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# THE SEVEN FORMS OF LIGHTSABER COMBAT

## HYPER-REALITY AND THE INVENTION OF THE MARTIAL ARTS

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## ABSTRACT

Martial arts studies has entered a period of rapid conceptual development. Yet relatively few works have attempted to define the 'martial arts', our signature concept. This article evaluates a number of approaches to the problem by asking whether 'lightsaber combat' is a martial art. Inspired by a successful film franchise, these increasingly popular practices combine elements of historical swordsmanship, modern combat sports, stage choreography and a fictional worldview to 'recreate' the fighting methods of Jedi and Sith warriors. The rise of such hyper-real fighting systems may force us to reconsider a number of questions. What is the link between 'authentic' martial arts and history? Can an activity be a martial art even if its students and teachers do not claim it as such? Is our current body of theory capable of exploring the rise of hyper-real practices? Most importantly, what sort of theoretical work do we expect from our definition of the 'martial arts'?

## INTRODUCTION

### WHAT ARE MARTIAL ARTS?

'It [Ludosport] started in 2006 in Italy. A few friends got some lightsabers as gifts and being into martial arts and re-enactment fanatics they decided to see if there was a way they could make it into a sport, and they did. They spent hundreds of hours consulting many different martial artists and fencing coaches to make sure that they got a really good sport. It's not a martial art. We're not trying to teach people how to cause physical harm, in fact that's exactly the opposite of what we're trying to do. We want something that's fast and fun, that people can enjoy'.

Jordan Court, Instructor of the Ludosport England, Lightsaber Combat Academy in Bristol (UK), as quoted in the *Bristol Post*, 29 January 2015.

[Flynn:] 'People laugh at us and say, "That's not a real martial art! I say, "Why don't you pick one up and try?'

[Damon Honeycutt:] 'They can say all they want ... you know what I mean? But the fact is, we are practicing and they are not'.

'Flynn' and Damon Honeycutt. *Reclaiming the Blade*, DVD2. Bonus Feature: New York Jedi. 2009. 4:14 min.

Is lightsaber combat a martial art? This seemingly odd question may have important implications for how we understand critical concepts within the field of martial arts studies. It also promises to shed light on the fundamental processes by which the traditional martial arts have been revived, reimagined and invented in the modern era.

As both a relatively new and radically interdisciplinary research area, martial arts studies is currently enjoying a period of rapid conceptual development. Nowhere is this more evident than in attempts to define the term 'martial art'. While it is in many ways synonymous with the field, only a minority of the foundational texts in our literature have attempted to define this concept or to explore it in ways that would point to new avenues for research. Nor has the existing literature coalesced around a single definition [Wetzler 2015: 22-25].

Researchers have adopted at least three distinct strategies when attempting to craft their understanding of this concept. The first, and

most widely used, might be referred to as the 'sociological approach'. It simply accepts the social or cultural consensus on the question as it has arisen within a tightly focused research area.

Given that everyone in 21st century Japan simply 'knows' that kendo, karate and aikido are martial arts, there may not be an urgent need to further explore the matter when discussing some aspect of Japanese martial studies.<sup>1</sup> This is especially true as so many works currently being produced adopt an 'area studies' approach which calls for a deep examination of the historical, social or even linguistic forces affecting developments in only a single region or state. It may seem beyond the bounds of a given research project to explore what characteristics make both kendo and karate martial arts given their many historical differences. The existing consensus is simply accepted as a social fact.

Nevertheless, future theoretical development within martial arts studies requires a greater emphasis on comparative case studies. This research strategy often necessitates comparing practices that have arisen in very different times or places. For instance, what makes both capoeira and kendo martial arts, and how can both be understood in light of the economic, political and social changes that swept the globe in the 19th century? In cases such as this it is no longer possible to avoid definitional discussions. For better or worse, classification and categorization are at the heart of the comparative enterprise.

Towards this end scholars have attempted to define the martial arts in at least two different ways. First, they have advanced short, universal definitions meant to identify those activities deemed to be 'martial arts' within the broader category of all social practices. A good example of this approach can be seen in Peter Lorge's 2011 volume, *Chinese Martial Arts*:

**I define 'martial arts' as the various skills or practices that originated as methods of combat. This definition therefore includes many performance, religious, or health-promoting activities that no longer have any direct combat applications but clearly originated in combat, while possibly excluding references to these techniques in dance, for example. Admittedly, the distinction can be muddled as one activity shades into another. In addition, what makes something a martial art rather than an action done by someone who is naturally good at fighting is that the techniques are taught.**

<sup>1</sup> Many researchers, in fact, have provided in-depth treatments of specific fighting systems without finding it necessary to first wrestle with the definition of the martial arts in general. For examples, see Wile [1996], Hurst [1998], Bennett [2015], and Judkins and Nielson [2015].

**Without the transmission of these skills through teaching, they do not constitute an ‘art’ in the sense of being a body of information or techniques that aim to reproduce certain knowledge effects.**

[Lorge 2011: 3-4]

This discussion is clearly superior to the sorts of vernacular definitions that one might find in a dictionary or within popular culture discussions.<sup>2</sup> First, it de-centers Asia from the image of the martial arts, recalling that similar combat practices have been observed in practically all human societies at one point or another. Indeed, the term ‘martial art’ has a long and distinguished history in Europe where it has also been used to describe western fighting systems. While popular discussions tend to focus only on Asian styles, martial arts studies needs a more robust concept.

Secondly, Lorge directly addresses the fact that martial arts are, by their very nature, social activities. They are not simply physical responses to acts of violence (no matter how effective they might be in the moment). A given body of techniques only becomes an ‘art’ when it can be effectively transmitted from one individual to another. Still, as Sixt Wetzler has cautioned in his own discussion of this definition, the ‘transmission’ of techniques is not always reducible to formal classroom instruction [Wetzler 2015: 24].

Historically, most martial arts existed as what Thomas A. Green has described as ‘vernacular’ fighting systems, where instruction tended to happen in the field and be a good deal less formal than what we might expect today [Green quoted in Svinth 2011: 10]. On the other side of the spectrum, literate martial artists in Europe, China and Japan have been writing detailed fighting manuals for hundreds of years with the explicit goal of passing on techniques to fellow students who they would never meet in person [Shahar 2008: 56-71; Kennedy and Guo 2005; Hay 2015]. The current era of cheap video and social media has also revolutionized the way that techniques are shared, tested and debated [Spencer 2014]. The insight that knowledge must be transmitted from one generation to the next seems to be at the heart of the martial arts in any period that we examine.

