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Kunio Okawara, The Man Who Designed 'Gundam' And Created The Profession Of Mechanical Design

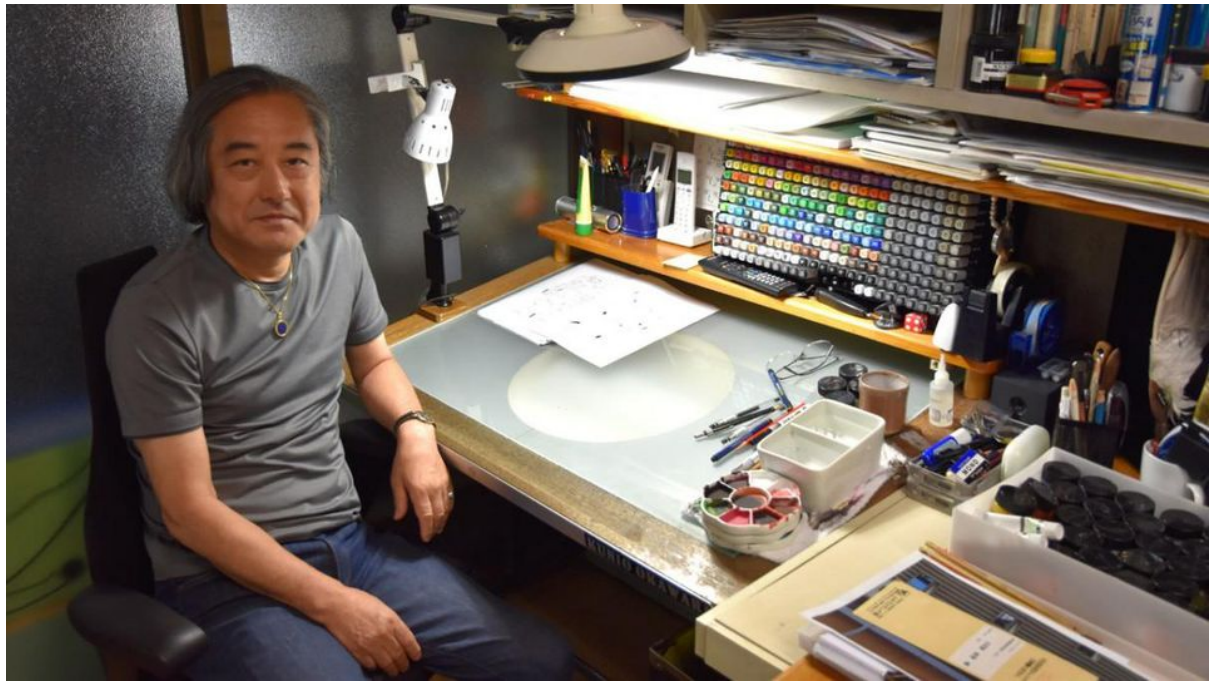


[Ollie Barder](#)

Contributor

[Games](#) I cover gaming in Japan as well as the pop-culture here.

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Kunio Okawara at his desk in his studio. (Photo credit: Ollie Barder)

When it comes to the profession of mechanical design, there really is only one person that comes to mind, mainly because he invented the role and has since gone onto influence anime, manga and games for nearly half a century now. I am of course referring to [Kunio Okawara](#) and I was lucky enough to meet with him recently at his studio and find out more about the work he does.

Based in [Inagi](#), Okawara lives in a wonderfully tranquil neighborhood and it made for a nice change of pace to get out of the intensity of central Tokyo.

His studio actually comes in two parts, an illustration room and an industrial factory where he makes all sorts of things, and it had “Okawara Factory” written on the outside, so I at least knew I was in the right place.

When we met, he was very kind and it was clear he was already doing some other work at his illustration desk. As we sat down his wife very kindly provided refreshments and it became clear that this area was one he’d lived in his whole life.

“I was born around here in Inagi, this piece of land has belonged to my family for generations. For over 300 years my family has been living in this area, since the Edo period in fact, and I've been living here since I was born in 1947. So for 68 years I've been living here.

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“When I was little I liked playing with mechanical things but I never thought I'd ever get into something that would involve drawing or designing. Up until high school I was at the state school and when I went to university I chose to study graphic design. Though that was at the beginning and during my second year at university I changed my major and started to study

textile design. After that, when I graduated, I went to work at Onward Kashiya because it was one of the biggest textile and apparel companies. After being there for some time but around the period I was getting married, I thought about my career and realized that there was [Tatsunoko Productions](#) quite close to where my wife's family lived, so to clarify they were in [Kokubunji](#) and my wife's family were in [Kunitachi](#), sort of a neighboring city. Looking at the job section in the newspaper and I found something at Tatsunoko Productions and then went to work there. While there I started on drawing the background art.

