Stalker0's Skill Challenge System

http://www.enworld.org/showthread.php?t=230567

VERSION 1.8 – "It's Time to be Bold!"

The skill DC and Complexity tables are the heart of the new system, carefully crafted to provide balanced skill challenges for a party. Complexity 4 and 5 challenges are especially difficult, generally for parties with stronger than average skills.

Table 1. Skill DC Table

Level	Easy	Med	High
1	14	18	23
2	**15**	**19**	**24**
3	15	19	24
4	**16**	**20**	**25**
5	16	20	25
6	**17**	**21**	**26**
7	17	21	26
8	**19**	**23**	**28**
9	19	23	28
10	**20**	**24**	**29**
11	20	24	30
12	**20**	**25**	**31**
13	20	25	31
14	**22**	**27**	**33**
15	22	27	33
16	**23**	**28**	**34**
17	23	28	34
18	**24**	**29**	**35**
19	24	29	35
20	**25**	**30**	**36**
21	25	31	38
22	**26**	**32**	**39**
23	26	32	39
24	**27**	**33**	**40**
25	27	33	40
26	**28**	**34**	**41**
27	28	34	41
28	**30**	**36**	**43**
29	30	36	43
30	**31**	**37**	**44**

Table 2: Complexity Table

Complexity Table		
Comp.	Success	Failure
1	3	3
2	5	4
3	7	5
4*	9	6
5*	11	7

*These complexities tend to be very challenging to normal parties (only 51-56% win rate). A DM may consider subtracting 1 from the DC when using these challenges.

Changes from 1.7
1) The easy DC at 11th level has been changed from 19 to 20 to prevent possible confusion.
2) Complexities 4 and 5 have opened up to normal parties. They will provide a near 50/50 win rate for normal parties.

Setting up a Skill Challenge:

Allowed Skills: When creating a skill challenge, the DM selects 3-4 skills as the standard skills for the encounter. In some cases, the Dm will leave allowed skills open-ended, allowing the player to describe why certain skills should be allowed skills.

Non-allowed skills: In some cases, a player will want to use a skill that is not allowed for the skill challenge. If the player's argument is convincing enough, the DM may place the skill on the allowed list. However, if the DM wishes to allow the skill in a limited fashion, he can allow it with Guiding Light only. Never penalize a player by allowing it with a hard DC, as this not only penalizes the player, but every player in the challenge!

Setting up Skills: All allowed skills are given a medium difficult. Easy and Hard difficulties are only designed for special rolls during the challenge.

Playing in a Skill Challenge:

Guiding Light (Easy): Each round the party can choose one character to be a Guiding Light, which is generally the character with the lowest skill bonus for the challenge. Instead of the character's normal turn, he rolls an allowed skill check that does not count as a success or failure. If he beats an easy DC, he can do the following:
1) Provide another character a +2 power bonus to his next skill check.
2) Reroll one of his own skill checks later in the challenge, though he must take the new result. He can accumulate multiple rerolls should he be a Guiding Light multiple times.

Heroic Surge: Before making a skill check, you may spend a healing surge to get a +2 to your skill check. If the skill challenge has entered the Time of Trials (see below), heroic surge provides a +3. Each character can use heroic surge once per skill challenge.

The Time of Trials: A skill challenge enters the time of trials when the party accumulates their second to last failure. In other words, one more failure will end the skill challenge for the party. During the time of trials, the party receives the following benefits:

1) When using *heroic surge*, the character receives a +3 to skill checks (instead of the normal +2)
2) All characters can now use the *Bold Recovery* skill check (see below).

Bold Recovery (Hard): During the time of trials, a player can use a bold recovery as an immediate reaction whenever another player rolls a failure. The player rolls an allowed skill at a hard DC. If he fails, the skill challenge ends in a failure.

On a success, he adds +4 to the failed players roll, or a +6 if he takes a -5 to his skill check. If the +4 (+6) turns the failed roll into a success, the failure is negated and the skill challenge continues to the next player. Each player can use Bold Recovery once per skill challenge, but never on their own rolls.

Example Skill Challenge: The Negotiation.

Complexity: 2 (5 successes before 4 failures)
Allowed Skills: Bluff, Diplomacy, Insight

Diplomacy: You use persuasion to win aid to your cause. If you get a success and also would have beaten a hard DC, you unlock the History Skill.
History (Helpful): History is unlocked through the diplomacy skill. It is especially useful when other party members, if you use the skill while you are a Guiding Light, you provide a +3 to a skill (instead of +2).

Bluff (Daring): You try to convince the other party using false pretenses. If you use a heroic surge with bluff, you gain an additional +1. You also gain a +2 to your roll if you use it with a Bold Recovery.

Insight: You empathize with the NPC and use that to encourage assistance.

Change log from Version 1.7
1) Aid Another is now called Guiding Light.
2) Guiding Light now gives the character a skill reroll on a success, in addition to the normal +2 he provides.
3) Guiding Light now provides a power bonus to skill rolls.
4) Heroic Surge now provides a +2 bonus to skill rolls normally, and a +3 while in the Time of Trials (changed from +1/+2)

DM's Corner, adjusting the system to your party

This system assumes (at 1st level) the following average party.

