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Cyberpunk Reviews

by Stephan Wieck

A Hot New Genre

What's the latest genre of science fiction and role-playing games? If you've been keeping up with SF or if you've been visiting your local hobby stores, you'll know that cyberpunk has taken the science fiction and role-playing game fields by storm over the past year. Novels by Gibson, Williams, and Sterling have created a new class of science fiction where the near future is run by megacorporations, the world is connected through an international computer matrix, and the lives of cyberpunk heroes are filled with drugs, cybernetics, and fast deals.

Several RPG companies have capitalized on cyberpunk's popularity by bringing it to us in role-playing games. R. Talsorian was first with *Cyberpunk* (reviewed in WW #14). Next came FASA's *Shadowrun*, a blend of cyberpunk and fantasy set in the near future (reviewed in *White Wolf* #17). Now, Iron Crown Enterprises (I.C.E.) has released its cyberpunk RPG called *Cyberspace*.

In this issue and the next, I'll take a look at the cyberpunk RPG market and fill you in on what's new and how good the products are. This month's article reviews all of the *Shadowrun* supplements that FASA has released to date. Next issue's article will feature a review of I.C.E.'s game *Cyberspace* and reviews of a couple of *Cyberpunk* supplements by R. Talsorian. All the reviews are followed by ratings on a scale of 1 (worst) to 5 (best).

FASA has published five *Shadowrun* supplements since they released the *Shadowrun* game in August of last year. These supplements include three adventures and two sourcebooks which are all reviewed below. FASA has also

released a Gamemaster's Screen for *Shadowrun* which includes a fairly long mini-adventure and there are *Shadowrun* miniatures by Grenadier, but these products are not reviewed here. Upcoming *Shadowrun* releases include the adventures *Bottled Demon* and *Queen Euphoria*, and the sourcebooks *Paranormal Animals of North America*, *The Advanced Magic Book*, *Seattle Sourcebook*, and *Neo Anarchist's Guide to North America*. Read WW for reviews of these products as they're released.

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DNA/DOA

by Dave Arneson

DNA/DOA is a *Shadowrun* adventure written by Dave Arneson, the co-creator of *Dungeons and Dragons*. And in fact, *DNA/DOA* runs something like a dungeon adventure. The characters are hired to make a run against Aztechnology. They must enter the Aztechnology complex through the sewers and search the sub-levels of the Aztechnology complex. The adventure includes pregenerated characters that can optionally be used as NPCs, and also has stats for some new creatures the characters may run into.

I was generally disappointed with *DNA/DOA* for two reasons. First, except for a few deceptions, the plot is just a straightforward underground search. My second complaint is that the adventure never achieves a true cyberpunk atmosphere. Besides a few cyberpunk trappings in the setting of the plot, it doesn't have any themes that propel the characters into the cyberpunk genre. It's plot components dealing with genetics, which give the adventure its name, are done more in the style of post holocaust mutations

than in a cyberpunk organ grafting style. The adventure's saving grace is the large number of interesting NPCs in the storyline. I would recommend *DNA/DOA* only as a transition adventure if you're a Gamemaster trying to get diehard fantasy role-players to give *Shadowrun* a try. The adventure's dungeon atmosphere will make the characters feel more at home while still introducing them to some aspects of *Shadowrun*.

Sum: 2

Mercurial

by Paul R. Hume

Mercurial was the first adventure released for *Shadowrun*. The adventure is written by Paul Hume, one of the creators of *Shadowrun*. The adventure begins with the players being hired to protect the megapopular rock star Maria Mercurial. The plot of the adventure goes through layer after layer of deception and intrigue as Maria's mysterious past begins to catch up with her and everyone from corps to the Yakuza tries to get Maria away from the players. The players must unravel Maria's past to put a stop to the constant threats to her safety.

Mercurial succeeds where *DNA/DOA* fails. *Mercurial* throws the characters on a rollercoaster ride through a world of cyberpunk punctuated with occasional blends of magic and fantasy that are part of the *Shadowrun* world. The adventure features players fighting Yakuza and hacking a computer system located half-way around the globe. These are the things which make the adventure entertaining and make it cyberpunk. *Mercurial* also introduces players to futuristic rock-and-roll in a cyberpunk setting. I thought the adventure could have used a bit more source material on this since music is not only integral to the adventure's setting and charac-

ters, but is also a part of the cyberpunk genre.

Mercurial's only weakness may be that some of its storyline transitions are difficult for the players to follow and for gamemaster to run. Like DNA/DOA, Mercurial has a fine cast of entertaining NPCs. It's unfortunate that some of the NPCs in the adventure are not used more in the plot. Overall, I highly recommend Mercurial.

