'I completely agree that *Street Fighter* has made me the "better person" that I am today. Now kids have a legitimate reason to argue with their parents'.
—Diago 'The Beast' Umehara

'… overturns everything you thought you knew about video games to forge a new path: this is everything you are already doing with video games but were too afraid to know!'
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'Anyone who's interested in contemporary competitive gaming, from *CounterStrike* to *WarCraft*, S*treet Fighter* to *League of Legends*, needs to read this book'.
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'This magnificent book does what I thought was impossible: it makes the virtual ninja real. For aren't fighting games spaces of deep learning and transformation, the training grounds for a prosthetic selfhood that is both virtual and real? Isn't synthetic violence a mode of personal cultivation that deserves respect? Chris Goto-Jones succeeds with his own "miraculous reversal play", bringing the virtual worlds of ninja into a contemporary, living public sphere and offering a deep meditation—both philosophical and spiritual— on the timeless desire to face worthy opponents. For all you would-be ninjas, this is a must-read gem'.
—Ian Condry, Professor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA

Navigating between society's moral panics about the influence of violent videogames and philosophical texts about self-cultivation in the martial arts, *The Virtual Ninja Manifesto* asks whether the figure of the 'virtual ninja' can emerge as an aspirational figure in the twenty-first century.

Engaging with the literature around embodied cognition, Zen philosophy and techno-Orientalism, this book argues that virtual martial arts can be reconstructed as vehicles for moral cultivation and self-transformation. It argues that the kind of training required to master videogames approximates the kind of training described in Zen literature on the martial arts. Arguing that the shift from the actual dojō to a digital dojo represents only a change in the technological means of practice, it offers a new manifesto for gamers to signify their gaming practice. Moving beyond perennial debates about the role of violence in videogames and the manipulation of moral choices in gamic environments it explores the possibility that games promote and assess spiritual development.

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Goto-Jones

The Virtual Ninja Manifesto

Chris
Goto-Jones

The
Virtual Ninja
Manifesto

Fighting Games, Martial Arts and Gamic Orientalism

Often misunderstood, marginalized and mistreated, we, the gamers, train to acquire strategic thinking and analytical skills while making lifetime friendship through fighting games. Goto-Jones uncovers this kind of engagement as the practice of pure discipline. This eye-opening and groundbreaking study is deeply significant to us, the gamers, revealing the connections between what we have gained through those experiences and the martial arts. As a gamer-philosopher, Professor Goto-Jones exposes the wonders of fighting games from an academic standpoint with unusual insight and passion. I completely agree that *Street Fighter* has made me the 'better person' that I am today. Now kids have a legitimate reason to argue with their parents.

— Daigo 'The Beast' Umehara

By turns playful and profound, *The Virtual Ninja Manifesto* sticks to the pragmatic question: what sort of truths do we make playing videogames? Demonstrating that the truths of videogames cannot be judged in isolation from the benefits they produce for individuals in their everyday lives, Chris Goto-Jones overturns everything you thought you knew about videogames but to forge a new path: this is everything you are already doing with videogames but were too afraid to know!

— Tom Lamarre, Professor, McGill University

There's been a lot of talk about competitive gaming as 'eSport' lately, but the connection between videogames and sports has always been rhetorical more than material. Goto-Jones offers a creative and smart correction, thanks to *Street Fighter*: maybe mastery in competitive games can be reinterpreted as mastery in the martial arts, rather than expertise in sports. Anyone who's interested in contemporary competitive gaming, from *CounterStrike* to *WarCraft, Street Fighter to League of Legends*, needs to read this book.

— Ian Bogost, Professor, Georgia Institute of Technology

This magnificent book does what I thought was impossible: it makes virtual ninja real. For aren't fighting games spaces of deep learning and transformation, the training grounds for a prosthetic selfhood that is both virtual and real? Isn't synthetic violence a mode of personal cultivation that deserves respect? Chris Goto-Jones succeeds with his own 'miraculous reversal play', bringing the virtual worlds of ninja into a contemporary, living public sphere, and offering a deep meditation — both philosophical and spiritual — on the timeless desire to face worthy opponents. For all you would-be ninja, this is a must-read gem.

— Ian Condry, Professor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

# Contents

# Acknowledgements

meet'. I obviously can't list you all, but thank you all. And thank you, Donna, in particular.

