

WHITE WOLF

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Review: Shadowrun

Publisher: FASA Corporation, P.O. Box 6930, Chicago, IL, 60680

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by Stephan Wieck

Say orc, you heard about Shadowrun? Yeah that's right, it's the newest game by FASA, the corp that brought you Battletech and Renegade Legion. Oh, so you heard it's got magic and sci-fi in it huh? And you heard it's sorta cyberpunk. And you think the game system is pretty good. Look trog, who's talkin' about this game, me or you. These chummers are hear to listen to me talk about Shadowrun, so why don't you clam up before me and my handrazors give you a new meaning to tonsillectomy.

Shadowrun is FASA's latest role-playing game, scheduled for release in August. The game is produced as a 200+ page hardcover book which retails for \$28.00. This review is written using a loose-sheet, pre-press copy of the game, so it's impossible to comment on the final quality of the Shadowrun book, but from the review copy, it is safe to say that the book will be very attractive. It features a cover illustration by Larry Elmore complimented by an incredible title logo. The rules read smoothly, and liberal insertions of fiction make the rulebook more lively.

Shadowrun is true to its slogan: "Where man meets magic and machine". The game is set in North America in the year 2050. The setting has a lot of similarities to cyberpunk environments, where Megacorporations have taken over everything, sending a large chunk of humanity into poverty and another even larger population chunk have become corporate wage slaves. The characters are Shadowrunners, existing in the shadows of the corporations and running missions for the corps that they don't want to be associated with.

Shadowrun takes several departures from the cyberpunk environment however, since it incorporates magic into the world. The Mayans were the first people to predict the emergence and disappearance of magic as it winds through history like a sine wave. Magic returns to the world in 2011 and brings with it all sorts of revolutions. Native Americans are the first to use the emerging magic since they never completely left their traditions of magic and ritual. With their power, the Native American Indians are able to carve out an independent nation on the west coast. More startling is the appearance of recessive DNA in humans triggered out of dormancy by magic. Strains of humans appear including dwarves, elves, orcs, and trolls. Social clashes occur as these metahumans take their place in the world. A futuristic

KKK style clan called the Humanis Policlub even forms to purify mankind from these strains. Magical strains appear in the animal world, creating all sorts of critters thought to be myths. And Dragons emerge and take powerful roles in the world, as corporate CEOs or political leaders.

Players in Shadowrun choose from 16 Archetypes to decide the character they'll play. The Archetypes are premade characters based on various stereotypical personalities of the Shadowrun world of 2050. Archetypes could be classified into three groups: Combat, which includes mercenaries, and cybernetic warriors; Magic, with shamans and mages; and Deckers, who plug their minds into computers or vehicles. When I first saw the Archetypes, I cringed. The Archetypes are complete with stats, equipment, and skills. They are ready to be played as is, just choose one and go. I feared a game populated by clones if everyone chose from a stereotype to play. But, it turns out that there's more to the Archetypes than it first appeared. The Archetypes are actually something between a character class and a premade character. True, you can play them as they appear, but they are meant to be much more. Say you choose the Orc Mercenary Archetype. Now you decide his gender, race (yes, metahumans are of all races and colors), appearance, and extra equipment. You also choose which of his skills he has concentrations or specializations in. And what's this guy allergic to, sunlight or silver? Finally, if you don't like any of the sixteen provided, there are rules for making new Archetypes.

So chummers, you decide what character you are yet? A deckhead! Tell you what pal, save yourself the trouble and go plug your head into a toaster oven. You don't want to be mindtrippin' around inside no corporate database. Me? I'd go with a shaman or a mage. I could even go for one of those vatjobs like the street samurai. All those cybermobs and chipped up reflexes? Shoot, urban predator nuthin', yer talkin' urban one-man army. Course it won't mean a thing if you don't know how to play the game out there on the streets.

