

The Worldbuilder's Guide to...

# *Kaiju*

by

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Games 4 Geeks



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# Introduction

This short guide is aimed at helping you to gain a basic understanding of the creatures and genre associated with Kaiju, the giant monsters seen rampaging through cities in films such as *Godzilla* and *Cloverfield*.

In writing this, I have two main audiences in mind: Gamesmasters (GMs) of roleplaying games and writers of fiction, whether that be novels or screenplays. To serve both groups, I have tried to keep the terminology fairly neutral such as using 'protagonist', rather than 'main character' or 'player character'. As well as both of these audiences, this guide is potentially useful as a starting point for anyone interested in the genre.

I don't consider myself to be a great expert on this subject, this is intended only as a brief overview and enough to give GMs and writers what they need. This is a starting point, not an in-depth 'everything you could possibly want to know'.

Having said that, I'm not ruling out that this guide might get revised at some point in the future. If you do feel there's any glaring omissions, errors in the material, or any other feedback, feel free to get in touch. I'm always happy to get feedback, so long as you tell me what it is that you like (or dislike) and why.

# What are Kaiju?

Kaiju means 'strange creature' in Japanese. The term is generally used to mean giant monsters however pretty much any monster is technically a kaiju. While daikaiju is the specific term for giant monsters, I'm going to go with the more common term of kaiju in this book.

Typically kaiju movies (*kaijū eiga* in Japanese) showcase these monsters attacking a city, or fighting each other. I'm sure you've seen images of Godzilla rampaging through a city while soldiers impotently try to fight him back.

Although the genre is undeniably tied to Japanese monster movies, the film that started the genre isn't actually Japanese; it was the 1933 American film *King Kong*.

In 1952 *King Kong* was re-released in Japan, inspiring the owner of Toho studios to make a monster movie of his own. Two years later, the movie *Gojira* (renamed *Godzilla* outside of Japan) was released to great box-office success. As I write this sixty years later, a new big-budget Godzilla movie is days away from release.

Most kaiju are modelled on either animals or mythological creatures. There have been lizards, turtles, birds, insects, and dragons. There have also been robots, animated statues, amorphous blobs, and fungi.

While the kaiju display gross physical characteristics, and often behaviour, comparable to normal animals, their size is beyond thresholds for which normal biology would be adequate. In addition many monsters exhibit unusual, perhaps even supernatural abilities, such as Godzilla's radioactive breath, or Rodan's gravity negation. Essentially, make them big, give them a couple of cool powers, then make sure they can level a city-block with ease.

Almost all kaiju are singular creatures and not species. There are exceptions to this, but being a giant monster does generally seem to be a lonely business. Having said that, one kaiju fighting another (or more) is not uncommon.

Frankly, if you can imagine it, and it's big and destructive, it can be a kaiju.

# Monsters

The following are some of the more famous monsters. This is not an exhaustive list, but should give you an idea of some of the weird and wonderful creatures that feature in the genre.

## Gamera

One of the classics, but also one that makes you wonder quite what inspired the creative process behind this creature.

Gamera was the result of Japan's Daiei Studios desire to have their own equivalent of Toho's Godzilla. They knew they needed to make it different to their competitor, and boy did they manage that. What they came up with is a bipedal turtle, who spews fireballs, has rocket jets to enable him to fly, and who can retract his legs while spouting flames from the holes and spinning through the air like a giant frisbee.

The 1990s series is generally considered superior to the originals, but the movies from the sixties have a definite campy charm.

## Ghidorah (King Ghidorah)

The three-headed space dragon, who typically stands toe-to-toe with Godzilla. With his numerous breath-weapons and giant wings capable of generating hurricane-strength winds, he's capable of dishing out some serious destruction. In his first appearance it took the combined might of Godzilla, Mothra and Rodan to take him down.

It's not all positive though, as he's shown on several occasions to be especially susceptible to mind-control. Oh well, at least it gives an excuse for some epic showdowns.

## Godzilla (Gojira)

Gojira, Godzilla's original name, was derived from the Japanese words for gorilla and whale, gorira (yes, I know) and kujira. This was due to the monster being planned as a cross between the two, alluding to his size, power and aquatic origin.

There's a reason Godzilla is called the 'King of the Monsters' and it's not because of his winning smile. He's been the star of twenty-eight productions from Toho and four American films. Other appearances include several comic book series (including ones by both Marvel and Dark Horse), a series of novels, Saturday morning cartoons and countless items of merchandise.

