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## Shadowrun 6th edition review

Old games never die, they just get new editions. Some games take big design steps and then walk them back (D&D, WFRP), while others start forking out into multiple, concurrent editions (Traveller and RuneQuest). Others still just revise every concurrent edition, walking a tight balance between satisfying the fanboys and making the game accessible to those who couldn't or wouldn't buy it the last time around. No game is better suited to tell this perilous story than Shadowrun. Shadowrun was born in the late 90s around the same time as Cyberpunk, but took to that genre with its own twist, adding in magic and Tolkienesque "metahuman" races. Originally developed by FASA, the same design studio behind Battletech, Shadowrun has always had wargaming roots show through by virtue of its complexity and level of detail. This both gained it many fans as well as an intimidating reputation, especially when we're talking about the first three editions of the game. Shadowrun Sixth World has been received about as well as you can expect for a new edition of a game with a committed fanbase: howling on all sides. The new edition has had some serious streamlining, as seen through a dramatically reduced page count (322 for Sixth World versus 489 for Fifth Edition). After reading through the new edition and considering how it compares to the couple Shadowrun campaigns I've played (one in Fourth and one in Fifth), I can say that this streamlining does have an impact. The game has both had its task resolution system cleaned up as well as a significant rules change pertaining to the use of Edge, a minor meta-mechanic in previous editions which is now quite major. The Basics Shadowrun's basic resolution mechanic has remained unchanged since the beginning: assemble a pool of six-sided dice based on the relevant attribute and relevant skill, and add dice for relevant modifiers, usually coming from magical effects or cyberware. Successes are 5s and 6s, while rolling enough 1s could generate a "glitch" even if the roll succeeds. Given the magnitudes of skills and attributes, a highly trained or highly specialized character could easily come up with a dice pool in the low 20s in many editions. This is not all that different here. While both skills and attributes have a cap on modifying dice of +4, these two caps, plus the given maxima of stats and skills, give a pool maximum (before Edge expenditure) of 28d6. The "buckets of d6s" stereotype of Shadowrun is still deserved here, and based on some of the text in the intro the designers like it that way. Let's talk about Edge a bit. While target numbers are given on a spectrum of difficulties and examples (one which you've likely seen in every traditionally structured game), the designers made a conscious decision to reduce if not entirely eliminate stray modifiers on dice rolls. This involves the Edge stat. In Shadowrun 5e, Edge was a luck stat, which replenished every session and could give PCs rerolls or extra dice in key moments. You could even burn a point of Edge, reducing the stat by one, to avoid death or give yourself an automatic success in a key moment. While none of these uses of Edge have gone away, the roll of Edge is very, very different now. In every encounter, you have circumstantial opportunities to earn Edge, and every character can, during an encounter, have up to seven Edge. While Edge does replenish every session, much more significant is the ability to earn one or two points of Edge \*per turn\* in combat encounters, and in turn Edge has been given some significant abilities to encourage its expenditure. For one, armor isn't really used as damage reducing equipment, at least not directly. The tide of a battle turns on comparing Attack Rating to Defense Rating: if the attacker has an attack rating of more than 4 higher than the defender's defense rating, they get a point of Edge. The opposite is also true. Defense is at a statistical disadvantage here, but given what we know about armor and bullets, that's not necessarily wrong. Still, it doesn't "feel" right in a lot of cases for armor to have so little of an impact. Nonetheless, I think it works given the math, and wouldn't be surprised to see equipment in future supplements come with "hardened armor" ratings, a mechanic already described in the core rules but currently only applied to dragons and other similarly fearsome creatures. Circling back, character creation uses the priority system that was introduced in 5e, which is a significantly improved and streamlined version of the point-buy systems from earlier editions. On one hand the game still has 10 stats, not including the two special stats which apply only to magic users and technomancers, respectively (Magic and Resonance). On the other hand, total skills are down to 19. Though there are specializations in each skill, a character is limited to one specialization and