

Since this review was begun (in the two weeks following GenCon 2008), several recent events and announcements have unfolded that have impacted the publishing of future Castle Zagyg installments. This review does not deal with those issues, and focuses instead on the boxed set itself, and the product-specific issues and improvements which could be leveraged in any future Castle Zagyg product (if any), regardless of the publisher.

The semi-final section to the essay covers many of the production problems with the CZ boxed set (as I see them), but rather than belabor points that are now meaningless (in terms of Troll Lord Games being able to address them in the future), for the sake of finally completing this review, I've truncated the details in my analysis for that section.

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Title: Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works

Authors: Gary Gygax with Jeffrey P. Talanian

Publisher: Troll Lord Games

Format: Boxed set including six booklets and three 11"x17" maps (one color, two black and white); the box and five adventure booklet covers are full-color cardstock, while the maps/illustrations booklet has a paper cover

Editing: Cory M. Caserta

Art: Peter Bradley (covers, interior illustrations and sketches), Jason Walton (interior illustrations)

Cartography: Peter Bradley

ISBN/Product Code: 978-1-929474-93-6/TLG8501

Year Published: 2008 (first release at GenCon, 14-17 August 2008)

Price: \$44.95

In this review of Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works, I am going to examine this product on two levels: against my long-held hopes and expectations for this seminal Greyhawk release, and for the simple reality of what the product is. I think that's the only way to be fair to CZ:UW and its authors, but still to remain fair to the history of its lineage as well. Therefore, I will be delving into how well CZ:UW represents its Greyhawk heritage, and how well it stands alone as a dungeon adventure product sans Greyhawk. I will also assess the boxed set's production and design (editing, layout, organization, art, and cartography), and then I'll conclude by grading the product in each category above on a 10-point scale (where 0 is horrible and 10 is perfect).

The Components

The CZ:UW boxed set consists of approximately 250,000 words and around 500 encounters, crammed into a 1 1/4"-deep box. The box includes the following components (and please note that my encounter counts are likely to be off here and there):

- Five adventure booklets that in 200 pages detail The Mouths of Madness (the nearby wilderness and the caves that lie within the tor upon which Castle Zagyg rests; 44 pages and ~63 encounters), the Ruins of the Castle Precincts (the castle's upper works and environs; 48 pages and ~161 encounters), the East Wall Towers (20 pages and ~49 encounters), the Castle Fortress (the main "castle" of Castle Zagyg; 44 pages and ~161 encounters), and The Store Rooms (the first dungeon level below the pile; 44 pages and ~73 encounters in the first 27 pages, with the remaining 17 devoted to 1 new spell, 24 new magic items, 18 new or modified monsters, 5 monstrous flora adapted from Legendary Adventures, 4 rival NPC parties [well, 3 and 1 scout for the fourth party], and a glossary of terms used throughout the booklets)

- One Maps & Illustrations booklet containing the map symbols key, 15 pages of maps, and 33 illustrations over 14 pages (34 pages total)
- Three 11"x17" maps: one double-sided wilderness map for players and DMs respectively, and two single-sided DM-only maps that depict the ruined upper works level and the adjoining Mouths of Madness/The Store Rooms dungeon levels

The adventure is written for a party of 5-6 PCs from levels 1-4. Spoilers abound throughout the remainder of the review, but in most cases I don't think that they would materially impact game play, although they will certainly inform future players about many details of the CZ:UW encounters, including various monsters likely to be met while exploring. In the area where I describe my favorite encounters, however, more revealing spoilers abound: you have been warned!

Greyhawk and Castle Zagyg: Legend and History

Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works is the first (and now, only) boxed set from Troll Lord Games to detail the legendary Castle Greyhawk dungeons from the original Lake Geneva Dungeons & Dragons campaign. First promised to the gaming public by Gary Gygax in the March 1980 (perhaps earlier), the publication of Castle Greyhawk has been fraught with disasters (Gygax's ouster from TSR, the folding of New Infinities), repeated delays spanning each of its round-robin of publishers, and changes in product format and co-authors throughout the projects. And at last, it has arrived, after 28+ years of waiting.

Over those years, various hints about the dungeons have been mentioned in *The Dragon* and in other sources, starting with August 1976's famous passage from Joe Fischer's "Hints for D&D Judges, Part 3: The Dungeons" (*The Dragon* #2, also reprinted in *Best of The Dragon*, Volume I):

When judges of D&D, new and old alike, think of an entrance to the dungeons, the greater percentage think of an old ruined castle somewhere outside their town. And many of this same group have the mistaken impression that there is only one entrance to every dungeon. Both these ideas are wrong. True, the famous game of Gary Gygax and Rob Kuntz is built around and under Greyhawk Castle, but this is far from being the only entrance. Besides the castle, I have discovered an entrance through an old dry cistern and another entrance that is under a pool of quicksand, and even an entrance in a simple hole in the ground.

Gygax provided similar glimpses into the Castle in articles from *Dragon Magazine* and in fictionalized accounts of early D&D game sessions, as in this excerpt from "The Magician's Ring" (*Wargamer's Digest* Vol. 2., No. 8, June 1975), which details one of Mike "Old Geezer/Gronan of Simmerya" Mornard's excursions into the Castle via a "simple hole in the ground":

Those who have explored the countryside between the bustling city of Greyhawk and the castle ruins of the same name which lie on the hill not a league to the east of the city will testify to the fact that there are a number of strange tunnels and wells about. Wise folks avoid them, for they know that these are but entrances to the fiendish maze of dungeons, pits, labyrinths, crypts, catacombs, and caverns which honeycomb the hill and the rock far beneath it. There are those, however, who eagerly seek these ways, for it is likewise well-known that incalculable treasure also rests within these twisting mazes.

