Barrowmaze Complete

A Review

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Barrowmaze Complete is an expansive adventure setting and megadungeon which uses the Labyrinth Lords game system. *Complete* is assembled from the two previously published parts of the adventure, *Barrowmaze I* and *Barrowmaze II*, all of which were designed by Greg Gillespie. The development and release of *Complete* was made possible by crowdfunding campaigns in 2012 and 2014 for *Barrowmaze II* and *Complete*, respectively. The setting and design of *Barrowmaze* were adapted from a campaign run by Gillespie for his local gaming group. *Barrowmaze*'s overall difficulty is loyal to the old school roleplaying style: character death is expected, traps are devious, monsters dangerous and surprises are waiting in the dark.

Barrowmaze uses a fantasy setting (magic, gods, elves, undead, etc.) and takes place in the fictional Duchy of Aerik. While the land itself is an expansive moor, creepy and full of danger, the adventure concerns itself with the titular Barrowmaze which runs underneath. In ancient times the people of the area entombed their dead in barrows, or mounds, which still sit on the moor. The barrows were expanded down and then outwards under the ground to eventually form a complex and expansive series of tunnels, tombs and catacombs filled with traps to protect the dead. Centuries later the people were driven away and an artifact from the God of Death, Nergal, was secreted away into the furthest reaches of the Barrowmaze and protected by his faithful. After the artifact was secured it gradually filled the Barrowmaze with undead, created from the innumerable corpses entombed within, and attracted the attention of both the cult of Orcus and the necromancers of Set. During this time new settlements were founded on the moor and rumours circulated regarding the untold burial treasures which could lie within the Barrowmaze. The adventure centers around the party exploring and looting the Barrowmaze. While the primary concern is to get rich (and die trying) the party can gradually uncover the full

history of the Barrowmaze and possibly put a stop to the undead which continue to rise from their tombs.

The Barrowmaze uses the temptation of riches and glory to lure the party in and motivate them to continue onwards. The population, the Duchy itself, relies on the economy created by greedy adventurers delving into the Barrowmaze. Stories of treasures brought back by successful raids are easy for an inquisitive party to find. Treasures both magical and mundane can be found near most of the entrances to the Barrowmaze to encourage players to follow their greed. Seemingly empty rooms have value as random treasures can be found by searching the alcoves where the dead are interred. As the party gains more treasure they also increase their odds of survival which encourages them to seek out more challenges for more power. This cycle of risk, reward and improvement is a key component of the old school roleplaying games which *Barrowmaze Complete* was designed after. Even if a player or character isn't wholly motivated by greed there's the additional temptation to follow the trail of clues to understand the truth of the Barrowmaze. A character who isn't greedy or inquisitive can still be lured in by the promise of glory or, if truly selfless, stopping the threat to the people living above. The adventure puts lure after lure in front of the adventuring party to pull them deeper into the Barrowmaze and drive them to take more risks.

With its expansive size and complex series of rooms and passages the Barrowmaze is designed to be explored. Each of the over 400 rooms and barrows features unique details and atmospheric touches which can hint at the room's purpose, secrets or dangers. Further exploration into the unknown rewards the players with fascinating new scenery and set pieces. The historically haphazard construction of the Barrowmaze means that the players cannot even rely on the architecture being consistent from room to room. The uncertainty of this design preys

upon player curiosity to keep them excited about the unknown. Careful exploration can result in new passages being discovered, including different entrances and exits into the Barrowmaze, and solutions to problems elsewhere in the dungeon. Thoughtlessly rushing into the unknown is nearly always fatal but still interesting and unique each time. Because the history and story are told in small clues found throughout the adventure any room could reveal a crucial fact. When players piece together the story fragments any gaps left over drive further explorations into the Barrowmaze to complete the picture. Characters may come and go but players are pulled forwards by their curiosity and the seemingly endless new areas to explore.

Players quickly learn that *Barrowmaze Complete* will betray them and their expectations. The Duchy above has many characters, from the lords to the homeless, who are not what they appear to be. Some of the non-player characters are members of a Thieves' Guild, others are immoral mercenaries and some are even cultists or necromancers in disguise. Other adventuring parties have their own agendas and, while they may seem willing to ally with the player characters, they know the easiest way to get treasure out of the Barrowmaze is to take it from other parties as they limp home. The moor is also home to several monstrous races who frequently raid or waylay travellers and the mists hide undead both common and terrifying. The Barrowmaze itself is filled with betrayals of both the players' trust and perception. Ingenious traps can be literally anywhere, triggered by anything, and even if they don't kill a character outright they require quick thinking and action to survive. The monsters within the Barrowmaze are varied and most can use the dungeon to surprise and quickly punish unwary characters. Prepared and experienced characters can be betrayed by their own knowledge as many creatures are a twist or variation on a well-known species. Victory doesn't always mean survival as even a defeated foe might have infected or poisoned their slayer. As players explore the Barrowmaze

their own actions can betray them as delving too loudly, too greedily or even for too long will bring the attention of anything from a swarm of zombies to a vampire lord. *Barrowmaze Complete* forces the players to question everything, even their own knowledge and perception, as anything could betray their trust at any moment.

Barrowmaze Complete is a testament to the old school roleplaying style of tabletop games. The size, depth and attention to detail are an impressive achievement and deliver an expansive narrative without being a standard fantasy epic. The cycle of risk, reward and advancement is not only a design cornerstone but also part of the setting itself. The old school roleplaying style exemplified in *Barrowmaze* meshes ludic and narrative components together better than many modern tabletop games. The dual carrots of reward and story are used to pull the players into the adventure and keep them delving deeper while a very big stick punishes thoughtless play. Characters are drawn to the Barrowmaze by temptation, careful exploration reveals treasures and information while characters fall to unforgiving dangers that betray their assumptions and expectations. Players, alongside their characters, fall victim to the temptation of advancement, the fascination of exploration and are betrayed by their own actions.

The design of *Barrowmaze Complete* is strong but it does not cater to players who enjoy long-term characters with complex roleplaying opportunities. The unforgiving nature of the traps and monsters can also frustrate players who are new to the game. These concerns are more a problem with the old school roleplaying game philosophy than *Barrowmaze* specifically. In following its roots and influences *Barrowmaze Complete* succeeds at perfecting their style, and excels in its own design and detail, while retaining their limitations.

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Bibliography

Gillespie, G. (2014). *Barrowmaze Complete*. (n.p.): Author