

**Figure 11: An assortment of covers highlighting the historic themes of IDW's "Phase II".**

From 2012 onwards and through two inter-connected ongoing series (and other limited works), the line focused on the characters' reconstructive effort, but also detailed their distant past. New creation myths and their murky relation to reality were proposed, prompting a number of characters in the present to travel in search of their mythical progenitors, to ask for their aid (Roberts et al, 2016). Cybertronian pre-history was elaborated on: a first civil war amongst tribal leaders (Barber et al, 2015b; Scott & Pitre-Durocher, 2018; Barber et al, 2018a) led to an exodus of survivors, the founding of independent colonies (Barber et al, 2017a; Scott, Howell & Pitre-Durocher, 2016), and a unified (if devastated) planet. Its new social order was predicated on racism and discrimination: one's function, mode of creation and ubiquity became signifiers of status (Roberts et al, 2016). In that way, in their early days, the Decepticons became a direct response to injustices that were not alleviated by the next political leaders of the planet (Barber, Zama & Milne, 2017; Metzen, Dille & Ramondelli, 2016). Past and present were often in dialogue: fear-mongering politicians thought dead turned out alive (Barber et al, 2017a; Barber et al, 2017b), parallel universes showed an alternative view to history (Roberts & Milne, 2015; Roberts & Lawrence, 2017) and a time-travel conceit bridged the tribal past with the fractured present in a straightforward fashion (Barber et al, 2018c).

**Figure 12: An assortment of covers highlighting the political themes of IDW's "Phase II".**

The consequences of the recently-concluded war continued to plague the characters on an individual and collective level. On the victors' side, ex-soldiers had to govern a populous that didn't accept them (Barber et al, 2015a), adjust to a peaceful condition that they equated with surrender (Barber & Ramondelli, 2018) and face corruption within their ranks (Roberts & Milne, 2013). The defeated still on Cybertron rebelled, fearing the return of systematic prejudice against them, but the ensuing chaos only helped the rise of an opportunistic politician (Barber et al, 2015a). Following the near-destruction of the planet by an ingenious scientist (Barber et al, 2017a), the situation was polarized further with the re-establishment of contact with Earth (Barber, Griffith & Coller, 2014) and the colonies, the creation of a council for the latter's governance (Barber et al, 2015c; Scott, Howell & Pitre-Durocher, 2016) and Optimus Prime's annexation of Earth into it (Barber et al, 2016). Megatron's decision to join the Autobots in an effort to re-define himself (Roberts & Milne, 2014) was equally controversial (Roberts et al, 2016). Amidst anti-robot sentiment (by both humans and alien species), whether in deep space or on Earth, through dramatic or light-hearted plots, the protagonists still have to balance the interests of a diverse population - visitors, refugees and nomads, rich and poor, religious and non-believers, winners and losers, old and young- as of this writing (Barber, Zama & Milne, 2017; Roberts & Lawrence, 2017; Scott & Pitre-Durocher, 2017), while an ancient adversary approaches them slowly (Scott et al, 2018).

**Figure 13: An assortment of covers highlighting the presence of women in IDW's "Phase II".**


Finally, some additional observations on Marburger's (2015) thesis will be made here, to update her text with the recent developments on gender and society in the IDW series. Her paper mentioned the invention of the term "conjunx endura", the equivalent of "significant other" or "spouse" in Cybertronian society, in 2012, a recording ending with the words "I love you" by one member of a (male) couple to the other in 2013, and the introduction of more female characters in 2014. Since then, both titles and the various other mini-series and events have, first of all, mentioned or featured multiple lesbian and gay couples (Scott, Howell & Pitre-Durocher,2016; Scott & Pitre-Durocher, 2018), as well as some comprised of different genders (Scott & Howell, 2015; Barber, Zama & Milne, 2017), some of which do not use the previously-established terminology. Along with them, even more (and diverse in terms of body type) female characters have been introduced in regular (Barber, Griffith & Ramondelli, 2016; Barber & Ramondelli, 2018) and starring roles (Barber, Gage & Milne, 2018), with at least two being transgender[71] (Roberts, Lawrence & Tramontano, 2018). Moreover, another issue of the case study has shown more hard light avatars, with more characters appearing as female in them (Roberts et al, 2015). Finally, with the Transformers' attempts to approach Earth once more, human characters have become more prominent, and at least three of the most important ones have been female: Verity Carlo, who was introduced at the start of the line (Roche, 2016), Marissa Faireborn (Barber, Griffith & Coller, 2014; Barber, Zama & Milne, 2017) and Ayana Jones (Barber, Ossio & Joseph, 2017; Barber et al, 2017c; Barber et al, 2018b). The above is but a small indicator that the very process of documenting the demands of diversification and the responses by the creatives in mainstream media is a constant (but rewarding) work-in-progress, much like the serial narratives themselves.

[71] James Roberts and Jack Lawrence introduced Anode and Lug, two new female characters with atypical designs at the end of 2016, in the continuation of "More Than Meets the Eye", "Lost Light". Yours faithfully can recall the fan-base's uncertainty in regards to their gender from personal experience, as the article on the fan-maintained "Transformers Wiki" website used neutral pronouns to refer to one of them (Lug) until official confirmation in later 2017 issues.

Even a cursory glance at the above synopsis shows some of the elements that set this iteration of “Transformers” apart from the rest. Its long duration, steady stewardship by specific writing contributors, unique artistic interpretations and new themes (of history, politics, relationships and identity), especially after 2011, have turned the line from a supplement to the rest of the media production into a stand-alone site of experimentation with the property. For these and other reasons, it has been chosen as the focal point of examination for this paper, which will take place in the following chapter.

# 4. Data and Methods

In order to examine the distribution of comics culture on a global level and its evolution, two aspects were focused on: the creative personnel and the fandom that has been generated around the "Transformers" property. The reasons for the selection of this specific property were its commercial nature, its (relatively) stable pop-cultural presence since the 1980s and the renewed interest it has experienced recently due to certain well-received and financially successful titles. Its fandom, on the other hand, was picked for its comparatively small size, at least in relation to that of mainstream American comics, its long history in areas outside its (primary) countries of production –and could thus be used to describe tensions between different cultures and ideologies - and its (both observed from outsiders and self-defined) niche status[72], making it both easily observable and easy to handle in terms of data. A smaller, tighter online community started and managed by fans, apart from reflecting the cult status of the subject- seems to encourage more socializing and communication amongst its members, as opposed to a larger one numbering millions and manned by a marketing team (Zhivov, Scheepers & Stockdale, 2011). Its hybrid, multi-media nature was also a point of interest: while the same is true for most successful comics properties, "Transformers" has had almost continuous production of materials across many media in its thirty-four-year history as of this writing, from toys and animation to comics, live-action films, web content etc. This raises many questions about the movement of narratives, creatives and audiences between media that older research has hypothesized about (Jenkins, 2006) and the skills developed along the way.

Given the industrial production of materials for the franchise and previous experience with that of comics, the focus on the creative side for this thesis was narrowed to the more recent comics with the characters from IDW Publishing. This allowed for tighter insight into the development of a particular corner of the comics world but able to sense larger trends within it, and supplying a manageable volume of data. The fandom, however, was not similarly restricted, and was considered to spring from both this iteration of the media franchise and others, largely due to the (implied and assumed) nature of licensed comics as products catering to pre-existing fan bases (Pillai, 2013). This freedom was then used to examine the place comics have within the fans' consumption of media, and thus their importance in raising or preserving a fan base.

After some preliminary research, the existence of a third aspect was noticed and added to the above: members of the fandom (either solitary individuals or those actively engaged with a broader community before or during their time as professionals) who joined the workforce for at least one issue of the comics. That allowed for a more thoughtful

[72] According to correspondence via e-mail with one of the interlocutors from the fan base, its estimated size number is about "10,000 to 20,000 active fans". It was also them who agreed with its characterization as "relatively niche" by the researcher, but stressed that it is "a vibrant and active community". They attributed its growth and longevity in areas outside the US to the aforementioned Marvel UK series.

analysis of the interplay between the former and the latter, and the factors that allow or prevent it.

## 4.1. Description of Methodology: The approach of netnography

The first part of this chapter will be dedicated to analyzing the techniques used for (quantitative and qualitative alike) data gathering and processing, but not before outlining the general principles that apply to both. These techniques spring from ethnography, a scientific discipline which has been used in the past to examine fandoms (Reijnders, 2011)[73], and is chosen for its qualitative, flexible approaches to cultural phenomena in their contexts, its use of thick description[74] that allows the immersion of the researcher and offers deep insight into specific cultural worlds, and its production of both descriptive and analytical results. Considerations such as preparing for data collection and cultural entrée, being insightful and trustworthy, ethical research and accurate representation remain important for the scholar as well (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2013). Moreover, research often involves a deeper interaction with the research subjects: the first identification by the community studied is often succeeded by active participation with it, in the form of allowing oneself to gain "participant experience" (Walstrom, 2004) by interacting with it, while also capturing it in note, recording and other "permanent" form. In the end, this enables an "enhanced cultural understanding, the confirmation of interpretation, and new opportunities to recast the research enterprise as collaboration rather than appropriation", and its sharing of the research could even benefit the community examined (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2013).

One of the most useful tools in the ethnographer's arsenal is the in-depth interview, which shall be defined here for its later use. The in-depth interview is a qualitative data collection technique that can be applied to a variety of tasks, thanks to its open-ended and semi-structured (pre-planned but also conversational) basic format. It is used to understand and interpret a correspondent's feelings and opinions on a given subject. It is often recorded and complemented with written notes by the researcher, both on the interviewee's reactions and further questions on the topic (Mack et al, 2005). Kvale (1996) suggests seven stages in conducting them: thematizing (finding the purpose and key information wanted), designing (creating an interview guide with questions and comments), interviewing (which includes explaining the context of the process to the participant and easing them into it), transcribing (producing a text of the interview), analyzing (re-reading and identifying themes), verifying (checking the credibility of the information stated), and reporting (sharing the results through a report). The result is a deeper understanding into any given subject and the possibility of further research, even if it a long and intensive process.

[73] Similar techniques have been used in architectural studies as well. Architecture and landscape architecture were (implicitly) a fundamental part of early anthropological fieldwork (Ingold, 2013), and (pre-arranged) interviews were an established part of its methodology by the 1990s (Beattie, 2010).

[74] Thick description is the name used for a particular critical discourse analysis method, defined by Van Dijk (2001) as "a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context", as "culture is not a power, […] it is a context, something within which they [construable signs, symbols] can be intelligibly-that is, thickly-described" (Colson & Geertz, 1975).

The emergence of the Internet as a viable place of human interaction has made it worthy of scientific interest and analysis, and thus many of the above core ideas can be easily transplanted to it or expanded upon to fit it better. For this project, this will be done through the practice known as netnography[75], "a technique for the cultural analysis of social media and online community data". Created by combining the words "Internet" and "ethnography" and first described by Kozinets and others (2010), it merges the characteristics of the latter with new skills required for this new field of research–choice of field sites, types of data and their collection-, as well as new ethical considerations. One considerable disadvantage of "traditional" ethnographic study, for example, is that it can be time consuming; on-line research can be conducted via the Web, in a faster, less intrusive manner (Beaulieu, 2004), although a clear definition of the community and strategies for collecting (and reevaluating) the needed data are also paramount to its success, to avoid "data overload". In short, "netnographic data analysis is about maintaining the cultural quality of the social media phenomenon through the careful consideration of the researcher's own role and social intelligence throughout the process of online social scientific research", even if the view it offers of any phenomenon is an incomplete one, missing out on the parallel component of "real-life" interaction (Garcia et al, 2009) and sharing a common problem with any other scientific method.

The ways to deepen the project's understanding of the community and its wider cultural context have also changed, as now researchers can choose their field sites and plan their introductions more carefully (Kozinets et al, 2010). One example of this process is "lurking", "a form of online reconnaissance – to gain information on the community before making the entrée" (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2013), often considered important as first contact with the community (Shoham, 2004) that should lead to further interaction with it, out of fear of missing less visible parts of the phenomenon (Beaulieu, 2004). The result is the researcher's smooth (but also personally introspective) entrance into a specific cultural space (Cherny, 1999)[76], similarly to any ethnographic project.

In those respects, the preparatory stages of this dissertation were conducted as they would have as part of a wider, ethnographic project, only updated slightly. As groundwork for this project, every text (in isolated comic book issue or trade collection form, digitally) that was part of the IDW comics timeline was read, so as to inspect its credits and understand its themes, aesthetics and artistic evolution. This was repeated for other seminal texts in the franchise's history that some creatives had previously participated in or might have been influenced by: the Marvel UK strips as reprinted by IDW, other IDW tie-in comics, the Marvel Comics "Generation 2" series, the complete "Animated" and "Prime" cartoons, selected episodes from the 1980s cartoon, the 1986 film and the two latest films in the live-action series as of this writing. In addition, before the official start of the project, she "lurked" through multiple virtual spaces her subjects and fellow fans frequented (e.g. Archive of Our Own, DeviantArt, fanfiction.net, tfw2005.com, The Transformers Wiki,

[75] The same methodology can also be found with the name "netography" by other researchers (Myers, 1999).

[76] The idea of a researcher becoming a culture member before starting his study of a community has been brought up before, in the form of Hayano's (1979) "auto-ethnography" and its online application has been dubbed "auto-netnography" by Kozinets and Kedzior (2009).

Tumblr and Twitter, the “Underbase” etc.) to understand facets of their culture, such as their perception of the brand’s history, their specialized codes of communication and their social hierarchy, composition and rituals. The entrée can be considered successful, as it led to playful banter with some of the interviewees and allowed them to make inside jokes without the fear of being misunderstood. This proved to be a continuous process, the newest comics issues at the time were brought up and more media was consumed during the writing of this thesis (the complete “Beast Wars” series). All these provided a good view of the subject matter’s history before venturing into its recent production and reception.

### 4.1.1. Data collection

Given that the research was conducted in two stages deemed distinct enough to warrant their own subsection each, they will be described separately. The first part of the research followed some specific elements of netnography that prioritize the observation of an online community without participating in it, keeping notes on them through freely available and public data on a regular basis. These notes (which can also include impressions, observations and questions) are simultaneously summarized, indexed and reviewed as the researcher develops their ideas (Myers, 1999).

Data collection warrants a special mention, as its volume and variance can be challenging. Both the expansion of the field to social media sites, blog-like spaces and wikis, to which a researched needs to get attuned to as background research (Kozients, 2010) and “constant and automatic saving, sorting, classifying, and archiving” of media that is now possible can be troubling. While the use of software for managing -analyzing, downloading or classifying- large amounts of data is also encouraged, the researcher needs to exercise their critical thinking and define the scope of the research carefully. Still, collection should be rigorous and thorough (no matter how small their quantity might be), following known methodologies. Moreover, data analysis should be grounded in them, and can be performed with methods that are very similar to that of “traditional” ethnography and sociology; for qualitative analysis, the popular approach of “open coding” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) can be used, in which the data is labelled and categorized by “field-level” meanings, and then grouped into more abstract categories (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2013).

For the first part of the research in particular, two types of data need to be defined: archival and field note data. The first type can be described as “anything the researcher can gather from the Web that is not a product of his or her involvement to create or prompt the creation of data”. That information is used to establish a “cultural baseline” for the subject and reveal “a portrait of what the community was doing before the researcher made his or her incursion into that social media environment” (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2013). The second type, notes “generated directly by the researcher for the purpose of research recording, reflection, and analysis” as they experience the community and “document the journey of the netnographer from an outsider to an inside cultural member”, are also kept throughout the duration of the project, starting as early as possible. They can take any form (text, image, video etc.) and let the scientist privately reflect upon their progress and results

(Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2013). While only the first are used in composing the final product of the research, both are invaluable in defining and completing the project.

In this thesis, the above technique was used for the collection of two distinct samples: one for the "official" comics creators, and one for the fans participating in the "Transformers: Mosaic" project. As for the first, the selection of creatives was made based on the titles of the main series of the IDW "Transformers" line, starting in December 2005 until the end of April 2018, to include as many creatives as possible. In some uncertain cases, the fan-maintained website "Transformers Wiki" was used to gauge which parts of the narrative were deemed vital by both publishers and fans[77]. One digital-first series ("Monstrosity") was also included in its reprinted form of "floppies". Conversely, the comics reprinting older material ("Best of UK", "Generations", "Target: 2006" etc.), tying into various assorted media (live-action film series, various animated series, video games etc.) or taking place outside the main continuity ("Beast Hunters", "Regeneration One", "Transformers VS G. I. Joe" etc.) were not included, mainly due to their creatives' fragmentary involvement in them (compared to the main line)[78]. The result was a total number of 376 issues, spread across multiple series and one-shots. As for the second, all 664 "Mosaic" strips were examined, beginning in June 18, 2007 and ending in October 22, 2012. There was some consideration of continuing into the following fan project by the same editors, "Transformers: Multiverse", but its low participation resulted in few stories, and thus it was not followed upon.

From there, the creative team of each issue or strip was catalogued and some of their personal information tracked, to identify those involved with the property. As for the first sample, these details inspected were the creative's role in production, country of residence, gender and previous artistic experience. In a manner similar to the examination of publisher Dark Horse Comics by Norcliffe and Rendace (2003), the two creatives considered primary for the creative process, writers and pencilers, were included. In contrast to previous work, however, all duplicate names were noted, as they showed the most prolific creators in the line and thus the ones with potentially the greatest interest in the property and evolution within it; the same applies for the second sample. The necessary data was gathered via widely accessible online sources: Wikipedia articles, comic-book and pop culture encyclopedias -such as Comic Book Database (2018)-, personal websites and social media accounts (usually profiles on Twitter and DeviantArt). For the official creators, additional information was taken from more specialized, fan-made archives, such as the aforementioned "Transformers Wiki" and the "Underbase" (2018), an archive for the works of the TransMasters UK fan collective. That information was found in public blog-like, open spaces and was considered published content, thus legal and open to criticism, though still

[77] As mentioned in the same site, the "Transformers" line was expanded in 2016 into the nicknamed "Hasbro Universe", which included stories and characters based on Hasbro-owned properties with their own, separate comics histories. These titles will not be examined here, as they do not intersect with the main line in major ways, and when they do, the "Transformers" characters are usually in the epicenter of events either way.

[78] They were, however, considered prior experience for the artists and brought up in conversation in later stages. The interviewees themselves were not apprehensive about being asked about them, and one even recalled being enthusiastic at the time.

subject to citation (Bruckman, 2006). The textual information was copied on an Excel sheet, along with additional field notes –the first of which were taken in July 2017, with the inspection of the credits on a number of "Mosaic" strips- summarizing and updating the focus of the research. That data was collected and compiled over a three-week period, from July 15th to August 7th 2017. There were a few gaps in the listing, mostly from fans (usually writers) that preferred to keep their information private. However, these omissions are understandable in protecting the privacy of subjects, so they do not impact the overall result by much.

### 4.1.2. The "snowball technique" and e-interviews

After that, when the need for live interaction with subjects arose, the methodology changed to reflect it, using different ethnographic tools. To compliment the above, strictly quantitative data, both descriptive, qualitative insights (Hendriks et al, 1992) and additional numbers for an evolving phenomenon in a relatively hard-to-reach population (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997) were needed. After communicating with a group of key interlocutors[79] with desired characteristics (the "source" or "seed"), their social networks were used to reach out to similar subjects and respondents. They, in turn, would recruit other individuals themselves, in a multi-stage process. This approach has been dubbed the "snowball technique", inspired by the visual of a snowball rolling down a hill (Everitt & Howell, 2005). It is described as an ascending methodology, a research strategy "elaborated at a community or local level and specifically adapted to the study of selected social groups" that employs "selective and intensive" data collection (Van Meter, 1990). Historically first used in studies of underprivileged communities (Whyte, 2012) and elements considered criminal or stigmatized (Kaplan, Korf, & Sterk, 1987; McNamara, 1994), it has also been modeled after "contact tracing" in public health, in which "one individual names all other individuals who were associated with a specific event" (Sadler et al, 2010), but can be placed in a larger set of link-tracing methodologies (Spreen, 1992) that take advantage of the (assumed) bonds between the initial sample and the same target population (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

The method in its traditional form has both considerable advantages, as well as traits that, though not negative *per se*, require additional effort on the part of the project manager. Research done with the snowball technique can be "semi-self-directed", "chain-referral", fast and inexpensive; its personal element can help the researcher navigate a new field with the guidance of its more knowledgeable members; it can uncover the diversity of a small or well-integrated community that would otherwise be difficult to identify; and it can be used to get to hard-to-reach individuals (who are sometimes distinguished by criteria considered too private) in a culturally sensitive manner which engenders trust amongst the

[79] Modern anthropology named the people who provided the researcher with knowledge on the field "informants" and was not primarily interested in helping them; the main motivation for interaction was the collection of data (Powdermaker, 1966). By the mid-1980s, the post-modern turn in the discipline placed a much bigger emphasis on reciprocity and collaboration with the local communities being studied (Kuhlmann, 1992). This led to the abandonment of the old term "informants" for "interlocutors", which is why it is preferred in this thesis. More recently, it has been used in anthropological works on architecture (Birnudóttir Sigurðardóttir, 2017).

participants (Sadler et al, 2010). Additionally, it is capable of producing internationally comparable data (Avico et al, 1988), combining qualitative and quantitative characteristics and following how a phenomenon changes with time, often in the form of interviews (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). There, are, however, some complications that a project like this needs to overcome. Firstly, some previous "knowledge of insiders" is required to locate the best possible initial participants, possibly coming from people in positions of relative authority or proximity to the population (Groger, Mayberry & Straker, 1999) and dependent on the research questions asked of them (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Last but not least, the individuals targeted may react with suspicion and hostility. The researcher has to establish trust with the respondents as the project develops and is more clearly defined over time (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997), including reassuring them that their privacy and identities will be respected.

In recent years and with the possibilities offered by online research, the above guideline has been adapted and the methodology has gained some new characteristics. The first was a greater emphasis on corresponding with the subjects: a broader definition of sources, collaborating with formal or informal "group leaders" (Sadler et al, 1998) and personal communication with potential subjects (Sadler et al, 2006). Networking has also been significantly eased through the Internet, and it has seen use in recruiting participants, with targeted e-mail communication, individual or institutional home pages or social media sites like Facebook (Bowen, Williams & Horvath, 2004) in previous research. These adjustments can help overcome some of the methodology's traditional disadvantages: the generation of small sizes (Pollok & Schlitz, 1988); how time-consuming and labor-intensive the process can be (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997); the generation of a non-random, demographically unbalanced sample, skewered towards more upper-class, highly-educated individuals or those with similar social characteristics (Magnani et al, 2005), including popularity and duration of stay within the group (Atkinson & Flint, 2001); missing "isolates" who are not connected to the network(s) the research have tapped into (Van Meter, 1990) or face geographical, transportation and economic barriers (Fahrenwald & Stabnow, 2005); the high refusal rate due to the absence of prior relationship with the potential participants; the easier disclosure of personal information; and the inability to spot whether the sample is "saturated" (when it offers no new information) or not (Sadler et al, 2010).

These changes are not incompatible with the concepts of netnography: these interactions, whether by asynchronous (e-mail) or (quasi-)synchronous (chat, live calling) modes of communication constitute elicited data, "content that is co-created by the researcher and members of the social media community through processes of social interaction" (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2013) and enable the opportunity of conducting in-depth interviews from a distance, in the form of "e-interviews". The means of contacting subjects (Fast, 2012) and the complexity of online interactions has grown exponentially complex, from private or public, synchronous or asynchronous, over different time periods and geographic locations, with two or more contributors (Ruhleder, 2000), on different sources (corporate-owned forum, personal page or blog, social media account etc.) and formats (text, image, audio, video etc.), it has also widened the field for conducting interviews. The term is usually used in literature to describe e-mail correspondence, the advantages and disadvantages of which were summarized by Bampton and Cowton (2002).

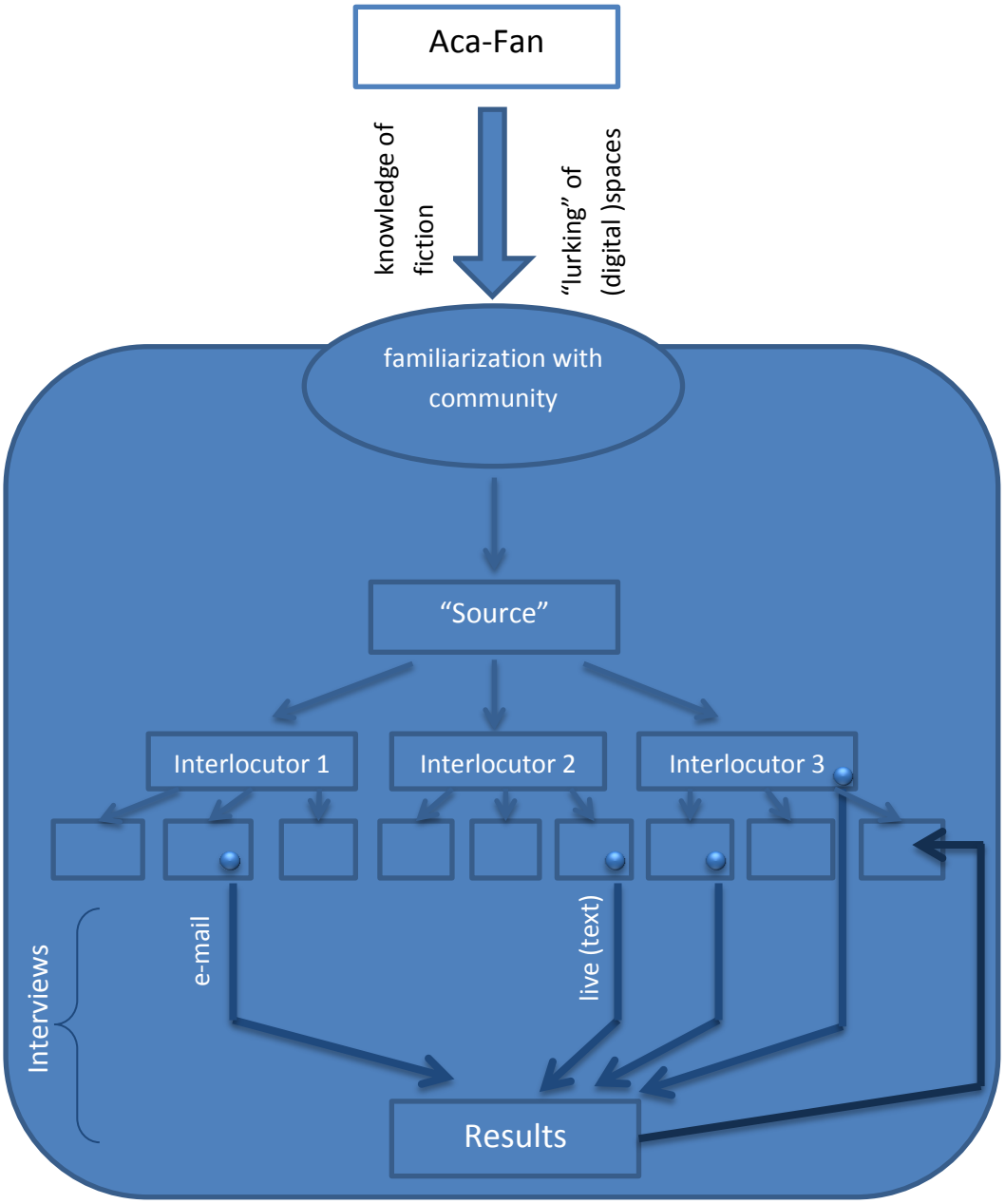
Interviews by e-mail were found to be swift and economical, connecting (geographically and socially) distant subjects, providing chances for follow-up questions and capturing certain types of data and offering an alternative for participants who have problems with scheduling or face-to-face interaction, but note that they also require the willingness and technology skills of both parties, require the creation of backup files and provide a "limited register for communication". While they argue for its complementary use alongside traditional interviews, others consider they allow for richer replies and self-reflection on the part of the participants (Shepherd, 2003), and since then, they have seen much wider use. Meho (2006) suggested a full methodology for conducting efficient and effective e-interviews, starting with inviting people individually and with an effective subject line. The researcher should introduce themselves, offer background information on the research, emphasize its anonymity and provide incentives for the subjects (such as a copy of the results of the project). The questions asked should be as clear and interesting as possible, as well as contain instructions and deadlines on the interview's completion. Any follow-up questions should be issued fast, and new questions could be formed for new interviews by responses in the previous ones. Other disclosures relevant to the research topic should also not be discouraged, as they could lead to new insights.

Two other minor forms of online interviews have been described, live chat by instant messaging and live interview via online connection. The first is another form of synchronous computer-mediated communication is. While not thought of as reaching the same amount of depth (due to the brevity demanded by the medium), can be sophisticated, both by the use of acronyms, emoticons and specially formatted text[80] (Shepherd, 2003). Fontes and O'Mahony (2008) advocate for its wider use, however, for letting the participants delve into sensitive topics with less pressure or interrupt the interview whenever they want, its greater dynamism and spontaneity, and for how easier it is to transcribe and consider follow-up questions or clarifications in its environment on the part of the researcher. Live calling is the second option, as it shares most of the characteristics of a phone interview, with the (sometimes) added benefit of body language from video. In any case, protecting the (online and offline) identities of the interviewees from harm, informing them of consent and asking for their permission in publicizing their words is paramount (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2013).

In the case of the present research, the above framework was followed and put to work with few alterations. A flowchart of the methodology is shown below (Graph 6):

[80] While not very important in the scheme of this particular project, it is worthy of note that there was relatively little use of abbreviations or emoticons in the interviews conducted, indicating that some respondents may have modified their style of writing to a more formal one due to being in an (announced beforehand) research environment.

**Graph 6: Flowchart of the methodology and fieldwork for the thesis.**




After an extended literature review period in which the topics of inquiry were decided (the fans' initial attraction to "Transformers", further interest in the franchise, gender, geography and language use), an initial online survey of 17 questions was created on Google Forms in January 2018, requesting either brief textual inputs or multiple choice selection as answers. While "Transformers" fans cannot be thought of as a vulnerable or underserved population because of this specific trait, they are narrowly defined and nearly indistinguishable from the rest of the populous, so an online variation of the snowball technique was needed to uncover them. The "TransMissions" podcast, an online radio show written, hosted and produced by fans featuring reviews, interviews and discussions on "Transformers" media, was used as the initial source, due to familiarity with its content in the previous months and its potential for spreading the word on the survey. After communication with two members of its crew, who in turn pointed towards more individuals, the initial online survey was circulated on social media sites like Facebook,

Twitter and Tumblr to attract more attention. The final number of participants was 302 (2 answers were disregarded as useless), each contributing with a completed questionnaire. The unexpectedly large size of despondence was considered statistically sufficient for the population studied and thus no additional statistical manipulation (Knoke & Yang, 2007) was needed; even still, the image presented here is but a fraction of the whole, as it is impossible to paint a full picture of any online community dispersed across multiple specialized spaces (Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley, 2013).

The required qualitative data was gathered through interviews, the additional option for which was offered as the last survey question, although new parameters had to be established for them beforehand. To avoid the diffusion of the conversation into multiple sites (Correll, 1995), interested participants were invited from a multitude of origins (most prominently social media websites Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr), where the survey was circulated) to fill in the survey and be interviewed. Furthermore, given the aforementioned variety of online interactions, it was decided to focus only on private interactions with interested participants by voice or text (live-chat or written interviews) as elicited data. The request for interviews was provided as a final question on the online survey, with a notice for the interested party to leave their contact info (e-mail) on a space provided. A massive message (hiding each recipient's identity from the rest) was sent to these addresses, along with another explanation of the research and the participants' rights to anonymity (Fast, 2012). Dates and times were set for each and every interested individual, and from February 1st to March 12th (the deadline was originally February 28th, but concessions were made for some delayed responses) a total of 50 interviews were conducted, 7 of which were live by voice over the Discord platform, 3 were done via live text chat and 40 became written ones, due to the interviewees' harsh schedules, the overabundance of material needing to be processed but also the ambition to combine the advantages of all those methods and secure the comfort of her subjects. All live interviews were recorded and later transcribed word for word (Bryman, 2004), then compiled and summarized for greater ease along with the rest; field notes were also included into them, reconstructing the talk and describing reactions of both parties, as well as any other thought that could prove to be useful for later parts of the process and put in a feedback loop for later interviews. In some cases, participants were asked for permission to have conversations or e-mails reproduced (Dodds, 2006). Finally, receiving a digital copy of the final text was used as incentive for participation, as another admission of transparency and as an effort to improve the community in some way.

