Tekken neutral game guide

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(I'm not very good with titles :V)

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1.   Introduction – why play the neutral game

This ain't about basic stuff - this is the high tech ideas that every self-respecting player knows and you should know if you want to get good. This is the game that is played when both characters are standing on their two feet and not in each other's face – the neutral game. No buttons have been pressed (although the likelihood of that remaining the same way in the future depends on the player) and the players are moving around. Some call it spacing but I think it is a broader concept than that, plus the words 'neutral game' sound way more awesome. Hopefully I can help you understand this concept through this series and that you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it if not more (and I LOVED writing this).

Before we try to understand what the neutral game is and how it works, we should understand why we are learning the neutral game in the first place. What the objective of the neutral game is, so to speak.

Well, the objective of the neutral game can be summarized in one sentence. This sentence is your one commandment and should be kept in mind whenever you make a decision when playing the neutral game.

Your primary objective from playing the neutral game is to go from a state of neutral momentum to a state of positive momentum.

Momentum in this statement is basically who is controlling the flow of the match. Whoever has the momentum is controlling how the match is supposed to be played. They are forcing the opponent to have to play defensively and they are pushing the advantage with

offense and trying to do damage to you. Shifts in momentum can occur through several ways on the screen, which include but are not limited to landing a knockdown, getting up close with frame advantage, pushing them to the wall, baiting an attack and landing a whiff punish, or performing a comeback.

Landing a knockdown can lead to your okizeme (pressuring the opponent as they are getting up), which if played properly, will decrease the opponent's options to tech roll or not tech roll, or if it's an untechable knockdown, stay down/side roll, get up or get up kick. In tag Tekkens there's also tagging out (and in Tekken Tag 2, tag crash), which creates another option for the defender.

Getting up close with frame advantage limits their movement options and can force them to have to use risky crush moves to try and escape the pressure you are applying. By pushing the opponent to the wall you limit how much they can try and evade your pressure and momentum by backdashing away, as well as increase the risk they take by getting a panic hopkick blocked, or a quick poke whiffed (Fast W! punishes are common and can lead to massive damage).

Whiff punishing an attack of the opponent (preferably with a launcher so you can get a lot of damage) can force the opponent to be more defensive and can lead to you being able to push forward with offense. These changes all require guessing right against your opponent. This all doesn't even include the idea of getting damage and either getting back a life lead or maintaining one. This is what momentum is and why is good.

You might also be thinking now, "Why do I need to have this anyway? My rush down is very good!" or "My keep away is very good!"

Being able to move from a state of neutral to a position where either character has an advantage requires mastery of the neutral game, so you already are playing the neutral game and implementing the concepts I am going to talk about, albeit to different degrees of expertise. Secondly, if you don't understand the topics I am covering here, there is an extremely good chance you crumble into pieces against better opponents because they will force you into neutral game situations where they can and will exploit your lack of an effective neutral game. At that point you have lost, because they can shut down your game and play theirs and there's not a thing you can do to stop that. It won't matter if you can punish well or have good planned offense or know all the frames, because at that point the battle of the neutral game played between the minds is lost. Better opponents will know how to not allow you to play your strengths and force your weaknesses.

How will we do this? We will do this in this guide through first understanding the concepts and what they mean in the first place, then watching match videos of top players and trying to understand the decisions they make while playing, how those decisions are influenced by several factors such as what happened earlier in the match and what tools their and their opponents' characters have.

2. <u>Offense and Defense</u>

As the saying goes, you need to learn to block while backdashing before you can learn to backdash cancel (wait that's not it? Oh, well, ok). To be able to understand the situations of the neutral game we first need to learn the underlying concepts that they are made of. To us, in this guide, they will be defined in two not mutually exclusive concepts - offense and defense. Spoiler alert: they do not exist.

However let's focus on offense now.

What does offense, better known as aggression, consist of? If you ask your average player they will say that offense consists of running up to someone and just hitting buttons, securing frame advantage and doing mixups off of that frame advantage.

Too bad the truth is not that simple.

If you are good at aggression, or have a good offense, you have **the ability to open your opponent up from a neutral state** and you can **place your opponent into unfavourable scenarios** where you can either **force your opponent to make a mistake, or hit them yourself enough to kill them**.

There are two types of aggression, fake aggression and real aggression.

Fake aggression is when you run up to someone in the mindset of, "I will do a df+1 and then sidestep," or, "I will do a df+1 then a backdash." In this mindset **you are using your pokes in order to agitate the opponent into making a decision** perhaps hitting a button or doing a stance transition **that you have baited and are going to punish**. You still maintain control over the situation

(somewhat) because you were the one taking the initiative, but you are trying to make a read on the opponent and what they choose to do (hint: they wouldn't be blocking/backdashing or sidewalking), so as to punish them for doing so.

Do note that this is one of two ways to beat the opponent's buttons. There are also counter hit setups, also known as frame traps, but they tend to fall in the middle of fake aggression and real aggression, as they are a way to make fake aggression work by discourage buttons, but they lose to movement by the opponent or blocking (there are some exceptions but they are incredibly rare and don't often to you being able to continue your pressure as strongly) so I don't really want to cover them in great detail in this guide as they're somewhat of their own beast.

Real aggression, the other type of aggression, is what it sounds like. While fake aggression is based around the mindset of using little pokes to set up whiff punishment, the idea of real aggression is based around **using pokes to set up more pokes and attacks**. In this mindset you are thinking, "I will do a df+1 into another df+1," or, "I will do a df+1 into a dash df+1." This mindset **restricts the opponent from using defensive movement** and presents you with either a situation reset or landing a low, perhaps one that is advantageous on hit that **allows you to try and pressure the opponent more**.

The two methods themselves cannot exist without one another. If you play by fake aggression and baiting attacks for whiff punishment, they can use defensive movement to return to a neutral position. If you play by real aggression and use attacks and dashing into attacks, you are going to run into attacks like 'random' df+2's or random hopkicks.

The trick to be good at offense is to **balance the two ideas according to your opponent**.

