

## On the SABACC Deck

“I’m especially intrigued by permutations and combinations of the number seventy-eight, taken three at a time. Fives are wild.”

– Lando Calrissian and the Mindharp of Sharu, 1983, L. Neil Smith.

Any discussion of the history of Sabacc – the game and the deck of cards used for it – which exists in the Star Wars universe must include references of our own Tarot deck. This is because the Sabacc deck described in the Lando Calrissian trilogy by L. Neil Smith (1946 – 2021) is very similar to this deck. These books are now part of the Star Wars Legends series and are not canon. The trilogy is available for Kindle from Amazon.

This essay will not address the rules of the game of Sabacc and the mechanics of play. Suffice it to say that I doubt any serious gambler would wager anything of value on the game Smith describes. Still, the books ought to have an appendix with the full deck and rules spelled out, perhaps with a guide for how to play it in our universe.

### The Sabacc deck described in the Lando Calrissian trilogy

It is generally accepted that Smith based his Sabacc deck on the Rider–Waite version of the Tarot deck [ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rider%E2%80%93Waite\\_tarot\\_deck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rider%E2%80%93Waite_tarot_deck) ]. Although not every card of Lando’s Sabacc deck is enumerated within the story, it is clear that it is identical to this one with many of the names altered slightly – such as “The Fool” becoming “The Idiot”. I don’t know whether or not Smith had written out all the card names for his own reference, but they do not all appear in the story. Some cards are mentioned without their numeric values, leaving us to match them to our cards. Some cards from our deck do not have their equivalents included in the story, so we must guess what name Smith might have chosen for them if they were.

“There were seventy-eight of them, divided into five suits: Sabres, Staves, Flasks, and Coins, arrayed from Aces to Masters, and a special suit of face cards with negative values and more profound meanings.”

– Lando Calrissian and the Flamewind of Oseon, 1983, L. Neil Smith.



The Rider Tarot Deck, copyright 1971, U.S. Games Systems Inc.

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A Tarot deck contains seventy-eight cards and can be separated into two main sections: fifty-six suited cards and twenty-two unsuited cards. Decks intended for cartomancy will generally refer to these as the Minor Arcana and Major Arcana, respectively.

The suits in a Tarot Deck have different names in various versions. The similarity of the Sabacc suit names to Rider-Waite Tarot suit names is obvious:

| <b>Italian</b>  | <b>Tarot (Rider)</b> | <b>Tarot (Marseilles)</b> | <b>Sabacc</b> |
|-----------------|----------------------|---------------------------|---------------|
| Denari (coins)  | Pentacles            | Deniers (coins)           | Coins         |
| Bastoni (clubs) | Wands                | Bâtons (batons)           | Staves        |
| Coppe (cups)    | Cups                 | Coupes (cups)             | Flasks        |
| Spade (swords)  | Swords               | Épées (swords)            | Sabres        |

Comparison of Tarot suit names to Sabacc suit names

The cards in the Minor Arcana are also similar to the Sabacc deck:

| <b>Tarot (Rider)</b> | <b>Tarot (Marseille)</b> | <b>Sabacc</b> |
|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| Ace                  | Ace                      | Ace           |
| 2                    | 2                        | 2             |
| 3                    | 3                        | 3             |
| 4                    | 4                        | 4             |
| 5                    | 5                        | 5             |
| 6                    | 6                        | 6             |
| 7                    | 7                        | 7             |
| 8                    | 8                        | 8             |
| 9                    | 9                        | 9             |
| 10                   | 10                       | 10            |
| Page                 | Valet                    | Legate        |
| Knight               | Cavalier                 | Commander     |
| Queen                | Reyne                    | Mistress      |
| King                 | Roy                      | Master        |

Comparison of card names

The books never mention any Legate cards being used in game play, but Lando sees two of them while reading his fortune. From these comparisons, it is apparent that Smith based the Legate on the Page:

As sabacc card-chips are prone to do now and again, the second card transformed itself into the Legate of Coins—but the image was upside-down. “Duttes Mer!” laughed Lando. “A being corrupt and evil if ever there was one!”

The Page of Pentacles –  
Reversed: Prodigality, dissipation, liberality, luxury, unfavorable news.

“The Legate of Staves. Don’t tell me I’m a do-gooder at heart!”

The Page of Wands –  
Dark young man, faithful, a lover, an envoy, a postman.

