

# Reactive challenges

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## Background

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I've never been happy with skill challenges (or extended challenges as they are called in Orcus). They seem very artificial, mostly a chance for each hero to roll skill checks and "contribute", rather than pose a puzzle or genuine challenge.

When I read YUM/DM write about the clever [three-stage reaction roll chart](#) from the 1983 Mentzer Basic Set, it switched on a lightbulb for me. It is broadly applicable to any kind of challenge, and roughly breaks down into: positioning, resolution and an optional "Hail Mary" if resolution fails. What I particularly like about it is that it is dynamic: after each roll, the PCs get feedback on how they have performed that they can usefully incorporate into their next attempt.

Reactive challenges are a replacement for extended challenges that borrow the old reaction roll structure from . In a nice bit of parallel evolution, they also work a lot like moves in Powered by the Apocalypse games. There are also bits of Strange Flight's [challenge crawls](#) in the mix.

## Identifying and describing reactive challenges

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The heroes might explore a vast, perilous swamp; piece together clues to catch a serial killer; or try over days to negotiate a complex peace settlement between two implacable foes.

These challenges are too important and intricate to be resolved with a single skill check. For these, the GM should outline a "reactive challenge". This requires three things:

### The setup

Why a challenge exists.

### The obstacles

Each thing that stands in the way of the heroes or needs to be addressed to overcome the challenge.

If only one thing stands in the heroes' way, then this situation is probably too simple to be a reactive challenge. If there are more obstacles than there are heroes, this should probably be broken into two or more reactive challenges. A good rule of thumb is one obstacle per two heroes.

### Changing obstacles

The GM should account for the heroes changing their strategy. For example, "Escape the Newport guards" is set up as a chase - but the heroes may decide to steal clothes drying on the line and disguise themselves as washerwomen instead.

### Blocks and turnstiles

A turnstile is an obstacle that each hero must overcome before other obstacles can be overcome. In a chase through Kingport, every hero has to make it down Sturgeon Street before they get to the Twisting Bazaar.

A block is an obstacle that the party must overcome before other obstacles can be overcome. In a chase through Kingport, the party needs to navigate the Twisting Bazaar to get to Crown Plaza. If the party is split up, each group must separately overcome this obstacle (unless the first group thought to leave markings for their fellows).

# The time pressure

What happens if the heroes take a long time to overcome the challenge.

## Final and non-final time pressures

Sometimes, the time pressure is final: if you take more than three minutes to rescue the kids, the building collapses and it's too late.

A good rule of thumb for final time pressures is each hero should get about three skill checks per reactive challenge before the time pressure eventuates. If the building will burn down in three minutes, each "round" is about a minute. If there is one day to convince the Duke, each "round" is about six hours (leaving six hours for sleep).

Other times, the time pressure is a bad thing that happens, but the heroes can press on - maybe indefinitely. For an exploration challenge, the heroes consume food and water every day. They can give up after a few days, or when they are half out of food, or press on even though they may starve if they do not reach their destination before the rest of the food is consumed.

Of course, even if there is a final time pressure you can add other bad things that happen along the way.

## Winning more time

The heroes may be able to win more time, for example arranging a bucket chain or summoning a water elemental to fight the fire consuming the burning building. Treat this as an additional, optional obstacle, which delays the time pressure if it is overcome.

## Example reactive challenges

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### The Duke's intervention

*Setup:* The Duke needs to be convinced to send his soldiers to search for villagers that have been abducted by bandits.

*Obstacles:*

- The heroes have no way to speak to the Duke directly.
- They have no leverage over him if they do get to speak to him.

*Time pressure:* The villain arrives at the bandits' camp in three days, and it will take about two days for the Duke's soldiers to find the camp – leaving just one day to convince the Duke.

Win time by delaying the villain's arrival, like setting up a distraction or booby trap, or blazing a trail to the bandit camp so the soldiers do not need to waste time searching for it.

### Escape the Kingport guards

*Setup:* The city guard are in hot pursuit.

*General perils:* The guards catch sight of one of the heroes; a merchant is incensed at damage to his stall; a loose roof tile slips, causing a climber to slide towards the edge; the guards call out to citizens to stop the heroes.

*Obstacles:*

- The long, narrow Sturgeon Street with fishmonger stalls on either side, leading to ...
- The Twisting Bazaar, a maze of colorful tents filled with hawkers and shoppers, leading to ...
- Crown Square, a plaza ringed on all sides with terraced houses, beyond which is the city gate.

*Alternative obstacles:* If the heroes decide to disguise themselves, seek refuge or hide instead of running, they may have to bluff their way through, convince others to help them or find good hiding places.

The heroes may use their knowledge of the city to identify shortcuts or alternative routes, such as through the sewers.

*Time pressure:* A second group of guards arrives at the city gate after three minutes, closing off the escape route and lending more eyes to the search.

