

S.C.A.D.S

Skill Challenges As Diseases System

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Suggestions and Comments:

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Description:

SCADS or Scads attempts to use the existing Disease System from 4th Edition Dungeons and Dragons as a way to add some perceived missing functionality from the official Skill Challenge system.

Scads attempts to alleviate the binary pass/fail of the official system and allows for partial failure and success results.

Scads also *should* make it easier, scads easier to make an obvious bad pun, for the DM to better narrate a Skill Challenge in many instances. The status track, see below, has a natural ebb and flow that alleviates one issue with the official system where on a 6 before 3 rating the players could have 2 failures but then 5 successes and think they're doing really well and then boom, one failure and they've failed the challenge. With Scads, the good successes cancel out the failures and alleviate them and failures during an otherwise string of successes cause a realistic setback which seems easier to narrate. Perhaps the party has been trying to bluff their way into the castle of Evil Guy #3 and they've been trying to social skill the guards. They've got a couple of successes under their belt when the warrior fails a bluff roll, "You don't remember seeing us from that reunion luncheon last month?" Now the guards are not so sure about this but a couple of diplomacy checks, perhaps aided by an insight support roll and things are smoothed over.

Scads is designed to allow the players to decide who participates and in what role and in what order although it does require a certain level of participation as a group. In any situation where a single character should be the only one involved in a challenge then that is typically better handled by simply having skill checks. Skill Challenges are designed to be a group endeavor and should be created as such.

Synopsis of the Mechanics:

The DM will determine the purpose of the skill challenge, the possible outcomes of the challenge, its primary nature, whether it's physical, mental or social, the relative difficulty, the participation level and role of the group members.

These are determined by answering the following questions during challenge design:

- 1) What is the Purpose of the skill challenge? What are the possible Outcomes ranging from total failure to total success?
- 2) What is the primary Skill-set used for the challenge? What, if any, support skills can be used by supporting characters? What skills are required per round?
- 3) What are the Difficulty Class values for sustain, success, major success?
- 4) What is the Time limit of the challenge?
- 5) What is the Participation level? How many players may elect take support and observer roles?

The players will attempt to win the challenge by making skill checks as either primary participants who directly affect the outcome or as supporting participants who provide useful information toward solving the challenge.

A challenge has a Challenge Status which is used to record the current status of the challenge. Clever name I know, I spent seconds thinking of it. This status typically starts at a value of 5 and as the players succeed and fail the status moves down to a low of 1 or a high of 9. This is simply a recommended range to ensure it takes at least one round to reach total failure or success but it could be shorter or longer as the DM needs. Reaching either end terminates the challenge immediately otherwise the challenge lasts for as many rounds as the DM has determined most appropriate.

The challenge typically lasts at least one round, and up to three per the DM's design and is ended when a Total Success or Total Failure result occurs or the time is up. In the event that the challenge runs the full time limit then the end will typically end up with a partial success or failure. In the event that a challenge is completed but ends up without either a success or failure result, Sudden Death will occur and the challenge will continue until such a time as any non-neutral result is obtained.

Natural 1's and 20's are penalized / rewarded as well to keep the inclusion of those more than normally memorable sessions where the fates stepped in and took over although typically neither is included in a normal skill check.

This rule can be entirely optional if so desired.

Basis of the Challenge:

Determine what question is going to be answered, what information gained, what obstacle bypassed or favor won.

Each challenge should have at least four possible success points (*See adjusting Difficulty*). These *can* range from the smallest possible partial success to total success. Partial success steps can be varied or they can all be the same thing but for best results there should be four possibilities.

Each challenge should have at least four possible failure points (*See adjusting Difficulty*). These are identical to the success points where they can vary in results or have one partial failure filling three of the points followed by a total failure point.

These points are referred to in total as the Challenge Track and the players' successes and failures will adjust the current position on the track up or down.

Primary Skill set:

Choose a primary set of skills and if desired a support set of skills from the lists below after determining one of the three general types of challenges. Not all skills in a skill set may be appropriate or used for one or both of the primary and support skill sets.

- Mental Skills – Arcana, Dungeoneering, History, Insight, Nature, Perception, Religion
- Physical Skills – Acrobatics, Athletics, Endurance, Stealth, Thievery
- Social Skills – Bluff, Diplomacy, Intimidate, Streetwise

Support Skill set:

If desired or appropriate a set of Support skills can be listed and usually but not always will have one difficulty class easier or by default the DC will be the Primary -5.

