

The Art of Rulings – Part 1 1

Narrative vs. Action Resolution

by [Justin Alexander](#)

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As a result of long tradition, most mechanical resolution in roleplaying games takes the form of *action resolution*. There is, however, an alternative paradigm that you may find useful: *narrative resolution*.

The classic example for distinguishing between the two involves the PCs trying to find hidden documents in an office with a locked safe. With action resolution, the mechanics determine whether or not they can crack the safe. With narrative resolution, the mechanics determine whether or not they find the documents. (The distinction, it should be noted, doesn't necessarily require a different set of mechanics: Either attempt can boil down, mechanically speaking, to the exact same Lockpicking check. The difference is in how you set up the stakes for the test and in how you interpret the results of the test.)

With action resolution, the player declares “I want to do Y” with the expectation or hope that it will result in X being accomplished.

With narrative resolution, the player declares “I would like to accomplish X by doing Y”.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches.

With narrative resolution, being able to say “this is how I would like to solve this problem” allows players to control their spotlight and it allows the GM to take a more general approach to prep. (The GM knows that there is incriminating evidence to be found in the club. The players decide whether they want to get it by sneaking into the office and cracking the safe, seducing the lounge singer, interrogating the club owner, or putting the place under surveillance.)

On the other hand, action resolution typically allows for a more simulationist experience of the game world (which, in its verisimilitude, can be more immersive for many). And it also allows for a more diverse array of possible outcomes (which can prevent the game from becoming predictable). (For example, the PCs succeed at opening the safe, but instead of finding the incriminating evidence of a criminal enterprise they find the mob's blackmail photos of JFK schtupping Marilyn Monroe. Now what do they do?)



USING NARRATIVE RESOLUTION

Unsurprisingly, narrative resolution is often conducive to (and associated with) storytelling games and RPGs with a dramatist focus. But this isn't necessarily the case: Remember that [undetermined external factors](#) are usually factored into mechanical resolution. There's no reason that one of those undetermined

external factors can't be whether or not the documents the PCs are looking for are in the safe. The GM is simply saying, "I don't know whether or not there's incriminating documents in there; let's ask the game mechanics and find out together." (This may require a radical shift in your thinking — it's literally a different paradigm for interpreting mechanical results — but it's no less valid.)

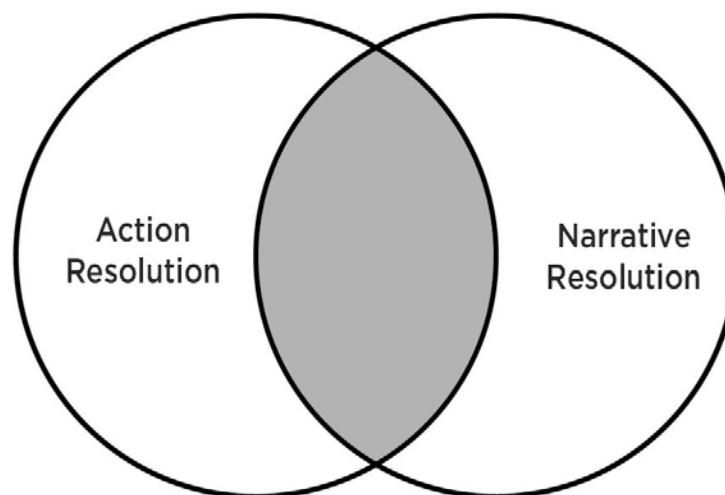
Oddly, narrative resolution often combines well with [failing forward](#). I say oddly because it seems counterintuitive that a system predicated on determining whether or not your goal succeeds would pair well with a technique predicated on assuming that your goal fails (albeit with complications). But I think it works because, first, narrative resolution *is* focused on the goal, and that focus makes it more natural for failing forward (which also focuses on the goal) to come into play. Narrative resolution also tends to lend itself well to larger chunks of resolution, which opens up a lot more breathing space for the sorts of interesting complications which really make failing forward worthwhile.

COMMON CONFUSIONS

When trying to grok the distinction between narrative resolution and action resolution, there are a couple common ways that I've seen people get confused.

First, it's not unusual for those being introduced to the concept of narrative resolution to frame a mechanical resolution in such a way that the desired goal of the PCs is identical to the action resolution and then claim that there is, in fact, no difference between the two.

For example, you might set up a scenario where the player says, "I want to sneak over and grab the guard's keys." The action is to sneak over and grab the keys; the desired outcome is to sneak over and grab the keys. So, what's the difference? Well, in this case, there is none. The two techniques resemble a Venn diagram in this regard.



