

# Playing with Being in Digital Asia: Gamic Orientalism and the Virtual *Dōjō*

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## Abstract

Seeking to address the general question, ‘Where is Digital Asia?’, this paper explores the various ways in which the digital and virtual realm interacts with the problematic and contested category of Asia. Beginning with a discussion of the relationship between Asia and Digital Asia, as both cartographic and ideological sites, it moves on to connect Digital Asia with the discourse of techno-Orientalism. Using the example of the videogame as an instance of a digital location that can be visited and explored, this article suggests that the gamic quality of interactivity adds a new, experiential dimension to the ideological structure of (techno-)Orientalism, hence positing the utility of a new form of ‘Gamic Orientalism’. Focussing on the ‘digital *dōjō*’ as the site of Gamic Orientalism and Digital Asia *par excellence*, this paper concludes with a discussion of the ways in which gamers represent their engagement with this site in a manner that echoes the way martial artists talk about the significance of their art as self-cultivation. Illustrated with texts from the *bushidō* canon and interviews with gamers, this playful and experimental piece posits the possibility of ‘virtual *bushidō*’ as the ultimate expression of Gamic Orientalism, suggesting that Digital Asia is finally located in an ideologically conditioned mode of engagement with the digital medium rather than in any cartographically defined space.

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## Keywords

digital worlds – embodiment – Gamic Orientalism – martial arts – techno-Orientalism – Videogames – Zen

## Illustration A

*It's difficult to explain. I don't really think about what I'm doing, you know? I just sort of do it. I watch the other guy's sword and his stance and then it's like [...] phsssst, you know? Sometimes he's dead even before he's even finished his cut. And I'm just standing there, sword already back in its sheath. It's awesome. I guess I've been practicing for so long that it just kind of happens by itself [...] I don't need to think about it, and certainly not about my thumbs – if you're worried about your thumbs it's all already over. If anything, it's just his sword in my mind, and as soon as it's about to move I just kill him. That's it.*

RAIDEN\_NUT7, Colorado, USA. 13 July 2012 [discussing *Bushidō Blade*].

*The most important strike of no-thought is when, facing off against your opponent [...] your body becomes the striking body, your mind the striking mind, and a powerful strike of your hand emerges from nothing and leaves no trace.*

MİYAMOTO MUSASHI (1985: 58-9), Kyushu, Japan, 1645 [discussing swordsmanship].

## 1 Asia and Digital Asia

Asia is a contested site in multiple ways. Despite its conventional use to indicate a vast (if historically variable) geographical area, it is not at all clear that it refers primarily to 'a cartographic index' (Sakai 2000: 790). It is even less clear that we can or should talk about the residents of this cartographic zone as 'Asians', and still less evident that those residents should or would identify themselves with this label. The cultural, political, and ethical force of the appellations 'you Asians' and 'we Asians' is volatile and intricate. If anything, the alleged site of Digital Asia and especially the concomitant idea of 'Digital Asians' seems even more problematic.

The politics of 'Asia' is inextricably bound to the colonial history of the term itself. It is well known that 'Asia' was coined to label the zones outside conventional European experience. Asia and Alien tend together at this 'science

fictional frontier' – the site of *othering* experience and knowledge (Goto-Jones 2009). As Sakai insists, 'one can never overlook the particular genealogy of Asia, that the name *Asia* originated outside Asia, and that its heteronomous origin is indubitably inscribed in the concept of Asia, even if it can by no means be taken as a geographic or cartographic locality' (2000: 791).

In other words, while it may no longer be the case (at least in principle) that twenty-first century Asia is subjugated to the dominance of the so-called West, the logic of this artificial binary remains rooted in a politics of imperialism. It is naïve to affect a reading of 'Asia' that is amnesiac about its conceptual history: the historical alienation and the 'colonization of Asia by the West is not something accidental to the essence of Asia; it is essential to the possibility called Asia' (ibid.). Hence, we must be alert to the possibility that 'Digital Asia' is a similar imposition of the ostensible 'centre' on an imagined periphery; in an echo of Sakai's provocative phrasing, we must ask whether the finger pointing towards an imagined marginality proclaims and perhaps creates 'you Digital Asians' or whether there is a locus of power energizing a call for 'we Digital Asians'.

Like 'Asia' (and perhaps continuously with it), it seems that 'Digital Asia' risks remaining embedded in the dilemmas of post-colonialism. If it is already difficult to 'talk about Asia positively', since it is comprised largely of negations rather than any coherent 'immanent principle with which to identify its internal unity' (Sakai 2000: 793,792), we might suppose that it is even more difficult to identify 'Digital Asia' in any sense other than the artificial and imposed. That is, either it represents an extension of the distancing mechanism that identifies the unfamiliar with the non-Western or Asian, or it represents the re-inscribing of this mechanism in a new media paradigm. One of the particular aspects of Digital Asia that makes this interpretation seem compelling is the apparent absence of an obvious place to look for voices proclaiming 'we Digital Asians' – assuming that any such voices should properly emerge from Digital Asia itself, rather than from some version of an Analogue Asia laying claim to this label as a new aspect of its existing identity.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the post-colonial dilemma is provoked.

In fact, this digital and virtual paradigm seems even more ill-suited to the maintenance of distinctively bounded ethnic-cultural products than the historical and analogue paradigm – that is, there appears to be rather little

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1 In consistent terms, this latter call would actually be: 'we Asians are Digital' rather than 'we Digital Asians'. The first is a descriptive claim (albeit resting on the prior agentic claim, 'We Asians'), while the second is a claim for agency. It is the second that interests me in this argument.

solid ground on which ‘we Digital Asians’ might take a stand. This category is quite literally immaterial, which has led some to construct it as an abstract aesthetic – as though Digital Asia were an aesthetic expression of an already established historical (and presumably analogue) Asia – a high-tech commodity with the aroma of Asia, if you like. However, as Iwabuchi (2002) has argued so persuasively, even the aroma of ‘Japaneseness’ that surrounds staples of techno-Asianism such as anime, manga, and digital games is without substance, sharing no necessary or sufficient connection with Japan. An implication of this is that the consideration of these products as ‘Japanese’ or ‘Asian’ involves a *political moment*: rather than operating as a descriptive, locative qualifier, ‘Asian’ works evaluatively to (de)privilege particular products as in need of additional (or atypical) analytic attention. Since, in general, we do not also talk about the ‘Digital West’ (even as a referent for contrast), this imbalance is unusually stark – knowledge of Digital Asia is somehow bounded, bracketed, quarantined. The deployment of ‘Digital Asia’ begins to resemble an attempt at the representation of a zoo – it is an enclosure around *digimon*.<sup>2</sup>

Within this general picture, the particular notion of a so-called ‘Digital Japan’ is an arresting case, especially in the context of the endeavour to avoid historically naïve readings of Asia. Notwithstanding the aggressive stance adopted by imperial Japan towards the appropriation of ‘Asian’ (and especially ‘we Asians’) as an expansionist self-identity for Japan and its empire in the early twentieth century,<sup>3</sup> contemporary Japan has engaged in a high profile and official embrace of ‘Digital Japan’ as a leader of ‘Digital Asia’ throughout the early years of the twenty-first century. Indeed, there has been a rather self-conscious attempt to appropriate an affirmative proclamation, ‘we Digital Asians’, which has been tied to the invention of a particular aesthetic and identity. This ideological architecture can be seen relatively clearly in the rapid development (and global success) of Japan’s tech-industries in the late twentieth century (especially following the so-called ‘digital revolution’) and

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2 *Digimon* – digital monsters. A Japanese media-mix franchise that evolved out of the craze for ‘virtual pets’ (*tamagochi*). The franchise has been controlled by Bandai since its emergence in the late 1990s. *Digimon* live in a digital world that exists alongside the analogue world. The franchise is largely concerned with stories about the permeability of the divide between the virtual and the actual world, typically with children journeying to the digital world for adventures with their tamed *digimon*. In this vision, the boundary between the digital and the analogue world is creatively permeable.

3 There is a wide literature on the imperial construction of the concept of Asia in early twentieth century Japan, much of which focuses on the Kyoto School (Goto-Jones 2005) or Takeuchi Yoshimi (Calichman 2004). A historical account is Hotta (2007).

then the semi-official construction of *kūru Japan* (Cool Japan)<sup>4</sup> in the twenty-first, which represented (at least in part) a deliberate attempt to appropriate an emerging techno-Orientalist discourse about Japan ('you Digital Asians!') as a source of empowerment for the Japanese themselves ('we Digital Asians!'). This kind of reverse- or self-Orientalism fits into a pre-existing ideological discourse in Japan known as *nihonjinron* (essays on Japanese uniqueness), which has its modern origins in the imperial period.<sup>5</sup> The assertiveness of this branding, together with its concomitant global economic success, has led many commentators to frame this ostensible commodity capitalism as a form of 'soft power'.<sup>6</sup> One of the subterranean issues emerging from this is the question of the relationship between this kind of soft power and the (hegemonic) construction of a form of digital regionalism. As Sakai has already noted, one of the chief dangers of constructions such as 'Asia' is the question of who has the power to produce it, and hence also the question of *out of whom* is it produced? Digital Asia cannot free itself from these questions, whether we ask about its determination from without or within.

So, it is at least partially in this complex politico-ethical context that we must consider the notion of 'Digital Asia', which, even more so than historical Asia, struggles with regional or cartographic identification: while we might at least be able to imagine a vague and vast locative expanse of 'Asia' in the material world (thanks to the pervasive conventionality of this pseudo-cartographic term), even our imaginations struggle to create a commensurate territory for Digital Asia. Asking 'where?' in relation to Digital Asia seems to demand a referent shift that approaches the transdimensional.

