E6

The Game Inside the World’s Most Popular Roleplaying Game

v 0.4.1

BY RYAN STOUGHTON
CREDITS

WRITING: Ryan Stoughton

The original EN World thread from which this document was transcribed is available at the following URL:

http://www.enworld.org/showthread.php?t=200754

LAYOUT: J.A. Dettman

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS E6?
Earlier this year Ryan Dancey suggested that d20 has four distinct quartiles of play:

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

There’s been some great discussion about how to define those quartiles, and how each different quartile suited some groups better than others.

E6 is a game about those first 2 quartiles, and as a result, it has fewer rules, a low-magic flavor, and it is quick and easy to prepare. I have playtested the system extensively with my crew, and it works as intended. 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 the World’s Most Popular Roleplaying Game, 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 20 levels to translate characters into the rules, E6 uses only the first 6. E6 is about changing one of d20 fantasy’s essential assumptions, but despite that it doesn’t need a lot of rules to do so.

In E6, the stats of an average person are the stats of a 1st-level commoner. Like their medieval counterparts, this person has never travelled more than a mile from their home. Imagine a 6th-level Wizard or 6th-level Fighter from the commoner’s perspective. The wizard could kill everyone in your village with a few words. The fighter could duel with ten armed guards in a row and kill every one of them. If you spot a manticore, everyone you know is in terrible, terrible danger. Against such a creature, the wizard or fighter may be your only hope. E6 recognizes that 6th level characters are mortal, while providing a context where they are epic heroes.

Levels 1 to 6 was 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. There are still major differences between the master warriors and the veteran mercenaries, but it’s not a change of scale.
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Character progression from level 1 to level 6 is as per the World’s Most Popular Roleplaying Game. Upon attaining 6th level, for each 5000 experience a character gains, they earn a new feat. A diverse selection of feats should be made available in any E6 campaign, however, 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 GM’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 the World’s Most Popular Roleplaying Game 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 threats under the same circumstances as high-level characters; those creatures, if they can be defeated at all, require the kind of resources and planning far beyond the typical 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 DM 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, insane horrors from another age might be a reason to run, and there is little a character could do in the face of an angry Titan. But these situations don’t call for direct confrontation, except with some special resource or amazing circumstance. 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 of Kord), with whom the players can do battle. Again, that’s far from a straight-up fight with a CR 20 creature, but we can console ourselves with the fact that it’s probably 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 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.

### ON ALLOWING FEATS

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

1. **The Cautious Approach**
   - 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.

2. **The Gestalt Approach**
   - The Gestalt Approach dictates that an ability can be learned under 6th level, then it’s learnable via some chain of feats.
   - This 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 playtesting.

3. **The Lean Upward Approach**
   - 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.
   - GMs 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

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 Spell Knowledge

**Benefit:** You learn new spell(s) whose level equals half your caster level (round down, and treat a new 0th-level spell as ½). Thus, a sixth level Sorcerer could learn one 3rd level spell, one 1st and one 2nd level spells, three 1st level spells, or 6 0th-level spells.

**Expanded Spell Knowledge [General]**

**Benefit:** You learn 1 or more new spells known, with spell levels totalling to half of your caster level (round down, and treat a new 0th-level slot 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.

#### Expanded Caster Stamina [General]

**Prerequisite:** Character Level 6th

**Benefit:** You gain 1 or more new spell slots, with spell levels totalling 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.
6. 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. The sorcerer’s 6d6 fireballs are phenomenal, but not so powerful that he can destroy a village and not fear retaliation.

7. Quick 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.

8. 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.

9. E6 is a great system for on the fly GMing. If you’re reasonably familiar with what a 2nd level threat looks like, power-wise, you can probably get away with running it without stats handy.
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### FAQ

#### 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*?

**A:** 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 DM, I like running things on the fly. Can *E6* support that kind of play?

**A:** Absolutely. A DM 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 DM 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 gametime 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?
A: 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?
A: 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LA</th>
<th>POINT BUY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+0</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+1</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+4</td>
<td>00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 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 6th level for the cap? Why not 12th, or 20th?
A: My experience with the d20 system 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 anymore.

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 fantasy can’t be all things to all groups, E6 caters to a specific set of tastes.
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