



THE DUELIST

A chaotic non-player character who likes to make people pay

by Arthur Collins

Rain fell steadily outside on the balcony, running off to fill the ruts in the road. The chancellor sat at his desk, his expression as sullen as the sky, but lit by no flashes such as occasionally brightened his office. The council meeting had not gone well. The king had scorned his advice again, and turned to the ever-more-popular young Lord Alfstan of Golvring, who kept up his prattle about cleansing the government of corruption. Honest men are dangerous, thought the chancellor. But what to do? Thunder growled in answer to his mood.

After a time, a change came over the chancellor's face. Honest men are dangerous to others, he thought, but *honorable* men — young, valiant, *noble*, honorable men — they can be made a danger to themselves. Quickly, he fetched writing materials and wrote a brief note, without signature or seal. He called for a trusted lackey, gave him the missive, and said only, "Leave this with the innkeeper at the Laughing Trout." The lackey glanced at the address, which said only *Holgrim*. The chancellor grinned as the messenger headed for the rain-soaked street below. . . .

"It's going on right under my nose, Gunnar!" The fat man almost choked on his outcry. His fellow merchant only sipped his beer and said, "Calm down, Wulfram. People will notice." But that hardly seemed likely in the roaring inn. Bawdy songs competed with three-score drunken men discussing everything but the cursed weather. Smoke from the fireplace and steam rising off drenched cloaks hung around the common room, shrouding it in a thick haze.

Wulfram continued talking to Gunnar, in an angrier but quieter voice. "I've told her, I don't want that young leech around. But every time I look, there he is lounging in *my* chairs, eating *my* food, and making verses to *my* wife. And that's not all he's making — I found one of his lute strings in my wife's chambers. She said she only took it there to compare it with her spare strings; she said he needed a new one. But I'm not so old and slow that I'm blind." Wulfram ended on a note of self-pity, such as often heard from rich, middle-aged men who marry young wives. His friend Gunnar made sympathetic noises, and then began to give him low-voiced counsel, pausing often to look around as if he feared being overheard, finally pointing out a figure in a corner booth.

In the corner of the Laughing Trout's common room sat a very wet man. He looked neither old nor young, rich nor poor. His dress did not particularly advertise his profession. Only the scabbard lying across his knees and his good gloves might give one to guess that he made his living at arms. At the moment, he was reading a hastily scrawled note given him a few moments ago by an equally drenched man.

Sipping his wine reflectively, the man named Holgrim mused on the ways of fortune. *Not a job in sixteen days*, he thought, *and now this*. . . . *Not a bad fee, but how do I find the man named in this document?*

At that moment a group of young nobles came cascading

through the door, led by the king's new reeve, Lord Alfstan. *Well, well*, thought the man. *Here comes the rent*.

Then Holgrim glanced to the side and saw a rather fat, greasy man approaching him. *Wulfram the wool merchant — coming to me?* Holgrim thought. *It never rains but it pours, they say*. He chuckled to himself, just as old Wulfram cleared his voice and said nervously, "Master Holgrim?"

Holgrim invited the merchant to sit, and heard his tale. They agreed on a price, and then Holgrim rose, saying, "It may take me a few days to attend to your business, Master Wulfram, but I'll see to it as soon as may be. Shortly, I may have to leave town for a while." Leaving the merchant to pay his bill, Holgrim stood up, loosened his sword in its scabbard, walked up to the dashing young royal favorite, and announced to the crowd at large certain speculations about family life at Golvring Castle. The crowd gasped, the innkeeper began to put his breakables below the bar, and Holgrim the Duelist set himself to practice his trade.

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For as long as personal combat has been going on, there have been specialists who would sell their prowess at it. Some have sold their services as mercenaries; this article has nothing to do with them. Mercenaries tend to be group-minded and barely proficient at arms; their place is to fill out a troop of soldiers. The emphasis in soldiering is on maneuver and cooperative effort. It is very fitting that most mercenaries in the AD&D™ game are permanently 0-level fighters. Repeated and frequent success in one-on-one combat requires something that a mere soldier is not up to providing. The specialists in personal combat became not mercenaries, but duelists.

And so evolved a distinct kind of profession. In Roman times, there were the gladiators, who made their way up from ignominy to international honor through their individual skill alone; in Renaissance times, there were the fencing instructors, who taught young rakes how to duel (and live to brag about it) the way that other specialists taught them how to dance or take snuff; and in all times, there have been the hired swords ("hired guns" in the Ole West), who have wandered about, fighting for glory, or money, or for lack of a better calling in life. The duelist non-player character class for the AD&D system represents this type of expert — one who makes his living by selling his skill in individual combat.