While a solid starting point, this definition still presents scholars with challenges. It is certainly the case that many martial arts arose from

<sup>2</sup> Note how the 2015 online edition of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary [<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>] defines the martial arts: ‘Any of several arts of combat and self-defense (as karate and judo) that are widely practiced as sport’. While it does not explicitly state it as such, definitions like this tend to reinforce the popular notion that martial arts exist only as an aspect of Asian culture.

combat practices. But is this central to our understanding of them? Archery may have been used in hunting and ritual before it was used in warfare. Indeed, it is interesting to note how much of Hurst’s discussion of the evolution of military archery in Japan actually focuses on these other activities well into the medieval period [Hurst 1998: 105-112; also see Selby 2000: 27-83].

How should we think about the many unarmed arts? While wrestling has long been part of Western and Eastern weapons training systems (and as such it could be argued to have real military value) boxing appears only sporadically and even then mostly as a type of recreational activity [Lorge 2011: 46-47]. Even General Qi Jiguang, who did more to promote the practice of boxing within the Chinese military than anyone else, saw it as having no actual place on the battlefield. He introduced it as a new type of training for his troops because of its ability to build mental and physical strength rather than its inherent martial value or long pedigree in combat [Lorge 2011: 177].

It would be possible to multiply examples, but the basic point is clear. The links between modern martial practices and their supposed battlefield origins are more complicated than current mythmaking might lead one to suspect. Often these genealogies exist only in the realm of popular lore.

Attempts to produce a simple definition of the ‘martial arts’ have proved challenging. And there are other issues to consider. While a universal concept, such as that advanced by Lorge, might succeed in identifying ‘martial arts’ in the abstract, it does not give us all of the analytical tools that we will need to investigate these social institutions.

At the most basic level, how can we tell where one style ends and the next begins? Are wing chun, weng chun and white crane three completely different arts, or simply three local interpretations of the same regional fighting tradition? Scholars need a concept of the martial arts that can help us to investigate questions such as this.

To address these issues a second group of authors have developed definitions that seek to classify the wide range of observed martial arts along different metrics. Some authors, such as Donn F. Draeger, sought to separate the truly ‘martial’ from the ‘civilian’ fighting systems [Draeger 1981: 6-9]. Unfortunately his system seems to be based on a now dated understanding of Japanese military history. And in any case, it is not always possible to draw a clean distinction between the military and civil realms.

Other students have looked at the specific goals motivating individuals to practice the martial arts. Perhaps the most common division in the

literature is a three part typology separating the competitive combat sports, traditional styles (focused on self-development and health) and self-defense or combat arts [Channon and Jennings 2014].

The great advantage of this move is that it accurately reflects the ways in which the martial arts are often discussed in popular culture. This makes the concept relatively easy to apply. Unfortunately this approach has trouble dealing with the huge amount of variation found within any single tradition.<sup>3</sup> In China it is not that hard to find wushu coaches who approach the taijiquan forms as competitive sports, while some of their students will go on to teach similar material as traditional health practices.

Lastly, Wetzler has proposed that we move away from efforts to definitively place certain practices in one conceptual box or another. He argues that we should instead acknowledge that the martial arts owe much of their popularity to their fungibility. The fact that a single set of practices can play many social roles in a student's life gives them great practical utility. It is precisely this multi-vocality that allows these hand combat systems to function as central organizing symbols for their practitioners.

Wetzler suggests that the best way to understand a martial art, and to compare various schools or approaches, is to examine its impact on five dimensions of social meaning [Wetzler 2015: 25-26]. Briefly these are:

1. Preparation for Violent Conflict
2. Play and Competitive Sports
3. Performance
4. Transcendent Goals
5. Health Care

Unfortunately this is more of a framework for analysis than a traditional, easily applied definition. Wetzler freely admits that future researchers may find it necessary to add additional categories to his list.

Nor does his approach solve the problem of sociological relativism. The flexible nature of Wetzler's concept opens the field up to a wide range of activities that not all researchers might be willing to accept as martial arts. For instance, would realistic combative movements learned from

a video-game count as a 'martial art' if their practitioner claimed them as such?<sup>4</sup> What about the many apps currently on the market to help students learn taiji or wing chun? Is this simply a novel way of teaching an old art, or is it something very different? Do we simply accept as a martial art anything that claims to be one?

The problem of relativism can also be seen on the other end of the spectrum. Because the martial arts are often seen as somewhat odd, eccentric or socially marginal, some individuals may try to evade the label all together [Bowman 2016]. Students taking a 'boxing essentials' or even kickboxing class at the local YMCA might claim not to be studying a martial art, even though any martial arts studies conference will include multiple papers on participation in amateur boxing and kickboxing activities.

It would seem that self-identification is a poor metric to judge what activities qualify as a martial art, or how we as researchers should structure our comparative case studies. Indeed, this has always been a potential weakness of the sociological approach. Lacking a universally agreed upon definition, how should we move forward?

This puzzle is a useful one in that it helps us to clarify our goals. When we ask 'Is lightsaber combat a martial art?' we must be clear that this question does not intend to establish a value hierarchy in which the researcher draws on their expertise to offer a binding opinion on what does or does not qualify as a 'legitimate' combat system. Nor are we even asking whether a given activity is worthy of consideration in martial arts studies as a research area. After all, our interdisciplinary literature routinely tackles a variety of topics and sources (including novels, films, community festivals and public rituals) that are not the product of any specific training hall.

As Paul Bowman recently stated, the problem with narrow debates over definitions is that:

**we are in great danger of moving the debate into a deeply problematic kind of obsession with categorising and hierarchising. This is only one step away from switching our role as 'interpreters' into [that] of 'legislators' (to use Zygmunt Bauman's terms). I think this is a trap that many people who are trying to work in and around martial arts fall into, again and again: they move from trying to make sense of it all, to imagining a system, to regarding that system as law.**  
[Bowman, personal correspondence, 2016]

<sup>3</sup> Sixt Wetzler notes the common case of modern karate schools that actively teach in all three divisions. This makes it difficult to classify their style [Wetzler 2015: 24].

<sup>4</sup> For a study that pushes these questions even farther, see Chris Goto-Jones' forthcoming book *The Virtual Ninja Manifesto: Gamic Orientalism and the Digital Dojo* [2016].

What this question really points to is the relationship between our object of study (in this case lightsaber combat) and the theoretical toolkit that we have developed to explore these sorts of systems within martial arts studies. Put slightly differently, do we expect that our core concepts and theories will help us to make sense of lightsaber combat in the same way that they might be useful when thinking about the rise of judo or jeet kune do? And if they fail in this specific case (as theories often do), will the lessons learned improve our understanding of more traditional martial arts as well?

Within the social sciences progress rarely comes from theoretical development or empirical observation in isolation. It is the triangulation of approaches that is the most likely to lead to the development of a successful research program. Do all martial arts arise from authentic combat activities? Must they be historically grounded? Can an activity be a martial art even if its students and teachers do not claim it as such?

