

## **The Hits and Myths of Martial Arts** by Chris Hepler and Jennifer Brandes

### **Myth 1: Taking a martial art is the same as knowing how to fight.**

Whenever you listen to anyone talk about fighting, consider the source.

A martial art is a body of folklore, a tradition orally transmitted down several "generations" by master and student, modified by the personal preferences and needs of those involved. Depending on the learning environment, fighting and self-defense may be the class's focus, or could be passed over in favor of exercise, tournament fighting, or cultural and spiritual lessons. Every martial arts instructor has a different idea of what the art is used for, and what aspects or techniques are useful and useless when violence actually hits.

Some people look at this subjectivity and get discouraged, rejecting martial arts entirely and saying that they don't work in combat situations. This is like saying being taught a foreign language in high school is useless. It depends on the teacher and the student. Many people will never have to use it; most people can't get it right unless they are immersed; throwing too much knowledge out at once is as bad as too little; and those who don't make learning it a priority will only remember fragments under times of stress. The ones the knowledge works for are the ones who can make the skill seem "natural" whenever they need it.

Making use of martial arts means you must ultimately recognize what is meant for fighting and what was an "extra" designed to get the practitioner in physical and mental shape. Quite often, tradition has an unspoken reason behind it...and just as often, it is vestigial due to specific, no-longer-applicable circumstances.

For example jujitsu was created for samurai to fight other armored samurai who were well-protected against punches and kicks. However, throws, joint locks, and other grappling maneuvers still worked fine, and were in fact critical against assailants with swords. Now, while punches and kicks are obviously not *always* ineffective, these circumstances created an entire school of fighting which heavily favors grappling. The famous Brazilian variant of jujitsu, the Gracie system, teaches to swat the opponent's face as a distraction technique rather than advocating punching to the face at all -- reasoning that punching at high speeds in stressful situations could hurt their hand, and throwing and choking moves are more reliable.

Over-relying on a martial art's favored moves is especially dangerous when the martial art has turned into a sport. Judo and Greco-Roman wrestling are former fighting styles from which the deadliest techniques were removed to make for matches that didn't break murder laws. They can be reverse-engineered to become effective fighting styles with a little effort and some understanding of their principles, but learning them is not the same as training specifically to fight.

### **Myth 2: Self-defense is the same thing as fighting.**

Self-defense, the goal of most martial artists, is about keeping yourself alive. This is not merely knowing how to break someone's arm or even being able to run very fast -- it is recognizing all the factors that can threaten your life and negating them. This is everything from locking your doors at night to blocking a punch. The key to successfully

defending yourself is being aware of a potential threat and responding.

The **GURPS**, **Rolemaster**, **Legend of the Five Rings**, and **Shadowrun** systems basically have it right -- barring super powers, all the fighting skills in the world don't help if you get blind-sided by someone with a brick. A large aspect of self-defense is, therefore, noticing the guy lurking at the train station *before* he gives your character an impromptu lobotomy. Once you know he's there, you can run, get to a public place, and so on, avoiding fighting at all. Even if you choose to fight, it is a major advantage to control when and where "the fight starts," that is, when both combatants are acting at once. If the fight starts after the attacker knocks the victim down, pins her, and draws a knife, and only *then* does the victim start struggling, it's vastly different than two people agreeing to "put up their dukes."

In roleplaying games, the prelude to a fight is often ignored. Players figure that GMs will ask for a Perception test if there's an ambush planned, and if not, that it was unavoidable. Then the combat starts, and everyone concentrates on trading blows. To make combat more interesting and more vivid, take a holistic approach to self defense -- look for potential conflicts before they start and find creative ways out of it once punches start flying. Combat should be exciting for both GMs and players, an opportunity for both roleplaying and team building.

It can make for more realistic games if character awareness coincides with player awareness. And this calculating of the odds shouldn't drop once you start rolling dice. It's pretty easy to "beat the crap out of someone" if you have a mind to. The difficult thing is beating the crap out of someone *while they're trying to do the same to you* and walking away afterwards.

So use everything you've got, especially your friends. One advantage RPGs have over real life is that you're rarely going to be attacked alone. If the whole party pays attention to each others' actions, you can use teamwork to increase everyone's chances.

Don't wait to be told about the light glinting off the assassin's rifle on the roof above you -- if you think someone wants to kill you, tell the GM that you're watching the rooftops, and the alleys, and the guy from the bar who left right after you. Ask how many potential opponents there are...*before* the GM tells you to roll initiative. Keep an eye out for any six-packs of young men in leather and while you're at it, don't deal drugs or have sex with their girlfriends on their turf. Ask yourself if you can beat the opponents *before* you get in the fight, rather than trying it for a few rounds and then realizing you were supposed to scatter. And have a back-up plan ready -- just because your first punch doesn't work doesn't mean you can't splash beer in their eyes and run while they're blinded.

This is where you can pull out a trump card on a well-designed martial artist character: a sky-high athletics or running skill. If you're a bad fighter, you can get out of range (and find cover in case they have guns or bows). And if you're a good fighter, it means no villain's henchman is getting away from you without a good horse or a car.

### **Myth 3: My martial art can make you unbeatable.**

Barring divine assistance, this is a heap of warm dreck.

