

The Streetfighter Lady: Invisibility and Gender Role-Play in Game Composition

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ABSTRACT

The dimension of music is too often an oversight in general game studies, while gender politics are not sufficiently addressed in the currently developing study of game music. In addition, although there are exceptions within academic research (cf. Collins 2016), female game composers are too often rendered invisible within popular and populist game archaeological practices. The presentation addresses an example of gender role-play within theme-based composition practices.

The international success of Japanese game design provides an example of gendered identification in game play and production, as game composers respond to themed music composition briefs that assume, and often reproduce, stereotypes as shorthand for game character identities. The focal point for this multi-faceted discussion is Yoko Shimomura, the female composer who produced the iconic original soundtrack for 1991 arcade version of the internationally popular and seminal fighting game *Streetfighter II: The World Warrior* (SF2) for the Capcom game development company. The stems for this version were used for subsequent versions of the game, adapted to a range of platforms, and leaving its legacy in various forms of popular electronic music. And so, for this paper, we dub Yoko Shimomura as ‘The Streetfighter Lady’.

Although we are currently hearing more now about female composers in the Japanese game world, there nevertheless still seems to be insufficient appreciation for the original composition work of female composers of arcade games. There seems to be an assumption amongst mainstream Western gaming discourse, that game producers, developers and composers of male-coded games are, indeed, male. Also, the composition work for arcade games were mainly ported to home computers by male music coders, so video game players would end up knowing the cover artist rather than the original composer. This seems also to be the case with Yoko Shimomura, who as the SF2 composer seems to have generally been misrecognised as male by non-Japanese players and music producers. Such type of misgendering may partially due to Western unfamiliarity with Japanese names, as well as their abstract pseudonyms (Yoko Shimamura used pseudonyms in the credits at the end of games, such as: ‘Pii♪’).

Yoko Shimomura joined the game industry since graduating from Osaka College of Music in 1988. Capcom released SF2 in 1991, after starting development during the late 80s. In an interview, she observes that “(t)here were a lot of people [on the team] who were outside the norm. I might have been the only one who wasn't” (Leone, 2014). However, she also notes that:

“(w)hen I joined Capcom originally, ... both of the top composers were women then. I heard them at the time, and they were talented and made great music. I felt that since the head staff were women, it was easier for other women to join the department”.

Yoko Shimomura remembers that, initially, composing music for SF2 was not her first choice:

“I ended up working on Street Fighter 2 by chance, rather than being excited to do it. I was free and had to choose between a few projects, and just went with SF2. It was incredibly lucky when I think about it now” (Dwyer, 2014).

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SF2 was released in 1991 as a fighting game for game arcades, which were assumed to be male-dominated public spaces (Kocurek, 2015) that cater to what Skolnik and Conway (2017) refer to as “Bachelor Culture”. Despite this, in the 2017 monograph *Ready Player 2*, Shira Chess shows that there are too many chauvinistic assumptions in the gaming industry, about what types of games “women” (the presumed secondary “ready player 2”), would like to play, while Royse et al (2007) show that women participated in a wide variety of digital games. Much of the music composition in SF2 corresponds to this gender-coded cultural space of the game arcade. For example, Shimomura drew on masculinist Hollywood compositions, such as the 1986 Hollywood action movie *Top Gun* for the *Streetfighter* character theme tune of Ken, a blonde American black-belt Marshall Arts fighting character.

In addition to Ken, SF2 introduced seven other fighting characters, each different and with their own fighting moves, scenery, and theme music. Yoko Shimomura produced musical themes for each of the fighting characters, each signifying a specific characteristic. Guile, a blond flat-topped army boxing character in a green army-inspired outfit, is accompanied by a particularly popular melodic theme.. This track was heavily influenced by album track “Travellers” (1984) by the Japanese Jazz-fusion band T-Square (The Square). It became subject of an Internet meme with fans pasting it into all manner of unrelated videos as it seems to go with anything. Guile’s theme also appeared on the rap recording of Ras Kass feat. Killah Priest & Kurupt (2017) “Street Fighter”.

