

Displacer Cube

By Daniel Dean

Illustration by Stan!

Last year, we held the latest of our Creature Competitions—this time, focusing on [hybrids](#). After asking for your hybrid creations, we arranged a series of duels between sixteen lethal (and occasionally thoroughly quirky) contestants. In the end, your votes put the displacer cube on top of them all as the fan favorite.

Daniel Dean's monster design included the following description:

It's rumored that a gelatinous cube once fed exclusively on displacer beasts, and absorbed something of their qualities. Already difficult to spot, the displacer cube's actual location may be shifted somewhere else entirely. It attacks

with gelatinous tentacles that reach out and inflict acidic damage. It's noted that while displacer cubes are not necessarily interested in absorbing adventurers, they can nonetheless be very territorial.

Here now is the fully realized displacer cube—which utilizes the most dangerous components of both displacer beasts and gelatinous cubes to create a truly worthy hybrid to pit against your players' characters!

Displacer Cube

Displacer cubes are aberrant creatures from the Far Realm, unusual beings that cannot be precisely perceived or accurately described. The name is taken from the inadequate descriptions of those rare few who have survived an encounter with a cube.

The rare tales told of these creatures include:

The town of Dolg-Acia fell victim to one such creature. The beast effectively laid siege to the town, blocking the main road at a time when torrential rains had washed away all other safe passage. It was weeks before the town elders realized what was becoming of the envoys they dispatched to bring aid. By then, many in town were dying of starvation and disease before the displacer cube entered the town proper and slowly swept its streets. The beast cared little whether its food was alive or dead.

In the shadow of Devil's Holler, a mountainous temple complex carved from mines and caves, rumors were swirling that Orcus had manifested deep within the temple's recesses. A band of adventurers, seeking to quash these rumors,



ventured inside—whereupon they found themselves in a labyrinth, surrounded by gibbering priests and stalked by a large, unseen creature. Although they escaped with their lives, the adventurers never returned to dispel any rumors or collect any reward. Instead, they foraged and hunted for provisions at the base of the mountain, supplying repeated expeditions into the labyrinth for weeks, motivated by some hateful vendetta against the creature.

An arcanist of some ability, Yovas Renquell, funded a hunting party to trap and study a young displacer cube. His journals record the encounter: “Engulfed by the beast, their skin sloughing off and sweat steaming at its touch, the mercenaries’ bodies hung limp in the air, clawing and gasping for breath; their movements slowed. Rescue proved difficult, for their vulnerable, dying bodies were never quite where they appeared to be, and by the time rescue had been attempted, more were instead consumed.” Renquell went mad later, convinced that a displacer cube had followed him home and stalked the steps of his tower. Half starved and demented, he destroyed himself in a flash rather than let the creature take him. To this day, his shadow remains etched against a wall of his tower.

Most people maintain that stories of this sort are mere bonfire myths, told to scare children into tending close to home, or to young soldiers in jest or to test their mettle. Others insist that these tales involve phenomena explainable by other means, such as fey tricks, or are the exaggerations of a fear-stricken mind after an encounter with an admittedly formidable displacer beast. One thing is certain: The machinations of mad wizards are bottomless and ever-churning; corrupt sorcerers and lunatic alchemists delight in the creation of such horrors.

Lore

DC 16: A rare creature, the so-called displacer cube has a bottomless appetite and glacial patience. The creatures are found in ruins and dungeon

Displacer Cube		Level 7 Elite Soldier	
Large aberrant magical beast (blind, ooze)		XP 1,500	
HP 166; Bloodied 83	AC 23, Fortitude 20, Reflex 19, Will 18	Initiative +8	Perception +5
Speed 4, climb 4	Immune blinded, gaze effects; Resist 5 acid	Blindsight 10	
Saving Throws +2; Action Points 1			
TRAITS			
Displacement (illusion)			
When a melee or a ranged attack hits the cube, if the player rolled an odd number on the attack roll, the attack misses. If the player rolled an even number on the attack roll, the attack hits, and this trait doesn't function until the start of the cube's next turn.			
Ooze			
While squeezing, the ooze moves at full speed rather than half speed, it doesn't take the -5 penalty to attack rolls, and it doesn't grant combat advantage for squeezing.			
Translucent			
The cube is invisible until seen (Perception DC 27) or until it attacks. A creature that fails to notice the cube might walk into it, automatically being hit with <i>engulf</i> .			
STANDARD ACTIONS			
⚔ Tentacle (acid) ♦ At-Will			
Attack: Melee 2 (one or two creatures); +10 vs. Fortitude			
Hit: 2d8 + 6 acid damage, and the target is grabbed (escape DC 16).			

environments, such as a series of sewers or a forgotten temple. When possible, a cube situates itself in areas of high traffic.

DC 23: A displacer cube devours everything in its vicinity until the entire area has been rendered barren. The cube retains the energy and mass of the creatures it devours until it has enough bulk to separate into smaller cubes. This event marks the end of the cube's life cycle, and the birth of new cubes.