Every martial art at one time or another has claimed that at the highest levels, its practitioners cannot be defeated. This was what the Chinese Boxers of "Boxer Rebellion" fame spread as their propaganda; through exercises called qigong or "chi kung," they

would become immune to bullets. (For a more thorough analysis of qigong, see "Why Aren't Those Peasants Bowing?") In this particular branch of history, British guns proved beyond a doubt that nobody is invulnerable.

However, to deny such claims from a martial artist while in his school generally means you'd better be ready to back up your skepticism by proving him wrong. And a wide variety of physics tricks allow martial artists to seem much more formidable than they are. A savvy martial arts teacher knows that if he never gets into a fight he cannot win, he is, by definition, undefeated.

When it comes to simulating the rules of reality in a roleplaying game, be aware that martial arts training *helps* a person learn the techniques to survive slugfests or shoot-outs. But just because you thought "martial artist character" when you wrote down the numbers doesn't mean the game is somehow less dangerous. No matter how hot your character, she will eventually run into someone who is better than she at one or more of the seven major ways to win a fight.

Each way gets hyped in its turn, but each is only a part of the whole. For instance, you may be so kill-crazy that you think nothing will stop you, but if your opponent has that same berserk rage, your advantage is gone, leaving the battle up to pure chance -- not something to stake your character's life on. Sometimes one will be the obvious deciding factor, but more often it is a combination.

\* **Intent.** You see this in a lot of (pseudo-)Japanese media. The "body of a rock," *tameshi*, or "killer instinct" is a serious part of fighting. If your opponent folds when hit once, you just have to get in that one hit. Conversely, if you can take your attacker's first punch without flinching, he may lose heart. Fear and indecision are a fighter's worst enemy. They make you freeze and keep you from starting, controlling, or ending the fight.

Intent isn't hard to get in a role-playing game: there is no risk to you as a player. You just need to decide to fight hard. However, the complete destruction of a beloved character is not easy to face, and there may be times when no lesser risk will defeat a worthy villain. The flaw of having this killer intention is that it is easy to concentrate on defeating the enemy and forget the true goal -- not to be maimed or killed yourself.

\* **Strength.** Big and strong people have a serious advantage -- if they forget all else, they can shove the other person around. Regardless of the skill level of either participant, a single second of inattention, shock, or pain can devolve it into a brawl.

While greater hitting power is a benefit in any style, strength really shines in wrestling. Nods should go to the game systems who combine agility-type attributes with brawling skills when hitting, but strength with the skill when wrestling. There is a reason wrestlers are put into weight classes. Many escapes from locks or holds require body positioning and leverage to work; if the stronger opponent is also skilled, he can match movements and go from one lock to another, maintaining physical and psychological pressure.

However, relying on strength makes for poor strategy. If you run into someone larger, you're out of luck. In a role-playing game, there is *always* someone stronger than you; even if you create the strongest human in the world, an above-average giant can still knock you into next week. And even a giant can't out-muscle a group of ten others. The strategy boils down to always choosing fights with weaker opponents, also known as being a bully.

\* **Speed.** As many game systems recognize, getting hurt slows people down. This means that if you are fast enough to get in the initial strike, your opponent will keep degenerating, making the fight one-sided. Just as important as getting in the initial blow, however, is keeping up a continuous stream of attacks, leaving the opponent too bewildered to do anything but dodge.

In our own roleplaying campaigns, we apply wound penalties immediately, including dropping Initiative scores for the current round. If the character is so unfortunate to lose her initiative entirely, he isn't able to act. This is a quick and easy way to simulate momentary stunning without having to involve a separate die roll.

The disadvantage to speed is that if you are blitzing the opponent, you are committing yourself, mentally or physically. Constant attack only works so long as it also prevents the opponent from attacking and you retain enough awareness to defend if you must. Otherwise, you're doing a glorified version of charging, and can be countered by someone with a level head.

\* **Endurance.** Fighting is tiring, nervous work, and staying "on" requires energy. Adrenaline shock from the fight-or-flight reflex can set in halfway through, turning your muscles to water. Strange as it may seem, people forget to breathe while fighting, and tired or hurt people fall back on simple or ingrained moves. While martial training helps increase endurance through cardiovascular exercise and body toughening, this is not something to rely on if you're trying to out-box an iron golem, or if you are outnumbered.

\* **Technique.** This is the actual skill and timing of hitting someone just right. It's one thing to know where the pressure points on the body are. It's another to nail them on a moving opponent who is trying the same on you, or to remember how to hold your hand after you just got smacked and are lashing out. An imperfect grip means weapons can be knocked from the hand with a simple whack.

The trouble with too much emphasis on technique is that each one takes a long time to learn and each style only stresses a limited number. If your training was more focused than thorough, you won't know half of them exist. And if you spend your time checking to make sure you are in a formal stance or crisply blocking everything thrown at you, you may miss opportunities to control the fight.

