

ALMOST HEROIC PRESENTS: SKILL CHALLENGES



A 5E ADAPTATION OF 4E MECHANICS

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SKILL CHALLENGES?

This is an adaptation of the 4e Skill Challenge system that can be used in 5e to show a passage of time, montage of events, or an action-packed sequence without the need for combat mechanics. It has been used for [our podcast](#) and at our home games since 5e came out, and we wanted to share the system with those who listen to the show or who were seeking to add a new element to their own games.

MECHANIC BREAKDOWN:

A skill challenge is an opportunity for players to use their skill set to attempt to succeed at a challenge set forth by the Dungeon Master. We will use the following formula assumed for the players average level of skill:

Player Skill = Their Primary Stat + Proficiency Level

For example, a level 1 Paladin using the standard array for stats can have a maximum of a 17 (+3) in Charisma. A Charisma based skill that they are proficient in should have a maximum increase of a +5 at this point of the game using the formula above. This will increase as their proficiency rises, or with class features/magic items being included.

These challenges can be used at 4 core levels: Easy, Average, Challenging, Very Difficult. Using the formula above, we want to set up the skill challenge to align with what an average roll would be. For simplicity, we will assume the following guide for this level 1 Paladin:

SKILL CHALLENGE CHART

Player Level	Easy (8+)	Average (10+)	Challenging (12+)	Very Difficult (14+)
1-4	13	15	17	19
5-8	14	16	18	20
9-12	15	17	19	21
13-17	16	18	20	22
18-20	17	19	21	23

FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN CREATING A DC

Some classes will earn a bonus to proficiency rolls via Expertise (i.e. Bards/Rogues). This is typically fine for one character to excel at skill challenges, as it will make them a valuable part of this stage in the game when they may lack some punch in others. Additionally, this scale may get skewed once players start to pick up magic items that increase their primary stats or if they decide to take Primary Attribute increases instead of feats.

If you find a majority of your players are doing this, you may have to increase the DC scale by 1 or 2 to compensate for them growing as players and characters. This will allow the Skill Challenge system to grow with them and still be an effective tool to set up narrative or have them be able to demonstrate skills they may not frequently use.

RUNNING THE SKILL CHALLENGE

Running the skill challenge should be done in 3 steps: set the objective, play the scene, and face the results.

SETTING UP THE CHALLENGE

As the DM, you will want to implement a Skill Challenge into an appropriate area to either speed up the passage of time, create a montage of action, or to solve a scene without the need for setting up the map for combat. To do this, players will need the following information from you: What they need to do and how many chances (Success vs Failure) they have.

WHAT DO THEY NEED TO DO

Set the objective to coincide with what is going on currently. If the party has just escaped from jail, the objective could be "Escape from the prison without getting caught". If they are travelling between two towns, the objective could be "Explain how the journey goes".

Setting a clear objective will help players describe what they want to do in the 2nd phase of running the Skill Challenge (play the scene). Make sure that the objective is something the party is naturally heading towards.

For example, if the party is storming the enemy's stronghold and are set on attacking the main antagonist at the center of it, a good skill challenge would be "Storm the Gates", letting them describe how they're breaking into this place. If the party was planning on doing this or dying in the process, then "Run Away from the Stronghold" would be a poor example of a Skill Challenge because it directly conflicts with their goals.

SUCCESS VS FAILURE

Skill Challenges use a Success vs Failure scale. Using the Skill Challenge Chart, if a player beats the set DC they will "Succeed" on that stage of the Skill Challenge. If they roll below the DC, they will earn a "Failure". The players should know this information and how many of each there are before the skill challenge starts.

The amount of successes and failures can also increase the difficulty of a skill challenge by making the players roll more often, increasing the odds of them rolling below the set DC.

Typically, you want there to be enough successes for each player to roll at least once during the challenge. When it comes to failures, you should have at least 3 chances to fail. If there are more than 4 players at the table, or if you wish to make the skill challenge more lenient on the players, then you may add more to the failure threshold. Try to limit this to 1 or 2 additional failures to avoid making the challenge too lengthy.

There should always be less chances for failures than there are successes to make the Skill Challenge carry weight and to help the players make an investment in the results.

PLAY THE SCENE

Playing the scene should be broken down into the 3 steps below:

PLAYER DESCRIBES SKILL AND ACTION THEY WANT TO TAKE

Let the play dictate how they want to use one of their skills to complete the Objective that was setup. It will be your job as the DM to help them determine how they can use their skills and to encourage them to create a part of this scene with their own flair.

ROLL THE DIE

Have the player roll their die and calculate if their roll has beaten the DC.