Lessnard chose one of the outside entrances to the lower levels of the dungeons, knowing it would save both time and the risk of unwished for encounters with wandering monsters....

Throughout that long interregnum, small portions of Castle Greyhawk have been published, including three demi-planar sub-level adventures excerpted from the Castle by Gygax---EX1 Dungeonland (1983), EX2 Land Beyond the Magic Mirror (1983), and WG6 Isle of the Ape (1985)---and three by Gygax's co-DM, Rob Kuntz---Garden of the PlantMaster (1987, 2003), "The Living Room" (2007) and Bottle City (2008). Excluding such excerpts, however, until now the original dungeon levels have never seen print.

Begin Sidebar

A Quick Summary of the Publishing History of Castle Greyhawk

Not including Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works or the various sub-levels extracted from the Castle, three other products have detailed the castle proper of Greyhawk Castle over the years. They are, in order of publication:

- WG7 Castle Greyhawk (TSR, 1988): the infamous "joke" version of Castle Greyhawk; this version is nearly-universally repudiated among Greyhawk- and Gygax fans, for the hatchet-job that it is; in premise, WG7 posits the worst qualities of a random dungeon, by creating a "funhouse" environment (literally, in the case of some encounters) that utterly fails to capture the spirit of the original dungeons; scores 2 on a possible 10 point scale
- WGR1 Greyhawk Ruins (TSR, 1990): the "serious" version of Castle Greyhawk, based in part on the recollections of Jim Ward, Skip Williams, and others at TSR; while largely not based on the original Castle or campaign save in name, WGR1 still largely sets the standard against which most published campaign dungeons are judged today (along with TSR's 1991 The Ruins of Undermountain boxed set), even though I find its individual levels to be too small; 4/10 points as a Greyhawk product, 5/10 points as a mega-dungeon product
- Expedition to the Ruins of Greyhawk (Wizards of the Coast, 2007): As much a sourcebook that updates Greyhawk City to the 3.5 D&D rules set as a dungeon adventure, the Castle Greyhawk levels within EtrRoG are built upon the foundation established in WGR1 Greyhawk Ruins; Expedition to the Ruins of Greyhawk modifies and expands upon those levels, and cannot stand-alone as a Castle Greyhawk without WGR1 (or another castle, such as CZ:UW); 6/10 stars as a Greyhawk product, 3/10 points as a stand-alone mega-dungeon, 5/10 points as levels to insert into an existing mega-dungeon

End Sidebar

Unfortunately, despite the fact that Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works boxed set is quite large, that fact remains true today that its fabled dungeons have not yet appeared, since the boxed set only details the first dungeon level, promising to reveal deeper levels in subsequent boxed sets (at least two or three, it seems).

The introductions to the various adventure booklets speak specifically to the fact that this product is **not** the long-awaited Castle Greyhawk with the serial numbers filed off, but is instead a "distillation" of the three previous versions of the Castle, and "superior to its predecessors" because "it contains all the best features of the former levels and is updated to include ideas that have developed during the decades since its origination" (Mouths of Madness, page 2). Similarly, the introduction to The Store Rooms, states on page 2 that

This should not be considered a replica of the original dungeon level as invented for game play during autumn of 1972, because this dungeon---and this entire mega-dungeon adventure---has gone through many permutations over its three plus decades of play and development.

The dungeon level presented here, and those that will follow, is inspired by and draws from the original work; the original maps, hand-written notes, and special encounter areas have been perused at length, and some of the original players have been interviewed extensively while crafting this newest, latest incarnation of the Mad Arch-Mage's infamous dungeon.

The tone and spirit of those original dungeon adventures is rife within in [sic] these pages.

Given that preamble, I expected to read more newly-revealed Greyhawk lore in the CZ:UW boxed set. While there are a lot of names (same or changed) that get dropped as well as nods toward Greyhawk content throughout the boxed set---including obvious references to Scarlet Brotherhood cultists, Boccob, and sub-levels for The Black Reservoir and Burroughs's Mars, as well as more-veiled allusions to the Bandit Kingdoms, the mysterious Jeweled Man, and Eneever Zig's challenges from the Gord short story "The Heart of Darkness" in Night Arrant---the hints and teasers remain (for the most part) at that level only, promising more to come, later, and offering few if any revelations on their own. For example, the Black Reservoir is alluded to several times, and while we don't learn any more about it than its name in CZ:UW; long-time Greyhawk fans will be familiar with this level already, after its rediscovery in 2003 on the Greytalk list but it's otherwise undescribed. (One such major revelation about Celestian features in one of my favorite encounters in the set, and stands out clearly from the rest; more on this later). At the very least, I expected the most-accessible content---such as the example from Joe Fischer's article that I quoted above---to be reflected in the adventure. It is not. Perhaps such details were part-and-parcel of the expanded Gygax and Kuntz Castle and were unusable without Kuntz's permission, or perhaps they were intentionally dropped during the distillation process. Hopefully they weren't simply forgotten, as the Black Reservoir had been, until relatively recently. In any event, these Greyhawk references seem to congregate most in the Mouths of Madness, Castle Fortress, and The Store Rooms booklets, though they do appear throughout the set.

To be clear, I recognize and appreciate the presence of the Greyhawk nods and allusions, but for the most part they don't scratch deeper than the surface. I can't quite compare this treatment of Greyhawk to how WotC handled Greyhawk as the "Core World" in D&D Third Edition, because the encounters and name-droppings are truer and more-contextually apt than WotC managed. That said, I can't shake the comparison because "name-dropping" remains a mostly-accurate description of how Greyhawk appears in CZ:UW---the names are dropped in CZ: UW more eloquently (so to speak) than in WotC's contextlessly-clueless 3.x efforts, but in kind the two usages of Greyhawk are closer than I would prefer them to be.