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4 'Cool Japan' has been adopted as a 'brand' for Japan by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2002 as well as the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, which referred to Cool Japan as a long-term concept designed to coordinate the efforts of different government offices, ministries, and private corporations when it established the Creative Industries Promotion Office in June 2010. The concept is focussed on Japan's creative industries in general (both analogue and digital, and the mixture of the two), but central to these are the 'digital' fields of video-games, anime, and even manga. Indeed, the *New York Times* coined the alternative appellation, 'Pokemon Hegemon', drawing the connection between these various digital mix-media very clearly (Talbot 2002), and also indicating the implications for Japan's emerging status soft-power superpower.

5 Despite or perhaps because of the tremendous controversy occasioned by it, the classic study of *nihonjinron* in English remains Peter Dale (1986).

6 The concept of 'soft power' has been widely debated in the literature of International Relations. A seminal work is Nye (2004), but explicit attempts to understand Japan and Asia through this lens would be Vyas (2013), Sun (2012), and Watanabe & McConnell (2008).

An interesting thought experiment might be to consider what it would mean to visit Digital Asia. What kinds of resources could be drawn upon in order to imagine this journey or this destination? To what extent does it make sense to imagine this 'where?' as signifying a cartographic question, like 'where is Japan?' or 'where is my cat?' How would we know when we arrived? Are we there now (wherever else we might be)?

While it does seem plausible that there is indeed a cartographic sense of 'where?' that makes sense in the digital realm, at least in so far as we can meaningfully talk about travel in/to virtual worlds (Goto-Jones 2014), as we have seen, it remains deeply unclear what criteria such worlds would have to exhibit in order for them to form part of a region meaningfully called 'Digital Asia'. The relationship between Digital Asia and Asia is problematic, and the meaning of Asia itself is already essentially contested; being able to visit a digital place does not immediately mean that we can (or should) identify such a place as Digital Asia, or that doing so would necessarily rely on locative criteria.

In this context, there are at least two possible sources of identity criteria. One of them is aesthetic or representative: to what extent does the digital place in question resemble our expectations about Digital Asianness (whatsoever that might mean)? This question contains a basic ambiguity: is the pertinent aesthetic quality 'Digital Asianness' or 'Asianness in a digital mode'? In either case, this emphasis on aesthetic criteria brings us into the domain of the politics of representation and Orientalism. This means that Digital Asia not only resembles a 'fictive ethnicity' in the sense developed by Balibar (2002: 96), but it also transgresses the terrain of techno-Orientalism (Morley & Robins, 1995; Ueno 1996), which we will discuss in the next section. An emphasis on representation raises the possibility that visiting 'Digital Asia' might locate us in a site that has never involved 'Asia' or 'Asians' at all.

A second possible source of the identity of this virtual place is origination: to what extent was this digital place produced, constructed, or owned by agents whom we recognize as 'Asian'? This question establishes a clear hierarchy in which Digital Asia is a product of Analogue Asia, and hence identifies the Asianness of the product with Asia itself (whatsoever that might be) and reduces the 'digital' to a medium through which Asia emerges. Aside from this issue of dependency, use of this criterion suggests that the identity of Digital Asia cannot be ascertained through our experience of the place itself, but only through our knowledge of the analogue, historical process through which it was created. In other words, Digital Asianness is experientially null; we could be in Digital Asia without ever being aware of it.

The possibility that Digital Asia might be a meaningful *experience* suggests a third possible source of identity criteria, which is uniquely suited to the

medium in question. Rather than being a location in the cartographic sense, Digital Asia might be considered a *quality of experience*. In particular, given that we are concerned with our presence in an interactive location, this quality might be not only aesthetic but also somatic – somaesthetic.<sup>7</sup> The meaning of Digital Asia could be contained in a particular somaesthetic quality; when we ask ‘where’ we might find Digital Asia, then, the answer could be ‘here’, embodied within us. This will be discussed in section three, below.

So, there is a sense in which ‘Digital Asia’, like Asia itself, signifies something other than nationality, race, ethnic culture, or even virtual geography; it is also (or instead) a matter of cultural capital. To some extent, this category refers to a standpoint – similar to what Sakai calls the ‘voyeuristic optic’ – expressing engagement with ‘an alluring fantasy’ (Sakai 2000: 797), rather than labelling an objective or cartographically predictable space. When we speak of ‘Digital Asia’ as a location or a site, therefore, we are (at least also) speaking of an ideological standpoint – it is the site of the subject into which the object is inscribed. In this digital case, the ‘alluring fantasy’ is not only the projection of representations that we see in static media but also the *fantasy of becoming*, which becomes embodied in the interactivity of a virtual, digital place.

## Illustration B

*There’s this famous moment in Ninja Gaiden, right, when there are so many enemies that the console almost gives up, like it can’t cope with the action, like the fight is making the whole world fall apart.<sup>8</sup> It’s cool because you just don’t have time to think, you just move. You’ve got to deal with one then the next, jumping and spinning between all of the bad guys, right? You can’t just focus on one of them, like in a normal fight. You’ve got to be fluid and let your*

7 The field of somaesthetics is closely associated with the ‘philosophy as a way of life’ movement, rejuvenated by Pierre Hadot (1995) but specifically as developed by Shusterman (2008).

8 Gokui23 appears to be talking about a notorious moment in the Xbox 360 version of *Ninja Gaiden II* (2008) in which the hero (Ryu Hayabasa) reaches the top of a staircase to find a dozen enemy ninja lying in wait. As Ryu cuts through them, more and more arrive until the demands on the Xbox exceed its power, such that the framerate collapses and the scene staggers into slow-motion. Microsoft eventually patched the software to reduce the number of enemy ninja in the scene, which caused consternation amongst the game’s most devoted fans. For *Edge* magazine (November 2014: 81), this was one of the ‘10 standout moments’ of the Xbox360/PS3 generation of games.

*mind go. Don't fixate, move! Like Bruce said: be like water!*<sup>9</sup> Then you have a chance, otherwise you've had it. Of course, some guys just mash the buttons and hope, not thinking at all [...].

GOKU123, London, UK. 7 January 2011 [discussing *Ninja Gaiden II*].

*For example, it happens that ten enemies each with a sword come at you hurling abuse; at that point, if you fend off each sword without leaving your mind behind as it was in those actions, while you fend off in the same way each sword as it strikes at you, you should be able to fight back splendidly against each and every one of the ten. Although you move your mind ten times to confront ten people, if you don't stop your mind on any single one of them, you will be able to respond to whichever enemy. But if it's the case that your mind is brought to a halt before one of the enemies, even if it's possible to fend off that person's sword, when the next enemy confronts you it will transpire that the appropriate response is completely lost to you.*

TAKUAN SOHO (1970: 31-2), Edo, Japan. Early seventeenth century [discussing swordsmanship].

## 2 Digital Asia and Techno-Orientalism

Given the complexities of locating Digital Asia, it is important to take a little time to differentiate between at least two senses of this term: the first establishes a material connection between particular digital products and their creation or manufacture in Asia; the second establishes an aesthetic or ideological connection between particular products and the idea of a Digital Asia. We might link these different standpoints via an interrogative triple-jump: from where is this digital product (Asia)?; in what way is its origin (in Asia) significant to our experience of the digital product itself?; to what extent do those (Asian) characteristics rely on the digital product having originated in a particular location (Asia)? There is also a possible twist to the landing of

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9 Goku123 appears to be referencing the famous Bruce Lee quotation: 'Don't get set into one form, adapt it and build your own, and let it grow, be like water. Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless – like water. Now you put water in a cup, it becomes the cup; you put water into a bottle it becomes the bottle; you put it in a teapot it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend.' Lee expressed similar sentiments (which are familiar tropes of martial arts literature and philosophy) in various places. This version is from the documentary, *Bruce Lee: A Warrior's Journey* (2000).



this triple-jump: to what extent are the answers to these questions dependent upon whether or not we identify ourselves as Asians?

In practice, the space between these standpoints is rather elastic, and it is precisely this elasticity that enables the range of cartographic, aesthetic, and ethical possibilities contained in 'Digital Asia'. At one end of this tension-scale we might explore the possibility of visiting the Digital Asia found in the products of Asian companies such as Nintendo, Namco, Blueside, or NetDragon, even though many of the digital environments of their games are not explicitly themed as 'Asian'.<sup>10</sup> At the other end of the scale we might imagine the possibility of visiting Digital Asia in the products of non-Asian companies that seek to depict Asia (or even the 'feeling of Asia'), such as Ninja Theory's 'Enslaved: Odyssey to the West' or Eidos Montreal's 'Deus Ex: Human Revolution'.<sup>11</sup> In between there is the expanse filled with locations characterized by both their origins in Asia and their explicitly Asian content, such as Tecmo's 'Ninja Gaiden', Square Enix's 'The World Ends with You', NCSOFT's 'Blade and Soul', or NetEase's 'Revelation'.<sup>12</sup>

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- 10 Nintendo is the world's largest videogames company by revenue; it is based in Kyoto, Japan. Namco is a Japanese videogame developer and publisher based in Tokyo – it is now part of the Bandai Namco group. Blueside is a successful Korean games developer based in Seoul. NetDragon is a leading Chinese game design and development studio based in Fuzhou, specializing in online games.
- 11 Ninja Theory is a UK videogame development studio based in Cambridge. Its acclaimed 2010 arcade adventure game, 'Enslaved: Odyssey to the West', is a re-imagining of the classic Chinese novel by Wu Cheng'en (1592), 'Journey to the West' (the game was distributed by Bandai). Eidos Montreal is a Canadian videogame development studio based in Montreal (now owned by Square Enix Europe, a subsidiary of Square Enix). Its acclaimed 2011 first-person action role-playing game, 'Deus Ex: Human Revolution', is set in a futuristic vision of China (the game was distributed by Square Enix).
- 12 'Ninja Gaiden' is a series of games developed by Team Ninja of Tecmo (now Tecmo Koei Games), based in Tokyo, Japan. The series began in 1988; it revolves around the exploits of a ninja in a Japanese setting. 'The World Ends with You' is a JRPG (Japanese Role-Playing Game) developed by Square Enix's Kingdom Hearts team. It was released in 2007 in Japan; the action takes place in the shopping district of Shibuya, Tokyo. 'Blade and Soul' is a Korean fantasy, martial arts MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) developed by NCSOFT (Seoul) in 2012 for release in Korea (2012), China (2013), and Japan (2014) – although NCSOFT has subsidiaries in Europe and the US, no Western release has yet been confirmed. 'Revelation' is a hotly anticipated OMMORPG (Oriental Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) developed by NetEase (China's second largest online game's company); due for release in 2014, the game is set in a fantastical vision of classical China.

