SESSION ZERO

Before the first session with the first mission happens the players need to have their Session Zero. A session zero is the foundation for a campaign. It builds both the narrative and, more importantly, social foundations of the game. This section has steps to follow for laying those foundations.

LINES, VEILS, AND THE X CARD

Beam Saber is designed to tell the harsh tale of people trying to physically and emotionally survive an all encompassing war, BUT it is still a game, and games are supposed to be fun. Nothing ruins a person's fun faster than being exposed to emotionally charged situations that they did not agree to experience, regardless of if they are a player or GM. This is where Lines, Veils, and the X Card come in. Even if all the people involved in the game would assume that they are on the same page about a harrowing topic (such as when everyone is part of the same marginalized group) it should still be brougt up as a Line or Veil because different people have different tolerances for engaging with those topics in play and in th real world. If someone at the table uses these tools in bad faith (such as using them to purposefully ruin the fun of others or introduce uncomfortable topics) the group should have a serious discussion about whether or not this person is an acceptable addition to the game.

There are also many other safety tools designed for tabletop role playing games, so if you aren't a fan of the ones presented here, don't hesitate to find some that work for you and your group.

LINES

A line is something that the group agrees will NEVER come up in the narrative of the game (not even "off screen" or in universe), with the reason being that at least one person in the group would have an emotional reaction to the subject that would ruin their play experience. Does this mean that there will be no dark themes? Of course not, but the world is a bad enough place that we can imagine dark stories that won't make players feel emotionally exploited.

These boundaries are set up by having an open discussion with everyone at the table. Ask everyone if there are any topics that they want left out of the game, and make a list of those that everyone can reference. Each player should feel safe and free from judgment to express topics that the game should not include. No one has to explain why they don't want to explore the topic, that may be very personal and private. If they do divulge their reasons treat them and their reasons with respect regardless of your own feelings on the matter.

VEILS

A veil is a topic that may come up in play, doesn't ruin anyone's fun, but is also something that at least one person at the table does NOT want to linger on. Veils are sort of a halfway point between open topics and those on the list of Lines. If they come up in play that's alright but it won't be described in detail, and the scene will fade to black to avoid giving it further attention.

Like lines, veils should be discussed as a group and a list made of the topics to be wary of.

THE X CARD

The X card is a tool created by John Stavropoulos (http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg) to help fill in the gaps of the lines and veils caused by the improvisational nature of role playing games. Draw a big X on an index card, on a piece of paper, or you could even have a large cardboard X cut out. If you are playing online a large X can be drawn in the play space. Put the X somewhere on the table that everyone can reach. If someone becomes uncomfortable with the current scene for any reason or to any degree, and they want the source of discomfort removed from the narrative they just need to invoke the x card. This might be by tapping the card, picking it up, making an X with their arms, typing out a line of "Xs", saying "X," or anything else that reminds everyone of the X card rule.

Once the X card is used the scene immediately edits out the detail that necessitated the card's use. If the Harmful detail is unclear pause the game to find out which one is the issue. If a break is required for people to collect themselves or have a longer discussion take one. Consider adding the Harmful detail to the list of lines or veils so that they can be properly handled in the future. This step might not be necessary because it could just be a temporarily sensitive topic, such as a person who recently ate hearing about eating something gross.

If someone does not use the X card that should not be held against them if they bring up the issue later. Additionally it is not a replacement for conversation; if a person would rather speak against a topic's use in the game that should be respected. Likewise if the X card is not used, and the problem is not brought up by the distressed person, they should understand that the other players likely will not be aware of the problem, and unfortunately may continue to invoke the Harmful detail.

DISCUSSING EXPECTATIONS

With boundaries for topics established it's time to discuss what people DO want in the game. While most mecha media does have shared themes relating to the costs of conflict at the scale that necessitates mechs, not everyone is interested in focusing on those, and even those who do may prefer different aspects of the topic. Some stories are focused on the personal goals of the pilots (Armored Trooper Votoms), others on the struggles of small communities (Mobile Suit Gundam), and a few spotlight the political maneuvering between massive organizations (Iron Blooded Orphans). Any

and all of these might be expectations that people come to the game with which should be laid out. If everyone is not on the same page regarding the game's direction it could cause problems.

