

U.S.-JAPAN  
**INNOVATORS**  
**PROJECT**

“Dai Sato talks with Doug McGray about animé – in Japan and around the world – and Sato’s development as a writer and creator.”

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**DM: American audiences know you as a writer for three very successful shows on the Cartoon Network: “Cowboy Bebop,” “Samurai Champloo,” and “Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex.” What are you working on now?**

DS: I’m the chief writer of two anime shows and one live-action series. I’m also working for my own company, Frognation.

**DM: How did you get into writing?**

DS: My family got a computer when I was a boy. I realized that when you write something on a computer, it looks like a draft for a book. That’s the first time I thought I wanted to write a story myself.

**DM: What did you write?**

DS: Just a copy of “Gundam.” I had a friend do the illustrations. We cut the pages up, and photocopied them. One of the guys who worked on that actually worked on the script for the original “Pokemon” game, years later.

**DM: When did you start to think about writing for television and film?**

DS: My father did set design for television dramas. He had all these scripts for television shows laying around the house—I’d read them in secret, when my dad wasn’t looking. After graduating from high school, I went to a trade school to become a TV writer. A *bad* trade school. But a couple famous industry people came as guest lecturers. At the end, when we got to ask questions, I said, “I want to join your company.” Then I sent them 200 scripts. A week later, they called me and offered me an internship: Three months, with no pay. . . actually, they paid me with leftover game show prizes.

**DM: 200 scripts?**

DS: They didn’t even read them. They just thought it was funny that I sent so many.

**DM: So, tell me about your current projects.**

DS: One is called “Eureka Seven.” The story takes place in a very poor area, an allegory to Tibet, where young people only have two choices: to join the army, or join this group of rock stars, who ride surfer robots and try to protect the planet. The planet is an organism. The army views it as a threat and wants to subdue it; the heroes campaign for co-existence.

**DM: It’s a kids’ show?**

DS: It’s aimed at children, but there are subtexts for viewers who aren’t children.

**DM: For instance?**

DS: One theme is the second summer of love.

**DM: That's the rise of rave culture in the 1980s.**

DS: The name of the first episode was "Blue Monday," which is a New Order song. The robots are called LFOs, and the enemies are called KLF.

**DM: Like the 80s club bands.**

DS: There are a lot of references to my generation's music and culture. One of the main characters is named after a character in "*Trainspotting*." Another is named Thurston, after Thurston Moore, of Sonic Youth. The father's name is Adrock, like Adrock from the Beastie Boys. The grandfather is named Axl, after Axl Rose of Guns N' Roses. The different generations in the show are represented by different music cultures. The youngest generation is represented by references to dance music, techno, and house. Hip hop represents the next generation, and rock represents the oldest generation.

**DM: Who are all these references for? Hip parents?**

DS: The show comes on at 7:00 am on Sunday morning. So it's for kids. But people who hung out at the clubs all night are also going to be tuning in. And the kids who are watching it now might figure out the references when they look back in 5 or 10 years.

**DM: How did the show's environmental theme emerge?**

DS: Surfers in real life are close to nature. I interviewed many of them when I was developing "Eureka Seven." They taught me this idea of wanting to protect the environment because it's fun to surf. And it resonated with me much more than a moral argument. I thought it might be an effective message for children, especially in Japan. It's pretty veiled. I didn't want to be preachy. But it would be nice if some kids, while they're young, watch this program and decide it's a good idea to protect the environment.

**DM: A lot of critics say anime isn't political anymore. Not like it was in, say, the 1970s.**

DS: Hayao Miyazaki ["Howl's Moving Castle" and "Spirited Away"] and Isao Takahata, who did "Grave of the Fireflies," are the central figures at Studio Ghibli. They grew up with the student movement. Even as adults, they were involved in communist politics, and had very idealistic values. Mamoru Oshii ["Ghost in the Shell"] was on the tail of that generation, and didn't grow up in the same environment, but he looked up to their ideals. My generation. . . we're cynical about these straightforward messages, trying to tell you what is right and wrong. We put social or political messages in our material, but they're just not as direct.

**DM: You have another new show still in development. What's it going to be about?**

DS: It is set in the future. A group of robots become infected with something called the Kojiro virus, and become aware of their own existence. So these robots, which had been tools of humans, decide to go on an adventure to search for themselves. They have to decide whether the virus that infected them created their identity, or whether they gained their identity through their travels. This question is meant to represent our own debate over whether we become who we are because of our environment, or because of things that are inherent in us. The robots are all named after philosophers: Derrida and Lacan and Husserl.

**DM: When you develop a new show, what kind of constraints do you face?**

DS: In the case of "Eureka Seven," there was a director, who wanted something that reflected the music and the subculture of his generation—and a love story. The producer said we need transforming robots that fight each other. The sponsor said the show must come on at 7:00 in the morning on Sunday, and that it should be for kids. Also, there must be fifty episodes. Everyone had to be satisfied.

