Behemoth Mecha Design Notes

A mecha RPG presents an interesting problem: how do you accurately capture the feeling of being a [insert your preferred size of mecha here] tall robot using only your player’s imagination?

Video games have it easy. You can rely handedly on UI and UX to convey the awesome feeling of being taller than buildings and crushing humans with your bare metal hands. But in an RPG how do we do that?

For starters, we can look to video games for inspiration. The dichotomy between pilot and robot is super important! If the pilot and robot feel the same then we have failed as a mecha game. Another thing that’s super lame is if the robot feels like the pilot but bigger. That shit infuriates me. Crank gameplay up to 11. Giant robots are faster, stronger, and better than humans at everything but fitting into normal sized doors and understanding social cues.

So for step one we got: Robots don’t have social skills, that’s on the pilot. Giant robots are a tool to be used by the players, not the be all end all. This leads directly into point two which is:

Robots shouldn’t be the solution to every problem. You know what isn’t stealthy? A 40-foot-tall death machine. (now a 20-foot-tall death machine with a stealth system. . .)

Really if we can get a lot of mileage just by extrapolating on “things a big robot does that a human doesn’t”. What do giant robots tend to do? Generate a lot of heat. From Battletech to Gundam a common hazard for big stompy robots is doing so much cool stuff in a short period of time that they overheat and must stop doing cool shit.

In conclusion, to capture the feeling of being inside a giant robot I am going to focus on what the pilot can and can’t bring to the cockpit. Are they good at shooting pistols? While using their giant pistol they get bonuses. Are they good at talking? Well maybe they can use their giant robot to threaten people but it’s not gonna give them any system bonuses. Performing actions inside of the machine will generate heat, crossing different thresholds of heat will cause different actions to occur in game leading all the way up to violent explosion. The giant robot is a tool for the player to use and should feel like a tool rather than an extension.

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Another week another essay written at a coffee shop.

I’ve been playing a lot of Brigador lately. It’s an isometric vehicle based shooter featuring mercenaries, mechs, and war crimes. It conveys a lot of the feelings I’m chasing but with UI, UX, and (interestingly enough) Lore. In a world with hovercrafts, tanks and defense turrets, Mechs are still being produced. The game explains this beautifully with a passage that honest to God gave me chills. Rather than post the entire log, I present you with the sentence that stirred something deep in my mech loving heart:

“[…] bureaucrats don't know what a psych-out it is to get stared down by a heavy.”

Which brings us back to last week. I went on about why the dichotomy between mech and. . .anything else is **important**. Making the system based solely around mechs is foolish. The more I design this system with pilots and players in mind the more I realize that the mech system I’m designing can easily be applied to other vehicles of various sizes.

I’m not interested in completely ripping off Brigador so we’re not just gonna up and add every drivable piece of metal from that game. (I am totally stealing powersuits though) Vehicles I’m planning on throwing into the mix are Tanks, VTOLs/Jets/Vertitech’s Guardian Mode, and Powersuits.

“Josh what is the fucking vehicle system you keep talking about”

-You, reading this

Last week I talked about how the mech/vehicle should be a tool of the player’s rather than an extension or its own independent system. Without getting into the meat of the pilot system too much, it is a success based system using D6. You roll D6 equal to your relevant skill and attribute. 5 and 6 are successes. The more successes the better you did. Having a vehicle make a roll for doing something is stupid. It’s a fucking car Jared I don’t need to roll to see how it drives. *However,* the car can make it easier to drive. So depending on what systems the vehicle has installed, it provides a flat success bonus to the player’s die roll.

This has the potential to make them uninteresting if I don’t extrapolate on the systems and sub systems. The trick to making players give a shit is give them the opportunity to personalize their vehicle. The different instruments of war will have different system points and weapon points for mounting guns and internal computers. Giving the player more customization makes this different than just a +1 sword. It’s *their* +1 sword with advanced combat systems and heated seats.

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Alright so

When we last left our heroes, I was going on about how to make giant robots interesting. This system making a shift from “Mech RPG” to “RPG with Mechs in it” means that we have to talk about something but giant robots eventually. That time is now upon us.

The Earth is dominated by 4 mega corporations in typical vaguely cyberpunk fashion: Militech, Max-Biotics, Evergreen Trading, and Stalwart Solutions. These companies take up the role of races in more typical RPGs. However, I found that giving players the option to choose a “race” without choosing a class made the corps feel. . . pigeonholed. Characters received attribute and skill bonuses that, while characteristic of the companies, left the characters feeling one dimensional in concept.

To circumvent this, I have instead move towards giving players starting equipment based on their corporation of choice. As soon as I put *vague ideas* for items given by corporate overlords to their mercenary peons the companies came alive. Militech gives standard but customizable soldiering gear, Evergreen Trading gives mercs slick pilot jackets and a sword, Max-Biotics doles out a tranq gun and medkit, Stalwart Solutions awards their workers with a basic space suit and **POWERFIST.**

I don’t even know what powerfists are yet but I know for a fact that I’m more excited to receive one as a player than a strength boost. The skill check system allows players to roll attribute + skill for checks, so maybe the player is a dexterity powerfist user. What does that look like? Up to them to decide.

The choice that is given to the players by the hiring packages is not only more flavorful than vanilla stat boosts but serves to subtly push players in a mechanical direction. A piloting jacket and officer sword gives a character mechanical implications no matter how you slice it (heh).