Gundam and the Japanese Media Mix: Novelizations, Model Kits and Statues

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Abstract: *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979) and related texts – collectively called the Gundam franchise – revolutionized robot animation with its realistic settings, eventually gaining immense popularity through reruns and expansions into various media formats. This paper explores the Gundam series' innovative media mix strategies, including novelizations, model kits, and life-sized statues, which have each been critical to its enduring success in specific ways. For instance Gundam novelizations, particularly those by director Tomino Yoshiyuki, deviated from the TV series, incorporating mature themes and expanding the narrative universe. This approach set a precedent for media mixing in animation. Additionally, Gundam's plastic models, especially the MSV series, created a new form of "narrative consumption" where fans engaged with the broader lore of the series through detailed models. These models maintained the franchise's popularity during periods without new TV broadcasts. Finally, life-sized Gundam statues further exemplify the franchise's media mix innovation. Starting with the 2009 Tokyo installation, these statues have evolved, incorporating dynamic elements and interactive features. These installations offer a unique "pseudo-authenticity," making the fictional Gundam universe tangible and attracting widespread attention. Overall, *Gundam*'s pioneering media mix strategieshave not only sustained the franchise's cultural and economic impact, but also expanded it, thus solidifying its status as a cornerstone of Japanese animation culture.

Keywords: *Mobile Suit Gundam*, Media Mix, Grand Narratives, Narrative Consumption, Tomino Yoshiyuki

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Introduction

In 2021, the Japanese government selected Tomino Yoshiyuki as a Person of Cultural Merit,[1] which is the second-highest official award that can be given to a cultural figure in Japan, following only the Order of Culture. Tomino is the second person in the animation industry to win the award since Hayao Miyazaki of Studio Ghibli in 2012.[2] Tomino's achievements in the animation industry are many and varied, but he is best known for directing the anime series *Mobile Suit Gundam*. In this regard, his award is an indirect indication that the Gundam series is part of a select group of works that represent Japanese animation culture. According to data from the Bandai Namco Group, which owns the Gundam series IP, the overall sales of the Gundam series, including toys, has been steadily increasing in recent years from 34.6 billion yen in 2010 [3] to a record high of 145.7 billion yen in 2024.[4] No other anime series has grown this much, and on these merits alone, there is already much room for research on the background of the Gundam franchise's success and its impact on the Japanese anime culture and industry. Consequently, this paper works to shed light on the contributions that the Gundam series has made in the history of the media mix of animated TV series, as well as explore how its success has affected consumers' impression of the series.

   Mobile Suit Gundam is a TV animation series that began broadcasting in April

1979. While the show was cancelled in January 1980, it eventually became

successful.[5] This is in part due to its focus on realism – but also, as this paper will

argue, due partly to the diverse development of related products and works in media

forms other than animation.[6] For example, Ōtsuka has pointed to the popularity of

Gundam's Gachapon dolls, which are more "deformed", that is, the exaggerated

expression that reduces the size to two heads to create cuteness, than the anime

designs, and the manga, which is more realistic than the original anime, as reasons

why Gundam was able to survive as a series after the anime ended.[7] Elsewhere,

Dominguez looks at the film *Char's Counterattack (1988)* and argues that it was the

turning point that created the worldwide popularity of the Gundam series, which

began to spin off into multiple media and other franchises, including manga, toys,

novels, and later video games, as well as the initial anime and movie.[8] Meanwhile,

Nakamura and Tosca have analyzed the Gundam series of video games, noting that

the wide range of genres, from simulation to action, has both satisfied hardcore fans

and also served as a gateway for "light" or more casual fans.[9]

   This strategy of developing anime and other character content through multiple

media is collectively referred to as 'the media mix' in Japan. The media mix is best

known academically as defined by Steinberg, who uses this term to describe "the

cross-media serialization and circulation of entertainment franchises" in comparison

to transmedia storytelling.[10] What both media mix and transmedia storytelling have in common the creation of various works across media platforms. However, it has been noted that while classical transmedia storytelling emphasizes the premise of a fundamentally consistent worldview, the majority of Japanese-style media mix works prefer a divergent model that allows for variation from the central world. Steinberg's analysis of the Japanese media mix, based on several examples, shows that the development by Kadokawa Shoten in the late 1980s marked a major turning point.[11]

However, while the media mix theory proposed by Steinberg itself is generally accepted in fields such as popular culture and anime studies, there is also a lack of analysis regarding the history of how the media mix developed from the late '70s through the '80s. This is acknowledged by Steinberg himself, who mentions the media mix of Gundam and of Bandai toys as one of the representative examples that he has not analyzed in his foundational work.[12] We would add that in regards to Gundam, as mentioned above, there are studies that focus on individual media mix methods and media mix strategies at a certain point in time. However, there are few studies that capture the role that the Gundam series has played in the history of media mixing itself, or else analyze the effect of such media mixing on the image of the Gundam series as a whole. As a franchise, Gundam has utilized both a strategy of deepening a singular worldview (transmedia storytelling style) and a strategy of

spreading a fluctuating worldview (Japanese-style media mix) in a complementary

manner,[13] making it a highly suitable case study for better understanding and

analyzing the history of Japanese media mix.

This paper argues that in the history of Japanese anime media mix, the Gundam

series has been a leader and a catalyst for development in two areas: novelization and

three-dimensionalization. It is also argued that the continued development of these

media mix methods provided a space for both producers and fans to expand and

reconstruct the Gundam setting, and established Gundam's status and image as a

realistic robot.

In light of the era during which *Mobile Suit Gundam* was launched, these were

not only successful examples of the media mixing of individual *Gundam* works, but

also and at the same time, were also important cases for revisiting the history of

media mixing in Japanese anime culture as a whole.