Interestingly, Godzilla has evolved over the years from being an unstoppable destroyer to being a protector of humans against other monsters, at least in the later Toho movies and the cartoon series.

## **King Kong**

I'm sure that the great ape needs no introduction, but what you might not know is that for a while in the '60s, King Kong is brought back to fight kaiju. Okay, so his height is adjusted to make him as big as Godzilla, but that just makes things fair for a true 'who would win?' contest.

## **Mothra**

A giant moth. A giant moth that's a deity to the inhabitants of an irradiated island. Wait, a giant moth that's mankind's only hope. No, a fairy moth...mecha-moth...what? A giant moth with two tiny, magical singing fairies?!?!?

Mothra has been through many incarnations, thanks to her ability to be perpetually reborn. This gives her a wide variety of forms and a seemingly endless bag of tricks. Normally cast as a protector (though not so much in her first film) she's even been known to fight in her larval state.

She is also probably the prettiest of the major kaiju, and has never been defeated by Godzilla without him having assistance.

## **Rodan**

Well yeah, a giant lizard with atomic breath is pretty cool, but can he fly?

Rodan is a giant pterosaur, and one of the most recognisable kaiju. With a wingspan of two hundred meters, and able to reach speeds of up to mach 1.5, Rodan can level entire cities with the hurricane force winds he generates.

Worth noting that as with Godzilla's origins tying into nuclear anxieties, Rodan's supersonic boom and "killing airstream of his mighty wings" relate to then-current fears about supersonic travel.

# Movies

Now you know a little bit about kaiju, I think it's time you got to see some of them in action. Here are some of the best that there are. Watch them and learn, you can pick up more from watching this selection than I can possibly teach you in words.

## **King Kong (1933)**

The first kaiju movie. A giant ape, a rampage in the city, the feeling that it wasn't really his fault it was ours for bringing him into our world. All the classic elements, along with what was for the time mind-blowing special effects.

Interestingly, in the original screen-play, King Kong was supposed to face-off against a giant komodo dragon in Indonesia. The huge ape/lizard showdown would have to wait until 1962s *King Kong v. Godzilla* to actually happen though, but right from the start monster vs. monster fights were a part of things.

## **The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms (1953)**

The first film to feature a giant monster caused by an atomic bomb. It was partly inspired by the re-release of *King Kong*, but also by the paranoia over nuclear weapons and a short story publisher a couple of years earlier. Also noteworthy for Ray Harryhausen's distinctive visual effects. A wave of creature B-movies was the result of this film's release, but it was the following year when the kaiju genre really took off.

## **Godzilla (1954)**

Yeah, there was no way this wasn't making the list, while it was partly inspired by both the above movies, this is the one that pretty much started the genre. Just as well, since this was at the time the most expensive Japanese film to date.

Essentially, the plot taps into the horror of the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, along with the recent 'Lucky Dragon 5' incident in which 23 fishermen, along with their entire catch of fish, were contaminated with radiation from an American nuclear test on Bikini Atoll where? The symbolism of the burning city would not have been lost on the audience, even without the fact that in this story the monster is awoken by a nuclear explosion.

A classic.



### **Them! (1954)**

Probably the best-known 'atomic monster' movie in the United States. Giant irradiated ants under Los Angeles versus the military. Probably one of the best sci-fi films of the 50s. Keep an eye out for Leonard Nimoy in a small, uncredited role.

### **Rodan (1956)**

The first colour kaiju movie (*Them!* was going to be but the studio wasn't happy with the result), *Rodan* features truly impressive footage of an aerial attack on Fukuoka City. So impressive, in fact, that Toho used it over and over again as stock footage in numerous other films. While Rodan went on to feature in many other movies, this is the one where he/she (there's two of them here) shines the most.

### **Mothra (1961)**

Unusual in that while she does her fair share of destruction, this is a début movie for a kaiju where it could be argued she is 'good'. Generally, it takes at least a second appearance for that to happen.

That's not to say she doesn't cause her fair share of destruction, but it's all in the name of rescuing her tiny priestesses from an opportunistic and greedy capitalist, and she goes home as soon as this is accomplished.

One of the more fantastical films on the list, it helped shape the direction of kaiju films in the '60s.

### **Ghidorah, The Three-Headed Monster (1964)**

Studio heads wanted Godzilla back, but with an opponent who could really challenge him. Enter the lightning-spewing, fire-breathing, three-headed space dragon.

This was the first real 'team-up', with Godzilla, Mothra and Rodan joining forces to take down the invading monster. This existential threat to the planet was the start of certain monsters being portrayed as protectors of the world, and becoming even 'likeable'.

