

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Duelling Through The Centuries

Introduction

This article is intended to provide some background for our 'Light-Sabre Duelling' game which premieres at Salute Zero Four. Apart from the immediate setting and an analysis of what is a great little, commercially available game system, I hope - as with my other SF subjects (most recently the old 'BUGS!' game, aka 'Starship Troopers') - to also put the action into its *historical* context (yeah, I know it was "...long ago, in a galaxy far, far away, ..." and so technically *pre-dates* this bit, but really...). So much of the 'good stuff' in both SF and fantasy writing has been borrowed from history, it seems only fair to repay the compliment - and they *are* called Jedi *Knights*, after all....

I suppose it could be argued that most pre-gunpowder combat was perforce very, very close, deadly and therefore pretty damned personal. One reason missile-armed troops have always been somewhat denigrated is that they - perhaps sensibly - kept a respectful distance from their enemies; no 'honour', you see! However, I'm not interested today in large groups milling around more or less in formation and hacking at all and sundry who stray within reach (i.e. otherwise known as an ancient battle). No, what I mean is the formalised combats with their own accepted rules of behaviour which take place between individuals *by prior agreement*, often (too often) to settle a 'point of honour'...

A Brief, Biased History of 1:1 Combat

"You do know how to use that thing?" "Of course - the pointy end goes in the other man!"
(Anthony Hopkins giving Antonio Banderas his first fencing lesson in 'Zorro')

Even in pre-recorded history, it seems likely that not all combats were like armed rugby-scrums - far better to have disputes over grazing rights settled by a fight between a couple of 'champions', than a potentially disastrous all-out fight in which even the winners may not have enough men left standing to collect the food for next week (let alone next winter). Such an approach is still visible today in the highly formalised combats used among the few remaining Stone Age-level tribes of the Amazon and New Guinea, plus - in case you're feeling superior - the crowd dynamics of riots in urban streets or football terraces. Just watch the next news reports, with lots of people present and shouting, making gestures etc (and *there's* those 'missile troops' again, still safely out of reach); but where only a *few* actually go forward to risk their all in direct personal combat... [for our purposes, riot police = Romans; see below].

Many of these actions will remain unknown, but some were significant enough to make it into the stuff of legend, recorded forever in human literature. '*David & Goliath*' was a classic pre-battle 'warm-up' contest between champions (although Goliath seems to have suffered from not checking the detailed rules of engagement), the outcome of which had an enormous impact on the morale of the army. And the *Siege of Troy* saw many instances of various champions engaging in well-publicised actions, making their names immortal - Hector, Agamemnon, Paris, Ajax, Achilles, Exeter, Graf Spe- (err, no, hang on a minute...). Anyway, each of these heroes went to considerable trouble to search-out *suitable* opponents (not just any old rank-and-file) to beat-up for the edification of their army.

The Romans on the other hand have their own special niche in our history of personal combat. Being on the whole quite little guys originally (compared to all those hairy, violent Celts), they very sensibly got rid of all the old honour rubbish and generally ran *war* as they did the empire - as an efficient, serious business. However, they did retain a strong, widespread and lasting interest in all aspects of the field of

personal combat, just as long as it involved other people! I mean, of course, the development of the **Gladiatorial Games**, for many, many years the 'main event' at civic arenas all over the Roman World; and while the fighting was not exactly by choice, still it represents one of the historical high points of skill and variations in close combat weapons and techniques. True, it wasn't always man-to-man and even the introduction of different weapons, animals and large-scale encounters (galleys!?) could not stop the 'viewers' eventually tiring of straight *professional* contests, so it began to stray more into the entertainment end of the mass slaughter business.

Well, as you know the empire came and went, so we're now back with the massed 'champions & oiks' school of tactical thought and fighting for the next thousand years or so, except occasionally in Britain ('cos archers were both available and cheap - British defence policy through the ages?); and China/Mongolia (where they still took their fighting seriously). I've deliberately left-out some of the more famous and *ferocious* elements from the Dark Ages, not because they lacked courage (e.g. the Vikings - motto: 'Killing Strangers For Fun And Profit'), but simply because they did not indulge - or certainly progress - the forms of 'private killing' which I'm trying to cover today.