In practice, the variety of experiences encompassed within this elastic range is huge. Indeed, we might consider it too inclusive to have any meaning at all. Even if 'Digital Asia' includes only the sites at the 'origination' end of the scale, it would immediately include (amongst hundreds of others) *Pokemon* (Nintendo), *Tekken* (Namco), *Kingdom Under Fire* (Blueside), and *Heroes of Might and Magic Online* (NetDragon); hence, it already includes cartoonish super-cuteness in a magical-realist contemporary setting of undetermined specificity, stylized and science-fictional martial arts in a post-apocalyptic setting with a fantastical Asian flavour, and Tolkienesque high fantasy in the classical European mode. In other words, we immediately encounter the same problem with Digital Asia as Sakai (and others) have observed with Asia itself – it is difficult to talk positively about Digital Asia as a site of origination because it lacks any coherent or 'immanent principle with which to identify its internal unity' (Sakai 2000: 792). Instead, we are left to assert the unity of Digital Asia through recourse to factors external to the digital locations in which we are interested, forming it ourselves with our voyeuristic eye.

This is another way of saying that, no matter who we are, we all bring with us various expectations about what Digital Asia will feel like when we go in search of it, just like travellers to Analogue Asia. Indeed, one of the great contributions of Edward Said's theory of *Orientalism* (1977) was to draw our attention to the ways in which we rarely encounter an Other naively; the quality, significance, and meaning of our encounter is mediated by our pre-existing expectations of that Other, which we may have drawn from particular cultural artefacts (a specific novel, travelogue, textbook, or movie) or from a less specific, general cultural atmosphere. For Said, the Orient was the archetypal case, but for us today we might consider Digital Asia in the same light.

In other words, when we look for an encounter in Digital Asia, we already have a sense of what this will mean and what it should feel like. The reverse of this is also true: when we encounter something that we are told is Digital Asia, even though it does not conform to our expectations, we resist – this requires a complex, active response from us. If we are told that a video-game set in the American 'Wild West' is part of Digital Asia because it was designed, developed, and produced in Japan, we are likely to resist by saying that it is not *really* Japanese.<sup>13</sup> It does not *feel* or *look* Japanese, whatever this

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13 In practice, especially in the context of the decline of the Japanese games industry in the last decade, these kinds of 'odour-free' games are increasingly on the agenda of Japanese studios, which seek to target wide, international markets. This tendency reveals that 'Japaneseness' is a niche not a mass market. Nevertheless, the role of the global market in the propagation of techno-Orientalism should not be underestimated.

might mean.<sup>14</sup> The *material fact* of its Japaneseness becomes incidental in the face of our ideological commitments.<sup>15</sup> Japaneseness is not a category controlled by Japan, but rather by our idea of Japan (whoever we are). This idea of Japan appears to be sustained and propagated by global capitalism rather than any particular national entity.

So, when we are talking about Digital Asia, leaping across our triple-jump away from questions of origination and towards questions of representation, what kinds of expectations do we bring with us? Specifically, for our purposes here, what are the unique representations that explicitly connect Asia and the digital?<sup>16</sup>

The popular imagination of the relationship between Asia and technology has an intricate history. Indeed, this relationship has shifted significantly since the 1980s – since the so-called digital revolution. As Sohn (2008: 8) observes, ‘in traditional Orientalism, the East is often configured as backwards, anti-progressive, and primitive,’ while the imagination of techno-Orientalism in the digital mode often portrays Asia (and especially Japan) as so progressive and advanced that it begins to resemble a vision of the future itself.<sup>17</sup>

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14 The possibility of a meaningful difference between how a product *looks* and how it *feels*, particularly in the context of games, will be considered in the next section.

15 The politics of knowledge involved in the interaction between these kinds of knowledge are deeply complex and much discussed. Under what circumstances does our confrontation with material reality lead us to change our ideas? The reverse of this might be so-called ‘Paris Syndrome’, which is a documented condition experienced by some Japanese travellers to Paris when they are confronted with the discrepancy between their expectations of the great romantic city and the reality of a modern urban metropolis. To some extent, this is the perennial mission of critical Area Studies, informed by Said’s Orientalism (to confront romantic and inaccurate representations).

16 Hence, this concept of Digital Asia does not seek to include all possible representations of Asia expressed in the digital medium (such as, for instance, Japanese kawaii culture in digital environments), but instead focusses on representations of ‘Digital Asia’ itself as a marker for expectations. So, it is possible that this formulation represents a subset of a larger overall picture.

17 Sohn also notes that it would be a mistake to see this apparent re-evaluation of Asia as a genuine inversion of the generally derogative framework of Orientalism. He notes, for instance, that together with this depiction of Asians as technologically advanced has come the assertion of a retarded sense of human development in Asia – Asians begin to resemble technologized non-humans. ‘Even as these Alien/Asians conduct themselves with superb technological efficiency and capitalist expertise, their affectual absence resonates as an undeveloped or, worse still, a retrograde humanism.’ (2008: 8). In this way, according to Ueno (2002: 94), techno-Orientalism enables the West to maintain a stable sense of political superiority in the age of cybersociety. Morely & Robbins

These kinds of images rely on popular representations of Asia in modern classics of science fiction, particularly those that participate in the cyberpunk movement since the 1980s. This movement is associated with writers such as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and the editor Gardner Dozois. In the context of the digital revolution and the rapid emergence of the Japanese bubble economy, visions of the future began to take on a distinctly East Asian visage, with Ridley Scott's sci-fi masterpiece, *Blade Runner* (1982), setting an early standard. Shortly afterwards, Gibson's acclaimed *Neuromancer* (1984) contained some powerful Japanese imagery, portraying a future tinged with Japaneseness: the microchip that makes everything possible carries a Japanese name, 'Hosaka'; the best computer equipment is manufactured by Ono-Sendai Cyberspace 7; and key characters (including the cybernetically enhanced and genetically engineered super-ninja, Hideo) have clear Japanese origins. By the time of Gibson's *Idoru* (1996), which is explicitly set in a vision of Japan that is simultaneously represented as a futurity (for the West) and as a fantastical version of contemporary Japan, cyberpunk's involvement in techno-Orientalism was firmly established as a convention of the genre. Later products, such as Neal Stephenson's seminal *Snow Crash* (1992) or the Wachowski Brother's influential *Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003, 2003) participate in similar conventions.

To some extent, it could be argued that Digital Asia not only becomes a surface on which the future anxieties of the West are projected, but 'one can see that this phenomenon operates again within a frame of the perceived threat the so-called East presents to the West' (Sohn 2008: 7). Indeed, this is one of the ways in which techno-Orientalism is a continuation of the Orientalism that Said observed in the 1970s. In fact, the genre of science fiction in the early- and mid-twentieth century (i.e. in the pre-digital age) explicitly participates in the generation of representations of Asia as a threat. In general, this threat is from an analogue Asia that represents a real and present danger to the material existence of the West, not a digital threat to the soul of the future. Classic examples would include ground-breaking comic strips such as Philip Francis Nowlan's *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* (which was the first comic strip in US history, starting on 7 January 1929) or Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* (beginning 7 January 1934), which depicts an America at risk of being overrun by the Red Mongols under the dastardly, dictatorial rule of Emperor Ming the Merciless – standing in his way was the eponymous American hero, the quarterback of the New York Jets.

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(1995: 170) agree, arguing that the contemporary political unconscious of the West has rendered Japan as the 'figure of empty and dehumanized technological power [...] the alienated and dystopian image of capitalist progress.'

However, perhaps the most remarkable of these prewar and pre-digital texts is the *Sixth Column* (1949) by Robert Heinlein, which was originally serialized in *Astounding Science Fiction* in January, February, and March of 1941 (nine months before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor). Heinlein depicts the invasion of the United States by a force of 'PanAsians', whom he identifies as a mix of Japanese and Chinese. The Americans defend themselves through recourse to a special 'ray weapon' that could be adjusted so that it would only damage people of a specific race.<sup>18</sup>

One of the key differences between the representations of a futuristic (but analogue) Asia in this 'Golden Age' of science fiction and the depictions of Digital Asia that we find in the 'New Wave' of cyberpunk is the way in which the physical body is relatively de-emphasized after the digital turn – the idea of a material, embodied threat is diminished. For most commentators this is about the shift 'from outer to inner space' associated with the New Wave, enabled by the digital imagination of a forthcoming singularity (Latham 2012). However, to some extent, this is also about the shifting parameters of the politics of racism across the twentieth century, about the ways in which digital technologies transform the idea of the physical and the embodied as well as the idea of location or place.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Chun (2003: 18) talks about 'twin obsessions' of cyberpunk as the Orient and the idea of digital-, virtual-, or cyberspace – enabling 'us' to 'envision the world as exotic and as data' at the same time.<sup>20</sup> The issues are not only those of realpolitik; Digital Asians in Digital

18 In many ways, Heinlein's novel is an intriguing window into American fears about Japan's imperial expansion and its proposed Co-Prosperity Sphere. As one of the most influential voices in American sci-fi, Heinlein's portrayal of the 'PanAsiatics' has been extremely controversial, and it has been variously condemned and praised for its engagement with the volatile race-politics of the time. On the one hand, critics have accused Heinlein himself of buying into American chauvinism and anti-Japanese propaganda during the early 1940s. On the other hand, Heinlein and others have argued that his purpose was anti-racist, and that his text was an attack on Japanese and US racism at the time. Whatever the actual force of this book, the historical interest of *Sixth Column* vastly outweighs its literary quality, which even Heinlein himself lamented.

