What version of Shadowrun should I play?

compiled and edited by PenLlawen ([twitter](), [reddit](), [SR forums]())
discuss this document: ([Reddit thread]())

Why this is a difficult question

When it comes to Shadowrun editions, there are no easy answers; only annoying compromises. Sorry!

Each version of SR comes complete with a significant number of foibles and fiddly bits, and I can all but guarantee that some of those are going to drive you mad. Every version of SR comes with bits you're going to want to patch or houserule over. There is no clear winner in that department.

To make things worse, a lot of people get emotionally attached to their favourite edition, come to terms with its faults, and then like to get in arguments online about it[1]. So this can be a contentious topic to discuss, despite the fact that it's a really common-sense question for a new player to ask.

So, setting out to write this doc, I thought the fairest way to do it was: attempt to give you some moderately objective facts about each version, then give the microphone to a ride-or-die megafan of each version in turn to make the case why this is the one you should play. Hopefully this will give you a rounded perspective; though not, perhaps, the easy answer you were seeking.

Before we start: obvious tie-breakers

Given that there is no right answer, there's a couple of factors that might make the decision for you without much further thought:
1. **If you or anyone at your table already has some experience of one specific Shadowrun version** - probably pick that one. Shadowrun can be hard work to get started with. Prior experience smooths over that significantly, so it is pretty valuable.
2. **If you or anyone at your table already owns a lot of books for one specific Shadowrun version** - probably pick that one. Unless you're desperately keen to spend more money, anyway.

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[1] I am not innocent of this, either.

3. **If community support is important to you** - pick 5e. It's currently (by far) the most commonly played edition, and therefore has the liveliest threads. If you ask random questions on community forums or Reddit, you're more likely to get good answers quickly if they're about 5e. It also has the best selection of digital tools available, such as chargen utilities, or Roll20 character sheets if you play online. It has the largest number of fan-made materials, like quick reference documents. Finally, it has a huge number of officially published sourcebooks available.

Versions at a glance

You might also like to see my [Shadowrun Through The Ages](#) side-by-side breakdown of specific game mechanics in each edition. It can give you a flavour of how each edition changed.

	1e	2e	3e	4e/4e20A	5e	6e
Publisher	FASA		FASA / FanPro	FanPro / Catalyst	Catalyst	
Core mechanic	Skill or stat; variable target number			Skill+stat; variable dice pool		
Tone	Retro-futuristic			Some transhumanist/sci-fi themes		
Matrix & comms tech	Wired & chunky; voice-only cellphones & PDA-like pocket computers; some "dungeon crawling" Matrix			Wireless & sleek; smartphones; Matrix stuff somewhat more integrated into gameplay		
Deckers exist as a distinct role?	Yes			Sometimes	Yes	
Editing quality / organisation	Good			Mostly good; later books poor	Poor	Poor
Roll20 charsheet?	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Sourcebook selection, community support, quick ref material, digital tools	Good (see r/oldschoolShadowrun & its discord; particular focus on 1e)			Good	Great	Weak

Tone through the ages

- 1e through 3e are a bit more "pure '80s cyberpunk": chunky cyberdecks with QWERTY keyboards, everything is plugged in with cables, simplistic (and very expensive!)

smartphones, people call the police via phone booths and receive breaking news via faxes. At the time, this was futuristic; to modern eyes, it's fair to describe it as "retro-futurism."

- 4e onwards increasingly introduce more modern elements into the setting, including transhumanism and more obvious sci-fi. These editions have wireless charging, laser weapons, railguns, nanotechnology, and ubiquitous augmented reality. In later 5e books there is even anti-gravity tech and a colony on Mars. Everyone has a smartphone analog ("commlinks") capable of full wireless Matrix access; hacking is via devices that look like tablet computers.

Deckers through the ages

- 1e-3e feature deckers who are quite "disconnected[2]" from the rest of the team: they have Matrix "dungeon crawls" that can involve a prolonged exploration of computer systems while the other characters might not have anything to do. This can be a challenge for GMs to manage.
- 4e attempts to address this by adding the ability to get hacking done to any character willing to spend money on gear, so at least all the characters can participate in hacking together. The addition of the wireless Matrix means hackers also have things they can hack in real-time during combat. But this dilutes the iconic cyberpunk hacker tropes. Many people felt this was a net loss. *(But they are wrong! -Tony, 4e advocate)*
- 5e & 6e revert back to having a distinct decker role, but continue to try to offer deckers the ability to act in concert with everyone else through wireless hacking. But again, complex Matrix actions can involve the decker doing their own thing for prolonged periods while the rest of the team is idle. GMs still need to work to manage this, although it's not as tricky as with 1e-3e. Some tables still take an "all decking is done by NPCs" approach.