That's not to say that the entire Medieval period was uneventful for our history of personal combat - far from it. Indeed, I think it's the *battles* in this period which suffered, as they seemed to be mere scaled-up versions of 1:1 knightly (or sometimes bi-weekly) 'tournaments' which replaced formal training regimes. It may have ended-up with the classic joust with ludicrous lances each side of a fence, but this was only one type of encounter, introduced later in a desperate attempt by the authorities to stop their armoured elite getting out of control and killing each other off (at least before their King is ready for the next war). The most common form of encounter was the, ah, rather 'free-form' Melee, an almost completely unregulated meeting arranged in any suitable field - or sometimes *town!* - between bunches of knights, 'victory' going to the last one standing. (*One of the most extreme that I know of involved some 300 knights 'advertising' their resolve across Europe to defend a tiny bridge somewhere in Spain [I believe] against all-comers! Went on for many days, if not weeks, and in the process ravaged the surrounding countryside as various parties fought and indulged in a little duty-free looting en-route. Bags of honour, though...*). However, whilst these engagements did have rudimentary rules and the period certainly stands out for the **quantity** of personal combats going on, it has very little to offer in the way of **quality** (wearing 20-30Kg of armour tending to reduce the finesse element somewhat!).

For a long time Japan was also terribly into the honour thing - battles were preceded by interminably long speeches, list of achievements [theirs *and* their ancestors], poetic recitals, posturing and single combats among a few of the more famous Samurai of each army (presumably encouraged by their respective foot-sloggers who love nothing more than to sit and politely applaud while watching their better's kill each other and delay the start of the serious business of battle). Mind you, after two hours in the freezing rain listening to some guys' combat-Karaoke version of 'I did it my way' *I'd* be ready to kill something, so no doubt it had it's uses... They continued with this form of psycho-torture until they faced the Mongols, who sat and listened to all this for a while, then filled the idiots stuck out in front full of arrows! Most dishonourable, if rather effective...

For a resurgence of a more 'civilised' approach in the field of close-up 1:1 killing, we must wait for the Renaissance Era, when battles are starting to become sordidly *professional* again and it's increasingly difficult to show-off your prowess with a pointed stick in a cloud of gunpowder smoke with lots of underlings taking pot-shots at you! Still, 'gentlemen' were expected to defend what they or others considered to be their honour both on and off the field, and much time was spent in training. As the period went on different 'national styles' emerged both in weapons (the Italians favoured the very deadly sword and knife combination, for example, whilst very long knives or 'Gladius' type swords were a popular alternative in Spain); and the **rules** under which engagements were increasingly fought.

Eventually actual schools were established by acknowledged master fencers all over Europe - and you didn't have to ask him for a reference; the mere fact that he was alive spoke volumes! If you were too far away to attend a class (or simply too mean), by the 17thC there were even published manuals of 'how to do it' guides, illustrated with lots of pictures of stance & pose, it being not enough now to simply bash & hack your opponent and come out alive - you had to do it with *style*, as well! Some of the most well-known examples from this era are in fiction - the Montagues and Capulets feuding away in Shakespeare's '*Romeo & Juliet*', or the legendary exploits of Athos, Porthos, Aramis & D'Artagnan in Alexander Dumas' '*The Three Musketeers*'.

In the modern era we have come to see classic 'duelling at dawn' increasingly as the pastime of late 18th and early 19th century gentlemen. It is also towards the end of this period when pistols start to become an acceptable alternative to swords (at least, when weapons are available which can hit something smaller than Belgium at 20 paces). In some ways this trend could be seen as part of the general shift in the officer's role in battles of the 'Age of Enlightenment', with officers & gentlemen doing plenty of *leading* but less and less of the actual *fighting* on the field of battle - except in extreme moments of self-defence (see John Keegan's book '*The Face of Battle*' to read more of this interesting trend). The use of pistols was also seen as a great equaliser, a test of nerve, and did not involve breaking into (much of) a sweat, which would of course ruin the cut of your Regency clothes!

It is towards the end of the Napoleonic period that the decline in duelling starts to set in - Wellington actually forbade his officers to kill each other off in duels during the Peninsular War, as he thought the French were already doing quite a good job in accomplishing that (it had in fact been made a capital offence some years before in England, but few in 'Society' bothered about silly little rules like that; if questioned by some parliamentary upstart, it was always 'self-defence'). There were also a number of well-publicised deaths among prominent politicians in the early 19thC, both here and on the continent, some of which undoubtedly altered the course of European if not world history! So, by the 1840's it was getting deuced difficult to arrange, as well as being frowned upon by those professional frowners, Victorian Society.