These are important questions as they help us to expand the borders of martial arts studies and demonstrate the utility of our field. They are also the sorts of issues that deserve to be empirically examined rather than simply accepted or dismissed by definitional fiat.

## GETTING A GRIP ON THE LIGHTSABER

Any attempt to define lightsaber combat as an authentic martial art will face a number of objections. The typical lightsaber class usually introduces students to some combination of forms practice, practical drills, competitive fencing and stage combat/choreography training. The emphasis on each activity varies from school to school and depends in large part on the goals of the instructors. In short, the typical lightsaber training session does not appear to be all that different from other martial art classes taught in a typical community center.

Yet the lightsaber is neither a historical nor even a real weapon. The idea that one might be able to systematically study 'lightsaber combat' is a relatively recent notion inspired by a uniquely successful film franchise. In that sense we are dealing with a 'hyper-real martial art'. By this we mean that it is an invented tradition that everyone acknowledges is based on a fictional text rather than a more or less

accurate transmission of some historical practice.<sup>5</sup>

Lightsaber combat presents students of martial arts studies with a set of theoretical fighting systems coalescing around the image of a (wildly popular) fictional weapon.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, many of the individuals working to develop lightsaber combat programs are traditional martial artists with extensive training in both Eastern and Western fighting arts. Their historically grounded skills are being married to the mythos and world view of the *Star Wars* franchise and then marketed to the public. Finally, the resulting synthesis is presented to new students in classroom environments that practitioners of the traditional martial arts would find very recognizable.

Nor is the practice of lightsaber combat limited to a few isolated individuals. The renewed popularity of the *Star Wars* franchise following the release of the prequel films in the early 2000s (Episodes I-III) and then Episode VII in 2015 has given rise to a dramatic increase in demand for practical lightsaber training. With a number of additional films already in the works, we may be well-positioned to watch the birth of a substantial new hyper-real martial movement. But are these systems true martial arts?

Using Wetzler's five dimensions of social meaning I explore the various ways in which lightsaber combat functions as an authentic martial art for its practitioners. Some of these may be obvious, others will be less so. Ultimately this discussion suggests that a set of activities functions as a martial art not because of its historical authenticity or connection to 'real-world' combat. Rather, the martial arts have always been defined primarily through their modes of social organization and the individual, group and systemic roles that they play. At heart they are social institutions rather than collections of isolated techniques. More specifically the modern martial arts are a social project by which individuals hope to improve multiple aspects of their personal and social destinies, and not simply their physical safety.

<sup>5</sup> The term 'hyper-real martial art' draws heavily from the concept of a 'hyper-real religion' (a system of worship or spiritual observance based in large part on elements drawn from popular culture) as developed within the religious studies literature. *Star Wars*-inspired belief systems are also an important element of this spiritual category. Readers interested in investigating the question of hyper-real religion (including Jediism) may want to see Possamai [2012]. This concept is also indebted to the work of Umberto Eco who sees the roots of 'hyperreality' in a strong desire for the experience of reality that leads one to construct an artificial system of signs which is then consumed in the place of reality [Eco 1986: 7, 16, 41-48]. One would be hard pressed to articulate a better description of many aspects of lightsaber combat and *Star Wars* fandom.

<sup>6</sup> For an academic discussion of the image of the lightsaber and the material culture of the *Star Wars* universe, see Wetmore [2007].

This should not be understood as a new development. We see this same pattern at the very moment of the genesis of the Asian martial arts. Japanese warriors did not need formal sword schools organized as ryūha to ply their trade or survive on the battlefield. They had succeeded in these tasks quite nicely for hundreds of years without them.

As Alexander C. Bennett has cogently argued, these institutions were created as a means of demonstrating social sophistication and self-discipline when Bushi warriors found themselves transitioning to political roles in urban areas which brought them into direct contact with Japan's highly cultured aristocracy [Bennett 2015: 36-40]. The original Japanese swords arts functioned just as much as a source of social legitimization as martial capital. These schools again saw massive growth under the later Tokugawa government, a period of protracted peace in which they once again served mostly social, cultural and economic functions [Hurst 1998: 64-68].

While history is not unimportant (indeed, we will see that it is deeply implicated in the creation of even hyper-real martial arts) researchers may ultimately wish to pay more attention to how ideas and beliefs about the martial arts, as a social project, are created and transmitted from one generation to the next. Nor is this set of conclusions unique to the world of lightsaber combat. The existence and rapid growth of hyper-real martial arts requires us to reevaluate what we think we know about the invention of the traditional martial arts more generally.

## CREATING THE SEVEN CLASSICAL FORMS OF LIGHTSABER COMBAT

While various 20th century science fiction stories had mentioned weapons like the lightsaber,<sup>7</sup> the image of this now-iconic blade seared its way into the popular consciousness in 1977 when George Lucas released his first *Star Wars* film (Episode IV: A New Hope). Luke Skywalker igniting his father's arctic blue lightsaber ('an elegant weapon for a more civilized age') in the presence of the mysterious Obi-Wan Kenobi became a symbol that defined the hopes and aspirations of an entire generation of filmgoers.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Edmond Hamilton's story 'Kaldar: World of Antares' [published in the April 1933 issue of *The Magic Carpet Magazine*], Isaac Asimov's 'force-blades' in *Lucky Star* (1952), and the 'rod' in Gordon R. Dickson's *Wolfling* (1969), which in many ways resembles the original concept art for the lightsaber. The idea of an 'all-cutting' energy sword used for personal defense was already well-attested in the science fiction genera prior to the release of *Star Wars* in 1977. For more on these literary parallels see the *Star Wars Origins* page on lightsabers at <http://www.moongadget.com/origins/lightsabers.html>.

They too wished for an adventure that would allow them to take their first step into a larger world. What better weapon for the knights-errant of the quickly dawning technological age than the lightsaber? It captured the romance and esoteric promises of our half-remembered, half-imagined collective past, while pointedly reminding us that it was an 'artifact' from the distant future. The symbolism of the lightsaber seamlessly combines a weapon of truly fearsome destructive potential with the promise of spiritual renewal. Once seen it is an image that is not easily forgotten.

The lightsaber's strangely hypnotic blade has now gone on to colonize the imagination of multiple generations, spawning countless novels, comic books, video games, collectibles, sequels and, most recently, entire combat systems. It goes without saying that in the absence of the *Star Wars* film franchise, and the immense marketing empire that surrounds and supports it, there would be no lightsaber combat training today. Our first conclusion must be that these media-generated images led directly to the creation of later combat systems, albeit with a somewhat puzzling delay.

