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Game Review
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Street Fighter II: The Original Warrior

A young male sees the letters "SF" together and thinks not of the Golden Gate Bridge or Ghirardelli Square but of a video game. Although SF abbreviates the great city of San Francisco to most, to the young male hanging out in an arcade, SF was an abbreviation not for the city or place but for a lifestyle. To that kid, SF stood for Street Fighter. In particular, that kid and all his friends at school were fascinated by SFII, the sequel to the original but less popular Street Fighter. SFII launched into arcades everywhere and became one of the most popular and influential games ever. Even after a decade of sequels and literally hundreds of clones, the classic game is still a favorite of the gaming community.

Before Street Fighter II's time, arcades were dominated by hybrid video games that featured both side-scrolling action and fighting. Such games included Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Arcade Game and Final Fight. Capcom and other game developers such as Data East and Konami had long been building games for the one-on-one fighting genre by stripping down the side-scrollers for their most satisfying elements: fighting and beating "bosses" who governed each level. The fighting genre's game-play still retained the side-scrolling genre's succession of levels and characters. However, per fighting game level, no obstacles lay beyond or before the boss, and no onscreen weapons or objects cluttered the action. The invention of the genre spawned Yie Ar Kung Fu, Karate Champ, and the original Street Fighter. However, due to their limited controls and the limits of video game hardware, the fighters featured game-play essentially like that of side-scrollers. Without the extra features and action in their side-

scrolling counterparts, fighting games were feable. It was not until SFII's release that the genre won a mass audience.

SFII was the brainchild of Yoshiki Okamoto, a legend among game designers. Now the head of the Research & Development division there, he has pushed the company to new heights with the additions of the Street Fighter franchise as well as the hugely popular Resident Evil franchise. Okamoto's video games roots, however, are remarkably much more humble. Dropping out of college only months before graduating, Okamoto was lured into the video game business as an artist and software designer for Konami, a Japanese software publisher responsible for such huge hits as Contra and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Indeed, he found good fortune in designing his own software hits like Time Pilot. However, his short-lived career at Konami ended in a clash with a Konami superior over philosophical and artistic differences. Okamoto's next stop was his destiny: Capcom.

In March 1991, Capcom debuted SFII as a continuation of the saga of the original Street Fighter, in which Ryu and Ken trained in the art of Shotokan Karate. Competing to be "strongest street fighter in the world," they eventually fought their way to victory. Ultimately, Ryu defeated the reigning champion, Sagat, and left a permanent scar in his chest with his own mystical Dragon Punch. SFII represents the next chapter in Ryu's quest to perfect his martial art. The game introduces a new tournament which showcases seven other competitors and four champions to overcome. Each competitor has his or her driving force to compete, ranging from avenging a friend's death to winning freedom from slavery. At the heart of this tournament is its host, M. Bison, the ultimate fighter with mystic skills to rival any of the main characters. At his side are Balrog, Vega and Sagat, each of whom adds a layer of mystery and difficulty to the

game. However, in the original version of SFII, Capcom neither revealed those characters' origins nor allowed allowed players to use them.

Street Fighter I - Ken, left, battles Ryu
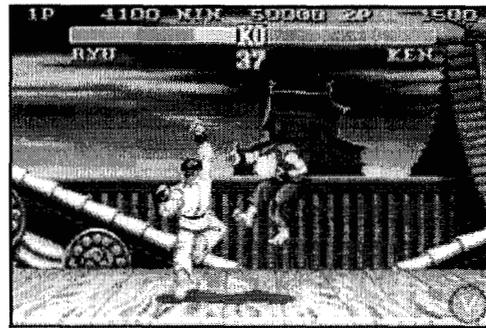
Street Fighter II - clearly better textured and drawn as obvious from the backgrounds, objects, shadow and movement

However, Capcom did allow human players to choose from one of eight fighters: Ryu, Ken, Guile, Blanka, E. Honda, Chun Li, Zangief and Dhalsim, all with unique fighting styles and diverse geographic backgrounds. As was typical of fighting games, all matches were individual, pitting player against computer or player against player. Each character in the game had over 30 moves in addition to a range of special moves executed through special combinations and keystrokes. It was this variety of moves as well as the grace with which players could pull off those moves that made SFII a watershed game. Up to its release, SFII's predecessors all suffered from choppy game-play and imprecise controls. In particular, players could manipulate the original Street Fighter using only a joystick and two buttons, one for punching and one for kicking. Only as the game started accumulating popularity did designers experiment with a new, six-button layout, three for varying strengths of punches and three for varying strengths of kicks. In spite of this innovation, a slower processor and limited memory hindered the game, and players could only execute powerful, "special" moves sporadically.

