

Reality Games
From Roman Times Till Now
By Sabah Saud

I have often questioned the wisdom of how papers get selected and if indeed there is a rational process behind selecting topics. Then the assigning of these topics to the best source equipped to inform. Or is it something else, maybe an exercise in writing or investigation writing or an exercise of managing frustration.

Game and reality shows are not on my “what to see” or “what to read” or “pursue knowledge” about, in this rapidly moving life or in the life hereafter for those of us who hope for one.

The title “Reality games from Roman times till now”. “Ah ha it’s a snap,” it’s merely two thousand plus years over the geography of the known world, across all ethnic communities, social economic orders, and social political orders. From a world dominated by pagan beliefs and practices to one that is preoccupied with the nature and character of one creator or maybe none at all.

From a world of slavery and emperors to elected overworked presidents where slavery is viewed at the most sinful act in humanity.

How does one compress time of over two thousand years into a thirty five minute presentation?

How does one place such a massive historical canvas inside a very small frame of time, and not sacrifice all historical essence and meaningful context out of it?

“Ah ha” it must be the quest spirit that drives us to believe that it is not only doable but a snap. I truly question the wisdom of that posture.

One way would be to translate this historical long road by describing its beginnings the gladiators of Rome and its current stars MMA fighters (mixed martial arts) and bypass everything in between as if to look at two books on either end of a long book shelf.

After all gladiators and the MMA fighters have one thing in common. Both aim at the destruction of your opponent. With gladiators the decision with who lives or who dies rests with the Roman emperor or his representative. In MMA fighters do have the choice to tap out (sign of submission) that says I have had enough and since I am a slave of my free will. I quit to fight another day in front of a different crowd in a different octagon in another city and with a new corner man. Because this one is not healing me fast enough. All a gladiator can do is to stay alive to fight again and again until someday he may earn his freedom. Those few were very fortunate and skilled at the art of war where their weapon and mind set are one.

Cathleen Coleman, historian consultant on Ridley Scott's film of two thousand gladiators. She is a Harvard College professor of Latin and an authority on Roman civilization, history and arts and has written about the gladiators. It is believed that the first gladiators were slaves trained to fight to the death at the funeral of a distinguished aristocrat. Junius Brutus Pera in 264 B.C. This spectacle was arranged by the heirs of the deceased to honor his memory.

Gradually gladiatorial spectacle became separated from the funerary context, and was staged by the wealthy as a means of displaying their power and influence within the local community. Advertisements for gladiatorial displays have survived at Pompeii, painted by professional sign-writers on house-fronts, or on the walls of tombs clustered outside the city-gates. The number of gladiators to be displayed was a key attraction: the larger the figure, the more generous the sponsor was perceived to be, and the more glamorous the spectacle.

Most gladiators were slaves. They were subjected to a rigorous training, fed on a high energy diet, and given expert medical attention. Hence they were an expensive investment, not to be dispatched lightly.

For a gladiator who died in combat the trainer (lanista) might charge the sponsor of the fatal spectacle up to a hundred times the cost of a gladiator

who survived. Hence it was very much more costly for sponsors to supply the bloodshed that audiences often demanded, although if they did allow a gladiator to be slain it was seen as an indication of their generosity.

Remarkably, some gladiators were not slaves but free born volunteers. The chief incentive was probably the down-payment that a volunteer received upon taking the gladiatorial oath. The oath meant that the owner of his troupe had ultimate sanction over the gladiator's life, assimilating him to the status of a slave (ie a chattel).

It was the prerogative of the sponsor, acting upon the wishes of the spectators, to decide whether to reprieve the defeated gladiator or consign him to the victor to be polished off. Mosaics from around the Roman empire depict the critical moment when the victor is standing over his floored opponent, poised to inflict the fatal blow, his hand stayed (at least temporarily) by the umpire.

The figure of the umpire is frequently depicted in the background of an engagement, sometimes accompanied by an assistant. The minutiae of the rules governing gladiatorial combat are lost to modern historians, but the presence of these arbiters suggests that the regulations were complex, and their enforcement potentially contentious.

Fighting Styles

The rules were probably specific to different styles of combat. Gladiators were individually armed in various combinations, each combination

imposing its own fighting-style. Gladiators who were paired against an opponent in the same style were relatively uncommon.