Sum: 4

Dreamchipper

by James Long

Dreamchipper was the second adventure released for Shadowrun. In the adventure, the characters are hired by a corporation to recover some experimental computer chips that have been stolen from the company. The players must find their way through corporate rivalries, street rumors, and more than a little danger to hunt down the missing chips. As the clues begin to pile up, it becomes clear that people are plugging into the experimental sensory chips and suffering bizarre personality changes as a result. I won't reveal anymore here, but suffice to say that the plot is quite original and very entertaining for players.

I found Dreamchipper to be a very good adventure. It's plot centers around cyberpunk technology and involves some of the psychological strangeness prevalent in cyberpunk literature. The storyline is very open-ended and ideal for experienced role-players. Again, the cast of NPCs is well thought out and adds nicely to the story. My only complaint about Dreamchipper is that many of its mystery elements are too easy for the players to discover, but this is balanced by the sheer number of revelations the players must make to see behind the scenes of the plot and complete the adventure. Finally, I found the art in Dreamchipper to be a step above par for FASA's productions.

Sum: 4

Street Samurai Catalog

by Tom Dowd

The Street Samurai Catalog was the first sourcebook released for Shadowrun. The 112 page book was

written by Tom Dowd, one of the Shadowrun designers. The catalog presents a bunch of new weapons, vehicles, cyberware, and other accessories for the Shadowrun world. After reading through the Street Samurai Catalog, I had mixed opinions of its value. The Catalog has a lot of essentials which are almost a must for a Shadowrun campaign, but the amount of material in the sourcebook doesn't justify the \$12.00 price tag.

The good things in the Catalog are the melee weapons, gun accessories, and the stats for Street Samurai Archetypes of each metahuman race. Several futuristic melee weapons are listed in the Catalog which will give Shadowrun campaigns an added future fantasy effect. Guns presented in the catalog expand and improve the arsenal available to characters. Heavy pistols are given enhancements to make them worth carrying, and the heavy gunnery is considerably expanded with the addition of rotating cannons and gyro stabilization vests.

One of the problems with the Catalog is that many of the items presented are nothing more than clones of items already presented in the Shadowrun rulebook. A lot of the weapons in the Catalog have only few trivial stat changes and a new name to differentiate them from old weapons. And the same goes for a few of the vehicles. However, the biggest disappointment of the Catalog is the cyberware presented, both the amount of it and the type. There are only fourteen new pieces of cyberware presented in the 112 page book. The majority of the new cyberware is head implants that are of more interest and use to NPCs than to player characters. Since most of the book is guns, vehicles, and accessories instead of cyberware, perhaps it should have been a Mercenary Catalog rather than a Street Samurai Catalog. Finally, the amount of material in the book is a bit skimpy. Each item is given a full page, but some of the items such as arrows only require a couple of sentences to describe which leaves a lot of blank space in the book.

Overall, there are several great pieces of equipment in the Catalog, but there are also a lot of redundancies. If you've got twelve bucks to spare I'd say buy it because you will enjoy it and the Catalog will enrich

your Shadowrun campaign, but you can get by without it.

Sum - 3

Sprawl Sites

by B. Peterson and J. Faughnan

I cannot recommend this sourcebook highly enough. If you gamemaster Shadowrun, you need Sprawl Sites. The book contains background information on life in a cyberpunk city which was edited out of the Shadowrun rulebook. Sprawl Sites gives the gamemaster a wealth of information and personalities right at his fingertips.

The sourcebook has four major sections. The first section gives maps and area descriptions for common city locations the characters will frequent such as bars, hotels, body shops, and hospitals. Although the material is not very exciting, having it means that a GM is never at a loss for description no matter where his players decide to go. The second section is the meat of the book. This section is made up of ideas for encounters which are formatted to be used on the spot. The 132 encounters are divided under headings such as Gang Encounters, Corporate Encounters, or Elven Encounters. Again, when players throw the gamemaster for a loop and venture off the beaten path of the adventure, the GM simply looks up an appropriate encounter and continues play without hesitation. The last two sections are filled with Archetypes and Contacts. The eight new Character Archetypes include Bodyguard, Combat Mage, and Troll Bounty Hunter. The section of Contacts includes over thirty stock NPC types almost all of which are new. The Contacts include Armorer, Corporate Scientist, and Taxi Driver.

The Sprawl Sites sourcebook is an incredible reference for Shadowrun GMs. The book is well organized and easy to use. Your campaign shouldn't be without it.

Sum: 5