

# Controlling Time and Space on the Rapier Field

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## The Games We Play

Once a fencer gains basic competence with the sword, they will (consciously or not) start to adopt a style on the field. This style is often referred to as their “game.” Some common styles are the strength game, speed game, range game, defensive game, thug game, etc.

Each style has advantages and disadvantages. Identifying and analyzing your game and your opponents’ games can pay huge dividends as you’re able to reduce your liabilities and exploit those of your opponents. High end fencers will generally have several games that they are comfortable with and will choose one that maximizes their effectiveness in the given situation.

One of the games that I’ve had success with is a timing technique where I attack while my opponent is committed to some other move and momentarily unable to respond. This paper will describe this timing game in detail with particular emphasis on identifying those movements by the opponent that should trigger an attack. I’ve heard others refer to this as the “twitch” game or as gunfighting.

## Terminology

I take “tempo” to mean the time for a single fencing move. This move could be a lunge, an attack, a parry, etc. It could be natural to a modern speaker to use the term “counter-tempo” to describe the game where you interrupt your opponent’s action with your own. I’ve also seen at least one modern author use “mezzo-tempo” to indicate a move that gets in the middle of an opponent’s move.

But, from a period manual viewpoint, these are incorrect usages of the terms. Period usage of the term “counter tempo” refers to the subset of my general approach where your timing attack is in response to your opponent launching an attack. “Mezzo tempo” has had several meanings including half moves (like a half cut) or a move that is faster than a full lunge, etc. In later works, it was nearly synonymous with “counter tempo.” The period terminology that is closest to the game I’m discussing is “taking a tempo,” which is making move that is smaller or faster than your opponent’s, but that’s still not exactly what I mean.

Each of these terms has been used slightly differently by different authors in period. I will generally avoid using these terms, but in the few places that I do, understand that I am following in period footsteps when I further expand the definition of that term. The main skill that I will be focusing on is timing an attack while your opponent is committed to completing a movement and thus much less able to respond to that attack.

“Measure” means range. If you are “in measure” you are in range to attack or be attacked. Obviously, different heights, arm lengths, sword lengths, and flexibility levels mean that you’ll generally have a different range than your opponent.

## Controlling Measure

Controlling and being certain of your range is an important skill for any successful fencer regardless of their choice of game. It is particularly critical for someone playing a timing game. You need to know for sure that you can land your attack with a single movement. Having to add a second movement will very likely lose the timing advantage we are seeking.

The most fundamental part of controlling measure is clean, sure, footwork. Practice it. Drill it. If you can provide a stable platform for your upper body to move around, you’re 75% of the way to controlling measure and less likely to be a victim of this timing game.

The remaining portion of measure control is being able to visualize and analyze the distance between you and your opponent so that you can make the right decisions about which way to move to produce your desired distance. This too can be drilled for improvement but experience on the field will be required to fine tune the results. A common drill for this is a mirroring drill where the fencers will move around each other in a mock fight with one leading and one following. The follower is to mirror the leader’s moves so as to maintain the original spacing while using good footwork. From time to time “hold” can be called to check that stance and range are correct.

I am 6 foot 2 inches tall with long arms. My normal sword has a 40 inch blade. It is unusual for me to face an opponent with the same or longer range. When I’m using this game, I work ruthlessly to stay just at the edge of my measure so that my opponent is always out of measure. That, in and of itself, has gained me a timing advantage. I can strike with a single action and they will always take at least two to hit me (a step and a lunge for instance.)

Forcing your opponent to fight from out of measure is a huge advantage if you can achieve it. But, it is not a requirement for successful timing moves. Understanding and being certain of the range you are at during the fight, however, is critical to successful timing based technique.

A final note, a “refused” stance (with your off hand forward) has its place. I use the stance a lot. But it is not a good fit for this particular game. It makes single-time (one motion) attacks very difficult. You will generally have to use at least two motions (a reverse and a lunge for instance) to attack and will likely allow your opponent time to recover from his enabling error.

## A Thief of Time

The core goal of this technique is to attack when the opponent has just committed to an action (by foot work, blade movement, or weight shifting for instance) and is momentarily locked into completing that action and unable to immediately respond to your attack.

You can do this reasonably easily if you note a pattern that you can exploit such as a tendency to rock their weight front and back. You can wait for them to start to settle their weight onto either foot and then fire. They have to complete the settling movement before they can start a new one to respond to your attack. Or they have to do something really awkward in mid-movement.