Despite the difficulties, the idea of duelling hung on for a while. Various bits of the USA (especially in 'The South') retained what they perceived as Old European values, while German students in particular (Otto Von Bismarck among them) for many years performed a highly stylised version wearing lots of heavily padded safety gear and using a quite ludicrous sword. The aim was to collect the odd fearsome-looking facial scar without risking getting terminally punctured in the process! The French of course did the whole thing no favours by allowing increasingly silly options (blunderbusses from hot air balloons being one of the low points) Meanwhile the Russians discovered their own version of Roulette which you bet on and could still be played even when too drunk to stand or focus on an opponent. However, the vital skill element had been reduced to being able to pour the next round....

So, as to when it all ended well, that's a matter of choice. You could say that the last great exponents were the gunfighters of the Wild West, but the central ideals of personal combat (individual skill etc) are often to be found in the memoirs of fighter pilots. Certainly in WW1 - and even to this day - the slashing, highly-skilled sword-stroke gives way to the high-G slashing attack... And after all, one of my favourite aircraft is the F-86 Sabre...

Game Description

The game features duelling between some of the main characters from the various Star Wars films. It is closely based on a cracking little commercial boxed game "*Star Wars Epic Duels*" designed by Craig Van Ness (with assistance from Rob Daviau), for veteran games company HASBRO; try the following address www.hasbro.com/starwars/pl/page.ts/dn/default.cfm. And I can heartily recommend purchasing a

copy - if you can find it...! As at the time of writing it's certainly still available via some of our Salute traders, and has quite some following on various web sites in the USA & UK; there's even talk of an official expansion set. If they've foolishly sold out at Salute, while you're in London try popping along to the 'Aladdin's Cave' of boardgaming www.playingames.co.uk, at 33 Museum St, just opposite the British Museum, or www.leisuregames.com up in Ballards Lane, Finchley.

The original game itself actually comes with a whole lot of 30/35mm 'interestingly' pre-painted figures. However - as you will see from the various photographs which accompany this article - in extending and translating the system to the tabletop we have taken the liberty instead of using the nowadays *startlingly* well-painted 3.75"/90mm 'collectors range' figures, widely available up and down the country from specialist SF shops and even Woolworths for as little as £3.99; so you can go away and recreate the game in your own club without desperately searching for the kit, or paying the earth for it. In addition, in true wargamer fashion we have added our own rule extensions to allow for more characters, weapons/vehicles and of course yet more special tactics.

The players are split evenly between 'Good' and 'Evil' types ('Good' Anakin Skywalker blows the timelines completely as he can also appear as 'Bad' Darth Vader, but that's time-meddling for you! If you're that concerned about the continuum, just have an optional rule that the older one disappears if the younger is killed.....). Each player has a main Jedi-type character plus a more normal helper or two; for example, Darth Vader has a couple of less-than-dazzling but laser-armed Stormtroopers, whereas Luke gets a very aggressive Leia (presumably still hacked-off at Dad for zapping her entire planet in film 1, episode 4, league division 2). And just wait to see the bad guy's faces as an irate Chewbaka throws their figure(s) bodily across the fighting area.....

The little helpers may not win it for you, but don't ignore them - even the dear old skinny battle droids (winner of the 'Most Useless Weapon-System Since the Rubber-tipped Arrow' award) can help by shooting vital bits off your opponent and wearing them down. Anyway, this all means that there should be somewhere between 15-24 striking figures on the table at the start of a game and provides a great deal of sustained (re)playability because of the different team structures and interactions of the characters.

"Star Wars Epic Duels" - Supplied Characters + Assistants	
Yoda	Clone Warriors (x2)
Obi-Wan Kenobi (Young - Ep.2)	More Clone Warriors (x2)
Han Solo	Chewbaka
Luke Skywalker (Ep.4-6)	Princess Leia (Ep.4-6)
Anakin "2 Sabre" Skywalker (Ep.2)	Princess Amidala (Ep.2)
Mace Windu	Yet more clone fodder (x2)
Emperor Palpatines	Red Guards (x2)
Darth Vader	Stormtroopers (x2)
Count Dooku	Super Battledroids (Ep.2) (x2)
Zam 'Horst' Wesell	Jango Fett
Darth Maul	Attack 'skinny' droids (Ep.1) (x2)
Boda Fett	Greebo

So how does it work? Well, once the teams are decided, players place their figures on the boards, collect their pack of special cards (see below) and set-up their 'control panel' which shows the amount of damage each figure can take. When play begins, all take it in turns to *move* then *perform two 'actions'*, before the next gets to go. The order always alternates good/bad/good/bad etc, so each side has a chance, although individual characters could end-up in a tight spot if acting rashly...