Typically, the duelist is of common birth. Serfs are given no opportunity to learn to bear arms, and nobles who take up arms as a profession tend to become fighters or paladins. Sometimes, as with the Roman gladiators, duelists are of the lower class, though they might have wound up that way not by accident of birth but by running afoul of the law. Sometimes they are of the lesser nobility — younger sons of younger sons, with no inheritance to give them status and no mind to be soldiers. Sometimes

they are merely disaffected types, loners or even outcasts, whose only claim to fame is their reputation with their blade.

This way of describing a duelist goes far to explain the alignment preferences of the class. The duelist has little use for law as an ethical principle, whether the law involved is good, bad, or neutral. Besides the fact that their profession is often illegal (though they are sometimes used by the protectors of the law), duelists also shy away from lawfulness because of their general outlook on life: They see things in individual terms (me against you), not in group terms (us against them). To be sure, most duelists are scrupulous about fulfilling contracts, but this is not a lawful-minded tendency so much as a matter of professional (by definition, individual) honor. Besides, an unreliable duelist gets no contracts.

Duelists, you see, have something of a code to live by, a parody of the knightly code of arms. The knightly code is born of law: Arms are to be used to execute justice; fair play (not taking undue advantage of an opponent) should influence behavior; the warrior is part of an arms-bearing brotherhood pledged to defend the community.

By contrast, the duelist lives by a highly individualistic (i.e., chaotic) code. Professional skill is exalted rather than the obligation to do justice: if the duelist's conscience sometimes accuses him of being a mere assassin, he tells himself he is just doing his job (and *doing it well*, by thunder!). Professional pride is a more important consideration than "fair play" — a duelist, like a knight, does not take undue advantage of an opponent, but a knight does this to be fair, while a duelist does it lest his reputation be besmirched. (This explains why a duelist will not use poison or flaming oil in personal combat — these are tools good

THE DUELIST

Minimum ability scores:

Strength: 9

Intelligence: 10

Dexterity: 15 (17+ = 10% bonus to earned experience)

Constitution: 9 (hit-point bonuses as for fighters)

Racial stock: Human or half elf

Hit die type: d12

Spell ability: None

Class level limit: 15 (Grand Fencingmaster)

Armor & weapons permitted:

Armor: Leather

Shield: None

Weapons: Dagger, scimitar (cutlass, sabre), quarterstaff, bastard sword, broad sword, long sword, short sword

Oil: No

Poison: No

No. of attacks per round:

Duelist level 1-4: 1/1

Duelist level 5-9: 3/2

Duelist level 10-14: 2/1

Duelist level 15: 5/2

Weapon proficiency:

Initial no. of weapons: 3

Non-proficiency penalty: -2

Added proficiency/level: 1/3 levels

Alignment: Neutral good, neutral evil, chaotic good, chaotic evil, chaotic neutral, or true neutral

enough for a cheap assassin or a stupid tavern brawler, but it would be seen as a failure in the area of his professional skill and bravery for a duelist to do the same.) The duelist is a loner, which means his worth is not measured by his attainments as a member of a warrior class, but by his individual achievements.

And so the world fears, admires, shuns, and brags of acquaintance with the duelist, all at the same time. He is both hero and villain. And he does have his place, not only as a hired sword (or, in some cultures, as a professional athlete). Running a fencing school, as many duelists do, is a very respectable occupation. It should be noted that what a Fencingmaster turns out of a fencing school are not necessarily more duelists — it takes more than

just fighting ability to fit that mold, it takes a certain kind of person. The Fencingmaster's customers are young men who desire to be accomplished at the skills of dueling — but who may be incapable of actually becoming duelists.

In a society or culture in which a gentleman is expected to be skillful at arms (even if the gentleman is obviously unfit for it), the Fencingmaster's school becomes a combination hangout, gymnasium, betting parlor, and male gossip-shop all rolled into one, and the Master himself is a man of reputation who is not only dangerous to cross but who can expel you from much of society by simply barring you from his hall. A paradox: The Fencingmaster has no place in society (being base-born and having to work for his living), but he is in many ways one of the keepers of the keys to society's door, like the innkeeper of the most fashionable watering hole. And, like inns, there is no better place to hear certain kinds of news than a fencing academy.

Athlete, hired killer, or patron of youthful nobility, the duelist plays many roles, but he is always what he is. Grim or merry, devious or straightforward, famous or infamous, he stands on his own merits.

