

# BRING IT CON

*A collection of personal essays by Graham Thomson*

<b>Essay One</b>	<b>A brief history of British Transformers conventions</b>
<b>Essay Two</b>	<b>Conventional confessions</b>
<b>Essay Three</b>	<b>Field Report: TFNation 2017</b>
<b>Essay Four</b>	<b>Conquering convention</b>
<b>Essay Five</b>	<b>Where the doors are always open</b>
<b>Essay Six</b>	<b>Field Report: TFNation 2024</b>

## **A Brief History of British Transformers Conventions**

Convention season is upon us once again. Comic-based conventions are more popular than ever, and, of course, that includes Transformers conventions from very humble beginnings in the early 1990s to the busy events all over the world that attract hundreds upon hundreds of visitors from across the globe.

Transformers conventions in the UK have grown steadily since the first one back in 1999. But the history of the British Transformers convention dates further back than that. The birth of the British Transformers convention can be traced back to early 1991 and a letter from a fan in Darn N Blast in issue 311 of the Transformers UK comic.

In the early 1990s, fans of the American Marvel comic started up the “Transmasters” fan club, and soon enough, word spread, and a British offshoot appeared. A letter appearing on the Darn N Blast page invited readers to join up. From there, a network of fans grew up and down the country as this was pre-Internet, and friendships were formed by way of writing letters. It was terribly quaint by today’s standards.

Eventually, local meet-ups were organised. A handful of fans gathered in places like London or Birmingham to meet for lunch and then a walk around local comic and toy shops. Incidentally, my first one was in Birmingham in 1995. There were about 20 of us. It was an incredibly surreal experience talking about Transformers to actual, real people after so many years of enjoying collecting toys and comics as a solitary hobby.

The meet-ups grew in size and frequency and, inspired by the first BotCon in the USA in 1994, the first “organised” UK-based convention dedicated to the Transformers appeared in 1999.

The first such convention, Transforce, debuted in London in June 1999. Transforce was quickly followed by BotCon Europe '99 in August of the same year in another part of London. BCE '99 had the first British Transformers guest... Transformers UK writer Simon Furman. It was a peculiar experience to meet the person responsible for writing over half of the comic I had grown up with. It was the first (of only two times) I asked Simon to sign something. He signed a Transformers UK Holiday Special for me.

In April 2000, the second Transforce took place. This time, the organiser had contacted Simon Furman, Jeff Anderson, Lee Sullivan, and Richard Starkings to produce a two-page comic called

“The Last Days of Optimus Prime”. Although unofficial, it told a brief tale of the fate of Optimus Prime and linked the Marvel Comics fictional universe with that of Beast Wars.

Later that year, the first Auto Assembly convention took place in Birmingham in October. Auto Assembly went on to become the longest-running UK Transformers convention. Apart from 2002 and 2007, it took place every year until 2015. Each year, it grew in size and scope and included guests flown in from overseas, including voice actors from Beast Wars and the original Transformers cartoon.

The third Transforce in August 2001 was a little bit more ambitious with its follow-up to “The Last Days of Optimus Prime” and published a full-colour illustrated text-story by Simon Furman, Geoff Senior, and Andrew Wildman called “Alignment: Book One”. Again, unofficial, it told a story set far into the future following from the Transformers: Generation 2 comic and focused on the Liege Maximo character. It also introduced a host of new Decepticons, such as Stormfront, Direwolf, Killzone, and Mantissa.

More than Meets the Eye/Lost Light writer James Roberts’s “Eugenesis” novel was released at Transforce 2001, with the first edition being snapped up within a matter of minutes. (I still have my well-thumbed original, signed copy!)

“Alignment” was completed for Transforce 2002, and in August of that year, a small book of the complete “Alignment” (including the previous year’s Book One) was published exclusively for the convention.

There was a second BotCon Europe (this time with different organisers than the first in 1999) in November of 2002.

It’s important to realise that, at this time, Transformers was still very much in its post-G1/G2 phase. The Transformers: Armada line was only just starting to gain momentum. And so, the conventions at this point catered mainly to fans of the original toys, comics, and cartoons (and movie!).

Auto Assembly continued its upward spiral as the “Unicron Trilogy” and the live-action Transformers movies brought in new generations of younger fans. In 2009 (and until 2011), it became so big that it was held at the Holiday Inn in the city centre of Birmingham. Growing further still, Auto Assembly moved to the site of the National Exhibition Centre and was held at the Birmingham Hilton Metropole Hotel for its final four years.

Auto Assembly was attracting over one thousand attendees at its peak. Buoyed by the popularity of the live-action Transformers movies, the size and scope of Auto Assembly was proof that there was a considerable appetite for Transformers conventions in the UK.

The last Auto Assembly was held in 2015. The following year, a new convention called TFNation took its place and was held at the same location — the Birmingham Hilton Metropole Hotel.