RESOLVE THE ACTION

After determining if this is a success or failure, the DM should finish the scene using the information that the player has setup to help illustrate the success or failure of this action.

After this, repeat these 3 steps until the Success/Failure threshold is met.

FACE THE RESULTS

After the Success/Failure threshold has been met, the DM will describe the resolution to the scene and results of the players' actions. It is recommended that Successes and Failures are handled in the following manner:

SUCCESS

The party gains an advantage in an upcoming situation or gains equal footing in a situation where they were supposed to be at a disadvantage. They can also gain knowledge of or access to something beneficial; such as useful information, a shortcut, or some type of wealth.

FAILURE

The party has a disadvantage on a situation or lose the potential to gain knowledge of or access to something beneficial; such as useful information, a shortcut, or some type of wealth. A failure can also result in a loss of something valuable to them: items, NPCs, or gold.

A failure should never result in the death of a player character.

ALTERING 5E MECHANICS TO ACCOMMODATE SKILL CHALLENGES

Players may want to use spells or class mechanics to aid them during these skill challenges. Here's how to resolve those instances.

Spells that are used thematically (Fireball, Hypnotic Pattern, etc) do not take a spell slot. They are used to flavor the scene. These spells during the challenge work in a way that help the scene progress, and should not be instant solutions if the Skill Challenge is in progress.

Example: Dominate Person allows you to control the actions of a person. If there's only one target in the skill challenge, such as a chase scene, then the effect should only last for the duration of their description in order to keep the Skill Challenge going. As a DM, if the players have something like this in their arsenal, consider making your skill challenges different in order to counter that a bit, such as by including multiple targets.

Spells or Class Features that are used to grant bonuses to rolls (Bless, Bardic Inspiration, etc) can be allowed if the DM chooses, but it is recommended that the player skips their turn in order to use these. These are helpful to the players, but can otherwise be abused during the challenge.

The Help Action is not allowed during the Skill Challenge, as it essentially allows a player to skip their turn at no cost. Players are encouraged to participate with their own character's actions.

VARIATIONS TO SKILL CHALLENGES

These are optional additional mechanics you can introduce to your game in order to better accommodate the Skill Challenge system.

INSTANT INSPIRATION

Because Skill Challenges may cause a game to have more rolls than normal, we award each player one inspiration token per long rest. A player may only possess one inspiration at a time, and they are not granted an additional inspiration if they have not used theirs before they take a long rest.

LORD KINSINGTON'S RULES OF SKILL CHALLENGES

The Lord Kensington method is adopted from the [Critical Hit](#) podcast. It uses the following rules for players during these events:

1) A player may not use the same skill back to back. For example: If they used Stealth for the first time, they have to choose another skill.

2) A player may not use the skill that the player just before them used. For example, if Player A uses Stealth, then player B must choose any skill besides Stealth.

By the second round of a skill challenge, this should limit the players options and encourage them to use another skill. This is done to add variety to the skill challenge and to help the scene be as entertaining as possible.

SITUATIONAL BOOSTS

The story so far might offer a player some advantages or disadvantages during this Skill Challenge. Maybe they have brought some trusted allies into the fray, or alternatively, maybe the campaign's main antagonist is present and could be making the challenge more difficult to succeed.

You can represent these as an extra d20 on the table that either a player can use to re-roll a failure or the DM can use to force them to re-roll a success. These should be limited to select situations to add a dramatic flair to what is occurring.

EXAMPLE SKILL CHALLENGE

In this example, we will use a sample Skill Challenge to show how these typically run during an Almost Heroic game. For this example, we will use the cast members of the show as the players as they try to navigate a series of traps in a corridor. The DC for this challenge is setup as DC15, but that information is hidden from the players.

PLAYER DETAILS

- **Murmur** – Bard (College of Whispers)
- **Sammael** – Warlock (Hexblade)
- **Ralf** – Cleric (Life)
- **Bashenga** – Ranger (Beast Master)
- **Vysarus** – Bashenga's Dumb Panther

We join the game at the beginning of the skill challenge

GDDM: As you walk down the hallway, you hear a small click underneath your feet. After that, you start to hear the noises of machinery turning and beginning to activate. And with that, we'll start a SKILL CHALLENGE!

(Table cheers because Skill Challenges are the best thing ever and I'm the one writing this!)

GDDM: Perfect. I know you're all excited. Lets set this thing up. So, we'll say the objective of this is to try to avoid a series of traps that are being triggered in this corridor.

Sammael: I thought this was a hallway.

GDDM: Same thing. Anyways you-

Ralf: What type of traps are these?

GDDM: You get to pick the traps. They can be anything you want. The objective is to get through the trapped corridor/hallway and to get to the other side. This will require 5 successes from the team to pass it, 3 failures and something bad happens. Go ahead and roll initiative.