Things to ask about the campaign :

- How long should each session be? Some people are comfortable playing for 3 or so hours, while others are happy playing for 8 hours plus breaks.
- How many sessions would everyone like to play in the campaign? When trying a new game having a single session of play, also known as a one shot, is common, but some people like to have campaigns without an expected end point.
- When can people schedule sessions? Some people work 9 to 5 jobs, and some online players are in different time zones.
- What are some media touchstones that inspire everyone? These can help clarify what tone each person is interested in experiencing in the game.
- Is the game about the Pilots or the Squad? The latter gives more room for roster changes should a Pilot die, retire, go AWOL from Overindulging, or any other reason that a Player will need to change characters. This helps gauge the interest in roster changes and if the Players are open to injuries that remove Pilots from the game temporarily or permanently.
- How politically complex should it be? (see the Political Scale section on page ??)
- What Factions and squads are people interested in? Whether choosing from the list of examples or creating them from scratch try to keep the game focused on 3 or 4 squads at the start.
- How large of an area should it cover? (see the Map Scale section on page ??)
- What kind of environment should it occur in? Some campaigns might take place in deep space with communities forming around clusters of asteroids and nomadic nation ships, but some players would prefer a more familiar game taking place in a climate similar to the region in which they live.
- How dangerous and gritty should it be? Some people want their character to be threatened by a mugger with a knife in an alley, while others want to fearlessly participate in gunfights.
- How combat focused should it be? Some people want to fight their way into and out of every problem, while others would prefer to talk or sneak.
- How frequently should the pilots face conflicts outside of their vehicles? Some people want to emphasize their vehicles' power through action, while others feel that pilots should be challenged as often as their machines.
- What technologies should be focused on in the game? The AR is part of the core setting of Beam Saber but players might have no interest in exploring its impact, and would rather focus on cybernetic augmentation.

CREATING THE CHARACTERS AND SQUAD

Once the social foundations of the game are established it's time to move on to building the fiction. During session zero this will primarily be done through Pilot, Vehicle, and Squad creation. As a group the players should decide which Patron Faction they want to work for. Pick something that everyone is excited about, don't just settle for the least offensive option. The Squad's Patron Faction may be the largest single aesthetic influence on the group, and will also give narrative reasons for the missions they take.

Next select the Squad Playbook which will direct the kind of missions that the Squad will participate in. Again this choice should be something everyone is excited about. If the entire group can't get excited about an option it might be that there are different expectations for what the game should be that weren't hammered out earlier.

With that chosen follow the instructions for Squad Creation, and then move onto Pilot and Vehicle Creation. If some players already have ideas for the pilot and vehicle before the Squad is decided that's alright. The order isn't too important since the two creation processes influence each other. Some groups may even find it beneficial to move back and forth between the two processes!

The History, Tragedy, and Opening of the characters help establish setting details through the lived experiences of the character. Each will reveal new details about the fiction that might not have been previously established. If a pilot's tragedy is that their orbital station home was used as a kinetic weapon that introduces inhabited space stations, and at least one group willing to use them as weapons.

When the Squad's Direct Superior is decided, the NPC Squads they affect are selected and the setting will naturally take on clarity as well. Whether selecting from the list of examples or designing original ones, each new Squad will add flavour to their Patron, the physical spaces they occupy, and the narrative setting as a whole. For example if the Dragon Slayers are included that establishes that the Autocracy has massive mobile fortresses, that there is a Tier IV Squad that could be encountered almost anywhere, and that mobile fortresses are an important symbol of power.

