

Fall 12-2017

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Recommended Citation

Andrew Hon. "Fighting Game Difficulty" *ART 108: Introduction to Games Studies* (2017).

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Art 108
8 December, 2017

Fighting Game Difficulty

Lowering difficulty in games has become a recent trend amongst gaming companies. The goal of this tactic is to provide a more welcoming platform for players that are new to the franchise. However, this trend has been met with criticism amongst more experienced veterans of their respective games. This essay will touch upon different games within the fighting game genre that have lowered their overall difficulty, and the positive/negative effects of it.

Fighting games have always been a small niche in the competitive gaming world. The community that played these games remained this way for much of the early days of fighting games. This might have been because these games were more arcade oriented. Todd Harper's book, *The Culture of Digital Fighting Games: Performance and Practice*, delves deep into his experiences with fighting games from the early 2000's to the present. For many years fighting games dominated the arcade scene, but did not keep up with other genres as console gaming became more popular. Harper shares a similar story to that of other old school fighting game players. Before Youtube and other means of sharing information were widely used, fighting game players had very few options to help them learn the game (2). Arcade cabinets usually had very generalized instructions, if any. Players were limited to practice depending on the quarters they were willing to spend. People who shared the same interest in the genre were few and far between, and thus sharing advice and information was almost non-existent. Eventually these games were ported over to consoles, with "Street Fighter 2" being Super Nintendo's highest

selling game (Su 361). Console's helped the once exclusive arcade players practice and play others more frequently, but still only connected local players together. The biggest breakthrough was through the internet. With the internet, people were able to post guides and tutorials, and exchange information through forums.

Having an outlet to share information was very important for the growth of the fighting game community. Mastering the controls and mechanics of the games was a tremendous hurdle few put the effort to overcome. Most fighting games share the same mechanics but with minor differences. Controls generally use both the buttons and directional keys to input an attack. Often the directional keys would need to be chained to create "motions". An example would be inputting forward-down-diagonal for a z-like input, or a down-diagonal-forward for a quarter circle motion. Blocking can be done with directional inputs or buttons. Movement options could also rely on button presses, such as with dashing and jumping. Along with controls, timing played a crucial role in chaining moves together. Timing can vary greatly in strictness, rewarding players who had the faster reaction times. Controls and timing varied game by game, and can often be used to differentiate series. With more recent titles, some of these controls have been changed to easier inputs. Along with more forgiving timing, the challenge more commonly seen in older fighting games began to phase out.

After the release of "Street Fighter 4" (SF4), the fighting game scene began to gain traction. As the game underwent more changes and new versions, the community grew with it. Fighting games began to solidify its spot in the competitive gaming world, and continued to break record popularity that would only have been dreamed of a decade earlier. Norman Su, author of *Street Fighter IV: Braggadocio Off and On-line*, explains in his paper the rise of the

competitive scene of SF4. After a long gap between releases, SF4 sought to include itself within competitive gaming. With core similarities to the older games, as well as online play, the game was allowed to expand the once very small fighting game fan base (Su 364). Tournament play pins some of the best players against each other, creating an entertaining viewing experience. With this rapid growth, Capcom wanted fighting games to be a more in line with traditional ESports. “Street Fighter 5” (SFV) is Capcom’s most recent title in the Street Fighter franchise. In order to attract the esports crowd, the game was simplified to be more accessible to new players. The controls for the game remained the same, but combo timing became much more lenient. The smallest gap to link two moves together was 3 frames, as opposed to the 1 frame in its predecessor. The combo system was also reduced. Players were limited in what moves could connect to each other, and combos were short. Fighting games were easier to get into than ever, and gained more publicity than ever imagined, but did not have the success this change was supposed to bring.

“Street Fighter 5” sold fewer copies than expected, with Street Fighter still unable to meet its goal of 2 million sold by the first year. As of now, Capcom has listed its sales at 1.9 million, compared to “SF4’s 3.4 (excluding the 3 updated re-releases). Much like ESports, the spectator aspect of fighting games is a major part of the experience. Harper talks about “Normative play”, which is defined as how a game should be played in the eyes of others (6). SFV kept all the same mind game and decision making aspects present in previous games. When watching a match unfold, spectators might question the player’s decisions, and conclude that what they would’ve done instead was the right choice. This immersion isn’t as present in SFV, with the skill gap between players being forcibly reduced.