Extension of the Novelization of Animation

Novelizations are one of the most common methods of media mixing for TV

animation series. In Japan, animation and manga have always had a close

relationship. For example, *Astro Boy* (1963), which was based on a manga (1952),

began as the first Japanese TV animation series. In contrast, novels for teenagers

began to flourish in Japan in the mid-1960s.[14] In 1973, a publication format called

"*bunko*" emerged – these were low-priced versions of monographs usually for a

teenage demographic.[15] In this context, media mixing in terms of novelizing a TV

animation series started with *Space Battleship Yamato*, which was broadcast in

1974.[16] The novel versions of *Space Battleship Yamato* were published on October

20, 1974 (*Earth Destruction Arc*)[17] and February 3, 1975 (*Earth Resurrection Arc*).[18]

At the time, home-use VCRs were less common in Japan; thus, the appearance of

anime novelizations were a valuable source of content for fans seeking to recall the

anime series after it had aired.[19]

   Although the *Yamato* novels differ from their TV counterparts in some of their

stories and settings, they did not further deepen the worldview of the TV version. In

addition, the end of the book clearly states that the target age group is "upper

elementary to junior high school students", individuals aged 9–15 years in Japan,[20]

and subsequently these novels did not present sexual descriptions. Ishizu Arashi and

Toyota Aritsune wrote the first novel version of *Space Battleship Yamato* instead of

Nishizaki Yoshinobu, who is known as the original author. In later years, another

novel version of Yamato was released, this one composed by Nishizaki;[21] however, it

recounted the original storyline using images from the main TV anime as

illustrations, with almost no original elements. Still, with the success of *Space*

Battleship Yamato, the anime novelization method was recognized as a form of media mix in TV animation.

Then in 1979, *Mobile Suit Gundam* was broadcast. Two novel editions of *Mobile Suit Gundam* were released at the time of its broadcast. The first was written by Nakane Masaaki, and the second was penned by Tomino Yoshiyuki. The Nakane novel version (Volume 1: March 31, 1980)[22] was released after the TV anime broadcast and, similar to the novel version of *Space Battleship Yamato*, was written for a relatively younger audience. Moreover, the content was similar to the storyline of the main TV series. However, the Tomino novel version (Volume 1: November 30, 1979),[23] which was also published by Asahi Sonorama, was novelized by Tomino, who is the original writer of *Mobile Suit Gundam* and the director of the TV anime. This version was released during the broadcast period (April 7, 1979–January 26, 1980) of the TV anime. In this way, for the first time in the history of Japanese animation, the director and original creator of a film had personally written a novelization of the film during its broadcast period. Of further interest is that Tomino's novelization featured many changes from the series. According to Tomino, the publishers held low levels of expectations for the anime novelization at the time; thus, they asked him to write the novelization as a complete work in one volume.[24] As a result, the story was changed to avoid any contradiction even if the novel was a

one-volume read-only work. Despite the shorter form, the novel expanded on several

core concepts from the series, particularly its metaphysical psychic elements.[25]

Later, the novel version was extended to three volumes due to the unexpected

success of the first volume. Here the final story differs greatly from that of the anime

version, with more spiritual and political content, including the spiritual awakening

of the people and the establishment of a new nation following the death of the main

character, Amuro Ray. Seager notes that Tomino's novel version reflects the

revolutionary-oriented leftist ideology found in the student movement that preceded

it.[26] Moreover, battle scenes were also more violent, and there was some overt sexual

content. Although the storyline of Tomino's novel version of *Gundam* differs from

that of the main TV series, a few of the original setting concepts from the novel

appeared in the later movie *Mobile Suit Gundam 3: Meguriai Sora* (1982) such as

the GUN CANNON aircraft number. Thus, the success of *Mobile Suit Gundam* – in

which Tomino as the animation director himself has worked on a piece of the media

mix – has been pointed out by Tsugata as the first case in which a creator in the TV

animation industry was brought into the limelight.[27]

   A notable novelization of the Gundam series has been the one undertaken for the

animated film *Mobile Suit Gundam: Char's Counterattack* (1988). The novelization

of *Char's Counterattack* was also written and directed by Tomino, who also wrote

and directed the movie of the same name. Unusually, though, this film features two novel versions, both by Tomino. The first was a three-volume novel called *High Streamer*,[28] which was serialized in the anime magazine *Animage* from May 1987, one year before the movie was released. In *High Streamer*, the story begins as a prequel to the movie *Char's Counterattack*, before eventually telling the same story as the film. The venue *Animage*, in which the novel was serialized, is a magazine published by Tokuma Shoten, which has been acknowledged as a pioneer of the media mix in Japan along with the Kadokawa Group.[29] The strategy of this magazine was to serialize many novels that were expected to be adapted into anime.[30] However, although the *Gundam* series was expected to be a success, the development of a prequel novel by the original author and director prior to the release of the movie was extremely rare as a form of media mix. Tomino himself described it as a new experiment, saying:[31]

> In the novel version of *Char's Counterattack*, I am trying a method of introducing the characters who will develop the next story before and after the current one, while continuing the work that I am currently doing. My fear that I would lose out to the younger generation if I did not take this approach is the reason I came to this approach.

Adding further to this experiment , another novelization of *Char's Counterattack* was released the following year. This second novelization, titled *Beltorchika's Children*,[32] was published not by Tokuma Shoten, but instead Kadokawa Shoten. *Beltorchika's*

Children is a novelization based on the first draft of the screenplay for the movie

Char's Counterattack,[33] and includes several elements that were not used in the

movie. For example, the main character, Amuro Ray, is married and has a child with

Bertorchka Irma, a character who did not appear in the movie. According to Tomino,

"The Gundam world is a story of evolving human beings," and *Beltorchika's Children*

depicts the "denial of machines" as the destination of this story, which was a

departure from the entertainment value expected from a robot animation work such

as *Char's Counterattack* in the main story.[34] As a result, such elements were

modified in *High Streamer* and the movie version of *Char's Counterattack* to reflect

the wishes of sponsors and commercial considerations.[35]

Tomino has commented at length on the position of *Beltorchika's Children* in

relation to *Char's Counterattack*, and reflected on the difference between the film

and the novel as media.[36]

> If the movie is the main story, *Beltorchika's Children* is positioned as a motif
> novel and should not be published in the nature that it should be...
> And I am presenting this book in this way for two reasons. First, I wanted to
> provide a sample of the differences in expression between film and print.
> Another reason is that this story was the motif of *Char's Counterattack* and I
> wanted to let people know that this was my original intention...
> Naturally, I wrote the scenario for the movie version of *Char's Counterattack*. The
> first draft of the theatrical scenario submission was this story (*Beltorchika's
> Children*), and when it was submitted for review by the investors, which could be
> called the "Gundam Movie Adaptation Committee," various opinions and
> criticisms were raised about this scenario.
> The most important opinion was that the theme of the novel was the denial of

mobile suits. Of course, this was my intention.

