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グレートメカニックG

Great Mechanics G

2024 WINTER

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大特集
30周年
記念!

機動武闘伝
Gガンダム

『機動戦士ガンダム 復讐のレクイエム』
『マクロスゼロ』
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グレメカG

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THE MIRACLE OF THE ALTERNATIVE SERIES

The 30-Year Journey of G Gundam

LOOKING BACK FROM TODAY'S PERSPECTIVE: IS G GUNDAM REALLY THAT OUTLANDISH?

About 30 years ago, in the 1990s, there were three Gundam titles that didn't carry the Mobile Suit moniker: *Mobile Fighter G Gundam* (1994), *New Mobile Report Gundam W* (1995), and *After War Gundam X* (1996). For a long time, fans lumped these together under informal terms like "GWX," "Heisei Gundam," or "Another Gundam."

Come 2024, Bandai Namco Filmworks (Sunrise) introduced the term "Alternative Series" for Gundam works not set in the Universal Century, effectively settling the old "what should we call them?" debate. This year marks the 30th anniversary of that first entry in the Alternative Series, *Mobile Fighter G Gundam*, the subject of our feature.

As most readers know, G Gundam stands out as the oddball of the franchise: a world where Gundams representing their respective space colonies duel one-on-one to determine global supremacy. It also served as a major turning point in Gundam history. In this piece, we'll reconsider G Gundam from a modern viewpoint and explore the significance it left behind.

UPON CLOSER INSPECTION, ITS STORY IS QUINTESSENTIALLY "GUNDAM"

At first glance, G Gundam's narrative, about headstrong men called Gundam Fighters who "communicate through their fists," feels like something straight out of a classic 1970s shounen manga. By the end of Japan's bubble era, that throwback style was oddly refreshing. Director Yasuhiro Imagawa once said in interviews that the show's theme was "love" (not just in the romantic sense). At the same time, it's a story meticulously shaped with Gundam logic in mind.

Take the Devil Gundam at the narrative's core. Its ties to protagonist Domon Kasshu's father and brother mirror a longstanding staple of mecha anime and Gundam itself: familial bonds entwined with giant robots. Normally, such connections justify why a hero pilots a special machine. Here, they underpin the hero's personal commitment to resolving the conflict.

And consider the series' most popular character, Master Asia, the "Undefeated of the East." His existence and motives, upon closer inspection, form a parallel to Char Aznable. He's a formidable antagonist who ends up strengthening the hero. He's willing to see humanity purged for the sake of Earth itself—pure, radical ideals reminiscent of Char. He may not wear a mask, but you can see the similarities, can't you?

THE SURPRISINGLY "GUNDAM-LIKE" WORLD OF G GUNDAM

In the earliest planning stages, G Gundam started as a more "realistic" concept. But sponsor feedback caused a sudden pivot toward something

inspired by the era's booming fighting games: Gundams from around the world battling it out in martial arts matches. Considering Gundam's history up to that point, it sounded unbelievable.

Yet, from today's vantage point, maybe it was inevitable. Realistic Universal Century titles were increasingly becoming the domain of older, core fans who'd stuck with the series through the boom years, while SD Gundam maintained its popularity among children.

So when a "Fighting Game Gundam" show premiered, it initially struggled to win over fans but eventually turned into a hit. Readers surely know this success story. But watching G Gundam today, you might be surprised how—despite its seemingly radical departure—it still feels like a genuine Gundam series. Perhaps Director Imagawa and the creative team, aware they were making something so different, felt compelled to emphasize the show's Gundam identity that much more.

WHAT MADE FIGHTING GAME GUNDAM SO TIMELY BACK THEN?!

G Gundam aired 15 years after *Mobile Suit Gundam,* in an era after the Cold War had ended and war felt distant to the Japanese public. After riding the bubble economy and experiencing its collapse, one key appeal of the original Gundam, "human drama within war," was losing its immediate relevance.

So what kind of "battle" would genuinely engage the kids of that era? Enter the world of fighting games, sparked into a massive craze by *Street Fighter II.* A hot-blooded story of combat, fueled by the spirit of competition, essentially sports manga with fists, felt more real to them than distant wars.

G Gundam projected fighting-game energy onto anime, merging it with classical mecha anime tropes of familial drama. In hindsight, it was a logical step. The show's setting, which prominently features Neo Hong Kong, also pays homage to Hong Kong cinema. Consider that Brigitte Lin played the legendary "Invincible Asia" (based on the wuxia novel *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer*) in *Swordsman II* (1992) and *Swordsman III* (1993). Master Asia himself is closer to the original character from the novel (who even undergoes self-castration) than to Brigitte Lin's interpretation.

THE BALANCE BETWEEN ABSURDITY AND REALITY IN THE WORLD SETTING

One undeniable charm of G Gundam is its sheer outrageousness. It takes the grounded world that *Mobile Suit Gundam* established and gleefully smashes it to pieces in a symphony of wild creativity.

Each colony reflecting its nation's geography is only possible because it rests upon the Gundam universe's foundation. Protagonist Domon's hotheaded, single-minded personality—barely understanding others'

feelings—might fit a traditional sports protagonist, but it also stands as a stark inversion of the Amuro Ray archetype. And as for Fuunsaiki, the horse that a Gundam rides, there's no room to even question "Does a Gundam need a horse?" Its mere presence shows how far the creators pushed their experiments. Amid this wildness, the Devil Gundam's role, tied to Earth's environmental crisis, resonates with the early '90s awakening to global warming issues.

At the same time, setting the stage with a mobile trace system that seeks a certain realism in how pilots and machines interact is also very Gundam-like. The show embraces both ridiculousness and logic, each reinforcing the other's impact.

A UNIQUE APPEAL BORN FROM UNCONVENTIONAL PREMISES

The central framework of G Gundam, the Gundam Fight, is undeniably peculiar. Yet aside from that core departure, many elements feel decidedly Gundam. Humanity tries to solve Earth's environmental crisis by expanding into space, which leads to a war-torn age where humanoid weapons (mobile suits) rule the battlefield, and special Gundams again take center stage. Even the sound effects come straight from earlier Gundam works, reinforcing that familiar atmosphere.

But the show's true originality lies in its characters. The production required five distinct Gundams, each representing a key fighter. The story's popularity skyrocketed once Master Asia entered the picture.

Domon and his four allies are both comrades and rivals, a classic shonen manga setup. Their relationships, along with the complicated family ties between Master Asia and Domon, recall the earnest, old-school intensity of 1970s sports dramas. The combination of that era's sensibilities, G Gundam's timely elements, and the fundamental Gundam ethos creates a one-of-a-kind charm unlike anything else in the franchise.

Interview Series #1
Kotaro Nakayama

As the first Gundam series set outside the Universal Century timeline, Mobile Fighter G Gundam is often considered a standout title in the franchise, complete with its own legendary behind-the-scenes stories. This interview series aims to explore and verify these accounts by speaking with those involved. Our first guest is Kotaro Nakayama, who served as a project planner and was involved from start to finish. What is the real story behind the "G Gundam legend?"

NOTE: This interview recounts perspectives from around 1994, when Mobile Fighter G Gundam was produced. The viewpoints expressed reflect the general international perceptions in Japan at that time and do not necessarily correspond with today's global circumstances or current evaluations.

BORN FROM A PROJECT REVISION AT BANDAI'S BEHEST

——This year marks the 30th anniversary of Mobile Fighter G Gundam. It was the very first Gundam series not set in the Universal Century, and it's well-known that the path to getting the project approved was far from smooth. Bringing an entirely new form of Gundam to life must have posed numerous challenges, and in retrospect, the show itself was quite a bold endeavor. As the project planner, could you describe the nature of your role at that time?