(The table rolls initiative. Bashenga rolls the highest and goes first. Sammael gets 2nd and Ralf gets 3rd. Murmur rolls his die off the table, resulting in an automatic 1 and is harassed by the other players for not rolling in the dice tray)

GDDM: Alright, Bashenga. The traps start to trigger in this hallway, but you're up first. What happens?

Bashenga: I'd like to use my Animal Handling.

GDDM: Awesome! How are you looking to use that?

Bashenga: Let's say that... some saw blades start to come out of the floor and walls. So I want to use Animal Handling to help coordinate Vysarus on where to go and how to avoid them.

GDDM: Alright, roll it.

Bashenga: I got a 13.

GDDM: A 13? That's not going to make it. Do you still have your inspiration?

Bashenga: Nope. Used it in the last fight.

GDDM: Okay. So... you go to coordinate with Vysarus, and you make it through this first part just fine, but Vysarus seems to lag behind as he can't quite figure out how to move without getting hurt. That'll be our first failure. Up next is Sammael! Animal Handling is off the table.

Sammael: I want to use my Arcana to try to Eldritch Blast my way through some of these saw blades.

GDDM: Go for it!

Sammael: 18?

GDDM: 18 will do it! You see that Bashenga and Vysarus tried to make it through by dodging... but you decide to use brute force instead and start destroying these saw blades as you push forward. That'll be our first success out of 5. Up next is Ralf! What do you do?

Ralf: Is Animal Handling available?

GDDM: Yep. Arcana is off the table as Sammael just used it, but everything else is open game.

Ralf: Are there any animals around?

GDDM: There's Vysarus. He's an animal.

Ralf: Alright... I want to pick him up and be like, "Hey, it'll be okay Kitty!" as I run forward.

GDDM: Perfect! Go ahead and roll it.

Ralf: 15.

GDDM: A 15? That'll succeed.

Ralf: Oh boy!

GDDM: Oh boy indeed! You grab him and start to charge your way down the hall. 2 successes, 1 failure. Up next is Murmur! Try to roll in the tray.

Murmur: IT WAS ONE TIME!

GDDM: What do you do?

Murmur: Alright. So are the saw blades the only thing in this hall?

GDDM: You get to make up the traps. There can be anything you want.

Murmur: Can there be some darts or arrows flying around?

GDDM: Yep.

Murmur: Cool. I'm going to use my acrobatics then to try do flips and rolls and other things as I dodge all these arrows.

GDDM: Sounds good. Roll it.

Murmur: 16! That'll make it.

GDDM: It does!

(Murmur claps obnoxiously, causing me to edit it out in the podcast)

GDDM: You zip around the arrows with easy as you flip your way toward the rest of the pack. 2 successes and 2 failures to go. Top of the round! Bashenga, you can't use Animal Handling, because you used it last time, and you also cannot use Acrobatics because Murmur just used it before you.

Bashenga: Are you just saying that to provide some examples of the mechanics to people reading this, or did you think I forgot this?

GDDM: Both. What do you want to do?

Bashenga: Well... since Murmur took Acrobatics... I guess I'll use Athletics.

GDDM: Groovy. What are you going to use Athletics for?

Bashenga: I want to throw my chakram at one of the traps to disarm it... like one of those big log pendulum things.

GDDM: Sounds good. Roll it!

Bashenga: Nice. 22.

GDDM: You hurl one of your chakrams at the log trap, snapping one of the ropes and causing it fall and crush some other traps beneath it, clearing your path.

Murmur: We got this!

Bashenga: Don't jinx it.

GDDM: 1 success to go, 2 failures left. You guys are in a good spot. You're up Sammael. Arcana and Athletics are off the table.

Sammael: ...can I use Intimidation?

GDDM: On the traps? No. But you could use it to sort of “Drill Sargent” everyone else in your party to hurry up and get out of this hallway.

Sammael: I do that.

GDDM: Let's see how you roll first.

Sammael: I got a 2... son of a- OH WAIT! I'm going to use my inspiration to re-roll that!

GDDM: Good call.

Sammael: CRIT!

GDDM: Awesome! So, you start to bark orders at your team. At first, your voice kind of cracks, making you lack a bit of your normal authority, before you go full R. Lee ErmeY on them as you all manage to get out of that trapped hallway.

Sammael: I thought it was a corridor.

GDDM: Same thing. That'll end our skill challenge! You all find yourself in the center of this dungeons, unscathed by the traps...

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The images below are masterpieces done by the one and only TjuringaToons for the Almost Heroic podcast!