Dice mechanics through the ages

Shadowrun started in 1e with a kitchen sink approach to dice mechanics: variable target numbers, dice pools, and two different vectors of modifiers for difficulty -- plus opposed and resisted rolls, and other mechanics. Some of these were phased out gradually, others still exist in modern Shadowrun.

- **Variable target numbers**: roll a number of dice equal to your skill, against a target number set by the difficulty of the task. Count the number of dice that succeed.
- The target number would be further modified by the situation, as would the number of dice you rolled.
- With variable targets, the target might be higher than 6; this required the **rule of 6**. If you roll a 6, you re-roll and add the next roll to 6, and keep going until you beat the target. If at least one dice beats the target, you succeed.

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[2] Pun intended. Sorry.

- ○ This results in some odd maths because 6 and 7 have the same probability of being rolled, but the system doesn't adjust for that. Taking a +1 penalty to a target number of 5 and one to a target number of 8 has a very different effect on your chances of making the roll.

Variable targets were phased out over 2e & 3e, for a static target number of 4, although sometimes they could still vary, and it would still be modified up or down by situational modifiers.

In addition to the above, SR1-3e have "**dice pools**": some number of dice that the player can choose to use on important or difficult tasks. Once used, though, they couldn't be used again until the pool refreshed - typically the next turn. These dice pools are derived from your character's skills and attributes and are the primary way attributes affect their chances of success. This can be a fair bit of book-keeping, as each character has multiple pools to draw upon, that must all be tracked as they are used and later refreshed. However they do give players a good amount of tactical agency.

From 4e and onwards, there is a major change to these mechanics. The "dice pool" term is re-used, now defined to mean "your skill rating plus the rating in a linked attribute"; for example, to shoot a gun, you might use a number of dice equal to the number in your Pistols skill plus the number in your Agility attribute. The target number is always 5 and situational modifiers only influence the number of dice you roll. This results in a smoother probability curve, but you're rolling (and counting) a lot of dice. 20+ is quite common; 30+ is possible; for very powerful characters 40+ isn't unheard of.

5e introduced a system-wide mechanism called "limits" in an attempt to curb powergaming. Each character has a set of intrinsic limits, derived from their attributes, which cap the maximum number of successes they can achieve on a test, regardless of how many dice they roll through combinations of high skills, expensive gear, magic spells, etc. It is also used for some gear, eg. the accuracy rating of a gun is applied as a limit on the hits when rolling to attack with it. Limits are often criticised for being fiddly to apply and ineffective at stopping players becoming very powerful. They were dropped in 6e.

First Edition (1989, FASA)

u/AstroMacGuffin:

The root of my undying love for first edition Shadowrun is that it is too good to be left behind. Second edition isn't simply a "1e but fixed", it's also fundamentally changed in a few places. Comparing 1e to later editions generally, nobody will ever convince me that a 300 page book is somehow a streamlined version of a 200 page book. Meanwhile, plenty of people make almost all of 1e work to great effect (frag you, vehicle combat rules). My nostalgia is happy sticking up for the underdog edition.

But besides that, some other reasons I'm on this weird hill:

There's a "less is more" effect in play: 1e puts greater emphasis on the heist, or on being a detective, or whatever's your flavor of underbelly RP, and it adds that emphasis by having fewer rules (and sometimes simpler rules).

Every player has a chance to shine in their unique way because at the same time the rules are diverse and thus bent toward emphasizing play style. There is no same-y-ness between magician, decker, muscle, and detective play styles, nor is there any of that pesky streamlining to narrow down the number of viable play styles per role. This is a game for going as far off the beaten path with a character concept as you could want and still be viable as a shadowrunner, all in barely 200 pages.

Variable staging numbers on weapon damage represent important parts of the simulation and were a key part of characterizing weapons. Higher staging numbers mean a character must be skillful in order to do extra damage, and that the target had better stay out of the field of attack. Lower staging numbers mean you could accidentally decapitate yourself with the weapon, but it's reasonably easy to deflect with a little skill. That's a lot to lose in the name of streamlining and so I still don't know what they thought they were going to gain by removing variable staging from the game.

The classic priority system and other parts of character generation all dictate that the player must get creative. Harsh constraints just have that effect, and 1e's character build rules are both generous and difficult to overcome.

1e is the most basic system. If something isn't covered in the rules you do some kind of Test and move on with the game. It's more personal, tactile, that way.

By keeping the simulation a little simpler, 1e's rulebook is smaller and looks more approachable. The game requires patching and house ruling, and the GM must take extensive notes, but I like that. The structure of the book's information needed a lot of work, and sometimes I'm thankful for a clarification from 2e or 3e, or for something introduced in the 2e equipment chapter; but I find that a physically thicker, larger book is intimidating to new players, and more expensive as a ticket price, and that's before you count the extra cost of time getting familiar.

