

Failed skill rolls in my current RuneQuest game (prequel to my response)

This is a big topic. The rules we're using were written when role-playing was barely four years old, as a known thing, and the whole idea of "skills" was not at all clear. In the wide range of early games, skill lists were very short and the skills (often called something else) were always particular dramatic tasks, usually with some consequence for failure.

RuneQuest (not yet called BRP) was the breakout for formal skill rules, I think. In terms of a decade later, the lists are still short, but they are very specific and a given character is individualized through them, not by an *a priori* classification. They also operate by (almost) the same mechanic as many other things in play, e.g., becoming an initiate, et cetera, implying that *activities in general* happen in a strange d100 stochastic space.

In these rules and for the hobby overall, "failing a skill roll" was completely unconstructed and unexplained, regardless of whatever whoever might have been doing at their tables at the time. Even the pre-existing models were not helpful, like not breaking a door when you tried – what does that mean? Was the door too strong? Were you strong enough (after all, you had a "chance") but you screwed up somehow? Does the roll describe the door's properties or the quality of your effort?

I'll get to how I'm using these very old rules, I promise. However, my answer has to take into account what happened in the decade or two following 1978.

Very soon, for RuneQuest and other Chaosium titles, Hero Games, and Steve Jackson Games (all of these designers were friends), skills' lists and options telescoped tightly in a certain way:

- Completism: if a person can do it, then it needs to be a skill, e.g, shifting Literacy from a fixed feature to a percentage; also Including daily/ordinary skills as well as the dangerous or dramatic actions considered standard for that game.
- Ontogeny: the design energy focused on nature/nurture development; it was apparently fascinating to know how much of one's skill with a rapier is due to "natural-born reflexes" and how much to "training and experience."
- Personal color: details of a character's profession or past, like Tying Knots and similar – in other fiction, such things typically turn out to be important ("Chekhov's Skill"), but in role-playing, this exists more as a fantasized hope than a reliable feature.
- Degrees of success: shifting from succeed/fail to critical/succeed/fail/fumble for all skill-use, not just combat; as well as making oppositional mechanics more complex; and that's just the start.
- Nested skill categories or "trees:" using different currency costs or prerequisites to determine one's precise depth and breadth among related skills.
- Complicated modifiers, to the extent of assigning bonuses or penalties both for the designated difficulty of an action *and* the severity of the opposition, as if those were independent things.

As a critical point, consider whether everyone in the fiction, especially when player-characters are not present, is conceived as doing things according to the logic and outcomes of the game's skill system – yes or no? The reflexive answer of the mid-1980s was "yes," and you can see the hard swerve in this period's editions of games like Traveller and Champions away from "no."

I'll just say it: all this elaboration masked the fact that no one had stopped to clarify what these percentage-type skill mechanics were actually for. In practice, the functions turned into these:

- Go/Stop buttons: I try this skill. Good! You proceed; alternatively, it was the wrong one to use. Try another one.

- Pacing: First you must Scan, then you must Spot Hidden, then you must Investigate, then you must Deduce ... (translate into social interactions like talking to the suspicious postmaster, translate into physical terms like traversing the cave system, whatever).
- Control: Using the above two points as well as strategic narration of outcomes to manage the fiction's wave-front as you please.
- Incidental color for narration: Wow, you nailed that Reading roll – you read it so well ... (pay attention to this one: it assumes that every action of reading during play requires rolling the dice for the relevant skill).

The trouble with all of these is that failing a skill roll doesn't make much fictional sense unless something or someone is opposing it in some notable way, or unless it has unusual consequences. "Non-conflict" real-world failures like forgetting your keys or missing a particular hammer-to-nail motion are out of place in fiction, which by definition displays this moment of mishap as worth knowing about for some reason.

By 1990 or so, I think that failed skill rolls were tacitly dreaded by players and GMs alike, because they consistently stopped play in its tracks, or blocked play from an intended direction, or introduced nonsense or out-of-nowhere opposition into the fiction, or imposed incompetence upon characters who were supposed to be good at things. Texts from the early 1990s are full of "GM survival techniques" for failed rolls, usually in tortured language that tries not to admit breaking with the model:

- Merely to ignore failures, either entirely or by narrating a successful outcome that occurs through coincidence rather than effort.
- To roll only the skills which are known to be dramatic or consequential for this game or this group, and the rest are resolved pass/fail on some other non-randomized basis.
- To narrate a minor fictional setback like a delay, so that outright failure is reserved for fumbles.
- To swerve toward another try, if some other target is handy or can be quickly invented – the famous "moving clue," as in, you fail to impress the postmaster, but Mrs. Postmaster is also there, and she seems nice, so roll your Impress again.
- (As a failed solution) Milk failed skill rolls for as much comedy as possible, often to tag a given player-character as the butt-monkey of the moment – or even for the rest of the game.

Jonathan Tweet's taxonomy in *Everway* is an explicit attempt to be more honest about how things are done – and, like *Amber*, it also rejects detailed skill lists to return to the ancient *The Fantasy Trip* method of using characteristic values for skilled actions. A few more games managed to "start over" in terms of what skills were available and what they literally did in (and for) play – but I submit that every one of these games was tagged as "weird" or "alternative" (in addition to *Amber* and *Everway*, think of *The Whispering Vault*, *Castle Falkenstein*, *Zero*, *Maelstrom*, et cetera).

A lot happened with design around 2000, so I'm going to stop the history here. I'm not going to outline the various principles or solutions you can see across my own designs, or how hobby fashions have changed. The question at hand concerns how I'm dealing with these original *RuneQuest* skill rules, especially as I had experienced and processed the history I've described.