

## Gundam to the Rescue!

by Andrew Birkbeck

"It is the year 0079 of the Universal Century. A half-century has passed since Earth began moving its burgeoning population into gigantic orbiting space colonies. A new home for mankind..."

Nine months ago, the cluster of colonies furthest from the Earth called Side 3 proclaimed itself the Principality of Zeon and initiated a war of independence. After a month of fighting, half the populations of both sides had been destroyed. Eight months have passed since the war started, and the war is at a stalemate..."

So begins Episode One of *Mobile Suit Gundam*, a Japanese Anime television show launched 23 years ago in 1979. The *Gundam* series follow the exploits of the two protagonist sides, the Earth Federation and the Principality of Zeon, as they do battle with various fighting machines, including the central characters: "Mobile Suits", giant robots controlled from within by human pilots. As with the U.S. television series *Star Trek*, *Mobile Suit Gundam* was cancelled before the series had a chance to catch on. However, it began daily reruns a year later, and became a smash hit. Following the original 43 episode series, follow-on series were produced, such as *Gundam 0080* in 1989, *Gundam 0083* in 1991-92, all the way up to *Turn A Gundam* in 1999-2000. And on top of the television shows, there have been highly successful *Gundam* movies produced for theater release, as well as comic book series, and video games. But for we modelers, the most amazing aspect of the *Gundam* series has been the massive merchandizing phenomenon—plastic model robot kits.

*Mobile Suit Gundam* was originally sponsored in 1979 by die-cast toy firms. However, when it went into its very successful re-runs in 1980/81, the Bandai toy firm began releasing detailed scale

models of the various space ships and mobile suits appearing in the show. These kits were an overnight smash hit, creating a feverish demand for the models that led to a 1982 incident in which 19 children were injured in a department store stampede! Bandai has done so well from the models that they ended up purchasing the production studio that produced the animated television series and movies. This turned Bandai into a firm whose combined sales approach US\$1 Billion annually!



I have known about *Gundam* model kits for a number of years, as a subscriber on and off to the Japanese monthly hobby magazine, *Model Graphix*. This superb magazine, which in my opinion makes the likes of *FineScale Modeler* look third rate, was a leader in promoting the *Gundam* modeling phenomenon. Each issue of MG featured one or more of the new Bandai kits in a major feature article. This said, I didn't know where the ideas for these models originated. This changed a few weeks back as the school summer vacations approached. I wanted to find an

activity that I could share with my two children to fill in the vast amounts of free time available to them during the vacation, yet which might also involve my personal interests as well. I can only take so many games of "Chutes and Ladders" and playing "Ken" to my daughter's "Barbie". Pushing two children on swings for too long starts to hurt one's arms...

So, what to do, what to do? The answer came while visiting our local Tony Roma's rib joint at Northgate. Following our usual routine when we eat out, I leave the table once I finish eating, taking our 3-½ year old William for a walk around the block since he gets a bit upset being confined to a highchair for more than a short time. On the most recent visit, we chanced to walk into a small shop within the same strip mall, called Kicks Hobby Japan. Lo and behold, wall to wall merchandise covering the Japanese anime phenomenon, including large numbers of *Gundam* model kits from Bandai. With their brightly colored box tops and their "cool" robot subject matter (William's word for them, not mine), William was soon loading up his arms with kits for me to get him! When we were joined a short time later by my wife and 7-½ year old daughter Zoe, Zoe quickly agreed with William that *Gundams* were indeed "way cool". So we bought one kit each for the two children, a "good guy" for Zoe, and a "bad guy" for William.

The kits we purchased were at the low end of the Bandai range, at \$8.95 each, plus sales tax, and extremely good kits they turned out to be. Each kit consisted of one set of parts for a 1/144<sup>th</sup> scale Mobile Suit, plus a very nicely sculpted vinyl figure of the suit's pilot. The pilot figure is actually to a larger scale, standing as they do just under two inches tall. The Mobile Suit kit in 1/144<sup>th</sup> stands around five inches tall. For the pilot figure to be in scale with the Suit, it would need to be less than a half-inch tall.

