

### more on mechanics

Picking up from where I was last time...

If your character has an 80% free throw skill (or rather your system says there is an 80% chance of success, whether using dice pools or other rolling method), you would expect to make 4 out of 5 shots. This is straightforward enough. But if your character has the same level in car repair, programming, or lock picking, what does that really mean?

Assuming it means you have an 80% chance to succeed at any task of the specified difficulty is not satisfying because it means that if you fix a car this morning, there is a 20% chance you cannot fix a car with the exact same problem in the afternoon. You did not suddenly forget how to do it and you are not going to screw up that badly that often. If you take 5 identical free throws, you would expect to miss 1 of them. If you fix 5 identical cars or pick 5 identical locks, you would not expect to fail even once.

Many game systems have a static value for strength and movement but not for other physical tasks. You never roll for your maximum lift or move per round but you do to throw a rock or jump a fence. We accept that there is less variability in feats of strength and speed than there is for feats of agility. Complex tasks that rely on knowledge and experience are more like strength than agility in this regard. This dichotomy between low- and high-variability skills is the root of the problem when a system fails to yield results that match the players' expectations.

One solution is to create two separate systems for simple and complex tasks. However aesthetically unappealing, it is an option. Another solution is to use a consistent system but to adjust our thinking about what the die roll, in particular a failed roll, means. Jonathan's "Kirkliness" is an example of this.

### if at first you don't succeed

With free throws, re-rolls are nothing more than getting another ball and shooting again. Complex tasks are a sequence of simple tasks. Therefore, the little missteps get washed over in the process, though they can lengthen the time required to finish the task. This helps to mitigate the inconsistency illustrated above.

If you have an 80% chance of success and you are allowed to try again if you fail, you will succeed, on average, every 1.25 attempts.<sup>1</sup> For complex, prolonged tasks, you can interpret this to mean it takes you 25% longer than ideal to finish. This effect can easily be chalked up to normal variance human performance and is much easier to swallow than outright failing 20% of the time.

In AD&D, if a thief failed a pick locks roll, no further attempts were allowed until the thief gained a level. While rather unrealistic and draconian, the idea has some merit. Sometimes you just get stuck and cannot make progress until you get more practice, get some advice, do some research, or maybe just walk away and do something else for a while.

With this in mind, there should be some limit on the number of re-rolls made for a complex task. I propose that on a major failure of a prolonged task, the character cannot attempt the task again until the GM determines circumstances have changed, such as doing research, getting help, acquiring new tools, improving skill level, or just taking a break for a few hours. For a simple task, a major failure would not necessarily preclude the character trying again, but could make the character look bad (like throwing up an air-ball) or have another detrimental side effect (like giving an opponent a bonus to hit next round).

How often major failures should occur is open for debate, but I will assume that it is one-tenth to one-fifth the chance of failure.<sup>2</sup> So, your 80% car mechanic has a 2.4-4.8% chance<sup>3</sup> of screwing up and failing to fix a car that should have been repairable. This is low enough so as

<sup>1</sup> Simply take the percentage as a fraction (4/5) and invert it (5/4) to find the average number of attempts. For example, 25% skill means it takes, on average, 4 attempts.

<sup>2</sup> Stolen directly from RuneQuest and its sister games.

<sup>3</sup> The chance of critical failures on re-rolls increases the chance of eventual failure from 2-4% to 2.4-4.8%.

not to contrast with player expectations and high enough to have meaning and add risk.

In a CoC game, my character searched a library for a book we were told was there. I must have failed a half-dozen Spot Hidden (or was it Library Use?) rolls until I found it. This was not good roleplaying on my part. At some point, my character should have simply said, "It's not here," and given up. Of course, someone else could have looked and found it and proven my character wrong.

Are these situations best left to roleplaying or should the rules provide results that can be roleplayed appropriately? The mechanism I proposed above does address the issue of not finding the book, even though it is there, and being convinced it is not. But I do not know if I ever rolled something that might have been called a major failure and so I think maybe the odds for a major failure are too low in this example—perhaps because searches are more like simple actions than complex ones.

Ultimately, I think there is a limit to what the rules can do to help in roleplaying. I think the condensed "game time" makes these situations more difficult to grasp. When re-rolls only take a few seconds compared to the minutes or hours for the character, players lose perspective. A 4-hour watch goes by in 4 seconds for the players who often have no clue how excruciatingly boring and uncomfortable it is or how difficult it is to stay awake in the middle of the night after a hard day of monster fighting.

### **on difficulty and possibility**

But what of tasks that are much more difficult? How do we distinguish between those tasks that are truly beyond the character's ability and those that are only a matter of time? If you back up far enough from the basket and a shot becomes impossible. Likewise, some tasks are simply out of range for a person of a given ability level. I find it very disconcerting when the game system allows someone of marginal ability to accomplish an Olympian feat. This is where the expectations of the genre come into play. Cinematic genres give characters a chance where more realistic ones do not, but there are always limits in any genre.

