



PLAYING THE GAME *INSIDE*  
YOUR FANTASY *D20* SYSTEM™ GAME

BY RYAN STOUGHTON

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# CREDITS

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The original EN World thread from which this document was transcribed is available [here](#).

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# INTRODUCTION

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## WHAT IS E6?

In the last year, there has been some discussion about how d20 changes as the levels increase. This can be broadly broken down into four distinct types of play, modeling 4 different genres:

- Levels 1-5: Gritty fantasy
- Levels 6-10: Heroic fantasy
- Levels 11-15: Wuxia
- Levels 16-20: Superheroes

**E6** is a game about the first 2 genres, and it does this by adjusting characters and monsters to a progression that levels off in the power range of heroic fantasy. As a result, **E6** has fewer rules than d20, plays fast throughout the campaign, and can be easily prepared or DMed on-the-fly. This system has been play tested, and it works as intended for multiple groups. There seems to be a lot of lively debate about **E6**, and some real interest in how it works, so I've revised it here.

## HOW E6 WORKS

Like d20, **E6** is a game of enigmatic wizards, canny rogues, and mighty warriors who rise against terrible dangers and overcome powerful foes. But instead of using d20's 20 levels to translate characters into the rules, **E6** uses only the first 6. **E6** is about changing one of d20's essential assumptions, but despite that it doesn't need a lot of rules to do so.

Imagine the life of a 1st-level commoner. They have rarely traveled more than a mile from their birthplace. They are unfamiliar with violence, and are vulnerable to attacks by raiders, soldiers – or even wild animals. In their world, a 6th-level Wizard or 6th-level Fighter is practically superhuman: The wizard could kill everyone in your village with a few words, while the fighter could probably slay a dozen armed guards sent to arrest him. The sighting of a mantichore, to the commoner, means that everyone you know is in terrible, terrible danger. Against such a creature, that wizard or fighter may be your only hope. **E6** re-tunes d20's inherent assumptions in a way that recognizes the potential for 6th level characters to take the roles of epic heroes.

# E6 Rules

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Character progression from level 1 to level 6 uses the same rules as d20. This is the period where a character comes into his own, where a crash course in action and danger transforms them from 1st-level commoners into capable fighting men (or corpses). Once transformed by their experiences, a character's growth is no longer a continuous, linear progression.

After attaining 6th level, for each 5000 experience a character gains, they earn a new feat. Since this is the only form of progression once 6th level has been reached, a wide selection of feats should be available in any **E6** campaign. Note that feats with unattainable prerequisites under this system remain unattainable.

For the purpose of experience awards, treat each 5 feats as +1 CR (or level), to an upper limit of 20 feats. After this, a ratio of 10 feats to 1 CR can be used, as it becomes more and more difficult to bring all a character's feats to bear in a given situation. Alternatively, and at the DM's option, player-characters with more than 20 feats can simply be always treated as if they were level 10 for experience and challenge purposes.

## FOR THE GM

**E6** isn't just a change for the players: Monsters are presented differently than in d20. Just as level 6 parties in d20 aren't expected to tangle with monsters higher than CR 10, the mighty monsters of **E6** require special consideration for presentation in-game. **E6** characters aren't intended to go up against high-level d20 threats under the same circumstances as high-level d20 characters; those creatures, if they are defeatable at all, require the kind of resources and planning far beyond the typical d20 encounter.

In terms of raw rules, CR 7-10 monsters are an excellent guide for what **E6** characters can handle. As they rise to around the 20-feat range, the range is more like 7-12. Beyond that, a GM should take monsters in the CR 7-12 range and use feats (and to a lesser extent templates) to advance them. Hit die or class-based advancement beyond CR 12, or base monsters above CR 12 should generally be avoided as straight-up fights.

Of course, not every monstrous encounter is a straight-up fight. For example, Lovecraftian

horrors from another age might be a reason to run rather than fight, and there is little a character could do in the face of an angry Titan. But these situations don't call for straightforward confrontation. Perhaps, in a special ritual with the presence of 20 mages, a Titan can be bound to the mortal realm (lowering its stats to an Aspect), with whom the players can do battle. Again, that's far from a straight-up fight with a CR 20 creature, but it makes for a very memorable encounter.

If, as a result of the restrictions on items, an item cannot be created, then it should not be distributed as normal treasure. Like high-level monsters, such items should be placed carefully and built to make sense in the context of your game. For example, a +4 sword can't be made by a human wizard, but it could be crafted by a Titan (which makes for great god-stats). That's a sword that no mortal can make.

