

On the Game of Centran SABACC

If you have watched “Solo: A Star Wars Movie” then you know that Han Solo won the Millennium Falcon from Lando Calrissian in a game of Sabacc. What you may not know is that Lando had won the ship from someone else in a Sabacc game.

“Having your own starship was not so much a matter of being able to buy it in the first place (he’d won his in another sabacc game in the last system but one he’d visited) as being able to afford to operate it.”

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

“Lando Calrissian and the Mindharp of Sharu” is the first book in the Adventures of Lando Calrissian trilogy by L. Neil Smith (1946 – 2021). These books are now part of the Star Wars Legends series and are not canon. The trilogy is available for Kindle from Amazon.

In the Lando Calrissian trilogy, Lando is in an area of the Outer Rim known as the Centrality, so he plays Centran Sabacc and teaches it to others. The “Solo” movie shows Han winning the Millennium Falcon from Lando in a game of Corellian Spike Sabacc, which is a very different game and uses a very different deck. Decks and rules for Corellian Spike Sabacc are available elsewhere.

The game in the story is, of course, a contrived game, created by a writer, not by a game theorist, and not one which has evolved over years of play. It was designed only to be part of the story. As such, it has problems and possible contradictions. I doubt that any serious gambler would wager anything of value on the game Smith describes, but it can be improved upon. 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 deck to be used

It is generally accepted that Smith based his Sabacc deck on the [Rider–Waite version of the 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.

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:

Italian	Tarot (Rider)	Tarot (Marseilles)	Sabacc
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:

Tarot (Rider)	Tarot (Marseille)	Sabacc
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

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:

Tarot (Rider)	Tarot (Marseilles)	Value	Sabacc	My suggestions
The Fool	Le Mat	0	The Idiot	

this is the way

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

Any of our standard Tarot decks should suffice as a Sabacc deck.



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”).

this is the way



Miniature Tarot of Marseille, from Lo Scarabeo, copyright 2019

The next thing to note, of course, is that the deck is composed of electronic “card-chips” which can swap values with any other card-chip in the deck at any time, whether either card is in a player’s hand or not. The only way to stop cards from changing value is to place them in an “interference field”, whatever that is.

“Each of the seventy-eight card-chips transformed itself at random intervals, unless it lay flat on its back within the shallow interference field of the gaming table.”

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

“What made sabacc really interesting—and destroyed the nerves of most amateurs who tried to play it—was that each card was an electronic chip, capable of changing face and value at random any moment until the card-chip was lying flat on a gaming table or upon the electronic mat Lando had provided.”

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

At one point in the story, Lando is accused of using a “cheater”.

“He had a cheater all the time! He could change the faces of the cards to suit him any time he wanted!”

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

I find it unlikely that a “cheater” would work that way. I think it’s more likely that a “cheater” would cast an interference field in the vicinity of the player’s hands, keeping that player’s card-chips from changing values. In this instance, Lando was being framed; he did not actually have a cheater.

As it is, Lando does cheat, in that he violates the rules – or maybe just protocol – by choosing not to win as often as he could. He prefers to win big pots and let others win the smaller pots. The story states that Lando is very lucky at Sabacc – perhaps he’s actually Force-sensitive to a low degree just as Han is. Lando knows he doesn’t have to win every hand he can; he can wait for a big pot while appearing to be just an average, though enthusiastic, player. Lando would not cheat in order to win a hand.

“He carefully lost the next three hands. It wasn’t easy. He’d had to dump two perfect twenty-threes and might have drawn to a third if he hadn’t stood pat with a

this is the way

fourteen-point hand, praying that the card-chips would keep the faces they'd begun with. The local talent thought they had a live one.”

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

The details of how the card-chips change isn't important. Some later writers state that there is a robotic dealer which sends signals to the cards throughout the game. That may be true in some areas of the Galaxy, but it is not true of the games Lando played in the Centrality. The fact that the card-chips changed value even when Lando was using his deck to tell his fortune demonstrates that it is simply the card-chips themselves which perform the swaps (somehow).

Having the card-chips swap values probably seems like a “futuristic” and “alien-tech” kind of thing, but the problem is that it results in a game which no serious gambler would wager anything of significant value on. Increasing a bet on a great hand only to have it become worthless is not what smart gamblers do.

The deck which is used for Corellian Spike Sabacc, as seen in the Solo movie, does not use card-chips which swap value. If those cards did change value then it would have been pointless for Lando to try to cheat by having a Sylop up his sleeve; he would never know what value he actually had up his sleeve. And Lando never cheats to win anyway.