The game includes one female fighter character, the Chinese Chung-Li, who Yoko Shimomura preferred to play. The ‘Chinese-styled’ music theme for this character is “light” compared with Guile’s theme, or Ken’s racey *Top Gun* inspired theme, assuming an orientalist femininity. This character has such strong legs and powerful moves (curbed in later versions of the game) that she was certain to win, and so a popular fighter selection with players of any gender.

The off-key rhythmic music theme for the slightly monstrous fighting character Blanka is cited as a favourite with some electronic music producers (Neil 2014). Its primitivist repetitive rhythm was inspired by Shimomura’s regular train trip, and memorably mixes the major of the melody with the minor keys of the rhythm section. Shimomura reminisces in an interview with Dwyer (2014):

“That strange, broken feeling is what made the song for me. People said the music was wrong at the time, but if so many people tell me they love it now, then I don’t think it’s wrong. I’m finally able to believe that now”.

It is exactly this “broken” quality that appeals to electronic music producers whose work is associated Black Atlantic musical forms, such as hip-hop in the US (Neil 2014) and other break beat-related genres.

Being victorious in shooting and fighting games at the arcade is a measure of competitive macho posture. For example, the friends of the winner get to stay on as the competition continues, while there is also the cult of leaving your mark in high score table like a graffiti tag, to prove the player’s superiority. Such attitudes can be illustrated in competitive masculinist music scenes that are interwoven with this type of game culture. For example, Gallagher (2017) highlights close links between fighting game culture the grime music scene, as an alignment between video game play and electronic music production can be found in the use of similar computer technologies for gaming and composition: “(v)iewed as a configurative practice, gameplay betrays striking affinities with grime, affinities highlighted by stories of producers cutting their compositional teeth on games or gaming hardware”. The characteristic competitiveness of fighting game participation can be illustrated in the lyrical battle discourse of Dizzee Rascal’s “Street Fighter Freestyle” (2004), and the rapid name-checking of the fighting characters in *Street Fighter 4* by D Double E in “Street Fighter Riddim” (2015)”. In relation to links between game culture and the grime scene, Gallagher further notes:

“That the two scenes are compatible is neither particularly shocking nor necessarily flattering: both thrive on macho taunts and fierce competition, and if fighting game culture still has issues with inclusivity and abuse, grime is no less prone than dancehall or hip-hop to homophobia and misogyny”

The above discussion of a selection of aspects related to Shimomura's 1991 OST of SF2, not only identifies the issue of invisibility, but also shows how musical influences run via SF2 from Western macho film music to macho electronic music scenes. In this, we argue that in composing the music of a game for the masculinist space of the game arcade, the female composer effectively operates with a "double consciousness"; this term is adapted from Gilroy (1993), in his analysis of what it means to be black in a white-dominated post-colonial society. In this context, a form of transvestivism occurs in the subjectivity of female composer, a concept influenced by Mulvey's (1981) assessment of how a female audience interacts with cinema produced from the perspective of the male gaze, whereby a type of gender misidentification occurs with the male protagonist. In turn, we have found in our case study of Yoko Shimomura's composition of the music and character stems of SF2, that she effectively contributed to the (re)production of an imagined hegemonic hyper-masculinity. Such hidden gender role-play may well have enhanced the assumption that an invisible game composer is male, even though this is not necessarily the case. The gender misrecognition projected onto a female game composer is further exacerbated when their music compositions for arcade games are transposed for home computers mainly by male coders, who are given credit and are remembered as the originators of these compositions.

In conclusion, although invisibility is also an issue for male composers, combined with the above two issues of misgendering and transvestivism, such opaqueness enhances the excription of female game composers from game archaeologies. A historical revision of game music composition is therefore recommended.

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