One strongly suspects that the first fan-based 'lightsaber duel' was probably performed with broom sticks the day after Lucas' original vision was revealed to the public in 1977. Yet there is very little evidence of organized attempts to institutionalize and spread specific ideas about what lightsaber combat might look like until the early 2000s. Systematized lightsaber fencing, as it currently exists, dates only to the middle of that decade.

This presents us with our first challenge. Given the immense popularity and huge cultural impact of the initial three movies, why did lightsaber combat organizations emerge only in the 2000s? More specifically, what was its relationship to the less popular, and critically reviled, prequel trilogy chronicling the Clone Wars and the rise of Darth Vader?

The answer to both of these questions can be found in the complex mix of materiality and mythos that lies at the heart of the *Star Wars* enterprise as well as the efforts to market its merchandise to the public. What is more powerful than a myth whose relics can be held in one's own hands?

Indeed, with certain 'artifacts' fans can even attempt to replicate iconic scenes from the *Star Wars* movie franchise. This actually makes replica and 'stunt lightsabers' (simple swords without elaborate sound effects created by third party vendors for the express purpose of dueling) somewhat dangerous. On the one hand their metal hilts and heavy, glowing, polycarbonate blades provide the same sort of intuitive psychological gratification that comes from handling any other sort of weapon.



At the same time, the fact that we all know that these replicas are ‘not real’ can lead to problems. While not actually filled with jets of hot plasma, the pure kinetic energy that a rigid one-inch polycarbonate blade can deliver is roughly equivalent to any wooden stick of similar length. It is certainly enough to cause pain or injury if full contact dueling is attempted without some basic safety equipment. In short, corporate liability issues may have initially limited the creation of licensed replicas of these iconic weapons. The fact that large costuming groups, such as the 501st Legion and Jedi Council, have a no combat/choreography policy would also have diminished the demand for more durable prop replicas.

There would have been technical issues to consider as well. Most sabers today utilize LED technology to ‘ignite’ their blades. These can withstand more forceful blows than delicate incandescent bulbs and they do not burn out. Integrated circuit boards with motion detectors can also be added to provide programmable sound effects and special lighting displays.

By the early 2000s the technology to mass produce convincing replica lightsabers became cheap enough to make the project economically viable while at the same time a new generation of (now adult) fans was in place to spend hundreds of dollars on each new model. It was the appearance of relatively high-quality replica (and later stunt) sabers which sparked the sudden boom of interest in practical lightsaber combat.<sup>8</sup>

These marketing efforts were also supported by the expansion of other aspects of the *Star Wars* universe. Particularly important were the writings of Dr. David West Reynolds, the holder of a PhD in Archeology from the University of Michigan. As an employee of George Lucas’ Skywalker Ranch in California, he had already written a number of *Star Wars* reference books [1998, 1999, 2002a]. Following the release of Episode II in 2002, he turned his attention to the lightsaber. In October of 2002 Reynolds published an article in *Star Wars Insider* [#62] titled ‘Fightsaber: Jedi Lightsaber Combat’. While a short article published in a fan magazine, this essay would have a profound impact on the subsequent development of the lightsaber combat community.

<sup>8</sup> The first official replica lightsabers with LED blades and sound effects were released by Master Replicas in 2002. Within a few years a greater number of models had been released at lower price points expanding the appeal of these products. By 2006 multiple third party manufactures had entered the market producing their own versions of these weapons, often aimed at individuals who wanted more specialized blades for choreography, dueling or display.

It is interesting to note that the actual movies say almost nothing about the details of lightsaber training. Reynolds, though not a martial artist, attempted to rectify this oversight in world-building. Drawing on his knowledge of ancient civilizations and cultural history, he wrote an article revealing the ‘seven forms’ of lightsaber combat as taught within the Jedi Order.

Each numbered form was given a short description outlining its philosophy as well as its strengths and weaknesses. Later publications augmented these with exotic sounding names (such as ‘Shii-cho’ for Form I) and associated them with mythic creatures from the *Star Wars* universe in ways that intentionally mimicked the use of animal imagery in the Asian martial arts (Shii-cho is ‘The Way of the Sarlacc’) [Wallace 2011: 41-43]. They also concocted increasingly complex backstories for each form.<sup>9</sup>

Reynolds set in motion a story-development arc which created a rich body of invented lore around the seven forms. This gave them an alluring feel of verisimilitude. Unburdened by the limitations of culture, history and politics, he created the image of a martial art that felt more ‘realistic’ than the actual models it was based upon. It drew from social streams that had already proved popular with consumers (most of the individuals buying replica lightsabers in 2005 would have had vivid memories of *The Karate Kid* [1984] and various martial arts films) and then offered them something more, an improvement upon the reality that they already knew [Eco 1986].

By the early 2000s *Star Wars* fans had been given access to both a steady supply of replica lightsabers, a new trilogy of films which featured many iconic lightsaber battles, and an increasingly complex system of invented lore explicitly designed to create a history for lightsaber usage that would feel realistic. While the *Star Wars* franchise has always emphasized the role of merchandise, the situation for would-be Jedi and Sith acolytes was more favorable in the 2000s than it was in the 1980s.

The next major step forward took place in 2005. Inspired by some short fan-films in which lightsabers had been digitally recreated, ‘Flynn’, a

<sup>9</sup> Given the diverse nature of the *Star Wars* product line, it is interesting to note that much of this subsequent elaboration was popularized through officially licensed videogames. Craig Page has noted that *Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords* (2004) did much to spread the names and basic descriptions of the ‘seven forms’ of lightsaber combat throughout the fan community [personal correspondence]. A number of individuals who I have interviewed over the course of my ethnographic study have stated that they were first introduced to the lore of lightsaber combat through videogames. While fans may have been inspired by the *Star Wars* films to pick up a lightsaber, it was the expanded universe of magazines, books, comics, cartoons and videogames that established the weapon’s complex fictional history.

founding member of the group NY Jedi, bought two Master Replicas lightsabers, took them to the roof of his New York City apartment building at night, and began to duel with a friend.

The resulting enthusiasm on the part of his neighbors was great enough that he then decided to bring a larger group of sabers to the 2005 Greenwich Village Halloween parade where their demonstration was again met with great fervor and numerous inquiries as to where one could go to learn to fight with a 'real' lightsaber. The group NY Jedi was formed shortly thereafter, and has offered weekly lessons taught by a variety of martial artists, choreographers and stage combat coaches [History of NY Jedi (2010): 0:01-2:00 min].

The simultaneous worldwide dissemination of the newly created mythos and marketing of replica sabers makes it difficult to reconstruct a single linear history of lightsaber combat. Nor is it entirely clear which group or individual staged the very first public lightsaber performance. Some of the earliest clubs appeared in the Philippines and Russia.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly all of these efforts seem to post-date the release of the first officially licensed replica sabers and cluster closely in time indicating the importance of market forces in the emergence of this movement.

