Extended Challenges

By Ewen Cluney

"Extended challenges" are a replacement for the Skill Challenges system in *Dungeons & Dragons 4th Edition*, an attempt at something that fixes the flaws in the original system and creates a mechanic that is generally easier and more fun to engage. The mechanics are a little meatier than those of skill challenges, but they still serve the same basic purpose, allowing for rules to help play out more complex non-combat tasks that you can't satisfyingly handle in a single roll. These rules do not affect character creation, and make use of the standard skill check rules, so you can slot them into your game without changes to anything else.

The key inspiration for these rules is the Focus System from the Advanced Rulebook for *Arianrhod 2E*, a Japanese tabletop RPG published by F.E.A.R., but I've tried to make something that's more mechanically interesting and that allows for a bit more creativity. Other games that played into this include *Cortex Plus*, *Mouse Guard*, etc. This is also something of a prototype for what I want to do with my own *Slime Quest* RPG.

Overall Goal

An extended challenge needs to fit into the overall story and have a concrete goal in the game world. All of the existing advice on conceptualizing skill challenges (Rules Compendium p. 157, Dungeon Master's Guide 2 p. 78) applies in full to extended challenges.

Basic Parameters

There are some basic numbers that you will have to set for the extended challenge.

Action Limit

This is the number of actions/checks that can directly contribute to progress in the extended challenge each round by making skill checks. Too many cooks spoil the broth, too many people trying to persuade the king turns into a lot of shouting, and so on. Players who want to help when the group has already reached the action limit can still contribute by using the Aid Another action (see Rules Compendium p. 128) to give one of the players making a Progress Check (see below) a boost.

Time Limit

Each extended challenge has a time limit measured in rounds, typically around 3 to 5 rounds. The length of each round in actual time varies depending on the nature of the challenge and the actions therein. A quick struggle might have rounds that correspond directly to combat rounds, while a lengthy search could have rounds that take place over days.

Progress Points

The heart of an extended challenge is a unit called "Progress Points." These are a measure of how close the party is to accomplishing the goal of the extended challenge, and character gain Progress Points by making appropriate skill checks. Depending on the nature of the challenge, the players will typically need to get between 10 and 20 Progress Points to succeed. You'll usually want this figure to be equal to the challenge's action limit times its time limit in rounds, since characters can usually produce 1-2 Progress Points per Progress Check.

Extended Challenge Level and Experience Point Value

Each extended challenge also has a level, which determines the DCs of skill checks made towards it as per a normal check. Successfully completing an extended challenge also earns XP. The XP value of an extended challenge is equal to that of one minion of the challenge's level per Progress Point required (or one regular monster per 4 Progress Points).

Rounds and Actions

An extended challenge goes in rounds, not unlike combat. The participants should still make initiative checks as per combat, but the DM may allow the participants to substitute a relevant skill instead of their normal initiative bonus.

An extended challenge can also take place during combat. In this case a Progress Check counts as a standard action. A single character can make multiple Progress Checks in one round if they are plausible and the character has the means to gain such actions, but these will count against the action limit. Attacks and other powers

can also potentially count as Progress Checks (see below), and thus count against the action limit.

Progress Checks

A "Progress Check" is a check intended to move the main goal of the extended challenge forward. These are usually skill checks, though you can substitute most any type of check imaginable if it fits the approach a character is taking.

Players are encouraged to try to come up with interesting approaches and choices of skills to pursue the end goal of an extended challenge—that's part of how the endeavor keeps from being a mere exercise in die-rolling—but of course not every course of action is going to be helpful. As a rule of thumb, the more of a stretch the strategy and/or skill choice is, the higher the DC should be. A progress check using a particularly clever and appropriate approach can get the Easy DC for the challenge's level, while an awkward or contrived but still workable approach should have to overcome the Hard DC.

Make the skill check as usual, and determine the margin of success by taking the result of the check and subtracting the DC. Compare that to the table below to determine how it affects the group's Progress Points.

Unlike normal skill checks, progress checks have both Criticals and Fumbles. As in combat, a critical is when the d20 rolls a 20 (not including any modifiers), and it gives more Progress Points, plus a Boon (see below). A fumble is when the d20 rolls a 1 (again, without including modifiers), and causes a Complication (see below).

