Defeating Sheng Long: How a Mistranslation Changed the Canon of a Franchise

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One of the most popular video games of the fighting genre, is Street Fighter II (released in 1991). Apart from its revolutionary for the period gameplay, it also accidentaly spawned a rumour that was not supposed to be true, but eventually would become reality.

The game’s protagonist, Ryu, is known for his special move ‘Shōryūken’ (Japanese
for ‘rising dragon uppercut’). Some characters of this word translate as ‘shēng lóng’ in Chinese pinyin. When the game was translated in English, the localization team mistranslated Ryu’s winning quote “If you cannot overcome the Rising Dragon Punch, you cannot win!”, to “You must defeat Sheng Long to stand a chance”. This had as a result fans to think that Sheng Long is a character in the game, instead of a special move, even prompting some of them to send letters to gaming magazines asking about his existence.

One certain publication, Electronic Gaming Monthly, decided to play along, and posted a ‘method’ for players to find him. The requirements, though, were almost impossible to be met. If the method was followed correctly, Sheng Long would supposedly appear and challenge the player. The trick provided by ‘W.A. Stokins’ (waste tokens) of ‘Fuldigen, HA’ (fooled again, ha) was widely perceived as true, until a few months later when it was revealed as a joke. However, the fan buzz around it made the magazine's staff quite surprised at the success of their prank; so much that they even repeated it in 1997 for the game Street Fighter III.

In 2008, about 17 years after the first mention of the supposed character, Street Fighter IV was released, and a new character named Gouken made his debut. That character was an elderly martial arts master, who looked like the way Sheng Long was speculated to look, and had the same backstory that was given by fans to Sheng Long. He even got the in-game quote “You must defeat me to stand a chance!” as a playful nod to the rumours and fan speculation of the past. Seems like if the 1992 mistranslation had not occurred, there would be no demand for such a character, and probably we would not have this case of ‘accidental’ transformative fandom. In general, it is interesting to see how fan-led initiatives of mass demand sometimes can be appropriated by companies and become part of the game’s official canon.