### **The War Of The Gargantuas (1966)**

Apparently, this is the movie that first inspired Brad Pitt to become an actor (no, really: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8EIEao\\_nSk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8EIEao_nSk)) and was kind-of a sequel to the rather 'meh' *Frankenstein Conquers the World*, which had seen Frankenstein's monster grow to enormous size. In this film, cells from that monster have spawned two monsters who face off in Tokyo.

Some great city destruction, and also worth noting for people getting eaten, rather than just crushed or blasted.

### **Destroy All Monsters (1968)**

Originally planned as the last ever Godzilla movie, Toho wanted to send him off with something special. An alien race takes control of eleven monsters and uses them to destroy the cities of Earth. Like a giant creature version of *The Expendibles*, it features Angirus, Baragon, Godzilla, Gorosaurus, King Ghidorah, Kumonga, Manda, Minilla, Mothra, Rodan and Varan in one hell of a team-up.

This film has quite an epic feel to it, with ray gun battles, trips to the moon, space aliens and a ten-on-one final kaiju showdown. One of the crowning moments of the genre.

### **Godzilla Vs Mecha-Godzilla (1974)**

In the mid '70s technology seemed to be leaping forwards at break-neck speeds. So, it was only fitting that Godzilla face off against a robo-menace.

Enter Mecha-Godzilla. Able to fire missiles from his feet (I'm sure he always gets missile-toe jokes at Xmas) and with laser-beam eyes, it wanted one thing and one thing only: to defeat the real Godzilla and conquer Earth for the aliens of the "Third Planet from the Black Hole".

### **Tremors (1990)**

In my opinion, one of Kevin Bacon's finest films. Possibly not an obvious kaiju movie, but the antagonists are basically kaiju versions of earthworms. Not an out-and-out comedy, but with plenty of humour it's an enjoyable movie. Also, the small-town, isolated setting makes for a very different feel to a city-based rampage.



### **Gamera: Guardian of the Universe (1995)**

The early Gamera films were cheesy, campy affairs as fitted the time. The '90s movie series, starting here, remedies that by rebooting things, streamlining the monster and ditching the whining kids that plagued some of the earlier movies. I think it's fair to say this created something of a renaissance of the kaiju genre.

### **Gamera 3: Awakening of Iris (1999)**

The first two movies in the '90s trilogy are good, but this final part is great. Themes of loss, hatred and revenge pepper the film and at times the human drama can almost overshadow the monster action. However, the action is some of the most impressive ever, and the final battle with the squid-like Iris contains mind-blowing special effects for what is essentially a man in a rubber suit.

### **Godzilla, Mothra and King Ghidorah: Giant Monsters All-Out Attack (2001)**

And the award for longest title on this list goes to... ..actually, it could be longer since not only does Godzilla face our favourite giant moth and space-dragon, but also Baragon, the burrowing dinosaur from *Frankenstein Conquers the World* and *Destroy All Monsters*.

A direct sequel to the original *Gojira*, this movie brings back the pissed-off Godzilla of old, looking meaner than ever. Often sited as the best Godzilla movie since the first one, this combines some spectacular rampages with a craftsmanship of film-making not seen in most of this list.

### **Cloverfield (2008)**

Like *Gojira*, this movie references real-world disaster; in this case the 9/11 attacks. Where *Gojira* played off the firebombing of Tokyo along with the nuclear fallout of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the 'Lucky Dragon 5' incident, *Cloverfield* stirs up images of the confusion and carnage of the 9/11 attacks.

Also worth noting for it's 'found footage' nature, as the film is supposedly captured by the protagonists on a digital camera. This gives the film a nice feeling of making you feel right there.

### **Pacific Rim (2013)**

In some ways, a subversion of the genre: nuclear powered robots and nukes being the solution to kaiju, rather than the cause. Having said that, it also plays it straight with the statement that global warming has practically terraformed the planet for the kaiju, and a numerical classification system of them that mirrors the Saffir-Simpson scale for hurricanes.

Basically it's a big-budget-blockbuster Hollywood treatment of the Japanese 'tokusatsu' films: giant robots fighting giant monsters, with great special effects.

### **Godzilla (2014)**

Okay, it's rather early to put this one on the list, since it's not even released as I type this. However, by all accounts it's running with the themes of the original, and it's got *Breaking Bad*'s Bryan Cranston, so I've got high hopes.