The privacy of the interviewees was safeguarded through an inspection of previous discussions in literature and communication with the subjects. Through the interview process, multiple interviewees made personal disclosures that showed the importance of the property in question to them but could be deemed too private. In addition, some of them belonged to the LGBTQIA+ community, a noted vulnerable group (Gorbach et al, 2009) the identities of which has to be protected. In accordance to ethical guidelines regarding the privacy of the "seeds" and those invited to participate through the "snowball technique" (Claudot et al, 2009), and considering the nature of research in an evolving field like the Internet (Markham & Buchanan, 2012) and the closeness of the online community studied, the concealment of any "real-life" names and Internet handles (as they can be common

across multiple platforms) alike was preferred[81]. Furthermore, whoever wished for their gender, age or country of residence to not be shown in the finished thesis would have that request fulfilled. Whenever such issues arose, they were discussed with the subjects and a solution was reached.

Finally, after some consideration (and with the encouragement of the initial interlocutors), selected IDW creatives were contacted for an interview on the first half of 2018, to elaborate on their introduction to the property, their (formal and informal) training, their artistic evolution and their relationship to the fandom. An informal list of names was compiled based on the creators' past experience in fan projects (including "Mosaic"), their role(s) in the creative process and their long-term employment for the publisher. In the end, the following artists, in alphabetical order, agreed to in-depth interviews in time for publication: writer and editor (from 2012 to 2016) John Barber (interviewed live on February 8th), penciler, inker and cover artist Andrew Griffith (on February 13th and 16th via live text chat) and colorist, penciler and cover artist Pricilla Tramontano (via e-mail, questions received on March 7th and answered on March 26th). One additional artist (penciler and colorist Evan Gauntt) was discovered amongst the survey sample, and he agreed to answer a series of questions via e-mail (received on February 13th and answered on February 28th). While his main body of work on the property was unrelated to the IDW comics (he was an illustrator for the bi-monthly "Transformers Official Collector's Club" magazine), his common origins and careful insights into the production of comics materials paint a more complete picture of the artistic scene.

A global map of the interviewees participating in the project (Map 1) and a final, aggregate table of their traits (Table 1) are shown below:

**Map 1: The 54 interviewees placed on a world map (the exact placements shown are symbolic).**

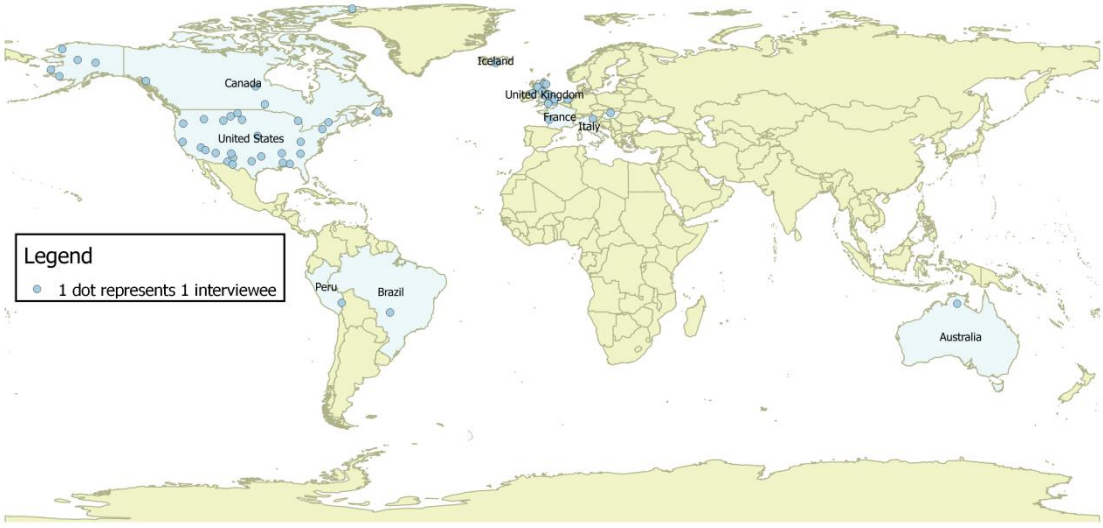



**Table 1: Total (fan and professional) interviewee characteristics.**

| Characteristics | Categories | Number | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Occupation with property** | | | |
| | Fan | 50 | 92,59 |

[81] The only real names of interviewees were those of the high-profile, published artists.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Professional | 3 | 5,56 |
| | Past professional, now fan | 1 | 1,85 |
| **Gender** | | | |
| | Female | 27 | 50,00 |
| | Male | 22 | 40,74 |
| | Non-Binary | 3 | 5,56 |
| | Other | 2 | 3,70 |
| **Country of Residence** | | | |
| | USA | 31 | 57,41 |
| | UK | 11 | 20,37 |
| | Canada | 4 | 7,41 |
| | Australia | 1 | 1,85 |
| | Brazil | 1 | 1,85 |
| | France | 1 | 1,85 |
| | Hungary | 1 | 1,85 |
| | Iceland | 1 | 1,85 |
| | Italy | 1 | 1,85 |
| | The Netherlands | 1 | 1,85 |
| | Peru | 1 | 1,85 |
| **Age (in years)** | | | |
| | <15: | 2 | 3,70 |
| | 16-20 | 1 | 1,85 |
| | 21-25 | 4 | 7,41 |
| | 26-30: | 12 | 22,22 |
| | 31-35: | 12 | 22,22 |
| | 36-40: | 12 | 22,22 |
| | 41-45: | 8 | 14,81 |
| | 46-50: | 2 | 3,70 |
| | Unknown: | 1 | 1,85 |
| **Interview Method** | | | |
| | E-Mail | 42 | 77,78 |
| | Live (Voice Chat) | 8 | 14,81 |
| | Live (Text Chat) | 4 | 7,41 |

Throughout all of this process, we remained engaged, approachable and transparent to the interviewees, while simultaneously protecting her private identity. With our admitted attribute of the “aca-fan”, a “hybrid creature which is part fan and part academic”, sharing the passion of both groups and wanting to bridge them (Jenkins, 2018), subjects were approached in a casual yet respectable and knowledgeable manner. Those interested were also challenged by submitting their own questions; these exchanges served as our proof of “fanhood” (favorite or least favorite characters and iterations, past fandoms, joke exchanges) or past academic experience (past projects and additional interests), helped bridge cultural gaps (the state of geek culture in Greece) or allowed the reexamination of major or minor issues of focus. Furthermore, following Livia (1999) and Hine’s (2000) concerns, the project was presented as academic upfront, but its executor was shown as

non-threateningly and neutral in terms of gender as possible, after some suggestions from the sources: full names was shortened to ambiguous nicknames ("Al" or "Ali"), and most mail was signed with the initials "A.D.". In the cases of (accidental) misgendering on the part of the interviewees, the issue was approached with humor and used as a starting point for conversation[82].

## 4.2. Results

### 4.2.1. Preliminary Industry Findings

Before examining the specifics of the official creatives of the line and since there will be discussions involving unpublished, industry-wide statistics, some preliminary results from unrelated and (as of yet) unreleased research will be shared. In the spring and autumn of 2017, a parallel project was conducted, aiming to examine the distribution of comics creatives in the American comics scene on a global level. To this end, a sample from the top-selling books of the industry (according to Diamond Distribution's numbers) was assembled: 400 books were chosen from four years (2000, 2005, 2010 and 2015, with 100 titles each) through a graduated random sampling method based on each publisher's market share that year. Although the direct market was the main focus of the dissertation, a few collected editions and *manga* slipped through due to its unsatisfactory diversity in earlier years. After each selection, the name, country of residence and gender of each creative (writer and penciler) involved with the book within the calendar year was collected using a netnographic approach identical to the one employed for this thesis.

The first observations were solely about the various roles involved in the creative process. It was found that there were significant fluctuations in the number of creatives employed throughout the period: for pencilers, a 34,46% dip was recorded between 2000 and 2005, a 47,89% increase was noted from 2005 to 2010 and a 35,24% fall the next five years; similar results, though less severe, were found for the writers, with a 39,29% drop, 36,84% increase and 34,34% fall respectively. As a result, the ratios of pencilers to writers progressed erratically, despite stabilizing twice: from 1,70 (for 2000) to 1,76 (for 2005), and from 2,14 (for 2010) to 2,12 for 2015. Finally, artists practicing both saw their numbers decrease steadily throughout the last fifteen years, ending up with less than half of their original population in 2015.

In terms of geography, the results were a further confirmation of Norcliffe and Rendace's (2003) findings: initially centered on the Americas, Europe, Oceania and Asia and unevenly expanded in the next fifteen years, the talent pool of comics creatives is a world-wide one. While about half of the creators are from North America, Europe, Asia, Oceania and the rest of the Americas are represented, along with a sole South African creator. They also got progressively more diverse: the residence of all individuals was North American for 74,12% of the sample in 2000 to 64,95% in 2015, although the broadening was significantly greater for artists than for writers. Several factors could be responsible for them: the

[82] This was further complicated by a real name which all English speakers asked considered obscure in origin and either unidentifiable or male-sounding in terms of gender.

evolution of communications technologies, the cultivation of local comics scenes and the use of traditional emigration routes to the US.

While the parameter of gender was omitted from the results of the project due to time constraints, the data can be utilized here for comparison. Women in mainstream comics accounted for 4,04%, 3,77% and 4,88% of all workers in 2000, 2005 and 2010 respectively, but a dramatic jump was made in 2015, in which they comprised 10,88% of the total workforce. They were also much more easily employed in writing positions until recently, with percentages of 5,98%, 5,88% and 6,67% of the total writing workforce for 2000, 2005 and 2010 respectively; their artistic percentages for the same years were 2,05%, 0,64% and 3,81%. This trend changed in 2015, when their industry-wide percentages were 10,05% for writing and 10,89% for artistic credits. The divide between the genders is evident, and although great progress has been made in the last few years, there is still a substantial bias in the employment of men, probably owing to a series of factors (mentioned in the literature review) making the market unattractive for female workers.

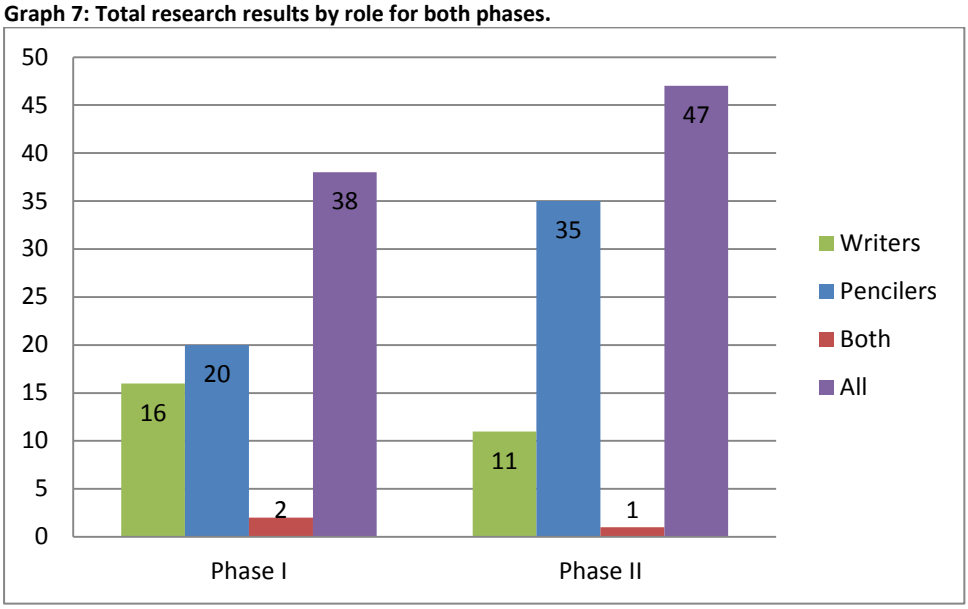
### 4.2.2. Official Creators: Graphs and Mapped Data

The first sample examined here are the official creators of the IDW "Transformers" comics, in its two "Phases": from the start of the line in 2005 until the end of 2011 and from the beginning of 2012 to 2018. In total, 376 issues of comics were examined, 132 for "Phase I" and 244 for "Phase II"[83], with 72 individual creatives from 16 different countries. In the following paragraphs, they will be examined for their role in production, their artistic origins, their gender, their longevity within the line and their country of residence, as well as potential recorded movements between multiple ones. Geographic data from the two different epochs will also be mapped and inspected more thoroughly.

The end result in regards to role can be seen in the following graph (Graph 7):

[83] This final count was done in April 30, 2018, with the latest release being "Optimus Prime" #18. While largely complete, it missed some extra credits for already established creatives (Jack Lawrence, Alex Milne, Livio Ramondelli, Sara Pitre-Durocher) and one oversized one-shot written and drawn by Nick Roche with assists by Brendan Cahill and the additional participation of UK artist Geoff Senior, famous for his work on the Marvel-era comics.

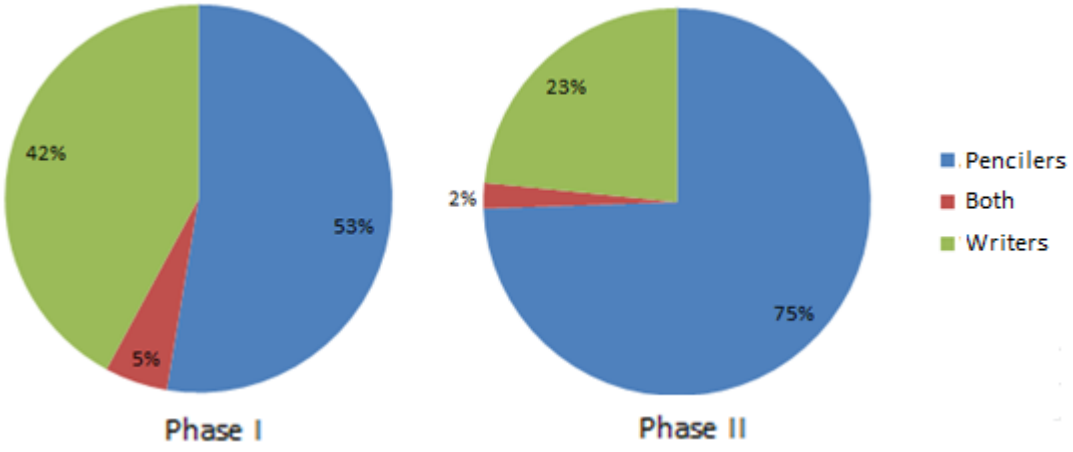
**Graph 7: Total research results by role for both phases.**




While the production of individual issues was nearly doubled between phases, the increase in number of creatives wasn't nearly as dramatic (23,68%), and varies considerably amongst the difference positions. The ones who benefited unequivocally were the artists, with a 75% rise in numbers, which is rather dissimilar to their erratic participation in the rest of the industry in the same time frame. The writers, on the other hand, saw a decrease of 31,25%, which might align more with their industry-wide trends, but is explained by the stability and long-term employment of a handful of writers throughout the last six years. The artists practicing both, already the most unstable position of the industry, struggled most of all, with only one representative in "Phase II"). While still following the fluctuations of the larger industry as detailed elsewhere -a rise in total numbers is accompanied by a rise in artists specifically, cartoonists struggle as a rule-, the "Transformers" comics seem to be a system with their own, internal rules.

Another way in which the importance of pencilers is shown is through overall percentage, shown below (Graph 8):

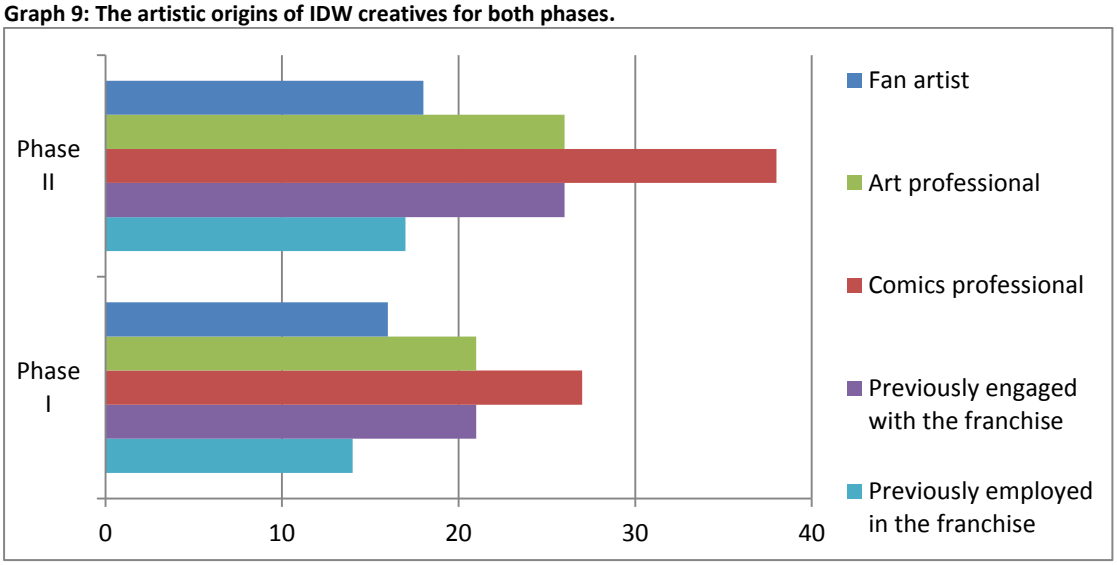
**Graph 8: The distribution of IDW creatives by role in percentage form for both phases.**



The count reveals a big percentage loss for writers and an equal gain for artists, but the real indicator is the ratio of pencilers to writers going from 1,25 to 3,18 “Phase II”, the largest recorded number of both projects. The first view is imbalanced compared to previous research, meaning that there was either a shortage of artists or a surfeit of writers (and thus many contributing voices), who are much less stable as a result. The situation is reversed in “Phase II”, indicating a surplus of artists for fewer writers. That, along with the existence of only two individuals who have switched roles or worked in both positions, shows that the observed rift between the disciplines is still present in the line, even in a greater extent than in wider mainstream comics, but also its larger dependence on artists.

But what are the origins of these creatives? During research, broad typologies were glimpsed and graphed as shown below (Graph 9):

**Graph 9: The artistic origins of IDW creatives for both phases.**



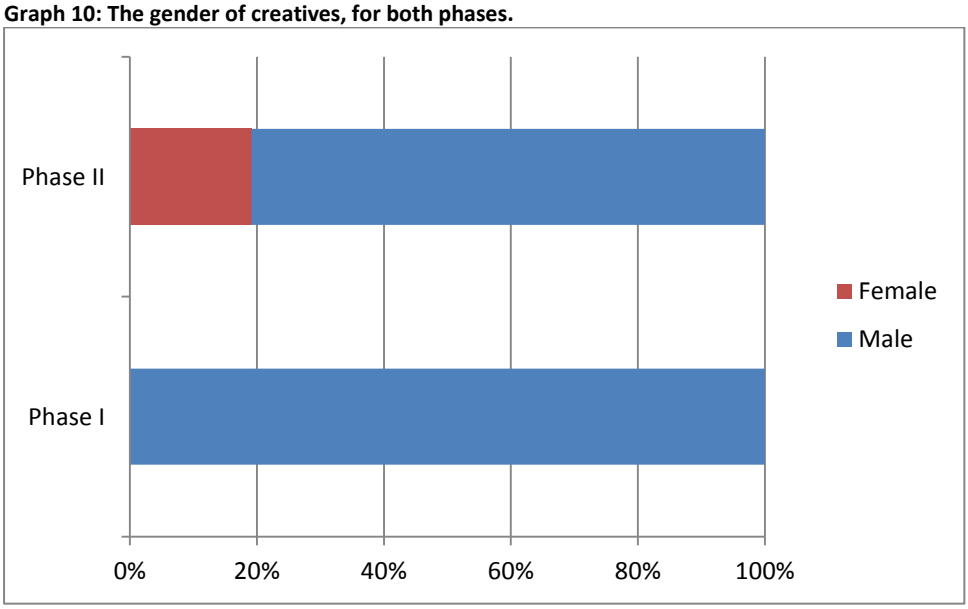

While the recruitment of artists with experience in comics is unsurprising, it is the other major groups who are more interesting: commercial and fan artists. The first group, about half of the creatives for both phases (55,26% and 55,32% respectively), had prior experience in other artistic fields –with assignments as diverse as scriptwriting, film production, concept art and graphic design, but also package illustration and toy design. Another significant portion of the workforce (around 40%) had prior experience as fans, either through organized fandom or as solitary individuals -Jack Lawrence, James Roberts and Nick Roche were members of the TransMasters UK fan collective, Casey Coller and Priscilla Tramontano were discovered thanks to the “Mosaic” project, Kotteri and Sarah Stone became famous online for their fan art, and Livio Ramondelli and Kei Zama were approached in conventions.

The final categorization was seeing whether the creatives had any previous involvement with the franchise, which is true for about 55% of the sample, and for 36%, it was in official capacity. Amongst them one finds people with long service to the franchise, in

multiple comic (Josh Burcham, Don Figueroa, Guido Guidi[84], Alex Milne, James Raiz and Rob Ruffolo had previously worked for Dreamwave Publications; Dan Abnett started his career in the 1980s Marvel UK title; Dan Khanna, Hayato Sakamoto and Naoto Tsushima were artists for the Fun Publications Collector's Club magazine) and media iterations (Flint Dille was a writer for the original 1980s cartoon; Simon Furman has contributed to a variety of comics, television and prose "Transformers" projects starting with the 1980s Marvel run; Marcelo Matere has designed toys and illustrated packaging; Sara Pitre-Durocher started as an illustrator for a "Transformers" mobile game; Maighread Scott was a writer for "Transformers: Prime" and its following shows) and spin-off materials (John Barber and Andrew Griffith first collaborated in the Bay films tie-ins) have functioned as gateways for a few of these artists. However sporadic, their interest is much more evident and focused, and they constitute a definite presence amongst the official work force of the comics, although the overwhelming trend is towards artists rather than writers. It should also be noted that some creatives apply to more than one category, such as Andrew Griffith being discovered through "Mosaic" before starting work as a penciler for a movie tie-in mini-series. These categories remained consistent throughout the two phases, with some light changes -from 42,11 to 38,30 for fan artists and from 71,05 to 80,85 for comics professionals.

The gender of the participants and how it is connected to the above is also worth examining, as depicted below (Graph 10):

**Graph 10: The gender of creatives, for both phases.**




The significant rise in 19% in participation is evident, but also worth breaking down in terms of the categories mentioned so far. It is obvious that all contributors in "Phase I" were male; while there were female artists in the creative teams (colorists Joana Lafuente and Priscila Tramontano started working for interiors in the books in 2008 and 2009 respectively), they did not occupy positions of maximum visibility. It is also interesting to note that both began employment through the fandom, as participants of the "Mosaic" fan

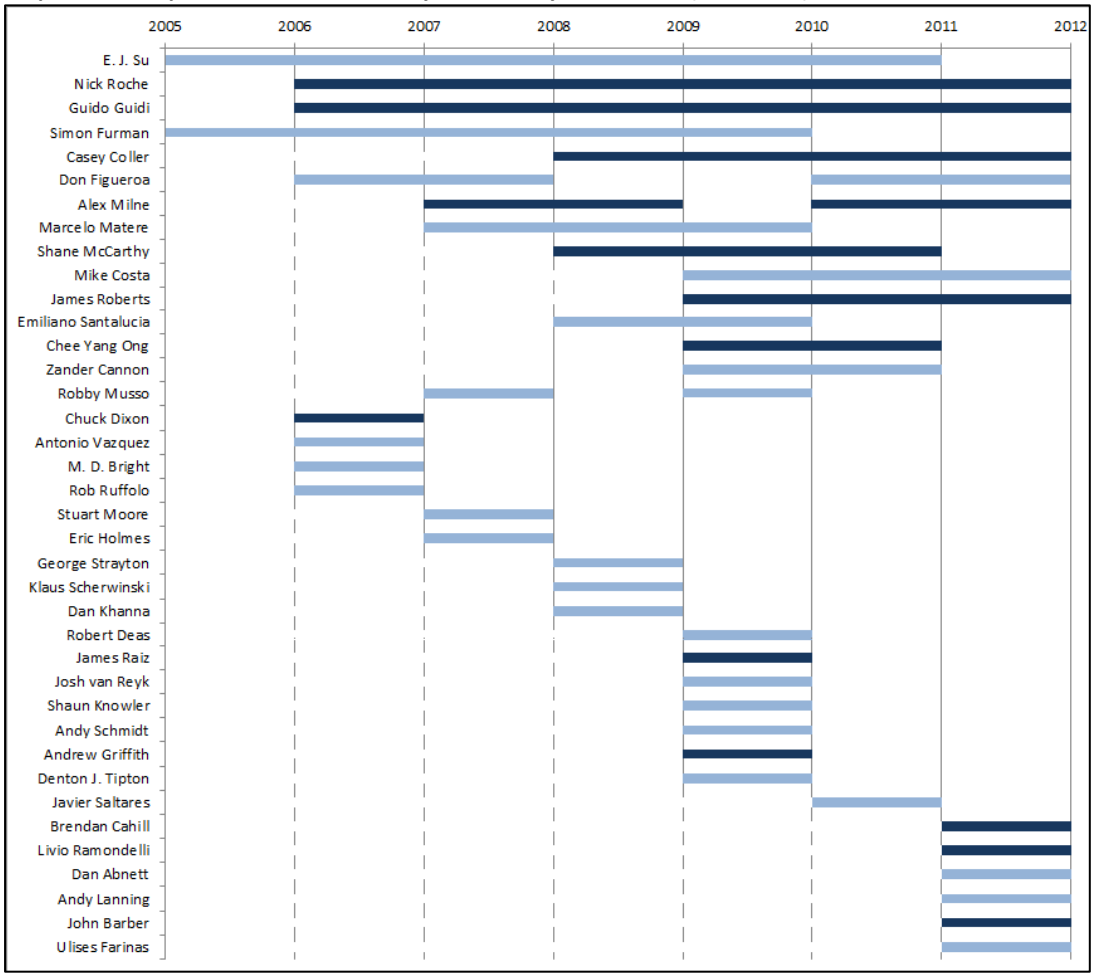
[84] Figueroa and Guidi were specifically mentioned by interviewee E. Gauntt (February 28th 2018) as arising from online fan circles circa 2002 and being employed by Dreamwave, who "began snatching up fan artists to work on official books" and seem to have set a trend for the following years.

project, and their first credits were alongside fellow male fans, artists and writers respectively. This corresponds with earlier stats regarding the employment of female writers and artists in the industry, which are even more dire here. That changes with the total introduction of 9 different women by the end of April 2018, starting with writer Mairghread Scott and artist Sarah Stone in 2014[85], ending in a total of 2 writers and 7 artists, with at least two (Kei Zama and Sara Pitre-Durocher) even becoming the main artists on titles "Optimus Prime" and "Till All Are One" in 2016, and thus their staples. These numbers line up better with the state of industry in 2015, and even surpass it significantly. In another point of divergence, women have started being employed in artistic rather than writing positions, though once again, their percentages are greater in comparison to the rest of the mainstream comics world: women accounted for 19,44% of artists and 16,67% of writers in "Phase II". As for their origins, 6 (66,67%) were fans, the same number with professional comics creatives, while 3 (33,33%) were occupied with the arts previously (television animation writing and digital illustration specifically) –in general, 7 (77,78%) were engaged in the franchise beforehand, and 2 (22,22%) in official capacity. Apart from corresponding with previous findings about women's participation in the industry up until 2015, all the above goes to show just how friendlier the entire line has become to women in the last six years.

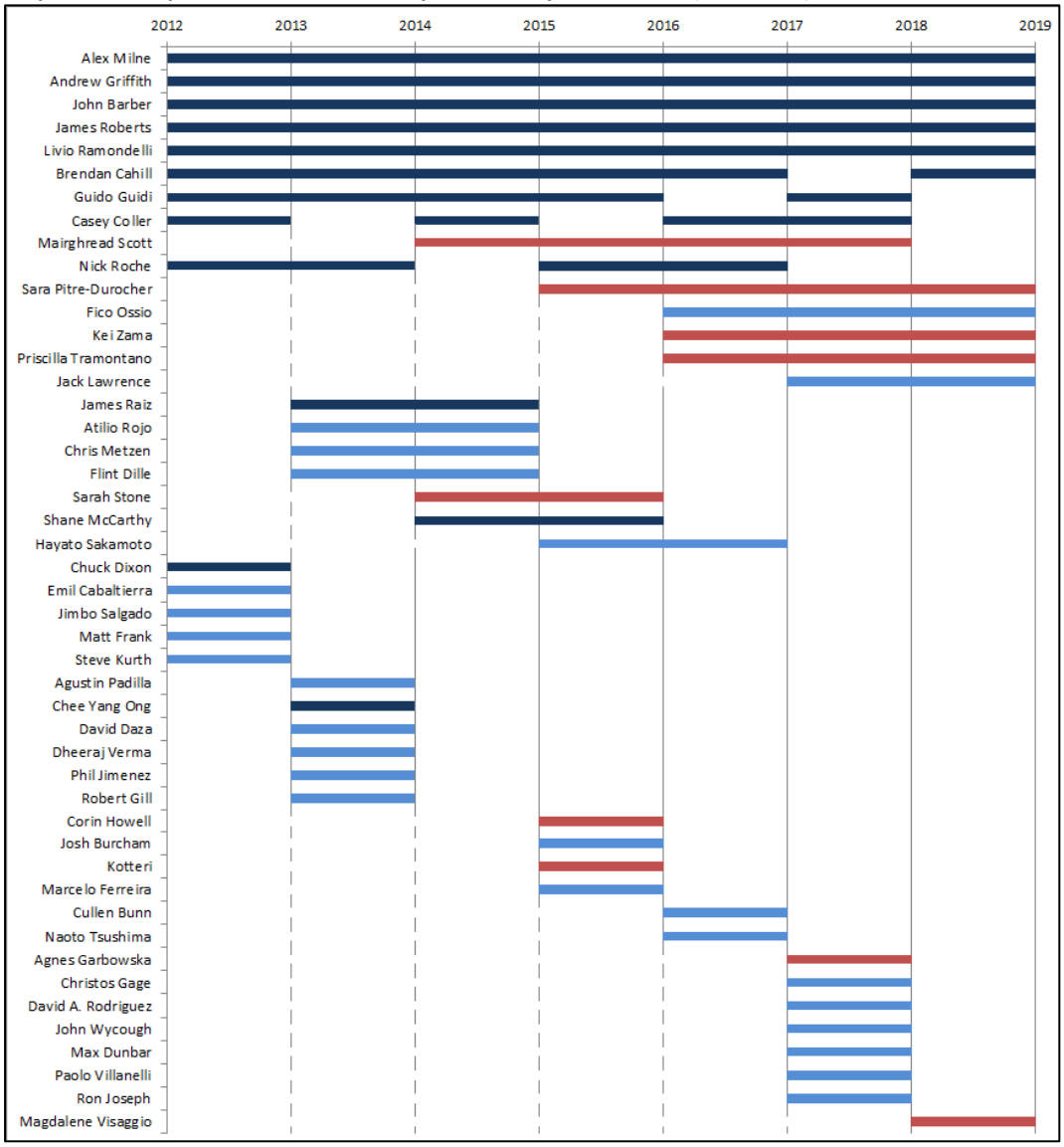
Another way to inspect the sample was through the individuals' involvement in number of years, as seen in the charts for each phase (Graph 11 and Graph 12) below – people participating in both periods are shown in deep blue, while the progress bar of female creatives was colored red:

[85] It is a technicality, but it is thanks to the "Transformers: Mosaic" strips that female artists were introduced to major artistic positions in official "Transformers" comics, thanks to some of them being reprinted on some of IDW's books. As a result, New Zealander Linda Carmask, Australian Kimberly Petrie and American Lindsay Smith became the first women to write comics with the characters, draw them and do both, in October 2007, August 2008 and June 2008 respectively. The formal introduction of female talent outside of the line inspected here came in November 2012, with co-writer Mairghread Scott in the 4-issue mini-series "Transformers Prime: Rage of the Dinobots", penciled by Agustin Padilla. She went on to write the 8-issue continuation "Transformers Prime: Beast Hunters" alone (but with the same artistic collaborator), totaling a 12-issue tie-in to the television series of the same name.