Second Edition (1992, FASA)

Sometimes described as "a polished version of first edition", it's close enough that a lot of game material and expansions barely need changing to work across both versions. However, there are still a good few differences.

Recruiting volunteers to write this!
tbd

Third Edition (1998, FASA)

- Chargen tool - NSCRG

u/JessickaRose:
If I misremembered something or forgot something, please feel free to correct, but I'll just ignore any "but X edition is better because Y" responses, that's not what I'm here to do. I just want to clarify a few things that are often misunderstood, and explain key differences.

I'll try to keep it sweet and compartmentalised, and I won't get bogged down in which is best and why you should play it. I play 4eA at the moment, and we're unlikely to go back to 3e but it definitely did some things better than later editions in my opinion.

People get bogged down and scared because 'high target numbers', but in most circumstances it's no more or less crunchy than 4eA, indeed many of the modifiers are literally the same number, they just modify the base of 4 rather than adjust from your dice pool. In either case, number of successes equates to degree of success. The difference is simply rolling a fixed dice pool based on skill+stuff against that modified number, or rolling your modified dice based on skill+att+stuff pool against 5.

3e also has dice pools based on your stats. (not the same as what 4e onwards calls "dice pools") - Combat/Spell/Hacking - which allow you some flexibility as to where you want to really put in the extra effort. You also have a Karma Pool, which naturally grows over time as you earn karma. In later editions, these mechanics became 'Edge' but as taht is just an attribute you can boost it doesn't reflect gaining experience the same way.

It's a more deadly system, the way damage is stepped from L through to D means a lot of damage can happen very quickly, you only need 4 net hits to step from M (3 boxes) through to D (10 boxes). You can bleed out fast, and you only ever get one Hand of God, which is very costly. Furthermore, armour acts to reduce the target number of a soak roll, but the roll itself is only your Body dice - so a Body 2 mage is going to get hurt no matter how much kevlar you wrap them in.

However, while more deadly, 3e is more forgiving of cinematic action gameplay. Your dice pool will never say 'no': Jonny the Mage can pick up that discarded shotgun, take that shot in the rain through eyes filled with blood from casting drain, and take down that last bad

guy whose only illumination is a flickering street light to save the day. It probably won't happen with 2 dice against a target number of 37, but he can try (and I've seen people pull off even more remarkable feats that the whole table enjoyed).

I think that may be the point where people get the bad impressions from it, as there isn't really a 'no you can't' point of running out of dice, because there will be a number you can crunch out to say 'you need this to do it'. That can make it a little slower to work out the nuances, as those less than practical actions come up a little more, but the payoff is characters pulling off superhuman efforts, which is part of role playing and part of why you spent a fortune on that 'ware.

Defaulting between weapon types is more logical; you take a +2 modifier for, say, picking up an Assault Rifle when you do not have the Rifle skill. +4 to default to a stat.

Perception is just an Int roll, not a skill. Athletics and Stealth are their own skills as well, so between these I think you're not stuck with quite so many "must have" skills, like Climbing, Running, Infiltration, Shadowing, and indeed Perception which limits choices outside of them. That streamlines things a lot outside of combat, as well as in creation.

There are a couple of creation systems, both point build and priority.

No Vampires, no AIs, no Free Spirits, no Pixies, no Sasquatches... Changelings came in in YotC.

Magic:

Mages and Shaman are much more distinct.

Mages are depicted as scholars, they summon Elemental which they must bind to their will, they'll have a Hermetic Library, they're not bound by the whims of a Totem, although they might have a bent based on their Tradition.

Shaman are more primal, they have to follow a Totem which gives them bonuses and penalties, and a path of behaviour. They summon Nature Spirits which are bound by Domain, and can't call upon an army of them as Mages can Elementals - however, they're free, on demand, and offer a little more versatility. Some Totems switch out Nature Spirits for Spirits of the Elements.

There are other Traditions with their own selections of Spirits and rules such as Voodoo and Wuxing.

Spellcasting is much the same regardless of tradition. However, unlike later editions, spells are learned by Force, so if you want to overcast a Force 9 Powerbolt, you've got to learn Force 9 Powerbolt as an individual spell - which is a tough roll just to learn the spell.

Magic Loss is kind of a big deal, it can happen just from taking Deadly wounds, it isn't recoverable except through initiation, and you have to offset with Geasa - so you're not likely to risk using slap patches. If you don't offset, you lose it forever.

Spell Defence also means allocating some of your Sorcery and Spell Pool to that, which

means you have less to be offensive with. Because yeah, Sorcery is a skill, Ritual and Counterspelling aren't separate, nor are Binding and Banishing separate from Conjuring.

I think Magic is a little less strong in 3e than 4e because of how spell defence works.