Nevertheless, NY Jedi was active very early in this period and earned a great deal of publicity for its efforts. It raised the public profile of lightsaber combat and inspired the creation of a number of other similar groups all along the east coast of the United States. Some of these emphasized costuming and performance, others attempted to focus on the creation of a 'pure' martial art.

Only a few months later three friends in Italy (all trained martial artists) brought a bunch of replica lightsabers to a birthday party. They were impressed with the technical flexibility that this new training weapon allowed. Almost immediately they started to develop their own martial system (Ludosport) based on the physical characteristics of replica lightsabers as well as elements of the *Star Wars* mythos [A Story of Light (2014): 2:26-5:03 min].

Most lightsaber groups seem to combine multiple elements in their training. While NY Jedi mixes traditional martial arts training with a heavy emphasis on stage combat and performance, Ludosport instead emphasizes the development of lightsaber fencing as a type of competitive combat sport. They have since opened branch schools across Europe and organized a system of international tournaments and rankings.

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Greg Ember (who has researched the individual histories of the various groups that comprise the lightsaber combat community) for bringing these cases to my attention after reviewing an early draft of this article.

As the introductory quote suggests, members of Ludosport appears to have distanced themselves from the claim that lightsaber fencing might be considered a martial art. In their vernacular terminology, an activity only qualifies as a martial art if it is aggressive in nature and focused on causing harm. For their own marketing purposes they seem to have decided to emphasize the athletic and competitive aspects of their practice.

Other groups, such as the Terra Prime Lightsaber Academy, have instead stressed the degree to which lightsaber fencing is, and should be thought of as, a martial art [TPLA Mission Statement 2012]. After all, the fight choreography seen in the *Star Wars* films was influenced by a variety of traditional martial arts including kendo, kali, wushu and historic European practices such as longsword fencing [*Star Wars: Evolution of the Lightsaber Duel* 2015; *Star Wars* Featurette: Birth of the Lightsaber 2004].

Many of the instructors teaching lightsaber combat today also bring their own backgrounds in the martial arts to the table. For them the challenge is to find ways to recreate the seven forms of lightsaber combat outlined in the *Star Wars* mythology using historic techniques, concepts and strategies. Drawing on their individual training, and the unique physical properties of commercially available stunt lightsabers, they have attempted to 'recreate' effective and historically-grounded systems of lightsaber combat which are still true to the texture of the movies and the *Star Wars* mythology. All of this has then been packaged in a way that it can be taught to succeeding generations of students in something that very much resembles a standard classroom environment. Some instructors even see in lightsaber combat a possible tool for promoting, preserving and disseminating traditional types of martial knowledge [TPLA 2012].

## FIVE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF LIGHTSABER COMBAT

While this review has helped to ground our discussion, it has not resolved the more basic question of whether lightsaber combat is an authentic martial art. At best we are thrown back on the statements of various practitioners. Some look to their own backgrounds and goals to assert that they are in the process of developing and teaching a martial art. In their view the media-driven origins of these practices have no bearing on their classification. What is important is the nature of the techniques used and taught.

Other individuals, even those deeply involved in the lightsaber community, are not so sure. Some see 'combat sports' and 'martial



arts' as mutually exclusive categories. And given the degree of cultural discomfort that still follows the traditional martial arts [Bowman 2016: 1-2], a few groups may have decided that it is more economically feasible to market lightsaber combat as a sporting, fitness or recreational activity.

Nor would it be difficult to find practitioners of more traditional sword arts who might claim that lightsaber fencing simply cannot be a martial art at all. So many of the small details that are critical in traditional forms training or cutting practice (e.g., edge control) simply disappear when we begin to discuss fictional all-cutting plasma blades. For them the potent symbolism of a futuristic sword cannot displace the historically-grounded reality of the blade.

This sort of indeterminacy has always dogged both the sociological and universal strategies for defining the martial arts. The current essay seeks to move beyond this impasse by empirically examining the practice of lightsaber combat in light of Wetzler's theory of the 'five dimensions of social meaning'. This will provide us with an appropriate baseline from which to explore whether the fictional origins of lightsaber combat alters the sorts of social functions that it provides in the lives of its students. It should also suggest something about the utility of the existing martial arts studies literature in making sense of these practices.

### 1. Preparation for Violent Conflict

New students of the martial arts often claim that they have been inspired to join a school by a need for self-defense training. There has always been a link between (some) martial arts and the perceived need to prepare oneself for the reality of violent conflict. Yet students of martial arts studies have observed that many of the sorts of techniques that are commonly used in these systems lack an element of 'realism'.

Scholars of Japanese military history have noted that high school kendo training as it evolved in the early 20th century did a poor job of preparing Japanese military officers to actually use their swords in the field. This led to a number of changes in the way that swordsmanship was taught in the 1940s [Hurst 1998: 164-165; Bennett 2015: 128-154]. Practitioners of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), for their part, often complain about the lack of 'realism' in more traditional styles. Yet weapons are for better or worse a common element of actual criminal assaults and they are banned from the Octagon.

One cannot escape the conclusion that the ways in which the martial arts attempt to prepare their students for the future cannot simply be

reduced to 'violence simulators' of greater or lesser degrees of accuracy. Equally important has been the building of physical strength, mental toughness and a tactical toolkit in environments that are quite different from what might be encountered in an actual attack.

Lightsaber combat also has a complex relationship with Wetzler's first dimension of social meaning. The chance of an individual being called upon to defend themselves from an actual lightsaber attack today is only slightly less than the probability that they will encounter a villain wielding a three-meter-long spear in a dark alley. Which is to say, very few people take up traditional weapons training because of its great utility 'on the street'.

Yet in a kendo class one will be called upon to defend against a mock (but still very spirited) sword attack. Likewise, in a modern lightsaber duel fencers will be called upon to defend themselves against a determined opponent who has been systematically trained in a variety of techniques. A failure to do so (especially if proper safety measures are not observed) might result in injury. In that sense lightsaber students are preparing themselves for combative encounters. All of this also contributes to the creation of a degree of physical and mental resilience.

Many forms of traditional weapons training have become functionally obsolete in the current era. Spears, swords and bows are no longer encountered on the battlefield and they play a limited role in any discussion of self-defense. While lightsabers can be placed further along the continuum of abstraction, these are fundamentally differences of degree rather than kind.

### 2. Play and Competitive Sports

There can be no doubt that for most students the fundamental appeal of lightsaber combat is to be found in its recreational value. The central mythos and symbolism of the exercise derives from the realm of film and commercial entertainment. Of course, in the current era what most of us know about past military battles and personal duels is also heavily mediated by media representations rather than firsthand experience, a fact that is too frequently ignored by martial arts studies researchers [Bowman 2015a: 7].

