

Stealth Godbook

So it has come to this: The rogue has decided to sneak off into the king's palace, the party has decided to steal a priceless artifact from the palace treasury, or the barbarian has been captured and thrown in jail. Regardless of the circumstances, it's time to run a stealth sequence. The following aims to be a complete guide to planning a stealth sequence regardless of length, level, or context, and should be useful as both a reference text and as a learning manual.

What is Stealth?

Before we can begin to plan out our gameplay components, we first have to understand what stealth is. Of the following, which appear to be stealth sequences?

1. A rogue pads through a silent hallway, before stumbling onto a guard, killing the guard, and continuing on.
2. A party of adventurers sneaks through a dragons' lair, looking for a specific item in the hoard. When the cleric slips on some loose coins, the dragon awakens and blasts them with acid breath before combat ensues.
3. A bard plays an impromptu street concert, allowing a rogue to slip undetected into the second-story window of a jewelry shop. Though the window makes a thud as it shuts, the rogue has several seconds to consider her options before guards turn the corner on the office she finds herself in.
4. At a masquerade ball, the party seeks out a prince they are trying to smuggle out of the city to safety. As they attract attention and otherwise progress, it becomes clear that there are others seeking out the prince, and seeking to remove other seekers. The party must find the prince without attracting too much attention, lest the ball devolve into a massacre.

Three of the above examples have the aesthetic qualities of stealth: #1 involves ostensibly sneaking and dealing with guards, #2 involves trying not to wake a sleeping dragon, and #3 involves trying to break into a building. However, #1 and #2 are not truly stealth gameplay components. From the description of #1, it's unclear whether there are any other guards, or whether the rogue had options other than 'murder the guard and move on'. It's unclear that the scenario would have played out any differently had the PC in question been a barbarian. From the description of #2, it appears that the moment a group skill check is failed, combat ensues, rendering the entire exercise dependent on each party member passing a set DC (or a roll of the dice from the dragon), where success presumably means complete victory, and failure means combat. #3 provides a partial success (sneaking into the building) while also allowing the opportunity for more successes or failures in the future (guards are coming, there are places to hide or sneak by). #4, while lacking the traditional aesthetic components of stealth, is mechanically very similar to a stealth sequence: There are pursuers who must be avoided,

certain actions are prohibited, and success or failure in the sequence is not dependent on a single die roll.

Using the above examples, we can construct a basic checklist of what makes something a stealth sequence:

- A pursuer must exist who can be avoided, but with whom direct combat is either impossible or exceedingly ill-advised
 - The pursuer may be a single entity or multiple
 - Combat can be impossible if the pursuer's numbers are de-facto limitless, or if the pursuer can not be directly engaged (Such as a scrying sensor, a raven familiar, or other difficult-to-attack objects)
 - Combat can be ill-advised if the pursuer is a very difficult combat encounter, or if combat will fundamentally change the nature of the encounter so as to render the goal unattainable
- Clear methods of action must be available
 - Confounding the pursuer must be possible, be it temporarily hiding, providing a distraction, or something else entirely
 - Likewise, there should be clear ways forward to achieve the goal, be it gaining access to a key room, overhearing secret codes, or disabling security countermeasures.
- Consequences for success and failure of various plans and activities must be clear, without either ending the sequence prematurely.
 - Success can open up new opportunities to the characters, or clearly indicate that they have more 'chances' for things to go awry, such as an alert level being reduced, guards being reassigned elsewhere, or a character gaining access to a new area
 - Failures can attrition resources away from the party, make subsequent checks more difficult, or close off certain options. However, it is vital that failure still move the sequence forwards. Perhaps while closing off the lower levels to the vault the key is dropped, providing a new method of access to the party.

This is all that is required for a stealth sequence. Note that 'Stealth', 'sneaking', and 'hiding' are all missing from the major bullet points. These are aesthetic choices that are (often) layered into the core gameplay, but as example #4 above shows it is entirely possible to create a stealth sequence (mechanically) that never features an attempt to hide or sneak.