One such type was that of the *equites*, literally "horsemen" so called because they entered the arena on horseback, although for the crucial stage of the combat they dismounted on foot.

The most vulnerable of all the gladiators was the net-fighter

Some of the most popular pairings pitted contrasting advantages and disadvantages against one another. Combat between the *murmillo* ("fish-

fighter”, so called from the logo on his helmet) and the *thraex* or *hoplomachus* was a standard favorite.

The *murmillio* had a large, oblong shield that covered his body from shoulder to calf; it afforded stout protection, but was very unwieldy. The *thraex*, on the other hand, carried a small square shield that covered only his torso, and the *hoplomachus* carried an even smaller one.

Instead of calf-length greaves, both these types wore leg-protectors that came well above the knee. So the *murmillio* and his opponent were comparably protected, but the size and weight of their shields would have called for different fighting techniques, contributing to the interest and suspense of the engagement.

The most vulnerable of all gladiators was the net-fighter (*retiarius*), who had only a shoulder-guard (*galerus*) on his left arm to protect him. Being relatively unencumbered, however, he could move nimbly to inflict a blow from his trident at relatively long range, cast his net over his opponent, and then close in with his short dagger for the face-off.

He customarily fought the heavily-armed *secutor* who, although virtually impregnable, lumbered under the weight of his armor. As the *retiarius* advanced, leading with his left-shoulder and wielding the trident in his right hand, his shoulder guard prevented his opponent from striking the vulnerable area of his neck and face.

Not that all gladiators were right-handed. A disconcerting advantage accrued to the left-handed; they were trained to fight right-handers, but their opponents, unaccustomed to being approached from this angle, could be thrown off-balance by a left-handed attack. Left handedness is hence a quality advertised in graffiti and epitaphs alike.

Originally the different fighting-styles must have evolved from types of combat that the Romans met among the peoples whom they fought and conquered- *thraex* literally means an inhabitant of Thrace, the inhospitable land bordered on the north by the Danube and on the east by the notorious Black Sea.

Subsequently, as the fighting-styles became stereotyped and formalized, a gladiator might be trained in an “ethnic” style quite different from his actual place of origin.

It also became politically incorrect to persist in naming styles after people who had by now been comfortably assimilated into the empire, and granted privileged relationships with Rome. Hence by the Augustan period the term *murmillo* replaced the old term *samnis*, designating a people south of Rome who had long since been subjugated by the Romans and absorbed into their culture.

Barrack Life

The gladiatorial barracks were marked by heterogeneity. Membership was constantly fluctuating, as troupes toured the local circuit. Some members survived to reach retirement; new recruits were enlisted, many of them probably unable to understand Latin.

In the larger barracks, members of the same fighting-style had their own dedicated trainer, and they often bonded together in formal associations.

Frequently it was a gladiator’s fellows who furnished his tombstone, perhaps through membership of a burial society.

...gladiators must frequently have met their intimate fellows in mortal combat.

Yet gladiators must frequently have met their intimate fellows in mortal combat. Professionalism and the survival instinct would have demanded a merciless display of expertise, inculcated by the gladiator’s training. Within a training-school there was a competitive hierarchy of grades (*paloi*) through which individuals were promoted.

The larger barracks, at least had their own training area, with accommodation for spectators, so that combatants became accustomed to practicing before an audience of their fellows. The system meant that combat and heroic prowess were brought right into the urban centers of the

Roman empire, whereas real warfare was going on unimaginably far away, on the border of barbarism.

Criticism and popularity

There were some dissenting voices; the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius found gladiatorial combat “boring”, but he nevertheless sponsored legislation to keep costs at a realistic level so that individuals could still afford to mount the displays that were an obligatory requirement of certain public offices.

Both pagan philosophers and Christian fathers scorned the arena. But they objected most vociferously not to the brutality of the displays, but to the loss of self-control that the hype generated among the spectators.

Gladiatorial displays were red-letter days ...

Gladiatorial displays were red-letter days in communities throughout the empire. The whole spectrum of local society was represented, seated strictly according to status. The combatants paraded beforehand, fully armed. Exotic animals might be displayed and hunted in the early part of the program, and prisoners might be executed, by exposure to the beasts.

