

Mech Force Nostalgia

by James Mendez Hodes for the Golden Cobra Challenge, 2018

Mech Force Nostalgia is a freeform live-action role-playing game about giant robots and their pilots exploring a dead world littered with sorrow and memories.

players	2 to 20 including a facilitator.
ages	7+. Young players must be able to approach cartoon-level violence (think <i>GI Joe</i> or <i>Transformers</i> , but probably not <i>Neon Genesis Evangelion</i>) seriously.
physicality	Walking, verbal communication, handling small objects, expressive motion. Pilot players don't touch anyone; robot players may if they want, but never have to.
time	About two hours. More players and larger play spaces expand game time.
space	An open area where several players can wander. Playgrounds, parks, convention centers, and woods > featureless planes. Ideally, there's enough open, flat ground for wheelchairs or long canes, as well as enough physical features like furniture, fountains, or logs to inspire reminiscences (see below).
materials	This document. Smartphones maybe.
safety tools	open door policy, lines and veils, misremember/blur (see below)
content	Violence, warfare, and loss.
ingredients	pillows, collection, masks, mistakes

This text is addressed towards the facilitator. Please read this entire document before running the game. Unless the text indicates otherwise, you may choose whether to read it out loud to the players, or convey that same information in your own voice and idiom.

Safety Briefing

Begin the game with introductions: names, pronouns, how you're feeling, favorite real or fictional robot. Describe what this game is about, and mention that war, violence, and loss will probably come up in play. Affirm that players' out-of-character safety and peace of mind supersede the game. Explain the **open door policy**: anyone is free to leave the game at any time without judgment or compunction, but should notify the facilitator so no one thinks they got lost. Ask the players about their **lines** (content they want excluded from the fiction) and **veils** (content that may included, but not described). Also introduce and practice two code phrases specific to this game: "**I remember it differently**" indicates that the play group should rewind and re-play something that just happened. "**That part is a blur to me**" tells the play group to fast-forward past a certain detail.

Initial Workshops: Mecha-Pilot Training

Ask players to form a line in order of preference between portraying giant robots or robot pilots. Explain that robots play a more somatic role, pilots a more verbal one. Then, divide players evenly into mecha and pilots. If there's an odd number, a facilitator steps back from play into a supervisory/command role. Over the next few minutes, players get used to their roles. The facilitator or a deputized player guides the group through their workshop. If there are only two players, the workshops are instead successive: each player guides the other through the workshop, then vice versa.

Mecha: Movement Workshop

Facilitator, read this section out loud. Imagine you're a skyscraper-sized robot. Fantastic technology comprises your body: sensor arrays; mobility aids; superweapons; and an artificial-intelligence heartmind, alien and strange and unfathomable. You may speak quietly to other mecha, but never communicate with pilots using words—only gestures, facial expressions, and onomatopœia (pew pew pew, beep boop).

Now the lead engineer will run you through calibration exercises here in the training yard, each of which lasts a couple minutes.

- **Practice movement.** Navigate the yard with slow, bold motions and gestures as you imagine how you look and move. What parts of your mechanical form resemble humans'? What parts do not? Watch other mecha and take inspiration from their movements, too.
- **Practice combat.** Now add gestures to represent mighty weapons and defenses built into your form. Do you have energy shields? Gatling guns? Chainsaw axes? Spar in slow motion with other mechs, wielding your weapons' non-damaging training versions. Defending mecha decide how incoming attacks affect them—but dramatically miming taking damage is fun. Remember also that merely trading damage with foes is for tanks, not mecha. In battle, you will have objectives like “defend a building” or “escort civilians to safety.” Practice using your environment for attack or defense:, e.g. taking cover behind couches.
- **Practice responding to pilots' commands.** Array yourselves in a grid. The lead engineer uses simple improvised motions and words to order all the mechs: move forward, sidestep to the right, shoot the target, that kind of thing. Stay aware of the pilot's position.
- **Practice rejecting pilots' commands.** You're an independent being with final authority over all actions you take, in combat and out. The sooner your pilot understands that, the more effective your partnership. If you judge a pilot's order to be incorrect or dangerous, you must override them. The engineer now gives orders you must reject. Do something else when you get them, signaling the pilot with gestures, expressions, or error beeps.

When you have practiced all of the above, it's time to meet your pilot.

Pilots: Setting Workshop

Choose a player to read this section out loud. You, ace Mech Force pilots, wield the deadliest weapons humanity has ever known. You fought impossible odds to preserve the planet to which you now return. You failed. Sit or stand somewhere you can watch the mecha training, but turn your attention to discussing the following questions.

- **Why is mecha technology so strange and alien?** Did ancient astronauts build them? Do they use futuristic materials or power sources unfathomed by science? Do they come from a distant future or an alternate dimension? Discuss possibilities. Do not decide on one.
- **What is this planet?** What climate does it have? Was it a rough frontier world, or covered with sky-choking cities? Why did it matter to us? Is there alien life? Sentient alien life?
- **What cataclysm drove humans away?** Did humans war with one another? Was there a natural disaster, or chain of natural disasters? Did aliens invade, or did local wildlife rise up against humans? If your game takes place in a public area, then the other life-forms present but not playing the game are kaijū: giant, invincible alien monsters, sometimes friendly, always dangerous. Kaijū must be treated with gentleness and respect, lest they wreck you.
- **Who are you?** What's your personal background? Are you human? Android? Alien, living among humans? Why did the Mech Force choose you? What is the Mech Force, anyway? Who runs it? How is it organized? Note that the Mech Force cannot be a government institution. Use military ranks if you want, but you're not police or a formal armed service.