However, Gundam has a thick market created by the sale of mobile suit toys, which provides the funds to produce the movie. If the production itself denies this realistic foundation, it is only natural that the investors would refuse to produce the movie. This is not an issue of the nature of "it can't be helped because we are in different positions. I had to admit that I was chasing too many dreams.

Yet another opinion that felt sanctioned to me was, "I don't want to see Amuro Ray married in a movie." Some may think that this opinion is worldly and trivial, but I have adopted it as the most important point because it is the opinion that I felt was most important for the production and planning of a film.

The reason why I have such an intuition is because I feel the same way about the nature of the film medium...

Films should be open entertainment, that is, something that can be enjoyed by a large number of people who can watch it together. In the past, there was a time when what were called "literary films" were accepted in Japan, but as times change, the concept of planning must be fundamentally changed...

The hero of the movie is a bachelor from Tange Sazen to the era of Rambo, the same James Bond and Sherlock Holmes even if the actors change. It doesn't matter how old you are or what you look like, you must fall in love and have adventures in a wonderful way.

Movies are for people who are tired of this world to watch for a little distraction. There is nothing more dangerous than propaganda films.

More importantly, Gundam is a robot anime. There is no need to watch it if the main character becomes the property of someone else in the show and goes about his "normal life," and furthermore, it has to have battle scenes that would be frowned upon by the PTA.

I have not forgotten this principle when it comes to battle scenes. However, as for the characters, the Gundam world is a story of evolving human beings, so the end result is "Immaterialism," or "denial of mechanical weapons = denial of mobile suits." This is the meaning of the comment on "Amuro's Denial of Marriage". It even risks becoming a film that denounces against investors...

In other words, this opinion made me keenly aware of the danger of making films based solely on personal feelings...

Therefore, I would like you young people to know that what is contained in *Beltorchika's Children* is a method that is only allowed in the form of a novel, and not strictly a field that can be turned into a film.

There may be some disagreement about this creative theory articulated by

Tomino. However, it is true that the film's content was changed based on sponsors'

wishes, while novelizations allowed Tomino a higher degree of creative expression

absent in film production. For this reason, *Beltorchika's Children* is frequently

regarded as a parallel, separate work that is not part of the so-called canonical

history of the series. However, *Beltorchika's Children* continued on in the media mix,

both in a Kadokawa-released cassette book (1989) that featured an audio drama with

many of the same voice actors as those in the main movie,[37] and a manga adaptation

serialized from 2014 to 2018 in Kadokawa Shoten's *Gundam A* magazine. In

addition, Tomino published a sequel to *Beltorchika's Children*, titled *Mobile Suit

Gundam Hathaway's Flash*.[38] The relationship between *Mobile Suit Gundam

Hathaway's Flash* and *Beltorchika's Children* has meant that the former has long

been seen as difficult to animate.[39] However, a theatrical adaptation directed by

Murase Shūkō was released in 2021.[40] Dominguez notes that these attempts by

Char's Counterattack to tell a broader story through various media mixes predated

other anime such as *Akira, Evangelion*, and *Ghost in the Shell*.[41]

Thus far, this paper has introduced the development of novelization works as an

example of the media mix in the Gundam series. With this series, the original author

and director Tomino undertook the novelizations as a tool for deepening the concept

of the work and for expanding the world of the series at a time when novelizations of

animated films were less common. Today, it is much more common for animation

directors to produce novelizations of their own work. However, instances where the

director has novelized a prequel or undertook novelization around the same time as

the broadcast of TV animation work – or novelizations where the world of the work

has been altered by rearranging it for an older audience – are relatively scarce.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that, unlike the early Gunpla strategy discussed

below, the novel versions of Gundam took an early strategy of diffusing the subject

matter of the work through the development of multiple worldviews, rather than a

single worldview as in transmedia storytelling. In the Gundam series, novelizations

have remained an important medium for strengthening the series as a whole, rather

than merely promoting or duplicating the animated works. Moreover, it has been

used for media mixes and anime adaptations based on the novels. Not limited to

Gundam, TV animation works have been the source for various media mixes, but the

characteristics of the TV medium make it difficult to use extreme expressions, and

there are restrictions that make it impossible to ignore the wishes of the sponsors.[42]

In this respect, novelization has the advantage of being free from such restrictions,

allowing the author to freely develop the story as he or she envisions it. Although

Space Battleship Yamato was the first novelization of an original TV animation work,

Mobile Suit Gundam novels by Tomino were the first to consciously practice the

strengths of novelization and establish this as a media-mix method capable of expanding the world of the work. Thus, one may say that the novelization of the Gundam series was a pioneering example in the history of Japanese animation media mixing.

Creation of the GUNPLA genre

Among the media mixes undertaken by the Gundam series, one initiative that also sets it apart from other animated series of the time was the challenge to produce three-dimensional models, of which plastic models are a typical example. Robot themes have long been popular in Japanese TV animation, beginning with *Astro Boy* (January 1, 1963-) and followed closely by *Tetsujin 28-go* (October 20, 1963-). A related phenomenon is visible in how television is an efficient advertising medium with a sponsor-supported structure, and from the very beginning of TV animation culture in Japan, there was built-in financial support from sponsors and a corresponding contribution to sponsorship from the animation side. In this case, the main sponsor of *Astro Boy* was the confectionery manufacturer Meiji Seika. According to Steinberg, Meiji's sponsorship was more accidental than strategic, but it came at a time when Japanese confectionery manufacturers were intensely competing for children's snacks and putting a lot of effort into advertising.[43] The success of Meiji's chocolate with an

Astro Boy sticker as an extra led to other TV animation series, including *Tetsujin 28*,

being sponsored by confectionery manufacturers.

