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ENGL-3130-001-Adv Comp

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04/24/23

Dragonball Z Budokai is important.

See how a cash grab video game pushed the fighting game genre forward.

I consider myself a voice of importance when the topic of video games arises. I have been playing video games since before I could remember, so 20 plus years of experience I reckon. I concern myself with most genres and subgenres video games offer and the genre I'm most familiar with is the fighting game genre. I didn't discriminate back then; I played all kinds of fighting games that were put in front of me. The big-name games like *Tekken*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Super Smash Brothers*, and *Dragon Ball Z Budokai*. One of those games is not like the other, one of those games does not belong. By playing such a diverse range of fighting games, I see gameplay influences shared between games and the games that are the most influential are the *Budokai* games. Despite being a licensed game for the *Dragon Ball* franchise, the *Budokai* games are just as import as the big names in the fighting game genre. *Dragon Ball Z Budokai 1* is the benchmark game that pushed the fighting game genre forward and the licensed fighter subgenre forward with more involved story modes, intricate in-game cutscenes, and excellent presentation. To understand *Dragon Ball Z's* place in fighting game canon, I must talk about the era preceding *Budokai's* release.

The 1990's were a period of exponential growth for the game industry. The consumer base was growing, the technology was innovating rapidly, and an explosion of genres and subgenre's came into existence. The fighting game genre was born, self-actualized, flourished, and innovated during this decade. The 90's is the golden era for fighting games thanks to the decade's shear breadth of content divided between the games that pushed the genre forward and the imitators trying to get in on the action. Capcom's *Street Fighter 2* set the gold standard for what fighting games can be and inspired copycat games such as *Karnov's Revenge*, *World Heroes*, *Fighter's History*, and the list goes on. SNK's *Fatal Fury* challenged *Street Fighter's* choke hold on the genre with a more involved storyline and the unique two-lane system- players can jump into the background to better reposition themselves. Midway's *Mortal Kombat* proved American developers were capable of making fighting games. *Virtua Fighter* and *Tekken* pushed the genre into the world of 3D graphics and 3 dimensional arenas. All my examples are only the tip of the iceberg with plenty of other games worth mentioning. Heck, I'm still finding hidden gems from the 90's era.

The 3 greats of the 90's
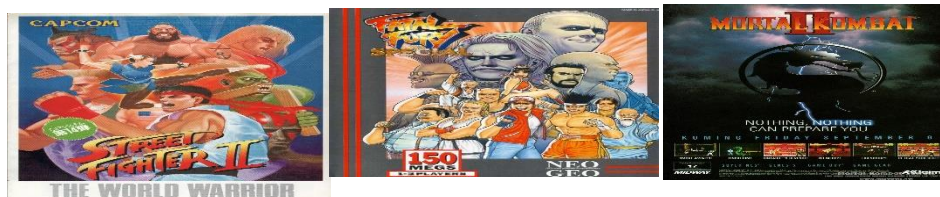
So much content got pushed out in such a short time and so much innovation squeezed into a niche genre. Back then, everyone was buying and playing fighting games. No wonder why older fighting game enthusiasts insist on the 90's being the golden age of fighting games. This perspective is hearsay to me since I wasn't alive to experience the golden age first hand but I understand why the 90's is seen that way. I accept this perspective because the number of good games that came out back then are still fun to play now, I would know I verified.

For those who don't know, fighting games often entail two players each picking a character from a wider cast of colorful characters used to simulate one-on-one combat with the goal of depleting the other player's health. In an easier explanation, two people punch, kick, throw, and energy blast one another until one of the opponents loses. Another media juggernaut for the decade was *Dragonball Z* which is a globally acclaimed manga/anime about a colorful

cast of characters who settle disputes by punching, kicking, grappling, and energy blasting each other until someone can't fight anymore. If the latter half of the previous sentence felt familiar then I hope I'm leading you down a train of thought. That thought being *Dragonball Z* is perfect for a fighting game, especially during the golden age. *Dragon Ball Z* has the setting, characters, and list of signature marketable attacks every fighting game needs. The colorful cast of weirdos are perfect for a fighting game roster, the characters already have their own signature attacks, and Dragonball Z was at the height of it's popularity. *Dragonball Z* just lends itself well to the fighting game format considering fist fights are how conflict is settled.