Get through these questions quickly. When the mecha finish training, it's time for ...

Pilot and Mech: Pairing and Cooperation Workshop

The quietest-voiced pilot explains to the mecha in brief how the pilots answered their questions. Next, each mech freezes in a cool pose, then closes their eyes. The pilots now go amongst the mechs, choosing partners as the spirit moves them. To pair with a mech, the pilot moves to where they could make eye contact with the mech and says, “Please open your eyes.” When eye contact is made, the partnership is forged. **Please give parents and young children the opportunity to pair with one another.** Now let's practice working together for a few minutes.

As the mech moves through the world, the pilot's player follows, staying a couple meters in front, behind, or to the side of the mech's player. Pilot players' positions in the real world have no fictional import; we assume pilots occupy mechs' cockpits or bridges. Pilots, practice guiding your mecha with words, gestures, and expressions. You can mime the use of pedals, throttles, and buttons; or suggest actions with dance-like motions. Remember: mecha have final say, period, over how to interpret your expressions; and they're thousands of times your size. They won't suffer threats or disrespect. Pilot and mecha are not driver and vehicle; they are more like horse and rider, or coach and athlete. You must develop a rapport and relationship with one another.

The pilot and the mech each independently choose a single word of two or three syllables—something that sounds dramatic, legendary, and stalwart. Put them together in either order to name the mech. You do both need to be able to say the mech's name without laughing.

Gameplay: Funerary Procession for a Dead World

Pilot-mech pairs now split as evenly as possible into squads. With five pairings or fewer, form one squad. With six or more, divide into an alpha squad and a bravo squad. Each squad explores a different part of the play space, gathering information about what happened there before returning to the rendezvous point at a designated time. Plan for at least five minutes per player in the squad, but be generous; an hour is a good length of time for the mission. Synchronize timepieces, set an alarm, and move out.

Other Life-Forms in the Space: Kaijū!

You may encounter other life-forms like dogs, cats, or humans who are not players in the game. These are called kaijū, and represent giant, invincible beings who now rule the planet. Fortunately, all mecha have stealth modes which mask their exterior appearance as those of kaijū. Your disguise automatically activates when your sensors detect nearby kaijū. Do not fight kaijū or otherwise engage them aggressively! Treat them with politeness and respect and you can blend in with them undetected. When kaijū pass safely out of range, you return to your normal configuration to continue the mission.

Exploration Phase

The mecha lead the exploration phase. During exploration, pilot players follow along behind their mecha, quietly listening and watching. The objectives of the exploration phase are ...

- Explore the ruined planet's surface
- Discover locations where climactic mecha action took place: battles, rescues, decisions
- Discuss your feelings about your existence, your mission, and humans

During this phase, the mecha collectively choose which way to go as they travel the world. Pay particular attention to interesting terrain features, using your words and your role-play to decide together what they are. Is the pillow an apartment block, or a desert mesa? Is the river a canal or a lava flow? Are the mosquitoes hostile drones or aggressive monsters? Your sensors aren't perfect, so some initial confusion over what things are is inevitable and okay. As you move, seek out interesting locations to climb on, crawl under, build with, or examine.

Any pilot may begin a reminiscence phase by indicating a region or terrain feature and asking, "What happened here?"

Reminiscence Phase

During a reminiscence phase, pilots and mecha flash back to a climactic moment in the planet's defense. The reminiscence phase's objectives are ...

- Highlight an action-packed turning point in the planet's defense
- Learn what the Mech Force fights for and how, instilling a sense of passion and loss
- Show how each pilot-mech pair works together

Unlike the meditative exploration phase, the reminiscence phase is fast-paced and intense. Pilots drive this phase, guiding mecha through the action with words and gestures as practiced earlier. Pilots speak freely with one another in-character. They may describe their actions, the terrain around them, or the adversity they face. Mecha may not speak except in onomatopœia, and must communicate using only movement. Use your role-play to discover what happened at this terrain feature. Were hostages rescued or lost? Did enemies run away, or triumph? Whatever the outcome, the terrain feature on which the reminiscence phase focuses is tragically devastated, destroyed, or otherwise rendered inhabitable to humans.

When the reminiscence passes through climax into denouement, the pilot who began the reminiscence phase may end it with the phrase, "We got what we came for." At that point, transition back to an exploration phase. But first, collect a memento to remind you of what happened there: an object from the region (perhaps an acorn or seashell), or a photograph of mecha climbing or posing on or near the terrain feature, perhaps.

At the End: Saying Goodnight

Once the mission's timer is up, all players return to the rendezvous point. Pilots may remain standing; mecha should kneel, sit, or recline, indicating a low-power state. One by one, the players reveal their collected mementos. Tell a quick version of the story surrounding each memento: "This is the black box of our general's mech, where it exploded at the battle of the Broad River." "This is the last seed of the great trees which towered above the rebel base." "This holo-photo shows Ardent Archangel taking cover behind the factory the aliens destroyed." Take a moment of silence after each memento, honoring the memory of those who fell. Finally, each paired mecha and pilot stand, salute one another with left hand cupped over right fist, and launch into space, heading for worlds they can still protect. The game has ended.

De-Roling

To end the game, pilots and mecha thank each other for playing. Then, break into small groups—maximum six to eight to a group, and try not to have the groups be all pilots, all mecha, or all players from one squad. Go around the group saying your real name and something you're looking forward to in the near future.