Let's apply this idea above to a scenario you'd probably come across a lot while playing online. Say you come across a Lars player, or a Lili player, or a Ling player, or a Capo player, or a Kazama player – basically any character whose players abuse their crushing moves. Even players of characters who have hopkicks fit into this idea.

Say you got a punish on them somehow and you now have frame advantage so you're going to take that frame advantage and go into offense.

The Lars, or Lili, or Ling, or Capo, or Kazama, or whoever player is now scared for his/her life. He/she doesn't want to be in this scary scenario. Imagine having to guess between your low and your mid! Scary, right? So he/she does what they feel is best.

Mash on their panic crush move, whether that be a Lars uf+3, Lili matterhorn, Capo RLX, Ling SSR AOP, Kazama b+3, or hopkicks. Being the smart cookie that you are after reading those two paragraphs, what do you do?

You block, or in the case of AOP and RLX you wait, or even in the case for hopkicks, you backdash or sidewalk to make them miss, or whiff. Then you punish.

You essentially presented the opponent with a kind of fake aggression, where you threatened with a mixup that the opponent didn't want to deal with, so they tried to escape it with a crush move but you read that and punished them for it.

Now you really have them shook. Next time you place them in the same scenario they will think, "I don't think I should use a crush move, because I got read and punished last time. Therefore I will backdash now."

They backdash.

You read that. Reading that, you dashed up and did your mixup again.

Now you presented them with the same scenario as before, but because they chose to move defensively and you read that, you continue on with your pressure.

You might be thinking at this point, "But hey, this requires reads. How is it possible for me to read someone who's living so far away from me and whom I'm playing on the internet?"

Your initial reads at the start of the match should include reading on which side of the scale should you be, and it all depends on what the opponent is doing.

Side note: if you want to see more about this kind of ideas about offense, plus learn how frame data is involved in this style of play, I have written another article on it, called The Grey Area Part Deux. I'll leave a link here so you can have a look at it. Go on, have a look. I'm waiting.

Now let's look at defense. What exactly is defense? People would say that defense is the opposite of offense or aggression, and defense is blocking the opponent's attacks. Here's my take on it.

A player has good defense when they are able to **stop the opponent's positive momentum and is able to use openings created through use of the game's defensive systems and their reads to turn the opponent's positive momentum into a state of neutral momentum or their own positive momentum**.

That sounded like a bunch of difficult to understand jargon? Fear not, young grasshopper.

Just like there are two types of offensive strategies, there are two types of defensive strategies. However, the first way of defense is so suboptimal that it will only be mentioned briefly.

The first kind of defense is passive defense; basically holding back out of fear, patience or anything else. This kind of a defense relies solely on the ability of the player to read the opponent's moves and punishing them. However, this method does not fully use all of the defensive options the player has and is thus not that great.

The second kind of defense, and the one I want everyone to employ, is active defense. This defense is equivalent of a monkey running around, being hard to pin down at one point. This defense takes full advantage of the movement system, the backdash option select (I will cover this shortly), sidewalking, attacks used for keep out such as magic 4's, and character specific defensive options. This method is just better in almost every way because this takes advantage of the idea that **the opponent can't rush you down if they can't pin you down**. If they don't know where you're going to be, then they don't know where they should be in order to press the issue onto you. The character specific options include reversals, parries, evasive stances like AOP and RLX, and crush tools like crouch jabs for high crushes and hopkicks for low crushes. The idea with using all of this is that the opponent has to deal with each of them in a slightly different manner, and if you can confuse the opponent into thinking you're going to backdash, when in fact you're going to mash jabs, their retaliation might not work.

(Quickie: The backdash option select is basically inputting back hold back. What this does is it backdashes and blocks highs and mids at the same time. So, if you were in the range of a mid or a high you'll block it, otherwise you make it whiff and you have the ability to

whiff punish it. This loses to lows that can hit you out of your backdash but overall is really strong.)

Let me give a scenario based example here, once again.

Suppose you're the Lili player, and you're playing against, say, a Baek player. Now, Baek has solid ways to break down someone who is using passive defense with db+3,3~f into frame traps, but he can't do that when you're backdashing, sidewalking, mashing jabs or doing crush moves. Doing stuff to make his life more difficult.

So you are playing him. He gets you to eat a WS 4,4,3~f, which is +3 OC on hit. He uses this +3 and the fact that you are scared stiff and not moving, to set up a db+3,3~f that hits you into basically a vortex of pokes and you're scared so bad that he lands a FLA grab, or even a db+4.
So that was bad huh.

Now let's see what could happen if you moved around.
Baek lands WS 4,4,3~f on hit, +3. Instead of standing there like an idiot, you choose to backdash. He thought you would stay there and so he does df+1 to check you, but you aren't there, so you whiff punish him and take half his life. Cool, right?

Part of learning the neutral game with me means that you'll be subject to going over the same scenario multiple times, so I can show you all your options and what consequences they would have if they go your way compared to if they didn't. They are going your way now because I want to show you the benefits of this play style.

Now let's see the same scenario in a different light. Baek lands WS 4,4,3~f on hit, and he knows that before you did a backdash to beat his +3 in this scenario. He does df+3~f to catch you backdashing, and he successfully does so. You both are in a semi neutral position

(I say semi because the neutrality is not determined by frames but by your mind). He thinks you might hopkick him out of any low he tries, so now he tries either one of these two scenarios:
1) He does a frame trap (his best one in this scenario is going for a CH 4 but it's a high). It helps if your frame trap is able to give a combo on a hopkick caught during its crush frames, especially if it's safe.
2) He tries to avoid the hopkick in an attempt to whiff punish it and get a combo. If he does df+3~f he can't back step to avoid the hopkick but depending on the timing he can definitely side step them by inputting df+3~d instead.

Against these scenarios, you can:
1) Block the frame trap and use the negative frames to go on your own offense, or punish that frame trap (if it is punishable) and use that to go on your own offense.
2) Use the idea that he is retreating in an attempt to make your attack whiff, and take those frames of defensive movement to aggressively more forward and mix the opponent up.

