

SKILL CHALLENGES

4TH EDITION TECHNIQUES IN 5TH EDITION

BY R P DAVIS



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INTRODUCTION

This monograph came about when I sent one of my recent adventures to my editor (the inestimable Chris Walz). I began making use of skill challenges fairly recently in my adventure writing, as a way to structure non-combat encounters. He pointed out that players of the current iteration of Dungeons & Dragons might not be familiar with skill challenges, and DMs might find them, er, challenging to implement. Rather than explain them in depth in each adventure—and repeat that explanation in a bunch of different adventures—I decided to put them here and refer DMs to this handy deep dive.

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R P Davis
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SKILL CHALLENGES...

The 4th Edition of Dungeons & Dragons has its proponents and detractors, and I have no intention of rehashing edition wars here. Like most players and DMs who have played many (if not all) editions, 4e has its good points, however, and the skill challenge is arguably 4e's best kept secret. 5th Edition doesn't make use of them, and I cannot for the life of me understand why, except that 4e challenges don't directly port over to 5e without modification. There's math involved in 4e

challenges (shocker) that doesn't translate into 5e's bounded accuracy.

But that doesn't mean you can't use them in your 5e game. You don't need 4e's math to balance them, for reasons which will become apparent.

And they add a great deal of spice to your existing 5th Edition D&D game! So don't wait—give skill challenges a try at your table.



WHAT IS A SKILL CHALLENGE?

Simply, a skill challenge is a series of skill checks by multiple characters, where a certain amount of successes spread across multiple skills and characters must be achieved before three failures.

We all know when skill checks are required: When a character in the game encounters a situation which is directly opposed by another character, and/or when a character attempts an action alone and the outcome of that action is uncertain. That's a fundamental precept of D&D. Usually that action is simple. It's something like pick the lock, force open the door, climb the wall, disarm the trap, sneak past the guard.

But what about when the characters are attempting something complicated? An action that requires multiple steps and multiple contributors? Tasks like talking around a skeptical noble, shoring up the roof of a mine, sneaking across a city, winning a court case, searching the jungle thicket, tracking down a criminal, gathering information from multiple witnesses, escaping from prison, or figuring out a complicated magical (or mundane) machine? That's something individual skill checks, even with the Help action, can't reliably accomplish.

5e has group checks, but group checks often can't reasonably accommodate a complicated activity or reduce a situation to one or two rolls over which the players have little agency.

If you use XP for character advancement, you've probably discovered one of 5e's few flaws—you only get XP for killing stuff. You could just switch to story-award level advancement, but some tables prefer the satisfaction of totaling the number. That's great! Skill challenges address non-combat XP elegantly. If you assign a skill challenge the same XP value that you would a similar combat encounter, you go a long way to solving the problem of experience only mattering in combat.

RUNNING A SKILL CHALLENGE

The practice of running a skill challenge is simple. It's not all that different than the way you usually resolve skill checks. The only real difference is that you're letting multiple checks determine the outcome rather than one.

It allows you to run exploration or social scenes allowing the players to leverage their characters'

skills—sometimes skills which you'd otherwise think weren't applicable—rather than subjectively judging their success or failure. You secretly keep score, and when the characters achieve a number of successes before they achieve three failures, they succeed.

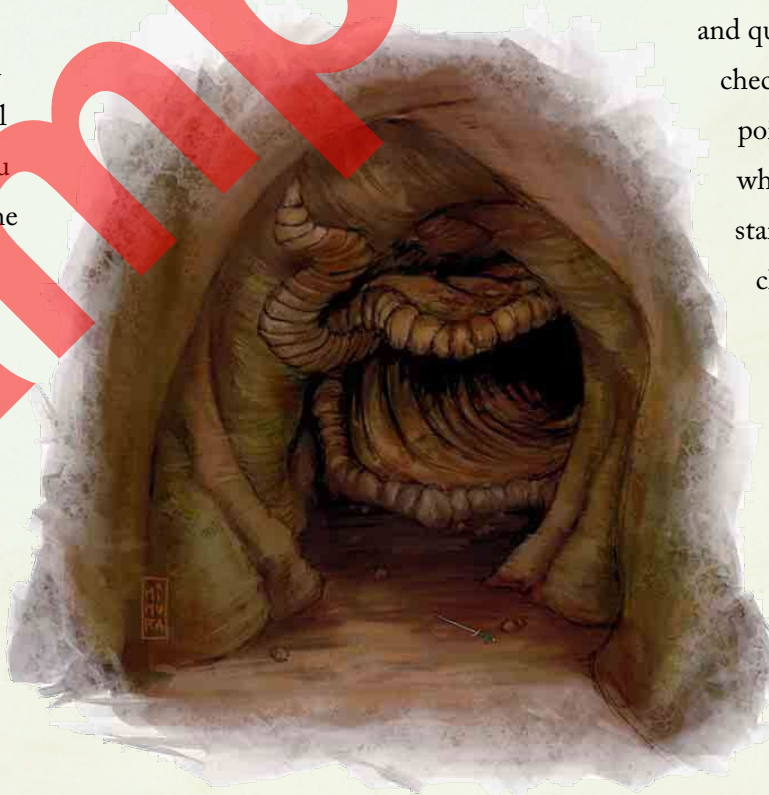
But there's a difference between a skill challenge and a string of skill checks. A skill challenge resolves scenes as they happen, and each resolution builds toward a larger goal.

