

# RUINED EMPIRE EXTRAS

RULES FOR PLAYING WITH FATE CORE OR HEROINE  
PLUS ADDITIONAL CULTURAL COMMENTARY



with writing by Anna Kreider, Andy Kitkowski  
Josh T. Jordan, and Ryan Macklin

# CONTENTS

**ASPECTS OF THE RUINED EMPIRE.....2**

**PRINCESS OF AZUMI: A HEROINE SETTING FOR THE  
RUINED EMPIRE.....16**

**RUINED EMPIRE: THE “COMMENTARY**

**TRACK” .....26**

Part 1: RPGs and Cultural Context.....27

Part 2: Thoughtful Game Development Does Not Preclude

Awesome.....35

Part 3: An Aside on Japanese Doll Culture.....40

# ASPECTS OF THE RUINED EMPIRE

## FATE COMPANION FOR ANNA KREIDER'S THE RUINED EMPIRE BY RYAN MACKLIN

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# INTRODUCTION

When I saw that Anna Kreider had a Kickstarter going for a Final Fantasy-inspired setting, I instantly backed it. I love the inspired vibe that happens when you mix magical themes with technology, and the Final Fantasy games kept reblending those two ideas. I told her that I'd love to do a mini-supplement that turns the ideas in her setting into Fate aspects, to make it easy for Fate players to pick it up.

Let's just say that she didn't expect me to write more than that, and I got carried away. Enjoy the read!

—Ryan

## WHAT THIS IS

This is the Fate companion for Anna Kreider's excellent *The Ruined Empire*—an anime-inspired campaign setting. Though it was originally created for the *Tenra Bansho Zero* roleplaying game, *The Ruined Empire* is a setting not specifically tied to a system. This companion, *Aspects of the Ruined Empire*, takes the ideas in the setting and turns them into aspects for any flavor of Fate.

This is a small companion that works for *Fate Core*, *Fate Accelerated*, and other flavors of Fate. It doesn't give you a bunch of new rules or greater detail than in Kreider's original work; this companion is about getting you diving into play, letting you figure out the specific details of your world together as a group.

Each of the five big empires and regions in *The Ruined Empire* have their own unifying themes and troubles, which make for excellent aspects. The three settings aspects come

## What to Read

**I assume you've read (or at least have)**

***The Ruined Empire*, and you'll need it to use this companion.**

**You don't need to read the *Terra Bansho Zero* roleplaying game, but I recommend it—for further context about general enjoyment.**

**This also assumes you're playing with *Fate Core* or *Fate Accelerated* (easy to get at [FateRPG.com](http://FateRPG.com) or [Fate-SRD.com](http://Fate-SRD.com)), or with some other *Fate* variant. You'll also get more out of working with aspects by reading *Fateful Concepts: Character Aspects* ([RyanMacklin.com/fateful-concepts](http://RyanMacklin.com/fateful-concepts))**

with notes for GMs on compels or framing interesting moments.

Setting aspects—whether as game aspects or aspect on a broad location—work best when they can propel the protagonists into action or press them into tough or dramatic situations. In other words, they're meant to be compelled. So while *The Mechanical Realm* might seem like a good aspect for Azumi, it's not because it doesn't present ways to push the story forward. When tailoring these aspects to your game, ask yourself: is it still filled with implied action or pressure? If so, excellent!

Don't use all three of a location's aspects at once! Pick one that suits the theme or issues of your game at the time, treating it as an overall game aspect while you're dealing with that story element. Juxtapose it with another game aspect to create a rich playspace.

Along with setting aspects, each personage detailed in *The Ruined Empire* has three aspects listed: a high concept, a trouble, and a third aspect generally relating to competence. These work as seeds for NPCs or even for PCs, with the skills or approaches, other aspects, and further details left to you to fill in for whatever variant of *Fate* you're playing.

# THE IMPERIAL DYNASTY OF AZUMI: THE MECHANICAL REALM

## ASPECTS

### OPPRESSIVE AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

Azumi is a place where even voicing concerns or disagreement about the empire is treason. Agents of the emperor's intelligence service could come at a most inconvenient time. Rebels could accost you, afraid you're a spy for the government.

### ALL SERVE THE MILITARY

The empire is heavily militarized, and all aspects of life are dedicated to this cause. Art and other "trivialities" are seen as wasteful. For example, upon hearing where your ship is going, an Azumi colonel "requests" passage for his and his soldiers.

### REGIMENTED SOCIETY

The citizens of Azumi have their roles in society prescribed. While there's the possibility of some social movement, the machine that is the empire needs its cogs to turn and its society to be well oiled.

## PERSONAGES

### EMPEROR AMABERAN

- High concept: *Emperor of Azumi*—being kami is part of this aspect
- Trouble: *Recluse*—this is a placeholder for what has made the emperor turn inward, whatever that is in your game
- *Ruthless, Even to His Own*

### MARIS THE SILENCE

- High concept: *Charismatic Head of the Emperor's Intelligence Service*
- Trouble: *Young for This Post*—though none would dare openly defy her, many are waiting for her to make a critical mistake
- *Informants Everywhere*

### KENROH KARETSU

- High concept: *Preeminent Artisan in the Empire*
- Trouble: *Pained to See Her Beauty Used for War*—yet she must create, because of her duty and because she cannot envision not creating
- *Master of Deceit*

# JAHGA REPUBLIC OF ENLIGHTENED PEOPLES: THE NAMESAKE REALM

## ASPECTS

### **ENLIGHTENMENT WILL BE DELIVERED TO ALL**

The idea of bringing a better way of life to “backwards, barbaric” people makes the constant war palatable to the citizens, and is a banner that the military proudly hangs. It doesn’t stop at war, though; to full be of the republic, vassal states must adopt Jahgan ways. Any complications arising from the war or of cultural assimilation works as compels.