“While at Tatsunoko Production I had a boss called [Mitsuki Nakamura](#). He asked me to design all the mecha for [Science Ninja Team Gatchaman](#). The promise was that after that I was able to go back to training for background art. So I worked on *Gatchaman* for two years but after that, Tatsunoko Productions kept on producing mecha-oriented projects. Starting from [Hurricane Polymar](#) and then it was a succession of other similar projects. So I didn't really go back to the background art design training for a long time and up until now I've been designing mecha.

“So when I entered into this industry it was to do with my marriage and that is was convenient to work at a nearby location. The point was, I wasn't initially getting into it because I was hugely passionate about anime or manga. In a way, it allowed me to take each project very coolly, just observing the deadlines and being objective about the whole thing. It really has just been a continuation of that up until now. In the process of working on each project I didn't get too involved with designing, it was a different take compared to how other people had entered into the industry.”



The iconic designs of the RX-78-2 Gundam (bottom) and MS-06S Zaku II (top) from the anime Mobile Suit Gundam. (Photo credit: Sunrise)

At this point, it was already clear that Okawara was a very grounded and calm individual. If I am honest, after interviewing other figures in the industry here I wasn't expecting someone so chilled and affable. This objectivity then was something that made a lot of sense and also helped to explain the variety of work he's done over the years.

Naturally, I was very keen to discover his influences, as he is the first ever credited mechanical designer, such as who or what helped get him onto that path.

“In terms of my influences, at Tatsunoko Productions it was Nakamura who was doing the mecha design and as I continued to work on mecha I referred to his work a great deal. At the time there wasn't any sort of job category or credit called 'mechanical design,' but I was the first one that got that title in the credits for Gatchaman. Nakamura really was a big influence for me. As an illustrator, I also used to look at books publishing in America as it wasn't the time with the internet. So I took a look at these kinds of books.”

It's here that Okawara went to his expansive bookshelf, which covered an entire wall of his studio. While curated, it was clear that these were all books to be used and referenced. Pulling down two books in particular, [Space Wars: Worlds and Weapons](#) as well as *The World of Tomorrow*, he started talking more about his influences.

“Really though I studied how all this should be done by looking at Nakamura's work the most. I also referred to other people who were in the same industry, like [Studio Nue](#) and [Yutaka Izubuchi](#). So those were another reference point.

“As an aside, [Syd Mead](#) also came to my studio as well when he worked on [Turn A Gundam](#).

“In terms of [Chris Foss](#)' work, I thought his work was a bit dated but in some parts, especially when he's designing anything mainly mechanical then some of those were very useful points of reference.”

For anyone that knows of Nakamura's work, then this strong influence makes a lot of sense. Nakamura was amazing at coming up with clean and sleek designs for things like *Gatchaman* and [Time Bokan](#). You'd see his vehicles and be able to identify them by their silhouette alone. Sadly, Nakamura died a fair few years ago now but like Okawara, his legacy is very much still with us.