Basic movement is simple but subtle and uses a dice to provide some variability (depending on the roll, either one or all team characters may move, up to the amount scored); but the system's real interest and entertainment value comes from the special decks of cards which are used to determine both combat and special 'Power of the Force' tricks. As these card packs are *unique* to each Jedi character/team, it is this feature especially which makes each game different and adds more 'period flavour' than many simple (and not-so-simple) points total systems.

After movement, players then have their two 'actions' which they may perform - this can be *picking up a card* (maximum of 10, but no cards = exhaustion; very bad news, survival wise...); using the force (and a card) to *heal characters*, either yourself or other team members; or *make various attacks*. These can be 'ordinary' combats (bashing adjacent characters with your trusty sabre, or getting a minion to try and shoot someone in line-of-sight with their laser); 'special attacks' (involving some force trick or advanced training which increases your attack or defence ratings; keep an eye on the 'newer' characters here...); or 'Force Use', which could be anything from levitating yourself - or another character - across the table, to Darth doing his remote-strangulation party-piece, or perhaps making someone 'panic' and lose all their current hand! And just for a bit of variability, *only* the cards with a picture of the character can be used for that character - so again, there may come a time when you are forced to bring the helpers into action while waiting for a better card to turn up.

The good thing about all this is that no single character has a dominant position in the game - true, Yoda and the Emperor are very tough propositions force-wise, but you'll find that the better someone is with 'The Force', the more they've forgotten about actual fighting (if you can get close enough). Conversely, the Sith Lords may put on a great display of sabre-juggling, but don't get too fancy with Yoda or the Kenobi bunch... Like any good battle, therefore, it's *teamwork* which gets results, as well as a small degree of luck. That's not to say that play balance can be ignored completely when setting teams - Han Solo & ChewBaka *can* take Darth Vader and his merry men sometimes, but the odds are against them. But with the 14 major teams in the basic box, there are a lot of permutations to work through.

Other Options

The first option is not really an option in my view - go out and buy the game! It's a real cracker and as such HASBRO deserves to get the cash, plus it alerts the people in suits at their HQ to the fact that wargamers exist as a market, so we all potentially get to benefit.

Secondly, although modern access to imaging software and colour printing makes expanding the existing game with more Star Wars characters and more 'special abilities' relatively easy, you can still use traditional 'cut and paste' to make new cards from numerous cheap film prints - even the cards on which the big figures are mounted! Look on the web as well to see the various discussion groups. And as ever, don't be afraid to experiment with other rules - if your group enjoys them enough, write to HASBRO! One of the scenario variations we have in mind is to use a LOT of 'skinny droids' vs a bunch of single Jedis in an SF version of the final skeleton fight from 'Jason and the Argonauts'!

However, as I mentioned early on, the whole card-based system of skills and manoeuvres itself is well-worth a look for other similar genres - Japanese Samurai and (my own favourite) 'The 3+1 Musketeers' come immediately to mind, but any personalised, skill-based skirmish could be tackled this way. And while fantasy subjects (Grandalf Plotter and the Philosopher's Ring etc) are already well-served by purely card systems, this approach provides a viable figure-using alternative to role-playing games; certainly it would be ideal to recreate 'Super-Hero' actions by specialised X-Men etc.

*But in my view perhaps the most interesting genre which is simply crying out for this system to be applied would be to recreate the **Gladiatorial combats** of the Roman arena, with the various types of warrior and weapon now being easily translated to their own unique set of cards - much better than simple 'points totals', and more believable - and manageable - than combat matrices (the bigger version of 'scissors, paper, stone'). By using packs of special cards this means that the whole thing can be expanded gradually, and with little effort, just as long as you always bear in mind play and team balance.*

Anyway, that's another project - when we do anything, check-out the club website for news...

GAME EQUIPMENT & CREDITS

Figures - these are all from the truly vast and apparently ever-expanding collectable range from - oh yes, HASBRO (again), which I have picked-up in a variety of stores all over the country (plus the odd Far-Eastern copy from SF toy fairs). As collectable items in their own right, prices can range from £2.99 at my faithful local bucket shop (*Nuxley's Toys*), up to around £7-8.99 or - well, whatever you want to pay. Oh, and most of them are all deliberately used in the *original* form 'out of the box', to show how the newer releases in particular require almost zero work before use.