Let's go back to what I said at the beginning of this chapter. I said that offense and defense and not mutually exclusive ideas, and I want to explain what I mean by that. By now you should have realised that both on offense and defense, **the best risk reward is in movement**, specifically defensive movement. It has the lowest risk, because if you do a back dash properly you can block high and mid during the back dash, and you can cancel sidesteps into blocking as well, and it has the greatest reward potential, because if you get a whiff you can punish it for massive damage. On both defense and offense, the idea of whiff punishing still exists – on offense, you can use movement and whiff punishment when you read that you've frustrated the opponent into hitting a button (of

course this is one of the two ways to beat buttons as I said earlier, counter hits being the other one), and on defense, you can use movement and whiff punishment when you read that your opponent is trying quick pokes to try and lock you down frame wise but you can still move away from these pokes and whiff punish them. Due to this somewhat big overlap, and the fact that whiff punishment is one of the biggest sources of damage, this causes the ideas of offense and defense to overlap – I would go so far as to say that because of this, thinking of the neutral game based around these somewhat rigid ideas of offense and defense is not a good idea.

What I want you to think of the neutral game is a game of tug and war. You pull and pull as much momentum towards yourself, putting your opponent in as bad of a situation as possible, and pulling enough momentum towards you will result in your win.

3. Starting rounds

The first part of learning the neutral game of Tekken is to understand how rounds start in matches. The way rounds begin in Tekken, or the players' opening gambit, as it's known in chess terms, is a great way to learn the general mentality of the players in the matches – whether the player has a more defensive approach towards the game or a more offensive approach towards the game. Understanding your opponent during the opening few seconds of the game can be a great advantage to you, especially during tournaments where there is a limited time for you to adapt to the opponent.

Before we get started, however, you need to read section [2.2] of chapter two of the Tekken Skill Project by (senpai) Noodlehead. Here is the link:
http://www.tekkenzaibatsu.com/forums/showthread.php?threadid=128939

Just reading that article won't do us any good if we want to see how players openly adapt to one another because it doesn't give us a complete picture of what is going on inside the players' head – it's like having a look at a chess match every half an minute, returning to the chess analogy. So what we are going to do is watch a video of a set, but we'll focus on how people start rounds more than the rest of the matches.

The video we will see is The Dinosaur, who uses King and Bryan, vs Phoenix Denja, who uses Paul and Wang, from SvB 2014 in the UK. Shoutouts to The Chef for recording the video, by the way – the man is godlike.

Here's the link to the match:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ex9XWOsVva4 . Go watch the whole video if you want to, before you read this. We won't be going over every single opening round in the set, just the ones that are notable for different reasons.

For the purposes of this video we're going to assume this is the first time they are playing each other. Someone might ask, "What difference does it make?" The difference it makes is that if they have played each other before, **they might have information on each other's play style**, and because of that, **they make adaptations before the match begins**, which might cause them to make some decisions they make not make sense to us.

First round first game – Wang does a standing 4, while King does a b+3+4 to evade and back up. The standing 4 from Wang is, according to the guide by Noodlehead, a straight forward attack while King's b+3+4 is a kind of a movement.

Then King runs in and does a df+1 that catches Wang trying to stutter but not moving anywhere. This is a representation of Dinosaur's game plan in this particular scenario as well as Denja's game plan in this particular scenario. Dinosaur is trying to use his King to get in and get some damage, while Denja was a little bit more defensive, trying to catch Dino's buttons and score big damage off it.

Ok so let's think about what would have happened if things didn't go the way that they had gone.
What if Denja hadn't thrown out the standing 4 with Wang? Well since Dinosaur did a back Jaguar step that has lots of recovery, Denja would have been able to punish it if he knew it was coming, or simply let Dino do it and be ready to deal with a mid range

scenario.

What if Dino hadn't done the back Jaguar step? King might have got hit with it if he was just neutral blocking or not blocking at all and trying to hit a button, but if Dino had just held back for even a little bit, he would have been out of the Wang standing 4 which he would have the ability to whiff punish it for big damage.

After watching the rest of the first round, we now have a little different view of the play styles of the different players. Denja mostly is focusing on hard reads to gain a lot of damage – we saw this with Wang standing 4 at the start of the round, the duck into WS 3,2 with Paul and the ff+4 as well. Dino on the other hand plays a lot more calculated and safer, preferring to have the opponent kill themselves, but also going in and using his offense when he sees that his defense is garnering no reaction from the opponent. He is also fairly jab happy, which may or may not be relevant shortly.

On to the second round.

Denja starts off the round with b+2,1, which is a direct counter to King b+3+4. Dino blocks. Denja then does d+4,1, which is an NCc high crush and leads to a lot of damage. Dino blocks yet again, and the 1 misses. Dino stutters as if he didn't expect that, and dashes in to get a jab punish into an iSW.

We see this adaptation on Dino's part, as he realises that Denja is one to go for high risk setups such as b+2,1 into d+4,1 with Wang, and chooses to block. Denja also adapted to Dino by trying to catch him from b+3+4'ing away, then trying the d+4,1 in case Dino jabs (and we realised from the first round that he is fairly ok with doing jabs with King as a poke).

Were the actions taken by the two players 'good'? They certainly

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were adaptations that they made by noticing patterns and habits in each other. However, what we have to realise is that an action that is taken in the game that has a reason to it isn't necessarily right or wrong because each tactic used in the game can be countered. If a tactic worked, then it was 'right', and if it didn't, it wasn't. In this case, blocking after blocking b+2,1 was the 'right' decision, and it was the decision Dino made. Conversely, doing d+4,1 after the blocked b+2,1 was the 'wrong' decision for Denja. However, had Dino done a jab string after blocking b+2,1, the d+4,1 response from Denja would have been the 'right' decision.

The opening of the third round of the first game is interesting because Denja chooses to change his point character to Paul. Dino sees this and opens with another backdash to keep his space, while Denja chooses to open with a df+2, which is a fairly risky strategy, but if it worked and Dino rushed in, he could have ate a lot of damage. Denja doesn't get punished for whiffing the df+2, and then he chooses to move forward and Demo Man. This isn't much of a change from previous opening scenarios, but what is different is how the match goes right after the opening, as Denja is able to get a lot of damage on Dino right away. He was able to do so with his Paul but not with his Wang (huehuehue).

