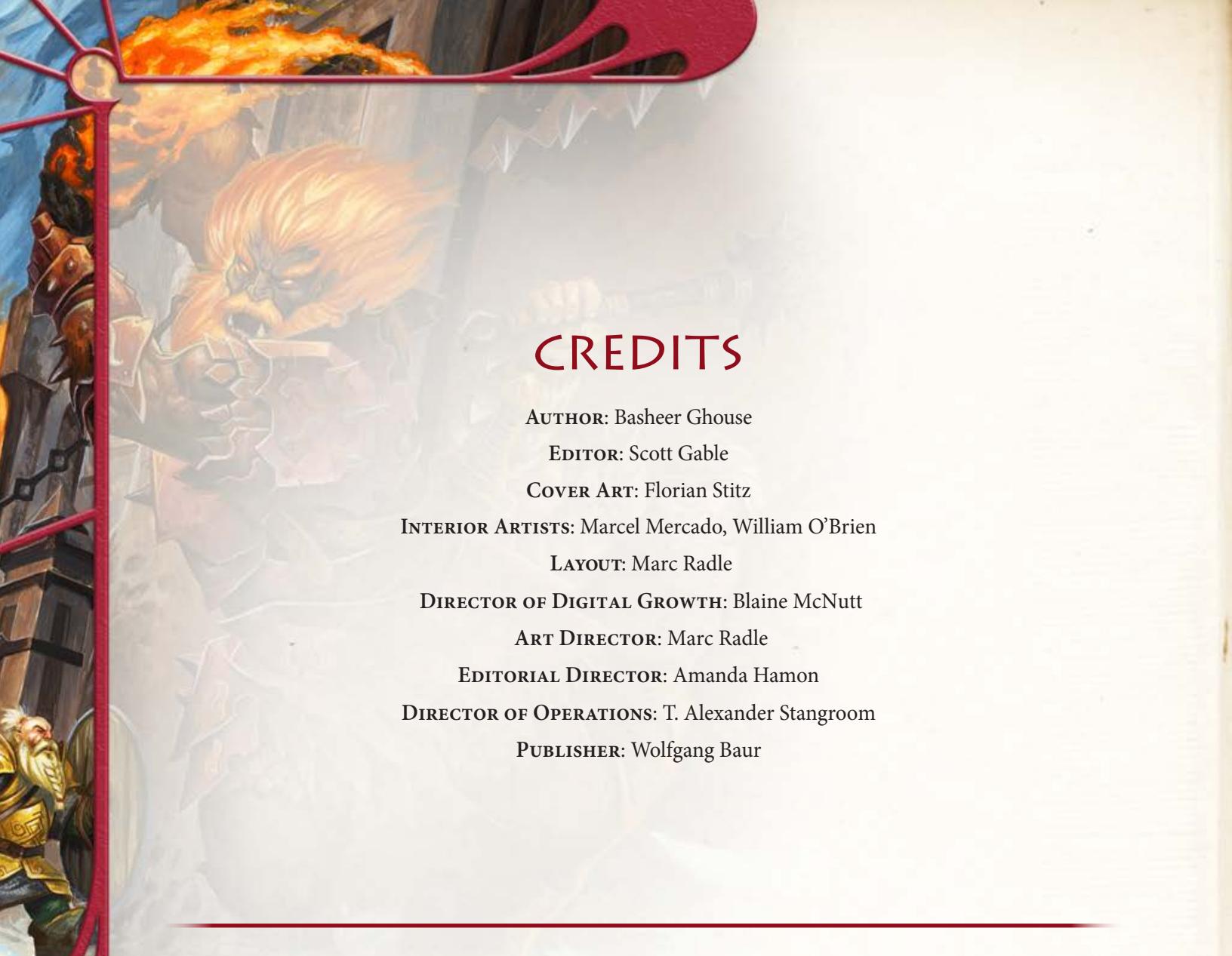


TOOLS OF WAR



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INTRODUCTION

The world's oldest roleplaying game isn't designed for mass combats.