### **GREAT STRUGGLE OVER POWER**

The political dance between the Senate and the Empress is intricate, especially when the emperor-consort complicates it. This aspect works for highly political storylines, where being a pawn in a great game is expected.

### **SHINTO PRIESTHOOD LOOKED DOWN UPON**

For their pacifist view (and because of certain political machinations), Shinto priests are not as warmly regarded as in past days. But still, the Senate is careful to never officially express disapproval, so the priesthood dances a fine line. This aspect should only be in play for Shinto priests or those engaged in the politics.



## PERSONAGES

### EMPRESS REINA

- High concept: *Beloved Empress or the Jahga Republic*
- Trouble: *“There Will Be Peace in My Lifetime”*—this expresses itself in the clash between her idealism and the harsh realities of rule, and the irony of using conquering as a tool to achieve peace
- *Equally Cunning and Compassionate*

### EMPEROR-CONSORT DAHJ-EN

- High concept: *Oni Emperor-Consort of the Jahga Republic*
- Trouble: *Outspoken Revolutionary Views*
- *Powerful Combat Sorcerer*

Reina and Dahj-en could easily have aspects about their love and devotion to one another, in a game centered on romance alongside political intrigue

### MYO-ON

- High concept: *Matronly Abbess of the Phoenix Sect*
- Trouble: *Truly Committed to My Mission*
- *Will of Tempered Steel*

# THE RINDEN KINGDOM: A PROVINCIAL MONARCHY UNDER OCCUPATION

## ASPECTS

### UNDER OCCUPATION BY JAHGA

The empire's forces are ever-present in cities and patrol the country. The people of Rinden are expected to bow to the cultural might and beneficence of Jahga. This aspect covers complications from the new ruling power and complications from the resistance force; it works for either side of the struggle and for those caught in the middle.

### BATTLEGROUND OF EMPIRES

Rinden is a borderland, with Azumi's forces ever challenging. This aspect covers stories about military life and the struggle between great powers, and those impacted by the border clashes. There are similarities with *Under Occupation by Jahga*, but the differences lie in power dynamics and what those in powerless situations have to expect or fear.

### UNSAFE FOR ONI

This aspect is narrowed in focus, but great for stories of a magically powerful but underrepresented people are hated by those conquered through their aid. Oni may be safe in the capital, but if there are any Oni PCs or prominent NPCs, this aspect is compel-worthy when traveling within the kingdom.

## **PERSONAGES**

### **GOVERNOR FEIGON MAROWN**

- High concept: *Stressed Governor of Rinden*
- Trouble: *“Why Don’t They See the Good We Do?”*
- *Skilled, Determined Diplomat*

### **MARUIHANA**

- High concept: *Leader of the Resistance, Royalty in Hiding*
- Trouble: *Young and Angry*
- *Brilliant Tactical Mind*

### **LOKUS REGONA**

- High concept: *Veteran Commander of the Republican Garrison*
- Trouble: *“The Governor is a Fool!”*
- *Hardened by a Life of War*

# THE INDEPENDENT STATE OF HOROM: COSMOPOLITAN TRADING NATION AND VASSAL STATE

## ASPECTS

### UNDER OCCUPATION BY AZUMI

The Horomii want to preserve their culture. The Azumi way is to subsume a conquered land's workforce and resources at the expense of the local's frivolous pursuits. The power is in the hands of the Azumi occupational army overall, but people find ways to hold onto what they can, at least for a little while.

### MERCHANTS, SMUGGLERS, AND THIEVES EVERYWHERE

If you want a place that screams "hive of scum and villainy," the grand trading ports of Horom are for you. That also means people out to scam you, sell you out, or worse rub elbows with people you might hope to gain the support of or hire.

### PLIGHT OF THE UNDERCLASS

This covers stories of those that the wealthy and middle class step on—the people that the Thieves' Guild and especially Ken the Black Wind fight to give hope and moments of reprieve to. This aspect is definitely in play when in the capital's necropolis.

## **PERSONAGES**

### **LINA TANATO**

- High concept: *Nominal Head of the Merchants Guild*
- Trouble: *Worried of the Future Under Imperial Rule—* and equally worried of the cost of war if Azumi is refused
- *Canny, Shrewd Businesswoman*

### **KEN THE BLACK WIND**

- High concept: *Infamous Head of the Thieves' Guild*
- Trouble: *Committed to the Needy and Destitute*
- *Friends Everywhere Among the Downtrodden*

# NIL: THE DESOLATE WASTE

## ASPECTS

### LAWLESS, DESOLATE RUINS

The origin of the cataclysm that broke the Dangoro Trading State is still unknown, but its effects are lasting. Any sort of post-apocalyptic dangers you can imagine fall under this aspect, especially far away from what pockets of civilization exist in Nil.

### REFUGEES OF ALL KINDS

People from many walks of life and desperate situations—criminals, slaves, those who have lost homes thanks to war—come to Nil. It's certainly no *safe* haven, but it's haven nonetheless for those who have nowhere else. But as a melting pot of the poor and the crooked, there are altogether different perils in the shantytowns that arise.

