

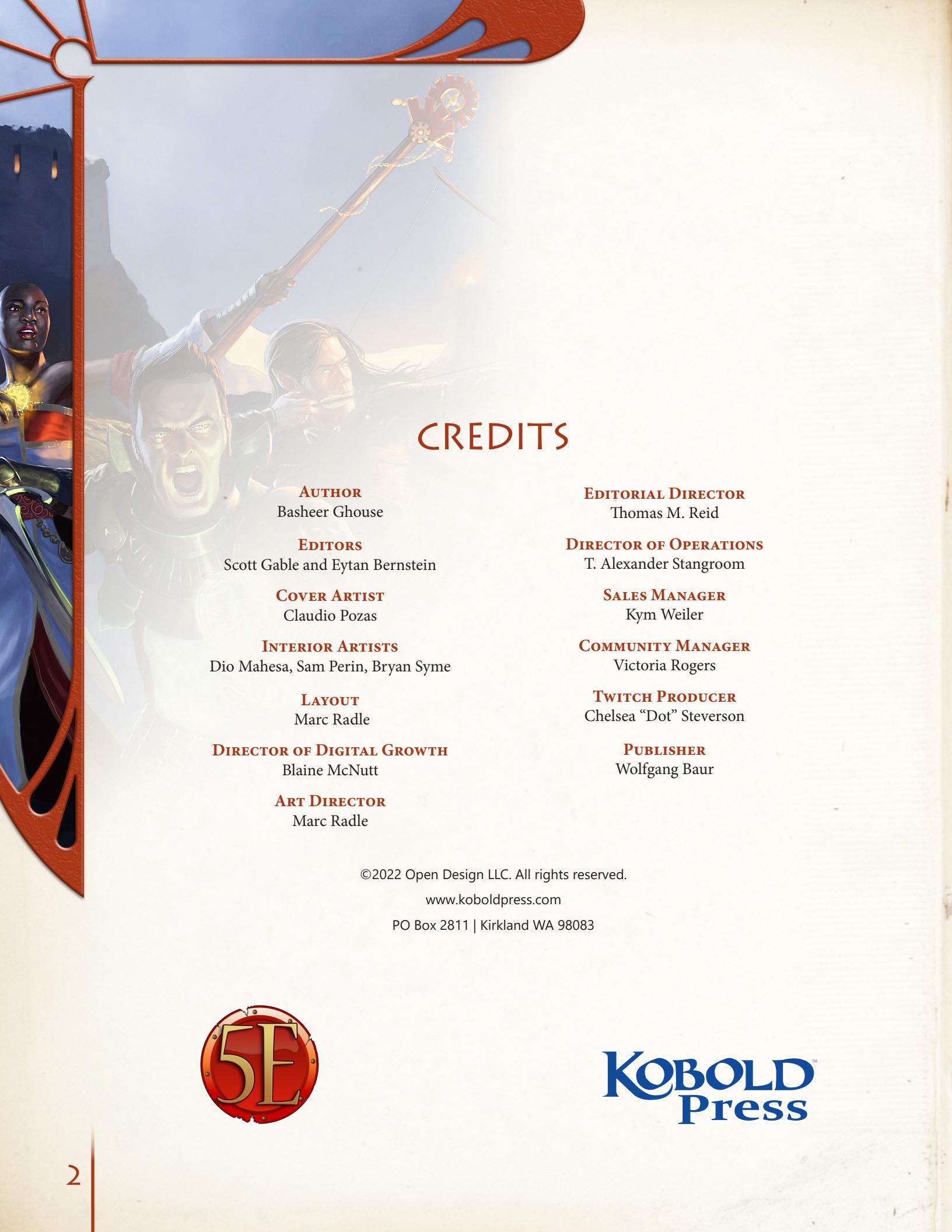
THE ART OF SKIRMISHING



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The Art of Skirmishing is a collection of articles focused on designing effective skirmishes that are fun and challenging. It provides GMs with tools to adjust the difficulty of encounters and tailor them to the strengths and weaknesses of both the PCs and their foes.

TO THE DEATH

You could not call such bloodshed a victory. Dwarven pike had met draconic spear wall, neither buckling until lines were met. Hradakh had been in the thick of it, stabbing his way through the brutal melee, and when the fighting stopped, he and his dragonborn kin held the field. What few of them had survived, anyway.

The field was carpeted in blood and bodies, and perhaps one in three of his comrades stood unaided. Another victory like this and there would be no war for lack of troops to fight it.

By default, combat in 5th Edition-derived systems is a deathmatch. Initiative is rolled, and combat ends when one side runs out of combatants. It is what most

rules and encounters are written around, what most groups of players are familiar with, and the basis of monster and encounter design. It is also an invisible limiting factor on encounter and monster design.

Combat-as-deathmatch puts constraints on what outcomes in a fight are acceptable as well as what sorts of storytelling are mechanically supported. All enemies in a battle are likely to die, and even when taking prisoners is an option, rules for doing so don't exist. Conversely, a player loss is defined as a party wipe, and PCs are mechanically encouraged to fight to the end instead of surrendering or retreating. This, in turn, shapes how combats, enemies, and adventures are designed.

If the PCs losing threatens to end the campaign, and all enemies are expected to die in a fight, then campaigns need to be designed around the assumption that PCs will win most (if not all) of their fights and in the process kill the hostiles opposing them. Losses need to be rare and ideally have some sort of mitigating factor to keep PCs alive. Scenarios must provide a way for the PCs to retreat or enemies



who are uninterested in killing them. Similarly, if you want an enemy to show up more than once, they need to either avoid combat or have some way to escape it. The plot needs to at least function when the PCs stand a reasonable chance of killing any villain they are in stabbing-or-casting distance of. Hostiles and locations are designed around this paradigm, an unspoken axiom that pervades many elements of how the game is designed and played. While there are optional rules like morale and guidelines in the community to encourage the use of enemies who flee when they're losing, these mitigate the problem—they don't solve the core problem.

If those constraints are comfortable for your campaign, this isn't an issue. However, when you try to work around them, you are likely to run into problems. It can feel like the game system is actively working against you, like you're constantly balancing between absolute disaster, and fights are becoming inconsequential. Fortunately, this is a problem that can be solved without homebrewing.

