

The Box

Open Game Content

Introduction

If your roleplaying campaigns are anything like mine, you have a hard time assembling a full group of consenting adults for each game. One guy's gone on holiday. Another guy has houseguests. A third guy forgot it was supposed to be this weekend but he'll see if his wife will let him out. Whatever.

We learn to work round these impromptu cast changes in most campaigns by saying that characters have gone off to attend to personal business, or they've taken a private job. It doesn't matter what, so long as it gets their character out of danger while the players who did turn up roleplay their way into certain doom.

The World's Largest Dungeon by Alderac Entertainment Group (<http://www.alderac.com/>) presents a problem here. It's a ginormous dungeon. There is no way out until the end. Even the doors which let the characters in are magically valve-like and can't be used to leave. Teleportation doesn't work. How do you take a character out of the picture for a while?

The Box

When the dungeon was constructed, the celestials knew that they were going to be mix'n'matching some of the nastiest, most dangerous creatures in the multiverse. They knew that fights would break out amongst

the inmates, and that was part of their design. But in some regions, they needed a way to quickly remove a prisoner when violence or mischief threatened to spoil an experiment.

So they created The Box. It's an extradimensional plane, a scant few hundred miles across, gifted with sentience and the ability to project a portal into the material plane, within the confines of the dungeon. The celestials would command it telepathically, giving it orders through their scrying mechanisms.

The Box would hear these orders, and a glowing portal would appear behind the miscreant in question, rushing forward to scoop him or her up and closing before there was any chance of escape.

The victim would find themselves plunged into pitch blackness, standing on some sort of uneven and unstable surface. At first it would feel like brambles; a spongy, moving base that picks at your shins and feet. Then the biting would start—hundreds and thousands of tiny little mouths and claws picking and nipping at your skin.

And it goes on. It doesn't stop until a celestial orders The Box to release a prisoner, who is spat out unceremoniously wherever the celestial chooses. The victim is exhausted, not having slept or even rested for however many days they were in the box. Expecting to find their body a mass of raw flesh, they look down and are surprised to find themselves,

and their possessions, completely intact.

Time

History has not been kind to the dungeon. The celestials who once operated The Box are now absent, or have better things to do. The Box is still alive and well though, and without any specific instructions it has taken to watching the antics of the dungeon's new inhabitants and scooping them up at random. Maybe it thinks it's helping.

When it comes

The Box does not sleep. The Box is Omnipresent in the dungeon. The Box pays no heed to the needs of the party or the dynamics of storytelling. No magic wielded by a mortal can dispel it. It has one, purely metagame, objective: to extract the characters of players who haven't turned up.

It appears as a regular wooden door reinforced with iron. It's always just large enough to fit the character it has targetted. It materialises a short distance from the victim and rushes towards them, the door opening to reveal a pitch-black nothingness with arcs of lightning playing across the opening. It is incapable of missing, and can travel in the ethereal plane to bypass any protection or take targets who are in the ethereal plane themselves. If the target somehow manages to move fast enough to get away, the door simply vanishes and reappears in front of the fleeing victim, using their own momentum to hurl them into The Box.

The only way to be completely safe from The Box is to escape the dungeon, or turn up to your gaming sessions.

Inside

The entire floor of The Box is covered in a carpet of scratch mephits. These pathetic little

creatures grow out of the fleshy floor, several feet down. As you walk in The Box, you are treading on these scratch mephits, probably killing half a dozen with each footstep.

They take a few seconds to notice a new arrival, but the dying squeaks of the mephits that the newcomer lands on will attract the attention of those around him, and more and more will come.

They swarm over the victim, biting and poking at any exposed flesh, gnawing at armour and clothes, weighing down shields and weapons until they have to be dropped or sheathed.

Light & Magic

The entire plane is covered in a perpetual *Darkness* effect, as per the spell. Torches, useless as they are, are rapidly extinguished by hundreds of tiny bodies climbing over the burning end. There may be a smell of burning rancid flesh. The darkness effect cannot be dispelled, but can be temporarily cancelled by a *Light* spell. See below.

The plane is also subject a type of antimagic effect, which effectively casts *Dispel Magic* on any ongoing magical effect one round after it is cast or enters the plane. This includes everburning torches or anything else with a *Permanency* effect. The dispel always works. So yes, you can use a fireball to clear an area if you want. A few seconds later it will be full again.

