



TENRA BANSHO ZERO  
DIRECTOR'S NOTES

天邪漢



# INTRODUCTION-IN-BRIEF

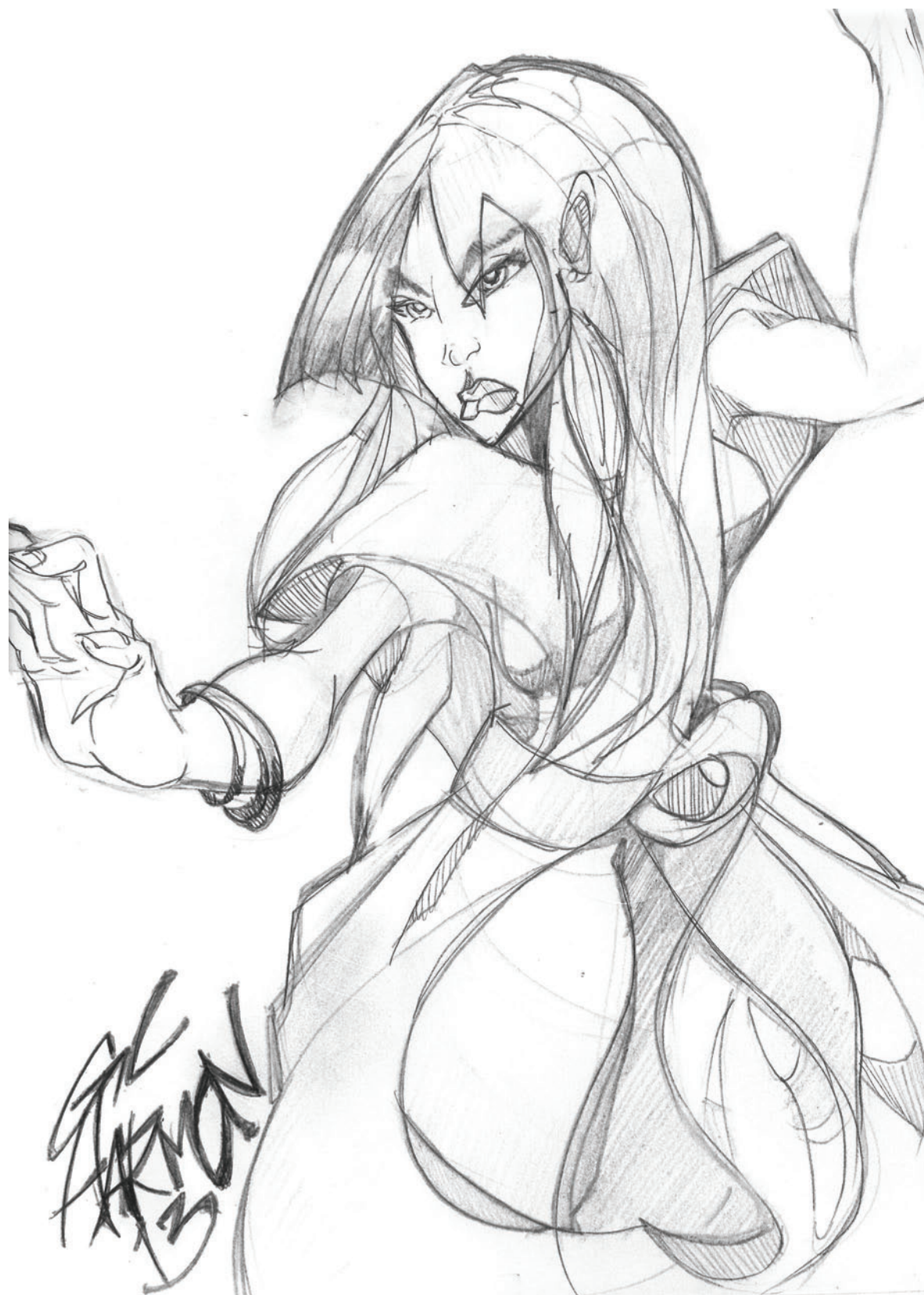
Hey, I'm Andy. I'm the guy who translated and published Tenra Bansho Zero, a role-playing game which you likely own in some capacity (PDF, physical book). Unless you have it, this biography-of-sorts will make no sense, really. Well, maybe one third of it or so.

Anyway, this Director's Notes book was meant as a behind-the-scenes look into the game. Over the eight years I've worked on TBZ, I've been asked a lot of questions about it. Everything from the translation process, to stories behind the rules, to a deeper explanation of some of the concepts in the game. I found myself telling some stories over and over again, and figured it'd be worth writing them down somewhere for others to enjoy as well. In the process, I had a ton more stories bubble up in my mind: The good, bad and strange things that happened over the years, the cool cultural bits that are utterly hidden from the text like the base of an iceberg, and so on.

If the Tenra Bansho Zero text was a movie, these next pages would be the vignettes I'd be sharing over the Director's Audio Commentary, reliving the nostalgia of the project perhaps with a drink in hand. I chose this "A-To-Z of Tenra" format because it was the one that triggered the most flashbacks, got me to write with speed and clarity, stories and history and random thoughts spilling from my fingers into my keyboard. I shared as many of the stories I could think of in relation to the book.

Most of the stories, anyway. I still have a few good ones, but you'll have to hit me up in person for those.

Enjoy! If you bought Tenra Bansho Zero in some form, you helped make this happen. Thank you so much!



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## IS FOR AIKI!

**A**iki. What a word! It's the Aiki of "Aikido", and the characters reversed form KIAI. It really has no easily transferable meaning in English that doesn't sound like hippie bullshit: Ai is "meeting/joining/fusion" and Ki is "spirit" (Chi in Chinese). So it can be thought of as "the meeting of spirits" or "the meeting of minds", or sometimes simple "harmony"... if you squint a bit.

Originally, in the First Localization Pass of

long ago, I called Aiki "Harmony". There was simply a lot of Japanese in the game already, and I wanted to pull the parts that were easily English-ifiable into English, to reduce the stumbling block of having to learn all these new terms we'd be throwing at people (Kijin! Kongohki! etc). Problem is, in playtests and stuff I kept calling it Aiki instead of Harmony by accident. And players just picked up on it, referred to them as Aiki instead of Harmony. So the term stuck.

Which is probably for the best. I was never entirely satisfied with using the word Harmony in the game. Words like Harmony fit into a category of words that "people say too much when they talk about Japan and Japanese culture without really understanding it." Harmony! Efficient! Traditional with the Modern! Samurai! It's a cheap tool to make an already asian-sounding setting sound that much more asian. In the end, the Real Deal - Aiki - proved strong enough to stick in people's minds.

## IS ALSO FOR AIKI

**A**iki chits in Japan were traditionally strips of paper. There was a sheet of paper in the book that you could print out and cut up. There was a set of mail-order supplements that were hard cardboard full-color aiki chits in the same format: Long strips about the size of your forefinger, a few mm wide. Honestly, it was just now that I realized that they pretty much look like Mah Jongg betting sticks. Huh.

Anyway, coins, glass beads and the like make far better aiki chits, though they can weigh a bit to carry around. For the longest time, I used thick clay poker chips: Yellow ones for 1s, Black or Red ones for 10s. They have weight, feel sturdy, have an excellent feel for something you give to someone or receive. Only problem with them is that if you're easily distracted (raises hand), you'll find yourself playing with them, making them clink together in a stack. Clink. Clink. Clink. It can get really fucking distracting as a GM or player, so just be mindful of that.

So, in the Kickstarter campaign, I decided to make these big foam sets of 50 aiki chits (40 of one color, blue for 1s; 10 of another color, red for 10s). They turned out to be pretty pricey, well over a dollar per chip. But man, they are awesome. Heavy, sturdy, soft, you can throw them at people when they

say something awesome, you can shuffle/juggle them without making any noise. Pretty much any other RPG or board game that has a marker mechanic, I bust these out for that game.

I got inspired by this from work, actually. I sat for a while in a cube near a sales guy, and he had a blue foam poker chip as some kind of giveaway, with our company's logo on it (company colors are blue-and-white). I knew I had to have a set, and went around online looking for a place that would sell them. It took FOREVER to find one, for some reason

they're a real minor item in the whole "plush/soft

corporate giveaway crap" market. In fact, it was half as cheap to write "Tenra Bansho" on

BASEBALL-SIZED SPHERES OF THE PLANET EARTH (though much more space) than go with the poker chips.

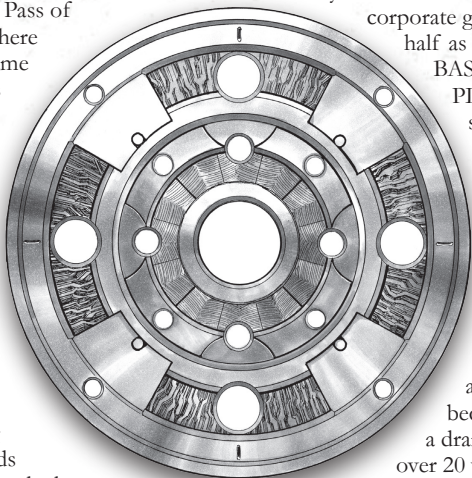
That kinda brings a cool image, though, of some guy role-playing well, getting rewarded with foam earth-spheres, having to herd them in front of him with his arms:

The better he role-plays, the more unweildy spheres he receives and thus has to herd with his arms so they don't fall on the floor or roll

all over. So role-playing too much becomes a handicap, as it's hard to give

a dramatic speech when you're hunched over 20 wobbling, randomly-moving spheres

you're trying to prevent from rolling away.



## IS ALSO FOR ASURA!

**A**

Asura - 修羅 - "Shura" in Japanese.

Asura is basically a kind of Buddhist/hindu devil, powerful and rich of emotion. In the game, once you go over 109 you don't actually grow demon horns and shit, you just go "dark Jedi". But hey, maybe in your game they do, that might be interesting.

While in most of my games the "Asura limit" is thought of (rightfully!) as "A wall one should not breach", I've had a few characters go asura usually in the very last scene or as their epilogue moment. Usually it only happens if it really fits the story. Since the game lasts like 1-3 sessions, the taboo against going Dark Jedi and retiring from play isn't as strong.

I consulted with the rules designer Endo Takuji (and bystander-designer Yano Shunsaku of DoubleCross to lend his opinion, being a huge fan of the game) to get his feedback: Have you actually had a character go full asura in play before the last scene? Did they retire? What happened at the table? Seems that in the end, becoming an asura before the last few scenes or so is pretty hard unless you are gunning for it like there's a console game "Achiement" on the line. In the end, we discussed some options like "letting the player play their character, but as an antagonist", "letting the player play a side character", etc. All solid options.

In the end, asura-ization (it's a word now!) shouldn't be thought of as a goal, it should be thought of as Getting Cancer. But sometimes it really works for the story-at-hand. See how it comes about at your table.



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## B IS FOR BUDDHISM

Wow. I could really kind of go on and on and on on this topic. There's so many interesting sub-topics to explore!

My own stuff: I'm an atheist who acts like a Buddhist. I normally say I'm Buddhist, as I follow the traditions of my wife and family in Japan, which is basically "being culturally Japanese". I studied under one of the foremost Buddhist academic scholars in the US (who also happened to be a cruel but fair grader), so I know my scripture, don't get me wrong (pounded into me through tests and papers in college, I was a double-major, one of those was Philosophy with an Eastern focus). But in reality, I'm actually still Buddhist (thought, act and deed), though don't really believe any of the higher-level spiritual and mystical stuff.

Don't be fooled, Zen practitioners will tell you that there is no spiritual stuff to Buddhism, but that's a specific belief branch that applies to Zen, doesn't apply to all the other sects of Buddhism all over asia.

### \* Buddhism in Japan

I've heard the purest, "to the scripture" version of Buddhism is found in Sri Lanka, followed closely by Thailand. In Japan, it's kind of a messy thing though. Lots of sects, lots of sub-sects, lots of in-fighting (not physical, just ideological) that happened centuries and millennia ago, that are pretty much over. What emerged is a cultural Buddhism that is kind of a mash-up of all three Buddhist traditions (Mahayana, Theravada, Esoteric/Mikkyo), where some certain ceremonies and observances are made usually around holidays and the death of relatives, but otherwise it's more of a background noise than a capital-R "Real" religion for Westerners.

For example, I've seen the following exchange happen a lot in front of me:

Western person: What religion are you?

Japanese person: I'm Buddhist!

Western: Oh! What do you do?

Japanese person: ... ..Hm?

Western: Like, what do you do in Buddhism? Where do you go on Sundays?

Japanese: ...Go?

In effect, someone in the west can ask someone openly about their religion (and in all the cases I witnessed, it was a genuine curiosity, not a lead in to sell them on Christianity or something), and if the person is Christian, Jewish, Hindu or Muslim, they can reply with:

\* The tenets of their faith

\* What they "do": Basically what they do in their religious observances. Stuff they avoid, like taboos (treyf, haram, etc)

\* Where they "go" (temple, church, mosque, etc), or at least where they would go if they were serious practitioners.

But in general, you have to "do something" for your faith. Go somewhere, do something, etc.

Not so much in Japan. No one really "does anything" for their faith (restrict themselves, go somewhere weekly) outside of funeral observances and the like. People that actually DO do something for their faith are either:

\* Actual Buddhist priests (or Shinto shrine-keepers)

\* Totally suspicious people, likely in a cult of some kind

The latter is, of course, a stereotype, though one with a lot of real news and incidents to back it up. Though there are real Buddhist communities like Soka Gakkai which do meet up and Do Things, aren't really a cult, but have historically organized against the government on occasion and thus are viewed with suspicion from members of the government. A friend of my wife, she wanted to marry this guy. His family was Soka Gakkai (and again, pretty much all these guys are are Buddhists who Actually Go To "Chuch" and stuff, they're not worshipping sleight-of-hand artists or gas-attacking subways), her family was mostly police and government officials, and her family wouldn't allow it. I forget how that turned out.

But anyway, Soka Gakkai aside, folks who actually Do Things and Go Places (outside of nationally recognized cultural events) for their faith are viewed as suspicious cultists (Buddhist, Chirstian, Jehovah's Witness, Animist or otherwise). Which... well... okay, I'll stop there.

It's interesting to come back and live in America after staying in culturally-Buddhist Japan for years. Some strange little observances.

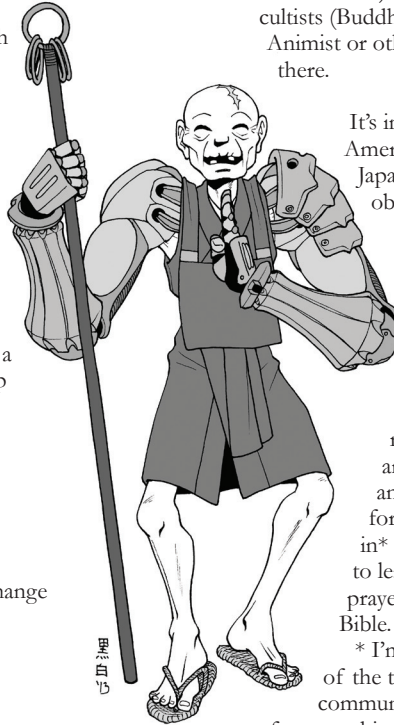
\* I've met a not insignificant amount of people who say that they are Buddhist (usually Zen), which is interesting. The depth beyond that statement being almost exactly the same depth as the Japanese "non-culty" people I met who say that they were Christian. Which is cool, no reason to really stay tied to traditions and teachings and doctrines and history and stuff. Still, I think a more proper term for both sides is "I \*have a real interest in\* X", until you at least dedicate yourself to learning at least one actual simple phrase, prayer, line from a sutra or passage from the Bible.

\* I'm actually really impressed by some of the temples I've visited in the US. The communities are cool, laid back people looking for something more. They run pretty kick-ass meditation retreats, which I think is a good thing for people of all beliefs and backgrounds. I'm surprised that at points many US folk take on Japanese/Chinese monk names, but I guess that's the black belt of being a monk.

\* I have encountered a few hardcore Buddhists who declare that they were seeking something more than the system of rites, forms, traditions and beliefs of their familial western religion. Then they found Buddhism, and now adhere to the system of rites, forms, traditions and beliefs of that instead.

\* I joined a few Buddhist internet message forums back in the day, looking to discuss belief and meditation. I found a lot of heated arguing, fighting, name-calling and the like, completely unhinged from the noble eightfold path... Oh well, it's not like Buddhism would be the one religion that would be free of that crap.

Overall, I've had positive experiences with Buddhism most places I've been, and the bad ones were usually do to people-





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issues. I guess that makes it... well... like every other religion out there in those regards I guess, eh?

## \* Buddhism in Tenra

There's three sects! That's pretty cool, and I really loved that aspect to the game. Sure, in advanced versions of D&D you can pick which God/dess you believed in and that can give your cleric a few different spells, but for the most part religion in western games has been pretty one-sided; "You're a cleric". In games that featured Japanese culture, you could often be a Buddhist monk. A monk of Buddhism. The one single Buddhism in all of Japan. Heh.

Other games set in a faux Japan, you could be a Buddhist-esque-monk-analogue. They study scrolls, walk around without shirts on, throw fireballs and have tattoos which turn them into tigers and dragons. Rawr!

Well, in Japan they sort of catered to various sensibilities in the monks portrayed, using sects and beliefs to really set them apart.

\* The Phoenix order is the classical "cloistered monk who studies sutras" archetype of the Theravada monk. Robes, meditation, sutras and prayer. Some of them know the esoteric arts which let them communicate with or pacify spirits and ghosts, heal with a touch, and shoot spirit energy balls.

\* The Ebon Mountain order is the Fist of the North Star slash Street Fighter slash Shorinji/ShaoLin martial artists, with a belief system which makes it make sense for them to be wandering around learning murder arts while helping people (Mahayana). The heretical monks or monks who worked closely with their community in Japan.

\* The Bright Lotus sect is really interesting. I mean, looking at the above, that split makes sense: How to have the cloistered book-worm magic monks and the kung fu monks? Make them different belief systems and backgrounds. Yup. Makes sense. So what are the Bright Lotus sect supposed to represent, with their strong underground base and simple belief system? Hippies?

Nope, they're basically an analogue of the history of the Pure Land (Jodo Shu/Jodo Shinshu) sect in Japan, right down to them being treated with suspicion during the feudal era, and the simple "say this and you're set" mantra. Look up Pure Land/Jodo Buddhism, heck even Wikipedia has a decent article on them. Might give you an interesting perspective on them, enough to make you want to have them in your game. Which I think is important, because they're believers who believe DESPITE not being able to shoot fireballs or break stones with their fists. In a game, where everyone could take the role of a walking weapons platform, that's pretty intriguing!

## \* Back to Buddhism in Japan...

Anyway, I mentioned a few times that Japan is kind of a mashup of junk when it comes to religion and Buddhism and the like. The best historical record of how this came to pass is in Sakaiya Taichi's book "Taiyaku Nihon wo Tsukutta Juuninin"/"The Twelve People who Made Japan" (you can import a Japanese/English bilingual version online, very cool biography, extremely popular in Japan), who traces it back to the actions of Prince Shotoku (Shotoku Taishi), who back in the year 600 or so was pretty much responsible for the upholding and growth of Shinto, the native beliefs of Japan. When Buddhism appeared, rather than do what traditionally happens in these situations like "buckle down and drive it

off", "start a religious war to crush or stomp it out", etc, he publicly came out and said, "Yeah, Buddhism's pretty cool. Now we're THAT, too." Or more specifically, "We're Shinto, but our \*religion\* is Buddhism."

That level of acceptance made it really easy for relatively bloodless entry of various religions (they saved the blood for power/land wars in the feudal era), as well as when schisms within Buddhism eventually happened.

Cut several thousand years to make a long story of Religion in Japan short:

"I'm Christian!" says the Shinto Buddhist.

## B IS ALSO FOR BOWS

Bows (bows and arrows, not "bowing at the hips") don't appear much in the game other than in the weapon list. In the setting, pretty much gunpowder rifles have replaced them. Feel free to make a campaign that takes place a generation or more earlier before the gunpowder revolution. Also, if you want to hack Tenra and set it in Tenjiku (mythic India), to keep the cultural theme you won't find katanas and soulgem swords there, instead there will be massive, beautiful crimson steel/soulgem bows.

## B IS ALSO FOR BAIAN THE ASSASSIN

Baian the Assassin - 仕掛人藤

枝梅安 - Ken Watanabe! Hashizume Isao! What a friggin' awesome show, and like extremely inexpensive to buy the full collector's set on Amazon.com. You really need to get this. The first episode is two hours and a little drawn out, but all the rest are awesome and tight. I've gotten everything from Names of NPCs to Descriptions of Locations to even some plot points from this series.

Also, the original book/story series it's based off was written by Ikenami Shotaro, who was like the Robert E Howard of Japan with his highly pulp-like fantastical tales of old Edo: Assassins, Ninjas, Samurai, oh my! He also wrote the book which Basilisk: Koga Ninpouchou was based on, which also (the original work, that is) totally influenced Ninja Scroll as well. If there's something you like from anime, manga or movies that has anything to do with assassins or ninjas, there's a high chance it was based off a work of Ikenami Shotaro.





Sometimes, though, discussions of Buddhism through the lens of gaming actually lend to a mutual sharing of knowledge and ideas, and ultimately understanding!

[From Oscar S. reprinted with his permission]

Finally got to begin reading my pdf of the TBZ game and came to discover a faux pas. On page 50, you placed a sidebar discussing Karma in Buddhism and labeled it as bad, without stating this was for purposes of the TBZ game.

As a real world practitioner of Nichiren Buddhism I can tell you the commentary is, at best, a gross generalization, and, at worst, a falsehood in describing Karma. Shakyamuni maintained that what makes a person noble or humble is not birth but one's actions. Therefore the Buddhist doctrine of karma is not fatalistic. Rather, karma is viewed not only as a means to explain the present, but also as the potential force through which to influence one's future. Mahayana Buddhism holds that the sum of actions and experiences of the present and previous lifetimes are accumulated and stored as karma in the depths of life and will form the framework of individual existence in the next lifetime. Buddhism therefore encourages people to create the best possible karma in the present in order to ensure the best possible outcome in the future.

Within the world of TBZ I would have no problem accepting Karma as bad, but I am saddened that most readers will not know real world truth from game fiction.

[My response]

Hey Oscar, thanks for your feedback!

First off, I'm working on that "Director's Cut Book" thing where I post notes about the behind-the-scenes of the game. Do you mind if I actually quote your letter below, in order that the players/readers of the game get a deeper, more nuanced understanding that "karma doesn't mean just one thing to all schools"? I think it's important to share knowledges views outside of my own, and I think this is a great start.

Anyway, good stuff!

However, there's a couple things going on:

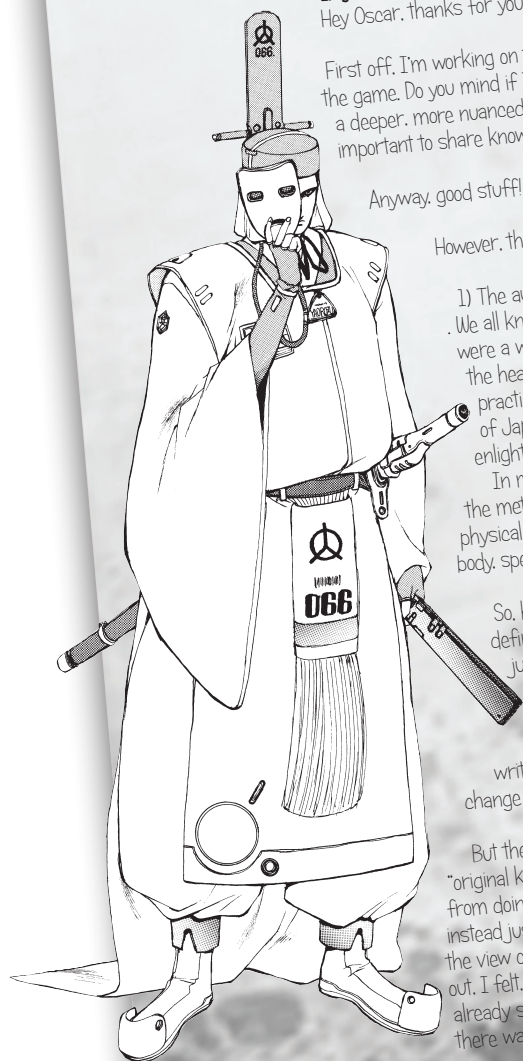
1) The author comes from a background more rooted in Shingon and Soto/Zen sects, vs. We all know what Dogen thought about karma (basically discussions of its metaphysicality were a waste of time and "not buddhism", just rather taking its cues straight from the heart sutra in regards to action/goh/karma). Nichiren isn't as popularly known/practiced here it seems, more folks in general are familiar with the vajrayana schools of Japanese-style Buddhism, which of course are aimed at personal vs world enlightenment.