The key is in breaking away from the unspoken default. Designing fights that aren't meant to be to the death. Ones based around a discrete objective and that end when that objective is completed—whether or not the PCs win. Fights where the penalty for loss isn't necessarily death but could be the loss of desired resources, a need to find a new route forward, or other plot-facing repercussions. One where enemies might show up again and again, facing off against the PCs over some discrete goal and retreating when they fail to accomplish it.

In short, you want to introduce skirmishes, fights around a concrete objective where most of those involved will live to see another day. This is a tool in your arsenal as a GM and storyteller rather than a new default. Something to be mixed in to enable more storytelling options, introduce more dangerous (or merely recurring) adversaries, or promote a real chance of failure without risking a total party kill.

That said, most of the guidelines in the game revolve around deathmatches, and most players and groups are used to them. When applied to skirmish design, existing guidance is going to result in fights that are too easy or where the optimal solution is still to kill every hostile on the field. Similarly, increasing the danger of opponents can result in lethality due to a systemic focus on physical danger as threat guidance.

As such, designing skirmishes is harder than designing deathmatches. You'll want to be in constant communication with your group as you introduce them. Observe how people feel about the encounters and whether some players feel like they aren't getting

to do things due to how the encounters are designed. To create satisfying and interesting encounters, you'll also need to consider how to initiate and end combats, and how to set up combat goals and enemy roles.

We will cover the entire process in more depth, but here's an overview of skirmish-based combat design to tide you over until we get there:

- What is the objective of the skirmish? Are you fighting to escape, protect a point, complete a ritual, or kill a specific target? How many turns might it take for the PCs to complete this objective, and are they on a time limit?
- What ends combat once the objective is completed? Will the enemies retreat or will the PCs? Is there a steady stream of hostile reinforcements on the way? Is the building on fire? Or is part of the objective ending combat?
- What does each enemy contribute to this fight? Are they threatening PCs, controlling an objective, or simply limiting movement options? Each enemy should be doing something even if that's just "making it dangerous to complete the objective."
- How does the terrain affect the fight? It doesn't have to, but time limits, burning buildings, chokepoints, and terrain are excellent ways to control encounters and escalate tension without simply adding more hostiles.

WHY WE FIGHT

The first step of creating any successful skirmish is to set compelling stakes and objectives, and to communicate them clearly to the players. The worst-case scenario for a skirmish is the players not caring about the outcome or not understanding what they need to do to affect that outcome.

In a deathmatch, this is handled for you. If you lose, you're dead. If you win, you're not. The stakes and, generally speaking, how to accomplish those stakes are very clear! For a skirmish, you are going to have to do this work yourself, largely during the campaign and before the fight breaks out. Fortunately, much of this is done for you. Game mechanics generally bring their own incentives along, encouraging PCs to seek out magic items and treasure, or requiring the PCs to consume food and acquire appropriate equipment to continue adventuring.

Players invest themselves in the setting over the course of the game, picking NPCs they love, locations they enjoy visiting, and belongings they prize over others. Your narrative, devoid of encounter planning, almost certainly includes plot hooks, information,



and events that PCs will be interested in acquiring or participating in. You can use all of these as stakes by either offering them as a reward for an encounter or putting them in jeopardy in case of failure.

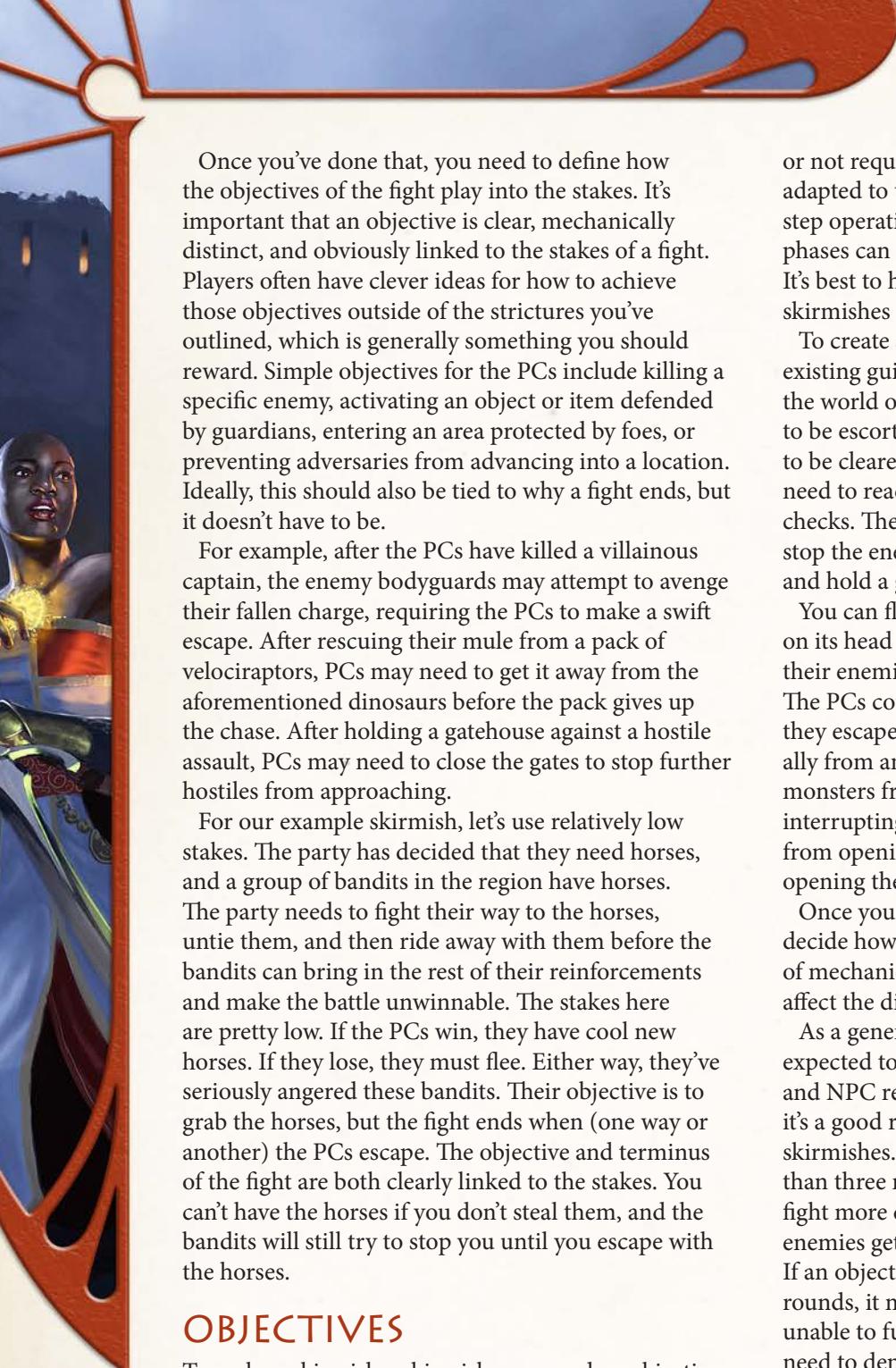
However, you shouldn't always use the highest stakes available. If players feel that attachment just puts things they like in peril, they'll become less invested in their favorites. And failing to save an important NPC feels a lot worse than not getting some potentially neat loot. Sometimes, stakes are low, and that's fine. A velociraptor trying to eat the party mule, with stakes as simple as "maybe we'll not have a mule for transporting loot," is a perfectly acceptable encounter. It's also one you can make fiendishly difficult or even impossible because the consequences of failure just aren't that bad.