Cyberware:

Cyberlimbs allow for breaking down of pieces and partial installations, like if you have a cyberarm, you cut the price of the dermal sheathing on the rest of you by 20%, or if you want to install a smartlink and already have an image link and the induction pad can be installed in that cyberarm, you only need the limited simrig and processor. Limbs add more body rather than damage boxes, because you get 10 boxes regardless of how tough you think you are. Dermal plating, bone lacing etc also adds to Body, not armour.

Having loads of 'ware would also increase your signature for targeting by sensor weapons.

Bioware uses its own "bio-index", which is even worse on magic than cyberware, as it doesn't just reduce your magic rating, it does so in a way you can't offset with geasa.

I think this actually offers better granularity and they are actually easier to track as separate systems than "one costs half the Essence of the more expensive pile". Though the effect on magic is really harsh.

Riggers:

Drone-riggers and getaway-driver-riggers are more distinct through skillsets, expense, and do not mean you can also try your hand at decking. Learning to rig a CCSS system to take over a building can be useful though.

Decking:

Is very much its own thing, probably a bit too far from the rest of the group. You have data size and memory to think about, I/O speeds of your connection, and might end up running a different dungeon crawl to the rest of the team. Definitely possible to run a combat decker and go in with the team, hack standalones/closed systems, depends how your GM sets you up, but it's also entirely possible to be playing a completely different game.

Your own team is also less liable to get Hacked themselves, Electronic warfare is something only the rigger might worry about, because Wireless is a very limited thing, so no Hacking the security team's guns either. There might be sentry guns and stuff you can play with, but the kind of Matrix overwatch is I think a bit different.

There are no technomancers, and otaku (a sort of prototypical technomancer) are bad.

Fourth Edition (2005, FanPro) & Fourth Edition, 20th Anniversary (2009, Catalyst Game Labs)

Note that the "20th Anniversary Edition" version of the Fourth Edition rules is essentially "the original rules plus errata and fixes". You should definitely pick the 20A version.

- A comprehensive chargen tool for 4e, [Chummer, is still available here](). It's no longer updated but should work fine.

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u/tonydiethem:

I'm going to keep this general… I don't see the benefit of arguing about specific skills or anything. So...

One of the things I love about future fiction is that it tends to heavily reflect the time in which it was written. Old Atomic Age fiction is fascinating to read as a person of this time and place.

Cyberpunk, and hence Shadowrun, is heavily rooted in the 80s. The hair, the punk, the neon, the dark dystopian future full of acid rain and big hair.

But it's not the 80s any more. It's inevitable that Shadowrun updates to the times. It was getting rather silly that the cyberpunk future didn't have wireless everything. We needed to capture the zeitgeist of our time. Cellphones are cheap and ubiquitous. Megacorporations know more about our shopping habits than we do. The problems with end stage capitalism are staring us in the face. And we can keep the neon, the hair, the 'tude, etc.

So, we update from 3e and we get wireless, AR, cheap computers, cheap drones. And a certain "Apple-ification" of tech, yes.

Shadowrun had a problem. It was the "Everyone go get pizza, it's time to do the decker minigame."

4e makes everything wireless and that gives the hackers stuff to do in combat. Hack the opposition's 'links, sign them up for spam, turn off their firewall, mess with their drones, listen in on their coms, disable their smartguns, etc etc etc. Judicious use of wifi blocking walls made it necessary for the hacker to come along for the ride too.

Wireless and cheap computers allowed people to "rig" on the cheap. Nothing beats a dedicated rigger, but the Street Samurai could keep a couple of cheap drones for peeking around corners or watching the escape route. Everyone could, and that is futuristic and good.

Virtual Reality is so…. Lawnmower man. 80s. AR is a more up to date and believable interface that lets you check out that hot elf chica's social media profile on the dance floor, which fits the zeitgeist better.

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I get that many people like the tone of earlier editions, but tone is largely set at the table anyway. You can have neon and mohawks and punk with 4e rules. You just also get ubiquitous cell phones and network connectivity.

4e also did away with a priority character generation system. I think the point buy allows for more nuanced characters. I think priority gen forces stereotypical characters.

I liked the metaplots. I thought the Brackhaven political stuff was interesting and plausible, for example.

I think the 4e matrix rules make sense. I'm a techie by trade. I get the 4e matrix rules. They make sense. They're not complex, but they ARE…. there's a lot. Trying to explain all of that to my friends felt like I was trying to give them a networking certification. I get why 5e tried to simplify the matrix rules. I just think they made it worse….

So why not play 5e? 6e?