Two players at +9 (+5 training, +4 ability).
One player at +7 (+5 training +2 ability, or +9 -2 for armor check penalties)
One player at +2 (+2 stat only)
One player +11 (+5 training, +4 stat, +2 racial)

Your party is likely different from this one, but as long as the differences aren't that great, you won't have to change a thing. the following are some guidelines for DMs who want to tweak the system to fit their party a bit better. These are just guidelines and most parties should function fine without any changes.

When to consider *adding 1* to the DC of the Challenge:
You are running a complexity 1 challenge
AND
Your best skill user has a +13 or higher to his skill (generally more than +3 the next best skill users)
OR
Your party (not including your lowest skill user) has +4 more in bonuses than this one.

When to consider *subtracting 1* from the DC of the Challenge:
You are running a complexity 4 or 5 challenge with a normal party.
OR
You are running a complexity 3 challenge AND you have no good skill user in the group (no one above +9).
OR
You party has a low skill user who does not use Guiding Light.

The rest are design notes and technical information, feel free to skip it if you have no interest in the under workings of the system.

The Nuts and Bolts of Version 1.8

Let's Begin: The Problems with the Standard Skill Challenge system.
1) A party handling a skill challenge of their level has a very low chance of succeeding. This is of course the heart of the issue. If a party is handling a skill challenge of their level they should at the bare minimum a 50/50 chance of winning. But in general, players are supposed to win, so even 50/50 would be regarded by many as too low. As currently stands, those numbers stand at around a 10% win rate or lower, which is completely unacceptable.

2) Skill Challenges have a huge variation in win rate based on DC and complexity. This is a problem hidden in the math of the skill challenge system. For example, let's say the skill challenge is perfectly balanced at complexity 3 at a set DC. The win rate is exactly where

you like it, and everyone is happy. If you add even +1 to the DC you can throw off the win rate by 15-20%. Change the complexity and you can change that number even more. If a party is just slightly weaker in skills than another party, they can literally go from a decent chance of beating the challenge to a very poor chance with the most minor changes in skills.

3) Increasing complexity can actually make a challenge easier depending on the skills of your party. This one isn't necessarily a "problem" as much as it is unintuitive. For example, if your party on average will succeed on each individual skill check of a challenge 70% or more of time, you will actually increase the party's win rate by increasing the complexity. However, if the party has only a 65% chance, then their win rate will drop by increasingly complexity.

Tackling the Problem: Our basic assumptions

Before we can do any math to fix these problems, we need to know what the solution is. In other words, how often should a party beat a skill challenge? I took my own personal intuition, and asked many other people I game with. We each came to around the same conclusion:

We will assume that a party of 5 is facing a skill challenge of their level with complexity 5. All checks for the skill challenge will be medium difficulty (the standard skill challenge). Each player will have the ability to use their best or close to their best skills for this challenge. In other words, we are assuming skill training and a high ability score (probably +4 or more). So at 1st level, each player will roll at a +9 in general.

With this assumption, we felt that a party should succeed at that challenge 80% of the time. However, at the same time, we thought that each individual check should succeed around 70% of the time. We all know how it feels when your DM gives you a skill DC, and everyone looks at each other across the table thinking that DC is absolutely crazy. With a standard skill challenge, every check should have a reasonable chance of succeeding, so that players don't get frustrated.

Pen and Paper: Our major limitation.

An important part of this process is to remember that we are playing a pen and paper game. Players are doing math in their heads and looking up charts in books. I could create an absolutely beautiful mathematical model that would run skill challenges perfectly across multiple skill levels, and you would never want to play it because it would simply be too darn complex! So while we are fixing the system, it is important to remember that the end product must be as easy to use as it is clean in its final results.

The Motto: It's Time to Be Bold!

From the start, I wanted to do more than just "fix" the math of the system, I wanted to make the system more exciting. After all, a high complexity challenge is supposed to be as entertaining as a combat, and I wanted to add exciting elements that also helped fix the math. You'll notice a lot of "Bold" mechanics in these rules. My goal is for players to feel empowered in using the system, while DMs can be comfortable knowing the system will support their party without breaking.

Heroic Surge: The more I cracked open the numbers, the more I realized that no system made with the pen and paper limitations could ever truly account for the variation in a

party. Now, because my system has less variance in it than the core system, it can handle a lot more "punishment" but it still can't work miracles. I decided the only way to ensure a solid system was to the give the players the ability to save their own skin. The first of these "bailout" mechanics is heroic surge. The idea is that players can consume resources (healing surges) to give themselves an edge. It's also a tactical choice, do they use their surges early to get an early advantage (and possible get to use more do to critical success) or save them and get a bigger bonus if the time of trials started.

Overall, if players are using a lot of surges, they get a very large bump in win rate. Generally I think most DMs are fine with this, if a party is using a lot of resources they get an edge, just as if they were expending a lot of potions. And it curbs the failure rate up. Generally a party that is failing will want to use surges more than a party is doing well. This was a way to help "losing" parties get back into the winners circle without a lot of complicated math.

