



Sabre Duel

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ENGL294

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Overview

Her majesty, Queen Alexandria Battagino, has grown weary with the world of political debacles She is forced to take part in day after day. She has requested you, the developers of Her kingdom, to craft a thought provoking yet relaxing game for Her to play in her down time to take her mind off the dreary politicians' ramble.

Goals

1. An analog game.
2. When designing, ensure that you are applying the course concepts we took up in our readings and include a document, 6-8 pages in length, detailing an explanation and breakdown of your design.

Specifications

This is a two-player turn-based card game simulating sabre fencing, where players secretly choose actions and reveal them simultaneously. The game features four core actions—Attack, Lunge, Feint, and Parry—along with a priority system that affects scoring and momentum. Designed for strategic depth, the game balances offensive and defensive playstyles, ensuring dynamic and engaging duels.


Milestones

I. The Rules Handbook First Edition

The first edition of the handbook establishes the fundamental mechanics of the game, detailing the four core actions, resolution system, and priority mechanics. It provides a structured reference for players to understand the strategic depth and flow of the game.

II. Online Referee First Edition

A digital implementation of the referee system was developed to automate the resolution of player actions. This online tool ensures accurate interpretation of the rules, highlights priority shifts, and clearly displays round results, making gameplay smoother and more accessible.




The first entry point in my game design revolves around Queen Alexandria Battagino's desire to escape the monotonous ramblings of politicians. As Johan Huizinga stated in *Homo Ludens*, "Play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration... It contains its own course and meaning." Our board game aims to create a clear separation between the Queen's daily obligations and the immersive world of play, offering her a reprieve from the relentless political debates she must endure.

This naturally leads to the idea of fencing, a historically popular activity that was once a fashionable pursuit among the nobility—a realm untouched by politics, where players can step away from the complications of regulations and embrace the simplicity and beauty of sports. In this world, players embark on a journey through speed, anticipation, reflexes, and mental strength, making it a challenging and rewarding sport. Fencing has a special appeal to people of different ages and backgrounds, making it a perfect fit for the Queen's requirements.

Fencing is known for being highly competitive, which is why we are using its principles to create a tense and exciting gameplay experience. As Huizinga states in *Homo Ludens*, "Play is 'tense'... the more play bears the character of competition, the more fervent it will be. In gambling and athletics, it is at its height." This suggests that the more competitive a game is, the more engaging and intense it becomes. The competitive nature of fencing stems from its origins in practical sword fighting. Over time, the sport has evolved, and its rules have become far more complex than simply swinging a sword.

Modern fencing is divided into three disciplines: Sabre, Foil, and Épée. As indicated by the game's title, our design is based on Sabre. Sabre is one of the fastest sports in the Olympics,




where most rounds conclude with fencers meeting in the middle of the piste. This fast-paced nature demands strong improvisational skills to adapt attacking strategies in real-time.

Ultimately, a fencer's actions and decisions determine the outcome of each round.

One simple yet classic game that came to mind when designing our mechanics is Rock-Paper-Scissors. This game is relatively fair, as each choice can beat another, and its dynamic nature makes it engaging. Over time, players begin to recognize their opponent's tendencies, allowing for strategic adaptation. Huizinga also states, "Though play as such is outside the range of good and bad, the element of tension imparts to it a certain ethical value in so far as it means a testing of the player's prowess: his courage, tenacity, resources and, last but not least, his spiritual powers—his 'fairness.'" This highlights that while competition is exciting, a good game should also test a player's skill, patience, and sense of fair play.

In visual terms, Rock-Paper-Scissors forms a perfect stable triangle between its outcomes, ensuring statistical fairness, with each choice having an equal one-third chance to win, lose, or tie. This principle provides a solid foundation for our game. In fencing, three primary actions align with this logic—Attack, Lunge, and Feint. Attack beats Lunge because a Lunge involves stepping forward, while an Attack is more direct. Feint is a deceptive move meant to bait an opponent into attacking before launching a real attack, making it effective against Attack. However, Feint loses to Lunge, as a committed Lunge covers distance and can bypass the deception.

While this model works well conceptually, in its current state, it remains a simple renaming of Rock-Paper-Scissors. As Jesper Juul explains in *Half-Real*, "In the game design process, the



game designer must select which aspects of the fictional world to actually implement in the game rules. The player then experiences the game as a two-way process where the fiction of the game cues him or her into understanding the rules of the game, and, again, the rules can cue the player to imagine the fictional world of the game.” Simply mimicking hand gestures or calling out moves would lack the essence of fencing.


To enhance realism, we introduce the concept of Priority along with an additional action: Parry.

Priority is a crucial aspect of Sabre fencing, as it incentivizes fencers to initiate attacks.

However, determining who initiated an attack can be difficult, even with slow-motion cameras, often resulting in simultaneous calls. This is where Parry becomes an essential defensive strategy—it allows a fencer to block an opponent's attack and take over Priority. With Priority established, simultaneous movements guarantee victory for the player who holds it, reinforcing an important fencing strategy. In real fencing, a parry is much more complex, as it involves positioning the blade in different ways to stop an attack. Incorporating various parries increases the complexity, as the main focus is on the action itself rather than the technical details.

