



# RuneQuest 6 Review

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## Introduction and Physical Product

We're now into a sixth edition of RuneQuest (seven if you include the unpublished RuneQuest: Adventures in Glorantha), and no less than three in six years, which is a pretty rapid turnaround. One can be a little forgiving of game designers churning out multiple editions in quick succession in the early years of the game as they try to find their "sweet spot" in terms of design. Dungeons & Dragons certainly did, as did RuneQuest, and GURPS, and the various White Wolf games; but this is a game that's had over thirty years of backing design and it is notable that this most recent edition comes from a new publisher, and one which is a little closer to the grognard RuneQuest community. It is assumed that the reader has some familiarity with previous iterations of RuneQuest, or at the very least, has read reviews of such products.

The latest iteration does come as a design from Pete Nash and Lawrence Whitaker, two pretty solid contributors to recent editions, and with a preface by Steve Perrin. The attractive cover by Pascal Quidalt is reminiscent of the first two editions with a female warrior fighting off a dragonnewt; except we are informed this time it's a slargr. The internal art, black and white line drawings, is contextually appropriate and shows a modicum of skill and creativity in most cases, certainly an improvement from more recent editions. The massive text, weighing in at over 450 pages with heavy grade paper, uses a two-column justified serif font throughout the main body with far too much whitespace, uncommonly used sidebar notes, and occasional boxed text. Page numbers are very clear and each page indicates chapter as a top-bar, along with a rune indicator. There is a good table of contents and one of the more extensive indexes. The writing style is formal, but quite verbose and lacking in excitement. Despite its thoroughly unwieldy size in a paperback format, the book seems very well-bound and glued.

## Character Generation

Rather than give an introduction to roleplaying games, there is an introduction to RuneQuest, an organisation summary, a glossary, and dice usage. As per previous editions of RuneQuest, the characteristics are Strength, Constitution, Size, Dexterity, Intelligence, Power, and Charisma. Characteristics are determined by either random rolls or point allocation. A series of example characters are introduced, used throughout the book (Anathaym, Kara, Zamothis, etc) in the fine tradition of Rurik Runespear and Cormac the Pict et. al.. In addition to characteristics, there are attributes, derived from characteristics or a combination thereof (except Movement Rate, which is species-based). These include Action Points, Damage Modifier, Experience Modifier, Healing Rate, Height and Weight, Hit Points, Luck Points, Magic Points, and Strike Rank (SIZ has been dropped as a contributing factor). Each of these are set up to scale, and mostly do so in a linear fashion. Each character has some two dozen standard skills with the base score derived from the sum of two characteristics (e.g., Athletics = STR + DEX), representing a percentage chance of success. In addition there is a number of Combat Styles, all based on STR + DEX.

RuneQuest has always emphasised cultural issues, and this edition is no exception. Following the Lewis Morgan inspired categories of primitive, nomad, barbarian, and civilised, RuneQuest since the third edition has assigned particular professions, equipment, magic, and beliefs according to these broad cultural types, albeit with Mongoose's initial RuneQuest edition making some rather incoherent variations. Cultures in RuneQuest 6 provide a selection from a set of skills and Passions, an optional rule which allows (in this case) "ingrained preferences and prejudices", which really comes down to a loyalty (to leader), a love interest, and a hatred. With the addition of Customs and Native

Tongue (both at +40%), effectively there is a +100 points of skill percentages across cultural standard skills, cultural combat styles, and professional skills. Characters also receive an optional randomly determined background events roll, which can act as a spur to character development, and also vary according to age. There is a good set of character social class tables to determine status and wealth relative to each culture, although it is more than a little weird to roll this randomly after selecting cultural skills, especially professional skills. Following this is several charts to determine family and siblings, a nice touch, family reputation, and allies, contacts, rivals, and enemies.

Added to this are career paths according to culture. Appropriately, as cultures become more technologically and socially complex, there are increasing degrees of specialisation. Characters have three skills from the professional skills available to a particular career, and may allocate 100 skill points to those skills and standard skills. The suggested professional range has a couple of errors in labour differentiation e.g., suggesting literate scholars for the paleolithic primitive cultures (a very loose definition of literacy is given), officials in nomad and barbarian cultures. The career chapter is also an opportunity to determine a character's age, plus additional skills points if relevant, and example starting equipment according to social class. Also introduced at this stage are the magic types of RuneQuest 6; folk magic (petty, aka "spirit magic" or "battle magic" from earlier versions), Animism (spirit control), Mysticism (inner mastery), Sorcery (natural manipulation), and Theism (deific power). It is possible for characters to join a cult or brotherhood at this stage as well.