Because this boxed set is the first volume to detail the Castle, I also expected an overview to summarize the scope and grandeur, breadth and depth of the ruins and dungeon levels as a whole. Without revealing specific details about the lower levels in future products, something that spoke to how the CZ:UW levels and denizens relate to the other levels would have been very useful, to provide the context for The Upper Works and The Store Rooms in their relation to the whole. Ideally such a summary would include an elevation or plan map to depict the ruins and dungeon levels relative

to one another, calling out stairs, elevators, deep pits, underground lakes and rivers, and such (if the map scale could accommodate such a level of detail). Perhaps something like that is already planned for inclusion within Castle Zagyg: The Dungeons (the next boxed set), or can be added to it or a subsequent release. The lack of an overview highlights another of my concerns about Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works, however: it doesn't quite feel big enough. I say that not because there aren't a huge number of encounters in the set (there are around 500 by my count!), but because we don't see the big picture in CZ:UW. While connections exist to the second and third levels (The Deep Cellars and The Dungeons, respectively), and to other side-adventures and sub-levels (The Black Reservoir, Eneever Zig's Way, Mars, Level 3A The Arena of Death), these hints toward the broader environment simply highlight how little about the rest of the dungeon is revealed in CZ:UW. The allusions to sub-levels and side-quests are a good appetizer for things to come, but they are not the main course, nor do they address questions like whether or not the Old Guard Kobolds or other dungeon dwellers can be reinforced by brethren present on dungeon levels 2 and 3, for example. Perhaps this lack is an inevitable artifact of Castle Zagyg's piecemeal publishing process; none-the-less, this introductory set could have provided a better foundation for the entire series.

In three places, Gygax takes the more scholarly and/or obsessive Greyhawk fans (such as myself! :D) to task, warning that we should not lose sight of the "fun" in D&D played as a game. The introduction to Ruins of the Castle Precincts (on page 2) advises that

This adventure features the ruins of a castle stronghold that at one point would have repelled even the most potent besiegement. How it fell to ruin---the when, the why, and the how---is mostly left to speculation. Suffice it to say that Castle Zagyg is now exactly how the Mad Archmage prefers it to be. His motive? Don't bother. How can one ascribe motive to one such as Zagyg? To associate this or any other component of Castle Zagyg with motive, plots within plots, convoluted histories, world-saving quests, or A to Z "expeditions" is antithetical to the spirit of the original adventures.

and similarly, an encounter in the East Wall Towers (page 12) narrates that

Legend speaks of such a deity having once been imprisoned by the Mad Archmage. Pseudo-scholars have attempted to assign motive, plot, and reason to Zagyg's behavior in this regard. How absurd.

while an in-character account in Castle Fortress states that

Scholars posit that Zagyg has a proclivity for tricking and trapping all manner of otherworldly being: from demon to demi-god, devil to deva, the Mad Archmage is reputed to spare none from his potent sorceries. Impudent fools lacking substantive evidence, however, venture to explain the Mad Archmage's reasoning for this, ascribing it to convoluted plot, motive, and objective. For sooth, these pseudo-scholars merely perpetuate myths, lies and utter balderdash so as to advance their own petty, self-serving agendas. Pish! Truly, who are we to fathom the mind of one such as Zagyg? (Castle Fortress, page 43)

Taken in the spirit that they're offered, I think Gygax was clearly asserting his primacy as the shaper and source for Greyhawk, and that we shouldn't accept third- and fourth-generation copies of the original (like TSR's WGR1 or WotC's Expedition to the Ruins of Greyhawk, which he seems explicitly to call out). I also believe that Gygax was warning the diehard fans not to take D&D too seriously (including this boxed set), and that he was reminding us to insure that fun guides our play. In that spirit of fun, and in the

clear recognition that I wasn't a part of the design team and therefore my expectations may-well be ill-founded, I'm hopeful that more lore will be forthcoming in Castle Zagyg: The Dungeons to sate the hunger of Greyhawk fans. So, history now set aside, let's dig into the meat of CZ:UW.

Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works – The Adventure and Encounters Designs

The encounters throughout the environs of Castle Zagyg offer a peek into Gygax's contemporary dungeon design sensibilities: a wide range of monsters and challenges await the loving attentions of a party of intrepid adventurers. Many of the monsters are "balanced" out with support systems (sources of water, vermin to feed upon, etc.), while others are more-whimsically placed. Gygax speaks to dungeon ecology in the introduction to Mouths of Madness, on page 2:

...the whole [castle and dungeons] is the work of a very, very potent wizard who enjoys the zany. However it bows at least a bit to those who demand more verisimilitude in their dungeons in that a sort of ecology is provided for. Thus the explorers will frequently discover such things as strange fungi... and pools of water in which vegetation and fish flourish thanks to chemosynthesis of a sort connected to magical radiation and light emission from some vegetable growths of like nature. These food sources are augmented by scavengers such as giant rats and the subterranean array of reptiles and giant insects.

Thus CZ:UW attempts to balance between the wild and woolly days of the original dungeon campaign, and the more-refined tastes of contemporary gamers, and it largely succeeds, I think. Most of the encounters are believably "realistic" in tenor and hue, while others glow in the dark with Zagyg-inspired colors---clear evidence of the hand of the mad wizard at work. The Zagygian encounters are certainly the exception to the ecologically-sound design principles, but their charm, originality, and whimsicality are exemplars of the spirit (and sense of pure-fun) that created D&D in the first place. Many of these encounters number among my favorites in the boxed set.