Since 2016, TFNation has become an extremely popular destination for Transformers fans of all generations. Nowadays, the attendees of the first conventions are old enough to bring along their own families to enjoy everything Transformers. TFNation has earned a reputation for being an inclusive event and big enough to provide something from all corners of the Transformers universe, with guests from the original comics/cartoon series to creators of comics and cartoons of the 2020s.

There have been other British conventions in recent years, too, from Roll Out/Roll Call to the TFUKCon. All the while, smaller meet-ups are still being organised around the country thanks to

the friendships made online and at the larger conventions. The immutable Transformers community spirit ignited in the early 1990s is still ablaze all this time later.

## Conventional Confessions

*This essay was written in the summer of 2017*

It's only a few weeks until the second TFNation convention and, as usual, I'm swinging between being super excited and super terrified.

Conventions like TFNation (and its predecessor of sorts, Auto Assembly) can be, and are, so, so much fun. But they're also the perfect opportunity for an over-thinking brain like mine to trigger a lot of anxious thoughts.

It's a battle. And if you let your anxiety get the better of you, and you convince yourself to not go if you've been planning to, you will lose out on a lot more than you realise.

Last year's TFNation was such a fantastic weekend. I very nearly didn't go. I very nearly missed out on such a fun time. But I was determined to not let my anxious thoughts get the better of me. It was a battle I'm glad I won.

But, saying all that, I have a few confessions. I want to share with you a few times I let my anxious thoughts get the better of me when it came to the convention experience.

Here are my conventional confessions:

- I didn't go to Auto Assembly 2015 (the final one) because I let my anxiety get the better of me
- I didn't go to Auto Assembly 2014 because I let my anxiety get the better of me
- I didn't go to the London Film and Comic Con in 2014, despite really, really wanting to finally meet Bob Budiansky because I let my anxiety get the better of me
- I didn't go to Auto Assembly 2012 because I let my anxiety get the better of me. And this was an expensive one, as I'd already pre-booked/paid for my ticket and hotel
- I *did* go to Auto Assembly 2013 but I didn't go up to speak to guest Stephen Baskerville (who had illustrated a brilliant commission for me previously and was kind enough to colour it for me at no extra charge) and I felt terrible for not even thanking him in person because I let my anxiety get the better of me
- Also at Auto Assembly 2013 (my first one at the Hilton Metropole) I skipped the hotel breakfast each morning and walked to the Starbucks on the other side of the NEC to eat alone because I let my anxiety get the better of me
- At Auto Assembly 2008 I had to ask a friend to go up to Guido Guidi to ask for a couple of sketches because I let my anxiety get the better of me
- At TFNation 2016 I turned down an invitation to go for an evening meal because I let my anxiety get the better of me

I could go on, but I won't.

I really don't know what was different about TFNation in 2016, but I really didn't want to add to the long list of convention regrets in my mind. I was determined to go, just as I am determined to go this year. (Bob Budiansky is a guest... I thought he'd never get the opportunity to return to the UK after 2014.)

I wanted to put these "confessions" out there because I know from my interactions on social media that anxiety can put off a lot of people either going to conventions or making the best of them.

Don't let your anxious thoughts get the better of you, like I have done on so many occasions.

From my own experience last year, TFNation is an excellent convention. It's smoothly run. The organisers and volunteers are all approachable. It's a safe and relaxed and inclusive environment. Yes, it's busy, and cliques and groups of friends chatting do tend to form but I am sure nobody at all would mind if you said hello.

The guests are usually brilliant; happy to chat and answer (sensible) questions about their work on Transformers.

Anxiety is a barrier at conventions and while it can be difficult or even near impossible to break it down, it is very much worth it.

Start small. Ask a question (How was your journey here? Which toys are you looking for? Which guest are you most excited to meet?) and you'll soon find yourself on the other side of that barrier and, hopefully, enjoying yourself!

## **Field Report: TFNation 2017**

I went to TFNation 2017. It was a Transformers fan convention at the Hilton Metropole, Birmingham, from 11-13 August, 2017. Here are my thoughts.

Although TFNation 2017 was officially a 3-day event (Friday to Sunday), I made sure to get there on the Thursday afternoon. Like last year's event, there was a relaxed feeling to Thursday.

Everyone had time to warm up to the convention itself and, for me, it was really nice to catch up with old friends who were anticipating the event as much as I was.

As soon as I stepped into the Hilton Metropole hotel I was hit with memories of TFNation 2016. It really hadn't felt like an entire year between last year's convention and this one. When I arrived at the bar I was literally welcomed open-armed by old friends and it felt wonderful.

As the evening drew on, more and more people arrived and the atmosphere in the bar was one of excitement and anticipation but also one of reconnecting and catching up. It was like carrying on where last year left off.