Making a Pursuer

Any stealth sequence must have someone the party is trying to avoid. After all, if there is no one looking for the party, why would they sneak? This entity will be hereafter referred to as the Pursuer, though pursuit may not necessarily happen during the stealth sequence. As stated above, there are several things one must decide when it comes to deciding on a pursuer.

One or Many?

Most stealth sequences default to having groups of pursuers. Palace guards, museum security, or hobgoblin sentries are all examples of having a group of pursuers. However, sometimes having a single pursuer can make matters more interesting, and open up different gameplay possibilities. Examples of single pursuers are a sleeping dragon, a slumbering hill giant or a central computer.

Single Pursuer

- Must be impossible to defeat - only distraction will work
- Distractions are much clearer to conceptualize
- More difficult to ramp up pressure if combat is initiated
- More localized, smaller field of play

Group of Pursuers

- Can defeat individual members
- Distractions are harder to conceptualize
- Difficulty can be ramped up with reinforcements - but calibration is important so that individuals are not complete pushovers
- Specialization of pursuers can allow for different paths/routes through the field
- Larger field of play enabled, smaller fields can feel cramped

As stated above, the default is to have a group of pursuers, and this is the best choice in most situations. However, it is important to know when choosing a single pursuer is better.

Pursuer Capabilities

Each pursuer must have a set of capabilities, both for the stealth sequence itself and for when combat breaks out. It is important to plan for combat, as it is a common consequence for stealth sequences (as will be spelled out later). A single pursuer will have just one set of capabilities: good detection capabilities can balance out poor combat capabilities, or vice-versa, to tweak the difficulty of the sequence. Groups of pursuers can have separate capabilities, allowing for some with good detection capabilities and poor combat capabilities, some the inverse, and other combinations.

What is detection?

As stated above, a stealth sequence need not be cloaks and daggers, sneaking around. Detection means the methods the players are trying to foil as they try to avoid the pursuers. Below is a list of possible detection methods the pursuers can use, as well as a suggested tier for each:

Perceiving the hidden

- Perception Checks (Tier 1)
- Detect Magic (Tier 1)
- See Invisibility (Tier 2)
- Blindsight (Tier 2)
- Mind Spike (Tier 2)
- Detect Thoughts (Tier 2)
- Locate Creature (Tier 2/3)
- Clairvoyance/Scrying (Tier 2/3)
- Truesight (Tier 3)

Seeing through deceit

- Insight Checks (Tier 1)
- Detect Magic (Tier 1)
- Zone of Truth (Tier 2)
- Dispel Magic (Tier 2)
- Detect Thoughts (Tier 2)

Following those who flee

- Athletics Checks (Tier 1)
- Acrobatics Checks (Tier 1)
- Flight/alternate movement modes (Tier 2)
- Entangling/Paralyzation magic (Tier 2/3)
- Time Stop (Tier 4)

Example Pursuers:

- The guards at the prison consist of the boss (Who has good perception/insight/athletics capabilities, a wand of detect magic, and is good in a fight), 2 nerds (who are poor in a fight, but one has good perception capabilities and the other is good at insight) and 4 brutes (All of whom are mediocre at detection, but quite good in a fight). [Tier 1]
- A slumbering young purple dragon can fly, has access to detect thoughts, and can be quite lethal in a fight [Tier 2]
- The guards at Dreadhold are led by a dwarf who uses scrying sensors to monitor the corridors of the prison. She has blindsight out to ten feet, and can cast zone of truth and detect thoughts. She is aided by a half-orc who can cast locate creature, and a half-elf with truesight. The standard guards on the floor are equipped with wands of see invisibility, as well as having excellent physical and mental faculties. [Tier 3]

Courses of Action

So you've figured out your pursuer. Good to go, right? The next step is to figure out the field of play. Field of play here means both the environment in which the sequence takes place, but also the actions that players will be able to take to both advance towards their goals and to avoid or frustrate the pursuers. The standard field of play is a building of some sort, often also including the immediate environs. Often players will be able to use stealth checks and illusion spells to avoid pursuers, and will have to contend with locked doors, traps, and unavoidable combat to achieve their goals.