Comparison of two Legate cards to the Rider-Waite Tarot

As to the values of these cards, that would really depend on the game being played. Enough game play is detailed in the books to determine nearly all of the values for Sabacc:

- ◆ The pip cards have values Two through Ten as expected.
- ◆ The Legate likely has a value of eleven – even though we never see one scored in game play.

this is the way

- ◆ The Commander has value twelve, the Mistress has value thirteen, and the Master has value fourteen.
- ◆ From the above quote from the story (“...arrayed from Aces to Masters...”), the Ace would be expected to have the value One, but we never see a card with value One being played. Every time we see a hand containing an Ace being scored, the Ace has value Fifteen.

It is possible that an Ace may be scored as either the lowest value (One) or the highest value (Fifteen) as circumstances dictate – as in Blackjack – but there is no evidence for this in the books. It may be that there are no One-valued cards in the version of Sabacc which Lando plays in the books, but that seems unlikely in a game in which the player is trying to achieve a hand with an exact point value.

The Sabacc deck for the roleplaying game published by West End Games (below) includes One-pip cards as well as Aces (which are valued at Fifteen), but I think that’s a bad design choice as it means that there are too many positive-valued cards and too few negative-valued cards for the version of Sabacc the books describe. I think it’s safe to assume that Smith did not intend for there to be separate Aces and One-pip cards in the deck, but that the two are the same, as with the Rider-Waite Tarot deck. A One-pip card may be called an “Ace”, just as a Two-pip card is called a “Deuce” and a Three-pip card is called a “Trey” in our game play.

We can therefore assume that the twenty-two cards in the Trump Suit (the Major Arcana) of the Tarot deck matches the “special suit of face cards with negative values” Smith describes. Unfortunately, not all twenty-two cards are shown in game play. A few are mentioned only during the fortune-telling section of the story, but we can align those with the Major Arcana:

| <b>Tarot (Rider)</b> | <b>Tarot (Marseilles)</b> | <b>Value</b> | <b>Sabacc</b>                 | <b>My suggestions</b> |
|----------------------|---------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| The Fool             | Le Mat                    | 0            | The Idiot                     |                       |
| The Magician         | Le Bateleur               | 1            |                               | The Wizard            |
| The High Priestess   | La Papesse                | 2            | The Queen of Air and Darkness |                       |
| The Empress          | L'Impératrice             | 3            |                               | The Senator           |
| The Emperor          | L'Empereur                | 4            |                               | The Chancellor        |
| The Hierophant       | Le Pape                   | 5            |                               | The Je'daii           |
| The Lovers           | L'Amoureux                | 6            |                               | The Companions        |
| The Chariot          | Le Chariot                | 7            | [The Starship, Destroyed]     | The Starship          |
| Strength             | La Justice                | 8            | Endurance                     |                       |
| The Hermit           | L'Hermite                 | 9            |                               | The Recluse           |
| Wheel of Fortune     | La Roue de Fortune        | 10           | [The Wheel]                   | The Wheel             |
| Justice              | La Force                  | 11           | Balance                       |                       |
| The Hanged Man       | Le Pendu                  | 12           |                               | The Penitent          |
| Death                | La Mort                   | 13           | Demise                        |                       |
| Temperance           | Tempérance                | 14           | Moderation                    |                       |
| The Devil            | Le Diable                 | 15           | The Evil One                  |                       |
| The Tower            | La Maison Dieu            | 16           |                               | The Spire             |
| The Star             | L'Étoile                  | 17           | The Star                      |                       |
| The Moon             | La Lune                   | 18           | (unnamed) [The Satellite]     | The Satellite         |
| The Sun              | Le Soleil                 | 19           |                               | The Core              |
| Judgement            | Le Jugement               | 20           |                               | Assessment            |
| The World            | Le Monde                  | 21           | [The Universe]                | The Universe          |

Comparison of Tarot Major Arcana cards to negative Sabacc cards

this is the way

Of note is that the value for “Endurance” matches “Strength”, and “Balance” matches “Justice”, in accordance with the Rider–Waite version of Tarot. There is a Wookieepedia article on Centran Sabacc which states that there is a card named “Hazard”, but I have no idea where that came from or where it would fit. The word “Hazard” appears nowhere in the Lando Calrissian trilogy.