Nakayama: Back then, Sunrise (now Bandai Namco Filmworks) specialized in producing original titles, and they had a dedicated planning department. We would develop concepts there, present them to toy manufacturers like Bandai and Takara (at the time), and once we secured approval, the concept would move into actual production. Before G Gundam, I was involved in setting and production work on *Shippū! Iron Leaguer.* After finishing that project, I joined the effort on what would become G Gundam, working closely with Bandai and staying deeply involved right through to the end. Originally, the slot following *Mobile Suit V Gundam* was to be filled by a new Gundam series under the direct supervision of Bandai's Boys' Toys Division—then led by Katsushi Murakami, ensuring it would be a product aimed squarely at a young male audience. And that's precisely how G Gundam came into existence.

——Shifting the franchise, which was traditionally anchored by Gunpla, toward a product line geared more directly to young boys sounds like a major directional change.

Nakayama: Sure it was. Before that, we had been working on a new Gundam project with director Yasuhiro Imagawa, tentatively titled *Polca*

Gundam. It followed the original Gundam flow we'd had for years. But when Masahiro Ueda, who was an executive at the time (and would later become president of Sunrise), along with producer Masahiko Minami (who would later become president of BONES), and Imagawa made their pitch to Bandai, the response was, "No, that's not what we want. Do this instead." That directive laid out the core concept of G Gundam. The climate then was heavily influenced by the arcade fighting game boom triggered by *Street Fighter II,* with titles like *Samurai Shodown* and *Fatal Fury,* where fighters from around the world would duel it out. Bandai told us, "Make an anime where Gundams from various countries fight each other. Imagine a regulated street fighting competition." That's how the concept was handed to us. I had been involved since the planning stages of the rejected *Polca Gundam* project, which would have featured mechanical designs from Kunio Okawara for the main Gundam, with Yutaka Izubuchi and Hajime Katoki handling the enemy designs. At that stage, Director Imagawa had this concept, "Let's make the main Gundam speak, like KITT from the overseas TV show *Knight Rider,* and let it have a female voice." I remember Bandai pushing back, concerned that a female-voiced Gundam might hurt sales.

THE FIRST GUNDAM SERIES NOT DIRECTED BY YOSHIYUKI TOMINO

——In the lineage of Gundam productions, and setting aside works like SD Gundam, your series was the first to take place outside the Universal Century. Was the canceled Polca Gundam concept also set outside the Universal Century?

Nakayama: Yes, it was. It introduced an entirely new world. Director Imagawa studied under Yoshiyuki Tomino, but rather than following directly in his mentor's footsteps, he wanted to create something new. By the time we asked Imagawa to take on the role of director, the decision had already been made to set the story in a different world. G Gundam was the very first TV installment in the franchise not helmed by Tomino, so we essentially had to start at zero and ask ourselves, "What does Gundam even mean?" We discussed that a lot. No single conclusion emerged; and once we pushed the concept all the way to a kind of Gundam fighting game scenario, we reached a point where we half-jokingly said, "If it's white and has antennae, let's just call it a Gundam," and leave it at that (*laughs*). Tomino himself gave us some ideas and was enthusiastically sketching rough concepts. For instance, he proposed a Ninja Gundam that had a giant shuriken mounted on its back. I remember him getting really fired up, saying, "You can throw that shuriken, then jump onto it and go flying!" Ultimately, we never used that in the show, though.

——Murakami at Bandai is known for having contributed design ideas to Mobile Suit Zeta Gundam, such as concepts for the Psycho Gundam. Did he provide any sketches or images when formulating G Gundam?

Nakayama: In the beginning, it was all about articulating the concept. Later on, he handed us a sketch featuring about twenty different Gundam heads lined up in a row. After that, we sat down with Okawara and the reps at the toy division at Bandai to kick off concrete design work. When told to create "Gundams from all over the world," Okawara apparently decided early on that the hero's machine would evoke a kamishimo, a type of formal samurai attire. The very first design he brought to the table had a remarkably strong kamishimo influence.

——When the project suddenly pivoted, how did Director Imagawa react?

Nakayama: I expected that, after having his initial efforts overturned, he might quit. But instead, he said he'd do it. I imagine he was under a tremendous amount of stress. At the same time, Imagawa was a huge fan of Hong Kong cinema—films like the *Once Upon a Time in China* series—and I believe he thought to himself, "Let's bring the essence of those kung fu films into Gundam." In fact, during planning sessions, we all watched that entire series together at Imagawa's home.

————Once Upon a Time in China starred Jet Li (then known as Li Lianjie) as Wong Fei-hung, the legendary martial artist. Hong Kong movies were hugely popular back then, and if you look at G Gundam now, you can see that it borrowed countless elements from that genre. Take Master Asia (Tōhō Fuhai), for instance. He originated in wuxia novels, but for Hong Kong film fans, he calls to mind the Swordsman series starring Brigitte Lin as a cross-dressing, gender-defying character—also based on that source material. By the way, it's well-known that manga artist Kazuhiko Shimamoto contributed to the project. Producer Minami, who went to college with Shimamoto, reached out to him. Shimamoto even drew a manga depicting their university connection, so fans know this story already.

Nakayama: Yes. After Shippū! Iron Leaguer, Minami—who had studied together with Shimamoto at Osaka University of Arts—asked him to help out again by drafting initial character ideas. We set up something called the Gundam Preparation Room in a single apartment room. We had Shimamoto come there and said, “We need rough concepts for three main characters.” He basically camped out, working around the clock to deliver sketches. I remember it clearly: Shimamoto was alone in that room, but we could hear him talking. He would say things aloud as he drew, like, "And now the hair

goes all... whoosh!" That must have been part of his creative process. It left quite an impression.

KIDS SINGING THE THEME SONG: A GUNDAM UNLIKE ANY BEFORE IT

—— I've heard that Bandai's initial request included having five main characters and five Gundams, including the protagonist's. Is that correct?

Nakayama: At the time, it was becoming common practice to present multiple main characters so viewers could pick their favorites. As a result, Okawara had to redraw the main Gundam's design over and over—he must have revised the Shining Gundam about ten times.

—— How did you decide on the visual themes for each country's Gundam?

Nakayama: Those concepts came from Okawara himself, drawing inspiration from each of the nations in question. He's the one person capable of pushing Gundam designs that far without losing their essence. It really was a job only he could handle.

—— Some designs, like the Nether Gundam, really went beyond the usual boundaries. How did you settle on each of those Gundams?

Nakayama: We started with a kind of playful approach: "Let's go all-in on these stereotypical images of other countries." But we ended up making them so direct that before the show aired, we got a bit nervous, wondering if people from those places might be offended (laughs). Still, if we watered them down, the unique characteristics of each Gundam would be lost. So in the end, we decided to just go with it as is.

POPULARITY IGNITED BY MASTER ASIA'S ARRIVAL

—— It's well known that in the early stages, the show struggled with low ratings and heavy criticism.

Nakayama: For about the first three months, it was what you might today call a total firestorm. The Comic BomBom (published by Kodansha) manga tie-in was landing dead last in their popularity polls. TV ratings were dismal. The merchandise hardly sold at all. It performed even worse than *Mobile Suit V Gundam,* which had been considered a tough sell, and we found ourselves in a real crisis. On top of that, there were purist Gundam fans back then who sent razor blades through the mail after each broadcast, accompanied by

messages like, "How dare you do this to my Gundam." We were receiving that kind of pushback every single week.

In the midst of all this, Producer Minami told me something along the lines of, "Kotaro, you're not just going to wash your hands of this after planning it. I'm holding you accountable until the end." I think that was his reasoning when he decided to list my name under 'Planning' in the end credits (*laughs*). From that point forward, the planning staff credit became standard. You could say this set the precedent. This uphill battle went on for about three months, right up until Master Asia's appearance. Until then, it really was dire. But once Master Asia showed up, everything turned around. I think it also took about three months for younger viewers—both lower and upper elementary school kids—to discover the show and get behind it. I have a vivid memory of this: at one of the hobby shows in Shizuoka or a toy show in Tokyo, Bandai's booth was looping the G Gundam opening song, and as I watched, ordinary kids passing by started singing along with it.