Shadowrun game mechanics create a fairly unique system which is easy to learn but hard to master. The biggest advantage of the system is that once you have it down, you don't need to consult the rulebook for much of anything during play. Six-sided dice are the only dice used in Shadowrun, but you need a lot of them. The results of actions are based on Success Tests which can be Unresisted, Opposed, or Resisted Tests. A number of dice equal to the character's applicable skill or attribute is rolled to determine the success of an action. For example, an elf tries to dodge oncoming traffic to cross the street and continue shadowing an enemy. The gamemaster has the elf player roll an Unresisted Quickness Success Test (the action is not opposed or resisted). The player rolls a number of six-siders equal to the elf's quickness, we'll say five dice. The GM decides that

it's a busy street so the player's Target Number is a five. Each die the player rolled that shows a five or more counts as a success. The elf only gets one success which means he dodges the traffic, but maybe a car had to slam on its brakes to avoid hitting him and screeches its horn. The elf's enemy hears the commotion and sees the elf. If the elf had gotten two or three successes, he might have dodged the traffic so well that he avoided such an incident and been able to continue his spying.

The skill system is cut and dried. You choose skills and assign ratings, unless you use a made Archetype, in which case skills are given. The most original part of Shadowrun's skill system is in concentration and specialization. An example best explains the system. A character with Firearms skill at 3 could concentrate in pistols. He would then use pistols at 4, but all other firearms at 2. Similarly, he could further specialize in a particular pistol such as the Ares Predator which he would then have at 5. And again, because he exclusively trained with that weapon, he would have all pistols at 3 (his concentration over the Ares Predator handgun) and other firearms at 1. The system helps personalize the Archetypes and aids players in defining their characters.

Combat is handled as Resisted Success Tests which means that the attacker inflicts damage and then the victim resists the damage to lessen its severity. In firearms combat, for example, the attacker rolls dice equal to his firearms skill adjusted for concentrations and specializations. His target number is determined by a list of modifiers depending on range, movement, cover, etc. Using our character above with Ares Predator at 5, he would roll five dice. Assuming his target number turned out to be four, he would then count his successes as the dice he rolled that show four or more. Note that there is no limit on the target number needed for success because of what the rules call "the rule of six" which means that any die thrown that shows a six is rerolled and the result is added to the six. As long as you roll sixes, you keep adding.

If any successes are rolled, the attacker inflicts his weapon's base damage plus he can "stage up" that base damage if he rolled several successes. The defender then rolls his resistance. He rolls dice equal to his Body attribute with a target number equal to the weapon's power level, a number which is part of each weapon's basic damage. His successes "stage down" the damage he takes just as the attacker's successes staged it up. Armor counts as automatic successes (no roll or target number needed) towards staging down the damage. Rules for autofire and melee vary the basic procedure slightly. The system works adequately, and there is a fair amount of tactical strategy involved.

Enough about the dice rollin ya say. What about the magic? Yeah, my second best friend is a wiz, so I can tell ya all about the magic. My best friend? That one's easy, it's my Uzi III.

The magic system in Shadowrun is in my view the greatest accomplishment of the game. There are two types of magicians in Shadowrun, shamans and Hermetic mages. Shamans have individual animal totems which affect their personality and abilities. They summon nature spirits and perform rituals in medicine lodges. They are by nature ritualistic and emotional in their magic. Hermetic mages are just the opposite. They take a systematic and formulaic approach to magic. They summon elementals, use Hermetic





Circles for rituals, and study in libraries. Many of their powers take longer to produce, but they have more control over them. For example, shamans can summon spirits in the midst of combat, whereas Hermetic mages must spend hours summoning elementals. However, once summoned, elementals can be bound to produce many different services while nature spirits disappear at sundown.

Shadowrun magic is divided into spellcasting and ritual. Spellcasting involves spells cast immediately by the magician which affect his local surroundings. Rituals are performed in medicine lodges or Hermetic circles and usually involve several magicians pooling forces to produce a powerful spell effect at any range. Details of magical items and the Astral plane of magic are described in the book as well. Both of these are done in an original, refreshing manner.