In most of the vajrayana and esoteric schools like shingon, and even the "out with the metaphysical" schools of Zen, there's a real strong attitude of goh (業), namely the physical 身業, 口業 and 意業 (I forget what these are in English: "karma/acts of the body, speech and will?") being the things that lead to the path of suffering.

So, he just didn't really consider every angle to all schools' views on karma. Inoue definitely wasn't a scholar of Buddhism, he just knew what he knew and did probably just a little more research to solidify it, but not enough to appease all sects views of how karma worked (and its importance).

Ultimately, I think Shakyamuni's interpretation of karma stands in the game/writing as-is, it doesn't say anything to the fatalistic-ness of karma (in fact, you change it only through action).

But the more fatalistic view of karma that comes from Hinduism, that there's like this "original karmic sin", and you can get better karma from doing good things, and bad karma from doing bad things, and that cycle doesn't take you further away from suffering but instead just determines what happens after you die (or to yourself in this life) is definitely the view of Karma that most westerners are exposed to. That view really had to be stomped out, I felt, by really calling a dramatic difference between the two (\*general\* mind) We already see how various sects take the beliefs in different ways) belief systems so that there was no confusion. In play, folks would say things like.





"How do I build up my "Good Karma"?"

"If I do "good things" like kill monsters and evil people, will that lower my "Bad Karma"?"  
stuff like that.

I needed to really instill some Four Noble Truths (in the form of the vajrayana sect view of 業/goh to get folks not to focus on the Hinduism view of karma.

Ultimately, hacking the game to a more mahayana/nichiren spin probably wouldn't be hard at all (just a careful balance of good/bad acts, and what things constitute them: "Is violence a bad act if it ultimately destroys true evil?" etc. And if the vajrayana/zen (soto, mind) view of karma is kind of a show stopper. I'd really urge you to, in your game, DEFINITELY hack it to suit your beliefs if it helps you find that easier to work with. If you do, I strongly urge you to please give me your notes, I would absolutely be happy to host them.

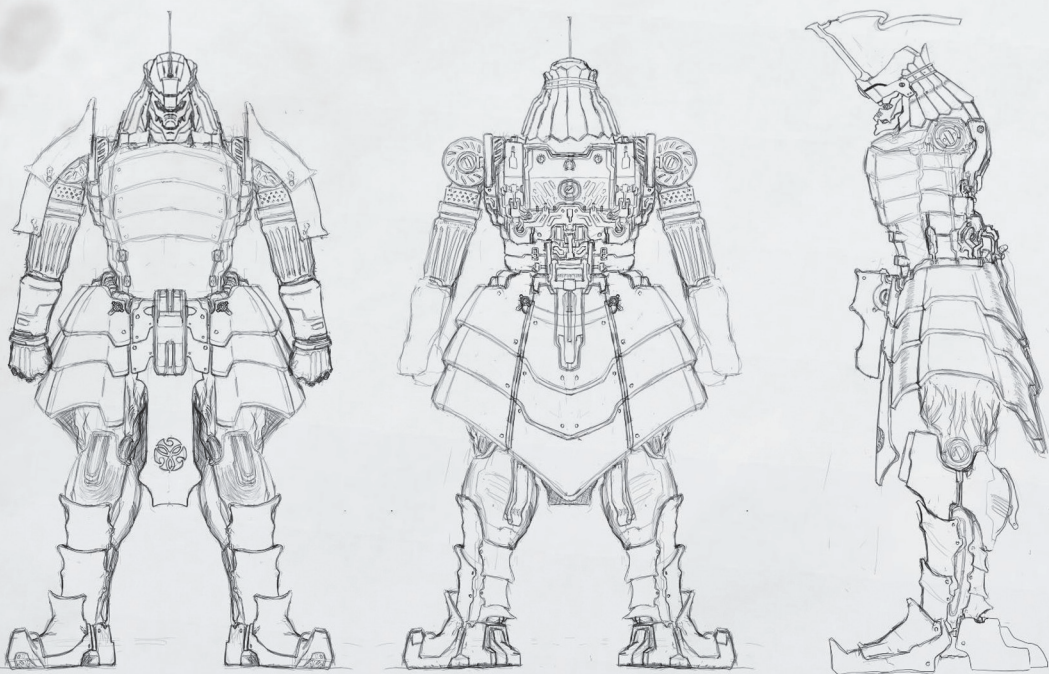
I'm not a huge practitioner (I don't go to temples outside of sightseeing and traditional services within my (Japanese) wife's family), but I've done a lot of research on various schools of Buddhism (mostly mikkyo and some zen; but I'm kind of a zen debunker, there's so much misinformation about zen going around), and always welcome the chance to talk to another scholar!

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Oscar was a great, stand-up fellow, and we followed up by thanking each other for our comments and participation.

Oscar's comments hold real weight, though: Buddhism is deep and varied; every country and culture has different practices and methods, and even within one culture (like Japan) something called "Buddhism" can be very different from sect to sect. The meanings of the terms, and their importance, varies dramatically as well! (Scholarly Buddhists will maintain that there's no such thing as "heaven" or "going to heaven", at least not as a thing of real concern for the faith; and yet a lot of texts reference "heaven", and even laypeople will commonly say that the ultimate goal of ending suffering is not annihilation but "getting into heaven").

While the author of the game Inoue Junichi says "Seriously, guys, don't sweat the details of culture and beating yourselves up about "getting it right" if it's going to prevent you from having fun."

But at the same time, don't think that you "get it", that you can jump into a discussion of Buddhism (culture, practice, beliefs, etc) based on the limited information presented in the game book alone. Get out there and read! Even Wikipedia is surprisingly scholastic as an entry-level text to Buddhism and Buddhism in Japan. And movies like Zen (2009) about the life of Dogen Kigen are solid in the basics of history and practice as well.





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## IS FOR CLUNEY COMMA EWEN

Ewen Clune is awesome. Long story short (you can read the long version in his book “Yaruki Zero”, it’s interesting! You can also get it on Amazon), he translated most of the Maid Role-Playing Game. I helped a little, did the eventual (re)localization, and published it. Ewen was testing out what it meant to be a translator, and I was testing out what it means to be a game publisher. We were both looking to cut our teeth.

It worked out well. While it pushed back Tenra-work about half a year, I got to explore everything from managing a book production project, to seeing all the aspects of layout, writing, and printing. Then, the other side of the project, publishing, managing print and electronic book copies, working with a fanbase, handling feedback. All in all, a great experience (filled with potholes of crappy stuff, but whatever, that’s life), and it couldn’t have been done without Ewen Clune coming up to me saying, “Hey, that crazy “Maid RPG” you and I have, I translated it to run at a convention! Want to see?”



## IS ALSO FOR CURRY DORIA

This is my meal of choice for Sunday afternoons or early dinner, when I’m on a writing or translating bender. Maximized ease of cooking vs taste. You need:

Delicious fresh vegetables: Standard is onions, green peppers, potatoes, maitake mushrooms (if available), maybe small tomatoes. Cube them all up so that you have like one to two fistfuls of vegetables. If you have time, sautee them plain in a pan for a few minutes.

Cooked Rice: Rice cooker rice is okay, but pressure cooker rice is the friggin best. Seriously. If you’re thinking about buying a rice cooker, but you already have a good pressure cooker, STOP, You’re Done. Better rice and in only 5 mins.

Shredded cheese: Any blend will do. I prefer just a very light amount of white cheddar or mexican blend.

You can cut up some sausage or veggie-burger if you want. and mix it in. I prefer straight veg, but sometimes some spicy or fruity sausage is nice.

Ready-made curry rice pouch: Go to your local asian/Japanese market. Of the big three (Golden Curry, Vermont Curry, Java Curry), Java medium is my fave, but if you can find other brands, or minor brands, aim for those. You might hit something crazy-awesome.

Get an oven-safe bowl. Dump in a standard rice-bowl of cooked rice. Throw the vegetables on top of that. Then, the curry sauce on top. Cook it at 400 degrees (200 celcius) for 15-20 minutes.

Then, take the bowl out, drop the cheese all over the top, and cook again at the same temp for another 10 minutes.

OISHII!



## IS ALSO FOR CRANE COMMA LUKE

A good friend for almost 10 years now, Luke was at the wrong place at the wrong time: That being the GenCon where I told friends I was translating the game, upon which he told me that he would love to do the layout.

Now, he curses my name in his sleep.

Luke’s an awesome human being (extremely kind and generous when people aren’t poking him with a stick online), a whirlwind of perfection and layout power. He had a vision for the book, and hot damn did he pursue it like a madman. He ended up discarding two layout drafts before finishing his final vision of the game, which took him several weeks/months of straight, solid, no-nonsense work to get it as good as it was.

Luke’s designed a number of role-playing games, like Burning Wheel, Burning Empires, Mouseguard, and Freemarket. Personally, Freemarket is my favorite because I love transhumanist science fiction and imagining what future societies and culture would be like. If you like long-form fantasy (running long games over several weeks/months/years), definitely give Burning Wheel a look. I helped out on the Kamakura-era supplement for it called “The Blossoms are Falling” (mostly the items on Buddhism/Shintoism). It’s the only Non-Sengoku, Non-Edo, Japanese historical setting out there: The rise of the samurai, basically.



## IS FOR DIAPER GIRL

That’s the affectionate name we’ve called the character on the front cover of the slipcase book, the original Japanese version of Tenra Bansho Zero. In reality, that dress is based on a the kimono of a classic kimono that Kunoichi (female ninja) used to wear. If you go to a cheesy historical theme park like Edo Wonderland Ise or Nikko Edomura, you’ll see a ninja show or a tour of a trapdoor-laden ninja housse by women in outfits like these, though for some reason classically they’re purple. There’s a reason for purple, I just haven’t learned why yet.

Oh, except those ninja shows don’t feature gun-swords as big as people. Otherwise, I would never leave.

Anyway, due to licensing and legalities and things and stuff, that was the cover, we couldn’t change it (even though the girl was a layer of the cover that could be removed) for aesthetic and legal reasons. The folks at FEAR, who I have a lot of love for, were extremely open to changes in the game text and rules and content, but the art was the one point that was not negotiable. In America, which is far more conservative on what goes on the covers of books, there was a real sentiment (from both strangers and friends!) of being uncomfortable to imagine carrying the book around town or on public transport.

It’s not an accident that the covers of the softcover books \*inside the slipcover\* feature a different centerpiece. That was our compromise.



## TENRA BANSHO ZERO

### THIS IS ALSO FOR DUNLAP COMMA DREW

My best friend since childhood and the Original Assassin from 'Nam, together we broke down the heavy doors of this hobby and marched right in. Take good care of Seth, he's an awesome kid.

### THIS IS ALSO FOR D-ADDICTS DOT COM

The sponsor of my ongoing Japanese language listening education and upkeep for many, many years now. If only more J-dramas were legitimately available over the web via Hulu, Crunchyroll or similar service... One may dream... Dream that Japanese traditional media conglomerates get their heads out of their butts and join the 21st century.

Anyway, until that time comes, Japanese television dramas, with their short seasons and complete stories, with their range from "crap starring crappy idols" to "historical dramas" to "bizarre but awesome late-night conceptual dramas", there's at least something each season that a language learner is bound to find compelling enough to watch for several hours, keeping up their listening skills.

### THIS IS FOR EIGHT YEARS

Eight years ago, I worked at a company (I'll just make up a word, and refer to them as Sisco Systems) known for creating internet routers and switches, doing deep-level support. It was a good day's work, I wasn't... too... bored. But some of the work was repetitive, so it left me with time to think and plan. It wasn't so exhausting, so I would come home and be ready for my Second Day: For a time, when we were poor as shit, I would work a night job as well. But over time, I no longer needed to, and thoughts turned to game design and translation of games.

Right around that time, Kenneth P contacted me (see P) and we blasted off.

Contacted FEAR, DING, scored the rights. Awesome. At this rate, I'd have the translation done in less than two years, considering how much free time I had at nights.

...but then traged...er, AWESOMENESS struck. A few months later I scored a job at the storage computing company where I work today. An awesome job, much more interesting than my previous one. A



job where literally I spend every day working and learning for 10 hours a day or more, a job involving so much daily learning that I would wager people would pay to work here just to get the knowledge and experience. Anyway, awesome things.

Except for hobbies, namely the hobby activity of the translation of Japanese RPGs. The new job and learning took its toll, daily: I quickly understood why most of my colleagues took on the hobby of installing/watching satellite TV: You get to a point where your brain just can't learn more, you can't do anything more in front of a PC; you're \*done\*. That's where I was for a few months as I got up to speed started learning my job. Then, things got under some control, and I found more time to translate. Awesome! Then I got a promotion. And more responsibilities. Then moved teams. Then switched specialties. Then switched teams again to a superteam, which was a huge pile of new responsibilities. Then switched specialties again to the single hardest specialty in support-computing (performance). Then another promotion. And team switch. And another team switch. And now, as I write this, yet another team switch to the team which the future of this company rests on: A rich, deep, OS with tons of features and a depth so utterly deep not even light can escape.

And I love it! Man, I love the work (owning solid work, seeing it through to completion! What a rush!), the company, the co-workers, good stuff all around. But it is brutal on hobby time. Bru. Tal. Long hours in front of a computer mean that I often get home after 9, 10, 12, on rare occasions 14+ hours with zeeeeeeero desire to look at a screen, much less spend more hours typing/"working" in front of one. If I sit in front of a screen after a long day of work, it's to control a hero as he shoots evil in the face for XPs.

So that's the underground story of why things took eight years instead of two, as I originally planned.

There was some good sides to all that time lag, though!

\* First off, all this Kickstarter stuff was a huge boon to self-publishing.

\* In those 8 years I never stopped running sessions of it at cons and the like. That was a lot of seed time to get the word out about the game, though it was also frustrating to make new fans wait that much longer.

\* I got to cut my teeth with publishing Maid, to avoid crappy potholes that could have sunk the game or made things a lot worse.

\* The biggest dodged bullet was that the game is coming out at all! Several years ago, I signed a contract to publish the game through a solid RPG company known at the time for releasing anime-themed games, and even had the Game of Thrones RPG license. A year after that was signed, the company collapsed, all product lines dead, all contracts locked or severed, all books printed but rotting, unsellable, in warehouses. That could have been the fate of Tenra if I didn't change jobs, and wasn't as much of a lazy shit as I am!

Speaking of changing jobs,



# TENRA BANSHO ZERO

## E IS FOR A THREE- LETTER-LONG COMPANY I USED TO WORK AT THAT BEGAN WITH E

Don't get me wrong, that job I had when I scored the rights to Tenra wasn't a classic shit job, the kind where you're so bored that you do hobby shit, writing, or game design at work because work is boring or dumb. No, that was what I was doing at my job previous to that, when I worked at... okay just checked they no longer exist... EXY (that's not their real name, but they started with an E. A one-time presidential candidate was the man who founded this company, but admittedly in his day as CEO it was an solid, industrious, and honorable place to work, not a grey, tasteless mashed up paste of a business/information company). Man, what a shithole.

When I came back to the US in the early 2000s, I was looking to crawl into a professional field - IT/Computers - that was collapsing in on itself at the end of the bubble, with people in that industry trying to crawl their way out. I had a wife, three cats, a car, and a few thousand dollars saved up in Japan which was hemorrhaging out as I looked for work. For about a year I had to work 2-3 jobs at once (only one of them remotely computer/technical-related), and at the same time I put my car up as collateral against a loan to go to a local school for more technical training to get back into the workforce.

EXY hired big in the area for new folks looking to get into the industry. They were basically a business casual meat-grinder for the soul. They didn't so much use you up and spit you out as assimilate you, make you do boring busywork while telling you that the interesting work--the work you joined the company on the expectation of doing--would be coming soon. Soon, don't worry about it. Real soon now. Then fired you when numbers looked bad.

I was part of a small team which was comprised of people who left a shittier, larger team, so for the most part they were okay. The job was easy and boring. Every time I tried to start projects to automate manual aspects of the job, to correct broken data, to write documentation, research potential cost-saving replacement systems, etc, I was told that wasn't my job, and that I should just stick to my job. Don't get me wrong, it's nice to be paid a salary of an 8-hour day for at most 90-120 minutes of work. I spent a lot of my day surfing RPGNet

and other RPG hobby or technical forums. It was that time that led me to get interested in possibly publishing or writing RPGs in the future.

I was already cashed out, but the wake-up call was when I got called into my manager's office. I was wearing white socks one day (all my blacks were in the wash, I didn't think anyone would notice). And our business casual dress code clearly stated that only black socks were allowed at EXY. In a position/area where clients never, ever appear.

"Just make sure it doesn't happen again, or there will be consequences."

"Absolutely. It won't happen again."

I went back to my desk, found that much better job, quit that place within a week.

They were a great springboard, though.

## E IS ALSO FOR EMOTION MATRIX

The emotion matrix (in Japanese "Kaikou Matrix" or "Reaction Matrix") was the first thing I stumbled upon back when I picked up my copy of Tenra Bansho Zero in Japan back in 2001 or so, that struck me as special. That TBZ wasn't just another bog-standard "stats and skills" RPG with some pretty Japanese-themed window dressing. It would be later when I would stumble upon the Karma and Zero Act systems which clearly distinguished itself from other games, but the first thing I clearly remember seeing that led me to think something interesting was going on was the Emotion Matrix. I remember what I remember thinking the first time I understood the implications and rules surrounding it:

"... ..wut?"

For real, the Emotion Matrix was kind of a paradox in roleplaying, and it took me a little bit to actually understand what it was saying. "You... don't control... what your character feels?" That's sort of anathema to classical role-playing, which pretty much has at its core "You control everything about what your character does and feels". It was a pretty new idea, even in Japan. And admittedly, even as the emotion matrix determined "how your character feels about another character", you ultimately have control over the results by spending *ki*ai. Still, pretty weird.

But I was into 'pretty weird', when it came to gaming.





# TENRA BANSHO ZERO

One thing I noticed as I started playing in America, though, with other friends that were into ‘pretty weird’ games: Many friends wanted the “Punch me in the gut, I’ll show you what I’m made of” experience of sticking to whatever result—no matter how strange or far-fetched—that the emotion matrix presented and taking it as a personal skill challenge. Don’t get me wrong, accepting a challenge is awesome, and can really help you push your RP skills. Plus, since the game only lasts 1-3 sessions or so, strange role-playing twists aren’t that big of a deal since you’re not stuck with them for weeks or months or play.

Still, as a GM there were a few times where I had to pry players into settling on a more appropriate emotion. The system of buying with Kiai and giving Aiki offsets the totally nonsensical results that may happen from time to time (“I feel that my young daughter... wants to kill me?”), and in Japan it’s a total natural thing to say “Hmmm, I’m up for a challenge, or a twist, but this result really doesn’t make much sense for my concept of this character. But that result seems pretty cool, so I’ll spend Kiai to take that result.” But for a time, when playing with friends, it seemed like the emotion matrix was a wheel-of-fortune of challenges, like a game show result: “You rolled X, you get X. Your challenge is to play it. The end.”

Anyway, just remember as you play, not to treat it as a straightjacket. It’s just to provide a spark. Still, challenges can be fun.

## F IS FOR FUCK YOU, 2CH ANONYMOUS DIPSHIT

Smug assholes are universall

When I originally announced the rights to Tenra and eventual release, it made some waves in the Japanese RPG community as well, including on 2ch, the largest internet message board in the world, kind of a giant Yggdrasil-sized mind toilet. Anyway, over on 2ch, there was a lot of interest, some fanfare, a few flamewars about how awesome/shitty FEAR games were (including “Don’t get me wrong, I like FEAR games, I just hate the people who play them”). I didn’t participate in any of these discussions, I just watched them, and in the process learned a little too much about Japanese-style anonymity-driven sarcasm, ennui, memespeak, and other general internet bullshit.

Anyway, there were some smarmy anonymous turds (anonymous people being anonymous; they just happened to be Japanese RPGers) taking potshots at the potential audience for the game.

One person was convinced that no one outside of Japan could \*possibly\* want to play such a Japan-centric game.

Another person agreed, and lamented that no one picked up the English rights to a bog-standard Japanese-made vanilla-with-vanilla-sauce (elves and dwarves... but they wear interesting hats!) western sword-and-sorcery game. Like we have a need of more plain vanilla western fantasy in the US, like we can’t go to any shelf of any game store, pick a game

book at random with a blindfold on and not have a 70% chance of hitting that..

But the third guy, the third dude got on my nerves. His response, loosely translated was basically,

“Guys, guys, you’ve got this all wrong. These sweaty foreign otaku just loooooove all this Japanese shit. It’ll capture their little hearts, they’ll eat this shit up! Samurai! Sushi! Geisha! Ninja!”

Yeah, fuck you too, dude. Remember where your hobby comes from: At least the folks at FEAR do. (^.^)

## F IS ALSO FOR FEAR

FEAR is short for Far East

Amusement Research. They’re the number one company of tabletop RPG production in Japan. They’re also really laid back, chill guys, though make no mistake: They are hardcore workers. Fingers crush keys. Paper flies. The DTP guy’s hands fly around the mousepad like he’s blocking bullets in realtime.

There’s lots of regulars who work there. I don’t know who is a permanent employee and who’s a full-time freelancer, but here’s the folks I’ve met:

- Nakajima-san, AKA Suzufuki Tarot (pen name). He’s the CEO of FEAR, and also an RPG writer and designer. If you’re an RPG player from way back in the day, and have the old Cyberpunk 2020 game books, he wrote the material (in the English game!) for the Asia-Pacific supplement about Japan. He’s really awesome. His vibe is totally laid back, jovial, and kind. But he also has an undertone of being a cunning businessman, a shrewd decision-maker, and an ambitious developer, which is basically the combination that (with the aid of some awesome games in the mid/late 90s) brought the Japanese Tabletop RPG scene back to life from its dying, vegetative state. It’s said that FEAR is the reason for the revival of the gaming scene in Japan, which was dying from lack of availability and pervasiveness of console gaming. But I’d credit it to Nakajima directly. He would totally not take credit for it, though.

Two of the big games he designed were Tokyo NOVA, a very Japanese-centric cyberpunk game, which uses Tarot cards and playing/trump cards for system resolution (and incidentally the first Japanese RPG I ever played!); and Blade of Arcana, a spiritual high-fantasy RPG which also uses a system of special Tarot cards to create characters and drama.

Tokyo NOVA really made waves when it came out, as it was the first game to really picture RPGs as a play, TV show or movie, with a real feeling of “scenes”, “acts”, “main character for this scene” and the like. Likely this was influenced by his work developing TORG RPG supplements in Japan, but where TORG just use scenes and acts as a namesake for encounters, he took that step forward and tied it even closer to media. That was 1994.

- Inoue-san, the creator of Tenra Bansho Zero. Self-proclaimed unredeemable otaku, he has recently gained huge-HUGE--success after publishing his autobiographical manga about living as an otaku with a Chinese wife. Very kind soul. He illustrated and designed numerous RPGs, like the “You are a monster hunting other monsters” game Beast Bind; the revolutionary Norse-myth-inspired Final-Fantasiesque





## INTERVIEW WITH JUN'ICHI INOUE

(originally appeared on the [tenra-rpg.com](http://tenra-rpg.com) blog; preserving here in print)

About halfway through the Kickstarter campaign, I gathered some questions to ask to Tenra's original designer Junichi Inoue. I added commentary where needed in parenthesis.

**[1] How did you get involved in the tabletop RPG design business, and what was the first RPG project you made?]**

The first RPG I've ever designed was the original version of Tenra Bansho (1996).

When I was in college, I joined up with the company Hobby Japan, where I worked by doing illustrations for them. I got a foothold into this company because I often contributed art to their in-house TRPG-themed magazine. That was my fateful beginning.

