GUNWAVE
The Mecha RPG System

Narrator's Guide

by Brent P. Newhall

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Introduction

Gunwave is a free tabletop RPG system for playing war with giant robots.

This manual is directed at Narrators, who run the show. For more information on playing the game, see the *Gunwave All-Purpose Player's Handbook*. This manual assumes that you've read the Player's Handbook.

Resources Available

The *All-Purpose Player's Handbook* describes the system in such a way that it can be adapted to many different mecha settings. There is also a *Settings* guide describing five specific universes, all based on styles of mecha anime or games, a *Vehicles Compendium* that describes a number of non-mecha vehicles, and a *Character Compendium*, which contains many pre-generated characters for use as antagonists or allies.

Roleplaying Tips <www.roleplayingtips.com> maintains a vast collection of articles and suggestions for Narrators, as well as a weekly newsletter of new articles.

I've Never Narrated Before!

Douglas Adams has the best advice: Don't Panic.

If you're putting together a campaign or adventure for the first time, you'll only have to think about a few major topics:

1. Which universe will you play in? Angsty Military, Epic Space Action, *etc.*

2. Which side are the players on? How do they fit into the universe?

3. What situation will the players face? This is the campaign or adventure that they'll play.

4. What Non-Player Characters (NPCs) will the players bump into?

Choosing Your Universe

This may be a simple choice; everyone may want to play in the same universe. If not, try to find a universe that everyone will enjoy. You're included in this decision; a great Narrator can make the game enjoyable even for players who aren't crazy about the universe.

If you end up playing in a universe that doesn't appeal to you, feel free to pull it in a direction that you find more interesting. The universes are malleable. There's nothing wrong with a Lizardmen Invasion met by grizzled military pilots, or a massive alien invasion of the High Houses.

Most players are reasonably comfortable in the Angsty Military universe, since its militaries are closest to modern ones, and the overall strategies of the war most closely mimic those of real wars that players are likely to know about.

Placing Your Players In The Universe

Most universes feature multiple sides in each conflict, so you'll have to figure out the player-characters' relationships to each of those sides in advance.

This is best done by talking to your players. What side do they want to fight for? Do their characters have any past experiences with a particular side? Perhaps they defected from one side, or their family was slaughtered by one side's soldiers.

Once you decide on the player-characters' overall alliances, where do they fit into their side's army? What branch or sub-branch of the military are they in? Who's their commanding officer? Do they work with other parts of the military (the players may be guarding a military base, or may be support units for another group)?

Of course, some of this may be decided by the scenario you play, but it's good to think

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about it beforehand, so you can fill in these details if they're not provided by the adventure or campaign you play.

The Scenario

Okay, so once you've figured out where your characters fit into the overall universe, you can decide on the precise situation in which the players find themselves. See the Missions section, page 9, for a list of campaign and adventure ideas.

If you're Narrating for the first time, consider starting with a one-shot adventure that will last just one session. Any adventure with two or three battles will keep your players entertained, and you'll have plenty to do without ensuring that all your future plot points are adequately introduced.

The NPCs

First off, see guideline #4 on page 7: Your NPCs suck and they're going to die. That's an overstatement for effect; the point is to avoid getting too attached to your NPCs. Your players will spend only a few minutes at a time with almost every NPC you create. Besides, you run the risk of wasting time on aspects of NPCs that the players will never see.

The large majority of NPCs can be described with just these basics:

- Name
- Personality (a few descriptive words' worth)
- Goals (military glory, providing for his or her family, beating back the aliens, *etc.*)
- Voice
- Race
- Specialty / Profession

Seriously, that's it. Even for pilots, you can copy a generic character's stats and tweak a few important numbers. Remember, your players don't care about the villain's Brains score. They want to be entertained by her bombastic personality, crazy goals, and powerful mecha.

General Game Mastering Advice

There are only a few definite guidelines to running a successful game:

1) The only worthwhile measure of success is this: **Is everyone at the table having fun?**

You and your players are included in this measure. How many people are leaning forward? How many are talking? How many jokes are flying?