Like the Village of Hommlet's Moathouse, in general the encounters in Castle Zagyg are designed to challenge experienced D&D players who will know not to bite off more than they can chew---or to run away if they do so. The Upper Works is not likely to be a forgiving proving ground for players new to the game. That said, several of the encounters appear to have been staged to be more forgiving than I expected. In particular, there's a teleporter in the adventure that is scripted so that the party almost-certainly cannot be separated by it: it whisks away all of the PCs, regardless of their proximity to the actual teleporter itself. I found similar issues with several higher-level monsters that will not pursue PCs out of their immediate lair/environs (several wights, a hill giant, a wraith, a high-level MU who can *geas* PCs!) and/or that don't seem to dominate the surrounding creatures like they seemingly should. Other, less fearsome monsters appear to have been softened up, or are reduced in efficacy---giant centipede poison doesn't slay on failed saving throws, imps lack poison tail stingers completely, cobra poison is fatal in 1-2 days (!), while an ogre with captured human children never eats them, and a giant wolverine is laden with stern TPK warnings. Like the teleporter, these details can easily be changed by the Dungeon Master, but the fact that they need to be changed in the first place is a bit worrisome. Many of these appear to be staged as learning-the-ropes encounters, but if so, I'm not sure that the lessons that they're teaching are the "right" ones: PCs should flee from overwhelming foes versus buddying-up to them (in the case of the hill giant), and being coddled by teleporters isn't going to help a party survive if they later get separated across multiple levels. All that said, The Upper Works represents the entry levels for the Castle and Dungeons, and not everyone playing through them will have fifteen to thirty years of

D&D experience under their belts, so I'm willing to let these concerns slide until the next boxed set is published, before deciding whether this softness is a flaw endemic to the design approach, or if it instead reflects a "learner's permit" for new delvers.

The encounters in CZ:UW are both more populous and treasure-rich than I would have expected. In addition, there's a decent chunk of unguarded treasure lurking about. The higher monster population may be the result of Gygax modifying his original designs to provide a more ecological approach as discussed earlier, but even with that in mind, I found many encounters with vermin (and wandering monsters) that offer victors solid rewards. I'm not against treasure, and nor was Gygax in his earlier works (the Giants and Drow modules are rife with loot waiting to be found), but there does seem to be an abundance of coins, gems, and jewelry in particular in The Upper Works. Magic items seem about par for the course, while various traps, tricks, and other special encounters seem about on-target, save in the Castle Fortress, which is more trap-laden than usual. While there are no unkeyed rooms on the maps of CZ:UW, there are number of empty rooms (and among them I count various supplies/food stores closets that otherwise lack adventuring equipment, although food can be very useful to discover after being lost for awhile).

By my rough reckonings, the encounter proportions in Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works break down as follows:

- Empty/Non-monster/Non-treasure/Stores without adventuring equipment/etc.: 40% (~200/500 encounters)
- Monsters only: 12% (~60/500 encounters)
- Monsters with Treasure: 26% (~130/500 encounters)
- Treasure only: 10% (~50/500 encounters)
- Trap: 8% (~40/500)
- Trick/Special/Other: 4% (~20/500 encounters)

As with my counts on the number of encounters per booklet, these figures are approximations, in particular the traps encounters, since many times monsters and traps were intermixed, or were placed nearby (as with guards not otherwise in a numbered encounter), and I undoubtedly counted some encounters twice in that regard. The dungeon design guidelines published by Gygax align around empty rooms at 60%, monsters 25% (of those only 60% have treasure), special/trap/trick 10%, treasure 5% (these figures are based on Appendix A of the Dungeon Masters Guide which is in turn based on Gygax's article in Strategic Review #1 (Spring 1975). Based on those criteria, there would be more encounters with monsters only and fewer monsters with treasure encounters (roughly 76 and 114 respectively). The encounters mix is otherwise on-target based on those sources.

The encounters themselves are presented with a title template that is not used consistently, unfortunately, throughout the booklets. The template variability is frustrating because I do like the idea behind the format: **Encounter Key #.** **Encounter Title, Room Dimensions** (sometimes in parentheses, sometimes not, sometimes with height too). I like it because it gives you a quick sense of the room right at the onset, and it strikes me as pretty unique to CZ:UW. Unfortunately, only about half of the rooms in the Castle Fortress booklet, as well as a few in each of the other booklets follow this structure. I can see why it was potentially abandoned, because in some cases it the room dimensions are hard to describe, or the title grows wordy, like "108. Serjeants of the Old Guard, 10'W x 50'L (U-Shaped)". And I shudder to think what would have to be written to accurately summarize the dimensions for the elven caverns at The Store Rooms #136, for example! (This could be as much a layout issue

as a design one, but I discuss it here because it feels more like a design problem that's not executed consistently across the encounters, to me).