The rest of the round, Denja was able to capitalise on the life lead he had gained at the beginning. This was certainly a strategy that paid off for him in the long term.

The first round of the second game begins with Denja's Paul against Dino's King. Denja begins the round with a b+2 from Paul, which is a homing move and would catch an opponent blindly sidewalking. Dino begins the round with a sidewalk into an immediate block, which allows him to not get hit by the homing move.

The rest of the round Dino is more active and taking control of the situation by doing more stuff with him, such as jabs and ff,n,1+2, which are standard King pokes, but is also willing to be patient in scenarios where he feels that Denja will attack and punishes whatever he can get.

You can again see this decision by Dino to take charge of things in round two of the second game. Dino realises that letting Denja control the momentum is not a good situation for him to be in, and that the round starting position is a key factor for Denja's control of the situation.

Both Dino and Denja back away at the start of round three. This is a stark contrast from Dino's opening in round two, and is an adaptation on Denja's part. Dino backed away so as to look for Denja's response to Dino's rushdown from rounds one and two. When Dino sees no buttons on Denja's part, he chooses to rush in and again establish his momentum.

In round three, Dino chooses to be more patient and play more of a hit-and-run style, coming in for the occasional poke, then backing away, trying to give Denja just enough rope to hang himself by looking to be in vulnerable positions then backing off and baiting Denja and score damage. This is how he gets the first round of the set so far.

Start of round four, Denja's choice to start with a jab is interesting. If Dino started the round with a f+4, as he had before, Denja would have floated him and got a combo from it. If Dino had chosen to back away, the jab was pretty safe as it would be difficult to whiff punish it if Dino hadn't predicted it, and Dino had been going for both these options before, hence all in all the jab was a pretty safe option.

Dino chose to start the round with d+4. d+4 would catch Denja from sidewalking and backdashing, which he had started the last round with.

Dino's d+4 crushes Denja's jab. This opening is really interesting as they are reads off of the understanding of the opening gambits and overall play style of each other, but they work out in such a different way than perhaps both players expected.

Dino's change from the last round is working here, as he is getting Denja to make mistakes that he is punishing, and when Denja isn't hitting buttons, Dino's choosing to advance, and he is guessing right in situations against Denja and getting the hits he needs to get this round. He is also tagging more and as early as he can, so as to regenerate all his red life.

Ryan Hart in the video brings up a good point – conditioning. Dino is conditioning Denja to play the way that he wants him to; defending when he wants Denja to attack and attacking when he wants Denja to defend. Part of this success can be attributed to his he starts rounds with his offense to gain momentum sometimes, and baits Denja to do stuff that he can punish other times.

Denja switches from Paul to Eddy, but does not choose to start with him. Dino begins the round with a d+4 to df+3+4, which is a hit grab that will grab stand blocking opponents. This is one of the times that Dino is attacking to gain momentum for himself. He doesn't let go of this momentum that he has built, and using this, baits Denja into making mistakes such as getting interrupted and floated during his Eddy uf+4 into a combo that puts him at the wall and into Bryan's favourable position where he kills Eddy.

During the last two rounds, we can see that Dino has completely scared Denja into doing anything and using this, he manages to win

the set. Like I said before, part of this change of general momentum from being in Denja's favour to being in Dino's favour was how they started rounds – in the early round, it was Denja who was controlling the momentum from the start, and that allowed him to gain momentum that he did not lose and got those rounds from, however, it was Dino who was able to control the momentum in the later rounds from the start, from either baiting Denja into making mistakes, or correctly predicting that he was going to defend and taking control of the situation at those moments. This match is a good example of showing how important the starting moments in a round really are, and how the starting seconds of rounds can help you win entire sets.

4. Movement and buttons

After the opening gambit, the neutral game becomes far more complex and depends on several factors, such as who has the advantage from the opening gambit, and how the players make use of the different movement and attack options available to them during the neutral game. The next two chapters intend to go over these factors in more detail, but it is important to think of these factors together instead of separately, because they are very much intertwined and it is difficult to look at a match and focus on one factor alone. We will look at these concepts individually before watching match videos.

This chapter intends to go over the relation between buttons and movement in Tekken.

Basic movement in Tekken consists of **backdashing** and/or backdash cancelling to **retreat from the opponent**, and **forward dashing** and forward dash cancelling– or for some characters, **wave dashing** – to **approach the opponent**.
Backdashing and backdash cancelling is performed by the inputs, b,B and b,b,db times as much as needed, respectively. By doing b,B (which translates to tap back, release, tap and hold back) you gain the ability to **block mid and high attacks during your backdash**, which is useful as many moves that people use to control space are mids or highs, and being able to block them while retreating at the same time allows you to perform a simple 'option select' – if the move was in range during your backdash and was a mid or a high, you will be able to block it, but if the move was not in range and it whiffed (missed), you will back away from it and possibly be able to whiff punish it, depending on the range of your whiff punishment tool, your reactions, and the spacing at which the whiff occurred. It is not an option select if we use the true definition of an option

select, but it's close enough to Tekken that we can treat it as such. Backdash cancelling is a somewhat advanced technique (out of all the advanced movement techniques it is the easiest to learn and the most essential because every character can do it), done by doing a backdash, but cancelling the backdash animation into a crouch, by holding down back, then doing a backdash again, so the input looks like b,b,db,b,b,db, etc. In the input display in practice mode your backdash cancelling input should look more like **b**,n,**b**,**db**,**b**,n,**b**,**db**,**b**,n,**b** etc, and the n is the neutral input, where you let go of your stick/pad. There are tons of video and/or written tutorials that go into more detail about the technique used to execute backdash cancelling, and if you wish to learn how to do so before learning the use of it, here are some links:

- Performing BDC on stick

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3whW6bh9Aks

- Performing BDC on pad

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKRexJeADoo

Backdashing and backdash cancelling is the primary way by which Tekken characters create or increase the space between themselves. Backing away from your opponent will cause the momentum to reset (outside of character and matchup specific scenarios, which in this game tend to be fairly rare). The further away you are from your opponent, the number of options they have to try and get momentum in their favour decrease, but so do the number of options you have to try and get momentum in your favour. Up close they have access to their quick pokes, but those quick pokes may whiff from further away, and the same goes for you. Backing away from the opponent is a good option for you if the opponent has the momentum, but not if you have the momentum.