Traditionally what separated the professional players playing the game and the viewers watching was the execution barrier. Professionals who've dedicated large amounts of time training could perform more optimized, higher damaging combos. They would also have faster reaction times, countering their opponents with seemingly superhuman speed. This gave spectators and players something to strive for, and encouraged practice so that one day they may be able to reach the level of their favorites players. A study done by Pope et al, examined the correlation between video game difficulty and attention. Though focused mainly on subjects with attention deficit disorder, it highlights the importance of challenging game mechanics. The study involved a simple video game. The difficulty would increase when the subject's attention would decrease, forcing the player to be more attentive in order to complete the objective (Pope 6).

When a person lands a hit on their opponent in a fighting game, the player must be extra attentive. The player has to focus in order to perform the right combo and not mess up, or risk being countered. SFV's combo system removed this aspect of the game. In order to bridge the gap between players of different skill levels, the best combos were easy to perform. Less variety in combos meant that players often played the same way, removing the individuality that differentiated players. With the execution barrier gone, the only difference in player skill was mind games and technical game knowledge. These qualities aren't as easy to spot from a spectator's standpoint, making matches seem repetitive. Professional players with distinctive play styles were harder to differentiate from everyone else. Due to this, general interest for the game declined.

Despite the negative reception, Capcom continued its trend with the release of "Marvel vs. Capcom: Infinite" (MVCI). The series is popular for its long (sometimes infinite) and

creative combo system and fast-paced gameplay. This newest installment brought another layer of creativity with infinity gems, which gave the players team of characters special properties. Though the combo system is more creative and less restrictive than it ever was before, combos are not as hard to perform. MVCI has taken steps to change these traditional controls. The forward-down-diagonal z like motion, commonly known as the “shoryuken” motion, was replaced with a double down input. An auto combo system has also been implemented. By pressing one button, a player is able to perform a simple combo. However this system is scaled to do much less damage than a proper combo, and is there as a resource for beginner players who are still learning. This mechanic is also seen in King of Fighters 14, and possible other titles as well.

With all games, once a tried and true winning strategy is found, many players will try to adopt it. This can be seen with combos in fighting games; players will utilize the best combos they can find. Though this happened a lot in the previous game, players often needed to have excellent execution to perform the combos. This was no longer the case for MVCI. Now that the game has been made more accessible, players could more easily adapt strong team compositions and strategies. Much like Marvel vs Capcom 3, players congregated towards using the same set of characters and combinations. At such an early stage in the game’s lifecycle, this should not be happening. Especially with the amount of creativity allowed in the game itself. However the game is constantly changing. Like with SFV, changes to the game could help alleviate its problems. It is possible that Capcom will address some of the issues with the arcade edition of SFV, which revamped the combo system to be less restrictive.

Since its return to the scene in 2013, Super Smash Bros Melee has gained in popularity rivaling that of Street Fighter. Despite being an old game, the competitive scene remains strong. The game itself is notoriously difficult, as players have had a long time to develop techniques that are hard to execute. Unlike traditional fighters, the goal of the game is to knock someone off a platform. The higher the damage received, the more likely they will fall (or be launched off). This makes the game much more movement oriented, with players having to utilize every part of the screen to find an advantage.

With Super Smash Bros 4 (SSB4), many of the technical aspects of melee have disappeared (Though most of these aspects were not meant to be a part of the game to begin with). Since its debut in Evolution, the largest fighting game tournament in the world, SSB4 has surpassed melee in terms of entrants and viewer count, despite being a much simpler game. I believe this is because SSB4 does not aim to mimic other games to gain similar success. Masahiro Sakurai, the creator of the series, has emphasized in multiple interviews about his intent to not make the game a traditional fighter. The game allows anyone to pick it up and have fun, though it does keep some competitive aspects to it. Ryu, one of the main characters from the Street Fighter series, was introduced as a character to the game. He retained his traditional move list and inputs, but also included regular SSB4 controls to execute the same moves. By continuing to stay true to the series, fans of the game will continue to support it. Whereas with Street Fighter, abandoning the system veteran players are fond of in exchange for new players have caused many to dislike the game.

Difficulty in fighting games does not define whether a game is good or not. It depends mostly on what the consumer is looking for in their game. The competitive aspect is something

that should not be ignored, players and viewers alike. Capcom wanted players to stand a chance against some of the best in the world, but neglected the viewer experience by reducing the skill gap. Games that remain relatively the same, such as Tekken, SSB4, InJustice, etc have become more successful by continuing to provide an experience that players have already come to enjoy.

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