

ALTERNATIVE LEVEL ADVANCEMENT: THE STEP SYSTEM

By Sean K Reynolds

A different way to track character progress is to use simple measurements called Steps. GMs award Steps instead of experience points; playing for a typical game session usually earns a reward of one or two Steps per character (though the GM may award more or less based on each character's progress). One Step per four hours of play time is about right. A Step is the equivalent of one-fourth of a level. After gaining four Steps, a first-level character becomes a second-level character, and after gaining four more, he becomes a third-level character. Each time you gain a Step, you gain some (but not all) of the rewards of your character's next level.

Steps are an easy and fast way to measure your character's progress from one level to the next—they're mini-levels that let you improve your character after every game. Because you normally get at least one Step after each game session, you know that at the end of each game you can expect to improve your character a little bit, and after four games, you can expect to gain a level.

A character class's abilities for each level fall into four categories: **Hit Dice/hit points/base attack bonus, saving throws, skill points, and special** (all other class abilities, such as a rogue's sneak attack, wizard spellcasting, and so on). Every time you gain a Step, you choose one of these four categories of abilities from your next level. The next time you gain a Step, you choose one of the remaining three categories, and so on until your fourth Step, at which time you gain the fourth category of abilities and reach a new character level.

Example: Marzog and Esathar are first-level fighters. After the first night, their GM awards them one Step each. Marzog's player decides he wants Marzog's next level to be fighter; he also decides he wants Marzog to be a little tougher in the next game and increases Marzog's Hit Dice and base attack bonus to those of a second-level fighter; all his other abilities are that of a first-level fighter. Esathar's player decides she wants Esathar's next level to be fighter; she also decides she wants Esathar to be a little better at skills, and increases Esathar's skill points to that of a second-level fighter; all her other abilities are that of a first-level fighter.

Not only do Steps let you learn something new after every session, they let you customize your character to make him or her unique. For example, even if Marzog and Esathar started out with exactly the same skills and feats, they chose something different for their first new Step, so they end up slightly different.

It's a good idea to keep track of which of the four ability categories you choose for each step. A simple "ABCD" designation on your character sheet is an easy way to keep track—"A" means Hit Dice/hit points/base attack bonus, "B" is saving throws, "C" is skill points and "D" is special. Therefore, Marzog is now level 1A (he's first-level and has selected Hit Dice/hit points/base attack bonus for his first Step) and Esathar is level 1C (she's first-level and chose skill points for her first Step). When you reach a new level, erase these ABCD notes, as reaching a new level means you've gained all four categories (level 1ABCD means the same thing as level 2).

You must choose all four Steps from the same character class; you cannot choose Step A from the fighter class and then choose Step C from the rogue class. When you make a decision to choose a Step, that choice locks you into that class until you've chosen all four steps from that class, at which point you can start again by choosing a new class.

Even if your character has made one, two or three Steps of progress toward his next level, your character still counts as his current level, not his next level. For example, a level 5ABC character counts as a fifth-level character for all level-based rules, such as when he gains a new feat or his eighth-level ability score increase.

Why use the Step system? One of the fun things about roleplaying games is that your characters grow and improve just as a real person. Character levels represent this improvement over time, and high-level characters are very powerful compared to low-level characters. However, most people do not go from unskilled neophytes to masters of their craft in a short period of time; it would be unrealistic if you gained a level every time you played, like a novice martial artist gaining a black belt after a month of daily lessons! On the other hand, it's not as fun if your character doesn't improve at all after a month of play. Using Steps allows your character to grow at a reasonable pace so you experience the fun of improving your character without an unrealistic jump in power. And it's a lot easier than counting up hundreds or thousands of experience points.

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