

The Quest for the Master

In a cinematic game, the PCs will eventually want to learn cinematic skills . . . or acquire Trained by a Master, Weapon Master, or Heroic Archer in order to be *able* to learn such skills. In any kind of campaign, they might want to study a new style. The GM could simply charge points and move on, but the quest for the Master – the sole teacher who can impart the necessary training – is an ancient and honorable subplot.

This could become a quest for any of several reasons. The most obvious is that the students don't have a master. Even if they do, he might not be able to teach them. He might believe that they're unready for the next lesson and send them on a mission, with the promise of training if they succeed. He might realize that he has taught them everything he knows and direct them to seek out *his* master. He might die of old age . . . or be killed.

The quest itself should be an adventure – possibly long, definitely dangerous. And once the heroes find the Master, they needn't immediately realize this. Most players expect the B-movie clichés: a wise old man, traditional in every way, who always knows what would-be students need (typically, the opposite of what they *want*). The Master doesn't *have* to be anything like that.

The Master might be a boy. Or a woman. Or skilled but stupid. Or a drunk. Or *evil*. Or greedy. (“Sure, I'll teach you the Seven Secret Kicks. That'll be \$30,000, in gold. For each of you.”) In a cinematic game, the Master might be a member of another race, a spirit, or even a god. The Master might not be a single entity at all, but an entire temple, village, or *planet* full of special teachers.

The adventure doesn't end when the students find the Master. The Master may set tasks for them, and these might not appear to make much sense . . . they might even seem evil or illegal. Perhaps they are! There's no law that says all masters must be good people. How the would-be students react to this is a roleplaying challenge.

There's also the matter of the time required. Instruction could take years (per *Learning Secret Martial-Arts Techniques*, p. B293) or be compressed into a few days or weeks (see *The Training Sequence*, p. 147). In a highly cinematic game, the adventurers might journey to a hidden valley or isolated monastery where years seem to pass but only a few weeks go by in the outside world.

Then again, the quest might not lead the students to a person. Founders of real-world styles have named dreams, meditation, and watching animals fight as inspirations. Enlightenment might come from the quest itself, with the seekers learning from their journey – if they survive it! Each obstacle they pass might teach an important lesson. Such things take as long as learning from a Master – perhaps longer.

The quest works best in a historical setting where teachers are rare and some schools are outlawed. In the modern world, where martial-arts schools advertise, the quest is usually part of a cinematic campaign. Searching for “hand of death” on 411.com won't accomplish much!

Still, a quest is possible in a realistic modern-day game. The Master need not advertise, or have a phone number or a fixed address. He could be an illegal immigrant with ties to organized crime. The PCs might not even know his name. Or the Master might be easy to *find* but temperamental, and the “quest” lies in convincing him to give lessons. Situations like this can be as trying and deadly as any journey – especially if the PCs must stay in the wrong end of town or an isolated village in a foreign country while they look for the Master or wait for him to make up his mind.

To make the martial arts central to a modern police game requires cinematic combat realism, even if cinematic *abilities* don't exist. “Buddy movies” regularly feature martial artists – usually one of an odd-couple detective duo – who use their arts to augment their shooting skills or who actually *prefer* fists and feet to firearms. Such cops draw their weapons only after using a few well-placed kicks to take down the bad guy and just before slapping on the cuffs! Television shows such as *Martial Law* are inspirational, as are innumerable Hollywood movies – the martial-artist lawman is a B-movie staple.

War Is Hell

A war campaign is an excellent place for the martial arts, obviously. The PCs needn't belong to a national army – mercenaries are common throughout history. During global conflicts, such as the World Wars, “adventurers” on the fringes of major theatres or in minor theatres might choose sides on the basis of personal gain, not national allegiance. In smaller struggles, soldiers of fortune can nearly always find employment.

World War II is especially fertile ground for a **Martial Arts** game. Japanese officers carry swords and have martial-arts training in the form of Aikijutsu (p. 149), Jujutsu (pp. 166-168), Kenjutsu (pp.173-175), or Kendo (pp. 175); their enlisted underlings practice Jukenjutsu (p. 197). Allied commandos learn Fairbairn Close Combat Training (p. 182-183p). Burmese, Filipino, and Indonesian guerrillas fight the Japanese with guns, sticks, and swords. Many 20th-century style originators lived through and fought in WWII.

In modern games, guns dominate warfare. Why drop your rifle to punch and kick if a three-round burst can settle the matter more effectively? The martial arts are still part of the military experience, though – from basic training for green recruits to advanced arts reserved for special-operations forces. The more elite the troops, the more opportunities they have to learn and use martial arts. A “silencer” isn't perfect, it merely makes a gun less noisy . . . but a stealthy, well-trained man with a knife *can* remove a sentry without a sound – at least in a cinematic campaign!

Good examples of war-themed martial-arts fiction are *The Duellists*, which chronicles a private duel during wartime, and *The Three Musketeers* (the novel and many movies), which includes intrigue, private squabbles, and a siege. David Gemmell's *Legend* features a Weapon Master and other larger-than-life martial artists at war. *The Seven Samurai* follows mercenaries in a small, private war.