\* **Surprise.** Surprise is the art of becoming something the opponent doesn't know how to handle. Even some stupid and outrageous moves can work -- if the opponent hasn't seen them before. Do you expect a guy carrying his T-shirt at the beach to suddenly ram it into your stomach, *before* you realize there's a knife inside? Do you expect your opponents to scream "Where are the snake people?" while they're getting in range? Lie down? Cartwheel as they attack you? Have the juice from hot peppers on their fingers? Give you a business card with very faint writing, so you take your eyes off them as you strain to read it? Surprise can make speed much less of a factor, as the brain tries to process something unrelated to fighting and is only clued in when it's too late.

The flaw of surprise is if the opponent doesn't blink, you are hung out to dry. *World of Darkness: Combat* rules notwithstanding, cartwheeling does not actually make you immune to enemy attack.

Surprise is a subject both players and GMs should consider honestly. Being told "you're surprised" when you can see violence coming (in and out of character) is a lousy feeling, as is someone arguing that her character "would have expected it" when she is obviously stunned. The gamemastering tricks from **Paranoia** are unparalleled in this

regard. Yelling "Whap!" and ruling that a character is hit if a player doesn't say "I duck!" in three seconds can keep players attentive. Crafty players should be thinking up distractions in their spare time.

\* **Making them play your game.** This is the most variable way of beating someone, and it's where the real "art" in "martial art" comes in. The easiest way to sum it up is going around an opponent rather than through them. This means timing, ingenuity, knowing the opponent's strengths and weaknesses, and capitalizing on them. If you're up against someone bigger and tougher than you, or if they outnumber you five to one, *don't just stand there and trade shot for shot*. They can rely on that -- you can't. You are playing their game, making it a fight of attrition. That's how they win, and if you don't see it happening, you have a problem.

Often, the real point of an RPG fight is not to kill every single lackey or critter that comes at you, but rather to defeat the entire situation by reaching your goal. GMs can use minor combats to waste the party's primary weapons, so they're out of spells when facing down the Great and Horrible Pit Fiend in its own dimension. This is an especially dangerous catch in games and in real life when someone feels over-empowered by having a weapon or knowing a martial art and thinking this makes them bulletproof, death-proof, or rape-proof. If that was all it took, no one would have invented guns.

If you like your character, your main focus is not getting her killed. To do so, you must recognize your attackers' strengths and weaknesses in each of these areas, and frustrate them. And to make sure the attacker plays your game, you need to know your own potential, since you won't always know what they can do.

Weapons give the wielder a great advantage, multiplying the force a combatant can dish out. But until you are dead, there's always a way to change the rules of the game so the opponent's weapon doesn't work. A heavy machine gun won't fire if someone telekinetically flicks on the safety. The Death Star's superlaser can't hit an X-Wing worth beans. Weapons do not replace thinking.

This force multiplier principle works in hand-to-hand fighting as well. The trick is timing, figuring out the opponent's effective range, and staying inside or outside it. For instance, kicks hurt a great deal if delivered right. However, if you're nose to nose with someone and continuously follow them as they backpedal, that kick may never get off the ground, and can even knock them down if they're off-balance enough. Similarly, it's obvious that it's not a good idea for normal humans to block a speeding baseball bat with their forearm. However, if they get inside its reach before it gets up to speed, they can block a pair of moving hands just fine. It is even possible to react to small cues and get out of the path of a bullet before the gunman thinks to fire...it's just ungodly scary, difficult, and you'd better know if you can do it before you try.

There are several techniques specifically taught in martial arts to change ranges, keeping the opponent where the practitioner is most comfortable. A t'ai chi shove is meant to keep an opponent off you, while a wing chun "entry" -- a quick skip forward with a knee covering the midsection and hands out -- gets in the opponent's face to both close distance and get a reaction. Neither is an attack; it's the combination with other factors that makes them deadly.

One last variable is the environment. But just because it varies doesn't mean you can't use it. Horatius and his buddies held off an army because they chose to fight on a narrow bridge, where the invaders could only send forth three men at once. I was once in

an AD&D game set in a flying castle, where the prime villain's first action was to throw up an anti-magic shell so the spellcasters couldn't touch him. My character disintegrated the floor under the bad guy, who went for a long drop. These are examples of letting the terrain do the fighting for you. Environment also includes all the other uncontrollables -- who's uphill, downwind, well-lit, who caught a cold the night before, and who's standing in front of the plate glass window. It is of great use to a GM whenever "critical fumbles" or spectacular successes come up.

You can adapt this to RPGs by simply describing your characters' actions vividly and thinking about what all the combatants want and expect to have happen in a violent situation. If the GM is roleplaying, too, you can get a much better feel for the fight scene.

**Myth 4: There's no difference between "fighting" or "kicking butt" and killing or maiming people.**

So you have a character with a katana skill higher than Musashi's, a shiny new katana, and when the Gang Member™ hassles you, you behead him and go back to your drink, just like Ben Kenobi in *Star Wars*, right? Not likely.

Let's look at that famous fight scene from start to finish. Old Ben was in "a wretched hive of scum and villainy," where criminals with death sentences hung out and got drunk. Even so, he tried to buy the jerks a drink and defuse the situation first. Luke obviously didn't get the hint to move to the other side of the bar, and Ben had to deal with the result. On top of that, one of the thugs pulled a blaster gun, incriminating himself by making the first move a potentially lethal one. Thus, the other patrons saw Ben as justified. And still, the cops (stormtroopers) came to investigate. Ben got out of there before he got jailed or shot for resisting arrest, but it was close.

