

Opinion

Robots for heroes promote awe for machines, not men

I found a fringe benefit at the bottom of my breakfast cereal the other morning—a "Starbot." It was a cheap, plastic imitation of the latest rage in children's toys — toys that turn into heroic robots.



Loren Steffy

The real things are called Transformers or Gobots or Voltrons or several other names. Basically they're model cars and trucks with parts that twist around until they look like humanoid machines. Most of the toys have cartoon shows in the afternoon and a slew of spin-off toys such as board games, masks and wrist watches.

I'm not one to believe that the toys a child plays with will cause brain damage or warped spines in later years. After all, I grew up in the days of Vampire Blood, Stretch Armstrong and Green Slime in a Can and my posture is fine.

But this cars-as-heroes craze stems from a broader attitude spawned by the computer boom of the '80s — machines can do anything, including save the world.

Robot heroes have been around almost as long as the concept of robotics. The Human Torch, a flaming android comic book hero, debuted in 1939. The only difference is that the Torch looked human, and despite his internal components, he was called human.

But cosmetic appearances became less important. The forerunner of the Transformers were the Shogun Warriors — giant, Japanese monster-fighting robots that were controlled by people. They were machines, but they were under direct human control. Then came Rom, the Spaceknight, a man who had been turned into a machine. Despite his mechanical body, he was supposed to have human emotions.

Now we have Transformers, Gobots, Voltrons, Starbots, etc. — mechanized heroes that look like something the Human Torch would have fought against, not beside. They even have secret identities. They're cars one minute, dogooders the next. It's a Toyota's fantasy come to life.

This theme of technology as a savior also is found in movies such as "Tron" and television mind-jello like "Knight Rider," to name only a few. The message is that once microcircuits assume human characteristics, they can save the day better than people. It sounds like a great sales pitch for President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative.

While the long-term effects may be minimal, the immediate results are a lack of concern for dealing with people. Instead of respecting and interacting with others, kids' admiration and attention is focused on machines. Cars, no matter how classy, make lousy role models, and misdirected vehicular affection can seriously affect career goals. "What do you want to be when you grow up, sonny?" "I

want to be a Dodge Ram Van that turns into a Deception."

The '80s has brought about the acceptance of high technology. Children are weaned on video games and portable stereos. Technology is the key to the doorway of the future, limited only by man's imagination.

In the past, movies such as "Dr. Strangelove" warned us that runaway technology could be our downfall. Now, shows like the Transformers encourage it. Machines, not men, are the preservers of justice and the protectors of good.

But this mechanical mindset misses a key factor: Someone has to build the machines, someone has to maintain them and someone, in some form, has to control them. Machines, high tech or not, are only tools. They may be awe-inspiring and they may make our lives easier, but they are not our replacements. It's an obvious point, but one that's easily forgotten.

I'm opposed to technological advances. Recent breakthroughs in computer technology make the production of this paper much easier than ten years ago. But no matter how easy they make my job, machines still need to mind their place.

The day my car turns into a robot and starts fighting bad guys — or even helps an old lady across the street — is the day I start buying a new kind of breakfast cereal.

Loren Steffy is a senior journalism major and the Opinion Page editor for The Battalion.

Mail Call

Potty permits new revenue-generator

EDITOR:

I just wanted to commend the University Police on the fine job they are doing in parking enforcement. Their enthusiasm is unsurpassed. I was driving around campus and every lot I passed had one of those officers in blue hot on the trail of one of those wanton parking criminals too, was once one of these wanton criminals but I've paid my \$45 and now pursue my education again — a freedom I mistakenly thought inalienable.

I've also found a feeling of security from my experience. You see, a ticket was given to my wife — another wanton criminal who thought could better herself at the library without first checking on all the regulations governing visitors. Thank God justice was served and she got her parking ticket.

The other two tickets I received were issued at 9 p.m. and 10 p.m. I was in the library studying for critical exams and assumed that the University would be out chasing desperate felons.

Little did I realize that when I parked my stickerless car in the almost empty parking lot I became a desperate felon. I now rest assured that even though bicycle and car thefts occur daily with only scant retribution, we wanton parking felons are punished to the full extent of the law — no matter what our story. Justice is served.

I guess I should really direct my praise to Bob Wiatt, the man who made police work not only "law and order" but "law, order and profit." The state budget in such shambles this man's talent is obviously being well used. I say let him loose; give him free rein.

My idea? It's simple — pay toilets in every building. With all the construction and renovation, eliminate the construction bathrooms. Our first objective is to limit the number of facilities. The sell bathroom permits — many more permits than there are facilities. We beef up the police force and patrol the bathrooms looking for those illegally "parked." Think of it: easy money, good working conditions (conditioning and no rain) and, of course, a safer community. The big money will come from those ignorant of the law. From the money collected, we'll fund the football games we should have the A&M Space Shuttle and parking for three years. Who needs oil revenues? We've got bathroom and parking permits.