## Wired to Fire

An additional option is to intentionally disable your conscious thought process and wire yourself to fire based purely on your muscle memory and experience. This can buy you enough speed to get past even the fastest fencers around. But, there are problems with this approach. First, it can be tactically dangerous. Your opponent could trick you into firing at a time of their choosing. And it could be physically dangerous. If you're triggering on your opponent's telegraphing that they're about to attack, you're leaping into a shot that you know they have already committed to throwing. That can be a recipe for hard shots. Finally, it is not simple to get "in the zone" and to have the proper levels of focus and detachment to make this work.

A level of zen-fencing is not a requirement to use this initiative stealing approach. Just being aware of the types of opportunities that will be discussed in the rest of the class can improve your fencing. And being aware of how this type of game works can enable you to be more effective against practitioners of this style. An example approach would be intentionally telegraphing that you're about to attack with the actual intent to defend, avoid the incoming timing attack, and then respond with an attack of your own.

The rest of this article will discuss a variety of mistakes that you can exploit with a timing attack. There is no intent to provide a complete list. But, the general theme is to identify movement that commits your opponent to continuing long enough for you to exploit.

## Feet First

The first type of mistake to watch for is a footwork error. This can be crossing the feet while moving, taking steps that are too long, or settling all of their weight onto one foot or the other. It could also be the act of settling into a static position that they're temporarily unable to move out of.

An effective attack in these cases is one that they'd normally respond to by moving in a different direction than where they have committed to go. Their need to change direction will at least cause confusion but will probably also offer a sufficient opening to land your attack.

If they've been doing a good job of stepping out of your shots, they temporarily will be unable to do so – you know where they are about to put themselves due to the footwork mistake.

## Telegraph for you, Sir

Telegraphing is a very broad concept. Any preparing action that is out of their normal behavior can announce to you what they are about to do. The term “tell” (used as a noun) is also sometimes used to describe a telegraphing action.

One common telegraph is cocking. If they bring an arm back before throwing a shot or lean their body forward in anticipation that can be noted. Cocking is also bad for other reasons: they’ve taken time to make an unnecessary movement rather than attacking and they’re intentionally adding energy to the attack, frequently resulting in an excessively hard hit.

Another, slightly more subtle tell is muscle tensing. If they’re all loose and casual for most of the fight and then tighten up their grip on the sword or other major muscles they will convey their intent to a careful observer.

Noticing a telegraph tells you that they have just committed to the pending action (typically an attack). For that brief moment, your opponent is unable to respond to your movement; they’re mentally locked into completing their intent. If you’re fast enough you have time to insert your own counter- action between the telegraph and their attack.

## And all the Rest

Any non-trivial motion that you opponent commits to has the potential for exploitation. It’s impossible to list all of the potential types of opportunities. A few more examples will have to suffice.

In my most recent major tournament I was facing a fellow Atlantian White Scarf who has won a few more tournaments than myself. I had been using this timing technique all day with extremely good results and was ready for the bout. He was using his knowledge of my previous preferences, in specific that I seldom lunge, to encourage him to try to sneak into my measure far enough to get to his own range. To further that, he moved his sword across his body from a normal body right position to a more centered position as an invitation. He was dead before he completed the 6 inch sword move. It was fast enough that I had to ask him afterwards what had happened; I had not consciously seen the opening but my “wired to fire” mode had noticed his commitment to the motion and momentary inability to react and had thrown the lunge and shot into the now open upper right chest.

In the same tournament, one fencer in my pod was an exception to my otherwise nearly perfect record. I lost to him repeatedly in the round robin and then tie breaker bouts. He was relatively new, but had had a fair amount of modern fencing experience. Belatedly I realized that he was very used to this kind of timing game and was in fact better at it than I was. I just simply was playing the wrong game for that opponent. For him, I needed to choose a game that used more SCA specific motion that he would not have the experience to deal with well.

Later that day in the semi-finals, I faced another, younger, white scarf with similar range to my own. Looking at a video of the fight, I saw myself controlling the range for a few minutes then briefly settling

my weight while still in range. I was dead before I finished the settling motion. I'd committed myself to a movement that I could not reverse quickly and I lost the match due to just the type of error I've been discussing in this article.

## You've Got Game

This type of measure- and timing-control is certainly not a game that everyone can pull off well. But, understanding and working on this style can pay dividends regardless of which game you choose to deploy.

Improving your footwork to provide a smooth stable platform to support your upper body is always a plus. Knowing what range you are currently at and having the ability to adjust that range as desired is an extremely powerful skill.

Watching your opponents' footwork, stance, and weight balance is also a useful skill that takes work to develop. But it can pay dividends in not only your effectiveness on the tournament field but also in your teaching and training of other people.

Finally, having the ability to identify the game that your opponent is playing allows you to learn its advantages and limitations and eventually lead to improved performance against anyone using a similar game.