Rarely, in RPGs, do people notice all these factors. More likely, characters assume any "attack," even verbal, is meant lethally and respond immediately in kind. This is just wrong. There are several degrees of intent in opponents, depending on what they want. Standard "punks who come up to you in a bar" are often trying to establish dominance, and want to see you knuckle under or flee in fear. These fights are usually over women, money, or their ego and reputation. On the other hand, revenge-seekers, mobsters, or the military -- that is, killers -- will make the fight a personal war for as long as it lasts.

When people miscalculate the intention of their opponents, a lot of people end up shocked or dead. A tough is often pressured by his friends to fight, or sees fighting as a legitimate way to establish dominance so no one else will try to beat him up or kill him. If you up the stakes in a way that wins his respect, he backs off. But if you up the stakes in a way that scares him, or tarnishes his rep, he has to get it back, which often means coming back with friends or a gun to go after the offender "for real." Ben Kenobi avoided this by both leaving the planet and leaving no survivors.

The brief talk, threat display or "interview" that often happens just before a fight is where you can win the opponent's respect, establish yourself as a threat, or both. This, too, is an aspect of self-defense. When the intent is clear (which rarely happens, especially when waving weapons), the combatants can respect one another, meaning either no fight at all, or a "friendly fight." This is part of the rhetoric you see in a lot of militaristic fiction about honor. Honor is a quick way of saying "both of us agree not to make this any worse than necessary." It is the only thing that draws a distinction between

a soldier and anyone else who kills human beings on a semi-regular basis: the capability, no matter what he says or thinks or wants, to stop.

**Myth 5: Fights last ten minutes or more, at which time the hero can make an impressive comeback.**

When two people really want to hurt each other, the conflict is usually resolved in three to five seconds. There's usually posturing beforehand, jockeying for position, and mouthing off, but actual strikes take nearly no time. The authors of this article can throw about five punches a second that could seriously rattle someone -- and, in truth, that technique is not hard to learn. The current world record for speed punching is 8.2 a second (held by William Cheung), but open-hand strikes can be thrown even faster. This assumes a stationary target that isn't knocked off its feet or backpedaling in pain.

Wrestling is another story. When two people lock up and start pushing rather than striking, not a lot of real damage is done unless a combatant gets pitched onto a hard surface or someone tries a joint break. They may pin one another down, but are too close to do much but bite or start tearing at eyes and ears ("dirty fighting"). If the wrestlers are out for blood, you'll see those happen quickly. But when a grappling stylist gloms onto another fighter in a tournament, her primary concern is not letting go, which (usually) keeps her from getting hurt. Then she takes her time (sometimes as long as a half an hour) isolating a part of the opponent's body to put in extreme pain.

In either case, comebacks are rare, unless the beaten participant isn't badly hurt. Pain makes the brain freeze up, and actual skill starts to disappear.

So what of *Rocky*? Why do boxing matches last so long?

A fair number of reasons. First, most boxers don't go all-out the second the bell rings. They stalk each other. They analyze. And they keep moving. Hitting a moving target means it can shed off much of the energy; this turns many boxing matches into a game of patience, some of which is extraordinary. The boxers give each other jabs to the face to try and get the opponent to lose their mind and start flailing. When that happens, they stay relaxed, keep moving, and when the opponent runs out of steam, they clobber them. And yes, they also train to take a lot of punishment.

But if they were allowed to trip the opponent and sit on them...if their hands weren't padded so they might hold the opponent with one hand and hit them with the other...or knock each other down and sandwich the opponent's head between their fist and the floor...how long do you think the matches would last?

**Myth 6: A fight only concerns the combatants.**

Ironically enough, while the authors of this article were playing an **Earthdawn** session to take a break from writing, a fight broke out ten feet away from us between two drunk individuals, and the table we were rolling dice on was up-ended to be used as a weapon. We didn't know the people and we weren't involved in their fight, but they still managed to ruin our night, and piss us off enough to call security on them. Every single unnamed character will have a reaction to a nearby combat, if only talking to the police afterwards or running for help.

Defeated opponents are obviously potential threats, but simply killing your defeated opponents doesn't end of the story, either. What's the number one motivation in a martial arts movie? Revenge for someone slain! So what happens when your characters

are doing the slaying? Every person they waste has had parents, and probably has living relatives, friends, and maybe lovers. They may not all be butt-kickers themselves, but if they're determined, they can find someone who is -- the cops, the mob, "adventurers," or the local military.

NPCs are also not without brains. Aware ones will try to recognize potential trouble -- like adventuring groups -- before it starts. After watching a few fights in a medieval setting, many people will realize that anyone who can reach you with a sharp weapon without you noticing can probably give you a mortal wound in under a second. Legal consequences aside, that's a very short time between alive and dead. So in most sword and sorcery settings, people are going to be very nervous if six armored strangers with swords and daggers walk into their local drinking hole. They're going to want more than words to guarantee those swords will not kill people they care about -- a "peace-bond" tie, a "no weapons" policy enforced by the bouncer, similar weapons, or at least distance and clutter to give them some warning time. This is, of course, a nice way for the GM to down-power mighty player characters to provide some drama in the next fight.

