

“One-on-One: The Shared Arena of Hip-hop Culture and Esports Fighting Games”

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[Introduction: Round One – Fight!](#)

Fighting games as a video game genre saw extreme popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, and this was in no small part due to the market; arcades in the United States were easily accessible to certain communities – urban communities, especially Black and Latinx communities.¹ The proposed reason for arcade fighting games finding such inroads with these demographics had much to do with the aforementioned accessibility; arcades allowed players to freely come and go, only requiring a few quarters to play. This is contrasted with home console and eventually online PC games, which often commanded high prices and an internet connection, and provided stern barriers to entry.² Incidentally, such gaming scenes were dominated primarily by White American and Asian American players. Due to black communities having such an interest in arcade fighting games, the cultures of both hip-hop and the burgeoning Fighting Game Community (FGC) started to affect each other; hip-hop culture specifically began finding strong legs in the development and presentation of later fighting games, and eventually the esports competition scene et al. Over the course of the development of the esports scene, famous rappers would find themselves both in – literally - and endorsing modern esports games, drastically increasing the mass appeal of these games. In this paper, I will discuss the how certain hip-hop culture trends has influenced the development of esports competition and culture,

¹ Xavier Johnson, “There’s a racial gap in esports. Let’s talk about it.”, Medium, June 19th, 2019, <https://medium.com/@XavierJohnson707/theres-a-racial-gap-in-esports-let-s-talk-about-it-8e8bec1114c7>.

² Ibid.

particularly the FGC, primarily citing popular fighting franchise like *Street Fighter* as an illustrative example.

Part 1: History of the Fighting Game Community and the Drift Towards Hip-Hop

To talk about the culture of fighting games, we must first define it. The FGC is an inherently competitive scene due to the nature of the games that players engage in. These games, which saw players engaged in one-on-one combat with a character of their selection, encouraged combatants to explore the different combos and special abilities each character specialized in;³ this added an element of skill to the activity, where players could practice the game (usually a specific character) and show off their skill to both other competitors and spectators alike. As previously mentioned, Black and Latinx communities often were the primary participators in these arcade fighting games (arcade games et al), and naturally brought with them their culture.⁴ While the games themselves did not always reflect these cultures, how people engaged with the games was reflective of their cultures; as Black players took on these competitive fighting games with each other, elements of hip hop culture started to seep through. In 1996, player Tom “inkblot” Cannon - a black man - began a forty-person tournament in Sunnyvale, California which consisted of the arcade games *Street Fighter II Turbo* (1992) and *Street Fighter Alpha 2* (1996). The intent was to “settle” who was the top player in the Bay Area, though that did not end up happening and eventually this “Battle of the Bay” turned into the annual Evolution

³ A ‘combo’ in the context of a fighting game is the act of the player stringing together inputs to create a chain of attacks that inflict significant damage on the opponent. These combos can be organic – where the player’s creativity is used in coming up with the combo, or scripted – where the programmers designed the character with certain input combinations in mind.

⁴ Mitch Bowman, “Why the Fighting Game Community is color blind”, Polygon, February 6th, 2014, <https://www.polygon.com/features/2014/2/6/5361004/fighting-game-diversity>

Champion Series, or Evo that we have today.⁵ Compare these collective gatherings in a fun, competitive setting to the MCing and DJing parties that would be frequent occurrences in the 1980s and 90s.

Compound these further with aspects such as players coining names for themselves similarly to hip-hop MCs and DJs taking pseudonyms and having these names become their public and professional identity.⁶ Perhaps entirely independently of the shared elements of both communities, the burgeoning FGC developed an inclusive attitude regarding the participants; it was competitive, but the point was to find the best player. To that end, anyone was welcome to play as there were no entry requirements, as was typically the case with league-oriented competitive games.⁷ FGC competitions hinged on players developing their techniques and skills and demonstrating them in front of the spectators. Furthermore, much like the competitive hip-hop battles where DJs brought their own turntables, speakers, and records to mix for the crowds against their DJing opponents, the FGC community developed their own analog to this aspect.⁸ When FGC tournaments shifted away from arcade cabinets towards consoles, they were “BYOC”, or “Bring Your Own Console” – competitors could bring their preferred gaming console, either the PlayStation 3 or the Xbox 360, as well as their controller of choice.⁹ Like DJ battles, equipment became an important factor in determining who was the best ‘street fighter’. These tournaments started to become so popular that the number of competitors forced