A big problem with the changing values is that when a player gets a really good hand (e.g. a Sabacc) he is required (at least by protocol) to immediately place it face-up on the table to “lock it in” before it can change. The result being that the player has little or no opportunity to try to have the other players increase the pot. Again, no serious gambler would do that. Bluffing would not be very effective either.

“Thus a winning hand, held too long, could change spontaneously to garbage”

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

Personally, I see no reason not to play Sabacc with a deck of “normal” cards which don't change value – it would make everything so much simpler.

Of lesser concern is that, according to the story, “fives are wild”. Wild cards are not something which serious gamblers use either. I would be surprised to see poker players (not video poker players) in a casino playing “deuces wild” or “one-eyed Jacks are wild”. Trump cards are OK, but wild cards are childish contrivances, useful only in Uno.

However, I'm sure that wild cards are something which can be used or not used in Sabacc depending on the particular players' agreement at the start of the game.

The object of the game

Other than never knowing what your hand will be worth from moment to moment, Centran Sabacc is pretty simple.

“The object of the game was simplicity itself: acquire cards until the value of your hand was exactly twenty-three, or as close as you could get without going over.”

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

The suited cards (ranked Ace through Master) have positive values. The pip-cards are valued Two through Ten. The Legate through Master are valued Eleven through Fourteen. The value of the Ace is a bit of a question; in the trilogy, every time an Ace is scored as part of a Sabacc hand it has a value of Fifteen. Surely there must be a card with a value of One, yet we never see a card being scored as One throughout the trilogy. So maybe – as in Blackjack – an Ace can be valued highest (Fifteen) or lowest (One) depending on the needs of the hand.

The other cards (the Trump suit or Major Arcana) have negative values in accordance with the numbers printed on them. The Idiot (Fool) has a value of Zero.

Is it really that simple?

Well, almost that simple. There are some complications. Consider these two quotes:

“A perfect zero or a minus twenty-three was as bad as a twenty-four”

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

“There were three ways of going out in the game: exceeding twenty-three, falling below minus twenty-three, or hitting zero.”

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

These statements are not fully explained in the story. We already know that a hand exceeding twenty-three won't win, that twenty-three is the maximum valid value for a hand. These seem to clarify that there is also a minimum valid value (negative twenty-three). Even if no other players are left in the game, if your hand has a value outside that range, you don't win. Why zero is also disqualified, I have no idea, it seems unnecessary.

So what does “ways of going out” really mean? It sounds ominous. It seems like it ought to mean that if your hand ever has one of those values that you are expected (by protocol) to dump (fold) the hand. But, it probably has no real meaning in game play other than during a Sudden Demise (covered later).

Why would you dump a hand simply because it is out of range? The value will probably change shortly anyway. And what if you don't dump and your hand remains one of those values? What if your hand changes to one of those values right as you show it?

In fact, why allow hands to range from so far below the goal without allowing them to exceed the goal by even one? I think it would make more sense to allow a hand to range from zero to forty-six if you're going to require a player to dump. After all, a positive twenty-four is much closer to positive twenty-three than a negative twenty-three is, so why not allow a player with such a hand to remain in the game?

Unlike Blackjack, Sabacc has negative cards, so if your hand exceeds the goal, it isn't so final.

I think that a player whose hand is outside the range should probably consider how likely his hand is to come back into range and have a shot at winning the hand. Bear in mind that there are only three chances to draw a new card improve the hand and this version of Sabacc doesn't allow discarding. It's probably unwise to hope that an unfavorable card will change to a favorable card. There are more positive cards than negative cards, so coming back from negative should be easier than the having a value get lower.

- 0) If there is only one more draw before the showdown, dump it.
- 1) A hand which is negative is unlikely to get anywhere near twenty-three, so dump it.
- 2) A hand which is well above twenty-three is also unlikely to come back down, so dump it.
- 3) A hand of zero or just above twenty-three might be reasonable if there are still two or three more draws left.

this is the way

Some people play that you have to pay a forfeit if you hold an invalid hand when the hand is called, but that is not seen in the trilogy. Still, dump a bad hand if you still hold it after the third draw.

this is the way

The Idiot's Array

To add more complexity, there is also...

“and there were certain special hands, such as that combining a Two of anything, a Three of anything, and an Idiot from the special suit, which ritual decreed were the equivalent of twenty-three.”

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

When Lando plays an Idiot's Array in the “Star Wars Rebels” animated series (Season One , Episode Eleven, “The Idiot's Array”), he says it beats Zeb's Sabacc ($-2 + 10 + 15$), however, “equivalent of twenty-three” means it would be a tie and a Sudden Demise would be in order. Granted, an Idiot's Array has a good likelihood of winning a Sudden Demise (because its actual value is only five), but it's not guaranteed.