### **Myth 7: Martial artists don't need or use weapons.**

This myth is promoted, mostly unconsciously, by sport- and tournament-oriented martial arts common in the United States. They want to see students perform a few basic defenses against a committed thrust or slash with a stick or knife. The hypothetical assailant they are practicing against seems limited to two or three techniques, and doesn't resist, feint, or even counter very quickly.

This myth was also the standard for a long time in Hollywood, which knows weapons are a lot more dangerous to work with on a movie set. Bladed weapons also mean the hero can't get really pounded on and make a dramatic comeback -- it's difficult to do so convincingly with a sword sticking out of your gut.

Most martial arts developed as a way to give an oppressed people an edge against the ruling class. Most such ruling classes banned weapons of war (such as swords) for anyone except themselves, their armies, and their political allies. This led to the perfection of bare-hand techniques *and* the use of a great deal of improvised weaponry among martial artists. Arguably, the weapons came first.

For instance, when the Spanish conquered the Philippines, they banned the natives from using their swords, kris knives, and other blades. However, they certainly couldn't prevent rattan trees from growing in the wild. The local fighters soon discovered that ninety percent of sword techniques also worked for beating people with a stick. Many of their Spanish conquerors didn't think that natives carrying sticks were a serious threat. This gave rise to the modern arnis de mano, also called kali or escrima. It is a martial art that starts off teaching how to fight with one or two rattan sticks, and then extrapolates it to machetes, short knives, and bare hands. The United States Army currently ranks arnis as the number one deadliest martial art in the world, and incorporates many of its movements in its hand-to-hand knife combat for SEAL teams and other Special Forces.

Similarly, when Okinawa was conquered by the Japanese, many of its boxing masters tried to make improvised weapons of wood, since metal was expensive and in some cases even knives were banned by the ruling Satsuma clan. The result was weapons made from farm and fishing implements; a mill handle (the tonfa, later adapted for U.S.

police as a "nightstick"), a grain-threshing flail (nunchaku), a six-foot staff (bo), paired sickles (kama), and a fork used to impale poultry (sai). There are some more obscure weapons that include "steel knuckles" made from a horse stirrup (techo), an oar (eku), and a sai-like spear (nunte), among many others.

Please note that the above weapons are *Okinawan*, some taken from Chinese progenitors, so the next time you see Japanese "ninja" using them in movies, sigh a bit.

The ancestors of karate were not considered complete without at least some training in weapons, because the weapons had a number of benefits. First, if you have ever been of the opinion that you could take a strike in order to dish one out or give a lackadaisical block against a solid strike, weapons cure this illusion very quickly. Nothing focuses the mind like having weapons swung at you. Secondly, weapons illustrate the importance of range and flowing from one movement to the next without stopping to think. Any part of your body that gets in range can be hit, and when both combatants are too close, this doesn't close options, only gives the first combatant to move a chance to back up and strike simultaneously.

The idea that a martial artist is somehow deadlier without weapons doesn't work. While the hand is more versatile than a weapon in the sense that it can grab or hit with many different surfaces, weapons have a distinct advantage. Weapons have no nerves. If you swing the weapon in the way of a powerful kick, it's synonymous with attacking their limb. It's not an even trade. The leg loses.

It gets much uglier when a sharp implement is used. A good knife fighter can hang back and slice up your limbs with quick, light cuts, and then wait while you bleed yourself dry. You have to end the fight by taking her out in one decisive movement -- which means she can wait for the rush and go for your heart. It's nasty, it's not fair, and it's awfully effective.

Why do you see so many unarmed heroes in the movies snatch weapons away from their opponents? Besides taking it with a grain of salt because they have the script on their side, watch their movements carefully. After some flashy weapon twirling, both actors rush in to where our hero can grab the handle or hit the bad guy, who of course falls down after one stroke. Gun disarms are done when the gunman sticks the weapon far forward, preferably dramatically in the hero's face.

You know...where he can reach it.

### **Myth 8: Fighting with two weapons is difficult and confusing.**

I've taught people basic arnis two-weapon patterns which they had incorporated into body memory after twenty minutes. The two-hand principle is very simple. One blocks, the other strikes. You then alternate hands as fast as you can.

With a tiny bit of footwork and aiming, this is the equivalent of teaching someone to hit anything that gets into range, and while not excellent against experienced fighters, that little bit of knowledge will take you quite far. Paired weapons of the same style, length, and weight are just like using extensions of your two hands. It is uneven-length weapon combinations such as stick and dagger that require brain power.

### **Myth 9: Weapons are heavy.**

Call it the bigger fish phenomenon. Somewhere, fantasy writers started calling swords eight or ten pounds of steel...or even forty or eighty pounds of steel. Where did

this idea come from?

If you pick up a sword at a convention or the local knife-collector's place in a shopping mall, it may feel like ten or twenty pounds. But how do you really know? How many long pieces of metal do you pick up on a daily basis?

I thought my backpack full of gaming books weighed forty pounds until I put it on a doctor's scale and found it weighed seventeen. I then put my hand-and-a-half sword on it. Ten pounds? Twenty, you say?