   Toys were also sold during the era of *Astro Boy* and *Tetsujin 28-go*, but the majority

of toys for these series were made of vinyl.[44] It has been noted that the success of

Mazinger Z was the first time that a toy company took control of an animation

project.[45,46] During the broadcast of *Mazinger Z* (December 3, 1972-), a three-

dimensional toy named "Chogokin" – which was made of zinc alloy – was released,

and quickly became a hit due to its realistic texture, reminiscent of the robot in the

series.[47] In this context, *Mobile Suit Gundam* also began airing with a toy company,

Clover, as the main sponsor. Clover released a silver-colored zinc alloy Gundam during

the 1979 broadcast period, which differed in design from the white-colored Gundam

in the anime. These toys were targeted at preschool children, but did not sell well

because they were unappealing to adolescents, who were the main audience of the

anime.[48] Yamaura Eiji, the producer of *Gundam*, suggested to Clover that a plastic

model that realistically embodied the shape of the robot and was inexpensive would

be a good idea.[49] However, Clover rejected the concept, and instead the manufacturer

Bandai was given the rights to produce plastic models based on the series.[50] The initial

plastic model of the main character, Gundam, was designed by designer Masatoshi

Muramatsu, who had been in charge of military plastic models, and the design was

inspired by the armor of tanks and fighter planes.[51] The model was made in a 1/144

scale, which was the same scale as existing plastic models for non-anime franchises.[52]

The Gundam plastic model (so-called GUNPLA, a combination of the first two terms)

at this scale became a huge hit and sold over 1 million units in only six months after its

release. This success occurred despite the fact that the models were released in July

1980, six months after the end of the TV animation in January 1980.[53]

In contrast to previous animated series, which focused primarily on heroes and

protagonists, the plastic models lineup for Gundam included the series' enemy robots,

such as the Zaku and Gouf.[54] Moreover, these models also gained comparable

popularity.[55] This success was partially due to the fact that all robots from the

Gundam franchise, be they friend or foe, were considered military weapons called

"mobile suits." In fact, Tomino requested that his mechanic designer, Ōkawara Kunio,

pursue designs that would make enemy robots "look like weapons."[56] As these booms

in sales heated up, all mobile suits that appeared in the anime were turned into model

kits, and eventually Bandai even produced a line-up of robots produced that did not

appear in the series, titled MSV (Mobile Suit Variation).[57]

The MSV project began when the publishers placed an order with Ōkawara for

information that could not be supplemented by the official setting materials alone at

the time of the release of the Gundam movie version.[58] So four newly designed mobile

suits (*Zaku* for wetlands, *Zaku* for bombardment, *Zaku* for underwater, and *Zaku* for desert warfare) were published in a book about the Gundam movie version.[59] Then, after all the suits that appeared in the TV anime had been made into plastic models, plastic modeling of the MSV series began.

Although they did not appear in the TV anime or movie version, mobile suits that were considered to have existed in the world of the film - such as ace-specific units, prototypes, and units that were modified for local use - were proposed and commercialized as plastic models and distributed to the public through media such as model magazines and anime magazines.[60] New MSV plastic models continued to be released during the gap period (1982-1985) when there were no TV broadcasts of the anime or movie versions of the Gundam series – and in this way, the MSV models contributed to maintaining consumer interest and memory of the Gundam series.[61] In addition, over the course of product development, the silhouettes of MSV plastic models have been improved, bringing realism to the Gundam worldview and attracting adult fans of plastic models.[62]

Table 1. MSV GUNPLA (all released by Bandai, in order of release date)

Release Date	Product Name

April 1983	1/144 MS-06R ZAKU II
April 1983	1/144 MS-06K ZAKUCANNON
April 1983	1/144 YMS-09 PROTOTYPE DOM
May 1983	1/144 MS-06D ZAKU DESERT TYPE
May 1983	1/144 RGC-80 GM CANNON
June 1983	1/144 MS-06M ZAKU MARINE TYPE
June 1983	1/144 MS-14C GELGOOG CANNON
June 1983	1/144 RX-78-1 PROTOTYPE GUNDAM
July 1983	1/144 MS-07H GOUF FLYING TEST TYPE
July 1983	1/144 FA-78-1 GUNDAM FULLARMOR TYPE
August 1983	1/144 MS-06E ZAKU RECON
September 1983	1/144 MS-06V ZAKU TANK
September 1983	1/60 MS-14C GELGOOG CANNON
October 1983	1/100 SHIN MATSUNAGA'S MS-06R ZAKU II
October 1983	1/144 YMS-09 DOM TROPICAL TEST TYPE
October 1983	1/100 YMS-09 DOM TROPICAL TEST TYPE
October 1983	1/100 MS-06K ZAKUCANNON
October 1983	1/60 MS-06R ZAKU II Black Tri-Stars use

October 1983	1/60 FA-78-1 GUNDAM FULLARMOR TYPE
November 1983	1/100 YMS-09 PROTOTYPE DOM
December 1983	1/60 JOHNNY RIDDEN'S MS-06R-2 ZAKU II
December 1983	1/144 RGM-79 GM SNIPER CUSTOM
February 1984	1/144 JOHNNY RIDDEN'S MS-06R-2 ZAKU II
March 1984	1/144 MS-06E3 ZAKU FLIPPER
April 1984	1/144 MS-06F ZAKU MINE LAYER
April 1984	1/100 FA-78-1 GUNDAM FULLARMOR TYPE
May 1984	1/144 MSN-01 PSYCHOMMU SYSTEM ZAKU
May 1984	1/144 RX-77-4 GUNCANNON- II
May 1984	1/144 MS-06Z PSYCHOMMU SYSTEM ZAKU ZEONG TEST BASE
June 1984	1/144 RX-78 PERFECT GUNDAM
July 1984	1/250 MSN-02 PSYCHOMMU SYSTEM PERFECT ZEONG
September 1984	1/144 JOHNNY RIDDEN'S MS-14B GELGOOG
September 1984	1/100 JOHNNY RIDDEN'S MS-06R-2 ZAKU II
December 1984	1/100 RX-78 PERFECT GUNDAM

The MSV series also involved expanding the *Gundam* setting. Kits included information such as when the specific mobile suits were created in the fictional timeline, their purpose, and who piloted them, helping to flesh out the world of the series. Ōtsuka has described the unique development of the Gundam series of plastic models as an early example of "narrative consumption" through media mixing.