Even in Hong Kong in the 1950s-1970s, a supposed golden age of traditional martial arts practice, wuxia novels and martial arts films were the medium by which most individuals were introduced to, and developed an interest in, the martial arts [Judkins and Nielson: 222-225, 233-237]. While not as frequently discussed, the traditional martial arts

have always been tied to the closely related worlds of folk history and storytelling [Green 2003: 1-11].

The very nature of lightsaber fencing has also contributed to the development of a strong sporting impulse. Whether in the form of Olympic fencing or Japanese kendo, in the current era the sword arts have come to be seen largely as combat sports. Students of lightsaber fencing will approach their new practice with an already well-established set of ideas about what a proper match should look like. Inevitably this includes safety equipment of some type (eye protection, fencing masks, armored gloves, other protective gear), one or more judges to call points, a transparent scoring system and a limited number of timed rounds.

All of these practices come from previous innovations in other arts. Yet they are immediately available to lightsaber fencers. The end result is that for many students lightsaber combat is primarily thought of as a fast-paced, highly enjoyable combat sport.

As I have interviewed various instructors in the field, some have pointed to these sorts of matches as sites for 'technical research'.<sup>11</sup> A few have asserted that the traditional martial arts might benefit from a 'neutral' platform where students of Western, Chinese, Japanese or South East Asian fencing systems can come together to compare techniques with those whose training is different from their own.

The physical simplicity of a stunt saber (which is essentially a smooth polycarbonate tube), and the ease with which it can be used by a variety of styles, has even led to some discussion of whether lightsaber combat might develop as a type of 'mixed martial art' for swords (albeit one with a very different worldview). While this possibility is not what attracts most new students to their local lightsaber combat group, it is certainly something that is being considered by key teachers and promoters of the practice.

### 3. Performance

The anthropologist D. S. Farrer has argued at length that every martial system contains both a practical and performative aspect. Further, these two elements cannot easily be separated [Farrer 2015]. While all sorts of practitioners may find that they have an economic or a social motive to promote their practice as a 'pure fighting art' (or alternatively, and

probably more lucratively, as 'pure combat choreography') this is usually far from the truth. Developments in the practical realm tend to drive new innovations in the realistic portray of the martial arts on stage. Further, the public discussion of these recreational images has inspired new thoughts about the more practical aspects of violence [Bowman 2015b: 10-12].

For example, throughout Asian history, archery did double duty as a cornerstone of public ritual as well as being a critical military skill [Selby 2000: 27-87]. Even the periodic military exams held by the Chinese government in the late imperial period tended to draw a large crowd and functioned as public spectacles as much as a rational mechanism for choosing the best military recruits (well into the age of the gun). Nor can we forget about the important social place of practices such as 'wedding silat', dance-like capoeira matches or the public performance of traditional martial arts styles on the stage of southern China's Cantonese Opera. All of this has a long and established history within the cultural realm of the martial arts.

Still, the relationship between the practical and the performative aspects of the martial arts is one of the most vexing aspects of these systems for current scholars. The development of lightsaber combat has the potential to contribute much to this aspect of the martial studies literature.

When looking at the variety of lightsaber combat groups, some scholars may be tempted to separate them into two categories. They might conclude that on the one hand we have those doing 'real' martial arts (here understood as including the combat sports), such as Ludosport, Terra Prime Lightsaber Academy or The Force Academy. These groups focus almost exclusively on the practice of historically-derived techniques or competition. On the other hand we have a number of schools, such as NY Jedi, The Capital City Jedi Knights or Fightsaber (in South East Asia), whose main activities are the staging of elaborate public spectacles through choreographed duels and storytelling.

Yet none of these organizations function in pristine isolation. One of the most interesting aspects of this global community is the density of communication between groups, often conducted through discussion boards or social media accounts. As a result, innovations in one area tend to diffuse to others.

While NY Jedi is known for its stage combat and public choreography, a number of its members (and former members) are also martial artists. One such individual is Damon Honeycutt. A longtime practitioner and instructor of the Chinese martial arts, he developed a basic lightsaber training form corresponding to 'Shii-cho'. This has gone on to become

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of how the practice of technique can act as a laboratory for new and innovative research, see Spatz [2015: 60-64].

perhaps the most widely distributed training tool within the lightsaber community. It is commonly practiced by both theatrically- and martially-oriented groups and both seem to find it quite useful.

The development of Shii-cho also points to the complex relationship between the historical and the hyper-real within the martial arts. In Dr. Reynolds' fictional account of lightsaber training, 'Form I' (also named Shii-cho) was hypothesized to have been organized around a basic set of infantry skills, originally developed for metal swords and later adopted by the ancient Jedi for use with their newly developed lightsabers. As such the form was described as betraying elements of its bladed origins. It was also simple and could be taught to all Jedi younglings, giving them a firm foundation for more specialized training in the future [Page 2011: 8].

Honeycutt wished to develop a training form that would accurately capture the feel of this fictional vision. To do so he looked to his own background in the Chinese martial arts. More specifically, he drew on the work of Yu Chenghui who, during the 1960s and 1970s, had attempted to reconstruct a method of fighting with long, double handed straight swords (*shuang shou jian*) which, according to the Ming era martial arts writer Cheng Zhongyou, had been lost at the end of the Tang dynasty [personal correspondence].

To accomplish this task Yu, himself an accomplished wushu performer specializing in the drunken sword style, examined a number of still existing forms for similar blades and studied reprinted versions of Ming era manuals dealing with double handed weapons. He also drew on his own martial genius, completing his form only after watching a praying mantis deal with heavy drops of rain during a sudden storm [Oh and Ching 2012: 39-46].

While Wushu's governing bodies eventually accepted his reconstruction as a 'historical routine' for competition purposes, scholars would be more likely to classify it as a classic example of an 'invented tradition'. Simply put, there are no existing documents detailing sword training methods dating to the Tang dynasty (though it should be pointed out that Yu did draw on authentic Ming and Republic era sources). His efforts reflect a desire to recapture a lost element of China's cultural legacy rather than a simple continuation of a documented or living tradition. Indeed, the desire to shape the expression of future social values by recapturing some essential element of the past is a common theme throughout the modern development of the martial arts [Gainty 2013: 142-146].

When looking for an ancient historical analog to the lightsaber, Honeycutt realized that the *shuang shou jian* was in many ways a natural fit. It too was a long straight weapon what would have been wielded

with two hands (as the invented lore for Shii-cho required). Further, Yu's dedication to historical detail meant that his reconstructed method contained a number of very practical cuts, parries and steps that would be of great value to students approaching a new class of weapon for the first time.