Second, it's oddly not unusual for those trying to *explain* the concept of narrative resolution to claim that traditional combat mechanics are a form of narrative resolution mechanic. The argument is that "make that person dead" is the desired narrative outcome and, therefore, the combat mechanics provide a narrative resolution of that outcome.

This is actually just the same error from a different angle, though. "HP 0 = DEAD" isn't a narrative resolution mechanic. It's just telling you whether or not you've killed somebody (just like an attack roll tells you whether or not you've hit someone with your sword). By setting the narrative goal to be "kill that guy", you once again superficially make the action resolution look like narrative resolution.

What would a narrative resolution mechanic look like? Well, it would be “HP 0 = you accomplished whatever your goal was”. Was it to escape? Was it to convince the princess that you’re a better swordsman? Was it to impress your master? Was it to kill somebody?

A FEW FINAL ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This concept – including the classic safecracking example – [was pioneered by D. Vincent Baker](#) using the terms “task resolution” and “conflict resolution”. Those terms have become relatively popularized and many of my readers may be wondering why I’ve chosen to swap them out for the terms “action resolution” and “narrative resolution”.

Basically, having participated in several dozen discussions about this topic over the last decade or so, I have found that the terms “task resolution” and “conflict resolution” are a source of deep and consistent confusion.

First, the common definition and usage of the term “task” is frequently goal-oriented: You are assigned a task and then determine how you are going to accomplish that task. This seems to heavily contribute to the first point of confusion described above (where people can’t distinguish what the difference is supposed to be between the task-oriented and goal-oriented resolution methods).

Second, the term “conflict resolution” only makes sense within a very specific and adversarial understanding of the interaction between the GM and the players. If you look at the lump sum of Baker’s thoughts back in 2004 (when he was struggling with and exploring the implications of this relationship), it makes a lot of sense why he chose the term “conflict”. But outside of that specific context, it tends to lend itself to the second point of confusion discussed above. I’ve also seen it frequently lead people astray who then believe that “conflict resolution” only applies if an NPC is opposing the PC (either directly or indirectly).

I don’t really consider it likely that my revised terminology will have widespread adoption at this point, but that’s not my primary concern: My primary concern is to attempt to clearly communicate a useful set of concepts to those reading this essay.

The Art of Rulings – Part 12

Hidden vs. Open Difficulty Numbers

by [Justin Alexander](#)

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It's time to discuss a topic which is surprisingly contentious: Should the GM tell their players the target number of a skill test?

(Seriously. Go to any online RPG forum, ask this question, and watch the long knives come out nine times out of ten.)

My personal approach to open and hidden difficulty numbers is to consider them a tool rather than an ideology, with their use being a blend of utility and practicality. What information in the game world does the difficulty number represent and does the character have access to that information?

1. If the difficulty number represents that the PCs can directly observe, tell the players the target number of the check. (An easy example would be the difficulty of jumping over a crevasse: The character can actually *see* the crevasse and make a pretty good guess about how difficult it is. Telling the player helps give them a clarity similar to their character's vision.)
2. If the difficulty number represents something that the PCs can't observe, keep the number hidden from them. (For example, they're walking through a jungle and I want to see if they spot a tribesmen hiding in the canopy above them. The difficulty of the spot task is based on how good the tribesmen are at hiding. Does the PC know how good the tribesmen are at hiding? No. They don't even know it's tribesmen they're trying to spot. Therefore, they don't get the target number.)
3. If you're feeling tricky, you can give the players an estimated difficulty number based on what their PC *does* know and only reveal the *real* difficulty number when they've realized their error. ("The guy is standing nude in the middle of the field. Should be really, really easy to hit him..." "Your shot bounces off the force field surrounding him. This might be trickier than you thought.")

When in doubt, I will generally default to *not* telling the players the target number. But this default position can be flipped in some systems for reasons of practicality. For example, in [Call of Cthulhu](#) you apply difficulty to the character's skill rating and then attempt to roll under the modified rating. I've found it's generally easier to give the players the difficulty modifier and simply report their success or failure rather than getting them to report a margin of success that I can then compare to the difficulty rating. (Your mileage may vary here, obviously.)

In addition to simple practicality and efficiency in game play, my method is influenced by a couple of factors. First, there is a limited bandwidth by which the player perceive the game world compared to their characters: They are relying almost entirely on imprecise verbal descriptions, whereas their characters have access to their full panoply of sensory input. While it is true that their characters cannot necessarily measure their chance for success at a task with mathematical certainty, I find that this nevertheless achieves more associated results than characters, for example, leaping over crevasses that no sane person would attempt if they could actually see it with their own eyes. Open difficulty numbers reduce the frequency with which there is miscommunication between the GM and the players, which can help minimize the old [Are you sure you want to do that?](#) problem.