So What Are We Doing Here, Anyways

Before deciding on a location, it is important to decide on what actions the players can take. These actions can be broadly divided into two categories: actions to frustrate the pursuers, and actions to achieve their goal. The actions to frustrate the pursuers can likely follow from the capabilities of the pursuers as defined above, but actions to achieve the goals are worth a deeper dive. Note that in either case the goal of defining actions is to spell out multiple options for the players, not to be prescriptive. If the players come up with alternative plans (As they likely should, especially with good verisimilitude), the prepared options should provide a template or guidance for how to gamify their plans.

Goals

Before deciding what options are available, it is important to settle on a goal for the players to achieve. Broadly, there are three distinct goals, though each has multiple variations:

- Proceed to an area
 - At its simplest, this is just 'frustrate the pursuers a certain number of times', and then the characters will reach the end location
 - It can also include separate puzzles or subgoals that are distinct from frustrating the pursuers, like picking locks or leaping across rooftops
 - Most other goals will include this as a subgoal
- Acquire an item
 - A staple of heists, the item need not be well-guarded. Sometimes getting the item out is more of a challenge than gaining access to it
 - The item can be something the party can carry, but also can be a creature or person
 - If it's a creature or person, getting it out is likely to be difficult. The creature may not have as much skill at frustrating pursuers, or may not wish to leave. This can easily provide additional texture to the sequence
- Interact with a creature or person
 - This can be as simple as having a conversation, or as complex as assassinating them without being noticed
 - Often gaining access is part of the challenge, but this is not necessary

Motion Towards

Many stealth sequences are intermixed with movement challenges. These can be twofold: the motion itself is a challenge (e.g. jumping a chasm) or the area in question is otherwise secured (e.g. picking a lock). Below is a list of types of challenges. Note that it is important to focus on the challenge itself, and not be too prescriptive with the solutions. That is, the solutions provide guidance on how to solve the puzzle, but are merely guidelines for how to reward creative thinking from the players. For this kind of challenge, the location is also very important for the construction of verisimilitude, and the subsequent section on locations is also very useful.

- Crossing a chasm
 - Jump across (athletics)
 - Swing across (acrobatics, if something is present to swing on)
 - Climb down, and then back up (if possible)
 - Alternate movement modes (Slow fall, flying, climb speed)
 - Building a bridge (if materials are available, possibly acrobatics to cross)
- Passing a locked (or barred) door
 - Break it down (athletics)
 - Pick the lock (Thieves' tools, if possible, either Dexterity or Intelligence)
 - Pass a guardian (Combat, riddles, explicit puzzles)
 - Find the key
- Passing a wall
 - Climb over it (Athletics)
 - Alternate movement modes (fly, burrow)
 - Dig under the wall, collapse it (Intelligence, Athletics, Mason's tools, possible damage)
 - Build a ladder or other traversal method (if materials are available, possibly athletics to traverse)
 - Go through (If something like a wall of fire, water, or poisonous gas, likely damage, possibly with a saving throw. Otherwise, possible use of abilities to hack through, blow through, etc.)

Come With Me if You Want to Live

Often, acquisition of an item is the end goal of a stealth challenge. Heists are a staple of the genre for a reason, as stealth is often justified by valuable items under heavy guard. If you've decided that an item is the end goal, the next question to answer is whether the item itself poses difficulty to move.

If the item is easy to move, often this is simple: either the entire sequence is gaining access to the item, as detailed above, or the second half of the sequence has a change triggered by the acquisition of the item, causing the challenges to be different in some way.

