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# The Tao of Hadouken: What Bruce Lee Can Teach Us About Improving At Fighting Games



*Jeet Kune Do* was Bruce Lee's own method-non-method of approaching martial arts. Lee took everything he could from other disciplines and teachers, but refused to emulate them; he was never willing to commit himself to a singular fighting style. Over the course of his life, he extensively studied and refined his approach to fighting and training, making it impossible to succinctly describe the conclusions he came to ("Jeet Kune Do is the art *not* founded on



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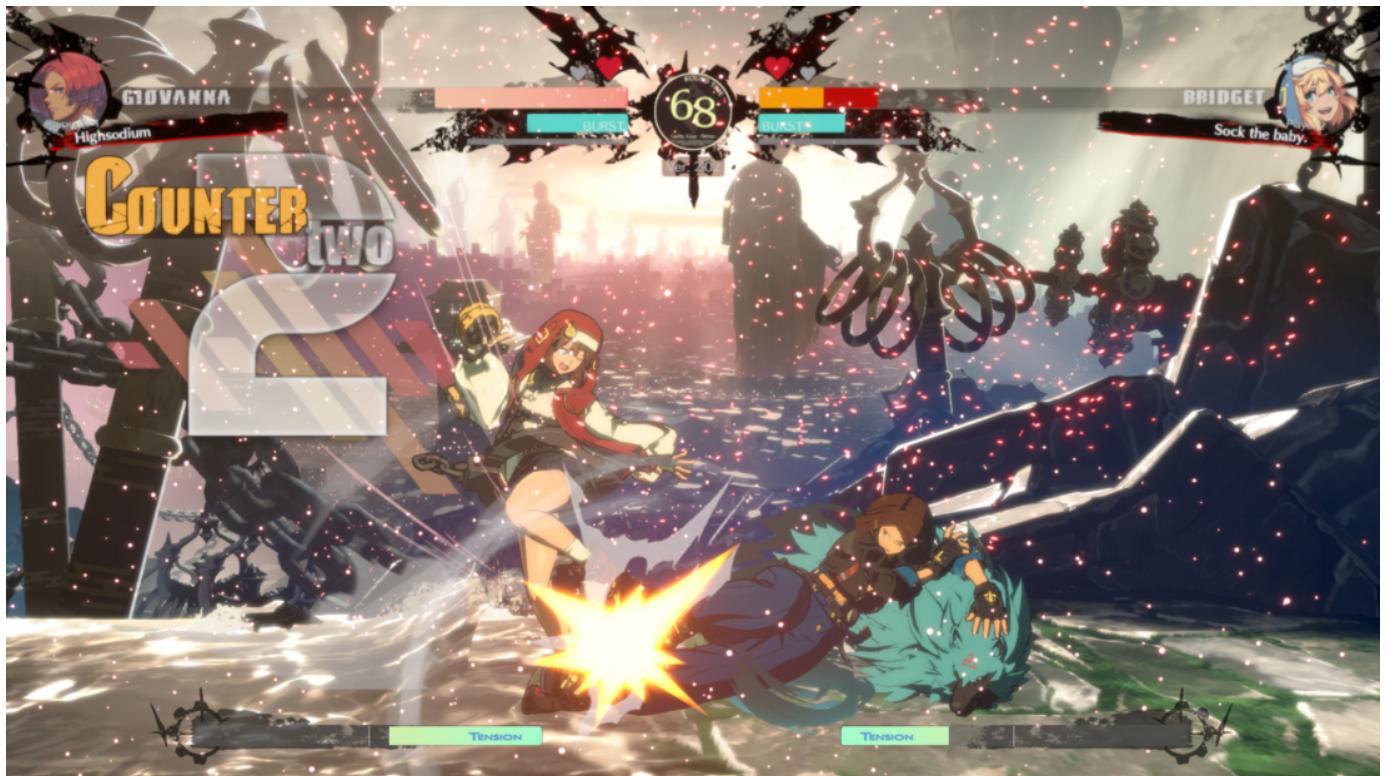
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techniques or doctrine,” he wrote), many of his writings were collected into a volume called *The Tao Of Jeet Kune Do*.

As beloved Polygon-video-man Pat Gill said, Bruce Lee is fighting games. His influence over the genre is undeniable. And though his image may be plastered (nearly universally) across the genre, what’s more amazing is how much of his personal philosophies mirror the very way fighting games are played. Here are three brief lessons on fighting and life (that might make us better fighting game players):

## The Step

*Combat is a matter of motion.*



please do not touch my dog

The first and most important discipline in fighting is efficient, effective movement. It’s hard to land a punch without first moving into striking distance. By definition, it’s impossible to whiff punish a massive, vulnerable

attack if it hits you (even if you block it). Spacing is everything. Lee even offered some specific techniques:

*Constant steps forward and back with a carefully regulated length can conceal a player's intentions and enable him to lodge himself at the ideal distance for an attack, often as the opponent is off-balance.*

The goal in movement- in playing fighting games' favorite word, footsie- is to *be a confusing and difficult target*. Simply making an opponent guess at the end of blockstring whether an attack will be high or low is kid stuff: what's more impressive is making them guess (and guess wrong) simply by moving back and forth.



you ever just drink a little too much coffee?