INTRODUCE THE CHARACTERS

With the characters and Squad made it's time to introduce everyone. Each player should state their character's:

- Name and/or callsign
- Look
- History
- Tragedy
- Opening
- Drive
- Pilot ability
- Vehicle name
- Vehicle model
- Vehicle look
- Vehicle Load

Ask the players questions about these details and encourage the other players to ask questions as well. You might ask if what the public knows about their Tragedy, why they are pursuing their Drive, or how they gained their pilot ability. If they aren't sure of the answer that's alright and is something that can be answered during play.

With everyone introduced it's time to make Connection Beliefs (see the Beliefs section) and name the squad. Don't skip coming up with Beliefs as they help define the bond between characters and get the pilots XP. If a player is really stuck on coming up with a Belief use one of the examples from their Playbook, or even a different Playbook. If you can't name the Squad don't worry, it's not urgent and might be figured out after a couple of missions.

HOW TO PREPARE A CAMPAIGN

The Session Zero is done, the Squad's got their FOB set up, and the Pilots are in their Vehicles ready to go. Now it's time to start thinking about planning the campaign. This can be daunting to do alone from scratch, which is why this section exists!

For all of the following sections, if you start to feel overwhelmed, use these tips:

- Think about what was discussed during Session Zero. A lot of ideas will have been shared at that time, both directly and indirectly. For example if the players agreed that they want to focus on a single city, then you have direction for the map scale, and also know that you almost certainly won't need Squads focused on space or sea travel.
- Ask your players questions whenever you need answers. If Session Zero didn't give you the details you need, just ask your players. Consider which player's Pilot would be the expert on the topic, and ask them! For example if you need to know more about how the Jovangellian military organizes itself, consider asking a player whose pilot is Jovangellian, or a player using the Officer playbook.
- Use the examples in this book. Whether you want to use them entirely or as a jumping off point, you can get a lot of value from the setting details in this book. For example you can insert The Broken Bank into any urban area that needs a ruined section, or maybe you just like the special rule about Proxies catching the Pilots unless they keep moving.

CAMPAIGN SCALE

An important consideration when planning a campaign as a group is the desired scale of the narrative. Impactful stories happen across the vastness of space (*Mobile Suit Gundam*), several regions (*Mobile Suit Gundam: 08th MS Team*), and the districts of a single city (*Mobile Suit Gundam 0080: War In The Pocket*). Some have a multitude of Factions vying for power (*Friends At The Table Season 2:*

COUNTER/Weight) and some have only a single Faction that the protagonists struggle against (*Mad Max: Fury Road*). What scale really determines in a campaign is the complexity, not the quality, of its narrative.

MAP SCALE

The physical geography of a campaign primarily influences two facets of the game: the amount of different environments, and the amount of community there will be outside of the squad. In a way it's a trade off between breadth and depth of the setting's fiction.

If a campaign is going to span multiple planets it offers the players and GM the opportunity to see many environments from the loneliness of space to airless moons to rolling plains and all the space stations in between. The plants, animals, vistas, natural dangers (and technology required to adjust to them) might change wildly from mission to mission. Of course such travel means that people get left behind.

The smaller an area covered by the campaign, the more connected the area will be, and the more attention each piece will receive. If the story takes place in a single city, it's quite reasonable for NPCs outside of the Squad to make an appearance or be sought out by the pilots. The characters that appear multiple times will become fleshed out just through their interactions with the pilots, and they'll in turn flesh out the people they are from, both their culture and social circle. The campaign's map too will become more fleshed out with time as places are revisited through going to them and also discussing them. Of course, staying in the same place means that the view outside the window doesn't change very much.

Is it better to have a planet hopping campaign with many strange horizons or one in a single city where the neighborhoods feel as much like home as the FOB? Chances are most groups will be somewhere in between the two, and there's nothing wrong with that. The decision is up to the players and GM, and should be discussed as part of Session Zero.

A quick guide for how to decide the scale is to determine how large a Region is that a Squad can use the Collect Downtime Activity on. Is it the size of a neighbourhood, town, county, province, nation, planet, or star system? A Region is the smallest mechanical unit of geography and the scale of a campaign should likely be no larger than two steps above a region's size. For example if every town is a Region then the game should be focused on the conflict in a single county or province at most; control of a single town won't make much of a difference on a larger scale.