Forward dashing and forward dash cancelling are performed using inputs that mirror backdashing and backdash cancelling, ie f,F and f,f,df respectively. Forward dashing and forward dash cancelling are a lot simpler than backdashing and backdash cancelling, because there's no auto guard during a forward dash. If you dash into an opponent's attack, there's no way to save yourself other than blocking with your face.

Movement in Tekken, however, can be cancelled to blocking instantaneously. This means that **you can block during forward dashes if you cancel them to blocking**, which you can right away. Blocking right from your forward dashes makes advancing fast a less risky option than in other fighting games where you can't block for a set period of time during your dash/run. If you can dash block effectively against your opponent who is using buttons to keep you out, you might discourage them from doing so, and that opens up your ability to dash in and get your mixups going, but I'm getting slightly ahead of myself.

Forward dashing towards the opponent reduces the distance between you and your opponent. By contrast, dashing forward leads to the momentum changing in your favour. You are taking the initiative to change the flow of the match and move to a place where you have the advantage in terms of what options you have. Getting to a situation where you have the advantage over the opponent is the whole point of the neutral game of Tekken, and dashing forward is the most straightforward (pardon the pun) of doing so.

Forward dashes travel forward faster than backdashes travel backwards. Against someone who backdashes to get away from your pressure, you can dash forwards to keep close to them, and your momentum going.

Some characters have a specific kind of forward movement. There are two types of those special forward movements, roll dashing performed by qcf (d,df,f) and crouch dashing performed by f,n,d,df. Side note: unlike in 2D games, the neutral is an important part of the input for a crouch dash.

These are not universal. Characters that have access to a roll dash are Anna, Bryan, Feng, Leo, Lili, Sebastian, Nina, Paul, Dragunov, Raven and Wang, while characters that have access to a crouch dash are Alex, Roger, Armor King, Baek, Bob, Bruce, Devil Jin, Hwoarang, Heihachi, Jin, Kazuya and King.

Roll dashes cannot be cancelled into one another, but crouch dashes can (Bruce is an exception). Roll dashes need to be cancelled by doing a sidestep into either blocking or another roll dash (cannot be done for Nina and Anna); this is known as a snake dash. Crouch dashes can be cancelled into blocking or another forward dash, which can be cancelled into another crouch dash. Doing crouch dashes over and over, between four to six crouch dashes per second, is known as wave dashing. Roll dashes and crouch dashes are useful for the characters that have them because they move forward faster than just dashing forward and they have the ability to duck under highs while moving forward, and are good tools against characters/players that use high attacks as a form of keep out, but I'm again getting slightly ahead of myself.

Phew, lots of stuff in the movement department. You do not need to memorise all of this; just keep the basic ideas introduced in mind.

Now, what is a button? What I mean by a button is literally **any attack**, whether it is a jab, a df+2, a hopkick, a JFSR or an EWGF. Any attack. Tekken attacks have a lot of uses, whether they are used in the neutral game or up close, and for the purpose of this

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document I will use the terms 'aggressive buttons' or 'defensive buttons'. Aggressive buttons would be used after a dash and often are used to **keep the momentum in your favour**, such as a df+1 poke or stronger moves like EWGF. Defensive buttons are often used to **swing the momentum from your opponent's favour to your favour**, such as whiff punishment tools like generic df+2's and EWGF but also crush moves, most notably Lili's matterhorn (d+3+4)or Lars' lightning screw (uf+3). This definition is admittedly not a very good one, especially since the same button can be used in different situations and that would define it being either a defensive button or an aggressive button, but it's the best we have got.

Earlier I mentioned the fact that because forward dashing moves forward faster than backdashing moves backwards, forward dashing can effectively counter backdashing and keep the momentum in your favour. However, if you stick out a 'defensive button', such as a generic df+2, against a player moving aggressively in such a situation, they can't block and they're going to get hit by the df+2 and depending on what you're doing, lose up to half your life. **Defeating the opponent who uses defensive buttons to stop your aggressive approach requires defensive movement** such as sidesteps or backdashes **to make the defensive button whiff and punish them**.
Of course, just like everything in Tekken, this gets super complicated, so let's just watch a video to try and understand these concepts.

Today's video is the Tekken Crash season 1 finals set between JDCR, who uses Armor King and Heihachi (henceforth referred to as AK and Hei respectively), and Knee, who uses Devil Jin and Craig

Marduk (henceforth referred to as DVJ and Craig respectively). Here's the link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_oqZ39w3vVw

It can be difficult to watch a match in its entirely just looking for neutral game situations, so I will just point out key moments in this set that demonstrate the ideas. We'll also only watch the first match in the set, because this is a very lengthy set, but feel free to watch the whole set between the two players.

14:03 JDCR dashes forward into a jab that whiffs, but Knee was backdashing away from it. JDCR then wavedashes forward into Hei db+2. JDCR notices that Knee is not taking the initiative right after the round began, so he uses this opportunity to try and gain momentum for himself with the wavedash into the jab than then wavedashing into db+2 when he sees Knee still is not willing to attack.

14:10 After JDCR blocks Knee's Craig d+3, both players return to the neutral game. JDCR again takes the initiative and wavedashes forward and then does a Hei f+4 to gain frame advantage. He has established that Knee isn't willing to take much action in the neutral game himself, so there is no reason for JDCR to not try and build momentum for himself. He then correctly reads Knee's willingness to hit a button in Craig uf+3, sidesteps it and punishes it with a Hei 1,1,2 into further pressure. JDCR notices when Knee wants to hit a button and then punishes that attempt himself. This is aiding his game plan of pressuring Knee that we see develop in this first round.