Honestly it's a crime that *Dragonball Z* never got any good fighting games in the 90's. The *Dragonball Z* fighting games of the era were beyond criminal in their mediocrity which I put in the nicest terms. My go to example for bad *Dragonball Z* games are the Super *Butoden* games for the *Super Nintendo*. There was a whole trilogy of these games. At first glance, the *Butoden*

games look fine, that is, until you start playing the game. The *Butoden* games have no sense of combo flow you just hit someone once, wait for the animation to be done, and hit again. The moment-to-moment gameplay is reduced to slow combat

and watching slow cutscenes take the place of real gameplay. Super *Butoden*'s greatest crime is trying to emulate watching Dragonball Z instead of letting the players replicate the action of the show through gameplay. Now I must be honest, the Super *Butoden* games did establish a few mechanics that would later be reused in other *Dragonball Z* fighting games such as stage transition triggered by knocking the opponent out the current stage, cutscene ultra-attacks that replicate key moments from the show and incorporates sustained flight into the games since people fly in *Dragonball Z*. All the pieces for a unique fighting game are present, just not used in the best ways. *Butoden* walked and fell down so *Budokai* could jog.

Now I have to bring up an attitude in the fighting game community that fighting games based on previously established intellectual properties are inferior for relying on brand recognition instead of having good gameplay. Licensed fighting games often substitute gameplay with depth for superficial flash, turning a game that should be give players thoughtful decisions into electric action figure bashing. Although common, not all licensed fighting games are shallow. These types of games are labelled under the colloquial term licensed game. Licensed games, as a term, was made by consumers to describe a video game made to capitalize on a pre-existing brand. The name refers to copyright owners giving the license to produce their property to another organization to get a foothold in another market. I see licensed games as an extension of franchising just with more outside hands involved.

To be clear, the fighting game community doesn't hate licensed fighting games in general, just licensed anime fighting games specifically. Capcom paid for Marvel licenses to make fighting games such as *X-men Children of the Atom*, *Marvel Super Heroes*, *X-men vs Street fighter*, and so on. Those games are beloved by the fighting game community and rightfully so, those games are awesome. The negative attitude is directed at the *Naruto Ninja Storm* series and

other games in the same vein for the rain drop amount of mechanical depth. However, those licensed games are more like hyper versions of *Street Fighter* with marvel coats of paint. Don't misunderstand me, *Marvel Super Heroes* plays pretty differently from *Super Street Fighter II Turbo* in terms of game speed and combo potential but those games definitely share the same mechanical DNA. Licensed anime fighting games don't often abide by the formula of standard fighting game + anime coat of paint = product, kind of model. In my head I like to keep with alliteration so from this point on I'm calling the licensed games franchise fighters. Franchise fighters have a different list of goals since franchise fighters are catering to fans of the franchise and not fans of fighting games. Franchise fighters must:

- Provide an experience not far off from the anime the game is based on. This means going beyond incorporating the marketable special moves into gameplay. The super special move has to be a shot for shot recreation of the exact moment the special move was done in the show/comic.
- Present an aesthetic that is similar to the anime the game is based on while being completely unique and lovingly crafted. The presentation must be eye-catching and appealing.
- The gameplay must be super simple for the assumed non-fighting game fans to enjoy. Flashy cutscenes often take priority over functional gameplay, typically.
- The gameplay must also be unique and tailored to the modes of combat featured in the show that is being represented.

The last bullet point is the most important to me. Crafting a fighting game experience unique to the franchise fighter is the most appealing element of a franchise fighter and *Dragonball Z* demands a unique gameplay style. A *Dragonball Z* game that plays like *X-men vs Street Fighter* is not a bad option but is a disservice to the latent potential a *Dragonball Z* game possesses.

I must speak the truth; franchise fighters are often shallow games that fall victim to quick deadlines or an adherence to keeping the game too simple for the assumed child audience. Far too often franchise fighters are weird clunky messes that lack the proper fine tuning normal fighting games typically have nor the deep thoughtful gameplay. I often find myself agreeing with the notion whenever 85% of the time I play a franchise fighter. Alas, I know that 15% of not bad games redeems franchise fighters as not only a viable source of entertainment but also a legitimate contender for fighting games. The game that defined what franchise fighters needed to be and could accomplish came from *Dragonball Z*. The game put out had the subtitle, *Budokai*, and showed the world what a good *Dragonball Z* game was. In spite of being licensed anime fighting games, the *Dragonball Z Budokai* series of games are massively influential to the fighting game space and provided a blueprint for the franchise fighter subgenre to work with. I'm getting ahead of myself, let me start someplace else.