It also seemed poetic that lightsaber combat, a newly formed hyper-real martial art, should look to another invented tradition within the Chinese martial arts for its inspiration. On a more personal level, Honeycutt wished to pay his respects to Yu Chenghui whom he had the opportunity to study with while the latter was visiting the United States. In this way an important example of research and innovation conducted by one of China's more influential modern martial artists has become the basis of much of the lightsaber training that is happening around the globe today [personal correspondence]. Given the dual nature of Yu Chenghui's career as both a martial arts researcher and actor, it is perhaps fitting that variants of Shii-cho are practiced with nearly equal enthusiasm by groups interested primarily in lightsaber dueling and public performance.

Nor is there always a clear division between the sorts of individuals who will be attracted to more 'traditional' martial training and those who might find themselves making and posting fan-films on the internet.<sup>12</sup> Rather than having two distinct sets of practitioners, often what we see are related practices used to fulfill multiple sets of social goals by the same individuals. While on the surface this might appear paradoxical, it has always been part of the appeal of the traditional Asian martial arts. Current developments within the lightsaber combat community are useful precisely because they serve to illustrate this possibility.

#### 4. Transcendent Goals

Even if lightsaber combat succeeds as a fast-paced combat sport, or as a channel for martial performance, what psychological or spiritual value could it have? In the current era many individuals turn to the traditional (usually Asian) martial arts precisely because they see in them a font of ancient wisdom [LaRochelle 2013: 46-47]. For the less esoterically-inclined, the physical and mental discipline of the martial arts has also been seen as a way to 'develop character'.

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that within the school where I have been conducting my own ethnographic research the students most skilled in combative lightsaber dueling are also the individuals most enthusiastic about costuming. While most groups within the lightsaber community seem to emphasize one sort of activity or another, individuals can be, and often are, drawn to an entire range of related activities.

While many actual martial arts instructors go out of their way to avoid discussing their practice in these terms, the idea that the martial arts should be a pathway to some sort of 'transcendent attainment' seems firmly fixed in the popular imagination [Berg and Prohl 2014]. It is one of the promises that draws students to these practices. Much of the commercial success of the traditional martial arts appears to be rooted in a near mystical faith in their ability to promote balanced development in both children and adolescents. One wonders how much of this belief (in the West) we can attribute to Luke Skywalker's very public journey to adulthood, aided by the dual disciplines of the Force and the lightsaber training, during the 1970s and 1980s?

Can lightsaber students find transcendent values in a practice grounded in what they know to be a set of fictional texts? The fact that we now have a literature on the existence of hyper-real religions strongly suggests that the answer is yes [Possamai 2012]. The underlying values that students can detect in a story and practice in their lives are more important for many people than their connection to an authentic ancient history [Morehead 2012].

My own ethnographic research conducted with a lightsaber combat group in a mid-sized city in the North East United States has revealed a surprising degree of dedication on the part of many of the students. The oft-repeated mantra that it is all 'just for fun' notwithstanding, it is clear that many students are approaching lightsaber combat as a key organizing symbol in their lives. The weapons may be fictional, but the feelings that are invoked through practice are authentic and profound. Nor are the sorts of mentoring relationships that students seek from their instructor any different from what one might find in a traditional martial arts institution.

Given the resources being dedicated to lightsaber combat, it should come as no surprise that students so often see their norms and beliefs (or perhaps those that they aspire to hold) reflected in these practices. The Jedi and Sith are readymade symbols ripe for spiritual or psychological appropriation.

When addressing a related point in an interview, Damon Honeycutt of NY Jedi said:

**You can bring about things in a subculture; you can create change through that. You can elevate consciousness through it. That is what I would like to see it do, really bring people to a heightened potential of what they really are. To be a lens for that, outside of comicons or conventions or competitions or forms or fighting or sparring or whatever people think that they are doing with it. That really would be the greatest thing.**

**With NY Jedi we are making ourselves better people to serve humanity, you know, the same thing that I do with the Kung Fu school. In a lot of ways they are the same. Its just that the myth behind it is different. The lineage behind it is different. The world view is different. But the overall goal is the same. [Reclaiming the Blade – New York Jedi: min 11:01-11:46]**

This description matches my own preliminary observations. Future research might fruitfully focus on the underlying social changes that have opened a space for hyper-real martial arts to play these roles at this particular moment in social history.

## 5. Healthcare

The martial arts are more than simple collections of combat techniques. They play a number of distinct social roles in the lives of their practitioners. In the current era individuals often turn to the martial arts to defend not just their physical safety but their personal health.

Many martial arts studios offer basic fitness and conditioning classes. Weight loss is a frequently advertised benefit of all kinds of martial arts training. And every month a new set of articles is published about the medical benefits of taijiquan for senior citizens in both the Western and Chinese press.

This may seem like yet another example of the commercial appropriation of the martial arts. Fitness is a multi-billion dollar industry and the average individual is constantly subjected to powerful media discourses extolling the health benefits of athleticism. Is it any wonder that all sorts of hand combat teachers attempt to link their practices to the culturally dominant athletic paradigm?<sup>13</sup>

In light of this it may be necessary to remind ourselves that the links between the practice of the martial arts and health promotion are actually quite old. Meir Shahar has demonstrated that by the end of the Ming dynasty unarmed boxing training was gaining popularity around China partially because of the unique synthesis of self-defense and health-promoting benefits which it offered [Shahar 2008: 137-157].

While less pronounced than some of the other dimensions of social meaning, it is clear that lightsaber combat is viewed as an avenue for

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the ways that modern 'healthism' and athleticism have shaped both the perception and development of practices such as yoga or the traditional martial arts, see Spatz [2015: 83-86, 93-97, 105-109].

promoting physical health by many of its students. In this case the emphasis is less on esoteric practices and Daoist medical ideas than Western notions of physical fitness and exercise. Many of the new students that I have spoken with mentioned the need to 'get in shape' and 'stay active' as primary motivations for taking up lightsaber combat.

Fitness also plays a role in the ways that lightsaber combat is discussed by more experienced martial arts teachers. Every instructor and expert whom I have interviewed has noted that these classes attract individuals who might otherwise have no interest in setting foot in a martial arts school or gym. Lightsaber combat gives such students a unique means to stay active and an incentive to get in shape.

For some students lightsaber combat also sparks an interest in other martial arts. Indeed, one suspects that this is exactly why so many traditional martial artists are currently opening classes dedicated to the subject. They have the potential to expand the appeal of the martial arts to groups of consumers who might not otherwise have ever been attracted to them.

The health benefits of any martial art depend in large part on how it is introduced to students and subsequently practiced. The same is certainly true for lightsaber combat. Once again, when comparing this practice to historically-grounded martial arts what we find are differences in degree rather than kind.