(called "RPG Magazine". Hobby Japan published it from 1990-1999. They had a monthly "submit your fan art" section, where aspiring or fan artists would submit color and B&W prints with an RPG theme to them; Inoue apparently submitted a lot of art to that magazine, enough quality art to be recognized)

**[2] What was the first RPG you ever played? Did that RPG influence Tenra Bansho Zero?]**

The first RPG I played was of course Dungeons and Dragons! It was the "Red Box" edition (4th version, 1983; Japanese 1985).

My first experience was the pretty typical starting adventure: A plain goblin extermination. But when that short session ended, I thought, "I've never in my life heard of a game as wonderful as this!"

Heh, I actually still think that today! Technology has changed so much since those times, but game-wise nothing comes close to tabletop RPGs. I guess it was inevitable that I would end up making them.

**[3] The English version of Tenra Bansho Zero is finally being released. Please let us know your thoughts on that. Also, please say a word to the fans of the English version, if you will.]**

Wow, it's been a long time hasn't it\*. I really think that all the hard work has been worth it. Thank you, Andy.

For those folks who are looking forward to the English version, I'll loosely borrow some words that appeared in the Avengers trailer here in Japan:

"Hey, America! This is what Tabletop Role-Playing is all about!"

I hope people enjoy this game, that would make me so happy!

\* In the time after I made Tenra Bansho, I created the game Alshard (a game equal parts final fantasy and Norse myth), which has become the de-facto standard RPG in Japan. I've also made dozens of wildly popular supplements for it, and even witnessed the second edition of that game. A world (Alshard) was born, Ragnarok came, and the world was resurrected. That's how long it's been!

**[4] As people play your game Tenra Bansho Zero in English, is there anything regarding the rules, setting etc that you want people to be careful of?]**

Tenra Bansho Zero isn't a game where you beat up your friends over being correct about being properly Japanese.

For example, if you are playing with some friends, and one of them says in character "I want to eat a Big Mac!", you shouldn't get on their case. Rather it is important to develop an attitude of forgiving that sort of thing, and giving it a pass.

That's harmony.

Hah, actually I say that but even at my own table we totally beat each other with thick rulebooks about rules nuances and the like. But hey, I'm still in the process of learning and training as well!

**[5] You are extremely busy these days with your manga "An Otaku Husband and a Chinese Bride". Are you planning on returning to game design? Or perhaps even revisiting Tenra?]**

Well, it's true that my blog (with some 24,000+ views a day) has kind of become the center of my life.



There's no way I can become a ninja and live on eating and drinking air. I am ashamed\*.

Tenra is my life work. At some point in the future I will totally return to it with a new edition.

Absolutely, before Maitreya (Miroku-bosatsu) arrives\*\*.

\* (I am disappointed; but opposite)

\*\* Maitreya—"The Buddha of the Future"—is said to herald the end of everything, and will arrive 5,669,999,500 years from now.

**[6] It's been almost a decade since Tenra Bansho Zero came out in Japanese. Is there anything you look back on and say, "I wish I did this/that instead"?)**

In those days, the RPG world in Japan was absorbed in a boom of innovative or unusual features. Tenra Bansho Zero was sort of at the spearhead of that movement. After I released my followup game Terra the Gunslinger, that boom ended, and was replaced by an era of reductionism and simplification. My game Alshard became the spearhead of that movement as well.

Because of all of that, sure, there's a ton of small adjustments that I would have made to simplify the experience. And yet, my ideology which I made the foundation of the Zero edition of Tenra Bansho has not changed one single bit since it came out:

"Create a wonderful story together, with the people at the table, in a spirit of harmony."

**[7] You travel a lot to China because of your wife and business. Have you ever thought about, like Tenra, creating a game set in a fictional China?]**

What I see when I'm in contemporary China is not fantasy, but reality.

Because of that, every day that I experience China, it becomes hard to make the leap to fantasy.

It's like, imagine if in your D&D session the DM said, "All of a sudden, SOME CHINESE PEOPLE rush to attack! What do you do?" Imagine what kind of face you'd make at the DM if she said something like that.

That's the way it feels.

**[8] There's a lot of cultural Japan in the setting of Tenra (Buddhism, Shinto, Samurai etc). Did you have any fear that foreigners might not "get it"?)**

There is absolutely no reason to be concerned with how correctly Japanese your experience is. Leave that stuff to academics.

You just have to have an interest in Japanese culture. That's the most important thing. It's all about having fun, and keeping your and the players' interest going.

That's far more important than being concerned with whether or not there are cheeseburgers in Tenra.

**[9] As a player or GM, is there a moment about playing Tenra that particularly sticks in your mind?]**

All of the sessions I've been a part of have been wonderful, and they are very cherished memories! That's the kind of game that Tenra Bansho Zero is.

So do I then actually remember every moment of play from the last twelve years? Heh, well. The beginning of everything is belief. is it not?

You can also read an interview with Inoue regarding his new manga and lifestyle over on the Japan Times, at this easy-to-type URL:  
<http://bit.ly/XGR13n>



# TENRA BANSHO ZERO

game Alshard and its sequels (Alshard ff, Alshard Gaia), Tera the Gunslinger (basically the Tenra Treatment, turned on a Steampunk wild west America, using a playing card game mechanic), and Angel Gear (high school kids in mecha kiss each other and fight off the murderous alien invasion).

He's a talented artist, producing everything from manga art, to setting design (computer eroge like Angel Core), and even several lines of figurines which are very very very very NSFV. That latter point is what made him a millionaire, and also led to him traveling to China (to inspect the figure factories), and getting married to a lovely Chinese woman, the subject of the manga he now writes from his blog to hundreds of thousands of views daily.

He also taught me a Japanese sentence that echoed in my own otaku, obsessive soul: "GenTeiBan ni Yowai"; "I have a weakness for limited edition material."

- Endo-san, the unsung hero of FEAR. Saying "game design" definitely has the implication of the actual rules, but a lot of that is doing things like conceptualizing and writing or drawing the setting material. Endo Takuchi is the man behind the scenes who creates and tests the actual rules for the various games. He's often a one-two combo with Inoue on his games, where one person designs the setting, and he designs the rules which provide the backbone for the games. He can also bend steel with his bare hands. I saw him.

- Yano-san, designer of Doublecross. Very handsome!

- Nakamura Y, a friend from long ago, introduced to me by my best friend at the time Satoru (see dedication in the credits page of the book). A gaming freelancer for a long time, he's a super laid back game obsessive. For instance, one time I came in to Tokyo for a few days to hang out with Satoru. It had been a while since I saw Nakamura, so Satoru called him over for a night of eating, drinking and game/nerd talk. An hour later, his girlfriend showed up. She was sent in his place. "Tanaka's making characters for Earthdawn, so I came instead". She was cute so we forgave him, but I don't think they lasted.

The most disappointing part: I confirmed for myself weeks earlier: The Earthdawn character generation system was no more comprehensible in its Japanese translation as it was in English. It was a fool's errand.

After Tokyo NOVA and Tenra Bansho made huge waves, they also took the scene by storm again with Alshard (a final fantasy-esque tactical-yet-rule-light RPG of high action, which caused a second gaming revolution), then Arianhrod (similar system to Alshard, but turned towards more generic western fantasy), and DoubleCross (Japanese Anime X-Men in a dark conspiracy world). Just like Earthquakes, Tokyo is due to another rocking from FEAR...

him. He'd regularly just pull friends, co-workers, random strangers into one of his several weekly game sessions, and his enthusiasm so effective that it would unlock their ultimate gaming potential.

That hottie model over there? Jerry introduced her to gaming, and now her Myrmidon warrior-oid will kick your ass while she trash talks you in front of your friends.

Also, his lovely wife Renee is not only the hotness and an awesome human being, she makes exquisite sock monkeys.

It was Jerry's enthusiasm and encouragement that led me to scream and claw and kick this project to completion, so we all owe him a little for the experience. Check out his game HELLAS, it really is in the same family as Tenra: A fairly traditional role-playing game of Greeks in space with super technology and magic, with rules that encourage character change and role-playing drama. I'm still iffy on the 1d20 rolling system, but the setting is PHENOMENAL.

## IS ALSO FOR GRAMMAR

Japanese grammar is awesome. It will bend your brain like pay-doh and make you its bitch.

Japanese grammar is horrible. It will twist your mind and ruin your day, it will make you question every single sentence you're about to say, because you're likely about to use the wrong grammar or a word with the wrong nuance to it.

Grammar in Japan at the low levels is hard. At its higher levels it's haaaaaaaaaaard. And the more vocabulary words you learn, the more opportunities you have to misuse them or get them mixed up in front of other people.

The following things are acceptable in Japanese:

\* Subject-less sentences: The downpour in April. This doesn't really work in English.

\* Predicate-less sentences: A run down street. This sorta works, but still a fail.

\* Run-on sentences: He found the joke fitting, as many in his condition do, because of the circumstances of his situation, which he couldn't put on anyone but himself. Nope.

\* Passive Voice: The pie was guarded by the ork. Not a rules-out in English, but we're trained to never, ever, ever use it. However, in Japan, most writing is exactly the opposite: People are taught to always use passive voice when possible, as it is less aggressive and harsh in tone than speaking direct.

While there are lots of unique-to-Japanese grammar issues that fuck up translators up, the one that really makes me run for the hills are noun phrases. A simple one is "The Blue HAT". Another: "The (which belongs to Tanaka) blue HAT". More: "The (which belongs to Tanaka and which just the other day he had sent to cleaning) HAT." Got it? That's called a "Noun phrase". Now, by itself it's not a huge deal, but with a few in a long run-on sentence, it's can be maddening to translate.

Essentially, you can easily run out of memory, in very much the same way a computer does, as you read these long sentences if you're not super familiar with all the words within them (that is, you have to translate words in your head as you go along without being familiar with them all). You'll get towards the end of the second half of the sentence, and

## IS FOR GRAYSON COMMA JERRY

Jerry Grayson, who I consider a friend and mentor, though he'd laugh if he heard that. He's been a game writer for much longer than I, with a passion deeper than my own. He also has that perfect combination of magnetic charisma and lack of shame that draws people to



# TENRA BANSHO ZERO

forget the contents or point/message of the first. So you go reread the first half of the sentence, and forget the contents, words or point/message of the second.

And so on, repeatedly. If you get caught in a loop, it basically does to you like in that one episode of Star Trek TNG where they developed this logical-loop spiral death pattern that would kill all the Borg. With enough of these over time, I learned my lesson: Nowadays I just will write out the first half of the sentence, in word and meaning, before moving on to the second half of the sentence.

Anyway, the thing is, the more poetic the writer is expressing him or herself, the more that many or all of the above will be used. All together, or right near each other. And Tenra's writing is really, REALLY poetic. To put it simply, I've translated eight-page medical specialist essays and patent reports on new-type intraocular lens injectors and their distribution systems in the time it takes to translate about 1-2 pages of the setting sections of the book. Since Tenra was more poetic, it takes a few steadier, concentrated hand to reassemble the words and thoughts into equally meaningful English sentences. Biotech reports are complex, filled with words I've never heard in Japanese or English, but because of the matter-of-fact and direct writing, it's so much easier to translate. I'd wager a book of 10 poems would be harder to do justice in a correct, thought-out translation than a 100 pages of medical reports.

Back to those long sentences and noun phrases. For example, Page 149 of the worldbook, the second paragraph on The Fist of Acala the Immovable, is this phrase:

"The founder of the First of Acala was Bokusen the Ebon Mountain, the originator of the Ebon Mountain sect of Buddhism. It is said that he met with the incarnation of Acala the Immovable while doing penance in the mountains and was instructed by this bodhisattva in the essential points of the art."

In Japanese, that was actually all one sentence:

不動明王拳の開祖は、墨仙宗の創始者である墨仙であり、山中での苦行のさなか、不動明王の化身に出会い、極意を伝授されたという。

Let's break that down into it's grammatical components!

First, we'll do a simple passthrough into roman letters, just for kicks:

\* *Fudoh Myou-oh no kaiso ha (well, "wa", for those in the know. Anyway). Bokusen-shu no sounshisha de aru Bokusen de ari, yamanaka de no kugyou no sanaka, Fudoh Myou-oh no keshin ni deai, Gokui wo denju sareta to in.*

Now, let's cut it up into its component English words. As you know, I went with the original Sanskrit words for the various Bodhisattvas and the like (Fudoh Myou-Oh literally means "Unmoving Bright King", but he's known as Acala in sanskrit):

\* *Acala Fist/Martial Art (possessive/'s) founder*

(target), Ebon Mountain sect -'s- originator ('as it exists'; indicator of noun phrase) Bokusen it is, mountains in the (at) (possessive) asceticism/penance -'s- at the height of, Acala -'s- avatar/personification (to) encounter; ultimate point (objective) initiate was (passive) it has been said.

I don't think like that when I translate, mind. It's just the way the grammar works. Anyway, you can see the meaning starting to come together. The problem is that it's a huge run on sentence. Plus, the phrase "Ebon Mountain order's originator" was a noun phrase used as an adjective to describe Ebon Mountain himself. I skipped out the "height of" to simplify the translation, but the "in the middle of the mountains" modifies the noun "penance", and together "penance in the middle of the mountain" is a modifier for "height of". The rest made grammatical sense as a complete sentence, so I cut it there into two

sentences.

At the time, paragraph-long sentences in Japanese like the above were the bane of my existence. Some of these I'd be waffling on for like 30-60 minutes before it came together full and baked in English. I'm a lot better at them (because of these kinds of experiences), but still it was an uphill climb.

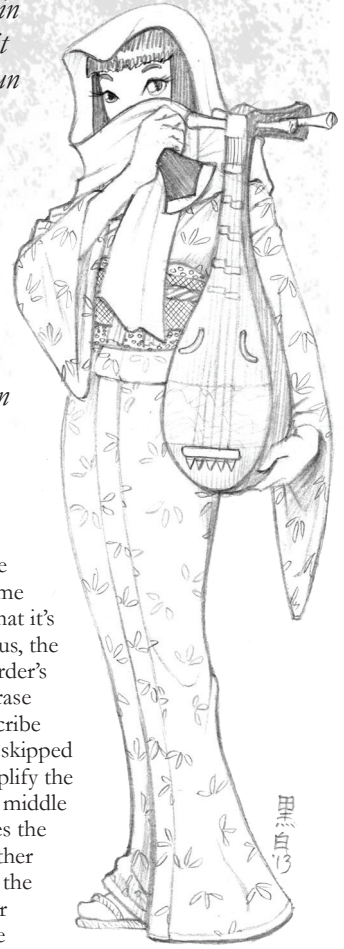
When I went to Japan to study Japanese, we had a speech delivered by a recent expat. I still remember his speech opener to this day: "You begin studying Japanese. Your friend begins studying a European language, like German or French. You both study equally as hard. Time passes. Right around the time that your friend is at a major university in a country that speaks that language, giving a dissertation about that language while speaking in that language to her peers, you'll be juuuuuuuuust about conversational enough in Japanese to order a beer without messing up."

Yep.

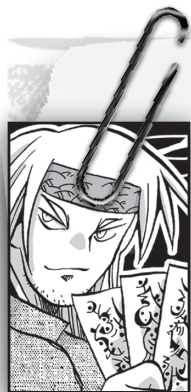
G is also for Gotchal

I read one of the original replays from the TBZ supplement "Tenjo Tenge". In it, I saw an experience that could only happen in Tenra, and it was just so cool I had to share.

The GM ran the adventure, which involved time travel, the







## UNDERGROUND GM ADVICE - TENRA AT MY TABLE

Some of these thoughts I actually coded into the rulebook under GM or Player advice. Others are just

Five friends gathered one bright spring day to indulge me in playing the first English game of Tenra Bansho Zero. It went pretty well, given that there was a lot of newness (rules, setting, playstyle) for all of us.

I ran lots of campaigns and demos over the next few years, and learned a lot from the experience. The main things I learned are reflected here and there throughout the book, but let me spell them out with personal examples:

[When running with new players, don't do ANY skill/combat rolls in the Zero Act]  
Hey, I bought the book. I read and memorized the rules, so I totally want to bust out the rules like rolling skills and combat up front, and the first opportunity is the zero act.

### RESIST!

Seriously, the only rules that you should really focus on having everyone learn in the Zero Act is just "Hey! Remember to give folks Aiki chits!" (while trying to remember to give them out yourself). Skills and attributes and combat and crap is in pretty much every tabletop system out there (this is assuming you're coming from a background of playing some other games in the past). Just focus on the Aiki chits for now. It really does take a little while to get used to handing out rewards to awesome lines/roleplay to the extent it happens in Tenra, both as a player and as the GM. Focus on it, like a laser... that's... uh... really focused!

You'll get to the skill rolls and stuff eventually in Act One and the rest of the game, you'll have plenty of time to use them then. For now, stick to the cornerstone of the game, the Karma (Aiki Chit givin') rules.

In my first few sessions, I tried to demonstrate the way skills or combat work (even with a single roll) in the Zero Act, but it really just ended up bogging down the character scene: Each scene will go for 2-5 minutes, but then you start explaining the rules and next thing you know you've got one person with a 10-minute Zero-Act scene.

Besides, in the end, I think that the Zero Act really shines best without skill rolls: This is a snapshot of who your character is and how they are tied to the story. Resolve all that stuff in true-to-Tenra form: With drama. Leave the dice for the story that unfolds in Act One.

### Make the Player in the Zero Act Have a Significant Choice

So, even in the official replay with four masters of the game that appears in the Tenra supplement Terjo Tenge, there was this one scene (the first scene, even) where the Armour Rider girl is basically having a nightmare, as if she was seeing through the eyes of her crazed Armour, and blood and death all around. The player got to get a choice line in or two, but basically it was a reaction to what the GM was throwing out there. A fine exposition, but it was also kinda flat: It started and ended fast. There was no "footprint" of the player in that scene, it was like the GM was saying "You're stuck in a haunted house! Scream a few times! ...Good. Okay you're out now. Scene Over!"

Good enough if you're at a convention or something and have limited time, but not really good enough for a game with friends. Pretty much from my first ever session running Tenra, I realized that the Zero Act scene works best if you provide:

- \* At least one emotionally close NPC to speak with.
- \* But more importantly, a Choice of some kind.

The NPC to speak with provides opportunities for the player to talk in character, and start building up Aiki chits. However, that Choice provides the player with an opportunity for the player to make a meaningful, usually hard, decision right at the beginning of the game. This basically throws gasoline on a Aiki Chit bonfire, for real: It fires up the player's in-game dialogue (before, during and after that Choice) and puts them in a natural situation to be awarded Aiki chits if they just come out of their shell a little bit.

But it also allows the player to - night off the bat - make a decision of importance to their character, something that speaks to their personality. This helps start that "immersion" into the character, to help define them a little as a person and feel a little closer to them. It also gives them a chance to shine.

Now, sometimes the choices I set up are ones where the player might feel an obvious pull to go in a certain direction: One Zero Act scene in my pocket is for Kugutsu War Maiden characters: their master has finished her, she is sitting in the study with her "younger sister" doing calligraphy, when basically the master - crazed - comes into the room dragging an adolescent village boy or girl and a katana. The master tells the kugutsu to kill the girl/boy to complete her training. I've used this startup about a dozen times, and every single time the player chooses to turn against the master (sometimes in interesting ways), free the child, run away, etc. However, it's the nature of /how/ they come to the conclusion of that choice that is interesting. And while this setup is a little extreme and I don't actually expect that we'll see the kugutsu kill the adolescent, I make sure to tell the player that "Either way, it's totally up to you: the story will change depending on what you choose, but it's still your decision."



In fact, I kinda wonder what I'll do if a player calmly grabs the katana and -slash-... I'll likely frame it as a flashback from many years ago, where "...After that the kugutsu dealt with the consequences of the pain she brought to the world, and promised herself that she'd never do that again... Right, PLAYER?" (wait for nod) Heh, I'm not interested in perpetuating a game of soulless psychopaths, so if that means railroading their character's emotions a hair to get back to a humane character, so be it.

But most of the Choices aren't that extreme or "It's totally up to you" (...but you and I both know you're going to do the Good Thing, right?). Frex, many of them are like:

- \* You're a monk. You are being thrown out of your order. How do you treat your expulsion, and what do you say? What do you do after you leave the monastery?
- \* You're a warrior, and competing at your domain's annual sword tournament. Final round, your last opponent is the nephew/son of the regent. Your instructor knows that you can beat him, but asks you to allow the nephew to save face by losing to him. What do you do?

- \* You're an annelidist in a hut on the outskirts of town. The drunk tough guy who has been harassing you for a year, calling you a "Corpse Eater" when you walk by, brings his kid (with a high unbreaking fever) to your hut in a rainstorm in the middle of the night, begging you to help. What do you do? How will he treat you later?

And as you can imagine, a lot of these require the GM to think fast, too: Based on what happens, there's a lot of cool dialogue spoken or outcomes of the choices to describe.

### Give Out Aiki Chits

Drill this hard into all the players at the table from the first scene. Seriously, it's the most important fucking part of the game. More than all that combat stuff and all. There's a reason the Karma rules come first in the English version!

I often lead in with an anecdote about how I, as a GM, also forget to give Aiki chits at the beginning. Like, how I'll be watching this awesome dialogue unfold right in front of my eyes, and then forgetting to give out Aiki chits. It's like I have to slap myself out of a "Watch awesome dialogue unfolding before my very eyes" coma in order to remember to reward them. But it's worth it: Once the Aiki starts flowing, the game pretty much runs itself.

### "Protagonize" the Characters

"You roll your attack using your katana. You whiff and fail." Blah.

"Your katana strikes true, and severs your enemy in half! ...At least, that's what you saw in your mind's eye. If it weren't for the fact that he was trained in a style that kept him mobile, it would have been over already. When you refocus, he's just outside of your striking range."

As a GM, I tend to do this for all sorts of character failures. Not that the characters will never whiff, but keeping failure as a "you would have succeeded if only for a factor beyond your sight/control" can be a pretty interesting way to describe failure, to keep things a little exciting.

### Combat! Sparse and Meaningful!

Holy cow, if there's one thing I learned about Tenra by running it, it's that combat should be limited to about once per Act, and really should be meaningful: Like mini-boss fights, major boss fights, and so on. Fights with like a few weak dudes? Maybe once in a long while.

However, after playing a lot of games, one thing that I do as a GM when introducing a new system is to include a... well... for lack of a better word, a relatively meaningless fight against a horde of weaklings/zako. Gets you used to the flow of the rules, helps you understand the game, etc. PC success is pretty much guaranteed. The whole thing is kind of a dance that is done with all RPGs with combat systems: "Gotta try it out, gotta throw a lite combat scene in there right away."

Ehhh, not so much with Tenra. The first game I ever ran, there was a fight between the PCs and about 5 (one per PC) mid-level punks (lower in attribute/skill levels than the PCs, but not so low that they'd be taken out in one hit, so it took a few rounds to beat them down). But it wasn't at the end of an Act (which would have made it fit), it was the second or third scene or so. Basically a typical RPG Rules Test Drive. It went on a little too long, and in the end didn't really impact the storyline at all. Normally it doesn't matter, but with Tenra you only have a few hours and a few Acts to tell a story. So "side combats", even if you want to show off the system, really don't have a place in Tenra. Get a feel for the combat system with the first mini-boss fight at the end of an Act, it'll be more meaningful and you'll get the same effect.

Plus, by then the players will have built up enough Aiki chits and Kiai points to make a difference.

In that first combat I mentioned above? The PCs didn't have enough Kiai to dump dice into finishing blows, so the combat took about 20 minutes (including description of combat system) before I just had them describe finishing off the last two NPCs.

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son of Makuu Nindo, and high-fiving the Oni Earth-Speaker. There was a big bad enemy warrior who had a showdown with a PC samurai. All the players gave it their all, kicked some serious ass, spent a dumpload of Kiai, and everyone ended the session just a few karma south of 108.

GM: Great job guys!

Everyone: Yeah, that was awesome.

GM: Okay, so now we'll start right into the next adventure, which I have prepared right here.

Everyone: WHAT????

Basically, the GM planned out a full 6 or so hours of gaming, and the scenario he ran was about four hours long. Solid and fulfilling. But then he surprised the players by popping a second, smaller, 2-hour-long scenario on top of the first. There wasn't a lot of combat, it was mostly roleplaying-focused, centered on the decisions the players made in the previous scenario. But he really got the players by bringing them into a second session when they had almost all their karma maxed out. The players had to play and spend Kiai very carefully in order to manage their Karma.