2) **Your players' characters are rock stars. It's your job to help them rock.**

Think of any good mecha anime—the protagonists are heroes, in one way or another. They turn the tide of wars. They're a major force in their universe.

Your players' characters should be heroes, too. Narrating's tough, since part of your job is to throw obstacles in their way (bad guys, armies, *etc*.). But remember that it's their job to fight through those obstacles *and succeed*. While it shouldn't necessarily be easy for them, it should be fun.

g3) While you Narrate, continually ask this question: **What's the most entertaining thing that could happen right now?**

You don't have to stick to your plan. If your players are bored, throw something exciting in. Have pirates attack! Have an enemy go crazy and get superpowers! Introduce a new villain! Let the next player hit do massive damage!

4) **Your NPCs suck and they're going to die.**

Your NPCs exist just enough to help your players move forward to achieve their goals. While three-dimensional characters can add valuable color to a session, your players come here to *rock*, not to watch your acting skills.

Do what you need with your NPCs to get your players to the next jam session.

5) **If you want your players to experience your intricate story, write a novel.**

It's not *your* story. Everyone around the table—you and the players—will collaboratively write the story as you play. Beware a tight grip on your neat story ideas. Let them go, if the players run in a different direction.

A Bit of Commentary on the Word "Narrator"

There's a bit of confusion among Narrators—particularly novices—about their role in games. The term "Game Master" suggests that the Narrator controls the game. This can mislead you into the terrible land of Un-Fun.

Some folks see Narrators as leading the players through a story, or that the Narrator tells a

story which the players interact with and influence. While a game can be played that way, it's usually not as much fun as it could be.

Great Narrators provide a scenario for the players, and react to the players to make a fun experience. The Narrator may not give the players what they want every time, but will provide entertaining choices and encounters. A great Narrator may have an idea of where the plot will go, but is ready to toss that out at *any* time if the players head in a different direction.

Missions

Most mecha settings focus on a single large-scale war. As such, you can often structure your games like military campaigns: the military has an objective, which your players assist in achieving.

You can make one campaign last for one session, or spread it out over multiple sessions.

A one-session campaign (also called a "one-shot") is similar to the Allied invasion of Normandy during World War II. The players have to make it through heavy fire and various enemy defenses to some particular location (and, usually, destroy it). This should take just one evening of gameplay to complete.

A multi-session campaign is more like the Confederate drive towards Washington, D.C. in the American Civil War, in which the Confederate army fought a number of different battles as it marched towards the Union capitol. The players will often play a support role during these conflicts, not seeing dramatic progress in the overall operation, but driving off a defender here or securing supplies there for a much larger allied force.

Multi-session campaigns help players feel like they're part of a huge, epic conflict. They can be tiring for a Narrator, though, so feel free to toss in an unrelated side mission every so often. Remember, the players are elite heroes, so they'll often be called on for special projects.

In addition to the combat aspects of a campaign, it's also fun to add in non-combat role-playing opportunities when your players are on "down time." Consider adding an NPC ally—a fellow pilot—who disagrees with the players about their role in the war. Give your players civilian girlfriends or boyfriends, or just brief loves while they're out on leave.

Military Campaign Ideas

- **Cutting Off Their Supplies** – The players' side begins an offensive to destroy a major supply base.
  1. The players begin in space. They must sneak (or fight) past a battleship patrolling the outer boundary of the planet. If they fight, the battleship deploys a few strikers and a fighter.
  2. The players must defend a planetary atmospheric drop of several hundred allied mecha, in a battle containing two enemy battleships, an enemy carrier, ten bruisers, ten heavy missile platforms, and three strikers. The players are helped by several allied mecha, though, so can only focus on a fraction of that.
  3. The players land a fair distance from the battlefield, near an enemy support base. They're attacked by a squadron of fighters.
  4. The players make it to the supply base. They have to take out several enemy

pillboxes that have pinned down their allies. The players' side then storms the base.