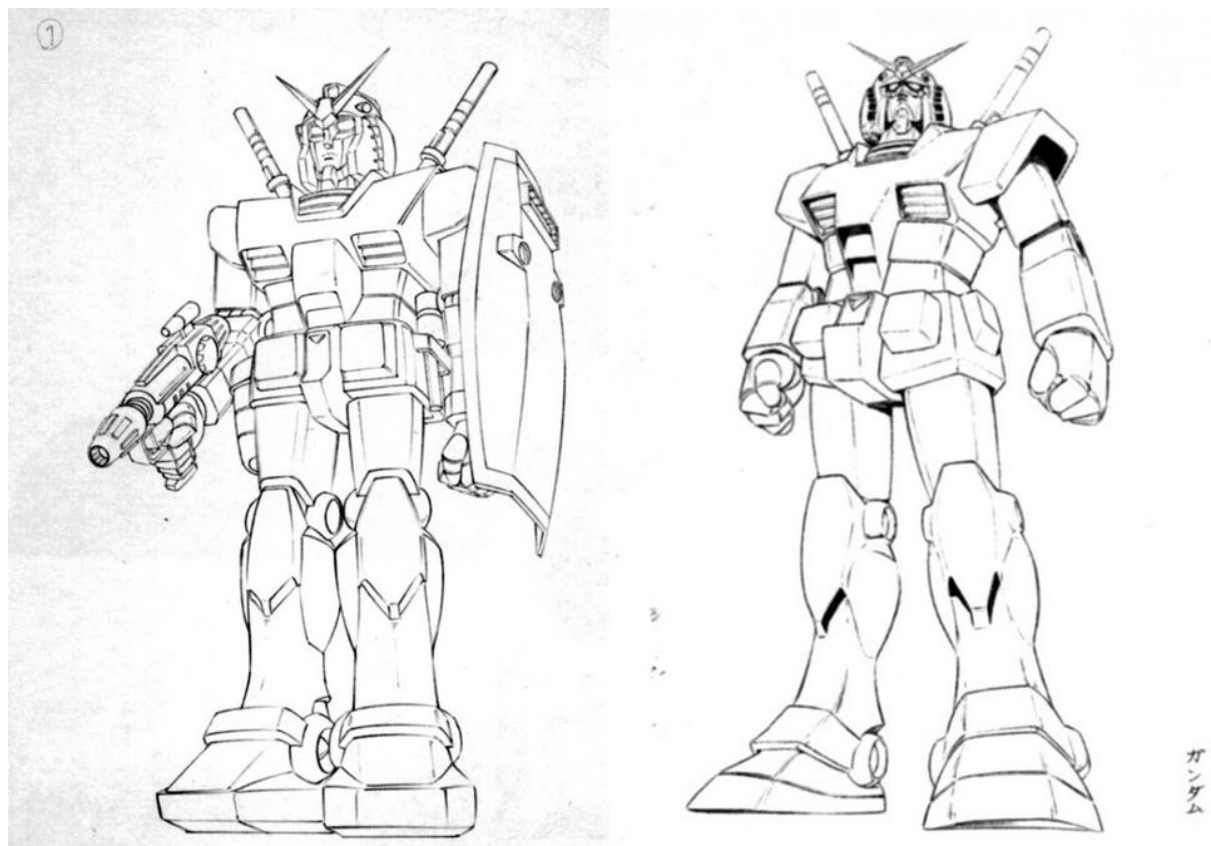
From Gunboy To Gundam And Beyond

For many, Okawara is known for his work on the original [Mobile Suit Gundam](#), not least because it moved from the realm of [super robots](#) into something new and more realistic but because of its immense success.

As I [interviewed Shoji Kawamori previously](#), he mentioned that Studio Nue was involved in the early pre-production for the series and I wanted to know more about that.

“At the beginning of the production for *Mobile Suit Gundam*, Studio Nue was involved in the scenario. Specifically, [Kenichi Matsuzaki](#) from Studio Nue was involved, whereas the design

side of things was helmed by [Yoshikazu Yasuhiko](#) and he got a commission from Sunrise. At the beginning, Sunrise was planning to do this project with Yasuhiko and Studio Nue but Yasuhiko wanted to work with me. So that's how this project came to me.



The original samurai themed version of the Gundam (left) followed by the final production version (right). (Photo credit: Sunrise)

“The reason why Yasuhiko chose me was because Studio Nue were a group of people that got together to work around a science fiction theme. In that sense, all the points of view they brought were really science fiction centric. Not exactly a wide-ranging type of entertainment. So they wanted to make the whole thing really scientific and their mecha weren't all that inclusive. Whereas Tatsunoko Productions could work on a wider ranging set of themes and it could include mecha design that wasn't specifically science fiction centric.

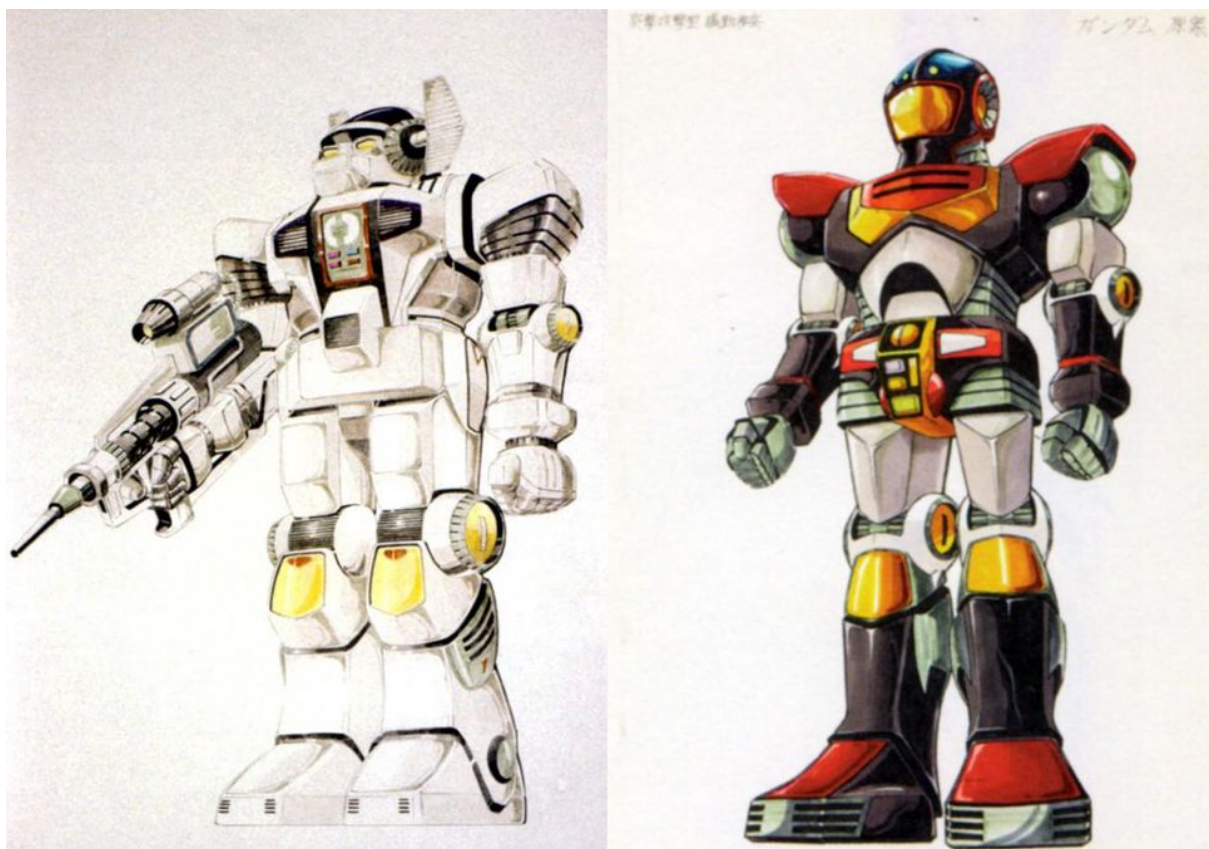
“Studio Nue's initial design influence came in the form of the Guncannon and this was done by [Kazutaka Miyatake](#) who had recently worked on the illustrations for the [Starship Troopers](#) novel. However, Yasuhiko brought me in around this time, as this early Guncannon design wasn't strong enough to lead the whole project. So not protagonist material and I proposed the Gundam instead. In the process of coming up with the Gundam, there were ideas from a great many people reflected in the final design. So it's not like a single-handed thing.

