Here's the review of "Hoard of the Dragon Queen", the flagship adventure for the new D&D 5th edition. We have mixed feelings about it, let us tell you why.

Review: D&D5 - Hoard of the Dragon Queen

It's been a fantastic year for D&D fans: we've seen the release of a new D&D edition meant to bring us all to the same gaming table again, and so far, we really dig this edition. Besides the Starter Set and the two of three basic rule books, the adventure "Hoard of the Dragon Queen" was published. Outsourced to Kobold Press, HotDQ is the first arc of the "Tyranny of Dragons" storyline, in which the Cult of the Dragon plans to unleash Tiamat, the Queen of Dragons, on the Forgotten Realms. To appease her, the Cult needs to amass a monumental treasure, which they, of course, do not intend to take from their own chests. With an exciting storyline and potential for epic moments, this adventure contains tons of inspiring material for DMs, but also has some flaws I cannot ignore.

Content

The HotDQ module consists of eight episodes, plus appendixes with the stat blocks for important NPCs and the description for their magic items. The rest of the stat blocks necessary to run the adventure must be downloaded, unless you already have the Monster Manual and the DM Guide.

The first appendix contains some background ideas related to the storyline, for your players to use during their characters creation. It is advisable to actually use these background ideas, as a DM you will need them to be invested early in the story somehow, because right from the beginning there is a major conflict: The traveling adventurers observe from afar the town of Greenest, being under attack by a dragon. If the characters intervene and survive the attack, they will learn that the Cult of the Dragon is behind it, and the PCs will be sent on a long journey to different locations of the Sword Coast to thwart the Cult plans. But only if they chose to intervene!

Previous knowledge of the Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting is not necessary to run the game; the adventure gives you enough information about the different factions' backgrounds and motivations. It also includes a very nice map of the Sword Coast for you to use as a reference. Of course, fans of Forgotten Realms will recognize along the journey key locations of the setting, such as Baldur's Gate or Waterdeep. If your own campaign is based in the Sword Coast, you will have plenty of chances to do a crossover.

HotDQ contains a vast array of NPCs and possible encounters, while also holding social interaction potential. One of the cool aspects of this adventure is the variety of scenarios that the PCs will face. There is something for every taste: intrigue, a rescue mission, interactions with different groups and their hidden agendas, and plenty of traveling across the land. The emphasis however, lies in dungeon crawling. Just in the first episode there are six different missions that the PCs could possibly take, and they are expected to carry them out overnight, with low healing resources, and while the town is under attack. Now, this could overwhelm a group of 1st level characters easily. On top of that, this new D&D edition is quickly becoming famous for its high lethality, so if you don't want a TPK right on the first episode, you will have to proceed with care.

On Rails

So, what is the problem with this adventure? It is in general nice: is diverse in its scenarios, is exciting, it has lots of potential in different areas … but there is a big issue. Very often, while reading this adventure, I found myself thinking "What if the players decide not to do this or not to follow that?" That is the main problem of HotDQ: there are not many other choices. You have to railroad the party, and if not, there is no other coherent option you could really implement to go on with the main story. The whole adventure depends on the characters to do specific actions, go to specific places and all of this in a certain way, in order to advance the adventure.

The PCs move forward by following the instructions of one NPC after the other. There are some suggestions on how to proceed, in case the players decide other courses of action, but all of them are just subtle ways to railroad the party. Others are not so subtle; in one instance it is suggested to just throw some money at the PC's, if they don't want to cooperate. While this might not be a problem for some parties, many experienced players will not put up with this. "The NPC gets angry at you for not cooperating" is not enough motivation for players that have a clear idea of what they want and how to proceed. I find this design frustrating, as a DM and as a player. PCs choices seem to matter very little, and their agency is sacrificed in order to continue the story. This makes this module very difficult to run as it is designed; at least if you don't want your players to feel like they are playing a video game.

Making this adventure work depends entirely on the end use you have planned for it. Do you want to mine it for ideas? Are you willing to prepare real alternatives for your party, in case they do not follow the storyline? Then, go for it. This adventure contains cool NPC's, locations, maps, encounters, scenes that will arouse your imagination. The plot alone is certainly bound to take the characters to an epic journey, but it needs a DM willing to convert it from a generic "we go from A to B" adventure into a good gaming experience.