## CONCLUSION

### LIGHTSABER COMBAT AS A MARTIAL ART

Is lightsaber combat a martial art? The answer is almost certainly yes. At its core are a group of combative and performance techniques almost all of which have been gathered from preexisting martial traditions. These have been developed into pedagogical systems capable of transmitting not only physical practices but also elaborate pseudo-histories, invented identities and a mythic worldview that seem to be no less potent for their fictional origin. All of this provides students with a variety of tools to create social and personal meaning in their lives.

An examination of Wetzler's 'five dimensions of social meaning' suggests that students of lightsaber combat understand their practice in much the same way as traditional martial artists. More importantly, both sets of activities play broadly similar roles in the lives of students and respond to the same social forces. As such we have no a priori reason to believe that the theories developed within martial arts studies cannot be applied to the investigation of hyper-real combat systems.

More importantly, our brief investigation of lightsaber combat may suggest a few ways to improve our understanding of the social meaning of these systems. Martial artists are often reluctant to discuss the economic consequences of their practice. Many individuals make a living teaching these systems, and students sacrifice notable resources (in money, time and opportunity cost) to practice them. In the current era the distribution of martial knowledge is closely tied to economic markets.

Yet openly discussing this fact seems like a violation of an unspoken norm. Among both practitioners and members of the public there is a strong presumption that the martial arts 'cannot be bought or sold'. It is hoped that the attainment of excellence in this realm will somehow transcend such base considerations. Given that many academic students of martial arts studies are also practitioners of these same systems, such attitudes can easily shape our own research as well.

The rapid growth of lightsaber combat over the last decade is interesting for a number of reasons. One of the most important is what it suggests about the power of economic markets to shape the development of martial arts systems and the ways that consumers encounter and experience various fighting systems. At the most basic level there would be no lightsaber combat without the production of successive generations of *Star Wars* films and massively expensive campaigns to market them to the public.

More specifically, the exact timing of the boom of interest in lightsaber combat owes much to the creation (and marketing) of high quality replica and stunt lightsabers in the early 2000s. While particularly pronounced in this case, the basic situation parallels the role of the media in sparking the sudden waves of interest in the traditional Asian martial arts which gripped the public in the 1970s and 1980s [Bowman 2015a: 96-98].

Economic considerations can be seen in other places as well. The major manufacturers of stunt sabers host message boards and social media groups that play a critical role in creating a sense of community. Individual teachers have turned to lightsaber fencing as a means of spreading the message of the martial arts beyond the horizons of the normally reachable market. And it is sometimes surprising to realize how much money individuals are willing to pay for a personally meaningful replica lightsaber, or for the opportunity to attend a seminar with a specific instructor or group. It is even interesting to contemplate why different lightsaber organizations adopt various economic models.<sup>14</sup>

None of this is all that different from what we see in the world of the more traditional martial arts. The ability to offer instruction can become an important source of personal income [Frank 2014]. The sudden appearance of a popular new action film can lift a little-known fighting system out of obscurity [Bowman 2015a: 115-117]. As a result, economic markets strongly condition how the martial arts will be taught, and who they can potentially reach, at any given point in history [Judkins and Nielson: 114-124].

While these sorts of considerations receive little attention in many of our studies, they simply cannot be avoided when thinking about the origin of lightsaber combat. As such we should consider adding a sixth category to Wetzler's discussion of social meaning within the martial arts. Economic markets are a means by which scarce resources are distributed within society. The martial arts have often served similar functions through their attempts to control community violence, support new status hierarchies and even create social capital.

<sup>14</sup> Many groups that focus on costuming and choreography seem to have organized themselves as non-profits dedicated to raising money for specific charities. This allows them to cooperate with other non-profit costuming groups (such as the 501st Legion) in the staging of large, high profile public spectacles without running afoul of the corporate interests that own the Star Wars brand. Traditional martial arts schools which have branched out into lightsaber combat seem to be less interested in this sort of cooperation. Their institutions instead reflect the fundamentally market driven 'style' and 'lineage' based models of organizations that have come to dominate the traditional martial arts community.

We should not be surprised to see powerful synergies emerging through the interactions of these systems. In fact, no student or teacher can approach the martial arts in the current era without taking their economic aspect into careful consideration. This suggests that students of martial arts studies should also be more mindful of this dimension of social meaning.

Critics of the time and energy being devoted to the development of lightsaber combat may voice a number of complaints. Stunt lightsabers, despite their seeming versatility, are essentially cylindrical sticks rather than copies of true blades. And given the unique mythology of this weapon, there is no incentive to imagine it as a metal sword for the purposes of practice and training. As such lightsaber combat is bound to depart from historically-derived sword techniques in important ways. Ultimately an hour invested in the investigation of German longsword fencing, or even kendo, would probably grant a better understanding of real military history than an equal amount of practice with a lightsaber.

Though it may be possible to find key norms within the practice of lightsaber fencing, or while the rich symbolism of the Force and the Jedi may point some students towards transcendent themes, the development of these ideas within the *Star Wars* universe is still shallow compared to the depth of lived religious experience that can be found within real Buddhist, Daoist or Christian monastic communities. Again, why invest scarce resources in a second-order reflection of reality when the real thing is available?

These are valid concerns. Ultimately most martial artists will not be interested in lightsaber combat. Then again, most martial artists also have little interest in kendo, wing chun or any other specific style. Many of these complaints also revolve around questions of taste rather than objective conceptual categories. Why practice that style when 'everyone knows' that mine is superior?

The very fact that lightsaber combat can so easily be drawn into this all-too-familiar mode of debate is yet another indication that it is seen as residing within the set of practices which we call 'martial arts'. Yet as Wetzler reminded us in his discussion, when it comes to definitions, scholars must rely on more objective measures. Ultimately the student of martial arts studies cannot become merely a critic of good taste in martial arts practice [Wetzler 2015: 23-25].

Instead we should ask why, when so much information about many historical styles is readily available, these specific individuals are choosing to study a hyper-real martial art. Why are seekers suddenly more open to finding transcendent meaning in a fictional story than in actual organized religions which espouse many of the same values



and views? How have consumers appropriated the products of a vast commercial entertainment empire to create independent social groups that better allow them to exercise their agency in creating more empowered identities?

None of these puzzles are unique to lightsaber combat. In reality we could ask a very similar set of questions of most of the traditional martial arts that are practiced in the world today. We seek to understand the invention of the martial arts because every hand combat system must find a place for itself in the social system of its day if it wishes to survive. Their many solutions to this dilemma reveal critical data about the nature of social struggle as well as the societies that we live in.

All arts, even the most historically-grounded, are caught in a continual cycle of renewal and reinvention. Practices such as lightsaber combat are valuable precisely because they force us to focus on the details of how that process unfolds within specific communities. Yet to be fully realized, we must first understand that hyper-real combat practices can be authentic martial arts.

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