And finally I should thank the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), which generously funded this project as part of a 'VICI' grant entitled: *Beyond Utopia – New Politics, the Politics of Knowledge, and the Science Fictional Field of Japan*. I feel grateful and privileged to have been trusted to try something so experimental. This leaves me to thank Esther Truijen for managing the project so smoothly, Cissie Fu for consistent engagement and provocation, and Siku for his professionalism and creativity with the images that comprise the manifesto itself.

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Martina has been an understanding and supportive editor at Rowman & Littlefield, and Paul Bowman has been wonderfully receptive and imaginative about the potentials of this project in the context of the martial arts more broadly. In the end, while most of whatever is good about this project is probably due to everyone else, any and all of the problems are my fault entirely.

# Introduction

## What Is the *Virtual Ninja Project*?

*Even if the ninja are an invented tradition, that's no guarantee
that you won't be killed by one tomorrow.*

In various different ways, the *Virtual Ninja Project* (VNP) has caused
quite a fuss. People ask about it a lot, apparently not quite able to
believe in its reality or seriousness. To be honest, seeing some of the
ways in which it has been appropriated, I've had my doubts about it too.
It's partly for this reason that I want to offer a brief account of how this
unusual experiment began. It emerged out of a larger project that was
concerned with the intersections between philosophy, digital culture,
and (the idea of) Japan, for which I was fortunate enough to be funded
by a so-called VICI award from the Netherlands Organization for Sci-
entific Research (NWO). One of the broader concerns of that larger
project was whether its research methods and final results were interdis-
ciplinary in nature, or whether they were simply extra-disciplinary. In
other words, how did this particular place of intersection challenge our
conventional views on what it means to say that something constitutes
knowledge in the first place?

Why are universities (and the academy more widely) so obsessed
with the idea that knowledge and *text* are so inalienably intertwined?
And what would it mean if we suddenly discovered or realized (or
simply admitted) that there's much more to knowledge than books? Of
course, people have been asking variations of this question for a great
many years, but the answers and their implications remain relatively

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marginalized. Bringing up the topic of videogames or the martial arts as potential resources for philosophical inquiry, expression, or argument usually returns blank disbelieving faces in the conclaves of academic philosophy. At best, such conversations are tolerated as harmless (and probably pointless) fads. At worst, they are dismissed as perniciously anti-philosophical – as though any appeal to a form of resource that was unavailable to Heidegger or even to Aristotle must necessarily be irrelevant to their elevated mission. For myself, I'm a firm believer that philosophy needs to speak the language(s) of its time or risk becoming irrelevant to that time.

## 'I PLAY A LOT OF *STREET FIGHTER IV*'

One of the vital first steps on the *Long Road to the Virtual Ninja* was a conversation I had with a group of talented honours students at a graduation ceremony about five years ago. Among all the usual posturing and pontificating that accompanies such rites of passage, I asked them what they thought was the most important thing they had learned in the previous five years. Given that this period included their entire university education, I was somewhat hopeful that their answers might include references to great works of literature, exalted philosophical principles, or perhaps rigorous scientific methodologies. Instead, perhaps predictably, I was greeted with a rousing chorus of: 'I don't know, man. I don't really remember it all that much. All the books just blend into one after a while, you know?' There was much nodding and agreement about the lack of distinctions between texts: 'They're basically the same, in the end. They just *tell* you stuff, as though by telling you to change your mind they'll change you.'

   On the face of it, this was a pretty disappointing answer. I suspect the students could see my discouragement, as I sipped a little too heavily on the cheap wine. But even then I had to admit to myself (if not to them) that quite a lot of their education had been about professors professing to them: *telling* them things. And they wouldn't be wrong (or even especially controversial) to complain that this has been widely disparaged as a pedagogical technology for nearly a hundred years: *telling* students things is not considered to be the model of a good education. Active learning suggests that we need to *do* something if we're going to learn effectively.

Perhaps in an attempt to make me feel better, one particularly thoughtful student, who had clearly learned something about political method at university, added this: 'It's an interesting question, professor. So perhaps you can help us? What do *you* think was the most important thing I learned?' I smiled, of course, and wandered off in search of another drink.

After the ceremony had droned on for quite a while longer, a couple of the students came back to me and one of them said: 'I've been thinking about your question, Chris, and I think I have an answer for you.' Before I could express the sinking feeling that swelled in my heart, Donna continued: 'The most important thing I learned in the last few years is that discipline makes us into better people.'

This was a good answer. I nodded, suitably impressed and (I imagine) visibly relieved. My brain started to make a network of possible connections between texts and thinkers from various periods and places for whom this conclusion would be justifiable. I smiled encouragingly: 'Can I ask *how* you learned this?'