One of these days, I'm totally gonna do that too.

## G IS ALSO FOR GUNMA PREFECTURE

I've lived in Tokyo, have traveled from the wilds of northern Hokkaido down to the southernmost parts of Kagoshima and everywhere in between; I've been to Kyoto more times than I can easily remember, have hiked to the top of Mount Fuji, got lost and found again in all sorts of wonderful places. While I think my favorite place in all of Japan is the Kamakura region, Gunma is my home.

Gunma, two prefectures north of Tokyo (about an hour by train) is where I lived after college for nearly five years. I met my wife there and made many friends. I spent many weekend nights with Rafi or Yoshi in the lively shutter-town of Kiryu, eaten my way from one side of Maebashi to the other (Goemon Ninja Soba, White Gyoza, and God King Burger), and watched in a kind of curiosity-and-horror as my town of Azuma and my wife's town of Sakai-machi were absorbed into the larger city of Isesaki. Many times I've gone up to the top of Mount Akagi (famous internationally for drift racing), even when it was too stupid-cold and windy to think rationally. From shopping at the crazy charming variety goods store Humpty Dumpty or the mesmerizing hobby center complex of Joyful Honda in Ota, or the cultural dumping grounds for all the cool shit that is (admittedly a chain store) Village Vangaurd. Thick forests, high mountains, steep valleys and long rivers, Gunma really has it all.

Well, except for trains. Everyone gets around by car, so that trains suck ass. Like, 2 trains an hour in some places. And walking several miles to the nearest station.

And downtown life. Isesaki has a culturally rich downtown that in a few quick years turned into a countrywide-famous brothel area because the city council couldn't get it through their fucking heads that Gunma culture is car culture, and not providing parking meant people would go to the car-centric areas of Isesaki, leaving the downtown to rot.

And warmth in the winter. Gunma is famous for its face-

ripping cold, dry wind that blasts the area all winter long. It'd be nice with a load of snow like the northern parts of Gunma in the mountains, but the place I lived felt pretty much like Minneapolis at times. Combine that with Japan's historic lack of solid home insulation on traditional homes, and you have long, cold, dark, dreary winters.

But hey, Gunma's my home in Japan.

## H IS FOR HAYAMI RASENJIN

He's the guy who did the rules manga that appear in the book. He's been doing his unique, comical manga art for RPGs for years now, mostly featured in the RPGs "Satasupe"/"Saturday Night Special", a self-described "Asianpunk" RPG, and "Meikyu Kingdom" (Labrynth Kingdom). He's recently released an actual capital M-manga called "Stamps and Cannons", a somewhat half-comical/half-serious war chronicle of a fictional Eastern European country analogue in the early 20th century. I really love the individualistic style he brings, and it's kind of a dream to one day work with him, perhaps illustrating something I work on. We'll see.

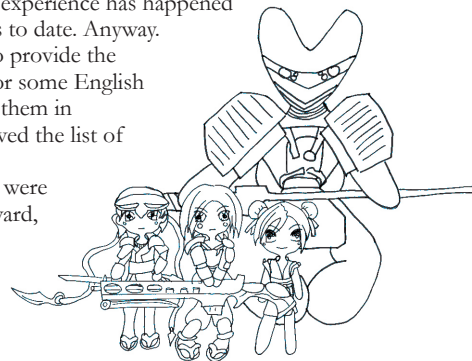
Incidentally, a few years before I even considered picking up the rights to Tenra, I showed the book to a bunch of game designer friends. For folks like me, rules illustrated through manga was a real winner. So easy to learn. It inspired a bunch of people, most notably Mike Miller, who released a superhero drama game called "With Great Power". Its card-based mechanics were illustrated through a 4-page comic spread not dissimilar to the way done in Tenra!

## H IS ALSO FOR HYOUGEN (JAPANESE EXPRESSIONS)

So, at one point I got involved with providing real Japanese phrases for the RPG "Blood and Honor", a game about conflicting Japanese nations and their leaders (it's actually really good!). The inspiration, like most projects I get involved with, was something like "It looked like someone pulled random English shit and stuffed it into a hand-dictionary and called it Japanese; it hurt my eyes and my brain, so I told them I'd do it for a copy of the book". This experience has happened about four times to date. Anyway.

I was going to provide the Japanese kanji for some English phrases and put them in Japanese. I received the list of phrases.

Thing is, they were all kind of awkward, stilted. Like if someone said "I want to get





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a kanji tattoo of AWESOME POWER EAGLE, what would that be?” Well, I can do it, but it wouldn’t look, seem or sound right, really.

Anyway, I started looking at a few of the phrases, and they just weren’t working out well in English. I decided to see if the author would instead be up for using, you know, like actual historic Japanese cool expressions that really existed.

“I don’t understand what the problem is?? These ARE Japanese expressions!”

...what?

Turns out, he had gone to some website long ago that specialized in “Well known Japanese phrases. From Japan”. Like a website of cool phrases from around the world, with a section for Japanese phrases. He grabbed the ones he liked, added in a few he had heard of before, and that’s what the list was. That’s what the original weird Japanese I saw was, too: Someone was trying to recreate them in Japanese without finding their original form.

So I went hunting for those well known Japanese phrases. Since they were so well known, I could just look up expressions on Japanese websites, or use a couple words from the expression to find it. First, I hunted for sites that contained the “Japanese phrase” (in English) but also had the original Japanese next to it, for proof.

Yeah, long story short, of a list of about 13 phrases, 3 of them actually existed! (“Ten men, ten colors” was one of the ones given; yep, it was exactly that, in a Japanese-but-likely-originally-Chinese form, actually used in Japan. “To each their own”, “Every person is unique”, that sort of meaning). The other 10 were TOTAL BULLSHIT. I did about 12 hours of (admittedly fun) research before coming to that conclusion.

How could that be? Well, best as I could tell, someone just made shit up, cause it sounded cool to attribute it to Japan. They then put it on a website. Someone else, creating a similar “quotes of the world” website, lifted all the quotes attributed to Japan, and included them in an even bigger site. Someone else did the same. There are dozens and dozens of “cool quotes from around the world” sites, and for most of them, the Japanese sections are all identical, having been copied from each other and propagated on and on until they stuck.

...which kinda sucks, because there are a lot of really awesome expressions in Japan: “Curse a person, dig two graves”. “After the rain falls, the ground becomes stronger.” “Even the bright halo of the statue of the Buddha statue depends on the amount of gold it was made with.” “Neither the spirit of justice in prostitutes nor square eggs exist.” Okay, that last one is a little weird.

So I ended up using those three actual, real Japanese phrases from the original batch, and then about 10 more I found on various Japanese language expression sites, verified ones that had meanings similar to (almost impossible to get “the same as” between English and Japanese; too much nuance differences) the ones they wanted to use in the first place. In cases where a meaningful match couldn’t be found, I went with something that was (well in Japanese anyway)

cooler than the original suggested phrase.

Anyway, if you ever hear the word “famous Japanese expression”, more often than not it’s bullshit. If you want to check look for expression sites that have both English and original Japanese together.

## H IS ALSO FOR HOW TO WIN AT TENRA

Matthew had a really smug face when he came to our second session of Tenra.

Matthew: “Hey Andy, I think I figured out how to win at Tenra.” (big grin)

Andy: (without a pause) “Oh, you mean pick a character with a high Empathy like the Kugutsu, load up on Fates that target the other players, and roleplay your ass off?”

M: (smile fades) “Um... yeah.”

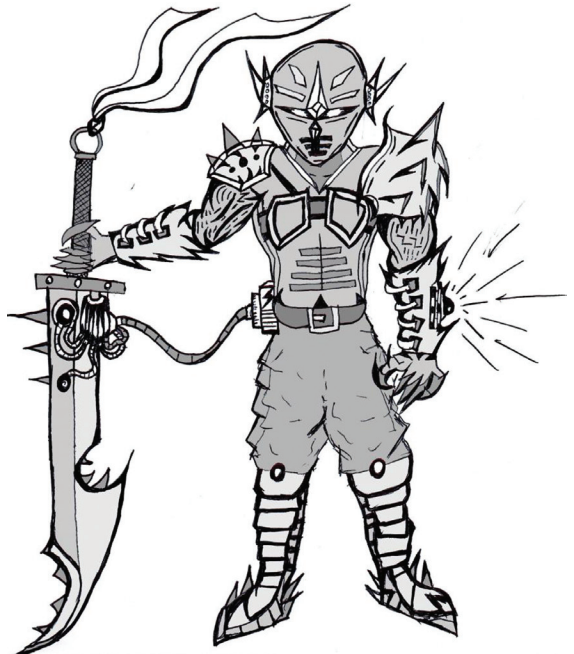
A: “Here’s the thing. To do that, you still have to do step three: Roleplay your ass off. Does everyone at the table try to win by roleplaying their asses off? Then FUCKING MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!”

M: “Heh. Well, what you can do is see who the scene judge is, and make sure you role-play in a way that they’ll reward you. Or, if everyone gives out chits, then target people specifically and roleplay in a way that they’ll reward you.”

A: “Um... yep! Oh, and if you want to score a basket from the three point line, all you have to do is just put the basketball in the net. Also, if you want to create a database application, you just need to program it with your fingers until it works with no bugs.”

M: “Hmmm?”

A: “It’s far more complicated than just saying “I roleplay in a way that they like”. If you can read your players, then tailor the role-play of your character to hit the reward-nerves of every player at the table individually, and still find fun playing them, then you need to step away from the table and book a *Director’s Notes*”



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ツ), etc

Onomatopoeia - ガラガラ (sound of a sliding door opening), ブリブリ (the sound of violent diarrhea)

Anyway, Tenra is punctuated by katakana in an interesting way. For example, the words “Armour”, “Shinobi”, “Samurai” and “Oni” are always written in katakana, even though there are absolutely kanji characters for each (which is how they’re normally written). The reason is that the author wanted to make it clear to the Japanese reader that, for example in the case of the word “samurai”, that they were seeing a word with a “warning bell”: That is, that by the syllabary used to write the word, it was an indicator that “this isn’t the word you expect”. In a single word, they conveyed the meaning of “This is written ‘samurai’, but this is clearly not the samurai that I’m used to seeing in other writings and fiction, otherwise they would have just used the kanji”. It was done to excellent effect in the original. Other words, like Onmyoji, Annelidist, Kugutsu and the like were written as-is in kanji, as they were ‘exactly as written’.

In English, though... well, we only have one lettering system, the Roman alphabet. The least I was able to do, though, is to draw attention to the difference between armor (that you wear) and armour (the mecha of the setting) by using the Queen’s English/UK English version of the spelling for that word, and the American English for “regular armor” and the rest of the book. Unfortunately it couldn’t be done with the other words. The little differences between languages can sometimes create a real gulf between them.

## K IS ALSO FOR KARMA

Another aspect to the Buddhism that appears in Tenra and through the book... Turns out that a lot of practicing Buddhists took issue with the Buddhism as portrayed in the book! This I thought was pretty interesting: The Buddhism in the game was pretty clearly made up, but also researched as well using some real world sects, beliefs, and of course the Japanese cultural background as the foundation to how it was all written.

The main point of contention was Karma, and how it’s mostly “bad”, where having too much causes you to turn evil and having zero causes you to transcend. It became a point of discussion for lots of folks! I’ve included a really cool and charitable discussion of the issue with a believer on the subject of Karma in the game, it was a rewarding exchange on both sides.

While the Karma in Tenra is not a perfect example of pure straight-from-the-sutras manifestation of the Karma of classical (read: as written in the original sutras, as opposed to as practiced all throughout Asia), the distinction definitely had to be drawn between Buddhism and Hinduism for the purposes of play. In America, in the 60s, we had a wave of eastern mysticism enter the mindscape. The tip of the spear there was Hinduism, and soon “karma”, and the concepts of “bad karma by doing bad things; good karma by doing good things” was a household concept. In my early games, using Karma (in Japanese “Goh”, which simply means “Acts”, and implies neither good nor evil inherently), sometimes the players became confused.

## I IS FOR IT'S FINALLY FUCKING FINISHED

Done.

\*claps dust off of hands\*

## I IS FOR JAPAAAAAAN

As RPGs in Japan go, there’s not that many that are truly Japan-focused. Games like Dungeons and Dragons and Tunnels and Trolls were what introduced Japanese people to the world of TRPGs (on the coattails of Lord of the Rings being translated into Japanese and released only a few years previously). From the start, “TRPG == Western Fantasy, based on a European vision” was a thing that was locked into the mindset in the scene. In Japan, “groggnard” gamers aren’t necessarily concerned with rules, but they usually do have a preference for western-themed games.

Tenra was the second successful Japanese historical (well, “ish”) game released in Japan. The first was “Daikatsugeki”, “The Big Action Movie”, which came out in 1992. It was a game set in the Edo era of Japan, and came in a boxed set that featured several booklets for rules, scenarios and the like. It featured the kind of play that was half role-play and drama, and (commonly) half brutal combat and infiltration. Stuff like walking around town and seeing the injustices at the hands of the evil magistrate, then infiltrating the magistrate’s compound and dispensing justice.

There were games set in modern or future Japan, like Tokyo NOVA (cyberpunk Japan) and the like, but it wasn’t until Tenra Bansho came out that a second real “Japanese game set in Japan for Japanese gamers” came out. Between that and the drama-focused rules, it really started a revolution in Japan, even dragging new butts into seats.

## I IS FOR KATAKANA

So there’s three syllabaries in Japanese: Hiragana, Katakana, Kanji. Most of you reading this probably have heard of them already, but the quick is this:

Kanji are the intricate Chinese characters, imported long ago into the Japanese language.

Hiragana is the softer brush-stroke-like phonetic syllabary that everyone learns when they start reading Japanese, including Japanese children.

Katakana is the more sharp stilted-looking syllabary, created long ago (originally carved up from kanji into phonetic components). These days katakana is used for things like:

Foreign Loanwords - Pasta (パスタ), Remote Control (リモコン),

Foreign Names - Andy (アンディー), Germany (ドイツ)



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"I'm just trying to influence this person, it's not evil. Why am I getting (bad) karma for it?"

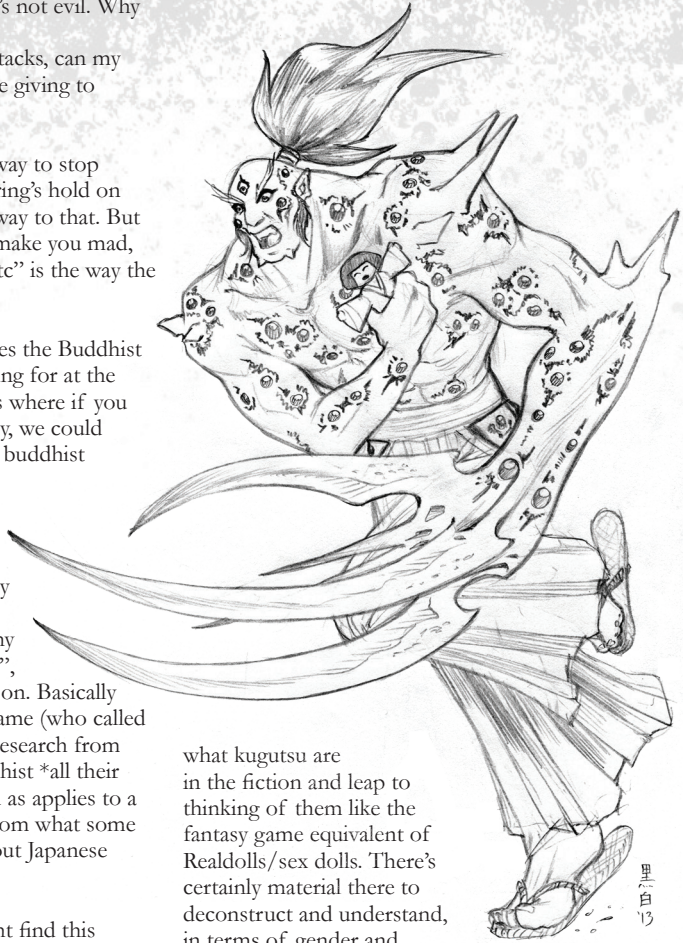
"If I get (bad) karma for adding dice to attacks, can my character buy it off by doing good things, like giving to charities or helping the common people?"

Well, Goh is Goh, acts are acts. The only way to stop suffering is to release the cause of that suffering's hold on you. The Noble Eight-fold path is the basic way to that. But simply to "stop caring about the things that make you mad, the things that drive you to do hurtful acts, etc" is the way the game gets to the same endpoint.

It really baffles in the creative way it handles the Buddhist condition. And yet, all the designers were going for at the time was a system of Awesome Power Points where if you use too many you "go to the dark side" ("Hey, we could set the upper limit at 108 because of the 108 buddhist sins/bonno! Hah, cool!").

But I've seen other comments here and there on the InterSpheres, with folks saying "Scoff! Destiny? Real Buddhists don't actually believe in destiny!" "There's Good and Bad Karma, I read all about it in some books! Why don't these Japanese people understand that?", "I know better than these buffoons", and so on. Basically calling out the beliefs of the writers of the game (who called on common knowledge, plus did additional research from source material) who have identified as Buddhist \*all their lives\*, because their description of their faith as applies to a couple of dials and coins in a game differs from what some western hardcore believers read in books about Japanese Buddhism - in English - somewhere.

Anyone with a sociology background might find this fodder for an interesting essay on cross-culture/cross-religious experiences vs academia. But to simplify it into a single sentence: At the end of the day... religion's messy. Christianity and Judaism aren't the only religions that get to claim endless discussion--and schism--on written minutiae.



what kugutsu are in the fiction and leap to thinking of them like the fantasy game equivalent of Realdolls/sex dolls. There's certainly material there to deconstruct and understand, in terms of gender and status (human ownership, for example). However, I think a pure "living sex doll" interpretation without looking deeper would be a cold misrepresentation, perhaps 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 traditional princess/royalty dolls, to modern ball-joint dolls (look up "Japanese dolls" and "ball-joint dolls" on wikipedia), and of course the steampunkish self-moving 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 - one thousand years before Christ. Likewise, magical "doll comes to life" stories and folklore tales 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 craftsman and the doll. In Japan, there's the tradition of the shokunin, or craftsman, 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, brush-makers, doll-makers, all who basically live their life doing one traditional craft and over again, in order to perfect the art. In bunraku doll plays, for example, 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

## K IS ALSO FOR KUGUTSU

So a few people (westerners, that is) have been perplexed about what the Kugutsu is all about. Some think "Pinocchio story", others think "Realdoll/sex robot with feelings". Their existence seems a little off, and certainly can be seen as problematic: A figure (mostly women) created by an artisan, then sold for lots of money to a lord, to be treated as at best a second wife, at worst a "thing" to look at.

Not to hand-wave those concerns away, but I think an understanding of the cultural context of doll culture in Japan can frame the kugutsu within a deeper, richer cultural background that may fill out the picture a little more, or help the reader come to a more thorough or personal understanding.

So, it's really easy for Westerners to look at the result of



# FAVORITE PLACES IN JAPAN

When I think about Japan, I think fondly on...

## Places in General

Kamakura - I may in fact retire here. Orie and I traveled here for the first time a few years back, and after wandering the city and forests, the towns and valleys, we both independently came to the conclusion that the Kamakura area of Japan (home of the ancient capital of Japan, after Heiankyo, before Kyoto and Tokyo) is our favorite. You know all that crap you see on TV about "Japan is a blend of old and new, of tradition and modernity. blah blah blah?" Well, it's really true of Kamakura. There's so much natural beauty, situated next to modern(ish) towns and transportation. When we came here, we both felt a sense of a "deep Japan", a richness here we couldn't put our fingers on, but didn't experience even in Kyoto or Nara. Old temples, old roads, the feeling of Japan of long ago, a certain slowness, restfulness, mindfulness. Wonderful ancient temples and historical sites, great places to eat and do things, and oh my: The mountains, valleys, forests and ocean, all in one spot. Plus, the island town of Enoshima is nearby, and also fairly fun to walk around, if a little touristy.

Of course, the spell is broken if you go to the great Buddha statue when there's a million elementary schoolkids running all over the place and screaming, but still it's a pretty kickass place.

Nara - Come for the nature, history and hiking. Sure, there's the big-ass Daibutsu statue, lots of temples and historic sites, but there's just simply lots to see and experience. Grab a map, pick a direction and start walking. Definitely has a more "in the forest" feel than Kamakura, and far more recognized temples and ancient buildings. I dunno, might be gaijin catnip, but lots of Japanese love this area too.

Kagoshima - Why? No idea. Something about the fact that Kagoshima city is the southernmost prefecture of mainland Japan, that it faces an active, always-smoking-day-and-night volcano that erupts lava regularly THAT PEOPLE ACTUALLY LIVE ON, that it houses lots of cool scenic spots south of the city on the coast... Between that, the food, the warm people, and the scenery change from "everyday Tokyo", makes Kagoshima a place I find myself returning to a lot.

Kobe - Kind of the best of all worlds, and the place I determined to retire before I visited Kamakura. Kobe is a city surrounded by forested mountains, right on the coast, near Osaka and Kyoto, surrounded by small towns: It's like a snowglobe that has a little of everything in Japan right in one little area.

## Specific Places

The Top of Mount Akagi

The famous mountain which frames my home prefecture of Gunma (and known internationally for its "perfect for drift-racing" curved mountain paths), the topmost part is quiet and serene on the way to the top, and at the top offers an overlook over what seems to be half of the Kanto region. If it's a hot summer day, try a swim across the lake in the dormant caldera, a great picnic spot. And at night, a starry night is so bright you feel warmed by the stars above, and the distant specs of light from Maebashi city below.

Hakata at Night

It was a toss-up, I also like West Shinjuku and Kasumigaseki at night over in Tokyo, but there's something about Hakata: You can start at one end of the river and eat and drink your way through like a dozen food stands before it's time to go home. Hakata ramen is also famous for being heavy on taste and delicious. Oh, missed the last train? Hakata is also where the first capsule hotels were built. Try one out if you don't get claustrophobic.

Kamakura Hiking Trails

You owe it to yourself that if you come to Kamakura for hiking: Get yourself lost. Take a trail not on the map. You'll find yourself emerging in (roll 1d6)

1-2 a hidden temple/shrine/statue/overlook not noted anywhere in any known guide

3-4 the middle of a relatively modern suburb town, with houses in clutches along roads bordering ricefields

5-6 the back of a super-huge and temple, with no idea of how you go there

Plus, it's kinda interesting to watch young women you pass navigate the several-km-long hiking trails in high heels. Hey, I didn't say anything, when they see me they usually apologize for being underprepared as they slip all over wet rocks and dirt. See if they need help, and move along.

Sanjusangendo, Chion-in and Kyomizudera

I can't fail to drop a few temples from Kyoto in here, right? Sanjusangendo is home to a huge, quiet hall of over a thousand Buddha statues. It's showy, and yet ancient and peaceful. The cool breeze, the reek of old wood and incense, the feel of the creaking floors and thick beams, all add up to an awesome experience. Chion-in is a temple that never makes it into the guidebooks, but is awesome (and not crowded for that very reason): Huge steps lead up to a Jodo-Shu temple compound, quiet and actually used. Kyomizudera, sure, everyone goes there and it's awesome... but on your way to the ticket counter, veer off



to your left, go to the gate, and head into the forest BEHIND Kyomizudera. The forest there is something out of a Miyazaki anime or Endor reel: Gorgeous, rich, sensual. Walk about a km and you'll come to some scenic views of the ancient capital city of Kyoto: Try to imagine it as it was a thousand years ago.

Himeji-jo

The most badass of all of Japan's badass castles. It's a huge castle compound where you can't swing a dead cat without hitting a tale of history. Currently being restored, which is awesome because now's the time you can climb up and actually touch the outside walls and roof of this massive, beautiful castle.

Harajuku

Yeah, I'm kind of a fan of fashion, even though I don't look it myself. Sometimes I wander through Harajuku's Omotesando street or the side-alleys with all the clothing and fashion shops, sit in a cafe and soak in whatever the year spewed out onto people. Punk, dance, club, sporty, high fashion, reggae, hippie, goth, it's all here. It's like a dance party for your eyes.