The editing is atrocious. The 20A book had all the splat books in the main book index. You could look up anything from all the books in one spot. That is awesome. *(So does the 5e Master Index Edition, to be fair - penllawen)*

I find 5e and 6e hard to read. Again, the editing sucks. There's too much gratuitous filler text, and they changed the background color to blacks and reds. Ooooohhhh. Edgy! Ugh. The language took a tone change too. I liked the "drek" of previous editions. Really though, after the beautiful editing and cross referencing available in the 20A book, reading 5e and 6e makes me angry… Why? Why'd they have to mess up something so basic? It makes it so hard for new people…

I already have all the splat books, and 5e/6e gave me gratuitous filler text instead of… gear, weapons, adept powers, etc that I had taken for granted as being "Standard". I don't appreciate being charged for something I already have.

The 4e Seattle book is awesome. I feel like 5e and 6e tried to go away from Seattle, but never released a good meaty book on other locations, so everything got kind of…. Fuzzy… for locations. That might just be me though.

They brought back priority generation after 4e. The standard priority gen is… well, everyone uses alternatives for a reason. Try making a troll decker. You need high priority for Troll, you need high priority for money to afford the stupid expensive cyberdeck, and you still need stats and skills. It doesn't work. So people use alternatives. Also, it felt like a naked attempt at "We're going retro!" without a good reason to do so.

Cyberdecks are expensive again. Some cyberware got more expensive too. Why? Tech gets cheaper, not more expensive with time! It beggars belief. It flies against the zeitgeist of the time. And again, it felt like a naked attempt at "Look at us, we're going retro!" without a good reason to do so.

I hate 5e limits. I loathe them. If they're an attempt to cut down on power gaming munchkins, they suck at it and instead of saddling every single roll in the game with something to check, they could have just imposed limits on dice pools ONE time at

character generation. If they're an attempt at "realism"? They're not needed, and they saddle every single roll in the game with something to check. They're no benefit, high cost.

I don't like the 5e or 6e metaplots. They feel recycled. Another crash! Another Chicago, but with nanites this time! And 6e feels even worse.

I don't like the matrix Foundation runs. If I want to play Wild West or Fantasy or whatever, I'll go play a different game.

I don't like the matrix rules. They don't make SENSE, from a technical standpoint. They brought in moveable matrix stats, which is just more headache to keep track of. The matrix needed a simplification, not a completely new ruleset with completely new problems.

I loved the 5e idea of grids. It brought in the Net Neutrality issues of our time. And then they did away with them….

I'm rambling…

4e20A. Better than 1-3e because of more believable tech, no pizza run/matrix time, better character generation.

4e20A. Better than 5-6e because the editing doesn't SUUUUUUCK, better character generation, more believable tech, no limits, and the plot isn't recycled. Again.

Fifth Edition (2013, Catalyst Game Labs)

- 5e is the most recent "complete" edition, in the sense that it has a full range of "splatbooks": one or more per-character-archetype books that expand and deepen player options. Some characters (eg riggers) suffer quite a bit without their splatbook, so that can be important if you want that depth to the gameplay. On the other hand, it can also be overwhelming, and it's often suggested that new players start out with just the core book and add splatbook content over time.
- Speaking of overwhelming, at 500 pages, the 5e core book is by far the longest of any edition. Compounding the sheer bulk of the thing is poor organisation, with some rules broken into pieces and scattered through the book. This can be frustrating, especially at first.
- A comprehensive chargen tool for 5e, Chummer5, is available here. It's highly recommended to take some pain out of chargen.
  - Also, the output from chummer5 can be directly imported into roll20, if you are playing online. This can be a huge time-saver.
- u/adzling has a collection of SR5 cheat sheets here.

u/Deals_With_Dragons:

- While 5e is not without issues, it is in general a fully working, complete edition. Meaning there are a lot of supplement books you can use. A few of them are really good and pretty much spot on their theme (for example Chrome Flesh, Rigger 5.0, Street Grimoire).
- It has a large community and was the latest edition people generally consider playable. You can ask a lot of questions.
- A lot of the background material from 4e is compatible and the rules are often "close enough" to make easy adjustments. This means even more material for 5e.
- While 5e can be deep and crunchy at times, you can also easily handwave/ignore/change/simplify rules so it's working for your table.
- 5e resembles our own world (technology!) closer than the old ones did. So if you're looking for a "projection of our world in a dystopian future" you're closer with 5e than with 2e.

u/adzling:

5e is the most recent complete edition, as a result it has the most sourcebooks and most up-to-date vision of what the 6th World would like in relation to real life.

Core mechanics work pretty well and are quite simple and oddly elegant (attribute + skill = pool).

Situational modifiers that add or subtract from the dice pool are easily fine tuned by the GM, impose meaningful variables on the chance of success, and reflect the reality of the environment / world pretty well.

Success thresholds (how many successes you need to succeed) are easily understood and reasonably reflect the difficulty of succeeding at any particular task.