⁵ Brian Crecente, “Fighting to Live: The History of the Longest Lived Fighting Game Tournament in the World.” Kotaku, October 6th, 2008, <https://kotaku.com/fighting-to-play-the-history-of-the-longest-lived-figh-5054856>

⁶ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 1994), page 56.

⁷ Bowman, “Color Blind.”

⁸ Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip Hop DJ* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012), pages 44-49.

⁹ Stephen Kleckner, “Spotlight on the Evolution 2K4 Fighting Game Tournament.” GameSpot, August 18th, 2004, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/spotlight-on-the-evolution-2k4-fighting-game-tournament/1100-6103845/>.

competition organizers to adjust the setup of the events, such as introducing rules such as double elimination.¹⁰ The feedback loop of increasing competitor participation naturally bolstered to the reputation of the event. Suddenly, Evo grew from forty annual participants to over seven hundred, with near equal numbers of spectators.

Now, just because many of the competitors and spectators of the FGC were black does not necessarily mean that aspects of hip-hop culture were natural accoutrements to the scene. However, arguments can be made about hip-hop culture being an intrinsic part of the black community,¹¹ and thus it was inevitable that the dominate population of the FGC would bring their cultural practices with them and evolve them along with the new community they were creating. Though the genesis and development of these scenes were a decade apart, the commonality between the two is the black community and the African traditions that had been morphed into new trends in the United States. We must keep in mind that there are historical trends of blackness in the United States being perceived as “cool” (Black Cool) by the white majority, and the FGC is no different.¹² When esports gained traction, many different people naturally started to take interest, including notable hip-hop artists like Drake, XXXTentacion, and Travis Scott.¹³ Indeed, on the FGC side of the tracks, we got an entire fighting game based around hip-hop culture: *Def Jam: Fight for NY* (2004) and features many then-Def Jam rappers such as Snoop Dog, Ice-T, and Ludacris – as playable characters! As ridiculous as the concept

¹⁰ Crecente, “Fighting to Live”.

¹¹ Rose, *Black Noise*, whole book.

¹² Rebecca Walker, *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness* (California, Soft Skull Press, 2012), whole book.

¹³ Adam Fitch, “Hip-hop and esports: a match made in heaven.” *Esports Insider*, February 13th, 2019, <https://esportsinsider.com/2019/02/esports-hip-hop-intersection/>

may sound, the game was extremely well received, including winning the Game Critics Award for Best Fighting Game 2004.¹⁴

Part Two: So, Where Are Now?

These days, the fighting game market is a world-wide phenomenon; millions of copies of popular fighting game series' – *Super Smash Bros.*¹⁵, *Tekken*¹⁶, *Street Fighter*¹⁷ - are sold with each release. These games on modern consoles are capable of online multiplayer, thus connecting millions of those players to millions more, right from their own homes. These games featured gameplay modes designed around tournament-style competitive play; bracket tourneys and elimination-based challenge modes, all of which inspired by the Fighting Game Community. Despite the tens of millions of sales for many of these popular series' (*Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (2018) is the highest-selling fighting game of all time) and being played by people across the planet, the FGC is a rather small portion of the broader fighting game market.¹⁸

Where we once had games featuring rappers as characters, we now have rappers playing the games and being contributing members of the FGC. In 2016, rapper Lupe Fiasco fought and notoriously beat famous *Street Fighter* player Daigo “Daigo” Umehara in an exhibition match for Mad Catz V Cup¹⁹; in 2021, Megan Thee Stallion did a livestream of her playing *Mortal*

¹⁴ Game Critics' Awards “2004 Winners,” accessed April 25, 2022, <http://www.gamecriticsawards.com/2004winners.html>.