Note: Support skills are the skills used by the player(s) in a Support role and if you allow a Support role you must set one or more Support skills.

Required Skills:

For some challenges it might be needed that a specific skill might be necessary per round. These are listed under the Required Skills and are usually drawn from the Primary Skill sets.

Note: Typically failed Required skills will have individual penalties for failure that might fail the challenge completely or move it onto a different path.

Example: To trail a band of goblins back to their lair without the goblins knowing the characters are doing so you might set a Required skill of Stealth – DC XX and Perception – DC XX with the listed failures of: “On a round with no successful Stealth check the goblins are now aware of the characters and will lead them to an ambush site. Allow the players an Insight – DC XX each round in addition to the normal challenge roles to suspect that the goblins are aware of them. This check does not count toward the Success or Failure of the challenge.” And for Perception, “On a round with no successful

Perception check the characters have lost the goblin's trail and the Perception DC will increase by +5 per round until the trail is regained or the challenge failed."

Difficulty Class:

Set the DC or difficulty class of the primary and support skill checks. You can use the following formula to determine this or use the recommended guidelines in the DMG.

For Primary Skills subtract 1 from the party level and then divided by 2 and round down – $(\text{Level} - 1) / 2$

Now add the following numbers to compute the Primary DC for Easy, Moderate, and Hard DC's:

Easy -	+15
Moderate -	+20
Hard -	+25

This number is the Success DC for this Challenge.

To compute the Sustain DC subtract 5 or more.

To compute the Major Success DC add 5 or more.

Examples:

Example 1: A party of 7th level with a Moderate challenge. The DC = $20 + ((7-1)/2)$ or 23. That gives us a Sustain of 18 or higher, Success of 23 or higher and a Major Success of 28 or higher.

Example 2: A party of 14th level with an Easy Challenge. The DC = $20 + ((14-1)/2) - 5$ or 26 for an Easy challenge. Sustain would be a 21 and Major Success would be a 31.

For Support Skills if used, use the Primary DC for loosely related Support skills and the Primary DC – 5 for closely related support skills. This referred to as the Support DC.

Support skills only have a Success value. **Note:** *Failure on a Support check has no effect on the Challenge.*

Adjusting Difficulty:

Aside from the obvious method of the DC check value you can also adjust the difficulty on the track by lengthening or shortening one or the other leg or side of the status track. Make the success leg longer with more positions and total success is now harder to obtain. Make the failure side shorter and it's easier to hit total failure and end the challenge.

Also you can increase or decrease the base difficulty by 2 levels by adding or subtracting 1 to the computed DC. Each +/- 1 equals an adjustment of 2 party levels.

As a DM you should also be aware of your players' skill levels and adjust the DC's appropriate up or down. The 'recommended' values are simply that, a general recommendation for a typical group where most will have at a 9 or higher in a pertinent skill at first level.

Time Limit:

Determine the time limit of the challenge. This should be no less than 1 round and no more than 3 rounds. The challenge ends on one of three conditions. The party reaches Total Success or Total Failure on the Challenge Track or they have run out of time.

The amount of game time or world time that each round of the challenge takes should also be noted if it is relevant to the challenge.

Participation:

Players involved in the challenge will have one of three roles. These are Observer, Supporter and Primary.

It is recommended that no more than one Observer and one Supporter role be used in a challenge although this can of course vary to fit the needs of the DM and the group. The remaining participants are Primaries.

Note: Support role usage requires designated support skill sets for the challenge.

- **Observer:** Do not participate and do not count toward or contribute to the success or failure of the challenge.
- **Supporter:** Make skill checks using the support set of skills and will generate bonuses for one player per round per successful check.
- **Primary:** Make skill checks using the primary skill sets and directly affect the outcome of the challenge.

Running the Challenge:

Skill Checks:

Skill checks are made by Support and Primary roles. Primary skill checks directly move the Challenge Track up and down by one or more positions. Support skill checks can provide a bonus to the next Primary skill check.

It is up to each player to define how they're using the particular skill they select to check against although the DM may provide some help in this regard. In some situations, usually Social challenges are the most likely instances, the DM may not allow for much out of character discourse between players. At the DM's discretion he can award up to a bonus +2 for the skill check roll for particularly clever ideas or well thought out descriptions as to how a skill is being used and the way it's being used.