Generally speaking, higher stakes escalate tension but also make failure less palatable. Not getting something feels better than actively losing something. A scenario where PCs lose things they aren't invested in hurts less than if they lose things they care deeply about. It's the deathmatch problem. If the stakes are things that can end the campaign or a player's fun in

the campaign, you must be a lot more careful with the possibility of failure. Even if those stakes don't strictly kill the PCs, you risk ruining their fun or ending investment in the plot or campaign.

That said, this does not mean that you must avoid high-stakes fights. They work well as the climax to arcs, at the culmination of a story, or to introduce new villains and plot elements. Dramatic losses of important characters can be incredible parts of a campaign that elevate it in the memory of your group for years to come. But it's something you want to do sparingly and intentionally rather than because you need some stakes on a random encounter roll.

Simultaneously, while players are generally onboard for fight after fight where death is on the line, they're often less onboard with fight after fight with some other thing always at stake. At the very least, they may seriously start considering whether that thing is worth them constantly protecting it in fights, so you want a varied stable of stakes to keep players invested. Vary fights between the risk of loss and the potential for gain, and mix in stakes related to PC interests, plot necessities, and mechanical incentives.



Once you've done that, you need to define how the objectives of the fight play into the stakes. It's important that an objective is clear, mechanically distinct, and obviously linked to the stakes of a fight. Players often have clever ideas for how to achieve those objectives outside of the strictures you've outlined, which is generally something you should reward. Simple objectives for the PCs include killing a specific enemy, activating an object or item defended by guardians, entering an area protected by foes, or preventing adversaries from advancing into a location. Ideally, this should also be tied to why a fight ends, but it doesn't have to be.

For example, after the PCs have killed a villainous captain, the enemy bodyguards may attempt to avenge their fallen charge, requiring the PCs to make a swift escape. After rescuing their mule from a pack of velociraptors, PCs may need to get it away from the aforementioned dinosaurs before the pack gives up the chase. After holding a gatehouse against a hostile assault, PCs may need to close the gates to stop further hostiles from approaching.

For our example skirmish, let's use relatively low stakes. The party has decided that they need horses, and a group of bandits in the region have horses. The party needs to fight their way to the horses, untie them, and then ride away with them before the bandits can bring in the rest of their reinforcements and make the battle unwinnable. The stakes here are pretty low. If the PCs win, they have cool new horses. If they lose, they must flee. Either way, they've seriously angered these bandits. Their objective is to grab the horses, but the fight ends when (one way or another) the PCs escape. The objective and terminus of the fight are both clearly linked to the stakes. You can't have the horses if you don't steal them, and the bandits will still try to stop you until you escape with the horses.

OBJECTIVES

To make a skirmish a skirmish, you need an objective as well as a condition for ending combat. In a standard combat, these are the same thing. Once one side runs out of combatants, the other side has completed its objective and the fight has ended. The game is designed around this paradigm, a paradigm that often isn't the case in a skirmish. As a result, objectives need to be crafted for the stakes at hand and to the capabilities of your party—with existing encounter design guidelines in mind.

The first step of designing a skirmish is to establish what mechanics are tied to the stakes. This should be easy to explain and remember, and simple to track—

or not require tracking at all! The skirmish should be adapted to the capabilities of your party. While multi-step operations and fights with multiple, distinct phases can be cool, they can also become complex. It's best to handle them either as a succession of skirmishes or as a succession of simpler objectives.

To create an objective, I recommend using pre-existing guidelines and tying the stakes of the fight to the world of your game. A threatened NPC may need to be escorted out of an ambush. An area may need to be cleared of enemies and held. A character may need to reach a point and complete one or more skill checks. The PCs must save the prince from assassins, stop the enemy from accessing a ritual circle, or open and hold a gate for their allies to save the day.

You can flip any objective the PCs wish to complete on its head such that they must instead prevent their enemies from completing a contrary objective. The PCs could hunt down a bandit captain before they escape the field instead of escorting a besieged ally from an ambush. Or they could stop a horde of monsters from interrupting a holy ritual instead of interrupting a profane one. They could block hostiles from opening the gates to let in their army instead of opening the gates to let in their own army.

Once you have this basic objective, you need to decide how long it will take to accomplish, what sort of mechanics to represent it with, and how it should affect the difficulty of the encounter.

As a general rule, an encounter in 5th Edition is expected to last around three to five rounds. PC and NPC resources are designed around this, and it's a good rule of thumb to keep in mind for your skirmishes. If an objective is going to take longer than three rounds to complete, it's going to make the fight more difficult as PCs run out of resources and enemies get the opportunity to deal more damage. If an objective can be completed in less than three rounds, it may make a fight easier, as enemies are unable to fully utilize their resources and PCs don't need to deploy theirs.

For a "normal" fight, the objective should be able to be completed in two rounds of combat, but plan for it to take three due to hostile action. This is fairly straightforward for most objectives: just difficult enough that the party can theoretically reach and complete the objective within two to three turns.