Katsumi Kawaguchi (known as Meijin Kawaguchi) from Bandai's Hobby Division at the time said, "I've never seen anything like this in a Gundam show before." Even though the series itself was still far from a major hit, I was a bit pleased to see it become something so different from previous Gundam installments.

—— After that, it seems older fans followed the kids' lead and came on board as well.

Nakayama: Master Asia's character was absolutely pivotal. Until he showed up, no one could really grasp what this Gundam series was aiming for. The first episode's direction was handled by Goro Taniguchi, who would later direct the Code Geass series. I remember the two of us talking, saying things like, "Is this even entertaining? Are we doing the right thing here?"

—— Once Master Asia appeared, I remember anime magazines saw a huge increase in positive reader feedback. Was this planned?

Nakayama: Not at all. Master Asia, who pilots the Master Gundam, is the antagonist to Domon, but let's face it, he's not exactly a young handsome rival. Bandai was strongly opposed to that. They wanted a handsome rival character, maybe one wearing a mask (laughs). We held firm and allowed Director Imagawa's vision of an older male rival to stand. So it was a huge relief when he caught on and helped the show's popularity. Imagawa really seemed more invested in Master Asia than in Domon. But whether the market would embrace that dynamic was another matter entirely.

—— It also felt like fans of Hong Kong cinema and wuxia novels gave the show a very positive reception.

Nakayama: Master Asia wasn't like any typical “master” character you'd find in Hong Kong kung fu entertainment. The mentor-student relationship between Master Asia and Domon might also be an echo of the relationship between Director Tomino and Director Imagawa. When Master Asia repeatedly calls Domon "foolish pupil", I cannot help feeling that those words carry that kind of subtext.

—— Speaking of Domon, he was straightforward in a way that broke the mold of traditional Gundam protagonists.

Nakayama: The plan was always for this to be about martial arts and to aim it at a younger audience. Initially, Domon's age was set at sixteen. We wanted him to be closer in age to elementary and middle school viewers. But since he fights with his bare hands, the TV network requested that he be depicted as an adult, and so he became twenty. We wanted him passionate and troubled, and the end result was basically "an adult who acts like a reckless kid" (*laughs*).

—— How was the heroine, Rain, conceived?

Nakayama: Rain represents what Imagawa envisioned for a female character at that time. She's the type of woman who follows a few steps behind, loyal and pure-hearted, almost old-fashioned in her sincerity. In any case, G Gundam was very much Imagawa's film. It felt close to a personal work for him.

WHAT ON EARTH IS GERMAN NINJUTSU?! THE STAFF FINALLY LET LOOSE

——In the end, G Gundam became a hugely influential entry in the Gundam franchise.

Nakayama: From my perspective, back then I thought, “This might be the end of Gundam altogether.” But once Master Asia and then Schwarz Bruder appeared, everyone just started embracing the absurdity. We were all like, “German Ninjutsu… what even is that?! (laughs)

——I think the audience also loosened up at that point. How was the title decided?

Nakayama: With the sudden shift in direction and re-planning, we knew that Sunrise preferred series titles that included strong, voiced consonants.

So we simply figured, “We need something punchy—maybe a Z or a V?” In the end, “G” stood out. That’s how we got G Gundam. The reason Domon starts out piloting the Shining Gundam and not a “G Gundam” is because we came up with the series title and the mecha designations separately. After settling on G Gundam for the title, we decided to introduce a unit named “God Gundam.” The unit names weren’t what inspired the title; the title came first.

——And where did “Mobile Fighter” (Kidō Butōden) come from?

Nakayama: Since it wasn’t set in the Universal Century, we decided not to use “Mobile Suit” anymore. But since it was still Gundam, I felt we had to keep “Mobile” in the name. The rest, (lit.) “Fighter’s Legend,” was a straightforward choice. We wanted something that would clearly signal to children that “this is about martial arts.” Just from the title alone, we wanted them to get the idea immediately.

——The show also featured distinctive technique names and stylized kanji for dialogue.

Nakayama: Many of those came straight from Director Imagawa himself. The Sekiha Love-Love Tenkyoken was one such example. At the time, everyone was thinking, “Love-Love? What’s that supposed to mean?” Then Imagawa said, “If you’re so annoyed, then come up with something even more striking than this!” Of course, no one could (*laughs*).

COMMITTED TO THE MAX, GOING ALL OUT

——G Gundam was born as a truly unconventional entry in the series, but looking at it now, its fictional setting seems to resonate with the real world we live in today. Whether it’s about war or the environment, the show raises a host of issues that feel quintessentially Gundam.

Nakayama: When we were drafting the proposal, there was a catchphrase that went, “Gundam vs. Gundam. The Earth is your ring—enter the Gundam Fight.” At that time, ecology was becoming a topic of conversation, and I thought, “If we don’t say something socially relevant, it won’t look cool.” So, on my own initiative, I wrote “ecology” into the project plan. Imagawa took that idea seriously and expanded upon it, which led to the creation of the Devil Gundam. And from that point onward, the story evolved into this theme of eliminating humanity.

——The Gundam Fight as a kind of proxy war feels like an abstraction of how Gundam has always engaged with the theme of warfare.

Nakayama: I think that's close to the mark. When we asked ourselves "What exactly is Gundam?" we knew it was inherently about war. But G Gundam does not depict a conventional war. Instead, we thought, "Okay, it's not a direct war, but what if there's such a thing as a proxy war?" That's how we approached it.

——By doing that, it feels like the essence of Gundam's worldview and imagery was preserved. It's not as if we just turned it into martial arts or a sports tool overnight. You can tell a lot of serious thought went into how Gundam's principles were carried over into this new framework.

Nakayama: People often say G Gundam was full of ridiculous elements, but we were anything but frivolous about it. We were deadly serious—unbelievably earnest. If you don't treat it seriously, viewers will see right through you. The idea was to go all-in, to commit wholeheartedly. I believe that sense of sincerity is something children picked up on.

Interview Series #2

Yoshitaka Kawaguchi & Keiichi Matsumura

How did they define that signature G Gundam style despite a crushing production schedule?

When G Gundam suddenly had to shift gears mid-planning, it evolved into a distinctive four-cour series—one unlike any other. In this conversation, we hear directly from Yoshitaka Kawaguchi, who managed setting production, and Keiichi Matsumura, who served as a production desk manager. They recount what it was like on the ground during that frantic process, offering an unvarnished look at the realities of the time.

NOTE: This interview recounts perspectives from around 1994, when Mobile Fighter G Gundam was produced. The viewpoints expressed reflect the general international perceptions in Japan at that time and do not necessarily correspond with today's global circumstances or current evaluations.

CONFRONTING THE LAST-MINUTE PROJECT OVERHAUL AND THE CHALLENGES OF A FOUR-COUR ANIME

——There's a notion that G Gundam resonated strongly with younger viewers. Was targeting a younger demographic part of the original plan?

Nakayama: We certainly had a sense of the audience we were aiming at, given our evening slot on TV Asahi. That said, this became clearer after G Gundam had ended. I remember Mr. Ueda (Masao) saying, "Next time, let's target a slightly older demographic." I think the reason was that lowering the core Gundam age bracket too far risked overlapping with the SD Gundam audience. The basic concept for that time slot was, "Gundam should be what you watch after you've graduated from SD Gundam."

——So did G Gundam consciously adjust its target age group?