In the trilogy, we see the Idiot's Array a few times, but never against a Sabacc. I haven't played a lot of Sabacc, but I suspect that a hand doesn't often come down to two players having Sabacc. Particularly when the first player to have Sabacc will likely call it immediately.

“You see, this comes under a special rule: whenever you have the Idiot—that's worth zero, you know—then a Two of anything and a Three of anything are considered an automatic twenty-three.”

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

It doesn't say “... are considered an automatic Sabacc”. I don't believe that Smith intended the Idiot's Array to be a “beat everything” hand. In fact, just as a twenty-one doesn't beat a Blackjack (in Blackjack); perhaps a natural twenty-three is Sabacc while an Idiot's Array is not a Sabacc. An Idiot's array would then rank just below a Sabacc. I think Zeb won the hand and Lando took advantage of his naiveté.

I think it's also notable that when Lando and Zeb are playing Sabacc, we never see the cards changing value. Zeb has plenty of time to get permission from Kanan to wager Chopper (the droid) rather than smack the cards down on the table and claim the pot immediately. Perhaps this was a different version of Sabacc – Lothal is in the Outer Rim, not far from the Centrality.

How to play

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

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

So, you want to play Centran Sabacc? You have a deck of suitable cards and a few friends who also want to play? Maybe some items of low value to wager so you can track who’s doing well and who isn’t?

- 0) Select a dealer to shuffle and deal the cards. The winner of each hand deals the next.
- 1) Anteing is mentioned in the trilogy, so it is a part of the game. There is no mention of how large the ante is, but possibly it was five or ten credits, depending on the circumstances of the game – e.g. how wealthy the players are for instance.
- 2) Each player receives two or three cards at the start of each hand (see below).
- 3) Repeat the following two sub-steps three times or until only one player remains in the hand:
 - 3.1) A round of betting (similar to poker).
 - 3.2) Followed by a round in which each player has a turn to draw a card or stand.

A player who draws a card resulting in “Sabacc” – a hand totaling exactly twenty-three – may (and should?) call it out and win the pot. The player also has the option of holding onto a Sabacc in hopes of a higher pot, at the risk of having the cards change.

- 4) There is a final round of betting before the players who are still in the game compare hands. At the showdown, each player still in the game will typically have between two and five cards.
- 5) If there is a tie, then a Sudden Demise is called. Each player in the tie gets another card in turn added to his hand until only one player remains:

“With the Four of Sabres Lando had drawn, he, too, had twenty-two. He displayed the hand, picked up the deck to deal again. ‘Sudden Demise.’ Doluff received the Three of Staves, breaking his hand. Lando could have stopped there, but flipped the next card over. The Idiot, worth exactly zero.”

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

It seems possible that, under unusual circumstances, a hand can end with no winner. As would have happened if Lando had drawn a card with a value greater than one. What happens then is not covered in the story, but probably the pot remains for the next hand.

All during that – at any time – a player’s hand may suddenly become a Sabacc and could/should be called. Now here’s another of the issues with calling Sabacc:

this is the way

“Lando saw the bet with mild amazement and raised it a hundred credits himself.
‘Sabacc!’”

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

It appears that Lando called Sabacc immediately after raising the bet. There is no indication that the other two players still in the hand had to see the bet, yet why would Lando raise if there was no chance for the others to see the bet? Is it required that all the other players see the bet after Sabacc is called? Why wouldn't they dump instead? That doesn't seem like a fair deal.

this is the way

Which brings to mind...

In “The Idiot’s Array” (mentioned above), Lando had just raised the bet and Zeb was looking for how to match it and call the bet. But if I understand the rules as provided, then Zeb could have revealed his Sabacc and claimed the pot without matching the bet. If a player who gets Sabacc can call it immediately even if it isn’t his turn, then what about other players who are holding twenty-three but have chosen not to call Sabacc (as was Lando)? Do they have a Sudden Demise? Do all players have to match the bet when Sabacc is called? Is calling “Sabacc” what makes a twenty-three a Sabacc?

The existence of those two facets of the game – cards changing value randomly and the ability to call Sabacc out of turn – are both very problematic, leading to many questions. And it’s the first which leads ultimately to the second.