### A SHINTO PRIEST'S DESPERATION

Metasanduro's decision to employ ronin to bring some order to Nil is a mixed blessing to some, and a powder keg to others. This aspect covers the social and political tensions in Nil, such as they are, between the priesthood, the samurai corps, and the people they together serve.

## PERSONAGES

### METASANDURO

- High concept: *First Priest of Dangoro*
- Trouble: *The Impossible Task of Rebuilding*
- *Will Do What's Needed*—which is a nicer and more thematic way of saying *Cold as Ice*

### BLACK GLOVE MOL

- High concept: *Commander of the Desecrated Land Samurai Corps*
- Trouble: *Secret Stained Past*
- *Honorable Warrior*

### metis

- High concept: *Reluctant Leader of the Kugutsu Refugees*
- Trouble: *Target of Admiration... and of Reprisal*
  - *Graceful Beyond Compare*—with or without a sword in hand

# PRINCESS OF AZUMI

## A HEROINE SETTING FOR THE RUINED EMPIRE BY JOSH T. JORDAN

*Suiko had known for years that her mother was lying. Of course, she would never confront her mother, but there's no way that someone with handwriting that nice was a merchant's daughter. She had the perfect skin of a noble and the gently sloping forehead of a member of the royal family. Now her mother was missing and imperial soldiers had been spotted on the roads near where Suiko and her mother lived, two days outside the border of the empire!*

*When Suiko was eight, she had discovered a book of poems dedicated to the last emperor in her mother's room. Since then, she had assumed that her mother was a "royal cousin," the illegitimate child of one of the princes. Suiko assumed that her mother had stolen the book of poetry when she fled the capital, an unwanted bastard.*

*Now that Suiko was alone, she began to doubt her assumptions. Her mother rarely spoke of her father, but she was clearly fond of him. And no one would send soldiers this far for a simple book of poetry. Maybe they were here for Suiko's mother. Maybe her mother wasn't a royal cousin. Which would mean that Suiko was...*



# INSPIRATION

This setting for *Heroine* or *Dangers Untold* takes place in Anna Kreider's *Ruined Empire*, a setting originally designed for the game, *Tenra Bansho Zero*. Ruined Empire is *Final Fantasy*-esque world full of several anime tropes. It combines magic and technology in an interesting way, and it is chock full of fascinating characters.

## HEROINE PLAYER

The following rules changes affect the Heroine Player. The Heroine is a princess in the Azumi Empire. She has been raised in secret so that other members of the royal family could not assassinate her.

### BE HEROIC

In a standard Heroine setting, the heroine uses the Be Heroic move to do something daring, clever, or kind. In Ruined Empire, she uses this move to do something pure and honest, clever and educated, or kind and democratic.

### PURE AND HONEST

She cuts through the lies and subterfuge surrounding her and takes a straightforward, moral action.

### CLEVER AND EDUCATED

She finds a solution that others have overlooked or that someone is trying to hide from her.

## **KIND AND DEMOCRATIC**

She chooses to care for a person or people who are suffering and in need.

## **INTRODUCTION TYPES**

When the Heroine's mother realized that she was pregnant with the Emperor's child, she fled to the borders of the Empire to raise the Heroine in secret so that the other heirs wouldn't have her killed out of hand. Choose one of the following.

### **MOTHER DIED**

Since then her mother has died and she is now old enough to hunt down answers about how and why she died.

### **SECRET DISCOVERED**

Some of her relatives have discovered her identity, and she must now leave her adopted home before they find her.

### **ENGAGEMENT REQUEST**

A noble from another family has discovered the Heroine's identity and has just publicly proposed marriage to her.

# NARRATOR

The following rules affect the Narrator.

## THEMES

In the standard Heroine setting, the Narrator tries to build conflict with the themes Confusion, Temptation, and Fear. In this setting, the Narrator instead uses themes of Confusion, Corruption, and Subjugation.

### CONFUSION

Create conflicts based on lies, misunderstandings, lack of information, and people in hiding. Show the players a world filled with fog, shadows, mazes, liars, and con men.

### CORRUPTION

Create conflicts based on sickness, waste, nepotism, and bureaucracy. Show the players a world filled with poison, curses, embezzlement, and cheating.

### SUBJUGATION

Create conflicts based on poverty, slavery, brute strength, and aristocracy. Show the players a world filled with slave owners, brawlers, generals, and prisons.

## INJURIES

The Narrator is always free to create unique Injuries to harm a character. In *Princess of Azumi* these special injuries are particularly likely.

## **CURSED**

You cannot directly harm the magic user who cursed you.

## **SECURITY LOCKED**

None of the local technology responds to your commands

## **IMBALANCED**

You focus all of your attention on only one of your problems. You ignore an important secondary problem.

## **OBLIGED**

You cannot leave your current location until you pay back the debt of honor you owe.

## **UNKEMPT**

You can't enter someone else's home or place of business until you change into different clothes.

# **ANTAGONISTS**

The Narrator may use one of the following sample Antagonists.

## **THE BOY OF IMUN-DA**

Once a human being, the Boy suffered a horse-riding accident who was given an supernatural insect symbiote in order to save his life. Twelve years later, the Boy is a full-blown Annelidist, host to dozens of the insects. Though he still appears to be an eight-year-old child, he is no longer human. The insects are in control, and they have a plan to move all humanity south so that they will live in warmer climates.

## **THE CORRUPTED ARMOR**

Colonel Fang is a veteran soldier and commander of the Armoured Corps in the Imperial Army. He command his team of giant robot pilots from inside his own robot, Spineticler. He also obsessed with collecting heart gems and other rare treasures. He is obsessed to the point of insanity. He will not waste his soldiers' lives, but he will spend them all to acquire more treasures.

