

## **Is *Street Fighter* a Martial Art?<sup>1</sup> Virtual Ninja Theory, Ideology, and the Intentional Self-Transformation of Fighting-Gamers**

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This experimental article explores the question of whether it is possible to examine the experience of playing fighting games (video games) as a form of self-cultivation or *practice* and, in so doing, whether it becomes possible to shift the debate about the potential impact of violent video games on the people who play them (and on society around them). The article draws on five years of surveys and interviews with gamers from around the world, but seeks to interpret this data through a critical and creative reading of the games themselves as well as a reading of the so-called *bushidō* tradition (of texts about the intersection between Zen and the martial arts). The article concludes that fighting games might be experienced as forms of martial arts in themselves, complete with potentials for self-transformation, but that this form of engagement requires appropriate intentionality from players, which provokes a space for a manifesto to guide players' intentions.

**Keywords:** video games, gamic orientalism, digital *dōjō*, ethics, self-cultivation, Zen, bushido, violence, manifesto, embodiment

### **From the Dragon to the Beast**

Bruce Lee is one of the most recognized names in contemporary history. It is no exaggeration to say that he changed the face of the martial arts, of the movie industry, and of Asian masculinity.<sup>2</sup> After the worldwide release of his landmark movie, *Enter the Dragon* (1973), and his untimely death in the same year, Lee's legend was secure. He became an icon; his brief presence on the world stage was a transformative moment in the lives of people all over the world, and remains a powerful inspiration to this day.

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2 This feature of Bruce Lee's impact is well discussed by Bowman (2010; 2011; 2013).

Thirty years later the world witnessed another inspirational (new) media event, featuring another emerging star from East Asia's fighting scene. Like Lee's breakthrough Hollywood movie, this moment was engineered at the intersection of "East and West" by a (new) media event in California; a powerful moment of hybridity. Yet, despite his incredible performance, which has been viewed by more than 25 million people on YouTube and has been recognized as the most important moment in pro-gaming history, the name of Umehara Daigo 梅原大吾 has not made it into the consciousness of the general public.<sup>3</sup> As "The Beast," arguably the greatest fighting-gamer of his generation, Umehara remains a subcultural hero rather than a global icon.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, there are many reasons why these two moments have landed differently in transnational popular culture. However, there are some important similarities that justify their comparison. In particular, while both participate in a transnational discursive space that features the martial arts (as practice, representation, simulation, simulacrum, and fantasy), both seem to be more than simple instances of entertainment; indeed, both appear to constitute "events" in Badiou's sense.<sup>5</sup> That is, just as the Bruce Lee "event" "enabled (or completed) a profound transformation in Western *discourses* and in Western *bodies*," so the Umehara Daigo "event" enables (or starts) a potentially profound transformation in transnational discourses and individual bodies.<sup>6</sup> To make this as concrete as possible: Bruce Lee's event changed people's aspirations and practices regarding kung fu, inspiring millions into new behaviors, beliefs, and routines of physical discipline; Umehara Daigo's event changed people's aspirations and practices regarding fighting games, inspiring millions into new behaviors, beliefs, and routines of physical discipline. Bruce Lee was the reason a whole generation of people went *Kung Fu Crazy*; Umehara Daigo is the reason a whole generation of people have invested millions of hours and dollars in *Street Fighter* (and other fighting games).

Taking this claim a step further, I would argue that the Lee and Umehara "events" are not only connected through thematic association but that they are also causally related. That is, the Umehara event *relies* upon the Lee event; Lee is one of the conditions of possibility for Umehara. In this way, we might render these two events as markers in a sequential (or at least an episodic) cultural narrative about the significance and meaning of the martial arts in contemporary societies, culminating in a postmodern embrace of the videogame as its current exemplar.

This experimental article seeks to explore the meaning and potential of this *Street Fighter* episode, suggesting that it represents a moment of transformation in the discourse and practice of both the martial arts and of videogames. Far from emerging from a cloudless sky, the "Beast event" of 2004 captured a cluster of cultural trajectories that included the martial arts boom, the digital revolution, New Wave science fiction and cyberpunk,

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3 The influential gaming site, Kotaku, named this moment as the most important in pro-gaming history. <http://kotaku.com/5820907/the-10-best-moments-in-pro-gaming-history> (Accessed 1 January 2015).

4 Umehara is listed in the 2011 Guinness Book of World Records (gamer's edition) as the most consistently successful player of all time with fifteen consecutive tournament wins.

5 The salient feature of Badiou's "event" in this case is neatly elaborated by Bowman (2011, p. 68) when he describes it as an *encounter* that transforms those participating in the encounter. This makes it importantly different from a form of *communication*.

6 Bowman 2011, p. 68.

and techno-Orientalism.<sup>7</sup> The role of Japan as an emblem of technoculture as well as the symbolic inheritor of the so-called *bushidō* 武士道 tradition is essential to this case. Part of the significance of this Japan-inflected event is the way that it enables a re-representation of the (Japanese) fighting game as the inheritor of the modern spirit of the martial arts in a postmodern age; the so-called “Japanese ideology” is at work.<sup>8</sup> Crucially, then, this identity seems to invoke an ideological commitment (either voluntarily or otherwise) and hence creates space for a manifesto as an intervention into the discourse.

This article ends with an experimental manifesto and *Virtual Ninja Code*, designed to enable (and encourage) gamers to participate in this ideological space of self-transformation—seeking to move beyond the seemingly endless debate about the impact of violence in videogames into a new register: rather than asking whether or not violent videogames are “bad” for individuals and societies, the *Virtual Ninja Manifesto* serves to provoke the possibility that (after “The Beast”) such games can be experienced as vehicles of positive self-transformation.<sup>9</sup> When an estimated 91 percent of American children (aged 2–17) play videogames, with similar figures in Japan and Europe, and when the videogames industry frequently more than doubles the annual revenues of Hollywood, the importance of revealing new ways to understand the significance of gaming could not be more urgent.<sup>10</sup>

### *Illustration A*

*The ignorance and afflictions of the beginner’s mind are unified into immovable wisdom through cultivation/training (shugyō 修行), 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 Sōhō 沢庵宗彭 (1970, p. 37), Edo, Japan, early-seventeenth century, discussing swordsmanship

*You know, at the start I’m all fingers and thumbs. I’m not a natural talent, so I have to practice a lot. To begin with, I just mash at the controls, reacting to what’s going on but screwing up the response. I hit the wrong button, or I just freeze up and don’t know what to do. It can be really frustrating. But after a while, playing with the same character, it begins to sink in. Things become more natural. More automatic. It’s about training, right? Hours and hours getting the combos down. Working on timing. Learning to see the tells. But then at some point it just clicks; I forget about my thumbs and about trying, and I just do it. Like Yoda says! There is no try. It just happens by itself. No worries. It’s awesome.*

J3d1Kn1ght, Tokyo, Japan, 30 August 2014

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7 This clustering is explored in Goto-Jones (2015).

8 The “Japanese ideology” implicates the literature/industry of the so-called “Nihonjinron” (essays about Japanese uniqueness). An early yet still powerful intervention into this ideological field is Peter Dale (1986).

9 This builds on the emerging literature about the cognitive, motivational, emotional, and social “benefits” of videogames (Granic et al. 2014).

10 NPD Group 2011.

### The Miraculous Reversal Play

The “Beast event” (or “Evo Moment #37” as it is sometimes called) refers to a fifty-seven second gameplay sequence in the final round of the first match of the semi-final of the *Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike* competition at the Evolution World Championships 2004, in Pomona, California.<sup>11</sup> The match was between the last surviving American player, Justin Wong, and the great Japanese hope, Umehara Daigo. Wong was playing as Chun-Li and Umehara as Ken. The dynamism of the sequence of play is difficult to describe and should really be *experienced* by watching it.<sup>12</sup> However, in brief, Wong had worn Umehara down to his last pixel of vitality; had Chun-Li successfully landed even one more strike, Umehara’s Ken would have collapsed. At this last possible moment, Umehara performed a stunning reversal: he parried 15 consecutive strikes and launched a powerful counter attack that won the match.<sup>13</sup> The crowd went wild. NHK’s MAG-NET programme called this the “miraculous reversal play” (*kiseki no gyakutengeki* 奇跡の逆転劇), a phrase more commonly used to describe a sudden comeback in baseball.

Watching this sequence for the first time can be a powerful and inspirational experience for gamers. The influential gaming site *Kotaku* has listed it as the most important pro-gaming event in history.<sup>14</sup> In the recent “Virtual Ninja” gaming survey, this event was the only pro-gaming moment to be listed as the inspiration that led people to take up gaming or to take gaming more seriously.<sup>15</sup> However, for many people, watching footage of this event is entirely inexplicable and confusing; it is just a blur of cartoonic, videogame martial arts, indistinguishable from the recreational play of children (and adults) everyday. People imagine frantic and arbitrary “button mashing” to produce semi-random outcomes, translated into visual spectacle by a computer. The scene appears *alien*. In the words of Seth Killian (then at Capcom, 2012), “only around 1 percent of people who watch that video really know what’s going on.”<sup>16</sup>

This question of accessibility and comprehensibility is a serious one, which is common to many specialized or highly skilled activities. It is related to the question of literacy. In this case, whilst gamers routinely refer to Umehara as a *gemu-kami* ゲーム神 (gaming-god), the academy has been slow to recognize the importance of Umehara’s accomplishment at least

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11 *Street Fighter* is a fighting game franchise developed by Capcom. The first game in the series was released in 1987, but it was *Street Fighter II* (1991) that really became the industry standard. Each instalment (up to and including *Street Fighter IV* in 2008) has generated multiple games, manga, anime, merchandising, movies, and so on. The *Street Fighter V* series is planned for release in 2016.

12 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBVdk1bFddk> (Accessed 1 January 2015).

13 In a rather anticlimactic Grand Final, Umehara (again playing as Ken) lost to the enigmatic “KO” (playing as Yun). For some aficionados, this grand final was of superior quality to the semi-final, which was distinguished only by Umehara’s moment of brilliance. It seems to be accepted that the character “Yun” is extremely difficult to master and that KO’s gameplay was extraordinarily skillful. This compares to the relative ease of playing (defensively) with Chun-Li in *Street Fighter III*.

14 <http://kotaku.com/5820907/the-10-best-moments-in-pro-gaming-history> (Accessed 1 January 2015).

15 The Virtual Ninja Project was supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). The survey was launched in 2010 in the gaming culture magazine *Edge*. It conducted online surveys of gamers, together with follow-up interviews with some of the respondents, and also live interviews with gamers in Asia, Europe, and North America. A second iteration of the survey was launched at the end of 2014. The textual “illustrations” in this article are drawn from these data. <http://www.virtuallninja.ninja> (Accessed 1 January 2015).

16 Seth Killian in an interview with Penny Arcade, via Capcom Unity: [http://www.capcom-unity.com/brelston/blog/2012/02/24/explained:\\_the\\_mind\\_games\\_of\\_evos\\_world-famous\\_daigowong\\_match](http://www.capcom-unity.com/brelston/blog/2012/02/24/explained:_the_mind_games_of_evos_world-famous_daigowong_match) (Accessed 24 February 2012). The Penny Arcade page is now dead.

partially because the kinds of literacies required to understand the event are not typically the kinds of literacies required of scholars. Nothing textual or narrative is happening; even scholars of videogames would find this fifty-seven second sequence extremely specialized and difficult. In some ways, the situation is not dissimilar from that around the martial arts in the 1970s and 1980s, when scholars struggled to understand *how to understand* the sudden and immense popularity of the martial arts and martial arts cinema.<sup>17</sup> Audiences could see that Bruce Lee was doing something amazing, but most could not really understand *what* he was doing (and some could not *believe* he was really doing what it looked like).

In order to begin to unpick the significance of the “Beast event,” we might recognize two interrelated kinds of literacy within the game itself. The first is an *abstract literacy* regarding the protocols and control schemes of *Street Fighter III*. The second is the *embodied literacy* required to perform the techniques and movements described by the abstract literacies. In the language of game studies, we might see abstract literacy as the culmination of “object skills” (including conceptual skills) and “social skills,” and identify embodied literacy with “locomotive skills.”