One of the most powerful things you can do in 5th Edition and its derivatives is to either get more actions or deny people theirs. As the game is simulationist, adding more people into a combat becomes a brute-force way to make this happen—be that hordes of opponents, summoned allied minions, or simply lots of players or allied NPCs. Additionally, each combatant makes every round of combat take more time, resulting in more delays between player turns, increasing disengagement with the game, and additional mental load in tracking and running encounters.

The following chapters introduce mechanics and suggestions to address specific issues with large combats, but first let's talk about design principles and balance to help you adapt those solutions, so you can better use the rest of *Tools of War* for your home games.

Your goal for all massive combat modifications is to simplify the experience and lessen the table-time of running combat. Condense multiple actions into fewer actions, multiple units into fewer units, and prevent abilities from creating new actions. This will inevitably dilute the simulationism of the game and make some options weaker and others stronger. That is a necessary sacrifice in the name of simplification and one you will have to negotiate at home. Use the following as guidelines:

- If a change increases GM load, it isn't worth it. If it increases player load, reconsider it.
- Expect to reduce damage output in favor of other metrics. Flexibility, area control, accuracy, and tanking are all areas you can fine-tune to compensate for falling damage.
- Try to avoid granular resources like spell slots and recharge in favor of simpler ones like short/long rest abilities and at-will use. Using charges or ammunition are useful half-measures.
- Use the mechanics introduced in *Tools of War* as a guideline for balance where possible: formations and group turn balance against monsters, minions balance against spell slots, NPC allies balance against both party members and magic items.

The group turn and formation rules (see Chapter 1) modify existing rules to do their work. Mechanically, a group turn converts every extra combatant in the turn into a pre-existing buff, either a better version of the Help action or a single-target version of *crusader's mantle*, to massively reduce the actions and damage output of a group of enemies. This favors enemies with lots of attacks and enemies that are in groups of

three. Changing the nature of those buffs and adding more steps can result in a group turn that incentivizes different numbers of creatures or different types of attackers, allowing you to tune the difficulty at will.

Try to avoid grouping up wildly variant enemies or different types of spellcasters as this can bog you down in resource tracking.

Formations are built like swarms with multiattack. You can use the existing tables to create them without issue, though you'll likely want to trend low accuracy with weight of attacks to increase their damage. The important thing to note is that their multiattack and artificial damage output lets them concentrate melee damage far more than an equivalent number of creatures would be able to. Restricting how they may distribute attacks, like how the tyrannosaurus must target different creatures with each attack, lets you avoid this.

Like group turn, you'll want to be careful about mixing in different unit types in a formation. This is a more severe limitation as formations are mechanically a single unit, and mixing AC values or resource management is an enormous mess. Having abilities or attacks that shut off at health thresholds can represent individuals in the formation going down; additionally, the Leadership ability can represent an officer while spellcasting can represent an attached unit mage. The trick here is to make it clear that, mechanically, this character is part of the formation and cannot be independently targeted. Once you do, adding specialists, operatives, and attached casters to a formation is a cool way to add flavor to an enemy.

Or to justify a two-stage boss fight once a villain's bodyguard is dead.

The Command action (see Chapter 2) is designed to sacrifice damage and action economy in favor of giving minions more variability. It allows them to provide auto-advantage en masse and to force tanking, something very difficult to do in 5th Edition. This is broadly balanced against spells available at 5th level due to the fact that *animate dead* is a 3rd-level spell and is the best guideline for mass-minion control the game provides. Spells like *spiritual weapon* and *healing spirit* provide bonuses based on some sort of controllable or passive minions, providing the mechanical basis for bonus action commands and non-damage commands, and if you're looking for new options for player commands (or ways to mechanize creative players giving weird commands), they're an excellent place to start. That said, I would generally avoid straight damage as it's more likely to scale oddly or break some of your encounter designs in a way that's difficult to manage.