Experience Level Table

Experience	points	level	12-sided dice for accumulated hit points	Level title
0 —	2,500	1	1	Beginner
2,501 —	5,000	2	2	Brawler
5,001 —	10,000	3	3	Fencer
10,001 —	20,000	4	4	Challenger
20,001 —	40,000	5	5	Gladiator
40,001 —	80,000	6	6	Bladesman
80,001 —	160,000	7	7	Master Bladesman
160,001 —	320,000	8	8	Superior Duelist
320,001 —	640,000	9	9	Expert Duelist ¹
640,001 —	960,000	10	10	Fencingmaster ²
960,001 —	1,290,000	11	10+2	Fencingmaster, 11th
1,290,001 —	1,600,000	12	10+4	Fencingmaster, 12th
1,600,001 —	1,920,000	13	10+6	Fencingmaster, 13th
1,920,001 —	2,220,000	14	10+8	Fencingmaster, 14th
2,220,001 +		15	10+10	Grand Fencingmaster

¹ — Only duelists with 17+ dexterity can attain this level or higher.

² — Only duelists with 18 dexterity can attain this level or higher.

Grand Fencingmasters are not limited in number, as are holders of top levels in the assassin, druid, and monk classes.

A duelist may have no henchmen until he or she attains at least 7th level.

Of all *fighter* encounters in a city or town, 5% (roll of 1 on d20) will be with a duelist.

Duelists are regularly engaged to slay people for hire (often by "calling out" their opponents), and the fees for assassins' work are typical of duelist fees, for which the duelist gains experience.

Likewise, the duelist gains experience points from the Assassination Experience Points Table for every foe he overcomes in single, open combat. Opponents so sought must be armed with a weapon, as opposed to being armed solely with natural weaponry (such as many monsters have).

Giving the duelist 12-sided hit dice is not intended to convey the impression that duelists are monstrous hulks, like sumo wrestlers. As the DMG points out (p. 82), hit points "reflect both the actual physical ability . . . to withstand damage . . . and a commensurate increase in such areas as skill in combat and similar life-or-death situations, the 'sixth sense' which warns the individual." And again, "the balance of accrued hit points are those which fall into the non-physical areas . . ." In other words, a character taking damage in a long fight is not necessarily getting cut up so much as he is getting worn out; his concentration lags, his arms get tired, his feet begin to drag, until he is down to his last few hit points. That's when one simple thrust

might kill him, as it would any man — when he is open to the blow. By definition, a duelist is an expert at hand-to-hand combat; his inventory of tricks, his professional skill, and his stamina are superior to those of other fighter-types. By giving the duelist 12-sided hit dice, these superior abilities are expressed in game terms. A 10th-level duelist will average more hit points than a 10th-level fighter, thus giving the former an appropriate edge in one-on-one combat; the duelist can outlast and wear out an opponent who is less skillful than he.

A duelist is surprised only on a roll of 1 on d6, and his code of “honor” makes him dislike attacking by surprise in a one-on-one fight. (But he is no fool; survival is ultimately more important than “honor,” and surprising an opponent is certainly not prohibited.) However, he only gains experience points on the Assassination Table if the fight is entirely conducted in the open — unless his intended victim surprised *him*. Note that “open” merely means man-to-man, without surprise being used by the duelist. It does not imply a *public* fight, nor does it entail a challenge conveyed through seconds. The DM will have to adjudicate all situations that require a ruling on whether or not the duelist will get experience points for a one-on-one fight.

When fighting opponents armed with weapons (other than missiles), the duelist gains bonuses to his armor class, simulating his superior skill in parrying blows. He also gains bonuses “to hit” and damage (referred to in the table below as the “combat bonus”) when fighting an opponent who is using a hand-held weapon. This bonus increases when the duelist is fighting an opponent using the *same* weapon the duelist is using:

Level of duelist	AC bonus	Combat bonus	Combat bonus vs. same weapon
1-3	+1	+1	+1
4-6	+2	+1	+2
7-9	+3	+2	+3
10-12	+4	+2	+4
13-15	+5	+3	+5

Duelists use the combat tables and saving-throw tables for the fighter class, and conform to the specifications of that class with regard to psionics and the use of magic items. In addition, they are considered as fighters for any other determinations not specifically mentioned herein.

When fighting humanoids of size S or M in hand-to-hand situations, the duelist (and his associates) gain a +10% bonus to morale. The associates get this morale bonus only if they know the duelist for what he is — that is, a member of the duelist class.