## **Skills and System**

Skills are divided into two categories: Standard and Professional. Every character has the same set of some twenty-two core standard skills (not including combat styles), with an additional thirty-six core professional skills (which includes all the magic skills). Skill resolution is roll-under percentile, with 01-05 being an automatic success, with a critical at one tenth of a skill's value, automatic failures at 96-00, and fumbles at 99 or 00, except is the skill ranking is over 100, then it is 00 only. A difficulty grade from "automatic" to "hopeless" has some strong variation (e.g., "Easy" is add half again to skill value), but with a more memorable simplified method (e.g., "Easy" is +20%). As per other recent editions of RuneQuest, there is no characteristic rolls or use of a "resistance table". Mechanically putting everything under the aegis of skills makes things easier, but it does mean that characteristics lose some simulationist importance. There's a few pages on skills in special circumstances, such as opposed rolls (best level of success, then by highest skill roll), augmenting (add 20% of the secondary skill), and group skill tests (team rolls and sorting rolls).

A game mechanics chapter effectively covers a range almost twenty spot rules in alphabetical order from acid to weather. Of particular interest the progressive decrepitude embodied in the ageing rolls, the character improvement rolls which do allow skills above 100%, but at 1% increments, a simple but progressive encumbrance system which allows a very generous free allowance, albeit with specific movement restrictions due to armour. The progressive approach is included in healing, with minor wounds being cured in multiples of days, serious wounds in weeks, and major wounds in months. The Passion spot rules allow for augmentation and are prone to significant 'deepening and waning' according to experience. In contrast the weather charts, whilst providing mechanical and descriptive effects, contribute very little to world design issues.

## **Equipment and Combat**

The equipment chapter (oddly located between skills and game mechanics), starts off with an coinage standard and ratio (silver piece standard, 100 silvers to the gold - about an order of magnitude off). A basic standard of living table is provided with slaves at 1 sp per day, freeman at 2, all the way up to rulers at 250 per diem - which really doesn't work at all with the relatively egalitarian primitive societies as noted in character generation. The subsequent price list ends up a little odd as well; whilst a hard working freeman has the sort of daily standard of living that costs the same a chicken, or even a duck, they can forget about buying a pig or goat - those beasts cost 25sp! As for a 2800 sp draught horse, they are clearly for nobles only. This aside, the equipment list, whilst making an offering on livestock, tools, clothing, vehicles, and food, is primarily about weapons and armour, which make up the bulk of the material. The range of armour material is up to 1 to 8 again, as per RQIII. The weapon list is quite extensive, providing all the necessary game detail, including "combat effects", such as "Bleed, Impale, Sunder" for a greatsword. In addition there are rules

for haggling (contested skill rolls giving variant prices), and some fairly easy rules for manufacturing, repairing, and enhancing equipment.

The core combat skill is one of many styles, of which somewhat vague design descriptions are provided, along with a more useful set of rules for weapon similarity outside of the style. Unfortunately only two actual styles are provided as side-bar examples. This is quite unacceptable; in a book that's on this side of 500 pages, the presence of several such combat styles should be the bare minimum. This aside, the combat system is a blow-by-blow affair fought over five second rounds, where characters have a number of Action Points, which determines how many actions they have (including reactions, such as parries and counterspells), and Strike Rank, which determines when those actions occur. Depending on the degree of success, the attacker or defender receive special effects bonuses. As per all prior editions, rolled damage is absorbed by armour, or by parrying weapons. Damage that gets passed these defensive barriers is applied to specific locations which carry their own hit points. Up to the hit point level is a minor wound, beyond that is a serious wound, which usually incapacitates the limb, and bringing the location to negative hit points is typically destroyed in some manner. This is particularly bad news if it is the character's head, chest, or abdomen. As a whole, the combat system is very colourful, interesting, and with plenty of tactical options.

## **Magic**

The six magic chapters (magic, folk magic, animism, mysticism, sorcery, theism) take up over 100 pages of the rulebook. RuneQuest magic comes from runes, "the archetypes of creation", divided into elements, forms, the diametrically opposed powers, and conditions, and is powered by magic points, a primary source being the character's Power. As an example of many of the optional rules within the game (a checklist would have helped), there is no set rate of return for magic points, although the "medium" is a painfully slow 1 magic point per day. Likewise, the consequences of a complete loss of magic points is also open to several options, ranging from fatigue to death. Developing a conscious relationship to a rune gives a character a "Runic Affinity", which is pretty much colour for how the disciplines of folk magic, animism, mysticism, sorcery, and theism, are implemented. In each case the degree of power available in magic is often strongly differentiated by the social status of the magic-user. For example, in Theism, the available miracles are limited by whether the worshipper is an initiate, acolyte, or priest. Likewise so is their ability to draw additional magic points from the Devotional Pool. Animists have variable trance preparation time and abilities, depending on whether they are followers, spirit worshippers, shaman, or high shaman.