**Graph 11: Participation of IDW creatives by number of years, Phase I (2005-2011).**



**Graph 12: Participation of IDW creatives by number of years, Phase II (2012-2018).**



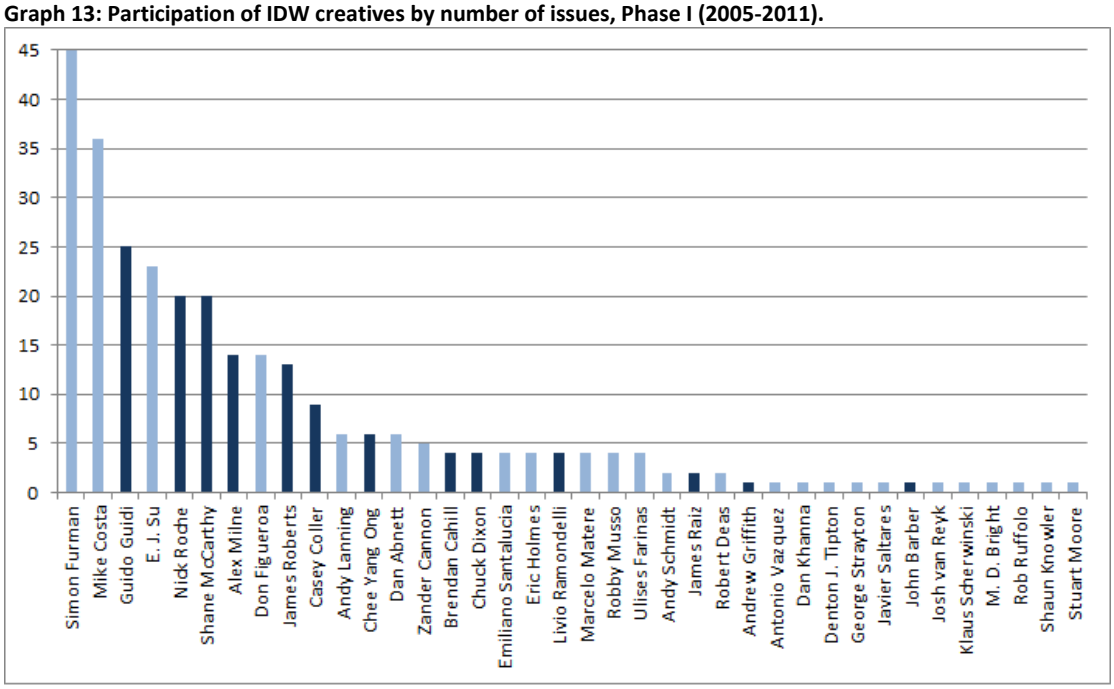

While the average presence of the creatives is for two years in each phase[86] and 3 (rounded up from 2,653) for the entire 13-year span, only 23 of the 72 total creatives had tenures that were equal to or surpassed the number (with 13 of them appearing for both phases). Amongst them, 15 were professional artists in other areas beforehand, 16 were fans and 17 had been involved specifically with comics; in total, 18 had been previously engaged with the property, and 12 had done so in an official capacity. It is also worth noting that this group is composed largely of artists (16), while there are only 6 writers and only one person who managed to switch positions or accomplish both tasks. In general, however, both roles tend to have a more stable presence throughout the years (5,5 years for prolific artists compared to 2,64 for the rest of the line and 5,83 for the same groups of writers compared to 2,43) against the rest of the industry, although a few artists tend to take small year-long breaks (only one took a two-year absence during "Phase II") before returning. After their introduction in 2014, moreover, a few women have been able to carve out

[86] There is some increased stability with "Phase II", as its average is 2,13 years against "Phase I"'s 1,9 years, but the results were rounded up to an even 2.

longer-than-average careers in both writing (Maighread Scott) and art (Sara Pitre-Durocher, Kei Zama, Priscilla Tramontano, Sarah Stone) duties. As for the rest of the artists (less so the writers), their introduction often coincides with special events and material in addition to the main books (e.g. the event series "Dark Cybertron", "First Strike" and the one-shots that led up to them). All the above point to the industry's tendency to hire reliable people and the ability of writers and artists to jump into comics from a variety of fields, but also the passing interest in the property of some and the search for knowledgeable and enthusiastic personnel on the part of editorial, with a special dependency on artists; even then, a select group of people (of both genders) with knowledge and devotion to the line can manage to survive long in it, and the recruitment of professional comics creators (both men and women at about the same rates after 2014) for less consistent assignments supplements their numbers.

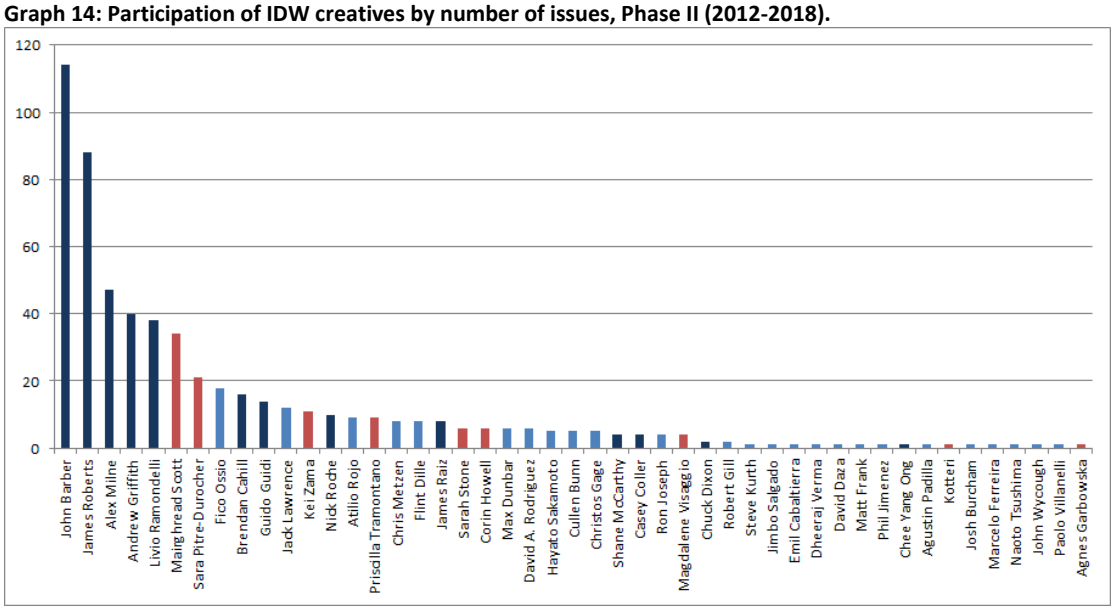
Two new charts were created to examine the individual productivity of the sample for both phases, using the same coloring conventions for the number of issues each creative has been credited for[87] (Graph 13 and Graph 14):

**Graph 13: Participation of IDW creatives by number of issues, Phase I (2005-2011).**




[87] This method is problematic, since some issues are bigger than average (annuals, oversized one-shots) or are comprised of multiple stories (specials). As a result, the work of creatives like Priscilla Tramontano, who contributed to two Annuals for "Optimus Prime", Livio Ramondelli, who painted three long-form one-shots alongside his main duties, and Nick Roche, who scripted and drew almost the entirety of the "Wreckers" saga, could be considered undervalued in this count.

**Graph 14: Participation of IDW creatives by number of issues, Phase II (2012-2018).**




With an average duration of 12,12 issues (7,71 for "Phase I" and 12,34 for "Phase II", explained by the growth of the production), it seems only a small percentage of the sample has achieved long-term stability, at least in work for comics interiors. Out of all creatives, only 25% (18) have penned more than average issues, and a significant percentage of the sample (34,21%, or 13 individuals, from "Phase I", 34% or 16 people, from "Phase II", 36,11%, or 26 creatives, in total) have only done so for one issue, regardless of role -artists and writers seem to have a passing interest only in almost equal measure. On this upper echelon of productive creatives, while a lot of writers can be found amongst them in both phases (and the two most prolific writers leave even the busiest artists behind), so do a lot of artists, and although there is some correlation between the most productive and the most attentive ones, the relationship is not absolute, with some (Alex Milne, Andrew Griffith, Livio Ramondelli) achieving a balance and others (e.g. Nick Roche, Brandan Cahill) seemingly failing to do so. This logic, moreover, doesn't seem to apply to some of the women of the sample (Sara Pitre-Durocher, Kei Zama), as they have amassed multiple credits solely from one phase of the line. In any case, while the most valuable role in the creative process is reversed, the reappearance of specific individuals remains.

As for the geographic origin of these creatives, there is both an agreement with and deviation from previous research. The 72 creatives live and work in 16 different countries (4 for the writers, 13 for the pencilers and 2 for those practicing both), though while the talent attracted was indeed international, the diversity of the artists was notably greater than that of the rest –the writers originated only from Australia, Canada, the UK and USA. Their continents of origin also align with previous studies, as European, Asian and American (especially North American) talent is represented, along with some limited Oceanian presence, although there are more Asian creatives (India, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines and Taiwan) and the North American ones remain stable, if less than for the rest of the industry -amounting for 44,73 and 44,44% of the sample for just the US, combined to a total of 55,26 and 55,55% for each phase with Canada. The noteworthy participation of artists (particularly writers) from the United Kingdom and Ireland can lastly be explained thanks to the strong ties the countries have to the American scene (and the tradition of "British

Invasion" of comics talent), as well as the aforementioned cultivation of an artistic scene and fandom with the Marvel UK series.

Examining the sample a little closer and splitting it between writing and artistic personnel gives the following results, both shown with the Pretty Breaks visualization (Map 2 and Table 2, Map 3 and Table 3):

**Map 2: Changes in the number of pencilers by country between phases.**

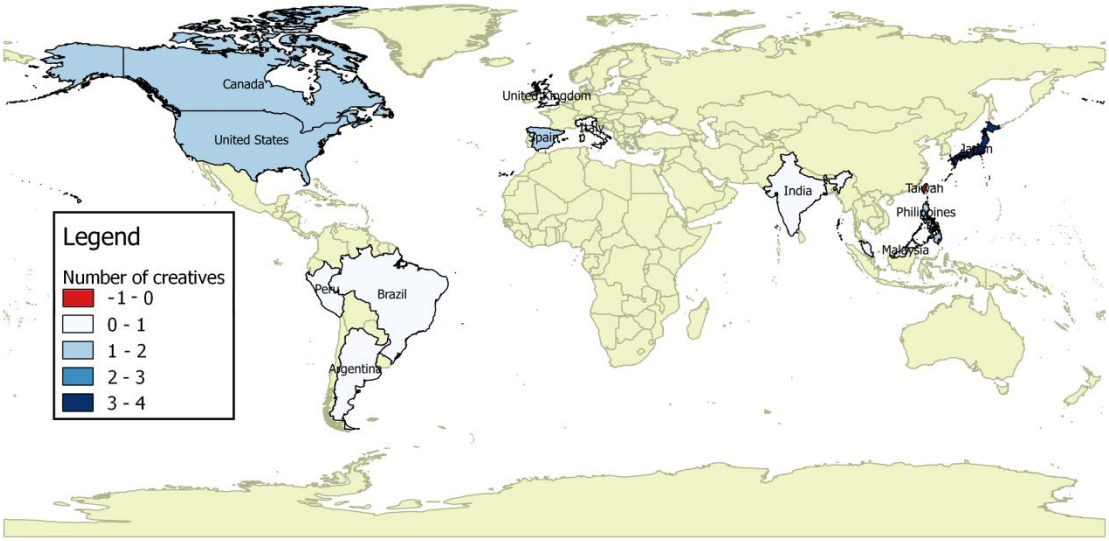



**Table 2: Absolute number of pencilers from each country in Phases I and II.**

| Country Name | # of pencilers in Phase I | # of pencilers in Phase II | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Argentina | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Brazil | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Canada | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| India | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Italy | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| Japan | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| Malaysia | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Peru | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Philippines | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Spain | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| Taiwan | 1 | 0 | -1 |
| UK | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| USA | 9 | 11 | 2 |

From the first map, the growth of the market is evident, contrary to the erratic patterns of the rest of the industry throughout the latest quinquennium. With the exception of Taiwan (and a creative who moved), there are no recorded losses anywhere, with the worst cases presenting a stable image of zero growth, in countries either at the edges of larger art scenes (Malaysia, Peru) or with already plentiful participation to the industry (Brazil, Italy, the UK). On the other end of the spectrum, both familiar areas such as western Europe (Spain) and south America (Argentina), as well as more obscure places, like south and southeast Asia (India, the Philippines), showed varied growth, though the lion's share

still belongs to north America (Canada and the US, with two new artists each). The case of Japan in east Asia needs to be singled out, due to its phenomenal growth of 4 different artists and its status as a major worldwide comics center with very little previous representation in the American industry (outside translated *manga*). This consistency could be explained as two-fold: both the same artists are continuously employed for the publisher and new ones are constantly brought over, in the context of a larger expansion of the job market for comics. The result is a noticeable growth in participation for Asian (from 5,26% of the "Phase I" workforce to 17,78% of the "Phase II" one) and South American personnel (from 5,26% to 8,89% respectively); even then, the development is largely witnessed in known corners of the comics world and the cultivation of internal talent continues apace, but the outside interest and its creatives' employment in new positions are evident.

**Map 3: Changes in the number of writers by country between phases.**

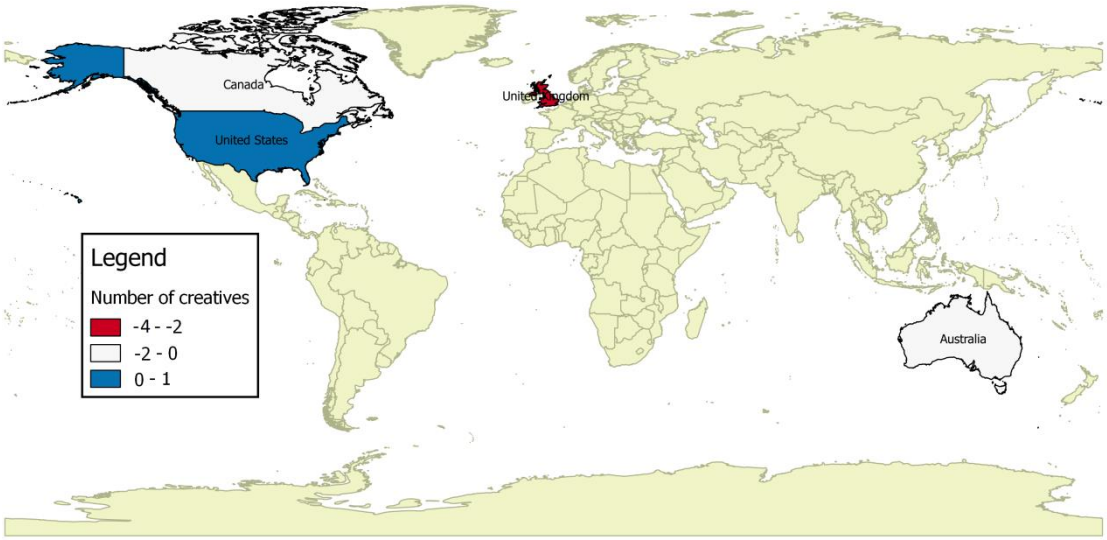



**Table 3: Absolute number of writers from each country in Phases I and II.**

| Country Name | # of writers in Phase I | # of writers in Phase II | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Australia | 2 | 1 | -1 |
| Canada | 1 | 0 | -1 |
| UK | 5 | 1 | -4 |
| USA | 8 | 9 | 1 |

As for the writers, the inverse phenomenon is observed, still centering around specific countries, although it seems to operate on its own rules, heavily impacted by the number of creatives being employed. Significantly smaller in number, the writing talent originates from only four countries (Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA, all developed countries with strong ties to America and a majority of English speakers), with loses and very small gains recorded for all of them. This is explained by the reduced number of writers between the two epochs, and even previously established hearts like the United Kingdom aren't unaffected. One could attribute the decreased participation of European talent (from 28,95% to 15,56% between phases) partly to this. It is also interesting to note that the only country gaining in talent in the United States, which, along with the country's strong presence in artists, shows the influence homegrown artists still have on the scene. From the rest, with the exception of the UK (owing to the presence of writers like James Roberts throughout the years), no country has managed to create a long tradition of writers for the

series, or even creatives in general in the case of Australia. The result is the prioritization of local talent at the expense of other potential voices, even from a limited pool, to the point of being considered an entirely separate scene from the pencilers.

Another angle of examination is through the ratio of writers to pencilers (with the addition of cartoonists) for both phases, using the Jenks classification (Map 4 and Map 5):

**Map 4: Ratio of writers to pencilers for each country (Phase I).**


**Map 5: Ratio of writers to pencilers for each country (Phase II).**


The fact that so few (only five) of the countries in the sample can contribute to this category is the first obvious observation to be made. While in most cases this is due to an absence of writing talent from the area, there are isolated cases where it is the artists who are absent (Australia). The shrinking of the talent pool between the two phases is also noteworthy, with Canada and Germany disappearing from the second map. There are also signs of instability, as the Canadian ratio is small and the German one is owed to a single contributor with multiple roles, contradicting the claims of the previous project and its rise in participating countries after 2010. Finally, with the notable exception of multiple English writers (with brief stints) in “Phase I”, the artists always outnumber the writers, indicating the latter role as more valuable and sought-after by editorial than the other. Despite that, there is a significant consistency for select “western” countries (the USA, Ireland, the UK), and even with a significant drop for the latter one, there is evident interest in the property from some of its traditional markets and dedicated artists in them (e.g., Nick Roche is the sole Irish creative with many credits in the line).

However, focusing on individual credits and aggregating them by country reveals a different picture. The differences between "Phase I" and "Phase II" were mapped, and are shown below, split between writing and art credits (Map 6 and Table 4, Map 7 and Table 5):

**Map 6: Number of issues written by country; comparison between phases.**

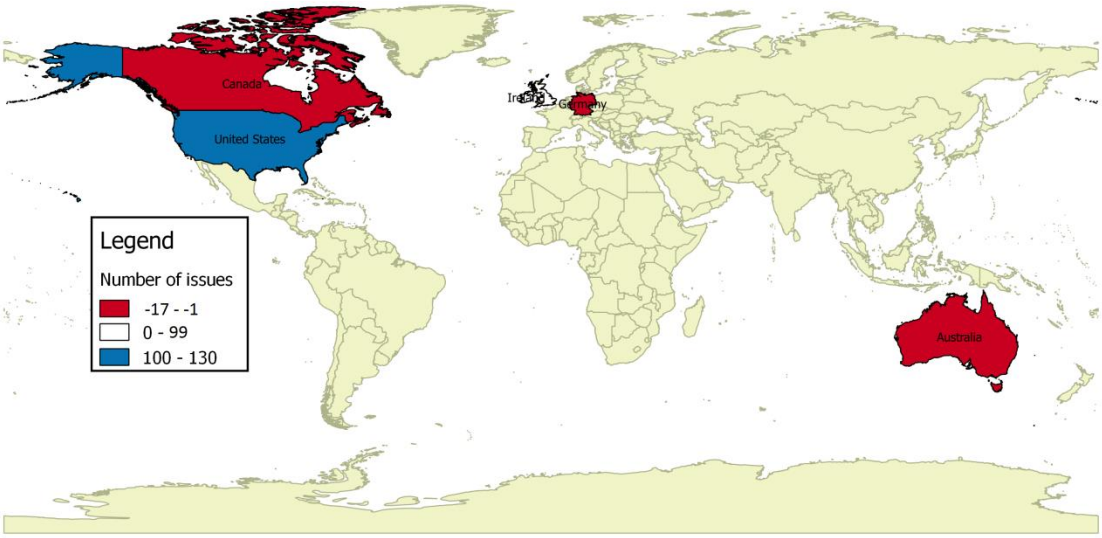



**Table 4: Absolute number of issues written from each country in Phases I and II.**

| Country Name | # of issues in Phase I | # of issues in Phase II | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Australia | 21 | 4 | -17 |
| Canada | 1 | 0 | -1 |
| Germany | 1 | 0 | -1 |
| Ireland | 7 | 7 | 0 |
| UK | 74 | 88 | 14 |
| USA | 51 | 181 | 130 |

**Map 7: Number of issues drawn by country; comparison between phases.**

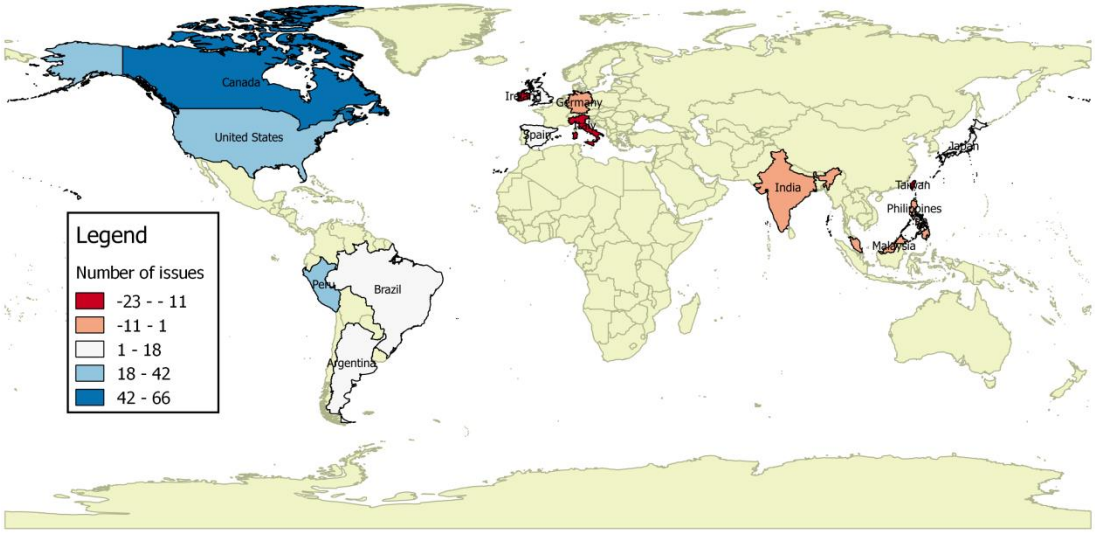



**Table 5: Absolute number of issues penciled from each country in Phases I and II.**

| Country Name | # of issues in Phase I | # of issues in Phase II | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Argentina | 0 | 18 | 18 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Brazil | 4 | 10 | 6 |
| Canada | 17 | 83 | 66 |
| Germany | 1 | 0 | -1 |
| India | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Ireland | 20 | 9 | -11 |
| Italy | 29 | 15 | -14 |
| Japan | 0 | 18 | 18 |
| Malaysia | 6 | 1 | -5 |
| Peru | 1 | 40 | 39 |
| Phillipines | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Spain | 1 | 11 | 10 |
| Taiwan | 23 | 0 | -23 |
| UK | 2 | 12 | 10 |
| USA | 42 | 84 | 42 |

From the above, the industry's inclusion of Asian artists is disputed, while the participation of South American and European talent is solidified thanks to individual contributions, as some create from countries without an overall strong presence. The shrinking of the writing pool (Australia and Canada disappeared in "Phase II") did not affect strictly US talent, and in fact gave them more chances to participate. Interest is also maintained in the UK and Ireland, countries that remain stable or experience some additional growth from their dominance in "Phase I". On the artistic side of the argument, while about half of the artists of the sample came from within the US and their contributions amount to a substantial portion of the production, the biggest growth was experienced by Canada, possibly owing to the increased presence of main artists Alex Milne and Sara Pitre-Durocher. The same could be said for Peru (homeland of Andrew Griffith), Japan (where Kei Zama lives and works), Brazil and Argentina (where Priscila Tramontano and Fico Ossio reside respectively). In Asia and Europe, with the exception of Spain (a known recent hearth of talent) and the UK (where main artists Jack Lawrence operates from), the rest of the countries contribute very sporadically, with one issue or less, are sometimes lost between phases (Germany) or experience losses due to a main artist having a less prominent position in production (Italian Guido Guidi participated less in "Phase II" than in "Phase I"). The case of Ireland also needs to be noted, as its representative (Nick Roche) turned to writing rather than drawing, indicating his mobility in the creative process and not a loss of interest. In general, creative talent seems to flourish regardless of country of residence, though still following some notable patterns of major artistic scenes.

What is also interesting to note is the relative movement specific individuals were able to achieve, with 4 of them showing some mobility. There is some recorded mobility for two creatives with mixed, non-USA heritage: one from Poland to the USA and one Greek-American who finally settled in the States, and both of these moves were completed before the period examined. As for the other two clearly documented trips, they involved traveling from Taiwan to the USA in 2010, from Scotland to Sweden around 2015 and from Brazil to Canada in 2017, all done for work-related reasons, though both outside of comics, long after the creatives had stopped working for them. Another artist's location also seemed to fluctuate between the USA and Peru, his current location. This comes in sharp contrast to

earlier results of 86 individuals changing their location in a 1015-strong sample (0,08%), and could be explained thanks to the multiple avenues of employment these artists rely on, as well as their personal support networks. Both major comics and geek culture markets (the USA, Canada, Brazil) and more minor ones (Peru, Sweden) were the final destination of the trips examined, indicating both the possibility of successful remote employment and the gradual development of pop culture production in the periphery of its more "traditional" centers. Even if scarce in comparison to the sample, these examples show artists do not depend on comics for income but pursue alternative paths, and it is thanks to these that they can choose their residence.

Summarizing the above, the more careful examination of a specific comics sub-scene revealed its workings in regards to the place of writers and artists in greater detail. In terms of roles, there is a much greater emphasis placed on pencilers, explained both by the constant introduction of new talent (largely unaffected by the wider industry's crises) and its skewered relationship to (many at first, few later) writers. The participation of a portion of these artists in the line was also erratic, as many were introduced for emergencies; the most persistent ones, however, amassed multiple credits, indicating a dedication to the subject matter and a steady environment they benefited from. This was also shown in their artistic origins, with many of them hailing from fan circles or having previously been engaged with the franchise in some capacity. The gender of artists was at first an indicator of regressive attitudes, but the exclusion was later corrected: women were introduced in earnest only in 2014, but have since managed to become both stable presences (on both writing and artistic duties) and passing contributors, to the point of being employed in greater percentages than for the rest of the industry. As for their geographic placement, other than the increased presence of North American artists, the global dispersion observed by Norcliffe and Rendace (2003) is verified. However, it is still dependent on productive individuals and already observed cultural influences –European (particularly British and Irish) and South American talent find ways to participate, but Asian does in small numbers (with the notable exception of Japan). The gap (even the geographic one, with English-speaking countries only contributing in writing talent) between roles remains, although isolated individuals managed to rise in new positions during their long-term tenures. All the above indicates a global interest in the property, a constant demand for artistic contributors with varied experience (especially concerning knowledge of the subject matter), gestures of inclusivity towards female creators and the possibility of artistic evolution for the individuals.

### 4.2.3. Fan Population: Graphs and Mapped Data

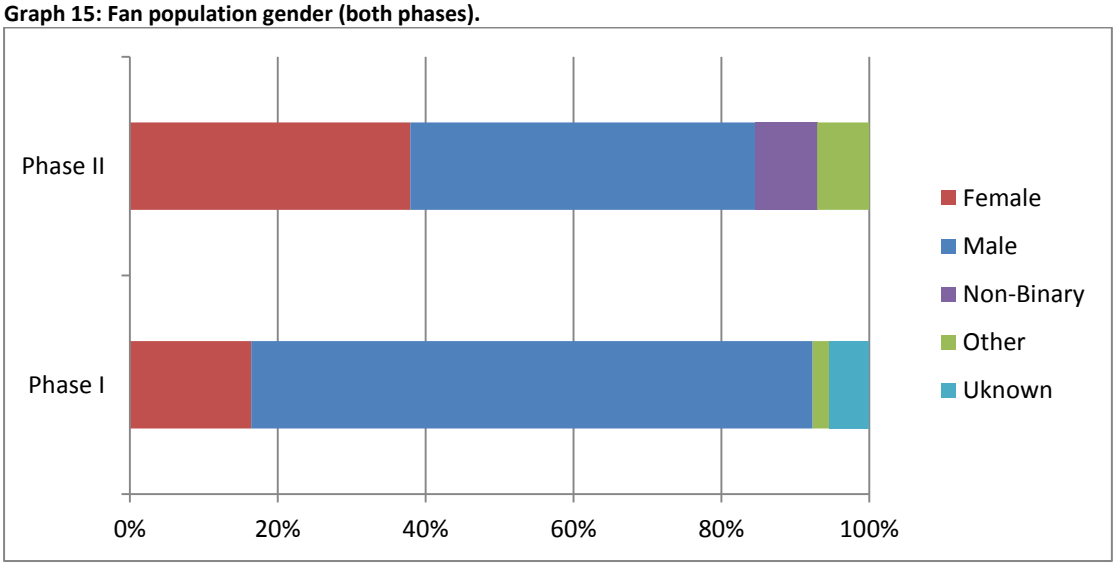
The second part of this thesis concerns the geographic and gender identity of the fans of "Transformers", glimpsed through two different samples. The first is the participants of "Transformers: Mosaic", a seven-year-long webcomic "Transformers" project that allows a glimpse into (part of) the franchise's past fan-base. Originating as one-page comics created and posted on the Allspark forums, it soon garnered interest from members and moderators of the forum but was well-received enough to attract the attention of professional creators (IDW Editor-in-Chief Chris Ryall is mentioned) and later became "open for universal and indefinite contribution". It debuted officially on June 18, 2007 and lasted until June 2012),

with the strips being circulated, apart from IDW's Message Boards, on other major message boards specific to the property, Seibertron and TFW2005 (2018). Its timing and space-specific circulation provides, therefore, an excellent opportunity to study the evolution of "Transformers" fandom before the change in creative direction for the comics in 2012 and the (hypothesized) advent of a new wave of fans in 2013 and later. The second sample is an online survey of seventeen questions that was circulated on social media and "Transformers"-specific forums. While the participants were asked to briefly elaborate on a variety of topics, a few will be discussed here and in the next chapter: gender, country of residence, initial attraction to the property, language use and changes observed within the fandom. These two will then be compared between the previously established epochs (2005-2011 and 2012-2018), to witness any changes to the fandom's makeup.

One note, however, needs to be made on the number of individuals involved with "Mosaic" and those examined for the purposes of this dissertation. Out of a total number of 327 fans (88 writers, 137 artists and 102 individuals who practiced both), only 262 (52, 120 and 90 respectively) could be identified by their gender and country of residence. DeviantArt, one of the main sites hosting the project, allows its users a significant measure of privacy, including hushing up their personal information, and in the intervening years between the end of "Mosaic" and the start of the research, some accounts have been emptied or deactivated. Furthermore, while all participants in the project had to be registered in the IDW forums, this was a later regulation, and their closure removed them as viable sources as well. While some names assumed to be real were used and one could infer a gender from them, as was done in previous research (McKenna & Bargh, 1998), it was avoided here. Therefore, all analyses will only use these numbers of securely matched persons as data, respecting the privacy of the participants.

The first parameter examined is that of gender, shown in the following graph (Graph 15):

**Graph 15: Fan population gender (both phases).**




The change between epochs is significant, but becomes even more apparent when analyzing the absolute numbers. For the first phase, these findings conform to some

preconceived notions about the audience and fandom of a "boy's only" property: out of a sample of 262 individuals, the vast majority (199) self-identified as male, followed by a not insignificant minority (16%) of female fans (43), people responding to other identities (6) and 14 participants who didn't display any gender identification. The differences in comparison to the "Mosaic" distribution are evident from the survey results: after about a decade, the fandom is much more diverse in terms of gender. Out of a 302-strong sample, 139 were self-identified male, 113 were female, 25 were non-binary and 21 responded to other gender identities (amongst which 9 considered themselves agender, while other options mentioned once or twice were agenderfluid, androgyne, demi-female, genderflux and genderqueer, intergender, transgender and other).