I'm a tiny kid in the early 2000's so young that I transitioned from toddler to fully cognizant child. I had been playing video games since before I could remember and was keenly familiar with fighting game mechanics. I was raised on *Tekken 2*, you know, the fighting game that belongs to the series that pioneered 3D graphics and gameplay that I mentioned before which still gets new installments to this very day. Yeah *Tekken 2* was the first fighting game I ever played and I owe my love of fighting games to the whole series. Now that my fighting game afficionado cred has been solidified, I must establish my relationship with *Dragonball Z*.

Around the same era of the early 2000's, my older brother grandfathered me into *Dragonball Z* fandom when I was developing from a toddler to a child. What a special time in my life being a fan of things I didn't fully remember or understand at the time. I knew which characters were good guys and bad guys, who I liked and who I didn't like, and I knew conflict

was settled by fist fights that ended in energy blasts. In the back of my tiny kid brain was a thought, no, a demand for *Dragonball Z* to get a fighting game. When we went to a friend's house, I saw just that, a *Dragonball Z* fighting game on the PlayStation 2, and I said out loud how obvious it was for a game to finally get made. Before I talk about the game I must talk about the state of the fighting game market back then.

The 1990's were over and so was the fighting game golden age which receded into the fighting game silver age. Capcom oversaturated the market with 3 different *Street fighter* series of *Street Fighter II*, *Street Fighter Alpha*, and *Street Fighter III*. Not to mention the other fighting game properties Capcom created to milk the market *like Darkstalkers I and II*, *Cyberbots*, Star *Gladiator I* and *II*, *Rival Schools*, *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure Heritage of the future*, and the list goes on. SNK financially reeled back due to the shrinking arcade market forcing the company to downsize, almost killing the company. While Midway put Mortal Kombat on a brief hiatus to catch up with 3D technology. 3D fighting games held a strangle hold on the market during that time, or that is what the old guys nostalgic for the golden age believe want you to believe. I know from personal experience that fighting games never disappeared or got bad in the silver age. Even calling the era the silver age is a lie, all kinds of great games came out from the 2000's. I feel older fighting game fans think less of the early 2000's as bad because all the games they like playing disappeared. Back then I was none the wiser, all I knew was *Tekken* is cool and *Dragonball Z* finally got a game. Not until years later would I fully understand the significance of *Dragonball Z Budokai*.

Now *Dragonball Z Budokai* didn't just materialize out of thin air, the came was made by somebody. That somebody was Dimps, a new game development studio at the time. I have to recap the origin of Dimps. The studio was founded by Takashi Nishiyama, a veteran game designer. What is the relevance of such a man? Well, Nishiyama is the co-creator of Street Fighter I who also left Capcom to make the *Fatal Fury* series for SNK. When both game companies slowed down fighting game development, Nishiyama stepped up and created Dimps so he and other game developers still passionate about 2D fighting games could continue making the types of games they wanted. However, a caveat to starting up a new studio by yourself leaves the company funds on the short side. So, Dimps resorted to licensed game development to keep the lights on. One of licenses Dimps procured was for *Dragonball Z* and so begins the *Budokai* series.

Dragonball Z, despite being made by veteran 2D game developers, is a 3D fighting

game. The game is more akin to *Virtua Fighter* in controls with one button for punch, kick, and block, but *Budokai* adds another button for energy blast or the universal projectile as I call it. *Budokai* is just simple enough for the young child demographic to play without issue and incorporates *Dragonball Z* elements into gameplay like charging your ki meter to fuel signature attacks and transformations for increase damage and new attacks. Dimps even had the curtesy to

include an obscure technique in the show where some characters put energy into their hand for maximum damage. The attack is given to all playable characters and is un-blockable with the added benefit of invulnerability up to three hits when charging up the attack. The un-blockable attack either launches the opponent in to the air or knocks the opponent on to the ground depending on in-game circumstances. I only used the un-blockable to launch my brother in the air so I could do some juggle combos, must be the *Tekken* rubbing off on me. Although that strategy usually ended in me getting grabbed and losing momentum in the round. One day I figured something out by complete accident. When I charged the un-blockable attack, my brother tried hitting me 3times, and reflexively I held the block button and cancelled the charging sequence.

