

New Mechanic Options

In roleplaying games, rules for combat are highly structured, and the loss of hit points and the visceral consequences of failing a saving throw make for clear drama. But it can be harder to properly use game mechanics to maintain tension in non-combat conflicts. While players and their game master can always handle these situations narratively or with *ad hoc* dice rolls, those who want more structure can use these new mechanics as a baseline.

These rules cover three types of scenes common in ZEITGEIST adventures.

Inquiries. Whether a delicate manipulation or an aggressive interrogation, when characters need to learn someone's secrets, they need to establish rapport before they can extract the information.

Pursuits. When a criminal runs, or a suspect tries to reach a secret rendezvous, characters need to balance keeping up with their quarry with avoiding obstacles or staying out of sight.

Secret Missions. Suitable for heists, abductions, and infiltrations, these complex challenges require the party to work together while avoiding discovery.

Group Effort

These systems don't use normal initiative or rounds. Instead, time is a bit more like a montage, and each character who is participating usually gets to perform one **effort**, wherein they describe how they're contributing to the scene, and then make an ability check.

Don't worry too much about total time spent, as long as each character gets a moment in the spotlight. One character's effort might be a five-minute conversation, while another's undertakes a ten-hour stakeout, but each just makes one ability check. If a character wants to provide



some special assistance – for example, using a spell – that might provide advantage, or sometimes even get an automatic success.

When to Use These Rules

Every genre of campaign can make use of each encounter type, but constables are likely to be doing a lot of pursuits and inquiries, while conspirators and revolutionaries a lot of secret missions.

But when should you use these rules, and when should the game master simply narrate, or call for a single die roll to speed things along? Ultimately it's a bit of a stylistic choice, and requires a consideration of what the group wants to spend its game time on.

If the game master has a cool action scene that might take the whole session, quickly advancing the plot through narration is fine. A single skill check could slightly tweak the scenario. Like if there's going to be a fight and possible chase at a smugglers' meet-up, maybe the party easily gets the rendezvous spot from a contact. Maybe someone in the group needs to make an Intelligence (Stealth) check to figure out the best way for the group to approach; a success lets them overhear clues to the wider operation, whereas failure spooks the smugglers and provokes a fight sooner.

But if the game master wants to give the players a chance to show off how they solve problems, or if they want to drive home how tough a task is, they can use some of the mechanics below. Maybe the game master wants the party's contact to be a recurring character whose loyalties are unclear, and so uses the Questioning rules. If the PCs succeed, the adventure progresses but the NPC looks unreliable. If the PCs fail, maybe the NPC gives them the location, but it becomes an ambush, or maybe he mentions there's a smuggling operation, but won't say any more. Then the ball is back in the players' court.

As always, no dice rolling is really necessary for any of this if your group has eager role-players, but calling for them can help make the game feel like the players are steering the narrative, instead of simply riding a rail from combat to combat.

Player Decisions and Flexibility

These rules are flexible regarding the specific ability checks and skills that should be used. Whether they want to interrogate a suspect by partying with him and earning his trust, or by dangling him off the side of a building, your players' choice gives your game a distinct personality. Certainly the game master can decide that, based on a given character's predilections, one tactic or the other might be easier, but generally we want the party to succeed and to continue the adventure's story. Failure in these sorts of encounters won't get the party killed, but might get them in a tricky situation.

It's important, though, that the game master maintains enough verisimilitude in the game that the players feel like their choices matter. In most situations, saying that carousing and threats on someone's life both require a DC 10 Charisma (Deception) check to get someone to open up is probably fine, but if the target is member of a temperance movement, carousing should be harder, maybe DC 12. For an ascetic who has forsaken worldly pleasures, trying to carouse might require a DC 15 check, which represents the PC figuring out they need to try a different approach and recover from their initial stumble.

And if a player suggests that they're going to make a Dexterity (Acrobatics) check and use cartwheeling to *confuse* the person into talking, that should never work, no matter how high they roll.

The rules should be flexible, but should still have some bearing on what is realistic within the context of the setting.