Kawaguchi: I never actually saw the original project proposal before it got scrapped. At the start, Director Yasuhiro Imagawa's idea, tentatively called "Polca Gundam," was apparently set on Mars—a relatively earnest and conventional Gundam narrative. When Mr. Ueda took this concept over to Bandai, Murakami (Katsushi) looked at him and said, "Ueda, from here on out, it's all about martial arts." Ueda never got the chance to show him "Polca Gundam." He came back empty-handed. I recall Nakayama (Kotaro) saying that the entire concept had to be reworked from the ground up.

——At what point did you both join the G Gundam project?

Kawaguchi: Well, throughout '93 I was still busy wrapping up tasks on Mobile Suit V Gundam, and I'd been told, "Next up, you're on G Gundam." To be honest, I wasn't thrilled about it. Handling Gundam setting production for two years straight is tough, and I still had more than a cour's worth of V Gundam duties to finish. The first five Gundam designs for G Gundam were actually assigned by Nakayama to Kunio Okawara. Once the new year started, I finally joined the G Gundam team. That's roughly how it happened.

Matsumura: Jumping into setting production midstream must have been pretty tough.

Kawaguchi: Right, initially Nakayama was running the show, and then I stepped in partway to take over his role.

Matsumura: Before G Gundam, I'd been working on *Shippū! Iron Leaguer.* I think I joined G Gundam around the time we had a finalized storyboard for the first episode and were a fair way into initial animation. Back then, the standard practice was to roll out a brand-new series every April. Transitioning smoothly into next year's new show always proved challenging.

——Before this, it seemed the Sunrise Planning Office would hand down a fully developed proposal to the production floor. Did the approach start changing around this time?

Kawaguchi: Yes, you could say that. At the time, Ueda was handling the negotiations with the network and sponsors, Minami (Masahiko) was serving as producer, and Nakayama took charge of the entire technical side, while Director Imagawa was working out the creative framework. As I heard it, both Director Imagawa and Minami had been preparing something completely different at first, only to be suddenly reassigned to Gundam at top speed.

——A complete project overhaul at that stage sounds terrifying.

Kawaguchi: Our schedule was extremely tight. Later on, *New Mobile Report Gundam Wing* would go on to break all kinds of records (*laughs*). Over in the same studio, I believe *City Hunter* also kicked off under strict conditions, but at least that one had a manga source. We, on the other hand, were building Gundam from scratch. Creating new content out of thin air for such a major series—now that was rough.

——The first three episodes of G Gundam were broadcast as specials, right?

Kawaguchi: Yes, that's what happened. By the end of '93, Director Imagawa was refining the G Gundam concept and commissioning scripts. The first scripts probably came in around early January. From there, we'd revise scripts while simultaneously moving into storyboarding. Partway through that process, the storyboard schedule completely fell apart. It became clear we couldn't possibly be ready by April. So we had to slot in three special episodes instead. Originally, they wanted to try something variety show–style, but the network pushed back. "This is an anime time slot; make it feel like an anime." That's why we ended up with a production documentary approach for those specials.

AN ERA WHEN ELITE ANIMATORS BROUGHT MECHANICAL SCENES TO LIFE, EPISODE BY EPISODE

——How did you refine the show's content along the way?

Kawaguchi: It was similar to how most original series were made back then—"figuring it out as we went." Even so, with G Gundam, it took until after the first cour before the show really found its defining personality. At the start, during that initial cour, we were aiming for something with a hardboiled feel. But over time, Director Imagawa's own strengths—his trademark style—started emerging more and more.

——It feels like the show really picked up momentum starting with the second cour.

Kawaguchi: I remember that, in the first cour, we were still trying to keep things straight-laced, so we worked very carefully on all the different settings in each of the places Domon visited. Director Imagawa would give instructions like, "Let's capture the feel of this particular movie," and we would borrow his LaserDiscs or rent videos to create references. We tried using library photos of overseas landscapes, but those never helped much.

——Shifting locations every episode must have made setting design pretty tough.

Kawaguchi: During that first cour, I actually asked, "Could we please stop changing locations every single episode?" That request led to setting the second cour in the Guiana Highlands. Then, in the third cour, the action moves to Neo Hong Kong. From the start, there was always a plan that, by the third cour, we'd anchor the story in a single locale. Although, initially, I do not believe it was going to be Neo Hong Kong.

——Given Director Imagawa's own artistic sensibilities, Neo Hong Kong seems like a natural choice.

Kawaguchi: Actually, at first Producer Minami had told Director Imagawa, "No Hong Kong references." Since Imagawa's past works had already featured Hong Kong elements, Minami wanted to avoid repetition. But by the time the character Master Asia (Tōhō Fuhai) entered the scene, they decided, "All right, let's just allow it." I think part of Minami's motivation was to prevent the series from veering too far into pure comedy, which can happen when Imagawa's flair runs unchecked.

——Looking back, having five Gundams fighting from the beginning seems quite ambitious.

Kawaguchi: I think there was a clear intent to feature the main five Gundams right away, to showcase the lead products early on. After all, the release schedules for model kits and toys were already set. Director Imagawa once said, "To advance the storyline, we need to have Domon take on each of those five one by one, or we cannot move forward."

——The mechanical animation was extraordinary. There were some astonishing pieces of work in there.

Matsumura: The G Gundam studio was originally the team behind *Mobile Suit Gundam 0083: Stardust Memory.* It included remarkable talents such as Hirotoshi Sano—top-tier mecha animators were all on hand. We brought in about three other animation studios to form a solid production base.

We organized a rotating system where each unit handled every fifth episode or so. In the credits, you might recall seeing a blank line followed by a few names—those people were the key animators stationed right in the studio. Even so, compared to today, it was a remarkably small-scale setup for a yearlong TV series. It was all about careful planning and making the most of a small, elite team.

Kawaguchi: We did have to strategize here and there. Toward the climax, the Devil Gundam's lower half merges with the colony. Drawing all of that by hand was going to be brutal, so we decided to obscure the lower half with clouds and handle it more like a background illustration.

Matsumura: Looking back now, a design like the Devil Gundam seems made for CG. But we pulled it off entirely through hand-drawn animation.

——In the previous series, V Gundam, there was a conscious attempt to streamline animation wherever possible. How about G Gundam?

Kawaguchi: There was definitely a kind of rebound effect after V Gundam. Removing shadows and details to save effort made the visuals look less appealing. I know it was a practical measure given the production climate at the time, but I personally felt complicated about it. I think our staff on G Gundam wanted to draw things in a way that looked truly "cool." It was a reaction against the compromises made on V Gundam.

——It feels like you managed to carry the series through all four cours without any breakdowns in production.

Kawaguchi: Unlike the digital era of today, we were still painting cels by hand, physically shooting them on camera, and dealing with actual film. If we failed to meet the photography and processing schedules, the show could not be completed on time.

Matsumura: In the end, we had a very real, hard deadline for finishing the animation. With no digital data transfers back then, we needed time just to physically move materials around. On top of that, for a yearlong series, we were always mindful of "pacing ourselves" over the long haul. Ironically, nowadays, with many series limited to just one cour, creators must give everything they have in a short span—so that brings its own enormous challenges.

BOLD, UNCONVENTIONAL MECHA DESIGNS THAT STILL LEAVE AN IMPRESSION

——I think one factor behind the show's success is how the mecha designs incorporate recognizable cultural elements from each region in a very accessible way.

Kawaguchi: Actually, that wasn't the plan from the start. Things began changing around the time we introduced Tequila Gundam. In the early days, Okawara was delivering serious designs in line with our direction, but when Director Imagawa requested "please add cacti to the shoulders" for Tequila Gundam... that's when humorous elements gradually started creeping in.

——It's true that beyond the cactus motif, Tequila Gundam itself is fairly standard in design.