Second, there are many circumstances in which the players will be able to figure out what the target number is. (Multiple characters making attacks against a fixed armor class, for example.) In some cases this experience can be very immersive (as the characters slowly figure out just how skilled their dueling partner is before declaring that they're not actually left-handed, for example). But that also makes it an example of how knowing a difficulty number doesn't instantly implode the table's immersion, and even in circumstances where difficulty numbers are initially hidden, it can often make sense to explicitly lift the veil of mechanical secrecy after a short period of time in order to facilitate the practicality of speeding up play.

RESOURCE SPEND GAMES

Over the last decade or so we've seen a proliferation of RPGs featuring mechanics where the players will spend points from a limited pool as part of a skill test. [GUMSHOE](#) and the [Cypher System](#) offer one common form, with points being spent from skill or attribute pools in order to provide a bonus to the skill test. [Tales from the Loop](#) offers another variety, featuring a variety of resource pools which can be spent to reroll failed checks.

I've found that these types of systems — particularly the GUMSHOE and Cypher System variety — require some special attention when it comes to open vs. hidden difficulty numbers. Blindly spending limited resources on tasks with unclear difficulties generally doesn't seem to work well in these types of systems: Players often get frustrated and resources are generally overspent, which can rapidly propel a session towards [the hard limits of the system](#) and really limit effective scenario design.

Which is not to say, of course, that difficulty numbers should NEVER be unknown in such games. The occasional spice of an unknown search test, for example, can be really rewarding: The player doesn't know if there's anything hidden in the room or how valuable it may be, so they have to make a tough choice about exactly how much effort they're going to put into searching it. When facing a previously unknown creature, they have to make a choice about snapping off a shot or really taking the effort to aim. That's immersive and effective.

But if the whole game is cloaked in perpetual mystery, it's much less effective in practice. It muddies decision-making (particularly in these resource spend games) and hurts immersion.

Another way of looking at this is that there is a "threshold of knowledge" at which the GM deems it appropriate to reveal the difficulty number. This threshold, however, is basically a slider. What I'm suggesting is that for these resource spend mechanics you want to radically reduce your threshold (particularly if you normally keep it relatively high).

For these resource spend games I have also coined the term "routine check" so that I can still call for things like routine Perception tests to determine which character spots something first without having everyone burn away their resource points, uh... pointlessly.

UNCERTAIN TASKS

[Traveller 2300](#) included an interesting resolution method that I have never seen reproduced elsewhere, but which can be trivially adapted to virtually any RPG system. For any **uncertain task**, in which the actual success or failure of the outcome may not be immediately clear to the character (such as gathering information, convincing someone to help you break the law, or repairing a buggy piece of equipment):

... both the player and the referee roll for success (the referee rolls secretly). If both are unsuccessful, the referee provides *no truth*. If one is successful and the other is unsuccessful, the referee provides *some truth*. If both are successful, the referee provides *total truth*. In all cases, the referee does not indicate whether the answer or information provided is truth, some truth, or total truth.



A result of *no truth* means the character is totally misled as to the success of the attempt. Completely false information is given.

A result of *some truth* means the character is given some idea of the success of the attempt. Some valid information is given.

A result of *total truth* means the character is not misled in any way as to the success of the attempt. Totally correct information is given.

Because of the hidden nature of the referee's throw, the character cannot know for certain the nature of the information being obtained. A referee may find characters doubting total truth, accepting some of no truth, or accepting all of some truth.

Marc Miller, the leader designer for *Traveller: 2300*, wrote about this mechanic in "Traveller: 2300 Designer's Notes" in *Challenge Magazine* #27:

Setting fuses for demolitions is an uncertain task contained in the *Traveller: 2300* rules. It is classified as easy, and anyone with any skill will usually succeed. Once in a while, the referee will roll a failure while the player succeeds: somehow the fuse setting failed (although it looks OK) and the explosive won't detonate when the proper time comes. And once in a while, the player will roll a failure (and immediately realize that he has wired the explosive wrong), he can rewire them immediately to try to fix the fault. And sometimes, the player will roll a failure and hear the referee tell him the charges have exploded - because the referee also rolled a failure.

This method is an incredibly clever way of reintroducing uncertainty into the player's (and character's) perceptions even when embracing the practical advantages of player rolls and open difficulty numbers. I think it deserves to be much more widely known and used.