# CHALLENGES

## **GILDED CAGE**

A high-ranking member of the Azumi Imperial court sends a messenger to you with a proposal of marriage. Upon asking the messenger about his employer, you discover he is wealthy and polite, but he plans to keep you from making any important decisions.

## **KIDNAPPERS**

A band of rebels with a political agenda has kidnapped one of your companions. They are uneducated, unpleasant, but not totally unreasonable.

## **DISHONEST AMBASSADOR**

Things would go a lot faster if you bribe this ambassador. He promises not only to lie to the guards, but to give you official documents to help you reach your goal.

## **IMPERIAL SECRET POLICE**

Spies discover your location, and you have one chance to keep them from leaving town and reporting back to the head of the Secret Police.

## **UNREASONABLE DEMAND BY GATEKEEPER**

In order to pass through the gate, over the bridge, or around the army, you must satisfy the Gatekeeper's demand.

## **MISCOMMUNICATION WITH THE GOVERNOR**

The governor is clearly trying to keep peace, but for some reason, he believes you represent a danger to the community. What is the source of the miscommunication?

# COMPANION PLAYER

The following rules affect the Companion Players.

## SAMPLE COMPANIONS

### STARLEAF

Starleaf is a living doll, a Kugutsu. Unlike most Kugutsu has been freed from slavery and has been working to become a restaurant owner and local politician.

### ABBESS MYO-ON

Myo-on is a kind, motherly woman who is also ruthlessly democratic. As the leader of the Phoenix Sect Buddhists, she fights to prove that the Shinto priesthood is a deeply corrupt, anti-republic organization.

### JORUJIKA

An Oni (a horned magical humanoid) and a forester, Jorujika cares for sick and injured plants, especially magical trees.

### SIXTEEN-SILENCES-TOGETHER

A Konghoki (a weaponized android) who is a practicing Shinto priest and friend of the above. He has a special love for animals and small robots. His friends call him "Sota."

### UMEKO

Umeko is a Kijin, an Azumi veteran who was involuntarily turned into a cyborg. Umeko escaped the Empire after being involuntarily converted into a cyborg. Now a local sheriff's deputy, she has a lot of vacation time accrued, because she usually works seven days a week.

## **LOCATIONS**

### **PROTEST**

Dozens of people, including several Kugutsu and a few Kijin, are demonstrating outside of a Shinto Shrine. The protestors want the local leader to be arrested for mismanagement and embezzlement. The shrine itself is quite small, but it is surrounded by a luxurious garden, which itself is surrounded by a tall iron fence.

### **MANY DROPS**

Many Drops is a waterfall considered sacred to Taoist magicians. It is also a popular romantic spot for newly married couples. Young, impetuous magicians often challenge each other to duels near the top of the waterfall.

### **BOOKS WITHOUT SUFFERING**

Books without suffering is a printing press owned by Phoenix Sect Buddhists. They publish many well-known religious texts. It is an open secret that they also publish anti-Shinto propaganda and other iconoclastic pamphlets.

### **DABO'S FOOD STICKS**

Dabo's Food Sticks is a food cart that sells delicious but unidentifiable meat on a stick. Rumor has it that they sell veggies on a stick as well, but that the veggies are mostly rabbit meat. If Dabo himself is minding the cart, you may also buy gossip and secrets. He knows more about what goes on inside various noble's bedrooms than they do.

### **STATION 57 EAST**

This police station is technical outside the borders of the Azumi Empire. However, its police chief is a powerful Armour and his "secretary" is a trained assassin. They are the most powerful



members of the local community, so everyone has silently agreed to police the town as if it were inside the Empire.

# **RUINED EMPIRE: THE “COMMENTARY TRACK”**

When Andy hired me to write an alternate campaign setting as a backer reward for his Kickstarter of the English translation of *Tenra Bansho Zero*, I didn't make any secret of the fact that there were elements of *Tenra* that I really wasn't a fan of. Thankfully, Andy was very understanding about that and was enthusiastic about my desire to write a setting that would subvert the most problematic bits. He was also very willing to talk honestly about his thoughts on the matter, and helpfully provided insight into the uniquely Japanese cultural tropes that wouldn't be familiar to most Western readers.

What follows is taken from that email conversation between Andy Kitkowski and I, which was turned into a series of blog posts over at *Gaming as Women*. It focuses mainly on a critical comparison of Japanese gaming culture versus North American gaming culture, as well as social justice concerns as applied to game publishing. That might make it sound very dry, but it's really quite interesting - I promise.

# PART 1: RPGS AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Tenra Bansho Zero is a hugely popular anime-themed tabletop roleplaying system first released in Japan. For many years, Andy Kitkowski had been working on translating the material and getting it ready to publish for North American audiences. When Andy was getting the Kickstarter together earlier this year, he wound up contacting me about doing an alternate campaign setting to be used as part of the higher reward levels. I had some pretty mixed feelings about Tenra, mostly because so much of the art had such gratuitous boobs and butts, and lots of crotch thrown in for good measure.

Ultimately, I wound up doing the project and writing the Ruined Empire campaign setting for Andy's Kickstarter campaign. I didn't do it just for a paycheck (although I'm not going to lie - paying work is always nice) - I used it as an opportunity to "fix" the things that had always bothered me about Tenra's default setting. And the result is something I'm really proud of! It's a super-grabby, dense campaign setting that's as social justice fail-free as I could make it.