Now I don't want to state that the highlight of the first evening was cake, but, yes, there was cake. And it was the highlight of the first evening.

The other nice thing about arriving on the Thursday was spending time with people who I knew would be unimaginably busy for the rest of the weekend. It was the calm before the storm, so to speak.

Because I was staying in a different hotel than the Hilton for the first night I had to peel myself away from everyone at around midnight. Listen, you gotta pace yourself!

Friday was a quiet start. I had a fantastic breakfast at the Crowne Plaza. I may have been surrounded by Quilters (off to the quilting convention later, I cleverly deduced), and very excited to get back to the Hilton for TFNation Day One but, hey, I wasn't going to rush a good breakfast!

The bar area at the Hilton was already busy by the time I arrived. The atmosphere was electric with excited chatter and expectation! Again, there was much time spent catching up with old friends and meeting new ones. Oh, and handing out Inky Bauds postcards!

Though the main hall for the convention didn't open until Saturday, there were several panels. I managed to squeeze into Josh Perez's and John-Paul Bove's "Colour Commentary" panel. It was actually a fascinating panel and both Josh and JP were great on stage and provided a real insight into their processes and all the hard work they put into their comic book pages. Funny guys, too!

You have to remember that I have something of a comic book bent when it comes to Transformers.

I pretty much spent the rest of the Friday afternoon and evening in the bar area. In fact, I was so engrossed in conversation with various people, and squeezed in a quick marriage ceremony, that I forgot to even eat! I know, right.

(I also missed out on the showing of "Transformers (2007)". Utterly regretful.)

Now, listen. I'm not going to begin to try to name names or give shout outs. This is mainly because I am terrible with names (and even worse with usernames) and I would be mortified if I left anyone out.

(If you and I chatted at all at any point during the weekend, then already you know who you are!)

Needless to say, Friday night was spent with friends. Old friends, new friends, friends who I've known for years, and friends who I'm still getting to know. As much as I enjoy my interactions on social media, to have that chance to speak to someone in person really is something special and, however brief, to be cherished.

I had some really lovely conversations with some really lovely people.

This aspect of TFNation is really important to me. My hobby is really a physically solitary one and I don't have many people local to me to discuss it with on a regular basis. So, aside from the odd meet-up here and there, the social side of TFNation is an amazing opportunity to forge and strengthen real bonds with the people you chat to online.

Utterly exhausted, I left the bar at around 1 a.m. and staggered into what I hoped was my own hotel room for the night.

Saturday morning rolled around and, boy, was I ready for breakfast! If there's one thing the Hilton Metropole excels at, it's breakfast. You want a waffle station? A pancake machine? A friendly young man who directs you to the packets of camomile tea? The Hilton has that and then some!

Breakfast was lovely. We were a group of 5 and it was just a wonderful (and surreal) experience to be starting the day chatting about Transformers over scrambled eggs. I almost didn't want to leave. One more sausage before, what was I here for again? Oh, that Transformers convention or something.

Saturday is the big day for TFNation. It's *the* main day. It's the day everyone is there for whether they're a weekender or a day-er. It's the day we are all here for! And, my word, the queue to get into the main hall was throbbing. I've never seen the like!

This is the point where, right before my eyes, the very heart of the convention itself and all the hard work and preparation of the whole TFNation team and volunteers was revealed! Every single member of the TFNation team has earned my utmost respect, gratitude, and admiration. They made sure everyone got into that hall quickly, smoothly, and safely. I cannot even begin to imagine the preparation needed for an event like this and the way the team handled the weekend itself and all of us attendees was nothing short of phenomenal.

The main hall on Saturday was amazing. It was busy but manageable, with plenty of space for the dealers, the guests, the stage, the seating area, and all of us. I heard talk of maybe 1,000 attendees this year. The shag on the main hall carpet took us all hard without complaining, that's for sure.

The Opening Ceremony was a real goosebumps highlight for me last year, and this year was the same.

I'm not as toy-oriented at Transformers conventions as I used to be. So after a cursory browse of the toy dealers I headed to the other side of the main hall to start queuing for some of the comic creator guests.

I naively thought I could queue to see James Roberts (writer of *More than Meets the Eye/Lost Light*) for about ten minutes before the Bob Budiansky panel started. I queued for about 45 minutes! That guy likes to take his time with his fans. But I am in no way complaining because, as I queued, I got chatting to some lovely people both in James's queue and the adjacent ones for Nick Roche and Jack Lawrence.

From James I got a handful of *More than Meets the Eye* scripts and from Jack, his *Lost Light* character study bible and his original artwork to the at-that-point-unseen cover for *Lost Light* issue 10.

Sadly I missed the first part of Bob Budiansky's panel but, based on what I did see, he was a legend on the stage! Bob came fully armed with an on-screen presentation of his typed and hand-written notes from when he *literally invented* Transformers. He was also keen to show us all the covers he both sketched out for other artists and pencilled himself. Bob was very personable on stage and fielded even the stupid questions with aplomb and great wit.