Sento/Onsen

I actually prefer public baths to hot springs. Hot springs are special and expensive. Sento/public baths are there to remind you that you're tied to a community of people who live (and bathe) together. They cut through any level of stress like a Global brand knife through rice porridge. Plus, they're slightly cooler (tempwise), cheaper, and more local (location-wise, and homeliness-wise) than hot springs.

New

And while I'm comfortable in many places in Japan, I got that way by going to new places, setting off in new directions. I'll circle a place I've been before, then actively look for new directions to go or paths to take. Or I'll just pick a new location I've never gone before, to some prefecture I know nothing about, and just show up. Cause shit, there's almost always something interesting, cool, or weird in every locale from one end of the country to the other. My home of Gunma is pretty boring in comparison, but even within Gunma there's all sorts of crazy cool things under the surface: Gunma's enormous flower park, German Village, Yabusuka Snake Center, Maebashi's Yasuragi-no-Yuu, the old shops of downtown Kiryu, the old hot springs towns of Ikaho and Minakami... It's like that everywhere. You just have to point yourself in a new direction.

## Food

Everywhere

Seriously. If you can't find something to eat in Japan, you may have real dietary restrictions, and thus I feel bad for you and would like to try to offer you help. Otherwise, if you're just picky, go home. I can't walk a kilometer in any direction without stumbling upon 2-3 places I'd love to eat at. Particularly Japanese taverns/izakaya: I don't think there's a foreigner alive who's lived in Japan for any length of time who didn't get the idea to build a Japanese-style izakaya in their own town or city... then realize it wouldn't work, since US public transport sucks, so no one could get home after drink-eating without a messy and expensive taxi system.

With Coworkers on a Friday

Nothing beats heading out to an earned break of eating and drinking with coworkers on a Friday after a hellish week of hard work. Since my own office (the Tokyo branch, that is) is in downtown businessman and government worker central, it's easy to find delicious food and sake in a warm environment for not-so-crazy-expensive. Just make sure you don't... well, overdo it. See the train station at Shibuya after 11PM on a weekend to see what I mean.

Tonbo (Tokyo)

A restaurant in Tokyo that has ties to a specific ricefield in the boonies, where every single dish is build upon a foundation of rice (from rice tea to riceballs to rice soup to rice-made desserts)? Wow, I try to come back once every year or two.

Goemon Ninja Soba (Maebashi)

Like 10 types of soba and udon, from Kirishita Mountain soba to Tea-cut udon, with do-it-yourself toppings for your bowl, this is my favoritest soba place to date.

White Gyoza (Maebashi)

Fat, hot, juicy potstickers that have the texture of compressed marshmallows. The most delicious souldfood I've ever eaten, and yeah I'm counting Gindako-brand takoyaki in there too.

Ohgiya Ramen (all over Kanto, mostly Gunma and Saitama)

Sure, I like all kinds of ramen, usually miso-based, from all over Japan. But Ohgiya Ramen's miso is like a high-powered garlic kick to the face. Perfect noodles, rich broth, great vegetables and toppings, this is like the best that fast food has to offer.

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left arm. Finally, after ten years of that, some schools will finally let you manipulate the right arm and head, seen as the “master level”. Spending 30 years learning a craft before calling someone a “master” is kind of a big thing in this Japanese 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 craftspeople 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 (search for Super Dollfie on wikipedia). 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 carefully by hand over weeks). 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 intertwined with the story of their craftspeople, 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).

That’s a good “Japanese” kugutsu-focused game. A “bad” kugutsu-focused game would put the PC in the roll of a kugutsu forced into a situation beyond her control, forcing them to live out the life of a piece of property, focusing solely on the misery of the kugutsu and not their inevitable escape from their situation, their confrontation with their master (or previous owner), their deeper understanding of who they are in relation to humanity, and so on.

I hope that adds depth of understanding to this discussion.

However! Now that kugutsu have been clarified in more depth, at the same time I definitely agree with a feminist look/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” style 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.

Anyway, in the end, the question of “What is a kugutsu, anyway?” is deeper than it appears when you take into consideration the very Japanese cultural background components of the kugutsu (doll culture, craftsman/shokunin culture)... 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 to us, or even more interesting as a story element!

## L IS FOR CRAP THERE’S NO L IN JAPANESE

There’s no L-sound in Japanese. Which is why I chose to relocalize all the oni words to make the L sound a strong component of their language. Frex, originally Yi-Yil was “I-iru”. Laz-Dii-Go was “Ra-Dei-Go”. I used a sound set that was almost a blend of Korean and French to emulate the quick staccato sounds of the words of their language, but with a richer consonant tone and L-sound of French.

## L IS FOR LEARNING JAPANESE

I highly recommend that if you’re interested in learning the language, that you find a community class or local college (take it as an audit, that way you can attend and learn without having to pay for full enrollment). If you really want to get better quickly... the best option would be to move to Japan.

Seriously. I took Japanese 101 as a freshman in college because I had been interested in Japanese forever but didn’t have the discipline to learn on my own. I had a free credit, so I started learning Japanese. A week later, I made it my minor: I was that interested in it. Sure, it was brutal, but it was fair. You got out what you put in.

Still, by the time I went to Japan for the first time to live and study in Tokyo (at Sophia University), I had studied Japanese for about 2 full years, and was one of the better students in my grade. But six months living and “working” (studying) in Japan with a homestay family made my



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schooling up to that point look cheap and meaningless in comparison. The learning scale basically was a steady arithmetic climb until I went to Japan, and then it shot up like a parabola. Just being surrounded by it at all times, even if you're not actively studying, is enough to hammer in the language if you're receptive to it.

After college I went to live, teach and work in Japan for about four more years, right in the early days of the Internet. Since then, I've gone back to Japan once every year or every other year or so, usually for somewhere between 2-4 weeks (sometimes for work, sometimes for family). I'm still learning today, and even though I read Japanese pretty much daily (short stories and manga before I go to sleep), I still have so far to go before I get to the level I want to be.

If only I could just take a year off and go back to being a student for one single year; I think that would do it, put me at the "Level One of the old Japanese Language Proficiency Test" level that I'm aiming at getting before I die.

In the meantime, though, I'll maintain and grow slowly. Reading and translating Japanese games has helped greatly with that.

## IS ALSO FOR LOCALIZATION

Localization is the art of taking a translation, and making it make sense for the target culture. Normally we use the shorthand of "localize" when we mean "standardize a few terms or names that repeat over and over throughout a work", but it also means things like, "take a poem, and rewrite the poem so that the meaning is still the same even if the words are a little different".

Here are some terms that we did a little localization dance with, where it was actually hard to determine how to actually treat the words for some time:

- Yoroi became Armour, although we say "Armour" or sometimes "Yoroi Armour". For a time I waffled between using many Japanese terms as-is, and localizing as many Japanese terms as possible because I feared that with too much Japanese the game would be that much harder to play. Still, the mecha were called the Japanese word for "armor", and I thought that was a pretty friggin sweet image, so I went with "Armour". Mind, this was a rare term where I actually also referred to "Yoroi Armours" in the game, effectively straddling both sides of the fence: Using the English word yet still keeping the Japanese word around, just in case.

- Mushi-tsukai became Annelidist in much the same way. Mushi is "worm/bug/insect" (the word does not distinguish between annelids, bugs, flying insects, and worms of the earth; they're all "mushi", and thus it was hard to pick one word), "-tsukai" is "-user". I started off with worm-user for some time, but annelidist just had a ring to it.

- Kiai became Focus, then later went back to Kiai again. I figured I wanted to keep the symmetry of the words AIKI and KIAI that exist in Japanese.

- Aiki became Harmony, then went back to Aiki. Same reason.

- Karma was "Sin" for a while, but figured it was best to keep it as Karma and provide an explanation. Although Karma (literally "act", as in "people taking action") can sometimes be translated as "Sin", it sounded too Western-religious.

- Tenka was Tenra, then became Heaven and Earth, then became Station. Station was the closest thing to what the attribute Tenka was trying to represent.

- Makura-jutsu became Pillow Arts, a straight-up translation of that word. It can surely mean sex itself, but it's mainly the art of seduction. I only saw one guy freak out at seeing the skill "pillow arts" on the character sheet. Fuck that guy.

Funny thing is that I remember seeing the word "Pillow Arts" long ago in a magazine or something, and I thought, "My, what an interesting expression!" I recently tried to find it again in Google, but Google just gives me tons of listings of "how to make a PILLOW: ARTS and crafts projects." Urg. Adding other words, though, turns of searches for references in books, usually involving "Chinese tantric sex stuff".

Side note: I re-translated/localized the original descriptions of the "use this attribute with this skill for these situations" for pillow arts. The description of the skill was clearly a seduction-like skill, but all the attribute pairing descriptions were kinda goofy and immature. They sounded slightly less immature in Japanese, but only just.

- Fudoh Myou-oh became Acala or Acala, Lord of Light (a combination of the Sanskrit and English words. I love Buddhist iconography. Fudoh/Acala is a badass.

- Kongohki stayed Kongohki, though I waffled with "Vajrid". Just didn't roll off the tongue correctly. Kongoh is the Chinese/Japanese word for "Vajra", which is the ancient Sanskrit word that is sometimes translated as "Diamond", but is basically "Admantium" or "an unbreakable mystic substance". Vajra is also the name of the buddhist symbol/object that looks like a hand-crank with 2 or 3 curved prongs on the end (the chapter opener for the Buddhist Monk section shows a pic of a monk holding one). Anyway, Kongohki is "Vajra/Admantium" and "Machine". Android... Vajroid? Didn't stick, so I went with keeping the original term.

- Bokusen, Hou-oh and Myouren became Ebon Mountain, Phoenix and Bright Lotus sects, respectively: Using the straight translation of each of the sects characters from Japanese to English. I really waffled on these. I really like the way Myouren sounds, and Bokusen, too. But Hou-oh, the Japanese word for Phoenix, just wasn't as slip-off-the-tongue for English speakers. Feel free to use the original words if you want. Anyway, Bokusen and Myouren were monk names, and monk names are always natural or poetic, so I figured the poetry came across in the English translations of the sect names.

- Onmyouji went from Taoist Sorcerer, then back to Onmyoji, since the word had picked up popularity recently. Still, I alternated between Onmyoji and Taoist Sorcerer, cause that's what they are.

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- Ohjuu became Gems, then Soulgem/Soulgems. This was my working word for a few years, and then I noticed that in the video game Skyrim they were using the word “Soul Gem” as a resource object in the game. My “I don’t wanna get sued” drop of sweat rolled down my head, but the words are common enough, the actual ways the terms are used are different, and Tenra’s spelling has them as one word, not two.

- Jingu-ke (Shinto House/Family) became “The Priesthood”. It just sounds ominous and awesome.

- Shura became demon, then Shura again, then Ashura. When in doubt, stick with the Sanskrit.

- Fuujutsu became The Seal became The Dark Arts. Fuujutsu literally means “the art of seal/sealing away (through magic)”. It just didn’t work well as-is. But the text referred to it as a kind of dark ritual that few survive, so I went with that interpretation. Dark Arts!

- Everything else was pretty much translated as-is into English, without a lot of waffling of terms.

## M IS FOR MARTIAL ARTS

If you can get to the 5th rank of Celestial Form Kung Fu in one game, you can basically get to that “+40 damage” effect in one round by spending “additional action” and “interrupt” over and over again until you do 5 attacks in one round, the 5th doing the +40 damage.

Using the word “Fist” for a few of the monk martial arts hopefully evokes Fist of the North Star, which they are clearly inspired by. But “fist” is just one interpretation of the kanji “ken”, and honestly a poor interpretation. It usually means “art” or is shorthand for “kung fu”. Like “suiken” (drunk, “fist”/“art”/“kung fu”) is the word for “drunken style kung fu”. Anyway, it’s the fault of the first localizer of Hokuto no Ken: It should have been called “North Star Kung Fu”. However, “Fist of the North Star” is pretty damn evocative in its own right.

## M IS ALSO FOR MUSHI-TSUKAI

Ahhh, the Annelidist aka Mushi-tsukai - 蟲使い - Not sure where the original inspiration came from, but there’s plenty enough to be found in media, just between the animes Ninja Scroll (remember Mushizo? The dude with the colony of wasps in his back and throat-needles) and Nausicaa. Note to Japanese speakers: Not just mushi 虫, but TRIPLE MUSHI 蟲, so that’s like totally exXxtreme and

stuff for realz.

It’s a pretty compelling character class, always torn between two worlds: People are afraid of them because they’re “unclean” like the burakumin, but when it comes to broken limbs or nasty diseases all of a sudden they’re the ones to turn to. They also have this “on the outskirts of society” thing going, living out away from others usually or traveling around, yet they also have their organized almost yakuza-like “Hive” organizations they can join and find a place among others of their kind.

Personally, my favorite kind of annelidist to play is not so much the “healer who controls his abilities”, but rather the “Oh shit I was a normal guy who stepped on something weird in the woods and now it’s buried in me and I can barely control it/myself anymore” annelidist.

Oh, quick aside: The “Demon-of-Battle” bug, which basically can shoot blasts of electricity. That demon-of-battle bug was in the earlier version of Tenra (1997) and was CLEARLY (based on the art and description in the old book) an opportunity to have a Sentai/Ranger hero type: They can even transform to look like Kamen Rider (or a really bug-like Iron Man suit), with a chitinous “helmet” and laser... LIGHTNING blasts from their arms. However, in play I like to re-describe the lightning (since lightning is just “something that does damage” without special “lightning rules” or whatever) for my own character as “chitinous 1000-needle/spike attacks” and other goocy/horrific bug-like things. I run my demon-of-battle less like Kamen Rider and more like “Clive Barker’s Kamen Rider”.

## N IS FOR NINJA

Ninjas are awesome.

If someone tells you that ninjas are not awesome, step back cautiously, and when you’re at a safe distance, run the fuck away. You’ve just met a sociopath who may try to eat your face.

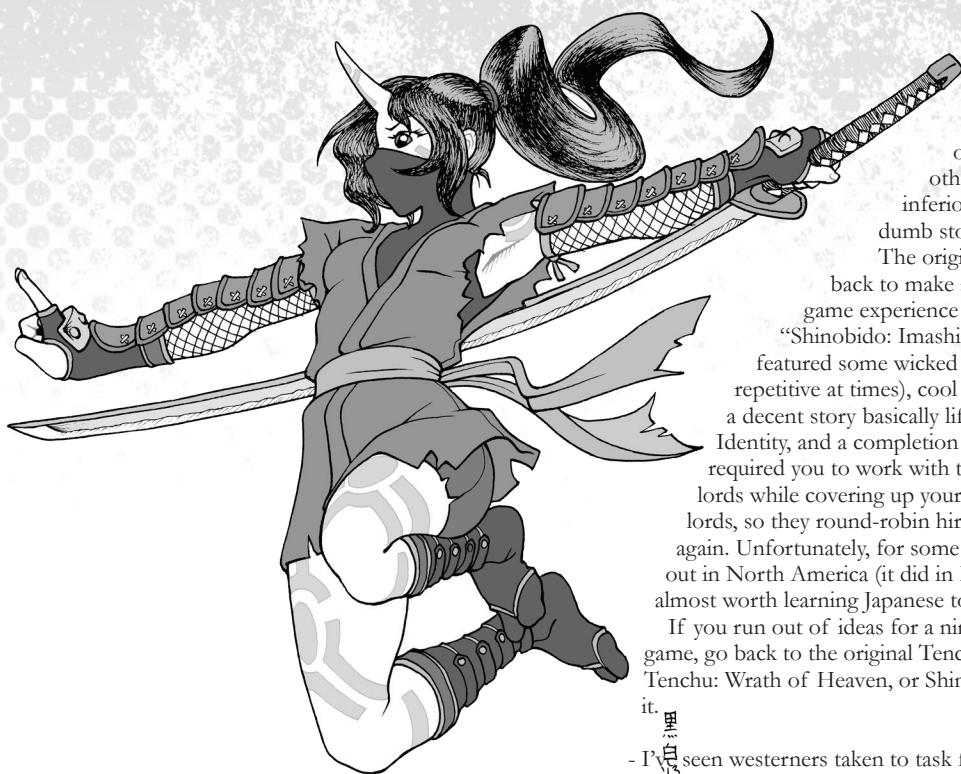
Now, I can get it if people think “Ninjas are awesome, but they’re played out”; or “I used to like ninjas, but they’re so overused that I’m tired of them.” Okay, I get that.

If you want to know more about “real” ninjas and ninja history, there’s a great little book that’s come out recently called “Ninja Attack!: True Tales of Assassins, Samurai, and Outlaws” by Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt. It’s really interesting, and gives a historic look at the records of ninjas in history. It’s much better than anything that came before it, like all the bullshit books from the 80s that taught you how to learn “real ninjutsu” and the like (yeah, Stephen K Hayes, I’m looking at you too mister “Quest Center”. Mikkyo’s cool and all but it’s not Ninja Stuff). How about some random shotgun ninja stories?

- My friend Seiji recalls one of the first movies he saw as a kid in an actual movie theater (a pretty rare and special occasion). It was the original Hollywood “Ninja” movie (likely “Enter the Ninja”). It made a huge impression on him,



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(Acquire) gave up the rights to the game (to From Software, as well as others), and subsequent versions of the game made by other companies were inferior: No evolved controls, dumb storylines, etc.

The original studio went back to make an even better ninja game experience through the game “Shinobido: Imashime” for the PS2, and it featured some wicked gameplay (albeit a little repetitive at times), cool character designs and a decent story basically lifted from The Bourne Identity, and a completion mechanism that required you to work with three opposed feudal lords while covering up your activities to the other lords, so they round-robin hired you over and over again. Unfortunately, for some reason it never came out in North America (it did in Europe), but man it’s almost worth learning Japanese to play it.

If you run out of ideas for a ninja-themed Tenra game, go back to the original Tenchu: Stealth Assassins, Tenchu: Wrath of Heaven, or Shinobido if you can find it.

- I’ve seen westerners taken to task for glorifying the ninja, “hollywood-ifying” their abilities and the like (from skilled infiltrators into “flying dudes with ninja magic”). Which, hey, I get it. Cultural appropriation and all that, it’s always good to be on the lookout for it, to make sure you’re not doing it too much unreflectively.

And yet, whatever appropriation a westerner applies to ninjas, it’s nothing--NOTHING--on what the Japanese have themselves appropriated from ninjas. Heck, even in Japanese-made tabletop RPGs, ninjas almost always appear in some capacity, even in games without a strong Japanese setting or feel! The roots of all the dumb 80s Hollywood ninja crap comes from movies made in Japan which over-glorified the powers and abilities of ninja. And when you trace it back far enough, most of the stories of ninjas flying around, using magic and crazy arts, comes from folklore and the like of course; however, you can put a focal point on the prolific writings of Ikenami Shotaro and Yamada Futaro, early 20th century “pulp fiction” writers who wrote about samurai and ninjas and assassins instead of sword and sorcery. But the stories are similar: Larger-than-life figures with too-incredible realistic and mystical powers. Fighting. Power. Status. Rawrr.

It was Yamada Futaro’s writings which led to the works which led to Hollywood-ification (and the Japanese branch, of course, what was stuff like Ninja Scroll and Basilisk: Ninja Scroll/Shinobi: Heart Under Blade). Anyway, I too long ago used to harp on folks for over-glorifying the history of ninjas in Japan, reading/watching too much pap pulp. Then I understood the full extent of how much that pap pulp originated from Japanese authors, and took on a life of its own, and realized that no matter how much weirdness we attribute to ninjas, it’s not as weird as you’ll find in the text of the country they came from. Still, while kinda universal (there’s all sorts of myth surrounding the kukri knife in Nepal, for example), it’s still good to know the roots. Maybe

namely because after the awesome credit sequence featuring almost Shaw Brothers-style martial arts performances by Sho Kosugi, the opening scene features the Temple of the Golden Pavillion, Kinkakuji, with the legend, in English: “TOKYO”. Kinkakuji is such an utter hallmark of the ancient capital city of Kyoto, it would be like seeing a Japanese movie where the scene opens with Big Ben and Parliament on the Thames, and the legend “NEW YORK” appears.

- The first RPG I ever made was in 7th grade, in the back of Math class. I used the West End Games Paranoia rules as a foundation to make a game about ninjas. It was awesome. Almost no role-playing at all occurred, but the skill spread was badass.

- GI Joe was pretty dumb, but there was one part where Storm Shadow basically punches pressure points on a tank to make it explode. Funny that I can remember that some 30 years later, and I don’t remember my online banking password every time I try to log in. Oh, another time Storm Shadow opens a letter by throwing the envelope in the air and slicing it open with his sword: But lengthwise; basically cutting the letter so the front of the envelope and back of the envelope fall away cleanly, and he snatches the floating message from mid-air. Badass.

- Tenchu was one of my favorite games for the original Playstation. I played the hell out of it. Actually I still highly recommend the soundtrack: Utterly devoid of digital bleeps and bloops, the soundtrack features a rich Spanish guitar and strings over a subdued acoustic-electronic blend. The first Tenchu game for the PS2, by the same studio, was also pretty incredible. It also featured a third playable character based on Fujieda Baian (doctor by day, assassin by night) which was doubleplusawesome. Unfortunately, that studio

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give some Yamada Futaro a read, but also check out that “Ninja Attack!” book.

- What the hell is up with that giant monster toad that high-level Ninja can summon? Look up “JIRAIYA” on the net. It’s a cool story, bro.

- When I came back to the US, I got into a local dojo for a while. It was a school teaching “Ninjutsu”, officially “Ninpo Taijutsu” (“Ninja-esque Exercise”) of the Genbukan school. I ended up quitting after a few months, too busy putting my life back together and all (I’d later move on to Wing Chun, then recently Aikido again after 15 years). But my friend Jurgen in Germany for years now has been training in Bujinkan, and is actually pretty high level now. Since Genbukan and Bujinkan are technically rival dojos, I’ve been telling Jurgen for years now we ought to settle the clan struggle in a fight. A cute little joke that is meaningless at this point, since I’m so out of shape. Ahhh, the little rivalries.

converting the entire Kiai-Aiki-Fate system into d20 (basically just kind of tacking it on, though it fit remarkably well), as well as Tenra’s “one session, campaign over” style of play (of course you could level up your guy and bring her back in another campaign or session later).

After some time, and realizing the scope of the interworkings of the game and the complexity of the text, I had to back-burner those thoughts. And back-burner eventually led to discarding them entirely once I realized how much extra work it would be, and the d20 tide started to fade out.

Still, if the game was released when we expected it to be released... Well, it wouldn’t have been released (see Peters, below); but if it had, it might have had this d20 section stapled to its ass.

## O IS FOR ORIGINAL PLANS

2004. That was when I originally talked to the guys at FEAR about an English release. The scene was so different then. Originally... we were going to release a d20 rules hack for Tenra Bansho Zero!

Yeah, d20 was pretty huge in those days, and there were more than a few games with original rules that also had a “d20 hack” or “d20 compatible rules in the back” section, to ride the wave of Dungeons and Dragons 3e’s rising tide. Although Ken (see below) made the suggestion, it seemed right at the time. Amazingly enough, the folks at FEAR were totally cool with it. While we couldn’t really toy with the art, they suggested we change the rules as much as we wanted to make the game work in the West.

Well, cut to about a year later, as I’ve dug in and understood the implications of the rules and style of play. At that point I had realized that a true d20 conversion would have been... well, at the very least misguided, at the worst unreflective and dumb. Still, there were a few really solid d20 conversions that played up the strengths of the original material and setting in new ways: Namely the post-Christian-apocalypse game “The End: Lost Souls Edition” (which is one of my favorite settings ever; I highly recommend buying the PDF if you come across some cash) and the superhero game Mutants and Masterminds.