“To clarify, the version of the Guncannon now known in *Mobile Suit Gundam* is very different from the one that was originally designed. It changed quite dramatically from that original design and idea. It was maybe more like the powered suit Miyatake did for *Starship Troopers*.

“So what I proposed for the Gundam was basically a samurai. So the head had a [chonmage](#) at the top with a face and a [maedate](#), in the form of a V-fin. It was also meant to be 18-meters tall and as such the face and a mouth was a little bit strange, so we put a mask over the mouth.”

This in particular was very interesting, I’d known of the samurai styling of the early *Gundam* designs for a while, not to mention [having previously written a great deal about the subject](#), but to have it openly confirmed and explained like this was fascinating.

At this point, I too had brought some books as I thought they would be helpful in terms of reference to certain questions I had. One of these books was the artbook sold at the Okawara exhibition I went to last year. In it, it showed some of the progression of the early designs for *Mobile Suit Gundam*, which was originally known as *Gunboy*.



Some of the very early designs from Gundam when it was known as Gunboy. (Photo credit: Sunrise)

“So this was something I drew for my job but at that stage the concept for *Gundam* was not fixed at all (shown directly above left). This was way before then. At the time I was working on [Daitairn 3](#), which was obviously very anime and manga styled. However, the next project coming up was something based in outer space, using mecha, as well as something that had never been done before. That was the whole idea. The inspiration then was to come from the clothes or suit an astronaut wears. That’s where the idea for mobile suits came from. However, at the time when I drew these there was no consensus, or any specific concrete ideas. I don’t think the name *Gundam* was even mentioned at this point.

“This one (shown directly above above right) is directly based around the astronaut's clothing and since it was a mecha, it would be the focus for the merchandising. I proposed this, literally taking the idea from the astronaut's clothing and then made into a mecha. As a toy though, this doesn't sell. Going back a bit, this was the stage when things were called *Gunboy*. At the time, Sunrise and I had gone to Clover, a toy company, to deliver a presentation. The selling point being that this was a fighting mecha but that it had interchangeable A and B parts with the [Core Fighter](#) in the middle. Thus allowing kids to play with a variety of parts. I was mainly working on the ideas for the toys because it has to sell that in terms of the merchandising. Whereas Tomino was working on the story but at the time, I had very little contact with him at all. I was working most closely with Sunrise's planning team and my role was to sell the toy idea to the sponsors. Obviously, the planning team were in contact with both Yasuhiko and Tomino, coordinating with me as they went along. To clarify, at this stage neither Yasuhiko nor Tomino gave any real direction.

“What was happening is that at the time of *Daitairn 3* obviously I'd design the mecha but I was coming at it from the point of view of selling it as a toy. So I was delivering presentations, making mockups and speaking to the toy company. *Gundam* was after this but it took a similar sort of process. So I was mainly talking to the sponsors about the toys and how to make them sell. I'd discuss with Sunrise what type of toy could be sold and what would work best for *Gunboy*. That discussion took place with Sunrise's head of planning, which was also one of the company heads and had the authority to make decisions. The story and all that came later after all that was fixed.