Combat:

In 5e speed (initiative / dodge), competency (dice pool) and resilience (armor and body) works as one would expect in a game that reflects "Matrix" movie style combats. Depth and nuance of character building allow you to build a "Neo" type who can literally dodge bullets or a "Hulk" who can shrug off smaller caliber firearms and light melee weapons. It's "cinematic" but retains enough relation to reality that armor can stop bullets and a 600 pound Troll hits with more force than a 6 lb Pixie. Gear choices significantly affect the outcome and bear a reasonable relationship to action movie reality. While it's possible to "break the game" by building for the extreme this is mostly controlled by the realities of the 6th World -- your GM isn't going to let you walk down the street in heavy armor with an assault rifle or combat axe without attracting Lone Star and likely heading to jail. This creates the all-important dynamic of choosing your gear to suit the situation.

Weapons and armor include significant variance and customization options (important for the combat focussed PCs) that import meaningful choices on the player/ PC.
This nuance and depth is critical for delivering meaning to the combat focussed characters' choices. It's one of the shining successes of Shadowrun in general going all the way back to 1e.

Social:

One of the requirements of a heist type game like Shadowrun is usabe rules for social interaction and cons. Luckily 5e's social rules don't suffer from the inane rules bloat that other sub-areas do (looking at you, rigging and matrix). Social is mostly a question of opposed dice pools and modifiers and that's just fine. Toss in some bonus modifiers for good RP and you've got all you need. Need more depth and nuance? Cutting Aces provides some good ideas on how to essentially use teamwork tests within the scope of conning someone.

Magic:

5e's magic system is very similar to prior versions and works out of the box without modification, well almost. The core issue of "magicrun" (whereby magic trumps everything else) is an unfortunate side effect of the continuous expansion of magic power within the mechanics and supplements. You know this is a problem when all your players turn up to the table with a mage or mystic adept. There are some very easy ways to mitigate this via houserules (ban reagents for increasing limits, restrict the number of active spirits at once, ban mystic adepts, etc). You might not feel this too much if your players are relatively low-powered, but even straight out of chargen savvy players with mage characters can be almost obnoxiously powerful. This only gets worse the longer you play. GMs should keep a weather eye on it, lest the mage players start to overshadow the rest of the table.

Matrix:

While 5e's Matrix does address the shortcoming of 4e's script-kiddie syndrome that rendered deckers irrelevant, it feels like it was written by someone who was reaching for

detailed, nuanced mechanics and edited by someone who failed to playtest it. The end result is a confusing mess of overly complex, nested systems that utterly fail to address the core aspect of any RPG; IT MUST BE FUN. The action economy also renders almost all Matrix activity less effective than just shooting the person / thing / target. The supplements help, a little, but it's hard to fix the core rules without fixing, you know, the core rules. This is sad and a terrible miss in a game that is meant to embody a mashup of Cyberpunk and Fantasy.

Vehicle chases / rules / rigging:

Perhaps the worst aspect of Shadowrun 5e, the entire vehicle rules section is utterly atrocious. Riggers are a confused mess where it's not even clear what attributes to use with the various vehicle control options and even if you do figure it out / houserule it riggers still suffer from Multiple Attribute Dependency (MAD). The vehicle chase and movement rules are an example of what goes wrong with poorly abstracted mechanics. Due to this abstraction simple questions like "how fast does my vehicle go" are not even answered. Rules that were bolted on afterward in Rigger 5.0 don't help much either. The Swarm rules are terrible from a balance perspective and inane from a common sense perspective. Overall it's best to ignore the chase rules and heavily edit what's used from the supplements.

Copy-Pasta:

Like all Catalyst Shadowrun products 5e suffers from extensive copy-pasta, resulting in rules that make no sense, that reference non-existent rules from prior editions and mechanics not matching the descriptions. The worst offender is the Street Grimoire but you will find this particularly pathetic example of editing in almost all Shadowrun products somewhere.

Perceived vs. Real complexity:

5e is perceived as a complex system, but is it? Yes and no. As you can see from above the core mechanics are very simple and easy to grok. The complexity comes from all the small details and the three overlapping subsystems of meat, matrix and astral. While those three subsystems have always been present in Shadowrun (and hence always upped the complexity level) it's also true that 5e's complexity was increased by the many "fiddly details" for these subsystems and the many supplements across which these are strewn. To some degree that's what happens when a game has as many supplements as 5e does, however it's exacerbated by Catalyst's poor layout and editing. This is not unique to 5e, it's present in all Catalyst products and is a product of their poor line editing in general. This can be dealt with to some degree by the judicious use of cheat sheets that summarize and condense these modifiers however it can be very daunting for someone learning the system for the first time. There are ways to manage this information overload by chunking how you learn Shadowrun into meat, matrix and astral sessions, using the aforementioned cheat sheets and simplifying/ hand-waving stuff you cannot remember in the moment.