Imagine the frustration of a player backed into a wall in anticipation of unleashing a towering fireball to catch and defeat his opponent only to realize that the CPU just failed to read the elaborate joystick motion. Instead of a fireball, a mild punch sputters out. It barely grazes his opponent, who in turn takes advantage of his vulnerability to end his life. Game over, insert another quarter (or two or three) to continue. What was the point of repeating play if one could not even repeat a move? To the relief of fans, Capcom addressed this problem when they returned to the 16-bit CPS arcade board recently developed for Final Fight. The increased memory capacity allowed for larger sprites, fluid animation and most important for serious gamers, fluid controls. The new control board could discern the difference between holding a joystick back two seconds and holding it three seconds. Diagonal motions too became a factor, allowing players to jump forward and not just straight up. Once players discovered a special move, they could master it with practice rather than attempt to replicate it in vain. With such ability, therefore, a player could come to master characters and overcome other players.

For the master player, the cycles of mastery were unending, and SFII provided endless ways to validate his domination. Therefore, the game's replay value was practically infinite. After beating the game once, the player had to prove himself again … and again. Beating the game after a few tries reduced to beating the game in one try. Even then, matches extended too long. Therefore, the player would have to conquer each match in two rounds, and in turn, each round in less than a minute. As a side note, players racked up as many points as they could in each victory. Players strove for "perfect" victories to double or even triple their average point count. Further, upon realizing one character's potential, a player dabbled with other characters until he mastered them, too. What a great player cared about was not the final result or product

but the process of dispatching of eleven characters, one by one, move by move. Local arcades and schoolmates served as the perfect playground and playmates, respectively. For the sake of the game's story depth, though, repeated play of the game offered little. Each character's unique ending was only of peripheral interest.

Although players usually attained parity against each other, an experienced player defeated the computer in less than half an hour. The game's artificial intelligence offered temporary challenge. In spite of an advanced technology, characters still all had their own patterns of movement and glaring vulnerabilities, namely Sagat's Tiger Uppercut. Striking Sagat after he missed such a move easily depleted half of his life. Therefore, defeating him only required luring him into two Tiger Uppercuts and responding each time with a special move of one's own. That was the extent of SFII's AI, feared at first for its unparalleled speed and complexity but quickly reigned in.

Indeed, any given player could win with any given character. In a similar vein, the game achieves equilibrium on many fronts. All characters more or less have the same number of moves, all characters have some sort of throw, all characters have particularly strong special moves, and all characters have weaknesses to offset strengths. When Ryu or Ken launch a fireball, their stance leaves them vulnerable for at least a full second, allowing a reflexive player to pounce. As far as balancing the characters' abilities, however, the game falls short. Given the chance, most players gravitated toward Ryu/Ken, Guile or Dhalsim. Gaming publications and websites alike have attested to the superior strength of those characters and especially, to the skill of those who master the characters. Although such mastery is neither rare nor difficult, motivation to achieve it flooded arcades and attracted gamers away from the stoic, impersonal personal computer platform.

Just before the runaway success of PC games like Myst, SimCity sequels and a generation of first-person shooters, SFII represented the ultimate departure from personal computers and computer game conventions like language parsers or three-dimensional graphics. SFII's task of a player was to force him to confront another player in a confined environment. The simplicity of this mission allowed the user to focus his efforts uniquely on the complexity of mastering a character and his or her moves. Although bound to eight characters and eleven levels, players could, nevertheless, experiment with thousands of combinations of moves and hundreds of different individual match-ups. Each match was unique in that a human player could adapt to anyone else's fighting style. Thus, in a way similar to real fighting tournaments, competitors would have to adjust styles or routines to surprise their foes.

At its heart, Street Fighter II is just about one player who wants to beat another. The game succeeded not because it was inventing a new kind of game but because it finally fulfilled competitive gamers' desire to fight and win onscreen. In addition, the inclusion of all the distinct characters and moves produced one of the most accessible arcade games of all time. In total, Street Fighter and SFII produced nineteen sequels and literally hundreds of spin-offs and generated hundreds of millions of dollars for Capcom, on the order of Super Mario Bros. 3's success. At the time, SMB3 was the most popular game ever. In fact, the success of SFII translated effortlessly from the local arcade to the home. Its release for the Super Nintendo pushed that console to the top of the 16-bit heap. Released in late 1990, the SNES had sold only about five million units in its first year, and although it was predicted to sell only ten million in its second year, SFII's home launch in mid-1992 pushed its sales to over fifteen million for the year. By the end of 1992, the SNES was the king of 16-bit consoles with over

two-thirds of the market. To attribute that success all to SFII would overstate its impact, but no doubt, this fighting game changed the way people played and paid for video games.

NOTES:

http://www.gamerstoday.com/world_tours/tour12a.html - Provided information about Yoshiki Okamoto and his background

http://www.videogames.com/features/universal/sfhistory - Provided some technical information as well as some info about the original Street Fighter video game

Other facts and figures were culled from various sites or articles I read at some point