In the above table, the card names in brackets [] are the ones which are mentioned only when Lando is telling his fortune, not during game play. Matching them to their Tarot counterparts isn't difficult:

- ◆ While reading his fortune, Lando reveals “The Destroyed Starship”. I feel that this not a card named “The Destroyed Starship”, but rather a card named “The Starship” which appears upside-down during the reading. So I think it matches “The Chariot”.
- ◆ “The Wheel” is simply “Wheel of Fortune”.
- ◆ We do know that there is a card with value negative eighteen, and that logically is “The Satellite”, in place of “The Moon”. The West End Games deck should include “The Satellite” (-18), but it doesn't, which is bizarre; it would make their deck the proper seventy-eight cards.
- ◆ “The Universe” is a good match for “The World”.

As with “The Wheel” and “The Star”, all the other names can be copied over from the Tarot verbatim if we choose, but where's the fun in that? Here are my thoughts:

- ◆ “The Magician” becomes “The Wizard”, after all Owen Lars says “that wizard's just a crazy old man” about Obi-Wan.
- ◆ “The Empress” and “The Emperor” can remain so, but I would go with “The Senator” and “The Chancellor” to remove gender-implied titles.
- ◆ “The Hierophant” becomes “The Je'daii”, but “The Bendu” could work as well.
- ◆ “The Lovers” become “The Companions” to be a bit more broadly defined. That way it could refer to Han and Chewie.
- ◆ “The Hermit” can remain because Luke Skywalker refers to Obi-Wan as “a strange old hermit”, but I would change it to “The Recluse”.
- ◆ “The Hanged Man” could become “The Destroyed Starship” if you like, but I would make it “The Penitent” – and not “The Penitent Man” (an Indiana Jones reference) to avoid a specific gender. However, having the picture represent Luke hanging in the ice cave on Hoth would be cool.
- ◆ “The Tower” becomes “The Spire” (Black Spire Outpost anyone?), but more on that next.
- ◆ “The Sun” becomes “The Core” mainly because I want to name one of the cards “The Core” (see below). Another good choice would be to use “The Core” for “The Tower”, but then I still need a name for “The Sun” which can pair with “The Satellite”.
- ◆ “Judgement” becomes “Assessment” because both words can be used to mean either someone being judged/assessed or someone being able to judge/assess.

“The Core”, you ask, why “The Core”? Well, because “The Core” is spoken in the books as a mild oath (“Core-blessed”, “Core-forsaken”, etc.), it is used quite fluidly by various characters, so I wanted to include it; it seems a major part of the culture of the universe (or at least of the Centrality). I didn't see anywhere to name a card “The Edge” (not the guitarist or Galaxy's Edge, but another mild oath) to go with it.

“What in the name of the Edge, the Core, and everything in between are they waiting for out there?”

– Lando Calrissian and the Starcave of ThonBoka, 1983, L. Neil Smith.

That covers the deck – what is referred to as the Centran Deck, for playing Centran Sabbacc, as they do in the Centrality. If you want to play the game as it is presented in the books, you should read the books, buy a Tarot deck, and have at it. However, I don’t recommend that, it makes no sense to do so; it’s not a good game. Try eliminating two things from the rules: the card shifting/changing and the “fives are wild”. Also try having the Aces be valued One-or-Fifteen as needed. Play toward a hand total of zero rather than twenty-three if you like.

Because here in the U.S. Tarot decks are associated with cartomancy more than with playing card games, it is notable that Lando uses the Sabacc deck to tell his fortune. But, in other areas of the world, Tarot decks are used to play card games. Different versions of Tarot decks may have different suits. This deck I bought is based on designs from the 1800s and has the standard French suits we’re familiar with, but it should work just as well for playing Centran Sabacc.



Tarot Nouveau or Bourgeois Tarot, from Fournier, copyright 2020

If you find that full-sized Tarot cards (7cm x 12cm or 6cm x 11cm) are larger than you like, how about trying a miniature Tarot of Marseille deck? These are 5cm x 8cm (a little smaller than “poker-size”, which is 2.5” x 3.5”).



Miniature Tarot of Marseille, from Lo Scarabeo, copyright 2019

this is the way

## West End Games' version of Sabacc

You might want to get a copy of the roleplaying rules from West End Games (“Star Wars: Crisis on Cloud City”, copyright 1989), but try playing it with a Tarot/Centran deck rather than the deck the rules specify. The West End Games deck, rules, and mechanics are different from the deck, rules, and mechanics described in the trilogy.