If an objective involves skill or ability checks, planning this can prove slightly more difficult. For an objective any party member should be able to complete, I recommend recording the highest bonus in the party and adding 5 to determine the target number. For an objective that depends on a party

specialist or that will take more than one turn, add 12 to the highest bonus in the party to determine the target number. And for an objective with a difficulty somewhere in between the capability of an untrained party member and that of a specialist, choose a number in between 5 and 12 and add it to the highest bonus in the party to determine the target number.

You should always keep in mind that the ability of a party to complete a given objective can vary heavily based on the composition of that party. A party with a monk or plenty of casters with teleportation spells, can reach out-of-the-way objectives and faraway enemies much more quickly than you might expect. If you're not careful, you may find that your party has achieved the objective and escaped from the fight within a turn thanks to a particularly clever monk. On the other hand, if your party has no such capabilities, a faraway objective may bog down the battle or simply result in the party killing everything instead of attempting the objective.

While it's fine if players circumvent an encounter with their cleverness, you should be trying to design your objectives with their capabilities in mind. So, take note of movement speeds, skill bonuses, spell choices, and class features. Design your encounters to show these off, such as having skill checks in magical darkness for warlocks with the Devil's Sight invocation or creating opportunities for martial characters with high Athletics to keep the enemy from the objective. Take into consideration the potential PC frustration caused by enemies who can circumvent party abilities, such as when a PC warrior throws an enemy who can fly out of a tower or when a fire-using wizard casts a *fireball* on a group of fire-resistant foes.

Whether or not your objective requires special actions to complete is your choice. Keep in mind that every non-combat action your objective requires of your PCs also makes the fight around that objective more difficult for them. That extra action is one that PCs aren't using to attack enemies, cast spells, or protect allies.

Judging encounter difficulty is hard, and sadly, there are no easy answers. I recommend using the pre-existing encounter balance guidelines. If your objective is going to take longer than three rounds, requires multiple non-combat actions from the characters, or requires expenditure of combat resources without gain, then make the encounter a step easier than it should be. If it's an objective that takes less than two rounds and consists entirely of combat actions that PCs would likely take anyway, you can make it a step more difficult if you so wish.

BAILING OUT

Selim's dagger came free, the high priest's corpse slumping over the altar.

"That's it then," he said. "Let's see what we're getting out of this mess."

"Boss," said Faridah. "We may want to nix the looting."

"Why would—" As he turned, Selim saw the ritual turned loose. The temple was falling apart, tendrils of noxious, ravenous void ripping through the stones. Unleashed magical energy lashed across the antechamber, and shadowy figures coalesced.

"Ah," said Selim. "You're right. We should run."

PCs completing their objectives doesn't always end a fight. Many encounters end up with objectives that don't logically relate to the end of hostilities. The bodyguards of the warlord you've assassinated are likely to still be angry after their boss has died; cultists are as likely to try and kill you for stopping their dread ritual as they are to rout; and escorting a dignitary away from an assassination attempt will probably see the assassins try to fight their way to freedom. Though the end of a fight is often reached by completing its objective, the move away from





deathmatches means that it won't always be. To deal with this, you can introduce a terminus.

A terminus is a secondary objective that ends the encounter after more important objectives have been achieved. It lengthens an encounter and causes more resources to be expended but generally doesn't risk taking away a victory. Instead, it threatens characters and resources after that victory is secured. It can also be used to introduce plot twists or new developments mid-encounter, wildly changing the course of an encounter and the narrative.

Terminus objectives should be simpler than the primary objectives of an encounter. This isn't just a question of resource balance but table experience. Spending one or more hours on a fight only to realize that it has another phase can be exhausting. Learning that that phase requires multiple skill checks and another few hours of play can be infuriating.

Broadly speaking, avoid skill checks or territory control for terminus mechanics and try to make clear what a terminus is going to be as soon as possible. Remember that the stakes for a terminus don't necessarily have to be lethal. The consequence for not reaching an extraction point by the time limit may simply be that the PCs must walk to their next location. Allowing an enemy to reach their extraction point may mean that the PCs don't learn who their assailants are.

These are guidelines rather than strict rules of encounter building and are laxer in encounters meant to take multiple sessions or at particularly climactic points in the narrative. That said, they are guidelines I recommend following whenever possible.

Mechanically, a terminus is just a formal way to make an encounter longer. Normal guidelines apply. Keep in mind the normal guidelines for encounter length, and when preparing the encounter, add the time it will take to complete the terminus to the time it will take to complete the primary objective. You will want to make sure that the opposition involved is dangerous enough that fulfilling the terminus objective is more desirable than killing everything on the field, but so long as you are simply lengthening a fight, you don't need to alter your encounter design.

However, you may want to throw in additional forces when the initial objective is completed. There are many narrative reasons to do this, but it makes the mechanics of the encounter significantly trickier to balance. In effect, what you've done is create two encounters that occur with no downtime between them. However, there is the additional complication that an unknown number of creatures and status effects from the first encounter will be part of the second.

There isn't an elegant way to solve this. You could calculate the hostiles you need to add to the encounter based on how many are left when the objective is completed, but this can be time intensive at the table. You could be conservative with the new threats you add to the encounter, but that risks the terminus being unsatisfying or the PCs simply killing their way out.

My recommendation is a mix of these approaches. Design the enemies for the terminus as if it were a complete encounter. However, once the primary objective is completed, only add part of these new threats to the fight. If your PCs are doing well, introduce a quarter to a third of the encounter each turn. If they've slaughtered all opposition, go as high as introducing half. If they're doing particularly badly, stay at a quarter or below. This should let you keep up pressure without overwhelming your PCs.

While we've talked extensively about limitations, the reasons you want to put a terminus in your encounters are largely narrative. They broaden the options available for skirmish-based encounter design and can facilitate combat storytelling in a manner that 5th Edition combat often struggles with.

A terminus can shape the narrative of a fight simply by the fact that it exists. Setting up a fight knowing the PCs must attempt a desperate escape afterward can prompt hard decisions from your players, as can harsh time limits to the acquisition of additional information or loot. The terminus is a good place to put side objectives—killing a hated foe, saving an imperiled NPC, or deciding to prioritize the party or personal gain—and it's a natural turning point in the story of a fight. The initiation of the terminus can represent the party moving from offense to defense or vice versa, a victorious denouement to a hard-fought battle or a last-minute reversal.