The possible outcomes of a Primary skill check are:

- Critical Success (*optional*) – A natural 20 on the check roll adds 2 to the challenge status value. This does not stack with other victory or failure results.
- Major Success (*optional*) – Rolling equal to or higher than the Major Success roll adds 2 to the challenge status value. *Optional: Limited to once per challenge.*
- Success – Rolling equal to or higher than the Success DC adds 1 to the challenge status value.
- Sustain – Rolling equal to or higher than the Sustain DC results in a no impact to the challenge status value.
- Failure – Any roll that is below the Sustain DC is a failure and subtracts 1 from the current status of the challenge.
- Critical Failure (*optional*) – A roll of a natural 1 subtracts 2 from the current status value. This penalty does not stack with any other roll result.

The possible outcomes of a Support check are:

- Critical Success (*optional*) – Any natural 20 on a skill check adds a +4 synergy bonus to the next skill check which must be done by a primary participant.
- Success – Any roll that is equal to or higher than the Support Success DC adds +2 synergy bonus to the next skill check roll which must be done by a primary participant.

Note: There are no penalties associated with failing a support skill check.

Note: Major Success and Critical check results, natural 1 and 20 rolls, are optional and can be ignored to remove a little of the randomness from the results although in the case of the 1 – 20 statistically it should even out. The optional rule of the optional Major Success can be deployed as well and limit it to once per challenge total. This would grant a one time boost toward success but avoid a skill monkey character from completely stealing the show. These challenges are intended as a way to let everyone shine but with a mechanic to allow those without pertinent skills to bow out if they want to. Not to let one player with a massive skill set just dominate all skill challenges.

Playing the Rounds:

Round Start: The players determine the order of participation and the role each player will have during the round with the following conditions – Support role players must act directly before a Primary role player. They are not allowed to go last nor are they allowed to go consecutively if more than support role is allowed by the challenge.

During the Round: Each participant in turn rolls a d20 + skill level and compares it to their choice of one of either the appropriate Primary or Support DC to determine their skill check result. The effects of that result are either applied directly to the challenge status in the case of a primary participant or as a possible bonus to the next person making a skill check. Primary role participants must choose a skill from the primary skills; support role participants must choose a skill from the listed support skills.

Heroic Interrupt: Once per player per challenge per round a player may perform an Immediate Interrupt and spend an Action Point to change a failure result by one condition level. They can turn a critical failure into a failure or a failure into a sustain result.

Note: A player can only spend one Action Point during a challenge and only one action point can be spent per round.

Round End: The round ends when all support and primary participants have made a skill check. If all rounds have been performed then see Ending the Challenge otherwise go to Round Start.

Challenge End: The challenge ends when all rounds have been used **or** a result of Total Failure **or** Total Success has been determined (*See Sudden Death*). At this time the challenge status is used to determine the outcome of the skill challenge.

Sudden Death: If a challenge ends without any resolution, then a Sudden Death round is used to determine the outcome. This is conducted exactly the same as a normal round with the condition that the first skill check that results in a failure or success of any level ends the challenge.

Note: Heroic Interrupt can be used during Sudden Death assuming it can still be legally used using the normal conditions on usage. (See Heroic Interrupt)

On the following pages you'll find some examples that might help explain things or least provide some guidelines on how to use this type of system.

To create your own skill challenges then provide the answers to these questions:

- 1) What is the Purpose of the skill challenge? What are the possible Outcomes ranging from total failure to total success?
- 2) What is the primary Skill-set used for the challenge? What, if any, support skills can be used by supporting characters? What skills do you require the party to succeed at per round in order to maintain the challenge?
- 3) What are the Difficulty Class values for sustain, success, major success (optional)?
- 4) What is the Time limit of the challenge?
- 5) What is the Participation level? How many players may elect take support and observer roles?

Note: The recommended +/- 5's are simply that, a general recommendation. You can certainly adjust those as you wish. If you want a skill challenge where it's unlikely the party will fail or succeed completely then broaden the Sustain range.

Example, instead of a 15 – 20 – 25 for Sustain, Success, Major Success(optional) you could use a 13-23-28 instead. Or if you wanted to increase the consequence of failure, have fewer positions on the failure side of the challenge track so that the track reads:

Social Skill Challenge – Warn officials of the goblin threat.