19 As Sohn (2008) and others (Chun 2006) have pointed out, it would be naïve to see this shift as an end to representational racism. Instead, it requires the analysis of new vocabulary for our imagination of a racialized future.

20 Chun (2003: 18) talks about the dream of bodiless subjectivity and its intertwining with representivity. She argues that 'since its very inception, then, cyberspace – as Orientalism heterotopia – has perpetuated and relied on differences that it claims to erase.'

The quotation in the body of this article varies between Chun 2003: 18, where it reads: 'enabling her to envision the world as data.' And in an earlier version of the text, Chun 2000, which is the version cited in text here.

Asia exhibit very different existential qualities than Heinlein's PanAsians in China and Japan. For many commentators (Sohn 2008; Ueno 2002; Morley & Robbins 1995), the existential shift in representations of Asia occasioned by the digital revolution can be seen not (only) as a celebration of Asian technological accomplishment but also as a mode of denigration, depicting Digital Asia as cold, culturally empty, and efficiently dehumanized (compared with a warm, open, and humanly inefficient West).<sup>21</sup>

One of the implications of this New Wave of digital representations is that this 'exotic' territory of data is constructed as a new frontier. In her discussion of 'high tech Orientalism', Chun (1998) suggests that this Digital Asian space serves to replace the open racism of early twentieth century science fiction with the idea of a virtual frontier – a new space of adventure and exploration – an apparently closed space waiting to be opened through pioneering spirit, savvy, and courage. Hence, this rendition of Digital Asia seems to sidestep anxiety about the perceived need for a resurgence of a powerful West in the face of the kind of 'yellow peril' depicted during the 'Golden Age' – indeed, Chun appears to have accepted the relative decline of Western power (specifically the decline of the power of Western states and corporations) as a given and as a feature of this new landscape. In its place, the terrain of this Digital Asia is determined by a more complex and nuanced politics of culture: the opportunity for the West in this location is for the individual explorer (whom Chun terms the 'savvy-navigator') to open up and challenge the power of Asian economic structures. In this way, Digital Asia seems to serve as a means to re-identify the West, shifting it from a historical self-identity of political and economic dominance in the world (positioned against a weaker but rising Asia) towards the embrace of a more heroic and individualistic identity: rather than being the centre of geopolitical power in an analogue world, the West becomes a centre of resistance, defiance, and freedom – a focus for the human spirit itself – in the digital world. In this vision, explorers from without visit Digital Asia in order to subvert its dehumanized technocracy from within.<sup>22</sup>

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21 See footnote 17.

22 The shifting balance of power in this conflict of cultural capital also gives Asia itself more influence in the construction of 'Digital Asia'. Indeed, we have seen a number of breakthrough cyberpunk successes from East Asia, most notably from Japan. Modern classics of anime, such as *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), demonstrate clear engagement with these political issues. Not only do they serve to thwart attempts to categorize Digital Asia as a monolithic entity by demonstrating, for instance, Japanese visions of China as technologically primitive, but they also show how Digital Asia speaks back against the West, representing America as technologically inefficient and clumsy, for instance. Here, the content of 'techno-Orientalism' becomes genuinely discursive, manoeuvring between deliberate

The idea that it is the spirit of adventure that characterizes the mode of engagement with Digital Asia provokes further questions about the place of spirit and spirituality in this location. Set against the prevailing representation of Digital Asia as a cold, dehumanized, technological utopia (or dystopia) devoid of the warmth of a humanistic spirit, there is also a powerful counter-current that seeks to suggest that Asian spirituality (whatever this might mean) can provide the solution to the alienation that apparently characterizes the digital realm as a whole. Indeed, to some extent, this kind of engagement with questions of the impact of the digital revolution on spirituality was a core feature of the 'inner space' landscape explored by the New Wave as a whole.

In this respect, it is interesting to consider the classic pair of cyberpunk movies, *Tron* (1982) and *Tron Legacy* (2010), which neatly top and tail the digital age. The former emerged early in the period following the digital revolution; it depicted the passage of a maverick American hero (programmer or 'savvy navigator') into the digital world of a computer mainframe, where he battles against the dictatorial Master Control Program (MCP), which is seeking to perfect its systems by eliminating human influence from them. The digital world is represented with iconic simplicity: straight lines of light defining a vector graphic, wire-frame, sanitized existence. The only moments of life and character come from the personified 'programs' that have been authored by human 'users' and by the human hero himself, who wants nothing more than to escape from this dehumanized realm. The digital world is a kind of culturally void, nihilistic nightmare that contrasts markedly with the all-American 1980s scenes of the world outside the computer.

In *Tron Legacy*, however, the cultural situation has changed. We discover that the human hero of the first film, Kevin Flynn, was marooned in the digital realm (on the 'game grid') between the films – he has been there (presumed dead in the analogue world) for twenty years. While one of the personified computer programs written by Flynn (Clu – the Codified Likeness Utility) has taken over the mainframe in the ongoing mission to create the 'perfect system', Flynn has gone into hiding because the perfect digital system has no place for the emotional, unpredictable qualities of human beings. When we finally re-encounter Flynn, after his son is lured into the digital realm by Clu, we discover that he has survived and even thrived in this nihilistic reality by adopting a form of Zen and spending his time meditating. Our reunion with Flynn even sees him sitting in *zazen* on a cushion, dressed in a stylized, science fictional

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constructions of the digital Other and attempts to (re)appropriate the representation of the digital Self. As we will see, one of the sites of contestation will be the human spirit itself.

version of a male *kimono* and fingering a Zen wrist-mala.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the main threat in *Tron Legacy* is that this (American) computer program will somehow escape the virtual realm into the actual world (America) and seek to colonize it as part of its perfect digital system – in this context, far from being a threat to the West, Digital Asianness is actually the source of hope that this alien(ated) invasion of digital life can be thwarted.<sup>24</sup>

The idea that the digital realm is culturally null but that certain kinds of East Asian spiritual practices can overcome this emptiness is increasingly conventional. It feeds upon the established representations of a minimalist and starkly austere Zen aesthetic, which coincides with similarly stark representations of a vector-drawn digital world. And it relies on the idea that Zen training is a process of eradicating emotion as a means to human betterment (even enlightenment) while the digital world is represented as simply deleting the space of emotional content altogether. To some extent, popular images of Zen in the West have always tended towards nihilism; but after the digital turn this association begins to seem like a way to overcome the apparent nihilism of

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23 In interviews, the director and cast of *Tron Legacy* have been explicit about its attempts to grapple with spiritual questions. Somewhat like *The Matrix*, it contains a mixture of influences from different traditions. However, the East Asian spiritual aesthetic dominates. Jeff Bridges (Kevin Flynn in both *Tron* movies) explains how the intention of the film was to create a modern-day myth to help people navigate their lives through a world transformed by digital technology. He also relates how he brought onboard a Zen master to 'help add some spiritual depth' to the technomythology (cited in Lamar 2010).

24 A possible interpretation of this situation is that the values of the West created the problem and are unable to solve it, leaving the West completely defunct and reliant on Digital Asia.

Interestingly, the idea of 'crossover' between the digital and analogue worlds is further explored in *Tron Legacy*. While it seems relatively straightforward for analogue people ('users') to manifest themselves as programs in the digital realm, presumably because this realm is itself a product of the analogue world, *Legacy* suggests that the opposite movement (digital agents seeking to manifest in the analogue world) would be extremely dangerous. Clu must not be allowed to cross over because his digital mindset will be destructive of human culture and way of life. However, this is because Clu is depicted as the personification of a program and it is intimated that this makes him less than alive, despite being animate and sentient. Flynn discovers a new form of digital life in the form of Quorra – a spontaneous emergence of life in the digital world, not a program. And taking her 'over' into the analogue world becomes a positive aspect of the mission, as though this would be returning life to life rather than leaving her in the digital realm, here synonymous with simulated life and real death.



the digital realm.<sup>25</sup> This idea of Zen (howsoever it relates to Zen itself) mediates the dehumanized, digital terrain, and reinstalls an enlightened human spirit within it; it becomes a source of hope for humanity in a realm devoid of a humanist spirit. Hence, contrary to the assertion that Digital Asia provides an opportunity for the West to reclaim an identity of heroic individualism in the face of dehumanized Asian techno-efficiency, this move to appropriate Zen as the positive spirituality of the digital realm actually suggests that the West has very little to offer at all. Digital Asia can be technologically superior *and* humanistically vital (these turn out not to be mutually exclusive) – visitors from without must be open to the need to adapt to the mores of this location if they want to flourish, remain relevant, or even survive. Rather than representing a shift in the politics of Orientalism, then, techno- or digital-Orientalism appears to act as a re-inscribing of a very familiar trope in which Asia stands in for the lost spirituality of the West in modernity.