**E6** will always inherit d20's balance issues at the same level, especially issues that result from scenarios where those characters d20 characters have long periods of downtime. The best approach is to be cognizant of these issues when considering what feats to allow in your **E6** game.

## BENEFITS OF **E6**

- **E6** plays very, very quickly, and it takes advantage of the players' familiarity with the d20 rules.

- **E6** can model a low-magic world without abandoning d20's familiarity.

- **E6** presents a well-structured, believable framework for heroic fantasy. Even legendary heroes remain mortal; while a 6th level fighter who has taken toughness several times can take on a good mob, he isn't invulnerable. Likewise, the sorcerer's 6d6

fireballs are a terrifying power, but not so powerful that he can destroy a village and not fear retaliation.

- As the PCs head up to the top of the power curve, **E6** requires planning, strategy, and tactics rather than leveling. For example, to defeat the CR 12 black dragon Zolanderos (terror of Staunwark Island), the heroes will need help, resources, and information. In contrast, d20 heroes can avoid the dragon temporarily, take on some level-appropriate challenges and return with the capabilities to steamroll the dragon in a straight-up fight. **E6** encourages the PCs to approach the biggest challenges with strategy and forethought – or at least boldness and panache.

- There is no need for filler at any level. Characters who have survived a small number of combat encounters have proven themselves, and this matches what we see in fantasy stories in other media.

- Classic monsters stay classic throughout the campaign; for example, Aboleths start scary, and stay scary. Likewise, dragons are always exciting encounters.

- Quicker prep. Make a 1st, 3rd, 5th, and 6th version of a sorcerer, and now you have a whole sorcerous dragon-cult that can last you through your whole campaign.

- You can put what you've learned of the rules to good use. It's hard to know every 4th through 9th level spell out there; they're the ones we see the least. But we've seen 0th through 3rd level spells many, many times, and mastery over them is relatively simple. More importantly, a GM that knows what a 2nd level threat looks like can improvise the stats on the fly and keep the game moving.

- **E6** is d20 compatible, which means an **E6** GM has a big community of gamers and excellent first and third-party support to fall back on.

# E6 FEATS

There are 3 philosophies on what feats to allow in an **E6** game, each more generous than the last:

- 1) The Cautious Approach
- 2) The Gestalt Approach
- 3) The Lean Upward Approach

The Cautious Approach is exactly what it sounds like – a GM chooses what feats to allow in his **E6** game very, very carefully. This GM does not make exceptions or new feats to accommodate players character concepts - he chooses what feats to allow and the players agree to work within that framework.

The Gestalt Approach dictates that if an ability can be learned under 6th level, then it's learnable via some chain of feats. The Gestalt Approach usually means all WotC sources are available, as well as a few extra feats to provide ways to learn class features. These can be done on an ad-hoc basis for a given player or they can be gathered from sources like the Book of Unusual Feats. The Gestalt theory is the one used in **E6**'s playtesting.

The Lean Upward Approach looks at the Gestalt Approach and says "6th level plus

many feats is clearly more powerful than 6th level. Thus, it won't be game-breaking to allow feat chains that bring characters from 6th level to 8th level, although this progression should be quite slow." DMs who like the Lean Upward approach might have feats to bring BAB to +8, or to gain 4th level spells, or 8th level class features, additional hit dice, and so on.

## EXTRA FEATS FOR E6

I consider these feats to be necessary even with the Cautious Approach; along with the SRD feats, they provide for a minimal level of continuing advancement for **E6** characters, and address issues like removing negative levels.

### Expanded Caster Stamina [General]

#### Prerequisite:

Character Level 6<sup>th</sup>

#### Benefit:

You gain 1 or more new spell slots, with spell levels totaling to half of your caster level. Treat 0th level spells as ½. Thus, a sixth level Wizard could gain one 3rd level slot, one 1st

and one 2nd level slot, three 1st level slots, or 6 0th-level slots. This feat cannot provide spell slots higher than you can already cast.

**Special:**

You may take this feat multiple times; each time you take it it provides more slots.

**Expanded Spell Knowledge [General]**

**Benefit:**

You learn 1 or more new spells known, with spell levels totaling to half of your caster level. Treat 0th level spells as ½. Thus, a sixth level Sorcerer could gain one 3rd level spell known, one 1st and one 2nd level spell, three 1st level spells, or 6 0th-level spells. This feat cannot provide spells known of a level higher than you can already cast.