I'll be honest. I had a real fear that he would have been struck dumb on stage, considering that his Transformers work for Hasbro and Marvel happened so long ago. But, happily, I was wrong. As a guest at a Transformers convention he was legendary.

After Bob's panel I retired to the bar area for a brief recharge.

Just like last year, this part of the weekend is my absolute favourite. Here's why: The initial craziness of the Saturday morning is over and everyone is floating back down from the intensity of spending their money and the bar area is a relaxed and friendly afterglow of people chatting about their new purchases.

I spent a good hour or so spending time with people I'd only really known through social media. I like doing that on a Saturday afternoon. It's daylight. Everyone is (presumably) more sober and the bar is a lot quieter so there's less shouting. Also, there are toys *everywhere*, and that's always a good topic for discussion!

Second wind achieved, I breached the main hall once more! Things were a lot calmer compared to this morning and I saw my opportunity to finally introduce myself to Bob Budiansky. As you're no doubt aware, I grew up on Marvel UK's weekly Transformers comics and Bob was responsible for (in addition other things) writing around about half of what I read in the first 200 or so issues.

When I was 9, Bob taught me many, many new words, inspired me to be a writer, and (along with Simon Furman) has been half-responsible for my continuing love for Transformers that carries on to this day. I mean, really, the guy has a great deal to answer for! So, yeah. What the hell to say to a person like that?

I simply said this: Thank you.

I'm really not much of a signature collector but I did ask Bob for his. I had a print of Transformers (US) issue 1 (which he was the editor of) to sign, along with a print of issue 80 for Simon to sign. I was thinking diptych. The man was a star. He made sure he was spelling my name correctly and deliberated whether gold or black ink would be best to contrast against the background of the print's artwork. It's attention to detail like this that we all owe 33-and-counting years' of Transformers for!

I then worked my way down the length of tables: After Bob Budiansky, Simon Furman, then Geoff Senior, then Stephen Baskerville. I picked up a script of Transformers (US) issue 80 from Simon.

I had only planned to quickly say thank-you to Geoff for the two commissions he illustrated for me earlier this year. (One of which I turned into that postcard I was busy handing out.) While chatting, I was idly flicking through his portfolio folder only half paying attention to it. And then I saw his original painted artwork for the cover of Transformers issue 72.

And my jaw dropped and my heart leapt.

I'm not a violent person but had anyone else been in the periphery of my vision at that point I would have gently (but assertively) elbowed them away. I couldn't go home without that artwork, that thought-lost gem of the golden age of Transformers that I personally andÂ,Â reverently hold so dear.

I paid cash, of course; thumbing note after note out of my wad like an utter gangster. I asked Geoff to sign and dedicate the painting (for itÂ is a painting) to me because, let's be honest, I'm gonna die with that artwork.

I briefly chatted to Stephen Baskerville and finally thanked him in person for a commission he illustrated for me in 2009. I also got the cover he and Andrew Wildman did for Regeneration One issue 100.

All in all it was shaping up to be a Best Day Ever! for this particular Transformers comic book fan!

Now this is where I feel that the overall busyness and *jam-packedness* of TFNation is a blessing and a curse. I spent so long with the guests I did spend time with that I missed out on a few panels and speaking to other guests. But that's my fault. I did try my best to stay organised, even to the point of putting the weekend's schedule into my phone and watch so I wouldn't miss anything. I'm sorry about all the great panels I missed, to everyone who put so much hard work into them (I heard great things about them!); I got caught up in it all!

The main hall closed at 5 p.m. or thereabouts and the little voice from under my diaphragm that I had ignored the previous day begged pathetically for food. This time I listened and we went for a hamburger.

"Club Con" is another TFNation highlight for me.

Like last year, the entire room was set out like a dinner theatre: a sea of round tables with chairs, lined up along the shore of the main stage. Each table was adorned with an Energon Cube that effused a flattering retro neon glow. The tables filled up quickly but there was additional seating around the back and side edges of the room. There was a bar in the corner and TFNation-branded drinks mats were supplied. It was like the main dining room of the SS Poseidon but, you know, the right way up.

The cosplay competition started in earnest and the parade of entrants marched across the stage to much applause from us all. To me, the cosplay competition epitomises the creative spirit and diversity of my fellow TFNation attendees. People travel from all over the globe to be here and

share in the fun with their peers. The cosplay competition feels to me like a distillation of our colourful and diverse Transformers community and, going by the crowd's cheers and applause, we happily accept and celebrate all comers.

(I'm afraid I missed the proceeding quiz and live script reading.)

Eventually back in the bar area I found myself in full conversation mode just like Friday, but harder, faster, *louder*.