Donna nodded enthusiastically and grinned a little too broadly, taking another sip of something that was probably not just Cola. 'Sure,' she said, 'I play a lot of *Street Fighter IV*. It's changed my life. This guy', she inclined her head and spilt her drink clumsily in the direction of her companion, 'is, like, a *master*.' The master gave a self-deprecating shrug, as though he knew that it was true but didn't want to make a fuss about it.

I have to confess that this is not quite the answer that I'd been expecting, and certainly not the one for which I'd been hoping. I had been anticipating perhaps at least a nod towards something she had encountered in her academic programme: maybe the name of an inspirational Greek or German philosopher – a dead, white, European male if possible – or a gesture towards a classic text of some kind. But instead she seemed to be talking about a videogame.

'*Street Fighter IV*?' I queried, 'that's … interesting.' At the time, I wasn't quite sure whether I'd meant this 'interesting' in the dismissive British sense of 'it's not interesting at all'. Was this interesting, after all? I made some quip about Donna being a '09er' (the term of mild abuse that hard-core *Street Fighter* players reserve for gamers who only became interested in the franchise after the release of the gorgeous and accessible version IV in 2009). 'I've always preferred *Street Fighter II* myself,' I added, attempting to establish my credibility in this

subculture through an appeal to the uncontroversial opinion that *SFII* (1991) is widely considered to be the finest and purest version of the game. Donna's master nodded sagely.[1]

After that exchange, I spent quite some time wondering what my answer to that question might have been. What is the most important thing I've learned in the last five years? What was the most important thing I learned at university? Donna's answer made me look back at my time at university with new eyes, and I realized that I'd spent quite a lot of my time there trying to master the PlayStation classics, *Soul Blade* (1996) and *Bushido Blade* (1997).[2] By then, I had already spent more time than I should admit with *SFII* on my Atari ST (1992), and I clearly remember spending alarming amounts of time on it in graduate school when it was re-released for the PlayStation in 1998, competing only with the much maligned *Fighters Destiny* on the N64 (1998). I think public opinion of Oxford might be quite transformed if it were more widely known how many of its DPhil students could throw a *hadōken* (wave motion fist). Some of the people I have loved most are those with whom I played these confrontational, violent games, striving to overcome them through a gymnastic combination of thumbs, fingers, and virtual projection.

Looking back, I also realized that my engagement with these games meant something more to me than procrastination or even fun (although I can't deny elements of both). For me, they were embedded in various other cultural practices, including the martial arts themselves (of which I was already a long-time student and teacher). Indeed, in some ways, these games form part of my consciousness of what the martial arts *mean*. Just as popular representations of the martial arts in movies and other media have worked to transform public perceptions and private practices of the martial arts in the contemporary period, especially after the emergence of Bruce Lee,[3] so *Street Fighter*, *Bushido Blade*, and *Soul Blade* have worked their way into my particular imagination of the significance and meaning of the martial arts.

This is not to say that I have realized that Donna's answer to my question is also my answer; it is not. However, her answer enabled me to realize that I have learned a surprising amount from my engagement with these games, some of which I think is probably important. More than this, though, I realize that there is a sense in which Donna's answer is itself one of the most important things I've learned in the last few years: this incident taught me that *for this particular student* at an elite

university, *Street Fighter* was more important to her view of the world than Kant's *Third Critique* or Plato's *Republic*. *Street Fighter* gave her insights into how to live the Good Life that she had not found in the texts of the various dead, white, European males that filled her Philosophy syllabus. This in itself, it seems to me, is extremely interesting and important – worthy, at least, of some investigation.

In some ways, Donna's insight sounds echoes of one of my own formative experiences as an undergraduate at Cambridge, where I had the temerity (or perhaps naïveté) to ask one of the wondrously erudite and impressive professors of political philosophy, 'I'm really interested in the ideas of non-European thinkers – when do we get to do read them?' The professor in question looked at me with the same kind of quizzically blank face that I had probably performed for Donna, but then he mustered his dignity and said simply: 'Young man, we won't.'

## PHILOSOPHY IN THE FLESH

I owe that professor a great deal. That moment was a genuine epiphany for me, and I left that lecture theatre into an entirely different world, in which stakes in the politics of knowledge were suddenly writ large in all the books and media I encountered. From that time onwards, my work has always been concerned with exploring the ways in which different philosophical traditions from around the world can speak with each other, across boundaries and frontiers, in the interests of creating new insights that might not have been available to any of them in isolation (even if such isolation were possible, which it isn't).