At this stage, it is helpful to reflect that the literature of videogame studies tends to privilege the significance of “object play” and “social play” while diminishing the importance of “locomotive play.”<sup>18</sup> These are the three rudimentary types of play commonly associated with basic animal behavior:<sup>19</sup> “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 in various ways (including moving our fingers and thumbs). The privileging of object and social play means that the study of videogaming has (so far) managed to avoid the kind of impasse that has emerged in martial arts studies, wherein forms of embodied knowledge that are generated by practice are valued as authenticating the authority of a scholarly voice.<sup>20</sup> The converse of this kind of open-minded responsiveness to the specific embodied literacies of the martial arts (in which resides much of the epistemologically radical potential of the field) is that claims to knowledge and understanding that are not supported by embodied cognition might be seen as weak or even illegitimate. That is, “abstract” knowledge of techniques, forms, conventions, and rules—the kind of knowledge traditionally privileged by the academy as “objective”—is de-privileged in favor of a kind of radical empiricism found in subjective experience. The scholar-practitioner becomes the model of the legitimate, literate inquirer.

While, in general, the literature on videogames sidesteps this fundamental issue by emphasizing the ways in which play takes place in virtual sites that are sealed off from

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17 Bowman (2011, p. 66), citing Bill Brown (1974), suggests that this difficulty was at least partially a result of scholarly reluctance to engage with the importance of the martial arts in an evolving race politics. It is helpful to remember that the technical skills exhibited in the martial arts are also alienating to many observers; this emphasis on embodied knowledge as an essential literacy is a factor that continues to inform and shape the field of martial arts studies today. See, for instance, Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011.

18 Myers 2009, p. 46.

19 Bekoff and Byers 1998.

20 The role of experiential knowledge in research methodologies has a long and controversial history, running from debates in anthropology about the merits of participant observation, through to cutting edge issues about embodied cognition and the “taboo of subjectivity” (Wallace 2000). The emerging field of martial arts studies (MAS) finds itself fully engaged in these controversies.

the actual world of physical bodies (that is emphasizing the self-contained nature of the virtual site and the immersion of players therein, as romantically represented in the genre of cyberpunk), it is nevertheless important to realize that “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.”<sup>21</sup> That is, at the very least, access to object play and conceptual play in the virtual world relies upon a minimal level of physical skill with an interface device, such as a joystick, controller, or keyboard. In many cases, this “minimal level” is a rather low hurdle: the control mechanisms are deliberately and self-consciously designed to be all but invisible and irrelevant to the gameplay experience. To the extent that locomotor skills are needed, they are basically ways to navigate an interface with the game rather than a feature of the game itself. Such control mappings are often revealed to players *as they play* rather than *drilled* in intensive periods of preparation and training before play. Gamers call these games “casual” or “accessible,” in contrast with “hardcore” games that place much greater demands on the physical (and sometimes conceptual) dexterity of players.

Although the amount of physical skill required to play a videogame varies across a wide spectrum, it is clear that the “interfaces ... are ideological” across the whole range because (no matter how much skill they require) they always serve to mediate the complicated relationship between the player and her avatar, between the actual and the virtual worlds.<sup>22</sup> This is true whether the avatar functions as a simple game piece to be manipulated, a form of “projective ideal” in a fantasy of becoming, or whether it is viewed as doing “double duty as both self and other.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the interface and control scheme is so powerful that Rehak suggests that “videogames seem to offer the potential for profound redefinitions of body, mind, and spirit” in a way we do not encounter in other media.<sup>24</sup> Crucially, the ways that different control schemes map the behaviors of our physical bodies onto our various virtual bodies “produce specific experiences of embodiment” such that “different types of interfaces and different game worlds mold players’ embodied experiences.”<sup>25</sup>

In other words, the design of the play interface and the control scheme is not only a game-play choice but also an ideological one. The ways in which physical movements of players are mapped onto the movements of avatars have real consequences, not only for the player’s access to the gameworld and her literacy therein, but also for the kinds of embodied experiences that feed back from the gameworld into the fleshworld of biological bodies, sensations, minds, and thoughts. The control interface not only transforms our experience of the game, but also the way that the game transforms our way of *being the in world* at large. In a manner of speaking, the control interface is the perfect liminal device, skating on the membrane of the “magic circle” that ostensibly separates the actual from the virtual, the everyday from the gamic.<sup>26</sup> The joystick is an event in itself, enabling and creating the

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21 Myers 2009, p. 49.

22 Rehak 2003, p. 122.

23 Rehak 2003, p. 122.

24 Rehak 2003, p. 123.

25 Gregersen and Grodal 2009, pp. 65, 66.

26 The idea of a “magic circle”—even the kind of semi-porous or permeable membrane envisioned by thinkers such as Fredric Jameson in his work on utopias—has been challenged, notably by Mia Consalvo 2009.

permeability of the gameworld, transforming embodied knowledge into virtual actions and vice versa.<sup>27</sup> Hence, while the movements involved may be relatively tiny and subtle—often just precise movements of fingers or thumbs—locomotor play in videogames is at least partially a form of embodied literacy akin to that required in other performative arts (puppetry, dance, martial arts, and so on).

In this regard, fighting games (such as *Street Fighter III*) are particularly interesting. This is because the fighting game genre is unique in its “hardcore” approach to the control interface itself. In general, since the release of *Street Fighter II* in 1991, fighting games have had very complicated control schemes that include “beginners” techniques (requiring only one or two button presses, simultaneously or in sequence), which may be enough to tempt a casual player into the game or enough to win an early stage.<sup>28</sup> Any competent or ambitious player will quickly move on to learn more advanced techniques and combinations, requiring ever more complicated and precise sequencing and timing. Most fighting games include a training mode or “virtual *dōjō*” where players spend hours, days, or even weeks attempting to master difficult techniques before using them in the game itself.<sup>29</sup> Some gamers talk about “practice” and “training” rather than “play”; they talk about “conditioning muscle memory” and “self-cultivation,” often utilizing the term *shugyō*—a word familiar from the *bushidō* canon. Gamers also talk about entering into “flow zones,” a term used by psychologists to describe heightened states of concentration, immersion, control, and a loss of self-consciousness.<sup>30</sup>

### **Illustration B**

*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 ... phssst, 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*]

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27 In this regard, it is noteworthy that there is such a range of joysticks and arcade pads available, and that many professional players customize and modify them to their own tastes and specifications, until the device becomes their personal instrument, which they carry with them to tournaments as a musician brings her own violin.

28 For example, the most recent edition of the popular fighting game *BlazBlue (BlazBlue Chronophantasma Extend, 2015)* includes a “Stylish Mode” for players who “don’t like to practice and just want to have fun.” This mode, which contrasts with the “Technical Mode” for players who wish to explore all the possible techniques and combinations, still requires a thirty-minute tutorial just to explain (in abstract terms) the range of possible movements, and still requires many hours to learn to actually perform these moves.

29 Goto-Jones 2015.

30 The foundational statement of “flow” was by Csikszentmihalyi (1990); more recent work in this field has focussed on videogames, for example Sweetser and Wyeth 2005.

*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.*

Miyamoto Musashi 宮本武蔵 (1985, pp. 58–59), Kyūshū, Japan, 1645 [discussing swordsmanship]

Unlike most other game genres, in which mastering the control scheme is an instrumental achievement that enables access to and exploration of the virtual world or narrative of the game itself (that is, learning the controls is a precondition for play), in fighting games mastery of the control interface is itself the goal. Whether or not the game is enwrapped in a (often tokenistic) narrative structure, gameplay is invariably in the form of “stages” or “matches” between two or more avatars in direct confrontation.<sup>31</sup> Winning a stage relies on spontaneous and fluent mastery of the control scheme and tactics appropriate to the particular characters on stage. Winning may also advance a player to the next narrative stage, but the main significance of victory is that another (usually more challenging) fight will take place. In short, the (narrative) development of the fighting game is expressed as the progression through increasingly difficult iterations of the same challenge (a face-to-face fight), requiring ever greater and more complete mastery of the control interface until, at the moment of final victory/mastery, the game is won. Far from being an instrumental precondition for play, mastering the controls marks the end of the game: the journey through the game is framed as the warrior’s journey to mastery.

The prototype for this structure might well have been Bruce Lee’s unfinished (but seminal) film, *Game of Death* (1978), in which Lee must defeat one opponent after the next as he ascends a pagoda towards the greatest challenge of his skill.<sup>32</sup> A similar structure is evident in Lee’s “event” masterpiece, *Enter the Dragon* (1973), in which Lee enters a martial arts competition on a private island and must fight through increasingly challenging matches before his confrontation with the “boss” character at the end of the film. Final victory in each case is the ultimate expression of technical (and spiritual) mastery, an idea captured clearly by the title of John Little’s documentary, *Bruce Lee, A Warrior’s Journey* (2000). The honorable ideal of direct, honest combat between two fighters (whether the opponent is another human/avatar or computer controlled) is clearly lauded in both of Lee’s films and in most fighting games. This “staged” and direct architectural form quickly became the standard in fighting games, with some franchises (such as *Tekken*, *Street Fighter*, and *Mortal Kombat*) mirroring the shape and tropes of *Enter the Dragon* and *Game of Death* with considerable fidelity.<sup>33</sup>

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31 Again, this structure was established by *Street Fighter II*. It is noteworthy that most games include at least two modes: fighting against computer-controlled characters in order to work through a sequence of increasingly challenging opponents or to advance through the narrative (in story mode); and fighting against another human opponent in one-off (or tournament-based) bouts. Excellent work on the subversion of this binary form of combat as a mechanism to problematize notions of identity and immersion has been done by Hutchinson 2007.

32 *Game of Death* was left incomplete in 1972 when Lee abandoned it to film *Enter the Dragon*. Five years after his death, a version of the film was released that included much of the original (100 minutes) of footage plus additional footage filmed by Robert Clouse (the director of *Enter the Dragon*) using stand-ins for Lee.

33 Many franchises organize their games around a central “global” martial arts tournament sponsored by an evil rich man bent on collecting and exploiting the powers of the best fighters in the world, just as in *Enter the Dragon*. In the latest version of *Mortal Kombat (X)*, there is even a “Tower Mode” in which players fight their way up their own *Game of Death* edifice towards the ultimate challenge.

This context helps us to unpack the cultural and ideological significance of the “miraculous reversal play” of 2004 in a more meaningful and literate way, which in turn helps us to make sense of the assertion by Seth Killian about Umehara’s “event” that “people can take the playing of games and elevate it into an art form.”<sup>34</sup>

Prima facie, this fifty-seven-second sequence simply shows Umehara’s Ken return from the brink of apparently certain death to an improbable victory over Wong’s Chun-Li. What we miss in this reduction is the extent of the improbability and thus an appreciation of the level of skill (and artistry) involved in accomplishing it. We might start by noticing that Umehara’s Ken (hereafter, UmeKen) had been reduced to the smallest possible amount of vitality—just a single pixel.<sup>35</sup> This meant that even a single strike from Wong’s Chun-Li (hereafter, Wong-Li) would have killed him. Vitally, in *Street Fighter III*, even blocking an attack causes a small amount of damage (known as “chipping”), which meant that UmeKen would also die if he attempted to block even a single strike (by moving away from Wong-Li as he attacked). So, UmeKen retreats to his corner to gain some space and thinking time. Meanwhile, Wong-Li is considering whether to attack or simply to let the clock run out (and thus win on points). UmeKen will lose if nothing happens, and will lose if Wong-Li makes any contact with him. Wong-Li could just stand there, do nothing, and win.

After a fraction of a second of thought, UmeKen throws two *hadōken* 波動拳 (wave-motion fists) energy balls across the screen at Wong-Li, who parries them easily. This has two effects on Wong-Li: first, by parrying these attacks he gains enough energy to launch a “Super” attack; second, he seems to find these half-baked attacks irritating, and they make him impatient. Meanwhile, UmeKen maintains his distance on the other side of the screen. A few seconds later, Wong-Li abandons the idea of waiting for the match to time-out and launches into his Super Combo—the deadly *hōyoku sen* 鳳翼扇 (phoenix wing fan) technique. This technique unleashes a tirade of fifteen sequential strikes against UmeKen in rapid succession: in less than four seconds Chun-Li performs seven kicks with one leg, seven with the other, and then a powerful high-kick to end. If any one of those touch UmeKen (or if he blocks any of them) he will die.