After persuing through all this rhetoric the point is really quite simple. You and I are weenies — we gripe and moan, then we pay. Thank God weren't around when America needed us during the Revolution.

Michael Bolton

Persecution of grad students

EDITOR:

I am writing *The Battalion* in order to bring attention to a problem the administration will not give attention to, perhaps because the administration is the source of the problem.

Zachry Engineering Center has a great deal of open space in the interior. The administration, in its zeal to see that the space is not wasted, gives it to any group that wants it — apparently they do not discriminate. In some cases, such as the regional science fair, I know that I and other students enjoy this. The science fair did not in any way interfere with our work. Most often it is turned over to square dancers or fraternity dances which entail a great deal of noise. In the case of a recent fraternity dance, I have doubt that the decibel level was dangerous to us still endowed with hearing, but unfortunately none of the engineers capable of measuring noise were foolish enough to be around.

What is most offensive is that the administration has so little regard for graduate students that it considers any utilization to be better than utilization by engineers. One must ask who it is that they want to hurt? Is it the engineers, general, or is it the graduate students in particular? One could make the case that graduate students are the persecuted minority of academia. The plan mainly on surviving graduate school and leaving, rather than fighting and lessening their chance of survival.

The point is, who is most likely to be working on a Saturday night? Graduate students of course. At one of our recent Saturday brouhahas, I was working because as a lecturer in industrial engineering I am honored to have 97 students, not the sort of load that you are likely to see a professor with. The insult takes on a particularly pernicious and malicious flavor when one considers that the graduate student is not merely burdened by excessive demands of graduate school, but is actually inhibited in meeting those demands by administration policy.

Could the administration be so careless and stupid so as to not realize what they are doing? I question that. Texas A&M has shown a pattern of senseless persecution before as in the cases of women in the band and the homosexual support group. Why not graduate students?

What I would like to know is, who should I sue? Is there anyone in particular that this obscene policy should be credited to, or should I just sue after the entire system?

J.M. Cargal

Lecturer, Industrial Engineering

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Helping educated women overcome marriage odds

According to last week's *Newsweek*, single educated women over 35 will only have a 5 percent chance of getting married.



Art Buchwald

Since their careers had precedence over marriage, the working women start looking for "Mr. Right" much later in life. Too late in most cases because he already has been captured by Little Miss Muffet, who couldn't care less for a title on her door.

How do I know so much? I have been serving as a volunteer matchmaker for my friends over the years. The hours are long and the work isn't easy.

Some weeks back a lady friend said to me, "I'm looking for 'Mr. Right' and I want you to handle my case."

"You have to take a number. I now represent seven women, all of whom have asked me to find them a man."

"I must have priority. I'm turning 40 next week," she said.

"All right, but first I have to get a profile on you. I would like to ask you a few questions. What kind of man are you looking for?"

"I'm not fussy," she said. "Any super-achiever will do."

"How about something on the order of a vice president of a large insurance company?" I suggested.

"He doesn't have to have a title as long as he is financially independent. I don't want to get involved with someone who looks up to me only because of my income or my position."

"That sounds reasonable."

"Find me a caring, loving man who understands my many moods and will adjust to them."

"That sounds fair."

"And I don't want anyone who is still in therapy."

"Now you're making it harder."

"I have very good administrative talents. Three hundred people answer to me. They say I'm firm but fair," she said.

"Yet the word on the street is that you carry the iron fist you use all day home with you at night."

"People are jealous because of my fast rise to the top which prevented me from competing for the man of my dreams. I'm confident you can find 'Mr. Right' now because he probably is unhappily married and at this very moment searching intensely for someone like me."

"It's not as easy to find an eligible man over 40 as one might think."

"Who says he has to be over 40? Anyone 21 years and up may apply."

"I don't have to many suitable 21-year-olds on my Rolodex," I told her.

"All I ask is that he be emotionally secure."

"You just made my task impossible."

"I want to make it perfectly clear that I am not desperate. I'm very happy with my situation. I have a lovely apartment, a large office, an American Express credit card and a cat named Sophie."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said, "because your case, while not the most difficult, is not the easiest either. Could you give me any idea of how determined you are to find 'Mr. Right'?"

"I'd go out with my UPS truck driver if he asked me."

"One more question. What sports do you like?"

"I adore tennis. I can wipe up the court with almost any man I play with," she said.

"Would you consider letting 'Mr. Right' win just a few games until you know each other better?"

"I'm not that desperate."

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The Battalion

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