# Using Kaiju in your stories

Creatures as large and powerful as kaiju are far too large and powerful to be used as just another animal in a fictional setting. If you're using them as a 'wandering monster' in a game or a normal opponent for the protagonists to beat, then you know the power level is getting a bit ridiculous. These are powerful creatures that can pose a threat to nations and spawn myths.

## Using them as a threat

Perhaps in your setting a culture or group of beings may worship the kaiju as a deity. Chances are, they'll be nomadic since the destruction these creatures bring doesn't lend itself to large permanent settlements nearby.

In such a situation, the protagonists will usually be dealing with the worshippers for most of the plot. Perhaps a successful resolution means the beast doesn't even appear; it's awakening being stopped by the heroes.

The cultists probably worship the beast due to its power, perhaps hoping to be spared its wrath, or wishing to be able to guide it towards their enemies. Human sacrifice in an attempt to placate the creature, perhaps? Maybe some occult ritual?

An alternative is that perhaps a sleeping kaiju is found, and events are in motion to wake it (whether deliberately or not). Perhaps soon 'the stars will be right' and it will rise as per the ancient prophecy. Or perhaps it's discovered lying dormant in the permafrost and scientists are intent on waking it for study or profit.

The important thing here is that this use of kaiju is as a threat to the world. The protagonists have failed if the monster is unleashed. Having said that, the story isn't necessarily over if that happens, as things can escalate to one of the other uses.

## Using them as natural disasters

This is the classic use and as they are portrayed in a lot of the original movies. They appear, perhaps in response to nuclear testing or some other environmental catastrophe, perhaps even for no fathomable reason. Whatever causes them to appear, they bring destruction wherever they go.

Treat them like a volcano, tsunami or earthquake. The emphasis isn't on defeating the monster, but on surviving for long enough to get away. Perhaps the protagonists have more to deal with than just this, perhaps they still have a job to do, and must do it while contending with collapsed buildings, panicked civilians and other effects of the kaiju attack.

At this level if the beast is fought directly, it's either going to be through cunning, with some sort of magic/high-tech MacGuffin, or it's going to fail.

Think massive destruction, fleeing refugees, high casualties and a feeling of unstoppable raw power.

### **Using them as opponents**

If your protagonists are powerful enough, perhaps they can actually fight the kaiju directly. At the lower end we're talking about them using a brilliant strategy, an awesome super-weapon, or some other 'power-up' to even the odds. At the higher end, we're just looking at them going head-to-head.

Do not use this option lightly. If you can take down one of these monsters, you can take on an entire army and win.

This is an appropriate level of threat for a powerful superhero, a giant robot or another kaiju. It's not really an appropriate adversary for a retired marine (at least, not without some serious help): these things take on entire companies of troops and win.

### **Using them as weapons**

Generally, kaiju are depicted as possessing an animal level of intelligence. At best, they are rarely depicted as having a more than human level of intelligence. Both animals and humans (yes, I know humans are animals, but you know what I mean) are susceptible to manipulation, and can be persuaded to do things they might not otherwise have done.

Mind control, strange ancient artefacts, magical rituals; these could all be used by a bad guy to take some form of control over the creature. Of course, it would be a terrible shame if this control was broken while the big bad is near the kaiju\_...

It doesn't necessarily need to be the antagonist who finds the way to gain control, perhaps the protagonists do; it's a perfectly fine way of stopping the attack. Alternatively, think of all the lovely damage that could be done to the bad guy's base just by the protagonists annoying the beast enough to get it to follow them there.

### **Using them as punishment**

One of the recurring themes of the genre is that somehow the creature's attack is brought about by meddling in things that should not be meddled with. Nuclear testing is the classic example, but the occult, or environmental damage are also good substitutes. In this way, the beast is often a giant, stompy manifestation of hubris.

# In Closing

I hope you've found this short guide useful, and that it's sparked some ideas.

Whether they're there just to cause massive amounts of destruction, or to be the embodiment of a theme, kaiju have the potential to create some truly memorable stories. As with all things, keep in mind what their purpose in the narrative is, and use that to shape how you use them.

If you want to take things further, I highly recommend you start with the article 'Towards a Theory and Biology of Kaiju' at:

<http://www.everythingkaiju.com/2013/10/towards-theory-and-biology-of-kaiju.html>

If you have any feedback on this guide, good or bad, then so long as you keep it civil and actually tell me what you did or didn't like, what you think I missed, etc., please get in touch. You can get me at [bez@games4geeks.com](mailto:bez@games4geeks.com) with any questions or comments.

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