Remarkably, UmeKen keeps cool. Indeed, in hindsight it is clear that he had launched his *hadōken* precisely to enable (and actually to goad) Wong-Li to make this devastating attack. UmeKen was maintaining a critical distance from Wong-Li that enabled him to time his response perfectly. Despite being in a horribly weak situation, UmeKen now had the advantage of knowing what his opponent was about to do (and knowing that he had been lured into doing it unnecessarily). He was playing Wong-Li’s mind as well as his body. Killian remarks that Umehara provoked a “mental break” in Wong.

Nonetheless, UmeKen still had to deal with a relentless Super Combo barrage. In *Street Fighter III* there is a delicate and precise technique known as the “parry.” Unlike the “block” (which is relatively easily accomplished by holding your direction away from an attacker),

<sup>34</sup> Killian 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Naming conventions for gamers are made more complicated by regional variations in naming. For instance, Umehara is known as Ume in Japan (a contraction of his family name) and as Daigo in the West. From interviews conducted during the Virtual Ninja Project, it became clear that the practice of contracting a player’s name and synthesizing it with her avatar to produce a unique tag emerges from the arcade scene in Japan. Significantly, these tags express different kinds of personalities and unities: UmeKen (Umehara playing with Ken) is substantively different than UmeRyu (Umehara playing as Ryu).

the “parry” does not suffer from “chipping.” To accomplish a parry, a player must move towards each individual strike at the very instant that it is performed. Completing a “full parry” against Wong-Li’s *hōyoku sen* would require UmeKen to complete fifteen separate instantaneous parries within four seconds (in front of a massive live audience in the semi-final of the most important tournament of the year). If he mistimed even one of them, the attack would kill him.

To the great excitement of the crowd, UmeKen successfully performs this miraculous “full parry”—it is the first time anyone has ever done this in a tournament, and the first time most people found out it was even possible to do it.<sup>36</sup> In hindsight, we can see that UmeKen’s control of distance (*maai* 間合い) and his opponent’s mental state had set up the conditions for this possibility. More than that, however, Umehara had trained long and hard in the performance of the parry, repeating it and repeating it until the movements and the timing were hardwired into his muscle memory: he did not have to think about the performance or enact the techniques consciously. As Killian notes, “the thing with parrying that Super is that it’s so fast you have to be parrying at the time the Super flashes, you can’t react to it ... You can’t see the flash and start tapping the parry out. You have to be parrying the instant the Super is initiated.”<sup>37</sup>

But this is not even the end: completing this astonishing “full parry” is only half of the “miraculous reversal play.” Knowing that the full parry would simply leave him standing next to Wong-Li with still only one pixel of vitality left, immediately vulnerable to even the simplest strike (and thus in no better situation than before his incredible performance—indeed, in a worse situation because there is less time left on the clock), UmeKen decides to improvise and make the last parry while jumping in mid-air, despite the ridiculous difficulty of doing this. This apparently unnecessarily flamboyant and dangerous move has a secret genius: knowing that his full parry will have gained him enough on his Super meter to execute a Super counter attack of his own, UmeKen seeks to combo his Super from a jumping kick as he descends from the last parry, thus minimizing the window of opportunity for Wong-Li to respond (if he were even able to respond after the shock of the full parry). As a result, the kick hits Wong-Li squarely and UmeKen follows it immediately with a Super Combo that knocks Wong-Li out of the match with its last strike. Thus, the miraculous reversal play is attained.

The various YouTube videos of this event (and the thousands of comments posted around them) show the crowd going crazy at this amazing accomplishment—it is Muhammad Ali dropping George Foreman in the eighth round (1974). But, more Lee than Ali, Umehara retains his characteristic calm; when asked about how he managed this incredible feat, Umehara gives the kind of response that might be expected from Lee: “I train all the time, so this kind of thing happens. It’s just one of my normal techniques, really.”

In fact, Umehara is famed for being cool under pressure. His playing style is noted for its crisp, controlled precision, while he sits in apparent tranquillity at the controls. For some, one of the stand-out moments of the “Beast event” is the way that he appears to get

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<sup>36</sup> In subsequent releases of *Street Fighter*, this aspirational technique was added to the training regimes in the practice mode.

<sup>37</sup> Killian 2012.

angry and frustrated at the start of the fifty-seven second sequence—the live commentator remarks on this in surprise. Umehara later explained that he had become frustrated with Wong-Li’s “turtling” (conservative, defensive tactics). But then he regained his cool and pulled off the miraculous reversal. The association between Umehara’s personal tranquillity and his technical prowess is such a strong element of the discourse that the “Keep Calm and Carry On” franchise produced a T-shirt and poster of this event: “Keep Calm and Parry On.”<sup>38</sup>

This juxtaposition between Umehara’s cool and Ken’s explosive dynamism renders the existential force of UmeKen and the cultural force of the “Beast event” into powerful experiences for literate audiences (who understand the intimate, embodied relationship between Umehara and Ken). In particular, it is interesting to note the way that this event participates in the “reiterated rhythmic cycle” observed by Paul Bowman as encapsulating the “fundamentals of the *event* of Bruce Lee.”<sup>39</sup> For Bowman, it was Lee’s consistent pairing of “superlative physical violence” and “supreme calm” in *Enter the Dragon* that affected a transformation in the discourse of the martial arts worldwide, forever tying superior physical technique to moral and spiritual accomplishment: “Repeatedly, Bruce Lee fights, wins, stops; is utterly calm. He bests hordes of opponents; then sits down in the lotus position.”<sup>40</sup> In the case of Umeken, the rhythm is transformed into simultaneity: Ken explodes with “superlative physical violence” while Umehara sits in “supreme calm.” The temporal unification of Umeken in this way provokes fascinating existential questions.

Like Umehara, Lee’s skills are represented as being the result of constant physical conditioning until techniques become “normal” or natural or automatic. Following his ritual triumph early in *Enter the Dragon*, Lee’s character explains to a senior Buddhist monk that remaining calm and relaxed in a fight is vital because it allows his body to act by itself: “A good martial artist does not become tense, but ready. Not thinking, yet not dreaming: ready for whatever may come. When the opponent expands, I contract; when he contracts, I expand; and when there is an opportunity, I do not hit ... it hits all by itself.” For the monk, this insight reveals that Lee’s skills “have gone beyond the mere physical level ... [to] the point of spiritual insight.” While the content of this “spiritual insight” remains rather opaque, the Bruce Lee *event* (as an intervention into the discourse of the martial arts in transnational popular culture) succeeds in associating the sublimation of physical techniques of violence through rigorous training with transcendental goals and virtue; and it succeeds in making this an aspirational model. The Beast *event* participates in this discourse in a new technological mode, demonstrating and actually embodying this union of physical and spiritual insight through the simultaneity of violence and calm in Umeken.

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38 This phrase is now a common catchphrase in gaming and has been associated with various games and some sports, such as fencing.

39 Bowman 2011, p. 68.

40 Bowman 2011, pp. 67–68. In many ways, this Lee “event” is a performance of an existing and pervasive theme from the more specialized martial arts discourse of practitioners, transposing it into a superstar event for a global audience. Stephen Chan has observed that certain Japanese martial arts (especially those performed in solo forms) exhibit a cyclical rhythm of stillness and action undergirded by the idea of meditation: “One meditates while being still; out of this meditation a single, short series of actions arises; the actions resolve themselves in stillness once more; this is visible to the onlooker; the practitioner is of the same meditating mind throughout. Being still, or in action, his (and today, also her) mind is clear as water, and is uncontaminated by conscious or rational thought” (Chan 2000, p. 72).

### *Illustration C*

*I know loads of people who twitch and throw themselves around while they play. They're usually not the ninjas. I'm not The Beast, but my boyfriend tells me that he sometimes wants to poke me to make sure I'm still breathing. It's the zone, right? It's focus. My body sort of shuts down everything it doesn't need. I sit really still with only my hands still working the buttons. He says I don't even blink. And then, in an instant, the other guy's dead, right. I just finish him without even blinking. The first thing I notice is the rush of victory.*

HaRun05akura, San Francisco, USA, 25 February 2015

*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.*

Eugene Herrigel (1953, p. 75), discussing *Zen and the Art of Archery*<sup>41</sup>

### **Embodied Orientalism and “Asian Hands”**

One of the defining features of the discourse about the martial arts in the 1970s and 1980s was the theme of race and ethnicity. In the simplest possible terms, the question was whether only “Asians” could really master the martial arts. The idea that this might be true was partially an aspect of cultural nationalism propagated by the Asian diaspora in California and elsewhere, where (as legend has it) kung fu would only be taught to Chinese people until Bruce Lee won the right to teach foreigners. This piggy-backed on the historical fact that the greatest expertise (together with the most established and elaborated schools and lineages) was in Asia. However, this sense of ethnic exclusivism was also a side-effect of the Bruce Lee *event*, which affected a transformation in the representation of the Asian male in Western societies precisely through the association of the martial arts with Asia and with the Asian body.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the importance of Bruce Lee in the West was most immediately appreciated by Black and Asian Americans as a (racially-charged) counter-hegemonic icon, an emblem of empowerment.<sup>43</sup> Lee's films played with these issues of racial politics, pitting Lee against fighters of various different ethnicities and races in order to demonstrate his

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41 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 and 2009.

42 The ostensible masculinity of this imagery, combined with often stereotyped gender roles, has led many to see this genre as essentially sexist. The gender politics of the representation of the martial arts, both in cinema and in games, is deeply problematic. While both media often showcase strong female fighters, there have been constant accusations of their fetishistic portrayal. This is especially the case in video games, where it has become the norm to represent female characters in overtly (and exaggeratedly) sexualized imagery—the recent controversy about the independent fighting game *SkullGirls* (2012) (which contains an entirely female cast of characters) illustrates this debate very well. The lead artist, Alex Ahad, responded forcefully to accusations of sexism, attempting to place the imagery into the context of a genre aesthetic of caricature that exaggerates male and well as female features.

Fascinating and important as the gender politics of fighting games certainly is, there is no space to do it justice in the context of this article. It will be considered more fully in future pieces. For now, the most salient point is precisely the shift in cinematic representations of the Asian body towards the masculine and heroic.

43 Bowman suggests that this counter-hegemonic, racialized impact was one of the reasons why the predominantly white, middle-class academy took so long to understand the importance of Bruce Lee. Bowman 2011, p. 66.

superiority over all—*Game of Death* is the most literal in this respect.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the most famous and powerful of these moments (for Western audiences) was Lee’s victory over the American hero Chuck Norris in the epic finale of *Way of the Dragon* (1972), staged in the Colosseum in Rome. In 1972, Norris was an acclaimed karate-*ka* in his own right, having been named “fighter of the year” in 1969; Lee played his victory with great care, showing respect for this valiant American hero but ultimately demonstrating emphatic superiority.<sup>45</sup>

As a Chinese superstar, however, Lee’s ethnic and race politics needed careful navigation around the vulgar category of “Asia.” Some of his most successful films in China were those that pitted China against Japan, kung fu against karate. For instance, *Fist of Fury* (1972), Lee’s second major Hong Kong release, depicted a direct confrontation between Chinese and Imperial Japanese in early-twentieth-century Shanghai. Lee’s spectacular superiority over all the Japanese fighters is clearly represented as the triumph of kung fu over karate, but also as the ultimate victory of the Chinese spirit over Japanese oppression. Mastery of the martial arts is not only about self-transformation and personal emancipation, but here is also tied firmly to ideals of political liberty and national pride.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Lee’s films suggest a (rather inconsistent) racial hierarchy for martial artists: being Asian is good but being Chinese is better when it comes to the martial arts.<sup>47</sup> Partially as a consequence of this enculturated representation, the martial arts became perceived as more than physical disciplines of technical skills and instead were adopted as *ways of life* in the West. For many, participating in the martial arts was colored by the fantasy of *becoming Asian*.<sup>48</sup>

Partially in this context, it is interesting to see how the discourse around *Street Fighter* and other fighting games developed in the wake of the “Beast event.” In particular, a “way in which ethnicity really comes into play in the fighting game community is a persistent privileging of Asian background as a marker of innate skill.”<sup>49</sup> It is true that players of Asian descent have been extremely successful in e-sports in general and in fighting games in particular. The phrase “Asian hands” is conventionally deployed by gamers to label aspirational qualities such as rapid reflexes, smooth sublimation and immersive flow, precise

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44 Following this model, especially after *Street Fighter II*, most fighting games include a roster of playable characters from different countries “representing” different characteristic fighting styles and arts. Global victory (that is, victory over these representatives) is the invariable goal. In some instances, such as in *Tekken* and *Mortal Kombat*, “representation” also includes nonhuman realms. In addition, pushing into the arena of gender politics once again, unlike *Enter the Dragon*, which sees Lee pitted against an almost entirely male field of competitors, fighting games include a mixture of nationalities, ethnicities, styles, and genders.