I wanted to write about the thought process that went into the creation of the Ruined Empire setting, as a way of highlighting that thoughtful game development can still be socially conscious and produce interesting material, but I felt like that would be missing an important part of the picture. Tenra isn't a Western game written for Western audiences. It's been translated and adapted for Western audiences, true, but it was initially created for Japanese gamers and anime fans. As such the cultural issues and context surrounding this game are different than what Western audiences are used to dealing with.

As a somewhat casual anime and manga fan, I have a base level of familiarity with some of these issues. But I thought it would be good to get Andy to comment a bit more in depth on the Japanese gaming/anime culture before delving into my own thoughts on Tenra as a cultural artifact. The following is taken

from an email exchange I had with Andy, edited only slightly for formatting.

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## **ANNA:**

So I'll admit that I fall into the category of people who would be reluctant to be seen in public reading a book with this cover, but that's a reaction I want to take a moment to examine. In talking about Tenra, you've mentioned that the Tenra cover art isn't "as bad" as it could be, and as a former manga collector (it's just too expensive a hobby to maintain) I totally get what you're saying. There's so much manga that really is worse in terms of cover art.

But by Western standards, the cover art is pretty damn extreme. That's a LOT of crotch right on the cover. So could you comment on the cultural differences at work there? Because it seems like that "I don't want to get seen reading this in public" is a very Western reaction.

## **ANDY:**

Yeah, it's kinda weird. I mean, in the west, we have games like "all of the Vampire the requiem book line", where the covers are artistic and abstract; but each of them inside actually features at least one or more pictures of female full frontal nudity. I found the clause that lets them get away with it in our hearts: "It's okay to depict full frontal nudity, as long as the woman is screaming and covered in blood" (all of the nudity in Vampire actually hit that mark. It's kinda creepy, actually).

Meanwhile, in Japan there's little compunction about putting it on the cover... In General. I mean, it's still a flag to people, like "be careful here if you don't like fanservice". In a way, making covers more marketable would of course net a wider market, but at the same time allows the reader to judge (a book by its cover) what the manga might contain without opening it. So I say "in general" because while eye-rolling is distinctly not a

Japanese gesture, a normal (casual manga reader with an adult temperance) woman might still 'roll her eyes' internally upon seeing such a cover, and move right along.

It's interesting, though: At the same time, nudity (for men and women) isn't as much of a big deal as it is over here: Little kids still go with their moms and dads to the sex-segregated public baths (little boys in the women's bath; little girls in the mens' bath, etc), cartoons or commercials might feature naked children (in a totally non-sexual way), until very recently Amasan (Japanese pearl-drivers, usually women) were topless... until exactly after WW2, when westerners would come by to watch point, take pictures, leer, etc; then that tradition ended almost overnight. Families (fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters) bathe together until the child is well late into elementary school. There's a lot of sexualization of the human body in Asia, but there's a not of non-sexual nudity and casualness that can be strange (and frightening!) to foreigners.

At the same time, modesty and shame (especially Shame, oh god) are huge in Japan. Incidentally, most bookstores will, for general privacy, offer to make [plain, unillustrated book jackets with just the book title]. So if someone is reading something that they think might get them looks, they'll opt for that book cover when buying the latest Princess Panty Pirate manga or whatever.

In the case of Tenra, specifically, I think the author at that time just wasn't aware of the possible misrepresentation that featuring "ninja crotch" on the cover of the book could cause. He was kinda in his own little puzzle palace at the time, and unless someone said "Hey \*smack\* you can't draw this!" he didn't consider it. At the time, he was very insular and reserved, and I think that definitely led up to some choices in art. You might say that even working with his friends and peers, he didn't have the spoons to look at his work from all angles.

But again, it's very interesting to see his art now: He's completely shelved his near-pornographic line of pose-able figurines (and replaced them with a line of cute figurines of people that appear in his new and widely popular autobiographical manga), and his art has become more reserved. He's definitely more aware of what's around him now that he's happily married, and successful enough to be, well, \*loved\* by people. It definitely returned him in part to a real world with real

people, pulled him in part out of his otakuhood, smoothed over some issues he likely didn't know he had, and now his art lacks most of the "goeeyness" of the past.

## **ANNA:**

In talking about doing this interview, you mentioned that you aren't going to do any future work translating games with cheesecake art that you don't have any editorial control over. I'd really like you to provide a little expanded commentary on your reasons for that. This is a hugely important thing to hear from a male publisher and I absolutely want to hear you say more about this.

## **ANDY:**

Well, in short, it makes me feel uncomfortable.

I run games all the time where sex and sexualization is not a factor at all. I run and play in games as deadly serious as *Stalker* to light comedy action games, from wacky maids to bloody body-horror demon hunting with blunt weapons, from traditional to independent; and aside from perhaps seduction, descriptions of pretty/sexy/etc characters, there's really not any gratuitous sex.

A cover, and the art inside usually sets the tone or mood of a game. Especially to a very visually-oriented person like me: I get more out of art books than setting descriptions. And if the art is primarily sexualized art, that alludes to a game that plays off of that. "You can play this game however you like, but this is what the author expects you to put into your sessions. You can choose not to, but by default it should be there" is kind of the message that art sends to a visually-oriented person like me.