So where has science gone in the past sixty years? Into the human body mostly. Cybernetics implants are not a freak thing in Shadowrun, they're commons sights on the wealthy and anyone who wants an edge on survival. The game contains most of the standard cyberpunk trappings as well as several ingenious little items, including several types of mind implants. The problem for characters is that cybernetic implants decrease their Essence attribute since they invade the body's finely tuned nervous system. It is suicide for magicians to use cybernetics since magic use depends on the body's natural state. A cybernetic wizard using magic is like a badly tuned instrument trying to play clear notes.

Shadowrun also uses the TRON-like computer landscapes common to cyberpunk atmospheres. These are found in the Matrix, the world-wide computer network of 2050. Information is power and profit in 2050, and ultra modern computer hackers, called deckers, are the ones able to invade the well protected corporate databases and steal their best guarded secrets. Action in the Matrix takes place in a bizarre world of computer graphics that the decker navigates, searching for datastores while trying to avoid the security programs stationed in the network. Entire adventures could take place in the Matrix world. The problem with the decker-Matrix concept is that most character parties will have only one decker. So, while the decker and GM are exploring the Matrix during an adventure segment, the rest of the players must sit and enjoy the show unless the GM is willing to run two scenes at once and has some baddies coincidentally pop up everytime the decker plugs into the Matrix.

The rest of the Shadowrun book is devoted to other equipment, critters, GM information, and a short ready-to-run combat encounter. The Awakened, the mythological creatures described in the Critters section, are described in a fair amount of detail. Their existence is incorporated into the world of Shadowrun excellently. The Sasquatch is now recognized by the United Nations as a sentient species and is due appropriate treatment. And, Vampires are created when humanoids are infected with a magical virus. The GM information covers area background information, awarding experience, and provides guidelines for regulating the players' activities. The combat encounter is intended as an immediate introduction to Shadowrun's system for new players.

So, you guys and gals ready to end your boring lives? Time to quit being Suits and try a Shadowrun? I just told you the basics of the game, so maybe you've already

decided if you've got the guts to take a run. But first, I'm gonna tell ya what I think of the game. You know, in a general kinda sense. It makes for a good conclusion.

After reading Shadowrun, here's what I like, and what I hope improves with further game supplements. Shadowrun's greatest strength is its cohesiveness. It has managed to take elements of two genres, fantasy and cyberpunk, and mesh them beautifully into one world under one set of rules. Every aspect of the game shows this, from the relation between cybernetics and magic-use to the description of a ghoul. The game system is extremely versatile and once you master what to roll in which situation, game play could progress very smoothly. Learning what to roll when though is a very intimidating task which slows down the game for the first several sessions while the rulebook is consulted. The system of rolling dice hoping for successes can be very exciting during tense play. "You need three successes to defuse that charge before it goes off and takes you with it". The player gets to roll a handful of dice like he's gambling with his character's life.

The largest problem with the game is that it has an ambivalent theme. The gamemaster is handed a setting filled with proud Indians, corrupt corporations, and nasty critters. But, after being handed all of this information, you're left saying "Now what? What do I have the characters do?". Plus, the fiction with the book is all darkly humorous, whereas the artistry and background of the game lend towards a more serious, action drama theme. These problems won't hinder an experienced gamemaster who can choose his own direction, but others could have a rough time getting their campaign off the ground. The introduc-

tory combat encounter helps a bit, but more information and ideas on running a campaign in Shadowrun should have been included in the gamemaster's section of the book. For this reason, I would recommend Shadowrun to experienced or older gamers. To these players I give it a very high recommendation.

Ratings 1--worst or least, 5--best or most--Appearance (5)--Components (na)--Complexity (4)--Playability (3)--Sum (4)

Hear Ye! Hear Ye!

In this new addition to pages of WHITE WOLF Magazine, we announce the sorts of articles we are searching for at this time. Send all submissions to White Wolf Publishing, 1298 Winter Place, Anniston, AL 36201.

1. The December/January issue is the alternate fantasy world issue. Articles for Talislanta, Overlord, and Shadow World would be welcome.

2. Every once in a while a game comes out which is so much fun that we like to provide continuing coverage. FASA's new Shadowrun is such a game and submissions for this game will be looked at closely.

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