





A British professor has spent five years and  
€1.25m seeking to answer a simple question:  
should Street Fighter be considered a martial art?

By SIMON PARKIN

Illustrations Siku (from concepts by Chris Goto-Jones)

A few years ago, during a drink-fuelled graduation ceremony at Leiden University, **Chris Goto-Jones**, a lecturer in comparative philosophy and political thought, asked a group of outgoing honours students to identify the single most important thing they had learned during their education. “I was somewhat hopeful that their answers might include references to great works of literature, exalted philosophical principles, or perhaps rigorous scientific methodologies,” he says. It wasn’t to be. Some students joked that they could barely remember what had happened during all those indistinguishable semesters, with their hedonistic nights and drowsy, morning-after lectures. One student drolly turned the question around, asking: “Professor, what do you think was the most important thing I learned?”

A little despondently, Goto-Jones returned his attention to the tinkling ceremony. Much later, a student, Donna, seemingly emboldened by alcohol, returned to her professor. “I’ve thought of the answer,” she said. “The most important thing I learned during the last few years is that discipline makes us better

people.” Goto-Jones, somewhat relieved, asked her how she had come to learn the lesson. “I was anticipating perhaps at least a nod towards something that she’d encountered in her academic programme,” he recalls. “Maybe the name of an inspirational Greek or German philosopher, a gesture towards a classic text.” Instead, the student grinned and drunkenly replied: “I play a lot of *Street Fighter IV*. It’s changed my life.”

**In the weeks** that followed, Goto-Jones couldn’t budge the student’s reply from his mind. While he’s both a martial-arts enthusiast and an avid player of videogames, including *Street Fighter IV* (“I would be willing to admit that the game has taught me some things, some of which I think are significant”), he couldn’t quite believe that, for Donna, *Street Fighter* had proven more important, relevant and memorable than Kant’s Third Critique or Plato’s Republic. “*Street Fighter* had given her insights into how to live, ones that she hadn’t seen in the texts of the various dead philosophers whose work filled her syllabus,” he says. “This in itself, it seemed to me, was of quite monumental importance.” ▶



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The first version of the Virtual Ninja Manifesto is available to download in PDF form from [www.bit.ly/vninjapdf](http://www.bit.ly/vninjapdf) and in iOS-friendly format from [www.bit.ly/vninjaio](http://www.bit.ly/vninjaio)

Immediately Goto-Jones wanted to know whether Donna's experience was unique or, if not, whether she was part of a trend, or even a movement, whereby people were learning lessons in the virtual realm that were influencing how they went on to live outside of it. "I suspected, of course, that people today learn much more from videogames in general than they or their creators are aware of," Goto-Jones says. "But it was fascinating to imagine that we'd reached the point at which *Street Fighter* was more formative on people than Plato. If that was true, what was it about the game that appealed so much more than these traditional sources?" This begged a further question: was the way in which *Street Fighter* had taught Donna the value of discipline limited to Capcom's game? Or do other fighting games, and genres beyond, also fulfil the same function?

Goto-Jones, a graduate of Oxford, Cambridge and Keio universities, and a professorial research associate at the Japan Research Centre at London University, already had a natural interest in the relationship between martial arts and psychology. His teaching grades in both Shotokan karate and Wing Chun gave him first-hand experience of the transformative effects that physical martial arts can have on a human being. It seemed

## **"THE PLAYER PERFORMS MOTIONS THAT CAUSE AVATARS TO PERFORM THE MOTION-CAPTURED MOVEMENTS, ONES THAT ORIGINATED IN DISCIPLINED PHYSICAL BODIES"**

plausible that the journey to master a competitive fighting game, particularly one that draws such heavy influence from real-world martial arts (albeit then exaggerated with mystical fireballs and physics-shanking acrobatics) might provide similar effects.