14:26 Now we see a change in game plan from both players. Knee's DVJ was willing to challenge JDCR's AK more, and after a blocked DVJ WS 4, JDCR begins backdashing to avoid the raged DVJ from doing a lot of damage to him. Knee sees this and wave dashes at

him into a WS 4, then again into a db+2, which hits JDCR. Knee's ability to notice this sudden change in JDCR's game plan at such a short notice is what allows him to immediately gain momentum for himself in an attempt to reduce the life deficit.

14:36 Knee dashes forward again and does a d+4 with DVJ. Don't you find it ironic that this was JDCR's game plan a few seconds ago – JDCR advancing and Knee backdashing away? JDCR could be backing away so as to maintain his life lead but Knee manages to successfully rush him and gain little damage at a time. JDCR's defensive approach and Knee's response with aggression can be seen even more clearly at 14:41.

14:46 Now JDCR has even more reason to back away – so as to gain distance to tag to Heihachi safely. This gives Knee even more reason to pressure JDCR, so he can look for a raw tag in the event that it happens, and punish it with maximum damage. You also see JDCR timing SSL's in coordination to Knee's forward dashes in the case that Knee would do an EWGF so JDCR could punish it. Knee's control of the situation and the momentum that is in his favour is really easy to see.

14:57 JDCR finally gets enough space to get a raged Heihachi in. How did this happen? Knee predicted that JDCR would respond to the d+4 that hit him with a button so he sidewalked right, except JDCR didn't and chose to back away. This had happened in the round before, at 14:31 when JDCR responded to Knee's d+4 with his own d+4 (which would get beat by Knee's sidewalk right and again at 14:38 when he responded with a forward dash. This was a read on both players' part, and because JDCR showed Knee that he was willing to retaliate after d+4, at 14:57 he was able to create space for a tag to Heihachi.

15:00 Knee comes in with an EWGF. JDCR had a hard read on this, and from the sidewalks he had been doing with AK before, we can see he knew this was coming, so this time he dashed forward with Heihachi and punished the EWGF with a duck to WS 1, qcf+2 for maximum damage.

15:09 Round two. JDCR goes right on the offensive again, with constant pressure from his Heihachi. Knee is again defensive in this situation. However, right after another WGF, JDCR creates some space. Knee immediately sees this and chooses to take advantage of the situation by dashing forward and trying to set up his own momentum against JDCR, which he had not done in the last round.

15:13 As JDCR sees Knee approach, he does a sidestep left in the case that Knee would do an EWGF, as Knee used EWGF's quite a bit when his DVJ was against JDCR's AK. Knee did not EWGF, so JDCR decided to do one himself. Seeing JDCR's usage of EWGF in this round and knowing Heihachi's toolset, Knee also does a sidestep left in case an EWGF comes, but he mistimes his step and gets launched for it.

15:35 Knee sees that just letting JDCR control the neutral game with Heihachi is not a strategy that will work, and chooses to try and get things going with his Craig, by running in a doing a d+3. JDCR tries to sidestep it but fails and gets hit.

15:40 Knee dashes in, and because he has got EWGF'd before for dashing in, he goes with a read on it by a dash into crouch, so if JDCR did an EWGF Knee would be able to punish it properly. JDCR does not do an EWGF, so Knee chooses to throw instead, playing on the hesitation that the dash forward from him caused in JDCR.

16:00 There is a noticeable change in both player's play style. Knee forward dashes to block twice to bait JDCR into attacking, even though Knee could tag to a raged DVJ.

16:29 Knee switches his point team from Craig to DVJ. JDCR sees this and changes his play style according to the character, with the sidestep left against EWGF's and ducks.

16:34 Blocking DVJ ff+2 creates a neutral game position. JDCR chooses to advance and attack with Heihachi b+2 while Knee chooses to block. Again, this demonstrates understanding of what the opponent is willing to do and capitalising on any opportunity. I have been mentioning this concept over and over again, but that is because it is a very important concept in Tekken and all fighting games.

17:45 Off the DVJ ff+2 knockdown, Knee chooses to go on the offense. JDCR chose to attack off the knockdown but he didn't get punished, but then he chose to duck then backdash. Knee wavedashes right after seeing the whiff, notices that JDCR chose to defend, and goes on pressure.

18:00 JDCR uses a fair bit of single jabs to control the space right around him, as a defensive button, but then right after that he chooses to block. Knee sees this and chooses to advance himself, catching him with a Craig qcf+2. Again, this is adaptation on Knee's part based on what JDCR was doing.

18:31 This is a prime example that we see in this match of a defensive button beating an aggressive movement. JDCR dashes forward into an AK df+1 but gets hit out of it by Knee's WGF. We don't see this often because most players choose to dash forward into blocking or backdashing or sidewalking to evade such buttons

and get a punish, but JDCR instead chose to try and seize the opportunity to get the momentum in his favour. Knee had a read on this and chose to EWGF. Fortunately for JDCR, Knee messed up the EWGF and got a WGF, which caused him to drop the combo after that, but it is still important because this is the first time this has happened for JDCR in this match.

19:10 Knee's duck on JDCR's DU with AK is a read on what options JDCR uses with AK to move aggressively. Unfortunately there's no punish but he does try to take control of the situation with a Craig ff+1+2. Such reads can lead to a lot of damage if you can get the punish if your read does end up being true.

19:18 Again, JDCR wavedashes into Knee's defensive button, this time a CH Craig db+2. This is one of the big sources of damage for Knee in this round.

19:38 JDCR wavedashes from far away towards Knee, even though the last time he did this he got hit by a CH Craig db+2 that caused him to be in this life deficit. JDCR notices that Knee chooses to maintain space and defend against JDCR's raged Heihachi, and thus he chooses to wavedash into db+2. Unfortunately he couldn't capitalise on this situation to get the comeback, and loses the round.

If there is one thing you should pick up from this chapter, it is that **knowing what the opponent's tendencies and what they will choose to do in the next moment will be a huge benefit to you in playing the neutral game successfully and gaining momentum for yourself**. Many times during this set, both Knee and JDCR knew what the other player wanted to do, and capitalised on it. However this is not only predicting defence and capitalising on it by advancing, but predicting advancing and choosing to attack that

would stop them from doing so as well; the two times Knee did that to JDCR, once with a DVJ WGF and again with a CH Craig db+2, it paid off, especially the second time. **If you have knowledge of what your opponent is going to do, you can punish them for it, and really badly too.**

5. Ending rounds and walls

Okay, so now you've played the neutral game well, and if the stage has walls, you pushed the opponent near the wall, or at least kept your back away from any nearby walls. How do you go about killing a character off?