As the combat between each pair of gladiators reached its climax, the band played to a frenzied crescendo. The combatants (as we know from mosaics, and from surviving skeletons) aimed at the major arteries under the arm and behind the knee, and tried to batter their opponent’s skull. The thirst for thrills even resulted in a particular rarity, female gladiators.

Above all, gladiatorial combat was a display of nerve and skill. The gladiator, worthless in terms of civic status, was paradoxically capable of heroism. Under the Roman empire, his job was one of the threads that bound together the entire social and economic fabric of the Roman world.

Not even Spartacus, the most famous of all gladiators, has left his own account of himself. But shreds of evidence, in words and pictures, remain –

to be placed together as testimony of an institution that characterized an entire civilization for nearly 700 years.

Modern Sport

Mixed martial arts competitions were introduced in the United States with the first Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) in 1993. The sport gained international exposure and widespread publicity when jiu-jitsu fighter Royce Gracie won the first Ultimate Fighting Championship tournament, submitting three challengers in a total of just five minutes, sparking a revolution in the martial arts.

Since the UFC's explosion into the mainstream media in 2006 along with their 2007 merger with Pride FC and purchase of WEC, few companies have presented significant competition.

On April 30, 2011 UFC 129 set a new North American MMA attendance record, drawing 55,724 at the Rogers Centre in Toronto; the event also set a new MMA world record for the highest paid gate at \$12,075,000 and is the highest gate in Toronto for any event.

Development of Fighters

As a result of an increased number of competitors, organized training camps, information sharing, and modern kinesiology, the understanding of the combat-effectiveness of various strategies has been greatly improved. UFC commentator Joe Rogan claimed that martial arts evolved more in the ten years following 1993 than in the preceding 700 years combined.

The high profile of modern MMA promotions such as UFC and Pride has fostered an accelerated development of the sport. The early 1990s saw a wide variety of traditional styles competing in the sport. However, early competition saw varying levels of success among disparate styles.

In the early 1990s, practitioners of grappling based styles such as Brazilian jiu-jitsu dominated competition in the United States. Practitioners of striking based arts such as boxing, kickboxing, and karate who were unfamiliar with submission grappling proved to be unprepared to deal with its submission techniques. This increase of cross-training resulted in

fighters becoming increasingly multi-dimensional and well-rounded in their skills.

Victory

Victory in a match is normally gained either by the judges' decision after an allotted amount of time has elapsed, a stoppage by the referee (for example if a competitor can not defend himself intelligently) or the fight doctor (due to an injury), a submission, by a competitor's cornerman throwing in the towel, or by knockout.

Knockout (KO): as soon as a fighter becomes unconscious due to strikes, his opponent is declared the winner. As MMA rules allow ground fighting, the fight is stopped to prevent further injury to an unconscious fighter.

Submission: a fighter may admit defeat during a match by:
a tap on the opponent's body or mat/floor
a verbal announcement/verbal tap

Technical Knockout (TKO)

Referee stoppage: The ref may stop a match in progress if:
a fighter becomes dominant to the point where the opponent can not intelligently defend himself and is taking excessive damage as a result
a fighter appears to be unconscious from a submission hold or due to a strike
a fighter appears to have a significant injury such as a cut or a broken bone

Doctor Stoppage: the referee will call for a time out if a fighter's ability to continue is in question as a result of apparent injuries, such as a large cut. The ring doctor will inspect the fighter and stop the match if the fighter is deemed unable to continue safely, rendering the opponent the winner. However, if the match is stopped as a result of an injury from illegal actions by the opponent, either a disqualification or no contest will be issued instead.

Corner stoppage: a fighter's corner men may announce defeat on the fighter's behalf by throwing in the towel during the match in progress or between rounds.

Decision: if the match goes the distance, then the outcome of the bout is determined by three judges. The judging criteria are organization-specific.

Forfeit: a fighter or his representative may forfeit a match prior to the beginning of the match, thereby losing the match.

Disqualification: a "warning" will be given when a fighter commits a foul or illegal action or does not follow the referee's instruction. Three warnings will result in a disqualification. Moreover, if a fighter is injured and unable to continue due to a deliberate illegal technique from his opponent, the opponent will be disqualified.

No contest: in the event that both fighters commit a violation of the rules, or a fighter is unable to continue due to an injury from an accidental illegal technique, the match will be declared a "No Contest".