Folk magic, the "lower discipline" is what was previously called "common magic". It allows relatively easy and immediate castings from a selection of some seventy spells such as Bladesharp, Demoralise, Heal, and all the old classics. The new Animism is pretty much what the old shaman used to do, that is contact, negotiate, combat, exorcise, and bind spirits, using the skills of Trance (enter and travel in the spirit world) and Bind. Mysticism involves achieving a higher state of consciousness to transcend normal physical limits with almost thirty special abilities, using the skills of Meditation (maximise spell intensity), and Mysticism (invoke traits and abilities). In contrast, sorcery invokes magical effects through the "understanding and application of transcendent knowledge" from selection of just over fifty spells. Their key skills are Invocation, the ability to cast), and Shaping, the ability to manipulate. The latter doesn't so much act as a skill, but rather sets the degree by which a sorcerer's spell can be manipulated in terms of combination, duration, magnitude, range, and number of targets. The powerful Theism, what was once called Rune Magic, is associated with the skills of Devotion (defines potential intensity of spells and devotional pool of magic resources), and Exhort (base chance to call from some sixty-five miracles).

## **Cults, Creatures, and GMs**

RuneQuest has always had a tradition of social relationships in game settings, and this edition is no exception with a chapter dedicated to "Cults and Brotherhoods", with a listing of organisational types (magical orders and cults, companies, colleges, gangs and guilds), and membership processes, progression, benefits (training, protection, aid etc) and restrictions, and runic affinities. An important aspect of organisations is to have an organisational base, and in this case meaning temples, shrines, monasteries, and schools (guild halls and the like could have also done with a mention). Temple facilities are described in some detail in terms of size, staff, library, lodgings, stables, and training facilities. A

handful of example cults are described in some detail, along with summary information for a much larger number of well-defined generic cults and orders.

The hefty creatures chapter (102 pages) starts off with the innovation of Instinct, a bonus to fixed intelligence beats for when their low intelligence ratings aren't really appropriate to simulate the animal cunning. Following this is several pages of special creature abilities, such as the ability to fly, breathe fire, regenerate, or trample. Creature character generation is discussed, along with an option for PC creatures. There is few pages of combat considerations (tactics, reach, natural weapons), before moving into the sixty or so detailed critters. Although provided from about half to a page per creature, with a modicum of discussion of their ecology and appearance, but mainly their relative capacity in conflict situations. Several pages in particular is spent on the various types of spirits and elementals.

The final chapter is "Games Mastery", a set of "tips and techniques for running enjoyable games". It starts with the assertion of the well-known Rule 0, the five principles of good gaming from Sandy Petersen (of which I agree with about 1.5), followed by notes on preparation and game aids, character creation issues, social integration for characters, investigation scenarios, combat, encounter pacing and challenges, cults and mythologies. Overall, it is a fairly disappointing conclusion; where it is a good it is obvious, and for the space it takes up, far too little useful information is provided.

## Overall Evaluation

Overall, there is no doubt that RuneQuest sixth edition can be described as an good game. Most errors or omissions raised in this review in terms of content, workmanship, and system, are relatively minor to what it generally provides; a consistent and detailed game system of playable realism, with an good style for fantasy settings. The more substantial issue that arises, is that it really is standard on the shoulders of giants, being previously published editions. One will found themselves a little at a loss to explain, with substance, to a gaming group why they should play this particular edition of RuneQuest compared to previous editions (especially MRQII, which it has significant similarity), particularly given its lack of developed setting and its variety of options offered for core system mechanics.

The most punishing grades given in this review refer to the poor signal/fluff ratio, some of the layout decisions, and what is general unwieldiness of the product. This is however, it must be emphasised, a fun game, one that is largely well-designed, that covers a lot of ground. There is greater flexibility in character creation, the inclusion of Passions is a necessary quasi-narrativist inclusion, and the contentious "legendary/heroic abilities" have been dropped. These are certainly all positives that add to the classic features that have made RuneQuest a popular game over the decades: classless, percentile skills, culture/religion rather than abstract alignment, creature equality, gritty combat, evocative and interesting magic, with a flexible and adaptive system.

Style: 1 + .4 (layout) + .7 (art) + .8 (coolness) + .4 (readability) + .5 (product) = 3.8

Substance: 1 + .9 (content) + .3 (text) + .7 (fun) + .7 (workmanship) + .8 (system) = 4.4

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