¹⁵ “Top Selling Title Sales Units”, Nintendo, December 31st, 2021, <https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/en/finance/software/index.html>.

¹⁶ “BANDAI NAMCO Group Fact Book 2021”, Bandai Namco, March 31st, 2021, https://www.bandainamco.co.jp/cgi-bin/releases/index.cgi/file/view/10492?entry_id=7280.

¹⁷ “Game Series Sales”, Capcom, December 31st, 2021, <https://www.capcom.co.jp/ir/english/business/salesdata.html>.

¹⁸ Bryan Dawson, “Evo 2019 Entrant Numbers”, Twin Galaxies, July 15th, 2019, https://www.twingalaxies.com/feed_details.php/2372/evo-2018-registration-numbers/15.

¹⁹ Team Spooky, “Street Fighter 5: Lupe Fiasco vs Daigo Umehara Exhibition - Mad Catz V Cup”, February 16th, 2016, exhibition match YouTube video, 29:07, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-VHLq5NoE_0.

Kombat 11 (2019) as part of a sponsorship with Warner Bros. Games.²⁰ Both of these instances of rapper participation brought in over a million viewers between them, which is a salient statement about the visibility of not only these events, but also of the rappers and their collaborations with the FGC. These types of crossovers happen frequently in the modern times, with rappers making references to the Fighting Game Community in their music and careers, and with the games themselves featuring music by hip-hop artists.

The ways in which rappers reference the FGC take a few different approaches. Some will make direct references to specific games in their raps; for example, Danny Brown namedrops *Mortal Kombat* character Kano in the lyric “take heat like Kano”²¹ – a reference to the character’s infamous “Fatality” move where he rips out the opponent’s heart to finish them off. Other artists will make references in their album art; Lupe Fiasco’s album art for *Drogas Light* features the kanji “hikari”, which is Japanese for “light”. This kanji is derived from the kanji “ten”, which means “sky” or “heaven”, and is the symbol for the character Akuma from the *Street Fighter* series. A thematic connection can be seen here.²² Particularly fitting considering that a year prior, Fiasco defeated one of the world’s greatest *Street Fighter* players.

Other rappers still take other approaches. Megan Thee Stallion, in her sponsorship/collaboration with Warner Bros. Games in November of 2020, created a cosplay of *Mortal Kombat 11* character Mileena to promote the expansion to the game which featured the

²⁰ Megan Thee Stallion, “Mileena Thee Stallion x *Mortal Kombat 11: Ultimate* – Livestream”, March 2nd, 2021, YouTube livestream upload, 36:29, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=locmC5MzRv4>.

²¹ Busdriver, *Ego Death*, Big Dada, September 9th, 2014.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/3XNdcusfibvkvXPIQWt2tp?si=19a493887569401d>.

²² Lupe Fiasco has made references to Japanese culture in the past. He is the vocalist of an indie rock band called Japanese Cartoon (though their music is decidedly not Japanese); additionally, the title of his 2015 album *Tetsuo & Youth* is a reference to the main antagonist of the famous Japanese manga and anime film *Akira*. Again, the music of the album is decidedly not Japanese.

return of the character to the series. The cosplay was especially notable to fans of both fighting games and Megan because the previous year for Halloween, the rapper dressed as Mileena as a fun thing on her own²³. That dress-up led to the official partnering with *Mortal Kombat 11* on a more elaborate cosplay to promote game a year later.²⁴