Their geographic spread is also worth inquiring. Mapping the individuals from the two different fan samples results in the following map (Map 8 and Table 6):

**Map 8: Absolute number of fans gained or lost between phases.**

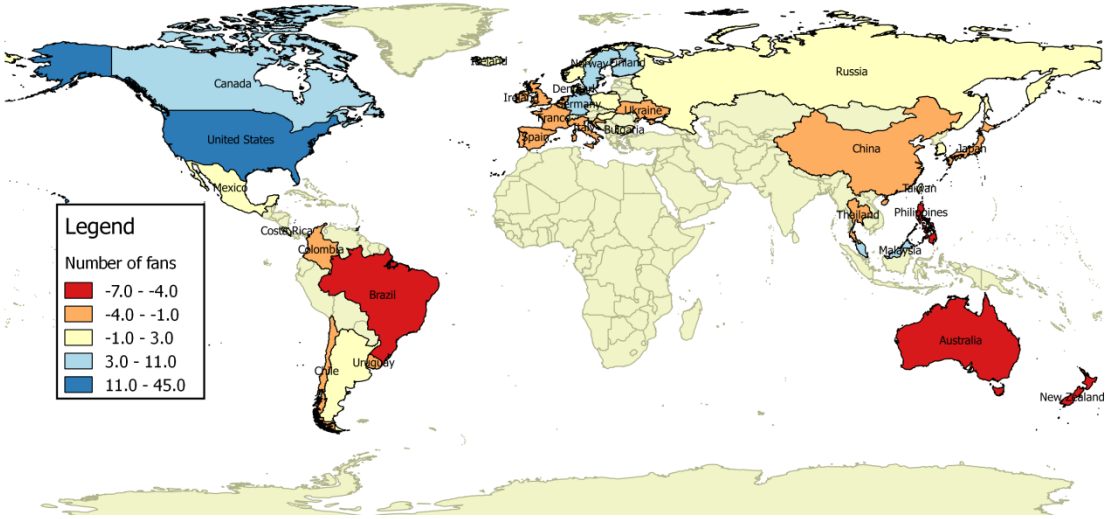



**Table 6: Absolute number of fans residing in each country in Phases I and II.**

| Country Name | Number of fans in Phase I | Number of fans in Phase II | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| USA | 107 | 152 | 45 |
| Sweden | 2 | 13 | 11 |
| Canada | 16 | 23 | 7 |
| Germany | 2 | 8 | 6 |
| Finland | 1 | 6 | 5 |
| Malaysia | 0 | 5 | 5 |
| Russia | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| Argentina | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Hungary | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Iceland | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Bulgaria | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Costa Rica | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Denmark | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Mexico | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Norway | 0 | 1 | 1 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Taiwan | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Trinidad and Tobago | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Poland | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| Singapore | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| South Korea | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Belgium | 1 | 0 | -1 |
| Colombia | 1 | 0 | -1 |
| Croatia | 1 | 0 | -1 |
| France | 2 | 1 | -1 |
| The Netherlands | 5 | 4 | -1 |
| Portugal | 2 | 1 | -1 |
| Thailand | 1 | 0 | -1 |
| Ukraine | 1 | 0 | -1 |
| Uruguay | 1 | 0 | -1 |
| China | 2 | 0 | -2 |
| Spain | 3 | 1 | -2 |
| UK | 49 | 47 | -2 |
| Chile | 3 | 0 | -3 |
| Ireland | 5 | 2 | -3 |
| Italy | 8 | 5 | -3 |
| Japan | 4 | 1 | -3 |
| New Zealand | 4 | 0 | -4 |
| Brazil | 5 | 0 | -5 |
| Australia | 16 | 9 | -7 |
| Philippines | 8 | 1 | -7 |

The fan sample boasts by far the most impressive distribution of countries in the project, even if it showcases similar losses and gains. A number of new countries belonging to the broader European (Belgium, Croatia, France, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Poland, Portugal, Ukraine) and (South) American regions (Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay), along with Asian participants (from China, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand) and a small Oceanic community (New Zealand), appear in the "Phase I" map, indicating a world-wide awareness of the property. In observing differences, it is apparent that, while the greatest gains between phases can be observed in North America (Canada and the USA, often considered "traditional" geek culture centers), Europe (Germany, Finland, Sweden) and Asia (Malaysia) exhibit considerable growth. Small rises in the number of fans and general stability (with minimal losses) is prevalent in the same areas, more specifically western (Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Portugal), eastern (Hungary, Poland, Ukraine) and northern (Iceland, Norway) Europe, the Balkans (Bulgaria, Croatia), east (South Korea, Taiwan) and southeast (Singapore, Thailand) Asia, as well as the rest of the Americas, especially in the south (Argentina, Costa Rica, Colombia, Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay). The cases of Australia, Brazil, New Zealand and the Philippines show instability in the peripheries of geek

culture and indicate an imbalanced fandom, and so does the continuous exclusion of continents such as Africa or parts of South Asia.

The final parameter worth looking into is the year of introduction into the fandom by country of residence. From the survey answers, the earliest year of entrance into the fandom was recorded for each country, and the results were mapped as shown below (Map 9 and Table 7):

**Map 9: Year of first fan appearance in 2018 survey by country.**

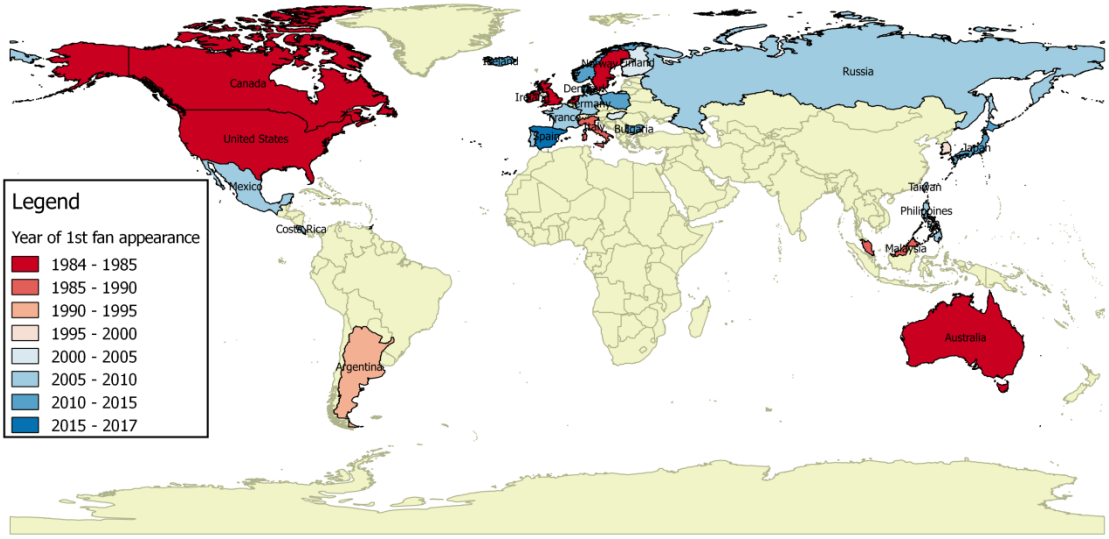



**Table 7: The top and bottom five countries with fans appearing in the sample from the 2018 survey.**

| 5 Earliest Countries | | 5 Latest Countries | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Country Name** | **Year** | **Country Name** | **Year** |
| USA | 1984 | Singapore | 2013 |
| Canada | 1984 | Norway | 2014 |
| British Islands (UK and Ireland) | 1984 | Poland | 2014 |
| Sweden | 1984 | Japan | 2015 |
| The Netherlands | 1984 | Spain | 2017 |

The above observations are put into greater perspective, lining up with the history of the property in certain areas as mentioned in literature. The first remark that is made apparent from the map is a divide between the countries that got acquainted with the property through its initial 1980s run and almost the rest of the sample. 1984 saw the brand's introduction to the US, the UK and Canada, as well as Sweden, the Netherlands and Australia, and Italy followed one year later. The following decade saw little expansion, with Argentina and Malaysia being the only two memorable examples. While there was some expansion at the beginning of the 2000s (as Finnish, Hungarian and South Korean children watched the *anime* releases of the franchise), it was 2007 that became a breakthrough year, with fans from France, Germany, Mexico, Portugal, Russia, Taiwan and Trinidad and Tobago joining in, probably propelled by the promotion and worldwide distribution of the first live-action film. After that, and aided by the live-action series and other products, the franchise gained fans in already known hearths of geek activity, like Japan, Spain and the Philippines, in countries in close geographic proximity to previously mentioned ones, such as Denmark, Norway and Poland, but also entirely new, peripheral centers, like Bulgaria, Costa Rica,

Iceland and Singapore. The progression mirrors that of the official creatives in some regards, starting from specific centers and becoming increasingly dispersed, although still staying on some fundamental continents.

### 4.2.4. Interviews and other textual elements

The following sub-section is devoted to an analysis of additional, qualitative information, taken from the multiple interviews with both fans and official creative personnel of the franchise working (mostly) on the IDW comics. The focus will be on the impact and contents of the comics, despite the discussion not being limited to them. The comics creators are mentioned first, as with the netnographic data, with the fans following later. On a final note, the maximum number of quotes cited will not be bigger than three, as an effort was made to include as many interviewees as possible, with the exception of statements made by official creatives and some special topics that were not widely mentioned in the sample otherwise.

#### 4.2.4.1. Interviews with Official Creatives

The first question asked of the creatives was about their first interaction with the property, whether they became active fans at that point and their trajectory in the following years:

> *""Transformers" came out when I was I think eight years old, in the US. When they first advertised it they did a cartoon TV commercial –it was really for the comic book, but it was to get away from the government regulation on what they could advertise. I remember seeing that commercial when I was in first grade or second grade and going to school the next day and everyone talking about it –"Did you see the commercial? The car-truck that turns into a robot? Who's the gun?" and all that stuff. [...]*
>
> *So the first thing I got from it was the comic book, the first issue of the comic book. [...] And yes, I really got into the comics and "Transformers" is one of the first that I really got into. I still think I have my copy, it's in my dad's attic and it's beat up, you know, I've read that comic so many times.*
>
> *So I remember my grandma buying me Prowl and Cliffjumper at a ToysRUs, those were the first ones I got. And then I was into "Transformers": I watched the cartoon, I read the comics. I think around the movie came out, I stopped watching the cartoon because it changed to a time in the morning –it was too early or too late for me to watch while I was getting ready for school. [...]*
>
> *So I kinda drifted away, I was never really part of any organized "Transformers" fandom –like I said, I read those comics. I looked at Dreamwave that got the license and read the first issue, but didn't really like*

*it. I liked the art style, but it wasn't enough to keep me going on."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

*"I got introduced to them at the very beginning. It was 1984 and I had recently started enjoying comics and reading what my older brother brought home. I had been a fan of "G.I. Joe" since 1982, so there was a bit of a connection there too with how they were marketed and introduced through the comics and animated show.*

*One day in 1984 my brother came home from school telling the family about this new toy all the kids were talking about in his class, "Transformers". So he and I talked my parents into driving us to the local mall to see them. It was amazing, there was this whole row of cars and planes and gadgets that turned into these very Japanese looking robots. Everything a young boy could want. [...] Soon after that we got the first issue of the comic, and I believe a month or two later the show came out on television. [...]*

*Well, I would say that toys were my first exposure to Transformers, but it was good timing as I was at an age where I was beginning to be interested in comics like "Spider-Man", "The Avengers", "G.I. Joe" and some anime and Japanese properties that had made it to the US. Especially because even in the first issues of Transformers they made clear it took part in the Marvel Universe and even had Spider-Man appear. [...] So it all felt very connected.*

*Through college I read very little in the way of comics and didn't follow much of what was going on with "Transformers". Though I did watch some of "Beast Wars" when I saw it was on TV. It wasn't until Dreamwave launched their "Transformers" comic around 2003 that I got back into it. Like a lot of other people."* (A. Griffith, February 13th 2018)

*"So! I know for a fact that I've watched some G1 as a kid but to be honest, I don't remember [it] making such a big impact in me at the time. I even remember my father showing me the 86' movie but my memories go so far. Again, not a big impact. What I do know is that my first real "contact" with Transformers was through "Beast Wars". I loved the show a lot and saw it every day after school, wouldn't miss an episode. But that was it for my knowledge of Transformers as a teen, even though I was a fan of anime and especially mecha anime, "Transformers" never got into my radar till years to come (you can say the franchise was never that big in Brazil). Years later, I went to see the first Bay movie and it piqued my interest. Felt like revising "Beast Wars" and "Beast Machines", watching, really watching, G1 for the first time, then the movie, then "Headmasters", "Victory", Unicron [Trilogy], etc. The cartoons were so great, I was completely sold on "Transformers", even kind of addicted. I was also lucky I got into it just in time for Animated, it was about to come out so I've got to see some of the previews and sneak peaks, it made me super excited."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

*"I first recall seeing the Transformers in 1984. Their animated series debuted in the United States and I was immediately hooked on it. I remember coming home from school each day and looking forward to watching it more than anything else on at the time. [...] The original G1 animated show is what got me into the TF universe, from there it was the toys that galvanized my interest in the series. I had some of the comics but for me it was the original animated series and toys that made me a fan. [...] All I knew was that this universe was unlike anything else I had seen before.*

*Mixing sci-fi, adventure, and fantasy in a unique way. By this point in my childhood I had seen many things with robots or outer space battles. The fact that these robots were not just vehicles piloted by people but in fact their own life forms, with their own personalities, was exciting. The idea that a robot could be a car, changing back and forth in an instant, was fascinating. Not only did it make for toys that were creative and dynamic, but the idea leaked into the real world. Seeing cars on the street and wondering about if they could transform, how big they would be, how wonderful. The line between what I saw on TV and the world I lived in was blurred more than with other shows that were pure fantasy."* (E. Gauntt, February 28th 2018)

The surrounding culture and geography played a part in shaping their perception (and that of other foreign artists) of the property and its iterations, even in places like the US, where geek culture is a relative given:

*"By the time the Michael Bay movie came out, I watched it and had a good time watching it... It came out on the 4th of July weekend and it had an army invading for middle-Eastern oil and robot cars... There is no more American movie than this. This is America's foreign policy made into a giant robot movie. But when I walked out of the theater, I was on the street and I couldn't believe all the cars weren't turning into robots trying to kill me."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

*"Comics in Brazil are relatively easy to get... if they are from Marvel or DC. Other titles from other companies come sporadically if they make a name for [themselves] in the USA or other parts of the world. Basically, they are distributed by a few, and when I say a few I'm talking about 3 or 4 publishers, and are released under the same company. For instance, both Marvel and DC, Vertigo, and most Dark Horse stuff, are printed by Panini. So yeah, we have access to only a small portion of things that come out, and they do take their time to get here, I would say about... 6 months to maybe a year. This is changing, though. It's getting easier to find more diverse titles, not only the superhero or Eisner-winning graphic novels. IDW usually it's published around here, save for a few exceptions. The most recent Transformers chronology is about to be made available on a Brazilian comic app (something like Comixology).*

*Yes, I was an earlier reader, loved me some "X-Men" and "Spawn", my father used to get me box after box of comic books, and even though I've been always the "kid who draws", it never came to my mind to pursue that career. I simply didn't know about it."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

*"One of the unique things about "Transformers", compared to any other property, is its mixed origin between Japan and the United States. Takara and Hasbro both had a hand in its creation in various ways and to this day TF is owned by both companies. It's not something you see with other brands. It's something that has appeal and roots in both countries. Because of that you had fans that were learning Japanese to get a taste of the other side of the "Transformers" universe. Be it with the cartoons or the figures that one country had but not the other. There is a built-in exchange of culture within the brand. Granted you can ignore it, just focus on one part, but many fans, myself included, like the diversity this has brought to the fandom."* (E. Gauntt, February 28th 2018)

The one non-native English speaker (a Brazilian woman) was additionally asked to go in depth on her personal secondary language skills and their acquisition, and one American artists who has collaborated with Japanese talent offered his perspective on this (lack of) communication:

*"It's very common for us to have contact with the English language since we are kids since the media we consume comes from the north. We study it as school, but the usual is to learn watching movies or series, playing games and reading. This gives you a good basis. So, most of my knowledge of the language comes from being exposed to it. Later in life, I studied it for like, two years, wanted to be prepared for my trip to the USA.*

*I won't say it's super easy but it's not crazy hard like other languages, you know? English and Portuguese have their similarities. The hardest part is to speak because the shyness and the fear of making mistakes can get in the way, but I can understand it very well."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

*"[On getting to work with manga artists Makoto Ono and Naoto Tsushima ("in a deal worked out with the TFCC and Andrew Hall, another guy from the fandom that made his way into the official side") and the rarity of this in the rest of the American comics scene:] I think it's been rare due to the language barrier. I've worked with other artists all over the world but they all also know English. Working with a Japanese artist was a rare occurrence for an official project and even now you'll see far more global collaborations between English-speaking artists than not. Even through official channels it's uncommon. Having to have another party involved to translate information back and forth takes time and money. When I worked with Naoto Tsushima it was done via Andrew Hall. Since then I believe he has helped coordinate other Japanese talent with IDW books. [...]*

*I think it's a natural evolution within the fandom to have people bridging that language gap. Wanting to share talent from both sides, share the history of "Transformers" and have them mingle and merge. Now people are filling that role and helping to bring together artists from both cultures. I think fans are continuing to drive that connection in ways that the companies don't seem as concerned over.*" (E. Gauntt, February 28th 2018)

The one creative who did not start as a devoted fan but as someone with a more passing interest resorted to other methods to understand the franchise and acclimate to it:

*"James [Roberts] and I started at the same time on those books and I think we both came out from different directions –I think he was more involved in the fandom than I was. [...] Much as I knew all the characters from when I was a kid and from stuff that I read and watched all throughout the years, I've still got a lot to learn, to get caught up on. I think that stuff's integrated into James' personality. He's had possibly the Chromedome he's had since he was, like, ten. He was, "See, that's Chromedome" [embarrassed laughter] and I was kinda more, "I didn't have that toy, I don't remember", you know? James' gift [is] that he's able to take all the stuff that he cared about and translate it to something that both fans of "Transformers" and people who'd never heard of "Transformers" could relate to. I was on the other way, I kinda put these ideas that I wanted to explore and used the frame of the "Transformers" to tell that story, with the characters of the Transformers to explore those stories.[...]*

*When I started with "Transformers", I found a podcast that I really liked and I liked the people on it. I listened to the podcast a lot, but it was research to find out what I like, what do "Transformers" fans like? I deduced to find out. It's like, here's some stuff I don't know about."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

When talking about their artistic influences and interests, all interviewees mentioned a very diverse array of creators and media:

*"There's something I like in ongoing comics: they used to be so sort of shameless about what they were pulling in. You know, with "X-Men" in the '70s and '80s you could tell what movie Chris Claremont saw that weekend. You can tell that he saw "Alien" and [created the Brood]- It's fun, you see these things that show and pop up, a reference to... Like, I was listening to a Mission of Burma album, so I thought I'd have Mission of Burma song titles.*

*The original pitch -issues one to sixteen- were really influenced by Warren Ellis and Tom Rayne's "Stormwatch", which was a Wildstorm comic in the late '90s, but it had this sort of a structure that each issue was a stand-alone issue and was narrated by several characters and if you read the whole thing, on a re-read, you started to see patterns emerging that the*

*characters maybe weren't aware of and they started to realize there was a bigger picture. It ended on this great two-part story called "Change or Die". It was very much the structural format of those initial 13 issues and there was some Optimus Prime stuff and other things surrounding them till 16. So that was really significant. "Deadwood" was another one that influenced this whole idea of a frontier town. Take these ideas and bring them into a science fiction world, so, instead of a snow storm stopping them, it's an electrical storm, and something like that.*

*I'm a big Grant Morrison person and a Bowie fan. [...] I read comics a lot, but also used to play a lot of video games, which I haven't really done since 1990. [...] We were at a party, Livio and I, at a comics party, and had the idea at the gallery: "Let's do a sequel [to "Transformers: Punishment"] like 'Fury Road'-". That was fun, I loved that, yeah. [...] Louise Simonson in "X-Factor" was one of my favorite comics, it was exactly the kind of thing I was reading when I was little."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

*"I had lost interest in comics for a while, too. My geekdom at the time was more centered around video games. [...]*

*I was into a lot of Renaissance artists even when I was young. I loved the anatomical studies of artists like Leonardo and Michaelangelo, and the ancient Greek aesthetics. But I also liked a lot of artists from the 18th and 19th centuries, who clearly had a good knowledge of the human body but interpreted it in interesting and exaggerated ways. People like Egon Schiele, Modigliani, and Gustav Klimt. I was also a music nerd, and a lot of people I listened to inspired me in how they lived their lives and pursued their artistic visions without being too restrained by cultural assumptions or financial pressures. Artists like The Cure, David Bowie, Radiohead, The Pixies and a lot of what you might alternative music that grew out of the late 70s Punk scene. [...]*

*My comics influences? Well, as I mentioned before, since I was a kid I had been reading lots of Marvel stuff. "Spider-Man", "X-Men", the original "Transformers" and "G.I. Joe" run. I also read a decent amount of DC too. Mostly around the Batman characters and universe. And when I was older and got back into comics it was mostly the same types of books that I got into."* (A. Griffith, February 13th and 16th 2018)

*"My interests run the gamut from art to science to video games to animation and beyond. Video games in particular would be one of my main fandoms these days. I got into them in the mid-80's like "Transformers". Over the years my interest in them have grown quite a bit, learning the history of the industry, playing more games than before, both old and new. I think they combine many of my interests, art, animation, storytelling, music, design, etc. I think my interests all have areas with some intersection. Art, animation, character design, story telling, world building, all elements of a*

*great game and certainly of the "Transformers" brand. So while one didn't directly lead to the other I do think they share aspects, things to spark my curiosity."* (E. Gauntt, February 28th 2018)

*"Of course I had a few artists I admired, most of them, manga artists, but the thought [of becoming an artist] never crossed my mind, till I started working for Marcelo [Matere]. [...]*

*Oh, I'm crazy about animation, probably my biggest love in life. And since I don't believe I have the necessary skills to make lines move, at least not yet (I'm practicing) I try to apply all the good things I've learnt from animators on my comic art. Expressions make a big difference, at least in my opinion, so does movement."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

Specifically about "Transformers", previous iterations of the media franchise were also mentioned[88]:

*"So I kinda drifted away [from the cartoon], I was still buying the comic –by then I was really into comics. "Transformers" and "G. I. Joe" were really the gateway that introduced me to comics. [...] Nobody was paying that much attention to "Transformers" from then but I lived in England for a little bit, and in America, a lot of people my age got into making comics by Larry Hama's "G. I. Joe". It's a really important thing, not just because of the toys but because of the way Larry- he did the silent issue- he always strived to use alternate techniques, so a lot of use were introduced to comics as an art form –yeah, this is a way of communicating, it's different than all those things. I was talking to a friend in England, D. W., and we started talking about Simon Furman's "Transformers", which I think to a lot of kids in England my age, but -I don't know if they were translated in England-, that was their Larry Hama: Furman, making these giant space epics, time-twisting stories. So I was an adult by then, I was in my definitely twenties, so I started digging up some of the Simon Furman stuff and started reading it, and it was really cool, I would've loved it when I was eight! [There is a lot of effort put into it, to engage such a young audience, and it offers them a lot of information.] Yeah, I was like, "you don't need to be that good"! I wasn't expecting it to be that, for him to put that much effort into it."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

*"[Was there a version you preferred as a kid from all of them?] Well, when I was young it was all G1. The only difference we had was between how they were drawn in the comics and the cartoons. [...] I liked the comics at first, but as they went on I think I liked the cartoon better in some ways, because it actually showed the conflict between the Autobots and the Decepticons.*

[88] P. Tramontano additionally mentioned her admiration for the Nick Roche-created "Last Stand of the Wreckers" 2010 mini-series (with assistance from James Roberts in writing).

*[...] But as I got older I appreciated the more sophisticated comics stories over the more simple cartoons. [...]*

*As I mentioned the other day I had been reading IDW almost since the beginning. And at that time I had been working on "Transformers" comics and projects for almost three years so it was hard not to be pretty involved in what had been going on in the comics. I didn't spend much time on Dreamwave when they launched, I think I read the first issue and thought it was really disappointing so I didn't continue with it. Though some of my friends continued to buy it so I'd read there copies. But the Marvel comics I read for most of the run during the 80s. I wasn't very aware of the UK comics until I got into the Transformers comics again in the 2000s. But I've never really been a fan of the Marvel UK comics so I'm not that familiar with them."* (A. Griffith, February 16th 2018)

*"When it comes to "Transformers" art my big inspirations are the Studio OX images. The stylish anime look for Transformers that have always been my preference."* (E. Gauntt, February 28th 2018)

With the exception of the one writer in the sample, art studies (but with supplements) were consistently brought up as a common experience for all interviewees:

*"All through school after [realizing I had talent], whenever I had a chance to take an art class, I took it. I would spend a lot of time at home drawing as well, whether it was of Transformers and super heroes and "Star Wars" characters, or just drawing things I saw around the house, I'd often be drawing. [...]*

*My goal was always to go to a good art school. But by the time I graduated high school I was a little sure which way I wanted to go. I also had developed more interest in other things at the time, academic and intellectual topics, music, theater, and English and writing studies. So in college and University (I went to a few different ones) I actually studied things like creative writing, scriptwriting, literature and English studies as much as I did art. But in the end I complemented my studies with a concentration in Studio Arts. So I was doing a lot of painting, sculpting, and graphic design classes. I was determined at the time to be a "serious" artist."* (A. Griffith, February 13th 2018)

*"I'm a mix of self-taught and formal art education. I was doing art before I had any formal classes. Eventually I did go to an art college (it was a four year art college after I completed high school, I received a Bachelor's degree in fine art with a major in illustration). It was at an odd time though right before digital art became so ubiquitous. College allowed me time to spend trying things with my art I had never done before, oil paints, live model drawing, etc. Some of those things from those days certainly had an impact on my work. However, when it comes to what I do now, something*

*like Photoshop, I'm self-taught, for good or bad. I had begun teaching myself Photoshop for digital colors before college and in truth only had one brief class in it (during my third year) that at best taught me some hotkeys. It wasn't until 2004 I began to really use Photoshop for almost all my projects. Lots of trial and error to this day!"* (E. Gauntt, Feruary 28th 2018)

*"My major is in Graphic Design. I don't consider myself a good designer but I've learned a thing or two about composition and color combination. Design stuff. And any knowledge, especially when it comes to "creativeness", can be applied on your work. But I must admit the biggest push I had in college was the life drawing classes. Drawing nude people can be extremely helpful when trying to improve your art, you have no idea! I wish we had more classes like those."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

Another common experience was the participation in fan circles, in which all three artists contributed to or gained prominence from:

*"Well, around [the time of Dreamwave Comics] I was working at a place where there were probably at least 100 graphic designers and artists in one building. So a lot of us had grown up with comics and "Transformers" and "Star Wars". People had their old toys on their desks, people would take lunch breaks and go buy comics, and while we'd wait for our work to upload to servers and things like that, a lot of us would do our own fan art at our desks on printer paper or whatever was handy. But I wasn't too familiar with online fan art and the online community until around the time that Dreamwave launched. Then I started paying attention to sites like TFW2005 and Seibertron.com [...] Around 2005 I learned they were making the live action Transformers movie, so that really got me energized about the franchise again. So I was visiting a lot of "Transformers" sites, catching up with what Dreamwave had been doing and reading the early IDW stuff. [...] I don't think I became aware of DeviantArt until about 2007 or 2008, maybe? [...]*

*[How were you networked with the rest of the community? If not online, through local cons, I assume?] Just with my real life friends really."* (A. Griffith, February 13th 2018)

*"I had drawn Transformers off and on for years for fun. Nothing consistent, just now and then when the mood caught me. Around 2002 I began to focus more time on Transformers art, by 2004 I had joined a message board and was making fan art on a pretty regular basis. Since then I've only been away from doing TF art for brief periods of time. [...]*

*Joining a board was easy, there were a few large ones that were at the center of the TF fandom so I joined up and started sharing. [...] I got noticed via the fan site, I honestly haven't made it out to too many conventions. [...]*

*[How was networking with fellow artists done: after online collaborations, after real-life meetings or both?] Online collaborations. It helped lots of people, me included. I don't think I met a person I had done work with in person until four or five years into doing TF work. With the best collaborators I find it's a nice mix of art talk and fan talk. Often who favorite characters are and what else they're working on. If I have art questions now there's a few people I can ask. Online collaborations have been the majority of my experiences but certainly in person is great. One of my most frequent collaborators (Dan Khanna, fan artist turned pro) was someone I had done some work with online, however it wasn't until meeting and talking in person that we began doing much more work together. Basically online is great for meeting a variety of people, but the real life meetings can cement those relationships."* (E. Gauntt, February 28th 2018)

*"I started doing bunches of Transformers fan art and posting them online, this lead me to my first job working as Marcelo Matere's art assistant. Since he was working on "Megatron Origins", it was when I discovered about the Transformers comic universe. I basically devoured all the Dreamwave and IDW material released do far in a couple of days."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

"Transformers: Mosaic" in particular was mentioned in all artist interviews as an interesting and sometimes formative experience:

*[In the "Mosaics", apart from pencils, you also wrote scripts, did some colors and some letters. How hard was it to fill all those roles?] Well it was a lot of fun. I had only recently started to seriously draw again, and I had a graphics background, so doing the colors and the text were things that I was able to do. And I studied writing and art in school so it was a great opportunity to put all of those schools together. But I look back at the ones that I did and now I'm kind of embarrassed. I was clearly just relearning to draw again at the time. [Would you consider the entire exercise as training ground for your (and a lot of other people's, really) current run at IDW?] Yes, you could definitely say that. It was an important step along the way."* (A. Griffith, February 13th 2018)

*"If my memory is correct, "Mosaic" was a collab open to anyone who wished to participate. I sent them a message saying I'd like to draw a page and they sent me the available scripts back. Couldn't be more simple. I got to do 3 pages and one small participation on the "Death of Prime" one, coloring Casey [Coller]'s lines."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

*"I participated to a very minor degree with the "Mosaic" project briefly. It was a pleasant experience but one I was not able to devote much time to due to other projects."* (E. Gauntt, February 28th 2018)

The route to being brought over to comics (and in particular being employed in the flagship titles) was different for each and every one of them, but common patterns emerged:

> *"So yeah, I'd read some of the [Marvel] comics, but it was really when I met Andy Schmidt, who asked me to do a pitch for writing a "Transformers" comic book that made me dive in and research everything. [A movie tie-in?] Yeah, what actually happened, um... I was one of the editors at Marvel, and Marvel was doing an Avengers-Transformers crossover story. [...] Andy really wanted to edit that and thought it was his only chance to work on "Transformers", so I learned of who else was editing it and I walked up to their desk, and I saw they had Prowl mislabeled as Ratchet. I told them that, and Andy remembered that, and after we both left from Marvel and he was editing "Transformers" at IDW (I was freelancing), he remembered that and he asked me to pitch for the "Sector 7" spin-off, which was from the "Transformers" movie. I tried to do my best Simon Furman and do more than I had to, kinda come up with this full, alternate story. I don't think it's that good, because it's really the first series that I wrote, but I shot for the moon."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

> *"I started seeing a lot of what were called "Mosaics", which for those who don't know where one page comic stories about "Transformers" done by fans and posted on various "Transformers" sites. So I started taking part in creating those and that helped start me on my way to being known as a Transformers artist. [...] Yes, that was when I really started getting to know a lot of the fandom online. And then the guys who ran that project, Josh [Van Reyk] and Shaun [Knowler], ran a contest along with IDW to find new "Transformers" artists. And there were about 500 fans that took part, so it was quite the large community. Many of those people are still my friends. [...]*
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> *[While working on the "Mosaics", was the thought of being employed by IDW at the back of your head?] Well, it was definitely a hope! And my goal at the time was to get some work in comics. I didn't know if it would actually happen, but I was determined to try. [...]*
>
> *[How did you become the main penciler for "Robots in Disguise"?] Well, when we were working on the final issue of "Foundation", I was looking to find what my next work would be. I didn't know if I could keep working in comics or if I'd have to find a full-time job. And I had just bought a house! But one day I was having lunch and I got a call from then-editor Andy Schmidt. He said I DW was looking to start a second ongoing series. And he wanted me to draw it! He said John would be writing it and we worked well together on "Foundation" so he thought I'd be a good fit as an artist. I assumed it would be a Movieverse continuity series. But I was very*

*pleasantly surprised to learn it would be IDW's version of G1! So that's how that all started."* (A. Griffith, February 13th 2018)

*"The nicest part [about the "Mosaic" experience] the interaction with other "Transformers" fans, I remember I got to meet Josh Perez around that time, hehe. And yes, I believe it helped me to get noticed because both Josh van Reyk and Shaun Knowler invited me to work as a colorist on the Jazz Spotlight, which they wrote, not long after. I had my fair share of fan-art, yes, but this was the first time I adventured in drawing comics. Super fun!"* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

*"I was approached by the TFCC [Transformers Collector's Club] via the Internet. I believe it was a message board PM that then went to emails. Around the same time I set up my own personal online gallery to have a more formal base of operations online."* (E. Gauntt, February 28th 2018)[89]

John Barber and Andrew Griffith reminisced on the recruitment of additional artists Livio Ramondelli, Sara Pitre-Durocher and Kei Zama, all with different backgrounds and experiences before working in comics:

*"I wasn't the one to hire Livio, he was working at Wildstorm, a San Diego publisher that is part of DC now. DC was doing a massive online game, and he was a background artist for that, he was designing environments. He was also at conventions and he had prints of "Transformers" and "Star Wars" stuff. I think Andy [Schmidt] saw that and was just blow away by the style. He was a fan but he wasn't really coming from fandom, he was working for a publisher and doing convention art on the side.*

*Which is more or less the same for Sara Pitre-Durocher, too. She came up to me in a convention and wanted to show her portfolio, and when people usually do that they're kinda terrible, you know? But then she showed it to me and said as I was flipping through that she was professionally drawing Transformers for the online card game. I said, "Wow, okay", and she was obviously knowing and I was really impressed by the line art, too. So that's*

[89] In the same interview, E. Gauntt additionally recalled being recruited to work on the colors of a book cover ("Transformers Legends", an anthology prose story collection) in 2004. The process was similar: he and fellow colorist Josh Burcham were approached via private message on a message board they had accounts in –it was common knowledge that "some higher ups at Hasbro at the time had accounts on the boards and would interact with fans". While the casual offer took them by surprise at first, the relationship with their intermediate Hasbro representative was "great", with little obstruction of the creative process, save for "which version [of the characters] had to be right to fit the book". He described the general vibe of the scene as "pretty relaxed and loose", when the company "was looking for passionate fans with art skills to help with the TF brand. Your love of TFs and your art skills could get you seen and it was crazy". According to him, this came to an end in 2007 with the success of the live-action film and executive Aaron Archer's departure in 2013, as Hasbro wished for "direct in-house control", "many avenues were shut down and communication with the fan base was more formalized".