**Special:**

You may take this feat multiple times; each time you take it it provides more slots.

**Open Minded [General]**

**Benefit:**

You immediately gain an extra 5 skill points. You spend these skill points as normal. If you spend them on a cross-class skills they count as 1/2 ranks. You cannot exceed the normal maximum ranks for your level in any skill.

**Special:**

You can gain this feat multiple times. Each time, you immediately gain another 5 skill points.

**Restoration [General]**

**Prerequisites:**

6th level, ability to cast 3rd-level divine spells, Wisdom 18, Healing 9 Ranks

**Benefit:**

You can use Restoration, as the spell (paying the material component), with a casting time of 1 hour.

**Stone to Flesh [General]**

**Prerequisites:**

6th level, ability to cast 3rd-level arcane spells, Intelligence 18, Craft (Alchemy) 9 Ranks

**Benefit:**

You can use stone to flesh, as the spell, with an expensive and secret magical ingredient with a market value of 1000 gp and a casting time of 1 day.

**Wondrous Rings [Item Creation]**

**Prerequisites:**

6th level, Craft Wondrous Item

**Benefit:**

You treat rings as wondrous items for the purpose of meeting item creation prerequisites. You must still meet caster level requirements for any ring you create.

## ABILITY SCORE FEATS

If you want your characters to be able to improve their abilities slightly above their natural aptitudes, then you can use the following:

### **Ability Training [General]**

You spend time honing one of your Abilities: Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma.

#### **Benefit:**

Choose one Ability; you qualify for the Ability Advancement feat for that Ability.

#### **Special:**

You can gain this feat multiple times, its effects do not stack. Each time you take this feat it applies to another ability.

### **Ability Advancement [General]**

Your training pays off, and one of your Abilities increases.

#### **Benefit:**

Choose one Ability. You gain a permanent +2 bonus to that ability.

#### **Special:**

**You can gain this feat multiple times, its effects do not stack. Each time you take this feat it applies to another ability.**



# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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## Using E6

Q: So characters just stop leveling at 6?

A: That's right. Characters who have reached level 6 have proven themselves, but this extremely rapid growth does not go on forever. Instead, they master specialized techniques, or become more versatile. This stage of a character's development is represented by gaining new feats.

Q: Does E6 change the stacking rules? For example, can I take Weapon Focus twice and have it stack? Can I take Skill Focus twice and have it stack?

A: The stacking rules remain the same as in standard d20.

Q: What if I want there to be a higher level magical effect, but still use E6?

The rules for rituals in *Unearthed Arcana* are an excellent fit for E6, to support things like opening portals to another dimension, higher-level divinations, and so on. When a spell is a 3-day event requiring 20 mages, it's more of a plot point than a spell itself, and that makes it a great a springboard for challenging the players.

Q: As a GM, I like running things on the fly. Can E6 support that kind of play?

A: Absolutely. A GM that knows how to estimate the

abilities of enemies in the low-level range can use that knowledge throughout the campaign. Likewise, familiarity breeds mastery – and for feats, spells, and monsters, there is more chance for a GM to become familiar with abilities in an appropriate range to the PCs, even if he is using a diverse selection of monsters. Furthermore, Dungeon Masters can get much more mileage out of their previous work: The stats of a 5th-level sorcerer written for 4th level PCs is still a useful tool months of game time later against characters who are 6th level +10 feats.

Q: Can you make high-level items as a low-level caster in E6?

A: No, caster level requirements for magic items are treated as hard requirements.

Q: If a character took multiple classes, or Prestige Classes, suddenly you've got a guy with saves that are seriously out of whack. Is this a game-breaking issue?

A: If you multiclass that much, you're probably doing it to get the saves. In that situation, your saves are your special ability. Moreover, saves are passive abilities; the player doesn't control when their character uses a save, which gives them limited appeal compared to stuff the player can control. So if a player goes after them like crazy, and succeeds in having really exceptional saves – let them have their fun.

Q: I prefer stopping at around 8th level, does that work for this system?

A: The system will probably work about as well at 8th level, but note that "Epic 6th" characters do end up being more powerful than regular 6th level characters. Epic 6th may be what you want for a game that sits at the power level for Level 8, and Epic 8th may cater more closely to Level 10 style play.

Q: Does **E6** work with a slower progression to level 6? Does it work when characters are created at 2nd level?

Yes and yes. I've tried both during my playtesting period. I'll be starting my new game at 3rd level.