Imagine a party that you've been dragged along to where you don't know anyone and the topics of conversation you find yourself in are boring you to the point where brain death is hoped for. Saturday night at TFNation is the complete opposite of that.

I was surrounded by friends, new and old (I keep saying that) and every conversation I was part of was compelling and interesting. Even peripheral conversations that I kept hearing snippets of above the ambient chatter were compelling and interesting.

To paraphrase a well known Furmanism, I had sown the seeds of friendship and was now reaping a whirlwind of delightful and sparkling conversation.

The bar became so flooded with awesome and interesting people I was ready to instigate a speed dating type system of strictly timed conversations so we could all get a turn with everyone we wanted to chat to! That's the thing when you interact with a large number of people on social media... actual conversations are not a rolling timeline of quick replies and clicking "likes".

Again, I can't bear to name names but it was just so fantastic to catch up with the people I regularly chat to online, to put faces to names/usernames, and to generally be in the moment with my peers. And still there were many people I couldn't get around to chatting with. (Hopefully next year!)

1 a.m. rolled around far too quickly again and, before I slipped into a state of semi-consciousness while cuddling up to the nearest fellow attendee, I headed up back up to my hotel room.

I slept in on Sunday morning and ended up breakfasting alone. Well, kind of. Bob Budiansky was at a nearby table and he, not that I was counting, kept revisiting the waffle station more times than was healthy for someone about to be on a panel in the main hall.

The main hall on Sunday was a far more relaxed and quieter affair compared to Saturday. How the dealers still had the energy to be still standing was beyond me.

I sat in on the Bob Budiansky and Simon Furman panel. It gave an incredible insight into the "change-over" between the two writers and both dispelled and confirmed many of my own thoughts and assumptions about what had gone on behind the scenes back in 1989! (Note to self: Get a Blue Plaque for the pub in Covent Garden where Bob unofficially passed the reins to Simon and organise a meet-up/pilgrimage.)

It was apparent that there was a lot of chemistry between Bob and Simon, like old friends catching up. I was glad to be there and to be party to it. It was at times like this where I felt that TFNation had been put on just for me, an old nostalgic fool.

After the panel I was struck by a sudden thought: *Â The Forge! I hadn't visited the Forge yet!* Much like the cosplay aspect of TFNation, the Forge itself was a vibrant, diverse and incredibly creative community-within-a-community. By the time I got to the Forge I had already checked out of my room at the Hilton and my luggage was in a specially allocated storage room. All I had with me was an A3 envelope, already stuffed with the artwork I'd bought the previous day. Luckily there was still space for a few more artwork prints and postcards!

I actually spent the last of my cash reserves in the Forge. I had to resort to PayPal by the time I got to the last table. I've always loved being a part of the more creative side of the Transformers fandom. (I started my first fanzine in 1995, after all.) It was a joy to meet and briefly chat to all the talented artists in the Forge, many of whom had travelled from all over the world to showcase their work. And I was happy to support their work, too. These guys are going to be the future of Transformers comics!

I hadn't planned on buying any toys at TFNation but I bumped into James Roberts at one table and he offhandedly mentioned that a dealer "back there" had a few of "the Nautica boxsets". One swift PayPal transaction later, I had the Chaos on Velocitron gift set under my arm. I didn't buy a single toy at last year's TFNation but was very glad to find this particular set as I'd been trying to source it from the USA/Canada for much of this year. If James hadn't mentioned he'd seen I'd have missed out again!

The Lost Light panel with James Roberts and Jack Lawrence was the final panel I sat in on. (I only caught the last bit of Mark Ryan's panel on my return from the Forge.) I've been reading More than Meets the Eye/Lost Light since it started and it was a genuine treat to glean some behind-the-scenes information on it. I was amazed at how many of James's longterm plans for his storylines had to be changed, tweaked and re-ordered at the whims of the publisher's ever-evolving plans.

And then TFNation 2017 officially came to an end. The closing ceremony was emotional and as we filled the main hall with thunderous applause for one last time it dawned on me just how quickly the weekend had come and gone. The last moments of the convention were bittersweet to say the least.

I had forty minutes until my train home and, not wishing to repeat how rushed my good-byes were last year, I spent my last last half hour trying to bid fond farewell to as many of my friends as I could. I think I missed more people than I hit, but, you know, that's the way it goes. A farewell hug says more than an online message ever can.

On the train home I was already on social media on my phone, desperately trying to keep the weekend going. I was exhausted and emotional and when the train attendant offered me a complimentary orange juice I tried to use all the strength I had left to hold back my tears. I failed of course, but I assured her and myself that they were good tears!

Transformers *is* so much more than collecting toys. It's a community, to me. It's a network of dearly cherished friendships (some new, some old; all treasured) and an event like TFNation is the hub. I am grateful it exists.