If the item is difficult to move, often the challenges in the second part will have a completely different texture, which can provide a fun and variable challenge to going through the same challenges with a different set of constraints. If the item is very unwieldy, there can be various difficulties involved in moving the item.

The item can also be a creature that needs to be escorted. Escort quests are often considered frustrating. After all, the escorted character will often lack the abilities of the player characters, have additional weaknesses, and otherwise serve as a frustrating roadblock to the clean accomplishment of the goal. It's important to be intentional when including an escort quest, using it as a way to explicitly change the way the second half of the sequence plays out, either by forcing a different route due to the differing abilities of the escortee, or by forcing a changed focus, such as more effort towards frustrating pursuers.

Below is a list of possibilities for how items can change the second part of the sequence

- Easily moved item - changes state
 - Additional Pursuers
 - Pursuers gain additional abilities
 - Arena changes physically, opening new avenues and closing old ones
- Unwieldy item
 - Requires two or more characters to move
 - Requires a check (athletics or otherwise) to move
 - Grants disadvantage on checks/attack rolls when carried
 - Requires a check (arcana or otherwise) while moving or else it either damages the bearer or attracts attention
- Creature to be escorted
 - Lacks a movement mode the party used, forcing another route
 - Worse at frustrating pursuers
 - Requires different route
 - Requires more effort to frustrate pursuers

Whodunit?

At long last the party has found the person they've been looking for. Whether the plan is to pick their pockets, have a serious conversation in a quiet corner, or stab them in the kidneys, there are several things to keep in mind.

The first question to answer is whether avoiding pursuers is part of the encounter itself. Access to the encounter is likely gated by pursuers, but the encounter may be in a secluded room. If pursuers are present, it can add another wrinkle to the encounter.

Whether or not pursuers are present, there are several frames that can work for an encounter, these are detailed below:

- Steal from the target: this can take the form of a second, mini-stealth sequence, with the target as pursuer.
- Talk to the target: a social encounter, the addition of pursuers can complicate matters, especially if frustrating pursuers can complicate communication and cause confusion.

- Fight the target: a combat encounter. The addition of pursuers can provide interesting disincentives for certain actions, or provide a new method of attacking the target.

Location, Location, Location

Once the skeleton of possible actions has been put together, creating a location in which the sequence takes place will help flesh it out. The location will contribute both to helping solidify the pursuers, goals, and consequences, but also to provide verisimilitude for the players, allowing them to think outside the box and generate other courses of action that you did not explicitly plan for.

It is important to avoid over-describing the location, however. Tactical movement can be fun, but can also quickly bog down the course of play. Allowing the location to drive the action is important, but having a sequence where a series of checks is required to shimmy across a landing while remaining undetected, or a maze to traverse, can quickly become boring.

Having a map is important, if only to ground the description provided to the players. Sharing the map with the players can be useful if the situation calls for it, especially if they have done reconnaissance, or otherwise gained access to a map. But even if the players don't have access to the map, its mere existence will help make the location feel more grounded.

Possible locations include:

- A complex of buildings, ideally with multiple levels. Characters can sneak through the main level, dealing with guards, or gain access to an upper or lower level that is less guarded. The alternate levels can be as simple as leaping between balconies and as complex as a fully-populated sewer system
- A locked-down dungeon, with high-alert guard patrols monitoring the halls. Traversal can involve dealing with the guards traditionally, but also pretending to be guards, or otherwise taking advantage of the existing security protocols, especially if transit between areas is expected, and the number of guards is high enough that they wouldn't all know each other
- A large party, with different social cliques forming different 'rooms' the characters can visit. Traversing between the cliques can be difficult both because of the clique the characters are attempting to leave and the clique they are attempting to join.

Regardless, the location should be derived from the possible actions, and not the other way around. The location should help reinforce what actions are possible, rather than merely being set-dressing over an unrelated skeleton.