Indeed, the status of Asian philosophy and spirituality as a mobilizer of science fiction is well established by Huang (2008). She argues that Zen and Daoism in particular have become place-markers for distancing the science fictional from the world of the voyeur's eye even before the digital revolution. For Huang, the cases of Philip K. Dick (*The Man in the High Castle*, 1962) and Ursula K. LeGuin (*The Lathe of Heaven*, 1971) are instructional; specifically, the ways in which Zen/Daoist philosophies are reduced, deployed, and represented as calls for 'inaction' as a form of action. Huang's position is more critically elegant and constructive than that asserted by Kingsley Amis (1981), who derided the New Wave for its reliance on 1960s fads, the hippie movement, 'obscurities, obscenities, drugs, Oriental religions and left-wing politics.' For Amis, Zelazney's *Lord of Light* (1967) might be indicative of the end of the 'Golden Age' of science fiction precisely because of its engagement with a future dominated by Asia spirituality. Ironically for Amis, only two years after Zelazney's acclaimed novel, one of the truly masterful, literary classics of science fiction, Hermann Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel* (*The Glass Bead Game*, 1969) was finally translated into English. Although originally published in 1943 during Germany's own intoxication with the 'mystic East', the novel speaks powerfully of a future in which East Asian spiritual traditions (especially meditation in the Zen manner) become the backbone of human civilization and progress.

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25 The idea that Zen or other traditions of spiritual philosophy from Japan can help us to overcome the dilemmas of modernity, including nihilism, is a central theme in modern Japanese philosophy, particular in the work of the Kyoto School's Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990).

This science fictional re-figuring of Asia as a spiritually rich alternative to a technologically angst-ridden and culturally defunct West was common to many novels of this postwar period, as well as being an already familiar Orientalist trope in European fiction. In fact, it bled over into the sci-fi boom of the late-1970s and into the 1980s that followed the release of *Star Wars* (1977). For many critics (as well as for George Lucas himself), aspects of the Star Wars galaxy, specifically the mystical 'Jedi Way', were derived from Daoist and Zen philosophies (sometimes with the admixture of Zoroastrianism): we see the Jedi as science fictional warrior-monks, finding mindfulness in meditation, searching for the harmony of no-willed-action, seeking oneness with the energy forces around them, wearing neo-Japanese robes, sword-fighting in the style of *kendō*, and (in the case of Yoda) speaking English in a manner rather reminiscent of Japanese-English. Despite the acclaimed 'Frontier' aesthetic of much of the franchise, it is the Jedi who represent mastery of the technological future through their Asian-inspired spiritual prowess.

Rather than vanishing with the emergence of techno-Orientalism in the 1980s, these pre-New Wave tropes have become increasingly conventional representations of Digital Asia. Indeed, to some extent, cyberpunk's fetish for collapsing consciousness and spirituality into digital technology has given this vision an even crisper and less ambiguous status. Digital Asian spirituality has become aspirational for millions of Westerners (and Asians) as a way to bring meaning and a sense of mastery into their increasingly technologized lives. Digital Asia resembles a recovery of a pre-digital Orientalism in which Asia represents the lost spirituality of the modern West. Ironically, this Digital Asia emerges as a kind of retro-Orientalism.

Popular culture, including the videogames industry, has embraced this quality of Digital Asia as commercially attractive worldwide – not only in the West but also in Asia itself. Countless movies and games seek to blend science fiction and digital technology with a Zen-like spiritual ethos. Catering to the popularity of action and adventure stories, and leaning on the (invented) tradition of *bushidō* and the martial arts, this ethos is often expressed in the person of a martial artist, Jedi, or a 'ninja'.<sup>26</sup> In this scheme, the Digital Asian *par excellence* is the cybernetic ninja, whether this is Gibson's cyber-ninja, Hideo, the Wachowski Brother's challenge-handshake authentication protocol, Seriph,

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26 The period 1969-1973 witnessed the emergence of Bruce Lee and the (Chinese) martial arts boom in the US and Europe. This triggered a new era of representations of East Asian men in the cinema as leading-men, fighters, and spiritual heroes. Contemporary popular culture, particularly the place of the martial arts in cinema today, owes much to this period. Important work on Lee is Bowman (2010 & 2013).

or Konami's cyborg ninja, Raiden.<sup>27</sup> Hence, rather than being a dehumanized threat to the West, Digital Asia can be constructed as a site of aspiration and longing for explorers (from anywhere, including from Asia itself). In this sense, it is not a cartographic location or even a site of origination; it is an aspirational idea arising from techno-Orientalist and retro-Orientalist representations. Like Asia itself, Digital Asia is as much an ideational product of the West as of Asia – it emerges as a global collaboration in the creation of cultural capital.

### Illustration C

*It's partly about being cool. You've got to keep your head. When all hell breaks loose and you're totally surrounded, the last thing you want to do is look down at your fingers and try to find the X button. You just have to know where it is. It's got to be automatic, without thinking. Instant. Wham, cut, kill! Dead. Move on. But you have to get it right, right? I really hate those gamers who just mash. Their reflexes might be great, but they're playing like nubes or idiots, just mashing randomly and hoping. You've got to train your reflexes so you win on purpose. It's not just winning, it's winning with Shoryuken!*<sup>28</sup>

ZANGIEF, Singapore, 1 February 2011 [discussing *Street Fighter IV*].

*We speak of cultivating principles and of cultivating techniques [...] As aforesaid, we call principle the cultivation of no-mind, such that when one arrives somewhere we are not taken in by anything [our minds are not arrested by anything] [...] However, no matter how much one accumulates the cultivation of principle, if you do not also cultivate technique you will be unable to move your body and hands as you wish. If we talk in terms of the martial arts, the cultivation of technique resides in the technical competencies learned through constant repetition of things like the five body postures [...].*

*No matter how well principle is understood, one must be able to move one's body freely in the performance of techniques. Conversely, no matter*

<sup>27</sup> The cyborg ninja Raiden features in the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise.

<sup>28</sup> *Shōryūken* is a special punch-attach associated with the character Ryu in the *Street Fighter* franchise. In *Street Fighter II* it was an aspirational technique for being almost unstoppable once successfully unleashed.

*how greatly skilled in handling a sword, when one is is unaware of the deployment of principle, techniques cannot come alive.*

TAKUAN SOHO (1970: 31-2), Edo, Japan. Early seventeenth century [discussing swordsmanship].

### 3 Techno-Orientalism and Gamic Orientalism

In this section, I would like to consider the relationship between techno-Orientalism and a particular version of Digital Asia that we find in the context of virtual worlds and videogames. In a particular sense, when we talk about the possibility of *visiting Digital Asia*, this is the most coherent meaning of Digital Asia. Here, it is important to move beyond the general aesthetics of a digitized, Asian futurity (common to literature, art, movies, etc.) and to interrogate the special qualities of the videogame as a medium of Digital Asia. One of the key issues in this regard is the factor of interactivity: when we enter the digital realm of a videogame, the quality and significance of our experience there is only partially determined by the artistic rendition of the digital world in which we find ourselves; much of our experience is determined by the mechanisms of gameplay that have been adopted, which serve as our mode of engagement and interaction with the world. No matter how perfect or beautiful an architectural environment might be, it is in the nature of architectural environments (including virtual worlds) that their meaning becomes fully evident only in our interaction with them.<sup>29</sup> They are meant to be *lived in*, not merely to be *looked at*.<sup>30</sup> They reveal themselves to us dynamically through our *skills of movement*.

In terms of mechanisms and gameplay mechanics, there are some that are immediately associated with Asian (and especially Japanese) games, and hence

29 The idea of exploring videogames as architectural locations is discussed in Goto-Jones (2014).

30 This is in no way to denigrate the purely aesthetic qualities of these gamic spaces, which can be considerable. In particular, I do not wish to ignore those aspects that are designed explicitly for aesthetic appreciation, such as non-interactive backgrounds and architectures that cannot be explored. Indeed, these aspects closely resemble the concept of 'scenery' – some games even enable players to take 'photographs' to capture particularly beautiful or meaningful scenes and moments. In this sense, 'scenery' is an aspect of our ability to *travel* through the space in question. However, we might also want to consider these non-interactive images as 'art' in their own right: the relationship between videogames and art is well discussed by Tavinor (2009). My point in this essay, however, is simply that it is the quality of *interactivity* that is *particular* to the gamic environment, not that this environment is devoid of other aesthetic qualities.

these are aspects of the pattern of expectations that gamers take with them to Digital Asia. Amongst those gameplay devices often associated with Japanese games are ‘trading card’ mechanics, such as those used in the *Pokemon* games or in some turn-based combat games such as *Metal Gear Acid* (2004). To some extent, these mechanics are geared towards a domestic games industry that is tied in with ‘media-mix’ franchises.<sup>31</sup> These development models explicitly test the permeability of the frontier between the digital and the analogue worlds, seeking to blur the two by allowing digital agents to emerge into the streets of Tokyo and gamers to delve into the digital realm.

Other typically ‘Japanese’ mechanics include those that characterize so-called JRPGs (Japanese Role Playing Games) – this is a controversial genre of videogame associated in particular with the developer Square Enix, which has been responsible for the biggest JRPG franchises, such as *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*.<sup>32</sup> While, JRPGs have a relatively niche market outside of Japan, they are often the highest grossing games domestically in Japan and elsewhere in Asia. Part of the controversy about JRPGs in the industry is whether or not the ‘Asianness’ of these products undermines their commercial success outside Asia. However, commentators are not always clear about what precisely is ‘Asian’ about these digital worlds. If these are instances of Digital Asia, in what does that signification reside?