> Narrative consumption" is the attitude of consuming the setting or worldview (Grand narrative) behind an individual work or episode (Small narrative). At the level of concrete products of narrative consumption, "stories" themselves cannot be sold directly, so "things as fragments are consumed as a pretense.[63]

In this positioning, where Ōtsuka reads Gundam as a "Grand narrative" work that replicated Cold War ideological structures, we argue that the MSV kits constitute an important point in the construction of this form of "narrative consumption."[64] With these models, users are consuming not only the small story of the MSV series of GUNPLA, but also the worldview of *Mobile Suit Gundam* behind them. In this way, GUNPLA have become a new medium for telling and expanding the larger story of the military history and development of weapons in the world of *Mobile Suit Gundam*.

In this manner, the plastic models of the MSV series became popular in contexts separate from those of the main anime series, such that a few of them even appeared in *Mobile Suit Z Gundam*, a sequel to the original anime *Mobile Suit Gundam*.[65] This is an example of the significant influence of plastic model culture on the main Gundam

series. Furthermore, a model magazine, *Mokei joho*, published by Bandai, the company manufacturing the GUNPLA models, further deepened the setting of Gundam's fictional world. This magazine was a free public relations magazine whose main purpose was to introduce the company's products, but it became popular when it began to provide additional information on GUNPLA, such as background military history and development history that did not appear in the main anime. Such was this new popularity that later it, and was later sold for a fee.[66] However, in the anime works that followed the first series, such as *Mobile Suit Z Gundam* and *Mobile Suit Gundam ZZ*, the development of plastic models such as the MSV did not gain much momentum.[67] Probably reasons for this include how the world of *Mobile Suit Z Gundam* was difficult to understand and the anime did not gain popularity; the sales strategy for GUNPLA during this period was inconsistent; and the structure of *Mobile Suit Gundam ZZ* was far removed from the worldview of the original *Mobile Suit Gundam*.[68] Specifically, *Mobile Suit Z Gundam* and *Mobile Suit Gundam ZZ* were stories that moved away from the simple conflict structure between the militaries of different countries, leaving little room to conceive of a background setting such as a military or development history – which had been selling points for the MSV models. In addition, the appearance of many mobile suits in these sequel series that transformed into or combined with fighter aircraft resulted in a loss of weaponry with

military elements.

Simultaneously though, the original novel *GUNDAM SENTINEL* (serialized in another monthly model magazine entitled *Model Graphix* from the September 1987 issue to the July 1990 issue, and depicting depicted the period between those anime works) featured plastic models with realistic designs and serialized images of plastic models with special effects. The development of original stories centered on this model magazine, consequently, the development of original, non-animated plastic model products became very popular among avid plastic model fans.[69] The project and concept of MSV itself continued afterwards and was developed as a media mix for works such as *Char's Counterattack*, *Mobile Suit Gundam F91,* and *Mobile Suit Victory Gundam*. Note that in the MSV project of *Char's Counterattack*, a mobile suit that only appeared in *Beltorchka's Children (*itself a media-mix work that became a separate story from the anime) was also incorporated and made into plastic models. In particular, the *HI-ν Gundam* and *Nightingale*, mobile suits unique to the sequel anime *Beltorchka's Children*, have had their settings changed in books,[70] such as being classified as MSVs as successors to the *ν Gunda*m and *Sazabi* respectively, in line with the worldview visible in the anime version.

When the sales of new MSV products for narrative consumption began slowing down at this point, GUNPLA turned to the route of making existing mobile suits more precise

and realistic. A significant example of this is the Master Grade series, a 1/100 size model line first released in 1995. Master Grade models, which were more realistic than existing GUNPLA models that cost several hundred to one thousand yen, were priced from 3,000 to 10,000 yen and targeted mainly at adults.[71] The Master Grade series sold well during lagging sales of the smaller models, and later led to the release of the 1/60 scale Perfect Grade series, which reproduced the internal mechanisms in more detail.

The 'realistic' angle of these new GUNPLA series is an interesting one. Of course, to begin with, the Gundam mobile suits do not exist beyond the franchise and its world, so they have little basis or limitations in reality. Moreover, even in the anime, detailed internal mechanisms are not depicted. Considering these two facts, the realism that GUNPLA and GUNPLA fans were aiming for differs significantly from the realism that plastic models of real tanks and fighter planes are aiming for. In this regard, Kawamura points out that GUNPLA are copies or simulacrum without substance: that is, they   are not realistic in the sense that they attempt to approach the real world, but rather, are media that make consumers rethink what "realism" is.[72] Matsui also points out that GUNPLA are not merely faithful "reproductions" of "shapes," but also have the mediating nature of "interpretation" of the original, and thus were passed on to subsequent character models as a new way of modeling products such as plastic

models.[73] Watanabe further points out that "interpretation" in GUNPLA is the logical bridging of unrealistic elements in the original anime so that they can be accepted as "what they could be," which is where new stories are born.[74]

While the existing scholarship is correct to point out these key differences, there are also additional complications to such discussions of 'realistic' models. For instance, since the 1980s, Gundam plastic models began to be developed in a different context from the world of the anime   and the previous trend of pursuing realism. Notably, in light of the fact that GUNPLA were widely recognized by the general public at this point, manga such as *Plamo Kyōshirō* (serialized in the monthly manga magazine entitled *Comic BomBom* from the February 1982 to November 1986 issues) were created, which were themselves about the GUNPLA building process. For example, *Plamo Kyōshirō* tells the story of the main character, Kyoda Shiro, who uses a plastic model simulation machine to pilot his own plastic models in a virtual space and fight rivals. It is characterized especially by its setting in which the level of modification of GUNPLA determines the winner, and the direction of the modification does not necessarily have to be faithful to the original work. As another example, the "*Perfect Gundam*," an original mobile suit in the world of *Plamo Kyōshirō* 's work, does not appear in the original Gundam anime, and instead was made into a plastic model in the MSV category after its appearance in *Plamo Kyōshirō*.