Donna's confession about *Street Fighter IV* underlines the way in which these frontiers are so dynamic and fluid. Comparative Philosophy can no longer claim to be an open discipline if it is closed around textual sources. A new frontier emerges around the sites of the gamic, the digital, and the virtual, sometimes in complex interdependence with the geo-cultural, linguistic, and historical boundaries that we recognize so readily.

In fact, it becomes clear very quickly that some traditions of thought have always been open to the possibility that knowledge (and thought itself) is found, performed, expressed, and given substance beyond the textual. For instance, we find 'philosophy in the flesh' in various times and places[4] emphasizing the fundamental importance of the body and

embodiment as basic aspects of the constitution of human knowledge
and thinking. One example would be non-dualistic philosophical sys-
tems, such as (but not only) those inspired by Buddhist principles,
which are generally open to (and even take for granted) ideas about
embodied consciousness. In Western modernity, however, this approach
has been severely deprivileged as the idea of scientific knowledge has
revolved around purely mental processes and rational abstractions. As
thinkers such as Weber, Foucault, and Derrida have lamented, the body
has become de-cognified and partially unthinkable, except as an object
detached from the self; our bodies are not involved in our thinking, but
they are suitable as objects for our mental inquiry.

In recent years, one of the expeditions around these borderlands
has emerged from the study of the martial arts. So-called Martial Arts
Studies, pioneered by critical and imaginative interdisciplinary schol-
ars such as Paul Bowman, has drawn direct attention to the myriad
ways in which the martial arts are disruptive of traditional disciplinary
boundaries (in the modern university). In particular, the martial arts
*qua* practice rely upon notions of embodied knowledge and theories
of self-transformation that do not fit neatly into any single modern
academic field; the study of the martial arts is scattered across many
disciplines (psychology, anthropology, philosophy, religious studies,
area studies, cultural studies, media studies, sports studies, etc.) and,
vitally, also encompasses the *practice* of the martial arts themselves.
Bowman positions the promise of Martial Arts Studies as a radical yet
inclusive gesture that seeks to shepherd together the kinds of knowledge
that scholars from various disciplines already recognize, but then also
pushes this flock towards the possibility of new kinds of knowledge and
thinking that have previously had no place to live in the academy.

These kinds of extra- and interdisciplinary insights that explore
the importance of practice and the place of the body in the formula-
tion and substance of knowledge resonate closely with some of the
possibilities represented by human engagement with videogames,
where so-called locomotor skills are often overlooked as fundamental
to such engagement. Indeed, martial arts games (MAVs) like *Street
Fighter*, *Mortal Kombat*, and *Tekken* place uniquely high emphasis on
mastering incredibly complex and intricate control schemes, requiring
delicate and precise physical dexterity; their emphasis on locomotor
skills is both substantial and substantive. Not only that, but the emerg-
ing literature of Martial Arts Studies also showcases the importance

of bodies of philosophy and theory from Asian traditions of thought, with many (but not all) of the most elaborate and sophisticated systems emerging from the historical traditions of East Asia in particular. This aesthetic, philosophical, historical, and practical association with the idea of Asia – which we might in turn associate with the ideology of Orientalism – also emerges in the culture of MAVs like *Street Fighter*.

At the outset, then, it seems that there are some intriguing (and perhaps even compelling) reasons to frame an inquiry into Donna's engagement with *Street Fighter IV* as a sojourn into Martial Arts Stud-ies. Of course, there are some significant obstacles to this move, so the step is not simple, but it is tantalizing. One of the most tantalizing prospects is that, like the traditional martial arts themselves, it seems plausible that Donna has engaged with *Street Fighter IV* as a kind of *practitioner* who has drawn from her practice a form of life philosophy that she was unable to find elsewhere. She believed that practising *Street Fighter* had made her into a better person (whatever that might mean), just as many martial artists insist that practising *Karate-dō* or *Kung-fu* transforms them into wiser and more ethical people. Both cases reside in similar ideological standpoints, wherein properly disciplined and motivated practice can enable self-transformation and access to forms of (embodied) knowledge that would otherwise be inaccessible or even inconceivable.

One of the important provisos that arises from this insight is the for-mative role of intentionality in its ideological structure. That is, in gen-eral, martial artists do not attempt to argue that *everyone* who practises, say, *Hapkido* will be transformed by this practice into a more sagely human being (although I have known *Aikidō-ka* who insist that simply practising *Aikidō* specifically is sufficient to affect such a transforma-tion in the end). Instead, the argument is usually formulated around a conditional: if approached with the right mentality, motivation, and ethic, then the disciplined practice of *Wing Chun* will not only trans-form an individual into a more effective fighter but also into a better person. Hence, while practice in the martial arts may be a *necessary* factor in such a transformation of the self, it is not a *sufficient* factor. It can't be denied that some talented and highly competent martial artists are awful people.