The aesthetics are generally stylized, anime-like graphics, which audiences do associate with East Asia, even if the subject matter has little to do with Asia per se. In terms of gameplay, however, these games are noted for having various characteristics: they have very complicated narratives with large quantities of dialogue, which players must step through by repeatedly pressing a single button; in general, despite the complexity of the storyline, the games are often seen as relatively linear and devoid of significant freedom of action or meaningful choices – gameplay is designed to drive the narrative forward rather than to shape it; these games have rich character development routines, not only but also through the acquisition of items during the game; they are usually third-person adventures either in 2D (viewed top-down), in isometric

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31 Here, media-mix refers to a phenomenon similar to what Jenkins (2006) calls ‘convergence culture,’ in which a franchise will generate a videogame, soft toys, manga, anime, trading cards, etc. And customers will seek the complete experience of the franchise by indulging in as many of these as possible.

32 *Dragon Quest* was first released in 1986 and has been constantly active with new releases ever since; the most recent being in June 2014. *Final Fantasy* was first released in 1987 and has been constantly active with new released ever since; the most recent being in May 2014.

3D, or (more recently) in full perspective 3D; typically, even if you play on your own, your avatar will be part of a group of adventurers in the game world, and each member of the group will have skills essential to the completion of the game; the typical combat mechanism in such games is oriented around a ‘turn-based’ system, in which players and their enemies take turns to deploy weapons or special powers – this is in juxtaposition to the real-time fighting found in some other games. To some extent, these mechanisms reflect the fact that JRPGs historically have developed on games consoles (i.e. on systems without keyboards), which means that there are only a limited number of input variables compared with the range of actions that should be possible in the digital world of a RPG. This encourages turn-based mechanics that resemble the mechanics of trading-card combat. In Europe and the US, on the other hand, RPGs have historically been developed for PC gamers rather than console gamers, although there are exceptions and the situation is changing.

In other words, it seems plausible that the constellation of expectations about this kind of Digital Asia in popular culture includes experiential, gamic elements in addition to the more conventional aesthetic qualities that we associate with techno-Orientalism. For our purposes here, I would like to narrow the focus and consider the pattern of gamic expectations about a specific genre of videogame that is particularly associated with Digital Asia: the martial-arts fighting game. This narrowing of attention is partly to control the scope of a potentially massive study, but it is also because we have already seen how important the martial arts are in techno-Orientalism as a whole. Hence, I hope this focus enables an exploration of gamic Orientalism that coheres with the earlier development of techno-Orientalism.<sup>33</sup>

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33 I immediately accept that this narrowing of focus also narrows the range of plausible conclusions regarding the meaning of engagement with ‘Digital Asia’. Hence, I present this simply as one possible reading and suggest (for the reasons outlined in the text) that this might be an exemplary reading.

That said, one of the critical implications of this choice is the impression that techno-Orientalist fantasies are gendered in a rather extreme manner. Fighting games (like the *bushidō* tradition itself) are deeply gendered environments resting on high evaluations of stereotypically masculine qualities (indeed, on overblown caricatures of masculinity) as well as violence. Female characters are similarly violent and are usually more than able to stand equally against the male figures, but they are generally depicted in overtly and overly sexualized images. Indeed, a number of characters from Japanese fighting games (such as *Street Fighter’s* Chun Li or *Tekken’s* Nina) have become pin-up girls with rather fanatical followings. The need for a critical study of gender politics in these environments (including on the possible impact of spending time in such environments) is serious.

The genre of the fighting game is closely associated with Japan and Asia more generally, not only because the martial arts they depict tend to have their origins in Asia (with some exceptions), but also because the most successful fighting game franchises are from Japan. Beginning with early classics, such as *Karate Champ* (1984), Japanese developers pioneered the genre.<sup>34</sup> The basic characteristics were established immediately: two characters face off against each other in a 2D scene; they are both similarly equipped with punches, kicks, and blocks (and later special combos), which are mapped to specific buttons on the game-controller; they must fight each other until one of them knocks the other down (or later kills them); there are multiple rounds of competition that get progressively more difficult as the computer-controlled opponent becomes stronger and quicker. In the same year, Data East released a sequel to *Karate Champ* that enabled two players to compete directly against each other (instead of against the computer) – this genius innovation kick-started the period of fighting game competitions all around the world, in which players would compete in leagues and tournaments to see who was the most skilful player. In the twin contexts of the Bruce Lee boom and the early stages of the digital revolution, virtual fighting in a games-arcade was at the cutting edge of cultural cool and in the heart of Digital Asia: for many people, playing a game like *Karate Champ* was the closest they would ever get to *becoming* the kind of martial arts hero that they could only *watch* in the movies.

Two of the intriguing features of this early game (in contrast to later iterations of the genre) were that characters could only perform ‘real’ techniques from Karate (rather than fantastical and impossibly gymnastic techniques) and the matches were scored like a real Karate competition – players had no health bar or energy level, but simply lost if their opponent landed two successful blows (or four half point blows). This kind of realistic simulation of the martial arts was quickly left behind in mainstream games in favour of more spectacular techniques, but it retained a cult following of fighting game

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However, here, I simply note that the site of Digital Asia being explored here appears deeply sexist.

34 ‘Karate Champ’ was developed by Technos Japan for Data East in 1984 for release on the Virtual Console in arcades. In 1985, it was ported to the Commodore 64 and Apple II. In 1985, the Australian developer Beam Software released an important rival, ‘The Way of the Exploding Fist’, for the Commodore 64 and other home computers then popular in Europe and the US. It was a very similar game and was modelled on Japanese karate.

purists, leading to more contemporary classics such as the ‘Legendary Hit’ *Bushidō Blade* (1997).<sup>35</sup>

Fuelled partially by the martial arts boom occasioned by Bruce Lee and the Hong Kong film industry, over the next few years fighting games rapidly became the centrepieces of high-street arcades as well as home computing. A landmark was the arrival of Capcom’s *Street Fighter* in 1987, but then especially *Street Fighter II* in 1991, which set the standard for all subsequent games in this genre.<sup>36</sup> One of the great innovations in *Street Fighter II* was the option for players to choose a character type at the start of the game – each character practiced a different martial art, had a different portfolio of techniques requiring different sequences of button presses, and each made different demands on the player’s skills. In addition, the *Street Fighter* franchise quickly became synonymous with powerful but complicated ‘combos’, in which a special sequence of button presses and directional moves would cause the character to unleash an almost magically destructive technique. Players would have to train for hours, days, or sometimes weeks to master these techniques, and each character in the franchise would have their own unique sequence requiring its own period of training. Indeed, later versions of the game would include a training mode, in which players could visit the *dōjō* to practice techniques against a dummy before attempting them in actual combat. Even as graphics improved and 3D environments took over, these gamic features have remained the staples of all of the major fighting game franchises thereafter: Sega’s *Virtua Fighter*, Namco’s *Tekken*, Tecmo’s *Dead or Alive*, Namco Bandai’s *SoulCalibur*,

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35 *Bushidō Blade* (1997) by Light Weight (Square) has achieved cult status amongst gamers (including via its re-release in 2007 in the ‘Legendary Hits’ series). Eschewing the trend towards increasingly spectacular and unrealistic fights, *Bushidō Blade* developed a fight mechanic designed to closely immitate the feel of real sword-fighting. There is no health or energy gauge but a simple ‘Body Damage System’ (BDS) in which carefully timed and aimed cuts damage the player’s avatar, disabling an arm or a leg, forcing them to limp or crawl, and hence changing their movement possibilities and the effectiveness of their techniques. The system encouraged careful, thoughtful play, and many players, like opponents in a *kendō* match, simply stand motionless for some time while their prepare themselves for a sudden burst of movement, in the hope that the match can be won with one perfect cut.

36 The *Street Fighter* franchise is developed and published by Capcom. Since 1987 it has been at the forefront of the fighting-game genre, through various iterations and refinements of the same basic format. The most recent release was *Ultra Street Figher IV* in June 2014. In addition, there have been Hollywood movies, anime, manga, toys, a television series, and music releases.



or Arc System's *BlazBlue*.<sup>37</sup> In this context, these conventions and staples comprise the culture of expectations that inform gamic Orientalism regarding the mechanics of play in this Digital Asia.

Data from the *Virtual Ninja Survey* conducted in 2010/11 suggests that gamers associate these kinds of games with Asia, and also that they associate these gamic mechanisms with Japanese games – these are part of our expectations when we visit Digital Asia in this mode. Gamers report feeling that playing a fighting game is a way to fulfil a fantasy to *be* a martial artist (that they would otherwise be unable to fulfil in their lives, for whatever reason). They report that the process of training in the techniques of the game helps them to feel a closer affinity with their avatars – that continued, repetitive actions seem to bind them to their avatars until they move as though one. What is more, they report that this is a desirable condition: there is a sense in which they want to *be* the martial artist in question, to be able to do those things, and there is a real sense in which they *are* that martial artist and *can* do those things (in a very particular site). Being and doing them means the perfection of certain locomotive techniques with their hands on the game-controller, just as being a martial artist in the 'actual world' requires certain locomotive techniques with all our limbs.<sup>38</sup>

Interestingly, when asked about which digital worlds felt most like Asia, gamers reported a range of products, some of which were not 'Asian' at all, but all of which notably exhibited these same gamic mechanisms and martial arts imagery. Together with Capcom's *Street Fighter*, we get Midway Games' *Mortal*

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37 Missing from this list is the *Mortal Kombat* franchise, which was designed and published from the US (NetherRealm Studios); its various releases (including movies, books, etc.) have ranged from 1992-2013. The series is similar in approach to *Street Fighter*, with which it competes, including through the adoption of a clearly Asian identity for most of the characters and settings, and through the adoption of *Street Fighter*'s genre-defining gameplay mechanics. One of the key differences for players is the amount of blood and gore is vastly increased in *Mortal Kombat*, reflecting one of the main differences between 'Japanese' and 'American' games. In general, Japanese games show less blood, even in violent games, than American games; this is even the case for the American releases of Japanese games, which frequently have blood and gore added to them as part of their localization. This was the case, for instance, with *Bushidō Blade* (see footnote 33).