Four point four.

My katana? Three point two without the scabbard.

A rattan escrima stick? Seven *ounces*.

These weapons feel heavier in the grip than they actually are for a number of reasons. The first is the lever principle, which is based on the phenomenon of angular momentum. If you swing a sword in an arc, the end of the sword is covering more distance in the same time as the handle. This is why it hurts: if you hit them with the far end as you swing, it will be at a greater velocity; velocity squared times weight equals impact divided by a very thin surface area (a blade), creating a much greater energy transfer than if you'd used your hand.

But doing so also creates more work (in the physics definition of the term) than if you'd done the same motion with a shorter object. For instance, if you pick up a five-pound hand barbell and roll your hand around a little, it will seem pretty light. If you pick up a four-foot-long, five-pound sword and make the same hand movement, it will be more work, because some of the weight you have to move is distributed over the length of the blade. Each time you turn your wrist, you are moving the tip several feet. What you are feeling is the work, not the weight.

Weapons, if they are the real thing, are used *quickly*, especially if it's against someone who has one or two of their own and is trying to beat you to a hit. The heavier the weapon is, the less chance you will have to get it in position. Now apply this over the course of a war. Were you a soldier in a medieval army, which would you rather carry across forty miles of marching; the four-pound sword or the eight-pound sword? Which would you rather swing for a battle when you don't know how long it will last or how many opponents you'll face?

Rest assured that fighting with even light weapons tires you out. My first escrima seminar was three hours of working with a pair of one-pound generic hardwood sticks. Though I had worked with seven-ounce sticks before on my own, by the end of the seminar, I experimentally flicked my hand downward and the stick fell to the floor. I didn't even know my numbed fingers had given out. Absently, as I was listening to the guro talk, I did it again. This is *not* the result you want on a battlefield.

There are a number of reasons for my fatigue; first, while the rest of my muscles were in reasonable shape, I'd rarely used the ones necessary for fencing or stick-fighting. The closest thing most modern Americans get to it is yard work with axes or sledgehammers, or perhaps a tennis game. Even so, more body motion goes into both activities. Add to this the difference between doing exercises in the air and making contact with a partner's stick. Exercises that make contact make you tense and exhaust you much more; it's why it's not out of the question to do three hundred kicks in a kung fu class but sixty good ones against a heavy bag leaves people weak.

This brings us to the question of how heavy a weapon has to be to crack armor.

The answer is, not much. The Society for Creative Anachronism today slugs it out on weekends in full or partial armor. They "only" use rattan sticks, and injuries are still reasonably common. They can't use metal weapons because most of them are dangerous enough to injure even through armor.

Take the historical "battle axe." The axe that Robert the Bruce used was not a two-handed, double-bladed monstrosity. It's actually more like a long-handled hatchet. But the physics of a few pounds at the end of the stick, combined with a wedge-shaped blade at a right angle to the swinging shaft means it can get most of the way through thin steel, and if it can't, it'll break collarbones and skulls with concussion. Even if the helm remains intact, a knockdown puts the opponent is on the ground. If the assailant sticks around, the *next* shot isn't likely to be the "glancing blow" the factoid books say metal armor could deflect.

So what good is a knight's plate armor if it doesn't stop swords and axes? It stops half-hearted blows from inept knights, tired knights, and incidental cuts from crashing into someone with an edged weapon. This allows a knight to dominate the peasantry and defeat many of them without bleeding to death.

**Myth 10: You can mash someone's nose bones into their brain and kill them with a single mighty palm strike.**

This would require some serious "mighty" or supernatural help. It's *theoretically* possible to pull this off, but it's quite a trick. The palm-heel is a powerful strike that can really knock someone off their feet. The palm can take a lot of impact and conforms nicely to the face, even if the opponent is very tall.

But the nose is mostly cartilage, not bone. Cartilage is reasonably squishy, so if you were to get it moving as a solid piece, you'd have to hit faster than the cartilage could compress (pretty darn fast). At that point, you'd have to break off bits of the bony septum just above it, and knock them through two little holes in the skull (veins and nasal passages) and into their frontal lobes. The frontal lobes, of course, control mostly higher thought processes. You can blow off the front of your face and frontal lobes with a shotgun under your chin, and still not die for a few minutes. If you want the fun stuff that shuts off heart functioning, you'd do a lot better to take out the *back* of the head, around the base of the skull.

**Myth 11: All martial arts look like Tae Kwon Do.**

Not by a long shot. TKD is probably the most popular martial art in America, followed closely by Shotokan karate, and quite honestly, lots of gamers have taken one or the other. (The most popular martial art in the world, actually, is t'ai chi -- mostly because millions of Chinese practice it.) Tae kwon do is what you see in most movies and American television like the *Power Rangers*, *Buffy*, and *Xena*. It uses lots of aerial and high kicks, emphasizes flexibility, and stresses fighting at relatively long ranges, standing up, with a lot of room. This is perfect for movie cameras and audiences who want a show.

