Hands-on with a $434 replica lightsaber: May the dork be with you

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Ars tests an Ultra Saber replica lightsaber

> ***Update**: It's Christmas day and Ars staffers are enjoying a winter break (inevitably filled with series binge-watching and fancy egg preparations). As such, we're resurfacing a few favorites from the site archives appropriate for the occasion—like this review of what may possibly be the nerdiest (and most awesome) gift any of us could receive. This piece originally ran on December 17, 2016, and it appears unchanged below.*

If you want to fake like a true Jedi master, your hardware options are limited. Robes and beards are easy enough to track down, but sword-like hilts that project concentrated beams of controlled, tactile light are still at least a few years out.

For those who insist on dressing in their finest Vrogas Vas linens and representing the Jedi Order in our own, simpler galaxy, replica lightsabers are the only way to go. I don't mean the fold-up, whip-out toy sabers that you can buy at Target. For whatever reason, the legal eagles at the Disney/Lucasfilm trust have stood back and let custom saber makers run amok. As a result, you can now buy sabers that

purport to be on par with movie set props—and aim to be the coolest dude in line for the next *Star Wars* film.

One of those manufacturers, Ultra Sabers, reached out to Ars ahead of *Rogue One*'s premiere this week to see if we wanted to whip one of their rods around. As you can see in the above video, I most certainly whipped it.

Lights, sounds, and plastic bonks

- Ultra Sabers' "Dark Catalyst" model.
  Sam Machkovech
- Closer look at the handle.
  Sam Machkovech
- Power button.
- Handle's blade end.
- Handle's battery end.
- This dull, domed tip helps project light around the entirety of the blade when powered on.

Ultra Sabers' replica sabers start in the sub-$100 range, but if you want the kind of light-and-noise saber fun seen in the above video, you'll spend no less than $150 for programmable light and sound options. Hilts, pommels, and other details can be customized as well. I went through Ultra Sabers' site and built a maxed-out version of the "Dark Catalyst" handle, complete with a "V4" soundboard and a programmable blade (which uses WRGB light information to make the saber light up).

The total cost before shipping and tax? $434. *Ohhh, maxi big da price!*

You do get more for paying more; the customization options and build quality exceed what you'll find at places like Disneyland's own "build your own lightsaber" stations. The plasticky handle I received is solid and finished with a

coating that has proven mostly smudge-proof in my on-and-off sabering over the past two weeks.

That build quality extends to the toy nature of this thing—meaning, you can, and are probably expected to, bang the plastic "blade" around, onto walls, cushions, and friends, without the blade portion coming loose from the handle or getting too dinged up with marks.

Insert a battery, hit a small power button, and the Jedi magic begins. The plastic casing and its domed tip do a good job of bouncing and projecting bright light through the entirety of the blade. Ultra Saber offers incredible uniform brightness with only a single light source.

The saber's sound performance, on the other hand, may disappoint some hopeful Jedis. The main issue I found in my testing is with the accelerometer used to register sword swipes and trigger appropriate sound effects. It's a binary, on-off trigger, so you won't hear blade-whirr noises that reflect your speed or motion. Worse, this trigger just isn't consistent. The unit is supposed to trigger noises due to both motion and blade impact, but I found the whirring didn't trigger about a fourth of the time. (You can also quick-tap the power button to trigger an "impact" mode, in which a secondary color flashes and sounds trigger as if your saber is actively clashing with another saber.)

Let's be clear: you're a proud dork if you buy and own one of these things. That's great. But your dorkiness shouldn't be affected or diminished because your sick spin-and-jump move isn't matched with a sick saber sound effect.

In better news, the saber sound options pre-loaded into Ultra Sabers' "version four" sound chip are intense and *Star Wars*-worthy. Really, I'm amazed these sounds, in particular, don't draw the ire of Lucasarts' legal brass. A simple Windows app makes loading new compatible sound files into the saber's

circuit board easy. Reprogramming the blade's colors is easy, too, should your Ultra Saber come built with a programmable light array. Once new sounds are loaded in, a long-press of the power button triggers a sound-selection process that works quickly and neatly. (Want a saber that makes loud tiger noises with every swipe? Meow, baby.)

All sound projects from the bottom of the handle, which makes sense in terms of how hands are likely to cover the rest of the handle. Indoors, this more than suffices, but the sound doesn't project well when outdoors.

You could win this saber

Make no mistake: Ars is nowhere near an authority on replica lightsabers. This review isn't an ironclad endorsement of Ultra Sabers' offering, especially since I have yet to test any other high-end sabers. (I invite any saber makers in the wild to let us test their wares, so that I may become our staff's leading replica saber critic.)

One thing I can say definitively at this time is that many nerds are manufacturing their own love-filled takes on lightsabers—or, at least, as much as they possibly can without bending the known rules of physics. This "Dark Catalyst" model has been fun to test, and while I wonder whether its $434 cost reflects Ultra Sabers' BOM and R&D costs, I fully believe the price is right for the kind of *Star Wars* fan who would buy and use one of these in the first place.

That price will be far less for one of you, by the way: we're giving away this Ars Technica-colored saber (black handle, orange default light, green "impact" light) as part of our annual charity drive. Head over there, read our official rules, and find out how this, or many other products reviewed by Ars over the past year, could be yours.

Listing image by Sam Machkovech

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