That may be why we never see either being exercised in “canon” stories, such as Solo, Star Wars Rebels, and the Mandalorian. Similarly, this could be why Corellian Spike Sabacc seems to have been chosen over Centran Sabacc for the more recent canon stories. In Solo, both Han and Lando have Sabacc, but they don’t have a Sudden Demise; instead, Corellian Spike Sabacc has a hierarchy of different Sabaccs (which is a whole issue unto itself, perhaps to be covered later).

How many cards?

There is a discrepancy within the trilogy as to how many cards each player receives to start a hand. Here are two conflicting snippets:

“Card-chips were dealt around. He received the Ace of Sabres, the Four of Flasks, and Endurance—which counted as a minus-eight. That made eleven.”
– Lando Calrissian and the Mindharp of Sharu, 1983, L. Neil Smith.

“‘You have a Three of Staves and a Commander of Sabres, Master,’ Vuffi Raa informed him from the ship, ‘total value, fifteen.’”
– Lando Calrissian and the Starcave of ThonBoka, 1983, L. Neil Smith.

Lando was dealt three cards in the first instance, but only two in the second. The three-card hand precedes the two-card within the narrative, so I feel that it takes precedence.

On the other hand, there is the conflict between “taken two at a time” within the narrative and “taken three at a time” on the cover – the version in the narrative should probably take precedence.

Most other rules for Sabacc I’ve read (Centran and Corellian Spike) agree that two is the correct number. (Note: in a version of Corellian Spike played at the Yarith Bospin Casino, each player always has exactly three cards.)

Similarly, what about when a player has a turn to improve his hand? Unlike Corellian Spike Sabacc, Centran Sabacc does not allow players to discard; players may only stand or draw. Throughout the trilogy, players stand or take one card, but what about this snippet:

“‘One,’ said Lando neutrally. He drew a Seven of Staves, which promptly flickered and became the Commander of Coins.”
– Lando Calrissian and the Mindharp of Sharu, 1983, L. Neil Smith.

Are players allowed to draw more than one card in a turn? If so, how many? Is there a maximum to how many cards a player may have in his hand? Consider if a player has two large negative cards, he’ll require at least two large positive cards just to get back to zero and still not get near twenty-three.

I see only one other set of Sabacc rules online which states that players may “choose to draw one or more cards from the deck”. In which case, are players allowed to look at the cards as they draw and stop when they feel like it? Or does the player have to specify how many cards he wants as in the above snippet in which Lando requests one card?

I do see one set of rules online which clearly states, “there is no limit to the amount of cards that a player may hold in his or her hand, but he must have at least two cards”.

Centran Sabacc in our Galaxy

How authentically do you want to play Centran Sabacc? I strongly recommend eliminating the changing card values, the ability to call Sabacc as soon as you have it, and the wild cards.

Yes, I know, nearly every time someone tries to “fix” a game, the result is even worse. However, I think I have made a convincing case for these changes (well, maybe not for eliminating wild cards).

Trying to simulate the changing values of the cards is essentially impossible. You could use computer-generated cards – maybe have an online version. But for a bunch of friends playing around a table with physical cards, no, it can’t be done. What has been tried is to have dice or something similar to generate a random event periodically during the game (at well-defined moments) which may trigger every player exchanging all their cards with fresh ones from the deck. But this is nothing like how the card-chips work in the story.

Possibly a better way to have value changing cards – more like in the story at least – would be to have a second deck of cards (similar but distinct so the cards from the two decks don’t get confused). At various points in the game, or maybe based on a timer expiring periodically (such as every two minutes), a card is turned over from this deck. If a player has the matching card in his hand, he discards it and is dealt another.

I don’t recommend eliminating the value changing simply because it can’t be simulated, I recommend it because the value changing is just not a good idea, and I hope I made that clear. However, if you play with value changing, you probably also have to play with the ability to call Sabacc at any time during a hand and you’ll have to resolve the questions about what happens when someone does so, including whether or not a player is allowed to raise the bet immediately before calling Sabacc.

Some versions of Sabacc rules you’ll see online include a second pot which is won only by a player getting a Sabacc. This pot can grow quite a bit, making the game more exciting. But there is no such Sabacc pot mentioned in the trilogy.

You will have to experiment to see what works best in practice. If no one bets very much, then maybe additional compulsory bets will be beneficial, such as having to pay into the pot to draw a card and stay in the game. I also saw a version where a player has to pay the pot to dump (fold) as well.

Plus, you may want the deal to rotate as in poker. Having the deal rotate prevents a dishonest dealer from winning every hand, or at least reduces the suspicion that a player is dealing dishonestly. The dealer, or the player closest to the dealer’s right, also has a better chance of winning a Sudden Demise, so a rotating deal seems best.