The fear, however, was that it was all just romantic fantasy, a story that Donna had told herself to justify the hours spent on a videogame developing skills with no practical application outside of the game's reality and one that, as a videogame fan, Goto-Jones had chosen to believe. But surely it wasn't, he reasoned, such an absurd leap of logic? Both martial arts and *Street Fighter* require constant practice in order to perfect complex combat techniques. "Then there's something magical about the relationship between the animation of avatars and the locomotive skill and conditioned dexterity needed to manipulate the avatars," he says. "The player performs motions that cause avatars to perform the motion-captured movements, ones that originated in disciplined physical bodies." It is, as he puts it, all rather poetic.

"Mostly, I wanted to know whether Donna was really a different person because of her particularly disciplined engagement with *Street Fighter*, and in what ways that different person could be seen as 'better' than the previous Donna," he says. "What did her training regime look like? With what kind of intentionality did she approach her training? Did other players recognise her

approach or any of its alleged outcomes? Could mastering *Street Fighter* transform a human being into a wiser, more ethical, more generally competent person?" Could the game truly fit within the long tradition of martial philosophy in East Asia?"

For most people, such questions would remain theoretical and hypothetical. Goto-Jones, however, decided to formalise a study. He came up with a name — The Virtual Ninja Project — and applied to The Netherlands Organisation For Scientific Research, which funds high-risk, innovative research projects that have the potential to make social impact, for a grant. "The project idea combined a variety of timely issues," says Goto-Jones. "Everything from the impact of digital media at a time of crisis in the university system, to the impact of the global spread of techno-culture from Japan, to the potential significance of so-called 'non-western' philosophical systems on contemporary European societies." Goto-Jones' hunch that there was a meaningful area of study here proved correct. He was awarded a €1.25m grant — in part to interrogate the question of whether or not *Street Fighter* could be classed a martial art in the orthodox definition. "By focusing on the self-transformative potential of

Japanese fighting games, rooted in theoretical models drawn from the bushido tradition, this project managed to hit a lot of buttons at the same time."

**Many of the** martial artists Goto-Jones interviewed at the start of the project conceded that both disciplines demand the repetition of physical movements to the point of sublimation. But most were sceptical of any further similarities. "For one, there's a complete absence of actual physical danger in *Street Fighter*," Goto-Jones says. "When Chun-Li is destroyed by Ken, for example, her player isn't left bleeding on the floor." The martial artists would argue the absence of danger and stress in playing fighting games creates a vast point of difference to the psychology and practice of physical martial arts.

"It's worth remembering, however, that few physical martial arts actually place fighters in much physical danger in the modern period," Goto-Jones says. "The majority are now sports, with light contact and heavy safety pads; the goal isn't to kill your opponent but to touch them at specific points. It's not obvious that the psychological stakes are any lower in a *Street Fighter* competition than in a Taekwondo competition, especially when everyone involved has trained so hard and invested so much of their identity in the practice." Some martial artists even saw Goto-Jones' argument as a damning indictment of the state of the modern martial ►





*Siku*

arts. “If they’re really so sanitised, perhaps they’ve lost all their meaning and power today?”

One difference that’s less easy to dismiss is the disparity between the purely physical stresses that fighting videogames and martial arts make on their practitioners. “*Street Fighter* isn’t nearly as physically demanding as snake-style kung fu,” Goto-Jones says. “You hardly ever sweat playing games. So the question becomes whether or not the sublimation of precise thumb and finger movements can be as significant in both psychological and physical terms as the sublimation of the movements of larger limbs, such as arms and legs.”

Undeniable, however, is the fact that once mastery of the physical aspect has been achieved, both fighting games and earnest fighting become contests of the mind. To find out where the similarities lay, Goto-Jones began by exploring the philosophical traditions of Buddhism, especially Zen, and their relationship with the transformative potentials of disciplined actions. He re-translated the classics of the bushido tradition in Japan to try to understand how the legendary warrior monks conceptualised the meaning and significance of martial training and combat. Then he performed a great

## “GAMERS WITH CONTEMPLATIVE OR MEDITATIVE APPROACHES TO GAMING ACHIEVE DIFFERENT CHANGES THAN THOSE WHO PLAY FOR FUN OR COMPETITION”

deal of field work, travelling to Osaka and Tokyo, New York and London, multiple times each year to interview players in arcades to find out whether or not they believed in his hypothesis or whether “they thought it was completely stupid”.