Decks for playing by the West End Games rules are available via online retailers. The cards look much like the ones Lando is seen using in the Star Wars Rebels animated series (season one, episode eleven, “Idiot’s Array”). The names on the cards are printed in the Aurebesh typeface.

The West End Games deck is similar to the Centran deck except:

- ◆ There are only seventy-six cards even though the books clearly specify that there are seventy-eight cards about ten times.
- ◆ It has One-pip cards as well as Aces – for no good reason.
- ◆ The Legate is called the 11.
- ◆ All of the cards – including the Aces and court cards – have their values printed on them (which pretty much limits their use to Sabacc).
- ◆ It doesn’t have a full set of the Major Arcana cards (only eight of the twenty-two).
- ◆ “The Star” is valued Ten rather than Seventeen.
- ◆ There are two of each Major Arcana card which it does include.

In West End Games’ defense, it is likely that they didn’t source the information directly from the trilogy. It seems that they used a list from another source. That source may have read only the first book (“Lando Calrissian and the Mindharp of Sharu”) and ignored the section on fortune-telling. West End Games did improve the game slightly in one way while also making it worse in others.

On the plus side, the deck contains sixty suited cards – in four suits (Coins, Staves, Flasks, and Sabers) of fifteen cards each, arrayed One through Ace – plus two Zeroes (“The Idiot”), for a total of sixty-two cards. You may discard all of the cards with negative values. With such a deck, you can play Corellian Spike Sabacc rather than Centran Sabacc. I’ll come back to this shortly. Furthermore, if you also remove the Ones and Elevens, the result is essentially our “standard” deck of playing cards and you can use it to play many of the card games we are familiar with – with a Star Wars flair.



West End Games style Sabacc deck from Lucky Sylop (Ebay)

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## Corellian Spike Sabacc decks

Centran Sabacc is not a game for serious gamblers, but Corellian Spike Sabacc is a real man's game. Han Solo won the Millennium Falcon from Lando Calrissian playing Corellian Spike Sabacc – as seen in *Solo: A Star Wars Movie*. The *Mandalorian* also has scenes involving Corellian Spike Sabacc.

You may note that neither appearance includes changing/shifting cards or the use of dice.

The Corellian Spike version of Sabacc uses a deck of cards very different from the Centran Sabacc deck. There are Corellian Spike Sabacc decks and rules available:

◆ The deck which comes with the Han Solo Card Game (from Hasbro) contains sixty-two cards. There is really only one suit – Triangles (i.e. Sabres) – and there are six sets of One through Ten: three sets green (positive) and three sets red (negative). I would say it's really two suits – green and red. Plus two blue Zeroes (Idiot or Sylop).



Star Wars Han Solo Card Game, copyright 2017 Hasbro

◆ The deck which is available from the Toydarian's toyshop in Black Spire Outpost on Batuu (at Galaxy's Edge) contains sixty-two cards. There are three suits – dots (i.e. Coins), squares (i.e. Flasks), and triangles (i.e. Sabres) – each with a green (positive) and a red (negative) set of One through Ten. I would say that there are six suits. Plus two Zeroes (Idiot or Sylop). There is no suit of staves, rather "staves" is the word used to mean "suits" in this version of Sabacc. This deck closely resembles the deck seen in *Solo: A Star Wars Movie*, and *The Mandalorian*. It is obviously the deck which Disney/Lucasfilm want to promote as "the" canon Sabacc deck.

this is the way



Sabacc game from the Toydarian's toy shop at Black Spire Outpost, Galaxy's Edge, copyright Disney and Lucasfilm Limited

One benefit of these two decks is that getting a four-of-a-kind is easier than with other decks – ya know, for kids. If you buy three decks of Sabacc cards from the Toydarian, you can make three decks of one-suit cards, similar to the Hasbro deck, though of course the suits (staves) have no function in Sabacc.

My main complaint with these two decks is that we are familiar with there being four suits in a deck of cards. But recall the deck I was describing a little bit ago (the West End Games Sabacc deck with the bad parts stripped out). It contains sixty-two cards in four suits – Coins, Staves, Flasks, and Sabres (whoops, nope, Sabers) – of fifteen cards arrayed One through Ace, plus two Zeroes (“The Idiot”). You can play either of the kid-friendly versions of Corellian Spike Sabacc with this deck. This would be a somewhat more difficult version of Corellian Spike Sabacc than the kid-friendly versions. You have to establish which suits are positive and which are negative. I would still eliminate the changing/shifting card values and the stupid dice.