Managing Consequences

A character failed a stealth check, alerting the guards. A character fails an athletics check, failing to leap to a balcony. A player fails a Thieves' Tools check, failing to open a lock. How do you make sure these failures feel meaningful, without ending the sequence entirely? One way to do so is to prepare a series of stepped consequences, with a certain number of failures ending the sequence in failure. Gauging the length can be difficult, as it depends on each group's playstyle and the balancing of success vs. failure in each individual check.

Merely choosing a number of failures to end the encounter with is insufficient, however. It is important that each failure qualitatively changes the options the characters have to either pursue their goals or frustrate the pursuers. However, to keep the failures from cascading, each consequence should also open up new options. An easy way to do this is to link each failure to a form of success from either the 'frustrating pursuers' section or the 'courses of action' section, for example having a failure attract attention, which means there are more guards in one area, but also serving as a distraction for the other areas.

Below is a list of possible consequences for failure:

- **Pursuers**
 - More Pursuers arrive
 - Pursuers focus on a specific area
 - Pursuers abilities change
- **Available Actions**
 - An action to advance towards the goal is harder
 - An action to advance towards the goal is impossible
 - An action to frustrate the pursuers is harder
 - An action to frustrate the pursuers is impossible
- **Character consequences**
 - Characters take damage to a resource (Hit Points, exhaustion, losing Hit Dice)
 - Characters must spend resources to escape (Spell Slots, magic items, class resources)

Once a certain number of failures have been accrued, success is impossible and the failure state will be reached. What that state looks like, however, can vary. It is certainly possible to end the game and roll new characters, but there are other, milder consequences that can still feel like failure but allow the game to continue. It is vital that there be some consequence, however, as stakes are impossible if success is the only real outcome.

Below is a list of possible macro-consequences for failure

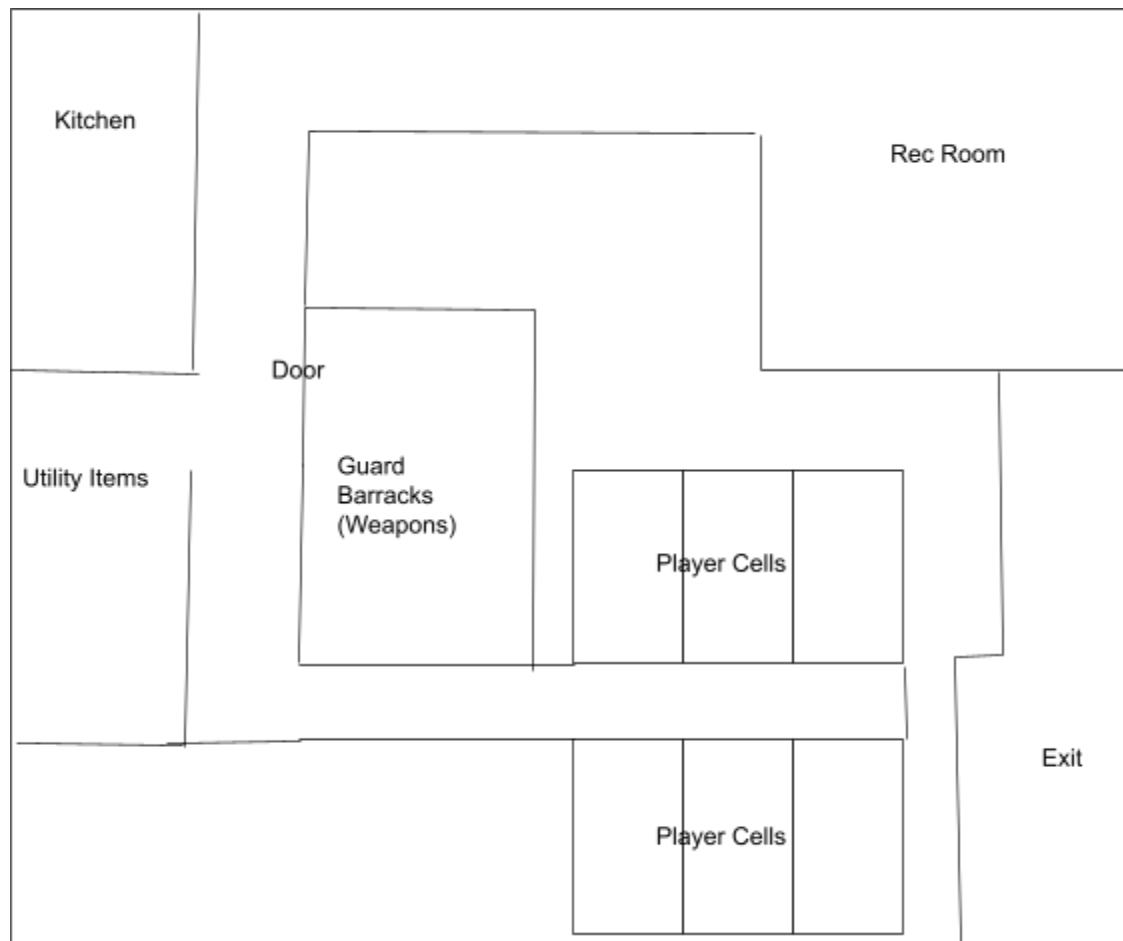
- Party is imprisoned, and must escape
- Party's short-term goal is failed, permanently, and another solution must be found
- Party's long-term goal is significantly hampered, requiring a difficult task to reverse
- TPK, new characters