*how she started. She's also into painting over Marcelo Matere's lines a lot of times. But I saw that and said that it was really great.*

*And as for Kei, she knew Andrew, who goes to Japan every few weeks, it seems, and he showed me some of her samples. It was "Transformers" fan art and stuff, I guess, and we did some covers. And then she sent me a sketchbook that she printed, a fan story that she'd drawn, and it was really great and Andrew left and we switched to "Optimus Prime", I figured that Kei could draw this book, it would be a really different. So I convinced everybody and well, people were kind of unsure, because this style is so different and so hyper-aggressive, it's very Kevin O'Neil in "2000AD" and "The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen"."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

*"I think a lot of artists have come from the fandom. So posting Transformers art online has helped a lot of people. In fact most Transformers artist and colorists I can think of came out of the fandom. [...]*

*[How did this networking with Kei Zama happen?] I first met Kei when she would come to our conventions there as a fan. At some point she started organizing commissions between fans and artists like myself and Livio who didn't speak Japanese. Someone pointed out to me that she was a good artist so I started following her Tumblr and was very impressed. So on my next trip to Japan I asked her to put together a portfolio. I looked through it and picked the pieces I thought were best and encouraged her to email them to me. She did, and I used them to recommend her to John, who was the Senior Editor at the time. A few minutes later she told me he had responded back positively. And she's only taken off from there! [May I ask one more detail: communication was done in English, correct? Or do you know Japanese?] No, I don't speak Japanese. That's why she helped to organize commissions for us. I've learned a few phrases but that's it. I'm lucky to know a few people in Japan who are bilingual."* (A. Griffith, February 13th and 16th 2018)

The idiosyncratic nature of the characters (giant alien robots, often with non-emotive faces) was considered one of their defining characteristics, and the ways creators approached the issue (from a variety of posts) was elaborated on:

*"["Was IDW editorial out for talent? How did this work, this communication? If there was one."] While I was aware of some of ["Mosaic"], I looked online, it was very definitely a considered effort on IDW's part to go to the fandom to find artists. Transformers are a hard thing to draw and the only reason you would have to draw them is because you really like Transformers. It's a very particular skill, and anybody else would be better suited for another comic. It's hard to convey emotion with mechanical creatures, it's a psychological drift for a lot of people to be able to think of them as people and not cars with a lot of parts. And the people who're really good at it, Andrew [Griffith], Alex Milne, Sarah Stone,*

*Sara Pitre-Durocher, Priscila Tramontano, they all obviously love Transformers, Casey Coller... So, we have a very specific set of artists that just wanted to do Transformers, not everybody wants to spend their whole life drawing them. It's a hard thing to casually do, I guess? [...]*

*I can't tell from how you drew a superhero and figure out if you would be able to do Transformers. And the only reason you're writing or drawing comics at all is probably because you're a fan. We really are looking in the fandom, looking for artists, and a lot of "Transformers" artists started out - and still do- doing this for fun."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

*"John [Barber] is right. [...] Me? I always thought they carried a lot of human qualities to them, that's why I preferred robots with personalities over than meant-for-piloting mechas. [...]*

*Even when a character is covered face to toe, we still get to play with his body language. And of course, since it's all make-believe, we CAN cheat some times and give a character like Cerebros some expressions, hehe!"* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

*"Well, I never really imagined Transformers as people. [...] For me, it was more about continuity. The most recent ongoing had been the one that Don Figueroa had drawn with the really detailed faces and designs. So I was trying to start with their faces being a bit more G1 than he had drawn them yet still with a decent amount of detail. But as the series went on, I slowly made the faces less technical and more organic. I think the fans prefer that anyway.*

*[But that's about characters that have visible and recognizable facial features. What about the others, how do they emote?] A lot of artists like to exaggerate their eyes or make cartoony shapes with them, but for me that always feels like cheating a bit. Like it's the easy way to go. I prefer to make them emote through body posture, camera angles, things like that. I think you can get a surprising amount of emotion out of character doing those kinds of things. I always laugh when the writer sends a description like "Wheeljack's face is clearly angry" or "Soundwave looks thoughtful." But hey, I've always managed to make it work, I think."* (A. Griffith, February 16th 2018)

"*With Transformers, even the duller gigs were still a chance to be part of something that inspired me. There's lot of things I find fun to depict with them, scale, body language, the dynamic lines that you can have in even a basic pose, having a character's personality shine through even if they lack human faces. [...]*

*Having a character emote without a "human face" is always a fun challenge. It can be done in a variety of ways including, but not limited to,*

*body language, camera angle, lighting, color choices, etc. A low angle can make a giant robot seem even more imposing, a head tilt can make someone seem pensive, dramatic lighting can seem sinister. This goes for anyone from Optimus Prime to Spider-Man, another favorite of mine and he also spends much of his time with his whole face covered. Being able to draw someone like Shockwave, who lacks even eyes, and have him convey personality is wonderful. [...] How well it works is in part the artist's intent, part in the execution, and part on the viewer. Still it's something I greatly enjoy doing when I work on robots that emote in ways beyond strictly the facial."* (E. Gauntt, February 28th 2018)

On the subject of other tie-in work with the "Transformers" characters (Barber and Griffith worked on a few mini-series set in the live-action film universe, Tramontano on a similar series for the 2015 "Robots in Disguise" cartoon), three interviewees describe a similar, learning experience:

*"[Would you consider these stories as some ground for practice and honing your skills?] Yeah. ["Was there any concern with tying into movie continuity?"] "Not really. Andy [Schmidt] suggested, "Why don't we do each issue into a different time period?" I liked that idea. [...] I watched the movies and I noticed some different things that were into the movies that would be interesting to follow up on, and then I found out about some historical stuff, like the Bonnie and Clyde death car, what if that was a Transformer? There was never a specific mandate for it.*

*The other one around was one of the two prequels that we did –one of them was set of Cybertron, one of them was set on Earth. They told me not to worry too much about the continuity, I kinda did the opposite and read everything and tried to figure out how all of this is put together. And people kinda sorta liked that. When I started doing the main series, I did the same thing: I went back and just reread every IDW comic and I took notes and all that. But what if this all happened in the same universe, what would happen? We had some also archaeology and alternate history. But no, it wasn't a mandate, we just had some fun."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

*"A few days after getting that work [in covers] I was asked to help on inks on one of the movie prequel comics. And that turned into helping draw some of the pages myself. [How was this first experience?] It was very exciting! I still remember the first time one of my covers hit the shelves. I was working at Eidos (now Square Enix) at the time and I went on my lunch break to a comic book store and was so excited I couldn't help but show it to people like my art director when I got back to work.*

*[For "Foundation", was adapting to the movie-verse designs an issue?] Oh, it's definitely a challenge. And very time consuming. We were doing prequel comics set on Cybertron, so a lot of characters I drew were based on toys, or Don Figueroa designs in the comics he did for the movies. So they were a*

*little simpler than what we saw on the big screen. But characters like Megatron were the same. And very complicated. I got to a point where I could pretty much draw Movie Megatron from memory and without reference."* (A. Griffith, February 13th 2018)

*"[Was the jump from coloring to line drawing hard?] Oh yes, it's hard, at least for me. Not only because of the responsibility, it can be intimidating, but because drawing comics involve things other than drawing, things like narrative and page construction, a good layout to make the reading smooth as possible. You don't want your art to be in the way of the story. And although I've always been in contact with comics, this sense of narrative is something you develop the more you make books. But of course my experience working with great comic artists before helped me. But yeah, I'm still learning."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

On the issue of corporate control over the narrative and the "toyetic" aspect of the franchise, writer and editor John Barber gave a much more measured response:

*"[The truth is, these comics are meant to, even indirectly, advertise products –new toys, new story concepts etc. How do you manage to strike a balance between the stories you want to say and the products Hasbro wants to push?] "I don't think that's exactly a fair thing to say. I think that was true in the '80s, but the sales of the toys are much higher than the sales of the comics, so it doesn't make a lot of sense to use the comics as a sales floor for the toys. It's another revenue stream for Hasbro, it's another way of getting the "Transformers" IP out there, it's a way for generating ideas for new toys and stuff. Occasionally, we would circle around and do things together, things like "Dark Cybertron", "Combiner Wars" and "Titans Return". Figures were paired with the comics going into the toys, so it's almost the opposite: it's like the toys were advertisement for the comics. Maybe if you don't read comics, you're not aware of the "Transformers" comics and hopefully you'll pick up the books, from my point of view, maybe start following the comics. Yeah, these were the three really big ones. There are certain characters they want to see or themes they want in there.*

*They really want us to tell a story in there, so most of the times we're like, "These are the books we're publishing, this is what happens, here's what the next story is", so we all know what we're doing. With "Dark Cybertron", James Roberts, myself, Phil Jimenez, all went to Hasbro and we really talked to people at Hasbro, including Andy Schmidt, Michael Kelly was in there, he's the Head of Publishing, a lot of other people... We talked a lot about what the story could be, so it was fun to do something really big, that was going to be out there. You can see it in the choice of who shows up, to push some toys, because we wanna get the toys, so that was a little frustrating on the creative end, but... James, myself, Mairghread [Scott],*

*Simon [Furman] when he was doing "Regeneration One", I think by and large we've been able to tell the kind of stories we want to tell. I kinda tend to be- sometimes when new characters that I know are gonna be toys become main characters –Waspinator didn't have to be a main character-, I like having them around."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

Evan Gauntt commented as an outsider to the group (he defined himself as being "on the fringes of the TF art world") in regards to the relationship between IDW and Fun Publications, his own former employer:

*"I don't know the exact ins and outs of things within the TFCC. My role as official artist was strictly the art. There was this impression though that the TFCC stuff, while official, was a smaller sub-category to anything going on in the main comics. One of the reasons was you had to subscribe to the club for a year to get the bi-monthly magazine that had the comics (you also had to be a member to access the online prose stories). Many people were only interested in the club exclusive figures or the BotCon stuff. The comics were their own little universe that was kept separate from the rest of the main TF series. That wasn't the club's fault, part of how things worked was that Hasbro had first shot at things and nothing the club did could step on Hasbro's toes. That's a big reason, from what I know, that they tended to use more obscure characters, it didn't cross into the territory that Hasbro was working on.*

*The club's main readers were hardcore figure collectors, I have no idea what the circulation was, but it was certainly isolated from the average, larger fandom. You could walk into a comic shop and pick up a TF comic for a small price. The club stuff was just harder to get. So, in part by design and part due to barrier of entry, the club stuff was seen as a side area of little consequence to many fans. I'm not saying there wasn't a fan base for the club stuff, there was, but I recall the impression from some online comments that IDW was where the "bigger name" artists were featured while the club stuff wasn't a priority for fans. There was some cross over, the club would use people from the mainline published comics when they could, but that cross over didn't really work both ways very often. The club understandably needed people who had more availability than those busy on other projects. The IDW comics are comics first, their freedom to tell stories with most any character is larger. The club was about the figures, the convention, the comics were in service to that.*

*Even now it's quite difficult to get the TFCC comics. There are no collections or trades like with IDW books. It speaks to a lack of market appeal, at least as far as Hasbro seems concerned. Even I'm missing several issues of things I worked on, either due to not getting a copy or some were damaged due to a flood. So anything done under the club umbrella is regulated to the more obscure side of the TF fandom."* (E. Gauntt, February 28th 2018)

The two primary IDW artists touched upon the aesthetic side of this discussion, in regards to their previously mentioned tie-in work:

> *"[Were there any other notes you had to adhere to from Hasbro when it came to the visuals? Because Mr. Barber implied he had quite some freedom.] They actually gave us a lot of freedom, to be honest. The only changes I remember they asked of the art had to do with the Autobot and Decepticon symbols. The ones for the movie looked a little different than the G1 versions so they wanted to make sure they looked like the movie ones."* (A. Griffith, February 13th 2018)

> *"As for the "Prime" designs, I don't recall Hasbro being too involved. They were basically the same designs, maybe just a little bit simplified to fit the style."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

When discussing the themes of the more recent titles, from politics and the (perceived) greater humanization of the characters, most approached it from a variety of views, both from their interests and the previous content of the franchise:

> *"I wanted to tell a story about what happens after a war, what happens to a species that tries to rebuild their society. If you dig through the history of "Transformers" you'll find that the worst "Transformers" comics are just about pieces of plastic fighting each other. I think both of us –James [Roberts] and I and Mairghread [Scott] and others- all had something we wanted to say with the characters.[...]*
>
> *It's funny because politics in 2011 in America were very different from politics in 2018 in America. For me, I was thinking of how that stuff works, how compromises are made, how people with good intentions or bad intentions get things done... It was an interesting intellectual exercise. Obama was President, everything seemed okay, everything seemed reasonable in America... So you go into this and you look into that and you get books like "Game of Thrones" and politics, "Deadwood", Machiavellian moves and stuff...*
>
> *I remember talking to Andy when I pitched this story –I first pitched it to Andy Schmidt, before I became an editor-, saying Starscream would be Bumblebee's chief rival, they would have this dynamic. There would be a third figure, Metalhawk, too, but the chief one was going to be Starscream. And Andy was blown away and was like, "That's a really great take on Starscream! But what if he's really good at it?" And I was like, "Yeah". He was always bumbling in the cartoons, he was always the guy who wanted to usurp Megatron for leadership. What if that backstabbing and conniving made him the perfect politician? He's got no moral center, no ideology, just ambition. And it all seems true, in America. That actually happened. And dealing with that in 2018 is a really different world than in the theoretical "What if somebody did that? What if*

*somebody just played the political system, just played it to the people out there?" So yeah, that was really interesting.*

*I think that then you get into the identity politics, which I think is a different thing from literal politics we were talking about, but it wasn't about pushing something -then it becomes politicized and I feel that's a different thing. I think that's James [Roberts] and Mairghread [Scott] and all of us trying to reflect the world that exists, and the different people that are in there, and reflect them in these robots. I don't know if we ever set out to be like "Oh, we're gonna make a big"- I dunno, maybe it's like that for James, I felt more like... [...] I don't see it so much as a statement, as much as the kind of stuff that appears in the world, yeah. We should reflect that in the comics. You don't wanna back away from that. [...] Maybe we were ahead of the curve in the comics world right at that moment."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

*"It comes down to a simple fact: If you write character like humans, making use of all the good and bad emotions we have, all the problems we face in day-to-day life, you will have a relatable subject on your hands. Take Megatron, for instance. Even though I like the funny '80s villain thing, what IDW did to him got be one of the most well craft[ed] plot[s] in recent comic memory. Taking a classic bad character and giving him layers, making him see past the blurry lines of good and evil. It leaves some room for conversation, make we reflect on our own morals. It's good stuff. [...] Cyclonus and Tailgate, dealing with a sickness consuming a loved one etc. It's all very relatable. That's what the current Transformers writers excel at, making comics about robots all too human. In my humble opinion, some of the best "Transformers" material ever made. And it makes drawing the comics too much fun."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

When it comes to the representation of female characters, one creative admits what he considers a mistake:

*"It took us way too long to get female Transformers into the mix. As editor, my biggest regret is that. The minute we started with "Death of Optimus Prime" and all these Cybertronians came back, we should've stuck a few women in there, too, and that should've been the end of it. Somebody asked me at a convention, if fans hadn't voted for Windblade, would we still have female Transformers? And I think we would, but it's embarrassing that it took us that long. I wish we had done that earlier. It's easy for it not to affect me, I guess I didn't realize how important it was and I think I realize now. But there's a failing on my part. And I regret that it didn't happen.*

*Yeah, it's very cool that Arcee was there since 2012 and we've followed her since we began, but it's embarrassing that she was the only one in the book for a couple years. I guess there should be more. I wish we could've had a better balance with the characters. I'm happy now that we get to the point*

*that, in this issue I'm just writing, there's a scene where it's three or four women talking about something in one of the scenes and it wasn't engineered like that, those are the characters that have risen to be important since then. I'm happy for that, but it took too long."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

Two of the interviewees even admitted a very personal connection to at least one storyline (minor character Thundercracker's attempts to become a scriptwriter) they have both worked on:

*"It's not obvious, but we have some stuff in the [2018] Annual that's like that [has meta-narrative elements]. It's a little semi-autobiographical memoir in "Transformers".*

*So yeah, there's a part of anybody that writes stuff, especially when you read stuff and go "This is terrible! What I wrote is terrible!" But when you're writing it, you have to convince yourself it's the best thing ever written, or else nothing gets done. This whole "Yes, this is genius!" And Thundercracker perpetually lives in that state that every writer has to be at certain points, but he never has those moments of looking back and reflecting on it. [...] That comes up again, that self-doubt. Like, "This is all a sham, this isn't right. I should just be killing people. That's what I'm good at." Um, that last one is not auto-biographical!*

*[Could he also be seen as a fan attempting to create his own stuff taking bits and pieces from everything that he likes and hoping he creates something new?] "Yeah! There's a weird balance when you're writing something about giant robots from space where... I mean it's cool, you can have stuff from your own life and real-world stuff that you've experienced, but a huge part of it is going to be all the movies and TV and comic books and music and video games that you've been influenced by, and that's like anybody. [...]*

*Yeah, there's definitely self-critiquing going on there, and reflections and stuff about that...!"* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

*"Thundercracker [is] facing issues we as artists have to deal with every day, the infamous impostor syndrome, doing his art because he loves [it]. [...] But I think the [issue] I had the most fun doing was the 2018 Annual because the script almost felt like tailor-made for me. I love love love drawing those characters when they have the opportunity to [be] both adorable and funny. And that's basically all that Thundercracker is during this issue."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

Moreover, they all agreed on having evolved to some degree over the course of their employment for IDW (and Fun Publications), both independently and in conjunction with their long-time artistic partners:

*"I think [decompression] became such a thing in the early '00s and when I started doing "Transformers" I wanted to do the opposite of that. Stuff like Brian Michael Bendis, Warren Ellis, we read about that in books, and there's also a ton of people doing second-rate versions of that, but are awful. These long conversations that don't go anywhere, there's no actual story reason for things. So I very much wanted to go against it.*

*And then there's James, who's just stuffing six issues' worth of stuff into one issue... It's his style and it works. Issues 1 and 2 of "More Than Meets the Eye" were originally issue 1. And I was like, "Oh, we have to break this into two issues, the people won't be able to follow all the characters". And in my head I was like, "We're doing more stuff than "Ultimate Spider-Man" or the "Ultimates" or something." But then I was thinking, "No, I have a slower pace when compared to "More Than Meets the Eye", which has twice as much stuff in... But that's cool. I really like that book and it's working for [it]. [...]*

*"Optimus Prime" is a weirder book than "Transformers" was. If you're gonna show somebody the first six issues of "Robots in Disguise", it looks like a reasonable comic book. There's the right number of panels and word narration and stuff. And "Optimus Prime" is super dense. There's a lot of things going on at once. There's usually a narration that's telling a different story than the main story, and that's intentional. It's weirder, but yeah, I'm very happy with it."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

*"Well [our collaboration with John Barber]'s evolved a good bit. Over the years he's learned what he can trust me to have some room with, when it's good to let my imagination run. Or when sometimes he has to provide more descriptions. He's also learned what references he can make in his script that I'll understand. Over the course of our run on "Robots in Disguise" we got to a point where we worked in a style where he would provide just the plot, and then I'd do the bulk of the storytelling and he'd go back in later and provide the script and dialogue. It's been a fun way to work. [...]*

*If I remember right, John would write something along the lines of "Blackrock walks Faireborne and Jones through a two-page spread of items he's collected." And then he'd list a number of things that we could expect to see, though I could add things if I wanted and didn't have to add anything. But the layout, the storytelling, and the rest was up to me. And, yeah, when it comes to things like Tracks and Needlenose it's entirely up to me to decide how close of an angle to use. I think those are good examples."* (A. Griffith, February 16th 2018)

*"[Was becoming a regular penciler for the two main titles intimidating or freeing?] OK, just what I said, it is super intimidating, especially when the series is an acclaimed one, like "Lost Light" or "Optimus Prime". You don't want to be the one to "ruin" what other people have worked so hard to*

*make special. But as a fan of both series, it's hard not see it as "woo I'm doing something right with my life", you know? I've been waiting to work with James [Roberts] ever since I read "Last Stand [of the Wreckers]" and John [Barber] is the greatest guy, both always provide me scripts full of emotion and funny moments, things I guess are my work's strongest points (boy oh boy, I like drawing Thundercracker being a cutie). That said, I believe that's the way my relation with them evolved. Nowadays, I tend to get character-driven stories to draw, instead of action-heavy stuff."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

*"The TFCC was a lot of fun for me since I was able to contribute in a wide variety of ways. I began with profile art but after a while I was doing all sorts of projects. Adapting was a good challenge since it wasn't the same thing for each assignment. Collaboration was usually dictated by the project. There were times where the deadline was crazy short, literally color something in a couple hours and the final art was shown at BotCon hours later (that actually happened). Other projects were more open ended and I had a lot of input. One prose story I was given had a breakdown of the images they needed made. The final one I though lacked the drama they wanted so I did the layout of their version but also a layout for a version I thought worked better. My editor (Pete Sinclair) agreed so I got to do my version. There was a good amount of trust and collaboration with the Club for me. More often than not I was given an assignment and had a good amount of freedom with things. It allowed for experimentation with my art that certainly helped me to grown and learn as an artist. [...]*

*[For the comics story "Alone Together", I worked on] not only colors but with the inclusion of some obscure characters brought back that Naoto [Tsushima] redesigned I had to do original color schemes on the group (they only prior apprentice was in black and white). The project was a blast to work on, from the fantastic story [by S. Trent Troop and Greg Sepelak], to the outstanding art, to getting to work with such a unique combination of talent from the US and Japan, sort of the two sides of the TF universe!"* (E. Gauntt, February 28th 2018)

Their interactions with fans (and in particular their engaged online component) and their feedback were elaborated on by all, with special mention to its negative side:

*"If you start looking into every message board comment and you start paying too much attention to it as a creator, you're gonna drive yourself crazy. You don't want to cut yourself off from the fandom and when I started I- This is true of anything. [...] If you find somebody you trust and you listen to them, you find some people you trust and you listen to them, that's good. [...]*

*We all have different opinions, but there's a part of the fandom that is not worth engaging with, parts of fandom especially online, not just in*

*"Transformers", in anything, making it very, very toxic. When you go to a BotCon, when you go to a TFCon, the actual fans that come up and talk to you are 99% of the time fantastic and really great to me and talk to and find out what they like in "Transformers"... The cool thing with "Transformers" is that there's men and women that are 60 and kids age 3 and anything in between into "Transformers", they come from all around the world, every background, and you see it all together and you think this is great, this is something we like.*

*It's very easy for a small number of people to be very negative online. When Andy Schmidt left IDW, I remember seeing this comment [about] how terrible Andy was, how he should be killed and, you know, the worst human being. And I went to another website and saw a similar comment and thought, "Well, that's the same guy!" It was the same guy who posted these comments. And I was like, "Oh, okay!" So instead, when people are gonna make it seem like there's more people, you gotta remember that more than, like, nice messages that say "Good luck" and not the one that says, "Let's murder him"."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

*"I feel very fortunate to have the work that I do. So I try to keep in mind to read fans' opinions and listen to podcasts. And it's had an impact on me, such as the way I made characters look more organic and more like fans said they wanted to see them. So I've tried to listen to feedback and listen accordingly. I tend to stay away from message boards though. I feel that they can be very mean-spirited and when I do read them I either see a friend being harshly attacked or on occasion myself and sometimes I've seen a mean comment that can throw me into a fit of depression that can last a day or more. So it does have an effect. [...] No, I haven't been harassed. Just mean comments about art, and things like that."* (A. Griffith, February 16th 2018)

*"I'm on Andrew's side, I stop[ped] reading message boards because people can be mean. And I'm not that strong, actually, I'm easily shaken. So it's relatively easy to make me doubt my own skills, to the point of making me want to quit. Yes, I'm that frail. And boy, do I get angry when I see my friends or people I admire getting shit or being treated unfairly.*

*But not all the fandom interaction had been negative for me, quite the contrary, when you know what kind of place to avoid, it gets easier to have a good time. Most people are kind and supportive, truly excited about the books, and even when they have some criticism of your work, they are quite polite about it. It's the type of criticism that actually helps you improve. Or maybe I'm being too naive. Maybe I'm in a bubble.*

*I have confidence there are people out there that dislike my style and I respect their taste, as long as they don't come out of their way to make my day miserable. Yes, I have faced two or three people who actually did that,*

*but the Internet is full of those. What we in Brazilian Portuguese call "escrotos" (don't google it, hahahah). [...]*

*But yeah, some people have accused me of ruining certain titles, and other people hate my "anime faces" among other harsh criticism. Some things I can work on, other things don't. As a comic artist and as a fan of comics, I try to make the fandom as positive as it can be so everyone's experience is a good one."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

*"Fan feedback is continues to bolster my work. Not so much as direct feedback but more in the way that if I try something new or different I can get a feel if it's something others will enjoy. I still tend to do my personal art based on my own interests but having that feedback is always welcome as art cannot exist in a vacuum. [...]*

*For me, no, online criticism has never turned sour. It's been predominantly positive from the things I've read but I also realize I don't read everything out there, good or sour. [...] As to why, well maybe people like my work enough that it's not something that comes up often enough for me to see. That's a possibility but realistically I think it has far more due to the fact that I've always been on the fringe of the TF art scene. I think with the fandom you need to cross that line into known artist mixed with high profile work. Doing work for IDW I think is the center of that currently. [....]*

*On the opposite side you have artists that work on the shows or movies and, with only a few exceptions, are not known to the average fan. With the IDW books now you have a popular, high profile project, that has an artist's name right on the front, coupled with a series that people have a vested interest in, it's that combination of things that I think bring out some of the most criticism. [...] It's a passion for TF mixed with personal preference and the easy online platform to criticize that can bring out some nasty responses.*

*I think reading too much or too little fan feedback is problematic. Reading too much positive can inflate the ego, too much negative and it harms it. While honest critiques of your work are useful sadly more often than not online you get a simple, it's awesome, or it totally sucks, with very little actionable feedback. [...] I think for feedback on your work artists need more peer criticism but to see if you're connecting with the fandom in the way you hope that's where the fan feedback is useful."* (E. Gauntt, February 28th 2018)

Gender as a factor in employment and work appreciation was brought up by both men and women, but with much greater intensity from the latter:

*"I haven't had it that bad, with "Transformers" fans. My interactions with fans have been tremendously positive. I know this is not necessarily the case*

*with– Sorry, the majority of the fandom is great, but there are a few people that really got to harass Mairghread [Scott] and other creators, I think Mag[dalene] Visaggio of "TF Visionaries". Twitter has become..."* (J. Barber, February 8th 2018)

*"The online harassment of female writers I think is an issue beyond the standard criticism. There are female artists on IDW books but for some reason it seems like the writers get more negativity, perhaps due to having control of the story beyond just doing the art. Honestly that particular issue isn't one I know much about personally as both a guy and someone who hasn't worked on IDW projects. It does seem there are some in the fandom that, for lack of a better analogy, don't want to share their toys with the girls. That's something though you see across the board with properties that were more "boy-centric" years ago but have now grown to include anyone. You see it with Transformers, video games, comics, super-hero movies, "Star Wars", "Teenage Mutant Ninja turtles", etc."* (E. Gauntt, February 28th 2018)

*"Working as a female comic creator is scary no matter what continent you live. People with bias will dislike whatever you do because you are a woman. Luckily, I haven't had any direct contact with those people. Those are the types of mean comments you will find hidden under a fake username and avatar. But see that happened to Mairghread Scott, or any thread regarding her work, and you will find them. Of course they will they you it's because it's "bad work" but... being a woman it's quite easy to differentiate those from the one with pure hatred. Those guys will always be there, lurking."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

Additionally, Priscila Tramontano expanded upon working with other women in the line (sometimes in all-female creative teams, such as the ones for "Till All Are One") and her thoughts on this development:

*"Time are changing, though. It's getting harder and harder to find a creative team without a female or person-of-color employee. And those without them are trying to change or are getting left behind. I remember when I started working in "Transformers". Joana [Lafuente] was the one I looked up too. Now we have Joana, Sara [Pitre-Durocher], Mairghread [Scott], Kei [Zama], and so many other female creators kicking massive ass. It's... tear-inducing, to be honest. And although in the ideal world we are fighting, having mixed teams as the norm without us having to make such a fuss about it is the goal, right now, those all-female teams are special, a statement. Making part of team like this is a great honor, almost like making history!"* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

On the artistic side, none were afraid of disclosing the realities of commercial art production and its financial rewards:

*"Well, I've been very comfortable financially with this career. The comics themselves aren't the best paying, but it provides a high visibility for other people to find you. For example, I've worked for Hasbro, on TV commercials, doing film concepts. And things like DVD covers due to being known as a comics artist. Plus, convention appearances, selling original artwork, and doing commissions can all help supplement a comics income. Most recently I was kept busy working on some concept art for a theme park that payed a lot better than comic book work. So things like that help too. [Has it been hard adjusting to each of these assignments?] Not really, no. It provides a nice variety. It can be challenging managing a schedule though to be able to get it all done in time."* (A. Griffith, February 16th 2018)

*"Being able to sustain yourself on comics comes down to the comics you're doing, really. Either by doing lots of work or being on a book at a larger company, IDW, Marvel, DC, etc. Many artists I know, myself included, do various projects, commissions, or sell prints, it really is a multiple area kind of approach to art. Freelance art in general is a tricky game and requires more time than most people realize. Not only are you responsible for all the art but then all the business side of things, and that covers a lot of ground. Money, invoices, social media, networking, scheduling, and the like. And some of us even try to have a bit of a personal life in there as well. I have been fortunate to be able to sustain myself for a while with my art. I'm recently married so with an amazing wife now, who works in at a hospital, the slow months aren't as tight with her income but it's never a guarantee with my work. Sometimes it does feel like feast or famine with freelance. These days anyone I know that works in comics is also doing various other projects at the same time to keep the income as steady as possible. Some even have non-art jobs to make ends meet. I don't know a single artist who got into art for the money, we all do it because for some reason we have to, we love it, and to make it work we do some crazy things at all hours of the day and night. It's a passion kind of a gig more than a rational one."* (E. Gauntt, February 28th 2018)

*"[How easy is it for someone to survive (financially) as a comics artist right now?] Won't generalize this question because I can only special for me. And the answer is: it depends. Brazil is famous for having a high cost of living and our currency, the real, is quite devalued at the moment. What helps is the conversion. The money I get in dollars, converted to reals, is what makes this career doable. But it's not only income I have, I try to have other options, work for other companies, not exactly doing comics but things that are related to illustration. Mobile games, magazines, stuff like that. Short answer, to live exclusively of comics, you have to do more than one at the same time. It all comes down to the work you manage to do in a month."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

Lastly, with only one person outside the US contributing to the project, the question of their local scene's development these last few years was brought up:

> *"[Have you seen changes in the Brazilian comics and nerd scene? Do you think the contributions of local (Transformers and not only) talent such as yourself and Marcelo Matere has helped in this, or have they gone unnoticed?] I've seen the interest in Transformers growing, yes, but it's not as big as it could be. Maybe now the books will be released we will see more people getting into it, but I've got to be honest. The Bay movies kind of dragged the franchise through mud. It's the only contact with Transformers that the general population will have and they made quite a name for the franchise, not necessarily a good one. Comics in general are big but still are a niche culture. The movies are the biggest reference, unfortunately. Hasbro Brazil is helping with the growth, they always have Marcelo and me in their booths as an attraction, where we draw and talk about our work. It's quite nice. I've met [a] bunch of other Brazilian fans this way. Marcelo is waaay more famous than me, though, hehe."* (P. Tramontano, March 26th 2018)

This subsection was dedicated to investigating the comics workforce of "Transformers", in order to better understand the workings of the artistic process. Initial topics included their origins as fans and their relationships to fandom, as well as their training and influences. Their relationships to the license holder, the industry's sexism and their own work proved fruitful. Finally, issues of financial stability and audience expansion were discussed, as well as the existence of multiple (geographic) scenes of geek activity. The next subsection will examine their audience, and whether there is a tighter connection between the two groups.