For a time, I invested a lot of thought into a d20 rules hack/conversion for the back of the book. I actually made it work, too: Aside from the Hit Points, Saving Throws, levels, abilities and the like (which are not that hard to build in a balanced format, as long as you keep things relatively simple), I even had a nascent frame for

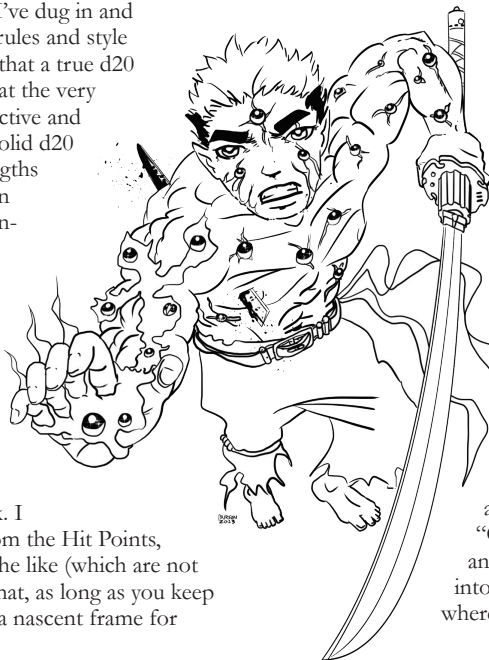
## O IS ALSO FOR OTHER STUFF I’M WORKING ON

Since Tenra started coming together hardcore in the last two years, I made a friend who’s become a writing/publishing companion, Matt Sanchez. The dude is a translation rocket, and an awesome human being. Because of his enthusiasm and work ethic (admittedly, at the time it was because he was still career-hunting and hadn’t landed the awesome--and busy--job he has now) which fueled my own, we were able to make plans, translate the shit out of some stuff, contact some dudes, set up some contracts, and line up the next few works.

- Our next game will be “Ryuutama: Natural Fantasy Roleplaying” by Okada Atsuhiko. It’s a western-themed feelgood game of travel and wonder. You play “normal people” in a fantasy world like bakers, farmers and the like, who get this bug and feel the inescapable need to travel

(every character gets this feeling, so everyone understands). You find some people who also have the bug, and set sights on faraway lands. The game has cute monsters, focuses on travel over combat, most of the adventures are about helping people (vs loot or death)... and yet, you can still get Total Party Killed by two 4th level poisonous bees (\*shakes fist in the air angrily\*). You also have to rigorously maintain equipment lists for your travels, in a way similar to the old computer game “Oregon Trail”.

It’s a game where the GM also has a character sheet, for a shapechanging dragon who watches over and protects the characters from a distance. It features magic spells like “Create a cubic yard of dead leaves” and “Turn any possible edible thing into a jam-in-a-jar”. It also features rules where having a delicious meal the night





# TENRA BANSHO ZERO



before can save your character from an untimely death.

It features awesome, simple, “happy” art by a few talented female artists, and it’s quite a departure from the style of play of Tenra; with its Western theme, long-term play, and generally “feelgood” attitude.

By the time you have a copy of this physical book in your hands, we’ll either be weeks away from or into the Kickstarter project to fund the printing of this game.

- After that, we will be releasing the small-form-factor story-focused RPG “Shinobigami: A Modern Ninja Battle Game” (“God of the Shinobi”) into English. This is a hand-sized book with simple rules, which produces a single-session story with your friends. Every player creates a ninja of a warring ninja in contemporary Japan, with their own abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and open and hidden secrets and goals. From there, the players have to both co-operate and compete with each other to achieve a goal or take the single “prize” of the scenario. Who you ally with, who you make your enemy, how you seek out information and what you do with it, these are all the themes of this wonderful, charged game. It’s the closest I’ve found to a tabletop role-playing game that plays out with the mindset of a German-style board game. It, too, is a very different game from Ryuutama and Tenra (not only are the authors and companies different, the themes and styles of the games are totally different as well).

- In the future after that... who knows? The folks at FEAR are wonderful to work with, and once the dust settles and we have a long rest, I’d love to consider translating another game from their collection. Or perhaps write our own FEAR-style game, using FEAR’s house rules system called the “SRS system” (basically a high-action anime-themed d6-based alternative to a d20 style Open Game System). If we don’t do so ourselves, we’d love to assist other earnest people in contacting FEAR or other companies to translate more games into English. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter who or which company gets the rights to the English translation of Japanese RPGs: Just by the fact that they come out in English at all enriches the entire hobby.

## O IS ALSO FOR OEDO ONSEN MONOGATARI

This fakey hot-springs theme park over in odaiba is one of my favorite “Contemporary Tokyo” places to go in Japan. I recommend it to anyone and everyone, especially if you don’t have the time or chance to get out to an old resort town in the mountains or a local public bath/sento. It will kick all the asses out of your ass, and leave you so refreshed you’ll be able to return and tackle a project... say, the translation and publishing of Tenra Bansho Zero... without curling up into a ball and giving up.

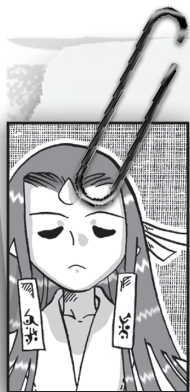
## P PETERS COMMA KENNETH

Ken is the reason you’ve got Tenra Bansho Zero in English. Well, sure, I did all the work and all, but without Ken I never would have considered picking up the project.

I bought TBZ back in Japan in 2002 or so. I was so enthralled by the art and style that I scanned a bunch of pages to show to friends and acquaintances on various RPG message boards at the time. A lot of folks became extremely interested in it. We all lamented, “Man, if only we could read this in Japanese” or “If only some big company would pick up the rights to translate it!”

Translation of “fun media” (rather than say, things that pay the bills like medical/science/tech translation) is a hard game to get into: The pay is cheap as shit. Translating a manga or an anime is a pretty easy thing in comparison to a short story or novel. I remember grabbing the output of the subtitles of some anime I was watching with a pretty solid amount of talking (Fruits Basket, perhaps?), a good 30 minutes or so of anime dialogue. I tossed it into word and compared that to the size of the Tenra setting book. The anime episode was something like the equivalent of a single page and a half (maaaaaybe two pages) of Tenra’s more dense spots. And the anime was of course much more conversational, and fun to work on. That, in short, is why all the Japanese RPGs out there (as well as solid novels, academic works etc) don’t end up in English at all. But I digress.

Anyway, for about two years after that initial post (or followup posts about other Japanese games, with scans of illustrations from those), every few months someone would contact me. “I represent a new up-and-coming RPG company”, they would say, “and I’d love it if you could translate this for us.” Most of the talks died right then and there, with no followup replies after I explained how long the book was. The longest the discussion ever lasted was with one person who said, “I can free up about four hundred dollars for this project” They said it with such an air that I’m sure they felt like that was a lot of money, and not like the cost to produce less than 40 books, much less pay for their translation. Hell, at the time, both they and me were poor as shit, so a hundred dollars was a lot of money... ish. Real translation is a whole different game, though. The



# The Gun Goes Off Way, Way too Early...

From November 10th, 2004:

Z-Builder Design\* proudly announced today that it will be translating and publishing one of the most revolutionary RPGs ever created, the Japanese RPG Tenra Bansho Zero. It was originally designed by Junichi Inoue and produced by Far East Amusement Entertainment (FEAR) and Enterbrain in 2000, a revision of the original 1997 release. Junichi Inoue is highly regarded as one of the best and most prolific game designers of our time, having designed, written and even illustrated several blockbuster games. Coordinating the Tenra Bansho Zero translation and production will be Andy Kitkowski, under the supervision of project lead Kenneth Peters.

"This is the first ever Japanese RPG to be released in English", said Z-Builder Design Head, Andy Kitkowski\*\*. "and hopefully English players will find it as revolutionary as the fans of the Japanese version. Thanks to the support of designer-illustrator Junichi Inoue, and Shinichi Nakajima of FEAR, Inc. and their tireless enthusiasm, we'll see an English version of the game that caused Japanese gamers to rethink the way they roleplay. We're blessed to have such cooperation on all levels, from designer to producer to distributor. This game will turn heads with its jaw-dropping gorgeous interior art, both color and black and white, as well as the mode of play it encourages"

## TENRA BANSHO ZERO

Tenra Bansho Zero (TBZ) is a relatively rules-light game of high fantasy and science fiction that takes place in the Sengoku (Feudal Warring States) Era on another planet in the far future. High magic and technology is commonplace in a world where Taoist demon summoners interact with mecha-rider children and high tech Ninja. There are dozens of archetypes from which to choose a character for quick and easy play, and rules are provided for people who want to make their own.

TBZ uses a light rules system of small pools of 6-sided dice. The game received much critical acclaim because of the core rules which focus on turning the gaming session into a theatrical production. Players gain abilities, skills and powers, as well as perform heroic feats, by spending "Kiai Points". Players get these points through roleplaying: Playing their character well, coming up with witty lines, and generally entertaining the other players. With the theatre motif, the game uses Scenes, Acts, and Intermissions to drive the action. And like a play or a movie, an entire campaign or story arc is meant to play out in one 4-6 hour gaming session.

The players are encouraged to give their characters various inner struggles, which they try to overcome throughout the roleplaying session. At the beginning of each session, the GM assigns the characters objectives called "Destiny" which they must meet over the course of the adventure. This friction is what drives the stories that are created in Tenra Bansho Zero sessions.

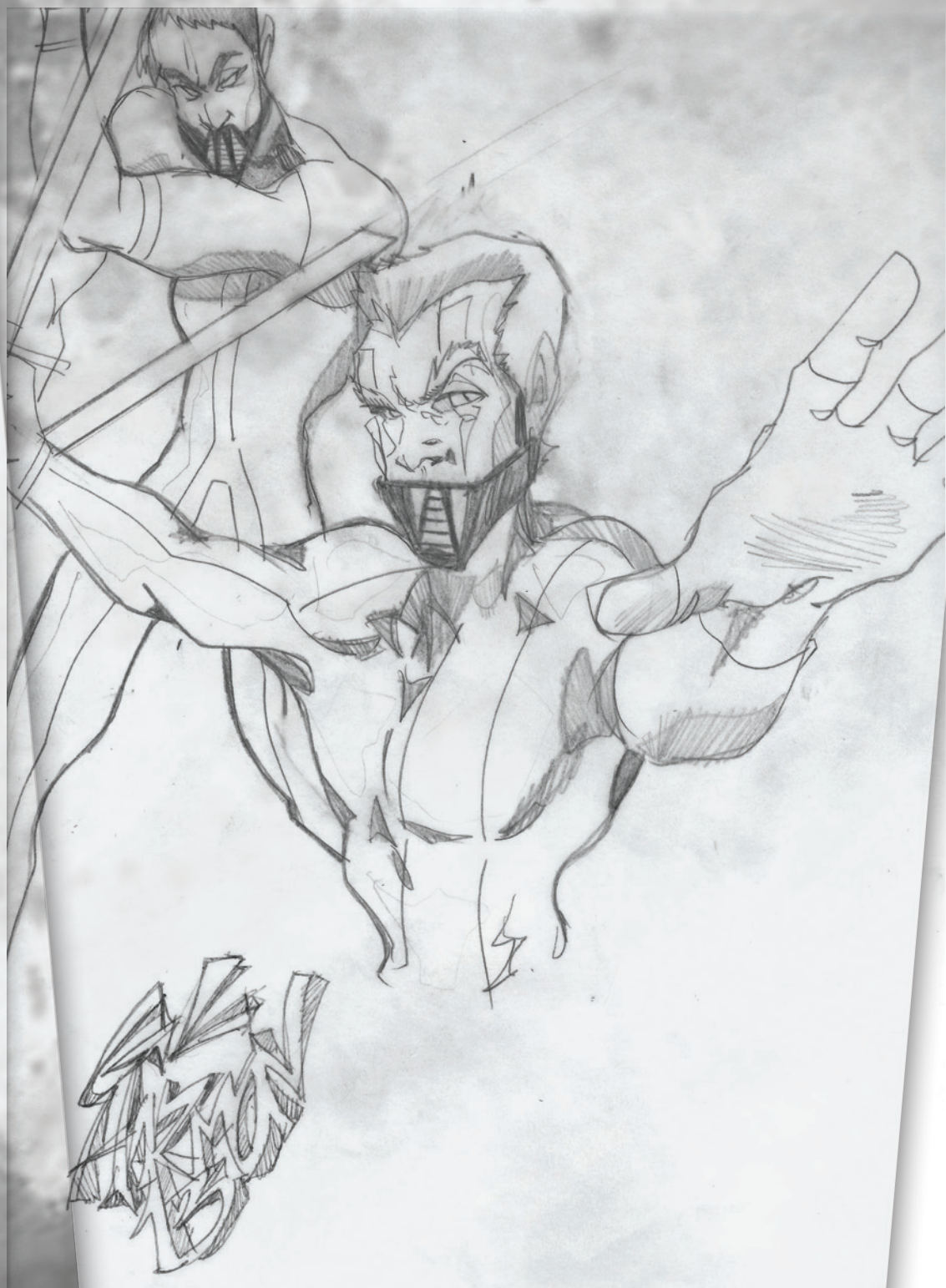
Over the coming months, Z-Builder Design will provide more information about the game, including translator notes, interviews with the designer and publisher, downloadable playtest files, sample character sheets, and more information about the world of Tenra Bansho Zero, including glimpses into the world of Junichi Inoue's Tenra Bansho through his fantastical and gorgeous manga art. The game is currently scheduled for release in January 2006\*\*\*.

\* That was the original name for my little RPG and Internet Consulting company at the time, Z-Builder, short for "The Ziggurat Builder". Ech, I so much more love KOTODAMA HEAVY INDUSTRIES, but maybe in 10 years I'll be going "yeich" again.

\*\* "said Z-Builder Design Head, Andy Kitkowski". LOL. In those days, everyone wrote their own press releases, as if some reporter with a pencil and the word "PRESS" taped to the side of his fedora was eagerly writing down my every word. Man, we were total chumps. I never want to write a press release like that again. Just info, entice, details, dates, and exit. No self-fellatio.

\*\*\* 2006. Two years. Holy hell was I naive. .





## TENRA BANSHO ZERO

average price for a technical/"hard" translation is about 20 cents per word. That's about what I charge when I do freelance translation on the side (give or take; far less if it's "fun", 20 or more if it's extremely technical or "poetic"). This dude was effectively offering to pay me the rate I would charge for about 2,000 words (this Director's Cut book is currently about 9 times that size, Tenra, at last I counted, was Way Fucking More), plus deal with all the international conversations, contracts, etc.

I don't remember exactly what I said, but I DO I remember being extremely polite when I said "no".

Ken was the last of the folks to approach me. He grabbed my attention by immediately proving himself:

- \* A fan of the genre.
- \* Having a lot of idle money (being single at the time and working for the government can create quite a stash).
- \* Having the will to commit the money to Tenra.

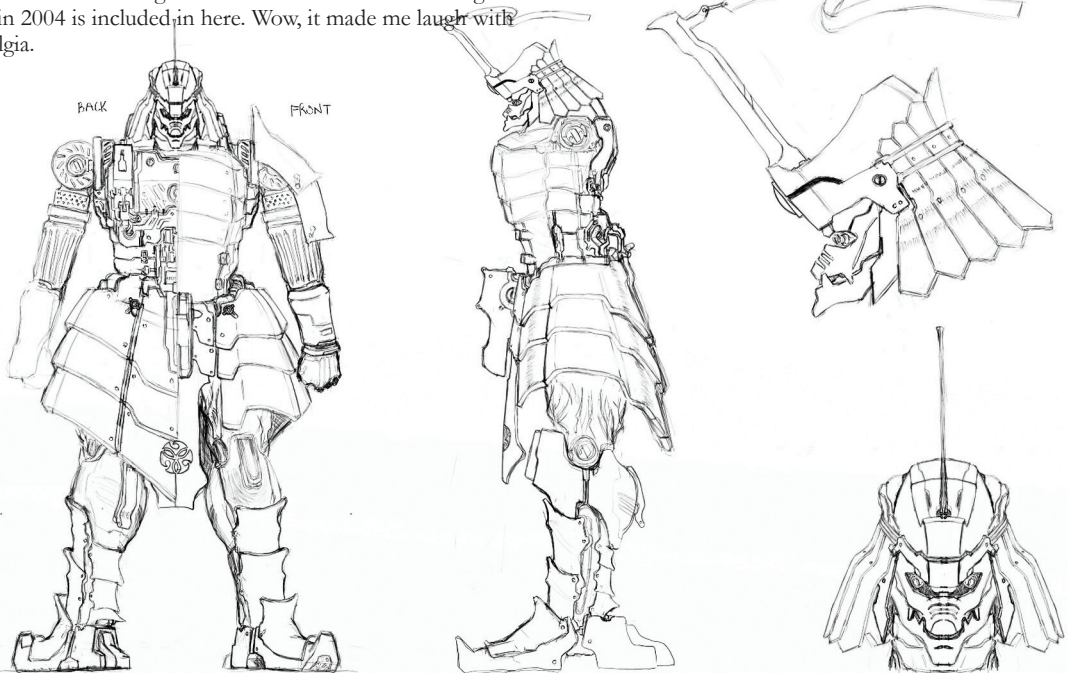
It was he who got me out of my "Politely dismiss yet another fool" mode and into more of a "Wait a minute, I wonder if this actually CAN be done?" Ken took me very seriously. Which made me take him very seriously. And got me to look at the project as not something that's wishful thinking, but accomplishable in my lifetime (only just, heh).

So we all have Ken to thank for this being out. Ken dropped off the project a few years ago and has focused on going back to school since, but he's been a huge supporter all this time, and is one of the high-tier Kickstarter backers.

Thanks, Ken, for getting the ball rolling.

## P IS ALSO FOR PRESS RELEASE

The original Press Release I made for the game back in 2004 is included in here. Wow, it made me laugh with nostalgia.



## P IS ALSO FOR PHOENIX SECT

鳳凰宗 - Hou-oh Shu - The traditional "shaved-head monks in quiet training, giant temples, chanting, and mystical magic" sect of Buddhism. Also, totally not a stand-in/metaphor for historic real-world Japanese Shingon Buddhism. Wink.

Phoenix Sect was the problem child in my translation/localization effort. I liked the sound/tones/hibiki of the other two sect names: The Bokusen sect, the Myoren sect (and heck I think I included the words in the text so that people could draw upon them if they really felt it). However, then we got to the Phoenix sect: Hou-oh. That's the best romanization I could apply to it to make it sensible, traditional Hepburn-shiki would have me write "Houou", which looks like a trick word to use in the game Hangman. I asked about a dozen people, some of them Japanophiles, and no one could really wrap their heads around or remember the word for Phoenix, so instead of having Bokusen, Myoren and Phoenix (which when read triggered some OCD or some shit), I went for All Englishificat'd.

If you play at my table, though, it's Myoren, Bokusen, and Phoenix.

If you want to play a monk character, at some point try to make a Phoenix or Bright Lotus sect monk with no kung fu. Everyone jumps for the kung fu monk (which usually means Ebon Mountain, or Phoenix), which is awesome because who the heck doesn't like kung fu monks (I'll tell you: The people on the opposite side of a Shaolin monk's spear/staff/sword, that's who). But try just a down-to-earth practicing monk (even one with magic is cool), trying to sort her shit out as she travels the world and sees the sights. It would be a fun challenge, I think.



## Q IS FOR QUESTIONING MY SANITY

This happens after trying to perfectly translate and capture the nuances of poetically-written sentences for like four or more hours straight.

Luckily, my wife has been really supportive at those times. She would gently come over to me and say, in soothing Japanese, “I told you this project was much bigger than you thought. Didn’t I say that? Yeah, I said that.”

Sometimes a slap of reality in the face like this is enough to summon a few more hours of hysterical, raw focus. “I’ll show them!! I’ll show them ALL!!!!”

## R IS FOR RULES CHANGES

There were a few!

In some cases, I realized that some of the rules weren’t particularly thought ahead (like the Kongohki transformation), and really were lopsided in play. Others were just too fiddly. I documented a list of all the changes made to the rules that I can easily recall. There weren’t that many, I didn’t carve it up into my “ideal set of rules” or anything like that: It would have turned Tenra Bansho Zero into a totally different game. I might write up a skinned-down rules-set at some point and make it a supplement, but I didn’t want to change the core book any more than necessary to make the game more playable, more fun, sliiiiightly more streamlined.

At the same time, I made absolutely sure to preserve the feel of what Inoue (setting, feel) and Endo (rules-smithy) were \*aiming\* for with the game. I also read their later games, most notably the wildly successful Alshard, taking queues from those and applying them back to their older work Tenra: Just enough, not going too far.

In one case, the rules for distribution of Aiki chits, I got straight from Inoue himself. The original Japanese game only had the “Scene Judge rules (plus GM)” for aiki chit distribution (for fear of being “fair” and “ensuring balance in distribution”), and the “anyone can distribute Aiki at any time” rule was a very common house rule many people simply created and used themselves, and was not mentioned in the book.

When I met Inoue years ago, I asked him at one point, “Is there any section of the rules that you wish you could change?” He thought about it, mainly coming to the conclusion of it being hard to change one thing, as it was created as a whole (though he did mention vagaries of wanting to slim things down just a touch). But one thing he did say was that he wished he wasn’t as strict with the Aiki rules, that he just let the players and GM give Aiki chits whenever they wanted without all the overhead rules of the Scene Judge.

I took that as my cue to make the change that I was hoping to add as a mere house rule, and instead rewrite that whole section in alignment with the author’s wishes: Aiki chits distributed by anyone, with the original Scene Judge rules relegated to an “optional rule” status. I’ve tried both ways, and honestly, I’ve played with friends, I’ve played with strangers, I’ve played with folks deliberately trying to dink with the system, and have never had a problem with the “everyone gives Aiki” approach. As long as they follow Rule Zero of roleplaying (“Don’t be a dick”), there should be no problems at your table.

Still, the Scene Judge, which it requires more handling, might be a fun switch-up if you are looking for a different way to play.

Oh, speaking of rules changes: One of the major changes in formatting of the book was the splitting up of the book into rules and setting books or sections. For the most part, the rules for the characters (the character-focused rules-sets in the rules book) were put in at the end of each character’s setting description. It was a little strange, because it basically presented all of the character-centric rules before it got to the rules section where it told you how to roll dice or use skills. So there was a lot of flipping back and forth between the sections of the book. We pulled all that text into the rules book, each into its own section (and splitting some further; the Kongohki and Armour rules were actually one cojoined section, but ultimately a little hard to reference because of the minute differences that appeared between each character type; so we split them into their distinct sections, even though some of the rules overlapped and thus were duplicated).

Hopefully, the setting-rules split produced a version of the game easy to read (setting) and easy to reference (rules).

## R IS ALSO FOR REVERSE DEATH SPIRAL

I love that rule. Seriously. It messes with everyone the first time they recognize exactly what it represents. The swelling of music while the hero stands back up; the “This is my Final Form!”

In fact, normal “Death Spirals” in RPGs kinda piss me off. If I wanted hardcore reality, I’d be out Doing Things and not Making Stories with friends. It got to the point where when I ran Legend of the Five Rings (the most famous asia-themed RPG; overall a cool game but holy shit the setting’s place and people names are so wrong they grate on my nerves) for about six months, the first thing I hacked onto it was a kind of Fate system, and Tenra’s Reverse Death Spiral.





## RULES CHANGES

Here's where I catalog all the rules changes made from the original Japanese version TBZ (the ones I can remember anyway), and why.

## ADDITIONS

I compiled most of the expanded information and rules from the official supplement and extra rules-packs into the core book. I figure this was a one-shot deal without that whole "release fat supplements" thing that we tend to do on major tabletop game releases in the US, so I wanted to cover as much ground in the core book as possible. That's like an extra \$120 worth (in the extra supplement and rules packs) of pure, raw data into the core book. Not to mention folding about 8

pages of errata and Q&A text into the core rules, to fix it all straight from the gate. You're welcome!

## OTHER ADDITIONS

I also scavenged the "How to make your own archetypes" appendix (p416) out of an RPG magazine I had to hunt to find, released around the same time as TBZ in Japan. That article didn't exist in the original game or supplements.

## PUNCHES AND KICKS

Punches were 0 damage. Kicks were +1 damage. This naturally led to everyone saying "I kick!" in unarmed combat. ALL THE TIME. I figured the simplest fix was reducing all hand to hand damage to 0, and letting the player describe them as kicks, punches, grabs-and-throws, jabs, elbows, and so on.

## WAR ART: Dragon and Tiger Under One Sky Style, Supreme Rank

This originally let you add both the damage ratings from each sword together when you hit, before they exploded. I'm like, "The swords EXPLODE. The gemblade that is your soul is devastated. That's all you get??" So I tweaked it a tad after playtesting. I changed it to making two rolls, piling on the bonuses/differences, and adding that difference plus damage twice. Far more damage, a one-shot attack worthy of making your swords into slag.