NPC allies (see Chapter 3) are the weirdest and hardest to balance of the new *Tools of War* options. They draw heavily from magic items and classes to concentrate the experience of having an ally into a few concrete abilities. While it's hard to pin down rules for them, here are some guidelines.

First, NPC abilities represent total potential over the course of an encounter, adventuring day, or adventure. Don't feel bound to how existing class features and spell structures work, but make sure that they don't outshine player characters over the course of the campaign. Rest abilities should represent about two turns of successful actions or damage with associated resource expenditure. Long rest abilities should represent about four turns or significant expenditure of permanent resources. Passive abilities should represent the passive benefits of having another party member.

Second, NPC abilities can afford to bend or break rules the way that magic items do. Their abilities exist to outline a character and fill a role rather than be mechanically balanced tools that any player can try to manipulate. They can have spells that don't fit the

existing spell lists, perform martial feats that play fast-and-loose with existing class features, and mess with the battlefield and skill checks in a way players can't. Players should never feel superfluous, but it's fine if NPCs open up new ways of approaching challenges. Providing advantage to player checks in an area of expertise is almost always a solid passive.

Third, NPCs should never represent a straight upgrade over a player character. They should offer different, characterful ways of dealing with problems.

CHAPTER 1: FORMATIONS AND HORDES

Enormous battles against overwhelming odds are a staple of the fantasy genre, of the books and movies and games that inspire so many campaigns. Trying to bring that experience to the tabletop though is difficult with the increased bookkeeping, time, and attention that such combats require.

There are existing rules to mitigate this. The game offers ways to speed up combat or handle large



numbers of opponents. However, these solutions don't quite make fighting a horde of foes a reasonable or mechanically rewarding task.

Fortunately, other games (especially wargames) have iterated upon solutions to this problem that you can adapt for your campaigns. The solutions we're going to talk about solve two problems. First, they let you simulate many enemies as a single combatant. Second, they keep the fight from dragging out long after it's been won.

For a practical example, let's take a hypothetical mob of 20 commoners (challenge rating 0). Only 10 XP each, but with twenty enemies, we will run into the worst problems of large combats with fundamentally boring foes. Additionally, what should be about 200 XP of opponents is now budgeted at 800 for most groups due to how encounter design works, but still only gives 200 XP worth of rewards to the players.

Our first potential solution to this problem is an iteration on grouping monster initiative called the group turn. Essentially, a mob is turned into a more manageable number of units by converting most of

them into a buff for one enemy who takes action: they absorb hits, occupy space, and increase accuracy and damage with these benefits disappearing as the mob is cut through.

Group Turn. All creatures that are part of a group turn take their turn on the same initiative count. All of them move and take actions and provoke reactions normally. Only one creature in the group (the group leader) can take actions or bonus actions. The group leader is decided at the start of each group turn.

For every three creatures in a group turn who are currently capable of taking actions, the group gains these bonuses in this order:

1. The group leader gains advantage to all skill rolls and all attacks. Each additional time this benefit is gained, another creature in the group gains its benefit.
2. The group leader gains +1d4 damage on all attacks. This does not stack with other effects or spells that would increase its damage. Each additional time this benefit is gained, another creature in the group gains its benefit.



- When the group leader takes an Attack action, one other creature in the group may take an Attack action. This stacks, though the same creature cannot take more than one Attack action.

All creatures in a group turn are treated as one creature for the purposes of encounter design. A group is worth XP equal to the combined XP of its members.

In this example, our mob of 20 commoners now becomes a group of twenty commoners. They're worth 200 XP and have roughly the damage output you'd expect from a challenge rating 1 creature. Additionally, while they have a lot of health, they have terrible AC and will lose lethality as the fight progresses. However, it's wordy, and the scaling will often fail to fit the XP value of the group as well as it has here.

Formations are our second potential solution. These are based on more traditional wargames. Here we use a monster feature to represent a formation of smaller, less dangerous creatures fighting in formation.

Formation (X): For effects that choose a number of targets instead of being applied to an area, the formation counts as X targets. Effects that would only apply to less than X targets do not apply conditions to the formation while effects that would deal damage to at least X targets or that are applied to an area deal double damage to formations.