Left: Bashenga and Vysarus

Center Left: Murmur

Center Right: Ralf

Right: Sammael



EXAMPLE OF SKILL CHALLENGES

Here are some examples of Skill challenges you can use in different situations. Make sure to set a DC for each of these challenges to an appropriate rating using the table from the first page.

CITY:

- Someone has stolen something from a party member. They need to chase down the culprit. Have the players describe how they chase progresses and what obstacles are in their way.
- The party splits up during a festival and participate in different events. Have the players describe what events they're participating in.
- Our adventurers need to break into a place. Have the players describe what measures they're taking to prevent being caught.
- A prominent member of the city will only hire those who demonstrate mastery in their skills. Have the players describe how they show off to impress this person.

WILDERNESS:

- A stampede of some kind has caused the party to flee. Have the players describe how they try to avoid being trampled/eaten.
- The party must survive some type of natural disaster (earthquake, forest fire, avalanche, etc). Have the players describe what they do to survive.
- The players have wandered into a highly magical area (enchanted forest, Fey creature domain, etc). Have the players describe the magical effects/hallucinations they experience and how they deal with it.
- The party is being stalked by a hunter of some kind. Have the players describe what measures they take in order to avoid this person/thing.

DUNGEONS/TEMPLE/RUINS

- The party has triggered a series of traps. Have the players describe what trap they triggered and how they're getting out of this.
- This place is huge! Have the players describe what they're doing to traverse this odd place.
- Something lurks in the shadows. Correction, MANY things lurk in the shadows. Have the players describe how they dispatch these creepy things!
- The party finds a large hole. It seems like this is the only way down. Have the players describe their treacherous descent.

VEHICLES:

- The party's boat/airship is under attack by a large creature! Have the players describe how they try to thwart the beast and save the ship!
- Airship engine failure! Have the players describe how they try to save their ship from crashing.
- Looks like those adventurers are at it again! Have the players describe how a high speed wagon chase goes.
- The party must set sail across an ocean in order to reach the next town. Have the players describe how the trip goes in a time lapse!

COMBAT SCENES

- Goblins! Goblins everywhere! Have the players describe how they cut their way through this horde in order to escape the camp!
- The party has gathered allies and are preparing a siege on the enemy stronghold! Have the players describe the epic battle they're waging in order to break through the defenses!
- The party has been captured and are forced to be gladiators. Have the players describe the minor matches that have lead up to the main event.
- Bar room blitz! Have the players describe how they either provoke or try to stop a bar fight in this tavern.

WACKY

- Thanks to that bard, the party now has to perform in "The Battle of the Bands". Have the players describe how they put on the best show ever!
- Jail is not the only option for troublesome adventurers. Have the players describe what they had to do for the elderly during their community service hours.
- A Warforged Artificer has accidentally created a rampaging death machine that is wrecking the town! Have the players describe how they are attempting to minimize the damage caused by this chaotic contraption!
- A murder mystery party has resulted in an actual murder! Have the players put on their detective caps and describe how they try to find clues!
- Planes hopping can be quite a trip. Have the players describe the weird worlds they end up passing through and the actions they take to get to the next.
- Honey, I've Shrunk the Party! Have the players describe the challenges they overcome while being only an inch tall!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This is the boring part that you can choose to skip. You haven't? Well, that's a relief!

My name is Patrick Tracy (AKA, The Goddamn DM). I've been playing Dungeons and Dragons for last decade. I intend on releasing more material from my personal games for you wonderful people in the D&D community.

If you've read this far and want to help, you can leave a review or check out my other projects:

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/TheGodDamnDM>

The home of my daily tabletop gaming jokes.

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/TheGoddamnDM>

A YouTube channel for veteran and new D&D players. Full of quick, useful breakdowns of classes as well as tips for Dungeon Masters/Game Masters.



ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

The commissioned artwork for this was done by TjuringaToons. Make sure to check him out also. He has an amazing style and also publishes his own paper minis!

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ABOUT THE PODCAST

Almost Heroic is a 5e Dungeons and Dragons adventure brought to you by the guys at Bytes N Brews!

Join us every Sunday as we battle against the Cult of the Devourer, make pop culture references, and try not to die along the way!

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/almostheroicdnd>

Website: <https://bytesnbrews.podbean.com/>



ABOUT THE EDITOR

Nicholas Johnson (AKA, Draconick) is a tabletop blogger with intentions to publish gameplay material in the near future.

It is his hope to contribute to the roleplaying community by helping wonderful creators like Patrick Tracy, sharing ideas through his blog and interactions, and by producing his own content.

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If you have read this sentence, then you are granted Advantage on your next d20 roll. Show this to your DM/GM as proof.