I am sick of hearing players ask, "Don't I even get a roll?" when they know they have zero chance to success. Not *very small*—zero. You cannot reduce a complex task (such as hacking

into a military computer system) to a single roll like you can a free throw (where you have a chance even if you have your eyes closed and your back to the basket). Complex tasks are not a matter of odds or luck—they are about knowledge and ability and a bit of luck. If you lack the first two, you do not get to roll. I see it as an issue of roleplaying: your character should probably say, "That's impossible!" and not even try.

I think we all agree that you should not have to roll for every action, but that some actions that would be gimmies under routine conditions have a non-trivial chance of failure when performed under stressful conditions. Unknown Armies, for example, formalizes this distinction. This has much the same effect as allowing unlimited re-rolls or "taking 20" in situations where time is not a factor.

How does this apply to simple actions like free throws? Is there such a thing as a non-stressed free throw? I think only when the outcome does not matter and if the outcome does not matter, you do not need to roll and actually determine if the shot missed. Once you want to find out if the shot made it, you have to roll—you cannot easily make an arbitrary claim of success or failure, as I discussed last month.

### **a different approach**

Suppose a character tries to fix a car and fails the roll. The GM could say something like, "The head is cracked—there is no way to fix it." In this case, the GM is retroactively changing the scene (what is wrong with the car) to reflect the failed roll. If the roll had succeeded, the head would not have been cracked. The in vogue way of doing this is allowing the player, rather than the GM, to determine the reason for failure, but the concept is the same. When using this method, you would probably not use the multiple-attempt, re-rolling rules discussed above.

As with failures, the GM or player can explain the reason for success. If someone with a low skill is successful, the task must have been fairly basic. If someone with a high skill barely made it, the task must have been very difficult, but if the roll was very good, the task was relatively simple.

This approach is very appealing, but it definitely falls on the narrative side of things and gets away from a more dogmatic approach to

roleplaying. In this type of system, the skill level is not so much a level of skill as a level of karma—those with higher scores face fewer impossible situations. Rather than saying, “I have an 80% of repairing this car,” the skill rank says, “There is an 80% chance the car is not so damaged that I cannot fix it.” This would work well for pulp or super hero campaigns, I think.

What I really like about this system is that it sidesteps the dichotomy between simple and complex tasks and saves the GM the trouble of determining the difficulty level. It works well with a straight percentile system like BRP or UA, for example. It also dovetails with the concepts of Kirkliness and the two approaches could be used side-by-side.

This system leaves questions such as what happens when another character, perhaps of lower skill value, tries and succeeds? Is there a way to sidestep this issue or some way to rationalize it? I worry that lower-skilled characters will be completely overshadowed and ignored or that players will begin to manipulate the system and have characters perform tasks in order from the least-skilled to the most-skilled in order to get the best overall chance of success. If someone with an 80% skill fails, there is no way someone with a 30% skill can make it. But if you roll for the lower skill first, it can fail and still be within the range of the 80% skill.

### **gns<sup>4</sup> tangent**

The above is an example of how a narrative approach runs into problems when you think of it from a gamist or simulationist point of view, or visa-versa. I do not think that the gamists care if someone with an 80% skill may be inconsistent—at least the risks and odds are clear. My dissatisfaction with both concepts I have presented comes from being a roleplayer and wanting the rules to simulate those things I cannot do myself, such as fixing cars. I think good GMs have been dealing with the dichotomies of simple vs. complex actions or narrative vs. simulative approaches for decades, but codifying these differences into consistent game rules is beyond my ability. I failed my game design roll—but what does that mean? : )

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<sup>4</sup> I apologize up-front for bringing the GNS model into A&E. I just think this is one of those times where it really matters if you think of rpgs as a game, a story, a simulation, or something else.

### **steve gilham**

Most gamers do not seem to want historical, “human-only” settings that lack special powers (magic, gunpowder, etc.). Unfortunately, this leaves out many interesting periods in human history, including Imperial Rome.

### **joshua kronengold**

The gypsy wagon did appear and the write-up is on my web site, but D&B never engaged the people to find out they were gypsies.

You saw me briefly at GenCon? Sorry for not seeing you, but I was at home. : )

Thank you for mentioning the Mayor from Buffy—a deliciously vile and yet kindly character.

### **richard iorio ii**

Ignoring over the icky facts of life is a historical setting is not a cop-out if the campaign is not about them. If you focus too much on the background, then the characters are out-of-focus. The facts of life should not be ignored when they are important or add to the roleplaying experience. But if they are a distraction and detract from the game, then they should be swept under the rug, in my opinion.

### **lisa padol**

My understanding is that Angel was to die after 3 or 4 episodes, probably while saving Buffy in some heroic manner. I have not been able to find anything to substantiate this claim by a fannish coworker.

### **eugene reynolds**

Any time that you do something that is not motivated by the character’s own beliefs and desires, you are not being “in character.” This includes setting things up to say a catchphrase.<sup>5</sup> When you do this, you are in writer mode, which is perfectly acceptable, but it is not being “in character.”

Having an unpleasant character succeed does not automatically imply the author endorses the character’s unpleasantness. The author could just be telling a tragedy or horror story.

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<sup>5</sup> Except to make jokes, I know of no one who consciously creates setups for their own taglines.