## WAR ART: Clarity of Heaven Style: A Lot

I had to rework this art a bit, as this sword art was little used in the original Japanese game from what I could read. In the original TBZ, NPCs pretty much had all the stats of PCs, including Vitality and all the Wound boxes. Since they no longer did, this style had to be re-adjusted. Originally the low level power let you auto-target the enemy's Light Wounds. Then Heavy. Then Critical. But that no longer made any sense. I still kept a reference to wounds ala the Advanced Rank, figuring that this technique could be used by major NPCs. The master technique essentially lets you double the damage done against NPCs.

## KUGUTSU-JUTSU:

There was a skill on the original sheet for Kugutsu-making (carving, training, etc). But the Kugutsu-maker was such a rare archetype that it was rarely used. Killed it, made it an optional fill-in skill in case anyone ever did make or play a kugutsu-maker.

## STRATEGY:

This was a skill originally only used for the mass combat system. Since the mass combat system wasn't going into the main book, I reworked the skill into something that a friend inspired (I think the idea was borrowed from Clinton Nixon's *The Shadow of Yesterday*): Where you "roll in advance" to save up successes to bring into play later through description. It'll get more skill-ish used in the Mass Combat system supplement.

## MASS COMBAT SYSTEM:

Removed. It's an awesome, well-planned system based on the Chinese 36 Strategems, and I planned on pushing it out as a simple few-page supplement. In the core book, though, it was simply out-of-place. Just a "Blap! Here's some mass combat rules! Yay!" They're cool and all, but weren't really "placed" as to how to use them, when to not use them, what they really do, and ideas on bundling them into scenarios that won't fall apart if the wrong side wins. None of the "advice" that I had carefully written into a lot of the rules was there, so I felt that to write it into the mass combat system would take up more time and space than was necessary. Since most of the game is individual-level stories, I figured on expanding them with scenario ideas and real advice/"placement" in their own supplement eventually.

## NINJUTSU:

Extra Successes: ...Yeah, that too. It felt dumb to roll 9 Agility/Ninjutsu dice on a skill that only took 1-2 successes to get off, plus had a target resistance (for the NPC roll to escape, like Shadow Stitch) so low that bosses could easily get out of them. Carryover successes: Problem solved.

## NINJUTSU:

Hmmm. So the original Japanese rules say that when building a school of techniques, that you had to take the lower and higher version of the same skill in one school. I kept that as-is in the corebook, but in my houserules I say "you don't have to take both".

## KARAKURI/MECHANICA:

I have a feeling that after playtesting I might have adjusted some damage up or down on maybe 1-2 mechanics. Not positive, I just remember thinking about doing so, thus likely did.

## MARTIAL ARTS:

Nothing! But cool side story: So Hokuto Shinken, the martial art from *Fist of the North Star*, is the basis for the *Fist of Acala*. Kenshiro's real "secret power" in that manga was not his "I make people explode" thing, that was sort of just the effect of his martial art. His real secret power that he used all the time was "mikiru", or "see-cut", or "seeing the attack come in, and counter-attacking at the last possible second at blinding speed before their attack lands". That's his real superpower, the exploding heads thing is just gravy.



## **SAMURAI LOADOUTS:**

Created all those myself in order to make custom samurai creation fast and easy.

## **ONMYOJI:**

I didn't hack/change anything here, but if I ran an onmyoji-centric campaign, I might make some house-rules to make them a little more powerful. Perhaps more creation points: Instead of Knowledge time X (skill), maybe (Knowledge + 4) times X (skill). Give them the power to create some truly horrific, awesome random shiki.

## **ARMOUR/KONGOHKI CREATION RULES:**

These were originally one ruleset, with a lot of side-references to "if Armour, do this; if Kongohki, do that". It was confusing, so I split them apart into two sections.

### **SCENARIO CREATION SECTION:**

Lots of little rules changes, including:

- \* All the scenario advice from page 160 onwards. Especially the Creative Task Rolls bit.
- \* All the rules on creating NPCs from 154-156, focusing on fast-made NPCs for quick creation and play, plus careful advice on how to balance them.

Those are it from that section, but that latter one on NPCs was very important. TBZ was created in an era where designers and players still thought that NPCs had to feature all of the stats and complications of regular characters. Thus it took a long time to create even simple NPCs, much less a cast of several important NPCs. While TBZ created a revolution of play in Japan, with new people stepping up to GM who never ran a game before, a common complaint for that era is "Man, NPC creation takes too long. I have to prep so much to run these games!" I wanted to remove that barrier, utterly.

Furthermore, Inoue and Endo themselves came to that same realization a few years later, and when they sat down to create the Final Fantasy-inspired game Alshard, all major NPCs and monsters had very simple stats, since they were just flavor and opposition in the end. I took the spirit of what they developed later in other game lines, and reverted it back into the "TBZ code line". I think it worked well, especially since I'd been playtesting the heck out of it for years!

### **SCENE JUDGE:**

As mentioned elsewhere, the core of TBZ had the scene judge rules, which was changed to an "optional rule" after talking to the designer about what they liked and didn't like about the game. A new players of the English version commented that he used the scene judge rules only for the first act, to get the players used to giving each other Aiki, then went to the default "everyone gives" style. That's an awesome transition idea!

### **PROTECT/TAKE BLOW (in Combat):**

The rules were fuzzy in the original version of the game. Official replays showed three different takes on the Protect rules:

- 1) If you protect, you must take all the damage, you cannot defend.
- 2) If you protect, you can defend to reduce the damage but you cannot counter-attack.
- 3) Same as 2, but you CAN counter-attack.

Option 2 came up the most in the rules, so I changed them all to reflect that clearly.

### **DAMAGE BONUS FOR RANGED WEAPONS:**

Yeah, this originally was a confusing description-only example of how if you throw 5 shuriken, 3 at one dude and 2 at another, they can give you little damage boosts and stuff. I created the chart on Page 95 to graphically explain it better. In truth, this rule kinda confuses everyone, and in Japanese replays I read often houseruled out. I simply houserule it that if you throw or shoot your weapons at multiple targets, no bonus. If you shoot or throw a lot at a single target, +2 damage (shuriken, uzi, machine gun, whatever). Simple. Unfortunately, by the time I came around to thinking that it would be a good idea to replace that rule like others I had done, it was too late. Oh well. Now you at least have my own houserule.

### **KONGOHKI OVERDRIVE:**

The original formula for Kongohki Overdrive was "Every day, you can start overdrive a number of times equal to your Spirit score, and it would last for a number of rounds equal to your Body score". One... day? Most games of Tenra have a pattern of play where the 'day' can change every other scene or so. So I changed it to "session", to keep it part of the overall play experience. Even then, it was too overpowered: The sample Kongohki could activate Overdrive six times a "day" (now "session"), and it lasted for 10 rounds, 60 total rounds of Overdrive capability. I've never run a combat in TBZ to my knowledge, in about 100 or so actual games, where combat ever took more than five rounds. Certainly not more than six. Total overkill. The solution I had (activating it for a number of \*rounds\*) is still pretty much overkill for 99% of your games, but at least there's the \*remote possibility\* that the Kongohki won't go full Overdrive, all the time.

So that was it. Ultimately, not a lot. Just a tap here and a tap there to knock some dust off and make it more interesting and in alignment with the own designer's thoughts he would have later in future designs, backporting those ideas into this game.

# TENRA BANSHO ZERO

## S IS FOR SATORU

Satoru “Hottsu” Hosono, was my best friend in Japan until his untimely and totally unexpected death from heart failure in 2006. He’s the little dedication that appears in the credits section of the books.

I met him by pure accident in late 1995 when I was living in Tokyo and attending college. It was the days of the Yoyogi/Harajuku-area street shutdowns on Sundays, where indie musicians, artists, rockers, DJs, and dancers would bring their gear and rock out, free concert style, on Sundays. I was aiming to be a DJ at the time, and thus made a lot of techno DJ friends, and spend many Sundays dancing all day in the streets of Harajuku in a giant open rave. Long story short, I happened to be wearing a “Cyberpunk 2020” hat, and he happened to be a gamer. We ended up talking a lot, and became fast friends; speaking mostly in Japanese, with some crazy English punctuation (his English speaking was okay-ish, but he had a crazy-high vocabulary from all the academic reading he did, he could pull out crazy English words like “post-structuralism” or “ethnomethodology” and the like at the drop of a hat).

He took me to the Tokyo game stores, got me into my first Japanese RPG session and convention, and introduced me to all sorts of cool visual culture: He ran with lots of manga artists (many of them indie), and I found myself upon my return to Japan for the long term regularly being dragged to Tokyo’s Comiket to help his friends set up or run their indie manga booths.

Met lots of interesting folks, including Japanese RPG industry freelancers, female pornographic manga artists (I met the lovely and talented Yonekura Kengo and helped her set up her booth, although later she and Satoru would have a falling out of sorts), philosophers who specialized in critiquing modern media (manga, anime, pop culture) from a postmodern philosophy/sociology lens, and all sorts of awesome weirdos and normals in between.



He was doing so much - editing philosophy periodicals for a famous professor, organizing media and gaming events, writing literature, playing bass in a punk band, working as an assistant of sorts for the artist of the Hellsing manga, and dragging his white gaijin friend to meet cool people and go cool places when in town. His family became a foster family of sorts to me, too, always pleased to see me when I came over, letting me stay with them for days at a time (convenient for downtown Tokyo, but they were such lovely people, from his mother, aunt and grandmother), asking me questions and telling me all sorts of cool things about their areas of expertise (his aunt was a clothing designer, which I found fascinating). He was planning on taking me to a cabaret club his friends (male and female) worked at the next time I came to Japan.

Alas, he left the world too soon. In January 2006 he passed away very suddenly from heart failure, so fast I couldn’t book a ticket in time to return to Japan to be at his funeral (I instead had flowers and a message for his family sent remotely). He had always had long-running heart issues, and unfortunately didn’t take good care of his body to compensate (he was always kind of rail-thin, but moreso the more he got involved with various projects; he was the kind who sacrificed his health to get that booklet written and printed on time, to make sure that the event was organized, to make sure others were taken care of).

Satoru was the one that introduced me to the Japanese gaming scene, and Tenra Bansho in particular (and so much more). While I’m forever grateful for that, enough that I dedicated the book to him, I really wish I could just turn back time to seven years ago and hang out with him for one more week, just talking culture,





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society, philosophy and shit, roll through Tokyo tearing it up, hitting up a giant-ass rave at Laforet in Harajuku or Jeff Mills' club in Shibuya. Even after all the blood and sweat I've put into this translation project, I'd trade in all the money gained from it if that were possible. Alas.

The least I could do is share his story with you. Ultimately, that was the desire I had which led to the idea of creating this whole Director's Cut book.

gestures. He looks like a mentat, it's awesome. When I see him conquering math in his head, I'm kinda jealous I never learned soroban, actually.

Anyway, that's the kind of thing that the shiki-slingers do: The kimenkyo (mechanica mirror) is a "computer", the abacus is the "keyboard", and they store/cast shikigami with it. Kablow! Murder By Math.

## S IS ALSO FOR SHITTY TRANSLATION

I aimed to not do that. I think I succeeded.

You can see there there are other translators credited in the book: At one point, I realized that I would have to start recruiting some help on the initial translation pass in order to get the work done faster. So I recruited a handful of folks with talent and free-time to assist, and had them go through some of the sections of the World/Setting book, translating entire sections.

In order to see if their translating mindset was compatible with the project, I had each person kind of... well, it sounds crappy to say "audition", but that's basically what I did: I gave each person one column of "poetic setting text" and one element of "rules text" to translate, to see if we were on the same wavelength in terms of:

- \* Striving for perfection.
- \* Attempting to translate as close to source as possible, but
- \* When impossible, to change the words and creatively reinterpret rather than a rote, unbalanced, stilted but exacting translation.

And for the most part, the exercise was hugely successful: I got back good work, sometimes excellent work. In the end, it all had to be relocalized, so some translations I used as a springboard to re-write the entire section by hand in a better way; others were used almost (80% or so) as-is, with more localization and editing to get it perfect.

Each translator was paid promptly, like within 3 days of finishing if possible (that's my policy). Not "I'll give you money when I recoup it from publishing" or other old industry standard crap, I paid with my own pocket cash long before publishing was an option. If the translator turned in their work before the deadline (most did), also immediately got a 10% bonus added.

With one exception (which I paid for, because I screened the translator myself; but ultimately had to totally trash the translation and start over because it was just poor. Not even numbers were translated correctly, no idea how they passed my test) it was an overall awesome experience, and it added a little turbo boost of productivity.

Ultimately, translations of work this big either amount to:

- \* One person doing a monstrous amount of work by themselves. If they have a day job, then they now have two jobs. (raises hand)

or

- \* Many people (usually with a central organizer) cutting up, distributing, and translating the work in small chunks, then reassembling it back together.

For Tenra, while I did most of the rules book myself, the world book had both distributed and central work, a hybrid of the above two.

## S IS ALSO FOR SHAKUJO

Shakujo - 錫杖 - In sanskrit it's Khakkhara (sounding staff), this is the Buddhist monk staff with the head with all the rings hanging off of it. "Ringed staff." In the great movie Versus (Versus is my favorite martial arts zombie yakuza gun-battle samurai time travel prison break post-apocalypse brotherhood supernatural horror movie), in the little "ancient era" clip, the bad guy has a katana hidden in his ringed staff: That scene, because of the cinematography involved (no SFX, just cheap/creative camera handling), is awesome, and it's a scene I've replicated more than once in my games. Look for it.

## S IS ALSO FOR SOROBAN

Soroban (算盤) in Japanese is the word for Abacus. Look up soroban videos online: Modern schools of soroban are set up like martial arts schools, complete with black belt ranks. There are videos (on Youtube, and on findable shows like "Begin Japanology" which had a soroban episode) where a master soroban dude outperforms huge mathematical functions (nine digit number times nine digit number) vs a guy with a calculator. Soroban are awesome. Plus, remember that one dude from Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon? Yeah, you know what I'm talking about.

I have a scientist friend that learned soroban at an early age, he basically does pretty high-level math in his head, visualizing the soroban beads, sometimes flicking them in his mind and at the same time making hand/finger physical

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## THIS IS FOR TENJO TENGE

Tenjo Tenge is the Chinese characters for “heaven above heaven below”. It basically is another expression which means “everything in heaven and earth”, usually used when some famous general or leader yells out to the masses what he intends to take control of.

Aside from being the title of a graphically pretty but totally hollow and fanservicé martial arts manga, it is also the name of the original supplement book that came out a year after Tenra Bansho Zero. It featured:

- \* A replay, with the designer of the game (as a player), where the players travel through time with Makuu Nindo's son and beat up a dude. Followed by a second scenario involving an evil Shinto cult priestess. Together, they were a series called “Demon in the White Mask”, and it took up about half the book.

- \* Two scenario outlines in rough detail.

- \* Zero-Act Scene ideas for various character types: A total of 18, which I used as a base to create the Zero Act Ideas for each sample character in the book.

- \* Revised Yohjutsu (Ayakashi) rules. The rules for Ayakashi in the original TBZ Japanese book were a little rough. This totally revised those rules. I used these revised/perfected rules as the core Ayakashi rules in the English version of the book.

- \* 17 New Archetypes: All of which appear in the English rules book's Archetype section.

- \* A few new Arts of War, which were included in the English book as well (the “Advanced Arts of War” are these).

- \* Ninjutsu rules, Mechanica, and Annelids, all again which were imported into the English version of the core book text.

- \* A bunch of extra sample characters. While the character descriptions themselves do not appear in the book, many of their character illustrations do. These gorgeous brush-stroke illustrations are the ones that make up each character-focused rules section's preceeding character sketch. The ones that didn't make it into that book are being moved into a “character collection supplement”.

## THIS IS ALSO FOR TREE GEISHA

That was the shorthand that Mark Causey used to refer to his Kugutsu character (“So, I'm basically a Tree Geisha?”) as a player in the first ever game of TBZ I ran in English, long ago. The name stuck. I remember Lisa's horrifying annelidist, Eric's old gruff cyber-shinobi, Remi's brutally huge but emo samurai, and Matthew's young up-and-comer ninja.

Also: That first session is where I learned that throwing a lot of medium-strength fighters at the heroes is good for a more tactical-combat game like Dungeons and Dragons, but in a game like TBZ it can really drag things down. I tend to stick to fewer, stronger enemies (usually 3-4 max; then only 1 or maybe 2 for major boss fight). Speaking of which,

## THIS IS ALSO FOR THERE'S GOTTA BE A BOSS FIGHT

So, a few years ago I was talking with Luke one weekend after a rousing set of Roller Derby at the North Carolina state fairgrounds. At the time, he was the manager of the Gotham Girls from Brooklyn, and they were fighting at the east coast conference. Roller Derby is badass: Far from just a spectacle, there's really so much strategy and skill that goes into... ah, but I digress.

Anyway, in TBZ you engage in combat just like other tabletop RPGs: You make a series of attack rolls. You take damage, in the form of Vitality and Wounds. When you use magic, you use Soul, just like Magic Points (MP) in console games you're familiar with.

But there's nothing deeper for Social conflicts, no further expanded rules of social maneuvering and conflicts. Social conflicts come down to in-character role-playing, plus maybe a single roll: Something like “I try to convince the warlord that what he's doing is wrong! I roll my Spirit and Persuasion against his Spirit and Willpower!”. You can still “do things” with that roll: You can spend Kiai to get more dice, to lower your difficulty number and get an advantage, etc. But the roll comes down to You vs Them, Most Successes Wins. There's no “Social Points” or “Station Vitality” to whittle down in social conflicts until one concedes.

This seems like a bit of a design flaw, really, and Luke questioned me about it. “This game needs some kind of social conflict and maneuvering system” (perhaps with an undertone of, “Perhaps kind of like the systems that are in all the games I designed, from Burning Wheel to Mouseguard!”). Admittedly, TBZ is about a decade old and all, and stuff like Social Combat is kind of a more recent RPG development. Therefore its lack seems like a flaw, or a Something Missing... until you look a little further.

I didn't even have to go as far as to compare Tenra against other games from FEAR that did have some kind of social maneuvering/extended conflict mechanic, in order to determine that the lack of such a system was a conscious choice. I simply had to Watch More Samurai Movies. I had to think back to all the Zatoichis, all the Hissatsu Shigotonins, all the Mito Komons, all the Baian The Assassins... or over to manga like Blade of the Immortal or Shigurui, or anime, or back to Kabuki Theater:

There's Always a Boss Fight. In fact, there Must Be A Boss Fight. That's the way the drama works. And that's the way the game works.

The town is on fire, burning all around us. The warlord's men are slain. He stands before you, sheathed katana at his side. He drops his Boss Speech, then draws his katana.

You can reason with the warlord. The princess (PC) can step forward and point her finger and demand that he stand down (with a contested roll). However, true to the fiction, the game will not end with the warlord sheathing his sword and turning himself in (even if that was historically perhaps more accurate). Hell no.



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Why? Because there's got to be a boss fight.

Instead, the princess convinces the warlord that he was wrong. She can destroy his beliefs. She can taunt him, or sympathize with him. She can make him believe that his quest (which in his mind was for a noble goal) was folly and in fact mistaken.

But he will still draw his sword and attack. Perhaps instead of "Shut up! I don't believe you!" (which may have been the result if the princess had failed her social roll), he has tears rolling down his cheeks: Confessing his sins and wrongdoing as he attacks, he says, "But this is all that I am now. I have nothing. I am nothing!"

You can still have a quick-roll roleplay and social conflict. It doesn't mean that the boss fight is avoided, though. It just means that the boss comes into the fight in a different state of mind.

And when you defeat the boss, did you kill him? Did you spare him, avoiding that final killing stike (but knocking him out)? That's up to the players. But first they have to beat the boss in the scenario-ending boss battle. When I explained this to Luke, he nodded his head in complete understanding. The answer was there this whole time in front of us, we just had to think about the story medium to realize it.

It's something to think about when creating a scenario. You can design a game of clever twists and raw role-playing excitement, or a bog-standard but fun Mission Quest ("Go X and Do Y, I demand it!" says the lord). But don't get past the fact that, be it a baddie NPC, a misguided NPC, or a PC-turned-Asura, just remember: There's got to be a boss fight.

## U IS FOR UNDERWEAR

I used Kickstarter to back Tenra Bansho Zero, and it was an awesome success.

I've backed a lot of Kickstarter projects, but one of the ones I'm most proud of is "Flint and Tinder" helping start a new underwear company who makes underwear from durable, solid fabric and 100% produced (down to the packaging) in the USA: That's not jinogism, that's thinking/acting local.

Plus, the underwear is awesome high quality stuff. I've never been so excited to purchase underwear in my life. My 8-year-old self would punch me in the balls with contempt then go back to his GI Joes and LEGOs if he heard me say that.

## U IS ALSO FOR USACK COMMA NIKOLAI

My other best friend and hero. Don't die before I die or I'll kill you. The world would be a fucking dumb place without you.

Cho thumbs up.

## V IS FOR VIDEO GAMES

So, when I get stressed out at work or whatever, I should really hit the gym. I'd be in rad fucking shape. Instead, I unwind by mostly playing video games. Sometimes I surf the web or read, but mostly it's video games.

At one point, stress was so high that I had gone about a month without touching Tenra (a few weeks at a time was common here and there), I was in a marathon session of... something. Likely at the time another runthrough of Final Fantasy X. I had the thought to make a journal of all the video games I was playing when I should have been working on Tenra or other creative projects (side game ideas, etc). I had a running total in my head, but over time (plus numerous Steam PC game sales) I just totally lost count. I can offer a "catalog list of notable games I played far too much (20+ hours at the very least) when I should have been doing Tenra/creative stuff", though!

### PC

Borderlands, Borderlands 2. It doesn't get better than shooting evil in the face for laughs.

Thief, Thief 2 and Thief 3. Hard mode. 3 times each.

Elder Scrolls: Oblivion, Skyrim. Crazy hours at first, quickly tapered off

Majesty Gold: That's about as deep as I go into simulation games, but man it hit the sweet spot.

Recettear: An Item Shop's Tale. Never had it in me to unlock all the hidden characters, though. There's obsession then there's Obsession.

Team Fortress 2 and Counter-Strike. For almost a decade Counter-Strike was my go-to when I needed to retreat from life, off and on. Team Fortress replaced it eventually.

Terraria: Never got into Minecraft that big, but man my world-tree which I designed in Terraria was an object of art.

### PS2

Final Fantasy X, over and over. Including the Japanese version, and the International Version with the (unfortunate) English voice-overs but the far-better grid system. My favorite of the franchise. Others are free to disagree and cite others as their favorite. That's fine, the world is big enough for WRONG PEOPLE too!

Final Fantasy X-2 at least twice. A wonderful followup. But man, the random encounters. Ugh.

SIREN 2: Probably five times. With respect to FFX, Siren 2 is the single best game for the PS2 generation. Unmatched in story, depth, suspense and graphics. Ending is a total "WTF?", tho.

All of the Fatal Frame games. Actually, more accurate to say that I watched my wife Orie go through these games while I sat on the couch clutching a pillow. Someone said they were scarier than Silent Hill, and I laughed at them... until I played the first, and then apologized to them with a low 90 degree bow.

Shinobido: Imashime. The best ninja game on console, ever. It's so disappointing that it never came to North America (EU folks lucked out on that one!).

Persona 3. Wow. I played the crap out of Persona 4 as well (and liked some of the rules/system a little more), but the setup, the situation behind Persona 3 is just too rich. It

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quickly became one of my favorite series. It was no surprise I saw a connection between P3 and Tenra, enough of one to create a setting based of the Persona series.

## Yakuza 1 and 2.

Shadow Hearts: Covenant... I actually played before I picked up Tenra. So it technically doesn't count. But since it was such a long, involved, rich console RPG, I had to give it a mention. Stay away from Shadow Hearts 3, it was shit.

## PS3

Yakuza Kenzan!, Yakuza 3, Yakuza 4, and right now Yakuza 5 (though I took a break from it for a little while to do things). What an incredible series. Story-wise, I think Yakuza 2 is the strongest, Y3 is the weakest, but Y4 is solid, and Y5 is proving to have the story-mass of a dying star. Yakuza Kenzan was great, though, as it reskinned the series in the age after the Warring States period. A damn shame it never left Japan, never picked up for translation by an international studio.

Valkyria Chronicles: The first ever strategy/war game I actually was interested in, enough to dedicate the time required to go through its long and deep story.

I put in the hours to finish Final Fantasy XIII (and XII on PS2 for that matter), but man. Letdown.

