# FAILURE FOR THE BEGINNING GM

by Justin Alexander – April 10th, 2021



The awesome thing about failure in roleplaying games is that it provokes creativity, heightens the stakes, and drives the adventure in interesting directions.

I would even go so far as to say that an adventure without meaningful failure is, all other things being equal, inherently worse than one with it.

Unfortunately, this may not be immediately obvious if you're used to scenarios prepped as plots (i.e., a predetermined sequence of events). In a scenario prepped as a plot – particularly if the GM is using railroading to enforce that plot – there is only one path. And if there is only one path, any failure must be interpreted as temporary and, therefore, meaningless.

Failure is meaningful (and interesting) when it creates an obstacle or consequences, and therefore requires the creation of a *new* path.

Once again, if you're used to prepping and running plots, this can sound incredibly daunting: With a plot you have to figure out how to reliably route the PCs from Scene A to Scene B. That's non-trivial and if the pre-planned routing fails, improvising an alternate route on-the-fly is tough.

But if you're prepping situations instead of plots, then the pre-planned route doesn't exist. And if the pre-planned route doesn't exist (or isn't important), then it's not even your job as the GM to come up with the alternate route! It's the players' job.

Despite this, though, you may find that failure is still just causing the wheels of the game to spin. Why?

Well, another common way in which failure can become meaningless is when unnecessary action checks are being resolved. As described in *The Art of Rulings*, action checks should generally only be made when failure is either interesting, meaningful, or both.

If you're a beginning GM trying to figure out how to make failure meaningful, here's a couple of simple techniques that you should be able to rely on.

## Intro Technique #1: No Retries

The easiest way to implement meaningful failure is to simply not allow retries: If you failed to pick the lock on the door, that failed check tells us that you'll never be able to pick that lock. You did your best; it didn't work.

Now what?

Kick it in? Cast a spell? Look for a different entrance? Look for a key? Seduce the housekeeper? I dunno. You tell me.

But as you can see from these example alternatives, each of these new paths creates interest: The PCs are leaving evidence or engaging in further exploration or creating new relationships. Arguably all of these are, in fact, more interesting than if they had simply picked the lock and gone through the door.

> *Note: A trap that you can fall into here is thinking, "Well, if failure is better, then I should just force everything to be a failure!" There's a longer discussion to be had on this point, but the short version is: Success is also important if, for no other reason, than that the players will become increasingly frustrated if they can never actually accomplish anything. So let the dice fall where they may.*

To be clear, this technique is not the be-all or end-all of how to adjudicate failure. There are more advanced or gradated techniques that can be used to good effect with practice. But if you're just getting started, you don't have to make it complicated.

## Intro Technique #2: Quick-and-Dirty Failing Forward

Okay, so you've done that for a few sessions and you're starting to get a feel for what meaningful failure looks like in actual play, but you're also starting to chafe a little bit under the straitjacket of never allowing retries.

You're ready to make it a *little* complicated.

What we're going to use here is a technique called failing forward: The mechanical result of failure (e.g., rolling below the target number) is described as being a success-with-complications in the game world.

A simple rule of thumb for when you should use failing forward is whenever disallowing a retry feels a little weird to you: Why *can't* the PC just try to pick the lock again?

In our first technique, the intended path fails and the PCs need to find an alternative path. Failing forward is a different way of making failure meaningful because you don't annihilate the intended route (whether you prepped it or the players chose it). You just complicate it.

Coming up with interesting complications on-the-fly, though, can feel intimidating. So, when in doubt, just impose a cost: You succeed, but…

- You have to pay extra.
- You took damage.
- Your equipment broke.
- It took extra time (if that's relevant).
- Someone knows you did it who you didn't want to know.

If you have a better idea, great. But if not, these five broad categories can cover like 90% of fail forward checks. In fact, you'll usually have multiple options. When picking a lock, for example:

- You open the door, but trigger the security trap. (You take damage.)
- You open the door, but your lockpick snapped off in the lock. (Your equipment broke.)
- You open the door, but it took twenty minutes and now you only have ten minutes before the Count returns home. (It took extra time and it was relevant.)

If nothing works and you can't think of something outside the box, that's fine: Either don't make the check in the first place (just let them automatically succeed) or default back to no-retries-allowed and move forward.

> *Advanced Tip: You can get a little fancy here with a [fortune in the middle](#) technique by offering the cost to the player. For example, "You've almost got the lock open, but the hacked security camera is going to come back online. Do you stay and open the door or GTFO before the camera spots you?"*

## INTRO TECHNIQUE #3: BASIC PROGRESS CLOCK

A progress clock is a simple, visual way of tracking how close a particular outcome is to happening. There are a lot of different ways that you can use a progress clock, but for today.

When the PCs fail their first check during an endeavor (e.g., sneaking into mansion, tracking a band of orcs, investigating a cult's activities in Dweredell):

1. Create a progress clock by drawing a circle and dividing it into four, six, or eight parts.
2. Set a significant consequence or overall fail condition. (For example, security at the mansion realizes there are intruders and the alarm is raised, the PCs lose the trail of the orcs and can no longer follow them, or the cultists succeed in summoning a demon who begins rampaging though the Great Market).)
3. Whenever the PCs fail a relevant check, fill in one part of the progress clock.
4. When the progress clock is filled, trigger the consequence or fail condition.

This technique can be used with any type of action check, but for our purposes primarily provides a default consequence for failing forward: If you can't think of any other consequences, just fill in the next section of the progress clock and explain the connection.

Progress clocks can exist in one of three states at that table:

- **Open Clock**: When you create the clock or fill in a section, you show it to the players. This is often the easiest method, making it crystal clear what the consequences of a failed check are with no fuss.
- **Hidden Progress**: When you create a clock, you directly or indirectly tell the players that it exists. (For example, when they're sneaking into a mansion you can clearly state that there's a risk the security team will detect them.) But the clock itself remains hidden. The players don't know how large the clock is or exactly what the progress on the clock is. However, because the clock's progress is hidden from them, you will need to clearly communicate the consequences of failure to them. (For example, if they fail forward on a lockpicking check, you might describe how they managed to get the door open, but they've left clear signs of tampering that might be noticed. Such explanations, you'll note, will also inform exactly how the failure condition plays out – in this case, it's possible that the alarm is sounded because someone noticed the damaged lock.)
- **Secret Clock**: You create the clock without telling the players it exists; it serves strictly as a tool for you to keep track of things. As with a hidden progress clock, it's your responsibility to continue clearly communicating the consequences of failure to the players in your description of the game world.

> *Advanced Tip #1: Other events or actions can fill in sections of the progress clock even if there isn't a failed check. If something happens that logically moves events*

*closer to the progress clock's outcome, fill in a section. (Similarly, particularly terrible failures might fill in more than one section at a time.)*

*Advanced Tip #2: It's also possible for progress clocks to "run backwards." If the PCs do something that sets back the plans of the cult, for example, it may make sense to erase one of the filled sections of the progress clocks. (On a similar note, progress clocks are not inevitable: If the PCs break into the mansion and get out before filling the progress clock, the alarm doesn't sound. If they wipe out the cult, the demon is never summoned. And so forth.)*