Kawaguchi: Director Imagawa really let loose after that. We had commissioned four units including Mermaid Gundam and Mandala Gundam as a batch, but these were initially serious designs too. I brought the design rough sketches to the director during a voice recording session. Mandala Gundam was originally conceived with a monk-like image, but Director Imagawa started sketching a Gundam that looked like a temple bell with arms

and legs attached. Mermaid Gundam was initially meant to look like a fishman, but he drew a rough sketch of a fish with limbs and a Gundam face peeking out of its mouth. That's about the time we knew exactly what kind of mecha style G Gundam would embrace.

——In the end, we even saw Gundams themed like flounders and crabs, however briefly.

Kawaguchi: Those were just quick cameos, so I literally doodled them, showed them to Imagawa for approval, and that was it. We weren't even planning to keep their official designs on record, but for some reason, the materials department decided to archive them. Once we started making these designs, we found ourselves genuinely enjoying it. Personally, I was a fan of Tatsunoko Production's mechanical designs—like those in the Time Bokan series and Yatterman. Okawara originally came from Tatsunoko, and Director Imagawa had also been associated with Tatsunoko animation research circles, so we naturally drifted toward that fun, playful spirit.

——Kimitoshi Yamane also ended up designing some more offbeat Gundams, right?

Kawaguchi: If I recall correctly, this was Yamane's first job at Sunrise. So I imagine he might have been experimenting and feeling his way through it. We were all figuring out where the line was.

——Speaking of shocking designs, the Nobel Gundam also made quite an impact.

Kawaguchi: Early on in development, before the series really took shape, we'd commissioned Hajime Katoki to design what we called the "Four Heavenly Kings" Gundams. The results he delivered were far more out-there than expected. I remember thinking, "Katoki can really push the boundaries when he wants to." That led us to ask him to design Nobel Gundam, but that one proved challenging.

——The motif suggests it might have been influenced by a certain extremely popular girls' show of the time.

Kawaguchi: Katoki's initial rough sketch looked basically like a skinnier RX-178 Gundam. It was Director Imagawa who said, "Let's give it hair that stands straight up when the Berserker System kicks in," scribbling notes to that effect. With that idea in place, Katoki decided, "Well, if we're going that far, let's really go for it," and came back with a fully committed, over-the-top design.

A WORK-IN-PROGRESS PRODUCTION STYLE, PERFECTED ON THE FLY

——What was Director Imagawa's presence like in the studio at that time?

Kawaguchi: Nowadays, younger directors rarely do this, but Director Imagawa had a more old-school approach. He'd actually read the lines out loud and time them while checking storyboards. So whenever he was reviewing storyboards in the studio, it was always lively.

——Really? (laughs)

Kawaguchi: He and our writer, Hiroaki Kitajima, would often pretend they were on *Star Trek.* Kitajima was a good sport, responding with "Yes, Captain!" and all that. Imagawa even asked me, "Kawaguchi, why don't you join in?" but I refused (*laughs*). He said, "I'll make you Admiral!" and I said, "Well, that's higher rank than Captain, are you sure?" "No, that won't work," he replied (*laughs*). Even though the schedule was brutal back then, I think we still managed to have our fun.

——How would you describe the impression made by Imagawa's storyboards?

Kawaguchi: Rather than being meticulously detailed, Imagawa's storyboards were all about energy and impact. There'd be one big, striking image that really pulls you in, and the surrounding cuts would help support that moment. Each scene had a clear sense of rhythm and emphasis, so we didn't have to stress too much about the tiny details. You know how in the old *Kamen Rider* series, they'd be fighting in the city, then jump, and suddenly they're battling in a quarry? That kind of logic jump was totally fine for Imagawa's shot design.

On V Gundam, we worried a lot about scale—like how small mobile suits looked relative to trees. But on G Gundam, the directive was "just make it look cool." We ignored the Gundam's official height. It wasn't about good or bad; it was that the concept for this series was different. The storyboards conveyed what we wanted to do simply and clearly, making them genuinely fun to watch.

Matsumura: The scenes where the character's face appears inside the Gundam's helmet—no serious Gundam show would attempt that. But I absolutely loved it.

——I've heard that many elements were finalized at the storyboard stage.

Kawaguchi: Given the schedule constraints, we hardly had any luxury in the script phase. We ended up tweaking and adding details at the storyboard stage. The director would go through the boards, scribbling tiny corrections and notes in the margins as he went, but he never showed anyone those notes (laughs).

——I've been told that the Shining Finger move was also decided right at the last minute.

Kawaguchi: Yes, it was decided during the final storyboard check. We quickly asked Yamane to create a setting sketch for it. We couldn't alter the original design too drastically, so we ended up just making the fingers extend slightly. For the God Gundam's finishing move, we were able to incorporate that concept right from the design phase.

——I get the impression that the basic philosophy was "decide as you go."

Kawaguchi: I don't know if it was "basic philosophy," but most of the anime I've worked on were done that way. With an original series, there's no source material, so while we had an overarching flow in mind, the finer details weren't set. As we filled in those details, even the story's structure would shift slightly. That was just how it went.

——Even so, the ending was stunningly beautiful. Sunrise productions of that era were full-year series, yet they came together very neatly.

Kawaguchi: That probably comes down to professional instinct. I think Director Imagawa, as well as other directors of that era, were aware of how far they could push things and still bring it all together in the end.

——I've heard a variety of stories about the "Sekiha Love-Love Tenkyoken."

Kawaguchi: Yes, even at the stage of production meetings for the animation, I heard people debating whether they should really go through with it. They were fine with Domon and Rain finishing the story by unleashing a combined ultimate technique, but the "Love-Love" part of the name rubbed some people the wrong way. Everyone had their line they wouldn't cross, and they differed from person to person, which was fitting for a show that never took itself too seriously.

——Looking back now, you could think that it shows how far Domon had come, that he was finally able to say something like that.

Kawaguchi: True. There was a sense that putting on airs just for the finale wouldn't have been appropriate anyway. It was better to stay true to what the show had been all along.

A 4-COUR FORMAT CREATED ROOM FOR EXPERIMENTATION

——Ultimately, the show became a huge success and now it's celebrating its 30th anniversary.

Kawaguchi: I wonder if we might have gone a bit over budget (*laughs*). Today, anime production costs are sky-high, but back then, even for Gundam, the production budget was just about the same as any average late-afternoon kids' toy-centered show.

——Producing Gundam sounds extremely grueling, both physically and mentally.

Kawaguchi: Absolutely. Just the fact that it's Gundam makes it tough. It's not something you can just churn out each year with a simple palette swap. If you cranked out "martial arts Gundam" every single year after G Gundam hit big, the concept would just degrade over time, wouldn't it? Everyone on the team got into this industry because we love Gundam. Deep down, the thought is always, "If we're going to do this, let's make it genuinely interesting." Simply repeating "yeah, do it like last year" doesn't justify making a new Gundam. That's the struggle. It was so overwhelming at the time that we couldn't help feeling negative. But looking at newer Gundam entries, it feels like the old resentments have finally been laid to rest (*laughs*).

——Still, the diversity in style that emerged back then feels like something unique to that era.

Kawaguchi: With a year-long series, you had ample room to try different things within the show itself. These days, when most anime run for just one cour, there's zero tolerance for a single failed episode, and that's rough. Back then, we could hand an episode off to an assistant director and say, "Why don't you give this one a try?" That sort of training ground is scarce nowadays. There are fewer opportunities for up-and-coming directors, or those aspiring to direct, to take on real challenges.

——How did the audience react at the time?

Matsumura: From the production side, I don't recall the resistance we'd worried about. Back then, we already had SD Gundam and non-Universal Century Gundam variations, so it really felt like an era where the franchise was starting to branch out in all sorts of directions. To me, G Gundam felt like a brand-new, fourth path for the franchise.