Win time by delaying one or both groups of guards, like setting up a distraction or booby trap.

## The burning building

*Setup:* The heroes come across a burning building, and are told by the crowd that there are three children still trapped inside.

*Obstacles:*

- One child is on the second floor. She knows where the child lost in the smoke is, putting the hero that rescues her in a good position to rescue that child too.
- One child can be heard, but can't be seen among the smoke.
- One child is trapped under a fallen beam.

*Time pressure:* The building will burn down within about three minutes.

- After the second round, the heat intensifies: all heroes in the building lose a recovery.

Win time by fighting the fire.

## Individual tests

Each obstacle needs to be overcome. Usually, different heroes can work on different obstacles: one can look for leverage over the Duke while another tries to line up a meeting with him. Or one hero finds one child and climbs out of the building with them while another peers through the smoke looking for another.

However, to overcome an obstacle usually needs two successful skill checks: one to get into a favorable position to overcome the obstacle and the next to actually overcome it.

In the dynamic challenge rules, this is the difference between *being in a good position* and *success*.

Implicit in each of these actions is a *cost*. At the very least, this is time – which could have been spent doing something else. But it can involve other resources too.

When you **maneuver into position**, make a skill check and compare it to the DCs for your level.

Result	Outcome
Beat Hard DC by 5 or more	Success. The hero does so well, they get into position and overcome the obstacle all in one.
Beat Hard DC	In a good position. The hero is well-placed to overcome the obstacle.
Beat Moderate DC	Try a different way. The hero failed but may attempt something different.
Beat Easy DC	In peril. The hero must escape the peril or suffer some kind of loss or damage.
Fail	Peril realized. The hero suffers some kind of loss or damage.

When you are in a good position and you **exploit your position**, make a skill check and compare it to the moderate DC for your level.

Result	Outcome
Beat Moderate DC	Success. You overcome the obstacle.
Fail	Lose your good position.

Generally, once the obstacle is overcome a hero returns to a neutral position for the next obstacle. But follow the fiction here – if they are well-placed for the next step of their plan, then they are in a good position.

Losing your good position does not literally mean you always return to the same place. If you got into a good position by climbing through a second-story window, you probably don't fall out the window if you lose your good position. But you may lose your bearings within the house, or take so long searching that the smoke grows thick and muffling.

When you **attempt to escape peril**, make a skill check and compare it to the hard DC for your level.

Result	Outcome
Beat Hard DC	You escape peril.
Fail	The danger is realized, and you suffer harm or damage.

Heroes will also want to help each other out. When you **help someone in a worse position than you** (they are in peril and you are not, or you are in a good position and they are not), make a skill check and compare it to the Moderate and Hard DCs for your level.

Result	Outcome
Beat Hard DC	Their position improves by one step (in peril => neutral => good position)
Beat Moderate DC	You cannot help them in this way.
Fail	Your position worsens by one step.

This may seem too generous, but consider that the helper is also spending time – time that they could spend overcoming obstacles instead.

## Advice for GMs

**Position:** Sometimes, heroes will begin the challenge already in a good position:

- A hero that can fly is in a good position to rescue a kid on the second floor of a burning building.
- To get information on the Duke, the heroes want to seduce the vizier – but one of them already did so, the last time they visited the Duke's castle.

If your heroes do not need to maneuver into position, do not make them. Start them (or some of them) in good position.

**Peril:** Even seemingly safe tasks can have peril. Imagine someone in a dusty university library researching a ritual to reduce the Dark Lord's power. Perils could include:

- A servant of the Dark Lord spots the hero.
- You find a ritual, but it has a hidden danger you are unaware of.
- You think you've found a ritual, but you are mistaken.

That said, you should not contort to find peril where none exists. At worst, losing time is a cost in itself, and is enough to increase tension.

Rather than give a penalty to the dice roll when a hero tries a dubious or risky approach to overcoming an obstacle, you can leave the modifiers the same but have a more serious peril if the hero fails.

**Try a different way:** Succeed or fail, each test can generally only be attempted once – either once by each hero or once as a group. If the thief attempts to use their lockpicks to open the door, they either succeed or they fail. Maybe the pick broke off in the lock, or the lock is beyond their abilities. They must try a different way – asking the berserker to smash the door in, for example, or laboriously unscrewing the door from its hinges.

This principle makes things more interesting, and it also makes it more likely that the rest of the party gets to participate. Maybe the silver-tongued bard does always take the lead in negotiations – but when he puts his foot in it, it's up to the berserker to scare the tax collector away.

**Multiple challenges:** There's no problem with heroes facing multiple challenges, or each pursuing different challenges, provided that the time pressures work out (catch the serial killer in a week, fight off the orc invasion in a year, etc.)

**Turn order:** Let the heroes go in whichever turn order they like. Technically that does let them see how their party members have performed before they get their go, but the rules are balanced around this.