The advantage of depth and nuance in an RPG:

So we've covered why Shadowrun in general and 5e in particular is complex and often

perceived as more complex than it is. The question that follows naturally from this is "why would I want to play a complex system instead of one where I can learn it in one session"? The answer is nuance and depth. Systems that tilt towards simple are great for introducing new players but tend to be terrible for long term durability. In the end all characters of a specific type end up feeling the same with little differentiation. With 5e there are so many ways to build AND PLAY a character that they almost never feel or work the same. Everyone's an individual with nuanced and unique options that drive characterization in a meaningful way.

Sixth Edition (2019, Catalyst Game Labs)

- Chargen tools - Genesis (free), Herolab Online ($).

u/D4rvill

Sooo…. 6e. The newest and without much doubt most divisive edition of Shadowrun with the big overarching goal of simplifying things. While having several similarities with 5e, it also features some huge changes.

The biggest of them is the new edge system. Instead of being a limited resource used for powerful effects, gaining and spending edge is now common during a session and can also be used for smaller effects, e.g. rerolling one die or increasing the number of a die by one. Many modifiers and qualities were changed in gaining edge and it is now a central part of the system. It also is the most debatable mechanic of the system, bringing its own slew of issues. Many of the problems I am mentioning later on are at least a bit tied to the edge system. Therefore, before starting with 6e, I highly recommend reading more about it beforehand. If the problems it creates might be a dealbreaker to you, don't try this edition. Edge is so deeply embedded in 6e that it is nearly impossible to houserule it out without changing half of the book.

I'm giving now a quick overview of the most mentioned pro's and con's of 6e. If not explicitly stated otherwise, you can assume that I share the public opinion due to my own experiences with the edition.

Pro's
- Simplified Skill List. That is especially positive for the matrix. Combat skills might be too grouped up for some though, when looking for houserules (and trust me, you WILL do houserules - but this is very likely true of any version of Shadowrun), you will sometimes see that combat skills are actually a bit split up again (including me). All in all though, it's better than the 5e list.
- Simplified initiative and action economy. While true that it might not represent the speed of street sams enough and also has a sudden jump in damage output at a certain threshold, the reduced bookkeeping makes up for it.
- Handling of knowledge skills.
- German supplements for 6e. They are awesome, trust me. Go Pegasus! Yes, call me fanboy here, but they are really doing a great job. Also, the german core

rulebook is laid out better and includes many (so far exclusive) errata. If you can speak german, you definitely have an advantage here.

Mixed opinions
- "Simplification" of Matrix. Some say it's noticeably simplified, others say it's no better than 5e. For me, most of the noticeable simplification in the matrix is due to the simplified skill list and simplified initiative. Taking that out, the rest is only slightly simplified and slightly more intuitive due to rewording things, removing one mark/access level and removing grids. So yeah, it's improved, but not as much as other ones let it seem in my opinion. Still, I take it :) However, I urge you to houserule matrix search, in its current state it's broken and actually not intended to work this way.
- Attack Rating and Defense Rating. Some weapon stats are merged into Attack Rating, which describes the general effectiveness of weapons. Armor (and some other things) adds to Defense Rating. The concept of simplifying offensive and defensive stats this way is interesting, but in its current state, it's heavily underbaked. It just determines the gain of one single point of edge (or the non-gain of it). Also, with the range of possible numbers being quite limited (base Attack Rating is from 1 to 14), weapons all feel the same. There was a tease though that in the incoming splatbook Firing Squad these two stats are getting more meaningful, so hope is not lost here. UPDATE: As far as i have read from reviews, Firing Squad hasn't done much for AR/DR :/
- Priority table. A huge improvement here is that every metatype is available for Priority E to C. You can therefore always take the metatype you like without gimping your character. However, it has problems in other areas. Several options are near impossible to take for building a viable character (Attribute E), others are way too powerful or too cost effective (Attribute A, Metatype C). Humans are not a viable metatype. The options are therefore actually more limited than they already are due to using the priority table chargen. I just did an homemade version of karmabuy for my players.