So the sense of being uncomfortable comes from me wanting to tell people, "Look, this is what the game is about! Well, mind you this piece here is just the artist's kink, you don't have to have bowling ball tits on your character. But aside from

that, this art here tells you everything you need to know about this game. Oh, that girl that looks like she's wearing a diaper? Well, it's a long story. See, traditional Japanese outfits from that period... (a long discussion of garb, body-issues, and culture commences). That's... complicated! I have to present material full of contradictions, require a lot of clarification that I have to be present for, and ultimately requires for me to say things like "The author doesn't care what you play, and the games can totally be 'rated PG', it's just... well... this is what he does, so he did it. And they published it. But you shouldn't judge the book because three out of three hundred pieces of art involve weird body images..."

I mean, in the end, isn't it just \*easier\*, and more comfortable, to present a book of art wordlessly to people, without feeling the need to jump in and clarify, to explain? That would just erase that discomfort I feel at contradiction.

Some might see this as an attack on sexy art, but I don't think so. Take a look at the art for the French version of Barbarians of Lemura (which was folded back into the English version of the game later): There's sexy characters, nudity, etc. It's very comical, very cool, not weird/gross, and it really sets the mood for the game: The game is seeped in this sexy imagery. I can pass someone a copy of Barbarians of Lemuria and not have to clarify anything: Either they'll get it or they don't. Then again, France and the Americas aren't separated by an extreme cultural gulf, so that might be a thing in play.

And to carry the point, I have to clarify a lot when I hand someone a copy of "Apocalypse World" (a great game, which I love) as well: It has very little art, and the art it has is stylistic and thematic of a post-apocalypse game. Nothing about the cover says "The characters all have to fuck each other. A lot. It's on the top of the character sheet. It's a requirement of this game that you, as a player, have to consider who your character fucks, in almost every scene or session of this game." That's not very clear by the art, so if you line it up on a shelf next to a copy of "Book of Eli" and "Fallout 3", people are going to assume the game is one thing by the cover, when it actually is another.

So in the end, whether you put sex scenes into your game of Doublecross or Shinobigami or Ryuutama or whatever will be up to the group, the book doesn't indicate at all that it's part of

the central experience of playing the game. Going forward, there's not going to be an issue, though:

\* Both primary Ryuutama artists are female, and there's no cheesecake. There's a sexy merchant, but it's sexy in the "1001 Nights" Claudia C-style art sense, and not "generic fanservice anime" sense.

\* The art in Shinobigami has no fanservice (the artist writes in a pseudonym; I heard that the artist was a woman but I am not positive).

Those games are not from FEAR, but from other companies. After Shinobigami we might work to translate 1-2 more FEAR games but again the art is simply devoid of fanservice.

## **ANNA:**

I've often noticed that there's a lot of shoujo ("girls" anime/manga) out there with a LOT of fanservice. Not the stuff with super super young protagonists, like Card Captor Sakura. (Because, um, yuck. She's like 12.) But even stuff where the protagonists are like 14 is just full of gratuitous outline nudity, beach/hot springs episodes, and panty shots - which always seemed weird to me considering that shoujo is aimed at a female audience.

Do you have any thoughts to offer on why it is that such extreme fanservice doesn't seem to alienate Japanese women the way it would alienate Western women?

## **ANDY:**

Hmmm. I think a lot of it goes back to the statements above regarding being more accustomed to nudity in general. But also note that not all women \*like\* it. It's becoming one of those staples that folks are starting to get tired of, the "fanservice dropped just to make sure you're still watching, that has nothing to do with anything going on". I'd wager that in another 10 years



we'll see less of it in mainstream anime, with perhaps those anime taking more of a sideline.

The other thing is that me and many of my friends who are into Japanese culture pretty much treat meaningless fanservice with derision: Like, we note it and move on ("Oh, it's one of \*those\*. Nevermind, next!"). However, there are a lot of folks with a better, more qualified voice who think and talk about it far better than I can. I found a plethora of interesting articles and blogposts on searches for "women and fanservice", "feminism and fanservice" and the like.

[\(This is a cute article which shows what the author finds to be classifiable fanservice types](#) (and I agree with most of the ones he lists, even if many of them are not so common, while others are.)

A side issue, but one of importance to me: There are many respected female manga artists, it's totally not a boy's club by any means (unfortunately, those bales and bales of shojo and romance manga (like all manga, a lot of it admittedly throw-away and dull) aren't picked up for translation in the west as fast as Dumb Egregious Shit is). But a lot of the discussion of manga (in particular) kinda glosses over that fact. In short, I see a lot of disparaging of Japanese visual culture in general, thinking that it's all a wash of misogynistic crap. There are so many women manga authors, it does them a real disservice to lump folks like Saibara Rieko, Takinami Yukari, Takaya Natsuki and hundreds more. Unfortunately, their stuff doesn't seem to be picked up by the west as fast as other things, but I think that's far more our fault (whomever makes decisions as to what to license) than Japan's.

And perhaps a more complicated issue: There are many women who are famous for making their living writing and selling pornographic manga: A friend-of-a-friend of mine is Yonekura Kengo (and apparently she's actually pretty famous, likely because her art is so excellent). She alternates between writing volumes of hardcore pornography and then non-pornographic

interesting tales of obsession, youth and sexuality ("Fire Candy"). I've seen a lot of Western slut shaming of the women who write for porn, in much the same way we do over here for alternate sexuality, kink culture, etc. It's... well, expected I guess, but it's disappointing. However, pornography is a much more complicated subject than for example the works of the women as per the paragraph above.

# **PART 2: THOUGHTFUL GAME DEVELOPMENT DOES NOT PRECLUDE AWESOME**

## **ANNA:**

Very early on in the process of translating Tenra into English, Andy had posted some of the "gooier" (as he calls them) art pieces on a forum and asked for opinions, and I was pretty strident in voicing my dislike of the style. Now, yes, It's easy to pick out Tenra's art as being pretty fail-worthy; turn to pretty much any page with a woman on it and you'll see awful sphere boobs, broken spines, and all other sorts of sins against human anatomy in the name of sexiness.