While I’m on the subject of “positive” and “negative” cards, I’d like to opine that, while these concepts are familiar to us and they make determining a hand’s value easier for us, I don’t think they really fit in the Star Wars universe. I think it would be better not to say that some cards are “positive” and others are “negative”, but rather that the different sets of cards balance each other. The result being that a hand’s value is never negative.

this is the way



Comparison with a “standard” deck of playing cards

The Tarot deck and our international “standard” deck are the result of hundreds of years of innovation and progress, both in the technology involved in making cards and in the types of card games people enjoy playing. The same thing could have happened in the Star Wars universe, yielding the different decks we see today and the variety of versions of Sabacc.

The “standard” deck of fifty-two French-suited playing cards we are familiar with greatly resembles the suited part of the Tarot deck (the Minor Arcana), but with only three court cards per suit rather than four.

| <b>Tarot (Rider)</b> | <b>Tarot (Marseilles)</b> | <b>Tarot (Nouveau)</b> | <b>Sabacc</b> | <b>West End Games</b> | <b>Standard</b> |
|----------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Ace                  | Ace                       | 1                      | Ace           | 1                     | Ace             |
| 2                    | 2                         | 2                      | 2             | 2                     | 2               |
| 3                    | 3                         | 3                      | 3             | 3                     | 3               |
| 4                    | 4                         | 4                      | 4             | 4                     | 4               |
| 5                    | 5                         | 5                      | 5             | 5                     | 5               |
| 6                    | 6                         | 6                      | 6             | 6                     | 6               |
| 7                    | 7                         | 7                      | 7             | 7                     | 7               |
| 8                    | 8                         | 8                      | 8             | 8                     | 8               |
| 9                    | 9                         | 9                      | 9             | 9                     | 9               |
| 10                   | 10                        | 10                     | 10            | 10                    | 10              |
| Page                 | Valet                     | Valet                  | Legate        | 11                    | Jack            |
| Knight               | Cavalier                  | Chevalier              | Commander     | Commander             |                 |
| Queen                | Reyne                     | Dame                   | Mistress      | Mistress              | Queen           |
| King                 | Roy                       | Roi                    | Master        | Master                | King            |
|                      |                           |                        |               | Ace                   |                 |

Comparison of cards

| <b>Tarot (Rider)</b> | <b>Tarot (Marseilles)</b> | <b>Sabacc</b> | <b>West End Games</b> | <b>French</b>     | <b>Standard</b> |
|----------------------|---------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Pentacles            | Deniers (coins)           | Coins         | Coins                 | Carreaux (tiles)  | Diamonds        |
| Wands                | Bâtons (batons)           | Staves        | Staves                | Trèfles (clovers) | Clubs           |
| Cups                 | Coupes (cups)             | Flasks        | Flasks                | Cœurs (hearts)    | Hearts          |
| Swords               | Épées (swords)            | Sabres        | Sabers                | Piques (pikes)    | Spades          |

Comparison of suits

As with the “stripped” version of the West End Games Sabacc deck I described earlier, you can play Corellian Spike Sabacc with a Standard deck of playing cards. The main benefit is that the cards tend to be easier to hold than “Sabacc-shaped” playing cards. Such decks are one set of court cards short and you’ll need to establish which suits are positive and which are negative, but that can be as simple as “the black suits are positive and the red suits are negative”.

There actually are “Sabacc-shaped” standard decks available if you prefer.

this is the way

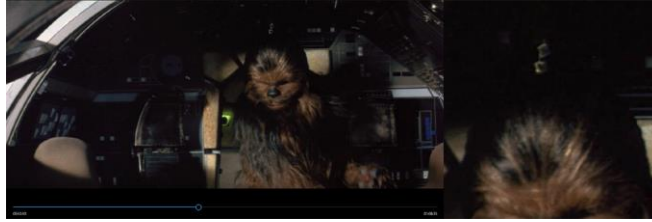


Sabacc-shaped French-suited playing cards, copyright Disney and Lucasfilm

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But what about the dice?

Han Solo's dice are unrelated to Sabacc. Dice are not used when playing Sabacc in-universe. I'm of the opinion that they were added to the set for the cockpit of the Millennium Falcon to give the actors a point of reference. The first time we see them, Chewie bumps them with his head.



Han Solo's "Lucky Dice", Star Wars, 1977  
(still captured from the Silver Screen Edition)

this is the way