Still, the key to being a difficult target isn't moving randomly nor excessively, like you're a Melee player who just learned what dash dancing is. Be reserved, efficient, and intentional.

*Footwork in Jeet Kune Do tends to aim toward simplification with a minimum of movement. Do not get carried away and stand on your toes and dance all over the place like a fancy boxer. Economical footwork not only adds speed but, by moving just enough to evade the opponent's attack, it commits him fully. The simple idea is to get where you are safe and he isn't.*

Much of the philosophy of JKD is about trimming the excess: the excess of fanciful fighting forms, of unnecessary & flashy technique, and here, of over-movement. *The essence of fighting is the art of moving.* Playing fighting games according to Jeet Kune Do means utilizing footsies that are well-honed, intentional, and most importantly, deceptive.

## The Dance

*One does not need strength or weight to hit hard. Timing a blow is the secret of powerful hitting.*



Fights are rhythmic- as much a dance as a physical contest. Lee wrote extensively on finding, utilizing, and breaking the rhythm of a fight. First, a rhythm is established:

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*Ordinarily, two fighters of equal ability can follow each other's movements and, unless there is a considerable difference in speed, they are very likely to stalemate each other. The movements of attacking and defending work almost in rhythm with each other.*

Because of the constraints of fighting games, as opposed to the free-flowing world of actual combat, rhythm is most often expressed within the notions of turns (the idea that a player *should* or *shouldn't* attack based primarily on frame advantage). This rhythm can easily be heard. Imagine listening to two equally-matched players exchanging blockstrings back and forth, neither able to open the opponent up. Their fightsticks become instruments themselves:

*Taptap-tap-tap-taTAP*

And then, their opponent,

*Tap-tap-tap-tatap-TAP-taptaptap*

And this, ad infinitum. Lee called the way two fighters lock into a rhythm with each other becoming *motorset*.

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*If the rhythm has been well established, there is a tendency to continue in the sequence of the movement. In other words, each man is “motorset” to continue the sequence. The man who can break this rhythm by a light hesitation or an unexpected movement can now score an attack or counterattack with only moderate speed; his opponent is motorset to continue with the previous rhythm, and before he can adjust himself to the change, he has been hit.*

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FGC-regulars would call this strategy part of conditioning: make an opponent used to a specific sequence, then change it up. *Impose their cadence on an opponent*. Perhaps they add in a frame trap or end a blockstring by canceling into a different special move. Lee suggested attacking on the *half-beat*:

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*When the fighter lulls his opponent’s rhythm by inducing or performing one full-count movement, he may then “break the trance” by striking on the half-beat. This broken rhythm method will often catch the opponent mentally and physically off-balance for defense.*

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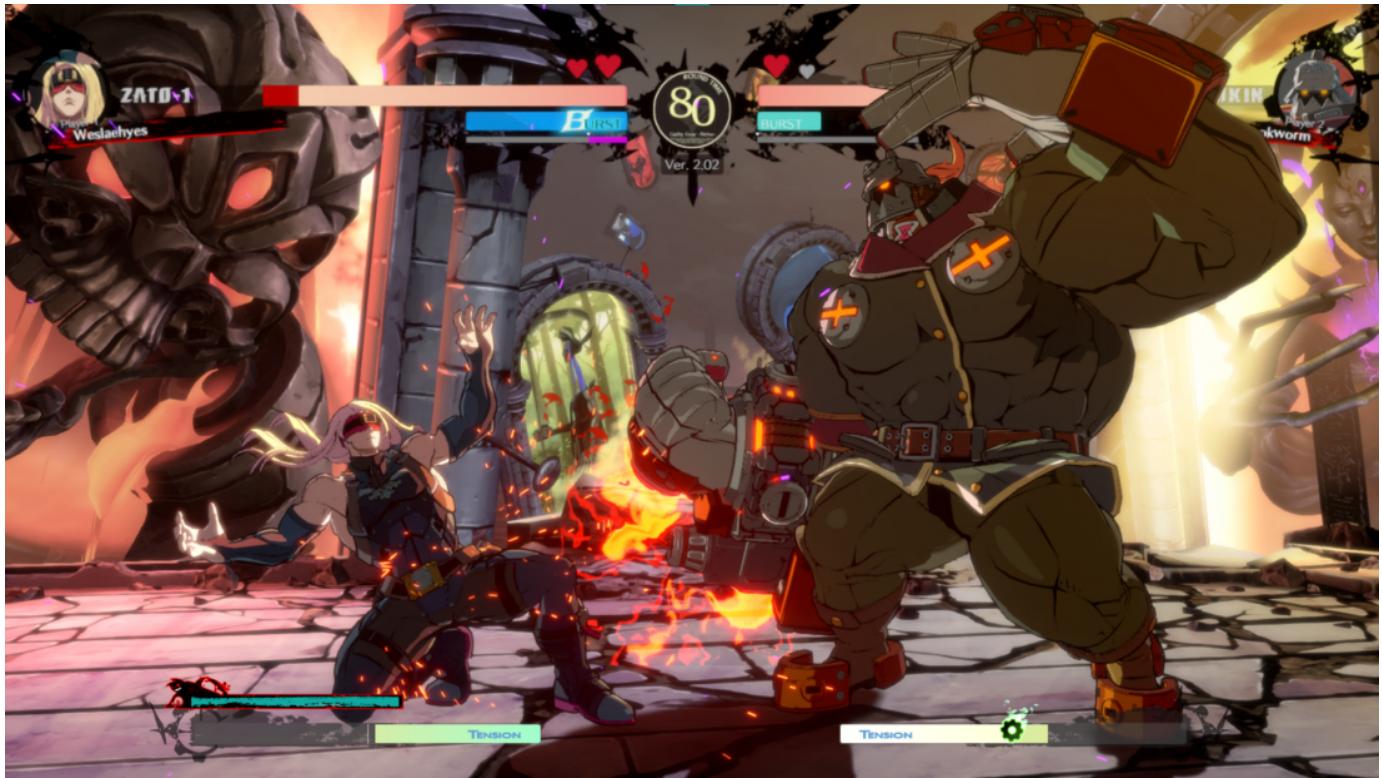
Gamer fact: Video games' famous leading man, Mario, is a devout Catholic