“It was the same with *Daitairn 3*, so the mecha was fixed then the story is placed around that. In the case of Tomino, he wouldn't place any directive on the mecha design.

“That said in terms of the Zeonic designs in the original *Gundam* I got really involved in were the [Zaku](#), [Gouf](#) and [Dom](#). So these were the ones I worked hard on. However, the other designs towards the end of the series, then Tomino would send me rough ideas. All I did for that was then filter it through to the character sheet. Originally, I had the idea of how the Zeon and Federation forces would look like, but after Tomino started sending me rough ideas then all that got a bit messed up. So I have to attribute the number and variety of mobile suits to Tomino and all I did was clean up those rough ideas to something that looked three dimensional.”

Following his work on the original *Mobile Suit Gundam*, Okawara has also contributed to other series but I wanted to understand how that worked. Especially, as he is credited as a supervising mechanical designer on some of the later series and movies.

“Naturally, I worked on the first *Mobile Suit Gundam* in regards to the mechanical design, but the designs were sold to them. So I don't have the rights to contribute to that further when they want to modify it. Sunrise didn't really inform me of anything but they're not obliged to do so. So I wasn't really involved a lot in later *Gundam* series.

“At the time of [Zeta Gundam](#), the director [Yoshiyuki Tomino](#) asked that all the mecha designs, character designs and the art design to be given away to a younger generation. He also said that he was going to give my role to the younger generation as well. That's how that all started. However, I still designed the [Gundam Mk. II](#) and the [Hi-Zack](#) for that series, though other designs were done by [Kazumi Fujita](#) and [Mamoru Nagano](#). Previously, Yasuhiko had been the main on the original Gundam but his role was handed over to

[Hiroyuki Kitazume](#). In addition, Nakamura's art direction role was handed over to [Shigemi Ikeda](#). All these directives came from Tomino.

“Such was this situation that it meant I wasn't involved in [Gundam ZZ](#) at all. Then later on Sunrise said that for [Gundam F91](#) they wanted the original *Mobile Suit Gundam* staff back, so I worked with Yasuhiko again.”

Bear in mind though, Okawara is credited on *Gundam ZZ* but like he says, they're not his designs in terms of the rights. So it's up to Sunrise on how they use them. In some ways, it's nice that he is still credited for something, as without his initial designs on *Mobile Suit Gundam* the series and mecha wouldn't be as popular as they are.

It's this popularity that I also wanted to talk to him about, as *Gundam* as a franchise is even bigger today than it was when it was released at the end of the 70s.

“At the time the original *Gundam*, I was working on four projects. Two with Tatsunoko Productions, [Gatchaman II](#) and [Zendarman](#), and two with Sunrise, *Gundam* and [The Ultraman](#). Also with *Gundam* I didn't think I wanted to do this forever, as I prefer to do many varied projects. That's more fun. In terms of the work process, I only start working on something after I've received an offer to do so. It's not as though I have something and then propose it to someone else. Once the offer arrives at my door, then I will consider it and agree on the contract. That's how it works. I personally prefer to come up with new concepts for new projects, so I don't necessarily want to do the serial. While it's wonderful in terms of your livelihood but other than that I prefer working on new things. So I don't find it sad that I am not really involved in *Gundam* all that much these days.

“The way I think of my work is to realize what the director wants as close as I possibly can to his imagination. So I don't think I am an artist but maybe more of artisan. The creation of animation is not something that only one person can do either, as it is definitely a team-based endeavor. So one person's insistence should not delay the whole process, because a project's schedule is very tightly planned to coincide with things like the broadcasting date and all that. My priority then is how I receive the project; understand it and then how quickly I can get to the output stage. I don't spend too much time thinking whether the design is good or bad, it is just that I receive the commission and then my output from that.

“I never thought that *Gundam* would be so popular nearly 40 years on. In this industry there are always new things coming along, so I never thought it would be like this. In terms of the mobile suits variations, or [MSV](#), there are just so many now. To the extent that there parts that don't really make sense. What I wanted to do in regards to that I managed to do in terms of [gunpla](#).”

Dougram, VOTOMS And Their Western Gaming Legacy

While many know of Okawara's work in regards to *Gundam*, his other mecha design work is as noteworthy, namely his collaboration with [Ryosuke Takahashi](#) on a variety of anime during the 80s.

These are also very important in a gaming sense but I will get to that in due course.

“As for [Dougram](#), When gunpla became this big boom in Japan, Takara wanted to make plamodel. Normally a mecha's face is the most important thing but Takara proposed to me quite a new idea because they wanted to make a real battle mecha. So using a battle helicopter's cockpit as a head, so that's how *Dougram* came about. Within the team I was working within, there was a junior guy from my university. So we could make the mock-up as soon I did the design and that allowed me to check how it look in the real world very quickly. At the time, the director for the animation side was Ryosuke Takahashi and [Takeyuki Kanda](#). Kanda was also extremely knowledgeable about armaments and weapons in general, so it was going to be a full on battle type story.