Light spells (including Light spells made permanent, such as an everburning torch) work for one round before being dispelled, penetrating the darkness and giving a character a glimpse of their horrible surroundings:

The magical light flares up from your (finger/staff/torch). The movement around you stops, and you can see thousands, no, hundreds of thousands of tiny, thin bodies, some no larger than a sling bullet, some as tall as an arrow. Each one has a vicious little mouth full of spiky teeth, and needle-like claws on the ends of every finger. And they all looking straight at you. As quickly as the light flared up, it is cancelled out again by some unseen magic. You are once again in darkness, and the tiny bodies start to crawl up you, biting and scratching.

Sleep

There is no sleep in The Box. Nothing can sleep while being bitten and poked by the scratch mephits, and any magical effect that might allow respite is dispelled automatically after one round.

Escape

There are no exits from The Box apart from the doorway itself, which appears and disappears at the the whim of The Box itself. Until The Box decides to let you go, you are trapped.

The Box will, of course, release characters once their player is present at a gaming session. The doorway will appear as suddenly and “unexpectedly” as before, but instead of hunting a character, it will float serenely a few feet off the floor. The door opens, as before, revealing the blackness with lightning dancing across it. Inside, the desperate and battered character will see a rectangle of light appear. It is actually a perfectly normal intraplanar doorway through which they would, under normal circumstances, be able to see their colleagues. But their eyes, long used to the blackness, will be dazzled and see it just as a brilliant shining portal. The scratch mephits suddenly and as one give up their assault and start to crowd-surf the prisoner to

the doorway.

The ex-prisoner is dumped gracelessly on the floor with their friends, and the door shuts and vanishes.

Characters released from The Box are exhausted (-6 to Strength and Dexterity, half movement speed) and will require a normal night’s rest to recover completely. Apart from that, though, they are uninjured. All the minor wounds they felt while in The Box have mysteriously healed up, and they are at full Hit Points, regardless of the state they were in when they entered.

Turnstile Effect

If you’re losing a different player the first time a character is returned from The Box, you can DM fiat a turnstile effect for added drama. In this example, Hando the cleric’s player is returning after having missed the last game, but Razumas the wizard’s player has gone to Spain for the week. The players of Eomer (a rogue) and Brother Gaius of St. Cuthbert (a paladin) have not missed any sessions. At the end of the last game, Razumas, Eomer and Gaius were resting up after defeating a room full of Fiendish Stirges.

Razumas is on watch while Eomer and Brother Gaius sleep. Suddenly, you two are woken up by Razumas leaping to his feet and yelling “A celestial portal! A celestial portal!”. Razumas runs across the room towards what looks like, to your sleep-addled brain, a door floating in mid air. The door opens, and Hando’s face and arm become visible at the bottom of the doorway, through a layer of electrified darkness. Razumas grabs Hando and helps him out, but it seems the celestial portal has a one-in, one-out policy, for as Hando is freed, Razumas is dragged in by an invisible force. You have barely got to your feet as the door closes and vanishes.

Lantern Archons

The only creatures who can communicate with The Box now are the lantern archons. Although they cannot order The Box around, or make it release prisoners, they can ask it to give up equipment. This is useful if, for example, the character holding the key to the doors from region B to region F is in The Box. Scratch mephits will hear the request, remove the equipment from the prisoner's body, send it far, far across the plane and throw it through a specially opened portal back to the material plane.

XP

Many GMs take a hard-line approach to experience for missing characters: if you're not there, you don't get the XP.

On the other hand, I don't think players ever willfully miss sessions. If they're absent, it's because there's something else they have to do, and they're probably not too chuffed at having to miss a game.

So not only do I include missing characters in divvying-up the XP, but I also throw in a consolation prize, say 300 XP or so, for having spent a few days in The Box. It makes the player feel better about having missed the game. If your players are crap enough to deliberately miss sessions to get an XP bonus, then I say let them. Because if a player thinks like that, the fewer of your games he turns up to the better.

Playing with The Box

Make sure your players understand that The Box has the Power Of Plot on its side. It comes and goes as need be, and they can't stop a character being taken.

That said, at later stages you might want to expand on mechanisms like The Box, and

allow PCs to somehow enter and leave at other moments; that's why there's detail in this document about what it's like to be inside.