5. Reinforcements arrive, in the form of several powerful enemy mecha.

6. The reinforcements are defeated, and the supply base is overwhelmed. Victory!

- **Disturbing Research** – The players discover a base that performs disturbing experiments on children, and are ordered to infiltrate and destroy it.

  1. The players are guarding a remote research base. One day, while on routine patrol, they're attacked by a mecha squad consisting of four Infiltrators. Upon being defeated, they see a battleship lift off in the distance.

  2. They return to base, where the commander orders the players to chase the battleship, which is now leaving the atmosphere, and recover at least one enemy pilot so you can interrogate. The players launch in their own battleship, and meet up with their enemies in space. They face a Bruiser, a fighter, and three Heavy Missile Platforms.

  3. After interrogating the recovered pilot, you discovers the enemy is carrying out tactical strikes against several allied research bases. However, their information reveals an extreme research base that even your own folks don't know about (and get the run-around when asking about it). Suspicious, the base commander orders the players to infiltrate this base, and return with proof of whatever it is they're doing.
  This base is about ten miles outside of a medium-sized town, in dense woods in the middle of an arroyo, surrounded by tall cliffs. Mecha occasionally land and take off behind the base, but the players see no mecha kept there. The players must find a way into the base, and pretend to be guards.

  4. While in the base, the players will find embryonic growth tanks, and will watch as young children—who have ear tags—are taught how to knife fight. Appropriate inquires (or hacks into the system) will reveal that this facility is actually *growing* children, rapidly, specifically as Augmented pilots. When they reach adolescence, they go through the Augmentation process. If the players try to escape, alarms sound. They get into a fight, but are outmatched.

  5. The players wake up in adjacent holding cells. A guard and a cook come around to provide food; the players can escape by overpowering them. The players must then escape the facility.

  6. Near the cell block, the players find their way to a (guarded) doorway that leads to a huge underground mecha launching bay, with a huge double-door above it. The players can steal mecha—especially if they find explosives on the way to distract everyone else—and escape.

  7. The players return to their home base. The commander immediately orders them out to destroy this base as an offense against decency, loaning them experimental mecha that shouldn't exist anyway. The players should expect fierce resistance.

- **That's My Sister You've Got!** – The sister of one of the pilots visits, and is

accidentally captured.

1. One of the players has a sister, Sheila, who visits him/her. Sheila clings to the player and is generally annoying, and insists on being shown the players' mecha. While doing so, there's a general alert—the players are under attack! Sheila climbs into the cockpit with the pilot, refusing to move.

2. During the battle, Sheila is so freaked out she begs to be let out. The allies send a pod, which Sheila climbs into...but an enemy slips forward and grabs it, assuming it to be a pilot. The enemies then retreat.

3. The players race after the enemy battleship. They engage it in combat, and overrun the ship. They discover the girl's been treated well, but sent to an advanced base for interrogation, under suspicion she's more than she appears.

4. The players must secretly infiltrate the enemy base and rescue Sheila (she'd be put under heavy guard, or hurt or killed, if they tried an all-out mecha attack).

5. As they leave with Sheila, they're attacked by the base's mecha, leading to an all-out mecha battle.

Military Mission Ideas

1. The military's lost contact with a transport ship over a certain area. The heroes are ordered to investigate the site and locate the lost ship. This can begins with a mecha-based strike into enemy territory, then an assault on foot into an enemy camp where prisoners are being held.

2. You've heard that the enemy is developing a powerful mecha on an out-of-the-way colony or space station. The players must sneak in, find it, and record it. Once they do, they'll be discovered and must fight their way out.

3. The heroes are ordered by their superiors to sneak into a nearby village, which is under enemy control, and gather as much information as possible about a nearby base without revealing their allegiances.

4. One of the characters has been captured. The rest of the party must try to rescue him or her, while the captured character tries to escape from the inside.