Kawaguchi: That said, I'm sure there was some perception that we'd taken a big leap. I remember seeing the initial project notes for V Gundam and thinking, "Oh, so we're doing another Gundam in the usual vein." I suspect Director Tomino feared that straying from the beaten path might alienate fans—and, in turn, cause the staff to walk away. That might be why he was careful about introducing the sponsor's requested "motorcycle battleship" idea, rolling it out step by step. After all that, G Gundam probably felt like we flung the doors wide open. At the end of the first episode, there's that line, "Another lousy year is about to start." Director Imagawa used to say, "That's how I feel right now." Looking back, it truly was a brutal year.

Interview Series #3
Hirofumi Kishiyama

A revolutionary concept to save a struggling line of realistic-scale model kits

Within the groundbreaking production of G Gundam, the development of its featured Gundam model kits—the cornerstone of the product lineup—proved to be a series of trials in itself. At the time, Hirofumi Kishiyama worked in the Bandai Hobby Division, playing a key role in planning these Gunpla. How did he approach the product development for G Gundam? We take a look behind the scenes.

FROM INITIAL REJECTION TO A MASSIVE SUCCESS

——It's widely accepted that G Gundam had a significant impact on the evolution of gunpla. What were your impressions at the time?

Kishiyama: To set the scene, the previous series, Mobile Suit Victory Gundam, was a return to a televised Gundam show after a considerable hiatus, so we at the Hobby Division invested heavily in it and released a wide range of products. But if I am being honest, the outcome didn't meet our expectations. Initially, the next project was set to be Polca Gundam—a provisional title for a more realistic storyline about humanity migrating to Mars. But then, abruptly and by top-level decision, the entire direction changed: "We'll do a martial arts-themed Gundam." Suddenly, we were hearing that Gundams from around the world would face off, and rough design sketches were coming down to us straight from the top at Bandai.

——So, from the concept stage to preliminary designs, it sounds like Bandai was in the driver's seat.

Kishiyama: In fact, I personally went to ask Kunio Okawara to finalize the designs. We had these rough concepts—like Shining Gundam, for example, which was always intended to evoke a kabuki performer—and I recall asking him, "Please present it in a way that puts everyone at ease." I wanted to ensure the final look wouldn't stray too far from what Gundam fans considered familiar and reassuring.

——"A form everyone could be comfortable with" suggests an attempt to keep it aligned with the established image of Gundam. How did those around you react?

Kishiyama: Most people reacted as if it were unthinkable. Now, I'm not saying G Gundam was some reckless prank, but around that time we'd also just had the OVA *Mobile Suit Gundam 0083: Stardust Memory,* which was more traditionally serious. Compared to that, many felt G Gundam wasn't being "serious" in the same sense.

Meanwhile, from a product perspective, the top sellers in those days were really the BB Senshi kits—those super-deformed Gundam models. People like me and Kawaguchi were managing the taller, more realistic-scale Gundams, but their sales always struggled. Realistic kits were not the mainstream; that was the hard truth of that era.

——The series ultimately became a hit, but when did you start to sense that people's attitudes were changing?

Kishiyama: Things started to shift about a quarter of the way in, once Master Asia showed up. I vividly recall a particular hobby show. Typically, older fans flock to the "realistic Gundam" sections, while the BB Senshi sections attract younger kids—there's usually a very clear segmentation. But at the G Gundam booth, we had elementary school kids right there in front of the displays. As the opening played on loop, they were all singing along.

Their eyes were sparkling. I had never witnessed anything like it. And for the longtime fans, after Master Asia's appearance, their initial disgust gradually began to fade. It was a very harsh period for us before that, so those children's voices—singing in unison—truly saved us.

——It sounds like you were under that much pressure.

Kishiyama: I had mentally prepared myself for the possibility that "Gundam might end with my generation." My predecessor, "Instructor Komiyama" (Yoshikazu Komiyama), used to say, "I want to hand over Gundam to you as soon as possible." Why? Because nobody wanted to be the one holding the baton when Gundam's legacy ended. If Gundam ended under your watch, it would be a bitter pill. That was always in the back of my mind, so when G Gundam gained acceptance, I was genuinely overjoyed.

——Why do you think G Gundam resonated so much with younger viewers?

Kishiyama: I believe the influence of BB Senshi was significant. While BB Senshi kits have these cute proportions, they still capture a certain coolness and clever mechanical gimmicks. Arms that stretch, weapons that fly—those qualities that made BB Senshi entertaining were unfolding right on screen in G Gundam. That's likely what appealed to the younger audience. Even setting aside the Gundam name, the show itself offered intrinsic excitement.

I remember how things were at Bandai's Shizuoka factory at the time. It was an older plant, and there was a small cafeteria with a TV. Every Friday at airtime, the entire floor would gather in front of that TV to watch the latest

episode. It was that communal experience, that weekly anticipation, which really stays with me.

INGENIOUS PRODUCT CONCEPTS UNVEILED BY A COMPLETE CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE

——How did you approach the product lineup under those circumstances?

Kishiyama: Generally, our pattern would be something like: if we offered around 10 kits at 1/144 scale, then we'd produce around 3 or 4 at 1/100 scale, and 1 or 2 at 1/60 scale. Given the lineup of mobile fighters in G Gundam, it naturally centered on the main five protagonists and their rivals.

——That stands in stark contrast to V Gundam, which had an extremely large number of products.

Kishiyama: As I mentioned during the V Gundam interview (in the 2023 Autumn issue), we went all-in for that title because it was the first televised Gundam in quite a while. In response to that experience, we wanted to be more discerning this time. So, yes, we deliberately narrowed things down for G Gundam.

——Did your approach as a product developer differ clearly from what you did with V Gundam?

Kishiyama: With V Gundam, our fundamental stance was "Make these Gundams look realistic." We aimed for sleek, show-accurate proportions. We added display stands and transparent parts, which were quite luxurious for the time. Yet the response back then was, "It looks too thin, and 500 yen seems expensive for what you get." In light of that, for G Gundam we aligned with Okawara's designs and opted for a more robust, muscular silhouette. Even at 1/144 scale, they made a strong impression and were well-received internally. Because mobile fighters in G Gundam generally don't carry the typical weapons or shields, we could allocate that plastic volume into making the body itself feel more substantial.

——The sturdier proportions seem to complement a hand-to-hand combat series. But as it was the first Gundam centered on martial arts, and the first set outside the Universal Century timeline, I'm guessing you faced a lot of unexpected challenges.

Kishiyama: Almost everything about it was new territory. For example, I was told the main character's Shining Gundam used a special move called the Shining Finger, basically like an iron claw technique. At the time, our Gunpla

hand structure was built so the thumb stayed fixed, the index finger moved independently, and the remaining three fingers moved as a single unit—just enough to hold a gun. We thought, "Sure, we can replicate this move the same way." But when I finally saw it on air, I realized, "This is far more dramatic than we expected."

By the time we got to the 1/60 God Gundam, we applied that lesson. We made all five fingers individually poseable so we could faithfully recreate the God Finger technique. What I learned from G Gundam was that we need to connect with the production staff on a more intuitive, heartfelt level.

——So, your relationship with the studio evolved as well?

Kishiyama: During V Gundam, my colleague Kawaguchi handled most of our Tokyo contacts, so I didn't interact with the studio directly. With G Gundam, however, I was involved in discussions about designs like the Master Gundam. I realized it would be better to hear their ideas firsthand. That's what prompted me to start visiting the studio frequently. I got to know Director Imagawa quite well and even took to calling him "Captain."

For instance, with the 1/60 God Gundam, I pitched the idea: "When the calf cover opens, the nozzle inside should extend mechanically," a neat gimmick I wanted to include. A few weeks later, that very gimmick appeared in a close-up shot on the show. Moments like that made me feel we were truly working in sync with the production team.

We actually brought a rough concept sketch for the God Gundam to the studio, saying, "We'd like to switch the main mobile suit over to this design." Fans will know this well—the idea of the wings on its back was to have it transform into a "God Bird" mode as a finishing move. But Director Imagawa said, "That's not really martial arts..." and so we had to let go of that concept.

