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ALTERNATE REALITY-BASED SELF-DEFENCE: THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE AND THE MYSTERIOUS ART OF NINJITSU

ABSTRACT

Given the unique positioning of martial arts between pacifism and violence, as well as between civil rights activism and fascism, this paper considers the potential of martial arts practices to enable ethical interventions in contentious cultural issues across polarised media ecosystems and political divides. At the same time, consideration is given to the potential of artistic-research methodologies to facilitate ethical interventions in the rapidly evolving practices, cultures, and discourses of martial arts. Through two case studies – ‘Self-Defense for the Zombie Apocalypse’ and the ‘Secret Ninja Academy’ – this paper demonstrates how pop-cultural favourites (such as zombies and ninjas) can be ethically utilised to leverage hyperreal practices and unfictional media as entry points for such interventions. This paper ultimately argues that martial artistry, when paired with artistic-research, enables practitioner-researchers to critically navigate and repurpose problematic narratives while building sustainable, inclusive, culturally responsive, and socially engaged forms of practice.

CONTRIBUTORS

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KEYWORDS

alternate reality-based self-defence; artistic research; creative practice; hyperreal martial arts; ninjas; practice-based research; zombies

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INTRODUCTION: A COMMON THREAD

Martial arts practices and cultures occupy a unique position betwixt and between violence and pacifism (Bäck & Kim, 1982) as well as between fascism (Bowman, 2021, 2025a; Katz, 2025; Koerner & Staller, 2023; Zidan, 2023) and civil rights activism (Godfrey, 2012; Griffith, 2023; Raya, 2015). Consequently, martial arts and combat sports are uniquely positioned to enable interventions in contentious cultural issues across polarised media ecosystems and political divides. For instance, Ronnie Chieng, a correspondent for the satirical news programme *The Daily Show*, noted in a recent podcast interview: 'Brazilian jiu-jitsu has totally been embraced by middle America ... I think it might be the answer to solving the divide in America. It might be the only common thread that can connect the Left and Right' (Torre, 2025).

Today, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) under the direction of Dana White – and its diverse blend of mixed martial artists and fight fans – has become a linchpin in American politics (Peck, 2024). On Donald Trump's 80th birthday, a politicized UFC main event was held on the White House lawn; the very lawn on which in 1904, Fude Yamashita – 'the judo master's wife' – provided judo lessons to empower a group of prominent women and daughters (Rouse & Slutsky, 2014, pp. 485–486). In stark contrast, the UFC's influence on young men – vis-à-vis Joe Rogan and other *bro-casters* and *manscapers* (see Bowman, 2025b) – has been linked to the 2024 re-election of Trump (Reilly, 2024), a convicted felon whose surprising re-ascendance has coincided with and accelerated an unmistakable turn toward authoritarianism, nationalism, imperialism, and fascism in the United States (Bowman, 2025a, pp. 68–75; Cadwallier, 2025).

Accordingly, this paper reflects upon the potential of martial arts and combat sports for enabling interventions in pressing cultural debates. In so doing, consideration is given to the potential of artistic-research and creative-practice methodologies to facilitate ethically interrogated interventions in rapidly evolving martial arts practices, cultures, and discourse. To that end, *unfictional* texts – in other words, fictional media which obfuscate their own fictional nature, either through design, or by happenstance – are explored as a potential starting point for such interventions. It is hardly insignificant that many martial arts traditions, histories, and practices are deeply entangled with unfictional media and invented traditions (Bowman, 2021).

The methodologies this paper reflects on are considered alongside two pop-culture perennials – the zombie apocalypse and the mysterious art of ninjitsu – both of which intersect with martial arts discourse and are sustained by unfictional texts. As such, this research aligns on two fronts with arguments advanced by Paul Bowman in *The Invention of Marital Arts* (2021). First, the need to seriously consider media representations and media supplements as primary (not secondary) sources in the inventions and reinvented traditions of modern martial arts (p. 10). And second,

the need to design and implement interventions in problematic areas of martial arts cultures and discourse (p. 234).

UNFICTION AND HYPER-REAL MARTIAL ARTS

The exploration of unfictional texts as starting points for alternate-reality-based or 'hyper-real' martial arts was substantially informed by Benjamin Judkins' (2016) analysis of lightsaber duelling in 'The Seven Forms of Lightsaber Combat: Hyper-Reality and the Invention of the Martial Arts'. Judkins describes this *Star Wars*-inspired activity as a potentially 'authentic' and 'hyper-real martial art' which 'entails a collection of practices ... that seem to be no less potent for their fictional origin' (pp. 19–20). Fascinatingly, as Judkins himself points out, questions raised by hyper-real martial arts practices can be asked 'of most of the traditional martial arts that are practised in the world today' (p. 20).

The term 'unfiction' originated within the field of alternate reality games (ARGs), where terms such as 'fiction' and the 'willing suspension of disbelief' were insufficient to discuss and analyse immersive, interactive, responsive, and coordinated narrative-based games and activities using diverse media platforms to blend fiction and reality in real world settings. As previously indicated, in this paper the term unfiction is used to more broadly denote fictional media which (intentionally or otherwise) blur the boundary between fact and fiction. As with the hyper-real practices Judkins explores, practices supported by unfictional source texts are no less potent for their fictional elements. In contrast to the indisputably fictional nature of the *Star Wars* narratives, however, the point at which unfictional narratives become fiction is not always immediately clear, if at all.