Originally I had Heroic Surge at +1, and then +2 during the time of trials. I changed this because I realized I could give a higher bonus without hurting the math too much, and it gives more incentive to use heroic surge before the time of trials. Previously, the bonus was so much more useful during TOT that mathematically it was stupid to use it earlier.

Secondary Skills and New Skill Tags One of the unfortunate things I had to do in the system was erase the hard and easy skills from the core mechanic. It wasn't something I wanted to do, and believe me I worked endlessly to fix it. I begged and pleaded with the numbers, I yelled out the numbers, I even threw my keyboard at the monitor (okay not the last thing, but I thought about it!!). In the end though, the variation it caused was just too much. So I worked on ways to spice up the medium skills. I definitely wanted to include secondary skills, but I wanted something to be special about them.

So I included a mechanic so that secondary skills are unlocked by a particularly amazing skill roll. Unlike the original system, secondary skills are permanently in the challenge, so players can keep getting benefits from them.

In order to spice up the skills a bit more, I added the Daring and Helpful Tags.

Critical Success: Just like a natural 20 is a fun event in a combat, I wanted skill challenges to have a similar effect. The critical success provides both a fun moment for the player, as well as encouraging team work.

So...where are they? In the end I dropped the concept because people's greatest complaint was there were too many little things to keep track of in the system. I realized that CS didn't play a strong role in the system, so it got hit with the hammer and taken out.

Time of Trials and Bold Recovery: Oh how I love this mechanic! This is my brainchild, my solution to a host of problems. (and if you don't like it, Skilly McAwesome will come a knocking!!)
My problem was this, any time you changed the basic probability of a party, the numbers would fly off the hook. The problem is laid within the complexity numbers. Any system where you have X success before Y failures has a lot of variance in it innately. And the more

total rolls you have, the higher that variance gets.

I realized I need a bounceback mechanic. Basically I needed a way to say "Hey this party is losing!! Let's give them a hand!" Or in other words, the more the party lost, the more it won. I tried numerous mechanics. I tried making DC adjustment specific to complexity. I tried giving parties a +1 to rolls after each failure. I spent 6 hours on one mechanic I thought would be perfect, and then wound up dropping it because I realized it had secondary effects that were outright bad for the system. Most ideas were either such a small difference it was a waste of time, or had such a huge impact I couldn't rely on it. And then I hit upon the Bold Recovery idea. This mechanic provides a very significant benefit, but only when a party really needs it. It also allows Skilly McAwesomes to shine, as they are normally going to be the first to use a Bold Recovery. Further, it increases the drama of the challenge. It bails the party out of a failure, but then they have to make that next roll and it could always end in a failure again.
The mechanic went through 3 distinct versions, and the first two just didn't fit the math. But the third worked like a charm. The mechanic was fun, it greatly reduced the variance between complexities, and it reduced the variance when I changed the party's probability. A 3 in one shot!

Guiding Light One distinct problem with the core system is its very casual about aid another, and mathematically it CANNOT be. Aid Another is the single most powerful mechanic in the entire system, and by the rules there's very little restriction on it. Mathematically that's suicide, parties can go from 7% to 90% win rates in the core system depending on how the DM utilizes aid another.

However, I had to keep the aid another idea in the system in some form. The reason there has to be something for a low skill player to do other than roll a success or failure, because low skill guys screw up the system! But we can't just stop them from rolling, where's the fun in that?

First thing I did was heavily regulate it, and made sure only 1 player could use it per round. Its just too powerful otherwise. Then I made sure to use easy checks instead of DC 10, so that it would scale with level.

Unfortunately, aid another was still the weakest part of the system. Parties get a much lower win rate if their weakest skill guy decides not to be a sport and aid. I didn't want to force anyone to aid, but at the same time, the system works so much better if they do.

So I created a compromise. I tried to create a new incentive for people to use the aid another action. First I changed the name to Guiding Light. I think the name is much cooler and evocative. Further, it differentiates the mechanic from traditional aid another, which avoids confusion.

Then I made sure that the Guiding Light got a little something for his selfless ways, in the form of a reroll on his own skills. That way if the GL decided next round to take his crappy +2 to a check and have a go, he would a least have a reroll backing him up.

While not a perfect solution, GL provided a nice bridge between someone forced to aid all

the time, and no one aiding ever.

So after all of this work,

The Final Result:

A system,

1) That can tolerate variations in party's skill use, including parties with high and low skill users.
2) That is resilient to odd ball party members.
3) Where the players can take active rolls in determine the fate of the challenge.
4) Where increasing skill complexity equals a more difficult challenge.
5) That allows for high drama and excitement when the chips are down.
6) That gets a Win rate of about 72-84%, with an individual rate of around 60-65%, very close to my original goal.

I am very proud to present this system to you all, and I hope that it will see use in many games, that it will provide an excellent source of enjoyment for people's 4e system, which other than problems like these I have found an excellent system so far, one I hope to play in for many years into the future.