This level of detail present in the title template manifests in the room descriptions and contents, which offer specific measures for room dimensions and ceiling height, and sometime room area (each disconcertingly often appears in the read-aloud text, a detail which strikes me as too much for an initial, and likely cursory scan). Various humanoid larders are stocked and detailed, seemingly with an eye toward dungeon ecology that pushes a bit too far in the direction of encyclopedic for my taste, but which is consistent with the level of detail in the Castle Zagyg: Yggsburgh campaign supplement. (Unfortunately the NPC nomenclature throughout the encounters are similarly consistent, as CZ:UW is populated with Louis, Vivian, Ian, Morgan, Denis, Robert, and many another mundane name; easily changed, yes, but it does distract from the fantastic mood). Ruins of the Castle Precincts encounter #15 also stands out: rather out of the blue, a single blank line is provided for the DM to fill in the various worker cottages; why not simply provide this information, as at similar instances elsewhere in CZ:UW? Similarly, Mouths of Madness #37A3 mentions an otherwise unexplained "Joss Effect" (which IIRC is a Legendary Adventures rule/effect like luck points). Two of the humanoid tribes (at The Store Rooms #s 110 and 148) placed signs to lure unwary adventurers into traps, both using backwards-written Rs as part of their Common-language signage; one backwards-written R can be played for laughs, but two strikes me as repetitive. There is also a certain amount of repetitiveness to the humanoid encounters as a whole in the Mouths of Madness, as well as with the goblins and kobolds in the Castle Precincts and The Store Rooms. The encounters have been individuated with leader-type challenges---chiefs, sub-chiefs, elite guards, shamans, and witchdoctors help to provide variety within a tribal group, but across the humanoid encounters when taken as a whole, they tend to grow too similar. Perhaps some additional use of helper animals, more differentiated trap types, a few stronger alliances among the enclaves, or adding additional non-humanoid encounters (either as prisoners perhaps, or within one or more of the lairs) would have provided additional variety. If these gripes sound like I'm reaching to find problems, I'm happy to report that I am: the encounters work, and work well: they're clear, well-written, and offer a variety of challenges, and my nits and picks above should definitely be recognized as such.

Among my favorite encounters in Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works are:

- the Ogre's cottage (Mouths of Madness #WD4)
- the statue of Zagyg (Castle Precincts #10)
- the cobbler goblin (Castle Precincts #22D)
- the Moon Well/Fane to Celestian (East Wall Towers #T1-H. Roof)
- the Great Hall (Castle Fortress #7)
- the spriggans on the first floor of the Castle Fortress
- the Chess Room (Castle Fortress #53)
- the minstrel (Castle Fortress #56)
- the dungeon-entrance guardian Dwarves (The Store Rooms #123) and Elves (The Store Rooms #136)
- "The Seven Geases" (The Store Rooms #137)

These number as favorites for a variety of reasons. I like the physical design of the Ogre's cottage and specifically its relationship to the larger dungeon environment: more "extended entrances" of this kind would have brought alive the spirit of the original honeycombed hill of the Castle. The original Castle dungeons features elves and dwarves who controlled access into the dungeon levels, so they certainly played nicely

to my Greyhawk interests. The cobbler goblin is a wonderful tribute to Gary Gygax, on a number of levels. The Fane to Celestian/Moon Well strikes me as one of the most original encounters in Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works, and reveals that that deity accepts human sacrifices (or at least did in the past!). The spriggans, Great Hall, its minstrel in the gallery (a nice Jethro Tull allusion), and the statue of Zagyg are simply full of whimsy and fun, while offering real challenges (and rewards to insightful players). The Chess Room and The Seven Geases stand out as unique and interesting encounters across the vast number of published modules I've read, run, and played.

In addition to these, many well-done, smaller design flourishes appear throughout the adventure, including various inventive traps, a secret door at the bottom of a pit, several secret doors/lairs/traps that are unknown to nearby inhabitants, a number of expulsion traps which forcibly eject PCs from the castle, and the use of several teleporters---more than I expected in the upper levels truthfully (and sometimes accompanies by quips and puns from Zagyg himself!).

In the Castle Precincts introduction in particular, and throughout the CZ:UW encounters, Gygax and Talanian offer concrete suggestions to transform the ruins and initial dungeon level into a dynamic environment that will withstand repeated player expeditions. Some future events are pre-staged for the DM: alliances and betrayals amongst the inhabitants, bugbears with designs of conquest scouting for a larger force due to arrive soon, hobgoblins digging from their Mouths of Madness caves deeper toward the dungeons. These seeds will evolve differently in each DM's campaign, but offer a glimpse into how the campaign dungeon should "come together" as its many pieces are placed into motion during play. This advice is useful, but also highlights again the lack of a comprehensive vision to help make this dungeon ecology as a whole come alive.

There is also little to no advice that addresses scaling CZ:UW to accommodate large numbers of players, or multiple simultaneous groups of players: six player characters with six men-at-arms could make short work of many of the tougher encounters, if played well. I don't consider these structural flaws, since few D&D groups today are as large as when the Castle was first created, but such insights would have been welcome, both from a historical perspective, as well as with the idea that the fearsome reputation of the Castle will (hopefully) encourage some players to seek additional reinforcements prior to commencing their explorations.

While portions of the writing in The Upper Works are reminiscent of Gary Gygax's style and tone---particularly in the various introductions; the Zagygian encounters peppered with quips, puns, and humorous magic item command words; and in the smattering of epicurean and flavorful domestic magic items such as the never-ending cigars---Jeffrey Talanian's voice is the one I hear most throughout the boxed set. Talanian's writing style is clear, flows well, and has a bit of sardonic and sometimes biting wit to it that I find engaging. His descriptions actively engage all five senses, and brim with the baroque vocabulary that sometimes sounds Gygaxian but more so recalls H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, and Gardner Fox. I don't believe that it would be a worthwhile exercise to try to deconstruct the words in CZ:UW to suss out which Talanian wrote, and which Gygax wrote: per many discussions online, it is clear that while Gygax guided the arm and the hand, Talanian's creativity was the animating force behind the pen that carved the words of Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works from the ether, and that built them into the fine product that it is. He deserves heart-felt thanks for helping to fulfill thirty-year-old promises, and for evoking Gygax's vision with such authenticity.