45 In the years between 1968 and 1974, Norris won the Professional Middleweight Karate Championship each year in succession. In 1969 he won more championship fights than any other competitor across all competitions, leading to his recognition as the “fighter of the year” by *Black Belt Magazine*. Hence, in 1972, Norris was at the top of his professional game.

46 The popularity of this theme in Chinese martial arts movies is underlined by the number of films that feature it, including the popular remake of *Fist of Fury*, Jet Li’s *Fist of Legend* (1994).

47 The complex postcolonial politics of martial arts cinema is a major theme in martial arts studies. The case of Bruce Lee specifically is considered in Prashad 2003.

48 This fantasy has been one of the focal points of “critical area studies” since the 1980s. It is associated with critiques of identity tourism, which have also been implicated in discussions of techno-Orientalism and engagements with cyberculture, for example Nakamura 2002.

49 Harper 2014, p. 112.

movement, delicacy of touch, and so on.<sup>50</sup> Debates on forums such as the influential fighting game site *Shoryuken.com* as well as feedback in the “Virtual Ninja Survey” (2010–2015) suggest that arguments about “Asian hands” revolve around two basic positions: the first is a racist position—Asian hands are allegedly more dextrous and agile than the hands of others; the second is a cultural and ideological position—because of the culture of training and play in Asia (especially in Japan and Korea), players from those countries allegedly develop superior skills. For Harper this pervasive idea of “Asian hands” reveals the “mystique” of “the inscrutable Orient”; he sees it as lurking behind the complicated relationship of worship/resentment that gamers exhibit towards great Japanese players like Umehara Daigo, whose nickname—the Beast—intimates that he is something other than entirely human.<sup>51</sup> Like the fantastical characters of *Street Fighter*, who train with such devotion that they attain super-human (and sometimes daemonic) forms, Umehara has “emerged from the mystic land of free-flowing arcades, where ... endless high-level competition has forged [him] into something altogether different ... not even altogether human.”<sup>52</sup>

Interestingly, some Japanese players seem to support this idea in their own speech-acts, participating in a form of self-Orientalism. For instance, in an interview with *Eurogamer*, Umehara talks about his first competition outside Japan (his 1995 *Street Fighter Alpha 3* face-off against Alex Valle in California, as the respective national champions of Japan and the USA). He notes that this was actually his first trip outside Japan at all, but goes on to explain that “even though I had no idea about the skill level of US players, I sensed that Japanese players would be stronger. For some reason I was confident that I would win, even though I had no solid base for my assumption.” For Umehara the difference was partly technological (U.S. joysticks and other hardware just seemed less precise and elegant than Japanese hardware) and partly something ineffable and atmospheric: “I don’t think my views were proven wrong ... Japanese players were operating at a higher level than the US players. The Japanese, in my opinion, enjoy a much better fighting game environment with enriched arcade culture to begin with. As such I do think the Japanese have an advantage in fighting games in general.”<sup>53</sup>

Evidence from fighting games forums, interviews with gamers, and the Virtual Ninja Survey reveal various rhetorical strands that unite to compose the “Asian Hands” discourse. Most prevalent is the pairing of two historical observations: first, that (with some exceptions) the martial arts are East Asian in origin, and hence that there is something about the martial arts (and associated activities, including simulations and games) that must come naturally to East Asian peoples; second, that (with some exceptions) fighting games (and aspects of videogame culture as a whole) are Japanese in origin, and hence that there is something about fighting games that naturally appeals to the Japanese (who are already predisposed to

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50 This aspirational discourse, which I call “gamic Orientalism,” amounts to the ideological appropriation of “flow zones” as “Asian,” which in turn renders “gamic Orientalism” into a species of “embodied Orientalism.” The possibility that this same discourse could be appropriated for negative ends—to denigrate or blame “Asian hands”—must be acknowledged, although the data available do not indicate that this negative appropriation is pervasive.

51 This is a telltale incidence of an evaluatively ambiguous (or even derogatory) appropriation of the Asian hands discourse, which is usually represented as aspirational.

52 Harper 2014, pp. 114–15.

53 Parkin 2009.

the martial arts).<sup>54</sup> The association between the martial arts, fighting games, and Japan is so strong that many participants in our survey insisted that the American game franchise *Mortal Kombat* must be Japanese because of its aesthetic participation in a martial arts model.<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, there is continuous slippage in the discourse between assertions about martial arts norms and assumptions about the culture of fighting games in Japan. This slippage takes a number of romantic forms, perhaps preeminent among which is the idea that Japanese gamers spend significantly more of their gaming time in gaming arcades on the high streets than Western gamers. In fact, this is true (albeit diminishingly so): until very recently, many Japanese gamers would do the majority of their gaming in an arcade, rather than on their computer or a console at home. Street arcades remain big business in Japan, and they can be found in most districts of most cities, with many cities supporting one or more dedicated districts for gaming and electronics (such as Akihabara and Nakano in Tokyo). This compares starkly with the situation in Europe and the USA, where game arcades have almost disappeared from the streets. In general, it remains true that Japanese gamers congregate in physical spaces (even if only at Starbucks to use their handheld consoles together) while Western gamers tend to eschew communal physical spaces in favor of virtual meetings online, remaining physically isolated in their bedrooms at home. The *physical interaction* of gamers is relatively deprived in Western societies.

This tendency towards recognition of physical gaming spaces as territories in particular neighborhoods slips easily into a martial-arts flavored discourse. Kijima Yoshimasa, for instance, observes the apparent transition of the traditional practice of *dōjō yaburi* 道場破り (*dōjō* storming) from martial arts *dōjōs* into gaming arcades. He explains that, for gamers, “their local arcade is like a dojo—a training gym—that is part of their home turf ... [F]ighting gamers also have a practice of *dōjō yaburi*, with players teaming up to challenge other players with a reputation at a rival arcade.”<sup>56</sup>

Kijima’s observations of gamers in Osaka in 2008 are consistent with my own (less systematic) observations in that city (three weeks each year, 2010–2014) and in Tokyo (2014). There is certainly a sense in which the romantic image of the *dōjō* spirit from an idealized, *bushidō*-inflected history impacts on gaming practice in cities where arcades/*dōjōs* are close enough together that players can move from one to the next challenging local champions and legends. Players in one arcade will certainly be aware of skilled players in other arcades. “Spies” (so-called “monitor cyborgs”—a character-type from *Street Fighter II*) will venture to those rival arcades to assess the skill of their best players, and return with reports. Conversely, players are wary of such spies in their own arcades, and some believe that they can *sense the difference* between a curious salaryman on his way home from work

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54 Most of the major fighting game franchises are Japanese in origin: *Street Fighter* (Capcom); *Virtua Fighter* (Sega); *Guilty Gear* (Aksys); *Dead or Alive* (Tecmo); *Soul Calibur* (Namco/Bandai); *Blazblue* (Arksys); *Tekken* (Namco/Bandai); *Super Smash Bro* (Nintendo), and so on. Interestingly, international player rankings approximately mirror the origins of the games, with Japanese players dominating the *Street Fighter* rankings but with Americans dominating in *Mortal Kombat*.

55 *Mortal Kombat* first appeared in 1992, developed by the Chicago-based firm Midway Games. While it deploys many of the same gaming conventions as the Japanese franchises, it is noted for using a much more spectacular “gore” system, especially in the finishing moves, which falls foul of the censors in Japan (where the portrayal of blood is a more sensitive issue). In general, fighting gamers are aware that this level of explicit gore means that a game is more likely to be American than Japanese.

56 Kijima 2012, p. 265.

and a spy sent to gather intelligence on new moves, techniques, and abilities. To circumvent this situation, some arcades have informal house rules (set by the players rather than the arcade owners) stating that if you enter certain parts of the hall you must play—no tourists allowed.<sup>57</sup>

Whether or not it is the case that these kinds of practices link directly back to the martial arts world of early and premodern Japan (where it is at least debateable that there were ever such practices), it is sufficient for us to note that this association is clearly made in the players' discourse today. This is how "serious gamers" mean their behaviors to be understood and signified: they self-identify as martial-arts gamers. And this is also how Japan's arcade culture enters into the transnational discourse of gamers. This discourse ranges from well-known urban legends (which we might now term *virtual legends*) about American champions venturing to Japan on holiday and being completely destroyed at *Street Fighter IV* by a five-year-old girl in a random, small town rural arcade or motorway rest-stop. This legend precisely echoes those of the 1980s, when advanced Western karate-*ka* would visit Japanese *dōjōs* only to discover that the level of karate in an average Japanese *dōjō* (combined with the heat and humidity of a Japanese summer) left them feeling like beginners again. At the other end of the scale, the discourse embraces figures like Umehara Daigo, suggesting that his "Asian hands" were forged in the constant competition and battle of inter-arcade *dōjō yaburi*. Reports suggest that Umehara refused even to have a game console in his apartment at home, so that his training must always be at the intensity required in an arcade.<sup>58</sup>

Having said all this, the classically Orientalist association between Japan/Asia and the martial arts is not only pushed into a techno-Orientalist association between Asia and fighting games by these kinds of subcultural practices. In addition, this transition is supported by a host of other cultural developments and phenomena. In particular, it is clear that the gaming franchises themselves seek to reinforce this kind of association. We have already seen how *Tekken* and *Mortal Kombat* participate in the architectural structure of *Enter the Dragon*, but it is the *Street Fighter* franchise that most fully elaborates the unity of martial arts and fighting games via Asia(nism), even to the extent that it plays with the intersection between gaming and fighting as a theme in the content of its narratives. Indeed, given that many fighting games include "story modes" to elaborate the personal narratives of their characters, it is important not to neglect narrative analysis in this genre.

#### "Someone Stronger than Me"

One of the defining themes of the post-*Street Fighter II* era has been the constant refrain of the game's catchphrase, "I'm going to meet someone stronger than me," which emerged from the backstory of the character Ryu—the archetypal Japanese martial arts hero. For Kijima

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57 This phenomenon, verified by data from the Virtual Ninja Project, echoes similar organizational issues observed by Harper (2014, p. 102). Harper notes the difference between the norms and conventions of tournament organizers (who can set the conditions of participation in a tournament or competition) and the conventions of communities of play, which are often set by "oligarchs," or groups of influential players, in an aspirational (rather than regulatory) mode.

