Mongoose RuneQuest II Review

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Introduction and Product

After a number of ordinary-to-positive reviews, the folk at Mongoose Publishing decided that it was time for a second edition of RuneQuest, which it must be admitted was a very good decision and shows that the company was listening, even if a little late in such an execution. Bringing in author's Whitaker and Nash was also a wise choice given their prior writing histories. On the other hand the decision to call the product RuneQuest II was a bit of a marketing disaster. Clearly they wanted to capture the popularity of RuneQuest second edition fans; instead they annoyed the grognards from that era - lose 0.1 points of style, right away, for not being cool.

The product itself is a a very pleasing hardback, faux brown-leather stamped with a gold rune (either luck or fate). It is very well bound, stitched and glued and should last a lifetime. The internal layout is pretty tight, with thin margins albeit without chapter identifiers and with too small page numbers. Whilst mostly having a good content-to-whitespace ratio, there are some exceptions especially in the creatures chapter. With a summary table of contents, and a good index, the writing style, in two-column, justified serif, is concise and formal. Most of the internal art is contextual, fairly good in execution (albeit quite inconsistent in style), but there are some notable exceptions that simply shouldn't have made it in to the book. At under two hundred pages, this does back to the "all you need is this book" school of gaming, almost as good as RQI and II, with subsequent supplements being truly optional.

Adventurer Generation, Skills and System

After a brief and interesting introduction to roleplaying and RuneQuest one is into character generation by the third page of content. Helping us through the process is the sage of Edric The Restless. The characteristics are Strength, Constitution, Size, Dexterity, Intelligence, Power, and Charisma, determined by either random rolls or point allocation. Attributes include age, combat actions (derived from DEX and INT), damage modifier (STR and SIZ, needs "etc" at the end of the table), hit points (CON and SIZ), magic points (POW), strike rank (SIZ, INT, and DEX), and movement. There are are twenty three core common skills, each with a starting percentage chance equal to the sum of two characteristics. These are augmented by background experience, derived from "culture" (either primitive, nomad, barbarian, or civilised) and by profession. Each of the cultures provides a set of common skill bonuses, combat styles, advanced skills, and starting money. Professions are restricted by culture with increasing levels of labour differentiation, and provide common skill bonuses, and the opportunity to open advanced skills, as well as an opportunity to learn magic. In addition characters receive 250 free skill points. This can be extended with the option of advanced starting characters, which alsoi includes bonus characteristics, status, and hero points. Characters also begin with community ties, including family and family connections, allies, contacts, rivals, and randomly determined background events. Finally, the character (with Glorantha being the default, magic-rich setting) receives six points of common magic.

The game system is the classic roll-under percentile method, with four levels of result (critical, success, failure, fumble). There are modifiers for difficulty and haste, expressed in a single table, with a handful of difficulty examples. Criticals are achieved at 10% of the modified skill level or less, with a 01 always being a critical. Fumbles occur at 99 or 00, or 00 if the skill is over 100. An roll of 01-05 is always a success, and 96-00 is always a failure. If circumstances permit, a default advanced skill can be attempted at -20%. Skills can augment other skills, and group tests (team and sorting) are recommended as a time-saving device. Opposed skills are resolved by degree of success and then by

highest roll. Skill descriptions themselves are presented with a few paragraphs each. Time is expressed in combat rounds (five seconds) or variable strategic time. Characters gain three improvement rolls per session, modified by CHA (community ties, etc). As per prior editions, skill improvements occur on d100+INT, seeking to achieve above the current skill rating, resulting in a benefit of 1d4+1 points, or only 1 if below. Improving characteristics requires an expenditure of a number of Improvement Rolls equal to the existing characteristic, and there are sensible rules for training. Aging, poisons, disease, and other environmental issues are given spot rules, along with some improved encumbrance and movement rules, fatigue rules, and a pretty unrealistic odd-jobs table for down-time. Finally Hero Points are offered as an excellent narrativist currency, ranging from 0 to 4 per session, allopwing for last chance actions, second chances, heroic insight etc.

Equipment and Combat

The currency system is primarily based on copper, silver and gold; 10 coppers to the silver, 20 silvers to the gold. Armour provides between 1 (soft leather) to 6 points (plate) of protection, reduced from any damage scored, along with encumbrance, and penalties to strike rank and movement. There's a lengthy list of clothing items, along with melee and ranged weapons, food and lodging, and general items, mounts and other animals, and transportation. Oddly, only the general items are expressed as being culturally specific. A particularly interesting component to the weapon list is their combat maneuvers, special effects that they can achieve depending on successful degrees of opposed success.