#### 4.2.4.2. Interviews with Fans and Online Survey Results

The second part of this sub-section will be dedicated to the qualitative data taken from interviews[90] with fans. While a very wide variety of media were brought up in the interviews and survey, the focus of this thesis will be on comics, their content and (perceived) impact, to examine how fans react to changes in the workforce and how these reactions, in turn, shape the surrounding culture. Moreover, some excerpts have been moved to Chapter 4, where they will be used to further elaborate on some points made about the impact the books have had and the popularity of the medium of comics.

Starting from the ways audiences evaluate content, what is of particular interest is a change in their attraction to the property, which could, at least partly, be attributed to the recent comics. Some of the most common themes gleamed from the online survey have already been identified and covered by past literature to various degrees: the tactility and ingenuity of the toys, childhood nostalgia, the multitude of materials and characters, the

[90] With the exception of some minor alterations on names, capitalization and the addition of air quotes, the contents of the written passages sent by the interviewees via e-mail have been left as are.

novelty of giant alien robots as science-fiction concept and reflection of humanity, the bonds of friendship they have developed within the fandom and personal guidance. However, some of the survey participants (about a sixth of the total population) singled out a few new topics, relating to issues of politics –social, ideological, moral and (post-)war conflicts were mentioned-, gender –diversity and representation were considered important, along with "canonically gay" and "queer" characters and the depiction of a "homonormative" society- and other identities –psychology, mental illness, bodily ability and new ways to experience humanity were brought up as well. They were observed across gender (though with a significant female presence), geography and age lines, although they tended to come from younger participants of the survey, born on average after 1990. Furthermore, most of these seem to relate to the recent runs of the franchise, with thirteen survey participants specifically bringing up the "More Than Meets The Eye" series as their entry point or narrative of particular interest, and their year of entry being 2013 on average[91].

These claims were backed-up significantly more by the interviews, where the fans could expand upon the ideas in greater detail and add a few more. In total, the IDW line was mentioned in 41 of the 50 interviews conducted, and was almost unanimously praised[92]. Some indicative excerpts on why are quoted below, grouped by theme, beginning with general claims of quality in writing and art:

> *"So, between the amazing writing and artwork of the comics -both of them, 'cause [John] Barber's got a nifty trick up his sleeve or two as well. [...] I mean, the world-building is some of the best sci-fi world-building I've seen in any series."* (Non-binary, 31, USA, February 5th 2018)

> *"Lately I've finally had the chance to read the "More Than Meets The Eye" and "Lost Light" comics series. I wasn't prepared for the fantastic art, the character arcs or the heartbreak that I seem to keep inflicting on myself as I keep reading. I recommend them to anyone."* (Female, 22, England, February 11th 2018)

> *"Additionally, the current IDW comics, especially "More Than Meets the Eye" / "Lost Light", are some of the best written science fiction comics I've ever read. Actually,they're some of the best sci-fi I've ever experienced, in any format!"* (Male, 40, USA, February 26th 2018)

Others bring up the line's focus on political and social issues as the reason it appeals to them:

> *"The new IDW comics have really caught my interest as they explore more of the social and political workings behind the Cybertronian workings, which give the whole fandom more depth."* (Female, 32, UK, February 17th 2018)

[91] One exception (Male, February 15th 2018) was drawn to the IDW books earlier, on the strength of writer Simon Furman's involvement.

[92] Multiple interviewees mentioned disagreements they have had with other fans over the quality, content, visuals and interpretations of the comics or fan works inspired by them, but they can be explained through the aforementioned generational and value differences amongst fandom populations (Jenkins, 2006b).

*"I really like the background politics of the IDW comics."* (Female, 38, USA, March 12th 2018)

*"[The series] has loads of depth – from the beginning of the war harkening to earthen policies of functionism, revolution and society to modern twists on Jungian and Freudian psychology in the comics with Rung and Froid. There's also the alien aspect; how does a society made of metal perceive the rest of the universe? Gender? Reproduction? The world-building of this franchise is a giant mess of a sandbox and I love it."* (Female, 22, England, February 11th 2018)

Gender identity deserves a special mention, as it was brought up multiple times as interesting, affecting and praiseworthy, even by interviewees that did not belong in the LGBTQIA+ community. There was even one case of a non-LGBTQIA+ interviewee for whom the experience of reading a particular storyline normalized homosexual people, allowing her to empathize with a previously ignored (bordering on maligned) group:

*"But, getting back to gender changes. JRo[93] has done an INCREDIBLE job with representation. [...] One of the most recent episodes, where one character is talking about her changes to become 'female'. I showed it to one of my roommates, who, again, have no interest in Transformers outside of "Prime". She thought that it was one of the most well-written fictional pieces about a trans character she'd ever seen... And I just realized that's trans representation, not gender representation. It's actually well researched, female characters actually get to do something and not be token characters."* (Female, 32, USA, February 5th 2018)

*"Lastly, the queer relationships and characters mean a lot to me. More than the representation, I appreciate that the same-sex relationships are allowed to be messy and flawed, and not elevated to an impossible ideal. I loved the tragedy of Chromedome and Rewind's romance and seeing their relationship change and evolve in a way that felt "real"."* (Nonbinary/Agender, 28, USA, February 20th 2018)

*"And so there have been stories, especially "More Than Meets The Eye", that made me really have to question some assumptions that I'd just... not examined before. Stories where if it were a human story, I would not have thought nearly as deeply about it as I do, just because they are not human and so they approach things slightly differently.[...]*

*And so when the Chromedome and Rewind thing happened, I was "whoooaaa, this is... real"! But at the same time, it was weird, because I'd spent so long telling myself that this was not legitimate, and it made me also reexamine the way I was thinking about gay people in the real world. Because I was raised very conservative, just, you know... I'm old, I come*

[93] This was an oft-mentioned nickname for writer James Roberts on certain fan platforms (e.g. Tumblr), and has been left as is to indicate the readership's (perceived) familiarity and intimacy with him and his work.

*from a town in Iowa, I was taught "no, this- this is not right". And I hadn't thought about it at all. [...] So it was just that thing that really made me... I spent months thinking, "You know what? Where do I stand on this?" It changed the way I relate to people, fundamentally. And it made me kinda get past a lot of the fear that I had. 'Cause if you don't understand something, it's easy to be afraid."* (Female, 41, USA, February 9th 2018)

A third group expands upon the last two points by comparing the current line to past iterations and how it expands upon its foundations or upends its more outdated reputation:

*"Initially I became invested in "Transformers: Prime" partially because the characters and story it featured had interesting potential for character and worldbuilding that I wanted to see explored, then I became very invested in the IDW comics because they actually did explore that potential."* (Female, 28, Australia, February 18th 2018)

*"Being designed for older readers, [the comics] explored more topics and characters than ever before, and it connected with me immediately."* (Female, UK, February 18th 2018)

*"When Transformers debuted, they were exclusively a 'boy's toy' with the creators explicitly told not to include any female characters among the first season's cast of Autobots or Decepticons. Later the few girl robots (Elita-One and her team, Arcee, etc.) only had tokenized or minimal roles. "Transformers" was firmly rooted in the strict gender roles of the 1980s.*

*I've noticed, especially since James Roberts and Maighread Scott began writing for IDW, that women and LGBT+ fans are joining the fandom in droves. After a quick and unofficial survey of fandom Tumblr accounts, it seems like ¾ of the fandom these days is LGBT+[.] It's awesome!*

*Not only are we seeing more diverse characters in the comics (aimed at an adult audience), like Rewind & Chromedome, Anonde, Windblade and the other Camian colonists, we're finally seeing more female Transformers even in media aimed at kids, like Strongarm in [2015] "Robots in Disguise". I'm glad girls can find lots of cool female heroes to identify with and finally get to play with one of the best toys of all time."* (Male, 40, USA, February 26th 2018)

The line was also mentioned multiple times when answering on changes to the demographics of the fandom they might have witnessed. The work of specific writers has been credited with introducing new audiences, such as women, teenagers[94], young adults and members of the LGBTQIA+ community, into the property:

*"When I started going to conventions, most of the attendees were geeky men the same age as me! Nowadays there are a lot more female attendees, kids, and LGBT attendees. I think the Michael Bay live-action movies*

[94] While their exact ages were concealed to protect their privacy, it is worth noting that the two youngest interviewees in the sample were teenagers and very enthusiastic about the IDW line.

*attracted a lot of younger fans to the mix. I also think that the current comics (especially those written by James Roberts and Maighread Scott), with their social maturity and commentary, are drawing more females and the LGBT community to Transformers fandom."* (Male, 38, UK, February 6th 2018)

*"My children enjoy the modern IDW comics, and my LGBTQ friends greatly appreciate the representation they see in the work of James Roberts' comics."* (Male, 38, USA, February 19th 2018)

*"I would definitely say that the fandom is becoming more inclusive. The last time I was at Auto Assembly I noticed a lot more females. I believe they may be more into the comics than the toys, particularly "More Than meets the Eye" / "Lost Light". I also know many females are into the fandom on DeviantArt. It's not like back in the 80's when Transformers was viewed as a boys[']toy only. I think the stories have expanded the fanbase, which is great."* (Male, 41, UK, February 6th 2018)

Another group, after taking note of the introduction of female artists (fans and professionals alike) into the property and the impact their work has had on the fandom as a whole, correlates a change in workforce with a shift in demographics:

*"When I first noticed that there was a shift, it was... The artist Sarah Stone was at TFCon, in Canada -she had done the art for the first "Windblade" series. And she was late to coming down for her table. So the convention had opened and people were coming in and they were starting to look around and people were waiting and asking about "Where is Sarah Stone? Why isn't she here yet? Is she here at the convention?" [...] Well, it might've been three hours or four hours after the convention had started that she finally came down, she had overslept. But she had this incredible line that were waiting for her to show up, and these people had been waiting for since the show started! They were there specifically for Sarah Stone. They didn't care what else was going on around them, they wanted their Sarah Stone art, and they wanted their books signed, and they didn't care how long they had to wait. And every single one of them –there had to have been about two dozen of them- they were all women. I was like, "That is amazing. I've never seen anything like that". This is a tonal shift in the fandom. And I'm looking at it right now!"* (Male, 38, Canada, February 1st 2018)

*"I can't say for sure, since I don't know any fans of "Transformers" in real life, but I think there is more female artists now than I thought there would be?"* (Female, 32, UK, February 5th 2018)

*"I really admire the female artists and writers on the "Transformers" creative team and they've been a big inspiration recently. (I also admire the fan-artists who've recently drawn "Transformers" comics because holy chalupa, you did it.)"* (Nonbinary/Agender, 28, USA, February 20th 2018)

Others mentioned the comics in tandem with other, more recent iterations of the franchise ("Transformers: Prime" and the live-action films); another considered the multiplicity of the franchise as helping in its inclusivity, and the creation of more female-friendly Internet spaces aided in the cultivation of a new, non-traditional audience for it:

> *"I would say there are fewer teenagers and more 20-somethings and older. I think that's because most new fans at this point are finding "Transformers" through the IDW comics, and so they tend to be a bit older than the average viewer of the TV shows. [...] I also think the gender split of the fandom has changed. The first "Transformers" convention I attended was in 2011, and I would say that women made up perhaps a third of the attendees. That convention has now doubled in size (from around 500 attendees every year to over 1,000) and I'd estimate that women make up at least half of the attendees. I would also put that down to the popularity and high-quality storytelling of the comics, but also to the growth of fan communities (like on Tumblr and Archive of Our Own) that are more welcoming to female fans than some of the older Transformers message boards tend to be."* (Female, 36, UK, March 6th 2018)

> *"I'm not a long-time fan, but I do get the impression that "Transformers: Prime" and "More Than Meets the Eye", both high-quality, strongly-written, inclusive series, opened the fandom gates to a wider audience than ever before, particularly among women and lgbt+ fans, who don't typically get associated with "Transformers"."* (Female, 30, USA, February 9th 2018)

> *"I think there's definitely a noticeable change in the demographic, and I also think the fandom is more strongly divided between fandom creators and fandom interpreters. I believe that the differing universes are part of the reason for this. Every universe is so unique and you have stalwart fans who don't like any other version, and you have fans who like all versions, you like fans who don't like the direction of the comics, and others who are grateful for the more progressive comics which have finally started addressing political, social, and economic issues, as well as LGBT representation. It's definitely a fandom that has fans from all walks of life, young to old, world-wide."* (Female, 32, USA, February 23rd 2018)

Another group, however, views the phenomenon inversely: it is the diversity of the fandom that has changed the property, as well as its tolerance of new ideas (both within the franchise and society in general):

> *"[...] there is a lot more acceptance now on different ideas. When I was more active, having a same-sex relationship with characters was considered a huge taboo. Nowadays, it's canon in the comics so it's no big deal. With having so many people in the fandom now, it also allows for different kinds of fans to branch off and form their own groups."* (Female, USA, March 8th 2018)

> *"[...] the amount of acceptable ideas in "Transformers" canon has changed. The IDW comics explored gay and lesbian relationships, gender roles, the morality of war and its effects, among other things. Today's demographic finds these topics acceptable to discuss. Previous generations (specifically the "G1ers" -fans of the first "Transformers" series) do not like these topics at all and prefer the "purity" of original G1 canon without question."* (Female, 33, USA, March 1st 2018)[95]

Two interviewees even used the word "fandom" to mean the amalgamation of official and fan materials when mentioning recent storylines and in light of the franchise's history:

> *"After accompanying [the characters] through these twisted sagas of life as we read through their stories of death, betrayal, success--all of the components of not just war per se, but life as a whole, we begin to see that underneath all of their Cybertronian appearances and stature, they are like every other person living on this Earth as we speak; we grow to understand that they are human. That notion alone should be enough to convince anyone that this fandom is worth a glimpse because the "Transformers" fandom has writers that can take intimidating robots and can turn them into people that we can relate to."* (Female, USA, February 28th 2018)

> *"While it appears black and white on the surface, there really are no true good or bad sides in the factions. You have really awful people on the Autobot side, and Decepticons who have valid reasons to do what they do, and are decent people. Even Optimus Prime seems to get knocked down a few pegs in the comics where people call him out on believing in his own cult of personality. There are just no limits in the fandom, and that's what keeps it from feeling stale."* (Female, USA, March 8th 2018)

Lastly, some of the female interviewees of the sample doubt this finding to some extent. One (42, USA, February 16th 2018) noted that, despite the standardized influx of "new, often very young (teens), fans" with every new fiction, "the platform fandom calls home changes it more than demographics of fans", another (26, USA, February 8th 2018) wonders if girls are simply "more visible" than when she was introduced in 2001, and a third (32, UK, February 5th 2018) never doubted that this property could interest her because of her gender, despite "store shelves telling [her] that "Transformers" toys were for boys", and finds the fandom "very inclusive", as it "doesn't care about who or what you are". Finally, some others (28, Australia, February 18th 2018; 38, USA, March 12th 2018) have not noticed any changes, at least in their own fan circles.

In regards to language and geography matters, the languages used by the fans were examined in regards to where they lived. Out of the 50 interviewees, only five lived in a

[95] Something similar was mentioned by another interviewee (Trans-Masculine Non-Binary, 40, USA, February 11th 2018) in regards to fan content production. They considered that the easier and more varied queer gender interpretations of characters in current (slash) fan fiction ("everyone is a single sex, but everyone has the spectrum gender") is connected to "more fans coming out in the LGBT+ community", and is one of the elements that drew them back into the fandom.

country where English is not an official language and one moved from their native country to the UK. All were more than capable users of the language, even if some felt a bit self-conscious of their written testimonies or accents. Their mother languages were brought up in the conversation regarding producing or consuming content, but only two (and two of the eldest of the group) actively tried to bridge the gap between the foreign-language materials they were consuming and their native tongue:

> *"[I use] English only. It is because of the lack of fans or wider fan communities, which is also mainly thanks to the fandom- and official content strictly being localized to the US region, with only a few events taking place in Europe, or anywhere else."* (Male, 25, Hungary, February 17th 2018)
>
> *"The other language [spoken] would be Icelandic, but everything is in English. [Is it because you wanted to avoid the Icelandic "Transformers" community, if such a thing exists?] I think there is one other person that I know? There are two person[s], one toy collector and another on Tumblr. [So it's an issue of not that big of a community existing.] Yeah. [...]*
>
> *[All these things have been available in Icelandic or English? How is western media consumed in Iceland?] It is mostly consumed in English; there isn't really much dubbing, except for younger audiences[96]. I would imagine that if they did get broadcast [rights] to a "Transformers" series, [2015] "Robots in Disguise" would certainly be dubbed. "Animated" would most likely be dubbed, and "Prime" would very much not be dubbed! [Or maybe not broadcast at all?] Yeah, it wasn't even broadcast, it wasn't just, say, "SpongeBob Squarepants" or "Phineas and Pherb".*
>
> *["You think that knowing English has helped you appreciate "Transformers" more, or would you have preferred it to be in your native tongue?"] I would've preferred it to be in English anyway, because I don't really think they're good for proper translation. Like in the Bay movies, the names haven't really been translated except for Autobots and Decepticons. [...]*
>
> *[When did you start learning English? And when were you comfortable in it?] Learning English, I think it begins in 7th grade in Iceland but it is still an ongoing process going through to Gymnasium, basically. You get an okay grasp but to read stuff you have to [go to] 10th grade and that's when you enter Gymnasium and that's when you get into more difficult texts and more fully understanding. Personally speaking... The problem is that I have a low-key Asperger's, so talking to strangers was something that I just did...! So by 2000 I was basically chatting everyone up. I was 14-15 years old by then, so I must've been good at talking by then."* (Male, 32, Iceland, February 9th 2018)

[96] The same interviewee mentioned watching parts of the "Transformers: Energon" anime in English around 2005, courtesy of the Scandinavian Cartoon Network channel.

*"[I use] English. I've been learning it since I was 6 and somehow it became the language in which I would make notes (using bad or no grammar when I was younger.) Now that I live in the UK, I can't imagine writing in Polish, it never felt right. Besides, the Internet speaks English and that's where I put my creations. It's just easier this way."* (Female, 32, UK, February 5th 2018)

*"[Do you prefer getting into properties in their original language, or would it have been the same via a Dutch translation?]Oh no, I really don't like comics that are translated in Dutch. It often makes it feel childish to me. I don't have much of a problem with dubbed television programs (if the cast is well-cast, of course), but I still prefer "Transformers" things in English. "Prime" has become an exception to that at some points, now that I've seen and heard the good points of it. [...] The rest of it I['d] rather have in English.*

*[Would you imagine yourself producing fan content in your native tongue?] Not at all, if I were to write fanfiction it would be in English. [To reach a wider audience, or for any other reason?] Mostly because I prefer English over Dutch in these kind of things! [Is it because the translation of terms would be hard, or because it sounds unnatural in some way?] I think a bit of both, plus the thing about it coming across as childish to me. English is also often the language I use before Dutch, I even talk English to my Dutch friends here on Discord! Don't get me wrong though, I'm a very proud Dutchman, and love the country. But with things like making fan content I go with English."* (Agenderfuid, 22, Netherlands, February 21st 2018)

*"At first I only produced material in my native tongue, French. My grasp on English was very weak at first; I struggled with it all through middle school, due to disliking the subject – or the way it was taught, most likely. It's actually getting involved in fanfiction and fandom that made me open up and study the language, hard. There just wasn't enough material on the French side of my favorite fandoms at the time to fill my hunger for new stuff, so over the summer between middle school and high school, I ended up making a foray into the English side, armed with a bilingual dictionary and a lot of patience. I made enormous progresses in a matter of months after that – so much that by the time I finished high school, I was working on doing fic translation and was pondering becoming a professional translator (I didn't, though I do work in a book-related business). It was hard at first but I regret nothing as it allowed to fully jump into the bigger fandom and not just stay on the fringes.*

*Nowadays, I almost only write in English. It feels more natural when writing fics, perhaps because I grew so used to it – though in the case of "Transformers", it was also because it was easier, as I had no idea how to translate certain terms. It also allows me to touch a larger public and to share more easily with my online friends, which don't speak my native tongue."* (Female, 30, France, February 26th 2018)

*"My first long-term endeavor was the Italian translation of all the US/UK Transformers comics which were never published officially in Italy, focusing especially on anything Furman had a hand in. Later, for the forum autorobot.it, I wrote most of the Italian guide to the animated series of "Generation 1" and "Beast Wars".*

*Currently, I write and letter fancomics. As I mentioned before, I also translated and lettered scans of the English and Japanese comics. [...] I produce material in English (to reach other countries' fans) and then translate it in Italian. But everyone on the web understands English these days."* (Male, February 15th 2018)

In addition to English, 28 languages (including American and Swedish Sign Language) were recorded in the survey, with the fans being bilingual on average, but very few (Japanese, Mandarin Chinese and Spanish) saw active use by the fans according to the interviews[97]. The following are the exceptions:

*"I am only fluent in English, thus post in English. When I was studying Mandarin Chinese, I once tried to read fanfiction in the language."* (Female, 26, USA, March 1st 2018)

*"I used English to produce my fan fiction, which is my native language. I also know Chinese, so I tried to read Chinese fics in order to help me learn."* (Female, USA, March 8th 2018)

*"[All of [your fan art] is produced with an English-speaking audience in mind, right?] Yes. Though I'd like to produce more bilingual content (English and Spanish, since those are what I can speak.) [Have you taken a look at the Spanish-speaking "Transformers" fandom? Is it organized?] No, I have not. I don't know exactly where to start. Most other TF bloggers like and produce English language art but I assume that is to reach a wider audience."* (Female, 28, USA, February 13th 2018)

Of special mention are fans attempting to reach the Japanese (artistic) side of the fandom by learning the language, interested in both official and fan material:

*"I produce my content in English, which is my native language, though I've been attempting to use a little more Japanese on art sites. I'm not incredibly comfortable with it though."* (Female, 30, USA, February 9th 2018)

*"I produce content in English, which is my native tongue. I interact with some content, especially fan-art and fan comics, on Japanese sites, which I can translate well enough to navigate and use search functions. The Japanese fans tend to latch onto different characters, concepts, or*

[97] Some interviewees (Female, 32, England, February 20th 2018; Female, 22, England, February 11th 2018) commented on their poor or underdeveloped second-language (German in the first case) skills, and another (Female, 32, UK, February 17th 2018) went on to congratulate those creating content in a language different than their native one.

*[relation]ships that don't get as much attention in the English-language fandom."* (Female, 33, USA, February 12th 2018)

*"I have been slowly trying to learn Japanese. So much of the TF universe comes from there, as do many things I'm interested in, that being able to read or talk about things in Japanese I think would add to my enjoyment of them."* (Male, 40, USA, February 13th 2018)

Finally, there is an artistically-inclined minority that believes art to be a non-verbal form of communication, and thus either sidestep the issue with a common language or find little obstructions when browsing for materials by non-English-speaking fans:

*"Most of the work I produce is in English, but as the main script writers of the comics I work on are from Italy, often the comic will be re-lettered in Italian."* (Male, 41, UK, February 6th 2018)

*"[I use] English. Though the art usually doesn't contain words. I know a little Spanish but that's about it." (*Male, 41, USA*, February 11th 2018)*

*"I love seeing fan-art from the artists I follow, and even if I can't understand them sometimes (a lot of my favorite fan-artists are Japanese/Korean) they put a little smile on my face throughout the day."* (Nonbinary/Agender, 28, USA, February 20th 2018)

Finally, on the subject of interviewees belonging to gender minority groups, individuals participated in large enough numbers to offer some insight into their fandom, the contents of the stories and how both relate to their marginalized or non-mainstream identities:

*"I think ["Transformers"] did kinda have a part in [my gender identity], but more in a "I have no idea how I feel so I wanna be a Transformer because that will make me feel so much more comfortable in my own body than I am now at least" kinda way (not so far as to say that I was kin with Transformers, though, because I have never been and never had a kintype whatsoever, just a "desire to be" out of curiosity and escaping the hectic [pace] of life). But because of that, the franchise certainly did open up the aspect of "Do I even feel human?", however. And I kinda explored from there."* (Agenderfluid, 22, Netherlands, February 21st 2018)

*["Did "Transformers" have anything to do with your gender identity or was it just unrelated?"] "Well, I was getting into "Transformers" at about the same time! And I think it must've- not the fiction itself, but my interactions within the fandom which were, you know, very good, especially when I first started. And there were non-binary people, too, I'd actually talk to and, you know, they'd sometimes share their general experiences or just fun anecdotes, you know. And eventually, I went, "Oh. So this is an option." and "Hm, okay, yeah!" So, you could kinda say that the "Transformers"*

*fandom did help with that, a little bit, even if it was unintentional."* (Non-Binary, 31, USA, February 5th 2018)

*"With me, it was more of... I grew up in a conservative-leaning household. So I wasn't allowed to really be me sort of thing. [...] I pretty much lived through that whole "You can't be this because of this" and I really do think in part it has to do with- Coming out more in the community just so happened to be me getting back into things I like and [thinking] "It's okay to be yourself". It might be coincidental, but it was like, "I miss "Transformers", it was when I was happy, it did bring me joy, let's go back into it, oh my God, what have I done, I've watched "Age of Extinction", now I need to get the taste out of my mouth"."* (Trans-Masculine Non-Binary, 40, USA, February 11th 2018)

In addition to the above, mentions to specific characters were made often enough to be worth writing down[98]. The oldest interviewees did express their joy in regards to the representation, as well as the various "queer relationships and characters" that "are allowed to be messy and flawed, and not elevated to an impossible ideal" (Nonbinary/Agender, 28, USA, February 20th 2018). On the issue of trans representation in particular, the two oldest interviewees cherished the appearances of female-identifying characters Anode and Lug specifically, while the youngest was indifferent to them (associating them with a reactionary type of online criticism/activism she found distasteful). Instead, she gravitated towards Arcee, curious about the character's journey and comparing her to another version she was more familiar with. The fourth person treasured Chromedome and Rewind's relationship, showing a diversity of opinion on favorite or noteworthy characters.

[98] Although multiple characters and their queer (re)interpretations in fan materials were brought up in all three live interviews, only those explicitly shown as queer in the comics as of this writing will be discussed.

# 5. Discussion

This chapter analyses the data presented previously and argues with pre-existing literature in their finer points. The IDW comics, their fans and makers will thusly be used to broaden our understanding of the comics industry and its fandom, by comparing it to similar, past cases. The following will be based on a synthesis of the quantitative and qualitative data for both fans and official creatives, starting with the latter group.

## 5.1. Comics Creatives: Origins, growth and survival

The initial, qualitative research showed that, while definitely a part of the larger comics industry, the "Transformers" scene has its own peculiarities. The most important deviation is the growing (and perhaps disproportionate) number of pencilers working for the publishers, which gets inflated more during special occasions like event series and specials with additive material. In contrast, with the exception of some quick turnovers in main writers, there are a few and specific writers with very steady careers, to the point of behaving almost independently from the artists and indicating the latter role as more valuable and sought-after by editorial than the former. Furthermore, since only one creative (a native English speaker) was able to switch roles (from penciler to writer), possibly owing to his extensive experience in the line[99], the rift between disciplines remains, even with some limited mobility options. The above show that finding people knowledgeable enough and interested in the characters is an ongoing concern, yet the increased stability of writers proves that their reputation as the main creative force behind comics could still be in play.

On the subject of their continuous or almost-continuous employment, another element of the scene is glimpsed: a sense of internal hierarchy between the roles that spreads to the artists as well, with a significant difference in productivity between "main" and incidental ones. While about two out of three creatives had less-than-average participation and showed little stability or interest in the scene, the remaining third (comprised largely or artists) exhibited impressive endurance compared to the rest of the industry; their previous experience in the franchise and fan origins may explain their attachment and success. Even then, however, there were fluctuations, with creatives that took breaks or contributed little material at a steady pace; possible reasons could be that comics are not their primary source of income but only a part-time job, that they profit from different sections of the comics art world (covers, prints, commissions etc.), that the industry's scheduling demands are too big for them, or that they wish for a more careful approach to storytelling, contributing only if they can expand upon their ideas in a

[99] It might be outside the limits of this thesis, but a note must be made on the additional promotion of colorists Josh Burcham and Priscila Tramontano into pencilers. Their experience in previous comics incarnations of "Transformers" (Burcham penciled issues of the Official Collector's Club magazine and Tramontano worked on a 2015 "Robots in Disguise" mini-series) may have played a part in this decision.

meaningful way. In other words, the repetitiveness of the credits and one's survival in the industry depends on many factors: their previous experience and expertise, their position in the creative process and their passion for the subject matter.

Initial statements from the interviews with official creatives were about their interest in the property (all of them had at the very least a passing familiarity with the source material before taking up artistic duties), and they all match up remarkably well to those of fans mentioned in previous literature or this thesis (see below). They belong to distinct generations (the "Generation One" run for the men and repeated exposure to successive versions with "Beast Wars" and the 2007 film for Tramontano), have patterns of rising and falling interest -the Dreamwave comics and the 2007 film reinvigorated the interest of Griffith and Barber- and either center around specific incarnations (e.g. comics for Barber, the 1980s cartoon for Gaunnt) or continue to the consumption of new materials (Tramontano). Their reasoning was also similar in theme: they were attracted to the property's connection to a wider universe (Griffith) or its unique sci-fi elements (Gauntt). While seemingly irrelevant, these confessions paint the official artists as processing the initial mindset of amateurs and starting from a similar emotional place.

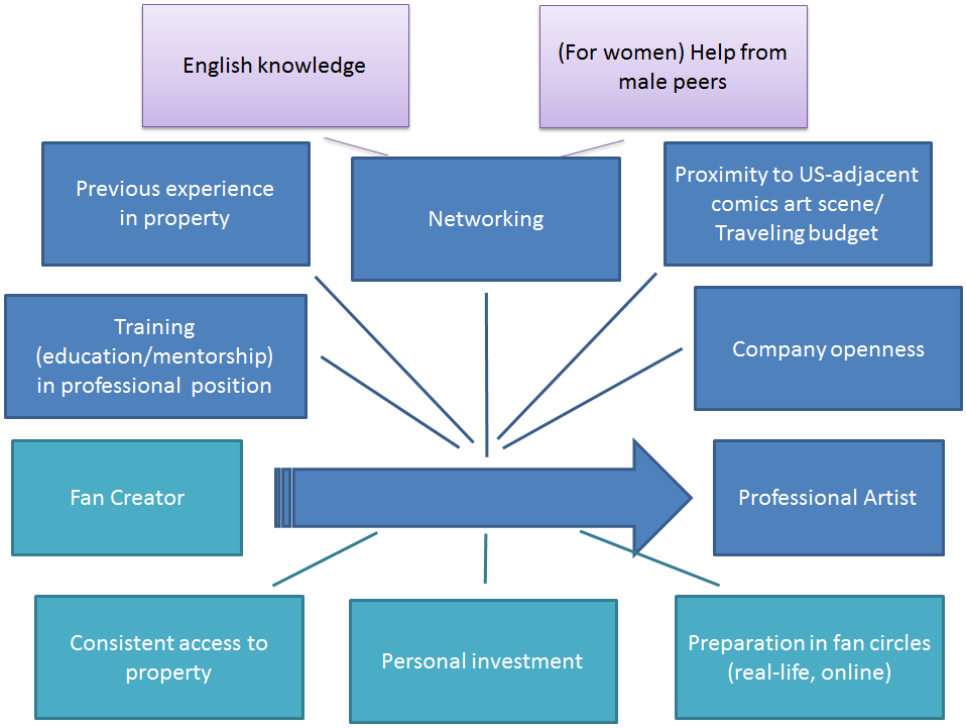
Their further relationship to fandom (with an emphasis on its online component) is also multi-faceted. The three artists rose from within it (although a real-life circle of friends was needed beforehand in Griffith's case) and the informal interactions between fans provided them with artistic practice that complemented their acquired education (e.g. combining skills or using digital tools). These exchanges helped cultivate connections to the official side as well[100]: bonds of mentorship (Tramontano became Marcelo Matere's assistant), guidance (Griffith aided Zama) and networking (Knowler and van Reyk helped bring Griffith and Tramontano over to professional comics, Gauntt's collaborations were done predominantly online) were developed through both online projects and face-to-face interactions at conventions (where an additional three artists showcased their work to a representative of the publisher), even if the latter still seems to be just as important in introducing a new creative in a visible position. Barber's case, that of someone with textual knowledge (which he used to get his first assignment relying on his own circle of acquaintanships within the industry) but not a devoted fan originally, is interesting. Feeling in an inferior position to his fellow writers, he used fandom materials as a research guide to gain insider knowledge while crafting a story that suited his own interests on a (relatively unknown at first) pre-existing framework. This process is dynamic and not strictly defined, as Barbers feels he misjudged importance of female characters and thus regrets their late introduction.