——It's clear that the design sensibilities shifted. Seeing how that later influenced Gundam Wing makes perfect sense in retrospect.

Kishiyama: Speaking of working closely with the studio, the Rising Gundam was another good example. After Domon switched to the God Gundam, the Shining Gundam was essentially left on the sidelines. I asked if we could do something to give the Shining Gundam another variation, and the studio proposed what would become the Rising Gundam. Although it was essentially a reworked version, it turned out to be very well-received.

——It seems that the development team's enthusiasm resonated with the production side as well.

Kishiyama: In the end, people respond to genuine passion. Of course, sometimes enthusiasm may miss the mark, but if you never express it, you'll never get your point across. There are limits to what can be communicated in writing or emails, especially with delicate subjects. That's why I decided to visit the studio in person as often as I could. I'm grateful for that effort, as I still have a good relationship with Director Imagawa even now.

TAKING ON CHALLENGES WITH LIMITED PRODUCT LINEUP

——Master Asia and the Master Gundam strike me as pivotal elements that triggered a surge in popularity. Given they were released both in 1/144 and 1/100 scale, would you say the Hobby Division was particularly keen to promote them?

Kishiyama: Yes, I certainly sensed they'd be a hit. The 1/144 Master Gundam, in particular, still stands out in my memory. These days, having wings on the back that fold around the body like a cape feels perfectly natural. But back then, without 3D CAD systems to check for parts interference, it was exceedingly difficult. Even the ace engineer who would later tackle projects like the Master Grade Zeta Gundam struggled with it. Still, the production team was determined to make it happen. In an unusual approach, we built a prototype model first, confirmed it worked in three-dimensional space, and then drafted the final plans from that prototype. That's how we pulled it off.

——The Devil Gundam's release also seemed significant.

Kishiyama: It had become standard practice not to commercialize final bosses in Gundam series. Late in a series, the staff is already shifting gears to the next project. Factor in the timing, and the retail window for a series' endgame mobile suit becomes very short. Unlike today, when you can continue releasing products after a show's finale, we lived by a strict one-year product cycle back then. But I saw the Devil Gundam as worth the risk, a chance to break that cycle and challenge the old assumptions.

In fact, we planned a 1/100 Devil Gundam as well. To differentiate it from the 1/144 version, we wanted a mechanism where the area behind its shoulders transformed into claws. Unfortunately, another project that required immediate attention came up, and we had to halt development. Our budget for the year was fixed, forcing us to abandon the 1/100 Devil Gundam idea altogether.

——It feels like the "grade-up" part sets emerged in step with the show's rising success.

Kishiyama: As G Gundam picked up steam midway through its run, voices inside our division suggested we give it an extra push. That's where Professor Okuda and Instructor Hasegawa, the team behind BB Senshi, came in to handle these upgrade part sets. They approached it with the same inventive spirit they brought to BB Senshi. At the time, neither I nor Kawaguchi had that kind of mindset—we were in charge of the "real-type" kits, which never really held much favor. We always felt somewhat sidelined and not fully trusted. At last, with G Gundam, it felt like we were stepping into the light.

——G Gundam marks its 30th anniversary in 2024, and it seems that new product developments have become more active lately.

Kishiyama: Seeing today's younger planning staff present their concepts, I admit there's a part of me, as an older hand, that wants to add my own touch. For Gundams in the show that never had a signature finishing move, I wondered, "Would fans be excited if we introduced new special techniques?" I reached out to Director Imagawa, and before long he'd come up with a range of new finishing attacks. We actually adopted some of his original gimmicks into the HG(FC) series.

For example, the Gundam Rose initially just launched its Rose Bits, but now we've enabled the shoulder shields to detach, allowing them to "dance" in midair. For the Gundam Maxter, on top of its boxer mode, we've implemented a feature where it can jettison even more armor. As for the Dragon Gundam, we included a mechanism to bring the Shin Ryusei Kochoken technique to life. All of these are based on Director Imagawa's new ideas, giving fans a chance to imagine these Gundams in action like never before. Whether these become official elements is still unclear, but I'm excited about the possibilities they open up going forward.

——With all this happening around the 30th anniversary, I'm hoping we might also see some of the other global Gundams from the story brought into the product lineup.

Kishiyama: I think there's genuine potential for new additions, so please stay tuned.

The following are the captions for the snapshots of the various Gunpla showcased in the article.

[1/144 SCALE]

RISING GUNDAM (On Sale April 1994 at 500yen + tax)
DEVIL GUNDAM (On Sale January 1995 at 1,000yen + tax)

At the standard 1/144 scale—considered the staple of Gunpla—key mobile

fighters like the main five, plus the God Gundam, Master Gundam, and Rising Gundam were all brought to market. Among them, the Devil Gundam replicated its transformation into a "Gundam Head." Still, with the entire lineup totaling just eleven releases (excluding gold-plated "Hyper Mode" variants), it leaves a somewhat modest overall impression.

[1/100 SCALE (HG)]

SHINING GUNDAM (On Sale April 1994 at 1500yen + tax)
DRAGON GUNDAM (On Sale July 1994 at 1,500yen + tax)

In what you might call the mid-price range, we have the 1/100 scale series. Until the mid-'90s, it was common practice to simply add the "HG" brand label to these larger-scale kits. Although only six were produced, nearly all their in-show gimmicks were faithfully reproduced. Interestingly, the Master Gundam released in August '94 featured a foldable cape that could later be attached to the MG version released years down the line—a playful twist from the manufacturer that astonished fans at the time.

[1/60 SCALE]

G GUNDAM (On Sale October 1994 at 3,000yen + tax)

These so-called "large-format" kits, with their plating finishes and light-up features, are distinguished by a premium feel. Both the Shining Gundam and God Gundam were produced in this category. However, the Rising Gundam—which in the show was essentially a modified version of the Shining Gundam—never received a product release here.

[MASTER GRADE]

GUNDAM SPIEGEL (On Sale August 2002 at 2,500yen + tax)

Launched in July '95, this premium series built at 1/100 scale was a high-end line that offered a richer combination of volume and mechanical gimmicks (it even encompassed titles beyond the Gundam franchise). G Gundam's MG series, starting with the God Gundam in November '01, the introduction of ABS action frames enabled faithful recreations of the show's iconic poses. Beyond crowd favorites like the God Gundam and Master Gundam, even the Gundam Spiegel was released, giving collectors a wider range of options.

[HGFC (HIGH GRADE FUTURE CENTURY)]

MASTER GUNDAM & FUUNSAIKI (On Sale August 2011 at 2,600yen + tax)

Debuting in May '99, this brand quickly became the core of the Gunpla lineup. While it focused mainly on Universal Century works under the HGUC

banner at first, over time alternative series like G Gundam—packaged under HGFC—have joined the roster. Most recently, although limited to Premium Bandai, the HGFC Dragon Gundam saw a release in November '24.

[HIGH RESOLUTION MODEL]

HRM GOD GUNDAM (On Sale October 2019 at 13,000yen + tax)

Although these are 1/100 scale products, this line takes a different approach than MG, enhancing the mobile suits' core design and material composition to achieve a “high-resolution” interpretation. Currently, including Premium Bandai exclusives, eight such kits have been produced. Seeing the God Gundam included among them makes perfect sense, given the series' reputation for lavish craftsmanship.

[RG (REAL GRADE)]

GOD GUNDAM (On Sale August 2022 at 3,500yen + tax)

Dedicated to the pursuit of "authenticity," this Gunpla brand focuses on dense part separation and textured finishes. Despite working at a compact 1/144 scale, the sheer amount of detail may be among the very best in its class. In the case of the God Gundam, there's even a Premium Bandai-exclusive expansion set that includes special effect parts and a clear display stand. As for what's next, a new Shining Gundam release is planned for April '25.