58 In fact, while it is true that Umehara did not have a games console in his Tokyo apartment (because he wanted to maintain his home as a work-free space), he not only trained in games arcades but also maintained a second apartment in which he kept all his games equipment. <http://kotaku.com/world-class-street-fighter-player-doesnt-have-a-game-c-1515591621> (Accessed 1 January 2015).

this refrain “fueled a culture of dojo challenges, encouraging players to go on expeditions to seek worthy opponents.”<sup>59</sup> Capcom deliberately indulged this tendency through the use of tie-in fiction, manga, and anime that elaborated on this idea. Hence, the influential anime, *Street Fighter II: The Animated Movie* (Dir. Sugii Gisaburō, 1994) focussed on the story of the Japanese hero, Ryu, who lived his life as a wandering martial arts master, testing himself against any worthy opponents he encountered along the way.<sup>60</sup> He lived simply and without pretension, with his life entirely dedicated to the development of his skills and his quest for worthy opponents. Along with this dedication came great moral stature: we see him feeding the starving and defending the vulnerable. He is the romantic icon of an honorable *rōnin*—the *youxia* (wandering force or knight errant) of classical China. As the Japanese hero, his “Asian hands” are depicted as the most superior of all the characters, while the Chinese fighter (Lei Fong, an obvious representation of Bruce Lee) is seen as talented, honorable, but ultimately too weak, and the leading American fighter, Ken, is shown as having been trained by the same Japanese sensei as Ryu. While being of similar skill, Ken’s decadent lifestyle makes him weaker (and more easily co-opted to evil) than Ryu.<sup>61</sup> Hence, *Street Fighter II* participates in (and challenges) the racial politics of the kung fu boom, transposing the superiority of Japan over China within the positively evaluated category of Asia.<sup>62</sup>

The movie’s plot is driven partly by the Japanese hero’s quest for worthy opponents and partly by the villain’s hunt for the best fighters to add to his collection. Hence, the franchise contains at least two motivations for the acquisition of martial expertise: the first is a spiritual quest, the second is a capitalist endeavor; the first is positively valued (and associated with Asia), and the second negatively. Martial ability without moral stature is represented as a kind of sickness, but the franchise retains this motivation for various characters in the games since it is clear that this is a real motivation for many fighters (ideologically represented by the non-Japanese characters). The franchise plays with the question of moral commitment to self-transformation through martial training that has been a perennial theme of martial arts literature in East Asia.

One of the most intriguing devices of the movie is the “monitor cyborg.” This is a cybernetic agent of Bison (the villain), which roams the world in search of fights to watch. When it finds one, it scans the fighters to ascertain their ability and potential—a process that is rendered much like viewing the computer screen of a fighting game. It then sends the data back to Bison so he can act. Just as gamers in the 1990s echoed the catchphrase “I’m going to meet someone stronger than me,” so the language of “monitor cyborgs” was also

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59 Kijima 2012, p. 273.

60 This is a classical trope in Japanese history, ranging from stories of the legendary swordsman, Miyamoto Musashi, through to the modern figure of Ōyama Masutatsu 大山倍達, founder of the full-contact form of karate known as *Kyōkushin* 極真.

61 The explicit renegotiation of intra- and inter-regional identity politics when compared with the Chinese-focussed “kung fu boom” of the 1980s is a clear indication of the soft power of “Cool Japan” by the 1990s.

62 The 2000 animated film by Yamauchi Shigeyasu 山内重保, *Street Fighter Zero*, serves as a mediation on the question of why Ryu consistently seeks to fight, why he must become stronger, and what this means for his spiritual and moral integrity. The enemy with whom Ryu ultimately gapples is his own nature, and the danger that he will succumb to the “Dark Hadō” (*satsui no hadō* 殺意の波動—tide of murderous intent) and thus become evil, consumed by the violence of his quest for the next fight. The film was produced as a testament to *Street Fighter II* on its tenth anniversary.

used to describe the spies in rival arcades, where they scanned the abilities and techniques of potential opponents.

Even more powerfully, the movie contains a legendary moment among *Street Fighter* players, when the witch doctor, Dhalsim, is fighting Honda, the sumo wrestler. At a crucial point in the fight, Dhalsim simply stops fighting and surrenders, telling Honda that there is no point in fighting anymore. Honda is confused and angry at what looks like sudden cowardice and capitulation. But Dhalsim lifts his head and looks around the crowd, searching for someone, and says: “Have you ever felt the fighting spirit of another?” It turns out that Ryu had been in the crowd and Dhalsim had felt his presence; in the presence of a greater fighting spirit, the fight between Dhalsim and Honda seemed pointless—they were both unworthy.<sup>63</sup>

*“The Fighting Spirit of Another?”*

Like “I’m going to meet someone stronger than me,” the phrase “Have you ever felt the fighting spirit of another” became a commonplace in *Street Fighter* circles. While the first phrase suggests a normative mission that evokes codes of honor and notions of worthiness, the second takes a step further and suggests that a player’s level of mastery and devotion is in some way visible in their embodied being (rather than only in the way they play). That is, just as the martial arts discourse suggests that the sage-warrior appears unlike her peers, so this fighting game discourse goes so far as to suggest that the master-player has a different physical presence from her peers.

Perfecting your techniques changes you.... You move differently, stand differently. You *are* different. It’s not just how you play the game, it’s how you approach it ... sometimes it’s how you physically walk up to the machine and put your money in.

[ga1d3n, 11/02/11, Osaka]

Sometimes you’re playing and you notice people watching. Usually it doesn’t matter. You ignore them. Focus, right? But sometimes you can really tell that someone amazing is there, like Ryu’s watching you. Maybe it’s the Beast or something? You know?

[p5kic8ba11, 24/12/10, Tokyo]

When you’re waiting in line, you can tell. It’s the way people place their coin or fold their arms. The way they study the play, or not. The moves that make them raise their eyebrows, and the ones they ignore even when everyone else goes nuts. You can tell the monitor cyborgs from the warriors—you can feel their fighting spirit, no? Have *you* ever felt the fighting spirit of another?

[f1rstDan, 01/03/11, London]

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<sup>63</sup> The conceit that spiritually advanced martial artists can sense each other’s presence is common to much of popular martial arts fiction, and also appears in techno-Orientalist forums such as the *Star Wars* franchise, where (for instance) Darth Vader famously senses the presence of Obi-wan Kenobi when his “old master” boards the Death Star.

This mythic conflation of martial arts discourse with content from media mix franchises adds a new dimension to the idea of convergence culture, bridging it into the arena of embodiment. Echoing classical literature from the *bushidō* tradition, the assumption is that mastering a fighting game changes the player in a radically embodied sense. That is, it is not only the case that mastering a fighting game causes specific and specialized changes in muscle memory, reflexes, and so on, that are evident while playing the game, but it is also the case that these transformations subsist or overflow into the player's general way of being in the world. Hence, they are visible (to the trained eye) even when not playing. Playing changes people. This idea resonates with what psychologists sometimes call the "generalization" of flow states into constitutional states: regular cultivation of flow in specialized activities can lead to general and persistent changes in personalities and neurological structures. Similar arguments are often made about the way that persistent and regular meditation cultivates changes in our way of being in the world—not only while we meditate but also in general.<sup>64</sup>

One of the least satisfactory retorts to this position is that while martial artists gain embodied skills that enable them to act spontaneously and efficiently to defend themselves in contexts other than in the *dōjō*, it is clearly not the case that a fighting game master has the same embodied literacies. That is, the embodied transformation of the fighting gamer does not make them real-world fighters.<sup>65</sup> This position seems to be incontrovertibly true, but it also seems to miss the point. The claim that a fighting games master is bodily transformed through her mastery of the game (in a manner visible to the trained eye) is of a different order from the claim that this bodily transformation renders her into an actual fighter. A fighting game is not a simulation of a fight, but rather a simulacrum—a martial contest in its own right.<sup>66</sup> Intriguingly, the martial arts literature also explores this difference, often representing the visible transformation of the martial arts sage in terms of a

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64 Psychologists have long been familiar with the ways in which "flow states" can be accompanied by feelings of calm, focus, and other positively evaluated traits. It also seems clear that the persistent accomplishment of such states can have a generalized impact on personalities, including by affecting neurological changes. Recent work on videogames has explored positive changes in cognitive, motivational, emotional, and social development (Granic et al. 2014). There is also the beginning of work about the intersection between gaming and meditational states. See Gackenbach and Bown 2011.

65 In terms of generalizable expertise conditioned within video games, fighting games are clearly different from driving games or flight simulations, in which skills can be transferable from the virtual into the actual. The issue is the type of mimicry or mimesis involved; Caillois (1961) uses this term as one of the key qualities of play. As Kijima notes, fighting games have a particular relationship with the idea of mimesis: "Just because one is a strong player in fighting games does not make one good at actual fighting or martial arts." It follows from this that "fighting games are not fictional versions of combative sports but are combative sports executed by one's fingertips." Kijima 2012, pp. 262, 269.

66 One of the most pressing and immediate problems with this position is the virtuality of the term "martial." Martial artists insist that the significance of the "martial" element of their art emerges from the heightened stress produced by being in imminent and real physical danger. Indeed, this has been one of the traditionalist criticisms of the transformation of the martial arts in sports and hobbies—in the absence of real danger, the arts are no longer martial. Nevertheless, despite this critique and the traditionalist schools that uphold the need for physical danger, it is now conventional for practitioners to call themselves martial artists even when all of their training has been in the (relative) safety of a *dōjō*. Hence, there is a sense in which the "martial" aspect of the martial arts has become performative rather than combative *per se*: facing death is not the point, rather the point is self mastery through the perfection of technique.

moral quality rather than a physical menace. The quality that is embodied in this discourse is *mastery* itself, not the particular skill set that was mastered.<sup>67</sup>

Hence, one of the deepest provocations around this idea is that this embodied transformation might also be (or might chiefly be) an ethical transformation of self. Just as the *bushidō* canon explores the question of whether martial practices (performed with appropriate sincerity, devotion, and duration) can constitute a path toward transcendent experience and being, so we might ask whether there is an ideological space for a parallel exploration regarding virtual martial practices—what we might term Virtual Ninja Theory.

In fact, at least since *Street Fighter II*, the fighting game community is quite clear about its aspirational relationship with the ethically-charged quality of “worthiness.” In his study of fighting games as performance, for instance, Harper condenses the views of hardcore fighting gamers present on online forums like Shoryuken.com into a list of qualities that define “being a good player.” He suggests that

the ideal fighting game player takes the game seriously, is a gracious winner, seeks self-improvement, has an investment in both gamer culture broadly and fighting game culture specifically, considers fighting games to primarily be a social activity and a test of skill, and both appreciates and seeks to emulate the (American) arcade ideal of two fighters challenging each other one on one.<sup>68</sup>

This general position is witnessed in various ways in the transnational community. For instance, among the “good players” there is a general disdain for players who simply “mash” the buttons and fluke victories. Such victories are seen as “unworthy” because they are not accomplished by skill and because they (therefore) provide no opportunity for either player to improve him/herself.<sup>69</sup> Allied to this is the development of subcommunities of fighting gamers who have come to be known as the “stop having fun guys” because of their insistence that meaningful play must adhere strictly to conditions that expose skill and eschew gimmickry: in practice this means standardizing the avatars being deployed and the

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67 Perhaps the most famous instances of this form of argument are in the classic statements of the seventeenth-century *bushidō* discourse, when writers such as Takuan Sōhō attempted to unify Zen philosophy with martial training, depicting the martial arts as simply one form of practice (among many) that could lead to enlightenment if practiced with appropriate intentionality and dedication.

68 Harper 2014, p. 135. Harper’s parenthetical qualification (American) seems counterintuitive in the context of this article. In general, though, Harper is not very interested in Japan *per se*. Here the qualification appears to be a reference to the idea of a cowboy code, as though that is the dominant cultural referent for this sphere of activity. This seems to be untrue for many players, for whom the association between fighting games, the martial arts, and Asia is powerful. In any case, Harper does not develop his qualification.

69 One *Street Fighter IV* player in Singapore, Zang1ef, puts it this way: “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!*” (1 February 2011).

stages on which battles are fought to ensure that skill is the only variable.<sup>70</sup> Very quickly, these kinds of norms for behavior come to resemble codes of conduct, and “play” starts to resemble “practice” in the cultivational sense.

Presumably, then, there is a sense in which gamers like *ga1d3n* in Osaka (above) are talking about the way in which worthy opponents seem to embody this worthiness in their everyday activities, including in simple activities like standing in line or placing their coin into an arcade machine. The kinds of embodied transformations that could be cultivated through mastery of fighting games echo the kinds of transformations claimed for practitioners of the martial arts themselves in at least two respects: 1. practicing diligently at a fighting game makes you better at that fighting game, at least partially because repetition of the necessary actions leads to their sublimation into muscle memory, making them instinctual and reflexive—we might perceive this embodied change in the musculature of the hands or the angle of posture, and so on; 2. practicing a fighting game to the point of mastery, which leads to embodied transformations, should also be the attainment of an ethical transformation of the self—the trained observer will be able to see this in the embodied presence of a master gamer.