It is also worth noting, however, that the main reception of GUNPA in *Plamo Kyōshirō* is different from the narrative consumption in MSV. In MSV, GUNPLA functioned as a medium for consuming the Gundam worldview, but in *Plamo Kyōshirō*, it is only the plastic models that appear. There, the GUNPLA is not portrayed as a reproduction of character in *Mobile Suit Gundam*, but instead as a character in its own right, without regard to the context of the original story.

After *Plamo Kyōshirō*, other works featuring boys and girls building GUNPLA continued to be developed, such as *Gundam Build Fighters* (October 7, 2013–March 31, 2014) and *Gundam Build Divers* (April 3, 2018–September 25, 2018). Like *Plamo Kyōshirō*, Build Fighters and Build Divers are also composed of plastic models built by the main characters and remotely controlled to fight. *Plamo Kyōshirō* is set in Japan at the time of the GUNPLA boom, a composition that makes the reader aware of the existence of the original work, albeit only slightly. However, Build Fighters and Build Divers are set in a time and space far removed from Japan and the real world, such as the future and other worlds, where GUNPLA is treated as a character completely removed from the original story. And in these series, GUNPLA are modified and arranged with more freedom than in the days of *Plamo Kyōshirō*. For example, the *Beargguy*, which appears in both series, is based on the *Agguy* that appeared in the original *Mobile Suit Gundam*, and is designed to be cute, reminiscent

of a stuffed bear. At the time of *Plamo Kyōshirō*, there was a consistent orientation toward boy-oriented content and military bases to create original cool weapons, but in this *Beargguy*, such weapon-like elements and coolness are completely discarded. This kind of arrangement and play with GUNPLA had been done independently by GUNPLA fans or shown in model magazines, but it is noteworthy that it was offered as official Gundam content.

These were far from the only such examples, though. In addition to these, several other anime and manga production series were created with plastic model production as the main focus, from which many original mobile suits were invented and then became a source of new plastic model products in turn.

Another series that emerged during the 1980s was the SD Gundam series, in which anime characters were arranged with two heads, which is a parody technique frequently used in Japanese anime.[75] The SD Gundam series was first released by Bandai in 1985 as Gashapon vinyl resin dolls, which became very popular and were quickly followed by manga, games, and anime that were completely different from the original Gundam worldview. These included the *Musha Gundam SD Sengoku Den* and *BB Warrior SD Sangokuden,* which both feature SD Gundam.[76] The plastic models for SD Gundam have also emerged since 1987 and have been continuously developed to the present day.[77] According to Kamiya, the culture of "deforming" characters as

parodies for the inner circle of a fan community had existed in manga and anime before the SD Gundam series, but it was SD Gundam that established this practice as its own genre of character consumption.[78] The *SD Gundam* series— completely differs from the realism pursued by the TV animation Gundam series and conventional plastic models. However, this move is also believed to have led to the development of the Gundam series as a whole by attracting a younger generation of fans who were unfamiliar with past animation works.[79] Ōtsuka has said of SD Gundam, "Ten years after Gundam's TV broadcast, the consumers of Gundam products are children who do not know the original Gundam, and the creation of SD Gundam, a replica, has once again prolonged Gundam's life."[80] Moreover, he argues that "The original Gundam is now only a realistic version of SD," citing this as a notable example of how deformed characters have contributed to maintaining the popularity of original works.[81] Similarly, Nakamura and Tosca point out that sales of games dealing with SD Gundam account for a large portion of the Gundam series' media mix in games, and argue that the SD Gundam series has contributed to attracting a younger audience and extending the life of the Gundam series as a whole.[82]

The fact that first GUNPLA themselves and then later the SD Gundam series became consumer content as independent characters, apart from their original stories, was in line with the trends of the time. As noted above, the early hits of the Gundam series

and activities such as MSV and other models supplementing the anime's world, have

tended to be understood through the narrative consumption theory presented by

Ōtsuka. In this regard, Azuma notes that the popularity of narrative consumption in

the 1980s served to compensate for the decline of larger narratives (such as political

ideology) in the real world.[83] On the other hand, Azuma has also pointed out, using

Evangelion as an example, that the main characteristic of otaku culture since the

1990s has become waning interest in the story itself, replaced instead by "database

consumption," in which only the components of the original work, such as "moe"

characters.[84] It should be noted that Ōtsuka himself is said to have regarded narrative

consumption only as a one-case example and not as a concept that lies at the center of

consumer society theory.[85] However, Azuma's suggestion of database consumption

and a preoccupation with moe elements was widely accepted as an alternative to the

narrative consumption theory and as an argument that represents the consumption

trend since the 1990s.[86] In these discussions by Azuma, *Gundam* was exemplified as

a representative example of narrative consumption in the 1980s, and as a counterpart

to the database consumption represented by *Evangelion* in the 1990s and beyond.

However, as mentioned above, the Gundam series as a whole has also been media-

mixed since around the 1990s as content that is separate from the story, such as SD

GUNDAM series and GUNPLA that are designed to be more realistic than the original

anime and has also been accepted as what Azuma refers to as database consumption.

For example, regarding the Gundam and Hello Kitty crossover project in 2019, Kamiya pointed out that this unique collaboration was possible because of the success and acceptance of the deformed and "cute" content of the SD Gundam series.[87] Kani also points out that there is a generational difference among *Gundam* fans, with the science fiction generation oriented toward "setting moe," which is story-consuming, while the anime generation is oriented toward "character moe" and "mecha moe," which is database-consuming, and that GUNPLA became popular because it was accepted by the latter group.[88]

As previously described, GUNPLA have expanded their contents through various new media mixes based on the two directions, namely, realistic and non-realistic lines. In particular, it is worth mentioning that, in addition to continuing the realistic media mix accepted in the context of story consumption, the company also responded to the trend toward database consumption by emphasizing characters and cuteness away from the story, thereby maintaining the acceptance of a wide range of content.