My neurons fired upon the revelation that I could cancel the charge attack animation. A whole new world of combo potential was unlocked. Charge cancelling even let me side step faster than the normal side-stepping mechanic. Never before had a franchise fighter incorporated such a sophisticated mechanic that elevated combat from the simple canned combos to infinite mix up potential. *Budokai* only has at least five full combos per character with some combos having charge attacks built into said combos. In the hands of a skilled player, *Budokai* one goes beyond the shallow shackles most franchise fighters are locked in. The charge attack mechanic is similar to another attack mechanic incorporated in *Street Fighter 4*. In fact, a design overlap exists between *Street Fighter 4* and the *Dragonball Z Budokai* series.

Before I talk about the return of Capcom's *Street Fighter,* I need to touch on a few presentation aspects in the *Budokai* games, which 3 numbered games exist. The *Budokai* games tried giving players the most authentic *Dragonball Z* experience by allowing player to mimic the events of the show. The single player story modes always let player experience the story with the

direct input of the player. The first *Budokai* has the best story mode with the lovingly crafted cutscenes, tone appropriate music, and full voice actor reprisals. The game is meant to offer the best *Dragonball Z* fan experience and a major factor in said experience is allowing player to relive show events through gameplay with the cutscene finishing moves. Cutscene finishing moves are attacks that initiate an event from the show that result in big damage which incentivizes players to use the attacks as much as possible. As new games were released, the cutscenes in the finishing moves got more elaborate and flashier. Now back to the fighting game timeline.

During the mid to late 2000's, Capcom wanted to reestablish dominance in the fighting game market but lacked the developers to make a game. Capcom hired Dimps to help make *Street Fighter 4* since Nishiyama and his teams were still familiar with the development process. Now I don't have any concrete evidence, but I believe some parts of the *Budokai* games got put into *Street Fighter 4*. My first example is *Street Fighter 4's* new focus attack system that allows a player to charge an attack that is un-blockable when fully charged that gives the person charging the attack up to 3 hits of invulnerability, albeit health still gets depleted. Another aspect of the focus attack is the ability to cancel the attack for either mobility reasons or combo potential. Again, I don't have any hard evidence but the link between *Dragonball Z* and *Street Fighter 4* is unmistakable. Another mechanic is the ultra-skill attack which a signature attacks every character has that does big damage. The ultra-skill attacks have elaborate anime cutscenes to convey the cool factor and power of the character performing the attack. To be clear, the cutscenes are performed in engine with the 3D character models and not substituted with hand drawn animation. Before *Street Fighter 4*, ultra-skills were called super moves and they were just

normal moves with extra damage, but now every *Street Fighter* game hence has big elaborate cutscene finishers in a similar manner to franchise fighters.

Now is the fighting game revival era where *Street Fighter* is back on top, SNK is back from the dead by making *King of Fighters*, and *Tekken* is still selling millions of copies. I feel all those games owe franchise fighter some gratitude. I say this because franchise fighters pushed the presentation a fighting game could have and experimented with mechanics that a normal fighting game is too scared to dabble in. Sure, franchise fighters aren't as deep as other fighting games but without licensed fighting game there are no story modes nor flashy presentation. In the modern day, a video game cannot rely on good gameplay alone. Me personally, I see where both camps are coming from. Normal fighting games are a time investment if a player wants to be good and franchise fighters only care about good presentation, but a middle ground exists. I have lived in both camps my whole life, I know what works and what doesn't for both types of fighting games. I especially know when one is influenced by the other. Franchise fighter push normal fighting games to look better and normal fighting games push franchise fighters to play better, a reciprocity exists across the market. I must say franchise fighter left a bigger impact on normal fighting games. The upcoming *Street Fighter 6* has the mechanical complexity wanted by hardcore fans while having a top-notch presentation, selectable easy mode, an involved character creator/story mode, and litany of minigames for more casual fans to enjoy. I don't think *Street Fighter 6* would have taken any of those design risks if *Dragon Ball Z Budokai* didn't take the risk first.