The Combat Armor Dougram from the anime Fang of the Sun Dougram. This was copied and used in both BattleTech and MechWarrior as the Shadow Hawk. (Photo credit: Sunrise)

“The story itself turned into guerrilla warfare and was quite political. As a result, this meant the viewer of the anime would be older than the age group that would be playing with the model. So we did something called Dual Model for the toy merchandising with *Dougram* and the toys themselves were quite expensive. Though at the time there was no toy that had the interior type detail, so that was quite new.

“With *VOTOMS*, one of the problems with the Dual Model toys though was that they couldn't recreate the famous sitting down pose of the *Dougram*. In the anime, the *Dougram* was 10 meters tall but in the anime it looks much bigger than that. In animation it is quite difficult to express the scale of things, whether making the head smaller or bigger. Animators cannot really communicate the size to the viewer so I started to wonder whether I could do a project where any animator could realize the scale of the mecha. I wanted to do something much smaller. So I started to think of the armored troopers in *VOTOMS* versus a person, allowing the relative scale to be always apparent. As anyone can understand the height of a person and that in turn would give a helpful point of reference for the mecha.

“As I worked on the project, I put a *Microman* into a mockup and from that mockup I calculated that four meters would be the right size to make a changeable toy. So using that quite understandable size reference and then worked on it from that. Luckily, at the same time Takahashi had similar ideas for a smaller type of mecha, so it quickly became a project.

“To explain a bit further, Takahashi is about five years older than me and he was a kid during the Second World War. He remembers seeing the US Army jeeps around at the time he was growing up and that whenever they drove around they left a big oil slick everywhere. Making a really shiny oily pattern to the water patches all over the roads. So he was talking about those jeep sized mecha as an idea. As it turned out what I worked out doing the mockup with the *Microman* figure was this four size but that too turned out to be about the same length as a jeep. So that's how ideas met.

“In terms of the design itself, Takahashi doesn't tend to have too many requirements, so he doesn't ask me to change this part or that part. He doesn't do that. Where we both met in terms of ideas was that we understood the idea of heavy armaments for real warfare. Whereas the younger generation nowadays, who haven't experienced war, would never really understand how something that heavy was so close to our lives. So because they never really experienced war, they could never really come up with something like *VOTOMS*. For instance, the generation of Izubuchi already has a great deal of classic designs surrounding him, so their life is so far away from actual warfare. *VOTOMS* was a result of people who directly experienced wartime.



The ATM-09-ST Scopedog from Armored Trooper VOTOMS. This design in particular was responsible for inspiring much of the functional parameters for the mecha in the Heavy Gear series. (Photo credit: Sunrise).

“Regarding the wheels, or rollers, in the AT's feet that came from Takahashi. To get the [Scopedog](#) to walk in terms of animation would require a lot of work because it was quite small. Whereas, having wheels in the feet meant it could skate around and save on the leg animation.

“I also [played that VOTOMS VR simulator](#) with Takahashi recently, it was fun but I felt a bit seasick”

Now, both *Dougram* and *VOTOMS* have a very important role to play in regards to how Western mecha games developed.

Specifically, *Dougram*'s designs were [directly copied](#) in *BattleTech* and *MechWarrior*, such as the [Shadow Hawk](#) being a straight copy of the [Dougram](#) among many others. In addition, *VOTOMS* is widely known to have directly influenced the mecha in [Heavy Gear](#), with the wheels in the feet as well as their overall parameters.

This is an important point, as with real robot mecha design form follows function. In that sense, copying the designs means you are copying low-level functionality, which will in turn define how the game will operate.

That's why when I often hear people say they prefer Western mecha design from things like *BattleTech* or *MechWarrior*, they are actually saying that are fan of Okawara's work from the 80s.

I also [talked about this subject with Shoji Kawamori](#), as some designs from *Macross* were also copied in *BattleTech* and *MechWarrior*, such as the destroids designed by *Kazutaka Miyatake*. However, *Dougram*'s influence is clearly a stronger one as much of *BattleTech*'s narrative bears a close similarity to *Dougram*'s.

However, Okawara's approach to all this is one of detached calm and in some ways more artistic as well.

“Seeing my designs used elsewhere is exciting for me. My time was when my generation looked towards the designs done in the West and then get inspired and made into their own projects. Now those things we made are inspiring people in places like Hollywood and elsewhere. That's really exciting. In the ideal world, there would be a cycle created that both ends are inspiring one another. Going round and round. Now in Japan, sadly there isn't anything new coming out in terms of mecha design. Nothing really challenging is appearing for years now. Somewhere in Asia, one day there will be something new introduced to viewers and then the industry in Japan will realize that they have got to actually keep on producing something new. Pumping that into the industry so that once again, they would become a source of inspiration for others, then Hollywood would look to it and then we would look at them again and become a cycle. That would be ideal.”