Duelists’ special abilities

Parrying the death blow: If the duelist receives a hit from a weapon which would finally take him to 0 hit points or lower in that blow, he gets a saving throw (vs. death). A successful save indicates no damage. On a second such death-blow attempt made during the same melee (but not during the same round; see below), before the duelist has regained some hit points through healing or other means, a successful save indicates half damage from the blow (or the duelist is reduced to 1 hit point, if that is necessary to keep him alive). A third such saving throw in the same ongoing melee is not allowed unless the duelist has first had some hit points restored. This special parrying ability applies only to attacks with hand-held weapons made by weapons-users. Thus, the duelist gets a save vs. a minotaur’s axe or a hill giant’s club, but not vs. a dragon’s bite, a pseudo-dragon’s sting, or a scythe-blade trap.

This special ability comes into play when the duelist is down to few enough hit points so that his opponent’s potential maximum damage *could* kill the duelist with a single blow. The opponent’s potential maximum damage, for purposes of this determination, is the maximum damage of the opponent’s weapon, plus any bonuses that apply to the opponent’s damage figure. If the opponent scores a hit, the duelist may attempt to parry the blow before dice are rolled to determine the actual damage.

Example: An opponent with a strength of 18/03 using a +1 long sword could potentially do 12 points of damage — 8 with the sword, +1 for the magic, and +3 for his damage adjustment

due to strength. The duelist then has the option to attempt his parry when he is reduced to 12 hit points or less vs. this opponent, *after* the opponent has rolled a “to hit” die successfully, and *before* damage is actually assessed. Should the duelist be down to 5 hit points or less, he must attempt to parry automatically, since the minimum potential damage his opponent can inflict with a successful hit is 5 points — 1 with the sword, +1 for the magic, +3 for his damage adjustment.

As long as an opponent’s minimum potential damage is less than the duelist’s remaining hit points, the duelist does have a choice in whether or not to attempt to parry the death blow. After all, this is a last-gasp trick, and he might want to keep it as an “ace in the hole” for one more round. Should the duelist be fighting more than one opponent, he may be forced to choose which of two or more equally deadly blows he will attempt to parry; he cannot try this trick twice in a round. Life is full of hard choices, isn’t it?

Two-weaponed combat: Duelists take 1 less point off in penalties for off-hand weapon swings in two-weaponed combat, but they will only fight in such a fashion against other two-weaponed humanoids or plain old monsters. The duelists’ code forbids them to seek a two-weapon advantage over a one-weaponed opponent, except in life-or-death situations.

Resistance to fear: Duelists make all saving throws vs. *fear* attacks at +2.

Identify magical properties: At 10th level and above, a duelist has a 5% chance per level of identifying the magical properties of weapons usable by his class. (One attempt per weapon per level.)

The Fencingmaster and his school

At 10th level (Fencingmaster) and above, the duelist has the option of establishing a fencing school. Such an establishment must be located in a large town or city, and must have adequate supplies and sufficient space for the exercises and activities that will go on there. Employment of a swordsmith is mandatory for such an establishment. The Fencingmaster will then attract students to his school.

Hiring a Fencingmaster as a teacher will cost 200 g.p. a month, and one can only be hired for a month at a time. Each month of work with a Fencingmaster gains a student a 10% cumulative chance of gaining a +1 “to hit” with a particular weapon the Fencingmaster employs. Dice are rolled *once*, at the end of the training, to see if the student gets the +1. This training must be uninterrupted by adventuring, and there is a maximum 60% chance of gaining the bonus. If the roll fails, the training must begin all over again. A student earning a +1 with a particular weapon (e.g., a long sword) cannot earn a further bonus with that weapon by continuing to study with a Fencingmaster, no matter how long he or she trains — but the +1 “to hit” could be gained in this way for more than one weapon, if the student engages in additional instruction.

The Fencingmaster can handle up to 30 students at a time, but if he goes out adventuring for more than 3 days in any month, his students will suffer from his absence, because their training will have been interrupted for too long — and the Fencingmaster will accordingly be deprived of the income those students would have provided.

The number of students a Fencingmaster has at a given time can be determined randomly by rolling 5d6 to see how many students a Fencingmaster has, and adding one student to the result for every 3 points of charisma the Fencingmaster has, up to a maximum enrollment of 30.

Fencingmasters, unlike fighters, acquire no *followers* upon reaching name level (10th), even if they establish a school.

Duelists’ reputations have a tendency to get around, and they are known, or known about, to a greater extent as they become more accomplished. Most duelists will be aware of other duelists of equal or higher level operating in the vicinity. Sometimes a duelist will “call out” another duelist on his own initiative, just to prove himself. Grand Fencingmasters are more often revered than challenged, however, and this is also the case with many other duelists of great reputation and high charisma.