Its punches are horizontal, and hit with the first two knuckles. Practitioners wear a *gi*, and a colored belt indicating their rank. It's not unusual to spin around and kick someone in the head -- as a matter of fact, this is encouraged in tae kwon do tournaments, which often give two points for hitting the head, allow no direct punching to the face, and don't count blows to the back. Fighting under these rules in real life, however, may fall

into that "playing the opponent's game" category mentioned above.

By comparison, jujitsu, aikido, and judo practitioners' emphasis is far more on grabbing the opponent, breaking their balance, and dumping them or immobilizing them in a painful lock. Practitioners wear a heavy, quilted *gi* that can take the stress of a human body being picked up and thrown many times a day. High-ranking practitioners in jujitsu and aikido wear a black skirt called a *hakama*. This skirt, by the way, hides their footwork, and some actually have a back support that enforces proper posture.

Taijutsu, the unarmed combat style of the ninja, deserves its own special mention. It combines kicks and punches with the locks and throws of jujitsu, but is not the stuff you see in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* movies. Though ninja clans definitely emphasized gymnastics as a part of their harsh training, and they do have some neat moves to roll out of locks and spin people over, they really didn't believe in a stand-up fight. They needed martial techniques to take out sentries, pin people down and suffocate them in their beds, and to fight off one or two folks before they could get to their weapons and get the heck out. If they were going to run into armored samurai who trained eight hours a day in cutting people up, they were going to *lose*. Their favored kick is a stomping sort to the hips or knees to knock someone down so the ninja wouldn't be chased. Lots of their hand techniques include shots to the throat, eyes, and pressure points for the same reason.

Though karate styles resemble tae kwon do superficially, there are differences. The Japanese-grown Shotokan karate and its offshoot Kyokushinkai karate are probably closest, though they emphasize lower stances and sliding the feet rather than stepping. The majority of karate styles, by the way, are not Japanese, but Okinawan. Most of the Okinawan schools use about 70% hand techniques and 30% foot techniques, have *very* low and sometimes pigeon-toed stances, and work with weapons. These styles include the two most popular ones of shorin-ryu and goju-ryu, as well as their synthesis, isshin-ryu (recognizable by its consistently vertical fists when punching), and uechi-ryu and shorei-ryu. Most of the traditional versions do not advocate kicking above the waist. Though our research is not exhaustive, we have yet to see a movie that takes full advantage of what these karate styles have to offer. I believe *The Karate Kid* series were choreographed in uechi-ryu, but the movements are somewhat sloppy, and fairly slow.

In China, the one thousand or more kung fu styles should be divided into northern and southern styles, and a few progenitors. They tend to have a great variety of techniques, including some "esoteric" stuff that is meant to rip pieces (like ears) off the opponent or blind them, and dozens of different ways to hold your hand rather than a fist. Kung fu styles don't wear *gis*. If a modern kung fu student isn't wearing sweat pants and a T-shirt, the outfit is more like pajamas with a sash rather than a belt, and black sashes may or may not indicate high rank.

What you see in Jackie Chan movies and most Hong Kong flicks is lots and lots of wu t'shu (also spelled "guoshu" or "kuoshu"). This is a martial art that was a blend of many long-fist styles and standardized to be a national symbol of the People's Republic of China in the 1950s. It's got wide-swinging, hooking punches, spinning and aerial kicks, and weapons galore.

Northern styles tend to be "hard," use a lot of long stances, use dozens of weapons, take up a good deal of room, and toughen the body through painful work. However, there are so many styles it is hard to generalize. Certainly Chang Chuan,

Hsing-I, and White Crane fit these stereotypes. However, Monkey style, the circular Ba Gua (or "Pa Kwa"), and T'ai Ch'i are comparatively soft martial arts with fewer battlefield weapons involved.

Tibetan white crane is visually distinctive because it is a true "long-arm" and long-range form. It hardly ever draws the hands close to the body, preferring to leave them fully extended. The practitioner whips from side to side, knocking away the opponent's arms with one and hitting them with the other. They also train to strike straight up and down more so than most styles, hitting the groin, nose, or collarbone with great bludgeoning effect.

Southern styles are stereotyped as having more hand techniques, and Southern Praying Mantis, Wing Chun, and White Eyebrow certainly emphasize very in-close, frenetic flurries of fists, palms, and fingers. Choy Li Fut and Hung Gar, though Southern, resemble Northern ones slightly more.

As an aside, the kung fu style of kempo and its somewhat-related American version of karate, kenpo, resemble most closely a mixture of Okinawan and southern Chinese styles. What is basically "the" kenpo movie is *The Perfect Weapon*, which also displays a little double-weapon work from arnis de mano.

Arnis was heavily influenced by (or evolved parallel to) wing chun kung fu, but while the two espouse the same principles and are seen as very combat-ready martial arts by military professionals, they are very visually distinctive.

Wing chun likes maintaining posture and balance. Given the choice between ducking and blocking, wing chun fighters generally will cover themselves with blocks and try to maintain contact with the opponent, to fight like fencers who feel the opponent's blade and follow it along up to the target. Unlike many systems, it spends little time or emphasis on throws, primarily because it trains to avoid a grappling situation whenever possible. They'd much rather take your balance for a quarter-second and hit you than risk a half-second trying to throw you.