While it's clear he obviously cares about his work and the design he's done, the real drive is obviously to come up with something new. So mutual inspiration, however it may manifest, is just part of that process for him.

Part of me feels that he still deserves to be properly credited but he's clearly happy with how things have turned out.

A Blue Comet And The King Of Braves

One of my favorite anime series is [*Layzner*](#), because not only it is brilliantly done but also [how it has gone on to influence all manner of other anime and games over the years.](#)

The designs are also quite different to other mecha of that period and I was curious how they had been conceived.

“In regard to *Layzner*, we worked with Bandai who released the plamodel. Bandai being Bandai, they always wanted to incorporate the new technology or a new thing that was made possible in technological sense into their toys and kits. At that time, there was development going on for plastic that changed its color once it was hit by ultraviolet light. That was the new thing. So they suggested that using that as a canopy, having it change color, that was the main requirement. During the period around *Macross*’ release, there was an aeroplane design but they wanted to do something different from that. So designing something different that wasn't an aeroplane, that ended up as *Layzner*.



The SPT-LZ-00X Layzner from the anime Blue Comet SPT Layzner. This series and mecha has also influenced a lot of mecha games over the years. Such as Omega Boost, Zone of the Enders, Bangai-O and Armored Core For Answer, to name but a few (Photo credit: Sunrise).

“As usual, myself and the Sunrise planning team went to do a presentation at Bandai, then working on that to fix the mecha side and then the story, setting creation, was handled by the directors. Sadly, this new light sensitive material didn't make it in time for the development, so it wasn't used in the end.

“Like *VOTOMS*, I designed the mecha so that the scale of it is quite clear. So you can see the pilot from the canopy in the head. It's transparent. However, the animator tended to make the heads too small because it looked more streamlined. What I had in mind was the image from the Second World War, where each fighter plane would send signals or gestures between the pilots in the cockpits so as to communicate with one another. For that purpose, the canopy for the mecha in *Layzner* was transparent and I imagine that this theme would be included in the series but it almost never came about.

“With other things like the head scope that Eiji uses, the character designers came up with that. Same with Chirico's helmet in *VOTOMS*, that was the character designers. In the industry, who does what is sometimes really vague. So who does the character design and the character designer's territory is up to this bit or the mecha designer's remit is here. It's really vague. So if someone asks me, I will do it but if not asked then I don't. This also goes with the background art as well, what is the remit of background art, it's never really clear.

Again, it's fascinating to see that the mecha were fixed in place prior to the story and that what was intended never really came about.

While *Layzner* is definitely on the harder edged real robot end of the spectrum, it's worth realizing that Okawara did go back and design super robots as well, with his work on the Brave series.

One of the last of these was [King of Braves GaoGaiGar](#), but one of the most successful anime of the 90s almost never happened.

“With *GaoGaiGar* this was with Takara again, they wanted to do a ten year project. The [Brave series](#). So they came to me with an offer. I started off with the [Exkaiser](#) design and because I worked closely with Takara they were planning this from the time of [Granzort](#). Over the course of the various series, the sales started to decline in terms of merchandise. So Takara's sales team was debating whether they should continue or not. However, Sunrise was very keen to keep going. They were just set to carry on. Meanwhile it wasn't clear whether Takara was going to continue sponsoring the project or not. After a rather unclear time with some arguments, in the end Takara agreed to sponsor and it was all go again. In terms of the enthusiasm, it was Sunrise that really wanted to carry on. So I'd been involved in it for a long time, again to sell the toys I got involved and the producer was Takahashi. That alone tells you that Sunrise was really dead keen on this project. Having done that, the review was quite good.

“Regarding the shinkansen for the shoulders, for the whole process Takara was very much involved. Their product development team was involved in the process. Lots of specifications came from them. I tended to work on the parts that didn't impact on the transformation. We had weekly meetings and I picked up the areas that doesn't touch upon the transformation and then finish the parts one by one. The whole process was done with that kind of method.

“When Sunrise started out it was a very small company. There were only two studios, one was working on their own project and the other was getting commission work from Toei. So that had cashflow issues all the way through at the beginning. Unless they sell toys and gain income from the royalties, they wouldn't have been able to function. It was a key point for the studio that they sell toys. First and foremost there was toy sales being the focus. Myself and the head of the planning team at Sunrise would fix the toy and then the story was made. Luckily, [Zambot 3](#), *Daitairn 3* and *Gundam* were a hit. After that it meant they could do more challenging and interesting projects. Basically, toy sales really kept them alive. In that sense, myself and the planning team had a great deal of decision making power, because the toy had to be fixed first and then the story happened later. In that sense there were a lot of interesting outcomes from that arrangement, as when we fixed the mecha we didn't imagine the stories would take such a different turn like they often did. In the case of [Xabungle](#), they started to make the story based on Tomino's direction and it became something I never imagined it would be based on the designs I had done. This setup is probably the other way around to the 'normal' process done elsewhere, but that's how it was.”