one expertise (a second tier of specialization with a larger bonus), which helps prevent specializations from becoming just another thing to sink points into. The things that are really there to sink points into, of course, are the extensive mechanics around magic and technology, and the ensuing subsystems which define riggers, deckers, technomancers, mages, and adepts. The Subsystems Shadowrun has famously been a subsystem game, which is to say that pretty much every set of special rules in the game existed within its own minigame, not always playing nicely with the rest. That has been reduced in Sixth World, both due to parallelism as well as straight-up simplification. This has worked fairly well on the magic side, with basic mechanics explaining most of spellcasting and adept abilities without too much headache. Mystic adepts make more sense in this edition, though this is more from the explanation of how to split magical abilities between adept powers and spellcasting than it is from changes in the rules. Most magical abilities are still there from previous editions, with magic providing the flexibility to contrast with technology's brute force. The changes to the technological subsystems are in some ways more dramatic than those to magic, while also not accomplishing quite as much. Hacking in Shadowrun is much as it's ever been, with deckers essentially operating on a different plane of existence concurrent to the rest of the team. One thing done in 6e to address the "pizza problem" (that is, the issue where the decker and the GM play out a hacking run while the rest of the group goes and gets pizza) is to ensure that the hacker is operating on the same number of initiative passes as the rest of the group. This is an improvement across the entire game, actually: multiple initiative passes are gone and only the speediest characters can get a second major action (based on the calculus that four minor actions can be traded in for one major action). Also, the number of skills applicable to hacking has been reduced to two, which is a great simplification even though cyberdecks still have their own four attributes (and now those four are split between the deck and either a cyberjack or a commlink). Still, the basic structure of running against hosts, which each have a rating that states how many IC programs they can run, remains. Compared to the much-simplified "elevator" construct in Cyberpunk Red, Sixth World still has the hacker taking on a fairly complex second combat and doing it on their own, though it's fortunately in real time due to initiative changes, and generally close-up thanks to the noise rules. It's the same basic story with riggers. Riggers can either jump into a vehicle or drone using a vehicle control rig, or control a brace of them using a rigger command console. While issuing a command to a drone takes a major action (just like an attack), you can issue the command to every drone slaved to your RCC at once. The descriptions of jumping into drones, using an RCC, and autosofts provide a bit more clarity than past editions, but the rules haven't changed appreciably and some headaches, like every single drone getting its own initiative roll, persist. The overarching simplification of the rules and reductions in both number of skills and types of actions have made all of these subsystems a bit easier. While hacking and magic have their own playgrounds, so to speak, a lower cognitive load for the entire system makes them easier to deal with. Similarly, adepts and technomancers, both kind of weird offshoots of mages and deckers, respectively, are easier to wrap your head around at first read both because there are fewer rules to process and because they've been presented with better parallelism to their counterparts. Compared to 4e, the first edition of Shadowrun I played, reading through Technomancer Complex Forms both a) tells you a lot more about what the complex forms actually do and b) doesn't give you a headache. True to form, the sheer variety of character abilities is mirrored by the sheer variety of gear that the core rules provide you. Gear and Goodies The Game Master's chapter comes before the gear chapter, and I mention it here because the amount of "goodies" that a GM gets for running this game are fantastic. There are monster stat blocks, NPC stat blocks broken up by professional rating (a challenge rating counterpart but also world-building tool to help tune threat response), a "heat" mechanic, and a long, long list of security devices and traps which could be useful in essentially any heist game. A lot of the GM chapter is the sort of qualitative advice you've come to expect from that portion of the book, but it's generally well done and, in the absence of actual tables or numbers, is often still grounded in numerical advice which can be easier for many GMs to understand. But onto the gear. Yes, there are plenty of guns, a few armor pieces, and lots of drones and