**DM: What about translation? Is it a kind of constraint, when you know a work has to travel well?**

DS: “Samurai Champloo” was made very much with American audiences in mind—in fact, the producers figured it would sell better in the U.S. than in Japan. The director did “Cowboy Bebop” and “The Animatrix,” and the character designer worked on the animation in “Kill Bill,” so everyone was very conscious of how their work would be translated. We actually included American references in the original scripts. In “Stand Alone Complex,” though, a lot of the plots are based on recent Japanese history, so the translation must have been very difficult.

**DM: For example?**

DS: The 9<sup>th</sup> episode of “Stand Alone Complex” was inspired by the Japanese web site 2Channel. In the story, there was a criminal called “the Laughing Man.” The main characters never actually appear in the episode. The whole story is based on a bunch of bystanders observing what’s going on, and communicating online, back and forth, trying to figure out who the Laughing Man is. It’s anarchic, there’s a bunch of flaming—exactly how people behave on 2Channel.

**DM: Anime would never have spread abroad without the efforts of foreign fans, who amateur-subtitle new work, organize screenings, swap DVDs, and pass shows around peer-to-peer networks. But I wonder if these fans also alienate mainstream audiences from the work.**

DS: I agree with your impression. One of the biggest barriers right now is that anime has been pigeonholed abroad as otaku culture, and it kind of limits it from growing in different directions.

**DM: What’s your impression of foreign otaku?**

DS: The term otaku came up in the 90s, the late 80s maybe. In the US, I guess if you say otaku, you just mean someone who enjoys things from Japan. But in Japan, there’s a more distinct definition. Miyazaki animation is not otaku animation. “Evangelion” is the first example of something created for otaku—created by otaku, really. The otaku style emphasizes character imagery. The cutesy girls are definitely a central part of it. The story is almost irrelevant. Anyway, the otaku in Japan, it took them ten years to go from consumers to creators. Right now, the foreign otaku are just acting as consumers. But perhaps soon, more of them will become creators. And when they start creating things, they might start influencing creators in Japan, and start a kind of give and take.

**DM: Have you seen “The Boondocks,” Aaron McGruder’s new show?**

DS: Yes!

**DM: Do you think it’s anime? To my eye, it has a real anime aesthetic to it.**

DS: Yes, I think it does count as anime. The foreign otaku might not see it that way. But I would take the stance of looking at it from a technical standpoint, and whether it belongs to this historical line of animation, or that. And it is limited animation, like Japanese anime.

**DM: Is it easier to be a creator in this field, now that there’s so much foreign interest, so much new investment and revenue, or does big business bring new hardships with it?**

DS: As a result of the boom, a lot of people have entered the field, just to try to jump on the bandwagon and make profits. They’re not creators, and they don’t understand the creative process. They just want someone to make them animation that has robots in it. And they have no sense for quality. In a week, there are a hundred new titles. It’s overproduction. But the number of creators is actually decreasing, and a lot of the work is being exported to Taiwan and China and Korea. The knowledge of the technology and the animation techniques is increasing in those countries. Once they start creating the stories, Japan will be out of the picture.

**DM: Will a time come when Japan no longer “owns” anime?**

DS: I think it would be better if anime becomes disconnected from Japan.

**DM: Why?**

DS: One of the reasons that Japanese anime turned out differently than American animation is that budget constraints limited it to about a third the number of the frames. It began as a technical difference. But anime has turned into a unique style. I don't want it to fade away, to be trapped in the Japanese market. It will die if it doesn't spread. Other Asian countries have come so far with the technology. If they learned a little more about the creative side, Japanese anime could become Asian animation. That would be a strong cultural asset. But the way it is today, I don't see much of a future.

**DM: What's the problem?**

DS: Japanese creators have no rights to speak of. No matter how popular anime gets overseas, how big a business it becomes, we don't feel the effects. The director receives a one-time payment as a director, nothing more. No royalties. The scriptwriter gets payment for the first broadcast on TV, and royalties for the DVDs, but only for domestic sales. The animators get about 50 yen per frame, or 8000 to 9000 yen for a 20-minute episode. Even if an anime is very successful, and making a lot of money, nobody on the creative side gets any benefit from the success. The use of the images and the characters, we don't have any of the rights to that either.

**DM: How does your firm fit in?**

DS: Frognation started out as a techno label, but that wasn't enough to keep it afloat, especially when the techno boom faded. Now, we've come up with video game concepts, we've done scripts for animation. We have a web designer, and musicians who we've worked with for over a decade. "Eureka Seven" was actually an experiment in how much Frognation could do internally. We did the script, coordinated the soundtrack, did the web design, and even did some of the original music. We had to work within the framework that exists in Japan: we don't have a copyright on anything. But our goal, in the next two or three years, is to do a full project inside Frognation, and have Frognation control the rights.

**DM: Is there an eventual cost to maintaining the status quo in Japan's entertainment industry?**

DS: The industry will hollow out, because the creators end up leaving the country, or the industry. If nothing changes, the present boom won't last ten years. I'm trying to figure out what can be done to prevent disaster.