

Shadow State

A Secret Spy TTRPG Setting

In the long, tense shadow of the Cold War, a new breed of conflict emerged. This is not a war of tanks and armies, but of whispers and clandestine operations, fought in the back alleys of Berlin, the bustling streets of Tokyo, and the hushed halls of global power. From the ideological battlefields of the '60s to the fractured world of the new millennium, agents of influence and sabotage have shaped history from behind a veil of secrecy.

This is a world where loyalty is a commodity, truth is a weapon, and every mission is a walk on a razor's edge. The world's superpowers have their militaries, but you serve a different master: The Directorate, a rogue agency of ex-spies and disillusioned patriots who believe the only way to save the world is to control it.

Prepare to navigate a labyrinth of political intrigue, moral compromises, and the ever-present threat of betrayal. Will you serve the greater good, chase personal vengeance, or simply try to survive in a world that is always watching?

The stage is set, the players are in position. Welcome to the Shadow State.

"Shadow State" plunges players into a world of clandestine espionage and high-stakes missions, spanning from the late 1960s to the 2000s. In this setting, players are agents of an unsanctioned, multi-national agency known as The Directorate, a "shadow state" that operates beyond the reach of any single government. The setting emphasizes paranoia, moral ambiguity, and the changing nature of espionage as technology and politics evolve.

The World: A Global Chessboard

The era begins with the ideological conflict between the capitalist West and the communist East. As the decades pass, the Berlin Wall falls, and the Soviet Union dissolves, the world is reshaped. Old enemies become complex allies or competitors, and new threats—global terrorism, corporate espionage, and rogue states—emerge from the power vacuum.

Technology is a constantly evolving tool of the trade. Missions in the 1970s might involve bulky wiretaps and manual decryption, while missions in the 1990s and 2000s will feature early computer hacking, digital encryption, and satellite surveillance. The tools of the trade change, but the art of deception remains eternal.

The Directorate: The Shadow State

The Directorate is an unsanctioned, clandestine intelligence agency, founded by rogue spymasters from both sides of the Iron Curtain. They operate beyond the laws of any nation, believing their existence is necessary to prevent global catastrophe.

Factions & Divisions

The Directorate is not monolithic. It is a fragile coalition of former enemies, and as a result, a number of factions have emerged, each with a distinct philosophy on how to achieve The Directorate's goals.

The Old Guard (Cold Warriors)

Descendants of the original founders, they cling to the old ways of Cold War espionage: subtle manipulation, dead drops, and the slow, methodical game of wits. They are deeply suspicious of technology and prefer to operate face-to-face. They believe the core threats of the past are still present, just in a different guise.

- Ideology: Pragmatism, secrecy, and a belief that traditional spycraft is the only way to truly win.
- Abilities: Skilled in classic spycraft, tradecraft, and personal intelligence gathering.

The Executors (Black Ops)

This is the blunt instrument of The Directorate. They are the field operatives who specialize in direct action, combat, and sabotage. They are ruthless, efficient, and often called in when subtlety has failed or is no longer an option.

- Ideology: Results at any cost, believing that a clean, decisive operation is better than a messy, prolonged conflict.
- Abilities: Masters of combat, infiltration, and high-risk extraction.

The Technocrats (Innovators)

Embracing the new era of information, these operatives leverage computer science, digital encryption, and satellite technology to conduct their missions. They are often hackers, data analysts, and tech specialists who see the digital world as the ultimate battlefield.

- Ideology: Efficiency, data-driven strategy, and a belief that technology is the ultimate weapon.
- Abilities: Masters of hacking, digital surveillance, and electronic warfare.

The Watchers (Analysts)

A more detached, cerebral division dedicated to long-term analysis, counter-intelligence, and hunting for moles. They rarely go into the field themselves, preferring to sift through mountains of data and intel to identify threats and patterns. They are the paranoid heart of the agency, trusting no one.

- Ideology: Absolute security, believing that vigilance and foresight are the keys to survival.
- Abilities: Expert in counter-intelligence, decryption, and human psychology.

Key Operations & Traditions

The Directorate operates under a set of unwritten, yet strictly enforced, rules

The Vow

You do not exist. Once you are in, you are erased from public records. Your family is given a new life, and your old one is gone forever. This is an unbreakable vow of absolute secrecy.

The Ghost Protocol

If a Directorate agent is captured or killed, The Directorate disavows them completely. There is no rescue mission. This rule is a source of both personal fear and deep-seated resentment among field agents.

The Silent War

The primary directive is to prevent open conflict. Any action that risks sparking a large-scale war, whether hot or cold, is a catastrophic failure and will be severely punished.

The Mole Hunt

Due to the agency's origins, paranoia is a core tenet. The ongoing hunt for moles, double agents, and turncoats within The Directorate's ranks is a constant and often personal mission.

The Long Game

The Directorate's plans often span decades, with agents being tasked to build networks, influence key figures, and lay the groundwork for future operations they may never see come to fruition.

The Gray Market

The Directorate operates in a world of limited resources. Missions are often funded through black-market deals, illegal acquisitions, and the exploitation of both capitalist and communist markets.