Finally, the terminus does not have to be public before it comes into play. The dramatic strength of having a staunch ally betray the party in their moment of triumph, or having a demonic warlord burst onto the scene as the party cuts off his army from entering the material realm, cannot be overstated.

THE ROLE OF CREATURES

A troll in a field is dead. A troll under a bridge is dramatic. A troll in your privy is terrifying.

The danger of enemies in 5th edition is based heavily on the circumstances in which they are encountered. Skirmishing doesn't change this fact but does change the nature of those circumstances. Previously, you've had to consider range, terrain, and how they interacted with a creature's abilities. Now, you also must consider

how they interact with the encounter's objectives and how you *want* them to interact with the encounter's objectives. I recommend choosing enemies for your encounter based on the role they will play.

A role doesn't have any actual mechanics. It is a guideline for what a given creature contributes to the encounter and how you plan to use them based on the tools available, the objectives, and the narrative. Broadly speaking, enemies are divided into **threats**, which are employed to deal damage to the party; **obstacles**, which make completing an objective more difficult; **support**, which make other enemies better at their job; and **filling**, which exist mostly to provoke resource expenditure.

Filling is the simplest role. Filling creatures are generally well below the party's level or else disadvantaged significantly by the nature of the objective. They might be there for flavor or because the party's done something clever, or else simply to absorb actions and resources that might otherwise be thrown at more important portions of the encounter. Most filling creatures can easily turn into support simply by using the Help action, even if they are otherwise unable to contribute to a fight.

Zombies are a good example of filling. Even in large numbers and at low party levels, they're rarely a true threat. Between their slow speed, low AC, and limited attacks, they primarily exist to eat up resources that could be used for something else. In an encounter where enemies can't reach melee, trolls and similar melee-only creatures become filling due to circumstance.

Obstacles are the most important role in an encounter. These are creatures that are stopping your party from completing its objectives. A party will either have to kill them to progress or spend precious resources and actions bypassing them. Broadly speaking, the obstacle should have something in its statblock that makes it suited to hindering the objective. They could employ speed or ranged attacks if the PCs are trying to protect an NPC; high health or large size if they're trying to block the route to an objective; or spells and abilities that can stop an objective from being completed while they're around.



If your PCs are trying to complete a skill check, a troglodyte's prodigious stench makes it an obstacle. If your PCs are trying to reach a location through a narrow hall, a troll's large hit points and melee prowess make it an obstacle. If they're trying to spirit an NPC away from an assassination attempt, a scout's 150-foot-range multiattack can make it an obstacle. Being an obstacle is all about circumstance.

Threats are the role you're likely most familiar with. In a skirmish where most PCs are trying to complete an objective, threats are likely to simply try and murder whichever PC is most vulnerable. Most monsters can be used as threats, but you should use this classification for the most dangerous and deadly creatures in an encounter.

Generally speaking, you will want some aspect of a threat to be more dangerous because of the nature of the skirmish. A troll fought in an underwater tunnel,

where most sources of fire and ranged attacks don't work, is a great encounter-specific threat. So are archers peering through cover or a dragon in flight.

If the party's objective is to kill a creature, it should probably not have the threat role, for that creature should be preoccupied with protecting itself and completing its objective rather than putting itself at risk to deal damage.

Support is a vague role. It describes any creature whose primary role in the combat is making others more useful. This can take the form of magic buffs but doesn't have to. Large creatures can carry others into battle, minions can perform the Help action, and others can even just give allies assistance with ruining the party's day. A support creature isn't directly stopping the PCs from achieving their objectives. It isn't directly dealing damage to the PCs, but it is making the encounter harder. It could also be making the encounter easier for its allies.

Good examples include a priest providing healing and support magic; a hobgoblin warlord using Leadership from a safe position; a horde of zombies using the Help action to make their allies more accurate; or a troll hurling kobolds over a ravine and into the fray.

In a given encounter, you should have obstacle creatures and creatures of at least one other role. You can get by without other roles, but they give a party choices to make that are independent of their objective, and can make encounters more interesting and varied. Make sure you allocate at least half the encounter's XP budget to obstacles, and add other roles to fit the tone and experience you want to create.

Threat creatures make an encounter more dangerous and tense but also make it behave more like a standard fight. Filling creatures make a fight feel easier and more heroic, but if you aren't careful, they can waste the turns of the PCs, and their fallen bodies can clutter the fight. Support creatures make other units more dangerous and are relatively likely to survive a fight. They are a good way to introduce recurring foes, but they can be supremely frustrating if they are too effective.

THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY

Terrain isn't discussed enough in encounter design, and there is a relative paucity of information about how to use it effectively. It is as important part of designing any encounter, whether that encounter is traditional or an objective-focused skirmish.

The primary role of terrain is to encourage and discourage a variety of behaviors in an encounter. It can do this by providing mechanical bonuses and penalties, limiting movement, and controlling line of sight. Deployed correctly, terrain is an incredible tool for modifying any encounter. You can play the same encounter with the same enemies and objectives, and if you run it with different terrain, it will play completely differently.

Battlefields are difficult to quantify in the same way as encounters. However, there are concrete measurements you can use to guide your design:

- Fire lanes are a concept from skirmish wargaming that describes concrete areas of line of sight that allow attacks to be performed at range.



- Line of sight blockers describe terrain elements that block line of sight, and therefore, attacks and abilities.
- Movement blockers describe terrain elements that block or impede movement even if they don't necessarily block line of sight.
- Zones describe terrain elements that do something weird that changes the rules of movement or combat: burning floors, teleportation pads, underwater areas, or areas that increase speed or provide additional movement options.

Long, wide fire lanes and a few line-of-sight or movement blockers provide an advantage to ranged combatants and large groups, as these allow them to focus the weight of numbers on individual foes and attack from relative safety. Short, narrow fire lanes, and many line of sight and movement blockers, provide an advantage to durable melee combatants. These allow them to close with their enemy without being engaged and keep more numerous enemies from bringing their numbers to bear.

Zones are less predictable. They provide advantage to different behaviors in different circumstances.

An *anti-magic field* greatly hurts spellcasters.