Zombies, for example, are obviously fictional. Yet, the threat of a zombie-esque viral pandemic has been treated quite seriously by various academics, pundits, documentaries, and at least one anti-zombie militia stockpiling weapons (see Discovery Channel, 2012). Furthermore, the use of the zombie apocalypse scenario as a *metaphor* for pandemics or natural disasters – such as in the 2011 'Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic' campaign by the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention – introduced extraneous confusion about the plausibility of a rabies-like pandemic (CDC, 2011a, 2011b; Kruvand & Bryant, 2015).

Ninjas – or, to complicate matters, *shinobi no mono* – are even less obviously fictional; and it is not readily apparent precisely where the grains of truth end, and mythology and popular culture begin. Indeed, for more than a century, the English-speaking public has been fed a steady diet of historical misinformation and/or disinformation presented as historical fact (e.g., Gingetsu, 1917, 1937; Hatsumi, 1964; Kim, 1981). Today, even experts routinely disagree about many details, both large and small (e.g., Cummins, 2025; Tuck, 2025b)



Figures 1–3: Appropriations/zombifications of twentieth-century self-defence literature: **(Left)** A 1955 spread in *Span* (Vol. 2. No. 14) originally entitled 'Dig that Dust Wolf!' featuring Dolores Marlins. **(Centre)** Charles Clarke's 1908 'The Defeat of the Hooligan' from *The Idler: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine* (Vol 33: pp. 516-522) featuring Marguerite Vigny as 'Mrs. Sanderson.' **(Right)** Edward William Barton-Wright's *The New Art of Self Defence: How a Man may Defend Himself against every Form of Attack* (circa 1899).

Beyond those violence-filled genres, unfictional narratives are rapidly gaining prominence – and becoming increasingly politically charged – via polarised (and polarising) media ecosystems and conspiracy-fantasy-fuelled discourse strategies of many pundits, politicians, and influencers (along with their supporters, enablers, and followers). It must be said that martial arts communities, cultures, and discourse are not immune to these toxic developments. This is proving particularly true with regard to the contemporary turn toward New Age approaches to health and wellness which – entangled as they are with the conspiracy milieu (Bowman, 2026; Ward & Voas, 2011) – are often entirely uncoupled from evidence or consensus reality.

Conspiracist ideologies are relatively common, for example, among North American Brazilian jiu-jitsu communities and influencers (e.g., McKinney, 2025; Rogan, 2017, 2019; Zidan, 2025). Indeed, although primarily defensive *in theory*, martial arts have long been entangled with violent ideation and fascist ideologies. Today, the escalating relationship between the Ultimate Fighting Championship and far-right politics is increasingly scrutinised in mainstream media (e.g., Mahdawi, 2026; Jenkins, 2025; Peck, 2024; Timms, 2024; Zidan, 2023)..

Even so, longstanding associations *also* exist between martial arts and self-improvement, self and bystander protection, and radical action for social justice. This unique confluence of factors positions martial arts cultures and discourse as a vital space, not only for the exploration of pressing cultural debates, but also for enabling direct action vis-à-vis these practices. Furthermore, artistic-research and creative-practice methodologies offer potentially informed and embodied points of entry for critically analysing discourse and cultures around, and within, martial arts practices and communities, as well as for directly intervening in

such spaces in a critical and, as Loraine Leeson (2019) describes it, 'socially-situated' manner.

Such methodologies, therefore, can inform the creation of sustainable and ethical research projects which are not necessarily *about*, but entangled *with*, martial arts. In other words, artistic-research and creative-practice methodologies can function as a useful fulcrum in martial arts practice; while martial arts practice, in turn, can function as a useful fulcrum in so-called 'culture war' issues. While there are no doubt other ways to pursue such outcomes, this paper highlights the potential of strategic engagement with unfictional pop-cultural texts by way of hyper-real martial arts practices.

METHODOLOGIES: GO WITH THE FLOW WITHOUT GETTING LOST

As a practitioner-researcher – a 'pracademic' to use Paul Posner's (2009) awkward but catchy term, which has been taken up in martial arts studies in recent years (e.g., Bowman, 2025a, p. 67) – my hybridised creative-practice methodology consists of an original combination of pre-existing approaches and philosophies, both from academia and martial arts. Below, I will expand on those aspects which, after having completed two creative-practice-based PhDs, stand out as being useful, as well as potentially replicable, transferable, or adaptable by other researchers, particularly those in martial arts studies.

The first is Bowman's concept of 'alterdisciplinarity,' as outlined in *Deconstructing Popular Culture* (2008). According to this approach, which I will discuss in more detail later in this article, research in

or around the field of cultural studies is ideally conducted not simply as an academic exercise, requirement, or disengaged 'critique' but as a specifically defined attempt to improve in some way the situation of the topic(s) being studied (Bowman, 2008, pp. 170–180). Naturally, this approach is equally appropriate for both artistic and traditional research methodologies. However, in the case of artistic research, the mechanisms for creating and implementing dynamic interventions are more readily available and apparent.

In line with the concept of alterdisciplinarity, rather than try to save the world with my project, I followed the advice of a bumper sticker: *Think globally, act locally*. Obviously, a bumper sticker is not an academic citation, but it does provide a useful heuristic. In this vein, I endeavoured to disseminate my research content through scholarly avenues such as journal articles and conference presentations, while at the same time engaging with popular platforms (including *YouTube*) and local contexts (such as my own academic and martial arts communities).