Con's
- Strength is almost meaningless. With the recent errata, there is nowhere a direct impact on the damage of melee attacks. The most it does is increasing your Attack Rating (a bit more on that later), which translates to an edge, which most times only translates to ⅔ of a hit. So basically a little child can challenge a dragon to a boxing match and both will do the same base damage. Other than that, it's used almost nowhere.
- Armor is almost meaningless. It isn't relevant for the soak test anymore. That leads to problems like the ones we have for strength. If you ever see the joke of bikini trolls, it's because of the crazy nerf to armor in 6e.
- Skills cost the same as attributes. Because an attribute affects several skills, it is something that just can't be right.
- The majority of qualities and flaws are off at least karmawise and sometimes even effectwise. The usual suspects here are Analytical Mind, Focused Concentration and Impaired Attribute. Analytical Mind in its original form is so cost effective that in my opinion there is not a single character who should not take this quality. In Debt is nicely done though, really like this flaw.
- Confusing, missing or contradicting rules, While also true for (at least some of?) the other editions, 6e is the worst here. It is said sometimes that without

knowledge of 5e, it is harder or even impossible to play 6e.
- Bad editing and layouting. Similar to the point before, while also true for 5e, it's worse for 6e. German rulebooks excluded though.
- Rules contradicting shadowrun lore. By far the biggest offender here are the changes to bullets which would lead to a complete turnaround of the weapon industry lorewise without a reasonable benefit AND also violating rule zero of Shadowrun.
- Rules contradicting the design goal of simplification. Again, ammunition, which price calculation suddenly got an additional layer of complexity. It's often said that 6e missed their design goal. For me, it's only partially right because of the listed pro's which are quite impactful. It's also debatable if the edge system is a simplification or actually brings more complexity.
- Mages being even stronger than in 5e. Have to see it more in action, but so far, I would share that opinion. Direct combat spells are a total joke though.
- Driving rules. The amount of vehicles you can choose that have doable piloting tests for an average driver is quite limited. January errata did an essential buff to rigger controls though, so riggers are at least a bit playable now (but still in a bad position overall).

Keep in mind that right now we are in a phase where there can still come a potentially bigger amount of errata. So maybe, with just a bit of patience, some of the issues are going to be addressed. If you want to try it out now, DON'T buy the physical version as of now. Because the first printing is missing an huge amount of errata, it's unusable. Get the PDF (which can be updated) and wait at least for the second printing if you like physical copies. That also applies to the german core rulebook.

Appendix: alternatives

You have options beyond the six mainstream editions of core Shadowrun. (For even more than discussed here, see this reddit thread.)

First, there are hacks of Shadowrun into **rules-light narrative-first RPG engines**. These fall into two broad categories:
1. *PbtAs* (Powered By The Apocalypse), games that take mechanical inspiration from the seminal and influential RPG Apocalypse World.
2. *FitDs* (Forged in the Dark), which use mechanics from Blades in the Dark[3].

This style of RPGs can be divisive; many people love them[4], some find their light-touch GMing style and emphasis on narration over crunch to be too far away from the Shadowrun feel they crave. You've little to lose by checking them out though!

For SR play, a few rules-light narrative-first options I really like are:
- Shadowrun in the Sprawl (donation) takes The Sprawl ($15) (a straight-up cyberpunk PbtA game) and blends in the urban fantasy elements we love about Shadowrun. You need those two books to play, but nothing else. It makes for an impressively breezy, fast-paced system - you can play out an entire run, soup-to-nuts, with a few complications and twists thrown in, in a few hours. But don't mistake that for being easy on the players. They'll still have to make hard, hard choices.
- Runners in the Shadows (free) is a Shadowrun-inspired FitD. You don't need any other books to play this. This is quite a light touch hack, as the core Blades in the Dark book is already very close to Shadowrun anyway -- being a game about desperate criminals doing risky heists.

There's also a few options if you want a more **rules-middling approach**, something with the same sort of density of crunch as (say) D&D 5e, but distinctly more than the PbtA/FitD approach.
- Catalyst themselves have had a pass at this, in the form of Shadowrun: Anarchy. As a system it has good bones but is criminally underbaked in lots of different ways. You'll likely quickly find yourself looking for more houserules to bolt on. If so, start by taking a look at Surprise Threat!, which has lots and lots of thoughtful suggestions.

  The world would be a better place if the author of Surprise Threat! was given free reign to write Anarchy 2e, but we are where we are.
- Savage Worlds (core book $10) is an entirely generic RPG engine which has numerous supplements and rulesets in all sorts of genres. One of those, Interface Zero 3.0 ($20), covers cyberpunk. Take those two, and add on this (free) fan-made hack (which cleverly uses pre-existing Savage World rules for fantasy elements like magic and metahumans) and you get yourself a pretty neat Shadowrun system.

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[3] An argument can be made that Blades in the Dark *is itself* a PbtA, as although it doesn't draw on Apocalypse World mechanically it definitely shares a lot of key design principles. But that's a side-note here.
[4] I am one of those people.

Appendix: some times reddit discussed the "which edition?" question recently

- [Which edition is the best edition to start and/or to play with friends?](#) Feb 2020
- [3rd vs 6th, which do you choose?](#) Feb 2020
- [What edition to start with?](#) Feb 2020
- [What Edition is the easiest to pick up?](#) May 2020