Teleportation circles allow martial characters to instantly cross the battlefield to help allies who want to be up close and personal with their foes. They hurt those who are trying to hold foes at a distance.

Terrain that discourages melee-focused PCs is more problematic than terrain that discourages ranged PCs. Casters and archers function reasonably well at ten or fifteen feet away from their enemies, and some ranged builds don't actually lose anything by being in melee combat. Melee builds often don't have tools to interact with a fight outside of melee range, so terrain stacked against them can be frustrating instead of challenging.

For a balanced map, you should include at least one fire lane longer than the average PC's movement speed. You should also include at least one way for PCs to move toward their enemy that allows them to remain safe from ranged attacks or spells. Combats in 5E trend short, so you should avoid designing scenarios in which PC combatants start farther away from the nearest enemy than their speed when taking the Dash action. It's fine if that Dash action makes characters more vulnerable.

That said, the magic of manipulating terrains in your encounters, and *especially* in your skirmishes, is that the maps aren't balanced. The terrain should favor a playstyle and encourage actions, even—or especially—ones that might be counterproductive to

the objective at hand. It's what allows you to prompt interesting decision-making and clever tricks from your players.

For example, the PCs are fighting at a port. There are lots of clear streets, creating long, narrow, intersecting fire lanes. The space between the streets is filled with narrow alleys and small buildings, each of which represents a small space full of obstructions, and several entry and exit points. In addition, there's a river leading into the bay and a boat on the north end of the map. The water's a zone where characters must be able to swim and can dive beneath the surface if they dare. The boat's a zone that can be unmoored and piloted away from the battlefield but is pretty open to incoming fire.

On this map, an enemy force made of archers led by a mage with *fireball* threatens the fire lanes. PCs will likely want to use houses and alleys to block line of sight, but this opens them up to a *fireball* hitting much of the party. However, that's one threat compared to however many archers there are, and it is something players can plan for and mitigate. Additionally, a character with high Athletics or a swimming speed may decide to dive into the water and use it to evade ranged attacks. The boat is likely to go unused because it doesn't have cover and is made of flammable wood.

But an enemy force of many fast melee combatants would change the fight. Buildings and alleys would become extremely dangerous places where enemies could isolate and swarm the PCs. Streets would be safer because they're hard to cut off, and they allow the PCs to engage at range and cast area-of-effect spells. The river may still be a viable route of retreat, but the boat is now more tempting. If some characters get on the boat and unmoor, it could trivialize the fight.

Now add an objective—a friendly NPC the characters need to get onto the boat and off the battlefield. The river scenario doesn't change; the map encourages PCs to do what they would ordinarily do in a straight fight. But in the street scenario, they now have hard choices. They must leave buildings to reach their objective, putting the NPC in danger. Additionally, they must reach and use that vulnerable boat, forcing them to plan around at least one round of profound vulnerability.

SYNTHESIS

Having covered all the individual mechanisms in skirmish-based encounter building, we now need to put them all together to create a cohesive process for encounter design. Fortunately, 5th Edition's guidance on creating combat encounters provides the tools we need, so we just need to tweak them a little.

We're going to focus on two tools. The first is to forcibly shove things along the encounter difficulty chart, moving encounters across the easy to deadly spectrum based on the skirmish's difficulty, regardless of the nominal XP budget. The second is to manipulate the encounter multiplier for having many foes.

While manipulating the encounter difficulty chart is a simple way to indicate how your choices affect combat difficulty, it's imprecise, doesn't have many gradations, and can be misleading. It still has its uses in adjusting the broad overview of an encounter. But it is less useful for dealing with more granular modifications, like how NPC roles or terrain may affect the difficulty of a fight.

The encounter multiplier for multiple foes is a better tool for more granular modifications. It allows you to deal with more incremental adjustments to encounter difficulty at the cost of having to perform multiplication. However, it can also be misleading when you use very low or very high numbers of enemies or with very large parties.

Both tools are imprecise. XP budgets are an estimation of lethality and resource expenditure at the best of times, and by introducing more factors that are difficult to quantify, they become further distorted. A deadly encounter may instead represent a high chance of the PCs failing the objective. It could present a situation where one character won't be able to use their best tools to avoid a significant chance of death. Similarly, an easy encounter may indicate that a brutal fight will be mercifully short rather than unlikely to injure or kill a character.

So, let's modify this process for skirmishing:

1. Determine XP threshold and record party capabilities.
2. Determine objective(s) and terminus, noting threshold adjustment.
3. Determine terrain and adjust encounter multiplier.
4. Determine opposition, assign roles, and adjust encounter multiplier.
5. Tally total experience and apply multiplier and threshold adjustments.
6. Adjust for desired difficulty.

The first step is to determine the XP threshold, as already recommended, but you should note the strengths, weaknesses, and capabilities of individual characters and the party as a whole for use later. Everything that follows is based on the capabilities of your specific party rather than a theoretical equivalent party at their level, so it's important to have a handle on what they can do.

The second step is to determine the stakes or objectives, and (if separate from the objectives) the terminus of the encounter. Using the guidelines from previous posts, determine if any of these represent a significant increase or decrease in difficulty compared to a standard combat. If so, once you've determined what threshold the encounter falls under, adjust it by one column as appropriate (toward deadly for difficult objectives and toward easy for trivial ones). This means that objectives that are easy for your party to complete probably shouldn't have an easy encounter difficulty *before* adjustment, and objectives that are particularly difficult should rarely have a deadly difficulty *before* the adjustment.

For the third step, determine the terrain for the encounter. You don't need to fully create the map, but you'll want to outline any effects that cover the whole map and anything that affects the objective. You'll need to have a rough idea of what the map will encourage and discourage; if the resulting terrain makes it harder for at least one member of the party to perform their role in combat or makes it harder to achieve the objectives, increase the encounter multiplier by 0.5. If both are true, increase it by 1. If the terrain makes it harder for the opposition to perform their roles in combat or makes it easier for the PCs to achieve the objectives, reduce the encounter multiplier instead. Particularly dramatic terrain pieces may be worth larger increases; for example, an actively hostile volcano is more dangerous than any of the enemies on the field, but that is an exception that doesn't mechanize cleanly. You need to approach terrain on a case-by-case basis.