The skill challenges in my DMs Guild adventures map it all out, recommending applicable skills and check DCs for particular interactions. But you can do it on the fly in your own adventures.

WARNING: DON'T ANNOUNCE IT!

Skill challenges work best in organic roleplay. Nothing breaks the narrative more easily and quickly than asking for check rolls. So make a point of *not* announcing when a skill challenge starts! Not announcing the challenge lets the narrative flow more naturally, and also increases the tension as it goes along.

Let's say the party needs to get through a city without being



found out by guards who are looking for them. You could say, “This is the start of a skill challenge. You need 5 successes before 3 failures to get across town without getting caught.” But that puts the focus on the metagame rather than the narrative; players track the successes and failures, and not the story. Instead, introduce the skill challenge by saying something like, “You need to get from your tavern to the East Gate. The Watch are on your trail; you can hear them shouting to each other. How do you proceed?”

Here are some possible answers, along with possible skills linked to those answers:

- I guide everyone past the guards using little-known routes along alleys and mews (Stealth)
- I take shortcuts through back yards and climb over walls, pulling the others up after me (Athletics)
- I recall what I know of the city's foundations to find a way through the sewers (History)
- I help the party blend in with the crowds on the street, concoct a cover story for us (Deception, Performance)

This helps ensure they stay focused on story-based solutions, describing actions, rather than focusing purely on mechanics. You're still resolving each of their actions with skill checks, because when actions lead to conflict or uncertainty a check is called for.

In each case, ask for the skill check and note the result. That's what makes a skill challenge

different: Behind the screen, you're recording the results of the checks and using them to build the drama in the scene.

NOT JUST SKILLS

4e didn't leverage magic items or spells into skill challenges, except insofar as magic gave characters bonuses to checks, but you definitely should in 5e challenges. Spells and other daily magic abilities are a precious resource in 5e, requiring careful management. They're designed to give their owners a profound benefit.

So let them do what they do.

If a spellcaster has an idea for using an appropriate spell in the challenge, you might give the spellcaster (or the target of her spell) Advantage on their next check roll. A powerful spell might provide a free success. If the





characters can regain spell slots during the challenge (such as a long voyage like crossing a jungle or a long-term project like building an ice castle), a spell should only grant another character Advantage on a particular check, never a full success.

You still have to use your judgment. You are the arbiter of whether or not a spell is appropriate. You need to decide if a spell is any actual help. Merely casting a high-level spell isn't a guarantee of success, and sometimes a cantrip is so appropriate that it should provide a free success.

Count magic items with a limited daily use, such as wands, like spells. Magic items with infinite use should, like spellcasting over the long term, provide at most one free success, or Advantage for one character for one check. Consumable magic items should usually earn a free success, provided their use is appropriate in the narrative.

KEEPING ORDER

You don't have to use initiative or any other kind of order when you run a skill challenge, but I do, because I think it helps me to keep activities organized. You can simply go around the table if you like. Going in some sort of order also ensures that everyone at the table gets the chance to participate and help the group achieve their goal.

As the scene goes on, you change the narrative based on the check results. If they're one success from victory, ramp the narrative to emphasize how victory is within their grasp. If they're one unsuccessful roll from failure, ramp up the narrative to highlight the characters' desperation.

At the same time, like any rule in 5e, self-imposed or otherwise, **don't be a slave to it**. If a player creates an innovative solution, or describes a clever usage of a character ability, that greatly advances the party's success *or just plain solves the situation the skill challenge was meant to govern*, for heaven's sake don't consign that awesome moment to merely another tick in the success column. Make it the solution to the whole challenge and move on.