Challenge to create a life-size Gundam

Life-size Gundam statues offer yet another entry and effort in this lineage of three-dimensional versions unique to this particular anime series. One of the earliest official

attempt to create a life-size Gundam of a human-controlled robot animation was probably the Gundam at the "Gundam Museum" (now the Bandai Museum at Toy City) in 2003. [89] However, it was a bust-like figure with only an upper body. Meanwhile, the first Gundam to be sculpted as a standing statue was the 18-meter tall Gundam (RG1/1 RX-78-2 Gundam ver.G30th) in Tokyo in July 2009.[90] At the same time, a 15.5-meter tall Tetsujin 28-go was installed in Kobe in October 2009 as a life-size sculpture of a robot animation other than Gundam.[91] Considering these examples, the Gundam series can be noted as the earliest example of a full-scale sculpture or standing figure from anime. Miyakawa, who was president of Sunrise at the time, recalls the time when the life-size Gundam project was first proposed.[92]

> When I was president of Sunrise, I built an 18-meter standing statue of Gundam in Odaiba in 2009, the 30th anniversary of the broadcast of Gundam. Most people would think that a new movie would be made to commemorate the anniversary of Gundam, but since I am not a visual artist, I was able to come up with the idea of a life-size standing Gundam statue without any particular focus…
> When we planned the standing statue, many of the board members were opposed to it for cost-effectiveness and safety reasons, but the result was a great success.

Furthermore, what makes the life-size Gundam unique is that it has been updated through multiple installations. The Gundam installed in 2009 was a standing figure with nothing in its hands; however, the Gundam installed in Shizuoka in July 2010 was a standing figure with a beam sabre – a weapon from the anime – in its right

hand.[93] When it was installed again in Tokyo in April 2012, the design was updated in detail to match the setting of the work, and at night, in addition to the lighting up of the main body, images were projected on the walls of the adjacent commercial facility.[94] In 2017, a life-size statue of the Unicorn Gundam (RX-0 Unicorn Gundam Ver. TWC) with a height of 19.7-meter tall from the original video animation *Mobile Suit Gundam UC* (March 12, 2010–June 6, 2014) replaced the Gundam installed in 2012.[95] This Unicorn Gundam incorporates new effects, such as a transformation mechanism that replicates the original every 30 minutes.[96] In December 2020, an 18-meter tall, movable Gundam was installed in Yokohama, and was recognized as a Guinness World Record for the "largest mobile humanoid robot" and "largest mobile Gundam"[97] Miyakawa, still discussing his time as president of Sunrise, describes the impetus for this movable Gundam project.[98]

> I created an 18-meter standing statue in Odaiba in 2009, the 30th anniversary of the airing of Gundam…
> When we unveiled it at Shiokaze Park in Odaiba, it attracted 4.15 million people in a period of just over 50 days. Then I thought, "If it drew that many people just standing there, wouldn't it draw even more if it moved?"

In 2021, an 18.03-meter tall Freedom Gundam from the animated TV series *Mobile Suit Gundam SEED* (October 5, 2002–September 27, 2003) was installed adjacent to

a commercial facility in Shanghai.[99] This Freedom Gundam standing statue, a new animation projected on an LED vision system in the commercial facility was incorporated into the production.[100] China was chosen for the first full-scale Gundam outside of Japan because it is the country with the highest sales of GUNPLA outside of Japan,[101] and because it is a country where Gundam is easily accepted. One possible reason why this model was chosen as the first for overseas development is that Gundam SEED was originally very popular in Asia.[102] And the most recent one, the RX-93ffv Gundam (unveiled in April 2022, with a maximum height of 24.8 meters), was installed in a commercial facility in Fukuoka, which was based on the ν Gundam in *Char's Counterattack*.[103]

As much as the GUNPLA series we have detailed at length – and perhaps even more so – these seven life-size sculptures mentioned above represent the challenging efforts that the Gundam series has undertaken. The Gundam series is essentially an animated work set in a virtual world of the future, so it does not have a model region on the present-day Earth and is not associated with film tourism.[104] However, given the fact that such Gundam-related facilities have actually been reported to motivate foreign tourists to visit Japan, it was a noteworthy initiative from the perspective of anime tourism.[105]

Matsui pointed out that the significance and appeal of the three-dimensional

Gundam cannot be explained by "narrative consumption," though that may be the case

for the conventional Gundam series.[106]   According to Matusi, narrative consumption

theory can explain the appeal of the content itself, but it cannot account for going all

the way to Odaiba or Shizuoka to see an 18-meter monument called a "life-size

Gundam." Consequently, this means that a full-scale Gundam has its own unique

appeal that cannot be found in the mere repetitive viewing of anime or the

consumption of stories through familiar character goods. One of its attractions would

be the pseudo-authenticity of the life-size Gundam. Regarding the significance of

Gundam's life-size monument, Matsui, citing Walter Benjamin's argument, suggests

that daring to materialize a symbolic existence without substance leads to the

possibility of perceiving the uniqueness of the here and now.[107] The "Gundam"

mechanic on which the full-scale Gundam is based does not exist anywhere in the

world as a physical entity, but only in two-dimensional contents and the "story" behind

them. However, the full-scale Gundam is a physical entity that dares to make the

"Gundam" a reproduction without substance into a "real thing." Benjamin uses the

word "aura" to describe the weight and authority that an original thing has in the "here"

and "now," and usually aura is lost when the "real" thing in the "here and now" is

"reproduced" in the form of an image.[108] However, in the case of Gundam's life-size

monument, Matsui contends that the contrary has happened: here, the existence that

was originally a "reproduction" of an image is materialized as a three-dimensional

object with a huge physical mass, which becomes "the only one that exists" and and is

perceived as a "pseudo-aura."[109]