While Goto-Jones interviewed hundreds of players and martial artists (in part via a survey conducted with **EDGE** readers in 2010), sceptics might question how able respondents were to give answers that were meaningfully true. For example, a player may believe that they’re learning discipline and other valuable lessons from videogames, but testing whether or not those lessons are consequential outside of the context of the game is highly difficult. It’s a problem, in fact, that’s not limited to videogame players. “The problem of verifiability is common to nearly all claims of self-transformation,” Goto-Jones says. “Certainly our project doesn’t conclude that *Street Fighter* will make you a better person – only that it seems plausible that gamers can engage with the game in such a way that aims towards that outcome, one rationalised by and consistent with a 500-year-old philosophical tradition.

“We can also show that neurological changes can and do occur in gamers, and that gamers with contemplative or meditative approaches to gaming achieve different changes than those who simply play for fun or competition.” Goto-Jones has even loftier hopes for

the results of his research that relate to his love of and, in his words, advocacy for the medium. “It’s one thing to say that games don’t necessarily make people violent, but it’s quite another to say that playing a specific variety of games brings about an ethical self-transformation of a player that makes them into a better person,” he says.

**Five years after** it began, Goto-Jones’ work is almost complete. The three PhD dissertations that formed part of the funding’s deliverables are written. Goto-Jones’ findings will be published later this year in a book titled *The Virtual Ninja Manifesto* (published by Rowman & Littlefield) and, perhaps most fittingly, the university is hosting the Virtual Ninja Tournament, an invitational *Street Fighter V* competition, in The Hague in the summer. For Goto-Jones, the result of five years of study has been to accept that the videogame medium might have the capacity to replace the spiritual and philosophical function of disciplined pursuits like the martial arts. If that claim seems outlandish, just wait for the combo finisher. “We might have found a way to make *Street Fighter* into a politically radical and ethically responsible social movement,” he says.

## STRESS TEST

While there’s no threat of physical injury to players of fighting videogames (beyond a bit of RSI in an over-eager thumb, perhaps), Goto-Jones believes the stress that participants undergo when entering tournaments, or even lower-level matches, is comparable to that of competing martial artists.

“It’s arguable to me that the key determinant of stress is the stakes involved,” he says. For Goto-Jones, the basic catalyst for stress is directly linked to our “intentionality” and our sense of the importance and significance of the outcome. In terms of the pressure and strain that players of fighting games undergo, at least, *Street Fighter* and martial arts are comparable.

Goto-Jones’ work has been rigorous, and his pedigree as an academic and researcher is unimpeachable. For anyone who has lost a summer holiday to committing the shoryuken motion to muscle memory, or who has learned to gracefully accept a defeat at the arcade as a necessary step in the lifelong journey of self-improvement, at least some of his study’s claims will resonate. While some will remain sceptical, anyone who’s felt the impact of time spent in a videogame’s reality can at least surely back Goto-Jones’ admirable aim to find out whether games can have positive effects on the human mind, and the way in which we view the world and our place in it. “As videogames become increasingly pervasive, I hope this work signals the possibility that we should be able to reflect on our play in more philosophically sophisticated ways,” he explains. “Just as we’re all open to the possibility that reading a great novel will make us into different, perhaps even better, people, we should be able to reflect critically on the ways in which games can be transformative because of their nature.”

Perhaps, in the end, the motivation for all this work wasn’t in proving a grand philosophical theorem, but rather in giving a student his support. “Ultimately, I hope we find a way to show that Donna wasn’t fooling herself when she said that *Street Fighter* changed her life and made her into a better person.” ■