For our example mob of commoners, we're aiming for CR 1 and end up with something like the following.

MOB OF COMMONERS

Huge formation (Medium humanoids)

hp 36 (8d8 + 0) **AC** 10

Abilities/Saves/Skills: As Commoner.

Overwhelming Numbers: While above half health, a mob of commoners has advantage on attacks and skill checks.

Formation (5): For effects that choose a number of targets instead of being applied to an area, the formation counts as 5 targets. Effects that would only apply to less than 5 targets do not apply conditions to the formation while effects that would deal damage to 5 targets or more or that are applied to an area deal double damage to formations.

ATTACKS

Multiattack: The mob makes any combination of six club and rock attacks. It may only make three attacks against a single target each turn.

Club. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +2 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 2 (1d4) bludgeoning damage

Rock. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +2 to hit, range 10/60 ft., one target. *Hit:* 2 (1d4) bludgeoning damage



We now have a challenge rating 1 creature that represents a large mob of hostiles through its actions but will die significantly more quickly and requires less bookkeeping than our group turn model. However, we've lost the ability to spread them out, and they have some of the same verisimilitude issues as swarms with regard to single target and area effects.

Our two solutions provide different ways to make combat against hordes and legions of enemies easier to run and more rewarding to play. Each solution has its own benefits and drawbacks: the group turn is easy and requires little to no prep from the GM but is wordy, can have scaling issues, and doesn't deal with the problem of the group becoming a mass of hit points to chew through. The formation is more mechanically elegant and can be tailored to fit a challenge of your choice but requires much more prep time and interacts counterintuitively with many effects.

TOOLS CHAPTER 2: COMMANDING MINIONS

You're playing a necromancer, and you've finally got animate dead. Your last battle leaves you with a small hoard of corpses, and careful spell selection and treasure hoarding has given you the resources to raise, equip, and transport all of them.

You reach the dungeon, a team of bandits riding out to meet you. You command your minions to charge alongside the barbarian and—

Oh no.

You have to roll initiative for all of these guys...

COMMANDING MINIONS

Player minions have long been and still are an important part of the game. Spells like *animate dead* and the summon lines, and some class features, still give access to minions meant to boost the player in or out of combat. However, like masses of foes, minions have playability issues.

Like hordes, minions bloat the time it takes to play the game and are an additional full creature for a player or GM to track, something that is often forgotten or botched in the bookkeeping at the best of times. Mechanically they bloat action economy much like hordes do, and for armies of the undead, hordes of summoned creatures, or a rallied town watch, the solutions offered in the previous chapter may well be good enough.

However, if your table's problem is simply having minions in combat at all, I would recommend abstracting them further. Controllable, moving effects that provide buffs or deal damage already exist after

all. Spells like *spiritual weapon* and *healing spirit* provide a template with which you can take minions out of the initiative order and balance them as a player option. They are a moving unit in the combat that uses an action (your bonus action) to perform an effect, and they can be removed by dealing sufficient damage to their caster.

There's a lot of variance in the types of minions your players are going to be using. Squads of zombies have a different role than familiars, which in turn act differently than animal companions and paladins' steeds. We're going to cover a general action economy fix first and then get into ways that solution can be tailored to different types of minions.