[100] In the interview with Evan Gauntt, the artist provided details of his initial, casual recruitment by officials of the company in 2004 for related work (a book cover), but also his pessimistic opinion of the future. His initial communications with Hasbro was extremely casual, an evolution of art curation the artists weren't formally prepared for. He was approached via personal message on a board he was a member of; he's uncertain of how common this was, but it was common knowledge that some higher-ups at Hasbro had accounts and browsed through the works. This relaxed vibe was usual at the time for fan artists, but after the success of the 2007 movie, Hasbro "seemed to want more direct in house control". Executive Aaron Archer's departure and the shutting down of avenues marked the end of an era in 2013.

The position of female creators was also complicated, despite the recent progress made. From the qualitative data, their late introduction into major creative roles lined up with the past view of the property and the comics industry as a proverbial “boy’s club”, but their recent contribution in comparatively great numbers subverted that, showing their intense interest in the franchise and the creation of a pleasant environment that they could return to. That said, having mostly become known through fan avenues or past experience in other iterations, these women entered the industry (along with the help of male co-workers) almost sideways, possibly indicating how hostile its “normal” routes were. The interviews supported this further: most women mentioned in the project rose from fan circles, gained visibility through the Internet, were helped my male workers or mentors and took visible positions in the artistic process only recently, although they now constitute a sizable portion of the workforce. Tramontano elaborated on the subject of sexism she and others have received (regardless of nationality), in the form of unfair criticism of the quality of their work and anonymous online comments, but notes it is offset by their confinement to the Internet, the helpfulness of her male co-workers and the greatly increased presence of women in the line. As a result of the above, her participation in all-female teams is considered historically significant and personally fulfilling, even if her personal ideal is mixed groups of artists. The inclusion of women and POCs in more and more projects beyond the line is observed with hope, even if it still depends on interpersonal connections and the help of male peers, and has to face a hostile online environment. Despite these difficulties and trends that are compatible with the sexism from the rest of the industry (Scott, 2013), multiple women have established themselves as significant creatives in the line, possibly by taking advantage of the relative lack of competition in a niche area of art (but not writing); the result is their increased presence in a still (despite the drastic changes made) male-dominated industry.

The above (fan-motivated, industrial and miscellaneous) factors that aid in a fan’s “promotion” to official creative (and thus show one major way in which fandom can contribute in official capacity) is summarized in the following graph (Graph 16):

**Graph 16: The various factors that affect a fan's introduction into the official workforce.**




The artistic influences and experiences of the "Transformers" workforce in particular are also worth examining. Their diverse origin, with a great percentage of them originating as commercial artists or as fans, is an interesting first finding; it could show the relative ease with which artists from all possible fields are able to jump into comics, but in this specific instance, it betrays the particular nature of the characters and the specialized skillset needed to depict them. This is further supported by how many individual creatives had been previously involved with the franchise in different mediums (comics, television, video games etc.), further solidifying its niche status but also securing the long-term development multiple artists have enjoyed thanks to it. The additional recruitment of fans specifically indicates a tighter bond between fandom and professional artists than previously observed, though both routes in which this meeting happens (conventions and the Internet) have been previously mentioned to some extent (Perkel, 2011).

In addition, their artistic influences revealed the intricate tapestry of arts that influences this (seemingly isolated) corner or pop culture. In their personal lists during the interviews, the creatives mentioned a wide range of media, from well-known creators and schools of sequential storytelling -Larry Hama, Chris Claremont, Warren Ellis, Grant Morisson, Jim Aparo, John Romita Jr., Todd McFarlane, *manga*- to high art (classic and modern painting, anatomical studies) and from music (rock and glam-rock, punk and post-punk, alternative) to new art forms (animation, action film, television, video games etc.). One reason could be their formal art education and contact with at least some aspects of the fine arts, which played an important role in defining all of them. They also showed they processed significant knowledge of the property, drawing equally from its past (Simon Furman, Ralph Macchio) and recent achievements in comics (Don Figuera, Nick Roche and James Roberts) and more obscure multi-media corners (Studio OX). The result was the

grafting of novel themes and ideas into the story, from contemporary post-war and political anxieties -initially brought in as an intellectual exercise and later as a frank (even prophetic) reflection of the real world- to a greater degree of humanization. On the depiction of the characters themselves, considered by the writer and former editor as a particular, sought-after skill, due to their detailed, mechanical nature, the artists have historically figured out a series of solutions: following the paradigm of past creators (or similar comics characters), relying on visual elements beyond the facial (composition and scale, body language, lighting and coloring) and exaggerating their many human-like traits in a cartoonish manner (even if it is considered "cheating"). Still, editorial has a specific roster of artists who know the characters and wish to work on them and is looking amongst the fandom to find new ones. The above reveals a group of individuals who both possess an awareness of the larger culture they inhabit, as well as an artistic lineage specific to the property they contribute to.

For a media franchise that has been defined as a strictly commercial vehicle in past literature, the creators admit a significant measure of artistic freedom, even if it is layered across iterations. There was minimal intervention in the tie-in series, with both writer and artists receiving few mandates on cosmetic issues of iconography. On the main line, John Barber mentioned that, limited commercial tie-ins with the figures, occasional character appearances or mentions of concepts notwithstanding, the story creators have been given considerable leeway in charting their plots independent of toy advertising. Hasbro is informed of their plans and accommodates them, using their new concepts in other media and asking for cross-promotion after communicating with them and reaching a consensus with them. Outside of the official licensee, however, the situation is more compromised. Evan Gauntt complements the position of IDW by revealing its difference from Fun Publications, which was a more heavily regulated environment employing artists considered minor (despite some exchange of talent between the companies), with fictions set in their own universe and using lesser-known characters. The end product was seen as "niche area of official work" for many fans and artists alike, appealed to a limited audience of subscribers with different interests and thus was considered less important to most fans, despite its official status. That, coupled with their limited accessibility, even after the club's dissolution[101], shows how tiered the comics production of the franchise can be, with certain enterprises being afforded much greater artistic freedom than others, even if the main line products are relatively free from the commercialization the property has been accused for.

Moreover, their long-term employment by IDW has allowed for their growth as artists, both separately and in tandem with one another. All three artists started their career in comics with "Transformers" auxiliary material or in less visible roles (cover artist, colorist),

[101] The issue was touched upon in the same interview with Evan Gauntt, who pondered the future of the club-exclusive fictions. After the club's end in 2016, some of the prose stories were released online for free in PDF form, but that wasn't the case with the comics. The artist had to rely on his personal archives for some of the missing pieces –being the colorist, he was "second to last on the pages' work schedule". He has since posted them in unlettered form online, but he believes their finished release would upset Hasbro. For that reason, he is of the opinion that "the majority of the TFCC fiction will be regulated to the fringe of TF lore and Wiki articles", as he doubted there will be a collected edition for them in the near future. Regardless, Gauntt was proud of his work on them (with the 2010 Botcon box art and the comics story "Alone Together" standing out in particular) and contributing to the franchise for a variety of projects in general.

in which they were allowed to hone their skills (writing and research, drawing and sequential art) in an environment with less outside pressure, even if it was intimidating on a personal level. In being brought to the main titles, they were able to loosen their style (Griffith), define their voices (Barber) and discover their strengths and weaknesses (Tramontano), as well as gradually trust their partners with major artistic decisions, approaching an almost "Marvel method"[102] way of comics creation in some respects. Their emotional attachment to the projects is also evident, with certain meta-narrative and auto-biographical storylines reflecting on personal worries and the artistic process itself. These bonds seem to have transcended to a personal level as well, with creators praising each other in their answers. The TFCC environment was similar, even if it came with the added pressure of occasions like BotCon, but the opportunity for personal input and valued collaborations was there. Both publishers have nurtured and tested their talent, and the result is stories that challenge and interrogate their "parent medium" by drawing elements from it, but subverting or commenting on them. Contrary to Jenkins' (2006a) and Johnson's (2005) ideas of reintroduced, "flat" characters in licensed media, these comics set themselves apart from their sources, stand on their own and have generated an artistic professional community, like any other art institution.

Fan feedback and reactions deserve their own mention. All artists understood the need for feedback and appreciate it, tweaking their work with time (Griffith) or locating weaknesses (Tramontano). All interviewees mentioned following at least some criticism online while ignoring other, especially since it tends to be either extremely positive or overtly negative (Gauntt), although the former can be devastating for some, who tend to ignore its more toxic elements and specific spaces (message boards). It also tends to be proportionate to their visibility (Griffith and Tramontano received more attention than Gauntt) and tiered by role (writers receive more than artists on average). Aside from the brutal criticism that all IDW creators have received, the sexism displayed by a portion of the online audience (created both out of a property traditionally believed to be masculine by some and the generally polarized political climate following the 2016 Presidential Election) was mentioned by all genders. The men were aware of it but recognized their relatively privileged positions, as they weren't the main victims, and the one woman did elaborate on the harassment she has received, normalizing it to an extent. The hierarchies (of roles, genders, popularity) of comics production are reproduced even in criticism, and the professionals are uncertain on whether to follow or dismiss it.

The financial viability of comics as a career (on the side of the artists) was discussed, reaching a mixed response. All three artists (and freelancers for their respective publishers) unanimously agreed that comics cannot sustain a person financially, unless they are being employed by a large publisher and work on more than one title. They all needed

[102] Pioneered by Stan Lee in his collaborations with Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko in the 1960s, the "Marvel method" is a process of comics scriptwriting in which a writer provides the penciler with an outline of the plot (rather than a full script with detailed breakdowns, lines and effects), letting them define the major beats of the issue, and returns later to pen dialogue, thoughts and text captions. It has been described as a "less rigid", more creative way of working that requires "a more synergistic relationship" between the creatives and encourages collaboration, but has also been accused of exploiting the artists (who only got paid for their art duties) in its past form (Yockey, 2017).

supplementary income from various projects in commercial art (for which they have been prepared by their studies and experience), and the convention market, commissions and the selling of prints further help them. One additional wrinkle came from the foreign resident of the group, who mentioned that the conversion of the US dollar to her local currency worked to her favor, thus justifying the editors' search for talent abroad and the interest of non-American artists. That said, comics provide them with visibility for further opportunities and are a passion for them. Freelancing in comics, therefore, assumes intense productivity, constant networking efforts and a tight schedule for relatively little reward or an overall imbalanced income, resulting in a perilous balance for the worker and almost always necessitating additional work, all largely in agreement to previous research by the author and others (Harper, 2015).

As for the geographic spread of the phenomenon through the origin of the industry's workers, both the confirmation and disproof of past findings are seen. While the expansion of the (artistic) market –in particular the creation of openings in South America and Asia– and the domination of (mostly American and European to a smaller extent) native English speakers in writing are undisputed, it hinges mostly on the creatives' individual performance and interest. The count of individual issues shows that an artist's participation in comics hinges to a degree on individual scheduling and productivity, independent of the artist's precise geographic location, but it is definitely influenced by wider cultural and economic factors. Some patterns are evident: the American scene, while stable, amounts to only about half of the total workforce, relying on imported work instead (possibly for monetary reasons), established comics hearths (Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Spain, Italy) supply the line with long-serving talent, minor scenes on the peripheries (Peru) are attracted to them, the intense interest from the UK and Ireland comes as a result of the successful Marvel UK series and even invites new personnel, and the introduction of a gateway into the industry for Japanese artists (unlike for any other Asian group), stemming from the property's shared ancestry. On another note, while their overall mobility is greater than that of the industry-wide sample, it rests on factors other than comics work: some of the creatives traveled when young -and can be explained as feeding into known migration flows to and from North America (Barkan, 1999; Grieco et al, 2012)- and for education, or became employed in different cultural industries (industrial design, video games etc.) Although the employment of talent worldwide indicates a growing, worldwide geek culture (at least modeled after the American one), an examination of (comics) art traditions has to be done on both a local and a global context; familiarity with the English language, stable linkages to major industries and the personal investment of select creators can be said to affect these results, as the pre-observed dichotomy between the various roles in the industry is confirmed and the geographies of inequality perpetuated.

Finally, on the interplay between local and global (but US-centric) geek cultures, the examples of Brazil and Japan have been glimpsed and seem to align with the previously internationalized comics scene (with one notable exception). Apart from the given presence the property has in the States (sometimes with an admitted jingoistic interpretation), it has remained a minor presence abroad, though there is growing interest in it lately. Brazilian nerd culture has been cultivated (apart from the efforts of the local Hasbro branch) with translated (if delayed and select) American material, and English language learning is

supplemented by widely available entertainment options and compulsory education. Japanese talent has a much harder time accessing the American scene and often needs mediators and translators to overcome the language barrier (many seem to not be fluent in English). Still, their own passion, the mixed history of the property, as well as the attempts of western fans to approach them by learning the language, has helped bridge the gap to some degree. Still, the nature of comics as a fringe culture will probably never supersede the monopolistic presence of the live-action film series to the general public, much to the disappointment of some of the creators.

### 5.2. Fandom: gender, geography and *gestalt*-like processes

As for the fan population, the first truly noteworthy evolution is that of the gender identity of its members, taking the presence of men as granted, given the property's "traditional" audience and its surrounding culture, and starting from the second epoch's results. The robust female presence can be explained through the increased visibility of women in geek and comics spaces, partly due to social media, better online networking, transmedia storytelling and activism (Scott, 2013; Maynard, 2017), but the appearance of other identities is more complex. Historically –and observed already by the end of the 1980s-,Turkle (1995) has argued that the Internet allowed further explorations of identities formerly hidden due to societal pressure. In an environment of freeing anonymity, individuals could admit to belonging in marginalized or nonmainstream groups and develop a sense of comradery with others in similar situations, which could lead to emotional support. While the conception of an oppositional non-binary gender began at the start of the 1990s (Garber, 1992) and had been documented in virtual environments since the end of the same decade, albeit in a role-playing environment (Roberts & Parks, 1999), it wasn't until the middle of the 2000s that it was first interrogated with subjects in a non-pathologizing manner (Bilodeau, 2005). The Internet (and particularly website Tumblr in its first stages, from 2011 to 2013) helped increase the awareness and representations for and by queer and trans individuals and allowed them to resist mainstream appropriation (Fink & Miller, 2014), which were further embraced and molded into counter-culture communities in the next years, becoming "a useful starting point for conversations" (Oakley, 2016). Since Tumblr was one of the places were the survey was circulated, their inclusion is not surprising, but their emergence in geek spaces can only imply their increased sense of comfort and security in a (virtual) community that affords them that expression. The matter of the participants who didn't display any gender identification –as well as some minor uncertainties in the sample- can be attributed to both the general trend of experimentation with (Bruckman, 1996) or lying about gender identity on the Internet (Nissenbaum, 2003; Jones, 2005); this practice does not cheapen the depth of the subjects' engagement with their interests or connections with one another (Whitty, 2004) and in fact showcases the complex ways in which gender and identity are constructed in the "offline" world as well (Taylor, 1999). In the end, the result is evident: contrary to past literature, "Transformers" has developed a diverse fan base across gender divides, aided by online outlets and changing broader attitudes towards gender, and shows how fandoms, from their online

roots to today's normalized Internet-heavy interactions, can be inclusive and protective towards individuals with non-conforming identities.

The fans' geographic spread, on the other hand, indicates the uneven growths of both fandom and commercial art industries. The appearance of Russia in the recent sample is noteworthy on its own, as there has been little inquiry about its connection to the franchise and American media in general; this finding, coupled with the recent popularity of the live-action series in the country which is reciprocated by executive decisions such as avant-premieres (2018), paint a much different picture from the "anti-Western and anticommercial sentiment" Barker (1999) described in the mid-1990s amongst Russian children. Other than that, it has to be noted that European, South American and Asian countries in general seem to become more in tune with American geek culture or develop their own scenes -most of the newly-introduced countries were mentioned as satellite scenes in previous research, though some (the European ones in particular) were noted as being weaker than the more established ones and Asian fandom seems cut-off from the rest. Still, cases of audience loss (losing more than two individuals between phases) should in general be treated with some skepticism: common countries (Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain and the USA) are well-established (however peripheral and recent) comics hearths, and Ireland could be grouped with the UK due to the (geographical and cultural) proximity of their artistic scenes. While fan presence may have appeared diminished in some of them (Australia, Brazil, Japan and the Philippines), they still supplied the line with creative talent, indicating an active interest in the franchise nevertheless. The rest (Chile, China, New Zealand, Thailand), however, could still be categorized as countries in the weak periphery of the industry, areas with interrupted or very recent industry participation and still tenuous connections to the US.

While the geographic profile of the fans turned out exceptionally diverse, the same cannot be said for the languages used by them for participating in the community: the vast majority were English-speaking, and even non-native speakers preferred it to their other languages, confirming the dominance of the language in certain circles (Warschauer, Said & Zohry, 2002) and the slight segregation of Internet users, despite the growing volume of non-English pages over the last years (Crystal, 2006). This result was also definitely shaped by some participants' presumed low or even marginal familiarity with the language, particularly in the Asian side of the fandom, whose issues with language acquisition are familiar (Bolton, 2008). That said, apart from a majority of native speakers, most participants' superior knowledge of English -cultivated both by compulsory education and incidental learning (Lankard, 1995) after fan engagement-, the source material's original language, a lack of communities or a developed geek sphere with its own linguistic identity in their local regions, the online dominance of English and the perceived poor quality of localizations and translations (in part out of restrictions on what could be locally shown or sold) were the reasons cited for their favoritism towards this language. The results reveal a geographically splintered (mostly European) community of fans who are synchronized to a globalist one out of necessity.

The decline of fan translations in particular is interesting, as it has been an area of interest for how it transforms consumers into producers. A phenomenon that began in the

1980s but truly flourished with the growth of the Internet, fan translations are digitally-produced editions of foreign material –*anime* (Cintas & Sánchez, 2006) and *manga* (O'Hagan, 2008) have received the most attention– made by amateurs, in their search for authentic text (Cubbison, 2005), as a way to fill in the gaps and delays of the official versions (O'Hagan, 2009) and as a reaction to their sanitized and over-edited forms (specifically *anime*) outside their native contexts (Leonard, 2005). It seems that the wide use of English has sidestepped the need for an intermediate, even if they are a fan, and so these local versions are no longer needed as urgently[103].

That said, even in a minority, language skills are cultivated in other tongues through fan interaction, and (almost) non-verbal communication was achievable and highly valued. The fans' desire to reach out or hone their language skills unofficially is evident in the references to Spanish-speaking and Mandarin-speaking communities. The case of Japan is known, both for the isolationism of its online community, explained by the development of same-language technologies thanks to the prominence of a national middle class within the country (Warschauer, Said & Zohry, 2002), and for fans' desire to reach untranslated pop culture products, giving it an elevated national position through this production (Fukunaga, 2006); this also applies to materials for a jointly-produced property often through of as "western". There has been no research on the non-native followship of fan artists, but it could definitely be interpreted as a form of cultural exchange and appreciation. In the end, the result is neither the destruction of traditional pillars of authority thanks to globalization (Castells, 1996) nor a backlash and the over-emphasis on native elements (Warschauer, 2001): it is a reexamination of local identities, but an embrace of both a common, global cultural field and its more isolated but productive branches.

Another way to examine the uneven geographic and linguistic spread could be through the general presence of the property in each country's conscience from the 1980s till today. The following table (Table 8) was created by browsing through the research material of this project, as well as some major digital and fan archives (Transformers Wiki, Wikipedia, interviews)[104]:

**Table 8: The availability of the most popular iterations of the franchise by country.**

| | **Iteration** | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Generation One** | | | **Beast Wars** | **Armada** | **Bay Films** | **Animated** | **Prime** |
| **Country Name** | **Comic** | **TV Series** | **Toys** | | | | | |
| Argentina | | | | | | | | |
| Australia | | | | | | | | |
| Bulgaria | | | | | | | | |

[103] It is worth noting, however, that one of the two fan translators has been employed in official capacity for the local release of the 1980s cartoon, similarly to amateur *anime* translators, proving the capacity fan circles have for translation training (O'Hagan, 2008).

[104] This coverage is obviously incomplete. Firstly, the "Generation One" toyline was mentioned to have been shipped throughout mainland Europe, but the countries were only counted if there was an effort to translate the material (e.g. through multi-lingual packaging). Secondly, no research was done on personal fan pages or blogs, which could have highlighted obscure translations or dedicated collections. Finally, there was no consideration of piracy, due to how hard it would be to trace.

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Canada | | | | | | | | |
| Costa Rica | | | | | | | | |
| Denmark | | | | | | | | |
| Finland | | | | | | | | |
| France | | | | | | | | |
| Germany | | | | | | | | |
| Hungary | | | | | | | | |
| Iceland | | | | | | | | |
| Ireland | | | | | | | | |
| Italy | | | | | | | | |
| Japan | | | | | | | | |
| Malaysia | | | | | | | | |
| Mexico | | | | | | | | |
| Norway | | | | | | | | |
| Philippines | | | | | | | | |
| Poland | | | | | | | | |
| Portugal | | | | | | | | |
| Russia | | | | | | | | |
| Singapore | | | | | | | | |
| South Korea | | | | | | | | |
| Spain | | | | | | | | |
| Sweden | | | | | | | | |
| Taiwan | | | | | | | | |
| Netherlands | | | | | | | | |
| Trinidad and Tobago | | | | | | | | |
| UK | | | | | | | | |
| USA | | | | | | | | |

The above, paired with Map 9, might explain the inconsistencies in the global development of the franchise. While the obvious post-2007 cultivation of unconventional scenes can be explained by the more systematic worldwide promotion of recent fictions (which, admittedly, had already started with the 2002 "Armada" *anime* and its sequels), the discontinuities observed in some of the older countries are worth noting. One obvious example is that of Germany, a country that was one of the first to receive a dub of the 1980s cartoon, translated figure bios and a reprint of the Marvel comics, but whose first fans in the present survey appeared in 2007, with new constantly being added in the next years, thus indicating a healthy interest from within the region. Similar discontinuities were discussed with other European interviewees, who were unaware of older localized material (Agenderfuid, 22, Netherlands, February 21st 2018), actively negative to that prospect (Male, 32, Iceland, February 9th 2018), cut-off from the (presumed) older local fan communities (Female, 30, France, February 26th 2018) or knowledgeable of their small numbers, and thus seeking the global ones (Male, 25, Hungary, February 17th 2018)[105]. In the case of

[105] The researcher herself could be included amongst them. Greece was one of the first countries to import the original toyline, with local distributor "El Greco" translating certain character names and crafting new head sculpts for some figures, but she was completely unaware of these facts until doing

"Transformers", it seems that the old local fandoms were unsustainable, limited in their numbers and reach, and thus have been distanced from the new waves of fans. While the start of "fanhood" might be through localized media, its continuation is not dependent on it, at least for the English-speaking individuals, who can join the more populous and better coordinated trans-national fandoms. Therefore, while in general matching some pretty known suppliers of (artistic) talent spotted in previous research, these blind geographic spots indicate the fluid nature of fandom, an awareness of "Transformers" as a property and the cultivation of comics-creating skills (even with underexplored infrastructural support), as well as a need for communication with the main fandom hub in a recognized (cultural and artistic) *lingua franca*.

On the recent line's evaluation, apart from mentions of its quality as comics, there is an obvious evolution with the mention of sociopolitical explorations and greater gender inclusivity (that has managed to appeal to members of the LGBTQIA+ community), all themes mentioned for the first time in "Transformers" literature. While similar ideas have been known to be explored in popular science fiction through its flexible distance from "our" reality (Brummett, 2008), there is an added element here: the IDW line is cherished not for how similar it was to its source material, but for how unique and divergent from it. Contrary to the claims of Jenkins (2006), the audience of "Transformers" seems to have no problem following a contradictory world through multiple media, but has historically shown capable of being invested in more than one interpretation. Moreover, unlike most licensed comics researched (Gough, 2007; Pillai, 2011; Pillai, 2013; Kashtan, 2017), this line was a more mature offering compared to its (traditional) media franchise and was not beholden to one aesthetic prototype, instead following unique plotlines, concepts and ideas. What is interesting, however, is the lack of mention of previous media that attempted to touch on similar themes ("Beast Wars", "Animated"), but that might be a result of their age and the new fictions' more adult direction -"Prime", the fiction most closely associated with the IDW line, was also described as darker and more complex by interviewees.

The enthusiasm displayed (mostly by male interviewees) for the new female and LGBTQIA+ audience seems to stem from a specific (mis)understanding of the brand's history and legacy. Firstly, the 1980s cartoon and the live-action film series are the two most widely consumed and studied iterations of the franchise, and so specific interpretations of it have shaped what the property is considered to be to a large extent: a retrograde, style-over-substance spectacle of underdeveloped characters. Secondly, the franchise's primary origin in action figures, a geek sphere often thought of as traditionally masculine (Geraghty, 2014), makes many individuals place the evolutionary steps made in *them* as more indicative of the company's true intentions[106]. Another factor contributing could be an unawareness of the

research in 2016. Her family was similarly uninterested, being very vaguely familiar with the 1986 film, presumably from its limited television broadcast. As a young girl, she ignored the dubbed broadcast of "Transformers: Armada" on national terrestrial television and the 2007 live-action series, and found out about the 1980s cartoon through humorous online criticism in 2010. It was through the digital releases of the IDW comics that she was formally introduced to the franchise in 2016, independent of every other iteration.

[106] The inclusion of female characters in toy form and more juvenile television fictions was seen by some interviewees as a greater or equal sign of progress than the comics narratives (Female, 32, USA,

female interest in the property from its infancy and its recent rejuvenation: girls wrote letters to the Marvel comics series (Male, 42, USA, February 6th 2018), a significant portion of the "Beast Wars" fan base consisted of young women (see below), and female communities developed around the 2007 film (Female, 28, USA, February 27th 2018). At the same time, comics fandom, often thought to comprise 90 to 95% of the entire population through uncited statistics (Lopes, 2009), has had to endure a historically "paternalistic attitude" (Brown, 1997) by society when enjoying its pastime: it has been characterized as overwhelmingly male, middle-class and Caucasian, neurotic in conduct and terrified of contact with the opposite binary gender, only accepting it in unthreatening or objectified depictions (Jones, 2004). Combined with the recent increased visibility of (queer or not) women within geek (Maynard, 2017) and comics spheres in the last ten years (Scott, 2013), the (pleasant) surprise at the visibility of women in the "Transformers" fandom becomes easier to explain. In the intersection of all the above and with the aforementioned venomous scholarly opinion on their favorite hobby in mind, perhaps a portion of male "Transformers" fans react in a positive, protective manner towards the new inductees; female fans have a different understanding of this, either having created their own spaces for years or coming in after the paradigm shift has occurred, but the few mentions of conflict between genders –only the aforementioned harassment of creators by a vocal minority was mentioned- paint an encouraging picture.

At the same time, there seems to be a difference of opinion regarding whether this change comes "from above" or "from below". Opinions are split on whether it is changes in creative voices and sensibilities (with female artists that broke the proverbial glass ceiling and writers sensitive to topical issues) or the acceptance displayed by the fandom (that moves along to larger societal trends) that have made the "Transformers" property more inclusive. Another interesting phenomenon was the use of the word "fandom" for participants of official and fan production, equating the two groups and thinking that they create content for a common cause. The "Transformers" fandom, therefore, seems to be aware of its own existence and significance for the continuation and protection of the property, and so its more active and engaged component both considers its own texts on the same level with official ones and constantly interrogates the last ones.

While known to an extent from previous literature, the closeness of the "Transformers" professionals and fans sets this community apart. This interplay between published creators and fans –like the submission of stories by the latter– and the cultivation of networks connecting passionate writing amateurs has been glimpsed in mainstream comics from the late 1950s and 1970s, in which one can see numerous future comics creators (amongst other professionals) appear in the letter's pages of "Superman", "Action Comics" and other series (Coogan, 2010; Gordon, 2012), and has been a part of their earlier literary ancestors, the pulps, as many science fiction writers and fans entered the comic book market in the 1930s or published fanzines (Cheng, 2012). This thesis shows that this

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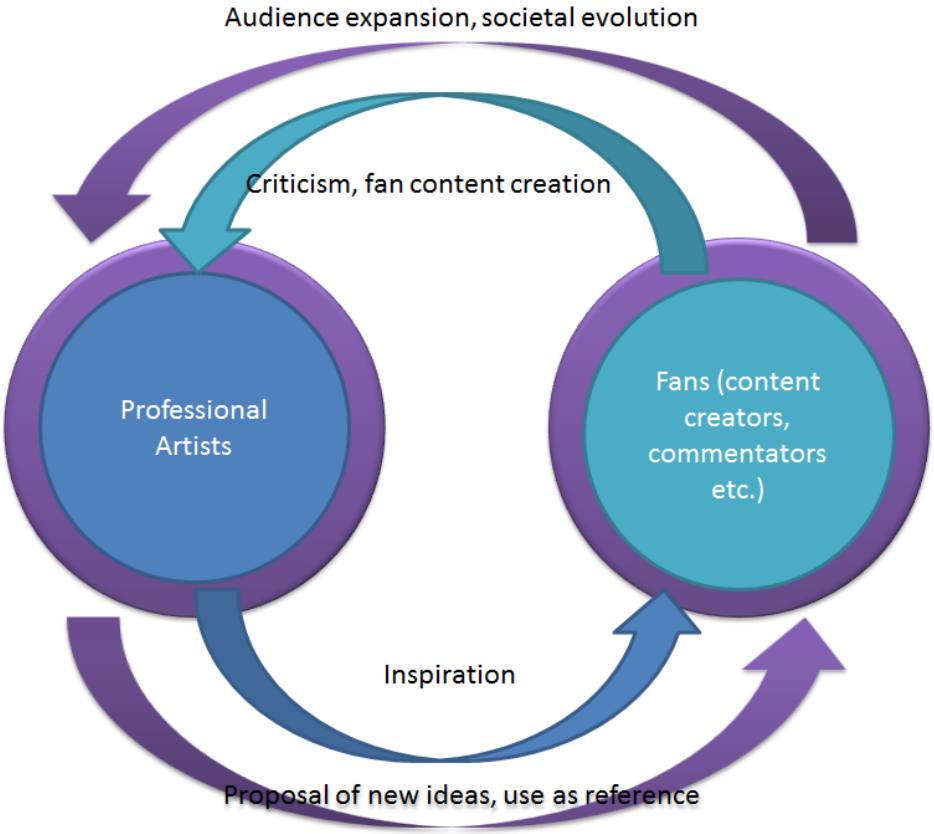
February 5th 2018; Male, 40, USA, February 26th 2018). Individual examples mentioned were Strongarm, a "female character and a non-feminized figure" (Male, 32, Iceland, February 9th 2018) and Solus Prime, a semi-mythical smith that could've been considered too obscure and been released by third-party developers a few years ago (Female, 41, USA, February 9th 2018).

facet of the industry has survived online, for a different role (artists instead of writers) and with greater duration (for more than an average of two years) and intensity. But continuing on it, a cyclical flow of cultural capital is witnessed from both sides: the official workforce proposes ideas, the fan-base criticizes, rejects or adopts them, creates its own content, influencing the official side or being absorbed into it, and the cycle begins anew, for a new group of creators (a mixture of old fans and uninitiated professionals) who in turn communicate with an audience that follows general societal trends on its own. The above are summarized in the following graph (Graph 17):

**Graph 17: The flow of ideas and workers from official to fan populations, as seen in the case of the "Transformers" community.**




Therefore, to the comics industry, fandom -particularly online, as new technologies and a changing cultural landscape have helped bridge the gap between passionate amateur and professional (Bruckman, 2002)- can be a networking hub, a bed seed of (artistic) talent, a training ground and a resource for the uninitiated, though while a viable path to published work, it is not exclusive nor substitutes personal interaction and existing professional frameworks.