Description: The characters need to persuade Baron Munchowson of the danger of the massing goblin horde in the mountains and those goblins are getting help from someone inside the town.

(Explanation: The party has been fighting goblins in the area of an old abandoned watch tower they've taken possession of 2 days distance toward the mountains to the east. During their encounters they uncovered information that the goblins are getting support and encouragement from someone inside the town. They have no hard information other than observation.)

Skills: Primary Social (Bluff, Diplomacy, Intimidate), Support Mental (Insight, History, Perception)

(Explanation: The party can use the social skills to try and convince the Baron of what they've seen and can gain bonuses from the three chosen relevant mental skills.)

DC: Primary 20, Secondary 20 – Major and Critical Success rules in effect.

(Note: Since no other numbers are listed it's assumed these break down into the +/- 5's. So for primary we have Sustain 15, Success 20, Major Success 25 and for support we have Success 20)

(Explanation: The party is level 1 and is not very well known in the town although they have been purchasing construction supplies and tools for the last couple of months so they're not completely unknown. This is decided to be a Moderate difficulty so we take level 1 – 1 and get 0, divide that by 2 and get 0 and add 20 which is the recommended Moderate base value. Because the party isn't familiar with the participants or the general area the support dc's are deemed only moderately relevant so Support DC is using the Primary DC. If the party had more knowledge of the area, its history or the Baron then Support DC's would likely be Primary DC – 5 or 15 in this case.)

Time Limit: 2 rounds that occupy roughly 10-15 minutes each in game time.

(Explanation: The Baron is a busy man and he's not going to give the group of unknown characters a lot of his time so they have 20 minutes to persuade him that his seeing them was worth it)

Participation: This challenge allows for one Observer, one Support, and the remainder Primary roles.

(Explanation: As this should be a challenge to the group, it's deemed that for a typical sized party of 5, one person can be off to the side without anything to contribute for whatever reason each round, another can be used to support the other characters and the rest will be needed to help convince the Baron that their news is true and their cause is just.)

Special: The players once the challenge has started are limited in their out of character conversation as all planning on what should be said, and who should say it, should have been taken care of prior to their meeting.

(Explanation: The 'characters' aren't going to typically discuss what each one is going to do while they're in front of the Baron so each player is going to be on their own for the most part during the actual challenge and all conversation is assumed to be spoken in front of the Baron and that will directly affect how the Baron reacts outside of the actual result of the skill roll.)

Challenge Status Track:

1: Total Failure – The Party has infuriated the baron with their 'lies' and are labeled troublemakers and town nuisances and are sentenced to 5 days in the community labor pool or pay 100 gold each. If they refuse either then they'll be thrown out of town and forbidden to come back.

2: Partial Failure – Party has angered the Baron and is thrown out. As a result they gain a reputation that will spread through the town resulting in a 10% higher costs and occasional lack of materials being available to them as merchants try to curry favor with the Baron.

"No those boards are spoken for. And that mortar. Yes someone's coming by to pick up all those shovels later this week."

3: Partial Failure – Same as Partial Failure 4.

4: Partial Failure – Party is listened to but told to come back with hard proof before any decision can be made.

5: Neutral – Non-decision. Status starts here.

6: Partial Success – Party is listened to but the Baron requires more proof to act. He orders a member of the town watch to go with the party to see if the tales are true. DM Note: Adds DMNPC to group that the party should try to protect on the trip out. Losing the DMNPC should have consequences of some sort.

7: Partial Success – Same as Partial Success 6 with the addendum the party is given access to the Watches stores to replenish weapons and supplies for the trip. NOTE: The amount of gear the party takes is noted and reported to the Baron.

8: Partial Success – Same as Party Success 7 and the Baron is willing to listen and his Captain of the Watch mentions it has been awhile since the Watch did field duty and they were getting soft and so outer patrols are set up. NOTE: This reduces the party's reputation with the watch members until such a time as it's deemed not a false alarm.

9: Total Success - The party has convinced the Baron that there is a clear and present danger and he issues orders for patrols, scouting missions and to call up the members of the citizens' guard for refresher training.

(Explanation: Our best case is that the town mobilizes, the goblins come up and possibly attack or possibly retreat to rethink the situation. Worst case the party is on the work force and the goblins attack during that phase and decimates the town. Cases in between give the party a chance to find further proof interfere with the goblins in some fashion, ferret out the goblin support in town, etc. Most skill challenges don't have to end this drastically where the players can end up deciding the fate of an entire town but you never know.)