5. The heroes are ordered to escort a hotshot test pilot to a test facility. On their way, they're ambushed and must fight it out until reinforcements arrive.

6. An allied squad is under heavy fire from the enemy and requests assistance. The heroes and a small supporting force are ordered out to aid their comrades.

7. An allied test mecha being transported to a testing facility was attacked and is pinned down. The heroes are ordered out to recover it.

8. The players' side is dropping an invasion force onto a planet. The players must fight off orbiting defenses, which will otherwise pick off the invading mecha as they drop,

defenseless, into the atmosphere.

9. An embattled allied position desperately needs supplies. Two support ships are sent to re-supply them, and the heroes must defend the ships until they deliver their supplies.

10. An enemy battleship is trying to sneak through your territory and free some political prisoners. The players must stop the battleship. They may arrive just as the prisoners are being freed.

11. Your side has learned that a band of pirates will be selling a cache of weapons to the other side in two days. The players must infiltrate the pirate organization, be present at the transfer (to prove that the other side was part of the deal), stop the transfer, and fight off both the pirate and military mecha.

12. You receive word that a powerful enemy test mecha is being transported to an enemy testing facility. The heroes must destroy it before it reaches its destination.

13. While out on leave partying in a bar, one of the players is approached by an attractive girl/guy. Suddenly cops show up to arrest her; she tazes them and escapes. One of the players finds she slipped a note into their pocket; it includes an address. They can co-operate with the police in capturing her, or investigate on their own, in which case they'll discover she's a double agent (ultimately on their side) whose cover has been blown, and she needs to be escorted to a safe house.

Freelancer Adventure Ideas

If your players are more the freewheeling guns-for-hire types, no sweat! Here are some story ideas for them:

1. A mysterious woman comes to the players, and asks them to deliver a small package to a distant colony. Payment is half from her and half on delivery. When they arrive, the addressee has disappeared, but the players can pry the information out of the landlord: he's "always" down at the arcade. If they hang around long enough, they can get to him, but he's afraid of the box. Turns out it's divorce papers. He won't want to take them, but the players can, um, *convince* him.

2. The players are asked to deliver a silver box (about six inches square, and very heavy). Turns out to be wanted by the local mafia.

3. A super-soldier has gone crazy and escaped from a top-secret military facility. The players are asked to track it down.

4. Several vials of blood—currently being used to test an important disease treatment— must be sent to a medical research facility. On the way, the players are ambushed by terrorists who steal the blood, and want to use it to create a new, deadly disease. The

players must, of course, stop them.

5. The net's buzzing with the announcement that the cops have put a one million credit bounty on the head of a notorious pirate. Not only must the players figure out how to track him down, they'll have to outwit all the other bounty hunters going after him.

6. An old friend contacts one of the players. This friend's personal (you know, *personal*) robot tried to kill him. He asks the players to investigate the manufacturer. They discover a computer virus was planted by a disgruntled ex-employee. The virus activates randomly, to increase the likelihood the manufacturer will try to keep it quiet until so many go nuts that they'll look bad for covering it up.

7. The police ask for help cleaning out a bunch of gangs who've holed up in an abandoned warehouse district. Lots of fun discovering traps, hidden weapon caches, doped-up gang members itching for a shootout, *etc*.

8. The group is out partying at a bar. A pretty girl/guy approaches one of the players, and has drink with him/her. This player suddenly feels woozy, and the girl/guy helps him/her to the back, where s/he passes out (unknown to the other player-characters). The players must then find their compatriot.

9. The police put a bounty on the head of Scaria the Blade, a pirate who's been raiding medical ships in the Greater Messianic Cloud. But when the players confront her, she reveals the medical supplies are tainted by the manufacturer to keep the populace sick. She even asks the players to help with her little Robin Hood rebellion.

10. The players are approached by a young woman who seeks her long-lost father.

Creating a Villain

Your players should *hate* your villain. Or, at least, love to hate him. Here's how:

Your villain(s) should actively work against the players. Make sure that most of threats and obstacles that the players encounter tie back to the villain(s).