On the other hand, if you want an adventure that is ready to use and that will require you nearly no preparation, I cannot recommend this. This adventure is clearly not meant for that. Certain sections of it contain a lot of detail but there are others that fall completely flat, for example: There is a point in which the characters will join a caravan that will take a long time to reach its destination. In this episode there is a lot of material prepared to make this travel interesting, even a list of caravan NPCs with descriptions, and ideas for road events that will not make your players feel like you are just rolling from a generic table. On the other hand, there is not a single deep description for any of the lower level cultists, and these, unlike the NPCs of the caravan, are meant to last for three or four episodes. The folks from the blog *Detect Magic* came up with a [Cultist Generator](#) tailored for HotDQ, in case you need a quick cultist to interact with your players. However, it was the work of the adventure designers to provide at least some flavor to them. Why was this possible for the NPCs at the caravan and not for these conspicuously relevant cultists? I have to admit that, reading this adventure, I fail to distinguish when lack of details is due to the "customizable" nature of the adventure, or due to a design flaw.

I think is valid to create an adventure that leaves a lot of room for the DM to adapt it and to personalize it. However, HotDQ gives me the impression that a lot of preparation is needed in order to run it successfully. Personally, I find this adventure very exciting in certain aspects and completely generic in others. There are some scenes that I would love to run for a group, scenes that would not fail to make a party feel epic. And there are other occasions in which I ask myself if the designers were even trying. The adventure is playable, but needs preparation. I find difficult to recommend this adventure to a novice DM, but surely more experienced ones will find a lot of nice material to draw from it.

Value for money

For about 20-22 EUR you get a nice, high quality, 96-pages hardbound book. The price is a bit high though, if you compare it with the other products that WotC released already for 5th edition. Rulebooks for example cost 30-35 EUR and have over 300 pages of content each. Also, I bought the Starter Set from my local gaming store for 16 EUR, and that got me a 64-pages adventure with 4 episodes, a 32-pages Rulebook, pre-generated characters, an empty character sheet and even a set of decent looking dice. Sure, the Starter Set is not a hardcover, but it is, in my humble opinion, superior in terms of content, adventure design and playability. On the other hand, HotDQ is beautifully made, contains amazing art, has some good material to inspire DMs, and surely will look good in your bookshelf. You have to remember that this is just the first published part for "Tyranny of Dragons", so, if you want to run the whole campaign, you will have to pay a similar amount for the second arc, "The Rise of Tiamat.".

Look 'n Feel

I do not get tired of saying it; the art of HotDQ is nice. The cover is absolutely stunning, and inside you will find illustrations of all major NPCs. The text is in general easy to read and the organization of each episode allows you to run the game in a smooth way, with just one particular annoyance. There is not a single map that contains a key. This is not a problem for most of them; you can refer quickly to the information in the text with the number code, but for the first and second maps, the area descriptions are buried in the text.

In terms of editing the adventure is unsatisfactory. It contains lots of errors. Many of the maps have a mistake or an omission, and there are inconsistencies in certain mechanic details. I can only assume that some of these errors occurred because the rules evolved while this module was being written. Actually, Steve Winter addressed some of these mistakes in the [WotC Forum](#) (warning: spoilers). None of these errors will prevent you to run the adventure nor should be a big obstacle for any DM, but I have to admit, is not the quality standard you expect from a product like this.

Bonus/Downloadcontent

HotDQ was released simultaneously with the Players Handbook on August 19th, before the release of the Monster Manual and the DM Guide. Because of this, it was absolutely necessary to download the [Online Supplement,](#) which contains the descriptions for most magic items, monsters, and spells not included in the [Basic Rules](#). While it is rather inconvenient to have all this pieces of vital information separated from the adventure book and scattered all over the place, we cannot deny that is great to have all this information available free of charge.

Conclusion

Let's be clear on something here: a good DM will always be able to circumvent the problems pointed out in this review, but, if I am paying for an adventure, I want it to be playable without me investing so much time to fix it. If I have to take the adventure and redesign it to make it suitable for my players, then I would rather run my own adventure or get another one. I do not like to railroad my players, even if they do not realize it. If I consider the experience, gaming style or the personality of the people whom with I usually play, I could not really run this adventure successfully. Experienced players will not abide to the obvious railroading, and why should they? The plot is cool, I grant you that, but the storyline is not more important than the ability of players to decide their course of action.

If this was any other random adventure, perhaps I would not feel so prone to criticize it like this, but this is the flagship of 5th edition. I love *Dungeons & Dragons*, and in my opinion, the new edition is

fantastic. And this adventure is, well, not up to my expectations. The design, the lack of details, even the not small quantity of mistakes found by the player community… for me, all of this amount to a feeling of disappointment.

There are many positive aspects. "Hoard of the Dragon Queen" is full of action, beautiful art and has an interesting storyline. If you want to take parts of it for your own campaign, it is a great source. Is it an entertaining adventure? No doubt about it, it can be a lot of fun. Many details of this adventure are a joy to read and there are great ideas to implement in-game. Is it playable? That is trickier to answer. I'm looking forward to seeing if they change style in "The Rise of Tiamat", and bring a product worthy of D&D 5th edition. I hope they do.