But there were other problematic aspects to the default setting than just the boobular art. I think a lot of the time it's easy to focus on game art that gratuitously sexualizes women, because that's the low-hanging fruit of fail that's easiest to go after. But let's face it, game settings can be another huge source of fail in gaming. Case in point: the recent Kickstarter for a game called "Going Native" about Native American tribes fighting each other. Because nothing says "sorry about that one time we committed genocide against you" like cultural appropriation.

Many gamers tend to hand-wave and think that "it's just fantasy" will excuse the problematic bits of their favorite game settings. So I thought it was worth picking out a few things that had particularly bothered me about the Tenra setting and talking about how I "fixed" them in my new setting.

## THE DILEMMA: BEAUTIFUL SLAVE WOMEN AND CRYPTO-NATIVES

The first major thing that bothered me about the default Tenra setting is the description of the Kugutsu - living dolls that are brought to life by their creators. Kugutsu are bought and sold like pieces of artwork, despite the fact that the setting is explicit that Kugutsu are alive and sentient. This rang a number of alarm bells for me. Yes it's possible that you could have a pretty interesting character arc about the conflict between ownership and personal freedom. But Tenra is designed to be a game that lets you throw a bunch of anime tropes in a blender.

There's nothing saying that you can't use it to tell such nuanced stories, but the system (or what I know of it) doesn't support it enough that I felt comfortable with that as a setting element. Especially given that their status as property is mentioned mostly as an aside, something that is secondary to what's really important about the kugutsu: they're really, really pretty.

What made me even more uncomfortable is the fact that the setting text specifies that male Kugutsu exist, but they're pretty rare. Most Kugutsu are female. (Because, you know, who'd want a pretty MALE slave?) And did we mention that Kugutsu are highly sought after as nighttime companions? Oh but don't worry! It's because they can go into your head and give you nice dreams, all Inception-style. Yeah. Not at all because they're super-hot and don't get to have any say in how their owners use them.

Now I'll give the creator some credit; I don't think that the implications of this really occurred to him. I think he was just jamming on some familiar anime tropes (they're kind of like "superhuman robot" meets "sword princess") and didn't really stop to examine what he wrote past "hey that sounds cool". But still, I was giving that portion of the game text major side-eye as I was reading through it. Maybe that's not what the creator intended, but I've got enough baggage that it definitely made me uncomfortable.

The other major problem as I saw it were the oni - essentially crypto-Natives who used to be the dominant population on Tenra before humans came. The game text goes on to paint them as what sounds suspiciously close to the "Noble Savage", citing how gentle they are and how well adjusted their society is and how they live in close harmony with nature - yadda yadda yadda. And then it takes a left turn into horrifying genocide. As it turns out, the oni are being hunted to extinction by the humans because they have "heart gems" that can be used to power the giant robot armors that are used as the dominant method of warfare on Tenra. So you have a peaceful race of noble savages who are being oppressed and killed by a colonial aggressor in order to take their resources.

... yeah.

Again, I come back to the intent of the system. Were Tenra a game about nuanced social commentary, I might not have such a problem with this. But this, too, seems like a case of "the author thought this was cool" and not a whole lot of real examination of the implications.

## **THE FIX: BAKE THAT CONFLICT INTO THE SETTING**

The challenge I was left with in addressing these two real difficulties is that with the oni, the central nature of their conflict was baked into the rules. There are endless rules governing mecha characters, and those require oni heart gems to make. No getting around that. (The matter of the Kugutsu was a bit easier, since that was more an issue of description rather than rules.) So I got to thinking. If I'm going to get stuck with this awful conflict, is there a way I can bake that into the setting in such a way that makes it a central issue?

And that was how I came up with the concept for my Final Fantasy-inspired take on the Tenra universe. Instead of a

multitude of small nations fighting each other, as exists in the default setting, my new Tenra was dominated by two huge empires fighting for supremacy - one a nation based on technology and one a nation based on magic.

Because it was hugely important to me to fit the oni into the setting in such a way that did *not* re-victimize them *or* paint them as noble savages, I took great pains to incorporate them in such a way so as to not adhere to either stereotype. In the past era in my setting, when the techno-empire began to rise to power, the oni made an alliance with the magic-empire and eventually became part of the ruling class, thanks to their inherent magical powers. So instead of victims or cardboard cutouts, they get to be sophisticated elites with complex motivations.

Making the oni's story one of the central elements of the setting also made it very easy to address the problem of the Kugutsu in a satisfactory manner as well by dropping a Kugutsu rebellion into the middle of my magic-using empire. My new oni were a people who rose from the status of hunted outcasts to ruling elite, so given that past how would they reconcile their laws that kept Kugutsu in bondage? It's a small change, but it took the most problematic aspect of the Kugutsu - their status as property - and made it an intentional jumping-off point for story to happen.

Now I didn't want this to be a story about a monolithic evil empire versus an opposing good empire, because that would be boring. So I made the magic-using empire dogmatically Imperialistic - an aggressively colonial force who conquered their neighbors to spread their brand of "enlightenment". And there you have the bare bones of a setting that can make some pointed social commentary *and* provide a rich and complex sandbox for groups looking to start a campaign off with a bang.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Being socially conscious isn't something that just happens. I don't mean to make this all sound easy, because it can be hard sometimes. I'll be the first to admit that I have my share of privilege. In developing this setting I had to make a real effort to examine my motives and the implications of what I was writing. Getting friends with different perspectives to look over your work is vital! Because inevitably, they point out things that you didn't mean to get wrong but did.