To expand upon this divergence, the ν Gundam installed in Fukuoka is a three-

dimensional rendition of a newly-designed mobile suit that does not appear in any of

the existing Gundam anime or related works. And, through the new animated images

created for it and the plastic models, it also contains expectations and possibilities for

a new story.[110] As another attraction, we cannot ignore the fact that the process of

creating a full-scale Gundam itself is also new content. Likewise, the movable Gundam

installed in Yokohama in 2020 (and its process from the 2014 project to its

development and realization over six years) has been introduced in various media and

sold as content. [111] Furthermore, in the development process of the Yokohama

Movable Gundam, design ideas were solicited from all over the world and projects

were developed to actually implement them.[112]

The success of the media mix of these three-dimensional versions expanded the

popularity of the Gundam work and character, and it came to be recognized by the

government as a representative of Japanese anime culture. Since 2000, the Japanese

government has officially recognized anime and manga as part of Japanese culture and

supported them as industries.[113] Cool Japan, an industrial policy launched in 2012,

has also considered anime and manga as one of its primary genres from the beginning.[114] In this context, Gundam in particular was highlighted as an advanced case study at the government's Cool Japan Strategy Promotion Conference in February 2015, due to its life-size Gundam initiative and overseas development.[115] Then, in April 2015, a plastic model of Gundam was installed in the office of the minister in charge of Cool Japan and opened to guests from various countries.[116] This plastic model has remained in the minister's office ever since, but Gundam is the only character content that received such special treatment.[117] In addition, in September 2018, the overseas development of GUNPLA was introduced on the website of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry as a successful example of export in Cool Japan.[118] In this way, the Gundam character and related businesses have come to be sought after for their diplomatic role as icons representing Japanese anime culture and as good examples of industrial policy. In particular, the full-scale Gundam was recognized by the government as a unique initiative, and subsequently introduced in a governmental white paper on science and technology.[119] In addition, materials on the development process of the full-scale Gundam and interviews with related persons were widely provided as educational content by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry.[120]

As discussed and analyzed throughout this section, the development of multiple life-

size sculptures and the combination of various production techniques are media mix

methods unique to the Gundam series and its success as both a ground-breaking

cultural production and a commercial product.

From Consumed Media Content to Social Icon

This paper has introduced examples of the challenging media mix that the *Gundam*

series has undertaken, and in many cases, pioneered. The *Gundam* series has created

room for diverse work development and media mixes by constructing a large story

based on its unique world and then using unique new extra-textual works to further

develop that. As introduced in the discussion by Ōtsuka and Azuma, the Gundam

series' media mixes such as GUNPLA were often referred to in the context of narrative

consumption. However, the series also features initiatives and meta-content that

cannot be captured within the framework of narrative consumption theory, all of

which are notable in the history of media mixes in Japanese animation. As briefly

covered and theorized in this work, the Gundam series has undertaken various

challenges in relation to media mix, including comic book adaptations, game

adaptations, and series-specific magazine strategies. Behind the Gundam series'

growth to this point as content is the fact that it has combined a media mix that allows

for the consumption of stories and a media mix that does not have a story to match the

needs of the consumers of each era. Through repeated efforts to reproduce Gundams and mobile suits in realistic three-dimensional forms, for which the "real thing" is not supposed to exist, and to weave background settings and stories to make their existence more convincing, we have become aware of the existence of the "real thing" and have come to feel a pseudo-aura from the reproductions. This is a unique characteristic of the Gundam series. Still, given the breadth and complexity of this franchise, there is certainly room for subsequent research on the evolution of the media mix strategy for the series as a whole. In addition, in the Gundam series, the copyright was transferred by the original author Tomino from the beginning, and as a result, various media mixes were conducted flexibly,[121] and the pros and cons of this and comparisons with other anime works are also considered to be worthy of further research.

An important challenge faced in evaluating the Gundam series is that the media mix has become so enormous that it has become difficult to consolidate content. In 2019, the number of Gundam-related books owned by individuals was recognized as a Guinness World Record at 4,049.[122] For example, a cross-series encyclopedic book series of mobile suit encyclopedias, called *MS daizenshû*, has been released irregularly since 1988 with different publishers. The *GUNDAM SENTINEL*, also mentioned in this paper, was a content derived from model magazines, and although it differs

significantly from the rest of the series in terms of copyright, it was included in the *MS daizenshû 2015* and other publications.[123] However, in the 2021 edition, GUNDAM SENTINEL is no longer included,[124] as the publisher Kadokawa states on its website that "some works are not included in the chronological table due to the wishes of the rights holders."[125] There are also issues such as whether or not works that do not appear in cross-series books and games, such as this *MS daizenshû*, should be recognized as canonical history for the franchise. It would   be worthwhile to examine these points in comparison with other franchises and series such as *Star Wars*, where similar complications and conflicts – even termed 'canon wars' – are known to exist.

On the other hand, too many media mixes and series developments of Gundam have themselves led to the creation of new products and stories that attempt to archive Gundam. This kind of media mix that becomes like an Ouroboros is an advantage in the sense that content can be mass-produced, but there is a risk that it will become a closed world of hardcore fans. One of the efforts to break the circle may be a social initiative such as the "Gundam Global Challenge" mentioned earlier. The project, called GUDA (GUNDAM UNIVERSAL CENTURY DEVELOPMENT ACTION), aims to return the message of the Gundam series, which has depicted a future society, to the real world, and to conduct open innovation research and development to realize a better future society.[126] Among these activities are unique attempts to support the

launch of open-access journal to which anyone can contribute.[127] The reason why Gundam is a good match for a project that considers such real-life issues may be due to the fact that the Gundam series has been pursuing a realism that relies on the real world and science in its pursuit of realism, in addition to the fact that it has been gaining recognition as a character through its continued challenge of a diverse media mix. Given that Gundam is set in a future society of mankind, the pursuit of realism in the Gundam world is, in turn, linked to the imagination of a future society of mankind. The Gundam series has always been about new media mixes, involving fans and communicating in an interactive manner. We will keep an eye on their future challenges, and we encourage fellow researchers to do the same.

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