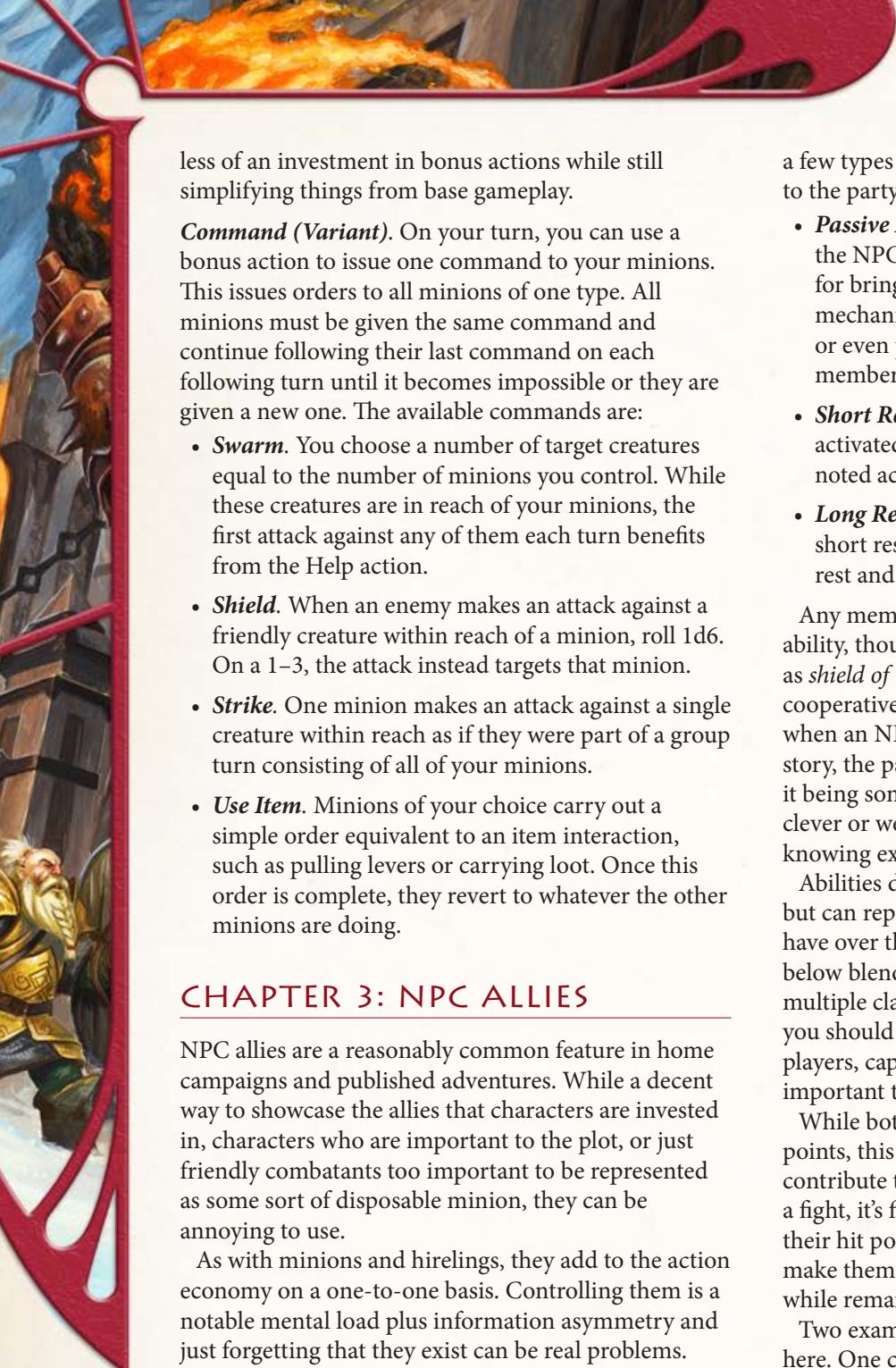
Our general solution is to take minions out of the initiative order and create the Command action. Minions (defined as "subservient, allied combatants that aren't full-fledged NPCs") don't get their own turns or actions and instead are commanded during the turn of whoever is responsible for them. For minions commanded through spells, items, or class features, this is obvious, but for hirelings and other special circumstances, it can simply be whoever has the spare action to command them or whoever was most involved in acquiring them. Ideally, one character should have full responsibility for a given group of minions.

The Command action is a new, baseline bonus action to the game that anyone can use to command minions loyal to them, allowing them to act despite the fact that they have been removed from the initiative pool.