The design of the maps in Castle Zagyg is good, overall, and they are fairly well-detailed. The large map for the Ruins of the Castle Precincts stands out as the best in the boxed set in my estimation: it retains an old-school untidiness that sets the stage for the whole ruins and dungeons environment, and is reminiscent of the T1 Moathouse map in execution. The remaining maps are good, but don't evoke the same grittiness, with their cleaner, less-cluttered lines. The Mouths of Madness map structure is reminiscent conceptually of the Caves of Chaos from B2 Keep on the Borderlands, while the connecting map for The Store Rooms dungeon level is built around the same micro-lairs concept, with semi-autonomous sub-sections (though clearly they are less independent than the outer caves, since they do connect via the corridor paths). Several "pinch points" of limited access segment the Mouths of Madness/The Store Rooms map, while providing for a variety of alternate paths to access each micro-lair. Even with the addition of the Mouths of Madness map connections, The Store Rooms map is relatively straightforward, and I don't believe that they would present mapping difficulties for experienced players. The maps are neither as complex as those originals from Castle Greyhawk that I have examined, nor are they as complex as sections from the Dungeon Geomorphs sets. They are closest to Dungeon Geomorphs Set Three: Lower Dungeons in their lack of busyness, but they offer more-regular and simpler room/corridor configurations as seen in Set One: Basic Dungeons. A number of ways to delve deeper into the dungeons exist, but they provide access only as deep as level three thus far (except perhaps the access to Eneever Zig's Way, which will proceed down several hundred feet if it follows the Gord story; exactly where it leads is not mentioned in CZ:UW). Thus, there is no easy access to the deeper levels, which the original Castle certainly featured. Like the encounters, I'm hopeful that this first joint dungeon level is intended to offer more orientation and to help set expectations properly for novice players, and that future releases in the line will mimic the original maps more-closely in their design complexity.

The currently-known/currently-written entrances and exits into The Store Rooms and lower dungeon levels are summarized in the first pages of book 5. The summary details the interconnections between the levels, although no lower-level specifics are provided, as I alluded to earlier: "Specific encounter numbers for the Deep Cellars (L2) and The Dungeons (L3) are not necessary at this time. Look for more specific information in future releases" (The Store Rooms, page 3). The list provided is not exhaustive---some entrances were missed the chutes from the Castle Precincts to The Store Rooms #135, and Castle Fortress are not mentioned; the Watery Caverns from Kuntz's Dark Chateau are alluded to in connection with a few encounters (WD#3, Y, Z) but no specifics about how they connect are not detailed either.

The encounters and maps are well-written and well-designed, respectively. Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works may be the first large-scale adventure module published since the advent of the various "mega-dungeon" or "campaign dungeon" design threads on Dragonsfoot, Knights & Knaves, and other old school sites and blogs. It's clear that Jeff "ghul" Talanian has not only soaked up many design techniques from Gary Gygax directly, but that these threads helped to shape the design principles of CZ:UW. I sincerely hope that these principles continue to play out in the lower-level dungeons when and if they are published.

Castle Zagyg the Product: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

The production values for CZ:UW are among the best I have seen from Troll Lord Games: they clearly put their best foot forward in the construction of this boxed set. The adventure booklets have cardstock covers, and each features a cover painting germane to its contents, although I miss the Jeffrey Jones covers first proposed for the series. The text appears in a fairly small font---it looks like about 9 or 10 point to me,

but I could be off---and is interspersed throughout with sporadic black-and-white interior illustrations, read-aloud boxed text, the occasional grey-fill sidebar, bulleted lists, and the judicious use of bold, italics, all-caps fonts, and such, to create an easy-on-the-eyes reading experience.

In the past, many TLG products have had obvious editing problems that intruded upon and/or muddled and confused the reader. That is not the case in CZ:UW. While various minor editing mistakes occur throughout the set, they remain unobtrusive, infrequent, and don't affect play at all (except in one instance where a trap's damage is missing, at The Store Rooms #114). Cory Caserta deserves ringing praise for his editorial management, since Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works is the best-edited and best-proofed Troll Lord Games product I have ever had the pleasure to read! I sincerely hope that new products in the series arrive with this same physical quality and editing acumen.

The same cannot be said for the boxed set's layout, on a several fronts: while the boxed set is well-organized all-in-all, several cartography errors and graphic design decisions impact the utility of the maps, a significant number of encounter stat blocks and text segments are repeated throughout the booklets, and the production/print run seems to have been rushed. I'll tackle each of these issues in turn.

- CZ:UW does not include an index, and in a boxed set this large, it would have been very useful; hopefully TLG will include one across all of the box sets when the product is completed; they could do far worse than to leverage the redoubtable Jason Zavoda for this effort!
- no stats book or appendix (like Rappan Athuk, T1-4, etc.): all-in-all, I think that embedding the stats with the encounters is a good idea. I already own the Monster Manual, so a reduced or simplified stat block would have been nicer. Removing the stat blocks entirely would mean that the DM would always need to use two books, which is a little less user-friendly, so this is a good layout decision, even though it means that some stat blocks get repeated over and over and over....
- CZ:UW's multiple booklets---especially the map booklet---are an excellent usage of the best advantages boxed set format, to make it unnecessary for the DM to lug around the whole thing for each game session. Several encounter-specific maps or map-detail sections are embedded at the encounter keys' text (for example, the Ogre Cottage at Mouths of Madness #WD4); unfortunately, the actual box is a bit of a problem, since the box art and text are pasted on, rather than printed on the box surface---the box has held up OK so far, but I can already hear the paper on the inner side of the lid crackling, and expect that it will loosen further, bubble, and likely come off entirely over time.