That said, the game master is encouraged to shake things up so the PCs don't always go to the same well. If a bard with expertise in Deception is always trying to use their +10 bonus to breeze through these challenges, make it clear that not every challenge can be solved with lies.

Statistics and Skill Challenges

Gamers have been rolling dice to kill monsters for over four decades, and game designers have gotten pretty savvy at tuning and balancing those encounters. With their precise mechanics and round-based action economies, any deft amateur mathematician can figure out the relative effectiveness of various character actions.

Non-combat encounters require more ad hoc game mastery, and sometimes human beings' intuitive numeracy isn't up to the challenge of designing 'fair' odds on the fly.

One of the most common scenarios where this happens is when the party needs to sneak past a guard. The game master decides the guard is only moderately attentive (DC 10), and calls for everyone to make a DC 10 Dexterity (Stealth) check – thinking of it more as a way to represent the flavor of sneaking, rather than a 'challenge.' But if the game master has a single failed check lead to the guard sounding the alarm, your average party has enough non-stealthy characters that they probably have only a one-in-three chance of getting past.

The more dice the PCs have to roll, the more likely they are to lose. And if a single failed roll results in a failed encounter, more PCs actually can be a liability, not an asset. This can discourage teamwork.

Various games have tried to avoid this with highly codified 'skill challenges,' but a common pitfall is when the statistics and mechanics are too prominent, causing non-combat scenes to feel like exercises in dice rolling, divorced from narrative or roleplaying. Our intent with the optional mechanics in this chapter is to keep the focus on story and character, and to keep the amount of dice rolling low.

Peril Before Failure

A common mechanic we use is that failing one check simply makes the situation perilous, but doesn't represent actual failure yet. A person



you're hiding from gets suspicious. A witness gets difficult and has to be coaxed to keep talking. Your ship gets caught on a sandbar so your pursuers get a chance to close the gap. It takes a *second* failed check to suffer a bad outcome. Often, the PC will need to decide between backing out or pressing on.

With this two-steps-to-failure conceit, players should seldom feel like they lost due to bad luck. The vibe should be more that they knew they were pressing their luck, so it's easier to own a failure.

[[Sidebar]]

Special Note – Bonuses and Advantage

Most of these new systems use ability checks to represent the results of a prolonged effort over minutes or hours. Usually characters cannot benefit from *guidance*, bardic inspiration, *enhance ability*, or similar short-duration effects that provide bonuses to or advantage on ability checks. Aid from allies also does not provide advantage for these checks.

Impossible Missions

The baseline checks for most of these new mechanics are DC 10, which is a reasonable challenge for low-level characters.

If the task is daunting, perhaps use DC 15. And if the party is being actively opposed by a specific foe, the DC might be 10 + that character's bonus with an appropriate skill.

For higher-level parties, the game master can increase the DC by 2 for every +1 increase of the party's proficiency bonus (e.g., DC 18 at 20th level).

Of course, the game master shouldn't *only* increase numbers, but also describe appropriately wild challenges. A stakeout isn't hard if you're just sitting on a roof and watching a dockside warehouse for hours. But if the local constables are looking for you, spotting the right info while laying low can be tough. Hobnobbing with nobles to get an invite to a party might not be a big challenge, unless you're meeting folks at a masquerade ball where you have to successfully pull off a half-dozen high society dances before anyone is willing to talk with you. And breaking into a museum vault might be a challenge, but doing so while dangling over a floor enchanted to sound an alarm if anyone steps on it is, well, not an *impossible* mission, but rather tough.

[[End Sidebar]]

Inquiries

Key Skills: Deception, Insight, Intimidation, Persuasion

An interrogation might involve subtly getting a suspect to talk about himself, verbally intimidating or manipulating a prisoner into confessing a secret, or physically punishing a target until he breaks. To get useful information, the PC must establish and maintain a rapport, and then extract information out of the target.



When running an interrogation as a skill challenge, the game master should first have the player explain or roleplay how they'll attempt to establish rapport, and then have them make a check. Then if they succeed they can explain what information they're trying to extract, and make a check for that.