Displacer Cube in Combat

A displacer cube is insatiable. It roves indiscriminately, pausing only to consume its foes. When on the prowl, it prefers easy prey. If it has a potential meal in its tentacles, however, it ignores superficial damage

⚔ Engulf (acid) ♦ At-Will		
Attack: Melee 1 (one or two creatures grabbed by the cube); +10 vs. Fortitude		
Hit: The cube pulls the target into its space, where it is still grabbed. Until the grab ends, the target takes ongoing 10 acid damage and is dazed.		
MOVE ACTIONS		
Relentless Grasp ♦ At-Will		
Effect: The cube walks or climbs up to its speed, and any creature grabbed by the cube remains grabbed in a space of the cube's choice within 2 squares of the cube or in the cube's space if the creature started the cube's move there. This movement does not provoke opportunity attacks from creatures grabbed by the cube.		
MINOR ACTIONS		
⬅ Reel ♦ At-Will (1/round)		
Attack: Close burst 2 (creatures grabbed by the cube in the burst); +10 vs. Fortitude		
Hit: The cube slides the target up to 2 squares.		
TRIGGERED ACTIONS		
Bloodied Fury ♦ At-Will		
Trigger: The cube is first bloodied.		
Effect (Immediate Reaction): The cube uses <i>tentacle</i> twice.		
Skills Stealth +11		
Str 16 (+6)	Dex 16 (+6)	Wis 15 (+5)
Con 19 (+7)	Int 3 (-1)	Cha 3 (-1)
Alignment unaligned		Languages –

and uses *reel* to slide enemies close enough that it can use *engulf*. It fights to kill and devour anything and everything within its reach.

Designer's Notes

I created the displacer cube through a fairly torturous road of inspiration. When I set out to design my own game world and run my own games, the only habitat suitable for a displacer beast was at least a year of play away from the party's starting point, and I had no call for long, underground passages to block with the unnoticed gelatinous cube. (I think both monsters are fabulous, but my campaign involved a lot of urban and rivergoing adventures.)

There was a particular bit of language associated with the 4th Edition gelatinous cube that inspired me, though: “invisible until seen.” It suggested to me a Lovecraftian creature (truly unknowable until it was too late) and put me in mind of faerie glamours and of children disappearing around a gentle bend in a path, never to be heard from again. If you will, it suggested more than just a slime; a creature with an id, at least.

What I put together was not a creature, but a race of creatures. I built a secondary unseen ecosystem in my game, to lay over what was a fairly pedestrian, mercantile travel route. Most of these creatures, I reasoned, would be benign or even unaggressive altogether. The rest would account for an increased difficulty in both long-range travel and communication. These things would not be necessarily malicious. They would be nearly mindless, but they would have a form of aggression best compared to a virus or a parasite.

It wasn't until I played in another 4th Edition game and faced both a displacer beast and a gelatinous cube in one sitting that I realized I had been backing up against something like the displacer cube all along. I had my secondary ecology; now I needed an apex predator. In the process of constructing the creature, however, even this philosophy changed to grow and include elements of a trap, to try to keep this new cube grounded in the roots of the old gelatinous cube (essentially, an acid pit that can chase you).

For my initial stab at the displacer cube, I hacked something together for my game. I am not the kind of Dungeon Master who enjoys making life as hard as possible for my players, but I am a person who enjoys subverting expectations. I often find it's hard to get a visceral response out of gamers who've read though the *Monster Manual* a dozen times. I looked forward to seeing my players become puzzled, until their realization dawned. The session went swimmingly: Although there were no fatalities, there was very nearly a total party kill. Even after the ordeal, the

players opted to hunt and scrounge provisions from the surrounding area in order to supply repeated trips back into the labyrinth, tracking the beast down and killing it, rather than escaping and seeking medical attention or even coming back with a dozen or so hired hands to finish the job. I've never gotten that response from any arch-villain or conspiracy or dread evil, and this particular adventure is brought up whenever we swap moment-of-glory stories.

When I then set out to build the displacer cube for 4th Edition, I had a bit of trouble. The game, perhaps more than any other edition, seems particularly concerned with balance: balance between races and classes, balance among powers, balanced encounters. This was tricky because at first the displacer cube represented a completely unbalanced creature; it simply had too much going for it. I got around this by approaching it as a trap and turning the creature into an elite, making it something of a utility elite. Rather than dealing massive amounts of punishment or having a pool of hundreds of hit points, this would account for all the cool stuff the displacer cube could do, while allowing it to function as a kind of melee *mélange*—with a bit of controller, a bit of soldier, and a bit of brute in it.

Developer's Notes

By Chris Sims

Development is essentially a matter of maintaining design intent while expressing a creature as precisely and concisely as possible. Intent is about the picture prose and mechanics paint. This is my favorite part of this critter's description: “Displacer cubes are aberrant creatures from the Far Realm, unusual beings that can be neither precisely perceived nor accurately described.” My second favorite is: “. . . the so-called displacer cube has a bottomless appetite and glacial patience.”

So what we have here is an eldritch horror beyond normal perception that basically exists to eat. Got it.

Daniel's original statistics spoke to that. The displacer cube is hard to see and hard to hit, and it's all about grabbing and digesting you. It's also about controlling the area within its reach, like a good soldier should.

When the original design is solid, development is often just a matter of streamlining and ensuring tight technical expression. Short story shorter: I ended up combining five attack powers into four and coming out with virtually the same mechanical effect. The original had a grabbing *tentacle* attack and another tentacle attack, so I simply made one that grabbed. Then I had to separate out the “cube drags you with it” stuff from *engulf* into *relentless grasp*. I also separated *reel* from *engulf*, since the two were originally intertwined.

The only element this terror lacks compared to the original is a healing power that was unlikely to come into play anyhow. That power might have ended up cluttering what I think is the ingenious functionality of this disturbing creature.

About the Author

Daniel Dean is an Atlanta resident who works and plays at Titan Games and Comics. He has written for *Cracked*, *National Lampoon*, and CNN. He lives with his wife, who plays the greatest revenant dragonborn ever.

Developer
Chris Sims

Managing Editor
Kim Mohan

Illustrator
Stan!

Publishing Production Manager
Angie Lokotz