There are numerous strategies that go into ending rounds in Tekken, and they are all affected by different factors, such as how much life your characters have, how much life your characters (both point and backup) have, how much life your opponent's point and backup characters have, whether any character has rage, and on stages with walls, whether a player's back is against the wall or close to it.

If you have the life lead over your opponent in general, ie your point character has more life than the opponent's point character or secondary character, it might be a good strategy to defend and force the opponent to make a mistake to get the kill, or it might be a good strategy to advance and force mistakes out of the opponent willingly and actively and getting the kill that way. Honestly, this is one of the more difficult topics to talk about in a concrete manner, so let's just watch two videos and try to understand what is going on.

This first video is a set between Zeugaru, who uses Jack-6 and Ogre, and Nobi, who uses Dragunov and Lars. The link to the set is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhlIEJW6zhM

Their first match is at 10:55 and that is the match that we will analyse. We will watch the whole first match but pay close attention to around the last five seconds of each round.

After watching the full first match, we can see that Nobi is more aggressive and willing to take control while Zeugaru is more patient and defensive at the beginning, but Zeugaru starts taking more action during the middle part of the match and that allows him to win it. Let's take a closer look at how round 1 ended.

At 11:27, round 1's ending scenario is very interesting. Zeugaru puts Nobi in a spike ender after his combo and puts him at a range where if Nobi tag crashed, he would get punished for it easily. Nobi notices this and gets up, blocks Ogre's charged db+2, then raw tags. This allows him to get a raged Dragunov in. Rage is a specific state for a character where their damage is increased by a big margin, which makes it essentially a 'comeback mechanic', allowing for players in life deficits to equal that deficit or even kill the opponent due to the increased damage. Nobi's Dragunov is able to poke Zeugaru's Ogre while raged, allowing him to reduce Ogre's life to 'kill range' – where landing one combo on Ogre will kill him. Zeugaru attempts to challenge Nobi after eating a Dragunov d+2, gets a WS 1,2, but gets hit by WS 4 himself, attempts to challenge him again, but gets CH WR+2 and loses the round due to the rage enhanced damage.

In this situation, why did Zeugaru lose? You can look at him getting hit by CH WR+2 as a mistake, and that was a part of it, but what caused CH WR+2? What caused Nobi to get into a scenario where that worked? What caused Nobi to get into the scenario that led to the scenario where a CH WR+2 worked?

A comeback in this sense isn't caused by just one mistake or one 'random' hit from the player down in life, but **several mistakes in a row by one player and capitalisation on those mistakes by the other player**.

Zeugaru made a mistake by allowing Nobi to tag his Lars out to his

Dragunov safely – mistake #1.

He made a mistake by not going for a frame trap right away after WS 1,2 (WS 1,2 is +3~4 OC on hit and he could have Ogre b+2 trade with Dragunov WS 4 which would have killed Nobi, or just have gone for a jab string) and instead letting Nobi hit him with WS 4 – mistake #2.

Zeugaru mashed after getting hit by Dragunov WS 4, which caused him to get hit by CH WR+2, which closed the game – mistake #3.

This is how a player with a life deficit can come back to win the round in TTT2 – a classic comeback if ever there was one. However we should realise the fact that there were several mistakes that Zeugaru made that if he didn't make, would have caused Nobi to lose the round. To reiterate, a comeback is not caused by one mistake or one 'random' thing that the player in the life lead gets hit by, but due to several mistakes made by one player and the other player capitalising on those mistakes.

At 12:17, the second round is the opposite of what happened in the first round – Zeugaru won because of Nobi's mistakes. Zeugaru hit Nobi's Lars with Ogre's db+2, which gave him the life lead, and using the space he had gained, he raw tags to Jack and goes for a running cross chop that Nobi blocks. Zeugaru does not use the frame advantage from the cross chop to set up a mixup and chooses to block instead. Nobi tries to catch Zeugaru's attacks with a Lars df+2 but Zeugaru blocks and retaliates with a Jack df+1, then blocks again as Nobi does a 1,4 and punishes it with a WS 4 that creates some space. Nobi then runs up and ducks, which Zeugaru catches with a df+2 (the SSL before that was probably to evade a Lars WR+3) and then gets the combo that kills Nobi and gets the round.

What were the mistakes that Nobi made here?

Nobi did a df+2 after blocking the cross chop instead of going for a mixup because Zeugaru was blocking – mistake #1.

Nobi did a 1,4 after blocking Jack df+1 that got punished – mistake #2.

Nobi dashed up and ducked and got caught by Jack df+2 and died – mistake #3.

As I stated before, this is the exact opposite of the first round. Nobi was the one at the life deficit, and trying to change that and getting the life lead for himself, causes him to lose the round. This is what might be called 'retaining the life lead'. Having the ability and the reads to force mistakes from the opponent and punishing those mistakes is what makes you good at Tekken.

Now you might be thinking, "Wait hold up a second. Those situations at the end weren't exactly neutral game scenarios." You are right. The situations right before the kill points weren't neutral game scenarios. However they do arise from neutral game scenarios and are caused by one player taking the initiative in the neutral game; Nobi in the first round with the run up df+1 with Dragunov and Zeugaru in the second round with Jack running cross chop. The way Nobi and Zeugaru approached the neutral game caused these situations to occur, hence having an understanding of how the neutral game works is key to winning in general.

One thing we have not really focused much on in this so far is how walls affect the neutral game. Walls are a very interesting addition to Tekken and its neutral game system because **they limit how much you can move**, specifically move backwards. This makes them a big part of the neutral game, because movement is a big part of the neutral game and the factors that affect movement affect the neutral game as well.