In all of the above, I consistently followed Dwight Conquergood's (2002) recommendation in 'Interventions and Radical Research' to 'triangulate' my praxis on the 'three pivot points' of 'artistry, analysis, activism' – or for those preferring the letter C – 'creativity, critique, civic engagement' (p. 152). In line with that triangulation, I sought to progress through 'three levels,' as advocated by *Kōdōkan judō* founder Jigorō Kanō (1918/2006), wherein the lower level is technical training for self-defence; the middle level is the cultivation of mind and body; and the higher level is the deployment of those achievements in contribution to society.

Kanō's three level approach, incidentally, is not worlds apart from the description of 'true *karate-dō*' provided by *Shōtōkan karate-dō* founder Gichin Funakoshi: 'That in daily life one's mind and body be trained and developed in a spirit of humility, and that in critical times, one be devoted utterly to the cause of justice' (1935/1973, p. 3). Nor, perhaps, is it worlds apart from Splinter's advice to the teenage mutant ninja turtles: 'There is no monster more dangerous than a lack of compassion' (Sternin et al., 2012). In line with Judkins's concept of hyper-real martial arts, a portrait of Splinter – as the paragon of ninjitsu – hangs on the wall of my training space beside portraits of Funakoshi and Kanō.

Ultimately, despite the complexity of the reflexive relationships between practice, reflection, and theoretical analysis, my primary method was – as Brad Haseman (2006) proposed in 'A Manifesto for Performative Research' – 'to "dive in" [and] commence practising to see what emerges' (p. 100). Haseman, along with Daniel Mafe (2009), expanded this concept in 'Acquiring Know-How: Research Training for Practice-Led Researchers,' describing the reflexive process as 'one of those "artist-like processes" which occurs when a creative practitioner acts upon the requisite research material to generate new material which immediately acts back upon the practitioner who is in turn stimulated to make a subsequent response' (p. 219). Along similar lines, Robin Nelson (2009) observed that 'creative practices do not typically construct rational arguments and adduce evidence to support them' (p. 19).

Each of these liberating approaches is refreshingly candid about the fact that creative and artistic work is often messy, ad-hoc, reflexive, and/or improvised. It is precisely for these reasons, I argue, that ethical positions should be established early in the artistic-research and creative-practice process. A moral compass, so to speak, allows one to go with the creative flow without drifting off course ethically.

ON FASCIST APPROPRIATIONS OF MARTIAL ARTS

Such ethical questions, today, revolve around the political uses and abuses of the martial arts in the context of their uptake by the far right, as I have already briefly discussed above. In a recent issue of *Martial Arts Studies*, Peter Katz (2025) explicitly called attention to the connections between the late nineteenth-century invented tradition of *bushidō*, the twentieth-century rise of nationalist fascism in Japan, and traditional Japanese martial arts. Specifically, Katz considered whether *Shōtōkan karate-dō* (under the influence of *Kōdōkan judō*) may have retained some latent aspects and structural elements which – *when physically embodied in groups* – are consistent with (or even sustain, perpetuate, or produce) fascist ideology via the cultivation of 'subjects whose bodies and beliefs are trained to forget, dominate, and conform' (p. 52). Given that the philosophies of *Shōtōkan karate-dō* and *Kōdōkan judō* are situated at the core of my own martial arts praxis – and since the points Katz raises are far from insignificant – further consideration of these ideas is called for.

To begin with, the collected writings of Kanō and Funakoshi (as previously indicated) hardly point in fascist directions. Admittedly, however, the values endorsed in those texts – including Funakoshi's twenty precepts (1938/2013) and Kanō's two guiding principles (1918/2006) – are not mutually exclusive with the aesthetics and philosophies of fascist or authoritarian societies. Indeed, the relativity and subjectivity of such 'values' is perhaps one of the most significant implications of Katz's article. Thus, the problem, I argue, is not that traditional Japanese martial arts practices are inherently fascist – either embodied or otherwise – but that these practices are not *automatically* resistant to appropriation by nationalist or fascist movements.

This issue calls to mind the nationalist appropriations of Zen Buddhism in Japan during the 1930s and 1940s. For instance, despite the fact that the forbiddance to take life is a fundamental precept of all schools of Buddhism, D.T. Suzuki famously wrote in 1938: 'For it is really not he but the sword itself that does the killing' (quoted in Victoria, 2013, p. 9). Going further, Sawaki Kōdō wrote in 1942: 'It is the precept forbidding killing that wields the sword. It is the precept that throws the bomb' (quoted in Victoria, 2013, p. 9). Considering that 'ethical commitment to compassion and non-violence ... lie at the heart of Buddhism as a religion' (Goto-Jones, 2013, p. 30), such interpretations are untenable. Violence committed in the name of a greater good *can* be morally and ethically defended, but responsibilities for those acts (and the agency of the actors) should not be deflected.

In this same vein, martial arts practices – while potentially consistent with many moral ethics frameworks – are *not* moral ethics frameworks in and of themselves. Martial arts, alone – especially when infused with unfictional histories and invented traditions – will not do the work for us. To summarise this complex topic in pop-cultural and fictional terms (borrowing from *The Karate Kid* franchise beginning in 1984): Whether or not karate makes you fascist may well depend on whether you are learning Miyagi-dō or Cobra Kai.

ARTISTIC RESEARCH AND MARTIAL ARTISTRY

The terms *artist* and *artistry* are inherently subjective. It therefore follows that the terms *martial artist* and *martial artistry* cannot be easily defined in purely objective terms. Those terms are further complicated by the application of artistic-research or creative-practice methodologies to the study of martial arts or vice versa (i.e., the incorporation of martial arts into artistic-research and creative-practice projects).