The team and volunteers do an amazing job of organising and running TFNation. The guests and attendees do an amazing job of elevating TFNation into something genuinely wondrous. I can only try to put into words how lucky I feel to have been part of TFNation this year, last year and, hopefully, for many years to come.

To everyone involved with TFNation I simply say this: Thank you.

# Conquering Convention

*This essay was written in the autumn of 2017*

It's only a been few weeks since the second TFNation convention and, as usual, I'm swinging between being super exhausted and super nostalgic.

Before TFNation this year I wrote a short essay called "Conventional Confessions" and the response I got online before and after the event, and during the weekend itself, has been hugely humbling and heart-warming. I'll be honest: I was surprised to say the least! I was initially hesitant to write it, let alone publish it. But I'm pleased I did. And if it helped anyone, anyone at all for even the smallest amount, I'm exponentially pleased!

TFNation 2017 has been and gone and, for me, it was a tremendously fun weekend. You can read all about my adventure in my field report. I deliberately didn't mention anything about anxiety in that write-up because, frankly, it didn't deserve to be acknowledged so as not to spoil all the fun.

It is often said that social anxiety disorder is an illness of missed opportunities. A weekend event such as TFNation (or any other convention) is an opportunity not to be missed! But a convention is also an opportunity for anxiety to narrow its eyes, wring its hands and let a cruel, sadistic smile stretch across its face. In other words, as it certainly has done to me in the past, anxiety can outright ruin an entire convention experience.

I've been interested in Transformers since 1984. Throughout my childhood and teenage years it was an isolated (and isolating) hobby. Every Saturday morning I would read the Marvel UK Transformers comic on my own and re-enact those adventures with my toys in solitude. It wasn't until I joined a Transformers fan club in 1995 that I became aware of, and had the opportunity to meet, fellow fans.

In those days, pre-Internet, everyone in the club communicated via hand-written letters like pen-pals. I remember reading in one of the printed newsletters that meet ups were a regular thing and it actually terrified me! At that point in my life I didn't really say much to people I didn't know if I could possibly help it.

Thinking back, I realise now that it was a symptom of anxiety but at the time everyone (myself included) shrugged it off as extreme shyness. Needless to say, I avoided most social situations. But the prospect of a meet up with like-minded Transformers collectors? It was terrifying, but also, after all those years of isolation, impossible to resist.

There were about 12 of us at that first meet up. I don't remember saying much at all for the entire afternoon. But I do remember having fun, and I do remember the boost it gave me.

So how does someone with social anxiety go from a small meet up of 12 people to an event like TFNation that accommodates up to 1,000 people? *Verrrrrry* gradually over the course of 22 years! No but seriously: very gradually over the course of 22 years.

Since 1995, those meet ups have evolved slowly into what we know as TFNation today. This gradual evolution has, more or less, worked out fine for me. Had my first social Transformers experience been with 999 other people in the same place I wouldn't have coped. At all. I would have very easily let my anxiety talk me out of going.

But we are at the stage where a UK-based Transformers convention is attracting up to 1,000 people. And if you've never been before I can fully, completely, unreservedly, utterly, *totally* understand how daunting that is!

This year I spoke to many, many people who, like me, have anxious thoughts that beat them up before, during, and after, a convention. ("Hey, your blog about anxiety really helped me," was a phrase my ego didn't at all get tired of hearing, by the way.)

As I listened and engaged, hiding my sweating palms of course, I realised that we were all climbing the same mountain with the harsh winds of anxiety pushing us back down.

In other words, a convention can feel like something that has to be conquered before it can be enjoyed.

Thankfully, the team behind TFNation have been working very hard, and tirelessly continue to do so, to ensure that the path to the summit isn't as steep and treacherous as you might fear. In fact, this year's TFNation was the least anxious I think I've ever felt at a social event.

(But don't worry, my anxiety has since replayed the entire four days back in my head, over and over, making me cringe at every ridiculous thing I said and did during every single conversation I had with every single person I met. Anxiety is super thorough like that.)

It took me a long, long time to realise that I wasn't alone in the way I felt about allowing my anxiety dictate my experience of conventions. I wish now I hadn't left it so late to reach out.

If there's one thing I've very recently learned, it's to get past the stigma associated with mental health, do my best to conquer it, and open up about it more. It's helped me no end, and I sincerely hope it's helped others too.

Every little victory in the battle against anxiety isn't exactly a conventional conquest, but it goes such a long way into improving things. Every little victory can improve the convention experience no end.

If you are interested in coming to something like TFNation for the first time and you're battling anxiety please just know that you're not alone and that many of your potential fellow attendees (and guests too!) will be experiencing similar feelings.

I can't stress this enough: you are not alone. In fact, you never were.

## Where the Doors are Always Open

*This essay was written in 2018*

I think it's fair to say that I've lived most of my life behind closed doors.

It started when I was 7 years old, back in the December of 1984, when my parents divorced. It was a jarring and emotional move from Germany to England.