Likewise, Donna's case for her self-transformation via disciplined practice of *Street Fighter IV* was not an attempt to argue that *everyone* who puts a certain amount of time and effort (and money) into the game

would automatically become a sage. Instead, she wanted me to understand that she had been able to tend towards her self-transformation at least partially because of the way that her attitude about virtual combat was already one of self-cultivation. That is, *Street Fighter IV* had been the means through which her intentionality was exercised and guided into a disciplined self-transformation. Her practice combined intention with action.

When pressed a little on this, Donna freely acknowledged that her intentionality in this regard had been pre-conditioned by her exposure to martial arts movies (especially Bruce Lee, but also the anime tie-in movies that form part of the *Street Fighter* media-mix franchise), by *Star Wars* (especially the figure of the Jedi) and then by the practical example of Kn1ght5 (the self-deprecating 'master' on whom she had spilled her Cola at graduation). It turned out that Kn1ght5 had been a semi-professional *Street Fighter Alpha 3* (1998) player, but he had quit the circuit in something like disgust when he eventually realized that many of the tournament players 'played only to win', and without any sense of 'artistry or honour'.[5] For him, and for the little stable of players who looked up to him as an exemplar, there was an important and real difference between becoming a strong player and becoming a master via playing. The quest for mastery – where this entailed a constellation of ideas orbiting around the notion of self-mastery, familiar to any number of martial arts narratives – only intersected with (and was not identical to) the quest for victory. Kn1ght5's concerns for the integrity of *Street Fighter* qua e-sport closely echo the laments of many traditionalist martial artists, who complain that commerce and competition have de-natured the martial arts by rendering them into sports and thus changed their fundamental nature. Such martial artists run *dōjō* along (apparently) traditional lines, emphasizing spiritual development and the forging of discipline and moral energy in the face of genuine physical danger.

The point here is not supposed to be that mastering *Street Fighter* and mastering Taekwondo are identical accomplishments – such a claim would be manifestly ridiculous in many ways. Perfecting the iconic *shōryūken* (rising dragon fist) with Ken or Ryū does not enable you to perform it in real life when someone takes a swing at you in the park; winning the *Street Fighter* tournament in the annual Evolution Championships does not mean that you could fight your way out of the proverbial wet paper bag in the 'real' world.[6] To be clear, then, there should

be no pretence that martial arts videogames are *simulations* of the martial arts, nor thence that mastery of the simulation is closely related to mastering the simulated. MAVs are not training aids for *Capoeira* students. Rather, it seems that we're interested in exploring the extent to which MAVs are a form of *simulacrum* in the postmodern sense – they are martial arts in their own right, standing for nothing other than themselves. Indeed, there seems to be something about the meaning and nature of the idea of 'mastery' itself that can be shared across these disciplinary accomplishments, uniting them into some form of family resemblance. Mastery appears to emerge as a special quality of ethical self-transformation that results from skilful practices that are properly intentioned, rigorously disciplined, and martially oriented.

## MARTIAL ARTS AS DISCOURSE

Tantalizing as these possibilities might be, they raise any number of questions and objections. For instance, could the same argument about mastery also be made about any (or even every) other disciplined activity? Is this simply a re-discovery of the 'Zen and the art of X' fashion that was sparked by Robert Pirsig's (1974) generation-defining re-appropriation of Zen in 1970s California, which was in turn a re-discovery of a much older tradition of inquiry at the intersection between *bushidō* (the way of the warrior) and Zen in Japanese intellectual history?[7] In a less expansive way, are the claims being made about *Street Fighter* and MAVs more generally equally applicable to other genres of videogames – what's so special about MAVs?

The potential answers to such questions are many and varied, as we will see, but the one I'd like to propose at the outset of this project is that part of the appeal of the *Virtual Ninja Project* from the start was the aesthetic and even poetic confluence of the martial arts and martial arts games. That is, this project has not primarily been interested in examining whether or not martial arts masters or *Street Fighter* masters are *really* transformed by their training (whatsoever that might mean) but rather it has focused on the question of how such training has been signified, evaluated, and represented in the relevant communities and subcultures. In these terms, we quite readily come across narrative, aesthetic, ethical and ideological affinities in the twin (and intersecting) discourses.