### Asian Hands, *Otaku*, and Techno-Orientalism

In the background to this discourse about the confluence of the martial arts and fighting games, influencing general expectations, are the techno-Orientalist representations of cyberpunk and the New Wave, especially since the so-called digital revolution. Since the 1980s, East Asia (especially Japan) has served as a standard emblem of a technological futurity—this has become a convention of Science Fiction.<sup>71</sup> The neon-riddled mega-cities of Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Shanghai stand in for the future in the present.

More than this, however, the 1990s and 2000s saw the rise of the *otaku* as a controversial representation of a technologically-dedicated youth in transnational culture. As a category, *otaku* has a complicated and uneven history, beginning in the 1980s when the term was used to label a stigmatized and marginal “geek” subculture in Japanese cities. By the end of the 1990s, however, and the emergence of so-called “Cool Japan,” the term was already being transformed in the popular imagination around the world, becoming a label for something closer to “geek chic.” The landmark publication of Azuma Hiroki’s 東浩紀 seminal work, *Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan 動物化するポストモダン* (The Animalizing Postmodern, 2001), provided a focus for the academic interrogation of the *otaku* as a mode of being for humanity in the postmodern era. Explicit behind the general concept of the postmodern human as a “database animal”—of the *otaku* as a “super information processor”—was the particularized story of the emergence of this way of being specifically in Japan. Participating in the current of techno-Orientalism that placed Japan at (or before) the vanguard of history, the *otaku*

70 Harper discusses this phenomenon with relation to the Nintendo game *Smash Bros Melee* (2014, p. 102). He talks about how serious *Smash* players will adhere to the “Fox only, Final Destination, no items” rules (4), indicating that both players will play as the avatar “Fox” on the game stage known as “Final Destination,” and that all additional items and ability boosts will be disabled.

Similarly, the Shoryuken.com community has become notorious for its disdain for the so-called “09ers”—players who took up fighting games in the wake of the release of *Street Fighter IV* (2009), presumably because it was such a graphical feast and a commercial success, rather than because they were really dedicated to fighting games *per se*. They were not worthy opponents.

71 Goto-Jones 2015.

rapidly became synonymous with a form of transhumanist futurity, in which human beings and the digital world interpenetrated each other in an increasingly seamless way. By 2007, Azuma was talking about the idea of “gamic realism” to capture the emerging unity between the experience of being in, of, and outside the digital realm simultaneously.

Although the introverted and nerdish *otaku* might be an unlikely martial hero, in the world of gaming the idea of the *otaku* stacks on top of representations of the confluence of martial arts and fighting games to reinforce the significance of so-called “Asian hands.” In the words of Ap0calypt1c0 from Los Angeles, USA (1 February 2015): “We just got no chance when they hit us with that next level, *otaku*, Brucie shit. They’re like *into* it, you know? It’s like a whole ‘nother level.”<sup>72</sup>

In other words, for gamers, the concept of the Japanese *otaku* brings with it certain ideas about obsessive dedication and constant practice, to the extent of reaching a unique level of immersion in the game that is accompanied by unique levels of emergent skill. As Kijima observes, this places the gamer-*otaku* into a slightly different category from other forms of *otaku* (such as those principally focussed on anime or manga): rather than placing their focus on the joy or intoxication of *viewing* their favored media (through collecting) or *mimicking/performing* characters from that media (through cosplay) or *modding* these products (through *dōjinshi* 同人誌—self-published works), gamer-*otaku* engage in the “joy of manipulation” as operators.<sup>73</sup>

What gamer-*otaku* share with *otaku* in general is the desire to go beyond casual engagement with an object, pushing interaction through to its most complete and comprehensive level of immersion. Hence, gamer-*otaku* are not principally interested in winning a game *per se* (which can often be done expeditiously by completing as little as 30 percent of the material in the software), but instead they are interested in finishing the game with 100 percent completeness. This *yarikomi* やり込み approach requires them to master completely the control schemes, tactics, and devices of the gameworld and to play in a manner that privileges the development and realization of these skills. They must encounter every possible opponent and access all the secret or hidden levels. They must become *masters* of that world in the fullest sense. As Kijima explains, for the gamer-*otaku*, “their passion is focussed on conducting exhaustive research in game mechanisms and masochistically pursuing difficult game play. In sum, fighting game *otaku* are characterized by their self-punishing and exhaustive game play, obsession with game mechanics, and they display their passions by performing to an audience.”<sup>74</sup>

As a result of this orientation, gamer-*otaku* approach “play” in a manner that seems to resemble that of the “martial-arts gamers,” who talk about “training” and “cultivation,”

72 Once again, this seems like an instance of the ambiguous (or even derogatory) deployment of gamic Orientalism.

73 Kijima 2012, p. 250. Kijima sees an affinity between the “joy of manipulation” experienced by gamers and that experienced by *modders* in *dōjinshi*. However, he distinguishes the two in various ways, including by noting that while the manipulation of gamers tends towards “operating,” that by *modders* tends towards “making.” Similarly, while he sees some similarities between the adoption of characters in cosplay and in gaming, he suggests that the difference resides between the aspirations of *becoming* and *manipulation* (p. 251).

74 Kijima 2012, p. 252. Kijima notes that the emphasis on public performance and demonstration of immersive accomplishment marks the gamer-*otaku* as different from the more introverted *otaku* associated with manga and anime. There appears to be some connection with cosplay *otaku*, except that gamers perform manipulation rather than representation.

“mastery” and “flow.” Indeed, rather than thinking in terms of “play,” we might consider the gamic engagements a form of *practice*. For Kijima, gamer-*otaku* think of their gaming in terms of “training” and “research,” where “training is a process of gaining mastery over the game controls” and “research involves devising new strategies and mapping out the flow of events in hypothetical fights.” Like the martial-arts gamer, the gamer-*otaku* “practice the same move hundreds of times until the motion becomes ingrained as muscle memory and they execute the move without any conscious thought,” while “careful research enables players to anticipate their opponent’s moves in actual fights.”<sup>75</sup>

Also in a manner similar to martial-arts gamers, the gamer-*otaku* appears to be particular about finding “suitable” or “worthy opponents.” Such opponents, often contrasted with “casual gamers,” are those who are fully committed to the game, with advanced skills, who focus on using the instance of competition as opportunities to both demonstrate and hone their skills. Not only that, but the *otaku* community highly values (and relies upon) its ability to gauge a prospective opponent’s level, often (also) making use of evidence drawn from the physical presence of the challenger in an arcade, coffee shop, or wherever. Gamer-*otaku* “scan for various clues to determine whether their opponents are serious players. The opponent’s handling of the controls, their sitting angle, their character’s timing and distance from the other character ...”<sup>76</sup>

Consistent with this suggestion that mastering a fighting game leads to embodied changes, the gamer-*otaku* also appears to participate in the idea that research, training, and performance—*practice*—is existentially transformative. Indeed, while the martial-arts gamer might talk about a transcendental quality of experience and being that is cultivated through continuous practice, the gamer-*otaku* appears to be interested in the revelation of a “true self” that is captured in the unification of physical player and digital character. Game play is an opportunity for a player to exhibit (and embody) their individual style and their *true identity* or personality. This contrast is in line with the general ideological tendencies of the martial-arts gamer towards *transformative transcendence* and the *otaku* towards *transformative immersion*.<sup>77</sup> In gameplay itself, the convention of referring to a player and their avatar together (for example, by calling Umehara Daigo + Ken = UmeKen, or Justin Wong + Chun-Li = Wong-Li, or we might say Player + Avatar = Playtar) stands in for the unity of these tendencies. In either case, the conventional self is somehow transformed by the *practice of play*, not only in the instant of the Playtar unity but also in the everyday life of the player herself in a manner that should be visible, at least to other similarly trained gamers.

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75 Kijima 2012, p. 261.

76 Kijima 2012, p. 261.

77 We see “transformative immersion” in *otaku* pursuits such as cosplay. To some extent, cosplay is concerned with accomplishing satisfaction by becoming (at one with) a fictional character that you love. Kijima talks about how gaming partakes in a particular relationship with mimesis (different from cosplay), because gamers are not *pretending to be* their fantasy characters but rather are engaged in a mediated process of *actually (or virtually)* being them: “The mimicry in fighting games is much closer to mimicking the player’s ‘true’ selves, with the individuality of the characters and of the players being inseparably linked with each other” (2012, p. 262). That is, the *otaku* milieu postulates the unity of *otaku* with a desired fictional character as the aspirational transformational accomplishment; this is a different aspiration from that found in the martial-arts gamer framework, wherein the motivation is not to become unified with a fictional character *per se*, but (through that embodied unity) to transcend the everyday self.

### Ideology, Intentionality, and the Victory/Loss of the Self

If we can accept the possibility of an ideological structure that supports the integration of martial arts, fighting games, and techno-Orientalism through the imaginary of Asia, leaving us with an emergent world view that contains the possibility of self-transformation through gamic practice, then it becomes important (as well as intriguing) to attempt a conceptual map of this terrain that is somehow consistent with the terrain itself.

A number of gamers questioned during the Virtual Ninja Survey were aware of a historical (and ideological) association between *bushidō* and specific Japanese games, such as *shōgi* 将棋 and *igo* 囲碁, which are often described as mental martial arts. Hence, there was an awareness of the possibility that *bushidō* ideals and codes could be cultivated through the medium of games as well as through martial arts *per se*. Intriguingly, the association between *igo* and *bushidō* has been sustained partly by the representation of *igo* as a war game (in East Asia in general) but also by the way that the game's community has signified playing as a disciplined, aesthetic pursuit oriented around the dual perfections of military skill and personal character. Playing *igo* in this manner is the pursuit of *kidō* 棋道 (the Way of Go).<sup>78</sup> So, one of the frameworks self-identified by gamers in the discourse is that of the so-called “Zen arts,” especially as exemplified by popular representations of the philosophy of the martial arts.<sup>79</sup> As we have seen, this narrative focuses on the accomplishment of 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. This kind of sublimation is associated (but not identical) with the psychological concept of “flow,” where gamic Orientalism might be seen as the ideological appropriation of flow as “Asian.” These iterated movements could be the tiny gestures of one's fingers in *chadō* 茶道 (tea ceremony), a particular manipulation of a paintbrush in *shodō* 書道 (calligraphy), or a precise slice with a sword in *kendō* 剣道 (swordsmanship). The principle being that repetition not only leads to mastery of the movements, but also sublimates the movement to free the mind from it.<sup>80</sup>

As we have seen, the Virtual Ninja Survey returned many opinions by gamers who talked about their research, training, and practice in terms of a quest to forget about their movements and techniques in order that such techniques could be performed spontaneously and without thought. Indeed, this was seen as essential to the attainment of mastery. Furthermore, echoing the debate in the Zen arts about why the martial arts receive privileged attention from Zen masters like Takuan Sōhō, gamers note that “no other genre

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78 I am grateful for the conversations and interviews with the staff, players, and visitors at the Nihon kiin 日本棋院 (Japanese Go Association) in Tokyo, August-September 2014.

79 I am taking this term from Rupert Cox, who specifically unified the “Way” of the tea ceremony with the “Way” of the martial art, *shōrinji kenpō*, deploying the overarching term “Zen arts” to encompass any of the *dō* in Japan that seem to be “above all aesthetic expressions of Zen philosophy” (Cox 2003, p. 1). This position is consistent with that taken by pioneers of Zen in the West, such as DT Suzuki 1970.