Rapport

Rapport reflects the target's trust of the PC, or at least willingness to talk. In a casual conversation, a target might think the PC is just a normal person and have no reason to look for ulterior motives, and after establishing a rapport with the PC he might be willing to share things he wouldn't with a total stranger. During a harsher interrogation, the PC must make sure that the target's anger or loathing of his captor does not overwhelm whatever other emotion the interrogator is trying to evoke.

To establish rapport, the PC must make an ability check, typically against DC 10 + the target's Wisdom (Insight) bonus. If the PC has a genuine connection to the target, he might make a Charisma (Persuasion) check to keep the target happy. Intelligence (Deception) works if the target is faking a connection, or Charisma (Deception) can represent seduction. If the target is a mage or scholar, the PC might even use Charisma (Arcana, History, Nature, or Religion) to make the target think they have much in common. Charisma (Intimidation) also works if the target has reason to think the PC can back up a threat, but this will usually leave the target unfriendly or even openly hostile after the interrogation.

The game master should consider granting advantage or impose disadvantage depending on the circumstances of the interaction.

If the PC succeeds their check, they establish rapport and can move on to "extraction." If they fail the check, the target cannot be coaxed to open up. The PC can try again, but the DC increases by 5. If they fail a second time, the target won't respond to further attempts unless something changes in their relation to the PC (such as if the PC saves the target's life).

Extraction

Once the PC has established a rapport, they can make an ability check to extract information from the target. This is usually a Wisdom (Insight) check against DC 10 + the target's Charisma

(Deception) bonus. On a success, the PC coaxes the target to reveal something useful, or discerns a key clue from how the target phrases their statements. The target might even tell a total lie, but the PC is able to see through it and figure out what's really true.

If the PC fails their check, the target gives up nothing and becomes a little wary. If the PC fails a second time, they lose rapport with the target, which counts as one failure on a "rapport" check.

Variants: A PC might roll Wisdom (Deception) instead of Wisdom (Insight). A success here doesn't suss out the truth, but does at least figure out what the suspect is being deceptive about.

Good Cop Bad Cop

When two or more characters coordinate in an interrogation, each PC can make a check to establish rapport, but usually they have to attempt different skills. As long as at least one PC succeeds this check, the whole team establishes rapport. Only if everyone fails does the DC for further attempts increase.

Once the team has established rapport, anyone can actually ask the questions, but they just make one Insight check to extract information, using whosever skill modifier is highest.

In the classic "good cop, bad cop" situation, the pair coordinate to get the target to open up, and then the character with a stronger insight asks the questions. A variant is to have one person physically break a target, and then afterward a different interrogator asks the questions. Or the same mechanics could handle five PCs carousing at a bar, getting a suspect drunk and then encouraging him to brag about their secret mission.

[[Sidebar]]

Torture and the Rule of Law

This is a topic the group should probably discuss before starting a constabulary campaign. Maybe everyone is alright with violent interrogations, but not with outright sadism. Perhaps they'd prefer to have a more heroic tone, where all the 'good guys' have to do is feign that they'd hurt a prisoner to get him to open up. Or the group could desire a more grim take, recognizing the fact that throughout most of history and even today, many in law enforcement believe that hurting someone will get them to talk.

Just make sure to go no farther than any player is willing to deal with. It becomes everyone's responsibility to make sure a social and supposedly 'fun' game doesn't make cause friends to no longer be comfortable around each other. Certainly the queen of Risur won't allow her representatives in the RHC to commit such barbarous acts, and the modern scholars of investigation have discredited prolonged violence as an interrogation tactic. Many groups will torture anyway, though.

[[End Sidebar]]

Pursuits

Key Skills: Athletics, Deception, Perception, Stealth

Chases are a perennial challenge to plan for in RPGs, whether the scene is a prolonged tailing of a suspect, a brisk foot chase to escape the authorities, or a madcap carriage ride to rescue a hostage being spirited away to the docks.

There is no need to focus on the minutiae of distance, speed, and action economy. Instead, chases consist of three **stages**, with each stage being one narratively distinct location. During each stage, there are two rolls.