To simplify and clarify terminology around these issues, it should be noted that the broad categories of ‘creative research’ (Carter, 2004) and ‘practice-as-research’ (Barret & Bolt, 2007) are similar. Ongoing conversations exist regarding the precise nuances of practice-based versus practice-led research (O’Sullivan, 2009; Smith & Dean, 2009) or creative-practice versus artistic research (Loughran, 2022; Skains, 2017), but the differences are minor. Additionally, the implementation of these terms varies from institution to institution. Yet, while each approach differs slightly in terms of the centrality of the creative/artistic process – or the degree to which theoretical research is reflexively informed by practice or vice versa – the key point is this: *all such processes ultimately seek to generate new knowledge or understanding through the inclusion of embodied perspectives.*

The finer points of these conversations necessarily fall beyond the scope of this paper in which the terms creative practice and artistic research are used to indicate two sides of the same *praxis*. The Cambridge dictionary offers a useful definition of praxis: ‘the process of using a theory or something that you have learned in a practical way.’ While this definition is helpful, it should be noted that the reverse is also true: a praxis also includes reflexively theorising about something that has been learned through embodied practice.

To involve oneself in praxis thus involves a recognition that, as philosopher Alfred Korzybski put it in 1933, ‘a map is not the territory.’ In line with this observation (which is, at once, both obvious and profound), a praxis requires familiarity with both theory (the map) and practice (the territory). As Korzybski’s

statement insightfully implies, while it is useful to theoretically map and explain problematic issues, it is also valuable to phenomenologically explore problematic terrains. Since engaging with the ‘territory’ of such practice necessarily involves entering into relationships with the real world – and hence moral considerations – this exploration must, furthermore, be carried out through ethical, safe, and sustainable methodologies.

Consequently, any praxis that includes martial arts, zombie apocalypses, or ninjitsu, must take into consideration that violence is a primary subject of these topics. Thus, the ethical imperative to exercise caution within any such praxis should be noted in no uncertain terms. For this reason, the case studies discussed in the following sections exist within a praxis that approaches martial arts broadly as a combined physical *and* philosophical study of self *and* bystander protection.

Beyond questions of violence, the zombie and ninja genres include any number of culturally and theoretically complex or problematic issues (to which I will return shortly). Yet it is also impossible to deny the popularity of those fictional concepts and, by extension, the marketing and pedagogical *potential* loaded within. Therefore, rather than write off ninjitsu or the zombie apocalypse as hopelessly corrupted – or use the concepts willy-nilly, taking on their baggage whether intended or not – a third option is to deliberately intervene in that discourse.

Interventions along these lines should begin with thorough (if not exhaustive) research – along both practical and theoretical lines – aimed at better identifying and assertively flagging potentially harmful and toxic elements, as well as highlighting potentially progressive aspects. While such research/exploration is imperative from an academic perspective, it is by no means mandatory in commercial contexts. Many commercial or tourism-based projects such as zombie-themed shooting galleries or ninja museums (or even the 2011 CDC ‘zombie-pandemic’ public service campaign) ride the comfortable trendiness of popular culture without fully considering the consequences or ramifications of mixing reality and fiction (Kruvand & Bryant, 2015).

The following sections contain summaries of two case-studies; one completed and one in-progress. To intervene ethically and effectively within problematic discourse, while minimising risks of unintentionally doing harm, the aims of these projects are twofold. First, to critically assess the ethics and effectiveness of martial arts and secular spiritual practices as vehicles for empowerment-based self-protection, self-improvement, and social justice. And second, to identify both problematic *and* positive aspects of tropes and media representations (and their subsequent repetitions, reiterations, satires, and parodies) in order to better avoid, subvert, or develop those aspects within the practical and pedagogical dimensions of the projects.

HOW I THOUGHT
I'D LOOK DURING
THE APOCALYPSE:



HOW I REALLY LOOKED:



Self-portrait of the author as a ninja.

Figures 4 & 5: Two variations on popular image-macro meme templates: **(Left)** A meme used in *The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie (Episode #1)* in which I endorse non-lethal deterrents while discussing fashion. **(Right)** A *Secret Ninja Academy* meme intended to foreground the absurdity of fictional 'ninja skills' via a portrait of a chair (photo source: Amusan John/Pexels). My use of memes is intended to emphasise that both laughter and seriousness are vital aspects of ethico-political interventions (Borum, 2023; Bowman, 2008, p. 157; Derrida, 1995, p. 404).

CASE STUDY: SELF-DEFENSE FOR THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE

Creative practice is not necessarily, of course, the best (or only) way to create, implement, or road map ethical and effective interventions within (or beyond) martial arts. However, this was the methodology I employed, both as a socially-engaged academic and martial arts practitioner, while providing live and online instruction on self-defense for the zombie apocalypse in a doctoral research project entitled *The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie*. This project had its origins in a paper entitled 'Empty Brain, Empty Fist: The Way of the Zombie,' delivered at the 2022 International Martial Arts Studies conference, in which I proposed an ethically-grounded and gender-neutral framework for self-defence instruction within the absurd context of a zombie apocalypse.¹

This approach was informed by – although not initially inspired by – *The Zombie* Safety and Self-Defense Handbook* written by Kevin Cole and Vernon Owens in 2014. Interestingly, the footnote indicated by the asterisk in that book's title notes that it 'also works on stalkers, vampires, werewolves, and frat boys high on Jell-O shots and an overinflated sense of entitlement!' In other words, the book overtly employs zombies as a *pretext* for

discussing less popular, but necessary, topics including stalkers, sexual assault, and domestic violence.