38 In October 2010, the Asiascape initiative at Leiden University (sponsored by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research) launched the 'Virtual Ninja Project' through a survey in the gamer's magazine *Edge*. The survey received 239 complete submissions over the next months from gamers around the world (88% in Europe or the US). Participants were asked a series of questions about their game-playing patterns, focussing on their feelings about how (and why) they play games. The gamers quoted in this article are all respondents.

*Kombat* series (USA). Next to Tecmo's *Ninja Gaiden*, we get Ninja Theory's *Heavenly Sword* (UK). In other words, popular expectations about Digital Asia could involve certain kinds of gameplay experiences and mechanics, rather than (or as well as) visual representations that we might also associate with images of (Digital) Asia. Origination seems to be largely irrelevant.

To some extent, this notion of Digital Asia as a way of *being with* digital technology is itself consistent with a form of techno-Orientalism. We have already seen how the science fictional imagination of Digital Asia encourages us to envision a privileged relationship between Asians and digital technology. In the case of fighting games, we are further encouraged in this direction by the visual 'Asianness' of the martial arts, the apparent origins of the games in Asia, and especially by the level of dedication and precision required from players who want to be good at these games – the training ethos seems to echo that of the martial arts themselves. In practice, Asia (especially Korea and Japan, but increasingly China) is disproportionately successful in videogame competitions, which also seems to support this matrix of associations. In this way, we can see how 'gamic Orientalism' folds back on itself in a self-reinforcing manner, and how gamers who are not Asian may experience the kind of 'lust' for *being Asian* that is sometimes seen as a romantic consequence of Orientalism itself. Indeed, gamers who are (analogue) Asians may experience a very similar kind of lust for being (Digital) Asians. And there is a sense in which the gamic-ness of this Digital Asia actually enables this becoming in a way that consuming Asian art or literature does not. Gamic Orientalism could be centrally concerned with *becoming a Digital Asian*, whomsoever we might be.

The dangers of this kind of quest for a quality of experience or being through recourse to the Other (whomever that is) are suggested by Ueno (1996) when he laments a transition in Orientalist interrogations of Japan from asking, 'what is *Zen*?' to asking, 'what is *otaku*?' While Ueno is not specifically interested in whether there is some kind of spiritual equivalence being drawn by this question (between *Zen* and *otaku*), he is not alone in observing that these questions represent the transition from Orientalism to techno-Orientalism, nor is he alone in his explication of the *otaku* as a prototype for a new form of *being with* digital technology in a world in which such technology is the stuff of everydayness – where this form of being at least originates in the Japanese experience. Famously and influentially, Azuma Hiroki has argued that the development of the *otaku* (as a super-informational processor) is actually a new phase of human being, adapted for life in post-modern, digital societies.<sup>39</sup> Indeed,

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39 Azuma develops his position in 2001 and 2007, leaning heavily on Lyotard's (1979) influential scepticism about grand narratives in postmodernity. In his subsequent concept of gamic-realism, Azuma develops the theory that the *otaku* is the prototype for a type of

he even pinpoints the emergence of this society in Japan to 1995, marked by the screening of Anno Hideaki's seminal science fiction anime, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995). In an intriguing intervention into this debate, Bradley (2013) asks 'is the otaku becoming overman?'

In some ways, the *otaku* serves as a prototype for the Digital Asian, with the Digital Japanese at the vanguard of history.<sup>40</sup> It has transitioned from being a derogatory term for geek or nerd into being an aspirational figure, marking an adaptation to a stage of economic and technological development rather than (or as well as) cultural particularity. The *otaku* is the digital ninja. People participate in their worlds as *otaku* all over the globe, suggesting that this form of Digital Asianism is a portable way of being, not an ethnicity or a cartographic origination. In some ways, indeed, this echoes the transnationalized treatment of Zen in the 1960 and 1970s.

One of the intriguing insights provoked by the notion of Gamic Orientalism, then, is whether analogue and techno-Orientalisms (characterized by 'Zen' and '*otaku*', respectively) might be unified experientially in the desire to become a Digital Asian. Furthermore, it seems that Gamic Orientalism adds to the conventional matrix of expectations about Digital Asia a cluster of interactive and performative elements, including certain types of physical movement and its signification.

## Illustration D

*It takes a long time. I don't think I'm a natural, so I have to practice a lot, but I can feel when things start to click, you know. There's this moment when I suddenly realise that I'm not thinking about my thumbs anymore and that I'm just doing it. When I come across the bad guys, I don't have to think what to do, it's just automatic. It's usually at about this point that the game suddenly gets much harder, or there's a boss battle or something, which means I get crushed because I need new moves that I haven't learned yet. So, I practice those until they're automatic too. And so it goes on. By the time I complete a game, I've usually mastered all the skills of that world. But then it's over. That's life, I guess.*

ARMOUR3D, New York, USA. 14 February 2011 [discussing gaming].

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human agency that engages with the world as though it were a videogame or database. He suggests that this is a consequence of the rise of interactive, digital media.

40 This construction echoes similar constructions about the place of Japan in Asia in the 1930s.

*The ignorance and afflictions of the beginner's mind are unified into immovable wisdom through cultivation/training (shugyō), and so we can inhabit no-mind-no-thought. If we attain to the highest point, in whatever they do our arms and legs act by themselves, and it transpires that our mind is not troubled in the slightest.*

TAKUAN SOHO (1970: 37), Edo, Japan. Early seventeenth century [discussing swordsmanship].

#### 4 Gamic Orientalism, Embodiment, and Virtual Ninja Theory

A challenging insight that emerges from this discussion of Gamic Orientalism is the notion that videogame ‘interfaces [...] are ideological’ (Rehak 2003: 122). This is because they mediate the complicated relationship between the player and her avatar, where the avatar might function as a form of ‘projective ideal’ in a fantasy of becoming, or the avatar might be seen as doing ‘double duty as both self and other’ (ibid.: 106). In other words, the significance of the avatar is not only informed by the constellation of expectations that a player brings into the digital world about the Other, but it is also informed by a cluster of aspirations and fantasies about becoming a different self in that world. It is not only ideological but also psychoanalytical. As Rehak explains, ‘avatars enable players to think through questions of agency and existence, exploring in fantasy form aspects of their own materiality’ (ibid.: 123).

This unique feature of the gamic medium suggests that ‘videogames seem to offer the potential for profound redefinitions of body, mind, and spirit’ that we do not find in other media (ibid.).<sup>41</sup> Critical in this process is the design of the interface – both in terms of the gameplay mechanics (i.e. in terms of our experience of ourselves as embodied in the avatar) and in terms of the physical device in our hands that we use to control the avatar (i.e. in terms of our conceptualization of our body as a physically existing biological entity). In other words, ‘different types of interfaces and different game worlds mold players’ embodied experiences’ (Gregersen & Grodal 2009: 65). The ways that different control schemes map the behaviours of our physical bodies onto our various virtual bodies ‘produce specific experiences of embodiment’ (ibid.: 66).

This physical aspect of play in the digital realm is often overlooked in our enthusiasm for the possibility of our entirely virtual presence in that realm,

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41 Whether or not they really offer this is a separate question. For now, we are interested in how this expectation or representation impacts on the ideological construction of Digital Asia.

which is a perennial theme of cyberpunk and techno-Orientalism. In Myers' terms, commentators tend to privilege 'object play' and 'social play' over 'locomotor play' when discussing videogames (2009: 46).<sup>42</sup> However, it is not the case that our physical bodies vanish from the material world even when we are deeply immersed in a digital world – our self remains embodied biologically even when it also becomes embodied digitally. One does not replace the other, but rather adds a new form of embodied experience.

Indeed, competence at locomotor play appears to be a basic condition on which object and social play rely in a videogame:

One of the more striking characteristics of video games is the extent to which these depend upon and require some mastery of locomotor play prior to engagement with the game as a whole, particularly prior to engagement with game rules governing object and conceptual play' (ibid.: 49).

To some extent, learning the necessary locomotor skills is a process akin to gaining literacy in our encounters with digital worlds:<sup>43</sup> while the basic controller configurations are shared across many different games (especially those in the same genre), some games require unique or much more demanding sequential patterns of movement – especially in the genre of fighting games, as we have seen. Without learning and eventually mastering these movements, a player simply has no access to the digital world she seeks to explore; progressing further into that world typically requires increasingly advanced command of these movements. Hence, while the movements involved may be relatively tiny and subtle, literacy in videogames is at least partially a physical or embodied literacy akin to that required in performative arts, such as dance or puppetry or even the martial arts.

One of the fascinating ways in which these issues of embodiment and conditioned locomotor skills intersects with the provocation of Digital Asia is in the

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42 These are the three rudimentary types of play commonly associated with basic animal behaviour (Bekoff & Byers 1998). 'Object play' is concerned with the manipulation of objects, including the kinds of conceptual objects we find in videogames. 'Social play' is concerned with our interactions with others. And 'locomotor play' is concerned with running, jumping, and using our bodies.