First, whoever is in the lead poses a **challenge** of some sort, which the pursuer must deal with (usually by making an ability check). If the pursuer fails, they can modify the DC of the second check, deal damage to the pursuer, or otherwise stymie them.

Second, whether they're pursuer or pursued, the PCs narrate an **effort**, which is how they navigate the area. Then one PC makes a check.

If the PCs succeed two efforts, they accomplish their goal in the pursuit. If they fail two efforts, they lose the pursuit.



Running a Pursuit

Pursuits work a little differently depending on whether the PCs are the pursuers or the pursued. The PCs always make a check for their effort to navigate a stage, but if they're being chased, they force the pursuers to make checks to deal with whatever challenge they pose. If the PCs are the ones chasing, they make both checks.

We'll provide some examples below, to help make it clearer.

Deciding Stages

Usually the game master will describe what new area the pursuit ends up during each stage, and might plan things in advance to have exciting environments and unique conundrums. But if the players are being chased, they'll have some leeway to decide where they're fleeing. The nature of the stage will determine what sort of effort can work to get through the area. Even if the PCs are in charge, though, the game master ought to exert some control and shake things up, so the same ability and skill won't be useful for every stage.

As an example, a criminal might steal a carriage and drive a merchant district (stage one), smash their way through the crowds of a riot (stage two), then slip into a shop that is run by the local syndicate (stage three).

Or if the party set off an alarm while undertaking a heist, they might first rush through the museum (stage one), dash down the rain-slick streets toward the nearest docks (stage two), and then try to reach a ferry they can escape on (stage three).

Posing Challenges

Each stage, whoever is being pursued can pose some challenge to their pursuer. Then the pursuer must make an ability check (usually DC 10) to avoid a setback. If there are multiple pursuers, they choose one person to make the check.

Here are some sample challenges and checks that could overcome them. Other checks might work, but could have slightly higher DCs.

Call for Help. The pursued entreats a crowd to block the pursuer. Pursuer makes a Charisma (Persuasion or Intimidation) check to get through the crowd.

Lay a Trap. The pursued sets up a snare or wounding trap. Pursuer makes a Wisdom (Perception) check to avoid or an Intelligence check with thieves' tools to disable.

Raw Athleticism. The pursued sprints at high speed or leaps a wide canal. Pursuer makes a Strength (Athletics) check to keep pace, or perhaps Wisdom (Vehicles or Animal Handling).

Shake a Tail. The pursued does something tricky to mislead the pursuer. Pursuer makes a Wisdom (Insight) to not be fooled.

Weave Through Danger. The pursued goes somewhere dangerous. Pursuer makes a Dexterity (Acrobatics) check if on foot to avoid, but perhaps Dexterity (Vehicle or Animal Handling).

If the pursued is unaware of the pursuer, use this challenge.

Looking for Pursuit. Pursuer makes a Dexterity (Stealth) check to avoid being spotted, or perhaps Charisma (Stealth) to blend into a crowd, or Charisma (Deception) if there's nowhere to hide.

Setbacks for Failed Challenges

The two most common setbacks are damage and distance.

Damage. The pursuer takes damage. This is usually 1d10 if the pursued is up to 4th level, 2d10 to 10th level, 4d10 to 16th, and 10d10 beyond that. If there are multiple pursuers, usually the damage is split among them.

Distance. If the PCs are being pursued, they get a +5 bonus to their check for this stage's effort. If they're pursuing, they take a -5 penalty.

Wariness. If the pursued isn't aware they're being followed, failing to remain hidden makes them suspicious. During the next stage, the pursuer must make another check to remain hidden, this time with a -5 penalty. If they fail the second check, the pursued realizes they're being followed and reacts accordingly. If you think you might fail, it could be smarter to give up and try another way to learn about the target, instead of tipping off a potential enemy.

Navigating Stages

Whether they're pursuer or pursued, the party chooses one member to describe how they're moving through the stage, then make an appropriate ability check.

In the first example above, a criminal took a carriage, moved through a shopping district, then went to ground in a shop. The PCs might tail the suspect by first using Dexterity (Vehicles (wheeled)) to weave through traffic, use Wisdom (Perception) to find the man in the crowd, and then locate the secret passage to his hideout with Intelligence (Investigation).