When your opponent's back is to the wall, it's just like in real life – **they don't have a lot of options to escape the scenario** as their primary way of increasing distance, backdashing, is not available to them, and the options they do have tend to be fairly risky, because if their attempt to escape doesn't work, they might eat a lot of damage by means of a wallsplat into a massive combo. Due to this, players will often use combos that carry the opponent to the corner over combos that do damage if they have the choice so that they have the positional advantage, but they will also use their own movement and buttons to push the opponent to the wall.

The risk reward of moves also changes dramatically in some instances. Moves like DVJ ff+2 become a huge source of damage because they give a wallsplat state but they do not have a lot of risk to them.

The match for this occasion is between Lowhigh's Lee and Nina vs Triple H's King and Marduk, and we will watch matches. The link to the set is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_jxNjPlYPfM.

0:33 Lowhigh has the positional advantage in this situation here and you see Triple H not go for as risky a decision as he did at the start of the round because if Lowhigh got a wallsplat in this position, it could be very difficult for Triple H to tag his King out without burning rage for a tag crash. He chooses to block and time a King d+2 to punish Lee b+1,1, does ff+4 to create some space and then tries to sidestep away from the wall. Lowhigh manages to catch him from doing so, however. Triple H does a hopkick that Lowhigh blocks and punishes with a 1,2~MS then does MS~SSL to get Triple H back on to the wall (please pardon the pun). Triple H is trying his hardest to get his back away from the wall in this situation because he knows that if he gets wallsplatted he will lose a significant chunk of his King's life, so he tries to sidestep away

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from the wall again, but he gets hit by Lee's homing move, 1+2, again placing him in a disadvantageous position and hitting them with FC df+4 to tack on some extra damage. Triple H then tries to tag to Craig but gets punished for it.

0:49 Triple H had to make that hard read on the 2 jab there. It's a risky option for him because if Lowhigh read the reversal, he can do a hopkick and put him on the wall and get a lot of damage on him.

We can see from these few interactions that Lowhigh placed Triple H in a very uncomfortable position from the very beginning of the round because Triple H made one mistake. Capitalising from this mistake at the start of the round with the pressure that followed allowed Lowhigh to maintain the momentum he gained and get the round.

2:11 Now this is the exact opposite situation from the first match. Triple H got a float and converted into a combo and gets Lowhigh at the wall. Currently Lowhigh breaks a Giant Swing, which creates space, but Triple H dashes in and tries to make use of this positional advantage he has because Lowhigh's back is to the wall. Lowhigh can't move backwards much here so he tries to be more active in trying to keep Triple H away from him by using Lee b+4, which is a tool used to catch people as they are rushing in with attacks, however it can be whiff punished or the recovery of it used to do a mixup on Lee. Had Lowhigh not had the wall behind him, he might have not chosen to go with this strategy and might have chosen to backdash instead, but because he can't backdash due to the wall behind him, it forced him to take that action that was potentially riskier than just backdashing. Triple H capitalised on the Lee b+4 abuse from Lowhigh by getting him with a King db+4 for the knockdown, backing off for a potential tag crash that didn't come, and continuing his pressure. Unfortunately it doesn't work out for

him as well in the short term as Lowhigh manages to tag in Nina and put Triple H's back to the wall.

This interaction is also unique as it showed a relatively unsuccessful attempt at using walls to one's advantage; where Lowhigh was able to use the walls to his advantage in the first round, Triple H failed to do so successfully in the third round. **Just because you have someone at the wall does not guarantee the win to you** – the defender has options, such as sidestepping away from the wall, blocking moves and breaking throws and creating distance between you and the opponent. The aggressor still has the advantage here, however, as the aggressor can still control the position better than the defender can.

I will conclude this chapter with this little interaction in the same match in the fourth round. At 3:05, Lowhigh drops the combo that could have got Triple H at the wall, which allows Triple H to techroll, and because he read that Lowhigh was blocking low not high (forgive me for the pun) he gets him with a Craig db+2 and tags out to King. After this, Lowhigh gets up and holds back for a solid 3 seconds because he is afraid that if he hits a button or ducks, Triple H might catch him with a whiff punish or a King f+4, which is a safe wallsplatting mid, and it would hurt a lot. This just goes to show you the power of walls in Tekken – **they allow you to put your opponent in very unfavourable spots** where it is very hard for them to get out, and because they can lead to a lot of damage, they are very good at ending rounds really fast (as we saw in the first round). Being able to play the neutral game well allows you to put the opponent in these situations, whether you have walls or not.

6. <u>Conclusion</u>

So in these few chapters, what have you read so far? We have learned about why we should play the neutral game well. We have learned about the concepts of offense and defense and how they don't actually exist in concrete manners. We have learned about the way rounds open and how those few opening seconds of every round can affect the outcome of the match. We have learned about how players use movement and buttons together for offense as well as defense. We have learned about how players end match. Lastly, we also learned how walls play a part in matches.

What was the point of all this?

The point of all this was for you to **help understand your own tendencies when you are playing the neutral game**. This is written so that you can understand what your strengths are and what your weaknesses are, and **by knowing your strengths and weaknesses you can improve**.

Now, if you were paying attention, hopefully you noticed that I said over and over that most of the decisions that were made by the players were reads based on them noticing patterns and tendencies in the opponent, and were not just random guesses. I want this to be the point you take home from this guide more than anything – in the neutral game, and really in all of Tekken, **you cannot win if you do not pay attention to your opponent and adapt to their actions and change your strategy accordingly**. The definition of stupid is, "Doing the same actions over and over and expecting different results," and you don't want to be stupid, do you?

Character knowledge, understanding of the game system, understanding of the mixup game and good reactions are certainly

things that matter as far as being successful in Tekken is concerned, but the biggest factor that counts towards being successful in Tekken is how well you can understand your opponent and their tendencies. If you know your opponent is going to block low in a moment, or backdashing in a moment, or doing a hopkick in a moment, it does not matter what character you use or what character your opponent uses – you can punish their actions and put them in a situation that is bad for them (well I'll correct myself it matters a little bit, but the read is more important by far). That is how you win in fighting games, and hopefully this guide was helpful to you in getting to understand this aspect of Tekken!