Cartography Issues

The maps bear the brunt of my production grumbles, and unfortunately the problems I see appear most-frequently in the dungeon levels maps:

- map icons are not consistently-used throughout: at least three different standard door icons appear on the maps (compare MoM #35 to SR #138 to CF #CT-3D); some stairs-up show arrows and some don't (compare MoM/SR map key to MoM caves O and K to SR#101 to CP #36-A to CF#CT-4D [or the other corner towers on the Third Floor] to CP #37 A-1 or to the landings to

- the right of #A4-a or CP #29, etc., etc.); spiral stairs differ (compare SR #101 to CF #CC-1 to CF #CT-3D again).
- some key numbers and map icons seem to be missing (SR #118A doesn't appear on the map, SR #115 is missing arches, secret door from SR #132-A to #132-B is missing, SR #145 spear trip missing) or are drawn incorrectly (the three northern alcoves in SR #123 are very shallow compared to the module text)
 - the placement of elevation figures on the East Mark Gazetteer folio map and the Ruins of the Castle Precincts map is not consistent, such that the elevations for the edge of the plateau and the elevations for the cave mouths are easy to confuse when using the maps side-by-side (which is necessary in order to view the truncated map areas if you don't have the corrected maps)
 - I'm pretty surprised that they didn't print the Castle Fortress map on larger paper, or at least over two pages in the map booklet; the Second and Third floors are missing direction compasses; the *walls of iron* in #85 are not on the map (and the caster level to try to dispel them is also missing); the corner tower walls are drawn too thickly (the text specifies that the walls are four feet thick, with the rooms twelve feet in diameter); CC#4 isn't drawn on the maps at all, nor included in the module as an encounter-specific map
 - the layout of The East Wall Towers maps could have improved by staggering larger-sized maps instead of stacking the smaller-sized maps atop one another while leaving at least four inches of space in the center column of the map booklet page
 - the thickness of the walls on the maps contradicts the text in the adventure

Outside of the layout problems I detailed above, the cartography is, for the most part, fine: it's functional, though not inspiring, and relatively undetailed. Using color in the maps for The Mouths of Madness and The Store Rooms would have helped to make the maps more user-friendly for the DM, I think, by calling out teleporters, traps, poison gasses, secret doors, and other dungeon features via different colors. Another possible improvement for a later reprint, perhaps.

Repeated Text

CZ:UW includes a LOT of repeated text, both in terms of the usual d20/OGL very wordy stat blocks, wandering monster entries and stat blocks that reappear regularly, as well as recap text for new monsters that are already flagged via asterisk as fully explained in an appendix. These are standard issues for any old school gamer dealing with d20/OGL materials, but they're not the only offending repetitions. Sections of text are repeated throughout, including long larder/store room contents lists (bulleted out), the details on how loopholes improve AC notes, and the capacities of kegs and hogsheads. I was very surprised by some of these, since some could certainly have appeared once in the glossary instead of repeating several times throughout the boxed set booklets. Other offenders include map symbol/trap explanations (G = Guard, T = Trap, etc.), and Open Door roll and Secret Door Detection roll variants. Perhaps these, wandering monsters, the glossary, and generic and repeating baseline monster stat blocks should have been assembled into some sort of quick reference guide of some sort.

Production Seems Rushed

The production for the box seems rushed: there was no cover for the maps booklet (I'm not sure whether it's supposed to have one or not, but it doesn't, unlike the other five books), and its pages were also cut the wrong way (the interior pages stick out from the center further than the edge pages). In addition, the map booklet pages were laid out

with inconsistent map orientation (sometimes the pages read left to right on both facing pages, sometimes the left page is left to right but the right page is right to left...), and the map for the Mouths of Madness and The Store Rooms dungeon level doesn't have a full bleed to print to the edge of the page and/or it wasn't sized properly since about a 3/8" is truncated all around the edges of the map, which does materially impact using the map, unfortunately (as well as slicing into the key, the map's title, Gygax's name, etc.). The large scale wilderness map is basically wasted---it lists some encounters and a pointer to the Dark Chateau---and I see little reason to have included that map at all, especially since that same sheet could have provided a much-larger map for the Castle Fortress, which is squeezed into three sheets in the map booklet, and is much-reduced in size (or perhaps a castle environs map, to provide detailed context for the placement of the Castle and its more-immediate surroundings).

The two-column text format is not always adhered to, and reverts to one column in a few places. Some pages end rather abruptly then continue in the next page (CF page 34; perhaps a picture is missing here?). Many bulleted lists could be distributed in two columns within a single text column to conserve space, while still allowing quick scanning.

Artwork

Some of the illustrations from the illustration booklet and the box's back-cover art are reused in the adventure booklets, which is disappointing, but it does highlight the need for more art in CZ:UW. Many of the encounters would benefit strongly from additional spot art, or from player handouts.

Jason Walton's art fits the Castle Zagyg material well, in particular his characterizations of the inhabitants as more-ribald and less-serious, as well as being somewhat gritty. Other than a few Egyptian-themed images reprinted in the Ruins of the Castle Precincts booklet, his work only appears in the Maps & Illustrations booklet. Walton's image of the Outer Gatehouse (#9) is reminiscent of a piece from the 1983 World of Greyhawk boxed set. Many of his character images are little too posed looking, but he does capture the gritty sense of the setting well.

Peter Bradley's interior art in CZ:UW falls into two main groups, for me: illustrations and sketches. The illustrations that appear finished are fine for the most-part. Bradley's versions of elves or goblins don't necessarily align to my own images of them, but beauty is always in the eyes of the beholder, so I'm not going down that path. My favorite "finished" piece by Peter is the elf Fighter/Magic-User on page 2 of The Store Rooms. Many other pieces, however, appear more sketch-like and "unfinished." In some cases that works fine (the monks on East Wall Towers pages 18 and 20, the EGG-tribute goblin on page 28 of Ruins of the Castle Precincts), but in many others I find that style less effective: the rest of just-mentioned goblin image, and the clerical turning (??) and Wolverine battle on pages 32 and 37 of the Castle Precincts; the two wererat illustrations in East Wall Towers (pages 4 and 7), etc.

