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).

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It's ya boi SKINNY PE-

Last week I talked about items so it’s high time we figured out how those work.

My system uses D6 to determine the number of successes an action has. Items should provide a static guaranteed success much like a mech does. As we discussed earlier, a mech is a +1 power sword that the players can customize. By that logic an actual power sword is just. . . a power sword.

We should also address how damage is dealt since weapons are going to be the main source of items in this game. I have *never* liked how in Dnd and other D20 systems you have to roll damage independent of the attack. Nothing feels worse than nailing your hit and then flubbing the damage dealt. Dnd attempts to circumvent this by adding bonuses to the damage you roll (e.g. 2d6 + 3) but you can still roll a minimum number. Because you are rolling dice and the game uses dice as the primary method of *doing things* it feels you, the player, have somehow failed despite there not being a direct way to influence damage outside of rolling a crit.

In Behemoth I’m going to try tying damage dealt directly to how effective an attack roll is. Since items grant bonus successes it’s both an attack modifier and damage modifier, which makes sense since something that’s better at hitting things should hopefully also be better at hurting them. So the way attacks will be resolved is: attacking players will deal damage their targets minus the target’s resistance score. Resistance will act as damage reduction until it’s depleted

Players aren’t gonna be rolling more than 8D6 for checks in general. This means that lower armor numbers are fine, especially since players will be able to purchase armor that provides static resistance bonuses much like items.

If a player nails an attack I want them to feel like they fucking nailed it. Chipping down target’s armor before delivering a killing blow is going to feel awesome. We could also introduce different weaknesses and strengths rock paper scissors style. I don’t want weapons or armor to feel useless but a pile bunker against heavily armored targets might get a +1

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Happy holidays gadies and lentlemen! I’m typing this from the comfort of my apartment instead of at a coffee shop. I’m sure you were all very interested in that fact.

We’ve talked about items, vehicle systems, and capturing the feeling of large vehicles. So I’m finally going to talk about the combat system. The old system is hot garbage. It was a lot like Dnd in that there were major and minor actions, engaging and disengaging, different terrain types and ranges, and my least favorite part: *defense rolls*. (Note: Dnd does not have defense rolls) I’m going to scrap most of this! Stay tuned.

Last week I talk about attacking, defending, and how it works in the context of a system that uses ‘number of successes’ as the primary form of interaction. In a lot of similar systems they use region based combat. I have nothing against region based combat but in a system that is focusing on how big robots run around and shoot stuff we need to support that rather than hand wave it.

“You move two regions each turn” is not as interesting as “you can move six hexes in a turn” because you can use those however you want! THAT’S RIGHT WE’RE GOING BACK TO HEX GRIDS BABY!

Wait come back

Another interesting thing we can do with a hex grid challenging the norm of weapons. Different weapons can have different areas of effect or minimum ranges that they can’t fire in. For instance, a laser that can only fire in a straight line, an artillery piece that can’t fire close to the mech, shotguns deal damage in a cone, rockets hit one tile and everything around it.

Last thing that needs to happen if we’re moving to a grid is “how do players know how fast they move?” Vehicles have it easy because we can just say “they go this many spaces fast” and no one can stop us. Outside of vehicles is where we actually have to come up with something clever. Since a player’s health is determined by their Strength times three I’m thinking that a player’s movement speed is determined by Agility plus three. This will result in a bare minimum of four spaces being moved each turn and a max of seven. These numbers seem fine to me but we’re only going to know for sure after testing, which should be soon™.