If PCs try to monkey about, pulling their colleagues back, or getting in the way of the door, feel free to turnstile them, and role-play a few minutes of torture within the box before they get spat out and the intended PC is collected.

Character Exchange

The Box can also double up as a convenient way to *add* characters to the party. After all, if the fighter dies in region G, what are you going to do? Go back to town and post a wanted ad? There's only so many times you can just "find" another solitary adventurer at the exact moment one of you dies, but maybe The Box is smart enough to recognise that a party has become short-staffed, and spit out someone it swallowed ages ago. Just a thought.

Scratch Mephits

These outsiders look like tiny elves, between one inch and one foot tall, and exceptionally thin. Their mouths are full of long, sharp teeth and they have nasty-looking claws. These statistics are for a solitary member of the race.

Diminutive Outsider (Extraplanar)

Hit Dice: 1d2 (1 hp)

Initiative: +3

Speed: 10'

Armor Class: 12 (despite size)

Base Attack/Grapple: +0/-4

Attack: Claw +0 melee (1 point damage)

Full Attack: Claw +0 melee (1 point damage) and Bite +0 melee (1 point damage)

Special Attacks: —

Special Qualities: —

Saves: Fort -5, Ref +8, Will -10

Abilities: Str 3, Dex 16, Con 8, Int 3, Wis 3, Cha 6

Skills: Hide +10, Listen +1, Spot +1

Feats: —

Environment: The Box
Organization: Unending sea (1,000,000,000+)
Challenge Rating: 1/20
Treasure: None
Alignment: Lawful evil
Advancement: 2-4 HD
Level Adjustment: —

Scratch Mephit Swarm

Once a character is inside The Box, they encounter an unending sea of scratch mephits, which are treated as a single creature, much like a swarm. The stats that follow apply to a group of about 1,000 scratch mephits; remember that as members of a “swarm” die, they are replaced from outside. There is no real organisation into swarms.

Diminutive Outsider (Extraplanar, Swarm)

Hit Dice: 2d1,000 (1,000 hp)
Initiative: +3
Speed: 10'
Armor Class: 0 (unmissable)
Base Attack/Grapple: +10/—
Attack: 2d10 (swarm scratch and bite)
Full Attack: 2d10 (swarm scratch and bite)
Special Attacks: Unending injury
Special Qualities: —
Saves: Fort +4, Ref +4, Will -10
Abilities: Str 12, Dex 12, Con 20, Int 3, Wis 3, Cha 1
Skills: —
Feats: —
Environment: The Box
Organization: Unending sea (1,000,000,000+)
Challenge Rating: 2 (sort of; see below)
Treasure: None
Alignment: Lawful evil
Advancement: 2-4 HD
Level Adjustment: —

Unending injury: The damage dealt by the scratch mephits hurts like crazy, but is non-lethal. It never causes a victim to die or even go unconscious. The actual damage rating given is more as a guide for things like the concentration skill, which depends on the amount of damage taken in the preceding round.

A note on challenge rating and experience: Given the rate at which you can stomp scratch mephits, any fixed XP reward at all per-swarm or per-mephit is inappropriate. Instead, you might consider giving a PC who has been in The Box an ad-hoc reward of a few hundred XP to represent the trauma. See the XP section, above.

The Door

The mysterious portal that appears to collect and deliver characters is merely an extension of The Box into the material plane, so these stats can be taken to represent The Box as a whole if need be.

Variable-sized Outsider (Extraplanar; well, a plane in its own right actually.)

Hit Dice: 50d10 (280hp)
Initiative: +10
Speed: 70'
Armor Class: 40
Base Attack/Grapple: —/—
Attack: —
Full Attack: —
Special Attacks: Collect
Special Qualities: At will: ethereal, dimension door
Saves: Fort +20, Ref +20, Will —
Abilities: Str —, Dex —, Con —, Int 16, Wis 30, Cha —

Skills: —

Feats: —

Environment: The World's Largest Dungeon

Organization: Unique

Challenge Rating: —

Treasure: None

Alignment: Lawful Neutral

Advancement: —

Level Adjustment: —

Collect: The door seeks to collect a character from the dungeon floor. It will accomplish this the round after it materialises unless the target manages to move very, very fast or use a dimension door or ethereal ability. In these cases, the door will use a matching ability and collect the target on the next round, instead.

A note on challenge rating and experience: The door is part of The Box. PCs should not get any XP for having faced it.

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