Margin of Success	Progress Points Adjustment
Critical (Natural 20)	+1d4+3, Get a Boon
10+	+4
7-9	+3
4-6	+2
1-3	+1
+0	+0
Failure	–1
Fumble (Natural 1)	–2, Get a Complication

Range

Position can potentially matter for a Progress Check, especially for an extended challenge that takes place during combat. As a rule of thumb, actions that require close physical tasks call for melee touch range, while tasks that call for using one's voice in a clear fashion are close burst 5. Other actions covering longer distances will usually fall under the combat rules.

Attacks and Powers as Progress Checks

In certain circumstances it may be appropriate to treat an attack as a progress check. If simply hitting a target is sufficient (say if a character is trying to fire an arrow at a specific target to cause something to happen), you can use the attack roll as a Progress Check. If raw damage will make it more effective, the DM can instead award 1 Progress Point per 10 points of damage (or 15 at paragon tier/20 at epic tier).

With other types of powers that do not involve making a check, if a player is able to use one in a way that should advance them towards the goal of the extended challenge, the GM can award 1 or more Progress Points, though it will still count towards the challenge's action limit. If an Eladrin's clever use of his Fey Step power helps things along, the DM can simply hand over some Progress Points.

This advice applies equally to items, magical or otherwise, that characters might want to put to use for an extended challenge.

Rituals as Progress Checks

Depending on the circumstances, players may be able to come up with a ritual (or martial practice) that would help them with an extended challenge. The ritual needs to be able to fit into the time interval of the extended challenge's rounds. If the ritual requires a skill check, you can have it double as a Progress Check. If it does not, the DM can simply assign one or more Progress Points based on how appropriate the ritual is to the challenge. In either case, the DM can opt to assign a Boon appropriate to the ritual effect.

Complications and Boons

Complications and boons are special effects that can pop up during an extended challenge. These can come up from a natural 1 or natural 20, from events, or simply at the DM's discretion.

Complications	Description
Fatigue	All party members lose 1 healing surge.
Hindrance	The next party member to make a Progress Check gets a –2 penalty.
Condition	One or more party members suffer a suitable condition until the end of the next round.
Theft	An item of some importance is stolen.

Boons	Description
Renewed Vigor	All party members recover 1 healing surge.
Power Refresh	One party member regains the use of a daily power they have expended.
Heal	All party members can immediately spend a healing surge as a free action if they wish.
Momentum	The next party member to make a Progress Check gets a +2 bonus.
Reward	The party acquires gold or items.

Events

"Events" are things that happen when the characters meet certain conditions as they progress through an extended challenge. The simplest kind of event trigger to use is having them pop up at certain thresholds of Progress Points, typically one event for every 3 points or so. An event can give a boon or complication, or cause a change of situation and/or difficulty.

Change of Situation

One of the more obvious types of events is a change to the situation. The chase moves from land to water, you get into a new layer of wizard's strange device that's designed differently, beyond the outer walls the situation in the keep you're infiltrating is different, etc. A change of situation typically has no immediate mechanical effect, but can radically alter the types of approaches and skills that make sense for the characters to apply.

Change of Difficulty

An event can also affect the difficulty of the challenge, thus raising or lowering the effective level on a temporary basis.

Success or Failure

If the party can get enough Progress Points before the extended challenge ends, they succeed. If the party runs out of time before they can accumulate enough Progress Points, they will fail the extended challenge. As with skill challenges, either option should move the action forward in some way, even if it's forward in a direction the party might not like.

Although it should be relatively difficult and/or undesirable for the characters to do so, it is possible for a player to come up with a course of action that short-circuits an extended challenge and brings it to a close prematurely, for good or for ill. If the party is trying to negotiate with the king and someone gets frustrated and just shoots the king, chances are the negotiations are over. Don't punish players simply for trying to cut through the Gordian knot, but do keep things consistent with the overall game.

Putting it All Together

Although a pre-planned extended challenge can potentially offer more cohesiveness and depth, you can also simply improvise one on the fly.

Extended Challenges in Combat Encounters

Running an extended challenge and a combat encounter simultaneously can be a lot of fun, as it presents players with some difficult opportunity costs as they try to juggle the two objectives. However, if you want to do this you should keep in mind that since the extended challenge requires party members to put several standards actions towards it, they will have considerably less overall resources with which to fight.

To create a balanced "dual encounter," reduce the effective XP budget of the encounter by anywhere from half to all of the XP value of the extended challenge. Another option is to have the opposition also competing in the extended challenge. In this case the enemy side runs its own extended challenge in parallel, and whichever side gets enough Progress Points first wins.