Despite relatively low production values, that book creatively and effectively utilised fantastical scenarios for framing and presenting best practices on awareness, avoidance, and self-defence. The book's effectiveness is not entirely surprising, given that Owens is a Certified Emergency Manager and high-level karate instructor/competitor and Cole holds a PhD in communications. Still, when considering the concept of self-defence against zombies *from an ethical perspective*, it is evident that all violence – *even violence against zombies* – must be appropriately interrogated and contextualised. For this reason, I chose to broaden the original concept to encompass self-protection *for* the apocalypse, rather than *against* zombies.

To productively and practically explore this broader territory of apocalypse prepping, I created a 21-part digital merit badge-based webseries aimed at using digital media platforms to prepare viewers and thus also myself (or, vice versa, perhaps) for an apocalyptic collapse or dystopian ascendance of digital technologies. As a result of the expanded concept, only four parts (#12–15) of the 21-part series were ultimately dedicated to hand-to-hand combat against people and/or zombies.

¹ Readers seeking more information about these projects are directed to Ch. 7 of *Alternate Reality Lifestyles: Reconstructing Conspiracy Theories and Apocalypse Prepping in the Digital Era* (McQueen, 2024) and the open-access monograph made available with this article: *Alternate Reality-Based Self-Defense* (McQueen, 2025).

Those episodes approached the topic from the perspectives of prevention/awareness, striking, and grappling. The techniques and principles discussed and demonstrated – while hypothetically useful in a zombie apocalypse – were included due to their potential real-world applications. To make this concept viable within its imaginary circumstances, I took an unusual but logical approach to zombie anatomy and biology, arguing that as long as one avoids being bitten, basic self-defence techniques would be no less effective on an undead attacker as on a living one.

This project was grounded upon the recommendations of a 2020 study finding that among women from 18 to 77 years old, those who completed a nine hour ‘community-based empowerment self-defence course’ experienced ‘significantly less sexual assault’ in the subsequent year, and demonstrated ‘significantly greater self-defence self-efficacy, more accurate knowledge about sexual assault and the possibility of resistance, and less self-silencing’ than control groups (Hollander & Cunningham, 2020). A study conducted in 2015 likewise found that first-year university students who completed 12 hours of a ‘rigorously designed and executed sexual assault resistance program’ were nearly one-half less likely to experience rape, and nearly two-thirds less likely to experience attempted rape in the subsequent year, relative to those who attended ‘a session providing access to brochures on sexual assault, as was common university practice’ (Senn et al., 2015).

In other words, amidst ongoing online debates about the ‘street’ effectiveness (or lack thereof) of basic self-defence training, studies find that – in line with the Pareto principle – *the majority*

of benefits can be gleaned within the first dozen contact hours. Yet, it is important to note that while studies endorsing comprehensive empowerment-based self-protection programmes are often cited by martial arts or self-defence academies (and/or instructors), many such academies (and/or instructors) fail to *actually provide* comprehensive – or, in the words of Senn et al. (2015), ‘rigorously designed and executed’ – self-protection programmes.

Reflecting upon the alternate-reality context of an unfictional zombie apocalypse, I examined the findings of those studies to determine, first and foremost, whether it was ethically defensible to advocate for, and provide instruction on, the use of violence in cases of self and bystander protection. Next, in line with recommendations, I designed a broad yet simple and concise curriculum – and delivered it with a female co-instructor – including theoretical and practical approaches for preparation, situational awareness, avoidance, boundaries, verbal de-escalation, deception, defensive technologies, verbal boundary enforcement, and as a last resort, physical boundary enforcement (Channon, 2016; Channon & Matthews, 2018; Hollander & Cunningham, 2020; Senn et al., 2015).

Of course, watching online content is less beneficial than in-person training, and the intent of these videos is to model how such courses might be designed and executed, rather than to substitute for an in-person empowerment-based self-protection seminar. Although the four-part video series has a runtime of less than 40 minutes, the effective delivery and execution of that content with diverse groups requires no less than three hours.



Figures 6–9. Episodes #12-15 of *The Art of the Apocalypse: From A.I. to Zombie* featuring co-instructor Dr. Patricia Darling McQueen.

With the inclusion of an introduction, ice breakers, safety drills, practice-time, demonstrations, questions, breaks, recaps, and so on, the content could productively fill up to six sessions of up to ninety minutes.

Additional content can also be incorporated within this model. For ethical and practical reasons, we opted not to provide online instruction on potentially lethal chokes or complex techniques, as implied by my concluding statement in Episode #15: 'Well, there's a lot more to it than that, but that's all for today.' During in-person training sessions delivered by qualified instructors, the inclusion of such techniques would be a logical progression.

While on the topic of the ethics of self-defense instruction, it remains a tragic fact that involvement in martial arts or combat sports communities can *increase* the risk of physical or sexual abuse at the hands of instructors or other practitioners. As one young practitioner humorously put this on social media: 'I used to get beat up at school so I started jiu-jitsu, and now I get beat up at school and jiu-jitsu.' The realities of abuse, of course, are far from funny. Although this issue is not analysed in depth within this paper, it is a reality that must be confronted in any context, and – due to its insidious and predatory nature – particularly within martial arts cultures and communities.

Ultimately, *The Art of the Apocalypse* webseries took a postmodernist approach to the post-apocalypse by *deconstructing* post-apocalyptic narratives – in the Derridean sense (see Derrida, 1967/1976) – in order to *reconstruct* them as entertaining, ethical, data-supported, and freely accessible, educational interventions. Central to this was the appropriation of survivalist aesthetics and vernacular (i.e., the form) in an attempt to subvert or overwrite the most 'toxic' implications (i.e., the function) of post-apocalyptic narratives. In other words, rather than *avoiding* contentious topics, I looked for opportunities and strategies to *intervene*.