Command. On your turn, you can issue one command to your minions. This occupies one bonus action and gives orders to all minions of one type (that is, all of your zombies, all of your familiars, and so on). Commanded minions may immediately move and take a single action. A creature may only respond to one Command each turn.

This can be tweaked to fit different types of minions. A group of hirelings may be relatively autonomous if commanded, and if concentration is maintained by a character, they will simply repeat their last action to the best of their ability. (This also gives martial classes, who traditionally don't have much to concentrate on, a role in leading troops.) *Animate dead* explicitly says that commanded undead will follow their last order, so concentration becomes unnecessary (but there is a spell slot investment).

If a character is heavily invested in Command, defining themselves as a necromancer, summoner, or army officer, the following variant allows for a more muscular and tactically varied use of minions with



less of an investment in bonus actions while still simplifying things from base gameplay.

Command (Variant). On your turn, you can use a bonus action to issue one command to your minions. This issues orders to all minions of one type. All minions must be given the same command and continue following their last command on each following turn until it becomes impossible or they are given a new one. The available commands are:

- **Swarm.** You choose a number of target creatures equal to the number of minions you control. While these creatures are in reach of your minions, the first attack against any of them each turn benefits from the Help action.
- **Shield.** When an enemy makes an attack against a friendly creature within reach of a minion, roll 1d6. On a 1–3, the attack instead targets that minion.
- **Strike.** One minion makes an attack against a single creature within reach as if they were part of a group turn consisting of all of your minions.
- **Use Item.** Minions of your choice carry out a simple order equivalent to an item interaction, such as pulling levers or carrying loot. Once this order is complete, they revert to whatever the other minions are doing.

CHAPTER 3: NPC ALLIES

NPC allies are a reasonably common feature in home campaigns and published adventures. While a decent way to showcase the allies that characters are invested in, characters who are important to the plot, or just friendly combatants too important to be represented as some sort of disposable minion, they can be annoying to use.

As with minions and hirelings, they add to the action economy on a one-to-one basis. Controlling them is a notable mental load plus information asymmetry and just forgetting that they exist can be real problems. More aggravatingly, you risk players failing to invest in the game or becoming resentful of the NPCs if they take up too much spotlight, trivialize combats, or take narrative agency away from the players.

Some of these issues have been mitigated in 5th Edition by turning NPCs into monster-like statblocks instead of fully realized player character equivalents. They're easier to run than characters, but you still run into some of the same issues, especially those regarding action economy and control of narrative agency.

My solution is to move all of an NPC's abilities into the hands of a player, much like for magic items and artifacts. NPCs instead become a short template with

a few types of abilities to represent their contributions to the party:

- **Passive Abilities.** Mechanics that exist as long as the NPC is in the party, which can include costs for bringing them around, their health, and any mechanics that might cause them to take damage or even passive buffs that represent the help a party member would provide in or out of combat.
- **Short Rest Abilities.** Mechanics that can be activated by any member of the party, using the noted action, and that recharge with each short rest.
- **Long Rest Abilities.** Mechanics that function like short rest abilities but only recharge with a long rest and are appropriately more impressive.

Any member of the party can utilize any activated ability, though the target of passive abilities (such as *shield of the righteous*) should be decided cooperatively by the players. Ideally, this means that when an NPC does something vital to a fight or the story, the party as a whole is invested in it rather than it being something the GM mandated. Closer to the clever or well-timed use of a magic item than the GM knowing exactly what was needed when.

Abilities don't have to map directly to class features but can represent the contribution an NPC would have over the course of a fight. The example NPCs below blend features from their race and class or from multiple classes to better represent the concept. While you should be careful not to make NPCs overshadow players, capturing character and role is more important than strict fidelity to class mechanics.

While both of the provided NPCs list their hit points, this isn't necessary. If an NPC isn't meant to contribute to combat or isn't meant to be in danger in a fight, it's fine to not include this. The point of listing their hit points is to put the NPCs in danger or to make them a resource that helps the party in combat while remaining at risk.

Two examples for 3rd-level parties are presented here. One combat oriented (based on a dragonborn fighter) and the other not (based on a human, non-combat alkemancer).