But taking the extra effort is worth it, because your product will appeal to a wider audience than just Straight White Male Gamers. This is great from a social angle - not alienating people is always a great thing. But it's great from a commercial angle too, since you're netting yourself a much larger potential pool of buyers.

# PART 3: AN ASIDE ON JAPANESE DOLL CULTURE

[The following is an emailed response from Andy that he sent after I put up the post in Part 2. I meant to post Andy's comments as a follow-up blog post but never got around to it. However, they were interesting, and so I offer them here.]

## **ANDY:**

Heya, the clarification parts on the Kugutsu (note, I talk about misrepresentation below; I am not alluding to the idea that you are misrepresenting them, I think you've got a solid deconstruction. I was indicating that it might be a natural conclusion to some folks upon looking at them, and thus the misrepresentation would be there):

So, it's really easy for Westerners to look at the result of what they are and think of them like the fantasy game equivalent of Realdolls or something. There's certainly material there to deconstruct and understand. However, I think a pure "living sex doll" interpretation would be a cold misrepresentation and at worst a western monocultural attempt to judge an asian culture.

Japan has a rich and long history of doll culture, from ancient doguu statues to classic kokeshi dolls, to classic princess/royalty dolls, to modern ball-joint dolls, and of course the steampunkish karakuri dolls of the 18th and 19th century. So it's really not that much of a leap to understand why they might appear in a Japan-themed game, dolls have been a huge part of the culture since at least a thousand years before Christ. Likewise, magical "doll comes to life" stories and folklore are present as well (like our Pinocchio, for example).



One of the interesting focuses that Tenra has, aside from the dolls (in this case, kugutsu) themselves, is the relationship between the doll craftsperson and the doll. In Japan, there's the tradition of the shokunin, or craftsperson, complete with apprenticeship and living one's life focused on honing one's craft. This is explored in the movie "Jiro Dreams of Sushi": Potters, weavers, doll-makers, all who basically live their life doing one traditional craft and over again, in order to perfect the art. In bunraku plays, it's said that it takes 10 years to learn to manipulate the legs. Then you graduate to spend the next 10 years learning the left arm. Finally, after ten years of that some schools will let you manipulate the right arm and head. Spending 30 years learning a craft before calling someone a "master" is kind of a big thing in this shokunin culture, and that piece also comes out in Tenra as well. In fact, in the earlier version of the game, "kugutsu craftsman" was a standard skill, as the author expected not only kugutsu characters but also kugutsu craftsperson characters as well... but ultimately players found the kugutsu themselves more compelling, the kugutsu craftspeople best left to be NPCs, and thus the game went that way.

A recent development in Japan is a hobby culture of doll crafting with ball-joint dolls, especially Super Dollfie. This is a highly expressive culture that both women and men participate in (including my cousin, who has made two when he became temporarily interested in that hobby culture: He even sewed the clothing they wore by hand). The cost, care and craftsmanship make them as much an "otaku" culture item as building elaborate plastic model mecha or highly customizable RC car kits. They are very lifelike, and limited edition dolls or dolls made by talented shokunin can even cost \$2000-\$5000 USD sometimes. Doll culture has really exploded in Japan since particularly the mid-90s, and I'd say that most folks who are into deep visual culture like manga and anime have dipped their toe into the BJD/Dollfie culture (be it pricing them out or looking at them on display at stores, if not actually buying or crafting one). Including, well, both female and male game designers.

Now, to combine the above statements on shokunin culture and contemporary doll culture back into the game: It's often the case that the story of a kugutsu becomes inter-twined with the story of their craftsperson, the person who gave them life. For example, in the setting, the undisputed master craftsman on the planet is a woman named Sho-Un, whose works are so beautiful that people fight wars over them. In Japan, many games of Tenra that involve Sho-Un aren't just about the kugutsu herself, but about her connection to Sho-Un: Why did she create me? Why did she craft me so that I age like a human, or alternately not age like a human does? Why did she make me a master swordsman? Why did she make me blind, but give me the ability to tell the future? Why did she hide me, releasing me "into the wild" rather than risk a war being fought over me, wouldn't it have been better not to make me at all? In many ways, the story of a kugutsu is the story of a doll and her maker/god, with rich questions of personal existence that actually might be answered in game (not to mention the whole idea of "does my character try to become human? It's rumored that such miracles can happen" ala Pinocchio).

I hope that adds depth of understanding to this discussion.

However! Now that kugutsu have been clarified in more depth, I definitely agree with much of your deconstruction of the kugutsu: It's plain that there are elements in play in the game that feature the fact that they are not treated as people, that they are basically the luxury items and slaves of human lords. There are many kugutsu stories which are less "philosophical discussion of what it means to be made, and to be human", and more "get revenge upon a cruel former lord" or "escape from slavery and hide while the lord scours the land for his 'property'", and other tales which are more along the lines of "kidnapped princess" or "runaway Replicant" narratives. And yet, even in those reports, there always seems to be a point at which the kugutsu's player explores those issues of humanity.

The issue is deeper than it appears when you take into consideration the cultural background components of the kugutsu... and yet, that doesn't change the fact that the narratives are what they are, or where a deconstruction of the kugutsu from another cultural context (in our case, Western) might make them that much more palatable (or even more interesting)!