## Other

Muramasa for (borrowed) Wii. I referenced this in the media section of Tenra. Badass game, great developer, a little repetitive but otherwise awesome.

3D Picross, Style Savvy for Nintendo DS. Great stress-relievers!

Man, so glad I never got into MMOs. That could have been the end of it all!

## W IS FOR WRITING

I've gone back to Japan at least six times since I got the rights to the game, maybe seven. The trip is like 12-16 hours by plane, total "door-to-door" of almost exactly 24 hours. I always bring my laptop or writing materials in order to translate and write, both on the actual travel leg, or in the downtime of my trips (business, personal, etc). Heh, never happens. I dunno, as soon as I sit in the plane I zonk out. Every time I think "I'll get it done this time, there's 12+ hours", every time I crumple and sleep.

Anyway, that aside, folks have asked me how much I contributed to the actual writing of the game. Well, I rewrote the thing from scratch, but of course I was basing that on the translation. In short, my own contributions come in the forms of:

- \* Explanatory text: Discussing the very basics of Shinto, Buddhism, "Killing Intent/Ki Presence" etc for folks who have never encountered them and didn't know the difference.

- \* A lot of rules examples, or expanded text on existing examples. It increased the page count, but reduced confusion.

- \* A lot of expanded explanations or added sentences in the rules books, to add clarification.

- \* Many of the Combat section sidebars, which were learned and forged in actual play.

- \* A lot of expanded text in the Type Zero/Zero Act

section, including many of the Emotion matrix examples.

- \* The rules in the scenario section for creating NPCs.

In the original game, there was no real advice here, it was expected that GMs created them like players did PCs. But in practice, most GMs simply wrote down the relevant numbers that were important, guessing at strengths, without creating full characters. This disconnect caused some confusion in the Japanese game with new players, and caused a lot of people excited to run the game take pause because of the sheer amount of work to create good NPCs, while their RPG-savvy counterparts were simply ad-libbing the enemy stats to great success. I cut straight to the ad-libbing, but in a structured way. The methodology behind this was pulled largely from reading the enemy/NPC/monster sections of Inoue & Endo's later games like Alshard.

- \* The entire second half of the Scenario Creation section from Scenario Advice onwards (again, all forged in actual play over the years).

- \* I didn't write the Against the Tide playset, but commissioned it from talented game writer TS Luikart. Nothing like that existed in the original game, instead it was just a sample scenario. It was a Japanese game for a Japanese audience, no one imagined the difficulty of a foreigner trying to create a Japanese-ish setting from scratch! My contribution in there was simply in adding all the "bullet point questions" at the end of each text section, to get people thinking about how to actually USE the setting. To not memorize it and use it as canon to discuss, but to actually pull parts out and put them into the actual game.

- \* The Glossary, Media Resources (of course), Advice, Setting in a Nutshell, 222 Things to Do, and Names sections were all my own creation for the English translation of the book.

- \* The ordering of archetypes into groups rather than sort-of randomly.

- \* The original sample characters were in the book, but the Roleplay Ideas and Zero Act Ideas for each one was my contribution. Also, the original game didn't have a sample Ayakashi character, which I found puzzling given all the attention and special character build rules for them. So I added that one at the end.

That was "my stuff". Hope it helped make the game playable!

## W IS ALSO FOR WHITEWASHING

Am I a professional translator? Well, I've translated a lot for money, so I guess so. Although it's not my core day job, else I'd be a lot faster at it than I am now.

"Voice and Flow" is supremely important when making a text easily accessible to a new audience. The text has to flow and not "stutter" (with things like constant obvious grammatical mistakes, constant switching of perspective from 3rd to 1st person, etc); and it should have a voice, or a consistent method in which it speaks to the reader.

So interestingly enough, after two solid runthroughs of the text by guys with solid editing (in terms of grammar for both, and one (Grant Chen, credited in the book) had a



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lot of skill with ensuring consistency across the text, asking questions that a reader might ask, and doing some copy-editing) skills, I tossed the text to a friend of mine who had a lot of experience with editing, including for various tabletop role-playing games. He was going to help with a third round of editing, but slammed on the breaks.

**BUDDY:** Andy, um... About the text. It needs a lot of editing.

**ANDY (ME):** Huh. I thought the text was pretty solid, save for the grammatical pieces we missed. What in particular?

**BUDDY:** Well... basically... um... This text needs to be totally rewritten from scratch.

**ANDY:** ... ..wut?

**BUDDY:** From scratch. All of it. Needs to be totally redone in order to be Perfect.

## QUE ANDY HAVING A STROKE.

So after we hashed it out for a bit, my shock and horror turned to "Ooooooooooh, so THAT's what you're talking about. Yeah, never mind that."

Basically, my friend was coming from a place of 'Total, Exacting Perfection (for English grammar) for the text. He said that the content was okay, that the organization was fine, that there certainly wasn't too little and if anything there may be Too Much text and explanation. But what he was concerned about was the grammar. Specifically, the fact that there were some sections--most of them throughout the World/Setting/Characters material where the "voice" of the original authors in Japanese is strongest rather than the Rules sections--that didn't flow perfectly. A few sentences that seemed stilted. A few sentences that were almost run-on sentences. More than a few places where Passive Voice ("The kingdom was conquered by the Oni" rather than "The Oni conquered the kingdom, etc") is used.

This feedback was great! But I quickly realized something interesting about the text.

The text \*feels\* Japanese! It's not a stuttering mess of classical Japanese grammatical problems with English ala English and the like (if you're interested in what that looks like in an RPG, go Google a game setting I wrote called "Take Back of Freedom!" an experiment in this kind of "translation from no source" from a few years ago). But as I went through the text in the original and subsequent translations, I actually did something subconsciously that I later--when it was pointed out by my friend--made a deliberately conscious effort to continue: I preserved the Voice of the original text as much as humanly possible in the English translation.

Instead of tearing it down to its raw meaning and reconstructing it back in always-perfect English writing form, I instead made the decision to keep a few of those "telling grammatical choices": A few run-ons, a few predicate-less sentences, some healthy Passive Voice, etc. In the end, the author of the original Japanese text was, throughout the writing, really giving you the feeling of the sheer largeness of the setting, the sheer awesomeness and limitlessness of the characters and world. I did everything possible to keep that tone while at the same time preserving English grammatical rules so as not to kill the Flow (which would have made the

text "Cool" but at the same time "Frustrating to Read").

In other words, I didn't want to "Whitewash" the text: To remove everything uniquely Japanese about the writing in order to make it fit our classical English literary-form buckets. To keep the essential meaning of the text yet totally sift out the tone because it got in the way. I've read some translations of various novels in English that lost the tone to appeal to an English-speaking audience (probably due to a conservative and aggressive editor), and honestly to me the effect ranges from "rubbing me the wrong way" to screaming "this is BULLSHIT!" and throwing the book across the room. Just like the art and setting and rules, the actual writing itself is a unique and distinctively Asian/Japanese piece of work, and I wanted to make sure that showed!

I think I did a good job of this. For if nothing else, when I explained this clearly to my friend, the light instantly went on in his head (he's a huge fan of anime/manga, but just wasn't "in that zone" when his "English grammar editor cap" was on on his first readthrough), and he totally Got It. He too agreed that whitewashing the text would really deter from the goal of publishing the game. We agreed that while it might give English majors some fits in places (although of course I did my best to ensure that it was as grammatically sound as possible, and flowed as smoothly as possible given the voice/tone of the text), the only reply to those criticisms--sans the few actual grammatical errors that make their way to print (and to date I have not seen)--is, "That's the tone of the Japanese authors. Deal with it!"

## W IS ALSO FOR WHALE COMMA WHITE

My White Whale is Slain. Your patronage is proof.

...By the way, you should really try it. Cooked like a steak, it has the extremely soft texture of filet mignon, but with the rich flavor of a ribeye. You can't get that combination in cowflesh; it's either the deliciousness of the ribeye, or the super-soft texture (but relative flavorlessness) of filet mignon.

Put down the sign, people in Japan eat a fraction of the meat that Americans and Europeans eat. Don't get me wrong, I was a vegetarian almost a third of my life: But when our own abattoirs slow to 1/10th production, I'll join you in protest.

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## X IS FOR X

Batsu! Batsu-Batsu! Baaaaatsul!! I...Ichil!  
Ichil! Saaaaafe! Ichil! Saaaaafe! Ichil!

## Y IS FOR YELLOW SUBMARINE

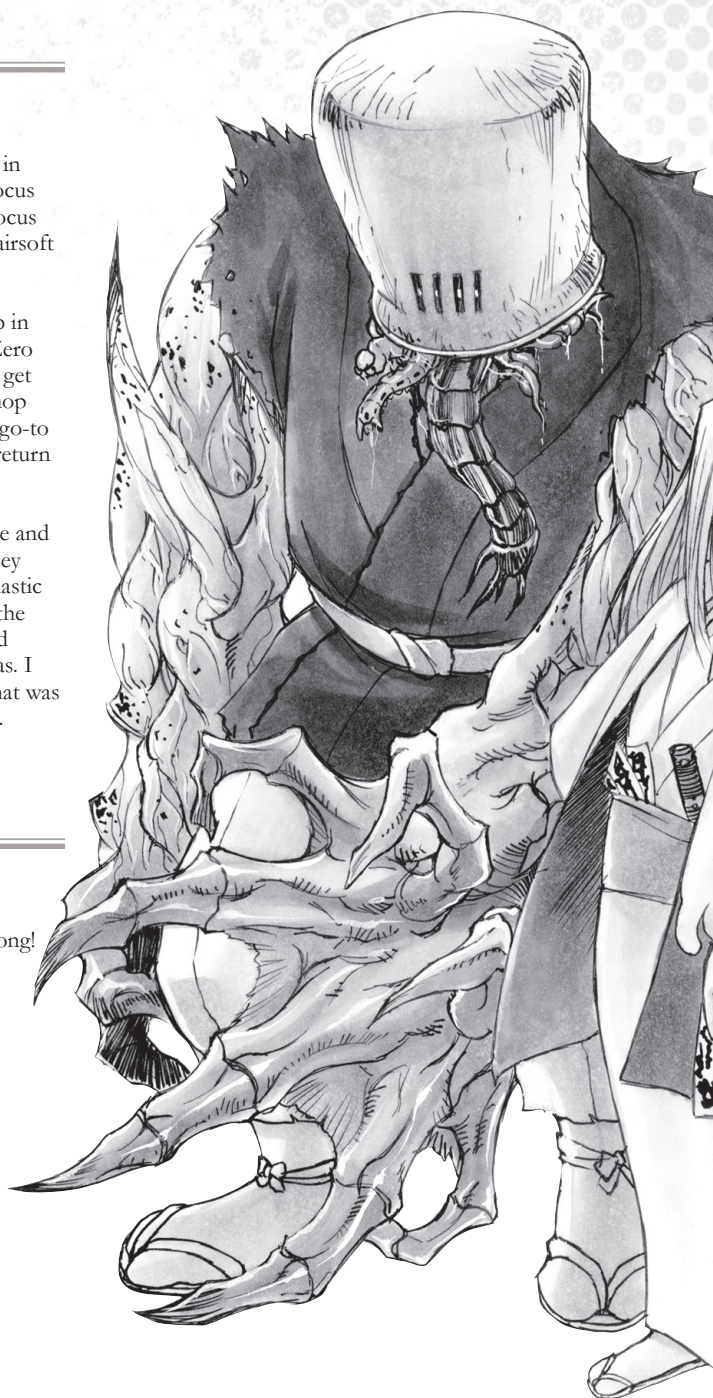
This is the name of the chain of stores in Japan which sell tabletop RPGs. There are some that focus on RPGs, others that focus on CCGs, yet others that focus on anime trading/collectible cards, plastic models and airsoft guns.

It was the (at the time largest) RPG-shop Yellow Sub in Shinjuku's west side where I picked up Tenra Bansho Zero back in 2001, and where I'd go back again and again to get more. That is, until they opened an even larger RPG-shop Yellow Sub in Akihabara. That has become one of my go-to places to pick up the latest and greatest games when I return to Japan.

The other store that has grabbed my heart is the Role and Roll station, also in Akihabara, only a few years old. They have a great play space, clean but small interior, enthusiastic staff, and the owner or a senior staff member updates the store's blog DAILY with pictures of the latest news and releases in the store's RPG, board game and fiction areas. I used to have to scramble all over the net to find out what was coming out and where, and they have it all in one place.

## Z IS FOR STOP READING NOW

We're done. Thanks for following along!

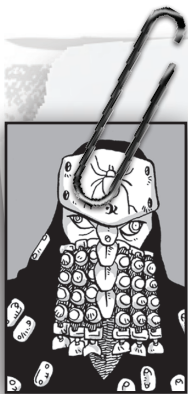




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## THIS GAME BROUGHT TO YOU IN PART BY...

### Coffee -

Lots of it. For a while I switched to Yerba Mate tea (bought online by the 5-pound bag), which is its own majesty: All the effects of coffee without the blood pressure increase, the caffiene ass-kick: it's caffiene just in a different chemical form which leads to a gradual rise rather than a kick.

But ultimately, I switched back to coffee: Through the magic of the Raleigh/Durham area Japanese community, my wife was able to get an excellent espresso machine for like 50 bucks. Turns out the owner was Takayoshi Sato, the lead artist, CGI director and writer on the games Silent Hill 1 and 2. I tell every fucking body this when I make them their espresso or cappuccino. To date, I haven't had any powerful hellworld-inspired nightmares, but each sip I have my fingers crossed that Tonight's The Night.

### Gunnar Glasses -

Holy shit, seriously. I am such an advocate that I ended up contacting Gunnar Optiks to hook me up with demo sets of glasses I could pass around the office (and got a few dozen more people hooked, too). So these are basically self-overhyped computer glasses with a yellow tint marketed as ExXtreme Gamer Glasses, but they are MAGIC. I was kinda worried that they were snakeoil until I read a compilation of favorable and negative reviews together. Gave them a shot, have worn them pretty much every work day ever since.

The slight magnification keeps you from leaning into your monitor (though I wear magnification-less prescription versions). The anti glare does its anti glare thing. But for me, the magic is in the yellow tinting. I can work or game for hours with pretty much zero eyestrain. At work we have a typical heavy fluorescent light environment, and between these and something called a "CubeShield" I've been able to rock a PC 8-14 hours at work, then come home to do more writing and translation. I've got two friends at work who used to get migraines all the time when using the PC, and who have both had them stop completely when using these glasses regularly.

Some people don't get anything out of them, but man, for me they saved my eyes, kept me in computer work, and kept me productive.

### Kitties -

Yuki, Maya, Nacchi. Mostly Maya, she's the one who sits near me when I write or hangs out with us when we game.

### Hearts of Space -

I've got a yearly subscription to [www.hos.com](http://www.hos.com). I love ambient/space music, it's the perfect background music for me when I work: I just can't listen to anything with lyrics when I'm trying to work or translate, and even a strong techno beat can be distracting (I dunno, it's just me). If you don't want to buy in hard, check out the iPhone app that gives you access to the weekly program.

Favorite programs to date: My fave list has 039, 464, 545, 552, 571, 593, 750, 769, 782, 862, 867, 871 (Sakurai), 878, 879, 885, 890, 894, 906, 909, 910, 911, 932. Got everything from space to melancholic to asian to otherworldly.

While my music taste ranges all over the board (usually electronic, experimental, soul, metal and hip-hop), so called "Space Music" is my Work Tunes.

### IceKey Keyboard-

Typing, typing, typing, typing all day at work and home. Even though I use a PC at home, I've used Macally's IceKey keyboard with it for... wow, about 11 years now (on my third). Super light touch with a tiny bit of resistance, so much better for my style than rigid keys or the no-resistance of the newer Mac keyboards (plus those keyboards have keys that are a tad too small, too crushed together). Choice!

### AirOBic Mouse -

Years ago I was actually worried that my tendinitis (not really carpal, just in my "mouse hand") was going to make me leave or re-evaluate my computer career. In constant wrist pain, my doctor basically gave me the "Computer User Bowling Glove" and that was it. Then my friend showed me his "Quill Mouse" (later remanufactured and remarketed with the kind of silly name "AirOBic") and let me use it for a few days.

It took me an hour to get used to the mouse. Within three hours my tendinitis went away and stayed away. Works so well that I can use this AirOBic mouse at work, and then come home and play crazy amounts of Team Fortress or Borderlands or whatever using a regular mouse, and my hands will be fine. This thing was a miracle, both a wrist and career-saver.

I thought it was kinda pricey, though, so I tested out like 5 alternative ergonomic mice (trackballs, stick-mice, upright mice, etc). Then I returned each and bought the AirOBic/Quill Mouse. That was 8 years ago, it's served me ever since.



### Aeron Chair -

If you work in front of a desk, you're gonna be at that thing like up to a quarter of the day, every day. That's a lot of time. Getting a chair that will be extremely comfortable yet support you is critical. I bought mine (one for home, one for work) on eBay way back when I was shit-poor, but it was worth it. Beds, chairs, eyeglasses, stuff you're going to use for hours every single day, it's worth spending a little extra to prevent your body from being mangled up, eyes ruined, daily exhaustion, etc.

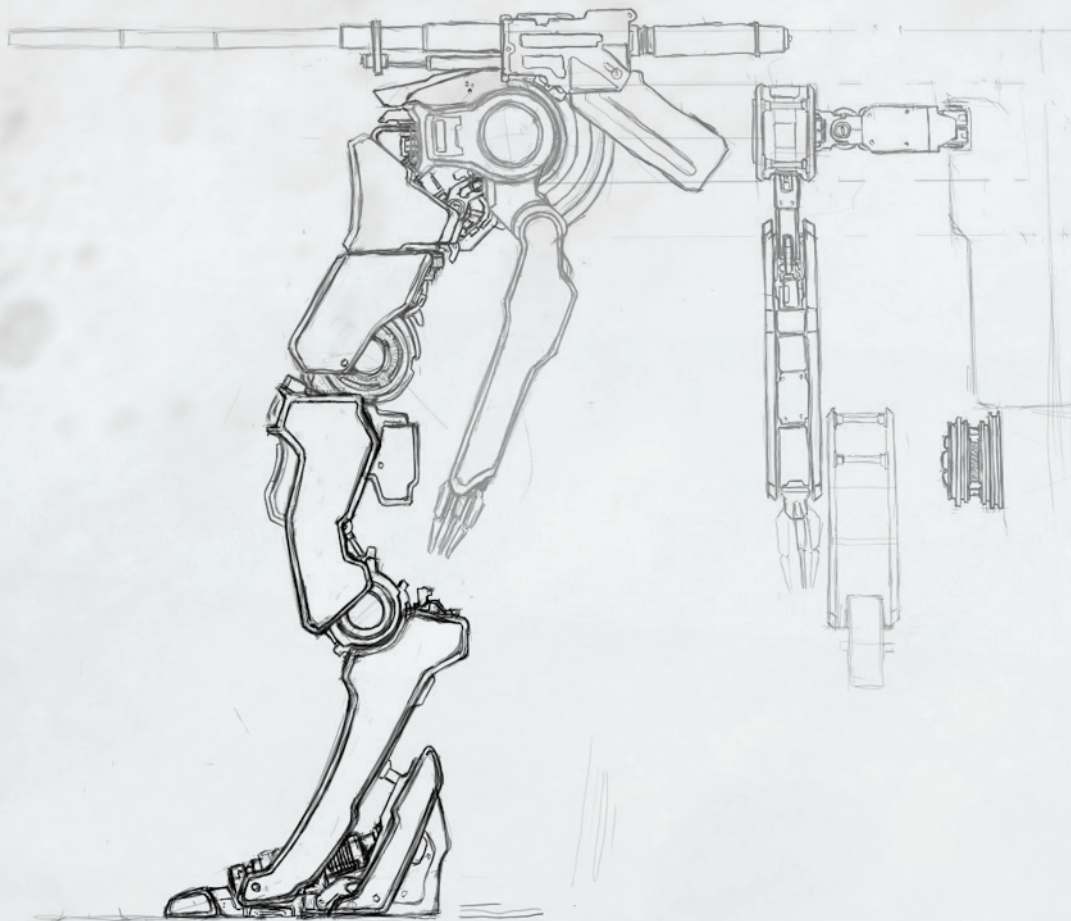
The aeron chair is kind of the standard for work chair excellence. I got tuned into them back when I worked at a company that sounds like "SchmAOL-Time Schmwarnier Cable" as a cable modem support guy, one of my first tech jobs upon returning to the US from Japan. The place was a fucking tomb of humanity and careers, but even us barely-above-minimum-wage hosers all were sitting in aeron chairs. Let me tell you, the reason that we could remain so calm and collected while dealing with the most stupid of stupid customers? That supporting, comfortable work chair. It probably prevented suicides and riots. It's the epitome of "things that startup companies buy" (and in fact I got my first two on eBay from collapsing dotcoms in Houston: "Hey want a fussball table too? We'll throw it in." "UHHNOTHANKYOU."), but they're not just some asshole status symbol, they really are (for me anyway) the perfect intersection of support and comfort.

### Aikido. Yoga. The Gym -

Sitting in front of a computer all day isn't healthy. If it weren't for going to aikido or yoga... yikes. Mind and body aren't two separate things, if you want to keep your mind healthy you have to keep at your body as well. Internet folks (like me!) tend to forget that. Most of my bursts of insane creativity usually come within 0-2 hours of visiting the gym.

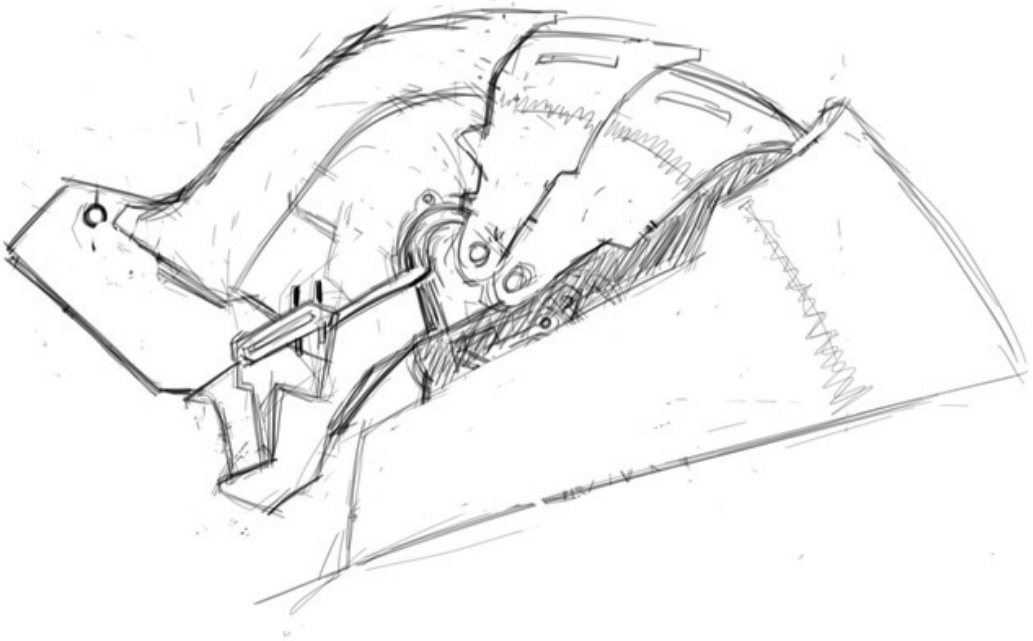
### Orie -

My wife. Uh, I could just start writing and not stop like ever, so I'll just say that she's awesome all over.



TENRA BANSHO ZERO

# 天邪零



**THIS BOOK WAS MADE BEAUTIFUL FROM UGLY BY  
JERRY D GRAYSON (WWW.HELLASRPG.COM)**

This document's art primarily consists of art submitted by players and fans. Thank you all! Some of the art was pulled from the original TBZ books, please see credits there.

Submissions from:

16, 31  
S Hagen  
kakuboi.deviantart.com

26  
Robert Burson  
coyotegrey.deviantart.com

17  
Cary "Tetsu" Watson

2, 13, 19, 25  
Craig "Shiro Kuro" Judd

27  
TheFIN  
hyakujihigh.net

9  
Eric\_H  
duderen0.deviantart.com

29, Inside Back Cover  
Glharmon

5, 8, 30, 43, 44  
Tebs Yap



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