ASNA: ERRANT FARIS

Shield of the Righteous (Passive). Asna has 29 hit points. At the end of each long rest, the party picks two members. Whenever either of them would take damage, there is a 50% chance that Asna takes it instead. She heals to full after a short or long rest.

Savior's Blow (Short Rest, Reaction). When a character would be hit by a weapon or spell attack, they may spend their reaction. Asna pushes them out of the way and retaliates against the attacker. The

character moves 5 feet while the creature who made the attack takes 7 (1d8 + 3) slashing damage, and the attack must be rerolled with disadvantage with the new result accepted. If the attack still hits, Asna takes the damage.

Dragon's Death Roll (Short Rest, Action). Asna unleashes a gout of flame, darts into the chaos, and bites a foe. All creatures within a 15-foot cone must make a DC 13 Dexterity save. On a failure, they take 7 (2d6) fire damage and are knocked prone. On a success, they take half damage and are not knocked prone. Choose one creature affected by this ability, and they take 7 (1d8 + 3) slashing damage and are restrained. At the start of each of their turns, they may make a DC 13 Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity (Acrobatics) check to no longer be restrained.

LAKS: KHANDIRI ALCEMANCER

Your Family Is My Family (Passive). As long as Laks is in the party, the group has advantage on Charisma (Persuasion) and Charisma (Performance) checks with the rural people of the Khandiri Mountains.

Civilian Alkemancer (Passive). Laks has 17 hp. Whenever multiple characters take damage from a

spell or ability, he takes 5 damage. The first time during each combat that an attack would knock a character unconscious, it hits Laks instead. He has 3 Hit Dice, 13 Constitution, and heals as a player character. During short rests, Laks can cast *identify* on any magic items or alchemical reagents the players have on them.

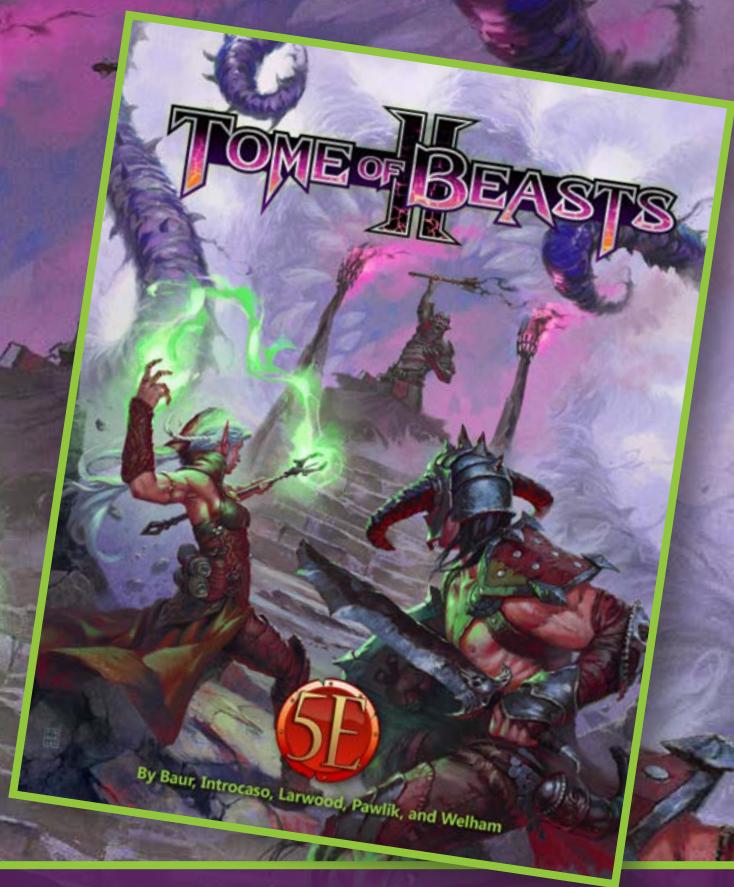
Frontier Physician (Short Rest, Action). Laks has 3 charges available for this ability. As an action, he can perform the following from reagents he has on him:

- Administer a potion with the effects of *lesser restoration*.
- Administer a potion with the effects of *cure light wounds* (healing 1d8 + 3 hp).
- Administer a potion that casts *comprehend languages* on the target.