80 The clear association between the ideology of the modern martial arts and apparently antique Zen ancestry is well observed by Stephen Chan: “It is this idea of an essential stillness, an intrinsic emptiness within the practice of the forms, that allows the martial arts to claim an antique ancestry that is very closely allied to religious and spiritual belief and practice in Japan. Here, we are talking precisely of the Zen school of Buddhism and the possibility of insight after years of “mindless” (*mushin no shin*) practice, or practice that values that which lies below or beyond consciousness. Eventually, the arrow finds its own mark; the sword cuts its own pattern; the person merely holds the weapon; he or she does not control it; the mindlessness of the person matches the mindlessness of the weapon; they move as one” (Chan 2000, pp. 72–73).

of games has consequences of defeat as severe as there is fighting games, in which survival of the fittest is distilled to its purest form.”<sup>81</sup> This representation of the fighting game as an instance of a martial art (“fighting games are not fictional versions of combative sports but are combative sports executed by one’s fingertips”)<sup>82</sup> folds the discourse about gaming into the broader discourse about *bushidō* as a Zen Way of martial conduct.<sup>83</sup>

### **Illustration D**

*It's like the Dog says: the Way of the Samurai is found in death. It's just the same. Train in the face of death. Fight in the face of death. And then live in the face of death. It's the only way to be fully alive. That's what I learned from Gouken. It's how the game changes me, you know. I face death in Street Fighter all the time, and then I'm ready to live properly on those other streets out there.*<sup>84</sup>

G0uk3n666, Washington DC, USA, 13 January 2015

However, no matter how attractive this idea might be, and no matter how coherent it may be with the overall trend of representations of fighting games, it is important to realize that this idea participates in an ideological position. Indeed, the notion of the “Zen art” as an aesthetic that transforms any repeated activity into a spiritual journey is one of the defining features of contemporary Orientalism. Everyday life is replete with repetitive, mundane activities: tying our shoelaces, driving a car, and so on. In general, such activities are not associated with Zen, but rather with “autopilot,” and attempts to force such activities into

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81 Kijima 2012, p. 260.

82 Kijima 2012, p. 269.

83 Once again, the absence of real physical risk and danger in the fighting game is potentially significant here. However, we would be naïve to suggest that the real danger to a virtual embodiment of the player is insignificant, or that the risk to that avatar is not more extreme in fighting games than in other genres. As noted above, it is also significant that the majority of modern martial artists participate and practice without any more physical risk or danger than that experienced by a football player or other sports person. If genuine danger of death is really an essential aspect of the martial arts today, it is not a simple task to differentiate between the legitimacy of the various ways in which this danger is represented and signified in different activities.

84 G0uk3n666 seems to be referring to *Ghost Dog*, the eponymous hero of the 1999 Jim Jarmusch cult classic. *Ghost Dog*, played by Forest Whitaker, is a professional hitman in the service of the U.S. mafia. He has developed a professional ethic based on the text of the seventeenth century *Hagakure* 葉隠 by Yamamoto Tsunetomo 山本常朝, a classic of the *bushidō* canon, translations of which pepper the movie. The line quoted by G0uk3n666 is from the famous opening sequence of *Hagakure*. *Ghost Dog* is also valuable as an instance of the decentering of Asia from the ethical and transformative potentials of the martial arts; as Bowman (2011) suggests, because *Ghost Dog* is neither Asian nor trained by an Asian master, his authenticity (such as it is) resides exclusively in the performance of his skill rather than on any claim to lineage or ethnicity. The *Street Fighter* character Gouken, from whom G0uk3n666 appears to take his name, is the fabled teacher of Ryu and Ken, guardian of a number of secret techniques. He wears a cloak bearing the character *mu* (nothingness), marking his spiritual stature. He was a mythic background character for much of the franchise, appearing as a (hidden) playable character for the first time in *Street Fighter IV*.

a Zen framework look like crude, naïve (or even offensive) Orientalism.<sup>85</sup> In other words, we need to be sensitive to the way in which participation in this framework is a type of choice—an ideological positioning. And, indeed, one of the key features of the so-called “Zen arts” resides in the adoption of 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.”<sup>86</sup> 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 *as martial ways* (*budō* 武道) 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>87</sup>

Vitality, this means that there are many people who engage in the martial arts without any sense that they are pursuing a spiritual pathway, and *those people are not pursuing a spiritual pathway*. And likewise we might suppose that there are those gamers who bring a specific intentionality to their gaming that invests them in an aesthetic and existential pursuit, and there will also be those who could not care less about discovering or expressing their authentic selves through gaming. Indeed, for many people the whole point of *play* is that it is frivolous and fun—a category of activity that should be free from all of this pontification and gravity. These are the people who identify the “serious gamers” as the “stop having fun guys.” Their intention is to have fun; so, very simply, they are not participating in the practice of a fighting game as a path to self-transformation.<sup>88</sup> This leisurely orientation towards gaming seems wholly legitimate and normal.

### *Illustration E*

*To be honest, I just don't get it. I don't understand why people can't just play the f\*cking games. Isn't that enough? The games are fun, right? That's the whole point. I play because I need to get away from all the serious crap in the rest of my life. It's escapism, pure and simple. Why would I want to ruin it by being all poncey and pretentious about it? If you don't want to have fun, that's fine, but don't ruin my fun too.*

Trevor1664, London, UK, 31 January 2015

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85 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* (Pirsig 1974). The book seems to riff on the classic of modern Orientalism, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (Herrigel 1953), although Pirsig himself concedes that his book does not profess to be accurate about either Zen or motorcycles. Pirsig’s work inspired a deluge of books entitled “Zen and the art of...”

86 Cox 2003, p. 5.

87 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 Sōhō (1573–1645)—the Zen master who wrote a treatise on the intersections between Zen and swordsmanship for the benefit of the great swordmaster, Miyamoto Musashi.

88 I am not making an argument that one could accidentally participate in ethical self-transformation without knowing, since intentionality is itself basic to participation. Arguments about immanent transformations are present in the *bushidō* canon.

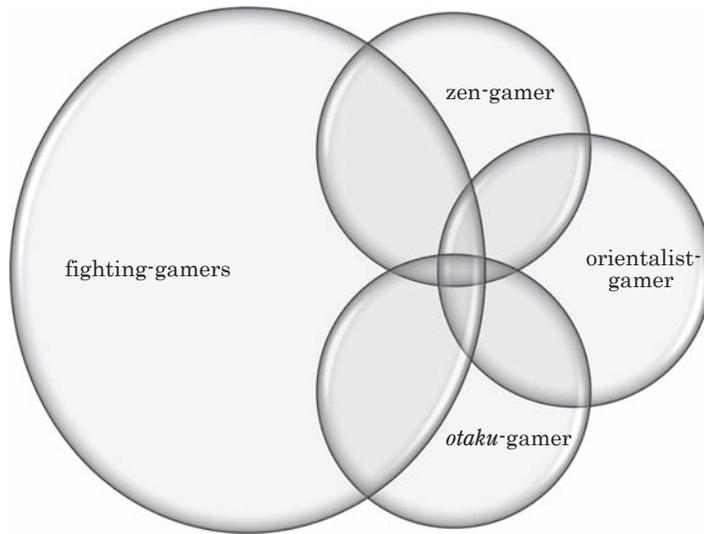


Figure 1. Intentionality choices for gamers (non-exhaustive).<sup>89</sup>

Of course, these two categories of gamers (fun-gamer and Zen-gamer) do not exhaust all the possible intentionalities. The *otaku*-gamer, for instance, approximates the behavioral patterns of the Zen-gamer, but his/her intentionality is substantively different; instead of seeking transcendence through mastery, the *otaku* seeks immersion and unification through mastery. The Orientalist-gamer, seeking to utilize the fighting game as a fictive means to *become Asian/Japanese*, is yet another possible category.

It is a persistent challenge for games designers and franchises to encompass these different approaches to gaming. *Street Fighter* appears to grapple with the issue head-on by building these various models of intentionality into the narratives of their products, so that players seeking to participate in a particular ideological stance can identify this stance in the characterization and game-play of specific avatars. They can *choose* explicitly to play as Ryu (on a quest for self-transformation) or as Chun-Li (on a quest for justice) or as Guile (on a quest for vengeance), and so on.

One of the implications of the existence of this site of intentionality, in which gamers can exercise choice about their orientation towards a game and its significance for their lives, is the importance of volition and persuasion in that space. This in turn gives rise to questions of ethics and politics: if there is a choice to be made regarding our approach to videogames, are certain choices *better* than others? if so, what kind of responsibilities do we have to promote those choices by enabling, encouraging, or even requiring players to adopt certain positions or standpoints?

In this regard, the major fighting game franchises are not normatively neutral. The ideological position of *Street Fighter*, for instance, demonstrates a clear preference for a

<sup>89</sup> This diagram suggests that all the spheres are subgroups of “gamers” as a whole, and it posits the possibility of intersections between each of these subgroups, as well as the possibility that each is (also) engaged in non-fighting games (RPGs, adventure games, strategy games, and so on). The diagram is not scaled by group size.

“Zen-gamer” mode of engagement, privileging a classical, *bushidō*-inflected narrative about the developmental importance of cultivation in the martial arts through the centrality of the Japanese character Ryu. Although other characters and approaches are enabled in the franchise, they are variously de-privileged as non-Japanese, non-Asian, or simply as cynical and self-interested egotists who fight because they enjoy the violence or crave fame and fortune.

As we have seen, this general ideological position echoes that of martial arts organizations in the 1980s, when there was a degree of moral panic in the West about young adults learning to become expert (even lethal) fighters. At least partially in response to this, the contemporary discourse about *budō* (martial ways) has sought to emphasize the role of martial arts training as a form of spiritual cultivation. Likewise, in the context of moral panics about the impact of violence in videogames, the possibility of the ethical transformation of that violence into a vehicle for self-transformation and moral attainment is enticing. It adds a new dimension to the growing literature on the possible benefits of playing videogames and helps to shift the agenda away from repeating the same questions about cognitive changes into new questions about ideological, ethical, and spiritual changes.<sup>90</sup> It is especially interesting in this regard that, much in the manner of Bruce Lee and other historical martial artists who wrote treatises to generalize the ethos of their training and practice into life philosophies, leading gamers like Umehara Daigo now attempt similar generalizations into life.<sup>91</sup>

It is into this context that the Virtual Ninja Project has sought to make an intervention with its *Virtual Ninja Manifesto* (VNM—see Appendix).<sup>92</sup> Accepting that fighting games provide a special opportunity for ethical choice and ideological investment, the VNM strives to offer gamers a way to connect with the ethos of Zen-gaming; it is modelled on the classic Zen sequence, the “Ten Ox-Herding Pictures” (*jūgyū* 十牛), which depicts the pathway to enlightenment through mastery of a worldly skill. For some, the VNM seems to have simply narrated an approach that they already knew or of which they were already conscious (28 percent). For some, it awoke them into consciousness of something they felt they were already doing unconsciously (31 percent). For others, it worked in the persuasive mode, challenging gamers to think about their play in this new way (53 percent). For these groups, there is a strong sense of *manifesto*: that this is the correct or best way to engage with fighting games (and perhaps with games in general). But, of course, for others this manifesto means nothing at all—it tastes a little like the “stop having fun guys,” as though it takes something intrinsically playful and strives to make it seem very weighty and profound; by transforming the engagement from play into practice, the VNM risks destroying the idea

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90 A recent intervention into the literature on *Street Fighter* specifically, which seeks to identify various forms of pleasures and rewards in the game, is the work of Surman 2007.

91 Umehara’s (2012) book fits into a long tradition of such books by martial artists, including those by Bruce Lee, but also reaching back into the seventeenth century with figures such as Miyamoto Musashi, and so on.

92 The first iteration of the *The Virtual Ninja Manifesto* is available as a free ebook via iTunes or as a PDF on the project website; see <http://www.virtualninja.ninja> (Last accessed 20 December 2016).

of play itself (11 percent).<sup>93</sup> In the end, though, the project revealed a relatively clear and consistent *Virtual Ninja Code*, to which many Zen-gamers, *otaku*-gamers, and Orientalist-gamers were happy to subscribe or aspire. This code might be seen as the locus of the manifesto, as both its pathway and its destination.

