



Hitting the Streets with *Street Fighter: The Legend of Chun-Li*

VFX Supervisor Marc Kolbe gives a blow by blow account of the CG work in *Street Fighter: The Legend of Chun-Li*.

By Silas Lesnick

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The more than 300 vfx shots on *Street Fighter* were accomplished by multiple studios. Photos by Patrick Brown. All images TM and © 2009 Capcom Co. Ltd. All rights reserved.

It's hard to believe that it was more than 20 years ago that **Capcom** released the first of its popular *Street Fighter* videogames to arcade-goers in the fall of 1987. It was just a few years after that when the series' real impact on the gaming community hit with the 1991 sequel, *Street Fighter II*. Instantly spawning a new way of looking at arcade fighting games, the sequel was the first time players were able to select and pair characters from a variety of different options. One of these characters, the young Chinese fighter Chun-Li, was an instant hit with *Street Fighter* fans and her story forms the basis for the new live-action film adaptation, *Street Fighter: The Legend of Chun-Li*, out today from Twentieth Century Fox and Hyde Park Films.

Previously adapted into a big-budget blockbuster in 1994, *Street Fighter*, alongside many other videogame cinematic adaptations, has proved that moving pixels around can be a tricky process and one that tends to require an appropriate measure of vfx work. It's the job of Visual Effects Supervisor Marc Kolbe to blend the bigger-than-life action and fantasy of the videogame with the film's verisimilitude, a task that has to be necessarily balanced against the film's modest budget.

Kolbe has maintained an ever-growing list of credits in the vfx field since his earliest interest in the digital world in 1989, though it wasn't until *Independence Day* in 1996 that he scored his first major credit doing previs compositing. Since then, Kolbe has served as supervisor on roughly two dozen projects, supervising teams of artists as small as ten and as big as 300, usually incorporating the work of at least four different facilities into the final product, bridging the gap between the film's director and the digital world.

For *Street Fighter*, Kolbe's involvement wound up taking him as far as Southeast Asia for the film's principal photography. "[I joined] last minute," says Kolbe of his experience. "I was referred to the producers. They needed a supervisor and the film was starting to shoot in two weeks... Next thing I knew, I was on a plane to Thailand."



Shots that weren't wire removal and greenscreen video replacements were in service of creating a believable and cool "Chi Ball" for Chun-Li.

After arriving on-set, Kolbe was responsible for overseeing work done at a number of separate facilities, each working on different aspects of the film's vfx and running an international gamut, including EFX, Sony Pictures Imageworks in India and Avatar VFX in Los Angeles, in addition to the in-house team that was established especially for the production and run by Kolbe himself.

In the film, Kristen Kreuk plays the titular Chun-Li, a young woman trained in martial arts by her father. After he is kidnapped by villainous gang leader Bison (Neal McDonough), she goes on a quest to save him, battling Bison's men and anyone else who stands in her way. Though there is a great deal of physical demand for the actors and actresses, the sweat can sometimes be alleviated by the right amount of vfx planning.

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Because of the high degree of hand-to-hand fight scenes, a large percentage of Kolbe's work involved digital wire removal. On-set fight choreography would be shot with the actors working in wire harnesses, allowing for an increased range of movement and a chance to simulate fighting moves that would be otherwise impossible. Afterward, artists went in frame by frame and removed the wires digitally. On set, everything had to be shot with the idea that anything extra appearing in front of the camera would have to be subtracted later.

"Wires get in the way," explains Kolbe, "[So] you work closely with the action director and the DP. If all of you are on the same page, it can be painless. If not, you can get stuck with a lot of fix-it shots or shots that are more complicated than they should be. There's nothing worse than a wire cutting across the actor's face in a close up."

To this end, a major part of Kolbe's production work involved staying in constant communication with Director Andrzej Bartkowiak and the Action Director Dion Lam. Even though Kolbe didn't get to Thailand until five days before shooting began, the creative trio had a clear-cut "stitch in time" mindset, with all three understanding that, even under the best of circumstances, it's better to shoot with the vfx shots carefully planned in advance than to just assume any rough patches can be fixed in post.

Though the wirework removal was the most intense part of more than 300 vfx shots in all, there were a number of other complicated digital additions that had to be completed in a very short six-week period, including compositing work for greenscreen window replacement.



Chun-Li trains with her master, Gen. She must fight the evil Bison to save her kidnapped father. VFX Supervisor Marc Kolbe worked with the director to make sure the shots were necessary fixes to fight scenes.

One sequence involves a state-of-the-art prison cell where a wall is meant to be made of video screens that simulate full-length artificial windows with adjustable views. The characters switch between a city setting and a nature setting, changing the view mid-scene. To accomplish this, greenscreen was utilized during shooting and later composited with the appropriate background. Another scene in an Internet cafe involved a similar but far more subtle effect, replacing monitors that were shot blank with different simulated screens, everything from videogames to Web browsers.

One effect that Kolbe ranks among the most difficult is Chun-Li's "Chi Ball." In the *Street Fighter* videogames, several characters employ a fight move called a *hadouken* or "surge fist." Meant to represent a wave of spiritual energy, Chun-Li is able to call upon this fantastic ability through intense concentration.

"We needed to come up with a 'make it look different' look," says Kolbe, who had to create an effect for the Chi Ball that would reflect the videogames while still feeling natural against the film's real-world environment.

"[The fantastic and the realistic] both can present their own set of problems. To me, fantasy can be harder since there are no limits to what your mind can come up with. But the questions, 'Is it interesting to the audience? 'Does it make the story better?', come up all the time. With the Chi Ball, we had so many iterations, I wouldn't say that one was better than the other. They were just different."



Warrior and assassin Vega goes into attack mode. The in-house team was aided by EFX, Sony Imageworks in India and Avatar VFX in L.A.

In the end, the Chi Ball appears in about 50 shots split between two different sequences. The team ended up using a look all their own rather than one directly inspired from the original game, an approach that was used for many aspects of the film in the hopes of creating an entirely new *Street Fighter* cinematic universe.

"I hope the true gamers are OK with how it came out," concludes Kolbe, who admits that the balance of time and money plays an unfortunate factor when it comes to trying to be a vfx perfectionist, "You can get caught up with never finishing a shot. You just run out time and money."

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