For example, in the US, a gun is far more likely to be used to kill its owner, or the owner's loved one(s), than to protect them (Harvard Injury Control Research Center, 2023). Thus, in line with a wide body of statistics and best practices, in Episode #12, I adopted an unusual position for a 'zom-poc' survivalist, advocating *against* gun ownership in lieu of more sustainable protective technologies, actions, and deterrents. (Clearly, those competent in gun use and safety were not my target audience.)

This approach, it should be noted, is very different from simply utilising and, thus, perpetuating unfictional narratives in educational or edutainment contexts. It is also different from simply critiquing the problematic aspects of post-apocalyptic narratives and edutainment from afar. Rather, I engaged in creative practice in an effort to directly intervene within prepper discourse; even if on a small or self-selecting scale.

This approach can be viewed as an example of Bowman's (2008) concept of 'alterdisciplinarity' – introduced briefly earlier in this article – which advocates not for 'critique from afar,' or 'from one's comfortable disciplinary spaces, but within "other" spaces, in the language of the "other"' (pp. 182, 185). Alterdisciplinarity,

Bowman acknowledges, is aligned with Stuart Hall's (1992) formulation of Cultural Studies as 'a serious enterprise, or project,' which has 'some will to connect' and in which there is 'something at stake' (p. 278).

Through such approaches, my project evolved from an alternate reality-based self-defence pedagogical strategy to a well-rounded apocalypse survival programme that leveraged the popularity of zombies and robots to reframe and discuss a range of culturally significant topics including: disaster preparedness, cognitive behavioural insights, secular spiritual pathways, sustainable digital practices, and empowerment-based self-protection.

CASE STUDY-IN-PROGRESS: SECRET NINJA ACADEMY

My second case study – ongoing at the time of writing – revolves around the creation of a secret ninja academy, in which real training (both ethical and physical) can occur, afforded through the appeal of the highly mediated and fictionalised figure of the ninja in popular culture. In spite of such (un)fiction, the work of the academy will seek to leverage the power of the martial arts to address and intervene in real-world social issues, such as protecting young people from bullying.

Although data on bullying prevention and intervention programmes for young people is less comprehensive than for adults, such programmes have been found to be effective. For instance, the Gracie University 'Bullyproof' (jiu-jitsu) programme was systematically evaluated in a 2015 doctoral thesis and found to be 'helpful in both preventing and responding to bullying at school [and] therapeutic and helpful in overcoming the effects of past trauma' (Emfield, 2015, p. iv). Additionally, the *Love Fighting Hate Violence* 'anti-violence advocacy campaign' created by Channon and Matthews in 2016, serves as a 'coaching toolkit' and collection of best practices pertaining to delivering 'anti-violence education through martial arts and combat sports activities' (Channon & Matthews, 2018).

However, the implications of taking up a 'ninjitsu' framework as a means of developing ethically-grounded strategies for providing self-defence instruction (for youth and adults) need addressing, since the ninja is just as problematic a figure as the zombie, if not more so. It is difficult to reflect on martial arts in popular culture without confronting the mysterious art of ninjitsu. The global ubiquitousness of characters with ninja skills/powers in cinematic blockbusters and TV series, ranging from family-friendly to gratuitously violent, is undeniable. Yet, due to the mystique imbued upon this fictional genre by decades of misinformation and unfictional source texts, this popularity has come at a cost. Ninjitsu, with its invented histories and techniques – and its numerous fake, fraudulent, and/or criminal purported practitioners both in Japan and abroad – is *almost* too troubling to associate with.

On top of *those* problems lie the appropriative, Orientalist, and white-saviour themed tropes of 'American ninja' novels and

cinema of the 1980s and beyond.² Similar problems, however, also exist with the all-too-often gratuitously violent, misogynist, and/or genocidal zombie apocalypse scenario; including its racist origins as an American travel writer's exoticisation of capitalist exploitation of slavery in Haiti (see Kennedy, 2011). Nevertheless, these popular and problematic contexts also create opportunities for interventions into toxified areas of discourse.

It is also important to reiterate that ninjitsu, for all intents and purposes, is an invented tradition of the twentieth century (Tuck, 2024, 2025a, 2025b; Turnbull, 2017). The ninjitsu that actually existed (*shinobi no jitsu*) is not what we talk about when we talk about ninjitsu. To put this even more bluntly: *ninja, as we know them today, are fictional*.

Studying ninjitsu via historical literature is therefore rather challenging since – as Rob Tuck repeatedly establishes on his scholarly *Critical Ninja Theory* Substack newsletter – nearly all writing on ninjitsu prior to 2017 is heavily dependent, either intentionally or unknowingly, on fictional or apocryphal works (Tuck, 2024, 2025a, 2025b). In this vein, most ninjitsu literature can be viewed as *unfiction* intended to obfuscate its fictional nature, or as Tuck (2024) puts it, a 'highly unusual form of historical fiction that doesn't acknowledge its own fictional status'.

The modern *fictional* portrayal of the ninja – highly skilled in disguise, deception, stealth, all manner of unusual weapons, poisons, assassination, and arcane techniques; able to hurl throwing stars, walk on water, and climb walls like a spider – emerged in Japan in the late 1950s (in literature) and the early 1960s (on screen).³ The American ninja genre, of course, emerged in America in the 1980s. Considering that I am a white American male, dabbling with fictional and unfictional ninjitsu narratives, I must additionally confront the American ninja tropes, which are largely as follows: A white (or half-white) American male (often an orphan) trained by an 'authentic' Japanese (male) ninjitsu master must eventually defeat his evil (and morally inferior) male Japanese counterpart.