Sculpt Life (Long Rest, 10 Minutes). Laks's true passion is the potential for alkemancy to fundamentally change the nature of a lifeform. One target creature heals a level of exhaustion and gains the benefits of the *alter self* spell for 8 hours. While altered in this fashion, they are resistant to cold and fire damage and are comfortable in all environments.



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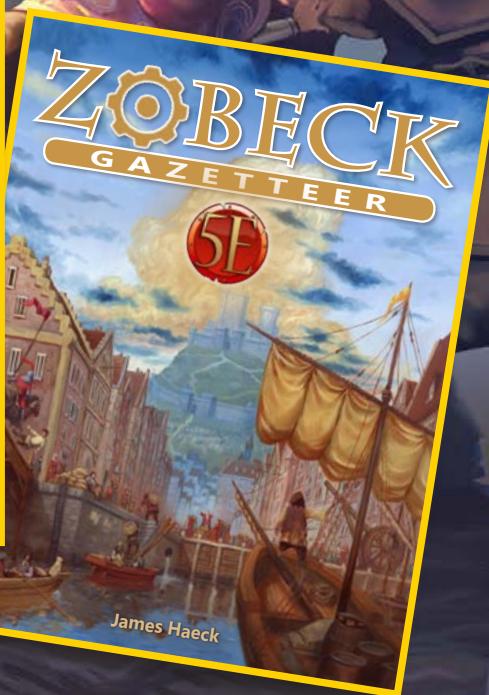
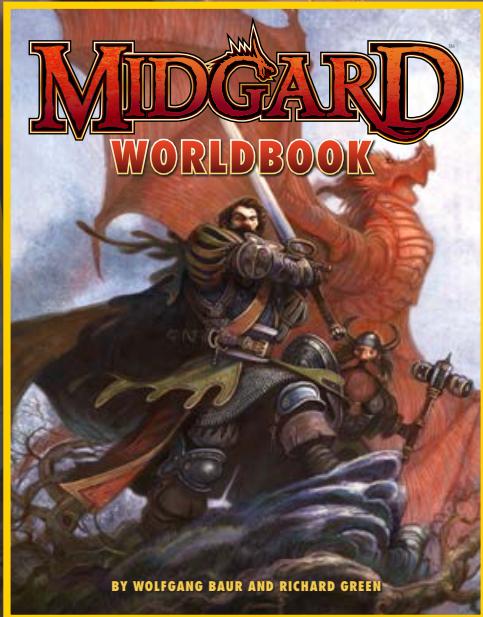
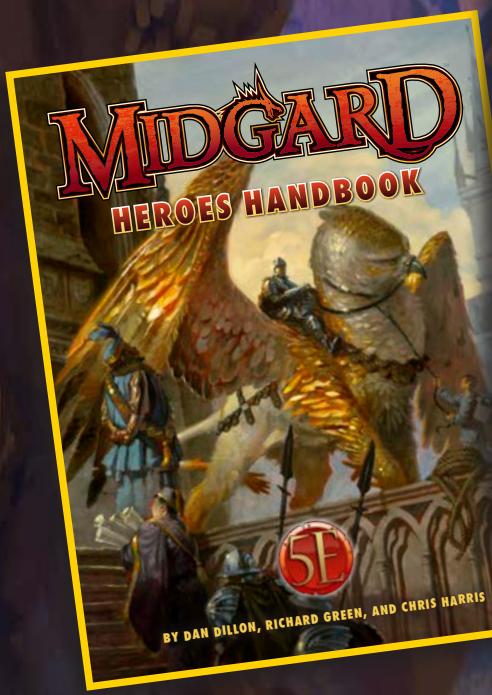
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