I prefer Bradley's cover art to most of the interior art, and like the covers to The East Wall Towers and the Mouths of Madness booklets the best. The former evokes Zagyg's accursed fog, billowing away, and features a gray hawk, which is a nice touch; the latter is the most menacing of the covers, and I like the suggestion of the three avenues for exploration, while the skeleton represents the dangers inherent in adventuring (whether as a fallen PC, or as an undead about to animate and attack).

Summarizing Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works

I think that CZ:UW is an excellent beginning for the core of the Castle Zagyg product line, and am hopeful that the problems that do exist within it can be corrected successfully in future releases---which I am definitely looking forward to reading and DMing!

- Greyhawk Heritage: 7.5
- As a Non-Greyhawk Mega-Dungeon: 8.0
- Adventure Design and Writing: 8.5
- Editing and Proofreading: 9.0
- Layout: 7.5
- Art: 7.5
- Cartography: 6.5

And the summary scores:

- Greyhawk Overall: 7.75 (all scores minus non-GH)
- Non-Greyhawk Mega-Dungeon Overall: 7.83 (all scores minus GH)
- Production Values Overall: 7.63 (drops GH, non-GH, Adventure Design)

Begin Sidebar

Contextualizing grodog's Ratings for Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works

Here are my thoughts on similar campaign dungeon products, to help give you a sense of where CZ:UW ranks among its peers. In each of these micro-reviews, I ignore the original setting for the product (and of them, only Ruins of Undermountain really belongs to a setting *per se*), treating them as stand-alone campaign mega-dungeon products.

Caverns of Thracia (The Judges Guild, 1978; written/created by Paul Jaquays)*

- As a Mega-Dungeon: 10
- Adventure Design and Writing: 10
- Editing and Proofreading: 8.0
- Layout: 6.0
- Art: 8.5
- Cartography: 9.0

Caverns of Thracia is the great campaign dungeon masterpiece: it features a brilliant three-dimensional design for the levels which is very challenging to explore and to map; the module is Ancient Greece/Egypt themed, but not so strongly that the background and trappings cannot be swapped out for other cultures or settings; it offers a good, lightly-designed dungeon ecology; it is populated with a variety of encounters that play to the cultural theme and are independent of it; and lastly, it features a ruined city in a jungle wilderness in addition to the many dungeon levels below.

* Necromancer Games published a Third Edition/d20 version of Caverns of Thracia in 2004, largely written/created by James Collura, and based on Paul Jaquays' original module. I only recently acquired a copy, however, so I haven't read it yet or included it in my ratings above.

The Ruins of Undermountain (TSR, 1991; written/created by Ed Greenwood)*

- As a Mega-Dungeon: 9.0
- Adventure Design and Writing: 8.5

- Editing and Proofreading: 9.0
- Layout: 10.0
- Art: 8.0
- Cartography: 9.5

The Ruins of Undermountain (TRoU) boxed set details Ed Greenwood's premiere mega-dungeon from the Forgotten Realms campaign setting. TRoU summarizes the history of the whole of Undermountain and its surrounding environs, and establishes the touchpoints with the FR setting. It is also the most-apt product comparison for Castle Zagyg: The Upper Works, given that it details only the upper-most levels of Halaster's dungeons. The Ruins of Undermountain is an excellent product, and provides a number of useful resources, including poster maps for all three dungeon levels (with level three occupying two posters), cardstock DM reference cards (with various traps, tricks, treasures, and dungeon dressing elements), and new monsters sheets. The inclusion of these fully-leverages the potential for the boxed set format.

Ruins of Undermountain felt more structurally what I always envisioned Castle Greyhawk to be like (the Gygax and Kuntz version of the Castle, that is): large, sweeping levels, lots of wide-open areas to get PCs lost in, and plenty of room for the DM to customize it to his own campaign's preferences. TRoU features many good and interesting ideas for encounters, and various dungeon dressing elements to insert into your campaign dungeon (traps, magical doors, etc.), and it lets the DM expand and customize via the use of large unkeyed areas on the maps.

* I am ignoring the sequel boxed set Ruins of Undermountain II: The Deep Levels (1994), since it was a horrible product, especially in comparison to the first boxed set. I'm also not taking into account Steve Schend's three Undermountain expansion modules published in 1996, since I'm not very familiar with them.

Rappan Athuk (Necromancer Games, 2001-2002, 2006; written/designed largely by Bill Webb and Clark Petersen)

- As a Mega-Dungeon: 6.5
- Adventure Design and Writing: 8.5
- Editing and Proofreading: 7.5
- Layout: 7.0
- Art: 8.0
- Cartography: 8.5 (based on Chris Boll's excellent maps, which are far superior to those in the original books @ 4.5 or Rappan Athuk: Reloaded's bland ones @ 6.0)

Rappan Athuk was published in three books, with corrected maps and extensive wilderness encounters published online, and then revised and expanded into a boxed set. It's a strongly-themed adventure (a lot of undead, and many ties to Orcus), which is one of its key strengths and weaknesses: if you're not into undead then Rappan Athuk is not the campaign dungeon for you. Rappan Athuk is a great source to extract encounters and levels for insertion into your campaign dungeon levels, but all-in-all I find the dungeon levels to be too small in size (much like WGR1 Greyhawk Ruins).

End Sidebar