I tried my best to adjust to the transition, but my anxious brain had other ideas. It was what you might call a triggering event.

School in England was hell. I was at one school for two terms before we moved again in the summer of 1985 and I started at another that September. Back in those days, and at the school I went to, divorce was apparently unheard of. I was the only kid in school from a "one parent family" and I was also the only kid who hadn't been born in England.

Long story, short: I was bullied relentlessly and mercilessly. For all sorts of things, for getting free school meals, to "not having" a dad, to being "German". No one could let go of any of those things. Classmates did a Sieg Heil salute when I walked into the classroom or on the fields during PE. Someone even drew the moustache on one of my school pictures.

Every day I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me. Every day, when I got home from school, I shut the door behind me and wanted it to stay shut. I would dash into my bedroom and shut that door, too. And if there had been a secret room inside my bedroom I would have ran in there and shut that door as well. And so on.

Over the years, I closed even more doors. That was all down to my burgeoning (social) anxiety. I guess I isolated myself as a coping mechanism, and in defence against all the bullying. I mean, no one can hurt you if you don't make yourself vulnerable, right?

Some doors I actively slammed shut, some I passively let close. But the end result was the same. I didn't mean for it to happen that way, but my anxious brain just kept swirling with thoughts that I wasn't welcome anywhere, that I was a nuisance and, well, that no one would miss my absence anyway.

Throughout school, sixth form, university, and employment, I kept shutting those doors.

Friendships and (often, one night only) relationships simply lost consciousness and there was nothing I could do to revive them. It was my anxious brain, convincing me that there was no point in letting anything develop into anything meaningful.

The only thing that seemed to break this social anxiety pattern was the few friendships I'd made through my hobby of collecting Transformers. Who would have thought, right?

In the mid to late 1990s, a few of us would get together to talk about our favourite robots in disguise. Then, as more of us found each other (first, via letter writing and then using online message boards) the meet ups eventually evolved into organised conventions.

By 2006 or so, a Birmingham-based Transformers convention called Auto Assembly became the main event in the UK (and Europe) to attend. I went to a few, and while I did enjoy them all, I could feel those dreaded doors closing again. I didn't go to every one. In fact, I didn't attend the last two in 2014 and 2015.

I can't explain how or why, but I know for a fact that my anxious brain was up to its old tricks again.

In 2016 a new convention, called TFNation, came to be. When I first heard about it, I shrugged it off. My brain, again, told me it wasn't for me. *Who'd want me there? What could I possibly contribute?*

But then I thought that if TFNation was a fresh start of sorts, then maybe I could be part of that fresh start. My brain and I fought and fought in the months and weeks before that first TFNation. We agreed a compromise, to open the door just a little bit... just to peek in.

I tell you what. I'm glad I did. There were a few points over the weekend where I felt the door closing but I pushed back and stopped it from shutting. I didn't want to be shut out of TFnation, and I certainly didn't want to be on the other side of a closed door from my friends, both new and old.

That first TFNation was a remarkably run convention. It felt like no other convention or meet up I'd ever been to before. The entire team had gone to enormous lengths to ensure that the event was safe, friendly, and inclusive.

For someone like me, who has spent nearly a lifetime at the mercy of (social) anxiety, TFNation really did (and still does) feel like a place where the doors are always open.

That's what TFNation does. It somehow opens doors and, for four days at least, keeps them open. It's a combination of the organising team's dedication, the venue itself, the guests and

dealers and, probably most importantly, all of the energy of the attendees, including the cosplayers and Forge artists.

It's this unique combination that, in my view, provides the welcoming and inclusive environment that is talked about so much on social media (before, during and especially after the event) and helps someone like me immeasurably.

I can only hope to begin to articulate my gratitude and appreciation to everyone who, three years running, has made TFNation what it is and what I hope will continue to be. I had so much fun at this year's TFNation and spending precious (and a frustratingly short) time with new and old friends, more than a younger me would have ever thought he'd deserve.

I have let a lot of doors close in the past, but TFNation represents one door that I am determined to keep open.

## Field Report: TFNation 2024

This time last week, the main Trader's Hall at the TFNation 2024 Convention had just closed, and several hundred fellow Transformers fans and collectors headed to various parts of the Hilton Metropole hotel, laden with their new Transformers purchases. It was mainly Blokees. Myself, I hooked up with a gang of pals and we went for dinner. Collecting Transformers is hungry work!

That morning, I'd made my way to the NEC complex by car. It was just over an hour down the M6 motorway. I usually take the train, but there was a bus replacement service between Stoke-on-Trent and Stafford, and I didn't feel like carting my inevitable Transformers haul while navigating replacement buses. I arrived at around 10:30 am, and not only was the car park rammed, but fellow attendees were queuing outside of the hotel. I had no idea it was going to be this busy!