What happens if the Squad needs to travel to a place that is beyond the scale of the campaign as decided in session zero? Then the players and GM have to consider if this degree of travel is a one time thing or a new norm establishing itself. A one time journey might be a mission deep behind enemy lines or going to a major political center for a bit of intrigue. If this is the case then there's no

adjustment necessary as most missions are still going to take place in the originally agreed upon scale. However if the game is shifting scale permanently then the group should discuss what the new scale is and if that's really the story everyone is interested in telling.

Regardless of the physical space that the campaign covers, you should work to make it feel like there isn't enough elbow room to move around. Aside from making the game's territory tighter, this can be achieved with strategic objectives that are constantly fought over, usually to ensure that a Faction gets the supplies it needs. Bridges, cities, factories, harbours, spaceports; all of these are points of conflict that every Faction wants for themselves or at least to deny its benefits to others. Constantly ratchet up the tension by making the campaign increasingly claustrophobic.

POLITICAL SCALE

With a map scale decided that map must now be populated with Factions and their Squads. Every Faction has its own goals, and each Squad methods to accomplish those goals. As more Factions and Squads are added to a campaign the focus of the narrative weakens. However, more Factions and Squads mean a greater variety of foes, more opportunities for schemes, and sometimes greater moral greyness.

When a campaign has two or fewer Factions it will have very clear political lines. Us and Them. If the players decide they want to play an Independent Squad they will be outside of the established power structures, able to play both sides against each other or push one side to victory. If during the course of the campaign this seems like too few Factions, or there are some absent that the group wants to explore, more can be added as the narrative develops.

If a campaign has 3 or more Factions it opens up the possibility of alliances between Factions, which in turn allows for betrayals, lesser evils, aligned interests, and all kinds of immoral, pragmatic decisions. If the players are an Independent Squad they will likely be pursuing their own ambitions as Factions will be far more concerned about the actions of other Factions. If that sounds bleak remember that patronized squads are also largely below notice, they just have someone looking over their shoulder judging them. If during play this seems like too many Factions the group should talk about which Factions interest them the most and then let the other ones fade into the background by having few if any missions involving them.

Regardless of the number of Factions involved in a campaign the number of Squads should never be more than 8. However, what's meant by "involved in a campaign" is missions where a Squad features prominently, either as the target, a close ally, or an interfering third party. The reason for this is that the story between the players' Squad and the NPC squads will struggle to gain depth if there are too many squads. There can be other squads that exist in the campaign, but they should not actually appear on screen in the game.

When choosing which squads should have prime roles on a campaign there are two considerations: which squads are the players interested in, and the Tiers of the squads.

If a player becomes invested in an NPC Squad, chances are that Squad will feature an Ally or Rival. As many featured squads as possible should have Allies and Rivals in them so that the players' Squad can regularly interact with them. This may even result in the Squad as a whole considering an entire NPC Squad to be their Ally or Rival, especially as Squad statuses improve or decline.

The Tiers of the featured squads will divide them into two narrative categories: direct competition (NPC squads that are two or fewer Tiers above the players) and conflict spoilers (squads that are three or more Tiers above the players). The split of squads should be half direct competition and half conflict spoilers, leaning towards direct competition.

Direct competition squads are those who are roughly on the same level as the players, should regularly be the targets of missions, and should take direct action (attacks, thefts, framing, etc.) against the players. If a direct competition Squad has a positive status with the players it may team up with them for missions on occasion. Squads that are two Tiers above the players, however, may occasionally act as conflict spoilers.

Conflict spoilers are the more powerful squads who have bigger fish to fry than the players, but are willing to provide support (employment, information, tools, etc.) to weaker squads to serve their own interests. Whether they provide these benefits to the players or their foes depends entirely on the Squad status. As the player Squad increases in Tier conflict spoilers will become direct competition as the players become threats to them.