But that is not the only ways hip-hop culture has come so ingrained in the FGC and the fighting game market as whole. Rappers through out the years have contributed their talents directly to fighting games. We had previously discussed the game *Def Jam: Fight for NY* which features several rappers both in game and as part of the soundtrack. Beyond that, the *Street Fighter* series in its then-growing popularity produced a live-action movie, *Street Fighter* (1994), in 1994. The soundtrack to this film was written and produced by prominent hip-hop artists and rappers including Nas, Ice-Cube, and MC Hammer.²⁵ This album was salient in the nascent FGC because it was a major film soundtrack that consisted nearly entirely of hip-hop music.²⁶ This was huge for increasing visibility for both the *Street Fighter* franchise and the public's association of hip-hop music and culture with fighting games.²⁷ Jumping ahead to modern times in *Street Fighter*'s history, the latest entry in the series features music by rapper Cal Combs and producer Daniel Lindholm. The song was produced in the style of Eminem (much to Capcom's

²³ Jordyn Woods, "Choose your fighter", Instagram, October 31st, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B4Rl87xlfON/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=410324fc-74c5-42f3-bc0c-103e9d83c016.

²⁴ Stacey Henley, "Megan Thee Stallion joins 'Mortal Kombat' ad campaign as Mileena", NME, November 5th, 2020, https://www.nme.com/en_asia/news/gaming-news/megan-thee-stallion-mortal-kombat-advert-2810105.

²⁵ Various, *Street Fighter – Soundtrack*, Priority, December 6th, 1994. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRE6fZyUIJeRX_R4KtmpJzHq-CBQppypH.

²⁶ Stephen Kearse, "The Long, Strange History of Street Fighter and Hip-Hop", The Vice, December 16, 2016, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ypvx7k/the-long-strange-history-of-street-fighter-and-hip-hop>.

²⁷ Ibid.

legal anxiety) with lyrics written by Combs.²⁸ The franchise in the past has touched upon the hip-hop culture it so strongly inspired and was inspired by – the character Dee Jay from *Super Street Fighter II* (1993) comes to mind – but the song produced by Combs and Lindholm was a real step into hip-hop music in the games. A significant step indeed, especially considering that the character the track was composed for, Ed, embodies a hip-hop attitude and backstory, channeled into his boxing career in the game’s story.

Conclusion: The Final Fight

Hip-hop and fighting games drew together in ways that almost seemed fated. Themes of hip-hop culture – energy, strength, accomplishment, defiance, boasting²⁹ - are also the same sorts of themes one finds in fighting games like the *Street Fighter* franchise.³⁰ It seems natural that the black community would gravitate towards arcade fighting games. The low barrier to entry that arcades had over PC and console games certainly contributed, but those games (before fighting games came to consoles) did not convey those themes that black people also happened to convey in hip-hop music and culture. Developers of these games certainly noticed the synergy between their games and the growing market that would become the Fighting Game Community. We can see that throughout the years of both communities that each contributed to the notoriety and broader exposure of each other through references, callouts, collaborations, and even participations. Indeed, the FGC would not be the cultural phenomenon it is without its relationship to hip-hop. The FGC came together due to the efforts a of black man, and top

²⁸ Dakota “DarkHorse” Hills, “Ed’s theme was based off of Eminem after all: Street Fighter 5 composer gives insight into his creative process and shares Zeku’s early themes - A peek behind the curtain at some of Street Fighter 5’s best music”, Event Hubs, July 10th, 2018, <https://www.eventhubs.com/news/2018/jul/10/apparently-eds-theme-was-based-eminems-lose-yourself-after-all-street-fighter-5-composer-gives-insight-his-creative-process-and-more/>.

²⁹ Rose, “Black Noise”, pages 21-24.

³⁰ Kears, “History of Street Fighter and Hip-Hop”.

players in the FGC are black people (ostensibly men, but that is a different discussion)³¹, and that is the strongest indication that this has always been a black cultural practice; one that has grown together alongside hip-hop. There is no winner in this pit; both challengers fiercely share the arena.

Discography

Street Fighter the Movie Soundtrack (1994)

Ego Death – Busdriver, Aesop Rock, Danny Brown (2014)

Ed Theme – *Street Fighter V* soundtrack (2017)

³¹ Johnson, “Racial gap”.

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