What follows is a Round By Round play out of the above skill test using the following 1st level characters (Note: characters are not what you'd consider 'optimized') and I'm just listing their highest skill(s) appropriate to this challenge:

Amawn – Diplomacy 9, Bluff 9
Barbar – Intimidate 9, Bluff 9
Chez – Insight 9, Diplomacy 9
Dank – Intimidate 6
Eko – History 9

The party is show in to see the Baron after pleading their case and having been left to wait in the audience chamber for several minutes. This waiting time is when the party discusses how they're going to try and persuade the Baron so that they don't discuss it in front of him.

They're going to use Diplomacy primarily to try and persuade the Baron of the plight and Barbar is going to provide intimidation. Dank is going to assume the role of Observer and Eko is Support. (Random numbers used during the test courtesy of www.random.org)

Round 1:

Amawn: Applies Diplomacy to the challenge, complimenting the baron on the job he's done to secure the town and in general brown nosing. *Rolls 19 + 9 = 27* and chart is moved from 5 to 7 due to major success.

Eko: Uses her knowledge of History of the area to mention the goblin raids of the distant past that had necessitated the system of now unused and mostly in ruin watch towers. *Rolls 17 + 9* Success and grants +2 to next Primary roll.

Chez: Continues in the Diplomatic vein and adds in how well the watch towers had worked in the past as an early warning system but that he has grave news now. That the party has been using one of the most distant towers and has run into signs that it looks like the goblins are forming up once more after all these years and an attack is imminent. *Rolls 12 + 9 + 2 or 24* Success and status is moved from 7 to 8. The Baron is listening and nodding in agreement, "That's definitely something that could occur."

Barbar: Uses Intimidation, describes the horrors that will occur if the baron doesn't get off his ass and do anything and does he really want that on his conscience? *Rolls 1, critical failure.* He uses a Heroic

Interrupt to turn that into a regular failure and the status is moved from 8 to 7. The Baron certainly doesn't like that tone, the welfare of the town has always been his primary concern and for someone to say it might be otherwise doesn't sit well.

Dank: Observes and stands silent.

Round 2:

(Party sees no real reason to shift at this point and every reason to keep Barbar last in the round since the Baron already doesn't like him.)

Amawn: Diplomacy again. He frowns at Barbar and then assures the Baron that what's best for the town is what's important and that no one would certainly imply otherwise. *Rolls 15 + 9 or 24 Success and status is moved from 7 to 8.

Eko: Supports and offers forth on the history of the goblin battles and some of the more well remembered barons of the town who are still hailed as heroes. *Rolls 3 + 9 or 11 failure, the baron is not impressed by the past; it is the present that concerns him.

Barbar: Tells the Baron that if he doesn't do something then they, the party, will and they'd see who'd be hailed as heroes and who'd end up thrown out of office... or worse. *Rolls 8+9 or 17 sustain, so no change in status." The Baron doesn't really care one way or another about the party; he's secure in his station and sees them as no real threat.

Dank: Observes

The challenge is now over as it had a time limit of 2 rounds.

The final status is 8, one short of total success and we compare our outcome chart to see the following:

8: *Partial Success* – Same as Party Success 7 and the Baron is willing to listen and his Captain of the Watch mentions it has been awhile since the Watch did field duty and they were getting soft and so outer patrols are set up. NOTE: This reduces the party's reputation with the watch members until such a time as it's deemed not a false alarm.

The DM informs the party that the baron has considered their words and finds significant merit in them and after talking with the Watch Captain has decided to send out patrols. He also wants the party to lead one of his best men to witness for him and bring back a report before he mobilizes the entire town.

Mechanics wise we work our way back up the status tracker because each partial success includes the effects of the previous and see that the end result is that a portion of the Watch is going to be set to patrolling outside the city which will certainly provide credible warning in the event of an attack but the town itself could definitely be better prepared so it's not all cake and bacon.

The party has been tasked with getting more proof, the means of which is up to them, and they've been given an observer to tag along while they do so. This is both a benefit and a liability (hence the *partial* portion of the success) as they need him to come with them and see the buildup of the goblin forces and then they have get him back alive.

Example 2:

Mental + Physical Challenge – “On the kidnapers trail”

Coming soon.