In 1990, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* became the highest grossing independent film of its time.⁴ This film – like its indie comic book source material created by Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird in 1984 – tells the story of four American mutant turtles instructed in ninjitsu by Splinter, a highly skilled Japanese mutant rat. Together, the turtle brothers seek revenge for their master's murder, murdered at the hands of a rival Japanese ninja operating as a New York City crime lord. Today, the pizza-loving ninja

turtles have been featured in more than a dozen animated and live action films and TV series, multiple comic book series and crossovers, video and arcade games, action figures, clothing lines, touring theatrical productions, and fast-food product promotions. But what are the implications of the unlikely fact that four turtles from New York have become the world's most recognisable ninjas?

Helpfully, the indisputably fictional nature of the mutant turtles foregrounds the fictionality of the entire ninja genre. Less helpfully, the American ninja turtles are all *boys*, of course, whose green skin has largely insulated them – despite not being voiced by actors of colour until 2018 (in the *Rise of the TMNT* series produced by Nickelodeon) – from the racial and cultural politics of other American ninja appropriations (Campbell, 2023). (Their turtle-ness also seems to have excused Splinter from what would otherwise be a clear-cut case of child abuse.)

Although the ninja turtles sidestep or subvert many issues associated with American ninja narratives in creative and fascinating ways, those issues remain present beneath the surface. Yet, the absurdity of the American ninja turtles also provides a useful frame of reference for approaching ninjitsu as fiction and mythology. Like all myths and fiction, ninja narratives can contain and provide real-world lessons and inspiration. While it remains problematic in any culture to pretend that ninjas (as we think of them today) are (or ever were) real, it can be helpful to use absurd fiction as a platform to discuss both real and imaginary ideas, including the boundaries *between* the real and the imaginary.

In other words, it is obvious that ninja TV shows (and films) are fictional. But it should also be made obvious that fiction *is the origin* of ninjitsu. Under those conditions, the ninja (as fictional) can serve as a flexible platform for ethically exploring not only empowerment-based self and bystander protection but a host of topics including: resilience, mindset, fitness, acrobatics, motor skills, team building, cultural appreciation, acting, illusion, or even pizza making.

On a promotional level, the concept of a 'secret' training location presents opportunities for humour, irony, or reverse psychology, so to speak, in 'secret' publicity materials. Like the ninjitsu facility ostensibly operating as a mountaineering school in the 007 novel (and film) *You Only Live Twice* (Fleming, 1964; Gilbert, 1967), a modern 'ninja academy' might operate behind a façade or 'front' such as, for example, a 'Zombie Apocalypse Supplies' store, a

² E.g., *The Ninja* (1980) by Eric Van Lustbader; Chuck Norris in *The Octagon* (1980); Italian actor Franco Nero (as an American soldier of fortune-turned-ninja) in *Enter the Ninja* (1981); Michael Dudikoff as the titular *American Ninja* (1985); and the multiple sequels of the latter franchises.

³ Viz., *Fukurō no Shiro* (Owl's Castle) by Ryōtarō Shiba (1959) and the serialised *Shinobi no Mono* novels by Tomoyoshi Murayama (1960–1962). The former was adapted for the screen in the Technicolor *Castle of Owls* (1963). The latter was adapted as a series of eight black and white films (1962–1964).

⁴ This was the second time that record was set by a film innovatively incorporating Asian martial arts. The first was *Billy Jack* (1971) in which Tom Laughlin plays a half-Navajo and former Green Beret Vietnam veteran who – courtesy of his stunt double, hapkido expert Bong Soo Han – calls upon both his shamanic powers and karate skills to protect the oppressed people of the fictional Nishnobia tribe. Despite such shortcomings, *Billy Jack* was a progressive and socially-engaged work that (ultimately, quite profitably) fought to bring attention to the marginalisation of indigenous communities in the US.

What people think ninjas do



What ninjas actually do



Figure 10. This original variation of a popular meme template reframes ninjas as positive role models and civic-minded community members via the juxtaposition of a stock image of a fictional ninja and a photo of real-world boxing coach Jennifer Huggins at the Kingsway Boxing Club in Toronto (photo by coach Virgil Barrow, copyright 2017, reproduced with permission).

'Bigfoot Evidence' shop, or a conspicuously plain 'Boring Coffee Shop.'

Certainly, 'hiding' the entrance and signage of a training facility is a counter-intuitive marketing strategy, yet this approach has proven successful for non-profit tutoring centres worldwide. In 2000, educator Nínive Clements Calegari and author Dave Eggers sought to create a youth writing and tutoring centre in a space zoned for retail. To skirt zoning restrictions, they created a 'Pirate Supplies' store with a tutoring centre in the back. According to Eggers and Amanda Uhle, the pirate supply façade may have started as a gimmick, but it had a 'galvanizing effect' and 'brought people in – random people, shoppers, tourists, potential students and donors and tutors' (2020). As Tom Berger further observes in *Edutopia*, the approach also 'had a profound impact on students, who felt no stigma about getting extra help in a store for pirates' (2020).⁵

In its overt fakeness, the false front – like the TMNT – provides both a literal *and* symbolic entrance point into martial arts training that foregrounds the imaginative playfulness of the hyper-real. In doing this, this point of entrance potentially interrupts the ideological suspension of disbelief attached to the seeming 'authenticity' of supposedly ancient martial arts.