Usually, I do the entire weekend for TFNation, but this year, for several reasons, I could only manage the Saturday day. Almost immediately upon arrival, I was greeted by TFN team member and very good friend of over twenty years, Mr Turnbull. He pointed me in the direction of the registration queue, and some twenty minutes later, I had my wristband in my hand and was ready for the convention.

At this point, the Trader's Hall was filled with the Early Bird ticket holders and so I joined the queue. I'd say the queue time was about 40 minutes. It flew by as I got chatting with fellow attendees, and, sporadically, someone I knew popped up to say hello and to show me what they'd bought already.

The TFNation volunteers did an amazing job keeping the queue moving and getting us into the main Trader's Hall as quickly as they were able.

I'd call myself a convention veteran. Firstly, because I'm getting quite old nowadays, and secondly, I've been to loads of Transformers conventions over the years. However, I was not prepared for just how busy the Trader's Hall was going to be! Like, it was the busiest I'd ever seen it! So, so busy. Busy AF. In previous years, being a weekend attendee, I would normally have a chilled Saturday. I'd take my time over the hotel breakfast and walk it off outside before returning to the convention at around midday when the initial furore had died down. But with just being there for the Saturday day only, I had to make sure I got into the Trader's Hall as soon as I could.

I made my way to the Toy-Fu area first because I had a HasLab Victory Saber to donate. It was heaving. I pick the worst possible time to leave a donation, I know. But in my defence, I was only here for the Saturday day! The Toy-Fu team are a fantastic bunch of people; some of whom I've

known for decades. Their dedication is inspirational, and they dealt with the thrumming crowds with ease, with the odd shout of “Card!” whenever someone wanted to pay by card.

Sadly, the sealed Transformers: Generation 2 Combaticons (which I’d seen on social media the previous day) had long gone, but I did spot a loose G2 Go-Bot Optimus Prime and, even though it didn’t have its gun, bought it on sight.

I made my way slowly around the other dealers and Forge artists for the next hour or so. But, in all honesty, it was just too busy to actually get close enough to the tables to look at anything.

But that didn’t really matter as, for the entire time, I was bumping into many old friends for very quick chats. Literally just ten-minute catch-ups on life and Transformers. I call these friendships with once-a-year interactions “conventionships”.

There was a sudden gap at one of the busiest dealers, and I swooped in. I spotted a set of Transformers: Generation 2 Aerialbots and bought them on impulse. I’m very irresponsible with money that way. I was over the moon. The Aerialbots are my favourite set of Autobots and I’d been after getting a new set of the G2 versions for a few years.

With the post-purchase serotonin flooding my brain, I retreated to the Hotel’s main bar area for some much-needed rehydration. Hydration is important, after all! It was a nice break and an excellent chance to sit with friends and see what they’d bought so far.

By about 2:00 pm, I ventured back into the Trader’s Hall. It was slightly less busy so I managed a full sweep of the room without getting the corner of someone’s cosplay in the kidney. I spotted a G2 Go-Bot Frenzy and snapped it up. All of my purchases this year were from the Transformers: Generation 2 line. I had kind of planned to pick up a few G1 toys from 1988 and 1989, but, to be honest, it was too busy to get a good look at the vintage stuff and inspect it properly before making a decision.

I made my way around the Forge to pick up a few fanzines, sketchbooks and other cool stuff. I’m just sorry I couldn’t get to every Forge table. It was a combination of busyness and time constraints. Also, I won a Hachette Transformers book in the TFNation raffle.

At this point, I bumped into another good friend, and she showed me her Red Alert Bloke, and I was, like, I want one. Now. A few minutes later, I had four sealed Blokees in hand!

It was about this time that the Trader’s Hall was closing — 4:00 pm. Was it really over so quickly? I headed back to the bar area and sat down. Having been on my feet all day, my back was aching, and my body was telling me to get some food.

A small group of us headed over to Resort’s World for a bite to eat at Karaage. I had some delicious “honourable tenders” and some bubble tea.

At around 6:00 pm, it was time to head back home. There was an issue with the car park system, and after a quick chat with the hotel concierge, I was given free parking.

As I navigated the so-called “smart” motorway home, my mind was swimming with the events of the day; I had spoken to so many people (and missed speaking to many others) that I had trouble remembering exactly what I’d said and to whom. I also thanked myself for not letting my social anxiety get the better of me, as it often does when it comes to big events.

It was an utterly fantastic — and frantic — day! It’s also so wonderful to catch up with friends, no matter how briefly. The convention itself is extremely well-organised. And it’s a really diverse and inclusive event, too! This year there was a huge amount of younger fans and families, all adding to

the positive atmosphere. I have nothing but heartfelt gratitude to the entire TFNation team and volunteers — and my fellow attendees — for making it such an amazing day.

***Thank you for reading!***