Q: I'm not a big fan of experience points. Do you need a strict XP system to make **E6** work?

A: An ad-hoc "gain a feat" approach would work absolutely 100% with this system. I used to do that with other systems (power up when the story makes it appropriate) and given the fact that the upper end of the power curve flattens off, that method should go very smoothly with **E6**.

Q: Can you use Prestige Classes with **E6**?

A: I'd recommend taking the same approach you take in your regular d20 game. If you allow Prestige Classes there, feel free to allow them here. Of course, characters capped at 6th level can usually take at most 1 level of a Prestige Class.

Q: With only 6 levels, how do races with a level adjustment work?

If you use races with a level adjustment, the 6th level cap is a big issue. Use the point buy rules in the DMG as follows:

LA	POINT BUY
+0	32
+1	25
+2	18
+3	10
+4	0

Thus, +LA races should start with zero LA, but use the point buy listed here. Keep in mind the difference between LA and racial hit dice (the two combine to give starting ECL).

## Why is **E6** DESIGNED THIS WAY?

Q: Where did **E6** come from?

A: **E6** was inspired by the article Gandalf was a Fifth-Level Magic User by Bill Seligman. The article was published in The Dragon (which became Dragon magazine) in issue #5, March 1977. When I first had the concept of **E6**, where we used the first six levels for the whole game, my very first step was pitching it to my players. Some thought it was a great idea, and the rest were willing to give it a try, so I gave it a shot. **E6** worked really well for our tastes, and we've done lots of playing inside **E6** since then. Back then **E6** was a lot more convoluted than it is now: there were intricate quasi-gestalt rules and several other little things that weren't so much about the cap as they were about my group's thoughts on d20 class balance. Over time, we found that the only rules we were really using (on both sides of the screen) were the feat rules, and that was producing a great play experience. So when I returned to **E6** just recently, that's how I wrote it up: As it was actually played.

Q: Why isn't the advancement to 6th slower?

A: Levels 1 to 6 was There are still major differences

between the master warriors and the veteran mercenaries, but it's not a change of scale.

However, if you prefer a slower experience progression in the levels 1 to 6 range in d20, the same modification if is completely compatible with **E6**.

Q: Why 6th level for the cap? Why not 12th, or 20th?

A: My experience in d20 is that at around 6th level the characters are really nicely balanced, both in terms of balance against other classes, and against the CR system. Also, there was an element of setting assumptions; each class is strong enough that they're well defined in their role, but not so strong that lower-level characters don't matter to them any more.

Q: How did you arrive at the cost of 5000 xp per feat post 6th level?

A: Originally, I considered that if I wasn't giving level 7, maybe 2 feats for the same price would be a good compromise (3000xp / feat). That way they would have this great feeling of advancement without popping the top off the power level." But in play, the players found it was so fast that they did not have time to enjoy their new abilities. There just wasn't time in-game for their characters to grow, so I upped the cost to 5000 xp, and it works like a charm.

Q: Why not use [system of character points / experience purchases / incremental gestalt rules] instead of **E6**?

A: Feats, if they don't work out in a particular case, are less controversial to tweak than, say, the XP table. If you find out that the XP table, or stats, or whatever else you've changed doesn't work for some players, it's a big deal to change it because it then affects everyone - and sometimes has effects that cascade through the system.

I have found that if a feat is too good, it's not that big a deal to say "Hey Ned, I think the feat I made for you is too good, but I don't want to take it away from you. I think it should have a prerequisite, like Skill Focus (Knowledge - nature) instead of being straight-up available. I'd like to leave you with it but say that your next feat needs to be that knowledge thing, rather than take it away now. We could do that, or if you want you could swap it out for something else. What do you think?"

It's important to me to keep the rule changes minimal, because players really don't want to read a lot outside of the game and they get frustrated if there's too many house rules.

2 years ago (before **E6** was called **E6**) I worked up these complex gestalt XP-buy rules, but eventually my players and I realized that with all the options available all that was really getting used were feat purchasing, because they were so easy to approach.

Q: Why not just stop advancement at 6th, and have characters just not advance after that, or slow experience down so much that you can game for years and never get higher than 6th level?

A: In my experience, players prefer to have characters that can grow – and have that growth reflected in the mechanics of the game.

Q: I like high-magic, high-powered campaigns. Is **E6** for me?

A: Probably not. Just as d20 can't be all things to all groups, **E6** caters to a specific set of tastes.

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