MOBILE FIGHTER G GUNDAM

Closing Thoughts

Mobile Fighter G Gundam truly represents a work that seriously grappled with how to adapt Gundam to its era—in the deepest sense of the word!

As a conclusion, let's consider how Mobile Fighter G Gundam can be positioned today as a Gundam series. When you look carefully, you'll find it is far more of a Gundam work than its initial image might suggest.

UNDERSTANDING THE ERA THAT GUNDAM NEEDED IN THE EARLY '90s

When Mobile Fighter G Gundam (hereafter G Gundam) first aired, it wasn't widely accepted by various audiences. That's no surprise, since it seemed so far removed from our conventional image of Gundam. But now, when we examine it closely, we can see it actually fits quite well within the lineage of Gundam.

G Gundam was broadcast in 1994 (Heisei 6), which is roughly 30 years ago from today.

To place this in historical context: On the world stage, the Cold War had ended, and the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. In Japan, while the bubble economy burst in the early '90s, the sense of that collapse hadn't fully hit home for many at the time. (Symbolic events like the voluntary closure of major securities firm Yamaichi Securities wouldn't happen until 1997.)

In other words, G Gundam emerged right around the threshold of what is now called "Japan's Lost 30 Years."

So what kind of "contemporary relevance" did Gundam need during that era?

If we trace Gundam's history, the previous work before G Gundam was Mobile Suit Victory Gundam (V Gundam, 1993), directed by Yoshiyuki Tomino. From today's viewpoint, we can consider V Gundam as an attempt to output the methodology of Mobile Suit Gundam in a timely way for its age. That methodology involved incorporating "reality" into robot anime, particularly the reality of war, in order to attract audiences beyond just children, who had been the core viewers of robot shows. By doing so, it created more complex, compelling drama.

When Mobile Suit Gundam aired in 1979 (Showa 54), it was still the Cold War period, a time when people believed that nuclear war could break out at any moment. For the young viewers and children of that era, war wasn't distant history, most of their grandfathers had experienced it directly. War felt much closer then.

In such a societal climate, portraying the emotional lives of young people thrust into a state of war perfectly captured that era. As is well known, this approach helped animation evolve beyond mere "TV manga." The keen

foresight of Director Yoshiyuki Tomino and the Sunrise team who planned it made anime fans impossible to ignore thereafter.

I realize I'm going on at length, but in a sense, V Gundam attempted to update that same methodology. Yet by the early '90s, just as the Cold War ended, contrary to hopes of a more peaceful world, ethnic conflicts and unexpected hostilities sprang up, creating a bitterly ironic situation. It is said that V Gundam took cues from images of war at the time, such as the ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, something Director Tomino himself has mentioned.

Even so, from today's standpoint, we can't deny that the era-specific elements V Gundam incorporated didn't fully align with what Japanese animation's "contemporary relevance" might have been. Of course, as we highlighted in our 2023 summer issue, V Gundam is still fascinating to watch today, perhaps even more so now. But looking back, its particular vision of "current events" didn't fully match Japan's own social climate at the time.

After all, by the early '90s, the Cold War's end had lowered the sense of imminent war around Japan, the bubble economy's prosperity seemed to promise endless growth, and the pre- and postwar atmosphere was rapidly fading from everyday life. In other words, for many Japanese people, "war" was growing increasingly remote. In fact, very few live-action war films were produced in Japan in the '80s, and those that were mostly focused on victims of the war, like kamikaze pilots. Against that backdrop, by the '90s "war" no longer seemed like suitable entertainment material.

It was into this climate that G Gundam was released. We know well that the concept of "Gundams from all over the world fighting in martial arts duels" originated from a sponsor suggestion. But to call it mere sponsor "arm-twisting" seems off, at least from today's perspective.

"MARTIAL ARTS" WAS THE TRUE KEYWORD OF THE ERA!

As noted, the Mobile Suit Gundam formula was beginning to drift out of sync with the times, so adjusting it was logical. Granted, everyone back then found the idea of "martial arts" as a theme to be outlandish, and we can't blame them. Still, anime robots had to be linked with product development even then, so it made sense that the series would incorporate timely changes.

Additionally, the show aimed to appeal to elementary and middle school students. According to Hirofumi Kishiyama from BANDAI SPIRITS, as featured in this special report, SD Gundam, BB Senshi, outsold "real-type" Gundams at the time, making realistic Gundams the outliers. With that reality in mind, if you wanted to present "battle" in a way that appealed to younger audiences, tapping into the popularity of martial arts, which was at the forefront of entertainment back then, seems quite natural.

In reality, martial arts were indeed becoming central to popular entertainment. With the 1991 arcade release of Street Fighter II and its subsequent 1992 Super Famicom port, fighting games created a massive

boom in the gaming world. Beyond games, in the late '80s, the Tenkaichi Budokai arc in the Dragon Ball manga kickstarted a surge in that franchise's popularity. The first K-1 tournament, a full-contact fighting event, took place in 1993, fueling a major martial arts craze.

In other words, this was a time when martial arts were becoming a mainstream trend. For a Gundam series that had to depict "battle," and aimed at school-age viewers, spotlighting martial arts as a more relatable form of combat doesn't seem that odd in hindsight.

On the other hand, it's also understandable that G Gundam wasn't warmly received at first. However, as the show's passion came across, it won over not only the intended younger audience, but also older core fans (who, if they were first-generation viewers, would have been around thirty by then). In the end, it became a commercial hit.

At first glance, this might seem like a heartwarming story of a forced change by sponsors that was ultimately redeemed by the show's inherent quality. It might also lead one to say, "This could've worked even without the Gundam name."

But from today's vantage point, that's not quite right. If you watch G Gundam again now, you realize it's actually crafted with a keen awareness of the Gundam tradition.

LOOK CLOSELY AND THE GUNDAM DNA IS EVERYWHERE

A straightforward sign that G Gundam is indeed a Gundam show lies in its use of the same sound effects found in other Gundam titles. This instantly evokes the classic Gundam feeling. The backbone of the "Gundam Fight" concept also aligns with typical Gundam themes: Earth has reached its limits, humanity expands into space, yet conflict never ends. Mobile suits remain the main weapon of war, and the Gundam-type mobile fighters are top-tier, special machines. Many elements rest upon the "cultural foundation" built by previous Gundam works. Taken to an extreme, even the fighting itself could be seen as analogous to Newtype battles in Mobile Suit Gundam, just presented differently.

On a finer level, look at how the colony dignitaries treat the protagonists as disposable tools—this too is reminiscent of classic Gundam power structures. Likewise, while Amuro Ray from Mobile Suit Gundam introduced a new kind of introspective hero, Domon Kashhu initially comes across as a classic "hot-blooded sports protagonist." Yet Domon is also clumsy, immature, and grows over time—a trait that, in a subtle way, mirrors Amuro's own development, despite their seemingly opposite natures. The other Gundam Fighters of the Shuffle Alliance can be friends or foes—like the original Gundam trio (Gundam, Guncannon, Guntank) or enemy units—expanding the narrative possibilities. The only element that might feel less "Gundam-like" is the strong emphasis on romance, but given the overall trend in mecha anime post-Gundam, introducing such elements is hardly surprising.

From today's perspective, G Gundam is "so Gundam it hurts." Later alternative-era Gundam series, including many recent TV entries, also grapple with how to interpret the Gundam legacy. But the three works of that era, G Gundam, Gundam W, and Gundam X, carry the original series' essence strongly within them. In that sense, G Gundam can be seen as a kind of creative challenge, a grand puzzle of "How do we cook Gundam?" where martial arts, demanded by the times, are stirred into the Gundam formula. Because this work (and Turn A Gundam) exists, subsequent series could build upon that foundation to soar even more freely.

Taking this viewpoint and re-examining G Gundam today makes the entire journey—and the reasoning behind it—feel far more convincing.