Putting it all Together

Below is a sample stealth sequence, outlined so as to be runnable.

Scenario: The party has been captured, and their gear has been removed. All weapons have been locked in one area, while all utility items (Arcane Foci, Thieves' Tools, etc) are locked in a second area. The party must escape from their cell, collect their items, and escape from the prison complex.

Map:



Pursuers:

There are, in total, 10 guards in the facility. Four are currently sleeping in the barracks, four are in the rec room, one is in the kitchen, and one is patrolling the halls and guarding the players in their cells. The guards as a whole are good at combat, but poor at detection. Two of the guards in the barracks are good at detection and at combat, and one of the guards in the Rec Room is good at detection but poor at combat.

Goals:

The players first need to break out of their cells. The keys can be acquired by distracting the guard in their area and picking their pocket, or by picking the locks with either smuggled tools or improvised tools (which will impose disadvantage). Failure to pick the locks will place a second guard in this area, but the guard will come from the kitchen, leaving it empty. A second failure will result in lockpicking being removed as an option, as the guards watch too closely. Two characters can also escape through a sewer grate in their cell that leads to the kitchens. The grate itself is easy enough to remove, but there is a guard in the kitchen to contend with.

Once the players have escaped from their cells, they need to acquire their gear. Their Utility Items are relatively unguarded (Though the guards patrolling the halls may still provide a challenge), and their weapons are in the barracks with the sleeping guards. The guards in the barracks wake if the players are noisy when entering, or if they are detected by the guards patrolling the halls.

Escaping the facility will require cunning or combat, as the exit is guarded by the guards in the rec room. Sneaking through will likely require a combination of distractions and quick thinking, but there is room for clever planning. A party with access to the kitchen could, for example, attempt to spike the next meal for the guards, rendering any escape trivial.

Tips for Running:

Though there are no numbers attached, it shouldn't be difficult to scale this to your party's specific setup. This is intended for low-level adventurers, as access to invisibility for the whole party, items like a lyre of building, or even something as simple as a fireball can quickly render many of the challenges here trivial. While it is possible to eliminate those options explicitly, it is likely better to design a new sequence better suited to higher-tier characters.

Stealth Sequence Checklist

Pursuers

One or Multiple

Abilities

Second Pursuer Type

Abilities

Third Pursuer Type

Abilities

Goals:

Secondary Goal:

Methods to advance Goals:

Secondary methods (If different from Primary)

Map

Consequences