Arnis, because it teaches weapons very early on, moves the body much more, ducking and clearing long distances with total commitment, to get inside an opponent's weapon range. It covers an entire gamut of weapons, from staff to stick to fist to elbow to wrestling (dumog). Ideally, a good arnis guro will teach you everything you need to know about fighting and they'll do it quickly. But by spreading itself out, most arnis training does not have quite the same demand for refusing to give the opponent any grip whatsoever the way wing chun does, and at the lower levels, arnis is less concerned with form and precision.

Incidentally, if you are primarily familiar with a martial art through formalized practice and "forms," or "kata," you are not necessarily seeing all of the style. While most American karate schools teach that the movements in their kata are simple combinations of blocking and striking, ancient karate in the days of the samurai looked a lot more like jujitsu than most modern practitioners think. Most kata which are practiced in the air can be used at much closer ranges than most sensei teach. The "retreating hand" that tucks at the waist or underneath the arm is not there for show (nor is it necessarily an elbow strike to a second opponent behind you). If you want a real eye-opening exercise, practice a kata in which every pulling-back motion is done with the opponent's wrist or elbow firmly in your grip, dragging your opponent off-balance and into your strike. Half of the awkward "blocks" or "strikes" are, in fact, throws, joint breaks and pressure-point

manipulation.

**Myth 12: A style is a style.**

Politics enters into martial arts all the time, and not just in inter-school competition. Two common events can divide a style -- when the grand master dies, and when someone travels or blends it with something else.

When a grand master dies, the succession is not always clear. For example, take the goju-ryu school of karate. After its founder Chojun Miyagi died, there were at least four people who were convinced they were the next guiding force of goju-ryu. Japanese goju-ryu formed under Gogen Yamaguchi, as well as two or more varieties of Okinawan goju-ryu (Shodokan under Higa Seikichi, and Jundokan under Eiichi Miyazato) a third which concentrated on weapons (Mateyoshi Shimpo's Kodokan), and a sub-style called American goju-ryu developed for United States karateka by Peter Urban, which of course has its own divisions. Our data gets sketchy around here, because the majority of martial arts history is transmitted orally by people learning the style. But it's clear that which school is the "real" goju-ryu is pretty subjective.

Certain instructors in kung fu historically settled this question by fighting over the successorship. One example of this type is covered in "Why Aren't Those Peasants Bowling?" But the most common changes today are simply modifying the classical forms in a subtle manner so that an instructor can tell at a glance where the student learned their art. For role-playing games, this is a great excuse to not only make histories of the fighting styles of the characters, but to base plots off the shifts in loyalties, and who knows the hidden techniques.

**Recommended Reading:**

If you're interested in learning more about "real-life" fighting, refer to the reading list below. Most of them can be found in martial arts supply stores. And as you find out more about the wide world of conflict, hopefully you can take a fresh look -- and a serious look -- at martial arts and combat. Learning these lessons somewhere more lethal than on a page or in a training hall is not something we would recommend.

For your games, however, this article is just a guideline. After all, in role-playing games, myths do come true -- if they're entertaining enough.

*FistStickKnifeGun* by Geoffrey Canada. This is Canada's account of growing up in Harlem, New York, and how he returned there to teach tae kwon do and keep the kids out of trouble in the early '90s, when the crack epidemic was at its worst. An informative book about street psychology, crystallized in one incident that explains why he was once ready to kill someone over a basketball.

*The Martial Arts Sourcebook*, by Dan Corcoran. Other than the lists of U.S. karate tournament winners if you're into that sort of thing, this book has reviews of hundreds of martial arts movies, and a listing of just how many official martial arts styles exist. And even they can't get them all.

*The Complete Guide to Kung Fu Fighting Styles*, by Jane Hallander. A well-researched and illustrative book that compares most of the prominent kung fu styles with explanations of how and why they came about.

*Ambushes, Cheap Shots, and Other Lessons, Pool Cues, Beer Bottles, and*

*Baseball Bats, and Violence, Blunders, and Fractured Jaws* by Marc "Animal" MacYoung. There are more in this series, but these are the core books that explain basic principles of self-defense for the uninitiated. They're also completely irreverent, extremely funny, and very serious. The first and third are a little more atmospheric; the second deals with weapon fighting and is a little more "how-to."

*Defend Yourself! Every Woman's Guide to Defending Her Life*, by Matt Thomas. Matt Thomas is the founder of Model Mugging, and points out in very evocative language that while male martial arts instructors advocate avoiding fights by saying "if it's just money, give the guy your wallet, it's not worth fighting over," for women it's often not about money. Most martial arts courses don't teach a lot of rape defense, gun disarms, or how to get off the ground with two assailants pinning you. This book does, in a very real way.

*The Karate Dojo*, by Peter Urban. This book is mostly included as a contrast to the others. The preface says that even if his history of karate is not the way it was, it's about the way karate should have been, which about sums it up. The golden age of karate and kung fu stories are worth a look for RPG campaign source material.

*The FBI Uniform Crime Report*, at [www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov). The FBI publishes one of these every year, and it has useful (and free) statistics if you've ever wondered where, when, or how common one kind of crime is over another. It's particularly handy for a modern or dark-future campaign to get a lot of the terminology down.