Each villain should be powerful. When the players finally confront the villain, he or she shouldn't go down in one round of combat. To calculate armor for a villain's mecha, add all the dice for every weapon that your players have, and divide it in half. That'll create a mecha that will last for roughly five rounds.

Make sure your villain uses powerful weapons, too, so he's dealing a lot of damage. Look at your players' armor ratings, and let the villain roll dice equal to about 2/3 of that. So, if your players have an average of 12 armor, your villain should roll something like 8 dice to hit. Feel free to increase or decrease this, of course, depending on the fight's flow.

Dual Villains

Gundam in particular often uses *two* villains: the political villain, and the pilot villain.

The political villain works behind the scenes, coordinating some terrible, apocalyptic event that the players will have to stop. This villain may not even pilot a mecha.

The pilot villain is the front–line antagonist who confronts the players with the latest military machinery. The pilot villain is always an *extremely* good pilot, able to easily defeat almost any one of the characters, and his mecha almost always uses advanced weaponry not available to the players.

This system creates some wonderful tension. Over the course of the campaign, you can spend time introducing and developing both villains. Then, at the end, the players have to stop the political villain, but they must defeat the pilot villain first. During the fight with the pilot villain, the political villain can taunt the players or be counting down to the release of the doomsday device.

Creating Mecha

Creating Player Mecha

You may want to provide only specific mecha units for your players to choose from. Indeed, you may want to assign specific mecha to your players, especially if their characters are members of a hand-picked military team.

In this case, create specific mecha using the rules for Mecha Creation set out in the *All-Purpose Player's Handbook*, or use the Mecha List in the *Player's Handbook*. Otherwise, let your players create whatever mecha appeals to them.

Creating Enemy Mecha

The mecha described in the Player's Handbook are for *players*! They are specifically balanced to be heroic mecha. The generic mass-produced units that your players fight (at least initially) should be less powerful. See the *Gunwave Settings* document for weaker grunt mecha for each setting.

Enemy mecha should fall into one of the following categories:

Standard Units – Large battles especially will feature lots and lots of cheap, easily-destroyed mecha. Set their Armor at 5 or less, so the players can easily take out a lot of them, but throw many of them at the players at a time.

Leader Units – These are the mecha used by experienced soldiers and fighters. They're significantly more powerful than a standard mecha, and are supported by several well-trained mecha in that group. Moreover, the rest of the team will tend to defend the Leader if it's attacked. Leader units should be nearly as powerful as a player's mecha. Specialists, such as spies, often pilot these types of units.

Super-Villain Units – These super-powerful suits should be a match for at least two or three of your player's mecha. Double or triple a regular Armor score, and increase Power by a good 50%. Also, create one or two special powers and/or weapons, just for them. Make sure they spread the damage around, though; if they focus on one player, they may wipe him or her out before the super-villain even starts to spark.

Scrap

You may wish to keep track of scrap in your game, so that characters can salvage damaged equipment.

If a mecha explodes, roll a d20 to determine how much salvage remains.

Roll Result	Remains
1–4	Nothing's left
5–7	The mecha was blown into small pieces that are individually salvageable, but none of the frame remains
8–18	The torso's destroyed, but the head, arms, and legs are salvageable
19–20	The mecha was blown apart into torso, arms, legs, head, and comm system, but all its pieces are salvageable

When a mecha explodes, the power reactor and coolant system are always completely destroyed.

To build a mecha from scrap, you need the following pieces:

- Head
- Torso
- Left leg
- Right leg
- Power reactor
- Coolant system
- Comm system
- Thrusters

Yes, you can build a mecha without arms, but it will only hold one weapon. Each arm allows it to hold one more weapon.

Miscellaneous Topics

Session Length

On average, expect to fit one battle per hour of gameplay. Each battle will take less than an hour, but the rest of the time will be filled with role-playing, strategizing, discussions, strategy sessions, *etc.*

You'll probably need to let your players recharge their mecha at least once per session; mecha usually can't last more than 2 or 3 even easy rounds of combat (they'll use up all their energy and ammo).