vehicles, but the sheer quantity of tools and intrusion equipment also stand out, and will intrigue creative players. Comms gear, non-decker software, imaging devices, and tools all come out to play here. Then you get to the cybernetics. Coming from Cyberpunk 2020 where cyberware got its own chapter, I was always confused by its placement here in the gear chapter in the back of the book. That said, the rules aren't that difficult: cybernetics reduces your Essence score, which will in turn reduce your Magic or Resonance scores each time it drops by a whole integer. This enforces a divide between magic and technology, but also does create a ceiling in terms of implants. So long as you have a positive essence, you have a wealth of items to choose from. Shadowrun has much more modular cybernetics than Cyberpunk 2020 did, with multiple tiers of cyberlimbs offering differing capacities in terms of their modifications. There's of course also bone lacing, wired reflexes, and anything else you could want to become an inhuman combat monster. In Conclusion Most of the rules changes in Shadowrun Sixth World come from simplification of core systems and letting those trickle down. It seems like magic, hacking, and vehicles are all principally similar to the mechanics in 5e (and 4e), but thanks to streamlining at the core of the game, they're easier to understand and apply. This does mean that issues with these subsystems still exist to a degree, but they should be easier to deal with when the whole game's easier to deal with. One thing that's not easier to deal with in Shadowrun Sixth World is the editing. For the most part I'm not talking about typos and omissions, though there are a few of both of those. Rather, I'm talking about the constant trend of bringing up a concept before it's explained, and the also constant headache of presumed knowledge. In terms of bringing up a concept before it's explained, a term is used and then the explanation comes up two pages later, which is annoying but sometimes unavoidable in a game text. Other times it's much worse: the term "professional rating" is used in an example in the combat chapter without a page reference, and doesn't end up getting explained until the NPCs chapter, nearly a hundred pages later. Presumed knowledge is actually almost managed (it's basically always a headache for a game with six editions), with a couple severe and problematic exceptions. Did you know it's never stated that characters start with an Essence of 6? Not at any point, though you can infer it from the NPC and pregen stat blocks. Similarly, the game doesn't tell you what happens if you get to Essence 0, except for a small discussion of metahuman critters, which may not apply to typical characters at all. These aren't gamebreaking omissions, but they are maddening to come across in a professional product, especially if you paid \$50 for a hardcopy. Overall, though, I liked Shadowrun Sixth World. The choice to simplify at the core rather than attack each subsystem means that you still have a number of very different feeling character options, while also having a ruleset which is easier to engage with. The changes to Edge and therefore to the core gameplay loop are going to bother some people, especially existing Shadowrun fans. That said, for players who are used to making non-simulationist gameplay decisions, like spending Advantage or Triumph in Genesys, this will feel very natural and will flow faster at the table. Shadowrun is still a complex game, and I'm not going to claim that all of the mechanical issues from previous editions have been solved. That said, I feel like this is a solid step in the right direction; Shadowrun Sixth World is still a crunchy game, but may actually be a fast-paced one too. After having played campaigns in both the Fourth and Fifth editions of Shadowrun, I'm glad Sixth World took the direction it did. The altered "push your luck" style of play encouraged by the dynamic Edge system fits thematically with both a heist game and a Cyberpunk game, and of course Shadowrun is both. This is still a game of subsystems, and it's still a game of rolling buckets of d6s. That said, if you've ever been on the fence about Shadowrun, Sixth World is probably worth checking out. With the cumulative improvements over the last three editions, the game has maintained its unique style while actually becoming accessible, not a small achievement if you consider where the game was for Third Edition. Personally, I'd GM a game of Shadowrun Sixth World, something I was never willing to commit to in either Fourth or Fifth. It's still Shadowrun, no question about that. Now, though, it's Shadowrun which I feel like I could run. Shadowrun Sixth World is available at DriveThruRPG. Note: Our PDF copy had corrections from the errata already integrated. Therefore, any errors noted in this article were not corrected in the August errata.



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