The false front, I argue, is doubly fitting for a ninja academy, since ninja/shinobi – both as fictional super(anti)heroes and as historical military spies/saboteurs – demonstrated a penchant for

disguise. Conceptually, this approach embraces the trope of secret identities as seen, for instance, in the Japanese *Super Sentai Series* and its North American adaptation *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*. In so doing, this trope reframes ninjas as: *those who inwardly possess the invisible skills, strength, and fortitude of a (fictional) ninja*. Although this case study remains in-progress, by publishing the theoretical groundwork for the concept, I hope to provide researchers with a roadmap and template for creating similar projects.

OUTCOMES: THE SCHOLARLY, THE PRACTICAL, AND THE PERSONAL

As both a researcher and martial arts practitioner, I have found numerous benefits in using artistic-research methodologies to design and carry out projects consisting of intertwined theoretical and practical strands. On the *scholarly* level, theory and practice supported each other in an ongoing self-reflective feedback loop. On the *practical* level, the martial arts practices were usefully integrated into, and interrogated within, broader cultural contexts and issues. On the *personal* level, practice helped make theoretical research more sustainable, and vice versa.

Indeed, at various times, I purposefully aligned my personal and academic incentives via the fulcrum of practice. To describe this

⁵ The '826 Valencia' tutoring centre served as a flagship for affiliated and independent writing centres worldwide, including a 'Secret Agent Supply Co.' in the Netherlands, a 'Boring Store' in Chicago, and a 'Superhero Supplies' store in Brooklyn (complete with a wind tunnel for trying on capes).

process bluntly, I was simultaneously exploring the subjects of my research *as well as* martial arts. Since both topics were prominent in my *umwelt*, I could not fail to notice connections between them. And since the creative-practice parameters of my project created space for a dynamic response, the crucial step was to identify and meaningfully elaborate upon the significance of those connections. Fortunately, the emergent field of martial arts studies – particularly its podcast and peer-reviewed journal – provided the scholarly concepts and theories necessary for bridging the gap between my full-time research and what was, at the time, a hobby.

Ultimately, the intertwining of martial arts and theoretical research into a unified praxis resulted in positive outcomes in both areas. For instance, during the course of the ‘zombie project,’ I resumed karate training (after a nearly twenty-year hiatus) and earned a black belt in Shōtōkan karate-dō; and during the exploratory phase of the ‘ninja project,’ I earned a ‘combatives’ certification in jiu-jitsu via Gracie University. Given my researcher’s predilection for documentation, those journeys are chronicled in ‘The Brown Belt Trilogy’ and ‘The Black Belt Saga’ created with Dr. Patricia Darling McQueen (McQueen & McQueen, 2022–2025).⁶

None of this, of course, is to say that the outcomes would have been *less* positive in the absence of creative-practice methodologies. Yet, the outcomes would have been very *different* in focus, scope, and impact. I hope it is clear that in discussing personal accomplishments entangled with these projects, my aim is not self-promotion. Rather, I wish to provide a complete picture of the theoretical and practical groundwork – as well as documentation – involved with these projects. Again, this is not to say that such approaches are mandatory, but they were the methods I employed in my praxis (and continue to employ outside of academia) to construct a sustainable scaffolding for my practice and pedagogy as a martial artist.

In all of the above, my ulterior motive – which is *not* to say nefarious purpose – was to utilise my fascination with the techniques and philosophies of karate-dō and judō /jiu-jitsu to better accomplish the hard work of carrying out and publishing scholarly research, while using my scholarly research to deepen, strengthen, and incentivise the hard work of consistent physical training and philosophical growth. At the same time, the alterdisciplinarity and triangulation of these projects ensured that the outcomes of my praxis were ethically-interrogated, socially-engaged, and of potential value to others and to society as a whole.

CONCLUSION: STITCHES IN TIME

In this paper, I have attempted to clearly communicate the need for, and benefits of, proactively initiating interventions within local martial arts and combat sports communities. While there are

countless ways to intervene in problematic discourses and practices, this paper outlined reasons for, and advantages of, employing a combination of martial artistry and artistic-research methodologies. To that end, strategies were suggested for leveraging (rather than ignoring) unfictional pop-cultural texts vis-à-vis hyper-real martial arts practices.

I further suggest, more generally, that martial arts and combat sports instructors should aim to provide *ethical* as well as physical education to those from both marginalised *and* non-marginalised populations. Practitioners of these activities should seek to intervene in local martial arts communities and cultures if and when such elements are absent or resisted. Guides such as the *Book of Ethics* made freely available by the Ju-Jitsu International Federation (2000) can provide a helpful starting point for this work.

If martial arts and combat sports are – as Ronnie Chieng said of Brazilian jiu-jitsu – ‘the only common thread that can connect the Left and Right’ (Torre, 2025), then perhaps this common thread can be used to stitch together the social fabric currently being torn apart. To assert (and reassert) the potential of martial arts and combat sports as pathways for self-improvement, self and bystander protection, and the betterment of society – rather than for empowering fantasies of violent supremacy or sexual domination – may be among the most crucial interventions of our era.

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Declaration of competing interests

The author affirms that they had no competing interests relevant to the work underpinning this manuscript.

Declaration of artificial intelligence use

The author affirms that no artificial intelligence applications were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

⁶ The latter tells the story of three martial arts masters: Jigorō Kanō, Gichin Funakoshi, and Splinter. In treating all three with equal regard, I establish (without going too deeply into specifics) that no *real* ninja master exists.

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