Key Locations: The Global Theater

The world is a stage, and The Directorate's influence is felt everywhere.

The Watchtower

The Directorate's primary headquarters, a sprawling, non-descript facility hidden somewhere in an unaligned nation. It is a maze of old analog equipment and cutting-edge digital servers, all run by a faceless council of spymasters.

The Berlin Nexus

The city of Berlin, split by the wall, serves as a crucial hub for operations. Its bustling black markets and myriad of rival intelligence agencies make it the perfect place for clandestine meetings, deals, and assassinations.

The Geneva Exchange

A neutral ground, often a high-end financial institution or a luxury hotel, where agents from opposing sides meet under a temporary truce. It's a place for diplomacy, threats, and the exchange of invaluable secrets.

The Black Box

A network of hidden safe houses across the globe, each stocked with gear, passports, and escape routes. They are designed for emergency use, but their locations and codes are a highly guarded secret.

The Digital Front

In the '90s and 2000s, this becomes a new key location. It is not a physical place but a vast network of servers, satellites, and encrypted channels where The Directorate battles against rival hackers and intelligence services in a new kind of war.

The World's Role

World leaders, corporations, and civilians serve as

The Pawns

Politicians, CEOs, and military leaders are often manipulated by The Directorate to serve its objectives without their knowledge. They are valuable assets, but also volatile ones.

The Target

Scientists, engineers, and informants are often the center of missions—the key that can shift the balance of power. They must be extracted, protected, or neutralized.

The Threat

Occasionally, a civilian or a journalist stumbles upon the truth, becoming a danger to The Directorate. They must be silenced or discredited, often without being physically harmed.

The Source

The general population is a source of intelligence, a cover for missions, and the very thing The Directorate claims to protect. They are the unaware masses who live their lives, oblivious to the secret world beneath them.

Threats & Conflicts

Superpower Antagonists

The KGB, CIA, MI6, Mossad, and other global intelligence agencies serve as primary rivals, each with their own objectives, resources, and rules of engagement.

The Rogue Agent

An agent of The Directorate who has gone rogue, carrying with them highly classified secrets and the knowledge of the agency's methods.

The Arms Race

Whether it's a new super-weapon, a devastating virus, or a piece of advanced technology, the race to acquire and control these assets is a constant source of conflict.

The Corporate Threat

In the post-Cold War era, powerful corporations and private military firms become a new, unpredictable enemy, often with their own agenda that clashes with The Directorate's goals.

Internal Betrayal

A mole, a double agent, or a disaffected operative working to undermine The Directorate from within.

Themes

The Burden of Espionage

The loneliness, paranoia, and psychological toll of living a life of lies. Losing your identity and watching the world move on without you.

The Nature of Truth

In a world of deception, truth is a fluid and dangerous thing. Agents must constantly question what is real, who they can trust, and what their own memories mean.

The End Justifies the Means

The seductive nature of power and the moral compromises made in the name of the "greater good." How much evil can one do to prevent a greater evil?

The Evolving Enemy

The changing nature of warfare, from a clear East vs. West conflict to a fragmented world of complex and unpredictable threats.

Loyalty vs. Ideology

The clash between a personal loyalty to a team or an individual and the larger ideological goals of The Directorate or a nation.

Key Elements for Your Game

The Era & The Gear

Before each mission, decide which era it is set in (e.g., 1970s, 1980s, 1990s). This will dictate the available technology, the style of the clothing, the political climate, and the nature of the enemy. A '70s mission might be a car chase through Paris in a vintage sedan, while a '90s mission might be a data heist from a secure server farm.

The Director's Mandate

The players are almost always operating under a specific, urgent mandate from the shadowy council of The Directorate. These orders are often cryptic, leaving room for interpretation and moral dilemmas. The players are expected to execute the mission, but they have the freedom to decide how, and what lines they are willing to cross to do so.

The Constant Threat of Moles

Paranoia is a central theme. Players should always be on guard, suspecting that a source is a double agent, a safe house is compromised, or even that one of their own teammates is a mole. The Directorate's internal structure is deliberately fragile to test loyalties and flush out threats from within.

Running Encounters

Encounters in Shadow State are multifaceted, blending social intrigue with high-stakes action. An interrogation is a mind game, not a brute force encounter. A heist is a puzzle to be solved with preparation and technology, not just a firefight. Leverage the mood and the era to create an immersive feel: the heavy static of a wiretapped phone, the clicking of a film camera, the tense silence of a high-tech lab. Remember, in Shadow State, the most dangerous weapon isn't a gun—it's a secret.

The "No-Win" Scenario

Missions are rarely clear-cut. Success often comes at a high price, such as betraying an innocent person, sacrificing a valuable asset, or causing a massive political scandal. There are often no easy victories, forcing players to choose between the lesser of two evils.

The Shifting World Order

The fall of the Soviet Union in the late '80s and early '90s is a seismic event that should be a major narrative turning point. Missions before this event are defined by the East vs. West dynamic, while missions after are defined by a scramble for power, with former enemies becoming potential allies, and new, unpredictable enemies rising from the ashes of the old world.