Terrain - the desert-style base boards and odd hill were done more or less to my design by my old friends '**PMC/TSS**' (if you have wacky project in mind, even if it involves modelling half of a Korean mountain, give them a call). You can see some more of their stuff at the show, or check out their website.

Scenery - most of the 'ancient' stuff comes from the aquarium department of my local pet store, as does the various bits of swampy undergrowth, only the lichen being a true model shop item. A couple of outstanding exceptions to this are the 'Aztec mound' from by *Ziterdes*, and the weird green stuff, purpose built for the SELWG club, whom I thank for the loan. The 'SF ruins', however, are a real hotch-potch collection: they include such disparate items as some 25mm SF vehicles and crates from good old '*Snapdragon Studios*' (now 'Moondragon', I understand); some 'X-Files' equipment from the 6" figure range; some '*Ainsty Castings*' pipe work (very good, if you can get it); and lots of ex-office kit such as pencil-holders, document trays and even a foot rest, suitably 'dirtied-up'.

FILMOGRAPHY (short version)

Of course, for the truly historical try finding a copy of the video "**Blow By Blow - A Guide To Duelling**"; it's one of the best browsing sources for the whole genre of 1:1 duels, with many historical versions being re-staged by some very skilled re-enactors (do *not* try this at home!). However, for truly 'classic' duelling on film, they do not come any better than the following:-

"**Star Wars**", Pts 1-? (Dir. George Lucas, 1976-?); *Sir Alec Guinness* and some other people

"**The Duellists**" (Dir. Ridley Scott, 1979); *Keith Carradine & Harvey Keitel set throughout the Napoleonic period' it is a study of obsession and one of the most beautiful films about people trying to kill each other ever made; very good for fencing styles, uniforms and how duelling was viewed.*

"**The Three/Four Musketeers**" (Dir. Tony Richardson, 1973); *the 'dream team' of Oliver Reed, Frank Finlay, Richard Chamberlain and Michael York, plus some superb villains: Charlton Heston as Cardinal Richelieu, plus Faye Dunaway and Christopher Lee.*

"**Scaramouche**" (1952); *Stewart Granger & Mel Ferrer - famous for the final encounter (of many) which lasts well over six minutes!*

"**Spartacus**" (1960); *Kirk Douglas*

"**Gladiator**" (Ridley Scott again, 21 years later); *Russell Crowe*

"**El Cid**" (1961); *Charlton Heston (again); great 'early period' formal combat.*

"**Ivanhoe**", and "**The Adventures of Quentin Durward**"; *Robert Taylor; the latter is interesting as it is set at the very end of the Medieval period and start of the Renaissance. And it has Kay Kendall.*

"**Seven Samurai**", "**Yojimbo**", and "**Sanjuro**", for incredibly fast, period Samurai action and all done without modern film tricks; *Toshiro Mifune* both stars and survives!

Then there's the Hollywood stuff of legend from the 20's, 30's & 40's; there is simply loads of now somewhat forgotten material by both *Douglas Fairbanks Snr & Jnr* in the 20's, but also:-

"**Zorro**" (1940); *Tyrone Power & Basil Rathbone*

"**The Adventures of Don Juan**" (1949); *Errol Flynn*

"**The Prisoner of Zenda**" (1952); *Stewart Granger (again; busy year!) & James Mason [Keep a close eye on Basil Rathbone, as well - one reason for Errol Flynn's frequent fights looking so good was that Basil actually fenced at international competition level!]*

Finally, just to prove it's not all Uzi 9mm and 40 Megawatt phasers nowadays, try recent versions of:-

"**The Mask of Zorro**" (1998) starring *Anthony Hopkins & Antonio Banderas; fun and fast*

Disney's versions of "**The Three Musketeers**" and "**The Man In The Iron Mask**" (1998) *the latter with Leonardo DiCaprio and some ageing [but still very deadly] Musketeers played by John Malkovitch, Jeremy Irons & Gerrard Depardieu;*

"Le Bossu" (1997); mid-17thC France;

- are all worthy efforts in the long tradition of such films, and much staging went into choreographing the many fight scenes. In the latter film, although it's in French even in it's subtitled form it is one of the most authentic, gripping fencing films you will ever see now outside a digital effects studio.

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