

Task-Based Skill Challenges

This is a rough draft; preliminary thoughts only.

Skill challenges as written ask players to make a number of successful skill checks before they fail another number of skill checks. These skill checks can consist of any number of combinations – they only thing the challenge cares about is that you succeed at a certain number of them.

In addition, skill challenges are presented as a list of relevant skills and DC, with a note next to them indicating what a successful check with that skill represents. For example, it might say:

Diplomacy (DC 20): You flatter the duke's wife in a way that endears the duke to you.

That seems kind of backwards. Sure, a good DM can easily turn that around; he can wait for someone to say “I try to flatter the Duke's wife” and then ask them to make a Diplomacy check. He can, obviously, interpret that descriptive text as simply an example, and have the player make the check should he or she attempt any Diplomacy-related strategy. But how about turning the whole thing around, and making the skill challenge task-based rather than based on an arbitrary combination of 8 successful skill checks (or whatever the target number is)?

We could define the *tasks* required to complete the skill challenge, and assign example skills corresponding to each task. The PCs' goal is to complete these tasks. If the PCs complete the tasks, the skill challenge is successful; if they don't, it is a failure.

We can easily add in **time limits** (in numbers of rounds), **triggers**: events which take place after certain tasks are completed or after certain time periods, **side-tasks** which can assist with the primary tasks, specific **penalties** for failure at certain tasks, even dead-ends, and so on. For example, we might say that the PCs have 3 rounds to complete the skill challenge (with a party of five, that's 15 skill checks). If they don't complete all the tasks in those 3 rounds, they fail the skill challenge. We might also say that after 2 rounds, one of the tasks becomes more difficult due to changing circumstances, and that after Task #3 is completed, all other tasks become easier. We can allow the PCs to attempt the tasks in any order, or we can require some tasks be completed before others are started. Some tasks might require **multiple checks**, others might require just a single check. And so on.

Finally, we don't have to use skill checks all the time. A task might be completed by a clever idea or by use of a ritual or power.

Proposal: for simplicity's sake, make all the DCs the same. The DM is allowed to set different DCs, of course, but making all skill checks for a given challenge the same CD makes things very easy. Use level appropriate DCs for this (easy/moderate/hard).

For example, let's take a very simple mechanical skill challenge.

Breaking into the Vault – Level 10 (Moderate) – DC 18

The giants' vault is protected by a massive iron door. It's about 12 feet tall and 10 feet wide. Unfortunately, the ceiling above you seems to have been damaged in the battle and appears ready to fall.

Tasks (must be completed in order):

1. **Discover the Trap (Perception)** The trap consists of an intricate rune carved at the top of the door.
2. **Identify the Trap (Arcana or Thievery)** It's a fireball trap! It requires you to carve a specific counter-rune on the opposite side of the door. Requires #1 completed.
3. **Disable the Trap (Arcana or Thievery)** Carve the counter-rune to disable the trap. Requires #2 completed.
4. **Unlock the Vault Door (Thievery)** An ordinary lock. **Trigger #1:** If #3 is not completed, the trap goes off and an alarm sounds:
 - 4.1 *Trap Explosion Attack*; close blast 5; +20 vs. Ref; 8d6 fire damage
 - 4.2 *Alarm goes off*. 3 rounds until enemies arrive.
 - 4.3 *Secondary lock* activates (Hard DC 26)
5. **Open the Vault Door (Athletics)** It's a heavy door, seeing as it's a giant's vault! Requires two successful checks.

Side Tasks (can be completed at any time):

- **History** can be used to recall the giants' traditional vault-making methods. Successful check makes DCs easy (13); failed check gives wrong information, making DC hard (26)
- **Dungeoneering** can be used to examine the vault design and improve methods. Successful check makes DCs easy (13); failed check makes matters worse, making DC hard (26); alternatively, two dungeoneering checks can be used to shore up the ceiling, preventing Event #1.
- **Religion** can be used to recall the giants' superstition about broccoli. The trap will do half damage to anyone who has eaten broccoli during this encounter.

Events

1. After 2 rounds the ceiling collapses. Close burst 5, +20 vs. Ref, 5d8 damage; all skill checks at -2 penalty after this point due to rubble, masonry and dust.
2. After 6 rounds the enemies arrive.

Notes

- The door has 100 hit points and resist 10 all. Attacking it prior to completing Task #3 sets off the trap and alarm (Trigger #1).

This is obviously a very simple, linear skill challenge, with tasks being completed one at a time. We've included one *trigger* (if task #4 is attempted before task #3 is completed), and a *time limit* within that trigger (the giants arrive in 3 rounds if the alarm sounds), as well as a *penalty* (the unlock DC increases if the alarm has sounded). We can, of course, make skill challenges which are less linear, or which do not require all tasks completed in order.

Summary

- A skill challenge can contain:
 - Tasks (required)
 - Events
 - Triggers
 - Time Limits
 - Side Tasks
 - Penalties or Dead-Ends
- Failure is generally defined as not completing the tasks. In the absence of time limits, triggers, or events, a failed skill check is just a delay. However, failure of a check will frequently have defined consequences.
- The Skill DCs are generally moderate DCs based on level, and can be made easy or hard by events, triggers, or penalties.
- Allows for partial success where appropriate defined precisely as tasks completed.