Fourth, select the opposition creatures for the encounter and determine their roles. The preexisting guidelines work well for this, and if you have a multi-part encounter (mentioned in the terminus post), the advice provided in the game works well for determining its encounter budget.

Try to make sure to have at least one obstacle and one other role represented. If the monsters chosen are uniquely threatening to the party, represent a wide array of the encounter roles, or have features which make objective completion far more difficult, increase the encounter multiplier by 0.5. If, on the other hand,



they are ineffective against the party or are poorly suited to contesting the encounter's objectives, reduce the encounter multiplier instead. In many cases, those in the role of **filling** don't meaningfully contribute to the difficulty of an encounter, so you may not want to include them in the number of monsters when determining your encounter multiplier. Additionally, monsters tailored to the party are also ones that have features that make objective completion more difficult and vice versa. For this reason, you should never apply the change in encounter multiplier for opposition more than once.

Finally, tally the experience points of everything in the encounter, apply the encounter multiplier, and adjust the difficulty threshold it falls under, as appropriate. If the resulting encounter difficulty isn't what you're aiming for, adjust elements of the encounter until it falls where you want it.

LOUDER THAN WORDS

"Alright boss," said Salma. "What's the plan?"
"Should just be some gnoll outriders up there," said Nur. "We shoot through them and then hail the ship. We're cutting it close, but we should have at least a minute before they bail."

"What if, in theory, that have a giant hyena?" replied Salma.

"Why would they—" Nur stopped themselves and looked over the rock they had hidden behind.

"Ah," said Nur as they watched the horse-sized predator pace along the cliff-side. "New plan. Run for the beach as fast as you can and try not to be lunch."

Now that we have our system for creating skirmishes, let's put it into action. Our hypothetical party is a four-character group at 3rd level, consisting of an elven ranger, a dwarf warlock, a hobgoblin rogue, and a human bard. We know that while they put out a lot of damage and are very mobile, they're fragile and don't have anyone comfortable in melee. We also know that the entire party likes making dramatic leaps off tall objects, which has gotten them into trouble with falling damage before; that dwarves only have a movement speed of 25 feet; and that no one has *misty step*.

This gives us an encounter budget ranging from 300 XP to 1,600 XP, depending on how difficult we want the fight to be.

With this in mind, let's set up stakes and objectives. Our party has recently stolen vital information they need to get back to a friendly city. They've arranged for transport via a discrete boat, but they have a narrow window for extraction. If they take too long,

the boat could leave without them, or it could be found and destroyed by their enemies. If that occurs, they'll have to take the long way home and potentially risk the information arriving too late to be of use. This gives us stakes (a long trip home versus a safe and timely arrival) as well as a clear objective for the encounter (get to the beach before your ship leaves or is found, a 5-round time limit). If the PCs fail, we'll need a terminus, but we don't need it to be particularly difficult, so we'll just have it be to escape the fight (reach the other end of the map). This is a pretty simple objective with a generous time limit that plays to the group's strengths as a troupe of mobile strikers, so we're going to adjust the encounter difficulty down once we've finished the design.

As this skirmish is about reaching locations (the beach or the other end of the map), terrain is going to be prominent, and we want it to play a big role in the encounter. It will determine how long it takes the party to complete their objectives. As such, the quickest route to the beach is 70 feet away and crosses 10 feet of difficult terrain as the path descends a cliff side. Additionally, we want to reward the party's tendency to jump off high places. The option to jump off a cliff and reduce the trip by 30 feet of movement exists, but it also comes with up to 30 feet worth of falling damage. In theory, all characters can complete the objective in 2 rounds of movement by taking the Dash action, though our Dwarf will need to move and use their action to Dash. If the PCs fail, the map edge is a mere 10–15 feet away.

To ramp up the challenge, we're also adding some movement and line-of-sight blockers, forcing characters to risk melee if they want to take the most efficient routes, and constraining their ability to simply eliminate enemies at range. This is relatively hostile terrain. It makes the objective significantly harder and plays against the strengths of the party, and as such, it is going to increase the encounter multiplier by 1.

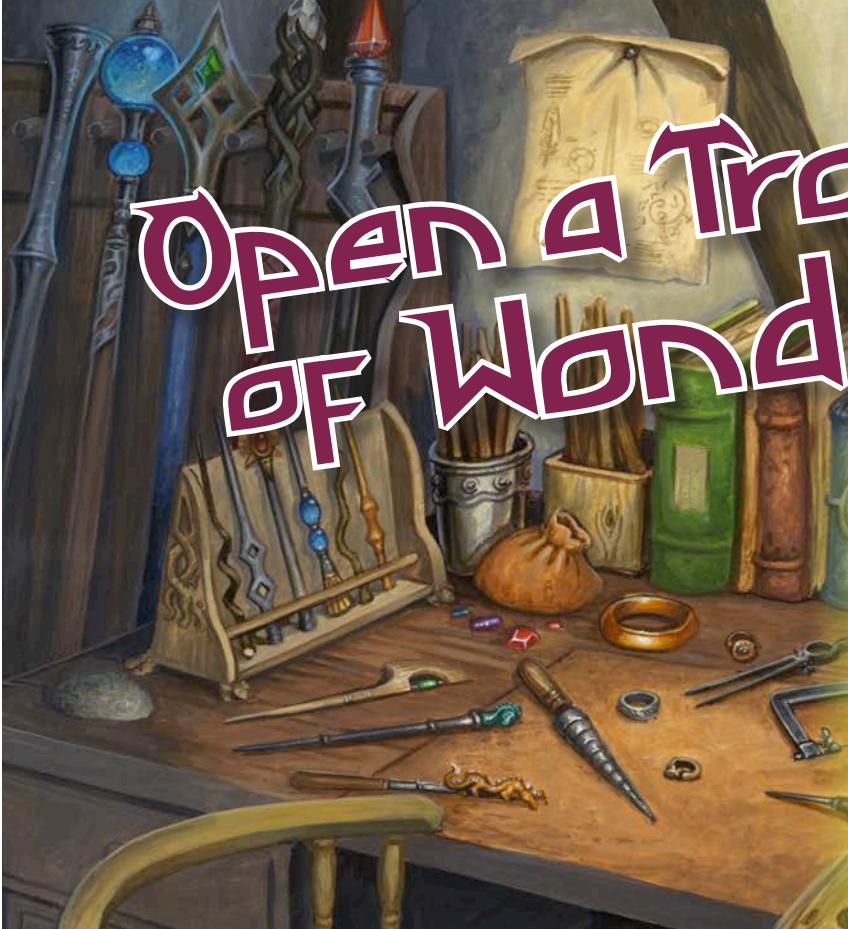
For opposition, we have a giant hyena, two gnolls, and a scout. The hyena and gnolls are obstacles. They're going to be moving to block paths and forcing characters to slow down and engage them before continuing. The scout is a threat. It's not blocking movement, but it is shooting at people whenever they enter one of its fire lanes. There's nothing particularly special about this composition that should worry the players. None of the enemies have abilities that constrain movement, and the characters' tools should work fine against these foes, so we don't need to change the encounter multiplier for our opposition.