The Mobile Suit parts from what I have seen (I have looked into four kits so far) consist of four sets of 7" x 5" sprues of

plastic, plus one sprue of vinyl parts. The plastic parts come in various colors, often more than one color on the same sprue (how'd they do that? ☺), and so it is possible for the junior modeler to produce a colorful model without resorting to painting parts. Self-adhesive stickers replace the normal decals, again making it junior modeler friendly. To top it all off, the kits are snap-tite. But unlike snap-tite kits I have seen before, these ones are very well engineered, and snap together very easily, and stay that way. All in all, they are excellent kits for junior modelers.

The vinyl parts are for the internal "joints" of the mobile suit, and that means that once completed, the *Gundam* model can be positioned in various poses. This adds even more fun for the children, as they can play with their models far more easily and safely than they could with your standard model of a car, tank, or especially an airplane. The model parts on these *Gundam* kits are both well detailed and sturdy. William has played with his, at age 3-½, and the model is still in one piece!

Since purchasing these "basic" *Gundam* kits, I have ventured into the higher end realm of Bandai's range, and purchased myself one of their "Master Grade" kits. This initial purchase was a "Zaku" series Mobile Suit, one of the "bad guy" versions fielded by the Principality of Zeon forces. The kit cost \$34 from Kicks Hobby Japan. The "Master Grade" series of kits are to the larger 1/100<sup>th</sup> scale and don't come with a vinyl pilot figure. And what an amazing kit this Zaku really is! This time you get 13 much larger sprues (up to 11 x 7 inches) of highly detailed parts, again molded in various colors, and again sometimes more than one color to a sprue. On one sprue, there were both clear and colored parts!!!! The stickers in the \$8.95 kits are replaced by high quality decals in the Master Grade kits. For those not used to Bandai kits, on first inspection this Zaku kit is equal to the likes of Tamiya and Hasegawa aircraft or armor kits.

While talking to the owner of Kicks Hobby Japan about the various aspects of *Gundam*, he pointed me towards the book *Gundam Official Guide*. I snapped this up the moment I saw it. At 128 pages, mostly color, this is an 11 x 9 inch soft covered book simply jam packed with information on the *Gundam* phenomenon. The book starts off with a condensed but very useful history of the *Gundam* Universe, covering each of the television series and movies.



There is a section covering details of each of the series' creators; the men who directed the various episodes; the major anime artists etc. Next follows a description of each individual series, the major plots covered, the various anime characters appearing in the series, and the various space ships and mobile suits, together with appropriate data covering weight, height, propulsion type, armament etc. This is all very detailed. Also appearing in this book are multiple page listings of the various video game releases, and of course, the Bandai models. All this for \$12, an amazing deal, and a real must for anyone interested in finding out about this series.

And finally, for those who wish to be "hard core" with their *Gundam* models, all of the *Gundam* series and movies are available on DVD, in English. Again, Kicks Hobby Japan has these for rental and you might also find them at Scarecrow Video in the University District. [The King County Library System also has the movies - ED.] I have started renting the first series, *Mobil Suit Gundam*. The animation in this series is acceptable, the story lines quite good, although there are some very cheesy characters. However, being the original series, it really is a must if you are to understand *Gundam*. By far the most lavishly illustrated series is *Gundam 0083*.

For anyone interested in building models with beginning modelers, or for that matter young modelers of any skill level, I can't recommend Bandai's *Gundam* kits highly enough. However, make sure you get the newer releases, as they are the most user friendly. This is as expected since tooling technology has changed quite a bit over the past 23 years. As for the senior modeler wishing challenging new subject matter, you can't beat a "Master Grade" *Gundam* kit. Happy modeling.

I have visited three model shops of late and all carry *Gundam* and other anime kits in various numbers. Without doubt Kicks Hobby Japan at 543 NE Northgate Way carries the largest numbers, and the best selection. They also as mentioned carry all the DVDs for rental, as well as various books and magazines on the same subject matter. Prices here are also very competitive. I have also found a decent selection at Skyway Model Shop and at Galaxy Hobbies in Lynnwood. For the very best listing of all the various anime currently available, HobbyLinkJapan at [www.hlj.com](http://www.hlj.com) is the place to go. You can probably pick up the kits more cheaply directly from Japan, especially if you order a few at a time (lower per unit shipping charges). Rainbow10 at [www.rainbow10.com](http://www.rainbow10.com) also has a great selection, but their site is minus HLJ's superb graphics. However, buying kits one at a time, doing it locally is as good a bet as any.