In the second example, the PCs flee through a museum, down city streets, and then to crowded docks. The PCs could panic the museum patrons with Charisma (Intimidation), run fast with Strength (Athletics), then dive into the water and stay under until the pursuers move on, using Constitution (Stealth).

Outcomes

If the pursued succeeds, they escape. If the pursuer catches their quarry, usually that leads to a combat, with the pursued party being in a position where they can't keep simply running. If the pursuer is just tailing someone though, and they succeed, they can get some information from surveillance.

Multiple PCs

Usually it's simple to just have the party act as one, with a different PC getting the limelight during each stage. But if you want, you can track each PC's progress separately.

During each stage, the pursued group creates one challenge, as normal. If the PCs are the ones being pursued, they still only get to create one challenge. If the PCs are the pursuers, each character makes their own check to see how well they overcome the challenge.

Then each PC makes a check to navigate the stage. Track their failures independently, and if they fail twice, they lose the pursuit. If the party's all running away, this might mean one PC gets caught. If the party's chasing someone, the PC who failed falls too far behind and loses the trail.

In some cases, a PC might voluntarily accept disadvantage on their check – either to overcome a challenge or navigate a stage – to grant advantage to an ally who can't afford to fail.

Secret Missions

Key Skills: Deception, Investigation, Perception, Stealth, plus various tool proficiencies

While freeform ingenuity is part of what makes a spy mission or heist so exciting, it can be useful for the game master and players to have a general structure for how to resolve these scenes.

First the game master designs the mission by determining a variety of obstacles. Then the player characters have a chance to assess the challenge and prepare for the mission. Finally, for each obstacle they must devise a way to overcome it and achieve their objective.



The skill challenge has one phase for the game master – **design the mission** – and two phases for the players – **before the mission** and **during the mission**.

[\[\[Sidebar\]\]](#)

When to Use Secret Missions

Conspirators make regular use of secret missions, though with a few tweaks this same system could represent a multi-part mission by revolutionaries to dismantle the power base of a lieutenant of the main villain, or an undercover operation of constables.

These secret mission rules work best when you want a bit of roleplaying of the consequential bits, but not to get bogged down with fine details. They are not meant to replace adventures, but rather provide a quick way to establish the party's competence and resolve a challenge that's better solved by cleverness than combat.

You might use them at the start of a session to quickly get the party to the action, such as by determining how they manage to sneak onto an Elfaivaran pirate's island lair, or how they got the schematics to the security system guarding the Ancient ziggurat of Urim. If they fail, the party might need to expend resources or owe someone a favor.

Or you could utilize a secret mission in the middle of a session when the party needs to accomplish a task that poses a bit more risk than a single skill check, but that isn't the main show. In this way, a secret mission can even fill in for spellcasters using magic to solve problems with a snap of their fingers.

Did the party locate a sunken treasure, but they can't cast water breathing magic and don't want to tip anyone off by buying potions? They might perform a quick heist to steal those items, or to commandeer a Danoran submersible. Do they want to ambush a Drakran crime boss, but don't

know where his heavily-guarded munitions factory lair is, and they can't scry and teleport? One secret mission later, and they can have gotten leverage over some of his bodyguards who'll grant access through the factory's hidden back entrance, sparing them the need to fight through layers of security forces.

[[End Sidebar]]

Design the Mission

To design a secret mission as a skill challenge, the game master should come up with a number of **obstacles** – usually at least two, but not more than the number of PCs. Additionally, players have the option to make things more complicated for themselves by adding obstacles, such as trying to frame someone else for whatever damage they cause. The more obstacles, of course, the more likely the party is to fail the mission.

The game master decides which obstacles will be apparent to the party, and which are hidden. For example, during a museum heist, it might not take the party any special effort to learn the layout of the museum, but the nature of any alarms would be hidden.

Similarly, while most obstacles must be overcome in the moment, some obstacles can be dealt with before the beginning the mission. For example, if the party's stealing a relic only on display during a museum gala, they might need an invitation to get in. A character could simply try to smooth-talk their way in, but forging or stealing an invitation in advance could be a safer option.