43 For Myers (2009: 51) the literacy required in videogames might best be compared with the experience of reading poetic language, in which the reading experience is unusually uncertain and dynamic, requiring readers to test constantly their assumptions about familiar linguistic conventions.

overlap between the training processes required to master one's embodiment in the digital realm and the training process associated with the so-called 'Zen arts' in the analogue world, including the martial arts.<sup>44</sup> In both cases, the key is a form of habituation through repetition, in which complex, nuanced movements are broken down into simple constituent parts that are then repeated and repeated until their performance no longer requires conscious thought. These movements could be tiny gestures of one's fingers in *chadō* (the tea ceremony), a particular manipulation of a paintbrush in *shōdō* (calligraphy), or a slice with a sword in *kendō* (swordsmanship). The principle being that repetition not only leads to mastery of the movements, but also sublimates the movement to free the mind to give its attention to other things. As Myers notes, through constant repetition of simple finger movements, 'video game locomotor play is sublimated in service of object (conceptual) play – a difficult and gradual task, which often only willing minds and nimble fingers are able to accomplish' (2009: 50).

Of course, it would be ridiculous to claim that any and all habituated and sublimated movements constitute a Zen art. Everyday life is replete with such movements: tying our shoelaces, driving a car, etc. In general, such activities are not associated with Zen, but rather with 'auto-pilot', and attempts to force such activities into a Zen framework look like crude, naïve (or even offensive) Orientalism of the kind that Kingsley Amis lamented in the New Wave movement.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, since it is precisely in the intersections between Orientalism and Digital Asia that we are interested here, we should consider the implications of the possibility of this representation. This becomes especially interesting in the context of first-hand reports from some fighting-gamers that they do consider their activities as participating in this ideological schema.<sup>46</sup> For some, training in a fighting game is experienced as training in a martial art, just as it is experienced as participating in Digital Asia: Ueno's fear

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44 I am taking this term from Cox (2003), who specifically unifies the 'Way' of the tea ceremony with the 'Way' of the martial art, *shorinji kempo*, deploying the over-arching term 'Zen arts' to encompass any of the *dō* (Ways) in Japan that seem to be 'above all aesthetic expressions of Zen philosophy' (ibid.: 1).

45 In fact, there is an established way to understand Zen art as potentially immanent in all activities, as long as those activities are performed with correct mindfulness. This idea that 'everything is Zen' was especially contagious in the Californian Zen movement of the 1970s. That context is, perhaps, best exemplified by Robert Pirsig's cult classic, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974). The book seems to riff on the classic of modern Orientalism, *Zen and the Art of Archery* (Herrigel 1953), although Pirsig himself concedes that his book does not profess to be accurate about either Zen or motorcycles.

46 See note 38.

of a confluence between Zen and *otaku* in techno-Orientalism appears not to be ungrounded.

One of the key features of the so-called 'Zen arts' resides in an appropriate intentionality. Rather than being about the perfection and sublimation of repeated activities per se, the 'proper goal' of the Zen arts is the 'refinement and execution of physical forms as an aesthetic activity' (Cox 2003: 5). In other words, it is not enough to engage in repetitive training simply to master the movements, nor is it appropriate to master the techniques for utilitarian or practical ends, rather the goal of the habituation and sublimation of the movements is the aesthetic expression of one's authentic self. Training in the martial arts (*budō* – the Martial Way) is not about becoming better at fighting, even if this is a natural effect of the training; it is about cultivating and finding oneself through the discipline of the training itself.<sup>47</sup> This does not mean that everyone who learns a martial art does so as a Zen art, but simply that those seeking to use the martial arts as an opportunity for spiritual development should adopt this attitude. For such people, this means that the physical movements are merely the external manifestations (the embodiments) of transformative inner states of being, and it becomes important not to mistake one for the other.

In a classic piece of modern Orientalism (which participated in the invention of the *Budō* tradition in the West), Eugene Herrigel (1953: 75) expresses the pivotal importance of embodiment in his influential essay on 'Zen and the Art of Archery':

Outwardly for the observer, the right shot is distinguished by the cushioning of the right hand as it is jerked back, so that no tremor runs through the body [...] But inwardly for the archer himself, right shots have the effect of making him feel that the day has just begun.<sup>48</sup>

This kind of sentiment is echoed by hanzo\_24, an ardent player of *Bushidō Blade*:

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47 The *bushidō* canon is rich with statements like this, phrased by swordsmen, samurai, and by Zen masters. In this article I have been quoting the famous work of Takuan Soho (1573-1645) – the Zen master who apparently wrote a treatise on the intersections between Zen and swordsmanship for the benefit of the great swordmaster, Musashi Miyamoto.

48 Herrigel's account has been convincingly (albeit controversially) discredited as overly romantic and naive and as participating in the invention of the modern *bushidō* myths in the West. Yamada (2001; 2009).

*My wife just laughs at me because I look so tense. She says I freeze up and my eyebrows twitch as I concentrate, and then I sort of spasm – my fingers go and my hands twist and I jerk to the side all at once. But to me this feels like perfect inner calm and then flawless technique. That guy's dead in one cut! That's what I see. That's why I come back for more.*

When asked how it feels when his technique fails, hanzo\_24 replies:

*Well, it's not great. But we all fail sometimes, right? Otherwise there'd be no challenge. It does feel good to cut the enemy down, but that's like the satisfaction at the end, you know? It's the cherry on the cake. I don't mind losing if I got the technique right, if it felt right. Then that other guy is just better, right? What I hate is when I fail because I screwed up the moves, when my fingers trip over each other or the buttons stick or whatever. Actually, I also hate it when I win after screwing up the moves or just button mashing. That seems to miss the point. I'd rather just lose and die than fluke a win.<sup>49</sup>*

The point here is that the significance of these intricate and conditioned movements does not (only) reside in the external aesthetic (either for our biological or digital bodies) or even in the success of the technique being deployed. Rather, for the performer herself, the significance and meaning resides internally, in the feeling that accompanies (and manifests) perfect technique. The purpose of perfection of the technique, then, is the transformation of the self. It is the embodiment of the transformed self.

While most videogames now include slower or easier periods at the start during which players can learn the peculiarities of the control scheme, it is the genre of the fighting game that has taken this idea of 'training' to its most sophisticated level. Indeed, while mastery of the controls is largely a means to an end in many games – that is, they define the basic literacy required to access the content – in fighting games specifically there is a sense in which mastery of the controls (and the techniques to which they map) is the purpose

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49 The disdain of hanzo\_24 about 'button mashing' was shared by many of the respondents in the Virtual Ninja Project. This phrase describes an approach to gaming in which players frantically press random buttons as quickly as they can in the hope that this will fluke a victory. Sometimes it works. The phrase is also sometimes used to describe those who learn just one simple technique (which might be disproportionately successful for reasons of a gameplay flaw) and then just repeat it constantly until they win. This was an early complaint about the *shōryūken* in *Street Fighter II*, for example. In either case, the complaint revolves around engaging with the game as though it does not require skill, practice or dedication. Some gamers talk about this as 'uncool' and others as 'dishonourable'. The most common phrase is: 'button mashing sux.'



of the game itself.<sup>50</sup> Hence, following the lead of the *Street Fighter* games, the genre typically includes a special environment in which players can practice and master different techniques in relatively safety. Either they perform the techniques against a wooden dummy or a robotic dummy, or sometimes the training partner can be specially programmed to make certain blocks or counter attacks to assist in the training process. In the martial arts, this kind of environment is known as the *dōjō* – a place of cultivation and training, designed to enable mastery of a martial art without mortal danger. The *dōjō* is basic to martial arts training and even synonymous with it. And it would not be stretching the idea of the *dōjō* too far to suggest that fighting games include a digital *dōjō* in which players train and cultivate themselves.

To be clear, I am not attempting to make the case that playing *Street Fighter* is a spiritual pursuit per se. My point here is not even (necessarily) that we should consider fighting games as *opportunities* to participate in a form of digital martial art, complete with the ideological and spiritual associations that might accompany this. Rather, my point is that this appears to be one of the ways in which players do interact with this digital site. The constellation of contexts within which fighting games exist enable the 'savvy navigator' to bring with them all kinds of Orientalist expectations about Asia, the martial arts, Zen, the digital realm, *otaku*, etc. Just as the 'life-stories of the founders of the modern martial arts ways have had a significant effect on the manner in which foreigners describe their experiences' (Cox 2003: 8), so these stories also have an impact on how participants in the digital *dōjō* describe their experiences. If the martial arts tend towards a form of embodied Orientalism, then fighting games tend towards a form of gamic Orientalism.<sup>51</sup> With the admixture of popular representations of the relationship between the digital world and Asia in general, the digital *dōjō* becomes the site of Digital Asia *par excellence*, rich with ideological implications.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the notion of Digital Asia

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50 See the note about button mashing (49).

51 One of the features of this is the way in which martial artists and gamers talk about the changing terms of their relationship with technique, and especially the inexpressibility of their experiences at higher levels of technical mastery. Those uninitiated cannot understand. This idea – that teachings must be experienced and cannot be explained – is a conventional trope of Zen literature.

52 Media-mix franchises serve to reinforce this constellation of representations, with gamers now able to play *Street Fighter* in the context of decades of *Street Fighter* tournaments and years of manga, anime, and feature films showcasing the legendary 'fighting spirit' of each of the characters, associating the whole enterprise of *Street Fighter* with a spiritual tradition of fighting from Asia. This is more direct than (but in addition to) the wider context of martial arts movies, novels, comic books, etc. which strive towards the same Orientalist ends.

here not only refers to the possibility of certain digital locations with particular characteristics (aesthetic, narrative, and interactive), but it also takes on an experiential meaning, referring to the somaesthetic signification of experiences in the digital realm. Here, Digital Asia emerges as an ideological device to help us bring depth of meaning and significance to a digital realm that we fear is a kind of cultural and humanistic void.

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