Weapon skills are expressed as styles, which pretty much come down to (a) two handed weapon, (b) one-handed weapon and .., or (c) missile weapon. The idea is on the right track, but insufficiently elaborated. Combat itself is conducted in short rounds, with initiative derived from strike rank and a number of combat actions per round. Most actions occur at initiative value, but some can occur in reaction (parry, evade). There are simple rules for weapon length and reach, and successful parries can deflect all, some, or none of a hit, depending on effective size (shields are useful!). The degree of success, as mentioned, allows for the implementation of offensive and defensive combat maneuvers, such as impale, bleed, sunder, and so forth. There is, unsurprisingly, a range of modifiers to style chances, along with spot rules for cover, knockback, multiple opponents, surprise, etc. Assuming a successful hit, location is rolled, followed by damage, and then armour protection is subtracted. Anything that doesn't reduce the location to zero hit points is a minor wound; beyond that the wounds become serious, rendering the location useless in some cases (resilience test), and at negative hit points or more, the wound is major, "severed, transfixed, shattered or ripped off", which is fairly serious if that is the character's head, chest, or abdomen. A three page(!) example illustrates all the components of combat.

Magic and Runes

Four types of magic are available in RuneQuest II, with runic association; common magic ("the echoes of the Runes... ubiquitous but weak"), divine magic ("power granted from the gods ... becoming a Rune... strength from scalability), spirit magic ("incorporeal entities.. fractured incarnations of a Rune's sentience... coercing a Rune.... strength from sustainability), and sorcery ("study and comprehension of how the Runes work.. emulating a Rune... strength from flexibility). The runes are explained as the sources of power and differentiated by elements (earth, air, fire, etc), forms (beast, man, chaos, dragon, spirit, etc), the paired opposites of power runes (death-fertility, fate-luck, movement-stasis), and conditions (magic, mastery, infinity, etc). Characters become "rune-touched" by initiation, spirit dreams, studious insight etc., providing a runic power with visible effects. Typically cast with a related skill, spells can often be resisted by persistence or resilience skills checks.

Characters impart energy via magic points, equal to their POW, and regain this every twelve hours, or six if resting which is certainly quite fast. Magic is rated in order of magnitude, the power and the magic point cost behind the spell. Common magic is relatively cheap and easy to learn, consisting of about sixty quick utility spells (befuddle, bladesharp, disruption, heal, second sight, etc) that were once called "battle magic", "spirit magic", or even "rune magic" in prior editions. Spirit magic now is the location and binding of spirits (limited by cult rank and CHA), whilst divine and sorcery magics are as per prior editions. Divine magic is powered by "dedicated POW", reducing the amount of free magic points that the character can use, but providing a pool from which the divine spells can be cast.

Divine spells, of which around fifty are described, are particularly noted for their power, and the size of the pool is limited by the standing of the character within the cult. In contrast, sorcerers have a grimoire skill for each book from the selection of around forty spells, and are limited by their INT on how many they can hold in their memory at any one point in time. Their ability to modify spells depends on the manipulation skill, which determines limits to changes to magnitude, range, duration, targets, and combination.

Cults, Heroic Abilities, Creatures, and GMs

Cults are those organisations which provide influence, magic, and training in return for devotion and donations, and are associated with compatible runes. Cults also have mythologies, which a character can call upon (using their culture skill) to gain inspiration (e.g., bonuses to skill rolls) and insight. Three sample cults are offered, which descriptions of their associated runes, magic, skills, core myths, and membership. These include Orlanth The Dragon (a theist cult), The Fire Dancer (a spirit cult), and the Black Serpent (a sorcery cult). Of particular note here is how the game includes a step-by-step process on how to interact with a myth through a cultic ritual - finally some core rules in print for HeroQuesting!

Derived from the previous edition of RuneQuest, the next chapter include examples Heroic Abilities, extraordinary abilities that require Hero Points, and minimum ability scores. These are effectively superhuman feats, and could be just as easily represented by extraordinary skill tests. Hero Points are better spent on narrative effects. Immediately following, the creatures chapter notes the classic distinction in RQ between variable intelligence and fixed intelligence, and provides a small collection of creature traits (dark sight, poison, etc), before allocating a page each (with far too much white space) to a short collection of a mere twenty-one creatures with Gloranthan flavour (alas, no ducks, nor rubble runners).

The final chapter on Gamesmastering, is a short set of advisory notes, which starts with emphasising the core themes of RuneQuest being community, magic, quests, and cults. In terms of plot development, it offers the succinct objective of "a good story, well told", before moving into the support material for campaign planning, bookkeeping, and the dramatic moments of risk. A selection of scenario aids is offered as well, including weather, travel conditions and expenses, and encounter tables.

Evaluation

Mongoose RuneQuest II is a significant improvement from its predecessor, and the ratings provided reflect that evaluation. Indeed, on a system level, if I were to list every complaint I had with the prior edition [1], it is almost like a checklist was made to ensure that they were fixed. The greatest problem - as much as it is a problem - is that the book comes to a halt. With an already existing excellent ratio of content to page count, it would have been absolutely spectacular to have just a few more pages (and tighter layout) of creatures, a little more elaboration on guilds and cults, a short Glorantha chapter, and so forth. As it is, there is a complete game here, with an excellent system, great scope, thoroughly enjoyable, and nice wrapped up in a physically good book.

Style: 1 + 8 (layout) + .5 (art) + .7 (coolness) + .7 (readability) + 1.0 (product) = 4.7
Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .8 (text) + .9 (fun) + .7 (workmanship) + .8 (system) = 4.9

Links:

[1] http://www.rpg.net/reviews/archive/13/13871.phtml