Coming up with good obstacles requires a bit of finesse. Sometimes the group will all cooperate to prepare for the mission, but only send one character in. Other times they'll be working in different places to bypass multiple challenges simultaneously. Either is fine.

Ability Check DCs. A typical obstacle requires a DC 10 check, but if a PC attempts something that's suboptimal, this might increase the DC by 2. For instance, it's easier to acquire an invitation to a gala in advance (DC 10) than to bluff your way in without one (DC 12). Likewise it's easier to bypass various security doors in a museum when you're there (DC 10) than to figure out what keys you need in advance (DC 12). But sometimes the party has no choice, like if the group's locksmith can't attend the gala.

Before the Mission

After the game master has designed the mission, they narrate what the player characters know about the mission and its non-hidden obstacles. Then each PC can undertake one **effort** before the mission starts. The player narrates what they're doing and makes an ability check.

The most common efforts before the mission are to surveil and to prepare. Surveilling gets more information, which can reveal hidden obstacles or provide advantage in dealing with one of the obstacles. Preparing attempts to overcome an obstacle in advance, usually by acquiring the right tools – costumes, keys, passports, vehicles – or setting up favorable conditions – scouting an escape route, sabotaging an alarm, or getting the guards on your side.

Surveillance. A character looks for more information about the mission site, or the people involved, and then makes a skill check, typically DC 10.

They might try to examine a secure facility's defenses up close while looking innocuous with Charisma (Stealth), or gather rumors about a gala by hobnobbing in high society with Charisma

(Investigation). A long stakeout to learn guard patterns could be a Constitution (Perception) check.

On a success, first, the game master should provide a clear hint about whether there are any hidden obstacles in the mission. Then the character chooses one of the known obstacles and grants advantage to any checks that are made to overcome that obstacle.

If a second character succeeds in surveilling, they learn thoroughly about any hidden obstacles, *and* they choose a known obstacle and grant advantage to checks to overcome it.

If a character fails, they can simply accept the failure, or they can try again, but this increases the DC by 5. For instance, they might try to gather rumors, but when no one talks they could try being more explicit, which puts people on guard. If they fail a second time, they suffer some a complication (see below).

Preparation. A character chooses a known obstacle and narrates how they intend to solve it in advance, then makes a skill check.

They might craft costumes with Intelligence check with weaver's tools, purchase fake passports with Charisma (Deception), steal keys with Dexterity (Sleight of Hand), or position a sailboat for a quick getaway with Wisdom check with water vehicles.

Usually the game master rolls in secret to determine how good the character's preparations are, and the character cannot try again. Sometimes the character will know if they fail (such as if they try to steal keys) and, just like with surveillance, they can try again, but the DC increases by 5, and if they fail a second time they suffer a complication.

If they succeed, the group will find out during the mission when someone tries to rely on the preparation to overcome an obstacle. If they fail, the character who's active in the mission probably gets caught with their pants down, but that doesn't mean they've failed. They can still try and improvise a solution, but this increases the DC by 5.

During the Mission

After each member of the party has taken an effort, the game master and players collaboratively narrate how they approach the obstacles of the mission. For each obstacle, one character takes the lead in overcoming it. They describe what they're doing, and if necessary they'll roll a check to determine whether they succeed.

If the character fails, they have the choice to either abandon the effort, which usually means the mission has failed, or to try again, which increases the DC by 5. If they fail on their second check against a given obstacle, they suffer a complication.

Some obstacles need to be dealt with sequentially, and so all PCs could be present, but still only one character is taking the lead. At the game master's discretion it might be reasonable for other characters to assist somehow and grant advantage, but that's not always viable. In other situations the party will need to handle multiple challenges at the same time, forcing them to split up.

Deflecting Blame. A common player-imposed obstacle will be deflecting the blame of your actions to frame someone else. A character who takes the lead in this task narrates their plan, and

then if necessary makes a check, usually against DC 10. Usually a character gets only one chance at this, and cannot try again if they fail.