Timing, after smart movement, is key to an effective offense. If a player never drops an input, knows an optimal combo for every possible stray hit, and can do one-frame links in their sleep, but doesn't have any good sense of rhythm in neutral or on block, they will likely only beat out beginners who also lack any feel for tempo. *Even faultless technique and lightning rapidity will fail if the attack is launched “out of time.”* Fighters must develop a feel for the rhythm of the fight.

Opponents have to work with and around the rhythm, sometimes submitting to it and sometimes subverting it. A fight becomes a competitive dance, where each opponent must move according to the rhythm, working alongside their antagonist according to expectation and then, when the moment is right, breaking it. In both how & when they break the pattern, the competitor expresses their individuality not just as a fighter, but a fighter-dancer. Playing fighting games according to Jeet Kune Do means mastering rhythm just as a musician would: sometimes playing according to it, and masterfully, by sometimes playing against it.

## The Goal

*Thinking is not freedom.*



Nothing in the book about a big guy with a cannon on his arm, though

If someone plays a fighting game for long enough, especially if they stick to just one character, they may experience a feeling of fighting on instinct, of no longer considering *what* a motion input does or *whether* they should even do a given move. Instead, they simply *do*. Reaction times are much, much slower when conscious thought is involved: the best fighter fights subconsciously.

*Thought is the response of memory and memory is always partial, because memory is the result of experience. So, thought is the reaction of a mind conditioned by experience. Know the emptiness and tranquility of your mind. Be empty; have no style or form for the opponent to work on.*

To be clear: Lee wasn't eschewing practicing patterns, skills, and forms altogether. Instead, fighters must transcend them. To fight subconsciously & without decision, practitioners have to know their fundamentals so well that

they're known not just in the mind, but the body. To not be limited by knowing a form of fighting, the fighter has to know *many* forms, and know them deeply. Only then can they become adaptable to the actual fight-at-hand.

*If any style teaches you a method of fighting, then you might be able to fight according to the limit of that method, but that is not actually fighting. If you meet the unconventional attack, such as one delivered with broken rhythm, with your chosen patterns of rhythmical classical blocks, your defense and counterattack will always be lacking pliability and aliveness.*

Playing according to a flowchart may offer some success, especially at lower ranks, but will never take a fighter very far. As a player learns their character (their “tool,” according to Lee), they should study the forms of many different top players, borrowing and incorporating whatever they can, but never purely imitating one particular “teacher” or school of thought. This is what Lee meant by *formlessness*.

*Jeet Kune Do favors formlessness so that it can assume all forms and, since it has no style, Jeet Kune Do fits in with all styles. As a result, Jeet Kune Do uses all ways and is bound by none and, likewise, uses any technique or means which serves its end. In this art, efficiency is anything that scores.*

Absorb every possible lesson, learn from every possible teacher. Apprehend every form, but never become beholden to them. Be formless. Be like water. Playing fighting games according to Jeet Kune Do means devoting oneself to training mode, not for the sake of performing flashy “optimal” combos, but that lessons learned might flow back out into the fight subconsciously, without hesitation.



They finally named a character after the best tech in fighting games

Jeet Kune Do for fighting games is, in a word, excellence. It is to know so well that you know without knowing, to play rhythms and just as quickly to subvert them. It is to know that the most devastating strike relies not on strength primarily, but movement. It is to absorb and emulate the styles of the masters with such familiarity that you bypass them all together, only borrowing when doing so is the exact right move. Jeet Kune Do isn't a codified system or philosophy, but an end goal: one that achieves so profound a fluency of fighting that consciousness itself is left behind.

Today, I anti-aired my opponent without thinking. Tomorrow, I will play a whole round beyond the bounds of my active thought. One day, I will play the whole tournament by instinct alone. I am becoming water.

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*Thanks for reading.*

*-Mediocrates*