However, this does not mean that all attacks can be blocked, as a lunge can still be used to bypass a parry.


With the fully designed strategic combat flow, it is time to implement what Juul describes: “The player’s real-world actions have a metaphorical relation to the fictional in-game action: Pressing of a controller button at the right time means making a perfect serve.” In other words, since any sport carries an inherent risk of injury, and setting up a fencing piste in a short time for the Queen is impractical, the metaphorical relation between real-world actions and fictional in-game actions



becomes essential. Looking at the game as a whole, a card-based system where players place action cards each round serves as an effective representation of fencing actions. A priority token is assigned to the player who has Priority, and a Referee Call Chart determines the outcome of each move. Additionally, a player board with a fencing piste and scoreboard enhances the immersive experience.

As Juul states, “Rules can cue the player into imagining a world. Fiction can cue the player into understanding the rules of the game.” This idea has been a guiding principle in my design process. The game is not structured around a single action but rather simulates the dynamic nature of real fencing—where players continuously shift priority and execute an infinite range of actions as long as the round remains unresolved. The first player to reach 15 points wins, a rule directly inherited from real fencing, yet the game also grants players the ability to adapt, anticipate their opponent’s strategy, and refine their approach based on situational awareness.


This interplay between rules and fiction is what makes *Sabre Duel* "half-real": it exists within both structured, mechanical constraints and an evocative, imagined world. The game’s rules dictate how combat interactions function, ensuring a fair and competitive structure, while the fencing theme immerses players, reinforcing their understanding of strategic decision-making. The mechanics—such as tempo shifts, offensive and defensive maneuvers, and the constant back-and-forth—mirror the psychological and tactical aspects of real fencing, making the game feel both authentic and engaging. This duality of structured play and thematic immersion embodies the essence of "half-real" games, where the reality of game systems and the fiction of the setting work together to create a compelling experience.



Beyond the Queen's experience, the game carries broader implications for the public. As Michael Warner explains, "The public is a kind of social totality. Its most common sense is that of the people in general... But in each case, the public, as a people, is thought to include everyone within the field in question." This means that even though the game was designed for the Queen, its principles resonate with a wider audience. Fencing is not merely a sport but a historically and culturally significant practice that has shaped public discourse around discipline, honor, and competition. From European dueling traditions to its modern Olympic form, fencing has consistently represented a balance between physical prowess and intellectual strategy.

Additionally, Warner notes, "A public can also be a second thing: a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space." This highlights the role of spectatorship in fencing and gaming. Whether in a fencing bout or a board game, the experience is shaped by the presence of an audience who engages with the competition, reinforcing the communal nature of play. By translating fencing into an accessible game format, we invite the public to appreciate the sport's strategic depth while contributing to its cultural legacy. This transformation from an elite historical practice into an interactive experience ensures that fencing remains relevant in modern discourse, engaging new generations in its timeless principles of skill, strategy, and fair play.


When I was reading *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, one idea that stood out to me was their discussion on *Pong*. Why do people love *Pong*? While its simple mechanics and social nature—allowing players to engage with one another—certainly contribute to its appeal, what truly struck me was the idea that every game is unique. This, I believe, is a fundamental building block of game design. A game remains



engaging when players feel that each round offers a fresh experience, compelling them to invest hours mastering it.

Consider a game like *Go*. At its core, *Go* is as simple as placing stones on a board. However, what makes it so captivating—and why people dedicate years to refining their strategies—is the infinite range of possible moves and outcomes. Each match unfolds differently, presenting new challenges and opportunities, ensuring that no two games are ever the same. This dynamic nature is what keeps players engaged over time.

Looking at *Sabre Duel*, the same principle applies. It mirrors the strategic unpredictability of real fencing, where split-second decisions and psychological interplay define every match. Just as fencers must read their opponent's intentions and adapt tactics in real time, the game requires players to dynamically respond to each other's actions—whether attacking, feinting, or parrying. These mechanics ensure no two duels play out identically. While basic moves may *appear* similar, the branching possibilities of player choices create a cascade of unique outcomes. A delayed parry, a well-timed feint, or a risky aggressive attack can dramatically alter the course of a match, making each duel a product of the players' evolving strategies and reflexes. This unpredictability fosters lively social interaction, as participants analyze their decisions, bluffing attempts, and mistakes in real time. Unlike scripted games, *Sabre Duel*'s emergent gameplay ensures that the narrative of each match—its tension, momentum shifts, and eventual outcome—is authored entirely by the players themselves.



Moreover, *Sabre Duel* extends beyond the individual gameplay experience and contributes to a broader social and cultural landscape. As Salen and Zimmerman suggest, games are not just isolated systems but interactive experiences that facilitate communication, strategy, and competition. The game allows players to engage with one another in a meaningful way, much like *Pong* does, by fostering a shared competitive spirit. It also carries the historical and cultural significance of fencing, a sport deeply rooted in tradition, discipline, and intellectual challenge.

In essence, *Sabre Duel* embodies the qualities that make a game truly engaging: infinite strategic possibilities, social interaction, and an ever-changing play experience. It merges the competitive intensity of fencing with a structured, rule-driven game system, ensuring that players remain invested round after round. This combination of uniqueness and interaction is what makes great games timeless and continuously appealing.

References

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