Typically an effort to deflect blame must be done during the mission, but sometimes it can be done before the mission. If trying to frame a priest for defacing a rival god's temple, they might scrawl appropriate quotes from scripture with Intelligence (Religion). To make the public suspect the head of the constabulary committed a murder, before they undertake their assassination they might print false threats of his toward the victim using Intelligence (Deception), or even make those threats in person with Charisma (Disguise Kit).



Complications

Complications come if a character fails two attempts of the same action during a secret mission. The most common sort is that the character's efforts leave a clue that – usually after the mission is over – can direct investigators toward the party. Sometimes the clue can be rather blatant and can cause people to immediately view the character as a threat.

For example, if during a museum gala heist a character tries to cause a distraction so that the guests and guards aren't looking while another ally snatches the relic, two failures means at least some people in the crowd figure out what the character was up to. If, though,

the character trying to bypass the alarm on the case holding the relic fails twice, they might have to just smash it open, which immediately summons the guards.

The game master should try to make sure a complication isn't automatically a failure. The party might defeat a few guards in battle, which cows the rest for a moment, letting the characters flee. Or they might just need to overcome a new obstacle, and make an ability check (now with disadvantage) to outrun the guards and avoid a fight.

Another complication might be a loss of face, such as if a character is surveilling by hobnobbing at a fancy party and is seen as gauche for asking too-pointed questions. A complication could cause a character to suffer a level of exhaustion, or damage (something between 1d6 and 1d10 per level). As always make sure any mechanical penalty is justified by the narrative and story.

Nested Missions

It's possible to have a truly elaborate mission with a dozen obstacles, but in such cases it's usually better to break the endeavor into multiple nested mission. This might represent the group finding a way to overcome a seemingly impossible task by tackling it bit by bit through smaller missions.

For example, if the mission's goal is to recruit an enemy agent who knows the location of the main villain's secret base, the party might first need to draw him out, then force him into a

compromised situation so he's desperate for help, and then turn him. However, each of those three steps could themselves require its own secret mission. Draw him out by stealing something he wants so you can auction it. Make him desperate by framing him for betraying his own side. Then, when he enters a high-stakes card tournament to try to raise funds so he can go into hiding, enter one of your number to outplay him while simultaneously fending off the hostile agents trying to silence him.

It's not necessary to structure all of this as skill challenges, but having the structure available can help plan complex adventures. You might even utilize the other new mechanics – inquiries and pursuits – to structure how the party overcomes various obstacles.

[[Sidebar]]

Ten Steps Ahead

A delightful trope in heist stories like *Oceans 11* is when the situation looks grim, and the protagonists seem on the verge of failure, but then a flashback shows how some clever preparation means it's actually all going according to their plan.

If you want to embrace that trope, a simple way is to use a non-chronological narrative. You run the During the Mission phase, and flash back to the Before the Mission Phase. Whenever a character is confronted with an obstacle During the Mission, the group has several options.

1. **Flashback.** A character could use their Before-the-Mission effort to prepare something to bypass that obstacle.

For instance, when a character goes to enter a gala, the narrative could flash back to another PC trying to acquire forged invitations. That PC makes an appropriate check.

2. **Normal.** The PC can, During-the-Mission, make a check to try to overcome the obstacle.

For instance, when a character tries to distract the crowds so that it's possible to steal a relic from under their noses, that PC makes a check in the moment.

3. **Wait, That Didn't Happen.** The party might even do both: let a PC try something during the mission, and if they fail their check, another PC can use their Before-the-Mission check to surveil, granting advantage.

For instance, when a PC tries to bypass the security on the case holding the relic, if they fail the check, that could be presented as a 'worst case scenario.' Then another character uses their Before-the-Mission check to grant the first PC advantage, which they then use to roll a second die and hope this one succeeds.

This mix of in-the-moment, flashbacks, and framing narratives can make the party's efforts seem slick and cool. And if they try to solve a problem in a flashback and fail anyway, it can be played as an "ah fuck" moment as the character realizes that the 'clever plan' didn't actually work.

[[End Sidebar]]