This gives us a pre-multiplier XP value of 500, a total encounter multiplier of 3:2 for having four monsters, and an additional multiplier of 1 for our terrain. That's an adjusted encounter budget of 1,500 XP, which would be a hard encounter and a third of our daily encounter budget. However, as our objective is relatively easy, we're treating it as a medium encounter for expected difficulty. If we're right about this, our characters will almost certainly win, despite the factors stacked against them, and they should be good for another encounter or two before needing to rest.

We want something with a bit more punch, however, so we're adding another scout to the mix. This brings our adjusted budget up to 1,800, which is solidly deadly before our threshold adjustment. This should be a meatier, more dangerous encounter, but the characters should pull through after expending some resources. It's also appropriately climactic for a dramatic escape through enemy territory that we fully expect to involve at least one character jumping off a cliff.

Open a Trove of Wonders!

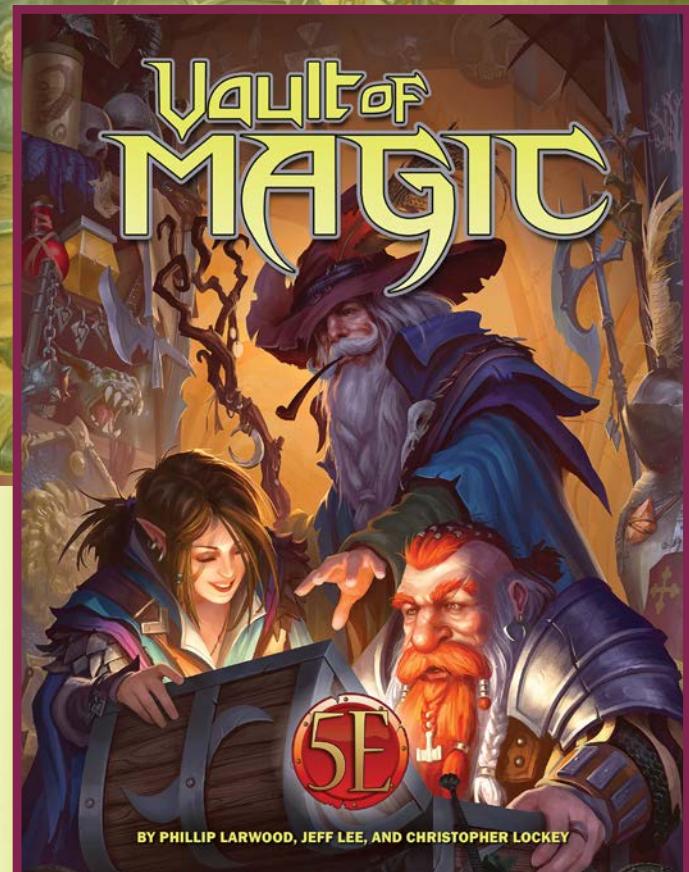


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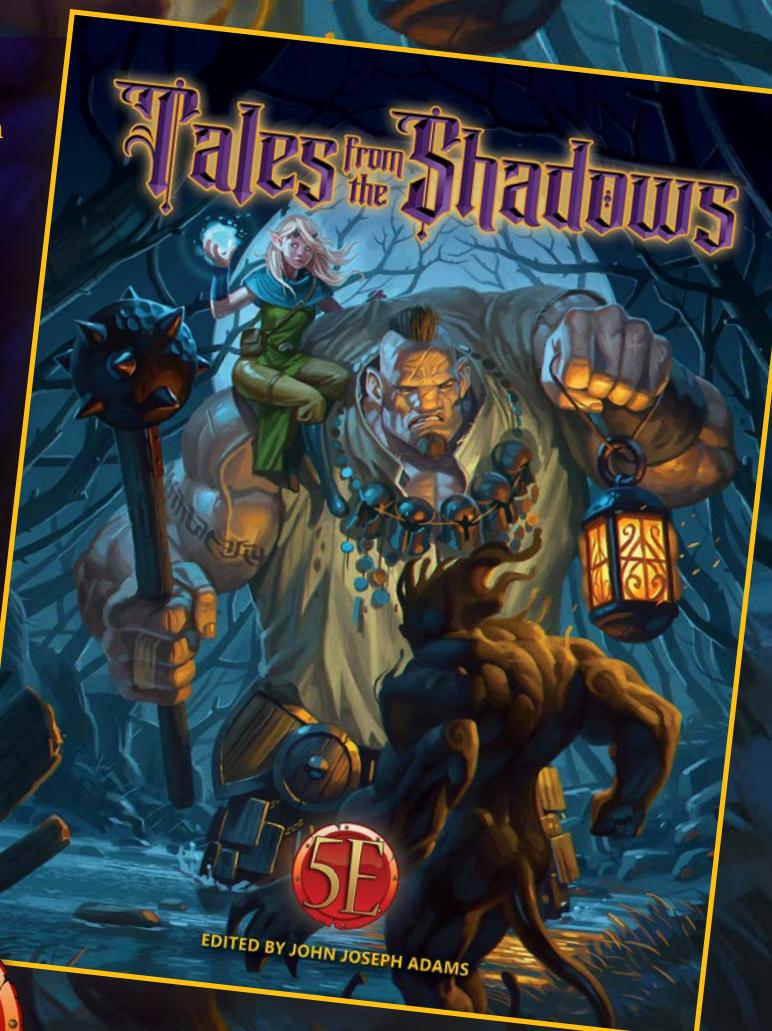
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