Finally, in regards to gender identity (and fans belonging to non-mainstream groups), both in-story reasons and community support played a part in the formation of the identities of these fans[107]. Firstly, and especially for the eldest, it was (mostly) the friendly

[107] For at least three of them, the process happened before they encountered the widely-considered as LGBTQIA+-friendly "More Than Meets The Eye" series, meaning that they have simply been

community developed around the property which helped them come into their own conclusions about themselves. In that regard, they align with the findings of McKenna and Bargh (1998) from their study of late-1990s online newsgroups with "marginalized-concealable identities" (with an average age of 37 years): these communities of like-minded people helped a significant percentage of individuals discover their sexuality and bring it up in offline relationships, even later in life, leading to minor demarginalization, "a process by which participation in a group of similar others creates changes in one's identity--specifically, the acquisition of a positive group identity where there was formerly only isolation and feelings of being different". Secondly, while there was no unanimous agreement on which characters deserved that attention, with some even going against previously mentioned literature on mishandled female representation (Marburger, 2015), both the ambiguity of the robotic characters and the content of the fictions was mentioned and all participants responded with some interest to these issues. In both cases, the result is greater self-acceptance and contentment for the fans, and while in-story representation is not the most major contributing factor to that, it reaffirms it.

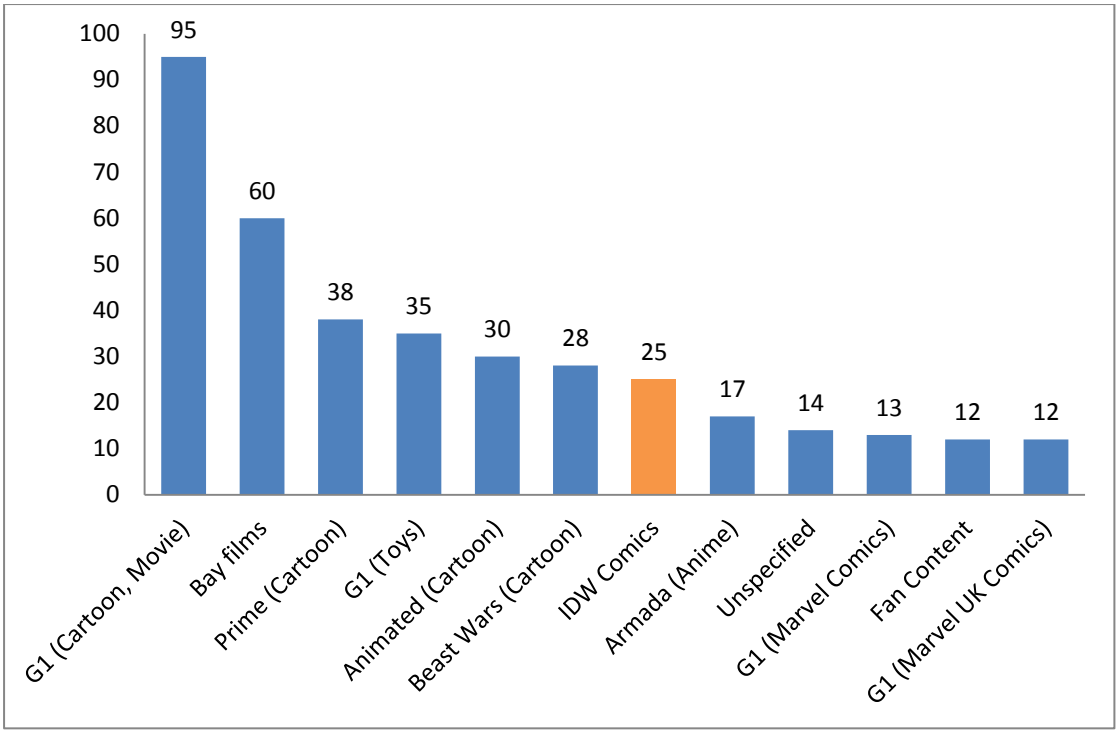
## 5.3. Comics: Between the fringes and the mainstream

However, how many of these changes we can attribute solely to the comics is debatable. One of the questions asked in the online survey concerned the narrative or element of the "Transformers" franchise that inspired the 302 participants to become fans. The results of the twelve most popular iterations[108] are shown below (Graph 18):

afforded greater visibility thanks to the series' fame and the attention social media has shed on gender discourse.

[108] Other narratives omitted due to their relative obscurity (having less than 10 votes) were, in descending order: the "Cybertron" *anime*, the "Beast Wars" and "Generation 2" toy lines, the "Energon" *anime*, the "Armada" and "Cybertron" toy lines, and miscellaneous promotional materials (trailers, posters etc.). Additional materials with only one vote included the "Prime", "Fall of Cybertron" and live-action film series toy lines, the "Beast Wars Neo" and 2001 "Robots in Disguise" *anime* and the "Rescue Bots" cartoon. These additional products showcase the franchise's diverse output of multiple entry points, as well as the varied tastes of its audience.

**Graph 18: Iteration that caused the initial attraction to "Transformers" by number of fans (2018).**




As seen above, the IDW comics line is listed as only the seventh most popular introductory narrative, with 25 individuals mentioning it, left behind much more popular mainstays like the 1980s cartoon, the live-action film series, the original toy line and some more recent animated programs. Even though it has become the most popular iteration of the property in the medium of comics (and could be seen as comparable to "cult classic" iterations like the "Beast Wars" and "Animated" cartoons), it does little to change its usual position at the fridges of the entertainment world (Jenkins, 2006b).

This can be attributed to a variety of reasons, found from both the survey notes and the interviews. A first common pattern from a lot of interviews is the participant catching the original television broadcasts[109] of major cartoons (the 1980s "Transformers", "Beast Wars", "Energon" and others), watching the films in cinemas with friends and acquaintances or witnessing a massive push for the toys, indicating the success of marketing and promotional campaigns and the failure of less massive media channels:

> *"I remember seeing commercials for the original G1 cartoon, and my younger brother and I watched the pilot episode after school when it aired. I was INSTANTLY captivated, and while I liked a lot of other things and popular cartoons of the time, there was nothing like Transformers."* (Female, 42, USA, February 16th, 2018)

[109] In a moment of humor that is indicative of the tensions between the enjoyment of pop culture narratives, figure collecting and capitalism, one interviewee (Female, 32, USA, February 5th 2018) called television "The only way to get into "Transformers" if you can't afford toys!"

*"I remember my parents taking me to "McDonalds" and the Happy Meal at the time had "Beast Wars" toys. My guess is that point I was interested enough to be a fan."* (Male, 27, USA, February 11th 2018)

*"I remember seeing the toys back when I was very little, but I really became aware of "Transformers" in the mid 90's when "Beast Wars" was airing on TV. I watched it every day before school because it was the only good thing on."* (Female, 33, USA, February 12th 2018)

*"It was at the first airing of a cartoon ["Transformers: Energon", from the Unicron Trilogy] that introduced me to the franchise back in 2004, I became an instant fan indeed. Toonami was a big deal back then, always airing the best kind of cartoons ("Samurai Jack" and "Teen Titans" comes to mind), so I had an instant liking to the show just by association [...]."* (Male, 25, Hungary, February 17th 2018)

The creation of official or unofficial archives is another parameter that helps in introducing new fans. Traditional methods of re-watching were mentioned, such as VHS tapes, DVD disks and television reruns[110]. In more recent times, the Internet, in the form of paid services (more than half of the audience for the "Prime" series discovered it through the Netflix online service) and amateur, "from below" structures (fan sites, fan fiction texts, uploaded YouTube videos[111]) alike, often plays an instrumental role in preserving or rekindling interest:

*"I first became aware of "Transformers" back in 1999/2000 when "Transformers: Beast Wars" was airing on Fox Kids. I loved that show (and I still do!) but once it stopped being shown on TV, I forgot that it existed. [...] Seeing commercials for Michael Bay's 2007 "Transformers" movie jolted my memory and made me frantically Google-search for those robots that transformed into animals. [...] After I found and watched all the episodes on YouTube, I fell in love with it all over again. From there, thanks to Google leading me to the "Transformers" Wiki, I found the original 1984 cartoon, binge-watched all of that, and fell even more in love. I've been in love since."* (Female, 28, USA, February 27th 2018)

*"I've been aware of the existence of an old cartoon about transforming cars and a character called Optimus Prime since I was approximately 10 years old, but seeing as I had no way of watching it, I shrugged and let it be something I would probably never see. Then in 2007, a few months before*

[110] This extended shelf-life after their year of production began in the "early to mid-1990s" with the original cartoon (Female, 33, USA, February 27th 2018). In more recent years, one 25-year old Finnish survey participant (on February 4th 2018) mentioned catching "Armada" on television in 2011 and another interviewee (Non-binary, 31, USA, February 5th 2018) re-watched "Animated" on the Hub network in 2014.

[111] Multiple interviewees (Female, 28, USA, February 27th 2018; Female, 36, UK, March 6th 2018; Female, 41, USA, February 9th 2018) remembered watching a variety of shows (1980s cartoon, "Beast Wars", 2001 "Robots in Disguise", "Armada") in a window of time from the end of 2007 to 2013 on the platform.

*the Michael Bay's "Transformers" came out, a good friend of mine suggested I watch the 1984 cartoon first. I went looking around the Internet and found some page with links. I binged the entire series and fell in love."* (Female, 32, UK, February 5th 2018)

*"I really learned about "Transformers" through the TV Tropes website: I found the entry for the "treacherous underling" trope (which the site refers to as "The Starscream"), and was intrigued by the site's explanation of who Starscream was and the stories of his attempts to take over the Decepticons in different continuities. [...] I started looking for fanfic (featuring Starscream specifically, at first), and then only started watching the show so that I could better understand the fics. [...] I started watching it (initially on YouTube, then on DVD) after discovering "Transformers" fanfic."* (Female, 36, UK, March 6th 2018)

A third reason is the multiplicity of the franchise, as a number of participants were "hooked" by two or three versions simultaneously (e.g. most "Generation One" media for older fans, the Bay films and the "Animated" cartoon for younger ones from the survey etc.):

*"I think I became aware of "Transformers" through the first commercial for the Marvel comics in 1984. I thought the animation was great and it caught my eye. A short time later, I saw some friends of mine at school with the toys. (I remember Bumblebee and Laserbeak specifically.) Then, I saw the cartoon and I was hooked."* (Male, 45, USA, February 8th 2018)

*"I think I started to really become aware of them when I saw a commercial on Toonami advertising this new cartoon called "Transformers: Armada". This would become my gateway drug. Little did I know that this was essentially the beginning of the resurgence of "Transformers". I got so many of the toys. I've been a fan ever since; I never really dropped out of the fandom."* (Male, 27, USA, February 8th 2018)

*"It started with the 2007 film but I straight-away found out more about it, bought the G1 cartoon box set and then "Transformers: Animated" came out, which I latched straight onto as well. I have since then gradually watched 90% of all "Transformers" stuff that has come out since. All of them have convinced me to become even more of a fan."* (Female, 32, UK, February 17th 2018)

Even the trans-generational passing of "fanhood" from a previous generation to the next, an oft-mentioned aspect of the franchise's fandom in previous literature (and confirmed here, though to a smaller degree and across gender lines), seems to have functioned more in the context of television, film and toy products as opposed to comics:

*"I probably first became aware of "Transformers" because of my dad, who would become a huge reason as to why I got into the whole fandom. Anyway, he still had his Transformers from when he was a kid, and I would*

*play with them when I was between 7-8 years old or something like that."* (Male, 27, USA, February 8th 2018)

*"How I got into "Transformers" is kind of a strange story... My brother used to have really tiny transforming cars, so I decided to go on an online forum called "Something Awful" and ask the "Transformers" fans there: "Hey, what were those cars that- I guess I got them from a friend, a personal one"."* (Male, 32, Iceland, February 9th 2018)

*"I first became aware of "Transformers" through my mother's like of the Bayverse movies and 2007 cartoon "Transformers: Prime". I would have been about eleven I think, though it took me some five years before I started to properly enjoy the franchise for myself and not just alongside my mum."* (Female, 22, England, February 11th 2018)

While the above vary, they can be boiled down to a handful of issues: the availability and approachability of certain media, the creation of (analog or digital) archives and the transmediality of the franchise being more emphasized on the audio-visual side. Even accounting for the subjectivity of the question -some listed multiple iterations, as many as three in rare cases; some listed their initial encounter only; others referenced their first *conscious* exposure to the brand-, it is interesting to note how relatively unpopular the comics are. The original Marvel run received attention in its time of release by being advertised on television, a benefit no comic with the characters has had since; there were no mentions of comics archives anywhere on the sample[112], despite the existence of the aforementioned Titan Boks reprints of the Marvel run and the recent IDW "Classics" and "Classics UK" series[113]; and arguably more material has been produced for television and film than for the printed page. Isolated participants even perceived comics as a much more intimidating entrance point than television and film, citing their volume and unattainability as reasons for it (Agenderfuid, 22, Netherlands, February 21st 2018), or had to ask for help into understanding how to buy and consume them, starting in 2008 (Female, 41, USA, February 9th 2018). While the availability and mainstream appeal of comics are a fluid process -five of the interviewees mentioned explicitly purchasing the comics through digital means, some referencing Comixology, a website created in 2009 that has changed and

[112] One exception to this was gleamed by an Internet personality and comic book reviewer who did not participate in the research, but provided historical details indirectly. An old website with posted scans of all the 1980s Marvel comics issues, which he visited "about five or ten years ago", was mentioned in one of his videos (Linkara-AtopTheFourthWall, 2014) uploaded originally on September 27th 2010. It was no longer available as of April 2nd 2012 (Linkara-AtopTheFourthWal, 2015) and "had fallen apart already" by that first date. The fact that the site wasn't referenced in the survey might be indicative of the fragmentation of fandom during the first years of the last decade and comics' insularity as a system, even in the field of online piracy.

[113] Literature on the introduction of comics in libraries (Weiner, 2010) often seems to ignore archival editions of old works as well, subsidizing graphic novels –and thus their literary weigh (Round, 2010)– instead.

expanded the visibility and consumption of comics (Wershler, 2011), by name-, it is evident that comics are not in an advantageous position to most mainstream media[114].

However, what needs to be noted is that these results focus solely on the narrative or element that made the participants get initially interested in the franchise; the individual consumption patterns are far more complex and unpredictable, crossing generations and media, and often seem to include comics. Out of the 50 interviews, multiple iterations of the brand were brought up in all of them, usually with little to no derision, indicating that the audience is seeking more material out and branches out from their original point of entry[115]. In the case of the recent comics, some of the above methods of introduction were employed once again: a portion of the faithful audience followed the story as it unfolded; another audience became familiar with one recent iteration (the "Prime" series was often mentioned) and subsequently "hooked" by another; the property's increased visibility (even in other mediums) played a part; and word of mouth spread through social media and fan archives (Tumblr pages, forums, The "Transformers" Wiki etc.). Some relevant excerpts are quoted below:

> *"I became a fan when the cartoon first aired in the United States in 1984 at 4 years old. [...] I returned when the first Michael Bay movie came out. My favorite part right now it the "More Than Meets the Eye"/ "Lost Light" comic run from IDW, although I really love when fan works merge elements from different universes together (like "More Than Meets the Eye" stories influenced by G1 characterizations)."* (Female, 38, USA, March 12th 2018)

> *"The 2007 movie did little for me, but I needed more so I began searching for a way to read some comics. Again, the Internet helped. I found the 2006 IDW series first and really loved it, but the first moment that I knew that this is more than just a half a year fad for me was after reading "All Hail Megatron". At the time I couldn't find more, but I knew it would forever be at the top of my favourite things in the whole world. [...]*
>
> *I was getting enough joy from just [the Deceptions'] antics, so I didn't really look for more until I stumbled upon James Roberts' "More Than Meets the Eye" in a comic store and saw Megatron wearing an Autobot badge. I thought, What the heck is going on!?"* (Female, 32, UK, February 5th 2018)

> *""Transformers: Prime" was my first real involvement in the franchise (when you do not count the movies that I barely paid any attention to.) [...] Even though it was my first, I never really associated myself as a "true fan" at this point.*

[114] On a final note, there were two exceptions of fans (Female, 48, USA, February 23rd 2018; Female, 20, USA, February 6th 2018) who explicitly mentioned wanting to get into or further support the comics out of curiosity and need for more material. Their recent popularity and the ease of (digital) purchase might have given these participants the added incentive.

[115] This was observed as early as the original airing of the "Beast Wars" cartoon series in the mid-to-late 1990s, as 6 of the interviewees mentioned following the show while it aired, despite being older than its targeted demographic (of children) at the time.

*I feel that what really made me a true, diehard fan was the extraordinary IDW comic series "More than Meets the Eye". After stumbling upon a tfwiki.net page about the DJD in the late spring months of 2016, I became curious. I wanted to learn more about this group who "stood for the Decepticon cause" (I had quite the passion for the Decepticon faction.) Soon, I began to research more until finally, I got my hands on the comics."* (Female, USA, February 28th 2018)

*"I became a fan watching the "Transformers: Prime" series. [...] I joined Tumblr and started seeing bits of "More Than Meets the Eye". I started reading the comics, and absolutely adore them now!"* (Female, 32, England, February 20th 2018)

On a related note, there is historical precedent to the phenomenon, as some of the older interviewees could attest to. While not as well-known amongst the current sample, older comics lines from three previous publishers (Marvel Comics in the US, the Marvel UK branch and Canadian company Dreamwave) were able to sustain the interest of at least a portion of the audience, by supplementing or surpassing the more "mainstream" (television, toy and film) content. Once again, interesting storylines, diverse characters, expanded sci-fi mythologies and a superior artistic pedigree (writer Simon Furman was singled out more than anyone else) were mentioned as appealing, going against the trend of considering past licensed work as substandard (Kashtan, 2017):

*"I was aware of the [Marvel] comic book, but I hadn't gotten into them, I had read a couple, not really dove into that really deeply, and after the cartoon ended, I started reading the comics regularly and went hunting for all the back issues and fell in love with the comic. That just cemented my affection for "Transformers", and it continued from the '80s to the '90s to today. [...] And the comic book felt a little bit more mature than the cartoon and was actually getting into lots of interesting science- fiction concepts – you know, for something that's just supposed to be a commercial to sell toys- and the artists involved with the comic really put a lot of effort into making the concept be more like a science-fiction epic, and especially starting with the comics written by Bob Budiansky and later on by Simon Furman. It was something that continued to appeal to me, those strong, archetype personalities the characters had and continuing it into lots of different media, even after the original Marvel comics ended."* (Male, 42, USA, February 6th 2018)

*"The first two seasons of the cartoon were fun but the third season really expanded the "Transformers" universe into a more developed science fiction story. The comics took that expansion even further."* (Male, 45, USA, February 8th 2018)

*"I discovered the "Transformers" Marvel UK comics in my local newsagent (no. 30 was my first issue). I instantly fell in love with the comics and would read them over and over again. Artist Geoff Senior stood out as my*

*favourite. I loved the complex stories, and especially the diverse array of characters."* (Male, 41, UK, February 6th 2018)

*"I also collected the Marvel UK comics in the '80s, and particular the ones from '87-'89 era - so characters like Bludgeon, Thunderwing, Scorponok, Powermaster Optimus Prime etc. were my equivalent of OP and Megs."* (Male, 37, UK, February 9th 2018)

*"But I would also say, the UK comics were also a big influence. When I started falling out of love with the toys (I hated the Micromasters and Action Masters when I was a kid), the UK comic took up the slack and kept me interested."* (Male, 38, UK, February 6th 2018)

*"After [Season 3 of the 1980s cartoon], I found out that "Transformers" Marvel comics were available in a monthly magazine edited by PlayPress, and I collected all the issues I could put my hands on. Unfortunately, the magazine came to an end only one year later, and the same happened with the cartoon reruns. [...]*

*Later, I read the "Generation 2" run avidly, and in the years 1999-2000 the flame was rekindled by my late discovery of "Beast Wars" and "The War Within": with this ultimate take on Transformers lore, creators such as Simon Furman, Bob Forward, Larry DiTillio and Don Figueroa said everything it had to be said about Transformers."* (Male, February 15th 2018)

*"Then I got hit... [In] '93 I was back into "Transformers" in passing, still interested in the comics. My first comic –and I have it somewhere, but I don't know if I have it around- was issue 74, so that's kinda [my number]. [...] That's the one that got me into it and it was the one where Optimus Prime and Scorponok are teaming up to fight the Acolytes of Unicron. That was one of my favorite[s], that got me back into comics, and then I got into "Generation 2", which is just INTENSE, I loved "Generation 2"! Very few people actually like "Generation 2"! [...]*

*So going from that, "Beast Machines" pretty must sustained me, and then that was about the time Dreamwave got the license. Which was a double-edged sword, everyone knows what happened to Dreamwave, but at the time, that was HUGE. We were like, "Oh my God, we're getting this back", and there was a resurgence of interest in "Transformers". I kinda rode that out. [...] I pretty much stayed throughout... I pretty much got the whole [line], I'm missing a few here and there, but for the most part... [...] [No "Unicron Trilogy"?] Now that's interesting. See, [from the]"Unicron Trilogy", I liked the toys. I collected the toys. I liked the comics –the Dreamwave comics were amazing! I mean, Simon Furman and Don Figueroa were THE amazing team! It was amazing!"* (Trans-Masculine Non-Binary, 40, USA, February 11th 2018)

From the above, it is safer to surmise that comics function not so much as the media that introduce a property to an audience, but as its preservers, keeping the interest of the people already invested and gradually expanding to new ones. Contrary to previous literature on licensed comics and transmedia storytelling, multiple engaged fans seem capable of jumping mediums and appreciating new, sometimes radical stories with familiar characters, even if an unawareness of some previous elements could color this perception. It subsequently managed to attract people from all age groups and genders and create supportive communities for them, thanks to its visibility through more "powerful" media and the Internet's increased accessibility, even if the sub-factions of fans and creatives match geographically and there is a disconnect between peripheral and central geek scenes. This fandom also sees itself as an active component of the production machine, equating itself with official creators and being active in its interest. In summation, while licensed comics do have the potential of renewing the audience of their medium, this achievement is a combination of multiple factors and results in a geographically dispersed yet united community, and it remains to be seen whether *they* will be passed down to the next generations of fans.

# 6. Conclusions and Further Research

The goal of this thesis was to uncover the geographic and cultural profile of workers and fans of the American comic book industry (and the connections between these two groups) through the evolution of a single, idiosyncratic line. The parameters of geography and gender were of major interest, as they allowed the investigation of the geography of commercial art production, its consumption and long-distance employment. After some initial research, the hypothesis of a connection between the two groups was proposed. Finally, a more thorough inquiry was made regarding the origins, development and sustainability of comic book artists and their work.

The approach chosen for the project was multi-disciplinary and as close to the fans as possible, taking full advantage of digital technologies and knowledge of the material in question. It was decided to focus on the comics component of the media franchise (given previous experience), but not ignore its relation to other material, and so brief definitions of terms such as media franchise and paratext were included. A historical overview of the property in question was also needed, to begin tracing its themes and formulate a history of its content creators, amateur and professional alike. Due to the two groups' common contact on a professional and even personal level and the industry's general acceptance of them, the common examination of both "official" creators and fans was decided. While previous projects were dedicated either to quantitative or qualitative methods only, a combination of the two was made in this one: record-keeping of personal data from open digital archives was used alongside structured and semi-structured interviews with both groups, to gain a clearer insight into their behavior, processes and values. A variety of tools was utilized to that end (as well as the final presentation), to combine as many of their strong points as possible: live and written interviews, record keeping from open digital archives and mapping software.

## 6.1. Summary of Results

The results from all the above data can be summed up for all three groups separately, starting with the official artists. The comics industry was found to be experiencing a great expansion in its reserves, even if it was insular in finding writing talent and much more outward-looking in recruiting artistic one. Especially for the latter, the need for knowledgeable and experienced individuals turned out to be the greatest priority of all, aided by an extensive talent pool that included another publication and even solitary fans. Geographically, the dispersed (and expanding) artistic talent pool theory (mostly to South America and Asia) was confirmed and established hearths showed interest for historical reasons (the UK and Ireland), but still depended on the artists' individual productivity, connections and various cultural and economic factors. However, the development of individual local scenes (with the American one often acting as a prototype) could be encouraged by the efforts of its individual creators, their presence in events such as cons

and the translation of their material, even if they alone cannot reverse the property's reputation.

In terms of role, experience and gender, and compared to previous literature, the art scene was found to both follow (some limited mobility in roles but also a rift between them, a greater need for artists than writers, the growing presence of women) and diverge (stable artistic and writing collaborators) from major detected patterns of the last fifteen years. The same can be said for their influences, which included both broad movements and forms and specific bodies of work in the franchise. Moreover, all artists went through an unofficial training process, starting from auxiliary products or roles and gradually receiving more assignments in the main line. In any case, the steady presence of some and the creative freedom they enjoyed (with few, cooperative intrusions from the license holder) resulted in stories that transcended their (traditionally thought of as) limited commercial role, helped their creators evolve and were satisfying to work on. Finally, while varied, their responses on the financial viability of comics were negative or dependent on output (and supplemented by other art work) and currency, thus justifying their limited mobility as a group, as it is usually owed to other revenue streams.

The substantial population of fans that became official artists for the property in particular was questioned on this transition. Apart from creators and fans across generations sharing a common emotional attachment to the property, the fandom has (indirectly but historically) helped in the training and networking (through a combination of online and "real life" interactions) of multiple artists, either by offering them opportunities for practice or by creating archives for them to turn to in becoming familiar with the text. Moreover, its usual critical role continued to be important to them (in the form of commentary on individual artists), even within limits -sexism and a vocal negative minority were two significant hindrances. Although this promotion depends on a series of factors, it is neither impossible nor infrequent, at least in the case of the "Transformers".

Fandom was the second group examined for its values, residence and gender. On the first factor, its appreciation of the property has evolved to include new themes (with sociopolitical examinations and identity politics chief among them), stemming from a more mature approach than previous iterations of the franchise. On its geographic distribution, a broadening but uneven world-wide spread was observed, spear-headed by more prominent audio-visual products and the cultivation of a local geek scene (and thus mostly European, South American and Asian countries). Moreover, while there is a synchronization of members residing in non-American countries with the global English-speaking scene, efforts were made to reach out to other sides of the fandom, especially Asian ones, while the lack of cohesion and generational gaps between members of individual local communities became evident.

Thirdly, its newfound inclusion of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals was treated with surprise (often pleasant) from within certain camps within it. The heated discussion around women in "nerd" spheres, their presence in separate Internet spaces (ignored until the start of the decade), the awareness surrounding non-mainstream gender identities (in which social media and the friendly communities within them aided significantly) and the

pushback against negative stereotyping of (male) geeks brought the female and LGBTQIA+ audience of “Transformers” to the forefront and challenged the salient narrative of “nerdy” properties being male-oriented and dominated (although certain women were not as surprised, having developed small hearths of activity over the years).

The uncertain cause of that change highlighted another important finding: the symbiosis of fans and “official” artists in a common arena. Both arguments –that the introduction of new ideas by the creatives brought more new fans; and that fans have become accepting to more ideas and societal trends and thus embraced the new fictions– were proposed. The aforementioned absorption of fans into the official comics workforce (after some showcase of their ability and getting networked with publishers) and the use of the word “fandom” to refer to a common production of materials blurred the line between the two groups even further. In any case, all the above (enhanced by the Internet), along with the fan-base’s awareness about this relationship, showed that the process of criticism, incorporation and renewal can be much more intimate and cyclical than previously witnessed, in comics, pulps or elsewhere.

The final conclusion reached had to do with the role that (licensed) comics played in the preservation and expansion of the audience. Due to the combined lack of visibility, prominence, connections to other media and archives, they have been pushed to the margins by other art forms (as well as their own inflexible distribution). Even then, they have succeeded in sustaining the interest of the core portion of the audience, which got accustomed to following multiple iterations with interest, and the same applied to work before the case study, for similar reasons. Moreover, these issues have even started to recede with the Internet (through the steady presence of the property in other media, the rise of the digital comics market and word of mouth spreading faster through social media), and comics have been able to recruit diverse (in terms of age, gender and geography) fans in numbers comparable to some of the older television series.

## 6.2. Evaluation of Methodology and Proposals for Further Research

Looking back at the methodology and its results, certain characteristics can be singled out as having contributed to the dissertation’s successful completion. Firstly, the focus on one art scene only limited the amount of data needed and brought specific complexities to the forefront: artistic lineages and intents, visual tropes, roles in demand, previous experience, stability and productivity within the line. Secondly, previous familiarity with the source material, its additional texts and fan-produced content allowed for more purposeful questions and better, more rewarding (and relaxing, for the interviewees) repartee with the community. The entrée was made more successful after contact with informal leaders and long-term participants of the fan community, who pointed the way to greater participation than expected. Finally (and perhaps most vitally), the extensive use of the Internet by all participants minimized intrusions (and accommodated a plethora of individuals), made coordination easier and helped in finding remote members and bringing out their perspectives to the thesis. Through a joining of specific focus, sufficient knowledge

and literacy of new technologies, the project reached a satisfactory conclusion and investigated a social phenomenon in an intimate yet affordable way.

Further research could help improve upon these results with more material and more careful planning in the preliminary stages of the projects. The most glaring obstacle in trans-national fandom research turned out to be the language barrier that still exists across sections of the fandom: a passable knowledge of English was required to fill in the initial survey, and the decreased presence of Asian fans can be attributed to this gap of language acquisition that has been talked about in previous chapters[116]. A similar phenomenon occurred with the interviews: the vast majority of subjects were North American and European, with a few South American and Australian exceptions. This could be countered with the addition of a second, bilingual researcher to accommodate more interviewees who might not be comfortable with English, or by organizing a second round of questionnaire completion, with the survey translated into major Asian languages.

Another refinement upon the current thesis could the number of interviews with official personnel, as the present projected was completed with only four contributors (and only one woman). A greater number of subjects could open up more issues for exploration and ascertain more hypotheses on the workings of the comics creative process. The inclusion of more disciplines into the interviewees (e.g. colorists, letterers, editors, or distinguishing painters from the rest of the artists) could add to our knowledge of the creative process and the workings of the industry.

A third aspect could be the addition of participant observation into the methodology. While a version of fieldwork (i.e. the interviewing process) lasted for a month and a half and included discussions on currently released issues and news, live interactions and notes from panels and discussions in a convention (after the coordination with its organizing committee and with their knowledge and feedback on a proposed meet-up with fans) could only add to the credibility of the statements and enrich the work. Another avenue would be the more direct confrontation with creatives there (provided the interview process does not disrupt the rest of their schedule, whether in the artists' alley or during panels) and an expansion on issues of mobility, finances and networking. With a longer time frame and the experience of this thesis, future projects could expand upon this work with new insights.

The final evolution of the above would be to test the methodology and approach on new and even more diverse subject matter. One such new pathway would be a historic approach to specific epochs of the fandom by those who were around to witness them, reconstructing a parallel history of the (as seen here, deeply interconnected) official and fan sides of the property. Alternatively, these English-dominant results could encourage a more careful approach to new case studies of local communities in Asia and Europe alike. Finally, the experiment could be repeated on other comics lines with sufficient, cross-media legacies from multiple creators (e.g. "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles", "My Little Pony") or examined from the perspective of non-American comics (e.g. the various "Legend of Zelda" and

[116] One particular survey participant mentioned the popularity "Transformers" enjoys with Asian-language speakers on Twitter.

"Pokémon" *manga*); another avenue could be the evolution of the teams working on specific characters with a long comics-only production and history (e.g. the various Superman and Batman "family" titles).

In the end, however, no matter the thoroughness of the thesis, one must never forget that there is much more material to be covered. While the survey and interviews are a snapshot of the people interested in the "Transformers" in the first half of 2018, this understanding cannot remain static. The production of "Transformers" materials will not stop anytime soon, and so new fans will be continuously attracted to it and other franchise properties like it. This thesis, no matter how detailed, is not the final word on pop culture production and consumption – it is only the end of one road.

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