Trait Checks

It's easy to go overboard with trait checks, asking players to roll every time they use their character's muscles, brains, or personality.

Attributes and traits exist to define what a character can do. If a character is obviously charismatic, and asks a reasonable question of a friendly character, the player shouldn't need to roll a Diplomacy check.

Only use trait checks when you're unsure if the player would actually succeed in their attempt, or if you use the roll to modify their success.

Bodysuits

For convenience's sake, it's assumed that pilots always wear bodysuits while piloting. However, there may be occasions in which a pilot rushes out to his or her mecha without putting on a bodysuit. Feel free to incorporate this into the game, but make it clear to players if they're taking this risk.

Self-Destruction

Normally, self-destruct mechanisms can be set for any interval, but take 10 minutes to disarm. There may be interesting world or character reasons why this might not apply to all mecha. Some may have no self-destruct mechanism (which has its own strategic consequences), or you may be unable to disarm it. Alternatively, disarming the self-destruct mechanism may require a difficulty 20 Mecha Intuition skill check.

Self-destruction is a powerful ability, and should be used wisely. If a player uses it recklessly, there should be in-game consequences: their commanding officer may hold them back for promotion (that is, they won't gain a level when everyone else does), or they may get less-powerful mecha. If a player kills their character with self-destruct without a good reason, you may enforce a penalty to their next character, lowering all their attributes by -1.

Ship Combat

Most ships will refrain from firing into a swarm of mecha, for fear of hitting friendly mecha. Once the battlefield is mostly cleared of its own units, a ship will open up with a full barrage. Also, if an enemy mecha separates itself from the fray, the ship may open fire on it.

Why hold off on ship fire? Because ships are so powerful in *Gunwave*. Best to let ships pin down your isolated players' mecha, and have the players fight their way through heavy ship fire at that point, than subject them to constant laser blasts from enemy ships throughout the entire battle.

A Checklist of Things To Bring To a Session

Here are some useful things to have on-hand whenever you Narrate. If you have to travel to your play location, consider making a Narrator bag (and be sure to cover it in colorful army patches, logos, pins, *etc.*).

- Scratch paper, such as notepads, index cards, or Post-It™ notes
- Mechanical pencils
- Dice. If some players own no dice, consider buying a cheap set. Six-sided dice are cheap!
- Name tags (for character names). Wide address labels can look like military name tags.
- Character and mecha sheets, if you keep them. Many groups prefer to keep character sheets with the Narrator, so players don't lose them.
- If starting a campaign, a pre-printed description of the setting and the player-characters' place in it (which side they're on, what unit they're fighting in, *etc.*)
- Physical copies of the *All-Purpose Player's Handbook*, for quick rule lookups
- A blank, erasable battle map
- Erasable markers for your battle map

Some optional, cool things to do:

- Distribute a pre-printed list of rumors that have been going around the base/camp/ship. Each player may have a different set of rumors. You can also include background information that the players would already know in whatever situation they're in (if they've been guarding a research base for six months, they'll already know a few things).
- Plug your iPod into a set of speakers (you can buy inexpensive portable speakers or plug into a home audio system), and play appropriate music. Create your own playlists for Battle, Receiving Orders, Sneaking Around, Big Plot Revelations, *etc.* I highly recommend the soundtracks for *Gundam SEED*, *Gundam SEED Destiny*, *Macross Frontier*, and *Turn-A Gundam*.
- Bring a tin cup to drink out of, or some other appropriate drinking vessel. Make the session feel more authentic with appropriate props.
- Make your playing area look as futuristic as possible. Drape furniture with white cloth and put out your most modern art.
- Wear a particular hat or shirt, to establish your "Narrator identity."
- When playing a particular NPC, wear "his" or "her" hat.

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Credits

This document was written by Brent P. Newhall.

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