This approach on finalizing the mecha beforehand is something that would make a great deal of sense with gaming. Games are a type of abstract toy and nailing the functionality down first makes a lot of sense. It's just a shame that people seem fixated on nailing the lore and narrative beforehand rather than drill down on what their games can do.

To my mind at least, mecha games would benefit a lot more from this toy based process that both Okawara and Sunrise took with their anime production and subsequent merchandising.

Gundam The Origin And The Future

As we were finishing up, we talked more about some of his more favorite projects and what he's been doing in more recent years. While Okawara has a calming demeanor, he's still clearly very passionate about his work and what new thing may come next.

“In terms of my favorite projects then it would probably be *VOTOMS* at Sunrise and [Yatterman](#) at Tatsunoko Productions. I really enjoyed working on those projects. Naturally, I enjoy all the work I do.

“The designs like *Gundam* because everyone is so focused upon it, do get a lot of attention and make me feel nervous because someone might come back to me and say a few things. Whereas the projects like *Yatterman*, there isn't that much focus on it so no one really comments or says anything, so it's more fun oriented. What I prefer doing is a project that all generations, regardless of the sex, can really enjoy. That's something I enjoy working on. Whether something is harder or easier, *Gundam* would be harder because of that focus that so many people put upon. These days, those that want to work on *Gundam* are the young people who entered into the anime industry adoring those series. So there are many people that want to take on that kind of *Gundam* role and that means the offers no longer come to me. However, this isn't bad because I prefer doing something new. So if there is something along the lines of [Gundam Build Fighters](#) style based around gunpla that would be my new source of enjoyment in terms of projects. If someone also makes an offer to me showcasing a different project that I haven't done before, then I would love to work on something like that.

“In terms of my hobbies, my work is my hobby really. However, around the age of forty I started scuba diving. These days I have less work, so I work seriously on each project. To be

honest, I don't like drawing very much but I love making mechanical things. I have my own little factory, where I sculpt metal and make things.



The Inagi city mascot Inashinosuke (left) and Haro from Mobile Suit Gundam (right).
(Photo credit: Ollie Barder)

“The original fans of *Gundam* are in their forties, so if they get into the industry they are in the position to be able to put forward projects to their company. So the collaborations with these kinds of people are increasing these days. Now that I have a stable livelihood, I want to still work but enjoy that more at the same time. So the mascot I did for Inagi, [Inashinosuke](#), that was done completely on a volunteer basis. With things like that, I am just trying to enjoy the rest of my working life, as I am turning 70 next year. I don't think I will continue to work at the same kind of rate like I used to but at the same time having said that, if a new anime project comes along then I can be a legend.

“Yasuhiko is the same age as me and I am involved with his new [Gundam The Origin](#) project, so as long as he is up and about and doing things then I can't give my work up.

“In general, I felt that as if I was floating through my life. I didn't have any specific target as such. I just drifted into this industry by chance, worked hard however, and then became the first ever person to become a mecha designer. No one actually told me 'well done' because unlike Yasuhiko, I didn't have the aim to become a manga artist and, as I hadn't come from somewhere like Hokkaido into the Tokyo scene and making it, I couldn't really present anyone that kind of story. That's not how it was. I had a good life, having fun, if there is another unusual project or work oriented thing coming along then I would only think that's another fun thing to do. In some ways, I've been quite passive but that's how it has been.”

Being able to talk with Okawara like this was fascinating. As I said previously, his tranquil and calm approach to things was not at all what I was expecting. However, in many ways it helps to explain how he has been so varied and prolific in terms of his mecha design output.



The surprisingly large renditions of Char's Zaku (left) and Amuro's Gundam (right) outside Inagi station. (Photo credit: Ollie Barder)

Considering how successful his designs have been, part of me felt before that he should be rewarded financially for that. Yet after visiting and talking with him, it's clear he is content and happy with what he's done. In some ways, he has found a type of wealth but in a different and more fundamental sense.

Leaving Inagi, I swung by the back of the station to see two giant statues, one of the Gundam and another for Char's Zaku, not to mention Inagi's mascot emblazoned all over the place. It reminded me of the swathe of gunpla across the world and the [huge full scale Gundam in Odaiba](#). Okawara's designs are a big part of everyday life in Japan and his work has had and continues to have a massive global influence. Yet, all I could think of as I left was this kind and cheerful man tinkering in his factory and designing mecha at his desk.

Okawara has shaped the world of mecha design for decades and will continue to do so for a long time to come. My only hope is that more people will acknowledge his work more openly, as without him we wouldn't really have mecha in the first place.

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I cover gaming in Japan as well as the pop-culture here. You can [follow me on Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) or check out [my YouTube videos](#). I also founded and continue to man...

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