*Virtual Ninja Code*

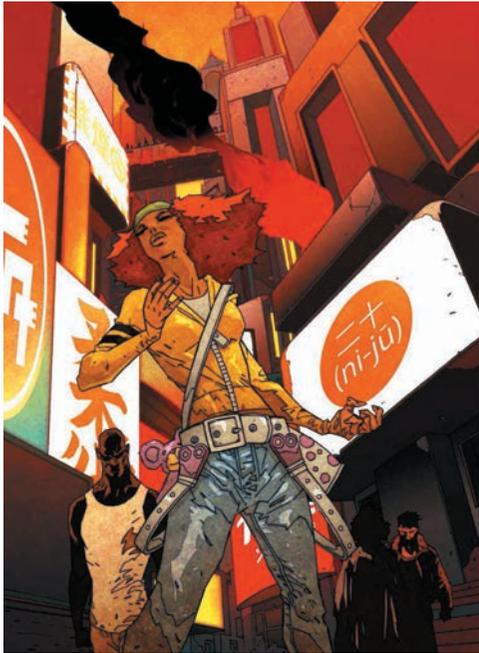
1. virtual ninja are actual ninja
2. embodied knowledge is as real in thumbs as in feet
3. search constantly for a worthy opponent
4. strive constantly to be worthy of a worthy opponent
5. worthiness resides in attitude, dedication, and skill
6. it is better to lose to a more skilful opponent than to overcome their skill unskilfully (or to win against a less skilful opponent)
7. the purpose of fighting is to become better
8. the purpose of training is to cultivate worthiness
9. a consequence of cultivation is the forgetting of thumbs
10. forgetting thumbs is transcending self
11. transcending self is the ultimate worthiness
12. without self, there can be no victory or defeat

For many commentators, it is clear that it took the academy a long time to understand the significance of the Bruce Lee event. The significance of his intervention into the transnational public discourse was overlooked, even as it worked to transform the lives of millions of people worldwide in myriad, complex ways. While I do not claim that the *Beast event* is of identical moment, it seems plausible that its significance in the transnational public discourse of the twenty-first century is considerably greater than academic attention has suggested. At the very least, it was an *event*: it changed the lives of millions of people. As a complex and nuanced event, it participated in many cultural threads simultaneously, transforming discourses about Japan and Asia, about humanity's relationship with digital technology, about embodied cognition, about the martial arts in the digital ages, and about the relationship between technology and spirituality. The miraculous reversal play—fifty-seven seconds of frantic button pressing—was potentially a world-historic moment.

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93 These percentages are drawn from a pool of 348 respondents to the first and second Virtual Ninja Surveys (as of 1 January 2015) from around the world, all of whom self-identified as “gamers.” Seventy-nine percent were from North America or Europe, with 21 percent from Asia. The majority were in the age group 24–39 (58 percent), with the smallest minority over 40 (9 percent). Seventy-seven percent identified as male, 19 percent as female.

Appendix 1: *Virtual Ninja Manifesto*



1 seeking without knowing

the streets churn and burn  
riddles of faces and flame  
hearts race, breath catches  
and roads run ever deeper  
cicadas shrill, thrill, elsewhere

Until now, you have never been lost, and so why do you feel lost today? By turning away from your own awakening you have become lost to it, estranged from it, enwrapped in grime and buried in the dirt of the city. The quiet sounds of home are drowned in neon, while thousands of streets present indistinguishable choices that mean nothing. Yet you are consumed with the lust for right and the fear of wrong, driven to win while fleeing from loss. No wonder you are dizzy.



2 hints and shadows

right in front of you  
obscured, hidden in plain sight  
is it there or not?  
but even within the gyre  
where can the obvious hide?

Did somebody point or was it simply an accident? Although you walk past it every day, today it looks different. With the aid of something or someone or nothing or nobody, a breeze cools your brow and whispers about home. Yet, fevered in the streets, you cannot tell truth from dreams or nightmares. Tethered to the labyrinth, a tantalizing zephyr seems only to infuriate. Before you make the journey home, how can you know where home is? Have you ever been there before?

3 seeing without knowing

a life sparks within  
an awoken memory  
exposed and revealed  
is the ninja alien?  
where is the roiling city?

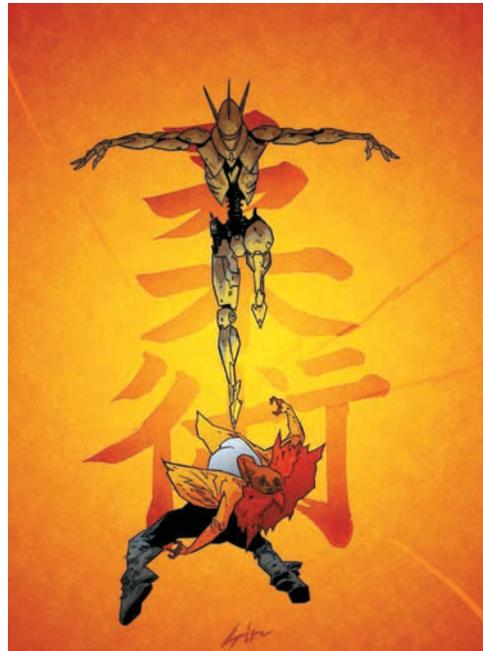
Your senses tell you that the streets are on fire. There is shouting and there are screams. The scent of ash and burning paint waft into your mind. Your skin is torn and blistered and bruised; you feel pain. And yet what do your senses tell you about you? Clouded by the smoke and intoxicated by the fumes, what can you know about the world beyond the window or the screen? You are there, present, in each daily deed. Why not raise your eyebrows and see yourself? Press “start” to start.



4 grasping the unknown

fatigue overcomes  
even the stubborn and strong  
some foes will not break  
mists dance around every blow  
but breath moves the air: inhale!

You have never seen it before, this ninja in its virtual lair. You have found it, as though stumbling across a new world. But so long hidden in the wilds, its spirits are high and its will unbroken. It is master of its world, devoted, untiring, and unflinching. You throw yourself at it, clumsy and pathetic, unable even to feel its resistance. The stink of the city lingers in your brain and you don't know how to touch this immaterial creature. Wild and disciplined as it is, you must breathe its airlessness.

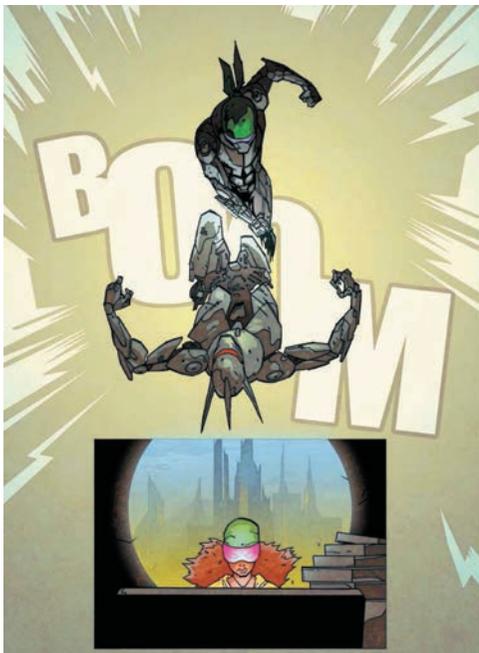




5 taming the unruly

the screen burns your eyes  
as your fingers crack and click  
not for a moment  
can you give quarter or rest  
its devotion is complete

Time passes unchecked. You can see this fighter move and glimpse its form of freedom, and as these thoughts arise others will follow. Be true to them and adhere to this awakening; should you ignore this reality, you will be left only with dreams. You are not betrayed by the world—actual or virtual—but only by your mind. Your senses are your instruments, not your masters. Keep focused on the screen and never look away; hold fast to the joystick and do not set it down until it vanishes by itself.



6 mastering the tamed

tired fingers dance  
a nomad's flute or joystick  
sudden twists of calm  
spark thoughtless motions, notions  
of nothingness whisper death

Are they hours or days? You can see the movement and feel your fingers burn. But are these really two? Thoughts of digits, digital thoughts. In fatigue you lose your fingers, numb or aflame. They are free of you and act by themselves. Without your thoughts to cramp them, your movements assure victory. The riots in the street call, but you do not turn around. The scent of fire catches at you, but you will not be tethered. From nowhere, the voice of nobody whispers victory.

7 at peace with mastery

conquest fades like flame  
leaving the glow of sunset  
or perhaps sunrise  
the screen blank and forgotten  
and your dreams flying freely

Were they days or nights? As the moon emerges from clouds, so you emerge from the game. A shaft of silver light more ancient than iron. As the fish and the net are not the same, so you are not the web in which you were caught. Victory and defeat blend and fade, no longer striving for duality, forgotten, futile, and without relevance. Your foe has vanished, your avatar gone. What were they to begin with? Your fingers are unbound and your dreams untethered. The city breathes.



8 game over?

all come to nothing  
the game cycles to zero  
but the screen flickers  
a snowflake in the flamepit  
melts like masters of the past

Isn't it confusing to forget why you were striving? The passion of fighting gives way to the tranquillity of mastery or boredom. It no longer matters whether you win or lose. But you cannot lounge and linger in this place; it is like death. And yet you cannot rush past it as though it is nothing. Your fingers have shredded worldly feelings and conquered worlds; your mind has traversed universes and erased elevated thoughts. You have overcome yourself, but if you ordered pizza now, would you eat it?





9 respawn at the start

the city persists  
concrete, neon, gravity  
you hide in your hut  
while your fingers waste away  
the city goes on breathing

You have played and practiced and become disciplined, but was this just a waste of time? Click, click, click. You found your home and untethered your soul, freeing your dreams, living in peace. But is this the same as becoming blind and deaf? When you are at home, you're not outside your home. In the city, rivers flow and flowers bloom red even amidst the bloodshed. The streets twist with torture and life. Can you deny this as delusion while residing in another dream? Is your home so divided?



10 living with magic

the streets churn and burn  
but a cool breeze makes you smile  
the city hustles  
withered trees burst into flower  
with no display of magic

Sitting alone in the middle of the city, a thousand strangers are unaware of your power. You are a secret legend, an unknown immortal. There's no need to parade the tracks of the sages—you have followed them to this seat. Here. Now. Your hands and mind are at rest, poised with delicacy and precision. Your breath breathes the city itself, as a breeze cools the turmoil around you. There is no need to run for home, because you have brought your home with you. Open your eyes: the street is full of you.

*(Dis) Claimer*

This experimental Virtual Ninja Project plays with and across many different boundaries. One of the most intriguing of these is the boundary between critical and creative scholarship, between critique and social intervention; while this project seeks to uncover and reveal an ideological framework that I call “gamic Orientalism,” there is also a sense in which it participates in this ideology. This raises complex ethical and political issues. Perhaps the central issue is the so-called “Virtual Ninja”: the characteristics of this role emerge from the discourse of fighting gamers, but they have been codified here by me; the “gamic Orientalism” of the discourse is then mirrored in the term “ninja,” partly to enable the ethical code to be re-emplaced into (and to act within) the narratives that generated it. While this is hermeneutically neat, it risks trapping the project within a form of Orientalism and thus contributing to the perpetuation of this potentially offensive ideology. To some extent, then, the (ethical) success of this project rests upon whether or not the resulting *Virtual Ninja Code* can be seen as a positive contribution to society despite its apparent complicity in Orientalist discourse. In other words, is this an instance in which the instrumental use of Orientalist icons leads to the betterment of self and society? And can this be an excuse? For some, the answer will simply be: no.

An additional consideration in this respect was the choice of the specific term “Virtual Ninja.” The ninja was chosen deliberately because of its dubious historical authenticity. That is, this project does not seek to participate in the continuity or perpetuation of the invented tradition of the ninja, but rather to associate itself with the critique of that tradition by revealing its cultural construction in the present. Hence, I deliberately embrace the ambiguity (rather than the alleged authenticity) of the term “ninja,” using it both as an ideological marker and (in its increasingly popular sense) as a marker of extreme skill. When we say, “she’s such a ninja,” we mean simply that she is really good at a specific activity, not that she is some form of magical super-assassin from Japan’s mythic past. Hence, the Virtual Ninja, such as she is, is a virtual virtuality or a simulated simulacrum. Whether or not this kind of construct has meaning or power, and whether or not that power is ethically respectable is really at the foundation of this project.

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